

Crossing the Dark River: Shaker Funerals and Cemeteries

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THERE ARE TWO LONG-LASTING RELIGIONS in the United States famous for being founded by women. One is Christian Science founded by Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910), and the other is the religion of the Shakers, established by Mother Ann Lee (1736-1784). A comparison of the graves of these two women emphasizes one of the admirable and most widely-known traits of the Shakers—their adherence to simplicity. The grave of Mary Baker Eddy is covered by an elegant Greek temple designed by architect Egerton Swartwout. Beautifully landscaped, it stands on the edge of a reflecting pond in Mount Auburn Cemetery. Across the pond the church authorities purchased a small park area and placed benches in it where people can sit to admire the beauty of the scene. Mount Auburn, founded by leading citizens of Boston in 1831, is the earliest and one of the finest of the so-called rural cemeteries that offered mourners a picturesque landscape to soothe and inspire, but that later in the century grew cluttered with man-made memorials as sentimentality about death and public display of mourning increased in American society.¹ In June 1872 Elder Otis Sawyer had this to say about Mount Auburn in *The Shaker*: "Such 'cities of the dead' as Mount Auburn and Greenwood [Brooklyn, New York] are fashionable institutions of idol worshippers. Money is lavishly, wickedly spent thus, while the living poor have not where to lay their heads, or wherewith to appease their hunger."²

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1. Barbara Rotundo, "Mount Auburn Cemetery: A Proper Boston Institution," *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 12 (July 1974), pp. 268-279.

2. Otis Sawyer, "Shaker Cemeteries," *The Shaker*, 2 (June 1872), p. 47.

Mother Ann Lee's grave is marked by a plain stone in a row with many others in a tree-shaded grassy square next to an apple orchard. After she died on September 7, 1784, Mother Ann was buried near her recently deceased brother, Father William, on the farmland in Niskayuna, New York, that the Shakers had rented. When they bought their own land nearby, the Shakers carefully established a cemetery and reinterred Mother Ann there in 1835.³ Located today near the Albany airport, the cemetery lies across a highway from the Watervliet church family buildings, many of which have been adapted for use by the Albany county nursing home, called, not unexpectedly, the Ann Lee Home. Known as Watervliet throughout the nineteenth century, the area is now officially Colonie, New York. At the time of the reinterment, each grave was marked by a small stone carved with initials.⁴ Then in 1880 marble tablets containing the name and dates replaced the small stones.⁵ Mother Ann's tablet is identical in form to the hundreds that surround it, but it stands a few inches higher. Surely this is a commemoration in keeping with the Shaker principle of simplicity and their belief in the unimportance of the body after death.

Shaker religious customs and rituals were based on the practices of the Society of Friends. Founded by George Fox in the mid-seventeenth century, Friends, or Quakers, worshiped in meeting houses rather than churches and in addition eliminated clergy, hymn-singing, and communion in any form. Other Quaker practices and beliefs included pacifism, active participation by women, and worshipful waiting in silence for divine inspiration. To these beliefs and practices Mother Ann made the important addition of personal purification through confession and celibacy.⁶ This paper will attempt no general exposition of the religion of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing since it is concerned only with Shaker beliefs influencing death rituals.

Mother Ann and after her death her English follower, Father James Whittaker, shaped the system of religious doctrines of the United Society as it developed in the United States. The organization of daily life and the decisions about communal conduct owe their formation almost entirely to Father Joseph Meacham (born Enfield, Connecticut, 1741) and

3. Unsigned contemporary account, May 9, 1835, New York State Library Shaker Collection Reel 5 #453.

4. On his visit to Watervliet Charles Dudley Warner, editor of the *Hartford Courant* and popular essayist, had difficulty identifying Mother Ann's marker, which was obscured by "coarse grass and low blackberry vines." "Out of the World," *Scribner's Monthly*, 18 (August 1879), p. 554.

5. Dorothy Filley, *Recapturing Wisdom's Valley*, (Town of Colonie and the Albany Institute of History and Art, 1975), pp. 81 and 85.

