

This article is protected by copyright, East Tennessee Historical Society. It is available online for study, scholarship, and research use only.

Suggested Citation:

Mathews, Paul Aaron. "Frances Wright and the Nashoba Experiment: A Transitional Period in Anti-Slavery Attitudes." *The East Tennessee Historical Society's Publications* 46 (1974): 37-52.

owing year, 1807,
 . In fact, only six
 post. On June 20,
 st time bore the
 ese letters would
 ew post forty-five
 the Clinch.⁵⁵

ort, the image of
 adowed the other
 Southwest Point's
 tiersmen built the
 uring the greater
 s. When Thomas
 he post departed
 er. This shift was
 Cherokee Agency,
 deral government
 the frontier. To
 ed with despatch
 with its orderly
 en as Meigs and
 with Indian and
 k to them and to

ary of War, June 20,
 -1870, Record Group
 m publication M-221,

FRANCES WRIGHT AND THE NASHOBA EXPERIMENT: A TRANSITIONAL PERIOD IN ANTISLAVERY ATTITUDES

By PAUL AARON MATTHEWS

It is much to have the fetters broken from our limbs, but yet better is it to have them broken from the mind. It is much to have declared men free and equal, but it shall be more when they are rendered so; when means shall be sought and found, and employed to develop all the intellectual and physical powers of all human beings, without regard to sex or condition, class, race, nation, or color.

—*Fanny Wright Unmasked by Her Own Pen*, p. 4.

The period around 1830 marked a crucial stage in the development of many American political, economic, and social patterns. In politics the revision of state constitutions during this period removed property-holding restrictions on suffrage in many states. Nominating conventions and the spoils system brought new vitality to the party system. In the decades following the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825, various state and local governments invested approximately \$125 million in building three thousand miles of canals and even more in building a vast network of railroad lines. Improved transportation drew more and more Western farmers out of a self-sufficient way of life and into a national market economy. Public schools received a boost in 1827, when Massachusetts passed a law requiring every town of five hundred or more families to set up a public high school.¹ The period around 1830 was particularly important, however, as a time when Americans re-examined their attitudes on slavery. This situation may be illustrated by examining Frances Wright's Nashoba experiment, a cooperative community organized in 1826 to purchase, educate, emancipate, and colonize slaves.

Before 1830, many individuals and small groups campaigned for the gradual abolition of slavery in the United States. The Quakers started their antislavery efforts in 1729 with the publication of *A Brief Examination of the Practice of the Times*, by Ralph Sandiford. Beginning in the 1790's, Quaker antislavery societies held occasional con-

¹ Excellent background material on this period may be found in Avery Craven, *The Coming of the Civil War* (New York, 1942) and Charles S. Sydnor, *The Development of Southern Sectionalism, 1819 to 1848* (Baton Rouge, 1948).

ventions to discuss their modest programs. They petitioned state legislatures and Congress, advocated schools for Negroes, and published antislavery essays. With broad appeal to different segments of the population, the American Colonization Society was formed in Washington, D. C., in 1816. The society was formed to promote the emigration from America to Africa of free Negroes and of slaves who were to be freed. However, many members admitted that they were more concerned about friendship with the slaveholder than about philanthropy to the slave.² In 1819, Elihu Embree established the weekly *Manumission Intelligencer*, which was the first American periodical devoted exclusively to antislavery discussions. Like most people concerned about slavery at that time, Embree supported the work of the manumission organizations and the American Colonization Society.

Around 1830, a few antislavery activists began to express dissatisfaction with the vague hopes and verbal victories of the colonizationists. In Boston in 1829, David Walker, a free Negro born in North Carolina, wrote an angry *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* advocating violence to destroy slavery and warning white masters of the consequences of holding Negroes in bondage. In 1831, William Lloyd Garrison began publishing a weekly newspaper, *The Liberator*, dedicated to the immediate abolition of slavery without compensation to slaveholders. Garrison regarded the political parties as tools of the slaveholders, the Union as a guardian of slavery, and the Constitution as a pro-slavery document. In relation to the conciliatory benevolence of antislavery forces before 1830 and the aggressive tactics and contempt for slaveholders which characterized many antislavery activists after 1830, the Nashoba experiment reflected a transitional period in the antislavery movement.

Attracted by the democratic principles of freedom, justice, and equality, Frances Wright left her comfortable home in England to journey to the United States in 1818. She travelled widely and found the Americans friendly, industrious, optimistic, and intelligent.³ She wrote: "I saw neither princes nor bayonets, nor a church married to the state, and conceived, in very truth, that liberty had here quickened the

² Virginia Colonization Society, *Seventh Report* (Richmond, 1838), 22ff., as cited in Louis Filler, *The Crusade Against Slavery, 1830-1860* (New York, 1960), 22.

