



Memoranda and Documents

TWO DOCUMENTS DETAILING THE ONEIDA COMMUNITY'S PRACTICE OF COMPLEX MARRIAGE

EDITED BY WILLIAM T. LA MOY

THE Special Collections Research Center at Syracuse University Library, the repository for the Oneida Community Papers, recently purchased the manuscript of an address by Dr. George E. Cragin entitled “Male Continence or Self Control in Sexual Intercourse: Its History and Its Practice,” which refers, of course, to *coitus reservatus*, a means that sustained the society’s allied doctrine of complex marriage by limiting unwanted pregnancies. Cragin’s address, as well as an account he references in a late-nineteenth-century medical journal, provides important, hitherto unknown physical and sociological details about the society’s idiosyncratic concept of free love.

As biographical notes in the Oneida Community Papers testify, Dr. George E. Cragin, although not born into the Oneida Community, was raised in it. In 1840, his father and mother, Dr. George and Mary Cragin, were among the first couples to join the Putney Corporation (the predecessor organization of the Oneida Community, formed in Putney, Vermont, by John Humphrey Noyes) when their son was just nine months old. The Cragins figure prominently in *Spiritual Wives*, by William Hepworth Dixon, and *Free Love and Its Votaries*, by John B. Ellis, both famous exposés of the Oneida Community and other similarly disposed societies.¹ On 1 March 1848, the Noyes and Cragin families arrived at Oneida, New York, and combined with the Burt, Abbott, Nash, and Ackley

¹William Hepworth Dixon, *Spiritual Wives*, 2 vols. (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1868), 2:89–174, and John B. Ellis, *Free Love and Its Votaries; or, American Socialism Unmasked* (New York: United States Publishing, 1870), pp. 267–330.



FIG. 1.—John Humphrey Noyes (seated in the center) and some Oneida Community members near their summer house in Oneida. Note the distinctive dress of the women. Photograph courtesy of the Oneida Community Mansion House, Oneida, New York.

families to form what would become the nucleus of the Oneida Community.

The decision to move to New York was not entirely voluntary. The Putney Corporation's neighbors could not seem to grasp the distinction between complex marriage and adultery, and they were

on the verge of having John Humphrey Noyes and others in the community arrested. Oneida was desirable because of its relative remoteness and the presence of friends in the vicinity who were sympathetic to Noyes. The money Mrs. Noyes inherited from her grandfather made the transition to the new location less painful than it might otherwise have been. Still, the group was faced with the challenge of constructing housing and creating a self-sustaining economy. Cultivating fruit trees failed, but producing silk thread, job printing, and manufacturing animal traps generated some much-needed capital. The most lucrative product of all, though, was silver-plated flatware, a project likely inspired by the proximity of the Oneida Community's Connecticut facility at Wallingford to the renowned silver-plated wares of Meriden. Having settled on a successful business plan, the Oneida Community began employing workers from surrounding towns who had no other connection to it.

The Oneida Community, essentially a closed society, reached a peak of about three hundred members in 1878. Its beliefs—based in a unique amalgam of the concepts of Bible Communism, Perfectionism, complex marriage, male continence, and stirpiculture (the community's foray into eugenics), all principles that John Humphrey Noyes believed to be the logical extensions of his religious inspirations—fascinated outsiders. In the late 1870s, however, the community began to splinter over the doctrine of complex marriage. In June 1879, John Humphrey Noyes fled again, this time to Niagara Falls, Ontario, to avoid the charge of statutory rape, leveled in connection with his practice of introducing young girls to the community's sexual activities. Soon after he left Oneida, the community suspended complex marriage and voted to constitute itself as a strictly commercial joint-stock company, which operated quite successfully in Oneida, New York, until 2004.

At the age of sixteen, George E. Cragin was sent to the Wallingford, Connecticut, facility. While there, he organized the chain-making shop, was involved with the *Circular* (an Oneida serial publication), and helped to start a silk business. Given his considerable services to the community, which he lists in his own biographical notes, he must have been regarded as among its most highly valued members. In due course, he was sent to the medical school at Yale (along with Theodore R. Noyes, the son of John Humphrey Noyes), and after his training, he joined his father in tending to the Oneida and Wallingford residents of the Oneida Community.

