

two hundred years of american communes

Two Hundred Years of American Communes: A Journey Through Collective Living

two hundred years of american communes have woven a fascinating tapestry of idealism, social experimentation, and community building across the United States. From the early utopian settlements of the 19th century to the vibrant intentional communities flourishing today, these communes have reflected changing attitudes toward society, economy, and the environment. Exploring this rich history sheds light on how Americans have continuously sought alternatives to mainstream living, often driven by desires for equality, cooperation, and shared purpose.

The Origins of American Communes: 19th Century Utopian Experiments

The story of two hundred years of American communes begins in a time of great social upheaval and religious revivalism. The early 1800s were marked by rapid industrialization, westward expansion, and a growing discontent with existing social structures. These conditions gave birth to a wave of utopian communities, many inspired by religious or philosophical ideals.

The Shakers and Their Legacy

One of the most well-known early communes was the Shaker movement, formally known as the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing. Founded in the late 18th century and peaking in the 19th, Shakers established self-sufficient villages emphasizing celibacy, communal ownership, and gender equality. Their craftsmanship and innovative agricultural techniques left a lasting imprint, even as their numbers dwindled.

Brook Farm and Transcendentalist Roots

Another significant episode in the history of American communes was Brook Farm, a transcendentalist community founded in Massachusetts in 1841. Inspired by the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and other intellectuals, Brook Farm sought to blend manual labor with intellectual pursuits, promoting a balance of mind and body. Though it lasted only a few years, the experiment highlighted the desire to harmonize individual freedom with collective responsibility.

The Evolution Through the 20th Century: From Socialist Ideals to Counterculture

As two hundred years of American communes unfolded into the 20th century, the motivations and forms of communal living evolved. The rise of industrial capitalism and the hardships of the Great Depression fueled socialist and cooperative movements. Later, the cultural shifts of the 1960s and 70s brought a new wave of communes inspired by countercultural values.

The Role of Socialist and Cooperative Communities

During the early 1900s, communities like the Commonwealth Club and the Equality Colony in Washington State emerged, rooted in socialist principles. These groups aimed to create equitable economic systems based on shared labor and profits. While many struggled to survive due to external pressures and internal conflicts, they contributed to a broader dialogue about economic justice and community resilience.

Counterculture Communes of the 1960s and 70s

Perhaps the most widely recognized period of American communes came during the counterculture movement. Fueled by opposition to the Vietnam War, environmental concerns, and a desire to reject materialism, thousands of people established intentional communities. Examples include The Farm in Tennessee and Twin Oaks in Virginia. These communes experimented with alternative lifestyles, from collective child-rearing to sustainable agriculture and consensus-based governance.

Contemporary Communes: Sustainability and Intentional Living in the 21st Century

Today, two hundred years of American communes have culminated in a diverse landscape of intentional communities that address modern concerns like environmental sustainability, social inclusion, and mental well-being. These newer communes often blend technology with traditional communal values, adapting to contemporary challenges while maintaining a commitment to shared living.

Eco-Villages and Sustainable Communities

Many modern communes identify as eco-villages, emphasizing sustainable building practices, renewable energy, and organic farming. Communities such as Dancing Rabbit in Missouri serve as models for reducing ecological footprints while fostering social connection. These groups often offer workshops and open their doors to visitors, promoting

awareness of environmental issues through lived experience.

Technology and Governance in Modern Communes

Unlike earlier communes that relied heavily on face-to-face consensus, some present-day communities incorporate digital tools to facilitate communication and decision-making. Online forums, project management apps, and virtual meetings help maintain transparency and participation even with larger or more dispersed groups. This fusion of high-tech and high-touch approaches reflects the adaptability of communal ideals to contemporary life.

Lessons from Two Hundred Years of American Communes

Studying two hundred years of American communes offers valuable insights into human cooperation and the quest for meaningful community. While no commune has been perfect or permanent, their collective stories reveal recurring themes and challenges.

