

AN article in the January issue, "The Harmonists and Euthanasia?," in which Gertha Reinert offered circumstantial evidence that a group of 19th century frontier religious utopians practiced euthanasia, sparked an unusual flurry of interest and discussion. Accusations about her scholarship and charges of libeling Harmony Society leader George Rapp, dead 140 years, marked a debate that raged all spring among a handful of interested scholars.

The only certainty to emerge from the dispute is that learned people disagree. The core of the debate about the short article turns on a translation of old German, and within that translation, on the meaning of two words. The purpose of this special section is to give the dissenters a voice and to place the entire argument in context for those not especially interested in Rapp's Harmonists, who came from Germany in the early 1800s, first settling in Butler County, Pennsylvania. They relocated their religious commune to the Wabash River region of Indiana from 1814 to 1824, before sinking roots in Western Pennsylvania at Old Economy Village in Ambridge, about 30 miles northwest of Pittsburgh.

The original article is being reprinted, beginning on the next page, the various written objections — pieces of scholarship themselves — will follow, and an editor's note will summarize the differences of opinion that remain.