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Mother Lucy's Last Visit to Watervliet

An Exceptional Shaker Manuscript from the Hamilton College Library Communal Societies Collection

By David D. Newell

Most of the early and important documentary record relating to the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing (the Shakers) is rare and survives only in manuscript form. During the first thirty years or so following the 1774 relocation of "the Shaker Church" from English to American soil, only a single, and very small, pamphlet was published and printed by Shaker leaders.¹ During this formative period of Shakerism, there was a conscious aversion to written compilations, whether printed or penned. The founders and first leaders of the American Shakers held that the written word would kill the spirit behind the words uttered by those inspired by God, and thus open the door to spiritual stagnation and theological legalism.

By the first decade of the nineteenth century, when Shaker missionaries had successfully expanded the church westward to locales as distant as Kentucky and Indiana, it became necessary to codify their faith and practice. After 1805 Shaker leaders (reluctantly in some instances) turned to pen and ink in order to explain doctrine to, and correspond with, their far-flung brethren. Between 1807 and 1816 they published several substantial and important works, including their first theological polemic (in 1808), first hymnal (in 1812), and a biographical-historical account of Mother Ann Lee and her English associates (in 1816).²

Although some of these early publications were intended for both Shaker and non-Shaker audiences, certain epistles and writings were closely guarded and restricted to a few manuscript copies, and intentionally were not published. The Shaker Ministry considered certain texts to have a substantial sacred value and esteemed them as pearls that were not to be "cast before swine." These were intended to be read only by the various society and family elders and eldresses and never shared with "the world's people."

The Hamilton College Library recently acquired one such Shaker manuscript, probably dating to 1821 or shortly thereafter. It bears a caption title: "Mother's Last Visit to Watervliet" and consists of nine unnumbered

pages (filled) within a twenty-four page booklet. It is an important and early work, and was never published by the Shakers.

It details the activities, meetings, counsels, and sayings of Mother Lucy Wright during the month preceding her death—from January 10, 1821 when she arrived at the Watervliet, New York Shaker society, to February 7, 1821 “when she expired a quarter before three O’clock.”

Lucy Wright was arguably the second most prominent and important Shaker woman, after Mother Ann Lee. She had been a member of the Shaker Ministry since 1788 and, following the death of Father Joseph Meacham in 1796, became the leading minister. She presided over the network of Shaker communities for a quarter century, overseeing the Shaker church during a period of dramatic growth and expansion.

Lucy Wright was born in Pittsfield, Massachusetts on February 5, 1760 to parents who were “possessed of means and social position [and who] gave her all the advantages at that time accorded to girls.”³ Jean M. Humez discusses the “revealing irony” of Wright’s ascendancy, noting that she

derived her authority not from the founding mother Ann Lee, but from one of Lee’s male successors Contemporary accounts suggest that there were significant class differences ... between Ann Lee and Lucy Wright. Lee was an unlettered visionary from a British factory town, whereas Wright was the genteel daughter of a prominent family in western Massachusetts.⁴

By all accounts Lucy was a very lovely young woman, “well proportioned ... tall and graceful, with a fine figure, beautiful and attractive ... her countenance ever wore a pleasant smile.”⁵ She married Elizur Goodrich in 1779 when 19 years of age, and they settled in nearby Richmond. Goodrich was a leading merchant and “her equal in culture, ability and social position.”⁶ The apostate Angell Matthewson remembered him as “a man of a decent deportment[—]a well educated man & had bin a merchant before he imbraced the faith—is one of the first tallants in the whole community.”⁷ Elizur and Lucy were likely members of (or associated with) the nearby Baptist church pastored by Elder Valentine Rathbun and were participants in the powerful revivals, today called the “New Light Stir,” that swept through Pittsfield and the surrounding towns in 1779.⁸

In the spring of 1780, many of the revivalists in Pittsfield, New Lebanon and elsewhere had heard reports of a “strange people” in the wilderness near Niskayuna, New York, led by a remarkable woman from England

who “daily talked with God,” conversed with the dead, had remarkable “gifts,” and had, with several of her associates, attained a state of complete perfection. Elizur Goodrich was among the first to visit Mother Ann Lee and her English compatriots, and one of the first to convert to Shakerism. Lucy did not initially share her husband’s feelings about his newly found religion. In 1968 Sister Frances Carr observed that

Lucy was not a person given to quick action or easily swayed by emotion [H]er natural instincts of cool, calculating discretion prevented her from joining herself to the cause in which her husband had now become so involved.⁹

Father James Whittaker’s counsel to Elizur was: “Take faith, Lucy may be gained to the gospel and if you gain her, it will be equal to gaining a nation.”¹⁰ After many months of conjugal and spiritual separation and mutual patience, Lucy finally embraced the Shaker faith, confessed her sins, and joined the growing community of Believers. Shortly after this she discarded the Goodrich surname, utilizing instead her maiden name.¹¹

