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Went off to the Shakers: The First Converts of South Union

William R. Black
william.black266@topper.wku.edu

WENT OFF TO THE SHAKERS:
THE FIRST CONVERTS OF SOUTH UNION

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William R. Black

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Tamara Van Dyken, Director of Thesis

Lawrence Snyder

Glenn LaFantasie

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Dean, Graduate Studies and Research Date

I dedicate this thesis to my parents, Kenneth and Reta Black,

thanks to whom I grew up surrounded by the church, history, language, and love.

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The Shaker bug first bit me when Matt Gore read aloud a sentence by Benjamin McDonnold in front of a few hundred Cumberland Presbyterians. The infection grew when Geoff, Rose Anne, and Marisa Knight took me to the restored Shaker village of Pleasant Hill. They encouraged me to buy Stephen Stein's history at the gift shop. Marisa, soon to be my wife, looked around the beautiful grounds and wondered how the Shakers could possibly reject the world. I began to share her wonder.

My thesis advisor, Dr. Tamara Van Dyken, undertook an independent study with me wherein we dove together into the world of Shaker studies. Through countless conversations she helped me shape my nebulous ideas into a thesis. I relished another independent study with Dr. Lawrence Snyder on the Second Great Awakening, and Dr. Glenn LaFantasie has been generous in his willingness to bounce off ideas and listen to my Shaker stories. All three provided excellent feedback on my thesis drafts, and they have left the finished work much better than they found it. Dr. Carol Crowe-Carraco offered useful research tips, provided useful comments on a research paper I wrote on John Rankin, and bought me lunch on the day of my thesis defense. Dr. Patricia Minter, for whom I wrote a paper on the Boler divorce case, helped me bring legal and religious history into a fruitful conversation. Do not blame any of these people if I messed something up. They have enough to worry about.

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CONTENTS

WENT OFF TO THE SHAKERS:
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Directed by: Tamara Van Dyken, Lawrence Snyder, and Glenn LaFantasie

Department of History Western Kentucky University

In 1807 the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing (Shakers) established a society near the Gasper River in Logan County, Kentucky. The society was soon named South Union, and it lasted until 1922, the longest-lasting Shaker community west of the Appalachians. Most of the first Shaker converts in Logan County had only a few years beforehand participated in a series of evangelical Presbyterian camp meetings known collectively as the Kentucky Revival, the Revival of 1800, or the Great Revival. Though Presbyterian revivalism and Shakerism shared certain characteristics (particularly millennialism and enthusiastic forms of worship), there were many differences between them as well; Shakerism was not necessarily a logical continuation of the Great Revival. So why did so many Scots-Irish Presbyterians in south-central Kentucky convert to Shakerism? How did conversion make sense to them? And how was Shaker conversion understood by those who did *not* convert? Through a close reading of primary sources, this thesis attempts to answer these questions.

Shaker conversion is better understood as an interaction within a community rather than as a transaction between an individual and God. The decade or so preceding the establishment of South Union—the disestablishment of state churches, the mass migration to the trans-Appalachian west, the burgeoning market economy—was, for many Scots-Irish Presbyterians, a period of social disorder. This was especially true in south-central Kentucky, where the local Presbyterian establishment was riven by schism.

The Great Revival was a brief but ultimately disappointing creation of an alternate community, a way of escape from the surrounding chaos. Shakerism offered the apotheosis of that alternate community. South Union was a camp meeting that never ended. However, the denizens of south-central Kentucky who did not convert to Shakerism were quite hostile to the new sect. They understood conversion as a form of betrayal, a renunciation of a community which they still identified with. This understanding became especially clear during a divorce case involving William and Sally Boler, in which William Boler's rights as a man and a citizen became circumspect because of his conversion to Shakerism. Since the mid-nineteenth century, Shaker conversion has become less threatening to the outside world. Indeed, the popular imagination has co-opted South Union as quintessentially American. By reclaiming the Shakers from the margins of society, popular memory has effectively erased conversion from the Shaker story. After all, Shaker conversion was never as much about belief or even practice as it was about a distinct and separate community.

Introduction

Shaker legend tells us that soon before she died in 1784, Ann Lee prophesied that her small religious sect would spread west of the Alleghenies. While walking among her followers and singing to herself, Ann Lee, a charismatic prophet who had led the Shakers to New England to escape British persecution, suddenly turned and said, "I feel a special gift of God; I feel the power of God running all over me." In Shaker terminology, a *gift* is a manifestation of the divine within the mortal, and can come in the form of dance, song, or in this case, a vision. Mother Ann, as the Shakers called her, stretched a hand out southwestward and intoned, "The next opening of the gospel will be in the south-west; it will be at a great distance; and there will be a great work of God." Then, echoing Moses at Mount Pisgah, she turned toward her disciple Eliphalet Slasson and added, "You may live to see it, but I shall not."[1]

She was right on both counts. On New Years' Day, 1805, a little more than two decades after Ann Lee's death, the central ministry at New Lebanon, New York, commissioned three missionaries to bring the Shaker gospel to the trans-Appalachian west. The sect, which called itself the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, hoped to tap into the "Great Revival" raging throughout the west. The revival had rocked the regional Presbyterian establishment and created vacuums that Methodist and Baptist itinerants were swooping in to fill. The Shaker missionaries—John Meacham, Issachar Bates, and Benjamin Seth Youngs—hoped to carve a niche into this religious

[1] Rufus Bishop and Seth Youngs Wells, *Testimonies of the Life, Character, Revelations and Doctrines of 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 Witnesses, in Union with the Church*, 2nd ed. (Albany: Weed, Parsons, 1888 [1816]), 173-174, quote 174.

Western Shaker Societies[2]

Society	Nearest City or Cities	Years of Existence
Union Village	Cincinnati, Ohio	1805-1912
Pleasant Hill	Lexington, Kentucky	1805-1910
Watervliet	Dayton, Ohio	1806-1910
South Union	Bowling Green, Kentucky	1807-1922
West Union	Vincennes, Indiana	1811-1827
North Union	Cleveland, Ohio	1822-1889
Whitewater	Cincinnati, Ohio	1824-1916
Sodus Bay	Rochester and Syracuse, New York	1826-1892

landscape before it congealed.

They found an audience ripe for their message. In the next two years they made inroads into the Kentucky Bluegrass and southwestern Ohio, and Shaker societies were established at Turtle Creek, Ohio (near Cincinnati), and Shawnee Run, Kentucky (near Lexington). The societies were later renamed, respectively, Union Village and Pleasant Hill. In 1807 the Shakers reached south-central Kentucky, the epicenter of the evangelical revivals, and they established a village in Logan County near the Gasper River. It was later named South Union, and along with Union Village and Pleasant Hill, it formed the backbone of a western Shaker culture that rivaled the original movement in New England.[3]

Only recently have historians taken much interest in these western communities. Records from the eastern Shaker societies are more accessible and closer to large

[2] Information from F. Gerald Ham, "Shakerism in the Old West" (Ph.D. diss., University of Kentucky, 1962). In 1836 the Sodus Bay society removed to Groveland, New York, some forty miles south of Rochester.

[3] Ham, "Shakerism in the Old West"; Julia Neal, *The Kentucky Shakers* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1977); Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 57-66.

population centers; also, for much of its existence as a field, Shaker studies have been dominated by New England antiquarians. But Stephen Stein's monumental history of the Shakers reclaimed western Shakerism's role in the sect's story, and this shift can be seen in the work of such Stein protégés as John Wolford, Dawn Bakken, and Stephen Taysom.[4] However, scant attention has been paid to the relationship between the success of Shakerism in the west and the evangelical Presbyterian revivals the decade before. Other than the movements' shared millennialism, scholars have done little to find continuities between these distinct religious phases.[5]

This thesis, then, is not a straightforward history of the South Union society. Instead, it is a study of the first Shaker converts who joined South Union in its early years. The decision to convert was not an obvious one. Evangelical Presbyterianism was not particularly anti-sexual; why then did these people join a celibate sect? The emotional and spiritual climax of the Presbyterian camp meeting was the eucharist; why then would they join a group that rejected the sacrament? How, in short, did these converts rationalize their decision to become Shakers? How was this decision interpreted by those who did *not* become Shakers? And how have non-Shakers interpreted that decision up to the present day?

My thesis discusses two sub-fields of historical scholarship: Shakerism and the western Second Great Awakening. Shaker studies have only reached academic maturity

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[4] Stein, *Shaker Experience in America*; John B. Wolford, "The South Union, Kentucky, Shakers and Tradition: A Study of Business, Work, and Commerce" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1992); Dawn E. Bakken, "Putting the Shakers 'in Place': Union Village, Ohio, 1805-1815" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1998); idem., "Young Believers and Old Believers in the Wilderness: Narratives of Place and the Constructions of Family among Western Shakers," *Indiana Magazine of History* 97.4 (December 2001): 278-295; Stephen C. Taysom, *Shakers, Mormons, and Religious Worlds: Conflicting Visions, Contested Boundaries* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 34-48.

[5] Efforts to explicate this relationship can be found in Ham, "Shakerism in the Old West," 74-76; and Paul K. Conkin, *Cane Ridge: America's Pentecost* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 145.

in the last quarter century. From the late Victorian era to the mid-twentieth century, the field was dominated by antiquarians, collectors, hobbyists, and the Shakers themselves. The first full-scale scholarly history of the sect, Edward Deming Andrews's *The People Called Shakers* (1953) did little to alter the sentimental consensus. However, in the 1980s historians like Lawrence Foster, Priscilla Brewer, and Clarke Garrett began writing more critically about the sect. 1992 saw the publication of Stephen Stein's *The Shaker Experience in America*, which remains the definitive history on the subject. Stein argued that Shakers were not queer anomalies but instead inextricably linked to the larger society, that they were as important for how they have been remembered as for their own lived experience, and that the Shakers were not a monolithic group but contained diversity and division within their own membership. Some later works that have specifically influenced my research include Elizabeth De Wolfe's *Shaking the Faith*, an analysis of Mary Marshall Dyer's failed attempt to divorce her Shaker husband and ensuing decades-long anti-Shaker campaign; and Stephen Taysom's *Shakers, Mormons, and Religious Worlds*, a comparative study which contextualizes Shaker conversion within a framework theorized by anthropologists Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner. According to this theory, communities undergo radical change in a three-stage process: a disaggregation of the pre-existing order, a liminal stage in which no order dominates, and a reaggregation of a new order. Borrowing this frame, I argue that the early republican era—with the settling of the frontier, the disestablishment of religion, and the trauma of war—was a period of disaggregation; the wild, almost anarchic Great Revival was a liminal phase; and the more ordered world of Shakerism was a new synthesis or reaggregation.[6]

[6] Edward Deming Andrews, *The People Called Shakers: A Search for a Perfect Society* (New York:

A wealth of scholarship exists on the Second Great Awakening in the west. The standard work on the period remains Nathan Hatch's *The Democratization of American Christianity*, while the best studies of the "Great Revival" are John Boles's *The Great Revival* and Paul Conkin's *Cane Ridge*. Other important works include Christine Heyrman's *Southern Cross* and Ellen Eslinger's *Citizens of Zion*. The book that has most influenced my work is Leigh Schmidt's *Holy Fairs*, a transatlantic history of evangelical Presbyterianism which documents how the seventeenth-century Scottish sacramental season evolved into the nineteenth-century American camp meeting. Schmidt's attention to ritual and space have shaped my thesis tremendously, as well as his general tendency to take the words and experiences of religious believers seriously, rather than reducing religion to what it was *really* about, such as class, politics, or neurosis. Schmidt notes how the sacramental season of Scots-Irish evangelicals centered around the eucharist, how the meeting's space fostered a sense of communal identity (both by including and excluding), and how Presbyterian devotional life followed a calendrical cycle of ecstasy, spiritual plateau, doubt, despair, catharsis, and ecstasy again. I argue that Shakerism provided western evangelicals a way to escape this cycle. The Shaker society was a community unlimited by time; it was a camp meeting that never ended, a camp meeting where everyone stayed forever. While the Great Revival offered glimpses of the divine, Shakerism offered eternal communion with the divine, so that the symbols of the

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Oxford University Press, 1953); Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Priscilla S. Brewer, *Shaker Communities, Shaker Lives* (Lebanon, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1986); Clarke Garrett, *Spirit Possession and Popular Religion: From the Camisards to the Shakers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); Stein, *Shaker Experience in America*; Elizabeth A. De Wolfe, *Shaking the Faith: Women, Family, and Mary Marshall Dyer's Anti-Shaker Campaign, 1815-1867* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Taysom, *Shakers, Mormons, and Religious Worlds*.

sacrament were no longer necessary; while the Great Revival fostered hope in a millennium soon to come, Shakerism promised the millennium here and now.[7]

The thesis begins by sketching the religious and social background for the arrival of Shakerism in Logan County, Kentucky. It describes the Scots-Irish community that immigrated to the Cumberland and Green river valleys (known collectively as the "Cumberland territory") from the North Carolina Piedmont. It then recounts the Great Revival of 1797-1801 and the schism that emerged within the local Presbyterian establishment. I frame these events as a period of disaggregation and liminality, a paradoxical web of destruction and renewal.

The second chapter narrates the first wave of conversion to Shakerism in south-central Kentucky and the establishment of what became South Union. I explain how western Shakers saw continuity between the Great Revival and the strange new sect. Shakerism offered solace from the paradoxes of Presbyterian devotional life, an answer to hopes for millennium, an apotheosis of the eucharistic community, and an orderly alternative to the increasingly wild and schism-ridden world of normative American Protestantism.

Next I look at those who did not see conversion to Shakerism as a logical step from the Great Revival. My main case study is a legal battle wherein Sally Boler sued her husband William for divorce when he joined the Shakers of South Union. At this time, divorce was an anomaly, an infringement upon a man's right to privacy—i.e., his

[7] Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); John B. Boles, *The Great Revival: Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1972); Conkin, *Cane Ridge*; Christian Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Ellen Eslinger, *Citizens of Zion: The Social Origins of Camp Meeting Revivalism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999); Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scotland and the Making of American Revivalism*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001 [1989]).

possessory rights over his wife. Sally's success in winning a divorce attests to the public criminality with which many imbued Shakerism. I contextualize the case within the larger anti-Shaker movement. I also read the court documents closely to learn how William's conversion abrogated his rights as a citizen and a head of household.

Finally I explore how different groups of people have remembered the first Shakers of South Union and their decision to convert. The last chapter follows the debate over Shaker conversion within nineteenth-century ecclesiastical history, as traditionalist Presbyterians posited the converts as proof for the slippery-slope dangers of evangelicalism, and evangelical Presbyterians did their best to distance themselves from the converts despite their historical kinship. Travel accounts from Shakers and non-Shakers in the Victorian era demonstrate how Americans began to see South Union as a landmark rather than a vibrant community. Rather than having made radical choices, the Shakers were simply "there." The tendency to erase conversion from the memory of South Union increased during the twentieth century, as popular and public history adopted the Shakers as icons of Americana.

I make two central claims about the first Shakers of south-central Kentucky: first, that conversion was not a binary choice but instead existed along a continuum of religious and social experience; and second, that conversion was not an individual choice but instead took place within a community defined by a geographical space and a set of lived rituals, especially celibacy. These arguments belie the notion that American evangelicals have always constructed conversion as a cut-and-dried transaction between an individual and God. Conversion was not a complete break from one's past but instead

rewrote—or reworded—one's past within a new story. Conversion did not occur alone in the garden with Jesus but within a living community of interlinked bodies and souls.

Chapter One: Prelude to Conversion

Revival and Schism in South-Central Kentucky

John Rankin was unimpressed with the religious life of the Cumberland territory.[1] A recently licensed Presbyterian minister from Guilford County, North Carolina (near present-day Greensboro), Rankin received an invitation to preach in the region between the Cumberland and Green rivers. He spent the 1795-1796 winter traveling throughout north-central Tennessee and south-central Kentucky. The region was, he later remembered, "a barren waste." It was difficult enough for him to preach, given his own struggle with spiritual "deadness" and dissatisfaction with Presbyterian orthodoxy; but in addition to these obstacles, he faced "the almost impenetrable darkness & indifference of a stupid & ignorant people." In January he visited the Gasper River church in Logan County, Kentucky, where he found not a single person who had any "knowledge of living religion, or any desire for it." Central to Rankin's own spiritual struggles had been his quest to attain "living" or "felt" religion, an experiential, internalized faith. Traditional Presbyterian teachings emphasized correct doctrine and liturgy rather than felt religion, and the churches of the Cumberland territory seemed no different to Rankin.[2]

Despite the region's dearth of faith, or perhaps in response to it, Rankin decided to move his family to Sumner County, Tennessee, the following fall. The Rankins left

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[1] Rankin (1757-1850) should not be confused with his son John N. Rankin (1798-1870), or with John Rankin (1793-1886), a Presbyterian abolitionist and Underground Railroad "conductor" in Ripley, Ohio.

[2] John Rankin, "Auto-biography of John Rankin, Sen." (South Union, Ky., 1845), transcribed in Harvey L. Eads, ed., *History of the South Union Shaker Colony from 1804 to 1836* (South Union, Ky., 1870), Shaker Museum at South Union, Auburn, Kentucky (SMSU), 29-30. For a typescript of Eads's history, see Shaker Record A at the Special Collections Library, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Kentucky (WKU). In all citations from Eads's history, I use the pagination from the SMSU manuscript. The WKU copy uses a different pagination but notes the original pagination within the typescript. Gasper River is also spelled "Gaspar" or "Jasper."

North Carolina on October 6, 1796, and arrived near Gallatin (now a northern suburb of Nashville) on November 15. Two years later, Rankin found himself again at Gasper River, but to a rather different effect. While preaching at a Monday sacramental service, he was overcome with religious enthusiasm. His "heart," he wrote, "was enlarged with love to the people, my tongue was loosed to address them, on the all-important subject of regeneration . . . [Ideas] rushed into my mind with flowing advance." Here was the felt religion he had so long desired. He imagined his own regeneration (a phenomenon equivalent to the modern evangelical process of being "born again") in concrete terms, as if his body were working for the first time—his heart grown, his tongue unstuck, his mind flowing like the very river alongside which he preached. After the service, most of the congregants remained and "sat fettered to the ground, with their heads bowed down," shaking and crying.[3]

Within a few months, the Gasper River congregation asked Rankin to be its pastor. He accepted the call and moved his family there in December 1798. Of course, during his pastorate, Rankin spent only about half of his Sundays at Gasper River. As was common on the western frontier, he doubled as a congregational pastor and a circuit rider. He traveled throughout the Cumberland region giving sermons and performing communion, and he attended most Presbyterian sacramental meetings within a hundred miles. Sacramental meetings were worship services centered around the eucharist. Typically, they were held during the summer and lasted for four days, with the eucharist performed on Sunday—the final or sometimes penultimate day of the meeting. For many, the sacramental meeting was their only "church" during the year, or at least their only

[3] Ibid., 30-31.

chance to partake of communion until the next summer. The meetings therefore constituted an annual season of heightened religiosity.

In Logan County the sacramental meetings became increasingly emotional and powerful, including one at Gasper River in August 1799 and one at Muddy River that fall. An unusually large crowd came to a meeting at Red River in June 1800 to hear Rankin and four other ministers preach. As the meeting concluded, many congregants remained quietly in their seats as if frozen. Then, as Rankin remembered,

> on a sudden, an alarming cry burst from the midst of the deepest silence; some [congregants] were thrown into wonderful & strange contortions of features, body & limbs frightful to the beholder[;] others had singular gestures with words & actions quite inconsistant with presbyterial order & usage—all was alarm & confusion for the moment.

The emotional outburst took many of the ministers, including Rankin, by surprise. One preacher, "a thorough Presbyterian," called Rankin aside and pled, "What shall we do?! What shall we do!?" Rankin replied that he was a stranger to such demonstrations, and that they would have to stand by and let the Holy Spirit act. The ministers had never seen the like of it before. They simply watched, amazed, as revival tore through the meetinghouse.[4]

Immigrants

The Red River meeting heralded a wave of religious fervor in the American frontier, a wave alternately referred to as the Revival of 1800, the Great Revival, or the Kentucky Revival. The religious gatherings were marked by extemporaneous exhortations, less formulaic than sermons and not necessarily based on a particular scriptural text; and physical manifestations of religious conviction such as heavy sighing,

[4] Ibid., 32-34.

crying, and shouting; manic singing and laughter, resembling modern Pentecostal glossolalia; and "falling-out" unconscious onto the ground for hours. The revival ushered in a uniquely American brand of religion marked by emotionalism, physicality, and contempt for ecclesiastical authority. The American religious landscape was permanently altered as old mainline churches (Presbyterian, Congregational, Anglican) were supplanted by once-fringe evangelical denominations like the Baptists and the Methodists. A few revivalists even abandoned their home churches for Shakerism. Indeed, most of the first converts of South Union were former Presbyterians who had participated in the Great Revival. Therefore, in order to examine their conversions, we must analyze the religious landscape which preceded the arrival of Shakerism in the Cumberland territory.

This chapter offers a sketch of the Scots-Irish community that migrated from the North Carolina Piedmont to south-central Kentucky and north-central Tennessee. I show how this community underwent a period of social disaggregation in the late eighteenth century. Then, within this context, I narrate and interpret the two events which ruptured Cumberland society during the turn of the nineteenth century: the Great Revival and the resultant schism in Cumberland Presbytery. In the next chapter, we shall revisit these events as we analyze why conversion to Shakerism made sense to those who had experienced the revival and schism. In the meantime, the reader should note how the Great Revival and the Cumberland schism signified a paradoxical process in which a religious community was created while an older kind of community—one based upon ethnic ties and established churches—disintegrated. Even for those who did not become Shakers, the turn of the nineteenth century marked a shift in communal identity. In this

sense, then, they were all "converting." With that in mind, it will be easier to understand how Shaker conversion was, rather than a sharp departure from the status quo, a point (albeit an extreme one) along a continuum of changing communal identity.

I will focus on two Presbyterian ministers who migrated from Guilford County, North Carolina, to Logan County, Kentucky, in the late 1790s, John Rankin and James McGready—Rankin because he later became Logan County's most important convert to Shakerism, and McGready because he was the most prolific writer from the Great Revival and therefore gives us a better idea of the experiences which shaped the founding members of South Union. Nearly all of the first converts to Shakerism in south-central Kentucky had had, at some point in time, McGready, Rankin, or both as their pastor.

Like many of those who settled the western frontier, Rankin was the son of Ulster Scots immigrants. His father George was a carpenter from Letterkenny, County Donegal. He was born in 1729 and moved to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, around 1750, with his father Robert. John's mother was born Lydia Steele in Limavady (now Newtown), County Derry, in about 1733, and left for Lancaster County in 1746. George and Lydia married in the early 1750s and soon thereafter moved to the "Nottingham Settlement," a contiguous group of land tracts in North Carolina. The settlement was essentially a planned community. Several Lancaster County families purchased the land in tandem and moved there during the 1750s. They were all Scots-Irish, and they all became members of the same Presbyterian church, named Buffalo. Among its founding elders were Robert and George Rankin.[5]

[5] Rankin, "Auto-biography," 5-7; Wendy Lynn Adams, "The Nottingham Settlement, a North Carolina Backcountry Community" (M.A. thesis, Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis, 2009).

John Rankin was born on November 27, 1757, followed soon after by his brother Robert. Sadly, George Rankin died in 1760. At some point Lydia remarried, and Arthur Forbis became the stepfather of John and Robert. Arthur and Lydia had four daughters. We know that one of the daughters got married in 1787, so Lydia must have remarried by at least the early 1770s, and probably in the early or mid-1760s. Lydia indoctrinated her children in Old Side Presbyterian orthodoxy, drilling them in psalms, creeds, and catechism. A conservative woman, Lydia was not against revivals *per se* but did not think such enthusiasm was a requisite for faith.[6] John, however, struggled mightily with orthodox Presbyterian teachings, and his quest for a more experiential faith took up much of his young adult life.

In the midst of this tortuous spiritual journey, John married a North Carolina native named Rebecca Rankin on December 5, 1786. She was twenty-one and he was twenty-nine. There is no evidence they were related, but given the close-knit nature of the Scots-Irish immigrant communities, it is possible their family trees linked up somewhere in Ulster. They had ten children together: George, Hannah, Robert, James, Solomon, John, Jesse, William, Eliza, and Polly, all of whom lived to adulthood—indeed, at least eight of them lived to be sixty.[7] In the early 1790s, soon after James was born, John

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[6] Rankin, "Auto-biography," 5-7; Adams, "Nottingham Settlement," 136-137.

[7] Rankin, "Auto-biography," 16; Samuel M. Rankin, *The Rankin and Wharton Families and Their Genealogy* (Greensboro, N.C.: s.p., 1931), 55; South Union graveyard book, WKU, 15 [my pagination]. The known lifespans of the Rankin children are:

George	1787-1880	Solomon	1796-1882	William	1803-1880
Hannah	1789-1826	John	1798-1870	Eliza	1805-1865
James	1791-1884	Jesse	1799-1882	Polly	1807-1881

Lifespans come from "Deaths," *Manifesto* 14.6 (June 1884): 144; *Necropolis of the Shakers* (South Union, Ky., 1906), WKU, 6, 8, 14, 19, 22. Robert's years of birth and death are unknown, but one record refers to him as Rankin's "oldest son but One"; Benjamin Seth Youngs, Molly Goodrich, Harvey L. Eads, et al.,

Rankin accepted a call to the ministry and spent two years studying under David Caldwell. Rankin learned geography, science, and ethics, and read Virgil, Horace, and the New Testament in Greek. At the age of thirty-eight, Rankin was licensed to preach in 1798.[8]

David Caldwell taught several future ministers besides Rankin. The son of Scots-Irish immigrants, Caldwell was born in Lancaster County in 1725, attended Princeton in his late twenties, and was ordained at the age of forty. Upon receiving his ordination, he moved to the Nottingham Settlement and became the pastor of Buffalo Presbyterian Church. His congregants were all former members of his home congregation; in this manner Scots-Irish congregations effectively multiplied themselves, re-creating their old communities in new parts of the country. In fact, many of the congregations in the Cumberland territory were offshoots of Caldwell's church.[9]

Particularly influential was Caldwell's academy, a rough-hewn "log college" in the tradition of William and Gilbert Tennant, no larger than 20 by 40 feet. In addition to John Rankin, Caldwell taught William and John McGee (the latter of whom became a Methodist circuit-rider), James McGready, William Hodge, Samuel McAdow, and Barton Stone. Stone moved to Bourbon County, Kentucky, where he presided over the famous Cane Ridge revival and led a Stoneite movement that merged with the

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journal (1811-1836), transcribed in Eads, ed., *History of South Union*, 228. The journal was mostly kept by Youngs.

[8] Rankin, "Auto-biography," 29-29.

[9] Adams, "Nottingham Settlement," 102; Conkin, *Cane Ridge*, 54. For biographical information on Caldwell, see E. W. Caruthers, *A Sketch of the Life and Character of David Caldwell, D.D., Near Sixty Years Pastor of the Churches of Buffalo and Alamance* (Greensboro, N.C.: Swaim and Sherwood, 1842); William Henry Foote, *Sketches of North Carolina, Historical and Biographical, Illustrative of the Principles of a Portion of Her Early Settlers* (New York: Robert Carter, 1846), 231-243; Mark F. Miller, "David Caldwell: The Forming of a Southern Educator" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1979). Caldwell was the maternal grandfather of John C. Calhoun, whose middle initial stood for Caldwell.

Campbellites of western Virginia and eventually evolved into the Churches of Christ and the Disciples of Christ. But most of Guilford County's young preachers moved to Sumner and Logan counties, where they became the leaders of the Cumberland revival.[10]

Among these men the most prominent was James McGready, a charismatic leader with a booming voice, strong carriage, and imposing six-feet height. The son of Ulster Scots immigrants, McGready was born in Lancaster County around 1760. When he was a teenager, his family left Pennsylvania for Guilford County. They joined the Buffalo church, and James attended David Caldwell's school. James was a prodigy in piety, praying every day since he was seven years old and refraining from swearing, drink, and sabbath-breaking. (In 1810, when he drank some liquor to treat "billious fever" and accidentally became intoxicated, he was paralyzed with guilt for weeks, and for the rest of his life he dedicated that day of the month for fasting and pray.) His behavior was so spotless that he came to believe he had been fully "sanctified from his birth." At the encouragement of an uncle, James's parents enrolled him at John McMillan's school in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania, a predecessor to Washington & Jefferson College.[11]

While studying there, McGready began to question the nature of his faith when he overheard a conversation between his roommate and John McMillan. The roommate asked McMillan whether he believed McGready had "religion," to which McMillan responded, "No, not a spark." At first McGready was outraged, and he resolved to leave

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[10] John Thomas Scott, "James McGready: Son of Thunder, Father of the Great Revival" (Ph.D. diss., College of William and Mary, 1991), 54; Paul Conkin, "Caldwell's Boys," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 50.2 (Summer 1991): 71-79; idem., *Cane Ridge*, 43-46, 53-55, 74.

[11] Foote, *Sketches of North Carolina*, quote 368; Scott, "James McGready," 34-41; James McGready, *The Posthumous Works of the Reverend and Pious James M'Gready, Late Minister of the Gospel, in Henderson, Kentucky*, ed. James Smith (Nashville: James Smith, 1837 [1831-1833]), 431; Robert Davidson, *History of the Presbyterian Church in the State of Kentucky; with a Preliminary Sketch of the Churches in the Valley of Virginia* (New York: Robert Carter, 1847), 260-261.

the school, but then he considered whether there was any truth in McMillan's statement. McGready believed the correct doctrines and behaved the correct way, but he did not actually "understand" God "experimentally." The Bible spoke of being "filled with the spirit" and "filled with joy." McGready felt none of this. However, after a "severe and protracted" spiritual struggle, and shaken by a nearly fatal bout of smallpox, he acquired a truly experiential faith. He was licensed to preach in August 1788.[12]

About two years later he attained two pastorates in Orange County, North Carolina, just east of Guilford County—Haw River and Stony Creek. In 1791 he led a minor revival which spread throughout the North Carolina Piedmont and earned McGready such followers as William Hodge, Samuel McAdow, and William McGee. But McGready made more enemies than friends. His sermons offended many of the community's most powerful families, who thoroughly enjoyed the tobacco-smoking, liquor-drinking, and ball-dancing, all of which McGready condemned. One night in 1795 or early 1796, a group of his enemies stole into the Stony Creek church and dragged the pulpit outside, where they "made a bonfire" out of it. They also left behind a letter written in blood, threatening physical harm against McGready unless he quit his manner of preaching.[13]

McGready and his family left for Logan County that fall. He began to pastor the churches of Gasper River, Muddy River, and Red River. Soon many others within McGready's circle—"Caldwell's boys," as historian Paul Conkin dubs them—immigrated to the Cumberland territory. The same year McGready came to Logan County, John Rankin moved to Sumner County, and he soon thereafter took over

[12] Foote, *Sketches of North Carolina*, 369-370, quotes 369; Scott, "James McGready," 46-49, 70.

