



Hancock Shaker Village.

The Shaker utopia

BY CHARLES W. UPTON

HUMAN HISTORY IS replete with myths of utopias or societies enjoying a perfect state of mutual harmony and individual happiness. When the word utopia was coined by Sir Thomas More in 1516 to describe the fabled island where righteousness prevailed and man lived in freedom, prosperity, and justice, he composed it of the Greek words *ou* and *topos*, whose literal translation is "no place." Century after century literature, philosophy, and religion pursued the utopian theme in discussion of the golden age, the Promised Land, the New Atlantis, the millennium, and the New Jerusalem, to mention only a few. These stories of heavens on earth kept alive the hope and conviction that the perfect society was a realizable dream, the more so when existence became unbearably cruel and insupportable.

The history of American utopian experiments or socialism, although largely governed by indigenous forces, has been greatly influenced by European developments and foreign philosophers. In the realm of theory, scholars and reformers were familiar with the egalitarian implications of Christian teachings and the communism of the primitive church, Plato's blueprint of the ideal state in his *Republic*, and Sir Thomas More's fascinating and attractive depiction

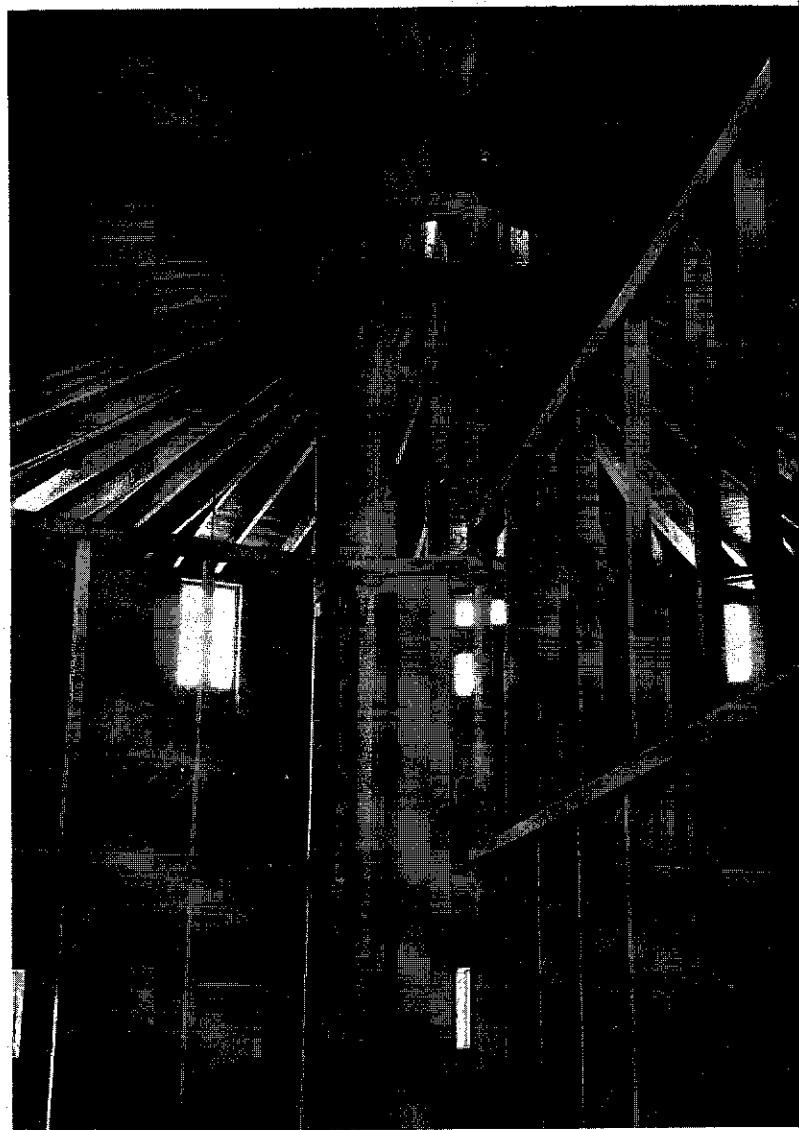
of perfect human happiness. The basic drive, however, behind the search for an earthly paradise was to be found in the political, economic, and social disintegration in western Europe at various stages in the transformation from medieval to modern, in the great social upheavals that followed the rise of heretical sects, the Protestant Reformation, the Counter Reformation, the Cromwellian revolution in England, and the French Revolution, together with the massive abuses of the new industrial and urban movement of the eighteenth century. More or less of necessity proposals for reform took on the character of dissent and revolution, a challenge to the Establishment, and those who sought to put these theories into practice were looked upon as enemies of the church or state and treated harshly by their neighbors and the authorities. Such repressive measures inevitably turned the attention of the utopia-minded to America, principally the United States.

