

Trustees, Deacons, and Deaconesses: The Temporal Role of the Shaker Sisters 1820-1890

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THE SHAKERS FOUND IT NECESSARY from the beginning of the gathering into communities to establish an order to direct temporal concerns. The Millennial Laws of 1821 describe the "order and office of deacons, and the temporal concerns pertaining unto."¹ The Millennial Laws of 1845 and 1860 also describe the functions of the Deacons and Deaconesses. It is clear from these three documents that the temporal order changed from 1821-1860. The 1821 Laws do not refer to Trustees, while both the 1845 and the 1860 Laws refer to Trustees as well as Deacons and Deaconesses.² Combined with the other documentary evidence, it seems evident that this order developed in both complexity and responsibility as the Church matured.

The role of the Deaconesses appears to have changed substantially from 1821-1890. We shall argue that the Sisters' order was at first little concerned with financial matters but as the century progressed, the Sisters came to take a more active role. Fragmentary evidence suggests that the Brethren resented the Sisters' new role in church management. This view is an explicit rejection of the interpretation put forward by Andrews that in "The institution of Shakerism... from the first women

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1. Theodore E. Johnson, "The Millennial Laws of 1821," *The Shaker Quarterly*. Volume 7, No. 2. (Summer, 1967), esp. p. 50.

2. Johnson, "The Millennial Laws of 1821"; Theodore E. Johnson, "Rules and Orders for the Church of Christ's Second Appearing, Established by the Ministry and Elders of the Church, Revised and Reestablished by the Same, New Lebanon, N.Y., May 1860," *The Shaker Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (Winter 1971), and Edward Deming Andrews, *People Called Shakers: A Search for the Perfect Society*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953.) esp. pp. 257-260.

were coequal with men in all the privileges and responsibilities of leadership and labor."³ Shaker feminism was not a reality until the late nineteenth century. The negative reaction of the Shaker Brethren to the more active role of the Sisters is indicative of the tension created in the church by the evolving feminist interpretation of church practice.

We argue elsewhere that the policy and practice of Shaker feminism began at the Mount Lebanon community⁴ and for that reason, this paper focuses on practice at the Mount Lebanon Community. Two important pieces of information from other communities indicate that the Mount Lebanon experience may be typical. Financial practices did differ from community to community, and only further study can indicate if Mount Lebanon can be taken as truly representative.

The Millennial Laws of 1821 divide Deacons and Deaconesses into two orders: Office Deacons and Deaconesses and Family Deacons and Deaconesses. All accounts, deeds, bonds, and notes, and monies were to be kept in the office. The only exception was ". . . a little spending money which the family Deacons . . ." were allowed to keep. Brethren and Sisters were to apply to the Family Deacons and Deaconesses for any worldly purchases and ". . . let them apply to the office Deacons and Deaconesses..." for needed items.⁵

It could be interpreted that the Office Deacons and Deaconesses were originally appointed to serve the whole community with each family having a Family Deacon and Deaconess. As families grew, the order of Deacons and Deaconesses took on a new complexity. Certainly, some families came to have Office Deacons and Deaconesses distinct from other families.

Andrews argues that a distinction was made between Trustees and Deacons; ". . . the fixed property was handled by the former, sometimes known as 'office deacons', varying in number, who had the power to give and receive deeds of warranty, stand in law for the society, purchase and dispose of property, plan industry, and carry on transactions with those without; . . ." The Deacons and Deaconesses directed departments (garden, farm, kitchen, for example) and saw to the needs of the family.⁶

3. Edward Deming Andrews, *The Community Industries of the Shakers*. (Albany, N.Y.: The University of the State of New York, 1932.) esp. p. 180. See also Priscilla J. Brewer, *Shaker Communities, Shaker Lives*. (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1986.) esp. pp. 51-52. Brewer also argues that the Sisters did not participate equally in the community decision-making process.

