

The Watervliet Shaker Journal

Shaker Heritage Society

America's First Shaker Settlement

Summer 2024

Vol 44 No 2

A Brief History of Shaker Island: Part 1

by Theresa Frey-Alexander



In my 3 months on staff as the Education Coordinator, I have learned much of the history of this fascinating place. The institutional narrative runs deep, and perhaps it's a gift that for a brief time I will have the fresh perspective of an outsider. There are areas of the history of the Watervliet Shakers that I want to know more about, and that seem to have largely been left out of the narrative. One of those areas is Shaker Island. Yes, I've learned that broom corn was grown there, but there must be more to this story. It seems that the Island's positioning near the confluence of the Mohawk, Hudson, and Erie Canal, and along the path of the Troy & Schenectady Railroad must have played a pivotal role in the diaspora of Shaker spiritual beliefs as well as their industrial success. Yet, I have encountered little mention of these topics in the reading I've done so far. (Of course, there is a LOT more reading to do!) So, inquiring minds want to know...

The recorded history of Shaker Island begins

over 100 years before the Shaker's arrival, and over 150 years before the Shakers purchased the island. The island was an active part of the Indigenous world. Nearby Peeble's Island was the site of a pivotal crossroads. Rivers were proto-highways, thoroughfares moving people quickly and providing sustenance along the way, and so an island at the confluence of two major waterways was a de-facto hub of human activity. We could superimpose interstates 90 and 87 and follow this pattern of human behavior to the present day. Likewise, lands along rivers, near a major confluence would, by extension, be well populated and well used. On page 14 of the *The Town of Colonie: A Pictorial History*, we learn:

“The lowland areas of the Hudson and Mohawk Valleys are characterized by long alluvial flats. These were the first lands selected by both the Indians and the early colonists, since continual flooding created fertile soils for agriculture. The alluvial flats along the Mohawk River near the Mohawk View area was designated by the Indians as “Canastagione,” a name that had many spellings, and eventually became Niskayuna. “Canastagione” referred to the Indian corn fields on the Mohawk.”

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From the Director

It's weed season at Watervliet. Vines are curling their tendrils up and around fences, brick walls, and tree trunks. The lawns are carpeted in white clover and yellow birds foot trefoil blossoms. Despite an unfortunate bumper crop of moles and voles this spring, the blooms in the herb garden remain resolutely lovely through the efforts of our dedicated volunteers. (Shout out to Becky Langer!) Peonies and roses unfurled in May and are already giving way to less showy but equally beautiful chamomile and milkweed. I swear if you listen, you can hear the roots pushing through soil and leaves stretching up towards the powerful sunlight.



It's a gorgeous time of year at the site but maintaining a balance between the natural landscape and built environment is a constant struggle. Trumpet vines provide a pollinator's paradise and can wreak havoc on historic brickwork. Another less obvious problem is that while the carpet and walls of green beautify, they also obscure the structural challenges we face.

Don't get me wrong, I want this place to shine and summer really helps us to do so. But, hiding what's unsightly is also hiding our urgent needs. How can we celebrate the progress we are making as a community, while still being honest about the remaining deficits to be met? How to galvanize support, rather than frighten stakeholders and discourage participation?

This year, I'm trying to think of our deficits as simply the "before" shots. Typically, I don't think about the "before" shot, until I'm finishing up the "after". Painted a building? Cleared some brush? Paved a hole? Installed a sign? Woohoo! Let's share a "Before" and "After"! But before? Broken windows? Spalling bricks? Holes in the pavement? Ugh, reframe the photo, cover those up.

However, preservation and rehabilitation aren't goals. They're actions. They are unending, iterative processes. We can only save this site with the support and advocacy of this community. I'm learning that sometimes that means being honest about the challenges we face. I invite you to visit us this summer, and don't be afraid to seek out these "before" shots. And let me know your ideas for how we may get to the "after"! It's the best way we can work together to envision a bright future for Watervliet.

News & Events

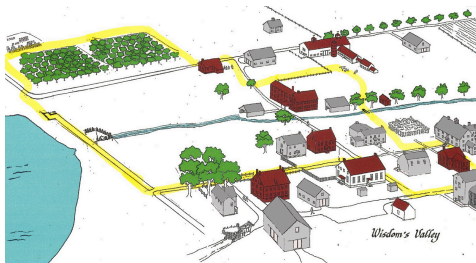
Summer Craft Fair Recap



We are ending June on a very positive note, our recent summer fair was a HUGE success; in spite of the weather,

we had over 100 vendors and an increase of 30% in foot traffic! If you were unable to make it to the Summer Craft Fair, mark your calendars for our Harvest Craft Fair, September 14 & 15, it will be worth the trip!

