

American Communal Societies Quarterly

Volume 3 | Number 3

Pages 111-137

July 2009

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Conflict and Tribulation on the Frontier: The West Union Shakers and Their Retreat

By Carol Medlicott

Introduction

The Shakers, formally known as the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, have an interesting historical geography in the United States. A few years after their 1774 arrival from England, they began to expand through proselytizing and missionary trips throughout the region close to their first settlement just outside Albany, New York. By the late 1790s, nearly all the settlements in the Northeast had been planted—eleven sites extending from near Albany eastward into Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Maine. The Shaker leaders in New York began a second phase of geographical expansion in 1805 when three missionaries set out for Kentucky, drawn by news of the intense religious revivals that were then underway there. By the 1820s, seven more Shaker villages were thriving, spread among the “western” states of Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana.¹ No further expansion occurred, and for well over a century the Shakers continued to be a presence on the American landscape through two very separate and distinct geographical concentrations of eastern and western sites.

Of the seven major western Shaker sites,² one in particular stands out as distinctive. This elusive and puzzling western site is the village of West Union, located along the Wabash River in Knox County, Indiana, several miles north of Vincennes. Although it was planted early by the original eastern missionaries who first directed their proselytizing efforts at frontier settlers in that area in the summer of 1808, it was also abandoned early and abruptly, after nearly twenty years of building, improvements, and expansion. Because the community was disbanded early, and its members relocated to other sites, the records and writings relating to West Union are more scattered and difficult to track down among Shaker primary sources. Despite the research challenge presented by West Union, some

studies have been attempted; however, very little has been published, and the preliminary work done by several amateur scholars in the last several decades has been underutilized.³ Indeed, many published discussions of Shaker history scarcely acknowledge that West Union ever existed.⁴

This article will offer fresh analysis of West Union from the perspective of historical geography. I will argue that the significance of the site has been misunderstood and misread by past scholars, and I will suggest that more systematic attention to the site's physical and social geography will yield a deeper understanding. Additionally, attention to the rich complexity of the events and evolution of West Union will provide a necessary corrective to existing analyses of the Shaker West, which overlook or marginalize West Union.

Impressions of West Union

Within the circles of Shaker and communal studies, West Union is usually recognized with a few generalizations consisting of the following. From its main core on the eastern bank of the Wabash River to a satellite sawmill location several miles west in Illinois, West Union—or “Busro,” as it was also called⁵—was the farthest west that the Shakers ever got, and thus the site bore the most striking characteristics of “frontier” life. It was the first Shaker site to close down entirely; ironically, it was disbanded while Shakerism was still on the rise elsewhere and before the peak population of Shakers in the United States had been reached. Thus, the settlement did not last long enough to experience several specific developments that impacted Shaker spiritual and economic life everywhere else. No “Era of Manifestations” impacted West Union, of course,⁶ nor did the trademark manufacturing of furniture that is so indelibly associated with Shaker villages ever take place there. Because of its peculiar location strategically close to several important regional military fortifications near Vincennes, the West Union Shakers were sufficiently disturbed by the disruptions leading up to the War of 1812 that they chose to evacuate the settlement temporarily while hostilities were going on. This gives West Union the distinction of being the only Shaker site to be evacuated and later re-inhabited. Of the major Shaker settlement sites, West Union's is currently the emptiest. Unlike most Shaker sites which continue to manifest signs of their Shaker habitation, ranging from dozens of restored buildings to just a few structures or landscape features, the Shaker presence has all

but disappeared from the West Union site. No standing structures remain, with the result being that the phrase “there’s nothing to see” is generally applied to the West Union site. Indeed, because the West Union buildings were mostly dismantled before the age of photography, there are almost no images of the many buildings that once stood at the site, making it difficult for contemporary observers to imagine what it may have been like. In addition, there are few artifacts from West Union known to Shaker collectors. Thus, West Union is often regarded as a minor Shaker settlement, the least important or interesting among all the Shaker sites. Some Shaker historians point to West Union as the greatest Shaker failure, and suggest that it anticipates the decline of Shakerism that was to occur later in the nineteenth century.⁷

If there is a driving question commonly asked within Shaker studies circles about the Shaker experience at West Union, it is “Why?” Why did the village disband? Was it doomed from the start? Was closure due to a single overriding factor or was it a combination of factors? But why West Union passed into Shaker history so early, when Shakers still remained a presence on the landscape of their “western” region for nearly a hundred more years is arguably *not* the most interesting question. More interesting is the question of “How?” How was the West Union site fundamentally different from other sites where the Shakers settled? And what role might those differences have played in the development and demise of the village at West Union? As a historical geographer, I look to geography to illuminate the study of historical questions. In considering West Union, therefore, I try to interpret its various distinctions as a function of its geography — not only its physical geography, but also its political and social geography at multiple levels, from those of the Shaker collective to Indiana Territory to the Wabash region.

* * * * *

Knox County, Indiana, is the oldest county in Indiana, yet it is on the far *western* edge of the State. This is a reminder to us that Indiana — along with much of America — was not settled in a gradual westward-pushing fashion, as F. J. Turner presented in his famous “Frontier Thesis.”⁸ Rather, a much more complex geography of expansion evolved, with outposts along major water transportation corridors settling earlier and large interior areas skipped over, only to be consolidated into American territory much later on. Figure 1 shows the location of Knox County bordering the

Wabash River, two counties north of where the Wabash joins the Ohio. The Shakers settled in Busseron Township, the northernmost section of the county, whose main feature was Busseron Creek. Shaker land flanked Busseron Creek and reached the Wabash across a scant mile of low-lying prairie. Busseron Creek was then navigable, so it represented an important resource for the Shakers. For bringing their crops and other goods to market, it was an easy reach down Busseron Creek to the Wabash and nearby Vincennes, then on to the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. Thus, the Shakers at West Union possessed, through their Busseron Creek gateway, a relatively direct water linkage with key trading cities along the Mississippi, such as St. Louis and New Orleans.



Fig. 1. This map of Knox County, Indiana, shows Busseron Township in the upper left corner. The location of the Shaker Settlement is indicated by a star, some fifteen miles north of the town of Vincennes. A dotted line marks the approximate location of Busseron Creek, from which the settlement name “Busro” was derived. Knox County is bordered to the west by the Wabash River and to the south and east by the main and west forks of the White River.

