

“Dear Friend and Sister”: Laura Holloway-Langford and the Shakers

by Diane Sasson

Introduction

For more than fifty years, Laura Holloway-Langford and the Mount Lebanon Shaker community sustained a complex relationship which has been preserved in correspondence written between 1874 and 1926. In her prime, Holloway-Langford was well known as an author, a supporter of progressive cultural and social causes, and an advocate for unconventional religious ideas. In 1906, she purchased the Upper Canaan farm from the Mount Lebanon Shakers, initially intending that it become a spiritual retreat. It was only after the deaths of her closest Shaker friends that Laura Holloway-Langford left Brooklyn to make her home on this property, where she died in July 1930, in obscurity, isolation and poverty.¹

Laura Holloway-Langford's Shaker connection opens a window onto the challenges faced within the Society of Believers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In earlier years, individual friendships with non-Shakers were discouraged, and private correspondence, outside the approval of the leadership, was not permitted. However, by the early 1870s, the Central Ministry at Mt. Lebanon had lifted restrictions on contacts with non-Shakers, allowed newspapers, magazines and books into the Society, and recommended vigorous missionary outreach. Shakers disseminated their views and attracted converts through public lectures, and, most importantly, through the establishment of the monthly periodical *The Shaker*, which began to present the faith as non-sectarian and pluralistic. In the late nineteenth century, it was Mt. Lebanon's North Family that was most active in establishing relationships with outsiders, seeking not only converts but also friends with connections to publishers, government officials and reform organizations. By the turn of the century, some members of the North Family had even concluded that the time had come to establish an “outer court” composed of those sharing belief in the coming of a new spiritual age, but not yet fully committed to celibacy and communal living.² It is within this context that Laura Holloway-Langford, as “Friend and Sister” of the North Family Shakers, should be understood. Despite the fact that her relationships with individual Shakers were steadfast

and heartfelt, conflicts periodically surfaced. These tensions, I argue, were not simply a matter of personal misunderstandings; they reflected a larger argument about the future of Shakerism.

Early Contacts: 1874-1901

Laura Holloway-Langford was born in Nashville, Tennessee,³ where she was educated, married, and gave birth to a son. In 1866, she relocated to New York City and supported her family as a journalist and writer, specializing in biographical portraits of famous men and women. Her most successful book, first published in 1870 and going through many editions, was *Ladies of the White House*. Like many of her generation, Holloway-Langford had rejected the Calvinist orthodoxy of her youth. In a time of spiritual disquiet, she became a religious seeker, attracted to phrenology, free-thought, temperance, spiritualism, theosophy, vegetarianism, Buddhism and Vedanta. But whatever her group affiliations, Laura's personal identity centered on sacrifice in the service of others, a self-understanding that justified her professional and philanthropic activities. From her first contact with the Shakers in late 1873 or early 1874, she imagined ways that their resources, both spiritual and physical, might ameliorate the condition of the world.

It is not possible to pinpoint precisely when Laura Holloway-Langford became interested in the Shakers, but I suspect that her initial knowledge may have come through phrenology. In January, 1869, her head had been "read" by Samuel R. Wells, editor of *The Phrenological Journal of Science and Health*, who identified benevolence as her strongest characteristic.⁴ Both Samuel Wells and his wife Charlotte, sister of Orson and Lorenzo Fowler, the founders of American phrenology, were interested in the Shakers.⁵ In 1871, Wells had published a "psychometric portrait of Ann Lee" and presented a phrenological analysis of her faculties.⁶ The next spring, an article in *The Journal of Phrenology* by Samuel Wells asserted that Ann Lee may have taught only chastity, not celibacy. Elijah Myrick, A. G. Lomas, and Harvey Eades responded, defending Shakerism in its pages. Rather than harshly condemning the "life of the flesh," Lomas argued that humans have two natures and that "both are good"; the life of the spirit must, however, be paramount. By framing Shaker theology within the larger Christian tradition and avoiding any outright condemnation of marriage, Lomas tried to appeal to readers of the *Journal of Phrenology* who, like Laura

Holloway-Langford, sought higher spiritual truths while living in the world.⁷

Holloway-Langford probably met her first Shakers on November 23, 1873, when they held a meeting in New York's Robinson Hall. Frederick Evans, North Family Elder since 1858, spoke and "scathed the rottenness of manmade creeds and hypocritical professions" with "utter abandon."⁸ A few months after this meeting, Laura wrote to Elder Frederick, proposing that the North Family host indigent boys on a summer holiday, where they might be physically invigorated and morally



Laura Holloway-Langford

(Courtesy, The Winterthur Library: The Edward Deming Andrews Memorial Shaker Collection)

improved by the Shaker life. The previous two summers, while employed by *The Brooklyn Daily Union*, she had persuaded businessmen to give youngsters in their employ "two holidays during the summer without loss of salary ... provided said days are spent at the sea shore, and under the care of those having charge of the working children's picnics," and she raised the money for this the first "fresh air fund."⁹

Frederick Evans replied that the Shaker Societies did not provide refuge for the city's poor: "My object, like your own, would be to befriend the better class; I can do nothing with the lowest." A month later, Holloway-Langford sent one youngster to the North Family. Eldress Antoinette Doolittle wrote: "My Highly Esteemed Friend Laura H. I have only time to say that your little boy John, in whom you have taken such a deep interest, is now with us, all safe. ... He thinks he will like a home here very much." Elder Frederick's response was less positive. He deemed the child "a desperate case" who might well prove a failure, but he called Holloway-Langford "a queen of Righteousness." It seems unlikely that

the boy remained long at the North Family, but Holloway-Langford had established herself as a “friend” of the Shakers. Elder Evans concluded his letter, “In much respect, and in increasing sympathy and interest in you.”¹⁰

