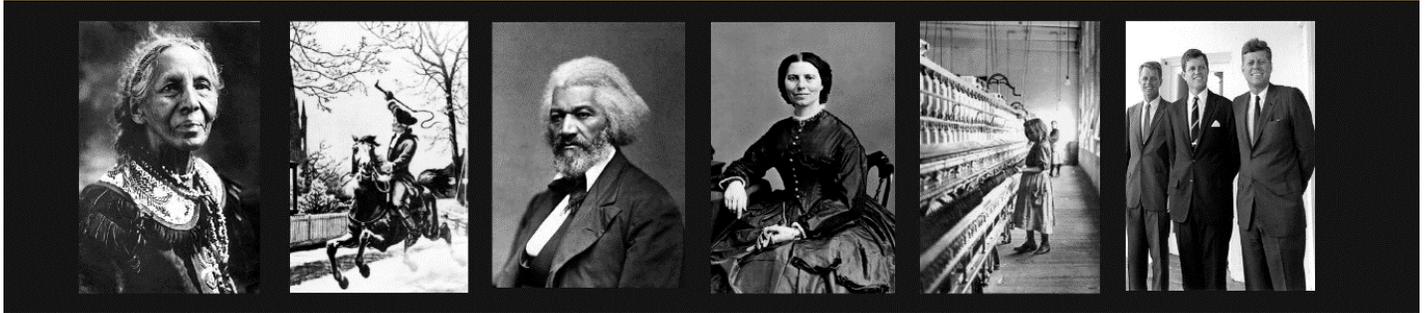


# *The Historical Journal of Massachusetts*



“The Women of the Hopedale Sewing Circle, 1848-63.”

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Source: *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*, Volume 44, No. 1, Winter 2016, pp. 116-135.

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University



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### **Lucy Ballou**

Lucy Ballou, wife of Adin Ballou, minister of the Hopedale, Massachusetts, community of Practical Christians, was a member of its Sewing Circle, a group of women and men whose activities embodied many of the progressive principles of Practical Christianity, notably equality between the sexes. Undated photo. Courtesy of the Bancroft Memorial Library, Hopedale, MA.

# The Women of the Hopedale Sewing Circle, 1848–63

LINDA N. HIXON



**Editor’s Introduction:** *The women of the “Hopedale Sewing Circle, and Tract Society” pledged as “Practical Christians” to spread the word of their new religion. But they also worked for their fellow beings, be they Practical Christian or not. The first two years of their nearly fifteen-year sewing circle record shows these women using their needlework skills to earn money to proselytize through donating tracts and writings about their beliefs. It also shows them learning to stand on their own. The women were given near equality in Hopedale, a socialist experiment started in 1842. Their sewing circle, originally a village effort, became the women’s group and the benevolent heart of the community. Linda N. Hixon is an archival assistant at Worcester State University.*

*The town of Hopedale is located in the Blackstone Valley in central Massachusetts, on the southeastern edge of Worcester County. The area was first settled in 1660s as the town of Mendon (incorporated 1667). The town was abandoned in 1675 during King Philip’s War and re-established around 1680. It developed as an agricultural and mill town. In 1780 Milford, a part of Mendon, was incorporated as a separate town.*

*It was here that Minister Adin Ballou, prominent social reformer, abolitionist, and pacifist, established the utopian Hopedale Community in 1842 based on Christian and socialist principles. The Hopedale Community*

*gradually became a prosperous manufacturing village shaped by elements of the Christian reform culture of its times, including abolition, feminism, temperance, and spiritualism.*

*In 1856, the community formally ceased when two of Ballou's closest supporters, Ebenezer and George Draper, withdrew their 75 percent share of the community's stock to form their successful Hopedale Manufacturing Company (also known as the E. D. and G. Draper Company). George Draper claimed the community was not using sound business practices. The community, however, continued on as a religious group until 1867, when it became the Hopedale Parish and rejoined mainstream Unitarianism. Ballou remained Hopedale's pastor throughout these transformations and finally retired in 1880. Hopedale, originally a part of Milford, was incorporated as a separate town in 1886.*

*The Draper Corporation went on to become the largest manufacturer of textile looms in the United States. In 1967, control of the corporation was passed to Rockwell International. Production ceased in 1979. Today, the town is included in the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor and is a historic mill village of national significance.*

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In early 1848, a group of men and women from the Community of Hopedale, Massachusetts, a Socialist religious experiment founded six years earlier, formed a sewing circle. Officially calling themselves "The Hopedale Sewing Circle, and Tract Society," this group of nineteen men and nineteen women created an organization that went beyond mending and sharing. Instead, they mixed industry and religion with caring and progressive views, in order to raise money, spread the word, and help in their community.

