

"No idle hands are seen": The Social Construction of Work in Shaker Communities

SUZANNE THURMAN

When the American historian Benson John Lossing visited the New Lebanon, New York, Shaker community in 1856 he was duly impressed. "In every department perfect order and neatness prevail," he wrote in an article for *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. "System is everywhere observed, and all operations are carried on with exact economy. Every man, woman, and child is kept busy. The ministry labor with their hands, like the laity, when not engaged in spiritual and official duties; and no idle hands are seen."¹

Lossing was neither the first nor the last to make such an observation about the Shaker work ethic. Indeed, the Believers' industriousness has become legendary, and much has been written about their work habits, from Edward Deming Andrews' early monographs on Shaker industries to the current debate on the value and role of women's work among the Believers.² Shaker scholars accept as commonplace the statement that work was a central feature of Shaker social organization. Even so, much remains to be said about the social functions of labor in Shaker communities. Looking closely at the various roles that work played in Shaker society moves us beyond generalizations about the "industrious Shakers" and allows us to

1. [Benson John Lossing], "The Shakers," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 15 (July 1857): 164-77. Quoted in Flo Morse, *The Shakers and the World's People* (1980); reprint (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1987), 113.

2. See Edward Deming Andrews, *The Community Industries of the Shakers* (1933); reprint (Charlestown, Mass.: Emporium Pub., 1971); Priscilla J. Brewer, "'Tho' of the Weaker Sex': A Reassessment of Gender Equality among the Shakers," in *Women in Spiritual and Communitarian Societies in the United States*, ed. Wendy E. Chmielewski, Louis J. Kern, and Marlyn Klee-Hartzell (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 133-49; Karen K.

Nickless and Pamela J. Nickless, "Sexual Equality and Economic Authority: The Shaker Experience, 1784-1900," in *Women in Spiritual and Communitarian Societies*, 119-32.

examine more closely what they thought about their labor and how they used work to build and maintain a sense of community.

Work and "Cultural Visibility"

Work is a socially constructed concept. A society, guided by its cultural, political, and religious beliefs and by its views on gender and race, determines who works, what constitutes work, and the value of the labor performed. Prioritizing the work that takes place within it, a group gives "cultural visibility" to those skills or jobs it deems the most valuable.³ Shaker society was no exception. The Believers' perceptions of work and labor were informed by their own unique combination of beliefs. Influenced by the teachings of Ann Lee, the tenets of Shaker theology, and the social and cultural norms of Yankee society, the Shakers created a social and economic system that encouraged hard work and accorded "cultural visibility" to those tasks that furthered their goal of creating a "heaven on earth."

Shaker ideas on work and labor came from a variety of sources but were rooted in the world view of the Yankee yeoman farmers who made up the original converts of Ann Lee. The basic religious, social, cultural, and economic ethos of the people who converted to Shakerism was the same as that of their non-Shaker neighbors. All of them shared a common heritage, grounded in their colonial past; the ideas which underlay that heritage, modified and transformed as they sometimes were by the Believers, formed the basis of Shaker economic organization.

Eighteenth-century Yankees were the cultural, if not always genealogical, heirs of seventeenth-century Puritanism.⁴ The continuity between Puritan and Yankee culture, is reflected in Yankee economic ideas that stemmed from a particular understanding of the words "ceconomy" and "ceconomic" found in colonial American society. In her book *Home and Work*, Jeanne Boydston argues that the Puritans defined ceconomy broadly as "household-government." Thus, any work that played a part in household maintenance was ceconomic. By this definition, all work, whether performed by men or women, possessed value because it contributed to the running of the home. The religious concept of "calling" also legitimated certain types of labor. According to this idea,

3. I take the term "cultural visibility" from Jeanne Boydston's work on the gradual degradation of women's work in American society—Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

4. See Richard L. Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and Social Order in Connecticut, 1690-1765* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967).

38 COMMUNAL SOCIETIES

God called each person "to an appropriate sphere of labor, ... infus[ing] secular work with an ethical dimension: the goal of labor was to be useful to the larger purposes of creation 'economy/ then, was the process of 'stewarding' ... material resources to the end that the general welfare of both household and community was strengthened."⁵

The economic world of the Yankee farmers was further influenced by the remaining vestiges of early Puritan social structures. When settlers first established towns in the seventeenth century, they signed a covenant, received land in more-or-less equal amounts, and lived within a network of interdependence with one another. The Puritans were not communitarians, for they valued the individual home as the domain of the patriarchal father, but they understood the necessity of working together, both within the family and between families, to ensure survival in the wilderness. By the end of the colonial period the influx of new immigrants and new ideas undermined the tight-knit and homogeneous nature of many of these towns, but the value placed on cooperation and interdependence, especially in the rural hinterlands, remained an important part of the people's mindset.⁶

