

The Ballad of Anne Bunnell: Troubled Families in the Shaker West, 1805–1825

Douglas L. Winiarski

Deep in the night of September 22, 1825, Anne Bunnell stepped out of her handsome framed dwelling at Turtle Creek, a rural township in Warren County, Ohio, located halfway between Cincinnati and Dayton. Standing atop a small rise, Bunnell's farmhouse provided a commanding view of her expansive 320-acre farm. It was unusually warm for the season and the fields of wheat and corn below were cloaked in mist from recent rains. Bunnell picked her way across the vegetable garden by candlelight then descended the hill to the barn. It was an impressive structure hewn from old-growth trees on the property. Some of the massive beams were sixteen inches square and ran the entire length of the forty-eight-foot, two-story structure. Larger by a quarter than typical counterparts in the eastern states, Bunnell's barn signified the power, prestige, and prosperity of its owner.

Drawing open the large wagon doors, Bunnell slipped inside and began rummaging nervously among her farming equipment. She was looking for something, perhaps weeping quietly as she searched. Bunnell's barn housed a variety of tools and other farming implements, including pitchforks and dung forks; barrels and steelyards; axes, augers, saws, shovels, and wedges; and a winter sled. Parked at the center of the structure was the family's gig, a two-wheeled carriage that served as their primary mode of transportation. Bunnell grabbed the harnessing items for which she had been searching: the surcingle, or thick leather belt that fitted around a horse's girth, and the long leather traces that ran through the surcingle and connected the horse to the gig for driving. Tying the traces together and looping them over the massive turning beam at the center of the barn, she fastened one end to an upright post and the other to the surcingle. Bunnell climbed onto

Douglas L. Winiarski is a professor of religious studies and American studies at the University of Richmond.

Many thanks to friends and colleagues who commented on earlier drafts of this article, including the Fall Line Early Americanists (FLEA) reading group (Jud Campbell, Terri Halperin, Marion Nelson, Ryan Smith, and Brent Tarter), the 2014–2016 Young Scholars in American Religion cohort (Kate Bowler, Heath Carter, Laurie Maffly-Kipp, Kate Moran, T. J. Tomlin, David Walker, and Grace Yukich), Christian Goodwillie, Christine Heyrman, Thomas Sakmyster, and the anonymous *JAH* reviewers. I am especially grateful to Mark and Cheryl Kolb, current owners of the Bunnell farm, for allowing me to examine the barn in which Anne ended her life. Richard Spence kindly lent his expertise in identifying the architectural elements of this extraordinary structure. Jenifer Baker, Deputy Archivist at the Warren County Records Center and Archives in Lebanon, Ohio, searched through dozens of boxes to locate the extensive court papers cited in the pages that follow. Students in the spring 2022 iteration of *Devil in the Details: Microhistory & Historical Narrative*, a first-year seminar at the University of Richmond, pushed me to improve and clarify the argument.

To contact Winiarski and access images, edited documents, and teaching materials related to this article, readers may visit <https://www.douglaswiniarski.com>.

doi: 10.1093/jahist/jaac117

© The Author 2022. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of the Organization of American Historians.
All rights reserved. For permissions, please e-mail: journals.permissions@oup.com.

the gig and buckled the surcingle tightly around her neck. Then she paused to collect her thoughts one final time and stepped off the elevated driver's seat into the annihilation of self-murder.¹

A newspaper story published four days later provided few details on Bunnell's shocking act in taking her own life. Readers of the Lebanon, Ohio, *Western Star* learned only that she had "been in much distress of mind in relation to her mode of life" and "previously made several attempts to commit suicide, but had been prevented." No coroner's inquest survives. It remains unclear who discovered Bunnell's body. Perhaps it was her sixteen-year-old son, William, the putative male head of the household; or her troubled older son, whose mental instability required placing him under the guardianship of a neighbor. Or it may have been Josiah Decker, the penniless paramour who shared her bed. Maybe it was their illegitimate daughter, Mary Ann, the youngest member of this peculiar blended family. Certainly, it could not have been Abner Bunnell, Anne's lawful husband of more than four decades. As the *Western Star* noted cryptically, he was the "tyrant" who had "mised her, and who persisted in requiring her continuance in a life prohibited by the laws of God and man." It was Abner's "oppression" that had driven Anne into such unconventional household arrangements in the first place and, eventually, produced the "delirium of distraction" in which she "committed the horrible act, which terminated her unhappy existence." Yet Abner was no rake, no miserable provider or hard-drinking deadbeat, no absconding husband. He lived two miles up the road in the prosperous settlement of Union Village, home to over five hundred members of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing.²

The Shakers were the fastest growing and most reviled religious sectarians in the new United States. Only later in the nineteenth century—and only after considerable strife and violence—did the self-styled "Believers" earn their reputations as honest, hardworking, and fair-dealing farm folk and artisans. Galvanized by an obscure English mill worker and religious visionary named Ann Lee, Shakerism flouted nearly all the conventions of Protestant Christianity. Rejecting the theological tenets of Calvinism, Shaker converts proclaimed Lee's advent as a new dispensation in Christian history, the second coming of the spirit of Christ in female form. The Believers condemned all other Protestant denominations as "antichristian" and replaced the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper with rituals of kneeling and confessing sins that smacked of popish superstition. Inhabiting a world of continuing revelation, miracles, signs, and wonders, Shakers engaged in worship practices in which they labored to call down the power of God through ecstatic dancing. Their bodies shook, trembled, and whirled. They spoke in tongues, practiced faith healing, and communed with the dead. Upon conversion to the sect, Shaker

¹ My speculative account of Anne Bunnell's suicide draws upon evidence from the *Lebanon (OH) Western Star*, Sept. 27, 1825; Joseph Mulford, Joseph Lamb, and Abraham Kever, "Bill of Appraisement," Sept. 27, 1825, Ann Bunnell Probate File, docket O, box 36, no. 13 (Warren County Archives and Records Center, Lebanon, Ohio); Nathaniel Taylor Diary, 1823–1830, Sept. 22, 1825, box 3, United Society of Believers (Shakers) Papers, 1808–1904, mss 119 (Ohio History Center, Columbus); and fieldwork at the Bunnell barn. See also Allen G. Noble and Margaret M. Geib, *Wood, Brick, and Stone: The North American Settlement Landscape; Volume 2: Barns and Farm Structures* (Amherst, Mass., 1984), 16–18. Anne Bunnell appears in various documents as "Anna," "Anny," and "Nancy," and her married name occasionally was spelled "Bonnell" or "Bunnel." I have retained the variant spellings appearing in quotations and archival citations but employ the most common spellings in my own prose.

² *Lebanon (OH) Western Star*, Sept. 27, 1825. For the composition of Anne Bunnell's household, see the entry for William Bunnell, Fourth Census of the United States, Turtle Creek Township, Ohio, 1820 (microfilm: M33, p. 228, verso), Records of the Bureau of the Census, RG 29 (National Archives, Washington, D.C.), available at Ancestry.com.

converts severed marital ties, surrendered their personal property and real estate, took up the cross of celibacy, and united in large communal families regulated by strict laws that segregated the sexes. And they were growing rapidly. Only eight Shakers accompanied Ann Lee on her transatlantic voyage to New York in 1774. Within a generation of her death, Believers numbered in the thousands and had organized a network of prosperous villages stretching from the Hudson Valley to southern Maine.³

Lee once prophesied the Shakers would one day open their distinctive celibate gospel to a people living in a “great level country” far to the southwest. During the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the sect expanded rapidly into the new settlements of trans-Appalachia during a period of intensified religious activity known as the Great Revival (1797–1805). Organized around multiday Presbyterian sacramental festivals and Methodist camp meetings—including the famed gathering at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, in August 1801—the western revivals drew immense crowds and initially fostered ecumenical cooperation. Yet within a few years, the Great Revival had devolved into a fractious scum, as ministers and laypeople wrangled over theology, ecclesiology, and, especially, the ecstatic bodily exercises attending the experience of the new birth. The once-dominant Presbyterian churches of Ohio and Kentucky soon were roiling with partisan schisms that fueled the growth of upstart denominations, including the Disciples of Christ and the Cumberland Presbyterians.⁴

Shaker leaders followed news of the western revivals with keen interest. Shortly after encountering an unusual story about the extreme bodily convulsions of western revival converts, the Shaker ministry at New Lebanon, New York, dispatched three missionaries to investigate. John Meacham, Issachar Bates, and Benjamin Seth Youngs trudged more than 1,200 miles through one of the worst winters of the nineteenth century. Arriving at Turtle Creek on March 22, 1805, the missionaries set to work evangelizing the most radical frontier “revivalers” in the region. Over the next several years, the Shakers gradually expanded their mission field, first among families at Turtle Creek and other revival strongholds in southern Ohio, then into central and southwestern Kentucky, and, finally, out to Indiana Territory. By 1812, the year the Shakers formally organized Union Village at Turtle Creek and four other western communal villages, more than one thousand men and women had confessed their sins, embraced the cross of celibacy, and set out on the Shakers’ path of spiritual perfection. Nearly all of these “Young believers,” as the missionaries called them, hailed from so-called “New-light” or “schismatic” factions that had recently broken away from the Presbyterians. Outsiders among the “world’s people” considered Shaker converts “unsteady” and “on the wild order,” but these zealous seekers were committed to following their religious experiences to the farthest reaches. Fervently believing they lived at the dawning of the millennium, they were willing to do just about

³ Benjamin Seth Youngs Journal, 1805, p. 54, Edward Deming Andrews Memorial Shaker Collection, 1747–1982, ASC 859 (Winterthur Library, Winterthur, Del.). The definitive study of Shakerism is Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers* (New Haven, 1992).

⁴ *Testimonies of the Life, Character, Revelations, and Doctrines of Our Ever Blessed Mother Ann Lee, and the Elders with Her* (Hancock, 1816), 221–22. Important histories of the Great Revival include John B. Boles, *The Great Revival: Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (1972; Lexington, Ky., 1996); Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scotland and the Making of American Revivalism* (1989; Grand Rapids, 2001); Paul K. Conkin, *Cane Ridge: America’s Pentecost* (Madison, 1990); and Ellen Eslinger, *Citizens of Zion: The Social Origins of Camp Meeting Revivalism* (Knoxville, 1999). On evangelicalism as a threat to the family, see Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York, 1997), esp. 117–60.

anything—including breaking with their families—to advance their ceaseless quest to embody the spirit of Christ. Abner Bunnell was one of them.⁵

Anne's suicide casts a pale light on the shadowy world of women living between and among the volatile evangelical communities of the early American republic. Where an earlier generation of scholars once pondered whether sectarian and utopian groups such as the Shakers enhanced or curtailed women's power, more recent studies have turned to the legal struggles and anti-Shaker campaigns of prominent eastern apostates such as Eunice Chapman and Mary Marshall Dyer. Bunnell's exceptionally well-documented story provides an opportunity to explore these issues in the settler communities of the West. For pioneering women, the divisions engendered by the Great Revival and the emergence of western Shakerism could lead to devastating emotional loss, social alienation, legal jeopardy, and economic disaster. At the same time, rising opposition to the revivals and increasing resistance to and violence against interloping religious sectarians provided opportunities for abandoned women to assert new forms of social power against their zealous seeker spouses. Shakerism played an outsized role in shaping the legal meanings of frontier family life, in which men and women increasingly viewed marriage in contractual terms based on mutual affection, rather than a religious sacrament sanctioning patriarchal property rights. The meteoric rise of the western believers between 1805 and 1825 fueled many of the tensions shaping frontier communities: between aggressive individualism and the desperate need for community; the power of patriarchy and its limits; the promise of landed wealth and the specter of poverty; ideals of religious liberty and their subversion; and the central place of families in the logic of settler colonialism and the many fragile forms they could take.⁶

Above all, the ballad of Anne Bunnell is a cautionary religious tale. Abandoned by her Shaker husband, she struggled for more than a decade to wrest control of her property, children, and legal identity in one of Ohio's earliest and best-documented divorce suits. Exhausted and disheartened after more than a decade of wrangling in the courts, she may have taken her own life in an act of depression, despair, or even madness—although it is impossible to know for sure. Seen from a different angle, however, Bunnell's suicide was the culminating act of defiance in a life spent struggling to overcome the entrenched structures

⁵ Edward Deming Andrews, "The Shaker Mission to the Shawnee Indians," *Winterthur Portfolio*, 7 (1972), 127; Richard M'Nemar, *The Kentucky Revival, or, A Short History of the Late Extraordinary Out-Pouring of the Spirit of God in the Western States of America* (Cincinnati, 1807), 41, 43; New Lebanon Ministry to David Darrow, April 28, 1808, ms 3944, Shaker Manuscripts, IV:A-31 (Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio); Abraham Chapline to Joseph Chapline, Aug. 28, 1810, in "Nourse-Chapline Letters," *Register of the Kentucky State Historical Society*, 31 (April 1933), 165–66. On the Shakers' theological concept of the "Christ within," see Stephen J. Stein, "A Candidate Statement of Our Principles': Early Shaker Theology in the West," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 133 (1999), 512. On the rise of western Shakerism, see Stein, *Shaker Experience in America*, 57–66; and Carol Medlicott, *Issachar Bates: A Shaker's Journey* (Hanover, 2013). For additional information on the large collection of Shaker manuscripts at the Western Reserve Historical Society, see Kermit J. Pike, *A Guide to Shaker Manuscripts in the Library of the Western Reserve Historical Society* (Cleveland, 1974).

