The term utopia was first used as a title of a book by Thomas More, published in 1516. Utopia is derived from the Greek ou topus meaning nowhere. More is one of the most respected men in British history. A close friend of the famous Dutch scholar Erasmus, he was one of the leading figures in the British Renaissance even prior to the publication of Utopia. More was trained as a lawyer, elected a Member of Parliament, and eventually became a top advisor to King Henry VIII. Deeply religious, More refused to accept Henry’s divorce of his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, and abandonment of the Catholic Church. As a result, he was imprisoned in the Tower of London and eventually beheaded in 1535 on a charge of treason. More’s principled opposition to the king has been immortalized in the play A Man for All Seasons, and he was made a saint of the Catholic Church upon the four hundredth anniversary of his death in 1935.

More’s novel Utopia is a conversational narrative. It begins when More was sent by Henry VIII to Flanders to negotiate matters related to the cloth trade. While there he was introduced by a friend to Raphael Hythloday, an old Portuguese mariner who had sailed on many fascinating journeys, often while accompanying the legendary explorer Amerigo Vespucci. Hythloday proceeded to tell More of one of his journeys to a far off land called Utopia. Utopia was an island located directly opposite England on the globe. The crescent-shaped island had a narrow strait separating the two ends of the crescent. Dangerous reefs and shallows made it almost impossible for sailors unfamiliar with the area to penetrate the strait. In addition, the strait was defended by a fortress built into a huge rock at the entrance to the strait.

The key societal feature of Utopia was that there was no personal property. Hythloday related that the Utopians believed that all evil stemmed from the ambition of man to accumulate personal wealth and property; “no equal and just distribution of things can be made, nor that perfect wealth shall ever be among men, unless this property be exiled and banished.” At this point, More argued with Hythloday, pointing out that the abolition of private ownership would also result in the end of personal ambition, and that laziness would be the only logical result if man were allowed to rely on others’ labor for his well being. Hythloday’s response was only to describe the happiness of the Utopians: “no man has anything, yet every man...
is rich." The Utopians also ignored European symbols of wealth. Everyone wore similar, plain clothing. Precious metals such as gold and silver were used only to make chamber pots and chains for slaves and criminals. Some children wore jewels, but any adult who wore them was ridiculed for being childish.

The island of Utopia was divided into fifty-four identical city-states of approximately 6,000 citizens each. High defensive walls surrounded the cities, which were made up of three-story, connected buildings. Citizens lived in houses facing a Street with large gardens in the back. A mayor, chosen by elected people's representatives, governed the city-states. The mayor served for life, unless he was convicted of being a tyrant. Each of the city-states also elected three men to represent them for a one-year period on the island's governing assembly. This assembly met only once per year. All elections were by secret ballot, and any candidate who openly campaigned or solicited votes was immediately disqualified. Laws were passed only after a minimum of three days of open discussion. Any public official who was found guilty of trying to influence decisions in private was charged with the crime of political conspiracy and received the death penalty.

Hylthoday told More that Utopia's system of government had proven so popular that other countries had asked Utopians to come and rule them.

The family was the key unit in Utopian society. Families were large and extended, consisting of ten to sixteen adults. Men were allowed to marry at age twenty-two, women at eighteen. Premarital sex was strongly punished, with the participants forbidden ever to marry. Prior to marriage, however, the young man and woman were brought in front of each other naked so that they could examine the body of the one they intended to marry. Marriages were considered lifetime commitments and adultery was punished by slavery. Wives were expected to be subservient to their husbands. Children were removed from the family early in their lives for their education, which was conducted by elected public officials. Every student was exposed to classic literature and also taught a practical skill such as cloth, metal, stone, or woodworking. Most children were expected to learn the same skill as their parents; however, if a child desired another trade, he or she could go and temporarily live with a family in that trade. In addition to his/her trade, every citizen was responsible for growing food. Citizens worked for rotating two-year periods on the island's farms. These periods were staggered so that those in their second year trained the new arrivals. At harvest time, additional people would come from the cities to assist the farmers. As a result, crops could usually be harvested in a day or two, and there was abundant food for everyone. Utopians who needed anything (such as tools or supplies) simply went to a warehouse and requested the needed items free of charge. Only a few citizens (elected officials, scholars, diplomats, and priests) were excused from physical labor. With everyone working, and no one attempting to possess more than they actually needed, it was possible to limit the workday to six hours (this was written in a time where most people in the world worked from sunup to sundown). Non-working hours were devoted to education and the enjoyment of music and conversation. Practices such as gambling and hunting were disdained as wastes of time. Wasting time was always discouraged in a society in which "everyone has his eye on you, so you're practically forced to get on with your job, and make proper use of your spare time."

