

# The Friends' Quarterly

A Newsletter from The Museum at Lower Shaker Village

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## "Our home-made cloth is much better.."

by Becky Powell

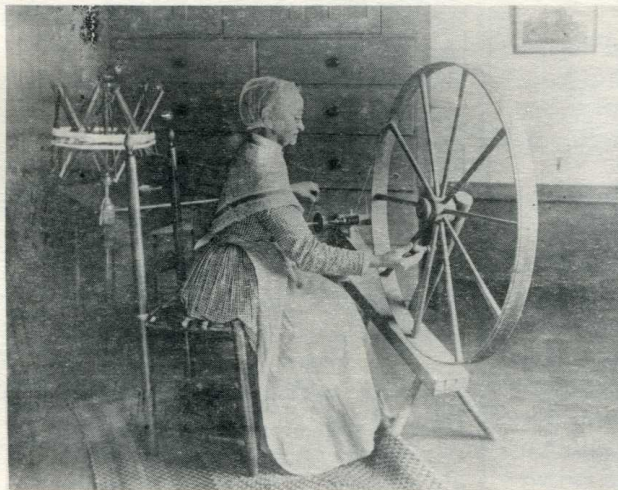
Mention Shaker furniture and an image springs to mind of graceful chairs and well-proportioned blanket chests and washstands. Mention Shaker weaving and the response is not so immediate: what can be said about the woven tape seats of the chairs, the blankets that filled the chests, the towels that hung from the washstands?

Shaker woven furnishings are often overshadowed by their wooden counterparts, partly because we take curtains and towels for granted, and partly because much of Shaker weaving is, in fact, less distinctively "Shaker" than the furniture. But Shaker weaving bears closer examination. Beautifully executed fabrics exist, which represent the Shaker striving for order, unity and perfection in craft.

Handwoven cloth was a major Shaker industry. Thousands of yards for towels, curtains, bedding, rugs, chair tapes, feed sacks, and the surprisingly ample wardrobe of each Shaker came from the Sisters' looms. As commercially produced cloth became more readily available, the Shakers wove less and less of their own. But this occasioned some regret; as Elder Frederick Evans said in 1875, "We used to have more looms than now, but cloth is sold so cheaply that we gradually began to buy. It is a mistake, we buy more cheaply than we can make, but our home-made cloth is much better."

Shaker weaving generally paralleled in materials and designs the weaving of non-Shaker colo-

rial America. Shaker experiments with materials and methods, however, produced some notable exceptions. Wool, linen, and commercially available cotton were in common use. But Shakers in the western communities wove silk from their own silkworms. Shaker poplar cloth, woven from strips of poplar and made into sewing cases



Shaker sister spinning with a great wheel

and other saleable products, created a practical use for a tree usually considered worthless.

Wherever design was used, the emphasis was on balance and symmetry. Many textiles were completely plain, but designs of stripes, checks, contrasting color or textured borders, and delicate pattern weaves also appeared. The pattern weaves were often used in linen towels to create a more absorbent cloth, so that what appears decorative is also practical, not surprising in Shaker work.

Certain ways of using color stand out as Shaker innovations. Using contrasting colors for the warp and weft (lengthwise and

crosswise) threads produced fabric with an iridescent shimmer, especially effective in the Shakers' silk weaving. Another Shaker technique was the twisting together of two different colored yarns. When woven, the twisted yarns created a diagonal color effect that is unexpectedly complex. The Shakers' taped chair seats owe their pleasing appearance to the interplay of weave against weave: the woven texture of the striped or plain tape is echoed and magnified in the pattern of the interlaced tapes. Such carefully planned and executed techniques resulted in Shaker cloth that is balanced and harmonious, and deceptively simple.

More than many artifacts, textiles are subject to deterioration from exposure to light, frequent washing, and plain hard use. Surviving examples, then, are precious. To supplement the collection of Enfield Shaker pieces at The Museum at Lower Shaker Village, a series of reproduction textiles is currently being researched and produced. These will allow visitors a closeup look at the type of textiles made and used by the Enfield Shakers. Without the need for protection from light that original textiles have, the reproductions will illustrate well the structure, designs, and materials of the Shakers' beautiful home-made cloth.

References: Andrews, Edward Deming: *Work and Worship Among the Shakers*. Gordon, Beverly: *Shaker Textile Arts*. Sprigg, June: *By Shaker Hands* and *Shaker Life, Work and Art*.

