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# The Gendering of Order and Disorder: Mother Ann Lee and Shaker Architecture

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## Memoranda and Documents

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### THE GENDERING OF ORDER AND DISORDER: MOTHER ANN LEE AND SHAKER ARCHITECTURE

JULIE NICOLETTA

IN 1782 the people of Harvard, Massachusetts, viciously attacked Shaker founder Ann Lee and her followers and dragged them out of town. Both members of the sect and apostates supported rumors that the Shakers danced naked in the woods, that Lee—a reputed illiterate who emphasized communication through actions and the spoken word—was a witch, and that to draw adherents she encouraged husbands to abandon their wives and parents to abandon their children. Lee's assertion that she was the counterpart of Christ, which non-Shakers misinterpreted as her claiming to be Christ incarnate, and her rejection of traditional Christianity upset the patriarchal order of the Harvard community. Like religious dissenters before her, including Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams, Lee was deemed a heretic and ostracized.

Still, despite episodes like the one in Harvard, Ann Lee attracted followers, and she did so for many of the same reasons that the town of Harvard had driven her out. Under her leadership, the Shakers, officially known as the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing or the Millennial Church, encouraged religious enthusiasm. For these new Shakers, who believed in Lee's pronouncement of the coming millennium, the promise of sexual equality and wild religious worship expressed through the body—in dancing, speaking in tongues, fasting, and practicing celibacy—was appealing. With the loss of their charismatic leader in 1784, however, the Shakers grew increasingly concerned about the sect's stability. Some of Lee's companions, who wished to avoid the persecution they had suffered during her tenure at the same time as they strove to promote economic growth in Shaker communities, stepped forward to assume leadership of the body of believers. Between 1785 and 1845, these men carefully planned and executed a series of measures—extending from the built environment, to community organization, to religious practice—that radically altered Ann Lee's spontaneous design.



During Mother Ann's lifetime, the Shakers had erected no structures; instead, they lived in farmhouses and often worshiped in fields and woods. In 1785, however, just one year after Lee's death, James Whittaker, who had followed her from England, and Joseph Meacham, who led a congregation of Baptists in New Lebanon, New York, before converting to Shakerism, launched a program to establish organized Shaker communities. Their first project was to build a meetinghouse at Mount Lebanon, New York, about thirty miles southeast of Albany. They enlisted Moses Johnson, the first known Shaker builder, whose skills in hewing timber and framing buildings drew the attention of Whittaker.<sup>1</sup> Meacham, however, most likely designed the meetinghouse.<sup>2</sup>

Prompted by the functional success of Mount Lebanon's meetinghouse, which still stands, Meacham sent Johnson to other Shaker communities throughout New England. Using the Mount Lebanon house as his model, Johnson built eight additional meetinghouses in eastern New York and New England before 1794.<sup>3</sup> The Shirley, Massachusetts, meetinghouse, built in 1792-93 and now standing at Hancock Shaker Village in western Massachusetts, typifies the early meetinghouses (fig. 1). Other meetinghouses built by Johnson survive at Canterbury, New Hampshire, and Sabbathday Lake, Maine.

Photographs of the Shirley meetinghouse, taken when the building was moved to Hancock in 1962, reveal that the structure is based on three important elements of Anglo-Dutch timber framing—the anchor bent, the anchor-bent joint, and the close spacing of bents—a method of framing particularly suitable for an unskilled workforce. For the exterior of the meetinghouses, Meacham favored an English gambrel roof, with both slopes of equal length, over a Dutch gambrel roof, which has a short upper and a long lower slope. For the interior, he preferred the strong colors of the period, specifically bright pruss-

<sup>1</sup>Edward Deming Andrews, *A Shaker Meetinghouse and Its Builder* (Hancock: Shaker Community, Inc., 1962), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>Judith D. Spiedel, "The Heritage of the Shaker 'House of Reverence,'" in *Historical Survey of Canterbury Shaker Village*, ed. David R. Starbuck and Margaret Supplee Smith (Boston: Boston University Press, 1979), p. 88.

