THE FREE LOVE NETWORK IN AMERICA, 1850 to 1860

By John Spurlock *Bloomsburg University*

During his lecture tour of the Midwest in the winter of 1856, phrenologist James H. Cook took time to write a catechism of radical thought. It reviewed a variety of social ills and built toward a denunciation of the basic problem of American society. "What constitutes the TRUNK of the tree of Social Evil?" asked Cook, who then responded, "Legal Marriage....Is legal marriage a far greater curse than African slavery? Yes, by far."[1]

American historians of the early 19th century have always been aware that a group of people during the Jacksonian era embraced a doctrine called free love. Unfortunately, who these people were and what their beliefs were have remained largely unknown. Perhaps the major problem that historians have had with free love is that since the pre-Civil War movement has received little systematic attention, free lovers appear as aberrations in the Jacksonian era. Several recent works, however, have analyzed the assumptions of Jacksonian Americans about sexuality, family, and personal identity. Within this context free love appears not as an aberration but as an expression of ideals of marriage, purity, and individuality that were widely accepted in the developing middle-class. But free love, in addition to being an expression of middle-class ideals, was also a unique and radical critique of American society that grew out of concerns of the late 1840s and 1850s.[2]

Recent American historiography has pointed to the importance of the emergence of the middle class in America following the Era of Good Feelings. From the 1820s young men and women, as they abandoned their farms and villages for new occupations and status, faced an often frightening world in which individuals seemed more isolated and at the same time more vulnerable to the demands of commerce, politics, and society. In order to establish at least a limited order in the chaos they perceived members of this new middle class used their experience of revival religion, their beliefs about marriage and the family, and their hopes for society to form an ideal of individual character. They believed that if individuals practiced virtue and saw through the shams of polite society they could give both meaning and moral order to their lives and overcome their isolation in those relationships that were most basic.[3]

Marriage assumed a central place in the social vision of this new middle class. Writers and lecturers like William Alcott and Sylvester Graham offered a comprehensive view of sexuality and marriage, stressing personal purity and the quality of relations both during courtship and in matrimony. By the 1840s an ideal of true marriage had been formed that viewed the voluntary decision to enter marriage as the most basic of all social relations. The guarantee that a marriage was sound, and therefore a sure foundation for society, was both the character of those entering it and their love for one another. True love never varied, but bound two people together exclusively and for life. Spiritualists, who appeared at the end of

the 1840s, even gave love credit for binding people together eternally.[4] As middle-class men and women came to view marriage as the root of all social relations, they also began to fear that its subversion potentially destroyed all of society. If something was wrong with marriage, as many Jacksonians believed, then all of society was at risk.

By tracing the shift in perception during the late 1840s that led some members of the middle class to repudiate marriage we can gain a clearer insight into the social vision of early middle-class reformers and radicals. Those who doubted the legitimacy of marriage shared many of the assumptions of middle-class reformers of the period — assumptions that derived from widely held middle-class ideals. These men and women looked upon individuality as an irreducible condition and feared institutions that limited individual autonomy, whether churches or governments. As we reconstruct the free love network that was formed to promote these beliefs we will see the connections between free love and other ante-bellum reforms, as well as free love's dependence on middle-class assumptions and values.

One pervasive result of revival religion, economic boom and bust, and the extension of political rights in the Jacksonian era was the proliferation of reform movements. Sylvester Graham preached not only sexual purity but vegetarianism; Elizabeth Cady Stanton campaigned for woman suffrage and the abolition of slavery. Communitarian experiments drew upon reform movements and often embodied powerful expressions of reform sentiment. In the 1840s the most widespread communitarian movement in the United States was Associationism, the Americanized version of Charles Fourier's socialism. Albert Brisbane promoted Fourier's ideas on the front pages of the New York *Tribune* during 1842 and 1843, and in pamphlets and books throughout the decade. Itinerant lecturers travelled the country preaching association and passional affinity. Twenty-nine associations, called phalanxes, dotted the landscape from Brook Farm in Massachusetts to the North American in New Jersey, and as far west as Ceresco in Wisconsin. As many as 10,000 Americans participated in Associationism, either investing time and money in advancing Fourier's system or actually living in a phalanx. Central to Fourier's teaching was the doctrine that human passions, allowed to act freely, would naturally produce a harmonious social order. The leaders of American Fourierism toned down this teaching, especially as it regarded marriage. Where Fourier insisted that the mass of humanity could never be reduced to monogamy, Brisbane and other propagandists assured American readers that marriage was the pivot of all social relations and association would tend to purify matrimony. Any changes in the bonds of marriage would come only after generations of successful association.[5]

By the end of the 1840s a wide ranging shift was taking place in American culture, summarized by John Higham in the phrase "from boundlessness to consolidation." As capitalism settled into the dominant structure of the economy, belief in a republic of independent artisans and workingmen gave way to a recognition of the inevitability of class conflict. At the same time, many abolitionists began to perceive southern slaveholders as more recalcitrant on the issue of slavery, and thus force as the more likely means of resolving the slavery question. Even in religion, ritual and formality began to displace the importance of revival. Fourierism was also fragmenting by the early 1850s. Almost all of the

phalanxes established during the preceding decade had dissolved by 1850 and the major Fourierest journal had ceased publication.[6]

