

The Law of Love: The Christian Commonwealth Colony, a Utopian Experiment

by

Randal Jordan Ray

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Approved by

Adam Jortner, Chair, Assistant Professor, History Department
Reagan Grimsley, Assistant Professor, History Department
Charles Israel, Associate Professor, History Department

Abstract

The Christian Commonwealth Colony existed as a utopian experiment from 1896 to 1900. The group of Christian socialists sought to live by the tenets of Jesus Christ's Sermon on the Mount. Members gave up their possessions and entered into a communal style of living. The CCC, extant during the Social Gospel movement, exemplifies an alternative to that movement's missionary societies and inner city preaching. Instead of working to alleviate hunger and want, the men and women of the Christian Commonwealth Colony sought by their efforts to create a model of godly society, an example for the rest of the world to follow. This thesis examines the CCC as both an intentional community and a reaction to the Social Gospel movement.

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List of Abbreviations

CCC Christian Commonwealth Colony

Chapter One

“One Little Corner”

Ralph Albertson never aspired to the earthly headship of the Christian Commonwealth Colony. A minister by training, Albertson aided in the founding of Commonwealth in 1896, but he believed his duty was to propagate the message of the Kingdom of God, not to administer its temporal counterpart. By 1900, however, matters had come to a head. Financial struggle, failure of industry, internal strife, and illness had laid the colony low, and many of the pillars of the community had fled. So, Albertson, a “sack of bones weighing 89 pounds” thanks to the effects of typhoid, was elected president, an office he had hereunto adamantly refused, therein necessitating that the election be held while the candidate was low with sickness. What he had helped to found four years earlier, Albertson was now required to steward in its closing days.

From 1896 to 1900, a small group of religious idealists lived on an old cotton plantation thirteen miles east of Columbus, Georgia. Started as an effort to live by “The Law of Love” as interpreted through Jesus Christ’s Sermon on the Mount, the Christian Commonwealth Colony, so named to describe a new enterprise serving as an outpost of the Gospel, was a utopian communal experiment. Members of the colony lived together, worked together at farming, printing, building, and teaching, and collectively owned the fruits of their labor and the hardships of their failures. Before Commonwealth’s eventual collapse in 1900, membership, though small and frequently fluctuating, claimed adherents from across the United States, from Florida to California. Commonwealth’s monthly journal, *The Social Gospel*, reached a readership of 2,000 subscribers. By living Jesus Christ’s example, the members of Commonwealth felt confident that they could shepherd in a new age of Biblical living.

Unfortunately, the CCC's estimation of their own abilities and the depth of God's grace proved incorrect. They found that living on love was easier to read about in the Bible than it was to enact in their daily lives. There were many factors stacked against them. The soil was exhausted on their cotton plantation. The money promised to pay off the land's mortgage never arrived. Members came and went, often leaving with the phrase, "I refuse to work for another man's children."¹ Of those who stayed, the necessary skill sets for self-sufficiency were lacking. The group planned for a Turkish Towel business, but no one possessed sufficient knowledge of textiles to make that a reality. Failure of temperament soon followed when several members sued the colony over joint assets. When the food supply was at its lowest due to a bad harvest and little money, typhoid hit. In 1900, the few that remained dissolved the organization and left.

America in the tail end nineteenth century was a land of religious innovation. Though Jesus Christ said that there would always be poverty, devoted Christians set about to ease the plight of the poor and downtrodden. The prevailing theological movement of the day, the Social Gospel was post-millennial; adherents believed that Christ would not come again to establish his thousand-year reign until humanity had rid itself of the plights of this world. To that end, Christians set about channeling their reforming zeal towards eradicating urban America's poverty, prostitution, illiteracy, hunger, homelessness, and a plethora of other ills. Church

¹ Ralph Albertson, "The Christian Commonwealth in Georgia," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 29 (June 1945): 132.

missionary societies proved a popular means of getting help to where it was most needed, generally deep within industrialized cities.²

The experience of the Christian Commonwealth Colony is a study in the radical edge of that Social Gospel. Settlement houses, missionary activity, and aid to the poor were common answers to the societal ills brought on by rapid urbanization. The example of the Christian Commonwealth Colony, however, allows scholars to study “improvement” taken to the extreme within the context of the wider Protestant movement. While Jane Addams went into the city of Chicago to establish Hull House, and Walter Rauschenbusch preached in Hell’s Kitchen, the men and women of the CCC abandoned extant institutions and urban life entirely.³ For Commonwealth’s believers, anything less than a totally new society merely attacked the symptoms, not the illness. This story highlights the lengths that some reformers were willing to go to transform the world.

² For an overview of the Social Gospel movement in the United States, see: Donald K. Gorrell, *The Age of Social Responsibility: The Social Gospel in the Progressive Era 1900-1920* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988); Robert T. Handy, ed. *The Social Gospel in America: 1870-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966); Charles Howard Hopkins, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865-1915* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940); Paul T. Phillips, *A Kingdom on Earth: Anglo-American Social Christianity, 1880-1940* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996); Ronald C. White and C. Howard Hopkins, *The Social Gospel: Religion and Reform in Changing America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976).

³ Conventional wisdom states that the southern United States did not participate in the wider national movement of social reform. Keith Harper’s *The Quality of Mercy* uses the example of Southern Baptists’ missionary activities to counteract this prevailing assumption: Keith Harper, *The Quality of Mercy: Southern Baptists and Social Christianity, 1890-1920* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1996). Likewise, see Wayne Flynt’s article in Samuel Hill’s *Varieties of Southern Religious Experience* for an examination of southern social religious activity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries: J. Wayne Flynt, “Southern Protestantism and Reform, 1890-1920,” in *Varieties of Southern Religious Experience*, ed. Samuel S. Hill (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988): 135-57.

This thesis will show that, for all the notoriety of urban reformers, the Social Gospel movement played a role in a rural context, as well. The men and women of the Christian Commonwealth Colony decided that theirs was not to remain in the crowded cities with the homeless and maligned, working person by person to achieve the Kingdom of God. Rather, the CCC sought to go out from the industrialized metropolises of their contemporary reformers, and instead to start totally anew.

In choosing a location in rural Georgia, Commonwealth's founders provide historians with an example of the Social Gospel movement moving away from the slums and soup kitchens of urban America. Rather than ministering to the poor one by one, or even seeking to change institutions, the people of Commonwealth decided to take the Social Gospel's perfectionist message in a very different direction. These men and women attempted to bring about the new world by making it themselves, from the ground up; placing Commonwealth's utopia on a farm in rural Georgia was a drastic departure from the focus of most Social Gospel missions in the crowded alleyways and tenement housing of the inner cities.

Commonwealth's story allows scholars to bring together two movements, the Social Gospel and communitarian utopianism, in a rural setting. The CCC used a communal model in the Deep South, far from the northern cities of Addams and Rauschenbusch. From their one community, the colonists foresaw the world following their example of godliness, therein preparing for the return of Christ. In spite of this example of the Social Gospel working in an unexpected context, however, scholars have neglected to study the CCC in any length or depth. Although Commonwealth's existence reveals an enthusiastic outpost of Social Gospel goals and hopes within a completely different geographical and sociological context from which scholars usually associate that movement, the community has enjoyed little attention.

The historiographical fate of Commonwealth is emblematic of the wider field of communal studies as a whole, that is, lacking in vibrancy and volume of new research. Communal experiments and utopian societies have received diminished attention from historians in recent years. That said, the majority of the existing published monographs are studies of individual communities. These books serve as biographies of separate experiments, and attempt to place the respective communal utopias within a larger framework of communal studies. Within this category, most of the works concentrate on utopias that began before the Civil War, though some, most notably the Shakers, a perennial favorite, continued much later into the century.⁴

Another popular trend centers on a collection of encyclopedic style entries of wide ranging experiments. These works usually include a brief introduction to the field, including an attempt to define “utopianism.” Each group gets a short treatment, which, in some cases, includes more facts and statistics than analysis. Generally, these books serve as introductions to communal studies.⁵

⁴ The most popular medium in utopian historiography is the study of an individual community or group. See: Christopher Clark, *The Communitarian Moment: The Radical Challenge of the Northampton Association* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Sterling F. Delano, *Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Richard Francis, *Fruitlands: The Alcott Family and Their Search for Utopia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Donald E. Pitzer and Darryl Jones, *New Harmony Then and Now* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2011); Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

⁵ See: Robert S. Fogarty, ed. *Dictionary of American Communal and Utopian History* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1980); Gerald Lee Gutek, *Visiting Utopian Communities: A Guide to the Shakers, Moravians, and Others* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998); Donald E. Pitzer, ed. *America's Communal Utopias* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Stephen J. Stein, *Communities of Dissent: A History of Alternative Religions in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); David Yount, *America's Spiritual Utopias: The Quest for Heaven on Earth* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2008).

Lastly, comparisons of aspects of varying communities are a popular strain through the literature. Though many different groups decided that a utopian experiment was their best chance to succeed at their stated goals, the similarities in thought and deed between communalists end with their choice to form an intentional community. Therein, comparisons of philosophies, motivations, and outcomes of disparate groups compose a large section of communal literature. Again, pre-Civil War groups receive the most attention.⁶

By comparison, post-Civil War utopias of the nineteenth century receive significantly less attention, outside of the aforementioned small examinations in monographs that describe communalism as a whole. Even so, in the latter examples, communes of the second half of the century do not earn nearly the level of examination of their earlier counterparts. Many scholars base their examinations of utopias on the new availability of religious expression with the founding of the Republic. Unfortunately, most treatments of communalism never leave those early decades.

