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## Document One: Citizens of York County, Maine, Petition to the General Court of Massachusetts, May 1817

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# American Communal Societies Quarterly

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**From the Editor –**

Dear *ACSQ* subscribers,

Wow, it's a warm late June day as I write this introduction to your July issue of the *ACSQ*. OK, no it's not, I'm lying. It's actually early November. It's been a crazy year and we got way behind. Too few hands on deck and new hands arriving that need training, and MANY classes to teach. So, here we are, sending you the July issue in November. Sorry. . . We're going to try to get back on track, honest!

This issue features Carol Medlicott's wonderful essay on the many cultural manifestations of the Tree of Life leading up to the iconic Shaker gift drawing painted by Hannah Cohoon, now in the collection of Hancock Shaker Village in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Medlicott's research has uncovered many cultural antecedents, both sacred and secular, from within and beyond the Shaker tradition. Additionally, she has procured many fine illustrations to bring the subject to life.

The second article is by another stalwart *ACSQ* contributor and Shaker researcher, Stephen J. Paterwic. In 2019 I discovered some interesting archival documents relating to the Maine Shakers in the Massachusetts Archives. I eagerly passed them on to Steve for his perusal. Thankfully, he agreed to digest their contents and produced this excellent article for us which fleshes out one of the first legal challenges to the Shaker covenant. The documents, as illuminated by Paterwic, also shed considerable light on relations between the Shakers and their non-Shaker neighbors.

***OK, better start working on the next issue.***

Have a great summer!

— Christian Goodwillie

# Reconsidering the Shaker *Tree of Life*: Cultural Antecedents & Fresh Interpretations

Carol Medlicott



Fig. 1. Hannah Cohoon, “Tree of Life,” watercolor or tempera  
and ink on paper, 1854.

Courtesy of Hancock Shaker Village, Pittsfield, Massachusetts.

*The Tree of Life* is one of the most iconic images to come out of Shaker material culture. It was created in 1854 by a sixty-six-year-old sister named Hannah Cohoon, who lived in the Shaker community of Hancock in western Massachusetts. On a sheet of paper about 18 x 24 inches, Cohoon has carefully drawn and boldly painted an abstract depiction of a single tree (Figure 1). The exaggerated size and vivid vermillion and emerald hues of the tree’s fourteen fruits and sixty-seven leaves, contrasted against the slender sinuous lines of the trunk and branches, fill the visual field to produce a veritable gut-punch for the viewer. As the eye moves irresistibly over the image, imagining bilateral symmetry but finding none, the tree seems to wave and dance, to literally come to life on the page. A “tree of life,” indeed!

Because of its aesthetic power, Cohoon's *Tree of Life* has been reproduced countless times since its existence was revealed to non-Shakers in the 1930s.<sup>1</sup> It has served as a veritable "logo" for all things Shaker. It is the recognizable basis for the actual logo of one Shaker heritage site, Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill near Harrodsburg, Kentucky.<sup>2</sup> It is one of a multitude of images created during a period in Shaker history known variously today as the New Era, Era of Manifestations, or era of Mother's Work. This was an extraordinary phase of spiritual vitality that engulfed the entire Shaker world for at least two decades between 1837 and the end of the 1850s. Twentieth and twenty-first-century scholars have been challenged to explain this turn in Shaker spiritual life.<sup>3</sup> But it is widely understood by scholars as a transitional interlude during which Shakers one or two generations removed from the founding period of Shakerism in America attempted to forge their own direct connections to Ann Lee and the other "Gospel parents," both integrating the spiritual values of their predecessors and building upon them. From the onset of this phase, exceptionally elaborate visionary episodes came to dominate Shaker worship, in which individuals would witness heavenly scenes and mingle with heavenly visitors. Shakers were enjoined by their leaders to record their visions in both narrative and graphic form, as prose, poetry, exhortations, songs, and drawings. An immense quantity of this material survives, including around two hundred documented gift drawings.<sup>4</sup> Undoubtedly more were created but have since been lost or scattered.

The artistic representations generated during this period are exceptionally diverse, bound together mainly by their surreal qualities. They range from pictographs and childish sketches to meticulously executed compositions of lavish beauty. Many incorporate elements that resemble other forms of nineteenth-century American folk art, including samplers, album quilts, and Pennsylvania Dutch fraktur.<sup>5</sup> Art scholars continue to debate their classification in American art history: whether they should be regarded as folk art or as an early form of modern art.<sup>6</sup> As a body of work, they stand in puzzling contrast to the general simplicity—even to the point of austerity—of the Shakers' built environments and material culture. Moreover, they are difficult to reconcile with Shaker directives pertaining to the use of visual decorations in their interior spaces.<sup>7</sup> Dominated by a singular abstract figure (the tree) Cohoon's *Tree of Life* is hardly typical of the gift drawings, many of which comprise vast assemblages of smaller elaborate objects and elements. But it is by far the most famous; as such it has come to represent this unusual period in Shaker history, as well as Shakerism more generally. Although as a Shaker image it is highly unusual, some scholars of American folk art see Cohoon's *Tree of Life* as typical of

folk depictions of biblical motifs, such as the Garden of Eden. In addition to fraktur, samplers, and album quilt designs, such scholars often point to published images contemporaneous to Shaker gift drawings (Figure 2), portraying the Tree of Life hung with spiritual fruits and walled off from the evils of the world.



Fig. 2. *The Tree of Life* (New York: Kelloggs & Thayer, 1845 or 1846).  
Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

Within the literature on the Shaker gift drawings, Cohoon's *Tree of Life* garners considerable attention. Of Hannah Cohoon herself, relatively little is known beyond the basics. Born Hannah Harrison in 1788, she grew up in a prosperous household where she evidently received a good education.<sup>8</sup> Like most girls in the period, Cohoon's education would have included needlework such as sampler embroidery and decorative applique. The circumstances of her marriage are as mysterious as her motivations for becoming a Shaker. She came to Hancock in 1817 along with her two small children. By 1823 she had signed the Shaker covenant and was living in the Church Family, Hancock's highest spiritual order. Cohoon is known to have created at least four gift drawings between 1845 and 1856, when she was in her fifties and sixties.<sup>9</sup> Four wordless dance tunes are also attributed to her, which appear to date to a much earlier period than her gift drawings.<sup>10</sup> After the creation of her final known gift drawing in 1856, nothing further is known of her until January 1864, when her death was recorded at Hancock. She was nearly seventy-six years old.

Trees and/or the fruits of trees provide the theme for all four of Cohoon's gift drawings: *The Tree of Light or Blazing Tree* (1825), *The Tree of Life* (1854), *A Bower of Mulberry Trees* (1854), and *A Little Basket Full of Beautiful Apples* (1856).<sup>11</sup> Cohoon's *Tree of Light* and *Tree of Life* strongly resemble each other in their general shape and presentation. One early scholar of the gift drawings, Ruth Wolfe, speculates that Cohoon may in fact have created a series of tree images and these two are the only surviving ones.<sup>12</sup> Trees and plant material more broadly—branches, fruit, flowers, vines, leaves—are possibly the category of motif that is the most common across all the gift drawings. Depictions of trees, plants, and flowers were incorporated into many of the earliest inspired drawings—the “sacred rolls” and “sacred sheets” that date from the early 1840s. Most of the complex composite gift drawings—multiple figures in elaborate and often lavish arrays—were created between the mid-1840s and mid-1850s, and trees are a major motif.<sup>13</sup> Other Shaker artists far more prolific than Cohoon also commonly depicted trees in their drawings, and in styles that are equally distinctive but entirely different from Cohoon's.<sup>14</sup>

The Shaker gift drawings in general, and *The Tree of Life* in particular, have been examined off and on over the past century by a range of scholars: scholars of American folk art, of American religious art, and of art history, along with scholars of Shaker material culture, theology, and spirituality. For the most part, this scholarship considers the symbolic, spiritual, and social implications of the gift drawings, but entirely within the context of the mid-nineteenth-century period in which they were created, and invariably with a focus on the individual Shaker creators (almost all

women). Perhaps the sheer power and complexity of the gift drawings, along with the degree to which they deviate from other forms of Shaker creative expression, have caused scholars to approach them as distinct subset of Shaker spiritual output. Similarly, the New Era in general has long been regarded in Shaker studies as a distinctive phase within Shaker history, a phase marked by a beginning and an end. That latter approach is changing somewhat, as scholars increasingly realize that another way to approach the New Era is to see it as part of a continuum, as a phase within a spiritual tradition that always centered upon visionary experience. Recent scholarship on Shakerism in the New Era is increasingly examining how the spiritual and visionary practices of the New Era were not in fact new to the Shakers; they simply became more prevalent after the late 1830s.<sup>15</sup>

By the same token, then, it follows that we should examine the inspired drawings as part of a continuum within Shaker culture. Drawing and painting were not part of the approved creative output for Shakers prior to the 1840s, but other forms of creative expression were encouraged, such as prose, poetry, and song. By examining hymn and poetry texts, letters, and published writings, we can trace how certain rich visual metaphors percolated through Shaker spiritual expression from much earlier periods. For *The Tree of Life*—and the symbolic use of trees, branches, vines, fruits, and flowers more generally—looking backwards from the period of the New Era reveals a strong continuum within Shaker culture of tree metaphors and related naturalistic forms such as vines and branches.<sup>16</sup> This continuity unfolds over decades, going back to the lifetime of Ann Lee and even to the period prior to the Shakers' coming to America.<sup>17</sup> Far from being a straightforward folk art expression of the well-known biblical image of a fruit-laden tree as depicted in the Book of Genesis, one of the two trees in the midst of the Garden of Eden, the Tree of Life, as a concept, actually points to a much more complex set of spiritual, theological, and even political ideas held by the Shakers. In order to perceive the many layers of meaning in the Tree of Life image and appreciate the many forms that the metaphor takes—tree, branch, vine, arbor, and so on—it is useful to examine much earlier forms of theological and spiritual expression in the Shaker world. Also, because Shakers inhabited a broader world and were to at least some extent influenced by cultural ideas swirling around them in early America, it is necessary to consider how early American tree metaphors may have influenced Shaker expressions of the Tree of Life.

This paper will identify five different symbolic layers in the Tree of Life, tracing how each of these layers appears in various forms in Shaker cultural expression. Some of these strongly match the symbolic connotations that



were also present in mainstream early American religious culture, while others seem, if not unique to the Shakers, developed with greater potency within Shaker theological discourse. The first of these five layers is the Tree of Life as metaphor for a soul-restoring sacrament, which happens to be consistent with how the Tree of Life is framed in Genesis, along with its twin, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. It is the latter tree from which humankind ate and fell from grace. Correspondingly, the Tree of Life and its fruit represent an opportunity for restoration, for the healing of sin, and for returning to an Edenic state. Secondly, the Tree of Life can be a metaphor for the individual Shaker. Just as the tree bears fruits on its limbs, the individual Shaker is ideally supposed to exhibit the fruits of the spirit. Third, the Tree of Life is a metaphor for the Shaker church as an institution, and for the relationship between individual far-flung Shaker communities and the central community at New Lebanon, New York, where the Central Ministry was located. Fourth, the Tree of Life was a metaphor for the political identity of the Shaker world within the broader context American patriotic identity during the Early Republic. And finally, the Tree of Life is a Shaker metaphor for God, and specifically for the feminine aspect of God.

In considering the first connotation, the Tree of Life as a restorative and sacramental metaphor, it is quite easy to locate similar usages within early American religious poetry and hymnody, material which would have been widely known to many of the early Shaker converts circa 1800. One potent example is the popular hymn “The Appletree” attributed to New England composer Jeremiah Ingalls. Its text was published in several early New England text-only hymnals circa 1800, before Ingalls included it along with a tune in his highly influential *Christian Harmony* in 1805 (Figure 3). The text clearly outlines the fruit-bearing tree of life as a metaphor for Christ, and eating of the body of Christ restores the soul and brings salvation:

The tree of life my soul hath seen, Laden with fruit and always  
green,  
The trees of nature fruitless be, Compar'd with Christ the appletree  
...  
This fruit doth make my soul to thrive, It keeps my dying faith  
alive,  
Which makes my soul in haste to be, With Jesus Christ the  
appletree.

et al.: Citizens of York County, Maine, Petition  
The Appletree. 81

*Loudly.*

The tree of life, my soul hath seen, Laden with fruit and always green; The tree of nature fruitless be, Compar'd with Christ the

*Softly.*

appletree. This beauty doth all things excel, By faith I know, but ne'er can tell, This beauty doth all things excel, By faith I know, but

L

82 The Appletree. Continued.

*Loud.*

ne'er can tell The glory which I now can see, In Jesus Christ the apple tree.

3 For happiness I long have sought,  
And pleasures doubt I have brought;  
I gain'd of all, but now I see  
'Tis found in Christ the appletree.

4 I'm weary'd with my former toil,  
Here I shall sit and rest a while;  
Under the shadow I will be,  
Of Jesus Christ the appletree.

5 With great delight I'll make my lay,  
There's none shall fright my slumbering;  
Among the fons of men I see,  
There's none like Christ the Appletree.

6 I'll sit and eat this fruit divine,  
It cheers my heart like spiced wine;  
And now this fruit is foun to me,  
That grows on Christ the appletree.

7 This fruit doth make my soul to thrive,  
It keeps my dying faith alive;  
Which makes my soul in haste to be  
With Jesus Christ the appletree.

Fig. 3. “The Appletree,” from *The Christian Harmony, or Songster’s Companion*, Jeremiah Ingalls, 1805. Courtesy of Centennial Library, Cedarville University.

