

# **Sally Dean and Her Letter to “Respected Friend Phineas”**

## **Introduction**

*by Glendyne Wergland*

In 1822, a young Shaker sister named Sally Dean penned a remarkable letter to her former church.<sup>1</sup> Simultaneously a testimony of her faith and a rebuttal to criticism of Shakerism, it is the only known manuscript attributed to Dean, who wrote that it was “quite contrary” to her feelings to communicate in writing. That letter, however, did an excellent job of promoting Shaker views.<sup>2</sup> What provoked it was a letter from Phineas Fletcher of the Baptized Church of Kingsbury and Hartford, New York. He wanted to know why, after professing her faith to the Baptists, she had left their church and gone to the Shakers, who broke up families, denied the resurrection of the body, and rejected customs such as baptism and communion. He asked for an explanation of her departure.<sup>3</sup>

In 1821, twenty-one-year-old Sally Dean had followed her brother John into the New Lebanon, New York Shaker society. The Deans must have been idealistic in seeking the religion that was right for them. By one account, John Dean “thought he was coming to heaven and likely he thought the church were all perfection—no difficulties, nothing but union, peace & perfect goodness as it were. But he must find it quite different.” Celibacy and obedience were only two of the challenges they faced. Isaac Newton Youngs explained that there were problems, “such as not always thinking just alike, or acting alike; such as having to be tempted & buffeted with our own natures, having to humble ourselves & keep under mortification, restrictions &c—having to bear with each others’ infirmities.”<sup>4</sup> Only true Believers would submit to such strict discipline.

Nevertheless, John and Sally Dean settled in and thrived. They may have needed a secure home. The Deans had lived in Dudley, Massachusetts in 1797, Windham, Connecticut in 1799 and, separately, in Savoy, Massachusetts and upstate New York in the 1810s. Their rootlessness indicates repeated searches for employment, a pattern suggesting economic marginality.<sup>5</sup> The world’s people recognized that Shaker villages were refuges for the destitute. Shaker proselyte Lucy Brown’s worldly friends and family in Berkshire County, Massachusetts, told her that “it was those who were poor and had no home or parents that joined the Shakers.”<sup>6</sup> In

some cases, that was true. A Shaker village was a port in a storm, and many took advantage of that shelter.

Through 1840, Sister Sally's life showed her increasing responsibility at the New Lebanon Church Family. By 1832, she was living in room fourteen of the Great House with Prudence Morrel, Joanna Kitchel, Zillah Potter, and Matilda Reed.<sup>7</sup> She filled her time constructively. She took her turn in the kitchen and laundry, learned how to make rye bread, and probably joined the general turnouts for spring cleaning, painting, and apple picking.<sup>8</sup> Like many Believers, she worked for perfection in her temporal labor, but her perfectionism may have been beyond the norm. For instance, Dean made bonnets, which required advanced needle skills; she was more accomplished than some of her peers.<sup>9</sup> The eldresses must have considered her a good role model as well, because she was a caretaker for the girls from 1829 to 1834.<sup>10</sup> During those years, she raised several girls who later became influential, including Polly Reed, Anna Dodgson, Tabitha Lapsley, Amy Reed, and Miranda Barber.<sup>11</sup> After leaving the girls' order, Sally Dean was a dairywoman, so she must have been among the neatest and cleanest of sisters in a society known for neatness and cleanliness.<sup>12</sup> In September 1837, she was promoted to office deaconess or trustee—a position of greater responsibility than that of family deacons. Living at the office to meet the public, she was probably a good example of a Shaker sister—outgoing, presentable, bright, reliable in fiduciary responsibilities, and steady enough to do business with the world's people without wavering in her faith.<sup>13</sup>

