

A Chapter on the Shakers: Reprint

By Isaac Hill

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In this unsigned article Isaac Hill describes a number of the Whitcher family members who lived at Canterbury, N.H., with particular attention to John Whitcher. Hill, as editor of the Farmer's Monthly Visitor, wrote regularly about the Shakers in New Hampshire, always from a sympathetic viewpoint. He was certainly the author of this article. He also describes a visit by Henry Blinn's sister. Hill cites the value of the education the Shakers provide for their children, names the individual children in the current class, and records autobiographical statements in verse by six children, age four to six.

On the 15th April, 1849, died at Canterbury of apoplexy after an illness of seventeen days, JOSEPH WHITCHER, at the age of 73 years. This man was the son of Benjamin Whitcher, whose connection with the Shakers date from their first establishment at Canterbury. We believe Joseph was born upon that ground then belonging to his father, with other brothers and sisters, which afterwards became the common property of the first family. One brother of the Whitcher name left them and married: of his children sisters who came with their mother to Canterbury are still resident there.

At the time of our last gratifying visit at Canterbury, spending with the first family two days over the Sabbath in August last, John Whitcher accompanied the editor of the Visitor about the premises: he was born upon that ground, and of the seventy years of his life we have known him nearly forty. Every thing that is creditable to humanity may be inferred from the character of John Whitcher,¹ who drew his first breath upon that ground and received a highly finished education there under his own self-instruction with the liberal means which were furnished by the generation before him who planted Shakerism in New Hampshire: such men as Job

1. John Whitcher (1779-1855) is a younger brother of Joseph (1775-1849).

Bishop and Francis Winkley in many respects as to things pertaining to this life, the true economy of living and adaptation of means to their true ends, were in advance of the age in which they lived. The matrons of the Shaker societies in New Hampshire, noiseless and unpretending, were fully equal to the males of the association. We might cite as a true sample of these people, Francis Winkley and his wife, the father and mother of a highly promising family at the medium age of between thirty and forty years, from the convictions of conscience eschewing the evils of the outward world, taking up their cross, and spending more than forty years out of the natural condition of man and wife—with the most generous affections to the world, and with the stronger affections to the household of faith; so liberal to the children that they carried to the society, after fitting them with the capacity, as to give them the voluntary choice in the pursuit of the business of life: the sons of Deac. Winkley, of whom we have often heard him speak with pride, went forth into business as some of the most enterprising. One of them as a successful manufacturer at Amesbury, Massachusetts, has been well known.

Of John Whitcher, a child of this society, we can speak as of our own knowledge. In the attempt to array the authorities of the State against the Shakers thirty years ago—in the attacks upon them then by a “talented creature” woman, who lives to this day and has not forgotten her resentments backed by all the prejudices which ignorance had engendered from suspicion, and by all the hostility which the arts of men of more enlightened professional practice could bring into the warfare; in this warfare upon them, John Whitcher was found with the pen of a ready writer to be fully equal to the conflict. With the sword and spear of truth, his arm was mighty in an array of facts and arguments which fully exonerated them from the false charges then made, and which effectually closed the mouths of the slanderers who had belied them. Strange it may be considered that, after a lapse of more than the fourth of a century, these “obsolete” false charges, almost letter for letter and word for word, should be revived to the begetting and propagating to a new generation “that knew not Joseph,” a prejudice and an injustice, if possible, still more aggravated, than those which Whitcher had allayed and driven from the field with the keen satire of talent not less than by the force of truth.

The Shakers have always been the friends of toleration: no denomination of Christians in the State were better pleased than the noble fraternity at Canterbury and Enfield then living, at the passage by the

State Legislature of the Toleration law of 1819: by the generation which has been born since, it would now be scarcely credited that up to that time every taxable inhabitant was compelled to pay his money for the support of the clergymen of the prevailing denomination of Christians, whether he agreed with them or not. Not only Shakers, but Baptists, Methodists, Universalists, considered themselves as among the persecuted for conscience sake. It is well for the credit of our jurisprudence, that the cases in court of persecution for conscience sake do not now exist in print in the shape of law reports.