³ Miss Wright described her travels in Frances Wright, *Views of Society and Manners in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1963), 5-11.

tioned state legis-
s, and published
segments of the
formed in Wash-
mote the emigra-
slaves who were
they were more
n about philan-
shed the weekly
merican periodical
most people con-
the work of the
ation Society.

to express dis-
of the coloniza-
ro born in North
ns of the World
white masters of
1831, William
, The Liberator,
ut compensation
s as tools of the
the Constitution
ory benevolence
tactics and con-
islavery activists
tional period in

om, justice, and
in England to
idely and found
intelligent.⁵ She
h married to the
e quickened the

38), 22ff., as cited
t, 1960), 22.

ews of Society and

human mind, until it was prepared to act under the influence of reason instead of fear."⁴ Within that liberal framework she began to promote actively women's rights, free public education, birth control, and prison reform. But the treatment of the Negro, Frances Wright realized, was the great failure of American society.

When Miss Wright first arrived in the United States, she was twenty-three years old. Her younger sister, Camilla, accompanied her. Well educated and moderately wealthy, the Wright sisters were cordially received throughout the country. In western New York state they were introduced to the rugged frontier; they toured a small area of Canada and were surprised by what they considered the difference in character between Canadians and Americans; they visited several battle sites of the War of 1812; they enjoyed the warm hospitality of Philadelphia and Washington; and they toured the plantations of tide-water Virginia.⁵ In the South Frances Wright expressed her only disappointment:

I own that as regards the southern states I have ever felt a secret reluctance to visit their territory. The sight of slavery is revolting everywhere, but to inhale the impure breath of its pestilence in the free winds of America is odious beyond all that imagination can conceive.⁶

Returning to England, Miss Wright wished to arouse Europeans to the promise of the United States. She decided to compile the letters she had written to a friend during her trip. Published under the title *Views of Society and Manners in America*, this book reflected her deep admiration for most of the people and principles which she had encountered. It was highly acclaimed in Europe and the United States. One contemporary periodical commented: "This book has been so extensively read in America, that a review of it at the present time may seem unnecessary."⁷ In Europe her book "excited no small attention."⁸ In fact, it won for her the friendship of many outstanding literary and political figures, including James Mill, Jeremy Bentham, and the Marquis de LaFayette.

⁴ Frances Wright, *Course of Popular Lectures* (New York, 1829), 9.

⁵ Miss Wright recorded her impressions of western New York in *Views of Society and Manners in America*, 97-128; Canada, 140-48; battle sites, 129-39 and 149-56; Philadelphia, 45-72 and 236-46; Washington, 259-64; and Virginia, 264-70.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 267.

⁷ Edward Everett in the *North American Review*, V (January 1822), 15.

⁸ Frances Wright D'Arusmont, *Biography and Notes* (Boston, 1848), 13.

Especially between Miss Wright and LaFayette, a deep personal regard soon developed. After reading her book the French general expressed the desire to meet her. In September 1821, she travelled to La Grange, LaFayette's estate, to visit the famous hero of the Revolutionary War. Before long he began to call himself her "paternal friend."⁹ When President James Monroe invited him to tour the United States in 1824, LaFayette asked Miss Wright to accompany him.

LaFayette was greeted with giant celebrations in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, and Yorktown.¹⁰ On most of his trips he was accompanied by Frances and Camilla Wright. They received a warm welcome from Jefferson at Monticello and from Madison at Montpelier.¹¹ While talking with them, Miss Wright again expressed alarm over slavery. She acknowledged that most Virginia planters were kind to their slaves, but "to break the chains would be more generous than to gild them."¹² Encouraged by Jefferson and others, she began to investigate in greater detail the problems of slavery.

She decided that "to give liberty to a slave before he understands its value, is perhaps, rather to impose a penalty than to bestow a blessing." The South was not preparing the way for the emancipation which its leaders seemed to think inevitable. Those Negroes who had been freed by their masters were more wretched and vicious than slaves. She did not see a miserable, half-clad Negro among the slaves, but many of the free blacks fitted that description. Therefore, she believed, the Negro should be educated before being emancipated. If all blacks were emancipated, the white population would be forced to hire their services at a fair price. Before that time, Negroes would continue to "forfeit the protection of a master without securing the guardianship of the law."¹³

⁹ LaFayette to Thomas Jefferson, La Grange, December 20, 1823, in Andrew A. Lipscomb (ed.), *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 20 vols. (Washington, 1904), XIII, 328.

¹⁰ A. Levasseur provided a first-hand account of LaFayette's travels in the United States in his *LaFayette en Amerique en 1824 et 1825*, trans. by J. D. Godman, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1829).

¹¹ Miss Wright's visit to Monticello was mentioned in Jefferson to LaFayette, Monticello, October 9, 1824, in Paul L. Ford (ed.), *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, 12 vols. (New York, 1905), XII, 379. Madison noted her visit to Montpelier in his letter to Mrs. Madison, Monticello, November 1824, in Gaillard Hunt (ed.), *The Writings of James Madison*, 9 vols. (New York, 1910), IX, 209.

