



Introduction

Abraham Lincoln, as soon as he began his four tumultuous years in the White House, received sacks of correspondence — piles of letters, invitations, and gifts. Many Americans felt almost a personal connection to the lanky, awkward man in his ill-fitting clothes, who seemed more accessible than his tightly-buttoned predecessors — more like one of the folks. Lincoln's presidency coincided with the widespread use of photography, and his homely face, topped by a shock of thick, untidy hair, was as familiar to most people as that of their next-door neighbor. Abraham Lincoln seemed like someone with whom they could lean over the fence and have a chat.

Armchair generals sent the president advice on strategy, offers of amazing inventions that would infallibly win the war, or scoldings for military blunders. Missives from heaven arrived, personally signed by the Angel Gabriel. Romantic ladies besieged him with reams of patriotic poetry and requests for locks of hair; office-seekers begged shamelessly for favors; bitter pleas for justice came from African-Americans. Lincoln disregarded, with apparent cheerfulness, the frequent arrival of profane or violently specific death threats.

Gifts sent by Lincoln's admirers ranged from the humble to the magnificent: a pair of hand-knitted socks, a pen-wiper, a "Mammoth Ox, [named] General Grant."¹ To Lincoln's weary secretaries, there seemed no end to the stream of offerings: a pair of live eagles, an embroidered sofa cushion, a case of wine (although Lincoln was a tee-totaller). A polite offer of war elephants came

from the King of Siam. Many presented Lincoln with food: pineapples, half a dozen hams, a fresh salmon, fruitcake. One thoughtful gentleman sent a cure for indigestion.

One day, yet another gift arrived at the White House, addressed to the president. It was a wooden chair.

Perhaps the harassed secretaries scratched their heads at the sight of this unadorned piece of furniture, suitable for kitchen use. The chair must have looked oddly out of place in the nineteenth-century White House, which was furnished along the lines of Buckingham Palace, with gold and crimson hangings, velvet draperies, and frescoed ceilings. Noah Brooks, a contemporary visitor, described furniture lavishly upholstered in blue and silver satin damask. "The woodwork of the chairs, sofas, etc., [is] solidly gilt," he continued admiringly. "Broad mirrors, with massive frames, surmount the marble chimney-pieces."²

In contrast to all this magnificence, the chair stood, plain and solid, designed with a strange, spare elegance. The simplicity of its design could not hide the craftsmanship: every rung straight, every joint polished and perfect, down to the smallest detail. The chair was basically the classic New England slat-back that had been common in American homes since Pilgrim days, but master craftsmen had taken this form and pared it to the bone, sternly resisting the temptation to add any trimmings. The man who was born in a log cabin may have found something refreshingly familiar in its simplicity.

The chair was a large one, to fit a large person; it was doubtless designed with the six-foot-four Lincoln's long legs in mind. The president pronounced it a "very comfortable chair."³

The empty chair stood in the president's office: a silent ambassador. It was sent to Mr. Lincoln by a unique group of people — some of the strangest non-conformists our nation of non-conformists has ever seen. Abraham Lincoln hailed these folk as "my good friends," but most Americans were suspicious of their bizarre religious services, during which the worshippers would dance, sing, and shake with fervor when they felt the Holy Spirit.⁴

Their formal name was “The United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing.” But the defiant Believers had taken an insulting label the World stuck on them, and adopted it as their own; they were proud to be known as “the Shakers,” feeling that their faith was “indeed mighty enough to shake the heavens and the earth.”⁵



My own first encounter with the Shakers didn’t begin with a chair — it began with a lamp, hanging in the polished hallway of a Shaker Dwelling House. The lamp looked old-fashioned, with a wick in a basin and a large funnel over the top, but a sleek metal tube poked out of the side, stretching overhead to a vent in the wall. It seemed an awkward contraption, a strange blend of old and new.

“The tube removes soot and smoke,” the tour guide explained. “Shakers were concerned about breathing clean air.”

I looked back at the lamp with amazement. As an environmentalist, I know that air pollution is a worldwide crisis, with far-reaching consequences for the entire planet. The Shakers were ahead of their times, I thought approvingly. But as I explored further, I discovered that this was just the tip of the iceberg.

