

From the Russells to the Pilots: The Beginning and End of North Union

By Cathie Winans

The North Union Shakers lived on 1,393 acres of land in northeastern Ohio's Connecticut Western Reserve from 1822 to 1889. They called their land "The Valley of God's Pleasure." The North Union Shaker Village, located just eight miles east of Cleveland, was destined to become the garden city known as Shaker Heights, Ohio.

This is the story of two married couples who were members of the North Union Shaker Community. The first couple was Ralph and Laura Russell; they represent the beginning of North Union Village. The second couple was John and Maria Pilot; they represent the end of North Union.

Following the death of Mother Ann Lee, founder of the Shakers, and that of her immediate successor Father James Whittaker, two American-born Shaker converts, Father Joseph Meacham and Mother Lucy Wright, shared the leadership role.

Mother Lucy sent Shaker missionaries from New Lebanon, New York to Kentucky and southwestern Ohio during the campfire revivals of the early 1800s. As a result, a Shaker community was established at Turtle Creek near Lebanon, Ohio. It was called Union Village. David Darrow, who had been imprisoned with Mother Ann Lee in Albany,¹ and later served as an elder at New Lebanon, became the head elder at Union Village.²

At the same time that Shaker missionaries were recruiting converts in Kentucky and southwestern Ohio, pioneers were migrating from New England to settle in northeastern Ohio's Connecticut Western Reserve. One of those pioneers was Jacob Russell, a veteran of the American Revolutionary War, who lived in Windsor Locks, Connecticut, with his wife, Esther, and their ten children (four other children had died as an infants).³ In 1811, at the age of sixty-six, Jacob purchased 475 acres of land in the Connecticut Western Reserve, more specifically land along Doan Brook in Warrensville Township, Ohio.⁴ Jacob sent his two sons, Elijah and Ralph, to inspect the land and clear an area large enough to build a log cabin. The next year, the Russell clan of twenty members migrated to Warrensville Township. They built more cabins and farmed the land. In

1821, Jacob Russell died and was buried on his son Ralph's farm just east of the intersection of today's South Park Boulevard and Lee Road.⁵

While the Russells were busy farming their land, we know from the diary of Elder Richard Pelham that James Darrow, nephew of Elder David Darrow, visited Union Village and confessed his sins. At James's request, Richard Pelham and Elder Matthew Houston made the 200-mile journey to Stow, Ohio. They visited with James and met his brothers, Joseph and George, Jr. The following is a passage from Richard Pelham's autobiography, written in 1844. It is rather lengthy but it offers a clear explanation of why North Union came to be located in Warrensville Township and not in Stow.

In 1820 we [at Union Village] received a visit from James Darrow, a nephew of Father David. He lived in Stow, Summit County, 25 miles from Cleveland where he owned land and had a family. He confessed his sins before leaving and requested a visit from some of our preachers, believing there were a number in his neighborhood who could be gathered. Soon afterward, Elder Matthew went there and took me with him and this was my first missionary trip and the distance was over 200 miles; roads were bad, and in some places lay for miles through uninhabited wilderness and we had to go on horseback. We found our lone brother situated in a beautiful location. His brother, Joseph, owned a fine farm right across the road from his and his brother George's farm lay on the north adjoining. They had good buildings and were in good circumstance. Taking these lands and the others adjoining and the situation seemed a lovely one for believers. The prospect for success opened quite favorably. James's wife a most amiable woman received us with great kindness and was soon ready to set out. The two brothers also set out, and Joseph's wife, a very kind and respectable woman set out with him. But George's wife, a gross animal biped, was ferociously opposed to the cross [the rule of celibacy].

Several visits were made here in each of which I participated. Several other souls were added 3 of whom were widows having children and some single persons and were quite in hopes of establishing a society. But after a while, George's wife got the victory over him and he fell back, and Joseph soon followed and all our prospects were blasted. We saved but one of Joseph's family,



Ralph and Laura Russell when they lived in Solon, Ohio
(From the collection of The Shaker Historical Society, Nord Library, Shaker Heights, Ohio)

Julia, a lovely young Sister who accompanied her Uncle James to Union Village and is still living an honorable and faithful believer. James was advised to stay a few months longer, till all that remained faithful could get ready to move to Union Village with him. During this interval, Ralph Russell was passing by James Darrow's to visit some relatives several miles beyond, and being benighted called on him to stay over night. James gave him a kind reception and during his stay opened the Testimony to him quite fully. This apparent accident laid the foundation for the establishment of the society at North Union! Ralph went on his way and was much sooner forgotten by James than James was by him. Soon after this James with his little flock moved down to Union Village, many of whom remained good faithful believers to the end. In the fall of 1821 Ralph Russell made a pedestrian journey to Union Village from Warrensville near Cleveland, the little heaven received from James having worked to that effect. Ralph confessed his sins.⁶

