

Document Three:

Massachusetts' Shaker Communities' Letter to the General Court of Massachusetts, January 1818

To the Honourable Senate, and House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, in General Court Assembled: in January 1818

Whereas, a petition from a number of persons in the County of York, was presented to the Legislature at their last cession, Praying that an act may be passed to disannul the Covenants, and agreements of the people called Shakers; alleging that they have withheld, and defrauded heirs of their Just and natural rights &c.

We, the undersigned, being members of the Societies of people called Shakers, in the towns of Hancock, Pittsfield, and Tyringham, in the County of Berkshire, knowing that any act to abridge the rights of any one Society of our denomination, within the Same State, must operate Equally upon all; feel in duty bound for ourselves, and in behalf of the Societies to which we belong; to declare our innocence, and to enter our Solemn protest against any act which so pointedly Strikes against the liberty of conscience, and the very root of the constitution of this State, and that of the United States.

The covenant into which we have entered is of the most Sacred and Solemn nature, being founded and established upon the most Sacred conviction of conscience, that it is what God required of us.

Hence any law that may be passed to annul, or counteract any article of this covenant, must Serve to abridge the rights of conscience; and Strike at the very foundation pillar of our free and happy Government.

The form and manner of our Covenant, by which we have consecrated ourselves and property to God; and by which the members of Each Society are bound together as the children of one family; being dictated by the purest principles of conscience; is to us the most dear of all others; and is that which receives the Sanction of divine revelation recorded in Scripture, and the practice, custom, and Support, of all Civilized nations for many ages; that a man, or woman, has a right to consecrate a part, or all his property with himself to God for pious & Sacred uses, is that which a canded world will never dispute; and if we refer to the Sacred writings, we Shall find that the right of parents to consecrate to God, what they possessed, was carried so far that that is Some instances they consecrated even their Children; as in the case of Jephthahs daughter, and Samuel the

prophet, and others; and also at the establishment of the primitive Church of Christ, under the immediate care of the Sacred Apostles when those who had possessions Sold all, and came and cast it down to the Apostles feet; and division was made to every one according to his needs; and no one called aught which he possessed his own &c.

But according to the third article of our covenant, no property can be admitted into the Joint interest of the Church, until it is cleared from all entanglements from without; by paying all Just debts, and making a Just and reasonable Settlement with all the heirs who Stand without; & this has been our invariable practice; and we challenge the world to prove to the contrary; and we think that none but the apostate and prejudiced will accuse us of defrauding or withholding any Just right from heirs or any other persons.

But it has often been the case, that parents who have believed and their children Stand without, that the parents have given their whole property to their children, not reserving the least remains to Support themselves thro the infirmities of old age; others after settling all Just demands as aforesaid, have reserved a portion to themselves, which they have agreeable to their own faith consecrated to God, for the Support of the gospel, and other charitable and pious uses.

The right of persons to devote property for laudable and pious uses, under our free constitution, appears to be fully established, by what almost daily takes place by individual donations to the use of Collages, Academies, and other useful improvements.

Upon what grounds of Justice then, do your petitioners wish to Single out the Shakers and deny them this right of acting according to the dictates of a pure conscience; Should this petition be granted according to the wishes of your petitioners, we can never consider it in any other light than as a real act of persecution.

But it is that which we confidently believe when duly considered and fully understood by the honorable and enlightened minds of those who compose the Legislature of our [fair?] and happy State; will never be granted.

Furthermore, as the design and purpose of our uniting in a Joint interest, according to the 5th article of our Covenant, was not to lay up a temporal interest here in this world; but all which we came in possession of by honest industry more than for our own Support, to appropriate it to the use of the Gospel, for the Support of the Poor, and other charitable and pious uses.

Hence, the hand of Charity has ever been held open to the poor, the fatherless, and widow; so that hundreds and thousands of dollars have been

expended, by each Society, (who hold their Joint interest in a Separate capacity;) and in Stead of turning our own poor, upon the town as is the usual custom, we have ever maintained them ourselves, and have bourn our equal burden in taxes for the Support of the poor in towns where we reside, as well as all taxes for the Support of Civil Government; and in cases of the destruction of property by fire, Such as Portsmouth, Newbury port, and other places, we have contrabuted largely for the relief of the Sufferers; as also in cases of Sickness as the yellow fever in New York, Philadelphia &C.

We have also laid out great expences upon the public roads, so that hundreds and thousands of dollars have been Spent upon the roads in and about our Villages, more than our legal taxation.

But these things are not mentioned for the purpose of boasting, but that Such as fancy that with the cruel grasp of the miser we are hoarding up treasures of Silver & Gold, may See the mistake.

Furthermore it ought to be Considered that, at the first establishment of all the Societies of our denomination thro the State, the people were mostly poor very few heads of families were in possession of more property than barely to pay all Just demands from without, so that in Some Societies nearly, and in others all the property now in Possession, is that which has been acquired by the faithful industry, and hard labour of those who now reside in our communities, who have consecrated themselves with their time, and talents to God, and each other, by the most Solemn Covenant. What right then, has a man, or woman, to break in upon that covenant, which Stands as the last will and testament of a departed Father or Mother, Brother or Sisters. For the honor of America! let it never be Said under our free and happy Government, that the Sacret pledges of the departed Saint, must be torn from the holy temple consecrated to the worship of the great ruler of the universe, to Satisfy Satisfy the demands of an apostate and avaricious mind!

In presenting the foregoing considerations to the wise and enlightened minds of the rulers of our State, we are far from wishing to censure or cast any reflection upon that respectable body, neither do we entertain a Suspicion that when they are properly informed, of the purity of our motives, and the Justice of our proceedings, they will pass any act which will be injureous to our persons or property, or infringe upon the rights of Conscience.

But as we Justly esteem the free and happy Government, under which we are placed by the finger of providence, we Submit the foregoing, to the Serious and deliberate consideration of the Just, and equitable rulers of our State; who are called to guard, and protect the rights and liberties of

conscience in this enlightened age.

And with due respect we Shall ever remain your faithful friends and wish for your prosperity & happiness.

In behalf of the Society at Hancock & Pittsfield{ Calvin Cogswell
John Wright Daniel Goodrich

In behalf of the Society at Tyngham{ Thomas Patten Henry Herrick

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