John Whitcher, although educated under all the supposed prejudices of Shaker exclusion, was the man to seek for truth wherever it could be found—he could not be caught up and carried away by every impulsive enthusiasm. In a beautiful grove at Allenstown more than twenty years ago, the editor of the Visitor attended a Methodist camp meeting. The old preachers who had caught the spirit of Whitfield and Wesley—men of impulse, some of whom were hardly scholars enough to write their own names and who of course preached from no written notes—were the men to manage a camp meeting. A veteran preacher from Cape Cod in Massachusetts took the stand: he had converted perhaps thousands by his persuasive eloquence, by the song of the syren charming most sweetly. John Whitcher with another Shaker brother was there, more for argument than passion, to listen to the voices of the speakers—he had travelled twenty miles to hear preaching from those not of his denomination. The thousands of the camp meeting were enchanted by the Cape Cod preacher: they drew up to the stand, hundreds falling upon their knees. John Whitcher and his Shaker brother with the writer of this article found themselves standing at some rods distance from the moved up outside, listening all of us to the voice raised to a pitch loud enough to be heard far beyond us. After the sermon was finished it became a matter of no little merriment that the strictly staid and consciencious Shaker should have been as immovable as the man who at that period had perhaps been wrought upon by no artificial religious impulse.

John Whitcher, up to this time is a preacher occasionally in the religious services of the Shakers on Sunday; but, free from superstition, he has been of great advantage as the schoolmaster at Canterbury, teaching and making of the orphans who have been there brought up some of the best educated business men of the State. His talent has shown itself in preparing others to take up and instruct a new generation.

Of his three nieces at Canterbury, (and the other two highly qualified as leading in the business of household management,—“seeking wool and flax and working willingly with their hands,” their works “praising them in the gates,”) Mary Whitcher, as the polished, persevering instructor of female orphans, has scarcely found her equal even among the most celebrated Sisters of Charity of the Catholic communion, whom these sisters at Canterbury and Enfield in many respects resemble. Mary has indeed exhibited evidence that in her calling she had taken the “better part” to which her talents were adapted.

Neither John Whitcher nor his niece is at present the immediate instructor of some fifty youth, orphans and destitute, under twelve years of age, who have recently been taken to the first family at Canterbury to be brought up as children should be, in those habits of purity and industry which shall reach the walks of future life, whether they shall go again forth to the world or remain voluntarily with the people who have treated them with this great goodness. None but contented adults—none but such as voluntarily choose the crown by taking up their cross—can or will long remain as the inmates of the Shaker association.

We cannot better illustrate the meaning of the self-denial of the Shakers than be taking the case of Peter Ayer of Canterbury: he is now eighty-nine years of age, and neither the firmness of his limbs nor the fire of his eye has as yet abated: he was born at Voluntown, Connecticut, and joined this people at Canterbury sixty-nine years ago. This man in that time has exhibited an amazing personal vigor in the pursuit of the business of the family. He has been in successive winters a hunter of foxes with dogs and gun following up on rackets many miles in the deep snow: he has had work within doors, as is the common practice of the Shakers in rainy or foul weather—he has within the last ten years laid many rods of stone wall on a distant adjacent form lately purchased, working alone with the aid only of a yoke of oxen. The farm lies at the distance of a mile, going to it through enclosed pasture grounds. Here the contrivance of Peter was to see and take care of his oxen and cows, his heifers, steers and calves, while on his way to and from his work. Peter Ayer said to us that he took up his cross and crucified the flesh before he became a Shaker; that he had waged war against the work, the flesh and the devil; that all the time, while in solitary work, his heart was after the gospel. “Every man that has hope (said he) purifies himself as Christ is pure.” Deac. Winkley, who had gone to his rest, was a year and a half older than himself: he was a man better

qualified to do common business and look after concerns abroad; but he said “the Deacon was ahead of him only in outward things—there was never superiority in the old family or idea of superiority.”

