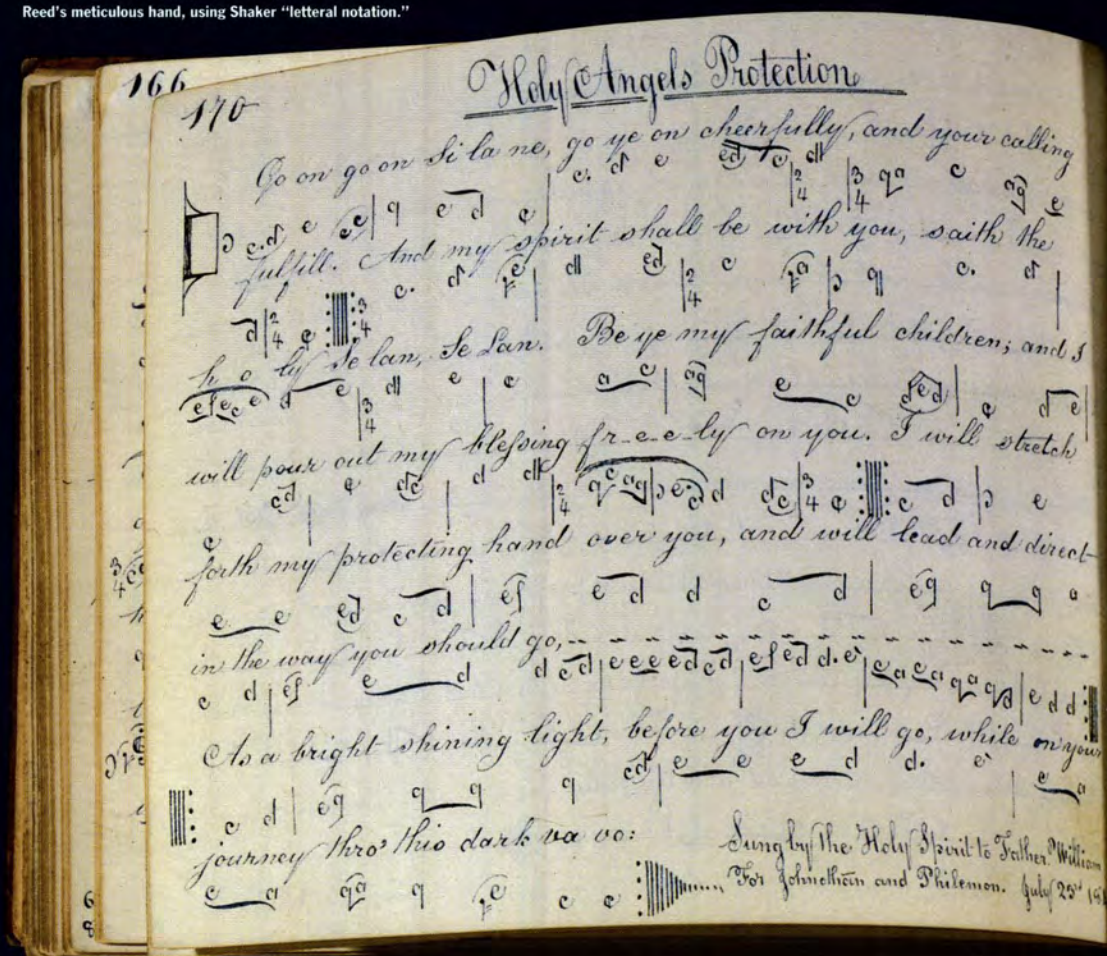


A COLLECTION OF SONGS, OR, SACRED ANTHEMS, MOSTLY  
GIVEN BY INSPIRATION BEGINNING NOVEMBER 29TH 1840.  
WRITTEN FOR BETSY BATES  
Attributed to Sister (later Eldress) Polly Ann Reed  
(1818–1881), copyist  
Church Family, New Lebanon, New York  
1840–1842  
Ink on paper, bound in leather  
6 1/2 x 5 1/2 x 1"  
American Society for Psychical Research, New York

The songs in this 279-page manuscript volume are in Polly  
Reed's meticulous hand, using Shaker "letteral notation."



