

The Shakers in Eighteenth-Century Newspapers, Part Three: “Calvin” versus “A Lover of Truth,” Abusing Caleb Rathbun, the Death of Joseph Meacham and the Tale of His Sister

By Christian Goodwillie

Accounts of the Shakers in eighteenth-century American newspapers help to shed light on the murky early history of the sect in the United States. They range from openly hostile to mildly sympathetic, and often provide details about the Shakers and Shaker life that are not found in the sect’s relatively meager eighteenth-century manuscript record. This article, the third and final in a series, will examine newspaper items relevant to the Shakers in the extraordinarily busy news years of 1796 and 1797.¹

The second installment of this series ended with the re-publication of a lengthy and fairly hostile account of the Shaker community at New Lebanon, New York. First published anonymously in the *Western Star* of Stockbridge, Massachusetts (a Berkshire mountain town located sixteen miles south of New Lebanon), on January 26, 1796, it was reprinted less than a month later in newspapers throughout New England, New York, and even South Carolina.² A few of these reprintings were published with authorial attribution to “Calvin” (a pseudonym), and a date of composition of January 8, 1796. The Shakers doubtless saw the original article when it was published in the *Western Star*, but it wasn’t until they (or a neighbor) received a copy of the *Herald* out of New York City that they learned of the mysterious Calvin, whose name was signed at the end of the piece. Even worse, Calvin’s unflattering account was headed in the *Herald* by an editorial aside stating: “The account of the *Shakers* given this day is genuine, and we believe, more accurate than any that has appeared. It cannot fail to be well received. The Sect is probably the most extraordinary that has appeared for centuries.”³ This statement, combined with the wide circulation of Calvin’s slanderous commentary, precipitated the first full-fledged newspaper battle over the Shakers and their strange faith.

Two weeks after Calvin’s initial salvo appeared in the *Western Star* the same paper carried a response written by “A Lover of Truth” (referred to

in this article as “*Lover*” for brevity’s sake).⁴ *Lover* was still unaware of the pseudonym Calvin, which did not appear in the *Star*. Addressed to the publisher of the *Star*, Loring Andrews, *Lover*’s response declared Calvin’s piece “indecent” and “destitute of truth.” *Lover*, who claimed to be a neighbor of the New Lebanon community, challenged Calvin’s assertion that “their young people, on whose industry depends principally the prosecution of their lucrative manufactories, are deserting them one after another.” *Lover* claimed that “their manufactures are now prosecuting with unremitting ardour.” New Lebanon Shaker Isaac Newton Youngs’ record of such departures seems to validate *Lover*’s assertions. Youngs recorded the apostasy of only five men between 1794 and January 1796. Four of these men, however, were in their twenties. Perhaps Calvin had foresight into what was to come for the Shakers, as fourteen male members ranging in age from twenty to thirty left the New Lebanon community between February 1796 and December 1799.⁵ Sisters Anna White and Leila Taylor addressed this wave of apostasies in their 1905 book *Shakerism: Its Meaning and Message*, in a section entitled “The First Defection.” They wrote: “About a year before the first break, Father Joseph, Mother Lucy and Elder Henry had foreseen the danger and had labored earnestly to prevent the sad catastrophe. The Elder of the Children’s Order led in the apostasy, which lasted for a few months. The Youth’s and Children’s Orders were then combined and in the spring of 1796 were dissolved altogether, the young people being placed with the First Family.”⁶

Lover laid the blame for Calvin’s calumnies at the feet of one of these recent young male apostates, William Dodge, who had left New Lebanon on November 4, 1795.⁷ *Lover* claimed that Dodge had been sent to New Lebanon by relatives in Harvard or Shirley, Massachusetts, as a sixteen-year-old orphan. At New Lebanon he had been well cared for and trained as a saddler. When he left the community at the age of twenty-three he was provided with clothing and a set of tools for his trade. Shaker journals record that Dodge returned to New Lebanon on December 4 to serve a writ on deacons David Meacham, Daniel Osborn, and Nicholas Lougee demanding past wages. *Lover* claims that Dodge demanded £350 in compensation for his past labor among the Shakers. The deacons countered with an offer of £100, which Dodge rejected and instead instituted a lawsuit. Before the suit could go to trial Dodge appeared at New Lebanon on December 24 and accepted the offer of £100.⁸ *Lover* framed a picture of ingratitude for his readers “Here we

see a youth of 16 years old, unprovided for, taken by the hand, acquiring a useful trade, furnished with tools, and demanding £350 for two years' service."⁹ Coincidentally, Nicholas Lougee left the Shakers only a few years later, on June 22, 1799.¹⁰

Lover followed up with a second piece for the *Western Star* on February 16, 1796.¹¹ By now he had discovered the pseudonymic "Calvin" through the attribution in the *Herald* aforementioned. Lover was genuinely pained by the guarantee of Calvin's veracity offered by the editor of the *Herald*. Perhaps in direct reaction to this he immediately took up the charges of drunkenness and lasciviousness Calvin had leveled at Mother Ann, and his recollections of "*Bacchanalian* dances she instituted, of naked fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters, through each other in the same room." Intriguingly, Lover writes: "For the sake of argument, let it be admitted that all this is true, and that these excesses took place about 12 or 15 years ago; the question then is, are the Shakers *now* in the habit of practicing such enormities? No." This is quite a loaded instance of playing devil's advocate. Why would Lover so casually accede to Calvin's accusations, which were among the most sensational and commonly repeated charges against the Shakers throughout the eighteenth century? The answer is unclear.

This quandary begs the question of the identities of Calvin and Lover. Calvin does not claim to have been a Shaker. He refers to events such as the mobbing of the Shakers at Judge Eleazar Grant's house in New Lebanon, and also speaks of the sect and its practices with the familiarity of a longtime observer.¹² In a later installment in the newspaper war between Calvin and Lover, Calvin signs his piece "New Lebanon," possibly denoting his place of residence.¹³ His sobriquet is likely expressive of his Calvinist rejection of the freewill salvation aspects of the Shaker gospel.

Lover is even harder to get a handle on. Was he a Shaker? It is possible, though it seems unlikely, as will be evident as this story unfolds. He was clearly a passionate advocate for the Shakers, which was a rare attribute in eighteenth-century Columbia County, New York. In his first piece he states, "I am a neighbour, in habits of intimacy with those people."¹⁴ Indeed, his writing are signed at the end "New Lebanon," again possibly indicating a place of residence. If Lover was not writing at the behest of the Shakers then they must have had mixed feelings about his allowing for the possibility of Mother Ann's drunkenness and lascivious behavior, even if tendered in the context of a heartfelt defense of the sect.