As much as they desired to fortify their ranks, the Shakers knew from hard experience that raising children was not a successful way to increase membership. Out of 110 youngsters admitted to the Church Family at Mt. Lebanon between 1871 and 1900, not a single one had converted. Holloway-Langford seems to have taken the lesson to heart, for in 1879, she wrote in *The Brooklyn Eagle*: “The Shakers nearly always decline to take children. . . . Unless a young person goes there from a strong personal desire it is hardly likely that he or she will stay, for the life is strictly ascetic, and a romantic sentimentalist or an idler would find little in common with the good men and women of this order.”¹¹

More than philanthropy, however, it was a deep spiritual affinity that connected Holloway-Langford to the sisters of the North Family, particularly Antoinette Doolittle and Anna White. The North Family Shakers had long been interested in spiritualism. They participated in seances, invited mediums to visit the Family, and some members held regular spiritual circles. Throughout their relationship, the Shakers believed that Holloway-Langford was a clairvoyant who communicated with the spirit world. When Believers were frustrated that Elder Frederick, after his death, had not contacted them, Daniel Offord asked Laura if she had received manifestations from him. In a time of difficulty, Eldress Anna reassured her that Elder Frederick’s spirit would “come to his daughter ‘Laurie’s’ rescue.” Throughout her life, Anna White remained confident that “dear Laura” was “in constant touch with the unseen spiritual world, seeing and conversing with dear ones from behind the veil.”¹²

In addition to feeling spiritual kinship, the North Family Shakers identified Holloway-Langford as a friend who could help publicize their gospel mission. In one of her first letters, Eldress Antoinette asked Laura to distribute announcements that the Shakers would be at Steinway Hall in New York on November 22, 1874. Holloway-Langford probably attended this presentation of “Shaker theology and practical life,” where she would have heard Anna White’s moving and lyrical testimony “to the purity and happiness of her life in her Shaker home.” During the years when she was an editor at *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Holloway-Langford increased coverage of the Shakers and changed how they were portrayed. Instead of articles

that ridiculed Shaker women's appearance, it printed a piece asserting that Shaker women lived longer and more serene lives because they had fewer ambitions and therefore fewer disappointments. Other articles described "Shaker communism" with sympathy and understanding. This change in tone has much to do with the times, with fears about the effects of unbridled capitalism and the crisis in labor; but it also demonstrates the importance of journalists, like Holloway-Langford, in changing the public's perception of the Shakers.¹³

During the 1880s and 1890s the Shakers took a back seat in Holloway-Langford's life, while she wrote more than a dozen books, married for a second time, and founded and directed the Seidl Society. After the death in February 1884 of Thomas Kinsella, editor-in-chief of *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Laura left her position at the newspaper. Probably a long-time member of spiritualist circles in Brooklyn, she now had the opportunity to pursue her interest in esoteric religion. In February 1884, Laura was admitted as a fellow in the New York branch of the Theosophical Society, her certificate of membership signed by the founders of this movement, William Quan Judge, Henry Steele Olcott and Madame Blavatsky.¹⁴

Holloway-Langford was also a conduit to the North Family for other new religious ideas, including New Thought and Christian Science. In January 1885, Elder Evans visited Laura in New York, where she told him about the "mind cure." He wrote asking for more details, arguing that this knowledge belonged with the Shakers who, "living the pure lives they do, would be admirable subjects for the exercise of such a Gift." He continued, "If you know of a perfectly reliable mind-curing Medium let us come into communication with him or her. ... Your friend, Eldress Antoinette, is just able to keep about, she would be a good case to cure."¹⁵

After the death of Antoinette Doolittle in 1886 there was a long gap in the correspondence. In late 1901, at a time of personal crisis, Holloway-Langford once again turned to the North Family, inquiring about its policy on taking children. Eldress Anna reiterated the Shaker position: "We take children but not all kinds, they need sorting. We have taken Asylum children, but the Asylum trait was upon all of them. Most of them were from the slums, and the change was too much for them, and too much for us with their slang ..., jeer and scoffings." In her next letter, Laura was more candid about her situation, revealing that her younger sister, Anne Catherine Carter, a widow, had died leaving a son, Charles Erastus Terry. Eldress Anna replied, "As you suggest, have your nephew come to us for a



Eldress Anna White
(Courtesy of Hamilton College Library)

visit of a week and then upon acquaintance the brethren will decide what shall be done.” On March 16, 1902, Charles Terry arrived at the North Family. Less than six weeks later, Eldress Anna wrote Laura: “The poor boy seems very unhappy. . . . One evening he was very determined to go down in the village of New Lebanon and when Elder Levi refused him he was very much put out about it and was quite insolent. . . . To our mind he needs stronger discipline, a firmer hand than we can give. . . . I know it will pain you to hear of our decision not to keep Charlie. We feel exceedingly sorry it has turned in this way, but we have done our best. We are fearful he will run away and make trouble.” What made this situation additionally poignant is that Charlie was not a child, but a young man of nineteen years, who, in his aunt’s words, was “feeble minded.” Charlie returned to Brooklyn and probably lived with Laura for the rest of his life.¹⁶

Laura Holloway had married Colonel Edward Langford, Secretary of the Brooklyn & Brighton Beach Railroad, in the spring of 1890. In July 1902, Laura wrote to Anna White to inform her that Edward was gravely ill. Eldress Anna replied that Edward’s spirit had, on the previous day, been with the Shakers, and that after he “passes over” he would meet “some of our people” in the spirit land where he would learn more about Shakerism. She offered Laura reassurance that Edward would continue to communicate with her: “You will miss his bodily presence; that can never be replaced, but the spirit may be so quickened as to know him better even than when in the body.” It was after Edward’s death that Holloway-Langford revived her earlier ideas for philanthropic projects. Dependent upon Shaker cooperation, these projects would both energize Laura and put to the test her Shaker friendships.¹⁷

