

# The New Circular

Showcasing historic writings and photographs of the Oneida Community and its legacy.

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Issue 11

## Fire! Two Burnings and Two Turnings in the Oneida Story

by Anthony Wonderley



Harriet Noyes

### The First Fire, 1851 by Harriet Noyes

*John Noyes abruptly exited the new Oneida Community to take up lodging in Brooklyn in early 1849. The printing operation, however, remained in Oneida for more than two years. Noyes must have missed it keenly because he always considered printing to be the means to superintend what were then six "Associated Communities" of Noyesian Perfectionists at Oneida and Brooklyn, of course, but also at Manlius, New York; Cambridge, Vermont; Newark, New Jersey; and Wallingford, Connecticut.*

*The Oneida Community's printing office was situated near the intersection of today's Chapel Street and Kenwood Avenue (location of bldg #34 on the map). Following its destruction by fire in 1851, Noyes was able to reconstitute press operation at his Brooklyn digs. These events are described below in a passage by Harriet Noyes taken from her unpublished manuscript, "History of the Printing Business of O.C." (pp. 22-23, 25, 27, 30). Her writing is filled with direct quotations from Community publications. This piece opens with a passage copied from the "Free Church Circular" of July 15, 1851.*

"TO THE SUBSCRIBERS OF THE CIRCULAR

"We take the first convenient opportunity to inform our subscribers of the suspension (for the present) of our printing operations, including the Circular, and the reason why. The building which was used for our printing office, store, shoe-shop, stereotype- foundry, etc., was destroyed by fire on Saturday evening, July 5th, and with it both our presses, a large share of the type, and all the publications on hand, with the exception of the Bereans...

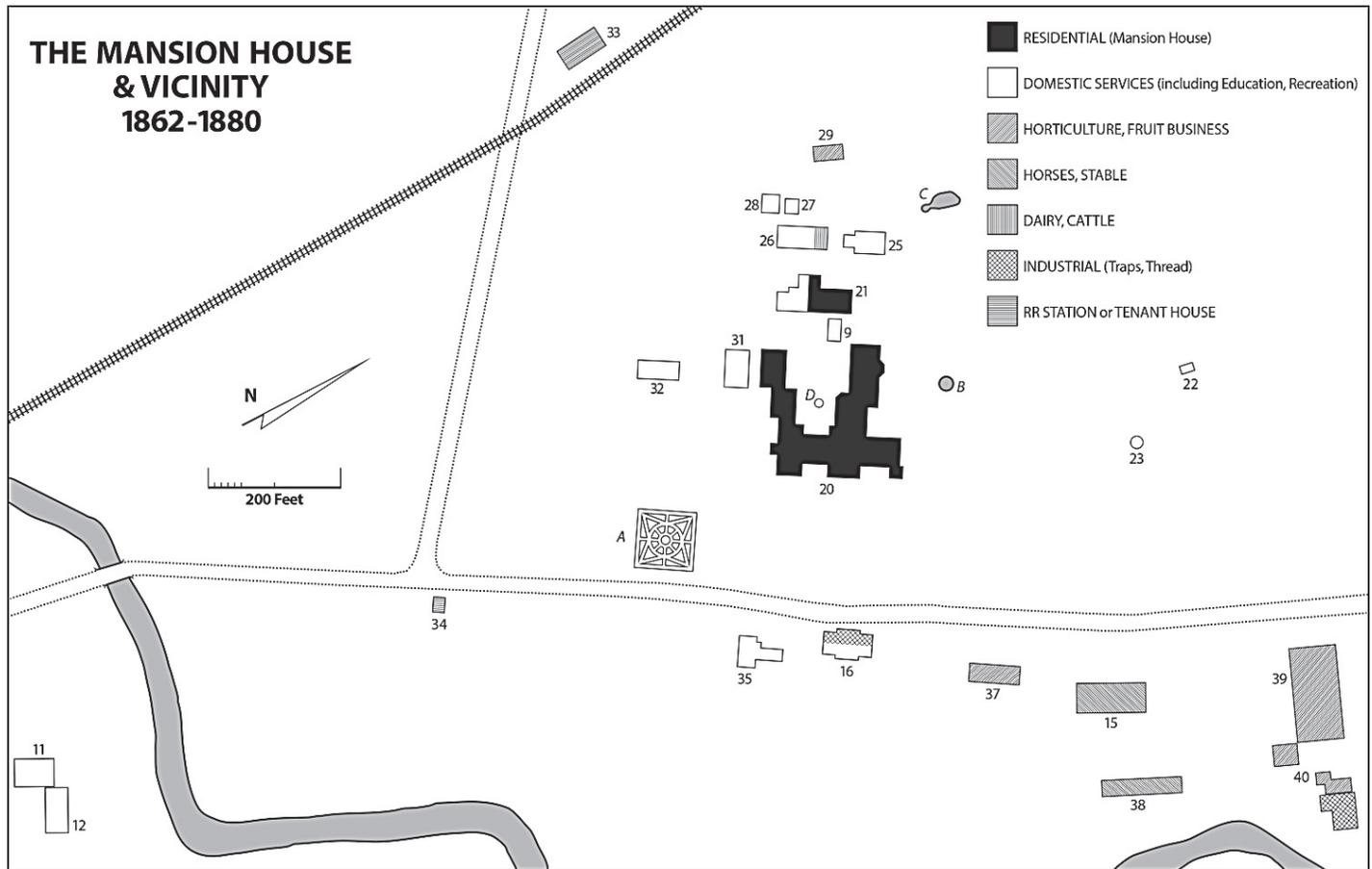
"As our readers may have a natural desire to know the particulars of this occurrence, we will not omit to give a brief sketch.

