

Church of Christ unto a People in Kentucky & the Adjacent States

Introduction

By Ralph Stenstrom

During my tenure as Hamilton College's Librarian, many rare Shaker titles were added to the college's growing collection of material by and about American intentional communities. Most of these early imprints revealed a wealth of information about Shakerism, but sometimes they concealed what we wanted to know, i.e. when and where were they printed, and by whom. One such imprint, obtained about 1997, was a small and unassuming three-page pamphlet, formerly a part of the impressive collection of Shaker publications assembled by the late Milton Sherman of Armonk, New York. It bears a caption title on the first page: *The Church of Christ, unto a People in Kentucky & the Adjacent States, Sendeth Greeting*.

When and where this pamphlet was printed is not indicated, but at the base of page 3 it states it was "Written in the Church at New Lebanon, in the town of Canaan, County of Columbia and state of New York. Dec. 31, 1804. Signed in behalf of the Church, David Meacham, Amos Hammond, Ebenezer Cooly."¹

Bibliographer Mary Richmond included this imprint as no. 455 in her *Shaker Literature, A Bibliography*. Richmond had examined the copy in the Wight Shaker Collection held by the Williams College Library (Williamstown, Massachusetts), and listed two other institutional holdings—The Western Reserve Historical Society Library (Cleveland, Ohio), and the Dayton and Montgomery County Public Library (Dayton, Ohio).²

This pamphlet played an important role in the expansion of Shakerism into the western states of Ohio, Kentucky and Indiana. It is in the form of a letter written to participants in the Kentucky Revival who attended the remarkable frontier camp meetings. These meetings, which attracted thousands and often lasted as long as a week, usually brought about an "inward throbbing of heart, then ... weeping and trembling: from that to crying out, in apparent agony of soul; falling down, and swooning away."³ The Shakers read accounts of these religious stirrings with great interest. Mother Ann Lee, the charismatic founder of American Shakerism, had

often prophesized that the church would some day gather souls in the western country.

“At Watervliet, in 1784, in the presence of David Slosson and many others, Mother Ann lifted up her hand, and, pointing to the south-west, said, ‘There is a great level country in the south-west, in which God will raise up a great people, who will be His people.’”⁴

The Shaker historians tell us that at three o’clock in the morning on New Years Day of 1805 (the day following the date of the letter), John Meacham, Issachar Bates and Benjamin Seth Youngs set out from New Lebanon on foot “to visit the subjects of the revival, and open their testimony to those who were able to receive it.”⁵ They had sufficient provisions for the tedious journey, a single horse to carry their baggage, and, likely tucked into their great coats, copies of the letter. It took them over two months to reach Kentucky, where they visited congregations at Paint Lick, Cane Ridge and elsewhere.

From Kentucky they traveled to Turtle Creek, Ohio and met Richard McNemar and members of his congregation. It was here that the Shaker missionaries had their first success in securing converts. By the end of 1805, about 370 individuals from Turtle Creek—white and black alike—had embraced the faith, confessed their sins, and set out as Shakers. In the following months, Youngs, Bates, and Meacham would have similar successes elsewhere in Ohio and Kentucky.⁶

Wherever the Shaker missionaries went, they carried these letters, and either read their message aloud or circulated them for others to read. One wonders whether the letters were in manuscript or printed form. In either case, there had to be multiple copies, for it is reasonable to assume that many who were impressed with this new dispensation wished to have a copy of the letter.

It is possible that the letter was printed in 1804, prior to the departure of the three missionaries. If so, it probably was printed by a commercial printer, for there is no account of Shaker printing prior to 1810. However, if the missionaries did in fact depart during the early morning hours of January 1, 1805, and if the letter was written the day before, it is unlikely that they could have secured printed copies in so short a time.

There are, however, some accounts which assign different dates to

the letter. For example, John MacLean, in his *Shakers of Ohio*, included a complete copy of *The Church of Christ unto a People in Kentucky*, but it is dated December 30, 1804.⁷ Mary Richmond reported that “the date of this printed greeting [i.e., December 31, 1804] differs from the date given by Julia Neal, “written Dec. 26. 1804.” Neal reported that in this version Stephen Markham is listed as a fourth signatory.⁸

If, indeed, the letter was written earlier than December 31, 1804, there would have been sufficient time to arrange for its printing prior to the missionaries’ departure. Perhaps December 31 was the date of printing, and the missionaries departed as soon as they had copies in hand. While this may be somewhat speculative, it seems logical that the Shakers would have wanted copies for distribution; furthermore, they had utilized a commercial printer fifteen years earlier when they arranged to have a doctrinal statement printed at Bennington, Vermont.⁹

Mary Richmond reported that the printed letter dated December 31, 1804 “appears to have been printed by R[ichard] McNemar in the 1830s,” possibly at Watervliet, Ohio.¹⁰ She also noted that it is found in some copies of McNemar’s 1831 *A Review of the Most Important Events*.¹¹ Indeed, McNemar often bound copies of some of his smaller printed pamphlets into larger works, creating made-up volumes of multiple works, each with its own pagination.

