

## Hartje Paper: The Society of Separatists at Zoar: Demonstrating the American Idealism of a Commune

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The traditional understanding of American ideals is formed by a collective, historical consciousness. Democracy, freedom, morality and, particularly, individualism remain customary American values. The archetype of this "American spirit" is, in theory, resourceful individualistic achievement fulfilled through the mechanisms of freedom and integrity. However, this "American idealism" as a vision of our ideological past should not be so narrow as to reject its realization in less than conventional circumstances. An interesting, and often neglected, facet of American history is the proliferation of communal utopias on the American frontiers in the early nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> These idealistic groups viewed the untamed territories as an opportunity to construct societies free from the encumbrances—be they political, religious, or economic—which motivated their migration. The most successful communal societies were in fact religious sects.<sup>2</sup> The early nineteenth century, Northeast Ohio frontier experienced a proliferation of religious, communal enterprises such as Kirtland, Shaker Heights, Tallmadge and Zoar.<sup>3</sup> Their development is illustrative of a widespread trend of utopian societies across the frontier. The Society of the Separatists of Zoar, established in 1817, perhaps best exemplifies the challenge of American principles at the boundaries of civilization: to merge pragmatism with the morality and liberty cherished as the consortium of American ethics.

The Zoarites originated from Württemberg Germany, and were a strong Separatist faction in the late eighteenth century, who wished to withdraw from the Lutheran church.<sup>4</sup> They rejected "worldliness," church ritualism (like baptism or holidays), supporting pacifism and an individualistic connection to God.<sup>5</sup> Their convictions prohibited military service, church attendance, or swearing oaths to secular authority and they were consequently persecuted.<sup>6</sup> To

escape this oppression, a large body of separatists, immigrated to the United States in 1817.<sup>7</sup> Separatist leader, Joseph Bäumlér (colorfully depicted as a "crippled hunchback," possessing "a large protruding eye") coordinated the purchase of 5,500 acres in northeastern Ohio, costing \$25,000.<sup>8</sup> They named the settlement "Zoar," referencing "the city to which Lot fled" after the destruction of Sodom; evoking imagery of deliverance from impurity.<sup>9</sup> Joseph Bäumlér outlined the religious code of the community in his "Principles of the Separatists," which confirmed their commitment to personal faith, pacifism, dissent from repressive institutions, and sectarianism.<sup>10</sup>

Zoar was not initially communal. The Zoarites had originally intended to "hold their interests separately," and subdivide the land.<sup>11</sup> However, in their first year they suffered the economic hardship of the harsh Ohio frontier coupled with a hefty mortgage, and many families were unable to support themselves.<sup>12</sup> So, in 1819 they established the Society of Separatists of Zoar, signing a contract instituting a collective society, and relinquishing all personal property to an elected board of Trustees. The formation of a commune was a practical shift in the Zoarite objective; however communalism proved an ideal medium for a group attempting to integrate religious idealism and frontier survival. As poor, religiously oppressed German peasants they had envisioned a new land in which they could attain religious freedom, equality and economic prosperity in the context of a moral society. Encountering obstacles, and facing failure, they became a collaborative to survive and thereby ensured unity, and fiscal stability. The Zoarites developed a "cooperative economic unit," and through employment constructing the nearby Ohio Canal, raised capital to pay off their debt and furthermore established a flourishing trade.<sup>13</sup> By 1838 Zoar "had an estimated wealth of \$2 million."<sup>14</sup>

The nature of their struggle reflects American ideals: flexibility, pragmatism and freedom.

Unfortunately this example of American values has frequently been demeaned, and the cooperative societies inaccurately perceived as communist political entities. Older sources on Zoar, and other contemporary communal societies, exhibit overt condescension; failing to recognize

that the Zoarites viewed the commune as an expedient and convenient vehicle for both their religious model and financial security, rather than as a political stance. Although conventional American culture did eventually overtake and end the frontier of communal utopias, it does not diminish their significance as part of the multifaceted narrative of American ideals.

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### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Elwin C. Robison, "Heavenly Aspirations and Earthly Realities," *Timeline*, Dec. 2000, 2.
- <sup>2</sup> Clifford F. Thies, "The Success of American Communes," *Southern Economic Journal*, 67 no. 1 (2000): 186.
- <sup>3</sup> Robison, 2.
- <sup>4</sup> Donald Dumbaugh, "Work and Hope: The Spirituality of the Radical Pietist Communitarians," *Church History*, 39 no. 1 (1970): 78-79.
- <sup>5</sup> William G. McLoughlin, "Pietism and the American Character," *American Quarterly* 17 no. 2 (1965): 163.
- <sup>6</sup> Robert P. Sutton, *Communal Utopias and the American Experience* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 49.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> Robert S. Fogarty, *Dictionary of American Communal and Utopian History* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), 14-15.
- <sup>9</sup> Sutton, 49.
- <sup>10</sup> E.O. Randall, "The Separatist Society of Zoar: An Experiment in Communism-From its Commencement to its Conclusion," *Ohio Historical Society*, 8 no. 1 (1899): 13-14.
- <sup>11</sup> Charles Nordhoff, *The Communistic Societies of The United States: From Personal Visit and Observation* (New York: Hillary House Publishes, Ltd., 1961), 101.
- <sup>12</sup> Sutton, 49.
- <sup>13</sup> Robison, 16.
- <sup>14</sup> Sutton, 51.