Tests of Friendship: 1902-1911

It is astonishing to realize that although she had communicated with the North Family for more than a quarter of a century, Laura apparently did not visit Mount Lebanon until the spring of 1904. She had opened her home when Shakers visited New York, and had introduced them to many of her friends. When Shaker sisters faced an emergency while in the city, Elder Daniel said: “Laura is the one, she will attend to whatever is wanting.” Despite her lack of first-hand knowledge of Shaker communal life, in the fall of 1903 Holloway-Langford suggested to the Shakers that their empty buildings become a summer boarding house. Additionally, she expressed interest in purchasing the Canaan farm, so that her friend Eliza

Chapin might establish a school for girls. Anna White advised her that Upper Canaan contained “over 400 acres with eight buildings including barns” and was too large for her enterprise. Instead, suggested Eldress Anna, Laura should examine in “our village ... a large vacant house that perhaps might be used to advantage.” That house was the former residence of the Center Family, and contained eleven rooms plus a kitchen and attic, which, White said, Shakers were willing to rent furnished for between \$20 and \$35 per month. She wrote: “The plan meets the approval of nearly all, some objections were raised to small children on the ground of the danger of losing fruit. Shaker villages are quiet places and too rampageous youngsters would not be acceptable, but of course you will select a good class of children.” White concluded, “Hoping all our interests may prosper and that a summer with you and your friends awaits us.”¹⁸

Thus, it was at Laura Holloway-Langford’s instigation that Mt. Lebanon Shakers, in the summer of 1904, first experimented with bringing the world’s people to board at what she called “St. Ann’s Inn.” Anna White preferred the name “Mountain Home,” explaining, “The name Mountain indicates loftiness and Home all that is attractive and sweet, while St. strikes one with awe and Ann ha[s] no meaning until explained.” The Shakers hoped that Mountain Home would attract spiritually advanced, single women, who were potential converts. In addition to adult women, one man and nine children took up residence at the Cottage. Twenty-two children, from age three to twelve, attended a school that was run by Lizzie Chapin and Katherine Edwards, with the youngest children cared for by Sister Sarah Burger. In early June, after Laura visited Mount Lebanon, Anna White wrote: “You have made your mark, you have left behind a favorable impression, how could you do otherwise with the spirit you carry? We understand you, we who have known you for years as being true to high living, true to the Christ within you. ... We look to you as a leader in the forth-coming cycle to open anew the spiritual avenues and help build up this cause which is to redeem the world.”¹⁹

But soon the Sisters at Mt. Lebanon became overwhelmed by the hard work required to make Mountain Home a reality. Water closets had to be put into two bathrooms; extension tables, table cloths, “eleven single bedsteads and one double bed” were needed. Anna White praised Holloway-Langford’s intentions, but insisted they had to work out those “minor things—of so much importance in this earth life.” The Society could not furnish sheets and pillow cases, hand-enameled oil cloth, canned

goods, or soap for laundry. They would, however, supply crocheted mats, basic groceries, and wash and press the sheets. Some members of the Society were alarmed by Holloway-Langford's boundless enthusiasms, which included plans for a "[r]etreat to those who want rest and who will care to become acquainted with our people"; "a school for boys and girls under efficient teachers"; and "a model Kindergarten." These ideas, Anna White cautioned, must wait for the future. "Your large heart would take in the whole world and mother it ... but, the law of limitation is as true as is the law of love: in a universal sense we extend feeling and sympathy for others when it is utterly impossible to do so in a practical way. ... There are two distinct elements existing in this little village of ours diametrically opposite, the one rigid conservatism, the other extreme radicalism, both dangerous when unbalanced by the other. ... In view of this, it is my judgment, dear Laura ... to move slowly ... not to project beyond what we can perform beyond what will be acceptable."²⁰

Holloway-Langford, feeling rebuffed, accused the Shakers of being afraid to make changes that would ensure their own survival and bring the new age to fruition. At this point Anna White affirmed her belief in Laura's mission: "To organize and establish a family—a society—such as you shall represent, that shall be an outer court—an outer wheel in God's providence calls for sacrifice, it call [sic] for brave hearts true and strong." In a subsequent letter, she elaborated: "I look to you as one selected and prepared by the spirit intelligences to perform and establish at Mount Lebanon a work that shall be the means of perpetuating the Shaker organization, by bringing to its aid men and women ripe for the resurrection order." Although Anna White believed Holloway-Langford was an instrument of divine providence, she nevertheless struggled to keep Laura's zeal in check, warning her that "large bodies move slowly. We must bear this in mind and hold on to the reins of our ambition, or we may meet with an upset." She begged Laura not to send any more persons to Lebanon, since the demands of the current guests were strain enough. Before White could post this missive, the Family received four more letters from Laura. Exasperated, White said they were "puzzled to know how to arrange for all the people you want to send," and she asked Holloway-Langford to decline a family which had four children.²¹

Yet, neither Anna White nor Catherine Allen was a match for Holloway-Langford's determination, and the large family took up residence at Mountain Home. At the urging of the Shakers, Laura did relinquish plans

for a Fourth of July celebration in favor of a commemoration of Mother Ann's landing in America. Held on August 7, 1904, this was one of the Mt. Lebanon Society's first ventures in holding conferences for the public. At the close of the season, Anna White wrote Laura: "With regrets do we part with the dear friends at the Cottage, they seem to be one with us as if we had always known them." She continued to hope that two or three of the summer guests might return to live permanently at Mount Lebanon, but she said that she never expected that "all those cottagers" would become Shakers.²²

