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The Perfectionist Standard : Reading and Study in the Oneida Community

Constance Noyes Robertson

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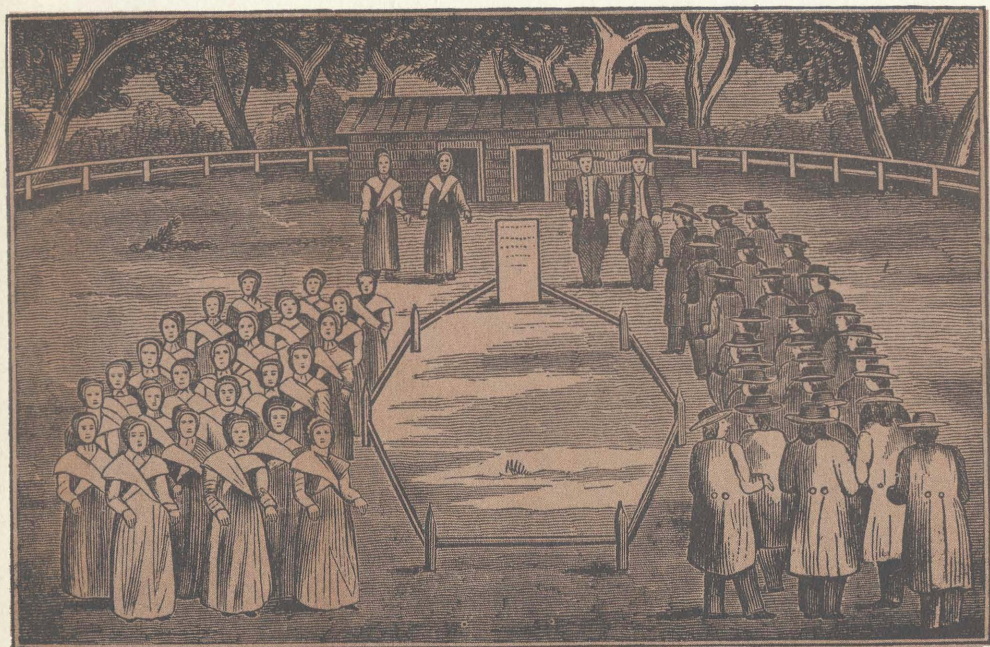
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Mountain Meeting. From *Two Years' Experience Among the Shakers* by David Lamson. West Boylston: Published by the Author. 1848.

THE COURIER

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Shaker History in the George Arents Research Library	3
	Sandra G. Brown
The Osborne Family Papers: Spotlight on Thomas Mott Osborne	13
	John Janitz
The Moscow Art Theatre in 1925	19
	Clara E. Sipprell
The Perfectionist Standard Reading and Study in the Oneida Community	32
	Constance Noyes Robertson
Random Recollections of Campaigning With Colonel Roosevelt	43
	John Proctor Clarke
Open for Research . . . Notes on Collections	52
News of Library Associates	54

The Perfectionist Standard

Reading and Study in the Oneida Community

by Constance Noyes Robertson

The Oneida Community materials in the George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University comprise probably as complete a collection of the Oneida papers as exists in any public institution. With the Shaker Collection of the Rare Books Department, described elsewhere in this issue of The Courier, they provide exceptional resources for research on socio-religious utopianism of the 19th century in America.

The Oneida Community, an experiment in communal living, was established at Oneida, N. Y. in 1848 by John Humphrey Noyes and flourished for some thirty years. Noyes' commitment to the idea of Christian perfection as an attainable goal became the basic theology of the Community, resulting in a striving toward perfection in all things.

The following article describes the application of the perfectionist principle to reading and study, both of which were approached with zeal and discriminating taste by the Oneida Communists.

Constance Noyes Robertson is the granddaughter of John Humphrey Noyes and author of a number of books, both fiction and non-fiction. Her most recent title, published in 1970 by Syracuse University Press, is Oneida Community, An Autobiography, 1851-1876. Mrs. Robertson's papers are also in the George Arents Research Library.

“... Here is a man who interrogates the squirrels and trees to some purpose, who does not deal with ‘hearsay and old clothes. Undoubtedly, *Walden* is the most original, sincere and unaffected book recently issued from the press. It is woody, resinous and strong with ground-smell. There are none of the scents of roses, pinks and violets in it.” This, after a long deliberation, was the opinion of the Oneida Communists concerning a famous contemporary. They published the review ten years late, in the *Community Circular* for March 11th, 1864. Characteristically, they added a retroactive self-criticism.



