

The Watervliet Shaker Journal

Shaker Heritage Society

America's First Shaker Settlement

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The Erie Canal: Shifting Currents at Watervliet and Beyond

by Theresa Frey-Alexander

This month marks the 200th anniversary of the opening of the Erie Canal and the maiden voyage of the first canal boat, the problematically named "Seneca Chief." The Erie Canal was the brain child of our founding fathers who saw great potential for financial gain in the wedding of the waters between the Mohawk River and Lake Erie. Decades of scheming and destruction that included the forced concentration of New York State's Native American population and, eventually, dispossession of Native American lands, including those of the Seneca in central New York, were required to execute this engineering feat that is credited as catalyst for industrial growth and the spread of ideas in nineteenth century America.



Old photograph shows team of mules pulling canal boat along the towpath at Clyde.

and eventual decline mirror the larger historical tides brought about by the canal. The Shakers were incredibly industrious and successful businesspeople, and their success did not occur in a vacuum. They sold hundreds of thousands of brooms and seed packets, as well as thousands of pounds of medicinal herbs and distributed them on the Erie Canal. Arguably, if it hadn't been for

The Watervliet Shakers, whose land abutted the canal, were deeply impacted by this force in American history. Both their growth

the Erie Canal opening western frontier markets, the Shaker industries would have remained smaller, scaled to the local economy. For the Shakers, the line between work and worship was blurry, and commercial success may have been an inevitable outcome of their religiously devoted lives. However, that seemingly inevitable commercial success led to a spiritual crisis within Shaker communities. It is from this spiritual crisis that the Era of Manifestations emerges. Ultimately, the broader industrial growth brought by the canal played into the fall in the population of Shaker communities in the later half of the 19th Century.

The Shakers at Watervliet began to expand beyond their initial settlement as early as the 1790s, and eventually, their continued expansion led them to own thousands of acres of (non-contiguous) agricultural land all the way to the Mohawk River (about 3 miles north of our 1848 Meeting House). Together, in 1814, the Church and North Families made the purchase of Winne's Farm and T. Staats property, whose land abutted the northern border of the vast Stephen Van Rensselaer Manor and ran along the south shore of the Mohawk River east of today's Shaker Island. This land became home to the Shaker's River Farm, where they grew mass quantities of broom corn, a cultivar of sorghum, which they used in the manufacture of brooms (a fitting industry for a group of people who place a high premium on cleanliness). At this point in time, religiously inspired Shaker industriousness was already giving way to

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From the Director

by Johanna Batman

The bounty of Shaker tables was legendary, and the act of sharing a meal is ripe with symbolism. Giving food can be a primal demonstration of power, success, favor, or preference. The Shakers were certainly acting as savvy marketers with their rich food and attentive service in the Trustees' Office. Yet cooking for another can also be a profound gesture of care, affection, and even love.



Johanna Batman with Shaker broom.

I personally love the excesses of the holiday season, yet the reality is that this season, vulnerable families will struggle more than ever just to get enough to eat.

Across the political spectrum, we tend to glorify endurance. We talk about serious illnesses as “battles” to wage, and revere martyrs more than those living quietly admirable lives. I believe this impulse speaks to the grinding poverty, both tangible and spiritual, of American society. Pride in collective strength can unite a community, but suffering without agency or relief can arouse hurt, jealousy, and anger. This anger may be directed at other vulnerable people if they are perceived as “cutting the line” with “handouts.” Among Shaker communities, communalism, egalitarianism, and even celibacy all helped to mitigate these dark emotions by removing the root cause - inequality.

While some may understand Shaker values as denying the self, they can also be understood as a boundless generosity, love, and respect for the other. Individually, we may feel powerless in the face of scarcity made worse by political chaos and rapidly advancing technology. When faced with these challenges, Shaker history shows us we have all the more reason to hold onto each other, and do our best to lift each other up. Let's take a note from the Shakers, and grow the table, so that our collective bounty might be more widely shared.

News & Events

Ann Lee is Coming to Theaters



“The Testament of Ann Lee” premiered at the Venice Film Festival in early September and was met by a 15-

minute standing ovation. Brought to you by Mona Fastvold of “The Brutalist” fame, the film’s premiere caused quite a stir. Now it seems the film has been picked up by Searchlight, which means the film will be available in theaters across North America and most of the world. We anxiously await the film’s release which has been slated for late 2025, or early 2026!

