

Mother Elinor and the God House

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Ann O'Delia Diss Debar, who used various aliases during her life of crime, including "Mother Elinor."

When Mother Elinor Mason arrived in Detroit at the God House commune, she must have seemed like the answer to all of the community's prayers. She had recently arrived from England, the land where their Jezreelite faith had its roots. She was a very charismatic woman and could communicate knowledgeably about the faith. The hope was for Mother Elinor to lead the God House. She would be the "woman to finish the work," to help gather in the 144,000 elect and usher in the millennium. Unfortunately for the God House, Mother Elinor was, instead, instrumental in ushering this intentional community to its ultimate demise.

The members of the God House had already overcome so many obstacles to its continued survival. This intentional community of Jezreelites in Detroit dates back to at least 1885 with three followers under the leadership of Edgar (Edward) H. Durand.¹ Two of these members were the Court sisters, Alice and Eliza, who had immigrated from England. Both served as canvassers for the faith. They traveled extensively in Michigan

sharing their experiences and their missionary literature.

This branch of the Southcottian tradition believed that James Jezreel was the Sixth Messenger. This new religious movement was founded by Joanna Southcott (1750–1815) from Devon, England. She began to have mystical visions and attracted followers hoping to reform the Church of England. She became the First Messenger, after her death others would lay claim to this role. Jezreelites recognized the succession of Joanna Southcott, Richard Brothers, George Turner, William Shaw, John Wroe, and James Jezreel as the true messengers. Each of these messengers expected the imminent return of Shiloh (Jesus), but death always came before this was realized and then another Messenger stepped into the role. Jezreel set up his community in Gillingham, Kent, England, and had approximately fifty followers who lived with him there by 1894.² He also had missionary outreach overseas to America.

In 1888, while Michael Mills was living in Port Huron, Michigan, he was given a copy of James Jezreel's work, *Extracts from The Flying Roll*, by Eliza Court.³ After that, the Millses, Michael and Rosetta, regularly attended Jezreelite gatherings. A group of Jezreelite followers in Port Huron existed from at least 1884 under the leadership of George Sutton, who regularly held meetings. Sutton officially founded The New House of Israel on April 1, 1891, and soon planned to relocate to the wilderness to await the Second Coming.⁴ Perhaps living in the wilderness was not attractive to the Millses, as they moved to Detroit to be with Durand's group. They were centered in the Fifth Ward of the city on the east side. At this time, Detroit was the fourteenth largest city in the United States.⁵ The Millses and Courts canvassed together as missionaries, preaching and selling Jezreelite literature throughout Michigan. On January 21, 1890, the Jezreelite periodical, *The Pioneer of Wisdom*, noted the group proselytizing in Dowagiac, Michigan, and cited this description in a local newspaper: "The Misses Court are English ladies, from whose faces shine integrity and willingness to sacrifice their own interests to the salvation of their fellow beings. More earnest honest workers probably never visited our city."⁶

Proselytizing was an important component for fundraising, as well as finding converts to the faith. There was a special urgency to this, as millennial denominations such as the Jezreelites believed that Jesus would return soon. According to James Jezreel in *Extracts from the Flying Roll*:

"The Flying Roll" is the last message sent to man, and is now sent forth to gather together the twelve baskets of fragments which the multitude could not eat. For it belongs to the twelve tribes of the house of Israel—it is their manna. The Jew and the Gentile have

been feasting upon the fishes and the loaves: the two fishes being animal, typifies the Jew, and the five loaves: the Gentile. The one offered the blood of the animal, for the salvation of the soul: the other, bread and wine. But the twelve baskets of fragments are the children of Abraham who will now be gathered from among the Gentiles. That the one hundred and forty-four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel, may be sealed. We are now in the third watch, of the eleventh hour, of the sixth day: during which time the "Flying Roll" is to be sent out to gather the seed of the freewoman to claim the promise of the fathers, for the freewoman's time is now come to bring forth.⁷

Ideally these gathered elect would be celibate, regularly confess, wear their hair long, eat a kosher diet, and be circumcised in the case of the men. The expectation was that living in this way would purify the body and soul, leading to both physical and spiritual immortality. There exist different viewpoints as to how strict the tenets of the faith were followed both in England and America. This was certainly the case for Detroit, given what transpired with Michael Mills.