⁶ For an assessment of the historiography of women's experiences in nineteenth-century sectarian and utopian communities, see Christopher Clark, "A Mother and Her Daughters at the Northampton Community: New Evidence on Women in Utopia," *New England Quarterly*, 75 (Dec. 2002), 593–95. On Mary Marshall Dyer and Eunice Chapman, see Elizabeth A. De Wolfe, *Shaking the Faith: Women, Family, and Mary Marshall Dyer's Anti-Shaker Campaign, 1815–1867* (New York, 2002); and Ilyon Woo, *The Great Divorce: A Nineteenth-Century Mother's Extraordinary Fight against Her Husband, the Shakers, and Her Times* (New York, 2010). Recent works highlighting the centrality of the family in the logic of settler colonialism include Anne F. Hyde, *Empires, Nations, and Families: A New History of the American West, 1800–1860* (New York, 2011); Honor Sachs, *Home Rule: Households, Manhood, and National Expansion on the Eighteenth-Century Kentucky Frontier* (New Haven, 2015); and Bethel Saler, *The Settlers' Empire: Colonialism and State Formation in America's Old Northwest* (Philadelphia, 2015).

of patriarchy that for decades had circumscribed her position in settler society. If rising rates of self-murder in the early republic registered a growing sense of discomfort with the whirlwind of economic, legal, political, and social changes wrought by the American Revolution, then Bunnell's extraordinary act of protest adds a crucial religious dimension to the maelstrom. Abner's ascendance from Great Revival convert, to schismatic New Light, to perfectionist Shaker ensnared Anne and their children in the vicissitudes of an increasingly competitive religious marketplace. In the end, she fell casualty to the Great Revival, the democratization of American Christianity, and the rise of American evangelicalism.⁷

Anne Bunnell was born in the Connecticut Farms district of Springfield, New Jersey, on February 12, 1768. Her father, Benjamin Scudder, was a prosperous millwright and farmer, Revolutionary War veteran, Presbyterian church leader, and a town official. Scudder spent much of his life acquiring land—dozens of parcels from meadows, mills, and a distillery along the Rahway River to farms and fields in Springfield and woodlots in the Watchung Hills. His sprawling account book reveals extensive economic ties within the community. Scudder traded milled boards, tanned hides, and agricultural products for labor, shoes, clothes, and finished goods. He amassed a wealth of livestock and high-status possessions, including a modest library of religious books and an assortment of carriages and riding chairs. He also owned at least one family of enslaved African Americans. By the time of his death in 1822, the Springfield grandee ranked among the wealthiest householders in central New Jersey.⁸

Shortly after the Revolutionary War, Scudder hired a young tradesman named Abner Bunnell to work in one of his mills. Bunnell, too, hailed from a prominent Essex County family, but his father had died young and Abner and his brother were put out to learn trades. Bunnell served three tours of duty in the war and fought at the bloody Battle of Monmouth. During the brief time he worked for Scudder, the young artisan began courting—perhaps clandestinely—his employer's daughter. When they married in April 1784, Anne was six months pregnant, a relatively common phenomenon in eighteenth-century America but one that may have raised eyebrows in Springfield. Scudder recorded their union in the margins of his almanac, but he did not attend the ceremony. Whether he disapproved of Abner—whom he later described as being “very poor”—remains unclear.⁹

⁷ I borrow the concepts of “democratization” and the “religious market” from Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, 1989), 3; and Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, 1992), 56. On the political meanings of suicide, see Richard Bell, *We Shall Be No More: Suicide and Self-Government in the Newly United States* (Cambridge, Mass., 2012).

⁸ Maud H. Greene, “Benjamin Scudder Bible Records,” *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society*, 66 (1948), 41; Virginia S. Burnett, transcriber, and Elmer T. Hutchinson, ed., “Marginal Jottings from the Almanacs of the Scudder Family,” *ibid.*, 63 (1945), 151–52; Benjamin Scudder ledger, 1784–1832, MG 1593 (New Jersey Historical Society, Newark); Benjamin Scudder will, Jan. 24, 1822, Essex County, N.J., Wills, vol. C, 1818–1823, pp. 478–83, image group: 5675836, available at FamilySearch.org; Springfield, N.J., rate list, 1820, Essex County Tax Ratables, 1778–1822, image group: 781591, *ibid.*

⁹ A. Van Doren Honeyman, ed., *Documents Relating to the Colonial and Revolutionary History of the State of New Jersey*, 1st series, vol. XXXIV, *Calendar of New Jersey Wills, Administrations, Etc.*, vol. 5: 1771–1780 (Trenton, 1931), 52; Christian Goodwillie, ed., “Shaker Revolutionary War Veterans: Pension Narratives and Related Documents,” *American Communal Societies Quarterly*, 14 (July–Oct. 2020), 220–21; Benjamin Scudder, “Answer,” Dec. 2, 1815, Warren County Court of Common Pleas, Series A, *Abner Bunnell and Nancy Bunnell v. Benjamin Scudder and David Fox*, November 1820 Term, box 42 (Warren County Archives and Records Center).

Perhaps grudgingly and out of a sense of paternal duty toward his compromised daughter did Scudder agree to provide one of his many Springfield properties for the young couple to set up housekeeping. During the next decade, Abner appeared in occasional entries in his father-in-law's almanacs and ledgers as an up-and-coming yeoman possessed of a strong work ethic and a wide range of abilities. He surveyed and assessed Scudder's properties; plowed and mowed his own acreage; and constructed roads and engaged in various projects to benefit the Springfield community. Once, the Bunnells hosted a "Spinning Frolick," a communal gathering in which the women of the neighborhood worked together during the day, then joined with the men for dancing and courting. Anne gave birth to ten children between 1784 and 1800, four of whom died in infancy.¹⁰

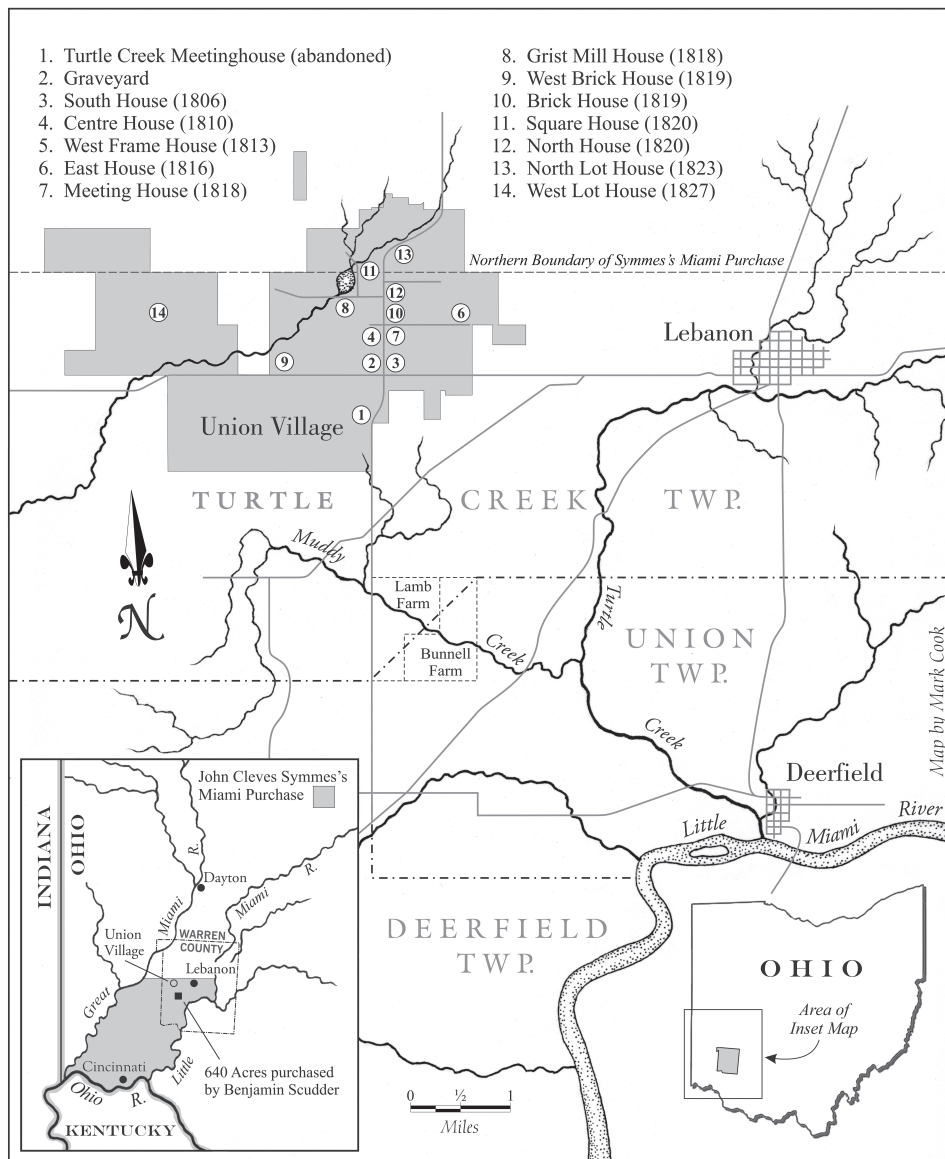
On May 25, 1801, Abner sold his household goods at a public auction and prepared to "set off for the Miami" with Anne and their six children. The Bunnells' decision to migrate to the Ohio Valley was part of a broader family strategy. Scudder had purchased over 1,200 acres of land in the Miami Purchase, a land speculation scheme in southwestern Ohio managed—poorly, as it later turned out—by New Jersey politician John Cleves Symmes and Springfield resident and Revolutionary War hero Jonathan Dayton. Scudder reserved two parcels for his youngest son and divided one entire section of 640 acres between the families of his two daughters, Anne Bunnell and Ruth Lamb. The group "Took their farewell" the following month. By early summer, Abner and Anne were working alongside the Lambs to establish their new farms in what would soon become Turtle Creek Township in newly organized Warren County. It was a first-rate parcel: level, thickly forested, and bisected by a creek. Few neighbors had such a promising head start in the race for landed prosperity in the newly opened settlements of the trans-Appalachian West.¹¹

The Bunnells and Lambs immediately set to work improving their lands. With axes and other gifts provided by his father-in-law, Abner and his older sons girdled trees and planted their first crop of corn. They built a substantial two-room, or dogtrot, log cabin, a barn, and a double corncrib. Abner provided valuable artisanal skills in the fledgling community at Turtle Creek, mending and cobbling shoes for his new neighbors. Within a few years, the Bunnells had thirty or forty acres under cultivation, and Abner ranked in the highest quartile of Warren County taxpayers. Two more children had been added to his family. Scudder regularly sent encouraging letters to his sons-in-law. But on November 14, 1805, the pattern of his correspondence changed dramatically. Instead of writing to Abner, as he had done for the previous several years, the New Jersey patriarch noted carefully in the marginalia of his almanacs that he had directed his latest "Letter to Anne Bonnell." Something had changed.¹²

¹⁰ Scudder, "Answer"; Burnett, transcriber, and Hutchinson, ed., "Marginal Jottings from the Almanacs of the Scudder Family" (1945), 156–57, 170, 221, 228; Virginia S. Burnett, transcriber, and Elmer T. Hutchinson, ed., "Marginal Jottings from the Almanacs of the Scudder Family," *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society*, 64 (1946), 28, 30; Greene, "Benjamin Scudder Bible Records," 44–45.

¹¹ Burnett, transcriber, and Hutchinson, ed., "Marginal Jottings from the Almanacs of the Scudder Family" (1946), 101; Hamilton County, Ohio, Deeds, vol. B1 (1794–1800), pp. 327–30, image group: 790061, available at FamilySearch.org.

¹² Burnett, transcriber, and Hutchinson, ed., "Marginal Jottings from the Almanacs of the Scudder Family" (1946), 101–6, 168–69. Joseph Lamb, deposition, Nov. 16, 1818, Warren County Court of Common Pleas, Series A, *Bunnell and Bunnell v. Scudder and Fox*, November 1820 Term, box 42 (Warren County Archives and Records Center); Henry Bunnell, deposition, Nov. 30, 1818, *ibid.*; Isaac Lamb, deposition, March 22, 1819, *ibid.*; Abner Bonnell, receipt, 1805, Jeremiah Cory Probate File, docket O, box 1, no. 17, *ibid.*; "A list of Residents lands in the County of Warren Subject to Taxation," 1806, Tax Records of Ohio, 1801–1814, image group: 4849183, available at FamilySearch.org; Greene, "Benjamin Scudder Bible Records," 45.