Social consolidation, and the politicization of many reform movements, provided the environment for some reformers to become far more consistent in their vision of society and far more radical as well. As some segments of the antislavery movement began to seek electoral victories, other committed abolitionists held fast to their confidence in personal regeneration and their distrust of government. As official Fourierism fragmented, fundamentalists in the cause took a hard look at the French socialist's most unpalatable ideas. By the early 1850s a network of individuals, communities, reform organizations, and periodicals supported a new vision of American society. Advocates of this vision often perceived different details — some, for instance, favored utopian communities while others refused to compromise their individual freedom in any group. In general, however, they agreed that commerce founded in selfishness, government based on force, and religion without proof destroyed social harmony and degraded the individual. These visionaries assumed for themselves and their movement the name radical, consciously distancing themselves from bourgeois illusions and compromises. At the same time radicals, as middle-class intellectuals, believed in the individual, private property, and true love. The ultimate expression of middle-class radicalism was free love, the repudiation of any relation between a man and a woman that violated the personal freedom of either.

While the consolidation of American reform movements freed the radicals to develop their own vision, American Fourierism provided the radicals with elements of both an ideology and an organization. Beginning in 1851, disciples of Fourier such as Marx Lazarus, Thomas and Mary Nichols, and Stephen Pearl Andrews recast Fourier's ideas into free love. Other former Fourierists, like James H. Cook, took to the lecture circuit to spread the new creed among the scattered faithful. In 1858 Albert Brisbane issued a manifesto suggesting that women should be beyond the control of their husbands and have the privilege of changing companions when necessary. New York City, Brisbane's headquarters and the home of the first major Fourierist journal, *The Phalanx*, was the earliest center of free love in America. The first works on free love were printed there. Ohio, which had more phalanxes than any state except New York, became the center of free love agitation by 1856. Apparently the lines of communication among Fourierists also carried the radical gospel, so that those who had come to despise the isolated household under the tutelage of Albert Brisbane were most likely to call for its destruction when the Fourier movement no longer provided a milder alternative.[7]

In some respects free love combined other reform beliefs. African slavery and married slavery had already been compared in abolitionist and feminist circles — free lovers demanded the end of both. They expected woman to gain her equality with man only after she gained economic rights and freedom from possession within marriage. Most free lovers embraced non-resistance, believing that all force was illegitimate.[8] Vegetarianism and teetotalism were pervasive among free lovers, both part of the personal rehabilitation necessary for those who sought more elevated sexual relations. Free lovers believed that sexual intercourse would be less frequent within a free relationship because both partners would be free of the lusts engendered by the artificiality of marriage.

Though it drew upon the ideas of Fourierism and other ante-bellum reforms, only free love demanded the abolition of marriage. The best means of identifying the core of free love ideology is by contrasting the middle-class ideal of marriage to an extreme statement of free love. This will allow us to appreciate the relationship between free love and middle-class reforms without losing sight of free love's distinctive features.

Henry C. Wright was a non-resistant and a spiritualist who lectured on marriage and family during the 1850s. He believed that love alone created marriage, but that such intense love could only be exclusive. At a spiritualist convention in 1856 Wright drafted and pushed through a resolution that condemned free love and extolled exclusive marriage. Francis Barry, an abolitionist in Ohio who was a spiritualist and free lover, took Wright to task in the pages of the Liberator for his views.

> I am aware that you and others advocate a system that you call marriage, in which love is an essential feature. ...The term 'marriage' has, by common consent, been applied to a system of which love forms no necessary part —a system essentially like chattel slavery.

Wright answered that he knew some free lovers really followed free lust, while other free lovers recognized that true love could exist only between two persons. Barry shot back that those free lovers who believed in exclusive attachments were a minority and were barred by their theory from following their attractions.

> Free lovers demand perfect freedom and unconditional freedom for love...and they are perfectly willing that the heart shall decide for itself whether it will have one or more objects...they believe...that variety in love is not only natural, but in the highest degree promotive of purity, happiness, and development.[9]

For free lovers, as for the middle class, men and women were joined by love. Both free love and middle-class marriage sought to spiritualize relations between the sexes, making them dependent upon a force beyond the will. While Wright was confident that true love would never change, free lovers like Barry believed that a relationship that began in bliss could end in bondage for the woman and despair for the man if love departed while the bonds of matrimony remained. Marriage was no better than any other arrangement that limited the individual's freedom. Happiness for men and women could only be certain if both were free to alter their relationships when love changed.

Again the links to reform currents persisted, even with the distinctive radicalism. This was one of the ways free love doctrines, though rebellious, linked to wider middle-class concerns. Although only radicals demanded that individuals be free to follow their affections, other reformers had by the early 1850s become embroiled in debates over marriage as the basis of social harmony or disorder and had begun discussing its potential for good and evil. As Blanche Hersh has shown, marriage became a major issue among feminists at this time. The first issue of the women's rights journal *The Una*, in 1853, contained an attack upon the domestic condition of women. Rev. A.D. Mayo wrote that women are as confined by the

household as men would be were they forced to reamin there. "Either can live exclusively in it, but only by the same process; by a systematic treading down of a whole scale of the nature." During its three years of publication *The Una*, edited by Paulina Wright Davis, persisted in questioning marriage. It represented many of the most important women's rights leaders in attacking marriage and demanding changes in divorce laws. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, for instance, in an 1860 convention, called for more liberal divorce laws. The harm done by the wrong choice of business partner, teacher, or minister, she said, was limited by the freedom to end contracts. This should also apply to the choice of a spouse: "...the dictates of humanity and common sense alike show that the latter and most important contract should no more be perpetual than either or all of the former."[10]