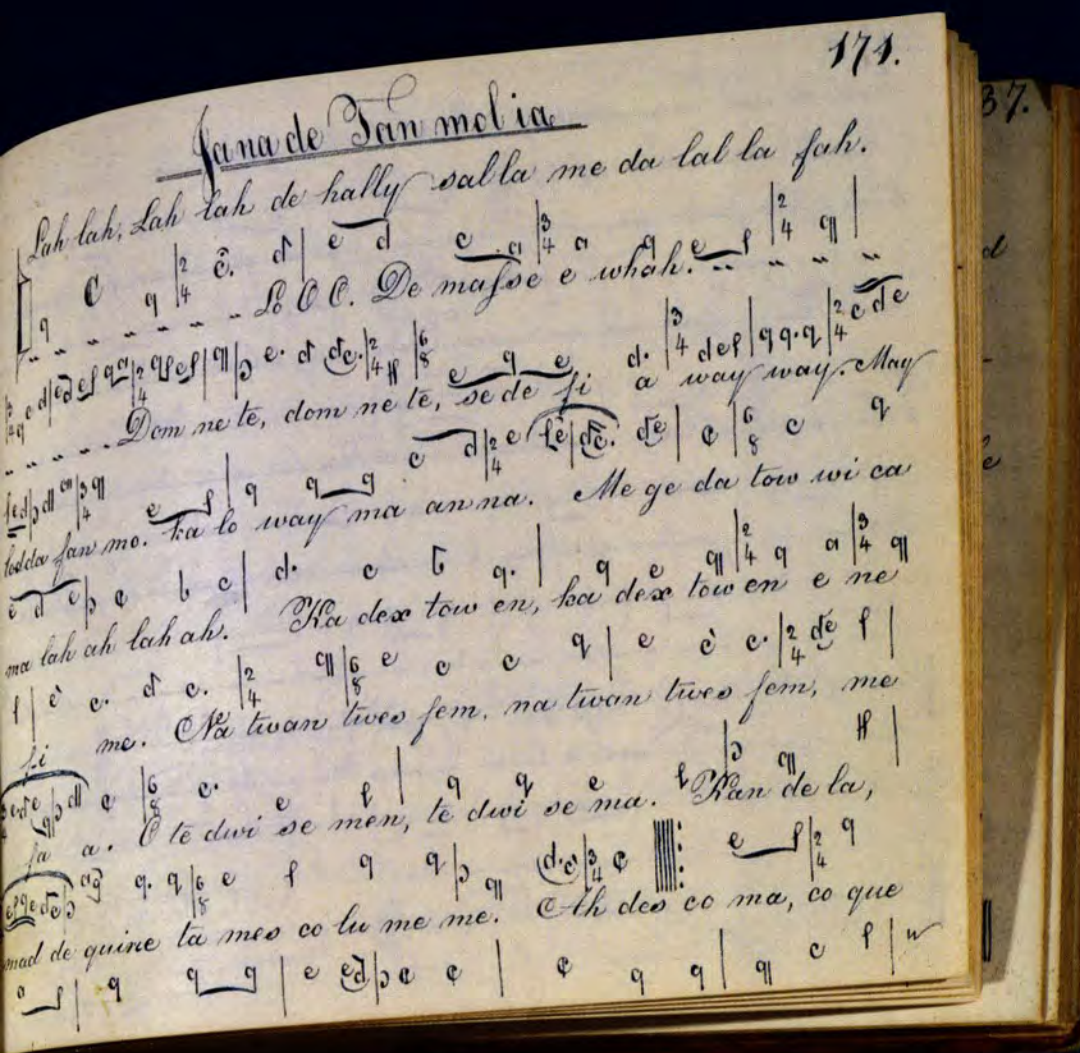
# “Given by Inspiration”

**Shaker Drawings  
and Manuscripts  
in the American  
Society for Psychical  
Research**

GERARD C. WERTKIN

**I**n July 1917, Dr. Walter Franklin Prince (1863–1934), a well-regarded researcher in the field of paranormal phenomena, wrote to Eldress M. Catherine Allen (1851–1922) of the Parent Ministry, the central authority of the Shaker communities at Mount Lebanon, New York. He sought to acquire for the American Society for Psychical Research (ASPR), with which he was affiliated as an honorary member and later as a research





officer, a collection of Shaker publications relating to visionary experiences among the Believers.<sup>1</sup> Years before, Prince had corresponded with Elders Frederick W. Evans and Alonzo G. Hollister of Mount Lebanon with the same objective in mind, but had been unable to raise the requisite funds to purchase the desired works.

By the time Prince wrote to Eldress Catherine, however, the conditions of the Shaker Society had changed. Many of its communities had closed, and the eldress despaired that an aging and enfeebled membership

