Cooking for the Family, Shaker Style

The bounty of the Shaker table was an enduring aspect of Shaker life, even though the Shakers at Niskayuna experienced crop failures and other disasters at times, and some communities dealt with serious food shortages. The Shakers were known for a well-balanced diet—some have credited them with following the “food pyramid” before it actually existed. Yet, we might be a little astonished at the variety of food served at one meal. One account notes that a typical breakfast at the Mt. Lebanon Church Family included “rye and Indian bread, wheat bread, tea, milk, potatoes, meat, butter, applesauce, apple pie, pickles, salt and water.”

In many ways, the Shakers approached food as they did other items they produced, whether it was clothing, furniture, or items made for sale: they used high quality materials, avoided unnecessarily embellishments, paid attention to the preparation, and relied on a collaboration of Brethren and Sisters who took on interdependent tasks. In fact, considering the number of those who had to be fed every day, we might look upon the production of food and provision of meals as one of the Shaker industries.

In the mid-19th century, one observer noted that the Shakers’ agricultural activities were distinct in their scale of operation. The Watervliet journals are full of information about the amount of work farming required. In December of 1838, Phebe Ann Buckingham of the Church Family Trustees Office writes “Brethren killed 24 hogs today, average 320 lbs. each,” on December 18th, and one day later they “borrow[ed] a machine from Schenectady to grind meat, grind 700 lbs.” In February of 1846, they “finish thrashing - 300 bu[shels] rye, 410 bu[shels] oats, 300 bu[shels] buckwheat, 20 bu[shels] barley.” The Shakers also harvested food in the wild as in July of the same year: “Ten of us go after whortleberries (blueberries). We git 7 bushels.”

All family members helped with various tasks in harvesting and processing crops.
From the Director

Like many of you, I celebrated a quiet holiday season this year. In lieu of the usual boisterous, multi-generation family dinner, my husband and I opened a bottle of wine and toasted to the health and good fortune of our families from afar, shared a little turkey with our dog, and enjoyed a rousing game of family-night bingo over zoom.

In the midst of a somewhat melancholy season, mixing danger and boredom in equal measure, it’s easy to lose sight of all we have to be thankful for, but we can turn to the Shakers for inspiration.

“We rendered praise and thanksgiving, bearing in remembrance the devout and valiant hearted Brethren and Sisters who established a Society in this place that we might enjoy the benefits of a Communal home.” – James Carr, South Union

The Shakers expressed gratitude for their “chosen” families, and celebrated the hard work and sacrifices of those who came before in order to create a more perfect community for those who followed. The necessity of giving thanks, and the mandate to serve were always in mind.

“Thanksgiving has come and gone; that is, the external manifestation of the day, but the time can never pass by when we are not able to render thanksgiving.” – Hamilton Degraw, North Family – Watervliet.

In this new year, let’s all draw strength from our communities, and remember to seek out new ways to help one another through the long cold days ahead.

Johanna Batman

Annual Appeal

What are you reflecting upon as we embark upon a new year? We are thankful for the continued health and safety of loved ones, mindful of the toll of the last year, and hoping for better days ahead. We are also grateful for your support and participation that sustained us through the unforeseen events over the last year. Preserving history in an on-demand world is more important than ever. Your generosity exceeded our goals, raising over $14,000 for the organization. As COVID continues to be a challenge, we are working to keep our community engaged while remaining safe and healthy. Your commitment to historic preservation and programs is very important, and your support makes a difference.

New Trustee Joins SHS Board

We are pleased to introduce Matthew Miller, who has over 25 years of experience as an attorney and finance professional. Raised in Guilderland, he recently retired from Wall Street and began a business selling Shaker furniture and taping Shaker chairs. He has long been familiar with the Church Family Site, and brings a lifelong interest in history and the Shakers to the board. He notes that SHS is an “important organization which combines my deep commitment to the local community and the Shaker ideals of honesty, hard work and equality.”

SHS staff would like to borrow a scanner to digitalize archives. Please contact us at educator@shakerheritage.org if you can loan one for a few months.
A Long-Term Lease Signed for the Shaker Heritage Complex

In December, Shaker Heritage signed a new fifty-year lease agreement with Albany County. It is the culmination of twenty years of advocacy and negotiation that began under the leadership of Past-President of the Board Phoebe Bender. This work continued under the guidance of her successor, Jessica Klami, and former Executive Director Starlyn D’Angelo. We are proud and humbled to be able to finally affix a signature to the document as a result of many years of hard work.