- **Shared Values Are Crucial:** Successful communes often begin with a strong, clearly articulated set of principles that guide behavior and decision-making.
- **Flexibility and Adaptation Matter:** The ability to evolve structures and practices in response to internal dynamics and external pressures can determine longevity.
- **Economic Sustainability Is Key:** Balancing idealism with practical economic models helps communes avoid collapse due to financial strain.
- **Community Dynamics Require Careful Attention:** Conflict resolution, communication, and inclusivity are ongoing processes that need nurturing.

Tips for Those Interested in Joining or Starting a Commune

If the idea of communal living resonates with you, here are some pointers drawn from two hundred years of American communes:

1. **Research Extensively:** Learn about different community models to find one that aligns with your values.
2. **Visit Communities:** Spending time in existing communes can provide firsthand experience of communal life.

3. **Clarify Expectations:** Open conversations about finances, roles, and governance prevent misunderstandings.
4. **Build Strong Communication Skills:** Effective dialogue and conflict resolution are vital in tight-knit groups.
5. **Be Prepared to Compromise:** Living communally involves balancing individual needs with collective goals.

Reflecting on the Enduring Appeal of Communes in America

Looking back on two hundred years of American communes, it's clear that the desire for community and shared purpose remains a powerful force. Each wave of communal living reflects broader societal trends, from religious fervor to political idealism to ecological consciousness. Even as the forms and motivations change, the underlying quest—to create spaces where people can live cooperatively, sustainably, and authentically—continues to inspire.

Whether as historical experiments or thriving modern collectives, American communes remind us that alternative ways of living are not only possible but essential for imagining a more connected and compassionate society.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are American communes and how did they originate?

American communes are intentional communities where people live together sharing resources and responsibilities. They originated in the early 19th century as experiments in social, economic, and religious reform.

What was the significance of the Oneida Community in American communal history?

The Oneida Community, founded in 1848, was significant for its radical social practices like communal property and complex marriage. It influenced later communal experiments and demonstrated the challenges of sustaining utopian ideals.

How did the 1960s counterculture movement impact

American communes?

The 1960s counterculture movement led to a resurgence of communes as people sought alternative lifestyles based on peace, love, and shared resources, often linked to anti-war and environmental activism.

What economic models have American communes used to sustain themselves?

American communes have used various economic models including shared labor, cooperative businesses, communal ownership of property, bartering systems, and sometimes integration with local economies to sustain themselves.

How have gender roles and equality been addressed in American communes?

Many American communes have actively challenged traditional gender roles by promoting equality, shared domestic responsibilities, and inclusive decision-making processes, though the degree of success varied among communities.

What challenges have American communes faced over the past two hundred years?

Common challenges include internal conflicts, financial sustainability, legal issues, leadership disputes, and external societal pressures that often led to the dissolution or transformation of communes.

Are there any American communes still active today, and what do they look like?

Yes, some American communes remain active today, often focusing on sustainable living, ecological practices, and cooperative economics. They tend to be smaller and more adaptable, incorporating modern technology and values.

Additional Resources

Two Hundred Years of American Communes: An Analytical Review

Two hundred years of American communes reflect a unique and evolving aspect of the United States' social and cultural landscape. From the early utopian experiments of the 19th century to contemporary intentional communities, communes have served as laboratories for alternative living, challenging conventional norms around property, governance, and social organization. This article delves into the historical trajectory, ideological underpinnings, and socio-economic impacts of American communes, offering a detailed exploration of their enduring presence and significance.

The Historical Context of American Communes

The genesis of American communes dates back to the early 19th century, a period marked by rapid industrialization, westward expansion, and social upheaval. These communal experiments were often motivated by religious, philosophical, or socio-political ideals. Rooted in the broader utopian movement, these early communities sought to create self-sustaining societies based on shared ownership, cooperative labor, and egalitarian principles.

One of the earliest and most notable examples is the Shakers, formally known as the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing. Established in the late 18th century, Shaker communities emphasized celibacy, communal property, and pacifism. Similarly, the Oneida Community, founded in 1848 in New York, experimented with complex marriage and communal child-rearing, reflecting radical departures from mainstream family structures.

These early communes were often isolated geographically, enabling members to live by their ideals away from mainstream society. However, many faced internal conflicts and external pressures, including economic challenges and legal disputes, leading to the dissolution or transformation of several communities.