The church at Canterbury, built fifty-seven years ago, preserves the same freshness as it had in 1809, when we first attended the Shaker worship in it. The original shingles upon the building, as they are upon dwelling houses build in 1794, are yet in a state of good preservation. This church is not sufficiently capacious to hold all the worshippers at the same time. At the time of our last visit the two upper families attended the open worship of the forenoon to which spectators from abroad were admitted; and the first family at the place of the church location worshipped afterwards on the same day. Through the day, with Mr. Southworth and his wife, then on a visit from New York, we had the privilege of three exercises, two of them out of the church, all of which were truly gratifying.

The second wife, much younger than himself, of Mr. Southworth, was a Miss Blinn of Providence, R.I. They came to the Shakers from New York city, where Mr. Southworth is pursuing editorial labors in a weekly newspaper, to visit Mrs. S’s younger brother, Henry Clay Blinn, now about twenty-one years old, who at the age of about fourteen, his father being dead, obtained the consent of his widowed mother to come and live with the Shakers at Canterbury, on the strength of the assurance of David Parker whom he met at Providence that he should be treated there to his satisfaction. He had not only been satisfied there, but he had in the time obtained at the Shakers such an education as qualified him to become the eminent schoolmaster of the flock. We have no room to go at length into the details of a Sunday morning exercise of some twenty boys under twelve years of age who were under the charge of young Blinn. In manners and in morals nothing human within our observation ever exceeded these youth, some of whom had been wrested from the very gutters of ignorance, and all of whom, in poverty at home, found a more improved, if not easier condition with the Shakers. Every thing here useful in schools had been taught these boys; and not the least important were the moral and religious lessons which on this Sabbath occasion were by them repeated. Of the boys present, each of whom gave a familiar account of his parentage, birth and age, recalling the events and the treatment which had made them happy and contented at the present home, Mr. Blinn presented the following list:

Andrew Jackson Moore, born at Portsmouth, aged 13 yrs.

Benjamin Cummins Freeman, born at N.Y. city,	“ 13 “
Charles Stephenson, born at Washington, D.C.,	“ 12 “
Albert W. S. Davis, born at Providence, R.I.,	“ 12 “
Daniel Merrill, born at Pictou, N.S.,	“ 12 “
James Volney Chase, born at Pittsfield,	“ 12 “
Thomas Russell Shute, born at Boston, Mass.,	“ 11 “
Jesse A. Davis, born at Providence, R.I.,	“ 10 “
Charles Jerald, born at Concord,	“ 10 “
James Rodman, born at New Orleans, La.,	“ 9 “
James Shepard, born at Amherst,	“ 9 “
John Robinson, born at Newburyport, Mass.,	“ 9 “
Charles Wesley Main, born at Philadelphia, Pa.,	“ 8 “
John Matthew, born at Portsmouth,	“ 8 “

For uniform decency of behavior as in dress, with faces of manly soberness in the mixture of youthful innocence with a gravity of intellect that would have done credit to faces of men, these boys could not be excelled. The spectators, strangers to Shaker education and Shaker practices (and among them the sister of young Blinn) were delighted at this exhibition. She came not in vain to see her brother who when he parted with her a boy himself of the age of his pupils, had become the man with all the qualifications of a first rate teacher.

If gratification was great at the exhibition of the young men and his school in the morning, higher still was the intellectual treat after the church service of the afternoon in the exercises of some twenty females, from the age of thirteen down to that of two years, who went through the labors of their accustomed Sabbath worship. Children as they were all, every one, down to the prattling infant of two years, was a lady in manners and motion. There was not in this gathering any thing of carelessness or rudeness, bashfulness or indifference or disobedience, which we accustom ourselves to meet in the schoolroom of young children: obedience and cheerfulness shone in every face. Affected to tears to hear the recitals of these children each of whom repeated a personal narrative in rhyme of what they were and what they had become—finding the destitution, some of parents and all of them of means of living, made up to repletion where they now are—we warmed ourself into the conviction that female innocence would all but make female perfection on earth. The school of females was under the direction of two young women—beautiful specimens of the fair faces and polished minds which adorn the granite hills of New Hampshire;—women