After tackling the most sensational charges Lover continued his second piece with a defense of the Shakers' training of their young people in manufacturing. In his initial piece, Calvin had justly praised the quality of Shaker wares, while pointing out that young people among the Shakers had little opportunity for recreation or other learning, and no personal liberty. Lover asks, "Do not you Calvinists put out your children for a series of years to learn useful trades?" Lover points out that the people of the World bound their children out through indentures to learn trades in much the same way as the Shakers dealt with youths. He does not, however, address the lack of recreation and liberty among the Shakers. Finally, Lover defends the stern benevolence of the Shaker leadership, using Calvin's own words to make his point. Calvin acknowledged that the Shakers "have of late years been *esteemed by many an inoffensive sect*, for their quiet neighbourhood, and for the *fairness* and punctuality of their external demeanor," a situation which in Calvin's words may have "flowed from the *dictates of policy*, as far as *relates to their artful rulers*." The Shakers' religion, Lover argued, was "a matter between God and themselves."¹⁵

Calvin, who had remained silent since his first article appeared on January 26, responded on February 23, 1796, to Lover's first two pieces with a legalistic defense of William Dodge, whom Lover had accused as the likely source for much of Calvin's information about the Shakers.¹⁶ Calvin claimed that Dodge was "disqualified to defend himself in a News-paper controversy, by the barbarizing servitude in which he hath been educated." Calvin unfolded a different version of events pertaining to Dodge's settlement of his suit with the Shakers — asserting that the Shaker deacons David Meacham and David Osborn met with Dodge on two occasions and ultimately attempted to settle with him for £100 and his saddler's tools. Dodge is alleged to have taken the tools but refused the money, keeping his lawsuit alive. Calvin then alleged that Meacham invited Dodge back to New Lebanon for a final meeting and paid him £115 and half of his legal costs. Calvin explicitly denied that Dodge knew anything of his first submission to the *Western Star*, and maintained that he knew nothing of the current one either. Furthermore, if indeed Dodge *did* bear any ill will towards the Shakers then he would not forbear to discuss "the occasion of scars, sores, and other marks of violent abuse, the inflicting of which have gone nearly to disabling a young *Chancey* ... and a young *Rathbun* ... or of the report of [the Shakers] having kicked or bruised another certain young man, in a certain part of the body, of exquisite sensibility." While

Chancey's identity is unclear, the Rathbun is undoubtedly Caleb Rathbun, grandson of leading anti-Shaker Valentine Rathbun, who would shortly direct his ire against the Shakers in print. Calvin finished his piece with a challenge to Lover to reveal his true identity, in which case Calvin would do the same.

On March 1, 1796, Lover published the third installment of his writings in the *Western Star*. In this piece he tackled Calvin's assertions about the lack of educational opportunities for Shaker youths. Calvin had stated that the Bible was prohibited among the Shakers. Lover positively refutes that notion, stating, "There is scarcely a single family among Shakers, either at New-Lebanon or Hancock, but what have both the old and new testament." Further, Lover advertised that "Shaker schools, their dwelling houses &c. will be open to decent people of all persuasions, who may have a disposition to be informed. — The Shakers are aware of secret combinations to defame them, and therefore are willing to submit to have the prosperous state of their society scrutinized." The editor of the *Western Star* placed a notice immediately following Lover's piece stating, "By mere accident the hand writing of several young Shakers have fallen into my hands ... to be shown to those who wish to know whether this part of the copious abuse of the Shakers is ill or well founded." The editor claimed that this lucky occurrence had happened "before Calvin's production [his first anti-Shaker writing] appeared in public."¹⁷ This was fortunate indeed for the Shakers, as interested outsiders could examine the writings and ascertain whether a young person such as William Dodge had indeed been raised in "barbarizing servitude."

Before Calvin could fire off a rejoinder, Lover issued his fourth installment in the *Western Star* on March 15, 1796. Lover began his latest piece by reprinting Calvin's own praise of the Shakers and their manufactures. Having established these facts as conceded by Calvin, Lover cites these qualities as fruits of the good example of the Shaker leadership, whom Calvin has cynically called "artful rulers." Lover defends the Shaker leadership, and once again he uses an example of a highly controversial incident at New Lebanon to make his point. Calvin had claimed that the Shaker leaders sometimes employed "hand-cuffing and imprisonment in a dungeon" in restraining those who wished to leave the sect. Lover acknowledges such measures were used in the case of a young man named Mechum, who was described thus:

So hardened in vice, that all gentle admonitions were totally

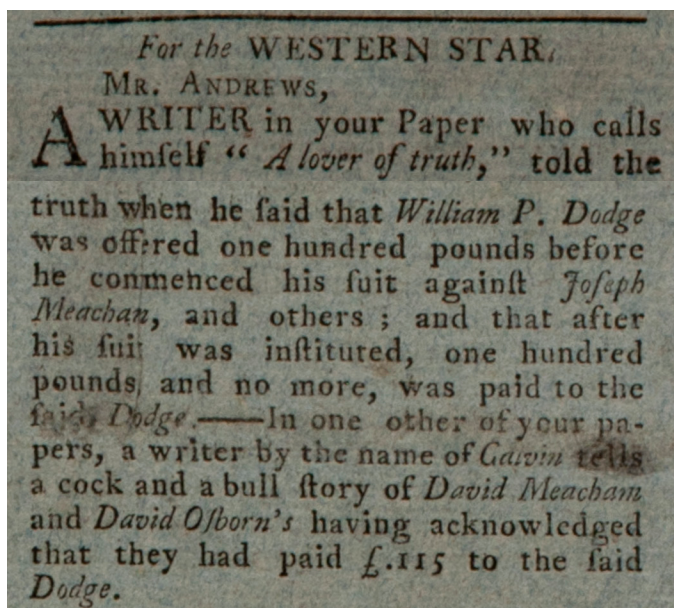
disregarded. The father of the lad, finding parental authority unavailing, committed him to the care of Elder David Mechum, who confined him in an upper room, (*not a dungeon*)—this proving ineffectual, and still pursuing his vicious courses, Young Mechum's wrists were then bound with pieces of pliable leather, to prevent a second escape. In this situation he was confined to the same room for a few days. Upon the culprit's promising amendment, he was released; and from that to the present time his moral character has stood unimpeached.¹⁸

Lover states that young Mechum was still living among the Society at Niskeyuna, and that if Calvin could prove otherwise then Lover would drop his defense of the Shakers forever, "and consider as corrupt the source from whence I have assumed facts." This source is crucial. Was he or she a member of the Shakers? Like the acknowledgment of naked dancing made by Lover in an earlier article, it seems that here again he is using inside knowledge to neutralize Calvin's accusations by allowing for the truth of some of them—but justifying them by circumstances. This would have been a courageous step for someone inside the Shakers in trusting Lover to deliver these delicate facts to the public, in defense of the Society no less.