After the American Revolution had transformed the American colonies into the United States, the new nation offered, or appeared to offer, unlimited opportunities for the establishment of utopian experiments. Here existed all the ingredients for a perfect society—political and religious

freedom, cheap land, an open society, and the prospect of early riches for the earnest and hard-working immigrant. In addition to the almost unlimited amount of virgin soil which allowed location of new settlements either on the frontier or close to the more populous areas, the United States presented a most favorable environment for a new moral code, a new economy, and a new and more perfect form of human association. Equally important, the violence and radicalism of the American Revolution which had broken the chains of religious orthodoxy and economic conservatism were reinforced by the spirit of freedom and equality of the frontier. Beginning in the early 1800's the United States was in the throes of a social and political revolution later described as the age of the common man. A wave of unrest swept across the country, particularly the eastern states, as religious revivalism and Jeffersonian democracy made steady headway against Calvinist doctrine and Federalist politics. A spirit of optimism spread throughout the population, arousing new hopes and expectations of well-being and progress and constituting a most favorable background for new and extreme proposals for social experiments.

During the nineteenth century over a hundred thousand men, women, and children, repelled and discouraged by economic and social misery and the hostility of their neighbors, fled to America to set up more than a hundred model communities. Because they were faced with a shortage of capital, burdened with numbers of poor persons immediately concerned with economic security and compelled to accept leadership of a few strong personalities, these individuals found it necessary to adopt communism in one form or another. Only by combining their scanty resources could they purchase the large tracts of land needed for an agricultural existence and maintain the controls needed to combat individualism, dissension, laziness, and backsliding. In a number of instances these sects had adopted communistic principles before coming to America; other groups not originally communistic became so for social and economic reasons; and in some instances communism became an end in itself. Another characteristic of these colonies, particularly the pietistic types, was the desire to separate themselves from established (wicked) society. This relative isolation permitted them to practice any special principles, such as celibacy, in relative safety, and also protected the members against the temptations and contamination of the outside world. Millennialism, or belief in the imminent thousand-year reign of Jesus Christ, was another widely shared belief.

The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, as the Shakers officially called themselves, is by all tests the most extensive, the most enduring, and for the American people the most important communal sect. The Shakers, English pietists, developed out of English Quakerism and distantly from the Camisards. Jane and James Wardley were leaders of a Manchester sect derisively called Shaking Quakers or Shakers because of their frenzied physical manifestations of religious zeal. Ann Lee joined this group in 1758 and became the accepted head in 1770 after a short stay in the Manchester jail for Sabbath-breaking. There Christ appeared to her and explained the cause of human depravity to be the sex act. Mother Ann, as she was now called, preached her gospel of sinlessness and celibacy, and sought unsuccessfully to recruit new members. After four years in which she was accused of blasphemy, tried and acquitted before an Anglican (church) court, imprisoned



Interior, Round Stone Barn, Hancock Shaker Village. This octagonal framework, running from the floor of the manger to the cupola, is an air shaft for ventilating the hay which was piled around it. The beams of the roof enclose the barn's twelve-sided superstructure; many of the beams are split halfway down their length to provide economical support for the roof's outer edge.

