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## **The Founding Fathers and the Shakers**

*By Christian Goodwillie*

For those of us who study the Shakers intensively, and somewhat exclusively, their presence looms large against the background of the history of the United States, perhaps disproportionately to their actual influence. The era of the founding in America, roughly from the beginning of the Revolutionary War in 1775 through the presidency of Andrew Jackson (the last president who was a veteran of that conflict), was also the era of most dynamic growth for the United Society of Believers. Scholars of Shakerism have dug deeply into early manuscript records of the sect, and its material culture has been studied exhaustively, but new research continues to give fresh insights into the longest-lived intentional community in the United States. It recently occurred to me to wonder: how large did the Shakers loom in the consciousness of the founding fathers, the very people who crafted a government that protected the religious liberty that allowed the Shakers to flourish? Searching the magnificent resource at [founders.archives.gov](http://founders.archives.gov) provided at least a partial answer to that question. This website contains fully text-searchable transcriptions of papers from Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton. That site, combined with John Quincy Adams's remarkable diaries, digitized by the Massachusetts Historical Society at: <http://www.masshist.org/jqadiaries/php/>, and a few select print publications, have yielded a number of fascinating references to the Shakers in the writings of the founders—and also one of the few known letters written by a Shaker directly to a president. This article does not pretend to be the final word on this subject, but it is hoped that the information below—some of which I believe is new to scholars—will spur further research into perceptions of the Shakers in the early Republic.

If the Marquis de Lafayette may rightly be considered one of America's founding fathers, it is interesting to note that he made a visit to the Shakers at Niskeyuna, attending meeting there on Sunday, September 26, 1784. Remarkably, this was only eighteen days after the death of Mother Ann



Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette (1757-1834). Portrait by Joseph-Désiré Court, 1791.

Lee. Francois Marquis de Barbé-Marbois, who accompanied Lafayette, left a detailed account of their visit to the Shakers.<sup>1</sup> Lafayette's own brief comments about the visit are contained in a letter he sent to the Prince de Poix from Hartford, Connecticut, on October 12, 1784. The comments read:

If you had the slightest bit of faith, my dear prince, I would tell you about a new sect of Shakers who do contortions and miracles, all due to the application of the major tenets of magnetism. I shall tell you that I can do a book in quarto entitled "Essay on Savage Dances and Especially on the New Dance Brought from the Western Woods" (which is like the Fitzjames or the Iroquois dance), "Applied to the Principle of Dr Mesmer."<sup>2</sup>

Over the years, Lafayette's visit assumed mythological proportions in the collective consciousness of the Shakers. A purported account of the occasion, given by Lafayette's spirit to Sister Lucy Wood (1801-c.1880?), was published in 1872 in the *Shaker*.<sup>3</sup> Lafayette placed himself at Watervliet, visiting Mother Ann "in the early and trying season of her settlement there." This account was greatly enlarged upon in an anonymous 1880 article, also in the *Shaker Manifesto*, that detailed the interactions of Brother Abijah Worcester (or Wooster) with Lafayette as the two compared spiritual and magnetic powers. The author of this account gave a correct date range for Lafayette's visit to Niskeyuna as either 1783 or 1784.<sup>4</sup> Harvard brother William Leonard, also a noted instrument of the spirits, amplified this account in a lengthy letter to Canterbury sister Mary Witcher in the December 1898 *Manifesto*. Leonard's account is richly descriptive, and he writes with tremendous admiration for Lafayette. He falls victim, however, to the fundamental error—by then part of Shaker folklore—of placing Lafayette's visit during Mother Ann's lifetime, and framing it in the context of spiritual seeking, rather than as the novel diversion it really was. Shaker sisters Anna White and Leila S. Taylor abridged these accounts for *Shakerism: Its Meaning and Message* (1904), and erroneously placed Lafayette at Niskeyuna in 1780 or 1781. White and Taylor also note that the spirits of Lafayette and Washington were visitors to the Shakers during the Era of Manifestations in the late 1830s and 1840s.<sup>5</sup> Despite his importance for the Shakers' self-validation as part of America's heritage of religious freedom, it does not appear that Lafayette visited any of the Shaker communities during his triumphant return tour of America in 1824-1825. Perhaps he

had seen enough of Shakerism in 1784, since he did visit Lebanon Springs on June 13, 1825 (only two miles north of the Shaker village of New Lebanon), but seems not to have called upon the Shakers.

