

The Watervliet Shaker Journal

Shaker Heritage Society

America's First Shaker Settlement

Fall 2023

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Watervliet Intersections with *The Magic Kingdom*

While the majority of Shaker communities were established in northeastern and central US, two short-lived communities were in White Oak, Georgia and Narcoossee, Florida. The Florida settlement, known as Olive Branch, is the setting of author Russell Banks' novel, *The Magic Kingdom*, which was published in November 2022. The Watervliet Shaker community had two points of connection with this little-known Shaker site and Banks' novel. Watervliet Trustees were heavily involved in the financial and legal matters throughout the settlement's history, and members of the Shaw family who had lived at Olive Branch relocated to the Watervliet North Family around 1904. Charles Shaw's loquacious and lively autobiographical writings provide an account of life at the two Shaker villages.

"Elder Isaac & Elder Joseph started this morning at 5 am for Albany to take the train for NY where. they meet Benj. Gates of Mt. Lebanon. They leave NY together and go on to Florida to look at some land there offered for sale at a low price. Benj. Gates thinks a Society of Shakers might be started there."

Watervliet West Family journals, October 5,
1894

In the 1890s, as development in Florida was growing, Shaker communities in the Northeast were in decline. Several leaders at Mt. Lebanon became interested in the prospect of establishing a settlement in a warmer climate and perhaps attracting those moving to Florida to join a Shaker community. They realized that the financial

arrangements were beyond the capacity of Mt. Lebanon and turned to the Watervliet community for assistance. Benjamin Gates, who advocated for the plan, and fellow Mt. Lebanon Brothers Charles Weed and Andrew Barrett traveled to Narcoossee in 1894 along with Isaac Anstatt and Brother Joseph of Watervliet. Not all Mt. Lebanon leaders were in favor of the investment. Eldress Emma J. Neale was strongly opposed and blocked Benjamin Gates from any decision-making roles.



Isaac Anstatt (1844-1915) was born in Germany and came to the Shakers with his father, Martin, in 1852. He taught school beginning in 1869, was appointed a business manager in 1872, elder in 1884, and legal trustee in 1885. Elder Isaac was not only constantly working on behalf of the West Family, but also assisted the other Watervliet families with a variety of projects. (SHS.405)

West Family journals record that on January 14, 1895, Elder Isaac made his usual run to Albany to sell butter and "then to NYC to meet Benj. Gates & then to Phila. to meet Hamilton Disston, owner of Florida land & pay \$60,000, rest to be paid later on." The entire cost for over 7000 acres was \$94,500 (in 1894 currency). Isaac Anstatt made a number of trips to Florida over the next few years. In February 1895 he worked for several

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From the Director

One of my favorite historical anecdotes to share with visitors revolves around the events of the “Dark Day”. On May 19th, 1780, the sky went dark at midday across a wide swath of New England. Eyewitness accounts describe people having to light candles to see their own lunch table. I add to this picture my own colorful details, imagining birds retreating to their nests in confusion, while nighttime creatures like bats and crickets emerged to swoop through the darkened skies, terrifying the God-fearing descendants of the Puritans. Many of the embattled colonists literally thought that Judgement Day had arrived.



The lawmaker Abraham Davenport is now famous for his stoic response to the alarming decent of the dark. In a debate over the wisdom of adjournment of the Connecticut Council, Davenport is quoted as declaring: “The day of judgment is either approaching, or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for an adjournment; if it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. I wish therefore that candles may be brought.” I love this quote for how it evokes both the practicality, and also the visceral fear wrought by the phenomenon.

In the end, the sun rose again the next day. Yet in the wake of this terror, many people were driven to question their lives and beliefs and seek out answers in the form of new religions and spiritual movements. Ann Lee here in the woods outside Albany may have seen this event as both a sign and as an opportunity. Within a year, she set out on a missionary journey to spread her gospel, and laid the foundation for eight new Shaker settlements.

This has always been a fabulous story. However, recent events have lent it a new gravitas. While still a matter of debate, the prevailing hypothesis is that the Dark Day was caused by a cloud of smoke and ash blown in from a forest fire in Ontario, Canada. During the worst days of the summer of 2023, when a smoky haze descended over the landscape and the sun glowed with a weird orange hue, we grimly joked in the office that the Dark Day had returned.

On those days, in between puffs of my inhaler, watching cellphone videos from my siblings in NYS where the skies were literally black, (at least on the air-quality index maps), I felt a sense of revelation. After years of warnings of a slow-motion disaster, the crisis is suddenly upon us. Perhaps climate activists are the prophets of our era. And maybe those colonists weren’t so ignorant. Afterall, don’t we all feel a little bit like the world might be ending? The question now is once again, are we going to do our duty?

