

The Changing Face of Shaker Life: How Pictorial Images in the Popular Press Reflect the Growing Acceptance of the Shakers in Nineteenth-Century America

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In the half century between 1830 and 1880 the American public encountered the first visual representations of Shaker life. Published as newspaper and magazine illustrations or on separate sheets that were meant to be framed and displayed, these printed images document the changing ways in which Americans imagined the Shakers over the years. This essay is drawn from my book *Imagining the Shakers: How the Visual Culture of Shaker Life Was Pictured in the Popular Illustrated Press of Nineteenth-Century America*, published by the Richard W. Couper Press in 2019, and was presented as a talk at the Enfield Shaker Forum in 2021.

Introduction

Print culture was on the rise in nineteenth century America, and printed pictorial images, which were formerly rare and expensive, became increasingly popular, increasingly affordable, and widely available. People became accustomed to seeing printed images, and through those pictures, became accustomed to seeing ideas represented in visual form.

With this flourishing of visual culture the Shakers were pictured in print for the first time. Having lived in America for more than half a century by the time these first images appeared, the Shakers had from the first gained a certain notoriety for their radical non-conformist beliefs—religious dance, communal ownership of property, pacifism, celibacy, and gender equality—all of which aroused considerable interest, and even apprehension, among their neighbors.

Over the course of a half century between 1830 and 1880 more than two hundred drawings of the Shakers made their way into print. These pictures compose a visual history of Shaker life at the height of its vitality. In this essay I will trace the changing public attitudes

towards the Shakers by examining the way they were pictured in the popular illustrated press.

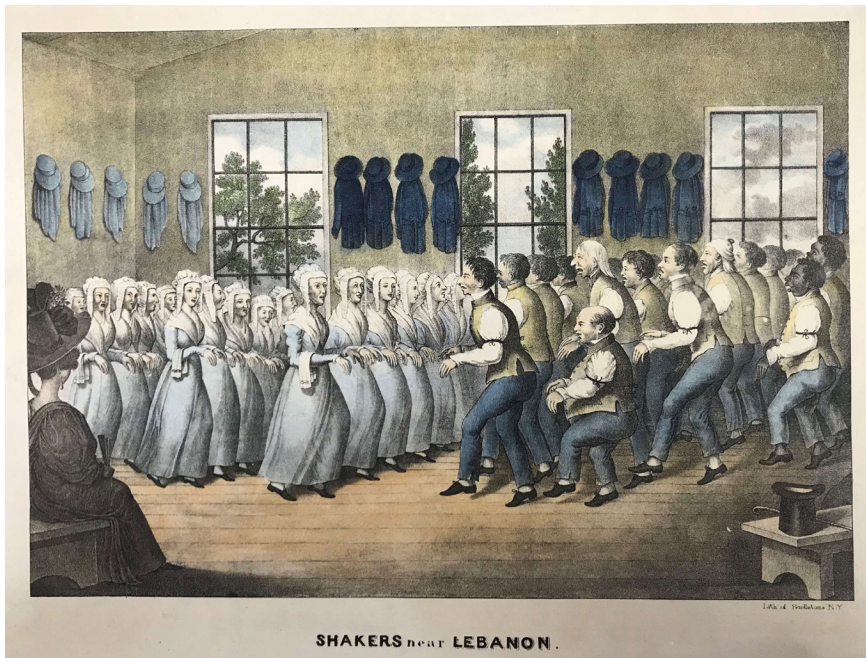


Fig. 1. John Pendleton, "Shakers Near Lebanon," ca. 1829.
Lithograph. Currier Museum of Art.

The 1820s: Shaker dance prints

The first pictorial images of the Shakers appeared in the late 1820s, introducing anyone who had never visited a Shaker community or seen a Shaker brother or sister to what the Shakers actually looked like. The early lithographer John Pendleton's Shaker print (fig. 1) is one of approximately twenty known versions of this scene, many so alike that they must have been derived from one seminal example made from first-hand observation.

These Shaker dance prints picture the Believers at Mt Lebanon, New York, in their meetinghouse with its famous bowed roof.¹ In his attempts to depict both the spectacle of Shakers dancing at worship and the remarkable arched ceiling above them, the original artist created an architectural contradiction, picturing the Believers against the

background of tall windows on the long back wall of the meetinghouse and simultaneously, and incongruously, under the arched ceiling of the shorter gable end. The anomaly of this impossible orientation was copied and perpetuated for decades in images derived from that scene.

Pendleton's print illustrates several distinctive characteristics of Shaker life. Most arresting is the use of dance in religious worship, which illustrated the Shakers' practice of separating the sexes. Worldly visitors were expected to observe that gender division as well: an elegantly dressed woman is seated on the left observing the sisters, while a gentleman represented by a top hat and walking stick is seated on a bench at the right facing the Shaker brethren.² Another unusual feature of Shaker life was the practice of racial integration, pictured here by the presence of two Black brothers in the back row. The distinctive dress of the Believers pictured here further identifies the Shakers as an unconventional people who intentionally chose to distinguish and remove themselves from the worldly life of their neighbors.

CARICATURES.

JUST PUBLISHED by S. HART, 65 south Third street, the following American Caricatures, viz:

1. The Dead Cut,—designed by E. W. Clay.
2. Life in Philadelphia, No. 12,—coloured.
3. Snug Birth in a Shower,—designed by Heath.
4. Much ado about Nothing,—coloured.
5. Life in Philadelphia, No. 13,—designed by E. W. Clay.

ALSO—for sale as above,

6. Johnson's Scraps, No. 1 and 2,—*very cheap*.
7. Shakers at Lebanon,—drawn by F. Kearney.
8. Lessons in Dancing, (including Mons. Vestris' Dance.)
9. Life in Philadelphia, complete setts, 1—13,—*cheap*.
10. The Long Story,—drawn by F. Kearney.
11. Posting in Ireland.
12. English Caricatures, comprising an assortment of upwards of 300, received by late arrivals from London, with a general assortment of SCRAPS and Engravings of every description, at *low prices*.

☞ Direction, opposite Girard's Bank. jan 13

Fig. 2. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 15, 1830.



Fig. 3. Nathaniel Currier, “Shakers Near Lebanon,” ca. 1838-1857.
Lithograph, National Gallery of Art.