Our first president, George Washington, apparently did not mention the Shakers in his copious correspondence and diaries. If he had an opinion about the Shakers, it may have been formed, unfortunately, by the letters, and attempted visit, of bitter Shaker apostate William Scales. As I have detailed Scales's unreciprocated attempts to communicate with both Washington and Jefferson in a prior article I will say no more on the matter.<sup>6</sup> The papers of Washington's successor John Adams contain no references to the Shakers until the 1810s, when Adams was retired at Peacefield, his home in Quincy, Massachusetts (of which more later).

The next contemporary reference to the sect is found in a letter Charles Thomson wrote to Thomas Jefferson on March 6, 1785, from New York City, thanking him for the loan of a pamphlet on animal magnetism. This pseudoscience was then quite popular in Europe. It was developed by the German physician Franz Anton Mesmer, who posited that a mysterious universal fluid allowed for the transfer of energy between all animate and inanimate objects. Thomson noted that the Marquis de Lafayette was a great proponent of the art, having lectured the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia on the subject, although he was presumably unaware of Lafayette's recent visit to the Shakers. The subject of magnetism reminded Thomson of the nascent Shaker communities, and he speculated that their spirituality may have been influenced by something similar: "Having heard of the Shakers in this state, the agitations with which they were affected and with which they affected some who visited them from curiosity, I began to admit the opinion that they had by some means become acquainted with this fluid and that what they ascribed to the influences of the divine spirit was the effect of this unknown agent."<sup>7</sup>

Gouverneur Morris of New York was famous for his wooden leg—and his reputation as a lady's man. He was active in the Continental Congress, as well as the Constitutional Convention of 1787. In fact, Morris authored significant portions of the Constitution. He later served as the United States' Minister Plenipotentiary to France from 1792 to 1794, witnessing some of the bloodiest scenes of the French Revolution. In the summer of 1810 Morris and his wife undertook a tour of Upstate New York, where it was proposed a canal be built to link Lakes Ontario and Erie with the Hudson River. On their way home they stopped at Lebanon Springs, and



Gouverneur Morris (1752-1816). Engraving by J. Rogers.

decided to visit the Shakers at New Lebanon for meeting.

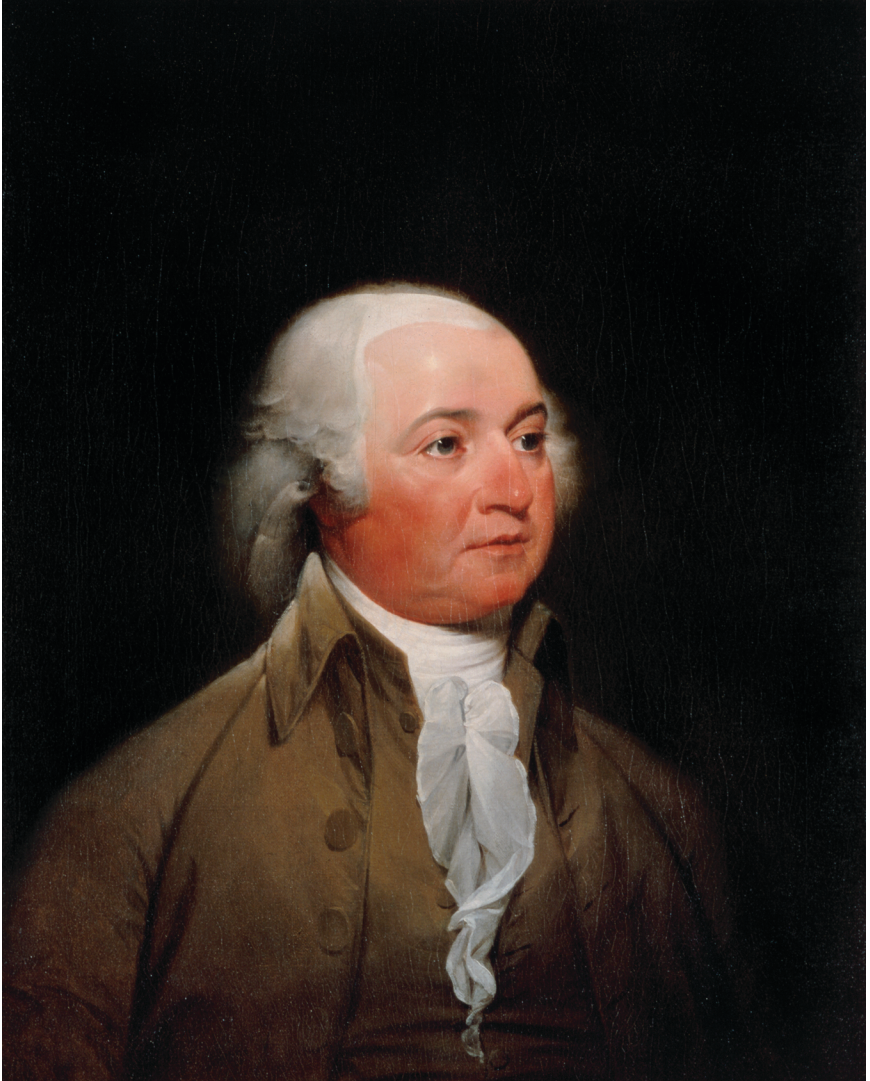
Sunday [September 2d], we stop at Lebanon Springs. Ride to see the divine service of the Shaking Quakers. The preaching is commenced before we arrive. We have a short address of invitation to us, the by-standers, to become members of their fraternity, after which they sing a hymn to the tune of 'Jolly mortals, fill your glasses,' and dance, moving backwards and forwards to the tune of an old country-dance—the men on one side and

