

# The Friends' Quarterly

A Newsletter from The Museum at Lower Shaker Village

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## Spiritual Feasts: A Shaker Tradition

by Greg Schwarz, Museum Trustee

The use of a Holy Ground among the Shakers began at the New Lebanon, NY community in early 1842 and was an outgrowth of the wave of spiritualism that had characterized Shaker religious services since 1837. Early in 1842 Brother Philemon Stewart of New Lebanon had a spiritual revelation that the community should establish a "Feast Ground." This consecrated spot was to be high on the nearby mountain which the Shakers had begun calling "The Holy Mount of God." Through Shaker mediums, referred to as "instruments," the spirits pointed out the exact spot. The Feast Ground was to be 168' x 136' in size, made completely level and cleared of rocks and trees. In the center was a hexagonal shaped area delineated by a low fence. This was the spiritual "Fountain", meant to be the holiest spot in the Shaker community. This was also the focal point of ceremonies at the site, around which the believers marched and gathered.

At the head of the Fountain stood the "Lord's Stone," the most remarkable feature of the site. A marble slab five and a half feet high, two feet wide and three inches thick, the surface was engraved with a long passage in biblical language as prescribed by the spirits. Included on each of the Lord's Stones was a curse intended as a warning to vandals. The curse on Enfield's stone read: "Whosoever shall mar this stone or that which is dedicated to me shall feel the justice of my fury to their shame. For I will bring a heavy curse upon them in my own time."



Greg Schwarz and Cathy Newman, of National Geographic Magazine, inspect the base of the Lord's Stone.

Soon the spirits dictated that other Shaker communities should also establish their own holy ground. Each would also be given a spiritual name as were the communities themselves. New Lebanon became known as "Holy Mount," Canterbury "Holy Ground," Hancock "City of Peace." Enfield, known as "Chosen Vale," found its holy ground in early 1843, and like many of the sites, it required extensive labor to properly prepare the places according to the spiritual directive. The Enfield site, called "Mount Assurance," was placed in the side of a hill and required much digging and fill to level

it. The Fountain House at Enfield was constructed in 1845, and the Lord's Stone erected there on October 6, 1846.

Each year in May and September, the entire Shaker community was required to hold a special service or "Feast" on the site. Two by two the community marched up to the site, beginning in the early morning and staying until mid-afternoon. In addition to the singing, dancing and speaking in tongues that characterized meetings, the believers also partook of a spiritual feast provided by the spirits.

Sometimes an instrument under direction of a spirit, would ask believers to erect an altar. Each of the brethren and sisters were to retrieve a stone from a nearby field and place them in a pile upon a spot chosen by the spirit. This was to be done as testimony to their faith so the participants were warned that only true believers should attempt to put a stone upon the altar, lest they incur the wrath of God. At Enfield, such an altar still remains along the eastern edge of the site, directly opposite the Fountain. From this altar they beheld a beautiful panorama with the Shaker holdings and Mascoma Lake spread out below.

The use of Feast Grounds lasted at most communities until the mid 1850's. The last meeting at New Lebanon was in October 1854, at which point a spirit message told them such services were no longer required. As they did with their buildings, once something was no longer used it was dismantled rather than left to fall into disrepair. During the early 1860's most of the villages dismantled their Holy Grounds and hid the Lord's Stones to make them safe from the world's people. Only two stones are now extant, those from Canterbury, NH and Groveland, NY.

It is still unclear when Enfield ceased using Mt. Assurance. M. Melcher, author of *Shaker Adventure*, claimed that Enfield continued to hold services until about 1880. Once one has seen what a beautiful spot the Enfield Feast Ground is, it is easy to understand why the Shakers would wish to continue holding outside services.

Today, except for Harvard, MA and Enfield, NH, most of the Feast Grounds are overgrown and visited only by a small number of Shaker enthusiasts. Some of the holy grounds have been totally obliterated by development. At Enfield, however, we have the opportunity to preserve this unique part of the Shaker legacy for future generations.

*This summer saw the beginning of an archeological dig under the supervision of Greg Schwarz, at the Enfield Holy Ground. Watch for an update on the progress of the dig in the next issue of The Friends' Quarterly.*