¹² Wright, *Views of Society and Manners in America*, 268.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 269.

deep personal French general he travelled to of the Revolu- her "paternal tour the United any him.

New York, Phil- most of his trips They received a m Madison at again expressed rginia planters d be more gen- and others, she very.

he understands n to bestow a e emancipation groes who had ous than slaves. the slaves, but e, she believed, d. If all blacks ed to hire their uld continue to e guardianship

123, in Andrew A. Washington, 1904),

vels in the United O. Godman, 2 vols.

o LaFayette, Monti- s Jefferson, 12 vols. in his letter to Mrs. Writings of James

During the winter of 1824-25, Miss Wright lived in Washington, D. C. She studied the laws concerning slavery and attended several sessions of Congress.¹⁴ She also went to hear Robert Owen, the English socialist, who lectured in the city concerning his cooperative community. Because she was looking for a way in which slaves could be freed gradually and without financial loss to the planter, Miss Wright decided to investigate the possibility of applying Owen's plan to emancipation.¹⁵

The following spring the Wright sisters left Washington to join LaFayette in New Orleans. They travelled over the Blue Ridge Mountains and down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers in order to visit the cooperative communities at Economy, Pennsylvania; New Harmony, Indiana; and Albion, Illinois. New Harmony was a small village which Robert Owen had recently purchased from George Rapp, who had moved his experiment in Christian communism to Economy, Pennsylvania. Miss Wright was particularly impressed by the Rappites:

Upon inspecting all the departments of industry, and more especially the agriculture, which formed necessarily the large base of the growing wealth and prosperity of the property, she was forcibly struck—not merely with the advantages of united and organized labor, which may be seen at any time in a cotton mill or in any other public work or institution whatsoever—but with their appropriateness to the object which, at the time, engrossed her attention. Nor was there, indeed, much difference in the point of intellectual advancement between the mass of the German laborers, there submitted to the spiritual and temporal control of astute leaders, and that of the southern Negro.¹⁶

By forming a cooperative community, then, slaves could be trained and later colonized without loss to the planter.

After reaching New Orleans and bidding farewell to LaFayette, Miss Wright proceeded to draft and publish in the fall of 1825 *A Plan for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery in the United States Without Danger or Loss to Citizens of the South*. In this pamphlet she proposed a plan of cooperative labor and gradual emancipation somewhat similar to the systems employed in the communities she had visited. Because the labor of the slaves would pay for their cost and keep (plus interest on the initial investment), the slaves could be purchased from their

¹⁴ Frances M. Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (New York, 1949), 226.

¹⁵ D'Arusmont, *Biography and Notes*, 23.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 24-26.

owners. After Negroes fulfilled their financial obligations and received a basic education, they would be colonized in Haiti or Mexico.¹⁷

As the prototype of several communities to be established, Miss Wright proposed to buy land in the upland cotton region of Tennessee, Alabama, or Mississippi. "The property will be somewhat isolated," she advised, "in order to prevent communication with local townspeople." On this land would be placed fifty to one hundred slaves.¹⁸ The adult slaves would receive regular classroom instruction, and their children would attend a school of industry based on the Lancastrian principle.¹⁹ At weekly meetings the slaves would be informed that the rewards of labor would be the attainment of their freedom and the opportunity to earn a decent living after emancipation. Miss Wright was convinced that without the "improvement of the Negro morally, intellectually, and industrially . . . emancipation must ever be a work of anarchy."²⁰

Now that her plan was complete, Miss Wright began to look for support. She sent copies of her proposal to many of the people who she felt would be sympathetic. She asked Jefferson for assistance, but he replied:

At the age of eighty-two, with one foot in the grave and the other uplifted to follow it, I do not permit myself to take part in any new enterprises, even for bettering the condition of man, not even in the great one which is the subject of your letter, and which has been throughout life that of my greatest anxieties. The march of events has not been such as to render its completion practicable within the limits of time allotted to me; and I leave its accomplishment as the work of another generation. And I am cheered when I see that on which it is devolved, taking it up with so much good will, and such minds engaged in its encouragement. The abolition of the evil is not impossible; it ought never therefore to be despaired of. Every plan should be adopted, every experiment tried, which may do something towards the ultimate object. That which you propose is well worthy of trial. . . . You are young, dear Madam, and have powers of mind which may do much in exciting others in this arduous task. I am confident they will be so exerted, and I pray to Heaven for their success, and that you may be rewarded with the blessings which such efforts merit.²¹

¹⁷ Frances Wright, *A Plan for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery in the United States Without Danger or Loss to Citizens of the South*, as reprinted in *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, October 15, 1825.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ The Lancastrian principle of education emphasized practical experience as well as classroom instruction. In her proposal Miss Wright asserted that such a system would "carry order and cooperation from the school room into the field." *Ibid.*

²⁰ Frances Wright D'Arusmont, *Course of Popular Lectures* (Philadelphia, 1836), xiv.