This map displays the Bunnell farm located a few miles south of Union Shaker Village in Warren County, Ohio. Shaded area represents Shaker landholdings ca. 1830, which totaled more than 4,000 acres. Numbered locations are keyed to Shaker communal family dwellings and related sites. SOURCES: “Plan of Union Village in 1829,” Shaker Manuscripts, I:A-19, ms 3944 (Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio); Warren County, Ohio, Deeds, 1:128, 329, 384, 390, 411, 438; 2:3, 257; 4:18, 118, 120–130, 230, 360; 5:238; 7:118, 411, 718; 8:294–95; 10:177, 205; 11:158, 396; 12:39–40, 270, 544; 13:104, 306 (Warren County Recorder’s Office, Lebanon, Ohio).

The Bunnells had arrived at Turtle Creek at a propitious moment in the religious history of the trans-Appalachian West. Two months after they departed from New Jersey, Kentucky had been set ablaze by the famed Cane Ridge sacrament, the latest in a string of powerful outdoor sacramental festivals and camp meetings associated with the Great Revival.

As many as twenty thousand people descended on clergyman Barton Stone's formidable log church in the heart of the bluegrass country in August 1801. From dawn to dusk over four days, a battery of Presbyterian, Baptist, and Methodist ministers delivered powerful sermons as their audiences fasted, prayed, and prepared to receive the Lord's Supper. Thousands swooned and crumpled to the ground under the weight of their perceived sins. The "strange operation" on the bodies of the revivalers became known as the falling exercise. The new somatic phenomenon, which many people associated with the physical descent and implantation of God's Holy Spirit in the event of conversion, spread rapidly through the region. Outdoor religious meetings proliferated, fueled by laymen and laywomen—including many from places such as Turtle Creek in southern Ohio—who traveled hundreds of miles to witness firsthand the extraordinary work of the revivals.¹³

The most powerful preacher at Cane Ridge was a "hot headed" Presbyterian minister named Richard McNemar. Concerned colleagues found his preaching theologically unintelligible yet emotionally powerful. Within a few months of the Cane Ridge sacrament, McNemar had rejected the traditional Calvinist doctrine of atonement. He argued that grace came freely to any earnest seeker and that it was possible for redeemed saints to reach a state of spiritual perfection in which they became "like God, holy, just and good." For these seemingly unorthodox statements, McNemar was released from his pastorate at Cabin Creek, Kentucky, but he quickly found a congregation eager for his services across the Ohio River at Turtle Creek. Shortly after his arrival, he and Barton Stone gathered a faction of "New Light" Presbyterian ministers who had grown dissatisfied with their more conservative colleagues' mounting opposition toward revival innovations. The renegades eventually withdrew from the Synod of Kentucky and briefly formed the rump Springfield Presbytery before announcing the dissolution of this makeshift dissenting organization in a published "Last Will and Testament." Freed from all ecclesiastical restraints, Turtle Creek and the other "schismatic" congregations in Ohio and Kentucky abjured all creeds, rejected a learned ministry, embraced spirit-centered gifts of the Holy Spirit, and adopted the name "Christians" in emulation of what they understood to be the pure churches of the apostolic era.¹⁴

Under McNemar's charismatic leadership, the Turtle Creek congregation exploded into an extraordinary array of bizarre somatic religious phenomena. Convicted sinners barked like dogs, rolled like logs, or were struck to the ground, where they lay insensible for hours at a time. Others sprang up, ran joyously through the woods, burst into peals of uncontrolled laughter, and engaged in ecstatic dancing. Observers claimed to have smelled unearthly fragrances or heard eerie music issuing directly from the bodies of re-born saints. People witnessed miracles, including dreams, waking visions, celestial sights, and other omens. A local resident near Turtle Creek claimed to have witnessed a "shower of blood" fall from a cloudless sky against his log cabin during the summer of 1804. But of all the phenomena attending the revival at Turtle Creek, none drew more commentary

¹³ M'Nemar, *Kentucky Revival*, 26. On the Cane Ridge sacrament, see Schmidt, *Holy Fairs*, 59–68; and Conkin, *Cane Ridge*, 64–114.

¹⁴ John Lyle, "Narratio Factorum," 1801–1808, pp. 21–24, 40–41, sc 422 (Kentucky Historical Society, Frankfort); M'Nemar, *Kentucky Revival*, 41–55; Washington, Ohio, First Presbytery, Minutes and Records, 1799–1810, pp. 63–65, 71–73 (Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, Pa.); William Warren Sweet, ed., *Religion on the American Frontier*, vol. II: *The Presbyterians, 1783–1840: A Collection of Source Materials* (New York, 1936), 314–23. For the text of the "Last Will and Testament," see *Observations on Church Government, by the Presbytery of Springfield* (Cincinnati, 1807), 19–23. On the "McNemar-Stone schism," see Boles, *Great Revival*, 149–59.

than “the jerks,” violent and involuntary convulsions that gripped sinners in the throes of the new birth. “They who fall down are strongly convulsed, and so violently agitated,” one visiting minister reported, “that it will require two or three to hold one of them.” The “work engaged my whole man,” a Turtle Creek parishioner later acknowledged, as religious meetings spilled out of the meetinghouse and lasted deep into the night.¹⁵

Newspaper accounts of the jerks and other wonders attending the western revivals soon caught the attention of the Shakers in upstate New York. On January 1, 1805, three missionaries—Issachar Bates, John Meacham, and Benjamin S. Youngs—set out on a 1,200-mile “Long Walk” to Ohio. The trio journeyed south through New York City, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington, then down the Shenandoah Valley, across Cumberland Gap, and into the Kentucky bluegrass country. They sought “jerkers” along the way, convinced the somatic fits were a “preparatory work” that readied Presbyterian New Lights to embrace the Shakers’ unique testimony of celibacy and bodily discipline. They targeted the breakaway “christian” congregations that had revolted against the Presbyterians and “refuse[d] to Join themselves to any Denomination of a former Standing.” On March 22, following a brief and unprofitable visit to Cane Ridge, the three men arrived at Turtle Creek. Here, less than two miles from Abner and Anne Bunnell’s farm, the Shakers would achieve their greatest successes in the West. Within a few days they had converted Malcom Worley, a leading New Light layman, and his wife. They were followed by Richard McNemar—along with many of his former Presbyterian congregants.¹⁶

As members of Turtle Creek Presbyterian church, the Bunnells participated in the growing religious radicalism in the region. Abner, in particular, seems to have embraced the revivals with unrestrained zeal. Since moving to the Miami country at the peak of the Great Revival, he had abandoned the Presbyterianism of his youth, experimented with Methodism, and joined McNemar’s New Light church. When the Shakers arrived, Abner was primed to convert. The missionaries encountered the Bunnells for the first time less than a month after arriving at Turtle Creek. Early on, Benjamin Youngs described the family as having “some faith.” Then, on June 2, 1805, before an audience of two hundred spectators who packed the former Turtle Creek Presbyterian meetinghouse, Abner knelt before Youngs, confessed his sins and converted to Shakerism. Issachar Bates struck up a laboring song, and Bunnell joined the group of thirty Shakers in their dancing worship. It was a “strange sight,” as the Believers were enveloped within a “thick cloud” of spectators who mocked, screamed, and threatened. Undaunted, Abner and his new brethren and sisters responded with equal force, clapping their hands, praising God, and crying, “farewell world.” Anne watched helplessly as her husband descended into the tumult.¹⁷

¹⁵ McNemar, *Kentucky Revival*, 58–69; David Spinning, “A Short Sketch of the Life of David Spinning,” Sept. 17, 1841, in *Shaker Autobiographies, Biographies, and Testimonies, 1806–1907*, ed. Christian Goodwillie and Glendyne R. Wergland (3 vols., London, 2014), I, 316–20; Thomas Hunt, “Autobiographical Sketches of Thomas Hunt Written by Request,” 1850 (microfilm: reel 12, no. 186, pp. 23–24), Shaker Collection of Records Concerning the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing, 1676–1937, MSS 39552 (Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.); John King to Ashbel Green, May 4, 1802, box 37, case 8, Simon Gratz Autograph Collection, 1343–1928, Collection 0250A (Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia). On the importance of the jerks during the western revivals, see Douglas L. Winiarski, “Seized by the Jerks: Shakers, Spirit Possession, and the Great Revival,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 76 (Jan. 2019), 111–50.

¹⁶ Douglas L. Winiarski, “Shakers and Jerkers: Letters from the ‘Long Walk,’ 1805, Part I,” *Journal of East Tennessee History*, 89 (2017), 90–110, esp. 104; Douglas L. Winiarski, “Shakers and Jerkers: Letters from the ‘Long Walk,’ 1805, Part II,” *ibid.*, 90 (2018), 84–105.

¹⁷ Hannah Bowers to Abner Bunnell, Feb. 25, 1806, Shaker Manuscripts, IV:A-66; Youngs Journal, 1805, p. 91, Andrews Memorial Shaker Collection.

Evidence of Bunnell's new religious commitments appeared in an unusual exchange of letters with his sister, Hannah Bowers, who lived in New Jersey. "I have heard that you have left your family & Joined the Shaking Quakers," Bowers wrote in February 1806. "Can it be true?" Bowers castigated her brother for being "tossed & fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine" like a "wave of the Sea." Wandering from the "good old way" of Reformed Protestantism, she warned, Bunnell would inevitably stray into heterodox and soul-damning heresies peddled by false prophets claiming to speak in the name of Christ. Shaker teachings regarding celibacy and marriage were manifestly unscriptural, Bowers asserted, and she mobilized biblical texts to support her contention. "What do you now think of that passage" in 1 Timothy, she challenged, "whare it is said he that provideth not for his own especially those of his own household hath denyed the faith?" "Dear Brother," Bowers pleaded, "Look back & consider the path you have trod."¹⁸

In his reply, Bunnell countered that he had not abandoned his family. He loved Anne and the children—as well as all of his former family members, neighbors, and friends. It was only "their corrupt & fleshly lives I revolt from," he admitted. Worshipping with the Presbyterians and Methodists had rendered Bunnell "respectable" in the eyes of the world's people but "never could have answered to take me to heaven." All the talking he had done about his religious experiences during the recent revivals was mere bluster. Even after his supposed conversion, he remained ensnared by "ungodly lusts," his soul thrown open to eternal damnation as he continued to engage in sexual intercourse and propagate children with his wife. The Shakers had finally unmasked this cunning deception as a plot of antichrist. "We think we have followed the old Adam long enough in the generation," he explained to Bowers, "& it is now time for us to set out & follow Christ in the regeneration." The Shakers' celibate gospel would be the "last dispensation of Gods mercy to a lost world," he warned her. Only those who made their bodies "temples of the holy Ghost" by crucifying their lust for "natural Generation" and taking up the Shakers' "final cross" would enter the kingdom of heaven. He expressed hope that Bowers, Anne, and all the former members of his family would "find the little narrow way that leads into it"—before it was too late.¹⁹

At the time he replied to his sister's letter, Abner claimed he was still living at home "engaged in the necessary calls & duties of life." Yet other evidence suggests a very different situation. Following his conversion to Shakerism, Abner divided the Bunnells' dog-trot cabin in half, allocating one end to himself and the other to Anne. He refused to engage in any labor on her behalf—even to the point of forbidding their sons to cut her firewood during the winter. Both spouses later recalled stories of physical violence. Anne recounted dreadful tales of cruelty in which her husband viciously beat her, threw her to the ground, and dragged her about the house. On one occasion, he bound her feet and wrists simply because she refused to give their frightened younger children clean clothes to attend a Shaker meeting. Abner countered that Anne had been the abuser, ordering him off their property after striking him over the head with a pair of tongs while he was reading his Bible.²⁰

The breaking point came during the spring of 1807, when Abner decided to move to the Shakers' new settlement a few miles up the road at Turtle Creek. In an odd separation

¹⁸ Youngs Journal, 1805, p. 91, Andrews Memorial Shaker Collection.