One of the most radical feminists of the 1850s was Hannah F.M. Brown. She contributed to *The Una*, made lecture tours, and edited her own journal, *The Agitator*. In 1859 Hannah Brown discussed marriage in a pamphlet on social freedom. Men refuse to learn the law of soul-marriage, while women are forced to marry from material necessity. "What are the results of uncongenial marriages? Ask the murderer. ...Ask the suicide. ...God has visited the sins of the fathers upon the children." Indeed, she went on, "There is no vice, no crime that is not the legitimate offspring of men-made marriages. Pauperism in rags; red-handed war, and slavery with its iron heart, may with propriety claim kinship with unloving unions." Hannah Brown believed that true marriages could be formed and would result if women were allowed to choose freely.[11] Feminists like Stanton and Brown accepted an ideal of marriage as the core of society and sought to defend that ideal against mistaken choices and unloving unions.

Although accused of being a free lover, Brown defended herself by saying that she never advocated the abrogation of marriage. Instead of perpetual unions, however, she believed in what she called both the "chainless marriage" and the "divine marriage," a system apparently based upon spiritualism. Spiritualist lecturer (and former Fourierist) Warren Chase wrote in the *Agitator* that only when marriage became a true union of harmonizing pairs would it be worthy the name marriage. For Chase, as for Brown, the redemption of marriage required the purging of what currently existed as marriage. "How strange," Chase wrote, "that seduction should be counted no crime when permitted by a priest or magistrate under the name and sanction of marriage."[12]

Many spiritualists believed that spiritual affinity was the basis of relationships in the beyond and sought just such connections in the here and now. Free lover Thomas Nichols proclaimed in 1855, "...the truth is, and it is well known to those who know anything, that the Free Love Doctrine, rightly understood, is the Great Central Doctrine of Spiritualism." Probably most spiritualists rejected Nichols' "Central Doctrine," but marriage reform remained a vital issue within spiritualism. The seer from Poughkeepsie, Andrew Jackson Davis, included marriage lectures as he travelled to spiritualist gatherings. Bad marriages, he told his audiences, produced evil offspring, while heart marriages would give the world beautiful and peaceful children. Another spiritualist lecturer, Alfred Cridge, believed that bad relations retarded spiritual progress. The spirits, he claimed, practiced free love and the living should emulate the departed by abolishing marital, along with chattel, slavery.[13]

Although it drew upon and supported antislavery, feminism, and spiritualism, free love was more than just an extreme position within various reform movements. Free lovers edited their own journals, established their own organizations, and proclaimed their own gospel. During 1856 both James H. Cook and Francis Barry lectured throughout the Midwest. In Illinois, Michigan, and Ohio Barry claimed to find more radicalism than he had expected. "I have taken the field," he declared, "and do not intend to leave it till God — that humbug of humbugs; and the huge hydra, hell begotten monster, Government; and Marriage, that abomination of abominations, shall no longer curse the earth."[14]

The reception accorded to lecturers on free love varied considerably; here is another way to test the complex radical/middle-class relationship. In some places radicals were clearly unwelcome, but where spiritualist beliefs, Fourierist doctrines, or concern over marriage had already become issues, the lecturers might make converts. A former Methodist minister, E.S. Tyler, lectured on spiritualism and women's rights in Skaneateles, New York, during the spring of 1857. Some residents there had already adopted the ideas of free love and agreed with Tyler when he claimed that marriage stood in the way of the advancement of women. In the next world, Tyler told them, affections were followed rather than possessed. By the fall of 1857 there were twenty respectable farm families that endorsed free love. During October ex-Rev. Tyler convinced one of his converts, Mrs. Mary Lewis, to accompany him to a free love colony in the West.[15]

Publications probably spread free love doctrines more widely than lecturers did. By 1854 Marx Edgeworth Lazarus' *Love vs. Marriage*, Andrews' *Love, Marriage, and Divorce and the Sovereignty of the Individual*, and Thomas and Mary Nichols' *Esoteric Anthropology* and *Marriage* had all been published. In 1855 Mary Nichols published her fictionalized autobiography, *Mary Lyndon*, and in 1856 James Clay's *Voice From Prison* emerged. The last long treatment of free love in the decade was Austin Kent's, *Free Love; or, A Philosophical Demonstration of the Non-exclusive Nature of Connubila Love*, which appeared in 1857. Periodical literature, on both sides of the free love question, reached an even wider audience. Horace Greeley, though opposing free love, debated the topic with Stephen Pearl Andrews in the *Tribune*. Similarly, Adin Ballou debated free love with Austin Kent in the columns of the *Christian Socialist* during the early 1850s. Alfred Cridge, with his wife Anne and his brother-in-law William Denton, began publication of the weekly *Vanguard* in 1857 to promote spiritualism. In addition to journals discussing marriage and free love, there were others that endorsed the abolition of marriage. *The Nichols Journal* began in April 1853, and continued, with varying titles and at changing intervals, until 1857. During 1856 and 1857 the *Social Revolutionist* was published by John Patterson. It was followed by *Age of Freedom* in 1858 and *Good Time Coming* in 1860.[16]

