

UTOPIAN THEME WITH VARIATIONS:

John Murray Spear and His Kiantone Domain

BY RUSSELL DUINO*

THE spiritualist colony that was variously called Harmonia, the Association of Beneficents, and simply the Domain, came into existence in 1853 near the village of Kiantone, Chautauqua County, New York. Although of small and indefinite number, the members of the community were of large, although sometimes impractical, vision. Their preoccupations ranged from perpetual motion to world government; they crusaded for feminine equality, "fair play" for the Indian, and emancipation of the Negro. And in all these endeavors they were guided by the greatest intellects the world has ever known! When their story is fully written, it will provide a significant footnote to the history of social experiment in nineteenth-century America. From secondary sources and recently discovered primary materials, it is possible to give now, in outline at least, an account of the rise and fall of a unique enterprise.

The valley of Kiantone Creek, just north of the Pennsylvania state line, was virtually foreordained to be the location of the Harmonia settlement. In 1850, the wife and daughters of John Chase, a local blacksmith, learned through a series of spiritualistic trances that the area had been inhabited in prehistoric times by a people whose society was perfect, thanks to "free love" and the abolition of marriage.¹ Furthermore, the capital of this ideal civilization had boasted two "magnetic springs"—one positive, the other negative—which had the power to cure all ills. John Chase and a neighbor unearthed what they presumed to be the healing springs, and samples of their waters were sent to some of the leading spiritualists in the East.

It should be recalled here that in 1848, spiritualism in America

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¹ Ray Finch, "Fabled Harmonia Lingers in Spirit," *Jamestown, N. Y. Sun*, September 1, 1949, 4.

was discovered, revealed, invented, or what you will, and that by the early 'fifties it had enlisted a great following. Many people had begun to make use of formerly unimagined psychic powers. One such person was John Murray Spear of Boston, a Universalist minister,² who in 1852 received a series of spirit messages from John Murray, his namesake and the founder of Universalism. On April 1, 1853, Spear received a spirit manifesto from a group who designated themselves the Association of Beneficents. This was no mean body, for it included Benjamin Franklin, Socrates, Thomas Jefferson, and others equally immortal. Their dealings with Spear were in the form of detailed instructions for certain radical changes in government, education, commerce, the church, marriage, and science.

Spear was among those mediums who received samples of Kiantone spring water, and because of certain powers which it exhibited to him, he and his spirit advisers chose Kiantone Valley as the site for a model community.

What was to have been a city of universal harmony began modestly enough, with ten oval and octagonal houses approximately ten by fourteen feet, and a larger house known as the "Castle."³ Later a thirty-five-room hotel, known locally as "Brittingham's Folly," was built. The rooms of the houses were painted in pastel green, blue, red, and other colors.

The designs for the houses, like the plans for everything else the community undertook, were transmitted from the spirit world. The "heavenly directorate" of the colony consisted of seven associations, devoted to beneficence, electricity and magnetism, the elements, education, health, agriculture, and government.⁴ It was to carry out the instructions of these spirit bodies that the Kiantone settlement came into being.

Of the social and governmental organization of the colony we

² John Murray Spear had been an abolitionist and prison reformer in Boston during the 1840's. With his brother Charles, he published a weekly paper called *The Prisoner's Friend*. The Spears were assisted in their prison work by Wendell Phillips, H. W. Longfellow, Horace Mann, and other notables. "Spear, Charles." DAB, XVII-XVIII, 438-439.

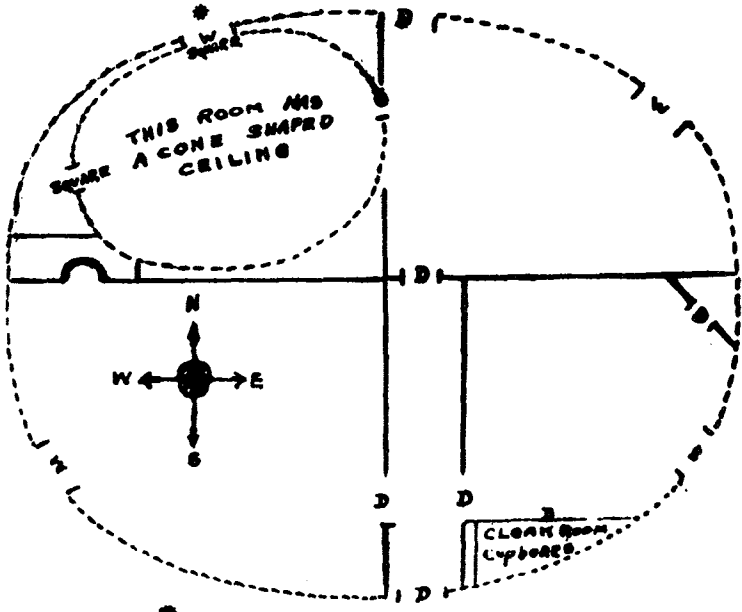
³ Oliver F. Chase, "The Kiantone Movement," *Centennial History of Chautauqua County* (Jamestown, N. Y.: Chautauqua History Co., 1904), II, 827-830.