"On the evening above mentioned, the Association were all, as usual, in general assembly. It was about nine o'clock—we had been talking about individual inspiration, and had

just passed a resolution that we would every one rely on interior direction for the guidance of our conduct the coming week. The subject was concluded, and conversation rested; a member requested to have the 13th chapter of Romans read, and the Bible was just opened, when we were suddenly started to our feet by an indefinite alarm. Upon the first rush forward, someone said, 'QUIET!'—moderation was restored, and the egress from the room was free and still. There was a simultaneous gush of gratitude, we believe, from all hearts, when it appeared that it was only the store that was in peril, and not our home buildings. A proud column of flame was already issuing from the roof, which defied to begin with, all the resistance that could be made, without an engine. An attempt was made however, and for a few minutes, the virtue of all the water that could be brought, was vigorously applied. It was vain; the rescue was soon abandoned, and all turned their exertions to removing the contents of the doomed structure.

"The fire took in the garret, from some unknown cause. Our printing office was on the second floor, and was invaded by the destroyer, before its doors were opened. A large hole was burned through the plastering, just over the power press. The progress of the fire was rapid, but orderly and graceful—sweeping clean in its descent from the roof to the foundations. You could imagine it an altar of sacrifice; in which the sacrifice, and then the altar was consumed. For some time the upper story was like a censor of flames, on the altar of the stories below. The evening was remarkably still—the fleecy clouds around the moon were motionless. There was helpfulness and energy on all sides, without distracting excitement. Everything in the store and shoe-shop was got out and carried to a place of safety, before the light of the fire was dim on our walks. In less than three hours we were re-assembled, with the exception of a few





Map showing locations of the print shop (#34), the horse barn (#15), and the Arcade (#39, fruit-processing building). The Mansion House of 1851 (not shown) stood just to the left of the Mansion House complex depicted here.

sentinels, in the room we had left, congratulating each other on the general good luck, and inquiring for God's meaning. The event had afforded us many profitable reflections, but it suffices for the present to say that we take it as 'conservative fire;' and are sure of profiting by this criticism of God's providence. Those of our friends who are acquainted with our history in the past, will not be disturbed by an irregularity in the publication of our paper, which is something it is well known we have never been over-scrupulous to avoid. If they reason as we do, they will assuredly anticipate a resurrection from the ashes of this fire, in an auspicious time, not very distant, and haply in a new and improved form..."