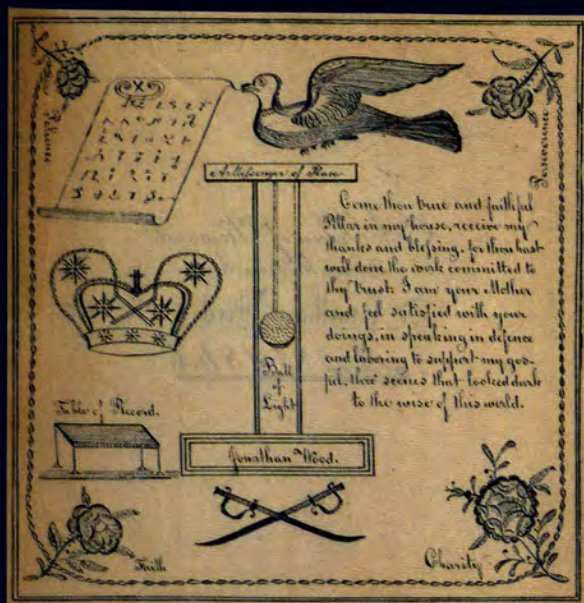
could no longer care for the material record of its history. She became convinced that the printed literature and manuscripts of the United Society belonged in public repositories, and had been instrumental in placing an exhaustive collection, consisting of thousands of items, at The Western Reserve Historical Society in Cleveland as well as smaller collections at other American institutions. She arranged for the donation to the ASPR of 169 books and pamphlets, a small but highly important collection of manuscript records and some drawings.

Although the collection assembled by Catherine Allen for the ASPR emphasized Shaker visionary experiences, it was not by any means limited to descriptions of these phenomena. As the eldress noted in a July 1917 letter to Prince, "a fuller collection of our literature than records of the psychic will be necessary to an understanding of that phase of our experiences."<sup>2</sup> She was convinced that there was "no place where we believe that our peculiar religious views would be more sympathetically studied."<sup>3</sup>

The American Society for Psychological Research was founded in 1885 by William James and others to apply the discipline of the scientific method to a consideration of claims of paranormal occurrences. Many of its early members were also pioneers in the developing fields of psychology and psychiatry, in part because of a common interest in dreams and other subconscious processes. Freud and Jung were among the honorary fellows of the Society. At the time Prince wrote to Eldress Catherine, Dr. James Herveys Hyslop (1854–1920), a psychologist who had taught logic and ethics at Columbia University, was ASPR's director and editor. Hyslop supported Prince's efforts to acquire Shaker literature for the Society.

That Walter Franklin Prince would have sought a collection of Shaker research materials is not surprising; in the literature of nineteenth-century spiritualism, which was well represented in the ASPR's library, genuine psychic phenomena in the modern era are often suggested to have occurred first in the Shaker communities. In her 1870 study, *Modern American Spiritualism: A Twenty Years' Record of the Communion between Earth and the World of Spirits*, for example, Emma Hardinge refers to the Shakers as the "John the Baptists" of spiritualism, citing the "manifestations of spiritual presence" among them through visions, dreams, trances, and other phenomena occurring from the time of their foundation.<sup>4</sup> H.P. Blavatsky, the founder of the modern theosophical movement (whose own claims to paranormal endowment were investigated by a British sister organization of the





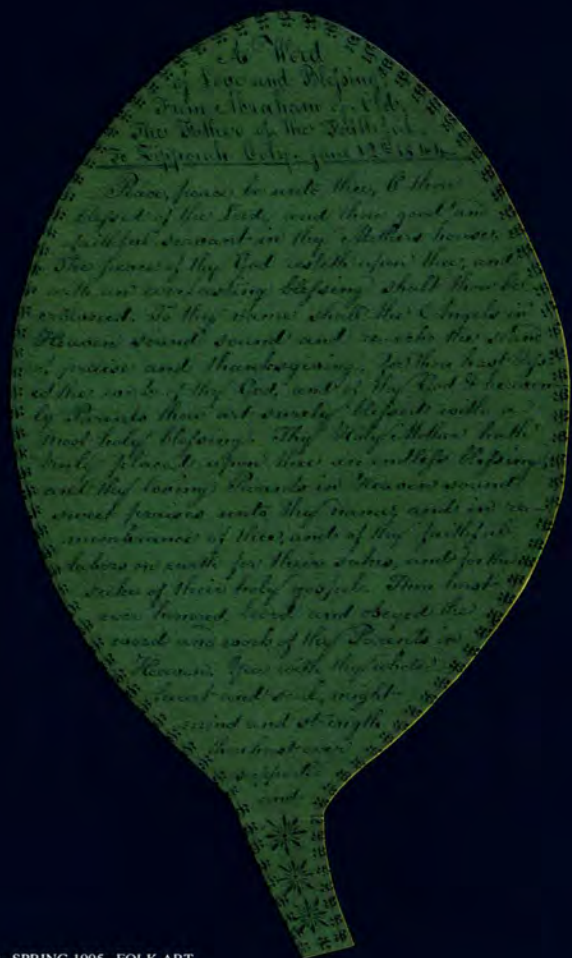
ASPR) wrote in 1877 that these "phenomena first appeared among the ascetic and exalted Shakers, whose religious aspirations, peculiar mode of life, moral purity, and physical chastity all led to the production of independent phenomena of a psychological as well as physical nature."<sup>5</sup> Prince hoped that by its acquisition of a collection of Shaker primary materials, the ASPR might undertake a critical study of the data.