Throughout this process, we have often fielded the question “why fifty years?” The County rarely grants such a long lease term, and only a decade ago Shaker Heritage was still operating under a year-to-year agreement. The answer is pretty simple: long-term plans require a long-term lease. With support from individual donors, private foundations, and state and local funders including Albany County, three buildings on the site have been stabilized in the past fifteen years: The 1848 Meeting House, the 1915 Barn Complex, and the 1856 Drying House. Despite these accomplishments, much work remains to be done. The lease now includes all nine remaining Shaker buildings and the Shaker Orchard.

A 2007 Master Plan for the site identified $6.3 million in improvements needed for the nine buildings and grounds of the Church Family Site. In today’s dollars, that’s closer to $8.1 million, and water damage in recent years mean actual costs are probably even higher. Through this agreement and renewed partnership with the County, funders considering support for Shaker Heritage will have assurance that their investments in this historic site will be protected for two generations to come. This lease will help us focus our energy on the mission of our organization: to preserve this historic site of national importance, and develop cultural, recreational and educational program opportunities that stimulate tourism and economic development within the region.

Thank you to everyone in the community who called or wrote your legislators in support of this lease. We are grateful to our partners at the County Executive’s Office for their help drafting, editing, and shepherding this lease through the approval process. Special thanks are due to Michael McLaughlin Director of Policy and Research in the Office of the Albany County Executive’s Office for fielding all of our calls, emails, and letters, and for liaising with the County Law office to gather answers. We also thank County Legislator Nathan Bruschi for taking up the cause in the legislature and coaching and cheerleading for us throughout. And of course, deep thanks to County Executive Dan McCoy, Chairman Andrew Joyce, and all the members of the Albany County Legislature who endorsed this vision of the future for the Church Family Site.

Shaker YOUR Plate? Recipe Collection Underway

The aroma of fresh bread, the sizzle of garlic, wafts of cumin and coriander...what are the tastes and flavors of home to you? Shaker Heritage seeks your contributions to our 2021 community cookbook on the theme of heritage.

Shaker meals were shared at a common table in the company of a chosen family. The dishes varied by season and region, but whether it was fried chicken in Kentucky, or apple pie in New York, the skillful preparation of a meal was an expression of devotion everywhere.

We invite you to choose a recipe that reflects your own heritage. It may be linked to a certain location, event, or person. Include these details with your recipe:

~ Your Name  ~ Your Community
~ Recipe Title  ~ Email/Phone #
~ Recipe measurements and instructions
~ In 150 words or less, tell us a little about why this recipe is special to you, and how it links you to the community and place that you call your own.

Photos are optional
~ Please confirm your permission to share the recipe.

Submissions may be submitted online here: https://www.jotform.com/203505733216145 or sent to director@shakerheritage.org. Recipes must be received no later than March 1, 2020. Contact Johanna at 518-456-7890, x1 with any questions.
Volunteer Spotlight: Community and Connection

Being a volunteer is a noble and complicated role to play. Volunteering connects people to others with similar values and brings people together who may not have the chance to interact otherwise. There are various ways people can volunteer, even within one organization. Here at the Shaker Heritage Society, our volunteers have played many different roles over the years. From serving as costumed interpreters for fourth grade programs to serving slices of pie at our Craft Fairs, and making repairs to the Meeting House, SHS volunteers have just about done it all. Some volunteers have been weekly regulars, others help out once or twice a year, and some are students who participate in a program just once but find it a memorable experience.

Volunteering can provide a sense of community during uncertain times. It gives people a sense of belonging and purpose. Ronnie Siegel is one of our beloved “Garden Buds,” the group of dedicated folks who tend to the Herb Garden. Ronnie appreciates how Garden Manager Becky Langer communicates with the core group: “She shares garden updates via email -- what is flowering, what needs TLC, which volunteers have lent a hand with specific details on what has been accomplished and what jobs await a willing pair of hands. Becky is always appreciative and generously shares her gratitude in her emails.” Ronnie is particularly grateful that the Buds have continued to flourish during these past few challenging months: “During this pandemic, when many of our community connections and volunteer opportunities have been limited, Becky has reached out and been a voice of encouragement. We can socially distance yet still delight in working in the garden on a summer’s morning.”

