

The Shakers in Eighteenth-Century Newspapers

Part One: “From a Spirit of Detraction and Slander”

By Christian Goodwillie

In 2010 researchers have more resources at their fingertips than at any time previously in history. Databases such as America’s Historical Newspapers make searching thousands of pages of extremely rare and geographically diverse newspapers a pleasurable task that can be done from the comfort of one’s home. Amassing a body of evidence illuminating the portrayal of the Shakers, or Shaking Quakers (as they were more commonly known), in the eighteenth-century American press has become a goal that can be reasonably achieved over the course of a few days, rather than the years of painstaking labor it would have required in the not-too-distant past. Reading these accounts it is easy to see why the early Shakers felt that they and their principles had been misrepresented in print—distortions that sometimes led to mob violence against their adherents. However, much of the information conveyed in popular accounts of the early Shakers is not found in Shaker sources, rendering these newspaper glimpses into the genesis of the American Shakers that much more valuable.

In 1808 the Shakers published *The Testimony of Christ’s Second Appearing* at Lebanon, Ohio. In the preface to that work they complained, “Many have undertaken to write and publish concerning the *principles* and *practice* of a people, who, in derision, are called SHAKERS, and either through ignorance or prejudice have misrepresented *both*.” They further charged, “The greatest part that hath been published abroad in the world [was by] writers either unacquainted with the people, or actuated by a spirit of prejudice ... nor hath any thing, hitherto, been published that meets our approbation.” Most seriously, the Shakers asserted, “Some things ... have been published, from a spirit of detraction and slander ... stating facts in an imperfect light [and also] adding the most groundless falsities.”¹

Shakerism during the 1780s and 1790s was new enough, and disturbingly wild enough, to merit the attention of the popular press. Given this fact it is unsurprising that then, as now, it was the most sensationalistic aspects of the Shakers activities that were widely reported.

Prior to the arrival of Mother Ann Lee and eight followers into New York City on August 6, 1774, one account of the sect was printed in *The Virginia Gazette* for November 9, 1769.² Attributed to a generic “correspondent at Manchester,” the article gives one of the only accounts of Shaker worship in England:

Our correspondent at Manchester writes a very strange account of a religious sect who have lately made a great noise in that town. They took their rise from a prophet and prophetess who had their religious ceremonies and tenets delivered to them in a vision, some years ago. They hold theirs to be the only true religion, and all others to be false. They meet constantly three times a day, at the house of someone of their society, and converse in their own way about the scriptures, a future state, other sects of religion, &c. until the moving of the spirit comes upon them, which is first perceived by their beginning leisurely to scratch upon their thighs or other parts of their bodies; from that the motion becomes gradually quicker, and proceeds to trembling, shaking, and screeching in the most dreadful manner; at the same time their features are not distinguishable, by reason of the quick motion of their heads, which strange agitation at last ends in singing and dancing to the pious tunes of Nancy Dawson, Bobbin Joan, Hie thee Jemmy home again, &c. These fits come upon them at certain intervals, and during the impulse of the spirit they disturb the whole neighbourhood for some considerable distance, and continue sometimes whole nights in the most shocking distortions and commotions, until their strength is quite exhausted, from which uncommon mode of religious worship they have obtained the denomination of Shakers.

The outward expansion of Shaker missionaries from their base in Niskeyuna, New York, following the “Dark Day” of May 19, 1780, brought the unprecedented sights and sounds of Shaker worship to central Massachusetts. Mother Ann Lee herself traveled through northern Connecticut, and into Upton and Grafton, Massachusetts, during June 1781.³ Apparently, Shaker converts had already come to the attention of the civil and religious authorities in Northampton, Massachusetts, as the following article from Boston’s *New-England Chronicle*, dated May 5, 1781, demonstrates:

Worcester, May 4. From several parts of the country, we are informed of the extraordinary behaviour of a number of people, who appear to be actuated by a kind of religious frenzy, they are commonly called SHAKERS—We are told that at the Superior Court holden at Northampton last week, two persons of this sect were indicted for Adultery, to which they both pleaded guilty; they are to sit on the gallows; receive a number of stripes each, and to wear the letter A on their outer-garments. It is said the woman, conceiving her husband to be an UNHOLY man, thought she ought not to cohabit with him, or suffer him to partake of those conjugal pleasures which were his right only to enjoy; but threw herself into the arms and embraces of one of the Brotherhood, who was, as she supposed, more righteous, and 'tis said is pregnant by him. It is hoped these disturbers of the peace will all be properly taken care of.⁴

This account was republished the same month in Providence, Rhode Island's *American Journal and General Advertiser*.⁵ However, the incident in question did not involve Shakers at all—but rather converts of the Baptist exhorter Elder Moses Hicks (often rendered “Hix” in contemporary sources). According to *The History of the Town of Warwick*,

[The zeal of Elder Hix] could hardly have been exceeded by St. Paul himself. They went from house to house, convincing and converting one another; held their meetings by day and by night, in season and out of season. Their daily and usual occupations were neglected.... Much enthusiasm made them mad, sober reason was discarded, and the town was well nigh turned upside down. But listen to the sequel.

