

# The Friends' Quarterly



A Newsletter from the Enfield Shaker Museum

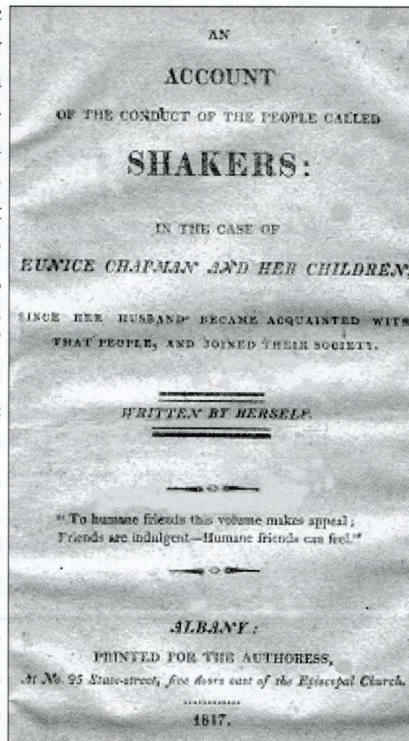
## A Woman of the World

Early Americans could be terribly fickle about the Shakers, as evident in the New York legislature in 1816. One day in March, the state granted the Shakers a long-desired exemption from military fines and duties, thereby recognizing the society's claims as a legitimate pacifist religion. Yet within a month, lawmakers were ready to kill off the same model citizens—legally, that is. It was proposed that all who joined the Shakers be considered “civilly dead,” that “their estates shall be disposed of as though they were really dead,” so that the Shakers would be “forever thereafter incapable of taking any estate, real or personal, by inheritance.”

Why the sudden reversal? Some of the change was no doubt the result of a basic tension in public attitudes towards the Believers. The Shakers drew admiration for their peacefulness and good works, as well as their law-abiding ways. Nevertheless, they continued to arouse fear and suspicion on account of their unusual lifestyle and religion. But there was something more at play as voices rose against the Believers in the spring of 1816: an angry, vengeful woman who the Shakers once called “the most abusive and refractory of any woman that ever came among us.”

Eunice Hawley Chapman's campaign against the Shakers began in 1814, when her estranged husband, James Chapman, took their three children from the home they once shared in Durham, New York, and brought them to the Watervliet Shakers, near Albany. Eventually, James fled with the children, relocating them to the Enfield, New Hampshire, Shaker community. Eunice's anguish was of little consequence: by the laws of the times, a man could do with his children as he pleased. Thus the story should have ended there.

Eunice Chapman, however, was a formidably savvy woman, who was determined to bring the Shakers down, if necessary, to bring her children home. “Remember,” she once warned the Believers, “that a woman can be as mighty to pull you down, as a woman was to build you up. If you think it is for revenge; remember that a woman can dive deep in that art, even to exceed an army.” She made a proud display of this fighting spirit in 1816, when due to her relentless petitioning of her state legislature, a committee of Senators resolved to grant her a divorce by direct legislative author-



ity—the first ever in New York history—and also to lay the groundwork for her custody claims by declaring the Shakers “civilly dead.”

It was customary in this period for the Shakers to take the high road when faced with challenges from attackers like Eunice. They had refrained from giving public remarks when ex-Shaker Valentine Rathbun had published ridiculous charges involving sedition and sorcery. Likewise, they had opted not to address Thomas Brown, whose even-keeled, historian's approach had done their society even more public damage. But this latest threat, originated by a woman, was one they could not ignore, and it would permanently alter their course. Never mind that the Shakers considered themselves “not of this world”: if the world's people refused to recognize them as citizens, the Believers stood to lose their property and everything they had worked so hard to build up as a society.

And so, for the first time, the Believers decided to fight back, embarking on an intense public relations campaign of their own. The lessons from this time would be well-learned: when Mary Dyer, a similarly enraged mother, came slinging her mud against the society in future years, the Shakers would know how to handle her. Here too, with Eunice, the Shakers had their successes, drawing sympathy from the likes of Thomas Jefferson. The Shakers scored the immediate victory when the proclamation of “civil death” against their society was taken off the table. But this initial skirmish would prove to be only the first in what would become a prolonged battle between Eunice and the Shakers—one with dramatic consequences that no one, save perhaps Eunice, could possibly have foreseen.

The Shakers seemed to have some sense of foreboding from the very beginning: they recognized that with a woman as cunning as Eunice, there was no knowing what to expect.

*Ilyon Woo is the recipient of the Shaker Workshop Outstanding Scholarship Award, presented to her at the Museum's Spring Forum in 2009. She holds a B.A. from Yale College and a Ph.D from Columbia University. She wrote her doctoral dissertation on anti-Shaker and Shaker apostate narratives. Her book on Eunice Chapman, The Great Divorce: A Nineteenth-Century Woman's Fight to Save her Children from the Shakers, will be published by Grove/Atlantic next summer. For details see [www.ilyonwoo.com](http://www.ilyonwoo.com).*