From their first coalescence as a group in mid-eighteenth-century Lancashire, the Shakers were receptive to phenomena that they recognized as gifts of the spirit. The earliest recorded impression of the Shakers and their worship, reported in 1769 by the Manchester correspondent of the colonial *Virginia Gazette*, refers to vision, prophecy, and the "moving of the spirit" among them. According to Shaker tradition, the decision of Mother Ann Lee (1736–1784), the founder of the religious society, to lead a small group of her adherents from England to North America in 1774 followed a "special revelation" that the new faith would flourish there, which was "confirmed by signs, visions and extraordinary manifestations, to many individual members...."<sup>6</sup>

The most significant Shaker growth and development occurred during the last decade of the eighteenth century and the first two decades of the nineteenth century and was the result of an effective, far-ranging missionary effort. At the conclusion of this period of expansion, eighteen Shaker villages graced the rural landscape from Maine to Kentucky. Visionary experiences continued within the United Society, but the requirements of larger-scale community organization brought order and regularity to Shaker life. Early unprogrammed, ecstatic worship forms yielded to ritualized dances or marches, and manifestations of the spirit, with some notable exceptions, became less central to the life of the communities. Deprived of the charismatic leadership of Ann Lee and her immediate successors, all of whom were by then deceased, the celibate Believers of the 1830s no longer entered actively into the religious debates of the day, and they drew fewer seekers from beyond

**A TOKEN OF REWARD, FROM MOTHER ANN, TO JONATHAN WOOD, MARCH 8TH 1846**  
Attributed to Sister (later Eldress) Polly Ann Reed (1818–1881)  
Church Family, New Lebanon, New York  
1846  
Blue ink on paper  
5 × 4 1/8"  
American Society for Psychical Research, New York

On the basis of stylistic similarities with the other drawings associated with Polly Reed, this work is attributed to her, although Patterson has identified the form of dove incorporated here with another gifted New Lebanon sister, Miranda Barber (1819–1871). The symbols on the scroll, intended to convey a hidden message, may be related to Munson shorthand or another stenographic system.



**A WORD OF LOVE AND BLESSING FROM ABRAHAM OF OLD, THE FATHER OF THE FAITHFUL TO ZIPPORAH CORY. JUNE 12TH 1844**  
Attributed to Sister (later Eldress) Polly Ann Reed (1818–1881)  
Church Family, New Lebanon, New York  
June 12, 1844  
Leaf cutout, blue ink on green-coated paper, verso; blue ink on uncoated paper, recto  
6 1/2 × 3 3/4"  
American Society for Psychical Research, New York

As this gift leaf demonstrates, Polly Reed was an especially deft scribe. The artist, who later (1868–1881) served as a member of the central ministry of the Shaker Society, created at least eight other leaves, each on green paper.