who, denying themselves those associations with the other sex to which nature prompts with a strong hand, are the polished granite note entirely rejected and disused, but who act their parts in a provoking separation from the youth to whose association nature alone would urge them perhaps even to a more useful purpose than that of rearing families who may or may not conduce to the sum of human happiness. The female school was under the direction of two young ladies, our hasty memorandum having escaped us, only one of whose names we can now repeat. These two persons were the instructed children of Mary Whitcher, whose works follow her in an ability to put the finishing polish upon females that makes them as nearly perfect on earth as beings of God's creation can be made. The only name we have of the two lady pupils of Mary Whitcher, as distinguished for talent as her uncle John and even now more comely than we might expect in a single woman of forty, is Dorothy Durgin, daughter of William Durgin of Sanbornton who was brought up, instructed and qualified here as an accomplished teacher. It was, we believe, Dorothy Durgin, whose elegant manners and beautiful face might almost tempt any one of the other sex from his propriety, who led in the instruction of the twenty girls, beautiful children of ten and twelve years, who were under her charge. Each child here, as in the male class, heard in the morning, gave account of themselves in nursery rhymes probably composed by their instructors. At the request of the editor made to one of the sisters, we were presented with the following, which were repeated as with one voice by all the females of the school. The poetry from the nature of the case might be expected to be homely: we think it decidedly better than much of the poetry that passes for good in some of our magazines and modern novels:

[The following lines, repeated by the children in the Lower Family, Canterbury, New Hampshire, were copied by request for Isaac Hill, August 11, 1848:

How could any children enjoy themselves better
Than we, who are gathered to this pretty fold—
Taught meekness, taught kindness, and to love one another,
And all that is needful we seem to be told:
We know we are blest beyond many children—
Here we have warm houses, good clothing and food;
But not altogether for the purpose of living
Are we fathered here, but to daily grow good.

We're taught how to read, how to spell and to cipher,
To write, English grammar, geography, too,
To sew and to knit and to mend up our garments,
And many more things we are taught how to do:
We're taught to improve every talent we have given
In service to God; so we dance and se sing,
Our hands and our feet we give in devotion
As well as our voices to honor our King.

We're taught to be neat, to be prudent and saving,
For god gives us all the good things we enjoy;
And we have a plenty while many are wanting,
So not the least thing should we waste or destroy.
We're taught to respect our natural parents—
To honor superiors and treat equals kind,
And if we are haughty, ungrateful or slothful,
'Tis because precious counsel we neglect to mind.

We know we are favored beyond many children
Who run in the streets and have little that's good,
Who suffer for counsel, for learning and clothing,
And many, (we're told) suffer greatly for food.
So let us be thankful, each dear little sister,
For what we enjoy, and obey what we're taught,
That we may repay our faithful kind teachers,
And they may be thankful that we were here brought.

The most interesting spectacle of all was that to which we were called when on the point of leaving them on Monday forenoon: it was that of a class of six infant boys, four, five and six years old, under the charge of the sister Sally Miller, herself brought up with the Shakers, and at this time forty-three years old. These children were instructed to make the work of sewing and knitting a pastime; and their work was done with all that perfection and completeness which are so peculiar to the Shakers. That we might not be mistaken about the character of their work, we purchased to pairs of the woolen stockings adapted to our own wearing and a pair of well manufactured checked pocket handkerchiefs which these children has hem-stitched. At the same time the children did this work, they were being

taught reading and spelling. The names of the boys were as follows:

John Holland, born at Plaistow, aged 6 years.

David Proctor Campbell, born at Hampton, aged 6 “

Edward Grover, born at Worcester, Mass., “ 6 “

Abraham Libbey, born at Northfield, “ 6 “

Nathan Fitts, born at Springfield, “ 4 “

Henry Campbell, born at Malden, Mass., “ 4 “

Charles Shepard, born at Amherst, “ 5 “

The following were repeated by the little boys:

David Proctor Campbell.

I've a father and a mother, and one little brother,

A second I had—(he is dead)

Who came here with me the Shakers to see,

Of whom we had oftentimes heard.

