"The Subject of building a 'New Meeting House'"

SHS staff recently noticed that February 15, 2023 was the 175th anniversary of the Watervliet Shakers’ decision to construct a new Meeting House. Below are excerpts from a complete study of the building, The 1848 Watervliet Meeting House, An Historic Structures Report, that was prepared in 1981 by the firm of Quackenbush, Wagoner & Reynolds, Architects.

1848 that we find a specific journal entry marking the decision:

... The Ministry, Elder, brethren and sisters assembled in the Meeting Room half an hour before the usual time of evening worship, and after the Hymn was sung, the subject of building a "New Meeting House" was introduced by the good Ministry, and urged as necessary to be commenced the coming Spring or Season and erected as soon as possible. A number, both Elders, brethren and sisters, expressed their feelings, all in union with the gift: and it was also made known that it is expected to be built near where the "Old Office" is now standing fronting the Brethren brick shop.

On February 23, the deacons and principal joiners met to discuss the Meeting House, and it was probably at this planning meeting that the design, materials, financing, and time schedules were discussed. . . .[The identity of the architect remains unknown, however journal entries note that “Jesse” is working on plans, and this may be either Jesse Harwood or Jesse Wells.] . .

As soon as the weather permitted, work on the new Watervliet Meeting House began. Stone was drawn by the brethren from an old mill site on the property; timbers were cut; and the twelve 53-foot long beams, each 12” x 10”, which had been sent from Groveland were brought to the
From the Director

Around the first anniversary of the war in Ukraine, I passed an anti-war protest on a street corner near the Church Family site. Participants were holding up placards with demands for "negotiation, not annihilation" with Russia. Inwardly, I scoffed. "How pointless to protest for peace in the face of a dictator bent on restoring the lost glory of a fallen empire." I thought to myself. This, despite the fact that I am also fiercely critical of what I perceive as the chest-thumping glorification of violence and weapons of war in the US.

I could fairly be accused of hypocrisy here, and my own duality of thought has led me to ponder inherent tensions in Shaker values. During the Civil War, it could be argued that the Shakers' commitment to equality was pitted against their embrace of pacifism. The brutal inhumanity of slavery in the US was fundamentally incompatible with their values. Yet, so too was the bloody Civil War that would ultimately end centuries of chattel slavery in this country.

The Shakers ultimately convinced President Lincoln of the sincerity of their beliefs and were awarded conscientious objector status. This achievement was the well-deserved outcome of over a century of Shaker activism and nonviolent resistance. Still, I wonder how each individual Shaker negotiated their own peace with their insularity in the midst of a struggle that would decide the personhood of millions.

It's easy to fall into the trap of judging from afar, but up close and personal moral clarity can become murky. I suspect that most of the protestors on the corner of Wolf Road here in Colonie are old enough to have experienced the horrors of the Vietnam War and witnessed state-sanctioned violence against peaceful protestors during the Civil Rights Movement. Likewise, a not insignificant number of Shakers at Watervliet had experienced war first-hand and many more had doubtless experienced the poverty, homelessness, and hunger that often goes hand-in-hand with war.

The Shakers' commitment to pacifism may appear passive, but Shaker communities actively rendered aid as needed to any soldier that passed through their villages, regardless of the flag they fought under. The Shakers looked beyond the conflict and recognized the humanity of each person before them, treating them with the same charity and compassion as their own Sisters and Brothers. I can hardly think of anything more admirable than that.
News & Events

Ann Lee Home Updates

Demolition of the Ann Lee Home was delayed this winter, but work began onsite March 2nd and will continue through May. We are happy to report that Historic Albany Foundation had an opportunity in late February to participate in a walk-through of the building to identify salvageable materials.

Wash House Mural

With support from a Legislative Initiative Grant from Assemblymember Phil Steck and the NYS Parks and Recreation Department, we are preparing to install a new temporary mural on the east side of the Shaker Wash House at the Church Family Site. SHS is excited to partner with Albany Center Gallery and artist Phoebe Rotter on this project. SHS is currently reviewing the artists’ concept sketches with an informal advisory group. We look forward to revealing the murals this April!