Sally Dean was a success as a Shaker. By all indications, she led a happy, fulfilling life until the Era of Manifestations, which roused spirits better left alone.<sup>14</sup> Anna Dodgson began “fanning away the chaff” in late 1840. She warned the skeptics, “Woe, Woe be unto you that shall now slight my manifestation saith Jehovah. With cursing upon cursing shall ye be followed; yea, cursed shall ye be in your basket and in your store. Cursed shall ye be in your outgoings and incomings. ... I will root you out from among my people; yea, I will cast you far from me, saith the Lord.”<sup>15</sup> By May, tension was high. The scribe wrote, “Indications of some soul's being shut out for hidden sins not fit to be spoken in this place. ... Solemn disclosure! I must be silent. Z.P.” Zillah Potter had intimidated even the scribe.<sup>16</sup> In evening meeting three days later, Sally Dean broke down in tears, and the horrified scribe wrote, “One of the inspired sisters instantly fell to the floor, in great distress. ... There was a solemn & powerful communication from the holy

angel of God, pronouncing wrath, indignation & final separation of sin & the sinner, for the hour was come & the soul of the sinner was rejected, with an unalterable curse.”<sup>17</sup>

As a result, Sally Dean was expelled from the society.<sup>18</sup> As soon as she recovered from the shock, which left her nearly suicidal, she petitioned for readmittance. She returned briefly. After a few days at the office, Sally Dean moved back into the Great House on November 6, 1841.<sup>19</sup> The elder brother “warned all to be wise and careful in this matter; let our words be few and not judge the matter: each one work in his own vineyard & keep the fear of God in all they do & say.”<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, the visionists went on a rampage. Miranda Barber, as the Angel of God, erupted with anger “kindled because of the hypocrite, and deceiver.” Defying the Elders, she said, “I will not hold my peace. I will not hold my peace, nay I will not hold my peace. But I will go forth in my fury, and will rend from before her face the vail of her covering, and she shall appear naked in the eyes of thy people. I will set upon her burning flames of fire, and she shall burn and burn in torment and vexation; —Heaven daring Mortal!”<sup>21</sup> On November 17, the ruckus was so bad that Sally Dean moved from the First Order to the Second.<sup>22</sup> On November 23, Miranda Barber rose at midnight to speak as almighty God, threatening to sharpen her sword to “cut and slash” the Church Family “into atoms.” She added, “I will seek for your destruction. . . . I will curse your stock and herds of all kinds; your beautiful fields & pastures shall become as barren deserts; and your joy and mirth shall be gone. In all my devices I will contrive against you, and will be comforted in your afflictions.” She ordered the family to fall prostrate before her and kiss the dust—and they did.<sup>23</sup>

On November 28, Semantha Fairbanks tried to reduce the conflict. Speaking as Mother Ann Lee, she told the female instruments to “confess every wicked and mean trick you ever did in your life.”<sup>24</sup> She may have recognized just those sins among her peers, but they did not heed her admonition. On November 29, a scribe wrote, “We hear some reading in relation to Sally Dean. The First Order singing a song of cursing around the 2d House.”<sup>25</sup> On November 30, 1841, Holy Mother Wisdom issued another edict of expulsion to Sally Dean, and the next day John Dean took his sister away.<sup>26</sup>

Amazingly, Sally Dean did not give up in petitioning for her return to the Shakers. With John Dean’s help, she kept her request before the Ministry for more than fifteen years. Finally a new generation of elders

and eldresses welcomed her back in 1857.<sup>27</sup> Isaac Newton Youngs wrote that Dean's "godly deportment" had won their confidence.<sup>28</sup> Eldress Polly Reed went to Rhode Island to accompany her former caretaker back to the Shakers. Reed wrote, "Here we found Sally our object in view, & O how rejoiced she was to see us & vice versa, the tears flowed plentifully while we embraced each other with love & tender emotions."<sup>29</sup>

Those events were, however, far in the future when Sally Dean's letter was written in 1822. The text shows an articulate, intelligent, and assertive (perhaps even combative) personality. Though she said she wished not to offend, she was blunt. She could not maintain contact with Baptists because she believed they were "servants to sin." Only among the Shakers had she found "that light & power of God" which enabled her to live a sinless life. She had come to believe in confession and repentance as a way to rise above lust. She wrote, "I believe in a virgin life, in rejecting adultery, fornication, uncleanness, & all the fruits of the flesh, that I may obtain the heavenly world." Moreover, the world's people were so contentious that she could not abide with them. "Therefore I have left this tumult, & took up my abode in the mansions of peace," she wrote. "I think it unnecessary to take time and paper to explain all the points of my belief," she wrote, "but they are not without proof, they are confirmed by scripture and reason." She bolstered her argument with forty-five scriptural citations.