Docent Tours & Education Updates



We started docent led tours in May and will continue to offer these tours for the

rest of the summer. You can catch a docent led tour on Saturdays at 11am or 1pm!

Additionally, we launched our new Self-Guided tour brochure, which is designed to appeal to a broader range of ages. The brochure helps visitors make good use of their time by providing a suggested loop that guides along a curated path. It also offers a fun and educational scavenger hunt!

School Groups at Shaker



This spring was an exciting time for field trips! On May 22nd, a group of adult English language learners from Schenectady visited and

thoroughly enjoyed themselves in spite of the heat. The circle dance was a great success, and one gentleman from Syria even recounted keeping milk cold in a stream himself. His eyes lit up when this tidbit was shared with him.

On June 4th, a large group of about eighty fourth graders from Karigon Elementary visited and also had a great time. A HUGE thank you goes to the volunteers, Ann Sayers, Rose Jackson, Jan O'Farrell, Geli Trzepacz, Linda Delfs, and Peter O'Hara, for sharing their knowledge and enthusiasm, and to the intern Jessa Smith for documenting the fourth grade visit.

Ann Lee Pond & Orchard Clean Up



A HUGE thank you to Capital Region PRISM for their cleanup work around the Ann Lee Pond preserve and orchard. Thank you, Sam Schultz,

Stephen Root, Chris Benincasa, Joe Simonds, and Riley Willard (Capital Region PRISM). Thank you, Olivia Downs and Anthony Coppola from County Parks & Rec Department. And thank you for organizing the day, Laura DeGaetano from County Office of Natural Resource Conservation.

Kerry Cows Have Returned



Our beloved Kerry Cows have returned from their Winter vacation. There are three cows and a calf back for the Summer and they are mighty photogenic!

Garden Volunteers Needed

News & Events, *continued*



We are in need of volunteers to join our “Garden Buds”. We need help maintaining our demonstration herb garden, which is home to over 100 herbs.

Also, we have a newly planted 4 Sisters garden that has a variety of vegetables! If you are interested in lending your hands, please email Anna at community@shakerheritage.org.

Visit Shakerheritage.org to register for upcoming events!

Moonbow Performance

July 27th @ 7pm, doors open @ 6pm
Suggested Donation \$10



Moonbow is an arts organization devoted to presenting multimedia events. Programming is inspired by each venue’s unique atmosphere and architecture.

Moonbow #7 at the Shaker Meeting House will feature:

Dei Xhrist - a vocalist merging opera, sound poetry, and noise into sacred experiences that are profanely cathartic.

Brian Dewan - a musician and visual artist who engages in filmstrip making and instrument building. He writes songs and collects songs from earlier generations.

Mosaic Pendant Workshop

August 3rd @ 10am
General \$65 | SHS Member \$60



We are so excited to collaborate again with Kim from Earthly Elements Glassworks to offer a unique jewelry-making experience. Participants will have the opportunity to create their own mosaic pendants. Kim, an expert in the craft, will guide attendees through the

entire mosaic-making process. Each participant will be able to design and complete two mosaic pendants during the workshop. This event is perfect for those who have always wanted to make their own jewelry and are eager to learn from a skilled artisan.

Bleeker Consort in Concert

August 25th @ 3pm
General \$15 | SHS Member \$12



Bleeker Consort, an Albany-based early music group founded in 1988, will perform at the historic 1848 Meeting House.

They will showcase a range of unique instruments, including the Dulcian, Shawm, Cornamuse, Crumhorn, Sackbut, Dulcimer, and viola da Gamba. Specializing in medieval and Renaissance music, the consort will present pieces from the 13th to the late 16th century. The concert will feature vocal performances in Galician, French, and English. Members from diverse professional backgrounds bring dynamic performances, sharing their passion for early music.