For the women recording their meetings—and only women recorded the meetings—religion was the center of their lives, but not their writings. These were "Practical Christian" women, and they simply did what was expected of this new religious movement. Two simple entries in the society's record at the end of 1849 speak to their quiet beliefs. "The Society met at the 'Old House' and worked for Mrs. Provan's family," the entry on December 19 reads. "Met at the house of Mrs. Bancroft and sewed for Mrs. Provan's children," says the second, dated the day after Christmas.<sup>1</sup>

The problem with these basic statements was that Mrs. Provan—Jeanet Provan—was dead. She had died on December 9. "Mrs. Jeanet came across he Atlantic already in consumption, and d[ied] here," minister Adin Ballou wrote in a genealogical register in his *History of Milford*, giving no more

detail of this Scottish immigrant who had come with her husband and four children to Massachusetts in May of 1849.<sup>2</sup> But the women of the Sewing Circle were doing what they pledged to do as Practical Christians: they were working for people around them—people who were in need. Even though Jeanet Provan had survived in the community only for a few months, she had left an imprint—and children and a husband who needed care. That was what the women of the Sewing Circle gathered to do. They were simply living their beliefs.

These Practical Christians, led by Adin Ballou and a group of ministers, had come to the area nearly a decade earlier to “build a new civilization radically higher than the old” on the banks of the Mill River, a tributary of the Blackstone.<sup>3</sup> The Ballous’ *Standard of Practical Christianity* called for its followers not to be “indifferent to the sufferings of a distressed humanity,” nor to “desert our brethren in their adversity.”<sup>4</sup> Jeanet Provan was not a Practical Christian, nor was she a member of the Sewing Circle, but even in death she was in need.

## THE SEWING CIRCLE’S UNTOLD HISTORY

Few historians have looked at the Sewing Circle record, and those who have gave it little notice. Edward K. Spann’s comprehensive history of Hopedale from its Practical Christian founding to its takeover by the Draper brothers in 1856 does mention some of the town’s higher-profile women and the community’s progressive views toward its female residents. But Spann noted the Sewing Circle only once, honing in on a passage from what he called the “Beneficent Society” record when the women discussed having a female physician in town.<sup>5</sup> The women changed the name of the group several times, and they did have a “conversation with regard to having a female Physician located here,” on April 24, 1851. “It was universally thought advisable,” they wrote, but didn’t mention that the proposed physician, Emily Gay, was a Sewing Circle member and occasional recorder for the group.<sup>6</sup> Neither did Spann.

The Sewing Circle was also given small context in a journal article on women in the community by Deidre Corcoran Stam. Stam analyzed the roles of women in Hopedale as Practical Christians, comparing their lives to the beliefs of Fourierism, a communal living idea conceived by Frenchman Charles Fourier that the community studied but did not espouse.<sup>7</sup> However, Stam only categorized the circle’s 15-year record as “‘bees’ to provide needed labor to the community.”<sup>8</sup> The circle worked on numerous projects for many community members over the years, including clothing, bedding, quilts,