Following his father's death, Ralph Russell decided to convert to the Shaker religion. He journeyed to Union Village and met with Elder

David Darrow. Imagine how exciting it must have been for Ralph to meet someone who had actually known Mother Ann Lee. Although Ralph was married and a father of three young sons – Ralph Ellsworth, Jacob, and Hezekiah – he planned to pack up his family and move to Union Village. However, Darrow advised Ralph to return home to Warrensville Township and await further instructions.

Upon his return home, Ralph was so enthusiastic about Shakerism that he converted his wife Laura, eight of his brothers and sisters and their families, as well as his nearby neighbors. Everyone was prepared to follow Ralph to Union Village. Then a letter arrived from Elder David. He recommended that Ralph, his siblings, and his neighbors donate their land and establish a new Shaker community called North Union. The deeds to the properties were signed over to the trustees at Union Village.

“Farms were dedicated to the joint interest, additional land was purchased by the trustees at Union Village, and the settlement was supervised by personnel assigned by the western Shaker leaders [at Union Village].”⁷ Elders Richard Pelham and James Hodge were sent from Union Village to North Union to instruct the new converts. The elders arrived on March 25, 1822 and held the first public meeting on March 31. This marks the beginning of North Union, which functioned more as a satellite community for Union Village rather than as an independent community.

The North Union community grew in strength and numbers. A building boom was underway. By 1826 the Center Family was ready to build its dwelling house on the west side of Lee Road between present-day South Park Boulevard and Shaker Boulevard. They hired James Prescott, a stonemason traveling through Cleveland on his way to Indian missions in Missouri, to cut the stone and lay the foundation for the dwelling house. It followed Shaker architectural guidelines with two separate entrances and staircases—one for the sisters and one for the brothers.⁸ Dormitory-style retiring rooms on the second floor accommodated the sisters on one side of the hallway and the brothers on the opposite side. There was a common dining hall where the sisters sat at separate tables from the brothers.

During the construction of the Center Family’s dwelling house the members of the North Union community lived in existing log cabins or frame farm houses. “In the spring of 1826, the Union Village ministry chose from among its members Ashbel Kitchell to be the lead elder at North Union.”⁹ It is important to keep in mind that Ashbel Kitchell was a fully covenanted Shaker; not only had he confessed his sins but he had also



North Union Center Family dwelling house

(From the collection of The Shaker Historical Society, Nord Library, Shaker Heights, Ohio)

signed the Shaker covenant. “He was accompanied by James McNemar who would serve as second elder along with Lois Spinning who would be head eldress and Thankful Stewart as second eldress. These four Shakers established the Order of Eldership with its equality of the sexes.”¹⁰

In his interpretative biography of Brother James Prescott, Richard Klyver quotes Brother James’ description of Ralph Russell as “tall and straight, about six feet in height, well proportioned, dark complexion, black hair and eyes, and a winning manner; mild and persuasive in argument, naturally of a sociable and genial disposition, and kind and hospitable to strangers,”¹¹ and Ashbel Kitchell as “of medium height, large head, self-esteem quite prominent, veneration large, large ears and eyes, deep and broad across the chest and shoulders, corpulent, weighing about 250 pounds, and of dignified and commanding appearance... Although he reproved sin and disorder with severity, yet he was tender-hearted, sympathetic and easily touched by the sorrows and griefs of those around him. In all his dealings with mankind he was no flatterer, but open, frank, generous, and candid.”¹² Klyver himself writes that “Ralph lacked aggressiveness, decisiveness, organizational ability and business acumen.... These were the very attributes which Ashbel Kitchell did possess. The head ministry at Union Village took note of these qualities and decided he was

just the right person to make the fledgling Colony of North Union into a viable, growing, and prosperous society.”¹³

By 1828 the dwelling house was ready to be occupied. First, the adult North Union Shaker converts needed to sign the covenant. For married couples, signing the covenant meant that the husband and wife had mutually agreed to dissolve their marriage and to relinquish authority over their children to the guardianship of the ministry. Beginning in September, 1828 and through late fall, eighty converts, including seventeen adult Russells, signed the covenant. However, Ralph Russell and his wife Laura were not among them. On September 20, Ralph accepted \$200 from Union Village trustees for his portion of the land. Eventually Ralph, Laura, their young sons, and Ralph’s widowed mother departed North Union.¹⁴

