

The Watervliet Shaker Journal

Shaker Heritage Society

America's First Shaker Settlement

Winter 2023

Vol 43 No 4

The Stones and Their Stories at the Watervliet Shaker Cemetery



We are fortunate that maintenance of the Watervliet Shaker Cemetery no longer involves retrieving baseballs from among the gravestones, the errant missiles having been lobbed from the minor league baseball stadium that once stood just north of the site. The fact that individual stones remain at all is due to the decision of the Watervliet Families to restore the cemetery in 1880. In addition, thanks to the efforts of two key people, this sacred burial ground is a valuable cultural and educational resource.

The cemetery was established in 1785 with the burial of Violet Bennet, a Black woman, and was closed in 1938 after the burial of Eldress Anna Case. The 445 graves reflect much about the Shaker community. Certain aspects are highly visible, such as the egalitarian nature of the

modest stones and the orderly arrangement of the graves of members who worked to be “in union” with one another and with all other Shaker communities. One can tell that the Shaker lifestyle was a healthy one, judging from the number of Shakers who were in their 60s-90s at the time of their death. Other portions of the story require a bit of investigation.

The first row of burials demonstrates the Shakers’ compassion. These people were not members of the community but were under the care of the Shakers when they died or were parents of Shakers who asked to be buried in the same cemetery as their children. Along the same compassionate lines, the graves of Shakers who committed suicide are interspersed among the others, not shunned nor sequestered in one area.

The orderly arrangement of the stones suggests that the burials followed a simple progression from west to east. But a closer look reveals a wide gap in the first row, two open areas in Row F (the location of Mother Ann Lee’s grave), and anything but a chronological order of death dates from west to east. The central portion of Row F was established fairly early as the resting place of those who played very prominent roles in Shaker history. Elder John Hocknell (d. 1791) was the wealthy English farmer who not only

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From the Director

I grew up in the Finger Lakes of New York in the ancestral homelands of the Cayuga Nation, one of the six nations of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy. For several decades, extending into my youth, the Cayuga, and Cayuga-Seneca nations sought reparations and restoration of lands wrongfully seized in the 18th century. While my own home wasn't part of the claim, bordering communities were embroiled in the dispute.



A local group that, somewhat ironically, called itself the Upstate Citizens for Equality posted lawn signs around local towns: “No Sovereign Nation, No Reservation”, denying not only the right of the Cayugas to file a claim, but ostensibly disputing their right to exist as a people. I remember vividly an interview on the local news wherein a local man declared that the Haudenosaunee “lost”. I guess in his mind they had their chance, they lost the war, finders-keepers.

Long after that land-claim has ended and the Upstate Citizens have gone dormant, the thorny problem remains – how to grapple with that responsibility? I don't feel that I am personally liable for the dispossession of the Haudenosaunee, nor would I be sanguine about surrendering my own home in a similar situation. But did my family benefit from this dispossession? Undoubtedly. Where does that leave me? I'm not quite sure.

As we look forward to commemorating the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution, and the arrival of Ann Lee and the Shakers in North America, we are presented with a similar conundrum. We vocally and earnestly celebrate the pacifist, egalitarian, and communal values of the Shakers. These values, while at times imperfectly applied, are real, true, and worth celebration.

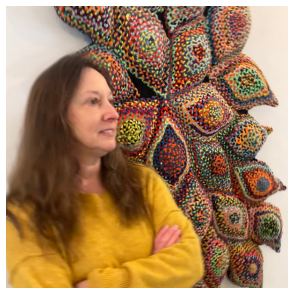
We are also presented with a parallel truth – that the Shakers' immigration, settlement, and colonization of territories to the east and west of Albany was made possible through the dispossession of indigenous communities. The history of the City of Albany stretches back nearly two centuries before the Shakers arrived on these shores. At that time known as Fort Orange, one of the troubling legacies of our community was the ultimately disastrous explosion of the beaver fur trade in North America. A trade that fueled the growth of this city, but gravely damaged the environment, and irreparably frayed the geopolitical stability of the Confederacy. This is the context into which the Shakers stumbled off the boat and into the story of New York.

This geographic conflict and ecological destruction are part and parcel of our story, and that of the Shakers. Embracing and exploring this ambiguity is uncomfortable, but as we reflect on the Thanksgiving holiday just past, and anticipate the promise of a new year ahead, perhaps we should all consider a resolution to make ourselves a little more uncomfortable.