It is certain that at least some Shakers would have been aware of this hymn text, though we can only speculate just how influential its striking imagery would have been. There is compelling circumstantial evidence connecting Jeremiah Ingalls, the hymn’s composer, to the Shakers. Ingalls was a prominent choirmaster in central Vermont from 1790 to 1810, during the time he was compiling *The Christian Harmony*, and he also was a tavernkeeper. Issachar Bates, who became a leading Shaker poet and composer, as well as preacher and missionary, lived close to the Vermont state line in the Lake George, New York, region between the early 1790s and his entry into the Shaker community of Watervliet in 1803. Bates was also a popular choirmaster in his local region, and his booklet of hymn texts, *New Songs on Different Subjects*, was published in 1800, the year before Bates embraced Shakerism. One of Bates’s hymns from that collection — “The Harvest” — became known to Ingalls, who included it in his 1805 *Christian Harmony*. Bates was exceptionally mobile during this period of his life, and his effectiveness as a choirmaster and preacher caused him to be sent on visits to other churches. Indeed, his mobility continued during his

first years as a Shaker, and he was sent into Vermont as a Shaker missionary around 1803. It is probable that Bates and Ingalls were acquainted and that this was how Bates's hymn came to be included in Ingalls's collection. That is only the beginning of the circumstantial evidence, however, because the son of Jeremiah Ingalls, Jeremiah Ingalls, Jr., later joined the Shakers at North Union, Ohio. The reasons for his joining are not known, but he arrived as an adult with a young son, sometime in the 1820s. He remained until his death in 1858, serving as North Union's leading singer and one of its leading hymn writers. In short, it is impossible to ignore how Shaker adult converts would have brought their life experiences and connections into the Shaker life with them, and these experiences would have continued to influence their perspectives.<sup>18</sup>

The same metaphor of a tree and its fruit being eaten in a restorative sacramental act can be seen in a very early Shaker hymn in *Millennial Praises*, the first Shaker hymnal published, from the early 1810s. Its contents had been written and collected since around 1807. Among the many "tree of life" references in *Millennial Praises* are many alluding to the restorative qualities of the tree, its leaves, and its fruit. One hymn in particular, "The Tree of Life," is replete with Edenic and sacramental references:

On Zion's hill is clearly seen,  
By souls who do not live unclean,  
The tree of life forever green,  
Of God the Father's planting...  
Its roots are deep and firm and strong,  
Its branches beautiful and long,  
With verdant leaves forever young,  
A spacious field it covers.  
The hungry soul that's destitute,  
Beneath its shadow may recruit;  
For it abounds with precious fruit,  
Much fairer than all others.

After describing the tree guarded by angels and generating a healing fountain of flowing water, the text concludes that all who seek the tree may "eat and live forever."<sup>19</sup> Around three-fourths of the hymns in *Millennial Praises* were written by one Shaker poet and theologian, early Ohio convert Richard McNemar, so his own understanding of the symbolic significance of the Tree of Life would have readily found its way into Shaker doctrine through *Millennial Praises*, as seen not only in "The Tree of Life," but also in the many Tree of Life references found in other of the volume's

hymns, such as “Old Adam Disturbed,” “The Kingdom of Zion,” “The Foundation Pillars Revealed,” “The Word of Life,” and the book’s opening hymn, “The Testimony of Eternal Truth,” along with related allusions to the “true vine” found in “Spiritual Wine.”

The same sacramental connotation is seen in many other hymns written by early Shaker converts. One powerful example is “The Living Vine,” whose author is unknown but was being sung by 1808 and is believed to be the first instance of the vine image in Shaker spiritual texts.

The living vine we know is good  
We judge it by its precious fruit  
The true Believers only food  
That will his weary Soul recruit.

Another example is found in the very popular “Christ’s Second Appearing,” attributed variously to Sally Eades and to her son Harvey Eades. Sally was pregnant with Harvey when she converted in 1807 at what became South Union, Kentucky. The hymn was characterized by western Shaker scribes as one of the “ancient” hymns of the Shaker West, and it was published in Richard McNemar’s 1832 hymnal, *A Selection of Hymns and Poems for the Use of Believers*. It also circulated widely across the Shaker world and was included in dozens of manuscript hymnals.<sup>20</sup>

Here the tree of life is growing,  
Here the hungry soul is fed,  
Here the heavenly juice is flowing,  
freely from the Fountainhead.

All of these references are consistent with ways in which Benjamin Seth Youngs explores the Tree of Life concept in his 1808 publication, *Testimony of Christ’s Second Appearing*. This publication was the first attempt at a comprehensive expression of Shaker theology, and it was written in the West, a collaboration between Youngs (who was one of the original Shaker missionaries to the West) and several other Shaker leaders in the West. Youngs traces the Tree of Life metaphor and fruiting tree metaphors in general (such as olive trees) through the Old Testament and also the Book of Revelation. The visions of the prophets Ezekiel and John, respectively, found in Ezekiel 47:12 and Revelation 22:2, serve as the basis for the Shaker interpretation of the nourishing and restorative aspect of the Tree of Life. Because both scriptures note how the Tree of Life symmetrically flanks the

river of heaven, Youngs connects it directly to Shaker conceptions of the duality of Christ—of Jesus Christ and Ann Lee. Youngs's writing seems to underscore the Tree of Life and consumption of its fruit playing a direct role in human redemption.<sup>21</sup>

A second form that the Tree of Life metaphor takes in Shaker culture is as a symbol for the individual Shaker. Youngs's *Testimony* fully explores this with an extensive exploration of the scriptural passages in Proverbs, Matthew, and Luke about trees being known by their fruit and the impossibility of bad trees producing good fruit.<sup>22</sup> At about the same time that Youngs was writing his *Testimony*, Richard McNemar expressed these same ideas poetically in an 1807 text titled "Sweet Apples" that tantalizingly anticipates Cohoon's depictions of both the Tree of Life and of apples in her 1856 "Basket of Apples":

The Good spirit is known by its fruit  
An honest Believer you cannot confute  
Say ye sinners did you ever see  
Good apples growing upon a bad tree!  
As sure as you're born the crab and the thorn  
Sweet apples have never produced.<sup>23</sup>

Richard McNemar repeats this form of the Tree of Life metaphor specifically in reference to Shaker elder David Darrow. "Father" David Darrow was the beloved senior elder in the West, presiding over the entire western Shaker enterprise for nearly twenty years before his death in 1825. McNemar compares Father David to the Tree of Life in a hymn written for his funeral:

He was a cross-bearer, we all must agree;  
his faithfulness none can dispute.  
Yea, from the beginning, this flourishing tree  
could always be known by its fruit.<sup>24</sup>

But perhaps the best examples of this connotation of the Tree of Life metaphor—the tree as the human body—lie in the work of Issachar Bates. Bates was well known as a woodsman and an orchardist. He worked as a logger before his Shaker conversion, and he was instrumental in laying out nut and fruit orchards in the west, as well as in methods of grafting. Many of his writings suggest that he personally identified with trees. He composed and taught a dance for the song beginning, "I will not be like the stubborn oak, but I will be like the willow tree," and during a bout of illness

in Ohio he declared his wish to be buried in a specific spot where an oak tree had once stood until he dug it out with his own hands.<sup>25</sup> One hymn by Bates deserves close examination for its visual reference to the Tree of Life. It was written by Bates sometime in the early 1810s through early 1820s during his period of eldership at Busro, Indiana, the westernmost of the Shaker settlements. The song circulated to several other Shaker villages, and it eerily prefigures Cohoon's *Tree of Life* drawing by painting a word picture of a human body hung with sinuous fruited limbs:

Now by my motion I will prove how much the work of God I love  
For ev'ry tree what fruit it shows is 'round the limbs on which it  
grows  
So let my limbs with fruit be strong while lab'ring such a lively  
song  
Come all my active powers wise and make a living sacrifice.

Moreover, the Bates's song connects the Tree of Life metaphor to the Shaker dance. The tree's limbs are waving and supple, which exemplifies the bodies of the Shakers when they are worshipping. Quite often, a willow tree appears in Shaker texts as a metaphor for the body, such as in the 1850 text from a New Era gift song, "I will bow and be simple, I will bow and be free, I will bow and be humble, yea bow like a willow tree."<sup>26</sup> But Bates's text is even more evocative, because it depicts the Shaker in motion as a fully fruited tree, exactly like the Tree of Life.<sup>27</sup>

The Tree of Life as a metaphor for the Shaker Church is a pervasive theme in correspondence exchanged among Shaker leaders across the Shaker world, particularly during the first third of the nineteenth century, when Shaker leaders still hoped for active expansion. It is also common in the poetic texts of hymns written and circulated by Shakers. Richard McNemar expressed the ideal for how individual Shakers were to be perceived as part of a spiritual tree: (T)he subjects of the new creation are as uniform as the leaves on an appletree: & whatever is opposed to that uniformity is of the old & will perish in time. I therefore rest satisfied that no essential difference ever will exist in the senior family, whether the members of it be located in the East or West, the North or South.<sup>28</sup>

The ideal goal was for individual believers to be uniform in terms of their spiritual orientation and spiritual behavior, as well as in their obedience to their lead, despite the far flung distances between the various villages. And the individual Shaker villages were conceptualized as the branches of the tree of the Church. McNemar's doctrinal hymn "Responsive" reinforces this metaphor while it also explains the singular Shaker interpretation of

the nature of Christ, demonstrating to us the importance of the metaphor to McNemar and to his fellow Shaker theologians. The tree with its crown of branches and leaves reflected the structure of Shakerism from the leadership to the various “order and lot” and in turn on to the fruit and leaves on each branch. In turn, the tree reflects Christ.

Amen. Even so let it be.  
There can be no room to dispute;  
As branches of one living tree,  
We’re now to be known by our fruit:  
While each in our order and lot,  
The gospel we simply obey,  
In deed, and in word, and in thought,  
The Savior we truly display.<sup>29</sup>

One interesting poetic example, also by Richard McNemar, comes from a text he apparently aimed at a tense situation that occurred at Union Village in the late 1820s, when Shaker brother Abijah Alley was sowing discontent among young adults.

Do you believe, for certain, that after Mother’s day,  
Her gospel was supported and did not fall away?  
That it has been supported. there can be no dispute,  
As all its lively branches, show clearly by their fruit.<sup>30</sup>

In this text, one can see the Church depicted as a tree with fruitful branches, but with an awareness that the need might arise pruning out withered branches. Undoubtedly this was a nod to John 15:4-6, a scripture with tremendous symbolic importance to the Shakers because it so strongly resonates with the highest Shaker ideals of collective union and obedience, along with the dire consequences of deviation from those ideals:

As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered, and they gather them and throw them into the fire and they are burned. (New King James Bible)

Biologically, fruit-bearing vines are “lianas,” which like trees and shrubs

are also woody-stemmed long-lived perennial plants. Unlike trees and shrubs, their stems require external support. But their biological similarity helps explain how tree, vine, and bush/shrub metaphors are widely seen by biblical scholars as carrying similar symbolic significance, so that they should be approached with the same interpretive lens when encountered in scripture.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, vines and trees functioned interchangeably as metaphors for Shaker writers and poets. In addition to the early hymn “The Living Vine” quoted above, in which the fruit of the vine is a sacramental food, vine and vineyard references are widespread in song material from the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Both “My Vineyard” from 1850 and “I Am the True Vine” from 1856 fully reflect the symbolism from John 15: 5-6. A verse from “My Vineyard” reads:

When all the wither'd branches  
Are sever'd from each vine  
And thrust without my Vineyard  
'Twill then in glory shine.<sup>32</sup>

“I am the True Vine” is set to an especially lovely melody and attributed to Elder Joseph Brackett (also credited with “Simple Gifts). It has attracted the attention of Shaker music scholars and caused it to be adapted for performance and recording by modern singers.

I am the true vine which my Father hath set in his lovely  
kingdom so fair,  
Every branch found in me Which bringeth forth fruit He  
purgeth it with care.  
But the vine that is barren He will reject And from him he will  
cast away  
Withered branches he'll shake off And burn in the fire  
That in me there be found no decay.<sup>33</sup>

Manuscripts also show how Shakers drew meaning from trees as symbolic of their spiritual collective. One example is recorded by Henry DeWitt:

This was the 20 of May. Apple trees were all in the blow... I shall never forget as we were marching back, the upper side of the orchard, Garret K. (Lawrence) was invited to speak... and took his text upon the apple tree. Spake of the branches being nourished by the root; from the blossoms on the limbs down



to the root one must be nourished by the other according to its order: So it was in our spiritual travel, the lesser must be bless'd by the better. Speaking of pruning, he observed that it was known, fruit trees would not thrive well, if trimmed while the sap was not flowing, but that fruit trees ought to be trimmed while the sap was flowing, then the wound would heal over... when the gifts of God was flowing & souls were awake, it was the time for souls to be pruned and to have evil branches cut off.<sup>34</sup>

Shaker manuscripts—journals, letters, poetry, and song texts—abound with cases of tree and vine metaphors being employed in reference to the believers and their relationship to one another. In addition to being consistent with scripture, a branching tree or vine serves as an ideal metaphor for the Shaker concept of “union.” Moreover, it was a highly convenient metaphor, since each and every Shaker community had direct experience with trees, especially with the care and management of fruit-bearing trees. Using tree and vine metaphors to reinforce collective union ensured that the message would not be lost. And union was the Shakers’ highest spiritual value, as evidenced by “United” being the first word in the formal name of the Shaker Church. Like branching, flowering, and fruited trees, Shakers were organically united across their many parts into one organic structure.

Yet another symbolic layer in the Shaker conception of the Tree of Life relates to the early socio-political identity of the Shakers within the early American national landscape. There is subtle but very clear evidence that the Shakers were influenced by another important tree metaphor from colonial America—the “Liberty Tree.” The term entered the American colonial vernacular in 1765. A 120-year-old spreading elm tree, planted in 1646 along the major road leading out of the Boston Common had long since become a site for public gatherings and the reading of proclamations. In 1765 the space under the canopy of this “Great Elm,” then a well-known landmark because of its stately dimensions and its spreading crown, became the center of political protests against the Stamp Act (Figure 4). Indignant colonists created an effigy of a British tax collector and hung it from the elm, and action memorialized in a poster hung with the effigy reading, “What greater joy did ever New England see, Than a Stampman hanging on a tree.” Anti-British sentiment grew, and a group of colonists attached a copper plate to the elm with “The Liberty Tree” engraved on it. Possibly the nameplate was made by Paul Revere, who was soon commissioned to engrave an obelisk to be placed under the



LIBERTY TREE, 1774,  
CORNER OF ESSEX AND ORANGE STREETS.

