

# **The Shakers in Eighteenth-Century Newspapers**

## **Part Two: Voyages of the Shaker Ship and Other Adventures, both Legal and Social**

*By Christian Goodwillie*

The first part of this article tracked the evolution of public attitudes towards the Shakers as shown in eighteenth-century American newspapers. In public papers before 1785, a kind word about the Shakers is rarely to be found. Instead, portrayals of the Shakers range from openly hostile, to satirical and disdainful. Following the death of Shaker leader Mother Ann Lee the hostility towards the sect began to wane, although Shakers were still considered ripe for ridicule and mockery. This second part of my sifting through eighteenth-century newspaper references to the Shakers will demonstrate that as the Shakers moved beyond the frenetic evangelism of their first years in America they were perceived as less of a threat to the general public welfare. Additionally, as they gathered into communities and set up manufacturing businesses for a wide variety of goods they slowly began to earn the respect of their neighbors. This is not to say that negative press directed at the Shakers ceased—this is certainly not the case—but it definitely diminished. Writing the second installment of this article has been instructive in another way. Some of the references to the Shakers in eighteenth century newspapers, while initially cryptic, have led me to important and heretofore unknown manuscript sources from the earliest days of the sect's history. These sources have enabled me to reconstruct episodes in Shaker history which may have been otherwise lost to time.

The following tale is almost certainly the invention of a creative writer, as no other source (Shaker or non-Shaker) prominently claims that Mother Ann had the power to raise the dead. In fact, the Shakers adamantly refuted the notion of a physical resurrection and instead believed that spiritual resurrection was the goal of every true Believer. These beliefs were even published as points in the important list of Shaker beliefs compiled by the anonymous "Spectator" (see part one of this article in the July 2010 issue of *ACSQ*): "The church is now in the state of the resurrection," and if a

Shaker should fall away, they will die “and shall never have their bodies raised again ... there being no resurrection but that in which they now stand.”<sup>1</sup> As such, this account is just one more in a series of humorous vignettes written to portray the Shakers as charlatans.

It is said, that just at the conclusion of the war, the late Elect Lady, so called, had congregated a large number of the Shaking-Quakers, at a town on Hudson’s-river, to display her power in raising the dead. — The supposed corpse was carried to a plain, and the important ceremony began, when a continental officer, who was stationed at a small distance, came up with a file of soldiers, intimating a design to fire a few braces of balls through the body, by which her authority might be more fully displayed. This being spoken in a loud voice, and the soldiers being ordered to make ready, so alarmed the subject to be acted upon, that he instantly kicked off the top of the coffin, and made a precipitate retreat, to the no small diversion of many unconcerned spectators.<sup>2</sup>

A number of newspapers in 1786 and 1787 carried notices in their shipping news sections on the comings and goings of the Shakers’ sailing ship—variously called the “Ark” or the “Union.” This bizarre episode in the early history of Shakerism has long tantalized scholars. The fact that a shipload of Shakers embarked on a trading voyage to the West Indies during the tumult following Mother Ann’s death and the unsure state of the movement seems very strange. According to the reminiscences of ex-Shaker Angell Matthewson, the whole project was conceived for missionary purposes in Rehoboth, Massachusetts, a few years earlier.

Orders for building this vessil or ark of safty was given in may Ad 1783 by a gift of god in & threw the mother—it was to be built at rehoboth it will when finished be an ship—an ark— of safety all the faithful people of god will Embark in to it to sail to furan lands to preech the gospil in this way the gospil is to be spread to all nations under heaven—the finger of god will p[o]int out its way threw the boistrus deep—the winds of heaven will be directed to carrey it toards its place of distination & when it shall arive to the haven where god appoints thare the people shall make a joifull nois & will see how good a thing it will be for brethren to dwell together in unity under this impression the people put thare hands & forces together to build the ship & went on well united the 6 ministers riding round the contry preeching to the people to be reddy to sail by when the ship was reddy to sail for sea till in to June Ad 1784 the mother & church caused a total diserye & discard & disoned the whole sistim of ship building tha[y] would have nothing to do with it—thereon the

ship was almost compleeted for sea—the men then that had embarked the most of thare property in building the vessil ware obleged to take it on thare own hands & make the best tha[y] could of it—tha[y] however loaded it with frate sailed to the west indias under the command of Morril Baker—William Morey as supercargo seven of the church brethren in all sailed in the vessil was bound to the west indias & thare shifted thare cargo & returned to savaner in georgia whare two of the crew Dan Heegley & gemaliel Cook desarted & traviled home on foot 12 hundred miles beging thare passage—& lived on the charity of the people

Baker shifted his cargo & returned to the west indies again—then shifted his cargo & returned to rehoboth then sold the vessil at a large discount on the accompt of its being much better calculated for a dancing room then it was for frating to the west indies—here ended the gospil ark—<sup>3</sup>

New York's *Independent Journal* for April 1, 1786, published a fellow ship captain's impressions of the Shaker vessel: "Captain William Van Duersen arrived at New York from Cape Francois [today's Cap Haïtien, on Haiti's north coast] ... a few days before he left the Cape, a large ship, called the Ark, arrived there, commanded by a Mr. Baker. This ship was fitted out at Newport, Rhode-Island, by the fraternity of *Shakers*, with an intention of setting out for the *New-Jerusalem*. Captain Baker, one of the fraternity, but more arch than fool, and pleased with the idea of having the ship fitted for him, suffered them to enjoy their infatuated notion until the ship was ready, when he advised them to send her to the West-Indies, stating to them the impossibility of *going to Heaven by water!*"<sup>4</sup>

The ship turns up again nearly a year later in the *Massachusetts Centinel* for February 24, 1787: "Arrived at Swansey, a few days since, the ship Union, Morrill Baker, master, in 14 days from Cape-Francois. The ship was fitted out, by the enthusiastick fraternity of Shakers, for a voyage to the New-Jerusalem; but the captain knowing that there was a prospect of making a better voyage in another path, persuaded the concerned to consent that he should make a deviation, and first try a voyage to the West-Indies, and back—which has been performed with tolerable success."<sup>5</sup>

Thomas Brown, in his *Account of the People Called Shakers*, gives a detailed account of the voyage and the personality clashes that attended it:

In 1785 and 6, the church by order of Elder Whittaker, built a ship of two hundred tons, called the Union, at the town of Rehoboth, principally for the purpose of spreading the gospel among foreign nations. It was an

