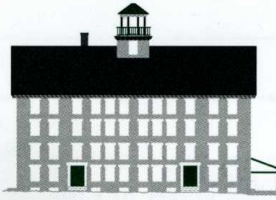


The Friends' Quarterly

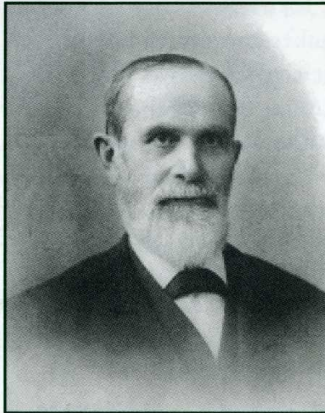


A Newsletter from the Enfield Shaker Museum

Henry Cumings and the Public Press

By Mary Ann Haagen

When Henry Cumings left the Shakers in 1881 his community was devastated. He had grown to manhood as an Enfield Shaker and was deeply loved and respected. For over twenty years he had carried the banner of the faith. As Elder of the North Family it was his job to gather souls to a Shaker life. He was the public voice of the Society, preaching on Sundays in the Shaker meetinghouse, responding to written inquiries for membership, and counseling, guiding and encouraging those who were trying the life. The idea that he would leave his Shaker family at the age of 47, to marry a Shaker Sister no less, was almost unbelievable.



Henry Cumings, 1834-1913.
Image from the collection of the
Enfield Public Library.

Two years earlier the regional paper The Granite State Free Press had gotten wind of a possible "scandal" brewing. The write-up went so far as to suggest that:

"There is evidently need of a great moral reformation among our neighbors across the lake. Interesting developments in regard to some of the inside life of the Shakers are likely to be made before long, and if their preaching and practicing do not better agree as far as some in high positions are concerned, it will be well for them to 'step down and out.'"

The Shakers were outraged by what they considered an unfounded accusation being circulated in the press. Usually circumspect about responding to gossip, the community weighed in.

"Now we should consider such innuendoes as beneath notice, only our silence might be construed into acknowledging that there was some truth in the insinuations. This we deny."

For weeks the newspaper published what the community must have considered a regrettable series of written exchanges between friends and foes of Shakerism. Detractors had more to say than their friends.

"Personally we have much respect for many of the Shakers, as men and women, but for their doctrine, which they admit would not do for the world to embrace, we see nothing in the teachings of the Bible or nature to uphold, and in the light of recent as well as former 'cases' it would be better that the institution should more rapidly than now die out as an institution for moral and religious instruction."

When Henry Cumings did in fact leave the society two years later the community kept its own counsel, and suffered the loss in silence.

Henry, on the other hand, gave an interview to the Granite State Free Press. It was published under the headline "Elder Henry Cummings Renounces Shakerism!" This willingness to share his story with the press would continue for the rest of Henry's life. Much of what we know about his transition to life "in the world" comes from the local newspapers. "Enfield Notes" in both the Granite State Free Press and The Enfield Advocate allow us to follow his employment history after leaving the Shakers, his hopes of starting a new life in Grand Haven, Michigan, his decision to return to the Upper Valley, and many details of his and wife Arabella's married life in Enfield, NH. Though they never had children they were host to "fresh air" kids. Arabella was responsible for gathering Christmas gifts for all the children of the town. They were strong supporters of women's suffrage, and participants in the fellowship of the Methodist Church. Henry kept hens and planted a large garden. He reported his successes as community news.

"Oct 18, 1895: Henry Cumings has kept an account of the income of 13 hens. They laid in 11 1/2 months, 158 dozen eggs which he sold for \$32.34, an average of 146 eggs for each hen and netting after paying for all food, \$1.55 to each hen. He also reports as having picked 21 pumpkins from one vine."

The couple shared information about their houseguests, their trips to visit relatives and their vacations.

York Beach, ME July 26, 1897

We thought you might like to know how we were enjoying the beach. Well, we find York Beach a very nice place to spend a vacation. The air is clear, cool and refreshing. There are to be had boats for sailing and fishing, teams for driving, etc. We went fishing one day and Mrs. Cumings caught three fish that weighed about 4 lbs each and drew one partly up that she estimates that must have weighed at least 25 to 30 lbs as it broke the cod line and so got away. The ocean in its grandeur reminds one of the Almighty Power of its maker and ruler. Like Niagara it never ceases its action and one never tires of watching and listening to its mighty voice.

Hastily,
Henry Cumings

(Continued on page 2.)

