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# The Friends' Quarterly

A Newsletter from the Enfield Shaker Museum

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## An Intimate Look at the Shaker Family One Hundred Years Ago

By Robert P. Emlen

One hundred years ago this fall a Boston-based photographer named John Henry Tarbell visited the Shaker village at Enfield, where he made a number of photographic studies of the Shaker family at work. Carefully staged in domestic settings in and around the buildings of the Church Family, Tarbell's charming images portray the family members industriously engaged in dignified labor. A century later many of these photographs are familiar to us—Tarbell's Shaker photographs have been reproduced as illustrations in Stephen Stein's *The Shaker Experience in America*, Flo Morse's *The Shakers and the World's People*, Timothy Rieman and Jean Burks's *The Complete Book of Shaker Furniture*, and Ray Pearson and Julia Neal's *The Shaker Image*, among other titles. In these books Tarbell's photographs represent a generalized Shaker life, a vision of how Shakers everywhere lived and worked at the turn of the 20th century. But these images have particular meaning for the Enfield Shaker village, for they picture known members of the family in identifiable settings, in the days when the brothers and sisters were still vital and actively engaged in productive work. Tarbell's 1903 pictures show the village in the last years when it resounded with young voices, and the elderly brothers and sisters still imagined a future was possible for their community of believers.

The details of John Tarbell's encounter with the Enfield Shakers remain obscure. No information has yet come to light about how he managed to introduce himself to the family, or how he convinced the Elders and Eldresses, brothers and sisters, and girls of the children's order all to pose for his elaborately contrived photographs. Even the date of his visit is conjectural—the pictorial evidence suggests that he visited the village in late September or early



Sister Marinda Keniston (1848-1911)  
Photograph by John Tarbell c. 1903

October of 1903—that is, before the death in July, 1904, of Elder John Bradford, who appears in a well-known scene of the family picking apples in the dooryard of the stone dwelling; but after the meeting house was dismantled and carted away in mid September of 1902. Tarbell's panoramic view from the hillside to the west shows only open ground where the meeting house once stood.

Tarbell sold his Shaker photographs to *New England Magazine*, which published some of them in 1910. He also sold prints to the public through the Boston Camera Club, and made presents of others to members of the Enfield Shaker family. But after that visit he seems never to have returned to the Shaker village. Thereafter his photographs picture scenes in Boston and in Rhode Island, and in other rural New England locations. However, in that one passing acquaintance with the Enfield Shakers he seems to have

captured an important moment in their history, during a serene season when the family was willing to open their doors and have their lives recorded by the camera's lens.

John Tarbell's photographs of the Enfield Shakers are the subject of a forthcoming exhibition at the Enfield Shaker Museum. Tarbell made his Shaker photos on 6" x 8" glass plate negatives, which he printed directly onto exactly the same size paper. Tarbell's photos are slightly larger than the more formal photographs of the Shaker family made by Col. Frank Churchill in the 1890s, which are thought to have served as Tarbell's inspiration in seeking out the Enfield Shakers. Readers who may know of the whereabouts of early photographs fitting the description of Tarbell's work are encouraged to contact the Enfield Shaker Museum.

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