

## **“The mighty hand of overruling providence”: The Shaker Claim to America<sup>1</sup>**

*By Jane F. Crosthwaite*

Since Ann Lee and her small band of followers landed in New York in 1774, they and the Believers who came after them have been objects of curiosity for their American neighbors; they have known derision, respect, fear, and interested wonder. They were viewed as heretics, but saw themselves as orthodox; they were persecuted but saw themselves as triumphant. They built separate communities, but expected the world's people to unite with them. They paid taxes and used the court system, but did not vote or join the military. As their numbers have diminished, the world's appreciation has grown. Their quick-step hymn to simplicity, humility, and celibacy, “The Gift to be Simple,” is sung and played in moments of somber national importance, but the effect of that kind of patriotic nostalgia is to forget the rigor of the Shaker vision. In their current status with few living members but many scholars, collectors, and random religious seekers circling around them, the Shakers remain elusive and intriguing. What onlookers in the twenty-first century fail to realize about this now small and rather marginalized group is the serious way in which their early leaders understood their place as being central to the landscape of the new American republic.

In 1800, as the New Republic was just underway, there seemed to be room for many claims to be the singular exceptional group for whom the new country was designed, and the Shakers—the Believers in the Second Appearing of the Christ—eagerly staked a claim for that golden ring. That their claim, today, seems to have been not only ambitious, but now to invoke a secondary meaning of the very word “exceptional,” moving from the idea of the best and most exemplary to the idea of the marginal and tangential is, at the least, haunting. Still, even if the Shakers did not turn out to be the cornerstone of the American dream, their claim, no less than their persistence and the success they did enjoy, offers surprising validation for that dream of religious freedom—that there is room for many traditions however central or marginal.<sup>2</sup>

The Shakers, with all their idiosyncratic ideas of millennialism, of celibacy, of separation, and of communal property, worked hard to position themselves as the fulfillment of God's plan for salvation made possible through the establishment of a non-coercive political system where they could live freely, oppose slavery, and encourage pacifism. The Shakers drew on common patriotic themes which stressed a divine plan for America, but they extended their reach by way of distinctive theological analyses which were neither superficial nor merely occasional. Their claims appeared in history texts, hymn verses, visionary manifestations, new sacred texts, and, even, a gift drawing. Although one can trace, as we will in this essay, examples of their national engagement ranging from 1808 to 1854, one might also notice that they had dreamed of an America where they would be free from persecution prior to leaving England in 1774<sup>3</sup> and that they continued to provide serious leadership for American ideals through their work in peace movements in the early days of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup>

The claims which the Shakers made as to their unique identity with the new American system were centered on George Washington and Christopher Columbus. In her perceptive analysis of Shaker gift drawings and of the Era of Manifestations, Sally Promey elaborated on the Shaker's adoption of these two men, among several others, where she saw the Shakers claiming them as "heroes of communal history,"<sup>5</sup> but the Shakers went much further to develop a grand vision which united God's divine plan and the development of America, all enhanced by the unfolding of Mother Ann's teachings. The patriotism in their vision was communal, but it was also deeply entwined with their newly revealed and unfolding theology.

In 1808, the Shakers ventured to publish their first comprehensive historical and theological introduction, *The Testimony of Christ's Second Appearing*.<sup>6</sup> Benjamin S. Youngs, the primary author of this book written both for "the world" and for the Shakers themselves, documented their claims that their new teachings were, in fact, the fulfillment of biblical prophecy and of Christian historical development. Near the end of the book, Youngs made an elaborate summary of God's providential guidance in the creation of a country which would allow "every one to think and act for themselves in matters of religion." Youngs' argument that religious liberty was coupled with a specific plan by God was unequivocal:

And from whence have flowed those blessings, both civil and

sacred, which you enjoy but from Almighty God, the wise disposer of all events; by whose providence you are placed, not only under the American Eagle, the brightest ensign of civil and religious liberty ever raised on the earth since the fall of man, but under the sunshine of the everlasting gospel, the only object of real and abiding happiness.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout *The Testimony*, Youngs relied on the scholarship of a German religious historian, John Lawrence Mosheim and his translator, Archibald Maclaine, to argue for the importance of religious liberty and against any identification of what we commonly call “church and state.”<sup>8</sup> Mosheim’s critique of the reformers Luther and Calvin for their use of political and armed force to support their visions of Christianity made them no better than Constantine whose consolidation of Christianity with the “persecuting state” had inaugurated the reign of the beast commonly identified as the Anti-Christ. To apply the Anti-Christ designation to other Christian groups was especially severe, but it was commonly used by Protestants against the Catholic Church and then against any other powerful group which persecuted free or dissenting ideas.

There is, of course, an unavoidable irony embedded in the Shakers’ patriotic praise of the New Republic. They argued *against* any established church which would be supported, maintained, and enforced by a political power, but they eagerly supported the new political power of America. Even if this new political power clearly favored religious freedom, choice and practice—to support the idea of a divine sanction for any political system was (and is) to risk contradiction, irony, and both political and religious disagreement. Out of necessity, the Shakers ignored this internal, logical problem and proceeded to reinforce their arguments for God’s purposeful leadership in the new political realm.