6. Scholars cannot agree about why she chose to endorse hymn-singing and dancing.

Mother Lucy Wright (born Pittsfield, Massachusetts, 1760), who took over leadership when Father James died in 1787. Through these two sets of leaders came the two strains of influence of concern here: Quaker practice and New England rural customs.⁸

Since everyone born must die, death is utterly democratic. No culture or religion can change that basic fact. What men and women can and have put their impress upon is the conduct of those still living as they handle and dispose of the body and memorialize the person who has died. The most superficial reading in anthropology shows that cultures around the world have developed widely different patterns.⁹ The Shakers basically followed the customs and held the attitudes that already existed among Protestants. Unlike other aspects of their lives as viewed by the "World's people," the Shakers developed no strange or strikingly different practices concerning death. Any Quaker would have felt comfortable in the funeral service, and any New England farmer or villager could have anticipated the routine of preparation and burial.¹⁰

The first official step after the death of a Shaker was to have the family deacon or deaconness, depending upon the sex of the dead person, prepare the body for burial. The Millennial Laws, revised in 1845¹¹ and reprinted with minor changes in 1878,¹² specified that the corpse could be laid out "in an hour after the breath had left the body." There were instructions for clothing: "A corpse should be dressed in a shirt and winding sheet [in 1878 the word "shroud" replaced "winding sheet"], a handkerchief and a muffler if necessary,—and for a female add thereto: a cap and collar."

The coffin was traditionally made of plain, unvarnished pine boards, though Elder Henry Blinn of Canterbury, New Hampshire, when he

7. Edward Deming Andrews, *The People Called Shakers*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 54ff.

8. John A. Stilgoe would say the customs were also influenced by geography, since the Shaker societies centered around their meeting-houses just as New England villages did. *Common Landscapes of America, 1580-1845*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 43ff.

9. The comparative study of death rituals has produced a body of literature discouragingly vast to a non-anthropologist. A collection such as *Celebration of Death*, ed. Richard Huntington and Peter Metcalf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) offers an introduction to the wide variety of material available. A book like Loring M. Danforth's *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982) shows modern scholarly application of anthropological theories and principles.

10. For the memorial service, see the *Discipline*, or set of accepted rules, for New England Yearly Meeting or New York Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends. For rural customs see Margaret M. Coffin, *Death in Early America* (New York: Elsevier/ Nelson Books, 1976), p. 69ff. or Emily Dickinson's funeral and procession, Jay Leyda, *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), II, pp. 474-476.

11. Andrews, *The People Called Shakers*, pp. 277-278.

12. New York State Library Shaker Collection Reel 5 #353.

visited the western societies, mentions a coffin made of walnut and one made of poplar.¹³ (Poplar would have been the local softwood equivalent of pine.) The coffin was narrower at the head and foot with a greater width, called the "bilge," slightly above the middle, in other words, the old-fashioned coffin shape. Edward Deming Andrews reported that he saw some unused coffins stored at New Lebanon, New York, made of plain pine but with the boards carefully dove-tailed.¹⁴ In the nineteenth century when the villages had a full complement of workers, a number of whom might be carpenters, the coffins were made for each individual after death rather than being prepared in advance or being bought from the "World" as they would have been by the time of Andrews' visits in the 1920's. Journals often report which brother or brothers made the coffin as well as which dug the grave as part of the recording of a death. These final attentions for a sister or brother are exactly like those that rural neighbors and relatives offered in New England (and in other rural areas as well). An older woman with nursing experience usually laid out the body, and a "handy" neighbor made the coffin. These rural networks of men and women dependent on each other—though not so closely knit as Shaker families—persisted until the spread of the automobile made access to the "amenities" of towns and cities available to all.