Sewing Desk Revealed



The Sewing Desk was the final piece to the new exhibit puzzle. We unveiled the custom piece back in September and with that, *Mother Ann Lee: One Woman's Revolution* is officially open to the public! A huge thank you to Mike

Delnero of Delnero Furniture for taking on this incredible project and making such a beautiful and fun piece of furniture for us to showcase small collection items for years to come!

In Memoriam

In July we lost an amazing volunteer and friend of SHS, Peter O'Hara. As an engineer, Peter brought expertise and intelligence to a 50-year career at the Watervliet Arsenal and Benét Laboratories. Peter along with his wife

Jean also dedicated over three decades to volunteer service here at Watervliet, as well as the Mount Lebanon Shaker Village. Peter generously connected SHS with the resources of his alma mater, RPI. Each season, he decorated the graves of veterans in the Shaker Cemetery with fresh flags. He developed a white paper on our Dwelling House Meneely Bell that has guided our plans for restoration and future display. Peter will be remembered for his wealth of stories, his ever-ready smile, and his incredible willingness to always lend a hand where needed.

Turkey Coop Demolition



Photo credit Andrew Franciosa.

After 30+ years, SHS volunteer Bob Reilly "retired" from raising turkeys and chickens at the Shaker Site last fall. Bob has

donated two mobile chicken tractors so that we may continue to keep chickens onsite in future years. In the meantime, we decided to remove the turkey coops and open up the barnyard. Our gratitude and thanks to Lee Hilt of the Northeastern Woodworkers Association and his son for their hard work clearing the barnyard. We look forward to sharing updates on the future of the poultry program. If you or someone you know is interested in helping with our poultry program, please contact us at director@shakerheritage.org

NWA Repairs Around Shaker

This October the Northeastern Woodworkers Association (NWA) graciously helped us with some much-needed repairs around the

News & Events, *continued*



property. They repaired and repainted the wooden bridge spanning Shaker Creek. Also, Charlie Goddard designed and built two beautiful white oak doors to replace

the decaying doors of the Drying House. We are incredibly grateful for our continued partnership with the NWA and all that they do for Shaker.

Holiday Market Raffles



We have three raffles going on during our Holiday Market! The first (featured at left) is a beautiful quilt inspired by the original Bird of Paradise Quilt that is housed at the Museum of American Folk Art. Second, we

have a smaller, brightly colored crib quilt that features the alphabet. It is perfect for a nursery or kid's room. Both quilts were handstitched with care by longtime SHS volunteer and artist, Libby Lee. Our third raffle is a set of reproduction Shaker chairs that have recently been retaped by another volunteer. Come by our Holiday Market to see all of our beautiful raffles and shop our incredible artists and crafters!

Harvest Craft Fair Recap

Thank you to everyone who joined us back in September for our Harvest Craft Fair. It was an amazing weekend of family fun, history, and supporting small business. Also, we were

joined by the Northeastern Woodworkers for their Annual Tool & Lumber Auction.

Altogether, we brought over 1,800 people to our historic site, making this one of our most successful fairs yet! Thank you again to our volunteers, vendors, and of course our community!

Fall Appeal



Funding is uncertain. Cultural priorities shift. And when that happens, sites like ours fall into the background, and we risk losing

more than old buildings. We risk losing truth, inspiration, and a rare space where people from all walks of life can connect over shared values. But that doesn't have to happen. You can help us change the story. Please give a gift today in honor of the 250th anniversary of Mother Ann Lee's arrival in Albany and the founding of the Watervliet Shaker community.

Supporting SHS isn't a political act. It's a patriotic one. It's about preserving a place that speaks to who we are as a community—and who we aspire to be. This is your history, your heritage. And your support ensures that it doesn't fade into silence.

Visit us at <https://home.shakerheritage.org/donate-today/> to donate!