⁴ John M. Spear, *The Educator* (Boston: Office of Practical Spiritualists, 1857), 44.



From sketch by Viola G. Cushman.
July 21 1907
Last house at Spiritualists Springs, Kiantone, N.Y.

Floor plan of last house Spiritualists Springs



SQUARE WINDOW SEEMS
TO HAVE BEEN BUILT SINCE
HOUSE WAS BUILT.
"D" DOOR
"W" WINDOW

Sketch and Floor Plan of a Kiantone House

know very little.⁵ Spear professed to be a socialist, hence there was probably some kind of a common holding of property. Most of the members preferred to spend the winter months in their own homes, some as near as Jamestown and Randolph, New York, others as far distant as Cleveland, Boston, and Chicago.⁶ Strawberries, blackberries, and raspberries were the chief crops, and the many osier willows in the area today are said to have been imported from England for use in basket-weaving.

When Spear came to western New York in 1853, he brought with him an "Electric Motor" or perpetual motion machine. The machine had been tried without success at Lynn, Massachusetts, shortly before,⁷ and Spear brought it to Randolph where he hoped that stronger electro-magnetic properties in the upstate New York earth would allow it to function. Before he had a chance to resume his experiments, however, a mob broke into the barn where the machine was stored and demolished it. Spear accepted the misfortune stoically, reflecting that Garrison had been mobbed and Birney's printing press thrown into the river, yet the cause of abolition went on.

The advent of all these strange people, building their strange houses, and entertaining their strange notions, was inevitably a source of comment throughout the countryside. By 1858, most of that comment was unfavorable to the Domain, for two reasons. One was the holding, in September of that year, of a national spiritualist convention at the Domain. Thousands of people are said to have attended, and an extensive account of the convention appeared in the *New York Tribune*.⁸ The following excerpt from a Jamestown newspaper story gives some idea of local reaction to the meeting:

When I reached the Convention on the p.m. of Satur-

⁵ One of the purposes to which the Domain was consecrated was "... the Upbuilding of a Government without a King, without Officers, and without Penal Laws." Spear, *op. cit.*, 139-140.

⁶ William S. Bailey, "The Kiantone Valley and the Association of Beneficents." Paper read before the meeting of the Jamestown, N. Y., University Club at Kiantone, New York, June 27, 1924, 11 (typewritten).

In 1924 Bailey, a regional historian of Randolph, N. Y., interviewed two old-timers who had lived in the area at the time of the settlement, and one of them spoke of it as a summer colony.

⁷ E. W. Capron, *Modern Spiritualism* (Boston: B. Marsh, New York: Partridge and Brittan, 1855), 220-225.

⁸ "A Spiritualist Convention in Chautauqua," *New York Daily Tribune*, September 27, 1858, 6.

Questions to be Proposed to Applicants for Admission to the S. O. of U.

QUESTIONS.

ANSWERS.

1. Do you seek to connect yourself with this Order for mere personal ease or emolument, or do you love God and man, and desire to obey the one, and to promote the happiness of the other?
2. Are you willing that each fellow member should follow his or her attractions, without any interference, jealousy, or unkind feelings on your part?
3. Where were you born?
4. What is your age? If a minor, have you parents or guardians?
5. Have you any permanent or local disease? If so, will you obtain a certificate of its nature from a physician competent to examine?
6. Have you children dependent on you for support? If so, what are their ages? Are they healthy, or otherwise?
7. Have you ever been arraigned before any earthly tribunal for any crime? If so, what was its nature, and what penalty, if any, was inflicted?
8. Have you a trade, or profession; and if so, what is it?
9. Have you been invited to join this Order? If so, by whom, and for what purpose?
10. Can you read and write? If so, will you give a specimen of your chirography?
11. Do you consider yourself free to go and come at will, and to do whatever you individually feel to be just and true?
12. Have you acquainted yourself with the Objects, Basis, and Rules of this Order, and do you approve and wish to be governed by them?

