

Celebrating 200 Years of White Water Shaker Village 1823-2023

Mother Ann Lee predicted that the next wave of converted Believers would be in the "West". This year White Water marks the 200th anniversary of the founding of the last society formed at the end of rapid Shaker expansion in the West. White Water was like other Shaker West communities as these converts were prosperous yeomen farmers who owned land and some were prominent citizens who held township offices before joining the Shaker society.

Founding of White Water Shaker Village

According to Brother Richard Pelham's memoir in the Library of Congress, Miriam Agnew traveled to Union Village near Lebanon, Ohio, in early spring 1823. Union Village was the parent settlement for the Western Shaker settlements including West Union in Indiana; Pleasant Hill and South Union in Kentucky; and North Union, Watervliet, Darby Plains and White Water in Ohio.

This solo journey for Miriam was a long one from home with the last 18 miles from Hamilton on foot. She came to learn about the Shakers. After a few days, she confessed her sins and became the first member of what would be called White Water Shaker Village. The community of White Water is located about 25 miles northwest of Cincinnati, Ohio.

Richard Pelham and George Blackleach were sent by the Union Village ministry in early May 1823 to preach to neighbors and relatives of Miriam and her husband Joseph Agnew. As word spread that a Shaker would preach in Joseph Agnew's barn, the gathering drew such a large crowd that the service was moved outside. At the end of the service, Joseph and his brother Brant joined the Shakers. Within the next month, 30 locals had joined the faith.

The earliest use of the term White Water was when Pelham and Blackleach traveled back to Union Village stating in a journal they had returned from White Water. Union Village sent 78 members from Darby Plains (near Columbus, Ohio) to White Water when Darby Plains closed.

In 1825, Union Village provided funds to purchase 100 acres. That same year, four elders/elderesses came to lead this newly expanded group. In 1826, White Water thrived with a good crop. A school house was built at the South Family. A report from the Union Village Ministry to the Central Ministry in the east stated that White Water was prosperous and could support themselves and bear burdens.

In August 1827, construction began on the two and one half story meeting house. This 35 x 44 foot structure was built with bricks that were hand-molded and fired on site. The first floor was for worship services. The second floor had four retiring rooms for the elders and elderesses. This building has a unique architectural design in which the

second floor and attic are suspended by a truss and hanger system in the attic. Therefore, no support columns are on the first floor leaving space for dancing without the obstruction of columns. Dark wooden pegs were placed in the floor as dancing cues. Four months later, the first church meeting was held on December 2, 1827. A brick dwelling, the same size and shape as the meeting house, was built in 1832 beside it.

Industry at White Water included many prosperous endeavors. Following additional land purchases, the grist mill (1828), sawmill (1829) and a brewery (1832) were built. Spirits, brooms and produce were sold to the world. The garden seed trade routes went as far west as Missouri. In the late 1850s, White Water earned more than \$5000 from the seed business. On the second floor of the Sisters' Shop, they raised silkworms and created bonnets. -

At its height before the Civil War, there were 180 Shakers living at the White Water Village. The turn of the century brought modern technology including a telephone at the Center Family and North Family, an automobile, and indoor plumbing. As the result of a devastating fire in 1907 and the decline in membership, the village closed in December 1916 after 93 years. The land was sold to three local farming families. In 1990, over 600 acres of the former Shaker Village was purchased by Great Parks of Hamilton County.

Friends of the White Water Shaker Village

In 2007, an all-volunteer nonprofit, Friends of White Water Shaker Village, Inc. (FWWSV), leased eight acres and the nine remaining historic structures at the North Family site of the village. Since then, volunteers have worked diligently to open the village to the public. FWWSV has completed many projects, including restoring all windows in the meeting house, building new modern restrooms, and installing a septic system. Current projects include restoration of the 1849 milk house and a volunteer painting initiative in the meeting house and dwelling.

During this 200th anniversary year, FWWSV is working to raise awareness of the Shaker village, to increase membership, and to raise funds for restoration work. Memberships and donations are important, as they provide the resources to preserve the great treasures in this village. You can help FWWSV continue its work to preserve, restore, and open the Shaker buildings to the public by becoming a FWWSV member. Visit the FWWSV website, www.WhiteWaterVillage.org, for more information about membership. Two more Open Houses and free guided tours of the village will take place on Sunday, September 24th; and Saturday, October 7th, from 2-5 pm. We would be glad to schedule a private tour for you on your next trip out "West".

Three pictures shown below.



Sister Shop on left behind tree. Back of Meeting House on the right side.



North Family looking South. Sister Shop is the brick building in the middle with the two chimneys. Rest of these buildings can be seen today.



Meeting House on the left. Dwelling on the right.