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CONJUGAL RELATION: THE SHAKERS' QUESTION FOR FRONTIER KENTUCKY

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University of Richmond

I. Introduction: Returning Home

In the summer of 1852, Daniel Boler finally made it to the eerily familiar Shaker settlement of South Union in Logan County, Kentucky. After traveling for weeks, he was now far from his home of New Lebanon, New York, but as he rode into the fields of South Union, a “curious” nostalgia washed over him. Under the hot blue sky, looking across the wide-open acres of farmland demarcated by rough tree lines, it was surely not the most unique sight he had seen on his travels in this region south of the Green River. But he was keenly aware of his connection to this place specifically, or as he later put it in his journal, “the old place where I first came into existence.” Although this is where Boler had been born and partly raised, it had been almost forty years since he’d been back. At the age of ten, just hours after his mother had won a divorce from his father, his father had taken him and fled into the dark of night. He had not back to Logan County or seen his mother since.¹

Now he was returning to the place of his birth for a specific purpose: to meet with his fellow brothers and sisters of the South Union Shaker village, as he himself was a prominent elder in the Shaker community of New Lebanon. He was also there to “fulfill a pressing invitation” from some of his long-lost relations. As he explored the village, much was “familiar” to him, and as he recorded in his diary, “I found several things...which I could clearly recollect.” While there, he eventually wandered about seven miles north of the village, to a small, run-down house that once belonged to his father, William Boler, who had been dead for twenty-six years. He described the scene by saying, “the Boler place, where I could remember some of the scenes of childhood... The old house where my father lived is all rotted away and gone.” Perhaps, upon observing his old home, Daniel’s thoughts drifted back to his father and the last time he’d seen this place, when they

¹ Daniel Boler, journal, July 23, 1852, V:B-153, MS 38944, Shaker Manuscripts, 1723–1952, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio.

“escaped” on that fateful summer night in 1814. It can never be known, but perhaps his thoughts even wandered to his mother, Sally. He likely was not aware, but she had died just two years earlier, far from South Union, in Crawford, Indiana. At one point on his tour, Daniel was able to visit the house that had once been built by his mother’s father, Archibald Felts. There he found his long-lost relatives, and though he was “received cordially,” something especially interesting stood out to Daniel about some of them. “The children were rather shy at first,” he would later recall in his journal, “which showed very plain that they had heard some stories about the Shakers.”²

This invites one to wonder: what stories had the children heard about the mysterious Shakers? That they were worshippers of the anti-Christ, bent on destroying America? Or maybe that their communes were just a scheme to seduce vulnerable pioneers, stealing their wealth and destroying their families? Whatever the Felts children had heard, it’s likely that the circumstances that had sent Daniel and his father away forty years earlier were still potent.

It is not a surprise to learn that the children had been inculcated with a fear of the Shakers, even decades after the divorce. This antipathy for the Shakers that was shared by the Felts children was not unique to them, but a commonplace on the frontier. It had been a similar anti-Shaker sentiment that had ended the marriage of Daniel Boler’s parents; the same force that had driven his father, him in tow, from that place four decades earlier. The story of Daniel’s parents’ divorce is more than that of the trial that led to the end of their marriage. It also is the story of an uncertain frontier, one that is insecure about the prospects for its own success and the source of its own significance. In this way, the Bolers’ divorce case conforms to the conventional understanding of

² Boler, journal, July 22, 1852. Biographical info on William and Daniel Boler comes from Wallace H. Cathcart, Shaker Membership Card File, nos. 001567-001568, reel 123, Shaker Manuscripts. Details on Daniel’s travels from South Union come from *Shaker Manifesto*, vol 23, no. 2 (February 1893): p. 40. More information on Felts’ Log Cabin can be found in Folklife Archives, Manuscripts &, “Felts Log House (MSS 551)” (2015). *MSS Finding Aids*. Paper 4091. The land of the Bolers and SU Shaker Village can be explored with “William Boler & the South Union Shakers,” *ArcGIS StoryMap*, Douglas Winiarski, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/4754410ba3e84a8488706b43c24ed145>

anti-Shaker sentiment identified by historians such as Tom Kanon, as a response to uncertain questions of new-found freedom and new-found responsibility in the early American republic.³

At the same time, there are aspects of the Bolers' divorce that resist these macro-historical characterizations. At its heart, this is a case fraught with pain and loss that is not unique to this particular period in frontier Kentucky. Although the presence of the Shakers, and a community's reaction to them, imbue this case with meaning historically, this divorce also speaks to unchanging questions about the nature of conjugal relation in the face of an uncertain eternity. This is a case that reveals something about broader anti-Shakerism, but it also demonstrates that for many, the broader contexts of religious change and budding institutions were not perceptible factors in their experience of life on the frontier. With the following microhistory, the goal is double: both to deepen the understanding of the broader forces at work behind the Bolers' divorce, but also to restore the lived experience of an intimate conflict amidst uncertainty.