²¹ Jefferson to Wright, Monticello, August 7, 1825, in Lipscomb, *Writings*, XVI, 119.

One person who offered help was George Flower, a man who had fought against the expansion of slavery into Illinois.²² In Miss Wright's proposal he saw no greater difficulties than those he and his father had overcome in establishing the Albion community. He agreed to furnish all the needed livestock and food for the first year to the value of \$2,000, and Miss Wright supplied \$10,000 to buy land and a few slaves.²³

In September 1825, Miss Wright and Flower journeyed to Nashville in search of land in the cotton region of Tennessee.²⁴ LaFayette had already arranged for them to stay with Andrew Jackson at the Hermitage.²⁵ Jackson directed them to the lands in the western part of the state, which had just recently been acquired from the Indians. Miss Wright purchased from William Lawrence and William A. Davis three hundred acres of Wolf River bottom lands about thirteen miles northeast of Memphis.²⁶ Later she bought additional acreage until the plantation spread over 1,860 acres of "good and pleasant woodland, traversed by a clear and lovely stream."²⁷ The name she gave to the property was the old Chickasaw word for wolf, Nashoba.

On horseback, Flower and Miss Wright travelled across the state to inspect the property. They arrived in Memphis on October 8, 1825. After only a few days, Flower returned to Nashville to buy several slaves. From there he journeyed to Illinois to make arrangements to carry his family and Camilla Wright to Nashoba the following spring.²⁸ Frances Wright remained in Memphis during the winter, organizing the plantation. She allotted \$1,000 for a small general store to supply the needs of Nashoba. Jeremiah Thompson, a Quaker in New York, was asked to serve as her buying agent; he agreed to do so, and he even contributed the first shipment of goods "in aid of thy good efforts."²⁹

²² See George Flower, *The History of the English Settlement in Edwards County, Illinois* (Chicago, 1882).

²³ Wright to Jeremiah Thompson, Memphis, December 9, 1825, Wright MSS, as cited in William R. Waterman, *Frances Wright* (New York, 1924), 102.

²⁴ Letter from Frances Wright, Memphis, December 26, 1825, in *Le Globe* (Paris), January 23, 1827.

²⁵ LaFayette to Jackson, Monticello, August 21, 1825, in John S. Bassett (ed.), *The Correspondence of Andrew Jackson*, 7 vols. (Washington, 1926-35), III, 290.

²⁶ Register's Office, Shelby County, Tennessee, Deed Book B, 54-55.

²⁷ Wright to Benjamin Lundy, Jackson, Tennessee, November 7, 1825, in *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, December 17, 1825.

²⁸ Letter from Frances Wright, Memphis, December 26, 1825, in *Le Globe*, January 23, 1827.

²⁹ Thompson to Wright, Philadelphia, January 28, 1826, Wright MSS, as cited in Waterman, *Frances Wright*, 104.

Miss Wright supervised the building of two log cabins at Nashoba, and she wrote to Benjamin Lundy that "a few mechanics, such as carpenters, bricklayers, etc., will be wanted very soon." After publicizing her proposal for Nashoba, she was pleased that "the principal people in the state concur in it."³⁰

During the spring of 1826, Nashoba began to take shape. Robert Wilson, a gentleman from South Carolina who had read of Miss Wright's experiment, arrived in early February to place his slaves under her care. The group of slaves which he brought, however, consisted of a pregnant woman, Lucky, and her five daughters: Maria, Elvira, Isabel, Viola, and Delilah. Miss Wright paid Wilson \$446.76 to compensate him for their transportation from South Carolina to Nashoba. Flower later commented: "They were not very appropriate subjects for opening up a new farm in the wilderness; and looking at the group of female slaves, alone, neighboring planters said that they would never earn the money paid for them."³¹ Two weeks after the arrival of Wilson and his slaves, Flower, his family, and Camilla Wright came from Illinois. Because they had been forced by bad weather to abandon their flatboat, they arrived in wagons loaded down with supplies and tools. The five male and three female slaves purchased by Flower in Nashville reached Nashoba on March 1. Soon afterwards, James Richardson, a man from Memphis with medical training, and Richeson Whitby and Robert Jennings, both former residents of New Harmony, joined the community. By May they had managed to plant fifteen acres of corn and two of cotton, cultivate a small potato garden, and fence an apple orchard of five acres.³²

As weeks went by, the difficult work and unhealthy climate hindered progress. Flower's children and Camilla Wright, who became ill, were sent back to Illinois. Exhausted, Frances Wright soon left for a brief visit to prosperous New Harmony. Both of the Wright sisters returned at the end of June, but Frances contracted dengue fever, an infectious tropical disease transmitted by mosquitoes, and suffered

³⁰ Wright to Benjamin Lundy, Jackson, Tennessee, November 7, 1825, in *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, December 17, 1825.

