

William Adee Whitehead's Visit to the Shakers

INTRODUCTION

By Elizabeth and Scott De Wolfe

On Saturday morning, August 7, 1830, William Adee Whitehead left New York City with his sister and brother “for the purpose of making part of what is called the ‘fashionable tour.’”¹ The party traveled north up the river to Hudson and then rode twenty-five miles to the summer haven of Lebanon Springs. Over the next two days, the Whitehead siblings took part in a popular antebellum pastime, visiting the Shakers.

As Glendyne Wergland documents in her recent compilation of visitors' accounts, from the time of the Shakers' first arrival in New York State in the eighteenth century they were objects of curiosity and a destination for the inquisitive.² As the home of the Shaker Ministry, and conveniently located near the popular healing springs, the New Lebanon Shaker community received particular notice from travelers. Sabbath services routinely took place in a meetinghouse filled with the world's people. Some visitors were careful and considerate observers of the Shakers' faith and practices. Others were less accepting, and jeered and disrupted the sacred services. Although the Shakers closed their services to the public gaze for a time in the mid-nineteenth century, for most of their history the Believers' worship services have remained open in hopes of gaining new members.

William Whitehead was a careful and curious observer. Born in 1810 in Newark, New Jersey, Whitehead left school at the age of twelve. Later described as “thorough, exact and efficient,” Whitehead embarked on a career as a surveyor and by 1828 was working in Key West, Florida.³ He journeyed to New Jersey in April 1830 for a short interlude in the North before returning in January 1831 to the southernmost city in the United States, having accepted the position of collector of the Port of Key West. He later served as mayor until a political struggle convinced him to leave Key West. Whitehead's various careers speak to his dedication to detail. Following his 1838 departure from the Florida Keys, he worked as a banker, draftsman, sketcher, merchant, historian, and writer. He was

instrumental in founding the New Jersey Historical Society in 1845 and served as its corresponding secretary until his death in 1884.⁴

Whitehead's party arrived at the New Lebanon Shaker Village on Sunday, August 8, 1830, to observe Shaker "exercises." He appreciated the clean, orderly village and remarked that "the houses are all large and kept in the nicest order, both externally & internally, and so very clean are they kept that the most notable housewife in the country might blush to behold the difference between their several establishments & her own."⁵ The meeting house was particularly impressive to Whitehead, and as he took his seat on the benches provided for visitors, he noted the "old fashion" dress of his Shaker hosts. He had little praise for the physical appearance of the Shaker sisters, relaying a common assessment that their dress and "pale faces gave them the appearance of so many corpses just risen from their graves."⁶

Following the service, Whitehead and company returned to Lebanon Springs, but the following day they ventured once again to the Shakers to "inspect their domestic arrangements and inform ourselves more particularly as to some of their doctrines."⁷

Whitehead's journal entry is typical of the visitor account genre, with descriptions of the community's buildings and Shaker dress, beliefs, and religious services. His observations are detailed and balanced. He seems genuinely curious about Shaker life and tours the entire village. Whitehead is impressed by the "beautiful, large" church and the "excessively clean and neat" buildings, noting that in the blacksmith's shop "even the anvil shone."⁸ The Shakers, he writes, "are very polite, treating visitors with the greatest attention and are very free in acquainting you with their doctrine."⁹ Whitehead attempts to record his theological conversation with a Shaker brother, but notes that his "memory may not serve [him] well enough to record their sentiment in respect to all the points that were touched upon."¹⁰ Words also failed Whitehead when he attempted to describe the Shaker dance, stating, "It is impossible to give a true idea, save by ocular demonstration."¹¹ Whitehead offers an unusual, and valuable, contribution in his journal: a diagram of the Shaker dance he witnessed, one of very few such sketches that survive. Despite Whitehead's positive impressions, the Shakers did not gather him to the fold. Whitehead concluded that "altogether, they are a most singular people, and while I pitied the delusion I believe them to be under, I could not but wonder at their appearing so perfectly convinced of its truth."¹²

Notes

1. William Adece Whitehead, *Memorandum of Peregrinations by Land & Water. Recorded for My Own Amusement. Vol. 2nd from July 1830 to May 1832 by W.A.W.*, 17. Photocopy of a manuscript journal in the collection of the Monroe County Public Library, Key West, Florida. A search for the original manuscript journal was unsuccessful and the location of the original is at present unknown. The authors are grateful to Tom Hambright at the Monroe County Public Library for permission to reprint this account, to Denise Treacy for transcribing the manuscript, and for the assistance of Fallon Kobes.
2. Glendyne Wergland, ed. *Visiting the Shakers: Watervliet, Hancock, Tyringham, New Lebanon, 1778-1849* (Clinton, N.Y.: Richard W. Couper Press, 2007).
3. Samuel Irenaeus Prime, "Memorial of William A. Whitehead," in *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society*, Vol. III, 1884-1885 (Newark, N.J.: Printed at the Advertiser Printing House, 1885), 185. Whitehead's papers are found in the New Jersey Historical Society. See <http://www.jerseyhistory.org/findingaid.php?aid=0941> for details.
4. On Whitehead's political career see Jefferson B. Browne, *Key West: Old and New* (St. Augustine, Florida: The Record Company, 1912), 52-54, 129.
5. Whitehead, *Memorandum*, 20.
6. Whitehead, *Memorandum*, 22.
7. Whitehead, *Memorandum*, 24-25.
8. Whitehead, *Memorandum*, 20, 29.
9. Whitehead, *Memorandum*, 30.
10. Whitehead, *Memorandum*, 26.
11. Whitehead, *Memorandum*, 22.
12. Whitehead, *Memorandum*, 29-30.