II. Bolers and Shakers

Fifty years before their son returned to Logan County, William and Sally Boler were married there in January 1801. At the time, Sally was only sixteen years-old and William was thirty-nine. Sally had been raised on a nearby farm by her parents, Archibald and Mary Felts, from the time they had moved to Logan County when she was around ten years old. On the other hand, the origins of William are far more unclear. Nevertheless, not long after they were married, William and Sally began to acquire land and start their own farm adjacent to Sally's parents. They had three children, a son named Daniel, and two daughters, Polly and Sally Jr. Of her and William's children, Sally would later say, "[they] promised to be the solace and comfort of [our]

³ Tom, Kanon, "'Seduced, Bewildered, and Lost': Anti-Shakerism on the Early Nineteenth-Century Frontier," *Ohio Valley History* 7 (2007): 3

declining old age.” Fortunately, the Bolers also found moderate material success, as they were able to acquire two 200-acre plots of land. However, the plots were hilly and heavily timbered, which made them poorly suited for farming. As far as anyone could say, they spent the first seven years of their marriage in “peace and harmony abounding.” Even Sally and William later agreed that they lived together in “perfect harmony and friendship.” Though they were living amidst an uncertain time and place, by all considerations, the Bolers had what appeared to be the beginnings of a successful life on the frontier. Yet, unbeknownst to the Bolers’, there were forces brewing beyond their control that would come to vastly complicate these promising beginnings.⁴

At the same time the Bolers were married, powerful religious changes were sweeping this region of Kentucky. Up until the end of the eighteenth century, the area south of the Green River had been known as a spiritual desert, with only 5 to 10 percent of residents belonging to a church. Secular concerns, like fears of war with Native Americans and political quarrels over Kentucky’s new statehood, meant that the rapidly increasing number of settlers found little time for religion. One group of Presbyterian ministers even expressed their concern about the “prevalence of vice and infidelity, the great apparent decline of true vital religion in too many places.” But quickly after the turn of the century, in the summer of 1800, immense religious demonstrations at the Red River meetinghouse in Logan County set the surrounding areas on spiritual fire. Led by zealous Presbyterian preachers like James McGready and John Rankin, these camp meetings became famous for their mass experiences of otherworldly excitement and claims of visits from the Holy Spirit. The pastor Rankin later recalled how “some were thrown into wonderful & strange

⁴ Sally Boler, petition for alimony and divorce, September 24, 1812, *Sally W. Bowler v. William Bowler*, Barren County, Ky., Equity Judgments, 30–45, no. 30, microfilm, Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives, Frankfort, Ky. Archibald Felts, deposition, April 10, 1813, *Bowler v. Bowler*. William Boler, answer to petition, October 1812, *Bowler v. Bowler*. A note on the spelling of ‘Boler’: in the legal documents, “Bowler” is used, but William and his son signed their name “Boler.” For the sake of consistency, “Boler” is used throughout this microhistory to refer to the members of the trial.

contortions of features, body & limbs frightful to the beholder.” Amidst the fervor of these camp meetings, many even converted on the spot. The Logan County revival gatherings were so successful that they set off a chain reaction, inspiring similar events across the region. It’s likely that the Bolers, who were Presbyterians, witnessed this massive shift. However, they were surely unable to anticipate the effect it would have on their lives. In particular, they likely could not predict that news of the massive religious fervor would attract the Shakers to their doorstep.⁵

More formally known as the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, the Shakers were a utopian Protestant sect of Christianity founded in mid eighteenth-century England. It’s believed that their founder, Ann Lee (posthumously worshipped by the Shakers as the second coming of Christ in female form), moved to the United States in 1774, where the sect found success in the northeast, with their main site in New Lebanon, New York. They were widely known for their ecstatic style of worship in the form of dancing and other intense somatic expressions. But it was their fervent devotion to celibacy and equality of the sexes, which took the form of communal living groups, that would make them infamous. Seeking to escape and overcome the corrosive forces of greed and lust, as well as the sin found in war and poverty, the Shakers fled and founded their own communities where men and women lived together as spiritual equals before God. Fundamental to the Shakers’ beliefs was a unique interpretation of original sin and the fallen state of humanity. For the Shakers, man’s first sin was found in Adam’s lust for his wife, or “knowing” her. Believing that this act was the root of all sin, the Shakers hoped to reckon for it by taking seemingly extreme measures. Within their communities, there was a strict adherence to celibacy and a prohibition on private marriages. As a result, in all aspects of their lives, the Shakers devalued