carpets, and even straw braiding.<sup>9</sup>

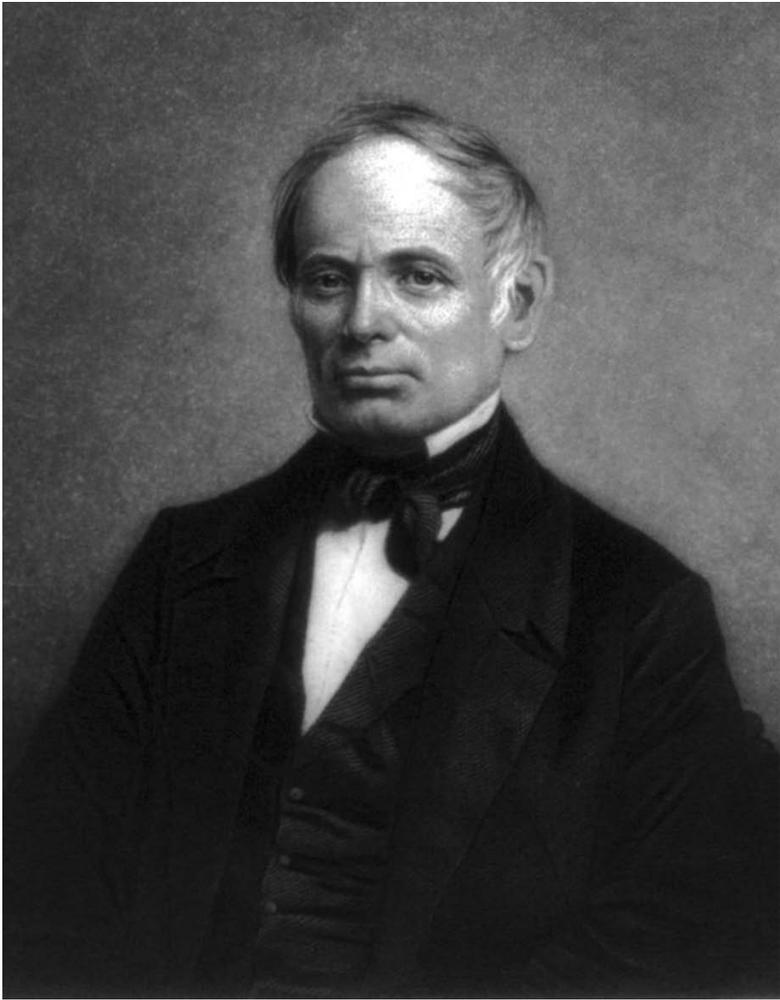
These descriptions minimize the record and the work of the women within those pages. In reality, the Sewing Circle record tied the pieces of the town's progressive ideas together, bridging the writings of the residents —men and women—in Ballou's newspaper, *The Practical Christian*, with the benevolent works the women were doing within their community. The few books and writings about the town's history tend to focus on the Draper years, leaving the community foundation as a simple backdrop to the greatness of the industry that came later.<sup>10</sup> A few women are occasionally mentioned: Sewing Circle members Abby Hills Price for her speech at the first National Women's Rights Convention in Worcester in 1850 or her later friendship with Walt Whitman, and Harriet Newell Green, for her spiritualist ideas and writings. But most of the women have been lost to the men of Hopedale's history.<sup>11</sup>

### IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD—AND LITTLE ELSE

In the early part of the nearly fifteen-year Sewing Circle record, the women did not divulge personal matters of daily life. The group was not created as a place to share grievances—at least not initially. Instead, Community members, men and women, began the Sewing Circle in part to spread the Word. Practical Christianity, a concept Adin Ballou and some fellow ministers had invented in 1839, called for its followers to proselytize.<sup>12</sup> Ballou expected those who joined to tell the world about Practical Christianity through “periodicals, books, pamphlets and tracts of the new social order. Induce as many of your neighbors as you can to read such publications, either at your expense, or their own.” But there was a caveat—spread the Word only in that quiet, New England manner. “Be not an obtrusive proselyter, and yet a faithful commender of truth and righteousness,” Ballou wrote:<sup>13</sup>

We cannot over-urge any person to unite with us, nor resort to undignified artifices of proselytism, nor seek debate with unreasonable men, nor protract a controversy for the sake of the last word, nor introduce sacred subjects for discussion in a company of scorners. Yet we will hold ourselves ready to give an answer to everyone that asketh of us a reason for our faith, opinion, or conduct, with meekness, frankness, and patience.<sup>14</sup>

The women took this view to heart and created the Sewing Circle to use their talents to earn money. Funds would go to buy the tracts, periodicals, and books to spread the Practical Christian Word. The women of Hopedale had a purpose: to sew for profit and use the funds raised to purchase writings



**Adin Ballou**

Image from an etching by H.W. Smith, 1896 (date unverified).