[13] Foote, *Sketches of North Carolina*, 373-375, quote 375; Scott, "James McGready," 89, 99-105.

McGready's pastorate at Gasper River. William McGee assumed the pulpit at the Shiloh church in Sumner County; in 1798, William Hodge took over Shiloh, and McGee began pastoring at Beech and Ridge churches, also in Sumner County. Meanwhile, William McGee's brother John, a Methodist, began riding a circuit in Sumner County. And Samuel McAdow, who had replaced McGready at Haw River, replaced McGready yet again in 1800 at Red River.[14]

No doubt the confluence of so many familiar faces made the frontier more palatable. Still, as we saw from Rankin's initial opinions of the Cumberland territory, Caldwell's boys were not quite thrilled with their new surroundings. The Green River valley was the wildest region of Kentucky, a younger, rawer frontier than the more settled Bluegrass region. The valley was a land of squatters; less than a fifth of its inhabitants owned the land they lived on. This changed after the Kentucky legislature passed laws in 1795 and 1797 appropriating the sale of 200-acre tracts to squatters at dirt-cheap prices, but the laws, coupled with the relative undesirability of the land, attracted the poorest and most desperate settlers. The region also attracted violent criminals. The Harpe brothers, a pair of highwaymen from Orange County, North Carolina, roamed the area killing travelers at random. John Breckinridge, the state attorney general, summed up the Green River valley's reputation when he warned a friend who wanted to move there that it was "filled with nothing but hunters, horse-thieves & savages . . . a country where wretchedness, poverty & sickness will always reign."[15]

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[14] Conkin, "Caldwell's Boys"; Scott, "James McGready," 105.

[15] Stephen Aron, *How the West Was Lost: The Transformation of Kentucky from Daniel Boone to Henry Clay* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 150-156; Christopher Waldrep, "Opportunity on the Frontier South of the Green," in Craig Thompson Friend, ed., *The Buzzel About Kentuck: Settling the Promised Land* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 153-172; Craig Thompson Friend,

And Logan County was the most infamous county in the region. It was a county of drifters; barely more than a third of the names listed in the 1792 tax list reappeared in the 1797 tax list. Peter Cartwright, later a famous Methodist circuit-rider, remembered that the county was nicknamed "Rogues' Harbor." He wrote, "Murderers, horse thieves, highway robbers, and counterfeiters fled here until they combined and actually formed a majority." Vigilante "regulators" battled gangs of rouges. The county's reputation was only furthered when Andrew Jackson and Charles Dickinson chose a spot in Logan County, near Adairville, to wage their fateful (and, for Dickinson, fatal) duel. Dueling was, after all, illegal in Tennessee.[16]

Perhaps more dismaying for the young preachers, the denizens of the Cumberland region lacked any trace of religious piety. The sabbath, Peter Cartwright sardonically noted, was "set apart for hunting, fishing, horse-racing, card-playing, balls, dances, and all kinds of jollity and mirth."[17] Whiskey was a beloved beverage, as well as a form of monetary and social currency—not to mention being safer to drink than water or milk. There were very few ministers and even fewer settled pastorates. Most churches were ad hoc, seasonal gatherings rather than institutional entities which could tie together a community. Babies died before anyone could baptize them. Couples entered common-law marriages when there was no one to officiate a wedding. These were conditions intrinsic to new frontiers, but they were aggravated by Kentucky's religious pluralism and liberalism. There was no state-sponsored church, since Kentucky had adopted

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Kentucke's Frontiers (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 211-229; Eslinger, *Citizens of Zion*, 73-74; John Breckinridge to Samuel Meredith, 7 August 1796, quoted in Friend, *Kentucke's Frontiers*, 213.

[16] Eslinger, *Citizens of Zion*, 87; Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright* (New York: Nelson and Phillips, 1856), 24-25; Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Empire, 1767-1821* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 142.

[17] Cartwright, *Autobiography*, 25.

Virginia's expansive definition of the freedom of religion. And Jeffersonian deism found several adherents, especially among the Bluegrass aristocracy, leading James McGready to condemn the "old, wealthy, drunken deists, who bear the pompous titles of Majors, Colonels, Generals, Doctors, Judges, or Members of Congress."[18] Overall, it is understandable that McGready perceived a "universal deadness and stupidity" within his Logan County congregations.[19] But this was about to change.

The Great Revival

McGready first witnessed "an out-pouring of [the Lord's] Spirit" upon the Gasper River congregation in May 1797. The outpouring yielded modest results. The congregation was "awakened to a deep and solemn sense of their sin and danger," and some "eight or nine persons . . . were savingly brought to Christ." As typically happened, the fervor died down with the following winter, only to re-emerge the next summer, during a particularly emotional communion service in July 1798.[20] The Holy Spirit re-emerged during eucharistic services at Red River in July 1799, Gasper River in August, Muddy River in September, and the Ridge in October. (By this point, John Rankin was the pastor of Gasper River, and he also assisted at the Ridge service.) Once again the winter weakened their fervor, and the congregations were not "so quick and lively as

[18] McGready, *Posthumous Works*, quote 138; Niels Henry Sonne, *Liberal Kentucky, 1780-1828* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939); Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 219. For McGready's major attacks on deism, see McGready, *Posthumous Works*, 1-14, 470-486. For a McGready temperance sermon, see ibid., 487-511.

[19] James McGready, "A Short Narrative of the Revival of Religion in Logan County, in the State of Kentucky, and the adjacent settlements in the State of Tennessee, from May 1797, until September 1800," *The Western Missionary Magazine* 1 (February 1803): 27.

[20] Ibid.

before."[21]

The sacramental meetings of 1797-1799 were, McGready wrote, "like a scattering drops before a mighty rain" compared to the revivals of 1800. At the Red River meeting in June, which Rankin had also attended, McGready reported that the congregants cried out, "What shall I do to be saved?" Boys and girls as young as nine lay "prostrate on the ground, weeping, praying and crying out for mercy, like condemned criminals at the place of execution."[22] Two weeks later in July, another sacramental meeting was held at Gasper River. The meetinghouse was new and had only been finished the night before worshippers arrived. When John Rankin and the other men finished shingling the frame building, they "scattered the shaving over the floor to prevent the dust from soiling the peoples clothing." For them, the sawdust floor was practical; for later generations it was iconic.[23] Many consider what happened the following weekend to be the first American camp meeting.[24]

It was not a conscious invention. Instead, stories about the Red River meeting spread so quickly that hundreds came to the next meeting at Gasper River. They came from such great distances—as far as 100 miles away—that rather than going back home every night during the meeting, they camped out, a dozen or so covered wagons lining the meeting's periphery. Some people came only "to gratify their curiosity." Others came

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[21] Ibid. (March 1803): 45-47, quotes 45 and 47.

[22] Ibid., 47-48; Rankin, "Auto-biography," 32-34.

[23] Ibid., 34-37.

[24] James Smith, *History of the Christian Church, from Its Origin to the Present Time; Compiled from Various Authors. Including a History of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, Drawn from Authentic Documents* (Nashville: Cumberland Presbyterian Office, 1835), 572; B. W. McDonnold, *History of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church* (Nashville: Board of Publication of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, 1888), 13; Conkin, *Cane Ridge*, 61-62.

"to scrutinize" the meeting and determine whether its origins were divine or diabolical. Whatever reason they came, they experienced something remarkable. Day and night the worshippers prayed, exhorted, sang, groaned, trembled, and let out "piercing & incessant" cries. People kept falling onto the meetinghouse floor until it "was literally covered" and some of the ministers had to carry their unconscious bodies outside and "lay them on the grass."[25] The worship transcended the normal bounds of human endurance; "hunger and sleep," McGready wrote, "seemed to affect no body." Children preached to their elders, describing to them the "plan of salvation." One little girl leapt from her mother's lap and preached:

> He is come! He is come! O! what a glorious Christ, what a sweet Christ, what a lovely Christ, what a precious Christ he is! O! what a beauty I see in him! What a glory I see in him! O! what a fulness, what an infinite fulness I see in Christ! O! there is a fulness in him for all the world, if they could but see it, if they would but come.

Young and old, male and female, black and white—all joined the orgiastic throng, a community created from nothing, a holy city that fell from heaven onto the wasteland of Rogues' Harbor.[26]

Once worship ended on Tuesday morning, people went home and began exhorting their neighbors "to repent & be converted to God."[27] When they had no minister they "met in society," meeting and praying together in different houses from day to day. On one occasion some twenty people found themselves together at the same house at the same time, and none of them knew why they had come; they soon "began to converse about the concerns of their souls." In late August a sacramental meeting was held at

[25] Rankin, "Auto-biography," 34-37.

[26] McGready, "Short Narrative" (March 1803): 49-51.

[27] Rankin, "Auto-biography," 37.

Muddy River, drawing even more people than the Gasper River meeting. This time twenty-two wagons came "loaded with people and their provisions," and they camped out near the meetinghouse from Friday night to Tuesday morning. John Rankin's preaching that Saturday made "poor sinners sensibly [feel] the arrows of the Almighty sticking fast in their hearts." A twelve-year-old boy persuaded a grown man to discard his educated deism, while a young woman pled with her little brother to accept Christ lest he "sink to the everlasting flames of Hell!" Sacramental meetings continued to be held unusually late into the year, with services at the Ridge and Shiloh in September, Clay Lick and Montgomery in October, and Little Muddy Creek and Hopewell in November. McGready estimated that the Shiloh meeting drew five thousand people; at that time, Kentucky's population was only 220,000 and its largest town, Lexington, had fewer than two thousand inhabitants.[28]

The revival fever did not remain in the Green and Cumberland River valleys but spread northward to the Bluegrass, southern Indiana, and southern Ohio; eastward to western Pennsylvania, western Virginia, the Shenandoah Valley, and eastern Kentucky; and southward to eastern Tennessee and the Carolina and Georgia Piedmont. Baptists, Methodists, and other evangelical groups participated in the revivals, expanding them beyond their Presbyterian origins. McGready's account of the Cumberland revivals was widely disseminated; the Methodist bishop and circuit-rider Francis Asbury sometimes read it aloud in lieu of a sermon. Camp meetings in the Bluegrass outgrew their southern cousins, the largest being the legendary Cane Ridge revival near Paris in August 1801. Anywhere from ten to twenty-five thousand people came to the six-day-long meeting.

[28] McGready, "Short Narrative" (March 1803): 52-53; ibid. (April 1803): 99-101; Lowell H. Harrison and James C. Klotter, *A New History of Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 99.

Those who came to Cane Ridge—or Gasper River or Shiloh, for that matter—probably saw more people in one place than they ever would again in this world.[29] Meanwhile the revival continued in the Cumberland territory. The gatherings did not reach the numbers of Gasper, Muddy, or Shiloh, but an intense evangelical core remained. Towards the end of his autobiography John Rankin provided an impressionistic account of the next few years: trances that went on for hours or days; children speaking "with boldness & truth, in language to which they were unaccustomed"; worshippers spinning round in circles; and prophetic visions.[30]

The revivals were marked by the influence of Arminianism, an emphasis on experiential or "felt" religion, a sometimes violent physicality, and a tendency towards social disorder. Most of the Cumberland territory's Presbyterian ministers, especially James McGready, would have objected to the label "Arminian." They insisted they were well within the parameters of Calvinist orthodoxy, albeit in modified form. They accepted predestination but rejected the doctrine of "fatality," more commonly known today as "double predestination"—the belief that God has predestined some for heaven and others for hell. They also rejected the doctrine that infants who died before being baptized (an all-too-common occurrence on the frontier) were condemned to hell.

John Rankin's departures from the Westminster Confession were more extreme; he confided to John Lyle, a conservative minister visiting the region, that he believed "God had given to every man a sufficiency of grace, which if he would improve, he would get more &c until he would arrive at true conversion or a living faith &c." In other

[29] Boles, *Great Revival*, 51-89; Conkin, *Cane Ridge*, 55-56, 63-117. I borrow from Harold Bloom's observation in *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 61.

[30] Rankin, "Auto-biography," 38.

words, there was no elect, and anyone could attain salvation if he could "improve" upon his own inherent "sufficiency of grace."[31] But even Rankin's less radical cohorts were often more Arminian than they wished to admit. One can glean much from which scriptures they chose as texts for their sermons. McGready recounted that at the Red River meeting in June 1800, William Hodge read from Job 22:21, "Acquaint now thyself with him." In 1805, John Lyle recorded that McGready preached from James 4:8 ("Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you") and Revelation 2:7 ("To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life"). All three scriptural passages emphasized the role of human agency—acquainting oneself with God, drawing nigh to him, overcoming sin—rather than divine agency.[32] After all, the cry at Red River had been, "What shall *we do*?!"[33]

Central to the Cumberland revivalists' quasi-Arminian rhetoric was the notion of "experimental," or experiential, religion. It was crucial that the Christian *feel* her faith rather than simply *believe* it. McGready condemned those who dismissed experimental religion as fanaticism or superstition, calling them "hypocrites" and "christianized deists" who would rather dabble in "geography, philosophy, and astronomy," who would rather talk about religion than actually experience it.[34] As one worshipper realized at the Gasper River meeting in July 1800, it was not enough to hold certain doctrines or perform certain

[31] John Lyle, "A Narrative of J. Lyle's Mission in the Bounds of the Cumberland Presbytery, During the Year 1805," typescript at the Kentucky Historical Society, Frankfort, Kentucky, photocopy at the Historical Foundation of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in America, Memphis, Tennessee (HFCPC), 2.

[32] McGready, "Short Narrative" (March 1803): 48; Lyle, "Narrative," 3, 4.

[33] Rankin, "Auto-biography," 34.

[34] McGready, *Posthumous Works*, 117, 258.

rituals. He cried out, "I have been a sober professor; I have been a communicant; O! I have been deceived, I have no religion—O! I see that religion is a sensible thing."[35]

One of the Christian's senses was, of course, sight, and many participants in the Great Revival had powerful visions. McGready cautioned his congregation from excessive interest in visions; he warned that those who believed they had literally seen Christ's bleeding body were subject to satanic deception, for Christ could only be seen with the "eye of the understanding when enlightened by the Spirit of God," not by the "bodily eye." But this distinction was probably lost on many of his congregants. McGready did not help matters with his metaphorical accounts of the soul's encounter with Jesus "at the foot of a tree," of Jesus appearing at the communion table, "his vesture dipped in blood . . . the scarlet streams of divine blood flowing from all his open veins."[36] Nor was McGready opposed to all visions or dreams. One biographer reports that, when McGready was filled with doubt about the spiritual state of the Red River congregation, one of its elders comforted him with a dream he had had, in which McGready, William Hodge, and William McGee were catching an "abundance of fish on the side of a dry ragged mountain."[37] John Rankin was especially open to congregants' visions, as will be discussed in the next chapter.[38]

Of course, the senses of faith entailed not just sight but the whole body. Felt religion was often violently felt—experiential religion was an *experience*. The most dramatic example of this was "the jerks," a phenomenon in which the worshipper's body

[35] Idem., "Short Narrative" (March 1803): 49-50.

[36] Idem., *Posthumous Works*, 352-354. Also see Schmidt, *Holy Fairs*, 145-153.

[37] Foote, *Sketches of North Carolina*, 377.

[38] See below, p. 57.

shook uncontrollably and was contorted into grotesque configurations. John Rankin, Jr., was often taken so violently with the jerks, sometimes on the way to school, that he feared they would "kill him." The only way to cure himself of the jerks was to "dance for an hour or more."[39] Peter Cartwright recounted the story—exaggerated, as Cartwright's stories usually were—of a group of "drunken rowdies" who came to taunt a camp meeting at the Ridge. The largest of them "cursed the jerks," and soon thereafter came down with a case of the jerks himself. He ran off into the woods in a panic. He tried to quell the tremors with drink, but he could not bring his whiskey-bottle to his lips, and finally he dropped the bottle and broke it. People gathered as he cursed with greater vitriol and jerked with greater force, until his neck snapped and he fell to the ground dead, "his mouth full of cursing and bitterness." At a time when the Reformed elite urged respectability and self-control, evangelical Presbyterians celebrated a form of worship that was often the loss of self-control.[40]

The revivals were not just emotional but dangerous, and generous not just to bodies but to society itself. The sacramental services upended social hierarchies of race, age, and gender. John Lyle wrote disapprovingly in his journal of a service during which "a baptist negor took the jerks & began to hollow or exhort," singing and dancing "in a shuffling step" for "half an hour." Lyle's tone implied he was less than thrilled with the prospect of white people being led in worship by a black man. Rankin took note of the vision of a young woman named Betsy Berry, and McGready suggested that the Red River revival truly began when "a woman . . . [broke] out into an amazing rapture of joy

[39] Daniel Boler, "A Journal or Memorandum of a Journey thru out the Western Societies of Believers" (1852), manuscript, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland (WRHS), microfilm at WKU.

[40] Cartwright, *Autobiography*, 50-51; Heyrman, *Southern Cross*, 206-252.

and adoration, for a few minutes."[41] McGready also recounted a pubescent girl who pled with her father to accept Christ, until he wept "like a child," the gospel "pierc[ing] the old man like a dart." The revivals placed children above their parents, women above men, and slaves above their masters. They disrupted the traditional relationship between husband and wife, as seen in the case of a man who interrupted the Ridge sacramental meeting in September 1800, cursing his wife for staying at the meetinghouse the night before. He insisted she go home with him, but she refused. Furious, he went back home, only to be "struck with deep conviction" which left him lying "powerless" on the floor "until . . . he obtained religion." The symbolic emasculation of these stories—the father pierced by an arrow, the husband lying helpless on the floor—reaffirms how the revival endangered traditional hierarchies.[42]

One of these hierarchies was that of the established denomination. The Great Revival was an interdenominational phenomenon, with Methodists like John McGee preaching alongside Presbyterians. Evangelical Presbyterians had a pragmatic understanding of doctrine; relatively trivial theological disputes should not stand in the way of salvation. McGready preached that on Judgment Day, the relevant question would not be, "Were you a Presbyterian—a Seceder—a Covenanter—a Baptist—or a Methodist; but, Did you experience the new birth?"[43] After Rankin informed John Lyle of his heterodox beliefs, he explained that when he had espoused the orthodox Presbyterian creed he had had less success in gaining adherents. "For my part," Lyle later asserted, "I am far from thinking that success in converting people to error is success in the cause of

[41] Lyle, "Narrative," 3-4; Rankin, "Auto-biography," 37; McGready, "Short Narrative" (March 1803): 48.

[42] Ibid. (April 1803): 101-102; Heyrman, *Southern Cross*, 77-205.

[43] McGready, *Posthumous Works*, 279.

God."[44] Rankin believed in a common-sense religion that valued results over doctrinal nitpicking. Lyle, on the other hand, prized dogmatic rigor above all else. These two points of view proved incompatible, and the Presbyterian church in Kentucky was soon torn asunder. And in the middle of it all was John Rankin.

The Cumberland Schism

Readers unfamiliar with Presbyterian polity may appreciate a brief explanation to make what transpired next in Logan County easier to follow. Presbyterian government is similar to the federalist government of the United States, with powers and responsibilities divided amongst various levels of judicatories. The smallest ecclesiastical unit is, obviously, the congregation; several congregations make up a presbytery; several presbyteries, a synod; and synods fall under the jurisdiction of the General Assembly. Presbyteries are in charge of licensing, ordaining, and disciplining ministers, while synods and the General Assembly function as appellate courts, ruling upon presbyterial decisions while rarely originating "legislation" themselves.

In 1786 the Presbyterian church grew large enough in Kentucky to justify the formation of Transylvania Presbytery, which covered not only Kentucky but north-central Tennessee and the Miami territory of Ohio, now the Cincinnati metropolitan area. In 1799 the Synod of Virginia, of which Transylvania Presbytery was part, divided Transylvania into three presbyteries: Transylvania (the Pennyroyal and the Cumberland territory), West Lexington (the Bluegrass region), and Washington (northeastern

[44] Lyle, "Narrative," 2.

Kentucky and the Miami territory). These three presbyteries were constituted as the Synod of Kentucky in 1802.[45]

I have already hinted at why conservative Presbyterians, labeled "anti-revivalists" by the evangelical camp, opposed the Great Revival. They saw the unchecked emotionalism of the revivals as disturbingly un-Presbyterian. The Reformed tradition encouraged Christians to moderate their emotions with their intellect and *vice versa*. The bizarre physical exercises of Gasper River and Cane Ridge were far from respectable. For some they were even a source of embarrassment. More importantly, evangelical revivalism placed a distinctly un-Calvinist emphasis on individual volition and inner spiritual experience, rather than divine sovereignty. The excessive enthusiasm of the camp meetings implied that such enthusiasm was necessary for salvation, and that by undergoing these cathartic displays, worshippers were attaining salvation. This smacked of Arminianism for traditionalist Presbyterians. In Westminster orthodoxy, it did not matter whether grace was "sensible." The elect were saved whether or not they felt it.

Presbyterian conservatives were also concerned by the revivalists' lenient attitudes toward ministerial education. The Presbyterian Book of Order required ministers to receive a classical education, but revivalist evangelicals did not consider education as a particularly high priority. John Rankin was particularly cynical about classical education, having benefited little from his time as young man at an academy in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. He later sarcastically remarked that the classics had "entertained" him with their catalogues of "injustices, cruelty & bloodshed," and the "heathen mythology" with its "paraphernalia of . . . rites, ceremonies, gods & goddesses." But this was ultimately a "course of reading much better calculated to inspire an aspiring

[45] Sweet, *Presbyterians*, 30-32.

youth with inclinations to become a Julius Caesar, an Alexander, a Cicero or a Demosthenes, than to lead him to the gentle waters of Eternal life." The scholar's life was not conducive to faith. Indeed, it was a hindrance to faith, as he became preoccupied with his studies and social life, and after two years of study he realized he felt no more qualified for the ministry than beforehand.[46] Other evangelicals in Cumberland Presbytery, even if they did not share Rankin's antipathy toward classical education, certainly felt it was a trivial matter compared to ordaining a sufficient number of ministers for the vast frontier. John Lyle summarized anti-revivalist concerns when he described the Cumberland preachers as "illiterate exhorters and licentiates who are chiefly Arminians in sentiment."[47]

Division over ministerial education began to sharpen in Transylvania Presbytery when in 1802 it approved Finis Ewing, Samuel King, and Alexander Anderson as licentiates, even though they were "destitute of classical learning."[48] Some conservative ministers objected to the licensure, but the majority invoked a popular loophole stipulating that uneducated men could be licensed "in extraordinary cases."[49] The conservatives were not persuaded by this argument but were overruled. The issue was only exacerbated by the organization of Cumberland Presbytery in 1803. The presbytery

[46] John Rankin, "Auto-biography," 11-13.

[47] Lyle, "Narrative," 2.

[48] Minutes of Transylvania Presbytery, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia (PHS), microfilm at HFCPC, 6 October 1802; reprinted in William Warren Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier, 1783-1840, Vol. II: The Presbyterians* (New York: Cooper Square, 1964 [1936]), 187-189. Future citations from the minutes of Transylvania Presbytery, Cumberland Presbytery, or the Synod of Kentucky will cite both the microfilmed manuscript and Sweet's edited volume.

[49] PCUSA Const. (1788), Form of Government 13.4; *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America Containing the Confession of Faith, the Catechisms, the Government and Discipline, and the Directory for the Worship, Ratified and Adopted by the Synod of New-York and Philadelphia, Held at Philadelphia May the 16th 1788, and Continued by Adjournments until the 28th of the Same Month* (Philadelphia: Thomas Bradford, 1789), 152.

covered the territory between the Green and Cumberland rivers, the largest pocket of revival evangelicalism in the Synod of Kentucky now that the Bluegrass-Miami revivalists had withdrawn from the synod and established an independent Springfield Presbytery. Revivalists had far greater representation in Cumberland Presbytery than in Washington or West Lexington presbyteries.[50]

Cumberland Presbytery's makeup almost seemed designed to brew bitter in-fighting. Its membership consisted of five evangelical ministers and five conservative ministers. The five evangelicals were James McGready and John Rankin; William Hodge, pastor of the Shiloh church in Sumner County, Tennessee; William McGee, whose brother John was a Methodist pastor; and Samuel McAdow, an older man in ill health and close to retirement. The five conservatives were Thomas Craighead, James Balch, Samuel Donnell, John Bowman, and Terah Templin, their *de facto* leader being Craighead, pastor of the Nashville church (and, incidentally, David Caldwell's son-in-law). But the presbytery did not remain split fifty-fifty. James Haw, a former Republican Methodist who had joined Transylvania Presbytery, transferred his membership to Cumberland, and was decidedly revivalist. Cumberland also accepted from Transylvania the previously mentioned licentiates Ewing, King, and Anderson. The presbytery went on to ordain Anderson in April 1803 and Ewing that October.[51]

The conservatives grew increasingly irritated with the presbytery's evangelicals. At the spring 1804 meeting they tried to prevent Finis Ewing from being seated on the old grounds that he had not been classically educated, but once again they were

[50] Boles, *Great Revival*, 148-154; Conkin, *Cane Ridge*, 124-129.

[51] Minutes of Cumberland Presbytery, PHS, microfilm at HFCPC, 5-6 April 1803, 4-7 October 1803; Sweet, *Presbyterians*, 283-289.

overruled.[52] After all, now that that Ewing and Anderson had been ordained, the revivalists had an 8-5 majority. This became an 11-6 majority with the ordination of Samuel King, Samuel Hodge, Thomas Nelson, and William Dickey (all revivalist except Dickey) and the sudden death of Anderson. Also, there were three revivalist licentiates, while the anti-revivalists had only one; and there were one revivalist candidate and thirteen revivalist exhorters, while the anti-revivalists had none of either (of course, they did not approve the licensure of exhorters at all).[53] Craighead and the others had no choice but to take their concerns to the synod, where conservatives held a majority vote.

Meanwhile, the synod was concerned with a separate issue in the northern Bluegrass, where the spirit of Cane Ridge had disrupted church order. The circumstances were in many ways similar to those in Cumberland Presbytery. The Synod of Kentucky had censured Washington Presbytery for ordaining Richard McNemar and John Thompson without a proper doctrinal examination. In turn, McNemar, Thompson, and three other ministers—John Dunlavy, Robert Marshall, and Barton Stone—withdrew from the synod on September 10, 1803, citing their refusal to treat the Westminster Confession as inerrant and their unwillingness to blindly accept Calvinist teachings on predestination. Two days later they formed an independent Springfield Presbytery. They soon acquired two additional ministers (Malcolm Worley, a disciple of McNemar; and David Purviance, whom West Lexington Presbytery had denied ordination) and the allegiance of some fifteen congregations in the Bluegrass and Ohio's Miami River valley. However, the ministers' anti-creedalism and anti-denominationalism soon convinced

[52] Cumberland Presbytery, 4 April 1804; Sweet, *Presbyterians*, 290.

[53] Ben M. Barrus, Milton L. Baughn, and Thomas H. Campbell, *A People Called Cumberland Presbyterians* (Memphis: Frontier Press, 1972), 52-54, 58-59.

them that the independent presbytery smacked too much of sectarian division. Therefore, on June 28, 1804, they dissolved the presbytery, issuing a satirically titled "Last Will and Testament." Rejecting confessional identity entirely, they chose to call themselves simply "Christians." Their movement ultimately joined forces with the Campbellites of western Pennsylvania and western Virginia. Their modern-day descendants include the Churches of Christ and the Disciples of Christ.[54]

It was October 1804, only a few months after the dissolution of the independent Springfield Presbytery, when Craighead submitted a petition to the synod attesting that the Cumberland revivalists were licensing men who were illiterate and doctrinally unsound. The synod heard Craighead's petition at the same time it met with a General Assembly committee on the recent Springfield schism.[55] Probably in an effort to prevent another Springfield, the synod responded the next year by appointing a commission of six elders and ten ministers to deal with the controversy. The commission was entrusted with full synodical powers.[56]

The commission began proceedings at the Gasper River meetinghouse on December 3, 1805. The location—John Rankin's pastorate and the epicenter of the Great Revival—was perhaps not the wisest choice. No one in the area opened their doors to the commissioners, except for a man named James Reid who "lived three or four miles from

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[54] Boles, *Great Revival*, 149-159; Conkin, *Cane Ridge*, 124-129, 146-150; "The Last Will and Testament of Springfield Presbytery," reprinted in Richard McNemar, *The Kentucky Revival, or, A Short History of the Late Extraordinary Out-pouring of the Spirit of God, in the Western States of America, Agreeably to Scripture-promises, and Prophecies Concerning the Latter Day: With a Brief Account of the Entrance and Progress of What the World Call Shakerism, Among the Subjects of the Late Revival in Ohio and Kentucky. Presented to the True Zion-traveller, as a Memorial of the Wilderness Journey* (New York: Edward O. Jenkins, 1846 [1808]), 153-156.

[55] Minutes of the Synod of Kentucky, PHS, microfilm in HFCPC, 22 October 1804; Sweet, *Presbyterians*, 328-330.

[56] Synod of Kentucky, 17-18 October 1805; Sweet, *Presbyterians*, 331-335.

the Church."[57] All sixteen commissioners stayed at Reid's house and trekked back and forth every day. Locals referred to the commission as an "Inquisition" and gave many of the commissioners hateful nicknames, of which we unfortunately have no examples. Rankin gave an "inflammatory address" to his congregation—and in front of the commissioners—the night before the commission's first day of business. According to one commissioner, the speech was "accompanied with threats, or language indicative of personal violence."[58]

Perhaps in response to Rankin's tirade, John Lyle opened the synodical commission with a hostile three-hour sermon "on the call & qualifications necessary to the gospel ministry," using Hebrews 5:4 as his text—"And no man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron."[59] The verse referred to the honor of the priesthood, undermining the evangelicals' efforts to democratize the faith while championing the traditional clerical elite. The charge against Cumberland Presbytery was twofold: "licensing and ordaining men to preach the Gospel contrary to the rules and discipline of the Presbyterian Church," as well as requiring "only a partial adoption of the Confession of Faith by persons licensed to preach."[60] The first charge was more arguable than the second; the presbytery had ordained men who did not meet the normal educational requirements, but they invoked the loophole in Presbyterian law

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[57] Davidson, *Presbyterian Church in Kentucky*, 235.

