

# "Numbers Are Not the Thing for Us to Glory In": Demographic Perspectives on the Decline of the Shakers

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IN 1816, MOTHER LUCY WRIGHT of the Shaker Lead Ministry complained: "Numbers are not the thing for us to glory in, but purity and holiness. I do not feel any lack in numbers; the great lack I feel is in purity."<sup>1</sup> Her emphasis on the spiritual side of Shaker life is understandable; Shakerism was, after all, a spiritual quest for perfection. But the numbers tell an important part of the story, one that has been too often overlooked. Careful examination of Shaker membership records and U.S. census schedules, together with thorough mining of the Shaker manuscript record, provides fresh insight into the reasons for and timing of the decline of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing.<sup>2</sup>

Taken together, these two statistical sources provide data that fundamentally alter the traditional picture drawn of the sect. They demonstrate that its numerical decline began as early as 1840, and prove that the rough estimates of total peak membership so often repeated have been considerably exaggerated. More important, they reveal two key demographic weaknesses that developed in the 1810s and 1820s: a marked increase in the proportion of unconverted young members whose spiritual education had to be provided if they were to join the Society on reaching adulthood, and a serious drop in the proportion

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1. Quoted by Calvin Green, "Biographic Memoir of the Life, Character and Important Events in the Ministration of Mother Lucy Wright" (New Lebanon, N.Y., 1861), Western Reserve Historical Society VI B 27, (hereafter WRHS), p. 91.

2. Unless otherwise indicated, all statistical data presented in this paper appear in the appendices of Priscilla J. Brewer, *Shaker Communities, Shaker Lives* (Hanover, N.H., 1986), pp. 209-38.

of members in the leadership pool. The overall quantitative decline that began after 1840 was thus presaged by demographic indicators that had shown themselves decades earlier, at a time when Shakerism appeared remarkably successful.

The demographic shifts observable throughout the northeastern communities in the early decades of the nineteenth century help to explain the rising incidence of behavior problems, proliferation of rules, and weakened leadership that plagued the sect thereafter, conditions amply documented in manuscripts but rarely evident in the secondary literature on the Society. The Shaker experience during the Grahamite crisis of the 1830s and the internal revival called "Mother's Work" that began in 1837 makes much more sense when considered in the light of this new evidence. The decline of the United Society was not fundamentally caused by such external factors as urbanization and industrialization, as many scholars have suggested, nor did it date from the post Civil War period. Internal dissension, a high apostasy rate, and particularly an inability to develop a method for ensuring the ultimate (and permanent) conversion of an increasing number of young people weakened the sect's membership long before these external factors had appreciable influence.

Yet the traditional view—that the Shakers maintained a high level of numerical, economic, and spiritual growth until the middle of the nineteenth century—has proven remarkably tenacious. Its earliest expressions date from the work of Edward Deming Andrews and Henri Desroche in the 1950s. I emphasize the work of these pioneering scholars because they were the first to discuss Shaker membership using statistical measures. Marguerite Melcher, whose study, *The Shaker Adventure*, appeared in 1941, mentioned Shaker numerical growth only briefly and in vague terms, noting, for example, that "the epoch of largest numbers and completest activity came between 1825 and 1860."<sup>3</sup>

It was Edward Deming Andrews who first enunciated the position that Shaker numerical, and therefore (through a connection implied but never fully analyzed) spiritual health, peaked in the years just prior to 1860. Although citing no sources for his data, he proclaimed in *The People Called Shakers*:

A curve plotting the growth and decline of the Shaker movement would be an almost symmetrical one. In point of numbers the United Society reached its zenith in the decade before the Civil War, when there were some six thousand members in its eighteen branches and fifty-eight families. Fifty years before that time the church had had a thousand adherents; fifty years later, after a gradual retrogression, the number was back to a thousand.<sup>4</sup>

3. Marguerite Melcher, *The Shaker Adventure* (Princeton, N.J., 1941), p. 136.

4. Edward Deming Andrews, *The People Called Shakers* (New York, 1953), p. 224.

The reasons for this downward trend, Andrews argued, were primarily economic, stemming from a combination of poor decision making on the part of the sect's leaders and the increasing competition of Worldly industries.<sup>5</sup>

Henri Desroche, in his 1955 book, *The American Shakers*, expressed similar views, arguing: "Symptoms of decline broke out in the last decade of the nineteenth century. In reality they had already been on the scene for a long time. For forty years the membership had been thinning out... ." <sup>6</sup> Desroche agreed with Andrews that the fundamental cause of this decline could be found in the effects of Worldly industrial growth.<sup>7</sup> He based his estimate of peak Shaker membership on the 6000 figure William Hepworth Dixon cited for 1860, but observed (a point that escaped the attention of Andrews and many other scholars) that the U.S. Census of religious groups in that year counted church accommodations, not actual members.<sup>8</sup>