The Mansion House of the Oneida Community

“Ten years ago *Walden* came before the public, but owing to unappreciative if not thoroughly hostile reviews, together with a strong suspicion on our part of its egotism and eccentricity, it failed to get our attention. It is with some humiliation that we make this confession.” After that, Thoreau was rewarded with a long and favorable review of *The Maine Woods*, then recently issued, and three several excerpts from his other works.

Obviously this group of Perfectionists, mounted securely upon the eminence of a platform dictated by Heaven and the Primitive Church, was bound to consider every problem—of art as well as of behavior—first of all in its moral, religious and spiritual aspects. Nor were they alone in this order of procedure. The moment was the very blushing prime of the century; if Victorianism was not yet a word with a particular meaning, certainly the meaning of the word was already the essential spirit of the period. Readers adored such titles as *The Lofty and Lowly; of Good in All and None All-Good, Thanatopsis* was a great philosophical work and the Gentle Reader shed nearly as many tears as little Ellie during the perusal of *The Wide, Wide World*. The Communists had chosen to differ from World’s Folks in the crucial matter of moral, religious and spiritual values. Their theology was explicit in stating that they had cut themselves off from the sinning world; had joined themselves with Paul and the Primitive Church; had accepted new revelations of perfection. They had voluntarily made themselves as remote from world’s opinions as from World’s Folks. For this reason, in reading they approached their subjects with minds critical, intelligent, but often as innocent of standard opinions—or as regardless of them—as though they dwelt, literally, upon another planet or in the Garden of Eden itself. Their dogma did, of course, give them a certain bias; they laid the Perfectionist rule-of-thumb along the material to be measured and arrived at a sum according to the formula of their own Heaven-sent mathematic. Occasionally they got the wrong answers. But it is rather extraordinary how often they reached conclusions that were fresh, original, and illuminating. And whatever their conclusion, they stated it—generally in print for they were inveterate publishers—with simplicity, with candor and with complete assurance. They had searched their own minds and hearts and this was what they thought; what the rest of the world thought was none of their affair.

They atoned handsomely to Thoreau for their first prejudice, but they never wholly forgave Hawthorne. In their eyes he was an apostate Puritan, an apostate communist, an apostate abolitionist, an apostate socialist. He had foresworn everything they believed in and then had written a novel poking fun at Brook Farm. It was true that he wrote beautifully. In an article on Style, a Community critic observed that “Hawthorne and Irving manage to put aerial perspective into their descriptions.” But they found the *Blithedale Romance* “impossible to read without pain and displeasure.” The entire work was “written in a minor mode” and the “impression left on the mind was as if you had been in communication with a fallen angel.” Even more heterodox

were their strictures upon—of all men—Milton. They dealt with him kindly but firmly, as though he were a subject for criticism in one of their Evening Meetings. “While duly honoring Milton’s poetic genius,” they wrote, “Paradise Lost is a great reservoir of home-made scripture. The devil, being in a sense its hero, had a good deal to do, we fear, in shaping the biography therein, of himself.” Coming as it did from a band at that moment defying the world in defense of another home-made scripture, this comment is fairly electrifying.

Blake they approved of. They reprinted entire an article entitled *Pictor Ignotus*, dealing with Blake’s life and remarked that “it seems strange that in the brief lapse of a half century he should have been so completely forgotten that his name falls strangely upon the ear.” Thereafter they also reprinted three of his poems, beginning with *Reeds of Innocence* and the *Little Black Boy*.

As a group they were voracious readers. During the many years when travelling bags were manufactured by the Community much of the work of sewing was done in Bag Bees—that is, in large informal groups, gathered in summer in the Quadrangle or on the Lawn or under the Butternut Tree and in winter in the Upper Sitting Room or the Big Hall of the Mansion House. While work was in progress it was customary to have one member read aloud from some book, generally a work of fiction which, they confessed, “contributed much to the attraction of the occasion.” They got through a vast number of books in this way; Scott and Cooper, Dickens and Thackeray as their work appeared, Charles Reade, Bulwer-Lytton, Wilkie Collins, the Brontës; “Felix Holt, a new novel by the author of Adam Bede.” They could range widely since there was neither an Index Expurgatorious nor any official censor except their own consciences, but it seems extraordinary that in an age teeming with trashy novels, from George Lippard through Mrs. E. D. E. N. Southworth, they chose to read none of them. And that, when eminent preachers were thundering against novel-reading as a vice “calculated to heat the imagination . . . and lead the young off into a world of dreams,” the Communists read Cooper’s novels at seven o’clock breakfast, “thus insuring some interest for attendance.” Their only discipline occurred when a novel grew too exciting, began to absorb more than its share of the family’s interest. Then they sometimes stopped the reader, even in the middle of a book. But this did not interrupt the general practice of reading aloud.