In 1913, George E. Cragin assumed duties as the organization's historian and began publishing reminiscences in the *Quadrangle*, another of the community's serials, which suspended publication in December 1914.² Soon thereafter, in March 1915, Cragin was approached by a Dr. E. H. Carpenter to deliver a presentation to the Oneida Medical Club, an organization with no ties to the Oneida Community. The manuscript of the address, written in pencil and sparsely corrected in ink, appears to have been prepared for publication, but despite its formatting and an accompanying cover letter that specifies that portions of the article are to be rearranged and retyped, I could find no evidence that it had ever appeared in any general or medical publication, and with the *Quadrangle*'s demise, no Oneida institutional publication was available to Cragin.³ Cragin's description of one of the central and most distinctive principles advocated by Noyes is valuable not only because Cragin was a lifelong, committed member of the Oneida Community but because, as a physician speaking to other physicians, one can assume that he spoke with authority and that he would have taken pains to be both thorough and precise.

In transcribing the manuscript, which is reproduced here by permission of the Special Collections Research Center at Syracuse University Library, I have retained punctuation, capitalization, and spelling; material within square brackets has been added for clarification.⁴ In 1877 Dr. Theodore Noyes invited Syracuse physician Ely Van de Warker to assess the health of the community's women; the results of those investigations were published as "A Gynecological Study of the Oneida Community," in the *American Journal of Obstetrics and Diseases of Women and Children*, vol. 17, no. 8 (August 1884): 785–810, and it includes an account by an unnamed woman who was a member of but then left the Oneida Community, an account that serves as an important counterpoint to Cragin's.

²Typescript versions of many of Cragin's *Quadrangle* articles are in the Oneida Community Papers.

³Diane Luft, of the Health Sciences Library at the Upstate Medical University in Syracuse, and Stephen J. Greenberg, of the National Library of Medicine at the National Institutes of Health, are hereby commended for their generous assistance in attempting to ascertain whether the article had ever made its way into print.

⁴Mary Beth Hinton, Michele Combs, and Lucy Mulrone graciously assisted with the transcription of the quoted material.



MALE CONTINENCE OR SELF CONTROL IN SEXUAL
INTERCOURSE: ITS HISTORY AND ITS PRACTICE

by Geo. Edward Cragin, M.D.

During the first few years of Dr. Humphrey's⁵ married life (between the years 1838 & 1844) his wife Harriet became pregnant five times, resulting in four miscarriages and one child carried to full term surviving. Deeply impressed by this useless suffering by his wife, Dr Humphrey resolved that he would live apart so far as sexual intercourse was concerned rather than subject his wife to such a drain upon her vitality. In meditating upon this subject the idea occurred to him that it might be possible for him to control in some way the propagative act; that he might possibly continue the sexual and amative relation without the final Seminal emission with all of its reproductive consequences. He tested this theory and found that he *could* control the seminal emission by the simple process of restraining the nerve excitement that led up to the final orgasm. Without knowing in detail the physiological action involved Dr Humphrey found that the whole matter lay within this excitement of the glans penis by friction upon the vaginal walls. If this friction was limited, the excitement was limited and could be easily kept within his control. A little practice enabled him to determine how much exciting friction he could use without a dangerous approach to the reflex action and final crisis. Having discovered that he was really master of the situation, and that the sexual crisis was *not* a necessary part of sexual intercourse, he lost no time in communicating his discovery to the members of his family, his brothers in law, and the Collection of believers who had gathered around the Central family in the little village in Southern Vermont.

Dr. Humphrey had for years been studying upon the problem of introducing a new form of society; a mode of life in harmony with the announcement of Christ that "In the Kingdom of Heaven they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels[.]"⁶ He had already started in a small way a Society founded upon the

⁵I am assuming that Cragin refers to John Humphrey Noyes as Dr. Humphrey to distinguish him from his son, Theodore R. Noyes, who was, with Cragin, the community's practicing physician.

⁶Matthew 22:30.

model established in the Christian Church upon the day of Pentacost where all things were held in Common; But Dr. Humphrey would go still farther in the direction of Community of interests. In the Bible account of this first Communal Society it is evident that "all things in common" did not include husbands and wives. The marriage relation was endorsed and encouraged by the apostolic writers. But Dr. Humphrey had devoted his life to the work of introducing the "Kingdom of Heaven upon Earth" carrying out the prayer of Christ to his Heavenly Father that "Thy will be done on Earth as in Heaven."⁷ But up to the time of his discovery of Self Control in sexual intercourse he had seen no solution of the problem involved in a society where "Complex marriage" with sexual freedom among all the members could be safely carried out without the drawback of unrestrained propagation. To attempt any such form of society as a substitute for the ordinary marriage relation would end only in social disaster. But the discovery of Male Continence changed the possibilities of such a social experiment. The sexes *could* live together in all the freedom of Complex marriage where every man was the husband of every woman, and every woman the wife of every man without the confusion of undesired propagation.