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Utopia · Lesson 4 · "Harrison Bergeron" and Satire
Because of the abundance of food, Hythloday reported that the Utopians enjoyed good health; however, there were also four hospitals in each city that dispensed free medical care to the sick. Priests counseled the incurably ill in euthanasia, but it was the individual’s choice whether to shorten his/her pain through suicide or to continue living. Death was not considered a cause for mourning but rather as a time for joyous celebration of the individual’s character and career. It was believed that the dead remained a presence within Utopia and constantly observed the activities of the community. Crime was rare in Utopia because there was no incentive to steal in that all possessions belonged to everyone anyway. Doors of homes were always left unlocked because no one had any possessions to protect. Laws were so simply stated that lawyers were unnecessary, and those who were accused of breaking the laws could defend themselves if put on trial. The elected officials determined penalties for lawbreakers, and the most serious crimes were usually punished by the offender’s being made a slave rather than being put to death. The death penalty was used only in cases of political conspiracy or repeated adultery.

Slavery was an important part of Utopian society. Slaves were either prisoners of war who had been captured by the Utopians, Utopians who were being punished for crimes, or refugees from other civilizations who gladly agreed to serve as slaves in order to live in Utopia. Slaves did farm work, hunted for food (a practice that Utopians were forbidden to participate in), and worked in the large dining halls where all Utopians ate their meals. Unlike later American slavery, Utopian slavery was not hereditary, and the children of slaves were not also considered to be slaves. Slaves, especially those who were being punished for crimes, could be freed from slavery by a pardon issued by the government.

Many religions were practiced in Utopia, from the worship of the sun or moon to a belief in one God. Utopians believed that divine truth would be eventually revealed in the afterlife, so it really did not matter if there were differences of opinion in regard to religion. The Utopians were receptive to Hythloday’s explanations of Christianity but when a new convert to Christianity began to preach loudly in the streets, condemning other beliefs and attempting to convert others, he was banished from the community for disturbing the peace. In general, most religious beliefs were tolerated, although those who denied the existence of an afterlife with rewards or punishments for earthly behavior were denied the rights of citizenship on the grounds that those who did not believe in a final reckoning in the afterlife were more likely to violate the rules of the society. Utopians worshipped in large temples, with the men and women divided on opposite sides, and the children sitting in front of the women where they could be watched. Worship ceremonies were general in nature so as to accommodate various beliefs. Ceremonies which were peculiar to certain individual sects were performed privately. Worshippers dressed in plain white while the priests wore bright clothing decorated with the colorful feathers of birds. The people elected thirteen priests per city. Women could serve as priests but this was very rare and only older widows were ever chosen. In addition to spiritual duties, the priests were primarily responsible for the education of the young.

Utopians detested war but were willing to fight for good reasons; to defend themselves and their allies, deliver others
from tyranny, or avenge their citizens who had been wronged by others. Their methods of warfare were unique. After war was declared, small numbers of Utopians would slip into enemy territory and post huge rewards for the capture or killing of the other country’s top leaders. Enemies who betrayed their country were handsomely rewarded and protected. Many conflicts were won simply by causing dissension among Utopia’s enemies. No Utopian was ever forced to serve in the military and they often hired mercenaries to do most of their fighting for them. Utopian soldiers who did choose to fight went into battle with their families right beside them to avoid the soldiers worrying about the condition of their loved ones at home and under the belief that they would fight harder to protect their loved ones if they were there with them. When victorious, the Utopians were generous conquerors, never putting prisoners to death, only demanding that their enemies pay for the cost of the war. Utopian soldiers were prohibited from taking any form of property from their enemies.