News & Events

SHS Awarded Preserve New York Grant:



Shaker Heritage Society is one of nineteen recipients of this year's Preserve New York (PNY) grants. An award of \$20,000 will fund a Historic Structure Report of the 1858

Washhouse by Albany-based firm Thaler Reilly Wilson Architecture.

In partnership with the Northeastern Woodworkers Association (NWA) Shaker Heritage Society aspires to adapt this structure into a new woodworking education center and potentially add sensitive new construction in the footprint of the demolished Shaker Cannery. When complete, the education center will house woodworking shops, classrooms, and a resource library. This facility will both preserve the structure and greatly expand the capacity of both our organizations to offer hands-on, skills-based instruction in traditional American crafts. We look forward to sharing updates on this exciting new project in the coming months.

The Preserve New York program is a regrant partnership between the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) and the Preservation League, made possible with the support of the Office of the Governor and the New York State Legislature.

Visit [Shakerheritage.org](https://shakerheritage.org) to register for upcoming events!

Harvest Craft Fair

Saturday & Sunday, Sept 9 & 10 @ 10am - 4pm



Bring your family for a fun filled weekend featuring a petting zoo, sheep shearing, demonstrations, live music, food, and of course over 80 vendors at our historic property.

Admission is donation based, all donations go towards the operating costs of SHS community based and educational programs.

The Shakers' Physic Garden of Remedies

Wednesday, Sept 13 @ 10:30am



The Watervliet Shakers' herbal medicine industry began in 1827 with about 140 products and grew to almost 300 items by 1860. Our herb garden has 150 plants, all of which are labeled according to their uses by the Shakers. This tour will introduce a bit

of history about this innovative industry and shed new light on both the ornamentals and weeds in your garden.

NWA Lumber and Tool Auction

Saturday, Sept 16 @ 10am - 5pm

The Northeastern Woodworkers Association (NWA) is holding their annual lumber and tool auction in the Shaker Heritage Barn. They will have lots of high quality lumber of many varied wood species - all air-dried in the Shaker Barn and ready to use. We expect great deals to be available. They will have high quality Dewalt, Powermatic, Delta (and many other brands) tools for sale as well. Doors open at 10am for viewing, while the auction starts at noon!

Visit <https://woodworker.org/lumber-tool-auction/> for more info!

Ornament Weaving Workshop

Saturday, Sept 23 @ 10am - 1pm



Participants will make three festive woven ornaments. Guided by local basket weaver, Sandy Salada, you will create an eight-pointed snowflake and a puffy heart, woven in thin maple strips, and a reindeer woven in dyed reed. No prior experience is needed!

News & Events, *continued*

Farm Momma Soap & Sip

Friday, Sept 29 @ 6pm - 8pm



Shaker Heritage Society has teamed up with the Farm Momma again to bring you this exciting new event! Come make cold pressed soap loaves with us but enjoy some wine while you do it!

The workshop will include a demonstration by Farm Momma herself followed by participants creating their own 4 bar loaf of soap that they color, scent, and design themselves. Each participant will receive a sampler goodie bag with approximately \$14 worth of product.

Learn 10 Nature Walk - Asters & Goldenrods

Saturday, Sept 30 @ 9am - 12pm

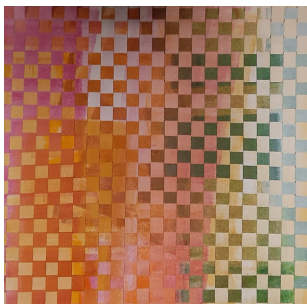
Happening at Ann Lee Pond Nature Preserve, we will focus on ten common New York species, look at actual specimens in the field and focus on the features that will help you distinguish one species from all others.

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.

Register at nyflora.org

Paper Weaving Workshop

Saturday, Sept 30 @ 10am - 12pm



The simple process of weaving paper strips can yield magical results of rhythmic color and pattern. Local artist Kathy Klompas will guide you in understanding a few approaches to get started and will wow you

with her sample book of possibilities. The fine art world has been embracing the process with bold

large-scale weavings of street posters to delicate images from a variety of paper ephemera. While all materials and tools will be supplies, perhaps you will want to bring papers that inspire you – magazine pages, photos, paper bags, or artwork that you would like to repurpose!

Arthur Brooks & Lori Goldston Concert

Wednesday, October 4 @ 7pm

Suggested donation \$10

Arthur Brooks Ensemble V

The Arthur Brooks Ensemble V is an improvisational group led by musician, composer, trumpeter/flugelhornist Arthur Brooks. Arthur Brooks was a member of the Bennington College faculty for 23 years as both teaching assistant and professor. There he founded Ensemble V. A veteran of the new music, Brooks has collaborated with Cecil Taylor, Bill Dixon, Sonny Sharrock, Frank Wright, and many others.

