

Benn Pitman's "Visit to the Shaker Settlement—Whitewater Village, O."

INTRODUCTION

By David D. Newell

Much of what we know about the Shakers and their communities during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is found in the myriad of published accounts of those who visited their villages. The Shakers were generally open to receiving visitors provided they conducted themselves with decorum and respect. Their meetings for worship were often open to the public, and while a potential convert might occasionally be found in the visitors' benches, it was mostly the curious who were drawn to the Shaker meetinghouses to watch the marches and whirling dances and to listen to the peculiar hymnody of the Believers. Most came, not to be evangelized, but to be entertained. They came from points across America and from England and elsewhere in Europe.

Most who visited the Shaker villages only attended worship services and did not linger. A few, however, chose to stay longer. Charles Nordhoff¹ was typical of those visitors who came among the Shakers, not to be entertained, but to learn about and attempt to understand their faith and practice. He visited most societies during the early 1870s, not only to attend services, but also to take stock of all aspects of Shaker life. Genuinely interested visitors like Nordhoff often stayed for days at a time, taking meals in the visitors' dining room, and inspecting farm operations and shops. Many took time to talk with the Believers and recorded their experiences and impressions. It is these more thoroughly researched accounts that furnish rich detail about the Shaker communities and the brethren and sisters who resided there.

A substantial majority of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century visitors' accounts recount trips to the New York communities at New Lebanon (later called Mount Lebanon²) and Watervliet. Both were located close to river and rail transportation lines and summer resorts and spas. The New Lebanon Shakers were located only a few miles away from the famed water cure and hotels at Lebanon Springs where a day trip to see the Shakers was

a popular activity for guests. While visitors' accounts to virtually all Shaker societies are known, some communities were infrequently visited and in some instances, only a handful of accounts survive. The communities at Tyringham, Massachusetts, and Groveland, New York, for example, were relatively distant from major routes of travel and rather remotely located, and consequently were infrequently visited.

Visitors' accounts describing the western Shaker communities in Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana are few in number in comparison to those describing the Shakers of New England and New York. Most published accounts describe visits to the larger western communities, including Union Village, Ohio, and Pleasant Hill, Kentucky. There are very few published works describing visits to two of the smaller Ohio communities—White Water³ and Watervliet. Indeed, even Charles Nordhoff, who visited almost all of the Shaker societies during or just prior to 1875, did not visit either because he considered them “small and subordinate to that of Union Village.”⁴

Arguably, the best outsider's account of the Watervliet, Ohio, Shakers was written by a German publicist who toured the United States in 1851 and 1852. Julius Hermann Moritz Busch (1821-1899) published *Wanderungen zwischen Hudson und Mississippi, 1851 und 1852* (Travels between the Hudson and the Mississippi, 1851-1852).⁵ It includes a lengthy and (according to bibliographer Mary Richmond⁶) an “interesting and accurate account” of the Watervliet community. Scholars of Shakerism did not know of Busch's visit there until the University Press of Kentucky published an English translation in 1971.⁷

What may be the most interesting and detailed outsider's account of the White Water community also has a history of scholarly elusiveness. It was written by Benn Pitman⁸ (1822-1910), a pioneer in the field of phonography and phonetics, who played a leading role in the development of the science of stenography. Pitman visited the White Water Shakers in 1855, two years after he had immigrated to Cincinnati from Wiltshire, England. Following his visit, he wrote and published an article entitled “Visit to the Shaker Settlement—Whitewater Village, O.” in *The Phonographic Magazine*⁹ in 1855.