Key Features of 19th-Century Communes

- **Shared Property:** Private ownership was typically abolished, with land and resources held collectively.
- **Collective Labor:** Members contributed labor to communal enterprises such as farming, manufacturing, or crafts.
- **Religious or Philosophical Foundations:** Many communes were founded on spiritual beliefs or social theories advocating equality and cooperation.
- **Governance Systems:** Decision-making was often democratic or consensus-based, although some adopted hierarchical structures.

The Evolution Through the 20th Century

The 20th century witnessed significant transformations in the concept and practice of American communes. The Great Depression, two world wars, and shifting cultural landscapes influenced communal living trends. Notably, the 1960s and 1970s counterculture movement sparked a resurgence of interest in communes, with an emphasis on ecological sustainability, anti-capitalism, and alternative lifestyles.

During this period, communes like the Farm in Tennessee and Twin Oaks in Virginia gained prominence. These communities integrated modern ideals such as environmentalism and social justice into their frameworks. Unlike many of their 19th-century predecessors, these communes often incorporated secular and non-hierarchical governance models, emphasizing consensus and individual autonomy within the collective.

Comparing 19th and 20th-Century Communes

Aspect	19th-Century Communes	20th-Century Communes
Foundational Motivation	Religious and utopian ideals	Countercultural, ecological, and political ideals
Governance	Often hierarchical or religiously led	Consensus-based and egalitarian
Economic Structure	Collective ownership, agrarian focus	Mixed economies including crafts, services, and education
Social Norms	Strict codes, often celibacy or complex marriage	Emphasis on personal freedom and communal responsibility

The Contemporary Landscape of American Communes

In the 21st century, American communes continue to evolve amidst new challenges and opportunities. Modern intentional communities often prioritize sustainability, technological integration, and social inclusivity. The rise of eco-villages, cohousing projects, and cooperative housing reflects a diversification of communal living models.

Technological advancements enable some communes to maintain connectivity with broader society while preserving their distinct lifestyles. Additionally, many contemporary communes engage actively in educational outreach, ecological restoration, and social activism, positioning themselves as models for sustainable and equitable living.

Modern Features and Challenges

- **Environmental Sustainability:** Emphasis on renewable energy, organic farming, and low-impact living.
- **Economic Viability:** Many communities develop small businesses, artisanal crafts, or eco-tourism to sustain themselves financially.

- **Social Diversity:** Efforts to include diverse populations and promote inclusivity regardless of race, gender, or background.
- **Legal and Zoning Issues:** Navigating property laws and municipal regulations remains a significant hurdle.

Pros and Cons of Living in American Communes

Living in a commune offers unique benefits and challenges that vary depending on the community's structure and goals.

1. Pros:

- *Strong Sense of Community:* Members often experience deep social bonds and mutual support.
- *Shared Resources:* Collective ownership can reduce individual financial burdens.
- *Alternative Governance:* Opportunities to participate in democratic decision-making.
- *Environmental Benefits:* Sustainable practices reduce ecological footprints.

2. Cons:

- *Limited Privacy:* Communal living can challenge personal space and autonomy.
- *Conflict Resolution:* Consensus decision-making may slow processes or create tensions.
- *Economic Uncertainty:* Dependence on communal businesses can be risky.
- *Legal Complications:* Property and zoning laws can restrict communal expansion or viability.

Impact and Legacy of American Communes

The legacy of two hundred years of American communes extends beyond their immediate membership. These communities have influenced broader societal trends in sustainability,

cooperative economics, and social innovation. For example, the cooperative movement, local food networks, and eco-conscious urban planning all draw inspiration from communal principles.

Moreover, communes serve as testing grounds for alternative social arrangements, offering insights into human cooperation, resource sharing, and conflict management. While many communes have dissolved over time, their ideas continue to permeate cultural dialogues about community, equity, and the environment.

The ongoing relevance of communes also invites critical reflection on their adaptability. As societal values and technologies change, so too do the forms and functions of communal living. This dynamic history underscores the resilience and complexity of American communes as a social experiment spanning two centuries.

