Fall 1993

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Black Shakers at South Union, Kentucky

Kit Firth Cress

Were there really black Shakers? Did the blacks live among the white Shakers? If there were black Believers, how were they treated? Were they segregated? Were they slaves? It is still difficult for a great many people to believe that race and color did not concern the Shakers. Anyone was welcome to join the sect as long as he or she followed the rules.

Most of the Ohio as well as both of the Kentucky communities had blacks as members. If families from North and South Carolina as well as Tennessee and Kentucky came to join Mother Ann’s followers, they brought their slaves with them. There were so many blacks at South Union, Kentucky, in the early days that they had their own family, in separate housing, with their own Elder and Eldress. However, as the slaves were freed by their owners (a Shaker rule), many of them left South Union; thus, the separate Black Family was no longer necessary. The remaining blacks who wished to be Shakers lived in the various family houses along with their white brethren and sisters.

Journals A and B of South Union¹ answer most of the questions about the blacks, but the best answer comes from the church rolls at Pleasant Hill, Kentucky:

Jonas Crutcher (colored) deceased at the Second Order aged 44, the second day of last April 1861. He was a slave and confessed his sins on the 15th of Oct. 1839. We continued to hire him that he might have the opportunity of spiritual instruction and obey his faith until the 4th of Jan. 1859 when to prevent his being sold South we purchased him that he might enjoy a privilege in the gospel on equal terms with the other members of the Society which he faithfully improved until his decease.²

Here follows the account, often quoted using the Elders’ own words, of the story of the Black Shakers at South Union.

79 CRESS
January 1, 1805, New Lebanon, New York: On this day Brothers Benjamin Seth Youngs, Issacher Bates and John Meacham left the community, set off on foot with only a horse to carry their luggage, for the purpose of opening Mother Ann’s gospel in the West. The ministry at New Lebanon had been following the newspaper accounts of an extraordinary revival that had been gaining power in Ohio, Kentucky, and neighboring states since 1799. Mother Ann had prophesied that the next opening of the gospel would be in a great level country in the Southwest. The elders felt the time had come to follow up this revival as an opportunity to acquire converts.

The foundation of the colony of South Union had its inception in this great religious upheaval taking place in southern Kentucky. John Rankin and James McGready, both Presbyterian ministers, were chiefly responsible for the revivals’ fast-spreading influence in Logan and surrounding counties. The last four pages of John Rankin’s autobiography give a historical description of the revival. This account, written in 1845 and included in Journal A of the South Union papers, tells of the first camp meetings at the Gaspar River in the summer of 1800. Rankin reports:

On Friday morning at an early hour the people began to assemble in large numbers—and by the usual hour for preaching to commence, there was a multitude collected, unprecedented in this or any new county of so sparse a population. The rising ground to the west and south of the meeting house was literally lined with covered wagons—Each one furnished with provisions and accommodations.

Rankin goes on to describe the scene:

At this instant the other preacher from Tennessee, a son of thunder (James McGready), came forward and without hesitation entered on the most heart stirring exhortation—. Towards the evening of said day inquirers began to fall prostrate on all sides and their cries became piercing and incessant—Heavy groans were heard, and trembling and shaking began to appear throughout the House; And again in a little time cries of penitential & confessional prayer sounded thru the assembly—toward the approach of night, the floor of the meeting house was literally covered with the
prostrate bodies of penitents, so that it became necessary to carry a number out of doors and lay them on grass or garments if they had them.

It was the report of these events that encouraged New Lebanon to investigate the possibilities of converts; in 1807, Issacher Bates accompanied by two converts, the Presbyterian ministers Richard McNemar and Matthew Houston, arrived at the house of John Rankin in Logan County. This was the first step toward the establishment of South Union. Within a month, twenty-five persons had become Shakers. During the next two years, the little colony continued to grow and, by 1810, had acquired land and erected a large building. In 1811 Gasper was first named South Union.

In these first years of growth each new convert was received with joy. As the numbers increased, there were many notations in the journals about the blacks who joined, because in the early days of the colony whole families as well as individuals were confessing to the Elders and Eldresses. Benjamin Seth Youngs' diary tells of frequent one- and two-hour conversations on various religious subjects. He wrote that when anyone, whether Diest, landholder, black girl, mulatto, poor white, or mere child, "under a measure of concern or being struck with conviction opened his or her mind," he accepted and recorded that person. No one was ever turned away. Everyone was equal in Mother Ann's teaching.