They moved first to Aurora and later settled in Solon. Laura and Ralph were to have four more children: Andrew, Gershom, Joseph, and Laura Josephine.¹⁵ Perhaps Ralph and Laura left North Union because celibacy was an obstacle or perhaps they did not want to give up being father and mother to their sons. One common theory is that they left because Ralph was insulted when the Union Village Ministry sent Elder Ashbel Kitchell to replace him in the leadership role.¹⁶ However, this writer proposes another explanation. Ralph Russell had served in the War of 1812, the same war in which Andrew Jackson distinguished himself as a military hero. Jackson ran for president in 1824, received the most electoral votes but not enough to win the election. Subsequently the House of Representatives selected John Quincy Adams as president and Jackson considered himself unjustly deprived of the presidency. He later won the presidency in 1828. Because political convictions can be very powerful motivators, it is possible that when Ralph learned from Elder Ashbel Kitchell, who was trained at New Lebanon,¹⁷ that Shakers were to avoid “political sentiments”¹⁸ and not vote, this brave, hard-working frontiersman could not accept being denied this basic right. Ralph even named his fourth son Andrew Jackson Russell as a statement of his convictions. One wonders if the ministry at Union Village decided to send Elder Ashbel Kitchell to North Union in 1826 in response to the birth of Ralph’s fourth son.¹⁹ Whatever his reason for leaving, Ralph will be admired and remembered as the founder of the North Union. He died in 1866 at age seventy-seven.

In the Census of 1830, Ashbel Kitchell was listed as “head of household” for the Center (Church) Family with thirty-one members; while Chester Risley was “head of household” for the North (Mill) Family

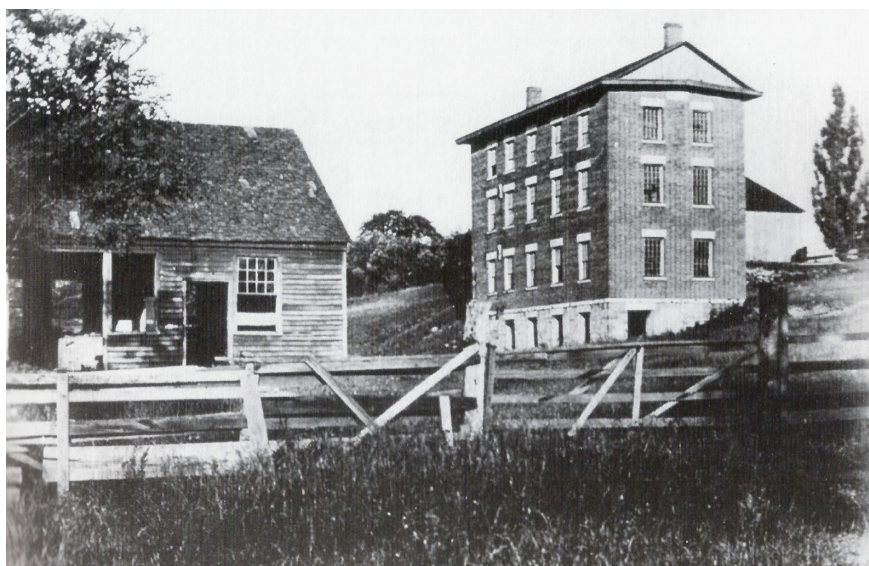
with thirty members; and Oliver Wheeler was “head of household” for the East (Gathering) Family with eleven members.²⁰ After five years of service at North Union, Elder Ashbel Kitchell was instructed to return to Union Village in December 1831, but not before he had defended his flock at North Union against pressure from Mormon missionaries from Kirtland, Ohio to convert to their religion.²¹

The North Union Shakers “put their hands to work and their hearts to God.” They dammed Doan Brook to form two lakes (Upper Shaker Lake and Lower Shaker Lake). As the membership grew, they divided the village into three portions. In addition to the Center Family dwelling house, they built dwelling houses for the North Family near what is now Coventry and North Park Boulevard and for the East Family near Fontenay and South Woodland Roads. They quarried sandstone and built a five-story grist mill in 1844. Unfortunately it was blown up as part of a Fourth of July celebration in 1886 by its new owner, Cleveland city councilman Charles Reader. He preferred to sell the sandstone rather than grind wheat into flour.