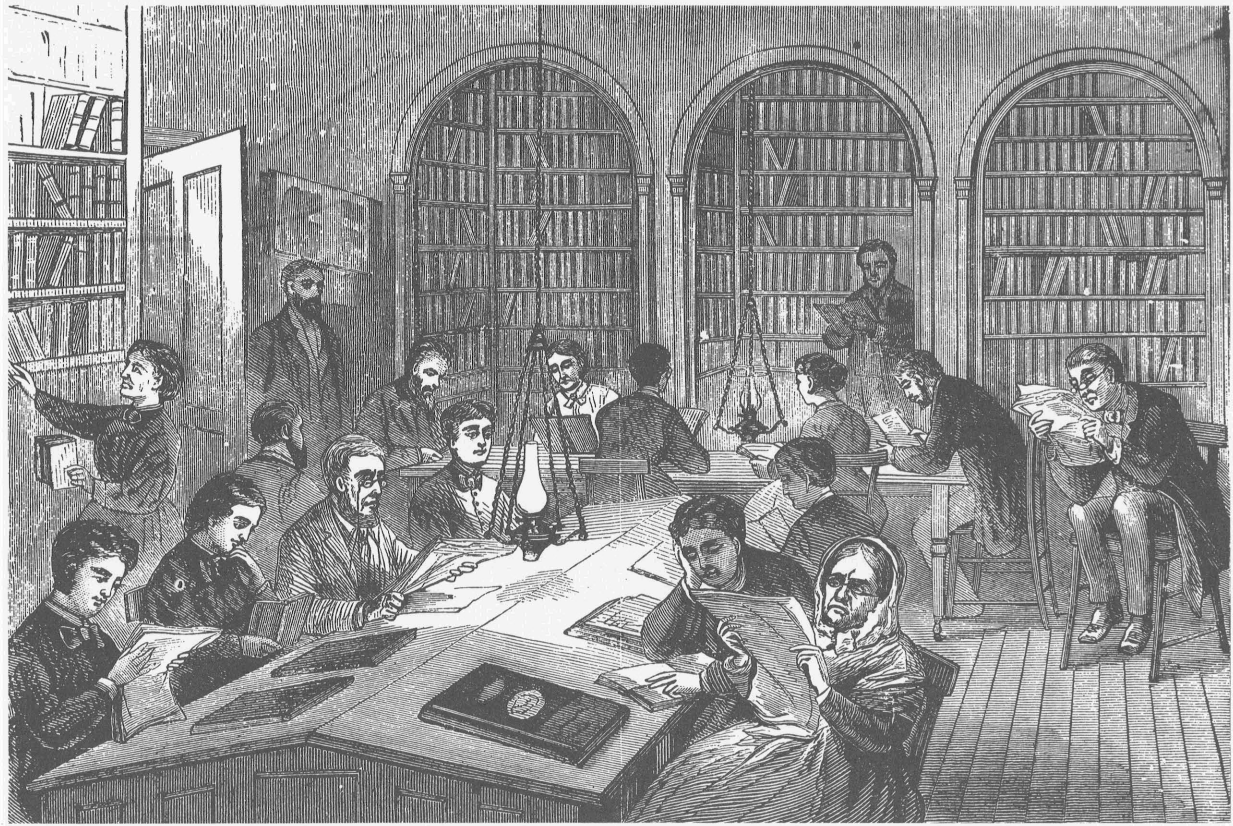
At Evening Meetings, after the business of the day had been discussed and a Home Talk delivered by Mr. Noyes or someone deputized by him, there would often be music and more reading aloud. Mr. Underwood, an ex-schoolmaster, was the usual reader and they supplemented novel-reading with works of travel, biography, articles from the current magazines, scientific works. They read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, but they read also the works of Francis Parkman, *Across the Continent* by Samuel Bowles of the *Springfield Republican*, D’Aubigne’s *History of the Reformation in England*,