[58] [Thomas H. Cleland], *A Brief History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the Proceedings of the Synod of Kentucky, Relative to the Late Cumberland Presbytery: in Which Is Brought to View a Brief Account of the Origin and Present Standing of the People Usually Denominated Cumberland Presbyterians; as Taken from Official Documents and Facts in Possession of Synod* (Lexington, Ky.: Thomas T. Skillman, 1823), 12.

[59] Lyle, "Narrative," 12-13.

[60] Synod of Kentucky, 6 December 1805; Sweet, *Presbyterians*, 338.

allowing for exceptions in special circumstances, the circumstances in this case being the shortage of ministers in the trans-Appalachian West. No one, however, denied the second charge. The presbytery had indeed ordained men who only adopted the Confession of Faith insofar as it adhered to the scriptures. For many this meant a modified Calvinism that excluded the doctrines of double predestination and the damnation of unelected infants.

These theological questions were not discussed, but James McGready defended liberal subscriptionism, the belief that ordained ministers should be allowed to differ on nonessential aspects of Presbyterian dogma. The Confession of Faith, he argued, "was Human composition and fallible," and they should not be "bound any farther than they believed it to correspond with the Scriptures."[61] The commission did not share McGready's open-minded view. They voted to examine everyone who had been irregularly licensed and ordained: five ministers, six probationers, and fifteen exhorters; twenty-six men in all. The five regularly ordained revivalists (McGready, McGee, McAdow, Hodge, and Rankin) objected that the synod had no power to do this; a synod could review a presbytery's actions, but only a presbytery had the power to deal with individual ministers and licentiates. Once a presbytery ordained or licensed someone, no other body could nullify the action, unless the presbytery itself appealed the decision to the synod. Kentucky Synod's only legal option was to dissolve Cumberland Presbytery and transfer its members to a presbytery with stricter licensing practices. All of Cumberland's former members would have remained, but it would have prevented any

[61] Synod of Kentucky, 6 December 1805; Sweet, *Presbyterians*, 338.

more irregular licensures.[62]

The commission, however, reaffirmed its order, asking the twenty-six "young men" to submit to the synod's authority. The revivalists asked leave to pray and discuss the commission's demands. The commission prayed for reconciliation while the revivalists left the room. After an indefinite period time, the young men returned, and as they did so, the commission asked each one, "Do you submit? or not submit?" In other words, did they unconditionally accept the Standards of the Presbyterian Church, including the Confession of Faith? All twenty-six men chose not to submit, insisting that the synod had no authority to even ask them such a question. The commission forbade all of them from preaching the gospel. The commission then turned to the regularly ordained revivalists. They accused Hodge, McGee, and Rankin of holding incorrect doctrine, and ordered them along with McGready and McAdow to appear before the synod's next meeting. The commissioners apparently intended an outright purge of the revivalist element within Cumberland Presbytery.[63]

After the commission, the twenty-six expelled licentiates and ministers, along with the other five threatened ministers, formed a council outside of the Presbyterian church's jurisdiction. John Rankin was a prominent leader within the council, representing it before the synod in October 1806.[64] McGready soon withdrew from the council, afraid that it would eventually become a separate denomination. However, the council's chief efforts for the next few years were aimed at reuniting with the parent church, a goal which many other Presbyterians considered viable if not expected. It was

[62] Synod of Kentucky, 6 December 1805; Sweet, *Presbyterians*, 338-339.

[63] Synod of Kentucky, 7-10 December 1805; Sweet, *Presbyterians*, 339-344.

[64] Synod of Kentucky, 25-27 October 1806; Sweet, *Presbyterians*, 350-352.

commonly believed within the denomination, after all, that Kentucky Synod had acted unconstitutionally. In 1807 a trustee of the General Assembly wrote the revivalist council that the synod had been "wholly improper in suspending ordained ministers, and still more improper was it for a Commission of Synod to do it."[65] That same year the General Assembly questioned the synod's actions and asked it to "consider whether some of them ought to not be rescinded, and steps speedily taken to mitigate the sufferings."[66]

But Kentucky Synod simply reaffirmed what the commission had done in 1805. Having dissolved Cumberland Presbytery in 1806, the synod deferred the issue to Transylvania Presbytery. The council was uneager to deal with the presbytery for two reasons: (1) a presbytery could not possibly override the actions of a synod—it would be like a county overriding a state law; (2) a presbytery, unlike a synod, *did* have the authority to reexamine the licentiates and ministers on doctrine and then depose them from the ministry—which was probably what the synod had in mind when it deferred the issue to Transylvania.[67]

In 1808 the council petitioned the General Assembly to help them out, but the assembly responded that it could only listen to an appeal from a synod, not from an irregular council. Things were complicated by the fact that Kentucky Synod had not submitted its minutes and therefore the assembly could not review the synod's actions. A commissioner from Philadelphia told the council that "[i]f the records of the Synod of Kentucky had been before us, we should without difficulty have reversed your

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[65] Quoted in Barrus et al., *Cumberland Presbyterians*, 69.

[66] *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1789-1820* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1847), 389-393.

[67] Transylvania Presbytery, 7 October 1808; Sweet, *Presbyterians*, 219-220.

suspension."[68] The 1809 General Assembly received the synod's minutes, along with two letters explaining what it had done. John Lyle gave a moving speech, openly weeping as he defended Kentucky Synod. The assembly voted in favor of the synod, effectively ending the issue. They had received no communication from the council, which had been told it could not petition the assembly.[69] The whole affair was an enormous mess.

After the 1809 General Assembly, the revivalist council began to crumble. William Hodge and James McGready agreed to accept the Confession of Faith unconditionally and were received into Transylvania Presbytery. Samuel McAdow, whose ill health was hardly served well by the controversy, moved to Dickson County, Tennessee. William McGee was indecisive, torn between his opposition to the church's actions and his distaste for schism. And John Rankin had defected to the Shakers in 1807. This left only two ordained ministers in the council, Finis Ewing and Samuel King. Church law required three ordained ministers to form a presbytery; if the council wanted to form an independent presbytery and be seen as legitimate, they needed a third minister. Out of desperation, Ewing and King, along with the licentiate Ephraim McLean, traveled to Dickson County and asked McAdow to form a presbytery with them. After a night praying outside, McAdow agreed to do it. On February 4, 1810, McAdow, King, and Ewing organized an independent Cumberland Presbytery and ordained McLean. They ruled that all licentiates and ministers would be required to "adopt the confession and discipline of the presbyterian church, except the idea of fatality." After a few more failed attempts to reunite with the parent church, Cumberland Presbytery divided into three presbyteries in 1813 and formed an independent Cumberland Synod. In 1829 the synod

[68] *Minutes of the General Assembly*, 408-409; Smith, *History of the Christian Church*, quote 628.

[69] *Minutes of the General Assembly*, 416.

became four synods which met as a General Assembly. By this point the Cumberland Presbyterian Church was a completely separate denomination, with churches in Tennessee, Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois, Alabama, Missouri, and the Arkansas territory, and around twenty thousand members.[70]

If the details of the Cumberland schism seem tedious, one can only imagine how tedious they were for those who lived through it. Presbyterianism underwent an utter breakdown in Kentucky. The revivals—with their quasi-Arminian rhetoric, emphasis on felt religion, violent physicality, disruptive egalitarianism, and common-sense rejection of dogmatic rigor—proved incompatible with traditional church order. After years of entanglement in bureaucratic disorder and resistance from dogmatic conservatives afraid of true religion, evangelicals in Logan County and the surrounding region were eager for an entirely different way of bringing believers together into community. Surely the old staid church was not the only way, especially now that the kingdom of heaven seemed to be quickly approaching. Indeed, on October 17, 1807, three men came to John Rankin's door with news that the kingdom had already arrived.

[70] Barrus et al., *Cumberland Presbyterians*, 74-80, 105-117, 129; [Finis Ewing?], "Circular Letter, Addressed to the Societies and Brethren of the Presbyterian Church, Recently under the Care of the Council, by the Late Cumberland Presbytery; in Which There Is a Correct Statement of the Origin, Progress and Termination of the Difference between the Synod of Kentucky, and the Former Presbytery of Cumberland" (1810), reprinted in Smith, *History of the Christian Church*, quote 683.

Chapter Two: A Sensible Conversion

From Evangelical Presbyterianism to Western Shakerism

The three men were Shaker missionaries named Issachar Bates, Richard McNemar, and Matthew Houston. McNemar and Houston were recent converts from the Stoneite Restoration movement. McNemar was one of the two ministers in Washington Presbytery whose ordination provoked the censure of Kentucky Synod, eventually triggering a schism. Soon after his visit to Logan County, McNemar published *The Kentucky Revival*, an account of the 1800-1801 revivals and the subsequent formation (and dissolution) of Springfield Presbytery. He was a songwriter, firebrand, and controversialist, and it is quite possible that if he had not joined the Shakers, we would speak today of the "McNemar-Campbell" movement.[1]

Bates was the oldest of the three and the oldest in the Shaker faith. He was a native of Hingham, Massachusetts, and converted to Shakerism in 1801. A missionary extraordinaire, he traveled 38,000 miles during his first decade as a Shaker, mostly by foot. He is best remembered now for his songwriting, especially this song:

> Come life Shaker life
> Come life eternal
> Shake Shake out of me
> All that is carnal . . .[2]

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[1] McNemar, *Kentucky Revival*; J. P. MacLean, *A Sketch of the Life and Labors of Richard McNemar* (Franklin, Oh.: s.p., 1905); Carol Medlicott and Christian Goodwillie, *Richard McNemar, Music, and the Western Shaker Communities: "Branches of One Living Tree"* (Kent State [Oh.] University Press, forthcoming, 2013).

[2] Issachar Bates, "Come Life Shaker Life" (1835), reprinted in Daniel W. Patterson, *The Shaker Spiritual* (Princeton University Press, 1979), 254; Carol Medlicott, "Issachar Bates: Shaker Missionary," *Timeline* [Columbus, Oh.] 26.3 (July/September 2009): 22-39; idem., *Issachar Bates: A Shaker's Journey* (Lebanon, N.H.: University Press of New England, forthcoming, 2013). For Bates' autobiography, see Issachar Bates, "A Sketch of the Life and Experience of Issachar Bates," ed. Theodore E. Johnson, *Shaker Quarterly* 1.3 (Fall 1961): 98-118; 1.4 (Winter 1961): 145-163; 2.1 (Spring 1962): 18-41. Future citations for the edited

Throughout the early 1800s, the Shakers—and really all New Englanders—were constantly exposed to newspaper accounts of the revival in Kentucky and elsewhere in the trans-Appalachian west. In response the central ministry at New Lebanon decided to send three missionaries to "that wild part of the world for Christs sake, & for the sake of them poor souls." Bates was one of those eastern missionaries; the other two were John Meacham (son of Joseph Meacham, former leader of the Shakers) and Benjamin Seth Youngs (eventually the chief elder at South Union).[3]

On New Years' Day, 1805, the eastern missionaries began their journey. In the early spring they began tentatively interacting with the New Lights of the northern Bluegrass and the Miami River valley of southwestern Ohio. They visited Barton Stone's church at Cane Ridge and Matthew Houston's church at Paint Lick, as well as such preachers as Malcolm Worley, John Thompson, Richard McNemar, and John Dunlavy. These were all men who had defected from the Synod of Kentucky, and who two years earlier had dissolved the independent Springfield Presbytery in favor of a non-denominational alliance of "Christians." The Shakers found rapid success, winning Houston, Worley, McNemar, and Dunlavy as converts. Worley was their very first western convert, and his home in Turtle Creek, Ohio (some thirty miles northeast of Cincinnati) became the base for Shaker missionary efforts in the west. By 1805 the base evolved into the full-fledged Shaker society of Union Village. That same year a village was established at Shawnee Run, Kentucky, twenty-odd miles southwest of Lexington; it

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autobiography will include the season and year of its publication in the *Shaker Quarterly*. For the 38,000 miles figure, see ibid. (Spring 1962), 20.

[3] Ibid. (Winter 1961), 152-153.

was later renamed Pleasant Hill.[4]

On September 22, 1807, Bates, accompanied by the New Light converts McNemar and Houston, departed Union Village for south-central Kentucky. They passed through Elizabethtown, crossed Bacon Creek and Green River, and may have stopped to see Mammoth Cave—the name is simply jotted down in their journal. On October 17 they arrived at the home of John Rankin, who, they noted, "received [them] with a measure of kindness." The next day they visited the Gasper River meetinghouse. The church forbade them from speaking, but one member, John Sloss, allowed them to come to his house and speak to a small group there. For more than a month they stayed in the area, spending most nights at John Rankin's house. On October 21 they preached at Drakes Creek, where a Methodist prophet named George Walls had a small number of adherents. Three days later they accompanied Rankin to the Muddy River church, though once again they were not allowed to preach. That same night they visited James B. Porter's church; Matthew Houston was allowed to answer questions, though not to preach *per se*.[5]

On October 26, the congregants at Gasper River allowed the Shakers to speak—the first time they were allowed to speak at a Presbyterian church. After the meeting, most of the congregants traveled with the Shakers back to Rankin's home, where they likely spent hours feeling out the specifics of Shaker doctrine. The next day, the Shakers received their first convert—John McComb, who was actually visiting from Henderson, Kentucky. On October 28, John McComb's brother Jesse confessed his sins and opened

[4] Ibid., 154-157; ibid. (Spring 1962), 18; Ham, "Shakerism in the Old West," 40-57.

[5] Anonymous journal (1807), transcribed in Eads, ed., *History of South Union*, 80-83, quote 80. Internal evidence suggests the journal was kept by either Bates or McNemar—Bates if one had to guess.

his mind to the missionaries, as did Neal Patterson and, most importantly, John Rankin. Several more conversions followed over the next week, including Jesse McComb's wife Sally, the prophet George Walls, John Rankin's wife Rebecca and their oldest son George, the Whyte and Eads families, and two slaves—Francis Whyte's "black man" Neptune, and Charles Eads's "yellow woman" Betty Freehart. Between October 27 and November 19, 1807, the Shaker missionaries gained twenty-five converts, and probably a few dozen children as well. The Gasper River society was well on its way.[6]

The Believers

Why did these settlers of south-central Kentucky embrace the strange teachings of a foreign sect? Most of them were evangelical Presbyterians, raised within a close-knit community in which ethnic, religious, and familial identity were inextricably linked—and now they joined a sect which rejected these ties along with much of mainstream Protestant doctrine, not to mention the Westminster Confession! It is not enough to say, as conservative Protestants maintained or contemporary historians sometimes imply, that they exchanged one hysteria for another. Conversion to Shakerism *made sense* to them.

Three major themes emerge when examining the continuity between evangelical Presbyterianism and western Shakerism. First, Presbyterian theology fostered a cyclical and ultimately frustrating relationship with the divine, which Shakerism transcended with its gospel of moral perfectibility, a process symbolized ritually by abandoning the eucharist in favor of celibacy and auricular confession. Second, this transcendence of the Presbyterian "cycle" offered a utopian vision of heaven on earth that fulfilled millennial expectations brewed by the Presbyterian revivals and American exceptionalism. Finally,

[6] Ibid., 81-83, quotes 82 and 83.

the Shaker village retained the Presbyterian sense of communion and brought order to those shaken by the liminal period of the Great Revival.

Past historians have mainly focused on the shared millennialism of the Great Revival and Shakerism, but such an emphasis veers towards the "one hysteria for another" fallacy.[7] The millennium was not an end to itself for the Shaker converts; instead, it occurred within a larger narrative of communal transformation, as the old ecclesiastical order disintegrated and a new heavenly community took its place. It was not enough to believe the millennium had come—what would a society of believers look like now that the kingdom of heaven had arrived? Shaker converts were concerned not just with individual beliefs but with how individuals would relate to one another in light of those beliefs. So the end of times had come—now what? Converting to Shakerism was not just an individual decision; it meant joining a community which was both real and imagined.

Shakerism began in 1747 when the Quakers began to distance themselves from older, more bizarre forms of Quaker worship—the violent "quaking" from which the Society of Friends earned their famous epithet. A small group of Quakers in Manchester, England, led by James and Jane Wardley, decided to continue the old style of worship. They became known as "Shaking Quakers," as opposed to Quakers who no longer shook; eventually the epithet was contracted to "Shakers." The sect, which at that point had barely a dozen members, took new shape with the conversion of Ann Lee. An illiterate cotton-factory worker, Ann Lee had a tragic personal life—all four of her children died in childbirth or infancy—but she possessed a strange charismatic power over others. Gradually she became leader of the sect. She experienced several dramatic visions, which

[7] Ham, "Shakerism in the Old West," 74-76; Conkin, *Cane Ridge*, 145.

taught her that sexual intercourse was the original sin, and that celibacy was required to be truly righteous. Ann Lee also asserted that she was the second coming of Christ.[8]

In 1774, Ann Lee, her husband, and seven followers left England for New York. They established a community a few miles northwest of Albany called Niskayuna. The first new converts came in 1778, and the trickle widened after a New Light Baptist revival in nearby New Lebanon. From 1781 to 1783, Ann Lee traveled throughout New England and gained dozens of converts, but the journey was physically arduous, so much so that she died in 1784. By the decade's end, however, two New Light Baptist converts, Joseph Meacham and Lucy Wright, injected the sect with newfound energy. They instituted what they called the "gathering order," wherein believers were gathered together into communitarian "societies." In the early 1790s Shaker societies were established at Hancock, Tyringham, Harvard, and Shirley, Massachusetts; Canterbury and Enfield, New Hampshire; Alfred and New Gloucester (now Sabbathday Lake), Maine; and Enfield, Connecticut.[9]

The gathering order marked the true beginning of what we now know as Shakerism. Everyone owned and worked the land in common, and ideally no one had his or her own room. Societies were divided into groups called "families," and each family dwelled together within a single building. The building and family were synonymous, so that the main building was usually called the Church Family, the building east of the Church Family was called the East Family, and so on. Each family had two "spiritual leaders," one male and one female; and two "temporal leaders," also one male and one female. Furthermore, the society as a whole was run by a "ministry"—two elders and two

[8] Stein, *Shaker Experience in America*, 3-10; Garrett, *Spirit Possession and Popular Religion*.

[9] Stein, *Shaker Experience in America*, 10-57.

eldresses—who lived in their own house (the Ministry House). The ministry at New Lebanon served as the "central ministry" for the entire sect.[10]

As the division of leadership probably makes clear, Shakers believed in the complete equality of the sexes. This belief stemmed from one of Shakerism's two main tenets: that God was not triune but dual-gendered. Rather than believing in the trinitarian formula of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Shakers believed in God the Father and God the Mother. This gendered formula was repeated throughout their theology. A man and a woman brought sin into the world. In turn, a new Adam and a new Eve—the twin Christs of Jesus and Ann Lee—were both required to rescue humanity from its fallen nature.[11]

The other central tenet of Shakerism was that of the indwelling Christ. In Shaker theology, the spirit of Christ was an entity independent of any human vessel, whether it was Jesus or Ann Lee. Neither of those individuals was coterminous with Christ; for example, Christ only entered Jesus of Nazareth when he was baptized by John the Baptist. In this sense, Ann Lee's claim to be the second coming of Christ was less remarkable than it seemed at face value, for the Shaker way of life allowed Christ to dwell within all believers. Ann Lee was simply Christ's vessel, and through her, Christ shared with all believers the key to becoming vessels themselves. It was within this framework that the millennium had come, for as long as there were true believers, Christ would dwell on earth, and wherever the believers dwelled *was heaven*. Of course, for heaven to truly exist on earth, there could be no sin. Fortunately, the Shakers taught that,

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[10] Ibid., 44-45.

[11] Stein, *Shaker Experience in America*, 71-73; 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*, 2nd ed. (Albany: E. & E. Hosford, 1810 [1809]), passim, esp. 435-440, 543-544.

with enough prayer, worship, and work, believers could eradicate sin from their lives. This eradication required celibacy, the rejection of private property, and the confession of one's sins to one's fellow believers. For the converts in the Cumberland territory, the Shaker doctrines of moral perfectibility and the indwelling Christ helped reconcile certain tension within Presbyterian devotional life.[12]

Moral Perfectibility and the Eucharistic Cycle

The eucharist, as recent scholarship has uncovered, was the central ritual of evangelical Presbyterianism from its beginnings in post-Reformation Scotland. When the Catholic liturgical calendar was abolished, the autumnal sacramental meeting, in which people gathered from miles around to partake of the Lord's Supper, became the high point of the year for Scottish folk piety. The Lord's Supper became the climax of a four- or five-day festival, and a veritable sacramental "season" evolved, with the pious (or curious) traveling from one meeting to the next. Scots brought this tradition with them to northern Ireland, then to the New World as they settled in Maryland and western Pennsylvania, then southward to Virginia and the Carolinas and westward to Tennessee, Kentucky, Ohio, and Indiana. In the trans-Appalachian west the sacramental season mingled with Methodist and Baptist practices and finally transmuted into the American camp meeting.[13]

One reason the eucharist was so dominant in the evangelical Presbyterian worldview was its opportunity for contact with the divine. The bread and wine consumed

[12] Stein, *Shaker Experience in America*, 71-73; Youngs, *Testimony*, 618-620; McNemar, *Kentucky Revival*, 4.

[13] Schmidt, *Holy Fairs*, 11-68; Heyrman, *Southern Cross*, 15.

at the Lord's Supper were God made manifest on earth, if fleetingly so. In a sermon he delivered at Gasper River in the late 1790s, James McGready compared the sacrament to Jacob's ladder, joining the eternal to the temporal. Echoing Jacob, McGready called the communion table "a dreadful place" and "the gate of heaven." This impingement of creator upon creation offered a terrible, brief glimpse of God.[14]

For some the glimpse was too brief. McGready referred to the eucharist as "one of the nearest approaches to God that can be made on this side of eternity," "a Pisgah's view of the promised land," and a "foretast[e] of heaven," as if the sacrament were one great eschatological tease.[15] The enthusiastic visions and physical exercises among the laity of Gasper River, Muddy River, and Red River can therefore be understood as expressions not only of ecstasy but frustration. The wailing, prophecies, and "falling out" that erupted from the congregations were a collective crying out to a god who had shown himself and then vanished. In his account of the Great Revival, Richard McNemar described the revivalists' violent physical exercises as a sacramental reenactment of Christ's suffering, a form of bodily mortification in which the worshipper united with Christ; also, by falling out and then regaining consciousness, the worshipper reenacted not just the death but the resurrection of Christ. Physical exercises shifted the locus for divine-human union from the eucharistic elements to the Christian's body. Implicitly, then, the eucharist was insufficient.[16]

Rankin did not specifically mention any personal dissatisfaction with the eucharist, but it is undeniable that he abandoned a revivalist religion centered around the

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[14] McGready, *Posthumous Works*, 174-179, quote 175; Schmidt, *Holy Fairs*, 69-114.

[15] McGready, *Posthumous Works*, 179.

[16] McNemar, *Kentucky Revival*, 33-34, 61-63; Schmidt, *Holy Fairs*, xiv-xxviii.

sacrament for a millennial sect that abolished it. Moreover, his autobiography detailed a torturous spiritual life that mirrored the Presbyterian sacramental season. The paradoxes of the eucharist, after all, symbolized a larger tension embedded within Presbyterian theology, the uncertainty of whether one was saved. The sacramental season convicted sinners of their depravity and turned them to God, but by next fall they had slipped back into sin and feared they did not belong to the elect. The next year's sacramental meeting brought a rejuvenated sense of unity with God but also beget eventual spiritual despair. This annual cycle of ecstasy and despair, of euphoria and withdrawal, reflected Presbyterianism's tendency to see life as a constant struggle rather than a cleanly linear progression toward heaven.[17]

This ambiguity was even reflected in the Presbyterian position on the eucharist, which occupied an awkward ground between Lutheran and Catholic teachings on the sacrament. The Presbyterian Confession of Faith denied transubstantiation but insisted that God was really—not symbolically—present in the sacramental elements. Communicants, the Confession explained, "really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally, but spiritually, receive and feed upon Christ crucified." Still, the eucharist did not signify "any real sacrifice" by Christ, but rather "a commemoration." Nevertheless, within the eucharist Christ was "as really, but spiritually, present" to communicants as the bread and wine were "to their outward senses." As with McGready's careful distinction between the eye of faith and the bodily eye, this doctrinal hair-splitting likely provided little consolation for the common-sense laity.[18]

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[17] Schmidt, *Holy Fairs*, 119-122, 153-168; Conkin, *Cane Ridge*, 46-47.

[18] PCUSA Const. (1788), Confession of Faith 29; *Constitution*, 42-44, quotes 42 and 44.

Rankin's early spiritual life reflected this Calvinist stew of uncertainty and ambiguity, the cyclical pattern of blessed assurance and spiritual despair. In his teens, he became dissatisfied with rigid Calvinism, wherein one's membership in a predestined elect outweighed any need for a dramatic, internal faith. He believed "there was something more to be done, than for a dead mind to operate on a dead letter . . . or for a dead mind formally to practice the routine of moral duty." Instead he desired "that quickening spirit" which would "operate on my dead soul, & quicken & bring into life." He wanted, as he repeatedly wrote, "living religion." But he did not have it. He kept his feelings to himself, lest he be confronted with "a sneer or the reproachful epithet of Whitfieldian or enthusiast."[19]

In 1776, at the age of nineteen, he began attending an academy in Mecklenburg County, where he hoped that God might give him the "experimental religion" he desired, that he might apply his education towards the ministry. But studying the classics proved more of a hindrance than a boon to his faith. One Sunday night, while meditating in a thicket, he had a disheartening epiphany: "[I]t was worse than vanity to attempt to preach a gospel which I had not in possession. I had now spent two years or more, & was essentially no better qualified than I was when I began." For decades Rankin was in spiritual disarray. Initially deciding to pursue a teaching career rather than the ministry, he finally "sickened & left the Academy" and returned home. He married, had children, and made a living as a farmer. But despite these attempts to function within the community, Rankin felt like "a dead carcass without a soul . . . compelled to duty by the

[19] Rankin, "Auto-biography," 5-11.

fear of punishment and dishonor among men" and not by love for God.[20]

When he heard a Methodist preacher testify to his certainty in his own salvation, Rankin was left despondent, his deadness even starker in contrast to this man who "knew he was alive to God!" He worried he was damned, excluded from the elect. At the same time, he felt the doctrine of double predestination contradicted the gospel message of God's love for all. His confusion was compounded by his friends who assured him that "living religion" was an anachronism, something that existed for the apostles but had since died out. One day, however, after meditating for a while in the woods, Rankin was on his way back home when a biblical passage struck him "as if spoken in my very heart: 'He which hath begun a good work in you, will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.'" In other words, he would one day find the living religion he was looking for. Rankin expressed this conviction in concrete physical terms, saying that "every nerve in my body seemed to be newly strung" and that hope "sprang up in my soul." He knew he would eventually obtain "deliverance from the body of death."[21]

In the early 1790s, Rankin began making himself known within his community as a religious thinker. He told two different preachers of his plight and was told by both that he "had religion." Rankin was not so sure, for he "felt a body of sin and death" within himself. One preacher told him he would "never get free from that on earth," but this comforted Rankin little. (Though he did not share it with his Presbyterian neighbors, he believed that Christians could indeed rid themselves of sin.) Finally, personally convicted

[20] Ibid., 5-8.

[21] Ibid., 14-21.

and encouraged by his neighbors, Rankin again pursued the ministry, and in 1795, at the age of thirty-eight, Rankin received a license to preach.[22]

The revivals of 1797-1801 must be understood within the context of the evangelical Presbyterian's arduous path. Presbyterian devotional life was marked by self-doubt, mental tedium, and emotional swings. The Great Revival was not really a climax but the highest point on a sinusoidal wave. Rankin's past crises of faith help clarify why the sacramental season, the peak of Presbyterian devotion, was ultimately not enough for him. He wanted more than a "foretast[e] of heaven"; he wanted heaven on earth. He needed more than a glimpse of the divine; he needed a lasting, felt faith. Over and over again Rankin's autobiography referred to an "experimental" or "living" religion, and his moments of religious ecstasy were physical, almost violent, experiences. What appealed to him most about Presbyterianism was its chief sacrament, not its grand theological tradition—the visceral rather than the cerebral. As Richard McNemar observed, the abstract life of Presbyterian devotion was fickle: "Conviction may die away; hope and comfort desert the breast; and the most lively views of the kingdom be forgotten. Hence," he added, playing on the etymology of the word *revival*, "the necessity of so often reviving these things among professors."[23] It was the *re-* of revivalism that was problematic for Rankin and others. The revival never satisfied and always needed repeating.

The Shaker missionaries who came to Rankin's home understood his dissatisfaction with the Presbyterian life of faith. In his writings Richard McNemar lamented how the revivals "raise[d] the people . . . to heaven's gate," only to "leave them

[22] Ibid., 23-29.

[23] McNemar, *Kentucky Revival*, 4.

to fall back into their former lifeless state."[24] And Issachar Bates experienced a similar struggle as Rankin had in his early spiritual life. Bates too was raised as an orthodox Presbyterian, only to find, as he recounted in his autobiography, that the path out of sin "must go deeper than my tongue—The disease was in my heart." He prayed that God would "pour in convicting power into my heart; till it burst asunder like the marsh mud befor a Cannon ball." He became a Baptist only to find that when he "came up out of the water—Lo! the spirit of death came upon me! and I was as dark as ever—The preaching, praying, singing, & sacrament; were all death." For nearly a decade, after a "thousand fruitless prayers" and countless "puddles of wasted tears," he remained in doubt, "still hoping that the next revival would bring Salvation." Like Rankin, Bates spent years searching for a felt religion that would not dissipate with time.[25]

Shakerism offered a tactile, concrete alternative with its doctrine of moral perfectibility. While he was still a Presbyterian minister, Rankin thought to himself that if Christ prayed that "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," then surely "to do the will of God in this life is attainable."[26] He tired of the hemming and hawing of Presbyterian devotion and wanted a clear-cut formula marking him as being among the saved. And indeed, as stated in a pastoral letter written by the central ministry and carried by the missionaries throughout the west, Shakerism promised "a way out of all sin."[27]

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[24] Ibid.