The Fruitlands Museum at Harvard, Massachusetts, has what Clara Endicott Sears, an early collector of Shaker artifacts and manuscripts, called a funeral plank "on which Shaker dead were measured for a coffin."¹⁵ Sister Myra McLean, a Harvard society survivor, lamented not long before she died in 1923, "I shall never lie upon that plank. Eldress Louisa lay upon it. Eldress Ellen Green and Olive Hatch and all the dear eldresses and sisters, but I am denied it."¹⁶ These words of Sister Myra also indicate that the sexual separation of Shakers extended to their thinking. Sister Myra names women only, but there is just the one plank in the collection, and there is no reason to assume there was a separate one for men. Although it is shaped like a coffin with the wider "bilge" in the middle, the plank probably served the same purpose as the bluntly named Appalachian Mountain "cooling board," where the body lay till the coffin was ready.¹⁷ The measuring was done by two attached wooden

13. Henry Blinn, "Notes by the Way While on a Journey to the state of Kentucky in the Year 1873," pp. 134 and 165. [facsimile reproduction of the original]

14. Edward Deming Andrews, "The Whilom House," *Galaxy*, 6 (Fall 1965), p. 47.

15. Edward R. Horgan, *The Shaker Holy Land: A Community Portrait*, (Harvard, MA: Harvard Common Press, 1982), p. 158.

16. "Sears Inventory of Shaker Museum," p. 16, Library of Fruitlands Museum, quoted in Horgan, *Shaker Holy Land*, p. 158.

17. Richard Zuckerman suggested "cooling board" at a conference held in Albany, New York on September 16, 1983, "Shakers: Aspects of the Culture of an American Religious Society."

strips (also in the Fruitlands collection) that could be adjusted sideways and lengthwise, rather like the metal measuring device used in some shoestores.

The burial normally took place within a day after the death. In the heat of Summer the burial sometimes took place before the funeral service.¹⁸ One exception to the brief period was a four-day interval before the burial in Kentucky in 1863, when both the northern and southern armies made such constant demands on the Shakers of the border country that it is difficult to imagine how they survived much less conducted rituals such as funeral services. When this service was finally held, Eldress Nancy sadly added in her journal that because it rained, "the sisters could not go to the burying ground."¹⁹ Although the sisters were treated as equals in governance, the weaker female constitution and the more delicate female sensibilities were accepted as undeniable truths by men and women Shakers just as they were by all nineteenth-century men and women.²⁰ The women might have caught cold standing in the rain, but the men were tougher and would not catch cold. The Millennial Laws also forbade children to attend funerals except for members of their family and did not allow them to participate in any funeral procession.²¹

The funeral service itself followed the same pattern as the unstructured memorial service of the Quakers. The attenders waited in silence until someone was moved to start a hymn or speak about the brother or sister to be commemorated.²² Neither Shakers nor Quakers have been averse to being prepared for the spirit to move them. Thus one might come to the service planning to read a passage that had been a favorite of the deceased while another, accustomed to ministering to the group, might have chosen a text for a possible exhortation. Speaking and singing continued until the elder in charge sensed that all who wished had contributed. Particularly during the intense spiritualist period, the late 1830's and early 1840's, the deceased often addressed the gathering through an instrument, or medium.²³ This spiritualism, in which someone from the other side or spirit world speaks through the living, lasted longer in funerals than in regular meetings for worship. Obviously at

18. Blinn, "Notes," p. 166.

19. Julia Neal, ed., *The Journal of Eldress Nancy*, (Nashville TN: The Parthenon Press, 1963), p. 112.

20. Cf. Blinn, "Notes," p. 135 and Neal, ed., *Eldress Nancy*, p. 112.

21. N.Y.S.L. Shaker Collection Reel 5 #353.

22. Perhaps the most interesting contemporary account of a Shaker funeral was written by William Dean Howells, "A Shaker Village," *The Atlantic Monthly*, 37 (June 1876), pp. 701-702.

23. Cf. Clara Endicott Sears, compiler, *Gleanings from Old Shaker Journals*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916), p. 237 and Julia Neal, *By Their Fruits: The Story of Shakerism in South Union, Kentucky* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1947), p. 145.

such a time the two worlds would seem closer because of the recent death. Furthermore, the leaders evidently did not require that all spirit messages received at funerals be written down—their apparent method for controlling the near hysteria at regular worship in the 1840's.