Chronological Narrative of Shakers at Busseron Creek

The earliest impulse among the western Shakers for developing a settlement in Knox County, Indiana, was an outgrowth of the process of establishing a group of converts in western Kentucky, near present-day Bowling Green. Shaker missionaries focused their efforts on revivals that were centered upon a settlement and meeting house at a spot called Gasper River. From converts made at Gasper River, the missionaries learned of still other settlers who might be receptive to the Shaker message at other more distant frontier locations. Thus, Shaker missionaries ranged north from the Gasper River location towards an Ohio River settlement called Red Banks, corresponding to present-day Henderson, Kentucky. Among their converts was a man who reported that he had family members living still farther north along the Wabash in Indiana and that they would surely welcome the Shaker missionaries. The summer of 1808 found a party of Shaker missionaries preaching in the neighborhood around the mouth of Busseron Creek, some fifteen miles north of Vincennes. Among this group was Issachar Bates, a New York Shaker who had been one of the original three missionaries to carry the Shaker gospel to the West in the winter of 1805. Several other men in the group were likely included because of their potential to wield great influence over would-be converts—Malcolm Worley, a southwest Ohio farmer who had been the Shakers' first convert in March 1805, and two well-known Kentucky revival preachers who had confessed their sins and joined the Shakers, Matthew Houston and John Dunlavy. Later, when the Shakers at West Union established their first formal covenant in 1815, the brief historical narrative in that document identifies the genesis of the community as the summer of 1808 when some seventy converts confessed their sins to the missionaries and declared their intent to live as Shakers.

Other preachers were equally active in the area. The famous Methodist Peter Cartwright was working to establish Methodist circuits in the region of Kentucky and Indiana. He was dismayed seeing the Shaker conversions of so many influential preachers. He regarded the area around Vincennes as especially vulnerable to the Shakers, because no Methodist circuit was yet established and because the local preachers in the area were, according to Cartwright, “not eloquent in public debate.” After the Shakers' initial visit to the area, Cartwright himself arrived in the neighborhood, seeking debate with the new converts. He persuaded dozens of them to renounce

their new faith, and from this group he established the region's first Methodist congregation.⁹ Hearing that the majority of their converts had succumbed to the Methodists, the Shaker evangelists took action. The senior Shaker preachers from the lead western village in southern Ohio set out on a winter journey to the new Busro settlement in January 1809. Leading the team was again Issachar Bates, who was fast becoming a dominant and authoritative figure in the Shaker West. Joining him were two other men, one of whom had been another well-known revivalist preacher in the region when he became a Shaker in May 1805. Bates, who had been a choirmaster and poet in his pre-Shaker life, memorialized that January journey in a lengthy ballad that became quite well known among all the Shaker villages over the next couple of decades.¹⁰

The following year, the growing number of converted Shakers at Busro was augmented by the group of converts at Red Banks, Kentucky, who were moved up to the new Busro settlement. More growth followed when in 1811 the ministry at Union Village decided to resettle in Busro a number of believers who had been converted from among outlying farming communities in remote southern Ohio locations. Thus, the Busro settlement came to consist mainly of an amalgamation of converted settlers from other parts of the region. Most of the Busro buildings were log cabins at that point, and the believers were strung out in three main settlements, corresponding to what had been the farm holdings of three of the earliest converted families. One early building project was the construction of a large two-story log schoolhouse to accommodate the nearly 150 (!) school-age children.

In Busro's earliest years, there were some memorable occurrences. One was the New Madrid earthquake, which struck the region repeatedly from December 1811 through the spring of 1812. Shakers throughout the West experienced the earthquakes to some degree. In some locations, buildings or chimneys were damaged, and believers everywhere felt the impact psychologically. The earthquake traumatized the Busro believers, although it did not cause serious damage to structures there. In general, the earthquakes affected virtually every Shaker site in the West.

Busro's most significant early challenge emerged from the Indian-related hostilities in the region. From their location near the territorial capital of Vincennes, the Busro Shakers confronted a deeply entangled set of U.S. government policies — policies towards the region's still belligerent tribes, policies towards the European powers still active in the American

interior, and policies towards settler expansion itself. With the new U.S. government declaring war on Great Britain in 1812, the implications for far western Indiana Territory, which was literally the geographic margin of the United States at that time, were dire indeed. The region's Indians who allied themselves with the British instantly became key players in the hostilities. The many military fortifications in the region became actively engaged in mustering, drilling, and fighting. At the crosshairs of full-scale armed conflict, the hapless Shakers at Busro faced circumstances wholly unlike any Shaker community had yet experienced. They decided to remove themselves from the region rather than risk entanglement or harm, and they fully evacuated the settlement in September 1812, leaving their fall crops behind in the fields.

After the early progress towards creating an active settlement at that site, the western Shaker Ministry did not intend to abandon Busro altogether, and Believers returned in the early spring of 1814. A covenant was signed in 1815, signaling a solid resolve on the part of the many members to continue to develop the site as one of the key western villages. By 1817, the leaders at Busro, which by then was called West Union, were aiming to expand still farther westward. To that end, they had acquired some land in Illinois on which they built a sawmill. A very large brick dwelling house was completed at the main West Union site in 1822, and a wood frame meeting house was erected adjacent to the brick dwelling in 1824. In the same year more Believers who had been newly converted or "gathered" at a southern Ohio location called Eagle Creek were moved to West Union, adding numbers to the growing community. Then in late 1826, the Shaker Ministry in the East handed down its directive that West Union was to be closed. Reasons for the closure were mixed. With the death in 1824 of one popular western leader, "Father" David Darrow, who headed the Ministry at Union Village, West Union lost probably its best Ministry-level champion. West Union had been frequently beset with epidemic disease throughout its history, and lost several popular leaders to sickness. The sudden death in the fall of 1826 at West Union of the well-loved elder John Dunlavy, a native westerner whose early conversion to Shakerism had helped assure the success of the whole western Shaker enterprise, is commonly interpreted as a pivotal moment in the decision to close West Union. Dunlavy, who led the Pleasant Hill community, had been sent to offer help and advice to the West Union Shakers. With his death, the pall under which West Union had long labored deepened perhaps beyond

remedy. Other more practical reasons presented themselves, too. With the passing of years, few of West Union's youth were developing into promising leaders. And the new State of Indiana was adopting laws not congenial to the Shakers—laws concerning compulsory militia service by young men. In any case, the message to close was delivered through the Ministry at Union Village, Ohio. The believers at West Union were to be split up and sent to live at other western villages, the land and property sold, and the proceeds divided among the western villages, proportional to the number of West Union believers each had absorbed. The final evacuation of West Union took place in the early spring of 1827.