³¹ George Flower to Benjamin Lundy, Memphis, August 25, 1826, in *ibid.*, September 30, 1826.

³² Wright to the Reverend Hugh McMillan, Memphis, May 3, 1826, Wright MSS, as cited in Waterman, *Frances Wright*, 105.

severely
keeper,
Inspired
not rec
Decem

Un
Nashob
cooper
Under
habits
difficul
to the
Board
Miss V
commu
ities of
age. A
attenti
educat
earned
amount
suitabl

T
additi
Whitb
Dale
Richar
and h
joined
Rober
der C
her fir
under

33

34

Shelley

35

21, 182

severely throughout the summer and fall.⁸³ Her doctor was the storekeeper, James Richardson, and her hospital was the little log cabin. Inspired by her recent visit to New Harmony and afraid that she might not recover from her illness, Miss Wright wrote a deed of trust on December 17, 1826.⁸⁴

Under this new deed of trust, the objectives and policies of Nashoba were altered. Nashoba would now incorporate a white cooperative community into the original plan of Negro emancipation. Under the new plan, slaves would perform those tasks which "their habits render easy and which to their guides and assistants might be difficult or unpleasing." But she added: "No life of idleness is proposed to the whites; those who cannot work must give an annual equivalent." Board for non-workers was later fixed at \$200 per year. In accord with Miss Wright's belief in personal independence, each entrant to the community would be considered individually, without regard to the qualities of that person's husband, wife, or children over fourteen years of age. A member once admitted could not be expelled and was entitled to attention during sickness and old age. The school at Nashoba would educate black children and white children equally. When the slaves had earned \$6,000 (with six percent interest from January 1, 1827) plus an amount equal to transportation costs, they would be colonized in a suitable location outside the United States.⁸⁵

To execute these policies, Miss Wright named ten trustees in addition to herself: General LaFayette, William McClure, Richeson Whitby, Cadwallader Colden, Robert Jennings, Robert Owen, Robert Dale Owen (the son of Robert Owen), George Flower, James Richardson, and Camilla Wright. Naturally, she included LaFayette and her sister Camilla. Whitby, Jennings, Flower, and Richardson had joined her in the actual work at Nashoba. McClure, Robert Owen, and Robert Dale Owen had been leaders at New Harmony, and Cadwallader Colden was a former mayor of New York whom she had met on her first trip to the United States. She decided not to place Nashoba under the control of the existing emancipation societies because she

⁸³ D'Arusmont, *Biography and Notes*, 30.

⁸⁴ Robert Dale Owen, "Frances Wright, General LaFayette, and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley," *Atlantic Monthly*, XXXII, CXCII (October 1873), 448-49.

⁸⁵ "Deed of Trust to Nashoba," in the *New Harmony Gazette* (Indiana), February 21, 1827.

felt that their views concerning moral instruction were different from hers. She stated: "Emancipation based on religion had hitherto effected but little; and, generally speaking, by the tone and the arguments employed, has tended rather to irritate than convince."⁸⁶

The new plan for Nashoba caused little change in the lives of the black residents. The slaves had always done the heavy labor. In her schoolroom Camilla Wright taught only the children because she had found the older slaves too slow to learn. Frances Wright did not blame this slowness in learning on any inherent racial inferiority. To the contrary, she considered black children as intelligent as white children. Age seemed the significant factor. Before coming to Nashoba, the adult slaves had been given few incentives to be responsible or to think for themselves. Miss Wright strongly believed in the importance of environment in establishing personal characteristics, but she now realized that she had overestimated the ability to change established patterns of behavior.⁸⁷

Only one additional person, Robert Dale Owen, came to participate in the new plan. Miss Wright invited Owen to join the resident trustees at Nashoba after the experiment at New Harmony had come to an end. Owen expected "more cultivated and congenial associates than those with whom, for eighteen months past, I had been living." Instead, he found "second rate land, and scarcely a hundred acres of it cleared; three or four square log houses, and a few cabins for the slaves the only buildings; and slaves released from the fear of the lash, working indolently under the management of Whitby, whose education in an easy-going Shaker village had not at all fitted him for the post of plantation overseer." Fortunately, Owen did not have to stay for very long. Miss Wright's health grew worse, and she asked him to accompany her on a trip abroad. In Europe, too, they hoped to secure money and recruits. On May 14, 1827, they left Nashoba under the care of Camilla Wright, Whitby, and Richardson.⁸⁸

In New Orleans, Frances Wright settled some business affairs and attempted, unsuccessfully, to generate interest in her community among

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Frances Wright, *Fanny Wright Unmasked by Her Own Pen: Explanatory Notes, Respecting the Nature and Objects of the Institution of Nashoba and of the Principles Upon Which It Is Founded* (New York, 1830), 6.