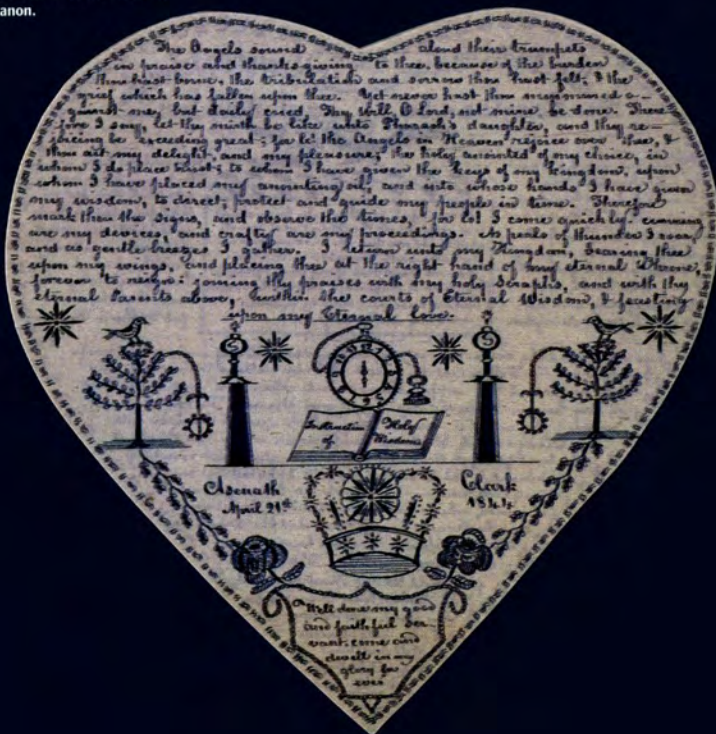
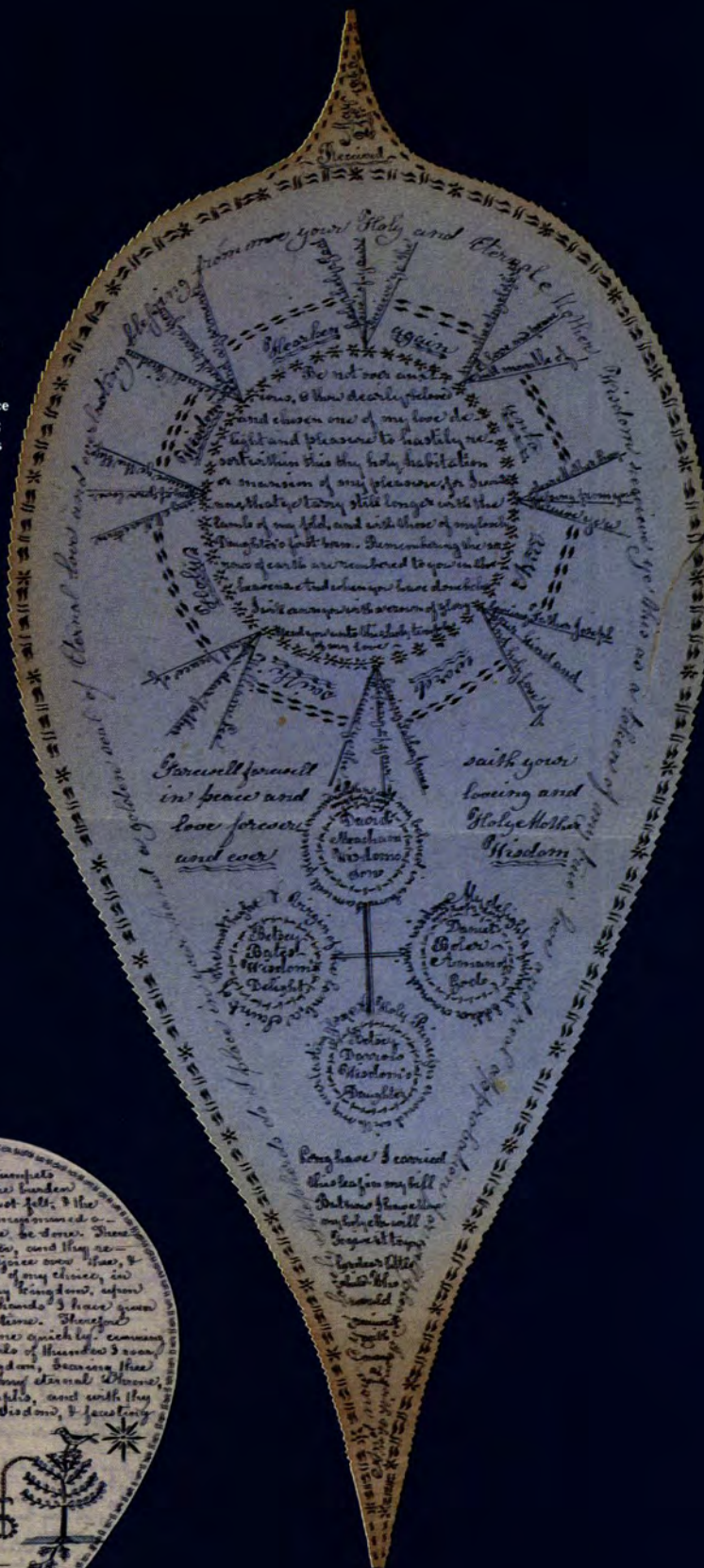


A HOLY LEAF FROM ETERNAL  
WISDOM, TO ELDER S(ISTER).  
BETSY DARROW  
Unidentified Shaker scribe  
Probably New Lebanon,  
New York  
May 21, 1843  
Leaf cutout, blue ink on blue  
paper, verso and recto  
11 3/4 x 5 1/4"  
American Society for Psychical  
Research, New York

"Eternal Wisdom" is a reference  
to the maternal aspect of deity;  
Shakers accept belief in God as  
Mother and Father.

INSTRUCTIONS OF HOLY WISDOM  
Attributed to Sister (later Eldress)  
Polly Ann Reed (1818-1881)  
Church Family, New Lebanon,  
New York  
April 21, 1844  
Heart cutout, blue ink on paper,  
verso and recto  
5 x 4 3/4"  
American Society for Psychical  
Research, New York

One of three heart cutouts attrib-  
uted to Polly Reed in the ASPR  
collection. Patterson lists twenty-  
two other hearts by Sister Polly  
and suggests that as many as 148  
of these tokens of affection may  
have been created by her—the  
number of members of the First  
Order of the Church, her family at  
New Lebanon.