The many books and journals reporting on or advocating free love reinforce the impression that marriage abolition was widely discussed during the 1850s. As early as 1852 Horace Greeley complained that the "...free trade sophistry respecting marriage is already on every libertine's tongue...." We cannot assume, of course, that ideas widely known were also taken seriously. For instance, Thomas Nichols claimed in 1853 that *Esoteric Anthropology*, his book of health advice, had already sold four editions of 1000 copies each. While many of those who bought the book

must have taken to heart its injunctions concerning the marriage bed, a great many more probably wanted to find out how much sleep they should be getting and on what kind of mattress. Thomas Nichols claimed a circulation for *Nichols Journal* of 20,000, though this was undoubtedly an exaggeration. We can have more confidence in the circulation figure for the *Social Revolutionist*, which was 400 in 1856, mainly of enthusiastic mid-westerners.[17]

Just as middle-class ideology had placed marriage at the center of social relations, free love placed marriage at the center of social evils and demanded that it be abolished. The unfettered flow of affection, affinity, or love would determine what relationships individuals would enter and how long they would last. C.M. Overton wrote that to be a free lover was "...to believe that ATTRACTION, or natural law, should form the bond of union between conjugal partners...." "The sexual relation," Thomas Nichols told an audience in Cincinnati, "Like all other relations, have their own laws, and the freedom we demand, is the freedom to obey those laws."[18] Both Overton and Nichols proclaimed a radical change in marriage, yet they based their demands upon the bourgeois assumption that only love could overcome an individual's isolation. Their movement elevated unions based upon free and undeluded love, but expected that love would change its object. Yet even among this narrowly defined group there existed an important division, with the authorities cited above on either side.

Health reformers Thomas and Mary Nichols had been among the first to carry the free love banner. In 1853 and 1854 they were at the center of the debate over marriage abolition at Modern Times, on Long Island, and helped make the anarchist community the first free love village. By 1854 they left for a wider field of activity in the West and in the spirit world. Their interest in spiritualism had developed about the same time that they became committed to free love, but it was not until 1854 that spiritual allies revealed to Thomas and Mary that a new society would be created by a small group of persons who first purified themselves by abstaining from unhealthy practices. Once purified, this group would establish on earth new social forms, including free love. Following the teachings of Sylvester Graham, the Nichols had always expected that freely acting affections would be temperate, but they proposed no specific limits to their fulfillment. Communication with the spirit world revealed a new element of free love to the Nichols. While variety was certainly the shape of things to come, a man and woman were to refrain from sex except when they intended to have children. The Nichols thus raised group needs for eventual transcendence above the exclusive rights of the individual.[19]

Soon after the Nichols announced their "Law of Progression in Harmony" others took exception. "Peter Socialist," writing to the *Social Revolutionist* from Boston, protested the Nichols' exclusivism; they established a standard of abstinence, not of temperance, and judged others by it.

> If freedom for the affections is not to be installed till mankind may control the sexual desire, as they now control the desire to ride on horseback, or to travel in foreign countries, we who are fighting for it, may as well lay down our arms.

He insisted that health required more intercourse than allowed by their rule.

Francis Barry attacked the idea of purifying a small group in preparation for a better society. "We do not believe in getting ready to live; — we believe in LIVING." Such a controversy might have been interminable had not the Nichols abruptly halted it. In 1856 they announced that revelations from the spirit world by St. Ignatius Loyola and St. Francis Xavier led them to the study of Catholicism. By 1857 they had been received into the Roman Catholic Church.[20] Subsequently, individual autonomy would be unquestioned within free love.

The ideas that free lovers advanced in their writings and debates show the importance that they invested in such middle-class values as purity of person, individuality, and true love. In order to appreciate the dependence of free love upon middle-class respectability we need to examine instances of free love in practice. The Free Love League in New York City was one important attempt to forge connections among those interested in marriage reform. In 1854 Stephen Pearl Andrews, Albert Brisbane, and other advanced thinkers in New York began meeting at Andrews' house for tea and talk. The circle grew so quickly that by 1855 a club had been formed, holding its meetings in rented halls. According to a *New York Times* reporter who infiltrated the Free Love League, the meetings attracted about 150 men and women twice a week. "They danced;" wrote the correspondent, "they made merry; they took part in plays of whist and chess and backgammon...." In fact, the Free Love League, in spite of its discussion of radical literature, appeared no more ominous than any other social gathering of serious-minded middle-class men and women intent upon improving, as well as enjoying, themselves. Harmless or not, the club aroused enormous interest in Manhattan. A crowd showed up at a meeting one week after the *Times'* article appeared. The police soon arrived and closed the meeting down. If there were subsequent meetings of the League, they were held discreetly.[21]

In the great distances outside of America's few cities the creation of networks among marriage radicals became the business of the journals. Readers of the *Social Revolutionist* not only could follow the debate over Progression in Harmony or learn the latest communications from the spirit world on free love, they could have their names added to the list of variety free lovers. For nine or ten cents to cover postage their names would be sent to everyone on the list and they would receive the list themselves, thus allowing contact among possible affinities. "Let radicals make themselves known to each other," read the announcement. Alfred Cridge offered to print descriptions in the *Vanguard* of those seeking congenial relations and serve as a go-between for the initial correspondence of interested parties.[22]