In his third article (which appeared in the March 15, 1796, issue of the *Western Star* along with Lover's fourth article), Calvin capitalized on Lover's seeming to be at cross-purposes with himself in citing Calvin's own writings to make his own arguments, and especially for admitting the truth of some of Calvin's gravest accusations. Calvin opened by inquiring, "Is this pretended LOVER OF TRUTH, this anonymous, verbose disputant, a Boy? or has his whirling round, and shaking the head, occasioned him a mental derangement, that his 2d and 3d numbers are so heterogenous and eccentric? ... [His second article] is, *for argument sake*, an acknowledgment that what I wrote was true concerning the idle vagaries of the Shakers in past times; a long chain of reasoning to prove them industrious now, and a quotation, shewing that I also acknowledge their present industry." Calvin challenges Lover to answer at once five charges regarding the Shakers' education and hierarchical structure. Once again he questions the availability of books, most specifically the Bible, to all young laborers. He also (correctly) surmises the different classes of membership within the Shaker community as demonstrated by the hierarchy according to which families worshipped at the Meeting House and when. Finally, he repeats his

demand for proof of the Shakers' educational system, asking for records of where a school was kept, and the names of the students. Calvin asserts that the Shakers' invitation (conveyed through Lover in his third piece) to visit their school and dwellings rings hollow after a similar opportunity had been arranged the previous winter—a visit that, according to Calvin, only confirmed the worst suspicions of the Shakers' neighbors. After that visit, Calvin says, "One of the principal Shakers soon after told me that they meant to reform in some things; and I have since heard of their buying bibles and spelling books, and putting some boys, &c. to school. If I should ascribe this to policy, or fear, they would wince, as usual. I therefore forbear, and allow myself to hope that they are not incorrigible, but are in a hopeful way to a degree of reformation in this particular."¹⁹

The Shakers themselves finally weighed in on the controversy though the pages of the *Western Star* on March 22, 1796. This brief notice is significant beyond just its content. It represents only the second time that the Believers issued any kind of printed statement, the first being the 1785/1790 pamphlet *A Concise Statement of the Principles of the Only True Church*. The Shakers must have considered the local uproar created by the exchange between Calvin and Lover, and the accusations regarding their treatment of Dodge, of enough importance to warrant a public statement.²⁰



For the WESTERN STAR,
MR. ANDREWS,
A WRITER in your Paper who calls
himself "*A lover of truth,*" told the
truth when he said that *William P. Dodge*
was offered one hundred pounds before
he commenced his suit against *Joseph*
Meacham, and others; and that after
his suit was instituted, one hundred
pounds, and no more, was paid to the
said *Dodge*.—In one other of your pa-
pers, a writer by the name of *Calvin* tells
a cock and a bull story of *David Meacham*
and *David Osborn's* having acknowledged
that they had paid £.115 to the said
Dodge.

We Shakers are taught by our rulers
always to abide by what is strictly true.
By way of exemplification, you will ob-
lige one of the society by publishing a
copy of the following receipt.

A true Copy.

“ WHEREAS I, WILLIAM P. DODGE,
of Canaan, in Columbia County, have
commenced a suit against *Joseph Meacham,*
Henry Clough, David Meacham, David Os-
born and Nicholas Longy, of the society
called Shakers, (for wages and damages
accrued during my stay amongst that
people) in the Court of Common Pleas
of this County; and whereas on an
agreement of accommodation I have re-
ceived of them one hundred pounds law-
ful money of New-York, I do therefore,
in consideration of that sum, fully dis-
charge the persons above named from
the said suit; and from every due and
demand whatever against that society or
Church, for my service, or damages.

Witness my hand and seal, this twen-
ty-ninth day of December, A. D. one
thousand seven hundred and ninety-five.

WILLIAM P. DODGE.

“ *In presence of* } MOSES YOUNGLOVE,
 } SHUBAL ADAMS.”

One stubborn fact is of more estimation
among those who are brought up to re-
spect truth and righteousness, than all
the calumnies such men as *Calvin* can
promulgate.

A SHAKER.

(Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society)

Lover's fifth piece was published in the March 22, 1796, issue of the *Western Star*, the same one that carried the Shakers' note on their settlement with Dodge. In this letter Lover continued to refute assertions made by Calvin in his very first article. Lover explains that the guards stationed around the Shaker village at night were posted to watch for—and prevent—the fires and theft that had plagued the Shakers, *not* to keep young people from escaping the Society. In fact, Lover explains that these very young people comprised the night watch. Finally, Lover presents some of the earliest known statistical information on Shaker mortality to counter Calvin's claim that "deaths are frequent among that people." Lover says that "eight years ago [1788] the Shaker society consisted of 477 men, women and children; out of this number 35 died—ten of these were from 60 to 97 years old; hence not quite one out of one hundred have died annually." The publication of these statistics more than anything else points to Lover being fed information from within the Society. Once again, however, Lover tempers his advocacy of the Shakers by acknowledging their error in being celibate, as "it is to be regretted that it was not in their power, consistent with truth, to have added *frequent* births among them." (One must wonder why the printer italicized the word "frequent" here. Could Lover have requested such a provocative setting of the type?) Lover concludes, rather weakly, "As long as the laws of our country tolerate them in making this sacrifice, for conscience sake, we ought to make a charitable allowance for the error."²¹

Calvin fired back with one final salvo in this battle, where he surmised it would be "unnecessary to make any distinction in remarking on the writings of a *Lover of Truth*, & a *Shaker* who employs him, any more than between Robinson Crusoe and his man Friday."²² Humorously Calvin asserted that there was no need to answer Lover, as "he will probably, if let alone long enough, fully refute himself." No, this time Calvin intended to prove his charges against the Shakers through evidence—spectacular evidence in the form of a written affidavit by one Caleb Rathbun. This affidavit (quoted below) was printed together with Calvin's article in the April 5, 1796, issue of the *Western Star*. In the final part of his letter Calvin returned once more to the matter of William Dodge, charging that the Shakers had skirted the truth in denying that they had *paid* Dodge £115. The Shakers, claimed Calvin, had *paid* Dodge £100, and *given* him the other £15. Quoting the Shakers' own printed statement in mockery he charged that this "low prevarication is played off before the publick by

those rulers who are brought up to deal in *stubborn facts*, and to respect truth and righteousness.”

So finished the saga of Calvin and Lover in the *Western Star*. In the end it is hard to establish what, if anything, was accomplished by their debate. In one sense, it is through the prism of these articles that scholars can know some of what life was like at New Lebanon in the 1790s, and also what the controversial issues were between the Shakers and their neighbors. Education, apostate claims, and hierarchy would remain hot-button issues with Shaker detractors long into the nineteenth century. If nothing else was resolved through these articles then perhaps they served as a safety valve for the release of tensions between the Shakers and their neighbors that in earlier times would have resulted in mob violence. But, as we shall see, 1796 was a busy year for the Shakers in the *Western Star*, and the most sensational was yet to come:

Caleb Rathbun, aged nearly seventeen years, the son of Valentine Rathbun, jun. maketh oath:

That his mother being dead, and his father being one of the people called Shakers, and working at the Clothier's business among that people in New-Lebanon, took the deponent when in the ninth year of his age, to work with him at the business. About four months after *Job Bishop*, *Eleazar Ran[d]*, and one *Walker*, Deacons, or in authority among the Shakers, constrained the deponent, entirely against his will, to leave his father, who likewise seemed fond of having him with him; they placed the deponent under the command of *David Slason*, with more than twenty other boys, to work at farming and other business, who were all constrained to very hard labour by very great severity. That the deponent believes he received, during about four years that he remained there, more than fifty severe whippings: the first correction he remembers of receiving there was inflicted on him and several of his mates in the meeting-house, under the pretence of their being carnal minded: this correction lasted nearly half a day, and was inflicted by *Job Bishop*, *Eleazar Ran[d]*, *Henry Cluff*, and *Elizur Goodrich*, in the presence of the Chief Elder, JOSEPH MECHUM, *David Mechum*, LUCY GOODRICH, *the mother*, and *Hannah Goodrich*. They were jirked each by one leg and one arm, from side to side, across the floor, and violently jammed against the wall, they were next stripped quite naked, and tied with their hands above their heads, and there

slapped with a stick, like a pudding stick, for near half an hour; and finally they were loosened in this naked situation, and set to jumping about, the Elders in the mean time running round among them and pushing them over.