## Shaker Drawings and the ASPR

The American Society for Psychical Research occupies a handsome Manhattan townhouse at 5 West 73rd Street, a few doors from Central Park West. When I first visited the Society in the early 1970s to study its Shaker manuscripts, it was a quiet place. More often than not, I was alone in the impressive library, except for the Society's cat, whose sudden appearances and mysterious feline presence seemed appropriate to the vast collection of literature on paranormal phenomena.

Although I became familiar with the Society's Shaker collection in the years that followed, several items were not immediately accessible to me. The inventory prepared by Walter F. Prince in 1917, when the collection was acquired, included a tantalizing reference to twenty-two "detached briefer manuscripts...including several drawings (probably automatic)."<sup>\*</sup> These clearly had been filed away for safekeeping, but no one among the members of the Society's small staff had sufficient time to examine the voluminous records of the hundred-year-old organization in an effort to find them.

In the early 1980s, Patrice Keane, then director of public information and education of the ASPR, recognized the significance of the Shaker collection and with the support of the Society's Board of Trustees sought to generate funds to protect and preserve the books and manuscripts that comprised it. She also sought to bring public attention to the collection. In June 1987, I collaborated with her on an exhibition at the ASPR of these materials and presented a lecture to the Society's members and guests on visionary experiences among the Shakers. I also encouraged her to search for the drawings.

About two years ago, Patrice Keane, now the executive director of the ASPR, left an excited message for me at the Museum. The drawings and other unbound manuscripts had been located! Under her direction, the ASPR had undertaken the comprehensive organization and cataloging of its archives and, in the process, a somewhat worn folder had been uncovered that yielded the treasures. That evening, I visited the Society to admire for the first time these wonderful products of a remarkable period in Shaker history. The collection included two impressive "sacred sheets" rendered in an "unknown tongue"; three lovely gift drawings in the form of hearts; two in the shape of leaves, one larger than the usual format and one on green paper; and two other drawings containing mystical signs and symbols.

From January 21 to April 2, 1995, the Museum of American Folk Art, through the courtesy of the ASPR, is presenting the exhibition "Given by Inspiration": Shaker Drawings and Manuscripts from the American Society for Psychical Research.<sup>\*</sup> I am delighted that an even wider audience will become aware of Shaker gifts of the spirit and the resources of the ASPR.

—GCW

<sup>\*</sup> Walter F. Prince, "The Shakers and Psychical Research: A Notable Example of Cooperation," *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* 12 (January 1918), p. 69.

their borders. According to many thoughtful Shakers, this time was a period of spiritual stagnation and encroaching worldliness.

In 1837, two Shaker girls at Watervliet, New York, entered into what appeared to be trance-like states; their strange, complex, visionary experiences, which seemed to many earnest Believers to be heaven-sent, had an immediate and profound effect on the Shaker communities. The leadership of the United Society understood them to be signs of the divine, a heavenly call for the Believers to return to their founding principles after a period of "dullness" and loss. Soon, similar manifestations were occurring in every Shaker village. Religious revival was in the air.

*It is now, in these days, a Shaker diarist recorded on January 1, 1840, a time of an abundance of manifestations from the spiritual world, particularly thro' instruments, by Inspiration. There is seldom a meeting without some communication, or message, from the spirits, mostly from our heavenly parents....*

*There is also an abundance of written messages, consisting of instruction, love and admonition, and much in the way of reining us up to strict Church Order, as it was first established....*<sup>7</sup>

The period of the revival, which the Shakers called Mother's Work, continued with varying degrees of robustness throughout the Shaker Society until the late 1840s, although manifestations associated with it occurred from time to time for another decade or more. The Shakers were diligent keepers of records; the journals, diaries, and correspondence of the period are replete with lengthy, detailed, and often excited descriptions of spiritual phenomena occurring in the villages. Thousands of such manifestations are described in the extant records. Shaker visionists, or instruments, as they were known, were believed to speak in trance on behalf of divine figures, saints, and angels, as well as incarnate persons from Shaker and secular history. They also were believed to bring symbolic gifts from the heavenly spheres.

*There is...an endless variety of gifts, and spiritual presents, the diarist*

*quoted above continued, bro't & given to us collectively & individually, much of which we do not fully understand & some we do understand as being signs and representations of divine things — such as lamps — doves — branches, balls of love, crosses &c &c...."*<sup>8</sup>

For the Shakers, all the manifestations of Mother's Work were "gifts." As in other examples of Shaker usage, this sense of the word is biblical in origin. According to the Epistle of James (1:17), "[e]very good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights...." During the period of revival, extravagant gifts, entirely invisible to the natural eye, were believed to have been presented, occasionally in solemn rituals involving elaborate miming. Others were described in detail in written form. Instruments also received hundreds of hymns and anthems by inspiration. A small group of Shakers, most of whom were women living in the communities at New Lebanon, New York, and Hancock, Massachusetts, depicted gifts visually, in the graphic form that we have come to know as gift drawings or paintings, following the terminology suggested by Daniel W. Patterson. In his careful 1983 checklist of all known Shaker gift drawings and paintings,<sup>9</sup> Patterson accounted for 192 works; several have been discovered since then, including the nine at the ASPR, but this number is still small when compared to the thousands of surviving gift writings and songs. Although the drawings and paintings are far less commonly found than other Shaker gift forms, they are simply extensions or elaborations of the oral or written phenomena and cannot be understood except in the same context. They derive from identical impulses and utilize equivalent symbolic language and imagery.

