

The Mob at Enfield

Introduction

By Elizabeth De Wolfe

For five days in May 1818, a mob set fear into the hearts of the Enfield, New Hampshire, Shakers. This little-known confrontation, provoked by two women whose husbands and children lived within the Enfield Shaker village, rallied public opinion against the Shakers and their way of life. The rare manuscript reprinted on the following pages records the Shakers' account of the five-day mob, one of two lengthy Shaker recollections of this volatile event.¹ Although written in the present tense, the document is retrospective and written after the conclusion of the mob, likely as part of the legal proceedings that followed.

Shaker Believers were targets of public scorn and collective violence from their earliest days in post-Revolutionary New England. From harassing mobs that stoned and assaulted founder Ann Lee and her followers on their proselytizing journey, to an enormous mob of more than five hundred people that descended on the Shaker community in Union Village, Ohio, in 1810 the non-believing public had used mob activity in attempts to force Shakers to act more in line with perceived societal norms.²

Frequently, Shaker apostates or biological relatives of Shakers raised the anti-Shaker mob. While the apostates rarely received their demands for back wages or goods, mobs that attempted to retrieve Shaker-held children were frequently successful, usually because the large number of participants overwhelmed the Shaker group and simply grabbed the children and fled. In all mobs, the potential for violence was quite real. Mobs injured Shakers, harmed animals, and destroyed property. The long history of violence against Shakers kept the Enfield Believers on edge as this mob event took shape.

At issue in Enfield were the rights of wives whose husbands and children were Shakers. The mob organizers, Mary Marshall Dyer (1780-1867) and Eunice Hawley Chapman (1778-1863), were outspoken and effective in arousing public opinion against the Shakers. They forced the Enfield Shaker community into the forefront of legal controversy by demanding

support from their husbands who were living with the Shakers, and by demanding access to or release of the Shaker-held children. This conflict drew widespread attention from the local community. It brought notoriety to the Shakers and resulted in public questioning of their claim to retain rights to children, and eventually changed New Hampshire divorce law.

The mob comprised three principal groups opposed to the Shakers: the co-leaders, Eunice Chapman and Mary Dyer, whose husbands and children were among the Enfield Shakers; local town officials who supported Dyer and Chapman; and sympathetic townspeople who formed the mob itself. The mob's goal was to force the Shakers to release the collective eight children of Mary Dyer and Eunice Chapman. On one level, the mob's actions reflected the town's desire to assert the rights and moral treatment of mothers, but the conflict also betrayed an economic concern—the town of Enfield's unwillingness to provide financial support for wives whose husbands, by virtue of their membership with the Shakers, were no longer family providers.

This vibrant account reveals the fluidity of mob attacks. The mob at Enfield was not one discrete event but rather was a series of connected interactions over the course of five days. During this tumult, allegiances shifted as the various participants gained—or lost—supporters. This manuscript account begins with the Shakers' first inkling that trouble was brewing when, on Monday, May 25, 1818, the Shakers learned that Eunice Chapman and Mary Dyer “with their forces” of supportive townspeople planned to come to the Shaker village the following morning at 8:00 a.m. With several of the male leaders absent from the Shaker community, the remaining Believers had good reason to worry about the gathering mob and its two vociferous and charismatic leaders.

For most of the previous decade, Eunice Hawley Chapman and Mary Marshall Dyer had plagued the Shakers with virulent anti-Shaker campaigns. Both women sought to retrieve their children. Chapman's three children had been among the Shakers for several years, secretly removed from her New York State home by her former husband, James, and taken away to Watervliet, New York. Eunice Chapman had published two anti-Shaker pamphlets, written threatening letters to the New Lebanon Ministry and petitioned the New York State legislature, ultimately receiving a legislative divorce from James. But when she attempted to retrieve her children from the Watervliet community, the children were nowhere to be found and the Shakers claimed no knowledge of their whereabouts.³

Mary Marshall Dyer had been a member of the Enfield Shakers for two years, leaving the community on a cold winter day in 1815. Denied her children, Dyer fought for their release and for the financial support of her husband, Joseph. Similar to Chapman, Dyer published anti-Shaker pamphlets, petitioned the New Hampshire legislature and traveled across New England gaining allies and stirring up anti-Shaker sentiment.⁴

The Enfield mob had its origins in a private conversation between Mary Dyer and Eunice Chapman. Acting on a tip that her husband and children had been smuggled to Enfield, New Hampshire, to prevent Eunice from retrieving the children, Chapman traveled to Enfield where she met Mary Dyer at an inn belonging to a local opponent of Shakerism, James Willis. There they made a plan. Mary Dyer and several local women would travel to the Shakers and request a visit with Mary's children. This was not at all unusual as Dyer had been a frequent visitor to the Shakers since departing the Enfield community. Once admitted, Dyer and her friends would request to see Chapman's children as well. At that point, the women planned, Eunice would burst in and, taking the Shakers by surprise, steal away her children. But their scheme was foiled when one of the Dyer-Chapman confidants alerted the Shakers to the impending ruse and Mary and Eunice had to change their plan.