The world should never forget the spot where once stood Liberty Tree, so famous in your annals.—*La Fayette in Boston.*

Fig. 4. *The Liberty Tree 1774, Corner of Essex and Orange Streets*  
(Boston: Published by Abel Bowen, 1825). Boston Athenaeum.

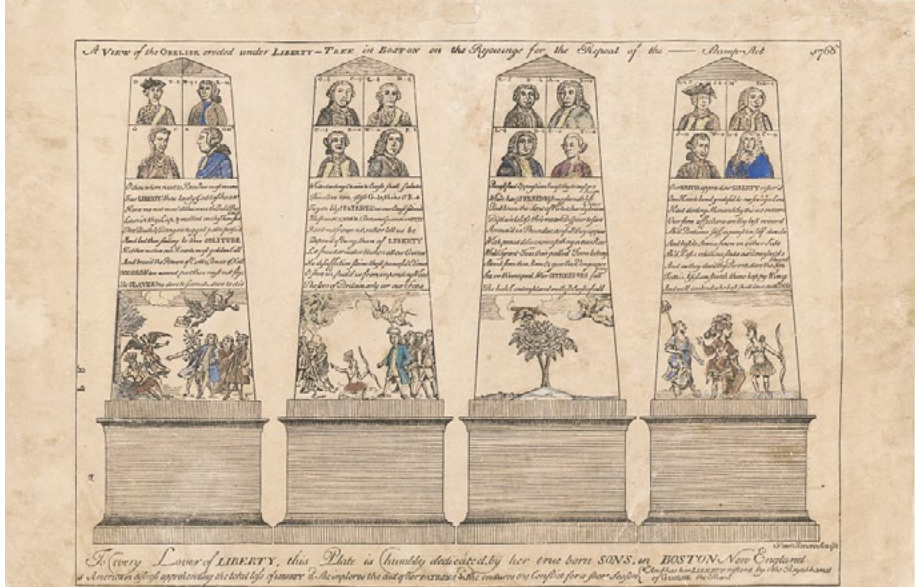


Fig. 5. *A View of the obelisk erected under the Liberty-tree in Boston on the rejoicings for the repeal of the Stamp Act 1766, Paul Revere, sculp.* (Boston: Paul Revere, 1766, restrike printed in 1839). Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

tree commemorating the Stamp Act protests (Figure 5). Soon after, other towns all over the American colonies began designating their own “liberty trees,” large trees centrally located near town centers which could serve as convenient outdoor sites to gather for political purposes.<sup>35</sup>

From early colonial times, pivotal historical events unfolded beneath landmark trees. Examples include William Penn’s “Treaty Elm” where negotiations with Native Americans were held and Connecticut’s “Charter Oak,” where the colonial charter was hidden for safekeeping. Such instances were complemented by a longstanding English folk tradition of organizing central village spaces around venerable trees or deliberately placed poles (such as those used as “maypoles” for seasonal rituals), for reasons that are still debated but tend to connect to pagan religions that spread from the ancient Near East northward into Europe in the pre-Christian era.<sup>36</sup> Inevitably, similar attitudes about the role of trees in public spaces entered colonial America, along with waves of English immigrants from various parts of the British Isles.<sup>37</sup>

Soon after Boston’s Liberty Tree and other designated trees around the colonies continued to serve as staging spots for political speech, meetings, and public demonstrations. Towns that lacked a suitable tree erected liberty “poles” as an alternative. At Boston’s Liberty Tree, it was common for political pamphlets to be tacked to its trunk or hung from its branches by anti-British groups. In 1774, the Sons of Liberty brutally assaulted a British tax collector under the Liberty Tree, an event that was captured in a well-known engraving (Figure 6). The Great Elm’s nickname was reinforced when Thomas Paine, member of the Sons of Liberty, penned an anti-British poem which he titled “Liberty Tree” and revealed to the public by nailing it to the Great Elm’s trunk. The poem was printed as a broadside and reproduced throughout the colonies.<sup>38</sup> It was also set to music. The song “Liberty Tree,” with Paine’s text, became the most popular song of the Revolutionary period, and it endured as a beloved patriotic song for decades.<sup>39</sup> Its first half establishes the striking visual image of the goddess Liberty bringing a branch to plant in American soil:

In a chariot of light from the regions of day, The Goddess of  
Liberty came,  
Ten thousand celestials directed the way, And hither conducted  
the Dame,  
A fair budding branch from the gardens above, Where millions  
with millions agree,  
She brought in her hand as a pledge of her love, And the plant she  
named Liberty Tree.

The celestial exotic struck deep in the ground, Like a native it  
flourished and bore,  
The fame of its fruit drew the nations around, To seek out this  
peaceable shore.  
Unmindful of names or distinctions they came, For freemen like  
brothers agree,  
With one spirit endued they one friendship pursued, And their  
temple was Liberty Tree.



Fig. 6. *The Bostonian's Paying the Excise-man, or Tarring and Feathering*, attributed to Philip Dawe (London: Robert Sayer and J. Bennett, 1774).  
Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.



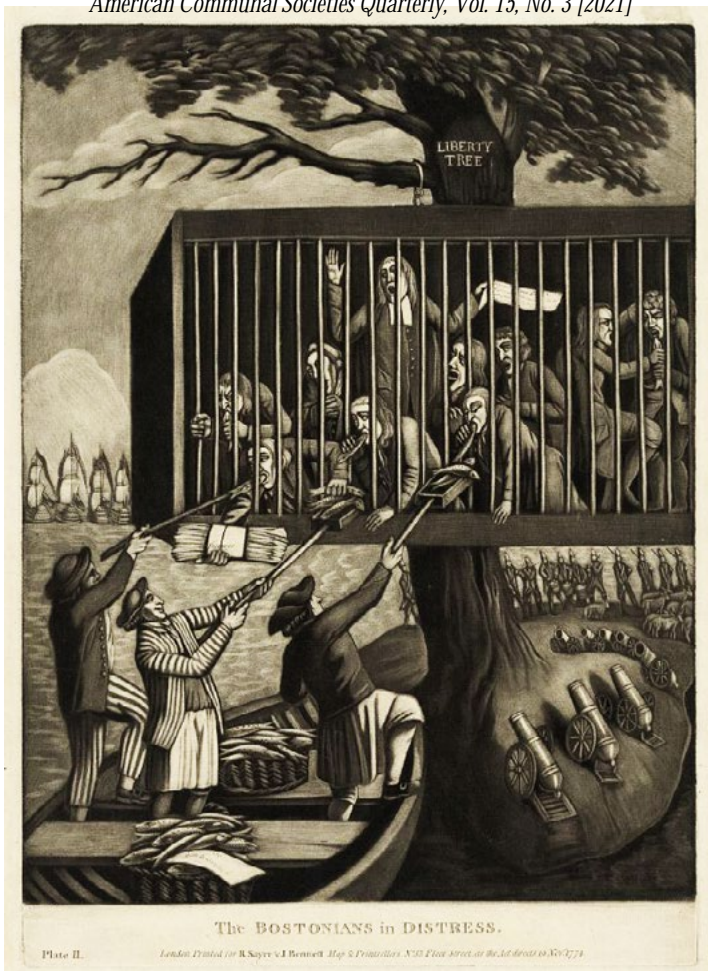


Fig. 7. *The Bostonians in Distress*, attributed to Philip Dawe (London: Robert Sayer and J. Bennett, 1774).

Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

Certainly Paine's song "Liberty Tree" persisted longer than Boston's actual Liberty Tree. The city of Boston was occupied by the British early in the war. After briefly using the Liberty Tree to stage some public retribution against colonial patriots in Boston (Figure 7), the British chopped down the venerable elm, leaving only a stump. But that did not stop other American towns from continuing to honor their own Liberty Trees, many of which were elms, because elms were one of the dominant deciduous trees in the Middle Atlantic and New England regions during that period. In Pittsfield, Massachusetts, only six miles from the Shaker village of Hancock, a Great Elm stood at the town center and served the same function as a site for public gatherings and political demonstrations (Figure 8).



Fig. 8. “Central Part of Pittsfield, Mass,” Drawn by J. W. Barber, Engraved by S. E. Brown, Boston. From John Warner Barber, *Massachusetts Historical Collections* (Worcester: Published by Dorr, Howland & Co., 1839).

Without a doubt, Thomas Paine’s “Liberty Tree” text was well known to the earlier generations of Shakers, anchored as Shakerism was within the sociopolitical culture of revolutionary America. Religious liberty, as well as freedom of conscience more broadly, were earnestly sought by the first Shakers who arrived as religious refugees in 1774. Shakerism’s strong endorsement of the fundamental rights defended by colonial patriots in the Revolutionary War is clearly exhibited in the early hymn “Rights of Conscience,” written by Issachar Bates, himself a war veteran.<sup>40</sup> Though the early Shakers embraced America’s potential, they also critiqued its shortcomings, such as what they regarded as excessive power wielded by faulty institutions. “Liberty is but a sound, if the conscience still is bound,” observes Bates’s hymn wryly.<sup>41</sup> But the coming of the Shaker faith to America was part of God’s plan, according to early Shaker James Whittaker who testified that while still in England he “saw a vision of America, and I saw a large tree, and every leaf thereof shone with such brightness, as made it appear like a burning torch, representing the Church of Christ, which will yet be establish’d in this land.”<sup>42</sup>

Paine’s “Liberty Tree” text, centered upon a female deity implanting an exotic new tree in American soil, must have resonated deeply with the Shakers, who may have seen it as further fulfillment of their unique claim to the ideological promises of America. As Jane Crosthwaite observes so eloquently, “America as seen through—or even, perhaps, as enabled by—

the Shaker vision was exceptional in her gifts of liberty and in her promise for a peaceful and just millennium.”<sup>43</sup> Given the prominence of a blazing American tree in the earliest visions of their “Gospel parents” (as the English Shakers and first American converts were commonly called), visions that even pre-dated Boston’s original Liberty Tree elm, the Shakers may have understood their envisioned tree as the righteous successor to America’s ill-fated Liberty Tree. As we have already seen, by the early 1800s, the Tree of Life was already well established in Shaker hymnody as a metaphor for the spiritual union of the Shaker world, represented hierarchically among the trunk, limbs, branches, and leaves of the tree. Probably sometime in the 1810s, a Shaker poet penned “Beautiful Branch,” a hymn text that deliberately echoes the “fair budding branch” of Paine’s Liberty Tree:

The celestial Dove from the field of communion,  
Where millions & millions of angels agree  
Has brought in her hand as a pledge of her union  
A beautiful branch of this great Union Tree

This branch from the great Union Tree is now growing  
And many are blest with an arbor of peace  
Sweet rivers of union from Zion are flowing  
And thousands have seen their eternal increase.<sup>44</sup>

“Beautiful Branch” and “Liberty Tree” have very different metrical patterns. But it is quite obvious that the Shaker author of “Beautiful Branch” made deliberate choices of words and phrases to create a strong poetic gesture to Paine’s “Liberty Tree,” while free of outright caricature. The intent of the Shaker poet is plain: to present the Shaker collective as a new body politic, divinely ordained and bound together not by liberty, but by an even more elevated ideal: union. At this tree, people would gather in a new heaven on earth, reveling in the Millennium, and echoing the actual gathering of American patriots around the Liberty Tree. The “Beautiful Branch” hymn became exceptionally popular across the Shaker world. It likely originated with western Shaker Samuel Mclelland at the community of Busro in western Indiana Territory, but it was shared widely and reproduced in dozens of manuscripts, some of which use the title “Union Tree.”

Evidence of the colonial Liberty Tree’s influence on Shaker culture goes even further. Fresh examinations of Hannah Cohoon’s 1845 *Tree of Light* and her 1854 *Tree of Life* suggest a connection of the colonial Liberty Tree concept to both of those gift drawings. The trunk, structure, and



Fig. 9. “American elm tree on Old South Street, Northampton, Mass. (October 2019).” Creative Commons license.

crown shape of both these gift drawings by Cohoon are strongly suggestive of the general shape of an American Elm (Figure 9). Not many elms survive in America, unfortunately, because the Dutch elm disease has so thoroughly decimated the species since it invaded North American forests and urban treescapes alike in the early 1900s. But in Hannah Cohoon’s lifetime, the American elm was a major tree species in the local deciduous tree canopy of western Massachusetts. Cohoon would have known exactly what mature stately elms looked like; she would have seen them virtually every day of her life. The leaves on both Cohoon’s *Tree of Light* and *Tree of Life* match the unique shape and texture of elm leaves: the jagged toothed edges, the pointed oval, the way they attach to the twigs (Figure 10). It is not at all far-fetched to suggest that an American elm served as an inspiration to Hannah Cohoon. Moreover, Cohoon would have been familiar with Pittsfield’s designated “ancient elm” that served as the town’s own “liberty tree” during the Revolutionary period. Whether or not that specific tree was her inspiration, the connection between colonial liberty trees and the elm species was well established in the public understanding. Consequently, it is quite possible that Cohoon fully intended to establish a symbolic connection between her trees and the Liberty Tree.





Fig. 10. American elm leaves. Creative Commons license.

Our fresh look at the Shaker concept of the Tree of Life gains one final layer when we consider the ways in which the Shakers understood trees in scripture as metaphors for God and for Christ. Of course, references to trees are abundant throughout the Bible in multiple connotations—actual trees, envisioned trees, metaphorical trees. For early Shaker leaders, devoted scholars of the Bible, scriptural trees would have played a role in the formulation of their radical theology. One category of scriptural tree that strongly reinforces a male-female godhead but has mostly escaped the notice of Shaker scholars is the category of “Asherah” trees. The term “Asherah” appears some forty times in the Hebrew Bible, and it is generally taken as a reference to a sacred tree or wooden pole. Asherah were often paired alongside altars of Yahweh in early Hebrew practice. How to explain Asherah while still remaining true to orthodox interpretations of the Hebrew god as a singular male deity began to vex theologians in the late nineteenth century, as European archaeologists in the Near East uncovered overwhelming evidence that Asherah were actually goddess representations, often accompanied by symbolic trees, and that these seemed to be entirely normal among the ancient Hebrews, as opposed to some cultic pagan aberration. This “Asherah problem” has

generated an interesting literature across a full century, with many scholars hard-pressed to find explanations for the many Asherah references and abundant evidence, while still remaining consistent with dominant western understanding of Hebrew monotheism.<sup>45</sup> The formulation of Shaker theology of a dual-gendered godhead unfolded quite separately from any deliberations of the “Asherah problem” in formal theological circles, of course. But the many references to Asherah as sacred trees, gendered in the female in the original Hebrew which Shaker theologians both read and understood, would have presented a compelling justification for a female element of the godhead.