The said *Slason* once to punish the deponent for taking an apple contrary to orders when it lay in his way, tied him up with his shirt over his head and eyes, and brushed his whole body with a sharp new broom, till his skin was streaked with red, and blood shot. That at another time he, for the like offence, was, by the said *Slason* stripped quite naked, part of his hair jirked off his head, and thrown into the fire, and then whipped with a stirrup leather, or crupper, till he was bloody from his neck to his heels. That said *Slason*, at another time, broke a press-board by a blow of it across the deponent's head; and in order to mortify him and his fellow sufferers, they were many of them compelled to drink urine, a pint at a draught, very frequently, by spells. That whipping and other cruelties were frequently repeated during his whole stay; and no opportunity or privilege allowed him to speak freely to his father during the whole time, or to complain to any one else; nor was any opportunity afforded them to learn to read or to write.

That nearly four years had thus passed, when, despairing of better usage, he attempted an escape by flight; but being soon met and brought back by one of those in authority among them, he was thereupon removed to the Shaker village in Hancock; and put under the command of *Comstock Betts*, the ruler there, or Elder Brother, as they call him, with whom most of the time he wrought at nail making, and boarded with several youths nearly of his age, who wrought at different employments, all under command of said *Betts*; they were steadily kept to hard service, and frequently and cruelly corrected.

That said *Betts*, among other cruel inventions to mortify them, would rouse them at night, in their sleep, push and punch them round the room, pull their ears and hair, this he would repeat several times in the dead of night, sometimes twice or more in a week. That he once whipped him for the slight offence of laughing after they went to bed, with an ox-goad of beach, till it was worn to a stump. That he hath seen one of his mates, named *Ezekiel Goodrich*, aged about 19 or 20 years, stripped quite naked, and buffeted round the room by an equal numbers of women and men, under pretence that he was carnal, this they severely and

repeatedly did for several months, guarding him day and night, that he might not complain or escape. That he, the deponent, and his mates, were taught that the world's *people* would be cruel to them, or kill them, if they should flee to them, which greatly terrified them.—Notwithstanding which, the cruelties of said *Betts*, and their confinements were so insufferable, that the deponent again attempted an escape by flight, and thro terror made no stay till he arrived at Westfield, where the Shakers overtook him and brought him back, and cruelly whipped him. This whipping was by *Jonathan Southwick*. That on a certain Sunday evening, about two years since the deponent, for falling asleep contrary to his orders, was taken up into a loft by *David Southwick* and *Eliphalet Comstock*, where he was, by order of said *Betts*, stripped naked, jirked on his knees round the room by one of them, and severely struck by the other with a ferrule, made somewhat like a large pudding stick, so that the skin turned blue, and till the skin and flesh on the tops of his feet and on his knees were so worn and torn by the floor, that one of his knees is openly sore to the present time. That neither he nor his mates had here any opportunity of schooling. That during his stay he could neither write nor cypher, and could scarce read easy reading, and most of this he had learned before he was put at the Shaker Church; and that part of his mates had still less learning than himself. That last September he determined on another effort to escape so cruel a bondage; at unawares he again took a sudden flight, and through fear scarcely halted till near the City of Hudson; as he never had information while in Hancock of his grand-father, Major *Thomas Lusk*, who lived not far from the Shakers, and hath since been the guardian and defender of the deponent.²³

his
CALEB X RATHBUN.
mark.
CANAAN, March 14th, 1796.
 Sworn before me,
SAMUEL JONES, Justice of the Peace.
A true Copy.

(Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society)

The grandson of Baptist minister Valentine Rathbun Sr. followed in the footsteps of his grandfather and great-uncle Daniel Rathbun in publishing some of the most sensational charges yet alleged against the Shakers. Born in 1780, Caleb Rathbun was brought among the Shakers as an infant following the conversion of his parents in or around the year of his birth. Caleb's father Valentine Jr. was a member of the New Lebanon community, and apparently Caleb had been allowed to remain with him as a boy and possibly into his adolescence. According to his affidavit, Caleb was eventually removed from his father's care and assigned to a succession of Shaker deacons who were in charge of young males and supervised their work. His affidavit also repeats the claim made by Calvin that young Shakers were denied the opportunity for education. It is impossible to prove or disprove the allegations of violent abuse made by Caleb Rathbun, but they would have resonated powerfully with disgruntled, anti-Shaker individuals throughout Berkshire County, Massachusetts, and Columbia County, New York. Caleb's mother Sylvia Lusk Rathbun died a Shaker at Hancock, Massachusetts, in 1784. Perhaps her father, Major Thomas Lusk, was one of the local anti-Shaker contingent as Caleb apparently sought refuge with him after finally escaping the Shakers. Unfortunately, manuscript records detailing the daily events at Hancock in the 1790s are not extant, so Caleb's escape attempts cannot be documented beyond this deposition. His affidavit was published immediately following Calvin's last anti-Shaker article. In light of its extremely graphic content and incendiary charges of maltreatment, the publication of the affidavit seems like an escalation of hostilities on the part of anti-Shaker activists after the rather anti-climactic denouement of the print war between Calvin and Lover. However, the pages of the *Western Star* remained silent on Shaker matters through the rest of April, May, June, and July.

The *Western Star* continued to be a venue for the communications of apostates, although the August 2, 1796, issue carried a surprising statement from one of the most prominent anti-Shakers of the eighteenth century. Amos Taylor, the author of the 1782 publication *A Narrative of the Strange Principles, Conduct and Character of the People Known by the Name of Shakers*, completely recanted the damaging accusations he had made against the sect. Taylor, at various times a Dartmouth student, revolutionary soldier, and Christian convert, came to the Shirley, Massachusetts, Shakers in 1780 or 1781. He lived among the Shakers there and at Harvard for about ten months. Upon his departure the dissatisfied Taylor undertook to damage

the Shakers by publishing only the second (after Valentine Rathbun) anti-Shaker pamphlet then in circulation. It is a mystery why—sixteen years later—Taylor undertook to rescind his attacks against the Shakers and write about them in very positive terms. In 1796 he was living in Whitingham, Vermont, where he was employed as a schoolteacher and bookstore owner.²⁴ His words were published as an ADVERTISEMENT in the *Western Star*.