The Phonographic Magazine was the organ of the Benn Pitman System of Phonography. Pitman's system was an early form of shorthand, which had been invented by his brother Sir Isaac Pitman in 1837 and perfected by the two of them over the course of the next fifteen years. In 1853 Isaac

urged his brother to emigrate in order to establish and market their new system of phonography in the New World. Benn Pitman established the Phonographic Institute in Cincinnati in 1854, and the same year published the first monthly issue of his magazine.¹⁰ While Richmond was intrigued with Pitman's publication, she was disappointed that she could not decipher the article about the Shakers. Despite this, she included it in her bibliography of Shaker literature, but with a caveat:

Titles of articles and some incidentals are printed in English, otherwise the text is printed in the now outdated Pitman shorthand characters and is printed from engraved plates by a process invented by Pitman for electroplating engravings. Until a transcription of the text of this article is published, it is of little value to researchers, except for those with a knowledge of Pitman shorthand.¹¹

Pitman was a man of enormous talent and ability. He was a respected painter and woodcarver whose works were exhibited at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition. He served as the official stenographer at the trials of the Lincoln assassination co-conspirators. He was an advocate of cremation of the dead, and when his first wife, Jane Bragg Pitman, died in 1878, she became the first woman to be cremated in America.¹² He was keenly interested in many of the social reform topics of the day, including communal and cooperative enterprises, which probably explains why he was drawn to visit the Shakers. Of the four Ohio Shaker societies, White Water was located closest to Pitman's Cincinnati home.

What Mary Richmond did not know was that Benn Pitman had also published his "Visit to the Shaker Settlement" in a second journal, this time utilizing another innovative format—phonetics. Shortly after Pitman had moved to Cincinnati in 1853, he met Randall P. Prosser, an advocate of phonetic spelling. Prosser had created a phonetic alphabet which utilized a combination of conventional Latin letters (e.g. A, a, B, b, etc.) and Greek letters (e.g. Σ, β, Γ, μ, etc.). Prosser commenced publication of the *American Phonetic Journal*¹³ in January 1855, just one year after Pitman had inaugurated his *Phonographic Magazine*.

Pitman was a frequent contributor to the *American Phonetic Journal*. During the early summer of 1855, he prepared and submitted to Prosser a phonetically written article entitled: "Visit to the Shaker Settlement—Whitewater Village, O." Prosser published it the July 1855 issue of his

journal.¹⁴ Unlike Pitman's shorthand-like system of phonography, which is extremely difficult to transcribe into conventional English, Prosser's system of phonetic writing is much more "reader friendly" and even today is relatively easy to learn. The following transcription of Pitman's article sheds light on life in one of the more obscure Shaker societies.¹⁵ It is a fascinating, well-written and spirited account of what Benn Pitman saw when he visited the White Water society. He liked what he saw there, offered a favorable account of the Believers, and enthusiastically reported that "the Shaker experiment [is] a successful illustration of the associative principle."¹⁶

When Pitman visited, in 1855, the White Water Shaker community was in a prosperous condition and their buildings and lands appeared as "models of cleanliness, neatness and order." That year, a new brick office of three stories had just been completed and work was underway on a "milk and loom house" and other improvements at the South Family.¹⁷ White Water had a membership that probably numbered between 130 and 140 persons and were gathered into three families.¹⁸

The first converts to Shakerism in the region had lived in scattered farms near the Dry Fork of the Whitewater River. In 1823, a powerful revival occurred among the Methodists there, and later that year, Miriam Agnew visited Union Village. She united with the Shakers and urged them to visit her Methodist neighbors. The Shaker missionaries were successful, for by 1824 her husband Joseph and a number of their neighbors had withdrawn from the Methodist Church and joined the Shakers.¹⁹ That same year, more "young Believers" settled in the White Water area. They were members of a small Shaker community at Darby Plains, Ohio which was in the process of being disbanded.