None of the lithographs or copperplate engravings of the meetinghouse scene were issued with a date of publication, but a notice in the *United States Gazette* for September 7, 1829, described the print in a Philadelphia shop window: “At the Window of Mr. Simpson’s Book store in Chestnut Street, is a very neat and correct lithographic view of a Shaker’s religious assembly, in which the devotees are performing a religious dance.”³ In an advertisement four months later the Philadelphia bookseller Sarah Hart gave the title of the print and the name of the artist who originally drew the scene: “Just Published by S. Hart ... Shakers at Lebanon, drawn by F. Kearney.”⁴ (fig. 2) Francis Kearney was a partner in the Philadelphia lithographic firm of Pendleton, Kearney and Childs, which ended early in 1829 when John Pendleton moved to New York.⁵ In the title of his Shaker dance scene “Shakers Near Lebanon” he included the credit “Lith of Pendletons NY,” indicating that this print was produced some time after he left Philadelphia for New York that February. Although the French immigrant lithographer Anthony Imbert was also working in Philadelphia in 1829, the Philadelphia partnership of John Pendleton

with the original sketch artist Francis Kearney suggests that Pendleton's lithograph may have been the seminal print from which all the others descended.⁶

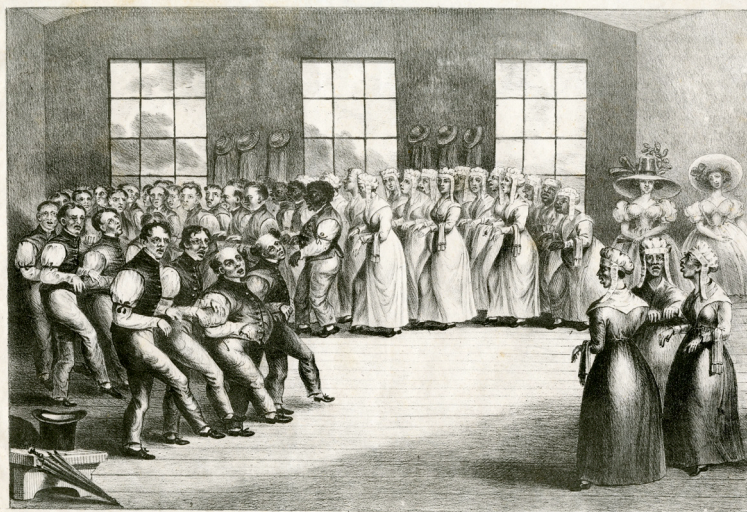
As successive printmakers created Shaker dance prints copied from previous versions, the details of the derivative prints strayed from the verisimilitude of the original. When John Pendleton's former apprentice Nathaniel Currier issued his own version of this scene (fig. 3) he included his street address in New York, at which he was located beginning in 1838.⁷ Currier's print copies every detail of the Pendleton print so precisely, right down to the earring on the elegant visitor seated at the left, that it appears he reused Pendleton's original lithographic stone and just substituted his own title. Not realizing that Francis Kearney had composed his drawing to highlight the splendid arched ceiling of the meetinghouse, however, Currier cropped that distinctive feature from his print. Over the years as other engravers and lithographers produced their own versions of this scene, each new print became farther removed from the authentic details Francis Kearney captured in his original drawing.



Fig. 4. "Dansende Kwakers," in
"Tooneeland uit Nord-Amerika." *De Tijd*, 1850.

The Shaker dance scene first appeared in a dated publication when a small woodcut by the Philadelphia engraver George Gilbert was reproduced in a German language almanac for the year 1831.⁸ Printed in the fall of 1830 for use in the coming year, the written text of the almanac made no reference to Shaker life. Evidently the publishers just sought to decorate their cover page with the visually arresting image of Shaker worship newly being sold in the bookshops of Philadelphia. It apparently made a significant public impression, as Gilbert was asked to engrave a second version for *Graham's Illustrated Magazine* in 1831.⁹

When these first visual images of Shaker life appeared, much of the outside world still viewed the Shaker society with misgivings, judging them critically for their transgression of cultural norms. The individual ownership of property, a willingness to take up arms, the creation of married families—all were revered in nineteenth century



SHAKERS near LEBANON, Their mode of WORSHIP.

Fig. 5. "Shakers Near Lebanon, Their Mode of Worship," after ca. 1830.
Lithograph New-York Historical Society.

America, and the repudiation of these norms and the enthusiastic adoption of worship through inspired movement caused concern and apprehension among many of the Shakers' fellow countrymen. Vivid illustrations of the Shakers conducting fervent religious exercises in their strange costumes amidst racially integrated company found a welcome audience. Just picturing the controversial activities of these religious iconoclasts was sensational, but some artists used the image as a point of departure to provide pointed and sarcastic commentary.

The artist of the Dutch lithograph "Dansende Kwakers" pictured a boisterous meeting in which the Shakers have kicked over a stool in the course of their worship (fig 4). (The depiction of worldly men and woman seated together on the sisters' side of the meetinghouse reveals how little the illustrator knew of actual Shaker custom.) In "Shakers near Lebanon, their mode of Worship" (fig. 5) the illustrator has pictured three Shaker eldresses as pinched-face crones overseeing a circle dance of wild-eyed worshippers, and not the sort of people whose company one would enjoy. The genteel visitor seated next to the Shaker sisters in the original print has now been transmogrified into a pair of worldly women in fancy hats, dripping with contempt and condescension at the wild scene unfolding before them. In these dance prints the controversial beliefs and customs of the Shakers are held up to ridicule. Lingering prejudices about this unconventional religious society would find a receptive public for a while yet.

1830s: Landscape Views and Picturesque Villages

Coincident with these critical depictions of Shaker life, we see published for the first time pictures of what the Shakers' communities looked like. In November 1835 the *American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge* illustrated a wood engraving captioned "The Village of the United Society of Shakers in Canterbury New Hampshire" (fig. 6) printed on the same page as an essay written by the Canterbury Shakers to introduce worldly people to that communal society.¹⁰

There we see a glorious image of billowing clouds and a sunny sky over well-kept fields. A herder looks over his cows and sheep grazing contentedly in the pasture. This scene illustrates what so many visitors to Shaker villages had said about them over the years. Travelers who observed Shaker communities at first hand wrote letters or newspaper accounts or published books reporting glowing impressions of the



THE VILLAGE OF THE UNITED SOCIETY OF SHAKERS, IN CANTERBURY, N. H.