West Union's "Tribulation" and Its Geographical Distinctiveness

To better understand both West Union's demise and its place in Shaker history, it is necessary to more closely examine the geographical and historical features of the community and of the region in which it was situated. The title of this essay includes the phrase, "Conflict and Tribulation on the Frontier." Of course, in one sense, this phrase could reflect the American Shaker experience as a whole. After all, most all the Shaker settlements underwent *some* sort of conflict and tribulation; however, it seemed that the conflict and tribulation experienced throughout the duration of West Union were of a different order. Quite simply, the Shakers at West Union faced a set of challenges different from those of any other settlement in the West. One can begin to understand the source of West Union's particular experience of conflict and tribulation by examining the political and social geography of the Indiana Territory itself. Figure 2 shows an Indiana that is starkly divided between a southern tier of mapped counties and a central and northern expanse of territory allotted to Indian groups—a cartographic depiction of the tumultuous and conflict-ridden process by which the North American landscape became the United States, passing from the domain of indigenous societies to being territorially consolidated into the political organization of the United States' Early Republic period. As this figure shows, Indiana Territory, which was part of the Northwest Territories added onto the young United States in 1787, was being carved out of the landscape that was occupied by the confederated tribes under Tecumseh's authority—the Wabash, Delaware, and Potowatomi. The area of northern Knox County on the far western edge of the portion

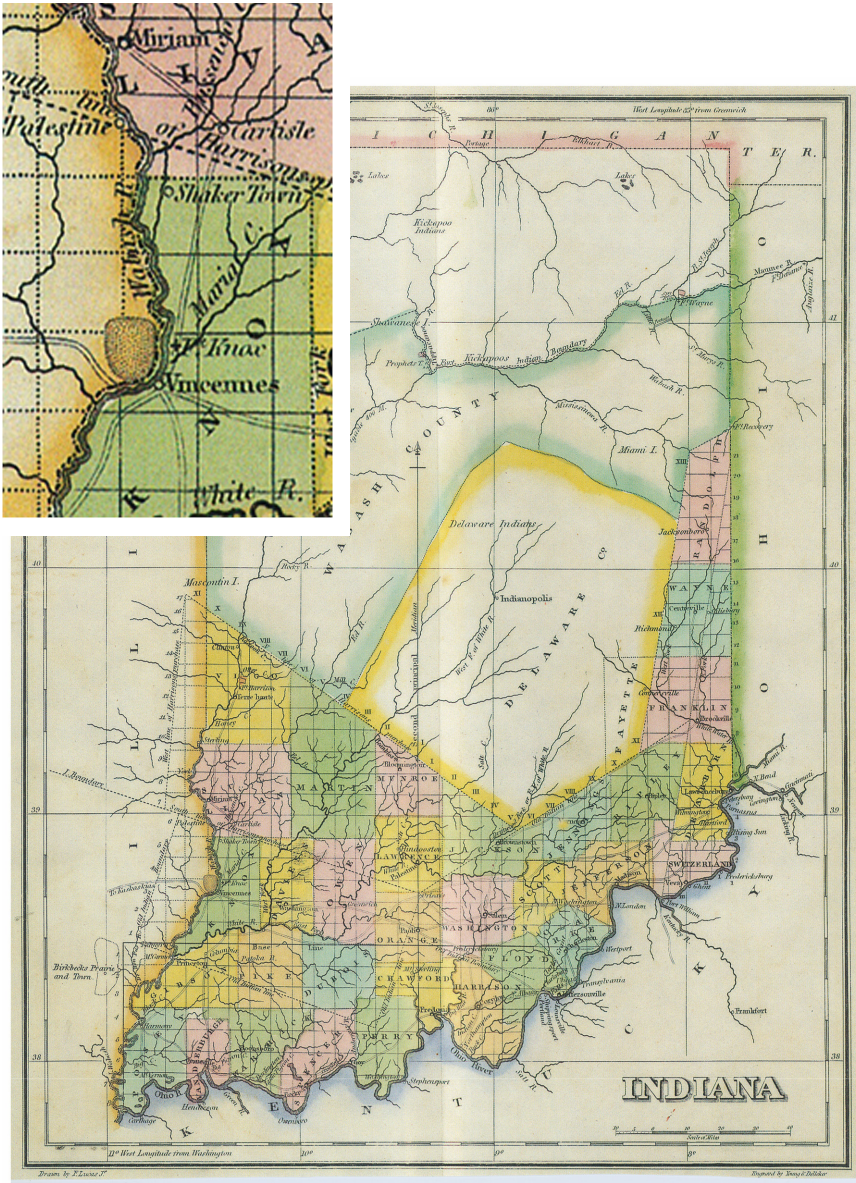


Fig 2. “Geographical, Statistical, and Historical Map of Indiana,” from Henry Charles Carey and Isaac Lea, *A Complete Historical, and Geographical Atlas* (Philadelphia, 1822). Image used by permission of Mr. John Palmer, Michigan History Publications. Inset shows detail of Knox County, where the location of “Shakertown” is indicated.

of Indiana Territory under American government control was a liminal space, close to the boundary zone where settled territory gave way to Indian territory. In no other location where they settled did the Shakers confront such an immediate complication and source of insecurity as that posed by their geographic location so close to the margins of the United States itself.

Indeed, West Union represented the Shakers' only experience of establishing a settlement in an area that was not yet even a state.¹¹ Indiana did not become a state until 1816, nearly halfway through the Shakers' experience there; prior to that time the situation was obviously unsettled politically and socially. Although the Shakers were separatists who desired to live apart from the social, political, and cultural mainstream, they nonetheless recognized the benefits that the political, economic, and legal infrastructure of the United States provided. Thus, they were cautious about settling in the Indiana Territory. In light of the opposition that Shakers had encountered in many places, the first Shaker missionaries needed to ensure that sufficient rule of law existed to protect their rights to freedom in their religious views. Writing of his first missionary trip in 1808, Issachar Bates says,

Now this wonderful movement being so great, and this being only a territory, I did not know whether there was any government at all over the Devil or not; so I told the brethren I was determined to call and see the Governor and know the worst. So we called at his home in Vincennes. His wife told us that he had rode out, "but I think you will meet him" said she and we did.... We said to him, "Governor Harrison we have been up to Busro preaching our faith, and a number have embraced it and we want to know if there are any laws in this territory to protect them." "The same law" said he, "that there is in any of the united States."¹²

This very interesting quote highlights another important feature of the Busro Shaker site. Ironically, despite being located in a territory rather than a state, the Busro Shakers were nevertheless geographically closer to their respective capital city of any other Shaker settlement in the West. Although Vincennes is no longer Indiana's capital, it was the territorial capital in 1808, and it remained the state capital until about 1821. Moreover, Vincennes was hardly a typical frontier town. It was easily one of the oldest towns in the Northwest Territories, having been laid out and settled by the French in the 1730s. And Knox County, where both Vincennes and Busro were located, was Indiana's first county. The land

acquired by the Shakers had long been part of an earlier land allotment system that had been established by the French. As Anglo-American settlers moved into the area towards the end of the eighteenth century, the old French families of Vincennes began selling their land allotments to the Anglo-American newcomers. Paradoxically, then, although this area was the farthest west of all Shaker sites and *was* regarded as the American “frontier,” it already had a long history of Euro-American settlement by the time the Shakers began to gather. At no other Shaker site were these elements held in such stark tension. Vincennes boasted certain amenities found in few frontier outposts: a library, fine architecture, established markets for trade and commerce, a well-used network of streets and roads. But in the immediate proximity was wilderness that was barely touched by Euro-American settlement. The processes by which the United States was negotiating both with native groups and with rival European claims to the North American interior were still far from concluded, and the outcome would determine the entire territorial future of the United States.

