



A Newsletter from the Enfield Shaker Museum

Enfield Shakers and Their Contribution to the Industrial Revolution

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From about 1820-50 two forms of industrialization emerged in New England, cottage industries practiced in rural homes, and large-scale factories. Domestic employment of rural women in traditional handicrafts increased when some production processes were mechanized. In payment, women were often given credit in store accounts controlled by their fathers or husbands. Large-scale factories depended on water-and steam-powered machines. Women worked away from home and were paid cash.

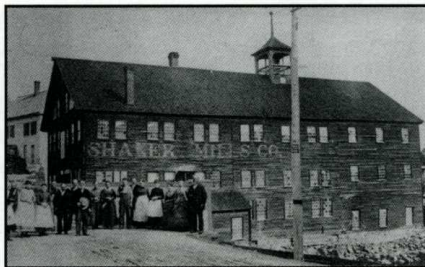
Enfield and Canterbury Shakers' industries fell between the two systems. Both communities had water-powered sawmills, gristmills, and factories. Archeologist David R. Starbuck, in mapping Canterbury's mill system, concluded that Canterbury may have been one of the most industrialized of all the Shaker communities. Production levels, however, were comparatively low.

Until 1825 the New Hampshire Shakers operated similarly to seventeenth century New England farms: clearing the land, establishing agricultural production, feeding members and using the surplus to buy what was needed. Women performed the spinning, cooking, milking, baking and ironing. Historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich suggests that by 1770 most New England households had shifted all domestic production, including weaving, to women. The Shakers were behind the rest of New England in making this transition—two Canterbury Brothers wove until 1825—but were organized like a large family. They called their founder, Ann Lee, Mother. Each community was divided into Families. Members were referred to as Brothers and Sisters. Deacons and Deaconesses supervised separate areas of production. Trustees oversaw sales. This structure reflects the gendered aspects of work.

Enfield and Canterbury's population levels could not support large-scale production, and the strain of caring for new and young arrivals affected their trades and labor division. Factories typically specialized in one type of product, but the Shakers produced a wide variety. Deacons oversaw the manufacture and rotated from department to department, Family to Family and at times from community to community. As in cottage industries, work was episodic.

In 1841 the Enfield Shakers had a red factory building on the Knox River. It bore the name "Shaker Mills" and was leased to Conant & Davis, a firm that made flannel from wool supplied by the Shakers. About 10 years later, the Shakers built a water-powered machine shop. Elder Henry Blinn recorded that in 1853 the Sisters were knitting shirts and drawers assisted by waterpower.

Historian Richard Candee thinks the Enfield Shakers might have used some of the earliest known circular machines in America, imported from France or Belgium, recorded in 1848-50. These were located in Thompsonville, in Enfield, Connecticut, another Shaker village. He suggests the Enfield, New Hampshire, Shakers developed a process that helped the state become a leader in the manufacture of the new "seamless" hosiery. A circular machine knit a ribbed (knit and purl) tube for the sock body. The Sisters hand-knit



the heel and toe. Their product was known as "Shaker half hose" or "Shaker sock."

The stocking factory system was unlike the Lowell system, which involved hiring girls, and the system at most New England textile mills, involving families. Stocking factories adopted the tradition of rural outwork common in hand-frame knitting. In 1867 John L. Hayes, the wool industry's lobbyist in Washington, DC and an investor in the first powered knitting mill in New Hampshire, credited the Enfield Shakers for starting this process, as did New Hampshire inventor and entrepreneur John Pepper, who may have sold a machine to the Canterbury Shakers.

Herrick Aiken, who invented and manufactured circular knitting machines with his sons Walter and Jonas in Franklin, New Hampshire, may have sold his second machine, an experimental model, to the Enfield Shakers in October, 1854. In December Aiken charged Enfield Shaker Trustee Caleb Dyer for customizing "ribbed stocking frames" several months before selling his seventh machine to the Shaker Mills Company.

Elder Timothy Randlett of Enfield's South Family is said to have invented an unpatented hand-cranked flat knitting machine used at the community before Aiken's machine. In 1905 former Enfield Shaker Henry Cumings stated that Randlett's machines supported the Enfield Shakers' flannel industry until they acquired the second circular knitter manufactured by Walter Aiken.

In 1855 Conant & Davis began manufacturing hosiery. Dyer managed the business, and the Shakers stopped supplying the company goods from their own shop. Conant & Davis reorganized as A. Conant & Co. (1860-73). Its successor Dodge, Davis & Co. (1873-85) made "Indigo Blue, All Wool Shaker Socks" until it lost its lease. Enfield Shakers marketed their own socks (Gents' All-Wool Half-Hose) into the first decade of the twentieth century.

The Enfield Sisters could not keep up with the factory production. Textile companies, however, could hire thousands of women to do the hand-knitting in their homes. In 1870 women from Etna, New Hampshire, to Thetford, Vermont worked for A. Conant. That same year, six Enfield Shakers operated three Aiken powered circular knitting machines for six months, producing only fifty dozen shirts and drawers worth \$1,100 and forty dozen stockings worth \$320. Textile companies used the Shaker name and reputation for high quality to promote their factory products.

Little remains today of this chapter in New Hampshire's industrial history, but Canterbury's steam drying racks and sock boards are on view at Canterbury Shaker Village. The author recently donated a type of circular machine used by the Enfield Shakers to the Enfield Shaker Museum. ■

Boswell has written and lectured extensively on the Shakers. Two of her publications have earned national awards. This article is based on "Canterbury Shaker Textile Production," in Textiles in New England II: Four Centuries of Material Life (1999). Footnotes and a bibliography are available.