The colonial concept of economy, which treated the entire household as one economic unit, took a new direction in the years surrounding the American Revolution. To the notion of interdependence fostered by Puritan social structures was added the republican principle of independence. Though political independence was certainly one meaning of the term, American republicans also used the word in the broader sense of "moral independence," embodied in the figure of the yeoman farmer. People who owned land and owed no debt were independent, free of the manipulative power of others. Independent people were virtuous and the cornerstone of the American republic. Thomas Jefferson, the most eloquent champion of the yeoman farmer, summarized this view: "Corruption of morals ... is a phaenomenon" which one finds not in the "mass of cultivators" but in "those, who not looking up to heaven, to their own soil and industry, as does the husbandman, for their subsistence, depend for it on the casualties and caprice of customers. Dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition."⁷

5. Ibid., 18-20.

6. For an examination of town formation in early Massachusetts and the communal aspects of Puritan life, see Kenneth A. Lockridge, *A New England Town: The First Hundred Years, Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636-1736* (New York: Norton, 1970). On the changing nature of New England towns, see Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee*.

7. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1955), 165.

When Ann Lee founded her movement in America, she built on both the colonial concept of economy or interdependence and the republican notion of independence to create an economic structure that was neither inherently anti-capitalistic nor wholly communitarian. Lee, herself, did not call for the creation of the communal villages associated with Shakerism. Rather, what she left behind were clusters of Believers in areas where she had proselytized. These clusters, made up of proximate individual homes and farms, formed a sort of "collective household," with Lee as the mother figure, and provided physical and economic protection against the wrath of nonbelievers.

Lee felt responsible for those who gathered to hear her, and she instructed them frequently on their temporal duties. Her teachings as found in the 1816 *Testimonies*, a compilation of her sayings and reminiscences about her life collected many years after her death, reflect her familiarity with Yankee economic notions and illustrate her concern for her followers. Lee repeatedly urged the Believers to live moderate and prudent lives and taught them "to be industrious; to put their hands to work, and their hearts to God; to be neat and cleanly, and observe good economy."⁸

Lee placed a heavy emphasis on diligence and hard work, ideas that were already "culturally visible" in the society around her. Indeed, Lee's admonitions against idleness were fully in line with the prevailing notion that "idle hands are the Devil's plaything."⁹ For the Shakers, this fear of "idle hands" took on a particular meaning. The Shakers believed that sexual intercourse was the sin that led to Adam and Eve's fall from grace in the Garden of Eden; consequently, celibacy was essential for salvation. Faced with the dilemma of conquering their sexual selves, it was natural for the Shakers to channel sexual energy into productive and nonsexual uses through the use of manual labor.¹⁰

Ann Lee also believed in conserving the products or rewards of one's labor, and she had no patience with those who squandered what they owned, "for it was always held up, as a doctrine of truth ... that those who were unfaithful in temporal things, could not find the

8. Rufus Bishop and Seth Y. Wells, eds., *Testimonies of the Life, Character, Revelations and Doctrines of Our Ever Blessed Mother Ann Lee, and the Elders with Her; Through Whom the Word of Eternal Life was Opened in this Day of Christ's Second Appearing: Collected from Living Witnesses* (Hancock, Mass.: J. Tallcott and J. Deming, 1816), 263.

9. On the prevalence of strictures against idleness in early American society, see David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 158-60. For an example of Ann Lee's warnings against idleness, see Bishop and Wells, *Testimonies*, 264.

10. Edward Deming Andrews, *The People Called Shakers: A Search for the Perfect Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953; enlarged ed. New York: Dover, 1963), 104.

blessing and protection of God, in their spiritual travel." She particularly abhorred debt, believing, like the republicans, that it compromised an individual, and she advocated working hard to repay one's loans. She made this point very clear in her response to Cornelius Goodale, a Believer who had gotten himself into a financial "embarrassment." He asked Lee "if it would not be better for him to sell his farm and buy a less one, and so pay his debts." She replied, "You better not. The people of God do not sell their farms to pay their debts; but they put their hands to work, and gather something by their industry, to pay their debts with, and keep their farms."¹¹

Working within a cultural framework that had already been laid, Lee adopted strands of both Yankee and republican ideology in creating economic policy for her followers. Her legacy was an economic system that promoted fiscal and social responsibility, moderation, unostentatious behavior, and physical labor. Having lived much of her life in poverty, Lee knew the importance of economic security. She therefore urged her followers to put their "hands to work" and gave "cultural visibility" to physical labor, establishing manual work as an important component of Shaker life. Yet the importance of work to the Shaker communities transcended its purely economic aspect. Work functioned within Shaker society in non-economic ways to build community, identity, and equality among its members.