The parallel appearance of the new country and the new Shaker phenomenon might have gained salience although these are not dates that the Shakers themselves stressed; the first Shakers arrived in 1774 as the rebellion against England was getting underway, and the Shakers were becoming organized by 1790 at the time of the adoption of the constitution in 1789. Ann Lee was temporarily imprisoned in 1780 as a possible English spy, and her relatively easy release, in spite of later persecution, strengthened a positive identification with the emerging American political system as part of God’s plan. An account of that imprisonment, first published in 1816, proposed the following assessment:

Thus ended the only imprisonment that ever Mother suffered in America; an imprisonment which, though intended to suppress the work of God in this country, was, by the overruling hand of Divine Providence, made the occasion of the most extensive circulation of the truth, and laid a foundation for the greatest ingathering of souls of any event that had ever yet taken place. By means of this event, the sound of the gospel trumpet and the fame of Christ's second appearing extended, as it were, to the ends of the earth.<sup>9</sup>

In spite of this triumphant vision, the Shakers did not focus on Ann Lee as an American leader as much as they did on George Washington whom they saw as Mother Ann's agent. In Youngs' view, George Washington was not only the emblem of a new era of religious liberty, but he was a primary actor chosen by Providence to break the power of the Anti-Christ. Like the Anabaptists whose positions Mosheim had particularly favored, and like many who seek religious liberty, Youngs believed that the newly established America had defeated a false "European God" along with the old "Christian bishops." Youngs wrote that it was by working with "noble advocates for civil and religious liberty, that the wise and generous WASHINGTON, established the rights of conscience by a just and equitable Constitution."<sup>10</sup>

Mason Weems had also given George Washington primary credit for the establishment of the new American system.<sup>11</sup> In his wonderfully florid, partisan, and exaggerated history published almost immediately after Washington's death in December 1799, Weems argued that God favored Washington and that Washington was instrumental in helping to strengthen and revise the Constitution on behalf of order, restraint, and accountability. It would be tempting to ignore the Weems book if similar arguments had not been made by more sober speakers, particularly in the many sermons following Washington's death.<sup>12</sup>

A number of critical books and articles studying the valorization, indeed, the deification, of Washington have been based on the sermons collected and organized by Margaret B. Stillwell and published in the *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* in May 1916.<sup>13</sup> Stillwell's checklist included 440 eulogies and sermons delivered between December 1799 and February 1800 honoring Washington in his death and marking the occasion of his sixty-eighth birthday two months later. As several articles later point out, Washington was generally depicted as an American Moses.<sup>14</sup> The scholarly work made possible by this checklist has been enormous, and

it has set the stage for many major theories and controversies about the historic and religious importance of America—whether this is a secular country founded on enlightenment principles or a country constructed on biblical themes—and whose theories and what purposes those ideas may represent. Some have argued, using the Stillwell checklist among other sources, that the theme of providential intention and care was so interwoven in the rhetorical fabric of the early thinkers, especially of the educated clergy, as to celebrate that guiding Providence as part of the common self-understanding of the citizenry.<sup>15</sup>

It is not clear whether any individual Shaker Believers either read the Weems book or heard any of the elegiac sermons, but the importance of George Washington to the emerging American imagination and the singular value of the cluster of ideas associated with him were of continuing significance—and so much so for the Shakers that following Youngs' book, several new claims locked Washington further into the Shaker vision.

The penultimate hymn in the Shakers' first hymnal, published in 1813 just on the heels of *The Testimony*, is an ode to Washington, one which celebrates his pivotal role in what the Shakers triumphantly—and persistently—called the “rights of conscience.”<sup>16</sup> Issachar Bates, who composed the verses to the hymn, wrote that the rights brought to fruition by Washington were specifically made possible by the providential hands of God and Wisdom. Although wisdom is a common feature of divinity in both Jewish and Christian readings of the bible, Shakers raised this traditionally female attribute to a divine status. Wisdom was recognized in the hymnal, as she had been in *The Testimony*, as the female portion of the godhead, a companion to the Heavenly Father; indeed the first hymn of this first hymnal made clear that the Shakers looked to the Holy Two in One, to Wisdom and Power acting as One God.<sup>17</sup> In this next to last hymn, then, Washington is not only endowed with *wisdom*, but has been led by *Wisdom's* plan—“to secure the rights of man.”

Rights of conscience in these days,  
Now demand our solemn praise:  
Here we see what God has done,  
By his servant Washington.  
Who with wisdom was endow'd  
By an angel, through the cloud,  
And led forth, in Wisdom's plan,  
To secure the rights of man. (verse #1)

Perhaps it would be an amusing point in the story of the “rights of conscience” for most Americans, but a careful reading of these verses shows that George Washington and America are the instruments of the Shaker vision and that the Shaker reading of sacred scripture gave them deeper theological insight than other Christian systems had access to. Shakers were not just a part of the American system, as they have been generally treated, but their understanding of God as Wisdom and Power made the new political system a possibility for other traditions, rather than the reverse.