¹⁹ Abner Bunnell to Bowers, Aug. 6, 1806, Shaker Manuscripts, IV:A-66.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

agreement drafted on March 25, Abner acknowledged that he had been filled with the Shakers' "magic Doctrin" and could no longer cohabit with his wife. He and Anne agreed to divide their "Goods and Chattels." Abner further pledged never to interrupt Anne's enjoyment or use of the land or personal property given to them by her father nor would he ever threaten to take away any of their three youngest children. But he did entice four of their oldest sons—Abner Jr., Isaac, Benjamin, and Clark—to move with him, and they left with nearly all of the family's clothing, furniture, and tools. As Anne later testified in court, Abner failed to abide by the separation agreement. Even as he took up residence among the Shakers, he repeatedly threatened to come back for his land. In rejecting the truth of the Shaker gospel, Abner maintained, Anne had defiled their property. He now referred to their farm as the "devils land" and was convinced that "he must give up himself & his house & all he had to the Lord & live upon redeemed land, for what was given up to the Shakers was redeemed to the Lord." Then, in "very angry & threatening manner," Abner warned his former wife he would one day throw her "on the fire & roast her if she did not give him up the deed" to their property, "that he might give it up to the Lord, & to the Shakers for they were the people of the Lord."²¹

Saddled with the three youngest children, Anne faced an uncertain future. As an estranged wife and feme covert, she possessed no legal status, no ability to transact business dealings on credit, and no guarantee of controlling the property given to her by her father. For the next two decades, she lived in constant fear that the "Shakers would rob her of all she had, as they had taken her husband and the Children that was able to Use any industry." Abner's radical religious awakening had placed her in a "dejected & very disconsolate situation."²²

The Shakers suffered bitter and often violent opposition almost from the moment of their arrival in North America. Early witnesses to Ann Lee's several preaching tours of New England during the 1780s puzzled over whether the self-proclaimed "Elect Lady" was a prophet, a British spy, a witch, or a common drunkard. Mobs gathered on numerous occasions, as Lee and her disciples were beaten, whipped, and jailed for disturbing the peace. Early visitors to Shaker villages scoffed at their blasphemous anti-Calvinist theology, lampooned their "gymnastic" dancing worship practices, and condemned the Believers' gaunt, pallid appearance, even as they praised the neatness of their productive villages. The sect suffered relentless legal harassment as well as unfavorable public exposure through newspaper accounts and scandalous exposés penned by former members. The "extravagant conduct of these infatuated people," summarized one opponent, was a "burlesque on all moral and religious principle."²³

²¹ "An article of agreement between Abner Bonnel and Nancy," March 25, 1807, Warren County Court of Common Pleas, *Bunnell and Bunnell v. Scudder and Fox*, November 1820 Term, box 42 (Warren County Archives and Records Center); Anne Bunnell, "Replication," Sept. 25, 1811, Warren County Court of Common Pleas, Supreme Court of Ohio, *Anna Bunnell v. Abner Bunnell*, September 1811 Term, box 13, *ibid.*

²² Bunnell, "Replication"; Anne Bunnell, divorce petition, June 4, 1811, Warren County Court of Common Pleas, Supreme Court of Ohio, *Bunnell v. Bunnell*, October 1812 Term, box 15, *ibid.*

²³ Glendyne R. Wergland, ed., *Visiting the Shakers, 1778–1849: Watervliet, Hancock, Tyringham, New Lebanon* (Clinton, 2007), 14, 20–21. See also Christian Goodwillie, "The Shakers in Eighteenth-Century Newspapers—Part One: 'From a Spirit of Detraction and Slander,'" *American Communal Societies Quarterly*, 4 (July 2010), 161–84; and "General Introduction," in *Writings of Shaker Apostates and Anti-Shakers, 1782–1850*, ed. Christian Goodwillie (3 vols., New York, 2015), I, xvii–xxxiv.

Although many of these same general criticisms continued to dog the Believers' missionary efforts in the trans-Appalachian West, frontier critics narrowed the scope of their opposition and trained their sights on the "leading feature" of Shakerism: their controversial attitudes toward sexuality, marriage, and the family. Reports circulating in Ohio and Kentucky during the first two decades of the nineteenth century seldom failed to note how the Believers prohibited the "natural use of the wife" and "propagation of the human species," "dissolved the sacred ties of matrimony," required men and women to assume the titles of brother and sister, "seperated many familys," and even exhorted their members to express hatred toward their unconverted former spouses "for the sake of religion." "Matrimonial cohabitation," a visitor to Union Village candidly explained in 1817, "they style legalized lust." Indeed, the Shakers' "rather indelicate" discussions of sexual intercourse as the original sin of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2 struck one traveler as being "so opposite to any thing like decency, that none but the filthiest pen could prostitute itself in detailing it." "I consider you beyond the reach of friendship's warning voice," one western politician complained in a letter to a prominent convert who had "discarded the wife of your bosom." He excoriated the believers' communal family practices as a form of "mental slavery," the "greatest abomination in the land," and a disgusting sign of "self-degradation and pollution." "Let Shakerism predominate," railed the outspoken Presbyterian elder James Smith of Kentucky, "and it will extirpate Christianity, destroy marriage, and also our present free government, and finally depopulate America."²⁴

Shaker celibacy touched a political nerve in the western states and territories because it struck at the very engine of settler colonialism: the frontier family. To be sure, the early republic was littered with broken marriages from down east Maine to the Natchez Trace. Elopement notices appearing in newspapers and occasional divorce petitions submitted to the courts pointed toward broad patterns of discontent. Abuse, adultery, alcoholism, debt, and a host of economic factors fueled failing marriages. These problems hit even harder in the nascent communities of the trans-Appalachian West, where transience was high, neighborhood ties fragile, and traditional social institutions weak. Not only were large farm families the primary units of economic production in places such as Turtle Creek, they also formed the advance guard of a rapidly expanding American empire. Religious sectarians such as the Shakers, who practiced rigorous sexual restraint and promoted alternative communal families of choice, menaced the orderly expansion of the republic.²⁵

²⁴ Unknown to Elizabeth Chatin, Nov. 11, 1817, Society Collection (Historical Society of Pennsylvania); *Brown's Western Calendar, or, the Cincinnati Almanac, for the Year of Our Lord Eighteen Hundred & Seven* (Cincinnati, 1806), [25]; Edward S. Joynes, ed., "Memoranda Made by Thomas R. Joynes, on a Journey to the States of Ohio and Kentucky, 1810," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 10 (April 1902), 224; David Thomson to Garner McNemar, Nov. 15, 1825, in *Biography of General David Thomson* (n.p., n.d.), Berry-Thomson-Walker Family Papers, 1830–1893 (State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia); Paul Woehrmann, "The Autobiography of Abraham Sneath, Frontier Preacher," *Filson Club Historical Quarterly*, 51 (Oct. 1977), 326; James McBride to Mary McRoberts, July 14, 1811, in "The Shakers of Ohio: An Early Nineteenth-Century Account," *Cincinnati Historical Society Bulletin*, 29 (Summer 1971), 131; William Tell Harris, *Remarks Made during a Tour through the United States of America, in the Years 1817, 1818, and 1819* (London, 1821), 121; James Smith, "An Attempt to Develop Shakerism," *Chillicothe (OH) Supporter*, July 10, 1810, in *Writings of Shaker Apostates and Anti-Shakers*, ed. Goodwillie, I, 184. For a survey of the broad sweep of anti-Shaker conflicts, see Tom Kanon, "'Seduced, Bewildered, and Lost': Anti-Shakerism on the Early Nineteenth-Century Frontier," *Ohio Valley History*, 7 (Summer 2007), 1–30. See also Adam Jortner, *Blood from the Sky: Miracles and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville, 2017), 91–111.

²⁵ I borrow the helpful concepts of sexual restraint and families of choice from Kara M. French, *Against Sex: Identities of Sexual Restraint in Early America* (Chapel Hill, 2021), 11, 72. On troubled marriages in the early national

It was for this reason, in large part, that Shaker missionaries John Meacham, Issachar Bates, and Benjamin Seth Youngs tread lightly during their first years in the West. God's "hunters" in the "wild wooden world," as the travelers styled themselves, selected their targets carefully and labored exclusively with disaffected Presbyterian revivalers. Schismatic clergyman Richard McNemar and his wife were among their earliest converts, followed by more than a dozen members of his breakaway Christian congregation at Turtle Creek, including Abner Bunnell. The missionaries tempered their message as well. They spoke in public only when invited; preached in general terms against the flesh, rather than advocating the strict celibacy for which the sect was known; and, for more than a year, they shielded their western converts from the most controversial Shaker doctrines, including what Youngs called the "first pillar of the Gospel": the divinity of their founder, Ann Lee.²⁶

Shaker evangelists worked within existing families, targeting entire households rather than individuals. Shortly after arriving in Ohio to assume leadership over the emerging western communities, Shaker elder David Darrow, reported that the "Great part" of the young believers were "married people." Of the more than 120 families that signed the earliest extant Shaker covenants at Turtle Creek (later known as Union Village) and Beulah (renamed Watervliet) near Dayton, Ohio, and Shawnee Run (renamed Pleasant Hill) and Gasper River (renamed South Union), Kentucky, between 1812 and 1815, over 80 percent did so as family units, with husbands and wives confessing their sins simultaneously or within a few weeks of one another. More than 90 percent of all married western converts brought children with them.²⁷

Converted families continued living together, as the Shakers slowly built up their following and quietly acquired land for their villages. Early maps of the Shaker settlement at Turtle Creek depict a landscape of newly erected log cabins housing resettled nuclear family groups, rather than the large communal dormitories for which the Shakers were best known. Joseph Stout built his house next to the clapboard dwelling of Malcom Worley, the Shaker's first western convert, whose property formed the nucleus of the emerging community. John Carson and his wife moved into a blacksmith shop at a crossroads along the main road from Cincinnati to Dayton; David Johnson, Calvin Morrell, and Samuel Rollins relocated their families to new structures adjacent to Richard McNemar's dogtrot; and Thomas Hunt built a cabin in the pasture near the Believers' large woodlot. "I lived in my own family," Hunt later recalled, "and managed for myself, until the spring of 1811, when we broke up our family, and gathered into large families."²⁸

Despite their cautious early efforts at evangelization, the Shakers nonetheless incited a vicious "Spirit of persecution" wherever they went. As dozens, then scores, then hundreds of New Light "religious Revolutionizers" confessed their sins, embraced celibacy,

period, see Merrill D. Smith, *Breaking the Bonds: Marital Discord in Pennsylvania, 1730–1830* (New York, 1991); Mary Beth Stevens, *Stray Wives: Marital Conflict in Early National New England* (New York, 2005); and Allison Dorothy Fredette, *Marriage on the Border: Love, Mutuality, and Divorce in the Upper South during the Civil War* (Lexington, Ky., 2020).

²⁶ Moses Eastwood, transcriber, "A Concise Sketch of the Life and Experience of Isachar Bates, Written by Himself," ca. 1856, p. 44, Shakers Collection, ms 003 (Dayton Metro Library, Dayton, Ohio); Benjamin Seth Youngs Journal, no. 6, Nov. 3, 1806–Jan. 21, 1807, p. 3 (Emma B. King Library, Shaker Museum, Old Chatham, N.Y.); John Meacham et al., to the New Lebanon ministry, June 1, 1805, Shaker Manuscripts, IV:A-66.

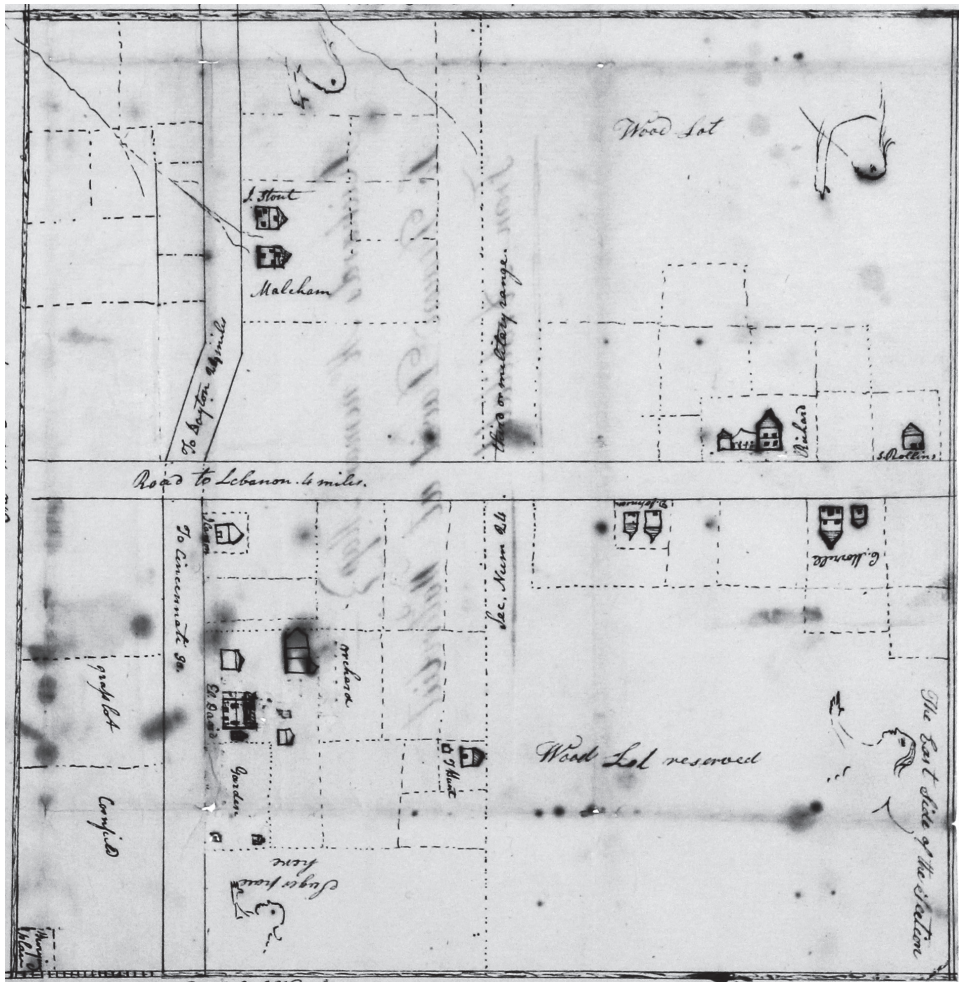
²⁷ Darrow et al. to the New Lebanon ministry, Sept. 25, 1805, Shaker Manuscripts, IV:A-66.

