



BROOK FARM, MASSACHUSETTS 1841-45

A TRANSCENDENTAL TOURIST TRAP

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In the mid-century, a group of prominent Transcendentalists endeavored to put their ideas into practice by founding a Utopian-living experiment outside Boston, Brook Farm. While this community's political and cultural contributions to nineteenth-century American society have received significant academic attention, the importance of the landscape and geography of Brook Farm – a bucolic tract of land, at crossroads of two important thoroughfares – is a theme that has been neglected by critics. This paper examines how the idyllic geography of the settlement, which was a touristic draw for upper-middle-class visitors, exposed salient members of Boston and New York societies to brief moments of rural utopian living. As several of these sightseers would eventually enroll their children in the for-profit Brook Farm School, the weight of their economic contributions would eventually shift the farm's definitive focus to private education, and in doing so, this phenomenon distorted the original egalitarian philosophic mission of the Brook Farmers, transforming the settlement to a more entrepreneurial, pay-for-service, organization.

Brook Farm was founded by George Ripley, a native of rural western Massachusetts, who had attended Harvard divinity school and later became a minister for a Unitarian Church on Purchase Street, Boston. While a contributing member of ecclesiastic organization, Ripley had considerably rebellious notions of the role that spiritual institutions should have in an individual's life. In his own words, a person's religion should be a "of the heart" [PACKER : 54] based on a close personal communion with God, a communion that is free, to a certain extent, from external guidance of institutional religious directives. For these reasons, in the early 1830s he

gradually broke from traditional Unitarian teachings. In particular, he rejected literal acceptance of miracles as membership requirement, establishing himself as unacknowledged interpreter of connections between religious doctrine and new libertine philosophies – the seeds of the Brook Farm movement. By 1836 he had been criticized in print on several occasions for these ruptures with mainstream Unitarian canons, and by 1836, Ripley and others, including Frederick Henry Hedge, Ralph Waldo Emerson, George Putnam, and Henry David Thoreau, had founded “The Transcendentalism Club” – whose initial meetings were held at Ripley’s home in Boston. It was, in part, Ripley’s rift with Unitarian doctrine that spurred his interest in the Transcendentalist movement, a sub-society characterized through focus on intellect and reason superseding adherence to religious decree.

In the years before his formal break with the Unitarian Church – which occurred in 1840 – Ripley was concurrently critical of the impending industrialism that was overtaking Boston, a phenomenon that he called “the inordinate pursuit, the extravagant worship of wealth” [DELANO : 8]. He also criticized what he believed were detrimental outcomes of free market on the populace:

I cannot witness the glaring inequalities of condition, the hollow pretensions of pride, the scornful apathy with which many urge the prostration of man, the burning zeal with which they run the race of selfish competition [MILLER : 254].

In response to these developing societal and economic tendencies around Boston, Ripley, with the support of the Transcendental Club, began his devotion to Associationism, an early Fourierist socialist movement. As the disenchantment with spiritual and economic affairs around the region grew, he had a vision of a local Utopian community that would exist outside the reach of these imminent forces.

Ripley’s goals were lofty. He endeavored to replace the capitalist dominion over humanity with a harmonious example of the union of labor and intellect through offering a new method of living, creating relationships with others, and interacting with nature. “If wisely executed,” he remarked, “it will be a light over this country and this age. If not the sunrise, it will be the morning star” [BUELL : 203]. The germ concept of the Brook Farm movement was to

pool labor, which, if appropriately allocated, would sustain the residents and also offer each member adequate time for literary and scientific pursuits. The initiative supported many of the social reform programs of its day: abolitionism, associationalism, the working men's movement, and the women's rights. It represented a test of Transcendentalist ambition and a challenge to Transcendentalist individualism through the practical application of more natural unity between work and intellectual enrichment. The settlement eventually opened in 1841 and, in a letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ripley explained:

Our objects, as you know, are to insure a more natural union between intellectual and manual labor than now exists; to combine the thinker and the worker, as far as possible, in the same individual; to guarantee the highest mental freedom, by providing all with labor, adapted to their tastes and talents, and securing to them the fruits of their industry; to do away the necessity of menial services, by opening the benefits of education and the profits of labor to all; and thus to prepare a society of liberal, intelligent, and cultivated persons, whose relations with each other would permit a more simple and wholesome life, than can be led amidst the pressure of our competitive institutions. [DELANO : 34].