For many years, the Shakers raised sheep. Not far from Jacob Russell’s final resting place, they built and operated a woolen mill. That brings our story to the second significant couple, John and Maria Pilot. John was originally from Newtown, Wales, where his family owned a rope-making shop. He met and married Maria at Little Falls, New York. Three of their seven children died as infants. In 1858, John and Maria, along with their four surviving children—Mary, Sarah, Charles, and baby Charlotte—arrived at North Union. They were assigned to the Center Family because John was a weaver by trade and the woolen mill was operated by the Center Family.²²

By 1854 the demand for woolen goods in the fast-growing Cleveland area prompted the North Union Shakers to build a substantial brick mill. The wool industry thrived as the Shakers produced gloves, mittens, and stockings. On the ground floor of the woolen mill a large lathe was installed for turning broom handles. John and Maria Pilot had arrived at the height of prosperity at North Union. Brother John was put in charge of the woolen mill.

In a 1934 interview with the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*²³ Charlie Pilot recalled how, as a boy of six, he watched from Lee Road as his father entered the Center Family dwelling house through the brothers’ door and his mother Maria, with his nine-month old baby sister Charlotte in her arms, walked



North Union woolen mill (with blacksmith shop on left)

(From the collection of The Shaker Historical Society, Nord Library, Shaker Heights, Ohio)

through the sisters' door. Then Charlie was told by one of the Shaker brothers that he was to live in the boys' house while his two older sisters were to live in the girls' house. In the archives of The Shaker Historical Society are letters written by Jemina Mousseau, a Native American woman who was one of three orphans left on the Center Family's doorstep. She described Maria Pilot as a gentle, loving woman who was responsible for the well-being of the younger girls.

Although he was in his eighties at the time of the *Plain Dealer* interview, Charlie Pilot still remembered how, when he was a boy of eight or nine, he had a chance to go for a walk with his mother. They walked until they were out of sight of everyone, perhaps among the trees of the Center Family's apple orchard. Then Sister Maria broke the Shaker regulations which restricted signs of affection between brothers and sisters: she gave Charlie a hug and a kiss that only a mother could give.

Following the Civil War, the lives of Brother John, Sister Maria, and their children reflected a growing trend at Shaker villages. The younger generation was no longer anxious to sign the covenant. The Industrial Revolution was taking hold in the country and competing with Shaker-made products. By the early 1870s, John and Maria's daughter, Mary,



Portraits of Brother John Pilot and Sister Maria Pilot

(From the collection of The Shaker Historical Society, Nord Library, Shaker Heights, Ohio)

had left North Union. Their daughter Sarah died and was buried at the Shaker cemetery on what is now South Park Boulevard.²⁴ Charlie declined to sign the covenant and left at age twenty-one. Later he married and had children. Charlotte left North Union when she was nineteen years old. She told the *Plain Dealer* reporter that she left because life at North Union was “so boring.”

Because of the exodus of the younger generation, it became increasingly difficult for the older generation of Shakers to maintain the buildings, care for the animals, farm the land, and produce adequate quantities of products for sale. As a result, “part of the property was rented to tenant farmers; laborers were hired to maintain the buildings and grounds; and the Union Village ministry visited periodically to provide spiritual care.”²⁵

Brother John and Sister Maria remained faithful to the Shaker religion. They were among the last twenty-seven Shakers living at North Union when instructions arrived from Union Village to disband. Their household goods were sold at auction. The 1,393 acres of land and buildings were

sold by the trustees at Union Village to real estate developers. However, Union Village trustees Joseph Slingerland and William Ayers “decided to revitalize [North Union’s] 350 acres of vineyards located in Wickliffe, Lake County, and develop a commercial winery.”²⁶