Next, she countered Fletcher's objections. Concerning Shakerism's effect on families, she argued, "When we are continually extending benefits to the needy, take in the widow; receive in many destitute children, & shelter the orphan, we think it unfair to be reproached on that ground." She noted that by going to war, Baptists added to the population that the pacifist Shakers had to shelter. Furthermore, by obeying God's order to increase and multiply, Baptists were no better than beasts. "But ye know the command of God is not your ruling object in that matter, it is your fleshly gratifications," she wrote. "If the works of man & wife agree with the command of God," she added, "then surely whoremongers & harlots appear much more strict to obey it." Dean then deconstructed mainstream Christians' belief in the resurrection of the body, which the Shakers rejected. After demolishing that view, she outlined the scriptural basis of the Shakers' confidence in the resurrection of the spirit.

From start to finish, Sally Dean was on the attack. Fletcher's criticism of the Shakers had roused her ire, and she fought back with theological fire. The following day, however, she evidently had second thoughts about

her plain speech and bold accusations. She assured Fletcher that she still respected her Baptist friends, and hoped that she had “thrown nothing offensive” their way. She also asked him to read her letter in church—a request that Fletcher was unlikely to fulfill. Having lost Sally Dean to the Shakers, he surely hoped that others would not follow her.

Sally Dean’s career as a Shaker was typical through the 1830s. Her Baptist background was not unusual; many Baptists joined the Shakers. Joining with kin was the norm for many early Believers. Writing a testimony of faith was common, as well. But after the Era of Manifestations, she followed what was, for a Shaker, an unusual trajectory. Most who left did not return. Sally Dean’s persistence in gaining readmittance shows that she retained the faith expressed in her letter long after her expulsion.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sally Dean letter to Phineas Fletcher, April 14-15, 1822, Hamilton College Library, Communal Societies Collection, MS 45.

<sup>2</sup> Sally Dean’s letter seems peculiar in several ways. The handwriting resembles Rufus Bishop and Isaac Newton Youngs’ script. The hook at the end of her signature resembles the ones on title words with terminal descenders in, for instance, *Book of Rolls, Letters, Messages* (1840-43), Emma B. King Library, Shaker Museum, Old Chatham, New York (hereafter SM), ms. 12,332, p. 28, 30, 36, 46. We cannot know for sure whether Dean composed it, penned it, or both. Even so, she “owned” the letter; her name is on it, and the Shakers sent it out over her signature. She could have drafted it, and the scribe recopied it for mailing. Furthermore, the one-page addendum, hastening to reassure her old friends of her continued respect, speaks as a friend (rather than an elder) would. Regardless of who authored, wrote, or edited Dean’s letter, Fletcher’s request for information provided an opportunity to proselytize the Baptists.

<sup>3</sup> Phineas Fletcher to Sally Dean, March 16, 1822, Western Reserve Historical Society (hereafter WRHS) reel 20, IV:A-34.

<sup>4</sup> Isaac Newton Youngs, *Family and Meeting Journal* (1815-23), September 6, 1819, Library of Congress Shaker Papers, microfilm reel (hereafter LC) 3: 42.

<sup>5</sup> Names of the Brethren and the Sisters in the First and Second Order April 1835, LC 5: 92; Tom Donnelly card file, Hancock Shaker Village Library (hereafter HSV); Shaker Names index, WRHS 123.

<sup>6</sup> *Book of Immortality*, Alonzo Hollister, comp., 320, WRHS 52, VI:B-37.