women on the other, each company regularly arranged in rank and file. Before the hymn they all (being thereto invited by the preacher) fall on their knees, and, closing their eyes, are, or appear to be, wrapt in meditation. After two dances, with a short pause between, a young preacher comes forward and addresses us in a sensible discourse (disfigured, indeed, by useless repetition), the object of which is to prove that we ought to abandon worldly pursuits, pleasures, and enjoyments, and, more especially, the conjugal pleasures, for the sake of that pure felicity which attends celibacy. The usual texts by which the Romish Church defends that unnatural (and therefore impious) doctrine are quoted, and, with the vainglory usual among sectaries, the smooth-chinned doctor assures us that they are the true disciples, the chosen of God, who see, feel, and know him. Alas! poor creatures. They know that incomprehensible Being who fills immensity, everywhere present, everywhere operating before time began and through eternity! At this proud boast we leave the preacher and his congregation to return to our quarters. How true that saying of Solomon, that

there is nothing new under the sun, and how ridiculous the notion, entertained by some, of the perfectibility of human nature. Now, in the nineteenth century, we see the same contrivances of superstition and enthusiasm succeed in this enlightened country which duped our ignorant forefathers seven centuries ago; and while these forlorn Shakers pursue that beaten track to perfecting which, if generally followed, must occasion the extinction of mankind, our self-sufficient philosophers expect, it would seem, to reach the same pinnacle by mathematical abstractions and chemical solutions, but, above all, by giving new names to old things and tricking themselves into a belief that science is extended in proportion as the size of the dictionary is swollen by terms borrowed from the Greek.<sup>8</sup>

By 1814 Thomas Jefferson was retired at Monticello. He still pursued many intellectual passions, fueled by his insatiable appetite for acquiring books. That year he purchased a copy of *History of the Shakers* from a Philadelphia merchant for \$1.00.<sup>9</sup> This was certainly Thomas Brown's *An Account of the People called Shakers: their Faith, Doctrines, and Practice* (Troy: Printed by Parker and Bliss, 1812). Bibliographer E. Millicent Sowerby, who compiled the *Catalogue of the Library of Thomas Jefferson*, noted that Jefferson initialed his copy of Brown at signatures I (page 97) and T (page 217); and that the back of the book was scorched(!).<sup>10</sup> Sowerby's *Catalogue* lists no other Shaker-published, or Shaker-related, books among Jefferson's vast holdings, although he did acquire one more shortly before the end of his life (as we shall see).

John Adams referred to the Shakers—or, his preferred term, “Shaking Quakers”—in five letters among his post-presidential correspondence. In one letter to his son John Quincy Adams, dated May 10, 1816, on the subject of despotic religious sects, he inquired, “Have you read the History the discipline and the Doctrines and the Miracles of the Shaking Quakers?”<sup>11</sup> Adams assured his son that if he were at Peacefield in Quincy he could furnish books that would enlighten him on the Shakers, as well as many other sects. Like Jefferson, Adams probably owned a copy of Brown's *Account of the People called Shakers*. Adams's letter written January 18, 1817, to Theodore Lyman Jr. bolsters this supposition. In it, Adams derisively dismissed the philosophy of Friedrich Melchior, Baron von Grimm, calling it “nearly that of Pythagoras, [it] is as credible & intelligible to me, as that of the Shaking Quakers, whose learned writings I have also lately read;



John Adams (1735-1826). Portrait by John Trumbull, ca. 1792.