The journals at South Union give solid evidence of blacks as well as whites uniting. To quote Journal A, book one, page 36, "February 11, 1806, Matthew Houston—united confessed to Benjamin, also Isaac Newton, his servant Bright part mulatto part Indian also united." In June Youngs went to Benjamin Fisher to inform him that one of his slaves had faith and wished to confess his sins. Benjamin said he might do as he pleased in the matter. The journal does not give the slave's name or explain whether he was permitted to attend the Shaker meetings, but it is clear that the Shakers were doing their best to avoid any trouble with the slaveowners. The journal goes on to say that on June 8, a black man confessed to Benjamin and Elisha—the same one mentioned the day before belonging to Benjamin. On September 12, Elijah Adams, a slave, confessed to Benjamin. On September 14, a note was entered that James Brown was enraged because his wife Nancy had united and his slave, a black girl, desired the same.
In November 1807: “Confession Neptune (Francis Whyte’s Black man) opened his mind.” Also in November: “Confession Sally McComb (wife of Jesse of this place) confessed to Richard McNemar. Also Betty Freehart, a yellow woman, slave of Charles Eades, confessed to Issacher. She is the last one who opened their minds to the first messengers on this visit to this country.” The confessions continue. “February 21, 1809, Harry Pfices, a sensible Black man from Busroe confessed.” “August 24, 1810, Confession Davis Haden, a black man.”

On October 8, 1811, the first mention of the Black Family appears. “Further east on the north of the great road the Black Family was located at George Rankins (used to be).” And on October 17: “Burden bearers in the four families are.... At George Rankin’s (used to be) Neptune Whyte and Betty Freehart spiritual at the Black Family consisting of about thirty souls little and big.” The Black Family evidently was formed as a separate unit to avoid trouble with South Union’s southern neighbors. At the other Shaker villages, the black members, who were few in number, lived in the same families and dwellings as their white sisters and brothers; the careful leaders at South Union apparently decided not to offend the white slaveowners by housing blacks and whites together.

For years the journal continues to note the blacks and whites working side by side as well as joining. “November 18, 1811: Francis Whyte, Robert Gray and two black brethren to coal banks for coal.” “December 26: Confession Halcott Pride and waiter came from North Carolina on purpose to see the Believers.” “December 30: Confession Halcott Pride and his waiter Sam to Benjamin.” It is interesting to note that the journal writer has no problem with blacks’ confessing, joining, or working at South Union, but often the names of the converts are not given or just a first name is mentioned. This practice was not all the writer’s oversight since many of the blacks had no last names, and, if they took their master’s name, which many did, it only added to the confusion when signing the covenant.

In 1812 there is more mention of the Black Family in the journals. “May 12—Confession—Black Ike confessed today. And on this same day there was a meeting at the Black Family—young Brn. & Sis. went there to a meeting.” On May 6 there is an ambiguous entry: “A general work of confession going on by both Brn. & Sis.” The next entry reads: “May 7—went to the North (family) on like business.” On the 11th: “to the Black Family searching out flesh and
It does appear that there might have been trouble in both the North and Black families, but the matter is not mentioned again. An interesting note in this year: "June 28 Matthew Houston, Whyte Jones and Cupelo (slave) set out for Tennessee, Virginia and Carolina." Here the black Cupelo is described as a slave, a condition in which the Shakers did not believe. Evidently he is the slave of one of the Believers, a state hardly acceptable according to Shaker tenets. On September 9, an entry refers to the names of families and those who tarried on the flight of the Believers from Busroe (West Union) to Union Village, "Benjamin Price and family, three white, and five blacks = 8." The Busroe families were to return to Union Village (Lebanon, Ohio) when Busroe closed down, but some of them evidently remained at South Union, once more evidence that blacks were accepted as Believers and probably lived among the white members at Busroe in various families. This acceptance also was the custom at Pleasant Hill. In November the journal says "Black family—we attended their meeting and then, to end the year—Joseph Small, George Rankin, and Black Gilbert went to the coal banks."