Other Shakers, however, felt that the peace and order of their lives had been disrupted by an enterprise that neither garnered converts nor made a profit. Trustee Emma Neale wrote: "The matters at Annlee Cottage are rather muddled for real business and I shall have to lump the wreckage somewhat." She lists articles that were broken, including a looking glass, a covered dish, and a chair. "I can hardly place an estimate, The chair was an easy little rocker I think I will call all \$1.50 & let it go if this is satisfactory." It is Leila Taylor, however, who put the summer's cooperative venture into perspective, urging Holloway-Langford to be sensitive to internal tensions in the Society at Lebanon. In this letter, for the first time that I have seen, Holloway-Langford was addressed as "Sister Laura":

It has been a perfect miracle-play to me to see you manipulate people, and bring such diverse elements into harmonious action. That so much peace and so little friction and so few mistakes should have marked the first season's work at Mount Lebanon, is the surprise, not that all matters have not gone just "according to Hoyle." ... It is by adding whole-souled, earnest, devoted women workers to our inner circle that true advance will be made. The outer ring of the nebulae will take care of itself if there is a live heart of fire at the centre. ... Dear Laura, there are many among us who feel that you are in a special sense the one sent to lead us in the effort that alone can bring the opening of the new day to our Order."²³

Eldress Anna had planned for Ann Lee Cottage to be occupied year round, but she was displeased with the family Laura had recruited to live there. Consequently, the Center Family residence was closed for the winter. Laura expected the Cottage would be re-opened the coming summer, but

she wanted improvements made on the house. Trustee Emma Neale balked at the cost. Anna White wrote that although “[w]e would be glad to have you again next summer and the summers to come,” the house, not being on North Family property, was not under her control. She informed Laura that the Ann Lee Cottage would not be available, because Brother Robert Valentine wanted “the lower part for a dairy.” In a letter to J. P. McLean, Leila Taylor wrote that the experiment was “successfully stopped this year by Robert, whose gut was down to stay. I think Laura tipped over her dish, &, so to speak, drove the cat up the tree by her own harangue in the last meeting she attended. It is, so my observation goes, entirely possible to manage the masculine being, but it is not a good plan to put it too plainly beforehand that you’re going to do it. As far as we are concerned, I’m glad the Cottage is in abeyance for this summer.” Anna White was disappointed, however, because she felt the Society had failed “to see the luminous rays of light that are transmitted by coming in contact with illumined souls.” The decision to close Ann Lee Cottage for the summer of 1905 indicated growing opposition to Holloway-Langford’s schemes, which required Shaker labor and financing but did not give Shakers control. For her part, Laura felt unappreciated, and her correspondence with the North Family slowed from a flood to a trickle.²⁴

That summer, Anna White invited Holloway-Langford to speak at the Peace Convention which was to be held on August 31, 1905. Holloway-Langford declined, but suggested P. Ramanathan, Solicitor General of Ceylon, who had just arrived in the United States at the invitation of Myron Phelps. On a ten-month book tour, Ramanathan was spending the summer at the Green Acre Fellowship in Eliot, Maine, lecturing on the unity of all faiths. The Peace Convention was held on a Thursday; Laura planned to come Friday, with Phelps and Ramanathan arriving the following day. But something alarmed her and she postponed her visit. Eldress Anna wrote: “It was a mistake your not being here. After we heard from you of Mr. Phelps and Ramarathan we thought to let them severely alone, we had no use for such whether Christian or heathen. It is only character which tells, the private life must be above censure to exert any kind of an influence over the public mind. Surely you will not have any fears of meeting them now, they will not molest us with their presence. What a scar, what a blot is this upon civilized nations! when men of that stamp have no restraint over themselves.” It appears that Phelps’s reputation as a free love practitioner had come to White’s attention; however, this could

hardly have been news to Laura, who knew Phelps from the time when he participated in theosophist meetings in Brooklyn. For years she had associated with people engaged in alternative religious practice, and there is no evidence that she, or most of them, equated spirituality with celibacy. Laura's Shaker friends knew only certain aspects of her life. The presence of Myron Phelps at Mount Lebanon might have been embarrassing, and it could possibly have risked a collision of worlds that Holloway-Langford preferred to keep separate.²⁵

The strains in her Shaker friendships during these years also reflect anxiety within the Society about the future of Shakerism. As membership decreased, Shakers needed friends like Laura to bring the world to them. Yet the Ramanathan incident raises the question of who were the "right sort" of people for the Shakers to host on consecrated land. Many of those in Laura's "inner-circle" held ideas that were incompatible with Shaker tenets. Some believed in a Mother-Father God, but by way of Vedanta rather than Mother Ann. Laura herself believed in reincarnation and esoteric knowledge communicated by spiritual masters. Others were Christian Scientists and New Thought practitioners, whose influence was felt in the North Family. Although more open to religious pluralism than other Shakers and despite some contentious internal debate, the North Family retained the central tenet of Shakerism that the most holy life was a celibate life.²⁶ Consequently, the appropriate role of friends like Holloway-Langford, who admired the Shakers but did not fully share their commitments, remained controversial within the Society.

