

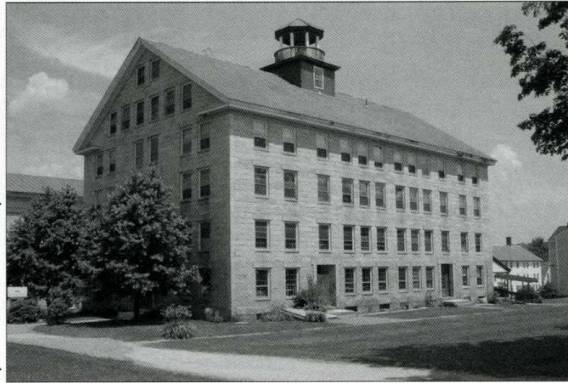
The Friends'*Quarterly*

A Newsletter from the Enfield Shaker Museum

Discovering the Refinements of the Great Stone Dwelling

By James L. Garvin, State Architectural Historian, N.H. Division of Historical Resources

The Great Stone Dwelling has always inspired awe. One of the first to comment upon the structure after its construction between 1837 and 1841 was Shaker brother Giles Avery. Writing in 1843, Avery described the dwelling as "one of the most stately, magnificent, and solid buildings I ever saw." The largest dwelling built by the Shakers anywhere, the building was regarded as the greatest stone edifice north of Boston and as an astonishing accomplishment in planning, construction, and perfection of detailing.

*Photograph of the Great Stone Dwelling by James L. Garvin*

The Enfield Shakers had to invest immense labor even before they were ready to raise the walls of their great home. The East and West Brethren's Shops stood on the site and had to be moved north to their present locations. The brook that descends from the hillside to the west ran in an irregular course close to the eastern end of the planned dwelling. It had to be re-channeled to the south, and its former bed needed to be trenched with drains to carry away the ground water and make a dry cellar. Using plows, shovels and carts, the Shakers excavated more than 1600 cubic yards of stones and soil from the great basement, fifty-eight by one hundred feet in dimensions.

Membership of the Enfield Shakers in the 1830s did not include builders with the skill and equipment needed to build granite walls that rise almost fifty feet from their footings to the building's eaves, or roofers with experience in laying the needed 7400 square feet of imported Welch slate. The Shakers depended on Boston craftsmen to perform the heavy and dangerous work of raising the walls and covering the roof. Luther Kingsley of Boston and Lowell served as masonry contractor for the building, while David Tillson superintended the slating of the roof.

Yet the Shakers did own a quarry that provided the granite for the walls, ample woodlots that supplied the timber, and mills and machinery to saw and plane the woodwork of the building. Shaker brethren quarried and hammered the stone and cut and sawed the timber for the internal framing, drawing these materials to the building site with their own draft

animals. The Shakers' immense labor made possible the construction of an edifice that would have been far beyond the financial capacity of the community if its members had needed to purchase the materials from others.

It has long been understood that the Shakers employed Ammi Burnham Young (1798-1874), a native of the adjacent town of Lebanon and an experienced builder-architect, to design their great edifice. Young had

already designed brick buildings at Dartmouth College, where his brother Ira was a professor. Young was the architect of the Vermont State Capitol, rising in Montpelier as the Great Stone Dwelling was being planned. He would soon win a design competition for the granite custom house in Boston, and would later become the supervising architect for the U. S. Treasury, designing many federal buildings.

With this quality of talent brought to bear upon the Great Stone Dwelling, it is not surprising that the edifice was extraordinary in scale and workmanship. Yet beyond its obvious distinction, more subtle refinements are becoming clear as the building is examined for work planned under the ongoing capital campaign for its rehabilitation. As a design by one of northern New England's leading builder-architects and as the joint effort of Shaker and non-Shaker craftsmen, the Great Stone Dwelling was one of the most advanced structures in New Hampshire in 1840. The building also shows an awareness of then-current detailing that is surprising in a Shaker building.

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James L. Garvin has served as curator of Strawberry Banke Museum in Portsmouth, N.H. and of the New Hampshire Historical Society. He has degrees in architectural engineering, art history, early American culture, and a doctorate in American Studies from Boston University. He has been the State Architectural Historian for more than twenty years. He is the author of many books and articles, including A Building History of Northern New England (University Press of New England, 2001). He is a member of the Enfield Shaker Museum's Preservation Planning Committee.

