

The Friends' Quarterly

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The Great Stone Dwelling: A Testament to the Shakers' Vision

by Mary Boswell, Executive Director

Shakers and "World's People" visiting the Enfield Society in the mid-19th century were often amazed as they approached the community. What they saw was a carefully organized village with neatly arranged buildings and bustling activity. The real testament to the Enfield Shakers' success, however, was the Great Stone Dwelling, rising 60 feet into the sky. Their "stone house" would have astounded any first-time visitor in the mid-19th century, for it would likely have been the largest building seen in a lifetime.

The Great Stone Dwelling was the center of the Church Family's daily life. It was where they cooked their meals, baked their bread, worshiped, slept and greeted guests. The Brethren occupied the west side, facing the fields, mills and machine shops. The Sisters occupied the east side, providing them easy access to the kitchen and baking rooms, as well as to their shops, laundry, and dairy building.

The Great Stone Dwelling was built between 1837 and 1841, a time of great spirituality for the Shakers. Its stark symmetry reflected their beliefs in celibacy, simplicity and order. Specifically, it reflected the faith of Caleb Dyer (1800-1863), a visionary leader of the Enfield Shakers. Dyer "thought in large terms," according to Robert P. Emlen, a Shaker scholar and past trustee of the Enfield Shaker Museum. It was Dyer, he reminds us, who oversaw the construction of the Shaker bridge across Lake Mascoma, and who led "the complex of mercantile ventures that turned the community into a major economic force in the state."

To design the new building, Dyer approached Ammi Burnham Young (1798-1874), a local architect already gaining a reputation in the field. By 1837 he had designed the First Congregational Church in Lebanon, New Hampshire, two dormitories at Dartmouth College and Vermont's State Capitol. Dyer's assessment of this emerging architect was correct: Young later became the nation's first Supervising Architect of the U.S. Treasury, creating Federal courthouses and post offices across the United States.

The Great Stone Dwelling was innovative in many respects. It was among the first in Enfield made of granite. To crown this magnificent building, Dyer felt that a roof of wooden shingles would not do. He studied the most modern building technology in Boston and determined that slate was the proper material. He hired stonemasons, carpenters, slaters and sheet-metal workers to carry out the specialized work required for the exterior. Within the 30,000 square feet of building, the Enfield Shakers maintained the same high standard of quality on the interior. They employed one style of baluster, one type of drawer, one molding for their panel doors, one type of flooring and one panel design for the window jambs. They judiciously used every square foot of space. The built-in drawers and cupboards ensured their efficiency. The external and internal windows, light wells and circulation vents facilitated their work and comfort.

Today, the modern visitor is also struck by the Great Stone Dwelling. With a Land & Community Heritage Investment Program grant, the Museum

hired architect Michael Gohl to conduct a Historic Structures Report, including the Great Stone Dwelling. His report details the consistency in construction unique to the Enfield area and to Shaker design. It is an essential guide as we progress on the \$1.1 million drive to address the building's most serious needs. Our immediate goals are to bring back the original appearance of the exterior, increase energy efficiency and upgrade mechanical systems. During the Spring Forum, Gohl will give a tour of the building, noting changes over time. We invite you to contribute to the campaign and attend the Spring Forum on May 18-20. Details are found elsewhere in this newsletter.

Credit for this article goes to:

Emlen, Robert P. "The Great Stone Dwelling of the Enfield, New Hampshire Shakers." *Old-Time New England*, 69 (1979) 69-85.

Gohl, Michael. "Historic Structures Report" (2006), 55-214.



Stereoview - Photographic Views, Shaker Village, Enfield, N.H. - General Views of the Village #8 or 9 "Stone Dwelling House and Second House". Published by W.G.C. Kimball, Photographer, Concord, N. H., circa 1890 (Enfield Shaker Museum, Leavitt Collection).

