

American Communal Societies Quarterly

Volume 5 | Number 4

Pages 204-223

October 2011

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The Tribulations of the White Water Shakers: The Child Molestation Trial of 1840

By Thomas Sakmyster

By 1840 the spiritual revival known as the Era of Manifestations that had begun several years earlier in the Eastern Shaker communities was in full force among the Believers of White Water village in southwestern Ohio. Members of the community, especially younger women, were having frequent visions and were being overcome by an emotional fervor or ecstasy in which they felt themselves to be in communication with spirits, whose messages or “gifts” they related to the rest of the community. The leaders of White Water, perhaps unconsciously seeking to preserve their authority and regulate the emotional fervor of these manifestations, also became instruments by which messages from the spiritual world could be conveyed in the form of inspired letters. Among the many such letters composed by the White Water elders and eldresses in 1840 were ones said to come from Mother Ann, Father Jesus, famous religious figures (such as Paul the Apostle and John Wesley), and even secular figures such as George Washington. These letters were typically hortatory in nature: the Believers at Whitewater were urged to strengthen their faith, purify their lives, and strive ever harder to achieve perfect union with their community.¹

However, three letters from late March 1840 were of a totally different tone and character. Composed, or “gathered,” by Eldress Eunice Sering, these communications from the spirit world referred to tribulations, sorrows, and suffering that the Shakers of White Water were experiencing. One of the letters, which Eldress Eunice was inspired to set down at 2 a.m. on March 28 while staying at an inn in downtown Cincinnati, was from Mother Ann, who offered consolation to her “beloved children” who were “suffering unjustly”:

Now my dear children, in time of tribulation keep your faith, and though you may meet afflictions that may seem unsupportable, yet if you keep a spirit of meekness, I will carry you safely through, so be encouraged, for what you have suffered will be no loss to you ...

[and] will tend to weaken [and] disarm your adversaries.²

The Shakers who were undergoing the tribulations and afflictions to which Mother Ann's letter referred were Elder Archibald Meacham and four other men from White Water. They had been arrested on March 25 and incarcerated in the Hamilton County prison in Cincinnati. The charge against them was shocking: six months earlier they had allegedly castrated two boys who were then residing at White Water. Their situation was desperate, for the evidence against them seemed convincing and some Cincinnati leaders feared that the menacing crowd that soon assembled in the streets near the courthouse would storm the prison and lynch the Shaker prisoners.

The historian who attempts to reconstruct the events surrounding the Shaker child molestation trial of 1840 faces a daunting task. Much of the relevant primary source material simply has not survived. White Water village lost many of its records in a devastating fire in 1907. As a result, almost no White Water diaries, journals, or other internal records are available to the researcher. Most nineteenth-century Cincinnati court records were similarly lost in courthouse fires. Curiously, most contemporary Cincinnati newspapers neglected to report on the Shaker trial, and only a single copy of the one that did cover it has survived. As a result, although the basic facts of the origins, development, and impact of the 1840 trial can be determined, there remain areas of dispute and uncertainty. Nonetheless, the 1840 Shaker child molestation trial merits close scholarly attention, for such a study can offer insights into a number of issues, including the way Shakers responded in a time of personal crisis, the problems associated with the care of children in Shaker villages, and the range of attitudes toward the Shakers in the antebellum Midwest.

In the first years after its founding in 1823 White Water village had had to contend with hostile and suspicious neighbors who deemed the Shakers a threat to moral and economic stability. There were sporadic acts of vandalism and in 1830 arsonists destroyed three buildings.³ But over time White Water prospered, and through their industry, meekness, and piety, the Shakers were able to disarm their critics and enemies. By 1840 the Shakers of White Water had managed to establish a normal, even friendly, relationship with most of their neighbors. Nonetheless, the Believers at White Water, like their brothers and sisters throughout the country, had to contend with legal problems stemming from their unconventional life style and religious precepts. On one occasion Elder Archibald Meacham, sued

by an apostate for back wages, was briefly arrested. In 1830 White Water village was unsuccessful in its attempts to take legal action against army officers who extorted fines and seized crops in retaliation for the Shakers' refusal to do military service.⁴

Some of the better-informed Believers at White Water were probably aware that even as many Americans were becoming indifferent or even sympathetic to the Shakers, public opinion in the American West was still shaped to a degree by the feeling that Believers were secretive, mysterious, and vaguely threatening.⁵ Over the years hostility against the Shakers had been incited by a number of books and pamphlets in which the Believers were accused of vile practices and immoral behavior. The assertion made by an early apostate, Thomas Brown, that "many of the Shakers, by order of the Elders, were castrated," fed the widespread suspicion that the Shakers would be able to enforce their rule of celibacy only through extreme measures that rendered sexual intercourse impossible.⁶ But the claim that the Shakers were guilty of castration appeared only occasionally in anti-Shaker literature, perhaps because such a practice would have seemed incompatible with the even more prevalent idea that they engaged in promiscuous debauchery.⁷ In any case, accusations that Shakers employed castration never amounted to anything more than vague allusions and unsupported rumors, and before 1840 never figured in any legal proceedings against a Shaker community.⁸