A far more elaborate network was the Progressive Union, developed in 1854 and 1855 by Thomas and Mary Nichols as the basis for their harmonic society. As with the variety list, members would be put in touch with one another. The Progressive Union, however, required that its members prepare themselves for harmonic society by quitting tobacco, eating only "pure" food, improving their manners, and saving their money to help establish the envisioned society. Progression in Harmony, that is, sex only when child-bearing was desired, was enjoined upon all members of the Union. "Friends," Thomas urged, "begin today. Do the first duty. Free yourself of any discordant or repulsive habit. Correct the first error." Thomas travelled throughout Ohio and Michigan promoting the Progressive Union in 1855. "The men and women who are its members," he

reported, "...are persons of great honesty and devotion; of moral worth, and, in many cases, of intellectual culture." He had been surprised to learn that many were wealthy. Thomas Nichols' own name stood at the top of the Progressive Union list, followed by Stephen Pearl Andrews and several hundred other names of people who had devoted themselves to spiritual and physical purity.[23]

While networks established contacts among prospective free lovers, radicals could realize their agenda only by living together. The Nichols intended the Progressive Union as a way of recruiting colonists for their community of Memnonia, in Yellow Springs, Ohio. The community began in July 1856. As should have been expected of the authors of Progression in Harmony and the founders of the Progressive Union, the Nichols instituted a regimen at Memnonia that was far from giddy. The twenty residents were placed on a strict diet. Those who wanted to attain harmony had first to practice continence during their 90 days of probation. Students informed one another of their faults, discussed the great utopian writers, and attended Mary Nichols' daily seances. Also, in order to establish harmony at Memnonia, Thomas and Mary imposed a temporary despotism. "There must be, in the preparatory condition," Thomas explained, "the power of preventing or removing discord." By 1857, of course, the Nichols joined the Roman Catholic Church, thus ending the short career of Memnonia.[24]

The authoritarian nature of Memnonia contrasts markedly with other free love communities such as Modern Times and Ceresco. Perhaps the best example of an attempt to put the free love life into practice was the community at Berlin Heights, Ohio. At least as early as 1854 Francis Barry was encouraging other radicals to join him in Berlin Heights, a township 45 miles west of Cleveland settled by New Englanders. Berlin Heights had an active spiritualist group and opened its public hall even to radical lecturers. One wonders if Barry and his fellow free lovers discussed topics with their neighbors as freely as they did in the columns of the Social Revolutionist. If so, we can imagine a talk concluding in this way: "Now, bigot, conservative, what have you to fear? Only that you can't be scoundrels, monopolists, libertines, oppressors, aristocrats, and perpetuate your vice. Farewell God."[25]

In late 1856 a convention of radicals in Berlin Heights discussed the prospects for establishing a community there. Some who came appear to have been convinced and purchased 90 acres of farmland. They also bought the hotel in town for use as a common home and visitor's inn for other free lovers. The Berlin Heights settlement coalesced around the ideas of individual freedom, honest commerce, women's rights, and free love. There was no attempt to order the lives of the colony according to any master plan. "In regard to organization," Barry insisted, "the less the better." In addition to the group at the farm, smaller groups purchased separate lots and followed their own paths to individuality and spirituality. The Berlin Heights free lovers rejected marriage as simply and completely as possible. "Believers in marriage...will not come among us," Barry wrote, "for fear of losing their 'property'. Those however who have faith, that the 'one-love' will be secure where attraction is recognized as law, we shall of course, welcome. But I warn them that 'variety in love' will be the result."[26]

The first convention at Berlin Heights alarmed the town's more conventional residents who called a meeting at the Presbyterian church to discuss the free

lovers. When free lovers attending the meeting defended themselves against charges of licentiousness, the discussion quickly turned into a debate on the merits of free love, with those believing in fair play willing to leave the marriage radicals alone. S.J. Finney, a spiritualist lecturer, turned the tide in favor of respecting the free lovers' rights: "...so long as they obey the laws, their opinions are their own."[27] A second free love convention in August 1857, however, was too much provocation for the town's monogamous residents. The faction in town that opposed free love quickly seized the initiative by calling a second protest meeting that excluded both free lovers and spiritualists. Free lovers had no moral right to be in Berlin Heights, the meeting declared; they were people "laboring under a state of partial insanity, caused by disappointed hopes and blasted expectations, by an inordinate love of notoriety and other causes unknown or unnecessary to mention." Children of the free love community were subsequently barred from the township's school, forcing the free lovers to form their own school.[28]

The opponents of free love were prepared to do more than merely denounce the movement. In November sheriff's deputies arrested several free lovers and took them to the county seat for trial; among these were E.S. Tyler and Mrs. Lewis whom we met above. At the end of the week-long trial five of the free lovers were released on their own recognizance when they promised to leave the county. Tyler was required to give a quit-claim deed to the Davis House and allowed to return to Berlin Heights only long enough to finish his business. Mrs. Lewis was sent back to her husband. The press of the *Social Revolutionist* was to be removed from the hotel. And the farm, where many of the free lovers lived, was foreclosed and put up for sale by the sheriff. The obvious intent of these judgments was to make it impossible for the free lovers to remain in Berlin Heights. "The Free Love organization of Berlin," reported the Sandusky newspaper, "may therefore be regarded as essentially defunct. We heartily congratulate the people of that township on the result. They are relieved of a monstrous nusiance, and shocking social enormity."[29]

The Sandusky paper underestimated the free lovers. The radicals stood fast and even printed a November issue of the *Social Revolutionist*. The radicals, for their part, had underestimated the antipathy toward them in Berlin Heights. Francis Barry took the papers into town to mail. As Barry hitched his horse two men took hold of him as a "...gang of infuriated women, hissed on by their owners..." seized the packages on his wagon and made a bonfire of them.[30] By the end of 1857 the free lovers in Berlin Heights had faced both legal and informal violence. Facing the loss of their property and a hostile faction, some of the radicals decided to leave. Rather than a defeat, however, this constituted a strategic withdrawal.