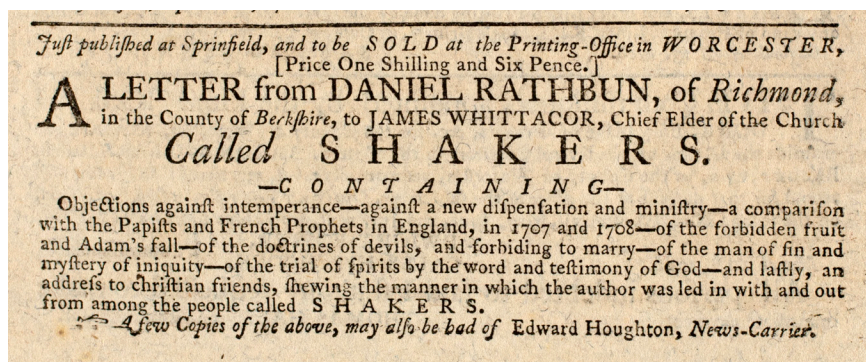
excellent ship, well built and completely finished. When, in consequence of a contention which arose between Morrel Baker and Noah Wheaton, which should be captain, the design of circulating the gospel was relinquished.— She was fitted out for Hispaniola, with a cargo of horses, flour and other articles in her hold, and commanded by Morrel Baker, who with most of the hands, were Shakers. From Hispaniola they sailed to Havanna, from Havanna back to Hispaniola, from thence to Charleston, from Charleston to Savannah, and then to Hispaniola again, and from thence to Boston, where she was sold. The building of this ship, with these several voyages, produced no gain to the church; and the conduct of Baker and the hands did not, while following a sea-faring life, comport with their profession.<sup>6</sup>

William Haskett, presumably a Shaker apostate, published his exposé *Shakerism Unmasked* in 1828. He added a few more details to the episode's aftermath:

During these voyages, the conduct of Baker disgusted the few Shakers who were aboard as sailors, and they left him at Savannah, and walked home, a distance of 1200 miles. Baker, who had deviated from the principle of Shakerism by taking his wife to live with him, on the complaints of the deserted crew, after their return home, especially on those of Mory and Cole, who had embarked their property in the completion of the project, was deprived of his membership. On his return home, he went to Whitaker, and begged on his knees, to be again received into the church. On the confession of his sins, Whitaker received him into full communion. The conduct of Baker was the means of ruining some families, by his departure with the ship. Mory left the Society.<sup>7</sup>

Matthewson's account provides the intriguing detail that structurally the ship was designed to have a large open space for dancing, something that would have been necessary for a seaborne group of Shakers. Alas, further details of the whole adventure are lost to time. Gamaliel Cook and Dan Higly, who according to Matthewson walked home to New Lebanon from Savannah, remained members of the Shaker faith. Cook died in 1788 at the age of thirty-three, perhaps worn out from his voyage and journey home. Higly lived a much longer life, passing away in 1848 at the age of eighty-nine as a member of the East Family. In a manuscript testimony taken down later in his life Higly made no mention whatsoever of his strange adventure at sea. William Morey does not appear in any Shaker records, so he presumably left the Society as Haskett records. The "Cole" referred to was possibly Nathan Cole, whose death is recorded at

New Lebanon in 1815 at the age of eighty. Morrell Baker went on to become a member of the Second Family at New Lebanon and passed away in 1833 at the age of eighty-two. Shaker antiquarian Brother Alonzo Hollister wrote of him: “From the talk I heard of him, I reckon he was not regarded as much of a Shaker.”<sup>8</sup> Notably, Baker made no mention of his maritime adventure in any of the surviving testimonies he left about his life. It is remarkable that the Shakers seem to have suppressed the entire series of events surrounding the ship and its convoluted history—there is not a single mention of it to be found in any Shaker-issued publication. Perhaps the ultimate failure of both the original missionary plan for the vessel, as well as subsequent trading voyages, made it an episode that they felt was best forgotten.



(Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society)

Notices of printed anti-Shaker works continued to appear in newspapers throughout the 1780s. In 1785 Valentine Rathbun’s brother Daniel added his own fuel to the fire with his *Letter ... to James Whittacor, Chief Elder of the People called SHAKERS*, which was advertised beginning in May 1786. The ad promised “a comparison with the Papists and French Prophets,” explications of “the doctrines of devils, and forbidding to marry,” and, by way of self-justification, “an address to christian friends, shewing the manner in which the author was led in with and out from among the people called SHAKERS.”<sup>9</sup> Later that same year William Scales, whose erratic career has been documented by David Newell issued an open challenge to anyone regarding Rathbun’s *Letter*, adopting an ersatz classical Greek pseudonym likely meaning “farsighted.”<sup>10</sup> “Whosoever have a mind to hear an Answer to *Daniel Rathbun’s Letter to James Whittacor*,

may hear it at any time by applying to *William Scales*, or in open street, or in any house they shall appoint. POLUBLEPOS.”<sup>11</sup>

Early in 1787 Scales made a first attempt to get his own work published. Intriguingly, it was to be a pro-Shaker work, very much different from what he eventually published in a lengthy newspaper diatribe against the Shakers.<sup>12</sup> Under a section of the newspaper headlined “Proposals,” Scales sought subscribers “For Printing a Pamphlet, entitled, the Mystery of the people called Shakers unfolded, and every objection against it answered. — The price of each Pamphlet will not exceed *six pence*. — Those who wish to gratify themselves in perusing the Pamphlet, will please to give in their names to the Printer hereof. Feb 17.”<sup>13</sup> This work was probably never issued, and Scales shortly turned against the Shakers. His manuscript is unknown to scholars, and was probably destroyed given his change of allegiance.

“Spectator’s” account from the first part of this article was reprinted verbatim in Matthew Carey’s *American Museum* for February 1787.<sup>14</sup> A presumably different “Spectator” published an overall positive account of the Shakers in the *American Mercury* for March 28, 1787, which noted the quality workmanship of the newly constructed Shaker meetinghouse at New Lebanon. The only moment of levity in his account is the report that as the Shakers began their worship they “began to strip off their coats after which they began to dance to the tune of ‘Pettycoats loose,’ which produced an involuntary laugh in the spectators.” The spectators laughed due to the celibate Shakers’ unintentionally ironic choice of music for worship. “Petticoats Loose” is a Scottish tune dating from the time of the Jacobite rebellion in the early eighteenth century. The original lyrics lampoon the licentiousness at the court of the Hanoverian King George I. The Shakers would have used this tune—as they did so many other common dance tunes—without any words, simply as a musical accompaniment for worship.<sup>15</sup> This account was published throughout New England, and as far afield as South Carolina.

