

Dig takes a look at how New Hampshire Shakers interacted

June 14 2015, by Rik Stevens

For more than a century, the long-gone trustees building at a Shaker village on the shore of New Hampshire's Mascoma Lake was where the members of a nearly extinct religious society met the outside world.

An archaeological dig that started this summer on the pastoral grounds where the building once stood has the potential to reveal and renew the space to where it can once again serve as a bridge between Shaker and secular cultures.

"It's a big order," said Michael O'Connor, curator of the Enfield Shaker Museum and an eager volunteer archaeologist working on the project. "We'd like to have a better sense of the use of this building. We'll define our sense of the space as the Shakers used fences to define their sense of the space."

The Shakers—or the "United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearance"—settled by the lake in 1793, the ninth of 18 communities established in the New World after the society fled persecution in England. The communities, including another New Hampshire site in Canterbury, practiced equality of the sexes, pacificism, communal ownership of property and celibacy.

It was the last that ultimately spelled the demise of the Shakers just about everywhere: There are believed to be just four known remaining Shakers, all at the Sabbathday Lake community in Maine. That injects a sense of urgency into research efforts.

"They are truly ready for archaeology," said Plymouth State University Professor David Starbuck, who is leading the dig. "This can be a place to start developing a permanent field space. It's places where you can continue to tell stories afterward."

At Enfield, where about 300 souls eventually settled, the society constructed the largest Shaker building ever built, The Great Stone Dwelling. At six stories of granite, it was once the tallest building north of Boston and its cupola still commands a breathtaking view of Mascoma Lake and the valley beneath Mount Assurance.

Directly in front of the dwelling stood the trustees building. In the early days of the dig, the green expanse was pocked with rectangular pits as students and others carefully dug through the sod looking for secrets. Near the top of the pits, they used spades to move bigger pieces of earth; when they reach artifacts such as foundations, trowels were used for the more intricate excavation. Portable artifacts, like pieces of pottery or utensils, are carried over to "the lab" housed in the Shakers' 1849 stone mill building.

The Shakers are perhaps best known for their hand-crafted housewares like baskets and, notably, their furniture—especially chairs—that is still easily recognized by its unadorned simplicity and superior quality.

"We know a tremendous amount about Shaker decorative arts. There are dozens and dozens of books about their furniture and architectural style but we really need to do a lot more research into their daily life," said Starlyn D'Angelo, executive director of the Shaker Heritage Society of Albany, New York, near where the society's founder, Mother Ann Lee, settled in the late 18th [century](#).

"The archaeology that is being done can really help us understand what they were like, what their lifestyle was like," D'Angelo said. "Maybe

we'll find china where you'd never expect. So it tells us that maybe people brought it into the community. It tells us who was moving into the communities."

Starbuck, who also works at military sites in upstate New York, said there's a different feel when working at a religious site.

"I do think there is a great reverence and respect for the Shakers who once lived there," he said. "It's not digging up the remains of just anyone. It's people who truly tried to live a very deep, spiritual existence."

A long-range goal, O'Connor said, is to use the archaeological findings as part of an interpretive display built on the same demarcations as the old trustees building, a fitting next chapter for the centuries-old site.

The Shakers left Enfield at the end of the 1920s and sold their buildings to the La Salette religious order. Next to the Great Stone Dwelling, a La Salette chapel still bears the Latin inscription meaning: "Go forth therefore and teach all peoples."

© 2015 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Citation: Dig takes a look at how New Hampshire Shakers interacted (2015, June 14) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-06-hampshire-shakers-interacted.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.