extolling the virtues of being a Practical Christian. But this sewing circle was unusual for its time.<sup>15</sup> Both men and women created the group, in equal numbers, with the women taking the lead in the organization and the men serving minor roles. Also, there was no insistence on Practical Christian beliefs in order to join. Residence in Hopedale was the only stipulation; religious beliefs were not. “Any inhabitant of Hopedale may become a member of this Society,” the 1848 constitution of the Circle stated.<sup>16</sup> At least four of the

nineteen women and several of the men who signed that first constitution were not listed as Practical Christian members.<sup>17</sup>

Additionally, the group was not solely an abolitionist support group, as were many sewing circles of the period.<sup>18</sup> The Hopedale women were undoubtedly abolitionists: the town was largely supportive of disunion to remove the country from the stain of slavery and served as a home base for radical abolitionist Henry C. Wright for several years. But that was not the sole purpose of the Sewing Circle.<sup>19</sup> Of all the progressive ideals this religious group supported, and there were many, Practical Christianity itself was the subject closest to the women's hearts.

### “PRACTICAL CHRISTIAN SOCIALISM”

Adin Ballou based Practical Christianity on the teachings of Christ, and the religion on the New Testament.<sup>20</sup> “I go directly to the Bible, especially to the Scriptures of the New Testament,” Ballou said in explaining what he would later call Practical Christian Socialism.<sup>21</sup> He wrote what he called the *Standard of Practical Christianity* in 1839, giving the basic concepts of the religion. There was much in this *Standard* for a progressive Christian woman to find appealing. The first three lines said it all: “We are Christians. Our creed is the New Testament. Our religion is love.” Although much of the *Standard* was written in the negative—“We cannot be inhuman, unmerciful, unjust, unkind, abusive or injurious toward any being of our race”—the positive aspects that came from all the negations could have tempted any wife and mother. These Practical Christians held themselves “bound to do good ... to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, minister to the sick ... protect the helpless, comfort the afflicted, plead for the oppressed ... [and] instruct the young.”<sup>22</sup>

The family takes center stage in large parts of this document. Ballou believed firmly in the sanctity of marriage, expecting everyone to enter into matrimony after “grave deliberation.” “We cannot neglect or abuse our families, nor evince any want of natural affection towards our bosom companion, our aged parents, or our helpless offspring,” the *Standard* reads. “We cannot imbrute our children by disregarding their education, nor by setting them an evil example, nor by over-fondness, nor by harshness and severity, nor by corporal punishments, nor by petulance and scolding.” Though written by a group of men, the *Standard* had appeal to women looking for a safe place to live and pray with family and like-minded people.<sup>23</sup>

Practical Christianity also had a firm basis in the idea of what Ballou termed Christian Non-Resistance. That idea, which fell within an early and large

paragraph of the *Standard*, was paramount to the group. Practical Christians would not take part in any government that supported war, either through voting, holding office, using the court system, or petitioning the legislature, nor would they join armies or navies or fight under any circumstance: “[n] either can we participate in any rebellion, insurrection, sedition . . . nor resist any of their ordinances by physical force.”<sup>24</sup> Many of the tracts the women purchased for distribution were either antiwar or nonresistant in nature.

Ballou raised the idea of creating a community based on Practical Christianity because, he said, others had brought the idea to the surface. In a September 15, 1840, article in *The Practical Christian*, Ballou spelled out the idea of this new community. He quoted from Ephesians 6:4, telling his readers the community would allow families to “‘bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord,’ away from those loose and degrading influences so prevalent in existing society.” Ballou also promoted the town as a safe place “for the orphan, the widow, and the outcast.”<sup>25</sup> Several women were some of the first to sign on, in part because of the family-centered constitution being created for the new society.