With these principles in mind Dr. Humphrey brought out his famous "Bible Argument defining the relation of the sexes in the Kingdom of Heaven," a document too long to be here quoted, but establishing the sexual relations on a practical basis of the Society known as Bible Communists.⁸

It is hardly necessary to go into details in comparing sexual intercourse as practiced by mankind in general with the same act under Male Continence.

Ordinary sexual intercourse is a brief affair; As described by the wife of a prominent member of the British Parliament, "A few rapid thrusts and a flood of the vital fluid that man wastes so carelessly." The part taken by the woman is entirely passive, and her sexual nature is rarely excited or developed. As one woman said in relating her former experience, "Mr.—would be all through and ready to turn over and go to sleep before I would be even warmed up."

⁷Matthew 6:10.

⁸John Humphrey Noyes, *Bible Argument; Defining the Relation of the Sexes in the Kingdom of Heaven* (Oneida, N.Y.[?]: Oneida Community, 1850[?]). There is a note opposite the title page indicating that this article was reprinted from the first annual report of the Oneida Community.

The principle clearly brought out in the Bible Argument was the separating of the Propagative and Amative relations. In ordinary sexual intercourse the Amative or sexual desire is simply a bait for, and leads to the propagative act. It is entirely a male affair. Under Male Continence the amative nature in woman is aroused and developed to its fullest extent. The woman has all the sexual attributes of the man without the seminal production and loss. She is subject to the sexual crisis the same as man, and under the stimulation of a prolonged intercourse she develops the same Amative enjoyment heretofore limited to the man for a few brief moments preceding the sexual crisis.

It should be distinctly understood however that the mode of life called Complex marriage did not in any way substitute the bondage of ordinary marriage for that of the extended Complex marriage. One important feature of the new relation was the entire elimination of the marriage bond. The principle of Community of interests in property was simply extended to the human relation. The union of the sexes was based upon attraction. No man could demand his sexual rights as a Complex marriage husband, nor any woman demand the exclusive attention of any man on the same ground. These principles put the relation of the sexes entirely upon the basis of a Continual Courtship where the sexes were upon their good behavior with every inducement to please. If a man was not attractive to a woman his proposal for an interview would be declined. There was no compulsion or forced meetings of the sexes.

To come down to details;

We found in actual practice that there was a great difference in the power of sexual Self Control among men. While one man would develop strong power of Control and could prolong sexual intercourse indefinitely, another man would have no Control whatever, a bare penetration would cause the ejaculatory orgasm and only a prompt withdrawal would prevent an exposure to conception. This was found to be the case particularly with young unmarried men who had had no previous sexual experience. The mere presence of the male organ within the vagina without any attempt at reciprocal motion would bring on the sexual crisis. Under these conditions, there would be provided an opportunity for safe practice. A Combination would be formed where the danger of Conception would be reduced to the minimum; or in other words the young man would be associated with a middle aged woman where the natural attraction between the sexes would be tempered by the difference in age. Under these modifying

influences the inexperienced man would be encouraged to get Control of his sexual feelings, and, as a rule this would be accomplished by a little practice.

Some men have raised the objection to Male Continence that it must leave the man in an unsatisfied Condition; to hang along on the verge of the orgasm without relief or completion of the act would, as they argued, be a prolonged tantalizing affair.

To this we reply: that to "hang on the verge for a long time *would* be both tantalizing and exhausting. But we were taught not to "hang on the verge," but to keep away from it as far as possible consistent with a moderate amount of sexual excitement. Under these Conditions there would be experienced by both sexes after the interview and especially on the part of the man a feeling of a satisfied Condition or satiety of his sexual desires fully equal to that obtained where the propagative act is made but entirely without the revulsion and exhaustion accompanying the usual ending. The Amative feeling can be as Completely satisfied as the Propagative, without loss or reaction.