In addition to being the closest to a capital city of any western settlement, the West Union Shakers’ access to an elected governor was perhaps the most direct. William Henry Harrison had a number of direct dealings with the Shakers, and he even appealed to them to act as intermediaries with the Indians in 1810, as this quote from a letter by Harrison shows:

I have also sent for the leading member of the Shaker Society...who resides about 20 miles from this place, with the intention of prevailing upon him to take a speech to the Prophet. This scoundrel (the Prophet) affects to follow the Shaker principles in everything but the vow of celibacy [sic], and the above mentioned leader has assured me that he believes the Prophet to be under the same divine inspiration that he himself is (a circumstance by no means improbable) but that for reasons growing out of his situation as a savage he was still permitted with his Indian followers to cohabit with women.¹³

The “Prophet” that Harrison is referring to in this letter was the brother of the Indian leader Tecumseh. He was a leader in his own right, and was particularly known for initiating a widespread religious revival among the tribes of Indiana and Ohio, coincidentally beginning about the same time as the Shaker missionaries’ arrival in the West. The Busro Shakers knew of the Prophet and his teachings, and vice-versa. The above quotation suggests that Governor Harrison was somewhat conflicted in his own view of the

Shakers and perhaps regarded them as a bit bizarre. His parenthetical clarification that he was referring to the Prophet, not the Shaker leader, as a “scoundrel” suggests that viewing the Shakers as scoundrels was not uncommon. And his sidebar comment that the Prophet’s sharing in the same divine inspiration as the Shakers was “by no means improbable” suggests that the bizarre behavior of both the Prophet and the Shakers eluded and mystified Harrison.

This quotation from Harrison points to two additional features of Busro-West Union. The settlement was distinctive for its direct dealings with Indians and also for the fact that it was literally surrounded by military forts and musterings. Figure 3 is a detail from a reproduction map of Knox County region around the time of the War of 1812. The location of “Shakertown” is identified, and nearby in all directions one can clearly see fortress icons representing military fortifications. This map also nicely depicts the early roads and trails of the region. From this one can easily deduce the social and political importance of Vincennes, because virtually all the roads and trails in the region lead there. The main north-south trail is called the Wea Trail and began as an Indian trail. From Vincennes it goes practically through Shakertown as it heads northward into Indian territory. Southward it aims straight for the Ohio River crossing known as Red Banks, familiar to the Shakers. Tecumseh and his brother the Prophet lived mainly in villages to the northeast. The fact that the Shaker settlement lay practically astride the main Indian trail meant that the Indians did not have to look hard for the Shakers. Because it was known among Tecumseh’s people that the Shakers were fair and compassionate, the Indians were regular visitors at Busro prior to the 1812 evacuation. William Redmon of Watervliet, Ohio, wrote in later years of his childhood at Busro and had a lot to say about their Indian neighbors:

For singing and dancing the Males exclusively excelled.... The accented notes were touched with laborious motion, accompanied in beating time... This Feast Dance terminated in a War Dance, the Indians being painted in a most hideous manner; exercising vehemently and vociferating and screeching like so many panthers or demons; at the same time wielding War Clubs and Hatchets. Some that these were religious dances, but aged John Slover said they might have religion but it was of the same kind of practices as when they had him at the stake to be BURNED, and some were now engaged who were present at that awful scene! Slover moved his all, on the next Monday towards South Union.¹⁴



Fig 3. This is a detail taken from a contemporary reproduction map, "Forts and Trails of the Lower Wabash." by Vincennes, Indiana artist and historian Larry Phegley. It is a research-based artistic rendering of an 1812 frontier map. "Shakerstown" is marked a short distance west of the Wea Trail, which runs north and south out of "Post Vincennes." Used by permission of Larry Phegley.

The individual identified in this passage as “aged John Slover” was in fact a seasoned frontiersman who had joined the Shakers along with his son. After a brief period at West Union, he moved to South Union where he remained. He was known among the Shakers for his early and colorful frontier experiences. This quotation bears out the notion that John Slover was perhaps anxious to put his past behind him. Evidently being in the Busro environment with Indians still so close at hand was a motivator to move to the tamer environment of South Union in western Kentucky.

Not all of the Shakers’ interactions with the Indians produced quite such dramatic accounts. It seems, however, that the Shakers were acutely aware of the potential dangers from Indians in their early years at Busro—that is, the years before the 1812 evacuation. One letter from Busro makes reference to having no neighbors to the west for five hundred miles, with the exception of a single family in Illinois who had been scalped a few months before.¹⁵ And when the settlement evacuated in mid-September 1812, bound for the Shaker settlements in Ohio, the large groups of evacuees traveled not east across Indiana on the newly established east-west wilderness road. Rather, they traveled directly south to cross the Ohio River at Red Banks, journeyed through Kentucky to the east, then turned back northward into Ohio. Why this particular route? It is quite probable that they wished to avoid traveling across southern Indiana due to Indian hostilities. In fact, an event known as the Pigeon Roost Massacre, in which a group of white settler families were attacked and many killed, took place in the vicinity of that east-west road in southern Indiana at the beginning of that month. The event had been reported in the Vincennes newspaper on September 8, as the Shakers were preparing their departure.¹⁶ It is entirely likely, therefore, that their choice of a route back to Ohio was influenced by a desire to avoid territory perceived to be in danger of Indian attack.

Another distinctive feature of West Union was the physical landscape. The West Union site is at the lowest elevation above sea level of any western Shaker site, and among the lowest of any Shaker site. Add to that the fact that West Union is the flattest Shaker site in the West—and again, possibly the flattest site the Shakers ever occupied. It sat directly on a major navigable river, the Wabash. If one examines the geography of the Shaker West, no other site fronted so directly on a river, at river level.