The fifteen verses of the hymn tick off a number of points vital to the Believers’ strategy of first locating America within the Shaker vision, then of locating themselves in America, and, finally, of offering an understanding of Shaker theology in general. For the Shakers, patriotism was a theological necessity, and this assumption led to a number of intricate, if fairly reasonable, steps in their treatment of both Washington and Columbus.

After establishing the primary claim of Washington’s agency, the hymn then had to account for the fact that Washington did not need to know himself as a Shaker or be known as one in order to be a part of the Shaker plan for freedom and salvation. Washington was unaware of his role in the divine cosmic plan; he was, rather, Cyrus-like in that God’s plan did not require his active understanding:

Cyrus-like, was Washington  
Call’d to do what he has done;  
We his noble acts record,  
Tho’ he did not know the Lord:  
As a prudent man of blood,  
He the hosts of earth withstood;  
Nature’s rights he did restore,  
God from him requir’d no more. (verse #6)

Just as Cyrus of biblical fame had not grasped the beneficial results of sending the exiled Jews back to Jerusalem, thus freeing them to rebuild the Temple, so was Washington, in his innocence, instrumental in God’s plan for America—and for the Shakers’ own right to organize and worship.<sup>18</sup> God had used Cyrus for the benefit of the people of Israel; George Washington was an instrument in the hands of Mother Wisdom for the people of America, a land many referred to as the New Israel.

Washington's agency in establishing the rights of conscience had the double effect of paving the way for Mother Ann's followers, first, simply to establish their church and, second, to consolidate their bulwark against the flesh and carnal life. Bates could write with confidence that following Washington's military victories, "Carnal swords are laid aside," so that no more blood needs to be shed and spiritual warfare now can be aimed at the temptations of the flesh.<sup>19</sup>

Further, Washington, whose will had stipulated that his slaves should be freed upon his death, would serve the Shakers on two additional levels concerning slavery. In their teaching about celibacy Shakers were fighting against bondage to a carnal life, but they also fought against the enslavement of any American.<sup>20</sup> The Wisdom and Power of God had created mankind to be free, able to choose against any kind of slavery, whether physical or spiritual:

When by precept he had shown  
What kind heaven had made known,  
By example aids the cause,  
Forms his own domestic laws,  
Breaks the yoke at his own door,  
Clothes the naked, feeds the poor,  
Bondage from his house he hurl'd,  
Freed his slaves and left the world.

.....

Still on bondage you are bent,  
Binding the poor negro too,  
Yet of Washington you boast,

.....

Now we mean to let you know,  
We've not treated freedom so;  
Since God's kingdom has come in,  
We find freedom from all sin. (verses 4, 11, 14)

In this single hymn, Issachar Bates and the Believers who sang with him celebrated Washington's accomplishments, locating him in their distinctive vision even as they transformed both his military actions and his abolitionist gesture (albeit unsuccessful on his part) into a more peaceful struggle against carnality—and they did so by subsuming the whole story under the guidance of the Heavenly Two in One.

Even in this relatively early stage as the Shaker theologians and hymnists were first publishing their ideas, they had developed a complete narrative about their origins grounded on the creation of woman and man in the image of a dual God; if human beings were created in the image of God, then God was both female and male. They traced further evidence of the female voice of the divine in the many biblical traditions of Wisdom and prophesy. And they had found legitimacy and room to practice their faith in the newly developing America. When, then, the Shakers moved into the Era of Manifestations in the late 1830's where the separation between earth and heaven became permeable, the Believers were ready to accept visionary visits and to hear the testimonies of many long-dead people. Their credulity was rested on the conviction that their search for purity followed God's plan—and, as many scholars have argued, on the need of the third generation to find experiential justification for their commitment to a celibate and spiritual life in community.<sup>21</sup>

It is not then difficult to understand that, following his depictions in Youngs' book and in the hymn, George Washington next made a "more personal" appearance to Believers at the Church Family in New Lebanon in 1839 during the period of visionary manifestations. On this occasion, in meetings on the 4th and 6th of July, the formerly innocent and uninformed Washington was now able to confirm a happy affiliation with other Believers, having met and joined with Mother Ann in heaven.<sup>22</sup> On the first day's visit, the Believers were praised for honoring the Fourth of July as a day of sober freedom rather than a day of recreation as many non-Shakers were doing. Two days later, Washington's presence was introduced by Mother Ann, through the medium of Philemon Stewart. Mother Ann first announced that "Brother Washington" had embraced her gospel, and then Washington introduced himself by saying, "You have all heard or read of me. It was my calling when upon earth to stand as first in the defence [*sic*] of my country; and for the rights of my fellow beings."