²⁸ Hunt, "Autobiographical Sketches of Thomas Hunt Written by Request," p. [25]; Robert P. Emlen, *Shaker Village Views: Illustrated Maps and Landscape Drawings by Shaker Artists of the Nineteenth Century* (Hanover, 1987), 32–37.

Table 1. Family Affiliation among Married Converts in Four Western Shaker Communities

Family Affiliation	Turtle Creek, Ohio (1812)		Beulah, Ohio (1815)		Shansee Run, Kentucky (1815)		South Union, Kentucky (1812)		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Both Spouses	36	83.7%	10	76.9%	37	78.7%	22	88.0%	105	82.0%
Wife Only	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	7	14.9%	1	4.0%	8	6.3%
Husband Only	7	16.3%	3	23.1%	3	6.4%	2	8.0%	15	11.7%
Total Households	43	100.0%	13	100.0%	47	100.0%	25	100.0%	128	100.0%
Brought Children	37	86.0%	12	92.3%	45	95.7%	25	100.0%	119	93.0%

SOURCES: The figures in this table are derived from a database of more than 2,000 men, women, and children who joined the western Shaker communities between 1805 and 1829. I have assembled data on the age, marital status, family relationships, and date of conversion for these “young Believers” from a wide range of vital records and genealogical sources, as well as various collections of Shaker vital records, which include the following: Benjamin Seth Youngs, *Journal*, 1805, Edward Deming Andrews Memorial Shaker Collection, 1747–1982, ASC 859 (Winterthur Library, Winterthur, Del.); Benjamin Seth Youngs, diaries and journals, 1788–1807 (Emma B. King Library, Shaker Museum/Mount Lebanon, Old Chatham, N.Y.); Harvey L. Eads, transcriber, “Record Book A (including Autobiography of John Rankin, Sr., 1805–1836, Shakers of South Union, Kentucky, Collection, 1804–1836, mss 597 (Manuscripts and Folklife Archives, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green); William T. Mooney, *A List of Shaker Names from the Official Church Record of Watervliet, Ohio, 1800–1882* (Dayton, 2003); Oliver C. Hampton, membership list compiled from various sources, 1805–1898, Shaker Manuscripts, III:B-33 (Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio); Pleasant Hill Shakers, Roll Book, 1805–1887, box 1 (Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill, Harrodsburg, Ky.); South Union, Ky., graveyard book, 1881, typescript, Shaker Manuscripts, III:B-32; and South Union, Ky., agreements, 1812–1829, Shakers of South Union, Kentucky, Collection, 1769–1893, mss 154. The village-level figures in the table draw upon datasets created by cross-referencing converts with pre-1820 western Shaker covenants. These sources include “The Covenant of the Church at Union Village in the County of Warren and State of Ohio: Gathered and Constituted in the Year of Our Lord 1812,” Jan. 15, 1812 (microfilm: reel 19, no. 262, pp. 13–16), Shaker Collection of Records Concerning the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing, 1676–1937, mss 39552 (Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.); “Certificate to the trustees of Section No. 29 4th township Warren County Ohio,” July 8, 1813 (Walter Havighurst Special Collections & University Archives, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio); “Copy of the Church Covenant,” 1815, documents copied from church records at Watervliet, Ohio . . . , 1804–1882 (microfilm: reel 19, no. 262, pp. 5–6), Shaker Collection of Records Concerning the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing; “Church Records: In Three Books, A, B & C,” 1845, folder 2 (Pleasant Hill Shaker Village, Shakerstown, Ky). Data excludes children, unmarried converts, widows and widowers, individuals for which there is insufficient information to determine family background, and the small, poorly documented Shaker community at West Union (Busro), Indiana.



This detail from an early manuscript map of the Shaker settlement at Turtle Creek, Ohio, depicts new converts living with their families in separate cabins—most of which had been recently erected. Richard McNemar, “Richard McNemar’s Draft of the Section that the old believers bot,” ca. 1806 (Emma B. King Library, Shaker Museum, Old Chatham, N.Y.). Courtesy Shaker Museum/ Mount Lebanon.

and dissolved their families, the western Shakers endured waves of vigilante violence at the hands of the world’s people. Benjamin Seth Youngs recorded in his travel journals numerous encounters with “blood thirsty” settlers “Drunk with opposition.” Shakers were spat upon and menaced with knives, clubs, and pistols. During the fall of 1806, a group of mounted Kentuckians accosted Youngs along an isolated stretch of road, interrogated him about the recent religious disturbances in the region, and threatened to castrate him. On another occasion, he and a companion spent an anxious night in the attic of a milk house in Kentucky, terrorized by a posse of ruffians who pelted the building with rocks and fired their guns in the air. At Turtle Creek, vigilantes smashed the windows in the Shakers’ first communal dwelling and tore down their fences. They poisoned the Believers’ horses, mutilated their livestock, and torched the large wooden platform on which the western converts performed their weekly dancing worship. For his part, Youngs

gloried in his persecution. Anti-Shaker violence gave a new sacred meaning to the old Native American myth of the Ohio Valley as a “dark & bloody land.”²⁹

Western settlers had many reasons to persecute the Shakers, but celibacy and family concerns topped the list of grievances. As spouses divided over their religious commitments, many families vacillated—one day “fully believing & tender” and the next “prejudiced” and “bitterly opposed” to the Shaker testimony. Household conversations devolved into shouting matches between spouses; fathers turned their converting daughters out of doors. William Beedle, the oldest settler in Warren County, disinherited three adult children who brought their families into the Shaker fold. One man threatened to shoot the first Shaker that came to his house to “delude & draw away any of his family,” although he later joined the society. Another woman vowed to commit suicide if her husband united with the Believers, while a neighbor gave his confessing spouse “two days to recant or be gone.” Boaz Murphy cruelly whipped his Shaker-sympathizing wife in the presence of one of the missionaries, whereupon she “gave up & went off with him.” “All the country appeared to be in an uproar” against the “false prophets” and “Deceivers,” Youngs noted in his journal, for “Breaking apart familys & churches.”³⁰

Families with divided religious loyalties posed the greatest threat to the social order. In previous generations elsewhere in British North America and the early American republic, most households affiliated with only one Protestant denomination. Church membership was a family strategy—a joint decision made by husbands and wives. Mothers typically took the lead in bringing their families within the protective watch of mainstream churches. But the evangelical awakenings of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries transformed the meaning of church affiliation from a family strategy to an individual choice. Tensions occasionally erupted within families, as parents split their religious loyalties between Congregationalists and Episcopalians, Methodists and Baptists. Radical sectarian movements such as Shakerism, however, threatened to unmake households altogether. The stringent social and legal demands of the Believers’ faith, which required converts to dissolve their marriages, consecrate their lands and personal property to the group, and sever social and economic ties with the world’s people, explains why men typically led their families into the Shaker fold. Conversion to Shakerism tended to run in family lines, and most male Believers eventually brought their spouses and children with them. Yet husbands predominated among the small numbers of married people who joined the western Shaker communities apart from their spouses. Comprising 12 percent of all converting western households with Shaker converts, husbands who broke with their families—men like Abner Bunnell—presented a clear and present danger to the stability of settler society.³¹

²⁹ Darrow and John Meacham to David Meacham, Dec. 12, 1805 (microfilm: reel 18, item 245) Shaker Collection of Records Concerning the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing; David Rice to [Ashbel Green], May 14, 1806, box 233, Simon Gratz Autograph Collection, 1517–1925, Collection 0250B (Historical Society of Pennsylvania); Youngs Journal, 1805, pp. 118, 136, Andrews Memorial Shaker Collection; Youngs to Matthew Houston, Oct. 20, 1806, Shaker Manuscripts, IV:A-52; Darrow et al. to the New Lebanon ministry, Dec. 19, 1805, Shaker Manuscripts, IV:A-66; Youngs to Ebenezer Cooley, Feb. 2, 1806, *ibid.*

³⁰ Youngs Journal, 1805, pp. 68, 96, 101, 105, 212, Andrews Memorial Shaker Collection; William Beedle, will, March 9, 1812, William Beedle Probate File, docket O, box 8, no. 1 (Warren County Archives and Records Center); Harvey L. Eads, transcriber, “Record Book A (including Autobiography of John Raankin, Sr.),” 1805–1836, p. 65, Shakers of South Union, Kentucky, Collection, 1804–1836, mss 597 (Manuscripts and Folklife Archives, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green); Darrow et al. to Lucy Wright, Aug. 13, 1806, Shaker Manuscripts, IV:A-66.

³¹ Douglas L. Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light: Experiencing Religious Awakenings in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill, 2017), 87–99, 107–8, 488–97, 518, 521. See also Priscilla J. Brewer, “The

Shaker household conversions in the West thus followed distinctly gendered patterns. Husbands abandoned by their wives could respond in a number of ways. Some of these men lashed out in violence, but none sued for divorce and a few appear to have ended their marriages amicably. At the Gasper River settlement in Logan County, Kentucky, at least two men who rejected the Shaker gospel willingly consented to the departure of their converted wives and children. On November 2, 1812, William B. Martin signed an agreement in which he granted his wife, Patience, and four children the right to “remain in & united with the Society of Believers or people called Shakers.” Martin pledged never to “sue, molest or disturb” them; he promised not to demand the return of any of the household furniture, clothing, or other property Patience and the children had taken with them; and he indemnified his former spouse from all past debts acquired in his name. Above all, Martin swore never to “force or compel” his family members to “abandon their faith or separate themselves” from the Shakers. Instead, he would allow them to “absolutely enjoy the free exercise of their religious faith.” It was a magnanimous gesture, to be sure, yet Martin’s agreement with the Gasper River Shakers betrayed a deeper ambivalence. As the male head of a household, these privileges were his to grant—or withhold.³²

Women who refused to follow their husbands into the Shaker order, by contrast, faced a much more difficult set of choices as a result of their limited legal standing as *femes covert*. Consider the case of Sally, the wife of William Boler, another Logan County convert. Married in 1801, the couple purchased a modest farm near the Gasper River Presbyterian meetinghouse, site of some of the earliest and most powerful revival events in the western settlements. During the next three years, the Boler family lived in “perfect harmony,” raising three children and amassing a modest estate. But when the Turtle Creek Shakers visited southwestern Kentucky for the first time during the fall of 1807, it took William only a “quarter of an hour” to begin talking about converting. Eight months later, he “renounced the marriage covenant” and formally affiliated with the Believers. William boasted he would “suffer his right arm cut from his body” or “have a sword pierced through him” rather than bed with Sally or engage in sexual intercourse, for he now believed he “could not have salvation and live with his wife.”³³

William moved to the emerging Shaker community at Gasper River in 1809. He took the couple’s only son, Daniel, with him, abandoning Sally and their two daughters. Aided by her father, a prominent local planter, Sally filed a divorce petition in the Logan County court two years later in which she demanded that William provide her with a “separate maintenance” in alimony. In the long and contentious legal battle that followed, William contended that he was only following the “dictates of his own conscience” and exercising religious liberties guaranteed by the Kentucky constitution. He initially appealed to Sally to move to a farm near the Shakers so he could continue to care for her and their children. When she refused, he offered to divide their property, farm animals, and household

Demographic Features of Shaker Decline, 1787–1900,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 15 (Summer 1984), 35–38; and Suzanne R. Thurman, “O Sisters Ain’t You Happy?” *Gender, Family, and Community among the Harvard and Shirley Shakers, 1781–1918* (Syracuse, 2002), 27–28, 199–201.

³² William B. Martin, agreement, Nov. 2, 1812, box 1, Shakers of South Union, Kentucky, Business and Legal Papers, 1769–1893, MSS 154 (Manuscripts and Folklife Archives).