In fact, the ramifications of this flat, low-lying, riverside location point to a feature for which West Union is well-known among Shaker historians. The people at West Union suffered cruelly from malaria, as did the settlers

throughout the Wabash Valley in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Among the Shakers themselves, West Union was notorious for being a “sickly” place. Issachar Bates wrote, “The Country, tho beautiful to look at, was naturally sickly and right in the very margin of a swamp.”¹⁷ It is well known that swamps in the temperate latitudes of North America once bred malarial mosquitoes. They no longer do, but they certainly did back in 1810. The Shakers at West Union suffered constant sickness, and it is likely that malaria was not the only culprit. Dysentery and perhaps cholera were also prevalent, because the water table was so high and the swamp water intruded into the wells. The Shakers wrote of “fevers and ague.” That was a common description of malaria, to be sure, but it could also refer to typhoid fever or encephalitic fever contracted from their close contact with cattle and the likelihood of their cattle contaminating their water source. These other non-malarial fevers would have been infectious. In fact, we know that the West Union Shakers carried infectious fevers with them to Union Village, Ohio, when they evacuated in 1812. Shortly after the West Union evacuees arrived, many of them ill, five Union Village Shakers sickened and died. The water supply at West Union may also have been contaminated by rotting wood, as evidenced by an account of digging a well and stabilizing its soft sandy sides with a hollow tree trunk.

From whatever source, sickness at West Union was prevalent throughout the community’s short history. At several junctures, so many adults were ill that the necessary work could not be carried on. Several beloved Shakers died at West Union, including John Dunlavy, the presiding elder at Pleasant Hill, Kentucky, who contracted a fever and died while at West Union on a visit. Issachar Bates, who lived at West Union for many years, was also stricken with fever. He wrote of the impact of the illness on the community in November 1818 in a letter to his close friend Benjamin Youngs, elder at South Union, Kentucky:

We have had so much stink here this season that I should be very glad of a change of air.... We have only all been sick here this season—I have kept my health, such as it is, and maybe three or four more—but the doleful siege is mostly over—and the people have generally got so that they can go to the little house—and have done shiting [*sic*] in their rooms, and the buckets washed up. But O our good friend, if we do not have tribulations here, I want to go to some place where I can find out what it is!¹⁸

Like the other western Shaker settlements, West Union's economy depended on agriculture. Much of the agricultural output was put to use by the community itself, and any surplus was traded or sold. Some products were also shared with other Shaker villages. The Shakers at West Union numbered around four hundred at one point. Many people who joined the Shakers did so with their families, so there were a large number of children. Children under the age of fifteen may have accounted for up to half the population at some points in West Union's history. Thus, the Shakers' subsistence needs were substantial—food and clothing for so many people, including children, youth, and working adults. The Shakers cultivated grain and potatoes, and they established apple and peach orchards. They raised other fruits and vegetables in garden plots. To support the weaving of the community's cloth, they grew acres of flax and raised sheep for wool. In addition, it appears that West Union Shakers were the first Shakers to cultivate cotton, constituting yet another distinctive feature of this settlement.

Studies of Shaker agriculture and textiles have dealt in depth with the production of flax, wool, and silk.¹⁹ The documentation of cotton processing is considerably more scant. After the cotton gin was invented in the 1790s, Shaker communities in the Northeast purchased and processed raw cotton until the region's emerging textile industry made cotton thread and cloth economical for purchase.²⁰ At South Union, Kentucky, a cotton gin was purchased in 1822, but records reflect that it was used to process purchased cotton, not that the cotton was being raised by the Shakers themselves. Cotton requires a long and warm growing season; even in Kentucky, part of the American South, cotton has never been a viable crop. Additionally, cotton is labor intensive, which is the reason its production gave rise to slave labor in the South. Today, outside of a few experimental plots, no cotton is grown in Indiana, and only a trace amount is grown in the extreme west of Kentucky.²¹ However, several pieces of evidence seem to confirm that the Shakers at West Union not only grew cotton, but they also processed it for their own use and traded or sold it locally. The West Union Ministry reports a good cotton yield in an 1819 letter to New Lebanon: "The dry season was quite favourable to the growth of cotton. After the cotton was gathered and the seeds picked out, there was about eleven hundred weight of good clean cotton off about seven acres."²² Reports on the cotton crop continued to be a feature of West Union's letters to the New Lebanon ministry. Elder Archibald Meacham

gives a glowing account of both the flax and cotton crop in an 1822 letter:

We have raised as good a crop of flax on this praira (sic) the season past as ever we saw grow out of the earth. We had about seven acres of it. Some part of it grew four and a half feet high. It is better than three feet long when dressed... We judge there will be at least 2000 wait (sic) of it. We also raised a good crop of cotton — about 1100 wait. This makes our good sisters look pleasant.²³

Several other letters from West Union in the 1810s and early 1820s mention cotton in discussions of West Union's crops. The West Union ledger reflecting the goods traded or sold by the settlement between 1815 and 1822 lists the sale of cotton several times.²⁴ A final piece of compelling evidence that cotton was an important part of the West Union economy comes from the final months of West Union, when the decision had been made to disband the village. The Shakers placed a column in the local Vincennes newspaper advertising the impending closure of the village and listing the village property that would be sold. The first item listed is a cotton gin.²⁵ A close reading of the West Union letters that discuss the cotton crop suggest that the cotton gin may have been acquired after a few years of success at growing cotton. Note that instead of employing the common term "ginned" for processing using a cotton gin, the 1819 letter uses the phrase "and the seeds picked out," implying that the cotton was processed by hand. Given the available labor that collective communal living permitted in a Shaker settlement, it is not surprising that the Shakers might have tried to grow cotton.

Possible corroboration for the Shakers' cotton-growing comes from an unlikely source — an 1862 New York Times article asserting the viability of growing cotton in the North.²⁶ During wartime, the inaccessibility of southern cotton pushed northern industrialists to pursue creative options. The Agricultural Bureau of the U.S. Patent Office was examining the cotton-growing potential of southern Indiana, southern Illinois, and eastern Kansas. As evidence that cotton could be grown in Indiana along the Wabash, the article cited a letter from Indiana Congressman John Law. Law stated that in 1817 he had witnessed a large load of dozens of bales of locally-raised cotton awaiting transportation in Vincennes, Indiana. This is an intriguing assertion, given the Shakers' own documentation of cotton being raised in that period.

As unusual as cotton was among the Shakers' agricultural products, the West Union Shakers record the production of something even more

curious. The same letter that elaborates on the flax and cotton harvest also relates another example of West Union's resourcefulness in satisfying a community need: "Our good friends at U. Village were in want of Rattle Snakes Oil—a few of our Brethren went a few days ago—and took forty Rattle Snakes out of a den and brought them home—and we have saved them bodily."²⁷ There is no indication of what use the Shakers made of rattle snake oil, but clearly, West Union's geographical location in a hot, humid, and low-lying prairie was ideal for harvesting rattlesnakes!

