

# The Friends' Quarterly

A Newsletter from The Museum at Lower Shaker Village

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## To Deceive No Purchaser

by Kyle Roberts

The raising and packaging of garden seeds for sale to the world was one of the Shaker's earliest and most profitable industries. At Enfield, the selling of garden seeds to the world was the largest source of revenue for the Shakers from the late eighteenth century to the mid-1880s, when the business was abandoned. Enfield was one of the first Shaker communities to sell seeds to the outside world, beginning in 1795, just one year after New Lebanon, NY started to raise seeds for sale. Nathaniel Draper (1757-1838) was the first Trustee of the Church Family and the man who initiated the sale of garden seeds at Enfield. Under his leadership, the selling of seeds grew to be a most profitable industry. From 1793 to 1838, the years Br. Nathaniel served as Senior Trustee, anything made by the Shakers and sold to the outside world had to be inspected by him and marked with his initials. The markings "N.D." assured the world that an item was well made and had passed his standards.

In his book *Fifteen Years in the Senior Order of Shakers*, Hervey Elkins describes the Shakers' desire for high quality in their seed industry. "From the earliest foundation of the Church, we have been taught to let nothing go out from us, for to be vended in the markets of the world, but what will bear the test of strict examination; to de-

ceive no purchaser, either in quantity or quality; to do all work in fear of God; and as though setting a pattern for the children of men to follow."



*The only complete Shaker seed box known to exist was donated to the Museum. See Donation story on page 3.*

The raising of garden seeds grew originally out of necessity. With over sixty Believers in the Enfield Church Family in the mid-1790s, the farmers would have to save many seeds in order to grow food the following year to feed them all. The cost of purchasing seed each year was way beyond the means of this infant society. So the Shaker farmers would have to let certain numbers of vegetables go to seed and then collect and dry the seeds. If they had any extra seeds that year they would sell them to the world. As the Shaker reputation for honesty and quality grew, so did the sale of garden seeds.

Early each spring the Shaker Brethren would deliver the seeds in red painted pine seedboxes to

the merchants. They were delivered not only to the surrounding towns in New Hampshire and Vermont, but as far away as Canada. The merchants were given a commission of 33 1/3% on all the seeds they sold. Almost all the different types of vegetable seeds that were widely grown at that time were offered by the Shakers including beets, corn, peas, cabbage, cucumber, lettuce, squash, beans, and melons. Even some more obscure vegetables were offered, like "Vegetable Oyster", which is a small parsnip sized vegetable with a taste that some people say is comparable to fresh oysters.

For many years the Enfield Shakers had a monopoly of the garden seed business until other companies entered the market in the 1850s. These new companies had fancy seedboxes and seed packages with color pictures. The Shaker's plain boxes and packages seemed dull by comparison. The Shaker's business gradually decreased until the 1880s when they were finally obliged to withdraw from the market.

The prominence of the seed industry in the history of the Enfield Shaker community makes it especially exciting that The Museum has recently been donated an intact Enfield Shaker seed box complete with printed label and seed packets. See "Museum Receives Important Donation" on Page 3 for more details.