Often in scripture, symbolic trees are in pairs, which for the Shakers reinforced their understanding of the true nature of both God and of Christ as dual-gendered, as well as of the gender-divided order of Shaker life. For example, Ezekiel 47:12 speaks of “all kinds of trees” unfailing in their fruitfulness that flank the two sides of the river flowing out of the temple of God, and Benjamin Seth Youngs interprets this as signifying the rectitude of the Shaker practice of gender division.<sup>46</sup> In Zechariah 4:11-14, two envisioned olive trees are identified as God’s “two anointed ones,” which the Shakers understood as the male and female incarnations of Christ. Revelation 22:1-2 describes the two Trees of Life, one standing on each side of the River flowing from God’s throne. Again, the Shakers understood this pair of trees as symbols of the male and female aspects of Christ. The contribution of all three of these scriptures to Shaker doctrine can be seen in verses from the early doctrinal hymn “Testimony of Eternal Truth,” the opening hymn in *Millennial Praises*, the Shakers first printed hymnal. The same eighteen-verse hymn appears at the conclusion of Youngs’s lengthy volume, where it is identified as “an abridgement of the foregoing Testimony.”

The prophets saw in visions clear, by whom redemption would  
appear  
That ‘two anointed ones’ should stand before the God of all  
the land.  
Two olive trees suppli’d the bowl as life from Christ supplies  
the soul,  
And certain as the vision’s true, the male & female are the  
TWO.

Ezekiel saw a river wide, with many trees on either side:  
The tree of life appear’d to John, & truly there were more  
than one

On either side the tree was seen, while living waters flow  
between –  
This tree of life on either side, he calls the Spirit and the  
Bride.<sup>47</sup>

Clearly all of these scriptures contain visually descriptive interpretations of fruitful trees. The strong role these images play in the formation of Shaker doctrine about the nature of God should help to inform our perspectives on the fruitful tree imagery that would emerge in Shaker spiritual texts and gift drawings alike. For example, the emphasis that the Shakers placed on the scripture from Zechariah, specifically, helps to explain the prevalence of another fruited tree—the olive tree—in Shaker imagery. Olive trees and olive branches appear as small motifs in gift drawings. And one exceptionally popular Shaker hymn dating at least as early as 1820, “Lovely Olive Tree,” emphasized the believer uniting with the olive tree, which symbolically signified both Christ and the Church, as well as being termed “the tree of life”:

More pure love I want to feel, More obedience and zeal,  
More united we must be, To the lovely Olive Tree.  
Every branch must fill its place Free from every thing that’s  
base  
Then the sap will freely flow And in union we will go  
Now depart discord and strife, We have found the tree of life,  
Heavenly love and purity Is the substance of the tree.<sup>48</sup>

A vivid poetic description of the feminine aspect of God as the “tree of life” can be found in an 1823 hymn by Pleasant Hill, Kentucky, elder Joel Shields. Titled “Love the Only Object,” the hymn treats “Love” as the deity, playing upon the familiar “God is love” trope, as well as long-established Shaker theology of treating “God” and “Love” as interchangeable: “For God is a fountain of love, And Mother a branch of the same.”<sup>49</sup> Shields portrays God/Love as both a beautiful and richly appealing tree and as a gardener tending a surrounding group of cultivated trees:<sup>50</sup>

With grace her fruitful boughs are spread, Her lovely fruits  
appear  
Her fields abound with living bread, Her welcome guest to  
cheer  
The fragrant trees that by her stand Like aloes sweet and fair  
Are nourished by her lovely hand And prun’d and dress’d with

No actions words or thoughts obscene No hatred war or strife  
Shall in thy lovely courts be seen; Thou art the tree of Life  
Come love sweet love possess me whole Come and possess my  
heart  
Make thy abode within my soul And never hence depart.

One place in scripture where the phrase “tree of life” appears unambiguously linked with the feminine aspect of God is in Proverbs, also known as the Book of Wisdom. It is well known among scholars of Shaker theology and spirituality that “wisdom” in Shaker writing always represents the female half of the dual-gendered godhead (Father God and Mother Wisdom). The Shaker interpretation was well supported by the fact that the word “wisdom” is consistently gendered as feminine in all the ancient languages of the Bible. In the book of Proverbs, it is quite clear that Wisdom not only holds female gender, but that Wisdom is also quite literally the Tree of Life. Proverbs 3:17-18 reads, “Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her.” During the New Era, when Hannah Cohoon painted her *Tree of Life*, the vision-filled Shaker worship regularly featured appearances by the female half of the deity, a spiritual entity often referred to as “Holy Mother Wisdom.” One reasonable way that a Shaker would have interpreted Cohoon’s *Tree of Life*, then, would have been as a literal portrait of God. Such an interpretation would have been entirely reasonable, given the degree to which Shaker devotional writings had been infused with tree, branch, and fruit metaphors since the beginnings of Shakerism in America, as we have seen throughout this present examination.

### **Concluding Thoughts: “Whichever way our eyes we turn”**

Because of the clear Shaker rejection of paintings and drawings in believers’ normal creative output and for decorative use, it has been most common to treat the New Era gift drawings as aberrations. However, such an approach fails to take into account how richly and intensely visual have been the accepted forms of Shaker creative output: writing, in all its forms, but particularly poem and song texts. Shaker spirituality has always elevated visionary experience, and Shaker verse was being used to lavishly describe believers’ visions decades before visions began to be set down in pictorial form by the creators of the gift drawings. “Whichever way our eyes we turn we view delightful towers, And in these pleasant groves discern the most delicious flowers” might well have described a New Era visionary experience and have been recorded meticulously as a colorful and detailed

drawing. But in fact, it comes from a hymn text written by the Richard McNemar's teenage son James sometime in the 1810s at Union Village, Ohio, and using words alone to paint a luxuriant garden landscape where "Wisdom's lovely ways" prevailed.<sup>51</sup>

The most impactful and aesthetically appealing images created during the New Era involved depictions of trees, and Hannah Cohoon's *Tree of Life* is by far the most iconic. However, because Shaker culture was infused with references to trees, branches, vines, fruits, and flowers long before such motifs began to be integrated into gift drawings, it is necessary to expand our search back to earlier phases of Shaker history in order to gain a more understanding of how these complex metaphors functioned within Shaker spiritual life.

Hannah Cohoon's *Tree of Life* seems to have been the artistic culmination of ideas that had been accumulating among the Shakers for many decades. Along the way, that tissue of ideas had been informed by colonial and revolutionary religious culture and the culture of the Early Republic. We have examined at least five different ways that trees functioned symbolically for the Shakers: as a restorative sacrament; as a metaphor for the individual believer's body; as a metaphor for the Shaker church and its hierarchical structure; as a metaphor for Shaker sociopolitical identity on the American landscape; and as an actual graphic representation of God, specifically of the feminine aspect of God. Given that the Shakers were well known iconoclasts who rejected the use of figural art, perhaps the boldest interpretation of the Tree of Life image is that it might have been perceived by the Shakers as a portrait of God, the ultimate Shaker icon.

In closing, seems fitting somehow to give the final word to another Shaker sister named Hannah, an African-American believer at South Union, Kentucky. Hannah Freehart entered Shaker life in 1807, a full decade before Cohoon, and she died in 1852 during the period that Cohoon was creating her iconic tree drawings.<sup>52</sup> Evidence that the western Hannah was also inspired by trees has survived in the form of tiny fanciful drawings of fruited trees etched onto the underside of a small oval box owned by Hannah Freehart, along with her name and the date of 1827 (Figure 11). Why Hannah Freehart chose to inscribe her box with images of trees can never be known. But placing the embellishment on the underside of the lid ensured that it would remain for her eyes alone, or for those with whom she chose to share it. In that sense, the Hannah Freeheart's drawings are not unlike the gift drawings of the New Era, and it is entirely possible that Freeheart, like the New Era artists, held similarly complex understandings of the symbolic role of trees in Shaker spirituality.



Fig. 11. “H. Freehart, June 28, 1827,” Collection at South Union Shaker Village. Image courtesy of Tommy Hines, Director, South Union Shaker Village.

## Notes

1. Edward Deming Andrews and Faith Andrews were the first non-Shakers to learn of the existence of the gift drawings. Sometime in the early 1930s, after at least ten years of cultivating friendships with Hancock Shaker sisters, the Andrewses were shown several gift drawings. Their account implies that the drawings had been largely forgotten by the Shakers at some point after their creation and possibly that many had been destroyed. See Edward Deming Andrews and Faith Andrews, *Fruits of the Shaker Tree of Life: Memoirs of Fifty Years of Collecting and Research* (Stockbridge: The Berkshire Traveller Press, 1975), 95-96.
2. Two other Shaker heritage sites, Canterbury Shaker Village and Shaker Museum of South Union, use logos based on Shaker gift drawings.
3. Other than the general discussions of Shaker spiritualism found in Edward Deming Andrews, *The People Called Shakers: A Search for the Perfect Society* (New York: Dover, 1963) and Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), along with the analysis of its musical dimensions in Daniel W. Patterson, *The Shaker Spiritual*, 2nd, corrected ed. (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2000), most scholars have addressed primarily the visual art produced during the spiritualist period. In addition to Daniel W. Patterson, *Gift Drawing and Gift Song: A Study of Two*

*Forms of Shaker Inspiration* (Sabbathday Lake: The United Society of Shakers, 1983) and Edward Deming Andrews and Faith Andrews, *Visions of the Heavenly Sphere: A Study in Shaker Religious Art* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1969), see Sally Promey, *Spiritual Spectacles: Vision and Image in Mid-Nineteenth Century Shakerism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993); and France Morin, ed. *Heavenly Visions: Shaker Gift Drawings and Gift Songs* (New York: The Drawing Center, 2001).

4. In his book *Gift Drawing and Gift Song*, Patterson alludes to the 113 gift drawings documented by the Andrewses, along with a further seventy-nine that he includes as part of his "Checklist." See also Andrews and Andrews, *Visions of the Heavenly Sphere*.
5. See the discussions in Daniel Sellin, "Shaker Inspirational Drawings," *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 57, no. 273 (Spring 1962): 93-99; and Sally L. Kitch, "'As a Sign That All May Understand': Shaker Gift Drawings and Female Spiritual Power," *Winterthur Portfolio* 24, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 1-28.
6. Sally M. Promey, "Celestial Visions: Shaker Images and Art Historical Method," *American Art* 7, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 78-99.
7. Most scholars believe that none of the gift drawings were put on display during the period of their creation and may have been seen only by a limited number of people other than the creator. Patterson, *Gift Drawing and Gift Song*, suggests perhaps a few dozen only. Patterson coined the term "gift drawing," and he asserts that because they purport to be simply visual records of spiritual "gifts," they were not intended as artistic expression, but visual documentation. Whether to apply the term "art" to this body of material is debated by some, as the Shakers had no established tradition of art and artists, though the community included many individuals who employed great artistic skill in the execution of these drawings.
8. Cohoon's better than average education can be inferred from the fine penmanship of the drawings' inscriptions, as well as their narrative composition.
9. For a short but thorough biographical essay, see Ruth Wolfe, "Hannah Cohoon," in *American Folk Painters of Three Centuries*, Jean Lipman and Tom Armstrong, editors (New York: Hudson Hills Press, Inc., 1980), 58-65. A biographical essay drawn from Wolfe, along with an earlier publication by June Sprigg, is found in Patterson, *Gift Drawing and Gift Song*, 47-50. See also Jane Crosthwaite, "The Spirit Drawings of Hannah Cohoon: Window on the Shakers and Their Folk Art," *Communal Societies* 7 (1987): 1-15.
10. Wolfe, "Hannah Cohoon," 65, includes an image of a page from a Shaker songbook containing several dance tunes, including one of the tunes attributed to Cohoon, and Patterson, *Gift Drawing and Gift Song*, 49, identifies the source of this and of Cohoon's other tunes as a specific Shaker music manuscript in the Library of Congress collection.
11. See Checklist of Cohoon's work in Patterson, *Gift Drawing and Gift Song*, 50.
12. See Wolfe, "Hannah Cohoon," 62. Wolfe also suggests that a very unusual tree design created in 1844 by Shaker Elder Joseph Wicker, also at Hancock,

may have influenced Cohoon's style.