The anticipation expressed in the foregoing Circular was realized in less than four months from the fire. On Nov. 6, 1851, the first number of the first volume of "The Circular," (change of name will be noticed) was issued at Brooklyn, N.Y., edited by J. R. Noyes...Particulars are given in Mr. Noyes' first editorial:

"The editor simply begs leave to observe by way of personal introduction, that he returns to his post, after an interval of five years, devoted to labors in the details of practical Association, with a consciousness of improved qualifications, and with fresh attraction and devotion to his old calling.

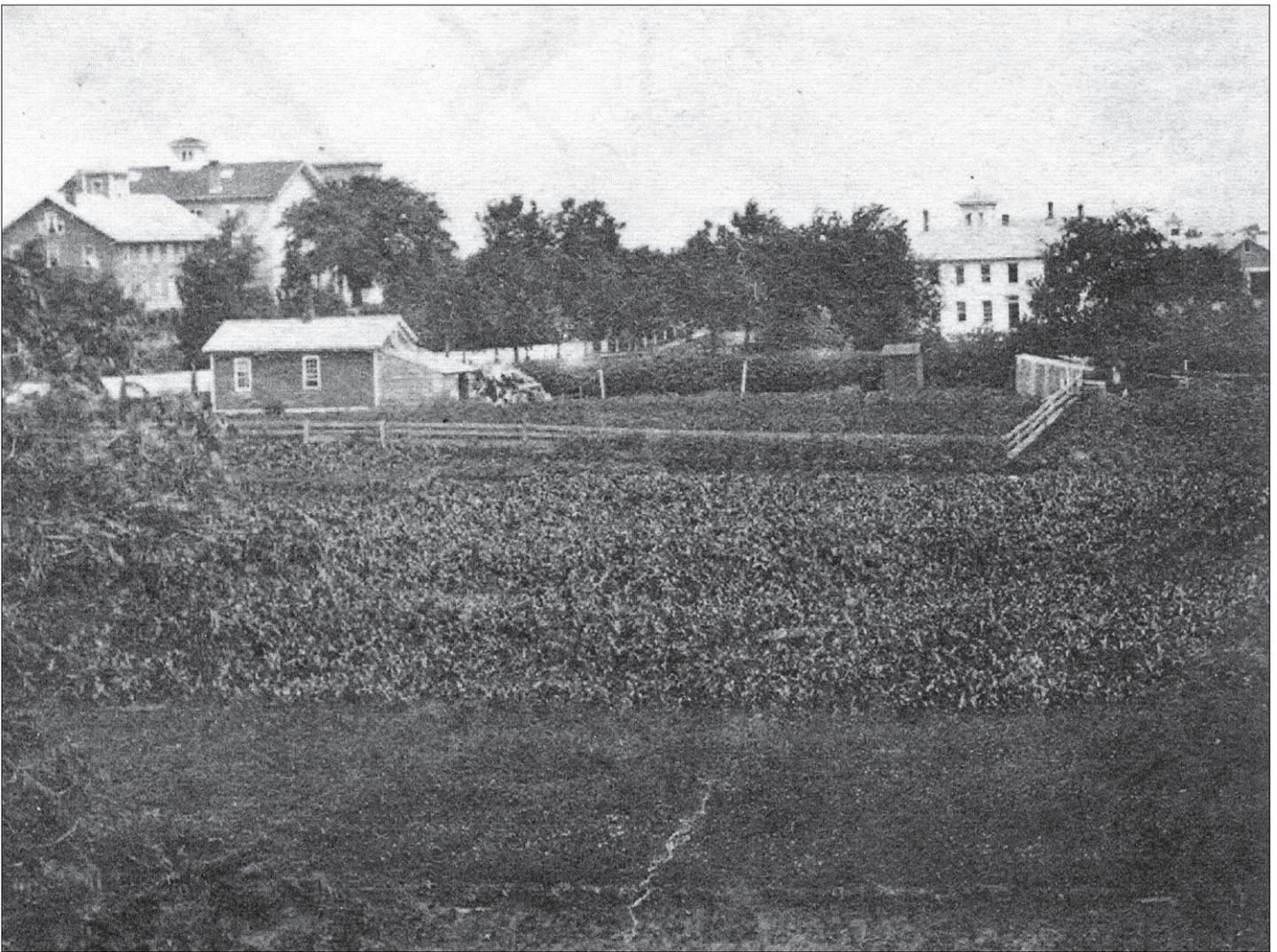
"The fire which destroyed the printing-office and press at Oneida, and thus abruptly terminated the Free Church Circular, spared the greater part of our type—sufficient for the use of this paper—and made occasion for the transfer of the printing department to Brooklyn. We have since built a printing office in the rear of our dwelling, procured a power-press, and made all arrangements necessary for efficient and permanent service in the work before us. We now commence a weekly paper at the center of communication, (for Brooklyn is a part of New York) surrounded by radiating lines of railroads, steamers, telegraphs and expresses. Our working company of writers, reporters and printers, is stronger than ever