Lofty and distinguished as these ideals are, indeed buttressed by Ripley's eloquent capacity to express them, Brook Farm was not a unique settlement for the period. In fact, a series of other Utopian communities in Massachusetts were founded at nearly the same time. There were Hopedale (1841), Northampton Association (1842), Fruitlands (1843), as well as nine Shaker movements already in existence around New England, settlements that also shared abolitionist drifts and socialist political leanings. Brook Farm, possibly due to its Transcendentalist ties, has become, arguably, the most notable.

Built on what had been Ellis Farm in what is now West Roxbury, Massachusetts, Brook Farm was 8 miles from Boston, 3 miles from the Dedham train depot, and ½ mile from Boston Post Road. During previous generations, the former tenants of the land had enjoyed a moderately successful dairy farm. Ripley's vision was for a synthesis of livestock and agriculture, though the rocky soil would eventually prove inadequate for

commercial crops. Brook Farm's proximity to the Boston Post Road would prove vital to economic viability in these early years. The Utopian experiment took place approximately sixty years before the construction of the Cape Cod Canal, the principal water route between the Boston metropolitan area and cities to the south. In spite of the relatively short distance between New York and Boston by water, prior to the canal's inception, the route was in fact exceptionally treacherous. In his study *The Cape Cod Canal : Breaking through the Bared and Bended Arm*, J. North Conway describes rounding the peninsula as "the most dangerous sailing route in the world" [15-29], and due to this there is a colloquial saying in the area that if you lined up all the ships that have wrecked between Provincetown and Chatham, one could walk on the decks without getting their feet wet. The passage had been significant complication since the colonial period, as it in some sense cut off Boston from the southern colonies. As Massachusetts General Court notes from 1776, a canal is needed "on account of shoals" which prohibited "a safe communication between this colony and the southern colonies" [CONWAY : 17].

In fact between 1843-1853 – the years of Brook Farm settlement – more than 100 ships were lost on the passage, which amounts to just under one vessel per month. Whatever the factors were that delayed the construction of this canal until 1911 (likely the railroad lobbies and stockholders from the turnpike) the horse-carriage route was, and continues to be today, a toll road. Thus, during the period of Brook Farm, the shipping and related passenger travel between these two metropolitan centers would have been largely over land. Whether by rail or horse-carriage, this traffic would have passed just a few kilometers from the Brook Farm settlement.

While for many Brook Farm was a permanent residence, the pastoral landscape and close proximity to Boston made it a popular "idealistic tourism" destination for the city's political, economic, and cultural elite. Located just off the Boston Post Road (the principal horse-carriage route to New York) and the Boston-Providence Turnpike, visitors and sightseers arrived from both north and south. The geography of the farm included rolling, grassy hillsides, open fields, a pine forest, and the namesake brook, which is a tributary of the Charles River. These aesthetically pleasing attributes created touristic interest in the bourgeois classes, and together

with the attraction of first-hand contact with the famous intellectuals there, the community's proximity to Boston (and the federally maintained Boston Post Road) facilitated these day-trippers, who often came to the farm first for afternoon getaways, and would return later to stay as visitors for entire weekends. After such brief visits, some notable Boston families sent their children to attend Brook Farm School, an institution staffed entirely by graduates of Harvard and Radcliffe. While Nathaniel Hawthorn, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller among others, invested in the project, it was the non-Utopian visitors, the commerce magnates and political chieftains of the period, who traveled the road during the first three years (1841-1843). They would eventually pay to enroll their children at the school, and their tuition compensation would prove to be a necessary economic boon for the farmers.