The Believers at White Water were thus shocked when on March 25, 1840, police officers from Cincinnati appeared at White Water village bearing arrest warrants for Archibald Meacham, sixty-three years old, presiding elder of the Center Family, and four other brethren. They were Joseph B. Agnew, age fifty-four, in charge of the South Family; Manley Sherman, age forty-two, South Family; William A. Agnew, age twenty-five, Center Family; and John S. Whitney, age twenty, South Family. Many at White Water immediately recognized the name of the woman who had lodged the complaint, Mary Black. Some time early in 1839 she had arrived at White Water and asked that she and her three children be taken into the community. The fact that Mary Black had traveled such a long distance from her home in Bracken County, Kentucky, suggests that she was at the time in greatly straitened circumstances, perhaps because her husband had recently died or abandoned the family. No doubt she knew, or had been told about, the Shakers' reputation for hospitality and charity, though it is puzzling that she did not try her luck at the closer Pleasant

Hill Shaker village in her home state. In any case, she and her children were welcomed and joined others in the “gathering” community at White Water, some of whom had been made destitute by the economic recession following the financial crisis of 1837. In this period Archibald Meacham reported to the Central Ministry in Mount Lebanon that there had been a spurt of such “young believers gathered among us,” and though he was cautiously optimistic that a few would become committed Shakers, he suspected that “some of them are of the wandering class of mankind & very uncertain whether they will get hold.”⁹

In fact, Mary Black never became a Believer. She fell into a category of short-term or “bread and butter” Shakers, individuals who were drawn to a Shaker village primarily in search of relief from economic or family problems, but who left once their prospects had brightened.¹⁰ Given the fact that no daily records exist for White Water in this period, the date of Mary Black’s arrival and the length of time her family remained in the village cannot be precisely determined. Presumably her two sons, Jackson (nine years old at the time) and Hiram (thirteen), were placed under the supervision of the caretaker for the boys at White Water, who numbered about fifteen in this period.¹¹ Like the other boys, they would have been expected to join in the farm work and adhere to the strict rules of a Shaker community. When, in the fall of 1839, Mary Black left White Water and returned with her children to Kentucky, she apparently made no complaints about how her sons had been treated.¹²

Something must have occurred in late 1839 that greatly improved Mary Black’s economic circumstances, for tax lists for Bracken County in 1840 show her to be the owner of one horse and a 124-acre farm valued at \$536. The federal census for the same year identified her as the head of a household that included her three children and one female slave.¹³ Black’s personal situation had thus stabilized, but in March 1840, perhaps at the instigation of her brother (or brother-in-law), she began to tell her friends, and eventually the local police authorities, that during their stay at White Water village her two sons had been brutally emasculated.¹⁴ When word reached Cincinnati of the accusations that were being made, the prosecuting attorney of Hamilton County, David Wade, decided to take action, since the Shaker Village of White Water was within his jurisdiction. Mary Black and her two sons were summoned to Cincinnati, where they arrived by March 24, accompanied by the boys’ uncle. There they repeated their accusation, stating that the castration had taken place in

August 1839. As a first step Wade appointed a physician to examine the boys. On March 25 the doctor, whose name is not known, submitted a report in which he confirmed that the two boys had no testicles and that he had detected “distinct and well-marked” scars that indicated castration had taken place.¹⁵ The boys were then questioned by police officials and perhaps by the prosecuting attorney as well. Their answers must have been convincing, for arrest warrants were made out for the five Shaker men named by the boys and their mother, and they were duly transported to Cincinnati late on March 25.¹⁶

That day rumors began to spread in Cincinnati about the imminent arrest of a group of Shakers who had committed a dastardly act against two boys in their custody. When, late in the afternoon, the Shakers were delivered to the county jail, they were met by an angry crowd that believed, perhaps on the basis of leaks by police officials, that the Shakers’ guilt was a foregone conclusion. The defendants were thus cursed and mocked by the crowd. Not even the dignified, white-haired Elder Meacham was spared this vilification. Fearing for the safety of the prisoners, the police proceeded to disperse the crowd and usher the Shakers into their dingy cells. Only then, perhaps, did the Believers realize the full horror of their plight. Having lived for many years in an environment based on the Shaker principles of order, cleanliness, and tidiness in all things, the defendants were mortified by the thought they would probably have to spend a considerable period of time in these “filthy” and “reeking” cells, with only one dirty blanket for their bedding.¹⁷ Further adding to their misery was the execrable food brought to them, which all five Shakers refused to eat.

Developments on the next day, March 26, offered no solace to the Shakers. The one Cincinnati newspaper that took notice of the affair, the *Cincinnati Daily News*, printed a report with a sensational heading: “Outrage of the Most Brutal Character.” Here it was stated as a fact that two boys had been “maimed by the Shakers” of White Water. It was further reported that police officers had been sent to White Water to discover if other children there “had been subjected to the same inhuman treatment.”¹⁸ This report tended not only to further inflame the anti-Shaker mood in Cincinnati but to stir the worst prejudices against the Believers elsewhere in the country, for a number of newspapers reported on the event using the *Cincinnati Daily News* article as their source. Thus the *Public Ledger* of Philadelphia on April 3 wrote of a “fanatical barbarity” that had taken place in Cincinnati in which Shakers had mutilated boys “for the purpose of depriving them

of the power of violating one of the principal tenets of that sect.” The *New York Sun* took the same line, even going so far as to justify the lynching of the Shaker suspects: “We should hardly grumble at Judge Lynch, should he in the wisdom of his code and the plentitude of his power, subject the butchers to a practical illustration of the everywhere conceded principle that ‘sauce for the gosling is sauce for the gander.’”¹⁹