⁵ John B. Boles, *Religion in Antebellum Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1976), pp. 16-19. For further details on the religious context within this section of Kentucky, see Stephen A. Aron, *How the West Was Lost: The Transformation of Kentucky from Daniel Boone to Henry Clay* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 170. The data and quotes come from pp. 173, 4

their physical bodies in preference for furnishing their eternal souls. In scorning bodies and other worldly things, the Shakers hoped they could attain perfection.⁶

Because they forbid procreation, the Shakers sought to ensure their community's growth through missionary work, seeking to compel "confessions" from "lost" Christians. Through the end of the eighteenth-century, they found success drawing new members to their communities in the northeast, and by 1800, they had 1,373 members. However, in 1805, upon hearing news of what would later be known as the Second Great Awakening sweeping the frontier of the growing nation, Shaker missionaries were dispatched in an attempt to capitalize on the enthusiasm. This is the reason they headed toward towns like South Union, in Logan County, KY.⁷

In October of 1807, the Shaker preachers Issachar Bates, Matthew Houston, and Richard McNemar rode into Logan County, KY. Not long after arriving in the village, they quickly found the success they had come looking for. After meeting with John Rankin, the popular local pastor, many in his congregation quickly began to "confess" or convert to the Shakers. The first was on October 27th, and by the next day, Rankin had "confessed" himself. Dozens among his congregation soon followed, including William Boler. According to one account, William "join[ed]" them "in one quarter of an hour after he first spoke to them." To Sally Boler, who was familiar with the disconcerting reputation of the Shakers, nothing could be more tragic. Just a few days after her husband converted, Sally fled to her parents' house, and when she was asked what had come of her husband, "she burst into a flood of tears heart rending circumstance." Luckily, only a few weeks went by and eventually William Boler renounced the Shakers, tentatively saving his relationship with his wife. For the moment, he proclaimed that "God had showed him that

⁶ Douglas Winiarski, "Shakers and Jerkers: Letters from the 'Long Walk,' 1805, Part 1," *The Journal of East Tennessee History* 89, (2017): 92. For more on the Shakers and their beliefs, see Priscilla J. Brewer, *The Shakers of Mother Ann Lee*, in Pitzer's *America's Communal Utopias*, pp. 37-56.

⁷ Brewer, *The Shakers*, p. 44

Shakerism originated in hell and would land in hell with all its followers.” Despite this, some seeds of their ideas had clearly been sown in his mind. Even if he had withdrawn from the Shakers, William was what was known as a “seeker,” or one of the many who spent this era of religious revolution moving between different sects, looking for the faith that would finally fulfill their spiritual longing. Even though he had moved on from the Shakers, William also reportedly left the Presbyterians to become a Methodist that winter. Although, by the following June, he returned to the Shakers and this time with much more vigor. It was then that he claimed, or boasted, that though him and his wife were still living together, he had sworn off all intercourse with her in accordance with the Shakers beliefs. William was heard exclaiming that “he would suffer his right arm cut from his body rather than ever live with her again as had done.” All evidence points to the fact that he stuck by this claim.⁸

By the end of March in 1809, almost a year after he had rejoined the Shakers, William could no longer resist the idea of taking his family and joining their new community that had formed at Clear Fork of Gasper River, seven miles south of the Bolers’ farm. He tried to reconcile his new devout faith with his wife by convincing her to join him, but it appears he was never able to. As he got more excited about leaving to join the Shakers at their settlement, William repeatedly asked Sally to follow him. At first, she was indecisive, and held out answering, but eventually, she solidly refused. At this point, William decided that he would have no more, and he made arrangements to take his son, Daniel, and leave for the Shaker camp immediately.⁹

⁸ Harvey L. Eads, transcr., Shakers—South Union, Ky., “Record Book A (including Autobiography of John Rankin, Sr.,” 1805–1836, 79–82, Shakers of South Union, Kentucky, Collection, 1800–1916, MSS 597, Manuscripts and Folklife Archives, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green. Archibald Felts, deposition, April 10, 1813, *Bowler v. Bowler*. Mary Felts, deposition, April 10, 1813, *Bowler v. Bowler*. Burley Lacy, deposition, April 10, 1813, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

⁹ William Bowler, answer to petition, October 1812, *Bowler v. Bowler*

On the morning of March 28, 1809, before setting off for the Gasper River settlement, William came to see Archibald Felts, Sally's father (who was only four years older than him), bringing his oxcart to divide up their property and once more beg Sally to join him. William promised to build Sally and the children a house if they joined him, saying "he would use every exertion in his power to make her comfortable." Sally continued to refuse, and William proceeded to divide their property with her father. In the division, William gave Sally's father the less valuable half of their land, as well as a portion of their livestock, and some of the less valuable furniture and other odd items, all totaling \$136.87. William kept the rest of the land, livestock, and furniture for himself, in all totaling five times the value of what he had given to Sally, or \$669.50. Reportedly, Sally had no part in the division, as her mind was seemingly elsewhere. Her father later claimed, "[she] sat in her chair and shed tears nearly the whole day, or quite, and did not interfere in anything, only as Bowler insisted, and appeared to care little about property." Again, William pleaded with her to join him, but she refused. Eventually, William was "order[ed] off" the Felts plantation as Sally "sat and shed tears."¹⁰