<sup>3</sup>The Mount Lebanon meetinghouse was moved from its original site and radically altered by the Shakers and successive owners. After 1821, the gambrel roof was replaced with a gable roof, and the Shakers used the structure as a seed shop. Johnson's subsequent eight meetinghouses were: Hancock (1786); Watervliet, N.Y. (1791); Harvard, Mass. (1791); Canterbury, N.H. (1792-93); Shirley, Mass. (1792-93); Enfield, N.H. (1793); Sabbathday Lake, Maine (1794); and Alfred, Maine (1794).

ian blue, another English influence. As with Quaker meetinghouses, he constructed separate entrances for men and women. Moreover—and perhaps most important—since the Anglo-Dutch style freed the first floor of structural supports, it provided plenty of open space for worship meetings and dances, thus deviating from a feature of Quaker meetinghouse architecture—the male/female dividing wall.

After Whittaker's death in 1787, Meacham assumed leadership of the sect. By 1790, with the Shaker population swelling to 538 members, Meacham decided to impose a formal set of rules to manage original converts and ensure the continued growth of the community.<sup>4</sup> Among his first acts was to establish a hierarchy determined by religious commitment and age. At Mount Lebanon, for example, Meacham divided members into the First, Second, and Third Families. The First Family was composed of converts who had demonstrated their devotion to the sect by giving up all their worldly possessions. The Second Family was made up of the elderly and the Third Family of the youth or novices.<sup>5</sup> Each family had elders and elders, deacons and deaconesses, and trustees. The two elders and two elders acted as the spiritual leaders of the group, while the deacons and deaconesses saw to the physical needs of the family. The trustees dealt with legal and business affairs involving the Shakers and the outside world. Overseeing the families at one or more of the villages was the ministry, eventually made up of two elders and two elders. The ministry made decisions governing the entire community.

Meacham also created dances of worship to control and contain the expression of religious feeling. Gone were the wild, erotic dances of Ann Lee's time. Instead, dances called the "Square-Order Shuffle" and "The March"—requiring rigid, precise movements and synchronized steps illustrated in "The Dance" (fig. 2)—were introduced.<sup>6</sup> Meacham, despite the Shakers' practice of celibacy, wanted the sexes to interact, to create spiritual and temporal families to build strong communities. The dances brought Shaker brothers and sisters, including children, into proximity without allowing them to touch each

<sup>4</sup>Priscilla Brewer, *Shaker Communities, Shaker Lives* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1986), p. 215.

<sup>5</sup>These families would later be divided into more groups, making a total of eight families at Mount Lebanon.

<sup>6</sup>Isaac N. Youngs, "A Concise View of the Church of God and of Christ on Earth. Having its foundation In the faith of Christ's First and Second Appearing. New Lebanon [N.Y.] 1856," ms. 861, Edward Deming Andrews Memorial Shaker Collection, Henry Francis DuPont Winterthur Museum and Library, Winterthur, Del., pp. 71-72.

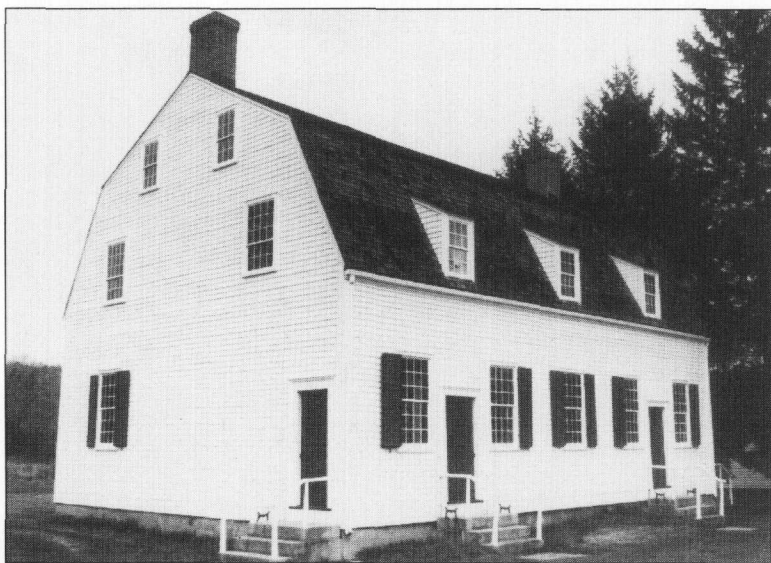


FIG. 1. Front and Side Elevations, Meetinghouse, 1792–93, Shirley, Massachusetts, now located at Hancock Shaker Village, Massachusetts. Photograph by Julie Nicoletta, 1988.

other. Meacham wanted them to be mindful of the temptations they had denied to become Shakers.