This situation, as William Sims Bainbridge has noted in his more recent work on Shaker demographics, led to a gross exaggeration of Shaker membership. The 6000 peak figure, still so often repeated, is thus entirely in error. The actual figure, computed by Bainbridge from manuscript census schedules, was 3842 in 1850.<sup>9</sup> The situation in the eastern villages, on which my research has focused, was less favorable. Membership in the eleven communities in eastern New York and New England peaked at 2427 in 1840, but this figure represented an increase of only 111 (4.8%) over the level a decade earlier. Thus it is clear that stagnation had set in as early as the 1830s.

But total membership figures do not necessarily reflect the Society's spiritual condition. Bainbridge himself has found that nearly 50% of the members living in Shaker villages in 1850 had either died or left the sect by 1860, a turnover rate so high as to suggest considerable turmoil and instability.<sup>10</sup> Examination of demographic measures other than total membership reveals that key developments in the 1810s and later presaged the overall numerical decline that began in mid-century.

Beginning in the early 1980s, several scholars turned their attention to such demographic indicators as male/female ratio, length of stay, apostasy rate, and age distribution. Several students of the sect, most

5. Andrews, p. 226.

6. Henri Desroche, *The American Shakers: From Neo-Christianity to Presocialism*, trans. and ed. John K. Savacool (Amherst, Mass., 1971; originally published 1955), p. 112.

7. Desroche, p. 113.

8. Desroche, pp. 128-29.

9. William Sims Bainbridge, "The Decline of the Shakers: Evidence from the United States Census," *Communal Societies* 4 (1984), p. 24.

10. Bainbridge, p. 25.

notably D'Ann Campbell in her 1978 article in the *New England Quarterly*, have suggested that the United Society always proved more attractive to female than to male members.<sup>11</sup> Louis Kern has gone so far as to conclude that the Shakers made conscious efforts to ensure that Sisters would outnumber Brethren.<sup>12</sup> But careful examination of statistical records reveals that men actually outnumbered women in the eighteenth century, and that the male / female ratio remained remarkably stable in most communities until the middle of the nineteenth century, hovering near 40:60. The feminization of the Society that occurred after that time was a key demographic development, but was a symptom rather than a cause of overall numerical decline.

Of greater significance has been the work done to ascertain apostasy rates and members' length of stay in the sect in different periods. Lawrence Foster's study of the New Lebanon Second Family, though based on a small sample of members, demonstrated that the 1830s was a key transitional period. Believers who entered the Family before that time remained there an average of more than thirty years, but members joining in succeeding decades demonstrated increasingly diminishing desire to live out their lives as Shakers.<sup>13</sup>

The pattern for the 1049 members of the New Lebanon Church Family between 1787 and 1900 is strikingly similar to that described by Foster, although a somewhat different picture emerges for Brethren than for Sisters. Males joining the Family between 1787 and 1830 stayed an average of between twenty-two and thirty years, but those who joined after 1830 stayed an average of ten or fewer years. Females in this Family demonstrated a more pronounced tendency to remain in the Society than males, those joining before 1850 staying an average of between twenty-two and thirty-eight years. After 1850, however, the dramatic drop in length of stay paralleled that of the Brethren, falling to an average of less than ten years.

This unfortunate trend (which, it must be remembered, developed among what were supposedly the best and most devoted Shakers in the entire Society) was exacerbated by a dramatic decline in the average age of new members. The men and women who joined the Family at its establishment in 1787 averaged 27.2 and 22.6 years old respectively. But the average age of new members fell noticeably beginning in the 1810s, remaining stable at between ten and fourteen years old well into the

11. D'Ann Campbell, "Women's Life in Utopia: The Shaker Experiment in Sexual Equality Reappraised, 1810-1860," *New England Quarterly* 51 (1978), pp. 25 & 29-30.

12. Louis J. Kern, *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian American Communes—the Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1981), p. 95.

13. Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1981), p. 56.

century. Clearly teenagers staying an average of less than ten years each would leave the Society at the beginning of their most productive years, and leave the communities burdened by an increasing proportion of children and older members.