Some of the first recorded legislative petitions for divorce from spouses whose mates had left them to join the Shakers were presented to the Massachusetts State Legislature in late 1788. Petitioner Josiah Barton complained that on August 20, 1787, his wife Elizebeth did “Leave my bed and board, and did go and Join her Self to those people called Shakers Solomnly Declareing that it was a Sin in the Sight of god for her to Live with me in the capacity of wife or to have any connection with mee in any such

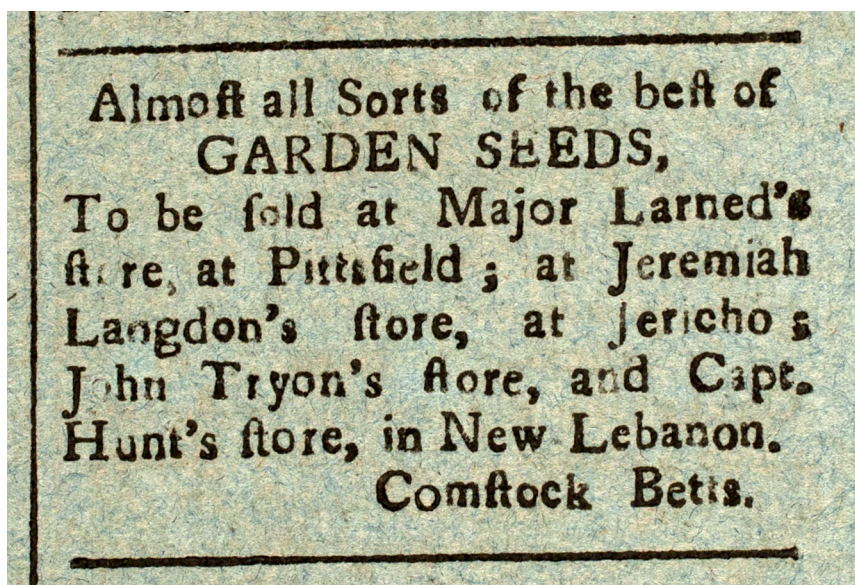
capacity.”<sup>16</sup> For good measure Barton also submitted an acquittance from his wife relieving him of any further responsibility for her maintenance. The *Massachusetts Spy* noted the submission of Barton’s petition to the General Court on October 31, 1788. The newspaper reported that “his wife had joined ... [the] Shakers, and became conscientiously opposed to a married state, and had left his bed and board, and therefore [he prayed] that he might be divorced.”<sup>17</sup> It seems that poor Josiah Barton was not granted the legislative divorce he was seeking, as the papers relevant to the case are today housed in the Massachusetts Archive’s “Unpassed Legislation” files. As for his wife Elizebeth, her name doesn’t appear in any Shaker records, so perhaps for her the Shakers were just a stepping-stone to get away from Josiah.

The *Spy* contained notice that a woman, Sally Main, submitted a similar petition on November 8, 1788, “praying to be divorced from her husband, who had embraced the principles of the sect of Shakers, and rendered her life unhappy.”<sup>18</sup> Sally Main, *née* Rathbun, was in fact the daughter of noted anti-Shaker Daniel Rathbun. In her petition to the legislature she recounted that she had lived with her husband Joseph “in the mutual enjoyment of Friendship, Love and harmony for the space of near two years during which time she was the mother of one Child the offspring of their Love, which had much Effect in increasing their Happiness, and she has not the most Distant Idea but that their Friendship and Esteem would have continued to this Day, had not the fatal & Destructive Delusion called Shaking Quakerism, prevaded that part of the country ... by means whereof the said Joseph was Led into the Delusion from which he has never returned.”<sup>19</sup> Main’s petition continued — accusing Joseph of having abandoned her and their child for more than five years, and pleading for the granting of a divorce to Sally, who was then only twenty-eight years of age, in the “Bloom of Life.” The Legislature granted the divorce. Joseph Main, on the other hand, continued to live at New Lebanon as a Shaker, where he died in the faith at the age of seventy-six on May 1, 1829.

John Stinchfield issued public notice in Portland, Maine’s *Cumberland Gazette* on March 12, 1789, that his wife Mehitable had “left my bed and board, and joined herself to a society of people called Shakers.... I will not pay any debt of her contracting after this date.”<sup>20</sup> Stinchfield was one of the founders of the town of New Gloucester, Maine, having moved there with his parents in 1755 from Gloucester, Massachusetts. His 1759 marriage to Mehitable, *née* Winship, was the first performed in the



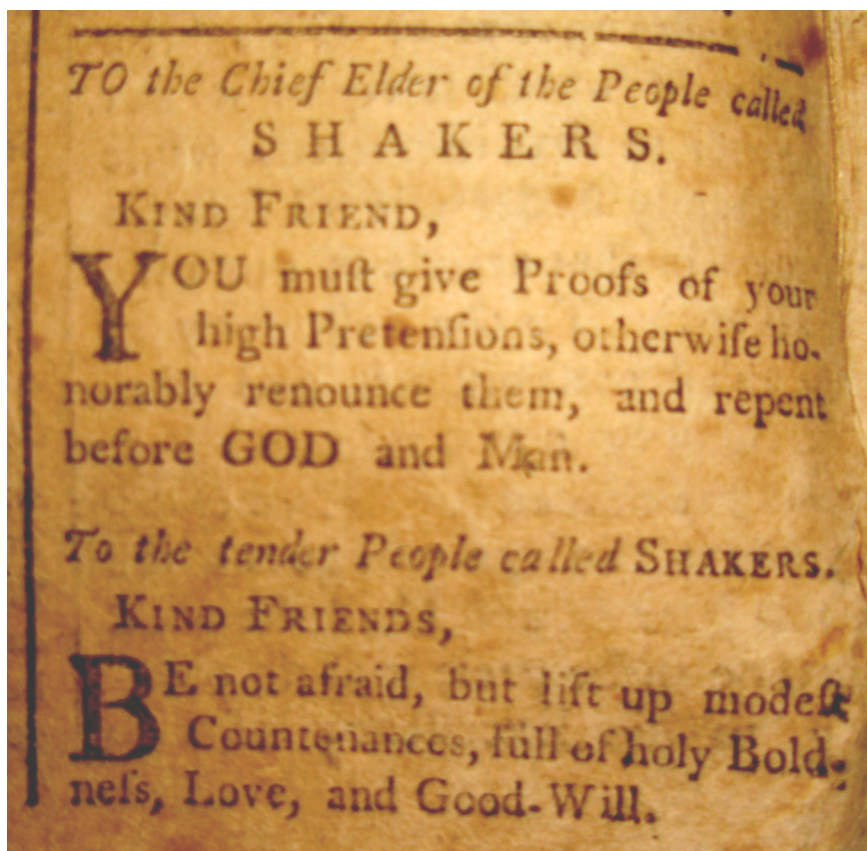
new settlement. John and Mehitable, along with seven of their children, embraced the Shaker faith in 1783. John left relatively early on, and was eventually followed by five of his children and his former wife Mehitable. Only the Stinchfield daughters Elizabeth and Eleanor remained faithful until death.<sup>21</sup> I have not discovered whether John and Mehitable reunited following their tenure with the Shakers, though I suspect they did not. Incidentally, their eldest son Ephraim went on to become a noted Freewill Baptist preacher. He wrote an autobiography (which curiously makes no mention of the Shakers), and published two editions of the work *Cochranism Delineated*, an exposé of the followers of Jacob Cochran, an enthusiastic preacher who advocated spiritual wifery.<sup>22</sup>



(Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society)

What is likely the first ever advertisement for Shaker garden seeds appeared in the *Berkshire Chronicle* on April 24, 1789.<sup>23</sup> Placed by Brother Comstock Betts, it shows that the New Lebanon community, and possibly the Hancock community, were already selling seeds through local merchants in Pittsfield and Jericho (later known as Hancock), Massachusetts, and New Lebanon, New York. The fact that the Shakers are not explicitly named in the ad is not surprising given that the sect was still highly controversial and viewed negatively by much of the surrounding populace.