4. Karen K. Nickless and Pamela J. Nickless, "Sexual Equality and Economic Authority: The Shaker Experience, 1790-1900." Unpublished manuscript, December, 1985. See also Karen K. Nickless, *Origins of Shaker Feminism*. (Master's Thesis, University of South Carolina, 1982.)

5. Johnson, "The Millennial Laws of 1821," p. 50.

6. Andrews, *People Called Shakers*, pp. 105-106.

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This appears to be Andrews' interpretation of the 1845 Millennial Laws. The 1845 Laws are the most ambiguous version of the Laws and, as T. Johnson has pointed out, are probably the product of the outpourings of the 1840s.⁷ The distinction between Deacon and Trustee is certainly not clear. Section IV, Rule 2 lends itself to the interpretation that all three terms, Trustee, Deacon, and Deaconess, are used interchangeably.⁸

Eventually Trustee would be used as the designation for those Deacons who traded with the world and held the deeds and monies of the community or family. By 1860, it is clear a distinction was being made. Part I, Section I, Rule 10 reads:

Family Deacons and Deaconesses should have the oversight of all work done in the family for sale, and the general direction of persons employed at the same, *in union with the Trustees*. [Emphasis added.]⁹

Whether each family would have Trustees *and* Deacons and Deaconesses may have varied from community to community. Large communities had several sets of Trustees while smaller communities such as North Union and Sabbathday Lake may have had only one set of Trustees. Indeed, these differences among communities may account for some of the differences in the Millennial Laws.

The term Trustee is found in the financial records of Mount Lebanon in 1839. The records are an annual inventory of the stock and value of the whole community by family. The records cover the period from 1839-1860.¹⁰ In 1839, the two men who reported for the Church Family and the two men who reported for the Second Family are listed as Trustees. Other family reports were made by unidentified Deacons. After 1839, only the Church family's report is from the Trustees; all other reports are from the Deacons of the various families. This distinction may be important since later records indicate only the Trustees were allowed to hold property in their name. Some of the families at Mount Lebanon were in the novitiate order where, according to Andrews, they were still allowed to hold property in their own name.¹¹ If this is true, these families may not have needed trustees as well as Deacons. While these records purport to show the value and holdings of the Church, in only one year (1850) is the Sisters' work listed. In 1850, the Church Family listed the products produced by the Sisters but without a monetary evaluation. No other family lists the Sisters' work.

7. Johnson, "Rules and Orders...", p. 140.

8. Andrews, *People Called Shakers*, p. 257.

9. Johnson, "Rules and Orders...", p. 147.

10. "Inventory of money and stock held at the beginning of each year," (1839-1864), The Western Reserve Historical Society (II: B-38).

11. Andrews, *People Called Shakers*, p. 69.

These records also show a distinction between the Sisters' money and family money. For example:

A Bill of Stock taken by the Deacons of the Second Family January 1st 1850

| | Dols | Cts |
|----------------------------------|-------|-----|
| We have money on hand | 205 | |
| " Money belonging to the Sisters | 350 | |
| " Due from the world | | |
| considered safe | 196 | |
| " Deposited in Savings Bank | 500 | |
| " Garden Seeds on Commission | 1634. | 69 |

The record continues to list Brothers' industries and then the debts due from the various Mount Lebanon families and other communities. Produce and livestock are also listed. Only the Second Family lists Sisters' money with any frequency. Other families list it sporadically or not at all.¹²

There may, of course, be several explanations for this method of bookkeeping, but the simplest is that the Sisters did not play an important role in the financial management of the community. The financial records of the Mount Lebanon Community in the Western Reserve Collection contain no records kept by a Deaconess.¹³ Andrews lists only one Journal kept by a Deaconess at Mount Lebanon in his sources for *Community Industries*.¹⁴ This lack of extant records may indicate that the Sisters did not keep accounts or that their accounts and enterprises were considered less important. This is certainly the impression given by the Annual Stock and Value records of the Mount Lebanon community. These are clearly intended to be records for the family and community and yet they are almost exclusively records of the Brothers' enterprises. It is hard to escape the conclusion that at least until 1864 the Brothers' work was considered the Family's work.

