



Rosalie Andrews Collection, Friends of White Water Shaker Village



Shakers' Height

VOLUNTEERS WORK TO RESTORE WHITE WATER
SHAKER VILLAGE BY TIM FERAN

Top: Shakers posing in front of the Meeting House at the North Family of White Water. From left to right, Elder Stephen Ball, Joseph Kennedy, Sara Smith, Florence Green, Cora Stephens, a hired man and Elder Charles Sturr.

Portrait: From left to right, Riley Cook, Brother Henry Frederick and Henry Grop. Grop, raised by the Shakers, maintained friendships in the community after he left in 1890.

Bottom: Henry Grop, left, and Brother August Frederick posing in front of a CH&DR locomotive at Dayton's Union Station, about 1900.

Most homeowners will agree that renovation projects always take longer to complete and cost more than expected.

Now imagine if that little renovation project happens to involve 10 original Shaker buildings in southwestern Ohio that have survived almost 200 years of tornadoes, neglect and misguided remodeling efforts—one of which included putting a hot tub in a previously austere bathroom.

That's what Friends of White Water Shaker Village has faced since the nonprofit, all-volunteer group was founded in 2002.

FOUNDED IN 1823

White Water is one of 24 communal villages founded in the United States between 1787 and 1824 by the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, commonly called the "Shakers" because of their ecstatic dancing during worship services. White Water was the last society formed at the end of rapid Shaker expansion in the West.

Located on Oxford Road just outside of Harrison, Ohio, White Water was founded in 1823 by early settlers in Hamilton County and Butler County and is the only remaining village of five original Ohio Shaker villages. Prior to the settlement at White Water, Shaker communities established in Ohio were Union Village (near Lebanon, 1805), Watervliet (Kettering, 1806), North Union (near Cleveland, 1822) and Darby Plains (Union County, 1822).

For 93 years, White Water Shaker Village was a thriving center for the Shakers. They were known for their simple way of life, technical innovations, music and hand-crafted furniture. They also believed in the importance of gender equality.

At its height before the Civil War, there were 180 Shakers living at the White Water Village. After the Civil War, its population declined. By 1916, with fewer than 10 Shakers left, the village closed and the land was sold to three local farming families.

AN UNUSUAL DESIGN

The village is unique in various ways. For instance, the Meeting House, built in 1827, is made of brick.

"It's the only brick Shaker Meeting House remaining in existence," says Friends board member Jennifer Bornemann. "All of the others—on the East Coast—are made of wood."

The design of the Meeting House was also unusual for its era, with the second floor suspended by a truss-and-hanger system in the attic. This design meant that the first floor is completely open and without the obstruction of columns, providing room for the Shakers to dance unimpeded during their religious services. Wood pegs embedded flush in the floor mark where the dancers should stand during the choreographed service.

Another unusual feature of the Meeting House is the double doors in both the front and back, with the back doors for Shakers and the front doors for “the World’s people.” The double doors were in keeping with the Shaker policy of strict separation of the genders—and of celibacy, which meant that the Shakers could only continue to exist by recruiting new members from outside in “the World.”

While the sect’s rules—the Millennial Laws—mandated everything from celibacy to the proper materials to be used in constructing buildings like the Meeting House, those rules could be bent.

The White Water Shakers used brick in constructing the Meeting House despite rules in the Millennial Laws that prohibited such material. Painted wood in the structure was different from the color specified in the rules, too.

THE OUTSKIRTS OF SHAKERDOM

The Ohio group was able to skirt those rules partly because “it was on the fringe of Shakerdom,” the sect’s farthest outpost west, and also because the Shakers knew how to make do with whatever material was at hand, says Friends board president Richard Spence.

“The sawmill wasn’t running yet, plus there were a lot of young men available to work—and a lot of clay around here from a nearby pond,” he says.

Providentially, the brick construction has proved to be durable.

“The building survived a tornado in 1952,” Spence says. “It took the roof off, but the building survived.”

But what couldn’t be destroyed by nature has been damaged by human activity. A private owner took out the original attic stairway in the Meeting House second floor when he brought up his Jacuzzi, Spence says, sighing.

And of course no photos were taken of how the stairway looked.