News & Events, *continued*

Make Your Own Spa Day

September 7th @ 10am

Admission \$50



Join us and Barbara Grose of Herbal Turtle Teas for a workshop focused on beauty and wellness! This engaging session will demonstrate how easy it is to indulge in spa-like treatments using

common household items. You will learn how to repurpose everyday items such as essential oils, salt, and more into effective beauty treatments.

Participants will enjoy creating their own spa treatments, making it a fun and relaxing experience. Discover how to pamper yourself effortlessly and leave the workshop with your very own homemade spa products. Find your zen with us and embrace the simplicity of self-care!

Harvest Craft Fair

September 14th & 15th @ 10am - 4pm

PAY WHAT YOU WILL



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

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

NWA Tool Auction

September 14th @ 10am - 4pm

FREE

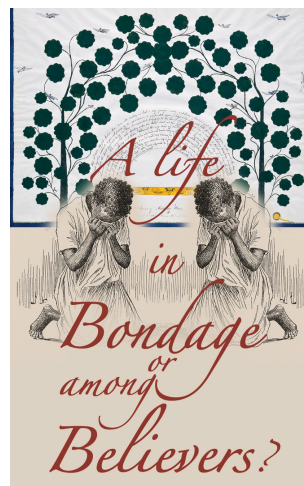


For the first time the Northeastern Woodworkers Association will be hosting their tool auction will coincide with SHS Harvest Craft Fair!

The NWA will be hosting the tool auction in our historic barn. Doors open at 10am, woodworking demonstrations run until noon. Auction starts at noon.

Betty and Phebe Lane: A Life in Bondage or Among Believers?

September 29th @ 5pm



Betty and Phebe 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. Written by Jean-Marc

Superville Sovak, *Betty and Phebe* will feature a cast of vocalists including ethnomusicologist and author Dr. Kyra Gaunt and Broadway writer and performer Melvin Tunstall III, as well as musical direction by award-winning violinist Gwen Laster and musical accompaniment by bassist Damon Banks, guitarist Patrick Jones and percussionist Todd Isler.