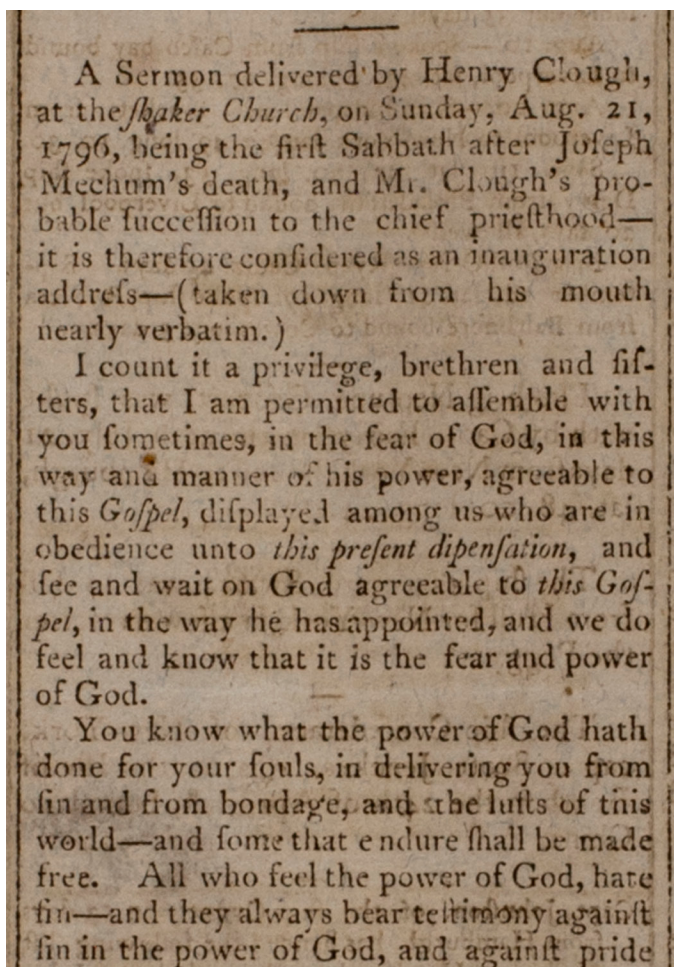
The subscriber having some time since published a book in Worcester, insinuating as if the people called *Shakers* worshipped the creature instead of the creator, and as if their reformation from ordinary vice arose from no other motive than to fit up power and dominion among their Elders, to the exclusion of any regard for the law and gospel, as revealed to us in holy scriptures—this is to certify, that from a careful inspection of my own motives, in writing said book, as well as from the most advantageous opportunity for observing their general deportment, and being unconnected with and uninfluenced by them (the author being a regular member of a congregational church in Vermont,) I now in this way retract my error in writing or speaking in any manner and at any time without judgment, proof or evidence concerning said people, as their deportment and profession actually carries a living and daily witness to the eyes of all rational spectators that they are a peaceable, honest and industrious people—and further that their profession and practice does not in the least give any man occasion to scruple but what they really worship God in spirit and in truth, according to the best of their judgment, through the mediation of Jesus Christ, by the assistance of God's spirit. Their idea of perfection in the members of their church appears to arise from no other quarter than an expectation of the aid and assistance of divine grace, as the consequence and procurement of which was purchased by the death and sufferings of Christ.

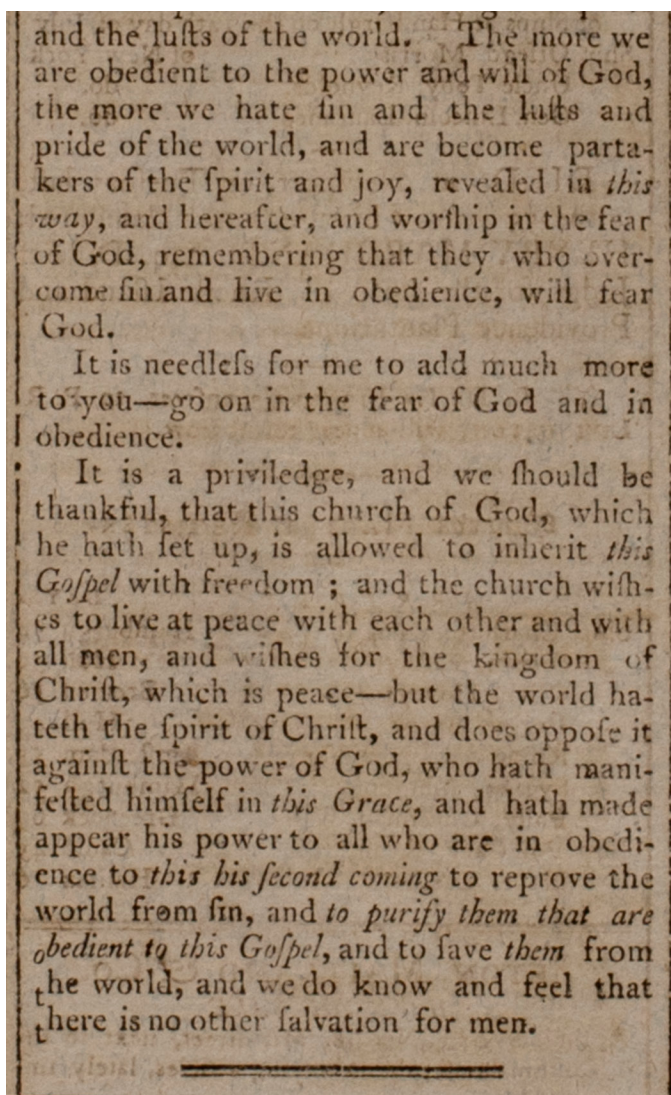
AMOS TAYLOR

*Whitingham, (Vermont) July, 1796*²⁵

Taylor's *mea culpa* must have been very satisfying for the Shakers. One wonders if Father Joseph Meacham had any knowledge of it, given that it was published just fourteen days before his death on August 16, 1796. News of his decease, and of the sermon preached by Henry Clough at his funeral, began to appear in the newspapers by early September. The publication of Clough's sermon "taken down from his mouth, nearly verbatim" is highly

important. Printed in the *Minerva & Mercantile Advertiser* out of New York City, it contains the only published account of Shaker preaching in the eighteenth century. In contrast to the “Articles” published by “Spectator” in 1786, or William Scales’ 1789 presentation of an imaginary dialogue between himself and a Shaker elder, Clough’s sermon is presented as being the actual spoken words of a Shaker elder—a rarity from the notoriously print-shy Believers.²⁶ Upon the death of Joseph Meacham, Henry Clough succeeded him as first in the New Lebanon Ministry, the central spiritual authority for all Shaker communities. Thus, the sermon recorded below is of primary importance for both its uniqueness and its content.²⁷





(Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society)

Published immediately preceding Clough's sermon in the *Minerva* was a piece by a commentator who used the pseudonym "CALVIN." It is unclear whether or not this was the original Calvin.²⁸ This piece was reprinted in the *Western Star* attributed to only "C."²⁹ This, combined with the relative lack of hostility in this account compared with the writings of the earlier

Calvin has led me to the conclusion that although the pseudonym has been reused, this piece might not be by the original Calvin. If it is, then his attitudes towards the Shakers have softened remarkably since his vicious attacks only five months before. C's account of Shaker government, worship, and music is one of the best to survive from the eighteenth century. In particular, his description of the Shakers singing wordless songs seems to indicate that they practiced "lining out" their songs—with the lead singer giving the melody three notes at a time and the congregation following. His evocative explication of the slow and arduous Shaker dance perfectly captures how alien and bizarre it must have seemed to spectators at the time. Finally, his synopsis of Morrel Baker's preaching—the same man who was captain of the Shaker ship *Union*, whose adventures were recounted in the second installment of this series—presents a nice counterpart to Clough's sermon.