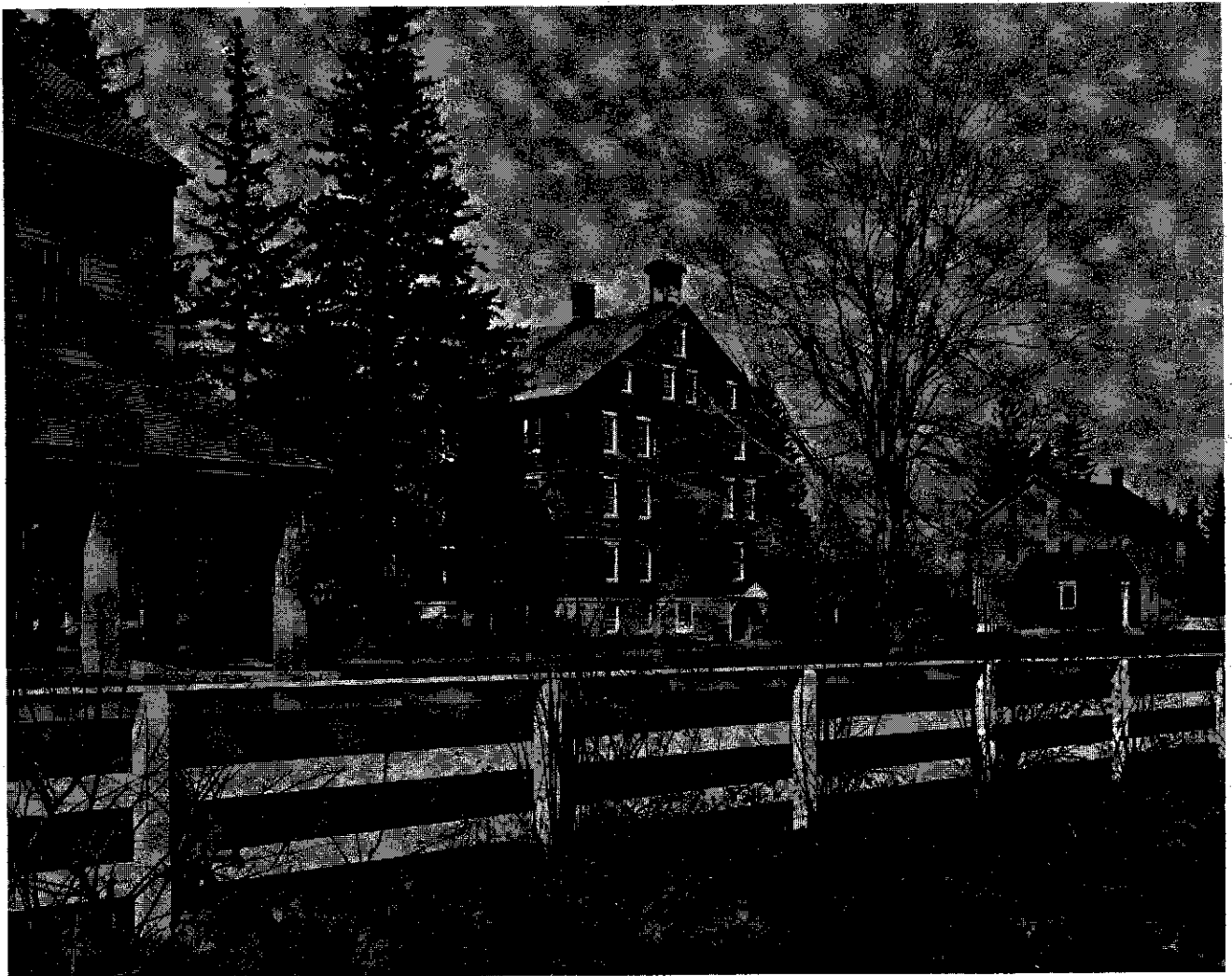
and stoned along with her companions, Ann was directed in a vision to go to America, where the Church of Christ's Second Appearing would be founded.

Ann and eight followers arrived in New York City on August 6, 1774, after a voyage of three months. Several of the little group sought employment outside the city while Mother Ann found work as a laundress and cared for her ailing husband. John Hocknell, the only person of substantial means among the Shakers, went up the Hudson to Albany where he purchased several hundred acres of wilderness land near the village of Niskayuna from Stephen Van Rensselaer in February 1776. Mother Ann and the others joined him in the spring, almost two years after arriving in the New World.