This Village is located in the northeasterly part of the county of Merrimack, on the main road from Concord to Conway, twelve miles from Concord, on an eminence; at the foot of which, as you approach the village, is a spacious granite watering trough, from the bottom of which boils a bountiful and never-failing spring; furnished by the Society for

two saw mills, three carding machines, one fulling mill, one trip-hammer, five mills for sawing fire-wood, three turning mills, and two tanneries, besides various other machinery. These buildings are all laid out and constructed in a regular, plain and elegant manner, which gives the Village a very fine appearance.

Fig. 6. "The Village of the United Society of Shakers, in Canterbury, N.H.," in *The American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge*, November 1835.



Shaker Village in Hancock.

The above is a view of some of the principal buildings in the Shaker village, which is 4 miles from Pittsfield, 7 from Lenox,

Fig. 7. John Warner Barber, "Shaker Village in Hancock," in *Historical Collections, ... of Interesting Facts of Every Town in Massachusetts*, 1839.

Shaker landscape. The Shakers' fields were better kept than the neighbors', they said, with crops more verdant, and meadows tidily trimmed right to the edges. Visitors reported that the roads through their lands were smoother and better maintained, their stone walls higher and laid tighter. The prosperous appearance of Shaker villages was the result of their having an army of volunteer labor who consecrated their toil to a holy purpose. Not only was there an economy of scale in working on these farms, but among the Believers there was also a religious dedication to perfection. The appearance of a Shaker village was by all accounts exemplary.

The results of the Shakers' devoted labor was not lost on the figures in the foreground of this landscape view. The Shaker brother on the left is the herdsman, dressed in his barn smock and Shaker hat, talking to a man dressed in a swallowtail coat and a top hat and carrying a walking stick. He is the worldly visitor taking stock of the landscape the Shaker brother is pointing out. The buildings at Canterbury are numerous, substantial, and in good repair. The stone walls are constructed with the same granite that everyone else in the town of Canterbury found in their farm fields. The neighboring lands all grew the same kinds of building timber and they all had the same kinds of soil. Everyone experienced the same weather. But by common acknowledgement the Shakers used these natural elements more effectively. Their villages just looked better.

In the 1830s we start to see more of these topographic views of Shaker villages, principally by John Warner Barber, who drew and then engraved small scenes of individual villages to illustrate his state gazetteers. Among those were the Shaker settlements in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New York. People who had never been to a Shaker village were able to see for the first time what one looked like. In Barber's view of the Shaker village at Hancock, Massachusetts, a passerby pauses and admires the large brick dwelling house, and behind it, the round cow barn (fig. 7).¹¹

An 1847 engraving of the Church Family dwelling house at Pleasant Hill, Kentucky (fig. 8) pictures a group of travelers stopped in front of that magnificent three-story structure, probably the largest and finest building in Mercer County. In the very same years that the dance prints pictured the Shakers as a peculiar and disconcerting people these topographic views depicted their fields and buildings

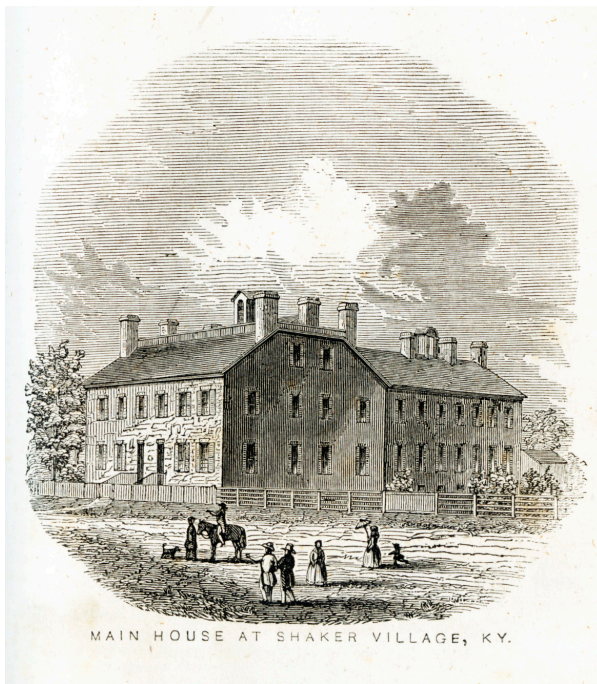


Fig. 8. "Main House at Shaker Village, KY," in *Collins' Historical Sketches*, 1847.



Fig. 9. "The Whirling Gift," in David R. Lamson, *Two Years' Experience Among the Shakers*, 1848.


as the work of industrious builders, model farmers, and laudable custodians of the land.

The 1840s: Era of Spirit Manifestations

There is no record of any worldly artists visiting Shaker villages in the 1840s. For the Believers it was the period of Mother's Work, a time of intense spiritual revival when they welcomed the spirits of otherworldly forces into their communities. Their journals from this period record visits from the spirits of departed Shakers, native Americans, or national heroes like George Washington, who came back from the spirit world and made their presence known to the Believers, bringing with them visions of mystical drawings and songs in unknown tongues. During this period of spirit manifestation the Shakers were less receptive to the visits of outsiders, as Charles Dickens learned in 1842 when the celebrated author's request to attend meeting at Mount Lebanon was unceremoniously denied.¹² As a result of the Shakers' desire for privacy during these years, the few pictures that were made of the Shakers in the 1840s came from outside the community.

At the Hancock Shaker village a Believer named Charles Lamson lived in the midst of this spiritual upheaval from 1843 to 1845, when he left the community disillusioned by the willingness of Shaker elders to give credence to divine revelations he considered to be spurious. In 1848 he published a memoir, *Two Years Experience Among the Shakers*, which he illustrated with three wood engravings of religious services inspired by Mother's Work.¹³ The original drawings for these engravings were made by an unknown artist based on Lamson's descriptions of the outdoor worship site they prepared under the direction of mystical revelations, and the Shakers' ecstatic worship in the meetinghouse at Hancock (fig. 9).

