

## **Biography of George Rapp**

Born in Germany, George Rapp experienced a religious vision that would cause a chain of events leading to the establishment of Old Economy. Separating from the Lutheran Church, Rapp believed himself a prophet who would lead God's chosen into heaven. Based on a strict interpretation of the bible, Rapp's beliefs attracted a core of followers devoted to his teachings. Immigrating with 800 followers to the United States in 1804, and seeking religious freedom, Rapp built the town of Harmony in Butler County. There they developed an agrarian and craft economy which also permitted them economic freedom, and quickly expanded into manufacturing goods such as cotton, linen and wool.

In 1814, the Harmonists, as they are now known, left Pennsylvania for a larger village in Indiana. There they developed into a political and economic force, producing textiles and having Frederick Rapp, George Rapp's adoptive son, serve in the state legislature. In 1824, six hundred members returned to Pennsylvania to establish their third and longest lasting settlement, known as Oekonomie.

## Religious Communities: 19th Century Harmonists

## Old Economy Village

### Source 2: The story of Old Economy

**Old Economy Village, located in the small western Pennsylvania town of Ambridge,** survives as a testament to one charismatic man's religious zeal and his followers' belief in his ideas.

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*The print shop at Old Economy Village, Ambridge, PA*

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Economy was a complete village. Laid out by Frederick Rapp, its church was the center of the settlement, with houses, stores, and numerous shops laid out in a grid around it. Nearly 200 mostly brick buildings were constructed in less than two years.



The Harmonists were nationally known in the 1800s, regarded highly by Thomas Jefferson and other national leaders for their independence and ability to meld agriculture and manufacturing in a self-sustaining manner. Supporting a wide range of manufactures, trades, and agriculture, the Harmonists prospered both economically and spiritually. Within the village, shops were built for blacksmiths, tinsmiths, potters, tanners, tailors, and shoemakers. The town supported a central laundry and dairy, and the Harmonists became known for perfecting the technologies of silk manufacturing. Boasting a winery, among other industries, the Harmony Society made and produced everything needed for the care of the adherents and also for the prophesized coming of Christ.

One marvel of Old Economy is the Museum Building and Feast Hall, completed in 1826 and opened in 1827 as a Natural History and Fine Arts Museum. The building qualifies as the second oldest museum building in the United States, predated only by the Peale Museum in Philadelphia.

Like many religious societies, Old Economy suffered and declined due to religious, not economic, factors. In 1832, about one-third of the Harmonists left the Society under the leadership of Count de Leon, a self-proclaimed prophet who disagreed with Rapp. In 1847, Rapp died. Having adopted celibacy in 1807, the Society's membership waned, and by the turn of the century only a few Harmonists survived. In 1905, the village of Old Economy was disbanded and sold to the American Bridge Company, which named it Ambridge. The new town gradually grew around Economy, but the state purchased the core of the Society's buildings in 1916.

With six acres of preserved buildings, grounds and nearly 16,000 original artifacts, the former religious utopia has become a historic site administered by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. Visitors today can tour the community kitchen, a cabinet shop, blacksmith shop, granary, store, brick home, and Rapp's house and gardens and take a walking tour of the historic village. Old Economy reminds us of the efforts made by the Society to live in a harmony of faith and hard work.