

Shakertown
Knox County
42.1966.1

Prepared by the
Indiana Historical Bureau 2010
IN.gov/history

Marker Text

First Settlement, 1808-1812, of a religious society of celibates known as Shakers. The four hundred members of this communal group occupied 1300 acres seven miles west of Carlisle.

Report

The Shaker community at Busro provides a unique opportunity to mark a place and period in Indiana history where many relevant and interesting topics intersect. Besides the early date of the settlement and the religious beliefs of the Shakers, the community offers an interesting study of women in leadership roles, equality between white and African-American believers, communal living with no personal property, interaction with several different tribes of Native Americans, interaction with soldiers during the War of 1812, and specifically the caring for the sick and wounded of the Battle of Tippecanoe. Unfortunately, the current marker addresses few of these issues. Furthermore, much of the information on the marker is erroneous and/or misleading.

J.P. MacLean's *Shakers of Ohio: Fugitive Papers Concerning the Shakers of Ohio with Unpublished Manuscripts* (1907) provides a wealth of primary source information. This work contains a 76-page, well-footnoted section on the Busro community. Within this section are reprints of primary documents, including a "memorandum of the meetings on the Wabash," which covers events from 1808 through 1810. The work also contains the reprinted journal of Samuel Swan McClelland, a prominent West Union Shaker. This journal begins in 1811 and covers all of the major Busro events through 1827. Therefore, there is primary source evidence for all of the major events from the founding of Busro to the abandonment of the area by the Shakers in 1827. The meeting minutes and the journal, combined with newspaper accounts and

secondary source information for context, would allow a rich description of Shaker life in the area.

In addition to McLean, Other valuable sources include: Oliver W. Robertson's "The Shakers in Knox County" from the *Indiana Magazine of History* (1938), L.C. Rudolph's, *Hoosier Faiths: A History of Indiana's Churches and Religious Groups* (1995), George E. Greene's *History of Old Vincennes and Knox County Indiana* (1911), Dianna Marie Sheffler's master's thesis, *A Historical Study of the Shakers at the Busseron Settlement in Indiana* (1968), Logan Esarey's *History of Indiana* (1922), Hazel Spencer Phillip's "Shakers in the West" from the *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* (1962) and Dawn E. Bakken's "Young Believers and Old Believers in the Wilderness: Narratives of Place and the Construction of Family among Western Shakers," from the *Indiana Magazine of History* (2001).

The first concern with this marker is the title. There are no primary sources that refer to the settlement as "Shakertown." The only located mention of "Shakertown" is in a footnote in a 1938 *Indiana Magazine of History* article. Several sources, including MacLean's primary sources, refer to part of the Busro land as "Shaker Prairie," but never "Shakertown." According to Rudolph, the Shakers themselves called their village Busro or West Union. McLean writes, "The name of the Indiana Society of Shakers I find variously spelled Busro, Busroe, and Buserow, and in the later documents the name of West Union universally occurs." The marker should read something like: West Union Shaker Community or Busro Shaker Community.

The marker states, "first settlement, 1808-1812, of a religious society..." The founding date of 1808 is correct. The Shakers left the South Union community in Ohio and arrived in Busro on June 3, 1808 to found the West Union community. The meeting minutes start June 8, 1808. These minutes document the meetings that started only five days after the Shakers arrived in Busro in June of 1808. However, the Settlement actually existed from 1808-1827. The believers did leave for a brief time in 1812 as war threatened. McClelland wrote in his journal:

"War – with the British and Indians – was the general talk in the county – To which our faith and practice was entirely opposed – And of course we need not

build forts, unless we intent to defend them – And our settlement was almost the very frontier – All these circumstances (and a great many more) had their bearing on our general center – which was that we had better abandon the ground in peace than to stay and fight for it, or even to run the risk of being insulted and abused by the militia troops – or of being massacred (sic) by the Indians.”