In the morning, as the prisoners were being taken to the courthouse for a preliminary hearing, they discovered that the hostile crowd that had abused them the previous evening had grown larger and even more menacing. It was only with great difficulty that the police were able to restrain the mob, which seemed intent on administering its own justice. Nothing in the subsequent proceedings that day offered the Shakers or their friends any reason for optimism. With the judge of the Common Pleas Court presiding, the doctor who had examined the boys repeated his findings. When asked to explain in their own words what had happened to them, the boys, as Elder Meacham later observed, repeated “word for word” the “wicked lie” they had been taught.²⁰ To the amazement of some of the lawyers present in the packed courtroom, the Shakers, “trusting wholly to, and in the Lord, and their entire innocence ... offered no defense at all, before the magistrate and the crowded court.”²¹ Under the circumstances the judge had no option but to return the defendants to their cells, where they would be held until a formal trial could be scheduled. He set bail at \$5,000, a staggeringly high figure that the Shakers could not raise quickly, if at all. Feeling that their tribulation had thereby been increased “tenfold,” the disconsolate defendants were then taken back to the prison by a different route so as to avoid exposing them once again to the fury of the mob.²² By this time both the judge and the mayor of Cincinnati, who was now taking a special interest in the case, were truly worried that the crowd outside the courthouse might overwhelm the police, seize the prisoners, and lynch them on the spot. For added protection extra guards were assigned to secure the jailhouse.²³

The situation thus seemed bleak for the prisoners on March 26, but during the course of the day there were some developments that temporarily lifted their spirits. A friendly Cincinnati innkeeper, at whose establishment Shakers doing business in town had usually stayed, sent over meals that the defendants found much more palatable than their prison fare. They were also visited by numerous friends, not just the brethren and sisters from White Water but also non-Shaker neighbors from Crosby

Township. The visitors expressed their solidarity and shook hands through the prison grate, while “tears coursed down their cheeks.”²⁴ At this time Eldress Eunice delivered the first of the three spiritual letters she was to receive during the crisis, in this case one said to be from “Mother Mary Noble and her Family” and addressed to “those in prison.”²⁵ The brethren were advised to remain true to their convictions “in this trying time”:

You must still watch and pray, for those that are blind, for they do not know what they are doing, and without a change, judgment will seize them like a mighty Earthquake, for their wicked deeds are numbered. So now, dear friends, keep your faith and stand firm, though you are afflicted. God will protect you, and Holy Mother will not forsake you in time of trouble, & remember that a justified conscience is better than mountains of gold.

Such encouraging words no doubt bolstered the spirits of the Shaker prisoners and prepared them for the ordeal to come.

However, one of the brethren at White Water, Ezra Sherman, apparently believed that divine intervention might be facilitated if the Believers took certain practical steps as well. On March 26 he hired lawyers from the Cincinnati office of Riddle and Row to serve as counsel for the defendants. The first step the lawyers took was to prove decisive: they secured the services of Samuel Gross, a well known surgeon who had been on the faculty of the Medical College of Cincinnati. It was fortunate for the defendants that Gross happened to be a resident of Cincinnati at the time, for he had a national, indeed an international, reputation in his field. His book on pathological anatomy had recently appeared, the first on the subject ever in the United States or perhaps even in the English-speaking world.²⁶ Thus, Gross was uniquely qualified to speak authoritatively on such matters as male sexual deformities. As his first assignment, Gross made his way to White Water village to determine whether any of the boys there had been castrated or otherwise physically molested. He found that the twelve boys residing in the community, who ranged in age from two to eighteen, “had no cause of complaint in that particular.”²⁷ The police officers sent by the court to assay conditions among the youth at White Water presumably made the same findings.

In the meantime Ezra Sherman was busy on another front. For a Shaker, Sherman was uncharacteristically gregarious and open to establishing good relations with the neighbors of White Water village. Indeed, when

he died in 1882 he was described by one of his non-Shaker friends as “probably the best known and most out-going person who ever dwelled in the Shaker community.”²⁸ Among the people Sherman had come to know was Othniel Looker, a prominent lawyer and former governor of Ohio who in 1824 had retired to his farm near Harrison, only a few miles west of White Water. Looker must have had a high regard for the Shakers, for when Sherman asked for help he agreed not only to do what he could on his own, but also apparently put him in touch with Bellamy Storer, one of Cincinnati’s most distinguished legal and political figures.²⁹ Storer had served a term in the House of Representatives in Washington, D.C., and was regarded by some as the city’s finest and most influential lawyer.³⁰ He was an intensely religious man who had in earlier days been the leader of a band of men, called the Flying Artillery, that traveled across the countryside promoting religious revivals. In doing so Storer had perhaps learned of and come to respect the Shakers, for he now assured Sherman that he sympathized with the Shaker defendants and would work to prove their innocence.³¹

Even before Ezra Sherman contacted him, Bellamy Storer had been discussing the Shaker case with friends and associates whom he met on a regular basis at the courthouse. They included George Torrence, a former presiding judge of the Court of Common Pleas who was then serving as the treasurer of Hamilton County, and David K. Este, then judge of the Superior Court of Cincinnati. These experienced jurists agreed with Bellamy that “there could be no truth in the wicked charge against the innocent, simple-minded Shakers.”³² But what was to be done in the face of the results of the medical examination and the testimony of the boys? At some point on March 27, Storer must have consulted with Dr. Samuel Gross, who reported on his findings during his visit to White Water. At the same time, it seems, Gross expressed his opinion that the physician who had examined the boys, whom he later deprecated as “an old medical practitioner,” had made an improper diagnosis.³³ What was needed, Storer and his friends concluded, was a new medical examination by more knowledgeable physicians and surgeons. Further, the best forum for requesting such an examination would be an examining court, a kind of pre-trial hearing at which any responsible party could present new evidence.