When the Friends needed to replace rafters in the attic, “we asked the architect if we could just spread the posts—and he fainted, so we used sliding tenons to avoid stressing—and possibly wrecking—the brick walls,” Spence says.

Collection of James R. Innis, Jr.



Elder Charles Faraday and boys in front of the Shaker Broom Shop about 1890. The Center Family dwelling is in the background.

A HIDDEN GEM

After the Great Parks of Hamilton County purchased the buildings from private owners between 1989 and 1991, the park district stabilized the structures. Since the Great Parks mission doesn't focus on historic preservation, in 2007 the Friends began leasing eight acres and 10 buildings from the park district to take on the big job of restoring this little-known historic gem.

Despite its uniqueness, the village has been relatively unknown in recent years, even among local residents, says Friends board member Linda Poynter.

"I live two-tenths of a mile up the road," Poynter says during a recent tour of the village. "I've always been interested in history, and on vacations we'd always hit historical sites. I know that there are lots of 'somebodies' who have saved those places. It is my turn to help save White Water for others to enjoy."

Unbeknownst to her, "my dad used to sit on the steps of the North Family Dwelling House as a little boy while his parents played cards inside," Poynter says, adding in astonishment, "when I saw there was going to be an open house here, my dad—who is now 88—said, 'Oh, yeah, I've been inside.'"

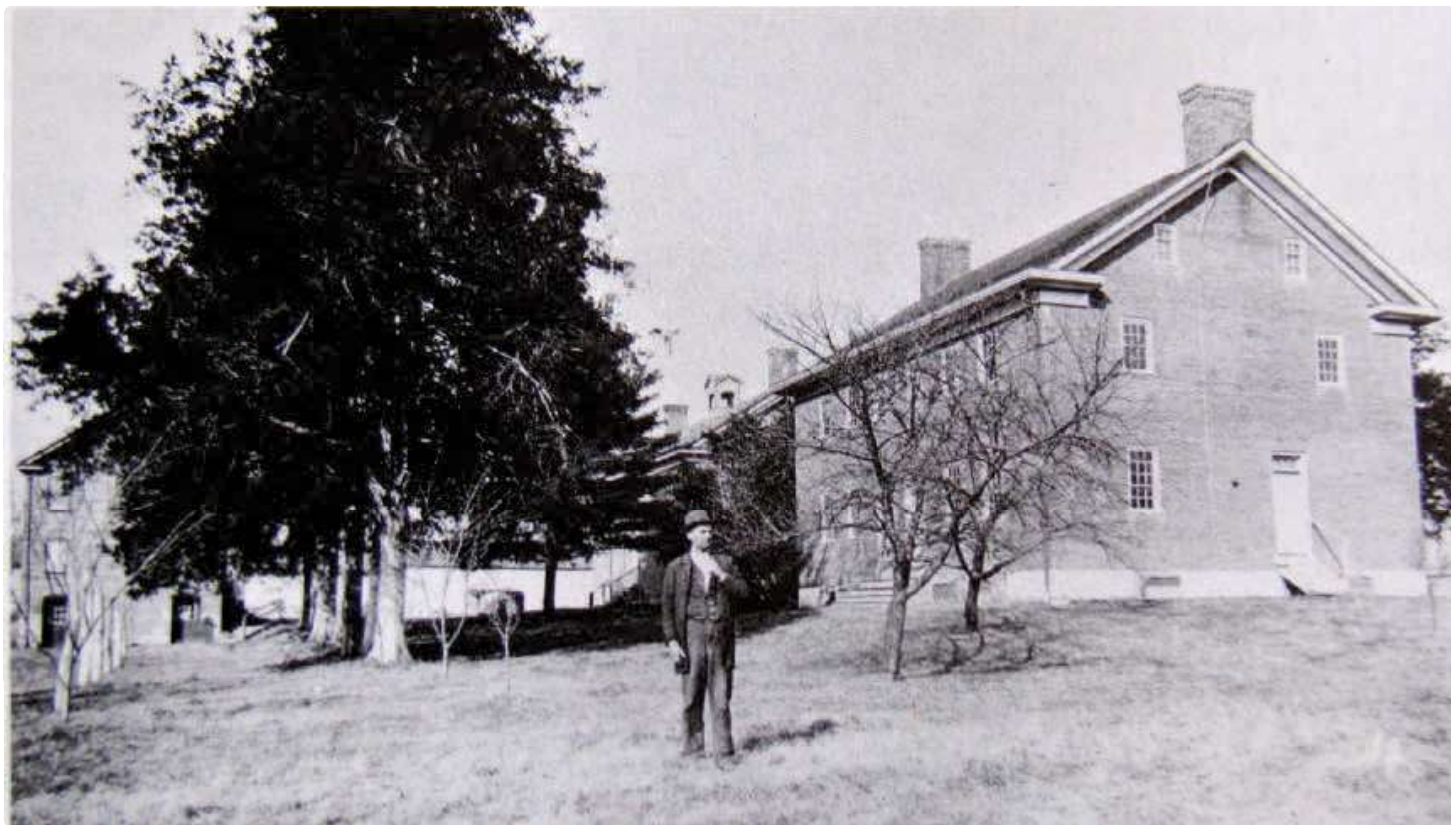
"We have members in 21 states, but getting word out even here is important," Poynter says. "We often hear people say, 'I didn't know it was here, and I live 4 miles away.' But they've been to Pleasant Hill," the Shaker religious community in Kentucky that is now a National Historic Landmark.

