THE NORTH AMERICAN PHALANX

Francois Marie Charles Fourier was a French social economist. He was born in 1772 and died in Paris in 1837. From his experiences in the French Revolution and directly there after, he developed his own social theory known as Fourierism. In this system industry was to be carried on by phalanxes. All were to live in a common building. The phalanxes were to be divided into series, and the series combined in groups; each work. and each series of group was to have charge of one kind of one special branch of that work. Each member of the society was to have their assigned tasks.

Fourierism was introduced into the United States by Albert Brisbane, (father of Arthur Brisbane.) An organization was formed with a view for establishment of phalanxes. Horace Greely became president and George Riply secretary. About 34 communities were organized of which the most important were Brook Farm near West Roxbury, Mass. and the North American Phalanx in Colts Neck Township.

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The Brook Farm was organized in 1841 adhering even then to many of the views of Fourierism which were adopted in 1843, under the influence of Albert Brisbane. The community prospered until 1846 when disastrous fires helped to dissolve it. Several of its members joined those at North American Phalanx.

In the summer of 1843 a commission was appointed consisting of Albert Brisbane and Allan Warden to explore the country, particularly near N. Y. and Philadelphia, for a suitable site upon which to begin the foundations of a phalanx.

A site was chosen in Monmouth County at Colts Neck. On August 13,1843 at the Albany (N. Y.) Exchange the North American Phalanx was organized. The land chosen was the old Van Mater farm, containing 673 acres, which was bought by Allen Warden, Thomas Guest and Nathan French from Hendrick Longstreet and Daniel Holmes for 14,000 dollars.

A description given in the bill of sale printed in the Monmouth Democrat enumerates, "the great natural advantages and resources, such as arable uplands, about 315 acres, well adapted to farming, natural meadows from which 2 crops a year can be cut, about 70 acres, woodlands well timbered with oak, hickory, chestnut and locust, about 220 acres; - all bountifully watered by springs and brooks, together with extensive marl beds (Hop Brook and Dry Bank)." Horace Greely was Vice President and owned the largest shares of the N. A. Phalanx.

By September, 1843 a few families took possession of the land crowding the two farmhouses on the place, but in most cases the men preceded their families. They began at once to build a temporary home 40 x 80 feet, 3 stories high, for those who would follow in the spring. The new building had long corridors on each side of which were suites of rooms for families; the 3rd floor was reserved for bachelors. The two old buildings were connected with the new building and used as dining room and kitchen. There was a fine old barn on the place, built before the Revolution.

Since farming was to be the chief industry, the men set to work at once to put the land in condition. The farm had previously been worked by slave labor (slavery was abolished in N. J. in 1846.) The tradition was that Van Mater (a bachelor) had always wanted to own 100 slaves but that deaths always prevented him from reaching that goal. In his will he freed all his slaves and, stories handed down, tell us they wandered up and down Phalanx road for days, lost and forlorn.

The soil was found to be poor and the workers proceeded to enrich it by spreading marl on it. Three distinct beds of marl were found on Hop Brook furnishing the Phalanx with an inexhaustible supply; excavations 40 feet deep failed to reach the bottom of the vein.

Concerning the early experiences of the pioneers, Mrs. Giles (she was a child and young adult at Phalanx) says: "Day after day these philosophers and reformers who had never until this time performed any manual labor, worked with shovels and pick-axes from daylight till dark, hoisting with derricks the marl which was carried in carts and spread over the land. The work which would have seemed drudgery under other conditions was hardly felt to be so, by those earnest workers who, in their enthusiasm, with a spirit of unity, lightened the burden." The first two years of the little co-operative group proved arduous and discouraging, few had much experience in farming and their efforts were often misdirected and futile. Returns from their labor at first were small, payments on the property had to be met and money was scarce. Nathan French, one of the pioneers, when recounting in after years the early experiences of the Association, often remarked that during the first winter he and other Phalanxers lived on buckwheat cakes and sorghum, and during the second winter they lived mostly on buckwheat cakes without sorghum.