Seth Wells' "Importance of keeping correct Book accounts" also gives this impression. Writing in 1836, he considers the Sisters' work less important.

Tho' the Sisters have but little to do in the business of commerce; yet being willing & desirous to do their part & bear their portion towards supporting the temporal interests of the Church or family in which they live & let their works be known, they are allowed to keep a Book account of the incomes of their own separate earnings and the expense of purchases made for their particular use. This is done by the Deaconesses at the Office. Of course, the money brought in by their

12. "Inventory of money and stock..." The Western Reserve Historical Society, (H:B-38).

13. Kermit J. Pike, *A Guide to Shaker Manuscripts*, The Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio, 1974.

14. Andrews, *Community Industries*, pp. 301-307.

exclusive labors is at their disposal, out of which they can make use of such articles as they need, *exclusive of the general purchases made for the use of the family*. Yet all these receipts and purchases are entered on the Book of Incomes and expenditures kept by the Deacons: so that the whole amount of the receipts and expenses of the family, both of the Brethren and Sisters, are regularly entered on the book,... This is the order and practice in the Church and Second Family at New Lebanon..." [Emphasis added.]¹⁵

The records of the Second Family described above indicate how casual the recording of the Sisters' work was in that family. The other families appear not to have followed the practice of entering the Sisters' accounts on the family books. Wells also seems to regard the Sisters' money as separate from the 'family' money, reminiscent of the farmer's wife's butter and egg money.

An apostate describes the Deaconship of each family at Mount Lebanon in 1846-48 as consisting of four persons, two males and two females. "As a general thing one deacon has the superintendence of agriculture and animals; the other of finance and exchange. The deaconesses have the superintendence of domestic economy, manufactures, etc."¹⁶ This seems to substantiate that the Sisters were not active in the financial affairs of the community.

By 1880, the role of one or more of the Deacons had apparently specialized to become Trustee. Documents from 1872 and 1870 indicate that only the Trustees were allowed to hold property or enter into transactions for the communities. The 1872 document specifies the role of Trustee to the outside world. This became necessary because a Shaker brother, Ed Chase of the East Family, had fled to the world leaving the East Family some \$20,000 in debt. (Interestingly enough, in 1864 when Ed Chase left the Lower Canaan Family to join the East Family, he left that family heavily in debt.) The 1870 document, which will be discussed in detail later, describes the covenant relationship between Brethren and Sisters. Both documents emphasize that *only* the Trustees can incur debt, or hold bonds, deeds, or legal contracts with the outside world. The 1870 document implies that the Sisters do not fill this role.¹⁷ Stronger evidence for this view comes from *The Shaker Manifesto*.

In 1880, the Shaker community at North Union, Ohio, reported to the other communities in *The Shaker Manifesto* that they had dissolved

15. Seth Wells, "Importance of Keeping Correct Book Accounts," cited in Andrews, *Community Industries*, p. 180.

16. Daryl Chase, "The Early Shakers: An Experiment in Religious Communism," (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1936). esp. p. 84.

17. "Principles concerning financial business arrangements among Shakers" (1872), "Covenantal Principles: Relative to financial business arrangements between Brethren and Sisters among Believers" (1870) The Western Reserve Historical Society. (I: A-II)

their board of four male Trustees and replaced it with a board of two Sisters and two Brothers. They felt compelled to justify this action noting: "This might seem a new departure. But is it not in keeping with the leading principles of our church organization from the beginning, which have advocated equality of the sexes?"¹⁸ Prior to 1880, the office of Trustee was not held by a woman at North Union. We can find no evidence to suggest a woman held this position at Mount Lebanon and conclude that before 1880 Sisters were not Trustees; that is, they did not hold bonds, deeds, accounts, or make contracts for the Church or their families.