When the victims of this delusion ... were wrought up to the highest pitch ... the bubble burst, the wolves in sheep's clothing were discovered. [Hix] ... absconded from the town with a young girl, the miserable dupe of his nefarious wiles, and a deluded proselyte to his pretended religion. This girl's name was Doolittle. As soon as the rookery was broken up by the arch demon's decamping, Mr. Amos Marsh cleared out with Mrs. Doolittle, the girl's mother; and Mr. Amzi Doolittle, the father of the girl, went off with Mr. Thomas Barber's wife.

The exasperated friends and relations of some of these elopers

followed after them, and took Mr. Marsh and Mrs. Doolittle somewhere in the State of New York, brought them back, and committed them to jail in Northampton, where they were tried for the crime of adultery, and found guilty. They were sentenced to sit on the gallows, pay a fine, and he was ever after to wear the letter A, in a large capital form, on his outside garment.

Before leaving this disgusting story, I will inform you of one of the methods this famous Elder Hix used to lead astray his credulous hearers, and make them the willing subjects of seduction. He told them that men and women had their spiritual husbands and wives as well as their temporal; and consequently where the spirit led them to love and admire each other in a spiritual sense, there was no criminality in the connection.”⁶

The records of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court corroborate the above version of events.⁷ Of chief significance is that neither *The History of Warwick* nor the court records mention that any of the people involved were Shakers, which they clearly were not. Despite that fact the damage to the Shakers’ public image was done via the newspapers who published the story—merely through the addition of the word “SHAKERS” to the otherwise accurate journalistic account of the misadventures of Marsh and Doolittle. Slander was thus manifested in the earliest known account of the American Shakers.

Appended to the republication of the Marsh and Doolittle story the same month in Providence, Rhode Island’s *American Journal and General Advertiser* is a notice that reads: “A particular Account of this Sect may be had at the Printing Office, on the West Side of the Great Bridge, Providence.” This is a reference to Baptist minister and Shaker apostate Valentine Rathbun’s *An Account of the Matter, Form, and Manner Of a new and Strange Religion, Taught and propagated by a Number of Europeans, living in a Place called Nisqueunia, in the State of New-York*. In his account Rathbun, who had become a bitter enemy to the Shakers, still conceded, “There is a very extraordinary and uncommon power attends their instructions.... I can compare it to nothing nearer in its feelings, than the operation of an electrising machine.”⁸ His publication, which also served as an apologia to his fellow ministers for having been temporarily deceived by the Shakers, was designed to highlight the deviant practices of the new sect. Rathbun related that “at one of their meetings, they hung a woman by the neck, but took her down before she was dead, to shew as a sign, how they were

to be persecuted.”⁹ He called the Shakers’ teachings the “doctrines of devils” that would be taught by the “seducing spirits” in the “latter times” spoken of in I Timothy 4. The persecution that the Shakers predicted was already beginning, thanks in some degree to these accounts of adultery and attempted murder.

Despite the commonly perceived threat posed by the Shakers, they could still be made objects of amusement. “A Countryman” wrote the following account, printed in Boston’s *Independent Ledger* on June 25, 1781. The writer describes how a Shaker imposed himself on an “honest Deacon” in the town of Barrington, New Hampshire, with the warning that he had something important to communicate to his congregation. The naïve deacon invited the Shaker to stay the night, and in the morning the Shaker “told the deacon he must dance for Christ’s sake; he desir’d the deacon to sing; the deacon replied, he could not sing; however, after he had urged him a long time, the deacon desir’d to know what tune would suit him; the Shaker replied, Joan’s Placquer was an excellent tune, desired him to sing it — the deacon declined; well then said the Shaker, I will sing it myself, and dance likewise which he performed to the astonishment of the good deacon. After he had finished his dance, the deacon kicked him out of his house for conscience sake.”¹⁰ A “Placquer” is a slit in a dress, blouse, or skirt, so the Shaker’s tune of choice implies a salacious undercurrent, giving the honest deacon great offense.

This same “Countryman” relates another tale of “these Jewels of Perigrination” (as he referred to the Shakers) that occurred at a “poor man’s house” in Canterbury, New Hampshire. The Shaker told the honest farmer about his conversion to Shakerism, and the wonderful consequences it had for his life. The farmer “thought him a saint, and treated him to the best his little cottage afforded.” On being invited to stay the night the farmer informed the Shaker that there was only one bed. The Shaker consented to stay, and the farmer slept in the middle of the bed, between the Shaker and his wife. “In the morning, the farmer arose and left the Shaker in bed with his wife, being unwilling to break his repose. as he snored very loud, and concluding him to be in a sound sleep, stepped out the door to provide a little fuel. He had not been there but a little time, when he heard his wife squawk; he ran into the house and desired to know the cause, — she told him the Shaker desired to convert her in his absence, but in a different manner from what she had ever been taught ... she never understood that true religion was conveyed by any kind of instrument which was used by

way of protrusion. The farmer reproved the Shaker for his male conduct; the Shaker acknowledged he had done wickedly, but plead he was in fault, that he was not his own keeper [the farmer said] I know you were kept at my expence last night—if you are not gone out of my house forthwith I will thrash you, and immediately ran to the barn to get his cudgel, mean time, the Shaker made his escape, with his gospel in one hand, and his breeches in the other.”¹¹ Similar to the account of the adulterous Shakers in Northampton, these humorous anecdotes paint the Shakers as lecherous charlatans using religion to sate their sexual desires.

