

The Watervliet Shaker Journal

Shaker Heritage Society

America's First Shaker Settlement

Fall 2024

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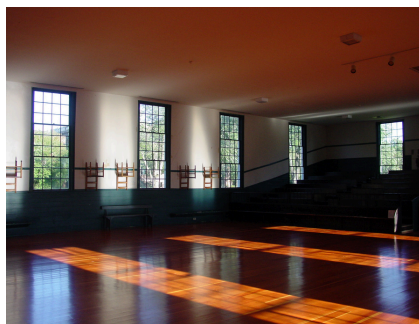
The Sphere of Shaker Spiritualism

by Theresa Frey-Alexander

This time of year, as fall settles in, and darkness falls earlier and earlier, the veil between the living world and the spirit world grows thinner and thinner. If we are willing, we might catch a glimpse, a sliver, of the enchanting spiritual landscape that the Shakers occupied. They deeply held the conviction that individuals could communicate directly with the spirit world. This belief shaped life here for centuries. It was more than a feeling, or superstition, it was a point of fact. For as far as the Shakers were concerned, spirits surrounded Wisdom's Valley. It was here that they saw angels, and experienced visitations from the dead. It would be odd, then, if we ignored this past, perhaps it would be an insult to the spirits that occupy these buildings, if we simply carried on without paying heed. So, this October, we hosted a number of events that harken the spiritual past of this place. A paranormal investigation that has been studying our site for years revealed just what it is that goes bump in the night around here. Theater students from Siena College presented ghost tours (it was this tour script that provided the inspiration for the present tone). Trunk or Treat delighted and terrified. And then there is this article. It is not the first of its kind, no. Instead, it is a sort of Frankenstein. A ghost of past articles stitched together to tell a story about the spirits that have swirled and surrounded this place.

We mustn't forget that from their earliest days in England the founding Shakers were receiving visions from the beyond. It was direct interaction

with the spirit world that would provide guidance to the founding Shakers and would ultimately serve as the basis for all of what is known as Shakerism today. Spiritual revelations led Mother Ann and her followers to these shores. John Hocknell was purported to have the ability to use his own outstretched arm as a divining rod. This, according to some accounts, is the means by which he arrived here, at Niskayuna.



1848 Meeting House interior.

Simon Meisel describes this sort of spiritualism that involves the human body becoming a conduit between the Earthly and the spiritual worlds, "It would happen most frequently in the act of worship, wherein Shakers were seized with the spirit; dancing, trembling, and speaking in tongues. It is these trembling communications with the spirit world that gave Shakers their name. At its peak, the 1848 Meeting House building would host some 300 Shakers in worship. Benches at the rear would afford a place for spectators from "the World" to come on Sundays to watch the Shakers as the spirit moved them to sing, dance, and speak in tongues." (1)

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From the Director

For some, the word “preservation” may evoke a staid, conservative, and unimaginative worldview. This is highlighted by the fact that we often default to pitting “preservation” against terms like “progress” and “development”. This kind of language encourages us to think of preservation as an investment that yields no concrete returns. However, in its best incarnations, preservation can truly be a dynamic and creative act.



“Adaptive reuse” is a buzzword I toss around a lot when describing my dreams for the future of the site. It’s basically just a fancy term for recycling a building. While it sounds new-fangled, we can look to the example of the pragmatic Watervliet Shakers for inspiration. When the Church Family outgrew their Dwelling House, they built a new, larger one and converted the old into an Infirmary to better care for the ill and elderly of the community. The building we call the Drying House today originally held kilns for drying fruits and herbs. But it was also used as a chicken coop for fresh eggs for the community, and a creamery to chill milk in later years. Even the sacred 1791 Meeting House was repurposed when the newer, larger 1848 model was completed. And of course, after the end of the Shaker era, the buildings across the Historic District have seen a century of additional uses – from apartments to office buildings.

