

# APICULTURE\* AT WATERVLIET

**In the 1860's the Watervliet Shakers started beekeeping in a very serious way.**

They bought young, fertile, Italian queen bees and set up over 100 hives all around their four Families, or enclaves. This included the Church Family, which is the location of the Shaker Heritage Society today.

The bees required special attention, and the Shakers were often challenged to keep the hives safe in extreme weather. During the winter, they tried to help their bees survive by moving them into special indoor storage and feeding them honey and sugar water.

This only saved a portion of the colony.

When the "corn island" in the Mohawk River flooded after storms, they had to quickly move the hives to keep the bees from drowning.

**Troy photographer James Irving received permission to photograph the Shaker community and began visiting the Watervliet Shakers in 1868.** His carefully composed images offered The World a glimpse of the secluded community. Today, Irving's photos provide the only visual record we have of the mid-19th century Church Family buildings and residents. In the photo above, the brick building at the left is the 1856 Drying House, which remains today. The stone bridge over Shaker Creek is no longer standing. (The modern bridge is located to the south, closer to the Laundry Building.) Notice the beehives at the right of the photo. Since the location of the bridge was close to the Dwelling House and in the middle of the Shaker enclave, an area of high foot traffic, it is likely that the hives were placed in the picture deliberately.



Shakers on bridge at Shaker Creek. Drying House is at left, beehives are at right. James Irving, c. 1868. *Collection of New York State Museum*



Elder Giles Avery (1815-1890) SHS

**The Shakers kept journals that recorded various daily activities.** Elder Giles Avery is the Shaker Brother and beekeeper mentioned in the following journal entries recorded in the Ministry Journal, kept by the Lead Ministry at the Mt. Lebanon Shaker community. As an Elder at Mount Lebanon, Giles Avery was part of the administration for all Shaker communities. He spent a great amount of time at Watervliet serving as a religious leader and participating in the Shakers' communal activities, including farming, making furniture, and repairing machinery in addition to his beekeeping.

\* *The branch of agriculture known as beekeeping, which involves maintaining colonies of bees in human-made hives.*



© Shaker Heritage Society



The Shakers dredged the south end of the Church Family property in 1812 for the construction of a mill, creating what is now known as Ann Lee Pond. The mill was located next to the pond. In 1842, it was replaced by a second mill built across the street from the pond. There were four waterwheels running: one in the saw mill, two in the grist mill, and one for running machinery. *James Irving, c. 1870s*



The Sisters' Workshop was built in 1848. In addition to rooms for weaving and the production of textiles, straw bonnets and mats, and other items produced for the Shakers use and for sale to The World, the building contained a dairy in the basement. The workshop was demolished when Albany County purchased the property in 1925 for the construction of the Ann Lee Nursing home. Today the site is the location of the SHS herb garden. *Historic American Building Survey, Library of Congress*

**The following entries are taken from the Ministry Journal and refer to the Watervliet (Albany) Shaker Community.**

**11/11/1863** Giles gets stuff into the mill for beehives, "contemplating making a dozen or fifteen double, compound, dead air chamber beehives, with movable frames for comb, on a new plan." ["Stuff" refers to lumber or materials.]

**11/27/1863** Giles at mill preparing his beehive stuff "on Freegift's buzz saw." [Brother Freegift Wells' saw would have been located at the 1842 mill building on what is now Ann Lee Pond.]

**4/6/1864** Nehemiah White goes to New Lebanon & with Giles goes to Alonzo Bradley's in Lee to purchase five swarms of Italian bees for \$54.

**5/10/1864** Giles making hives for queen rearing.

**5/13/1864** Giles drives a swarm of bees, takes its queen & gives it the Italian queen in order that the colony may rear queen cells.

**5/20/1864** Giles moves some bees from SF [South Family], WF [West Family], and NF [North Family] to make a clear field of 2-3 miles for rearing Italian queens.

The South Family's journal for the same day reports: "Elder Giles and Nehemiah take our bees away 'to Italianize them.'"

**5/23/1864** "L. A. Aspinwall, about 3 miles from Albany on the plank road, came to WV [Watervliet] to see our Italian apiary." We make up 4 nuclei swarms for rearing queens and take them to SF.

**5/30/1864** Giles makes two barrels of honey wine.

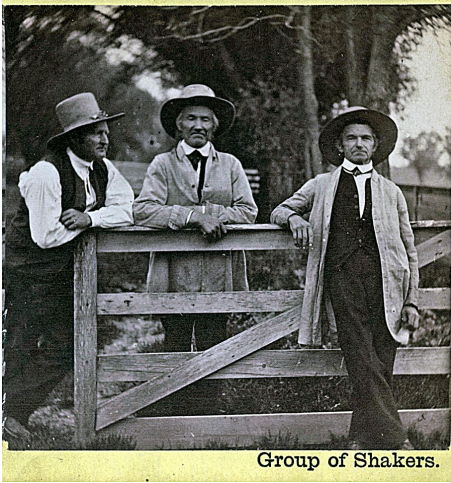
**11/23/1864** Ministry come to WV. Giles works on his beehives all the time, moving them to the cellar, taking lumber to Albany to have new ones made; Elder Daniel planning basket stuff. Have 22 swarms of bees in SE corner of Stone Shop cellar. [The "Stone Shop" was the Church Family Sisters' Workshop, a three-story stone structure on the site of today's herb garden.]