Please append your name and residence, in full, to the following:

APPLICATION.

The undersigned, heartily approving and desirous of laboring for the objects of the S. O. of U., respectfully solicits admission to that institution.

[Signed]

Application for Membership in the Sacred Order of Unionists

day, I found a motley crowd, with curious eyes, watching the vehement declaration of the President, Mrs. Carrie (Popcorn) Lewis of Cleveland, who was rehearsing the divine messages of the "spirits" heaven through Mr. John M. Spear, the accredited (by some) link between the material and the spiritual world. Such ranting mysticism and extravagance, such verbiage and nonsense, it has not been my lot to hear of since the Babel period. The tone of most of the lectures that I heard during the afternoon was the abolition of the marriage and family relations, the elevation of woman to perfect freedom or "individualism," and the change of society to a visionary state of perfection and order. . . . On Sunday a great crowd from all the four winds assembled. Mr. [Thaddeus] Sheldon spoke with undoubted sincerity on Spiritualism. Mrs. Lewis followed on "generation." The flippant, blushing Cleopatra walks on to the stand . . . and—a woman—discourses on a subject sacred to the library of the physician or the holy of holies of the family. . . .⁹

The other cause for popular disapproval was John M. Spear's open liaison with his "amanuensis," Miss Caroline Hinckley. It seems that by the fall of 1858, Miss Hinckley was pregnant, a conception which members of the colony chose to call "miraculous." The *Spiritual Telegraph* of Boston disagreed in vehement terms:

. . . We do not believe in the old story of immaculate conception, neither in the pretended duplicates of it in modern times; and therefore we must conclude that the "exciting event" is no more nor less than Spear-ism gone to seed, which "ism" we are not inclined to advocate or make apologies for. . . .

Suppose Miss H-----y does refuse to tell who the father of her child is, and Mr. Spear denies that he is the man—still the fact that Mr. Spear has left his family, and has lived at Kiantone several months at least, in a small . . . shanty, with only one bed in the house, is an outrage on social order, and no amount of apology or denial will absolve the parties from the charges and opinions of which they complain. . . .¹⁰

By 1863, Spear had divorced his first wife (the former Betsey

⁹ "The Spiritual Meeting," *Jamestown Weekly Journal*, September 24, 1858. Quoted in Bailey, *op. cit.*, 11-13.

¹⁰ "The Spear Movement—Kiantone Convention," *Spiritual Telegraph*, VIII (November 20, 1858), 297.

Briggs of Hanover, New Hampshire) and made an "honest woman" of Caroline Hinckley.¹¹

Despite the Spear-Hinckley love affair and the uninhibited tone of the spiritualist convention, there is no evidence that the Domain was a "free love" colony, in the sense that Oneida and some others were. The Kiantone group were staunch feminists, however, and believed that woman in marriage was little more than her husband's servant and chattel. In the realization of their concept of the "new society," she would take her place *beside* man in government, business, education, and above all, marriage.¹²

The autumn of 1859 did not see the usual exodus from Harmonia's flimsy structures that had marked the approach of cold weather in previous years. The reason was portentous: a new series of "communications" had come to Spear, outlining a bold—one might say quixotic—mission for the people of the Domain. The Association of Governmentizers, that body in the spirit world whose purpose was to "make one of the many divided and disordered governments of earth," decreed that Spear and his followers form an organization to be called the Sacred Order of Unionists. Its mission: to bring union to the world in the form of a federation or "planetary congress," whose ultimate authority would derive from God and the spirit world.

An America that was slipping ever closer to civil war gave the

¹¹ For most of our information on happenings after 1858, we must be grateful for a collection of 321 manuscripts, consisting of spirit messages, letters, and miscellaneous documents, that was discovered in an attic trunk by Mrs. Margaret Fish of Randolph, New York. She is the granddaughter of Thaddeus Sheldon, an associate and backer of Spear, and for that reason, the collection has been designated the Sheldon Papers. Now on deposit in the University of Pittsburgh Library, the Sheldon Papers were formerly in the possession of Ernest C. Miller, oilman and historian, of Warren, Pennsylvania.

