

# The Watervliet Shaker Journal

Shaker Heritage Society

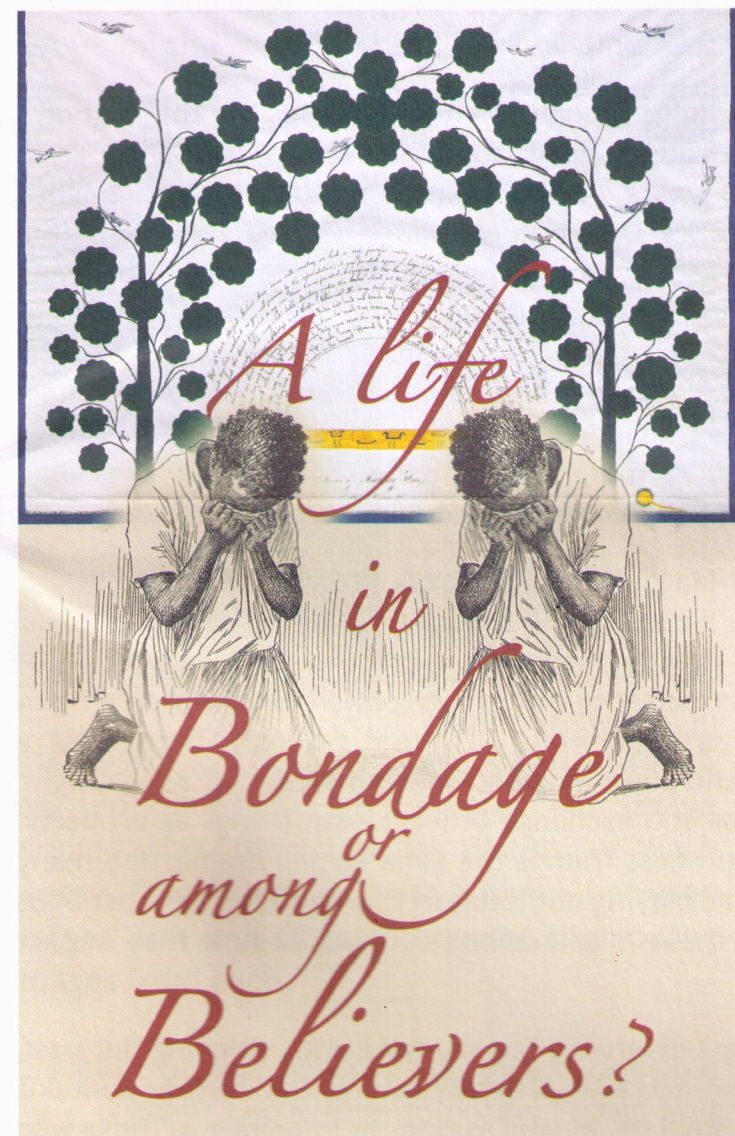
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## Betty and Phebe Lane: A Life in Bondage or Among Believers?

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While the mention of the words “Black” and “Shaker” often elicits surprise in many who may not have heard the two together before,

the story of Betty and Phebe Lane, two Shaker sisters “of color” who joined the Society as young girls in 1802 and lived the rest of their lives as sisters both in blood and faith is well known to the history of the Shaker Community at Watervliet. In my attempt to retrace the story of Betty and Phebe, one that includes a lawsuit against the Shakers that was pursued all the way to New York State Supreme Court, I have come to learn that while their story may seem historically exceptional, it is also in many ways exemplary of the life of many Black citizens of early 19th century in New York for whom “Gradual Emancipation” meant a transition to a different form of servitude.

Upon my arrival at Director Johanna Batman’s invitation to the Shaker Heritage Site, I came to meet face to face with an almost life-size reproduction of a photograph of Phebe Lane, taken when she had reached the ripe old age 83, placed as though she had been casually sitting alone in the 1848 Meeting House. Phebe’s appearance in the photograph, the crispness of her dress and the softness of her smiling face reminded me some of the rare moments I glimpsed my own grandmother at ease, pausing from the

continued, page 7



## Betty and Phebe Lane..., *continued*

obligations that often require a Black woman to have the patience of a saint. Indeed, the look of satisfaction on her face is one of fulfillment, grace and peace that one would attribute to Beatitude. It appears the life of celibacy, of communal ownership, and the self-determining belief in the Second Coming of Christ in the female form of the Divine appealed to Phebe who lived free from the peculiar institution of slavery to the age of 94 and is buried along with her sister at Watervliet. There is no photograph, however, of Betty who died much earlier at age 51. From the moment of her arrival among the Shakers at age 19, indeed, since her birth to her enslaved mother Hannah, Betty's life would be in limbo. Born to an enslaved woman, Betty was, by law, also a slave who, by joining the Shakers, would be recognized by the Society as free. At such a young age, Betty's life was caught between a stone prison built by the laws of men, and a sanctuary built by the laws of God. By the time Betty reached age 26, it was unclear whether she would live her life as a slave or as a Shaker, whether hers would be a life in bondage or among Believers.

