
“The Spirit Of Improvement”: The America of William Maclure and Robert Owen

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In February and March of 1825, Robert Owen of New Lanark, Scotland, delivered two lectures on “A New System of Society” in the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C. His audience included the best of Washington society—senators, congressmen, cabinet officers, Supreme Court justices, and the outgoing and incoming presidents of the United States. Owen was in Washington enroute to New Harmony, Indiana, where he planned to launch a community that would begin the remaking of the world. At the distant New Harmony, Owen told the assembled dignitaries in the Capitol, he would “commence a new empire of peace and good will to man, founded on other principles, and leading to other practices than those of the past or present, and which principles, in due season, and in the allotted time, will lead to that state of virtue, intelligence, enjoyment, and happiness, in practice, which has been foretold by the sages of past times.”¹

Owen’s lectures and their reception reveal much, not only about the man but also about the United States in 1825. Owen and his fellow philanthropist William Maclure, who would join the undertaking in the fall of that year, saw themselves standing at a critical juncture in history. They believed that the age in which they lived and the reforms they undertook were fraught with significance for humanity’s future. Temperamentally, the two men were a study in contrast. Maclure, far more cautious and skeptical, lacked Owen’s charismatic personality and penchant for oratory. Yet in a quieter and more subdued way, Maclure was a visionary too. Like Owen, he believed absolutely in the coming of a better world and in his ability to help fashion it.

Maclure’s redoubtable optimism led him to see opportunities to rebuild society everywhere, even in autocratic Spain and anarchic Mexico. But it was America that drew forth his and Owen’s highest hopes. “A new era is commenced on your side of the Atlantic,” Maclure wrote to his protégé, Pestalozzian educator Marie Duclos Fretageot,

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¹Robert Owen, *A Discourse on a New System of Society, as Delivered in the Hall of Representatives of the United States . . .* (Washington, D.C., 1825), 13.

in 1823. "The aurora of reason breaks out on a most extensive horizon. The sun will follow, and the diffusion of Knowledge will be as unbounded as his light." Both he and Owen, Maclure wrote a year later, considered "the field of moral experiment in the United States to be the finest in the Globe." America was already the world's "purest and most rational Society," hence the ideal place to implement plans for social improvement.²

Americans themselves could not have agreed more. Since the founding of the colonial settlements, America had been a place to start over, to erect a new and perfected society. The Revolution powerfully reinforced Americans' sense of standing on the leading edge of progress. In *Common Sense*, the pamphlet that galvanized the movement toward independence in 1776, Thomas Paine announced, "We have it in our power to begin the world over again. . . . The birthday of a new world is at hand." The Great Seal of the United States proclaimed a *Novus Ordo Seclorum*—"A New Order of the Ages."³

In the mid-1820s American self-confidence soared to new heights. Like Owen and Maclure, citizens saw themselves and their country as marking a new epoch in history. In America alone, they believed, humanity had thrown off the chains of oppression and tyranny. While royalty and aristocracy still ruled Europe and its colonial possessions, in America most people lived not as subjects but as citizens—enlightened, prosperous, and free. As Maclure and Owen began their work at New Harmony in 1825, a concatenation of momentous events—the triumphant return of the Revolutionary hero Marquis de Lafayette, the completion of the Erie Canal, which was hailed by its builders as "a work more stupendous, more magnificent, and more beneficial than has hitherto been achieved by the human race," and the forthcoming Jubilee celebration of American independence—seemed to herald the dawning of a new era.⁴

"The spirit of improvement is abroad upon the earth," President John Quincy Adams declared in December, 1825. Americans believed their unique combination of political freedom and material abundance would enable them to lead the world in the march of what Adams called "moral, political, intellectual improvement."⁵ Wealth, intelligence, wisdom, and virtue would all advance together.

In conceiving of progress as indivisible, and thus in linking together improvements in education, science, and social organization,

²William Maclure to Marie Duclos Fretageot, November 20, 1823, August 25, September 10, 1824, in Josephine Mirabella Elliott, ed., *Partnership for Posterity: The Correspondence of William Maclure and Marie Duclos Fretageot, 1820–1833* (Indianapolis, 1994), 249, 297, 300.