Historic Albany Foundation Volunteer Day

We look forward to partnering with Historic Albany Foundation on several workshops this year. We will additionally be the grateful recipients of a day of service from the HAF Tool Library Volunteer Corps. We hope you will join us for this special Hands-To-Work day in June to repair and repaint the fences by the 1915 Heritage Barn and the picket fences of Meeting House.

Museum Shop Updates

When we reopen in April, come in and see what’s new for the shop in 2023! We have an array of brand new USA products such as children's activity kits, Adagio teas, soaps and lotions, wellness products, jewelry, eco products from France, and much more!

Mother Ann Lee’s Birthday Success

This year for Mother Ann Lee’s Birthday, we hosted a food & fund drive to benefit the Regional Food Bank of Northeastern New York. Despite the snowy weather we had a wonderful day of sweets, music and giving! We were able to donate over $300 to the Food Bank and 8 very full boxes of food.

Visit Shakerheritage.org to register for upcoming events!

Shaker Style Take and Bake

Shaker Heritage Society has teamed up with 2Shea catering again to produce wonderfully delicious Shaker style Take and Bakes. For only $40 you get a meal for two. All recipes came from Shaker Your Plate: Of Shaker Cooks and Cooking by Sister Frances A. Carr from the Sabbathday Lake, Maine community.

This Take and Bake will be Meatloaf with potatoes and rosemary butter broccoli. Yum! Each Take and Bake will include reheating instructions and the original Shaker recipe these dishes were inspired by. Pickup of these meals will be at the Meeting House on March 23rd from 4pm - 6pm. If you are interested in purchasing this meal, please contact Anna Starrington at community@shakerheritage.org by March 19th!

continued
News & Events, continued

Shaker Cheese Basket Workshop

Saturday, March 25th @ 10am - 3pm

Local weaver Sandy Salada is here to deliver another stunning workshop! A 10" round, 3" deep multi-directional weave basket in the Shaker style. Originally used for curing cheese. Today’s basket makes a wonderful bread, muffin or roll basket and looks great hanging on a wall when not in use. Made from 3/8” natural flat reed.

No prior weaving experience is needed, suitable for ages 13 and up.

Material fee of $15 is required.

Save Your Own Garden Seeds!

Saturday, April 1st @ 10:30am - 12pm

Each winter, Shaker Brethren loaded wagons and sleighs to deliver seed packets to merchants around the state. You too can get ready for the growing season by learning how to harvest and store your own garden seeds. Cornell Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners will provide an overview of the importance of native plants and seed saving, and the nitty gritty of how to collect, store, and germinate perennial seeds.

The program will include a brief introduction to the Shakers’ seed industry, which began in the 1790s when the Watervliet Shakers developed the process of packaging seeds in small envelopes for sale to the World. The session will end with a stroll in the Shaker Heritage herb garden. For more information or to register offline, call 518-456-7890, x3 or contact educator@shakerheritage.org.

Mosaic Pendant Workshop

Saturday, April 22nd @ 10am - 1pm

Shaker Heritage Society is thrilled to be teaming up with Kim of Earthly Elements Glassworks to present these beautiful mosaic pendants. Kim of Earthly Elements Glassworks to present these beautiful mosaic pendants. Kim will walk you through the mosaic making process and you will have the chance to make 2 mosaic pendants of your very own! Kim will lead the class through the first pendant which is inspired by the Watervliet Shaker landscapes. For your 2nd pendant, choose your shape and create whatever your heart desires!

Music in the Meeting House - Jazz Appreciation Month

Sunday, April 23rd @ 3pm - 4pm

Shaker Heritage will host a concert by the band Standard Time sponsored by the Music Performance Trust Fund and arranged by the Albany Musicians Association. The performance will feature familiar jazz standards and swing music associated with Ella Fitzgerald, Peggy Lee, and Latin and Bossa Novas by Jobim, along with some commentary about the singers and songwriters of the era.