13. See the chronology in Andrews and Andrews, *Visions of the Heavenly Sphere*, 110. Promey briefly addresses trees as metaphors in gift drawings, *Spiritual Spectacles*, 79-81. In one intriguing and useful observation, Crosthwaite observes that an influential work on fruit trees as a spiritual metaphor, *The Spiritual Use of an Orchard*, by seventeenth century English arborist Ralph Austen, had just been reprinted as a new edition in 1847, around the time that trees became more prevalent in Shaker gift drawings. However, there is no direct evidence that the Shakers were aware of this text. See Crosthwaite, "Hannah Cohoon," 9n20.
14. In particular, the distinctive tree styles found in gift drawings attributed to Sarah Bates and Polly Collins have been noted, and both styles contrast sharply with that of Cohoon.
15. This is the approach taken by Ann Kirschner, "At the Gate of Heaven: Early Shaker Dreams and Visions," in Morin, *Heavenly Visions*, 169-78.
16. Carol Medlicott, *Partake a Little Morsel: Popular Shaker Hymns of the Nineteenth Century* (Clinton: Richard W. Couper Press, 2011), 9 and 68-72, begins to address nature metaphors expressed in early Shaker hymnody.
17. Diane Sasson, *The Shaker Spiritual Narrative* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983), 28-32, examines how the first Shakers envisioned the Tree of Life, but primarily during the period of life of Ann Lee and James Whittaker only. A few scholars have grappled with the general question of how the Shakers confronted the natural world, such as the exceptionally erudite but broad treatment by Carl Benton Straub, *An Honorable Harvest: Shakers and the Natural World* (New Gloucester: United Society of Shakers), 2009.
18. On Jeremiah Ingalls, see Thomas B. Malone, "Jeremiah Ingalls and Shape-Note Connexion," from *Singing Ingalls* 2010, <http://www.singingalls.org/>. On Issachar Bates as an aspiring hymn writer in the 1790s, see Carol Medlicott, *Issachar Bates: A Shaker's Journey* (Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2013), 54-57. On Jeremiah Ingalls, Jr., see Patterson, *Shaker Spiritual*, 258-59; and Peter Van Demark, editor, *Elder Rufus Bishop's Journals, Volume I: 1815-1839* (Clinton: Richard W. Couper Press, 2018), 210-11, 211n53.
19. See *Millennial Praises* (Hancock: Printed by Joseph Tallcott, Jr., 1813), 131-33. See also Christian Goodwillie and Jane Crosthwaite, *Millennial Praises: A Shaker Hymnal* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009).
20. See Carol Medlicott and Christian Goodwillie, *Richard McNemar, Music, and the Western Shaker Communities* (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 2013), 306; and Medlicott (2009), 46-47.
21. Benjamin Seth Youngs, *Testimony of Christ's Second Appearing* (Lebanon: Press of John Mc'Lean, 1808), 395, 455, 525-29.
22. Youngs, *Testimony of Christ's Second Appearing*, 171-74, 207.
23. The full text of "Sweet Apples" can be found in Medlicott and Goodwillie, *Richard McNemar*, 312.



24. The full text of this memorial hymn to David Darrow can be found in Medlicott and Goodwillie, *Richard McNemar*, 177.
25. Medlicott, *Issachar Bates*, discusses Bates's long and complex relationship to trees, plants, and gardening. See for example 48 for his conversion while working as a logger, 126 and 160 for his work as an orchardist, 249 for his stated desire to have his body replace the great oak tree at Watervliet, Ohio, and 266 for his teaching of the "Stubborn Oak" song and dance. Whether Bates actually wrote the song is unclear, but he may have. See also Patterson, *Shaker Spiritual*, 208-9.
26. Patterson, *Shaker Spiritual*, 339-40, attributes "Willow Tree" to Mary Hazard of New Lebanon.
27. See Medlicott, *Issachar Bates*, xx, for analysis of this song.
28. Richard McNemar to Seth Wells, 23 March 1824, OClWHI IV:A-70.
29. See "Responsive" and the analysis of it in Medlicott and Goodwillie, *Richard McNemar*, 125-26.
30. See "A Dialogue, Little-faith and Go-ahead," and the analysis of it in Medlicott and Goodwillie, *Richard McNemar*, 236.
31. William R. Osborne, *Trees and Kings: A Comparative Analysis of Tree Imagery in Israel's Prophetic Tradition and in the Ancient Near East* (University Park: Eisenbrauns, 2018). For instance, the oaks that shaded the tent of Abraham in Genesis 18 offer similar symbolic meaning as the vine that grew to shade and comfort Jonah in Jonah 4, and the New Testament reference to the Father as "the vinedresser" is a deliberate echo back to Adam having been enjoined by God to tend and keep the trees of the Garden of Eden.
32. From "My Vineyard" recorded by D. A. Buckingham and quoted in Patterson, *Shaker Spiritual*, 411-12.
33. "I Am the True Vine," quoted in Patterson, *Shaker Spiritual*, 412-14. "I Am the True Vine" was adapted by singer/songwriter Chris Moore and included on his album *Kindling Stone* (2008) as a harmonized duet.
34. From Journal of Henry DeWitt of New Lebanon, OClWHI V B 97, quoted in Patterson, *Shaker Spiritual*, 411. The date of this passage could not be located, but it would be sometime before 1835, as the very popular Shaker speaker and singer Garrett Lawrence died in 1835.
35. A scholarly analysis of the Liberty Tree concept in colonial America is found in Arthur M. Schlesinger, "The Liberty Tree: A Genealogy," *The New England Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (1952): 435-58. For a full treatment of how liberty and freedom were manifested in American visual culture, see David Hackett Fischer, *Liberty and Freedom: A Visual History of America's Founding Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
36. The literature on the role of trees in Anglo-Saxon folklore and English landscape tradition is considerable. For a recent and concise contribution, see Della Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England: Literature, Lore, and Landscape* (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 2010).
37. For a specific examination of how English landscape ideals were transferred to New England village design, see Jonathan Wood, "'Build, therefore, your

- own world': The New England Village as Settlement Ideal," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 81, no. 1 (1991): 32-50.
38. The rise of Liberty Trees as public protest locations is explored in Alfred F. Young, *Liberty Tree: Ordinary People and the American Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), especially 265-95.
39. See Joel Cohen, "Program Notes," *Liberty Tree: Early American Music 1776-1881*, by Boston Camerata (Erato CD, 1997).
40. For a thorough exploration of Shaker perspectives on American patriotism, see Jane F. Crosthwaite, "'The mighty hand of overruling providence': The Shaker Claim to America," *American Communal Societies Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (April 2012), 93-111.
41. The full fifteen verses of "Rights of Conscience" are included in Patterson, *Shaker Spiritual*, 165-67.
42. This account of James Whittaker's vision is quoted or paraphrased in many Shaker sources, as well as in numerous secondary sources, including Sasson, *Shaker Spiritual Narrative*, 29-30, and Crosthwaite, "Hannah Cohoon," 14.
43. Crosthwaite, "The mighty hand of overruling providence," 105.
44. The full text of "Beautiful Branch," along with analysis of it as one of the Shakers' more popular hymn texts and an example of nature imagery, as well as analysis of the significance of the tune used by the Shakers, is found in Medlicott, *Partake a Little Morsel*, 68-69.
45. On the "Asherah problem" see Judith Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah: Evidence for a Hebrew Goddess* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); William Dever, *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: William B. Erdmans Publishing Company, 2005); and Tilde Binger, *Asherah: Goddesses in Ugarit, Israel, and the Old Testament* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997). Recently the topic of Asherah has generated many popular treatments from a range of perspectives, including feminist, New Age, and evangelical.
46. See Youngs, *Testimony of Christ's Second Appearing*, 514, 525.
47. Youngs, *Testimony of Christ's Second Appearing*. The text of "Testimony of Eternal Truth" is tipped in at the end of Youngs's *Testimony* on unnumbered pages, along with an Errata page.
48. See the discussion of "Lovely Olive Tree" in Medlicott, *Partake a Little Morsel*, 72.
49. From "The Season of Loves," in *Millennial Praises*. See Goodwillie and Crosthwaite, *Millennial Praises*.
50. From "Love the Only Object" in "A Hymnbook, Containing a Collection of Ancient Hymns... Compil'd and Recorded by Paulina Bryant, Executed at Pleasant Hill Beginning June 1854," DLC-MSS, Item 361, 148-49.
51. See Medlicott and Goodwillie, *Richard McNemar*, 141, for the full text, tune, and analysis of "Gospel Fare" by young James McNemar.
52. I am grateful to Tommy Hines of Shaker Museum of South Union for sharing information on Hannah Freehart, along with images of Freehart's box, which was re-discovered in the 1990s in private hands.

# **An Attempt to Have a Law Enacted by the General Court in Boston to Allow Heirs to Inherit Property Previously Dedicated to the Shakers**

**Stephen J. Paterwic**

In a collection of archival material preserved by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts are a number of petitions, letters of remonstrance, and testimonies that tell of the long-forgotten struggle to have an act passed by the General Court that would allow heirs to inherit property previously dedicated to the Shakers. These documents remind the reader that until 1820, Maine was part of Massachusetts, for the appeal was made not to Augusta but to the General Court, the Massachusetts legislature in Boston.

In May 1817, 197 citizens of York County petitioned the General Court on behalf of non-Shakers whose relatives had joined the society at Alfred and “in other parts of the Destrict of Maine” (Gorham and New Gloucester) and “so united all their property both Real & personal estate” according to the Shaker constitution (covenant). After the decease of these relatives, “the heirs without have been wholly Deprived of their Legal right, as heirs to their Fathers property estate some of which are really poor having left the society for Conscience sake.” Such heirs had repeatedly asked for what the petitioners considered their just share of what they are entitled to, but such requests had been denied by the Shakers. As a result, concerned citizens of York county “pray that your Honors would take it in your Wise Consideration and that an act, may be passed Simelar to that in the state of Connecticut that all their heirs without, or not belonging to said Society May not be deprived of their Just proportion of the estates of their Deceased parents or relations that have deceased among the People called Shakers, on account of any of their Covenant agreements or articles of Constitution.” Moreover, the petitioners stated that they would accept any act “in such a manner as you in your wisdom may think fit that what we Consider so great an evil may be remided [remedied].”

The signers of the petition were neighbors of the Shakers, the relatives of such neighbors, people who had business dealings with the society, local civic leaders, and those who had family members among the Believers. Although it is not possible or useful to discuss every petitioner, a few words about some of them will be sufficient to indicate the close family connections that they had. Given subsequent Shaker history, two of the most notable

petitioners were Timothy Ricker Sr. (1761-1837) and his son Timothy Ricker Jr. (1793-1838) of Waterboro, Maine.<sup>1</sup> Timothy Ricker Sr. was the oldest child of Jabez Ricker (1741-1827) who in 1793 had exchanged his property in Alfred for the property of Eliphaz Ring (1768-1854) of Poland, Maine. The Poland, Maine, descendants of Jabez Ricker would eventually develop the Poland Spring Hotel, mineral spring, and bottling works. Jabez's grandson Hiram Ricker (1809-1893) and his sons maintained a close relationship with the Sabbathday Lake Shakers, in contrast to Jabez's grandson Timothy Jr. Mary Ann Hill (1799-1877) was Timothy's wife, and her relatives—possibly uncles or brothers Moses Hill, Joseph Hill, and John Hill—all signed the anti-Shaker petition. Furthermore, the mother of petition-signer Benjamin Ricker Hamilton (1795-1878) was Elizabeth Ricker whose uncle or first cousin, both named Phineas Ricker, also signed. Another intriguing character was Stephen Sanborn (1773-1860), whose name was used various various times in reference to the petition by Massachusetts officials and some of the Shakers. Like the Rickers, Sanborn lived in the town of Waterboro, directly northeast of Alfred. In 1810, however, he had lived in Enfield, New Hampshire, where he certainly knew of the Shaker community in that town. His wife's maiden name was Mary Sanborn, Sanborn being a prominent name among early Enfield Shakers. Mary Sanborn (1772-1862) had a sister named Sarah Thing (1775-1856) who was married to petitioner William Thing (1774-1850) of Waterboro. Their son Gilman Thing (b. 1800) also signed. William's father was almost certainly signer Nathaniel Thing Sr. (1775-1856) along with the names of his son and grandson, Nathaniel Thing Jr. (1773-1844), and Samuel Thing (1797-1870). Furthermore, Nathaniel Jr.'s wife was Sarah Bagley (1772-1838), very likely the sister of petition-signer Orlando Bagley (1790-1832). Well-known signers were Colonel Nathaniel Hobbs (1768-1850) of Berwick and his cousin the Reverend Henry Hobbs (1768-1848); they shared the same grandfather, Thomas Hobbs (1695- 1777). Not only did James Barnes (b. ca. 1760), Jacob Emery (1777-1849) and Joseph Pike sign affidavits before York Justice of the Peace Reverend Henry Hobbs in 1817 for use against the Alfred Shakers, they signed the petition as well. Five other men with the surname Pike or Emery can also be found on the document, including Dennis Emery (b. 1863) who may have been a brother, and though the connection has been lost, he was related to six Alfred Shakers who remained faithful their whole lives. Jacob Emery, moreover, was married to Nancy Jellison and thus related to signers James Jellison (b. 1780), Aaron Jellison (1779-1846), and Jedediah Jellison. In addition to being either closely related or near neighbors, a common thread among them was a dislike of the Shakers, indicating that the openhostility of forty

years previous still festered in the vicinity of Alfred Shaker village.

It should be noted that with one exception, the signers of the petition were not seeking any inheritances for themselves. Though the group was acting in general on behalf of all disinherited heirs, the plight of James Barnes was their primary focus, and his name appears last on the petition. The Barnes family was an important and prominent family in the Alfred Shaker society. James Barnes was not some obscure figure seeking to gain a small inheritance. If the petition had succeeded and James Barnes received a share of the property dedicated to the Shakers by his father Benjamin Barnes (1727-1815), this would have been very disruptive to the Alfred community since the Barnes land formed the core of the Shaker village. Even an equivalent donation of property to him would have been expensive and set the bad precedence of implying that the Shaker covenant was not legally binding. Before continuing, therefore, it is necessary to speak of the Barnes family in greater detail. They literally were the foundation family of Shakerism at Alfred.