The year 1781 ended with a sensational case that brought more negative press to the Shakers throughout northeastern newspapers. One James Yates was incarcerated at Albany, New York, for the murder of his wife, four children, and livestock.¹² Brief initial reports of Yates’ crime were printed in Connecticut, New York, and Pennsylvania. By January 1782 a fuller description was widely published: “[Yates] ran naked about half a mile to the house of his father and mother, who were ancient people, and told them he had killed his wife and children; they did not believe him, but however went to his house and found it as he had said. His wife, and infant across her breast, were lying dead on the road, a small distance from the house, supposed to have been endeavouring to make her escape; the other three children were found dead in the house; they were all supposed to have been killed with a club, which was found lying by his wife, as their heads were all bruised and battered to pieces. he had likewise killed his dog, two horses and two cows; in the body of one of the cows, which was not quite dead, an axe was found sticking.”¹³ This gory description was likewise published in newspapers in Philadelphia, Salem, and Boston.

In February 14, 1782, *The Massachusetts Spy*, published in Worcester, published a brief version of the story, adding that James Yates was “one of the Society of Shakers,” a fact which, if true, had not been published in any prior version of events. Additionally, as scholar Rowland Hughes has pointed out, the *Spy* editorialized that “It seems this unfortunate man was tempted to this horrid deed by the spirit which which so manifestly actuates the whole society.”¹⁴ A week later the *Spy* ran the lurid longer version of the story, once again noting Yates’ adherence to the Shakers.¹⁵ *The Connecticut Gazette* of New London, Connecticut, also printed the shorter version of the Yates’ story from the *Spy*, including the added information about the Shaker connection.¹⁶ Worcester and New London were each adjacent to areas that were then hotbeds of Shaker activity. Mother

Ann Lee herself had visited Petersham, Grafton, Upton, Shirley, and Harvard, Massachusetts and Windham, Preston, Norton, and Stonington, Connecticut. In subsequent petitions for Yates' release from prison on grounds of temporary insanity in 1787 and 1789 his Shaker membership was not mentioned.¹⁷ It is my contention that Yates was never a convert to Shakerism. The selective addition of this information to the original versions of this story in locations where it would harm and discredit the Shakers is extremely telling. One of the chief Shaker tenets was celibacy, acted out in the denial of traditional familial and marital relations between husband and wife. Valentine Rathbun had written the previous year that converts to the Shakers "must renounce and refrain all works of the flesh ... They tell the man to abstain from his wife, and the woman from her husband."¹⁸ The Yates story served to magnify the concern of anti-Shakers that families were being separated—transforming it into the wholesale slaughter of a family by a Shaker convert. This manipulation played on the deepest fears of New Englanders. If the facts were altered to connect Yates with the Shakers then it was truly an example of the "spirit of detraction and slander" in full effect.

In 1782 newspapers served as the medium for advertisements heralding two new anti-Shaker pamphlets: Valentine Rathbun's *A Brief Account of a Religious Scheme, taught and propagated by a number of Europeans, who lately lived in a place called Nisqueunia in the state of New-York, but now reside in Harvard in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, commonly called Shaking Quakers*; and Amos Taylor's *Narrative of the strange Principles, Conduct and Character of the People known by the name of Shakers*.¹⁹ The ad for Rathbun's latest work appeared in *The Massachusetts Spy* on March 14th, one month to the day after the first printing of the Yates murder story that tied Yates to the Shakers. This Worcester printing of Rathbun's account was now enhanced by a spurious "Dialogue" between King George III and his ministers plotting Shakerism as a scheme by which to reconquer New England.²⁰ The emphasis of the word EUROPEANS (rendered in all capitals on the title page) further Rathbun's xenophobic agenda. Taylor's *Narrative* was also published in Worcester, and advertised in the *Spy* beginning on April 26.²¹

In September 1783, one of the first truly objective accounts of Shaker worship appeared in Boston's *Continental Journal*. Contributed by "a well-wisher to Mankind," it is one of only a handful known to have been written during the lifetime of Mother Ann Lee. It is noteworthy for its rich descriptive language, and an almost journalistic distance from the

derisiveness typical to most contemporary descriptions of the Shakers. Describing a Shaker meeting in a private residence, it presents quoted speeches from two Shakers justifying their faith. Further, the author actually acknowledges that the Shakers have a valid point about the inconsistency of the mainstream clergy, and he uses the Shakers' arguments to gently admonish them. In light of the importance and rarity of this account it is here presented in full:

Having lately heard much talk of a religious sect, called SHAKING QUAKERS, I was induced by curiosity to go to near them the other Sabbath day. Upon my entering the House in which they were assembled I found them, to the number of 12 or 14 women, and 8 or 10 men, all standing, shaking their heads, with a general tremour of the Body, and groaning very heavily. It appeared to me, that they were at a loss how to begin; however after about 12 or 15 minutes, from the time that I entered spent in that manner, the eldest of them (who as I was told was master of the house in which they were) assumed the power of speech, and commenced with saying that their sect was held up as a bye-word and derision to the people; but that for his part he knew themselves to be the only true gospel people.

