

# *Shaking the Faith*

Women, Family, and Mary Marshall Dyer's  
Anti-Shaker Campaign, 1815-1867



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# ***Shaking the Faith at Twenty-Five:* Reflections on Shaker Research in the Digital Age**

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The spring break trip to Portugal was cancelled; the dean nixed my plan to go to a Washington, D.C. conference; and then, suddenly, the university sent all the students home and I had five days to figure out how to teach my courses online. The COVID-19 shelter in place order obliterated my research plans, forestalling travel to archives and libraries in New England and beyond. Still, I consoled myself, there was much I could review online—genealogical research, digitized nineteenth-century works on Google Books or archive.org, journal articles accessed digitally through my university library. Except for the absence of long car rides and my archive-habit of eating granola bars for a quick lunch, not much in my research practice would change.

Because much has changed. Twenty-five years ago, in 1996, I completed “Erroneous Principles, Base Deceptions, and Pious Frauds: Anti-Shaker Writing, Mary Marshall Dyer, and the Public Theater of Apostasy,” submitted for my Ph.D. in American and New England Studies at Boston University. Six years later, I had revised and published the work as *Shaking the Faith: Women, Family, and Mary Marshall Dyer’s Anti-Shaker Campaign, 1815-1867*.<sup>1</sup> It was the first biography of Mary M. Dyer and the first extensive examination of anti-Shaker writing. It gave a nascent outline of the apostate network, and suggested that apostasy was a role performance leading to formulaic expressions of their unsatisfactory experiences with the Shakers. Twenty-five years later, my work is still cited and read.<sup>2</sup> It was a labor well worth completing.

And as I sat at home in this pandemic, I started thinking about that labor, particularly as I read of the challenges facing current graduate students.<sup>3</sup> When I began my dissertation research in the mid-1990s, there was no internet to speak of, no World Wide Web with journal databases, online newspapers, or Ancestry.com, and no archive websites posting convenient online Finding Aids. Heck, I wrote my dissertation in WordPerfect!<sup>4</sup> Windows was brand new; I had an Apple IIC; the laser printer I purchased (after much hand-wringing) was nearly \$1000 (I’d have it forever, I thought). My current printer—\$50. And so, in this moment of

quarantine, I wondered: if I were undertaking my dissertation research today, in 2020, how would it differ from how I managed in the mid-1990s?

In my work recovering women's voices, my first step is to plot their social networks—to identify their families, relatives, and friends. Back then, I spent weeks putting together Mary Marshall Dyer's family lineage, using clues from Dyer's books and spending hours with New Hampshire town records in the basement of the New England Historic Genealogical Society in Boston. It took weeks, months when you factor in the reality of working in research time in between teaching (and a job as a caretaker of a historic house) to support myself while dissertating. Today I plugged Dyer's name into Ancestry and what had previously taken weeks, now took seconds. Dyer appeared on numerous family trees pieced together by legions of Dyer and Marshall family descendants.

We know Mary Marshall Dyer from two sources: things said about her, and things she said herself. Of Dyer's own words, she published five works from 1818 to 1852. Three decades ago, reading her works required either trips to one or more archive (and no one archive had all five works at that time) or acquiring them through the rare book trade. In this regard I was fortunate to have a rare-bookseller husband; yet even still, Dyer's last work, *Shakerism Exposed*, eluded me for a considerable period of time.<sup>5</sup> Today, all five of Dyer's publications (plus Joseph Dyer's works) are available on Google Books, HathiTrust Digital Library, or Internet Archive.

Of what others said about her, in 2020 we have a combination of boom and bust: for boom, Newspapers.com or Chronicling America might have saved my eyes months of reading scratchy microfilm and many drives to the New Hampshire State Library where I did much of my newspaper reading.<sup>6</sup> But here's a surprise: neither of these online collections includes the key newspapers from my Dyer research: the *New Hampshire Patriot* and the Concord (N.H.) *Gazette*. And there's a parallel bust: what the Shakers said about Dyer—and they had plenty to say—is ensconced in the Western Reserve Historical Society Shaker collection (WRHS), microfilmed, but not yet digitized. In the 1990s, I read through decades of the WRHS at the Sabbathday Lake (Maine) Shaker Community library, the fortunate recipient of a warm welcome and a daily lunch from the Shakers. The irony was not lost on me that I was reading of virulent anti-Shakerism while at a Shaker village. Another unique dissertation challenge in the pre-internet era: trying to read microfilm in a warm library after a full noontime Shaker dinner. The days that roast turkey was served were particularly detrimental to making research progress.