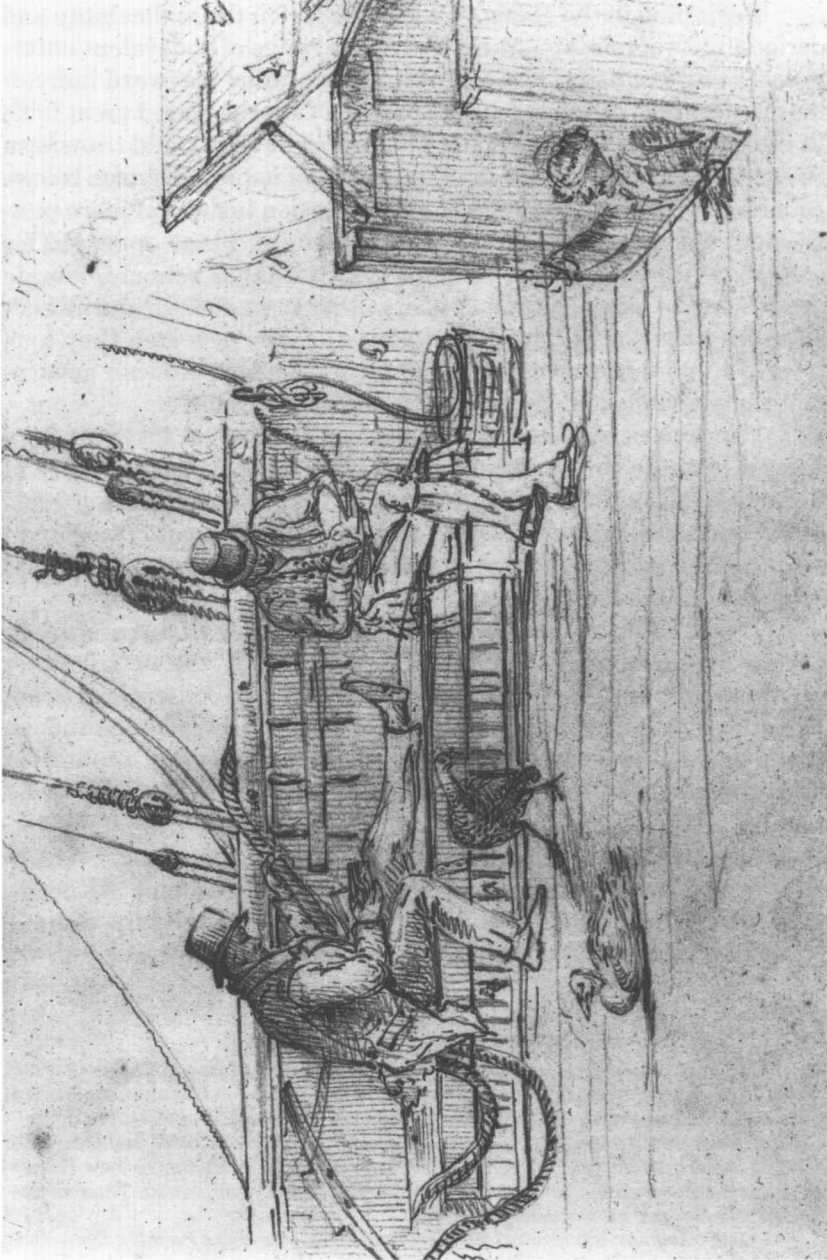
³Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, in *Thomas Paine: Collected Writings*, ed. Eric Foner (New York, 1995), 52–53.

⁴David Hosack, *Memoir of De Witt Clinton* (New York, 1829), 420.

⁵James D. Richardson, ed., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789–1897* (10 vols., Washington, D.C., 1895), II, 311, 316.

WILLIAM MACLURE AND
CHARLES-ALEXANDRE
LESUEUR ABOARD THE *LOUISA*
IN LATE FALL 1815
SKETCH BY CHARLES-
ALEXANDRE LESUEUR

Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle du Havre,
Le Havre, France (#38003).