More described his purpose in writing *Utopia* as to offer a model of a society where man can live with his fellow man and find personal fulfillment without doing harm to others. He hoped that sixteenth century Europeans would use this novel as a basis of comparison to improve their own societies. Although his character Hythloday offered an extensive description of the “perfect” commonwealth, More was willing to argue many points with him, especially concerning the abolition of all personal property. *Utopia* was widely read and influenced centuries of writers as well as introducing the term “utopia” into the English language as a label for a perfect society.

The French Utopians

The French Revolution, with its call for “Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity,” spawned many who would ponder the question of what constituted a perfect society. The lofty goals of the 1789 revolution soon transformed into disenchantment and bloodshed. The privileges (and even the lives) of the aristocracy were destroyed, but the society that replaced the old regime was even more tyrannical and bloodthirsty than its predecessor. It was the profound disappointment in the development of the revolution that led one of its strongest supporters, François-Nœl Babeuf, to form what became known as the Conspiracy of Equals in 1795. Babeuf argued that the revolution could not be complete until it rendered “true equality” for all. In his mind, this required the abolition of all private property and the dedication of the state to ensuring that all of the goods of society be shared equally. In a manifesto entitled *The Doctrine of Gracchus Babeuf*, he wrote: “In a real society there ought to be neither rich nor poor,” and added that “the Aim of the French Revolution is to destroy inequality and to re-establish the general welfare.” His other tenets included:

- Nature has bestowed upon each and every individual adequate right to the enjoyment of property.
- The purpose of society is to defend such equality, often assailed by the strong and the wicked in the state of nature, and to augment the general welfare through the co-operation of all.
- Nature has imposed upon each and every individual the obligation to work; anyone who evades his share of labor is a criminal.
• Both work and benefits must be common to all.

• There is oppression when one person is exhausted by labor and is destitute of everything, while another lives in luxury without doing any work at all.

• Anyone who appropriates exclusively to himself the products of the earth or of manufacture is a criminal.

• The rich who are not willing to renounce their surplus in favor of the poor are enemies of the people.

• No one, by accumulating to himself all power, may deprive another of the instruction necessary for his welfare. Education ought to be common to all.

Babeuf’s contention that the revolution had been betrayed did not endear him to its rulers. He was arrested in 1796, carried to Paris in an iron cage, put on trial, and executed in May 1797. His idea that the goal of society should be to produce equality, however, later became the genesis (origin) of socialist and communist ideology.

A decade after Babeuf’s execution, another Frenchman laid out extensive plans for an ideal society. Charles Fourier rejected the trend toward increasing urbanization and advocated that society needed to be reorganized into self-sufficient rural communities consisting of 1,620 persons. These communities, or phalanges, would seek to operate in harmony with nature and thereby eliminate all human conflict. All work would be shared within the community. Fourier believed that modern society denied man’s innate desire for variety. The unpleasantness of manual labor was primarily due to its repetitive nature; therefore, in his communities, workers would organize themselves into teams and rotate all jobs on an hourly basis. In his Theory of Social Organization, he also arrived at a solution to performing the society’s most unattractive tasks:

• To secure the execution of uncleanly and offensive labors a body of youths—those attracted to much dirty work (youngsters aged nine to sixteen, composed of one-third girls, two-thirds boys)—what we shall call the Juvenile Legion—who shall perform them all. The young love to wade in the mire and play in dirt, are self-willed, rude, daring, and fond of gross language. From a sense of honor the Juvenile Legion will do the dirty jobs—highway repair, cleaning the stables, feeding and slaughtering animals, maintaining the buildings, and so forth.

Although he believed in free education for all, he believed that study in school should be regarded less important than the labor young people would perform in the community.

Fourier was strongly opposed to the institution of marriage, believing that it stifled the natural need for a variety of sexual partners and was in general harmful to the interests of women. An advocate of what would later be known as “women’s liberation,” Fourier believed that the level of any civilization could be determined by the extent to which its women had been liberated from traditional gender roles. He advocated that women have the same status as men and be permitted to choose as many partners as they desired, theorizing (in his typically precise manner) that most would prefer four.