The mystical revelations and unrestrained conduct that manifested during the era of Mother's Work drove more Believers than just Charles Lamson out of the Shaker fold. Other seceders from Shaker societies seized upon the idea of taking to the stage, where they supported themselves by performing the ceremonies of Shaker worship before paying audiences. Two such apostates were Olive and William Carter, formerly members of the Shaker community at Enfield, New Hampshire, who posted announcements publicizing appearances in which they would perform Shaker dances and sing



THE SHAKERS.

WM. H. CARTER and OLIVE G. CARTER, Seceders from the Shaker Society at Enfield, N. H. will give a true history of the Shakers, sing 20 Shaker Songs, part of which will be in an unknown tongue, (as sung by the Shaker Visionists.) and go through all the various modes of worship peculiar to that strange and secluded people, at the Universalist Church, on SATURDAY EVENING, Nov. 26th.

Doors open at 7 o'clock. Lecture to commence at half past 7 o'clock.

Admittance 12½ cents, (for expenses to be paid at the door. Ladies and Gentlemen will avail themselves of this opportunity.

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Fig. 10. "The Shakers. Wm. H. Carter and Olive G. Carter," in *The Newark (N.J.). Daily Advertiser*, November 25, 1842.

The Manager takes pleasure in announcing an engagement with the novel and amusing company known as the

SHAKING



STRONG.

QUAKERS!

Composed of THREE BEAUTIFUL LADIES and THREE GENTLEMEN who have recently seceded from the Society at Catebury, N. H. where they have spent a great number of years, and have filled the highest ranks among that strange and peculiar people. The gentlemen held the offices of

Fig. 11. "Shaking Quakers!" Broadside, 1846.
New-York Historical Society

Shaker songs, some in unknown tongues. Their advertisement for a performance in Boston in 1841 (fig. 10) included an unlikely picture of the couple dressed in Shaker garb, while holding hands in a distinctly un-Shaker-like behavior.

It was not long before P. T. Barnum got into the act, promoting appearances of a troupe of seceders from the community at Canterbury, New Hampshire, whom he billed as “Shaking Quakers” who would whirl, sing, and dance in “full Shaker costume.” Thomas Strong, the engraver Barnum employed to illustrate his most spectacular broadsides, produced woodcuts to adorn the Shaker playbills, picturing one of the apostate women twirling around so rapidly that the undergarments clothing her lower legs were exposed (fig. 11). While he never suppressed Strong’s lurid illustration, Barnum hastened in his advertisements to assure the public that the apostates’ performances would contain nothing to offend the most delicate sensibilities.

The novelty and popularity of Shaker apostate performances inspired troupes of minstrel players to add Shaker acts to their comic presentations. A popular form of entertainment in nineteenth-century America, minstrel shows featured white performers with black makeup on their faces parodying in song and dance what they supposed to be Black culture. It was but a short step to extend this ridicule to other minority groups, and soon they included on their programs acts featuring “Black Shakers.” The performers were neither Black nor Shaker, of course. That was the point of the joke. And when “The Celebrated Black Shaker Song” was published, it was accompanied by a small wood engraving of seven men in blackface (fig. 12), one playing a fiddle flanked by six others pictured in postures copied from a Shaker dance print. The presence of the fiddle player revealed that these minstrel players knew nothing about Shaker worship. It was a silly, absurd picture, but the point of these performances was to provide cheap popular entertainment. Authentic representation of Shaker life was never a consideration for the Black Shaker minstrels.

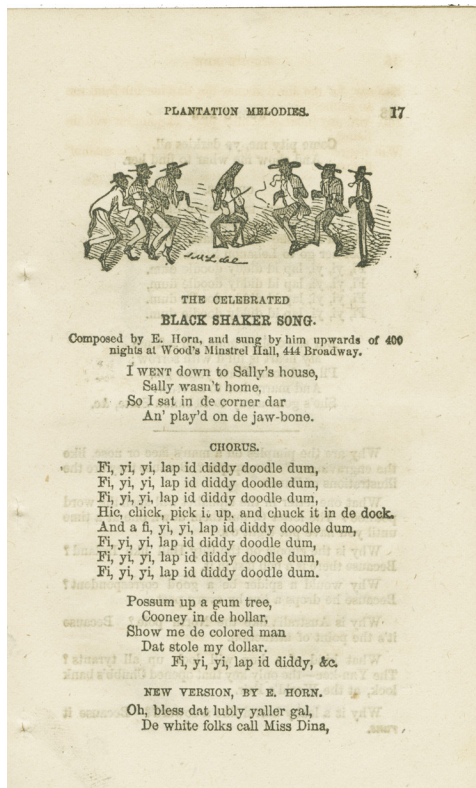


Fig. 12. "The Celebrated Black Shaker Song."
John Hay Library, Brown University.

1850s: *Harper's Magazine* and Benson Lossing's "The Shakers" in 1857

In July of 1857 *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* published a 7,300 word article describing and illustrating the landscape, buildings, and daily life of the Shaker community at Mount Lebanon, New York. Although the article was unsigned, it is now known that it was written by Benson John Lossing, a "special artist" for Harper's, who made eighteen illustrations of the Mount Lebanon Shaker community to accompany his account of his visit there.¹⁴

By the summer of 1856, when Lossing visited Mount Lebanon, the time of Mother's Work had come and gone from Shaker communities. And, as the Believers were re-engaging with the world beyond their villages, a new generation of illustrated magazines was flourishing

in the outside world. These new periodical publications were made possible by large high-speed printing presses that allowed publishers to produce their magazines and newspapers in much greater number, and expanded transportation networks that allowed them to distribute them to a much wider readership.

As they re-engaged with the world beyond their communities in the 1850s, the Shakers became better at managing their own public image. Indeed, the Shakers at Mount Lebanon arranged with Lossing to stay as their guest for a few days in the community. The Shakers depended on converts to the faith to replenish their numbers, and they could see the value of winning the good will of a writer from one of the most popular illustrated magazines in America.