and Professor Agassiz's *Lectures*, "which some called rather dry." They read Carlyle, Fénelon, Ruskin, Herbert Spencer, John Stuart Mill, Darwin. They investigated Mesmerism, Spiritualism and Phrenology when everyone was discussing the New Sciences. They were devoted poetry readers. In their publications there are innumerable references to favorite poets: "This is one of old George Herbert's perfect days, 'So cool, so calm, so bright'." Quotations were rife, from Dryden and Pope, from Shakespeare and Milton, from Cowper, Gray, Butler, Thompson, Tennyson who, they felt, derived from Poe and had a tendency merely to "play with words." Once they reprinted a verse from Punch, and once, regrettably, from N. P. Willis. The most enthusiastic devotees kept poetry scrapbooks or copied their favorite poems into handbound notebooks.

There was a fever of enthusiasm for education of every sort. Each year, at the close of the fruit-canning season, classes for study were organized for the whole family. A regular school was started for the small children, and a boy's school all day throughout the winter "to be thoroughly drilled in elementary branches of study." In 1866 fifteen classes for adults were announced as the Education Programme. The Grammar class enrolled twenty-seven pupils, Geometry eight, Geography eleven, Phonography seven, Colburn's *Arithmetic* ten, Thompson's *Higher Arithmetic* twenty-one, Elementary Algebra twenty-nine, a second class of the same, twenty-two, a third, twenty, and two classes studying Robinson's *New University Algebra* had fourteen and thirteen pupils apiece. The notice mentions "a few small classes in French and other studies not mentioned in the above list." That year Algebra was quite the rage among elderly scholars. The *Daily Journal* tells of "one of our elderly women who got so absorbed in mathematics yesterday that the premonitory strokes of the dinner bell failed to reach her ear and on she plodded till some time past one o'clock." And one of the elderly men who had just commenced the study of Algebra said that he was "so charmed with it that he could think of nothing else all day and he dreamed about it at night."

That winter another notice commented, "our educational campaign is fairly opened and enthusiasm for study runs to the highest pitch. One cannot look in any direction and scarcely any hour of the day but he will see persons hastening with books, slates, &c. to find their places in some class; and in almost every corner or private room little clusters are seen gathering for study. Yesterday . . . Mr. P. hastened past and, being asked why he hurried so, he said, 'I am afraid I shall be late for school.' Someone called to see Mr. V. (at the shoemaker's shop) but he, too, was at school and so it is all round. Our hired folks have caught the infection and have solicited our people to furnish them with a teacher as we did last winter."

On another occasion a scene was described. "At the table sit three of the brothers deeply engaged in the study of Algebra. One is reading the example, another performs the operation, while a third demonstrates. These



The Library. Oneida Community.

gentlemen perhaps fancy themselves in class and consequently their voices are raised considerably above a whisper, to say the least. At another side of the table a lady sits absorbed in Arithmetic, apparently undisturbed. Two more are studying aloud. (Grammar and Phonography) . . . A rather facetious old lady perceives the state of things and proposes to read aloud from the *Circular*. This she does in a clear loud tone without in the least diverting the attention of anyone else." One person, having occasion to get up in the morning at an unusually early hour "found herself trying hard, before rising, to work out the unpleasant problem by Algebra, instead."

Mathematics was not the only love. A class, mostly of young women, was drilled "in the elementary exercise of elocution" by a Professor Frobisher who was invited in from the World and who later gave some recitations in the Hall, closing with an exhibition of ventriloquism. After the war a class in The Detection of Counterfeit Money was offered to those interested. One wonders how this could have appealed widely to a group many of whom had not handled money of any kind for years. In 1867 there was a class in Chemistry, one in Natural Philosophy, one in Composition and two in French, in addition to the usual list. German was read in one class; *Faust* and *William Tell*. The students commented, "It is a quite delightful change to pass from the metaphysical speculation of Goethe to the singing music of Schiller." The French class read the New Testament as an introduction to less familiar texts, and, later, novels and poetry. The teachers of all of these classes were appointed from among the Community members; classes met wherever it was most convenient. ". . . Geometry and Grammar at the tables where our dinner is served up to us. Our Algebra and Spelling classes seem thoroughly wide awake though they are held in the same room where some of the members sleep. All seem enthusiastic. . . . We ask to improve our minds . . . and keep a healthy ambition free from competition." Occasionally their spirits must have flagged. One old woman wrote rather wistfully that "the Devil did his best to envelop us in a sleepy spirit and destroy our ambition for study," but they routed him evidently, since each year found the classes reopening with a grand afflatus and closing rather regretfully in the spring when business needs of the commune called all hands on deck for labor. "This winter we have had a very good time for study and improvement . . . a liberal allowance of time and means, zeal and enthusiasm. Now the same spirit should lead us to turn the zeal into business and make us single-eyed in our devotion to it."