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4. Fourier was obsessed with mathematical calculations. He arrived at 1,620 by determining that there existed exactly 810 differing psychological types or personalities. Allowing for one type of each sex, he determined the optimal number of 1,620. The term phalange came from the Greek battle formation, the phalanx, which grouped men tightly together in an interdependent and virtually impenetrable fighting unit.
Fourier's main ideas not only offended many, but the precision of his pronouncements and the bizarreness of some of his less essential predictions (such as that the seas would eventually lose their salt and become oceans of pink lemonade or that humans would eventually develop a third arm or archibras) often made him a target of ridicule. Undeterred, he worked endlessly to refine his plans and waited patiently for a rich benefactor to donate the money to put them into effect. Unfortunately for Fourier, this never occurred; however, after his death in 1837 others modified and publicized his ideas, giving rise to many planned communities based roughly upon his writings. During the 1840s, over 40 Fourier communities were established in the United States, the most famous being Brook Farm near Boston. Most lasted only a few years.

Claude Henri de Saint-Simon, an aristocratic Frenchman who had volunteered to fight in the American Revolution, was a contemporary of Fourier but took a very different view of organizing an ideal society. Rather than rejecting technological progress in favor of a simpler agrarian past, Saint-Simon embraced modernity. He believed that just as scientists were discovering that there were physical laws that dictated the operation of the natural world, a similar set of absolute laws governed the behavior of society. In the previous agricultural state, perhaps the landed aristocracy and religious authority of the church were needed to manage society, but in a modern state these were no longer necessary and should be replaced by a system in which intellectuals or scientists ruled for the benefit of all. In his advocacy of a meritocracy (society based solely on one's achievements or qualifications), Saint-Simon advocated the abolition of individual inheritance rights, the public ownership of businesses, and gradual emancipation of women. Late in his life and after his death in 1825, numerous Saint-Simonien societies were established in France. Gradually, his followers became more radical, eventually calling for an end to all private property and wearing jackets that buttoned only in the back to stress the interdependence of mankind. They opened communal residences for the poor where they would share fellowship, meals, and child-care responsibilities. These residences were originally financed by donations from the wealthy; however, they were eventually supposed to be self-sufficient and supported by the wages of the residents. Most failed because they only attracted residents who were either unable or unwilling to find work.

New Harmony

Utopian ideas were immensely popular in the United States during the first half of the nineteenth century. Three centuries after the publication of Sir Thomas More's Utopia, two attempts were made to establish Utopian settlements on the banks of the Wabash River in Southern Indiana. The first of these settlements was founded by a German religious leader, George Rapp, and the second by a British manufacturer, Robert Owen.

In the spring of 1814 over five hundred Germans, who had immigrated to America 11 years before, poled their boats up the Wabash into the young Indiana Territory to establish a settlement they called New Harmony. Their leader, George Rapp, was a large, 56-year-old man with a long flowing white beard. A successful farmer in Germany, Rapp had split from the Lutheran Church and attracted many followers to his belief that the second coming of Christ was imminent. He and his followers came to Pennsylvania in 1803 and established a settlement.
near Pittsburgh called Harmonie. This settlement was a resounding success, attracting an additional six hundred German settlers in its second year. The Rappites established several successful small industries in their community, including a whiskey distillery, in addition to profitably cultivating their 5,000-acre holdings. It was their inability, however, to grow grapes in the harsh Pennsylvania climate that motivated them to move west. Many of the men had been skilled winemakers in their native Germany, and even the economic success of their Pennsylvania settlement did not deter their strong desire to practice their craft in the New World. In testimony to the success of their Pennsylvania venture, after purchasing 25,000 acres of land in Indiana from the government for just over $61,000, the Rappites still left $12,000 on deposit in a Pittsburgh bank when they set out for Indiana.