Although suspicious of organization, free lovers were capable of cooperative action. Many free lovers remained in Berlin Heights on private farms or in small groups. During the winter and spring of 1858 some of those who had left began returning. They leased, then purchased, a water-cure site and grist mill; others came to live at the water-cure establishment and the group was soon milling wheat. By summer they had built two or three houses and were buying more land. Monetary considerations seem to have calmed the scruples of those they did business with and undermined a plan to force them out by isolating them. One of the leaders of the opposition, for instance, abandoned the isolation plan when he

found that the free love flour was cheaper than competing brands. Other opponents of the free lovers advocated violence and rumors of mobs circulated during the summer. The radicals had learned their lesson. They set up a system of signal guns to warn of an approaching attack and began making preparations to meet force with force. Even peace-loving Francis Barry bought a shotgun, "...and for the first time in his life, set himself to work investigating the philosophy of its construction and the mode of its operation." This time, no mobs appeared.[31]

From 1858 the faction in Berlin Heights willing to leave the free love group alone seems to have become predominant. This respect for the rights of the free lovers was a recognition of individual freedom, an attitude that middle-class Americans shared with free lovers. For their part, the radicals gave their neighbors good reason for continuing their liberality. Free lovers worked hard and did business honestly. Free love author and editor James Clay built a store where free lovers came to dance and talk on Sundays, and where both free love and monogamous townspeople conducted business on the weekdays. The grist mill, box factory, and fruit business operated by various free lovers all prospered.[32] One of the Berlin Heights residents who had led the initial oposition to free love later expressed admiration for his unconventional neighbors:

> As a matter of fact, the members of the community though dreamers, were conspicuous for intelligence, industry and good citizenship... In their hands the waste places of the town became its garden spots. They were the pioneers in various industrial enterprises. They were quiet and law-abiding; and not least among their virtues was their capacity for thinking well of others and minding their own business.[33]

Two stories support the appearance of harmony between free love and middle-class values. Among the 50 or 60 free lovers at Berlin Heights was one group that apparently wanted to return to nature. These radicals enjoyed swimming naked together, and were discovered by one of the local farmers who spied on them for at least an hour. When the voyeur made his discovery public, respectable townspeople joined with the free lovers in pointing out the prurient nature of his action, thereby frustrating the resurgence of the free love opposition. Further, the majority of free lovers found the naked swimming offensive and insisted that the nature group cease.[34]

On another occasion, the musicians who played for the free love dances invited a group of marriage radicals to a dance in nearby East Townsend. Among those who attended the event were many who came out of curiosity to see the free lovers and some men eager to woo the free love women. "Conspicuous among them," recalled a free lover, "were the representatives of a class who always on such occasions carry a bottle of whiskey in their pockets." For a time the free lovers, "by their dignified and prudent behavior," managed to avoid any unpleasant incidents. Drunkeness finally overcame the meager scruples of one of the sports who introduced himself to a free love woman "...and began abruptly making familiar advances to her." She immediately called for her wrap and announced to her friends "...that they had gotten into bad company, and the thing to be done was to get out of it." The entire free love group departed together.[35]

Whether in New York City or rural Ohio, free lovers obviously expected

behavior to conform to strict standards. Although they damned American civilization, it often seemed that what free lovers really objected to was the great unwashed, both the New York mob and the hayseed bumpkins. Recruits to free love came from the middle-class, like the respectable farmers near Skaneateles who welcomed E.S. Tyler, or the people of learning, culture, and even wealth who joined the Progressive Union. Taught since the 1830s that what one ate or how one acted in society could perfect or corrupt, some middle-class men and women accepted the demands made by the Nichols for strict diet and standards of behavior to attain personal harmony. Others, who held more closely to the ideal of individualism that seemed to pervade ante-bellum society, were attracted by a community that assumed high standards of behavior in love and commerce, condemning libertines and aristocrats as well as scoundrels. All free lovers believed that the relationship between man and woman was the primal social relationship; like their neighbors, they considered love the best guarantee of that relationship. Unlike their neighbors, free lovers had no faith in legal or religious bonds. They expected that freedom in love would elevate sexual relations and emphasize responsible behavior. Free lovers, it seems, were good bourgeois in everything except their attitude toward bourgeois society and marriage. By the end of the 1850s they formed a small but vigorous counterculture within American society, ineluctably bound up with the values, forms, and assumptions of America's middle class. It was only following the Civil War, with the continued consolidation of middle-class values and institutions, that defenders of the dominant culture could unite to demand the extirpation of a group that so frequently mirrored American society.

Dept. of History
Bloomsburg, PA 17815

FOOTNOTES

1. "Questions and Answers," *Social Revolutionist* [hereafter SR] 1 (Feb. 1856): 94.