Noting Father Joseph's recent demise, C speculated that Meacham's "melancholy decline ... was not a little owing to the alarming defection of his followers." Intriguingly, sisters Anna White and Leila Taylor in their 1905 history of the Shakers seem to state the same thing:

During the latter part of Father Joseph's administration, occurred the first break, by apostasy, in the new church.... It is related that once during this period of sorrow and labor for these reckless spirits, he was walking in the dooryard and was suddenly stricken blind. Being led into the house, he said: 'There is one soul now in the Church that is shut out from the Kingdom of Heaven; there is no more sacrifice that I know of for him.' The next day, Morris Farrington, a promising young man, went away and returned to the world. Another time, returning to the house he inquired who had gone, and when they told him he sadly said, 'The loss of souls is very great!' The Elders tried not to have him know when anyone went away, it caused him such suffering.³⁰

Shakerism, a self-professed "progressive" religion that changes according to the present gift, was recognized in those terms by C as early as 1796, when he wrote that "their forms and regulations from the first have varied in almost continual progression." His article contains such a full account of life and worship at New Lebanon in 1796 that it is here presented nearly in its entirety.

Their dances, their music, and, (as they term it,) their whole *order*, has been greatly altered. At their main seat, in new Lebanon, that

people are at present distinguished by several general divisions, with degrees of gradation in rank. Besides the first division, most honorable, most known ... (who ... have their officers, are victualled from a common stock, and are under as regular discipline and restriction as a garrison of standing troops,) there is a second division, who, subject only to the general instructions of the Church, have not embodied themselves with them, nor given up their property, but are mostly on their own farms in the neighborhood and are tributaries; as the Church could not obtain the title of their lands, they clapped their patent merely on their consciences, and have perhaps gained the more, for *estates in the land of idea and conscience are vastly productive of corn, wine, and every necessary*. And this order is again subdivided into several inferior grades of devotees and tributaries, living all out of the village. Each of these divisions has its proper officers, subject to the officers of the church, and at their several inferior and dependant establishments in Nisqueunia, and in Massachusetts and New-Hampshire states, their government and *order* is a miniature of that in this place, as just described: in all of them the degrees of each man and woman's rank are mostly distinguishable by the length and fineness of their dress; and I have particularly remarked among the men in this warm season the lengthy skirted, blue coat, which distinguishes the rulers from the short jacketed common labourers. But every rank of them are remarkable for their cleanliness, stillness, taciturnity, and inoffensive behaviour to other people.

Their Hall of Worship, which is the lower floor of their church, is very little if at all occupied by any but the most honourable families of the tributary order, who there assemble for worship on Sundays; and as the neighbours have access to their worship I have lately attended it, and will briefly describe it.

The different families, &c. are each distinctly marched in the morning from their different quarters, in 2 compact files, the men foremost, with 2 in the long blue coats as file leaders, and the women at their heels, with leaders of their own sex. When they arrive in the road opposite the Church, the women file off to enter at their own gate and door, and the men march on and enter at theirs.

Along the back side of the floor is a bench or seat for the leaders of the two sexes to sit on, each at their proper end. The

bench opposite a middle post, is the place of the chief Elder, when he deigns, some times, for a few minutes during the worship of this inferior order, to fill it. On his left hand is the women's place, and on his right the men's; the 2 leaders of the men who commonly preside and speak, generally occupy the 2 next places of the bench on the right. The men, when they enter form on that side of the floor obliquely in ranks and files, and the women in like manner on the left, in such a manner as that the floor between the men and women unoccupied, forms nearly a right angled triangle. The rulers on the bench being in the rectangular point, which is a little opened to give them room. The men and women stand in their ranks, partly fronting each other, during the services and the intermission, excepting that now and then one of them change place with some who sit next the ends of the bench.

On the front side the spectators are obligingly seated, the two sexes apart, and thus they partly front both the ranks of men and women and also the rulers.

When they have thus silently waited till all have assembled, and a little longer those who are seated rise, and the singing begins, led by the first man in the front rank. The voice is modulated much in the mode of singing in our Low Dutch meetings, with this difference that no word is expressed in whole or in part, excepting O! by the leader; and that in a very unequal and irregular manner; the leader deals out the sounds in threes, which seems like 3 beats in a bar. This singing lasts perhaps 8 or 10 minutes, and is followed by an address from the Speaker of perhaps about the same length of time; then a pause of intermission ensues of perhaps 15 or 20 minutes, after which the singing is repeated and another speech delivered. Soon after this the men and the women, each at their proper end of the floor, form in a square body, rank and file, all facing the bench, which is now left by the rulers and occupied by a few singers, who soon being a tune a little more lively than the former, and the crowd begin to slowly shove each person one foot at a time, and to face as soldiers do when training; but every tune they turn, they bow, or rather crouch in a very extraordinary and particular manner, bending the body to an almost horizontal posture, the back a little curved, the knees bowing forward, the hands sprawling forward and downward, and the posterior part

of each projecting so as to nearly approach the face of the next one. This continues a few minutes, and the worship ends; tho' sometimes a third service is performed the same day; the people standing the whole time, are, after meeting never dismissed from the ranks till they are again marched off.

I very lately attended their meeting; their principal Speaker was *Moral Baker*; he expatiated on the privileges of that people above others, and asserted that they alone had the power of God and way of salvation: that all other Church establishments of the world were totally corrupt, and ignorant of the will of God as the brute beasts, and as the Monks and Nuns of the East; that should he explain the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelations, clearly understood by them, as to mystical implications, calculations of time in the prophecies, &c. the labour would be lost, for want of capacity in the world to understand spiritual things; thro' their sins, lusts, and false learning. He reprimanded a part of the audience, (who might have been more orderly,) with a degree of petulance, ending with an acknowledgment that many of them behaved decently, *and came no doubt honestly seeking instruction*. These and other hints of his, were well adapted to impress his simple adherents with an opinion that those gentlemen, some of them of rank, figure and accomplishments, came from their distant homes with reverence, seeking information from this fountain of wisdom, rather than out of cur[i]osity to remark on the extravagant vagaries of the human mind.

C.