It will be asked; "Were there no accidental exposures and unaccountable conceptions during all that period of thirty four years of Complex marriage and Male Continence?" "Could all the men be kept up to the high standard as set by Dr. Humphrey and his early followers?" To this we reply. There were quite a number of unintentional Conceptions during this period. Some accidental, and some unaccountable. And there were instances of deliberate violation of our rules of honor among the men. But not many. Such cases of intentional exposure found themselves under the sharpest Criticism, and also practically ostracised by the women. There was every inducement to behave well in this department.

As to unaccountable Conceptions we adopted Certain rules of procedure as a safe guard against accidents. One rule or understanding as it might better be termed, was limiting the sexual interview to an hour or so instead of sleeping together for the night. This limitation promoted temperance in the sexual act; lessening the liability to overdoing on the part of the man and of exhausting the woman. Some women were easily tired by prolonged sexual excitement; and some were indifferent or totally lacking in the sexual feeling. This custom also secured a night's rest to both parties.

It was also an established rule at a later period that whenever the man was overcome and had an emission the interview terminated at once, thus eliminating the danger from a later intercourse with a urethra full of undischarged semen.

But in spite of all these precautions we have to admit that Male Continence did not wholly safeguard against Conception. It greatly reduced the liability of unintentional propagation, but there were instances that quite eluded our understanding of this department of human physiology.

In one case, especially, there could be no doubt as to the paternity of the child as it grew to maturity. But the Conditions of the begetting were apparently free from accident or carelessness. There was but one man involved; There was no conscious emission or any approach to the sexual crisis; There was no exhaustion on the part of the man by prolonged intercourse; Every detail showed moderation and perfect Control. But there must have been of course a seminal leakage of which the man was unconscious[.] There were other cases where there were several men involved. but no conscious emission on the part of any one of them. The paternity could never be determined by physical or mental attributes developed in the offspring and they remain to this day without identified fathers.

But in a society that assumed all risks, and took all responsibility for the children born, whether intentional or unintentional, the paternal identification was not of paramount importance.

Again it will be asked, "Was your system of Male Continence applicable to any form of modern society?"

To this we reply by an emphatic negative. We can conceive of no form of modern society wherein Complex marriage and Male Continence could be carried on without producing social anarchy. In the first place we do not believe that *any* society or combination of men and women without a strong vital Controlling religious basis or afflatus could establish the system of personal responsibility and devotion to the public welfare necessary for the success of any such attempt at social reform. In dealing with the sexual question especially with men you are dealing with his strongest passion and desires; Passion and desires to be only Controlled by a devotion to the highest ideals and a spirit of self sacrifice for the public welfare.

But we see no reason why Male Continence cannot be practiced in ordinary married life. And we see many reasons why it should be adopted.

For one thing it tends to preserve the Amative attraction of the Courtship period into the realities of the marriage relation. It removes the haunting fear of undesired Conception from the heart of the wife whenever she engages in the sexual embrace. It stimulates and

develops the Amative sense and desire on the part of the woman where ordinary sexual intercourse leaves her unresponsive or in a state of cold disgust. It reduces to a great extent the seminal drain upon the man conserving his vital resources and prolonging his potential energies. And lastly it elevates the sexual relation to a higher level than obtains in the lower animals and places man where he belongs as master of himself and "Lord of the Fowl and the Brute."

A word as to the supposed physical effect of Male Continence upon the man. We say "supposed" as the objecting medical men and Professors of Physiology with whom we have discussed this question have *assumed* that the restraining effect upon the man would be deleterious if not positively injurious. At any rate it would be "going against Nature!" We admit that it would be "going against Nature"; but why confine this devotion to Nature to sexual intercourse? Wearing of clothes is going against Nature in some parts of the world; Cooking of food; living in warm houses; the system of monogamy and the thousand and one details of modern life are openly against Nature. Shall we allow Nature to dictate how we shall live and move and have our being? As regards the assumption that a Control over his seminal waste would cause impaired prepotency and the loss of propagating power we can simply say that we have proved the Contrary.

Some fourteen years after we began practicing Male Continence we had a general microscopical examination of our men in order to determine the truth or falsity of the theory that the practice of Male Continence caused sterility of the male.