2. Outstanding recent works that deal with topics related to free love include Stephen Nissenbaum, *Sex, Diet, and Debility in Jacksonian America:: Sylvester Graham and Health Reform* (Westport, Conn., 1980); Louis J. Kern *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias – the Shakers, the Mormans, and the Oneida Community* (Chapel Hill, 1981); Lewis Perry, *Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the Government of God in Antislavery Thought* (Ithaca and London, 1973); treats free love as an independent movement.

3. Among the works that have shaped my understanding of the early 19th century middle-class culture, the most important are the following, Stuart M. Blumin, "The Hypotheses of Middle-class formation in Nineteenth-century America: A Critique and Some Proposals," *American Historical Review* 90 (April 1985): 299-338; Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York, 1978); Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle-Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge, Eng., 1981); Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven, 1982); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York, 1985); Nissembaum, *Sex, Diet, and Debility*.

4. On Sylvester Graham, see Nissenbaum; William Alcott probably did more than any other single thinker to shape the ideal of middle-class marriage, beginning with *The Young Wife, or Duties of Woman in the Marriage Relation* [1837] (New York, 1972) and ending with *The Moral Physiology of Courtship and Marriage* (Boston, 1857); Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Great Harmonia; Concerning Physiological Vices and Virtues, and the Seven Phases of Marriage...* (Boston, 1855).

5. On ante-bellum reform, the standard compendium is Alice Felt Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment: Phases of American Social History to 1860* (Minneapolis, 1944). Carl J. Guarneri, "*Utopian Socialism and American Ideas*: The Origins and doctrine of American fourierism," (Ph.D. dissertation, Johns Hopkins, 1979), pp.1-53, 131-141 and Guarneri, "The Fourierist Movement in America," *Communities* (Winter 1985): 50-54.

6. John Higham, *From Boundlessness to Consolidation: The Transformation of American Culture, 1848-1860* (Ann Arbor, 1969); Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York, 1984), p. 15; Lori D. Ginzburg, " 'Moral Suasion is Moral Balderdash:' Women, Politics, and Social Activism in the 1850s," *Journal of American History* 73 (1986): 601-622; Smith-Rosenberg, p. 133; Guarneri, "The Fourierist Movement in America," pp. 50-54.

7. "Organs of Modern Socialism," *New York Herald* (July 14, 1858): 4. For more on the connections between Fourierism and free love, see John Calvin Spurlock, "Free Love: Marriage and Middle-class Radicalism in America, 1825-1860," (Ph.D. dissertation, Rutgers, 1987), chapters 2 and 3.

8. Ronald G. Walters, "The Erotic South: Civilization and Sexuality in American Abolitionism," *American Quarterly* 25 (1973): 177-201; Perry, *Radical Abolitionsim*, pp. 55-91.

9. *Liberator* 26 (July 25, 1856): 120; *Liberator* 26 (August 22, 1856): 140: *Liberator* 26 (Sept. 5, 1856): 148; *Liberator* 26 (Sept. 26, 1856): 150. This exchange is discussed in Lewis Perry, *Childhood, Marriage, and Reform: Henry Clarke Wright, 1797-1870* (Chicago, 1980), pp. 253-255. Perry has an extended discussion of the relationship between antislavery and marriage radicalism in *Radical Abolitionism*, pp. 188-230.

10. Blanche Glassman Hersh, *The Slavery of Sex: Feminist-Abolitionists in America* (Urbana, 1978), pp. 65-67; Mayo, "The Real Controversy Between Man and Woman," Una 1 (Feb. 1, 1853): 3; Mari Jo and Paul Buhle, eds., *The Concise History of Woman Suffrage* (Urbana, 1987), p. 171; Paulina Wright Davis, *A History of the National Woman's Rights Movement for Twenty Years...* [1871] (New York, 1970), pp. 10-11.

11. [Francis Barry], "From the Lecturing Field," SR 3 (April 1857): 127; Brown, *The False and True Marriage; the Reason and Results* (Cleveland, 1859), pp. 9-11, 15, 16.

12. Mrs. H.F.M. Brown, "Reply to 'B', "*Agitator* 1 (Sept. 15, 1858): 6; "L.A. Hine and the Marriage Question," *Agitator* 2 (Nov. 15, 1858): 28; Warren Chase, "Seduction," *Agitator* 2 (Dec. 1, 1858): 34.

13. Nichols, "*Free Love a Doctrine of Spiritualism;*" *A discourse delivered in Foster Hall, Cincinnati, December 22, 1855* (Cincinnati, 1856), p. 3; Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Magic Staff* (New York, 1857), pp. 470, 492; "Spiritualism, Socialism, and Free Love," SR 1 (April 1856): 124-125.

14. SR 1 (May 1856): 145-146; Barry, SR 1 (May 1856): 147.

15. *Oneida Circular* 7 (March 4, 1858): 24.

16. "The Reason Why," *Nichols Journal* 1 (April 1853): 5; William Vartorella, "Free Love and Sexual Anarchism: A Brief History of the 'Berlin Movement' and the Role of the Towner clan," unpublished paper, no date, Center for Communal Studies, University of Southern Indiana, pp. 6, 9.

17. Andrews et al., *Love, Marriage, and Divorce...* [1853] (New York, 1972), p. 53; *Tribune* (July 22, 1853): 7; SR, extra (following December number, 1856).