For several years the tiny group labored to build log cabins, drain and clear the land, and prepare for the converts to Shaker gospel. At first Ann and her disciples enjoyed little success in persuading their neighbors to join them, and they momentarily fell into the clutches of the law when as English newcomers they were suspected of

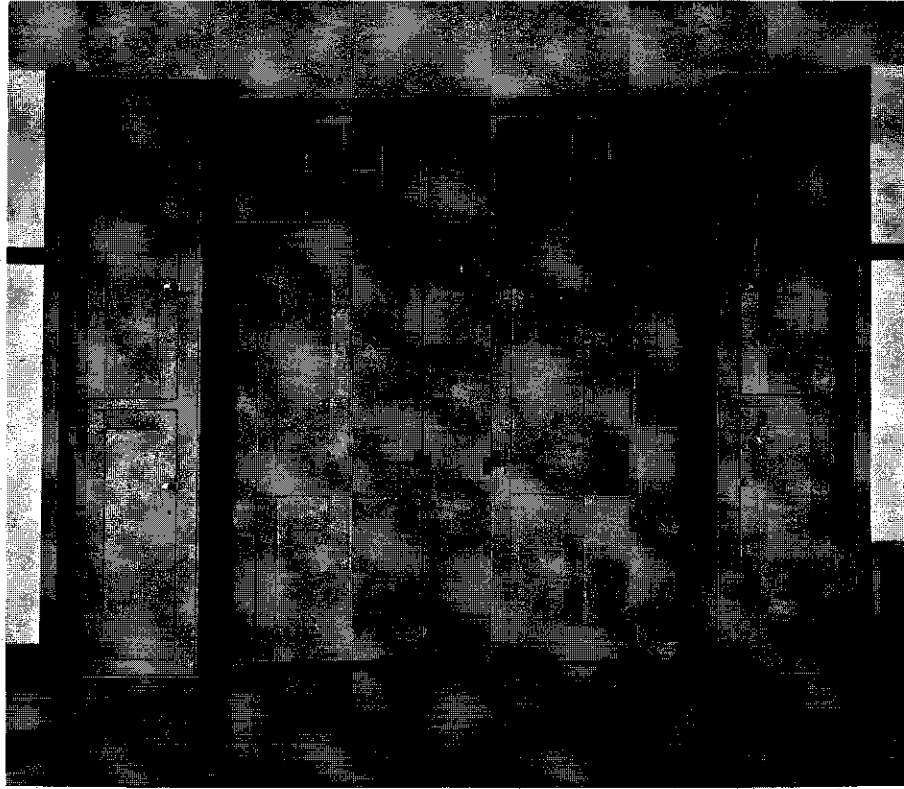
being spies for George III. The turning point in their fortunes came in 1779 when a series of religious revival meetings was held at New Lebanon, New York. These attracted hundreds of people living in towns on the Massachusetts-New York border who heard for the first time of the Shakers at nearby Niskayuna. Many of these traveled there to learn of the new Messiah. Beginning in 1780 Ann and her followers visited New Lebanon and neighboring towns making hundreds of converts. Later-in 1781 she and her brother undertook a two-year missionary journey into Massachusetts and Connecticut where they encountered rough handling by the mobs that turned out to greet the leaders of this queer sect. Mother Ann and her brother, William Lee, died the year after their return home in 1784. It is believed that the injuries received in this visitation contributed to Ann's demise at the age of forty-eight.

Fortunately, strong new leaders appeared in the persons of James Whittaker, Joseph Meacham, and Lucy Wright in the crucial years from 1784 to 1821 and of Frederick W. Evans from 1836 to 1893. Three Shaker communities



View of Hancock Shaker Village, showing (from the left) part of the Laundry and Machine Shop, the Brick Dwelling, the small brick Wash House (c. 1810), and the Sisters' Shop (c. 1820). The bushes along the fence are *Rosa gallica officinalis*, the blossoms of which were used for making the Shakers' celebrated rose water.