He said "that some of them had been most cruelly persecuted; more so than any man of humanity would treat a dog, or any dumb beast; that they had separated themselves, because the clergy in general, who undertook to guide men in the road to salvation lived in all the desires of the flesh and of the eye; that they were not true shepherds, but hirelings, and that the true flock would not know them: and he earnestly entreated of his sect to stand but in their present belief." At the close of his speech, they resumed their aforementioned shaking and groaning which continued till a younger man of about 27 or 30 years of age, took his turn, and informed "that he had lived 20 years without any true sense of religion and should have gone on in that manner, without being in the least made sensible of his evil ways; notwithstanding that he had been constantly under the preaching of many an elder: but that he had been illuminated by the true light, as conveyed to him by the influence of that sect, of which he was a member."

I think that they are a very illiterate, superstitious people: and believe that their cannot by any great danger of any person of

common understanding being drawn away by them: however, I should be sorry that they should receive any what of severe treatment or persecution; as it would be, not only unreasonable in itself, but perhaps serve as a means of more strongly cementing them in that their persuasion.

What truth there is in what the eldest of them advanced, with respect to some of the clergy's not living up to the precepts of their great master, I submit to the clergy themselves; but must it not tend in a great measure not only to countenance those people in such assertions, but likewise to diminish of that respect which the Laity in general bear to their office, when we see that those, who are set as overseers to men's souls, degrade their sacred function, by meddling with affairs which do not belong to them; thereby causing strife among brethren; but even hear, at this day, that some who have been long in the ministry, are not settled in their own opinion, respecting a leading point of doctrine: Or, allowing that they have for some time past entertained such opinion, that their preaching has all along given it the lye.

It is to be hoped that these hints may answer their desired effect, in rendering such overseers more circumspect and consistent; which is the only intent for which they are given.²²

At Salem, Massachusetts (where another version of Rathbun's account was published that year with a title that began *Some Brief Hints of a Religious Scheme*), *The Salem Gazette* lightened the mood a bit with a story on September 29. "A correspondent, who stiles himself HOMO, says, 'By late advices from New-York we are informed, that so great is the prevailing influence of a certain religion, acknowledged by a modern *sect*, and very well known by the name of SHAKERS, that no less a personage than his Britannic Majesty hath *lately* espoused it with such fervour, that the utmost exertions were necessary to bring his fingers to command a *pen* with sufficient direction to enable him to sign intelligibly the *late* commission of Mr. Grenville, for the acknowledgment of *American independency* at the Court of *Versailles*; that it was hourly expected his agitation would rise to such a height as to commence *whirling!*'"²³

In December 1783, *The Salem Gazette* leveled a new and scandalous charge against the Shakers, that of dancing naked. The report read, "The people in the western part of this state, who stile themselves SHAKING QUAKERS, and who suppose they, and they only, have discovered the true

[MASSACHUSETTS.]

The SALEM

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GAZETTE.

October 5, 1784.

By SAMUEL HALL.

HARTFORD, Sept. 27.

Died at Nesqueunia, about three weeks since, the woman who has been at the head of the sect called Shaking-Quakers, and has assumed the title of the Elect Lady. What is extraordinary, a brother of her's, who was one of their principal elders, died the same week, and with the same disorder: they were taken with inward bleeding, and died very suddenly.

It is not improbable that the manner of worship practised by those extravagant enthusiasts, might conduce to a rupture of the vessels, and occasion this mode of dissolution; as many of their ceremonies require such unnatural distortions, and continued agitations of every limb and muscle, as must shock the strongest constitution; and the texture of the human body is too delicate to render it a fit habitation for such violent and disorderly spirits. We hope these instances of untimely death, in those who deemed themselves immortal, will induce others, who adopt this gymnastick religion, to compare the danger of ruining their constitutions with the benefit which may arise to their souls from such violent exercise.

mode of worship, have of late (it is said) utterly disclaimed the use of any kind of garment when engaged in their *religious* exercises; presenting themselves *unpolluted* by the vain and unchristian articles of dress, and performing all their *dancing, turnings, jumpings, tumblings, twistings, and wriggling*, in that condition.”²⁴ This report was republished in Boston, Providence, Philadelphia, and Windsor, Vermont. Many early detractors accused the Shakers of dancing naked. Daniel Rathbun, the brother of Valentine Rathbun, wrote in 1785 that the Shakers would have “men and women, parents and children, dancing stark naked together” and that they would “drink hard, sing and dance all night, strip naked and spank one another’s arses.”²⁵ In 1828 apostate William Haskett wrote more about the Shakers dancing naked in his book *Shakerism Unmasked*.²⁶ The truth of any of these charges will likely always remain a mystery. However, it is not impossible that given the mortification of the flesh, and rejection of earthly uses of the body sought by the early Shakers, that they could have worshipped without clothing as an act of humiliation, with—indeed—parents and children dancing naked together.

The Massachusetts Centinel of Boston carried the following brief notice on June 26, 1784: “By a gentleman from the interior parts of this State, we are told, that the deluded people called *Shakers*, have nearly all left their *Tutors*, and returned to their former method of worship.”²⁷ It is unknown what prompted this hopeful report, as the Shakers were then under the living tutelage of English Shaker leaders Mother Ann Lee, her brother William, and James Whittaker. This situation was not to exist much longer, however. William Lee died on July 21, 1784. Mother Ann followed him to the grave on September 8, 1784.²⁸ They both died at Niskeyuna (which would soon become known as Watervliet, New York), likely from the combined effects of physical violence they had suffered at the hands of persecutors and the self-imposed mortification so central to their style or worship. Newspapers picked up the report of Mother Ann’s death, first published in *The Connecticut Journal*, issued at New Haven on September 29, 1784.