As an additional mechanism to regulate the sexes and subdue desires of the flesh, Meacham instituted union meetings. Five brothers and five sisters—sitting in parallel rows about five feet apart—would meet during the week in a retiring room. Each brother conversed politely with the sister opposite him for an hour or so. The relationship between brother and sister, who were similar in age, extended beyond their semi-weekly meeting, however. Sisters mended clothing for their brothers, who, in turn, performed “needful favors” (such as moving heavy objects and repairing machinery) for the sister. The couple maintained their union unless moving, death, or new members required a change. Such intercourse was a reminder to the men and women of what they sacrificed to become Believers.<sup>7</sup>

Meacham’s edicts and hierarchies left no doubt as to where an individual, male or female, stood within the community. Labor roles were defined along gender lines. For example, trustees—because the

<sup>7</sup>Youngs, “A Concise View,” pp. 181, 185.



FIG. 2. "The Dance," an engraving after a drawing by Benson John Lossing, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, July 1857, p. 169.

position required frequent interaction with non-Shakers, a role not suited for women—could only be men. The choreographed dances, a blatant defiance of Ann Lee's encouragement of spontaneous worship through free bodily movement, trained brothers and sisters to control their bodies and subdue emotions and desires. To spread the word about the Society of Believers, Meacham wrote *A Concise Statement of the Principles of the Only True Church . . .* in 1790, a text that helped Meacham transform Shakerism into a highly structured religion. In the text, Meacham neglected to mention Ann Lee. The omission initiated a trend in Shaker literature that, according to Louis J. Kern, characterized women as less rational than men, less able to control their emotions, and as a source of temptation to their brothers.<sup>8</sup> The gender line was being drawn.

<sup>8</sup>See Joseph Meacham, *A Concise Statement of the Principles of the Only True Church According to the Gospel of the Present Appearance of Christ. As Held to and Practiced upon by the True Followers of the Living Saviour, at New-Lebanon, &c. Together with a Letter from James Whittaker, Minister of the Gospel in this Day of Christ's Second Appearance, to his Natural Relations in England* (Bennington: Haswell and Russell, 1790). Louis J. Kern, *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), pp. 84–85.



Despite Meacham's imposition of order, he selected Lucy Wright, one of Ann Lee's closest followers, to stand with him as head eldress. Her appointment, although Meacham continued to make most of the decisions shaping Shakerism until his death in 1796, helped to alleviate the ambiguities of gender and leadership among early Shakers. It also established a new system within Shakerdom based on dual-gendered leadership and a formal hierarchical structure.

More important, in a move that triggered five years of rebellion and dissent among the young men at Mount Lebanon and Hancock, Meacham acknowledged that Wright, upon his death, would act as the authoritative Shaker leader despite her "being of the weaker sex in man."<sup>9</sup> Jean M. Humez notes that "Meacham's elevation of Wright to a position parallel to his in the emerging church governance was of tremendous importance" and adds that the "radical decision was to appoint a woman first in the line of succession after his death, thus establishing a precedent of female first eldership of the entire Society." Having served with her for seven years, Meacham apparently believed that Wright was the best choice to be his successor.<sup>10</sup>

During the twenty-five years of Lucy Wright's reign, until her death in 1821, she continued Meacham's policy of maintaining order. The Shaker population grew to approximately 4,300 followers. The community encompassed sixteen villages, some located as far west as Indiana.<sup>11</sup> Still, the insurrection under which Wright's rule began was followed by frequent authoritative challenges from Shaker men during her entire administration. Because she was constantly under siege, Wright, despite her leadership role, was unable to give women a more prominent place within Shakerdom.<sup>12</sup> As was the case under Whitaker and Meacham, work assignments remained segregated by sex. Marjorie Procter-Smith notes that well into the nineteenth century, Shaker elders, rather than eldresses (a tradition that can be traced

<sup>9</sup>Jean M. Humez, "Weary of Petticoat Government: The Specter of Female Rule in Early Nineteenth-Century Shaker Politics," *Communal Societies* (Spring 1991): 5-6. Humez closely examines a number of cases of male dissent under Mother Lucy's leadership, using manuscript letters among elders and eldresses at various Shaker communities and the letters of some of the men leading the dissent.