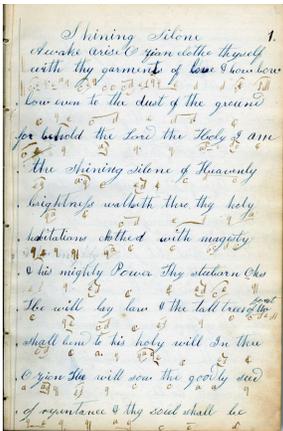


Visit [Shakerheritage.org](https://home.shakerheritage.org) to register for upcoming events or contact community@shakerheritage.com

News & Events, *continued*

Schools Off, Museums On: Cursive & Calligraphy

November 11th @ 10am - 1pm
FREE



Looking for something fun and educational to do when schools closed? Bring the kids to Shaker Heritage Society for a FREE Museum Day! This special event invites kids of all ages to explore “the secret language of adults” by learning the basics of cursive and calligraphy.

Participants will get hands

on experience practicing their new skills on a real slate chalkboard and paper, just like students of the past. They’ll also get the chance to decode authentic Shaker journal entries, testing their ability to read historical handwriting. It’s a perfect mix of history, creativity, and fun! For more information, email educator@shakerheritage.org or call 518-456-7890.

Stained Glass Holiday Ornament Workshop - Join our Waitlist!

November 15th @ 10am - 3pm
General Admission \$110



Discover the beauty of stained glass in this fun, beginner-friendly workshop! Learn the basics of this timeless craft as you create your very own gnome and tree ornament—perfect for decorating your

home or gifting to someone special. No prior experience is needed; all patterns and materials are provided. Just bring your creativity and enjoy a relaxing, hands-on crafting experience!

Stained Glass Winter Suncatcher Workshop

November 22nd @ 10am - 3pm
General Admission \$115



This class is perfect for crafters of all skill levels! Learn the basic stained glass techniques needed to create a beautiful winter-themed suncatcher measuring 2" x 11". All materials are provided, with glass precut and colors preselected by the instructor, so you can focus on the fun of assembling your piece. Please bring gloves, a mask, and wear closed-toed shoes for safety. Space is limited!

Save the Date

- January 24:** Painted Barn Quilt Workshop
- January 31:** Heart Basket Workshop
- February 21:** Kintsugi Workshop
- February 28:** Felted Fungi Workshop



Visit Shakerheritage.org to register for upcoming events or contact community@shakerheritage.com

The Erie Canal: Shifting Currents at Watervliet and Beyond, *continued*



Paul Russel's broomcorn.

commercial success. The Shaker broom and seed industries were well established, and Shaker Trustees were strategically purchasing land. Three years after the establishment of the River Farm, in 1817, construction on the Erie Canal began, and was finally completed in 1825. The opening of the Erie Canal created a faster,

cheaper means of transportation and dramatically increased the connectivity of disparate markets and people. A Guide to Shaker Manuscripts in the Library of the Western Reserve Historical Society says "...members of the Shaker hierarchy, who found it necessary to travel among the communities, frequently kept detailed journals of their experiences. Occasionally they visited other communal sects, (but more frequently they were in search of markets for their goods)" (1) With direct access to the Erie Canal, Shaker products, such as brooms and seeds could quickly and efficiently reach passage on water and travel to farther flung western frontier markets, without the headache and cost of additional middlemen. Of course, Shaker industriousness was special, as was the quality of a product imbued with the divine, however, the success of Shaker industry is mirrored in the region and by the Erie Canal's broader history.

The Shaker's success did not occur in a vacuum. The Erie canal facilitated a region-wide broom boom. Schenectady was considered the broom making capital of the world during the 19th century. Broom corn wasn't just grown by the Shakers and their hired hands down at the River Farm, it was grown all along the banks of the Mohawk from Amsterdam to Cohoes, in the river's nutrient rich alluvial flats. In fact, the family of Mohawk interpretess and 17th century

holder of Shaker Island and other lands along the Mohawk River, Hilletie VanSlyk VanOlinda, who was the subject of our Summer 2024 article, resurfaces in the context of the Erie Canal and associated regional industries. Her progeny appear to have become successful broom distributors, building a broom warehouse that fronted the canal, which eventually burnt down around 1900. (2) The production and sale of brooms throughout the region grew alongside the canal, as a growing market led to increased demand. Schenectady's broom production reached its peak around 1855 (3), while the canal enjoyed its peak use the same year (4), and the Watervliet Shakers reached peak broom sales, industrial prowess, and population right around the same time.