We found no indications of such sterility as shown by the number and vigor of the spermatozoa in the seminal fluid. On the Contrary many of those who had developed the greatest Control over seminal waste showed the most vigorous Condition of the semen. Dr Humphrey himself a man of 53 years and the discoverer of this method and who had practiced it longer than any one else, led the crowd in the number and vigor of the seminal zoosperms. And furthermore when a few years later we began systematic stirpiculture or improved race breeding Dr. Humphrey showed his virility by begetting some of our most vigorous children, now middle aged men who are managing the Company affairs. So much for sterility and "going against Nature"!

The objection has also been raised that prolonged sexual intercourse must be injurious to the woman; that her nervous system would be subjected to a prolonged and unnatural strain resulting in nervous prostration and a whole train of injurious results.

This objection and deduction was based entirely upon the same pure assumption as given in the case of men and we meet it in the same way, viz. by actual experience and observation.

In the first place it should be noted and doubtless is a well known fact to medical men that women have in a measure, the same sexual desires and appetite as with men; It is less prominent than with men and in many cases remains wholly undeveloped even thru married life, and of course thru unmarried conditions. But it is an attribute of the normal woman and we fail to see why it should be unnatural and injurious to have this appetite developed and made a part of her life.

As we have before explained Male Continence means more than a mere retention of semen under sexual excitement. We inculcated the practice of *Continence* or self restraint in the *amount* and *duration* of sexual intercourse; Because a man has great power of self Control and can prolong the sexual act for hours, there is no reason why he should do so at the expense of the woman, who perhaps has the sexual feeling imperfectly developed and is easily satisfied with a short interview. The men were taught to exercise *temperance* as well as Continence, not only for their own good but for the good of the woman as the "weaker vessel."

Furthermore; to meet this objection that Male Continence must produce injurious effects upon the women we had the matter investigated by a disinterested physician of high standing in gynecology. In 1877 Dr T. R. Noyes who had made a special study of the results of our efforts in Stirpiculture invited Dr Eli Vand der Warker of Syracuse a noted surgeon and student of Gynecology to visit us and make a report of his observations as to the Condition of the women who had been subject to the practice of Male Continence for thirty years.

Dr. Van der Warker promptly responded to this invitation and made a thorough examination of a large number of our women. The result of his investigations were published in the Obstetrical Journal about 1878 or 9. As we have no copy of that number at hand we can only give from memory an idea of the results of Dr Van der Warker's investigations.

While not endorsing our system of Male Continence, he frankly admitted in his report that he found no Conditions among our women that would justify the assumption that Male Continence had produced nervous break downs, or had in any way lowered the nervous vitality of the women subject to this practice. To the student of Modern Eugenics and the general sex question including the so called "social evil" the following questions will naturally occur.

- a* How did the practice of Male Continence affect the frequency of sexual meetings compare[d] with the habits of ordinary married life?
- b* How did Male Continence affect the *duration* of an interview compare[d] with married life?
- c* What was an average duration of a sexual interview?
- d* How did Male Continence affect the general Sexual Circulation among the family? Did the practice tend to exclusive relations or the reverse?

To these questions we reply;

a From all we could learn from the related experience of the married couples that formed the larger share of the Community family; From all we could learn from the correspondence and Confessions of those who sought relief from the sexual bonds of married life we can claim that Male Continence under our form of Complex marriage greatly reduced the frequency of sexual intercourse.

In ordinary married life especially during the first years the Common practice is for husband and wife to sleep together. This alone is provocative of sexual desire on the part of the man, and as a rule with but few exceptions he takes a full advantage of the situation and satisfies his sexual desires by intercourse every night, perhaps several times. We know of one instance where the man indulged in the propagative act twice every night for three hundred and sixty five nights in the year! We know of one case where during the wedding night the bridegroom gave his shrinking and tortured bride evidence of his virility for seventeen times! What a night of horror that must have been! Under the system of Male Continence such a sexual debauch was, of course, utterly unknown. Sexual meetings between the same parties in Complex marriage seldom occurred oftener than once a month, but this question is one of great difficulty to answer. We might say that frequency of intercourse might be rated at a percentage of from one hundred per cent meaning every night, down to zero where there was an entire absence of sexual intercourse by either man or woman.