In time the fortunes of the colony improved. New members joined, good farmers and mechanics, among them Andrew Coleman and John B. Coleman. During the year 1844 the population numbered about ninety persons, including at one time nearly forty children. Crops were planted, teams and implements were bought, the building of shops and mills begun, business organization was systemized, and co-operative living was soon going at full swing. The products of the Phalanx Mills wheat, rye, buckwheat flour, mustard, cornmeal, hominy and samp came, in time to be widely and favorably known. The North American Phalanx marketed the first boxed cereal. All these products, as well as fresh fruits and vegetables from the farm, found a good market in New York. Later, dried fruits, prepared in a kiln, and bottled fruits and tomatoes also found a ready sale. The trade-mark N. A. P. was a stamp of excellence, and dealers vied with each other to secure the products. The New York markets were reached by water, the Phalanx owning part interest in one steamboat that ran from Red Bank and another that ran from Keyport.

After the community was fairly under way, there were numerous applications for membership, but the applicants were obliged to wait until the industries warranted their admission. By requiring credentials and a long term of probation, the North American Phalanx avoided what had been one of the chief causes of disaster in other such communities. Approved applicants were invited to come as visitors for thirty days; after that, they might be admitted as probationers for one year. During that period they were given opportunity to try the various kinds of work, and at the same time the members with whom they worked side by side were able to judge their eligibility for membership. At the end of their probation a vote of the entire membership was taken.

Perhaps in the matter of labor, the theory and practice of the members of the Phalanx is of the greatest interest to us today. The workers were divided according to Fourier's plan into series with a chief at the head, and each series was divided into groups with a head for each group. The Agricultural Series was divided into the market garden, the marling, the farming, and the orchard groups; the Domestic Series was divided into groups in charge of cooking, the dishwashing, dining-room, dormitory halls, lamps, dairy, sewing, dressmaking, millinery. The Manufacturing Series was composed of millers, carpenters, iron-workers, tin-workers and woodmen. The Live Stock Series looked after the horses ,cows and oxen. The Festal Series had charge of music, dancing and dramatics. The chiefs of the groups formed what was known as the industrial council. They met every evening to map out the work for the next day and each worker read his assignment on the bulletin board in the saloon before retiring. Every able-bodied person, including the children who had reached a proper age, had his or her appointed task. Because of careful planning and supervision there was no confusion, loss of time or idleness.

It was Fourier's idea that men should be happy at work as at play; in order to avoid monotony, a worker should be allowed to change from one kind of work to another before it became tiresome. Working days were to be short. (Workers at Phalanx were encouraged to work longer hours only while the community was making its beginning.) There always seemed to be an atmosphere of joy among the workers.

There was no exploitation of one class by another. Charles Sears (one of the pioneers) in his history, says, "We have abolished the servile character of labor and the servile relations of employer and employee - everyone becoming his own employer, doing that which he is best qualified to do." Wages were paid on the principal that the least agreeable and the most exhausting jobs be paid for at the highest rate. There was no distinction regarding age or sex. The wages ranged from six to ten cents an hour - the heads received about ten cents a day additional for planning and supervision, a very low pay but everything was furnished the members at wholesales prices, most items being produced at the farm.

Mrs. Giles records that in 1852 the profit from the farm, exclusive of the orchard was over 2500 dollars. In this year the property which originally cost $14,000 was valued at 80,000 dollars.

By 1847 conditions seemed to warrant the building of a phalanstery, the realization of a three year's dream. It was the building which still stands today, crumbling away and described by Alexander Woollcott, in "While Rome Burns," (Woollcott was born at Phalanx in 1887, a grandson of John Bucklin, one of the pioneers.) On the first floor were office, library, reception room and the "grand saloon"; on the floor above were suites of rooms for families; several distinct cottages formed a wing for families and the refectory covered the entire basement. The saloon was large; at one end was the musicians' gallery under which stood a grand piano, at the other end was a large fireplace. The room was lighted by windows on both sides and decorated with historical scenes, and busts and portraits of famous men. This room served as a dining-room, lecture room and ballroom. The refectory had all the labor-saving devices then known, including running water, steam for cooking, heating and washing.