In 1869 four of the young men were graduated from Yale and returned to Oneida fired with a new idea—to form what they called a Manual Labor School. Their purpose was to give the whole Community a college education. "True," they confessed, "it might take longer than at Yale or Harvard, as our scholars spend but half of each day in study, but then, we are at home all the time and can be as many years about it as we choose. The plan of having classes of men and women study together is favored and the system of

examinations is highly approved. We expect to start on a small scale and add one thing after another as desirable." Among the subjects added to the original list were History, Draughting, Astronomy, Microscopy, Spiritual Philosophy and Thorough Bass. At the Wallingford Branch, "it was proposed that the Family pass an examination in Algebra, Geometry, Arithmetic, Physics and Grammar." For two evenings at seven o'clock the family tested its learning. "As everyone had been very busy, with little time to read up, the examination was not very strict but turned into a pleasant informal affair. A question was read and one and another called upon to answer or not as they could." Later in the fall they reported that the new school had sixty-five students, "a considerable class past their teens. . . . In ordinary society many of them would consider their education finished . . . but the Community sets no bounds to education and improvement and the lists are open to all." Not all, perhaps, but many did avail themselves of this opportunity. No difficulty of time or equipment discouraged them; four German classes studied out of the same text books in true community spirit, and a reading class met before seven o'clock breakfast.

The Community Library grew from a nucleus of books brought to the commune from the homes of individual members. Among these books were a number of early and fine editions, some of which are still extant in the Mansion Library. Not all of them, however, since at the time of the break-up of the Community, members were allowed to buy back what books they had brought, and often did so. In reading over the titles of these books one searches for an explanation of the extraordinary catholicity of taste in a group drawn largely from New England farms or small settlements. The answer lies in the fact that these folk had all been "searching for the light"—were, in their time, thinkers and readers. From such a group one might expect "Religious Lives" and volumes of theology, but there was an amazing lot of good stuff besides. Many biographies, histories, poetry, novels, early scientific books, Greek and Latin authors in translations, Tasso, Dante, Moliere's plays, Coleridge's philosophical works, besides all the standard 19th century writers up to 1880. They had the *Documentary History of New York State*, a priceless collection of reprints of original documents, and many other historical foundations. They were interested in genealogy and their copy of Savage's *Genealogical Dictionary* is pencilled with family notations. They had Froissart in a fine old leather binding, Gibbon, Hume, Cotton Mather, Catlin's *North American Indians* with colored pictures which one little girl used to pore over with delight, and two huge volumes of *Animated Nature* with pictures of boa constrictors and barnacle ducks which fascinated her. There were also hand-colored manuals of moths and butterflies, Hugh Miller's *Old Red Sandstone* and other geological works, Tyndall, Huxley and Darwin, and archeological works on Egypt and Troy.

Since they were largely of Yankee stock, they collected New England state and county histories. They owned—probably the original property of

the founder, John Humphrey Noyes—a complete set of Jonathan Edwards. They possessed a complete first edition of Cooper's novels; they bought the novels of Dickens and Thackeray, first in the serial volumes as they appeared and then in complete sets. Poetry was one of their enthusiasms and they had not only Shakespeare but all of Beaumont and Fletcher in an early edition, and a very liberal assortment of the other poets. One man, a "peddler" of the Community's traps and fruit, used to save his luncheon allowance and buy books which were later contributed to the Library. His daughter still has his copies of Chaucer, Spencer, Evelyn's Diary and Pepys Diary. In 1867 two of the young men were sent abroad for the Grand Tour. They wrote letters to the *Circular* about their travels, sent home elaborate collections of botanical specimens and brought a large number of new books. No list of these titles is available, but dating from this time a distinct influx of European literary influence set in and a quantity of books with English imprints was added to the Library. They followed the fads of the day with a collection of Swedenborg, Andrew Jackson Davis's *New Harmonia*, and spiritualistic literature of the usual fantastic sort. They dabbled in Mesmerism and Phrenology, and on the shelves of the Old Library bound volumes of the *Spiritualist Magazine* and *Phrenological Journal* still gather dust. It is to be said in their favor that when these doubtful sciences were an almost universal craze, the Communists were never wholly convinced, nor were their opinions particularly credulous or simple.