<sup>10</sup>Humez, "Weary of Petticoat Government," pp. 4-5.

<sup>11</sup>Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 89.

<sup>12</sup>Humez, "Weary of Petticoat Government," p. 5.

back to Ann Lee), preached to Shakers and non-Shakers and controlled the format of worship meetings.<sup>13</sup> In addition, elders held the dominant role in community planning and architecture. In some respects, though, this arrangement was merely practical. Some Shaker men, many of whom had converted as adults, had prior experience in construction and could train Shaker boys in the trade. The opportunity to learn about design and construction, however, did not extend to women; committees of elders and brothers determined which buildings should be erected and when.<sup>14</sup> Eldresses and sisters had, at best, marginal input. They helped put the finishing touches on the buildings, doing the painting and varnishing, but always under the direction of a brother. While they were free to voice their opinions concerning the domestic sphere, they had little control over the engineering of technological innovations and arrangement of spaces—such as kitchens, laundries, and sleeping quarters—affecting them.

Thus, scholars note, dual-gendered leadership—especially within Shakerdom—still fostered traditional gender roles by placing women in a position subordinate to men.<sup>15</sup> Ann Lee upheld her leadership by comparing the church to a family yet recognized that it was only in the absence of a husband that the wife could govern. Meacham, though establishing a dual-gender leadership hierarchy, modeled his orderly Shaker society on families headed by elders and eldresses. He institutionalized a system in which female leaders, with the exception of Wright, served as second in command to male leaders. And even though Wright served as the primary leader of the Shakers after Meacham's death, it appears that Wright, like Ann Lee before her, simply accepted the traditional gender roles that prevailed at the time. Certainly Wright, known as Mother Lucy, represented the same benevolent, nurturing, motherly figure as did Lee in the first two decades of the nineteenth century.

<sup>13</sup>Marjorie Procter-Smith, *Women in Shaker Community and Worship: A Feminist Analysis of the Uses of Religious Symbolism* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1985), p. 140.

<sup>14</sup>Isaac N. Youngs, "A Domestic Journal of Daily Occurances [sic] . . ." New Lebanon, 11 March 1840, ms. 13500, Shaker Collection, New York State Archives, New York State Library, Albany.

<sup>15</sup>See Humez, "Weary of Petticoat Government," and "'Ye Are My Epistles': The Construction of Ann Lee Imagery in Early Shaker Sacred Literature," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* (Spring 1992); Procter-Smith, *Women in Shaker Community*; and Linda Mercadante, *Gender, Doctrine, and God: The Shakers and Contemporary Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990).





In 1816, thirty-two years after her death, Ann Lee's name first appeared in a Shaker publication, *Testimonies of the Life, Character, Revelations and Doctrine of Our Ever Blessed Mother Ann Lee . . .*, which depicted her as an individual who had risen above her womanly nature as an irrational being and source of temptation. In the following years, as the ruling elders achieved stability and recognized the importance of exposing the sect's early roots, first-hand accounts of Mother Ann, whether true or not, were compiled based on the memories of brothers' and sisters' initial experiences with her. This compilation, followed by what Jean M. Humez describes as "the official story created by later male leadership about Lee's journey with her associate elders through New England," presents Lee as a benevolent and motherly follower of Christ rather than as a passionate evangelical who encouraged religious enthusiasm.<sup>16</sup> This motherly, gendered image of Lee, the elders anticipated, would further rationalize women's domestic roles in the Shaker community. The elders believed, presumably, that creating a patriarchal sect would give the Shakers more credibility in the outside world, allowing the sect to attract more converts and avoid the persecution it had endured in the past.<sup>17</sup>

The circulation of the Millennial Laws in 1821 and in 1845 shifted the Shakers even further away from Mother Ann's legacy. The laws codified nearly all matters of Shaker life—including worship, daily behavior, and architecture—and specifically addressed the growing concern among the elders for defining physical and architectural space between the sexes, as embodied in the following rules:

- ◆ Brethren and sisters may not pass each other on the stairs.
- ◆ Brethren and sisters may not go to each other's apartments, without a just and lawful occasion.
- ◆ The brethren must all leave their rooms, while the sisters are doing the necessary chores therein.