Two years passed as Sally and her two daughters moved back in with her parents, awaiting her husband's return to reason that would never occur. On April 16, 1811, she finally took the substantial measure of filing for divorce. From the scant records, it is clear that this petition did not go far. This was at a time when both the laws and social practices around divorce were far stauncher. When women married, their legal identity subsumed into that of their husband. This meant that divorce was seen as a threat to the patriarchal order and a husband's right to control property and household. Thus, divorce was rare, except in cases where serious harm had been done by the husband. Surely enough, less than a year after Sally filed her petition, on July 22, 1812, the

¹⁰ John Shannon, deposition, July 8, 1813, *Bowler v. Bowler*. Samuel Robinson, deposition, July 13, 1813, *Bowler v. Bowler*. Archibald Felts, deposition, July 14, 1813, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

court dismissed it. Though the magistrates had found that William “left and abandoned [Sally] with the intention of abandonment for the space of two years,” they were not convinced Sally had been sufficiently wronged. For Sally, this could have been the end of the story. However, likely unbeknownst to her, there had been a rising number of cases similar to hers, where marriages had been disrupted by “abandonment” to the Shakers, and those in power were starting to take notice.¹¹

With anti-Shaker sentiment rising in the western states and cases like Sally’s becoming more common, state legislatures on the frontier began passing laws that allowed wives to legally separate from husbands who had joined certain radical religious sects. On February 12, 1812, the Kentucky legislature approved such a law, decreeing women could seek alimony and divorce in cases where their husbands had abandoned them to join such groups. The insinuation was not subtle. Specifically, the law allowed divorce in cases where:

Any [husband]... shall renounce the marriage covenant, by refusing to live with his wife in the conjugal relation—by uniting himself to any sect, whose creed, rules, or doctrine require a renunciation of the marriage covenant, or forbid a man and wife to dwell and cohabit together according to the true spirit and object of marriage¹²

It was a thinly veiled ruling, undoubtedly aimed at the Shakers. Although constitutionally questionable, the Kentucky abandonment law demonstrated just how extreme anti-Shaker sentiment had become. The fact that divorce, which was typically reserved as a legal punishment, was being extended to members who had joined the Shakers, showed the criminality that had come to be associated with the sect. At the time, Shakers reacted in staunch protest. One even wrote, “*Another display of The Dragon’s power. An unconstitutional law as passed by the Kentucky*

¹¹ Sally Bowler, petition for divorce, April 16, 1811, *Bowler v. Bowler*. For more details on the context of divorce laws in America at this time, see William R. Black, “Went off to the Shakers: The First Converts of South Union” (2013). Masters Theses & Specialist Projects. WKU. Paper 1243: 6. James H. Davidson, the facts found by the jury, May 1, 1812, *Bowler v. Bowler*. Logan County Circuit Court, dismissal of petition, July 22, 1812, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

¹² *Kentucky Session Laws, 1811: Acts Passed at the First Session of the Twentieth General Assembly for the Commonwealth of Kentucky, ...the Second Day of December, 1811* (Frankfort: William Gerard, printer, 1812), 219

Legislature today... *Oh! Kentucky! Noble Kentucky! How art thou fallen!*” Nevertheless, it was this law that would spur Sally to refile her petition for divorce, and this time, the trial would go very differently.¹³

III. Anti-Shakerism on the American Frontier

By the time Sally was petitioning the Logan County Circuit Court to divorce her husband, many on the frontier had had their fill of the Shakers. Though there was much religious progressivism among the frontier, to many, the Shakers’ tenets were seen as being too radical, and they were often the subjects of ridicule and even violence. However, as historians such as Tom Kanon point out, there was something distinct about anti-Shakerism in burgeoning post-revolutionary America. Throughout the new nation, but especially on the frontier, Shakerism was seen as not only a threat to more traditional Christianity, but as a threat to the newly enacted Constitution itself.¹⁴

In the first decade of the 19th century, just as the new nation was moving on from the tumult of the Revolution and a new religious fervor was exploding across the western settlements, the Shakers and their radical forms of worship attracted particular scorn. Specifically, settlers hated the Shaker’s practice of celibacy, which undermined the traditional familial roles ascribed to both men and women. As a place of instability and uncertainty, Kanon argues the frontier west “became an amalgamation of Revolutionary ideology and rhetoric and frontier realities.” It was this new, fragile process of identity-forming that Shakers appeared to pose the biggest threat to. Nascent institutions of family, capitalism, and especially marriage “could scarcely tolerate challenges” from the Shakers. At a time when the ink was still drying on the new constitution and the dust was