In 1813, two entries: "March 23—Building yesterday. Samuel Wilson, Andrew Barnett began to make marker at the new stone shop at the Mill. Cupelo, Willie's black man to help them." "May 9 Confession—Ned Lacy, colored, to Elder Benjamin." On May 4, a quote from a letter from Benjamin S. Youngs at South Union: "The Society here is divided into four families; 90 persons, 50 persons, a Black Family of about 20 and a school family 150. The quite young Believers we try first to halter break." In June, "Black Family, we, visitors and all, went there to supper—had young potatoes—first this season." On August 9 there is the first mention of two mulatto boys, both of whom were to cause the Shakers much agitation over the years. "Taken from school—Two Yellow Boys Aaron Nash to haul water to the North family and Justinian Cartwright to go to the Blacksmith Shop." Justinian was a model Shaker until 1828, when the first mention of trouble is noted.

In the meantime the journal reports how food was shared among the various families. "June 23, 1814—Wheat harvest began today. 100 acres of good wheat divided among 300 people as follows: 33 acres to the First family, 26 acres School family, 18 North family, 12 Black Lick (out family) and 6 to the Black family—1 acre for 3 persons."
"January 1, 1815, the whole number in the society—little, big, black, and white—is about three hundred thirty souls. Centre 50, North 40, Black Lick 50, Colored 30, Grove 145 children 14 adults almost half the children to be clothed and schooled." In April an entry shows another facet of Shaker treatment of blacks. "Building: Brethren engaged a mulatto man J. Brown from Frankfort to plaster the new brick house at 1 shilling per yard or $158.00 for the whole building." The entry continues: "April 27, Jas Brown commenced lathing the lower rooms. May 18, Jas Brown begins plastering Brick house today." The white and black members of the Society shared quarters. "December 17—move—sent Moses to Neptune’s or Black family and Aaron Nash (mulatto) from Neptune’s to the North family." Neptune is the Elder in the Black family, hence called Neptune’s.


Slavery was a source of worry to the Elders, and they wrote to the Mother house at New Lebanon for advice and guidance. John Rankin sent the following letter from South Union:

1. Shall money or property which has been obtained by the sale of Negro slaves be refused or accepted by the Church of Christ?
2. If refused how far removed from the sweat and blood of the slave must money or property be to render such money or property acceptable to the church. Our sugar and coffee come directly from the toiling slave thru his master and is acceptable. Should money be acceptably so?
3. There is a sister of 25 years standing in the Society and 15 years in the Church whose father in Tennessee being the owner of some slaves died intestate. By the laws of that state, "Made & provided", the court has to sell the property slaves included. The proceeds of this sale

84 THE KENTUCKY REVIEW
brings to the heirs $2000.00 each. We have received for
the heir who is with us $1600.00 & soon will have the
balance.—When question No. 1 is answered, we will
know what to do.

The writer adds: "If the slaves are brought to Ky. they cannot by
the laws here be freed, and be allowed to remain the slaves of Jency
& Judith or those to whom they may sell or give them." Bishop
Harvey Eades, the foremost spokesman of the sect in Kentucky,
opposed the practice of freeing the slave by hiring him from his
master and paying the latter for the sweat of the former. Eades' solu-
tion at South Union was to place the slave, after receiving him
on agreement from his legal owner, on "decent Shaker wages" so
that the Negro himself could "buy his body & soul."

On June 11, 1816: "Meeting: important—All the heads of families
met today, about 60 in number and were spoken to on the subject
of freeing their slaves, as well as releasement from their children—
general agreement was had, the exceptions were one family, James
& Mary Judkins." The South Union leaders solved the Judkins' prob-
lem on September 22 with the note: "Blacks purchased, James
Judkins resolves to go with the world. His four slaves wish to
remain and be Believers. One man, one old and two young women,
one rather a girl vis: Sampson, Old Molly, Lucy and Violet
Judkins." The Brethren agree to pay $800 for them in four years in
$200 installments. For once the journals give the whole story with
the position clear. The year goes on with the everyday notations.
"Well digging, Rob't Paisley & Black Gilbert now blasting in the
well thru the earth 8 ft. And another Black problem Brot Back. Sam'l
Steele went & brot back from Tom Proctors the obstinate yellow
boy Mose who was taken out there to learn a little of slavery or to
get his haughty spirit reduced a fraction." "Back Sliding Black Leah
McComb went off—good riddance. June 13, Confession, yellow
woman Robinson to Nancy Perkins Rankin." Once again the Black
family gets a share of food. "November 14, Corn gathering &
Division. All hands gathering corn this beautiful weather. 200 acres
at South Union & 40 at Black Lick divided thus: 62 loads in the
husk counted 25 bu. per load 1370 bushels to each family & the
school order the same. The Black family 375 bu. And the well
digging goes on. Rob't Paisley & Gilbert (colored) after going 60 ft.
thru solid rock came to blue clay & find water."