⁸⁸ Robert Dale Owen, *Threading My Way* (New York, 1874), 303-4.

free blacks. During her brief stay in the city, however, she did engage two women of mixed blood, Mam'selle Lolotte and her daughter Josephine, to serve as teachers for the small school at Nashoba.³⁹

After a tedious voyage Miss Wright and Owen reached France in July. Although at times during the trip Owen was afraid that Miss Wright might not recover, she had regained her health and spirits by the time they reached their destination. After several days in Paris they travelled to La Grange, where they spent only a few days before they began to hear disquieting rumors.⁴⁰

During their absence James Richardson had started to live with one of the black women at Nashoba. Unfortunately for all concerned, he chose to publicize the arrangement. The following passages from the journal of the plantation were published in several newspapers throughout the country:

Friday, June 1, 1827

Met the slaves at dinner time—Isabel had laid a complaint against Redrick, for coming during the night of Wednesday to her bedroom, uninvited, and endeavoring, without her consent, to take liberties with her person. Our views of the sexual relation had been repeatedly given to the slaves; Camilla Wright again stated it, and informed the slaves that, as the conduct of Redrick, which he did not deny, was a gross infringement of that view, a repetition of such conduct by any of the other men, ought in her opinion, to be punished by flogging. She repeated that we consider the proper basis of the sexual intercourse to be the unconstrained and unrestrained choice of *both* parties. Nelly having requested a lock for the door of the room in which she and Isabel sleep, with the view of preventing the future uninvited entrance of any man, the lock was refused, as being, in its proposed use, inconsistent with the doctrine just explained; a doctrine which we are determined to enforce, and which will give to every woman a much greater security than any lock can possibly do.

Sunday evening, June 17, 1827

Met the slaves—James Richardson informed them that, last night, Mam'selle Josephine and he began to live together; and he took this occasion of repeating to them our views on color, and on the sexual relation.⁴¹

The article aroused bitter feelings in America. Lundy himself, although absent when the article was published in his newspaper, protested against the sexual practices described. Many of his subscribers

³⁹ Owen to Camilla Wright, New Orleans, May 29, 1827, Wright MSS, as cited in Waterman, *Frances Wright*, 112.

⁴⁰ Owen, *Threading My Way*, 304.

⁴¹ *The Genius of Universal Emancipation*, July 28, 1827.

were shocked by the conduct of the resident trustees. One reader wrote a letter calling Nashoba one great brothel.⁴² The first news of the article and subsequent uproar came to Miss Wright during her stay at La Grange. She wrote to Richardson urging restraint in the public expression of such unpopular opinions.⁴³

Miss Wright and Owen continued their efforts to solicit support in Europe. Generally they were unsuccessful, but they were encouraged by the interest shown by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley and Frances Milton Trollope.⁴⁴ In her first letter to Mrs. Shelley, Miss Wright explained her broader goals: "While we endeavor to undermine the slavery of color existing in the North American Republic, we essay equally to destroy the slavery of mind now reigning there as in other countries."⁴⁵ Several letters and a brief visit followed, but Mrs. Shelley decided not to participate. With the second candidate, Mrs. Trollope, Miss Wright was successful. Although the Trollope family was having financial difficulties at the time, it was still quite an accomplishment to persuade a prim and proper Englishwoman to move her family to a radical community on the edge of a wilderness. Mrs. Trollope and her children set sail from London with Miss Wright on November 4, 1827.⁴⁶

On this return trip, Frances Wright wrote a small book concerning Nashoba. She did not comment directly on the recent incident, but she stated views supporting the conduct of Camilla Wright, Richardson, and Whitby. She expressed her belief in "the free exercise of the liberty of speech and action, without incurring the intolerance of popular prejudice." She described the tyranny of the marriage laws and declared that religion had no place at Nashoba.⁴⁷

Almost in passing, she commented that miscegenation was one device which would help the racial problem in the United States.⁴⁸ As

⁴² "Mentor" to Benjamin Lundy, August 3, 1827, in the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, August 18, 1827.

⁴³ Wright to Richardson, La Grange, August 18, 1827, Wright MSS, as cited in Waterman, *Frances Wright*, 120-22.

⁴⁴ Mrs. Shelley was the author of *Frankenstein* (published in 1818), widow of the English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, and pioneer exponent of the rights of women. Mrs. Trollope became famous after she published a book, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, on her travels in the United States.

⁴⁵ Wright to Shelley, Paris, August 22, 1827, Percy B. and Mary A. Shelley Journals and Notes (in Manuscripts Department, William R. Perkins Library, Duke University), 1094.

⁴⁶ Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, 1.