“Around midnight, June 1st, 1783, John and Sarah Barnes were abruptly awakened and frightened by the sounds of shouting and pounding on their door. The voice of their friend, John Cotton (1760-1847), was repeating the words, “I bring you tidings of great joy!” And so the Shaker Gospel arrived in the town of Alfred.”<sup>2</sup> John Cotton had been a New Light Baptist and intended to move to Vermont. On his journey there, he encountered fellow New Light James Jewett (1746-1825) who had converted to Shakerism. Cotton also became a Shaker and instead of going on to Vermont, he returned to Alfred and called upon his New Light friends John Barnes (1755-1832) and Sarah Barnes (1759-1851). They also became Shakers and, in turn, other members of the Barnes family followed them into the faith. The family homestead was the property of Benjamin Barnes and his wife(?) Mary Barnes (1736-1810). Their house was located at what later became the Sisters’ Shop of the Second Family, and it was the early headquarters of the Alfred Shakers. This was the geographical heart of the 2,400 acres of Shaker holdings. Benjamin’s farm “extended from Massabesic Lake to Bunganut Pond” and was one of the first pieces of property dedicated to the Shakers after the society was gathered at Alfred in 1793.<sup>3</sup> In addition to his son John and daughter-in-law Sarah, Benjamin’s son David Barnes (1759-1825) and his wife Joanna (1760-1850) also became Shakers as did Benjamin’s grandchildren Anna Barnes (1772-1827), Mary Barnes (1775-1807), Daniel Barnes (1778-1826), and Rachel Barnes (1780-1820). All died in the faith. Betty Barnes (1766-1850) embraced Shakerism and lived at Alfred as well as New Gloucester. She may have been the daughter of Benjamin Barnes and thus the sister

of James Barnes. This is an impressive roster of converts from the same family, but it is typical of the era. There may have been other children of Benjamin Barnes who never came into the faith or eventually left after a short time, but they are not of concern. The only other child of Benjamin Barnes that must be considered is James Barnes.

James Barnes joined the Shakers at the time of his father's conversion, but left. He states that he joined in 1800, but one of the documents implies that this was the second time. Before his father died in 1815, James left the community again. He claimed that his father Benjamin Barnes had once promised him that although he was no longer a Shaker, he should get some land. After Benjamin's death, James sought what he thought was his fair share. James stated that "John Barnes my older brother (then Bishop of said society) promised my father that I would have my full proportion of said estate adding that I ought to have as much as he and David Barnes both (as my father told me) as they had both been to learn a trade six years, and that I had lived with my father and helped earn the interest." James continued, "Father often requested them to pay to me what they had promised him they would but after father signed the Covenant they refused to give me anything." His brothers, moreover, refused him entry to the Shaker village and would not discuss details of his father's estate. One of his brothers was the formidable Father John Barnes (1755-1832) of the Alfred Ministry. His brother David Barnes was first elder of the Church Family.

The financial situation of James Barnes was apparently quite dire since after he joined the Shakers, though he had not signed the covenant, he had given his property in nearby Waterboro to the Shakers. He said that they had promised him land in Alfred. Apparently, the Shakers sold the land for \$1,200. After he left the community, the Shakers did not give him either the money or any land. His brother John said, "I might sign their Covenant or go to Hell by which means I am reduced to poverty and wretchedness with a wife and family and unable to administer to their necessities." James also mentioned that there were others that shared his situation: Ara Cushman (1784-1863), Nathaniel Freeman (b. 1769), and Samuel Freeman (1772- 1842). One of these men was away at sea and another lived at a distance so it was not possible to get dispositions from them. Thus the testimony of James Barnes was the only one from an actual heir, and he swore to its veracity before York Justice of the Peace the Reverend Henry Hobbs on December 15, 1817. If dispositions from Cushman and the Freeman brothers had been obtained, they would have been similar in content to that of James Barnes.

Ara aka “Ary” Cushman’s father, Thomas Cushman (1758-1816), had been head of one of the first families to convert to Shakerism at New Gloucester. Ara’s mother was Ruth Ring (1765-1828), almost certainly the sister of Eliphaz Ring who had switched his land in Poland with the Ricker family. Ara had stayed a Shaker until 1814. He married in 1817 and had five children and lived the remainder of his life in Minot, Maine.<sup>4</sup> His parents and his only sibling, Israel Cushman (1785-1845), were faithful Shakers.

Nathaniel and Samuel Freeman’s grandmother Bethiah Freeman (1713-1795) had been “the oldest person that believed at Alfred” when the Gospel first opened.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, their father Nathan Freeman (1744-1802), their step-mother Lydia Freeman (1748-1826), and sister Elizabeth “Betty” Freeman (1773-1820) were Shakers. In addition to them, all of their half-siblings, Hannah “Lovey” Freeman (1776-1852), Ebenezer Freeman (1780-1863), and John Freeman (1782-1852) also stayed faithful until death. In fact John Freeman Jr. was first deacon of Alfred’s Church Family. In his capacity as a trustee, he held all the deeds of the family and exercised a great deal of financial power.

It may seem after reading the disposition of James Barnes that he had been cheated or unfairly taken advantage of; however, a closer look at the situation shows the situation to be more complex. By Shaker custom, after being informed of the conditions of membership, a person could voluntarily turn over property to the society, and this was deemed by the Shaker Church Covenant as an irrevocable act. Though, in theory, this might seem somewhat draconian, the reality was that no one was immediately expected to turn over their property to the community and only after living as a Believer for a sufficient time to become fully aware of the rules and regulations was a person allowed to take this step. Shaker deeds, moreover, indicate that sometimes it was as much as twenty years before such property dedications were made. For example, Father Joseph Meacham’s brother David Meacham (1743-1826), may have become a Shaker in 1780, but it was not until 1800 that he deeded the remaining half of his farm in Enfield, Connecticut, to the Shakers. That one-hundredacre parcel was a major part of the Church Family and already being used by the Shakers; it also contained the burying ground for the community. Stalwart David Meacham took his time and retained a portion of his land, even after he moved to New Lebanon in 1787. This was not atypical.<sup>6</sup>

By his own admission, Barnes admitted that he gave the Shakers his land although he had not signed the covenant. At the time he joined, there was no Gathering Order at Alfred and covenantal arrangements were fairly fluid. As he grew in faith, he could have kept his land for years as

other young Believers did. No doubt, however, his strong-willed brother John and his brother David pressured him. If James is to be believed, his father welcomed his embrace of Shakerism and assured him with promises he no longer had the legal right to make. It appears that James had not thought enough about the possible implications for him or his family of hastily and unnecessarily dedicating his property to the Shakers. Though not connected to them legally, he had in effect given them his possessions. This was very bad judgment on his part. Though he had not signed the covenant, it does not seem possible that James Barnes would not have been familiar with the terms of the covenant and the general attitude the Shakers had about the free dedication of time, money, and property though during the 1790s, even though the specifics of dedication of property had not been articulated in detail in the covenant. The 1794 version of the covenant at New Gloucester, for example, simply stated, "All should be received as members; being of age that had any substance or property; that was free from debt or any just demands of any; that were without; either as creditors or heirs were allowed to bring in their substance being their natural and lawful right; and give it as part of the Joint Interest of the Church; agreeable to their own faith and desire." This indicates that a convert was not forced to give up property, but was to take this step only according to faith and desire. By the time James Barnes donated his property, the 1794 covenant had been amended in 1801 to include the words, "And whereas we find by experience and travail ... that further provisions ought to be made for the further supporting and maintaining the joint union and interest of the Church: and that each member receive a full information and understanding of the order and Covenant ... we do by these presents solemnly covenant with each other; for ourselves, and assigns, and heirs, never hereafter to bring debt or demand ... on account of any services or property that was devoted and consecrated to the sacred and charitable uses."<sup>7</sup> James would have received "full information" that guaranteed his "understanding" of what was expected. If James had sought to get his property back, he may have had a strong case before the law because he had not signed the covenant, and legally he still had an option to bring a lawsuit to demand a return of his assets. Instead of doing this, however, he wanted to get a share of his father's property, which had been dedicated to the Shakers almost twenty-five years before 1817. This was a tenuous claim at best.

To avoid situations similar to that of James Barnes, the Shakers made a major revision of the Church covenant in 1814. Although the 1814 covenant quoted here is from the Harvard, Massachusetts society, it is the revision as written by the Ministry at New Lebanon and copied by all



of the communities. The covenant states, "Although it has been our faith from the beginning that to be united in a joint interest ... yet we know and testify that this important relation cannot be immediately entered into by any; but must be attained by a preparatory work, which necessarily requires some time to be accomplished." After settling debts and righting wrongs, the new Shakers stand apart and "make their own bargains, settle their own accounts, and dispose of their own property for their own personal ends and purposes." The process required "the utmost caution and deliberation." To this end, "previous to making a final dedication of themselves, or their property, believers have a privilege to prove their faith and love, by coming into a family relation, which may be dissolved at any time without damage." While a member of a Shaker family, each prospective Shaker dedicated his/her time and service and the use of his/her property although "the property itself cannot be dedicated; but an inventory thereof being taken, the family stands jointly accountable for the property of each individual members, whenever he or she shall call for it; which any one may do at any time, and taking it whole as it was, may depart; but can never bring any debt, damage or blame against the family or Society; nor against any member thereof, on account of service or use of property." Finally, "When sufficient trial and proof have been made... and the way is sufficiently prepared for a full and final dedication, then the members may settle the matter in their own hearts, to make a full sacrifice to God, of themselves and all their property and in doing so, they become a branch of the Church; after which there can be no reasonable grounds for any recantation."<sup>8</sup> Thus by the time the petitioners tried to appeal to the state for relief of heirs, the covenant had developed into a detailed "full disclosure" document. If outsiders, such as the legislators, examined the 1814 covenant they would wonder how anyone could NOT have known what dedicating property to the Shakers meant and why someone not legally connected to them would foolishly hand over valuable assets to them with just oral assurances, and much worse believe oral promises that were contrary to the covenant. Of course, they had the word and oath of James Barnes and others that such promises had been made, but seen from the perspective of 1817, the case of James Barnes would have appeared weak. If a lawyer or legislator had examined earlier covenants regarding the donation of property, it would have been discovered that they implied rather than clearly stated that care had been taken. In any case, however, James Barnes had given away his property not in consequence of signing such a covenant, but because he had been given oral promises that those in charge either did not have the right to make, in the case of his father, or had no intention of fulfilling, in the case of his brothers. Though John and

David Barnes may be chided for their lack of charity toward their brother, James Barnes naively signed away his assets, and, notwithstanding the testimony of his supporters, there was no way to verify that the Shakers had promised him anything for this largesse. it was his word against theirs.

Before turning to the sequence of the documents found in the archives, another matter must be cleared up. The petition states that a law had been passed in Connecticut that prohibited heirs from being excluded by the Shaker covenant. This is incorrect information. No Connecticut statute existed then or later that allowed heirs to claim previously dedicated Shaker property. The Shaker trustees of Alfred, Harvard, and Shirley affirm this when they state that “no such act has ever been passed in that state, or in any other free state.” Even had there been such an act, however, donors always had the opportunity to make provisions for family members who did not join the society or who had withdrawn. Shaker trustees at Hancock and Tyringham made this quite clear when they noted what the custom was when parents believed in the Gospel and their children did not. They said some parents gave all property to their children, “not reserving the least remains to Support themselves thro’ the infirmities of old age; other after Settling all Just demands as aforesaid, have reserved a portion to themselves” which they dedicated to the Shakers. (see item 9 below) Though Shakers cannot have wills since everything is owned in joint interest, before signing the covenant, nothing prevented a property holder from writing a will in such a way that if spouse or children left the society, they would be well-provided for. Since Connecticut was cited by the petitioners, an example from that state can be used to prove the point. Before Enfield, Connecticut, Shaker Zacheus Munsell (1745-1794) died, he provided generously for his Shaker and non-Shaker family in his will. To his wife Hannah Drake Munsell (1746-1831), he left a third of his personal estate and one-third rights to his house, barns, and fifteen acres. To his six children, he left the remainder of the house, barns, land, and personal estate. He also left each of them pieces of land on or near his home farm.<sup>9</sup> His wife and three of his daughters—Agnes, Hannah and Submit (aka Mitta)—were Shakers when he made his will and they remained lifelong Believers; their inherited shares reverted to the society. His three children who were not Shakers—Susannah, Levi, and Zacheus Jr.—sold their portions to the Shakers in 1795 and 1796.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, Zacheus Sr., also left money to some of the Shakers. His total estate was valued at 424 pounds, 15 shillings and 4 pence. To eight Shakers, ranging in age from eighteen to sixty-seven, he left a total of 78 pounds, 7 shillings and 9 pence or 18 percent of the whole.<sup>11</sup> Six of the eight were females, and he had lived with at least three of these at the South Family. Zacheus

Munsell died before written Shaker covenants but it was around the same time Benjamin Barnes joined the Shakers and gave all his property to them. Barnes could have drawn up a similar document that provided for his wife and children. For his part, James Barnes could also have asked his brothers and father to put their promises in writing before he gave away his property.

The documents quoted in the previous paragraphs are from the manuscripts in the Massachusetts archives. It is helpful to put all of the items in chronological order:

1. May, 1817, one hundred and ninety-seven citizens of York County petitioned the General Court in Boston for an act to be passed to allow heirs to receive property previously dedicated by relatives to the Shakers. Read and committed to the Committee of New Trials by the Senate May 31, 1817 and send down to the House of Representatives for concurrence. The House of Representatives read and concurred on June 2, 1817.
2. Copy of the petition and this order to be published at least thirty days before the first Tuesday of the next session of the present General Court in the *Columbian Centinel* and the *Weekly Visiter*. The *Columbian Centinel* was a Boston newspaper from 1790 until 1840. The *Weekly Visiter* was printed at Kennebunk from 1809 until 1821. "All persons interested" may then appear and "shew cause, (if any they have) why the prayer of said Petition should not be granted." Read and concurred in the Senate on June 7, 1817. Read and accepted in the House of Representatives on June 9, 1817.
3. Testimony of James Barnes explicitly explaining his grievances. He lived in Shapleigh, a town west of Waterboro and northwest of Alfred. Given in solemn oath before York Justice of the Peace Henry Hobbs on December 15, 1817.
4. Testimony of Shapleigh native Jonathan Emery claiming familiarity with the Alfred Shakers and Benjamin Barnes. Emery stated that after Benjamin Barnes had already given up his property to the Shakers, he said that his son James "had as good a right to his property on the Hill meaning the Shaker seat in Alfred as any of his children." John Barnes once told him that "if James Barnes his Brother left them again he should hate him above all flesh and that he should never have anything there & he would try to injure him all he Could." Furthermore John

Barnes stated no one who left the Shakers would have anything if he could help it and if the society could “wrong them out of it.” He said that this was the Gospel. Finally, while Benjamin Barnes was on his deathbed, his son James tried to see him, but was refused. Emery felt that the Shakers feared that his father might give him something or that “what had been done would be undone.” Given in solemn oath before York Justice of the Peace, Henry Hobbs on December 20, 1817.