### “TRUE EQUALITY OF THE SEXES ...”

This new community also promised something as important as family and unavailable to the average woman of the time—equality.<sup>26</sup> The Constitution of the Fraternal Communion, which each potential resident signed when he or she moved to a part of Milford called The Dale, granted women the right to serve in the community on equal ground with men and to vote on all community issues.<sup>27</sup> “All members . . . shall stand on a footing of personal equality, irrespective of sex, color, occupation, wealth, rank, or any other natural or adventitious peculiarity,” the document stated. Even further, the women could participate in the Community’s government. “Every member shall have one and but one vote on all questions.” Thirty-two people signed the original Constitution in 1841, almost half of them women. Several of the women would hold Ballou to his word and serve in town government. Most of the women who served were Sewing Circle members.<sup>28</sup>

Women not only took their equal status seriously, but also expressed themselves publicly, and not infrequently. Adin Ballou published articles by and about women in *The Practical Christian* almost from its inception in 1840. One of the first local women to write for the newspaper was Emily Taylor, whose poem “A Mother’s Love” appeared on October 1, 1840.<sup>29</sup> Taylor was not in the Sewing Circle record, but she may have been the daughter of Levi Taylor, who purchased sewn items from the group in 1848 and 1849.<sup>30</sup>

Several Community women would publish poetry in the newspaper from that moment forward. In fact, during the first two years of the Sewing Circle record, over a dozen poems and articles would be penned by women for *The Practical Christian*, most by Sewing Circle members. Another twenty pieces about women or the women's sphere would also be printed in the paper.<sup>31</sup>

Articles about women's issues, sometimes written by the male editors of the newspaper and sometimes reprinted from other publications, appeared regularly on the pages. In early 1841, George Stacy, an unapologetic abolitionist minister and coeditor on Ballou's first paper, *The Independent Messenger* and on *The Practical Christian*, printed an extract from the "Golden Rule," a "moral reform paper" by a "Committee of ladies in Boston and Salem."<sup>32</sup> In the piece, Mrs. A.B. Ordway wondered where all the questioning about the sphere of woman came from and asked if it was "from men, who wish to keep her sunken and depraved?"

She pointed her question at ministers, mentioning the pastoral letter of a few years earlier.<sup>33</sup> That letter, issued by the General Association of the Massachusetts Congregational Churches in 1837, denounced women for becoming involved in public discourse. Although giving women credit, noting that their "appropriate duties and influence" are "the sources of mighty power," the document quickly became a criticism of the women's activity. The ministers wanted the women to continue their efforts "advancing the cause of religion at home and abroad," but not to go too far and step into man's territory. "[W]hen she assumes the place and tone of a man as a public reformer, our care and protection of her seem unnecessary ... and her character becomes unnatural," the document noted. The ministers admonished "those who encourage females to bear an obtrusive and ostentatious part in measures of reform, and countenance any of that sex who so far forget themselves as to itinerate in the character of public lecturers and teachers."<sup>34</sup>

Mrs. Ordway took exception to the minister's views, and the Hopedale newspaper reprinted her thoughts:

Look at their efforts to silence the voice of woman, when uplifted to plead for the oppressed and dumb, and to prevent their associations from so much as being represented in Anti-Slavery bodies ... and being heard, even when they are constituent members.

Mrs. Ordway also mentioned taxation without representation. Neither of these subjects would have sat well with the women in the Hopedale Community, nor with George Stacy. He gave women credit for bringing

the subject to the forefront. “They utter the truth of words in soberness. Let them not be spurned as puerile because uttered by woman,” he added at the end of the article.<sup>35</sup>

The community’s leaders were vocal about their views on women’s rights. In early 1842, the members were taken to task for supporting equality and had to print a defense. Someone calling himself “J.C.” complained that the group, which pledged to follow the New Testament in important matters, was misreading some of the Scriptures. “I know much good might be done by women being on an equality with men; but we must not think to be wise above what is written,” J.C. wrote. “J.C.” was John Calkins, and he literally gave the editors Bible chapter and verse on women’s inferiority to man.<sup>36</sup>

The front-page answer ran over a page and a half of very dense text. The piece had no attribution, but may have been written by Stacy himself. The reply, which appears to have been typeset in haste, made it very clear that the New Testament was important but not always to be read literally:

If these passages are to be construed [in] their most literal and sweeping sense, they certainly teach that women are inferior to men. Nay more, they teach that the woman is a mere appendage to the man — nothing but an animated instrument of his arbitrary will.