85 CRESS
1817: "Jan. 14. Arrangement—four Brethren appointed to make rails all winter for the farm, viz: Solomon Henson, Robert Paisley, John Dillon & Gilbert Barris (colored) & 3 with a team to get firewood, viz: John Slover, Sampson Judkins (col’d) & Aaron Nash (col’d). Apr. 12. Brick making commenced again. Solomon Henson, Blk James & others. April 13. Justinian Cartwright & John Johns in the (smithy) shop here. May 24. Dark troubles Yellow Mose—Black Ned, Black Mary & Yellow Aaron all in a bad & dangerous fix. July 10. Special labors—John Rankin, Wm. John, Nancy Rankin & Susan Robinson go & make special & heavy labors with the Black family—not much headway. Nap the Elder has about concluded that it is not yet the niggers day to be called" (the first evidence of the disrespectful term "nigger"). As a result of the Black trouble, we have "back-sliding." "Matt, Ned & Mary went-off July 12." More trouble July 17: "Sent away: Yellow Fireby Ham sent off from the Black family. John Rankin, Nancy Rankin & Susan Robinson gone to labor with the Black family & find it true enough—De Debils got among-Kiz." July 24: "Back sliding—Black Nap the Elder steals off & goes to join Matt & Ned at Bowling Green." A sad note July 29: "The former owners of the Blacks & others reluctantly see their Negroes leaving—they go today & bring them back, but knowing they are free they intend to make use of it & no coaxing can induce them to remain & bear the cross—others of them will likely soon follow." But minds change on August 10: "Neptune ex-Elder of the Black family confesses to Francis. Matt also opens his mind & tries the Cross again to Jas Allen." But there must have been more back-sliding because on December 17: "Meeting: having had a solemn meeting in which the Black apostate Matt attended—he became convicted & confessed & united.

The journals start with a sad note on January 2, 1818: "Reduced to slavery—John Lacy’s Ned who was freed in 1813 left here is captured, taken south and sold into slavery." In April Black Matt is still with the Believers and helps in a move to Drakes Creek where orchards were begun; two loads of furniture and provisions also go. Eldress Molly says "it’s a proper big move." In May the move continues: "More brethren go up, two teams & 12 brethren. Wm Howell, Rob’t Johns, Jos Dillon, Bart Sellar? Beard Carey Barnett, Yellow Mose from the frame family & Geo Rankin, Edmond Dillon, Black Gilbert & Armstead (a black)." There are 30 brethren at work at Drakes Creek. August: "the Black family—we all visited this morning." December: "To Drakes Creek, 13 brethren
& 5 sisters go up. Among them are Black James, Mose & Aaron Nash & David Chism (5 color)."

1819: "Jan. 3. Sent them to their old home—Black James Matt & Aaron to Blk family to live again. Jan. 23. Log hauling. Geo Rankin, John Merrifield & Blk Armstead." Once again the slavery issue arises. "Mar. 3: Meeting—important—Assembled all the Slave Holders together, gave counsel for all and each of them who had the faith so to do to set their slaves free in an effectual manner & lawful way. To do it on parchment signed by themselves & counter signed by the Clerk certifying thereto & let it be recorded in his office. This was agreed to by all. June 30. Emancipation. Matt Johns & Mary Lacy set free by Wm Johns & John Lacy. Aug. 1. Emancipation. Since Matt & Mary were set free (June 30, 1819) this parchment has been made out & is given to all the Negroes making them perfectly freed men & women. So we may look out for a stampede. Aug. 13 Blacksliding [sic]. Kiz (matt's wife) leads off today. Also Judkins Violet $200.00 out of pocket (she was one of the slaves bought free by the Believers). Oct. 14, the Exodus continues. Bird with his parchment went off with Kiz. Dec. 4. Moves: Houston Shannon & Fielding Miller moved to the Center Brick house & Justinian Cartwright (mulatto) & Spencer Lacy moved to the Frame House (not the Black family). Dec. 10. Hog slaughtering, finished killing hogs today—48 in number for two families, 22 for the Frame Family & 21 for the Brick and 5 for the Black family."