5. Testimony of Waterboro resident Jacob Emery claiming that James Barnes, after the death of his father Benjamin Barnes, took out a letter of administration of his estate. Such a letter was granted by a probate court when a deceased person left no will. In this case this letter would allow James Barnes to deal with matters relating to his father’s property. Jacob Emery heard the Shakers say that James Barnes should have no part of his father’s estate and that before he would receive anything, they were prepared to expend large amounts of money to do so. They believed that their covenant would prevail. Emery also claimed that at one time he heard “one of the deacons” say that they would give James something were it not for others who would also try to claim an inheritance from the Shakers. Given in solemn oath before York Justice of the Peace Henry Hobbs on December 20, 1817.
6. Testimony of Waterboro resident Joseph Pike claiming knowledge of how the Shakers viewed those who withdrew from the community. He stated, “if they left them they should have Nothing for their Covenant agreements would prevent all persons from obtaining any thing.” Given in solemn oath before York Justice of the Peace Henry Hobbs on December 20, 1817.
7. Remonstrance of the male members of the Church Family, New Gloucester to the General Court on January 2, 1818, against “a petition desiring you to alter the Laws of the Land, Such wise as that all Conveyance of real & personal estate to any family or to individuals of our faith, Shall become null & void at the death of the grantor.” Though not generally interested in meddling in public affairs, the New Gloucester Shakers felt compelled to respond to the “blow aimed at us in particular.” The Shakers had been accustomed to see it as a right that citizens may lawfully dispose of property as they wished to “pious & charitable” uses. This “right to give” they supposed applied to “the trustees of ministerial funds, Bible and Tract Societies, Hospitals, Missionary Societies, & others.” Since they could not imagine the

legislature taking away such rights from these groups, the Shakers felt that the intent of the proposal was only for them. Rather than answer base charges from people who knew little about them, they directed the legislators to look at how the Shakers have acted by their industry, sobriety and integrity. Also if they were so corrupt, no law would be necessary since they would come to ruin on their own. To the signatures of the Shakers, seven non-Shakers added their names since they were “acquainted with most of the persons whose names are Signed to the within memorial, and Consider them as men of good character, to whose Statement we Should not hesitate to give credit.” Committed to the Committee by the House of Representatives and sent up for concurrence on January 15, 1818. Read and concurred in the Senate on January 20, 1818.

8. Response of the Shaker trustees of the Alfred, Harvard, and Shirley Shakers to the House of Representatives of the General Court in Boston. The trustees of these three Massachusetts Shaker societies expressed “regret and astonishment” at the petition and stated that the right of an individual to dispose of property was not “peculiar to them.” Indeed, “All owners of property may dispose of it without fraud.” If a person donated property and later no longer was connected to that group, they had given up their right to that property. The trustees claimed that “every fund for pious and charitable uses” operated under the same principle. Moreover, they felt it was “essential to liberty that a man should dispose of property as he pleases.” They pointed out that people join the Shakers voluntarily, and if coercion or any force was used to make them dedicate their property such agreements would be void. The trustees also challenged the petitioners to show them a person who left them, even one who had harmed them, who left in distressful circumstances. These people always had their “pity and charity.” If the legislators passed a law based on the petition, it would destroy the right of conscience in the same Constitution that protected all groups no matter how small or how peculiar their way of worship may seem. As noted, they also affirmed that no Connecticut statute existed that allowed heirs to gain Shaker property. They ended their remonstrance by offering to meet with the petitioners or any counsel they had. Read and remitted to Committee by the House of Representatives on January 16, 1818. Sent up to the Senate and read and concurred on the same date.

9. Response of the Shaker trustees of Hancock and Tyringham, Massachusetts on January 7, 1818. They saw the proposal by the petitioners to be an attack on the liberty of conscience guaranteed by the constitutions of Massachusetts and the United States. They offered two examples from the Old and New Testament to show that the Shakers were following Biblical tradition. As noted they explained how a believing parent could leave property to non-believing children or not. Furthermore they could not understand why the Shakers should be singled out when the practice of leaving property to colleges and academies was widely established. They said that any act that deprived them of their freedom in this matter would be “a real act of persecution.” Very shrewdly they also mentioned that unlike everyone else, their poor were taken care of by themselves and not put on the town, and that they paid town taxes and spent their own money on road improvements. Rather than seeing their wealth as something to hoard as a miser would, they contributed to many charitable causes. Finally, their riches had come from “faithful industry” since when the societies were first started, the membership lived mostly at the subsistence level. Read and sent to committee by the House of Representatives and read and concurred by the Senate on January 20, 1818.
10. Testimony of eleven citizens of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts offering their support to the Alfred Shakers. They viewed the petition with “surprise and alarm” having known the Shakers and finding them to be “civil in their deportment, upright in their conduct & strictly honest and punctual in all their dealings.” They felt that those who dedicate their property to the Shakers had a “free and absolute right” to do it. They also pointed out that there are many modes of faith in the gospel and no law that prevents parents from disinheriting their heirs. They declared that the Alfred Shakers “never withheld the property of any after uniting with them thought proper to withdraw his connections; and do further aver from satisfactory information” if it had not been possible to give the person the original property, “a satisfactory equivalent” had been given instead. They closed by stating that they cannot understand why a law should pass “bending” the faith of the Shakers any more than a similar law against free-will Baptists or other sects. Read and sent to committee by the House of Representatives and read and concurred by the Senate on January 20, 1818.

11. The documents had been referred to the Committee of New Trials. This committee reported that after considering the petition “praying for relief from certain covenants & arguments with the people called Shakers... ask leave to Report—That the Petitioners have leave to withdraw their Petition Which is submitted by order of the Committee” on January 22, 1818.

The General Court began its session on January 14, 1818. The remonstrance letters of the Shaker trustees and those who supported them began to be read by the legislature the very next day. Everything was sent to the Committee for New Trials by January 20, 1818, and it apparently took them little time to realize that the petition trying to have a law enacted that would alter the covenant of the Shakers would not be legal or worth the legal entanglements that would ensue should the General Court make a law interfering with a citizen's right to donate assets or disinherit heirs. Just two days later they decided to allow the petitioners be granted leave to withdraw the petition from consideration. The petition, in other words, did not make it past the committee. No acts or resolves in that session or subsequent ones of the General Court dealt with any legislative attempt by statute to invalidate the Shaker covenant to accommodate disinherited heirs from Alfred. After March 15, 1820, the General Court no longer had jurisdiction over matters in the new state of Maine.<sup>12</sup>

### **Addendum:**

Among the documents is a manuscript that at first seems out of place. It discusses a legal judgment involving Thomas Cushman of the Alfred Shakers. Though it is in the archives, there is no evidence or notation that it was brought before the General Court. The case had been a dispute between Cushman and James Barrans of Waterboro. Apparently Barrans had demanded that Cushman pay him \$100 for nine months wages for two boys. Barrans and Cushman agreed to abide by the decision of a group of three men acting as referees who would present the case as soon as it could be brought before a court of common pleas in York County. One of the referees, John Law was likely related to 1817 petition signers Thomas Law (1752-1838) and Daniel Law. Another one of them, Tobias Lord shared the same surname with petition signers Andrew, Simon and Abraham Lord. After listening to evidence from both sides, it was decided that Thomas Cushman legally held half the house belonging to James Barrans in common with non-Shaker Ebenezer Buzzell (1778-1807). The house was on Cushman's land. It is inferred that Cushman did not want to pay the laborers since the house was leased by Barrans. On April 4, 1806,

the court decided that Cushman had to pay Barrans eighty dollars in two installments. When the money was paid, then Barrans had to give up the lease to Cushman.

A number of explanations for the presence of this document come to mind. First, the name James Barrans and the names James Barnes are so similar and both men lived in Waterboro at one point. These facts make it nearly impossible to imagine that they are not the same person. If this is the case, then the manuscript is evidence that James Barnes had a previous encounter with the Shakers over financial matters that needed to be resolved by a court of law. The inclusion of this item in the collection may also have been a supporting document to show how the Shakers tried to defraud their workers. If James Barrans is not James Barnes, the item could have been a miscellaneous piece of evidence that had been collected but never used for Ara Cushman's case against his Shaker father Thomas Cushman. As noted, Ara never gave a disposition against the Shakers for disinheriting him.

Before closing it is of interest to note that in the Shaker manuscript collection of the Western Reserve Historical Society are two documents dealing with the 1817 petition and a Shaker response. The Western Reserve has relatively few items that concern the Alfred Shakers so it might seem quite a coincidence that this collection has a copy of the 1817 petition to the General Court and a copy of the remonstrance by the Alfred, Harvard and Shirley trustees.<sup>13</sup> It really is not surprising, however. From the petition published in the *Columbian Centinel* and the *Weekly Visiter*, the Shakers and others would have made and distributed them among the seven Massachusetts Shaker villages.<sup>14</sup> At least one copy would also have gone to Mother Lucy Wright (1761-1821) and her associates for their perusal. The same is true of the letters of remonstrance by trustees. When items were being collected by later Shakers and sent to the Western Reserve for preservation, the Alfred related documents were included from one of these sources. Finally, along with the two Western Reserve items mentioned, there is an unreadable manuscript dated March, 1818 signed by David Barnes and John Anderson (1751-1829) of Alfred. The last item, dated so close to the case, may contain a reference to the failed petition.



## Notes

1. In documents from the era, the town is spelled Waterborough. and that is how the town was incorporated by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in 1787. The name was shortened to Waterboro in 1895, and I have used the modern spelling through the article.
2. Brother Arnold [Hadd], "Holy Land: A brief history of The Alfred Shakers," written in conjunction with the exhibit "Simple Gifts: The Alfred Shakers 1783-1931," a commemoration of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the closing of Alfred held at the Saco Museum, Saco, Maine, 2006.
3. Sister R. Mildred Barker, *Holy Land: A History of the Alfred Shakers* (Sabbathday Lake, Maine: The Shaker Press, 1983), [4].
4. Henry Wyles Cushman, *A Historical and Biographical Genealogy of the Cushmans: The Descendants of Robert Cushman, the Puritan, From the Year 1617-1855*, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1855), 285.
5. Theodore E. Johnson, comp., "A Complete Register of Deaths Which Have Occurred in the United Society of Believers, Alfred, Maine 1790-1931," *Shaker Quarterly*, Winter, 1961, 176.
6. Grantor David Meacham to Grantees Benjamin Pease and Daniel Wood, September 3, 1800. Deed Book Seven, 527, Town Clerk, Enfield.
7. Brother Arnold Hadd, "Agreeable to Our Understanding: The Shaker Covenant," *Shaker Quarterly*, Nos. 1-4, 1996, 59, 61-2.
8. Ibid. Specifically, within the article by Brother Arnold Hadd, "The Covenant of the Church at Harvard, 1814," 69-70.
9. "Estate of Munsell, Zacheus, Enfield, 1794, No. 2059, East Windsor Probate District," in "Connecticut Wills and Probate Records, 1609-1999," Ancestry.com.
10. Grantor Zacheus Munsell to Grantee Ezekiel Slate of Somers, 16.5 acres, May 20, 1795. Deed Book Six, 186, Town Clerk, Enfield. Grantor Susannah Munsell to Grantee Asa Allen, no acreage given and no date. Deed Book Six, 143. Town Clerk Enfield. Grantor Levi Munsell to Grantee Asa Allen, 9 acres, November 2, 1796. Deed Book Six, 271. Town Clerk, Enfield.
11. "Estate of Munsell."
12. "Consolidated Table of Massachusetts Laws and Resolves 1806-1820 (including those applicable to the District of Maine)," courtesy of [lldc.mainelegislature.org/Open/Meta/MassLaws/Table1806-1820.pdf](http://lldc.mainelegislature.org/Open/Meta/MassLaws/Table1806-1820.pdf)
13. "Land deeds, petitions, indentures, and other legal documents...", Covenants, Laws, and Legal and Land Records, I A-1, Western Reserve Historical Society.
14. New Gloucester, Gorham, Alfred, Harvard, Shirley, Tyningham, and Hancock

## Documents

### Document One:

#### Citizens of York County, Maine, Petition to the General Court of Massachusetts, May 1817

To the Honorable the Senate and the Honorable house of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in General Court Assembled on the last Wednesday of May 1817 your petitioners inhabitants of the County of York beg leave to humbly shew that in Several Instances that where the heads of families have Joined and united with the religious denomination of Christians Called Shakers in the Town of Alfred ~~and~~ in said County, and in other pa[rts?] of the Destrict of Maine, and when having so united all their property both Real & personal estate is Considered as belonging to said Society, (agreeable to their Constitution) by which at the Decease of Certain persons among them, the heirs without have been wholly Deprived of their Legal right, as heirs to their Fathers property estate some of which are really poor having left the society for Conscience sake, previous to the death of their parent, and after the decease of their parents, & have often requested Said Society, or Societies to pay what we your petitioners believe them Justly intitled to, as heirs but have been Denied of any part or portion whatever.—and as their Constitution and articles of agreement among themselves are such, that your petitioners are doubtfull whether the heirs that are without or not belonging to said Society Can by Virtue of any Law now in existance in this State obtain what we your petitioners think them Justly entitled to. we therefore pray that your Honors would take it in your Wise Consideration and that an act, may be passed Simelar to that in the state of Connecticut that all the heirs without, or not belonging to said Society May not be deprived of their Just proportion of the estates of their ~~Deceased~~ parents or relations that have deceased among the People Called Shakers, on account of any of their Covenant agreements or articles of Constitution agreed upon among themselves—or that and Act may be passed in such a manner as you in your Wisdom may think fit that what we Consider so great an evil may be remided as in duty bound will ever pray

Stephen Sanborn  
Jona French  
James Jelleson  
[ABY?] Jelleson  
Samuel Bradens