(Courtesy, Berkshire Athenaeum)

Evidence of the continuing tension between the Shakers and the local people on the New York/Massachusetts border is found in a starkly worded challenge to Shaker elder Joseph Meacham printed in the *Berkshire Chronicle* on May 8, 1789.<sup>24</sup> The anonymous author of the piece paid for its placement in the “Advertisements” section of the paper. The second part of the message offers reassurance and encouragement to the general membership of the Shakers, almost bidding them to remain patient while outside forces worked to discredit and bring to justice their leadership. The exact meaning of the message and its repercussions, if any, remain unclear.

Harvard graduate, published author, and Shaker apostate William Scales finally found an outlet for a presumably much altered form of his work. The work as originally proposed was a defense of the Shakers

entitled “Mystery of the people called Shakers unfolded, and every objection against it answered.” Scales had since lost his faith and instead published “Mystery of the People called SHAKERS laid open, and their Ministration exploded, for its Falsities and Impositions” in the *Boston Gazette* for June 15, 1789.<sup>25</sup> An account of Scales’ life and exploits, as well as the text of this article have been previously published in David D. Newell’s “William Scales’ 1789 ‘Mystery of the People Called Shakers.’”<sup>26</sup> Other than the appearance of this lengthy work in three columns (which covered the entire front page) there seems to have been no published reaction on the part of the Shakers or any other commentator.

In January 1790 New York City’s *Gazette of the United States* printed an intriguing account of Shakers being allowed to worship in the building of another sect or society:

Another correspondent informs, that a number of the sect called SHAKERS, having, thro the benevolence of a certain Society, not an hundred miles from John-Street, been indulged with the use of their Tabernacle for a few evenings past, to hold their *particular* meetings in, has occasioned those extraordinary appearances, noises, &c. which have excited so much speculation, — There is nothing new in all this — there was a sect in Persia a thousand years ago, that beat this hollow, in writhings, contortions, groanings, and screechings.<sup>27</sup>

John Street is lower Manhattan, though the clue that the location was “not an hundred miles” from there doesn’t assist much in deducing where it might have been. It is hard to fathom what other religious denomination or society would have given the Shakers their space at this early date.

The *Concord Herald* for May 18, 1790, published a most tantalizing reference to an item “under consideration” for a forthcoming issue. The piece was to consist of the “Substance of articles avowedly maintained by the Shakers in Gorham, in a conference with a reverend gentleman, July 26, 1784.”<sup>28</sup> A thorough survey of the following issues of the *Herald* revealed no such article; it apparently did not pass muster with the printer/editor. The substance of such a piece would likely have been quite similar to the article by “Spectator” which was published on January 26, 1786, in the *Spj*. That piece, illustrated in facsimile in the first installment of this article, consisted of nineteen “Articles” of the Shaker faith as recorded in a “Conference.” However, “Spectator” made no mention that the “Conference” took place at Gorham, Maine. Intriguingly, the first Shaker converts in Gorham were made during 1784, the same date attributed

to the “substance of articles” alluded to in the *Herald*. In her history of Gorham, Sister R. Mildred Barker wrote that “meetings were held in different parts of town by Elders who came from Shaker communities to the west,” and that Henry Clough of New Lebanon was instrumental in the public preaching at these meetings.<sup>29</sup> We can never know for certain, as the piece on the Gorham Shakers’ beliefs was never published, if it would have reflected the “Articles” published by “Spectator,” but the possibility is open for speculation.

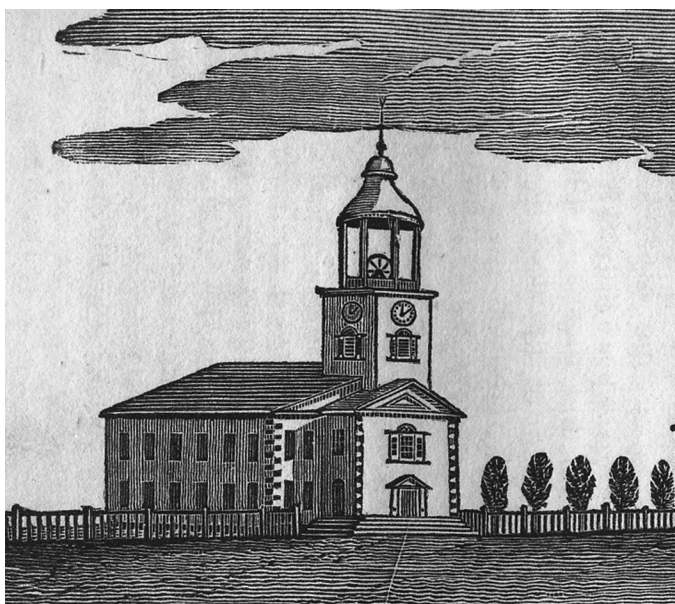


Elijah Wilds’s house in Shirley, Mass.  
(Published courtesy of Fruitlands Museum, Harvard, Mass.)

The grisly suicide of a prominent Shaker made newspapers throughout New England in April 1791. “We hear from Shirley, that one day last week, Mr. Elijah Wilds, of that place, who was of the denomination of *Shakers*, put a speedy end to his temporal existence, by cutting his own throat with a shave. The Jury of inquest judged, that he was insane—doth not every *enthusiast*, as well as every person, who tak[e]s away his own life, discover a degree of insanity?”<sup>30</sup> Wilds had been instrumental in helping Father James Whittaker convert many residents of Shirley, Massachusetts.<sup>31</sup>

The following “Extract of a letter from a young gentleman in New-Concord, to his friend in New York, dated the 27th of July, 1791,” gives a wonderful—if derisive—early account of Shaker worship, including singing in unknown tongues. New Concord is a small hamlet just south of New Lebanon, New York, which is likely the community that the “young gentleman” visited.