Further evidence on the financial relationship between the sexes in the communities indicates that the Sisters were not viewed as full partners till the late nineteenth century. The Millennial Laws of 1821, 1845, and 1860 refer specifically to the method to be used by the Sisters in ordering work traditionally done by the Brethren. It is interesting that only in the 1845 Laws does it specify how the Brethren shall apply for the Sisters' work or services. Andrews argues in *The People Called Shakers* that each Sister was assigned a Brother. Mundane sisterly tasks could have been provided as a matter of course.¹⁹

But the Sisters worked in the Brothers' industries as well. Was this work acknowledged in accounts? The financial records of the Mount Lebanon community show outstanding balances for Sisters' labor between families. One document from 1870 indicates that this practice was conducted within families as well.

This curious document is an attempt to clarify the financial relationship between Brothers and Sisters in the same family. It indicates that by the 1870's some friction had developed between the Brethren and Sisters. This document is included in the financial papers of the Mount Lebanon community in the Western Reserve Collection. It is a copy of the original done by the Elders at Union Village. This indicates that the Ministry at Mount Lebanon sent this document to all of the Shaker communities. It is titled "Covenantal Principles: Relative to financial business arrangements between Brethren and Sisters among Believers." As mentioned above, it also outlines the duties of the Trustees.²⁰

The Ministry appears to have had three main concerns: protecting the communities from embezzlement and fraud, re-establishing that only Trustees can hold property, and eliminating the practice of holding property exclusive to each sex. Paragraphs 3-7 are quoted in their entirety.

18. W. Reynolds, "Letter to the Editor," *The Shaker Manifesto* 10 (June 1880) p. 139.

19. Andrews, *People Called Shakers*, p. 123 and p. 181.

20. "Covenantal Principles: Relative to financial business arrangements between Brethren and Sisters among Believers" (1870) The Western Reserve Historical Society. (I: A-II)

3 No person, neither male nor female, should hold the title of Deeds or hold bonds, notes, or [accounts] in such person or persons own individual name, who are not appointed as Trustees, for that purpose and duly appointed and confirmed.

4 Hence [illegible] official Sisters should be furnished with money sufficient to meet the ordinary current expenses of their sex, in the purchases of necessary clothes and domestic ware incidental to them and their industrial occupations. According to the ability and means of the family in which they reside, yet no accounts of Debt and credit should be kept between brethren and Sisters, as forming separate and distinct interests peculiar to each sex.

5 According to the foregoing principles as *neither* Brethren or sisters can hold property, either real or personal or private exclusive to the sex; so neither Brethren nor sisters can borrow from nor loan to each other money [illegible] as debt.

6 Accounts between Brethren and sisters may be kept, for reference only showing from time to time, that each sex contribute to the united interest; but in the nature of the case these would be of very little use, as it is so difficult to set out the facts of service, as comparatively little is produced by either brethren or sisters for sale, in many families, except a portion of help from the opposite sex is expected upon the same. Again to come accuracy Sisters would need to charge Brethren for all their time spent in domestic service; and Brethren charge sisters for the raising of crops, caring of the farms and stock, driving the teams, nailing the [illegible], building, repairs etc. etc. and working out the principle of division, how are the taxes to be paid, and covenantal relations of an [illegible]. It could not be done.

7 According to covenantal principles, there can be no treasury, nor [hoarding of bonds, notes, etc, & etc, the interest of which is returnable to Brethren or Sisters in a separate capacity. As there is to be no existence of such a treasure as Brethren's money, or Sister's money, in a separate interest, But the money as the houses and land are to be held in a united capacity only.

