In an estimation of American folk art the “hand-minded” work of the Shakers takes its place as an important contribution to the history of Yankee inventiveness and to the principles of our democracy. This celibate group developed a way of working and living together in a realistic, productive community based on sound economic and spiritual needs. Important in relation to the early republic is the fact that this exposition of living survived distrust and persecution, fear and want, and came to be a recognized symbol of honesty, quality, and genuine simplicity.

The Shaker way of life flowered on American soil. Ann Lee, the spiritual leader of the movement, came from England, but not with boats full of believers or hundreds of followers. She arrived in New York in 1774 with but eight followers and lived only until 1784. These ten years served well to plant the seed of the Shakers in the New World. James Whittaker, who had come with her from England, succeeded Mother Ann as “Father” of the movement in America. He in turn died in 1787, three years after Mother Ann, and the government and development of the Society was left wholly to converts made in America.

The birth and growth of the Shaker movement had taken place in England when many individuals were seeking spiritual and economic guidance through the hardships of the mid-eighteenth-century wars and taxes. The sect believed in the second coming of Christ during the millennium as foretold in the book of Revelation. Mr. and Mrs. Wardley, the early leaders of the Shakers, had the further belief that Christ’s second appearance would be in the form of a woman.

Thus it was logical that through visions and manifestations, sincerity of word and deed, Ann Lee should have become the spiritual leader of the Shakers at this time. Upon her struggle to find true faith in God and on the mystic revelations and visions she received was founded a belief, which, transported to the New World, flourished and bore fruit for a full century.

As the credo took form and was publicly expressed by “Ann the Word” and her friends, its persecution in England began. The suspicion and antagonism of the unconverted were aroused by the principles of celibacy and of communism that the Shakers preached and practiced. Their method of religious expression, that is, of “shaking” themselves free of sin, caused more than casual comment and added considerable incentive to witch hunting. Disturbing the peace, disregarding the Sabbath, and blasphemy were the usual accusations. The blasphemy charge was primarily based on Ann Lee’s revelation that she represented Christ’s second coming.

After years of persecution, opposition in England for one reason or another diminished and disappeared, and the believers were left to practice their faith unmolested. It was then that Ann received the vision directing her to America, “with the divine promise, that the work of God would greatly increase, and the millennial church would be established in that country.”

All this happened just prior to the American Revolution, when in England and in Europe the principles of freedom and democracy were being much discussed. To this English group the discussion opened up the vista of a wilderness where seclusion and freedom of worship were offered. This along with Ann Lee’s revelation of a millennial church in the New World encouraged her and her eight apostles to come to America.

On their arrival in New York the small
group scattered to follow various pursuits and to live as best they could. Mother Ann and her husband found work in New York City. John Hocknell, who had financed most of the transportation costs from England, proceeded with Ann’s brother, William Lee, to find a suitable tract of frontier country, where they could establish themselves without fear of ridicule or persecution. These men took an option on land at Niskayuna, later called Watervliet, above Albany.

Soon the group had expended practically all of their meager resources, and therefore Hocknell went back to England to raise money to complete the purchase of the land. The year that passed before his return proved particularly arduous for those who were left in the New World under parlous conditions. The group had separated perforce. Some found work near their proposed home in the frontier town of Albany. Mother Ann, who remained in New York City, suffered particularly and came almost to starvation. To add to her trials, her husband “fell away” from the group.

At length Hocknell returned, bringing funds enough to complete the purchase of the land, and the small band was reunited. With song and prayer they looked forward to the prospect of work and worship that would further their mission.

They were beset, however, by new and unforeseen problems. Artisans from English industrial communities, they had in their new environment to learn the entirely new task of farming the land. With the same sort of courage and fortitude that marked early colonists and later pioneers of our country, the Shakers manfully went about clearing the frontier wilderness, planting crops, and building shelters for themselves.

For four years the small community lived in their seclusion, free to worship, yet weighed down with poverty. They made friends with the neighborhood Indians, but no converts were drawn into the fold. Though they had found peace in which to worship, it seemed that their mission had little future.

The religious revivals that swept the new continent in the last part of the eighteenth century had failed to satisfy the spiritual hunger of the people. And when the disillusioned but fervent believers of the New Lebanon revival of 1779 heard of the settlement above Albany, they came to visit these Shakers who “served God day and night and did not commit sin.” In the fortitude of the Shaker faith they found fresh hope and leadership. Many became converted and returned to their communities to spread the new gospel.

From then on the seed that had for four years shown no life began to sprout and put forth shoots of spiritual comfort throughout New England. The “hand-minded” artisans, the plain people, and the ministers who were to found other Shaker communities in many states of the new republic began to join. The revelation Mother Ann had received in England, that “the work of God would greatly increase,” and the vision at Niskayuna, that converts would “come like doves,” had both come to pass.
The success of the Shakers' venture was due in part to their common background. In England both leaders and proselytes were artisans, factory workers, and middle-class property owners. Ann Lee herself was a cotton worker, a cutter of hatter's fur, a cook in a Manchester infirmary. Her father, brother, and husband were blacksmiths. James Whittaker was a weaver. Similarly in New England most of the members who joined the movement were artisans or plain folk. It was these Americans who realized the precepts of their beloved Mother Ann and established the high standards of integrity to be found in all Shaker undertakings, both spiritual and industrial.