Charlyn Petit and Sue Lyons, both longtime Museum Shop volunteers, fondly recall William, an orange tabby cat who lived in the Meeting House for years. Charlyn says, “His meows would echo so beautifully because of the great acoustics of the Meeting Room.” Sue recalls, “People visited just to see him. Even sent generous checks or bought food for his care! A major mouser!” It’s clear that valuable volunteers aren’t all human!

Volunteering is a great opportunity to step out of one’s comfort zone, participate in meaningful causes, and learn more about one’s community. Leslie Niera served as Volunteer Coordinator for many years, helped set up numerous craft fairs, and still works in the shop every Friday. One memory of shop customers stands out: “Two ladies from England who were settling a grad student at SUNY Albany on a rainy Friday morning were seeing the Capital District by bus and taxi. They were familiar with Mother Ann’s story and they even had a Shaker store in London, but they couldn't afford anything in it. One of them left with one of our Shaker boxes.”

Ann Sayers is one of many volunteers, past and present, who share their love of our site by giving tours and assisting with school field trips. You won’t be surprised to learn that she’s drawn to our history: “The Shaker site is a historic gem, right in the midst of the bustling Capital Region, where we can learn from the past, walk around bucolic fields, mingling with the natural world, as well as meet new people and help imagine the future of this special place.” Ann takes great delight in “the satisfaction that comes from leading a lively tour, featuring lots of interaction with the group.”

Our volunteers are often our best ambassadors. Charlyn Petit is proud to share the Shaker legacy. She says, “You don’t need any special knowledge, just bring your skill set and see where you fit in. As the Shakers famously said, we make you kindly welcome. I feel like I’m helping to keep the history of the Shakers alive in this area which has embraced the Shakers’ name in so many ways, such as street names, schools, etc.”

While volunteers obviously are not rewarded with salary, or vacation time, anyone who has volunteered with regularity or just once knows the satisfaction of doing work simply for the good of it. We are fortunate to have a variety of opportunities for volunteers. Whether you want to give weekly tours, work the cash register in the Museum Shop, or assist us during the Holiday Market, there’s something for everyone here at the Shaker Heritage Society.
“Everyone busy gathering in seeds, broomcorn, herbs, apples & everything else” Sister Phebe’s journal reads in September, 1844. In the fall of 1857, the Church Family used the new drying house for the first time to dry apples. “Sisters all turn out to pick up cider apples & 4-5 brethren helped. Sundown when they finished.” In October of 1863, Phebe Buckingham reports that apples were cut up for apple butter and drying. “We pared 25 barrels, a good day’s work. We had a new machine that one person could [use to] pare a barrel of apples in 20 minutes.”

Innovation, invention, and modern technology played a role in the kitchen as they did elsewhere. In 1857, the “Ministry, Elders and Trustees [met] concerning George Price getting a patent for his “butter squasher” and later “[p]repared papers to get a patent on a butter worker George invented.” He also invented a pea sheller. In 1861, the Church Family decided to update the Dwelling House kitchen. First, Chauncey Miller accompanied six Sisters on two trips to Albany to look for a new cooking range. Then George Price made the trip to buy "the range and a number of pans, boiler and kettles, a cooking lantern, etc." and worked with the hired plumbers and masons to install the new equipment.

Glendyne Wergland describes the “reciprocity” between Brethren—who built work areas, piped in water, made tools, and set up equipment—and Sisters who processed the harvest, cooked, and served meals. A visitor noted “the kitchen and the dairy...were throughout distinguished for the cleanliness and ingenious contrivance observable among these people...”

Preparing and serving good, plentiful food was an act of devotion. As with other work, Sisters were usually assigned to the kitchen for short periods of time. They approached cooking with the same mindfulness and efficiency as those processing seeds and herbal medicines. There was a prohibition against “bothering” the sisters for snacks between meals. (Of course, we know about this due to complaints about those who broke the rule.) The dining room was arranged with seating in small groups, and food was placed on the table so that everyone in each group could serve themselves. They were strongly admonished to take only what they could eat and to “Shaker your plate,” or finish the food to avoid waste. Talking was not permitted, in order not to draw out the meal and prolong the time before Sisters could clean up (and likely begin preparing the next meal).