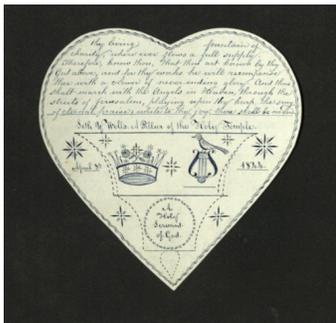
Inevitably, all of this commercial success had deep implications for the Watervliet Shaker Community. The material success that was made possible by the Erie Canal led to deep disillusionment. After all, how was a religious community firmly rooted in the basic tenets of Christianity outlined in the beatitudes, able to reconcile the reality that it was serving two masters? Or as posed by John Wesley, founder of Methodism,

"I do not see how it is possible, in the nature of things, for any revival of true religion to continue long. For religion must necessarily produce industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will...love of the world in all its branches" (5)

It wasn't just brooms setting out for the west – it was the purity of the Shaker experiment. The Shakers may have had no problem integrating a strong work ethic into their religious principles, but it seems that they did struggle to reconcile devotion to commercialism and material success with those religious principles. In the

The Erie Canal: Shifting Currents at Watervliet and Beyond, continued

late 1830s, spirits at the Watervliet South Family communicated with a group of girls and called for renewed religious commitment among the Shakers. "The most unusual series of records, the inspired writings, came into being at a time when the Shakers appeared to be wavering from their original religious intent and falling victim to such worldly temptations as material prosperity. " (6) This period, called the Era of Manifestations or Mother Ann's Work, is characterized by a return to the ecstatic worship and communication with the spirit world that the founding Shakers engaged in – behaviors that cannot be commodified or sold. Once again, the tide of Shaker history is reflected in the larger world at this time. All along the route of the Erie Canal, religious fervor was emerging. Joseph Smith and the Church of Latter Day Saints, the Seventh Day Adventists, and the Oneida Community were all part of the "Burnt Over District," and the Erie Canal was the vein that connected them.



Shaker spirit drawing by Seth Wells circa 1844 - Era of Manifestations.

As time went on, industrial success and religious fervor hit a crescendo, and by the 1860s the opening of the west had given way to industrialization. Stops along the canal, such as Buffalo, Syracuse, Rochester, Utica, and Troy experienced an

economic boom. The promise of urban employment, coupled with growing secularism, was fueling a broad shift away from agrarian life and toward urban life. In addition to drawing young people away from their family farms, it

drew would-be Shakers away from life as a Believer. They now had plenty of job prospects in Troy's iron works, and shirt collar factories, diminishing the perceived need for a communal life that provided three meals a day and housing. Young people now had more options. Many factors lead to the decrease in the Shaker population at this time, but the role played by the Erie Canal is clear. The Canal paved the way for large-scale Shaker commercial success but in an ironic twist, the Canal also paved the way for industrialization that ultimately led to the movement's decay.

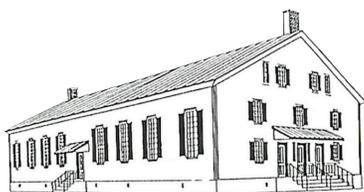
Sources:

1. From the introduction in A Guide to Shaker Manuscripts in the Library of the Western Reserve Historical Society. Kermit J. Pike, comp. (Cleveland: The Western Reserve Historical Society, 1974. pp.ix-x)
2. "Broom-Making Formerly Major Industry Here, Doing \$120,000 annual business" by James M. Quigley- Christopher
3. Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor. <https://eriecanalway.org/learn/history-culture>
4. April 1955 article by Peg Cheetham called "Broom Trade Once Swept Schenectady into Spotlight"
5. Quoted by Max Weber, The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit Capitalism, London 1952, pg. 52
6. From the introduction in A Guide to Shaker Manuscripts in the Library of the Western Reserve Historical Society. Kermit J. Pike, comp. (Cleveland: The Western Reserve Historical Society, 1974. pp.ix-x)

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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.