1820: "Mar. 6—Cabin at the Black family raised." "Apr. 3—Move—All the women & children at Black Lick moved today to South Union & were located at the Black family, viz: Rachel Ryan, Emily Ryan, Susan Barker & Peggy Daniel & children & next Thursday Polly Shirley & her baby on increase" (no note that these people were black). In September there is another mention of Justinian Cartwright who, along with John Meigs, went to West Union. On October 5 what must have been the end of the Black family as such: "Move: First move & establishment of a Junior or young Believer order at Juo Rankins old place now to be called East House." "Nov. a Brick kiln of only 50,000 set on fire & burned well by John McComb, Matthew Houston, Black James & Marcus alias Servitus alias Davis Patillo a boy." "Dec. 28—Arrived home from West Union, John Meigs, Rob't Gell & Justinian Cartwright (mulatto blacksmith)."

1821: "Feb. 18 Mill Point—home again for the meeting Brn. John Rankin, Absolom Chisholm, John McComb, Benj. Goodhope,
Matthew Houston, Tolliver Jones, Elephay Davis, David Barnett (col’d) [this is the first mention of faithful David], Urban Johns Mose, Robert Paisley & Edmond Dillon. April Tan bark getting—went to Gaspar. Aaron Nash among others went to Hill point. Aug. 4 Yellow Mose takes a trot to David Harden’s & back confesses up. Dec. 13 Confession—Maria Aldredge to Eunice Freehart (col’d)."

1822: “Mar. 12 Move: John Slovers Aaron Nash, Sam Fisher & Almarian Smith moved from the East House into the new School House cabin down there at the Grove. July David Barnett & Servetus Patillo with other brethren cut stone for the cellar of the Center house. David Barnett (col’d) leaves the brick yard & goes to help Sam’l Eades at the cellar walls at the East house. Aug. On the sick list 34 Bros. & Sis. among them Justinian Cartwright. Aug. 26, Those moving to the frame family George Freeman—black (9 other boys).” There was no note that the other boys were black. A Mary Freeman was among the girls moving, but she was not designated as being black. “Dec. 8—learn that George Flowers has taken and re-enslaved Neptune and others of the Blacks who have left here.” The year 1822 was the last one in which the Black family was mentioned as a family. There was no allowance given for the Black family when meat was apportioned December 31, 1822. From this time forward the black members of the Believers lived in the same houses with the white members.

“February 24, 1823 Appointment George Rankin moves to the East house for beacon and Aaron Nash (col’d) moves to the Frame house. July 15 Bacchus and Moses now 25 feet digging—2nd well. July 17 Stone—95 loads now hauled Justinian and H. L. Eades ox teamsters—Armstead part of the time. Aug. 26 hauling—Sandy Rice, Milton Robinson and Armstead Page (colored) came with his ox team from Water Vliet to assist about the new center building.” The first carriage made in the Society was built in September. Robert Johns and Tolliver made the wood work; John Dillon, Carey Barnett and Justinian Cartwright the iron work. It is a good two horse carriage for ministry work.

1824 arrived with no mention of any blacks until June 11 when the day book mentions David Barnett making bricks. In September Justin Cartwright, Fielding Miller and Armstead Page haul shingles. In November Paul McLelland and Jesse Ligier start for their home at West Union. The black man James Parker goes with them. In 1825 David Barnett goes with David Smith and Solomon

88 THE KENTUCKY REVIEW
Rankin to look out a place for making shingles and getting timber for the new office. The group working on this project include Aaron Nash and Servetius Patillo as well as the white brethren. David Barnett with other white brethren began cutting stone for chimneys in April. In June Servetus Patillo ran off and "July 19 Samuel Whyte went in a dearbourne yesterday for Servetus Patillo who is lying very sick about 40 miles distant. Brot him back today. July 23—Building—the foundation of the new office brick at west division was begun today by David Barnett and Aaron Nash both colored brethren." In August another positive note—elders at the East House are "Robert Houston and John Stover, Nancy Rankin and Eunice Freehart (col’d)." In September Servetus is cured of his sickness and goes off again. During the fall and early winter of 1826, David Barnett is mentioned several times as working with a group repairing chimneys at the gristmill and building at the East House. In December "Down the river with seeds. A little boat or kind of batteau having been built at S. U. was put on the ox cart (Justinian Cartwright driver) and taken to the Red River above Clarksville."