As the founder and head of the Community family Dr Humphrey felt the necessity for promoting and stimulating the free exercise of sexual relations among all classes in the family. Furthermore; realizing the vital necessity for securing an early hold upon the young women of the society before their young affections would be captured by those of their own age Dr Humphrey began at an early date the

function of introducing the young girls soon after the age of puberty into the sexual department of the society. This function of course required tact, gentleness, absolute self control, and the power to win respect and Confidence. In all of these attributes Dr. Humphrey was a supreme leader. It was his practice to select a Companion thru a third party every evening after our regular evening meetings. These nightly Companions were not confined to young girls or young women although this class was prominently represented.

Taking the standard set by Dr. Humphrey as one hundred per cent, the rate diminished thru all classes and degrees of spiritual standing down to a few who from either lack of sexual appetite, some form of physical disability, or condition that made their person unattractive to the opposite sex, and rendered them unavailable from a sexual point of view. They simply let it alone. A man might have an interview one night, with a certain woman and from the general warmth of sexual feeling developed would ask for an interview with another woman the following night. He might then go a week, a month or more before seeking a sexual feast again. There was no rule or regulation regarding such meetings. As the soliciting was as a rule done thru some recognized "Central Member" or prominent person who had charge of the accommodations for such meetings, the Central authorities were pretty well informed as to what was going on and the general trend of every individual. In case a woman found herself the object of more frequent invitations than was agreeable to her, she could decline all such invitations as she saw fit.

As the sexual appetite varies in intensity in most men, subject also to the ups and downs of health, fatigue of body and mind, so the applications would vary thru every degree of the scale; We couldn't even give a guess as to an average frequency of sexual meetings.

b and c In Married life, or in ordinary sexual intercourse the affair is all too brief. The man has but the single idea of rushing to the final crisis, and the actual intercourse lasts but a few moments. In Male Continence there was the limit only of the pleasure to the parties concerned. It might be an hour, or two hours, but my impression is from my own experience and of those with whom I was familiar that sexual interviews lasted generally an hour and a half. All night interviews were generally discouraged as we have before noted. By the expression of "an hour and a half" we do not mean that there would be continuous intercourse for that length of time. But that the pair would be together for that period. The actual intercourse might be limited to several sessions of but a few minutes at a time; It all

depended upon the amount of sexual attraction between the parties. In all such questions the idea was encouraged to cultivate moderation and to avoid exhausting each other.

There are some women who come to a sexual crisis almost at the instant of penetration if the clitoris is touched and to whom a continuation of intercourse would be one sided and without pleasure. In such cases a gentleman would not force matters by attempts at a renewal of sexual appetite by artificial methods.

In other cases the woman would have a repetition of the crisis, possibly two or three times. In all such cases the man would have to not only take care of his own Control, but to allow the woman perfect freedom to express her sexual emotions without check or limitation. A trying Condition for the man, and a severe test of his own Control.

d Exclusiveness in the sexual relation was discouraged as tending to the isolation of the parties from the general circle of Complex marriage relation. A man and woman who sought only each other in the sexual relation soon became so attached to each other that they had no wish to take part in the general relation of the sexes; They became in fact a married couple. This would be destructive of Complex marriage. On this account we did not favor intimate relations between the young or horizontal fellowship as we called it. It tended to "Special love" and ultimate exclusiveness.

Male Continence pure and simple without special love tended to preserve the sexual Circulation in the entire body of the Community family. There were those it is true that could only perform the sexual act unless under special Conditions and special attractions, but as a whole this free Circulation among the men and women of the society was well preserved as a living, controlling form of life. It bound the old and the young together in a way not possible in any other form of society; It literally made as one all the members of the Complex marriage relation.

Dr Humphrey died in 1886 with a firm conviction that his discovery of Male Continence would be a boon of inestimable value to mankind; that it had received the endorsement of the medical world and had marked an era in the advance of Civilization and progress toward the goal of an outward realization of the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth!

But we do not see any such progress; or any signs that Male Continence under any form of Complex marriage or in married life has been accepted by mankind as a solution of the vast problem of sex relation. The sons and daughters of the "Progressive Committee" as Dr Humphrey styles his devoted band of followers, have married and

intermarried, have begotten children and grandchildren, but so far as we know, the practice of Male Continence has only been to them a theory applicable to an ideal state of society that has been tried and found not practicable to this age.

Some future generation may advance to the high plane of Civilization required by such a mode of life and profit by the experience of the "Progressive Committee of Sexual Experiment." We have shown that Male Continence is possible, practicable and safe under Certain Conditions, a future generation may profit by our experience.