Michael Mills rose quickly in the Detroit group and became the leader of the commune that he named the New House of Body of Israel, but most commonly called "God House," which was officially founded on May 13, 1892.⁸ With funds donated by his followers, he purchased a home on land contract at 47 Hamlin Avenue to serve as the community's headquarters. Mills claimed "to have undergone a physical change, in which he suffered great agony, and by which the evil was burned out of his body; that from that time he claimed to be, and his followers believed him to be, the Michael spoken of in the twelfth chapter of Daniel; that he believed himself to be divinely commissioned to gather the lost tribes of Israel."⁹ Under his leadership, approximately thirty people lived communally at the God House and a few other rentals in the neighborhood. He began to call Eliza his "Spiritual Affinity" and though Mills claimed that their relationship was platonic, his wife, Rosetta, did not believe him. Jezreelite headquarters became alarmed about these developments and publicly warned followers in *The Messenger of Wisdom and Israel's Guide*,¹⁰ stating "Michael Mills and Eliza Court, of America, having set up a church of their own there and are publishing a paper with a view of propagating their own ideas upon THE FLYING ROLL, the public are cautioned that they are in no way connected with the House of Israel." Their Jezreelite printing houses would also refuse to sell copies of the *Flying Roll* to those affiliated with the God House.¹¹



Michael K. Mills, Detroit Jezreelite leader, who proclaimed himself the Seventh Messenger.

For its part, the God House seemed to continue many Jezreelite practices, proclaiming, “We of the House of Israel neither shave, nor cut our hair, neither do we wear mixed garments, nor eat any unclean meats, but seek to walk in the footprints of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who said, ‘I am the way the truth and the life;’ and ‘Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.’”¹² The God House was a millennial sect, expecting the ingathering of 144,000 and the return of Christ.¹³ Circumcision does not seem to have been required for members of the group.¹⁴ One major divergence, however, would be the claim that Prince Michael was the Seventh Messenger.

As the Seventh Messenger, Prince Michael believed he should take his rightful place over all the ingathering. Prince Michael recounted, “I received the message from about midnight Jan. 16 telling me to go to England, and not let the day dawn upon me, and in the morning I was on my way. I went to arrange for the coming of our converts there, all of whom are to settle here.”¹⁵ As both Jezreel and his wife Queen Esther had died, he in 1885 and she in 1888, perhaps Prince Michael believed their followers would readily accept his leadership. He, however, did not receive

a warm welcome. The *Free Press of Shiloh* recounted,

Prince and Princess Michael, with eight other sisters, went over to England soon after starting the colony at Detroit, and called on the heads of the two Houses at London and Chatham Hill, of the New and Latter House of Israel, to whom He declared Himself to be Michael the great Prince, and introduced to them the woman that was to finish the work. But by both Houses they were not only rejected but railed upon and treated with scorn and contempt.¹⁶

Discouraged, the Detroit Jezreelites left for Michigan.

Legal trouble began to brew at the God House not long after Prince Michael returned from England. Habeas corpus proceedings were begun by Joseph Richardson for the return of his daughter after his estranged wife became a member of the commune and had taken their daughter with her.¹⁷ Complaints from the neighbors of the God House raised the attention of the police. People in the neighborhood were disturbed by the fact that members of the commune were regularly nude in the home on 47 Hamlin Avenue and did not have window coverings. One news report stated:

Residents on Smith avenue have the bathroom of the heaven in full view, and they assert that the “prince” assumes the role of “Knight of the Bath” when the “angels” are performing their ablutions. So immodest was the spectacle that the “prince” was requested by the indignant neighbors to put up shutters. He complied to the extent of pasting white paper on the windows, and now evenings the exhibitions are like silhouettes. The neighbors contemplate complaining against Michael, on the ground of indecent exposure.¹⁸

Since much was on display at the God House, it was also noted that there were not enough beds for all of the people living there, so that raised some eyebrows as well. Law enforcement began to visit and ask some questions. This may have helped Rosetta Mills feel comfortable in leaving Michael and she accused him of several crimes. She officially signed papers charging Mills with adultery on March 26, 1892.¹⁹ Michael Mills and Eliza Court were initially charged with both adultery and lewd cohabitation. Michael was also charged with carnal knowledge of a girl between fourteen and sixteen, Bernice Bickle, a God House member. Mills pled not guilty to all charges. Court “declared that she was unwilling to

justify herself.”²⁰ The cases of adultery and lewd cohabitation would fall apart as Rosetta refused to testify in the trial, later obtaining a divorce from Mills. The charge of carnal knowledge of an underage girl proceeded to a sensational trial that gathered even more negative attention for the commune. During the trial it was recorded:

On December 21, 1891, Mrs. Bickle took Bernice to Detroit and delivered her over to the respondent, at the house occupied by respondent, which was termed the “God House.” The occupants of this house were respondent, his wife, Mrs. Eliza Court, Alice Court, Emma Butler, Nellie Armstrong, May Webster, Carrie Bendry, and Ellen Rowlinson, and Bernice. There were four beds in the house. It is unnecessary to go into the disgusting details of what took place in this abode. It is sufficient to say that respondent, taking advantage of the innocence of the prosecutrix, and of her religious instincts; representing to her that he was inspired and acting by divine command; that he was the son of man, and had been purified; that his purpose was her purification; and that her duty was obedience to him,—after repeated attempts on different occasions,—overcame her scruples, and had illicit intercourse with her, which he afterwards repeated.²¹

Mills maintained his innocence and blamed a conspiracy of neighbors, police, prosecuting officers, and the press for his persecution. Mills was convicted on June 17, 1892, and sentenced to the state prison at Jackson.²² Mills and Court wed in secret during his incarceration, on October 8, 1892.²³

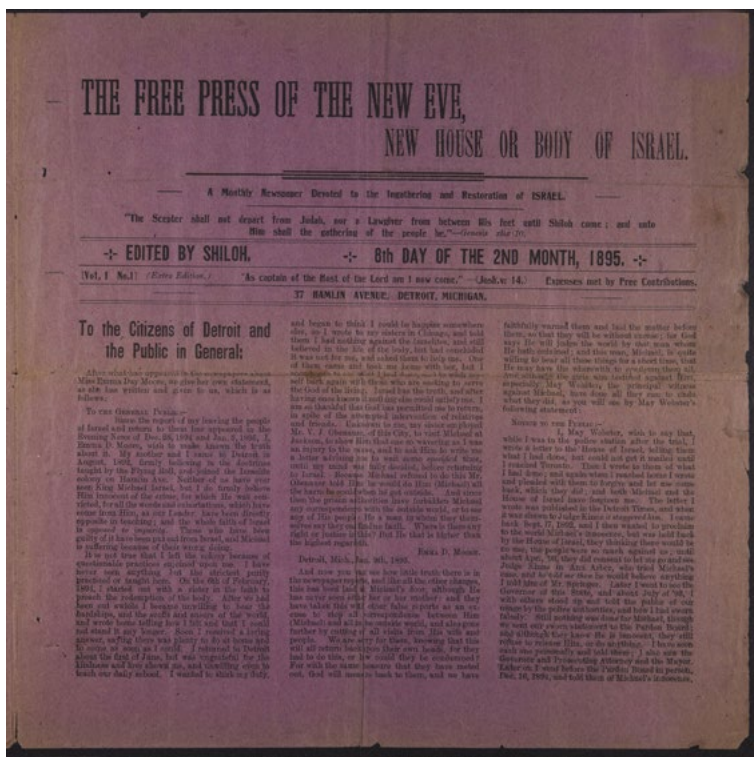
The new Mrs. Mills oversaw the God House, now called The New Eve, New House or Body of Israel, in Michael’s stead. Given the negative press the God House received, a name change was probably wise, though for the sake of simplicity I will continue to use the older name. The community published its own missionary literature, much of these existing documents focused on defending Prince Michael as an innocent man. A common refrain was that Prince Michael was accused by backsliding members who had been reprimanded for not following the tenets of the faith. To get back at Prince Michael, they came up with a plot to accuse him of the sexual crimes they had committed; these “scorpions” were listed as “Joseph Daly, Edward (Edgar) H. Durand, John Smith, Mrs. A. L. Johnson, Mrs. Cornwall, Charles Bickle, Elizabeth Anderson and others.”²⁴ Interestingly, Edgar H. Durand left the colony after being denounced and eventually became a missionary for the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter

Day Saints.²⁵

Eliza Mills petitioned the Michigan courts in hope of getting her husband's sentence overturned, but her effort was unsuccessful. She was readily accepted by most members of the God House in her leadership role. She was called the Princess Michael, Mother, and Queen by the faithful. Michael Mills was released from prison June 19, 1896.²⁶ It was rumored that he was released early under the condition that he leave the United States. Upon his release, one of the areas of greatest interest to the press was the prospect of a marriage between Michael Mills and Eliza Court, but they had already entered into wedlock years before. Much was made in the press of the fact that Eliza was older than Mills and thought to be less physically attractive. When asked as to his next move by reporters, Mills replied, "The story of what I was doing in Jackson is an old story and not worth repeating, I will stay in Detroit some days but eventually think of moving to Sarnia. My course, however, is much like that of a small boy who has to go wherever he is sent."²⁷ Mills, however, abandoned the idea of leaving for Canada and instead decided to focus on rebuilding the God House in Detroit. Mills put Eliza in charge of a women's auxiliary for the colony. Unfortunately for the couple, more trouble was on the horizon.

In 1897, Prince Michael decided to call to the God House one of his followers from Scotland, David Livingstone Mackay. Mackay had been the main canvasser of Edinburgh, Scotland, from at least 1896. He was in his early twenties, and described as very handsome by the press. Mackay was to help with recruitment and would become Prince Michael's personal secretary. Mackay brought with him a new convert, Katherine McLean. She did not stay long at the God House and received help in leaving from a local pastor and lawyer. The media picked up the story and portrayed her as a naive young woman who became infatuated with Mackay and was influenced by him to convert to this "queer religion." Mackay refuted this and blamed her leaving the God House on being overcome by the ministers of Satan. He argued, "Who are these ministers of Satan? Why those nice, delicate, polite, polished, white-tied, black-coated devils, reputed as the ministers of righteousness; those wolves in sheep's clothing, scribes and Pharisees, who, although esteemed among men, are an abomination in the sight of God. They are false shepherds, who have stolen my only sheep, the tender lamb I cared for on the distant Scottish hills."²⁸ The McLean case, the God House noted, "has brought so much additional reproach on the Church of God."²⁹

The Millses made the decision to attempt once again to go to Gillingham, England, to take up the mantle of James Jezreel. They may have been influenced by the fact that currently they were not having much



The Free Press of the New Eve, one of the missionary newspapers, published by Michael K. Mills.

luck with rebuilding their commune, along with the longtime dream of Michael Mills to lead the New and Latter House of Israel. In November 1905, Prince Michael sent his secretary Mackay, along with Frank Harmony, ahead to visit Jezreelite groups in Scotland and England and announce his impending, triumphant return.³⁰ Those left behind in Detroit were now left without their Messenger.

The trustees of the God House attempted to keep the commune viable. When Mother Elinor arrived the following year, the vulnerable group readily accepted her as their spiritual head. By this point in her life, Mother Elinor was an expert at taking advantage of vulnerable people. It is possible that she had, as rumored, been at the New Eve sect of Kent in Gillingham before coming to Detroit, as later it was reported that they charged her with defrauding them of 400 pounds.³² There are no extant sources to verify this, but the fact that Mackay arrived in Canada with Mother Elinor in early 1907, with a final destination of Detroit, bolsters

this claim. Previous to this, the last confirmed residence of Mother Elinor had been Aylesbury prison, Buckinghamshire, England. Mother Elinor, in July 1906, had been released early for good conduct after having served five years of a seven-year sentence for the crimes of obtaining property by false pretenses, procuring girls, and rape.³³



Ann O'Delia Diss Debar, with her con-man husband, James/Frank Dutton Jackson, who also used several aliases.

She, along with her accomplice and current husband, James or Frank Dutton Jackson, had established an organization called the Theocratic Unity Temple near Regent's Park at 29 Durand Gardens in London.³⁴ The duo, calling themselves Swami Laura and Theodore Horos, had been able to persuade naive young women to join their "Purity League" to obtain salvation and give of themselves completely, both body and purse. The couple was arrested, indicted, and found guilty in a sensational trial in December 1901.³⁵ Theodore Horos was sentenced to fifteen years and Swami Laura to seven years.³⁶