and both have contributed, more & more to convince me that Ignorance & absurdity are divisible like matter, in infinitum.—Nevertheless, neither Atheists nor Quakers, have, to borrow a well known phrase of an American philosopher ‘broke my leg, or picked my pocket.’ I would not therefore persecute either. Let both have a care however, how they thrust their hands into my pockets or strike my legs like Epictetus’s master.”<sup>12</sup> The “American philosopher” Adams quoted (tongue firmly in cheek) was Thomas Jefferson, whose own ambiguous religiosity had prompted him to make the statement of tolerance Adams quoted. Jefferson’s attitude, however, rankled many staunch Christians. Lyman responded to Adams: “We must confess, that we marvel very much what ‘learned writings’ of the Shaking Quakers you have been reading, and doubtless these learned Quakers would marvel still more, if You should tell them that Pythagoras, in whose porch You have placed the worthy Baron, was himself a Quaker, inasmuch as constituting a Community of Goods makes a Quaker.”<sup>13</sup>

President James Monroe visited the Shaker community at Enfield, New Hampshire, in August of 1817. Monroe, a Republican, and disciple of Jefferson and Madison, was the fifth president. Under the playful headline “Republican Simplicity,” Monroe’s call at the community on the shores of Mascoma Lake was widely reported in newspapers across the country. Supposedly, as Monroe reached the “big house” at the village, the elder stepped forward and said “I, Joseph Goodrich, welcome James Monroe to our habitation.”<sup>14</sup> Monroe also visited the Shaker community at South Union, Kentucky, on June 17, 1819. General Andrew Jackson and his family accompanied Monroe on this visit.<sup>15</sup>

New York’s Governor De Witt Clinton was a staunch Republican, and political ally of Thomas Jefferson. Clinton wrote to the former president on March 7, 1822, on the subject of the New York’s canals. He also included a gift for Jefferson, writing: “I also take the liberty of enclosing two metallic pens made by the Shakers near this City: They can manufacture enough for the supply of the U.S.—and their pens write better and are much cheaper than any imported.”<sup>16</sup> The Shakers were justly proud of the silver pens they manufactured at Watervliet, and routinely listed them among the inventions and innovations that they had brought forth for the benefit of mankind. Watervliet Elder George A. Lomas wrote to *Scientific American* magazine in 1879 to inquire if, as he suspected, the Shakers were indeed the first to manufacture steel pens in the United States. In fact, he wrote the letter with a silver pen, a “one slit,” that was made by the Shakers from



James Monroe  
(1758-1831). Portrait  
by Samuel Morse,  
1819.



DeWitt Clinton (1769-  
1828). Portrait by  
Rembrandt Peale, ca.  
1823.

coin metal in 1819. Lomas reported that the Shakers sold the pens for twenty-five cents in 1820, eventually switching to more durable steel.<sup>17</sup> As will be seen, their pens were well regarded by more than one prominent politician in the early Republic.

If we disregard Shaker apostate William Scales's letters, then Thomas Jefferson was the only founding father to receive a letter directly from a practicing Shaker. The writer, one Robert Richardson, was formerly an associate of the scandalmonger journalist James Thomson Callender. Callender, a Scotsman, emigrated to Pennsylvania in 1793 after stirring up political trouble in the United Kingdom. In America he was patronized by Thomas Jefferson, and penned numerous books, pamphlets, and articles critical of George Washington, John Adams, and Alexander Hamilton. Most notably, Callender exposed Hamilton's affair with Maria Reynolds, which was a key factor in Hamilton's political downfall. Richardson worked closely with Callender during 1800, and a number of Callender's letters to Jefferson were actually written by Richardson, acting as amanuensis. Following Jefferson's triumph in the election of 1800, Callender sought a patronage position as postmaster of Richmond, Virginia. When Jefferson ignored his requests Callender turned on his former benefactor, and exposed Jefferson's *own* relationship with his slave Sally Hemings. Callender subsequently died in mysterious circumstances, and was found drowned in three feet of water in the James River on July 17, 1803.

The course of Richardson's life between that time and his conversion to Shakerism are unknown. He is not listed in the Cathcart index of Shaker membership of the Western Reserve Historical Society, although a careful perusal of Union Village journals may yield some evidence of his tenure there. From evidence in his letter it seems he joined the Shakers around 1818. His letter to Jefferson accompanied a copy of the 1823 edition of the *Testimony of Christ's Second Appearing*, which was printed at Union Village.<sup>18</sup> Richardson acknowledged their former connection through Callender, and I have chosen to reprint their exchange in full below. The content is fascinating with regard to not only Shakerism, but also one of the most controversial journalists of the early American republic.

Union Village, State of Ohio, 31st March 1824.