Accordingly, arrangements were made with the prosecuting attorney for an examining court to be held on March 28. The Shaker prisoners,

probably unaware of what Bellamy Storer was planning, had no reason to believe that this hearing would be any different from that held on the 26th. They were, however, comforted by another letter brought to them early that day by Eldress Eunice, who had received it hours earlier during a restless night.³⁴ This came from Mother Ann, who advised her “little children” that their sufferings were “small in comparison to mine when I was on earth,” but “according to what is required of you, your sufferings are great enough, and your wisdom and patience has been equally great.” The prisoners were assured that, though their tribulation was great and their afflictions seemed “unsupportable,” they must “retain their spirit of meekness” and trust that Mother Ann would “carry you safely through.”

Their confidence thus renewed, the Shaker defendants were taken to the courthouse, where the mayor of Cincinnati, Samuel W. Davies, was to preside over the proceedings. Such a “mayor’s court” was an acceptable procedure in the circumstances, for mayors had the same criminal jurisdiction and powers as those vested in a justice of the peace. Davies was apparently eager to play a leading role in the resolution of the case, perhaps not so much out of sympathy for the Shaker defendants as from a desire to bring a swift end to the case and ensure that the anti-Shaker clamor in the streets did not lead to uncontrolled violence. So great was the public interest in the mayor’s court that Davies arranged for it to be held in the largest room of the courthouse. Most of those who crowded into the courtroom assumed that the Shakers were guilty. As one eyewitness put it, the room was “crammed and jammed with greedy and prejudiced spectators, and outside of the old courthouse, in the extensive yard and the neighboring streets, there were hundreds and thousands of interested citizens from the city and the country, and they were all full of indignation and excitement, from prejudice and bigotry.” The *Cincinnati Daily News* reported on the “immense crowd,” but, perhaps because the writer had learned something of what Storer and his friends were planning, took a more cautious approach than in the paper’s first article on the case: “We forbear any notice of the evidence given, until the result is known.”³⁵

Accompanying Bellamy Storer into the courtroom were a group of distinguished active and retired lawyers who apparently had agreed to appear unofficially as *amici curiae*, or friends of the court, on behalf of the defendants. George Torrence was designated spokesman for the group. The proceeding opened with testimony from the two boys, who repeated the story they had previously told. Torrence chose not to question the boys,

but instead asked the prosecuting attorney if he had obtained a second opinion from “skilled physicians” to confirm the findings of the initial medical examination of the boys. When the prosecuting attorney replied that he had not deemed that necessary, Torrence turned to the spectators and histrionically asked: “Are there any experienced physicians within the sound of my voice? If so, please step forward before the court.”³⁶ Of course, all of this had been carefully planned ahead of time, so it was no surprise to Torrence and Bellamy when four of the most distinguished and respected physicians and surgeons in the American West advanced and offered their services. They included Samuel Gross, the expert on anatomical pathology, and Daniel Drake, the founder of the College of Medicine at the University of Cincinnati and the editor of one of the country’s leading medical journals. The court was then recessed for an hour and the boys were taken to an empty jury room, where they were examined by the four physicians, joined by the doctor who had made the initial diagnosis.³⁷

When the examining team returned to the courtroom and were sworn in as witnesses, Daniel Drake reported on their findings:

As surgeon experts, after a most thorough examination of the parts of these boys, we find that there has been no castration at all.... So that there has been no mayhem, there has been no crime — no crime at all, committed by these innocent citizens.

Drake and Gross then proceeded to give a brief description of the abnormality they had found in the boys — cryptorchidism, or undescended testicle. They further reported that they could find no scars or other indications that could be considered evidence of castration.³⁸ So conclusive and authoritative were these findings that, as the *Cincinnati Daily News* would report on the following day, they “instantly changed the current of feeling of the numerous assemblage at the Court House.” Nearly everyone had arrived at the hearing believing in the guilt of the Shakers, but now all seemed to agree that they were innocent. Seeing no need to prolong the hearing, the mayor declared that the prisoners were not guilty and released them, to “the great delight of the poor Shakers ... and the great merriment of the by-standers.” To show his solidarity with the defendants, and perhaps to calm the angry crowd outside the courthouse, who had not yet heard the startling outcome of the hearing, the mayor warmly shook the hands of the freed prisoners and personally escorted them out

the door and into the street. As further proof that the Shakers had been vindicated, the prosecuting attorney immediately ordered the arrest and imprisonment of the two boys and their uncle, in order to “ascertain the origin of this nefarious accusation.”

Whether the many Shakers present among the spectators in the courthouse joined in the “great merriment” over the outcome of the hearing is not known. The defendants, it seems, acted in a subdued and dignified manner. Indeed, as Elder Freegift Wells of Union Village would later report, the brethren “had conducted themselves altogether becoming their profession, through the whole scene.”³⁹ It must have been immensely gratifying to them that the assurances given in the two spiritual letters conveyed by Eldress Eunice had been fulfilled. Probably only vaguely aware, if at all, of the behind-the-scenes efforts of Ezra Sherman to win support from influential Cincinnatians, the five defendants could only conclude that they had been rescued through divine intervention, especially when Bellamy Storer proclaimed publicly that the outcome of the hearing was a manifestation of the power of God.⁴⁰ This belief was strengthened when later on March 30, once back in White Water village, Eldress Eunice received a third inspired letter, this from Father Jesus.⁴¹ In a state of intense emotional fervor, the eldress gathered the letter over the head of Elder Archibald: “It came in a bright light & ... shone to that degree that it was difficult to read.” The words of Father Jesus, as conveyed by the eldress, offered an interpretation of the meaning of the events of the past week.