New-Lebanon, August 25, 1796

Barely a month after Joseph Meacham's death another article appeared, this time authored by "CIVIS," which translates as Citizen.³¹ It detailed the purportedly sad fate of Father Joseph's sister Ruth Meacham, now Ruth King. Ruth had been married to Captain Gideon King, but had forsaken her husband and children to follow her brothers Joseph, David, and Moses Meacham into the Shakers. Gideon King had fought in the Revolutionary War, and in 1786 received a grant of land in the "King's District" of Canaan from the state of Massachusetts.³² Apparently, he ran into financial difficulties as his homestead was sold at auction in 1790.³³ In the years prior to this, and probably in part because of it, his wife and some of his children converted to Shakerism and joined their uncle, Father

Joseph, at New Lebanon. Ruth King had been involved in the movement since at least 1781, as she provides an eyewitness account of the assault of Mother Ann at Petersham in December of that year.³⁴ Gideon King and his non-believing children immigrated to Burlington, Vermont, in 1788. He set up a tavern and became prominent in local affairs and commercial navigation, eventually becoming known as “Gid King, Admiral of the Lakes.”³⁵ Civis was prompted to write the piece following the departure of Ruth’s son George King from New Lebanon. Seventeen-year-old George left on September 5, 1796, and lodged in the tavern run by his uncle Reuben King of New Lebanon. Because George King was a nephew of Father Joseph, his apostasy seems to have had particular significance for Civis who used the occasion to write one of the first accounts of a Shaker woman to appear in print. Ruth Meacham King is presented as a broken woman:

[She] droops in silence among a dejected crowd of Shaker *Sisters*. She has now, disconsolate and unpitied, to conceal every tear and stifle every groan, while she reflects that she was once the darling of a kind and provident husband, in opulent circumstances and good repute, with a blooming family of children, beloved by them both; that she *tore herself* from all these, under the influence of the Shaker religion, and thereby scattered her children and wrung the heart of her husband almost to distraction, which, after he had in vain tried every kind of effort to regain her, was the apparent source of his despondency and imprudence, the ruin of his affairs, and the cause of his quitting this part of the country.

Civis claims that Gideon had returned to New Lebanon once more in 1794 and begged Ruth to return to Burlington with him, but that she refused. Subsequently he married again, although Ruth was unaware of this. Civis speculates that her longing for her family caused her to leave the Shakers during 1795 and briefly lodge with General David Rossiter, a prominent resident of Richmond, Massachusetts.³⁶ He further speculates that she must have discovered that Gideon had remarried, prompting her to return to the Shakers, who penalized her by placing her in the “2d order at *Amos Hammond’s*.” Indeed, a New Lebanon journal kept by scribe Joseph Bennet documents that on December 31, 1795, “Amos Hammond brot Ruth Meacham home and took her to his house to live.”³⁷ This journal, as well as others, documents the departure of George King, and the subsequent defection of (presumably) his brother Joseph King on

November 14, 1796.³⁸ That must have been a further blow to Ruth. It is likely that Rhoda King, a faithful Believer who died at New Lebanon at the age of forty-two in 1820, was the daughter of Gideon and Ruth King. Likewise, Solomon King, who would become a leader among the Ohio Shakers in the 1820s, and die in the faith at New Lebanon, aged eighty-three, in 1858, was almost certainly their son.³⁹ It is to be hoped that Ruth found some consolation in their loyalty to both their faith and their mother.

There are a few more scattered items about the Shakers in eighteenth-century American newspapers, but we must end this series somewhere. And what better way to end it than to revisit Valentine Rathbun, a man who was probably responsible for more printing about the Shakers in the eighteenth century than anyone else. Valentine's last-known article attacking his long-term enemies the Shakers was published by the *Western Star* on April 10, 1797.⁴⁰ Although the Rathbun family enmity against the Shakers would continue with the publication of Reuben Rathbun's *Reasons Offered for Leaving the Shakers* in 1800, the letter below would be Valentine's parting shot before he moved to the central New York town of Marcellus, where he died in 1814.⁴¹ Rathbun's text offers information on the missionary activities of Morrel Baker (the sailor and preacher we have encountered before) and Rufus Cogswell—including a particularly courageous visit that the duo made to Rathbun's house! It also offers one of the earliest statements about the precipitous decline of Shakerism, launching a tradition that continues in the press to this day. We here present this important text in full.

For the WESTERN STAR.

Messrs. ROSSETER & WILLARD,

Please to give the following piece a place in your useful paper for the benefit of the public, and you will oblige a friend to the religious interest.

The Shakers in New-Lebanon and Hancock being on the decline, their old people being dead and dying, and their young people leaving them, they are brought to their last trial to maintain their ground, as such they have taken the following method, viz. — They have appointed two of their servants, MORRAL BAKER and RUFUS COGSWELL by name, their missionaries to go forth and preach for the conversion and bringing in new disciples to their religion. Accordingly said Baker and Cogswell went forth, and when they had performed a certain tour, returned and called at my house, in order to have some conversation with me; and soon after they came in, Morral Baker asked me whether I had any faith in their

religion, I answered none at all; he asked the reason why I had no faith in them, on which I began to open the corruption of their system which made them both very uneasy, and rising up to go, I begged of them to tarry a little longer; that I might further open the falsehood of their scheme; but they were so nettled with disgust, they immediately departed; a few days after this, there came a man to my house, by the name of *Carpenter*, who lived not far from the Shakers in New-Lebanon, and desired to have some conversation with me about the Shakers, and went on and told me that Morral Baker had tried him and his wife a long time to confess their sins to him and join the Shakers, telling them that thousands were now coming in, and in order for greater influence, said Baker told them he had been to Elder *Rathbun's*, (meaning my house) and conversed with me, and that I stood exceeding tenders towards them, and that I confessed they had the great power of God, and that it was the work of God, and that I cried like a child, and further said it would not be many days before I would come in and join the people; in all which there is not the least color of truth, & I know not what it can be called, short of wilful lying; and I understand by people that have come from the towns where they have been in their tours since, that they make the same report, that I own them to be the people of God, and that I am coming in soon to join them — thus they are making me a stalking horse to increase their influence among their hearers — which conduct must be the most shockingly wicked. When I consider therefore the awful effects of that diabolical scheme in parting men and their wives, in breaking up families, in monopolizing wealth to themselves in the most fraudulent way, &c. I believe it to be my duty to caution and warn people against such lying impostors, lest the ignorant and simple by them are led astray. What I have here asserted I am able to prove by moral testimony. VALENTINE RATHBUN.