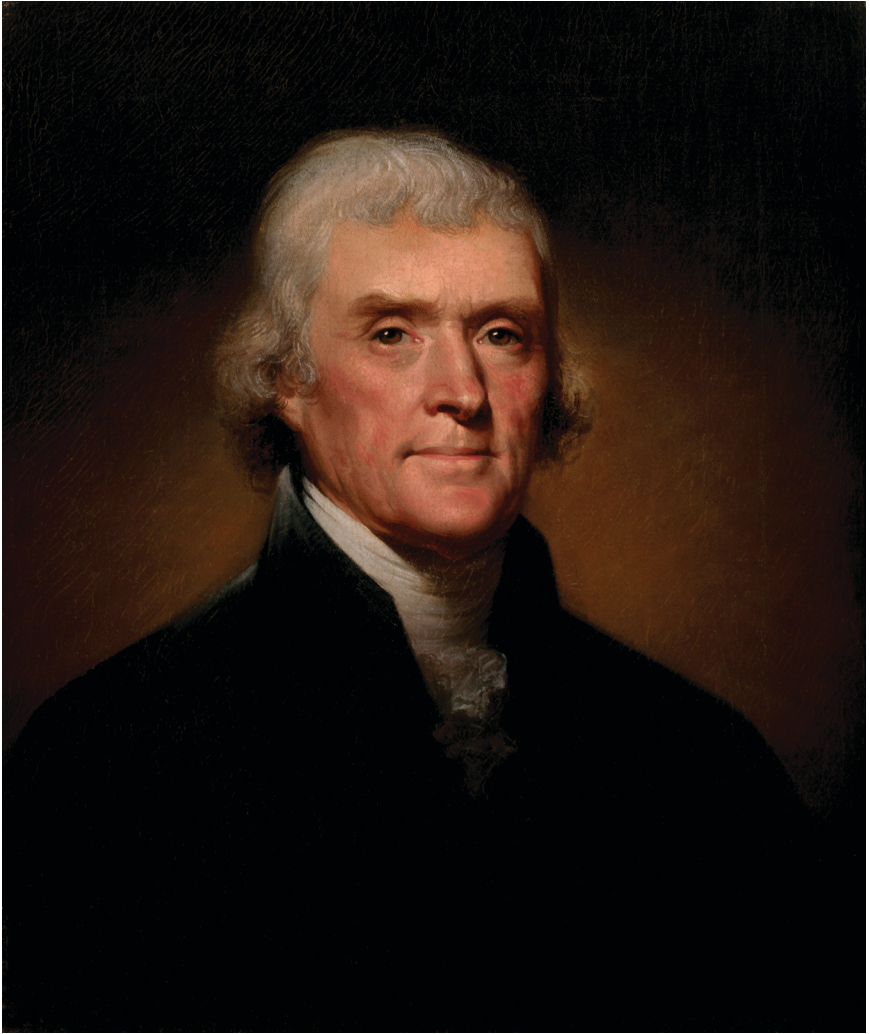
Respected friend,

I have for some time past been desirous that you should have an opportunity of perusing a Work, which was published some

years ago, by the people called Shakers. The book has lately been reprinted in this village, and I herewith transmit you a copy, in sheets, by the Mail. I have attached myself to this society, and it is now six years since I did this best act of my life. The subject on which this book is written, being of all others, the most important one, that can possibly occupy the mind of man, I fondly hope that it may suit your convenience to give these sheets an attentive perusal. They are sent from a pure motive, and because of the stability of my friendship for you.

It has indeed been a matter of serious regret to me, that during a residence of more than forty years in Virginia, my native state, I had never once the pleasure of a personal interview with you. And yet it is probable, that you now have articles in my hand writing, among your papers. I am entirely acquainted with the contents of the second volume of the Prospect before us: and as to the Defence, under the signature of a Scots correspondent, the whole of the manuscript, with the exception of fifteen or twenty lines, was in my hand writing. It comprised Nineteen columns, when printed in the Examiner. The extent however, of my agency in these matters was not known to any individual, either in Richmond, or elsewhere, except to James Thomson Callender, and of course to myself. But as soon as he began, in his paroxisms of inebrity, to commit unwarrantable indiscretions, and to assail in the foulest terms his best friends, I told him plainly to his face, that I would not in future write any thing with him, or any thing for him. And to this declaration, I adhered strictly. It is well known to John Beal, an Italian Merchant, who lived immediately adjoining the office of the Recorder, that I told Callender my mind, one evening, very freely in his presence.

In passing some months ago, through Barren county in the state of Kentucky, I called on George Richardson, a relation of mine,—when he submitted for my perusal, your letter to him, which I think was dated on the fifteenth of september last. He requested that I would write a letter for him to the Island of Jamaica, which I did in conformity to the advice & directions contained in your letter. I wrote also for him to Francis Johnson,—a member of Congress from the green river country, and requested the favour of him to facilitate the conveyance of the letter to Jamaica. This



Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826). Portrait by Rembrandt Peale, 1800.

kinsman of mine, is considered by his neighbours as an industrious man; and his primary object seems to be,—the accumulation of property. He married the daughter of a major Smith, formerly a celebrated champion against the Torries, in South Carolina; and the oldest son of George, a promising boy, of nine years old, they have named Jefferson Jackson.