³³ Sally Boler, petition for divorce and alimony, Sept. 24, 1812, *Sally W. Bowler v. William Bowler*, Barren County, Ky., Equity Judgments, image group: 675179, available at FamilySearch.com; Archibald Felts, deposition, April 16, 1813, *ibid.*; Mary Felts, deposition, April 10, 1813, *ibid.*; Matthew Simpson, deposition, July 14, 1813, *ibid.* For early revival activity in Logan County, Kentucky, see Boles, *Great Revival*, 52–58; and Conklin, *Cane Ridge*, 54–63.

goods. William's new Shaker brethren appeared at court to confirm that both spouses "appeared to be Satisfied" with their shares. Sally's father countered that William had claimed all of their best land and material possessions, leaving his daughter with a third-rate parcel encumbered by state fees and prior legal challenges from neighbors. "I don't count it worth a Cent towards Supporting a woman and Children," Archibald Felts thundered in his deposition, before launching into a tirade against the "vain philosophy" of the Shakers and branding the Believers "wicked and carnal men imposing upon the ignorant" with talk of their "strange God."³⁴

Boler vs. Boler dragged on for four years. Initially rebuffed by the Logan County Circuit Court in 1811, Sally sued again two years later in a different jurisdiction and eventually won a divorce from her husband. Then, on the night of July 2, 1814, in defiance of a court order, William absconded with their son. He and Daniel set off on foot in the dead of night, fleeing first to the Shaker village at Pleasant Hill and, eventually, to the Believers' largest eastern village at New Lebanon, New York. Sally filed a writ of habeas corpus to keep her family together, but it was too late. The Shakers praised William's illegal actions, claiming that his successful escape was a sign of the "works & wonders of the Almighty." In time, the Kentucky legislature declared Sally a feme sole and waived the balance of the remaining state sales price on her two-hundred-acre farm. She eventually married a deponent from her divorce suit, started a new family, and moved to southern Indiana. But she never saw her son again. Daniel Boler remained among the Believers in New York for the rest of his life and served as the highest-ranking member in the Shaker ministry for more than four decades.³⁵

The shattering of families and the legal struggles that ensued underscored the debilitating material and emotional impact of sectarian religious strife on frontier women. A few abandoned wives managed to turn their lives around through brief and successful divorce suits. For other women the legal process of restoring their "rights and privileges" could take years. Although Sally Rice of Ohio initiated divorce proceedings against her Shaker husband in 1823, lawyers were still arguing her case more than a decade later. All that time, Rice remained in a state of legal limbo, unable to contract debts, own land or property, or remarry. Shakerism shackled Jane Woods of Paint Lick, Kentucky, with a lifetime of hardship and dependency. Not only did her husband, John, abandon her when he moved to the Shaker village at Shawnee Run in 1806, but he also posted an elopement notice on the door of a local tavern blaming Jane for the breakup of their marriage and warning members of the community against "entertaining her, as I will not be accountable for any of her contracts." John proceeded to sell their farm and place the profits under the control of a fellow Believer to prevent Jane from making claims against him after the property had been consolidated as part of the Shakers' new "joint stock" settlement.

³⁴ Sally Boler, petition for divorce and alimony, Sept. 24, 1812, *Bowler v. Bowler*, Barren County, Ky., Equity Judgments, image group: 675179, available at FamilySearch.com; William Boler, "Answer of William Boler," [ca. Oct. 1812], *ibid.*; Francis A. Whyte, deposition, July 8, 1813, *ibid.*; Mary Felts, deposition, April 16, 1813, *ibid.*

³⁵ Logan County, Kentucky, Order Book, vol. 6½ (1810–1813), 162, 286, 353–54, 377, 441 (Logan County Archives and Genealogical Society, Russellville, Ky.); Logan County Order Book, vol. 7 (1813–1816), 37–39, *ibid.*; Barren County, Ky., Order Book, vol. 1 (1813–1816), 203–4, 321, image group: 8675168, available at FamilySearch.org; Eads, transcriber, "Record Book A," 148, 218; "From South Union, Ky., the Early Home of Daniel Boler," *Shaker Manifesto*, 23 (Feb. 1893), 40; *Acts Passed at the First Session of the Twenty-Fifth General Assembly, for the Commonwealth of Kentucky* (Frankfort, 1817), 104–5; H. H. Pleasant, *A History of Crawford County, Indiana* (Greenfield, 1926), 17, 39, 75–76, 205. On Daniel Boler's life among the Shakers, see Stephen J. Paterwic, *Historical Dictionary of the Shakers* (Lanham, 2017), 47–48.



Jane Woods’s lichen-encrusted 1841 headstone in the Old Paint Lick Cemetery in Paint Lick, Kentucky, acknowledges her dependent status as the “daughter of Robert Brank” but makes no mention of her husband, John, who abandoned his wife and two children when he joined the Shakers in 1807. *Photograph by Douglas L. Winiarski.*

Abandoned by her husband and effectively stripped of her dower rights, Jane lived as a dependent on her father’s plantation for over three decades until her death in 1841.³⁶

³⁶ *Acts Passed at the First Session of the Twenty-Ninth General Assembly, for the Commonwealth of Kentucky* (Frankfort, 1821), 148; Union County, Ohio, Common Pleas Court Record, vol. 1 (1820–1836), 55–56, image group:

Thrown back on their own resources and facing lives of poverty and dependence, western women estranged from their Shaker husbands increasingly turned to desperate measures. Furious family members appeared at Shaker villages and began carrying away their relatives by “force” and with “violence.” On several occasions during the 1810s and 1820s, distressed mothers organized mobs that stormed the villages to search for missing children. The largest of these events took place at Turtle Creek in August 1810, when Polly Smith—daughter-in-law of the famed Kentucky revivaler and anti-Shaker activist James Smith, whose son had absconded to Union Village—raised a troop of “five hundred armed men, equipped in uniform” and led by local militia officers, in an unsuccessful attempt to liberate her three children. The mob, which may eventually have numbered in the thousands, “threatened to extirpate the Shakes from the face of the earth” and demanded that all Believers “renounce their faith or quit the country.” Disbanded through the interposition of some prominent citizens of the neighboring town of Lebanon, the “Great Mob of 1810” nonetheless made national headlines and once again raised the specter of the Shakers’ maltreatment of women and their families.³⁷

State politicians took notice. In December following a second attempted mobbing at Turtle Creek and in direct response to a petition filed by Polly Smith, the Ohio legislature passed “An act providing for the relief and support of women who may be abandoned by their husbands.” Kentucky enacted a similar law the following year. The Ohio statute specifically targeted a “sect of people in this state, called and known by the name of *Shakers*.” Under the new law, women “abandoned by their husbands, robbed of their children, and left destitute of the means of support” could petition for material relief. The courts would determine whether the couple had been lawfully married and if the husband had renounced the “marriage covenant,” refused to live in “conjugal relation” with his wife, or violated the “true intent and meaning of the institution of marriage” by joining a celibate religious community. In such cases, judges were empowered to seize the husband’s personal and real estate to be placed under the control of the abandoned wife. The Ohio law further denied converting husbands the right to gift property to a sect such as the Shakers, and it imposed a stiff fine on anyone attempting to “entice or persuade” another person to “join any sect” that attempted to “inculcate a renunciation of the matrimonial contract.”³⁸

The Shakers were stunned by these “most unconstitutional” laws and other tyrannical displays of the “Dragon’s power.” Benjamin Seth Youngs and Richard McNemar immediately dispatched a remonstrance to the Ohio General Assembly in which they decried the Ohio act, which targeted the Shakers by name, as “incongruous with the rights of conscience” guaranteed by the Bill of Rights and enshrined in the state constitution.

8704603, available at FamilySearch.org; Union County, Ohio, Supreme Court Records, 1820–1878, pp. 86–87, image group: 870460, *ibid.*; Frankfort (Ky) *Western World*, Nov. 27, 1806; John Woods, “Shakerism Unmasked (1826),” in *Writings of Shaker Apostates and Anti-Shakers*, ed. Goodwillie, II, 382–83.

³⁷ Eads, transcriber, “Record Book A,” 191, 195; Benjamin Seth Youngs, *Transactions of the Ohio Mob, Called in the Public Papers “An Expedition against the Shakers”* (Miami County, Ohio, 1810), 1; McBride to McRoberts, July 14, 1811, in “Shakers of Ohio,” 131; Molly Goodrich Journal, 1805–1831 (microfilm: p. [39]), Molly Goodrich Papers, 1805–1831, MSS1185 (Library of Congress); Andrew W. Beattie, Israel Trotter, and Peter Boyd Journal, 1858–1862, and synopsis of events of the church at Union Village, 1805–1850 (microfilm: reel 12, no. 231, p. 90), Shaker Collection of Records Concerning the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing. Reports of the Ohio mob appeared in newspapers across the country, including the *Philadelphia Democratic Press*, Oct. 1, 1810.

³⁸ *Acts Passed at the First Session of the Ninth General Assembly of the State of Ohio* (Zanesville, 1811), 13–14, 16; *Acts Passed at the First Session of the Twentieth General Assembly, for the Commonwealth of Kentucky* (Frankfort, 1812), 219–23.

The petitioners denied rumors that they compelled converts to dissolve their marriages or that the Shakers engaged in abusive or cruel behavior. All Believers were free to follow their consciences, they claimed. To punish men who converted without the consent their wives not only stripped them of “domestic authority” but also divested them of “all the privileges of a common citizen.” McNemar and Youngs feared a slippery slope: “For if one particular sect is proscribed by law the preference given to others in violation of the Constitution let the Society who stands next in order in the way of bigotry, prepare for the fatal event, and so on, till the yoke of religious tyranny is fastened on the necks of all sects and denominations, but the strongest party, for ecclesiastical tyranny never rested short of sole dominion.” “Nothing can be more contrary to the constitution of the State, and of the United States,” a western Shaker leader summarized in a letter to the New York ministry. The Ohio “Lyeslature” had trampled the “rights of conscience” by attacking a Christian denomination of “honest upright & benevolent people.”³⁹

For the world’s people, sacrificing fundamental principles of religious freedom seemed a small price to pay for restoring marital order in the settler communities of the West. Horrified by Shaker strictures against marriage and procreation, one prominent Kentucky planter heartily endorsed the recent anti-Shaker laws in Ohio and Kentucky in a letter to a relative. After all, he reasoned, the “framers of the Federal Constitution never dreamd. that Religious inthusionism would ever prompt them to a dissolution of the Human Race by that means as population is always been thought one of the first, objects in all Governments to insure prosperity.” Women who refused to join the Shakers now possessed a powerful weapon for striking back against their believing husbands.⁴⁰

With anti-Shaker sentiment waxing in the West, Anne Bunnell should have been able to wrest control of her difficult family situation after Abner deserted her in 1807. But instead of filing a petition under Ohio’s expansive abandonment law, she petitioned the state Supreme Court for an outright divorce in September 1811. It was a risky move. The Ohio Supreme Court granted divorce only in cases of adultery, bigamy, desertion, or extreme cruelty—a much narrower standard than the recent abandonment law provided. Even when these conditions were satisfied, frontier judges appeared reluctant to sanction divorces. Only three women successfully petitioned for divorce in Warren County before 1815; all of them had been abandoned by husbands who subsequently fled the state. With her husband living only a few miles away, Anne must have known she was fighting an uphill battle.⁴¹

The reason for her puzzling choice appears in the Supreme Court minute book, a few lines below the entry for Anne’s divorce suit. Later that day the court considered a similar petition by Josiah Decker. Like Abner and Anne Bunnell, the Deckers hailed from

³⁹ Eads, transcriber, “Record Book A,” 124, 130; Benjamin S. Youngs et al., “To the General Assembly of the State of Ohio,” Sept. 24, 1811, “Copies of various letters from different societies written 1811–1841,” pp. 25, 28–29, 31, Shaker Manuscripts, IV:B-36; Darrow to “Beloved Brother,” Jan. 22, 1811, in “Western Letters/Manuscript No III,” notebook (microfilm: reel 12, no. 248, pp. 81, 87–88), Shaker Collection of Records Concerning the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing. See also *Constitution of the State of Ohio* (Chillicothe, 1802), 23–24.

⁴⁰ Abraham Chapline to Joseph Chapline, March 5, 1812, in “Nourse-Chapline Letters,” 167.

⁴¹ Warren County, Ohio, Supreme Court Issue Docket, 1803–1833 (microfilm: GR4467, p. 95) (Ohio History Center); Warren County, Ohio, Supreme Court Record Book, vol. 1 (1804–1811), 70–71, 259–61 (Warren County Archives and Records Center).