The year of 1827 begins with changes: "removals & app’ts. East House organized anew. The deacons are Wm. Ligier and John Meigs with Aaron Nash ass’t. Francis Whyte from the North House and Sarah Lowry from the Center again go to Water Vliet for Elders and Geo Rankin with them for Deacon and soon after Eunice Freehart goes there too." There are five families in the Society: Center, North, East, East Section, and Watervliet. "Mar 1 coming in is Henry Lightfoot and family, 6 in number and Jack and Black woman came in. Located at the North House. Mar 8 Henry Lightfoot confessed to Robert Houston and the 2 blacks also join today, 8 in all. April 29—First order Center family Sampson Freeman col’d, Jack Lightfoot col’d, Mollie Sautler col’d Water Vliet or Childrens Family Geo Teman col’d, Eunice Freehart and Mollie Judkins col’d”—proof that blacks lived among whites in the same house. "Oct. 27 Whiskey Black Ab came from Paint Mill [sic] with a loaded ox team with whiskey to take down on the boat to sell. Ab went on down to Clarksville with it." A later load had teams loaded with onions, straw hats, garden seed, brooms. The final word for the year notes that David Barnett is foreman of the brick kiln.

In 1828 names of the brethren at the new office are Eli McLean and Jefferson Shannon and Sampson or Freeman Anderson (black)
for hostler. In April David Barnett and others planted 6800 sweet potato hills while in June U. E. Johns and Justinian Cartwright went with a team to Mill Point for joists for the office stable. Justinian Cartwright and David Barnett are the most-mentioned blacks. On August 7 Justinian hauled the great stones for the walk across the great road near the Center Brick house. He used seven yoke of oxen in the hauling. Suddenly the orderly procession of days is interrupted by an entry for September 29. “Special meeting is called for the purpose of allowing the mulatto Br. Justinian Cartwright to confess and ask forgiveness of the church for his base and disorderly conduct which he did on his knees with tears.” There had been no previous entries in the journal concerning his causing any trouble, but the journal is sometimes obscure. In October Justinian was hauling rock for the foundation of the oil mill and on November 11 Justinian was removed to the East family from the Center. December 21: “stampede: Fielding Miller, David Moore, Black Gilbert and John Merrifield all off the hinges and to the world.”

1829 begins with a continuation of Justinian’s story. “Jan. 10 baby born—Lucinda Smith the mother, Justinian Cartwright the daddy” and “Feb. 1, Justinian moved to the East Family some days since.” “Feb. 21 Sampson Freeman or Anderson Hostler at the Tavern moves to the Center. April 29 David Barnett, clbr, scutched 130 lbs of cleaned flax from the Break today more than doubled the best days work of the others—the flag for Dave.” “June 1, U. E. Johns goes 25 to get his brother Alexander to sign the paper of freedom for Justinian Cartwright the slave of their father Dr. William Johns. June 20, U. E. Johns and J. McComb went to Russellville and had free papers for Justinian recorded there. June 21 Justinian with his free papers after public meeting made a display by walking out and getting into the stage at the Centre house amidst the shouts of the passengers. June 29 impertinent negroes with free papers grow very saucy. Gilbert Saulter threatened to cut John Hancock in two and send him to h---l, afterwards ducks. Aug. 1, Return: begging the late pompous mulatto Justinian Cartwright was found in his old ox stable this morning admitted at the east section this evening—charitable.” On August 5 in a return to quiet life the boat company was “noted brother U. E. Johns, Eli McLean and Geo Teman (mulatto).” “Aug 13, S. Rankin, D. Barnett and H. L. Eades finish repairing the fence down the North street.” On October 12th brothers David Smith, Jesse McComb, Lorenzo L. Martin, Rhinaldo
Martin, Daniel Whyte, Napoleon Small, Seth Meigs, and Dr. Morrison started to Clarksville to build a boat 60 x 14 for coasting to New Orleans. The black Napoleon was listed as a brother and was to work with the white brothers on this project.

The year of 1830 started on a sad note. On January 15 John Seth Meigs, John’s oldest son hanged himself in an old vacated frame house formerly occupied by the Black Family (Dr. Geo. Rankin’s old house). In May “black sister Molly Judkins died at Water Vliet. Funeral and burial today.” The year goes on with the usual notes. “May brickmaking—north family commenced today Aaron Nash (mulatto) the molder. Oct. emancipation: Absalom Chisholm and Saul G. Whyte go to Russellville to have the last emancipation papers recorded for the black persons here: vis David Barnett, Sampson Anderson, Lucy Judkins and Archer. Nov. down the river: the brethren who started from home for the boat were U. E. Johns, T. J. Shannon, Sampson Anderson & Robinson is to go for his health. Dec. 31—hiring—4 darkies. The slaves of our neighbor hired today for service this coming year.”