The Shaker brother assigned to accompany Lossing around the village brought him first to a Saturday night service in the great bow-roofed meetinghouse. With the publication of the Shaker dance prints in the 1820s, religious exercises had become fixed in the public imagination as the dominant feature of Shaker life, and the visiting artist's first drawings pictured the Believers marching in a circle dance with their hands stretched out to receive blessings from above (fig. 13). Lossing's depiction of Shaker worship was more respectful of the Shakers—no contorted expressions or disapproving onlookers here—and more accurate than his predecessors' dance prints. His drawing, reproduced as a wood engraving in the magazine eleven months later, was the first to accurately picture the worshipers marching past the long wall of tall windows instead of the shorter gable end with the arched ceiling.¹⁵

Lossing returned to the meetinghouse after the Sabbath and made a drawing of the interior of the building in all its architectural glory (fig. 14). His drawing was a great departure from any of the views of the meetinghouse to date: it was the first to picture the vast room without any Believers at worship. The only figure in his scene was the brother who was showing him around the community, drawn seated on a bench in the middle of the empty hall, his long coat trailing down behind him to the floor.

The sympathetic tone of Lossing's article for *Harper's* suggests the warm welcome he received in the community. His guide introduced him to Shaker sisters, who modeled for him the different costumes they wore indoors and out. The brethren posed for him too, modeling

em. As it died away, the clear musical voice of a female was heard from the external circle, telling, in joyful cadence, how happy she felt as a member of that pure and holy community. To this many among the worshipers gave words of hearty concurrence. Another sweet female voice then commenced a hymn in which "Mother Ann" was celebrated. The entire body of worshipers formed into a single line, marched slowly around the central circle of singers, and as the strain ceased their hands fell gracefully to their sides, their bodies were inclined gently forward, and their thin hands were slowly raised and clasped over the waist.

After a brief pause they commenced singing a lively spiritual song. The worshipers now formed four circles, with the singers as the central one, and held each other by the hand, the men and women separately. These circles symbolized the four great Dispensations—the first from Adam to Abraham; the second from Abraham to Jesus; the third from Jesus to "Mother Ann;" and the fourth the present, which they hold to be the millennial period. In this hymn they sang of UNION, as exhibited by their linked hands; and when it had ceased they all lifted up their hands, and gave a subdued shout—the shout of victory—the final victory of Christ in all the earth, and the triumphs of the Shaker, or Millennial Church.

Three or four more songs and hymns, with graceful dances or marches, and the ceremonies drew to a close. While singing the last sweet song, the men and women took their respective places at each end of the room, and stood facing each other. Elder Evans then addressed a few words of encouragement to them, and stepping forward, thanked the au-

dience for their kind attention, and informed them that the meeting was closed.

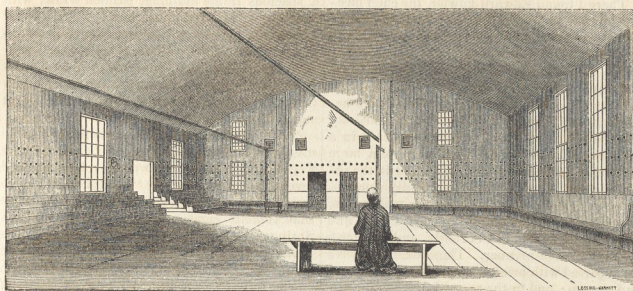
From that house of strange worship every "Gentile" seemed to depart with serious feelings. Whatever may have been the scenes among the Shakers in former times or in other communities, of which many have spoken with contempt and ridicule, it can not be denied that their public worship at Lebanon is dignified, solemn, and deeply impressive. We may differ from them in opinion as to its propriety, but we must accord to them great earnestness and sincerity. Their songs and hymns breathe a pure and Christian spirit; and their music, unlike any to be heard elsewhere, captivates the ear because of its severe simplicity and perfect melody. Their movements in the dance or march, whether natural or studied, are all graceful and appropriate; and as I gazed upon that congregation of four or five hundred worshipers marching and countermarching in perfect time, I felt certain that, were it seen upon a stage as a theatrical exhibition, the involuntary exclamation of even the hypercritical would be, "How beautiful!" The women, clad in white, and moving gracefully, appeared ethereal; and among them were a few very beautiful faces. All appeared happy, and upon each face rested the light of dignified serenity, which always gives power to the features of woman.

On leaving the house of worship I was invited to the dwelling of the preacher, and there I spent the afternoon and evening with him, and some of the brethren and sisters, in pleasant conversation, the chief topic of which was their doctrine and discipline. They accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament (our common version) as the true record of the revelation of God



THE DANCE

Fig. 13. After Benson J. Lossing, "The Dance," 1857.
Harper's New Monthly Magazine, July 1857.



INTERIOR OF THE MEETING HOUSE.

fastened with three buttons and turned over. The women wear, on Sunday, some a pure white dress, and others a white dress with a delicate blue stripe in it. Over their necks and bosoms were pure white kerchiefs, and over the left arm of each was carried a large white pocket-handkerchief. Their heads were covered with lawn caps, the form of all, for both old and young, being alike. They project so as to fully conceal the cheeks in profile. Their shoes, sharp-toed and high-heeled, according to the fashion of the day when the Society was formed, were made of prunella, of a brilliant ultramarine blue. Such was the appearance of the worshippers in the presence of at least six hundred strangers, attracted there by curiosity.

The worshippers soon arose, and approached from opposite ends of the room, until the two front rows were within two yards of each other, the women modestly casting their eyes to the floor. The benches were then instantly removed. There they stood in silence, in serried columns like platoons in military, while two rows of men and women stood along the wall, facing the audience. From these came a grave personage, and standing in the centre of the worshippers, addressed them with a few words of exhortation. All stood in silence for a few minutes at the conclusion of his remarks, when they began to sing a hymn of several verses to a lively tune, and keeping time with their feet. In this, as in all of their songs and hymns, they did not pause at the end of each verse, but kept on without rest and with many repetitions until the whole hymn was completed. Elder Evans then came forward, and addressing a few words to the audience, asked them to regard the acts of worship before them with respectful attention. This request was unnecessary, for there was nothing in the entire performance calculated to elicit any other than feelings of deep respect and serious contemplation.