Putting Dyer's work in the larger context of anti-Shaker and apostate writing was key to understanding her quest. Dyer was one of some three-dozen opposition authors. I read actual copies of almost every extant

piece, in archives or private collections—traveling across New England, New York, Washington, D.C., and as far west as Cincinnati to do so. Today, many of those works are available online and the vast majority have been collected, introduced, and annotated in Christian Goodwillie’s three-volume *Writings of Shaker Apostates and Anti-Shakers, 1782-1850*.<sup>7</sup>

As for the scholarly literature, the availability of JSTOR today is a twenty-first century god-send for researchers, at least those with access via a research library, although as a grad student I spent many happy, quiet hours in the Boston University library stacks, paging through hardcopies of journals, dolling out my dimes for photocopies, long before scanner apps on smartphones.<sup>8</sup> Out of curiosity, I looked up a few of my key secondary book sources including works by Lawrence Foster, Jean Humez, Priscilla Brewer, and Stephen Stein. Only Stein’s *The Shaker Experience in America* is available today electronically (although, as an author and wife of a bookseller, I will always advocate for owning real books). Yet, given the dominance of Amazon, all of these classics are available quite inexpensively, in most cases, under \$2.00—a good price point for the new researcher amassing a library.

And then there is Google Maps, which I have used in my recent projects to get a sense of where my subjects lived. I’ve walked down London streets to see which buildings pre-dated the Blitz, and which ones were clearly built after. I’ve looked at old Paris hotels, and Washington, D.C., neighborhoods. While writing my dissertation, I learned, archivally, that Dyer’s house had been torn down to make way for a highway. I still wanted to see both the former house location and her final resting place, so my husband and I drove to Enfield. Google Maps would have helped us greatly in that adventure to find the Purmort Cemetery, but that invention was a good decade into the future.<sup>9</sup> So long before GPS could appear at our fingertips or yell at us from our car, we navigated using a combination of a nineteenth-century atlas and a modern Delorme map. We drove up and down wooded backroads and just could not find our destination. In the end we got directions from a man gutting a deer. He left a bloody thumbprint on our map.

We had been searching for Dyer’s grave—seeing her headstone and reading the bittersweet inscription became an important part of the conclusion to *Shaking the Faith*.<sup>10</sup> Here again, today, a quick search on Find-A-Grave provides a photo of her headstone; I left a digital flower for Mary.<sup>11</sup> But what Find-a-Grave doesn’t show is how lonely her grave is, tucked in a back corner, no family members nearby. The curious inscription, “Wife of Joseph Dyer,” was not only inaccurate in a legal sense in 1867 but also a cruel reminder of Mary’s loss of role as both wife and mother. I stop by the cemetery each time I pass that way and often leave real flowers. I am

grateful to Dyer for her story—for advocating for what she called the “just rights, which belonged to [her] sex” in a time when women had few, and I’m grateful for what her story personally gave to me: a Ph.D., a book, tenure in a rewarding career—even if now, I enact that career primarily on Zoom.<sup>12</sup>

Starting my dissertation research today with the abundance of online resources would no doubt save time and money, and there are few humanities grad students out there who couldn’t use more of both. I could have so much at my fingertips that I could more quickly determine if I had a project worth doing and could see the scholarly gaps into which my work could fit. With digitization, we can research more deeply, recover more voices, and tell more stories. Historian Catherine Bishop argues that women, in particular ordinary women, have become more visible with digitization. The “ever-growing digital archive has enabled pieces of individual women’s lives to be retrieved and connected in order to create more complete pictures of those lives, and to tell different stories about them.”<sup>13</sup> And for the scholars who tell those stories, with Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and other social media platforms, they can easily connect to multiple communities: scholars of Shaker history; graduate students; non-fiction authors. Dissertating does not have to be a lonely pursuit in a digital world.

But the bounty of the digital age comes with cautions: I saw errors in several Ancestry Dyer/Marshall family trees, no doubt replicated one from the other. And for all the newspaper images Newspaper.com’s search feature found, most were some other Mary Dyer—a very common name, as it turns out, which could lead to a very time-consuming process of sifting to find the wheat among the chaff. (The lesson here is that an online search does not eliminate the necessity to look at the original documents.) More darkly, digital visibility can put one’s own work at risk: it is all too easy for less scrupulous researchers to copy and paste material found online, whether from digitized journals, electronic editions of books, or Facebook posts relaying an amusing research story.<sup>14</sup>