Rapp and his followers devoutly believed that Christ’s return to earth would come in their lifetime and were determined to purify themselves in anticipation of the great day. Seven years prior to their departure for Indiana, the group had adopted a policy of celibacy and most of the men and women in New Harmony were housed in separate dormitories. Some previously married Rappites chose to remain living together, but they were expected to abstain from sex. A Rappite schoolmaster later explained: “As they expect Christ to reappear soon, they wish to be prepared to meet him in a fit state, which they could not be if they were taken up by sensual pleasures.” Nevertheless, a small number of children were born in the settlement despite this prohibition. In addition to celibacy, the Rappites also dispensed with private property. Settlers surrendered all their worldly goods and their personal share of any fruits of their labor in return for food, clothing, lodgings and “all such instruction in church and school as may be reasonably required.” In 1818, they held a ceremony in which all records of the possessions that the settlers had originally brought with them to Indiana were burned.

Within ten years, New Harmony had developed into a resounding success. Compared to the haphazard manner in which most frontier towns grew, New Harmony seemed a genuine utopia to visitors with its neat rows of homes and fertile fields. Buildings were so solidly constructed that many remain today—four brick dormitories, each of them capable of housing sixty adults, complete with kitchens and community rooms; a large house for Rapp and his family; two granaries; a water mill and dam; a textile mill; a dye-house; two sawmills; a hemp and oil mill; two large distilleries; a brewery, in which the pump was operated by a large dog walking on a treadmill; forty two-story brick and frame homes; and eighty-six log homes, all with fences, stables, and gardens. The Rappites also constructed an elaborate labyrinth that symbolized man’s struggle to negotiate the difficult path toward true harmony. $100,000 worth of goods per year flowed down the Wabash to the Ohio and on to New Orleans from the settlement. Farm crops, whiskey, wine, woolens, silks, wagons, hats, rope, and leatherworks were exported to 22 states and 10 foreign countries. Life in New Harmony was well ordered, beginning each morning with a call to work from French horns. Work stopped four times per day for meals: nine o’clock for lunch, noon for dinner, four o’clock for vesperbrot, and finally at sunset for dinner.

Due to geographic isolation and the policy of celibacy, the growth of the
settlement soon stagnated. The close knit religious group did not seek new members nor worry much about the future due to their view that the world, as they knew it, was soon to end with the Second Coming. With little more to accomplish in Indiana and relations between the Rappite community and other settlers strained, Rapp decided to try to sell the settlement and move back east to Pennsylvania. He was astonished when, in 1824, his agent in Britain reported that he had quickly found a buyer willing to purchase the entire settlement for $130,000.

The purchaser of New Harmony was Robert Owen, a 53-year-old British textile manufacturer and social reformer. Owen had not only made a fortune in his business but also had transformed the dismal mill town of New Lanark, Scotland, into a world-renowned example of a model community. Owen believed “that the character of man is formed for him, not by him” and that “any character may be given to any community by the application of the proper means.” In three decades at New Lanark, he had paid wages that afforded his workers a decent standard of living, and shortened the work day from thirteen to ten and a half hours in order to allow them the time and energy to improve their community. He also freed young children from the demands of daylong labor, establishing schools for them, including Britain’s first efforts at early childhood education. Even more radical was his program that allowed the workers to share in the profits of the industry.

Although Owen’s accomplishments at New Lanark were respected by many, his published attacks on organized religion, the negative effects of marriage on women, and the resentment of his fellow factory owners soon brought a strong wave of criticism from the British ruling classes. The opportunity to acquire land in America, where he could try out his social and economic views on a fresh canvas, proved irresistible to him, and he eagerly purchased New Harmony from George Rapp in January of 1825.

Owen immediately launched into his efforts to build a “New Moral World” on the banks of the Wabash. He gave two addresses to the United States Congress with the President and Supreme Court in attendance, outlining his plans, exhibiting drawings and models of his planned community, and predicting that communities like his would spread all over the United States. In response to his call, over 1,000 people descended on New Harmony even before the Rappites could vacate the town. In his first speech to the people of his settlement, Owen promised “to introduce an entire new state of society, to change it from an ignorant, selfish system to an enlightened social system which shall gradually unite all interests into one, and remove all contests between individuals.” Owen’s plans called for large rectangular settlements with public buildings located at the corners and workers’ houses in between. The inner areas would be filled with botanical gardens and other recreational facilities. Education would be offered to all, with lessons adapted to the age and ability of the students. No one would own any property but all would share in the profit of the community. Owen initially appointed a temporary committee to rule but eventually all adults over the age of thirty would share the government.