Little is know about Lucy’s first years as a Believer. The renowned scholar of Shakerism’s formative years, Clarke Garrett, reported that during the early 1780s, Elder James Whittaker

was assisted by Lucy Wright Goodrich, who had been made “caretaker” of the females [at Niskayuna] while Whittaker and the Lees were on their New England journey Lucy Wright was responsible for the daily maintenance of a “household” that fluctuated in size between a dozen and fifty or more.¹²

Lucy must have impressed the church leaders with her abilities and spiritual steadfastness, for at some time during the 1780s, the elders bestowed on her the new name of “Lucy Faith.”¹³ Following the death of James Whittaker in 1787, Joseph Meacham ascended to the spiritual fatherhood of the Shaker order, and almost immediately commenced labors to bring the Shakers into what he called “church order.” Believers were urged to sell their homes and relocate to new farms near New Lebanon and other Shaker “centers.” Some were placed in various communal orders where work and worship were carried out separately.

By 1788, Meacham had decided to modify the structure of leadership to what Humez calls “a ‘joint parentage’ of female and male leadership . . . a new gender-balanced and hierarchical governance system [which] replaced James Whittaker’s looser ‘system of fathers & mothers.’”¹⁴ The

same year, Meacham appointed the 28-year-old Lucy Faith as his coadjutor “in the female line.” Angell Matthewson’s recollection of these events is both interesting and instructive:

Elder Joseph Meacham at this time nocked down discried & caused a full discard [i.e., discord?] on the whole sistim of fathers & Mothers established by Elder James accept he would allow of none being called father accept himself—he disallowed aney being called Mother accept Lucy faith the wife of Elizur goodrich[—]in this way he obtained the title of the father of the church—he also gave lucy faith the title of the Mother of the church.¹⁵

Both Father Joseph and Mother Lucy appointed assistants to help in the task of gathering the Believers scattered from Maine to eastern New York into large compact communal families. This laid the foundation for what would be a permanent and effective central Ministry of “first” and “second” elders and eldresses, residing in the upper lofts of the meetinghouse at New Lebanon and presiding over the entire United Society. When Meacham died in 1796, Mother Lucy, then thirty-six years of age, became the senior and leading ministry member. Matthewson, who was resident at New Lebanon that year, recollected that

Lucy faith is not onley hed of the church at lebanon but she is the supream hed of elevn churchis in all whom all look up to hir for spiritual gifts at the same time tis not expected nither is it hur office or duty to preech or pray or sing songs or dance in fact she has nothing to do accept to consult the oricles & giv out orders of god—eat & drink & ride to waterfleet [i.e., Watervliet, also known as Niskayuna] & back again in a curious pleasure waggon drawn by a compleet span of horses & a driver to wate on hur ...¹⁶

For the next quarter-century, Mother Lucy administered the Shaker church, and gave leadership to various reforms and improvisations in dress, worship, and all aspects of community life. She “opened the gospel” during the late 1790s, and dispatched missionaries to “gather souls.” During the opening decade of the nineteenth century, new communities were established in Ohio, Kentucky and Indiana. During this time, Mother Lucy abandoned Meacham’s strident asceticism and began to interact with rank and file Believers. She traveled from New Lebanon to other communities, often attending meetings for worship, and offering counsel and love to all. She was respected and beloved, and her words were cherished.

In 1804 Mother Lucy chose a new assistant in “the female line.” Mary A. Landon (who had been renamed Ruth) moved into the meetinghouse with her that year. During the summer of 1819, Mother Lucy’s health began to fail. Hamilton College’s manuscript, reprinted here, furnishes insight into the matter of the appointment of successors—something she chose not to do in 1819, but would two years later during her final illness.

Sabbath Feb 4th [1821] she had a particular gift concerning her successors in the Ministry. This she opened to Sister Ruth [Landon] alone, naming those who were to take the lead in the Ministry after her decease. It has since been remarked, that, during her sickness in the summer of 1819, when many expected her to be very near her end, she felt no gift on this subject, tho’ she was several times questioned about it.¹⁷

The manuscript furnishes a record of Mother Lucy’s activities and counsel to the Believers during the last month of her life. Several of her “sayings” recorded in this manuscript, including her vision of a “golden chain” (perhaps the best-known saying of Mother Lucy), were included in later manuscript compilations. Sister Frances Carr aptly described the importance of Mother Lucy’s “sayings” to the Shaker brethren and sisters.