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The dining-room was arranged with small tables on each side of the room. At each table was a bill of fare printed on the Phalanx press. The young women served as waitresses, dressed in bloomer costume, consisting of a sort of Turkish trouser over which was worn a full skirt falling just below the knee. In 1852 some of the prices of food were: Coffee 1/2 cent a cup, bread 1 cent a plate, butter 1/2 cent, meat 2 cents and pie 2 cents. Breakfast usually would average 1 1/2 to 3 1/2 cents, dinner 4 1/2 to 9 cents and supper 4 1/2 to 8 cents. Living expenses, including laundry, amounted to 2 or 2.50 dollars a week.

Recreation, planned and provided for by the Festal Series, filled an important place in the life of Phalanx. Mrs. Giles says that it was the custom for all to join in a social meeting in the big hall at the close of the day, both old and young taking part-in the singing and dancing. A dancing class was a regular feature of the community life. Dramatic ability was encouraged and several plays were given each winter. In the summer canoeing on the lake and strolls along the shaded avenue were enjoyed by all. Work and play were often happily mingled. When the farmers brought baskets of peas from the fields, they gathered in the kitchen and sang together as they shelled peas.

Formal education was by no means neglected. School was kept with modern methods of instruction. Pupils were given an insight into the real business of life, the actual production and distribution of wealth, the science of accounts, the administration of affairs. Industries, arts, sciences were demonstrated to the children. They knew the miller and the mill, the farmer and the products of the farm, the blacksmith and his forge, the tailor at work on his clothes. In one of the small houses very near the main building, there was a day nursery; there was an evening school, the branches taught included common and higher mathematics, music and the languages. Many distinguished lecturers were brought to the Phalanx.

The North American Phalanx was non-sectarian but not nonreligious. Members represented every religious denomination and everyone was free to follow his own teachings. The hall was at the disposal of any group who cared to worship. Several clergymen were members of the community. Religious services were held every Sunday, and a Sunday School was established.

In the fall of 1854 a disastrous fire occurred which completely destroyed the flour mill, saw mill, blacksmith, tin shop and valuable machinery. The Insurance Company went into bankruptcy and the loss, estimated at about 10,000 dollars was complete. The fire was the immediate cause of the dissolution. In the spring of 1853 a few members withdrew taking their share of capital with them, forming an association at Perth Amboy called Raritan Bay Union. In the fall of 1853 there arose public discussion of religious dogmas and lack of inner conviction on the part of the leaders; all these were factors in the final selling of the North Ameriacn Phalanx domain in the winter of 1855-56. Some of the former members bought these lands and their descendants still live there today.

Other names which appear in various records, otherwise not mentioned, that were members or associated with the North American Phalanx were: James H. Martin, George B: Arnold, Dr. E. Guillaudeau (teacher), J. Warren, John B. Angell, Charles Chapin, Benjamin Urner, James Bray, Burrows Walling, Parke Goodwin, Saurwein (Artist), and Richdale.

Well known names who were all at one time associated with or guests at the Phalanx were: Frederika Brener, leading Swedish feminist and authoress of her day; William A. Hinds, author; Charles A. Dana, editor of the N. Y. Sun and Asst. Secretary of war (who frequently wrote about Phalanx in his paper); A. J. Mac Donald, a Scotchman interested in social re-adjustment in Egland; Emmerson and Hawthorne are said to have also visited.

Looking back it has been said the members of the Colony were 40 years ahead of their time in their ideas. This is not an exaggeration, they established profit-sharing, the thirty hour week, a place for women in industry with equal pay to men, planned recreation, a day nursery, an all-day school which provided both work and play, a night school, economy through co-operation and religious toleration.

Source : http://www.colts-neck.nj.us/hist/hccn.html

Extract from a page on the history of Colts Neck, New Jersey, USA.
This document was scanned from an undated booklet (borrowed from the Colts Neck Library). Judging from the text, the booklet covers Colts Neck's history until 1964, and was probably written circa 1965.