And my best finds could not be replicated online—I learned that the Polly Dyer I had seen flit in and out of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century town records was my Mary Dyer—that Polly was a nickname for Mary. I learned that at a cook-out from a fellow historian named Polly who clued me in to variations on the name Mary. This led me to return to those town records for a second, more informed, look. I gained access to a wonderful letter with anti-Mary Dyer sentiment when I happened to blather on about my research to a local antique dealer at a diner. She listened, and then said, “I have something you might want to see.” I did. And Dyer’s will—a quote from which I begin *Shaking the Faith*—I discovered

in an archive, previously unknown and not recorded on a finding aid. And although a transcribed copy of the will is now on Ancestry, it differs in a significant feature from Dyer's manuscript original: the nineteenth-century clerk recording her will cleaned up Dyer's carat marks and afterthought additions. An online reader would miss the importance of her clarifying handwritten distinction between her children being "Shakers" or, to her mind, simply being "with Shakers."<sup>15</sup> And my most important discovery—just two weeks before my book manuscript was due—was when I found the longest extant document in Dyer's own hand: her manuscript deposition for her 1830s divorce. These Grafton County (N.H.) court records, long assumed lost, had unexpectedly appeared in a long-forgotten closet off a long-forgotten basement room. While at the New Hampshire state archive to fact-check some dates, I glanced down while waiting at the librarian's desk and saw a list of new arrivals, and on that list were the very court records that had been deemed lost or destroyed. My eyes went wide and I begged to look at them. Not processed yet, they said. Covered in soot, they said, vaguely motioning toward my white summer t-shirt. I made a lame joke about my haute couture and they relented. The bundled documents had not been untied since 1830 and they were covered, *covered*, with a fine black dust. I was filthy within minutes. My eyes watered, my nose ran. I didn't care. I pawed through the boxes searching for *Dyer v. Dyer*, Mary Dyer's desperate attempt to free herself from her Shaker husband. And of course, I found them in the last box, last bundle. I removed the sooty exterior wrap and found pristine, cream-colored pages recounting the case which changed N.H. divorce law: depositions, testimony, counterarguments, and Mary Dyer's own statement of the collapse of her marriage upon the intrusion of the Shakers.

Mary Dyer's will and the documents recounting her divorce gave me the bookends for my rendition of her life: the will, the book's opening scene; the deposition, the story's end. There is an element of luck in research—I was in the right place at the right time, I am nosy and read lists on librarian's desks—but then there's the experience that comes from years of reading and research, including plenty of dead-ends. What researchers frequently identify as serendipity in the archive, is often the result of finely-honed instinct and intuition. As I tell my students, when opportunity knocks, you have to know how to answer the door.<sup>16</sup>

There is no substitute for feeling the weight of a handwritten letter or seeing the size of an anti-Shaker tome; for studying whether Dyer's pen skimmed over the paper or dug deeply, leaving tiny crevices and pools of ink. Examining multiple "real" copies, for example, of *Portraiture of Shakerism*, made me realize that the typo Dyer corrected by hand in one copy, had been corrected in each copy—and before the book was bound.

If I had read just the singular digitized Google Books copy available today, I would not have realized that and missed an important clue to her work as author and hawker of books. And if I had satisfied myself reading a copy of *Rise and Progress* online, I would not have paged through the copy I read in a major archive and noticed a tiny fold on the end sheet of the book. I flicked the fold to release it, and the end sheet fell open to reveal, tipped into the back, a previously unknown and uncatalogued Mary Dyer broadside, advertising her Christmas Day anti-Shaker lecture.<sup>17</sup>

In no way am I suggesting a return to the “good ol’ days” of in-the-trench research. Traipsing from historical society to local library to major research centers took time and money, at a time period when I had little of either, and often with no idea whether the trip would be a feast or a famine (there were many famines). The challenges of time and funding for me (and other humanities researchers) are little different now, well beyond my grad school days, with the demands of teaching, committee work, and family all competing for scarce research time. What differs today is our ability to better prepare. Online finding aids allow researchers today to gauge how much time is needed at a given research site; requests for pdfs or scans of images save countless hours of travel to one-item archival collections. Completing foundational research from Ancestry lets you get right to the meat of your project: the focus is not who was your subject’s sister-in-law, but why that mattered.<sup>18</sup> Digitized books and journals let you get up to scholarly speed on your schedule, or the schedule of a pandemic—not just when the academic year gives you spring break or a summer without classes. The availability of online resources builds your knowledge, your timelines, and your factoids, less expensively and more efficiently. THEN, you head to the archive, because there’s magic there.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Shaking the Faith: Women, Family, and Mary Marshall Dyer's Anti-Shaker Campaign, 1851-1867* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002). The book remains in print.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to *Shaking the Faith*, my doctoral research produced: DeWolfe, "Murder by Inches: Shakers, Family, and the Death of Elder Caleb Dyer," in *Murder on Trial*. R. Asher, L. Goodheart, and A. Rogers, eds. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2005; "The Mob at Enfield: Community, Gender, and Violence Against the Shakers," in *Intentional Community: An Anthropological Perspective*. Susan Love Brown, ed. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2002; "A Very Deep Design at the Bottom: The Shaker Threat, 1780-1860," in *Fear Itself: Enemies Real and Imagined in American Culture*. Nancy Schultz, ed. West Lafayette, In.: Purdue University Press, 1999; "So Much Have They Got for Their Folly: Shaker Apostates and the Tale of Woe," *Communal Societies*, 18 (1998):21-35. "Mary Marshall Dyer, Gender, and *A Portraiture of Shakerism*," *Religion and American Culture*, 8 (Summer 1998): 237-264 and "The Mob at Enfield." *American Communal Societies Quarterly*, vol. 4, no. 2 (April 2010): 80-91. In 2010, I published *Domestic Broils: Shakers, Family and the Narratives of Mary and Joseph Dyer* (Univ. of Mass. Press, 2010), a work now out of print but available in an open access digital edition via DUNE: DigitalUNE at [https://dune.une.edu/history\\_facbooks/2/](https://dune.une.edu/history_facbooks/2/)