DIED at Nesqueunia about three weeks since, the woman who has been at the head of the sect called Shaking-Quakers, and has assumed the title of the Elect Lady. What is extraordinary, a brother of hers, who was one of their principal elders, died the same week, and with the same disorder: They were taken with inward bleeding and died very suddenly.

It is not improbable that the manner of worship practiced by these extravagant Enthusiasts, might conduce to a rupture of the vessels, and occasion this mode of dissolution; as many of their ceremonies require such unnatural distortions, and continued agitations of every limb and muscle, as must shock the strongest constitution; and the texture of the human body is too delicate to render it a fit habitation for such violent and disorderly spirits. We hope these instances of untimely death, in those who deemed themselves immortal, will induce others who adopt this gymnastic religion, to compare the danger of ruining their constitutions with the benefit which may arise to their souls from such violent exercise.²⁹

The report of Mother Ann's death was published throughout New England and even in Philadelphia. The cautionary tone of this obituary lapsed once more into derision and mockery in a report published by *The Massachusetts Centinel* of Boston, on October 23, 1784.

The death of the elect lady, so called among the shaking quakers, has given a universal shock to her poor deluded admirers. Certain it is—they believed her to be immortal; that Christ, in person, was making his second appearance on earth, and that he would continue till all who were to be saved should be called in, and join the church.—Their faith in this strange personage, (or as they used to term her, holy mother) was such, that they believed she sat daily in council with the Deity; and that things past present and future, were ever open to her view—But alas!—This *feign'd immortal*, who has long *made the simple drunk with her cup of fornications*, is no more!—Her followers now begin to find they have been duped by an impostor.—Some few, still thirsting for the poison of *satanic delusion*, avail themselves by saying:—*She is not dead, but sleepeth.*—Others, *that she is gone to prepare a place for them in glory.*³⁰

The death of Mother Ann Lee was a moment of great crisis for the Shakers. Although she had never pretended to be immortal, and instead preached the resurrection of the spirit, her followers could not have expected her to have left them so soon. The first American conversions to Shakerism had only begun four-and-one-half years earlier, in the spring of 1780. Reuben Rathbun, (a son of Valentine Rathbun) who had remained with the Shakers and had become elder of the Church Family at Hancock,

Massachusetts, remembered that this was “to be sure a very trying time to believers; it being so contrary from what was first expected; but elder James soon gathered the greatest part of the people to a comfortable faith in his ministration, signifying it was necessary for the mother to go away in order for a further increase of the gospel.”³¹ Mother Ann’s death did not stifle the public’s interest in the activities of the still-threatening and intriguing Shakers. The very month that news of her demise reached most readers, another visitor’s account was published of the Shakers at “Acquakanocho”—likely a mutilation of one of the various renderings of Niskeyuna—near Albany. His account conveys an almost grudging admiration for the physicality of the Believers. It also contains very early references to Shaker communalism and the turning, or spinning, performed by Shaker sisters in worship.

NEW-YORK, Oct. 15. A gentleman of this city, having business at Albany, was stimulated to extend his journey to Acquakanocho, the place of residence of a party of those people lately known in this country under the denomination of Shaking Quakers! This congregation consists of about ninety persons, under the fostering care of a farmer at the place; Whenever it happens that a proselite is made, he is advanced by the brethren to convert his entire property into money, and deposit it with the farmer, who engages on his part, to furnish a plentiful supply of *earthly* food, and such other accommodation as may be necessary; this essential preliminary being settled, the newly initiated pupils fall a shaking in whatever manner is most agreeable. Our correspondent was astonished at the facility with which they performed almost incredible actions; one woman, in particular, had acquired such an understanding in the principle of balance as to be able to turn round on her heel a full half hour so swiftly that it was difficult to discriminate the object. They are extremely reluctant to enter into conversation upon the principles of their novel, and apparently absurd worship, but content themselves with declaring they have all *been* very great sinners, and, therefore, it is that they thus mortify themselves with painful exercises.³²

Following the death of Mother Ann Lee the viciousness found in most accounts of the Shakers up to that point, diminished. In its place came humor, sensationalistic descriptions, and eventually plain observational

journalism. However, real-life persecution of the Shakers continued. *The Pennsylvania Packet* for November 5, 1784, carried a story out of New York stating, “Yesterday one of the Shaking Quakers made his appearance in this city, but with so little eclat, that he received the discipline of the horsewhip in the Fly-market, and at the ferry was met by a constable, who conducted him to Bridewell [prison], where he will be obliged, once more, to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow.”³³

Just as the anonymous Shaker elder quoted by “a well-wisher to mankind” had noted, Shakers had come to be a “bye-word and derision to the people.” A satirical poem addressed to a member of the House of Assembly published in *The Freeman’s Journal* out of Philadelphia charged that of its subject: “Like a true Shaker† he follows his nose.” The explanatory footnote indicated by the dagger (one of only two in this ninety-six line poem) stated: “In allusion to an enthusiastic sect of religious inhabiting certain parts of New England, who, when desirous of knowing to what place it is the will of Providence that they should go, turn themselves round with rapidity, and think themselves in conscience bound to follow the course at which the nose stops.”³⁴

Another humorous poetic jab at the Shakers was published in *The Vermont Journal* for June 14, 1785. Entitled “A Receipt to make a Shaking Quaker,” it outlined a “receipt” (an archaic term for recipe or formula) to construct a Shaker from scratch.