Emma Neale decided that the Ann Lee Cottage would reopen in the summer of 1906, but under complete Shaker control. Although the Shakers hoped that Laura would help them recruit the right kind of "inmates," to use Anna White's term, they did not want non-Shakers to be involved in running the enterprise. Laura agreed to publicize the Cottage, and wrote an article for the *Daily Standard Union*, which, to the dismay of the Shakers, portrayed Mount Lebanon as a sanctuary for destitute city children: "To this good work of rescuing homeless children the Shakers owe much of their genuine popularity with the public. . . . That not more boys and girls are sent among them is due to the fact that this custom of theirs is not known. . . . If the waifs of this large city could be set down amid the scenes of Mt. Lebanon, to them a panorama of Paradise itself would be unfolded. The hills and the sky, the mountain air, and the singing of birds would awaken new life in city-bred children."²⁷

Anna White could barely contain her anger, and her reply was sharp: “The assertion ... [that] ‘Shakers at Mount Lebanon open doors to city children,’ is misleading and is untrue, for the idea has never once entered our minds. ... I wish we might by writing make it sufficiently plain to you, why we do not and cannot open doors in this way. ... So please counteract the movement for the ‘fresh air children.’” Anna White was correct, of course, that what Holloway-Langford proposed was a recycled version of her “fresh air fund.” Despite this reprimand, in 1908 Holloway-Langford again suggested that the North Family establish a school for girls. Eldress Anna replied, “While we very much appreciate your suggestions made toward the training of young minds, we find ourselves in the same dilemma as at a previous suggestion. ... We must keep open doors and hearts to all sincere, honest-hearted applicants and further we cannot go.”²⁸

The Ann Lee Cottage opened in the summer of 1906, with Sister Emma Neale charging \$2 per day, about twice the rate in 1904. By summer’s end, all were relieved to see the boarders depart. Anna White wrote Laura: “They were a queer lot, uninteresting and fault finding. Sister Emma has had her hands full, she is asking if it is best to continue another year. I doubt it very much, doubt if it pays and doubt as to the propriety—the wisdom of so doing. Your scheme is far ahead of any yet made and we pray most fervently for your success.”²⁹

Decline

There is nothing so likely to sour a friendship as a business deal gone bad. In 1884, the Mt. Lebanon Shakers had closed the Lower Canaan Family, and 1000 acres were purchased by Mr. and Mrs. Frederick G. Burnham, who founded a school for problem boys. Members of the Upper Canaan Family were moved to Enfield, Connecticut in 1897. Although the Upper Canaan farm was sometimes leased, the Shakers were anxious to sell the property. By the time Holloway-Langford became interested in Shaker land, she was no longer young, and despite rumors to the contrary, she was not wealthy. Originally, she planned to buy Shaker property in co-partnership with a group of friends, including a Dr. Burrows, who would establish a “Milk and Rest Cure Sanitarium.” Such “sanitaria” were popular retreats for those troubled, as one advertisement says, by “dyspepsia, neurasthenia, morphinism, or a nervous, run-down state of health.” Elder Daniel Offord supported a “celebrate [*sic*] sanitarium” on Shaker property,

and offered the Upper Canaan farm to Holloway-Langford for “eight thousand dollars, to be paid as follows. One thousand dollars cash down and five hundred dollars a year till the whole is paid, without interest. We make this proposition because we are heart and soul in the object and purpose it will be devoted to.” Holloway-Langford agreed. In July 1907, Holloway-Langford dissolved the partnership agreement with her friends, so that the deed to the land was in her name only. Ernest Pick, trustee of the Second Family, assured her that the price was a bargain and that the value of the property should triple in ten years. In December, Elder Daniel wrote “Friend and Sister Laura, . . . trust that all will be consummated in harmony and pray that the Peace of God will rest upon Canaan and that prosperity will crown all your efforts.”³⁰

Later, Holloway-Langford recalled that she first visited Canaan in the summer of 1905, when she and Sister Anna rode out to Queechy Lake. After the sale was finalized in June 1906, Daniel Offord told her that she wouldn’t “care to stay” in the large house, but that the smaller one had been “fixed . . . up very nicely.” In August, accompanied by Daniel Offord and several Shaker sisters, Laura and Dr. Burrows visited the Upper Canaan farm and went “through the big house, & on the roof, where we had a view of the Lake.” After purchasing it, however, Holloway-Langford found that the Upper Canaan farm was in a deplorable condition. She recounted:

I had bought the Shaker farm under the impression that the farm buildings were in good order. . . . I found there was not a habitable house on the place and to put the big house in order for Sanitarium purposes would cost as much as to build a new one. . . .

The one other dwelling house had been a Shaker shop, & was not possessed of a bathroom. It had few if any comforts, and, none of the buildings had been painted—within or without—for very many years. It was a forlorn place, altogether [*sic*]. The grounds were littered with debris, old beer & whisky bottles by the hundreds, tin cans & broken crockery lying about in every direction.

Elder Daniel was the only Shaker who came here & knew the condition the place was in, but he never seemed to realize the actual facts. His mind was fixed upon what had been the situation of affairs when the Shakers lived here, & he seemed unable, or unwilling to face actualities.³¹

Elder Daniel had informed Holloway-Langford before she bought the property that the sewers to the main house were clogged, and he had promised to clear the drains. By February 1907, he had not gotten around to it. Laura complained, and in March 1907, he wrote her: "In the 1st place the house has not been occupied for over 2 years. ... 2. all the drains from that large house are clogged. 3. for sometime before the Jews vacated the premises they broke the pipes in the cellars and all the sewer and slops went in the cellar. We cleaned it out and covered up the floor with shavings. 4th the water pipes are broken and will have to be repaired before you can get any water there." Laura confided her troubles to Eldress Anna, who offered spiritual encouragement, but no concrete help: "Dear child, you are compassed on every hand with difficulties, but from them you will arise stronger to surmount them. ... You are fortunate in possessing a certain sort of grit—an ingrediant [sic] very necessary—in carrying out plans and meeting with cross-currents, and then you are helped from an invisible source, visible to you, from which I am sure you derive strength and courage."³²