1831: “Sept.—Justinian began to haul sand for plastering the new house. Oct. more backsliding Kezia alias Rosina Steele off at last. Demise old black man Jacob died. The Society bought the old almost helpless man eighteen years ago on purpose to get him out of slavery as he had become useless—paid $12.00 for him. He however with humane treatment recovered so as to do some good—was always thankful and died at 80 years. Sept. The Brethren left S. U. for Clarksville thence by river in a small boat for Orleans viz: Jefferson alias T. J. Shannon, Jesse McComb, John McLean and Colored Sampson Anderson.”

On February 1, 1832 Sampson the “colored person,” decided to leave the Shakers. He said “talk to me about eternal life! Why Jesus Christ never saw a steam-boat;” so he chose the steamboat and went back on it at $15.00 a month. In May there was a robbery: “Last night some person or persons broke into Benj. D. Price’s room at the North House and broke open his chest and stole therefrom $260 or 70 dollars in silver. The Brethren on suspicion took up a negro Isaac Ellis who finally confessed and led them to where he had hidden the money. After this his master sent Isaac off to the iron works in Tenn. from which place there is little chance of escape. When he had served his year out, he returned. He said he wished he had stayed with the Shakers (he had been hired). He said, ‘When I was in hebbun I wouldn’t stay—but when I went to hell da made me stay.’”

91 CRESS
“November 21, 1833. Arrived Justinian Cartwright, the mulatto apostate at the office—has no doubts of his ability to be a good Shaker.” On February 27, 1834 T. J. Shannon went to Clarksville to assist “Justeen” Cartwright in the recovery of some missing property. The property consisted of iron, which Justinian sold for the sum of $438.00. He then gave this money to the Believers. There was never any explanation of where Cartwright got the iron which supplied the money—an enormous sum for a black man to possess.

In 1835 David Barnett was brickmaking with David Smith. Justinian Cartwright is still a Shaker, returning from Nashville, Tenn., with S. S. McClelland. However, on September 28, the journal is justly indignant. It states—“to the world—low down—on the 5th, the mulatto Justinian Cartwright took Lucinda Smith with her copper colored Bastard and departed for other timber. This is one case in which charity has been liberally but wrongly extended. They should have been driven from Eden on first transgression. This same mulatto has been here off and on some 3 times within the last 3 or 4 years (he had also fathered another mulatto child—Juliette in 1829).” And an interesting note about some of the girls who were moved October 12, 1835 from the East to the Centre family: “viz Sally Shirley, Emily Pearcefield, Louisa Cowen, Frances Manchester, Salome Roberts, Edney Hatfield, Cynethea Shirley and Almina Pearcefield. They are well favored and with proper culture may make profitable members.” H. L. Eades comments as he transcribes these journals many years later: “Louisa Cowen alias Minifee is all the one of the above girls who has made a good and profitable member. She is colored somewhat in skin—but a white soul.” Salome Roberts died. The rest all turned their backs on the cross and went off seeking the pleasures of the worldly life. At the end of November a note: “Brick burning finished burning the brick kiln today. Good David Barnett with John Hardin and David Smith have burned this kiln of brick.” The year ended with a meeting of the elder deacons and principal brethren to ratify the agreement to abandon the practice of hiring slaves from their masters. It received thirty-nine signatures.

The practice was abandoned for a short period. On June 3rd, 1836, the journal comments: “on the 4th and 5th of June the brethren with some hired help put up a large lime kiln”. The rest of the notes concerning the harvesting and flax gathering mention the work’s being done by the brethren and the hired hands. However, by July 1, 1836, there is this “breakfast lecture”: “As soon as we had
finished eating our breakfast this morning, Eld Benjamin came in and proceeded to give us a sound castigation for the violation of our agreement entered into on the 31st of last Dec. in which we solemnly agreed to have no more slave labor on our premises. But it seems they are brought in, in utter and total disregard of the general agreement and that without a word of request on the subject. There could be no excuse for such wanton and willful violation and trampling on sacred things when all here who entered into the sacred compact and if we were bent on this course of conduct nothing but ruin could follow." He desired that every slave should be immediately dismissed even if the whole months wages had to be given to their masters as a result.

“1837 David Barnett and others getting timber. Feb. 1 Aaron Nash (a yellow man) left his home in the second order of the church and has cut himself off from this society or any part of lot or privilege herein.” During the summer of 1837 there were the usual changes in leadership and locations. Eunice Freehart, a black woman, was the eldress at the North House. In 1838 Joseph Teman died at one hundred years of age. He had been in the society since 1827, and the note about his funeral reads: “a good number of brothers and sisters went to the 2nd order to attend the funeral of our departed brother (Joseph Teman).”

