THE BRETHREN'S WORKSHOP, THE OLDEST SURVIVING BUILDING AT THE NORTH FAMILY SHAKER SITE, HOUSED A TWO-STORY WATERWHEEL THAT POWERED WORKING TOOLS AND A FORGE.

A traveler in the 1820s, having toured the prosperous Shaker village of Mount Lebanon in upstate New York, raved about the place in his memoirs: "Every thing bears the impress of labour, vigilance and skill." Along the community's busy fields and streets, he noted, "Not a weed, not a spot of filth, or any nuisance is suffered to exist." The austere buildings were so kempt and well-constructed, he concluded, "unless overthrown by force, they may stand for centuries." Despite his predictions, few of Mount Lebanon's buildings endured a century.

Mount Lebanon peaked in 1860 with a population of 600 living on 6,000 rolling acres with Berkshire views. The community was originally organized into eight "families," clusters of dwellings and workshops to accommodate 30 to 100 Shakers. Three of these clusters have been razed. Fragments of the other five survive, due to a few devoted owners, preservationists, and scholars. One belongs to a Sufi commune called the Abode of the Message, and the rest are concentrated in an historic district with 32 buildings—out of an original 130—dotting 72 acres. Fires have devastated portions of the site, groundwater torrents have unsettled its foundations, vandals have torn out its fittings, and carpenter ants have gnawed its hewn beams.

Hands to Work, Hearts to God

A Shaker site in Mount Lebanon, New York, illuminates an ephemeral way of life

by Eve M. Kahn

photographs by Elliott Kaufman

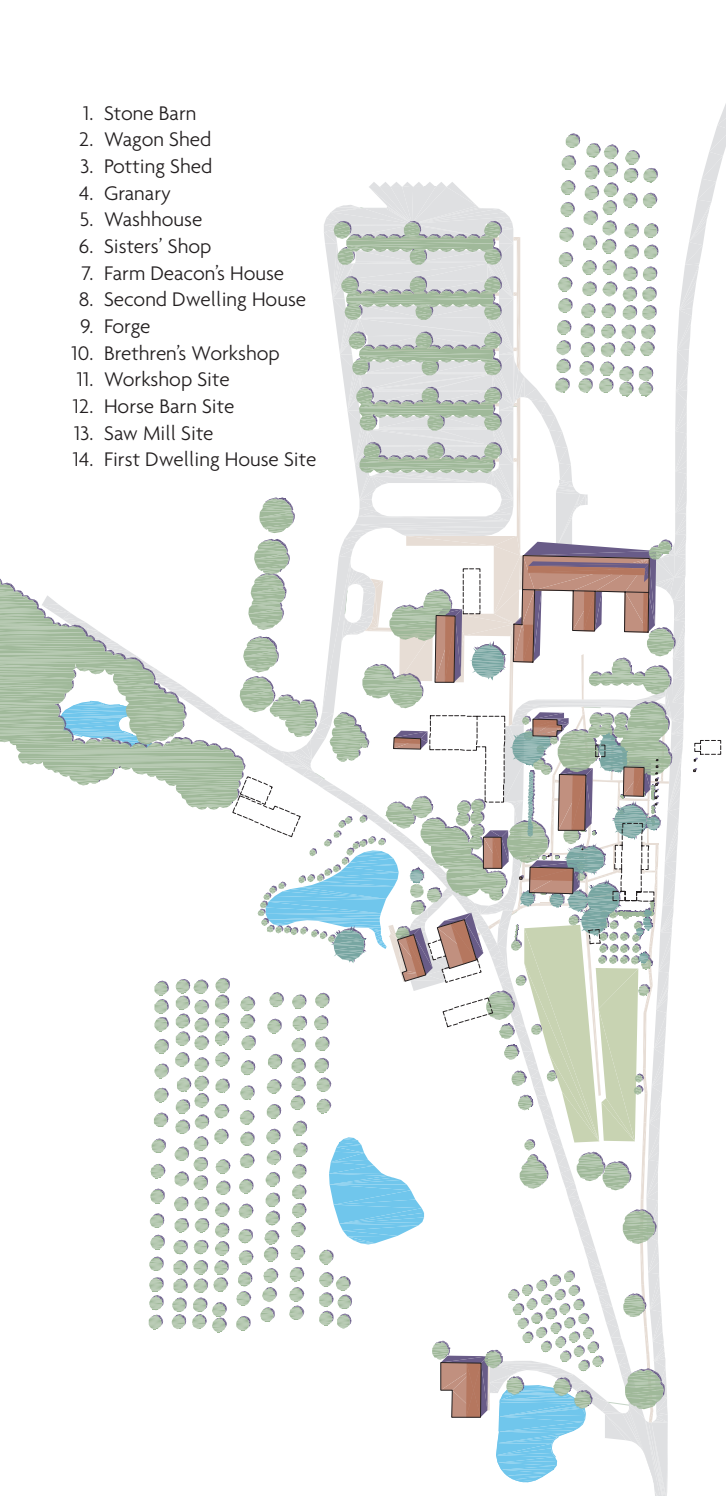
America's first Shakers, an eight-person band of Britons, had fled persecution in their homeland in 1774. Their prophetess leader, Ann Lee, was convinced that Christ would return as a woman—and possibly already had, as Mother Ann herself. Her oft-quoted motto: "I am the word." Her followers called themselves the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing. They were known as Shakers because of their paroxysmal confession practices and ecstatic meetinghouse dances. Though they professed celibacy, they attracted converts in a dozen states, establishing two dozen outposts from Maine to Tennessee, and peaked at 3,608 members in 1840.