Through this lens, two hundred years of American communes represent not only a historical phenomenon but a living dialogue about collective life, challenging assumptions about individualism and community in the American experience.

Two Hundred Years Of American Communes

two hundred years of american communes: *Two Hundred Years of American Communes*
Yaacov Oved, 2017-09-08 The United States is the only modern nation in which communes have continuously existed for the past two hundred years. This definitive history of communes in America examines the major factors that have supported the existence and growth of communes throughout American history. The most impressive survey of the communal experience since the works of Noyes and Nordhoff, it is informed by a deep respect for the human subjects and organizational forms of American communes. The findings in the analytical chapters are of considerably theoretical import beyond the historical narrative. Oved details the founding, growth, development, and sometimes failure of alternative societies from 1735 to 1939: Icaria, Ephrata, Oneida, Shaker, religious, secular, and socialist communes. Extensive reference material cited will assure this work a special place in the archives of the literature on communes.

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Robert P. Sutton, 2004-02-28 This important study begins with America's first secular utopia at New

Harmony in 1824 and traces successive utopian experiments in the United States through the following centuries. For the first time, readers will come to realize that American communalism is not a disjointed, erratic, almost ephemeral part of our past, but has been an on-going, essential part of American history. We have a communal utopian motif that sets the history of the United States apart from any other nation. The utopian communal story is just one other dimension of the Puritan concept that America was a city upon a hill, a beacon light to all the world where the perfect society could be built and could flourish. After discussing New Harmony and other Owenite communities, the author examines nine Fourierist utopias that were built before the Civil War. Next, he analyzes the five Icarian colonies that, collectively, were the longest-lived, non-religious communal experiments in American history. Then, discussion moves to the seven Gilded Age socialist cooperatives, followed by the utopian communities created during President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. Finally, Sutton turns to the hippie colonies and intentional communities of the last half of the 20th century.

two hundred years of american communes: *Mediale Gegenwelten* Martin Doll, 2024-08-02 Die Entwicklung neuer Technologien geht häufig mit einem Versprechen von politischer Emanzipation einher. Martin Doll begibt sich dazu auf Spurensuche ins 19. Jahrhundert und widmet sich anhand des Mediendenkens von Charles Fourier, Karl Marx und Edward Bellamy folgender Frage: Wie wurden Architektur und (Verkehrs-)Infrastrukturen von der Telegrafie bis hin zu ersten Formen der automatisierten Datenerhebung zusammen mit sozialen Neuerungen als Triebfedern politischer Veränderung konzipiert? Dabei wird deutlich: Nicht jede Gegenwart muss notwendig auf ewig weiter in die Zukunft geführt werden.

two hundred years of american communes: *Inside the Ark* Yosef Kats, John Lehr, 2012 The world's longest-lasting and most successful communal society, the Hutterites have a model of governance that has served them well for almost five hundred years. In the past the colony was an ark, isolated from both the secular world and the host society. But today colonies face new challenges because of globalization and digital technologies and are losing much of their ability to exclude these influences from their lives. Based on extensive fieldwork with the Schmiedeleut branch of the Hutterites, the book includes the Conference Letters and Regulations, published for the first time in English translation, that provide invaluable insights into strategies for managing change.

two hundred years of american communes: *States of Union* Mark E. Brandon, 2013-09-17 In two canonical decisions of the 1920s—*Meyer v. Nebraska* and *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*—the Supreme Court announced that family (including certain relations within it) was an institution falling under the Constitution's protective umbrella. Since then, proponents of "family values" have claimed that a timeless form of family—nuclear and biological—is crucial to the constitutional order. Mark Brandon's new book, however, challenges these claims. Brandon addresses debates currently roiling America—the regulation of procreation, the roles of women, the education of children, divorce, sexuality, and the meanings of marriage. He also takes on claims of scholars who attribute modern change in family law to mid-twentieth-century Supreme Court decisions upholding privacy. He shows that the "constitutional" law of family has much deeper roots. Offering glimpses into American households across time, Brandon looks at the legal and constitutional norms that have aimed to govern those households and the lives within them. He argues that, well prior to the 1960s, the nature of families in America had been continually changing—especially during western expansion, but also in the founding era. He further contends that the monogamous nuclear family was codified only at the end of the nineteenth century as a response to Mormon polygamy, communal experiments, and Native American households. Brandon discusses the evolution of familial jurisprudence as applied to disputes over property, inheritance, work, reproduction, the status of women and children, the regulation of sex, and the legal limits to and constitutional significance of marriage. He shows how the Supreme Court's famous decisions in the latter part of the twentieth century were largely responses to societal change, and he cites a wide range of cases that offer fresh insight into the ways the legal system responded to various forms of family life. More