Arthur Bestor, the preeminent scholar of utopias, said that by the latter half of the nineteenth century, the idea of communalism “had grown not trite but anachronistic. No longer did it state a profound reality, as it might have done half a century before. By the 1880’s there was no point in talking about laying the foundations of new commonwealths within the United

⁶ See: Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press: 1981); Lawrence Foster, *Women, Family, and Utopia: Communal Experiments of the Shakers, the Oneida Community, and the Mormons* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991); Lawrence Foster, “Why Do Millennial Religious Movements Become Politically Revolutionary?: A Comparative Analysis of the Oneida Community, the Taiping Rebellion, and the Mormons during the Nineteenth Century,” *Communal Societies* 31, no. 1 (2011): 1-28; Seymour R. Keston, *Utopian Episodes: Daily Life in Experimental Colonies Dedicated to Changing the World* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996); Stephen C. Taysom, *Shakers, Mormons, and Religious Worlds: Conflicting Visions, Contested Boundaries* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

States.” Further, Bestor attested, “Serious social reformers in the latter nineteenth century were faced with the task of altering institutions already firmly established.” In Bestor’s estimation, “For most American reformers in an industrialized age, communitarianism was a tool that had lost its edge, probably for ever.”⁷

The existence of “commonwealths” established after 1865 belies Bestor’s sixty-year-old assertion, but the relative dearth of literature on said communities attests to the historical establishment’s general agreement with him. Following Bestor, Mark Holloway wrote in *Heavens on Earth* that in the later years of the 1800s, there “was no place for dreamers,” and that “Utopian communities of socialist or communist origin were no longer attempted.”⁸ Holloway made that bold claim with absolutely no qualifier.

Bestor’s and Holloway’s books are not recent, but within the limited field of communal studies, their assertions set the tone for the dialog on the study of utopias. As such, Bestor, Holloway, and others following their path, effectively wrote out communalism as having any role to play in the great events running through American Christianity at the end of the century. The accepted view of collective experiments ascending to a zenith in the 1840s and ‘50s, only to be felled by the Civil War, served to discount that communalism could be a possible reaction to religious change as time passed. As such, the great majority of the field’s literature, with only a few exceptions, has in effect constructed a narrative of communal defeat midcentury, only to see

⁷ Arthur E. Bestor, Jr. “Patent-Office Models of the Good Society: Some Relationships between Social Reform and Westward Expansion,” *The American Historical Review* 58, no. 3 (April 1953): 526.

⁸ Mark Holloway, *Heavens on Earth: Utopian Communities in America, 1680-1880* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1966): 213.

a quasi-renaissance with the counterculture and hippy communes more than one hundred years later.⁹

In 1990, Robert S. Fogarty published *All Things New*, in part a response to the established doctrine. The book, which covers 1860 to 1914, explores hereunto barren ground. Bucking Bestor's bold assertion of communalism's uselessness in an industrial age, Fogarty provides an appendix listing 141 groups founded between 1860 and 1914, a number that speaks not to utopia's success, but rather to the belief in both an idea and an institution as a possibility for change.¹⁰ The Christian Commonwealth Colony fits, was born and grew, in that belief.

Fogarty groups post-Civil War utopias into three categories: "cooperative colonizers, charismatic perfectionists, and political pragmatists." The first, Fogarty says, organized themselves to guard against the predation of the wider, outside world, the capitalism that set men against each other. The second model, charismatic perfectionists, "were based either on the personal sanctity of the membership as a whole, or on the personal sanctity, special gifts, or powers of a forceful leader." Moreover, "their concern for social questions was always secondary to an emphasis on the personal and religious development of the membership as

⁹ Based on the journal of the Communal Studies Association and WorldCat, John Goodin of Luther College compiled a bibliography of scholarly publications related to utopian groups. For example, for the last two years, 2011 and 2012, it shows several works released on the Shakers, Harmony, and jumping ahead, to Kibbutzim and modern communes based around sustainability, but nothing exploring experiments after the Civil War to 1900: "Communal Studies Bibliography 1992-2012," last modified November, 2012, accessed July 7, 2013, <http://academic.luther.edu/~goodinjo/CSAbibliography.htm#top%20of%20page>.

¹⁰ Robert S. Fogarty, *All Things New: American Communes and Utopian Movements 1860-1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990): 227-33.

outlined by an inspired leader.” Lastly, the pragmatists were “radicals who were seeking an arena within which to test their principles and publicize their ideals.”¹¹

As this and the following chapters will show, throughout its existence the Christian Commonwealth Colony, though at first glance tailor made for Fogarty’s “charismatic perfectionist” category, bucked an easy categorization, and instead took elements from all three qualifiers. Similarly, Commonwealth does not conveniently fit with the conceptualization of the Social Gospel movement as a force confined to northern cities. This thesis will show that, though the life of the group was short, its existence sheds light on both utopian communalism and the Social Gospel, two influential strains of American religious thought.

Despite the wide breadth of the Social Gospel movement, not everyone was convinced that the kingdom, God’s will done on Earth as it is in Heaven, would be best served by incremental attacks against the symptoms of society’s disease. Some Christians, eager to serve God as they saw best, called for more radical attempts to curb the world’s depravity and start a new life of holiness. Some Christians wanted to take the next step and build the Kingdom from the ground up. The first call came in November of 1895.

The Christian Commonwealth Colony was born out of a letter. On November 29, 1895, *The Kingdom* printed a letter to the editor from John Chipman, an Episcopal minister of Wade, Florida. Published in Minneapolis, Minnesota from 1894 to 1899, *The Kingdom*, headed by the famous George D. Herron, was a weekly populist, socialist publication. The editors listed its purpose as being “applied Christianity,” the tenets of Christ used to cure social ills. *The Kingdom*

¹¹ Ibid., 16-19.

and its readers then, devotees to the cause of curing the world to make way for the Kingdom of God, served as the perfect forum for the proposal that Chipman brought forth in 1895.¹²

In a letter addressed to the editor of *The Kingdom* titled “A Proposition,” an entreaty to “those who love Christ,” John Chipman proposed the creation of a new Christian community. To do so, he begins with the words of Jesus. “A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another as I have loved you.” “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth.” “Whosoever he be of you that renounceth not all that he hath, cannot be my disciple.” In choosing those and several more Biblical excerpts, Chipman started his note with an accusatory tone. The path of a disciple is not easy, and the road is long. Hereunto, people had failed to follow through. But the commandments come straight from the mouth of Jesus, and therein his followers must obey. Chipman hoped to use Jesus’s authority to legitimate his proposal.¹³

Chipman continued confrontationally: “If we really believe Christ to be the son of God, we are fools not to obey him, even if he tells us to do that which seems to lead to certain death.” The author admitted with this bit of foreshadowing that all would not warmly receive his proposition; it would not be an easy cross to bear. After several dismal lines of sin, death, poison, and despair, Chipman came to his reason for writing. “Why not come together and put all that we have, little or much, into a common fund, buy a tract of cheap land and go there to live and work all good works in Christ’s name?”¹⁴

The proposal is fundamentally different from the standard call to arms of the Social Gospel movement. Preachers and churches often asked their members to donate their time, their

¹² Ronald C. White, Jr. and C. Howard Hopkins, *The Social Gospel: Religion and Reform in Changing America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976), 150.

¹³ John Chipman, letter to the editor, *The Kingdom*, November 29, 1895.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

money, their energy, and perhaps even their personal safety to go into the inner cities, into the slums, and minister to the seedier aspects of society. A member of a missionary society might labor for hours on end, but the opportunity to go home was implicit.

By way of comparison, consider *The Christian League of Connecticut*, a series of stories published in *The Century Magazine*. In 1883 Washington Gladden, a Congregationalist minister, wrote the fictional story of a group of churches and members coming together to do missionary work in the cities. Though fictional, many readers found *The Christian League of Connecticut* to be similar to their own experiences with Christian work during the Social Gospel period. The people in the story worked together and discussed, held youth activities, and organized works for the poor in the cities. Gladden painted a picture of a decidedly middle class conglomeration of clergy and laypersons coming together to work, but when the day is done, when the meeting is over, the individuals return to their homes, to their families.¹⁵

In his letter to the editor of *The Kingdom*, John Chipman called for something more radical entirely. He knew this. Chipman threatened that the wage of sin is death, and to sin is to disavow Christ. Christ, Chipman would have readers believe, would endorse this message of a common fund, a common land, and a common work.

The letter urged for the common land to be deeded to Christ, the son of God the legal owner of the land of his followers. The brothers and sisters who live and love together will provide all necessities from their own labor. Chipman went on to make the sure statement, “We cannot suffer.” He charged that the “laws of Christ” would be the laws of the group, and the group would be open to all who wished to join and give over their possessions to the common

¹⁵ Robert T. Handy, ed., *The Social Gospel in America: 1870-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966): 72-73.

fund. The group would live the Christian life, following the Bible, and Jesus would supply the rest.¹⁶

Following several paragraphs of additional rhetoric, Chipman discussed issues practical to the foundation of the Kingdom of God on Earth. He proposed that fifty families should come together, and surely they could each contribute at least four hundred dollars, therein starting the community, as yet unnamed, with \$20,000. Additionally, Chipman most hopefully stated that his estimate was conservative; “perhaps a single member could bring the half of that.” Next, they would find a place to settle. In total, Chipman wanted 2,000 acres in land. Of that, 1,500 acres would be farm land, and the remaining 500 acres would serve as woodland. East Tennessee or west Georgia, he thought, would do nicely, and there the price would probably only reach \$8,000. From there, the group would need to support itself, and Chipman thought of that, too. A sawmill would be \$1,500, livestock \$3,000, and a “small cotton goods factory” would probably cost \$3,000. At those estimates, the group would still have \$4,500 left from their starting point of \$20,000, and would also have a means of industry to make a living.¹⁷

The group would not only provide for themselves monetarily. Their industry of love and Christ would provide food through farming. It would provide clothing by way of the textile mill. The group would build their homes from the trees harvested from the woodland. In this letter to the editor of a midwest paper, John Chipman envisioned a totally self-sufficient outpost of God’s kingdom. Nothing would go wrong, the members would love one another, and Christ and the Father would handle everything else. Towards the end of his proposal Chipman said, “And we will work for all. Our life’s aim will be to make all this world a glorious Kingdom of God.

¹⁶ John Chipman, letter to the editor, *The Kingdom*, November 29, 1895.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Success is ours – or rather Christ’s – if only one little corner be made into his Kingdom visible on Earth.” They only needed one little corner.¹⁸

The November 29 letter was a sales pitch. The Florida minister spoke in terms of certainty and the lack of possibility of failure. The first step in any venture is to pique interest, and after that, the details, hereunto glossed over in a veneer of happy assurances, can be hammered out more fully. In this case, obviously Chipman spoke from his heart, from a depth of belief. He genuinely believed, as evidenced in his letter, that the men and women of the proposed group would love one another and God would take care of the rest. From that Biblical beginning, the collection of believers would transform the world anew, transform it into the Kingdom of God. But personal conviction does not always serve as evidence enough for all people, and another of *The Kingdom*’s readers posted a rebuttal.