Lori Goldston

Classically trained and rigorously de-trained, possessor of a restless, semi-feral spirit, Lori Goldston is a cellist, composer, improviser, producer, writer and teacher from Seattle. Her voice as a cellist, amplified or acoustic, is full, textured, committed and original. A relentless inquirer, her work drifts freely across borders that separate genre, discipline, time and geography.

Holiday Market Preview

Tuesday, Oct 10 @ 4pm - 7pm

For the first time ever Shaker Heritage Society is opening their doors a day early for their locally famous annual Holiday Market. At this exclusive event, you will have the opportunity to shop beautifully crafted hand made goods before anyone else. While you enjoy your shopping, we will have live music to add to the ambiance. Don't forget to grab a drink and a nibble before checking out with your wonderful new goods.

Save the Date:

Holiday Market: Oct 11 - Dec 17

Stories and Spirits at the Shaker Cemetery: Oct 11, 15, 19, and 24

Watervliet Intersections with *The Magic Kingdom, continued*

weeks with Benjamin Gates to fence the land they had purchased. He returned from a March 1896 trip with a "live alligator, a stuffed one, and an egg." In addition to selecting a real Shaker community for his fictional work, Russell Banks also featured a real family as leading characters in his novel, the Shaws, taking artistic license with the facts. Named the Manns in the novel, the family members are a widowed mother and her five children, which included two sets of twins.

However, their real story is as dramatic as any novel. They are one example of the many families who sought refuge with the Shaker communities when hit by disaster.

Charles Shaw and his twin, Percy, were born in May, 1887 in Cincinnati, Ohio. Their father was a medical student at Cincinnati College of Medicine and Surgery, and their mother worked as a typesetter on the schools' medical journal. Mrs. Shaw's proceeds from the sale of her family's farm helped to establish Dr. Shaw in his new practice, which he began in Covington, Kentucky. The family had grown with a second set of twins, Howard and Marie, and a fifth child, Virgil, before Dr. Shaw died suddenly in April of 1898.

Mrs. Shaw moved the family back to Cincinnati where she worked as a nurse. In October 1899, she used \$500 of insurance funds to join the Ruskin Cooperative Colony in Dickson County, Tennessee. The socialist community had been established by newspaper editor John Augustus Wayland in 1894 and named in honor of John Ruskin, an English writer, art critic, and philosopher. Mrs. Shaw worked as a typesetter on the colony's newspaper, *The Coming Nation*, which was its major business. The family apparently arrived not long before the colony was breaking up, and they joined one faction relocating to Waycross, or Duke, Georgia, in late 1899. Charles recounts "hearing of the new future, Mother knew this did not add up to the security she was hoping for." His "young heart

saddened at the sight of such swamp and desolation" when they arrived at the Georgia site. (p. 19)

The Waycross Ruskin community also faltered, and Mrs. Shaw heard of an opportunity with the Woman's Commonwealth, a women's communal society in Belton, Texas where the family moved in 1900. When that situation did not work out, the family returned to Georgia to the dying Ruskin community. Mrs. Shaw and her older children took on a variety of jobs including making strawberry baskets at a cooperative crate factory. Many people were constantly ill with malaria. Finally, Mrs. Shaw heard about the Shaker community at Olive Branch and wrote to inquire whether they would take the family. Waycross closed in 1901, and the Shaws made their way to Narcoossee.

"Shaker Orange Grove, St. Cloud, Fla" shows one of the many fruit crops grown by the Olive Branch community. (Communal Societies Collection, Hamilton College)



The Shakers had transferred their well-established farming skills to the warm climate at Olive Branch, and Charles Shaw's writings describe the variety of agricultural endeavors. Unlike the older Shaker communities, there were no industries.

Beef we used to drive to Kissimmee, brought an average of ten Dollars a head. Most of were shipped to Cuba. . . We were clearing a second six acres for a new planting of orange trees (budded fruit). It took us a day's ride fifty miles to Orlando, to buy these plantings. After swinging an axe, cutting and "snaking" logs, grub-hoeing palmetto roots, and

continued

Watervliet Intersections with *The Magic Kingdom, continued*

burning out the pine stumps, you were pioneering for sure. (p. 24)

An "acre plot covered with lath" was the site of the pineapple crop, with phased plantings that yielded year-round harvests. Rotating strawberry crops were ready for picking every 40 days. There were plenty of fish in the five lakes which were caught using bait and seine nets.