Preserving these old buildings of the Watervliet Shakers is thus both an act of renewal and the continuation of a long tradition. By filling them with new purpose, activity, and life, we seek to investment and economic development in our community and honor the men and women who 250 years ago, dreamed of building Heaven on Earth right here in Albany.

News & Events

In Memoriam

John Henry Nickles:

We were saddened to learn of the passing of John Henry Nickles in June. The Nickles Family have been long-time supporters of SHS. John and his wife Betty have tirelessly promoted and modeled stewardship of local resources, both natural and historical. In recent years, they have made possible numerous projects, including installation of picnic tables and benches around the property, critical repairs to our collection storage room, updates to the Virtual Watervliet website, and pruning and care of the historic orchard on Heritage Lane. John was a professor of Chemistry at HVCC for nearly four decades. Betty, a fellow academic, led countless botanical walks and investigations of the Ann Lee Pond Preserve over the years in partnership with John. John's kindness, curiosity, and generosity will be greatly missed.

Janet Hiser:

Janet served on the SHS board as a trustee from June 2021 until October 2022, but even during this brief period, she left a lasting mark on us. As a member of the Development Committee, she helped direct new fundraising strategies for SHS appeals and helped to guide the creation of a new strategic plan. We send our deepest condolences to Janet's family but know that she touched many lives and the impact of her work, both private and professional, will continue to benefit our community for many years to come.

Redevelopment at Heritage Park



On October 15th, the Albany County Legislature approved the sale of the former Heritage Park baseball field. The New York Army

National Guard's 42nd Infantry Division plans to construct a new headquarters at the site. Given the proximity of this site to the core of the historic Shaker village, we are invested in working in partnership with all parties to ensure the protection of the Church Family Site. Shaker Heritage Society staff and trustees have been engaged in discussions with representatives from the Army National Guard since mid-August and measures are being taken to minimize the impact on existing archaeological resources and views from our leasehold. We look forward to continuing the dialogue to identify appropriate mitigation measures in partnership with Cultural Resources staff and the State Historic Preservation Office. The Shaker cemetery adjoins this parcel, and National Guard representatives are working directly with Brother Arnold and the Sabbathday Lake Shaker community to address the special preservation needs of that site. We look forward to sharing updates on this important development in the coming months.

Capital Region Nordic Alliance Partnership

For the past year, staff from the Capital

News & Events, *continued*



Region Nordic Alliance have been piloting accessible sport programs at the Shaker Heritage Site. This summer, CRNA secured a grant through the Invictus Games Foundation to bring 20 veterans from around the world to the Capital Region for a week of Trail Orienteering challenges. SHS was honored to be one of the partner sites. Combining competitive sport, adaptive technology, and place-based history, we hope this program will continue to grow and help us develop new tools to better meet the needs of visitors with mobility and visual impairments.

Empire Ride 2024



We welcomed the return of the Empire State Ride to End Cancer in July this year. This annual fundraiser

brings 250 cyclists on a 2 week-long ride from NYC to Buffalo. The cyclists collectively raised \$2.2 million dollars for cancer research through the Roswell Park Alliance Foundation in Buffalo, NY. To commemorate the 10th anniversary of the event, Albany County Parks and Recreation Commissioner Bakary Janneh visited the site to deliver a proclamation to Ride founder Terry Bourgeois.

Bender Family Foundation Grant



We are delighted to share that the Bender Family Foundation awarded SHS \$15,000 this summer to help us launch our long-awaited Barn Bathroom project. Survey work and construction documents are set to be developed this fall, in preparation to put the project out to bid in the first quarter of 2025. We look forward to sharing updates in the coming year!

A Farewell to Turkeys



After 35 years, SHS volunteer and former board member Robert Reilly is preparing for “retirement” from his role stewarding the

farm program at SHS. In recognition and celebration of the agrarian lifestyle of the Watervliet Shakers, Bob invested countless hours and dollars raising and caring for cows and poultry and developed the necessary infrastructure to keep them here at the Shaker Heritage site. His investments and stewardship have been a tremendous source of community enjoyment for decades. We are currently consulting with staff from the Cornell Cooperative Extension office about options for hosting another aspiring small livestock farmer in the future, so we may honor and carry on Bob’s legacy.

