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Christian Goodwillie

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Shaker Seminar 2009

Enfield and Canterbury, New Hampshire

By Christian Goodwillie

Nearly fifty participants convened in New Hampshire for the 35th annual Shaker Seminar beginning on July 22, 2009.

The week's festivities began on Wednesday evening at Enfield's Great Stone Dwelling. We were welcomed to Enfield by museum director Mary Boswell and her staff. After enjoying an opening banquet in the dining room, we retired to the meeting room for a viewing of Mary Ann Haagen's documentary *We Find No Harm in Dancing*. Her presentation was enhanced by introductory comments on Shaker dance and the making of the film.

Thursday was primarily a day of lectures. See below for abstracts of the presentations given. We also had the unique thrill of touring the double attic and cupola of the Great Stone Dwelling. The original built-in cupboards and drawers and impressive flying staircase in the cupola were sights to be long remembered. The Shaker Seminar adopted a window in the Great Stone Dwelling by donating funds for its preservation.

Friday morning, after a breakfast at Enfield, we migrated to Canterbury Shaker Village. Museum director Funi Burdick welcomed our group to three days of tours and talks at Canterbury. Friday afternoon we took advantage of three concurrent events: an architectural tour, a tour of the exhibition "By Shaker Hands," and a self-guided tour of the site. Afterwards, we enjoyed a delicious dinner at the Shaker Table restaurant. That evening, long-time friend of the Seminar Darryl Thompson led the group on a twilight walk of the grounds and shared stories of the supernatural which he learned during his many years of living at the Village.

Saturday morning most of us convened for a guided hike through the forests surrounding the Village. The hike wound through the thick New Hampshire woods, stopping at the site of the Canterbury Shakers' feast ground called Pleasant Grove. There we saw the base of the fountain stone. Hikers also passed by many of the Shaker mill ponds and a large stone mill dam. Those who chose not to hike were treated to a lecture on Shaker textiles. After lunch the Seminar convened in the chapel of the Shaker Dwelling for a series of lectures (see below). David Newell displayed

his evangelistic fervor in recounting the story of Baptist-turned-Shaker-turned-apostate Valentine Rathbun. That evening the Seminar partook of a wonderful closing banquet at the Shaker Table.

Rounding out the week's events, we met Sunday morning at the Shaker Table for brunch and two excellent lectures, by Rob Emlen and Steve Paterwic. Thanks to excellent staff, meals, speakers, and weather at our two locations, the 2009 Shaker Seminar was an unqualified success! Hope to see you all in 2010 at Hancock Shaker Village where the Shaker Seminar will help celebrate the 50th anniversary of the museum there!

Abstracts of Lectures Presented at the 2009 Shaker Seminar

Visitors' Changing Views of the Shakers: 1780 – 1897

Speaker: Glendyne Wergland

Visitor accounts changed in several ways from 1780 to 1899, moving from the sharp criticism of early accounts to acceptance and even admiration after 1850. What visitors did not realize, however, was that the Shakers were a radical social experiment in equality of the sexes as early as 1788. Most antebellum visitor accounts do not mention Shaker equality, but its practical benefits drew more women than men to Shakerism. Moreover, Shaker sisters worked together to shape their society in ways that other churches and communal groups did not allow. By 1870, visitors noticed. In 1878, a visitor recognized that Shaker society was what he called a “woman-ocracy (gynécration), or a government by women.” Among the Shakers, women's roles evolved farther and faster than among the world's people. Shaker brethren and sisters took equality further by advocating for women's rights, and shared that gift with the world.

Daughter of the Shakers: The Story of Eleanor Brooks Fairs

Speaker: Johanne Grewell

See Grewell's article in this issue.

Shakers Among the Communes, or, Visiting the Unusual.

Speaker: Brian Bixby

There has been increasing interest among Shaker enthusiasts in examining accounts of visitors to Shaker villages. Often, these accounts are embedded in longer works. This paper analyzes three such nineteenth-century books to demonstrate how the larger work sheds light on the specific approach each author took in covering the Shakers. Charles Nordhoff's 1875 account was part of a larger project to evaluate whether communes could help contemporary working men become financially independent; hence his unique emphasis on the businesses of Shaker communities and on their leadership structure. Thomas Low Nichols was struggling to reconcile his beliefs in sovereign individualism and strong authority when he penned his account in 1864. His description of a visit to Union Village concludes by both praising and condemning the Shakers for their strict way of life, a conclusion inexplicable without reading the rest of his book. William Hepworth Dixon's 1867 account of a visit to Mount Lebanon was a celebration of living life and sexual equality, themes that ran through his analysis of America. The paper concludes by discussing how today's tourist promotional literature and memoirs about the Shakers can be treated in similar analytic terms.

Cummings and Goings: The Impact of Shakerism on the Edward Cummings Family

Speaker: Mary Ann Haagen

The Cummings family became part of the Enfield Shaker Community in 1844. Three of the children became lifelong members of the Society and died in the faith. For over fifty years they contributed their significant and varied talents to the community that their parents had chosen for them. As membership in the community dwindled, Rosetta Cummings in particular accepted increasing responsibility for the Society's daily physical needs, for income, for maintenance of a large property, and most importantly for supporting and encouraging Believers in their Shaker faith. The parents and two of their sons had a more complex and in some cases hostile relationship to Shakerism. This article explores their reasons for leaving the Shaker faith, what their choices reveal about the demands and challenges of a Shaker life, and the impact of their apostasy on a family now divided by that faith.