The band members are Cathy Olsen on vocals, Ken Olsen on trombone, MaryAnn Kosek on guitar, Ben Rau on drums, and Diane Geddes on keyboard.
Learn 10 at Ann Lee Pond
Join us for a walk, or three, and you'll be able to tell a beech tree from a locust, spot a honeysuckle and be wowed by asters. You don't have to be any kind of plant expert to participate. Happening at Ann Lee Pond Nature Preserve, we will focus on ten common New York species, look at actual specimens in the field, and focus on the features that will help you distinguish one species from all others.

This program is cosponsored by the Shaker Heritage Society and the New York Flora Association. Sessions will be led by Steve Young, former Chief Botanist of the New York State Natural Heritage Program. The walks are free but limited to 10 people each.

The walks will take place from 9am to noon on these dates:
- Sunday, May 21 - 10 Shrubs
- Saturday, August 5 - 10 Trees
- Saturday, September 30 - 10 Asters & Goldenrods

Save the Date:
- May 6th: Utensil Basket Workshop
- June 10th & 11th: Summer Craft Fair
- June 22nd: Shaker Garden Party

Intersections and Singular Paths: An Introduction to Shaker Theology
Thursday, May 4 @ 7:00pm

We describe the Shakers as a Christian sect that developed into a celibate, pacifist communal group who seek salvation by living a pure life. Behind that apparently simple statement lie complicated questions (and answers) that were tested and modified over many years. What were believers seeking when they heard Mother Ann Lee’s millennial message? Why was celibacy crucial? Did they use the Hebrew Bible and/or the New Testament? How did they come to believe in the dual nature of God as both female and male? Why did they reject the Trinity? Were their views radical or traditional? How do their ideas challenge thoughtful seekers today?

Jane F. Crosthwaite, Professor Emeritus of Religion at Mount Holyoke College, will discuss (some of) the theological issues raised by the unique challenges of the Shaker vision. The talk will be presented online.

One of the most iconic Shaker products, the Shaker box which has been adored and coveted by many since the 19th century, could be made by your own two hands! Guided by box maker Eric Pintar you will use thin strips of wood to carve the "swallowtails" or "fingers" on one end before soaking them in a hot bath to soften for bending. Copper tacks will be installed to hold the oval shape before top and bottom boards are fit and held together by wooden pegs. Each student will create five nesting oval boxes out of cherry wood.

Please note this workshop takes place over two days. April 28th, 5pm to 9pm and April 29th, 8:30am to 4pm.

Shaker Box Workshop
Friday & Saturday, April 28th & 29th @ 5pm - 9pm & 8:30am - 4pm

Learn 10 at Ann Lee Pond
Join us for a walk, or three, and you'll be able to tell a beech tree from a locust, spot a honeysuckle and be wowed by asters. You don't have to be any kind of plant expert to participate. Happening at Ann Lee Pond Nature Preserve, we will focus on ten common New York species, look at actual specimens in the field, and focus on the features that will help you distinguish one species from all others.

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The selected site had another structure, the old office, already on it, so in May the Shaker brethren who were early practitioners of adaptive reuse readied the office for moving...

May was also the month in which the foundation work began. The brethren themselves started digging on the first of May, and by the eighth had accomplished enough that the crew of hired masons, under the leadership of an Albany mason named John Edict, began to lay the foundation. The first cornerstone was placed on May 27th, and by June 20th, in their seventh week of work, the masons had finished the foundation walls...