¹³ Eads, transcr., *Shakers—South Union, Ky.*, “Record Book A,” 130

¹⁴ Kanon, “Seduced, Bewildered, and Lost,” 3

still settling from the revolution, the Shakers and their utopianism stood as easy targets for what was distinctively un-American. As one critic put it at the time, “Let Shakerism predominate and it will extirpate Christianity, destroy marriage, and also our present free government, and finally depopulate America.”¹⁵

In particular, the Shakers were seen as a threat to the institution of marriage. Marriage symbolizes security and unity in the face of the uncertain future. At its core, marriage is a *relinquishing* of freedom for the benefit of all. One’s religion and their marriage may be theirs to choose, but this ultimate freedom had to be weighed with the aim of preserving the growth of a fledgling nation. More than just between two people, the marriage contract was a contract with God. For Americans, especially those on the frontier, this contract made with God stood as an assurance that the future was promised to them. The Shakers, in their repudiation of this accepted matrimonial bond, were seen as threat to this fragile contract. With the marriage bond of the nation still in its infancy, the knot newly tied, the subversive ideology of the Shakers could not be entertained.

Only two months after her first petition for divorce was denied, on September 24th, 1812, Sally Boler filed another petition through her attorney, Solomon Sharp. With the abandonment act now law, Sally and her family knew that they had another chance to win a divorce from her husband. Unlike the first attempt, this trial would take far longer to play out and would end up covering many more details of Sally and William’s marriage. Throughout the trial, dozens would be deposed and testify on either’s behalf. This included friends and acquaintances of the Bolers, as well as Sally’s family, such as her mother and father. But it also included several members of the nearby South Union Shaker village.¹⁶

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 12, 23

¹⁶ Sally Boler, petition for divorce and alimony, September 24, 1812, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

The abandonment law put on the table the notion of “true spirit and object of marriage”, but it would then become the trial’s job to sort out what exactly this entailed. Was marriage merely “cohabitation,” or was there some intrinsic, emotional value to that bond? Was ‘love’ involved, or merely property? This conjugal relation, does it extend beyond the material, beyond intimacy? In this way, *Bowler v. Bowler* was no ordinary divorce case. Instead, the trial was tasked with answering these questions about the nature of marriage, but specifically on the frontier in a place like Logan County. The case would come to be defined by these questions of marriage, and furthermore, defined by the different ways people answered them. Though it was a trial about divorce, each side would have to first defend their conception of marriage.

Although the trial was initiated in an attempt to prove that William Boler had broken the letter of the law, the case came to be about more than just him. In particular, Sally’s father, Archibald Felts, took on a leading role in the trial. Looking at his concerns and the manner in which he approached the prospect of Sally’s divorce, it is clear that for him, the trial was about something very different than it was for his daughter.

IV. *Archibald Felts, Kentucky Frontiersman*

Serving as the well-respected patriarch of the case, Archibald Felts’ role in the trial cannot be assumed to be anything less than crucial. Looking at his depositions and questioning (at points he acted as Sally’s lawyer and cross-examined witnesses), it’s clear that he was deeply invested in the outcome. Since Felts was a pioneer who had led his family west and built a seemingly prosperous life from nothing, it’s no surprise that William’s conversion to the Shakers was seen as endangering not just the livelihood of his daughter, but also the future generations of his family.

For Archibald, his “unstable” son-in-law, but more generally the Shakers, stood as a threat to everything he held dear, his entire way of life.¹⁷

To truly understand Felts’ response to the Shakers and the divorce, one also has to understand his story, a story not uncommon for many white men of that age. Born in Sussex County, Virginia, in 1758, he followed his father into the cabinetry business. Just as the Revolutionary War was beginning, when he was around 20, he left home and moved to South Carolina, and tried to begin a life on the Congaree River, where he started his own cabinetry business. About a year later, in May 1780, the British captured Charlestown and Felts was ordered to join their militia and fight against the patriots. Felts later claimed that “come life or death, I would not fight against my own country.” He then fled north where he joined General Thomas Sumpter’s army and fought with him for only two battles. In the second one, the battle of Hanging Rock, Felts was badly injured on his right elbow by a broad sword. Briefly taken prisoner by the British, Felts wouldn’t have full use of his injured arm for another 25 years.¹⁸

After being discharged from military service, in the fall of 1780, Felts returned home to Virginia. Not much is known about the next decade of his life, but sometime before 1785, he married Mary Weldon in Halifax County, North Carolina. On October 18th, 1785, Sally was born there. Over the next decade, Archibald and Mary had five more children. Eventually, like many veterans who had fought in the war, or anyone who was looking for new opportunity, he moved his family out west. He claimed to move to Logan County, Kentucky, by 1795, and he showed up on tax lists by 1797.¹⁹

¹⁷ Archibald Felts, deposition, July 14, 1813, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

¹⁸ This information comes from Felts’ later pension petition, found in WKU Folklife Archives, Manuscripts &, “Felts, Archibald, 1758-1825 (SC 1699)” (2008). MSS Finding Aids. Paper 526.