This was not Swami Laura's (aka Mother Elinor's) first incarceration. She had already served time locked up in cities such as Cincinnati,³⁷ New York,³⁸ and Joliet.³⁹ Her criminal career dates back at least to 1870. At that time, she had adopted the moniker of Princess Editha Gilbert Montez and entered the lecture circuit, claiming to be the daughter of famed dancer Lola Montez and the King of Bavaria, Ludwig I. The *Evening Telegraph* described her as an attractive woman in her early twenties, dressed in yellow

silk and black lace, who gave a talk entitled, “The Equality of Women and the Wrongs of Lola Montez.”⁴⁰ The Princess would have many aliases—Vera Ava, Swami Laura Horos, Ann O’Delia Diss Debar, Laura Jackson, Della Ann O’Sullivan, Ava McGowan, Swami Viva Ananda, Madame Messant, Madame McGoon, Edith Solomon, and A-Diva Veedy. Her original name, however, was likely Ann O’Delia Salomon of Harrodsburg, Kentucky, born in 1849.⁴¹

For the first half of her criminal career, Mother Elinor had focused primarily on bilking wealthy older people with her psychic abilities, the most infamous being the Luther Marsh case of 1888. Mr. Marsh was an elderly New York lawyer who reportedly gave her several thousand dollars and allowed her to move into his Madison Avenue mansion.⁴² Harry Houdini in his expose of spiritualism, *A Magician Among the Spirits*, summed up her life:

Ann O’Delia Diss Debar’s reputation was such that she will go down in history as one of the great criminals. She was no credit to Spiritualism; she was no credit to any people, she was no credit to any country – She was one of these moral misfits which every once in a while seem to find their way into the world. Better far she had died at birth than to have lived and spread the evil she did.⁴³

The latter half of her life, Mother Elinor concentrated on either creating her own new religious movement, such as the Mahatma Institute (1909, New York City), or attempting to infiltrate established communes to perhaps more efficiently swindle a larger group of people. These communities included the Theosophists, Jezreelites, Fruitarians, and Spiritualists. One newspaper article stated, “She had a mystifying lingo, a knowledge of stage paraphernalia, and an audacity in money-getting that made it easy for her to carry off the game of Spiritualism, or New Thought, or New Revelation, or a Brotherly Love religion turn and turn about in the company of fairly acute persons.”⁴⁴

Mother Elinor might be considered the first American woman to head a Jezreelite commune in her own right. David Livingston Mackay served as her right hand man, much as he had for Michael Mills. Mother Elinor and Mackay arrived together at St. John, New Brunswick, on the ship, *The Empress of Britain*, in December 1906. They both told immigration that their final destination was Detroit, Michigan.⁴⁵ This raises several questions. Had Michael Mills made a deal with Mother Elinor for her to serve as his proxy in Detroit so he could still keep control, only later to be betrayed? Had Mackay made a deal with Mother Elinor and then double-crossed Michael

Mills in order to gain more control of the Detroit sect? Had Mackay been loyal to Mills, only later to be corrupted by Mother Elinor? These are still unanswered questions due to a paucity of documents. Interestingly, the Prince and Princess Mills left Liverpool on December 29, 1906, on the ship *Canada*, eventually arriving at Portland, Maine, on January 8, 1907. Their stated destination was Detroit, Michigan.⁴⁶ They were denied entry and did not make it to Michigan, as they both arrived back in Liverpool on January 21, 1907. It does raise questions as to the reason for the journey.

Unfortunately for Mother Elinor, her reign at the God House was brief, lasting approximately three months, because in March 1907 the press began to ask questions. Mother Elinor seemed to bear a striking resemblance to Ann O'Delia Diss Debar. Ann O'Delia in her later years had been described in newspaper reports as approximately five feet tall, between 250 and 275 pounds, with white hair and pale blue eyes; additionally, she had a prominent scar on her right temple. This description also fit Mother Elinor.

Initially those at the God House stood by her. Trustee Edward Preston stated that Mother Elinor was, "but a good woman who has been mighty helpful to us all."⁴⁷ The trustees also downplayed any threat to the colony if it turned out she was the infamous criminal:

Mother Elinor could not have come into possession of any jewels, money, property or anything else belonging to the colony since the temporal and spiritual heads of the order are now separate. They admit that Prince Michael acted both as temporal and spiritual head, and that the trustees under his regime were mere figureheads, but Mrs. Mason, they insist has had nothing whatsoever to do with the finances of the colony, receiving only her traveling expenses, which they say was a small amount.⁴⁸