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before, and ready as one man for any amount of service that the times may demand. Thus our enterprise is in good condition at the outset, and may grow....

"The Circular is published by Communists, and for Communists. Its main object is to help the education of several confederated Associations, who are practically devoted to the Pentecost principle of community of property. Nearly all of its readers outside of those Associations are Communists in principle.... The main object of the Circular has been avowedly to help the education of those Associations."

*Overseeing printing in Brooklyn, John Noyes did indeed influence and exercise some degree of supervision over the scattered Perfectionist groups. Printing became the main enterprise of the Brooklyn family. And it was really there that the familiar publishing routine of the Oneida Community was established—that is, a team of all ages working happily together in the fashion of a bee. "Almost every member participated in the work on the Circular, the housework being distributed in a way to allow that privilege to all," the Brooklyn press announced. "All our women, and the children not too young are learning; and alternate between the different departments of domestic care, and setting type."*



*Looking to the north is a cottage (late 1860s) built on the site of the print shop destroyed in 1851 (left center). To its left is the first Mansion House (built 1848, demolished 1870).*



Pierrepont Noyes

## The Second Fire, 1881, by Pierrepont Noyes

*After the Community breakup and with utopian sanctuary behind them, the Oneidans faced a fearful arena of ambition and selfishness in a world that now seemed implacably hostile. Those living in the Mansion House sensed that what lay beyond their grounds was a threatening presence, coiling and drawing its energies together to strike them down. As the first year of joint stock life drew to a close, the idea of attack from the outside became palpable as Pierrepont Noyes, then eleven, and living in the Mansion House, remembered all his life. The passage that follows is taken from his book, "My Father's House" (pp. 207-10, 213).*

Late in the month of October, the Community was startled by a midnight fire in the printing office down at the Arcade [building #39 on the map]. It was extinguished by a watchman without serious damage, but it left a cloud of apprehension hanging over us. Oil-soaked rags indicated that the fire was of incendiary origin.