I have seen your sufferings & the anger of your enemies towards you, and in as much as you suffered for my sake, and the Gospel, you shall be rewarded. You have not been left alone in these trying times, but have had the protection of your Father and Mother with you, and your meekness and simplicity in all your afflictions will go to promote the gospel and help lost souls. Although the power of the enemy was very great, yet remember my children that the flaming sword that is my right hand shall destroy it. I was present with you and worked your deliverance.

These were comforting words indeed for the Believers of White Water, who now could truly feel confident that no matter what tribulations might be in store for them in the future, they would endure under the protection of their heavenly Father and Mother.

One question that interests the historian apparently was not given

much thought by the Shakers in the aftermath of the 1840 trial: What had motivated Mary Black and her brother to make their vile accusation against the Shakers? The brethren at White Water were in full agreement with Elder Freegift Wells, who believed that the “nefarious plot” originated not so much from “a spirit of malice” but from “a desire & expectation of swindling the Shakers out of a large sum of money.”⁴² This is perhaps the most plausible explanation, but one wonders what made Mary Black and the boy’s uncle believe that they could carry off such an audacious scheme? Did they not realize that a Cincinnati judge would surely call in doctors who, if they were competent, would discover that no castration had taken place? How would Black explain why she had not reported the crime to the police immediately after she discovered it when her family departed from White Water village in the fall of 1839? How could they be confident that the two boys would learn the story they were expected to tell and then lie in a convincing way when questioned by a judge or skillful defense lawyer?

There are certain hints in the available sources that suggest another explanation of how the accusation of castration came about. It is possible that Mary Black actually believed that her boys had been castrated, or mutilated in some way, by the Shakers. This could only have been possible if her ignorance of male anatomy was such that she had never noticed before that her sons’ genitals were abnormal. If this was the case, then the plot against the Shakers may have been devised solely by the uncle, who manipulated Mary Black and convinced her that something horrible had happened at White Water. Elder Archibald may have been referring to this possibility when he wrote that the “wicked lie” was formulated in Kentucky by “those that were older in wickedness.”⁴³ This may also explain why, after the exoneration of the Shakers, the two boys and their uncle, but not the mother, were incarcerated. But even if this is the true explanation, there remains the mystery of how the uncle was able to train the boys, fourteen and ten years old at the time, to lie in such a convincing manner.

In his account Elder Archibald stated that the boys had been well coached ahead of time and when questioned were able to repeat their lies “word for word.” Yet would not an experienced judge or prosecutor find it suspicious that the two boys testified using the exact same words? One intriguing possibility is that the boys were not in fact asked for a detailed account of what had happened. A curious feature of this story of alleged

child molestation was the reluctance of those speaking and writing about it at the time to use the actual word “castration.” They resorted instead to circumlocution. The newspapers wrote of a “brutal outrage,” “barbarity,” or “maiming,” leaving their readers to imagine the worst. The Shakers who wrote privately about the incident alluded to “a certain alleged crime” or the accusation that the boys “had been made eunuchs.”⁴⁴ Since even adults found it difficult to speak openly among themselves of what had actually happened, it seems possible that the two boys were at no point asked directly if they had been castrated. A judge may have been reluctant to pose the question in its starkest terms, for example asking what sort of knife was used or how much blood was spilled. Instead, the questions may have been indirect, along the lines of, “Did the Shakers do something terrible to you?” This would have made it easy for the boys to lie merely by answering yes, and then offering the names of the five men who had supposedly carried out the dastardly deed.

Yet another possibility is that something had in fact occurred at White Water village that had distressed the boys at the time and that, when they recalled it later, they interpreted as the Shaker “crime” that everyone was so concerned about? In such a case, the boys may have been confused but not consciously lying in their testimony. When they arrived at White Water in 1839 Hiram and Jackson Black were fatherless boys from a Kentucky farm. They may have had considerable difficulty in adjusting to the highly regimented and disciplined life style imposed by their Shaker caretakers, who insisted on very high standards of cleanliness and purity. Having grown up in rural Kentucky, Hiram, the older boy, may have acquired from older friends certain habits that the Shakers regarded as abhorrent, such as profane or bawdy language. Not much is known about how Shakers dealt with the delicate questions that arose when children in their care reached pubescence and started to become aware of their own sexuality,⁴⁵ but one example from Enfield village suggests that draconian methods were at times used to break teenage boys from what were regarded as impure habits. In the early 1840s a caretaker for the boys resorted to severe whipping to punish one of his wards for “uncleanliness.” This continued for six months, and when the boy claimed “he could not help it,” he was “sent off into the world.”⁴⁶ There is no way of knowing if Hiram Black was treated harshly for similar transgressions, and even if White Water diaries and journals from this period had survived, such matters would probably not have been recorded. Nonetheless, this seems a possible explanation of how Hiram,

the older boy, full of resentment toward the Shakers, could have provided testimony that in his own mind was truthful, but that in fact had nothing to do with the allegation that the Shakers had castrated the boys.

