

# “The Happiest Days of My Life”



Searching for Utopia in Tennessee



Timeline  
and  
Bibliography

Tennessee State Library and Archives  
403 Seventh Avenue North, Nashville, Tennessee 37243-0312

## Timeline : Major Utopian Colonies

- 1800 Second Great Revival: religious outpouring across the mid-South follows five-day revivals during which people spoke in tongues, fell to the ground, entered near-comas, and professed their faith.
- 1800-50 Significant religious and political utopian communities are planted in New England, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, and Tennessee.
- 1808 Congress bans the importation of slaves into the U.S. after January 1, 1808, but slave shipments to American will continue virtually unchallenged until 1859.
- 1809 **Shaker colonies** are established at South Union and Pleasant Hill, Kentucky.
- 1814 The Harmony Society, religious separatists led by **George Rapp**, found **Harmonie on the Wabash** in New Harmony, Indiana.
- 1816 The American Colonization society is formed to encourage and enable the resettlement of American slaves in Africa. Their efforts will lead to the founding of Liberia in 1820.
- 1819 The Panic of 1819 is the country's first major financial crisis, with widespread unemployment, numerous bank foreclosures, and a decline in manufacturing and agriculture.
- 1825-26 Fanny Wright buys 4,000 acres of land in West Tennessee for her utopian experiment at Nashoba. The venture is political and cultural rather than religious: Nashoba's interracial community is an early effort to provide an alternative to slavery.**
- 1825 The Harmonists move to Economy, Pennsylvania. **Robert Owen**, hoping to create a more perfect society through free education and the abolition of social classes and personal wealth, buys their remarkably well-planned Indiana town and the surrounding lands for his communitarian experiment, **New Harmony**.
- 1827 Fanny Wright's illness, the hardships of wilderness life, and the complexities of trying to rise above the master-slave relationship and live as equals makes life in Nashoba increasingly difficult.**
- 1828 **Robert Owen** returns to England. His children and others continue his work in **New Harmony**, but within a year the colony ceases to exist as a distinct enterprise. Nevertheless, the community continues to function as an intellectual center, introducing the nation's first free public school, the first kindergarten, the first free library, the first school with equal education for both boys and girls, and an early vocational education program.
- 1830 By this time, Fanny Wright has moved the few remaining Nashoba colonists to New Harmony, Indiana, which has also fallen on hard times. Eventually many of the colonists will move to Liberia.**
- 1840 **John Humphrey Noyes** founds the **Putney Association**, a Vermont religious group who choose to live according to communistic tenets.
- 1841 Unitarian minister **George Ripley** founds **Brook Farm**, an experimental farm in

- West Roxbury, Massachusetts, based on shared manual labor and cooperative living. Members and visitors included Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Horace Greeley. Its school, based on progressive concepts concerning learning from experience, was exceptional.
- 1846-1847 Because of the poor soil and lack of farming experience of the members, **Brook Farm** is not financially successful. When the community's main building burns to the ground before it is even completed, the experiment comes to an end.
- 1848 The **Putney Association** becomes the **Oneida Community**, centering in Oneida, New York, and Wallingford, Connecticut.
- 1855 A group of German Pietists known as the Ebenezer Society move from New York state to Iowa. They name their settlements (seven villages) the **Amana Colonies**.
- 1870 Thomas Hughes, the English social reformer and author, conceives of establishing a colony in the United States where England's "second sons" could pursue farming and trades without being stigmatized by caste or class. England's younger sons were restricted by the tradition of English primogeniture from enjoying a full range of professional opportunities.
- 1876-1880 Disagreements in the **Oneida Community** lead to major changes in its leadership and social structure.
- 1880 Rugby colony officially dedicated on October 5, 1880.
- 1881 In January the joint-stock company, called the "**Oneida Community, Limited**," is set up and the **Oneida Community** is discontinued; the commercial enterprise that succeeds it (the Oneida silversmiths) survives into the present century.
- 1881 Typhoid epidemic takes the lives of seven Rugbians.
- 1884 Approximately 400 colonists live in Rugby; the next several years are the most successful for the community in terms of population growth and accomplishments. Although Rugby never thrived, the settlers managed to establish a canning company, sawmill, commissary, printing office, and boarding house, The Tabard Inn, which drew in summer holiday traffic.
- 1887 A decline in commodity prices, falling land prices, and a long drought mark the beginning of the end for the Rugby settlement.
- 1892 Robert Walton, one of Rugby's first settlers, assumes management of Rugby's Board of Aid until his death in 1907. Walton's son, William T. Walton, and his family continue to reside in Rugby and manage the public buildings until their deaths in the late 1950s.
- 1894**
- **Julius Wayland** uses *The Coming Nation* profits to buy 1,000 acres in Dickson County, which he names after social critic John Ruskin.
  - The first 32 settlers arrive and draw up a charter for the colony.
- 1895** Forced to relinquish control of the paper, Wayland leaves the Ruskin colony.

1896 Rugby founder Thomas Hughes dies, having lost thousands of dollars pursuing his dream of an American Utopia.

### 1897-1898

- At its zenith, Ruskin has 250 residents from 32 states and several other countries. Community assets include \$100,000 in cash, 1800 acres of land, and 75 buildings.
- A diverse commercial enterprise, Ruskin operates a print shop, a book store, a farm with a large dairy herd, a kiln and planing mill, a grist mill, a steam laundry, a large canning plant inside Ruskin Cave, a machine shop, a café, a bakery, a commissary, and a school. They also manufacture chewing gum, suspenders, and patent medicines.
- A long series of lawsuits begins when several colonists attempt to resign from the colony and ask that their investments be reimbursed.
- The issue of women's rights divides the colony, and requests for membership end.

### 1899

- In the midst of efforts by charter members to dissolve the corporation, newer members vote to replace the association with the Ruskin Commonwealth.
- The charter group convinces a judge to declare the colony deadlocked and to sell its assets at auction.
- At a festive 4<sup>th</sup> of July party for their neighbors, the colonists sell their assets at sharply discounted prices, hoping to recoup their losses. However, once the debts are paid, only \$6,000 remains . . . less than \$40 per colonist.
- A few loyal members create a new Ruskin Colony in Georgia and continue to publish *The Coming Nation*. By 1901 that community will also have failed.

1933 The **Amana Colony** in Iowa ends its communitarian lifestyle when members elect to separate the commercial activities of the community from their religious life. The Amana Society, a commercial enterprise overseen by a board of directors continues in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to manage the society's farmlands, forests, and manufacturing enterprises (Amana refrigerators, ovens, and microwaves).

1966 The Rugby Restoration Association is formed to preserve the settlement.

1967 **Stephen Gaskin** begins "Monday Night Class" lecture series in San Francisco.

1971 The Farm is founded in Summertown, Tennessee.

1974-76 Opening of The Farm to the outside world; Organization of Plenty International; Publication of *Spiritual Midwifery* by **Ina May Gaskin**, whose efforts will revolutionize the midwifery movement in America.

1980 The Farm's population peaks at 1,400-1,700 people.

### 1983

- Reorganization of the economic structure of The Farm to individual self-support.
- Return to "human scale" of balancing population to the surrounding ecosystem.

1990 Return to sound financial footing, better fiscal management, and more effective production

1993 Development of **The Farm's** eco-village concept

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