At the time the media story broke in Detroit, Mother Elinor was out of town. She had been visiting Point Loma, California, for two weeks. What business she had there was not shared with the press, but it should be noted that Point Loma was the headquarters for the Theosophical Society. It could be that Mother Elinor was merely on vacation, but more likely, given her history, she was attempting to find Theosophists to bilk. Mother Elinor's response to the charges from the press was that she would immediately return to prove her innocence.⁴⁹

Mother Elinor arrived back in Detroit in early April. At this time, she still had the Jezreelites believing in her, because as commune treasurer Albert Maddon reasoned, "The very fact that she is returning is in a way



“Mother Elinor” was known for her beauty, her love of finery, and her ability to expertly play a part to bilk unsuspecting marks.

proof that she is not criminal which certain people believed her.”⁵⁰ Mother Elinor met with her followers and the trustees privately to explain herself. She claimed that the charges against her were a plot and called upon “God and all of the angels to witness her innocence.”⁵¹ She promised to meet with reporters the next week and “make them take back the horrid things that they had said about her.”⁵² This meeting never happened, as Mother Elinor and Mackay in the midnight hour loaded up several trunks on a carriage and left from the Windsor home where they had been staying.⁵³

After she and Mackay absconded, it took over a week for the community to come to terms with the fact that the duo was not coming back. Finally, members of the God House released a statement denouncing Mother Elinor as a fraud.⁵⁴ Once again the God House was given unwelcome notoriety and made to look foolish due to the misdeeds of its leadership. If Michael Mills had initially given his endorsement of Mother Elinor or that it appeared he had, that may explain why the God House believed in her for as long as they did. Mother Elinor’s powers of persuasion should

also not be discounted. She and Mackay continued to engage in several exploits together for the next two years until their partnership ended when Mackay was arrested and deported back to Canada.⁵⁵ He was charged with violating “section 2 of the immigration act of February, 1907, relating to the entry into the country of ex-convicts.”⁵⁶ He had been convicted previously of selling obscene literature in Canada.

The God House limped along, attempting to survive. Canvassers for the commune made a concerted push in the summer of 1907 to find financial support and new members. Otis Bauschke and Silas Mooney traveled to the Cleveland area as canvassers for the faith and were disappointed in the response. The *Cleveland Plain Dealer* quoted them. “We have knocked on the gates to spread the new faith and have been repulsed,” lamented Mooney. “They have spurned the Prophet Michael,” added Baushke.”⁵⁷ It should be noted that Baushke and Mooney were connected to the Benton Harbor colony, the House of David, under Brother Benjamin and Sister Mary Purnell, so there must have been some relationship among the Michigan sects. This same article noted that the faith had lost several wealthy members after the Mother Elinor fiasco. Some of the membership was still hopeful that it might be possible for Prince Michael to return if the proper authorities in Washington, D.C., could be convinced to allow an exception to immigration law and allow the ex-convict entry into the country. Sadly for these faithful, neither Prince Michael nor Princess Eliza returned to American soil. The God House ceased to exist on July 31, 1909, when Judge Murphy cleared the title of the God House, as it had been bought on contract by Prince Michael and he had failed to make a payment for fifteen years.⁵⁸

Mother Elinor, along with all of her known aliases, also disappeared from the historical record. Due to her age and life of excess, it has been surmised that she died and was buried in a pauper’s grave in 1909. However, in the 1914 divorce trial of her bigamous husband, Frank Dutton Jackson, he stated that he last heard from her in 1910. He stated he was unsuccessful in contacting her for evidence in his divorce proceedings and that “she had the power of materialization and I believe she had the power of dematerialization as Mme. Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, one of her greatest friends, had. Mme. Blavatsky evaporated into the air, so why not the swami?”⁵⁹ If accurate, Mother Elinor may have materialized again in 1913. She was reportedly arrested in London for “spiritualistic frauds.”⁶⁰ Unfortunately the name she was working under was not revealed in this article. She then evaporates from the historical record for good.

The history of the God House, though relatively brief in comparison to other communal societies, is still very important in understanding the Southcottian tradition in America. Though Queen Elinor proved to be a false prophet, her brief stint with the colony underscores qualities within the ingathering of steadfast faith: acceptance of female leadership, resilience, and hope for the return of Shiloh. It is unfortunate that these same qualities put them at risk from the likes of Ann O'Delia Diss Debar.



For all her infamy, “Mother Elinor” exited the historical record circa 1910 and her final resting place is unknown.

Notes

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