New Jersey. Josiah married Mary O'Lairy in 1779 and moved to Ohio during the 1790s. By 1800, he had secured a modest farm for his large family of ten children. Mary joined John Thompson's New Light Presbyterian church in Springfield (now Springdale). Then something went wrong in the Deckers' lives. Josiah later declared himself insolvent, citing "Unforeseen difficulties & disasters." With mounting debts likely exacting a toll on their marriage, Mary walked out on the family during the spring of 1806. At the divorce proceedings five years later, Josiah's lawyer argued that she had no "reasonable Cause" and produced witnesses who testified that he had been as "kind & pleasant with her as husbands generally are with their Wives." Mary told a very different story. She related harrowing encounters with a cruel and abusive husband who kicked, beat, and dragged her through the house until she was "entirely deprived of her senses." Josiah boasted openly of his violent behavior, and he frequently told Mary he "wished to get another wife." Ever since she had left her husband, Mary explained to the court, he had "connected himself with a Woman of ill fame by whom he has had one child and with whom he now lives." And that woman was Anne Bunnell.⁴²

Josiah had moved in with Anne sometime around 1809, two years after Abner joined the Shakers. At the time Anne and Josiah petitioned for their divorces, Decker had assumed the role of a head of household and was paying taxes on the Bunnell's farm. He now claimed Anne was his lawful wife, and they appear to have had a child who likely died in infancy. Even as Anne stood before the bar pleading for a divorce from her Shaker husband, she was already nearing the end of the first trimester of another pregnancy. Mary Ann Bunnell was born the following March, a "Bastard as I guess," her grandfather Benjamin Scudder grumbled as he recorded the child in his family Bible back in New Jersey. While the two spouses traded stories of cruelty and abuse, of religious principles and "Sanctimonious" rantings, Abner held firm to the biological facts of the dispute: Anne had entered into an adulterous relationship and "prays to be Divorced, so as to get the law for a cloak to cover her wickedness." He was not opposed to dissolving their union, although he categorically denied Anne's charges against him. "Constrained by inward conviction to obey my faith," Abner vowed never again to "live with any woman on earth after the flesh." The judges of the Ohio circuit court remained unimpressed with any of the testimony. In September 1811 they denied both divorce petitions and charged Josiah Decker and Anne Bunnell the costs of their suits.⁴³

This surprising turn of events formed the opening act of a sordid legal drama that lasted more than a decade. At one point during the divorce proceedings, Abner offered additional allegations against his wife. Only a few months after his conversion to Shakerism in 1805, he accused, Anne "secreted the title" to their farm, so it would not fall into the hands of the Shakers. Later evidence indicates that Anne burned the deed she had

⁴² Hamilton County, Ohio, Deeds, vol. E2 (1801–1803), pp. 461–62, image group: 8193290, available at FamilySearch.org; Charles W. Hoffman, *The Story of a Country Church* (Cincinnati, 1902), 139; Josiah Decker, "Josiah Decker's petition for the Benefit of Insolvent act," Feb. 18, 1812, Warren County Court of Common Pleas, Series A, June 1812 Term, box 15 (Warren County Archives and Records Center); Decker, divorce petition, June 4, 1811, Warren County Court of Common Pleas, Supreme Court of Ohio, *Josiah Decker v. Mary Decker*, September 1811 Term, box 13, *ibid.*; Thomas Mills, deposition, Sept. 21, 1811, *ibid.*; Mary Decker, "The Answer of Mary Decker to the Petition of her husband Josiah Decker for a divorce," Sept. 20, 1811, *ibid.*

⁴³ Greene, "Benjamin Scudder Bible Records," 45; Bunnell, "Replication"; Abner Bunnell, "A protest against the charges contained in a petition filed . . . by Anne Bonnell," Sept. 21, 1811, Warren County Court of Common Pleas, Supreme Court of Ohio, *Bunnell v. Bunnell*, September 1811 Term, box 13 (Warren County Archives and Records Center); Warren County, Ohio, Supreme Court Record Book A, 1803–1811, pp. 165, 441–43 (Warren County Archives and Records Center). On the taxes on the Bunnell farm, see note 54, below.

received from her father before it could be officially recorded in the Warren County land records. In October 1814 Abner cast aside the stipulations of the separation agreement he had made with Anne and launched an equity suit against Benjamin Scudder to reclaim his lost title to the land. He had spent “much of his constitution and vigour” clearing the forest and improving the property. Now, in his declining years, strangers—including Josiah Decker—had “obtained possession of his farm,” and he wanted it back. The law appeared to be on his side: as Abner’s attorney argued in his petition to the court, “during coverture, a feme covert cannot hold in her sole right, and at her disposition, real estate.”⁴⁴

Abner’s decision to file this petition appeared to have been triggered by other events. Anne had recently returned from a trip to New Jersey, where she schemed with her father to protect her Ohio landholdings. Evidence of the plot appears in the marginalia of Scudder’s almanacs. In September 1814 the New Jersey patriarch compiled a list of Anne’s “Credible Neighbors” at Turtle Creek, including Enos Williams, a “Recorder of Deeds.” Several months later, Scudder drafted a new deed for the farm “where formerly Abner Bunnell lived,” brought the document to be certified by New Jersey’s Essex County court, and sent it off to Anne in Ohio. Citing his “Natureal love and Efection” for his daughter, Scudder placed the farm under the supervision of David Fox, the father-in-law of the Bunnells’ eldest son, Henry, and a prosperous Warren County landholder. Fox was tasked with administering the Bunnell farm in Anne’s name for the remainder of her life, after which, the property would pass to the “Male heirs of her Body Lawfully Begotten that then are not Shakeing Quakers.” On July 1, 1815, Williams dutifully recorded the heavily revised, replacement title in the Warren County deed book.⁴⁵

In the prolonged and bitter lawsuit that followed, Abner contended that his father-in-law had given the couple a deed in fee simple prior to their departure for Ohio in 1801. Scudder—clearly doing his best to shield his daughter and protect his patrimony—hid behind his aging memory. Writing from New Jersey in a long response to the charges against him, Scudder claimed to have given Anne, not Abner, a written “instrument” that authorized the Bunnells to take possession of a portion of his Ohio lands. Whether the document was an informal agreement or a legal deed he could not remember. Nor did Scudder disclose the fact that he had explicitly referred to this document as a deed when he recorded the event in his 1801 almanac. Eventually, Anne’s sister Ruth Lamb and her brother-in-law Joseph joined the fray, since Anne’s decision to destroy Scudder’s original deed threatened their legal title to the other half of the original 640-acre section. In 1821 the Lambs sued her and Abner for illegally harvesting timber on their property.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Bunnell, “Protest against the charges contained in a petition filed”; Abner Bunnell, petition, [Oct. 10, 1814], Warren County Court of Common Pleas, Series A, *Bunnell and Bunnell v. Scudder and Fox*, November 1820 Term, box 42 (Warren County Archives and Records Center); Joseph and Ruth Lamb, petition, May 5, 1821, Warren County Court of Common Pleas, Series A, *Joseph Lamb and Ruth Lamb v. Abner Bunnell and Anna Bunnell*, November 1821 Term, box 46, *ibid.*

⁴⁵ Virginia S. Burnett, transcriber, and Elmer T. Hutchinson, ed., “Marginal Jottings from the Almanacs of the Scudder Family,” *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society*, 65 (1947), 157; Benjamin Scudder, deed, Jan. 4, 1815, Warren County Court of Common Pleas, Series A, *Bunnell and Bunnell v. Scudder and Fox*, November 1820 Term, box 42 (Warren County Archives and Records Center); Warren County, Ohio, Deed Record, vol. 5, 238–39, *ibid.*

⁴⁶ Scudder, “Answer”; Burnett, transcriber and Hutchinson, ed., “Marginal Jottings from the Almanacs of the Scudder Family” (1946), 101; Lamb and Lamb, petition, May 5, 1821, Warren County Court of Common Pleas, Series A, *Lamb and Lamb v. Bunnell and Bunnell*, November 1821 Term, box 46 (Warren County Archives and Records Center).

Anne was incensed. Throughout the proceedings, she “absolutely & roundly” protested her estranged husband’s decision to name her as a plaintiff in a lawsuit against her own father. “The land in controversy,” she explained in a separate petition to the court, was intended “for her & her children.” Abner was “not to have anything to do with it, except what benefit he should receive by living with & being a tender & dutiful husband to her.” Anne and her lawyers used this opportunity to restate the arguments presented in her divorce suit, from the happy days of their early marriage, to Abner’s Shaker conversion, to his subsequent abusive behavior, to his abandonment of their family, to his strange statements about redeeming the land to the Lord. Abner had no real interest in running their farm, Anne attested. He merely schemed to have the land “decreed to him that he may give it to the Shakers, & thereby deprive her of a living, contrary to the good intentions of her aged father.”⁴⁷

There was more bad news during these difficult years. As Abner and Anne’s case against Benjamin Scudder slowly ground through the courts, local magistrates turned their attention to Josiah Decker’s infidelity. Arraigned and convicted by a grand jury for cohabiting with Anne in a “State of adultery,” Decker narrowly escaped punishment on a legal technicality in 1817. The following year, the Bunnells’ son, Isaac, died unexpectedly among the Shakers at Union Village. A darker fate awaited his older brother, Abner Jr. More than a decade living among the Shakers had taken a devastating toll. As Anne explained to the court in her 1815 deposition, Abner Jr. had become “delirious & crazy & unfit for Labour with the Shakers.” She blamed the Believers’ “hard usage” for her son’s mental decline. Abner Sr. brought the troubled young man back to the farm in 1815, where he became “still farther burden to her.” The following year, the Warren County overseers of the poor declared Abner Jr. an “insane person” and appointed a guardian to manage his meager estate.⁴⁸

It took the Ohio Supreme Court more than six years to untangle the knotty legal issues. In the end, the judges sided with Abner. But their verdict was a carefully worded compromise that worked in Anne’s favor. On November 21, 1820, the court rejected Scudder’s specious claims, declared his 1815 deed “null & void,” and ordered him to produce a new deed that regranted the original lands to the Lambs and Bunnells in roughly the same terms as the parties had agreed to in 1801. Yet the judges also limited Abner and Anne’s side of the deed in specific ways. The magistrates directed Scudder to convey the Bunnell property to his daughter “during her natural Life to her Own separate and proper use.” Abner would receive the remainder of the land upon her death, after which it would devolve to “children of the body of said Ann Bunnell lawfully begotten.” Only if Abner returned to live with Anne as “his lawful wife” would the farm pass back into his control during her lifetime.⁴⁹

Anne was free, in certain respects, from the men who had dominated her world. Free from her husband, as long as he remained a Shaker. Free from her father, whose paternal care throughout the entire ordeal nonetheless reinforced her subordinate status as a feme

⁴⁷ Anne Bunnell, petition, Nov. 7, 1815, Warren County Court of Common Pleas, Series A, *Bunnell and Bunnell v. Scudder and Fox*, November 1820 Term, box 42 (Warren County Archives and Records Center).

⁴⁸ Warren County, Ohio, State Records, vol. B (Oct. 1815), 78 (Warren County Archives and Records Center); Anne Bunnell, petition, Nov. 7, 1815, Warren County Court of Common Pleas, Series A, *Bunnell and Bunnell v. Scudder and Fox*, November 1820 Term, box 42 *ibid.*; Jacob Tremble and Daniel Banta, “Inventory of the estate of Abner Bunnell an insane person,” Sept. 25, 1816, Warren County Probate Records, docket O, box 37, no. 6, *ibid.*

⁴⁹ Warren County, Ohio, Common Pleas Records, vol. 7-A, p. 296, *ibid.*

covert. Free from the men of the courts. And yet she remained barred from uniting with her partner, Josiah Decker.

The death of Decker's estranged wife allowed Anne to take a final step toward full independence. In 1824 she filed a second divorce petition with the Warren County court. Anne must have felt cautiously optimistic about the outcome. During the decade since her first legal battle with Abner, judges and legislatures across the western states and territories had softened their stances on divorce. Of the nineteen divorce suits initiated by women in Warren County between 1816 and 1825, fourteen were settled in the plaintiff's favor. The Ohio Supreme Court dissolved nine marriages outright; five other women used their growing legal power to obtain alimony or favorable out-of-court settlements. Yet Anne's case was different. As a strong-willed woman who had successfully wrested her land and economic independence away from her Shaker husband, she may not have cut the same sympathetic figure as other female petitioners. Further, she had been living in an adulterous relationship for nearly fifteen years. The cursory record of the 1824 divorce suit suggests her plea fell on deaf ears. After the judges heard testimony from nearly a dozen people, including members of the Bunnell family and several Shakers, they dismissed the case.⁵⁰

A little more than a year later, on a warm and rainy autumn night, Anne ended her life.

The Bunnell family swung into action following Anne's suicide. There was work to be done: debts to be settled, an estate auction to manage, and a body to be prepared, interred, and, ultimately, mourned. As Anne's children worked to put her affairs in order, they produced a wealth of information indicating just how successfully she had rebuilt her life, despite ongoing legal entanglements with her Shaker husband and the social stigma arising from her long-term relationship with Josiah Decker. These documents reframe the meaning of Bunnell's suicide—away from economic and legal misfortune and toward the broader religious implications of her shattered family life. In the end, the tragedy of Anne's death lay not in the fact that Abner's conversion to Shakerism during the Great Revival left her destitute and impoverished but, rather, that his radical religious choices made it nearly impossible for her to reestablish her sense of respectability as a woman, a wife, and a mother.⁵¹

In 1801 Anne and Abner had arrived in Ohio with only a handful of material possessions. But her estate inventory reveals that by the time of her death two decades later, Anne owned a wide range of household goods and luxury items. Besides feather beds, cupboards, cookery, farm equipment, and livestock, she had purchased desks and chairs,

⁵⁰ Warren County, Ohio, Supreme Court Minute Book, vol. 2 (1817–1851), p. 177 (Warren County Archives and Records Center); Warren County, Clerk of Courts, Supreme Court Issue Docket, 1803–1833, p. 334, *ibid.* The full record of the court's proceedings in Anne Bunnell's 1824 divorce suit has not survived. Warren County divorce statistics were derived from Warren County, Supreme Court Record Book, vol. 2 (1811–1816), 476–77, *ibid.*; Warren County, Supreme Court Record Book, vol. 3 (1817–1820), 230–35, 344–62, 380–84, *ibid.*; Warren County, Supreme Court Record Book, vol. 4 (1821–1824), 204–6, 211–13, 229–42, 264–66, 326–27, 334–35, 347–48, 365–78, 382–84, 502–5, 519–23, *ibid.*; and Warren County, Supreme Court Record Book, vol. 5 (1825–1829), 31–35, 54–55, 59–65, 90–91, *ibid.* For a complete list of cases, see Ellen Van Houten and Florence Cole, comp., *Divorces, 1803–1900: Court of Common Pleas, Warren County, Ohio* (Loveland, 1990). On the liberalization of divorce standards in the trans-Appalachian West, see Fredette, *Marriage on the Border*, 55–82.