Maclure and Owen embodied the American spirit of the age. American optimism melded national pride and civic boosterism with Enlightenment faith in the power of reason and the unity of truth. Patriot scientists such as Benjamin Silliman of Yale and New Harmony's Thomas Say hoped their discoveries would vindicate a democratic people's claim to intellectual distinction. Every town promoter shared William Maclure's hope of making his community "an Emporium of arts and Sciences" of international renown.⁶

Beginning in the 1820s, American belief in the malleability and perfectibility of human nature powered a range of benevolent enterprises from "civilizing" the Indians to reclaiming wayward individuals in asylums, orphanages, and prisons. Citizens placed great faith in the possibilities of education. They believed they could transform the national character by raising a generation of improved human beings. American prisons that aimed at rehabilitation instead of mere punishment became a magnet for foreign visitors. Plans appeared for schools of all sorts—free schools, manual labor schools, female academies. In education, as in every other area, Americans intended to lead the world. They believed that every new step they took toward human improvement would exalt both republican government in principle and the United States as its living embodiment.⁷

The Americans' belief in themselves as a people set apart for a special purpose thus ensured a receptive hearing for the ideas of Robert Owen and William Maclure. In the heady atmosphere of 1825, nearly anything seemed possible. Both grand and vague, Owen's call for a "new system of society" matched Americans' own immoderate expectations for themselves.

Proclaiming utopia, however, proved easier than building it. Owen's dream foundered quickly at New Harmony, the victim of poor planning and unrealistic expectations. After two contentious years his prematurely declared Community of Equality dissolved. Although Owen was unbowed by the disaster, the miracle-worker reputation he had brought to America from New Lanark was spoiled beyond repair.

Meanwhile, at New Harmony William Maclure quietly continued with his sponsorship of schools and scientific research. Although Maclure shared Owen's hope of regenerating humanity, he came to regard Owen himself as a charlatan swept off his senses by his own

⁶Maclure to Benjamin Tappan, May 4, 1827, Benjamin Tappan Papers (Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.). On geologist/chemist Benjamin Silliman, professor at Yale and founding editor of the *American Journal of Science and Arts*, see John C. Greene, *American Science in the Age of Jefferson* (Ames, Iowa, 1984) and George H. Daniels, *American Science in the Age of Jackson* (New York, 1968). On New Harmony entomologist/conchologist Thomas Say, see Patricia Tyson Stroud, *Thomas Say: New World Naturalist* (Philadelphia, 1992).

⁷On Jacksonian-era reform, see Alice Felt Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment* (New York, 1944) and Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers, 1815–1860* (New York, 1978).

rhetoric. With a less sanguine view of human nature, Maclure had always doubted that communitarian schemes and charismatic leadership could instantly transform society. Instead, he invested in education and science as slower but surer roads to the same end.

Yet in their efforts to build schools and to spread knowledge among the citizenry, Maclure and his New Harmony agent, Marie Duclos Fretageot, also encountered mounting frustration and disappointment. Given the American enthusiasm for individual and social uplift, why did their program founder? The answer is ironic, for the same democratic and optimistic milieu that nurtured Maclure's and Fretageot's hopes also nourished the germs of their failure. Americans chorused Maclure's faith in the perfectibility of their society, but it became increasingly clear that they differed with him in their vision of what a perfected society should be.

Maclure had always linked his scientific and educational pursuits to political ends. Along with his faith in progress, he took from the Enlightenment a profoundly Manichean view of social evolution. Maclure saw starkly opposing forces of light and darkness contending for control in Europe, in Mexico, and even in the United States. Some elements in his analysis—his attack on the commercial classes and his championing of the common people as the real producers of wealth—seem to anticipate Marx. But neither his diagnosis of social ills nor his cure were solely economic. The real root of injustice and distress, Maclure believed, was not the upper class's control of wealth or production, but its monopoly of knowledge.

As his friend Thomas Say observed, Maclure was "thoroughly convinced, by all his experience that the inequality of knowledge is the source of all the evils that torment humanity." The masthead of Maclure's *Disseminator of Useful Knowledge* at New Harmony proclaimed that "Ignorance is the fruitful cause of Human Misery." Educating the rich would only widen the gulf between the rulers and the ruled. But by the same token, as Maclure told his friend Samuel George Morton, "raising the mass of industrious producers by the diffusion of useful knowledge" would equalize both property and power, and thus secure "freedom and happiness" for all mankind.⁸

Naturally, the "aristocracy" (a favorite epithet of Maclure and his friends) would not willingly relinquish their hold on either knowledge or power. "Ignorance," Maclure observed, "is the food, clothing, and only support of every description of priest." It maintained and fortified "the priveledges, imunities, and consideration of all men in power, and 9/10 of the rich and influential in all countries." By keeping the masses ignorant, the aristocracy kept them down. Its chief instruments of control were the coercive force of the state and the doctrinal