Another West Union distinction is the fact that the village produced a map drawn and painted in color in 1825, making it the earliest Shaker



Fig. 4. This hand-tinted map of West Union is based on a map in the Western Reserve Historical Society collection that is believed to have been produced in 1825 by Richard McNemar. This version is in the collection of the Indiana State Library. It appears to consist of an early twentieth-century facsimile copy of the WRHS 1825 original, tinted by hand. Image provided by the Indiana State Library.

village, east or west, to produce such a map. Figures 4 and 5 show that map alongside a modern map of the site today. Figures 6 and 7 show photographs of the site as it appears today. The landscape of West Union has remained far less disturbed than that of many Shaker sites. Essentially, its land is still agricultural. The family that now owns the land is only about the fourth family to own the land since the Shakers evacuated it 180 years ago. The deed in the family's possession reflects the transfer of the land from the Shakers to each subsequent owner up through to the present time. Other than the absence of buildings, the site is remarkably pristine in a way that relatively few Shaker sites can match. Thus, rather than there being “nothing to see” at the site today, one can see “everything” that made up West Union—the productive land; the waters of the creek, Wabash River, and swamps; the flood-prone fields and unstable river bank. Aside from the buildings being absent, the site is amazingly intact.

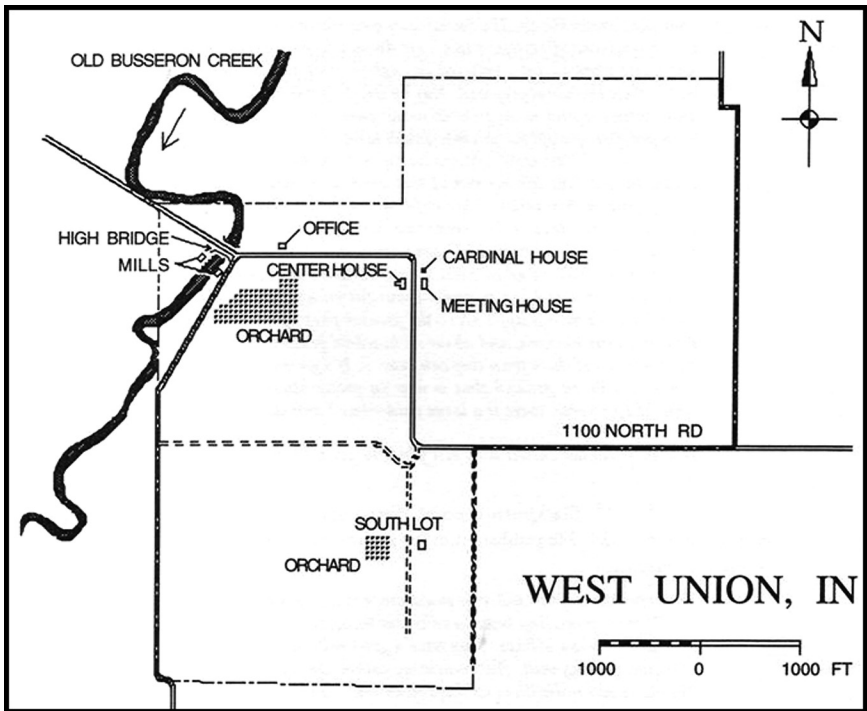


Fig. 5. Contemporary map of the West Union site, from Martha Boice, Dale Covington, and Richard Spence, *Maps of the Shaker West* (Dayton: Knot Garden Press, 1997), 71. Used by permission of the authors.

West Union's Demise

West Union was still growing as late as 1825, adding members and constructing large buildings. In particular, the 1824-25 meeting house, built to accommodate religious services, represents an accomplishment that suggests optimism for the future of the village. However, in 1826 the lead Shaker ministries in the East and at Union Village, Ohio, handed down the directive that West Union be closed. Two reasons are commonly given. The lead western Shaker elder at Union Village, "Father" David Darrow, took a close personal interest in West Union, perhaps in the face of some resistance by other Shaker leaders. When Darrow died in 1826, this left a vacuum of support for continuing West Union. The primary reasons given later by Shakers themselves were the chronic sickness and fevers experienced throughout West Union's history,²⁸ even though the number of documented illnesses and deaths diminished significantly after 1820. Perhaps because the West Union community experienced the deaths of several leading members in sudden, tragic, and gruesome ways,²⁹ the specter of death remained indelibly associated with West Union even after its overall death rate subsided from its once elevated state.



Fig. 6. A recent early summer image of the West Union site, showing a flooded field and the treeline of Busseron Creek. Access to the property courtesy of the Jerry Cardinal family. Photo by author.

However, West Union faced other more complex difficulties. One was maintaining social order. Early in its eighteen-year history, West Union's population had been remarkably young, with a huge number of children and youth. One can find strong indications in letters from West Union leaders that they faced a constant challenge in corralling these young people and molding them into committed Shakers as they grew to adulthood. Letters speak of the tracking and marksmanship skills of the young men, while lamenting that they do not know how to use tools to do farm or construction work. Issachar Bates wrote to Seth Wells in 1817:

View the beings that inhabit this place ... sprightly and active men, surely one among them all but what can cut off a wood-pecker head with a rifle ball at the distance of six or eight rods, or course a bee through the woods to his hive in a few minutes — but not one among them all (two years ago) that knew how to hang a sithe [*sic*] or use it when it was hung, or how to use any other farming tool except an axe. This fills me sometimes with such tribulation that I can hardly stand still one minute in a place.³⁰



Fig. 7. A recent image of the West Union site, showing two trees that remain from the Shaker period, as well as the distant treeline of Busseron Creek. Access to the property courtesy of the Jerry Cardinal family. Photo by author.

Letters also imply that the youth of West Union resisted the orderly life imposed on all Shaker settlements, and instead had to be “hunted up” in the fields, forests, and meadows where they would wander according to their own impulses. Archibald Meacham wrote in 1825 that the young Believers “were found to be without cultivation; almost like wild animals with the exception of a few.”³¹ Issachar Bates observed that West Union Believers “do not work more than half as many hours as the people do at the eastward — and waste more than four times as much.”³² Shakers often used music to offer prescriptions for the difficulties they were experiencing in their communal life. This song written by Issachar Bates at West Union and titled “Industry” is a strong indication that the virtue of industry may have been lacking among the young Believers of West Union!