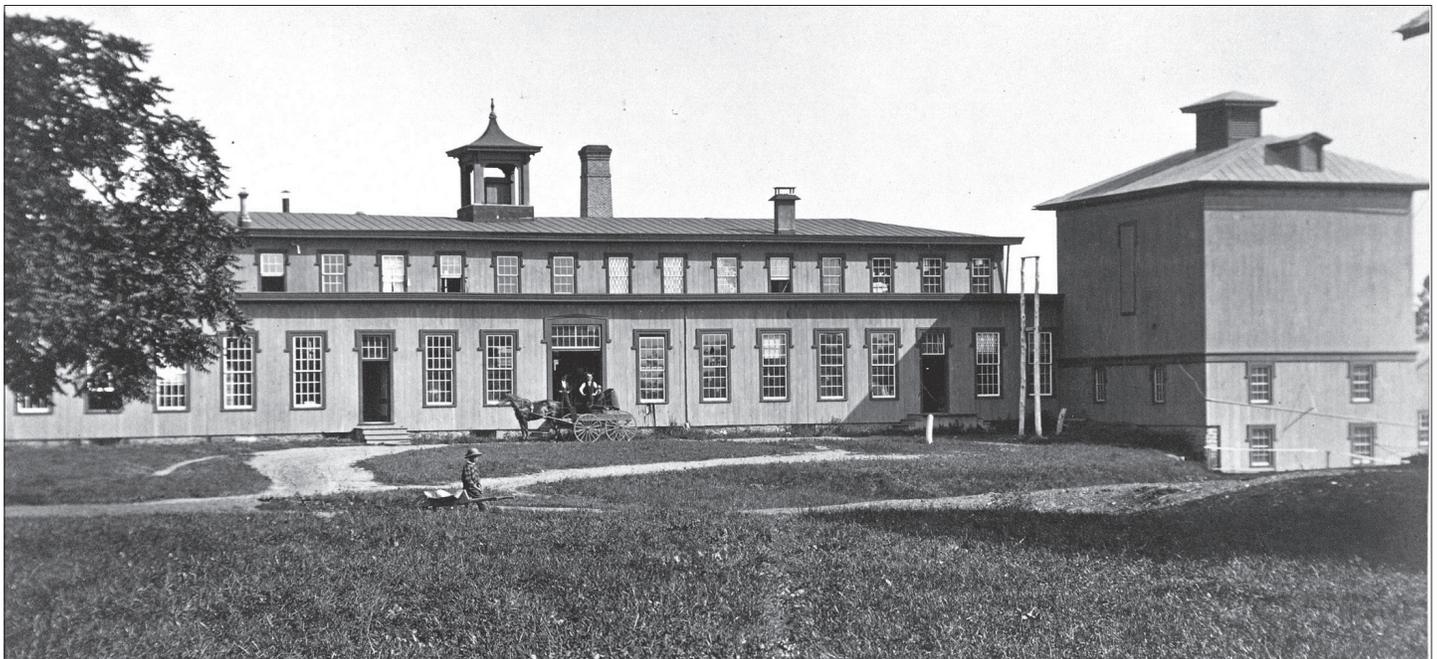
In the days that followed, the most alarming and absurd rumors were credited. Callers brought to our room their fears that the Mansion House would be attacked next. I was

proud of my mother [Harriet Worden]. She maintained a quiet confidence, mixing advice to trust in God with heartening assertions of her belief that the menfolks were fully capable of protecting the buildings and would soon catch the firebug.