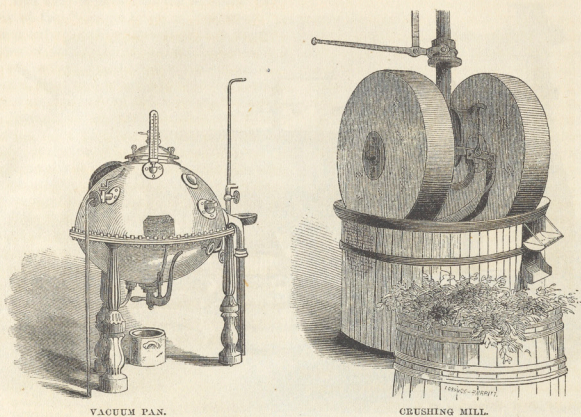
After two other brethren had given brief "testimonies," the worshippers all turned their backs to the audience, except those of the two

wall rows, and commenced a backward and forward march, or dance, in a regular springing step, keeping time to the music of their voices, while their hands hung closely to their sides. The wall rows alone kept time with their hands moving up and down, the palms turned upward. The singing appeared like a simple refrain and a chorus of too-ral-loo, too-ral-loo, while all the movements with hand, foot, and limb were extremely graceful.

The worshippers now stood in silence a few moments, when they commenced singing another hymn, with chorus like the last. When it was ended they retired to each end of the room, the benches were replaced, and the men and women again sat down opposite each other. Elder Evans then came forward, and, in an able discourse of almost an hour, expounded the peculiar doctrines of the Shakers, especially that which relates to the duality of God as male and female, and the second advent of Christ upon earth in the person of Ann Lee, the founder of the Society. When he had ceased all the worshippers arose, the benches were removed, and they formed themselves into serried ranks as before. Then, with graceful motions, they gradually changed their position into circular form, all the while moving with springing step, in unison with a lively tune. In the centre stood twenty-four singers in a circle, twelve men and twelve women; and around them, in two concentric circles, marched and countermarched the remainder of the worshippers, the men three and the women two abreast. A brief pause and they commenced another lively tune and march, all keeping time with their hands moving up and down, and occasionally clapping them three or four times in concert. The women were now three and the men two abreast. When the hymn ceased, with a prolonged strain, they all turned their faces toward the inner circle of singers.

After another pause the worshippers commenced a hymn in slow and plaintive strain. The music was unlike any thing I had ever heard; beautiful, impressive, and deeply sol-

Fig. 14. After Benson J. Lossing, "Interior of the Meeting House," 1857.
Harper's New Monthly Magazine, July 1857.



VACUUM PAN.

CRUSHING MILL.

would in the open air. In a room adjoining the vacuum pan are mills for reducing dried roots to impalpable powder. These roots are first cracked to the size of "samp" in the room below, by being crushed under two huge discs of Esopus granite, each four feet in diameter, a foot in thickness and a ton in weight. These are made to revolve in a large vessel by steam power. The roots are then carried to the mills

above. These are made of two upper and a nether stone of Esopus granite. The upper stones are in the form of truncated cones, and rest upon the nether stone, which is beveled. A shaft in the centre, to which they are attached by arms, makes them revolve, and at the same time they turn upon their own axes. The roots ground under them by this double motion are made into powder almost impalpable.



FINISHING ROOM.

Fig. 15. After Benson J. Lossing, "Finishing Room," 1857.
Harper's New Monthly Magazine, July 1857.

the clothing they wore for different occasions—on the Sabbath, in the workshop, in the fields, or on trips to town. For the first time an artist from the outside world was permitted to make illustrations of the working life of the community in the areas of the village the Shakers reserved for themselves. In a laboratory and workshop he observed the process of making herbal medicines, all the way from boiling and distilling roots and leaves to pasting labels on glass bottles (fig. 15). His drawings of Mount Lebanon's herb industry illustrated for the first time how members of a Shaker community worked in unison, sisters and brothers, to prepare and package their renowned products.

In 1857 Harper Brothers claimed a circulation of 100,000 for the *Harper's Monthly Illustrated Magazine*, and in 1875 reused Lossing's engravings to illustrate Charles Nordhoff's *Communal Societies of the United States*.¹⁶ This was the reading public Benson Lossing introduced to the Shakers through his illustrated account of his visit to Mount Lebanon.

1860s: Character Studies in the London *Graphic*

In November 1869 the celebrated English painter Arthur Boyd Houghton also paid a visit to the Shaker community at Mount Lebanon, on assignment from the London *Graphic*. The *Graphic* was an illustrated newspaper, and Houghton was at the outset of a tour across the United States to picture America and Americans for the *Graphic's* new feature "Graphic America."

Houghton was following in the footsteps of his fellow countryman Hepworth Dixon, a British explorer and social critic who in 1866 traveled around the United States visiting religious settlements and communities of progressive thinkers—the kinds of unconventional social experiments that he thought could flourish only in a brave new world. He was particularly keen to visit the Shakers, and when his book *New America*¹⁷ was published the following year it was dominated by his enthusiastic observations about the religious society at Mount Lebanon.

While Dixon described his American travels in evocative prose, *New America* was for all intents and purposes devoid of illustrations. His publishers had included a few engravings he had acquired here and there, but none of them pictured the visual culture of life in a Shaker community. By sending Houghton on assignment to visit some

of the same places Dixon described in his narrative, the editors of the London *Graphic* evidently saw an opportunity to illustrate *New America* after the fact.

Houghton had made a name for himself in London as a painter of uncommon perceptiveness, and it was this talent for insightful observation that brought him to Mount Lebanon. Sketching in a small handheld notebook he pictured the little personal moments of life in the North Family's dwelling house. Although they had allowed the *Harper's* sketch artist Benson Lossing to sketch Shakers at work in 1856, no one had ever captured the intimate dynamics of a Shaker family as did Arthur Boyd Houghton in 1869.

Recent advancements in printing technology now permitted the publishers of pictorial newspapers to print large-scale wood engravings—as much as 20 inches high by 13 inches wide—on the pages of oversized journals. The pencil sketches Houghton produced on site he later expanded into finished drawings to be published as engravings in the large format of these new journals. A small character study of Frederick Evans (fig. 16) and an adoring sketch of three little girls (fig. 17) were incorporated into scenes of Shaker meeting for the *Graphic* (fig. 18). The Shakers' renowned buildings and furnishings did not much interest Houghton but his depiction of the human side of the Shaker experience produced the first vignettes of members of the Shaker society engaging with one another.