⁸Thomas Say to Benjamin Tappan, August 30, 1827, and William Maclure to Samuel George Morton, March 26, 1835, in *Science in Nineteenth-Century America: A Documentary History*, ed. Nathan Reingold (Chicago, 1964), 34, 53.

authority of the Church—in Maclure's terms, "king-craft and priest craft."⁹

But in America the chains had been broken, first by the Revolution that overthrew the principle of aristocratic rule and later by the democratic upheaval that spread suffrage to the people and in 1828 made Andrew Jackson president. Maclure shared much in outlook and rhetoric with the Jacksonians; and though he was never politically active himself, he and his associates Thomas Say, Marie Duclos Fretageot, Robert Dale Owen, and Frances Wright all identified with Jackson and his Democratic party. Jackson too assailed the "aristocracy" at every turn, and his clashes with the Congregational-Presbyterian phalanx of benevolent and charitable organizations mirrored the New Harmonists' hostility to clerical authority.¹⁰

Yet, as Maclure never fully grasped, "aristocracy" is in the eye of the beholder. In his schemes of social uplift Maclure repeatedly found himself frustrated by what he termed "the obstinacy of schoolmasters the ignorance of parents, and the intolerant bigotry of priestcraft."¹¹ Maclure's earnest devotion to the welfare of the working people blinded him to his own dogmatism. Wishing only to educate the laboring masses to their true interest, he never doubted that he knew what was best for them himself.

Both Maclure and Owen assumed that with political liberty secured, Americans' most pressing need—the prerequisite to any further advance in their status, knowledge, and power—was to sever themselves from religion and its web of superstition and terror. Their Enlightenment view of history taught Maclure and Owen that the Church and its minions had always fought social and intellectual progress. Hence both men branded organized Christianity as their worst enemy. In his famous "Declaration of Mental Independence" at New Harmony on July 4, 1826, Owen denounced "ABSURD AND IRRATIONAL SYSTEMS OF RELIGION" as one of the three greatest evils besetting the human race.¹²

While Owen railed publicly, Maclure sought to replace religious indoctrination with "useful knowledge," disseminated through scientific publications for adults and practical schooling for children.

⁹Maclure to Fretageot, August 28, 1821, in Elliott, *Partnership for Posterity*, 144; Maclure quoted in John F. C. Harrison, *Quest for the New Moral World: Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America* (New York, 1969), 40.

¹⁰Jackson and the Democrats clashed with evangelical Christians over the Peggy Eaton affair, Indian removal, Sabbatarianism, and slavery. See Daniel Feller, *The Jacksonian Promise: America, 1815–1840* (Baltimore, 1995), 178–83.

¹¹Maclure to Morton, March 26, 1835, in Reingold, *Science in Nineteenth-Century America*, 53.

¹²Robert Owen, "Oration Containing a Declaration of Mental Independence," *New Harmony Gazette*, July 12, 1826, reprinted in Donald E. Pitzer and Josephine M. Elliott, eds., *New Harmony's Fourth of July Tradition* (New Harmony, Ind., 1976), 10.

Yet although his ideas of experiential education and of practical application of technical knowledge would later gain wide acceptance, Maclure's efforts yielded little direct result. Maclure worked on a small scale and never learned how best to reach the people he was trying to help. There is something inspiring and yet deeply pathetic in his attempt to get plain farmers and tradespeople to forsake their useless "poetry, history, romance, law, & etc." for his "real and usefull" scientific and polemical works, and in his bafflement when his offerings did not sell.

Similarly, Maclure never comprehended the tenacious resistance of parents to his schemes for educating their children. He came finally to believe he could never succeed with pupils from the "independent classes," who had ideas and interests of their own. In place of these "defective materials," he sought "orphans who have no parents to depend on, or to spoil them," and with whom he could play a free hand. Here, too, Maclure's sincerity of purpose blinded him to the implicit authoritarianism of his own position.¹³