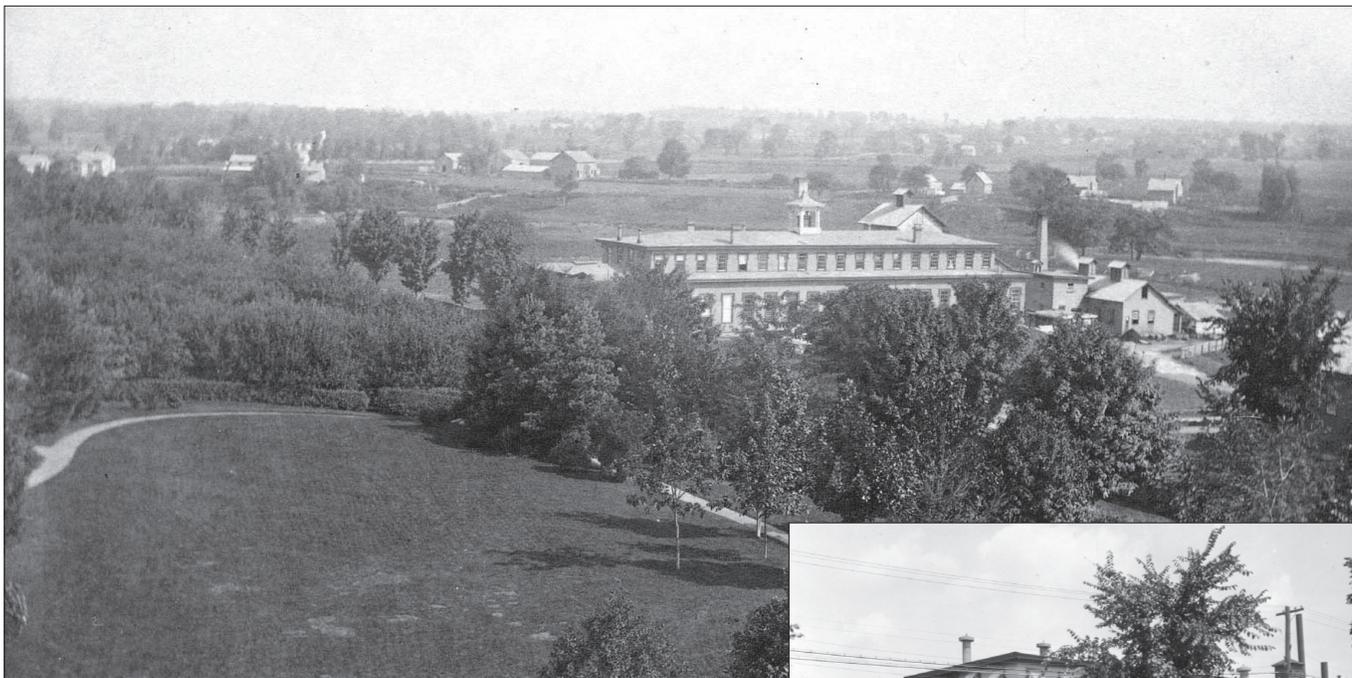
There was, nevertheless, even in her self-reliant cheerfulness an element of grimness that could not escape my anxious solicitude. I spent more of my time with her than ever before. For many months my mother had met the problems forced upon her by the breakup with a practical optimism. She often said, "We have a good home, we have each other, and what is most important, we all have good health. God is good to us." Now, however, this new danger brought to the surface whatever of pessimism had lain buried in her consciousness. I sensed this. I think that during those autumn days of 1881, my mother and I tried to conceal from each other our real feelings by little dramatic exhibitions of cheerfulness. She played lively tunes on the piano and sang the liveliest songs. On my side, I remember rushing in to her one evening and announcing with exaggerated enthusiasm a one cent per hour raise of my pay at the



Harriet Worden



The Arcade, perhaps late 1870s



*The North Lawn and the Arcade, about 1874*

carpenter shop. We certainly pooled whatever optimism we had and it carried us, with reasonable morale, through the period which I have always reckoned as the low point, the emotional nadir, of my life.

As weeks passed by without discovery of the Arcade incendiary, there settled on the entire Community group a feeling of impending disaster. The number of watchmen on the premises was doubled. When men, even our strongest men, discussed the fire, there was an ominous note in their well-meant assurances. Memory is apt to be pictorial and my memory asserts November, 1881, was a dismal succession of dark, rainy days, low-hanging clouds and thunderstorms. This picture may be only a reflection of the gloom in my soul.

And then came the catastrophe. One night my dreams were invaded by a cry, a man somewhere in the darkness yelling, "Fi-er! Fi-er!" Once awake, the cry sounded even more terrifying as it grew fainter and fainter in the distance. When the lamp in our room was lighted, I saw my mother dressing feverishly. She told me to dress, but to stay with Stella [his sister] while she found out where the fire was. I shall never forget the ghastly terror of those minutes—they seemed like hours—while, alone with Stella, I awaited my mother's return. The accumulated apprehensiveness of the weeks just past was transmuted into horror.

