

Francis Wright

Utopian,
1795-1852

by David Rosen

Now forgotten, Frances Wright was the most scandalous woman in America during the antebellum era.

In 1830, Wright, along with Robert Dale Owen, son of utopian Robert Owen, opened the Hall of Science in a converted church on 859 Broome Street, where hundreds regularly attended their lectures. According to one historian, "the first books of reform [female] physiology and birth control were openly distributed." So threatening was her message that she was denounced as the "Priestess of Beelzebub" and the "Red Harlot of Infidelity." Walt Whitman attended her lectures and, looking back at his youth, he fondly recalled her: "I never felt so glowingly toward any other woman. ... She possessed herself of me body and soul."

Wright first visited New York in 1818 accompanied by her sister, Camilla Wright, and produced and published *Altorf*, a play about the struggle for Swiss independence. Leaving the city, the sisters traveled throughout the still unsettled west and did so unchaperoned by a male, a scandal for the day.

Born in Scotland in 1795, she was a respected author, on a first-name basis with John Stuart Mill, Jeremy Bentham and Mary

Wollstonecraft Shelley. In 1821, while in Paris, she met the Marquis de Lafayette and worked with him supporting a number of revolutionary movements.

In '22, she published *A Few Days in Athens*, a fictionalized work on the philosophy of Epicurus, that drew praise from Thomas Jefferson, writing to her it was a "treat to me of the highest order."



Wright's relation with Lafayette scandalized his family. He was openly infatuated with her, calling her fondly, "my dear Fanny" and referred to their relationship as familial, in father-daughter terms. He was likely attracted by her challenge to traditional male-dominated intellectual culture. She wrote him, "I dare say you marvel sometimes at my independent way of walking through the world just as if nature had made me of your sex instead of poor Eve's." And concluded, "Trust me, my beloved friend, the mind has no sex but what habit and education give it, and I who was thrown in infancy upon the world like a wreck upon the waters have learned, as well to struggle with the elements as any male child of Adam."

Wright returned to the U.S. for six years from 1825 to 1831 and had a series of profound adventures. She met and regularly corresponded with Jefferson,

strongly challenging him over his acceptance of slavery.

She is credited with being the first American woman to edit a journal, initially the *Harmony Gazette* that, after relocating to Gotham, became *The Free Enquirer*. She joined utopian socialist Owen's "cooperative village" at New Harmony, IN, fiercely opposing him over slavery.

She broke with Owen over slavery, joining with his son, Robert Dale Owen, and her sister, Camilla, to found Nashoba, the Chickasaw word for Wolf River, a radical utopian community in rural Tennessee. With the help of Andrew Jackson, Wright purchased nearly 2,000 acres in rural western Tennessee in 1826 in order to establish the community.

At that time, Memphis, the largest nearby settlement, was a tiny fur-trading outpost with only, as she reports, "a dozen log cabins." At Nashoba, she attempted to create a community that would not merely challenge deep-seated racial practices and beliefs and do so south of the Mason-Dixon line, but also challenge fundamental Christian values and sexual mores. In addition, she sought to make it a financially self-sufficient operation.

Nashoba was a mixed community of women and men, married and unmarried, black and white, free and slave, adult and child. It was an historically unprecedented attempt to remake civil society. It was doomed to failure by the forces of its inherent and irreconcilable contradictions as well as by the material conditions under which it operated. From all accounts, it seemed to have been

a miserable place, with only a handful of poorly constructed and furnished houses, a well for water and ill-tended gardens and domesticated animals.

At Nashoba, Wright and her compatriots crossed the race line, the Grand Canyon of sexual intimacy, thus confronting the deepest fears -- and fantasies -- of the American experience. Two community members, a free black woman and white man, chose to marry with neither government nor church approval. As two biographers would later declare, the arrangement was "[a] free union of two persons without marriage! Sexual relations between a white man and a colored woman, on exactly the same terms of free choice and mutual inclination which might be expected among whites." After Nashoba failed, Wright freed Nashoba's slaves in Haiti.

Wright was a sought-after speaker, one of only a few public women in early-nineteenth century America. She was a true radical, championing abolition, advocating free love and assailing religion. She took an unequivocal stand for the equality of the sexes:

"No woman can forfeit her individual rights or independent existence, and not assert over her any right or power whatsoever, beyond what she may exercise over her free and voluntary affections; nor, on the other hand, may any woman assert claims to the society or peculiar protection of any individual of the other sex, beyond what mutual inclination dictates and sanctions."

Wright was so prominent that she was invited to give Cincinnati's 1828 July Fourth keynote address, thus credited with being one of the first women to give a major public

address in America. She opposed capital punishment, challenged religious intolerance, was a feminist before feminism, calling for equal education, birth control, legal rights for married women and liberal divorce laws.

Wright and her husband returned to America in 1835 to settle in Cincinnati, and once again, she began to give speeches. She became a convincing supporter of President Jackson and attacked the Second Bank of the U. S. as a public menace that bound the U.S. to the wealth of England. Her suggestions for gradual emancipation and the eventual assimilation of free blacks aroused much opposition, and her public appearances provoked demonstrations, even violence.

For more information:

Celia Morris Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright - Rebel in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

J. G. Perkins and Theresa Wolfson, *Frances Wright: Free Enquirer - The Study of a Temperament* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1939).