Last Sunday I visited the society of people called SHAKERS, and saw them perform the *service of the day*. It was a compound of *comedy and tragedy*—a scene the most remarkable I ever beheld. Their woeful countenances, and the solemn manner in which they performed every action, would make even a *Democritus* sad; and the aukward gestures many of the old ones make in dancing, would set the risible muscles of an *Heracitus* in tune. Their house of worship is really neat and curious—every thing in the most exact order—inclosed within a neat pale fence—two doors and two gates, one for the men, and the other for the women: spectators must observe these rules, or they give great offence; so very particular are they lest the men and women should have any kind of intercourse with each other, that when a little girl, a spectator, came in and sat down



Pittsfield's meetinghouse, designed by architect Charles Bulfinch,  
from an 1829 engraving.  
(From David D. Field, *A History of the County of Berkshire*, 1829)

on a seat by a man, one of the Shakers immediately left his place, and shewed her to another seat. They begin their service with a tune in which they all join, in the manner of the Jews; and the one that sings loudest, sings best. This unintelligible jargon they call *the unknown language*—and well they may, for I do not believe they understand it themselves. After singing some time they stop, take off their coats and hang them up, and each one takes his rank, much more regular than our most expert militia—the women at one end of the house, and the men at the other; two of each sex stand out a little distance from the ranks, and sing a slow king of *fal-de ral* tune, after which they all dance as regularly as at the most accomplished assemblies, which exercise continues about an hour, until they are wet with sweat. Then one of the elders comes in, and after advising them to keep the day holy, not to break through the order of God, by no means to admit of any unnecessary conversation, and informing strangers of the rules of their society necessary to be kept on the Sabbath—he dismisses them for a short time. They perform this scene four times in a day and call it *labouring in the service of God*. I think it is very properly called *labour*; but it is difficult to make a stranger believe they are offering a very acceptable service to God. They are the most ordinary set of human beings I ever beheld; and it is really curious to see the old, maimed, halt, and blind, *dancing their way to Paradise*.<sup>32</sup>

Late in 1791 controversy erupted in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, surrounding the public funding of the new Congregational meetinghouse in the town (which was designed by noted architect Charles Bulfinch). An Episcopalian church member sued the assessors of Pittsfield seeking the exemption of his own sect, as well as the Baptists and Shakers, from taxation.<sup>33</sup> The pages of the *Western Star*, of Stockbridge, Massachusetts, hosted a spirited debate among local residents as to the justice of requiring all citizens to financially support the Congregational church financially, no matter what sect they belonged to individually. An anonymous Shaker weighed in with a personal opinion on the matter: “I entirely agree...‘that they who enjoy a benefit ought to bear the burden.’ If it is the voice of the majority in the congregation thou art a member of, to be provided with a singing-master, we, of our persuasion, are satisfied, so that the expense of supporting him is not raised by a town tax on all denominations. Our Society, it is true, dance; but it is equally true that we pay our own fidler. A SHAKER.”<sup>34</sup> One citizen, styling himself “T.Z. A Second Farmer,” opined that each sect knew best what type of building it wanted for its particular worship: “A Shaker will like to sing and to dance, and to accommodate himself with a house of worship decorated with a chimney at each end.”<sup>35</sup>



“A Berkshire Farmer” wrote anonymously, charging that by requiring all denominations to support the construction, the majority religion of Massachusetts would become like the very persecutors they had sought to escape when they originally established the Bay Colony. He cited the Shakers as an example of a self-sufficient religious society asking: “Was it a necessary charge to the Corporation [town] of Hancock, to build a Shaker meeting-house in that town? It was not thought so; for the Shakers erected the meeting-house at the expence of their own society.”<sup>36</sup> Judging by the sentiments of the “Berkshire Farmer,” the Shakers were beginning a slow transformation from objects of derision into a separate, yet admirable, group of people.

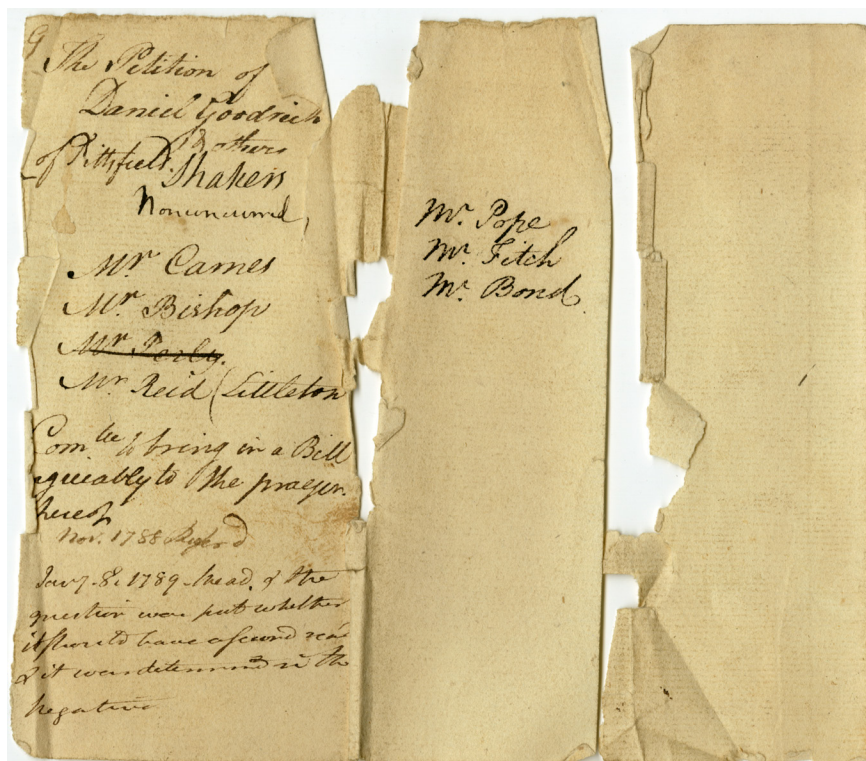
At the same time as the Pittsfield controversy was raging, the rights of the Shakers were tested at the state level. On January 19, 1792, the state legislature considered a petition to exempt the Shakers from military duty. This was to be the first of many entanglements that Shaker communities had with the law over militia duty and the draft. Massachusetts newspapers reported:

The committee on a petition from a number of Shakers, praying to be exempted from doing Military Duty, reported verbally, that the Petitioners have leave to bring in a bill agreeably to the prayer of the petition; which report was accepted and ordered accordingly. A bill to exempt the religious denominations of christians called Shakers from Military Duty, was bro’t in by leave, and read the first time, and Friday next assigned for a second reading thereof.<sup>37</sup>

The petition, which still exists in the Massachusetts Archives, was submitted by the following Shakers on behalf of the whole Society: Daniel Goodrich of Pittsfield, Ephraim Welch of Richmond, William Clark of Tyringham, Elijah Wilds of Shirley (prior to his suicide), John Warner of Lancaster, and Aaron Jewett of Harvard. In total it bears the names of eighty individual male Believers from the aforementioned towns, as well as Hancock and Lunenburg. The petition was accompanied by two affidavits from neighbors of the Shakers in Pittsfield and Lancaster, Massachusetts, attesting to their character as a “peaceable and inoffensive people and good Citizens of the Commonwealth,” and supporting their request for exemption from the militia.<sup>38</sup>

Consistent with the Shakers’ wish to be exempt from the militia was the petition of Shirley, Massachusetts, Shaker and revolutionary war veteran Amos Buttrick. The *Western Star* reported that on February 24,





The Shakers' petition for exemption from militia duty. The original document bears the dates 1788 and 1789, although the legislature did not enact a law exempting them until 1792.