Following her death, however, many felt that the words of strength and encouragement which she had uttered should be gathered together and distributed for the benefit of all Believers. The first such compilations began to circulate almost immediately after her death in 1821. By 1830 they had reached a definitive form. The standard compilation *Mother Lucy's Sayings*, can doubtless claim the distinction of being the only Shaker inspirational and devotional source to have maintained a continuous tradition of use down to the present day, although it had existed only in manuscript form.¹⁸

Mother Lucy not only left her good words of counsel and encouragement to Believers, she also left instructions with Ruth Landon that would strengthen and solidify the central Ministry, in turn ensuring that Shakerism would continue to thrive. Lucy Wright directed that Ruth succeed her, and that Asenath Clark join her as her assistant. She also deemed it prudent that Abiathar Babbit, then her male counterpart, be “retired” to Watervliet. In place of Babbit (who Matthewson described as a “portly man of but few words”¹⁹), she advised the appointment of two

highly competent brethren, Ebenezer Bishop and Rufus Bishop, to be the leading male ministers.

Mother Lucy's judgment proved to be good, for all four of her appointments were apt and effective leaders, remaining in office for over a quarter century until 1848.

Notes

1 *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 Appearing—to his Natural Relations in England. Dated October 9th, 1785.* (Bennington, Vt., 1790). Another early edition with a similar title, while undated, was likely published prior to 1790. The authorship of both the "Concise Statement" and the "Letter" is uncertain. While most bibliographies attribute authorship to Joseph Meacham, the undated edition seems to imply that James Whittaker wrote both works. Other early sources indicate that one or both works were written by William Scales, an early convert who apostatized after 1785.

2 [Benjamin Seth Youngs], *The Testimony of Christ's Second Appearing Containing a General Statement of All Things Pertaining to the Faith and Practice of the Church of God in This Latter-day* (Lebanon, Ohio, 1808). [Seth Youngs Wells], *Millennial Praises, Containing a Collection of Gospel Hymns, in Four Parts: Adapted to the Day of Christ's Second Appearing Composed for the Use of His People* (Hancock, [Mass.], 1812); a small number of these hymnals were dated 1812, with many more dated 1813. [Rufus Bishop and Seth Youngs Wells], *Testimonies of the Life, Character, Revelations and Doctrines of Our Ever Blessed Mother Ann Lee and the Elders with Her: Through Whom the Word of Eternal Life was Opened in this Day of Christ's Second Appearing: Collected from Living Witness, by Order of the Ministry, in Union with the Church* (Hancock, [Mass.], 1816).

3 Anna White and Leila Sarah Taylor, *Shakerism, Its Meaning and Message: Embracing an Historical Account, Statement of Belief and Spiritual Experience of the Church from its Rise to the Present Day* (Columbus, Ohio: Press of F. J. Heer, [1904]), 106. Lucy was the daughter of John and Mary (Robbins) Wright.

4 Jean M. Humez, ed., *Mother's First-Born Daughters, Early Shaker Writings on Women and Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 65.

5 White and Taylor, 106, 150.

6 White and Taylor, 106-7.

7 Angell Matthewson, "Reminiscences in the form of a series of letters to his brother Jeffrey, 1792-1813," Shaker Manuscript Item 119, New York Public

Library, Letter 23.

8 White and Taylor, 107. Valentine Rathbun's church was large, with members from Pittsfield, Richmond and southern Hancock. Almost all church members, including Rathbun, converted to Shakerism, although he and a few others later apostatized. He wrote the first published attack against the Shaker Church in 1781—a popular work which went through numerous editions.

9 Sister Frances A. Carr, "Mother Lucy's Sayings Spoken at Different Times and Under Various Circumstances," *The Shaker Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (1968): 101.

10 Carr, 102.

11 Clarke Garrett, *Spirit Possession and Popular Religion From the Camisards to the Shakers* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 211. Garrett reports that Lucy, while sympathetic to the Shakers, did not actually join them until "two years later" (presumably sometime in 1782).

12 Garrett, 211.

13 Matthewson, Letter 8. See also Humez, 64. The practice of bestowing new names to certain brethren and sisters was not uncommon during the formative years and persisted until at least the 1810s.

14 Humez, 66.

15 Matthewson, Letter 11.

16 Matthewson, Letter 23.

17 "Mother's Last Visit to Watervliet," MS 1012, Communal Societies Collection, Hamilton College Library, p [7].

18 Carr, 103. The Hamilton College Library manuscript "Mother's Last Visit to Watervliet" probably predates what Carr calls "the standard compilation." In "Mother Lucy's Sayings" (i.e. the standard compilation) the text relating to "the golden chain" had been expanded and altered from that contained within the Hamilton College Library manuscript to read (in part), "Believers are held together in union, by a golden chain, this chain is composed of the gifts and orders of God"

19 Matthewson, Letter 23. Joseph Meacham had appointed Henry Clough as his assistant about the same time he appointed Lucy Wright (in 1788). Following Clough's death on March 12, 1798, Mother Lucy appointed the "portly" Abiathar Babbit in his place.