When Henry Blinn visited the western societies in 1873, he specifically stated that the funerals at Pleasant Hill and South Union, Kentucky, were different.²⁴ In Kentucky all stood until the first hymn had been sung, then they sat, whereas the other societies sat from the beginning of the service.

The funeral procession or funeral march accompanied the coffin to the grave from the service, which was held in the meeting house when the families were large, but eventually was moved to the hall of the dwelling house. These were often walking funerals with the brothers carrying the coffin to the graveyard, followed on foot by the community members. The Canterbury, New Hampshire, Society still has a wooden bier that would have held the coffin at the service and would have been used to carry it to the grave. Edward Andrews referred to those that he collected as "carrying racks," but there is no need to avoid the word "bier," used in English for centuries.²⁵ About the height of a coffee table, the biers have four legs and two handles that protrude in front and two in back, rather like the handles of a wheelbarrow.²⁶ Sturdy white woven tapes bound the coffin to the bier and were then used to lower the coffin into the grave that was dug the traditional six feet deep. One account referred to an ox pulling the coffin, another referred simply to a wagon, while a third stated: "The procession had to go in carriages on account of the rain and mud."²⁷ Since there was no Millennial Law specifying these arrangements, the deacons and deaconesses, who had the burials in their charge, could adjust for the weather, the terrain, and so on. A typical description from 1878 summarizes the Shaker attitudes and ends with the frequently used biblical words of the angel of the sepulchre. "We had a beautiful meeting called by some a 'funeral' on the afternoon of the fifth of July. Then the outward form of our brother was laid away in our little cemetery. He is not there."²⁸ Shakers did not believe in the resurrection of the body, but they did believe a certain respect should be shown toward the cast-off body. Also their instinctive orderliness led them to space straight rows of graves evenly and assign graves in roughly chronological order.

24. Blinn, "Notes," pp. 134 and 165.

25. Andrews, "The Whilom House," p. 47.

26. The New York State Museum has a bier in natural wood finish, but the bier at Canterbury is painted light green. See also the bier on top of a small, simple wagon, photographed at Hancock Shaker Village, reported as blue. Coffin, *Death in Early America*, p. 115.

27. Neal, ed. *Eldress Nancy*, p. 174.

28. Aurelia G. Mace, *The Aletheia: Spirit of Truth*, (Farmington ME, 1907), p. 127.

Here it might be instructive to compare other religious communal cemeteries. The German Harmonists, followers of George Rapp, urged but did not enforce celibacy. They were also one of the few groups to take advantage of industrialization.²⁹ Like the Shakers, they looked for sites with good water power and later utilized steam power. The Harmonists had three communities and three cemeteries between 1804 and their final dissolution early in the twentieth century. The first two cemeteries have walls and sturdy gates, the third has a chain link fence that looks quite recent and a padlocked gate. Inside each is a green lawn with two also containing apples trees. There are no stones, not even one for their leader, George Rapp.³⁰ They did, however keep careful records of burials.

The Moravians came from Germany in the early eighteenth century. For them communal living was necessary for survival in the beginning rather than part of their beliefs. Their living unit was not a family like the Shakers but *choirs* containing people of similar status. The unmarried men were in one choir, the married couples in another, the widows, etc. They lived, worked, and had daily worship by choir. They were also buried by choir.³¹ Because married couples were not likely to die at the same time, they were separated at death; burial by choir therefore meant separation by sex. The Moravians, who neither practiced nor admired celibacy, were buried in complete sexual segregation, while the celibate Shakers were not. Usually each row in a Moravian "God's Acre" represented a separate choir, but if they ran out of space, a girl might be buried at the end of a widow's row, but there was a wide space separating the female choirs from the male that was never crossed. As to markers, all have similar stones, a few inches above the ground, but they are not identical and have varying amounts of information on them. Thus both Harmonists and Moravians shared with the Shakers the practice of simplicity and equality in burial.