On January 10, 1896, the newsletter published a piece from W. Harper of Americus, Georgia, interestingly a town not very far from the eventual location of Chipman’s proposed group. In his letter to the editor, Harper expressed firm doubts, even certainty, that such a system as proposed by the utopian from Florida was possible.

First, the writer spoke to history. Communistic experiments have never before succeeded, and the likelihood of the present proposal doing so is low. In fact, Harper wrote, Chipman’s entire premise was incorrect. It is not for one man, or any group of men, to presume that they can administer the Kingdom of God, even the earthly version. “The Kingdom of Heaven cometh not with observation, nor is it simple enough to be formulated by the human intellect. We may

¹⁸ Ibid.

render useful service to the Kingdom,” Harper said, “but God alone is qualified to be its manager. No such community, therefore, can ever represent the Kingdom of God.”¹⁹

Further, Harper turned Chipman’s Biblical quotes around. To love one’s neighbor does not mean to pull up roots and leave him adrift. The formation of a colony, no matter how open to new members, is to necessarily leave behind other brothers and sisters. To leave them is to act counter to the spirit of love in the verse. Even if the venture were to succeed, and the writer highly doubts that it would, but if it somehow did achieve business success, the ability of the proposed group to stay solvent would not be a testament to Christian morals anyway.²⁰

Rather, Harper suggested a course of action more in line with mainstream Social Gospel mores. A community such as the one that Chipman proposes would serve less well than one that already exists, the municipality. Go into the cities, Harper said, where Christians can put their skills to use, not reinventing the wheel as in a communal society, but rather in helping those who are in need. A community is too small to cultivate the skill sets needed for self-sufficiency, but the city is large, and the city has need and opportunity for help and the expression Christ’s teachings, which is what Chipman wanted in any case.²¹

In this, Harper implicitly advocated that Chipman follow the example of Jane Addams or the teachings of Walter Rauschenbusch, or other of those reformers who worked among the people. Rather than starting something new of dubious scriptural purity, Harper would have Chipman follow the more traditional path of going amongst the poor and ministering to them in their homes and in their lives.

¹⁹ W. Harper, letter to the editor, *The Kingdom*, January 10, 1896.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

One week after the Harper criticism, *The Kingdom* published another letter to the editor, this time from George Howard Gibson. Gibson, the author of a book of poems advocating workers' rights, was a noted Populist with past associations with several of that group's publications.²² In his letter of support, he wrote, "Is Communism practicable? To my mind, no other mode of life is practicable, wise or Christian." To live one's life after capitalism is unchristian, against the teachings of the Bible; Gibson referred readers to chapter eighteen of the Book of Revelation for God's view of the market economy.²³

In his support for a Christian communist enterprise, Gibson started with a premise, what he called a fact: "No undertaking ruled by Christ has or can come to naught." Like Harper, he appealed to the lessons of history. "The Christian communes of the first century were broken up and scattered by persecution by outside power then reigning not by the discovery that they had made a mistake." As to the failed enterprises Harper mentioned, "The communes that have failed were not composed of hearts that acknowledged allegiance to Christ." Past communes, Gibson alluded to Brook Farm and the Shakers, failed because they limited themselves with lack of vision, and in the second case, unnecessary rules like celibacy.²⁴

The main factor, in Gibson's mind, behind the failure of communes has been Christianity's allowance for worldly practices such as business and pleasure. The letter writer believes though, that a new "great light is beginning to dawn." Gibson did not believe that the

²² A contemporary movement to the Social Gospel, Populism swept through the United States in the nineteenth century, advocating agrarianism and hostility to the upper social classes. See: Joe Creech, *Righteous Indignation: Religion and the Populist Movement* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955); Robert C. McMath, Jr, *American Populism: A Social History 1877-1898* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992).

²³ George Howard Gibson, letter to the editor, *The Kingdom*, January 17, 1896.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

world could be improved with reforms and aid societies. To his way of thinking, something new and altogether more radical was needed if God's will was to be enacted on Earth.

At the end of his letter, Gibson revealed himself to be already a member of a group interested in coalescing into a larger, communal unit. He and his family were members of the Christian Corporation, and for ten months had been planning on just such a venture; Chipman's letter to *The Kingdom's* editor provided the onus needed to sell property and form into something larger. Gibson ended with, to put any worries to rest, "The Christian organization of industry will not limit individual liberty, but increase it."²⁵

The group that would become the Christian Commonwealth Colony believed it was at the forefront of a worldwide shift. The members believed that as soon as American society saw the fruits of their labor and their love, tenets ascribed as necessary by Christ, temporal norms would quickly shift to follow their example. Notably, the group chose a communal model, rather than the more accepted and common individual or even group acts of charity, to invoke their vision and bring about their change. Commonwealth thus would serve as an example for how a Christ-oriented society would cure the world's ills by bringing brotherly love into the realm of industry. While equality in Christ would reign however, practicality and necessity drew men and women with the qualities of leadership and with a vision for the future to the top.

Without question, the most important and influential theological driving force behind the Christian Commonwealth Colony was Ralph Albertson. A Congregationalist minister, early life well prepared Albertson for his future role at the center of a communitarian movement poised on

²⁵ Ibid.

exhausted land in rural Georgia. His father, Richard Albertson, ran a farm on Long Island that almost totally provided for the family's needs without the need to purchase elsewhere.

Albertson's father died when he was thirteen, and soon circumstances necessitated that he learn a trade, woodworking. Finding such a life unsatisfactory, in 1889 Albertson matriculated at Oberlin Theological Seminary in Ohio, long a center of reform theology since an association with Charles Finney, the renowned reform theologian during the Second Great Awakening.²⁶

Seminary first introduced Albertson to the ideals that would so strongly influence his career as a community leader. As a student, he read Karl Marx and other socialist writers. It was at this point that the plight of the poor affected his conscience. After graduation in 1891, Albertson journeyed to Springfield, Ohio, to become the minister for the Lagonda Avenue Congregational Church. He worked with a church that served congregants in both soul and body, attempting to meet both the spiritual and physical needs of the community, a popular trend among churches during the Social Gospel movement.²⁷

In 1895, Ralph Albertson started following the series of letters to the editor detailing views on Christ and communism in *The Kingdom*, the religious newspaper published in Minneapolis; the articles attracted attention from those who shared Albertson's socialistic inclinations. In 1896, Albertson published in the paper, supporting the idea of Christian socialism. With heartening correspondence from George Howard Gibson and John Chipman, among others, the seeds of a new Christian utopia grew in Albertson's mind as a method to cure the world's ills. He resigned from his position as minister at the Lagonda Avenue church to act

²⁶ Theodore Kallman, "The Pilgrimage of Ralph Albertson," *Communal Societies* 26, no. 2 (August 2006): 79-80.

²⁷ Ibid.

on his conversations with Gibson and Chipman.²⁸ Together, these three would be the driving force behind the colony.

Before journeying to Commonwealth, George Howard Gibson was a prominent Christian socialist in Nebraska, the editor of the *Wealth Makers*, the paper of the state's Populist Party, the People's Party. A professional journalist by trade, Gibson wrote on the usual Populist topics of temperance, free silver, poetry, and religion, among others. However, he became disillusioned with the prospects of political reform, and instead focused on religious change.²⁹ In 1894, he worked with a communal experiment outside of Lincoln, Nebraska. Upon the community's failure, and the financial troubles of the *Wealth Makers*, he resigned his stake in both enterprises. Soon thereafter, as the result of his correspondence with Albertson and Chipman, Gibson left Nebraska for Georgia.³⁰ It was Gibson who took up the first defense of Chipman's proposition in *The Kingdom*.

The third member of Commonwealth's founding triune was John Chipman, although in the course of the colony's life, he played a smaller role. Indeed, he was never a permanent resident, in spite of his position as the father of the idea. It was Chipman who wrote the initial inquiries to *The Kingdom*, expressing the need for a community that would showcase the effects of Jesus's love to the world. It was fitting that as Chipman had aided in the philosophical formation of Commonwealth, he also would enable the colony to become a physical reality.

²⁸ Ibid, 85-86; Albertson, "The Christian Commonwealth in Georgia," 125-126.

²⁹ Michelle D. Tiedje, "The People's Hour and the Social Gospel: George Howard Gibson's Gilded Age Search for an Organization of the Kingdom of God" (master's Thesis, University of Nebraska, 2010), 104-6. In her biography of Gibson, Tiedje argues that activists within the Social Gospel based their plans for reform on past experiences. In Gibson's case, he was disillusioned with the political arena, and turned to religion.

³⁰ Samuel Walker, "George Howard Gibson, Christian Socialist Among the Populists," *Nebraska History* 55, no. 4 (December 1974): 565-567.

With a colony in mind, Chipman chose a plot of land in Muscogee County, Georgia. In November 1896, a representative group from the burgeoning utopia visited Columbus. The party announced to a group of locals that they were touring the South, seeking a location for their colony. The representatives proclaimed that they “had the money to pay for any tract of land that might be selected, and which suited them in every particular.” They certainly possessed confidence in their enterprise; they sought an area whereat they could purchase adjoining plots, when and if the colony required expansion.³¹

The *Columbus Enquirer Sun* reported that during that trip, the utopian scouts found the location for their future Eden. A Mr. A.S. Dozier sold the emissaries 935 acres located approximately thirteen miles east of Columbus. The property, which sold for \$3,000, was traversed by a line of the Central Georgia Railroad. A month after the sale, the colony, by then home to thirty-eight people and increasing by the day, secured a promise from the Railroad to build a depot on the property, and had also propositioned the federal government for the establishment of a post office.³²

Colonists came from across the nation. “Nebraska, Washington, California,” George Howard Gibson said, “Massachusetts, Ohio and other states,” as well. “We propose,” Mr. Sheffield, a colonist from Nebraska said, “to show the good people of Georgia that they are in the best state in the union and we also intend to prove to them that vegetation of all kinds can with success, be grown here.”³³ Columbus natives, without the knowledge of the new colonists, dubbed the colony “Agopolis,” the City of Love. The *Enquirer Sun* reported that as soon as the

³¹ “Muscogee Now Has A Colony,” *Columbus Enquirer Sun*, November 24, 1896.