Building Community

After Ann Lee's death in 1784, her followers had two choices. They could either lose their sense of purpose and scatter to the winds (as often happened when a group lost its charismatic leader), or they could stay together and create a religious system that would perpetuate their founder's teachings. They chose the latter and within a few years established their first communal villages.

These early years were exciting times for the Believers as they watched their plans materialize, but success depended on the willingness of everyone to share labor and possessions. Having little capital, the Shakers relied on their own resources for everything from land and building materials to food and clothing, but their most important resource was physical labor, without which boards and nails would never become a meeting house or corn and rye a loaf of bread. Labor was the bond that united the Shakers and sustained their radical experiment.

Labor also became a commodity in its own right. On 8 January 1790

11. *Ibid.*, 263, 267.

Caleb Crouch left the New Lebanon Church family, signing a release that absolved the Shakers of any responsibility for his well-being. The discharge document stated that he had lived in the Church family for four months "to learn the Cooper Trade."¹² This Caleb Crouch may well be the same Caleb Crouch who covenanted the following year to help build the meeting house at the newly-formed Shaker community of Harvard, Massachusetts, and who remained a faithful Believer there until his death in 1841.¹³ If so, the Shakers benefited for many years from their early investment in his manual training. If not, they provided a young man with an important skill to use in the outside world. In either case, Crouch went to live in the Church family in 1789 with the express purpose of learning the art of coopering.

Crouch's departure after obtaining the knowledge that he sought highlights the potential instability of the Shakers' situation. People came to the Believers for a variety of reasons. Some were seeking spiritual answers, others a haven from exploitation and abuse. Yet others viewed the Shakers as a convenient stopping place where they could obtain food, clothing, even manual training, for a little work in return. These people often left after they got what they wanted, and the drain on the Shakers, financially and otherwise, could be devastating.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the Shakers remained committed to their communal vision of sharing their knowledge, as well as their goods, with all who lived with them, and they accepted the fact that some would abuse the system. Most did not, and the time and effort that the Shakers put into training their members eventually led to stable and prosperous communities.

That the average Shaker shared in this larger sense of community building is evident from the journals and day books in which individuals captured the rhythms of daily life. Many journals are detailed lists of the tasks performed by the writer or other members of the family. Augustus Grosvenor's journal, for example, is a straight-forward

12. "Discharge of Caleb Crouch," 8 Jan. 1790, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio, LA: 10, (hereafter cited as WRHS).

13. "A Book of Records of the Church of the United Society In Harvard Massachusetts. Commencing January 1791, 1, Emma B. King Library, Old Chatham, New York, 10,340 (ms. 9757); Church Family Register, Harvard, typescript, 12, Fruitlands Museums, Harvard, Mass., Reel 1, (hereafter cited as FRU).

14. The Shakers characterized those who came and left after a short time as "winter Shakers." Though the Believers often felt that these transients took advantage of Shaker hospitality, Stephen Stein cautions that not all who left did so because they saw the Shakers as a temporary abode. Many, he argues, were sincere in their wish to try Shakerism but found that it simply was not for them—Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992), 162, 257.

42 COMMUNAL SOCIETIES

account of the planting, weeding, harvesting, haying, composting, and related activities that took place on the Harvard Church family farm. Likewise, the "journal of domestic work" kept by the deaconess of the Harvard Church family recorded the various housekeeping activities of the sisters under her care.¹⁵

The information recorded in these journals is important, giving us glimpses into the daily round of activities in which the average Shaker was engaged. Indeed, the very structure of these documents has much to say about Shaker concepts of work. That the Believers counted every action as worthy of record is significant; by keeping track of the work they performed, the Shakers gave lasting and concrete shape to the sometimes intangible process of community building. Every row they hoed, every floor they swept, contributed to the furthering of their millennial vision.