BIG PLANS

This year, as White Water Shaker Village celebrates the 200th anniversary of its founding, the Friends continue to press forward with restoration. Their goal, when all the work is done, is to offer docent-led tours, Shaker craft workshops, demonstrations and fairs, and a shop selling Shaker-style crafts and books.

Their efforts have, predictably, come up against unexpected complications. "The previous owners of the Dwelling House poured concrete into peg rail channels because they wanted wallpaper," Poynter says. "We had a gift shop in one of those rooms and wanted to put the peg rails back, but didn't expect it to take this long to remove the concrete. And we're getting bids on the upstairs to fix the ceilings and skim coat so we can paint."

"We're trying to stretch as much as we can. There have been a lot of donors, a lot of volunteers."



The Shaker Museum & Library, Old Chatham, NY

Elder Frederick Faulhaber and the White Water Meeting House about 1890.



Sister Melissa Carpenter



Unknown White Water Sister



Sister Lucinda Parker

Among those donors was Hedda Windisch von Goeben, whose roots were in Cincinnati's historic Windisch-Muhlhauser Brewing Company. When she died in 2021 in Granville, Ohio, she left the Friends an endowment of more than \$460,000.

"She appreciated the fact that we are all-volunteer and doing the majority of the work ourselves," Poynter explains.

The Friends have already completed work on a modern restroom and septic system, and are working on installing parking lots, walkways and exterior lighting while meeting other code requirements. Their restoration of the Meeting House continues, and they've begun to restore the Milk House, built in 1849.

At the turn of the 20th century, a visitor to the village, A.D. Emerich, called it the best collection of Shaker buildings in private hands in America.

"More than 200 years later, our ultimate goal is to restore all the buildings to how they looked," Spence says.

Tim Feran is a native of Cleveland and a graduate of Harvard University. For more than 40 years, he's been a professional journalist, first at the *Lorain Journal*, then for 30 years at *The Columbus Dispatch*, and currently as a freelance writer. He lives in Columbus with his wife, Maryellen O'Shaughnessy, Franklin County Clerk of Courts.



LEARN MORE

In June, *Cincinnati Magazine* featured a story about White Water Shaker Village. Read it at ohiohistory.org/shaker1.

Visit the Friends of White Water Shaker Village website at whitewatervillage.org. The group is hosting open houses on Sept. 24 and Oct. 7 from 2 to 5 p.m. They're also scheduling small group tours. Email them at friendsofwwsv@gmail.com.



Steve Kistler Collection, Friends of White Water Shaker Village



Linda Poynter, Friends of White Water Shaker Village

Top: North Family vista from the north, about 1890.

Bottom: Present day view of the 1827 Meeting House (far left), 1832 Dwelling (center) and 1826 Woodhouse (right) at the White Water Shaker Village North Family site.