<sup>16</sup>Humez, "Ye Are My Epistles," p. 103. For another analysis of the *Testimonies*, see Stephen A. Marini's, "A New View of Mother Ann Lee and the Rise of American Shakerism, Part I," *Shaker Quarterly* (Summer 1990): 47-62, and "Part II," (Fall 1990): 95-114.

<sup>17</sup>For an expanded analysis of this topic, see Procter-Smith, *Women in Shaker Community*.

- ◆ Sisters must not mend, nor set buttons on brethren's clothes, while they have them on.
- ◆ Sisters should not use cloths that have their own initials on to do up brethren's clothes in, nor keep the brethren's clothes with theirs, neither hang them side by side, nor together.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps fearing that an official code would regiment Shaker life too rigorously, Lucy Wright averted early attempts to record the orders. After her death, however, Shaker men inherited leadership of the society and approved the laws in written form.<sup>19</sup>

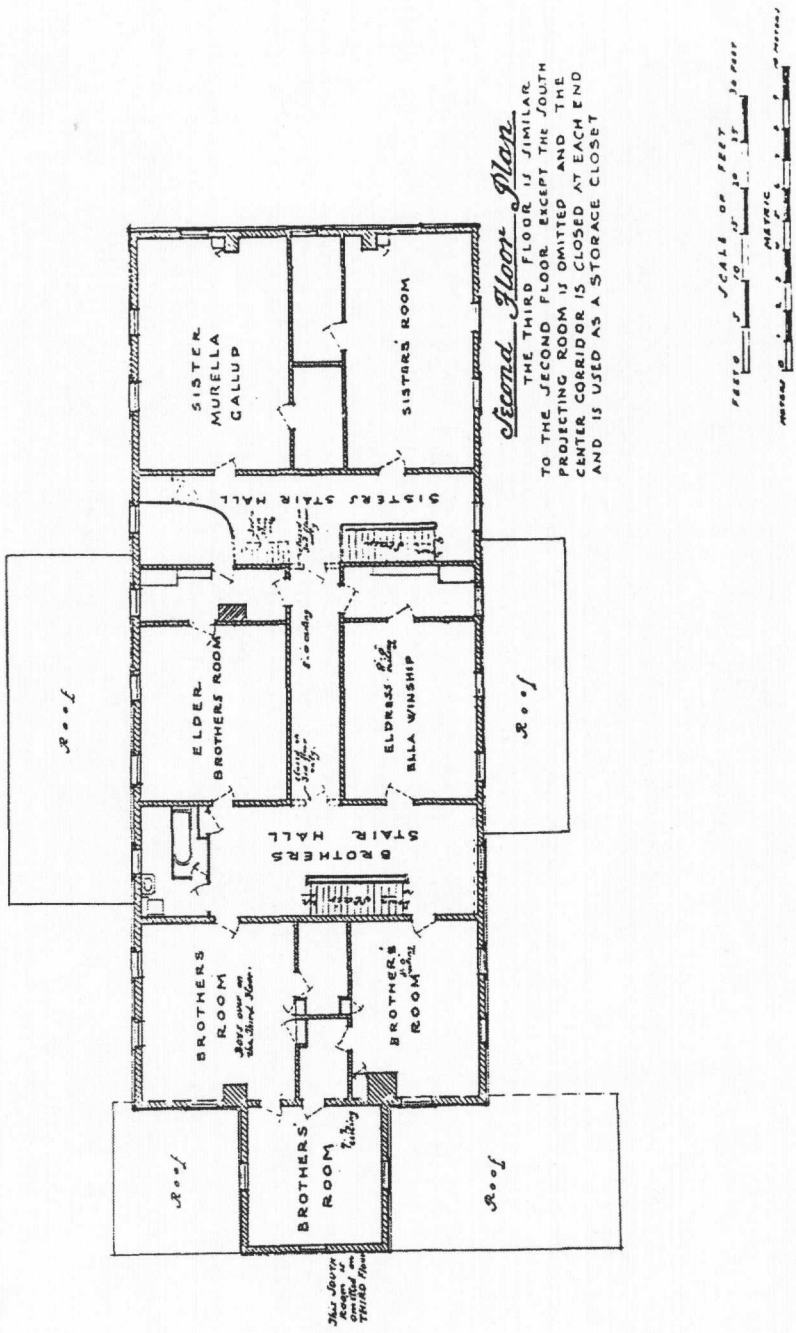
Beyond governing aesthetic concerns—such as the exterior colors, varnishes, and furnishings of buildings—and devoting specific sections to the interaction of the sexes within those spaces, the Millennial Laws extended the ministry's control to clothing and to the body. Underlying the rules was the belief that an outward display of order—in the simple dress of members, in the rigid dances of worship, and in the standardization of dwelling houses—would hold Believers to the path to spiritual perfection. In order to facilitate adherence to these laws, however, new building forms, particularly well-ordered dwelling houses, had to be devised.