³² Ibid; “At Commonwealth,” *Columbus Enquirer Sun*, December 29, 1896.

³³ “Christian Commonwealth,” *The Commons*, October 1898; “On to “Agopolis,”” *Columbus Enquirer Sun*, December 18, 1896.

town's neighbors chose "Commonwealth," they too used that moniker. Having bought the property in late November, by the end of the year, the City of Love was "in correspondence already with at least 300 applicants."³⁴

When making the deed to the community's property, John Chipman initially sought to list "Jesus Christ" as the owner. Ralph Albertson objected because, "Jesus Christ would not pay the taxes."³⁵ With land purchased, the burgeoning idea of the Christian Commonwealth Colony next needed to establish a new way of life.

³⁴ "Colonists and Their Colony," *Columbus Enquirer Sun*, December 20, 1896.

³⁵ Albertson, "The Christian Commonwealth in Georgia," 127; 133-134.

Chapter Two

Living in the Kingdom: Internal Mechanics of the Colony

The Christian Commonwealth Colony, like other religious offshoots of the Social Gospel movement, believed that improvements on Earth paved the path to Heaven. A community, Commonwealth's organizers thought, would remove Christians from the world's vices and provide a backdrop for an order of life that God would find pleasing. This lifestyle would, person by person, eliminate sin from the Earth. "You are the light of the world," Christ said. "A town built on a hill cannot be hidden." Commonwealth found their mission in the command to let their "light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in Heaven."¹ With Jesus's Sermon on the Mount in mind, a group of idealists founded a community approximately thirteen miles east of Columbus, Georgia, named the plot Commonwealth, and made it the home of the Christian Commonwealth Colony. Admission was free and work was voluntary.² All were welcome, so long as they took a simple pledge:

I accept as the law of my life Christ's law, that I shall love my neighbor as myself. I will use, hold, or dispose of all my property, my labor and my income according to the dictates of love for the happiness of all who need. I will not withhold for any selfish ends aught that I have from the fullest service that love inspires. As quickly as I may be able I will withdraw myself from the selfish competitive strife and devote myself to the co-operative life and labor of a local Christian Commonwealth. As a member of this organization I will work according to my ability in labor together with God for the production of goods for human happiness.³

¹ Matt. 5: 14-16.

² Ralph Albertson, *A Survey of Mutualistic Communities in America* (New York: AMS Press, 1973), 415-416.

³ John O. Fish, "The Christian Commonwealth Colony: A Georgia Experiment, 1896-1900," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (June 1972): 216.

This chapter will describe the internal mechanics of the Christian Commonwealth Colony. The group's purpose was to show the world how a godly society operated, and in that, Commonwealth hoped to lead by example. To fulfill their aims, the colony espoused what they saw as the communistic love of Jesus, and attempted to live to those standards.

It is important to remember that while Commonwealth had recused itself from the world, the eventual goal of the community was to lead by example, and foment a worldwide revolution towards godliness and Christian love. Thus, it was important that while the colonists were not of the world, they needed to be connected with it, so that others could see the changes that they were affecting in their hearts and in their lives. When the rest of the country, and then the world, saw what they took to be the obvious benefits of living communistically, according to the teachings of Christ, the world would act on common sense and transform, too. In forming a utopian experiment to fulfill the promise of God's word Commonwealth sat astride the most radical edge of the Social Gospel movement, but their view that the kingdom could be achieved person by person, through the meeting of physical and material needs, was common for the era.

To keep in touch with the outside world, to laud their achievements and to, in a sense, goad the wider society to change, Commonwealth published *The Social Gospel*, a monthly newsletter and journal. As the colony was never able to achieve the worldwide revolution they hoped for, the publication of *The Social Gospel* was undoubtedly their most lasting and important contribution. Published from 1898 to 1901, actually enduring several months after the colony's eventual foundering, the journal provided theological articles, calls to God, commentary on the major news pieces of the day, book reviews, and, most importantly, a section labeled "Colony Notes," that described in great detail the physical needs of the group. Aside from the

historical value of what was essentially a colony wide diary, “Colony Notes” revealed, with candor and openness, the quality and nature of life at Commonwealth.

In “Colony Notes,” readers could see for themselves the privations faced by colonists. Members always hoped that once the enterprise came to fruition, sympathetic readers would donate. Donations would provide enough capital for Commonwealth to fully enact its vision, a vision that relied on money as much as it did on love and Jesus. Some money and goods did flow down to Georgia from likeminded individuals and families, though not enough. Eventually, *The Social Gospel* would become extremely influential, theologically, to such an extent that it reached two thousand readers and the title became commonly known as the name for the entire liberal Christian movement of the day, the Social Gospel movement.⁴

Commonwealth published volume one, issue one of *The Social Gospel* in February, 1898. A magazine of “Obedience to the Law of Love,” the inaugural issue promised that “The Kingdom of Heaven is at Hand.” Published in Commonwealth, a year’s subscription cost fifty cents, while single issues were five cents. George Howard Gibson and Ralph Albertson served as the managing editors, while George D. Herron, William T. Brown, Ernest H. Crosby, James P. Kelley, S.H. Comings, and John Chipman acted as associate editors, although only Comings resided full time as a member of the colony. The list of absent associate editors speaks to the fact that Commonwealth, while separate and apart, was not solitary and isolated.

The first issue of *The Social Gospel*, published two years after Commonwealth’s founding, described for the uninitiated the goals of the members, and detailed what the world would look like under a Christian communist, brotherly love oriented organization. The “Current

⁴ Charles Howard Hopkins, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865-1915* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940), 196-197.

Events” section commented on everything from trust busting, politics in Haiti, Kaiser Wilhelm II, J.P. Morgan, and the annexation of Hawaii, further evidence that “apart” did not mean isolated.⁵

In the first issue, *Commonwealth* set the tone for the future. “The highest ideals possible to human society are found in the life and character of God. Hence the social ideal is a social incarnation.” The incarnation had no room for the class wars of the world; God loved all, and all were to love one another. *Commonwealth* was a part of the world, but not “of” it, and as such, the colonists commented on the news stories of the day. Trust busting opened eyes to injustice, *Commonwealth* said. The law of love did not abide in Haiti, where “the rightness of things is a variable contingent determined by bigness of guns and such things.” The Georgia utopian group was skeptical of Kaiser Wilhelm’s “love fest” with Tsar Nicholas II, seeing it as an attempt to pressure the Reichstag to pass a military appropriations bill. Hawaiian annexation involved “serious moral considerations.”⁶

The road to publication was not easy. *Commonwealth* was not able to even purchase the land on which they sat with their own funds, so extraneous expenses took time to accomplish, thus the two year delay after the colony’s founding before initial publication. Not until the second issue, in March, 1898, was the printing press used to produce *The Social Gospel* paid for, and that only occurred thanks to the twenty dollar donation of a “brother in Pennsylvania.” With publication underway, though, it was not long before words of support started pouring in. “It reads like a continuation of the Acts of the Apostles,” wrote one reader. Said another, “I think it is the best matter outside of the Good Book that I have ever read.” “*The Social Gospel* is

⁵ *The Social Gospel* 1, no. 1 (February 1898): 1-31.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

unrivalled as an utterance of the Spirit of the abundant life that is to prove the emancipation of man,” wrote a third. “In *The Social Gospel*, you have cleared away the mist, and I see the way clear now before me,” said another.⁷ More famously, Leo Tolstoy supported the work, and *The Social Gospel* specifically; he wrote to George Howard Gibson, “I duly received your letter and magazine, both of which afforded me great pleasure.” The count told the members of Commonwealth that their work would flourish, “only by strict following of the law of love and will perish by acting in opposition to it.”⁸

Less than a year after the publication of the introductory issue, Commonwealth was in need of a new printing press. The press’s plight exemplifies the relationship between the CCC and the readers of *The Social Gospel*. “The old trap on which *The Social Gospel* has so far been printed is almost beyond use. It has neither fountain nor throw-off and prints only two pages at a time. This month it has caused the printers much trouble and nearly stalled the edition.” The need had not diminished by February, with a cylinder and jobber required, although that month’s edition still went to press. Finally, in March 1899, two women in Boston donated one hundred dollars, and a friendly person from Washington, D.C. donated another twenty-five dollars. The problem was not immediately solved, though. Several options for presses were available, and the Extension Department, that division charged with external relations with the world and thus the publication of the journal, decided that a press with steam fixtures available second hand in New

⁷ “The Christian Commonwealth: Colony Notes,” *The Social Gospel*, 1, no. 2 (March 1898): 22-23.

⁸ Daniel T. Elliott and Tracy M. Dean, “Commonwealth, Georgia: LAMAR Institute Publication Series Report Number 90,” (Savannah, GA: The LAMAR Institute, Inc., 2007), 27-9.

York was the best option, the cost, however, including shipping, was three hundred and seventy five dollars, thus leaving Commonwealth with a shortfall.⁹

Commonwealth reported deliverance in the April 1899 issue. Paul W. Koetitz, a regular reader and correspondent, agreed to donate a press that was then seven years old, and had originally cost \$2,225. It had the capacity to print 1500 impression an hour. The windfall provided by Koetitz allowed for the planning of more extensive publishing; the eventual goal being educational publishing in the manner of books and pamphlets.¹⁰

The Social Gospel would be the community's most lasting contribution. After Commonwealth failed, the journal continued printing in New York until May 1901, and even the last issue gave no indication that there would not be a follow up. Commonwealth saw the publication as its best chance of accomplishing their mission to change the world by example. *The Social Gospel* provided detailed accounts on many minutiae of life in the small community, sparing no details of hardship or want. Unfortunately, the group had few successes to report. The details of privations, food rationing, and the occasional fire, freeze, or crop failure found sympathetic ears, but not so sympathetic that enough money found its way to Georgia to keep the operation afloat in the end, though even the concluding issues were not diminished in enthusiasm for Commonwealth's work or mission.

