



A Newsletter from the Enfield Shaker Museum

A Basket with a Past

by Galen Beale

Last September, Dr. Kenneth W. Smith, a long time supporter of the Enfield Shaker Museum, donated the large handsome basket seen here. As with all gifts, the Collections Committee began to investigate the origins of this basket.

Many Shaker villages made, used, and sold baskets made from the black ash tree, and Enfield was no exception. Early Shaker baskets were large utilitarian containers like this one, and in the construction of this basket were many techniques that echoed the skilled hands of a Shaker basket maker. The basket's patina spoke of its age, perhaps as early as the 1850's, and the careful preparation of the black ash splint, the thin strips of wood woven together to make a basket, indicated excellent craftsmanship.

Other clues to its construction were found in looking at the uprights, weavers and rim. The uprights were nicely beveled and the weavers well cut; the substantial rim had been carved with a hand plane; the rim was wrapped with sap wood – the most pliable and strongest choice; and the bottom of the basket was reinforced with splint 'runners' to protect it from dampness.

I sent photographs to Martha Wetherbee, who is renowned for her reproduction Shaker baskets, and she and her husband Alan Litchfield came up to the Museum to take a closer look. Before they arrived, I gathered more information from Dr. Smith. He graciously shared what he knew, and it was immediately clear that his family had a long acquaintance with the Shakers. Dr. Smith's uncle, Josiah Lincoln, had a cottage at the head of Mascoma Lake where Dr. Smith had spent many happy hours. He remembers his mother rowing across the Lake to buy peas from the Shakers.

We also found in the July 1898 "Home Notes" section of the Shaker newspaper, *The Manifesto*, a notation that Dr. Smith's grandfather, Elias Cheney, visited the Enfield Shakers that year. Elias Cheney had been the editor of the Lebanon, New Hampshire, newspaper, *The Granite State Free Press*, for many years. In 1867 he became a State Representative and then joined the U.S. Consular Service and was appointed to Matanzas, Cuba. In 1898 his successor was apparently visiting, and Mr. Cheney took him on a visit to the Shakers.

So often we want something to be Shaker, and there is evidence to suggest that possibility in this basket. But it is important to broaden the search to consider other alternatives. Martha and Alan are also very knowledgeable of the broader New England basket tradition. They both joined former Museum employee Michael O'Connor and me again to examine the basket. We agreed it was very well made, had a beautiful patina and had very little damage. But there were



Ash Work Basket

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Kenneth W. Smith in memory of Dr. Smith's parents, William A. and Helen K. Smith

other clues as well. We examined the "hole handles" which eliminated the need for an overhead handle and thereby made the basket easier to stack. The wide band of splint seen at the top of the weaving under the handles was not a Shaker technique. This type of wide band is reminiscent of an Indian basket, but we agreed it was more probably the maker's stylistic choice rather than a Native American basket.

Martha pointed out that the basket had an "industrial" look. This, coupled with the wide band at the top and the lack of a handle, drew us to the conclusion that this basket had probably been acquired from a local basket factory, such as those in Peterborough, New Hampshire, or in Western Massachusetts.

Dr. Smith continued to add to the basket's history. He had found this long-forgotten basket in the cellar of his Lebanon, New Hampshire, home and recognized it as the basket he used when he worked at *the Granite State Free Press*. Here, he was instructed to carefully place the ordered newspapers that were going to the post office. *The Granite State Free Press* had started in Lebanon in 1861 with Elias Cheney as editor. Elias Cheney was once the publisher of the *Peterborough Transcript* and was probably familiar with the many basket factories in the area.

While we do not know this basket's history before it arrived at the *Granite State Free Press* building, there are many possibilities. The basket is in excellent condition, indicating light use. The Lebanon/Enfield area was full of textile mills, laundries and other mills where baskets were employed. Dr. Smith also recalled seeing a photograph in Robert Leavitt's "Lebanon, New Hampshire in Pictures" of a sponge factory that showed similar large baskets. The Shakers, too, would have used such a basket.

The Enfield Shakers had many close connections with the surrounding community, and Dr. Smith's basket shows how hard it is to untangle fact from speculation with some artifacts. Until we can connect more dots together, it will remain a beautiful New England basket, similar to those used by the Shakers. It will be very useful as an exhibit piece, as it reflects a moment before New England's population began to shift towards the cities, and rural areas began their slow decline. It was at this time that baskets were replaced by other containers.

Galen Beale is a past president of the Museum's Board of Trustees and chairs the Collections and Exhibitions Committee. She is a former basket maker and herbalist at Canterbury Shaker Village. She has written extensively on the Shakers and co-authored The Earth Shall Blossom.