Betty and Phebe were the daughters of a free Black man named Prime Lane and a formerly enslaved woman named Hannah whom Prime married after purchasing her freedom in 1786, a year after Betty was born. Prime Lane's status as a free man was never disputed, however, his claim to Hannah's and Betty's manumission would be come into doubt as manumission certificates were

never produced. This detail, of Betty's birth before Hannah's manumission would become crucial to Prime Lane when he later sued the Shakers to reclaim his daughter.

Until 1817, New York State had passed several "Acts Concerning Slave and Servants" (some dating to Colonial Era slave codes) that had become so intricately written so as to consider whether a New York citizen's (and slave owner's) ability to sell a slave "down South" should be kept as an exception to the prohibition on selling slaves in and out of New York State borders, "allowing masters to export slaves for disciplinary purposes, traditionally one of the most punitive weapons in a master's arsenal." (1)

The egalitarianism practiced by Shakers with regard to gender and in particular to race was well known to have made this religious Society abolitionist by definition as well as by law. "From the first," writes Edward Andrews in

his authoritative study, "[Shakers] had opposed the institution of chattel slavery and welcomed Negroes, as well as former slave owners, into the society." (2) Welcoming the formerly enslaved as



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## Betty and Phebe Lane..., *continued*

equals, therefore manumitting them, would become exceptions written into law for religious societies like the Shakers (often associated with Quakers.)

According to the Act Concerning Slaves and Servants of 1801, "[E]very negro, mulatto or mestee within this state who is now a slave for life, shall continue as such, unless such slave shall be manumitted according to the law; [I]t shall be lawful for the owner of any slave to manumit such slave [...] by any certificate or writing for that purpose." (3) In order to free a slave, therefore, however briefly, one had to be the owner of a slave. This would also be crucial to Prime Lane's case against the Shakers.

Where Shaker doctrine clashed with the law of the "the World" was an obvious concern to the Church Elders. Shakers were no strangers to legal troubles, in part, due to vengeful former members, as was the 1829 New York case of Eunice Chapman "who had lost her husband, children and means of support to the Shakers [which] led to the passage of a private divorce bill coupled with a general statute allowing a non-Shaker wife to secure the custody of children retained by writ of habeas corpus." (4) As early as 1795, Shakers "had devised a written covenant that [...] was essentially an agreement as to the joint ownership of use and property and an agreement not to make future claims[.]" Many a court "expressly held that the Shaker covenant was valid and binding [and] it viewed the covenant as any other contract."

(5)

When the Lane family arrived to Watervliet in the spring of 1802, living "in the old garden house [...] north of the South Family" (6), they presumably had the intention of living as more than "Winter Shakers." The Lane family continued in the covenant for another eight years working, eating, worshipping at Watervliet. According to Church records, Prime and Hannah Lane also had another two younger daughters at Watervliet. In all likelihood, the whole family grew up in the faith. What exactly provoked Prime Lane in November of 1810 to break his covenant and move from Watervliet with Hannah and the two youngest daughters as of yet remains unknown. What is known is that Betty and Phebe, then aged 25 and 23, respectively, had now come of age and chose to remain at Watervliet as Shakers, and that this was a choice their father clearly refused to support.

On December 11th 1810, Prime Lane walked into the Court of Jedidiah Strong Esquire, Justice of the Peace in Albany County, and issued a plaint against Stephen Wells of the Shaker Community at Watervliet. Unlike Eunice Chapman, however, Prime Lane was not suing the Shakers for custody of his child, he was suing for "two penalties of twelve dollars and fifty cents each for harboring his slave Betty." (7) He was suing for his property.

It is not difficult to underestimate the kind of legal standing a person of color, free or not, would have had in a court of law in New York,

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# Betty and Phebe Lane..., *continued*



or anywhere in the United States for that matter, in 1810. If Prime Lane had sought to recover the custody of his child he believed to be wrongfully held, like Eunice Chapman, he would have had to secure a writ of habeas corpus, requiring Betty to be brought before a judge or a court of law to present his case to secure her release. Unlike Eunice Chapman's children, however, Betty, born a slave, was not considered an equal citizen before the law.

Why, after eight years, did Prime Lane decide that he no longer wanted to be a Shaker, and that he no longer wanted his wife or children to be Shakers? As a free Black man, did he decide his freedom meant nothing without his children, without the possibility of a legacy? "Habeas corpus" is Latin for "you shall have the body." Manifestly, Prime Lane was prepared to use the law, any law

available to him, to have Betty back.