Unfortunately, Owen was better at formulating plans than seeing them to their completion. After a brief stay in New Harmony, he left for seven months to publicize his “Community of Equality” and settle his business affairs in Scotland. During his absence, things began to fall apart. Many of the people who had been
attracted by Owen's utopian dreams lack the skill or inclination to build a successful community on the American frontier. Quarrels broke out over who would perform the necessary labor, and as a result, fields went unplanted and the settlers soon had to depend on purchasing food from other settlements.

In January of 1826, William Maclure joined Owen as partner in the venture. With him, Maclure brought a large group of intellectuals that Owen dubbed "The Boatload of Knowledge." Among this group were naturalists, schoolteachers, scientists, and writers. Although this small settlement on the frontier had one of the highest concentrations of intellect in all of America, it continued to flounder as the settlers read, debated, wrote, and attended lectures rather than performing the physical labor necessary for the settlement to survive. As economic conditions worsened so did the atmosphere of cooperation that Owen so strongly hoped to install. Many fights broke out. Two women had to be forcibly separated when they traded punches in the street in front of the community house. A group critical of Owen even went to the point of constructing a huge coffin to bury "Owenism" forever. Within two years, Owen was ready to admit defeat and move on to his next venture. He delivered farewell addresses in late May of 1827, deeded his property over to his sons, and left for Mexico to request (unsuccessfully) that the Mexican government give him Texas for his next experiment.

It is ironic that the Rappites, who intended their settlement only as a temporary waiting ground for the second coming, were much more successful than the Owenites, who were convinced that they were building a permanent settlement that would serve to inspire thousands of imitators. Many of the Rappite buildings still survive, while there are few physical reminders of Owen's settlement. George Rapp died at age 90, still believing that Christ would come in his lifetime, saying as he lay near death: "If I did not believe that the Lord intended me to present my people to Him on the last day, I would think I was dying." He left over half a million dollars in the vault of his great house from the successful efforts of his followers in Pennsylvania and Indiana. By 1905, only two of his followers remained, one of whom pronounced that the wait for the second coming was over and claimed the vast sum of the Rappites' wealth for himself. Robert Owen never succeeded in creating his "New View of Society," but his ideas became celebrated in the socialist philosophy of the British Labour Movement. His son, Robert Dale Owen, went on to serve two terms in the U.S. House of Representatives, representing the state of Indiana, and was instrumental in the creation of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

The Shakers

Although both of the New Harmony utopian communities had expired by 1830, another utopian movement in the United States was far more successful. The United Society of Believers in Christ, First and Second Appearing, was the nineteenth century's largest and best known communal society. The group, better known as Shakers due to their animated worship ceremonies, was founded in England by Ann Lee in the late eighteenth century and eventually established nineteen communities in America.

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4 Owen may have overlooked a key element in the success of New Lanark. His workforce was composed of a very homogeneous group of Scottish Calvinists, who believed that hard work was essential for salvation. The diverse group of settlers attracted to New Harmony did not share any common beliefs.
Ann Lee was born in Manchester, England, in 1736. Like most other poor Manchester girls, she began work in the textile mills before she was ten years old. The horrid conditions in the mills of Manchester had a profound effect on Lee as she witnessed firsthand all of the worst abuses of the still-young industrial revolution. Her marriage was an unhappy one, and all four of her children died in infancy. During the 1760s she began to be viewed as a spiritual leader within a small group of Manchester Quakers. Attempting to spread her beliefs, she was imprisoned in Manchester after she disrupted a Church of England worship ceremony. While imprisoned, Lee began to develop her religious beliefs into a coherent doctrine. Influenced perhaps by her unhappy marriage, Lee believed in the dissolution of all marriages and a life of celibacy. Her followers should separate themselves from the rest of the world, with all property held, not by individuals, but by the community as a whole.