The author of this article made a descriptive calendar of the Sheldon Papers, under the title "The Domain at Spiritual Springs," as a master's thesis for Western Reserve University Library School. A microfilm copy of the thesis is on file in the Regional History Collection at Cornell University.

¹² Sheldon No. 267, "Address to the People of America" (given in London "through John Murray Spear"), March 9, 1866.

This address advocates, among other things, woman suffrage, and suggests that some women would make good governors, and could be presidents as able as Pierce, Polk, or Fillmore.

Sheldon No. 9b (undated) speaks of a new concept of woman's role: her freedom in and out of marriage, her right "to be a mother *by anyone she desires* (*italics mine*), or not to be a mother at all."

Sacred Order reason enough to believe that lasting peace was possible only through world federation. It was in this spirit that a handful of people,¹³ like the "peace marchers" of today, went forth to unsettle the conscience of the world.

It is better, perhaps, to compare the Sacred Order's mission to that of Henry Ford's "Peace Ship" of World War I days, for the Sacred Order also traveled by water. On December 2, 1859, the steamer *Cleopatra* set out from Oil Creek, Pennsylvania, on what its passengers believed would be a cosmic voyage.

Documents written during the river journey have come down to us as part of the manuscript legacy of the Domain. The writings of Spear and Miss Hinckley at this time were mostly transcriptions of supra-mundane advice, e.g., to study the iron industry of Pittsburgh, to visit the "slave" side of the Ohio River and if possible, take fugitive slaves aboard, to "seek soil in favorable temperate regions," and to "beat the social drum . . . calling the people together."

The terminus of the voyage was New Orleans, where the *Cleopatra* arrived in early May, 1860. There were stops along the way at Cincinnati; at Patriot, Indiana, where an offshoot of the Domain was established; and at Altior Place, Louisiana, where a "shelter" was dedicated. From New Orleans there were side trips to Mobile and Memphis.

The original plan had been to sail all the way to Cuba and the West Indies, but for some reason—lack of funds or the unseaworthiness of the *Cleopatra*—it was never accomplished. By July 1, 1860, the voyagers had returned to Cincinnati and the nearby settlement at Patriot, Indiana. Although the Order continued its work for a time afterward, the peace voyage remained its grand gesture of protest against a world of armies and armaments.

The money which Spear had received from such well-to-do friends as Thaddeus Sheldon, John Sterling, and Dr. Abel Underhill in the early days of the colony was almost all spent by 1860. After the river voyage, the Sacred Order had to retrench and somehow find a new way to finance its projected missionary work.

¹³ No statement or estimate of the population of the Domain has so far been discovered. In manuscripts and other sources, approximately twenty individuals have been named as members of the colony. At its greatest strength, the Domain probably did not number over forty people.

By March, 1861, a money-raising scheme had been chosen—the Sacred Order had entered the sewing-machine business.

Several items in the Sheldon Papers constitute our only information about the sewing-machine enterprise. We know from a list of receipts that machines were made and sold, and from a letter (John Sterling to Thaddeus Sheldon), that the designs were patented by Amos Hanes Boyd in 1858, 1859, and 1861.¹⁴ We know also that members of the Sacred Order were involved in four sewing-machine companies: Williams and Orvis; Orvis, Boyd, and Company; the New York, Philadelphia and Boston Sewing and Embroidering Machine Company; and the American Sewing and Embroidering Machine Company. That they formed a sort of interlocking directorate is indicated by the fact that Sheldon was president of the American Sewing and Embroidering Machine Company and at the same time a partner in the Williams and Orvis Company (1862). In 1863 Orvis, Boyd, and Company (evident successor to Williams and Orvis) authorized the use of forty shares of its stock held by the American Sewing and Embroidering Machine Company as a contribution to the Sacred Order.

The Orvis of the two firms was John Orvis (without doubt the Brook Farm lecturer of the 1840's), second and last Omniarch¹⁵ of the Sacred Order.

The sewing-machine enterprise, whatever its intrinsic merit as a business venture, was unable to save the Sacred Order of Unionists. On February 2, 1863, John Orvis proclaimed the official dissolution of the Order, and with it the dissolution of the Kiantone Domain and the farm at Patriot, Indiana. He gave no reasons, but we can surmise a few: financial difficulties, dissension, failure to attract followers, and a growing disenchantment with an America divided against itself.¹⁶

¹⁴ U. S. Patent Office. *Index of Patents Issued from the U. S. Patent Office from 1790 to 1873, Inc.* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1864), III, 1301.