That view, although from a source paramount to the Practical Christians, could not stand with their progressive beliefs. “But no one presumes to take them literally—even those who are fondest of ‘taking the Bible just as it says,’” the response noted. The Community’s stand was firm, with the author stating that they would “endeavor to demonstrate the true equality of the sexes, without violating their mutual relations, or forcing either out of the sphere of usefulness ordained by the all wise creator.” The entirety of Calkins’s letter was printed in a later edition, and he must have been satisfied with the answer: he became a Practical Christian member a year later, and his wife a year after that.

Within months of this interchange, one of the community’s leading women began publishing more than poetry in *The Practical Christian*. Abby Hills Price was one of the first women to write an article in the newspaper. On October 1, 1842, she published “A Sketch—No. 1,” a lyrical description of the nature that the “humble pioneers at Hopedale” enjoyed now that autumn was in the air. She questioned what the community members would do for “amusement” to “make the stern moments pass quickly away.”<sup>37</sup> *The Standard of Practical Christianity* called for members to take care when seeking entertainment, enjoining them not

to “join in frivolous amusements, nor countenance games of chance.”<sup>38</sup>

Ballou published part two of “A Sketch” in November, with Price musing even more on the coming winter.<sup>39</sup> She was a busy woman, publishing numerous poems and occasional articles in *The Practical Christian*. She was elected by the town’s members to serve as Community secretary on January 4, 1843, a position listed as second only to Adin Ballou, who served as president.<sup>40</sup> Secretary was not simply an ancillary position; the secretary was to act as “Clerk of the Community, Board of Trustees, and the Executive Council, and to keep full, fair well-ordered records” in all matters.<sup>41</sup> In this role, Abby Hills Price would have had the pulse of the community.

By the time of the formation of the Sewing Circle in 1848, Price was no longer serving in town government, but was serving as secretary of an abolitionist group and speaking at antislavery rallies.<sup>42</sup> The Sewing Circle asked her to serve as secretary and treasurer at their first meeting; she resigned that post at the next meeting, dated February 19, 1848. Mary J. Colburn was chosen to fill that role.<sup>43</sup>

Mary Jackman Colburn was also active, both in print in *The Practical Christian* and the Sewing Circle record. The Circle met at her home several times during 1848 and 1849. Colburn published her first poem in *The Practical Christian* in 1844 and graduated to writing articles in spring 1845.<sup>44</sup> Her first independent piece was yet another antislavery tract, strongly written and calling for action. “A momentous crisis is approaching, in which none can be neutral,” she wrote. “Let those who have it, give liberally of their abundance, and those who are poor in this world’s goods, give that which is better—their heart, to the work.”<sup>45</sup> She studied medicine before moving to Hopedale and marrying Samuel Colburn, also a Sewing Circle member, in 1844.<sup>46</sup> The couple moved to Minnesota in 1850, where Mary Colburn went on to practice medicine and speak on women’s rights.<sup>47</sup>

## “THE DISTRIBUTION OF TRACTS”

Six years passed in the new Community before these mostly liberated women raised their needles to spread the word of Practical Christianity and nonresistance. Town members, women included, passed a resolve:

designed to regulate and make available to the profit of the Community, the family, and the individuals concerned, the labor of the women of each and every household, and all the children under twelve years of age connected therewith, under a general system of what was termed Domestic Industry.<sup>48</sup>

The Sewing Circle was created a year later in part to fill this need.

The women created their own Sewing Circle Constitution “for the purpose of promoting the cause of Non-Resistance.” All Hopedale residents were invited to work for the cause. But the Sewing Circle was a subscription “Society.” Men were charged fifty cents per year to join. Children became members “by paying the sum of twenty-five cents per annum, or by working at the Society’s meetings.” To be involved, the women were supposed to work. They would only have to pay if they were “prevented from attending the meetings of the Sewing Circle, or wishing to do their own work at those meetings.” But the women who signed the Constitution paid their fifty cents along with the men. Nineteen women and nineteen men were noted as paying the subscription and putting their names to the Constitution on February 19, 1848.<sup>49</sup>

Within just a few weeks, the women were planning to use the funds accumulated to purchase tracts for distribution. The first tract they earmarked money for was titled *Away with War*, “to be gratuitously distributed.”<sup>50</sup> During the meeting in early May, as the war between Mexico and America was winding down, the women decided to leave copies of the tract in Hopedale’s Non-Resistant and Practical Christian printing office, “for the use of members who may have an opportunity to circulate them judiciously.”<sup>51</sup> The printing office was one of the many industries the Practical Christians created to make their Community joint-stock socialist venture profitable.<sup>52</sup>