William Henry Channing remarks, "the place is one of great natural beauty, and indeed the whole landscape is so rich and various as to attract the notice even of casual visitors (*sic*)" [DELANO : 149]. Invited and uninvited guests took advantage of the proximity to Boston and the turnpike, coming out to visit Brook Farm in droves. Sterling F. Delano describes the settlement as "something of a Mecca for the hordes of friends, well-wishers, and the merely curious who showed up with often annoying frequency on the steps [...]. No other antebellum American [Utopian] community – and eighty-four were in existence, at one moment or another, during the 1840s – attracted so many visitors" [52]. These transcendental onlookers numbered in the thousands each year, and we might endeavor to put them into categories to comprehend their role in the community's development. There would be commercial visitors, those traveling from Boston-New York, or vice versa, on the post road; another group would have been upper-middle-class socialites from Boston who would come to visit for the day, or stay overnight; and a third would be similar socialites that would visit Brook Farm from the New York area.

To put the number of tourists into real terms, in 1844, the Brook Farm guestbook has over 4,000 entries, which puts a flat number at over 10 people per day (the entire population of the settlement at that time was 90) [CODMAN : 79-81]. However, actual numbers were likely significantly greater than 10 per day, as visitors would not have made the day trip in the off-

seasons due to the poor weather, nor at any time of the year on weekdays. John Codman said of the visitors, “[they were] some of the oddest of the odd; those who rode every conceivable hobby; some of all religions; bond and free; transcendental and occidental; antislavery and proslavery; come-outers; communists, fruitists and flutists; dreamers and schemers of all sorts” [79-81]. He went on to recommend that Saturdays be reserved for business affairs with no visitors, as their presence disrupted the communal activities. This social disturbance caused by the uninvited was an economic boom for Brook Farmers: the Minutes from Brook Farm meeting on 24 March 1844 note \$425.00 income from the months prior, charged at 25 cents per dinner, 12 cents per supper, 25 cents per lodging—and we should bear in mind, many of the prospective members were not charged [“Brook Farm Minutes”, *Brook Farm Papers*]. Eventually Brook Farmers would begin charging fees for boarders; people residing there, not working, were charged 4 dollars per week, 2 dollars for children [DELANO: 67]. Thus while the crops and industrial enterprises were failing, the transcendentalist spectators brought necessary maintenance income to the farm. The Brook Farm tourism program, which was to a certain extent unintentional, kept the settlement afloat and opened the social channels of communication in Boston and New York about the Brook Farm School.

A very important detail to note here are the sums that visitors would provide when they subsequently enrolled their children in the Brook Farm School. They were charged 5 dollars a week per boy, \$4 dollars per girl, and \$3.50 per child under 12 – these totals were exclusive of other boarding charges [67]. In fact, the school was the farm’s principal source of income in 1842, and then its only source of income by 1844 [156]. As early as 1842, it is clear that directors of Brook Farm were aware of their economic dependence on their educational institution. “We are a company of teachers,” remarked Ripley in *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*. “The brand of industry which we pursue as our primary object, and chief means of support, is teaching” [BROWNSON: 481]. And similarly, Ripley seems to have abandoned the farming dimension entirely, remarking: “This is almost exclusively an Educational Establishment, relying mainly upon the income of an excellent school” [MYERSON: 43].

In spite of the egalitarian emphasis originally articulated by the community's founder, the socio-economic demographic of Brook Farm settlement did not represent the middle or average segment of the regional or national population. As Kate Sloan Gaskill, a resident at Brook Farm, noted:

There were men and women from the most select literary and social circles from Boston and New York, scholars from many European countries and happy boys and girls that in a few years were to be leaders in the communities from which they had come and to which they were to later return. [MYERSON : 303]

The school itself was also staffed entirely of Harvard and Radcliff graduates, and it is often noted that Harvard as an institution supported the school, saying it was "fitting for college" [DELANO : 81]. This substantiation from Harvard, however, seems in some ways an unconstructive endorsement, as the university has held very few egalitarian attributes during its history. In 1880, 33 years after the closing of Brook Farm, after 350 of existence, as David McCullough notes,