Occasionally, Shakers explicitly stated the community building function of labor. In reflecting on his life with the Believers, Giles Avery, who had spent many years as elder brother in the Central Ministry, recalled in his autobiography the many and various occupations in which he had engaged. As a young adult he served as the boys' caretaker, helped teach school, drove an ox team and a horse team, and ran the family farm. When he was twenty-five he was appointed elder brother in the New Lebanon Church family: "My manual employment was the repairing of buildings, digging cellars for foundations, stone masonry, sawing stone for a new dwelling, plumbing, carpentering and plastering. I had some experience at cabinet work and wagon making, and even made wooden dippers. I took an interest in orcharding; trimmed and grafted many hundreds of old apple trees; and prepared cisterns for holding liquid manure for fertilizing."¹⁶

Writing for a public audience, Avery went on to interpret more fully what his actions meant to the community. "I mention these things to show how similar to colonization in a new country, communal association necessarily is; that members of a community should be willing to turn a hand in any needed direction, in order to render their best service in building up and sustaining the cause."¹⁷

15. "A Journal kept by Augustus H. Grosvenor on the Church farm in Harvard," 1838-1841, Hancock Shaker Village, Inc., Hancock, Mass., 9785A4; "A Journal of the Domestic Work of the Sisters In the Church at Harvard Mass. Kept by the Deaconess. Commencing Feb. 1867," FRU.

16. Giles B. Avery, *Autobiography* (East Canterbury, N.H.: n.p., 1891), 5-6.

17. *Ibid.*, 6. While Avery did not seem to mind the many and constant physical chores demanded of him, not all Shakers were so amenable. Isaac Newton Youngs, the famous Shaker clockmaker, often felt overworked or, as he once rhymed, "an endless list of chores & notions" kept him "in perpetual motion"—Andrews, *The People Called Shakers*,

While Avery focused on what his particular actions as a Shaker meant to his community, an unidentified author recorded the group effort of the sisters at the Lower Canaan family to hold their family together. Their story is important, for it not only shows very clearly the value of women's work in Shaker communities but also reveals the potentially destructive consequences of Believers ignoring Shaker principles and placing too high a premium on the value of their labor.

The Lower Canaan family, organized in 1816 as a branch of New Lebanon's gathering order, was a community that seemed doomed to fail. "Composed of disinterested individuals whose only feeling was that the world owed them a living," the family faced a never-ending round of financial difficulties and suffered from poor leadership. James Farnham, the first elder of the family, was "not so good a calculator in temporal things. His organ of mirthfulness was largely developed which imparted a sort of levity to his character which was not beneficial in a family composed of the class of members with as little faith as this was."¹⁸

The situation did not improve over time, and the family survived only through the group effort of the sisters. To earn money the women raised and sold teasel, a plant whose prickly flower head was used to raise a nap on woolen textiles. When they got tired of living in a half-completed dwelling house, the sisters finished digging out the cellar after the brothers refused to do it. The sisters, moreover, continued to carry out their own chores. Having invested themselves so heavily in the maintenance of their family, they refused to let anyone bully them, including William Evens, a "would be gentleman" and a self-appointed leader of the family. Evens tried to control the sisters' activities, going so far as to stand next to them in the kitchen while overseeing their cooking. The women tolerated Evens for two years but finally had enough and "took him by the collar and put him into the street and threw his clothes after him."¹⁹

The importance of the sisters' work to the survival of the Lower Canaan family cannot be overemphasized. The writer of the family's history noted that when he or she "first became acquainted with the family it was generally remarked by all that knew them, that during that dark period of the first ten years they would certainly have failed had it not been for the exertion of the sisters." Unfortunately, continued

108-109; Jerry V. Grant and Douglas R. Allen, *Shaker Furniture Makers* (Hanover, N.H.: pub. for Hancock Shaker Village, Pittsfield, Mass., by University Press of New England, 1989), 48-51).

18. "A History of the Lower Canaan Family, N.Y.," 1813-1879, WRHS V.B: 84.

19. Ibid.

44 COMMUNAL SOCIETIES

the author, "the sisters were fully aware of [this situation], and the effect was not salutary. It had a tendency to create a sort of independence and rather overbearing spirit ... [so] that when the scum was cast off and replaced with respectable bretheren [sic] it was injurious to the union of the family."²⁰

The history of the Lower Canaan family is intriguing precisely because it offers the reader a mixed message. The importance of the sisters' work in ensuring the survival of the family was undeniable, yet the family reacted negatively to the women's "overbearing attitude" and continued to experience difficulties, even after more conscientious members, who were willing to work, moved in. The lesson to be learned from the Canaan family's story reinforced Ann Lee's earlier teachings. It is better to share work equally among family members so that everyone has a stake in the survival of the community. Only when everyone is a part of the effort will a sense of community result.