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⁹ "Colony Notes," *The Social Gospel* 2, no. 1 (January 1899): 25; "Colony Notes," *The Social Gospel* 2, no. 2 (February 1899): 24; "Colony Notes," *The Social Gospel* 2, no. 3 (March 1899): 24.

¹⁰ "Colony Notes," *The Social Gospel* 2, no. 4 (April 1899): 23; "Colony Notes," *The Social Gospel* 2, no. 5 (May 1899): 28-29.

In the hopes of being a fully functioning and sufficient community, Commonwealth depended on a diverse group of individuals with a myriad of skill sets. In his recollections, Ralph Albertson remembers several people and families who he felt were especially important in achieving the group's mission. While the functioning government of Commonwealth consisted of member-wide gatherings, officially, the group elected a president to preside at such meetings. Additionally, Commonwealth consisted of labor divisions, with managers titled "Superintendents." There were superintendents of Farming, of Buildings, of Saw Mill, of Orchard, of Printing Office, and of Cotton Mill, in addition to the offices of Head Housekeeper, School Teacher, and Head of Commissary. At the addition of a member to Commonwealth's ranks, he or she chose which department best suited their skills. If the need for additional labor was not needed in that branch, the new member would be asked to choose again.¹¹

On November 14, 1898, Muscogee County, Georgia, officially granted the Christian Commonwealth Colony a charter.¹² In December, Commonwealth held official elections under its new constitution. In a community based on the equality and love of all members, there were thirty-six leadership positions up for election. Nominations were prohibited, but all adults over the age of eighteen were eligible to vote for positions that included President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer, Director of Labor, Health Officer, and then three members each for community-wide boards that dealt with the various aspects of colony life and labor, positions that carried with them no pay or additional benefits, and a term of one year. Every single adult member of the community voted.¹³

¹¹ Ibid, 129.

¹² Charter Book 1, Clerk's Office, Superior Court of Muscogee County, 227-229.

¹³ "The Christian Commonwealth: Our Commonwealth Politics," *The Social Gospel* 2, no. 1 (January 1899): 21.

Upon the granting of the official charter and the election of officers, Commonwealth published the newly propagated constitution. The document enumerated the qualifications for leadership, the requirement that all funds and material wealth be given up to the service of one's fellow man and in the "spirit of love." To serve as a leader, one simply had to be a member of the Colony in good standing, and accept the constitution and the majority will of Commonwealth, though the group naturally expected that the majority will would never go against the "law of love."¹⁴

The Christian Commonwealth's constitution was a short one, consisting of eight articles. The members supposed that a voluntary association of free men and women would not need onerous legislation to govern itself. "At Commonwealth we vote for men in whom is the Christ spirit, the spirit to serve. And our representatives do not make our laws. So far as we enact laws or rules, each individual votes directly upon such laws or rules of action. There is no delegated law-making power or ruling class."¹⁵

Children of members were considered to be wards of the community with all privileges of members, save voting, until the age of eighteen. Technically the Colony did consider children to be wards of the whole, but like any other possession, traditional family units stayed in Commonwealth, so parents raised their children.

A majority vote of all members after an open trial could expel a member. Any member who withdrew voluntarily had no claim on any property that they brought with them to Commonwealth, as upon joining they had given an oath to give up such things. Annual elections

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid, 21.

would take place on the last Thursday of November. A simple majority of members could amend the constitution.¹⁶

Commonwealth believed that the love of Christ and the love of their fellow men, their reason for association, would bring them through any problems that they encountered. It was from the outside world, not the inside, that Commonwealth expected problems, so the constitution listed an oath that all outsiders must take before conducting business with the colony.

I, name of contractor, do hereby contract, bargain, and agree with The Christian Commonwealth, that for such board and other benefits as the said Christian Commonwealth shall voluntarily give me I will work faithfully at the labor I may be assigned to, and my board is and shall be accepted by me as payment in full for the labor I perform, and I hereby relinquish all claims whatsoever to any wages. And I furthermore agree to peacefully and promptly leave the premises of The Christian Commonwealth whenever I may be officially requested to do so.¹⁷

With a method set for self-government, Commonwealth, its house in order, could focus on both its internal work, and the task of making that work known the world, the task of setting a Christian example. To do this, they depended on capable people.

W.C. Damon, a Methodist professor from California, occasionally served as president, and applied his agricultural knowledge to benefit Commonwealth's orchard. He preached and taught Latin and Greek. Similarly, S.H. Comings used his past experience as a Michigan farmer to the advantage of the colony's agricultural endeavors. Both, like the rest of the members, differed slightly in the nature of their theology, but all agreed in the basic mission of their

¹⁶ Ibid, 22-23.

¹⁷ Ibid, 24.

enterprise. The Superintendent of Farming, Dan Hinckley married Sue Fay, the schoolteacher and Superintendent of Education, a role that will be further examined later.¹⁸

Many more people, both individuals and families, transients and permanent residences, contributed to the four years that Commonwealth remained operational. The idea of a communistic utopia with the mission of bringing about the Kingdom of God brought approximately three hundred people to the Colony at various points. Many did not stay long, with communism in practice asking more of them than had communism in theory, but for some, the years between 1896 and 1900 were of great value. Fourteen years after the end of the colony, Albertson asked a former member, Ida McDermott, what she thought. “It was the finest and grandest experience of our lives,” she replied. “We would not give up what we got in Commonwealth for all the rest of our lives put together. Commonwealth made us what we are – good for something in the world, and good for something to ourselves.”¹⁹

Something good for the world was the primary goal of the Christian Commonwealth Colony, and all aspects of its existence were designed towards that goal. Members knew that once the world saw their good works, society as a whole would reform and follow a good example. Education, seemingly an internal issue, was part of that good example, and would be an important pillar in the colony platform for bringing about the Kingdom.

Jesus was a communist, and his followers were to “work, work hard, work as hard as it was humanly possible to work. For work, we said, work is love.” The Christian Commonwealth Colony sought to translate that “love” into an industrial output that would serve as the harbinger

¹⁸ Ralph Albertson, “The Christian Commonwealth in Georgia,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 29 (June 1945): 133-135.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 135.

of the Lord's will coming to pass. The Colony "undertook to make good citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth out of some very poor material. By miracle. By love." Commonwealth, Ralph Albertson stated, "believed in the miracle of love," and the colonists "hoped to prove that unstinted brotherly love would produce the highest industrial efficiency." Love did play a central role in Commonwealth's administration, though for such a lofty task as bringing about the Kingdom on Earth through industrial productivity, the Colony found it necessary to take more tangible measures, to teach love, and to teach work. To transform the word, this needed to start at home in Commonwealth.²⁰

The CCC knew for one thing that the proliferation of the "cooperative age" depended not only on the love advocated by Jesus, but also upon investment in the future. People were needed, people who were well suited by training to live in the Kingdom and fulfill its works. To that end, Commonwealth aimed for "a new and more perfect system of education for the young, from the kindergarten to the full college and industrial course." School, from early childhood into adult life, would serve as the instrument of preparation to bring about the goal. Such was the importance of the desired end, that *every* child needed training. In Commonwealth, all would work, but all would learn, too.²¹

Under a scientific educational regimen as proposed in *The Social Gospel*, all students were to be ready to support themselves by the age of sixteen. During their time in school, children would learn professional and industrial skills, so that by adulthood, a career would be a realistic option based students' education and training. A common tutelage of "high ideals of a real brotherhood" would sweep away diverse backgrounds and work to merge individuals into a

²⁰ Ibid, 126.

²¹ "The Christian Commonwealth: Proposals Invited," *The Social Gospel* 1, no. 6 (July 1898):24.

cooperative society. The world's universities failed students, according to colony leaders, by keeping separate the humanities and sciences from industrial, practical skills. In the contemporary, widely accepted system, students would graduate from universities with little to no capacity to work skilled tasks.²²

More specifically, under a Commonwealth educational system, students were to choose their careers during their school life, and therein be trained from a young age for a future profession. This process of early commitment served two purposes. Upon graduation from a typical university, a student found himself adrift in a world for which he was unprepared, the leaders of Commonwealth thought. Should the student's career goal be ill suited towards his or her temperament, the course could be rectified early in life, rather than later, therein saving time.²³

To fulfill this lofty goal of a revolution in education to help spurn society towards industrial communalism, the leaders of Commonwealth devised a grand plan. Five of the brethren would raise \$25,000 with the goal of outfitting the industrial education aspect of what *The Social Gospel* tentatively dubbed Cooperative University, the manifestation of Commonwealth's plans to revolutionize post-secondary education by integrating practical vocational skills with the classical arts and sciences. Confident in their plan, the colony's leaders expected that once the institution started its work, thousands would contribute financially towards the goal. "Able educators" assured the readers of *The Social Gospel* that once the world saw Cooperative University, other educational institutions would quickly "fall into step with its manifestly superior methods. Such a system would prepare for the cooperative civilization which

²² Ibid, 24-25.

²³ Ibid, 25.

men of all parties and all creeds plainly see is the next forward step to which evolutionary forces are pressing.”²⁴

\$25,000 for a university is a considerable sum however, and the colony, poor as it was, was never able to acquire it. Cooperative University became an unfulfilled dream. In spite of this setback, education, from Commonwealth’s founding, played an important role in the community, though their practices never convinced the world’s universities to mend their broken ways as had been hoped. The idea that children must be educated, though, held fast.

On January 14, 1898, the Christian Commonwealth Colony’s school opened. The building held four rooms, “the largest and best in Muscogee County outside of Columbus.” The Superintendent of the Educational Department was Sue E. Fay, the only female head of a Commonwealth department. She had three assistants aiding her in her labors. Fay, later Sue Fay Hinckley after her marriage to Dan T. Hinckley, another Commonwealth resident, had been an Ohio teacher, and followed Albertson from his church in Springfield, Ohio. Albertson described Fay as having “great good influence with the women and probably contributed more than any other individual to the harmony and general success of our communal life.” He went so far as to say that Fay and Hinckley would have made Commonwealth “historic” had it survived.²⁵

By March of 1898, the Commonwealth school under Sue Fay’s leadership taught twenty-seven regular students who learned vocational subjects in addition to Latin, Greek, and logic. Others learned, too. “Several of the older and married people make daily pilgrimages at regular hours to the school house for special studies,” according to *The Social Gospel*. While

²⁴ Ibid, 25-26.