News & Events, *continued*

Craft Fairs Recap



Thank you to everyone who came to our Summer and our Harvest Craft Fair! We had an excellent showing at both fairs. We welcomed wonderful vendors and extraordinary guests. Both fairs brought in over 1500 people to our historic location!

Visit Shakerheritage.org to register for upcoming events!

Holiday Market

October 9th to December 15th



Join us for our traditional Holiday Market at the historic 1848 Meeting House, where over 90 regional artisans will showcase their handmade pottery, jewelry, fiber crafts, artisan foods, and more. This is the perfect opportunity to find one-of-a-kind gifts for your loved ones while supporting local businesses this holiday season.

The fair runs from October 9th through December 15th, we are open Tuesday through Sunday from 10am to 4pm (closed on Mondays). Admission is free, donations are always welcomed.

Community Trunk or Treat

October 27th @ 4pm - 6pm

Admission \$5



Shaker Heritage Society will host its annual Community Trunk or Treat with the help of Shaker High School. Led by a scavenger hunt that is perfect for families and kids of all ages they will wander the historic property on the hunt for candy!

Local magician, Jim Snack will perform close up magic from 4pm to 5pm. Then will perform a turn of the century style magic show starting at 5pm!

Make sure to wear your best costume and please park in the lot next to the Meeting House.

Thank you to our sponsors:



Save the Date

Needle Felted Mushroom Workshop - January 11th, 2025

We are hard at work putting together a spectacular 2025 season of events. We are hoping to bring you a combination of old and new. With fan favorites, like basket weaving. And new work like mosaics, kintsugi, felt art, flower pressing and much more! Stay tuned as we start to announce our 2025 season.

The Sphere of Shaker Spiritualism, *continued*

Animal magnetism, also known as mesmerism, was practiced by the founding Shakers. The Marquis de Lafayette's interest in mesmerism provoked his wish to sojourn to a Shaker meeting 240 years ago, in October of 1784, his intention was to examine the meeting for any resemblance to this phenomenon. Lafayette was not disappointed and described the Shakers as "enthusiasts who go through incredible contortions and who claim to perform miracles.." (2)

Simon Meisel so eerily described the contemporary experience of the Meeting House in his Ghost Tour Script as follows, "Today, visitors to the Meeting House with an affinity for the supernatural often describe the Meeting House as a peaceful, tranquil place, with an ever-present connection to the spirit world. Local clairvoyants have reported seeing spiritual phenomena manifest as "orbs," or impressions that someone was reaching out to make contact. Visitors have described the spiritual background noise of the room as "overwhelming," including a local medium who uses the space to conduct annual séances – which was much to the agitation of William, the now deceased museum cat." (3)

In the 1840s, spirits called for renewed religious commitment among the Shakers. It started here at Watervliet, in the South Family. It was during an evening meeting that a young girl of fourteen years saw the spirit of a woman dressed in white. She was entranced as she watched the spirit slowly travel from girl to girl, giving them each a kiss. (4) Before long, all of the girls at the South Family were experiencing the supernatural. One evening, three of the girls appeared to be "withdrawn from the scenes of time." (5) They had entered a trance-like state. The spirits had become demanding, instructing the girls to deprive themselves of food and sleep, and even to kneel and bow for long periods of time. A December 27, 1838, journal entry noted: "Sarah

was taken in vision four times this forenoon. And after supper she was taken again and then she informed us that Mother [Ann] wanted we should eat on our knees five times a week."

Soon the presence of spirits was being felt beyond the South Family. Shaker worship took on a renewed fervor. When the usual singing, dancing, and speaking in tongues reached a fever pitch, the Shakers closed their doors to the World. During meetings, Shakers believed themselves to become intermediaries for the communications of numerous notable deceased. Mother Ann and her brother William posthumously communicated through Shaker intermediaries, and so did George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and even Pocahontas. Believers believed these spiritual interactions to be scientific evidence for their religious beliefs—evidence of distinctiveness and religious superiority, and even superiority over the founding Shakers. It was a period of intense spiritualism that came to be known as the Era of Manifestations, or Mother Ann's Work.