This supposition is borne out by an examination of apostasy rates among the Shakers. Discussion of this demographic trend has been quite heated, and several divergent points of view have emerged. Louis Kern, basing his conclusion on data culled from a small sample of New Lebanon, Watervliet, Canterbury, and Harvard records, has asserted:

It is a tribute to the genius of Shaker organization, and evidence of the ability of the individual Shaker to control and subdue his emotions, that the rate of apostasy from Shaker communities was only about 1 percent.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast, Lawrence Foster has found that the rate of turnover among the Believers he studied at New Lebanon and Sodus was startlingly high.<sup>15</sup> William Bainbridge's findings also suggest that turnover was very high in the mid-nineteenth century. Certainly any thorough perusal of Shaker written records gives the impression that apostasies were becoming alarmingly common in the decades after 1830. Brother Isaac Youngs, for example, complained in 1837: "What in the name of reason does it mean that so many are going off nowadays????!! Is there none of the younger part that will abide & be good for something—are we indeed unable to raise any children or youth among us?"<sup>16</sup>

Data from the New Lebanon Church Family records indicate that Brother Isaac's concerns were well-founded. The overall apostasy rate for these supposedly exemplary Shakers was 32.3% for the period 1787-1900. The overall rate for the Brethren was even higher—38.9%<sup>17</sup> In some decades, notably the 1790s and the 1860s, more than twenty percent of Family members chose to leave the faith, a distressingly high rate for such a short period of time.

Moreover, it is important to emphasize that these high departure rates do not include children under covenant age removed from the Society by relatives. Of the 678 children (under age sixteen) brought into the New Lebanon Church Family between 1787 and 1900, only 121 (17.8%) died there after conversion. Two hundred and fifty-seven (37.9%) signed the covenant and later left the faith, and a nearly equal number (255 or 37.6%) were taken away by relatives. Thus youngsters brought into this Family

14. Kern, p. 100.

15. Foster, pp. 54-58.

16. Isaac N. Youngs, *Personal Journal* (New Lebanon, N.Y., 1837-1857), Shaker Museum, Old Chatham, N.Y., #10,509, March 24, 1837.

17. Priscilla J. Brewer, "The Demographic Features of the Shaker Decline, 1787-1900," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 15 (1984), p. 52.

had less than a one in five chance of living out their lives there, a probability that diminished sharply as the nineteenth century progressed. Only one of the 197 children admitted after 1860 permanently converted after reaching adulthood. As Bainbridge has pointed out: "Defection seems to have been the rule for younger members."<sup>18</sup>

But while these various demographic measures of instability within the communities prove that the Shakers were experiencing difficulties as early as the 1830s, they do not go very far toward explaining the reasons for them. They do, however, point in the right direction. The decades when internal dissension and a high apostasy rate first became noticeable happen to be the same decades when key shifts in the age distribution within the villages were occurring.

Most converts in the eighteenth century were in their twenties, thirties, and forties—old enough to possess usable property and to have experienced lasting conversions. At New Lebanon, for example, 64.7% of the Church Family's members in 1790 were between the ages of sixteen and thirty-nine. Yet, none were under seven and only fifty-four (17.9%) were under sixteen. Those teenagers who did join the sect generally did so as part of larger kin groups, and documentary evidence suggests that many of them had experienced religious awakenings that would have made them spiritually, if not chronologically, adult.

While 1790 census returns are very scattered for the eastern communities, most of which had not yet been officially "gathered," figures for the year 1800 indicate that few youngsters were brought into the sect in the preceding decade. In that year, there were only thirty-nine children under sixteen in all eleven communities, a mere 2.8% of the total population. As a result, supervisory problems were few and older Shakers had little reason to resent a large number of members who were too young to make a meaningful contribution to the Society's spiritual and economic welfare.

But as the nineteenth century progressed, and the Society became increasingly prosperous while economic conditions in the World became increasingly unstable, converts were drawn as much by the prospect of earthly security as by the promise of heavenly reward. Many new members in these years came from broken homes, and many were under age sixteen. A large proportion had never experienced a true conversion, so it is hardly surprising that their devotion to the sect was correspondingly tepid. The Lead Ministry observed this trend with dismay, commenting ruefully in 1817: "We could have a great many loaf Believers in this distressing time (especially children) if we were willing to take them—doubtless we could have enough to fill all our buildings and consume

18. Bainbridge, p. 26.

all our provisions, and by that time they would be willing to go somewhere else."<sup>19</sup>

By 1820, the demographic makeup of the eastern communities had thus altered significantly. An 1819 membership list of the Canterbury Church Family reveals the demographic composition that was typical in this period. The Family had ninety-nine members, of whom forty-five were male. The membership was composed primarily of adolescents and Believers over the age of fifty, and included only six Brethren between the ages of twenty and forty. Nearly one third of the members were under covenant age of twenty-one, posing supervisory problems for their Elders that had not existed in previous decades.<sup>20</sup>

Similar conditions prevailed throughout the eastern villages. The overall proportion of members under age sixteen had increased to 19.8% by 1820, up 17% in just twenty years. In many villages, the presence of unconverted youngsters was even more evident. Twenty-four percent of Hancock's members in 1820 were under sixteen; the proportions at Shirley and Sabbathday Lake were 23.8% and 28.1% respectively.