Several cooks note their delight in cooking. Phebe Ann Buckingham records several instances of making favorite “spoon cakes,” and Anna Goeppe’s 1920 diaries recount the large quantities of baked goods she is turning out. However, it must be said that all was not always rosy in the kitchen. Goeppe contrasts the high-quality food available under the administration of Eldress Anna Case with her past experiences (possibly at Groveland). And, truth be told, there are also journal entries recording the relief of the writer when a certain cook is either finishing a kitchen rotation or returning to resume cooking responsibilities, indicating that not all who were assigned to the kitchen were well-placed.

Dining did not necessarily mirror other egalitarian aspects of Shaker life but, instead, reflected the hierarchy of the community. The entire family did not eat together. Hired laborers were served in the Trustees Office or another dining area, and ate separately from the Shakers. Those appointed as Trustees lived in the Office and took their meals there, likely enjoying some of the special fare served when they were hosting guests. Elders and Ministers were served in their separate quarters or in a room separate from the communal dining area. No matter the group or location, though, the fare was substantial and tasty enough to sustain the hard-working community.

1. How Shakers Cook, Historical pamphlet
2. Richard Francis, Ann the Word, p 106
3. Glendyne Wergland, Sisters in the Faith, p. 106; Visiting the Shakers, 1778-1849, p 54

Shaker Heritage staff collaborated on two programs focusing on Shaker foodways this winter. The programs can be found on You Tube.

“Shaker Your Plate: A Conversation about Shaker Cuisine” with Hancock Shaker Village & South Union Village
“An Utopian Christmas” with Hancock Shaker Village

See p. 8 for information on future online programs.
Harvest Craft Fair and Holiday Market Are a Success

We were so grateful to be able to host our outdoor Harvest Craft fair this fall and welcome our community back to the Shaker Site. With over 65 vendors participating, it was a fun and joyful weekend of handmade crafts, music, tours, and more. Despite a number of challenges involved in producing an indoor event with 90 vendors, we are pleased to announce that our Holiday Market completed a successful 10-week run. Thanks to everyone who joined us for wearing your mask, keeping your distance, and helping us keep the event safe for everyone to enjoy.

**Save the Date: Summer Craft Fair - June 12-13th!**

Facilities Update

Shaker Heritage received a second NEH Preservation Assistance Grant to support continued assessment of our facilities and collections storage conditions. To kickoff the project in September, a consultant from Landmark Facilities Group conducted a full building analysis of the Meeting House’s thermal envelope and utilities. Dataloggers were installed throughout the building to continually monitor heat and humidity conditions. The data collected will give us a year-round picture of environmental conditions. The results will improve our ability to anticipate problems and develop solutions to improve preservation of the 1848 Meeting House and the collections it holds.

**Environmental Assessment: National Endowment for the Humanities**

Thank You for Helping Our Garden Grow!

With your generous contributions, work has begun on the installation of a new fence around the Shaker Herb Garden. We extend our sincere thanks to the Colonie-Guilderland Rotary Club and Faddegon’s Building and Remodeling for their generous donation of time and expertise installing the fence posts and rails. Keep an eye out for beautiful new Watervliet “candleflame” pickets custom-made by the Northeastern Woodworkers Association in the spring!

The Northeastern Woodworkers Association Does It All

How do we thank thee? Let us count the ways:

- Designing and building mounts and installing ten new interpretive signs on the property.
- Replacing a door on the Shaker Heritage Barn doors.
- Repairing the crash-bar mechanisms on the Shaker Garage and placing a tarp on the roof to keep out the rain until stabilization work can begin next year.
- Replacing the crash-bar mechanisms on the Shaker Heritage Barn doors.

We simply could not ask for better partners and stewards of this historic site!

