STRIVING FOR PERFECTION

Shaker Village interpreters demonstrate herb processing in the Farm Deacon's Shop. The building, which was constructed in 1809, was at that time the original Centre Family dwelling.

SHAKER VILLAGE OF PLEASANT HILL

The Shakers are one of America's best-known utopian societies. An investigation of Pleasant Hill, one of their former communities in Kentucky, reveals how their emphasis on order, work, and religious devotion, and their penchant for innovations, were an attempt at perfecting their lives.

By Kelli Whitlock Burton

Of all the Utopian societies in America's history, perhaps the most widely recognized by both scholars and consumers is the Shakers. An offshoot of England's Quaker church, the Shakers, who came to America in 1774, are known for their boisterous worship services, gender and racial equality, and, of course, their trademark ladder-back chairs. "They seem to me unusually interested in perfecting things," said archaeologist Kim McBride. "They wanted to create heaven on earth." Thanks to the diaries, records, and artifacts they left behind, the Shakers' place in the country's cultural memory is secure. Indeed, historians have called the American Shakers one of the most successful religious communal societies of the 19th century.

While these traits may represent a part of the Shakers' history, McBride has learned that there are elements of Shaker life that can't be conveyed solely through documents and furniture. "The Shakers are pretty well known and pretty well studied from an historical standpoint," said McBride, adjunct assistant professor and co-director of the Kentucky Archaeological Survey at the University of Kentucky. "From an archaeological standpoint, not so much."

For 22 years, she has worked on and off at Pleasant Hill,

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Archaeologist Kim McBride uses a transit to map part of the site.

Kentucky, once home to the third-largest Shaker community in America, to rectify this situation. Located 30 miles southwest of Lexington, Pleasant Hill was founded in 1805 by a few New England Shaker missionaries and a small group of converts. At its peak, the village had nearly 500 residents who built some 250 structures and cultivated more than 4,000 acres of farmland.

McBride has directed a series of field schools in which more than 100 students have located the sites of former buildings throughout the village, helping to create a more complete picture of how Pleasant Hill once appeared. She has come to appreciate an aspect of Shaker philosophy that is often overshadowed by the goods they produced and their frenzied worship practices—their strong sense of order. Its influence can be seen in everything from the social hierarchy of Shaker communities to the layout of the stone foundations McBride has uncovered over the years.

Founded in Manchester, England, in 1747, the Shakers, who were formally known as the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, were given their informal title because of the frantic dancing and trembling movements they made to purge their bodies of sin as they worshipped. By the 1770s, the Shakers had a new leader, Ann Lee, one of the first women to head a church and a charismatic and outspoken believer who claimed to have spiritual revelations and visions of Christ. In 1774, Lee led a small group of Shakers to America to create a utopian society where men and women were considered equals, all possessions and property were shared, all members practiced celibacy, and work was viewed as the ultimate worship of God. Their first settlement was near Albany, New York. Over the next several years, with their numbers increasing as more converts joined their sect, the Shakers established communities around New England. They continued to flourish after Lee's death in 1784.

In the early 1800s, church leaders decided to expand westward, and in January 1805, three missionaries set out on foot for central Kentucky. By the end of that year, a small group of Shakers was living on a 140-acre farm owned by new convert Elijah Thomas. The community signed its first family covenant (a pledge to adhere to the Shakers' lifestyle and ethics) at the end of 1806, and three years later began construction of a permanent settlement on a hilltop not far from Thomas' farm. They named it Pleasant Hill.

Shaker communities consisted of several families, each with between 60 and 100 unrelated people who lived and worked together as brothers and sisters. Pleasant Hill had five families. Each family had its own dwelling, washhouse, and assortment of outbuildings, and was led by an elder and an eldress, a reflection of the Shakers' belief that God was both male and female. At the top of the village hierarchy was Centre Family, whose members were considered to be the most spiritually devout, and who had two elders and eldresses.

Unlike the New England Shakers, who largely made their living by making and selling crafts and fine furniture, villagers at Pleasant Hill turned to the region's rich farmland for their industry. In addition to farming, they manufactured flat

brooms, shoes, weaving devices, woolen materials, and other goods. They sold and traded their products in towns up and down the Kentucky, Ohio, and Mississippi rivers. Their good fortune lasted decades.

But the outbreak of the Civil War and the appeal of urban life in the mid and late 1800s led to a decrease in membership and economic decline for the Pleasant Hill Shakers. Most of the community elders and leaders had died. Their commitment to celibacy meant the society could only increase its membership through religious converts, and by the 1880s, the number of converts had dwindled and much of the Shakers' land had been sold. Finally, in 1923, the religious society at Pleasant Hill ceased to exist. The remaining buildings were either sold or fell into a state of disrepair.

That could have been the end of the Shakers' legacy at Pleasant Hill. But in 1961, a group of Kentucky residents joined forces to save what was left of "Shakertown," as it was known. They created a nonprofit organization, Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill, Inc., and raised funds to buy more than 2,000 acres of the land that had once belonged to the Shakers. Included were 34 of the village's original buildings which, although in a sad state, were fundamentally sound due to the solid Shaker construction. Restoration efforts began in 1966 and two years later, Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill was open to the public. It is now a National Historic Landmark that draws more than 125,000 visitors a year.

Two field school students expose stratigraphic profiles that helped determine the location of the 1810 meeting house, while two others screen excavated dirt for artifacts.

