

THE SHAKER MOVEMENT



SHAKER VILLAGE
OF PLEASANT HILL

On May 10, 1774, a barely seaworthy ship, the *Mariah* set sail from Liverpool, England for the New World. Three months later on a Sabbath, nine dedicated but impoverished members of a religious sect called the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing gratefully disembarked in the New York City harbor. They had fled persecution, reached the land of religious freedom and fulfilled the vision of their leader, a short, stocky woman they called Mother Ann.

Ann Lee had grown up in grimy, industrial Manchester, England. She had been a child laborer in the textile mills, married and given birth to four children, all of whom died young. She was illiterate. As a young person, she turned her energies away from her wretched life toward searching for security after death. She joined a dissident sect who worshipped by giving themselves to being, quite literally, moved by the spirit of God. From these ecstatic, animated movements they gained the title the "Shaking Quakers," and then just "Shakers," a name they ultimately used themselves.

Soon Ann began to see visions, to hear Christ speak to her. Revelations convinced her that the only true road to salvation was celibacy and confession of sin. As a part of their continuous persecution, the Shakers were cast into prison. While there, Ann received a vision of Christ appearing to her in person. She told followers that Christ had made his first appearance following his resurrection to a woman, which "showed that his second coming would be as a woman."

The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing was born and Mother Ann became its leader. Scholars differ as to whether her followers believed she was the female reincarnation or whether she was a prophet predicting a second coming in female form. Mother Ann's vision, "that God had chosen people in America," brought them here. Their first year was a discouraging battle for survival. Yet by the fall of 1776, they had a permanent settlement or "gathering" in Niskeyuna, New York, outside Albany. Their first conflict with the outside world was not over doctrine, but was aroused by suspicions they were Tory spies.

In May 1781, Mother Ann, her brother William, and James Whittaker set out for New England on their first proselytizing mission. They met with persecution; this time brought on by their strange, nonconforming way of worship. Two years later, they returned. The struggles had taken their toll on Mother Ann, who died at age 48 in 1784. Her able followers took up the cause successfully and, in 1787, founded the New Lebanon Shaker Village, southeast of Albany. It became the mother colony, the residence of the governing mother or father, the final authority and the maker and dispenser of laws.

Ultimately, the Shakers founded 19 villages from Maine to Kentucky. New Lebanon was the largest with approximately 600 members; Union Village, Ohio was almost as large; Pleasant Hill was third with 500 members. From 1787 to the present, the total recorded membership according to figures from the Western Reserve Historical Society is 16,828. Only one community exists today with Shakers in residence. It is near Lewiston, Maine at Sabbathday Lake and has four remaining residents.