But virtually coincident with success came opposition, and the story of the American Shakers repeats the pattern of persecution suffered by the English group. As membership spread quickly throughout New England, and the tenets of celibacy, community property, the second coming of Christ, pacifism, and the public confession of sin became generally known, the believers were attacked and persecuted. At first it was with ridicule and tolerant amusement. Yet as the movement grew and nonbelievers saw families and friends separated, and the ownership of property en-
tangled in the communistic policy of the Society, their distrust and suspicion increased. Again, as in England, the song and dance, the "shaking," was not understood. As persecution developed it became more and more evident that separation from "the world" was necessary in order to live in accordance with the millennial concept.

To effect isolation the believers, as the "United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing," were "gathered into Society Order." In 1785 a meetinghouse was built in New Lebanon, and that location was chosen for the establishment of the first "gathered" community. The meetinghouse served as the focal point for planning the village and around it the "family" houses, workshops, and barns were built. Other communities were established, and by 1794 there were eleven Shaker villages throughout New England.

From the beginning, in the sordid atmosphere of an eighteenth-century English manufacturing town, Ann Lee had preached simplicity of speech, dress, and living as part of the millennial laws. The hardships and sufferings and economy demanded by frontier life in the New World served only to strengthen these precepts. In the early days of Niskayuna, living together in close quarters and in almost complete poverty, the immigrants found it necessary to organize their life so that both their spiritual and economic needs could be successfully fulfilled. Their religious convictions demanded the ultimate in cooperation, group activity, usefulness, and economy. From these fundamental tenets developed the Shaker way of life, which produced the simple Shaker furniture, architecture, song, and dance.

Mother Ann had admonished, "Do all your work as though you had a thousand years to live and as you would if you knew you must die tomorrow." As the physical counterpart of their spiritual life, their work habits and the products of their labors reflected the millennial harmony which they were seeking.

They designed and built their houses and furniture, workshops and equipment, barns and outbuildings, with the teachings of Mother Ann in mind. Perfection was sought in all things, down to the slightest detail. Every barn, workroom, meetinghouse, and dormitory was planned for efficiency and easy, cooperative use. Every object was made with extraordinary and loving care. Shaker furniture, with its well-balanced proportions, light-colored stain, and functionalism, appears to have been made for the "thousand years of holiness."

At the peak of membership, between 1840 and 1860, there were eighteen communities, housing over five thousand believers, from Maine to Kentucky and Ohio. The standards of quality and similarity of techniques were uniform in all the products from the various communities. This evenness was based on the practical policy of exchanging ideas and work methods among the widespread communities.

As Yankee inventors the Shakers are credited with many improvements in machinery, the origination of various appliances, and the
development of progressive work methods that sometimes approached the present-day assembly line. The list is long and of particular interest as every device, invention, or improvement was intended to simplify work and make efficient the co-operative factory techniques they employed. The Shakers are credited with a washing machine, a flat broom, a needle with an eye in the middle that was later adapted to the sewing machine, a circular saw, a mowing machine, a rotary harrow, automatic springs, the brimstone match, a machine for making electricity that was used in therapeutic treatment, a screw propeller, a threshing machine, and many other laborsaving devices. Few of the inventions were patented, and the ideas were borrowed freely by mechanics and inventors from "the world." Perhaps it was some of these very inventions, forerunners of the Industrial Age, which helped to spell the doom of the Shaker communities.

Though they had "gathered" into self-sufficient communities, they remained true Yankees and carried on business with "the world." One of the signposts that marked a Shaker village reads, "This is a place of trade and public business. Therefore we open it not on the Sabbath." Through the medium of the goods they manufactured, their deals in real estate, the herb and seed industry, the tracts and letters they published, they maintained continual intellectual and material exchange with the "world's people." The products of their craftsmanship and husbandry were widely commended for their high standard of quality and were in great demand by the public.

The Shakers were known for their improved breeds of farm stock, perfect seeds, and the
purity of the herbs they grew. After taking care of their own needs they sold to “the world” their well-made chairs, hayforks, other wooden farm equipment, wooden measures, sieves, leather goods, small oval wooden boxes, hats, buttons, and many other products. Factories were set up where items were made almost solely for “world” consumption. Inferior goods were never sold. The standard of work for “the world” was always equal to that of the products made for their own use.

Shaker villages still exist, but continue to be maintained mostly as museums, schools, or state institutions. There are still survivors of the Society living in some of the communities.

Two fundamental principles of our democracy—freedom of religion and freedom of speech—made it possible for the Shakers to live their way of life in America. Their writings and their tracts are valuable documents in our libraries and historical societies. Their furniture and their objects of craftsmanship have become significant in our American heritage. The planning of their villages, the arrangement of their “family” houses, the neatness and efficiency of their barns, workshops, laundries, kitchens, all attest to the standard and quality of this heritage. The proportions of the rooms, halls, and stairways, the placement of windows and doors, the built-in cupboards, and the arrangement of the simple furniture were designed, consciously or unconsciously, to give a wonderful feeling of rest and spacious peace. Even in the workshops and barns that feeling prevailed. The Shakers achieved a simple elegance that gave each object they produced a complete expression of refinement of line and beauty of form. Their furniture, craftwork, and architecture, perhaps even more than their writings, remain as living testimony to their sincerity and their strangely prophetic belief in our American freedoms.

Much of the information in this article is from The Shaker Adventure, by Marguerite F. Melcher (1914), and Shaker Furniture, by Edward D. and Faith Andrews (1937).

An exhibition, Shaker Craftsmanship, scheduled to open March 22 in E15, will show watercolor drawings and photographs of Shaker crafts and communities compiled by the Index for the Work Projects Administration.