Another puzzling aspect of the Shaker child molestation case is the sharp division of opinion among the people of Cincinnati when news of the arrest of the White Water brethren began to spread on March 25. Probably most ordinary citizens of Cincinnati had previously given little thought to the Shakers, regarding them mainly as a secretive but basically harmless group of religious eccentrics. But the rapidity with which an angry crowd assembled to abuse and threaten the Shaker prisoners suggests that the anti-Shaker books and pamphlets of the past several decades may have created a latent antagonism toward the Believers that could erupt in certain circumstances and lead to mob violence. Thus, the first story in the *Cincinnati Daily News*, which emphasized the horror of the crime that had been committed and assumed that the Shakers were guilty, was probably an accurate reflection of public opinion at the time. Writers for newspapers in Philadelphia and New York had a ready explanation for the “fanatical barbarity” of the White Water Shakers that many angry citizens of Cincinnati probably implicitly agreed with: the Shakers had to resort to castration because otherwise the men would violate the rule of celibacy.

Yet if some ordinary men and women of Cincinnati were predisposed to be hostile to the Shaker defendants, the professional and political elite of the city from the start seems to have held an opposing view. Even when the first medical examination apparently demonstrated that Hiram and Jackson Black had been castrated, they refused to believe the Shakers were guilty. The unofficial defense team that went to work behind the scenes and then appeared at the March 28 examining court comprised some of the finest and most influential lawyers and jurists in Ohio. The doctors and surgeons who volunteered their services were equally distinguished in their field. In normal circumstances no ordinary citizen could have assembled, or afforded, such legal representation and medical advice. Why did the civil leaders and professionals of Cincinnati take such an interest in the plight of the Shaker defendants? One possible answer is that though the Believers of White Water, like Shakers everywhere, had sought to isolate themselves from the world, nonetheless there existed certain personal connections that proved to their advantage in 1840. Othniel Looker, who had lived in close proximity to White Water village during its entire existence, seems to have developed a real respect for the Shakers

and a friendly relationship with a few of them, notably Ezra Sherman. In the crisis of 1840 Looker's support proved invaluable to the Shakers, especially since he was a respected member of Cincinnati's legal fraternity. Calvin Morrell, one of the first doctors to practice in Cincinnati, had been known by most medical professionals in the area, including Daniel Drake.⁴⁷ Morrell became a Shaker in 1805, and from 1825 to 1831 was at White Water presiding over its early development. Although Morrell died in 1833, those who had known him or of him, like Drake and probably Looker, may have felt some responsibility to come to the rescue of the religious settlement he had helped found.

It is more likely, however, that in March 1840 the primary motivation of Cincinnatians like Bellamy Storer, Samuel Davies, and Daniel Drake in defending the Shakers was the desire to ensure that the national reputation of their city, the sixth largest in the country and the "Queen of the West," was not sullied as a result of the child molestation trial. Cincinnati's civil and professional leaders were intensely proud of their city, which some hoped would become the "Boston of the West." They were keen to demonstrate that the great majority of the inhabitants of Cincinnati were "responsible citizens" and to prevent any occurrences that newspapers in the East could use to perpetrate an image of Cincinnati as a lawless and only semi-civilized frontier town.⁴⁸ This had been a danger several times in the 1830s, when race riots and nativist agitation had created the impression that street violence and mob law prevailed in Cincinnati. Cincinnati's political, financial, and professional elite were thus determined to combat the disruptive and intolerant influences that, as Daniel Drake wrote in 1833, threatened to "deluge our pleasant places and rush in desolation along our streets."⁴⁹ In March 1840, Cincinnati's leaders thus wanted to make sure that the Shakers were treated fairly and were not wrongly convicted of such a heinous crime as castration. Above all, they were intent on calming public opinion and maintaining public order, for the worst possible outcome was a public lynching of a group of meek, innocent Shakers.

In its report on the dramatic conclusion of the investigation of the allegations made against the Shakers, the *Cincinnati Daily News* implicitly endorsed the strategy that had been adopted by the city's civil and professional leaders. The writer, conveniently overlooking the fact that the *Cincinnati Daily News* had incited the public by initially assuming that the Shakers were guilty, asserted that the chief lesson to be drawn from the

events of March 1840 was that in contentious or highly emotional cases it was wrong for the public to reach a conclusion before all the evidence was presented. Demands for revenge against the Shakers had at first been so strong that had the civil authorities not taken special steps to protect the prisoners, the angry mob would surely have taken things into its own hands and administered “Judge Lynch’s law.”⁵⁰ One Cincinnati, Judge Alfred Carter, who had been an eyewitness to the Shaker trial, drew a somewhat different lesson when writing about it many years later. He emphasized the exoneration of the Shakers as a victory for religious tolerance, for it meant that the “city, and the county and the country were relieved from the foul consequences of one of the most wicked conspiracies against innocent and harmless men, because of their religion, that was ever known.” Furthermore, he asserted, in the long run the ordeal they had been subjected to “redounded to the benefit of the Shakers of Whitewater village,” for it demonstrated to the public their essential “goodness and innocence” and preserved them from future conspiracies or molestations.⁵¹

It is true that the Shakers of White Water would never again have to confront such baseless accusations and public hostility, although, like most Shaker societies, they would in future years be involved in a number of court cases involving child custody and money matters. But the memory of the tribulations of 1840 seemed to weigh heavily on the Believers of White Water. In the spiritual messages that the society’s leaders continued to receive well into 1841, there was frequent mention of tribulations, sorrows, and imprisonment.⁵² In 1842 or 1843, when Shaker societies were instructed by the Central Ministry to select an appropriate spiritual name, all the others chose positive, uplifting names like City of Union, Vale of Peace, or Wisdom’s Valley. The Believers of White Water, unable to put out of their minds the harrowing experiences of the brethren in 1840, were alone in selecting a name with negative connotations: “Lonely Plain of Tribulation.”⁵³