Darby Plains was located about one hundred miles northeast of White Water, just west of Columbus. Shaker missionaries had visited there in 1820, and by 1822 numerous residents had confessed their sins and embraced the Shaker faith. By 1823, Shaker leaders at Union Village decided that the Darby Plains Shakers were living in a "sickly location" and the lands they had purchased and settled did not have clear titles because of overlapping military claims. Because of this, the Western Shaker Ministry at Union Village urged them to abandon the site and join the Believers at White Water. By 1824 the first Darby Plains Shakers had completed their hundred-mile trek and arrived at their new home near the banks of the Dry Fork of the Whitewater.²⁰

The White Water community was further enlarged in 1827 when the West Union, Indiana, community was discontinued and its members relocated to various western Shaker societies. According to John P. MacLean, who in 1904 published what still stands as the most comprehensive history of the White Water Shakers:

During the month of March, 1827 the principal part of the young believers of West Union arrived for the purpose of making Whitewater their home. This was done because, owing to the fever-stricken locality, West Union was broken up, and the members scattered among all the western societies, save that at North Union.²¹

Starting in 1846, numerous “Second Advent Believers” were drawn to Shaker meetings in Ohio and elsewhere. Many came seeking the millennial experience that had eluded them when William Miller’s predictions that the second coming of Christ would occur in 1843 (then 1844) proved erroneous. Upward of 120 Adventists would eventually join the White Water Shakers during the late 1840s, increasing membership to an apogee of about two hundred.²²

By the time of Benn Pittman’s visit to White Water in 1855, many of the Adventists-turned-Shakers had apostatized, driving membership down to less than 140. Despite these losses, the Society remained strong, stable and united, the brethren freely “dispersing [their] love” to the sisters, and the sisters responding with “their countenances beaming with emotion” according to Pittman.

By 1855 the White Water community appears to have attained a complete unification of the four larger bands of Shakers who had come there from different places and at different times. The older Believers who had moved there from Darby Plains and West Union, and the relatively younger Believers, many of whom were former Adventists, had successfully coalesced into a strong and united religious community.

An abbreviated transcription of Pittman’s account was published in 1855,²³ a fact missed by Mary Richmond. The following transcription of Benn Pittman’s “Visit to the Shaker Settlement—Whitewater Village, O.” was completed by Cassandra Nawrocki and David Newell in June 2009. It is reproduced here in its entirety without correction or emendation.

Notes

1. Nordhoff authored *The Communistic Societies of the United States; From Personal Visits and Observation...* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1875).
2. A post office was established at the Shaker village at New Lebanon, New York, in 1861, and after that time, the Shaker Village was called Mount Lebanon, in order to avoid confusion.
3. The Shaker community in Hamilton County, Ohio, is sometimes designated as Whitewater, and sometimes as White Water. It reflects the community's location near the Dry Fork of the Whitewater River. I have not encountered alternative spelling for the river (e.g. White Water River). Although Shaker historians John P. MacLean and Eldress Anna White both utilize the "Whitewater" spelling, it appears that most scholars today have opted for "White Water." While author Stephen J. Stein utilizes "Whitewater," authority Stephen J. Paterwic utilizes "White Water," and I have cast my lot with the latter party.
4. Nordhoff, 205-6.
5. Moritz Busch, *Wanderungen zwischen Hudson und Mississippi, 1851 und 1852* (Stuttgart; Tubingen: J. G. Cotta, 1854).
6. Mary L. Richmond, comp., *Shaker Literature, A Bibliography* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1977).
7. Moritz Busch, *Travels between the Hudson & the Mississippi, 1851-1852* ([Lexington, Ky.]: University Press of Kentucky, 1971).
8. His first name is occasionally misspelled Ben, and his last name occasionally misspelled Pittman.
9. *The Phonographic Magazine* was a monthly published at Cincinnati by Pittman's "Phonographic Institute." It commenced publication in 1854. Scattered issues dated 1859 are in the Communal Societies Collection at Hamilton College, Clinton, New York.
10. *New International Encyclopaedia* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1920), 18:674-75.
11. Richmond, annotation to entry 3541.
12. "Benn Pitman, Noted Stenographer Dead," *The New York Times*, December 29, 1910.
13. *American Phonetic Journal* was a monthly published at Cincinnati and edited by Prosser. It commenced publication in 1855. OCLC reports issues through 1858. Scattered issues dated 1859 are in the Communal Societies Collection of Hamilton College, Clinton, New York. Some of these issues have corresponding issues (by month and year) of *The Phonographic Magazine* sewn in).
14. "Visit to the Shaker Settlement, Whitewater Village, O.," *American Phonetic Journal* 2, no. 1 (July 1855): 12-16.
15. I am indebted to friend and colleague Cassandra Nawrocki of Ashfield, Massachusetts, who took the lead on the transcription of Pittman's article. We found Prosser's phonetic system quite interesting, and in time we were able to read phonetic articles without pause or hesitation. Despite this, the transcription went through three drafts before we felt certain that we had transcribed the article without error. We finished the transcription in June 2009.
16. "Visit to the Shaker Settlement," 16.
17. John P. MacLean, "Origin, Rise, Progress and Decline of the Whitewater Community of Shakers Located in Hamilton County Ohio," in *Ohio Archaeological and Historical Publications* (Columbus: Fred J. Heer, 1904) 13:433.
18. Stephen J. Paterwic, *Historical Dictionary of the Shakers* (Lanham, Md.: The Scarecrow Press, 2008), 241. Pitman reported that Shaker membership "consisted of about two