The New York State Act Concerning Slaves and Servants of 1801 states "That if any person shall employ; harbour, conceal or entertain any slave or such servant [...] knowing such slave or servant to belong to another person without the consent of such owner, such person shall forfeit to the owner of such slave or servant the sum of twelve dollars and fifty cents for every twenty-four hours [...]" This was the legal ground Prime Lane could stand on to get his daughter back and it was enough to convince Justice Jedediah Strong in Albany to issue Stephen Wells a "plea of debt of twenty five dollars." (8)

Stephen Wells refused to pay. A warrant was issued for his arrest. Bail was set which Wells also "refused to give, although several bystanders offered [...] bail." (9) Justice Jedediah Strong proceeded the case to a trial during which witnesses testified that Stephen Wells was warned "not to keep [...] Betty any longer because she was [Prime Lane]'s slave[.]" (10) Wells is said to have replied "he would not send [Betty] away but that [she was] at liberty to go or stay." (11) During this time, Church records state that "[a] mob with old Hannah Lane came to [South Family] to take away Betty Lane. She was dragged out of the house but by a 'violent and resolute struggle' she broke away and ran into the house and the mob left." (12) The trial determined that Wells indeed owed several penalties including Warrant fees, Constable

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# Betty and Phebe Lane..., *continued*

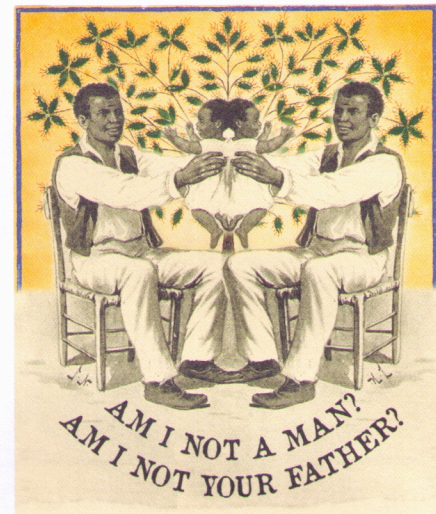
fees, Witness fees and Oaths which now amounted to a total of \$149 (13) (the equivalent today of \$3,674.89.) Still, Wells refused to pay. "Stephen prays that the Judgment [...] may be reversed, annulled and altogether held for nothing and that he may be restored to all things which he has lost by occasion of said Judgments." (14)

Ultimately, the New York State Supreme Court's decision *Per Curiam* reversed the judgment against the Shakers. The final judgment of this case rested on the question "determining whether the negro woman, Betty, is to be considered the slave of [Prime Lane]." (15) The Court relied on the 1801 statute "relative to manumissions [which] would seem to require a certificate or some instrument in writing, for that purpose." (16) Prime Lane "declared that [Betty's] former master would not give him a bill of sale of her or her mother" and that "he gave a trifling sum for them." The Court declared that Prime Lane "knew that neither slaves nor slaveholders could be admitted in the [Shaker] society and while [Prime Lane] and his family were in the society, they were considered as children and not as slaves." (17) Betty, the Court declared, "was certainly not a servant" and twice makes mention that "[Prime Lane] had always called Betty his child."

A conclusive interpretation of this story may depend on whether one judges Prime Lane a villain or a savior. Thwarted either way, Prime Lane, in my opinion, should be withheld

from such a judgment when considering what I believe to be the most crucial and also the most painfully obvious aspect of this story; had members of the Lane family not been born Black, none of this would have ever happened. Had Prime Lane been born white, it would never have taken a New

York State Supreme Court decision to determine his claim to Betty as his property - he would most certainly have been given the benefit of the doubt. Had Betty Lane been born white, there would have never been a need for a judge to tell her that she was a free woman. To me, the story of Lane family demonstrates the enormity of the State's legal authority to regulate almost every aspect of the lives of African Americans whose access to full citizenship and all the freedoms guaranteed therein was denied, delayed and painfully, and only eventually, conditionally granted. The conditions that provoked Prime Lane's legal action against the Shakers are the same conditions that inspired Betty and Phebe to live the rest of their lives as Shakers: what critical historian Saidiya Hartman call the "precarity of Black life." For what is the value of freedom if it can be constantly diminished by the threat



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## Betty and Phebe Lane..., *continued*

deprivation and dependence? Of all the manifestations of the Shaker doctrine, I believe what mattered most to Betty and Phebe Lane was the guarantee of physical autonomy and self-sufficiency: freedom to govern their bodies and freedom from poverty. The smile on Phebe's face in the 1870 photograph is the smile of a woman who truly knows what it is to "do all your work as though you had a thousand years to live, and as you would if you knew you must die tomorrow." The Shaker Society's Death Records mention Phebe Lane "had been a Shaker for 73 years, and a good one too." No doubt, Betty, whose life had been shaken between one of bondage and one among Believers had been "a good one too."



Betty Lane's tombstone located at Shaker Heritage Society



Phebe Lane's tombstone located at Shaker Heritage Society

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