<sup>7</sup> *Ministry Sisters’ Journal* (1780-1841), September 1832, WRHS 32, V:B-60.

<sup>8</sup> [Semantha Fairbanks] *Journal* (1835-36) at end of John DeWitt, Memorandum (1824-25), October 14, 1836, WRHS 33, V:B-92.

<sup>9</sup> Isaac Newton Youngs, *Domestic Journal* (1834-46), March 26, 1836, New York State Library, Shaker collection, (hereafter NYSL) microfilm reel 10.

<sup>10</sup> Youngs, Domestic Journal (1834-46), end, NYSL 10.

<sup>11</sup> Names of the Brethren and the Sisters in the [New Lebanon Church Family] First and Second Order April 1835, LC 5: 92.

<sup>12</sup> [Fairbanks], April 20, 1836, WRHS 33, V:B-92.

<sup>13</sup> Tom Donnelly card file, HSV; Rufus Bishop et. al., Records Book No. 2 (1825-1929), New York Public Library Shaker collection microfilm (hereafter NYPL) reel 2:6, 36, 42.

<sup>14</sup> Sally Dean's Spirit Gifts: Isaac Newton Youngs, Sketches of Visions, May 19, 1838, p. 52, WRHS 75, VIII:B-113; Joseph Babe, Journal of Inspirational Meetings (1840-41), July 5, 1840, WRHS 77, VIII:B-139; Rufus Bishop, Daily Journal of Passing Events (1839-50), October 6, 1840, NYPL 1.2.

<sup>15</sup> Anna Dodgson, Prophetic Warning Concerning Reprobates, June 1, 1840, 45-46, SM 12,341.

<sup>16</sup> Derobigne Bennett and Isaac Newton Youngs, Journal of Inspirational Meetings (1840-41), May 23, 1841, WRHS 77, VIII:B-138.

<sup>17</sup> Bennett and Youngs, May 26, 1841, WRHS 77, VIII:B-138.

<sup>18</sup> More on Sally Dean's expulsion will be in *Sisters in the Faith: Shaker Women, 1780-1880*, forthcoming.

<sup>19</sup> Ministry Sisters' Journal (1780-1841), November 6, 1841, WRHS 32, V:B-60.

<sup>20</sup> Bennett and Youngs, November 4, 1841, WRHS 77, VIII:B-138.

<sup>21</sup> Miranda Barber, instrument, Chapter XXIII, A True Record of Sacred Communications, v. VII, p. 163-67, WRHS 76, VIII:B-122.

<sup>22</sup> Rufus Bishop, Seth Youngs Wells and Isaac Newton Youngs, Records Kept by Order of the Church (1780-1850), November 17, 1841, NYPL 2: 7.

<sup>23</sup> Miranda Barber, instrument, Words of solemn and weighty truth, November 23, 1841, True Record, v. VIII, 96-103, WRHS 76, VIII:B-123; Bennett and Youngs, November 23, 1841, WRHS 77, VIII:B-138.

<sup>24</sup> Samantha Fairbanks, instrument, A short communication from Mother Ann to the Ministry and Trustees, November 28, 1841, True Record, v. VIII, 132-35, WRHS 76, VIII:B-123.

<sup>25</sup> [New Lebanon] Church Order Journal (November 1841-46), November 29, 1841, WRHS 35, V:B-135.

<sup>26</sup> Bennett and Youngs, November 30, 1841, WRHS 77, VIII:B-138.

<sup>27</sup> Bennett and Youngs, May 28 and October 18, 1841, WRHS 77, VIII:B-138; Isaac Newton Youngs and Giles Avery, Records Kept by Order of the Church, v. III (1856-71), SM 10,342.

<sup>28</sup> Youngs and Avery, Records Kept by Order of the Church, v. III (1856-71), SM 10,342.

<sup>29</sup> Polly Reed, A Journal of Miscellaneous Items Kept by the Elder Sisters (1855-64), November 17, 1857, SM 10,452.