First, take a handful of dread, then a few leaves of folly, with a little vainglory, with a few blossoms of mirth, with a few formality flowers, with a sprig or two of self conceit with some of the buds, and some of the herbs of hypocrisy on the brink of self-will, put them into a mortar of disdain, pound them with the pestle of head strong wood; also, take half an ounce of rag manners, and a good quantity of the root of ambition, and the path of self conceit, with some of the moss that grows on the brink on the wild sandy foundation, together with some of the plumbs that grows on the runnegade hill, with some grains that is in Sodom, and a few currents that is in Gomorrah, & some of the spice of Babylon, take these twenty sorts, steep them in a strong handed jug, over the fire of blind zeal, when they are soaked and cemented together enough, grate in a little sulphurous powder, and strain them thro’ a seive of vanity, & in the morning take down a good draught into your stomach thro’ a snout of ignorance, and in a little time it will

rouse rouse the spirit, and you will quake and shake, and quiver, and smite your breast and groan, and soon will become a rank quaker.³⁵

Legal troubles continued to plague the Shakers. In June 1785 Valentine Rathbun's son Reuben was tried in New London, Connecticut, for the defamation of a young lady named Keren Eggleston. News of the trial was widely reported in papers from Newport to Philadelphia. This important early case concerning the Shakers will be treated in greater depth in a forthcoming article by this author.

Tuesday Evening was tried before the Court of Common Pleas, now sitting here, a Cause brought by a Miss Eggleston, of Stonington, against one Reuben Rathbun, an Exhorter among the People called *Shaking Quakers*, for defaming her, by uttering sundry Expressions of and concerning her, at a public Meeting in Stonington. After a full Hearing, the Jury retired, and in about an Hour returned with a Verdict in favour of the Plaintiff for 20 £. Damage, and her Cost.³⁶

Despite continued negative publicity, Shakers finally received relatively balanced treatment in an anonymous article submitted by "Spectator" that was published in *The Massachusetts Spy* on January 26, 1786.³⁷ The venue of publication for this article is intriguing, in that the pages of the *Spy* had carried some of the most salacious stories then making the rounds about the Shakers, including the lurid tale of the axe-murderer James Yates. Spectator claimed to present "Articles" of the Shakers' faith as agreed upon at a meeting of Shaker leaders. This seems highly unlikely, given that some of the supposed "Articles" are not consistent with anything subsequently published by the Shakers regarding their beliefs. However, some of the tenets of Shakerism reported by Spectator do accord with known Shaker beliefs. His account may very well be the earliest printed explication of Shaker beliefs written by a non-Shaker. Only Amos Taylor's seventeen points of Shaker doctrine published in his 1782 *Narrative* predates the list compiled by Spectator, which comprises nineteen points.³⁸ I have found no record of a conference of the Shaker leadership during 1784 or 1785 where any such "Articles" would have been agreed upon. However, that was a time of great tumult in the Shaker church where the leadership crisis created by the deaths of Mother Ann and Father William was being resolved. It is quite possible that such a meeting was held and that no other

record of it survives. If this is the case then the report by Spectator is all the more crucial to our understanding of the early Shakers.

Bookseller and researcher David D. Newell is in the process of unraveling the history of the first printed work issued by the Shakers, the *Concise Statement of the Principles of the Only True Church*, which was published at Bennington, Vermont, in 1790. His research has persuaded him of the likelihood that an undated edition of the *Concise Statement* may have been published as early as 1785. Nevertheless, the contents of the following article and the Shakers' *Concise Statement* are very different, indicating that it is unlikely that Spectator had access to that publication. This account emphasizes Shaker doctrines such as the new dispensation available through Mother Ann, the confession of sins, spiritual resurrection (the Shakers' belief that the resurrection was one of the spirit rather than the body), and the conversion of the dead. All of these beliefs were professed by Shakers well into the nineteenth century, and some are reflected in the *Concise Statement*. However, Spectator errs when he states that the Shakers considered the last dispensation to have begun in 1776. The *Concise Statement* declares that it began in 1747.³⁹ Additionally, alleged practices such as the whipping, or biting, of infants and others to drive out devils were surely never part of any written Shaker statement of beliefs. Such actions as whipping to drive out devils likely did occur during the most frenzied scenes of Shaker worship in the 1780s, but those actions were never codified as forms of Shaker worship. Consequently, it is unlikely that Spectator knew of the *Concise Statement*. Spectator's negative closing aside stating that the Shakers "call Rum the Spirit of God!!" precedes one of the earliest printings of the allegation that Mother Ann Lee was a habitual drunkard—a charge that was oft-repeated by later apostate writers. We have reproduced the full account by Spectator in facsimile due to its length and the important information contained therein.

The Massachusetts Spy

January 26, 1786

From the ESSEX JOURNAL.

To the PRINTER.