The most serious problem at the Canaan farm concerned the location of the spring, which Elder Daniel had told Holloway-Langford had enough force of water to run a manufacturing enterprise. Shortly after buying the property, Laura expressed concern about the water supply; in November 1909, Elder Daniel recommended a plumber, who he hoped could solve "the water matter and put you at ease in regard to it." But at the end of that year, Offord discovered a record of a 1894 exchange of property between the Upper Canaan Family and the Burnhams, who purchased the Lower Canaan property; nevertheless, he reassured her "the spring is on the Shaker's land." Holloway-Langford claimed to have discovered that ownership of the spring was contested only in August 1910, when "Mr. Mayo, then superintendent of the Burnham Industrial School, called at the house to ask permission to use the private road on the farm. He said ... that this road was not a private one & the school people had the right to use it." Mr. Mayo also asserted that the spring belonged to Mr. Burnham. "I dissented, and said I had a clear title and the Shakers had sold me the land with the spring, that my boundary line extended beyond the spring." She reported to Elder Daniel that she had installed an iron gate and lock to prevent the school's access to the road and the spring. On February 23, 1911, two days before his death, Elder Daniel wrote to "Friend Laura": "Do you think of doing anything about the surveying of the Canaan farm

to determine about the spring this coming season?... We hope prosperity has attended you; for your prosperity is our prosperity." Laura Holloway-Langford's condition was hardly prosperous. That January she had sent to the Shakers only \$250 rather than the usual \$500 payment on the farm. She mailed an additional check in March. In June, she requested a loan from the North Family. Leila Taylor replies: "We would very much like to assist you, if only for love's sake, but, dear Laura, it is utterly impossible. Our own family must come first, and we have, small sums or great, absolutely no money to lend."³³

Troubles over the Canaan property came to a head the next summer, when the Burnham School demanded rights to the spring. Holloway-Langford threatened legal action. Catherine Allen, head of the Society, acknowledged that there was some "little misunderstanding between the Trustees," but she admonished Laura: "It is thought that the estimated injury to your farm has been greatly magnified—that the water privilege was to be left accessible [sic] to both farms—But of this the North Family have never had knowledge." Laura offered not to sue on condition that the Society take back the Canaan farm and pay her \$11,000, the \$8000 price plus an addition \$3000 for improvements. Allen replied "that simply would be beyond the possible in our present circumstances. You have had the means to put far more on that little farm than the North family have been able to do for theirs." Allen concludes: "Be calm and patient dear Friend assured that the best within our power will be done."³⁴

It appears that the spring was shown on both the Burnham's deed to the Lower Canaan property and on Laura Holloway-Langford's deed to the Upper Canaan farm. Both parties engaged lawyers. But by this time, all the Shakers who had been directly involved in the original sale of property had passed away. The matter was settled out of court, with the Burnham School given the right to install a pipe to tap into water from the spring on Holloway-Langford's land.³⁵

In January the previous year, Eldress Anna had fallen, fracturing her left arm. Laura had also been ill, undergoing serious surgery and residing in a sanitarium until she returned to Canaan early in the summer of 1910. In one of her last letters to "My Dear Laura," Eldress Anna wrote: "It is only this body of flesh, I should say bones, that keeps me from you. I am praying and helping in other ways as best I can.... Your work is our work, Believer[s] on the other side are helping." On Dec. 16, 1910, Elder Daniel sent a telegram to Brooklyn: "Eldress Anna passed away seven

thirty five this afternoon.” On February 23, 1911, Elder Daniel wrote “Dear Friend. . . . We miss Eldress Anna very much; and nothing would give us more pleasure than to hear from you and her. If you have any communications from her, will you not let us hear from you!” Three days later, Holloway-Langford received a letter informing her of Elder Daniel’s sudden death. It was signed “Yours in a common & yet for each a separate sorrow—Leila.” The deaths of Eldress Anna and Elder Daniel in less than three months was a devastating loss to the North Family. It was, wrote Leila Taylor, “an orphaned house.” In preparation for a Memorial volume, Taylor asked to borrow White and Offord’s letters to Laura; she also asked Holloway-Langford to contribute her own recollections of her Shaker friends. Laura loaned the letters, but she did not write a remembrance. In February 1912, Sarah Burger wrote to Laura of Eldress Anna and Elder Daniel: “Do you know sometimes I feel so lonely that I want to go where I can hear their comforting voices and see the faces that would often speak of encouragement. . . . I supposed you see the dear ones very often and get their messages of love and sympathy, how I wish I was blessed with the gift.”³⁶

Whether or not Holloway-Langford was in touch with the spirits of Eldress Anna and Elder Daniel, her life was also a lonely one. Her dream of reviving Shakerism died with Anna White, who had fostered and sustained it. Disappointed that none of her philanthropic plans for the Shaker property had been realized, Holloway-Langford was also bereft of the spiritual and emotional sustenance that her Shaker friendships had provided. She gave up her house in Brooklyn, possibly in an effort to economize, and moved with her son to live at Canaan year round, but she seems to have had little contact with the Shakers. By the 1920s, she lived “like a hermit” with her brother, Vaulx, and her nephew Charlie. Her only real property was the Canaan farm, with an assessed value of only \$7,500, less than what she had originally paid for it. Additionally, she had mortgaged the property three times, and was reduced to begging friends for gifts or loans in order not to lose the farm.³⁷

Conclusion

The relationship between Holloway-Langford and the Shakers was based both on pragmatic needs and on religious hope. Shakers turned to “Friend and Sister Laura” when they needed publicity or intercession with

the world; for Holloway-Langford, the Shakers provided subject matter for her writing as well as land and buildings for her philanthropic projects. On the spiritual level, Laura Holloway-Langford gave the North Family Shakers hope that their light was spreading into the world and that their mission would continue. The Shakers, especially Elder Daniel Offord and Eldress Anna White, gave Laura Holloway-Langford confidence that she was chosen to be an instrument in the inauguration of a new era. That hope for a time of peace and prosperity, of friendship and unity, was not to be realized in their lifetimes.