Now aware of the presence of Chapman and Dyer, the Shakers turned to Judge Edward Evans, a local resident, and Joseph Merrill, an Enfield selectman and justice of the peace, to quell the rising tension. As this account documents, Evans attempted to mediate between Dyer (whom he had assisted previously) and Chapman, and, the Shakers. In an attempt to prevent large numbers of agitated people descending upon the Shakers, Evans drew up a list of proposed visitors for Shaker approval and carried this list to the Shaker village. Merrill, on the other hand, welcomed a show of town force and argued with Evans about how to proceed. All agreed the two mothers had a right to visit their children but the conditions of such a visit were a focus of this debate. While Evans met with the Shakers, Merrill, Chapman, and Dyer continued to stir up the crowd in front of James Willis's inn. When Evans returned to the inn with the Shakers' counter-proposal for a visit, a list of those whom they would permit to see the children, it was too late—Dyer and Chapman, with an entourage behind them “some on gigs and some on horses,” were already headed toward the Shaker community.

The struggle continued at the Shaker village with both the mob leaders

and the Shakers attempting to gain control of the volatile situation. The Shakers offered a meeting in the Dwelling House; Chapman insisted on the Trustees Office. It is interesting to note the presence of Merrill and Evans' wives at this gathering—does this reflect curiosity on the women's part or an attempt to conduct this mother and children reunion as a civil visit?

The visit was difficult for both mothers. Eunice had not seen her children in over two years. When she saw her daughters, she wept uncontrollably—joyful at the reunion but fearful of the changes in their manner. Her youngest daughter, Julia, refused to sit in her lap. Eunice had brought a gift of a doll, but to her dismay, Julia refused it. The older child, Susan, age twelve, became alarmed when her mother reached out and tried to remove her Shaker cap. Both girls stated that they wished to remain with the Shakers. Dyer's visit was equally distressing. Her two oldest children, Betsy and Caleb (called Marshall), by then young adults, intervened between Mary and their three younger siblings and insisted that they were all well cared for and that none of them wished to leave. The Shakers attempted to keep an aura of civility about the proceedings and served supper to the six visitors before their return to Enfield. Although Evans, Merrill and the men's wives appreciated the Shakers' hospitality, Eunice, the Shakers recorded, spoke to them rudely. With supper concluded, the entourage returned to town and the Shakers turned to an uneasy sleep.

The next day brought more conflict but Mary Dyer's weaker claim is clear during this third day of the mob action. Late in the day, Mary Dyer and several women traveled to the Shaker village to seek another visit with the Dyer children. But unlike Chapman, Dyer had neither legal custody nor a legislative divorce. Thus, local authorities hesitated to interfere in what was seen as a private marital dispute between the Dyers—what Shaker Richard McNemar later dismissed as a “domestic broil.” On this day, with no judges or selectman in attendance to support Dyer's claim, the Shakers refused to let Mary enter the community. Stung by their rebuke, she threatened to expose the Shakers and bring unwanted public attention to the beleaguered community. Experienced with Dyer's threats, the Shakers were rattled. James Chapman hid his children, fearing the mob would attack that night.

Tension built. Eunice Chapman returned to the Shaker village the next afternoon. She demanded to see her former husband but was told James could not be found. Eunice made good on threats of her own. This

manuscript captures Chapman's fury, and her quick and acidic wit, in an exchange of insults with Shaker James Pettengill. By evening Merrill and about a dozen men arrived at the Shaker village and demanded to see James Chapman. Merrill took control of the growing crowd and made a long speech, trying to calm the mounting tension and reasoning with the crowd to remain focused on the resolution of the issues at hand.

Merrill began with his claim that the group did not come for a riot, nor for the Dyer children. They only wanted a meeting with James Chapman and the lawful return of his kidnapped children. Merrill stated loudly that James Chapman had escaped the laws of New York by fleeing to New Hampshire. James's escape from justice, and the Shakers' refusal to help Eunice, had "stirred up" people's minds. Merrill declared that the treatment of Eunice, and by extension Mary, was "contrary to the laws of God and man." He threatened that the group would not leave until "satisfaction was given."