There were no blacks in the class of 1880 [at Harvard], suffice it to say, and no foreign students. There were exactly three Roman Catholics, but no Boston Irish, no Italian[-Americans], Swedes, or Latin Americans, no one with a last name ending in an i or o, and there were no Jews. Full page cartoons in *The Lamppoon*, the undergraduate magazine, were crudely anti-Irish, anti-Semitic, or mocking Negro aspirations. [MCCULLOUGH : 199]

Harvard University itself would make an interesting parallel to Brook Farm, as it, too, in a sense, is a Utopian experiment that has long used manipulated admission controls to socially engineer the campus population. As Jerome Karabel comments in *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton*, Harvard and other universities have long had morally bankrupt admissions policies designed to exclude "socially undesirable" – but yet offer the latitude to admit unqualified "privileged young Anglo-Saxon men," while rejecting "brilliant but unpolished children of immigrants [and other under-represented groups]" [KARABEL : 1-2]. The Brook Farm community, as I will make clear, followed similar entrance policies. By 1842, in practical terms, Brook Farm was functioning as a tourist attraction and elite private school, whose

accompanying fees and tuition supported the lofty social dimensions pretended by its founder. Thus the pristine location of Brook Farm and proximity to Boston-New York travel routes were significant factors in its economic and later philosophical development, as it influenced the demographic of the community members, reducing the unrestricted involvement of those from all sectors of society.

During this early period at the settlement, the carpentry, metalworking, and other enterprises slowly failed, as shipping costs were too great to ensure profitability. The expenditure for moving raw material by horse-carriage from Boston lumber and material yards out to this isolated production area, and second, the cost of moving the manufactured goods, again by horse-carriage, back to Boston for market – the industries were trading at less than cost of production. J. Homer Doucet, a worker at the farm remarked, “There was no railroad [depot nearby]. The lumber had to be hauled from the yards of Boston with horses. Then the bulky finished products had to be transported to market by the same means” [DELANO : 215-6]. Therefore, there was dependence on the board and tuition payments from these wealthy tourists and matriculants, and when reviewing incoming applications for membership at the Brook Farm Community, there was very likely pressure to admit those who could and would, and ultimately did, pay. It is important to note as well, that many of the initial investors defaulted on their monetary contract payments – as many were poor to begin with, and the utopian settlement that employed them was financially unviable [251].

These fiscal circumstances shifted the philosophical practices of the movement, which we might evaluate through the admissions tendencies. When we scrutinize the application documents, to the school and to the community in general, certain patterns emerge. For example, in 1844 there were 87 admissions [157], at the same time, between May-September of the same year, 100 applications (more than half of those received) were “indefinitely postponed” a euphemism for rejection [178]. The reasons for rejections are not documented, though we might surmise that these chosen for admission had some skill, or wealth, which would benefit the faltering economic situation of the farm. Many scholars have asserted that the Brook Farm School itself was egalitarian; Sterling Delano, for one, remarks that the institution “paid no attention whatsoever to considerations of wealth, gender, or social standing” [162]. However, there is significant

documentation to the contrary. There is the case of Sophia Eastman, an impoverished girl from provincial New Hampshire. Her correspondences with her family about the school give a significantly different image than that of a classless and free existence. Despite pretensions of communal impartiality, she writes, “there is an aristocracy of privilege here”; the girl felt alienated because the community wanted “individuals capable of refinement, a great taste for literature, and possessed of superior abilities” [letter in Arthur E. Bestor Jr. Papers]. In the case of a 17-year-old from rural New Hampshire, like the young Eastman, from whence might these characteristics derive? She also noted that “many complain of being neglected” [FRANCIS : 48]. Eastman was dismissed from the settlement in 1843 [DELANO : 126],¹ and later, in a letter regarding her case, Ripley corroborates that wealthy students had indeed been admitted over the poor, saying, “she is not the kind of person contemplated in our plan of admitting a few pupils to defray their expenses by their services” [FRANCIS : 96]. What is unsaid here is that this plan concomitantly includes admission of some affluent students (their service being payments, as children under 5-15 years of age likely offered few practical “services” to the community); the payments would have defrayed services by covering a disproportionate expense.