[25] Bates, "Sketch" (Fall 1961), 101, quote 116; ibid. (Winter 1961), quotes 146 and 148.

[26] Rankin, "Auto-biography," 25.

[27] David Meacham, Amos Hammond, and Ebenezer Cooly to potential western converts, 30 December 1804 [hereafter cited as "pastoral letter"], reprinted in J. P. MacLean, *Shakers of Ohio: Fugitive Papers Concerning the Shakers of Ohio, with Unpublished Manuscripts* (Columbus, Oh.: F. J. Heer, 1907), 62. See Taysom's interpretation of the letter in *Shakers, Mormons, and Religious Worlds*, 41. For an example of the Shakers reading the pastoral letter aloud to potential converts, see Bates, "Sketch" (Winter 1961), 157.

McNemar assured converts that the Shaker path would shape the believer's life to the point "that he can no more commit sin, than a fish can fly through the air, or an eagle dive to the bottom of the sea." If the violent "jerks" of the Logan County revivals briefly identified the religious enthusiast with the dying and risen Christ, then moral perfectibility gave Shakers a means to permanently identity with Christ. As McNemar formulated it, the Shaker was resurrected alongside Christ, "dying unto sin once—rising with him [Christ] to a new, spiritual and holy life, and ascending, step by step, in a spiritual travel," to the status of moral perfection and membership in the kingdom of heaven.[28]

Celibacy was intrinsic to the process of moral perfection. As the Shaker pastoral letter explained, "[I]t was impossible for those who lived in the works of natural generation, copulating in the works of the flesh, to travel in the great work of regeneration and the new birth." In addition to believing in Christ's second appearing, the Shakers asked converts to "take up [the] cross against the flesh" (i.e., become celibate) and to confess their sins to the larger community of believers.[29] These two rituals—celibacy and auricular confession—supplanted the traditional Protestant rituals of the eucharist and baptism. Indeed, the two pairs of rituals corresponded respectively. Confession only needed to take place once, though if someone abandoned the faith and then returned, they would have to confess again; this was similar to some evangelical attitudes towards baptism. Celibacy, on the other hand, replaced the eucharist as the chief ritual of devotional life—a ritual which was constantly performed and clearly marked the

[28] McNemar, *Kentucky Revival*, 80-83, quotes 82 and 90.

[29] Pastoral letter, 62.

believer's body as belonging to a community of saints. Celibacy was unmistakable; it was certain; it allowed one to be free from doubt.[30]

Frontier Millennium

The eschewal of the eucharist in favor of celibacy also signified the extent of Shaker millennialism. After all, as the popular Presbyterian author John Willison explained in his *Sacramental Catechism*, "in heaven there is no need of sacraments." The eucharist was no longer necessary when humanity had direct contact with God.[31] Within Shakerism, Richard McNemar wrote, "the Believer travels out of the use of shadows and signs, ceremonies and forms of worship." The Shaker had no need "for calling upon God afar off," for God had "taken possession of his body, and lives and walks in him." Even the "bodily exercises, dreams, visions and ecstasies" that characterized the Great Revival were "but a fleeting joy" that paled in comparison to the bliss of a Shaker, in whom Christ permanently lived. The indwelling spirit of Christ constituted the triumphant reconciliation of God and humanity—in other words, the millennium.[32]

And indeed, the revivalist Presbyterians of south-central Kentucky were eagerly anticipating the millennium. The pastoral letter from New Lebanon observed, "We know there are many among the wise and prudent of this generation who are looking for the

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[30] Taysom, *Shakers, Mormons, and Religious Worlds*, 104-105.

[31] John Willison, *A Sacramental Catechism: or, a Familiar Instructor for Young Communicants. Plainly Unfolding the Nature of the Covenant of Grace, with the Two Seals Thereof, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Wherein Especially the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper Is Fully and Distinctly Handled, Both in a Doctrinal and Practical Manner; with Many Cases of Conscience Relative Thereto, Intermixed and Resolved, for the Relief and Support of Those Who Are Exercised to Godliness. With an Appendix, Containing Suitable Materials for Meditation and Prayer, Both Before and After Partaking* (Glasgow: David Diven, 1794 [1720]), 87.

[32] McNemar, *Kentucky Revival*, 91.

coming of Christ in this latter day."[33] John Rankin had encountered millennial prophecies while pastoring the Gasper River church; moreover, the prophecies eerily presaged the arrival of the Shakers. One young woman named Betsy Berry experienced a vision that "the kingdom of Christ [was] near at hand, but that we revivalists were not in it, but that people would come to" Rankin, and he would then join them. Later the Methodist prophet George Walls, after a day of prayer in a post oak grove, came to the Gasper meetinghouse and told Rankin and others "that the new Jerusalem church, would be built near the head" of Gasper River, where indeed the Shaker community of South Union was established.[34]

These prophecies should be read with caution. The octogenarian Rankin was relating these episodes through the lens an already decades-old Shaker faith. But the recounted prophecies at least indicate that participants in the Great Revival expected *something* to happen soon. Issachar Bates had grown up with similar millennial expectations. In his autobiography, he recounted various natural phenomena that he believed augured a new dispensation in the narrative of God and humanity: an unusual display of the aurora borealis that lasted for weeks and turned the night sky into "a flaming Brushheap"; "a blazing Comet" with a long tail and the "shape of a trumpet," alternately white and "red as blood"; a "dark day" across New England, during which the sun never rose and everyone had to work by candlelight. One phenomenon merits a verbatim reprinting:

> I happened to look up, and called on [my family] to see what was in the air!—it was a black vane about the size of a common Stove pipe, it appeared to be about 5 rods long and crooked like a black Snake, and in the same shape, tapering at both

[33] Pastoral letter, 62.

[34] Rankin, "Auto-biography," 37-38.

> ends. It began to draw up like a horse leech, till into a round ball about the size of an 18 inch bombshell and then exploded! and the fire blew in every direction! and the report was as loud as any Cannon I ever heard, only not so sharp. In one moment the sky was as red as blood![35]

One can imagine Bates and Rankin bonding over their various prophecies, in addition to their shared spiritual struggles and dissatisfaction with Calvinist orthodoxy.

There is nothing too remarkable about the derivation of millennial prophecy from natural phenomena; this practice has been a feature of popular Christianity since the authorship of Revelation. What was less typical, however, was how the generation of Bates and Rankin tied millennialism to American exceptionalism. One of the ominous phenomena Bates recounted was an enormous "flock of birds" that flew overhead on April 19, 1775, the day of the Battles of Lexington and Concord. Bates served as a fifer in the Revolutionary Army. He witnessed the horrific burning of Charlestown, "the hot balls, carcasses, and stink pots, flaming through the air, for the distance of more than a mile." At the same time, John Rankin witnessed the war in North Carolina, the "armies marching & counter-marching," the "scenes of blood & carnage." The violence and chaos of the Revolutionary War must have greatly resembled the end times for Bates and Rankin.[36]

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[35] Bates, "Sketch" (Fall 1961), 101, 102, 113. I suspect that the comet was Lexell's Comet of 1770, which passed Earth at a closer distance than any other comet in recorded history; the comet's coma appeared as large as or larger than the moon. Also, the "dark day" of May 19, 1780, was a well-attested phenomenon which modern scientists attribute to a forest fire in Ontario, near the modern-day Algonquin Provincial Park. My best guess about the "black vane" is that it was a meteor explosion. Gary W. Kronk, *Cometography: A Catalog of Comets, Volume 1: Ancient – 1799* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 447-451; Thomas J. Campanella, "'Mark Well the Gloom': Shedding Light on the Great Dark Day of 1780," *Environmental History* 12.1 (January 2007): 35-58; Erin R. McMurry, Michael C. Stambaugh, Richard P. Guyette, and Daniel C. Dey, "Fire Scars Reveal Source of New England's 1780 Dark Day," *International Journal of Wildland Fire* 16.3 (July 2007): 266-270.

[36] Bates, "Sketch" (Fall 1961), 104, 106; Rankin, "Auto-biography," 13.

And if the war had been Armageddon, then the peace which followed—the formation of the American republic—seemed to signify the arrival of the New Jerusalem. In his tome on Shaker theology, Benjamin Youngs, soon to be an elder at South Union, celebrated the "providence" by which Shakerism bloomed "under the American Eagle, the brightest ensign of civil and religious liberty ever raised on the earth since the fall of man."[37] Both the Shakers and the Logan County revivalists sensed that America was destined to have a special role in the new dispensation. They expected the millennium to not only come soon, but near. George Walls's prophecy was particularly emphatic as to the location of the New Jerusalem; it would be at the head of Gasper River. Of course, it was a popular motif in American discourse that the New World had a special relationship with God. John Winthrop espoused the theme in his famed sermon on the *Arbella*, likening the Puritan experiment to "a city upon a hill," while nineteenth-century Mormonism taught that the resurrected Christ appeared to Native Americans and would eventually return to the earth at Jackson County, Missouri. The narrative of American exceptionalism found heightened life in the western frontier, whose inhabitants perceived the land as the *new* New World, untainted by the decadence of the east coast elite, unset in its ways and prime for experimental communities. The Great Revival was partly an effort to save the west before it was too late, while much of the Cumberland schism stemmed from westerners' efforts to avoid the influence of the Princeton establishment.[38]

An interesting and subtle example of this frontier exceptionalism can be found in a sermon delivered by James McGready at the Gasper River meetinghouse. While

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[37] Youngs, *Testimony*, 619.

[38] For more on the relationship between American exceptionalism and religious movements in the early republic, see Hatch, *Democratization of American Christianity*, 184-189. For more on the notion of saving the frontier, see Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 10-11, 43.

describing the passion of Christ, McGready paid special attention to which direction the crucified Jesus faced:

> . . . he is denied the privilege of common malefactors, who were executed with their faces toward the temple; but he is placed with his back towards it, and *his face to the west*. But even here the rage of men and devils defeats their own designs; for while his back is turned towards the temple, *his face looks far away to the western world—even to these ends of the earth*—and he casts a look of pity towards many millions of lost sinners weltering in their blood in these dark regions of the shadow of death, and a gleam of joy fills his breaking heart, where upon the cross *he looks even towards Gasper River* . . .[39]

In an effort to personalize Christ's compassion, McGready framed the American west, and Gasper River in particular, as a locus for special divine attention. The crucified savior had his eye set on the west and upon this small settlement in the Kentucky Pennyroyal, which filled him with "a gleam of joy." This special relationship was magnified by its rhetorical context, in the middle of a lengthy anaphoric stretch that urged the Presbyterian congregants to perceive the crucifixion as they partook of the Lord's Supper. "View him in the garden of Gethsemane, sweating blood, in an agony," he began. "See him prostrate on the cold ground . . . hear him crying in extreme agony . . . listen to that heart-rending prayer . . . . See him betrayed . . ." The whole passage contained ten commands to "see," two each to "view" and "listen," and one each to "hear," "look," and "behold."[40] Christ and congregation were united in a mutual gaze. Christ was present at the Gasper River sacrament, while Gasper River was present at Christ's suffering and death. This transcendence of space and time while staying rooted in a specific time and place, this melding of the temporal and divine, contained the kernel of millennial frontier exceptionalism that had its fullest embodiment in the western Shaker villages.

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[39] McGready, *Posthumous Works*, 177. My italics.

[40] Ibid., 176-177.

Another example of frontier millennialism appeared in a hymn written by an unknown believer at South Union sometime before 1840:

> O come, O come come away
> Where the fig tree forever is bearing
> Where the flocks and the herds are so pleasant and gay,
> And the desert a sweet smile is wearing
> And the wilderness restored to her glory
> The tongue of the dumb sweetly singing
> O grave! O grave, Where is thy Victory
> O death! Where is thy Sting[41]

The hymn cast the American wilderness as an ideal site for a millennial kingdom, a pastoral paradise populated by domesticated livestock and vegetable produce, a heavenly place free from death. It was a refuge from the fallen world, and outsiders were urged to "come come away" there. The wilderness was "restored to her glory," suggesting that it had fallen from a past edenic state and that the arrival of the heavenly kingdom tamed it. McGready had used similar language in his account of the Great Revival:

> This wilderness and solitary place has been made glad; this dreary desert now rejoices, and blossoms like the rose; yea, it blossoms abundantly, and rejoices even with joy and singing.[42]

But the springtime of revivalism did not last. When winter came, the wilderness returned, and souls ached for their absent savior. The Shaker society, by making permanent what the revivals only brought forth for a season, defeated the wilderness for good. Shakerism, then, was a way to settle the frontier, America's New Jerusalem.

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[41] "The Wilderness Restored," reprinted in Patterson, *Shaker Spiritual*, 228-229. The song uses the word *desert* in its older sense—a deserted land, or wilderness.

[42] McGready, "Short Narrative" (March 1803), 48.

A Republican Communion

There was an ecclesiastical corollary to the American Revolution, a development which was similarly violent and chaotic yet necessary to prepare the way for millennium: the disestablishment of churches in the early republic. Freedom of religion dissipated the old Anglican, Congregationalist, and Presbyterian strongholds, and America became stomping ground for an unprecedented proliferation of sects. The radical dissident groups of Europe thrived in the New World, no longer having to hide from state-church regimes.

But many Americans, despite their opposition to established state churches, were dismayed by the extent of religious pluralism in the young republic. James McGready argued that the Devil used schismatic "contention" to set Christians against each other, splitting apart the body of Christ over arcane issues like predestination or the administration of baptism. Richard McNemar mocked the very name of the United States; far from united, he wrote, the nation was "divided into a thousand little kingdoms," a mass of "worms, biting and devouring one another, each pursuing a distinct course to which he presumes all others must finally give way." McNemar also wrote a song in 1807 satirizing the innumerable religious factions sprouting in the New World. The second stanza began, "A thousand reformers like so many moles, / Have plow'd all the bible & cut it in holes." And in his *Testimony of Christ's Second Appearing*, the first Shaker systematic theology, Benjamin Youngs disparaged the "creeds and confessions, and subtle arguments, written in defence of divided and sub-divided parties." American denominationalism, despite its allowance for religious freedom, left many in a state of fatigue.[43]

[43] McGready, *Posthumous Works*, 195-196, quote 195; McNemar, *Kentucky Revival*, 116; idem., "The Moles Little Pathway" (1807), reprinted in Patterson, *Shaker Spiritual*, 136-137, quote 136; Youngs,

These attitudes prompt two important questions. First, how could conversion to Shakerism possibly relieve the epidemic of schism-itis? After all, did Shakerism not just add one more sect to the towering pile of sects? The answer, of course, was that the Shakers did not see themselves as simply another sect. Shakerism ushered in a new dispensation, a new way of relating to God, which supplanted all previous (and false) faiths. The Believers saw their faith as totally distinct from the denominational marketplace raging throughout New England and the trans-Appalachian west. McNemar suggested it was no accident that Shakerism should arrive to America just in time for the Revolution and the subsequent explosion of sects. "May it be," he asked, "that God has sent down the New Jerusalem for the refuge of souls, before he began to tear down the old buildings?"[44]

Implicit in McNemar's question was that *new* buildings were needed, which brings us to our second question: why were rough-and-tumble pioneers of south-central Kentucky so opposed to the proliferation of sects? The democratic marketplace of American denominationalism seems, when compared to the Shaker society, more consistent with the frontier ethos. Shakerism was, with its communitarian lifestyle and hierarchy of families and elders, rather undemocratic, if not totalitarian. But this line of thought misunderstands the nature of evangelicalism in the early republic, a misunderstanding which stems to a large extent from a misreading of Nathan Hatch. The Second Great Awakening constituted the democratization of American *Christianity*, not of American *Christians*. Americans wanted a democratic marketplace in which any religious faith could thrive or perish—but they did not necessarily want their particular

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Testimony, viii.

[44] McNemar, *Kentucky Revival*, 86-87.

faith to be democratic. The denomination that most flourished in the Second Great Awakening was Methodism, and its ecclesiastical government was episcopal. Alexander Campbell exerted an authority over the Restoration movement which belied its purported autarchism, once admitting that the Bible was "not sufficient to govern the church." And, in another case, the Mormons were far from democratic in their government and their condemnation of free-market capitalism.[45] Though Hatch describes the Second Great Awakening as the victory of Jacksonian populism over classical republicanism,[46] the Presbyterian evangelicalism of the 1790s and 1800s was still more republican than democratic. Individuals had to decide for themselves whether to accept salvation, but in order to do so they had to reject egoism and join a communion of saints. Paradoxically, the republican freedoms of worship and conscience gave evangelical Christians the freedom to cede their autonomy to a religious faith of their choosing.

For many Presbyterian revivalists in the trans-Appalachian west, Shakerism represented a reaggregation of order coming out of the past decade's chaos. Indeed, the Shaker hierarchy paralleled the Presbyterian system of government, with families standing in for congregations, societies for presbyteries, regional orders for synods, and the central ministry for the General Assembly. There was therefore something inherently conservative about becoming a Shaker, because it admitted the need for some kind of ordered structure, albeit different from the old one. Rankin stressed the importance of communal identity to one's faith, writing, "All have not the same gift to describe in language, distinctly from other ideas, the operation of the divine spirit on the soul of man;

[45] Alexander Campbell, "The Nature of Christian Organizations," *Millennial Harbinger* 1 (1841): 532, quoted in Hatch, *Democratization of American Christianity*, 206. Also see ibid., 81-83, 193-209.

[46] Ibid., 22-23.

but let one in a gift of the spirit of God speak, and every soul prevent under a similar degree of light will reecho in unison, amen to the truth."[47] This was a republican, pragmatic understanding of the interdependence between individual liberty and social order, a far cry from the more ruggedly democratic theology of Finney or Emerson.

I mentioned earlier that one central aspect of the Presbyterian eucharist was its capacity to delineate a community. This was achieved in various ways: distributing communion tokens on the first day of the sacramental meeting, which were then required for admission to the communion table; the "fencing of the table," wherein the minister preached at great length on who was forbidden from the table; the invitation to the communion table, as the saved approached the table and the unsaved sat behind; and the table itself, a long table at which everyone sat and normative class distinctions were erased.[48] The transformation of the Scots-Irish sacramental meeting into the American camp meeting only magnified the ritual performance of community. Rather than returning home every night during the eucharistic festival, American evangelicals camped overnight. Gasper River, Cane Ridge, and other camp-meeting sites became, in historian Paul Conkin's memorable phrase, "temporary cities."[49]

Though Shaker theology dismissed the eucharist as a hollow sign no longer needed in the millennial dispensation, the sect shared the Presbyterian tradition's emphasis on a communion of saints distinguished from the unrighteous outside world. Celibacy displaced the Lord's Supper as an identity marker, forging an internal boundary

[47] Ibid., 11.

[48] Schmidt, *Holy Fairs*, 94-112, 216-218. For references to such sub-rituals in the Cumberland sacramental meetings, see McGready, *Posthumous Works*, 174-179.

[49] Conkin, *Cane Ridge*, 87; Eslinger, *Citizens of Zion*, 225-235.

within the Shaker body.[50] Moreover, villages like South Union and Pleasant Hill created distinct holy communities. The Shaker society was the logical extension of evangelical community planning. The sacramental meeting became the camp meeting, and South Union was a permanent camp meeting—a revival whose participants never went back home or rather made the camp their home.

Only gradually, however, did the Shaker community of Logan County become South Union. There was not yet a central location synonymous with the Shaker "society." The first converts mostly remained in their own homes, meeting together sporadically for prayer and scripture-reading. After the missionaries returned to Union Village, John Rankin and other local converts became temporary leaders. Novices guided the novitiates. Shakers from Union Village visited Logan County in the summers of 1808 and 1809, the spring and fall of 1810, and the summer of 1811. Rankin and others visited Union Village in the winter of 1808-1809 and the spring of 1810; Rankin also visited Shawnee Run (later Pleasant Hill) in December 1809. During a visit in May 1809, John Dunlavy, Matthew Houston, and Benjamin Youngs spoke at Gasper River for three to four hours before some two hundred people, of whom about seventy identified as Shakers. The next month, the missionaries learned that two families had moved into Jesse McComb's house. Other families began to move in together, forging makeshift "families" along the model of the eastern societies. On November 30, 1810, the Gasper River Shakers finished a frame house, the first structure built specifically for the Shaker society. A year later, on October 1, 1811, four Shakers left Union Village to live in

[50] For more on celibacy as an internal boundary, see Taysom, *Shakers, Mormons, and Religious Worlds*, 109-111.

Gasper River and lead the young society. They were Benjamin Youngs, Joseph Allen, Molly Goodrich, and Mercy Pickett.[51]

The new elders and eldresses found a more contiguous and organized society than they saw in previous years. There were four families: the Center Family, who lived in the new frame house and included John Rankin, his son George, and the brothers Francis and Samuel Whyte; the North Family, who lived in a brick house that formerly belonged to Jesse McComb; the East Family, who lived in John Rankin's former house and included about seventy-five children; and the Black Family, about thirty slaves living in George Rankin's former house.[52] From 1811 to 1820 the society built a brick kiln, a saw mill, a maple-sugar camp, a bridge, a grist mill, a tanyard, a fulling mill, a shop shop, a wheelwright's shop, a blacksmith's shop, an icehouse, and a cooper's shop. They grew strawberries, peaches, potatoes, cotton, cucumbers, beets, and sweet potatoes; harvested flax, wheat, oats, hay, hemp, and corn; and raised hogs, sheep, and cows. They made cider, distilled whiskey, sold brooms and straw hats, and packaged seeds.[53] For the society's first decade it maintained an average of three hundred members. In 1815 Youngs counted 330 members, including 145 children. An important meeting the next year drew about sixty men who were, in Kentucky law, heads of household. In the

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[51] Youngs et al., journal, passim. The journal was mostly kept by Youngs. Also see Bakken, "Young Believers and Old Believers in the Wilderness," 278-295.

[52] Youngs et al., journal, 138, 153.

[53] Ibid., passim. For more on industry at South Union, see Neal, *By Their Fruits*, 84-135; John M. Keith, Jr., "The Economic Development of the South Union Shaker Colony, 1807-1861," (M.A. thesis, Western Kentucky State College, 1965); Donna C. Parker and Jonathan J. Jeffrey, "Flax Production at South Union, Kentucky," *Shaker Messenger* 14.1 (1992): 7-9, 23; idem., "'We Have Raffeled for the Elephant & Won!': The Wool Industry at South Union, Kentucky," *Kentucky Review* 13.3 (1997): 58-74; idem., "Fulling Around: The Shaker Fulling Mill at South Union, Kentucky," *Chronicle of the Early American Industries Association* 52.4 (1999): 127-133; Jonathan Jeffrey and Donna C. Parker, "A Thread of Evidence: Shaker Textiles at South Union, Kentucky," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 94.1 (1996): 33-58; Donna C. Parker, "'Ho! for Drakes Creek': Something Ventured, Nothing Gained," *Communal Societies* 14 (1994): 113-122.

meantime, on May 1, 1813, the society changed its name from Gasper River to South Union.[54]

Rather than being monastic or shut off from the outside world, South Union had rather porous boundaries. The Shakers were constantly engaged in trade and travel. Between 1812 and 1814, Benjamin Youngs noted no fewer than fifty-eight journeys undertaken by members of South Union. Only about half of the journeys were to Union Village, Pleasant Hill, or West Union. Joseph Allen and John Shannon traveled to Pittsburgh to buy steel, iron, and glass; Francis Whyte went to Henderson, Kentucky, to buy fur hats; Samuel Whyte took Benjamin Youngs to a physician in Nashville, then sold horses with Benjamin Price in Vincennes, Indiana; Robert Houston and John McLean bought millstones in Louisville. Within three months in the summer of 1820, Eli McLean sold straw hats in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, and Nashville, and traveled to Louisville to buy copper, iron, glass, medicine, and coffee.[55]

The society also saw the constant coming and going of visitors, as Benjamin Youngs half-complained one night in February 1812: "[W]e have daily, almost, strangers to entertain—In the two nights past we have had 28 strangers—This morning 12 horses were saddled before the door."[56] South Union became known for its good food and hospitality, and was a popular stop between Nashville and Louisville, as well as for tourists coming to see the nearby Mammoth Cave. Some of the strangers were rather famous, including John J. Crittenden, Henry Clay, James Monroe, and Andrew Jackson. In addition to strangers there were frequent guests from Union Village and Pleasant Hill,

[54] Youngs, et al., journal, 140, 195, 236.

[55] Ibid., passim, esp. 139, 143, 144, 184, 297, 302.

[56] Ibid., 162.

as well as at least one emissary from the Rappite community of Harmony (now New Harmony), Indiana.[57]

The boundaries of South Union were also porous in the sense that there were gradations of membership within the community—gradations of conversion, one might say. White novitiates began in the East Family, then moved into the North Family, and finally the Center Family. Sometimes unorthodox living arrangements were allowed to ease transition into the community, as in the case of Robert Pearce, who wrote the Shakers from his home in Sangamon County, Illinois, asking if they could build a separate cabin for him and his family, in which they could live until he convinced his wife to move into the East Family. The South Union ministry granted his wish.[58] Occasionally some of the members did not live exactly according to the Shaker standard, and they received due notice from the society's leadership. At one point Youngs alerted the believers of heretics within their midst who were "artfully sowing seeds of disaffection . . . affecting the hearts of the simple minded—poisoning all they can." Later the ministry warned the brothers and sisters against "trafficking in whiskey" or "making presents to each other," and still later against "secret private conversion . . . between the sexes."[59]

And of course there were "backsliders"—members who left the community, sometimes only to return again. Sometimes backsliding was prompted by an excess of zeal, when a member's efforts to reform or add to the Shaker faith failed. This was the case of Willie Jones, who became a vegetarian in the spring of 1813 and tried to convert

[57] Ibid., 240, 282, 455.

[58] Ibid., 312.

[59] Ibid., 160, 247, 278.

the whole society to a vegetable diet. When Jones finally left that September, Youngs blamed his departure on "superior faith—wild notions & self will."[60] Sometimes the backslider lacked sufficient zeal, like John Rankin's son Robert, who after years of unorthodox muttering finally left South Union in 1818. As a farewell gift, the society gave Robert a horse, a saddle and bridle, and $130.[61]

It is not evident why Joseph and Anne Dunn ran off to Tennessee on July 8, 1812, or why they returned three days later; Youngs simply wrote that they left "in pretended Union." The Dunns left again sometime that fall and returned again in November. Joseph requested "union" with the society and pled for its "help," and he and Anne confessed their sins. But the following spring Joseph was (Youngs wrote) once more "fixing for his trinity, world flesh, & devil." On May 15, 1813, Joseph took his wife and children away from South Union for the last time. Perhaps Joseph Dunn was one of South Union's "winter Shakers," entering the society when winter approached and departing once the hardest work began. In any case, Anne did not want to leave. Joseph responded by threatening to take her and the children by force if necessary, and to burn down "every house & barn" at South Union. Youngs concluded the day's entry by writing, "Poor Anne went away weeping bitterly."[62]

A wave of backsliding struck the Black Family in the summer of 1817, roughly a year after the society decided to free its slave members. Youngs wrote of "dark troubles" and "black heresies," as Mose, Ned, Matt, Mary, Aaron, and Neptune all seemed on the cusp of abandoning the society. Twice in July some of the white members met with the

[60] Ibid., 141, 184, 190.

[61] Ibid., 228, 233, 263.

[62] Ibid., 171, 174, 183.

Black Family to try to reason with them, but Youngs suspected it was "not yet the nigger's day to be called" to Shakerism. Neptune, who had been the Black Family's spiritual leader, left for Bowling Green in late July, only to return and confess his sins three weeks later. Ned also left for Bowling Green, where he was captured and sold into slavery. The white members now "reluctantly" watched as their former slaves departed. Youngs lamented that, "knowing they are free," the former slaves meant "to make use of it & no coaxing can induce them to remain & bear the cross."[63]

Not everyone at South Union was as spiritually or theologically minded as Rankin. Some people joined in the hope of financial security or at least having food and heat through the winter; others joined in a brief fling of curiosity, or out of loneliness, out of the fear of dying in childbirth or of sexual intercourse itself. It is obvious, too, that many of the slaves who converted to Shakerism felt coerced to do so, and soon after they became free, they left. Many of the women who converted may have felt similarly coerced to join, lest they be separated from their children. One wonders, for example, about Sally McComb, who confessed her sins to Richard McNemar *twenty days after* her husband Jesse had. What transpired in those twenty days at the McComb household? Or what about Rebecca Rankin, who converted eleven days after her husband John?[64] In most cases, the answers are unknown or unknowable.

But, in a sense, the motivation of why anyone joined or left the South Union community was beside the point for these Shakers. It did not really matter. Individuals were flighty and weak—but the community remained. South Union was greater than the sum of its parts. Within that sacred space, individual motivations and weaknesses danced

[63] Ibid., 236, 251, 252.

[64] Ibid., 81-83.

and intermingled, but the space remained sacred. A popular South Union hymn—one which it actually inherited from the Great Revival—ran thus:

> Come old & young come great & small.
> There's love & union free for all.
> And every one that will obey
> Has now a right to dance & play
> For dancing is a sweet employ
> It fills the soul with heavenly joy
> It makes our love & union flow,
> While round & round & round we go.[65]

The Shaker society offered "love & union free for all," invoking the democratic egalitarianism of the frontier; at the same time, it only guaranteed the "right to dance & play" to those who would "obey." It was in this way that South Union replicated the republicanism of the Scots-Irish sacramental season, providing a centralized space wherein individuals could freely come and go, but which transformed the individual into the subject of a heavenly kingdom. And whereas the eucharistic revival only lasted for a few days, the Shaker society lasted forever, ever open to new members.

The sidewalks at South Union are unusually narrow, too narrow for two people to walk side-by-side. However, the sidewalks' very narrowness create an indelible image for the South Union visitor: a clean line stretching seemingly into infinity. The sidewalk can be said to represent Shakerism's linear, progressive view of history, a narrative wherein a community of saints ascends to a new dispensation. Moreover, the straight line, a motif commonly found in Shaker design, signifies the boundedness of the Shaker community, as porous as the actual boundary might have been. Conflating these different meanings of the South Union sidewalk, one can imagine an infinite, single-file line of believers. Individual believers, as they are so moved, constantly step onto and off of the

[65] Transcribed in ibid., 216.

sidewalk. But despite this dance—despite the democratic bustle of novitiates and backsliders—the sidewalk remains.[66]

For those who remained committed to their choices, Shakerism made sense for the Logan County converts. The faith resolved some of the paradoxes and tensions within evangelical Presbyterian devotion by making permanent what had previously been temporary and transcending the eucharistic cycle with the indwelling Christ and the promise of moral perfectibility. Shakerism fulfilled millennial expectations intensified by the American Revolution, the disestablishment of state churches, the move westward to Kentucky, and the revival and schism in the Green and Cumberland river valleys. Shaker society was the ultimate incarnation of the holy communion forged briefly during the Presbyterian sacramental season, creating a heavenly kingdom that fit squarely within republican notions of community and individuality. Yet Shakerism did not make sense for everyone. After all, most people did not become Shakers. In various parts of the country, including south-central Kentucky, anti-Shaker sentiment arose as the religious movement gained ground. Many of those who turned against Shakerism did so because they perceived conversion as a betrayal to the larger community and, to some extent, to the nascent republic. Many stories, especially happy ones, end with a marriage. This story begins with a divorce.