News & Events

NYSCA Support in 2024:

Shaker Heritage Society sponsored two applications this summer to the NYSCA Support for Artists Program, and we are thrilled to announce both projects were funded!



Kathy Greenwood: Devotion and Determination: Reflections on Creative Work. This new body of work will focus on the late nineteenth/early twentieth century Shakers, the artists and cultural oeuvre that built the Index

of American of American Design in the 1930s, and conversations with contemporary American artists about the value of creative work in this century.



Jean-Marc Superville Sovak: “Betty and Phebe Lane: A Life in Bondage or Among Believers?” This is a dramatized narrative in song that tells the story of two Black Shaker sisters (in blood and in faith) who, after joining the Society

with their family in 1802, are thrust into a legal battle when their father later renounces the faith and sues the Shakers to get his daughters back.

We look forward to sharing updates as their work progresses in 2024! For more information on the grantees, follow them on Instagram @greenwoodkart and @supersovak.

Shaker Heritage Society is honored to once again be a recipient of Support for Organizations funding through the New York State Council on the Arts. This grant of \$40,000 will provide direct support for our education and community outreach activities in 2024.

Our education and arts programs are made possible by the New York State Council on the

Arts with the support of the Office of the Governor and New York State Legislature.

Building Capacity in the Barn:



We are so excited to share that Albany County has awarded Shaker Heritage Society \$80,000 in ARPA funds to support the

installation of seasonal restrooms in the 1915 Barn. We have now raised \$210k of our \$240k goal. This project will help us grow our facility rental program and build our organizational capacity together with our partners in the local hospitality industry. We look forward to sharing updates in 2024!

In Memoriam:

Shaker Heritage Society has worked to preserve, protect, and promote the Watervliet Shaker Site for over 40 years. We have benefitted from the generosity, expertise, and commitment of too many people to count, but we wish to take a moment to remember a few to whom we bid farewell this past year:

Graham H. Jones

Graham will be remembered here as a stalwart steward of SHS as a board member and Treasurer, a cherished mentor to his colleagues, and a man possessed of a delightful wit! His professional accomplishments are nothing short of astonishing, including work at IBM assisting with development of the first heart-lung machine, management of the company’s ballistic missile defense program, and collaboration on some of the fastest most powerful super-computers in the world. As executive director of the New York State Science & Technology Foundation, he helped to elevate New York’s status as a global destination for technology education and R&D. In addition to his service at SHS, Graham also served on the boards of WMHT and Albany Pro Musica.

News & Events, *continued*

Fran McCashion

A life-long educator, historian, and preservationist, Fran contributed to numerous local history and cultural organizations. She helped form the Town of Colonie Historical Society, was a charter member of the NYS Archeological Association and the Van Epps-Hartley Chapter of NYSAA; and a member of the Capital District Civil War Round Table. She also served on the board of both the Pruyn House, and Shaker Heritage Society, where she also ran Girl Scout programs and led site tours for many years.

Holiday Market Recap:

What an incredible Holiday Market! We had over 90 vendors join us this 2023 Holiday season. We have to extend a HUGE thank you to all of our vendors, who came to restock on a weekly basis. Our volunteers who helped keep Shaker Heritage staff running all season long. And of course, our customers! The Holiday Market produced over \$322,000 in sales, which is a 15% growth from last year! Along with our sales we saw over 8,200 people visit us, compared to the 6,000 from last year! We hope you and your family and friends enjoy the goodies and we can't wait to see you all when the Museum and Gift Shop open back up on April 2nd, 2024.

Visit Shakerheritage.org to register for upcoming events!

Cozy Mug Rug Quilting Workshop:

January 20th @ 10am



Join Shaker Heritage Society and the Capital District Modern Quilt guild as we help beginner sewers learn all the skills necessary to make a quilt! Just in time for Valentine's Day, we will be making quilted heart mug rugs.

At the end of this workshop, you will go home with a completed mug rug and the basic skills needed to make any size quilt!

Participants must bring their own sewing machine to participate in this workshop. Materials fee is required. Lunch will be provided by Shaker Heritage Society.

Heart Ornament Workshop: January 27th @ 10am & 12:30pm

A crowd favorite for Valentine's Day, come make 3-dimensional Valentine Hearts woven in red maple strips for that special someone. Each participant will make 3 hearts. No experience needed. Suitable for ages 14 and up.

