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Robert Leavitt and His Enfield Shaker Friends

By Cynthia Barton

Mascoma Lake in Enfield feeds the Mascoma River, which flows through the city of Lebanon. These waters connect not only the two towns but also the historical path of Robert Leavitt. He and two generations before him passed their summers on the lake, where they became friends with the Shakers.

Robert was born in 1922 and was the third generation of his family to live in Lebanon, at 40 Mascoma Street. The Enfield Shaker Museum's archives has a photograph of Sister Margaret Appleton standing in the driveway, holding the infant Robert. The Leavitt family's relationship with Sister Margaret began with Robert's grandfather, George Ulysses Lincoln Leavitt.

As a historian, Robert had an insatiable quest for knowledge. His passion for history was nourished by this grandfather, whose name alone might have stimulated such an interest.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, summer residents, many from Lebanon, began building camps on the lake's eastern shore. They soon began to cross the lake by bridge or boat to purchase milk, butter, and fresh vegetables.

Friendships ensued. A photograph called "Summer Gathering" currently hangs in the meeting room of the Great Stone Dwelling. Taken in 1898 by Frank Churchill, a summer neighbor of the Leavitts, it depicts camp residents enjoying the outdoors with their Shaker friends. One of the most gregarious of the Shakers was Brother Franklin Young, carpenter of the community and the last of the male brothers at Enfield. George Leavitt and Brother Franklin became good friends. George frequently visited him in the carpentry shop, which was also his dwelling place. Brother Franklin had made himself a rather heavily ornamented bed of birds eye



Sister Margaret Appleton and infant Robert Leavitt. Photo taken in 1922. (ESM, Leavitt Collection)

maple and black walnut. When George queried him about the lack of simplicity, Brother Franklin replied, "The sisters can't come into my bedroom, so I can ornament my bed if I want." When the Enfield community closed in 1923 and Franklin moved to Canterbury, he gave the bed to George.

Robert inherited many Shaker objects from his father. In 2001 he gave the collection to the Museum in anticipation of going to a nursing facility. Along with the bed, two other large pieces from the collection are on display in the Museum – a tailoring bench used by Elder Abraham Perkins and the desk used by the Church Family Trustees. George, who was an upholsterer by trade, bought both items and used them in his shop. Robert graduated from Lebanon High in 1940, was a defense worker during World War II, and after the war took over his grandfather's business.

After the Enfield community closed the Leavitts kept in special touch with Sister Margaret Appleton. Robert loved to tell of the time, while a teenager, he and his family

visited her. She wanted to show him something at the old meetinghouse, which was up a hill and approached by steps with flagstones between them.

"As I did with my grandmother without ever thinking, I put my hand under her elbow just to steady her. And when we got up onto the flagging there she turned a little and smiled at me. She says, 'Mr. Leavitt, the Sisters can't see us out of the window, but when they can see, you mustn't touch me.'" He had completely forgotten that no man was to touch a Shaker Sister, but he knew by her smile that she had not been offended.

Sister Margaret died in 1944, living long enough to return to Enfield for the dedication of the new Shaker bridge in August, 1940. (The one built by the Shakers in 1849 was destroyed by the 1938 hurricane.) The governor escorted Sister Margaret to the middle of the bridge where she cut the ribbon to mark its formal opening. This occasion became one of many topics Robert wrote and lectured about. His personal collection of photographs included pictures of the old bridge taken by Frank Churchill in 1889 and his grandfather in 1894.

It was largely due to Robert's efforts that the Lebanon Historical Society came into being. In 1958 the Churchill collection of historical photographs and artifacts was offered to Lebanon, but there was no historical society to care for it. Robert helped to found one and became its longtime curator. He became Town Historian in 1973 and helped update the town history to 1994. Robert helped save the Dana House, the oldest house in town and photographed historic buildings he knew were to be demolished.

Perhaps his most valuable contribution to Lebanon's history was his two volume *Lebanon, New Hampshire in Pictures*, published in 1997. (continued on page 3.)