According to McClelland, the West Union believers settled in other Midwestern Shaker communities for a time, but only a year later, in 1813, “the people began to contemplate on removing back to Busro again.” By 1814, almost all of the members had returned. They moved the settlement to a different part of their land – but the settlement was still made up of the same buildings, same people, same community. Although the community suffered greatly from malaria, they were prosperous and successful for the next decade after their return. In 1825, many young Shakers left the community and during its final years the society was plagued by fever and drought which also caused members to leave Busro. The 100 remaining believers completed the journey from West Union in Busro to Union Village on March 30, 1827. Beside’s McClelland’s journal, see Sheffler’s thesis for more information including several letters between Shaker communities.

The current marker describes the Shakers as “a religious society of celibates.” While this is not incorrect, it is misleading. The Shakers were best known (and criticized) for this part of their faith, but while celibacy was important to them, it was not the most crucial part of their beliefs. Shakers believed in a dual god, both male and female. They believed that Mother Ann was the second coming of Jesus in female form and that they were living in the Millennial Age. They did not believe in marriage or private property. They believed that all people were equal, black and white, male and female. They were pacifists who did not believe in violence or warfare. These beliefs all influenced their history. For example, Shaker belief in equality between the sexes and races created a community that included African Americans and women as members and as leaders. Their pacifism required that they remove from Busro during the war, sacrificing their fields, homes, and barns, as opposed to staying and protecting their property. For more information on Shaker beliefs see Rudolph or Dominica Harlan’s essay “Shakers: The United Society of Believers,” which can be accessed through the University of Virginia

Library website, <http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu>. For more primary information on women and African American Shakers see McClelland's journal.

The marker gives the peak membership as 400 believers, but this is inaccurate. Only George E. Green's *History of Old Vincennes and Knox County* puts the membership as being this high. (The Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana's *Knox County: Interim Report* also cites the number as 400, but uses the aforementioned county history as its source.) All of the primary sources give lower numbers. According to the meeting minutes from 1808, the settlement started with 30 members. The meeting minutes for 1809 show that the number grew to 40 over that year. Samuel Swan McClelland's journal gives membership numbers several times over the years. When they left Busro in 1812 to live at other Shaker settlements during the war, there were "about 300 human souls." This seems to be the peak number, because when they returned in 1814, some stayed at the other Shaker communities. At the time that the Busro settlement was permanently abandoned in 1827, there were "about 100 believers, most of whom were females."

Finally, the marker describes the location of Busro as "seven miles west of Carlisle." However, the location of the community should be described in terms of its relationship to Vincennes, not Carlisle. Carlisle is not mentioned in any of the primary sources, while Vincennes played a key part in the history of the Busro community. One of the first key events in Busro history was Elder Bates's trip to Vincennes to speak with William Henry Harrison to request protection from mobs who persecuted the Shakers. In July 1811, over 200 Native Americans camped right outside of Busro for two weeks, waiting for Tecumseh. They then traveled to Vincennes to meet with Harrison where the negotiations failed. As the Indians passed back through Busro, Governor Harrison sent soldiers behind them. Again, McClelland wrote:

The Governor had the light horse, and 3 or 400 footmen together for a week or ten days, to guard the town against their unprepared company of Indians, squaws and children. After all the parade was over, and every voice from the Indians was peace, and no foundation but jealousy, to build upon for war, the Governor sent them away with a party of men hard at their heels, to keep them from pilfering the

inhabitants. But this was like setting the dogs to watch the butter – for they did more mischief in one night, than the Indians had done all summer.

By September 12, 1811, the army was camped at Busro where they were training for the upcoming Battle of Tippecanoe. After this battle the wounded were brought to Busro and cared for by the Shakers. In the summer of 1812, soldiers again came to Busro to prepare to fight both Tecumseh and the British. Harrison offered the Shakers protection in Vincennes, but they chose to leave for other Shaker communities. Again, these are just a few examples of the relationship to Vincennes during important periods in Shaker history. See MacLean and Rudolph for more information. MacLean describes the location as “the northwestern corner of Knox County, Indiana, in Busseron Township, on Busseron Creek, and about sixteen miles north of Vincennes.”

Besides incorrect dates, the current marker has misleading information and misses opportunities to touch on important topics. If this marker were to be rewritten under the current standards it would include Native American, women’s and African American history as well as the connection to the Battle of Tippecanoe and the War of 1812 that define this Shaker village.