The next distribution of tracts occurred in September, when the women voted to earmark ten dollars toward the distribution of a twelve-page pamphlet the women called *Dick and Zach*, written by Henry C. Wright.<sup>53</sup> The full title of the tract is *Dick Crowningshield, the assassin, and Zachary Taylor, the soldier: the difference between them*, printed in 1848. This tract was an odd pairing — a combination of a sensational and true murder-for-hire story set against the gruesome details of the atrocities of the Mexican-American War perpetrated, according to Wright, by Zachary Taylor, the United States Army, and the Texas Rangers. But the women chose this publication deliberately. Wright geared this tract, through the use of domestic symbols and bloody descriptions, to a female audience.

Wright used the women’s sphere and deliberately shocking descriptions to stir women on the effects of war. He told his readers in unabashed detail what was about to happen to that mother playing with her “four little ones”: “Zachary discharges a gun loaded with grape-shot at them; and in a moment their limbs and bodies are torn to fragments, and the mother sits amid their mangled remains.” Again and again, Wright used images from the domain of women, filled with details of destruction and atrocities, as the army went

from street to street invading the heart of the home: “till the kitchens, parlors, nurseries and bed-rooms run down with blood.”<sup>54</sup>

The women used their sewing skills, along with monies earned from yearly subscription payments and the sale of tracts to purchase more publications like Wright’s to spread the Word. In the summer of 1849, they distributed a tract called *Conversations on Nonresistance*.<sup>55</sup> A few months later, they voted an appropriation of twenty dollars to give away copies of *The Practical Christian*.<sup>56</sup> One thing is certain: the women were sewing a lot, mostly for the men of the community. Out of sixteen line items in their 1849 accounting, which is something they did rarely over the history of the record, eleven noted sewing done for male residents. The women made shirts “for one of the old house boarders,” who remained anonymous but was most likely a man. Tract sales of one dollar were also noted, showing that the women weren’t giving away every tract they have printed. The accounting adds up to \$8.38½.<sup>57</sup>

Most of the entries simply noted that “sewing” was being done for the customers, but some went into more detail. The women sewed shirts for several men in the community. They also created overalls and stockings for male customers. Three of the men who received sewing work were married — their wives were members of the Sewing Circle. The work done for the town’s women was simply noted as “sewing.”

Circle members’ working for free for Circle members who were not Practical Christians may have been yet another way of proselytizing. The women had pledged to “diffuse a universal charity” when signing the “Standard of Practical Christianity.”<sup>58</sup> “We cannot desert our brethren in their adversity, nor call anything our own when their necessities demand relief,” the *Standard* reads. The women helped several community members and residents during these first two years as a Sewing Circle. Besides their help to Jeanet Provan’s family after her death, they record at least two additional instances of giving their work to the recipients rather than taking payment. In August 1848, they worked without charge for George Rollins, who signed the Sewing Circle subscription earlier that year but was not a Practical Christian member.<sup>59</sup> And on May 18, 1849, they worked for Sewing Circle member Sybil Lillie “gratis.”<sup>60</sup> The Sewing Circle continued throughout the remainder of the record to give work to people who needed help.

Sybil Ann Lillie had been a member of the Circle since 1848, but she, too, was not a Practical Christian. In fact, she was only eighteen when she signed the Sewing Circle subscription. The Lillie family was literally the first family of Hopedale. In October 1841, they moved into the building the members would term the Old House, the original building on the site when the land was called Jones Farm. The house was used as communal living space until families were



### The Old House

In October 1841, the Lillie family moved into this building, which was shared with twenty-eight other people. It was the original structure on the Hopedale Community land. Undated photo. Courtesy of the Bancroft Memorial Library, Hopedale, MA.

able to build their own homes, and later would be home to new families or single men working in town. Caroline Lillie, stepmother to Sybil Lillie, gave birth to the first child of the Community shortly after the family came to the Old House, naming the baby girl Lucy Ballou Lillie after Adin Ballou's wife, a Sewing Circle member.<sup>61</sup> Sybil Lillie's sister, Sarah, wrote about her childhood experiences in the Old House for a collection presented to the Hopedale "Ladies' Sewing Society and Branch Alliance," the next incarnation of the original Sewing Circle, in 1910.<sup>62</sup>



**Caroline Hayden Lillie**

A member of “the first family of Hopedale,” Caroline Lillie gave birth to the first child born into the community, Lucy Ballou Lillie. She named the child after Adin Ballou’s wife, a member of the Sewing Circle. Undated photo. Courtesy of Bancroft Memorial Library, Hopedale, MA.