Mother Ann, as she was known to her disciples, left England with a small number of followers in 1774 to begin a settlement in New York. The group established a small farming community near Albany, but was soon disrupted by the Revolutionary War. Committed pacifists, the Shakers refused to fight for either side in the war, and some of the men were jailed for refusing to join the Continental Army. Lee was also threatened with deportation, but the end of the war began an era of prosperity and growth for the Shakers as they were able to recruit numerous converts to their faith. Many of these converts were females, eager to avoid or escape the loneliness, drudgery, and hard labor of being a farm wife. Despite the frequent separation of the genders, the Shakers believed in complete equality of the sexes. Every important position in the community was held both by a man and a woman.

Mother Ann died in 1784 at age 48, but her community continued to prosper. In 1805 the decision was made to expand the faith beyond the northeastern part of the country. Three colonizing missions were sent over the Appalachian Mountains; the largest of them arrived in Harrods Town, Kentucky, in August of 1805. Harrods Town (now Harrodsburg) had been established in 1774, the first permanent settlement in Kentucky. The Shakers settled nearby and named their 140-acre settlement Pleasant Hill.

The settlement soon became a huge economic success. It grew to encompass over 4,000 acres and housed 500 people at its peak. Sturdy buildings of limestone contained dormitories, mills, shops, and a laundry. The Shakers were prolific inventors, seeking to use technology to free up time for worship and contemplation. They developed an elaborate water pumping system powered by gravity with a huge wooden tank mounted on three stone pillars. The community grew wheat, rye, corn, flax, tobacco, and hemp (for rope). In addition, they raised cattle and sheep. In their shops, Shaker craftsmen produced their famous flat brooms, chairs, baskets, and cabinetry. Work began at four in the morning during the summer and at five in the winter. A clanging bell awakened the community in the morning and chores began only 15 minutes after the bell sounded. An hour and a half of work followed, and then the men and women assembled in two separate lines to await breakfast, which was eaten in silence. After breakfast, it was a return to work for five more hours prior to the day’s main meal, which was consumed at noon. After eating, the community returned to work until six. The evening included a half hour of meditation followed by
evening worship. The Sunday worship ceremonies began at ten in the morning as the men and women filed in through separate doors and took their seats on benches facing each other. During the ceremony, the two genders came into contact as they danced and sang together. In addition to Christmas, Mother Ann’s birthday on February 29 or March 1 was celebrated as the birth of a second savior.

Throughout the first thirty years of its existence, the community continued to prosper and grow despite its policy of celibacy. In the beginning the growth was due to converts, drawn, no doubt, by the community’s tranquility and economic success. The Shakers also began taking in orphans in 1833 after a cholera epidemic. This practice continued, especially during a second cholera epidemic in 1849. Kentucky was a slave state, and even though the Shakers disapproved of slavery, some converts brought their slaves with them to Pleasant Hill, where they were well treated. Some were eventually freed or purchased by the community. Several free Negroes were also members of the community at times.

The turmoil of the Civil War began the rapid decline of the Shaker community at Pleasant Hill. The war disrupted trade and threatened the economic well-being of the community. After the war, the rapid social and economic change of the postwar era made Pleasant Hill seem even further out of the mainstream than its founders had intended. Shaker support of the rights of the newly freed slaves brought retribution from the Ku Klux Klan. Several mysterious fires took place in the community, and an effort to recruit Swedish settlers proved divisive. The most significant problem, however, was simply that the community had aged, and the policy of celibacy had left it without a new generation of leadership. By 1884 the population had dropped below 200. Twelve years later, only sixty residents remained, and they were forced to sell some of the property to survive. Finally, in 1910, the remaining twelve inhabitants of the village deeded the remaining acres to a Harrodsburg resident in return for the promise that he would care for them until their death. Today only one active Shaker community still exists in America—Sabbathday, Maine.

In 1961 a nonprofit group was established to preserve the heritage of the Shaker Village at Pleasant Hill. Today 33 of the original buildings have been restored and 2,700 acres of farmland preserved. The Shaker Village is now a living museum, attracting thousands of visitors per year.