

The Friends' Quarterly

A Newsletter from the Enfield Shaker Museum

Volume XIV/No. 4

Fall 2002

"And here, Elder Daniel, is where I stand."

Letters of Elder Abraham Perkins

By Mary Ann Haagen

In 19th century Shaker community letter writing was primarily the privilege of its leaders. Surviving trustee correspondence offers insight into business transactions and financial concerns of the Society. The spiritual health of Shakerism is the overriding theme of correspondence between Shaker elders and ministers.

Abraham Perkins, 1807-1900, was one of the important spiritual leaders of the New Hampshire Shaker Societies. He was also a prolific correspondent. In his autobiography and surviving letters we have an important record of events that impacted on his spiritual well-being and that of his Shaker family.

Abraham Perkins joined the Enfield, NH Shakers on March 27, 1827, at age 19. For the next eighteen years he filled roles in his community typically assigned to promising, committed young men. He was caretaker of the boys, schoolteacher, and tailor. These responsibilities did not require or encourage him to engage in written correspondence. Our primary record of his experience during these years is his autobiography, written in 1880.¹

From 1845 until 1894 Elder Abraham served as either Minister of the New Hampshire Bishopric or as Elder of the Church Family at Enfield. In his autobiography he wrote, "Whoever has had any experience in these respective offices may understand the weight of labor therein; none others can possibly comprehend it."² His correspondence bears witness to the responsibility he felt. As early as 1854 he expresses anxiety about Shakerism's failure to attract new converts.

"Winter yet clings to us in a most forbidding manner. What is still worse to relate is that spiritual darkness has become so dense that it can be felt. We find but few that love the gospel; they therefore shun its devotees as we would shun a pest house, desiring nothing of us but to eat our chickens and make such discoveries as may be flattering to their natures and help prop up their selfish curiosi-

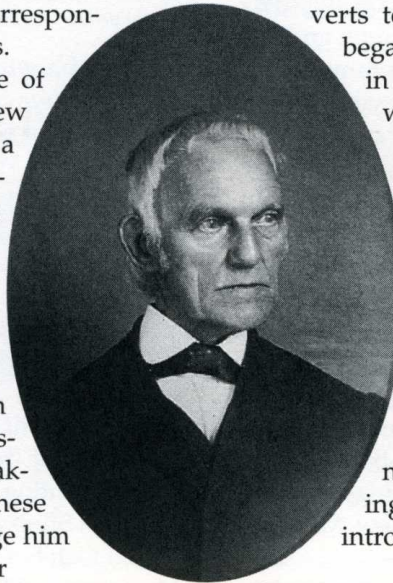
ties. We cannot even pick up many winter Shakers. When is that glorious time coming when Zion will be sought after with that interest with which men now seek for gold?"³

Perkins was not alone in his concern about a lack of converts to Shakerism. In some societies individuals began to suggest that celibacy should be forsaken in order to gain and retain members. Perkins was adamant that Shakerism could not be renewed or popularized by compromising its founding principles. In 1862 he wrote: "How much, dear Ministry, we are all suffering for the want of a deeper baptism in Zion in this element. If those called to the gospel could all feel the importance of adhering closely to first principles, could understand that our Fathers and Mothers had the right of the matter, that God through them had given the essential and necessary revelation. That it needed not the ingenuity of the present age to bring out and introduce innovations to improve and make the gospel more mighty and powerful."⁴

In September 1863 Abraham Perkins was removed as first Minister of the NH Bishopric, and he returned to Enfield where he served as First Elder to the Church

Family. On July 19th the society at Enfield had been devastated by the shooting death of Caleb Dyer. By September it had become clear that Dyer's involvement with local businesses, particularly the Alpheus Conant Company, had compromised the Society. Perhaps Abraham Perkins was returned to Enfield to stabilize the situation. Perhaps he was being disciplined for the crisis that the community found itself in. He wrote to Elder Daniel Crosman, "Well Elder Daniel, I can but exclaim, great are Zion's sufferings in these days. Sometimes I inquire, 'Why is it so? I frequently receive a ready answer: 'Many of your burdens, much of your sufferings you have brought upon yourselves in the same way your nation has involved itself in trouble."⁵

(Continued on page 4.)



Elder Abraham Perkins (1807-1900)
Enfield, New Hampshire
Collection of John and Marjorie Carr