The people called SHAKERS have made so much noise in some parts of this Country, that many have been at the pains of long journies on purpose to find out their Scheme from their own mouths; it might perhaps save that trouble to others, as well as afford some satisfaction to all; if you should think proper to hand to the publick, through the channel of your useful paper, the following ARTICLES; which, having been avowedly maintained by themselves, in a Conference publicly held at one of their Meetings, were taken down, read, and discussed before them, by paragraphs, and affirmed by sundry of their Leaders, in the presence of a number of their disciples.

1. **T**HERE is but one person in the Godhead. The word **CHRIST** does not mean any divine person; nor any thing but the attributes of wisdom and power. And the word **JESUS** does not signify any thing human; he was a man, indeed, when he suffered: but not since.

2. The word **HOLY GHOST** signifies no divine person; but only a power or influence on the hearts of men which makes them believers; and that comes only from the word of the *Mother*.

3. The *Mother* is the Spouse spoken of in the Canticles—the elect Lady in John's Epistle—and the woman clothed with the Sun in the 11th of Revelations.

She is holy—omniscient—and every where present as God himself is :—and as much to be revered, believed and obeyed, as he. She is the Lamb's wife, and the mother of the Church ; no blessing ever came down from heaven—nor shall any man ever ascend to that blessed state and world, but through her. Hence

4. None had ever gone to heaven before the year of our Lord 1776. That year was the *Fulness of time*, mentioned in Scripture ; for, then the old, literal dispensation of the gospel under JESUS ceased ; to make room for the new Spiritual dispensation under the Mother ; just as that of *Moses* withdrew when JESUS appeared.

5. The Scriptures are true, and given by divine inspiration : but they are all fulfilled already ; except what is now completing in the Shakers.

6. These are the only true church, these are the 144000 on Mount Zion with the LAMB :—In them CHRIST is come to the last judgment of the quick and dead.

7. For carrying on this great work, God was pleased to transfer his power, and all his gifts to the *mother* : and for the same purpose, she has commissioned seven fathers ; who are perfect and holy as herself : by her concurrence with their labours, the number of the disciples already amounts to 14000; and this number will soon be enlarged so as to destroy all that will not receive their gospel, and then to fill all the world.

8. By this body, that gospel is to be preached to all the living and to all the dead ; and whoever, of either class, believes—confesses—and forsakes all sin, shall certainly be saved—but all others eternally damned.

9. The gift of tongues—of miracles—and of discerning of Spirits is now imparted, through the mother, to this church : and the dead are daily coming before them to receive their final doom from their mouths.

10. In order to salvation it is necessary to confess all our sins to the Mother, or her elders—utterly to renounce marriage and all use of it—and never commit any sin for the future : but yield ourselves, and all that we have, up to the disposal of the

church ; and, be in all things, obedient to its directions.

11. Upon this confession, these leaders take all the sins of the proselyte on themselves—and set the new convert free ;—and from that time he has no need to pay any regard to Sabbath—to baptism—to the supper—or any external ordinance—all these being already fulfilled for him : it is, however, incumbent on him to labour himself up to the perfection of God.

12. This they may do by any bodily work—none such being, in truth, an act of worship, more than another : But, yet, these labours must depend, for their kind and continuance, on the *gift* conferred at the time, this sometimes determines to one sort of labour, and sometimes to another, as laughing, singing, dancing, turning round, weeping, &c. &c. all which are appointed as means for mortifying the body and waking up the soul.

13. The *church* is now in the state of the resurrection, and equal to the angels ; serving God perfectly every moment, and never commits one sin.

14. But, if they should cease to labour, and be seduced by the devil to intermit the dance, they may fall away and die ; and, in case they should they shall never have their bodies raised again : there being no resurrection but that in which they now stand.

15. To prevent this fall, they are ever fighting against devils, and expelling them from themselves and others ; but all this combat is maintained in a bodily manner, the devils being visible to their bodily eyes ; as the good angels also are.

16. They carry on very frequent dialogues with both angels, devils and departed souls—a party of them being employed now in preaching to the Indians and negroes who have died since the beginning of time, in the respective languages of those nations ;—others are engaged in like benevolent employ with the dead of other nations ; and among other instances of their success, several divines of eminence, in those days, have lately returned—confessed their sins—received their gospel—joined their head—and entered into their redemption, among whom are the late Rev. *Whitefield* and *Watts*.

17. The devils which will not depart from the possessed, when commanded—especially in the case of infants, are to be expelled by whipping, or even by biting the unhappy subjects.

18. All touching, or shaking of hands between different sexes, is lustful, and an abomination : but they are allowed to blow the *mother's* love into one another, by breathing in their faces, which always fills them with transports of joy.

19. It is not lawful to make war, in any case.

N. B. The various works of obscenity—intemperance, and madness charged on these people, by some who have lately deserted them, are not here noticed ; as themselves denied them ; —but it is notorious that they call Rum the Spirit of God !! and account it a piece of devotion to be filled therewith—this, it is said, was forcibly inculcated by the mother, both by precept and example : and continues to be so still ; as she is said to be more frequently with them in the dance, since her death, than ever before.

SPECTATOR.

Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society

Part two of this article will examine the further evolution of eighteenth-century attitudes towards the Shakers as expressed in newspapers. It will appear in the next issue of *ACSQ*.