About five weeks ago, I very unexpectedly met George Richardson on the road, in Mercer county. He then informed me, that after my departure from his house, he received a letter from a distant relation, who resides in the state of Georgia. His correspondent proposes to go for him to Jamaica in quest of his brother Richard Richardson's estate, on the shares. But George says he will not accede to his proposal, being determined to follow the advice, which you have kindly given him.

With best wishes for thy welfare, I remain, in sincerity, thy friend,  
Robert Richardson.<sup>19</sup>

Jefferson, despite his advance age and failing health, politely replied to Richardson. His comments about Callender are quite interesting, and Jefferson carefully avoids any suggestion that he was once one of Callender's financial patrons. Jefferson also artfully deflects any definitive religious commitment, a position for which he was highly criticized during his life.

Mont[icello] Apr. 20. [18]24.

Sir

I have just now recieved your favor of Mar. 31. and with it the book you have been so kind as to send me, but I cannot promise that I shall read it. 600 pages at the age of 81. are a formidable undertaking. the subject too is one on which had I not made up my mind before this age, I should be inexcusable indeed, and having done this in the vigor of body and mind, a change under the wane of both would be more likely to produce than to correct error.

I will remember the merits of the Prospect before us, and the subsequent demerits of the miserable publisher. he was a poor creature sensible, hypocondriary drunken pennyless & unprincipled. I learn with satisf[actio]n that your separ[atio]n from him dated with his deflection from the path of merit, and that you are entitled to so much of the credit which had been

given to him exclusively.

The correspond[en]ce with Richd Richardson gave me reason to believe he had a considble sugar estate of land & negroes in Jamaica but encumbered with large debts. the sudden discontinuance of his letters left me without a doubt of his death.

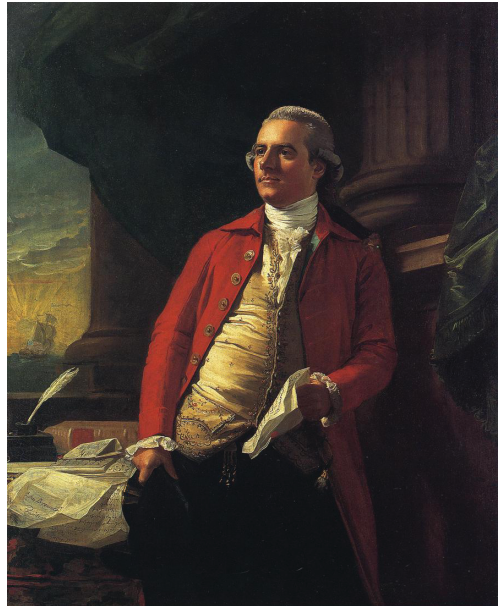
Accept the assurance of my esteem & respect

Th: J.<sup>20</sup>

Elkanah Watson, the noted writer, and promoter of agriculture and canals, was a near neighbor to the Shaker communities of eastern New York and the Berkshires. In fact, he wrote one of the earliest visitor's accounts of New Lebanon, New York.<sup>21</sup> Watson was among the first to raise Merino sheep in the United States, a breed that was very popular with the Shakers. He also organized the Berkshire Agricultural Society, which held its first fair in 1811. The Shakers participated in this, and many other agricultural fairs, which helped promote their products and innovations.

Watson wrote to former president James Madison from Albany on March 8, 1825, advocating the implementation of a National Board of Agriculture. His lengthy letter contains the following postscript, which bespeaks Watson's close cooperation with the skilled horticulturists among the Shakers.

In 1820 I rec'd from the American Consull at Naples in consequence of Circular Letter—a variety of selected Garden Seeds—a partition of which I gave the shakers in this Vicinity—



Elkanah Watson (1758-1842). Portrait by John Singleton Copley, 1782.

with an injunction to return me a partition of such seeds, as they might find new—& useful—& adapted to Our climate—Faithful to their trust, they call'd lately & delivered me some Cabbage Seed of an intire new species in this Country—partaking of the properties of the Savoy—but forming in large heads—the leaves remarkably delicate—& thin—laying closely compact—I take the liberty of enclosing to you about one fourth the qty. I have rec'd—supposing you wou'd chearfully distribute a portion to some of your friends so as to promulgate a New & Value Article for the table——<sup>22</sup>