Washington proceeded to elaborate on the pacifist theme dear to the Shakers and already written into the hymn where Bates had transformed Washington's military work into a spiritual attack on carnality. Like many other pacifists, the Shakers needed to account for the benefits of the Revolutionary War (and other war-like actions) which allowed them to be pacifists. On the one hand, the Revolutionary War had been necessary to win freedom from the war machinery of Old Europe and thus had a certain functional and time-based quality of winning ground in order

to establish a new world order—for peace.<sup>23</sup> In addition, Washington explained in his visit that pure motives and moderate decisions could also be invoked, even in times of fighting: “But I never delighted in wanton cruelty but was always as careful of the lives of my fellow beings as in my power, and never suffered life to be taken where it could be consistently avoided.” Having thus made his *apologia* for peace over war and for his relative purity, Washington went on to say that now he, too, had come low in Shaker humility to be joined with Mother Ann and her Church.<sup>24</sup>

A much later Shaker document returned to this theme and made careful space to address questions which united General Washington and Shaker pacifism. Anna White was a leader of Shaker peace causes at the turn into the twentieth century, having initiated an important Peace Conference in 1905. In her 1904 book written with Leila S. Taylor, *Shakerism: Its Meaning and Its Message*, White tells a story about George Washington to justify the Shakers’ feeding of troops in the Civil War.<sup>25</sup> Although the Kentucky Shakers may have had little actual choice in the matter and were often forced to supply the needs of both Northern and Southern troops, White and Taylor quoted an “old Quaker in the days of the Revolution” who explained to General Washington that *he* could not use or supply “carnal Weapons,” but he could feed Washington and the troops because the Bible said to feed the hungry and clothe the naked.<sup>26</sup> This story may well carry signs of both Quaker and Shaker casuistry, but pacifism is not an easy religious or political position to maintain without some elements of compromise.

While the Shakers may have tried to clean up—or, at times, ignore—some of the rough edges of their religious and political story, they were not apologetic about the complete intertwining of theology and politics *in their terms*. Both America and the Shakers were products—indeed, *the triumph*—of God’s plan for religious liberty and for a new spiritual way of living. In a further intriguing consolidation of religious and political imagery, the Shakers saw the new American eagle as a sign of the success of their own religious vision. Long a biblical symbol of strength and persistence, the eagle embodied the promise that God’s chosen people would “mount up with wings as eagles.”<sup>27</sup> Fully recognizing the Hebrew Bible’s prophetic visions, the Shakers further specifically identified Mother Wisdom with the woman clothed with the sun described in Revelation 12:14-17: “And to the woman were given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness, into her place, where she is nourished for a time, and times,

and half a time, from the face of the serpent.”

In their new revelation of Holy Mother Wisdom and of the teachings of Ann Lee, the Shakers explained that their message had been hidden in the wilderness until the time was ripe for disclosure. The founding of America, with rights of conscience, constituted the proper time. Mother Ann had come to America under the protection of angel wings and with the wings of an eagle, and Holy Mother Wisdom had emerged from the historical wilderness to the new world (itself now emerging out of the wilderness) to make her ancient truth fully known.<sup>28</sup> The Shakers were able to sing, in an 1833 hymn, “The American eagle now soars toward heaven,/and bears us aloft on her virtuous wings.”<sup>29</sup>

Just as the Shaker adoption—and domestication—of George Washington appeared in histories, in hymns, and in visionary accounts, so also did they lay claim to Christopher Columbus.<sup>30</sup> Giving credit to Columbus for the discovery of this country came to carry additional rhetorical weight; Columbus had, of course, given his name as the sobriquet for America, as many speeches and songs changed his gender and praised Columbia for *her* achievements or exhorted her to higher goals.

Like Washington, Columbus appeared to the New Lebanon Church Family during the Era of Manifestations, but he was also featured in their new sacred text, *The Divine Book*, and, even more strikingly, in a gift drawing. To look at the culminating depiction of Columbus, found in the gift drawing known as “An Emblem of the Heavenly Sphere,” is to see not only the continuing patriotic themes of Shaker identity, but just how interrelated their documents are. In this case an 1840 visionary visit, the sacred book, and the drawing carry echoes of one another. The “Emblem,” attributed to Polly Collins and dated to 1854, has often, like other gift drawings, been treated in isolation, as an independent work of art, but the figure of Columbus offers an unusual clue to its connections with other Shaker activities.<sup>31</sup>

In the “Emblem,” the alignment of the saints in heaven, all of whom are dressed in Shaker attire, show four figures on the top row—Mother Ann Lee, Father James Whittaker, and Father William Lee (each of whom emigrated from England), and Christopher Columbus. By contrast, the American-born leaders usually associated with early Shaker leadership, Father Joseph Meacham and Mother Lucy Wright, are not depicted in the saintly array at all; only biblical figures, including the Savior, are aligned below the top four travelers. Nor is there any text on the drawing referring

to Columbus other than his name next to his image; rather he appears very much at home with the three immigrants and the heavenly assemblage.