[66] My thoughts on the sidewalk are inspired by observations in Catherine L. Carter and Martha E. Geores, "Heaven on Earth: The Shakers and Their Space," *Geographies of Religions and Belief Systems* 1.1 (October 2006): 21. Also see Charles Nordhoff, *The Communistic Societies of the United States; From Personal Visit and Observation: Including Detailed Accounts of the Economists, Zoarites, Shakers, the Amana, Oneida, Bethel, Aurora, Icarian, and Other Existing Societies, Their Religious Creeds, Social Practices, Numbers, Industries, and Present Condition* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1875), 213.

Chapter Three: Conversion as Betrayal

Anti-Shakerism and the Boler Divorce Case

In the spring of 1811, Sally Boler's lawyer filed a bill of complaint in the circuit court of Logan County, Kentucky, requesting a divorce from her husband William. The bill recorded that Sally and William had married in 1800. (Actually, they were married on January 5, 1801.) Sally had been "a dutifull virtuous and faithfull wife" and ensured that William's home was "a Retreat of Peas [peace] and happiness." She had also given him two daughters and a son. In short, she had performed her duties as a wife. She had upheld her end of the marital contract.[1]

William, however, was "not content with the enjoyment of Terrestial blessing." He became a religious zealot, "Saized and infatuated with a weird and unnatural fanaticizm" by the name of Shakerism. William converted to the faith in June 1808 and thereby renounced the marriage covenant. The bill of complaint recounted his actions in melodramatic terms:

> [William Boler decided to] no longer live with her his wife but wholly to abandon and leave her unprotected and unprovided for alone to Shear [share] the torrent of adversity and buffet the waves of misfortune no one to Shear her Sorrows and to make them less.

After unsuccessfully attempting to convert his wife, William finally left her for South Union on April 10, 1809. Since then, the bill continued, William had never returned to live with her "or [treat] her as his wife," and had left her the two daughters to "take care of without aiding her in that arduous task." The bill concluded that William's actions

[1] Solomon P. Sharp, bill of complaint, [spring 1811], handwritten copy, Jesse McCombs Papers, WKU. The correct date can be found in *General Index to Marriages, 1790-1818 and 1938-1950, Logan County*, Logan County Clerk's Office, Russellville, Kentucky.

were so "contrary to Justice and equity" that Sally required "the Speedy intervention" of the county court, in the form of "a divorce final and perpetual" from the man who had violated his side of the marital contract.[2]

Sally Boler's bill of complaint precipitated a legal drama that dragged on for six years. The case of *Bowler v. Bowler*[3] went through four different permutations in three different courts from 1811 to 1814, and the Kentucky state legislature played a role during and afterward those proceedings. But already in Sally's bill, certain themes emerged that reappeared throughout the entire legal narrative. Sally argued that she had upheld the marital contract while William, by joining the celibate Shaker sect, had violated that contract. Furthermore, Sally's proclaimed dependency upon the court's "intervention" highlights how, in the early republic, marriage was by default a private matter. The courts were reluctant to interfere with a man's possessory rights over his wife and children.

The crux of *Bowler v. Bowler* was whether William's conversion to Shakerism was enough of a public transgression to justify legal intervention into his private affairs. If William's conversion justified the extraordinary public intervention of divorce, then that meant conversion to Shakerism was equivalent to adultery, physical cruelty, or

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[2] Sharp, bill of complaint, McCombs Papers.

[3] The primary sources contain both the "Boler" and "Bowler" spelling. William Boler signed his name "Boler"—the illiterate Sally only made her mark—so I use that spelling for the Boler family. However, the legal documents mostly (though not always) use the "Bowler" spelling, so I use that for the court case. For previous writings on *Bowler v. Bowler*, see Neal, *Kentucky Shakers*, 58-59; and Thomas Whitaker, "From Jasper Valley to Holy Mount: The Odyssey of Daniel Boler," *Shaker Quarterly* 10.2 (Summer 1970): 35-45. For analysis of the more famous Shaker divorce cases of Mary Dyer and Eunice Chapman, see Nelson M. Blake, "Eunice against the Shakers," *New York History* 41 (October 1960): 359-378; De Wolfe, *Shaking the Faith*; Jean M. Humez, "'A Woman Mighty to Pull You Down': Married Women's Rights and Female Anger in the Anti-Shaker Narratives of Eunice Chapman and Mary Dyer," *Journal of Women's History* 6 (Summer 1994): 90-110; and Ilyon Woo, *The Great Divorce: A Nineteenth-Century Mother's Extraordinary Fight against Her Husband, the Shakers, and Her Times* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2010).

abandonment. William and other Shakers criticized the divorce case as a violation of William's constitutional right to worship however he chose. At a time when the courts construed divorce as a punishment for a quasi-criminal act, it was understandable that the Shakers perceived *Bowler v. Bowler* as an expression of anti-Shakerism, an attitude prevalent within Kentucky. Shaker conversion—William's "weird and unnatural fanaticizm"—was, in religious, social, and even political terms, a subversive act.

If conversion made sense for the first Shakers of Logan County, it made no sense at all to much of the outside world. In fact, the public's response to Shaker conversion was generally one of hostility and outrage. Still, both the Shaker and the anti-Shaker understood Shaker conversion within the context of communal identity and republican citizenship. They simply differed on what conversion's place was within that framework. Shakers believed that the old social order had crumbled to pieces and that South Union represented a new community to which they could belong. Anti-Shakerites, on the other hand, still believed in the old social order and saw Shakerism as a danger to it. Both groups believed that conversion was not just an individual choice but participation in a community. The question was whether someone could be a member of that community without renouncing another community—the republic. Despite its lack of mob violence or published vitriol, the divorce case was South Union's most significant struggle between the Shakers and their opponents. On trial was not just the marriage between William and Sally Boler, but whether William's conversion to Shakerism changed his status before society, the law, and God.

Anti-Shakerism

"As to the state of the Church," James McGready wrote a friend in December 1807, " I have no good news to write." He continued:

> McNemar, Houston and Bates have been in Gasper River, Logan County with their Testimony, and have been successfull. Mr Rankin and about 20 persons of his congregation are now Shakers, and Shakerism is now beginning to show its head in this County.[4]

Though it was not as pervasive or prolific as anti-Catholicism, anti-Mormonism, or anti-Masonry—largely due to the relatively small number of Shakers—anti-Shakerism was a sizeable movement in the early republic, reaching its height between the 1790s and the 1820s. Evangelical Protestants denounced Shakerism as a leech-like travesty upon their own revival efforts. Perhaps they feared that their conservative brethren would point to Shakerism as the *reductio ad absurdum* of revivalism. After all, the Shakers of the west did indeed see their faith as the culmination of the Great Revival. Mainstream evangelicals like McGready therefore saw the Shakers as unwanted cousins, who retroactively tainted their shared ancestry.

Anti-Shakerism, however, was about more than just religious heterodoxy. James Smith (1737-1812), an pamphleteer in Bourbon County, Kentucky, derided Shakerism as a "money making scheme" that seduced innocent people so as to acquire their property. They came to the west "covered with sheep's clothing" and misled converts as to the nature of Shaker doctrine. The elders were, Smith maintained, hypocrites who secretly "live[d] in ease and luxury," "stored up liquor for their own use," and turned young Shaker girls and women into sex slaves, aborting any resultant pregnancies. The Shaker society turned its members into "slaves." They did their masters' bidding, and the masters

[4] James McGready to Archibald Cameron, 11 December 1807, PHS, photocopy at WKU.

reaped the fruits of their labor. The Shaker lifestyle—celibacy, renunciation of family, communal living, pacifism—was a serious challenge to social norms.[5]

Some people expressed their hostility to the Shakers through intimidation, vandalism, and violence. In August 1810, provoked by James Smith's recent pamphlets, a mob of more than two thousand people approached Union Village. A few hundred of them were armed with guns, swords, clubs, knives, and hatchets; they were accompanied by state militia and a justice of the peace. The mob demanded that Union Village surrender some of its child members and that the Shakers stop practicing their religion in Ohio. When the Shakers refused their demands, the mob still insisted on interviewing a few of the society's youngsters. To their dismay, the children all testified to enjoying the Shaker society and did not want to leave.[6]

Most anti-Shaker violence was less organized. A few years earlier in December 1805, ruffians came to Union Village and broke some windows, burned down a meetinghouse, and cropped the ears of some of their horses. In October 1810, someone burned down the South Union barn, destroying about $1,500 worth of wheat and flax. Further rumors of arson emerged two years later, leading the members of South Union to begin night-watches. In June 1825 a few dozen men burst into the Center Family dwelling at Pleasant Hill and began to indiscriminately club worshipping Believers, intent upon rescuing a young woman from their clutches. When the young woman, Lucy Bryant, insisted she wanted to stay, the men left, but a week later a larger mob, led by

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[5] James Smith, *Remarkable Occurrences, Lately Discovered among the People Called Shakers; of a Treasonous and Barbarous Nature, or Shakerism Developed* (Paris, Ky.: Joel R. Lyle, 1810), quotes 14, 15, 17. Also see idem., *Shakerism Detected, Their Erroneous and Treasonous Proceedings, and False Publications, Contained in Different News-papers, Exposed to Public View, by the Depositions of Ten Different Persons Living in Various Parts of the State of Kentucky and Ohio, Accompanied with Remarks* (Paris, Ky.: Joel R. Lyle, 1810).

[6] MacLean, *Shakers of Ohio*, 367-379.

Lucy's mother, stormed the society and dragged her away. And four years later someone poisoned a dozen of South Union's horses with strychnine.[7]

It is arguable, however, that legal challenges posited a greater existential threat to the Shakers than the occasional flash of mob violence. The legal challenges usually focused upon one of four issues: divorce, child custody, property, and military service. Could a woman divorce her husband if he joined the Shakers; could they still be considered married if they did not cohabitate? Could a woman gain custody of her children if her husband took them to a Shaker society; did he still have his possessory rights as a father? If someone joined the Shakers and gave his property to the society, and then decided to leave, could he get his property back? And could a state government force the Shakers to join a militia, despite the sect's pacifist stance? All these questions were battled out in state courts and legislatures.[8]

Implicit in each issue was the notion that the Shakers were somehow not American citizens. How else could one deprive an organization of its property or a man of his children or wife? The answer was that, by joining such a strange sect so contradictory to the republic's values, the Shakers had negated their membership in the republic. This formula helped anti-Shaker activists reconcile their legal strategies with the Jeffersonian disestablishment of religion. Shakerism was not protected by the

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[7] Theodore E. Johnson, ed., "Violence at Turtle Creek: An 1805 Missionaries' Letter," *Shaker Quarterly* 12.3 (Fall 1972): 107-116; Youngs, journal, 12 October 1810; Youngs et al., journal, 172; Stein, *Shaker Experience in America*, 97-98; Youngs et al. [probably Harvey L. Eads], journal, 460-461.

[8] Ralph Michael Stein, "A Sect Apart: A History of the Legal Troubles of the Shakers," *Arizona Law Review* 23.2 (1981); Barbara Taback Schneider; "Prayers for Our Protection and Prosperity at Court: Shakers, Children, and the Law," *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 4.1 (1992); James M. Upton, "The Shakers as Pacifists in the Period between 1812 and the Civil War," *Filson Club History Quarterly* 47.3 (July 1973): 267-283.

Constitution, they contended, because it placed its members beyond the Constitution's purview.

In fact, James Smith argued they were inimical to the republic itself. Smith even feared that the Shakers might raise a Tory army against the United States. Their professed pacifism, he believed, only extended towards any fight "in favor of American liberty"; if their leadership ever told them to raise arms *against* America, they would surely do so.[9] One passage in Smith's *Shakerism Developed* nicely summarized how the Shakers were not truly members of the republic and therefore ought not to be protected by the First Amendment:

> I rejoice in the freedom of our American Constitution, that all men are priviliged to worship God according to the dictates of their conscience. Yet I clearly see that this class of people until their protection are endeavouring to sap their foundation. They condemn . . . all government both civil and ecclesiastical except their own.
>
> Let Shakerism predominate, and it will extirpate Christianity, destroy marriage and also our present free government, and finally depopulate America.[10]

Smith's rhetoric paralleled that of contemporary anti-Catholicism. Catholics were, after all, subjects of a foreign sovereign, the Pope, and therefore had no allegiance to America. Smith even referred to David Darrow, an elder at Union Village and *de facto* leader of the western Shakers, as "Pope."[11]

Furthermore, Smith's lurid tales of sex slavery and forced abortions echoed similar rumors about monasteries and convents, as well as later stories about the Freemasons and the Mormons. Smith's accounts of young women imprisoned by Shakers also resembled the Indian captivity narratives popular in America since the seventeenth

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[9] Smith, *Shakerism Developed*, 21, quote 22.

[10] Ibid., 15.

[11] Ibid.

century—a comparison made all the more fitting by the fact of Smith's own enslavement by the Caughnawaugha tribe during the French and Indian War, and subsequent authorship of his own captivity narrative. It is therefore understandable that Smith had particularly acute notions of the "other," and for the need to exclude the "other" from the republic (which he had after all fought for as a Revolutionary colonel). Smith even reasoned that, since Ohio was able to forbid free blacks from entering the state unless they paid a large fee, the state could just as easily forbid Shakers. The moment someone converted to Shakerism, that person became somewhat less than a person. And a man was not quite a man.[12]

A Divorce

William and Sally's marriage lasted from January 5, 1801, to October 26, 1813. As their marriage fell apart, their lives became public. In the early republic, divorce was public, and marriage was private. Marital privacy was an intrinsically paternalistic

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[12] Idem., *An Account of the Remarkable Occurrences in the life and Travels of Col. James Smith (Now a Citizen of Bourbon County, Kentucky) during His Captivity with the Indians, in the Years 1755, '56, '57, '58 & '59* (Lexington, Ky., 1799); idem., *Shakerism Developed*, 18. For more on anti-Shakerism, see Tim Kanon, "'Seduced, Bewildered, and Lost': Anti-Shakerism on the Early Nineteenth-Century Frontier," *Ohio Valley History* 7.2 (Summer 2007): 1-30; Elizabeth De Wolfe, "'A Very Deep Design at the Bottom': The Shaker Threat, 1780-1860," in Nancy Lusigan Schultz, ed., *Fear Itself: Enemies Real and Imagined in American Culture* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1999), 105-118.

On similar prejudices, see Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," *The Paranoid Style in American Politics: And Other Essays* (New York: Knopf, 1965), 3-40; Elizabeth Fenton, *Religious Liberties: Anti-Catholicism and Liberal Democracy in Nineteenth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Terryl L. Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); J. Spencer Fluhman, *"A Peculiar People": Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); William Preston Vaughn, *The Anti-Masonic Party in the United States, 1826-1843* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983).

On James Smith and Indian captivity narratives, see Willard Rouse Jillson, *A Bibliography of the Life and Writings of Col. James Smith of Bourbon County, Kentucky, 1737-1812* (Frankfort: Kentucky Historical Society, 1947); Daniel E. Crowe, "James Smith among the Indians: Cultural Captives on the Early American Frontier, 1755-1812," *Filson Club History Quarterly* 73.2 (April 1999): 117-138; June Namias, *White Captives: Gender and Ethnicity on the American Frontier* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

construct, signifying that the public sphere had no right to interfere in a man's household. A wife's rights had little meaning in this legal fiction, for she ceased to be a legal entity once she was married. She and her husband became one person, and that person was the husband. In his commentaries on English common law, William Blackstone wrote:

> By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and *cover*, she performs everything; and is therefore called in our law-french a *feme-covert* . . .

From the term "femme covert" comes "coverture," the word used to describe this doctrine of married women's essential legal nonexistence. A wife could not sue or be sued, own property, establish credit, or make a will "without her husband's concurrence."[13]

The marriage covenant was vital to social order. Americans in the early republic believed that marriage was not a normal contract; it was made before God, and it was for life. Sometimes life got in the way of the ideal—husbands moved west, wives cheated, people remarried, often bigamously—but the ideal existed nonetheless. Also, marriage was central to a man's identity. In order to be a man, and in order to be a full citizen of the republic, one had to be master of one's house. To take this identity away from a man, and to nullify a covenant made before God, required a violation so rash that it transgressed the private sphere. Financial disagreements, an occasional brothel visitation, a light physical chastisement of one's wife—these were private matters that the courts had no jurisdiction over. But sometimes marital problems grew to a point that they

[13] William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1765-1769), 1:430; Hendrik Hartog, *Man and Wife in America: A History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 115-135; Marylynn Salmon, *Women and the Property of Law in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 14-57.

punctured the public sphere, and the court felt it had to intervene.[14] The real question in *Bowler v. Bowler* was whether William's conversion to Shakerism merited such an intervention.

As he gave his deposition before a justice of the peace in April 1813, Sally's father Archibald Felts recounted how William Boler had become a Shaker. When the Shaker missionaries arrived in Logan County in the fall of 1807, William was quickly drawn to their message. The Shakers attended a sacramental meeting led by John Rankin. William and Archibald Felts were both in attendance as well. Felts saw William meet with the Shakers and within fifteen minutes begin "joining them and backing what they said." That Sunday William went to hear them preach. He went to hear them again on Tuesday. Felts grew suspicious of his son-in-law's religious activities and asked his daughter about it when she came to visit that Thursday: "I asked her if Bowler was almost a shaker and she burst into a flood of tears—heart-rending circumstance."[15]

William seemed to have been a rash man prone to emotional decisions, for within a few weeks he experienced a dramatic un-conversion. Felts recounted that William "flew off from shakerism and he boasted that God had showed him that Shakerism originated in hell and would land in hell with all its followers." He was tired, however, of his inherited Presbyterianism, and joined the Methodists for the 1807-1808 winter. But by the spring, as if the sect's appeal had a direct corollary to the climate, William began

[14] Hendrik Hartog, *Man and Wife in America*, 24-29, 108-110; Michael Grossberg, *Governing the Hearth: Law and the Family in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 1-30.

[15] Archibald Felts, deposition, 10 April 1813, *Bowler v. Bowler*, Case No. 30, Barren Country Circuit Court equity case files, microfilm at the Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives, Frankfort, Kentucky.

fraternizing again with the Shakers, until by June 1808, as both William and Sally remembered, he became a solid Shaker convert.[16]

But the Bolers' marital crisis did not come until nearly a year later. For the fall and winter following his conversion, William stayed with Sally and his children. At that time, there was no "South Union," and the Believers were still only gathering occasionally for prayer-meetings. But soon they began to move in together and create makeshift communal families, and it was one of these proto-communities that William decided to join in March 1809, when he moved in with the family of Francis A. White. Sally refused to move.[17]

At this point Sally and William moved into what Alexis de Tocqueville once termed "the shadow of the law." Tocqueville used the phrase when he reflected upon the power of the courts and the law in the American imagination. Not only were Americans extremely quick to litigate any problem they might have, but they also worked within popularly shared and constantly negotiated conceptions of "the law" outside of any legal apparatus.[18] With William living in one household and Sally living in another, the marriage was over in reality if not in name. The only logical thing for William to do now was to return Sally to whom she had belonged before he married her; i.e., her father Archibald Felts. On the morning of March 28, he took Sally and (probably) their daughters to Felts's home.[19]

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[16] Ibid.; William Boler, answer, 22 October 1812, *Bowler v. Bowler*; Sharp, bill of complaint, McCombs Papers.

[17] Felts, deposition, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

[18] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer and tr. George Lawrence (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969 [1835-1840]), 139; Grossberg, *Judgment for Solomon*, 2-3.

[19] Felts, deposition, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

William then divided the property between himself and Sally. He signed over the plat and certificate to Felts for half of his land, a 400-acre tract which he had bought as a headright grant from the Commonwealth of Kentucky. Sally received 200 acres of the land, as well as a mare, some pigs, four or five cows, and all the sheep; an oven, a skillet, a flatiron, two tubs, a bucket, some bacon and corn, a bottle, and assorted tableware.[20] They also divided the children, William keeping their son Daniel and Sally keeping their two daughters. William and Felts then entered an informal agreement regarding Sally, as a man named William Lowry later testified:

> Bowler then implyed he did not want to find her in the publick and maybe she was to go and buy things and run him in debt . . . [Felts responded,] if she buys good[s] I will pay for them and that alone is all the indemnification that took place at that time . . .

While interrogating Lowry, William Boler suggested that he had requested "an instrument of writing to indemnify [himself] from any charge coming against [him]," though Lowry did not remember that particular conversation.[21] However much William may have later regretted it, he made no legally binding agreement with Sally or her father. But under the shadow of the law, they came to an understanding they could live with, at least for a little while.

When Sally filed a petition for divorce with the Logan County Circuit Court in the spring of 1811, she was paradoxically asserting both power and powerlessness. The power was not hers but the law's. Her power only existed vicariously within the power of men—her father, her lawyer (whom her father surely hired), and the judge. Her bill of complaint practically bowed to the judge in supplication, pleading for "the Speedy

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[20] Ibid.; William Boler, answer, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

[21] William Lowry, deposition, 10 April 1813, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

intervention of your Honour," to whom she was "as in Duty bound."[22] Sally's dependence on the law reflected her status as a woman. Men did not need the courts to instigate a *de facto* divorce. They could simply run away, which was what William practically did. William could live satisfactorily with their informal agreement, but if Sally ever hoped to acquire financial support for herself and her children, she really only had two options: remarry or get her son back. Both options required the intervention of the law. It was due to Sally's sex and consequent powerlessness that she had to turn to *de jure* divorce.

Russellville and Frankfort

Sally's lawyer was a handsome, popular Bowling Green attorney named Solomon Porcius Sharp. In 1809 and 1811 he had been elected as the state representative for Warren County. Sharp was later elected to the U.S. House in 1813 and 1815. He became known for his populist-democratic politics. Sharp lobbied for a tax on the Bank of the United States and sided with the Debt Relief Party that uprooted Kentucky politics in the late 1810s and 1820s. The pro-relief faction sided with Kentucky's thousands of debtors, whereas the "anti-reliefers" represented the state's creditors. From 1821 to 1825, Sharp served as the state attorney general under pro-relief governor John Adair; during their tenure, the state abolished debtors' prisons, passed a debt-relief replevin act, and abolished the Court of Appeals when it ruled the replevin act unconstitutional. The latter

[22] Sharp, bill of complaint, McCombs Papers.

action resulted in two parallel courts that equally insisted upon their legitimacy, a fiasco dubbed the Old Court – New Court controversy.[23]

Sharp's greatest fame, however, came later—long after the Boler case—when he was murdered by Jereboam O. Beauchamp in 1825. Beauchamp had recently married a woman named Anna Cooke, who hated Sharp for allegedly impregnating her and claiming the stillborn child was a mulatto; she made Beauchamp promise to kill Sharp in order to win her hand in marriage. The positively Gothic circumstances surrounding the murder—heavy with overtones of politics and sex—solidified the murder in national lore. The "Kentucky tragedy" was adapted into several literary works, including Edgar Allan Poe's only (unfinished) play *Politian* and Robert Penn Warren's novel *World Enough and Time*.[24]

In the spring of 1811, however, when Sharp authored Sally's bill of complaint, he was a well-liked and very much alive lawyer with a seat in the state House. He actually was not present for most of the Barren County court proceedings because he was fighting the Shawnee from February 1812 to that October, and in May 1813 he left for his new seat in the U.S. House.[25] Anyway, his lawyering did little good in Sally's initial case before the Logan County Circuit Court, which convened in Russellville. A year after the

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[23] J. W. Cooke, "The Life and Death of Colonel Solomon P. Sharp, Part 1: Uprightness and Inventions; Snares and Nets," *Filson Club Historical Quarterly* 72.1 (January 1998): 24-41; idem., "The Life and Death of Colonel Solomon P. Sharp, Part 2: A Time to Weep and a Time to Mourn," *Filson Club Historical Quarterly* 72.2 (April 1998): 121-151. For more on the Old Court – New Court controversy, see Theodore W. Ruger, "'A Question Which Convulses a Nation': The Early Republic's Greatest Debate about the Judicial Review Power," *Harvard Law Review* 117.3 (January 2004): 826-897; and Arndt Mathis Stickles, *The Critical Court Struggle in Kentucky, 1819-1829* (Bloomington: Graduate Council, Indiana University, 1929).

[24] Cooke, "Life and Death of Sharp"; Dickson D. Bruce, *The Kentucky Tragedy: A Story of Conflict and Change in Antebellum America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006); Matthew G. Schoenbachler, *Murder and Madness: The Myth of the Kentucky Tragedy* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009).

[25] Cooke, "Life and Death of Sharp," 31-32.

petition was filed, the court appointed a jury to gather facts on the case. The jury found that William had joined the Shakers in March 1809 and had left Sally "with the intention of abandonment for the space of two years."[26] But in July 1812 the judge ruled that there was insufficient evidence to grant a divorce. He dismissed the case and ordered that the defendant recover his costs from the plaintiff. The last order was later scratched out in the county order book, perhaps because it was later ruled irrelevant, or perhaps because William did not want to place that financial burden upon Sally.[27]

But something took place the previous winter at the state capital of Frankfort which eventually led Sally to petition again for divorce. On February 8, 1812, the General Assembly of Kentucky enacted:

> That where any man united in lawful marriage, hath, or hereafter shall renounce the marriage covenant, by refusing to live with his wife in the conjugal relation—by uniting himself to any sect, whose creed, rules, or doctrines require a renunciation of the marriage covenant, or forbid a man and wife to dwell and cohabit together, according to the true spirit and object of marriage; the person so offending shall subject himself to recovery of alimony or separate maintenance by the wife aggrieved thereby.

The first section simply mandated that the convert pay for his wife's "separate maintenance," but the eighth section elaborated that the woman could sue for divorce. (She could not, however, remarry until a year had passed since the divorce decree.) The law also empowered the court to decree part or all of the man's land to his children and to appoint guardians for his children. If a religious group illegally detained a child, a writ of *habeas corpus* could be obtained to retrieve the child, and if the religious group then

[26] Logan County Order Book (LCOB) 6½, Logan County Genealogical Society, Russellville, Kentucky, 1 May 1812.

[27] LCOB 6½, 22 July 1812.

failed to comply with the writ, they would be penalized up to $500.[28]

It is hard not to wonder whether Solomon Sharp, who was finishing up his term in the state legislature, had a hand in the law, which seemed awfully convenient for exactly one Kentuckian, Sally Boler. But even if it were not for Solomon Sharp's probable lobbying, the law could have easily passed due to the strength of anti-Shakerism in early nineteenth-century Kentucky. Granted, the law did not explicitly name the Shakers, but the initial bill probably did. The bill went to the Committee of Religion, which referenced several petitions "respecting the people called *Shakers*," but advised that the law not specify "any particular denomination whatever." The General Assembly was well aware of the contradiction between anti-Shaker legislation and the Kentucky constitution's guarantee of freedom of religion. Indeed, New York's governor DeWitt Clinton vetoed a similar law in 1818 on the ground that violated that freedom. (His veto was overridden.) Kentucky tried to pre-empt this objection with generic wording; the law was not about picking on any particular sect but about preserving the institution of marriage.[29] The Shakers, however, did not appreciate the state legislature's careful wording; Benjamin Youngs called the law "unconstitutional" and lamented, "Oh! Kentucky! Noble Ky! how art thou fallen!"[30]

On the grounds of the new divorce law, Sally filed again for a divorce on October 23, 1812.[31] The following year was consumed by the collection of depositions, including

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[28] *Acts Passed at the First Session of the Twentieth General Assembly for the Commonwealth of Kentucky* (Frankfort: W. Gerard, Printer to the State, 1812), 219-223.

[29] "Legislature of Kentucky, Jan. 10," *Niles' Weekly Register*, 21 March 1812; Stein, "A Sect Apart," 742. New Hampshire also passed a similar law in 1824; ibid.

[30] Youngs et al., journal, 130.

[31] LCOB 6½, 23 October 1812.

those of Archibald Felts, William Boler, and more than a dozen others. Most of the time Felts acted as Sally's counsel, while William represented himself. It might have seemed an open-and-shut case: William had joined the Shakers, so Sally was entitled to a divorce. But the law did not specify Shakerism; the plaintiff had to prove that William had joined a religious sect that required him to renounce the marriage covenant.

Several of the depositions therefore centered around whether or not William had stopped having sex with Sally. Burley Lacy recalled a visit William paid him in the fall of 1808:

> [A] conversation arose about shakerism and Bowler asserted that conjugal intercourse was a damning sin and we had a long conversation and I asked him if he had no intercourse with his wife and he asserted he had not and to the best my recollection he affirmed that and I asked him how long since he had, had any intercourse with his wife and he said not since he had received the light.