The distinction Seth Wells made in 1836 between Sisters' money and family money is no longer useful. This document indicates that the continued division of monies into Sisters' money and Brothers' money is against the Covenant of the Church. Since the Second Family followed this practice from at least 1836-1864, we must read this as a response to some sort of change in the community. Two other sources may help us interpret this document: a manuscript history of the Lower Canaan Family at Mount Lebanon and the testimony of apostate Nicholas Briggs. The Lower Canaan Family was a small gathering order. It never achieved the numbers or success of the other families at Mount Lebanon. A journal written in 1867 for the elders of the Lower Family tells their story. The author, who is not identified, lived in this family for "the greater part of the past twenty-five years." In the introduction, the author expresses concern that the reader will think the early trials of the family are exaggerated. Of the Sisters' role, the author states

Perhaps some may think there is more ascribed to the Sisters than justly belongs to them, but the language of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon will best answer

this question. "The half is not told." When the writer 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. This the sisters were fully aware of, and the effect was not salutary. It had a tendency to create a sort of independence and rather overbearing spirit, (of which there is a plenty in human nature) that when the scum was cast off and replaced with respectable brethren, it was injurious to the family. This was a serious difficulty that took a large amount of labor to overcome.²¹

This Shaker's description of the Sisters' toil is very moving. Until the 1840's life was a constant struggle for this family. There appeared to be no shortage of Brothers, but they were unwilling to work or left the community after a short time. In one case in 1834, a Brother (Aaron Gilbert) left because of an entanglement with a Sister, taking an undetermined amount of money and the receipts for the Family's fledgling herb business. The Sisters also had to pay off a debt on the 1828 acquisition of a farm. It is clear they did not incur this debt but they paid it off by growing teasals. In 1838, a family Deacon, Jesse Lewis, borrowed \$100 from the Sisters and never paid it back. He advanced in the community to become deacon of another family. It is small wonder the Sisters developed an independent spirit. It is important to note that this spirit was resented and viewed as an obstacle to the families' spiritual and temporal prosperity.²²

In 1920, Nicholas Briggs would recall his life as a Shaker at the Canterbury community. Briggs, a Shaker for forty years, reported that the Brethren controlled the community in spite of the dual government. He explained:

Although the Shakers have always recognized the most perfect equality of the sexes, yet in certain conditions, as for instance in worship, both cannot lead, and in this and similar cases the initiative was always conceded to the brethren. So also, as there was no divided financial interest, the brethren only were Trustees, the title of the Office sisters being Office Deaconesses. The brethren kept all the books of account, and in their names were made all deeds and titles to real estate.²³

Briggs recalled the Sisters taking charge of their own industries, something he considered an innovation.

In the earlier part of her official career Dorothy [Durgin, Eldress at Canterbury] was very deferential to her brethren, and insistently urged this upon her sisters, and the mutual relations of the sexes were very harmonious. But later in life, when the ranks of the brethren became depleted and the general character of their

21. "A history of the Lower Family commenced in 1869 (sic) and continued annually thereafter." Western Reserve Historical Society (V: B-84).

22. Ibid.

23. Nicholas A. Briggs, "R)rtly Years a Shaker," *Granite Monthly*, 52 (February 1920) p. 61 and p. 64.

ability weakened; and while on the other hand the sisterhood retained, and in some respect exceeded its former vigor, it was quite natural that Dorothy should realize and be tempted to exercise her superiority. It was also only natural that the brethren should resent the usurpation of their old time prerogatives and upon occasion make it apparent. The sisters finally demanded a separate interest in business. They sold the product of their industry, kept separate books of account and managed their own finances independently. Little by little they acquired the larger portion of the authority and deciding voice. It proved to be a mistaken policy. It caused dissension and was a fruitful cause of the loss of some of their best men, a misfortune which they deeply deplored.²⁴

The 1870 document appears to be a response to the increasing role of the Sisters in the financial decision-making of the Church. The Sisters, perhaps because of their increasing relative numbers or the increasing importance of their industries, were no longer satisfied with the male management of finance. It is also possible that the Sisters were attempting to change the Church into a feminist institution. In the changes in the role of the Deaconesses and the appointment of women to the position of Trustees, we may be witnessing the impact of the changing interpretation of Shaker doctrine. Not explicitly feminist before the Civil War, the Shakers may be struggling to put their newly found feminism into action.

24. Briggs, pp. 61-62.