Notes

1. A group of these messages, assembled by Elder Archibald Meacham, is found in the *Shaker Collection of the Western Reserve Historical Society* (Glen Rock, N.J.: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1972), VIII.B.283 (reel 86). Hereafter cited as WRHS.
2. Letter of Mother Ann “to her little children,” March 28, 1840, WRHS VIII.B.283, 56-58 (reel 86).
3. J. P. (John Patterson) MacLean, *Shakers of Ohio. Fugitive Papers Concerning the Shakers of Ohio, With Unpublished Manuscripts* (Columbus: F.J. Heer, 1907), 234, 243.
4. MacLean, *Shakers of Ohio*, 241-42.
5. On public attitudes towards the Shakers, see Tom Kanon, “‘Seduced, Bewildered, and Lost’: Anti-Shakerism on the Early Nineteenth-Century Frontier,” *Ohio Valley History* 7, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 1-30.
6. Thomas Brown, *An Account of the People Called Shakers* (Troy, N.Y.: Parker and Bliss, 1812), 336.
7. Richard McNemar, an early and influential Shaker convert in Ohio, alluded to this contradiction when he wrote that the enemies of the Shakers claimed that they “castrated all their males, and ... divested of all modesty, stripped and danced naked in their night meetings.” Richard McNemar, *The Kentucky Revival, or A Short History of the Late Extraordinary Outpouring of the Spirit of God, in the Western States of America* (Cincinnati: John W. Browne, 1807), 95.
8. On Shaker views about ways to restrain carnal impulses, and a possible case of castration at New Lebanon village, see Glendyne L. Wergland, *One Shaker life : Isaac Newton Youngs, 1793-1865* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 44-47.
9. Meacham’s letter to Rufus Bishop, March 15, 1838, WRHS IV.A.86 (reel 28).
10. For a good discussion of this issue, see Stephen J. Stein, “The ‘Not-So-Faithful’ Believers: Conversion, Deconversion, and Reconversion among the Shakers,” *American Studies* 38, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 5-20. “Bread and butter” Shakers were also called “winter Shakers,” but the latter term does not literally fit Mary Black, for she and her family arrived at White Water in the spring and departed in the fall.
11. Contemporary and later accounts give different estimates of the age of the boys. Elder Archibald Meacham, writing close to the event, was correct in his estimate that they were thirteen and nine years old in 1839. Undated (late March 1840) note of Archibald Meacham, WRHS VIII.B.283 (reel 86), hereafter cited as “Meacham’s Account.” The ages are confirmed in federal census records: for Jackson Black, 1850 Federal Census, Bracken County, Kentucky, National Archives microcopy M432, reel 193, 428b; for Hiram Black, 1870 Federal Census, Bracken County, Kentucky, National Archives microcopy M593, reel 382, 441b.
12. In his brief account of the incident, Elder Meacham recalled that the Black family had left White Water “some time in the fall of 1839.” “Meacham’s Account.” If before her departure Mary Black had expressed any dissatisfaction with the treatment of her sons, Meacham no doubt would have mentioned it. In his account Meacham referred to “a full history of the transaction” that he had previously sent to “the east.” That document has apparently not survived.
13. Rosemarie Bonwell Pell, ed., *Bracken County, Kentucky, Tax Lists* (Brooksville, Ky: Bracken County Historical Society, 2002), vol. 2, pt. 1, 10b; Mary Black household, 1840

- Federal Census, Bracken County, Kentucky, National Archives microcopy M704, reel 105, 349.
14. S. (Samuel) D. Gross, "Case of Pretended Mayhem, Which was a Trial before the Mayor's Court in Cincinnati, March, 1840," *Western Journal of Medicine and Surgery* 3, no. 5 (May 1841): 355. John MacLean erroneously identified the relative as a cousin. *Shakers of Ohio*, 248.
 15. Gross, "Case of Pretended Mayhem," 355.
 16. A. G. W. (Alfred George Washington) Carter, *The Old Court House. Reminiscences and Anecdotes of the Courts and Bar of Cincinnati* (Cincinnati: Peter G. Thomson, 1880), 299-300; MacLean, *Shakers of Ohio*, 246-47. Both Carter's and MacLean's accounts contain inaccuracies, and at times they contradict each other. For example, Carter was under the mistaken impression that the initial arraignment of the Shaker men occurred before the justice of the peace in New Haven, Ohio, near the Shaker village. MacLean reported that the initial medical examination was performed by two doctors, Hiram and Jackson, but these were in fact the given names of the two boys.
 17. Letter of Freegift Wells to Eastern Ministry, May 1, 1840, WRHS IV.A.72 (reel 25). Stories about the horrible conditions in the Cincinnati prison were passed down from generation to generation, and sixty years later the Believers at White Water were still vividly recalling the "putrid" cells, from which "emanated such odors as almost suffocated the prisoners." MacLean, *Shakers of Ohio*, 247.
 18. "Outrage of the Most Brutal Character," *Cincinnati Daily News*, March 26, 1840, 3. Apparently the only surviving copy of the March and April 1840 issues of this Cincinnati newspaper is held by the Wisconsin Historical Society. I am grateful to Lori Bessler, Reference Librarian, for making available to me photocopies of the relevant articles.
 19. "Fanatical Barbarity," *Public Ledger* (Philadelphia), April 3, 1840, 3; and "Fanatical Barbarity," *New York Sun*, April 2, 1840, 2. Reports on the "brutal outrage" in Cincinnati also appeared in the *Baltimore Sun*, April 2, 1840, the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*, April 8, 1840, and the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, April 14, 1840.
 20. "Meacham's Account."
 21. Carter, *The Old Court House*, 301.
 22. "Meacham's Account." It is not clear whether the \$5,000 bail bond was for each prisoner, or for all five as a group.
 23. Carter, *The Old Court House*, 301.
 24. MacLean, *Shakers of Ohio*, 247
 25. Inspired letter of Mother Mary Noble to "those in prison," March 26, 1840, WRHS VIII.B.283, 56 (reel 86).
 26. Samuel D. Gross, *Elements of Pathological Anatomy*, 2 volumes (Boston: Marsh, Capen et al., 1839).
 27. Gross, "Case of Pretended Mayhem," 355-56.
 28. Thomas Shroyer's eulogy of Sherman, cited in Marjorie Byrnside Burress, ed., *Whitewater, Ohio, Village of Shakers, 1824-1916. Its History and Its People* (North Bend, Ohio: privately printed, 1979).
 29. Carter, *The Old Court House*, 301; Burress, *Whitewater, Ohio*, 88.
 30. While in Cincinnati in 1832, Alexis de Tocqueville had a long conversation with Storer, whom he called "the leading lawyer of Cincinnati." George Wilson Pierson, *Tocqueville in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 554.