At first glance, the restored Shaker village had seemed a drowsy corner of rural New England. But as I wandered the grounds of the living history museum on that sunny October afternoon, I grew more and more aware that something earth-shaking had once gone on in this tranquil place. It seemed that every detail of life had been examined, and reinvented, by the Shakers. Their picturesque barn was designed like a Swiss watch, planned to ease the labor of the workers and ensure the well-being of the animals. Rustic workshops housed heavy-duty power tools: circular saws, an industrial-sized washing machine. These peaceful farmers had literally built a better mousetrap — a “have-a-heart” trap. I began to wonder — who in the world were these people called Shakers?

These ingenious inventors were not of “the World” at all. The Shakers were — and are — a group of religious non-conformists

who withdrew from society, which they called the World, and dedicated themselves to a life of worship interspersed with labor. Their villages were not unlike Catholic monasteries, and like monks and nuns, Shakers were strictly celibate. Shakerism was one of the many Utopian “experiments” of America’s early days. And that’s what first drew me to the Shakers — their role as daring experimenters.

They were always ahead of their times, these strange people. They constantly tried new things: techniques to improve health, inventions to lighten work. They sought, with a passionate idealism, to make the world a better place — in fact, to make a perfect heaven of a very imperfect earth.

They would not have called themselves scientists, of course, but like true scientists, they questioned everything. Shakers examined the familiar trappings of life — a lamp, a broom, a wash-tub — took them apart, and experimented. And when they put things back together, they created something new.

But the Shakers didn’t stop with redesigning lamps and improving brooms. They looked at the social conventions of their time, and relentlessly took them apart as well. They redefined the concept of family; they reinvented God. They tossed aside the ordinary rules of life and made up their own. “Tell them,” cried Ann Lee, the Shakers’ founder, “that we are the people who turn the world upside down.”⁶

In their tranquil villages, Shakers turned their backs on the World’s values, its politics, and especially its wars. Shakers were among the very first Americans to reject violence; they took their stand as conscientious objectors in the nation’s earliest days. Beginning with Mother Ann’s defiance of Revolutionary War officers, Shakers have battled with authorities for the right to abstain from war.

In the nineteenth century, the Civil War hit the nation like a freight train, and the Shakers were in its path. After two years of bloodletting, horrendous casualty lists had made it all but impossible to attract volunteers. Shaker Brothers, like many unhappy men before and since, were receiving messages from their draft board.

Never afraid to question authority, the Shakers decided to take their protest right to the top. That image — the Shaker Elders walking into the White House to inform Abraham Lincoln that they had no intention of fighting in his “uncivil war” — captured my imagination.⁷ What did these most peaceful of people say to the commander-in-chief of the nation’s bloodiest conflict? How did the president respond to American citizens who refused to vote, and denied that they were a part of “the World?”

And does this story — this long-forgotten footnote to history — have any value for us today? What we can learn from the Shakers, it seems to me, is their passion for never-ending and fearless experimentation. We, too, can challenge authority; we, too, can reinvent the rules. The Shakers showed us that we don’t have to do things the way they’ve always been done.

We don’t have to breathe polluted air. We don’t have to waste so much time on household chores. We don’t have to raise our food on factory farms.

And maybe — just maybe — we don’t have to go to war.

Notes

¹ Holzer, Harold. *Dear Mr. Lincoln; Letters to the President*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1993, p. 222.

² Brooks, Noah. *Lincoln Observed: Civil War Dispatches of Noah Brooks*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, p. 82.

³ Abraham Lincoln to New Lebanon Shakers, August 8, 1864. In the collections of the Shaker Museum and Library, Old Chatham, NY.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Sprigg, June. *By Shaker Hands*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1975, p. 8.

⁶ Bishop, Rufus, and Seth Youngs Wells, compilers. *Testimonies of the Life, Character, Revelations and Doctrines of Our Ever Blessed Mother Ann Lee, and the Elders with Her; through whom the Word of Eternal Life was Opened in this Day of Christ’s Second Appearing: Collected from Living Witnesses, by Order of the Ministry, in Union with the Church*. Hancock, MA: J. Tallcott and J. Deming, 1816, p. 318.

⁷ Clark, Thomas D. *Pleasant Hill in the Civil War*. Lexington, KY: Pleasant Hill Press, 1972, p. 25.