Although their presence did not necessarily presage the decline of the sect, these young people did pose a challenge to the creativity of the Society's leaders. Some system had to be devised for their spiritual education if a large proportion of them were to choose the Shaker way upon reaching adulthood. It was here that the sect's leaders failed most signally in their efforts to secure the future of the United Society.

Yet this evidence of weakened leadership had a demographic element as well. Few of the young people brought into the villages after 1810 converted largely because fewer and fewer adult members were available to provide good role models. Just as the proportion of children was rising, the proportion of young and middle-aged adults (those most likely to be chosen as leaders) was declining. The proportion of Brethren aged twenty-five to forty-nine in the New Lebanon Church Family dropped from 75.4% in 1800 to just 17.3% in 1825. A similar, though less dangerous, trend developed among the Sisters, the proportion in this age group dropping from 60.2% in 1800 to 29.5% in 1825.

Throughout the eastern communities, a similar trend was observable, as the overall proportion of Brethren aged twenty-six to forty-four fell from 36.8% in 1800 to 20.7% in 1820. Among the Sisters, a parallel situation developed, as the proportion of women in this age group dropped from 43.6% in 1800 to 24.5% in 1820. Because the number of leaders required to govern a Shaker community remained the same, the selection process thus became increasingly difficult and the quality of leadership declined noticeably.

19. Letter of Ministry New Lebanon to Ministry Union Village, Feb. 22, 1817, WRHSIV A 33.

20. Brewer, *Shaker Communities, Shaker Lives*, pp. 68-69.

After the death of Mother Lucy Wright in 1821, no single, dominant leader emerged to ascend to the apex of the Shaker hierarchy. The Lead Ministry that succeeded her proved unable to deal with a series of internal crises that plagued the communities beginning in the 1820s. Behavior suffered first, particularly among the young. Even before 1821, Mother Lucy herself had noticed disturbing signs that all was not well, commenting in 1815:

The sense seems so drowned in temporal things that there can be but little sensation or desire for the gifts of God — I sometimes feel I would be thankful with all my heart if the sense was so that it could be satisfied with less of... this world's treasures.<sup>21</sup>

One of her fellow leaders reported other problems in an 1813 letter to South Union:

We sometimes discover lurking about our peaceful habitation some little tory that would wish to betray our souls into the hands of our enemies. There are three or four scoundrels of this grade who are very pestiferous. They go by the names of Old Slug, Mrs. Lounge-about, Great I and Old Fret!<sup>22</sup>

During the next several decades, conditions worsened. Relations between the sexes, though carefully supervised and subject to increasing regulation, more often ripened into "carnal" love. Many communities saw individual Brethren and Sisters leave the sect to marry, and so far two cases of fornication have been documented among the Believers—one at Shirley in 1832 and one at New Lebanon in 1835.<sup>23</sup> But other, more serious, difficulties loomed on the horizon.

Sometime during the mid-1830s, some members in the east became interested in the teachings of the dietary reformer, Sylvester Graham, who advocated a simple, meatless diet to control, among other things, sexual impulses in young men. Many younger Believers felt that God had revealed useful new truths to the "World's People" that they would do well to emulate, but many older Shakers doubted the necessity of renouncing food that had satisfied Mother Ann and her early followers, especially when the movement originated in the corrupt World.

In the absence of clear divinely inspired instructions on the subject, and perhaps due to a difference of opinion among themselves, the Lead Ministry left decisions regarding diet up to individual members, an unprecedented departure from previous practice. The ensuing discussion

21. Quoted by Green, "Biographic Memoir," p. 94.

22. Letter of unidentified New Lebanon Church Family Elder to Second Order Elders at South Union, Aug. 23, 1813. Quoted by Anna White and Leila S. Taylor, *Shakerism: Its Meaning and Message* (Columbus, Ohio, 1904), p. 134.

23. Brewer, *Shaker Communities, Shaker Lives*, pp. 94-95.



raged for many years and was extremely damaging to Shaker "union," as Brother Isaac Youngs observed: "People have ran very wild on this subject, and are of two parties, going to great extremes in opposite directions; the one discarding all indulgence of appetite,... the other observing no particular restriction..."<sup>24</sup> The inability of the Lead Ministry to determine an appropriate course of action in this case demonstrates the first major failure of the Society's system of consensus government, a failure directly traceable to demographic imbalances dating back several decades.