If one little child was ever beguiled

By the hours of life sweetly passing,

It surely is me, for I, like the bee,

Sip honey at eve, noon, and morning.

Here sisters, who're kind to body and mind,

My every want do attend,

And here I am happy in each little duty

By being obedient and kind.

I sing, read and spell, learn to sew and knit well—

Do often go out in the field,

The orchards and gardens, the meadows and pastures,

And pick the fine thins which they yield.

I thank my dear father and kind tender mother

For this pretty home with the just;

I'll strive to repay in some future day

The debt I now owe and still must.

I love to be sporting with playmates so loving:

My dear little brothers and me

Do take so much comfort, how can we but show it,

And pleased with our homes always be?

O, is it not pretty to learn such a ditty
Instead of some vain wicked play?
Some good thing be learning instead of contending,
That I may grow wiser each day?

Edward Augustus Grover.

My name is Edward Augustus Grover—
Was four when I came here—
Born in town and county of Worcester,
Eighteen forty-two the year—
Was brought here by my parents
A happy home to share,
They were firm and sealous advents,
But took of me good care:
I love my father and mother,
And mean to be so good
That they can love their little son
They've given to the Lord.
I love mu little brothers,
To them I will be kind—
I'll condescend to tohers,
No fault with any find:
So I shall be beloved
By all, both old and young,
And often shall be praised
By those I dwell among
Is not this right and pretty
For such a little child
To imitate the Saviour,
Be harmless, simple, mild?

Charles Shepard.

My name is Charles Shepard, in Amherst I was born,
December the eleventh in the county of Rockingham: (Hillsborough)
Born eighteen forty-two, my age was some past three
When I came from New Boston to the North Family;
I was not hardly four when to the church I came.
But now I am some more; and much I love my home.

I love and thank my father for letting me come here
With fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters near and dear:
I have three natural brothers, Robert, James and George—
Have also several sisters with whom I'll serve the Lord:
I love my playmates well: they're kind and loving too—
With them I read and spell, and learn to knit and sew,
And tho' my name is Shepard, I'll be a little lamb—
Keep in the fold contented, for happy here I am.

John Holland.

My name is John Holland, and this I relate—
I was born in Plaistow, New Hampshire State,
I'm six years old and over—born November 2d day
In eighteen hundred forty-one, in Rockingham county.
When a year and eight moths old my parents brought me here
And placed me in this fold under believers' care;
Now I will be an honest child and learn what good I can,
That all may love and bless me when I grow up a man.

Nathan Fitts.

My name is Nathan Fitts, I now am five years old—
Was little more than *two* when brought here I am told.
In Springfield town was born, in county of Sullivan,
December the fifth morn, named for my grandfather Nathan:
I have an older sister, Fransina is her name,
Her age was some past six when to this place we came.
I've one more little sister, dear Ednah, she is small,
Tho' I've no natural brothers, my mates I brothers call.
My parents both were Advents, they'd shout and praise the Lord,
And kinder natural parents the earth could not afford.
I thank my tender parents for this my privilege here,
And love my kind instructress for all her tender care.
A pleasant little Shaker I ever mean to be—
A pretty little peace-maker, a babe of purity.
I love and bless you, father, for giving me up free
That in this place through him I may protected be:
And for your care, kind mother, which I have ever shared,
My little heart shall tender goodness in days ahead.

I'm happy and contented, as a little boy could be,
And kindly fed and clothed, as you perhaps may see.

Henry Campbell.

I know I'm small and very young, and need parental care,
And kindest friends I am among who feed with pleasant fare,
They teach me to be very good whatever I may be,
And tell that there is a God who all my works can see
O! what kind friends, such pains to take with little tiny ones
And always labor for their sake, that they may good become.
I love my friends, and always shall—I'll be a pretty child,
Be always ready at their call, be simple, meek and mild.

My age is now four years, and when four and ten,
If you should again call this way,
I hope you will find me as gentle, as when
I tell you the joys of to-day:
A Friend to mankind and a lover of God,
A generous, kind-hearted brother,
A preacher by works of his most sacred word
If chancing to meet me hereafter.