Dr. Ely Van de Warker's report, "A Gynecological Study of the Oneida Community," which was published more than thirty years before Cragin's address, offers a valuable context in which to assess Cragin's remarks. A fellow of the American Gynecological Society, Van de Warker opens his study by quoting (pp. 786–87) Noyes's explanation of the principle of male continence:

It [sexual intercourse] has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Its beginning and most elementary form is the simple presence of the male organ in the female. Then usually follows a series of reciprocal motions. Finally this exercise brings on a nervous action or ejaculatory crisis which expels the seed. Now we insist that this whole process, up to the very moment of emission, is voluntary, entirely under the control of the moral faculty, and can be stopped at any point. In other words, the presence and the motions can be continued or stopped at will, and it is only the final crisis of emission that is automatic or uncontrollable. Suppose, then, that a man, in lawful intercourse with a woman, choosing, for good reasons, not to beget a child or to disable himself, should stop at the primary stage, and content himself with simple presence continued as long as agreeable? Would there be any harm? It cannot be injurious to refrain from voluntary excitement. Would it do any good? I appeal to the memory of every man who has had good sexual experience to say whether, on the whole, the sweetest and noblest period of intercourse with woman is not that first moment of simple presence and spiritual effusion before the muscular exercise begins? But we may go further. Suppose the man chooses for good reasons, as before, to enjoy not only the simple presence, but also the reciprocal motion, and yet to stop short of the final crisis. Again, I ask, would there be any harm, or would it do no good? I suppose physiologists might say, and I would acknowledge, that excitement by motion might be carried so far that a voluntary suppression of the commencing crisis would be injurious. But what if a man, knowing his own power and limits, should not even approach

the crisis, and yet be able to enjoy the presence and the motion *ad libitum*? If you say that this is impossible, I answer that I know it is possible, nay, that it is easy.⁹

Van de Warker relates (p. 791) how he was engaged to perform his examinations:

In the autumn of 1877, Dr. Theo. R. Noyes, with whom I had been acquainted at that time nearly a year, spoke to me about the feeling of dissatisfaction, then growing in the institution [the Oneida Community], concerning the effect of their peculiar sexual practices upon the health. As the subject was one of great physiological interest, I expressed a willingness to undertake the necessary investigation. He returned to the Community, and in about a week after I received a letter inviting me to Oneida, to make a study of the subject upon the lady inmates. At that time, I have been since informed, there already existed the two factions, one in favor of, and one opposed to the sexual habits that were then practised, and which division finally resulted in breaking up the Community. Whether the examinations were allowed after consultations with one or both parties I do not know, but that visit was the only one I ever made for this purpose. About one-fourth of the lady inmates were examined when the investigation was stopped by, as I have since learned, the interference of the venerable head of the Community himself, Mr. John Humphrey Noyes, whom, by the way, I have never seen.

Although Cragin reported that Van de Warker “found no Conditions among our women that would justify the assumption that Male Continence had produced nervous break downs, or had in any way lowered the nervous vitality of the women subject to this practice,” Van de Warker’s conclusion (p. 809) is considerably more negative: “I have described in this paper one of the most artificial sexual mal-relations known to history, and in its most aggravated form, namely, a group of men and women under the laws of communism mingling promiscuously together. In the facts I have presented, without conscious bias, I can discover nothing but negative evidence relating to the effect of male continence upon the health of the Community.”

The harshest portion of Van de Warker’s article, however, is the section in which he reproduces (pp. 788–91) the account of one Oneida woman who offered a written response to a series of questions

⁹John Humphrey Noyes, *Male Continence* (Oneida, N.Y.: Oneida Community, 1872), pp. 7–8. There are discrepancies between Dr. Van de Warker’s transcription and the official Oneida Community publication, but they are minor and do not affect meaning.

he had prepared at her request. In a note, Van de Warker explains that "In order that no eye of suspicion should rest upon any lady at present resident of the Oneida Community Co., Limited, I will state that this paper has been in my possession several years, and was written by a lady who had left the O. C. never to return." The text of the woman's report is numbered and reads as follows:

1. The Community, or Mr. Noyes, who represented it, thought that girls usually had, as they termed it, "amative desires," when quite young, and that they would get bad habits unless these feelings were satisfied in the way of sexual intercourse, and so of course they were looked after and introduced into the social system *certainly* at the age of puberty and in quite a number of cases before.
2. I am knowing particularly of at least four women of my own age who had sexual intercourse at ten years of age, and one case at nine years of age. One of these cases did not arrive at the age of puberty until five years after, another not until two years after, and the other two were unwell very soon after, before they were in the least developed. This was not confined to the girls; boys of thirteen and fourteen years old were put with old women who had passed the change of life, and instructed all about such things before they had begun to think of it at all.
3. The sexual relations were encouraged very much. The young women were always instructed that the more unselfish they were in giving the men all the satisfaction they could in that respect, the nearer they were to God. They were encouraged so much that those in office would advise and urge it to both men and women if they thought they did not care much for it.
4. In theory this relation was under a rule, and to a certain extent in practice. Still there was a *great* deal of rule-breaking in regard to it.
5. There was a great deal of complaint by the young women and girls, a few years before the breaking up of the system, of too frequent demands upon them by the other sex. Ten years before, they *felt* just the same, but partly in bondage to their religious beliefs about it, and partly from fear of criticism and the knowledge the relation with a loved one would be broken up, they were quiet, and submitted. I have known of girls no older than sixteen or seventeen years of age being called upon to have intercourse as often as seven times in a week and oftener, perhaps with a

feeling of repugnance to all of those whom she was with during the time. She would do this without complaint simply to gain the confidence of those in charge of such things so that she would be allowed to associate with some one she loved.

6. Sexual relations did occur clandestinely, but were nearly always confessed and the parties criticised and separated; by this I mean the more common people. Those who held office did as they pleased, only they made some show of always having a "third party."
7. A lady might refuse at one time without incurring criticism, and at another time be severely criticised, and, too, it made a difference who the person was that she refused. If it were one of the leading members she was just as likely to be taken out of any responsible position she held at the time, and not be allowed to do anything until it was thought she had a good spirit and was humble.
8. Pregnancy was sometimes accidental. Ever since I remember anything about it there have been at least from six to eight pregnant women during the year, and perhaps one or two of these by accident, and in some cases no possible way of telling who the father of the child was. This, of course, was in accidental pregnancy.
9. Abortion was never practised while the social theory was in existence to my certain knowledge. What was done after people were married I will not attempt to say.
10. Love affairs were frequent and caused a great amount of trouble, sometimes causing one or both of the parties to leave the Community (of their own accord). It was generally like this: If a young couple loved each other and were intimate, so much that they did not care for others, they were severely criticised and separated, one being sent to Wallingford, and all correspondence forbidden. It was frequently the case with those who had children that they were getting too "special" to each other, and to the child. The consequence was that the child would be put into other hands, the father and mother separated, and one or both to have children by others.
11. I cannot say that there was any *special rule* governing the ages of the parties to the sexual relations. It was very seldom that a young man under twenty years of age associated with a woman who had not passed the change of life, or who was not so near it that she would not be likely to become pregnant. Of course

there were some exceptions to this. As to young women and girls—girls, after they were twenty or twenty-five years old, were allowed to associate with men who were not very much older than they were, but with the older ones, too. Girls under those ages did not, as a general thing, associate with men who were much under forty years, and then very seldom. They were considered better off, morally and physically, if they were sought after by men fifty and seventy years of age, and in fact were put under moral pressure about it.

Scholars have long speculated about the sexual practices of the Oneida Community, specifically the practice of male continence. With the publication here of Dr. Cragin's candid account as well as of the female rebuttal that Dr. Van de Warker reproduced in his investigation five years after the society's demise, few questions will remain.

William T. La Moy is Curator of Rare Books and Printed Materials at the Special Collections Research Center at Syracuse University Library; prior to his current position, he served as the James Duncan Phillips Librarian and Director of Publications at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts. As of July 2011, he became the editor of PRINTING HISTORY, the semiannual journal published by the American Printing History Association.

“TIMES CHANGE”: FRANK J. WEBB ADDRESSES
ROBERT MORRIS ON THE PROMISE
OF RECONSTRUCTION

EDITED BY AMBER D. MOULTON

ON 29 November 1869, Frank J. Webb wrote to Robert Morris to announce that he had returned to the United States and hoped to use his antebellum connections to establish himself in a society he believed had been turned upside down by Reconstruction. Webb's letter, although essentially personal, is important not only for the new evidence it offers about his travels and how it maps African American reform networks that spanned the northeastern United States but because it conveys one man's poignant, seemingly