Drawings of the North Family's main dwelling house, made in 1939, exemplify how later Shaker dwellings were more carefully planned and executed than they had been in the late eighteenth century. The original building, erected in 1818, stood two stories tall and included a basement. The southern end of the structure (fig. 3 and fig. 4) contained a central hall surrounded by four rooms. Because the early Shakers had neither the resources nor the inclination to devote themselves fully to house construction, the elders made no attempt to impose their own order over living space. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, with a larger population and an increasingly complex economy, the elders introduced new spatial arrangements to further the mandates of the Millennial Laws. Leaders dictated that early

<sup>18</sup>*Millennial Laws, or Gospel Statutes and Ordinances adapted to the Day of Christ's Second Appearing. Given and established in the Church for the protection thereof by Father Joseph Meacham and Mother Lucy Wright The presiding Ministry and by their Successors The Ministry and Elders. Recorded at New Lebanon Aug 7th 1821. Revised and re-established by the Ministry and Elders Oct 1845*, printed in *The People Called Shakers*, by Edward Deming Andrews (New York: Dover Publications, 1963), pp. 266–67.

<sup>19</sup>Andrews, *The People Called Shakers*, p. 243; Stein, *Shaker Experience*, pp. 132–33.





*Architect's name is ditto; they are 1900.*

FIG. 4. Second and Third Floor Plan, Dwelling House, North Family, Mount Lebanon. Plan by A. K. Mosley, 1939. Historic American Buildings Survey, NY-3249, Sheet 7. Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress.

dwellings be enlarged to accommodate separate entrances for brothers and sisters, which led to separate stairways and halls. The North Family's Mount Lebanon dwelling was expanded in two stages. The first addition, in 1845, nearly doubled the size of the existing structure. It extended the north end of the building sixty feet and included a sisters' entrance and a meeting room where the family assembled for worship during the week (fig. 3). The second phase, in 1863, raised the building two stories, adding a third floor and attic (fig. 4). With the new extensions, the elders clearly defined the separate spaces for men and women by requiring brothers to live at one end of the house and sisters to live at the other.

The imposition of order affected more than living space. The enlarged living areas the new architecture provided reinforced feminine behavior within the community. Whereas celibacy freed Shaker sisters from the potential physical dangers of pregnancy and childbirth, it did not free them from domestic chores.<sup>20</sup> Sisters prepared all meals for the entire family, cleaned the dwellings, mended clothes, and cared for young children. Only a small number of sisters, who had duties in the sick house, the laundry shop, the office, or the sisters' shop, worked in non-domestic buildings. Even in these structures, the role of a Shaker sister involved tasks such as nursing, cleaning, and sewing. Brothers, on the other hand, tended to the agricultural and industrial production of the community. Unlike the sisters, who spent most of their time within the village, many brothers were allowed to travel in order to trade beyond Shaker community borders. Only at the end of the nineteenth century, after the male population had dropped dramatically in Shaker communities, were women allowed to adopt more responsibility. As industrialization proceeded apace, domestication became a perceived means of maintaining control over a rapidly changing world. For the Shakers, domestication meant that the brothers could devote themselves to the production of goods for trade, while the sisters cleaned living quarters, prepared meals, and maintained the villages in much the same way the Victorian housewife was expected to run her household.