Another of the Whitcher family we remember to have seen several years ago in a sister who took charge of the dairy. She seemed then to claim precedence at Canterbury on account of the soil of the first family's farm being the property of her father. The number of cows kept at the first family in the summer season of milking is generally forty. Ichabod Whitcher now has charge of the cattle: with him we bargained for the purchase of a heifer calf, whose mother during the last summer had given milk which made fourteen pounds of butter in each week. Under the management of young Whitcher, the Shakers have greatly improved their cows in a mixture of the native with what he calls the Bulluck, the Durham and the English breed. The heifer we have in possession, and now only a year old, is a fine specimen of a cow. Although we gave for the calf the high price of fifteen dollars, we should be loath to part with her for twice that sum.

Supplied by a stream entirely artificial brought down from some of the highest grounds in the county of Merrimack, the Shakers, at an expense of

about \$10,000, erected the best flour mill in the country several years ago.

Upon this artificial stream there are seven water falls embracing as many mill privileges. The first use of the falls further up is by the upper or third family with the motive power for manufacturing rakes, wheels, tubs, and for sawing wood. the first family upon this stream have abundance of water for six mills—first a mill for threshing grain and grinding bark for tanning—then a clothing mill, at which power looms for weaving flannels have been introduced—then a variety shop for turning iron and wood, making large wood screws, &c. —then the saw and grist mill, with bur stones for manufacturing the best flour; and next a mill for carding and spinning, turning iron, grinding medicine, roots and bark, &c.

The visiting company was grandly entertained at the office, sleeping in beds covered with an outside counterpane of home-manufacture and with blankets softer than silk. In all their rooms there is a ventilator carrying off the disagreeable smoke from candles or lamps. The sisters all dressing alike and walking generally with the same gait, few of them look old: the most of them live to a great age, proving that an active life conduces to health. The floor of the dining hall of the office stained with yellow covering, was clean enough to be eaten from any part. Our attendant, Philenda Miner, a sister who had been here twenty-one years and now thirty years of age, seemed like a girl of twenty. Not so much for its poetry as for its sentiment do we copy the verses which we found in the eating room whose table furnished for us the most palatable and perfectly cooked meats, bread and vegetables:

TABLE MONITOR

Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost.—CHRIST.

Here then is the patter
Which Jesus has set;
And his good example
We cannot forget:
With thanks for his blessings
His word we'll obey;
But on this occasion
We've some what to say.

We wish to speak plainly

And use no deceit;
We like to see fragments
Left wholesome and neat:
To customs and fashions
We make no pretence;
Yet think we can tell
What belongs to good sense.

What we deem good order,
We're willing to state—
Eat hearty and decent,
And clear out our plate—
Be thankful to Heaven
For what we receive,
And not make a mixture
Or compound to leave.

We find of those bounties
Which heaven does give,
That some live to eat,
And, that some eat to live—
That some think of nothing
But pleasing the taste,
And care very little
How much they do waste.

Tho' Heaven has bless'd us
With plenty of food;
Bread, butter and honey
And all that is good;
We lothe to see mixtures
Where gentle folks dine,
Which scarcely look fit
For the poultry or weine.

We often find left,
On the same china dish,
Meat, applesauce, pickle,

Brown bread and minc'd fish;
Another's replenish'd
With butter and cheese;
With pie, cake and toast,
Perhaps, added to these.

Now if any virtue
In this can be shown,
By peasant, by lawyer,
Or king on the throne,
We freely will forfeit
Whatever we've said,
And call it a virtue
To waste meat and bread.

Let none be offended
At what we here say;
We candidly ask you,
Is that the best way?
If not—lay such customs
And fashions aside,
And take this monitor
Henceforth for your guide.

[*Visitor's eating room, Shaker Village*]

There is not in the world perhaps any people whose property and pecuniary condition is so little liable to fluctuation as are the Shaker societies in New Hampshire: there are certainly no people of the country whose lives have been more lengthened out than they; and must we not for this give them credit for less abuse of the bounties of Heaven than almost any other community?