There is a curious exception to the customary Shaker practice of burying men and women together. In North Union, Ohio, Henry Blinn recorded the "peculiarity" that from the beginning of the settlement in 1822, men and women were separated in the cemetery, the sisters being buried in the north half and the brothers in the south half.³² This

29. The scholarly authority on the Harmonists is Karl J. R. Arndt.

30. There is an exception not relevant to this paper. When Rapp's only son died early in their years in America, the leader was so heartbroken that he broke his own rules and erected a conventional stone. He later regretted his emotional action and moved the stone from its conspicuous central position to a side wall where it still stands in Harmony, PA.

31. Adelaide L. Fries, *Customs and Practices of the Moravian Church* (Winston-Salem: Board of Christian Education and Evangelism, rev. 1973), p. 50f.

32. Blinn "Notes," p. 190.

cemetery no longer exists, but the Shaker remains were moved to Warrensville West Cemetery in 1912.³³

There is irony in observing the language used by the Shakers in their written records. They achieved a special simplicity in their clothes, furniture, and architecture. Their memorial service was simple, and they did not indulge in the display of mourning so dear to the Victorians. Yet in their reports of death, their language is the same as that used by all devout men and women of that day. They describe their brothers and sisters as "Passing from the shores of time," "shuffling off the mortal coil," "summoned to his blest abode," and "taking her flight to a better world."³⁴ The title of this paper comes from an entry in a Shaker journal: "Gertrude Green passed over the dark river."³⁵ With twentieth-century consciousness of language, we notice that all these phrases avoid the word "death," yet we should also notice they are all metaphors from nature and carry reminders that death is natural as well as mysterious.

The appearance of their cemeteries and the kind of memorial to give the unimportant physical remains were questions that long vexed the Shaker communities. In the early days they could afford neither the time nor the money to make more than a wooden slab at the head of a grave dug in a corner of a field. Eventually they laid out cemeteries and marked the graves with dressed or shaped stones with initials. The Shaker communities at Harvard and Shirley, Massachusetts, were close to Pin Hill, a source of good slate for the famous gravestone carvers of the eighteenth century. Elder Joseph Myrick of the South Family at Harvard was a gifted stone-carver.³⁶ Certainly the beautifully maintained (by the town of Harvard) Shaker cemetery at Harvard is a pleasure to visit with its rows of slate and marble markers as well as the unusual cast-iron ones, discussed below.

By the 1870's conditions in the graveyards ranged from total neglect to loving care while the choice for memorials varied from Italian marble costing \$16 per grave, as reported by the horrified Elder Blinn,³⁷ to the opposite end of the scale represented by Elder Frederick W. Evans (1808-1893), a radical reformer famous among the World's People, who wanted each discarded body to nourish a tree or vine.³⁸

33. Virginia Atkinson, Director, Shaker Historical Museum, Shaker Heights, Ohio, pointed out this move and supplied the reference: Carolyn Piercy, *The Valley of God's Pleasure* (New York: Stratford House, 1951), p. 219.

34. See Neal, *By Their Fruits*, pp. 79-80, 145; Neal, ed., *Eldress Nancy*, p. 114; Mace, *Aletheia*, pp. 60, 76, 82.

35. Horgan, *Shaker Holy Land*, p. 150 .

36. Sears, *Gleanings*, pp. 223 and 238.

37. Blinn, "Notes," p. 33.

38. Editorial, "Novel Horticulture," *The New York Times*, December 10, 1877, p. 4.

In 1872 Central Ministry (elders and eldersses residing in New Lebanon and having jurisdiction over all the United Society of Believers) agreed on some middle-of-the-road standards, but they had not issued the standards to the members when Elder Blinn arrived on his journey. Blinn was very interested and copied some extracts into his journal. When the instructions were ultimately promulgated in modified form, they accepted any stone or cast-iron marker that was not more than 22 inches in height from the ground or more than 18 inches wide. Only the name, age, and death date could appear on the stone. Each graveyard was to be "enclosed in a plain, neat fence and kept clean from large unsightly weeds and rubbish."³⁹