⁴⁷ Wright, *Fanny Wright Unmasked by Her Own Pen*, 12.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

es. One reader wrote
the first news of the
at during her stay at
traint in the public

ts to solicit support
ey were encouraged
Shelley and Frances
Shelley, Miss Wright
r to undermine the
Republic, we essay
g there as in other
ed, but Mrs. Shelley
ate, Mrs. Trollope,
e family was having
accomplishment to
ve her family to a
s. Trollope and her
November 4, 1827.⁴⁹

all book concerning
nt incident, but she
Wright, Richardson,
ercise of the liberty
erance of popular
e laws and declared

egenation was one
United States.⁴⁸ As

ius of *Universal Eman-*
right MSS, as cited in

. 1818), widow of the
rights of women. Mrs.
iners of the Americans,

ary A. Shelley Journals
ary, Duke University),

she later explained, she personally was not opposed to an interracial marriage in which both parties gave their consent, but she was very much against a slaveholder forcing his slave to participate in sexual relations. She stated: "Whatever blending of races may befall the human family in the course of its destiny, let us hope it will be other in the future, than what, up to this hour, has, for the most part, alike violated decency and brutalized character."⁴⁹ However, her original statement, which many misunderstood and exaggerated, caused her a great deal of trouble. In fact, the entire pamphlet only served to alienate her former supporters.⁵⁰

When Miss Wright and the Trollopes arrived at Memphis in January 1828, they discovered Nashoba in very poor condition. Because Whitby could not manage the slaves, the harvest was small and the houses were in disrepair. In fact, during the past year the plantation had sold only \$225 worth of cotton and produce. Instead of earning extra money the slaves now owed the plantation \$159.79!⁵¹ Of the three resident trustees, only Camilla Wright and Whitby remained. And in spite of all Camilla Wright had said against the marriage bond, she and Whitby had been married by a justice of the peace in December.⁵² It was probably not a very happy homecoming for Frances Wright.

Two days after Miss Wright's arrival at Nashoba, Mrs. Trollope appeared. She, too, was disappointed:

One glance sufficed to convince me that every idea I had formed of the place was as far as possible from the truth. Desolation was the only feeling—the only word that presented itself: but it was not spoken. I think, however, that Miss Wright was aware of the painful impression the sight of her forest home produced on me, and I doubt not that the conviction reached us at the same moment, that we erred in thinking that a few months passed together at this spot could be productive of pleasure to either. But to do her justice, I believe her mind was so exclusively occupied by the object she had then in view, that all things else were worthless, or indifferent to her. I never heard or read of any enthusiasm approaching hers, except in some few instances, in ages past, of religious fanaticism.⁵³

⁴⁸ D'Arusmont, *Course of Popular Lectures* (1836), xiv.

⁴⁹ For example, James Madison commented that "her disregard and rather open defiance of the most established and vivid feelings" created "insuperable obstacles" to the achievement of her goals. Madison to LaFayette, Montpelier, February 20, 1828, in Hunt, *The Writings of James Madison*, IX, 310.

⁵¹ "Nashoba Book," Wright MSS, as cited in A. J. G. Perkins and Theresa Wolfson, *Frances Wright, Free Enquirer* (New York, 1939), 191.

⁵² "Nashoba Book," December 15, 1827, Wright MSS, as cited in *ibid.*, 187.

⁵³ Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, 27-28.

Not long after Mrs. Trollope and her children had left Nashoba, Robert Dale Owen arrived from Europe, but he stayed on the plantation only a few days. Whitby was ill, so he and his new wife left for New Harmony. The slaves worked quietly under the charge of John Gilliam, a man Miss Wright had hired to run the plantation. Miss Wright spent a lonely spring at Nashoba.⁵⁴

Even the enthusiasm of Frances Wright, which Mrs. Trollope probably exaggerated, began to wane, and she left Nashoba in June. She spent the rest of the year in New Harmony, but returned the following summer to transport her thirty slaves to Haiti. There they were given land and placed under the protection of President Boyer.⁵⁵ Although the slaves were indeed colonized, their colonization certainly was not accomplished in the manner which Miss Wright had originally proposed. They had attended only a few days of school at Nashoba, and their work had not produced enough money even to pay for their upkeep, much less to repay Miss Wright for her original investment. When the Nashoba experiment ended, even Frances Wright admitted that it had been a failure.⁵⁶

But why was Nashoba unsuccessful? Internally, there were several factors. Although extremely dedicated, Miss Wright and her assistants lacked experience in operating a plantation. It was very difficult to transform 1,860 acres of forest into a prosperous plantation. Certainly, the whites were not at all suited for the grueling manual labor required for such a task. When Miss Wright's illness forced her to leave, she placed Nashoba in the incompetent hands of Richardson, Whitby, and Camilla Wright. Because the incorporation of a white cooperative community into the original plan placed the emancipation aspect in a secondary role, the chances for success were reduced. Externally, Nashoba encountered at least two obstacles. The misrepresentation of Miss Wright's views on miscegenation turned many people against her proposal. Finally, Miss Wright suffered a handicap in her business dealings and in her relations with the general public because she was a woman.