Building an Identity

The case of the Lower Canaan family, in addition to providing an example of community building, also illustrates how the sisters' labor contributed to the formation of their identities. Having saved their family from collapse, the sisters saw themselves as strong and powerful forces (some would have said too strong and powerful) in their community. That they based their identity largely on the value of their labor is not surprising, for people's identities have historically been bound to the work they perform. In almost every society, a person's occupation determines, to a large degree, his or her social value. Work also serves as an agent of socialization, preparing individuals for their place in society.²¹

Shaker society was no exception. The Believers understood who they were largely in terms of the work they performed. Following Ann Lee's injunction to be a simple and upright people, the Believers consciously chose a life of manual labor as a reflection of this uprightness and simplicity. But just as important as what the Shakers did was how they did it. Committed to excellence in workmanship, the Shakers became known in the outside world for the high quality of their market goods. It was important, therefore, that each item manufac-

20. Ibid.

21. Medieval guilds, for example, provided members with an identity based on their participation in a certain craft. Guilds also prepared their members for the responsibilities and privileges of life as master craftsmen in urban society. See, Roland Mousnier, *The Institutions of France Under the Absolute Monarchy, 1598-1789: Society and the State*, trans. Brian Pearce, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 1: 463-73.

tured be of the best quality so as not to damage the Shakers' reputation. David Meacham stressed this point as early as 1791 in his instructions for the manufacture and pricing of wool hats. He ordered the Shakers to use only the best wool and to make the hats "in the Most Decent—Modest & Best Manner[.] All Hats Don Compleat may Be Sold for One Dollar Each[,] the Rest in a ... Preportion according to their goodness ... as we are not after gain only in that Manner that will be for the Honnor of the Testemony and the Real good of Mankind."²²

When the Shakers grew lax in their labors, economic and spiritual troubles soon followed. If the situation warranted, even the spirit world involved itself. During the Era of Manifestations, a period during the late 1830s and 1840s when spiritual activity increased dramatically in Shaker communities, the spirit of Ann Lee scolded the Harvard Ministry for allowing the Shakers there to sell shoddily manufactured items to the world. One serious consequence of this breach of Shaker principles was the damage that the Shakers' reputation suffered among the world's people. An equally serious consequence was the spiritual paralysis that resulted from the Believers' behavior. As the living Ann Lee had taught and as her spirit continued to remind them, the Believers' management of their temporal responsibilities was directly linked to their spiritual state. By manufacturing items that did not meet Shaker standards, the members of the Harvard society not only ignored the important Shaker principles of integrity and industriousness but also, concluded Lee's spirit, stifled the blessings they could receive from the spirit world.²³

Labor also served a socializing function in Shaker villages, reinforcing the doctrine of celibacy and acting as an agent for the transmission of gender roles. For all their attempts at equality, the Shakers adhered to the belief that men and women inhabited separate spheres with gender-specific duties. Thus, from their earliest years in Shaker communities, boys and girls worked with Shaker brothers and sisters respectively to learn the behavior appropriate to their gender.

The segregation of men and women according to traditional spheres of labor was done for practical, as well as ideological, reasons. Working in same-sex groups eliminated extended contact between men and women and reduced both the temptation to sin carnally and the opportunity to do so. As Charles Nordhoff, a journalist and nineteenth-

22. David Meacham, "Instructions for Making Wool Hats," New Lebanon, 16 Feb. 1791, WRHSLA: 10.

23. "Communications from our Heavenly Parents and other good Spirits in the course of Holy Mother's Second visitation at Harvard. Begins Tuesd. 28th December, and ends with Holy Mother's visit at the 2nd Family forenoon of Frid., Dec. 31st, 1841," 30 Dec. 1841, WRHS VIII.B: 63.

46 COMMUNAL SOCIETIES

century student of Utopian societies, found out when talking to a Shaker brother, Shaker women could never become blacksmiths, not because they were necessarily incapable of doing such work, but simply "because this would bring men and women into relations which we [the Shakers] do not think wise."²⁴

The Believers were more concerned about the socialization of girls than of boys. Shaker brothers seemed to assume that the boys' daily contact with their male caretakers and their chores on the farm and in the workshops were enough to ensure that they matured into able-bodied men who understood the rules of Shaker manhood. Immersing the boys in a distinct "male" culture was certainly one reason for the work arrangements, typical of all Shaker villages, found in the Harvard Church family in 1846. Two boys were assigned to work in the nursery, two in the seed garden, two in the herb industry, one in the tannery, and several on the farm, while two other boys became shoemaker's apprentices. Beyond training the boys for appropriate male jobs and teaching them basic Shaker religious concepts, however, the boys' caretakers seem not to have worried about their charges.²⁵

Shaker sisters, on the other hand, expressed concern over the socialization of the girls in their care, stressing not only that the girls learn to perform domestic chores but that they learn "to act like women." That the sisters worried more about gender roles than the brothers is not surprising given that women's identities were, in many ways, more bound up with the performance of their work than were men's. Having renounced biological motherhood, which served as the center of most women's identities, Shaker sisters were forced to find other ways of assessing their value as Shakers and as women. For this reason, women's work took on a heightened value and caused the sisters, more than the brothers, to worry about the socialization of their charges.