The spiritual and regulatory headquarters was Mount Lebanon, founded in 1787 on farmland donated by an early convert, George Darrow—namesake of the boarding school that now occupies a portion of the site. The Central Ministry—comprised of two elders and two eldresses, for Mother Ann had set a precedent of strict gender equality—laid down rules for the other villages. Mount Lebanon's 1821 "Millennial Laws," for instance, dictated exact times for rising and praying and resting, and even which streets and buildings should be spiffed up just before the Sabbath. The areas near the meetinghouse should be cleanest, since tourists gathered there by the hundreds to watch services. In the Sabbath crowds, Mount Lebanon's leaders would scan for outsiders particularly swept up in the proceedings, and hence likely new believers.

Newcomers had to sign over their possessions and often sued for restitution after leaving the sect. They moved into ascetically furnished, four-to-eight-person bedrooms, where mirrors could measure no larger than 18 by 12 inches, and fell into tightly scripted schedules. Their enforced diligence and adherence to the motto: "Hands to Work and Hearts to God" paid off. "They are good farmers," Charles Dickens wrote after an 1842 tour of Mount Lebanon. "All their produce is eagerly purchased and highly esteemed."

"Unlike the similarly garbed and disciplined Amish and Mennonites," says conservation architect Marty Hylton, "the Shakers embraced technology. They adopted all the latest agricultural techniques,

AN ENGINEERING FEAT STILL ADMIRED TODAY, THE ARCHED ROOF STRUCTURE OF THE SECOND MEETING HOUSE (1824), ABOVE, ELIMINATED THE NEED FOR INTERNAL SUPPORT POSTS ON THE GROUND FLOOR, WHICH PROVIDED AN OPEN WORKSPACE AND PLACE FOR SHAKER DANCES. THE CURRENT MASTERPLAN PROPOSES THE REUSE OF THE NORTH FAMILY SITE AS A NEW HOME FOR THE SHAKER MUSEUM AND LIBRARY, REUNITING OBJECTS, ARCHITECTURE, AND THE LANDSCAPE.



they patented new machines, and they loved power tools." The workshop at Mount Lebanon, for example, was once connected to an adjacent 1840s forge by a rod in midair. Powered by the workshop's two-story waterwheel, the spinning rod drove the forge's trip hammer. The waterwheel's overrun, in turn, coursed down to a now-vanished lumber mill.