Why They Look Different: Barn Building At Enfield and Canterbury, New Hampshire, 1853-1859

Speaker: Lauren Stiles

Beginning in the 1850s Shaker builders began to modify dramatically their design of new dairy barns, changing the plan from the three-level barns of the late 1820s and 1830s to four-level structures. Two of the earliest of these new outsized barns were built at Enfield (1853-1854) and at Canterbury (1853-1859). Like earlier barns, these were constructed with deep two-level hay mows at the upper level that were reached by a ramp and bridge running the length of the top level. Hay could be pitched down into the mows below, saving much labor. Below these two upper levels was a stable floor. However, the added level in the new barn design was a manure cellar running the full length underneath the barns. The cellars were high enough to be accessed by wagons and their drivers. Shaker leaders — some actively involved in construction projects — were avid readers of the newly developing agricultural press and were influenced by publications like *The Cultivator* and *The Genesee Farmer* that heavily promoted improved farm practice, including use of natural fertilizers and especially manure. Likewise, architectural and engineering innovations also interested Shaker barn builders. The Canterbury Church Family barn is a case in point. It used new technology for the construction of its “flat” cloth and gravel roof and a truss system which eliminated the need for columns in its manure cellar. Through an exchange of ideas among Shaker leaders and builders, many features of the new four-level design came to be used in barn building in the New York and New England Shaker villages for the next twenty years.

As Branches of One Living Tree: Richard McNemar and the Music of the Shaker West
Speakers: Christian Goodwillie and Carol Medlicott

Christian Goodwillie and Carol Medlicott shared some of their ongoing research into Richard McNemar’s 1833 hymnal *A Selection of Hymns and Poems; For the Use of Believers*. Their talk centered on new discoveries about both the process of compiling the hymnal, which contains texts both historical and doctrinal in nature, and McNemar’s printing of the work. Goodwillie and Medlicott sang more than ten songs from the book, using tunes they located in Shaker manuscript hymnals. Their finished work will result in a critical edition of the book, reuniting texts and tunes for the first time ever.

Valentine Rathbun

Speaker: David Newell

The first work written about the Shakers was authored by apostate Valentine Rathbun in 1781. Rathbun was the leading elder of the Pittsfield Baptist Church. He, his family, and almost all of his congregation embraced Shakerism shortly after the “gospel was opened” in the spring of 1780. Rathbun left the Shakers after several months, and in December 1780 wrote a highly critical account of the Shakers which went through ten editions by 1783. New research has shown that the Providence edition, long assumed to be the first edition, was in fact the third. We now know that the Hartford 1781 edition has precedence, having been advertised as “just published” in the February 3, 1781 issue of *The Connecticut Courant*. It bore the title *A Brief Account of a Religious Scheme* It proved to be a popular work, for one month later a second edition was published at Norwich, Connecticut, followed by four other editions the same year. The third edition, published at Providence, Rhode Island, bears a different title: *An Account of the Matter, Form and Manner of a New and Strange Religion*. While the content of the Providence edition is mostly identical to the earlier editions, there are numerous differences in text suggesting that it was prepared for the press from a different — possibly earlier — manuscript source. A Worcester 1782 edition included a second incendiary anti-Shaker work bound in, with its own title page. It attempted to show that the Shakers were agents of King George III and enemies of America. Other editions are known from Boston and Salem, Massachusetts, as well as New York, and Halifax, Nova Scotia.

The Birth, Life, and Death of Olive Branch

Speaker: Vernon Squire

See Squire’s article in this issue.

“From Mary Magdalene to the Beloved Elders in the Church at Shirley”: Bearing for the Dead, Conversations in Heaven, and the Problem of History.

Speaker: Jane F. Crosthwaite

See Crosthwaite’s article in this issue.

Picturing a Shaker Village: How the Public Imagined the Shaker Landscape in 1835
Speaker: Rob Emlen

Rob Emlen discussed a group of historical images of Canterbury Shaker Village and described how the public perception of all Shaker villages was established by this first group of pictures. In 1835 Canterbury was the first Shaker village ever to be pictured in print, and the popular success of that scene insured that it would be reprinted and reinterpreted in prints, drawings, and photographs throughout the nineteenth century. It was virtually the only image of any Shaker village to be published before 1878, when the Shakers themselves began to illustrate their other villages in *The Shaker Manifesto*. The site of this lecture in the reconstructed Blacksmith Shop meeting room allowed participants to look out the window and see much the same view as found in those early images.

Canterbury Takes the Lead
Speaker: Stephen Paterwic

Although the Ministry of New Hampshire (based at Canterbury) remained secondary to the Ministry of Mount Lebanon, the Society at Canterbury surpassed Mount Lebanon in population by 1902. This paper shows the reasons why Canterbury came to dominate Shakerdom through a confluence of many factors dating back to the 1860s. Indeed, for fifty years, many positive forces strengthened Canterbury spiritually and temporally, while almost all of the other societies were in serious decline.