The inclusion of the alternative cast-iron marker is significant. During this same stay at Mount Lebanon, Elder Blinn went with Elder Giles B. Avery to the mill where the brothers had worked out the method for casting the letters and figures and attaching the four-foot rod that went into the ground.⁴⁰ Today these cast-iron markers, called lollipops by some because of their shape, stand as grave markers only at Harvard, but several museums have uprooted markers in their collections. These cast-iron markers were apparently original with the Shakers. Other cast-iron grave markers in the nineteenth century were either three-dimensional imitations of regular stones or two-dimensional tablets in Gothic shapes. Among all the customs and artifacts connected with death, this is the single instance in which Shakers created something unique. The cast-iron markers are also a fine example of mechanical ingenuity set to work to produce a superior product. But unlike the sturdy inexpensive chairs, the warm and becoming cloaks, or the carefully gathered seed, this was not a product of interest to the World's People. The design was too modest for them and required too much maintenance. Cast-iron fences around cemetery lots had already gone out of fashion because cast-iron needs regular painting to prevent rust. But Shakers passed their cemeteries daily and could paint as often as necessary. They wanted an inexpensive marker that did not require the specialized skills of a stone-carver and was easier to handle than a stone with a long enough extension underground to keep it from heaving out of the ground with the first freeze and thaw.

Why was there just this one innovation, and why was it made toward the end of the century when the earlier creative spirit seemed to be dying out? Looking at those aspects of life in which the Shakers made radical changes may suggest the answer. The most dramatic change was, of course, celibacy. So far as Shakers were concerned, they joined the

39. Filley, *Recapturing Wisdom's Valley*, p. 81.

40. Blinn, "Notes" p. 33.

Society to attain personal purification and believed that life without sex offered them that possibility. Although many young people, for instance, found celibacy a cross to bear, they preferred the cross to the problems caused by sex, marriage, and procreation. Communal living and shared ownership, the second drastic change in their lives, enabled Shakers to avoid the natural disasters of the agricultural world and the economic disasters of the competitive marketplace. The large size of the families, the ample extent of the farmlands, and the variety of manufactures protected them from natural disasters and also from the wide-spread bank panics and depressions in the economy such as most adult Americans had experienced.

But the death rituals as the Shakers had experienced them before becoming Believers offered no problems. The Quaker service, as unstructured as their regular worship, allowed every brother and sister a chance to remember the living spirit and afforded the spiritual leaders an opportunity for beneficial words. The cooperative helpfulness of the rural community in caring for its own is just the kind of system the Shakers would have created had it not already existed in the World. Only the conspicuous display in the cemeteries of the Gilded Age would have disturbed them, and that they could avoid by choosing small stones or even better by inventing a simple and handier substitute, the cast-iron marker.

By 1900, and earlier than that in some communities, the shrinking Shaker families had turned to professional funeral directors to perform the duties of the deacons and deaconesses. Some also asked neighboring Protestant ministers to conduct their funeral services. Today only a few of the cemeteries have the stones that decorated the sites in the nineteenth century.⁴¹ Because the rows invited vandalism and caused maintenance problems, most have been pulled up and replaced by a single central stone. In some cases the stones have disappeared, in others they lie piled in the cellars of old Shaker buildings.⁴² Only the Enfield,

41. I visited more than fifteen Shaker cemeteries in 1983 and about the same number belonging to other religious and communal groups, including Moravians, Rappites, Zoarites, Quakers, Ephrata, and the Oneida Community. Four Shaker cemeteries still have individual stones: Pleasant Hill, Kentucky; South Family, Enfield, New Hampshire; Harvard, Massachusetts; and Colonie, New York. Colonie has more than three hundred stones all standing 22 inches high except for Mother Ann's, which measures 28V2 inches above the ground.

42. Robert P. Emlen tells about the rescue of the Hancock Village stones that were about to go on the auction block in "Protective Custody: The Museum's Responsibility for Gravestones," *Markers*, I (1979/80), p. 46.

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Connecticut, Shakers devised an imaginative solution: they stacked all the individual marble markers together to make an impressive single monument. It stands today as a memorial to the individual Shakers who lived and worked at Enfield but also as a symbol of the simplicity and ingenuity of Shakers everywhere.

the final typed word, Donald Emerich gave generously of his wide knowledge of Shaker beliefs and material culture and liberally lent books from his impressive personal library.