It turned out that the fire was in the horse barn [see bldg



*Front of the old Arcade, about 1923*

#15 on map]. We were greatly relieved, but I remembered that the burning barn stood just across the road and not more than a hundred yards from the Mansion House. My mother dressed Stella; not until then would she permit me to go to the front of the building, where I could see the fire.

It was a spectacular blaze, a huge barn filled to the roof with hay and all on fire at once. I was not allowed to go nearer than the North Lawn. From there, with other boys, I watched the roof fall in, a terrifying roar, and then a great column of fiery sparks rushing far up into the darkness. The spectacle was so gorgeous that, being boys, we at times lost all sense of disaster and went wild with excitement over each outburst of roaring flames.

Between the crashes we talked of the poor horses and were sickened by the thought of their agonies. We knew most of them by name. Holton wandered restlessly among the crowd repeating the question: "Don't you hope they saved Barnard and Prince?" (These were two huge bay-colored Clydesdales we all loved.) And I heard Grosvenor anxiously asking someone: "Was Judy saved?" Whatever joy

*Cont'd. next page*

was found in the spectacle was gone when Ransom, coming out of the darkness, reported: "Only two horses rescued and one of those, Jenny Snow, badly burned."

Circulating among the crowd we learned that another fire was discovered at the fruit-house—Arcade—just before flames appeared in the barn. Pat Maloney, our watchman, was the hero of this smaller blaze and he had a lacerated hand to prove his heroism. He told his story over and over. Pat was greatly, and it almost seemed permanently, excited. When he lost his men listeners, he was glad to repeat the tale to an audience of admiring boys. He told how he smelled smoke, and all the details of his fire fighting, and then when he had the Arcade fire out, how he looked up and, "By God, the whole barn was on fire."

For years thereafter November 9th, "when the horse barn burned," was a sinister date with all of us.

Whether I went to bed again that night I do not know. All I remember is a cold gray dawn, the smoldering ruin, and a pervasive smell of burnt horseflesh. Twenty-seven horses were burned. The incendiary, with a fiendish determination to make destruction certain, started the fire in a chute which communicated with the hayloft above. There never was a chance of saving the barn and Pat nearly lost his life trying to rescue the horses. I picked my way among the smoldering heaps of

debris and dead horses in that part of the ruins where the flames had been extinguished. All the world and the future smelled of destruction—of charred wood and burnt flesh.

To my surprise and lasting admiration, our men appeared neither alarmed nor discouraged. They went about cleaning away the wreckage with the most matter-of-fact efficiency, and I heard them discussing, cheerfully, plans for a new barn and the hiring of necessary horses until such time as more could be bought. Their spirit told me of the difference between a man and a boy. Further, as I recall now the calm courage with which most of those men met that disaster, I think I know more about how the Oneida Community survived its many economic difficulties and the savage attacks by press, pulpit and public opinion for more than thirty years....

As I look back on that period of my life, it seems to me that the barn fire cleared the atmosphere of Oneida as a thunderstorm at the end of a rainy spell sometimes clears up the weather. Between the time of the burning of the horse barn and my trip to Niagara Falls the following spring, my memories are of a busy Community, whose members, emerging from the nervousness caused by our fire scare, had, through some kind of reverse suggestion, shaken off much of the questioning timidity which marked the first months of the new social order.



*The horse barn, about 1874*

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*“Group No. 1” (1863), the Community posed on the North Lawn with the horse barn visible at right.*



*Immediately rebuilt after the 1881 fire, the horse barn (center left) looked like this about 1900. This is looking west over Oneida Creek.*

Oneida Community  
**MANSION  
HOUSE**  
A National Historic Landmark

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