than a historical overview, the book also considers the development of same-sex marriage as a political and legal issue in our time. *States of Union* is a groundbreaking volume that explains how family came to be “in” the Constitution, what it has meant for family to be constitutionally significant, and what the implications of that significance are for the constitutional order and for families.

two hundred years of american communes: *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* Lester H. Hunt, 2015-06-22 *Anarchy, State, and Utopia: An Advanced Guide* presents a comprehensive and accessible introduction to the ideas expressed in Robert Nozick’s highly influential 1974 work on free-market libertarianism—considered one of the most important and influential works of political philosophy published in the latter half of the 20th-century. Makes accessible all the major ideas and arguments presented in Nozick’s complex masterpiece Explains, as well as critiques, Robert Nozick’s theory of free market libertarianism Enables a new generation of readers to draw their own conclusions about the wealth of timely ideas on individualism and libertarian philosophy Indicates where Nozick’s theory has explanatory power, where it is implausible, and where there are loose ends with further work to be done

two hundred years of american communes: *Globalization of Communes* Yaacov Oved, 2017-09-08 After World War II, communes and cooperative communities became internationally oriented in their membership and networking began to develop. Unlike earlier such enterprises, these groups shared an openness to international relationships. This was evident both in the groups’ social composition, and in the extension of networks beyond their own country. Such globalization opened up the possibility of comparative analysis, which has become a trend in research since the 1950s. The dynamism and speed with which voluntary communities have spread throughout the world is impressive. In the 1950s there were only a few hundred such societies, but by the end of the last century there were thousands. These have taken a variety of forms. There are religious and secular communes, intentional communities, ecological communities, co-housing projects, various types of Christian communities, communities of Eastern religions, and spiritual communities inspired by New Age thought. Yaacov Oved shows that such societies maintain a community based on cooperation and expand their influence through newspapers, television, and the Internet. Their chief characteristic is their openness to the outside world, and their search for a way to move beyond a world of individualism and competitiveness. To accomplish this, they embrace all the tools of the modern world. Oved observes that those who predicted the failure of communes and intentional communities failed to appreciate the extent to which people in today’s society aspire to communal life. This book answers the doubters and does so with a sense of deep historical understanding.

two hundred years of american communes: *Making Men, Making History* Peter Gossage, Robert Rutherford, 2018-05-01 What has it meant to be a man in Canada? Alexander Ross, fur trader; Percy Nobbs, architect, fisherman, fencer; Andy Paull, residential school survivor and athlete; Yves Charbonneau, jazz musician and commune member; “James,” black and gay in postwar Windsor. Who were these men, and how did they identify as masculine? Populated with figures both well known and unknown, *Making Men, Making History* frames masculinity as a socially and historically constructed category of identity, susceptible to variation across time, place, and social context. This examination of historical Canadian masculinities reveals the dissonance between hegemonic ideals of manhood and masculinity and the everyday lives of men and boys. The volume showcases some of the best new work in masculinity studies. With an introduction that contextualizes the international origins of the field, *Making Men, Making History* is the first book to explore these themes entirely in Canadian historical settings.