(Collection of the Massachusetts Archives)

Pittfield Oct- 1840

To the Honourable Senate and House of Representatives  
of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in General Court Assembled  
Humbly Shew Daniel Goodrich, Ephraim Mialch, Aaron Jewett,  
Elijah Miles, William Clark and John Warner, Your Petitioners  
in behalf of ourselves and our Bretheren of the same Faith and  
Religious Community with us, Denominated or known in the  
World by Name of Shakers. That we believe it to be our duty  
to Render all Honour <sup>and</sup> Subjection to the Powers that are  
or preside over us and do endeavour at all times to demean  
ourselves as peaceable subjects of the Commonwealth and do  
willingly subject ourselves to the Laws in paying of Taxes  
and other duties which the Laws require of us according to our  
conscience. But whereas we cannot in conscience bear the Arms  
of War it being in our understanding, contrary to our Religious  
Principles or Faith in Christ, and the penalties which we are  
subject to by the Laws, on that Account should soon deprive  
us of our Substance so as to render us unable to support  
our Families and do our duty in other respects and as we are  
conscious to ourselves before God and all men in this matter.  
Your Petitioners do therefore humbly request and desire that  
the Court would take our cause into their various considera-  
tion and grant us Relief by an Act which shall exempt us  
from bearing Arms and the penalties of the Law relative  
therunto and as we are conscious in these things ~~to be~~  
before God, our desire and Labour is always to keep a Consci-  
ence void of Offence both towards God and towards man.

Daniel Goodrich

Wm Clark

Ephraim Miles

Elijah Miles

Aaron Jewett

John Warner



## Pittsfield Octr 1790

These may certify that we whose names are under written are unanimous-  
ly agreed in the choice of ~~Samuel~~ Six of our Brethren (viz)  
Daniel Goodrich of ~~Pittsfield~~, Ephraim Welch of Richmond, William  
Clark of Springfield, Elijah Miles of Shrewsbury, John Warner of Lancaster  
And Charon Jewett of Harwood being all of them of the Religious  
Society denominated as known in the World by the Name of Shakers  
And are all appointed to act in behalf of the Church and Society in  
Participating to the General Court and to give certificates to these  
Brethren if required

Thomas Patton Asa Patton Henry Herrick Nathan  
Cutper. William Clark Junr. & Wells Clark John Clark  
John Stanley of Springfield

Phineas Cogswell, Amasa Hurlburt, John Deming  
Nathan Robertson, Nathaniel Deming, Calvin Cogswell,  
Adin Deming, Nathan Robertson Junr, Jeffery Tallcott, Ruben  
Cole, Josiah Torry Hephiah Osborn, John Munroe, William  
Torry, of Pittsfield

Amos Rathbun, Elijah Nelson, Hephiah Osborn, David-  
Goodrich, Valentine Rathbun, Nathan Goodrich, Gideon Cole  
Jonathan Southwick David Osborn, Thomas Miller.  
Ruben Rathbun of Haverhill

Timothy Bigelow James Tallcott, Joseph Tallcott, John-  
Tallcott, David Southwick of Richmond

Josiah Wilds John Coolidge Phineas Eames  
Amos Buttrick Daniel Prentice Joseph Frost  
William Blanchard Daniel Burt David Nelson  
Jon<sup>r</sup> Robbins Levi Warner Daniel Clark Sam<sup>l</sup>  
Randall Oliver Burt of Shirley

Moses Hayward Nathan Willard Aaron Lyon  
Ruben Barrett Sam<sup>l</sup> Whitney Eben Cogswell  
Sam<sup>l</sup> Milborn of Lancaster (Turn over)

Oliver Adams; Jon<sup>a</sup> Crouch David  
 Divinck; Benj<sup>a</sup> Locke; Sam<sup>l</sup> Cooper  
 John Robbins; Tho<sup>s</sup> Bardeens; John Warner Jr  
 Solomon Fairzel, Ezra Lathe Simon Cooper  
 Solomon Cooper; Asa Brookbank;  
 Jeremiah Willard & Sam<sup>l</sup> Godding  
 Belonging to the Society in Harvard -

1792, “A singular letter was presented by AMOS BUTTRICK, a Shaker, [to the General Court, or Legislature] praying that government would receive back the Securities, &c. which had been granted him, as a pension for the loss of an eye in the service; declaring, at the same time, that he could not conscientiously keep it, nor receive any further gratuity.”<sup>39</sup> Buttrick’s letter states that he fought with the “Massachusetts Militia commanded by Eleazer Brooks Esq. in Capt. Simon Hunts Company in the year 1776—Received a Wound in a Battle on White plains by which means I lost the Sight of my Right Eye—being thereby Entitled to a Pention of Fifteen Shillings pr Month.” Buttrick continued:

But after I had Received Said money my mind was much Exercised in Relation to the Justice of the thing; For as the Gospel of Christ which we have Received among the ... Shakers [teaches] we cannot in conscience bear the arms of war... Finally considering that many poor and Fatherless and Widows also many Lame and Infirm persons Far more unable to get their Subsistance by their Labour than I am; would have to bear their proportion in paying the Said Pention which could not afford me any comfortable Reflection in the Day of Trial—After mature Deliberation I came to a Setled Resolution to Return the Money.<sup>40</sup>

On March 8, 1792, the Legislature responded to Buttrick’s selfless petition by resolving that “Amos Buttrick be & he hereby is permitted to deposit in the Treasury of this Commonwealth any sum of money he may have received from this Government, as a pension, there to remain.”<sup>41</sup>

Buttrick lived until the ripe old age of eighty-seven, passing away at Shirley as a faithful Believer on February 19, 1844. It is unlikely that he ever collected the considerable amount of money due to him held in the treasury of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

The Shakers' petition for exemption from militia duty was successfully passed on March 9, 1792, the day after the Resolve on Buttrick's case was issued. The *Eastern Herald* reported that the "Act for regulating and governing the Militia of the Commonwealth" included the final clause "That no Alien or Shaker (so called) shall be held to do military duty, in the militia of this Commonwealth."<sup>42</sup> Perhaps Amos Buttrick's magnanimity in refunding his pension garnered sympathy from lawmakers and confirmed the resoluteness of the Shakers' conscientious objection to war and all that pertained to it.

The second installment of this article closes with a remarkably detailed account of life at New Lebanon's Shaker community immediately prior to the death of Father Joseph Meacham. The Shakers had gathered in their followers at New Lebanon beginning in September 1787.<sup>43</sup> During the next ten years the logistics of communal living and working were being developed at New Lebanon under the direction of Father Joseph and Mother Lucy Wright. The following account, which was published in the *Western Star* of Stockbridge, Massachusetts, on February 26, 1796, is partly a reminiscence of the Shakers (as perceived by an unkindly disposed neighbor), and partly a report on Shakerism at that moment. It contains the usual scurrilous accusations common to eighteenth-century reports, but it also offers a wealth of good information—some of which should be taken with a grain of salt. Most particularly it conveys the perspective of an unsympathetic outsider confidently awaiting the collapse of the sect. For all of these reasons we have decided to print it in full.