Madison famously mentioned the Shakers in his letter to British “free inquirer” and reformer Frances (Fanny) Wright. Wright was a fierce advocate for feminism, universal education, emancipation, and a close associate of Robert Owen and his son Robert Dale Owen. Wright founded a short-lived, multi-racial intentional community called Nashoba near Memphis, Tennessee, in 1825. During that year she also accompanied Lafayette on his travels through the United States. In the late summer she wrote an impassioned letter to Dolley Madison advocating gradual abolition for slaves within the United States, and included a proposal whereby slaves could work to pay off their freedom. James Madison, a slaveholder, responded directly to Wright, on September 1, 1825. Madison acknowledged the evil of slavery, but expressed deep reservations about the practicability of the system of abolition and education she proposed. Apparently, Wright had invoked the examples of the Shakers, and other religious communists, as an example of the benefits of voluntary cooperative labor. Madison reminded her of the key element that bound those societies together and facilitated their cooperation.



Frances “Fanny” Wright (1795-1852).  
Portrait by Henry Inman, 1824.



The examples of the Moravians, the Harmonites and the Shakers in which the United labors of many for a common object have been successful, have no doubt an imposing character. But it must be recollected that in all these Establishments there is a religious impulse in the members, and a religious authority in the head, for which there will be no substitutes of equivalent efficacy in the Emancipating establishment.<sup>23</sup>

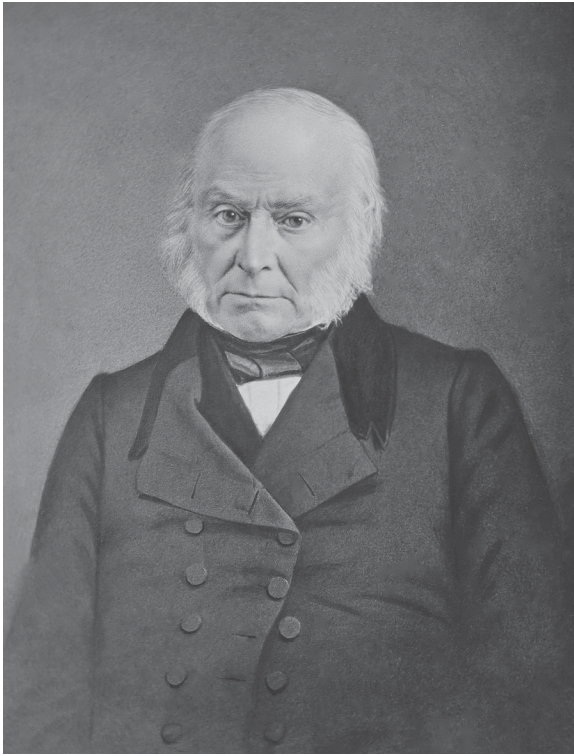
Thomas Jefferson was not the only president who was exposed to the Watervliet Shakers' steel pen. George Tucker, an immigrant from Bermuda who settled in Virginia, eventually representing the commonwealth in the United States House of Representatives, wrote to James Madison on October 13, 1833. Tucker was concerned about difficulties Madison was having when writing letters. He recommended a particular type of pen that might ease Madison's burdens.

When I was last at Montpelier, you seemed to think that you would still be able to write with ease, notwithstanding the lameness of your hand, if you had a very fine nibbed pen. I have thought it not improbable that some of the newly contrived metallic pens would answer your purpose, and with that view I now send three by way of specimen—One is an ordinary silver pen, made by the shakers which has this advantage over the others that it can, by scraping, be mended when it is worn, & be altered by bending it—The other two are made principally of steel, & are among the novelties in the pen way which have lately come forth. Should you find, on trial, either of these to answer your purpose, on your saying which, it will give me pleasure to procure them. I pray you, Sir, to present my respects to Mrs. Madison & to believe me to be  
With the highest consideration, wholly your's

George Tucker<sup>24</sup>



Labels for silver pens, manufactured by the Society of Shakers, Watervliet, Albany County, New York.



John Quincy Adams (1767-1848). Daguerreotype attributed to Matthew Brady, ca. 1847. This image is a photographic copy made in 1860.

John Quincy Adams's famous diaries, which he kept for virtually his entire life, are one of the richest sources for information on early American life and politics. In 1843 Adams, aged seventy-five, was still serving as a member of the House of Representatives from Massachusetts. That summer he took a long trip by carriage, arriving at Lebanon Springs, New York, on Saturday, July 8. He lodged at the famous Columbia Hall, a popular resort located just below the Shaker community at New Lebanon. Adams was quite impressed with the stately inn, and its highly picturesque setting in the Berkshire Hills. He described it thus:

A Hotel kept by Hull and Bentley, with about 120 bed chambers on four low Stories of a wooden mansion with wide piazza round three sides of the house on the second and third Stories. A large



Columbia Hall, Lebanon Springs, Columbia County, New York.

dining hall on the ground floor with a reading and bar room over which ascending a flight of stairs there is also a large drawing room—The house is built on the eastern side of a high and steep hill, in the form of a half rectangle the short side of which fronts the street, and the long side a very extensive valley between two ranges of lofty mountains.