²⁵ “Commonwealth Colony Notes,” *The Social Gospel* 1, no.1 (February 1898): 24; Albertson, “The Christian Commonwealth in Georgia,” 134.

Commonwealth would prove unequal to the task of creating the desired Cooperative University, the tenets behind its intellectual conception still held true. All of Commonwealth's members should learn to benefit the upcoming industrial, communal society. While many of the world were not fortunate to have grown up in a colony that propagated the necessary education, in their later years they would still find avenues of advancement in institutions like the Cooperative University, the colonists thought.²⁶

Students were educated in the "religious economics" of the Kingdom of God. To better further that mission, Sue Fay, with the assistance of her sister, Lucy, held a night school for those adults whose duties to Commonwealth kept them occupied during the day. S.H. Comings, the California professor, helped to formulate the curriculum, and he would have been the driving force behind the out of reach and soon abandoned Cooperative University.²⁷

The Fay sisters did not maintain discipline at the Commonwealth school through corporal punishment, as was the norm in contemporary grade schools. As in all other aspects of communal life in the colony, nothing was to be coerced, but rather gained through love. "The methods of teaching and the methods of discipline are such as to call out the embryonic manhood and womanhood of the children, and teach them self-reliance and self-respect," said *The Social Gospel*. Sue Fay and her sister were surely gifted with patience.²⁸

The August 1898 edition of *The Social Gospel* announced bold new plans to extend Commonwealth's education beyond the community's borders. Organizers intended that the first of October would see the opening of a new Commonwealth school along the lines of a normal

²⁶ "The Christian Commonwealth: Colony Notes," *The Social Gospel* 1, no. 2 (March 1898): 21.

²⁷ "The Christian Commonwealth: Colony Notes," *The Social Gospel* 1, no. 3 (April 1898): 23.

²⁸ "The Christian Commonwealth: Colony Notes," *The Social Gospel* 1, no. 5 (June 1898): 24-25.

and “industrial” institution of learning that would allow for four years of instruction. In a school year of three three-month terms, students from outside the community would pay five dollars a month and work four hours a day towards Commonwealth’s goals, which would covers students’ expenses, room and board, and other miscellanea.²⁹

Students at the proposed school would take part in a classical education, but would also be required to enroll in at least one industrial course, to better prepare themselves to take part in the upcoming cooperative future. Several options were available: blacksmithing and wagon making, saw-milling, carpentry, printing, steam engineering, horticulture, agricultural chemistry, greenhouse gardening, stenography, pedagogy, sewing, shoemaking, and tailoring. The eclectic nature of the available courses allowed the school to “turn out men and women rather than professors and machines.” At the proposed school, students would be “taught the dignity of service and the self-respect of self-support.”³⁰

The next issue of *The Social Gospel*, however, lamented that a lack of money and manpower prevented Commonwealth from opening the proposed school by October 4, 1898. That lack of funds probably would prevent any opening date until at least the beginning of the new year. This would be the fate of most Commonwealth projects, unfortunately.³¹

The proposed school’s failure to bear fruit is indicative of the general mindset of progress at Commonwealth. From the initial plans for a community, leaders postulated about the great things they would do under God’s guidance and with the help of their fellow man. They formulated grand plans for changing the world and enacting God’s will on Earth. In some

²⁹ “The Christian Commonwealth: Commonwealth School,” *The Social Gospel* 1, no. 7 (August 1898): 21.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

³¹ “Colony Notes,” *The Social Gospel* 1 no. 8 (September 1898): 28.

instances, as was the case with the planned school, Commonwealth went so far as to create budgets and curriculum, extensive plans. The group never secured money, though. In the Kingdom of God money would not matter, but in rural Georgia it did.

The people of the Christian Commonwealth Colony attempted to recreate society from the smallest minutiae of social interactions to grand and sweeping government reform. The ultimate goal, that the Kingdom of Heaven come to fruition on Earth, stipulated that people must love one another, work together, and share with each other. In spite of the grandiose plans of transformative universities and worldwide conversions, however, life at Commonwealth was more earthy than heavenly. The group continually worked on their printing press. They considered building a sanitarium. They planted trees, tried their hands at the textile industry, and raised chickens. The members married one another and grew their families.³² In a sense, it was a surprisingly mundane place, this birthplace of Heaven. At the very least, Commonwealth did enjoy the bemused affection of their neighbors in Columbus, as evidenced by the tone of *Columbus Enquirer Sun* articles, but that was hardly the level of brotherly love required to institute the hoped for world-wide shift.

Commonwealth met with failure after failure. The colony even started its life in debt by depending on John Chipman to pay for the land entirely, while in reality he could only make a partial payment. The proposed school could not open due to lack of funds. The printing press was constantly in need of new parts and more money. A proposed textile business never evolved out of the planning stage.

³² “New Notes From the Colony,” *Columbus Enquirer Sun*, February 5, 1899.

The colony did not fail for lack of enthusiasm. Members believed in the righteousness of their cause, and in all the good that it could do for the world. Living by the law of love, they knew that the greatness of their inspiration, Jesus Christ, would build in them a groundswell of support. Their colony, they felt, would do what others before had failed to accomplish, and actually live by the standards of Christian communism. Everyone would have enough to eat, and no man would be the slave of another.

The next chapter will more fully examine the main causes of Commonwealth's eventual downfall in 1900. The end involved internal dissent, a lawsuit, and a typhoid epidemic, in addition to insurmountable debt. The end came because the members were unable to pay their debts; the colony was not structured in such a way as to allow for financial success. While the colony believed that to be right with Jesus one had to live communistically, it was not to Jesus that they owed money. After the fact, the former leaders realized that their finances had been against them, but they were not willing to admit that humanity, with all its inherent flaws might not be able to match the extremely high standards that they had set, in fact believed that Jesus Christ had set, for life in both Commonwealth, and the hoped for but never achieved Kingdom of God on Earth.

Chapter Three

“Decidedly Spicy”

The nineteenth century saw the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire, the defeat of two Napoléons, the failure of the Confederate States of America, and the end of the Shogunate in Japan. Less bombastically, Commonwealth too ended, not with a bang but a whimper. The previous chapter described Commonwealth’s grand plans and godly hopes. This chapter examines the group’s closing days, and what caused the men and women of Commonwealth to shutter their dream of a heavenly kingdom.

The Christian Commonwealth Colony never flourished materially. In his pitch for a utopian community, John Chipman, the Florida Episcopalian from whose head the CCC sprang like an underwhelming Athena, had originally estimated that fifty families might come together to form the community, and each family would bring with it at least four hundred dollars, for a total of \$20,000. Optimistically, Chipman hoped that his estimate was conservative, and that the CCC might be so fortunate as to have one particularly rich founder who could supply as much as \$10,000. Sadly, those who became colonists in God’s new kingdom shored up their treasures in Heaven, and were only rich in love, rather than things of this world.³³

Clearly, Chipman miscalculated when he assumed that the extremely wealthy, anyone with \$10,000 to give away, would be a candidate for membership. It is difficult to ascertain, however, just how wrong he was. According to Ralph Albertson, the colony’s leading voice if not always official leader, “there was no admission fee; anyone could join simply by asking for membership. No record of work was kept and there were no internal accounts. The poor were

³³ John Chipman, letter to the editor, *The Kingdom*, November 29, 1895.

invited, the wicked, the infirm. About 300 hundred persons became members.”³⁴ The group kept no official roll, and made no list of what each member donated to the community upon entering, which makes it difficult to ascertain just how monetarily poor the CCC was during its existence.

The rationale was noble; in God’s kingdom all were brothers and sisters, and the selfish desires of property and individual ownership were things of the past, of the dying world. Problematically, however, the brothers and sisters in Christ did not always shed their human frailties as they did their coats in the hot Georgia summertime. While the Christian Commonwealth Colony was beset by numerous problems during its short existence, it was the root of all evil that started the downward slide.

All was not well outside of Columbus, Georgia in the summer of 1899. As the tumultuous nineteenth century came to a close, the men and women of Commonwealth found their lives of labor and love embroiled in a worldly dispute, just the sort of affair they had hoped to escape by banding together in brotherly camaraderie. From within the CCC’s ranks, a small number of colonists decided that they wanted to leave the group, which was allowed. They also wanted to take their “share” with them. That was not allowed.

The CCC was a collective. Everything belonged to everyone, and no one had a share or a piece; only the whole existed for the mutual benefit of the community, and from that, the benefit of God’s kingdom. Members contributed their possessions upon admission, and said possessions thereafter belonged to the colony, permanently. The constitution promulgated in the January 1899 issue of *The Social Gospel* provided rules for membership, and additionally stated, “Any

³⁴ Ralph Albertson, *A Survey of Mutualistic Communities in America* (New York: AMA Press, 1973), 415.

member withdrawing or being expelled from this society shall have no legal claim to reimbursement, since all contributions to its funds and equipment, both in money and in property and in labor, are and shall be only of the nature of absolute and irrevocable gifts.”³⁵ The cost of joining the community was plainly stated.

The details of the dispute are murky. Superficially, the conflict that started the downward spiral sounded much like a children’s argument, a matter of one child wanting something that the other possessed. The argument in question, however, would have more far-reaching ramifications than the ordinary dispute over toys and candy, no matter the similarities in motive and dialog. If Ralph Albertson is to be believed, the trouble began with a small group. “At first they refused to work, knowing that they would suffer no penalties, and at the same time made themselves as troublesome as possible to the rest of us. They wanted us to buy them off. This we would not do, nor would we penalize them.”³⁶

Little is known about the three leaders of the dissention, but that they were important members of the colony. *The Social Gospel* lists Albert Hall, a Cleveland man, as the CCC’s blacksmith and wheelwright, and also tasks him with starting a dairy, and the stewardship of six cows. Next, C.L. Brewer served as the head farmer, no small task for a colony on a former cotton plantation bent on feeding itself by tilling the soil. He also occasionally contributed articles to the monthly journal. Lastly, S.W. Martin was a “walking encyclopedia,” high praise, surely.³⁷

It is telling of the nature of the colony that these three men led a quasi-insurrection against everything that Commonwealth stood for – love and equal ownership, yet were not

³⁵ *The Social Gospel* 2, no. 1 (January 1899): 22.