The Shakers' belief in the separation—though equality—of the sexes is expressed architecturally by this pair of doorways leading into the dining room of the Brick Dwelling at Hancock: that on the right was used by the brethren, that on the left by the sisters. Of pine and butternut, the woodwork is stained a light brown, effectively contrasting with the whitewashed plaster of the walls. The built-in cupboards flanking the doorways are a ubiquitous feature of Shaker interiors, effectively symbolizing the Shakers' insistence on order and tidiness.



were established in New York State, four in Massachusetts, one in Connecticut, two in New Hampshire, and two in Maine. Four groups settled in Ohio, two in Kentucky, and one in Indiana. There were also two short-lived communities in Florida and Georgia.

Converts to Shakerism numbered in the thousands; it is estimated that at the height of the movement some six thousand inhabited the nineteen communities. Shaker religious doctrine was easily reconciled with that of most Protestant sects which involved acceptance of the Bible as the source of all religious teachings, confession of sin, belief in life after death, and a rigid code of individual virtuous conduct leading to perfectionism. Mother Ann's personal contributions to Shaker theology were her belief that God is a dual personality, feminine as well as masculine, and her demand for celibacy to insure purity and spirituality. While Ann herself was endowed with the spirit of Christ, she was not divine, but only the instrument for the expression of divine truth. As for the faithful, life must be lived in accord with the twelve virtues: faith, hope, honesty, continence, conscience, simplicity, meekness, humility, prudence, patience, thankfulness, and charity.

The Shakers' economic growth and well-being were exceptional during the period down to the Civil War. Communism, the antithesis of individual ownership, provided the inspiration for personal benevolence and dedication to group welfare, encouraged the acceptance of discipline needed to maintain the maximum production of goods, and strengthened the authority of the leadership of this tightly knit organization. From the beginning, the Shakers carried on diversified agriculture as the means of livelihood most likely to preserve the communitarian principle. Driven by their religion to economize on time and labor, the Shakers displayed great ingenuity in inventing labor-saving devices

and instituting co-operative production, in some instances approximating the mass-production techniques developed elsewhere later in the century. Meticulous in maintaining high standards of quality, scrupulously honest and fair in pricing, the Shakers produced goods eagerly bought by the outside world, with the result that wealth and prosperity along with an exceptional reputation for integrity blessed the Shaker societies.

Shaker life tended to be standardized in the various communities. Celibacy and communism required strict discipline. Most buildings, including the meetinghouses, had two entrances, one for men, the other for women; separate stairways led to the sleeping quarters, and men and women dined at separate tables in the same room. Order and cleanliness pervaded the shops and dwellings, and the rooms were lined with rows of pegs on which to hang chairs and wearing apparel. Temperance and often total abstinence, along with a moderate use of tobacco, were customary; some families practiced vegetarianism. Visitors, including almost every celebrity, domestic and foreign, came to see communism in action and to watch the Shaker services with their songs, lively dances, marches, and prayers. Curious travelers came to sample the bountiful meals served by the Shaker sisters. All in all it was a busy life with security, simplicity, and satisfaction in settlements of unconscious architectural beauty.

The peak of wealth, membership, and achievement which the Shakers had reached shortly before the Civil War could not be maintained. The losses of property in Kentucky in the war, the inability of Shaker industry to maintain its early advantage of large-scale production, the materialism of the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the failure to hold young members of the order, and the decline in organizational and leadership qualities, along with the ad-