¹⁹ Logan County, Ky., tax books, 1792-1815, microfilm (Salt Lake City: Genealogical Society of Utah, 1952-1953)

In Kentucky at this time, the area south of the Green River possessed marked differences from the bustling Bluegrass Country and Lexington to the north. In the Green River country, such as counties like Logan, land had long been looked down upon by the propertied gentry and wealthy speculators from Virginia. But as potential for farming was discovered in this area around the time Kentucky attained statehood in 1792, the legislature soon passed acts that made it easy acquire tracts of this land. Notable legislation in 1795 allowed squatters and pioneers to purchase 200-acre plots for thirty cents per acre, inspiring a massive influx of those looking to stake their claim in the new United States. Though he was a part of a wider movement of settlers, Felts eventually found himself far ahead many who had made the same journey westward. At a time when land was the primary indicator of wealth and status, he was able to amass around 800 acres of fertile farmland along the Gasper River. By the time the Shakers arrived in 1807, this meant he ranked in the upper ten percent of landowners in the county.²⁰

Those flocking to the untapped lands of the west brought a common sense of purpose with them. For patriarchs like Archibald Felts, the modus operandi was simple: acquire land, farm and develop that land, have as many children as possible, and then pass this success down to the children. This certain method of occupying unfamiliar space produced a fixation on the worldly and bodily. For these men, the freedom promised by the new country was a freedom to pursue the opportunity offered by the land. Success on the frontier was about property, large families, and a toil performed with the expectation of reward. Similar to the frontier around him, for Felts, the Shakers' sweeping rebuke of material acquisition and all that was bodily posed a serious threat.

Until the Shaker preachers arrived in 1807, Archibald likely saw his son-in-law, William Boler, as the one who could carry on his legacy, following in his footsteps as a patriarchal frontier

²⁰ For more on the Green River Country, see Aron, *How the West Was Lost*, 150, the statistics on land distribution come from p. 205.

farmer. At the least, one imagines that Archibald had a certain life in mind for his daughter—she would marry, settle down on some land, serve her husband, raise a large family, and pass the land and property down to her children. William’s conversion to the Shakers jeopardized these plans. In this sense, Felts’ motivation in the trial comes into focus as his anti-Shakerism is revealed to be a clear example of a sentiment that certain historians associate with the nation at large.

Central to the depositions Felts gave in Sally’s divorce case were detailed lists of the original property split he had made with his son-in-law two years earlier. For Felts, the greatest loss in William’s conversion to Shakerism was the material wealth that his son-in-law had compromised. In his abandonment, Felts was preoccupied with recouping the loss for what he saw as an unfair division of property, where William had only left his daughter with some poor land he couldn’t sell and minor household items of no value. For a man whose life had been defined by the worldly success that could be attained on the frontier, it was crucial that William not throw this pursuit off course.²¹

In his deposition, Felts also presented an extensive theological argument that encapsulated the common anti-Shaker sentiments of his day. Being a Presbyterian, Felts was profoundly concerned with certain seemingly extreme aspects of the Shakers’ beliefs. In particular, he understood their ideology to be leveling fundamental challenges to the supremacy of God, the sanctity of the marriage bond, and the prospect of divine judgement. He devoted an extensive portion of his deposition to attacking a Shaker theological tract, *The Testimony of Christ's Second Appearing*. Even though his reading consisted mostly of several idiosyncratic quotes (mostly pulled from the beginnings of chapters and largely taken out of context) his selections from the text reveal what he saw as most threatening about the Shakers and their faith. Felts was appalled

²¹ Archibald Felts, deposition, July 14, 1813, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

that they seemed to “deny the being of a Supreme God.” He was also especially concerned with the Shakers threat to the institution of marriage, saying, “[the Shakers] hold that conjugal intercourse was the original transgression and the root of all sin, and to obtain salvation a man must renounce it and break off from it.” Lastly, he was alarmed that they might deny the existence of divine judgement, or “that there is any soul...nor any possibility of future reward or punishment.” For, in a nation whose success seemed tied to righteousness and hard work, what could be more threatening than any notion of an unrewarding moral limbo? Throughout his tirade against Shaker theology, it becomes clear that Archibald’s fear of the Shakers resembled those fears of a nation uncertain of its future and its place in creation.²²

In the testimony of a man like Archibald Felts, and in the stares of his shy grandchildren, one senses the pressure that he, and those who followed him, felt to make something out of the barren frontier. The perspectives of the landed male residents of Logan County tell one story; a story that depicts a response to the Shakers likely shared by men throughout the broader nation. But this generalization misses something crucial to understanding how this divorce was experienced by those closest to it.