New Interpretive Signs Greet Visitors

The SHS complex has long been a favorite spot for walkers, (many accompanying their dogs), and rental clients. It’s fair to say that most of these folks have never taken a tour or attended an SHS program. Since September they’ve been able to learn about the Shakers via a series of ten interpretive signs. Designed and fabricated through a generous grant from the Hudson River Valley Greenway, they were installed with in-kind support from the Northeastern Woodworkers Association. Thanks to a generous gift from John and Betty Nickles, we will create more signs to orient visitors to the Shaker Cemetery and Apple Orchard on Heritage Lane.

Project Growth Repairs Fence

This fall, under the guidance of members of the Albany County DPW, a class from Project Growth spent two days at the Shaker Site rebuilding the split-rail fence along Meeting House Road. Project Growth is a program for young adults ages 17-24 who are involved in the criminal justice system. They receive mentoring on career skills, and work on paid service projects to earn money for restitution payments. The new fence creates a much better “first impression” for our visitors, and we deeply appreciate their help making the site more beautiful and welcoming! Special thanks to Brian McCoy for spearheading and coordinating the project with us.
Welcome Kilkee!  
For the first time in over 100 years, a calf was born at the former Church Family site. Arriving in November, 2020 and named Kilkee, she is shown here between her sister, Carne (L) and mother Tralee (R). She’s the latest addition to the little herd of Kerry cows owned by SHS Volunteer Bob Reilly.

Anonymous phone message from a visitor: Just looking at your place here and you have very beautiful grounds. Thank you for letting me [visit] this place.

Shop at SHS Online
While the Museum is closed until April, you can still support SHS via our online store. The catalogue is on our Facebook page or follow the link on our website. Museum Shop manager Jackie Davis has eco-friendly, reusable, and regionally-sourced goods, affordable gifts, practical housewares, and even face masks for children and adults, in addition to traditional Shaker items. We offer pickup, delivery and mailing options.

In-person Workshop!
Door/Wall Basket Workshop with Sandy Salada
March 13, 10:30 am - 3:30 pm  
$45 - SHS Members, $50 - Non-Members; $10 materials fee
This wall or door basket will look great decorated with seasonal artificial flowers or for holding mail, papers or recipes. The possibilities are endless. The basket is 10” x 15” and the pocket measures 10” x 7” deep with a sturdy oak handle. Woven in natural reed with dyed reed accents, choices are red, brown, blue, black or green. No experience needed, suitable for ages 14 and up.

SHS is following all protocols to maintain a safe environment for visitors. The session is limited to 8 participants, and each will have their own table. Materials were purchased before the pandemic and have been stored in a Covid-free space. Students will bring their own household tools, and masks are required. Register online at Eventbrite.
There have been an astonishing number of utopian and communal groups established in the US, and the Shakers are regarded as one of the most successful societies on the list. If you are researching one of these groups, it is likely that you will find resources in the Communal Societies Collection at Hamilton College in Clinton, NY. The best news? A good amount of the collection is publicly-accessible online. We focus on the collection in a new series on researching the Shakers.

Travels in Utopia: Twenty Years of Collecting & Conserving
Thursday, February 25, 2021  7:00 pm (EDT) - Online
Christian Goodwillie will relate some of his adventures tracking down rare materials from the Shakers, Israelite House of David, Koreshan Unity, and even the Beat writers! Goodwillie is Director and Curator of Special Collections at the Burke Library of Hamilton College, and previously served as Hancock Shaker Village's Curator of Collections for ten years. Tasked with building and preserving the nation's premier collection of communal materials and making them accessible, he has 20 years of stories about the joys (and a few sorrows) of collecting objects and archives of intentional communities. The event is free; however, donations are appreciated. Register here.

In Her Rightful Place: Women's Roles in the Shaker Community
Wednesday, March 10, 2021  7:00 pm (EDT) Online
Perhaps known more for their furniture and celibacy, the Shakers were revolutionary in their views on gender and racial equality. Women were deeply involved at every level of the Shaker hierarchy as religious, business, manufacturing, and administrative leaders. In short, “women’s work” in the community involved far more than cooking and cleaning. One need look no further than Mother Lucy Wright who was the national leader of the Shakers for 25 years. However, there were also plenty of women like Sister Isabella Graves (1861-1912) of the South Family who served as a Deaconess and was in charge of selling Shaker goods to downtown stores in Albany. The speaker is Lorraine Weiss, Shaker Heritage Society’s Education Coordinator. The event is free; however, donations are appreciated. Register here.