By examining the texts of the various works included in McNemar’s 1831 *Review*, and comparing these with the corresponding separately-published works, one can determine whether or not they are identical. In the copy of the *Review* from the Wight Shaker Collection at Williams College, we find that in all cases but one the texts were identical. The sole exception is the 1804 *Letter*. While both versions contain three pages of printed text, the bound-in version utilizes a different and much larger type. There are also some minor differences in text and punctuation, but both are dated December 31, 1804. The bound-in version is virtually certain to have been printed by McNemar. Neither version makes use of the long “s.”¹²

It is difficult to understand why McNemar would have printed two editions or versions of the *Letter*, going through the process of setting the type twice. If he set the type only once, then the separate version must have been printed by someone else, possibly in 1804, or shortly thereafter. Could it have been printed in Pittsfield, Massachusetts in 1804? Or is it possible that more copies were needed when the three missionaries

journeyed through the western states in 1805 and the separate version was printed in Kentucky or Ohio? It is tantalizing to speculate that the December 31, 1804 separate version represents the second known Shaker imprint. However, more evidence is needed before this can be stated conclusively.

Whether Youngs, Meacham and Bates carried printed or manuscript versions of the *Letter*, it remains the second earliest known written statement by the Shakers directed to the world. It is reproduced here in its entirety, without change or correction. It is a powerful, clear and confident statement of the Shaker Church urging the western revivalists to “believe in the manifestation of Christ and in the messengers he had sent ... and take up [their] cross against the flesh, the world and all evil.”

Notes

¹ *The Church of Christ unto a People in Kentucky & the Adjacent States, Sendeth Greeting*. [n.p., n.d.], 3. (Hereafter referred to as *Letter*)

² Mary Richmond, *Shaker Literature, A Bibliography* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1977), 63 (entry no. 455).

³ Richard McNemar, *The Kentucky Revival, or, A Short History of the Late Extraordinary Out-Pouring of the Spirit of God, in the Western States of America...* (Albany: E. & E. Hosford, 1808), 20.

⁴ Rufus Bishop and Seth Y. Wells, *Testimonies of the Life, Character, Revelations and Doctrines of Our Ever Blessed Mother Ann Lee, and the Elders with Her ...* (Albany, N.Y.: Weed, Parsons and Co., 1888), 174-75.

⁵ Thomas Brown, *An Account of the People Called Shakers: Their Faith, Doctrines, and Practice ...* (Troy, [N.Y.]: Parker and Bliss, 1812), 348.

⁶ John MacLean, *Fugitive Papers Concerning the Shakers of Ohio, with Unpublished Manuscripts* (Columbus, O.: F.J. Heer, 1907), 61-63.

⁷ MacLean, 63. It is not known whether MacLean copied a printed or manuscript version of the *Letter*.

⁸ Richmond, 63 (entry no. 455). Richmond refers to Julia Neal, *By Their Fruits; The Story of Shakerism in South Union, Kentucky* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1947), 20-21.

⁹ *A Concise Statement of the Principles of the Only True Church, according to the Gospel of the Present Appearance of Christ ...* (Bennington, Vt.: Haswell & Russell, 1790). This work is often cited as the first printed work by the Shakers. Another undated eighteenth century edition of this work is known. Manuscript copies of this work survive.

¹⁰ Richmond 1:63.

¹¹ Richard McNemar, *A Review of the Most Important Events Relating to the Rise and Progress of the United Society of Believers in the West* (Union Village, Ohio: [Union Press], 1831).

¹² Hamilton College Library does not own a copy of *Review*. I am grateful to Linda Hall, Archive Assistant at the Williams College Library and David Newell of Ashfield, Massachusetts who made these comparisons. Printers began to discontinue the use of the long “s” shortly after 1800. Some American imprints known to have been printed in 1804 utilize the long “s,” while some do not.