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A Newsletter from the Enfield Shaker Museum

Shaker Observances of Christmas

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Section IV.

The Order of Christmas, Thanksgiving and Fast Days

As the signal by which all true followers of Christ are known, is unfeigned and unalloyed love to each other, the order of God requires that on Christmas day Believers should make perfect reconciliation, one with an other; and leave all grudges, hard feelings, and disaffection one towards an other, externally behind on this day; and to forgive, as we would be forgiven; and nothing which is this day settled, or which has been settled previous to this, may hereafter be brought forward against an other.

2. *It is order to attend one general meeting, and one union meeting on this day.*

3. *It is the order to remember the poor of this world on this day, and to carry to the place of deposit, at the Trustees Office, such garments and goods, as are designed for them.*

4. *This day must be kept sacredly, and no work, except such necessary chores as are allowable on the Sabbath, may be done on this day, or until sunset.*

5. *Days appointed by the Government, for Thanksgiving and Fast, are also required to be kept and regarded, -- and Believers should attend one meeting, and devote the remainder of such days in cleaning, and putting things and apartments in order.*

The above excerpt is from: *Millennial Laws, or Gospel Statutes and Ordinances adapted to the Day of Christ's Second Appearing. Given and established in the Church for the protection thereof by Father Joseph Meacham and Mother Lucy Wright The presiding Ministry, and by their Successors The Ministry and Elders. Recorded at New Lebanon Augst. 7th 1821. Revised and re-established by the Ministry and Elders Oct. 1845.*

Visitors to Hancock Shaker Village in Pittsfield, Massachusetts during the Christmas season at the turn of the twentieth century would have found the 1830 Brick Dwelling festooned with holiday greens and red ribbons. On candle stands in the Believer's Dining Room stood small Christmas trees decorated by the children cared for by the celibate Society. Red and green paper chains draped from the ceiling above the long dining tables. Tinsel, and cutout paper birds and bells, added touches of whimsy at odds with the solid, enduring simplicity of Shaker architecture and furniture design. From the basement kitchen, the aroma of gingerbread cookies and



Sisters Olive Hayden, Bessie Dietrich, and Gladys Smith in the music room of the Hancock Shakers' Brick Dwelling, 1915. Note the festive fireplace made of cardboard and paper and painted to look like brick. (Photo courtesy of Hancock Shaker Village)

spiced cider, special holiday treats, wafted through the large six-story Dwelling. The voices of Brethren and Sisters singing songs written for the Christmas season sounded up and down the long halls of the building, once the residence of nearly a hundred Shakers at their peak a half century earlier.

While these signs of holiday merriment may at first seem incongruous with the image of the simple Shakers, they are authentic, as early twentieth century photographs and descriptions of Christmas in the Hancock community illustrate.

Christmas decorations and frivolity were far from the minds of the first Shakers during the late eighteenth century, however. Like the early Puritans and the later New England Protestant contemporaries of the Shakers, the Believers at first deemphasized the celebration of Christmas. Due to the common association of Christmas celebrations with the ancient pre-Christian or pagan rituals of the winter solstice, the Shakers' observance of Christmas was purely religious – a time of spiritual cleansing through fasting and repentance.

The Shaker Order of Christmas as practiced at Hancock and other communities during the growth and peak decades of the sect originated in 1776, at the first Shaker settlement in Watervliet, New York. According to Shaker lore, one of the Sisters was afflicted with a shaking of her limbs as she unsuccessfully tried to put on her shoes Christmas morning. Mother Ann Lee, the Shaker leader, interpreted this as a spiritual sign, reminded of God's words to Moses on Mount Horeb: *Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.* Christmas thus was to be more sacred than other days of the year for the Shakers.

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Todd Burdick holds a BA in History from Vassar College and an MA in Public History from the State University of NY - Albany. He has presented programs on Shaker culture, music, dance, crafts and trades, and other topics including museum education, interpretation and administration. His media appearances include those produced for PBS, NPR, A&E, The History Channel, Food Network, The Travel Channel and The Discovery Channel.