Notes

1. Benjamin Seth Youngs, *The Testimony of Christ's Second Appearing* (Lebanon, State of Ohio: From the Press of John M'CLean, 1808), preface [5].
2. *The Virginia Gazette* is now available free of charge through the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation's website. The Shaker article for November 9, 1769, can be accessed at this url: <http://research.history.org/DigitalLibrary/VirginiaGazette/VGThumbs.cfm?IDNo=69.PD.43> (accessed August 17, 2010).
3. Rufus Bishop and Seth Youngs Wells, *Testimonies of the Life, Character, Revelations and Doctrines, of Our Ever Blessed Mother Ann Lee* (Hancock [Mass.]: Printed by J. Tallcott & J. Deming, Junrs., 1816), 84-85.
4. *The Independent Chronicle and the Universal Advertiser* (Boston, Massachusetts), May 10, 1781, [2].
5. *The American Journal and General Advertiser* (Providence, Rhode Island), May 16, 1781, [2].
6. Jonathan Blake, *The History of the Town of Warwick, Massachusetts: From its First Settlement to 1854* (Boston: Noyes, Holmes, and Company, 1873), 59-61.
7. See Supreme Judicial Court Record Book, Hampshire Sitting, vol. 1781-1782, p. 41; and the Suffolk Files Collection, #158229, vol. 1167, Commonwealth vs. Marsh and Doolittle, May 1781; Archives, Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court.
8. Valentine Rathbun, *An Account of the Matter, Form, and Manner of a New and Strange Religion, Taught and Propagated by a Number of Europeans, Living in a Place called Nisqueunia, in the State of New-York* (Providence: Printed and Sold by Bennett Wheeler, 1781), 10.
9. Rathbun, *Account of the Matter, Form, and Manner*, 14.
10. *The Independent Ledger, and the American Advertiser* (Boston, Massachusetts), June 25, 1781, [4].
11. Ibid.
12. *The Massachusetts Spy: Or, American Oracle of Liberty* (Worcester, Massachusetts), December 27, 1781, [3].
13. *The Pennsylvania Packet or the General Advertiser* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), January 17, 1782, [3].
14. *The Massachusetts Spy: Or, American Oracle of Liberty* (Worcester, Massachusetts), February 14, 1782, [3]; see also Rowland Hughes, "Wonderfully Cruel proceedings: The Murderous Case of James Yates," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 38 (no. 1, 2008): 43-62.
15. *The Massachusetts Spy: Or, American Oracle of Liberty* (Worcester, Massachusetts), February 21, 1782, [3].
16. *The Connecticut Gazette and the Universal Intelligencer* (New London, Connecticut), February 22, 1782, [3].
17. *The Daily Advertiser* (New York, New York), April 7, 1787, [2]; *The Independent Gazetteer* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), January 10, 1789, [1].
18. Rathbun, *Account of the Matter, Form, and Manner*, 8.

19. *The Massachusetts Spy: Or, American Oracle of Liberty* (Worcester, Massachusetts), March 14, 1782, [4].
20. For a fuller discussion and reprinting of this “Dialogue” see David D. Newell, “‘Late Recruits for Britain’: Anti-Shaker Propaganda During the American Revolution,” *American Communal Societies Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (July 2008): 103-21.
21. *The Massachusetts Spy: Or, American Oracle of Liberty* (Worcester, Massachusetts), April 26, 1782, [2].
22. *Continental Journal* (Boston, Massachusetts), July 17, 1783, [4].
23. *The Salem Gazette* (Salem, Massachusetts), September 26, 1782, [2].
24. Ibid, [3].
25. Daniel Rathbun, *A Letter, from Daniel Rathbun, of Richmond, in the County of Berkshire, to James Whittacor, Chief Elder of the Church, called Shakers* (Springfield: Printed at the Printing-Office, near the Great Ferry, 1785): 19, 36.
26. William Haskett, *Shakerism Unmasked, or the History of the Shakers* (Pittsfield: Published by the Author, 1828).
27. *The Massachusetts Centinel and the Republican Journal*, June 26, 1784, [3].
28. Frederick Evans, *Shakers, Compendium of the Origin, History, Principles, Rules and Regulations, Government and Doctrines ...* 4th ed. (New Lebanon, N.Y.: 1867): 145, 159.
29. *Connecticut Journal* (New Haven, Connecticut), September 29, 1784, [1].
30. *The Massachusetts Centinel* (Boston, Massachusetts), October 23, 1784, [3].
31. Reuben Rathbun, *Reasons Offered for Leaving the Shakers* (Pittsfield: Printed by Chester Smith, 1800), 7.
32. *The Independent Ledger and American Advertiser* (Boston, Massachusetts), October 25, 1784, [3].
33. *The Pennsylvania Packet, and Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), November 5, 1784, [2].
34. *The Freeman’s Journal: or, The North-American Intelligencer* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), November 17, 1784, [2].
35. *Vermont Journal* (Windsor, Vermont), June 14, 1785, [1].
36. *Connecticut Journal* (New Haven, Connecticut), July 6, 1785, [3].
37. *Massachusetts Spy: Or, Worcester Gazette* (Worcester, Massachusetts), January 26, 1786, [2].
38. Amos Taylor, *A Narrative of the Strange Principles, Conduct and Character of the People Known by the Name of Shakers* (Worcester, Massachusetts: Printed for the Author, 1782), 7-9.
39. Joseph Meacham, *A Concise Statement of the Principles of the Only True Church* (Bennington, Vermont: Haswell and Russell, 1790), 13.