On June 27th all was ready for the raising of the Meeting House—the sheathing boards had been planed; the joiners had finalized their plans; the framers had put on the sills and sleepers. On the morning of that day the Church Family members rose at 4 a.m., breakfasted at 5:30, and began the raising at 6. They raised the north end first because they expected it to be the most difficult due to "an abundance of small timber." They raised four bents before the dinner break at 10:45. One hundred and one people were served dinner, and "lemon-aid, peppermint, and small beer" were the beverages served between meals to the workers. Oliver Prentiss, a Shaker joiner from the [West] Family, was in charge of the raising which was completed by 6 p.m. The day was a grand occasion, noted not only in all the extant Watervliet journals but by writers from other communities as well. As Ann Buckingham reported, "all the brethren that could do as much as pull the rope came to the raising Elder Sister and Emeline Eleanor and Ann Browser from [West] Family came to see and help, all had Liberty to come." It was also a model of Shaker order and efficient planning. A neighbor who joined the viewers was impressed with the "order and dispatch". He was overheard to say that he had never seen so many people mind one man and move immediately with the word of command.

In addition to the Watervliet brethren, four hired men were employed for the work, and on July 1st six brethren from Mt. Lebanon were added to the work force; three tinners for the roof, and three wood-workers. The tinning began on July 6th and was finished in two weeks and one day on the 18th. They tinned not only the main roof, but the door caps and scuttle hole for venting the attic as well.

On July 3rd John Edict and two hired masons returned to start the chimney work, while the Shaker brethren worked on putting up the sheathing and installing the window frames. On August 13th they began siding with clapboards bought in Albany; the front and back sides were finished in four days, and by August 22nd it was completely covered even to the door caps.

continued
"The Subject of building a 'New Meeting House', continued

Meanwhile other brethren were mixing paint – “I ground the whiting for priming the Meeting House” -- and by October 14th all three coats of white had been applied to the exterior. Others worked on the insulation. On September 1st, eleven Shakers went "beyond the Albany and Schenectady turnpike back of Wilson's tavern into a large fly or slough [a place of deep mud or mire] and gathered 31 loads of Moss for the Meeting House". We know from earlier references that the moss was stuffed between the joists as insulation.

As the weather became colder, almost all the exterior work of framing, roofing, siding, painting and finishing was nearing completion, and work on the interior was soon to become -the focus of activity. Although the stone and timber used in the building was from Shaker land, most of the other supplies for the building including clapboards, lath, paint materials, nails, and even the stone steps were purchased from the World. This is in definite contrast to the popular notion of Shaker self-sufficiency, as is the fact that so many outsiders were hired for both skilled and unskilled jobs.

[During the rest of the summer and fall of 1848 and through the winter of 1848-9 sheathing, plastering, painting and similar chores were completed. On March 1, 1849 [the day commemorating Mother Ann Lee's birthday] the Meeting House at Watervliet was dedicated with a grand meeting attended by 285 members of the society. After this date the finishing work of erecting the support buildings, building a fence, grading of the land, readying the Ministry apartments were all completed. On July 27th, 1849, exactly thirteen months after the raising of the building, David Buckingham wrote: "The brethren that have been to work here at the Meeting House and outbuildings attached therto, have now accomplished their work. A blessing has attended our labors and we acknowledge the source from whence it came." Even though the Shakers employed others, the Meeting House was a source of pride to them. Their sense of joy and accomplishment as they watched the building take shape led David Buckingham to alter his usually dry journal entry by adding a bit of verse:

Some are busy painting the Meeting House all white
Some within are plastering and fixing it all right
Some setting glass and puttying the windows complete
Some passing by and viewing, speak out, and say,
"Tis ·neat"

Note: A full copy of the Historic Structure Report, complete with footnote citations, will be available on our website.
Membership (Individual, $35 | Household, $50 | Supporting, $100 | Sustaining, $250+)  

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At Shaker Heritage Society, our work has always been about keeping the spirit of the Shakers alive and preserving our history. History shows us where we’ve been, how we’ve progressed, how we can help to shape the future. Your contribution to Shaker Heritage today will make sure we’re here tomorrow to keep the Shaker culture and site an integral part of the Capital Region’s history. SHS Members enjoy free or reduced admission to SHS programs and events; a 10% discount on regular gift shop merchandise and a 5% discount on facility rentals. Visit www.shakerheritage.org and click “Donate” at the bottom of the homepage, or send this form to: Shaker Heritage Society, 25 Meeting House Rd, Albany NY 12211.