Endnotes

¹ Based on more than 150 extant letters from Shakers to Laura Holloway-Langford, this paper presents their relationship primarily as seen through Shaker eyes. Although Holloway-Langford's perspective is preserved in her other writings, her letters to the Shakers do not seem to have survived. In citing the letters, I refer to "Laura Holloway" prior to 1890; thereafter, I refer to "Laura Langford." I use the following abbreviations for Shaker manuscript collections: DeWint: Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, Delaware; HPB: HPB Library, Toronto, Canada; MPH: Hancock Shaker Village, Inc., Pittsfield, Massachusetts; NOC: Emma B. King Library, Shaker Museum, Old Chatham, New York; OClWHi: Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio.

² Stephen Paterwic, "Talk delivered Aug. 31, 2005, 100th Anniversary of the Shaker Peace Conference, Lebanon, N.Y.," 8-9. MS, MPH.

³ Born on August 22, 1843, Laura O. Carter was the daughter of Samuel Jefferson Carter, proprietor of Nashville's St. Cloud Hotel, and Ann C. Vault. Laura married Junius B. Holloway on June 18, 1862, but the marriage dissolved not long after the birth of their son George, in 1864.

⁴ O. S. Fowler and L. N. Fowler, *New Illustrated Self-Instructor in Phrenology and Physiology; with Over One Hundred Engravings; Together with the Chart and Character of Mrs. C. Holloway* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1868), as annotated by S. R. Wells Jan 13/69. NOC. Wells, p. 127, gives her a "7" on "benevolence," the highest possible rating.

⁵ Since the 1850s, Charlotte Wells had been a friend of Eldress Eliza Babbitt of the Harvard Community, where *The Phrenological Journal* was read and "its principles recognized and assimilated." J. A. Fowler, "Eliza Babbitt, Eldress of the Shakers, Now in Her Ninety Third Year," *The Phrenological Journal of Science*

and Health 107 (1899): 1. "Literary Notices," *The Phrenological Journal of Science and Health* 52 (1871): 364, announced the inauguration of *The Shaker*.

⁶ *The Phrenological Miscellany; or, The Annals of Phrenology and Physiognomy from 1865 to 1873* (New York: Fowler & Wells, 1882). The portrait originally appeared in the 1871 *Annual*. "Items of Interest," *Shaker* 2 (1872): 24.

⁷ [S. R. Wells], "The Shakers: Have They Made a Mistake?" *The Phrenological Journal of Science and Health* 54 (1872): 400-1. Elijah Myrick, "The Shakers Again," *The Phrenological Journal of Science and Health* 56 (1873): 410. G. A. Lomas, "The Shaker Problem—No. 1. By One of Them," *The Phrenological Journal of Science and Health* 57 (1873): 42. H. L. Eades, "The Shaker Problem—No. 2," *The Phrenological Journal of Science and Health* 57 (1873): 111; and "The Shaker Problem—No. 3," *The Phrenological Journal of Science and Health* 58 (1874): 194.

⁸ Antoinette Doolittle to Laura Holloway, 10 Oct. 1874, DeWint. In this letter Doolittle refers to having met Holloway-Langford in New York. G. A. Lomas, "Meetings of Shakers and Spiritualists in New York," *Shaker and Shakeress Monthly* 4 (1874): 2.

⁹ Although the Reverend Willard Parsons is credited with beginning the tradition of providing country vacations for city children in 1877, Holloway-Langford was the first to organize such excursions and to use the term "Fresh Air Fund," which is still used today. "Fresh Air Fund. The Colored Picnic," *Brooklyn Daily Union*, 24 Aug. 1872, and *Brooklyn Daily Union*, 10 June 1873.

¹⁰ Frederick Evans to Laura Holloway, 15 April 1874, DeWint. Antoinette Doolittle to Laura Holloway, 17 May 1874, DeWint. Frederick Evans to Laura Holloway, 19 May 1874, DeWint. Frederick Evans to Laura Holloway, 25 May 1874, DeWint.

¹¹ Priscilla Brewer, *Shaker Communities, Shaker Lives* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1986), 179. "Questions Answered," *Brooklyn Eagle*, 23 March 1879, 2.

¹² Anna White to Laura Langford, 21 July 1902, DeWint. Daniel Offord to Laura Langford, 15 Nov. 1908, NOC. Anna White to Laura Langford, 23 Nov. 1905, DeWint. Anna White to Laura Langford, 27 Sept. 1905, DeWint.

¹³ Antoinette Doolittle to Laura Holloway, 11 November 1874, DeWint. Anna White, "Remarks at Steinway Hall," *Shaker and Shakeress Monthly* 5 (1875): 6. "The Longevity of Women, and How Secured," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 6 April 1879, 2. "The Shakers. A Communistic Religious Society," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 13 Oct. 1878, 3. "Where the Shakers Live. The Beauties of New Lebanon Described by an Enthusiastic Brooklynite." *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 11 Aug. 1879, 4. Holloway-Langford was, of course, only one journalist who played a role in this change. Most important was Charles Nordhoff, *The Communist Societies in the United States*, 1875, which presented the century's fullest and most accurate account of Shaker communities.

¹⁴ DeWint, SA 1303.

¹⁵ Frederick W. Evans to Laura Holloway, 20 Jan. 1885, DeWint. Frederick Evans to Laura Holloway, 9 Feb. 1885, DeWint.