The work relied on outside labor as there were never more than about a dozen Shakers in the community. Shaw offers his assessment of several of the Shakers:

Elder Egbert [Gillette], an honest but rough extremist. . . looked and acted like a reformed bum, and that was what he was. Eldress Minerva, in her eighties, was spiritually beautiful and saintly. There was a purity of her presence, and she had a Loving interest in the realm of Heavenly affairs. There was Sister Amanda. She was tall and had an unselfish devotion to her duties of cooking the simple sustenance of turnips and greens, fish, and bread. Sister Elizabeth was a good worker and quite a Spiritualist who always got messages. Brother Ezra [Stewart], a new arrival from Mt. Lebanon, always wore a "Prince Albert" coat, even in his frail efforts in grubbing palmetto roots. Eldress Minerva and Amanda were the manifestations of the purity of the Shaker code of practicing Mother Ann Lee's Precepts, although they struggled to overcome the world, the Flesh and the Devil. "For whosoever is born of God overcometh the world" (pp 26-27)

Despite what seems to have been a far more secure situation, Mrs. Shaw was concerned about

the lack of schooling for her younger children. Once again, she explored other opportunities and discovered that the Watervliet North Family would accept the family. In 1903, when her older twins were 16 and Virgil was about 7, the family relocated to Albany.

Percy and Charles were put to work on the farm. Charles notes "[a]n Englishman, Bert Willy who I liked from the start, was boss of the truck garden, the rest of the big spread was dairy-farming. The farm help were not Shakers, most of them English from Somersetshire and industrious workers." (p. 31) Three times a week he drove to the market square with a carefully packed wagonload of produce, arriving by 2 a.m. and selling out by 7 a.m.

Charles frequently drove the Shakers to Albany or other cities for business and to Sunday meetings:

"a load of Sisters and a few ancient Brethren to the meeting house, a second load with the Eldress and the orphan children . . . We'd let 'em all out at the "horse-block and tied our teams under the long shed,. . . now then to the meditating room, a small room adjoining the big meeting room for fifteen minutes, the long hard continuous bench along the sides, silence unless you are "moved to speak." . . in meeting however, they would rise and sing, with a common gesture, they walked with the lowering and raising of opened hands, (giving their gift of Christ's love) continue their singing, their hymns were beautiful and inspiring. (p. 35)*

He also took children from the various families to the "only school in Colonie," where Sister Ella Winship was paid \$30 a month for teaching. The school was located on Heritage Lane on the site of the former power house for the Ann Lee Home.

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Watervliet Intersections with *The Magic Kingdom, continued*

By 1907, Mrs. Shaw was no longer satisfied with life among the Shakers. With the help of the Elder Alexander Work, Charles purchased his first real suit at Steefel Brothers department store. He briefly joined Percy Shaw working at the Whitbeck Farm with Bert Willey, then delivered coal before he got a job making a sales route selling tea and coffee. He would build this into his own business in time, expanding to groceries and dry goods. The Shaw family moved to Keyes Avenue in Schenectady. Percy and Howard went to work at GE, and Marie trained to be a nurse and lived with Charles' family.



Shaw family members posed with other residents of the Watervliet North Family. Mrs. Shaw is 5th from the left, and

Charles is 2nd from right in the back row, Marie is likely 3rd from left in the front, and Virgil and Howard are 2nd and 1st at the right in front. (SHS.628b)

The Olive Branch community was still in existence when the Shaws left the Shakers. While they had increased the production of pineapples, earned a gold medal at the 1907 Jamestown Exhibition, and successfully added bananas as a crop, the settlement had never attracted new members. When Isaac Anstatt died in 1915, Eldress Emma Neal took control of the property.

The Shakers made several attempts to sell the property. In 1917, Sister Anna Gropper wrote in the South Family journal that the attorney was meeting with Elder Josiah Barker of the Church

Family and Eldress Anna Case of the South Family, both Watervliet Trustees, about a sale having fallen through. In 1920:

Eld Anna & Eld Josiah to Albany to meet Emma J. Neal at Stanwix Hall in regard to Florida property which they as trustees expect to take out of Lawyer Van Voast's hands. "Van Voast has the deeds and has acted as trustee for this property, but has never given an account of himself to Shaker trustees once. He is highly incensed at being notified as to what Emma Neal expects to do (our trustees are united with her) and V. V. threatens a law suit. As Isaac Anstatt placed all legal documents in V.V.'s hands, it looks like some trouble ahead."

Elder Josiah and Eldress Anna were still meeting with lawyers in 1921, and Emma Neal was on her way to Florida at the end of December 1922 "to sell out." While the Shakers still owned the property in 1935, the last two members of the Olive Branch community were called back to Mt. Lebanon in 1924.

*This room would have been the one of the "shoe rooms" that are now the gift shop and exhibit room.

Sources:

Thank you to Christian Goodwillie, Director and Curator of Special Collections, Hamilton College, Burke Library for research assistance. Charles Shaw's daughter, Grace Shaw Clement, provided copies of his autobiographical manuscript to several sources, including Shaker Heritage Society and the collection of the Hancock Shaker Village Museum. Page numbers refer to this document.

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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.