Houghton's character studies of the North Family Shakers were not at all like Dixon's descriptions of the community, which dwelt more on horticulture and theology. If the purpose of Houghton's visit was to complement *New America's* text with illustrations, then he was the wrong artist for that job. In addition, when the pictures appeared in print, Frederick Evans complained that the community had been misled and was being mocked by the society painter from London.¹⁸ But Houghton's Shaker drawings can also be seen as a sympathetic rendering of the souls who had committed themselves to the faith. They turned out to be the most perceptive illustrations of Shaker brethren and sisters to be produced in the nineteenth century.



Fig. 16. Pencil sketch, A. Boyd Houghton, "Shakers," 1869.
Victoria & Albert Museum.



Fig. 17. Pencil sketch, A. Boyd Houghton, 1869.
Victoria & Albert Museum.



Fig. 18. After A. Boyd Houghton, "Shakers at Meeting:
The Final Procession," 1870. *Graphic*, May 14, 1870.

1870s: Picturing Domestic Life in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*

In March 1870 the sketch artist Joseph Becker took a train to Mount Lebanon to visit the Shakers, on assignment for *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*. Like Arthur Boyd Houghton before him, Becker was visiting communal societies and religious communities across America and, like Houghton, he was evidently inspired by the publication of Hepworth Dixon's *New America*.¹⁹ Houghton's Shaker drawings had not yet appeared in print and the New York sketch artist was likely unaware that the celebrated English painter had preceded him there.²⁰

Unlike Houghton, who had mastered the subtleties of painting genre scenes in the Royal Academy of Art, Joseph Becker learned to draw as a teenager in the engraving rooms of *Frank Leslie's*, where he was employed as an errand boy.²¹ His first assignment as a "special artist" was as a war correspondent on Civil War battlefields, where he learned to record the visual information readers had come to expect in the *Leslie's* publications. It was this skill of narrative illustration that he brought to Mount Lebanon.

His Shaker hosts invited Joseph Becker to attend religious services in the Church Family's meetinghouse, where he drew a scene of a spirited circle dance (fig.19). With his talent for recording details he captured not only the scene of brothers and sisters in ecstatic movement but also the worldly visitors seated at the side of the room, which he pictured accurately with men at the north and women at the south.

The Shakers then invited Becker to draw the domestic spaces where they lived and worked. The fourteen engravings made from his drawings illustrated for the first time the office where Shaker trustees conducted business with the public. He was shown to a communal dwelling, where he pictured the accommodations of a brothers' retiring room, warmed by a wood stove and insulated with a quilted blanket made to line the exterior walls in winter. He visited the dining room where he sketched brethren and sisters seated apart and enjoying their meals at their own tables, and the kitchen sisters preparing food in a modern kitchen in the basement below. His drawings of domestic life at Mount Lebanon pictured a world of contented men and women enjoying the benefits of a prosperous rural existence.

Becker did not editorialize about the people he reported on. The tone of his Shaker drawings is consistent with the images he created



Fig. 19. After Joseph Becker, "New York State. The Shakers of New Lebanon. Religious Exercises in the Meeting-House," 1873.
Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, November 1, 1873.

in a long career at *Leslie's*, recording the details of what he observed without making judgments. When his Shaker guide accompanied him to a social occasion in which Shaker sisters and brothers met to hold discussions and sing Shaker songs, Becker pictured the gathering as a pleasant evening of shared company. His pencil drawing of the scene pictures the seven Shaker sisters as amiable folks, joining the brethren in song (fig. 20). In the published engraving (fig. 21) the reading public saw a more caustic, less sympathetic version of these faces. But it was not in Becker's nature to make fun of his subjects, and his preparatory drawing demonstrates that he pictured the Shakers in good faith.

No doubt the Shakers appreciated being pictured in a positive light. They depended on converts to sustain their communities, and Becker's objective depiction of their domestic life attracted the attention of a wide reading public. The publishers at *Frank Leslie's* found such a successful reception for Becker's Shaker drawings that they reprinted his engravings twice in the next twelve years.²² Joseph Becker was the first artist to emphasize scenes of domestic comfort



Fig. 20. Sketch, Joseph Becker, "The Shakers Singing Meeting," 1870.
Graphite and white gouache on toned paper.
The Becker Collection, Boston.



Fig. 21. After Joseph Becker, "New York.—The Shakers at Lebanon
—The Singing Meeting," 1873.
Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, January 11, 1873.

MOTHER ANN'S CHILDREN.

"plenary inspiration" and the Trinity, but all avenging or merely vindicatory punishment, all vicarious work on the part of Christ, all the supernatural in his

wise well proportioned, light hair, blue eyes, regarded as beautiful words, and plain

In her was full of animation, expression of joy she was with her rejoiced gregarious large, altation. The which the nearest arisen earlier a revival Mother ity was she called "Shake ever for



birth, life or death; regard his crucifixion as a hindrance and not a means of United States, and American sect.

Fig. 22. William Bodfish, "[In the Garden]", in Van Buren Denslow, "Mother Ann's Children," *American Magazine* 6, no. 1, (May, 1887), 173.



Fig. 23. William Bodfish, "The Reading Room," in Van Buren Denslow, "Mother Ann's Children," *American Magazine* 6, no. 1, (May 1887), 170.