Columbus was not further justified on the gift drawing, but he was discussed in several earlier Shaker documents—documents which confirm the Shaker claim on him as an agent of Wisdom and Power, the Heavenly Father and Holy Mother. In September 1840, just over a year after the recorded visit of Washington in July 1839, Believers detailed a visit from Columbus to a meeting of the Church Family at New Lebanon.<sup>32</sup> Mother Ann, who was also present, vetted Columbus by stating; “But he has received and obeyed the gospel, and is worthy to convey this my word to you; for I have proved him.” Mother Ann then recounted at some length that he had been led by Holy Mother Wisdom, at the instruction of the heavenly Father, to venture to America: “But know ye the hand of God never forsook the land on which he purposed to build his holy Church, from the time it was discovered until I, with Father William and Father James landed on its lovely banks.”

With this statement, Mother Ann unites the four “travelling” figures later depicted by Polly Collins. Exaggerated claims of a direct influence on the drawing by Collins are not necessary, although Sally Promey points out that the account of the Columbus visit was circulated among Shaker communities.<sup>33</sup> I am more interested in the thoroughness and broad expressions with which the Shakers understood their place in American history—and America’s place in their own long struggle to find religious freedom—a union of visions which Mother Ann’s statement so succinctly captures. Columbus may have come to know Mother Ann and to accept her teaching, but both he and she were part of an even larger divine plan. Mother Ann concluded her introduction of Columbus with what would have been only a rhetorical question for those in the September 1840 meeting: “Think ye this was done by natural wisdom? Nay, but by the mighty hand of overruling providence.”<sup>34</sup>

Columbus himself then spoke, noting that following his death and after a long search, forty-eight years ago [c.1792], he had met and knelt before Mother Ann and confessed his sins. “Now,” he said, “when ye think of me, if you will but consider me as a little one among you, and a small child of my Mother, it is all I desire.”

And so he was depicted in the “Emblem of the Heavenly Sphere” by Polly Collins yet fourteen years later. Like the three English-born Shakers, Columbus had come to America for a specific purpose, and like those

biblical figures aligned in Shaker order below him, he had been a part of the providential plan of Holy Wisdom and the Heavenly Father, now more fully disclosed to each of them, as well, in heaven.<sup>35</sup>

If, however, Polly Collins drew Columbus as a rather ordinary Shaker dressed like the other Shaker saints, Anna Dodgson, the visionary instrument who spoke for him in the 1840 meeting, saw a more dashing figure, and she took care to describe him in some detail:

He was seen by the writer of the following, as a person about six feet tall, well proportioned: was dressed in an orange colored coat, and white vest: had lightish colored hair; and very bright blue eyes. Was of a commanding figure; looked remarkably clean and neat; and had a well-formed countenance, that the beholders might love and respect.

There may have been a charming disagreement between Anna Dodgson and Polly Collins about Columbus' attire, but both women found him worthy of inclusion in the Shaker community. Another detail in his testimony reminds us that when Columbus confessed to his conversion forty-eight years prior, he was marking the 300th anniversary of his first trip to American lands. There were several subsequent references to the passage of three centuries and to what Columbus might think of the many changes in the country.<sup>36</sup> Other Americans were celebrating the 300th anniversary, but it was momentous for the Shakers: "Think ye, beloved, had Columbus been told what three Centuries would bring to pass, he would have believed it? Has not God wrought by means? ... Was it not even that he might raise his Zion upon this holy land?"<sup>37</sup>

In spite of the imaginative strength of his depictions in the Era of Manifestations and in the gift drawing, when Columbus was discussed in the sacred text of *The Divine Book*, he was less identified with Mother Ann who had presented him in the visionary meetings, or with the other two early emigrants; rather he was more closely aligned with Holy Mother Wisdom, whose work and whose place in Shaker theology the book was designed to reveal most completely. The chapter in which the uncovering of America and the agency of Columbus in that drama were presented was written in the voice of an angel speaking for the Lord God. The angel began with a summary statement: "The wilderness of America was discovered by the providence of God, to be the field for the manifestation of Christ in the female, etc." Seeking a safe place for freedom for human agency promised by God—and for the disclosure of the woman—the chapter explains: "And thus it went with Christopher Columbus, the first who became an

instrument in my hands, to clear the way, to make ready a habitation in the wilderness, whereon to establish my kingdom of peace and rest.”<sup>38</sup> Less recognition is given to Washington or to Columbus because the power and the vision belong to God’s wisdom: “Know ye not that the hand of the Lord freed America?” The claims for the rights of conscience by the rule of God continue:

#17 And they who bind the consciences of the souls of the children of men, they bind that which I the Lord have set at liberty; and a heavy wo from the Almighty shall rest on them. For I created man a free agent, to act according to the dictates of his own conscience, as it relates to his faith, wherein the requirements of his faith do not infringe upon the wholesome laws of the land.

.....

#19 And the soul that with violence lifteth a finger to violate not only the laws of his Maker, which have established the free agency of man; but also the laws of your constitution, which was framed according to my wisdom, saith the Lord, even the soul that doeth this, in defiance of the laws of God and man, shall feel my judgments.