³⁶ Ralph Albertson, “The Christian Commonwealth in Georgia,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 29 (June 1945): 140.

³⁷ “Colony Notes,” *The Social Gospel* 1, no. 3 (April 1898): 22-23.

named as such in *The Social Gospel*, a publication known for its candor and its thoroughness in chronicling even the colony's most mundane happenings. The men's only mention by name came a year beforehand in their introductions as prominent members in the community. Of the revolt, in August of 1899 *The Social Gospel* simply said:

One of the great lessons of that lawsuit, and one that must be kept constantly in mind, is that under our charter and by the principals of our organization there is and can be no individual ownership of the property of the Christian Commonwealth. Membership does not involve ownership. The property is held by the corporation, and not by the membership. The members own no stock.³⁸

That this account, a passage that names no names and throws no stones, is the colony's only mention of their troubles affirms them in their quest to turn the other cheek and live as Christ. The only detailed description of the actual dispute comes from the local newspaper, the *Columbus Enquirer Sun*.

On May 18, 1899, the *Columbus Enquirer Sun* reported, "The Colony is Now in Court." Heretofore the local newspaper had mentioned Columbus's zealous neighbors only sporadically. But in mid-May the CCC was on the tip of the town's tongue. Certain members of the CCC, the *Enquirer Sun* reported, were accused of attempting to "freeze out" other members who were not part of some nefarious plan. In fact, twenty-seven members found themselves so wronged, so maligned that they left the colony "in a body."³⁹

Commonwealth's dissenters filed a petition in the Superior Court against the colony as a whole, and Damon, then president, and Albertson, always influential even without formal office, in particular. The plaintiffs said that Damon and Albertson "combined and colluded together for the purpose of converting said property of the said colony to their own use and benefit, and to

³⁸ "Colony Notes," *The Social Gospel* 2, no. 8 (August 1899): 27.

³⁹ "The Colony is Now in Court," *Columbus Enquirer Sun*, May 18, 1899.

this end and purpose they have secured a majority of the members and are constantly and continually preferring some frivolous charges against other members of said corporation who are not in accord or confederates with their scheme...” Additionally, the plaintiffs accused the CCC’s majority of wrongly expelling anyone who was in the way of the aforementioned nefariousness. To combat this, the plaintiffs asked that the colony be put in a receivership. In response to these allegations, Judge W.B. Butt of Columbus ordered that the defendants appear at the end of the month to explain their side of the events, and to defend themselves against the charges of colluding to use the colony’s property towards their own devices.⁴⁰

Damon, Albertson, and the rest were not unduly distressed, even though a loss in the court would have ended the existence of the Christian Commonwealth Colony. Speaking to a reporter during a visit to town in the days before their first court appearance, Damon and Albertson said that they felt that they had the right on their side, and that the vast majority of the colony backed their position, pointing out that the plaintiffs comprised but a small minority of the colony’s population. Albertson went on to sweep away the problem; he said that it originated from the colony’s former policy of letting anyone into the Commonwealth Colony, regardless of their skills or resources. Though he declined to name names, Albertson said that the colony had admitted members “who were virtually tramps.”⁴¹

Before the trial, Albertson was quick to point out that the dissenters made up a small minority of the Christian Commonwealth’s overall population. “The exact number of people who have signed the petition to have the colony placed in the hands of a receiver who authorized their signatures is twelve. There were a total of fourteen names,” Albertson told the *Enquirer Sun*,

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ “Say the Colony Will Win Out,” *Columbus Enquirer Sun*, May 24, 1899.

“but two of the persons say that their signatures were not authorized.”⁴² At the time of the dispute, there were fifty-three voting members of Commonwealth, and one hundred residents overall, which left the dissatisfied at a stark numerical disadvantage.⁴³

Between the interview to the *Enquirer Sun* on May 24 regarding their surety that the CCC will win out, and a follow up in the May 31 edition of the paper, something changed. Albertson and Damon unabashedly stated that the court case was a moment of crisis for the colony, going back on their earlier optimism. “Everybody is aware of the fact that this is the most serious crisis in the history of our enterprise.” The two leaders reflected on previous privations, but pointed out that “you could travel the world over and not find a happier or more contended community.” However, then Albertson and Damon repeated their earlier assertion that the present ills are problems stemming from lax membership regulations.

From the very first the colony has been gradually going through a sifting process regarding its members. The enterprise has tested the character of many people. About half of those who originally went with us left us – it was too hard for them. The standard of morals at the colony is very strict, and many people did not come up to the test. We have injudiciously let in a good many people who have no business at the colony, and to whom the ideas of the place are uncongenial. Those people have been leaving all along.⁴⁴

The primary accusation against Damon, Albertson, and the rest of the colony was that the leaders and the majority had attempted to “freeze out” anyone who was not a member of their clique. In effect, this meant that the leaders wanted those who did not agree with them to leave the colony, therein forfeiting whatever worldly goods or monies they had originally brought into the

⁴² The May 18, 1899 article in the *Columbus Enquirer Sun* reported twenty-seven people as leaving. It is possible that only twelve of that number officially signed the petition to be presented to the court.

⁴³ “Colony Case Up Sunday,” *Columbus Enquirer Sun*, May 31, 1899.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

relationship.⁴⁵ The *Enquirer Sun* reported asked the two leaders if such a policy, even if it were true, would be “remunerative enough to attract anyone.” It would not, they said.⁴⁶ Though not stated in the interview, the reality was that the colony was perpetually poor and in want of both money and goods.

In addition to Damon and Albertson’s assertion that the petitioners’ claim, if true, would lead to no financial gain, the two colony leaders added that the dissenting group, during their tenure with Commonwealth, received benefits that equaled, in cash value, the amount of labor and goods contributed by the aforesaid. Sometimes, they asserted, the monetary value of living expenses spent on the dissenting group was more than the dollar value of what the dissenters brought to the colony upon joining.⁴⁷

In concluding the interview, Damon and Albertson attested that, contrary to the claims of the plaintiffs, the elected leaders of Commonwealth, an ever-changing group, lived no better than did the rest of the brothers and sisters. Food, another bone of contention, was selected and approved by the majority of the colonists. Lastly, the *Enquirer Sun* reporter asked about the issue of S.W. Martin, a leader in the dissenting group. Apparently, Martin had written a letter to the leaders of Commonwealth concerning an attempt made by them to expel him from the group. To this charge, Damon and Albertson said that Martin had never been a member of the CCC to begin with; he had signed a contract to “work for his living. In the contract it was distinctly understood that he was to receive no wages but merely a living, and what the Commonwealth

⁴⁵ This argument does not take into account the aforementioned CCC charter that stipulates that all possessions given to the colony at the time of admission irrevocably belonged to the colony henceforth, meaning that Damon, Albertson, etc. would not have needed to “freeze” anyone out to gain access to their possessions.

⁴⁶ “Colony Case Up Sunday,” *Columbus Enquirer Sun*, May 31, 1899.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

desired to give him.” It is unclear by what Damon and Albertson meant by asserting that Martin was never a member. Possibly, this could reflect bad record keeping on the colony’s part, or this could be a face saving maneuver by Damon and Albertson, an attempt to distance themselves and the colony from a trouble maker who had thereunto been a friend. In the April 1898 edition of *The Social Gospel*, the journal called Martin “a walking encyclopedia,” and mentions him in the same section that provides short biographies of the colony’s other notables.⁴⁸

The case against Martin served as a prolog to the main trial to determine the proposed receivership of the Christian Commonwealth. On June 1, the Superior Court of Muscogee County heard the Commonwealth’s case against S.W. Martin, their complaint being that he was living on the colony’s property without their permission. Martin, represented by the attorneys who also labored for the main body of dissenters, testified on his own behalf for over half an hour, by all accounts a humorous display, complete with swearing. “Mr. Martin said that he was not trespassing. He said that he had as much right at Commonwealth as anybody else, and that that was the reason he stayed there.” To Martin’s logic, if he was trespassing, then so were the colony’s members.⁴⁹

The next day, June 2, 1899, his lengthy and “humorous” testimony notwithstanding, the court convicted Martin on charges of trespassing, with a sentence of twenty-five dollars, which as of the day after the conviction, he had not paid. Martin’s conviction must have been seen as good news for Commonwealth, as one of the leaders of the dissenting faction had been discredited in the same court that would decide their own fate.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Ibid; “Colony Notes,” *The Social Gospel* 1, no. 3 (April 1898): 22-23.

⁴⁹ Side Issue in Colony Case,” *Columbus Enquirer Sun*, June 2, 1899.

⁵⁰ “Colony Draws First Blood,” *Columbus Enquirer Sun*, June 3, 1899.

The main trial began on June 7, and consisted of the readings of affidavits from each side, each protesting or negating the actions of the other. After the plaintiffs stood down, Commonwealth's lawyer asked if they did not have more affidavits to present. The attorney for the plaintiffs, Col. Thornton, answered that he, "had always supposed that a man was permitted to conduct his case in a manner in which he saw fit, and that if he did not see fit to read any other affidavits which he might have he did not think that they should be brought into court any how." The judge overruled the lawyer and ordered that he present any evidence that he had right then, before the colony's lawyers presented their own affidavits.⁵¹

After hearing lengthy testimony from both sides, Judge Butt found in favor of the Christian Commonwealth and dismissed the case. He said that the colony was solvent, therein negating the need for the receivership requested by the dissenting plaintiffs. Before the judge's verdict, Albertson remembered going over to the three "kickers" and asking them to come back to the fold, with all forgotten. Events did not transpire in that manner.⁵²

Unhappy with the results, "some of the petitioners" announced that they would soon be holding a meeting at a public hall. They proposed a number of speeches that would "detail the position of the minority faction of the colony." Not all of the defeated petitioners, however, committed to joining the group for the losers' rebuttal. On June 9, about thirty people gathered, and three of the leaders from the defeated faction spoke against Commonwealth, including C.L. Brewer, of whom we shall see more momentarily. In defense of the colony, George Damon, son of President Damon, spoke, saying that a visit to Commonwealth would show that the members were trying to "build up a Christian Commonwealth based upon principles of right." The losing

⁵¹ "Colony Case Is In Full Swing," *Columbus Enquirer Sun*, June 7, 1899.

