

The Friends' Quarterly



A Newsletter from the Enfield Shaker Museum

Enfield Sap Buckets, Revisited

By Robert P. Emlen

In the 1970s, when I was researching the home industries of the Enfield Shakers, I became interested in Elder Henry Cumings' bucket and tub manufactory at the North Family. The material evidence of this Shaker industry was everywhere—buckets, pails, and tubs stamped “N.F. SHAKERS/ENFIELD N.H.” were turning up in antique shops and flea

markets all across northern New England, near the farm towns and sugar maple groves where they had originally been used in the years following the Civil War. A series of articles Cumings wrote about his experiences with the Enfield Shakers for a local newspaper called The Enfield Advocate in the early 20th century filled out the pieces of this story. Elder Henry Cumings had been charged with developing a new source of income to restore the Enfield Shakers' finances after Elder Austin Bronson devastated the North Family when he embezzled its funds in the early 1860s. Elder Henry's solution was to transform the old cooperage into a mechanized operation that used local resources to produce excellent woodenwares efficiently, inexpensively, and in great numbers. Labeled with the Shakers' name, these tubs, pails, and sap buckets soon became to the Enfield Shakers what Br. Robert Wagan's chair factory had become for the Mt. Lebanon Shakers—a useful commodity cleverly marketed under the Shaker brand to great profit for the community. In 1979 I published this story in the Maine Antiques Digest, which was reprinted the next year in the Shaker Messenger.

Looking back on it, I think I got it pretty much right, though if I knew then what I know now, I would have changed a couple of things.

The case of the mysterious “2”:

Every once in a while an Enfield Shaker pail turns up with the number “2” stamped on the bottom. After seeing #2 pails itemized on an 1870 bill of sale from the North Family, I supposed they might have been numbered by size, something like the chairs made at the Shakers' factory at Mt. Lebanon, New York. But in the



years that followed I never saw any number other than “2.” What I did see was Elder Henry's advertisements in the Shaker Manifesto in the 1870s warranting that his pails and tubs were made of old-growth, virgin timber. As his stock of this dense, clear, strong lumber dwindled, he advertised that he also had for sale pails made from second growth pine, that is, from sub-

sequent generations of trees that grew up after the virgin forest was harvested. I have now come to think that the stamped “2” refers not to the size, but to this less durable and less expensive “second growth” lumber.

The case of the recycled machinery:

In an 1895 issue of the town newspaper, the Enfield Advocate, I found a notice that the old pail shop at the North Family of the Enfield Shakers had burned to the ground. It had been standing vacant, its machinery having been sold when the pail business was given up some years before. I took that to mean that someone had purchased the whole operation—lathes, cutters, coopering jigs—and had continued to make buckets to the Shakers' original specifications. While that may well be true, I have since come to think that the notice in the Enfield Advocate doesn't necessarily support my original conclusion. It just as well could have meant that the neighbors purchased only the steam engine, and that the Enfield Shaker's industry of making pails and tubs may have ended after Henry Cumings left the faith to get married in 1881.

Oh, hindsight. How nice it would be to go back and tidy up the things we said 30 years ago. How nice it is to have this opportunity to revisit some hasty conclusions I made in 1979.

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