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& So We Go Along

by Douglas C. Leitch

For a structure as magnificent as the Enfield Shakers' Church Family dwelling a detailed account of its design and construction would be of significant interest. The Great Stone Dwelling, with its precise layout of living spaces ordered around the meeting room at its core, is a clear statement of Shaker beliefs. Yet the existing record of its construction is unfortunately limited to a few letters from the Enfield Shakers to the Ministry at New Lebanon and two journals written at Enfield during the period 1834-41.

One of these journals is a pocket-sized notebook most likely written by Caleb Dyer, an Enfield Trustee and the Shaker responsible for supervising the building of a new granite dwelling for the Church Family. The account book begins with observations made during a fact-finding trip to Boston and Worcester, Massachusetts in 1836 when Brother Caleb surveyed the current preferences for roofing materials - "slate vs. zink." After conducting his exhaustive pre-construction survey, he determined that slate was more permanent and waterproof than "zink" and therefore was the roofing material of choice for a Shaker structure.

The remainder of this no-frills

record documents the construction beginning in May 1837. Weekly summaries of work progress are terse and sometimes scrawled in a hasty hand.



The Great Stone Dwelling in 1988. The Museum's permanent collection and the Shaker Store are currently housed in the ground floor. The building is the subject of a new exhibit entitled "Building in the Shaker Spirit." See article on page 2. Photo by D. Leitch.

Few words and little punctuation make it appear to be the work of a busy person, a taciturn Shaker. Sentences often end with "e&" (etc.) as though the author hadn't time to complete the thought (but, of course, the reader could be expected to follow each logical thought to its conclusion).

Entries make brief reference to the weather as it affected progress (or lack of it) in raising the granite walls. The account is so abbreviated and limited to the essentials that, if each entry were illustrated and the pages rapidly flipped with one's thumb, it would be easy to visualize an animated high-speed film of the building's growth with industrious

Shakers scurrying about their tasks.

By October 1837 construction of the walls and roof was nearly complete. After six months of block-by-block labor compressed into laconic entries, Brother Caleb concluded his October 21st summary with the unexpectedly loquacious remark, "& so we go along." That brief extraneous editorial could be construed as the resignation of a tired supervisor too long on the job. But, written by a Shaker, the phrase suggests an enthusiasm for completing a worthwhile project.

Minor setbacks due to the weather and the Shakers' begrudged use of hired stone masons and slaters notwithstanding, the building was closed to the elements in six

months and its interior painstakingly finished in another four years - a phenomenal tribute to the strength of the community. The Enfield Great Stone Dwelling symbolizes not only the Shakers' beliefs, but also their unity and their optimistic growth soon to peak in the 1840's.

Like the building itself, the inclusion of the words "& so we go along" in the account of its construction speaks of the broader Shaker faith in their ability to create a heaven on earth by overcoming obstacles through patient labor. These are not the words of an overworked construction supervisor. They are the words of joy and progress toward a lofty goal.