As darkness fell, more townspeople gathered at the Shaker community. One Shaker estimated that more than one hundred people surrounded the village. Some patrolled on horses and others hid under fences. Still others fired guns to keep the Shakers on edge. Again the Shakers pleaded with Merrill to disperse the crowd, but again Merrill refused.

After dark, James Chapman finally appeared and met with Eunice in the North House shop. Eunice insisted that she wanted the girls, but that James could keep George. The Chapmans argued for hours but could not reach an agreement on the children, so Eunice returned to the crowd, where Merrill threatened to bring five hundred people to the village the following day.

At 11:00 p.m. town officials produced a warrant for the arrest of James Chapman. At this evidence of a legal resolution, some of the gathered crowd returned to their homes, for they saw James's arrest as the last obstacle to the release of the children. But when Eunice announced she would not leave until she had her children, the remaining crowd took matters into its own hands and wildly searched the village. Around 1:00 a.m. Enfield resident Moses Johnson discovered George hidden in a barn. The rest of the mob broke up. Although she had hoped to retrieve her daughters as well, Eunice immediately fled New Hampshire with the unwilling George, and returned to New York State.

The following morning, Friday, May 29, the Shakers lodged a formal complaint against the mob's actions with Judge Blaisdell of the nearby

village of Canaan. Blaisdell called together the principal participants including Joseph Merrill, the Shakers, and Mary Dyer. He rebuked the group for such a disorderly proceeding and especially castigated Merrill for permitting the unlawful search of the Shaker village. At a public meeting the next day, Judge Blaisdell's admonition to the participants in the mob offered an effective resolution to the event. The Shakers had forced the town to adhere to civil behavior and legal measures to resolve disputes. Random violence would not be condoned.

Despite this measure of success, the Shakers were discovered to be holding the Chapman children illegally and this revelation forced the Shakers to adhere to custody laws of the surrounding community. The following spring, Eunice returned to Enfield with a writ of habeas corpus and the Shakers dutifully released her daughters.

Mary Dyer was not as successful. Four of the five Dyer children remained Shakers until their deaths. The middle son, Jerrub, seceded, but not until 1852. Mary Dyer's diatribes against the Shakers lasted another forty years and included several damaging publications.

For all the mob's frenzy, it received little notice in the local papers. The *Dartmouth Gazette* carried the news of George's retrieval. Eunice Chapman took it upon herself to publicize the event as her personal triumph over Shakerism, as did Mary Dyer who although she never triumphed, cited this mob event in her writings and speeches as evidence of the continued cruelty of the Shakers. Although the mob at Enfield reestablished a more or less peaceful relationship between the Shakers and the town of Enfield, tension still remained. Ever fearful that the town would be forced to support non-believing wives of Shaker men, Enfield residents placed four petitions before the New Hampshire Legislature over the following decade asking the legislature to intervene when Shakerism split apart a family. Each time, the requests for assistance were denied.

Notes

1. See also John Lyon, "Statement of John Lyon." In *Historical Notes Having Reference to Believers at Enfield*, comp. Henry Blinn. Typescript in the collection of the Shaker Library, Sabbathday Lake, Me. For a detailed analysis of this event see Elizabeth De Wolfe, "The Mob at Enfield: Community, Gender, and Violence Against the Shakers," in Susan Love Brown, ed., *Intentional Community: An Anthropological Perspective* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002): 107-130. An earlier version of this essay appeared in the *The [Enfield, N.H.] Friends Quarterly* 9 (Spring 1997): 1-[2a]; Part Two, 9 (Summer 1997): [2a]. The author is grateful for the assistance of Elaine Brouillette, University of New England.
2. On violence against Ann Lee and the early Shakers see Stephen J. Stein, "Celebrating and Sacralizing Violence: *Testimonies* Concerning Ann Lee and the Early Shakers." *American Communal Societies Quarterly* 3 (January 2009): 3-12.
3. On Eunice Chapman's campaign, see Nelson Blake, "Eunice Against the Shakers." *New York History* 41 (October 1960): 359-378 and Jean M. Humez, "'A Woman Mighty to Pull You Down': Married Women's Rights and Female Anger in the Anti-Shaker Narratives of Eunice Chapman and Mary Marshall Dyer." *Journal of Women's History* 6 (Summer 1994): 90-110.
4. On Mary Dyer's life and anti-Shaker campaign see Elizabeth De Wolfe, *Shaking the Faith: Women, Family, and Mary Marshall Dyer's Anti-Shaker Campaign, 1815-1867* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002). For a discussion of Mary and Joseph Dyer's continuing battle and a reprint of their first publications about their dispute, see Elizabeth De Wolfe, *Domestic Broils: Shakers, Antebellum Marriage, and the Narratives of Mary and Joseph Dyer* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010).