The plaintiff's agent, seeking to reaffirm the Shaker prohibition of sexual intercourse, asked Lacy, "[D]oes not the shakers in publick and private conversation even in preaching exclaim against intercourse as the most damning sin[?]" Lacy answered affirmatively.[32]

Matthew Simpson also spoke with William when he saw him at John Shannon's saw mill in the spring of 1810. Simpson related asking him "if did not want to go back and live with his wife again," to which William balked and declared that if he had to choose between living with Sally and having "a sword pierce through him" (William drew his fist to his chest in a stabbing motion), he would choose the sword, "for he could not have salvation and live with wife."[33]

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[32] Burley Lacy, deposition, 10 April 1813, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

[33] Matthew Simpson, deposition, 14 July 1814, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

Finally, Archibald Felts deposed that he "virtually" witnessed his son-in-law admit to having given up sex with Sally. William boldly told a Methodist group-meeting that "he knew he commited no sin." Felts inferred from this that William had become celibate, since he understood that the Shakers taught "taught conjugal intercourse was the root of all sin." Felts also gleaned corroborating evidence from the gossip of "the women."[34]

William's rebuttal was somewhat muddled. He denied that the Shakers prohibited sexual intercourse, that instead "such matter is always left to the dissention and conscience of the member." Indeed, such a strict creed would be contrary to the Shakers' belief in "the freedom of will." But then, tacking the subject from a different angle, he argued that Sally "hath not required [him] to cohabit with her, and consequently he hath never refused her such cohabitation. . ." In other words, William had indeed stopped having sex with Sally, but he was not *required* to.[35]

For William, "the freedom of will" had a corollary in the law: his constitutional freedom of religion. He insisted he had

> done no more than constitut. of the date guaranteed to him as well as to every other individual in the community, that worshipping his god according to the [illegible] of his own conscience and in the manner he esteems to be right.[36]

In addition to his status as a husband and father, he perceived Shakerism itself to be on trial. If conversion to Shakerism were an offense worthy of granting a divorce, then the law essentially criminalized Shakerism. Indeed, several depositions suggested that Shakerism was criminally heretical. The plaintiff's agent asked Burley Lacy whether the

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[34] Felts, deposition, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

[35] William Boler, answer, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

[36] Ibid.

Shakers "den[ied] the resurrection of the body" and preached "that there is no heaven only what is here," statements which Lacy confirmed.[37] In his own deposition, Archibald Felts spent ten pages (in a total of twenty-two) attacking the entirety of Shaker doctrine. He quoted from a copy he had acquired of Benjamin Youngs' *Testimony* and lambasted Shakerism as "a vain philosophy and a motly spectacle of superstition." He admitted that the "shakers talk a great deal about God but it appear to me a strange God that they hold forth," going on to attack Shaker teachings on the afterlife, the human's ability to achieve divinity, the story of Adam and Eve, the nature of Christ, and the means of salvation.[38]

Not only William's constitutional rights but his rights as a head of household were at stake. Within the depositions a larger argument was taking place between warring notions of marital obligation and the paterfamilias's role. Though William was now celibate, the status of being Sally's husband and the father of their children was still vital to his identity. He had "prepared a neat & comfortable habitation for her, himself and their children" at South Union and pleaded with Sally to return "to the Bed, board & comfort of this defendant." Moreover, he denied that had "ever refused to live with [Sally] in the marriage relation . . . withdrawn himself from her bed."[39] Apparently William was still willing to provide for Sally and live with her. It is uncertain how this would have meshed with South Union's communal living, though such exceptions were more common in 1813 than in, say, 1853.

William's proposition was insufficient for at least some of his neighbors. When he suggested the above scenario to the deponent Matthew Simpson, Simpson scoffed, "I

[37] Lacy, deposition, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

[38] Felts, deposition, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

[39] William Boler, answer, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

heard you say that you would build her a house off. But did not take up that you intended to live with her as man and wife."[40] In Simpson's estimation, a mere house did not uphold the marriage contract. Indeed, the whole notion of Shaker communal living subverted the traditional order of the household. Felts argued that for Sally to go off to live with William in Francis White's house would render her "a Slave."[41] One deponent testified that Sally herself said "she did not wish to live with [William] as a slave."[42] If Sally lived in another man's house, she was no longer serving her husband but a foreign master. If she lived at South Union, William could no longer be her husband. He had foregone all possessory rights over her.

In fact, the whole court case implied William's loss of rights as a husband. His entire sex life (or lack thereof) was on display. As his own counsel, William had to participate in this public exposure. When one deponent testified about William's renunciation of sex with Sally, William asked Lacy, "Did you ever stay all night at my house[?]" Lacy had not. It is not hard to guess what William was implying.[43] Still, it pained William to expose his domestic troubles within a court of law. He blamed Felts's interference for the whole thing, claiming that if it were not for him, Sally would have happily agreed to live with him. But instead his crumbling household "occupied the attention of a temporal Judge" and "echoed in the halls of a Courthouse."[44]

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[40] Simpson, deposition, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

[41] Felts, deposition, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

[42] [Illegible], deposition, undated, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

[43] Lacy, deposition, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

[44] William Boler, answer, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

After months of collecting depositions, the Logan County Circuit Court came to a decision on October 26, 1813. The court granted Sally a divorce. Furthermore, Sally would retain all the property "she has already received from said Wm. Bowler," without any more "interference molestation or Concern from said William Bowler." As for William's own half of the property, he was to deed it over to his children. He was also to pay Sally's court costs.[45]

Then a peculiar thing happened. Both Sally and William petitioned for a new trial. William's reason for doing so was not recorded. Sally, however, asked for a change of venue, stating that the judge was prejudiced against her case and therefore it was "impossible to get a fair trial" in Logan County.[46] It is possible to infer from the depositions why William and Sally were dismayed by the trial's results. Archibald Felts suggested that the division of land was unfair. William's 200 acres was "good low ground" which was easily worth $500, while Sally's 200 acres was only good for "a few peach trees" and some timber. Felts had tried to sell the land for $200 and then $120 but received no takers, and he concluded, "I dont count it worth a Cent toward suporting a woman a children."[47] Meanwhile, William Boler apparently wanted Felts to pay him for Sally's 200 acres. William Lowry overheard an argument between Boler and Felts during which Felts told him "he would not pay the [Shakers] for another mans land," while West Maulding overheard Felts reaffirm with Francis White that his agreement with William

[45] Decree, 26 October 1813, *Bowler v. Bowler*; LCOB 7, 26 October 1813.

[46] LCOB 7 and 27 October 1813; change of venue petition, undated, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

[47] Felts, deposition, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

Boler only required Felts to pay for goods purchased by Sally.[48] On the land issue, the decree was a loss for William.

The other issue at stake, however, was the custody of the Bolers' son Daniel. William was rather defensive about the matter, saying, "This defendant admits that he has the second child a child about 8 years old with him." But Sally "concented" to his taking Daniel. William even admitted attempting to take one of the children but did not "out of compassion for" Sally. He made a conscious effort to appear magnanimous on the issue, suggesting that he feared his son would be taken from him.[49] Given the economic realities of that time, it would have been understandable for Sally to want custody of a boy on the cusp of working age.

But why did Sally think the judge was prejudiced against her? The historian can only guess. The judge in question was Henry P. Broadnax, a native Virginian who served as the Logan circuit judge from 1804 to 1819.[50] Broadnax's worldview was decidedly conservative—a temperance man, slaveholder, and wealthy bachelor. When he was not riding the circuit, he liked to climb up a tower he had built on his Russellville estate, where he watched his slaves labor in the fields.[51] He dressed in the style of a "high-toned" tidewater patrician: silk stockings, short breeches, and riding boots. A daughter of John J. Crittenden wrote that Broadnax had "an exalted sense of the dignity of the court,

[48] Lowry, deposition, *Bowler v. Bowler*; West Maulding, deposition, 2 October 1813, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

[49] William Boler, answer, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

[50] Otto A. Rothert, *A History of Muhlenberg County* (Louisville: John P. Morton & Co., 1913), 53.

[51] Edward Coffman, *The Story of Russellville: A Short History of the Town of Russellville, Logan County, Ky.* (Russellville, Ky.: News-Democrat, 1931), 21.

and a great contempt for meanness, rascality, and all low rowdyism," and that he "was, at heart, an aristocrat."[52]

Furthermore, he was a Presbyterian of the strict Calvinist variety. Anecdotes proliferated about Broadnax's no-nonsense religion, utterly devoid of evangelical enthusiasm or sentimentality. He supposedly had a church built for his neighborhood, and when it burned down during a forest fire, he replied, "I built that house . . . and gave it to the Lord, and if he don't take care of His own property, I can't furnish him another."[53] In another instance, while overseeing a case in a courthouse built *on top of* the county jail, Broadnax was infuriated by a prisoner revival that erupted below them. He reprimanded a prisoner for his loud exclamations and hallelujahs.[54] A man who ultimately willed $20,000 to the Presbyterian seminary in Danville,[55] Broadnax would have had little patience for the anti-seminarian radicals fomenting religious fervor in his own county of Logan, and rending apart his denomination with evangelical schism. It is likely that William Boler, disciple of John Rankin, one of Logan County's leading religious radicals, found little sympathy in Broadnax.

In *Bowler v. Bowler*, the plaintiff's case challenged conservative notions of domestic privacy and paternal rights, while the defendant's case challenged conservative

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[52] Mrs. Chapman Coleman, *The Life of John J. Crittenden, with Selections from His Correspondence and Speeches*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1873), 18.

[53] Lucius P. Little, *Ben Hardin: His Times and Contemporaries, with Selections from His Speeches* (Louisville: Courier-Journal Job Printing Co., 1887), 479.

[54] Harrison D. Taylor, *Ohio County, Kentucky, in the Olden Days: A Series of Old Newspaper Sketches of Fragmentary History* (Louisville: John P. Morton & Co., 1926), 21. Broadnax threatened to fine the prisoner, which led to the following exchange:

> "Fine me, your Honor, but how will you collect it?"
> "I will send you to prison," responded the furious judge.
> "Prison, your Honor? Ain't I already in prison?"

[55] *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*, vol. 15 (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1857), 31.

notions of religious restraint and societal stasis. Torn between the two, Broadnax made a decision that apparently pleased neither the defendant nor the plaintiff. In all, it is not hard to understand why Broadnax agreed to transfer the case to the Barren County circuit court. He was probably glad to be rid of the whole matter. On February 2, 1814, Judge Henry P. Broadnax approved the venue change and had the case files transported to the Barren County seat of Glasgow, invoking Sally's petition while at the same time ruling that it would "be continued at the cost of the Defendant."[56]

Glasgow and Frankfort

At this point, the historian's trail becomes dismayingly narrow. It is certain that the case files arrived in Glasgow at some point. In 1972 a Glasgow attorney, Marion Vance, wrote to Julia Neal, a Shaker historian and director of the Kentucky Library & Museum at Western Kentucky University, and informed her that a local genealogist had come across a Shaker divorce case in the Barren County equity case files: Case No. 30, *Bowles v. Bowles* (Vance mistakenly transcribed the names)[57] However, at some point between 1972 and 2012, this case file disappeared. The Barren County court records, now stored at the Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives in the state capital of Frankfort, contain no such file Case No. 29 and Case No. 32 are from the same time period as *Bowler v. Bowler*, but there is no Case 30 (or 31, for that matter); nor has it been misplaced in any of the case file containers from that period. Fortunately, at some point the Barren County case files were microfilmed by another religious sect

[56] Proceedings, 2 and 10 February 1814, *Bowler v. Bowler*. For more on Broadnax, see Boynton Merrill, Jr., *Jefferson's Nephews: A Frontier Tragedy* (Princeton University Press, 1976), 176-179.

[57] Marion Vance to Julia Neal, 10 February 1972, Mary Julia Neal Papers, WKU. Marion Vance was the attorney. The genealogist was Eva Peden.

controversial for its marital practices, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Within the microfilmed case files survives Case 30, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

But the files are simply the Logan County files which Judge Broadnax sent to Glasgow. There are no proceedings included from the Barren County court. No is there any mention of the Bolers in the county court order books.[58] In short, there is no indication from Barren County's records that its circuit court ever actually heard *Bowler v. Bowler*. There are, however, hints of what happened in Benjamin Youngs's journal. On June 26, 1814, Youngs noted, Samuel Whyte "went to Barren Court on acc't of the Boler suit."[59] An entry two days later records that Whyte returned to South Union. Whyte may have come to depose on Boler's behalf, or perhaps he was simply there to provide Boler support. Apparently he did not stay for the whole trial, for it was not until July 2 that Youngs wrote:

> Wrong Decree
> The Barren Court to day, decided adverse to justice, & against Wm. Boler, but in accordance with the late unconstitutional act of the Ky. legislature—The decree takes from Wm. Boler his land & his child because he had joined the Shakers—[60]

Relying solely on this Shaker account, it appears that the Barren County court ruled totally in Sally's favor. Whether the court ordered William to give Sally all of his land, or whether it simply denied him compensation for the land he already given her, is unclear, but either result would have been a defeat for William. Moreover, the court's decision to give Daniel over to his mother was an unmistakable victory for Sally.

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[58] Barren County, Kentucky, Order Book No. 4, May Court 1812 – August Court 1818, microfilm at WKU.

[59] Youngs et al., journal, 148. Curiously, there is not even a record of the Barren Country court convening *at all* in June, nor in early July.

[60] Ibid.

The victory was fleeting. In late June or early July, having apparently caught wind of the Barren County court's decision, William Boler fled from South Union with his son Daniel. William believed that the law had failed to bring about justice, so he took extralegal measures to restore that justice. Daniel later remembered "how he wore his shoes backward and walked 'toeing in' through the sand, that the tracks might lead his pursuers in an opposite direction."[61] William did not inform the society of his decision to flee or where he was going, probably so that South Union would not have to pay a $500 penalty for sheltering Daniel if Sally decided to obtain a writ of *habeas corpus* against the society. South Union was already $14,000 in debt, suffering the typical business issues of a utopian community, and did not need any more financial burden.[62] In early August, the South Union elder Benjamin Seth Youngs inquired the elders at the central ministry of New Lebanon, New York, whether they had seen or heard from William and Daniel.[63] We do not have New Lebanon's response, but eventually William and Daniel did arrive at New Lebanon, where they both remained for the rest of their lives.[64]

Despite William's taking the law into his own hands, *Bowler v. Bowler* was not quite over. On July 2, 1814, the Shakers representing William appealed the case to the Kentucky Court of Appeals, at that time the highest level of the state court system. Here the historical trail becomes narrower still. The courthouse in Frankfort burned down in

[61] Anna White and Leila S. Taylor, *Shakerism: Its Meaning and Message* (Columbia, Oh.: Press of Fred J. Heer, 1904), 166.

[62] Whitaker, "From Jasper Valley," 40.

[63] Benjamin Seth Youngs to Daniel Moseley and Calvin Green, 8 August 1814, WRHS, microfilm at WKU.

[64] Whitaker, "From Jasper Valley," 41-45; *Manifesto* 23.2 (February 1893): 25-45.

1865, with the earliest surviving case files and order books only dating back to 1860.[65] George Bibb, the court reporter in 1814, did not include *Bowler v. Bowler* in his selection of Court of Appeals decisions.[66]

Once again the Shaker journal provides the only clues as to what happened. On July 11, 1814, Samuel Whyte and Samuel Eads left South Union for the Court of Appeals in Frankfort, and returned on July 25.[67] South Union kept William's 200-acre tract, so the Court of Appeals probably overruled Barren County on the land issue (unless, that is, Barren County had simply refused to make Sally pay for the 200 acres William had already given her).[68] Events that transpired a year later, however, indicate that the Court of Appeals upheld the Barren County court's decision on the custody of Daniel Boler. On July 14, 1815, the county clerk came to South Union bearing nine writs of *habeas corpus* for Daniel Boler. The attempt failed. Three days later, Benjamin Youngs wrote in his journal, "Writs returned—The case laid by—this is the finale."[69] Sally and her family apparently did not have the resources or inclination to pursue the case to New York, if indeed they even knew where William and Daniel were.

One last legal remedy remained at Sally's disposal: special legislation. On January 30, 1817, the General Assembly of Kentucky passed a special act on Sally W.

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[65] Personal communication with employee at the Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives, 27 November 2012.

[66] George M. Bibb, *Reports of Cases at Common Law and in Chancery Argued and Decided in the Court of Appeals of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, from Spring Term 1813, to Fall Term 1814, Inclusive* (Frankfort: G. E. & J. B. Russell, 1817).

[67] Youngs et al., journal, 149.

[68] For references to South Union retaining Boler's land, see Youngs et al., journal, 254; and Prudence Morrell, "Prudence Morrell's Account of a Journal to the West in the Year 1847," ed. Theodore E. Johnson, *Shaker Quarterly* 8.3 (1968): 82.

[69] Youngs et al., journal, 217.

Boler's behalf. The act summarized how Sally's husband had "deserted" her and "joined the shakers," and how Sally was now in poverty with "several children" to take care of. This was a common situation for divorced women in the early republic. Without a husband, they were unable to support their families. Sally could not easily acquire cash, nor could she pay for anything on credit. And indeed, her problem before the Kentucky legislature was financial in nature. Her 200-acre tract of land, first granted to William by the state of Kentucky, was still not paid for. The General Assembly ordered that however "much of the state price as remains unpaid" be "hereby remitted."[70]

This was an unusual piece of legislation. There were thousands of Kentuckians in addition to Sally who were indebted to the state government for their land. Cash was scarce, and a series of indulgence acts kept putting off when headright settlers had to start paying the state government back. In fact, many did not pay until 1833 (thirty-six years after Kentucky granted its first headrights), when the legislature told them to either pay or work on the roads.[71] In short, Sally's indebtedness to the state was not unique. The General Assembly's remission of her debt was not just a charitable act but a political statement, a reclamation of justice in light of Sally's messy divorce and the Shakers' legal and extralegal trickery. The language of the "whereas" clause, pinpointing William's defection to the Shakers and Sally's resultant pitiful state, reaffirms the sentiment behind the act.

Unbeknownst to the Kentucky legislature, a month before the special act was passed, Sally Boler ceased being Sally Boler. On December 28, 1816, she married a man

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[70] *Acts Passed at the First Session of the Twenty-fifth General Assembly for the Commonwealth of Kentucky* (Frankfort, Ky.: W. Gerard, Printer to the State, 1817), 104-105.

[71] *Acts Passed at the First Session of the Forty-first General Assembly for the Commonwealth of Kentucky* (Frankfort: Albert G. Hodges, Public Printer, 1833), 167.

named David Rice (not the famous Presbyterian minister). She was thirty-one years old.[72] It is unlikely she ever saw her first husband again. William spent the rest of his life at New Lebanon, dying there in February 1826 at the age of sixty-four.[73]

Daniel Boler grew up to be a prominent Shaker elder. As the New Lebanon ministry's chief basket-maker, he was popularly credited for what became known as the Shaker basket style, "using such innovations as the trip-hammer and the buzz saw to create ash stock for weaving." His trade became an important source of income for New Lebanon, which during the 1840s produced approximately 500 baskets a year.[74] From 1852 until his death in 1892, Daniel served as an elder in New Lebanon's Central Ministry, the highest office attainable in the entire sect.

When a group of New Lebanon Shakers visited South Union in 1847, they were approached by one of Daniel Boler's uncles, probably one of Sally's brothers. The uncle told them he was going to visit Sally later in the week and was eager for any news at all about Daniel, knowing that Sally "would be pleased to hear from her son."[75] This is the last we hear of Sally, who then disappears from the historical record. It is also the last hint of any communication, indirect or otherwise, between Sally and her son. Daniel actually paid South Union a visit in 1852, but in his journal he made no mention of his mother.[76]

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[72] *General Index to Marriages*.

[73] Whitaker, "From Jasper Valley," 42.

[74] Stein, *Shaker Experience in America*, 142.

[75] Morrell, "Account," 83.

[76] Daniel Boler, "Journal."

The law is not a Platonic ideal hovering beyond space and time. Instead the law is lived by those who shape their lives according to the law and shape the law according to their lives. Judges, deponents, and litigants alike participate in what legal historian Hendrik Hartog calls "improvisational performances."[77] This is not altogether that different from the life of religious faith. Both law and religion are spaces where lived reality intersects with abstract ideology. The result of this intersection is invariably fascinating, if messy. William and Sally Boler, Archibald Felts, Solomon Sharp, Henry Broadnax—they were not just arguing over acres and dollars, but over differing views of the obligations of marriage, the boundaries of private and public, and the relationship between religious piety and republican citizenship. In the county and state courts of Kentucky, William Boler's conversion to Shakerism was as much on trial as was his performance as a husband. As the years passed, his conversion—and the conversion of all those who first joined South Union—was tried in a different kind of court: the court of memory.

[77] Hartog, *Man and Wife in America*, 3-5.

Chapter Four: Remembering Conversion

The South Union Converts in History and Myth

On June 15, 2010, the Cumberland Presbyterian Church celebrated its bicentennial at the denomination's birthplace shrine in Montgomery Bell State Park, near Dickson, Tennessee. In the park stands a replica of Samuel McAdow's log house, where McAdow, Samuel King, and Finis Ewing organized the independent Cumberland Presbytery in February 1810. Hundreds of Cumberland Presbyterians attended the bicentennial celebration. Living historians strolled around the log house purporting to be McAdow, King, Ewing, and Ephraim McLean. Others wore costumes for the sheer fun of it, with varying historical accuracy—petticoats, bowties, Lincolnesque top hats. Everyone was hot, there being little shade in the large green where the main ceremony took place. Flimsy handheld fans, distributed by event organizers, provided a modicum of comfort.

Still, everyone sat respectfully through the main ceremony, an unabashed paean to Cumberland Presbyterian history. A bagpiper played "Amazing Grace" while the seminary president waxed poetic of the hardy, "stubborn" Scots-Irish immigrants who first settled the region. A group of Samuel McAdow's descendants stood up from their folding lawn chairs to polite applause. And church historian Matthew Gore read aloud an excerpt from Rev. Benjamin McDonnold's 1888 tome, *History of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church*, detailing how, from 1805 to 1810, the exiled revivalists gradually despaired of rejoining their denomination. Gore, still reading McDonnold, related how the council began to lose its ordained members:

> McGready and Hodge being genuine Calvinists, withdrew and made terms for themselves with the synod. This left the council with only four ordained

> members—McGee, Ewing, King, and McAdow. McAdow was in feeble health, and had not been meeting with the council. The name of Rankin never appears on the rolls of the council at all. He went off to the Shakers.[1]

The crowd erupted in laughter. The sheer bathos of the phrase—"He went off to the Shakers"—punctured the reverent proceedings. Gore went on to tell how King and Ewing left for McAdow's home in the dead of winter and plead with him to aid their cause, how McAdow prayed in the snow throughout the night, how he finally felt called to join the two men in re-organizing Cumberland Presbytery—but the damage was done. John Rankin stuck out like a sore Shaker thumb.[2]

This was not the first time the South Union Shakers inconvenienced a Cumberland Presbyterian. Indeed, for the past two centuries many different people have had to grapple with the decision made by those first Logan County converts. Nineteenth-century ecclesiastical historians debated back and forth over how closely South Union was related to the Great Revival, and whether South Union was somehow an indictment of the revival. Over time, however, as the Logan County revivals receded into memory and the Shakers became part of Americana, the revivals were telescoped into South Union's history. The Great Revival became, retroactively, a Shaker event, and the Shaker conversions of Logan County became less and less problematic. By the mid-twentieth century, the popular memory of the South Union converts was utterly rosy; the worst that could be said of them was that they were eccentric or a tad overenthusiastic.

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[1] McDonnold, *Cumberland Presbyterian Church*, 84. Matthew Gore is the author of *A History of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in Kentucky to 1988* (Memphis: Joint Heritage Committee of Covenant and Cumberland Presbyteries, 2000); and *A Brief History of Cumberland College, 1825-1861* (Ellendale, Tenn.: Boardman Books, 2010).

[2] I attended the ceremony.

My analysis of the South Union conversions within historical memory is a necessarily impressionistic one. Histories of South Union, both academic and popular, tend to emphasize the society's height during the mid-nineteenth century, as the records from that time period are more substantial. Indeed, the society's origins usually receive less attention than the society's slow decline in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, due to the relative abundance of records, photographs, and modern witness accounts from those who visited South Union in their youth. For this chapter I have assembled fragments—usually no more than a few sentences here and there—bearing upon the initial conversion of the South Union Shakers. The fragments come from nineteenth-century Presbyterian historiography, travel accounts from Shakers and one non-Shaker, the writings of Julia Neal, a pageant performed near (and eventually at) South Union from 1962 to 1990, and the modern South Union museum.

The Church Historians

For ecclesiastical historians, the converts prompted a series of related questions: why did they abandon the Presbyterian faith of their upbringing, what relationship did the conversions have to the Great Revival and the Cumberland schism, and what did this mean about the overall evangelical-revivalist movement? Evangelicals, particularly Cumberland Presbyterians, sought to distance themselves from the Shakers, carefully divorcing Shakerism from the revivals and schism in Cumberland Presbytery; traditionalist Presbyterians, on the other hand, pointed to South Union as evidence for the dangers of revivalism. Both sides of the historiographical debate, then, saw South Union as a threat to the meaning and efficacy of evangelical Christianity.

The first history of the Cumberland schism was published by the Presbyterian synod of Kentucky, the same synod which expelled the revivalists from Cumberland Presbytery in 1805. The author was Thomas Cleland, pastor of the Harrodsburg church—a meetinghouse located less than a three-hour walk from Pleasant Hill. In 1821 the synod appointed Cleland to draft an account of the whole schism controversy. Cleland submitted his work to the synod the following year; the synod approved it unanimously and had it published and distributed throughout the denomination in 1823.[3]

Cleland was no enemy of revivals *per se*. He attended the great Cane Ridge meeting of 1801, where after days of hard-heartedness his "heart was melted." He spent all that Sunday night crying, exhorting, and praying; "I wept," he remembered, "till my handkerchief was saturated with my tears." The revivals changed him. He began to preach extemporaneously, and in 1804 he was ordained into the ministry by Washington Presbytery.[4] Still, Cleland had little sympathy for heresy or schism. He made a name for himself as a controversialist, helping to depose Thomas Craighead for his "Pelagianism," opposing Horace Holley's liberal presidency at Transylvania Seminary, and writing tracts condemning Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell, as well as Catholics, Arminians, Baptists, and anti-pedobaptists.[5] Most significantly, Cleland was a member of the synodical commission that convened at Gasper River in 1805 and purged Cumberland Presbytery of its irregularly licensed members.[6]

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[3] Cleland, *Brief History*; Edward P. Humphrey and Thomas H. Cleland, *Memoirs of the Rev. Thomas Cleland, D. D., Compiled from His Private Papers* (Cincinnati: Moore, Wilstach, Keys, 1859), 139. Cleland's name does not appear within the pamphlet; his authorship is confirmed in ibid., 131.

[4] Ibid., 52-89, quotes 54-55.

[5] Ibid., 14. See ibid., 131-132, for a bibliography of Cleland's writings.

[6] Synod of Kentucky, 3 December 1805; Sweet, *Presbyterians*, 337.

Unsurprisingly, then, Cleland's account of the schism was biased in favor of the synod and against the Cumberland revivalists. He began by explaining why the pamphlet needed to be published in the first place. The synod was concerned for Presbyterians who might, while emigrating "from distant sections of our Church," fall under the spell "of those people who style themselves 'Cumberland Presbyterians.'" As his quotes suggested, Cleland meant to assail the splinter denomination's claims to legitimacy. They were, he wrote, "a people who have no ecclesiastical connection with us whatever; and moreover, are not recognized by us as being in correct Presbyterial standing." More to the point, the Cumberland Presbyterians threatened to overthrow established Presbyterianism in the west, which had—"until then," Cleland ominously parenthesized—been growing with "an almost unrivalled prospective strength."[7]

John Rankin's eventual conversion to Shakerism was therefore a useful component of Cleland's effort to discredit the Cumberland revivalists. While reporting the humiliations and discomforts suffered by the commission at Gasper River, Cleland described Rankin's tirade against them: "Mr. Rankin, the minister of the place, *who afterwards became a Shaker*, delivered an inflammatory address to his people, on the evening preceding the communion, and in the presence of the Commission, accompanied with threats, or language indicative of personal violence and opposition."[8] The italicized non-sequitur (unitalicized in the original) accentuates Cleland's portrayal of the "Cumberlands" as bizarre fanatics. Later, when detailing the dissolution of the revivalist council, Cleland contrasted McGready's and Hodge's return to the church with "the final apostacy of Mr. Rankin to the abominations of the Shakers." The contrast implied a link

[7] Cleland, *Brief History*, 3.

[8] Ibid., 12.

between Rankin's apostasy and the Cumberland Presbyterians' establishment of a heterodox splinter sect. Rankin's conversion to Shakerism was different in degree but not in kind from the Cumberland Presbyterians' actions.[9]

This connection was even more explicit in an article published in *The Presbyterian* in 1833. Its author was Samuel Miller, Professor of Ecclesiastical History and Church Government at Princeton Theological Seminary. It is hard to imagine someone with a more different background from the evangelicals of Logan County. Miller was well-connected: a Freemason, a friend of DeWitt Clinton, and an occasional guest of the Tammany Society. He was a member of the Friendly Society, a New York salon at the center of American intellectual life. Miller was a kind of American *philosophe*, authoring a thousand-page encyclopedia titled *A Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century*, covering everything from philosophy and history to electricity and zoology. He was particularly fond of John Locke and Thomas Reid. Priding himself on being a gentleman, he wrote a book for young ministers on the finer points of gentlemanly manners; prohibited behaviors included "spitting on the floors and carpets," "excessive drinking of water," "loud or boisterous laughter," "combing the hair in company," "yawning in company," "coughing in company," "leaning with your elbows on the table," "*blowing the nose* in a loud and disgusting manner," "*looking into the handkerchief*, after blowing the nose, as if apprehensive of finding some threatening appearance in the secretion inspected," "tilting your chair back," and finally, in case he

[9] Ibid., 22.

missed anything, "all slovenly habits of whatsoever kind."[10] One wonders how Miller would have reacted to the congregants at Gasper River.

In addition to all these things, Miller was a religious controversialist, railing against Unitarians, high-church Episcopalians, and other heterodox groups. As a professor of polity, he cherished ecclesiastical order and was devoted to the Presbyterian form of government. "Without wholesome discipline, for removing offenses and excluding the corrupt and profane," he wrote, ". . . there cannot be a *Church*."[11] Therefore, while discussing "presbyterial order" in his 1833 article for *The Presbyterian*, Miller saw the history of Cumberland Presbytery as a warning for all those who threatened the established church. When the presbytery began to irregularly ordain and license young fanatics, irregularity begat irregularity and the whole synod was in crisis. "With very few exceptions," he wrote, the irregularly licensed men "all turned out grossly heterodox and disorderly." Disorder and heterodoxy went hand in hand. Most of the exiled fanatics became Cumberland Presbyterians, Miller recounted; another sizable portion joined the Stoneite movement (here Miller conflated the Cumberland and Washington presbyteries); while a third, "*under the same lawless impulse*, took a third course, and fell into all the fanatical absurdities of 'Shakerism.'" Miller explicitly categorized the Shaker converts as of one piece with the Stoneites and the Cumberland

[10] James H. Moorhead, *Princeton Seminary in American Religion and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 44-62, 70-77; Samuel Miller, *Letters on Clerical Manners and Habits; Addressed to a Student in the Theological Seminary, at Princeton, N.J.* (New York: G. & C. Carvill, 1827), quotes 61, 72, 76, 78, 80, 81, 83, 86.