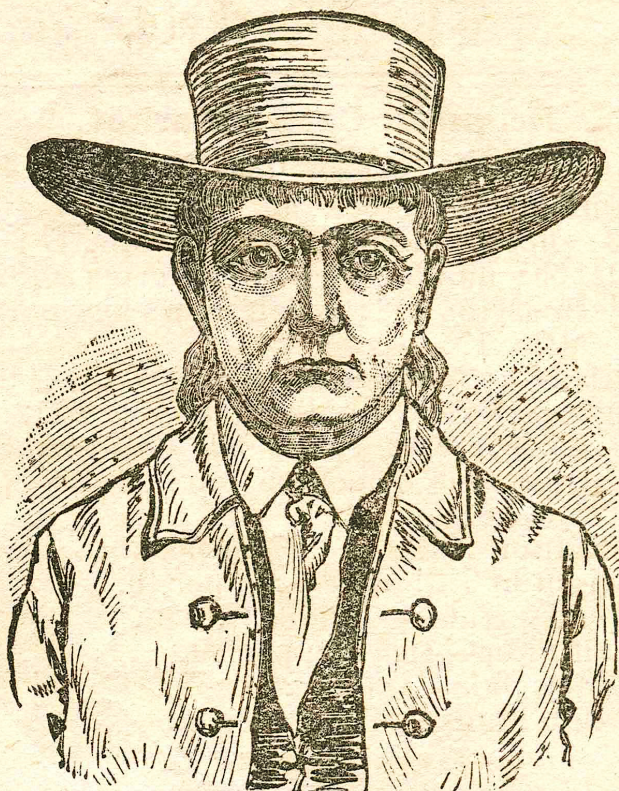
over scenes of religious zeal in a Shaker village, and his drawings for *Leslie's* introduced the American reading public to a much wider view of Shaker life.

The 1880s: Upstanding Citizens

In 1887 the social theorist Van Beuren Winslow published an article in the *American Magazine* about the Shaker community at Watervliet, New York.²³ His essay “Mother Ann’s Children” was accompanied by eight illustrations of temporal life at Watervliet, but contained no views of Shaker worship. Instead, William Bodfish’s soothing pencil drawings dwelt entirely on the simple pleasures of daily activities in a community withdrawn from the hurly-burly of modern existence. His illustrations pictured young women at work in the garden (fig. 22) or in thoughtful repose in the community’s library (fig. 23). Sensational scenes of animated religious dance were nowhere to be found.

In the 1880s Bodfish was not alone in depicting the Believers as benign and genial participants in a picturesque rural life. The public perception of their evolution from social disrupters to peaceable neighbors can be seen also in commercial illustrations promoting Shaker goods. When the Shakers produced brochures to advertise the products of their shops and fields they personalized their good name by illustrating likenesses of Shaker brothers and sisters on product labels and broadsides. Commercial purveyors of wares linked to the Shakers followed the Believers’ example, using images of the Shakers in their advertising to associate the quality of their products with the reputation of Shaker goods for excellence. The Shaker image had become the personification of trustworthiness (fig. 24).

The way the public pictured the Shakers changed fundamentally from the 1820s to the 1880s. Once regarded with skepticism and disapproval, in the minds of their fellow Americans the Believers had become paragons of stability and reliability. The scores of printed images made of the Shakers during those decades reveal how public perception evolved to portray them ultimately as simple, honest, and traditional folk who in their own eccentric way embodied some of the most admirable qualities of the American people.



**CANTERBURY SHAKERS
LIFE-INVIGORATING
SARSAPARILLA.**

The Great Health Restorative.

Fig. 24. "Canterbury Shakers Life-Invigorating Sarsaparilla,"
Maine Farmer, November 6, 1880.

Notes

1. Jerry V. Grant, *Noble but Plain: The Shaker Meetinghouse at Mount Lebanon* (Old Chatham, N.Y.: Shaker Museum and Library, 1994), 16.
2. At Mount Lebanon the sisters actually occupied the right hand side of the meetinghouse and the brethren the left. In the process of making this print the lithographer switched the brethren to the right and the sisters to the left.
3. *United States Gazette*, September 7, 1829.
4. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 15, 1830. The author is grateful to Erika Piola for bringing this reference to his attention. See also advertisements for the Shaker dance print by R. H. Hobson in the *Philadelphia Daily Chronicle* for September 4, 1829, by Francis Kearney in the *Philadelphia National Gazette* on October 15, 1829, and by Sarah Hart in the *Philadelphia Daily Chronicle* on November 21, 1829. The author is grateful to Richard Dabrowski for bringing these references to his attention.
5. Pendleton, John, *Philadelphia on Stone Biographical Dictionary, Library Company of Philadelphia*, <https://digital.librarycompany.org>
6. Imbert, Anthony, *Philadelphia on Stone Biographical Dictionary, Library Company of Philadelphia*, <https://digital.librarycompany.org>
7. Currier, Nathaniel, *Philadelphia on Stone Biographical Dictionary, Library Company of Philadelphia*, <https://digital.librarycompany.org>
8. *Americanischer Stadt und Land Kalender auf 1831ste Jahr Christi* (Philadelphia: Conrad Zentler, 1830).
9. *Graham's Illustrated Magazine* 6, no. 2 (February 1831): 72-74.
10. *American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge*, November 1835, 123.
11. John Warner Barber, *Historical Collections, Being a General Collection of Interesting Facts of Every Town in Massachusetts* (Worcester, Mass.: Dorr, Howland, and Co., 1839), 74.
12. Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1842), 39.
13. David Lamson, *Two Years Experience Among the Shakers* (West Boylston, Mass.: by the author, 1848).
14. Don Gifford, *An Early View of the Shakers: Benson John Lossing and the Harper's Article of July 1857* (Hanover, N.H.: The University Press of New England, 1989), 69-73.
15. [Benson John Lossing], "The Shakers," *Harper's Monthly Illustrated Magazine*, July 1857.
16. Charles Nordhoff, *Communitistic Societies of the United States* (Harper and Brothers, 1875). Lossing's Shaker illustrations continued to appear in

- the popular press thereafter, including in *The Philadelphia Sunday Times* for February 12, 1893.
17. William Hepworth Dixon, *New America* (London: Strangeways & Walden, 1867).
 18. *Harper's Weekly*, October 7, 1871, 931.
 19. In the text accompanying the engravings of his Shaker drawings Becker copied Dixon's written account of his visit to Mount Lebanon verbatim.
 20. Engravings of Houghton's Shaker drawings first appeared in the *Graphic* on May 7 and May 14, 1870.
 21. Joseph Becker, "An Artist's Interesting Recollections of Leslie's Weekly," *Leslie's Weekly*, December 15, 1905, 570.
 22. "A Day with the Lebanon Shakers," *Frank Leslie's Sunday Magazine* 5 (February 1879): 137–49, and "The Shakers in Niskayuna," *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly* 20 (December 1885): 660–72.
 23. Van Buren Denslow, "Mother Ann's Children," *American Magazine* 6, no. 2 (June 1887): 167–68.