Even in their most impoverished days, the Communists not only published a weekly magazine themselves but subscribed to many outside periodicals. They took the *New York Herald*, the *Tribune* and the *Sun*, and the local Oneida and Utica papers. The earliest periodicals received were the *Boston Monthly Magazine*, *Littel's Living Age*, the *Democratic Review*, *The American Repertory* and *Ballou's Pictorial*. Later, they had the *Atlantic Monthly* from its first number, *Putnam's Magazine*, the *Continental*, *The Museum*, *All the Year Round*, edited by Charles Dickens in 1859, *Harper's* from 1864, *Scribner's* from 1870, *Appleton's*, *Popular Science*, *Scientific American*, *The Nation*, the *Eclectic Magazine*, *The Galaxy* and *Harper's Weekly* and *Harper's Bazaar* with its funny page of pictures by DuMaurier and A. B. Frost. All of these magazines were faithfully bound in leather and preserved. One small reader remembers the thrilling pictures of battles in the Civil War drawn by "our special artist," and the grim series of "Tweed Ring" pictures by Thomas Nast; Tweed with his pear-shaped 'money-bag' head.

The good day of children's books had not arrived before 1880, but the boys had Trowbridge's *Cudjo's Cave* and Castleman's *Frank on the Prairie*, *Frank on a Gun Boat*, *Frank on the Mississippi*. Miss Alcott had begun to write delightful books for girls and the Community children had them. They also read the "Prudy" stories which they enjoyed although a later generation came to scorn them, and the "Rollo" books which it is difficult to believe that any but the most virtuous could truly love. The children of that day



The Infant School. Oneida Community.

were supposed to delight only in improvement, but there were moments when human nature—or perhaps it was still called original sin—got the better of them and protested against such extremes of virtue. In his book, *My Father's House*, my father tells a heart-breaking story of youthful disappointment when his class of boys, who had been promised a real cocoanut apiece as a reward for swimming across the deep hole, were given instead, by their somewhat austere schoolmaster, a volume entitled *Zig-Zag Journeys in Europe*. I doubt if any of those boys ever read that book except under duress. Some of the younger children did, later, and one of them still remembers hearing Aunt Julia read it aloud every evening after supper to a flock of children perched around her room like little birds, roosting on the bed, on the window sills, even under the bed and behind the curtain of her wardrobe. Aunt Julia sat by the lighted lamp, a tiny, charming old lady with her short black curly hair tucked sedately back of her ears and a white apron over her dress. While she read, the children knitted away on spools with “shaded yarn.” They were making lamp mats.

Although the Library began with a donation of privately owned books, it became one of the important centers of Community life and was liberally supported by the group. In 1864 the *Circular* reported that “the Library is a growing institution and the care of the catalog and all the interests of the room are quite a complete duty. For general convenience, so that the whereabouts of a book may be readily found, we have something like the system of common circulating libraries. Liberal appropriations are now made quarterly for the addition of books, a dozen newspapers are filed, monthlies are on the table.” In 1867, library expenses are given as \$302.63, while music for the year was only \$254.00. (That year in the Community the average cost of living per individual was \$1.46 a week, and of clothing, per annum, \$38.95.) The room itself was an arrangement of alcoves and wall cases; in the middle a long reading desk slanted on both sides to hold the spiked-backed newspaper files and the current magazines in home-bound covers laced with shoe strings. A Librarian was in charge and under her care the books were distributed, the room tended, the magazines collected and bound. Sometimes, if they were quiet, the children were allowed to tiptoe in and sit by Miss Sophia while she showed them the colored pictures in some cherished volume. Their own books were kept in their own South Room bookcase. The Library was for their elders; certain people had their favorite chairs; Aunt Charlotte was a devotee of the *Tribune* and read every word; Mr. Underwood's familiar stance was at the reading desk. Every new book was an event. 1865 was a cold winter, but they were not dismayed. “Snowbound,” they wrote, “but we feel happy in knowing that we can find plenty of interesting matter in the Library if the blockade should last all winter.”