In the summer and autumn of 1824, George Rapp’s Harmony Society was in the process of transition. Their second communal settlement at New Harmony, Indiana, was being sold to Robert Owen. New property had been bought on the Ohio River near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on which they would form their third settlement on American soil. Just twenty years before (1804–1806) the Separatist and radical Pietist, Johann Georg Rapp, had led approximately 700 of his followers to the New World from Württemberg, Germany, in order to form a communal society and to practice their religion in freedom. Now, after a tearful goodbye from their fellow Harmonists at New Harmony, a vanguard of men, including George Rapp, journeyed to take possession of their newest settlement called Economy, leaving the majority of the Harmonists behind. Letters flurried back and forth between the spiritual head of the community, George Rapp at Economy, and the business manager, Frederick Rapp at New Harmony. In these letters spiritual concerns and issues that were normally handled verbally between the two leaders were written down and preserved. This correspondence, as well as other sources, thus provides valuable insight into an aspect of the Harmonist religious life that has previously been virtually unknown or ignored—the division of the Harmony Society into a form of Pietist conventicles called “companies.” In one such letter, George Rapp enthusiastically underscored the importance of the companies, not just for the Harmonists, but for society at large: “Certainly if a beginning is to be made to improve humanity, then the beginning must be made through companies, where people who are fairly similar in their opinions and disposition meet together. From there, they influence the whole [of society].”

1 Letter written on 10 October 1824 to his adopted son, Frederick: “u[nd] gewiß wan
The existence of companies within the Harmony Society has, to my knowledge, only been noted by two scholars, Karl J.R. Arndt and Donald Pitzer. Arndt understood that the companies were work units that were formed to accomplish more efficiently their economic endeavors. In a volume of his documentary history of the Harmony Society he states: “The Society was divided into companies to expedite its varied pursuits; there was a company of shoemakers, one of carpenters, dyers, etc. each headed by a master artisan.” The Harmony Society was truly divided into work units. The efficient organization of their agricultural and manufacturing pursuits, including the division of their members into work parties, was attested to by contemporary descriptions and proved to be the key to the economic success of the Harmony Society. Nevertheless, Arndt was incorrect in his equation of the work parties with the companies within the Society. It will also be shown below that individual companies included members that practiced a wide variety of occupations.

Donald Pitzer and Josephine Elliott, in an article originally printed in the Indiana Magazine of History, claimed that “While at New Harmony, Rapp divided the entire congregation into five categories according to age and sex for the purpose of prose and poetry competition [my emphasis].” These categories or groups were referred to as companies. The authors correctly noted that not just individuals, but primarily companies within the Harmony Society produced poems, essays, and hymns deemed worthy of publication in the Harmonist hymnbooks during the New Harmony era. The author will demonstrate in this essay, however, that the companies were not formed merely for the purpose of writing poems.