hundred souls” at the time of his visit (1855). It is likely that Pitman was mistaken. I am persuaded that Paterwic’s estimate of Shaker membership at White Water is probably correct.

19. MacLean, 407. See also Anna White & Leila S. Taylor, *Shakerism, Its Meaning and Message: Embracing An Historical Account, Statement of Belief and Spiritual Experience of the Church from Its Rise to the Present Day* (Columbus, Ohio: Fred J. Heer, [1904], 128-29.
20. MacLean, 403-410.
21. MacLean, 412.
22. MacLean, 425-426. See also Paterwic, 241.
23. *Western Literary Messenger* 25, no. 2 (Oct. 1855), 84-86.

Visit to the Shaker Settlement.

Whitewater Village, O.

Handwritten text in Pitman shorthand, consisting of approximately 12 lines of shorthand characters and symbols.

First page of the original publication in Pitman shorthand, *The Phonographic Magazine* (1855): 85-95 (Richmond 3541).

VIZIT TU Æ ÆAKER SETLMENT — HWËTWËTER VILËJ, O.

—
 BË BEN PITMAN.
 —

¶ Hø kan wøk over a brød estat widst felip sum kjnd ov respekt fer ðe oner; ¶ hø kan behold a wel kultivated fçrm widst admjrip ðe industri dat mad it so; ¶ hø kan se big bçrnz, störd wid plenti, widst felip sumþip ov ðe blessednes ov nedful welt. Hø kan se trötful simplisiti widst luvip it, er integriti widst admjrip it; er klenlines, regyulariti, kwjstjüd and öder, widst wifip dat el ðe wurld—and hiz wif to, wër dylti imprest wid ðe beatjüd ov ðez vertyuz. It iz sumþip tu met wid men høz wurd iz respekted, høz statments qr resevd az undisputed fakts; hø, hwen ða bj do, not depresjat, and hwen ða sel do not egzajerät; hø labor fer eq ufer az fer ðemselvz, and dezjr nø gad hwig ða qr not willip dat eq member ov ðe komuniti jad ekwali fär.

“And prä,” asks Wurdlip “¶ hwär qr we tu luk fer ðis paradizjkal stat ov þipz; ¶ hav traveld ðe wurld över and hav not fänd it.”

Perhaps so, but go tu ðe Æaker setlment and yø wil be surprjzd at ðe ner sproq tu it dat haz bin mad bj ðis pepl. “Fanatisizm,” sez Wurdlip;—if so, it iz astonijip hz net lik hwot we konsev jenyün Kristianiti mjt be, iz ðe imifafon ov ðis pepl.