Mount Lebanon began to fade after the Civil War, as its population aged and new converts were hard to attract, and harder to keep. Disgruntled members sometimes just fled after nightfall. So the leaders consolidated families, closed down manufacturing divisions, and had no compunction about tearing down or renovating structures. In 1947, the last seven Mount Lebanon Shakers, residing solely within the North Family site, decamped for Hancock Shaker Village, five kilometers away over the Massachusetts line—a community which itself closed in 1960. One of the last to leave, Sister Jennie Wells bragged about the stone barn to a reporter from The New Yorker: "I don't want to sound vainglorious, but it's the biggest barn in the whole United States," she said. "It's as sturdy now as the day it was finished." She also complained about the Shaker-obsessed collectors hovering around: "These people would grab the chairs right out from under us if we's let them."

The region's main Boston-Buffalo route, now a sleepy byway, once ran past the Mount Lebanon North Family site. Its eye-catching architecture—plain, but inventively engineered, as well as strangely oversized to accommodate communal life—drew customers to Shaker stores selling everything from brooms to broadcloth.

At first glance, the North Family buildings look like pared-down versions of the region's Anglo-Dutch, Federal, and Neoclassical architecture. But growth hormone seems to have been injected into every feature, for both practical and aesthetic reasons. Doorways come in twos and threes so that the Shaker sisters, brethren, and leaders could circulate separately. Windows are gargantuan for their time, with splayed-out frames and sills to maximize natural light and ventilation—even the North Family 1850s henhouse-turned-potting shed has 48 panes per opening. Rooms contain column-free spaces up to 25 meters long, thanks to ceilings suspended on iron hangers from post-and-beam frames. Gabled or arched roofs are shallowly pitched to maximize attic spaces; the Shakers then softened the awkwardly tall upper stories with decorative flared cornices.

"It's been called 'the architecture of confrontation,'" says Jerry Grant, the research director of the Shaker Museum and Library in Old Chatham, fifteen kilometers south of Mount Lebanon. "The Shakers built unexpected, curious, unmissable buildings, right on

PLAN COURTESY COOPER, ROBERTSON & PARTNERS

ACCORDING TO THE CURRENT MASTER-PLAN, 11 BUILDINGS AT THE NORTH FAMILY SITE ARE TO BE RESTORED AND REUSED, INCLUDING, FROM LEFT ABOVE, THE SECOND MEETING HOUSE (1854), THE BRETHREN'S WORKSHOP (1829), AND A GRANARY (1838). THE WASHHOUSE (1854) CONTAINED DRYING RACKS, BELOW, THAT USED PASSIVE HEAT TO DESICCATE CLOTHING DURING THE WINTER MONTHS.

the roads, and then allowed outsiders very little access. It was part of their marketing themselves to the unconverted, to those they called 'the world's people.'"

The North Family structures are now in fair to poor condition, and two are on the verge of collapse. A roofless 1859 stone barn, gutted by a suspicious fire in 1972, has lost so much of its mortar that it's propped up mainly by inertia. Its shale, sandstone, and marble mass, at 60 meters long, was once America's largest stone barn. A few yards from its cracked and weed-choked shell, the fieldstone footings of the clapboarded 1854 washhouse are so waterlogged that the frame is about to slide down Lebanon Mountain.

In total, 11 structures still stand, including the endangered barn and washhouse, the potting shed, a decrepit 1860s wagon shed, a relatively sturdy 1838 granary with a cantilevered seed chute, and an 1829 brick workshop that hasn't been used, let alone painted or patched, in the five and a half decades since the Shakers had unsentimentally sold off the property and much of their belongings. They left behind, though, their walls' ubiquitous pegboards—strips of knobs in every room, used to hang cloaks, tools, candleholders, and chairs. Most of Mount Lebanon's territory was gradually taken over by a coed prep school, the Darrow School, which has tried to steward it well while converting the buildings into

dorms, classrooms, and offices. In 1989 the school turned over the North Family site to a historical society, which has attracted perhaps 500 visitors a year to its summer-weekend opening hours.

In 2001, the Shaker Museum and Library received a $750,000 Save America's Treasures Millennium Grant to conduct a feasibility study to restore Mount Lebanon as a must-visit destination, a project estimated to cost some $40 million. According to a masterplan now being finalized, the North Family cluster—as well as Mount Lebanon's meetinghouse, a barrel-vaulted 1824 marvel with a sanctuary ringed in three rows of pegboard—is to become a hub of galleries and research centers exploring every facet of Shaker life, from their vegan diet and celibate ways to innovative manufacturing techniques, from mesmerizing ritual dances to their little-known belief that architecture should dazzle passersby.