Kintsugi Workshop: April 13th @ 10am



Kintsugi is the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery. If a bowl is broken, rather than discarding the pieces, the fragments are put back and the cracks are adorned with gold. There are no attempts to hide the damage, instead, it is highlighted. The practice has

come to represent the idea that beauty can be found in imperfection.

Join Shaker Heritage Society and hvkintsugi for a unique workshop based on the ancient Japanese practice of Kintsugi. This workshop will be led by local Art Therapist Tara DeLuca.

During the workshop you will connect with your bowl, break it, confront the damage and take ownership of the pieces that remain by glueing them back together.

Save the Date:

Self-Love Elixir Workshop - **February 9th!**
Bleecker Consort Concert - **February 25th!**

The Stones and Their Stories, *continued*

paid for the Shakers' voyage to New York in 1774, but who also found and leased the land that would become the first U. S. Shaker settlement in 1776. Elder William Lee and his biological sister, Mother Ann Lee, are next. Both of the Lees died in 1784, before the cemetery was established. They and William Bigsby (d. 1781) were buried on land not owned but only leased by the Shakers, and their graves were moved to the cemetery in 1835. (In the mid-20th century, Mother Ann's prominent stone replaced an historic stone that was similar to the others, although it also contained more text.)

Mother Lucy Wright was co-Lead Minister with Father Joseph Meacham beginning in the late 1780s, and they determined the form and function of the Shakers' way of life. After his death in 1796, she continued alone as head of the Shaker religion for 25 years, codifying all details of the Shakers' work and worship and sending missionaries to establish the western Shaker communities. The rules and guides she established to "bring order" were published as the Millennial Laws after her death in 1821. Lying next to Mother Lucy is her successor, Eldress Ruth Langdon, so that Row F contains the graves of the first three female heads of the U. S. Shakers. Mother Lucy and Eldress Ruth lived at Mt. Lebanon, the site of the central Shaker administration, but they were frequent visitors to Watervliet and were at the site when they died. This is also true of Elder Giles Avery, a Lead Minister who exemplified the type of multi-talented Shaker brother who worked tirelessly in all areas to maintain the physical and spiritual community. Eldress Anna Case was the last Eldress of the South Family, and of the entire Watervliet community.

Then there is Ella Myer in the center of Row F.

Hers is one of a number of puzzling grave sites. Never a leader of any kind in the community, she would have more likely been buried at the south end of Row P along with others who died in the late 1930s. There are a few infants and number of children and young people buried among the Shakers. While they were not old enough to have officially joined the Shakers by signing the Covenant, and therefore were not technically Shakers, they were still included in the general cemetery instead of Row A. Burials in Row B include most of the earliest graves and span the years 1785 to 1866, the widest range of any row, but are not in chronological order.

When the cemetery map is color-coded according to the decade of burial, it becomes clear that there are two areas of graves divided by Row F: one beginning in Row B and moving east, and one beginning in Row J and moving west. For almost 90 years, the Shakers were buried by Family associations, with members of the South and West Families placed at the west end and the Church and North Family members buried at the east. These two sections reflect the development of the community. The first two Families established were the Church (1776) and the North Family which was settled by 1790. The South Family was settled as the Gathering Order in 1800 and by 1810 had grown to the point where the West Family was split off. The two-section system was abandoned after the 1860s when there was no more room in the west section, and chronological burials began in Row K and continued to the west through the 1930s.

The fact that we know the date and name associated with each grave is a rarity among Shaker communities. The Watervliet cemetery

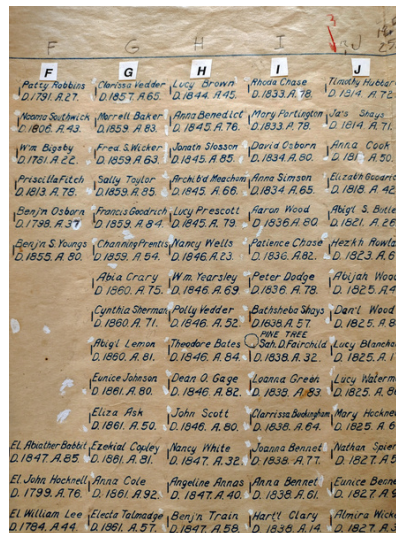
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The Stones and Their Stories, *continued*

is one of only several of the 22 Shaker communities that retain individual graves. Remember Elder Giles Avery? He discovered what he thought was excessive spending for new gravestones at the Enfield, CT community in 1872, a time when maintenance of old cemeteries was too costly of a burden for communities that were in decline. He wrote a circular directing communities to address the issue of deteriorating cemeteries by installing short modest stones with short epitaphs. Later, Shaker communities were encouraged to replace individual markers with one communal marker for the whole cemetery. This second approach was deemed most appropriate for a communal society where no individual was more important than another. Many Shaker communities followed this course of action. A few, like Watervliet and Tyringham and Harvard, MA replaced the individual markers. The Harvard cemetery markers are unique - arched, cast-iron markers that give the cemetery its "lollipop" nickname.