The equation of womanhood with domestic chores done well is evident in the observations of Eldress Ruth Landon and Elder Sister Asenath Clark on the young girls at New Lebanon. As eldress and elder sister there, Landon and Clark were responsible for instilling in the young girls a desire to work hard, produce high quality goods, and do their part for the community, all of which necessitated a constant

24. Marjorie Procter-Smith, *Women in Shaker Community and Worship: A Feminist Analysis of the Uses of Religious Symbolism*, Studies in Women and Religion, vol. 16, (Lewiston, N.Y.: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1985), 61-62; D'Ann Campbell, "Women's Life in Utopia: The Shaker Experiment in Sexual Equality Reappraised, 1810-1860," *New England Quarterly* 51 (1978): 26; Charles Nordhoff, *The Communistic Societies of the United States From Personal Visit and Observation* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1875), 166.

25. Journal, 1845-1847, 1 Jan. 1846, FRU Reel 2.

monitoring of the girls' activities. Clark required each girl who was a spinner to keep her yarn separate from all the others and periodically show it to Clark for inspection. This yarn was eventually made into fabric, and every girl had "to wear the cloth of their own spinning; and then it will be known who does their work well." Clark also checked the laundry room on ironing day "to see if [the girls] do their work well...; to see whether they iron dirty clothes or not."²⁶

While doing one's task well was an important component of Shaker womanhood, equally important was a positive and compliant attitude and a willingness to work for the community, rather than oneself. Landon and Clark had noticed among their girls that "some have got a sense that they shall have a living, for there is a plenty of everything and it is no matter whether they earn their living or not." Such an attitude was unacceptable. The ministry sisters wanted the young women to understand that "they must do their work faithfully, and find an increase, and not be afraid they shall do more than their part of the work." "I tell them," recalled Landon, that "they must never call themselves likely young women, till they can do a woman's days work, ever after they are 14 years old."²⁷

Instilling this desire to work hard and well was a continuing process. Eleven years later the New Lebanon sisters faced another generation of girls, still trying to exact "a woman's days work" from them. The New Lebanon sisters thought that if they gave the girls some of the privileges of womanhood, then the girls might assume some of its responsibilities. Accordingly, the sisters allowed "the girls [to] have tea twice a day when they are in the kitchen, after they begin to work for a hand; & once a day when they are out of the kitchen, so if they share like the Sisters at their meals, they may feel obligated to act like women in the work."²⁸

The importance of work as an agent of female socialization was heightened when the issue of race also became involved, illustrated by the case of the daughters of Prime Lane. Lane was a free black who moved with his wife, Hannah, and four daughters to the Watervliet Shaker community in 1802. They "set out" to become Believers but lived as an "out family" on one of the Shaker farms. The Lanes were poor, and the Shakers provided them with housing, firewood, food, and clothing and set up a sharecropping arrangement with Prime. The sisters took a particular interest in Lane's daughters, who, they noted, knew nothing "of most of the branches of business performed by

26. "Receipes," 14-16, FRU Reel 1.

27. Ibid., 14-15, 17-19.

28. "A Journal of Events Kept by Betsy Bates. Beginning April 7th 1833," 7 July 1833, WRHSV.B:128.

females amongst us. ... We accordingly taught them to spin, weave, make cloth, Comb worsted—taught them prudence & economy, & how to lay out their business to advantage—how to economize their time, improve their talents, correct evil habits, etc."²⁹

The Watervliet Shakers helped the Lane family as they did "the [other] poor families around us who profess the same faith with us, and whose peculiar circumstances require such services." But the Believers took a special interest in the Lanes "because they were ignorant and black & more liable to be imposed upon by the wicked than white people." Lanes' daughters represented a particular challenge to the sisters. Until the girls joined the Shakers, their race, class, and gender had worked against them. Their lack of knowledge about what the Shakers deemed proper female behavior, which included time and business management as well as the ability to perform domestic tasks, shocked the sisters. By ushering the Lane girls into Shaker womanhood, the Believers offered the girls a new identity and gave them a chance to live a free life among equals. That the Lane girls understood this is seen in the refusal of the two oldest daughters, Phebe and Betty, to leave the Shakers with the rest of their family in 1810.³⁰