**2/16/1865** Elder Daniel bottoming chairs with splint; Giles making beehives.

**3/3/1865** Giles makes 100 new beehives.

**4/4/1865** Giles comes back to WV to take care of his bees. Gardeners of CF set about 1500 bushels of turnips. Goes back to Lebanon on 10th. Hear that Gen. Lee has surrendered.





Group of Shakers.

Brother Nehemiah White is at the left in a photo of Brothers taken by James Irving, c. 1870. *Hamilton College Communal Societies Collection*

- 5/17/1865** Giles sawing stuff for new hives –100 nuclei hives for raising queens.
- 5/8/1866** Giles and Nehemiah overhaul all the bees. Lost about half of hives during winter and most of those alive are in sad condition.
- 7/23/1866** Giles engaged about some bees at Henry Lansing's, west of NF.
- 8/8/1866** Jesse Harwood making partition in SE corner of Stone Shop cellar for a place to store bees in winter.
- 11/23/1866** Giles and Nehemiah bring in 28 swarms of bees and put in Stone Shop cellar.
- 12/12/1867** Elder Daniel works on CF chairs; Giles on his bee stuff.
- 11/12/1868** Giles gets 9 swarms from Aspinwalls and 2 from SF – now has 58 swarms, all Italian and semi-Italian.
- 11/21/1868** Giles begins building a wintering beehouse, 30x16.
- 12/1/1868** Giles puts his hives in cellar – 59 swarms.
- 7/5/1869** Giles has been putting up a beehouse. Now a man comes from Canaan to “put a plastic slate roof on the beehouse.” Elder Daniel and DAB [*David Austin Buckingham*] finish clapboarding the beehouse.
- 10/7/1869** Giles rearranges his beehives. CF [*Church Family*] has finished canning sweet corn and are now drying it. The NF [*North Family*] sweet corn on the island in the Mohawk was covered with the flood for some days.
- 10/13/1869** Rains 8 ¾ inches. Have to move bees again to keep them from drowning.
- 12/15/1869** Giles has been working at his new beehouse, putting up shelves, etc. Now moves 32 swarms in. Gets the rest in on 16<sup>th</sup>, making 56 swarms.
- 12/24/1869** Giles went to Albany & got lumber for 80 beehives, also hardware, paint and glass.
- 1/12/1870** Giles works at beehives.
- 3/31/1870** Giles putting the hives out. Lost about 30 colonies for want of honey, tho we fed about 2 barrels of sugar to our bees last fall.
- 4/13/1872** Only 13 swarms out of 60 survived the winter.
- 4/26/1872** Giles goes to Albany to order “a set of teeth.” He is spending time putting a ceiling in his bee house to make it warmer.
- 4/16/1877** Giles & some sisters taking up all the honey & wax as the bees have all died. Have about 1 ½ bbls [barrels] of honey & white sugar mixed together, “makes beautiful dip for pancakes.”
- 11/8/1877** Elder Daniel is bottoming chairs; Stanton & Henry George are working on a spring on the hill towards WV [Watervliet]; Giles is working on bees, bought from Aaron Van Vranken; gardeners getting in turnips.



**Beekeeping activities continued with the work of Byron Coburn (1874-1935), who came from the Groveland Shaker Community, near Rochester, when it closed in 1892.**

Byron lived at the North Family, now the site of the Shaker Ridge Country Club. As you can see from the photos, he had an extensive number of beehives. A shy Marguerite Putnam poses near the beehives in the early 20th century.

The South Family journal mentions Byron Coburn's gifts of honey in 1919.

**Sept 1** Byron brought us 8 lb white clover honey in comb

**Sept 27** Byron brought us 24 lbs choice clover honey

In 1919, the North Family was closed and the residents moved to the South Family, close to the Christian Brothers Academy on South Family Road.

**Nov 6** Byron brought 16 hives of bees down from NF

Like Giles Avery, Coburn's beekeeping was only a part of his work in the community. He helped with all manner of farm work, building projects and repairs, and drove products to the farmers market.

Both Giles Avery and Byron Coburn are buried in the Shaker Cemetery on Heritage Lane.



**Today, we are pleased to report that beekeeping is still an activity at the Watervliet Shaker complex.** Ian and Beth Munger keep hives in the Shaker Orchard which is adjacent to the Shaker Cemetery and across from the Ann Lee Pond Nature Preserve. You can watch an [introduction to their bees here](#).