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There is something else significant in the entry concerning Sybil Ann Lillie: the women start, for the first time, to give their record some interesting details, which begin to put flesh on what at first glance appears to be a fairly unremarkable record. “A pretty good number of the members present and all seemed to take hold of the work with animation, and as if they felt like doing it,” Ann Fish wrote that day.<sup>63</sup> Her entry makes these Practical Christian women come alive.

She would prove to be an important but quiet member of the Circle for the next twelve years.

Ann Fish was one of at least eight Hopedale women who would attend the first national Women's Rights Convention, held in Worcester, Massachusetts, in October 1850. Abby Hills Price, already a seasoned public speaker, delivered a keynote address on the first day of the convention. Price spoke in part of the lack of economic opportunities available to women. A wife and mother, she must have worried about the role of her own daughters in the world. "Our daughters should fit themselves equally with our sons, for any post of usefulness and profit that they may choose," Price told her audience. "No matter if the yoke we wear is soft and cushioned, it is nevertheless a yoke. No matter if the chain is fastened by those we love, it is nevertheless a chain."<sup>64</sup>

She also spoke about the relative equality she experienced in her Hopedale community:

I am happy to feel that in the little Commonwealth where I live, all persons have equal rights, in public deliberations. Men and women are alike recognised as having a common interest in public officers and public measures. Hence our annual meetings and elections are quiet and orderly, the business is soon despatched [sic], for our women never forget their homes to wrangle and discuss business points of minor importance, and I have never, in the small State of Hopedale, heard of one home being neglected, or one duty less thoroughly attended to by allowing women an equal voice.<sup>65</sup>

Of the dozen or so people from Hopedale who attended the convention, the vast majority, women and men, were members of the Sewing Circle.

In its first two years, these women used the Hopedale Sewing Circle as their way to share their Practical Christian beliefs and to use their skills to generate funds. Money earned was spent purchasing tracts to give away. Eventually, the women changed the group's name to the "Social Beneficent Circle," and as the female department of the Hopedale Industrial Union used their power as a group to help the less fortunate in town.<sup>66</sup> That was, after all, their charge and the reason Adin Ballou remembered them when he wrote his *History of Hopedale*. The Sewing Circle, he said:

found much to do in caring for and helping individuals and families that ... were brought into circumstance of dependence and need, thus obviating the necessity in numerous cases of

presenting demands upon the common treasury for means of relief.<sup>67</sup>

The men would branch off into their own Industrial Army, and leave their own record, which would last for about five years.<sup>68</sup>

The Hopedale Sewing Circle existed for almost fifteen years from first constitution to last entry. The women rewrote their charter several times and gave their group different names, but the goal of the Sewing Circle always stayed true to the beliefs of a Practical Christian community. The women sewed and shared, and through this record left a glimpse into their thoughts and ideas. After attending the Woman's Rights Convention in 1850, the record expanded as their progressive ideas grew. The women ceased purchasing tracts to educate others and began to use their time sewing together to educate each other. Over the next thirteen years, they discussed women's rights, dress reform, divorce, temperance, children, and books. They would sew for numerous causes, most notably abolitionist fairs and would, in the end, sew for the "Contrabands," eventually giving clothing and almost one hundred dollars to the escaped slaves.<sup>69</sup>

The women of the Sewing Circle gave their time, their skill, and their earnings to Practical Christian causes, using their own values as the gauge for their work and their discussions. Only some of the women of Hopedale are remembered for being important, either within the community or in the larger world. But within the record of the Hopedale Sewing Circle, most of the women in town gathered to share labor and ideas. These women were more than simply names. All of them were important in the pages of a little marble notebook.

HJM

## Notes

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