All nature calls for busy hands, for this is Heaven’s decree,
The beast the bird, the insect stands, a monitor to me.
The little busy artful bee works ev’ry shining hour,
And her industry I can see in ev’ry op’ning flow’r.³³

For the youth who joined West Union along with their parents in the early years of the settlement, Shaker life was not their choice. In such a dynamic location as western Indiana, where recent statehood offered new economic opportunities in the nearby capital of Vincennes and the frontier beckoned to the west and the north, the youth of the settlement must have faced many lifestyle options that were more appealing than Shaker communalism and celibacy.

The most direct cause of West Union’s closure, however, was related to the region’s political geography. With statehood, Indiana implemented a requirement that all white male property owners undertake annual service in a state militia or pay an annual cash sum for an exemption. Pacifism was a pillar of Shaker doctrine. Military service was one aspect of “the world” that the Shakers renounced, along with marriage, sexual intercourse and procreation. Shaker communities likely owned guns for hunting or pest control, but their teachings and covenants absolutely forbade them to take up arms against fellow human beings. One reason that the Shakers evacuated West Union in 1812 was to avoid being in the path of wartime hostilities as the War of 1812 unfolded in western Indiana. They had successfully resisted attempts by officials of the Indiana Territory in nearby Vincennes to draft their young men. But they must have feared what might happen if their settlement was attacked directly,

tempting Believers to violate Shaker doctrine by fighting back in self-defense. After Indiana achieved statehood, the West Union Shakers were again faced with a requirement to serve in the militia, and once more they set about arranging for an exemption for their young men. Amateur Indiana historian John Martin Smith, an attorney, has located evidence of the Shakers' efforts to secure an exemption through the courts. They attempted to argue that communal ownership of goods meant that the Shaker Society at West Union was itself a *single* property owner, not a collection of individual property owners. As such, they argued that the entire Society should be assessed the same sum for a cash exemption as the State demanded from individuals. This argument, however, did not prevail; and because the Shakers' economy was based on subsistence and barter, there was simply not enough surplus cash available on an annual basis to pay the militia tax for each young man in the community. Smith makes a compelling case that this was the true reason for West Union's closure.³⁴

West Union's Aftermath

After West Union was disbanded, the Shakers there were dispersed among nearly all of the remaining Shaker villages in the West. Several went to Kentucky, South Union and Pleasant Hill. Some went to Union Village, the largest western Shaker site. Some went to the smaller nearby site of Watervliet, Ohio, on the outskirts of Dayton. The presiding elder at Watervliet by 1827 was Issachar Bates, who had served in the West Union ministry for most of the period of 1811 to 1824. In 1824 he was told that he was no longer needed at West Union and instead would be sent to Watervliet. Nonetheless, his long association with West Union made several of the West Union Believers naturally gravitate to Watervliet, where they could live under his leadership once again.

The largest segment of the West Union Shakers were sent to live at the newest Shaker site in the West, which was in fact the last one to be established. White Water, Ohio, in the northwest corner of Hamilton County near the Ohio-Indiana state line on the White Water River, evolved from the farm holdings of the Agnew family, who had come to Union Village seeking religious instruction in 1823. The family converted, adding their lands to Shaker landholdings in southwestern Ohio. At the same time, a group of converts had been attracted to Shaker doctrine much farther

north near Champaign County, Ohio, in a flat and marshy area known as Darby Plains. The Union Village leaders decided to move the Darby Plains Shakers to the new White Water location. The closure of West Union must have provided a timely opportunity to add still more Shakers to this nascent community on the western edge of Ohio. A large number of West Union Shakers, including Elder Archibald Meacham, arrived at White Water in the spring of 1827. Conditions were poor and crowded, with no structures other than log cabins. Construction seemed like the most pressing need, and with the assistance of Shaker brothers from Union Village, Watervliet, and Pleasant Hill, a handsome brick meeting house was completed by late in the fall and dedicated on December 2 of that year. Its upper floor contained several “retiring rooms” that could house some of the newcomers while other structures were built. Significantly, by making the construction of the meeting house White Water’s first priority, as it faced the instant absorption of around one hundred additional people, the Shaker leaders seemed to have been signaling that they regarded communal worship as the most valuable means of fostering group cohesion in this new Shaker site.

Elder Archibald Meacham, an eastern Shaker who had been sent west in the 1810s and shared leadership of West Union until its closure took him to White Water along with scores of his former West Union “flock,” writes of that group of people in 1830, a few years after their resettlement at White Water:

Now in relation to the State of the believers at White Water where I now make my home, there is about 120 in number who have been blessed and prospered since I have been with them, as much as any believers that I have lived with in the Western Country; they were generally a people in poor circumstances when I came to live with them but they are increased so that they are now able to live quite comfortable. The place seems to prove to be now quite a healthy one.³⁵

Conclusion

The Shakers of West Union endured conflict and tribulation on the far western margin of American territory from 1808 through 1827. When they ultimately retreated to other western Shaker sites, their buildings were dismantled and their artifacts and documents dispersed. Thus, the

Shakers of West Union have become a minor footnote in the annals of the western Shaker experience. Yet the many distinctive features of this Shaker settlement and its endurance for almost two decades in western Indiana, despite the challenges unique to that site, make it deserving of renewed attention by scholars. This “Lost Land of Busro”³⁶ holds many important lessons for understanding the Shakers and how they confronted the challenges of communal living in a geographically distinctive environment. The words of a song written by Issachar Bates at West Union in 1820 serve as a call to “remember ... the faithful children” of West Union and to achieve greater understanding of the historical geography of the Shakers through their singular experience.

Remember Lord the faithful children, who have kept thy holy way,
 O do protect and comfort them, on their journey night and day.
 When they’r’e tried in ev’ry quarter, when they feel thy scourging rod,
 O then appear for their salvation, O help them feel the way of God.³⁷

Notes

1. The Shakers of the nineteenth century consistently referred to the Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana sites as “the West.”
2. Besides the seven settlements of Union Village, Watervliet, Pleasant Hill, South Union, West Union, North Union, and White Water, there were numerous smaller clusters of Shaker converts spread across the Ohio and Kentucky frontier through the work of the western Shaker missionaries. Believers at these clusters were gradually consolidated into the seven long-term settlements. For an excellent account of the many minor settlement sites that never became long-term villages, as well as the seven major settlements themselves, see *Maps of the Shaker West: A Journey of Discovery*, Martha Boice, Dale Covington, and Richard Spence, (Dayton: Knot Garden Press, 1997).
3. The earliest historian of the Shaker West is John Patterson MacLean. His *Shakers of Ohio: Fugitive Papers Concerning the Shakers of Ohio with Unpublished Manuscripts* (Columbus, Ohio: F.J. Heer, 1907) contains a basic account of West Union (276-94). Two published articles on the West Union Shakers are Oliver Robinson, “The Shakers in Knox County,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 34, no. 1 (March 1938), 34-41; and Mary Lou Conlin, “The Lost Land of Busro,” *Shaker Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1963), 44-60. A substantial amount of work collation and preliminary analysis of West Union was undertaken by three amateur Indiana historians — Estelle Weeks, in the 1940s; John Martin Smith, in the 1980s and 1990s; and Dorothy Jones in the late 1990s and early 2000s. However, no publications have resulted from this work.