[11] Moorhead, *Princeton Seminary*, 57-60; Samuel Miller, *An Essay on the Warrant, Nature, and Duties of the Office of Ruling Elder in the Presbyterian Church* (New York: Jonathan Leavitt, 1831), quote 174. For more on Miller, see Samuel Miller [Jr.], *The Life of Samuel Miller, D.D., LL.D., Second Professor in the Theological Seminary of the Presbyterian Church, at Princeton, New Jersey* (Philadelphia: Claxten, Remsen and Haffelfinger, 1869), 2 vols; and Bruce M. Stephens, "Samuel Miller (1769-1850): Apologist for Orthodoxy," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 67 (Winter 1975): 33-47.

Presbyterians. Indeed, he implied, the very diversity of these movements was symptomatic of the original sin: disrespect for ecclesiastical order. It little mattered if Cumberland Presbyterians behaved less strangely than the Shakers; they were both guilty of creedal rebellion and contempt for authority.[12]

Miller's article was reprinted in *The Western Luminary*, a Presbyterian paper in Lexington, Kentucky, where it caught the attention of Finis Ewing. Ewing had been one of the ministers expelled from Cumberland Presbytery and one of the three founding members of the independent presbytery; more than anyone else, he could be called the founder of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. Small wonder he was rather perturbed by Miller's interpretation of the schism. Ewing resented any association of his denomination with the radical Shakers, especially since he and other Cumberland Presbyterians identified their denomination as theologically moderate, occupying a space, as Ewing later wrote to his eventual biographer Franceway Cossitt, "between the Scylla of Calvinism and the Charibdis of Armenianism."[13] Miller's article therefore urged Ewing to write a vitriolic response in *The Revivalist*, a Cumberland Presbyterian paper.

> "In the fruitfulness of your imagination," Ewing wrote, addressing Miller, you have formed a *common stock*, which, agreeably to *your* showing, was produced by the irregular proceedings of [Cumberland Presbytery] . . . this heterogeneous mass!—of which you have made three sub-divisions, assigning the "majority" to the Cumberland Presbyterians, another part to the Socinians [Stoneites], and a third part to the Shakers. Having all sprung from the same common source, you leave it to be inferred, of course, that there is no great

[12] Samuel Miller, "Letter XI. Adherence to Presbyterial Order," *Letters to Presbyterians, on the Present Crisis in the Presbyterian Church in the United States* (Philadelphia: Anthony Finley, 1833), 207-208; reprinted from *The Presbyterian* [Philadelphia]. See Miller, *Letters to Presbyterians*, iii, for note on original publication.

[13] Finis Ewing to Franceway R. Cossitt, 25 January 1840, Finis Ewing Papers, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee, quoted in the Finis Ewing Papers finding aid. For more on Ewing, see F. R. Cossitt, *The Life and Times of Finis Ewing: One of the Fathers and Founders of the Cumberland Presbyerian Church, to Which Is Added Remarks on Davidson's History; or, a Review of His Chapters on the Revival of 1800, and His History of the Cumberland Presbyterians* (Louisville: Lee Roy Woods, 1853).

> *difference* among them. Permit me to say, reverend sir, with due deference, that in your garbled account of those transactions, you calumniated the *living* and the *dead*. Your history is a shameless misrepresentation of *facts* as they *did* and *do* exist.[14]

Ewing went on to rebut several of Miller's claims, among them that any of Cumberland Presbytery's expelled revivalists became Shakers. John Rankin had been "licensed and ordained," Ewing pointed out, "by Dr. Miller's Church, *before* any difficulty arose in the Kentucky Synod, with regard to the 'young men.'" Rankin had never been a Cumberland Presbyterian and was not one of the "young men" discharged from the presbytery. In short, Ewing rejected any attempt to include Rankin and the other Shaker converts of Gasper River in the story of his denomination's origins. Indeed, Ewing taunted Miller, "it would have been more just for the reverend doctor to have searched for the *cause* in his *own* system . . ."[15]

After receiving letters from other Cumberland Presbyterians and reading more literature on the denomination's history, Miller apologized for his errors. The apology was printed in the *Revivalist*. "I am now convinced," Miller conceded,

> that in representing the "New Lights," or "Stoneites," the "Shakers," and the Cumberland Presbyterians as exfoliations from the same disorderly body . . . I wrote under a misapprehension of the facts. For although I cannot resist the conviction, that the disorders in all these bodies had, remotely, a common origin in the wonderful excitement of [the Great Revival]; yet I am sensible that in my statement, justice was not, in this respect, done to the Cumberland Presbyterians. Neither the Stoneites nor the Shakers ever made constituent parts of their body. . . . After the most careful inquiry, I cannot find that any Cumberland preacher ever became a "Chrystian," or "Stoneite," and but one a "Shaker," and he was not one of the young men who had been licensed in the disorderly manner of which complaint has been made.[16]

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[14] Finis Ewing to Samuel Miller, *The Revivalist* [Nashville], 19 June 1833; reprinted in Richard Beard, "Sources and Sketches of Cumberland Presbyterian History.—No. IV," *The Theological Medium: A Cumberland Presbyterian Quarterly* (January 1876): 13-16, quote 14.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Samuel Miller to James Smith, *Revivalist*, 18 June 1834; reprinted in Beard, "Sources and Sketches," 24-

James Smith, the editor of the *Revivalist* and unrelated to the eponymous anti-Shaker pamphleteer, was not completely satisfied with the apology and published his own remarks below Miller's letter. Miller may have corrected his factual errors, but he did not abandon his overall thesis that the Cumberland Presbyterians and the South Union Shakers shared any common origin in the socio-religious frontier of Logan County. Smith also took issue with the phrase "and but one a 'Shaker,'" refusing to accept Rankin as a "Cumberland preacher" at all. "Rankin was a Presbyterian," Smith wrote, "and joined the Shakers before the Cumberland Presbyterian Church was constituted." Of course, Miller had simply meant that Rankin was a preacher in the Cumberland territory and a member of the original Cumberland Presbytery, but Smith refused any hint of association between the Shaker convert and the moderate evangelical denomination.[17]

The taint of radicalism-by-association was particularly abhorrent for Smith, an outspoken advocate for the mainstreaming and modernization of his denomination. A Scottish immigrant and former deist, Smith had a somewhat different worldview—less emotional, more intellectual—from most of his fellow Cumberland Presbyterians. He edited, printed, and distributed the denomination's first newspaper, whose name he eventually changed from *The Revivalist* to *The Cumberland Presbyterian*. He was a major promoter and fundraiser for Cumberland College, the denominational school in Princeton, Kentucky. In his newspaper Smith attacked Cumberland Presbyterians who were critical of seminary education or ministerial salaries, and he criticized the practice of circuit-riding. "The ministry of the Cumberland Presbyterian church," he said,

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27, quote 26.

[17] James Smith, "Remarks," *Revivalist*, 18 June 1834; reprinted in Beard, "Sources and Sketches," 27-31, quote 29.

lamenting the church's anti-seminarian attitudes, "are a mass of ignorance, heresy, and fanaticism." Smith wanted to transform his adopted church from a frontier sect to a respectable denomination.[18]

Among the many projects he undertook to achieve this goal was the first history of the denomination, a 140-page appendix within his *History of the Christian Church* (1835), a nearly 700-page tome. He depicted the Cumberland schism as resulting from synodical disorder, and he presented the denomination's first decades as a narrative of progress via theological codification, formation of synods and a general assembly, establishment of a college, and geographical growth. The most colorful aspects of the Great Revival therefore posed a problem for Smith's narrative, a problem which he solved by pinning the revival's excesses upon John Rankin. Smith began by superimposing his own Enlightenment views upon the ministers of Cumberland Presbytery:

> The jerks, and falling down . . . were viewed by the ministers as the result of mental excitement, but forming no part of the work of God, although they accompanied it. Therefore they paid no attention to the exercises, neither forbidding nor encouraging them: with the exception of Mr. Rankin, who on some occasions, appeared to place too much importance upon them, and sometimes, encouraged the delusions of those who imagined or gave out, they had received extraordinary revelations from heaven—he subsequently became a *Shaker*.[19]

With a single dash, Smith suggested a logical progression between Rankin's excessive emotionalism and his conversion to Shakerism. Smith's purpose was twofold: to defend his church from charges of revivalist excess by historically distancing the church from the revival's errors; and to warn Cumberland Presbyterians against embracing a theology or worship-style too far from the Reformed tradition, lest they fall down a slippery slope

[18] McDonnold, *Cumberland Presbyterian Church*, 230-240, quote 234.

[19] Smith, *History of the Christian Church*, 592.

into ever greater heresy. The moderate evangelicals of Smith's historical imagination were model Cumberland Presbyterians; Rankin, and the others who eventually became Shakers, were analogous to those who stymied Smith's efforts at legitimization and rationalization.

In his *History of the Presbyterian Church in the State of Kentucky* (1847), Robert Davidson found a similar slippery slope from revivalistic fanaticism to Shakerism, except for him the relationship was a broad indictment of the whole evangelical movement, including the Cumberland Presbyterians. Davidson was a Presbyterian minister, a Princeton graduate, and a former president of Transylvania University, a Presbyterian college in Lexington, Kentucky, the first college of any kind west of the Alleghenies.[20] He therefore shared Smith's affinity for education but not his need to defend the revivals. Davidson denounced James McGready and the other revivalists as "illiterate exhorters, with Arminian sentiments," whose "amalgamation with the Methodists" resulted in "fervor, noise and disorder."[21] They had abandoned Reformed orthodoxy and decorum.

According to Davidson, when the synodic commission met at the Gasper River meetinghouse in 1805, the Shakers were lurking around like vultures, hoping to benefit from the Presbyterian in-fighting. Davidson wrote, "To complete the turmoil, the Shakers, who had a village in the vicinity, were on the ground in full strength. . . They anticipated a great commotion and schism, and hoped to cast their net successfully in the

[20] Robert Peter and Johanna Peter, *Transylvania University: Its Origin, Rise, Decline, and Fall* (Louisville: John P. Morton & Co., 1896), 167-168. When the Peters were writing, Transylvania University had merged with Kentucky University, hence the "fall" of the subtitle. Kentucky University changed its name to Transylvania in 1908 and is now affiliated with the Disciples of Christ.

[21] Davidson, *Presbyterian Church in Kentucky*, 223, 229.

troubled waters."[22] Davidson fudged the facts a bit; in 1805 the Shakers were at the opposite end of Kentucky. But his point was that the excesses of the Cumberland revivals opened the door for more radical sects and the ultimate dissolution of Presbyterianism in the frontier. He followed Thomas Cleland's account of Rankin's rabble-rousing: "That nothing must be left undone to stimulate the passions of the people, Mr. Rankin, the pastor of [Gasper River], himself an avowed Arminian, *and afterwards a Shaker,* delivered an inflammatory address to the assembled multitude, well calculated to provoke mobbing and personal violence."[23] Like Cleland, he alluded parenthetically to Rankin's conversion, clearly linking the high passions in Cumberland Presbytery to the mass apostasy of South Union.

After Davidson, Presbyterian historians tended to ignore Rankin and the Logan County Shakers, as the Cumberland Presbyterian Church became more mainstream and the schism receded into memory, overshadowed by the Old School – New School schism of 1837 and the secession of southern Presbyterians in 1861. However, Cumberland Presbyterian historians still grappled with the memory of South Union. For instance, as an appendix to his biography of Finis Ewing, Franceway Ranna Cossitt (his name a marvelous corruption of François-René) offered a 175-page rebuttal to Davidson's *History*, critiquing among other things Davidson's portrayal of the relationship between the Cumberland revivals and the Shaker converts.[24]

Cossitt was, like James Smith, unusually educated for a member of his church, and like Smith he was a major player in the church's professionalization and legitimation.

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[22] Ibid., 235.

[23] Ibid. My italics.

[24] Cossitt, *Life and Times of Ewing*, 325-501.

Cossitt was born a New Hampshire Episcopalian in 1790, graduated from Vermont's Middlebury College, studied theology at an Episcopalian seminary in New Haven, and only became a Cumberland Presbyterian in 1822, soon after he moved near Clarksville, Tennessee, and just before he married a Cumberland Presbyterian preacher's daughter. He was the primary force behind the establishment of Cumberland College and was its first president. When that college went into bankruptcy, he became the first president of what became Cumberland University in Lebanon, Tennessee. It is understandable, then, that Cossitt was eager to distance the radicalism of the Logan County revivals from his image of Cumberland Presbyterianism as a moderate, respectable church.[25]

One of Cossitt's points was rather similar to Finis Ewing's rebuttal of Samuel Miller. Davidson had castigated "Rankin, McGee, and the whole troop of exhorters . . . as decidedly Arminian."[26] Cossitt responded by, among other things, dismissing Rankin as utterly unrelated to Cumberland Presbyterianism:

> Nothing need be said of Rankin, who afterwards disgraced himself and the old Presbyterian church, as he would have done any other with which he might have been connected. Still, it is not known that he ever belonged to any other, until he, with several ministers of the same church, shamefully apostatized and joined the Shakers; not one of them ever belonged to the Cumberland Presbyterian body.[27]

Rankin was an embarrassment to "the old Presbyterian church" and to himself, but not the Cumberland Presbyterians.

Cossitt slyly went on to turn the slippery-slope argument on its head: it was the "rigid Calvinism" of the old-line Presbyterians, not the emotionalism of the revivals,

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[25] Richard Beard, *Brief Biographical Sketches of Some of the Early Ministers of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church* (Nashville: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1867), 154-191.

[26]Davidson, *Presbyterian Church in Kentucky*, 228.

[27] Cossitt, *Life and Times of Ewing*, 378.

which drove the Gasper River congregants to Shakerism. Calvinism forced upon people a false dichotomy between heartless predestination and narcissistic Arminianism, "a dilemma whose horns are equally absurd, and equally remote from revealed truth." Rather than accept the doctrine of fatality, some people "seized the other horn of the dilemma, and bolted off into Pelagianism, Unitarianism, or Shakerism." They were like, Cossitt analogized, "men on a burning vessel, who, regardless of the life-boat which comes to their rescue, and intent only on escaping the fire, rush headlong into the water, and are drowned."[28] Borrowing Ewing's metaphor, Cossitt remarked, "They know not that divine truth secures a safe passage between the Scylla and Charybdis."[29] The conversion of the Logan County Shakers was therefore a cautionary tale of the dangers of extremism on either side of the theological spectrum, making the Cumberland Presbyterians' emphasis on moderation all the more attractive.

For Cumberland Presbyterians the issue was settled by Benjamin McDonnold (1827-1889), a minister who memorized the New Testament at the age of sixteen, graduated from Cumberland College, and served as the president of Cumberland University.[30] His *History of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church* (1888), still the best history of the denomination, conceded that Rankin was a vital participant in the Logan County revivals and the Cumberland schism. "It is true," McDonnold wrote, "that one of the preachers who co-operated with McGready afterward joined the Shakers." McDonnold continued, "It is true, too, that one of the apostles who traveled along with

[28] Ibid., 430.

[29] Ibid., 431. See above, p. 114, for Ewing's use of the metaphor.

[30] J. Berrien Lindsley, "Sources and Sketches of Cumberland Presbyterian History.—No. VI," *Theological Medium* (October 1876): 413. McDonnold also taught mathematics at Bethel Seminary in 1849-1850, again (after it became Bethel College) from 1852 to 1857, and served as Bethel's president for a year after the Civil War (during which he had been a Confederate chaplain).

Jesus afterward sold his Master."[31] Rankin, then, was the great Judas Iscariot of the Cumberland revivals, a traitor who fed into religious traditionalists' and moderates' worst fears.

The Cumberland Presbyterians' caginess toward Rankin is particularly striking given their active embrace of James McGready. While Cumberland Presbyterians reiterated that Rankin never actually became one of them, they adopted McGready as a founding father. James Smith edited a two-volume compilation of McGready's sermons and spent ten pages of his denominational history upon McGready's biography. According to Smith, McGready told his Henderson, Kentucky, congregants, shortly before he died, "Brethren, when I am dead and gone, the Cumberland Presbyterians will come among you and occupy this field; go with them, they are the people of God." Franceway Cossitt excused McGready's return to Transylvania Presbytery by noting that McGready "had grown old in the Presbyterian church," and that the formation of an independent presbytery was best left to the "young men." The Cumberland Presbyterian theologian and historian Richard Beard included McGready in a collection of biographical sketches of early Cumberland Presbyterian ministers.[32]

This made little historical sense. Rankin was no less involved in the Great Revival than McGready was, and Rankin actually remained in the revivalist council longer than McGready. But Rankin's conversion to Shakerism made him a problematic forefather. His presence among the revival preachers tainted the revival for Cumberland Presbyterians, who wanted to maintain a legitimate, mainstream image far removed from

[31] McDonnold, *Cumberland Presbyterian Church*, 25. Also see ibid., 80.

[32] McGready, *Posthumous Works*; Smith, *History of the Christian Church*, 561-570, 672; Cossitt, *Life and Times of Ewing*, 168; Beard, *Brief Biographical Sketches*, 7-17.

the Stoneites at Cane Ridge, much less the Shakers at South Union. They prided themselves on moderation—a common-sensical "medium theology" between Calvinism and Arminianism—not radicalism. The converts of South Union underscored the dangers of revival.

The Travelers

In the spring or summer of 1874, a decade or so before McDonnold compared Rankin to Judas, the journalist and author Charles Nordhoff found the South Union Shakers' tales of revival quaint and delightful—not dangerous. Nordhoff was undertaking a massive tour of America's communitarian societies. He traveled to several German-American pietist settlements: the Amana Colonies near Iowa City; the Separatists of Zoar in Tuscarawas County, Ohio; the Harmonist Society in Economy, Pennsylvania; and the communes begun by William Keil in Bethel, Missouri, and Aurora, Oregon. Nordhoff also visited the Icarians, a French non-Christian utopian sect near Corning, Iowa; and the Perfectionists of Oneida, New York, and Wallingford, Connecticut, famous for their practice of "complex marriage." But he spent most of his time visiting the nation's eighteen Shaker communities, including his southernmost stop at South Union.[33]

Nordhoff was one of many visitors received by Shakers nationwide. Such travels indicated a shift in how the "world's people" understood the Shaker sect, as the anti-Shakerism widespread in the early republic subsided. The Shakers became a curious natural phenomenon, akin to Niagara Falls or Mammoth Cave. Locals and not-so-locals attended Shaker worship services, sometimes disrupting worship with talking or laughter.

[33] Nordhoff, *Communistic Societies*, esp. 206-211. Nordhoff (1830-1901) should not be mistaken for his grandson Charles Bernard Nordhoff (1887-1947), co-author of *Mutiny on the Bounty*.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Charles Dickens, Horace Greeley, and many others wrote about their tours of Shaker communities. For those who could not visit the Shakers, the Shakers could come to them; a group of Shaker apostates from Canterbury began touring the country in 1846, including a three-month stint at P. T. Barnum's American Museum. They reenacted the dances, songs, whirls, and trances of the sect's worship services, encouraging their audiences to laugh at the bizarre demonstrations. In short, visitors and spectators alternately pitied, admired, or mocked the Shakers, but by the Victorian era they rarely feared or hated them.[34]

James Fenimore Cooper expressed many of these emotions upon visiting Shaker villages in New York and Massachusetts in the mid-1820s, describing them both as "deluded fanatics" and as "models of decency, cleanliness, and of morality." Cooper found their worship services simultaneously "ludicrous" and "melancholy," wanting to both laugh and cry. Still, he remarked, they were "inoffensive and industrious citizens," and he was glad that the state governments were treating them "humanely."[35] Similarly, Harriet Martineau was impressed by the "flourishing fields," "spacious" homes, and "delicious" food at Hancock and New Lebanon, which she visited in the mid-1830s. However, she lamented, "Their life is all dull work and no play." She pointed to the Shakers as an argument for America's spirit of experimentation, but she hoped that the

[34] Stein, *Shaker Experience in America*, 215-222; Brian L. Bixy, "Seeking Shakers: Two Centuries of Visitors to Shaker Villages" (Ph.D. diss., University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2010), 51-154; 411-412; Vera Brodsky Lawrence, *Strong on Music: The New York Music Scene in the Days of George Templeton Strong, Volume I: Resonances, 1836-1849* (University of Chicago Press, 1988), 411-412; American Museum handbill, 1846, reprinted in Philip B. Kunhardt, Jr., Philip B. Kunhardt III, and Peter W. Kunhardt, *P.T. Barnum: America's Greatest Showman* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 76. For a useful compilation of nineteenth-century travel accounts, see Flo Morse, ed., *The Shakers and the World's People* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1980), 73-236.

[35] James Fenimore Cooper, *Notions of the Americans: Picked up by a Travelling Bachelor*, 2 vols. (London: Henry Colburn, 1828), 2:328-332.

Shakers' methods "might be tried without any adoption of their spiritual pride and cruel superstition."[36] Victorians normalized the Shakers by separating their beliefs from their more appealing material culture and by placing them within the myth of American exceptionalism. Their strange doctrines were not dangerous but irrelevant. Rather than being inherently un-American, the Shakers were quintessentially American.

In his book *The Communistic Societies of the United States* (1875), Charles Nordhoff championed the Shakers as symbols of American opportunity while de-emphasizing their religious oddities. Nordhoff had led a rather adventurous life and was therefore attracted to Shakerism's paradoxical mixture of solace and exoticism. Born in Prussia in 1830, Nordhoff immigrated to America at the age of four with his father Karl. Charles never saw his mother again, and his father died when he was nine. As a young man he ran away from an apprenticeship to join the navy, and he spent several years on naval and whaling ships. Back on shore he became a journalist, and was a major editor of the *New York Evening-Post* from 1861 to 1871; he was forced to resign when he refused to censor editorials critical of Boss Tweed. He often found himself in situations of danger or controversy; he was almost killed in the New York draft riots, offended conservatives with his 1863 book on the freedpeople of the South Carolina sea islands, and in the 1880s and 1890s made enemies with E. L. Godkin, James G. Blaine, Jay Gould, and the Hawaii annexationists.[37]

Nordhoff began his work on American communism after returning from a tour of southern California and writing a travel account that proved a major factor in the region's

[36] Harriet Martineau, *Society in America*, 3rd ed., 2 vols. (New York: Saunders and Otley, 1837), 1:310-315, quotes 310, 311, and 313.

[37] Carol Frost, "The Valley of Cross-Purposes: Charles Nordhoff and American Journalism, 1860-1890" (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 1993).

development. (In fact, the resort town of Ojai, roughly halfway between Santa Barbara and Oxnard, was originally named Nordhoff, changing its name in 1917 due to anti-German sentiment.) Nordhoff was infatuated with the region and half-heartedly considered establishing his own utopian community there.[38] He was also highly disturbed by the poverty wrought by the Panic of 1873, which he saw as symptomatic of unchecked capitalism.[39] He sought to prove that communism was a workable means of organizing society, that "Communism" need not be "a word . . . of terror or of contempt," as it was in the public discourse. Moreover, he wanted to reconcile communism with the American virtues of self-government and self-improvement.[40]

The Shakers and other communist societies of America served his purpose. Nordhoff could distance them from the cynical trade-unions of Europe, which surrendered all hope that workers could ever gain control of their own labor but instead squabbled over wages and nurtured class-envy. Granted, he foreswore the need to agree with any sect's religious beliefs. He specially rejected Shaker spiritualism and asserted that communist societies needed "neither religious fanaticism nor an unnatural sexual relation" to succeed. But for "a commune to exist harmoniously," he wrote, it "must be composed of persons who are of one mind upon some question which to them shall appear so important as to take the place of a religion, if it is not essentially religious."[41] Without any kind of religion, even a secular religion, communism begat violence and anarchy, as in the Paris Commune of 1871. America, however, was free from the

[38] Ibid., 271-340, esp. 276, 336-338; Charles Nordhoff, *California: For Health, Pleasure, and Residence. A Book for Travellers and Settlers* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1873).

[39] Frost, "Valley of Cross-Purposes," 341.

[40] Nordhoff, *Communistic Societies*, 11-22, quote 17.

[41] Ibid., 11-22, 387-388, quotes 387, 388.

"priestcraft and tyranny" which "sapped [the communist's] faith and debauched his moral sense."[42] The Shaker lifestyle was a sign of America's promise, while Shaker religion was made digestible through abstractification. It was important that the Shakers held true to their faith, but less so the actual content of their faith.

The abstractification of Shaker faith and Americanization of Shaker culture effectively erased Shaker conversion. The radical decision by dozens of Kentuckians to join a celibate, communitarian, millennial sect was often lost in the popular narrative. The Shakers simply *were*. They were a static tableau rather than a dynamic community. In this narrative, the initial conversions of the 1800s, and the revivals that preceded their conversions, were transmuted into timeless folklore. They were the stuff of legend rather than radical, personal experiences and choices within historical time.

Nordhoff's account of South Union contained the usual descriptive details. The society lay on some 3500 acres, with another 2500 acres lying "about four miles off." It had about 230 members—105 women, 85 men, 25 girls, and 15 boys. Nordhoff saw their orchards; fields of "corn, wheat, rye, and oats"; a grist-mill; and "a large brick hotel at the railroad station," its proximity to a sulfur spring making it a popular "summer resort." He observed the Believers as they made brooms, canned and preserved fruits, and packaged seeds. He found that they had no baths or library, though they had recently acquired a piano. "The singing," he dryly commented, "was not so good as I have heard elsewhere among the Shakers." They had a five-month school for the children, many of whom were recently orphaned by yellow-fever in New Orleans and Memphis. The Shakers were glad to have the orphans and told Nordhoff they "would rather have bad ones than none."

[42] Ibid., 408.

Nordhoff considered this "charity" quite "admirable," especially considering how few stayed through adulthood.[43]

This picturesque scene was haunted by the founders of South Union. "Some of the log cabins then built by the early members," Nordhoff noted, "are still standing." The founders' presence could also be felt in the shade of "the large pines and Norway spruces growing near the dwellings," demonstrating how "the founders provided for their descendants." The founders' memory lived on in timeless artifacts which implicitly eclipsed the historical reality of the founders' conversion. South Union simply appeared. Nordhoff framed the relationship between South Union and the Great Revival in geographical terms, writing, "The society at South Union was founded nearly on the scene of the wild 'Kentucky revival.'" Rather than being a moment in time which led many to reject tradition and form a new heavenly community, the revival was a landmark, like the nearby cave or the sulfur spring.[44]

What we might call the anecdotalization of the revival is evident in a particular passage from Nordhoff's account. The Shakers showed him "two fine old oaks, under which Henry Clay once partook of a public dinner." James Monroe and Andrew Jackson had also, they recounted, "stopped for a day at the country tavern . . . near by." One Shaker remembered that Monroe "was a stout, thickset man, plain, and with but little to say; Jackson, tall and thin, with a hickory visage." Nordhoff concluded the story with a sly regional joke: "Naturally, this being Kentucky, Clay was held to be the greatest

[43] Ibid., 207, 208, 210, 211. I should note that Nordhoff's visit predated the famous yellow-fever epidemic of 1878.

[44] Ibid., 206, 208. It is likely that the trees were planted in February1816 by Benjamin Seth Youngs and two of John Rankin's sons, Solomon and John, Jr.; Youngs et al., journal, 145.

character of the three." The Shakers took more pride in their senator than in either of the presidents.[45] "Here too, as I am upon antiquities," Nordhoff continued,

> I saw two old men who in their youth had taken part in the great "revival," and had seen the "jerks" . . . To dance, I was here told, was the cure for the "jerks;" and men often danced until they dropped to the ground. "It was of no use to try to resist the jerks," the old men assured me. "Young men sometimes came determined to make fun of the proceedings, and were seized before they knew of it." Men were "flung from their horses;" "a young fellow, famous for drinking, cursing, and violence, was leaning against a tree looking on, when he was jerked to the ground, slam bang. He swore he would not dance, and he was jerked about until it was a wonder he was not killed. At last he had to dance." "Sometimes they would be jerked about like a cock with his head off, all about the ground."[46]

These anecdotes were typical examples of a story-cycle which pervaded the trans-Appalachian west in the nineteenth century. The stories, often involving unbelievers overcome with the "jerks," attested to the revivals' overwhelming power, their ability to bring disparate individuals into communion, and their often frightening, violent physicality. The stories were cultural remnants of the revivals and the schism, apostasy, and conversion that the revivals engendered. But for Nordhoff they were quaint tales, irrelevant to his purposes in observing the Shakers. He dismissed the recounted "jerks" as "an involuntary convulsive movement," though he noted sarcastically that "the people believed the whole was a 'manifestation of the power of God.'"[47]

The Shakers themselves participated in the decontextualization of the revivals and the erasure of conversion. After all, from the mid-nineteenth century onward, most of South Union's members (at least excluding "winter Shakers") did not convert to the society but grew up in it. Even those who converted in their youth had by the 1850s spent

[45] Nordhoff, *Communistic Societies*, 208.

[46] Ibid., 208-209.

[47] Ibid., 209.

the bulk of their life as Shakers. South Union had always been there for them. For John Rankin, Jesse McCombs, and others, South Union was a radical choice; for their children, it was home. Three Shaker travel accounts from the late 1840s and early 1850s attest to how the Shaker *communitas* subsumed memories of liminality.

Prudence Morrell's carriage ride from Bell's Tavern (present-day Park City) to South Union was decidedly unpleasant. It was August 6, 1847, and Morrell was fifty-three years old. More to the point, she was "cover'd . . . from head to feet with ticks & jiggers [chiggers]." When she arrived at South Union around five in the afternoon, the sisters "fixed a large tub of water" for her and her female companions—Eliza Sharp, who had accompanied her from New Lebanon; and Sally Sharp, an eldress at Union Village and Eliza's biological sister.[48] All three women had joined Union Village as girls. In fact, Prudence was among the young members interrogated by the mob in 1810; she told them she would rather be decapitated than leave the Believers.[49] As young women Eliza and Prudence moved to New Lebanon, and they were now visiting the western societies for the first time in about twenty years.

Morrell and the Sharp sisters were able to wash off most of the ticks, but they had to get some out with tweezers. "The jiggers," Morrell observed, ". . . are much worse than the ticks, and between these two savage vermin we had but little whole skin left on our bodies." The remainder of their stay in South Union was far more comfortable. The next morning they visited the Ministry and enjoyed some watermelon. The day after that they saw John Rankin, now eighty-nine years old, and the next day they saw the mill at "Jasper Creek." On August 10 they received many questions about Daniel Boler—"what

[48] Morrell, "Account," *Shaker Quarterly* 8.2 (Summer 1968): 58-59.