⁵⁴ "Nashoba Book," June 4, 1828, Wright MSS, as cited in Waterman, *Frances Wright*, 130.

⁵⁵ Robert Dale Owen, "An Earnest Sowing of Wild Oats," *Atlantic Monthly*, XXXIV (July 1874), 75.

⁵⁶ D'Arusmont, *Biography and Notes*, 32.

Although an undeniable failure as a solution to slavery, the Nashoba experiment is significant to the modern historian. Before examining more closely the context of Miss Wright's project, it is interesting to note the manner in which her personal background relates to that of other antislavery activists. Many historians have tried to pinpoint personal characteristics which were common to leaders of antislavery groups. One historian has noted that many of the antislavery activists were young, that the great majority were well educated, and that a disproportionate number were women.⁵⁷ Another historian has emphasized the great influence which English citizens had on the American antislavery movement.⁵⁸ A third historian has written about the large number of antislavery activists who were interested in other reform movements.⁵⁹ Thus, Miss Wright illustrates many of the personal characteristics common to antislavery leaders.

Certainly, Frances Wright's attitude in undertaking the Nashoba experiment stands in contrast to that of antislavery leaders during other periods. Unlike so many others, Miss Wright wanted to help both master and slave. She wrote:

I was equally remembered as a practical friend of the man of color, and as a peaceful and dutiful citizen of a southern state. I was known to have studied the south and planted myself down in its bosom, not to spy out the land with a view to its betrayal, the slandering the character of its people, nor the disturbing of its peace, but simply to understand its position, its difficulties, its feelings, and its interests, with a view to the full and accurate comprehension of a question which I had long been convinced was least understood by those which most actively meddled with it.⁶⁰

With an almost scholarly approach, Miss Wright devised a careful, practical plan to end slavery.

In discussing the transitional role which Nashoba played, the Southern reaction is an important aspect. Many Southerners, including Madison, Jefferson, and Jackson, were extremely receptive to Frances Wright's original project. There is evidence that "many local planters were in sympathy with her plan."⁶¹ Although Miss Wright altered her plan and received unfavorable publicity, Joseph Davis,

⁵⁷ David Donald, *Lincoln Reconsidered* (New York, 1969), 21-36.

⁵⁸ Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond (eds.), *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimké Weld, and Sarah Grimké*, 2 vols. (New York, 1934), I, x-xii.

⁵⁹ Craven, *The Coming of the Civil War*, 131.

⁶⁰ D'Arusmont, *Course of Popular Lectures* (1836), iv.

⁶¹ LeRoy Pope, "Fanny Wright: Remarkable Grandmother of a Surprising Priest," *the Commercial Appeal* (Memphis), January 22, 1933.

brother of Jefferson Davis and owner of a large plantation near Natchez, Mississippi, corresponded with her in a pleasant manner.⁶² Years later, Miss Wright commented that "never, during the course of my journeyings and residence in the south, although my general sentiments and purpose were understood, did I ever experience aught but respectful treatment, and confiding, open-hearted hospitality."⁶³ Even if most Southerners who knew of the project were indifferent, at least they were not hostile.

In various forms, the three principles of Nashoba (compensate the slaveholder, prepare the slave for freedom, and colonize the slave) were discussed for many years before and after 1830. First, in many of the early proposals, including that of the American Colonization Society, slaveholders were requested to free their slaves with little or no payment in return. During the 1830's, however, after Parliament had compensated slaveholders in the British empire, a few people suggested that Congress reimburse American slaveholders who freed their slaves.⁶⁴ The Nashoba plan provided compensation, as the later plans did, but without any contribution from the government. Second, the early Quaker antislavery societies suggested that slaves be educated so that they might read the Bible. Providing education for a slave was outlawed by Southern legislatures during the decades after 1820. Miss Wright's plan, again in an intermediate position, proposed that slaves receive a basic instruction in reading and industrial arts. Third, colonization was an idea which was very popular during the 1820's. But in 1832, Garrison and others founded the American Anti-Slavery Society because they felt that the American Colonization Society's policy on colonization was motivated by a desire to rid the country of free blacks. Miss Wright promoted colonization because she recognized the real, if unhappy, status of free Negroes in the United States. Thus, in the development of each of these three ideas, as well as in the more general framework of the American antislavery movement, Frances Wright's Nashoba experiment illustrated the transition which occurred during the period around 1830.

⁶² Joseph E. Davis to Wright, "Hurricane," near Natchez, Mississippi, February 26, 1828, Wright MSS, as cited in Perkins and Wolfson, *Frances Wright, Free Enquirer*, 192.

⁶³ D'Arusmont, *Course of Popular Lectures* (1836), xiv.

⁶⁴ One plan was proposed in John Rankin's *Letters on Slavery*. Rankin proposed that part of the public domain be set aside for the purchase of slaves.