18. In this discussion of free love I leave out the perfectionists of Oneida, followers of John Humphrey Noyes who probably first promoted the term free love. During the 1850s they vigorously distanced themselves from the free love movement being discussed in this paper. For the Oneida view of free love, see "S.P. Andrews and the Tribune," Oneida Circular 2 (Jan. 29, 1853): 86; TLP, "The duality of Communism and Free Love," *Oneida Circular* 11 (April 10, 1862): 36; AWC, "New Institutions for New Society," *Oneida Circular* 6 (August 26, 1857): 126; *Oneida Circular* n.s. 7 (June 27, 1870): 116. "What is it to be a Free Lover?" SR 3 (March 1857): 77; *Nichols, Free Love a Doctrine of Spiritualism*, p. 20.

19. Bertha-Monica Stearns, "Two Forgotten New England Reformers," *New England Quarterly* 6 (1933): 59-84; Nissenbaum, pp. 166-169 discussed the Grahamite roots of Mary Nichols' ideas; John Calvin Spurlock, "Anarchy & Community at Modern Times, 1851-1863," *Communal Societies* 3 (1983): 29-47; Thomas and Mary Nichols, Marriage (Cincinnati, 1854), p. 317 and discussion of spiritualism following p. 407; Mary Gove Nichols, "A Letter from Mrs. Gove Nichols to her Friends," *Nichols Monthly* (Nov. 1854): 67; Thomas Nichols, "The Progressive Union: A Society for Mutual Protection in Right," *Nichols Monthly* (June 1855): 53-59; "The Progressive Union. Third Report," *Nichols Monthly* (August/Sept. 1855): 195-196.

20. "To Dr. T.L. and Mrs. M.S.G. Nichols. Sectism and Sexuality," SR 2 (July 1856): 26-30; SR 3 (March 1857): 79-81; "Letter from Dr. and Mrs. Nichols: Giving an account of their conversion," Vanguard 1 (May 2, 1857): 66-67 and (May 16, 1857): 81-83; Philip Gleason, "From Free Love to Catholicism: Dr. and Mrs. Thomas L. Nichols at Yellow Springs," *Ohio Historical Quarterly* 70 (Oct. 1961): 283-307.

21. "The Free Lovers: Practical Operation of the Free-Love League in the City of New York," *New York Daily Times* (Oct 10. 1855); 1-2; "A Rich Development," *New York Daily Times* (Oct 19. 1955); 4.

22. SR 3 (April 1857): 127-128; Alfred Cridge, "Congenial Relations," *Vanguard* 1 (April 11, 1857): 21.

23. Thomas Nichols, "The Progressive Union," *Nichols Monthly* (June 1855): 53-59; "The Progressive Union. Third Report of the Central Bureau," *Nichols Monthly* (August/Sept. 1855): 59; *Nichols Monthly* (June 1855): 59; *Nichols Monthly* (August/Sept. 1855): 145, 187; "The Progressive Union. Fourth Report of the Central Bureau," *Nichols Monthly* (Oct./Nov. 1855): 303-306; The Progressive Union lists in the Oneida archives contained 324, 527, 506, and 155 names respectively, with some duplication of names. See *Oneida Circular* ns 7 (June 27, 1870): 116.

24. Gleason, pp. 295-297; *Nichols Monthly* (June 1856): 6 and (August 1856): 77; See also Bertha-Monica Stearns, "Memonia: The Launching of Utopia," *New England Quarterly* 15 (June 1942): 280-295.

25. "Government and Reform, or Theism and Atheism," SR 3 (June 1857): 181.

26. Joseph Treat, "Berlin Movement," SR 3 (Jan. 1857): 15-16; "Berlin Heights," SR 4 (August 1857): 63; "Practical Socialism," SR 2 (Sept. 1856): 73-74; Francis Barry, "Practical Socialism," SR 3 (March 1857): 81-82; Cook. "Way-Marks," *American Socialist* 3 (August 1, 1878): 246; Alvin Warren, "Reminiscences of Berlin Heights," *Our New Humanity* 1 (June 1986): 27-42.

27. Warren, 27-28.

28. *Sandusky Daily Commercial Register* (August 25, 1857) and (Sept. 8, 1857); John B. Ellis, *Free Love and Its Votaries, or American Socialism Unmasked* [1870] (New York, 1971), pp. 362-4; 366-7; Warren, pp. 32-33.

29. *Sandusky Daily Commercial Register* (Nov. 21, 1857); "Legal Annoyances," SR 4 (Dec. 1857): 189.

30. "November No. of the Social Revolutionist Burned by a Mob!" SR 4 (Dec. 1857): 189-190; "The Free Lovers Again," *Sandusky Daily Commercial Register* (Dec. 4, 1857).

31. "The Free Love Settlement at Berlin Heights, Ohio," *New York Times* (July 21, 1858): 3; "The 'Free Love' Iniquity: A Movement to Suppress the Nuisance at Berlin Heights..." *New York Times* (July 27, 1858): 2; "Pugnacious Reformers," *New York Times* (August 3, 1858): 3; Warren, p. 39.

32. Vartorella, p. 8; Warren, pp. 31-32.

33. Job Fish, "The Free Love Community," *The Firelands Pioneer* 23 (1925): 322-323.

34. Ellis, 372-373; "The Berlin Free Lovers Redividius," *New York Times* (June 25, 1858): 2.

35. Warren, pp. 33-34.