Though Phebe and Betty were legally adults and could choose to remain with the Shakers, Prime and Hannah wanted their daughters back. In an interesting ploy to remove them, Prime made the argument that Phebe and Betty were his slaves and, as his property, must be returned to him. Prime's argument was based on the fact that the two girls, who were actually his step-daughters, were the children of a former slave mother. When Prime met Hannah she was a slave, and by law, so were her children. Prime was a free black, however, and he bought Hannah's freedom before he married her, acknowledging her daughters as his own. This purchase, he now argued, made Phebe and Betty his slaves.³¹

Prime found a sympathetic lawyer, described by the Shakers as "an inveterate enemy to the faith" who "probably anticipat[ed] some advantage to himself from the labor of Prime's daughters," and took his case to court. Stephen Wills, the head of the Shaker family in which the girls lived, and incidentally a black man too, was ordered to appear in court "for harboring [Prime's] slave Betty." Prime and his lawyer wanted the Shakers to pay \$12.50 for each day that Betty was "detained" by the Shakers, presumably the value of his step-daughter's

29. "Charity to Prime Lane," Watervliet, N.Y., WRHS II.A: 15.

30. Ibid.; "Records of the Church at Watervliet, N.Y. Comprising the principal events relative to said Church, in connection with other Families and Societies, since the Year 1788," 2 Nov., 13 Nov. 1810, WRHS V.B: 279.

31. "Records of the Church at Watervliet," 13 Nov., 4 Dec. 1810, WRHS V.B: 279.

labor of which he was being deprived. Found guilty by the jury, Wills was forced to pay the fine. The Shakers appealed the ruling and the case went to the Massachusetts Supreme Court where the decision against the Shakers was reversed.³²

Though in many ways a typical story about the lengths to which individuals would go to remove a family member from the Shakers, the case of Prime Lane is also unique because it illustrates how differently the Shakers and the outside world used racial and gender categories in determining the value of an individual. In the Believers' eyes, Betty and Phebe Lane were equal to any other Shaker. Believing that girls or young women, especially those of color, who could not perform important domestic tasks were at a disadvantage, the Shaker sisters trained the Lane girls and socialized them into the ways of Shaker womanhood. With the Watervliet Shakers, Phebe and Betty had found a home where their gender and their race were not liabilities, a place where their social value as women capable of performing "a woman's days work" was recognized and appreciated. Prime and Hannah, however, continued to value the girls in worldly terms. After they left the Believers, they tried to deny the Shakers the benefit of the girls' domestic education. Prime went so far as to declare his step-daughters to be his slaves, his property, and to assign a value to their being in dollars and cents. For Prime, Phebe and Betty's inherent worth lay not in their humanity but in the monetary value of their labor.

Building Equality

As the case of the Lane girls so vividly illustrates, one of the most important functions of labor in Shaker society was the building and maintenance of equality among the Believers. Shaker communities were built on the premise that manual labor was the most valuable labor a person could provide. The early Believers regarded formal education as useless and focused their energies on clearing the land, building workshops and dwelling houses, and setting up industries to meet their own needs and generate income. In the short run their attitudes, inherited from Ann Lee, proved valuable in creating self-sustaining economic communities, but long term survival required an acceptance of the validity of intellectual and professional activities.

Over time the Shakers tempered their distrust of intellectual pursuits. They built schoolhouses and instituted a uniform system of education. They also realized the need to codify their beliefs, and they encouraged their more educated members to write books on Shaker

32. Ibid., 13 Nov., 4 Dec, 11 Dec, 20 Dec, 21 Dec. 1810.

50 COMMUNAL SOCIETIES

theology. Nevertheless, the tension between "book-learning" and "practical labor" was never resolved. Even as late as 1832 Giles Avery recorded in his journal that his current job of assisting at school was "rather tedious" and "not so very laborious to the body but to the mind." "Perhaps," he continued, "the reader will not think the labour of the mind much of anything[,] but ... I will leave this question unanswered."³³

This sustained emphasis on manual over mental labor created a unique work environment within Shaker communities and protected them, to some degree, from the vagaries of industrialization not spared American society at large. Many scholars have documented the deleterious effects of the Industrial Revolution on American society—the break down of the largely self-supporting family unit, the widening and hardening of class divisions, the degradation of women's work as it became associated with the domestic sphere.³⁴ The Shakers, however, escaped many of the pernicious effects of industrialization by continuing to uphold manual labor as the most legitimate type of work for their members. They were, therefore, able to protect themselves from the degradation of hand labor that took place in the larger world. The ramifications for all Shakers, but for women in particular, were enormous.