These passages in *The Divine Book* bring together the salient themes of God’s providential plan which were cherished by the Shakers. It was a plan which was based on free human agency (not political coercion), which needed a new and “unblemished” country (made possible by Columbus), and which needed a safe constitutional government (made possible by Washington). The culmination of this plan then allowed God and God’s Shaker people to reveal the ancient truth and work of Holy Mother Wisdom through the new millennial teachings of Mother Ann Lee. The new theological revelations, long a part of God’s divine plan, could be brought to fruition through the Shaker teachings of religious and human liberty; all Believers could now enjoy freedom from lust, from slavery of all kinds, and from wars.<sup>39</sup> America as seen through—or even, perhaps, as enabled by—the Shaker vision was exceptional in her gifts of liberty and in her promise for a peaceful and just millennium.

If 150-some years have shifted the Shakers’ vision from centrality to marginality; and have brought a shift from one definition of “exceptional” to a different one, now in a minor key, perhaps some strains of the original vision have persisted so that others also on the edges and in the margins

would also have room to flourish and to exercise the rights of conscience. But, when the records we have examined ended in 1854, George Washington and Christopher Columbus had become Shakers—and the new millennium had been inaugurated. It had begun not only in heaven, but also in America where Mother Ann Lee and her followers were able to unite the discoveries of Columbus and the leadership of Washington with the new Shaker society under the guidance of the Holy Two in One. As they sang in yet another hymn designed to celebrate Mother Ann's landing in America on August 6th, 1774:

Hail the blessed sixth of August  
Shout and hail that blessed day!  
When good Mother and the Elders  
Landed in America.

. . . . .

While the land was in commotion  
To break off from Britton's chains  
Lo! The gospel trumpet sounded  
Independence is declared  
Through blessed Mother Ann<sup>40</sup>

## Notes

1. Portions of this paper were delivered at the Communal Studies Association meeting at the Shaker Village at South Union at Auburn, Kentucky, on September 30, 2011. A Winterthur Research Fellowship allowed me to complete research on this project.
2. There are many political and religious arguments about the idea of American exceptionalism and about this nation's responsibility and/or failure to live up to a divine plan. I am assuming that such an idea was present in the New Republic. I recognize, further, that my treatment of this argument is also haunted by the famous essay by Perry Miller, "Errand in the Wilderness," in which he argued that the sense of their "errand" enacted, and then reframed, by the first Puritan colonists carried a new valence as they came to terms with living in the new country. See *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1956). And see, even in the most simplistic terms, the seventy-two footnotes in the Wikipedia entry for "American Exceptionalism."
3. One of the classic stories from Shaker history involves a vision of America by Mother Ann's English associate, James Whittaker, of a shining tree "representing the Church of Christ, which will yet be established in this land." In the light of religious liberty, of course, the vision of individual shining leaves would further represent multiple religious traditions thriving without persecution. [Rufus Bishop], *Testimonies of the life, character, revelations and doctrines of our ever blessed Mother Ann Lee, and the elders with her ...* (Hancock: J. Tallcott and J. Deming, Junrs., 1816), chap. 9, #13, p. 66. Hereafter referred to as *Testimonies*.
4. See Stephen Paterwic, "The Shaker Peace Conference of 1905: Witness and Hope at the North Family of Mount Lebanon," *American Communal Societies Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (April 2008): 51-69. The Hancock Shaker Village has, in fact, just hosted a Peace Conference in September 2011.
5. Sally Promey, *Spiritual Spectacles* (Bloomington: Indiana U. Press, 1993). See especially chap. 6 entitled "[Re]collecting History: A Visible Genealogy of 'Gospel Relations,'" pp. 107-31.
6. [Benjamin S. Youngs], *The Testimony of Christ's Second Appearing; Containing a General Statement of All Things Pertaining to the Faith and Practice of the Church of God in This Latter-day* (Lebanon, Ohio: John McClean, 1808). Hereinafter referred to as *The Testimony*.
7. Youngs, *The Testimony*, p. 619, #32.
8. John Lawrence Mosheim, *An Ecclesiastical History, Ancient and Modern....* trans. Archibald Maclaine, 4 vols. (New York: Elvert Duyckinck et al., 1824). The first English translation of this book appeared in 1764, following the initial publication in Latin in 1755. The many editorial additions and comments by Maclaine add enormously to this impressive early venture in writing a comprehensive church history.
9. Bishop, *Testimonies*, chap. 10, pp. 69-81.
10. Youngs, *The Testimony*, p. 381, #19.
11. Mason Weems, *A History of the Life and Death, Virtues and Exploits of General George Washington* (New York: Macy-Massius, 1927). With an introduction (and apology) by Mark Van Doren.

