
The Friends' Quarterly

A Newsletter from The Museum at Lower Shaker Village

Volume VI/No. 2

Spring 1993

The Stone Machine Shop - Church Family, 1849

by Wendell Hess

In an important agreement signed March 31, the Stone Shop described here, a Shaker barn, 18 acres of land, and a large part of the Museum collection became Museum property. See page 2.

A brief description is necessary to explain why the Stone Machine Shop was built in the middle of the 19th century, when this Community was at the peak of its growth, activity and membership.

One of the early buildings of importance in the Community was the grist mill, erected in the early 1800s. It was 60 x 32 feet and two stories high. It was built on the site of the present Stone Machine Shop, facing north and south instead of east and west, as does the present shop. From all that can be determined, the mill was erected over the existing brook, which at that time flowed down through the center of the Church property.

A huge overshot water wheel, 30 feet across with 8 foot wide troughs, divided the building. A 25-foot, octagonal pine log went from the wheel into both sides of the building. Attached to it were huge cog wheels which supplied power to each side of the mill. Water was brought from the reservoir by a wooden trough on trestles that reached some 30 feet

high at the mill. The building had three runs of millstones, reduced to one when a later grist mill was erected in Enfield town. This shop was well equipped with both wood-working and iron working machinery. Iron working lathes replaced the mill stones. Edging saws, matchers (machines to cut the tongue and

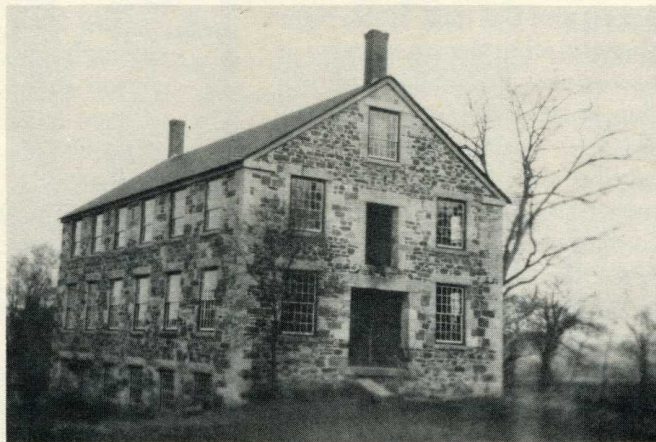


Photo Courtesy Viola Hess

the matching groove on the sides of boards to be "matched up" into solid siding), planing mills, fine edging and planing machines—including machines for shaping the sides and bottoms of buckets and measures—was some of the equipment there.

All sorts of hand tools and hand-operated machines occupied the second floor of this mill. In fact, all the woodwork for the Great Stone Dwelling was made in this wood frame shop. At the time, the Shakers also did contract work for the folks in the surrounding area. The mill was reputed to be the best equipped north of Boston.

On July 29, 1849, a fire broke out in the old mill. It not only was a dry

season, but the day was very windy. In no time the mill and surrounding buildings, six in all, were ablaze. On that unfortunate day, the Brothers were haying in the neighboring town of Canaan. The only help was from the Sisters, children, and a few South Family Brothers. Smoke from the fire was seen as far away as North Enfield, and men from there crossed the partially complete Shaker bridge bringing ladders and buckets to help keep the fire from spreading farther. It was a great loss to the Community, estimated at \$3,000.

So much for the old wooden predecessor to the Stone Machine Shop!

Caleb Dyer, the great leader and materialistic builder of the Community, went to work to replace the tragic loss as soon as possible. On September 10, 1849, less than two months after the devastating fire, work was started on the new machine shop, to be four stories high, perfectly proportioned, and built of "fireproof" granite. Granite was quarried from as near as half a mile and as far away as five miles, accounting for the variety of colors of stone in the mill. An open quarry on nearby Shaker Hill Road supplied some of that granite, and parts of the "trail" on which the stone was drawn to the lake are still visible after 134 years. The stone shop's perfect proportions suggest that perhaps Ami Burnham Young had a hand in its (STONE SHOP, continued on page 3)