A butternut tree leaf and nut.

But people were not the only spiritual conduits here at Watervliet. In Ned Pratt's 1996 article entitled, "The Spiritual Landscape at Watervliet" he takes a detailed accounting of the trees, stones, and water that could channel the spiritual world and bring Believers into close contact with the beyond. In May of 1842 an angel, by the name of the Holy Angel of Light, or the

Holy Angel of Discernment, paid visit to the Church Family. It would be the first in a series of visits. The angel instructed the Believers as to

The Sphere of Shaker Spiritualism, *continued*

the precise location where they were to plant a butternut tree seedling – to the east of the dwelling house– this spot and this tree were to be venerated as the center of Wisdom's Valley. The Holy Angel of Discernment made another appearance a month later. This time they commanded that Believers plant a second butternut tree at Wisdom's Valley's northwest corner, a spot known as Watching Angel's Tower, where Father William was supposed to have stood. It must have been a long day for the believers as the angel instructed them to set out with a compass and chain and mark out the corners of Wisdom's Valley. Finally, when the Believers had determined the southwest corner, they were instructed by the angel to place a large stone on the spot. In August, Benjamin Youngs and Fredrick Wicker set out "with the aid and guidance of the Holy Angels, and through medium of divine inspiration," to set a triangular cobblestone in the spot. It was a large stone, some three feet high, and was engraved with the words, "SW Corner, May 5, 1842." (6)



The home of the Fox sisters. Rochester, NY.

It wasn't just the Shakers, though, you see, a belief in spiritual communication was widespread during the mid nineteenth century. The Believers followed

this expanding cultural phenomenon with curiosity and intrigue. In Samantha Hall Saladino's 2013 Shaker Heritage Society Blog post entitled, "Beautiful and Important

Wonders," she outlines Shaker spiritualist activity of this period. When they heard tell of the Fox sisters in Rochester, who heard disembodied rappings on their home's front door, an assemblage of Believers traveled to their home to hear the "knockings" for themselves. (7) It was also during this period that Believers attended séances and met with famous spiritualists. They came to consider James M. Peebles, a Spiritualist preacher, to be their "dear friend." He peddled the belief that mental and spiritual existence continued in death. Considering the journal entries that report the deceased attending their own funerals, it is safe to say that the believers accepted this teaching.

These tales of the thinning veil, and the sphere of Shaker spiritualism only scratch the surface. We hope that you will take some time to enjoy the site this month. Take in the reflection of the autumnal palette on Ann Pond, join us for a program, and reflect upon the spirits of Shaker days gone by.

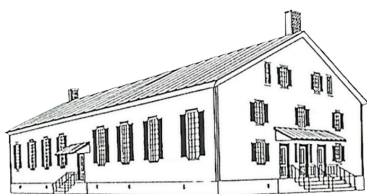
Sources:

- (1) Siena College Ghost Tour Script by Simon Meisel
- (2) *The Marquis: Lafayette Reconsidered* (2014) by Laura Auricchino
- (3) Siena College Ghost Tour Script by Simon Meisel
- (4) The Spiritual Landscape at Watervliet, NY by Ned Pratt (modified from an article by the same name that appeared in *Shakers World*, September 26, 1996)
- (5) *The People Called Shakers* (1953) by Edward Deming Andrews
- (6) The Spiritual Landscape at Watervliet, NY by Ned Pratt (modified from an article by the same name that appeared in *Shakers World*, September 26, 1996)
- (7) "Beautiful and Important Wonders": The Shakers and Spiritualism by Samantha Hall-Saladino; September 12, 2013, Shaker Heritage Society Blog

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



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SHAKER HERITAGE SOCIETY

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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.