⁵² Albertson, "The Christian Commonwealth in Georgia," 141.

faction's goal from the meeting is unclear, and the *Columbus Enquirer Sun* does not report them as accomplishing anything by it.⁵³

Before the end of the Commonwealth's courtroom saga, one more dissenter made an appearance. After Commonwealth's victory, C.L. Brewer was in court on his own. Aside from his role in the problems of peace in the colony, Brewer had also written a somewhat notorious book advocating free love, and had broken up one family in Commonwealth, Ralph Albertson remembered, "but this was the sort of thing that could have happened anywhere and it did not besmirch the reputation of the colony."⁵⁴ Now, after a short visit to Florida, he had returned to Commonwealth, an action that found him returned to Columbus's Superior Court.⁵⁵

Brewer argued that a member of the former minority, the group that had lost in court yet returned to the fold, had invited him to live with them at Commonwealth, as was their right, he argued. The judge ruled that the right of invitation belonged solely to the leaders and government of the Christian Commonwealth Colony, and as such Brewer's continued presence there was unwelcomed. Despite a reportedly impassioned argument, Brewer was found guilty, and ordered either to pay a fine of twenty-five dollars or to serve for three years on a chain gang. The newspaper did not report his choice.⁵⁶

Technically, the Christian Commonwealth Colony won a victory in their court battle. The losing dissenters either rejoined the fold of brotherhood, or left. In July, *The Social Gospel* made

⁵³ "No Receiver for Colony," *Columbus Enquirer Sun*, June 8, 1899; "Told Their Troubles," *Columbus Enquirer Sun*, June 10, 1899.

⁵⁴ Albertson, "The Christian Commonwealth in Georgia," 140.

⁵⁵ "Brewer, Too, Has Been Fined," *Columbus Enquirer Sun*, June 14, 1899.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

the longer of just two mentions of the recent court troubles. George Howard Gibson, a prominent colony leader, enumerated that the fault originally fell at the colony's feet for allowing unsuitable people to become members of the CCC. Next, however, Gibson firmly accused the recently defeated dissenters of a litany of crimes:

They were egotists. They had an itch for leadership. They made diligent endeavor to organize a disaffected party inside and break up the society. . . . The disaffected element kept away from our religious meetings, mocked at prayer, and showed themselves to be materialists, the contrary profession by which they gained entrance to our body having been ignorantly or insincerely made. They trampled on their vows, set aside the contracts they had entered into, and being determined in spirit to have their will or break us up, finally filed a petition for a receiver to sell and divide the property, and dragged us into the courts. They made all possible preparation for this suit, even to sending for a member we had expelled for writing and seeking to circulate a freelove book [Brewer], to come and help them in the trial.⁵⁷

In the end, “full proof was made in the court of the successful management and prosperous condition” of the colony.⁵⁸ Commonwealth defeated the legal challenge of its dissenting members, but the victory was pyrrhic. By even lowering itself into the worldly arena of the Georgia court system, the perfectionist members of the CCC had broken their pledge to remain apart from the world, to create a new world with no ties to old sin. In the eyes of many supporters, Albertson and the others betrayed their mandate in founding the Christian Commonwealth by even contesting the lawsuit. By going to court, the CCC had neglected to turn the other cheek, and this, in the eyes of some, betrayed their mission of godly life.⁵⁹ It is unclear if the preferable outcome would have been for the dissenters to take everything and sunder the colony.

⁵⁷ “A Lawsuit,” *The Social Gospel* 2, no. 7 (July 1899): 23.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁵⁹ Albertson, “The Christian Commonwealth in Georgia,” 141.

The colony's strife did not cease with the conclusion of the lawsuit. Three days after the trial ended, Dr. Eora Henry died of typhoid fever. Later, in the August edition of *The Social Gospel*, the colony reported that on April 25 of that year, the group had picnicked and made lemonade and coffee with water from a brook. "The water of this brook we afterwards had reason to believe, was contaminated with typhoid germs." Three weeks later, four members were sick, and a month after that, nine members had typhoid. The report concludes by stating that there had been two deaths.⁶⁰

Ralph Albertson suffered from the disease, and for many weeks was low, losing weight precipitously, though he did survive. In all, however, ten others did not. During this same time, Damon, occasionally president of the CCC, finally took his family and abandoned the colony. Gibson, too, another prominent leader, took his family and left for Saint Louis. As John Chipman had never been a permanent resident, a weakened Albertson was the only strong voice from the first days remaining.⁶¹

The Christian Commonwealth Colony did not fold overnight. Never as vibrant as Chipman had hoped in his 1895 letter, the group had managed to meet its basic needs, though there was never any money for anything that might be considered a luxury. Within a very short time frame, however, the colony suffered from a debilitating lawsuit and membership loss, an epidemic, *The Social Gospel* lost financial solvency, and then finally, they found that their mortgage was due. The Right Relationship League, an organization in Chicago created to support socialist religious endeavors, had held the mortgage. Since the CCC had supposedly violated their philosophical and theological foundations in contesting the court case, the Right

⁶⁰ "Colony Notes," *The Social Gospel* 2, no. 8 (August 1899): 28.

⁶¹ "Colony Notes," *The Social Gospel* no. 21 (October 1899): 31; Albertson, "The Christian Commonwealth in Georgia," 141-2.

Relationship League called in the debt. For a colony that could now barely feed its ever declining membership, the remainder of the mortgage, two thousand dollars, was too much. In June 1900, the Christian Commonwealth Colony entered into a receivership and the members disbanded. *The Social Gospel* continued in New York under two of the CCC's former members, though it would not continue on past the next year.⁶²

⁶² "A Statement," *The Social Gospel* no. 29 (June 1900): 23-25; John O. Fish, "The Christian Commonwealth Colony: A Georgia Experiment, 1896-1900," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (June 1972): 222-3; Albertson, "The Christian Commonwealth in Georgia," 142; Daniel T. Elliott and Tracy M. Dean, "Commonwealth, Georgia: LAMAR Institute Publication Series Report Number 90," (Savannah, GA: The LAMAR Institute, Inc., 2007), 22-3.

Conclusion

On June 20, 1900, Judge Butt appointed W.A. Ross, a colonist, to be the receiver for the Christian Commonwealth. In the face of the former utopia's debts, on the third of November the judge ordered the colony's assets to be sold by the first Tuesday in December, at a public auction. On that day, December 4, 1900, William T. Harvey and William Henry Harvey purchased Commonwealth's land for \$3,800. Using the money to pay off outstanding debts, Ross was left approximately \$500. Judge Butt ordered him to divide the money between those twenty-six men and women who had last been members of the deceased society.¹

A few cotton looms remained to be sold, along with some cables, hangers, a washing machine, some bedroom furniture, and other minutiae – a rather pathetic lot of items, these last remaining testaments to a group's dream of Heaven on Earth.² In hindsight, it is amazing that the Christian Commonwealth Colony survived until 1900. Considering that almost every initial assumption of support levels from the founders proved incorrect, it was a feat that the colony even materialized at all. Further, the group's publishing of a journal that found success with a national audience belies any logical expectation that one could have of the little band of idealists that founded a colony outside of Columbus, Georgia in 1896. From the beginning to the end, the colony's survival lent credence to the colonists' belief that God stood with them and their endeavor.

When John Chipman wrote his initial proposition in *The Kingdom* in late 1895, he spoke of living out God's word, living out God's love for one another, as brother and sister. Chipman's

¹ Deed Book, Clerk's Office, Superior Court of Muscogee County, 278-80; "About \$500 For the Colonists," *Columbus Enquirer Sun*, June 11, 1901.

² Deed Book, Clerk's Office, Superior Court of Muscogee County, 278-80.

plan was not unique; the pre-Civil War United States had seen utopian communalism at its zenith. Chipman planned to take the cause of the Social Gospel movement out of the missionary societies and homeless shelters. His plan called for a shift, from preparing the world for God's coming, to remaking the world entirely.

It did not work. Ultimately, God's kingdom on Earth ran afoul of worldly economics; in terms of dollar versus Dieu, the American greenback, or rather the want of it, came out on top. George Howard Gibson, late of Commonwealth, said, "They understood the law of love, they were moved by its impulses; but they had not studied with care the necessary means and methods or plans of economic production."³ Commonwealth failed for simple lack of money.

Even so, the value of the Christian Commonwealth lies not in their failure but in their founding. The idea that a group of people in the late nineteenth century could come together as a commune and push change on the world runs directly contrary to Arthur Bestor's assertion that, "By the 1880's there was no point in talking about laying the foundations of new commonwealths within the United States." Bestor said, "Serious social reformers in the latter nineteenth century were faced with the task of altering institutions already firmly established."⁴

Commonwealth's existence provides scholars with not only an example of post-Civil War communitarian utopianism, but with tangible evidence of Social Gospel principles enacted outside of an urban context. Like the reformers of missionary societies and anti-prostitution leagues, the men and women of Commonwealth thought that Jesus's return was contingent upon a perfect Earth. Rather than attempting to fix urban problems and institutions, however, the

³ "Why Commonwealth Failed," *The Commons*, January 1901.

⁴ Arthur E. Bestor, Jr. "Patent-Office Models of the Good Society: Some Relationships between Social Reform and Westward Expansion," *The American Historical Review* 58, no. 3 (April 1953): 526.

Christian Commonwealth Colony took the Social Gospel out of dark alleys and settlement houses; for Commonwealth, the Social Gospel meant a new city in Georgia, surely the first of many, they thought, once word spread of their good works and brotherly love.

Commonwealth did fail in its hope, but its example illustrates that the Social Gospel as a movement was not limited to soup kitchens and missions in northern cities. Utopian communities were not optimistic relics of the past, buried until a rediscovery in the 1960s. For Albertson, Gibson, Damon, Chipman, and scores of others, a rural community was the best way to enact the change they thought the world needed. Commonwealth did not succeed, but their attempt defies the supposed death of communalism and the solely urbanized nature of Social Gospel reform.

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