<sup>20</sup>Kern notes that the Shakers' concern for women's freedom from patriarchy extended only as far as protecting them from pregnancy. See Kern, *Ordered Love*, p. 115.

By the late 1840s, outsiders traveling through Shaker villages were struck by the pervading organization and neatness that Meacham had inspired fifty years earlier. Benson J. Lossing, after a visit to Mount Lebanon in 1856, commented on the harmony and tidiness of the village and the buildings in an article that appeared in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*.<sup>21</sup>

Others visited the Shakers to collect information for comparative studies of communal societies. John Humphrey Noyes, founder of the Oneida Perfectionists, wrote his *History of American Socialisms* to argue for the superiority of the communitarian way of life. Though he said little about the Shakers, he stated that "Their influence on American Socialisms has been so great as to set them entirely apart from the other antique religious Communities."<sup>22</sup> Journalist Charles Nordhoff, seeking a model for efficient land use to accommodate the settlement of laborers as a way to relieve social pressures in cities, traveled to all the "communistic societies" that existed in the United States in 1874 (about seventy-two separate communities). He visited the villages of the Rappites, the Oneida Perfectionists, the Icarians, and the Shakers. Of the Shakers, he wrote, "They are the most thoroughly organized, and in some respects the most successful and flourishing."<sup>23</sup> He described Shaker dwellings as representing a "style of house architecture, whose peculiarity is that it seeks only the useful, and cares nothing for grace or beauty, and carefully avoids ornament."<sup>24</sup> Based on "a very positive and deeply rooted religious faith" and on their "mechanical ingenuity," which allowed the Shakers to become financially prosperous, Nordhoff ranked the Shakers as one of the most successful examples of a communal society in America.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, just as Whittaker and Meacham envisioned, the Shakers were avoiding the persecution they had suffered under Mother Ann Lee. In fact, the practices of other religious and communal societies (especially the polygamous Mormons and the free-loving Oneida Per-

<sup>21</sup>See Benson J. Lossing, "The Shakers," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, July 1857, pp. 164-77.

<sup>22</sup>John Humphrey Noyes, *History of American Socialisms* (1870; reprinted, New York: Hillary House Publishers, 1961), p. 595.

<sup>23</sup>Charles Nordhoff, *The Communistic Societies of the United States* (1875; reprinted, New York: Dover Publications, 1966), p. 117.

<sup>24</sup>Nordhoff, *Communistic Societies*, pp. 117-18.

<sup>25</sup>Nordhoff, *Communistic Societies*, pp. 388, 390.

fectionists) would attract much more negative attention in the mid- to late nineteenth century. The Shakers' relatively conventional gender roles seemed less threatening.<sup>26</sup>

This growing acceptance of the Shakers and their increasing interaction with the outside world fostered a renewed interest in Mother Ann. Whereas early Shaker treatises ignored her, in the early nineteenth century Ann Lee became the sect's focus of attention. Yet, the Ann Lee that emerged from the new consciousness was not the Ann Lee who encouraged wild expressions of religious belief. Instead, she became the benevolent Mother Ann, representative figure of the reconstructed religion. Her sayings, such as "hands to work, hearts to God," which advocated allegiance to the larger community and efficient use of time and labor, were another opportunity for the elders—as Meacham had done with his rules, as they had done with the built environment—to impose and maintain order. In fact, during the nineteenth century, the focus on home and the arrangement of space between public and private, masculine and feminine, became more pronounced in Shaker communities just as it did in the larger culture. Not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the relative economic productivity of Shaker and non-Shaker women began to rise, did both groups of women gain more power within their communities and more control over their built environments.

<sup>26</sup>For comparative studies focusing on communal societies and sexuality, see Kern, *An Ordered Love*; Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984); and Lawrence Foster, *Women, Family, and Utopia: Communal Experiments of the Shakers, the Oneida Community, and the Mormons* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991).

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