The Shakers in the neighbourhood of New-Lebanon Spring and Hancock are of late in a great fermentation, which seems to indicate an approaching revolution among them, especially at New-Lebanon, their principal seat, and the residence of their Chief Elder, or Pontiff, and *mother*, or Chief Matron. Their young people, on whose industry depends principally the prosecution of their lucrative manufactories, are deserting them one after another, and recovering wages for their past services of them—which, weakening their number of hands, and impairing their stock, seems to shock their rulers, as an event unlooked for.

This hath however been expected by many of their neighbours, who considered how little inducement their young manufacturers and

labourers have to remain with them, after arriving to nature years. When placed, by accident, or by their parents or guardians, under the Shakers, they were mostly too young to have any rational choice of their own; nor does it appear that they were ever wrought into that religious enthusiasm which cemented the elder ones into a mass, and which is now so far cooled that very little precept or example of their religion is exhibited even by the Elders. On the contrary, the common rank of their church are steadily at work on week-days, and are allowed no religious books on Sunday, nor may they of late years, go to their Meeting-house. But in order to stimulate them to industry, they are taught to *excel the world's people in their works as much as in their faith, for (say they) faith without works is dead* — which faith is understood to be a confidence in their Chief, and by these works they are to understand their manual labor.

They are almost every way restricted by the mandate of those in whose appointment they have no voice; for the high priest appoints those in office under him, and names his successor. These young labourers have hardly any opportunity of learning; they have been deprived many years of almost or quite every print, but the Almanack; the bible was prohibited, psalters and service books burned, &c. they are allowed no property at their disposal; they may not converse freely with other people, and are much restricted in their conversation with each other, as their Pontiff pretends to know not only their most private words and actions, but even the thoughts of their hearts. Their liberty of walking is limited to a small bit of land; excursions for wholesome recreation are constrained, and diversion and pleasantries, sometimes so essential to health, is forbidden. They are therefore pale, dispirited and sickly, and deaths are frequent among that people. They are all day inspected by their rulers, and at night a stated watch keeps centry at their doors; while even the dear, consolatory impulses of natural affection are interdicted as criminal, as well among relatives, as between those of the different sexes. Thus situated, and living on the public road where young people of the different sexes are seen riding together for their innocent pleasure, in rosy health, how can it be expected but that Mother nature will whisper to them that they are also her free children, and stimulate them to throw off their irksome and barbarizing bondage, as they now frequently do.

But it is painful to recollect with what eagerness we have seen them (in the attempt) pursued along the highway, and from house to house, and the stripes and other assaults, the very mention of which decency forbids, which hath been the portion of some brought back again, and of such as are unwilling to abide in their ways; sometimes followed by handcuffing and imprisonment in a dungeon, &c. many of these abuses the neighbours can testify, and the worst of them were lately proved by



lawful evidence.

Such of them as make good their escape, are disagreeably situated; from their great change, and sudden emancipation, they can, many of them, be scarcely expected to know how to use their liberty without abusing it. They are children *in the science of social life*, and have every thing to learn at once. If they have any sensibility, they find themselves singular and solitary even among a crowd of well-wishers, in whose presence they are dissident; and thus desponding, they are not unfrequently seduced by their old task-masters to return to their former bondage.

The Shakers are deservedly commended for the excellency of their manufactures; but it is a disagreeable consideration that the liberty of so many must be sacrificed to the business. They have also of late years been esteemed by many an inoffensive sect, for their quiet neighbourhood, and for the fairness and punctuality of their external demeanour. This may however have flowed from the dictates of policy as far as relates to their artful rulers, but it is very little doubted but the bulk of that people are well meaning and virtuous.

Artful as their rulers are, their policy has its visible imperfections; their institutions clash with the immutable laws of nature, and with the principles of reason and social order, and would evidently, if extended, and adhered to exterminate the human race. And as they are deficient in authority to controul any but the ignorant; and as nothing but the frantic enthusiasm which actuated them to stem the current of nature and reason, they might have foreseen that as soon as this blind zeal had spent its force (which was too intense to be durable) their former zealots would begin to warp off as seems now to be coming the case, thro' a natural chain of events, which may be thus briefly traced.

Who of the old inhabitants of their neighbourhood but can recollect the wild vagaries of their first setting out, the drunkenness of their old first mother and foundress, whom they held to be immortal: her known lasciviousness; their once crowding and kneeling round her, when she was drunk, to kiss the hem of her garment, in presence of most of the neighbours, at Esq. *Grant's*, in New-Lebanon. The *Bachanalian* dances she instituted, of naked fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters, through each other in the same room; men running after their hands, which were extended and guided by the Spirit, through quags, briers, hedges and over mountains; their agonizing groans, twitchings, whirling round, talking in unknown tongues, prophesying, working miracles, &c. while excessive drinking was countenanced among them, and industry quite discarded.

The artful refugees from Europe, who formed and led them, with the *mother* at their head, perceiving that by the mode of procedure

sustenance would soon be lacking, ordained now the collection of their persons and estates under a Spiritual head. This done, they taught the body of them industry, economy, sobriety, obedience, dependence, and implicit devotion to the Chief, who, with a few favorites, seems thence forward to have secretly monopolized the various excesses which their institution favoured, to which they were addicted, and which hath probably precipitated the sudden death of so many of them, and given the remainder their florid appearance and trembling nerves.

The first order, now secluded from the common people's inspection, (who may not speak to them without being first addressed by them) established regularly their pretended theocracy, and ruled by their Oracles, divesting themselves of the care and management of the common property, which they vested in the second order, depending solely on them for the sanction of their authority, consisting of a few of their most knowing and artful, who soon learned interested pursuits, and cooled down into a fair, plausible, hoarding combination; while the common labouring many, by natural consequence, sank into blind, abject torpitude. Their signs, miracles, prophecies and tongues failed; the spirit no more twitched, cramped and twirled them round, nor led them from their work by the guidance of the extended hand, in rough paths; and their worship dwindled into a mere assembling now and then to hear a few, perhaps 50, words of very little meaning; to hum in concert an inarticulate, melancholy tone, and then, forming in the shape of a corn-harrow, dance a short jig, horn-pipe, or the like, while the Deacons, singing the black Joke, the tune of Peggy and Molly, or the like, filled the apex of the angle. This worship wasted very little of their strength, which was prudently husbanded for more productive service.

Still the different sexes are kept asunder among all but the first order; matrimonial bands were broken and interdicted, and natural love, with all its dictates and enjoyments, forbidden, as abominably carnal and sinful, and the cloathes of the two sexes could not even be seen hanging on the same line to dry. The consequences of this were, as might have been expected; the subordinate orders, devoted as they were, could but observe with murmuring the partial license of the Head Elders, who lived a recluse life in chambers of which they kept the keys, and where also dwelt an equal number of the most beautiful and accomplished women among the sect. To remove this impression, and to exhibit a shadow of equality, the women and men among all the different orders are now permitted to live near each other, and to eat and drink together; but still all affectionate intercourse and intimacy are as before prohibited, and the families being numerous, they are checks and spies to restrain each other.