<sup>3</sup> For example, see Megan Zahneis and Audrey Williams June, "How has the Pandemic Affected Graduate Students? This Study has Answers," Sept. 3, 2020, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-has-the-pandemic-affected-graduate-students-this-study-has-answers>, accessed Jan. 30, 2021; Zahneis, "For Many Graduate Students, Covid-19 Pandemic Highlights Inequities," March 26, 2020, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/for-many-graduate-students-covid-19-pandemic-highlights-inequities/>, accessed Jan. 30, 2021; and of the challenges specifically in the Humanities see Richard Godbeer, "Adapting Humanities Research in the COVID-19 Era," May 28, 2020, University of Kansas Office of Research, <https://research.ku.edu/news/adapting-humanities-research-covid-19-era>, accessed Jan. 30, 2021; and PhD History candidate John Vsetecka's post, "The Challenges of COVID-19 for Graduate Students," Nov. 18, 2020, H-Net Book Channel, <https://networks.h-net.org/node/1883/discussions/6801508/challenges-covid-19-graduate-students>, accessed Jan. 30, 2021. I feel for graduate students whose work the pandemic has interrupted and acknowledge here that I write this essay from a position of privilege as a tenured, fully-employed academic.

<sup>4</sup> I used DOS commands in my Master's thesis!

<sup>5</sup> I have been immensely fortunate in my career to find many of my research projects among the inventory of DeWolfe & Wood Books (Alfred, Maine), [www.dwbooks.com](http://www.dwbooks.com)



- <sup>6</sup> *Chronicling America* is the digitized newspaper collection of the Library of Congress <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>
- <sup>7</sup> Christian Goodwillie, ed., *Writings of Shaker Apostates and Anti-Shakers, 1782-1850* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013), 3 vols.. Goodwillie omits from his volumes the better-known and widely accessible works including that of Thomas Brown, William Haskett, David R. Lamson, Hervey Elkins, and the first four of Mary Dyer's works. Her rare final volume, *Shakerism Exposed* (1852), appears in volume three.
- <sup>8</sup> This was well before cell phones of any kind. Because I drove from my home in Maine to Boston for my graduate work, often returning late at night after evening seminars, I bought a car phone. This circa 1992 Motorola was stored in a case the size of a shoe box, plugged into the car cigarette lighter, and must have weighed five pounds. It made calls, it received calls. That's all it did. Twenty-five years later, I can do my research, reading, and writing on my smartphone.
- <sup>9</sup> Google Maps became available in 2005.
- <sup>10</sup> See *Shaking the Faith*, 182-83.
- <sup>11</sup> Mary Marshall Dyer, Purmort Cemetery, Enfield, N.H., *Find A Grave*, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/201440970/mary-dyer>.
- <sup>12</sup> Dyer's advocacy for the "just rights" of women appears in *A Portraiture of Shakerism* (Haverhill, N.H., 1822), 371-72.
- <sup>13</sup> Catherine Bishop, "The Serendipity of Connectivity: Piecing Together Women's Lives in the Digital Archive," *Women's History Review* 26, no. 5 (2017): 767, 770. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2016.1166883>
- <sup>14</sup> Trust me on this warning: I've found my work, verbatim and without attribution, in blogs, in articles, and in books. See this recent Twitter thread on the pervasive nature of scholars and plagiarism: <https://twitter.com/amybarnhorst/status/1353826634084749312>
- <sup>15</sup> *Shaking the Faith*, [1].
- <sup>16</sup> As historian Nancy Lusignan Schultz writes, "Serendipity, like chance, favors the prepared mind." Schultz, "Serendipity in the Archive," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 15, 2011, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/serendipity-in-the-archive/>
- <sup>17</sup> "Free Lecture to the Ladies," advertising handbill, Dec. 25, 1850, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.
- <sup>18</sup> In Mary Dyer's case, for example, her sisters married attorneys and other leading men which offered Dyer entrance to the male-controlled world of law, politics, and publishing. See, for example, the assistance provided by Mary's brother-in-law, Judge Moody Rich, *Shaking the Faith*, 51-52.