Several additional textual documents from the period also support this notion. For instance, upon the matriculation of the two sons of a famous New-York banker, Ripley said, “we’re going to have two Greek Gods among us” [DELANO : 83]. Ripley seemingly never equally glorified anyone from an impoverished background, and valued the presence of these two landed boys through their financial circumstances—not their intellect, morality, or principles. At the same time, Ripley’s scheme of admitting some to Brook Farm that cannot pay on basis of their work, and admitting others that can pay on basis of their wealth, created a social dilemma, if not a crisis. Delano points out:

¹ Eastman’s criticisms are a troublesome topic for Brook Farm scholars. Delano attempts to discredit her assertions with the following introductory clause: “If we can believe a young student-boarder named Sophia Eastman...” [358].

One important consequence of having so many boarders and students is that they outnumbered associates 55-15 by August [1842], the effect of which was to compromise and distort the original aims [of the community]. [77]

It seems, though that this compromise was a necessary component in the existence of the settlement, as the landscape could not support the agrarian dreams of the founder, who had no experience of farming.

The touristic draw eventually waned, too, and with it, so did the number of applications to the school and community; and as the boarding and meal fees also disappeared, Ripley eventually changed the structure of the settlement to a Fourierist slant, and endeavored to shift the economic focus to publishing. In this interest, the farm put out several notable periodicals in the last period of its existence, *Harbinger* and *Phalanx* (1843-5). Almost admitting defeat, however, Ripley describes the last days of Brook Farm, on the 20 December 1845 edition of *Harbinger*:

The life we now lead, though, to a hasty and superficial observer, surrounded with so great imperfections and embarrassments, is far superior to what we have been able to attain under most favorable circumstances in Civilization. There is freedom from the frivolities of fashion, from arbitrary restrictions, and from the frenzy of competition; kindred spirits are not separated by artificial, conventional barriers; there is more personal independence, and a wider sphere for its exercise. [...] We are laboring not for personal ends, but for a holy principle. [240]

A few months after this publication, a fire tore through Brook Farm, and together with defaults on their existing loans, a smallpox outbreak, and a stream of rejections from creditors, the settlement was effectively over by 1846. As we have seen, the geographic makeup of the region determined to a significant degree a touristic economic base, which, for a time, allowed pleasure seekers to engage their curiosity about Transcendental living. However, this geographic situation also distanced the settlement from its primary aims, as due to industrial and agrarian enterprise failures the directors of the residence depended on accessible monies — a course of action which led to unscrupulous actions, namely educating wealthy families that could afford lofty tuitions. Delano remarks that the school became “a

prototype for the private boarding academies that were later established in Massachusetts and elsewhere in New England" [79].

While the Independent Schools League (ISL), arguably the leading group of private academies in New England today, has implemented financial aids to less-fortunate applications, like Brook Farm, the campus populations of those schools are far from representative of local community socioeconomics. Indeed, the average tuition of the 16 ISL institutions is \$40,099 per year, a figure more than double the per capita income in 20 US states. Today the campus of Roxbury Latin School, a member of the ISL, is just a few blocks from the tract of land that was home to the Brook Farm settlement. Roxbury Latin School, which has an exorbitant tuition, enjoys an endowment of \$144 million dollars, the largest of any all-boys school in the United States. The utopian pretensions of equality are especially complicated to achieve in education, as sustainability without external funds is particularly complex; yet, as we can perceive through the modern-day ISL – where there is significant presence of superfluous capital – those with the means to implement social equality through educative measures concede the communal benefit in favor of hierarchic stratification that benefits the wealthy, a phenomenon established through for-pay access to elite schooling.

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