¹⁵ Sheldon No. 37 (untitled) dated January 22, 1860, defines Omniarch as the name to be given to the "all-controlling and all-permeating mind." Other officers were Sheldon (Leading Mind), Spear (Communicator), Miss Hinckley (Recordress).

¹⁶ Sheldon No. 201, "The Future of America," by "Robert Rantoul, Benj. Franklin, and Frances Wright." Transcribed by J. M. Spear, June 27, 1863.

Among seven points of consideration relative to America are these comments (paraphrased): The North does not see fit to give the Negro the

Although the Sacred Order was no more, its leaders, Spear, Sheldon, Orvis, and Sterling, were determined to continue the work they had begun; and if a chaotic United States would not hear them, they were certain that Europe, where peace and sanity still reigned, would welcome them. Accordingly, Spear, with his second wife, the former Miss Hinckley, established himself in London as a healer ("Guided and assisted by beneficent Spirit Intelligences"), character analyst, and fortune-teller. The Sterlings settled in Paris about the same time (1863) and John Orvis arrived two years later. These people were in Europe for two purposes: to preach the cause of world union, and to sell sewing machines. Thaddeus Sheldon remained in New York as director of the business operation.

While the Spears were in Europe they became acquainted with a number of leading socialists and spiritualists, e.g., the Davenport brothers of London, who were mediums, and Francois-Jean Cantagrel, a former Fourier disciple and onetime associate of Victor Considerant. Mrs. Spear wrote *A Brief Essay on the Position of Woman* (1866) and founded the London Spiritual Institute.

A letter, Orvis to Sheldon, written from England in 1865, perhaps foreshadowed the demise of the sewing-machine venture. It assailed the lack of practicality and organization in all of the commercial affairs the group had undertaken up to then, and held little hope for future success.

At any event, the Spears had returned to America by 1873, for in that year there appeared a small book of John Spear's reminiscences, which briefly (and sketchily) reviewed his twenty years as a medium.¹⁷ He was at that time surrendering his "commission" from the spirit world and flinging the torch to a certain Mrs. Manley.

Thaddeus Sheldon died in 1868, and the documents he had been keeping remained hidden in an attic trunk until his granddaughter discovered them in 1940.

opportunity to fight in the Union cause and thus treat him as an equal; the war is not referred to as a war for universal freedom; if it were, many men from the "Old World" would join the Northern cause; war cannot force into being a union based on freedom.

¹⁷ John M. Spear, *Twenty Years on the Wing: Narrative of Travels and Labors as a Missionary Sent Forth by the Association of Beneficents in Spirit-land*; . . . (Boston: W. White and Co., 1873).

John Orvis capped a long career of reform by returning to America and joining the Sovereigns of Industry, an organization active in the co-operative movement. In 1876 he wrote a book on co-operative stores and boards of trade;¹⁸ he is said later to have joined Bellamy's Nationalism.

Regarding the later doings of other members of the Domain, nothing has thus far been discovered.

It is interesting to speculate on what Spear and his friends would be doing if they were alive now. Some of them, possibly, would be "Beatniks" or some other variation on the theme of social rebellion. Women have won their equality with men in many areas, and that would be one less cause to crusade for. But even now, a century later, lasting peace through world law is still a remote ideal and an ever more desperate necessity; even now, a century after emancipation, civil rights for some Americans exist only in the statute books. The ranks of the "peace marchers" and the "Freedom Riders" would surely be augmented by the Sacred Order, or whatever they might call themselves in the un-sacred twentieth century.

On a hillside near Kiantone, a small shed with a stone foundation conceals the only remaining artifact of the Domain.¹⁹ In 1858, just before the great convention, a spirit communicator ordered that a cave be dug into the hillside, on the promise that treasure and the remains of prehistoric, webfooted Indians would be found. The diggers went in about 150 feet, struck a sulphur spring and stopped. Today a hand-lettered sign above the shed door reads "Spiritualists Spring," and water still seeps out around the stone foundation.

¹⁸ John Orvis, *A Plan for the Organization and Management of Co-operative Stores and Boards of Trade*. (Mechanicsburg, Pa.: Sovereigns of Industry, 1876).

¹⁹ The last oval house at Kiantone stood until 1907, when farmers in the vicinity tore it down for firewood. The last person to live in the house was an eccentric Jamestown lady who spent her summers there before the turn of the century.