Nathaniel Hobbs  
James Hamilton  
Josiah Swett  
Samuel Swett  
Olando Bagley

Benjn R Hamilton	Dennis Johnson
Henry Hobbs	James Stevens
Benjn Peirce	James Chase
Dennis Emery	Gilbert Harty
William Dearing	Joshua Hill
Samuel Carle	John Hill
Edward Walker	Moody [Davis?]
Isaac Phillpot	Enoch Stanley
Daniel Smith	John [Butchelson?]
William Dearing Jr	[Samuel?] Howard
Timothy Ricker	Thomas Brooks
Timothy Ricker Jr	William Rend[er?]
Moses Hill	Otis Densmore
Isaac Pray	William Harmon
Aaron Bragdon	Samuel Briggs
Simeon Knight	Thomas Goodwin
John Young	Jacob Abbot
Jonathan Knight	A. D. Baker
Joshua Bagley	Timothy Pike
Benjamin Sinkler	Moses B [Pond?]
Thomas Carll	Paul Patch Jr
John Carll	Darling Huntress
Peter Horrell Jr	Abraham Lord
Peter Carle	Jerry [Traff?]
James Carlisle	Simon Lord
Benja Page	John Stone
Thomas Knight	Nathaniel Thing
Zebulon Knight	Nathaniel Thing Jr
Daniel Knight	Samuel Thing

that what we consider so great an  
reminded as in duty bound will ever pray

Stephen Sanborn Nathaniel Hall Henry Hobbs  
John A. Hamilton Benja. Peirce  
James Jellison Josiah Hill Dennis Emery  
Samuel Carle William Dearing  
Samuel Bragdon Orlando Bagley Samuel Carle  
Benja. Hamilton

Edward Walker  
 Isaac Phillips  
 Daniel Smith  
 William Dearing jr  
 Timothy Richer  
 Timothy Richer jr  
 Jacob Richer  
 Moses Hill  
 Isaac Pray  
 Aaron Bragdon  
 Simon Knight  
 Joshua Knight  
 Jonathan Knight  
 Benjamin Finkler  
 Thomas Carll  
 John Carll  
 Peter Horrell  
 Peter Lane  
 James Carll  
 George Pa go  
 Thomas Knight  
 Lebrary Knight  
 Daniel Knight  
 Bonny Johnson  
 James Stevens  
 James Chase  
 Gilbert Harty  
 Joshua Hill  
 John Will  
 Moody Pa

Enoch Stanley  
 John Nuttall  
 Pampel Howard  
 Thos. Brooks  
 William Bunde  
 Chas. Denmore  
 William Starnun  
 Samuel Bux  
 Thomas Goodwin  
 Jacob Elliot  
 A. D. Baker  
 Timothy Pike  
 Moses B. Bond  
 Paul Patch  
 Darling Hunt  
 A. D. Hunt  
 Jerry F. Hunt  
 Simon Love  
 John Stone  
 Nathaniel Thing  
 Nathaniel Thing  
 Samuel Thing

**Document Two:**

**Sabbathday Lake, Maine, Shakers' Letter to the General Court of Massachusetts, January 2, 1818**

To the Honorable the General Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts

Respected friends

We the brethren of the Church and Society of believers in New Gloucester Commonly Called Shakers, have heard that certain people in & about Alfred have Sent a petition desiring you to alter the Laws of the Land, in Such wise as that all Conveyance of real & personal estate to any family or to individuals of our faith, Shall become null & void at the death of the grantor. Although it is not our way to intermeddle with the public affairs, but to Submit quietly to all Laws enacted for the whole body of the people whatever they may be: yet regarding this proposed measure as a blow aimed at us in particular, we are constrained to remonstrate against it

We have been accustomed to Consider it as the Law of the Land that any citizen may lawfully bestow his welth to pious & charitable uses. On this basis we believe rests the general Statute respecting donation to Such uses, making certain officers of Churches corporation to take by gift: and in virtue of the Same right to give, we Suppose Sundry other Corporation are empowered to receive estates. Such as the trustees of ministerial funds, Bible & Tract Societies, Hospitals, Missionary Societies, & others; all having in view the free & charitable administration of good to the bodies or Souls of men.

We cannot think you ~~will~~ would pass any general Law which Should limit donations to Such Societies as these to the life of the donor. If therefore any law is enacted, it must be a particular one, levelled Specially at our Communion. But before you can be persuaded to pass any Such law, we think you will first be persuaded that we deserve it; either for Some radical fault in our faith pernicious to the State at large, or for Some equally dangerous corruption in our practices.

Respecting our faith we do not think it expedient with a relation of all the errors unjustly laid to our Charge= there are Some calumnies which we Shall never stoop to answer. We believe the Holy Scriptures to be a true record of the revelation from God to man = and we hope for Salvation through the lord Jesus Christ, and in no other way- Our particular views of the scriptures are contained in the writings of our brethren & are published to the world at large; and we desire that no peculiarity of faith may be Charged upon us but what is there expressed. We think that we can better

declare our belief then others can for us.

Touching our outward demeanor, it becomes us to Say but little. Our actions Speak for themselves. But we ought to observe that we do not urge or press any man to unite with us. We would not willingly receive any one to our Communion who is not fully persuaded in his own mind: We do not require any man to Convey all his property to us: nor do we receive any till his lawful debts are paid & Such provision made for his family as is just and proper. On this last point we are Scrupulous to have every just cause of complaint removed. If we Spend our Substance in vitious living, instead of works of piety and and charity, ~~if we are~~ if we are destitute of industry, Sobriety, frugality, temperance or integrity, let our enemies witness against us. Whose [?] have we taken- whom have we corrupted or defrauded or whose garments have we received for a pledge?

But if we are both corrupt in principle & immoral in practice; granting our enemies all they falsely allege against us: we still would Suggest that no act of legislation can be necessary. If this work or this counsel be of men, it will come to naught. We do not read that any pernicious Sect has ever existed in the Christian world any longer then it was thought proper to persecute it professors.

Let it not be said that in this last asylum, this only hope of the friends of true liberty in the earth, the Secular arm was lifted against any temple for the worship of Jehovah.

But should it be Still objected that we ought not to possess lands in common, we answer, let our titles be examined in the Courts of Justice, for the remedy Seems to be amply with them. We do not Suppose that they will hold as valid any donation or Conveyance obtained by fraud, or intended to carry into effect any immoral or unlawful purpose.

Wherefore, we respectfully request that you would not grant the prayer of that petition

Jan. 2. 1818

Joseph Briggs  
Joshua Merrill  
John Holmes  
James Holmes  
Calvin Holmes  
William Merrill  
Robert Willson  
Oliver Holmes  
Barnabus Briggs  
Ephraim Briggs

James Merrill

Richard Thurlo

We the Subscribers are acquainted with most of the persons whose names are Signed to the within memorial, and Consider them as men of good character, to whose Statement we Should not hesitate to give credit

David Nelson

Daniel Howard

Joshua Abbe

Wm Bradbury Jr

Isaac Parsons

Joseph E. Foxcroft

Simon [?]

Jan'y 15<sup>th</sup>

Committed to the Comtee on the petition to which this remonstrance refers

House of Representatives Jan 15. 1818

Read & commd to the Commee on Pet. of S. Sanborn & others.

Sent up for concurrence

Timothy Begelow Speaker

In Senate Jan 20 1818

Read and concurred

John Phillips Presidt

Wherefore, we respectfully request that you would  
not grant the prayer of that petition  
Jan. 2. 1818.

Joseph Briggs,  
Joshua Merrill  
John Holmes  
James Holmes  
Calvin Holmes  
William Merrill  
Robert Williams  
Oliver Holmes  
Nathaniel Briggs  
Ephraim Briggs  
James Merrill  
Richard Thurlow



**Document Three:**

**Massachusetts' Shaker Communities' Letter to the General Court of Massachusetts, January 1818**

To the Honourable Senate, and House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, in General Court Assembled: in January 1818

Whereas, a petition from a number of persons in the County of York, was presented to the Legislature at their last cession, Praying that an act may be passed to disannul the Covenants, and agreements of the people called Shakers; alleging that they have withheld, and defrauded heirs of their Just and natural rights &c.

We, the undersigned, being members of the Societies of people called Shakers, in the towns of Hancock, Pittsfield, and Tyringham, in the County of Berkshire, knowing that any act to abridge the rights of any one Society of our denomination, within the Same State, must operate Equally upon all; feel in duty bound for ourselves, and in behalf of the Societies to which we belong; to declare our innocence, and to enter our Solemn protest against any act which so pointedly Strikes against the liberty of conscience, and the very root of the constitution of this State, and that of the United States.

The covenant into which we have entered is of the most Sacred and Solemn nature, being founded and established upon the most Sacred conviction of conscience, that it is what God required of us.

Hence any law that may be passed to annul, or counteract any article of this covenant, must Serve to abridge the rights of conscience; and Strike at the very foundation pillar of our free and happy Government.

The form and manner of our Covenant, by which we have consecrated ourselves and property to God; and by which the members of Each Society are bound together as the children of one family; being dictated by the purest principles of conscience; is to us the most dear of all others; and is that which receives the Sanction of divine revelation recorded in Scripture, and the practice, custom, and Support, of all Civilized nations for many ages; that a man, or woman, has a right to consecrate a part, or all his property with himself to God for pious & Sacred uses, is that which a canded world will never dispute; and if we refer to the Sacred writings, we Shall find that the right of parents to consecrate to God, what they possessed, was carried so far that that is Some instances they consecrated even their Children; as in the case of Jephthahs daughter, and Samuel the

prophet, and others; and also at the establishment of the primitive Church of Christ, under the immediate care of the Sacred Apostles when those who had possessions Sold all, and came and cast it down to the Apostles feet; and division was made to every one according to his needs; and no one called aught which he possessed his own &c.

But according to the third article of our covenant, no property can be admitted into the Joint interest of the Church, until it is cleared from all entanglements from without; by paying all Just debts, and making a Just and reasonable Settlement with all the heirs who Stand without; & this has been our invariable practice; and we challenge the world to prove to the contrary; and we think that none but the apostate and prejudiced will accuse us of defrauding or withholding any Just right from heirs or any other persons.

But it has often been the case, that parents who have believed and their children Stand without, that the parents have given their whole property to their children, not reserving the least remains to Support themselves thro the infirmities of old age; others after settling all Just demands as aforesaid, have reserved a portion to themselves, which they have agreeable to their own faith consecrated to God, for the Support of the gospel, and other charitable and pious uses.

The right of persons to devote property for laudable and pious uses, under our free constitution, appears to be fully established, by what almost daily takes place by individual donations to the use of Collages, Academies, and other useful improvements.

Upon what grounds of Justice then, do your petitioners wish to Single out the Shakers and deny them this right of acting according to the dictates of a pure conscience; Should this petition be granted according to the wishes of your petitioners, we can never consider it in any other light than as a real act of persecution.

But it is that which we confidently believe when duly considered and fully understood by the honorable and enlightened minds of those who compose the Legislature of our [fair?] and happy State; will never be granted.

Furthermore, as the design and purpose of our uniting in a Joint interest, according to the 5<sup>th</sup> article of our Covenant, was not to lay up a temporal interest here in this world; but all which we came in possession of by honest industry more than for our own Support, to appropriate it to the use of the Gospel, for the Support of the Poor, and other charitable and pious uses.

Hence, the hand of Charity has ever been held open to the poor, the fatherless, and widow; so that hundreds and thousands of dollars have been

expended, by each Society, (who hold their Joint interest in a Separate capacity;) and in Stead of turning our own poor, upon the town as is the usual custom, we have ever maintained them ourselves, and have bourn our equal burden in taxes for the Support of the poor in towns where we reside, as well as all taxes for the Support of Civil Government; and in cases of the destruction of property by fire, Such as Portsmouth, Newbury port, and other places, we have contrabuted largely for the relief of the Sufferers; as also in cases of Sickness as the yellow fever in New York, Philadelphia &C.

We have also laid out great expences upon the public roads, so that hundreds and thousands of dollars have been Spent upon the roads in and about our Villages, more than our legal taxation.

But these things are not mentioned for the purpose of boasting, but that Such as fancy that with the cruel grasp of the miser we are hoarding up treasures of Silver & Gold, may See the mistake.

Furthermore it ought to be Considered that, at the first establishment of all the Societies of our denomination thro the State, the people were mostly poor very few heads of families were in possession of more property than barely to pay all Just demands from without, so that in Some Societies nearly, and in others all the property now in Possession, is that which has been acquired by the faithful industry, and hard labour of those who now reside in our communities, who have consecrated themselves with their time, and talents to God, and each other, by the most Solemn Covenant. What right then, has a man, or woman, to break in upon that covenant, which Stands as the last will and testament of a departed Father or Mother, Brother or Sisters. For the honor of America! let it never be Said under our free and happy Government, that the Sacret pledges of the departed Saint, must be torn from the holy temple consecrated to the worship of the great ruler of the universe, to Satisfy Satisfy the demands of an apostate and avaricious mind!

In presenting the foregoing considerations to the wise and enlightened minds of the rulers of our State, we are far from wishing to censure or cast any reflection upon that respectable body, neither do we entertain a Suspicion that when they are properly informed, of the purity of our motives, and the Justice of our proceedings, they will pass any act which will be injureous to our persons or property, or infringe upon the rights of Conscience.

But as we Justly esteem the free and happy Government, under which we are placed by the finger of providence, we Submit the foregoing, to the Serious and deliberate consideration of the Just, and equitable rulers of our State; who are called to guard, and protect the rights and liberties of

conscience in this enlightened age.

And with due respect we Shall ever remain your faithful friends and wish for your prosperity & happiness.

In behalf of the Society at Hancock & Pittsfield{ Calvin Cogswell  
John Wright Daniel Goodrich

In behalf of the Society at Tyningham{ Thomas Patten Henry Herrick

In behalf of the Society  
at Hancock & Pittsfield } Calvin Cogswell  
John Wright  
Daniel Goodrich

In behalf of the Society  
at Tyningham } Thomas Patten  
Henry Herrick