two hundred years of american communes: *Strangers in Paradise* David Mittelberg, 1988-01-01 The literature on the Kibbutz is large and sprawling. This stands in marked contrast to the intimacy and proximity of the individuals who have actually participated in the life of the Kibbutz. In this quite remarkable work, David Mittelberg succeeds in capturing the specific life styles and aspirations of the Kibbutzniks. And he does so by integrating this within the broad and

rich traditions of the sociology of culture and religion. *Strangers in Paradise* provides a massive amount of current data on Jewish and non-Jewish volunteers, division of labor by sex and language of origins, demographic characteristics of Kibbutz hosts and recruits, and a variety of attitude measures far beyond any other work in the literature. But what gives special value to this effort is its unusual utilization of the phenomenological tradition - from Simmel to Schutz, to Berger and Luckmann - along with recent efforts in organization and negotiation theory - from Blau to Goffman - in order to explicate this massive data. A special element in this volume is the central place accorded to voluntarism in an open culture. For Mittelberg, membership in the Kibbutz is at its core a voluntary act of individuals who commit their lives, or a portion thereof, to a collective movement in a strange land. This is a study then in intentional communities rather than Utopian organizations. The synthesis of the concrete and the abstract, the empirical and the theoretical, will establish Mittelberg's volume as a new standard in Kibbutz studies.

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two hundred years of american communes: *The Archaeology of Utopian and Intentional Communities* Stacy C. Kozakavich, 2023-01-24 This volume describes and discusses historical archaeologists' contributions to our understanding of intentional communities throughout American history. Structured according to the scale of methodological focus - from settlement patterns and landscape, to the built environment, to artifact studies - the case studies presented in this volume will give readers a thorough introduction to archaeological research to date in this field.

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two hundred years of american communes: *Conflicts and Conflict Management in Intentional Communities* Michal Palgi, Shlomo Getz, 2025-06-02 Intentional communities combine complex economic organizations with member-run governance. As in any human organization, conflicts arise—whether between members, officials, or external entities. These communities seek to manage disputes locally, often avoiding formal mechanisms like state courts. Many rely on bylaws and committees, adjusting their conflict-resolution strategies over time. Strategic decisions often require broad consensus, pushing members to refine their approaches to agreement. This volume

explores how various intentional communities—such as kibbutzim, eco-villages, and cooperative housing—navigate internal and external conflicts. The book contains both theoretical analysis and research articles written specifically for this volume, alongside innovative practical methods developed and tested to resolve conflicts that arise in intentional communities.

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two hundred years of american communes: Group Works Ethan Philbrick, 2023-04-25 An exciting new reflection on the role of artistic collaboration, collectivism, and the politics of group formation in the neoliberal era. The artist and author Ethan Philbrick's *Group Works* re-imagines the group by undertaking an historiographic archaeology of group aesthetics and politics. Written against both phobic and romantic accounts of collectivity, *Group Works* contends that the group emerges as a medium for artists when established forms of collective life break down. Philbrick pairs group pieces in dance, literature, film, and music from the 1960s and 1970s downtown Manhattan scene alongside a series of recent group experiments: Simone Forti's dance construction, *Huddle* (1961), is put into relation with contemporary re-performances of Forti's score and huddling as a feminist political tactic; Samuel Delany's memoir of communal living, *Heavenly Breakfast: An Essay on the Winter of Love* (1969/78), speaks to performance artist Morgan Bassichis's 2017 communal musical adaptation of Larry Mitchell's 1977 text, *The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions*; Lizzie Borden's experimental documentary of feminist collectivity, *Regrouping* (1976), sits alongside visual artist Sharon Hayes's 2014 piece on Manhattan's Pier 54, *Women of the World Unite! they said*; and Julius Eastman's insurgent piece of chamber music for four pianos, *Gay Guerrilla* (1979), resonates alongside contemporary projects that take up Eastman's legacy by artists such as Tiona Nekkia McClodden. By analyzing works that articulate the politics of race, gender, and sexuality as questions of group formation, Philbrick approaches the group not as a stable, idealizable

entity but as an ambivalent way to negotiate and contest shifting terms of associational life. Group Works presents an engaging exploration of what happens when small groups become a material and medium for artistic and political experimentation.

two hundred years of american communes: *Practical Directions for the Speedy and Economical Establishment of Communities, on the Principles of Mutual Co-operation, United Possessions and Equality of Exertions and of the Means of Enjoyments* William Thompson (Writer on Political Economy.), 1830

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