The Shakers avoided the labor unrest that surrounded them by refusing to create different levels of jobs with different values. Everyone who was physically capable performed manual labor, and no one received special privileges for being an "intellectual." As Lossing pointed out, even those in positions of authority were required to engage in some sort of physical labor when they had the time.

While everyone benefited from this situation, women gained the most from it. Within Shaker communities, unlike the outside world, women's work was valued equally with men's. Scholars have analyzed the degradation of women's work in American society, linking it to industrialization and the separation of men's and women's work into separate spheres. In pre-industrial America, when everyone worked to

33. "A Journal or Day Book Written by Giles Avery began January 1, 1832," 2 Jan. 1832, WRHSV.B:104.

34. See Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990); Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn*, Studies in Urban History (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976); Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979); Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986); Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

support the household, women's work possessed "cultural visibility" and was seen as an integral part of the household economy. As the economy changed, men began to leave the farms to work for wages in cities and towns, earning money to support their household. Women were left to run the home and take care of the children, activities which, though vital to the maintenance of the home, brought in no income and so lost their "cultural visibility" and social value.³⁵

This gendered division of labor was pervasive in American society, and, not surprisingly, the Shakers also employed it in their communities. Men were farmers, blacksmiths, and business managers; women were cooks, laundresses, and housekeepers. What differentiates the Shakers' and the world's use of such a system is that for the former the gendered system of labor did not lead to the degradation of women's work. In Shaker society all labor contributed equally to the community, and most labor was physical. Therefore, the Shakers attributed no higher value to the goods produced by a farmer or shoemaker than to a sister's contribution of food or clothing. The key factor which made the separation of men's and women's spheres so damaging to women in the outside world—the categorization of women's work as physical, non-wage-earning, and therefore valueless—did not exist in Shaker communities. In other words, women's work retained its "cultural visibility," ensuring its value within the Shaker economy.³⁶

Labor, then, served a very important function in Shaker society by maintaining the basic equality of men and women. Anna White, a notable Shaker leader of the late nineteenth century, elaborated on this function of labor in an article that she wrote for *The Manifesto*, a monthly Shaker publication. Outraged by the degradation of women's work in the outside world, White wrote "Though [a woman] may work side by side with her lord and master, what does she receive in compensation for an equal amount of labor performed, with not half the muscular strength he is endowed with? Only half pay!" And in addition, continued White, the woman alone cares for the children and manages the household.³⁷

Though White appears to acquiesce in American society's prevailing attitudes about women's weaknesses, her point remains valid. Women worked just as much and just as hard as men, but they did not

35. See Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work*, and Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*.

36. I have written at length elsewhere about the place of women's work in Shaker communities and about the Shakers' high estimation of women's labor. See Suzanne Thurman, "The Order of Nature, the Order of Grace: Community Formation, Female Status, and Relations with the World in the Shaker Villages of Harvard and Shirley, Massachusetts, 1781-1875," (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1994).

37. Anna White, "Woman's Mission," 21 *The Manifesto* (Jan. 1891): 3.

receive equal compensation. Fortunately, White concludes, "the glorious revelation of divine truth has pierced the heart of humanity, and brought forth an order of people [the Shakers] whose central idea is equality; men and women ... who have recognized in each other capabilities and powers, each supplementing the other's deficiencies. Such have been able, through the counsel of wisdom and love, to work together harmoniously in all places of care, trust and government for over a century."³⁸

Conclusion

As the foregoing analysis has shown, labor, in addition to securing financial security for the Shakers, played specific functions in their communities. Sharing the workload strengthened the Believers' sense of community. At the same time, work provided individual Shakers with an identity, reinforced the doctrine of celibacy, and served a socializing function, particularly among the younger generation. This was especially important in training young women to become loyal and hard-working Shaker sisters. Women's work was a defining factor in the identity of Shaker sisters, primarily because they had renounced biological motherhood, the more traditional choice, as the center of their identity. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, work served to equalize relations in Shaker society. Both men and women worked hard, sometimes at tasks that were difficult or unpleasant, yet Shaker society recognized the labors of all. Equal valuation of labor led to a widespread sense of equality in Shaker communities. This equality, to be sure, was not perfect. Nevertheless, Shaker society offered its members a system that was as equal and classless as one could find in the nineteenth century. For all Believers, but especially for those, such as Betty and Phebe Lane, whose race and gender were obstacles to a better life, the Shakers provided a welcome haven of equality in an unequal world.

38. *Ibid.*, 4.