V. *Sally Boler, A Different Conception of Anti-Shakerism*

Although Sally petitioned for the divorce, in many ways, the trial moved on without her. For her father, it was about the property and corporeal future he wanted to ensure for his descendants. For William Boler, it was about proving to himself and to everyone else that he had been justified in his conduct. But for Sally Boler, it’s clear that the trial was about something else entirely.

²² Archibald Felts, deposition, July 14, 1813, *Bowler v. Bowler*. Benjamin S. Youngs: *The Testimony of Christ's Second Appearing* ([Lebanon, Ohio]), 1808

The only recorded testimony of the illiterate Sally comes from her original petition. This testimony reveals how she made sense of the dissolution of her marriage at the hands of the Shakers. In Sally's eyes, marriage certainly was a contract, but not in the legal or theological sense like it was for her father. Instead, Sally's petition illustrates how the marriage contract was about an intimate emotional connection, an assured mutual love amidst an uncertain eternity. She opened her petition by claiming she had "conducted herself with due obedience and... in every respect behaved and demeaned herself as a dutiful and virtuous provident wife should and ought to do." For Sally, the loss suffered in William's abandonment to the Shakers was not about an unfair division of property or any physical mistreatment. Instead, William's biggest wrong was failing to keep up his end of a deal that went far beyond anything material.²³

In contrast to her father's extensive theological attack on the Shakers ideology, Sally mentioned only one thing in her petition about the Shaker's beliefs. All she was concerned with was that "[Shakers] profess to believe it their duty to abandon their wives and refuse to live in the marriage relation of husband and wife and renounce the marriage contract and names." For Sally, the Shakers' threat did not lay in the ways they challenged a traditional frontier way of life or the prospect of reward for the toil such a life requires. Nor was it that the Shakers' beliefs appeared to threaten the foundations of a burgeoning American Constitution. Past the indication that they were the reason her husband had abandoned her, it was not clear Sally cared about anything the Shakers believed. Like her father, Sally mourned the loss of a future the Shakers took from her. But instead of being concerned for property, or the "things of this world," Sally's 'anti-Shakerism' stemmed from the emotional losses that couldn't be counted.²⁴

²³ Sally Boler, petition for divorce and alimony, September 24, 1812, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

²⁴ Sally Boler, petition for divorce and alimony, September 24, 1812, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

One notable feature of William's defense was his attempt to prove that his wife had been originally unbothered by the property division, and, thus, was not entitled to seek further damages. In his response to Sally's petition, William even claimed that his wife "at that time expressed herself perfectly satisfied with the division of property made." In another instance, a Shaker ally of William claimed, "I saw nothing in Sally that seemed like she was dissatisfied with what she got." At another point in the trial, a neighbor named David Rice was asked by William, "Did ever you hear Sally say that I was unkind to her?" and further, "Did ever you hear her say that I had abused her in any respect?" All Rice could say was that "I never heard her say that you had beat her with a stick or anything of that nature." William also asked Rice, "Did you believe that Sally was satisfied with the division of the property at that time?... Did you hear her complain at that time?" Rice answered, "I do not recollect to hear her say one word." It was not just her husband who claimed that Sally was uninterested in the property aspects of their separation. In his second deposition, when asked if his daughter had complained, Archibald Felts claimed that "I believe her distress was such that she cared but little about property, and I did not hear her complain." Throughout the trial, witnesses reported that Sally either made no mention of or played no role in the division of the Bolers' property. To William, this was proof that she was somehow satisfied with it. However, in consulting other testimonies, it becomes clear that this lack of complaints did not stem from satisfaction, but instead from her focus being entirely elsewhere. In his original deposition, when he described the initial split of property, Archibald Felts claimed, "I went down and Bowler [*sic*] made an optional divide of property and Sally had no hand only in one or two things of small matters." One is apt to wonder what Felts meant by these "small matters." Perhaps literally, he just meant the "tableware" that her husband had left her. However, it's also important

to consider what else was small to him that was big for her. The day her husband left her was clearly not a day of small matters for Sally.²⁵