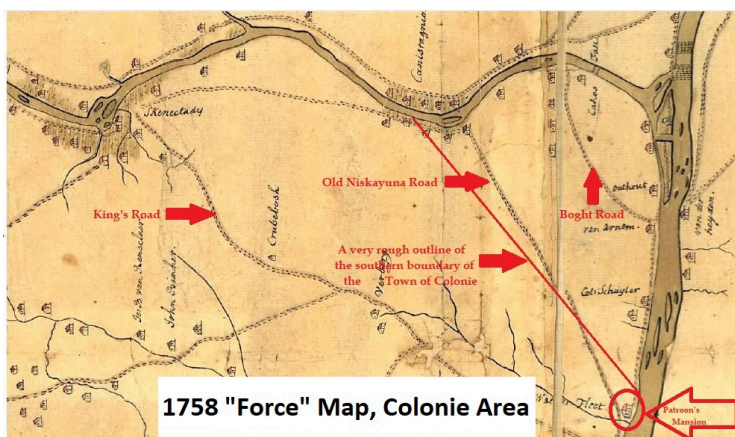
Save the Date

September 28th - Woven Ornament Workshop

September 28th - Moonbow #8

October 4th - Kintsugi Workshop

A Brief History of Shaker Island, *continued*



1758 Force Map, portion of showing Colonie & Canastigone, roads, etc.

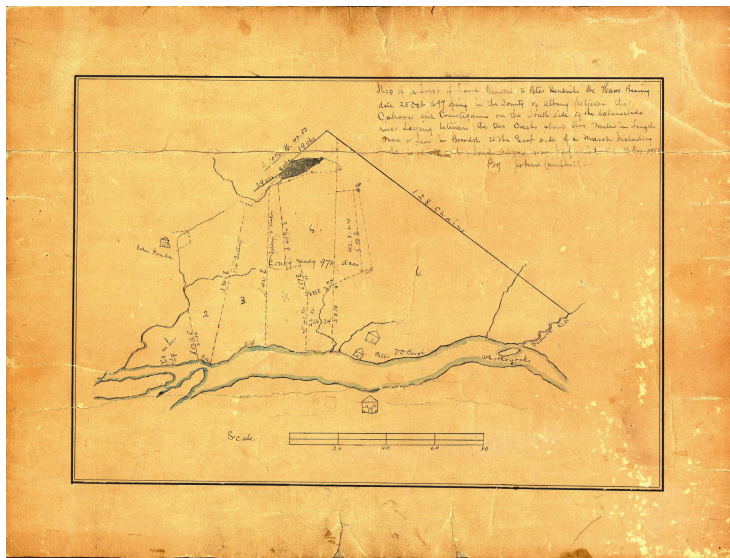
Shaker Island, previously known as the Grand Island of Canastigoine, and the adjacent land on the southern bank of the Mohawk was indeed Mohawk agricultural land. Although this land would continue to be used for agricultural purposes for centuries to come, it would change hands, names, and jurisdictions numerous times. The earliest recorded history of this land's possession centers around a woman named Hilletie Van Slyck Van Olinda. Van Slyck Van Olinda's mother was Mohawk, and her father was Dutch. She was a bright and curious child, and grew into an adult who was not only fluent in both the Dutch and Mohawk languages, but was also fluent in the cultural norms and mores of both groups. She was uniquely positioned to serve as an interpreter and came to be known as the "Interpress of the Indians at Albany." (It seems she was one in a long line of interpreters— her grandfather served as an interpreter for Champlain!). She was compensated for her services by both the provincial government and Mohawk sachems. While it's unclear what form the provincial payment took, it is clear that the Mohawk sachems, likely at Niska Isle, paid Van Slyck Van

Olinda in land. On June 11, 1667 Van Slyck Van Olinda obtained payment of five islands in the Mohawk River, including the 80 acre Shaker Island. (I just barely missed the 357th anniversary of this event the day I visited.) She continued to provide translation services and continued to receive payment in land. Eventually, she possessed a large tract of land, which extended to the southern bank of the Mohawk, and seems to have included land that would one day encompass the Shaker River Farm:

On October 24, 1704 Hilletie van Olinda petitioned for a patent "known by the Indian name of Dewaethoeiacocks, lying on the south side of the Maquase [Mohawk] River, bounded on the south side by Kiliaen van Rensselaer's patent; on the west by the patent of Peter Hendrick de Haes; easterly down along the river, by the Kahoos or Great Falls, containing 40 acres." ... The acreage amounted to two square miles. The Van Olinda descendants farmed the area for many years.

Interestingly, in 1710, three years after Hilletie's death, Chapter 216 in the The Laws of New York amended and clarified property laws when they officially classified married women in the same category as children, those not of sound mind, and those living abroad; hence unable to own land. Was this new law a relic of European law or was it an intentional move on the dispossession of Native Americans who considered women the holders and keepers of land? Either way, if the story of Hilletie Van Slyck Van Olinda had occurred just a few years

A Brief History of Shaker Island, *continued*



1788 De Haws, De Hass Patent at Canastagione on S Side Mohawk River, historical society artifact

later she might have been lost to history. Van Slyck Van Olinda, and her husband, sold much of the land she had earned and it was divided into numerous parcels that were sold to and farmed by the Clute, Staats, Winne, and DeHaas families (and others, my research of this era was not comprehensive) until Shakers purchased land from them. Part of the Shaker's River farm was purchased in 1814, and it wasn't until 1836 that they further expanded, purchasing Shaker Island for \$800 and expanding the River Farm to the east.

It is here that the Shaker role in the history of this land begins. Was their decision to make this purchase influenced by the opening of the Erie canal eleven years prior? I have much more research to do to uncover the role

played by the Canal and the Troy & Schenectady Railway in the proliferation of Shaker beliefs and wares. I hope to tour the area with Paul Russell and learn more about the Shaker broom industry along with his hyper local family history, dig into more Town of Colonie land records and our own institutional archives. It seems a Part II of the Brief History of Shaker Island is in order.

Sources:

Early Records of the City and County of Albany: Deeds 1656-1675 i.e. 1679 https://books.google.com/books?id=xZwCAAAAMAAJ&dq=hilletie+van+slyck&source=gbs_navlinks_s

Silversten, Barbara *Turtles Wolves and Bears: A Mohawk Family History* 1996 p7

<https://exhibitions.nysm.nysed.gov/albany/bios/vs/hivsl yck.html>

Early Records of the City and County of Albany: Deeds 1656-1675 i.e. 1679

Town of Colonie website
<https://www.colonie.org/departments/historian/early-history#:~:text=On%20October%202024%2C%201704%20Hilletie,river%2C%20by%20the%20Kahoos%20or>

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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.