Pittsfield, January 7, 1797

Notes

1. For the first and second installments of this series see: Christian Goodwillie, "The Shakers in Eighteenth-Century Newspapers, Part One: 'From a Spirit of Detraction and Slander'," *American Communal Societies Quarterly* 4, no. 3 (July 2010): 161-82; and Goodwillie, "The Shakers in Eighteenth-Century Newspapers, Part Two: Voyages of the Shaker Ship and Other Adventures, both Legal and Social," *American Communal*

- Societies Quarterly* 5, no.1 (January 2011): 27-51.
2. *Western Star* (Stockbridge, Massachusetts), January 26, 1796, [1]. In the last installment of my article this item was erroneously cited as appearing in February.
 3. *Herald* (New York, New York), January 27, 1796, [3]. The Library of Congress's website for eighteenth-century American newspapers notes that the *Herald* was a semi-weekly edition of the *American Minerva* (<http://www.loc.gov/rr/news/18th/newyork.html>). This piece, as published in the *Herald* has the header: "For the Minerva," which seems to imply that it was commissioned for that newspaper. Unfortunately the issue of the *Minerva* that would have carried the piece does not seem to have survived. In the absence of that issue, priority of publication for this article is given to its January 26, 1796, appearance in the *Western Star*.
 4. *Western Star*, February 9, 1796, [2]. This piece is dated at the end: "New Lebanon, 30th Jan. 1796."
 5. "Elders First Order. Names and Ages of those who have been gathered into the Church; With the place of their Birth, and time of coming; ... Departures, Death, etc. Written by Isaac N. Youngs," 1856. Hancock Shaker Village #326, pp. 121-25.
 6. Anna White and Leila S. Taylor, *Shakerism: Its Meaning and Message* (Columbus, Ohio: Press of Fred J. Heer, 1905), 102-3.
 7. For Dodge's departure, see "Domestic Journal of the Important Occurrences Kept for the Elder Sisters at New Lebanon," WRHS V:B-60, p. 28.
 8. "Domestic Journal of the Important Occurrences Kept for the Elder Sisters at New Lebanon," WRHS V:B-60, p. 28.
 9. *Western Star*, February 9, 1796, [2].
 10. "Elders First Order. Names and Ages," 1856. Hancock Shaker Village #326, p. 121.
 11. *Western Star*, February 16, 1796, [4]. This piece is dated at the end: "New Lebanon, February 8, 1796."
 12. For the Shakers' account of the incident involving Judge Eleazar Grant, see Rufus Bishop and Seth Youngs Wells, *Testimonies of the Life, Character, Revelations and Doctrines, of Our Ever Blessed Mother Ann Lee, and the Elders with Her* (Hancock [Mass.]: Printed by J. Tallcott & J. Deming, Junrs., 1816), 184-95.
 13. *The Western Star*, February 23, 1796, [1]. This piece is dated at the end: "New Lebanon, Feb. 12, 1796."
 14. *Western Star*, February 9, 1796, [2].
 15. *Western Star*, February 16, 1796, [4].
 16. *Western Star*, February 23, 1796, [1].
 17. *Western Star*, March 1, 1796, [1].
 18. *Western Star*, March 15, 1796, [1]. This piece is dated at the end: "New Lebanon, February 22, 1796."
 19. *Western Star*, March 15, 1796, [1]. This piece is dated at the end: "New Lebanon, March 6, 1796."
 20. *Western Star*, March 22, 1796, [1].
 21. *Western Star*, March 22, 1796, [1].
 22. *Western Star*, April 5, 1796, [4].
 23. *Western Star*, April 5, 1796, [4].
 24. Marcus A. McCorison, *Amos Taylor, a Sketch and Bibliography* (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1959), [37]-42.
 25. *Western Star*, August 2, 1796, [4].

26. "Spectator's" account was originally published in the *Massachusetts Spy; Or, Worcester Gazette* (Worcester, Massachusetts), January 26, 1786, [2]. It is reprinted as part of Goodwillie, "The Shakers in Eighteenth-Century Newspapers, Part One: 'From a Spirit of Detraction and Slander'," *American Communal Societies Quarterly* 4, no. 3 (July 2010): 161-82. Scales' account originally appeared in the *Boston Gazette, and the Country Journal*, June 15, 1789, [1]. It is reprinted with commentary in David D. Newell, "William Scales' 1789 'Mystery of the People Called Shakers,'" *American Communal Societies Quarterly* Preview Issue (September 2006): 6-20.
27. *Minerva & Mercantile Evening Advertiser* (New York, New York), September 8, 1796, [2].
28. This piece was originally printed in the *Minerva & Mercantile Evening Advertiser* (New York, New York), September 8, 1796, [2], and signed "CALVIN" at the end. When reprinted by the *Western Star* the signature was truncated to only "C." In both newspapers the piece is headed with the line "For the [name of newspaper]," implying that it was specially commissioned by the newspaper. By date the *Minerva* would have precedence, so it is unclear why it was published with that header in the *Western Star*.
29. *Western Star*, September 12, 1796, [1].
30. White and Taylor, 102-103.
31. *Western Star*, September 26, 1796, [1].
32. *History of Berkshire County, Massachusetts*, Vol. 2 (New York: J. B. Beers & Co., 1885), 67.
33. *New York Genealogical and Biographical Record* 42, no. 3 (July 1911): 342. King's land was sold to one Samuel Hand.
34. In her own testimony, given in 1812, she says nothing of her life or tribulations, but instead gives a detailed account of the assault on Mother Ann Lee at Petersham, Massachusetts, where a group of men abducted her to physically examine whether or not she was a woman. See [Seth Youngs Wells and Rufus Bishop, comps., collected 1812], "Testimony of Sixty," Alonzo Hollister copy, WRHS VI:B-40, 62. Thank you to Glendyne Wergland for this reference. The dating of this incident comes from Bishop and Wells, *Testimonies of ... Mother Ann Lee*, 92.
35. Thomas H. Canfield, "Discovery, Navigation and Navigators of Lake Champlain," in Abby Maria Hemenway, ed., *The Vermont Historical Gazetteer* (Burlington, Vt.: Published by Abby Maria Hemenway, 1867), 668.
36. David Dudley Field, *A History of the County of Berkshire, Massachusetts* (Pittsfield: Printed by Samuel W. Bush, 1829), 331.
37. "A Domestic Journal of Domestic Occurrences," 1795-1802, WRHS V:B-65.
38. For George and Joseph's departures see "Journal of Shaker activities," 1788-1804, WRHS V:B-62. Page 31 of the "Domestic Journal of the Important Occurrences Kept for the Elder Sisters at New Lebanon," WRHS V:B-60, carries the interesting note for May 24, 1797: "Joseph King came to the Church in sorrow and trouble desiring some further privilege among the people." King's death is not recorded at New Lebanon, so either he was not granted a further privilege, or he did not stay.
39. Stephen J. Paterwic, *Historical Dictionary of the Shakers* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 232, gives Solomon King's mother as Ruth Meacham King.
40. *Western Star*, April 10, 1797, [1]. Rathbun's article was also printed as "About the Shakers" in *The New Star; a Republican Miscellaneous, Literary Paper* 6 (May 16, 1797): 45.
41. See Reuben Rathbone, *Reasons Offered for Leaving the Shakers* (Pittsfield: Chester Smith, 1800). For Valentine Rathbun's will see <http://genforum.genealogy.com/cgi-bin/print.cgi?rathbun:653.html> (accessed November 22, 2011).