[49] MacLean, *Shakers of Ohio*, 377.

size he is, what color is his hair, how old he is," and so forth. Solomon Rankin remembered being Daniel's roommate as a boy and said, "I should be very much pleased to see him once more in the body."[50]

Two days later Morrell and the other visitors "went out to William Boler's old place," about eight miles from the society. They drank water from the well and ate apples from the orchard "but did not tarry long." When they returned to South Union they were once again "covered with ticks and jiggers, and the brethren say, we have seen the worst part of Kentucky." They visited a nearby cave on August 13, and the next day Eliza went without Prudence to see the "the old presbyterian meeting house, where John Rankin formerly preached in 1800." Though it is unclear from Morrell's account, it seems that Rankin's son, John N. Rankin, went along with Eliza and related stories about "the New Light revival." He remembered that the revival began "when the dancing began." He remembered a woman dancing for more than an hour and exhorting, as Morrell paraphrased, "there will be more dancing yet, for Jesus Christ is our fiddler &c."[51]

Daniel Boler also visited the old meeting-house when he visited South Union in 1852. John N. Rankin and Urban Johns accompanied him to see "where the revival first started in the west," and regaled him with incidents that had occurred to them or others they knew. By this time Rankin's father had been dead for about two years. He showed Boler the old road he used to take to the meetinghouse, and remembered how when he was a boy he was often overtaken by the jerks.[52] Once again, these stories were typical within western folklore. The Great Revival was no longer embedded within a conversion

[50] Morrell, "Account," 59-60.

[51] Ibid., 82-83.

[52] Daniel Boler, "Journal."

narrative but was instead a source of folklore and anecdote. The meeting-house was not a shrine but a landmark.

It may have been the nature of Shakerism to mute the tumult of conversion in favor of a seeming permanence. Once the Shakers found heaven on earth, it little mattered how they got there. Indeed, it is remarkable how much interest the Shakers still retained in the old days of the revival. There is a hint of nostalgia in their tales, as if their placid world lacked the fiery heart of its origins. Heaven on earth seemed dull in comparison.

And this nostalgia was felt not only in South Union but in other Shaker communities—especially by the 1850s, when a wave of Millerite converts had run dry, membership had begun its slow decline, and the last major Shaker revival ("the Era of Manifestations") had died out. In 1854, four summers after his father's death, John N. Rankin joined three fellow South Union Shakers (Urban Johns, Betsy Smith, and Nancy E. Moore) on a tour of the eastern societies. On September 2, they visited one of the families in Enfield, Connecticut. The family included around fifty members. They showed off their new barn and post office and treated the visitors to a hearty dinner, including "[m]elons with sugar sprinkled on them" for dessert. The family requested Rankin to lead the evening worship service. He kept time and shouted out instructions while everyone sang and danced. After the service was over, the host family urged Rankin to "tell over his Kentucky revival stories." One brother had already heard them; afraid he might be seen "nodding" off, he "put on his hat and strayed up the hill in front

of the dwelling house." But for the others, Rankin's tales of the Kentucky revival were new or at least worth hearing again.[53]

One wonders how well Rankin remembered the revival. He was only a year or two old during the histrionic sacramental meetings at Red, Gasper, and Muddy rivers, and barely more than a toddler when the revival fervor died down. No doubt his memories of the revival were a blurred composite of first- and second-hand experience, heavily filtered through the memories and sermons of John Rankin, Sr. When those few dozen exhausted Shakers sat enthralled by their visitor's tales of revival in the west, they may have been listening to his father's stories.

Restoration

By the turn of the twentieth century, the tale of Shakerism in the west was not one of revival but of painful decline. Pleasant Hill and South Union lost thousands of dollars in cash and property during the Civil War; the rise of government-funded orphanages squelched a major tool for bolstering membership; new mass-production techniques diminished the profitability of Shaker industries; Christian Science, spiritualism, and other new movements supplanted Shakerism as fashionable alternatives to mainstream religion. North Union closed in 1889. Pleasant Hill closed in 1910, along with Whitewater and Watervliet in Ohio. Union Village, which had at one time been the largest society behind New Lebanon, closed in 1912.

Finally, in 1922, the Shakers auctioned off the last remaining western society, South Union. There were only nine Shakers left there. The central ministry gave them an option to move to New Lebanon or accept a $10,000 gift. Only one of them, Logan

[53] [Betsy Smith], diary (23 July 1854 – 10 September 1854), WKU, 75-76.

Johns, refused the money and moved to New Lebanon. Seven took the money, two of them moving to Louisville and five to Auburn (of those, two became a married couple). The remaining member was taken to a mental asylum.[54]

The eastern societies shrank as well. By 1936 the entire sect had ninety-two members, less than one-fifth of its population in 1906. Of those ninety-two members, 88% were female, mostly elderly. In 1947 Mount Lebanon closed, leaving only three small communities: Hancock, Massachusetts; Canterbury, New Hampshire; and Sabbathday Lake, Maine. In 1951 there were only forty members left, thirty-eight of them female.[55]

Ironically, this time period also saw a revival of public interest in the sect. Artists, curators, and collectors heralded the Shakers as precursors to the modernist aesthetic. In the early 1930s various Shaker exhibitions were held at the New York State Museum, the Berkshire Museum, and the Whitney Museum of American Art. Shaker-made goods, sometimes of questionable veracity, became a hot commodity. Two collectors, Edward Deming Andrews and his wife Faith, wrote several popular books on Shaker music, art, furniture, and other forms of material culture, including a general history titled *The People Called Shakers* (1953), which remained the standard text on the subject for forty years. Edward Andrews' *The Gift to Be Simple* (1940), a study of Shaker song and dance, inspired the composer Aaron Copland to include the tune "Simple Gifts" in his 1944 ballet score *Appalachian Spring*. "Simple Gifts" quickly became part of the American canon, finding its way into Protestant hymnals, television commercials, and inauguration ceremonies for Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama. American consumers

[54] Stein, *Shaker Experience in America*, 242-256; Neal, *By Their Fruits*, 267-268.

[55] Stein, *Shaker Experience in America*, 252, 256, 350, 360.

bought make-your-own-Shaker-furniture kits, Shaker cookbooks, Shaker coloring books, Shaker paper dolls, Shaker polo sweaters, Shaker calendars, and Shaker ski racks.[56]

Popular memory of the Shakers in the twentieth century continued certain trends from the Victorian imagination, particularly the abstractification of Shaker belief and the contextualization of Shakers within American exceptionalism. These tropes became increasingly entangled with kitsch capitalism and cultural conservatism. If the Victorian imagination first saw the Shakers as "American," the modern imagination saw the Shakers as Americana. And rather than simply dismissing the Shakers' stranger beliefs as irrelevant, modern Shaker enthusiasts often projected postwar conservative ideals upon the Shakers. The result of all this was that conversion was increasingly absent from the popular Shaker narrative. The Shakers stood for stasis, not radical change; a simpler past, not an uncertain future. Shakerism became so inherently American that there seemed to be no need for conversion at all.

The two most important figures in South Union's posthumous history were not present for the 1922 auction, but their parents were. Julia Neal's parents bought a candlestick, a flax candle, a sundial, and a serving box engraved with the name of Nancy Moore, while Deedy Price's parents bought a grandfather clock, a dresser, a chest of drawers, two beds, and four dining room chairs.[57] Both Julia and Deedy grew up in the

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[56] Ibid., 370-384, 394-409; Bixby, "Seeking Shakers," 175-185; Roger L. Hall, *The Story of "Simple Gifts": Shaker Simplicity in Song* (Holland, Mich.: World of Shaker, 1987); Edward Deming Andrews, *The Gift to Be Simple: Songs, Dances, and Rituals of the American Shakers* (New York: J. J. Augustin, 1940); idem., *The People Called Shakers: A Search for a Perfect Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953); Edward Deming Andrews and Faith Andrews, *Shaker Furniture: The Craftsmanship of an American Communal Sect* (New York: Dover, 1950); idem., *Religion in Wood: A Book of Shaker Furniture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966); idem., *Fruits of the Shaker Tree: Memoirs of Fifty Years of Collecting and Research* (Stockbridge, Mass.: Berkshire Traveller Press, 1975).

[57] Sheryl D. Reed, interview with Julia Neal, 5 November 1991, quoted in Sheryl D. Reed, "Leaving a Last Legacy: The Life and Accomplishments of Julia Neal," unpublished article, 1993, Sheryl Dian Reed

nearby town of Auburn and often visited South Union as children. Deedy later remembered:

> So often you would be there and they would be baking bread and the aroma was so wonderful. . . . They were glad to have us. Seemed to be happy to have people come. . . . You just took your own table cloth and you spread it on the ground. The only place that we had close by to take visitors. There was so little to do in this area, that it was a treat to go to Shakertown. Four miles away, back in the early days, we could walk there.[58]

The Shakers were so everyday for Auburn residents—"a little bit queer," Deedy laughingly recalled—that Julia Neal was rather stumped when a professor at Western Kentucky State Teachers College suggested she write an article about the Shakers for the January 1926 issue of the college newspaper. She doubted anything interesting could be said about the Shakers, but wrote a short piece after spending the weekend at home.[59] It was an elegiac piece with a brief summary of South Union's history and wistful descriptions of the ruined utopia. "The buildings," Neal wrote, "surrounded by weeds and uncut grass, and some of them in bad repair, fail to reflect the glory that was once theirs." She quoted Wordsworth's *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*:

> Turn wheresoe'er I may,
> By night or day,
> The things that I have seen I now can see no more.[60]

The article sparked within Neal a new interest in the Shakers. She earned a Bachelor's in English from Western Kentucky in 1931 and a Master's in 1933, and taught there for the next decade, in the meantime making a hobby out of reading Shaker

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Papers, WKU, 6; Sara McNulty, interview with Deedy Price Hall, 18 September 1989, Sara Jane McNulty Papers, WKU, 1-2.

[58] Reed, "Leaving a Last Legacy," 2-3; McNulty, interview with Hall, 13-14.

[59] Ibid., 13; Julia Neal, "How I Became Interested in the Shakers," lecture notes, Neal Papers.

[60] Idem., "Shakertown of the Long Long Ago," *College Heights Herald* [Bowling Green, Ky.], 14 January 1926. Neal slightly misquoted Wordsworth, writing "that" instead of "which."

manuscripts at the college's Kentucky Library. The hobby became a passion. She researched the Shaker collections at Pleasant Hill, the Western Reserve Historical Society in Cleveland, the New York Public Library, and the Library of Congress. She visited the last Shakers of Canterbury and Sabbathday Lake. While doing post-graduate work at the University of Michigan, Neal turned her research into a manuscript. The manuscript became a book when in 1947 the University of North Carolina Press published *By Their Fruits: The Story of Shakerism in South Union, Kentucky*.[61]

The book remains the best history of any single Shaker community. Neal contextualized the origins of South Union within the history of the Logan County revivals and the Cumberland schism, attesting to the decreasing controversy of such an association as the revival receded into memory and the Shakers became beloved American icons. Still, *By Their Fruits* greatly favored material culture over theology or worship, thereby participating in the abstractification of Shaker doctrine. This was not for lack of sources; Neal largely ignored the voluminous theological writings of South Union elder Harvey Eads.

She concluded her history by praising the Shakers' functionalist aesthetic and work-ethic. The last sentence of the book is: "As a people, the Shakers have helped to preserve the best virtues of *our early colonizing spirit*: simplicity, honesty, self-reliance, fortitude, love of industry, and *the capacity for holding fast to convictions*." I have italicized two key phrases. The first places South Union within the myth of American exceptionalism, so that the Shakers had the same "colonizing spirit" as, say, Daniel Boone. The second phrase is the epitome of what I call abstractification. It did not matter if the Shakers believed in an unorthodox Christ, heaven on earth, human perfectibility, or

[61] Descriptive Inventory, Neal Papers.

celibacy; it simply mattered they had held true to their beliefs—or, as Neal more secularly put it, "convictions." The quality of their faith, rather than its content, was why the Shakers should still be remembered.[62]

Meanwhile, the actual property of South Union had undergone some radical changes. At the 1922 auction, a farmer named Oscar Bond purchased most of the land. He housed his workers in the Center Family dwelling, but he ultimately tore down most of the buildings for tax purposes. He also ground up the cemetery's tombstones for lime. Then a group of Benedictines bought much of the land from Bond in 1949 and established St. Mark's Priory, a monastery. They acquired the Center Family dwelling in the early 1960s. Afraid of termite damage in such an old building, they ripped out the wood floors on the first floor. They then discovered that all the joists were "solid walnut" and there was "not a termite in the house."[63]

In the decade to follow, Auburn resident Deedy Price Hall grew determined to restore the old property of South Union. Her initial project was a Shaker museum which exhibited items she and her friends had collected over the years. Her husband Curry was renting an old church for storing tobacco, so she "begged a little corner" to display the collection. Nearly everyone in Auburn had a South Union artifact or two or twelve in their house, and the collection quickly grew until, Deedy recalled, "soon we needed another corner, then more space, until we literally pushed him out the front door." The Shaker museum of Auburn opened in 1960. It was staffed entirely by volunteers. Visitors

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[62] Neal, *By Their Fruits*, 11-32, quote 269.

[63] Ibid., 268; McNulty, interview with Hall, 7-8, quotes 7; "South Union's Shaker Cemetery Re-discovered," *Park City Daily News* [Bowling Green, Ky.], 12 April 2011; Stacy Towle Morgan, "High Standard of Living," *Park City Daily News*, 28 July 1983. So that others will avoid my confusion, let me clarify that the full name of the Bowling Green paper is indeed the *Park City Daily News*. Confusion arises because thirty miles from Bowling Green (nicknamed "The Park City") there is a town called Park City.

paid fifty cents and eventually a dollar to see the Shaker artifacts. Deedy was surprised to see "big campers . . . pull off of the main highway and come through the little village of Auburn to the museum."[64]

In 1962 Deedy Hall approached Russell Miller, a theatre professor at Western Kentucky, about writing a skit on South Union's history. "Why have just a twenty-minute skit," Miller responded, "and not a play?" Hall pulled the more colorful passages from Julia Neal's book, and Miller spent his spring break turning the passages into a two-hour play titled *Shakertown Revisited*. The pageant was the centerpiece of a Shaker festival that summer. It was staged on the high school tennis court, with the audience sitting on bleachers or folding chairs. The festival became an annual event. The 1963 festival took place over five days in July and included an art exhibit, a country store, an antique car show, a tour of the Shaker buildings (still owned by the Benedictines), and a "Junior Miss Beauty Contest." Vendors sold food made from Shaker recipes. The festival grew more and more popular, and in 1965 the National Association of Travel Organizations ranked the Auburn Shaker Festival as one of the "top ten events" in the nation.[65]

Shakertown Revisited was made up of several vignettes, ranging from Ann Lee's imprisonment in Manchester to the departure of the last Shakers in 1922. After the Ann Lee vignette, the narrator began to speak, placing South Union squarely within a narrative of American exceptionalism:

> America is a fabulous country. In each valley, beyond each range of hills, and spread across its fertile plains are the stories of its people's efforts and

[64] McNulty, interview with Hall, 4-5; Maureen McNerney, "Volunteer Effort Restores Shakertown at South Union," [Louisville] *Courier-Journal*, 23 April 1972.

[65] "Second Shaker Festival, Antique Show and Sale," broadside, 1963, Neal Papers; "Shaker Festival, Fair Next Week's Features," [Russellville, Ky.] *News-Democrat*, 6 July 1967; "Top Ten Events of USA Include Shaker Festival," *Auburn* [Ky.] *News*, 28 June 1965.

> achievements, begun in a pioneer panorama as the surge of a nation's progress passed on toward the Pacific. No history book can contain them all. They remain, or are forgotten, as each community is conscious of its ancestral heritage. Tonight, this Logan County community revisits Shakertown, the South Union colony of the United Believers.

The narrator continued, casting the Shakers as participants in the great American experiment; after all, "Shakertown was an experiment in human brotherhood." A tension emerged as the narrator characterized the Shakers as "spiritual adventurers" whose "strange new religion was conceived in the ecstasy of emotional exaltation—born amid the pangs of struggle against misunderstanding and fear." This tension lay between two somewhat contradictory narratives: that Shakerism was a strange, radical adventure, based upon deep-felt human emotion; and that Shakerism was not so strange after all, but rather part and parcel of a great American story. Perhaps this is a paradox inherent to American exceptionalism—that the defiance of tradition is the national tradition, that America has been "new" for more than five centuries. The narrator intoned, "The Shakers attempted to chart that hardest of all realms to enter, the realm of the spirit," and then referred to Kentucky as the Shaker missionaries' "promised land," as if Shakerism were the religious equivalent of Columbus' voyage or the Lewis and Clark expedition.[66]

The play portrays the arrival of Shakerism in Logan County in an understandably compact manner. John Rankin leads a raucous camp meeting which is then interrupted by the three Shaker missionaries. In the following scene, Rankin and others interrogate the Shakers upon doctrine. The audience learns the bulk of Shaker teaching—the perfectibility of man, the resurrection of the spirit, continuing revelation, God's gendered duality, celibacy, communitarianism, and withdrawal from the world. The question-and-

[66] Russell H. Miller, *Shakertown Revisited: A Symphonic Drama of the South Union Shaker Colony* ([Bowling Green, Ky.], 1962), 6. A copy of the script can be found at WKU.

answer session ends with a missionary quoting Ann Lee's maxim, "Put your hands to work and your heart to God." Jesse McCombs responds, "Amen, Brother. That sounds good enough for me. It's fair—and it's just. Brother McNemar, I can believe that, and I'd like to join you." The perhaps unintended effect of these scenes is to depict conversion as a clear-cut process, rather than the nebulous interpersonal negotiation of historical reality. Notice, however, that the play, like Neal's *By Their Fruits*, was more than willing to link the Great Revival with Shakerism. The revival had become so distant and obscure that, rather than being tainted by association with the Shakers, it only survived in public memory by being incorporated with the story of South Union. Rural Kentuckians, most of them evangelical Protestants, proudly claimed the iconic Shakers as their own, gleaning from them important lessons about hard work (note the maxim which immediately preceded McCombs's conversion) and the simple life.[67]

This appropriation of a once-marginalized sect climaxed in 1971 when the governor of Kentucky appropriated $37,500 to help purchase the South Union property from the Benedictines. The state leased the property to the nonprofit organization Shakertown Revisited, Inc. This development required a good deal of lobbying from Deedy Hall and others, who "camped on the doorstep at Frankfort" until, Deedy claimed, Governor Louie B. Nunn "got tired of seeing us there." She suspected that the state preferred to devote its money and attention to the larger and more pristine Pleasant Hill site. Still, Nunn agreed to put up half the money if Deedy could raise the other half. She did so in ten days.[68]

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[67] Ibid., 7-20, quote 20.

[68] McNulty, interview with Hall, quote 5; McNerney, "Volunteer Effort"; Larry Wilkerson, "Painting at South Union," *Logan Leader* [Russellville, Ky.], 24 April 1972.

On November 28, 1971, a dedication service was held in front of the Center Family dwelling. It was a kaleidoscopic blend of the past and present, history and myth. A "Shaker choir" sang the Protestant hymn "Brother We Have Met to Worship." Father Thomas O'Connor of St. Mark's Priory gave an opening prayer. Julia Neal briefly detailed the history of the South Union Shakers. Governor Nunn performed the dedication. He noted that the event might "very well mark my last personal appearance," since his term as governor ended on December 7. He proclaimed South Union as part of Kentucky's "rich heritage" and "meaningful past." The property was a beautiful example of Kentucky's "rich land," and the Shakers themselves were "an inspiration for all mankind." Deedy Hall officially accepted the lease, and then dramatic readings were given by actors portraying Ann Lee and John Rankin. The photograph in the Russellville *News-Democrat* is striking: John Rankin stands at a podium before a microphone while Ann Lee stands a few yards from him; behind them, Louie Nunn, Deedy Hall, Julia Neal, and Granville Clark (Russellville lawyer and president of Shakertown Revisited Inc.) sit on metal folding chairs, gazing upon Rankin. After Rankin's reading, the Shaker choir sang "My Old Kentucky Home." A reception followed. A woman dressed in Shaker costume poured coffee for everyone, while a local farmer presented Governor Nunn with a country ham.[69]

Though the Shaker Festival was discontinued in 1990, the Shaker Museum at South Union is doing well. Its main attraction is the restored Center Family house built between 1822 and 1833, though several other buildings stand in various states of

[69] "Shaker Property Deeded to State," *Park City Daily News*, 29 November 1971; "Big Day at Shakertown," *News-Democrat*, 2 December 1971; "Dedication Services," bulletin, Shakertown Revisited, Inc., Auburn, Kentucky, 28 November 1971, Neal Papers. The Nunn quotes come from the *Daily News* article.

restoration and ruin: the ministry's house, a grain barn, a dairy room. The graveyard is marked off by a fence, though of course the tombstones are long gone; a single stone has been erected in honor of all the believers buried below. On the ground floor of the Center Family is a gift shop where visitors can buy flat brooms, straw hats, cutting boards, salad tongs, key rings, wooden toys, apple butter, and barbecue sauce. The museum hosts turkey shoots, Shaker breakfasts, music festivals, and a Christmas at Shakertown Holiday Market, as well as conferences, reunions, and—best of all—weddings.

If you ask around at the museum, someone will point you to a historical marker for the old Gasper River meetinghouse. The marker was erected in 1962 and is about a mile from the museum, at the intersection of Shaker Museum Road and Kentucky Route 73. "Gasper River Meeting House," the marker reads. "One of three churches . . . around which the great frontier revival of 1797-1805 began." The marker is in front of an antique store/self-storage facility. But the actual meetinghouse was located some two miles north of the marker. That spot is now a private residence on Bucksville Road, where someone put up a sign reading, "Gasper River Cemetery." It seems a morbid thing to do, for there are no tombstones, only a front lawn regularly mown. But someone must speak for the dead, whether or not the dead have anything to say.[70]

[70] Personal visits to SMSU; *Shaker Museum at South Union*, www.shakermuseum.com, accessed 22 March 2013. I poke fun at the museum but appreciate its existence and believe that those who work there do so out of love. For more on the location and history of the Gasper River church, see Thomas Whitaker, "The Gasper River Meeting House," *Filson Club History Quarterly* 56.1 (January 1982): 30-61, esp. 55-61.

Conclusion

Solomon Rankin had something to say a few months after he died. On February 16, 1883, the renowned spiritual medium Mary Theresa Shelmaker held a séance in the office of *The Banner of Light*, the nation's most popular and influential spiritualist newspaper. The office was in the downtown shopping district of Boston on Province Street. Shelmaker held séances every Tuesday and Friday afternoon, and any and all guests were welcome until three p.m., at which time the doors were locked and no one was allowed in or out. Visitors were encouraged to bring flowers, as they were "gratefully appreciated by our angel visitants."[1]

During this particular séance, Solomon Rankin was among the angel visitants. The fifth of John Rankin's ten children, he was about eleven years old when the Shakers came to Gasper River. He lived in South Union until his death on November 3, 1882, at the age of eighty-five. Only two of his siblings survived him; Jesse Rankin died a month later at the age of seventy-nine, and James Rankin died at Pleasant Hill in March 1884, aged ninety-one. In a sense Solomon Rankin was already a ghost before he died.[2]

He suggested as much in his spirit message to Mary Shelmaker. Though he had only become "a denizen of the spiritual world," during his earthly life he had sometimes felt "as though I had dwelt apart from the body; as though I was in association and communion with angelic beings." He visited the earthly realm because he wished to give

[1] Lewis B. Wilson, "Public Free-Circle Meetings," *Banner of Light*, 12 May 1883. Today the office's location (I am unsure whether the building still exists) is directly across the street from Sam La Grassa's deli.

[2] "Deaths," *Shaker Manifesto* 12.12 (December 1882): 283; "Deaths," *Manifesto* 13.1 (January 1883): 22; "Deaths," *Manifesto* 14.6 (June 1884): 144.

his "brothers and sisters" at South Union assurance that life was everlasting and "that the spiritual life that at times falls upon them is indeed brought from a supernal source," not a delusion. He had met with Mother Ann, and she gave them her blessing.[3]

Much of Shaker theology was constructed around strict dualities: male and female, flesh and spirit, Shakers and the world's people. But the lived reality of Shaker societies belied this naïve dualism. The believers of South Union constantly dealt with the world's people. Their society was a revolving door for the fringes of the larger world—free blacks, vagrants, widows, orphans, fanatics, and con artists; the confused, the frightened, the curious, the insane. And Shakers lived very much in the flesh. They planted trees and savored the year's first strawberries. They twirled and sang, felt anger, joy, and lust. They did not just believe in heaven but in heaven *on earth*.

In his spirit message, Solomon Rankin suggested a real continuity between earth and heaven, the realm of the flesh and of the spirit. After all, he had been in "communion with angelic beings" while still among the living. For his visit he donned the peculiar Shaker dress of his previous life, much to the befuddlement of his fellow spirits. He informed his audience that "in the higher life," people retained their individual personalities and lived "in association together, in brotherly love and friendship." The "same laws" of conduct held true as upon earth, except there was "no death." His world was not a dualistic one but rather a beautiful, messy confluence of spheres. The defining feature of his worldview was not dualism but community.[4]

To be fair, one should not draw too much about the Shaker worldview from a spirit message dictated through a Boston medium. Harvey Eads, the South Union elder

[3] [Mary Theresa Shelmaker], "Spirit Messages," *Banner of Light*, 12 May 1883.

[4] Ibid.

and theologian who was actually born into the Gasper River society in April 1807, aired skepticism about the spiritualists' claims, though not specifically about Rankin. Eads saw spiritualism as an outlet for those who were disaffected from orthodox trinitarian Christianity but were not willing to adopt a new, more rigorous creed, i.e. Shakerism. The spiritualists were therefore drawn, Eads believed, to an amorphous motley of pseudoscience and superstition. And their greatest error was believing in the materialization of spirits, which ruptured an existential boundary. "To admit the possibility of the interchange of spirit and matter," Eads wrote, "would be fatal to pure religion, all pure spirituality."[5]

But then Eads was not a convert. He had a very different experience from his parents, or the Rankins, or the Whytes. The revivals of the Cumberland territory, the gathering of the Gasper River families, the establishment of South Union—these had all been about "interchange." God was made flesh in bread and wine; the Holy Spirit possessed and shook the bodies of worshippers; John Rankin heard a divine voice in the woods; Christ dwelled within the souls of true believers; a heavenly community was created among a few log cabins in Logan County. Perhaps Eads could not, during the twilight of the South Union society, admit the porousness of boundaries. In any case, Eads's careful warnings reminds one of James McGready's cautions against eucharistic

[5] Harvey L. Eads, *Shaker Sermons: Scripto-Rational. Containing the Substance of Shaker Theology. Together with Replies and Criticisms Logically and Clearly Set Forth*, 4th ed. (South Union, Ky., 1887 [1884]), 137-143, quote 143.

On spiritualism in nineteenth-century America, see Bret E. Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Robert S. Cox, *Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003); Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 177-254; Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); and Cathy Gutierrez, *Plato's Ghost: Spiritualism in the American Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

visions; just as McGready asserted that Christ could be seen with the "eye of the understanding," not the "bodily eye," Eads explained that spirits could not be seen with the "normal eye," but one could "see, hear, and feel spirits, *spiritually*." As with McGready's hairsplitting, one wonders how much Eads persuaded his fellow Shakers.[6] It is significant that Sarah Small, an eldress in the East Family, had a copy of Solomon Rankin's spirit message in her possession.[7]

In his book *The American Religion*, literary critic Harold Bloom theorizes that religion in America is more Gnostic than Christian, an individualist faith that celebrates the Whitmanian "Me myself" and downplays the importance of a faith community. A democratic-populist gospel of self-help, self-esteem, and self-worship has supplanted Christendom. However right Bloom may be about the present day, the Shaker converts of Logan County provide an important historical counter-narrative. Their ability to transition from the evangelical Presbyterian revivals to a radical communitarian sect—their ability to bridge two religious movements caricatured as, respectively, anarchic and totalitarian—demonstrates the complex relationship between individual and community in the early republic. A religious choice was not made in the vacuum of "Me myself" but within a living community that allowed for gradations of belief and belonging. What mattered was not so much a black-or-white decision—Shaker or not Shaker, saved or damned—but rather the existence of a heavenly community that enabled "interchange."

It is dangerous for the historian to scorn the spiritual medium, for the work of history is often like communicating with the dead. However, in doing so, so we must

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[6] McGready, *Posthumous Works*, 352-354; Eads, *Shaker Sermons*, 141, 143.

[7] "Spirit Message from Solomon Rankin to His Brothers and Sisters at South Union Ky," handwritten transcript from [Mary Theresa Shelmaker], "Spirit Messages," *Banner of Light*, 12 May 1883, copied by Phil Wheat, 3 June 1883, WRHS, microfilm at WKU.

keep in mind both of the conversation's participants. I do not intend to teach the dead anything about themselves, but they have much to teach me. "The conductor of this meeting," Solomon Rankin informed the séance, "desires me to enter at this time. I accede to his wishes."[8] The historian, then, is equally part of the conversation—not in the sense that the historian conjures up the dead, but rather that the dead shape their lessons to our needs. I have tried to inhabit and recreate a foreign world, to delineate and circumscribe the distance of time. This is impossible. The dead are dead. I am no spiritualist, but I have spent most of my life in the same struggle as John Rankin's, trying to feel something I know not what. And I have found great comfort in finding so similar a struggle within someone else. History, like the church, is first and foremost a community. History, like the life of faith, is built upon love. There will be more dancing yet.

[8] [Mary Theresa Shelmaker], "Spirit Messages," *Banner of Light*, 12 May 1883.

I want more love, I want more Union.
Love is my treasure love is my heaven—
I want to feel little I want to be low—
I want Mother's blessing wherever I go.

a song of South Union, 1819

Youngs et al., journal, 276.

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HFCPC	Historical Foundation of the Cumberland Church and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in America, Memphis, Tennessee.
LCOB	Logan County Order Book, Logan County Genealogical Society, Russellville, Kentucky.
PHS	Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
SMSU	Shaker Museum at South Union, Auburn, Kentucky.
WKU	Special Collections Library, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Kentucky.
WRHS	Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio.

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