

# The Friends' Quarterly

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## Maple Sugaring: A Rite of Spring By Glendyne R. Wergland

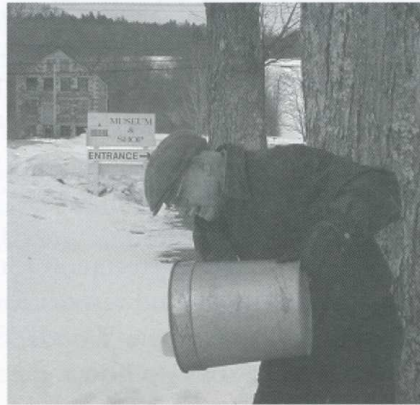
Shakers began sugaring after they immigrated to America. Colonists learned sugar making from Native Americans who collected maple sap and boiled it into sugar. Maple sugar was not a trivial thing for either the Indians or the immigrants they taught; sugar provided calories at winter's end when other food ran short. A good stand of maple trees was insurance against starvation.

Sugarmaking evolved into an economic strategy. Maple sugar was one of the few cash crops a farmer could reap from steep, rocky hillsides. The sugar harvest was so important in the nineteenth century that the *New York Times* printed front-page articles on it. One said that farmers with 600 to 1,000 maple trees made more money from this crop than from any other. Furthermore, sugar is made in late winter, so it fills a seasonal niche in the farmer's annual expenditure of labor.

Maple sugaring yielded several benefits. In 1857, when the price of imported cane sugar rose, the New Lebanon, New York, Church Family saved money by increasing their sugaring operation. The Tyringham, Massachusetts village was recognized for its sugarbush. In 1846, a visitor commented on their "towering and majestic" maple trees, the largest he had ever seen. Tyringham Shakers tapped five thousand trees. One family made a ton of sugar and syrup each year, maximizing their return from otherwise marginal land.

For Enfield, New Hampshire Shakers, sugar making provided another economic opportunity. Sugaring required sap buckets, which were made in winter when farm work was minimal. Each tap needed a bucket, and larger trees supported three or four. Enfield Shakers profited from that demand, making sap buckets for sale. They also made sugar, and made 1,750 new buckets for their own trees in 1881.

Depending on weather and elevation, sugar time starts when the sap rises in the trees. The sap flows best when the sun shines warm after a freezing night. Just as farmers have to "make hay when the sun shines," sugar makers have to tap trees when



Board President Doug Smith recreates the Shaker tradition by tapping the trees at the Museum.

the sap runs. In the early nineteenth century, hollow sumac twigs were used as spiles (or taps) for conveying sap from trees into pails. Boys whittled the spiles and burned the pith out of the center of each with a red-hot poker. Men and boys chiseled or drilled openings into the bark of each sugar maple tree, tapped the spiles in place, and hung buckets to catch the dripping sap. Sometimes sap ran faster than it could be collected. They boiled the sap until it became syrup. During a good sap run, sugar makers boiled sap day and night. The process was lengthy because it takes about forty gallons of sap to make one gallon of maple syrup.

It was not a foregone conclusion that Shakers would follow the same division of labor that the world's people used. Brethren may have done the outdoor boiling at the sugar camp. The sisters, however, probably did the sugaring off, when they finished boiling the syrup down into sugar. The sisters may have finished the sugar on the kitchen stove, where the heat could be more easily adjusted to keep the product from scorching. The fact that sisters made maple candy suggests that the final stage of sugar making was gendered female as other indoor cooking was.

Sugaring was important in yet another way. In New England, winter meant spending a lot of time indoors. When snow was deep or weather bitter, some Shakers

worked in their dwellings so they wouldn't have to heat their shops. In December 1835, Samantha Fairbanks noted, "Mercury 8 degrees below cypher. The sisters stay in." After spending weeks indoors, they looked forward to sugar making. In April 1836, she noted that the sisters had walked into the maple grove. "This seems like something new," she wrote, "after being confined at home for a long and cold winter." A nineteenth-century poem says, "Though sugarin' ain't a snap, The year don't bring us any fun / That's ahead o' boilin' sap." Enfield, New Hampshire's young Believers visited the sap works to swing, eat "chopstick" (maple candy cooled on snow), and have a good time. Everyone enjoyed a "holly day" or "season of recreation" in the sap woods, playing in the sunshine.

Shakers continued making maple sugar as long as they had the manpower to do it. In 1890, the Canterbury Shakers made more than 500 gallons of syrup and the Enfield, New Hampshire Shakers reported that their sugar harvest was above average because the sap had a higher-than-normal concentration of sugar. In 1894, Enfield made 500 gallons from two orchards, but the North Family reported their harvest was down, because they tapped only 500 trees and did not hire extra help. As young men left the society, the manpower shortage limited their production. By 1891, the dwindling Hancock Shakers reported they were making "very small quantities," and the scribe wrote, almost with envy, "we are reminded of the toiling ones in our sister societies (particularly those in New Hampshire,) who are manufacturing such large quantities of both syrup and sugar, and we wonder how so much labor can be accomplished." In 1896, one Hancock brother made twenty gallons of syrup, and they were grateful for that. Nevertheless, they called sugartime a season of "celebration." Like other farmers who appreciated nature's bounty, Shakers counted maple sap as a special blessing and the resulting sweets as rewards for their hard work. Maple sugaring was their rite of spring. (Endnotes are available at the Museum.)