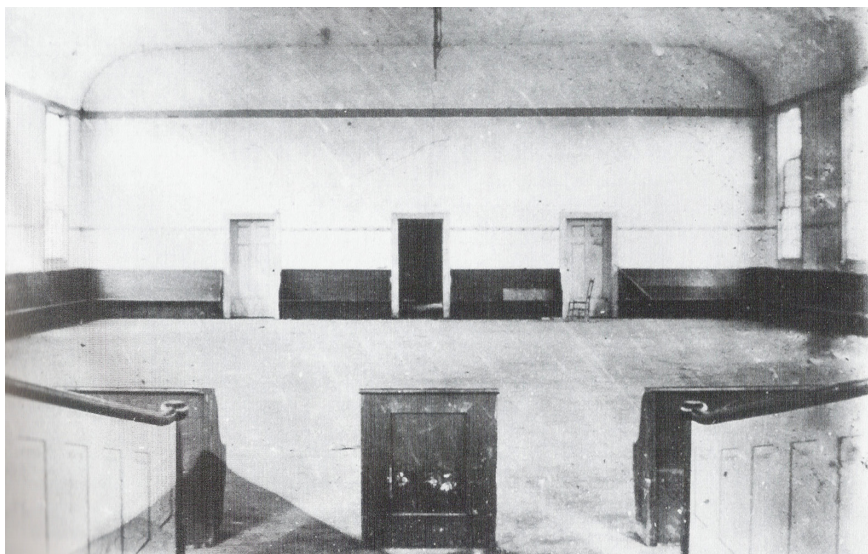
October 24, 1889 marked the end of the North Union Shaker community. Brother John and Sister Maria traveled with their Shaker brothers and sisters to Watervliet, Ohio, near Centerville.²⁷ John died there in 1898 and Maria died in 1899.²⁸ When Watervliet disbanded, the few Shakers remaining there had to move on to Union Village where Ralph Russell had wanted to go originally.

Today, when you visit Shaker Heights, you can revisit and celebrate the heritage of the North Union Shakers. You can recall their jubilant singing and dancing whenever you pass the original two stone gateposts at the northeast corner of Lee Road and Shaker Boulevard, where the Meeting House once stood. If you walk near the intersection of Kemper and Fairhill Roads, you can catch a glimpse of the historic marker that commemorates the location of the great stone gristmill. You are “most kindly welcome” to visit The Shaker Historical Museum, located near Horseshoe Lake (Upper Shaker Lake), where you can see firsthand the beauty of Shaker craftsmanship in exhibits of Shaker furniture and artifacts. You can pay your respects to the North Union Shakers with a visit to the Warrensville West Cemetery on Lee Road just north of Chagrin Boulevard. In 1909 the Van Sweringen brothers, the famous real estate developers and railroad magnates who built Shaker Heights, the Shaker Rapid Transit, and Cleveland’s Terminal Tower, had the graves in the original Shaker cemetery on the south side of South Park Boulevard, just west of Lee Road, dug up and re-interred in the Warrensville West Cemetery.²⁹ (Ah, but that’s a story for another day.)



North Union meeting house

(From the collection of The Shaker Historical Society, Nord Library, Shaker Heights, Ohio)



Interior of the North Union meeting house

(From the collection of The Shaker Historical Society, Nord Library, Shaker Heights, Ohio)

Notes

1. *Testimonies of the Life, Character, Revelations, and Doctrines of Mother Ann Lee and the Elders with Her Through whom the Word of Eternal Life was opened in this day of Christ's Second Appearing. Collected from Living Witnesses in Union with the Church*, 2nd ed. (Albany, N.Y.: Weed, Parsons & Co. 1888) 55-57.
2. Cheryl Bauer and Rob Portman, *Wisdom's Paradise: The Forgotten Shakers of Union Village* (Wilmington, Ohio: Orange Frazer Press, 2004) 30-31.
3. Caroline B. Piercy, *The Valley of God's Pleasure* (New York, N.Y.: Stratford House, 1951) 16. In a letter dated Oct. 11, 1969, to Mrs. Elizabeth Nord, first curator of The Shaker Historical Society, George Ely Russell explained that Ralph was the tenth of Jacob's fourteen children; not the eighth of eleven as written by Piercy. Another important source is J. P. McLean, *Shakers of Ohio* (Columbus, Ohio: F.J. Heer Printing Co., 1907) 112-89.
4. Township 7, Range 11 was re-named in honor of Daniel Warren, who built the first log cabin in 1809.
5. George Ely Russell, *Descendants of William Russell of Salem, Mass., 1674* (Middletown, Maryland: Catoctin Press, 1989) 56-60 and 117-121. Note: Lee Road is not named in honor of Mother Ann Lee but rather for a farmer, Elias Lee. He owned so much of the land needed for the road that Cuyahoga County agreed to name it after Farmer Lee.
6. Richard Pelham, *A Sketch of the Life and Religious Experiences of Richard W. Pelham*, Shaker Manuscript Collection. VI. Testimonies and Biographies. North Union, O., B. Vol. 45-48. (Cleveland, Ohio: The Western Reserve Historical Society). Reprinted in *The Shaker Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1969) 58-59.
7. Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992) 109.
8. Richard D. Klyver, *Brother James: The Life and Times of Shaker Elder, James Prescott* (Shaker Heights, Ohio: The Shaker Historical Society, 1992) 12-15. Based on the Journal by Brother James Prescott in Shaker Manuscript Collection of The Western Reserve Historical Society.
9. Klyver, 19.
10. Klyver, 21.
11. Klyver, 19, from James Prescott's "History of North Union – 1830," 13.
12. Klyver, 21, from Prescott, 26-7.
13. Klyver, 19.
14. Piercy, 91. In a letter dated Aug. 29, 1967, George Ely Russell explains to Mrs. Nord that in a deed of Sept. 20, 1828, Ralph and Laura sold 59 acres in the east part of lot 34 Warrensville to Union Village Shakers for \$200.
15. In the letter referenced above, George Ely Russell goes on to explain that he believes Ralph probably left North Union in 1829 or very early in 1830 for he and his family are listed in the 1830 Census as living in Aurora Township, Portage County. On July 1, 1959, the birth and death years for Ralph's children were transcribed by Mrs. Nord from the Union Cemetery Records:

Ralph Ellsworth	1818-1850
Jacob Von Huffman	1820-1888 (or 86)

Hezikiah Loomis	1821-1857
Andrew Jackson	1825-1906
Gershom Sheldon	1832-1854
Joseph Pelton	1834-1870
Laura Josephine	1837-1843

16. Klyver, 24-25.
17. Piercy, 85.
18. Stein, 73. In her response from New Lebanon (the name changed to Mount Lebanon after 1861) to the publication of the *Testimony*, co-authored by Union Village elders, David Darrow, John Meacham, and Benjamin Youngs, Mother Lucy Wright “chided the western Believers [in a letter dated 23 Feb. 1809] for their open expression of *political sentiments*, ... because *our Kingdom is not of this world*.” And on page 225, Stein quotes from the monthly publication of the 1870s *The Shakers*, edited by George Lomas, which stated that the “angelic life” has “freedom from political parties.”
19. The birth year for Andrew Jackson Russell (see note 15 above) was also listed as 1825 in “Appendix to the Russells of North Union Shaker Society, Warrensville, Ohio 1822-1889, Compiled by George Ely Russell 1951.” However, in Chart #4 of Genealogy Charts compiled by Mr. and Mrs. Charles Lawson of Bellvue, Michigan, in 1965 using the Union Cemetery Records for Ralph’s immediate family, the birth year for Andrew Jackson Russell is 1830. And on p. 120 of George Ely Russell’s *Descendants of William Russell of Salem, Mass, 1674*, Andrew Jackson Russell’s birth year is listed as 1830. Lacking a definitive answer to when Andrew Jackson Russell was born, we can only speculate whether his birth played any role in Ralph and Laura’s decision to leave North Union.
20. “1830 Ohio Census, Warrensville Township,” www.saintswithouthalos.com.
21. Robert F. W. Meader, “The Shakers and the Mormons,” *The Shaker Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (Fall 1962) 88-90. An intriguing event occurred at North Union in 1831. It is written in Section 49 of the Mormon’s *Doctrine and Covenants* that a party of Mormons comprised of Sidney Rigdon, Parley Pratt, and Lemon Copley from Kirtland, Ohio, spent a weekend at North Union with the expectation of converting the entire Shaker community. Elder Ashbel Kitchell, after listening politely for several days, told the visitors in no uncertain terms that the North Union Shakers stood firm in their faith and to the “cross” [of celibacy].
22. “History of the Pilot Family.” In vertical file archives under North Union. (Shaker Heights, OH: The Shaker Historical Society).
23. Georgiana Worthley, “The Last of the Shakers,” *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Sunday Magazine Section, June 17, 1934) 2 and 6.
24. “Death List of the United Society of Believers North Union, Cuyahoga County, Ohio, 1827-1888. *The Shaker Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (Winter 1962) 134. (The original burial record book is at the Elizabeth Nord Library of The Shaker Historical Society).
25. Bauer, p. 237.
26. Bauer, p. 243.
27. Martha Boice, Dale Covington, and Richard Spence. *Maps of the Shaker West* (Dayton, Ohio: Knot Garden Press, 1997) 93.
28. “Death List.” 140 (Note: misspelling of Pilat. Correct spelling is Pilot).
29. Virginia P. Dawson, *Hands of the Past: Celebrating the First 50 Years of the Shaker Historical Society* (Shaker Heights, Ohio: The Shaker Historical Society, 1997) 10.