⁵¹ Advertisements for the "Administrator's Vendue" of Anne Bunnell's estate appeared in the *Lebanon (OH) Western Star* between October 4 and December 3, 1825. For receipts and settlement papers, see Ann Bunnell Probate File, docket O, box 36, no. 13 (Warren County Archives and Records Center).



Supported by massive hewn timbers now hidden by modern siding and additions, the barn where Anne Bunnell ended her life in 1825 stands today in Lebanon, Ohio, on the disputed property Benjamin Scudder deeded to his daughter and son-in-law in 1801. *Photograph by Nate Byrum.*

candlesticks and lamps, tea sets, a looking glass, a clock and case, and the gig and harness she used to end her life. Appraised at \$193, her considerable personal property reflected emerging standards of polite taste and middle-class respectability that had reshaped material life even in the once-remote communities of the Ohio Valley. Although Anne's possessions were sold at auction by a court order, her children managed to purchase nearly all of the most valuable family items.⁵²

Anne not only succeeded in passing down most of her personal property to her children—albeit circuitously through an estate auction—but she had also participated in southern Ohio's burgeoning farming economy despite her limited legal status as a *feme covert*. A handful of debts settled by the executors of her estate hint at her expansive business dealings in the community. Anne hired local farmers and their sons to perform key tasks on her farm, such as carting bushels of corn, shearing sheep, carding wool, hauling timber, building fences, and haying. Surviving receipts cover purchases of farming implements, shoes, and clothing. She contracted with tanners and blacksmiths. She paid the lawyer who had petitioned unsuccessfully for her divorce in 1824. Most surprising, Anne and Josiah Decker cosigned at least two promissory notes, including one as late as the fall of 1824. The couple borrowed significant sums money, perhaps, with an eye toward expanding and improving their house, barn, and property.⁵³

⁵² Mulford, Lamb, and Keever, "Bill of Appraisement"; Henry Bunnell and George Bowers, "Sale Bill," Dec. 24, 1825, docket O, box 36, no. 13 (Warren County Archives and Records Center). On the expansion of consumer culture, see David Jaffee, *A New Nation of Goods: The Material Culture of Early America* (Philadelphia, 2010).

⁵³ For these examples, see the miscellaneous estate papers in Ann Bunnell Probate File, docket O, box 36, no. 13 (Warren County Archives and Record Center).

There was also the land itself. Among Anne's estate papers is a receipt submitted by her son Henry for \$4.80 in full payment for the 1825 Ohio state and road taxes. Following Abner's abandonment of the family, Decker had paid the annual rates on the Bunnell farm from 1811 until 1819. But in 1820, only a few months after her husband's successful chancery suit against her father, "Anna Bunnell" appeared for the first time on the Warren County rate lists as the sole proprietor of 320 acres in the east half of section twenty-one, in the fourth township of the third range of the Miami Purchase. Decker remained her lifelong companion, but Anne had become the legally recognized head of the household. Almost overnight, she vaulted into the top 10 percent of Warren County taxpayers. She continued to improve the property. At some point following Abner's departure for the Shakers, Anne dismantled their original dogtrot log house and rebuilt a framed dwelling on the original foundations. She would have had a hand in supervising the extensive process of raising the massive, four-bay bank barn in which she ultimately took her own life, and she brought hundreds of acres of prime Ohio farmland into cultivation. By almost any measure, Anne Bunnell had succeeded in the western settlements. Abandoned by her husband, hamstrung by the courts, and hampered by her father's paternalism, she nonetheless persisted and secured a prosperous yeoman competency.⁵⁴

And there was this: a final acknowledgement from Abner. After more than a decade of bitter legal wrangling with Anne and his father-in-law, and despite repeated threats to annex his former farm to the Shakers' redeemed land, Abner finally gave up. The intervening years had not been kind. Following the settlement of his lawsuit against Scudder, Abner served time in debtors' prison, as he had no means of paying the considerable legal fees he had incurred to win his suit. Like Josiah Decker, he was forced to file for bankruptcy. The reasons his Shaker brethren and sisters did not contribute financial resources to cover his legal fees remain unclear. Yet in a signed statement drafted four days after Anne's suicide, Abner agreed to "make no claim" against her estate and authorized the court to empower his children to dispose of the property as they saw fit.⁵⁵

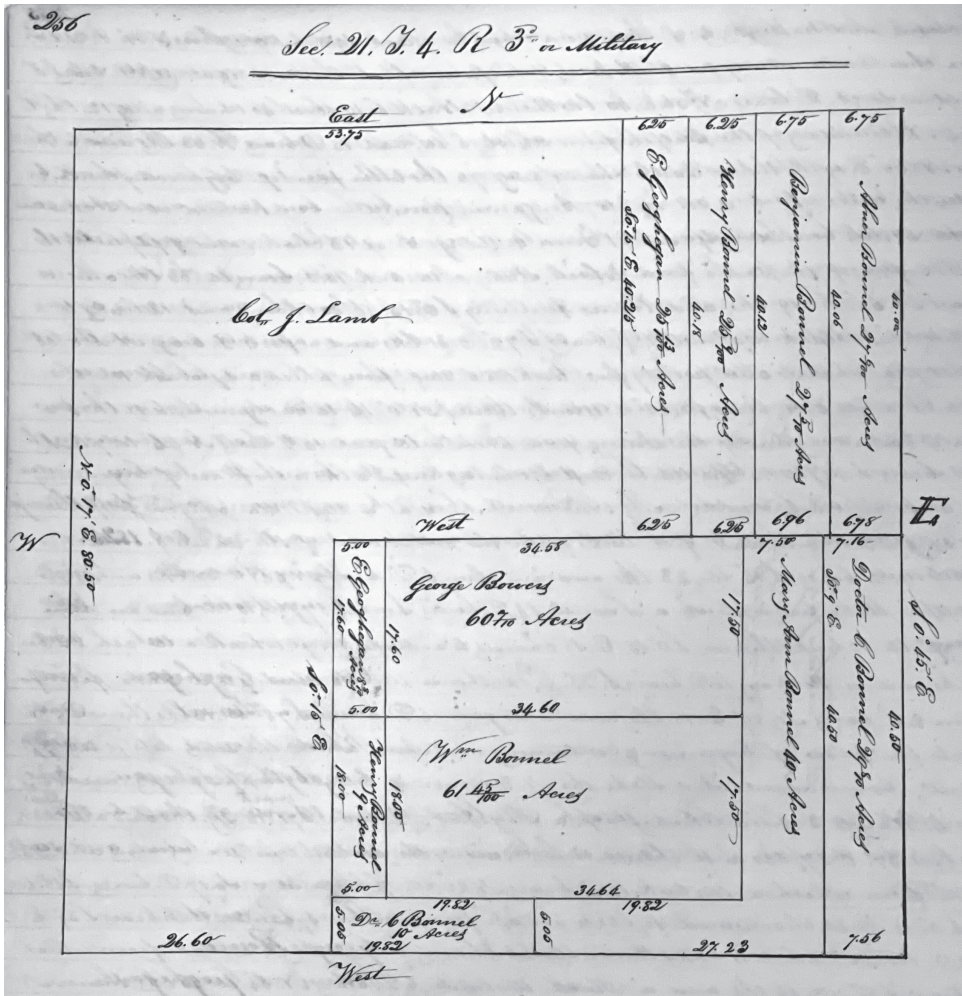
The following month, the Bunnell children divided the farm into eleven lots, each valued at fifty dollars. The eldest son, Henry, claimed two shares. Four other shares were assigned to siblings Benjamin, who left the Shakers in 1818, youngest son William, and married daughters Rhoda Bowers and Betsy Geohegan. The Bunnell siblings showed extraordinary care in managing their parents' property. Attempting to heal the rift that had opened with their father's conversion to Shakerism two decades earlier, they split the property in such a way as to take care of the entire family. The Bunnells pooled their money to purchase shares for their half-sister, Mary Ann, and their troubled sibling, Abner Jr. They even provided a share for their remaining Shaker brother, Clark.⁵⁶

At this point, the characters in the story fade into obscurity. Clark Bunnell never claimed his land. He continued to reside at Union Village, where he served as the

⁵⁴ Henry Bunnell, receipt, [Sept. 1825], Ann Bunnell Probate File, *ibid.* Taxes on the Bunnell farm were paid by Abner Bunnell in 1806 and 1807; Anne Bunnell in 1809 and 1810; Josiah Decker from 1811 to 1819; Anne Bunnell from 1820 to 1825; and the heirs of Anne Bunnell after 1825. See Esther Weygandt Powell, comp., *Early Ohio Tax Records* (Baltimore, 1985), 399; Tax Records of Ohio, 1801–1814, image groups: 4844183, 4849184, 4849187, 4849189, 4848996, 4848998, 4849000, available at FamilySearch.org; and Duplicate Tax Records of Warren County, Ohio, 1816–1826, image group: 4849171, *ibid.*

⁵⁵ Warren County, Ohio, Chancery Records, vol. 1 (Aug. 1824–April 1826), 140–42 (Warren County Archives and Records Center); Abner Bunnell, statement, Sept. 26, 1825, Ann Bunnell Probate File, docket O, box 36, no. 13, *ibid.*

⁵⁶ Warren County, Ohio, Land Records, vol. 12, pp. 250–55 (Warren County Archives and Records Center).



This 1825 plat map of the Bunnell farm embodies the desire of Anne Bunnell’s children to heal the family rift created by her husband’s conversion to Shakerism. Clark Bunnell, a lifelong Shaker, and Mary Ann Bunnell, the illegitimate daughter of Ann and Josiah Decker, both received 40 acres of land, although neither was legally entitled to inherit property based on the 1820 verdict in *Abner Bunnell and Nancy Bunnell v. Benjamin Scudder and David Fox*. Warren County, Ohio, Land Records, vol. 12, p. 256 (Warren County Archives and Record Center, Lebanon, Ohio). Courtesy Warren County Recorder’s Office, Lebanon, Ohio.

community’s wheelwright and physician. Abner Jr., struggling with mental illness, lived as a ward of the state and died in 1829. Henry, along with sisters Rhoda and Betsy, sold their interests in the farm and moved with their spouses to other properties in Warren County. Shaker apostate Benjamin Bunnell married and worked his corner of the property until his death in 1871, alongside his younger brother, William. Overcoming the stigma of her birth, Mary Ann married Abraham Allen, sold her forty-acre share, and moved to Indiana, where she raised a large and prosperous farm family. As for her father, Josiah Decker, he appears to have remarried in 1828. Two years later, he turned up on the federal census as resident of the town of Lebanon. Decker was living with an unnamed

woman, aged forty to forty-nine, and two children under the age of fifteen. After this, he vanished from the historical record.⁵⁷

Abner Bunnell stayed at Union Village for the remainder of his life. He left few traces in Shaker records beyond his name on various covenants and other membership lists. In 1834 visitors from the eastern villages listed him among the residents of the South House, the oldest of the eleven communal families at Union Village. As was their practice for all their members, the Believers took meticulous care in recording Bunnell's passing one year later: five minutes past four in the morning on April 26, 1835. He was the 222nd Shaker to die at Union Village, aged 74 years, 6 months, and 20 days. The "old pillars fall," lamented one diarist. A funeral was held the following day at half past 8 o'clock in the morning. Bunnell was buried in the Turtle Creek cemetery.⁵⁸

No one knows where Anne Bunnell's remains lie.

⁵⁷ In reconstructing the later lives of the Bunnell children, I relied on family files and vital records available at the Warren County Genealogical Society, Lebanon, Ohio (some of which may be accessed at <http://www.wcgsoh.org/>); land and probate records available at FamilySearch.com; and federal census records available at Ancestry.com.

⁵⁸ Wallace H. Cathcart, "Names and Ages of Western Believers," in "Various Lists of Names and Ages of Members; Elders, Trustees and Deacons in the Various Communities of the United Societies of Shakers," 1912, typescript, p. 47, Shaker Manuscripts, III:B-48; Daniel Miller, "Journal of Passing and Important Events at Union Village Ohio," n.d., p. 109, Shaker Manuscripts, V:B-237; "A Memorial of the Deceased," 1807–1830, p. 40, vol. 1187, Shakers (Union Village, Ohio) Records, 1807–1906, mss 2777 (Ohio History Center).