The nine drawings that were donated by Catherine Allen to the ASPR all seem to be from the Church Family at New Lebanon, New York. Several are the work of Sister (later Eldress) Polly A. Reed (1818–1881), an exceptionally gifted artist, who is also represented in the ASPR collection by a wonderful book of hymns containing the distinctive Shaker "letteral" musical notation. The detailed,



# UNTITLED

Unidentified Shaker scribe  
Probably New Lebanon,  
New York

c. 1845  
Blue ink on paper  
7 3/4 x 9 1/4"

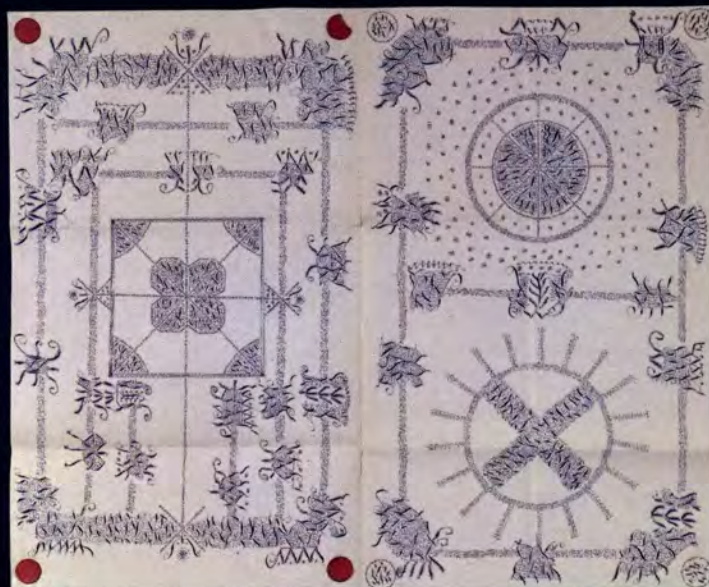
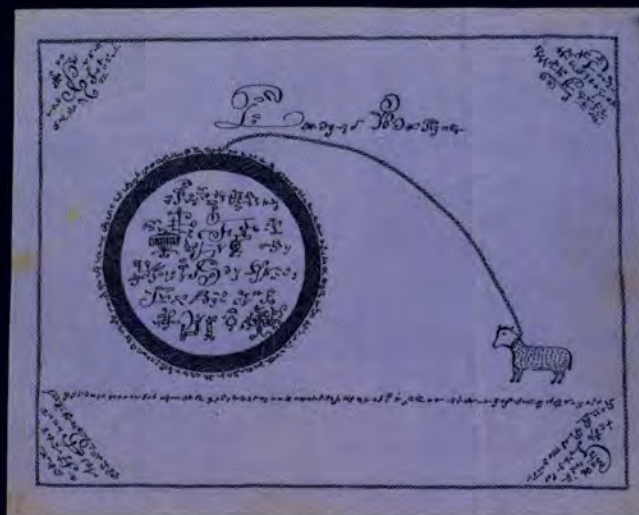
American Society for Psychical  
Research, New York

The words in an "unknown tongue" were often believed by nineteenth-century Shakers to be inspired by native American spirits. Although lambs and other animal figures are occasionally included in Shaker gift drawings, this composition is highly unusual.

finely drawn imagery of Sister Polly's skillful hand is especially appealing, helping to draw the viewer into the mystical world of the period of Mother's Work. At least one of the drawings at the ASPR that is attributed to Polly Reed contains the symbolic alphabet of an "unknown tongue," a kind of visual glossolalia found in many Shaker gift drawings. Two "sacred sheets" attributed to Sisters Semantha Fairbanks (1804-1852) and Mary Wicks (1819-1898), also of the Church Family, are dominated by such writing.

Unlike the "automatic" writings or drawings of nineteenth-century American spiritualism, Shaker gift drawings were not believed to be the work of discarnate spirits guiding the hand of a visionist or medium. Catherine Allen, referring to the exquisite drawings of Polly Reed as "manifestation gifts," explained that she "did the work by dictation of the medium to whom the message & the vision were given."<sup>10</sup> While some Shakers recorded, in written form or drawing, visions that they received themselves, even then the recording was rarely accomplished in a trance state. With the exception of certain of the communications in "unknown tongues," the Shaker drawings were acknowledged to be the conscious act of their creators, the recording of a vision previously received. More often than not, they contain messages of consolation and encouragement intended for those Shaker brethren or sisters to whom they were addressed.