This partial indulgence hath however humanized them again in a degree, giving a new spring to the softer propensities of the heart, and kindling a relish for social enjoyments, which, uneffaced as at first, by a daily and free intercourse with their chief, or by the fanatic zeal thereby inspired, is daily bursting the brittle bands of their unnatural constraint.

When, through their growing independence of thought, any of their more knowing or influential are become disaffected, and appear to be about withdrawing, the Elders conciliate them to stay by preferments and indulgencies. But when it shall be generally known among them that disaffection and revolt are the road to preferment and indulgence, more and more will follow the same track; and this temporizing expedient will defeat its own object.<sup>44</sup>

The third and final part of this series will appear in a future issue of *ACSQ*.

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## Notes

1. *Massachusetts Spy: Or, Worcester Gazette* (Worcester, Massachusetts), January 26, 1786, [2].
2. *New Hampshire Mercury and the General Advertiser* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire), February 1, 1786, [3], points 13 and 14.
3. Angell Matthewson, "Reminiscences in the form of a series of thirty-nine letters to his brother Jeffrey...", New York Public Library Shaker Collection, #119.
4. *Independent Journal* (New York, New York), April 1, 1786, [2].
5. *Massachusetts Centinel* (Boston, Massachusetts), February 24, 1787, 183.
6. Brown, Thomas, *An Account of the People Called Shakers...* (Troy [N.Y.]: Printed by Parker and Bliss, 1812), 325-26.
7. William Haskett, *Shakerism Unmasked, or the History of the Shakers* (Pittsfield: Published by the Author, 1828), 93-94.
8. Dan Higly and Morrel Baker's testimonies (along with Hollister's disparaging comment about Baker) can be found in Alonzo Hollister, "Unpublisht Testimonies," WRHS VI:B-43. A second testimony by Morrel Baker is located in Alonzo Hollister, "Testimony of Sixty, a Cloud of Witnesses," WRHS VI:B-40.
9. *Massachusetts Spy*, April 27, 1786, [2].

10. For a fuller discussion of Scales' life and relations with the Shakers, as well as the text of his publication, see David D. Newell, "William Scales' 1789 'Mystery of the People Called Shakers,'" *American Communal Societies Quarterly* Preview Issue (September 2006): 6-20. I thank Hamilton College's Winslow Professor of Classics Carl Rubino for providing a translation for Polublepos.
11. *Cumberland Gazette* (Portland, Maine), December 15, 1786, [2].
12. See Newell's article, cited above, for a full transcription of Scales' anti-Shaker writing.
13. *New-Hampshire Gazette, and General Advertiser* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire), February 17, 1787, [3].
14. "Some account of the tenets and practice of the religious society called Shakers," *American Museum* 1, no. 2 (February 1787): 148-50.
15. *Connecticut Journal* (New Haven, Connecticut), March 28, 1787, [3]. For "Spectator's" full account see Glendyne Wergland, ed., *Visiting the Shakers, 1778-1849: Watervliet, Hancock, Tyringham, New Lebanon* (Clinton, N.Y.: Richard W. Couper Press, 2007), 134-35. For the origins of "Petticoats Loose" see Charles MacKay, ed., *The Jacobite Songs and Ballads of Scotland from 1688 to 1746* (Glasgow: Richard Griffin and Co., 1861), 83-84.
16. Massachusetts Archives, SC1/series 230, House Unpassed Legislation, Josiah Barton's petition, H2867 (1788).
17. *Massachusetts Spy*, November 6, 1788, [3].
18. *Massachusetts Spy*, November 20, 1788, [2].
19. Massachusetts Archives, GC3/series 1710X, Governor's Council Divorce Files, Sally & Joseph Main Divorce (1788).
20. *Cumberland Gazette*, March 19, 1789, [2].
21. Robert Jones Burdette, ed., *American Biography and Genealogy, Vol. 1, California Edition* (Chicago, New York: The Lewis Publishing Company, [n.d.]), 506. Also, I am grateful to Brother Arnold Hadd of the Sabbathday Lake Shaker community, and Tina Agren of the Shaker Library for their kind help in supplying genealogical information on the Stinchfield family.
22. Ephraim Stinchfield's autobiography: *Some Memoirs of the Life, Experience, and Travels, of Elder Ephraim Stinchfield* (Portland: Printed at the Argus Office, 1819); and his works on Jacob Cochran: *Cochranism Delineated* (Boston: Printed by Hews & Goss, 1819) and *Cochranism Delineated*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Printed for N. Coverly, 1819).
23. *Berkshire Chronicle* (Pittsfield, Massachusetts), April 24, 1789, [3].
24. *Berkshire Chronicle*, May 8, 1789, [4].
25. *Boston Gazette and Country Journal*, June 15, 1789, [1].
26. Newell, 6-20.
27. *Gazette of the United States* (New York, New York), January 16, 1790, 319.
28. *Concord Herald* (Concord, New Hampshire), May 18, 1790, [3].
29. R. Mildred Barker, "History of Union Branch, Gorham, Maine, 1784-1819," *Shaker Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1967): 64.
30. Rufus Bishop, *Testimonies...of Mother Ann Lee* (Hancock: Printed by J. Tallcott & J. Deming, Junrs., 1816), 329-30.
31. *Independent Chronicle and Advertiser* (Boston, Massachusetts), April 14, 1791, [3].
32. *New-York Daily Gazette* (New York, New York), August 16, 1791, [2].
33. *Osborne's New-Hampshire Spy*, (Portsmouth), February 22, 1792, 134.
34. *Western Star* (Stockbridge, Massachusetts), December 20, 1791, [3].

35. *Western Star*, December 27, 1791, [1].
36. *Western Star*, February 7, 1792, [1].
37. *Boston Gazette, and the Country Journal*, January 23, 1792, [3].
38. Massachusetts Archives, SC1/series 229, Passed Acts, Acts of 1791 chapter 64, Act in Further Addition to an Act for Regulating and Governing the Militia of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and for Repealing all Laws Heretofore Made for That Purpose.
39. *Western Star*, March 6, 1792, [1].
40. Massachusetts Archives, SC1/series 228, Passed Resolves, Resolves of 1791 chapter 150, Resolve on the Petition of Amos Buttrick.
41. Massachusetts Archives, SC1/series 228, Passed Resolves, Resolves of 1791 chapter 150, Resolve on the Petition of Amos Buttrick.
42. *Eastern Herald* (Portland, Maine), March 30, 1792, [1].
43. Anna White and Leila S. Taylor, *Shakerism Its Meaning and Message* (Columbus, Ohio: Press of Fred J. Heer, 1905), 73.
44. *Western Star*, February 26, 1796, [1].