4. Two recent publications are a good example: Tom Kanon, "Seduced, Bewildered, and Lost: Anti-Shakerism on the Early Nineteenth Century Frontier," *Ohio Valley History* 7, no. 2 (Summer 2007), 1-30; and Roger Hall, *How Happy Are They: Twelve Shaker Spirituals from Kentucky and Ohio* (Stoughton, Mass.: Pinetree Music, 2007).
5. The Indiana site is located along a tributary of the Wabash River called Busseron Creek, a name reflecting the earliest French settlement in the Wabash Valley region. The word "Busseron" was generally rendered "Busro" by the Shakers, and the settlement was called Busro at least through 1814. In the last dozen years or so before the final dismantling of the site, it went by the name West Union.
6. The period known as "Era of Manifestations" or "Mother Ann's Work" was a phase of intense spiritual outpouring that swept across all Shaker communities for about fifteen years, beginning in 1837, ten years after West Union's closure. See Jean Humez, *Mother's First-Born Daughters: Early Shaker Writings on Women and Religion* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1993), especially section four. See also the essays contained in *Heavenly Visions: Shaker Gift Drawings and Gift Songs*, Frances Morin, Curator (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).
7. Stephen Stein reflects this view in his influential *Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992).
8. F. J. Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," delivered in Chicago, 1893.
9. Peter Cartwright recounts his confrontation with the Shaker converts in Indiana in his autobiography. See *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright the Backwoods Preacher*, ed. W.P. Strickland (London: Arthur Hall, Virtue, and Co., 1862), 17-18.
10. See the discussion of this ballad in Daniel Patterson, *The Shaker Spiritual*, 142.
11. While the Shakers established two settlements in Maine prior to its independent statehood, Maine was a province of Massachusetts at the time, and thus part of a state, as opposed to being a separate territory.
12. "Sketch of the Life and Experience of Issachar Bates, sen," copied by Betsy Smith, 62. Chambliss Collection, Kentucky History Library, Bowling Green, Kentucky.
13. Governor Harrison to the Hon. William Eustis, Secretary of War, Vincennes, May 15, 1810. In *Messages and Letters of William Henry Harrison*, ed. Logan Esarey (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1922), I: 421-22.
14. William N. Redmon to Sister Eliza Sharp, Watervliet, Ohio, January 17th, 1860. Library of Congress Shaker Collection, Item 245.
15. "Western Letters Manuscript III," Library of Congress Shaker Collection, Item 248.
16. *Vincennes Western Sun*, 8 September 1812.
17. "Sketch of the Life Experience of Issachar Bates, sen.," 65.
18. Issachar Bates to Benjamin Seth Youngs, West Union, November 10th, 1818, in "Indentures, correspondence, and other papers, concerning Busro and West Union, Ind., 1812-1836," Library of Congress Shaker Collection, Item 249.
19. See Edward Deming Andrews, *The Community Industries of the Shakers* (Albany, N.Y.: New York State Museum, 1933); Russell Anderson, "Agriculture Among the Shakers, Chiefly at Mount Lebanon," *Agricultural History* 24, no. 3 (July 1950), 113-20; Beverly Gordon, *Shaker Textile Arts* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1980); and Jonathan Jeffrey and Donna Parker, *A Thread of Evidence: Shaker Textile Industries at South Union, Kentucky* (South Union, Ky.: The Shaker Museum at South Union, 1996).

20. Gordon, *Shaker Textile Arts*, 40-41. Gordon quotes Isaac Newton Youngs' 1856 history of the Shaker movement, in which he recounts how the Shakers of the Northeast quickly began purchasing cotton thread and yarn, followed by commercial cotton cloth.
21. Asserted by a U.S. cotton industry expert, www.larkranch.com/corn_maze_tm.html. See also www.cottonusa.org.
22. West Union Ministry to the Ministry at New Lebanon, December 20th, 1819. In "Correspondence between Shakers in Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky," Library of Congress Shaker Collection, Item 351b.
23. West Union Ministry to New Lebanon Ministry, February 14th, 1822. "West Union, Indiana, Letters from Issachar Bates and other members of the ministry to Mt. Lebanon," WRHS IV.A.85.
24. "In This Book Is Entered All Articles That is Sold on Credit, Commenced February the 23rd, 1815, Indiana Territory, Knox County, Westunion," Indiana State Library, Item # S2712.
25. "Notice," *Vincennes Western Sun*, Sunday January 6, 1827 and Saturday January 13, 1827.
26. "Agricultural Bureau of the Patent Office — Cultivation of Cotton in the Free States," *New York Times*, February 17, 1862.
27. West Union Ministry to New Lebanon Ministry, February 14th, 1822.
28. See Anna White and Leila Taylor, *Shakerism: Its Meaning and Message* (Columbus, Ohio: Fred J. Heer, 1906), 117-19.
29. David Darrow's sister Ruth, a well-loved eldress from the east, died at West Union, as did John Dunlavy. Eldress Martha Sanborn's prolonged and painful death from breast cancer was the subject of several letters and poems.
30. Issachar Bates to Seth Wells, West Union, Indiana, September 2, 1817, WRHS IV.A.85.
31. Archibald Meacham to the New Lebanon Ministry, West Union September 26, 1825. WRHS IV.A.85.
32. September 2, 1817, WRHS IV.A.85.
33. "Industry" is found in the West's first printed hymnal, *A Selection of Hymns and Poems for the Use of Believers, Collected from Sundry Authors by Philos Harmoniae* (Watervliet, Ohio: Richard McNemar, 1833), 33-34. The song is also included in several manuscript hymnals with attributions to Issachar Bates and West Union.
34. John Martin Smith has not published this research. He presented it publicly to the Western Shaker Study Group, Lebanon, Ohio, in October 1996. In 2006, I obtained a transcript of his presentation directly from him, along with copies of his research materials.
35. Letter from Archibald Meacham at White Water, Ohio to Beloved Ministry, New Lebanon, New York, May 27, 1830. WRHS IV.A.85.
36. This phrase comes from the title of an article by Mary Lou Conlin, "The Lost Land of Busro."
37. Issachar Bates to Isaac Newton Youngs, West Union, 1820. WRHS IV.A.66.