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Shakers Report FYS 100-50

What Were the Causes of the Advancement and Recession of the Shakers

Throughout a famous history that spans four centuries, the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing, or Shakers, experienced a stark rise and sharp fall in terms of membership. From their humble beginnings as a new community in America to their “zenith” in the 1840s, the Shakers experienced a golden age; they had tremendous economic success and attracted many members with their ideals of equality and community. They “[were renowned] for their industry, craftsmanship and inventiveness” (PBS). However, their membership began to decline very significantly from that point. I based my research question upon this curious spike and dip in population for the Shakers; I wondered what allowed them to thrive up to the 1840s and what changed during that time period economically, societally, etc. I discovered that the Shakers began as a sect from the Shaking Quakers, who began as a sect from the Quakers (Sabbath Lake Shaker Village). The founder of the Shakers was Mother Ann Lee, and, due to the religious intolerance of the English, she fled with a handful of followers to begin an intentional community in America (PBS).

When the Shakers had settled and began expanding their way of life, the differences within their society were apparent. I found in Sirico’s article that the Shakers placed women equally with men at the helm of leading the religion, and they dealt fairly with members that wished to leave by returning their possessions. They were a hard-working folk that did nothing but toil and pray every day of the week. Although, their most distinctive quality, which became a major contributing factor to the Shakers’ decline, was the chaste lifestyle. Without a way to simply “produce” more members themselves, the Shakers had to make themselves appealing to the outside world to attract members. I suspect this need is the explanation for the Shakers’ equal treatment and respect for all (Sirico). Furthermore, the Shakers established themselves as one of the most economically successful intentional communities within the country when Cosgel and Murray demonstrate their economic ability compared with firms of the time period. Despite a lack of monetary incentives for work, the Shakers were able to equal and even surpass businesses in both agricultural and manufacturing productivity. This demonstrates clear strength in “organizational form” by the leaders of the Shaker network and communes (Cosgel and Murray).

As the Shakers acquired a large influx of converts, they saw both social and economic issues in holding all members within a single commune, so they began to establish a network of Shaker villages in order to maintain communal life while balancing the costs for coordinating the communities. Within each commune, Shakers were divided into “Families” in which they shared wealth and income. This ploy was also used by preceding intentional communities when membership levels became unsustainable within a single commune. Although this seems to be the best management tactic in order to preserve Shaker values, the Family system actually became counterproductive to Shaker ideology because of the unequal distribution of wealth among Families (Cosgel, Miceli, and Murray).

Problems began for the Shakers as society changed and advanced. As industrialization began, the Shakers could no longer compete with new, efficient methods of production. This industrial boom also attract many men within the Shaker communes, causing a decline in membership (PBS). Additionally, the Shakers’ decline in membership was exacerbated by the second generation, urban converts, according to John Murray. These young members were much more likely to apostate and tended not to persist within the colonies, and the Shaker hierarchy struggled to convince them otherwise.

In conclusion, my research on the Shakers has revealed the spectrum of causes that resulted in the steady rise and sharp fall of Shaker society in North America. They began their journey as a social utopia when just a handful of the Shaker faithful crossed the Atlantic in the hope of religious freedom. When they arrived, they established an intentional community with the aims of providing equality for all, religious freedom for all, and sustainability for all (Evans). Converts came into the community looking for fair treatment and received their desires. They developed the value of hard work and prayer, and strengthened community bonds by doing away with private property, much like other social utopias we have studied. However, with the passing of time the Shakers began to lose their footing as a relevant producer of agricultural and manufactured goods to growing industrial efficiency, and many members began to forsake the once-booming network of communes. They fell gradually to what little we have today, just one village of three Shakers, but their legacy of honesty, dedication, and prayer still resound in those that take the time to know them.

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