12. Weems is referenced here partly for the sheer pleasure, but his work is representative of the popular cult of Washington which developed along many lines. Portions of this paper were written during a fellowship stay at Winterthur Museum and Library where a large stature of Liberty crowning Washington stands in one of the galleries. Wendy Cooper and her associates devote many pages to representations of Washington in the Winterthur collection, including sets of china, clocks, portraits, and other objects. *An American Vision: Henry Francis du Pont's Winterthur* (National Gallery of Art and Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library, 2002), pp. 162-71.
13. Margaret B. Stillwell, "Checklist of Eulogies and Funeral Orations on the Death of George Washington: December, 1799-February, 1800," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 20, no. 5 (May 1916): 403-50. Stillwell also indexed the sermons according to states and dates and included several texts from other noted collections.
14. See Robert P. Hay, "George Washington: American Moses," *American Quarterly* 21 (1969): 780-91.
15. See, for instance, John F. Berens, *Providence & Patriotism in America: 1640-1815* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978). Berens stresses several themes particularly valuable for Shaker thinking, including America as God's new Israel, the deification of the founding fathers, a blending of national and millennial expectations, and the idea of providential history. In his perhaps more nuanced analysis of national self-understanding, Nathan Hatch argues for the changing face of Christianity in light of changing political and demographic developments, especially as he compared the first and second Great Awakenings and then concluded with a careful reading of the Book of Mormon. At its core, Hatch sees in the early republic a quest for an ancient order, a crusade against Calvinist orthodoxy and control, a reliance on scripture, and a millennial outlook. *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).
16. The words to this hymn have been attributed to Issachar Bates, one of the few Shakers known to have served in the Revolutionary War. Even without Bates' military background, this hymn would suggest an appreciation of Washington and a commitment to the cause of liberty—and to the Shaker way of life. Bates was one of the first three missionaries to the West (during the Second Great Awakening), helping to establish new Shaker outposts and travelling between Eastern and Western communities over a number of years; thus he was also an early observer of the new frontier made possible by the Revolutionary War and by the subsequent adoption of the Constitution. Bates was a great versifier, often writing exuberant ballads and songs detailing his experiences. "Sketch of the Life and Experience of Issachar Bates (sen.)," [c. 1840]. DWt #813.
17. For music and texts for all the first hymns and for essays detailing their theological components, see Christian Goodwillie and Jane F. Crosthwaite, eds., *Millennial Praises: A Shaker Hymnal* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009).
18. Isaiah 45:4-5.
19. Indeed, almost forty years later in one of their meetings at the gathering ground they called Mt. Sinai, the Hancock community spoke of a visit by George Washington where he distributed "spiritual guns" to the brethren (and musical instruments to the sisters). According to the record, the brethren were "very nimble and shure [*sic*] in loading. I do believe there was not one shot that miss fired." "A Record Kept of the Several Meetings held Upon Mount Sinai by the Family Orders on Days of the

- Feasts. 1842 -1845.” (Hancock). DWt #828.
20. The Shaker opposition to slavery was a persistent theme, and it was strongly argued in two documents most relevant to the issues in this essay. In *The Divine Book*, a new sacred text devoted to the full introduction of Holy Mother Wisdom, several early chapters were almost inexplicably given over to a denunciation of slavery as a failure of the American system. This book was edited by Calvin Green, a Shaker brother, who took up this theme several times, once in a visionary diatribe on Columbia/America’s failure to live up to her promise and, certainly, later in his guidance of this book. See Paulina Bates, *The Divine Book of Holy and Eternal Wisdom* (Canterbury, N.H.: United Society, 1849), pt. 2, chaps. 1-3, and Calvin Green, instrument, “A Declaration of the Word of God to Columbia, (or America) by Daniel, the Prophet,” chap. 23 in “Prophetic Warnings of the Judgments of God About to come upon the Earth, Delivered & Written at the Holy Mount in the Years, 1840, 41, 42, 43, & 44, Collected and Transcribed by Giles B. Avery, 1846 & 47,” WRHS 78 VIII: B-146, pp. 90-98. Calvin Green also logged enthusiastic accounts of his various visits to Revolutionary War sites during his missionary travels. See his *Biographic Memoir* completed in 1861, especially his records from 1828. WRHS 51 VI: B-28.
  21. Promey is especially helpful in her arguments about the pressures on the third generation, those who had not personally known Ann Lee or the original leaders, pp. 1-7.
  22. “A True Record of Sacred Communications; Written by Divine Inspiration,” WRHS 75 VIII: B-116. The visits on July 4th and 6th of 1839 were recorded a year and nine months later on April 3rd, 1841.
  23. It is useful in light of the Shaker gestures here to point out that, like a number of other classical texts, the *Bhagavad Gita* was designed to answer similar questions and conundrums about when, whether, or how to wage war when all one really seeks is peace.
  24. The shift from war to peace is also invoked in a hymn collected and possibly written by Richard McNemar and published in 1833. Here in a complicated structure of verses which alternate between Shaker brethren and sisters, the argument goes that Christmas is a better day to celebrate than July 4th because the birth of Jesus and the second appearing of Christ in Mother Ann are more liberating. Finally saved from tyrants and kings—and living in peace—one can refrain from killing. *A Selection of Hymns and Poems* (Watervliet [sic], Ohio, 1833), #153. See Carol Medlicott and Christian Goodwillie, *Richard McNemar and the Music of the Shaker West: Branches of One Living Tree* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, forthcoming). Martha Boice and Tom Sakmyster have pointed out a message received at Whitewater, Ohio, on 10 February 1840, in which Mother Ann speaks to the community in a letter “Written by George Washington.” WRHS VIII: B-283, pp. 11-12. There are no references to matters of liberty or national identity in this message; Washington seems to serve only as a secretary for Mother Ann.
  25. See Paterwic. See, as well, Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 315-17.
  26. White and Taylor, p. 184. They also recounted a personal visit by Lafayette to the Shakers in 1780 or 1781 and then later visionary visits during the Era of Manifestations, pp. 239-41.
  27. Isaiah 40:31.