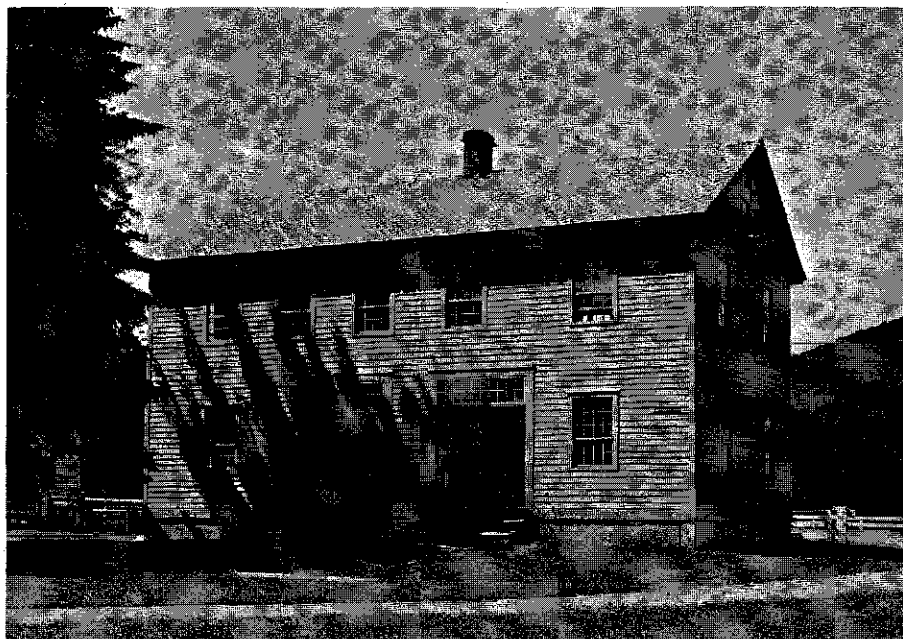


Eldresses' Sitting Room, Meetinghouse, Hancock Shaker Village. The Shaker Ministry, consisting of two Elders and two Eldresses, occupied quarters apart from the rank and file of Believers on the second floor of the meetinghouse. This room adjoins the Eldresses' "retiring" room. The chest of drawers, from the Shaker community at Mount Lebanon, New York, was formerly in the collection of the painter Charles Sheeler. Photograph by Louis H. Frohman.



Laundry and Machine Shop, Hancock Shaker Village. Dating in part from 1790, this building is one of the oldest in the Village. It also houses the Village's herb department.

Brethren's Shop, Hancock Shaker Village, c. 1820; one of several similar structures housing the community's varied industries. It now contains exhibitions relating to some of the Shakers' best-known manufactures: chairs, brooms, baskets, and clocks. Visitors to Shaker communities during the nineteenth century marveled at the well-lighted and well-equipped work-rooms where the sect's industries were carried on.



Brick Dwelling, Hancock Shaker Village. Built in 1830, this structure was designed to house most of the adult Shakers of the Church Family. In addition to the Family's communal rooms—the kitchen and ancillary storage rooms, the dining room, and the meeting room used for weekday worship—the building contains on its second and third floors the brethren's and sisters' "retiring" rooms. Virtually all the materials used in the building were village-produced: the brick from its brickyard, the wood from its timber lots, the limestone from its quarries.



vancing age of the Shakers, led to an inevitable decline in the economic activity and prosperity of the communities and their members. Slowly the societies, first in the West and then in the East, closed and sent their members to the more populous orders. In 1970 only two communities remain, one at Sabbathday Lake, Maine, and the other at Canterbury, New Hampshire. Here some fifteen sisters carry on as Mother Ann directed. Their chief activity is to welcome visitors from far and near, curious to learn the mysteries of the once-flourishing utopia of Shakerdom.

Other socialistic utopias, co-operative associations, and semicomunistic experiments, however, were set up in the United States and elsewhere after the Civil War, and indeed continue to be founded. For the most part they have not succeeded to the same degree as the early religious groups. Land is no longer cheap, the expense of establish-

ing manufactures is prohibitive, the primitive faith and moral purpose of the early communarians seem to have disappeared, while capitalism has softened its image by accepting many semisocialistic reforms. Still the search for utopia with its perfect state of human happiness goes on in literature and social experimentation. B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two* blueprints a scientifically controlled society, while the Israeli *Kibbutzim* and even the hippie communes seek to recapture something of earlier, happier, and more humane life.

All the illustrations here are of Hancock Shaker Village in Massachusetts, which has been restored since 1960; captions are by Eugene Merrick Dodd, curator of the Village. Except as noted, photographs are also by Mr. Dodd.