If it be fanatisizm tu poses huzex, landz and gadz in abundans,—el akwjd bj onest toj; tu ðro wid ðar dorz and invjt el hø wil tu kum and partak ekwali ov ðar tojz and tregurz; tu ofer felter and suport tu ðe wido, ðe örfan and ðe homles; tu eksersjz kjndnes tourdz eq ufer and çariti tourdz el; tu nø nø mustersz and nø sçrvants, and hwär he dat iz grättest iz sçrvant ov el— if ðis be fanatisizm, ðen iz Æakerizm net but fanatisizm!

Æ Æaker setlment at Hwjtewter viläj, in ðis stat, iz establjft on a magnifiscent fçrm ov abst fiften hundred akers. It kontanz ðre “homs,” er residensez, and ðo we belev ðis setlment iz wun ov ðe smolest in ðe Yunyon, it konsists ov abst to hundred solz.

Æ stranjer hø vizits ðis pepl iz at fçrst sørli puzld, on öbzçrjip dat nun qr mör ambifusli klad ðan ufersz, tu asertan hø iz “Çef” er “leder;” and stil mör hwen he diskuverz dat ðe simpl hqrted man hø kam wid hersez and wagon tu feq hiz gests from ðe nerest ralrod stajon, and hø in el respekts displad ðe submjfon ov ðe sçrvant, iz ðe wun hø wil perhaps mäk ðe möst tuçip adres at ðar ralijuz gæderip, and is privilejd “tu led of in ðe dans.” Æs “sister” to, hø wats at tabl and hø afterwardz wofez up ðe dijez, wil möst ljkli be diskuverd tu be “ðekones.”

Æ fçrst notabl fetyur ov Æakerizm iz ðe antek stjil ov dres stil retard. Æs brød brimd stre hat; ðe lop tald kot ov linen, stuf er walen, wid trszersz ov

First page of the publication using the phonetic alphabet,
American Phonetic Journal 2, no. 1 (July 1855): 12-16.

THE PHONETIC ALPHABET.

The Phonetic letters in the first column are pronounced like the italic letters that follow. The last column contains the names of the letters.

| LETTERS. | ILLUSTRATIVE WORDS. | NAME. | LETTERS. | ILLUSTRATIVE WORDS. | NAME. |
|----------------------|---------------------|---------|---------------------|---------------------|---------|
| <i>Long Vowels.</i> | | | <i>Explosives.</i> | | |
| E e |eel |e | P p |pale |pe |
| E e |earth |er | B b |bale |be |
| Ā a |ale |a | T t |tame |te |
| A a |air |ar | D d |dame |de |
| Ā a |arms |ar | C c |cheer |ce |
| Ē e |all |e | J j |jeer |je |
| Ō o |oak |o | K k |kame |ka |
| Ō o |ooze |o | G g |game |ga |
| <i>Short Vowels.</i> | | | <i>Continuants.</i> | | |
| I i |ill |it | F f |fain |ef |
| E e |ell |et | V v |vain |ve |
| A a |am |at | h t |thigh |it |
| Ā a |ask |at | Ā a |thy |ae |
| O o |ou |ot | S s |seal |es |
| U u |up |ut | Z z |zeal |ze |
| Ū u |wood |ut | Σ j |shall |lj |
| <i>Diphthongs.</i> | | | K k |vision |ke |
| Ē i |ice |i | <i>Liquids.</i> | | |
| Ō o |oil |o | L l |lull |el |
| Ō s |owl |s | R r |rare |qr |
| Ū u |dupe |u | <i>Nasals.</i> | | |
| <i>Coalescents.</i> | | | M m |maim |am |
| Y y |yea |ya | N n |nine |en |
| W w |way |wa | Ū p |sing |ip |
| <i>Breathing.</i> | | | | | |
| H h |hay |ha | | | |

⚡ The marks of punctuation are the same as in the Romanic orthography, excepting the following changes and additions: the mark of interrogation † is placed before the first word of a question; † is placed at the end of a sentence, and indicates doubt; † indicates laughter; † surprise; † sorrow; the inverted period † signifies the omission of a letter.

The phonetic alphabet used to translate the Pitman article into normal English.