In the next few years there are very few references to the black members. In 1839 under changes and removals—“Eunice Freehart who this day resigned as sister in the Elders Lot in the 2nd order of the Church and moved to the 1st order of the Church to assist Betsy Smith in the oversight and care of the little girls.” In 1840 we learn of the death of Lucy Robinson, a colored sister who died of consumption, aged about forty. In 1842 a note about Louise Menifee alias Cowan who moved from the gathering order to the second order; on October 30 of the same year Eunice Freehart and Eliza Hankins accept the leadership on the sisters part in care of the family now making up at the old office (now called the Second House, being a branch of the first order of the Church). Again in 1844 sister Eunice Freehart resigns her care in the West Family and moves to the first order of the Church. Once again in 1846 there is mention of David Barnett at the building with S. G. Eades and Christian Oberlin. There are several more items about Barnett and others going to the building. And in August, changes: “Jesse Rankin comes to the house to take care of the boys along with Augustus Couchou. Ruben Wise is released from the care of the
boys and moves into the room with David Barnett a good colored brother.” “1849: William Harding (mulatto) left for the world.”

“1850 El. Br. S. Shannon and Sis. H. Freehart (col’ d) and Susan Smith to Dr. Roberts. August 1, 1850 casualty while threshing machine was in motion the cylinder burst asunder—one of the staves striking David Barnett on the legs bruising but not breaking them. August 17 move D. Barnett (colored) and Wm. Edwards moved into the little brick house by the well—both being on the decline.” In 1851 David had recovered enough that he was helping Elder John Rankin and others plant peach trees. “April 4 a casualty—sad—good old Chloe Ternan this evening fell under the tappets of the fulling mill by which means she got badly injured. Dr. Briggs and Atchison were sent for and came to do what they could, but Sister Chloe departed this life April 17, 1851.” In July David Barnett was once again a casualty when he fell out of the barn and sustained a slight injury. April 1852 finds David very helpless, and on May 29, 1853, there is this note: “David Barnett (colored) faithful David departed this life.” He was first mentioned in the journal in 1821; his signature appeared on the 1830 Covenant; and he followed the Cross faithfully until his death. In this same year another faithful black Shaker died, Betty Freehart, who was first mentioned in 1807. She signed the Covenant in 1830 as “(colored).” Both are shown on the Necropolis List, “a list of the names of the Brethren and Sisters who have died in the Society since the year 1810.” It seems safe to assume they were buried in the Shaker graveyard.

The evidence is clear that there were black Shakers. Journals A and B show that they were members of the Black Family from its inception until its demise in 1822; when the Black Family was broken up, various members of it went to the North Family or Water Vliet, the East House, or any of the other families. The blacks were referred to as Brethren and Sisters after signing the Covenant. Among those who signed the 1830 Covenant were David Barnett, Justinian Cartwright and Aaron Nash, Eunice Freehart, Hannah Freehart, Betty Freehart, Amelia Psalter, Chloe Leman, and Lucy Robinson. The names were marked as being colored, but there were others who signed who were black but were not designated as such. There was an earlier Covenant in 1812 according to Elizabeth Coombs’ article in the Filson Club History Quarterly, but it seems to be missing. If it is ever found, it will be interesting to see which of the early members of the Black Family—if any—signed it. These names are from the Necropolis List: Joseph Teman, Betty Freehart, Hannah Freehart, Amelia Gordon, Molly.
Judkins, Matilda McCome, Amelia Psalter, Nellie Psalter, and Chloe Terman, indicating burial in the Shaker graveyard—sure proof of a perfect Shaker life.

NOTES

1 South Union journals A and B, Shaker Records, Kentucky Museum, Bowling Green, Ky.
2 "Book of Records pertaining to the Affairs of the Church at Pleasant Hill, Ky.," 99. At the University of Kentucky Libraries Special Collections Department this book is on microfilm M-3, reel one, Records of Shaker Colonies in Kentucky (copied from the Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio).
4 South Union journal A, 1-35.
5 Benjamin Seth Youngs, "Letters from the West," reel 29, IV B 34 FB, 124, at the Western Reserve Historical Society.
7 Necropolis list, Shaker Records, Kentucky Museum.