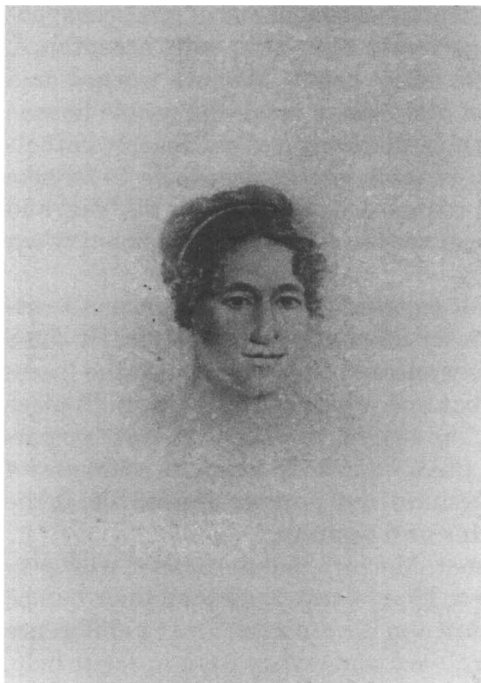
In short, like any reformer, Maclure had to contend with peoples' reluctance to be reformed. Everywhere they tried their hands, even in New Harmony, Maclure and his associates met indifference and even hostility from the ordinary people they were trying to help. For this, Maclure's system of social analysis offered no ready explanation. How could the people not want what was best for them? Only stubbornness or stupidity could explain their rebuff of his offer to elevate their condition and set their minds free.

As Maclure perceived, the real root of his difficulty lay in religion. When Marie Duclos Fretageot in 1825 remarked "the evils which surround my pupils" in Philadelphia, she meant mainly the religious opinions of her neighbors. One of those neighbors, the Quaker Deborah Logan, savaged Robert Owen's New Harmony "Declaration of Mental Independence" a year later: it was an "impious rhodomontade" full of "poisonous doctrines" and "nefarious disclosures." "How any woman of piety and good feeling can bring herself to stay at his odious settlement, I know not."¹⁴

And indeed many could not. As Maclure and Owen discovered, even New Harmony offered no haven from religious controversy. The reign of what one critic called "nothingism" there brought notoriety abroad and turmoil within. Long after Owen's community collapsed, its reputation for infidelity lingered, poisoning Maclure's efforts to recruit students and to spread his doctrines, and even souring his own family relations. Maclure knew his hatred of preaching cost him tenants

¹³Maclure to Fretageot, August 25, 1830 (?), in Elliott, *Partnership for Posterity*, 775.

¹⁴Fretageot to Maclure, February 11, 1825, and Deborah Norris Logan diary, July 8, 1826, in *ibid.*, 325, 1050.



MARIE DUCLOS FRETAGEOT

New Harmony Workingmen's Institute,
New Harmony, Indiana.

and scholars among "the religious people," for "Harmony is an eye sore to all sects of Christians."¹⁵

Coming from Maclure, this remark was not a lament but a boast. Maclure gloried in keeping preachers out of New Harmony. The "confusion, falsehood, scandal, and calumny" sown by critics merely fortified his resolve, for "a town to thrive without a church and a priest to preach in it would contradict all the prophecies." Maclure cared nothing for "scandalous falsehoods" spread by self-interested "priests and sectarians." He expected no less from the clerical aristocracy.¹⁶

But in America there was no clerical aristocracy. Maclure's fundamental error was to mistake the nature of his religious opposition. It was not, as he thought, the work of a reactionary priestly class, for in the United States the tenets of Christian faith were not dictated and enforced from above. The religious establishments that still reigned in Europe had crumpled in America in the wake of the Revolution.

Yet Americans in the 1820s and 1830s were converting to Christianity by the tens of thousands, swept up in a national revival that had been building since the beginning of the century. Cresting in the

¹⁵Gabriel Rey to Mr. and Mrs. Victor du Pont, April 13, 1826, Fretageot to Maclure, August 23, 1830, and Maclure to Fretageot, October 30, 1830, in *ibid.*, 1065, 773, 820.