¹⁶ Anna White to Laura Langford, 11 Nov. 1901, DeWint. Anna White to Laura Langford, 5 Jan. 1902, DeWint. "North Visitor's Room, Mt. Lebanon Columbia County, N.Y.," 1893-1903, MPH. Anna White to Laura Langford, 26 April 1902, DeWint. Laura Langford to Hildegaard Henderson, 17 Aug. 1922, HPB. ¹⁷ [Announcement of the marriage], newspaper clipping, Scrapbook, Brooklyn Historical Society. Anna White to Laura Langford, 21 July 1902, NOC. The Shakers had met Edward when he brought Charlie to them in the spring of 1902.

¹⁸ Anna White to Laura Langford, 11 Dec. 1903, DeWint. Anna White to Laura Langford, 18 April 1904, DeWint. Anna White to Laura Langford, 23 April 1904, DeWint.

¹⁹ Anna White to Laura Langford, 15 June 1904, DeWint.

²⁰ Anna White to Laura Langford, 20 June 1904, DeWint. Anna White to Laura Langford, 21 June 1904, MPH. Anna White to Laura Langford 21 July 1904, DeWint. Anna White to Laura Langford, 17 June 1904, DeWint.

²¹ Anna White to Laura Langford, 17 June 1904, DeWint. Anna White to Laura Langford, 21 July 1904, DeWint.

²² Anna White to Laura Langford, 19 August 1904, DeWint. Anna White to Laura Langford, 5 Sept. 1904, MPH. Anna White to Laura Langford, 24 October 1904, DeWint.

²³ Emma Neal to Laura Langford, 14 Sept. 1904, MPH. Leila Taylor to Laura Langford, 25 Sept. 1904, DeWint.

²⁴ Anna White to Laura Langford, 3 Oct. 1904, DeWint. Anna White to Laura Langford, 3 Feb. 1904, DeWint. Leila Taylor to John P. MacLean [sic] 30 April 1905, OCIWHI IV:A-47. Anna White to Laura Langford, 3 Feb. 1904, DeWint.

²⁵ Anna White to Laura Langford, 25 July 1905, DeWint. Myron H. Phelps, "Miscellaneous: A Representative Hindu," *The Open Court* 19 (1905):438. "Hindu Sage's Mission is Religious Harmony: Mr. Ramanathan Comes Here to Unify all Deistic Beliefs," *New York Times*, 23 July 1905. "American Civilization Arraigned by a Hindu Sage," *New York Times*, 8 October 1905. Anna White to Laura Langford, 22 August 1905, DeWint. Anna White to Laura Langford, 11 Sept. 1905, DeWint.

²⁶ Celibacy itself may have been questioned within the North Family in late 1905 and early 1906. Anna White to Laura Langford 23 Nov. 1905, DeWint. Anna White to Laura Langford 9 May 1906, DeWint.

²⁷ [Laura Holloway-Langford], "Shakers of Mt. Lebanon Open Doors to City Children: Former Brooklyn Woman Senior Eldress of Interesting Colony," *The Daily Standard Union*, 10 June 1906.

²⁸ Anna White to Laura Langford, 7 June 1906, DeWint. Anna White's reply was dated before the Sunday issue of the *Daily Standard Union*; perhaps Holloway-

Langford sent her an advance copy. Anna White to Laura Langford, 27 Aug. 1908, DeWint.

²⁹ Anna White to Laura Langford, 12 Sept. 1906, DeWint.

³⁰ [Laura Holloway-Langford], MS, n.d., DeWint, SA 1439. *Health*, 58 (1908):511. Daniel Offord to Laura Langford, 28 June 1906, DeWint. [Laura Holloway-Langford], MS, n.d., DeWint, SA 1439. Ernest Pick to Laura Langford, 19 Feb. 1907, MPH. Daniel Offord to Laura Langford, 21 Dec. 1906, DeWint.

³¹ Daniel Offord to Laura Holloway, 20 July 1906, DeWint. [Laura Holloway-Langford], MS, n.d., DeWint, SA 1439.

³² Daniel Offord to Laura Holloway, 15 Feb. 1907, DeWint. Daniel Offord to Laura Langford, 20 March 1907, DeWint. Anna White to Laura Langford, 27 Nov. 1907, DeWint.

³³ Daniel Offord to Laura Langford, 4 Nov. 1909, DeWint. Daniel Offord to Laura Holloway, 29 Dec. 1909, DeWint. Daniel Offord to Laura Holloway, 5 Jan. 1910, DeWint. [Laura Holloway-Langford], MS, n.d., DeWint, SA 1439. Daniel Offord to Laura Langford, 23 Feb. 1911, DeWint. Daniel Offord to Laura Langford, 15 Jan. 1911, MPH. Leila Taylor to Laura Langford, 12 March 1911, DeWint. Leila Taylor to Laura Langford, 27 Aug. 1911, DeWint.

³⁴ [Laura Holloway-Langford], MS, n.d., DeWint, SA 1439. M. Catherine Allen to Laura Langford, 27 Aug. 1911, DeWint.

³⁵ Philip Kaminstein, Berkshire Farms' archivist, telephone conversation, 2 July 2007.

³⁶ Anna White to Laura Langford, n.d., DeWint. Telegram from Western Union to Laura Langford, DeWint. Daniel Offord to Laura Holloway, 23 Feb. 1911, DeWint. Leila Taylor to Laura Langford, 26 Feb. 1911, DeWint. Leila Taylor to Laura Langford, 12 March 1911, DeWint. Sarah Burger to Laura Langford, 26 Feb. 1912, DeWint. Leila S. Taylor, *A Memorial to Eldress Anna White and Elder Daniel Offord Mount Lebanon* (N.Y.: North Family of Shakers, 1912).

³⁷ Laura Langford to Hildegard Henderson, 18 Aug. 1922, HPB. Sheridan R. Cate, Attorney at Law, to Sidney P. Henshaw, 26 Feb. 1925, HPB.