The disunion sparked by the Grahamite controversy was exacerbated by the revival known as "Mother's Work" that began in the winter of 1837-38. By this time, the Society was in a very precarious state, afflicted by an increasing apostasy rate, a high level of internal dissension, and a considerably weakened leadership. The revival, often seen as the final flowering of Shaker culture, was, in fact, largely the result of these conditions which made a retreat into the spiritual realm a welcome release for devout Believers.

The volume of inspired messages designed to correct members' behavior reveals all too clearly the state of the sect in the 1830s. Instrument Joseph Wicker, himself an Elder, transmitted the following counsel to his charges at Hancock in 1841, cataloging the behavior lapses that had plagued the Society for several decades:

Love not the ways of evil, Love not the carnal mind,  
 Love not to pick and cavil, Love not much fault to find;  
 Love not an idle spirit, Love not to fret and scold,  
 Love not to be from meeting, Love not to leave the fold.  
 Love not a boistrous spirit, Love not a noisy tread,  
 Love not a filthy union, Love not to slight your lead;  
 Love not to be a tattler, Love not to be unwise,  
 Love not a vile affection, Love not the least disguise.<sup>25</sup>

In spite of these and many other, similar pronouncements, the situation failed to improve. In the early 1840s, unpopular "gifts" prohibiting the use of tea, coffee and pork and prescribing the spiritual reception of "unbelieving spirits" led many members to lose faith in the instruments and the leaders who had anointed them, thus undermining the success of the revival.

24. Youngs, *A Concise View of the Church of God and of Christ on Earth Having its foundation In the faith of Christ's first and Second Appearing* (New Lebanon, N.Y., 1856-1860), Andrews Shaker Collection, Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, Del. (hereafter Andrews Collection), SA 760, pp. 299-302.

25. In *A Record of Messages and Communications given by Divine Inspiration* (Hancock, Mass., 1840-1845), Andrews Collection, SA 1066, p. 89.

By 1850, members in the eastern villages had become disheartened and disillusioned. The decline of the sect, evident in the manuscript record, and presaged by changes in age distribution that undermined the Society's leadership system, had become irrefutable. By 1850, the population of the eastern villages had dropped 7.3% to 2249. The next two decades would see an even more precipitous decline, until by 1870 the eastern communities had only 1444 members, a 35.8% drop in just twenty years.

This situation placed severe stress on those members remaining in the Society. In 1848, Elder Thomas Damon of Hancock reported in a letter to his friend, Elder George Wilcox of Enfield, Connecticut:

On going into the wash room a few days ago, one of the Sisters who was to work there alone, mentioned to me what a lonesome feeling she had come across her that afternoon, and remarked that if all the folks were only here that had gone away in all these years, it need not be so, as she could then have help and company enough.<sup>26</sup>

Brother Isaac Youngs observed in the late 1850s that these feelings were widely shared, and went on to suggest why the condition of the sect had altered so dramatically:

Much depression of spirit has been felt, and struggling thro' dark and gloomy prospects, on account of apostasies, lifelessness and backslidings of faithful members, and the scanty ingathering from without. There have been some efforts to open our testimony to the world... but there is such a stupidity of soul and absence of conviction for sin... that there is rarely one to be found who is willing to submit to the mortifying terms of the gospel. We gather in many children, but when they come to act for themselves, a large portion of them choose the flowery path of nature rather than the cross.<sup>27</sup>

The conditions Youngs described showed no signs of amelioration as the nineteenth century waned; in fact, things got worse. That any Shakers continued to maintain Mother Ann's gospel into this century is remarkable. The primary reason for their survival lies, I feel, in the birth of a new attitude toward Shaker life that first appeared in the 1860s. In 1861, Elder Giles Avery of the Lead Ministry observed:

Another great source of weakness to many souls in Zion is the want of numbers — Numbers, it is true, when united in righteousness, are the great fountain of strength... but the experiences of the human family have abundantly shown the fact that individuals, single handed [are] more potent for victory than a host on the side of error."<sup>28</sup>

26. Letter of Thomas Damon to George Wilcox, April 1, 1848, WRHS IV A 19.

27. Youngs, *Concise View*, pp. 176-77.

28. Giles B. Avery, "An Address to the Believers Generally" (New Lebanon, N.Y., 1861), Andrews Collection, SA 823, pp. 24-25.

Avery's comments indicate that many Believers with foresight had realized by this time that the Society as a whole was in decline, but also recognized that individual effort might still prove valuable. Doubtless it is this philosophy that has provided much of the sustaining force for Shakerism during the last century.