¹⁶Maclure to Fretageot, October 30, 1830, and Maclure to Reuben Haines, June 29, 1831, in *ibid.*, 820, 1106.

years of Maclure's and Owen's activity at New Harmony, the Awakening also rode the tide of national optimism and faith in progress. Its preachers did not challenge democracy or reason; instead, they embraced both. But they defined human improvement and America's providential mission in explicitly Christian terms; the utopia they sought was the reign of Christ on earth. Preachers like the Presbyterian Lyman Beecher labored in "full belief that the millennium was coming, that it was at hand, that the Church was just about to march with waving banners to final and universal dominion." Using techniques of suasion rather than repression, Christian evangelists strove for free and voluntary conversions, not slavish obedience. Aiming to make the United States a Christian nation, they launched crusades against drinking, Sabbath-breaking, and slavery.¹⁷

The choices facing Americans were dramatized in 1829, when the revivalist Alexander Campbell debated Robert Owen on the evidences of Christianity before packed crowds in Cincinnati. Both men agreed the millennium was near. But was it Owen's rationalist millennium or Campbell's religious one? At the end of the eight-day debate Campbell asked those who believed in Christianity to stand up. An audience of twelve hundred rose as one. In the printed version of the debate, it was Owen who appeared didactic and doctrinaire, while Campbell seized the high ground of reason and democracy by urging the reader to "reason, examine and judge, like a rational being, for himself."¹⁸

It was Owen's and Maclure's misfortune to launch their experiments against the greatest torrent of religious enthusiasm the United States had ever seen. Locked in his dualistic view of the world, Maclure could never see the revival for what it was: a profoundly popular movement propelled by impulses and hopes that were as progressive and stirring as his own. The great gainers in the Awakening were not old established hierarchies crying damnation and despair, but upstart denominations—Baptists, Methodists, Christians, Disciples, and a dozen others—that spurned authority and tradition to appeal directly to the people. Like Maclure, they, too, preached popular empowerment and liberation, but empowerment and liberation attained through a Christian faith and directed to Christian ends. Shedding or sidestepping the forbidding doctrines of Calvinism, they married Americans' prevailing confidence in progress and improvement to a creed that stressed the hope of individual salvation and the ability of committed Christians to create a better world.

¹⁷Barbara M. Cross, ed., *The Autobiography of Lyman Beecher* (2 vols., Cambridge, Mass., 1961), II, 112. On the Awakening, see Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, 1989) and Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York, 1994).

¹⁸*Debate on the Evidences of Christianity Held in the City of Cincinnati, Ohio, in April 1829, Between Robert Owen & Alexander Campbell* (Cincinnati, 1829), 5.

The scope and strength of this Christian upheaval baffled and frustrated Maclure and his friends. They believed that destiny favored them. They expected to lead Americans toward a rational future, purged of religious cant and superstition. Instead, without understanding what had happened, they found themselves cast aside as the parade of history took a different route.

Delivering Maclure's eulogy in 1840 before the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, which Maclure had long served as benefactor and president, his friend Samuel Morton observed that "what Religion itself has not been able to accomplish, Philosophy will attempt in vain." Maclure's philosophy was his faith in reason, a faith so simple and artless that it amounted to a religion of rationality. But from the time of the revival that surrounded and engulfed Owen's and Maclure's reform efforts in the 1820s and 1830s, their Enlightenment cult of reason beat a steady retreat under the renewed onslaught of evangelical Christianity. Although some of Maclure's educational and scientific ideas endured, the philosophy that inspired them—a philosophy not only irreligious but explicitly anti-religious—was overpowered and in time nearly forgotten. A century and a half have passed since Maclure and his fellows scanned the horizon for the dawning of their new day. Yet philosophy has not displaced religion.¹⁹

And what of that vision, shared by Owen and Maclure and their Christian adversaries as well, of America as a New Moral World? Although muted and bruised, in some sense it still lives. But as early as the 1830s, events began to undermine American hopes of an imminent millennium. The dissolution of New Harmony; the disappointment of other experiments in social engineering such as the one at Lowell, Massachusetts; the Panic and depression of 1837, which destroyed hopes of limitless, seamless economic growth; the deepening impasse over slavery, as white southerners entrenched themselves behind a wall of proslavery repression; the emergence of political parties, implanting the principle of divisiveness instead of harmony at the heart of American politics; the perversion (at least in some eyes) of the country's moral mission in the world into an unseemly thirst for territorial acquisitions—all of these developments served to stifle, if not to extinguish, Americans' expectations of breaking loose from history and erecting something new under the sun. Americans would not stop dreaming and striving for a better world. But never again would that dream seem so tantalizingly close as when Robert Owen stood in the Capitol, with all of official Washington in attendance, and proclaimed "A New System of Society" in 1825.

¹⁹Samuel George Morton, *A Memoir of William Maclure, Esq.* (Philadelphia, 1841), 29.