After the period of Mother's Work was concluded, the Shaker leadership stored away the material evidence of the manifestations in the chests and cupboards of their villages. Revival had not brought the anticipated renewal, and within a few decades the communities began to close. In giving the spiritual gifts of an earlier time to the American Society for Psychical Research, Eldress Catherine Allen retained the conviction that there would be a "great awakening to the spiritual side of life, a truer perception of values." Then, she predicted, "[t]he benefit of the Psychical Research Society will be recognized as never before, so many yearning for an assurance of continued individual iden[tity] in the world to come."<sup>11</sup>



A SACRED SHEET, SENT FROM HOLY MOTHER WISDOM, BY HER HOLY ANGEL OF MANY SIGNS, FOR SISTER SEMANTHA FAIRBANKS RECEIVED MARCH 5TH 1843. WRITTEN MARCH 23RD 1843. IN THE FIRST ORDER ON THE HOLY MOUNT

Attributed to Sisters Semantha Fairbanks (1804-1852) and Mary Wicks (1819-1898)  
Church Family, New Lebanon,  
New York

1843  
Blue ink on paper, red-coated  
paper  
13 x 16"

American Society for Psychical  
Research, New York

One of two "sacred sheets" in the ASPR collection. Patterson attributes nearly identical works to Semantha Fairbanks and Mary Wicks on the basis of a signed drawing. The other sacred sheet in the ASPR collection also bears their names, as instruments. The fact that the drawing illustrated here is addressed to Semantha Fairbanks may place the attribution in question, although Shaker scribes occasionally recorded gift messages believed to have been intended for themselves.



In August 1917, a month after he began his correspondence with Eldress Catherine, Walter F. Prince visited the Sabbathday Lake Shaker community in New Gloucester, Maine. He interviewed the resident Shakers as a group as well as individually and found them "thoroughly sincere and upright" and "intelligent considerably above the average." He discovered that gifts of the spirit remained a feature of Shaker life even in the twentieth century; the Believers spoke to him of premonitory and symbolic dreams and inspired music, among other phenomena.<sup>12</sup> Today, only Sabbathday Lake remains as an active center of the Shaker faith,<sup>13</sup> but the legacy of the United Society is more widely known than ever before. The Shaker collection at the American Society for Psychical Research is an important resource to a fuller understanding of a fascinating aspect of that legacy. ★

Gerard C. Wertkin is director of the Museum of American Folk Art.

#### NOTES

1 The official name of the Shaker Society is the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing. "Shakers" and "Believers" are synonyms and are used interchangeably in this essay, as are "Shaker Society" and "United Society."

2 Quoted in Walter F. Prince, "The Shakers and Psychical Research: A Notable Example of Cooperation," *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* 12 (January 1918), p. 62.

3 Ibid.

4 Emma Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism: A Twenty Years' Record of the Communion between Earth and the World of Spirits* (New York, 1870), p. 27.

5 H.P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*, vol. 2 (Pasadena, Calif.: Theosophical University Press, 1976), p. 18.

6 Calvin Green, *A Summary View of the Millennial Church, or United Society of Believers, (Commonly Called Shakers)* (Albany, N.Y.: Packard & Van Benthuysen, 1823), p. 13.

7 [Seth Youngs Wells], "Records Kept by Order of the Church," entry for January 1, 1840, Shaker Manuscripts Collection, vol. 7, p. 176, New York Public Library.

8 Ibid.

9 In Daniel W. Patterson, *Gift Drawing and Gift Song: A Study of Two Forms of Shaker Inspiration* (Sabbathday Lake, Me., United Society of Shakers, 1983).

10 Catherine Allen to W.H. Cathcart, December 22, 1917, Shaker Manuscript Collection IV: A-49, The Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland (WRHS).

11 Catherine Allen to W.H. Cathcart, August 20, 1918, Shaker Manuscript Collection IV: A-49, WRHS. In its research and programming, today's ASPR places little emphasis on "spiritualistic" or "occult" phenomena and more emphasis on parapsychology, alternative healing, and related fields.

12 Prince, op. cit., pp. 64-65.

13 Ironically, Sabbathday Lake was one of the very few Shaker communities that did not cooperate with Catherine Allen in her efforts to place Shaker literature in public repositories, its leaders stubbornly asserting that the Believers themselves should retain custody of the records of the United Society. Its library, which is open to the public for serious study and research, remains today one of the country's leading centers for Shaker scholarship.



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