31. Henry Howe, ed., *Historical Collections of Ohio. An Encyclopedia of the State*, vol. 1 (Cincinnati: State of Ohio, 1908), 832; Daniel Aaron, *Cincinnati, Queen City of the West, 1819-1838* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1992), 52, 62-63.
32. Carter, *The Old Court House*, 301.
33. Gross, "Case of Pretended Mayhem," 356.
34. Inspired letter of Mother Ann to "her little children," March 28, 1840, WRHS VIII.B.283, 56 (reel 86). Eldress Eunice declared that she had received this letter at 2 a.m. that morning.
35. "Maiming," *Cincinnati Daily News*, March 28, 1840, 3.
36. Carter, *The Old Court House*, 302-3.
37. Gross, "Case of Pretended Mayhem," 356.
38. Carter, *The Old Court House*, 304. In his later published report on the examination, Gross took delight in pointing out the "self-complacency" with which the doctor who had made the original report tried to insist that certain "folds of the skin" were in fact "scars or cicatrices." Gross, "Case of Pretended Mayhem," 356.
39. Letter of Freegift Wells to Eastern Ministry, May 1, 1840, WRHS IV.A.72 (reel 25). Wells had not attended the trial, but learned about it "from both invisible and visible agents."
40. MacLean, *Shakers of Ohio*, 248.
41. Inspired letter of Father Jesus to Elder Archibald, March 30, WRHS VIII.B.283, 59-60 (reel 86).
42. Letter of Freegift Wells to Eastern Ministry, May 1, 1840, WRHS IV.A.72 (reel 25).
43. "Meacham's Account."
44. The only exception was a feisty Shaker at Union Village, who wrote in her diary: "The great uproar in Cincinnati occasioned by the false swearing of 2 boys on some of the brethren at W.W., purported to be castrated, believers charged \$300 besides other expenses." Diary of Sally Sharp, March 31, 1840, WRHS. *Records of United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1976), #298 (reel 22).
45. See Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America. A History of the United Society of Believers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 158-59.
46. *Report of the Examination of the Shakers of Canterbury and Enfield before the New Hampshire Legislature, at the November Session, 1848* (Concord: Ervin B. Tripp, 1849), 27. The "uncleanliness" referred to was probably masturbation and/or nocturnal emissions. That even Shaker men struggled with the problem of such "carnal urges" can be seen in the case of Isaac Newton Youngs. Wergland, *One Shaker Life*, 34-35, 42-45. On methods used by Shakers to discipline children and prevent "unclean" behavior, see Louis J. Kern, *An Ordered Love. Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias: The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 95-96.
47. Drake mentioned Morrell in a speech given in January, 1852. See *The Western Journal of Medicine and Surgery* 9, no. 3 (March 1852): 220.
48. Walter Stix Glazer, *Cincinnati in 1840* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999), 77-78.
49. *Physician to the West. Selected Writings of Daniel Drake on Science and Society*. eds. Henry D. Shapiro and Zane L. Miller (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1970), xxx, 284. On the concern that Cincinnati's image would be damaged by reports

- of violence in the streets, see Silas N. T. Crowfoot, "Community Development for a White City: Race Making, Improvementism, and the Cincinnati Race Riots and Anti-Abolition Riots of 1829, 1836, and 1841" (PhD diss., Portland State University, 2010), 282-83, 326.
50. "The Shakers' Case of Maiming," *Cincinnati Daily News*, March 30, 1840, 2. The *Catholic Telegraph* of Cincinnati endorsed this position on April 11, when it reprinted the article from the *Cincinnati Daily News*. The only out-of-town newspapers that is known to have corrected its original account on the incident was the *Baltimore Sun*, which reported that the charges against the Shakers had been found to be "without the slightest foundation." "The Shakers," April 4, 1840, 1.
51. Carter, *The Old Court House*, 304-05.
52. For example, letters from Father Jesus referring to "trials and tribulations," April 11, 1840; from "an angel of the West," referring to "persecution and imprisonment," April 4, 1841; and from Mother Ann on the "weight of tribulation," September 10, 1841. WRHS VIII.B.283, 56 (reel 86).
53. Stein, *The Shaker Experience*, 177, 181, 478 fn133. "Lonely Plain of Tribulation" has traditionally been accepted as the spiritual name of White Water, although no contemporary document has been found directly confirming this.