From the depositions, it's clear that the male world around Sally was unable to make sense of what she'd lost. For some, like her father and her husband, she was simply unbothered by the separation and the division of property. For others, her emotions in response to the abandonment of her husband made her hysterical. One witness to the division of property would later describe her behavior as such: "I saw her take what I term a hysterical fit & she did not appear as if she had any thought of speaking in some part of the time. But as to her feelings otherwise, I know nothing about them, for I don't think I touched her & I have no idea whether her limbs were stiff or her jaws set." While many of the testimonies focused on the dollar amounts of what was exchanged that day, they could not understand Sally's lack of interest in it. In defense of his client, Sally's lawyer claimed, "that she sat and shed tears a great part of this day... she cared nothing about the things of this world." Ironically, not unlike the Shakers against whom she was making her case, for Sally it was not the material goods which mattered.²⁶

Whereas the sentiment of her father categorically aligns with the commonly understood form of anti-Shakerism, based on frontier anxiety about the prospect of an uncertain future, Sally's view of the Shakers feels markedly different. For her, the Shakers did not represent a grand threat to the future of the nation, instead they were the force that destroyed her marriage; a marriage which mattered more than any land or livestock. Though this case stands as an example of the widespread anti-Shaker sentiment, illuminated through the system that allows the divorce to happen in the first place, and the testimony of prominent witnesses like Archibald Felts, it's not

²⁵ William Bowler, answer to petition, October 1812, *Bowler v. Bowler*. William Lowry, deposition, July 14, 1813, *Bowler v. Bowler*. David Rice, deposition, April 10, 1813, *Bowler v. Bowler*. Archibald Felts, deposition, July 14, 1813, *Bowler v. Bowler*. Archibald Felts, deposition, April 10, 1813, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

²⁶ Samuel Robinson, deposition, July 13, 1813, *Bowler v. Bowler*

clear that this is the whole story. Sally's perspective of the case suggests that antipathy towards the Shakers need not necessarily be grounded in vast fears about the prospects of the nation's future or great threats to the attainment of material success, but instead how scorn for the Shakers could come about in what felt like an immensely individual loss.

VI. Epilogue: The Divorce is Granted

The final deposition given was by Sally's brother, John Felts, on October 5, 1813. By this point, after dozens of testimonies, it had been over a year since Sally had filed her initial petition. On October 26th, the jury decided the facts in the case. Crucially, the jury was convinced that William Boler had, in fact, committed a criminal offense. Or, as it was recorded:

That the Defendant did on the [blank] day of June 1808 unite himself to a certain sect commonly called Shakers whose creed rules and doctrines require a renunciation of the marriage covenant and forbid a man and wife to dwell and cohabit together according to the true spirit and object of marriage and that said Defendant has ever since he so joined and united himself to said sect so called as aforesaid refused to live with the said Complainant in the conjugal relation.²⁷

In an almost word-for-word citation of the Kentucky abandonment law, the jury made it clear that William's conduct made his wife eligible for divorce. Although he would try to appeal the eventual ruling, even getting the case moved to nearby Barren County, William could not forestall the inevitable. On July 1, 1814, almost two years after Sally had filed her initial petition with the Logan County Circuit Court, and over five years since her husband had left her on her father's farm with nothing but her tears, Sally's divorce was finally granted. The Barren County court decreed that "henceforth the said marriage in the bill mentioned shall be totally annulled and held

²⁷ Facts found by the jury, October 26, 1813, *Bowler v. Bowler*

for naught.” As well, she was given full custody of all three children and William was ordered to hand over his remaining share of their 400-acre farm.²⁸

The same night that the divorce was granted, and immediately after the sentence had been released, William Boler immediately absconded with his son into the night. He silently left behind everything, his family, wife, daughters, and property. With Daniel on his back, they trekked through the wilderness toward the Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill, Kentucky, and then eventually made their journey all the way to New Lebanon, where William finally found the stronghold of his newfound devotion. It’s here that his son, Daniel, would grow up to find notoriety and admiration as a senior elder, and as a “true, upright, honest Shaker.”²⁹

Without the details, one can only speculate how Sally Boler responded to this outcome. If she had hoped the divorce would amend the pain of her tragic marriage, it’s hard to conceive how this conclusion could have. Surely, she hadn’t needed a court to tell her that her contract of marriage with William was “annulled and held for naught.” And now her 10-year-old son and the man she had once loved, but now didn’t know, were both gone into the night. Perhaps it’s telling that only two years later she would remarry. On December 28, 1816, she married David Rice, one of the prominent deponents in her own divorce trial. Together, they would have two more children and leave Logan County, moving to Crawford County, Indiana. In this step, one hopes that Sally was finally able to find what had previously evaded her: a bond to withstand the winds of time.

²⁸ Judge Armistead Morehead, summary of the Logan County Circuit Court proceedings to Barren County, February 10, 1814, *Bowler v. Bowler*. Barren County Circuit Court verdict, July 1, 1814, *Bowler v. Bowler*.

²⁹ *Shaker Manifesto*, pp. 3, 27, 40