A gentleman farmer/investment banker named John S. Williams founded the museum in 1950, after befriending Shakers at dying villages around the Northeast and buying up artifacts and archives. He filled his red barns with furniture, tools, baskets, a firefighting wagon, and quantities of documents—the manuscripts alone fill more than ten meters of shelf space. Some 80 percent of Williams' material came from Mount Lebanon. Other, perhaps better-known finds from the site, including the Shaker rooms now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the American Museum in Bath, England came from the North Family's first dwelling house, demolished in 1972.

"The Save America's Treasures grant enabled the Shaker Museum to assemble a project team and carry out a level of survey and documentation work that would never have been possible otherwise," explains Cherie Miller Schwartz, the director of the Mount Lebanon project for the Shaker Museum. The funds so far have gone toward 1,500 pages of analyses and plans by architects and conservation firms.

Architects and planners at Cooper, Robertson & Partners have devised schemes for incorporating 4,600 square meters of galleries into the barn, while gently adapting the rest of the terrain for up to 90,000 visitors a year. Stabilization begins this winter, and construction could start as early as spring 2004, depending on funding flow. Preservationists at Page Ayres Cowley Architects have studied practically every inch of the buildings and compared their findings to the Shakers' own detailed housekeeping journals. At Cowley's office, some 500 minute samples of paint, mortar, wood, brick, and plaster have been encased in clear resin cubes like precious fossils. Reports in progress note which buildings are supported by which kinds of girders and joists, and which were painted which colors—Prussian blue, cinnabar red, yellow ochre, forest green, cream—and when. And landscape historians at Landscapes LA have mapped every marble fencepost, aging apple tree, and broken aqueduct, and every intrusive modern traffic sign and fire hydrant.

"There are very few historical sites in America that have been this well documented," Cowley says. Lili Ott, the executive director of the Shaker Museum, adds, "So many of us in the museum field only see incremental changes at our institutions. Here, every day, there are leaps and bounds. To bring the collections back where they belong feels so great."

ON THE NIGHT OF SEPTEMBER 28, 1972, A FIRE SWEPT THROUGH THE NORTH FAMILY STONE BARN, LEAVING ONLY ITS MASSIVE EXTERIOR WALLS. FOR THE PAST THREE DECADES, THE BUILDING HAS STOOD AS A RUIN, CONTINUING TO DECAY FROM EXPOSURE TO THE ELEMENTS.

Of the 19 surviving Shaker villages, about half have become museums. The rest are either private homes or have been incorporated—sometimes improbably—into prisons, hospitals, and a golf course. Mount Lebanon's mixture of boarding school, commune, private houses, and future major museum, then, is not unusual. What is unique, Jerry Grant explains, is the fragility of its most damaged structures, its quantity of untouched historic fabric, and the array of high-powered experts poised to turn it into a showplace.

Perhaps only the utilitarian Shakers themselves wouldn't be impressed. Two years ago, Marty Hylton, WMF's Manager for New Projects, met Brother Arnold, one of four Shakers living in the sect's last active community at Sabbathday Lake, Maine. Brother Arnold asked Hylton, "Do you know what the Mount Lebanon Shakers would have done with the buildings? [They would have]... torn them down, because they no longer served their original use." The new master plan, Hylton points out, of course calls for no demolition, but is nonetheless Shaker in spirit: buildings will be thriftily saved and reborn for new functions.

"The North family is a very pure Shaker site, a mid-century Shaker village at its peak," Grant says. "What few Victorian intrusions were there have burned down. No other site has as urgent problems as ours, or is in such transition. Sometimes I feel it can't all move fast enough for me. But then I remember: Mount Lebanon wasn't built in a day." The North Family Site is included on WMF's 2004 list of the *100 Most Endangered Sites*. ■

THE SHAKERS INSTALLED A WINCH IN THE ATTIC OF THE SECOND MEETINGHOUSE TO RAISE, LOWER, AND TILT A PANEL TO CORRECT POOR ACCOUSTICS IN THE WORSHIP HALL BELOW.