That day, Adams and his party, took the opportunity to visit the nearby Shaker community:

We next rode, taking with us a small boy a son of Mrs. Crowninshield, to the village of the Shakers, and visited a man named John Mantle, and a woman living in two rooms of one house, where they keep a small shop of Shakerism, at unconscionable prices. We saw also their dairy, and cheeses and cow yard with two women, milking 25 cows. Returned, and after tea, I spent the evening Piazza, in converse with a cluster of strangers.

On Sunday, after attending services at the nearby Baptist Church, Adams retired to the hotel where he enjoyed a warm bath at the adjacent spring. Adams relaxed for the remainder of the day on the piazza of Columbia Hall.

In the course of the day I read the pamphlet I had purchased at the Shaker Shop. A brief exposition of the established principles and regulations of the United Society of Believers called Shakers—printed at Canterbury New Hampshire this year A second improved edition: the first having been composed for the defence of the Society to arrest the passage of some prosecuting bill, introduced into the New York Legislature. They complain that their principles and practices have been very grossly misrepresented, but their exposition veils under indefinite generalities all their most exceptionable practices. Not a word is said about that mode of worship, exclusively adopted by them which consists of an awkward and clumsy fashion of dancing—They utterly deny that they ever require the separation of families desirous of admission into their Society—and they give the following list of the virtues and graces of which they require the preliminary pledge from every candidate for admission among them 1. A life of innocence and purity; implying entire abstinence from all sensual and carnal gratifications (This is the [?] vow of chastity) 2. Love—spiritual Love 3. Peace 4. Justice 5. Holiness 6. Goodness 7. Truth—This is the perfection of the human character; but in the application of these principles they discard all the sympathies of nature to substitute the unbounded devotion of Soul and body to the artificial organized family of the Society. Outrageous as is their sacrifice of all the ties of nature to the paradoxes of fancy; it is not a solitary instance of the abuse of reason—If the shakers admit whole families in to their community, without formally breaking them up, it is under the unqualified condition of inviolate chastity binding upon every member of the family, the Parents as well as the children and this is disingenuously gauzed over in the exposition—Another sharp question between them and the world is the disposal of property conveyed to them by converts who afterwards wish and demand to have it restored to them and to withdraw themselves from the institution. The other pamphlet by a clergyman named John Dunlavy now dead; and is

a formidable and elaborate religious argument against marriage, founded upon the scriptural authority of Jesus Christ and his apostles—It is an example added to numberless others of subtle and ingenious absurdity.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, it seems the Shakers *were* in fact on the minds—at least occasionally—of nearly all of our founding fathers. It is well known that a number of subsequent presidents have met and/or corresponded with the Shakers, and a few have visited Shaker communities. I hope that this brief look at the awareness of, and opinions about, the Shakers by our founders shows that the sect has always occupied a special niche in the American consciousness.

## Notes

1. For Barbois's account see Glendyne Wergland, ed., *Visiting the Shakers, 1778-1849* (Clinton, N.Y.: Richard W. Couper Press, 2007), 15-17.
2. The original French reads: "Si tu avois le plus petit grain de foi, mon cher prince, je te parlerois d'une nouvelle secte de trembleurs qui fait des Controsions et des miracles; le tout applicable au profit des grandes principes magnetiques. Je te dirois que je puis faire un livre in 40. intitulé, essai sur les danses sauvages, et particulierement sur la nouvelle danse apportée des Bois de l'occident, (ce qui est Comme la Fitzjames ou la tracite des Iroquois) appliquées au principe du Docteur Mesmer." The letter was transcribed and published in Stanley J. Idzerda and Robert Rhodes Crout, eds., *Lafayette in the Age of the American Revolution, Selected Letters and Papers* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), V:419 (translation V:267-69). I thank Professor John A. Gallucci, Colgate University, for assistance with this passage. Louis Gottschalk in *Lafayette Between the American and French Revolution, 1783-1789* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950), 97-98, prints some purported dialog from Lafayette's encounter with the Shakers. An examination of Gottschalk's sources has not yielded this dialog, which is almost certainly spurious.
3. Lafayette, *Shaker* 2, no. 9 (September 1872): 69.
4. "Gilbert Motier, Marquis de Lafayette, and His Experience among the Shakers in 1783, or 1784," *Shaker Manifesto* 10, no. 3 (March 1880): 52-6.
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