28. McNemar, Hymn #153. Mother Ann also was remembered by Isaac Crouch as having claimed healing and redemptive powers using the imagery of wings: "Mother being present, said, 'I will tell you a vision I saw of myself. I saw a great gulf, fixed between God and the world of mankind; and I had two great wings given to me; and my work was to go up that gulf and fan it away ... so that poor lost souls could come to God'" Bishop, *Testimonies*, chap. 26, #17, pp. 233-34.
29. McNemar, Selection of Hymns and Poems. See, as well, verses 9 and 10 in the second hymn in Part II of *Millennial Praises* where angels and eagles work together to bring Mother Ann and her English associates to "Columbia's happy shore" and to live "In Hudson's lovely bay!" Such was the work of "the Columbian Eagle." Goodwillie and Crosthwaite, pp. 117-18.
30. Mormons also make certain claims about Columbus. Like the Shakers, they were an American-grown religious tradition seeking to establish their millennial teachings for a new country. See review comments by Louise G. Hanson, "Columbus, Christopher," from "To All the World: The Book of Mormon Articles" from the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, on the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship website. [<http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/books/?bookid=51&chapid=359>] My thanks to Josh Probert for sharing this information with me.
31. This gift drawing is owned by Hancock Shaker Village. I am using the identification of Polly Collins established by Daniel W. Patterson in his book, *Gift Drawing and Gift Song: A Study of Two Forms of Shaker Inspiration* (Sabbathday Lake, Me.: The United Society of Shakers, 1983), pp. 51-54. Edward Deming Andrews and Faith Andrews include this drawing along with a copy of the notations by Polly Collins. *Visions of the Heavenly Sphere: A Study in Shaker Religious Art* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, Published for the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1969), Plate IX. Omitted in the Andrews' text is the additional notation by Collins that the drawing is "A Gift from Mother Ann given Jan 1854" and "Dictated by the Prophetess Deborah." See Sharon Duane Koomler, *Seen and Received: The Shakers' Private Art* (Pittsfield, Mass.: Hancock Shaker Village, 2000). Although there are additional elements connecting this drawing with other Shaker texts, this essay will only deal with Columbus as a uniting thread. I will point out, however, that the image of the crossing of the Red Sea in the lower right corner of the "Emblem" which had appeared in the Geneva Bible was also proposed, albeit with slight variations, as a possible image for the Great Seal of the United States by Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. Such an image would have led to a greater affirmation of divine Providence. Julian P. Boyd, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 1, 1760-1776 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), pp. 494-97.
32. See "Journal of meetings at which inspired messages and communications were received, begun by Derobigne M. Bennett and continued by Isaac N. Youngs," 21 and 23 September 1840. WRHS 77 VIII: B-138. See also "A True Record of Sacred Communications; Written by Divine Inspiration." v. 118, July 1-Nov. 14, 1840, Recorded on 19 May 1841. Chap. 8, pp. 38-48. WRHS 75 VIII: B-118.
33. Promey asserts, "It is legitimate to assume a relatively wide audience for the Columbus roll," and she says that the Ministry included the account in letters to other communities, p. 259n104.
34. Note that this phrase had appeared in the 1816 *Testimonies* and was cited above regarding Ann Lee's imprisonment.

35. The testimonies from these biblical figures, ranging from Adam and Eve to the twelve disciples, acknowledge learning more fully of Wisdom's role and Mother Ann's agency, and these accounts comprise the second part of *The Divine Book*.
36. For an engaging treatment of American fascination with Columbus, see Claudia L. Bushman, *America Discovers Columbus: How an Italian Explorer Became an American Hero* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1992).
37. Bennett and Youngs, p. 40.
38. Bates, pp. 330-32. Like Washington, Columbus was described as an innocent agent lacking full awareness of his role: "yet were his motives pure, not being led by pride, selfishness or ambition; but with the intention of doing good to mankind."
39. This chapter takes additional pains to justify the military violence necessary to establish a peaceful system. In a manner reminiscent of the earlier treatment of Washington, God's angel makes an apology for war: "Yet, saith the Lord, I had no pleasure in the sacrifice of human lives, but would rather my purposes could have been accomplished by pacific means.... And thus did I cause the inhabitants of this land to become zealous in the defense of their own rights, even if the shedding of blood must be the result." (p. 334).
40. "Gospel Adoration, Or A Collection of Gospel Hymns adapted to the worship of God in this latter Day of Christ's Second Appearing ... 1839," Copied from various communities. WRHS IX: B-288. A note says this hymn is from the Harvard community. Christian Goodwillie has pointed out that Patterson identifies the collection as by David Austin Buckingham. cf. Daniel W. Patterson, *The Shaker Spiritual* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 521.