David Austin Buckingham (buried at M17) documented the 1880 restoration of the cemetery. Elders, Eldresses, and Trustees from all four Families agreed to remove the stones, re-grade the cemetery with 75 loads of sand and dirt, re-seed the site, and purchase new marble gravestones from a New Hampshire quarry. In 1944, Alvin P. Boettcher undertook extensive research on the Shaker cemetery, mapped the entire cemetery for the Town of Colonie, and recorded details of each gravesite. The timing was crucial as the details carved into the soft marble stones have since been worn away by the elements.

New stewards became involved with the cemetery when Shaker Heritage Society was



Alvin Boettcher's 1944 hand-drawn map recorded each of the 445 graves and noted features such as trees.

established in 1977. Founding member Betty Shaver had met the Shakers as a very young child in the early 1920s when her father Charles Denison came to buy canned tomatoes for his grocery store on Route 7. Part of the extensive work she did for SHS was transcribing the journals of all four Families in the collection of the New York State Library by hand and typing her notes at home. She then reviewed the journal entries, extracted information on every individual mentioned, conducted additional research using membership rolls and other records, and developed a biographical page on all but a few of the 445 individuals buried in the cemetery.

Using the Boettchencher map and Betty's extraordinary research, we can access the varied stories represented by the uniform stones. Volunteer Peter O'Hara can find the graves to mark with American flags to show which Brothers were veterans of the Revolutionary War or War of 1812. One of these men, Theodore Bates (H 9), invented the Shaker flat broom. We can locate the members of several large families who made

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The Stone and Their Stories, *continued*

significant contributions to local and national Shaker history – the Wells, Youngs, Buckinghams, and Wicks. There are expert carpenters, bonnet makers, weavers, farmers, producers of herbal medicines and of silver-tipped pens. There are those who were “instruments” during the Era of Manifestations which began at the South Family in 1837 and spread to the rest of the Shaker communities. A number of people are associated with Mother Rebecca Cox Jackson: Nathaniel Frey (N 10) who visited the Shakers with her in 1837 and later joined the community; and members of the largely Black Shaker community she established in Philadelphia who returned to Watervliet after the community closed, including Rebecca Perot (O 10). There are men and women who rose to their full potential, running various industries and the many businesses of the Shakers. In short, the cemetery provides an astonishing record of the Shakers’ tremendous efforts to build and maintain this unique, communal, spiritual society.

All of this information is in the SHS library and on the Shakerpedia.com website. Information on each grave was entered on the Find A Grave website (www.findagrave.com) by volunteer Nancy Reddy, whose family has ties to the Pleasant Hill Shaker community in Kentucky.

When the Watervliet Shaker community closed in 1938 and the final portion of the community at the South Family property was sold, the Shaker Trust retained ownership of the cemetery. Shaker Heritage Society and Albany

County collaborate to maintain the cemetery. A full conditions survey was conducted, and information is updated as we are able to clean the stones during volunteer “Hands To Work” days. A few stones were replaced by descendants of Shakers’ family members. Recently, volunteers Linda Delfs and Mike Kozlowski spent days removing vegetation and clearing around the gravestones. We would like to establish a group to provide regular maintenance similar to the Garden Buds who work in the Herb Garden. We have the name ready – The Graveyard Shift – we just need the volunteers!



Photo of cemetery volunteers - Siena Service Day, students cleaning stones

Resources:

“The Harvard Shaker Cemetery,” Roben Campbell, American Communal Societies Quarterly, October 2011, Volume 5, Number 4, Pages 179-203.

The Watervliet Shaker Cemetery, Elizabeth Shaver, Shaker Heritage Society, 1986, updated 1992

Note: More information, including maps, is available at www.shakerheritage.org.

Shaker Heritage Society is grateful for the General Operating Support we receive from the Support for Organizations Program of the



Council on the Arts



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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.