IN 1990, McBride was asked to help locate several buildings and areas that were no longer visible and that had played a key role during the Shakers' time at Pleasant Hill—the first meeting house, an outdoor worship area that had been used for religious ceremonies, and the home of Elijah Thomas, where the Shakers first settled. Almost immediately, she was drawn to Pleasant Hill's architectural

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The students work at the site of the 1810 meeting house, which burned down in 1839.

This drawing was done by a member of Pleasant Hill in 1887. It shows the village from the south. On the left side of the drawing, the three Centre Family dwellings are clustered together to the right of the road.

design. Two perpendicular roads ran north to south and east to west through the middle of the village. The main buildings, which had a precise spatial relationship that McBride found fascinating, lay largely in two rows on either side of the east-west road. "Over time I've come to personally focus on this sense of order of the village," she said. "From what I have read about many other communal societies, most grew in a more haphazard way, not as explicitly planned as Shaker communities."

Indeed, when looking at Pleasant Hill, it's easy to see how the Shakers' strong sense of familial order influenced its layout. Three main families lived in the heart of the village, the East, West, and Centre families. As their names suggest, the Centre Family was located in the center of the village, directly across from the meeting house where the entire community worshipped, and the East and West families lived to the east and west of Centre Family. The two remaining families—the North Lot and West Lot families—lived a short distance from the others. The village's industrial operations were based at the West Lot Family area, which the foundation acquired in 1986. Only three of the West Lot's original buildings remained intact, including a washhouse that would become one of McBride's first projects.

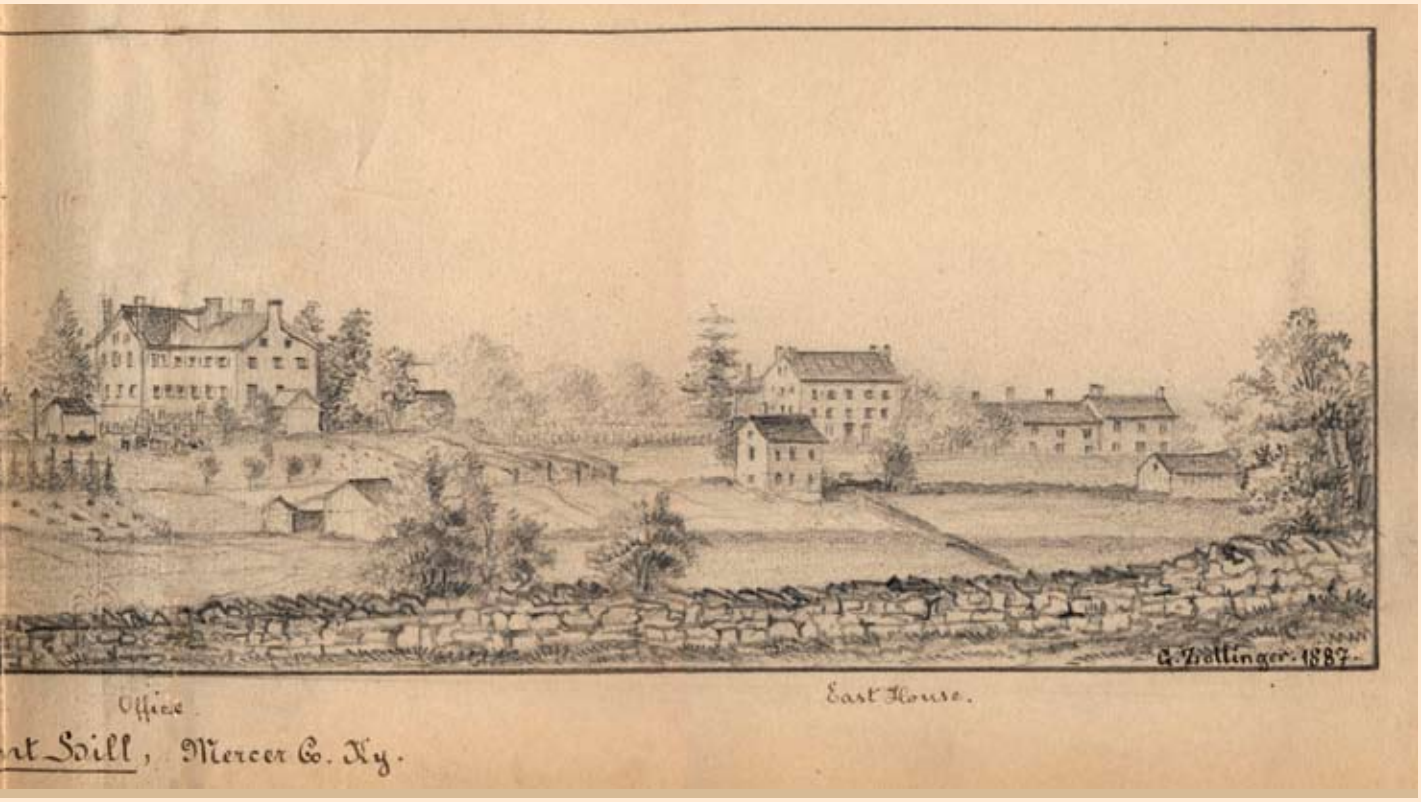
After they acquired the West Lot buildings, Pleasant Hill's staff set out to restore the old washhouse and convert it into overnight lodgings for guests. McBride was asked to survey the site for artifacts before restoration went further. She found the remnants of three furnaces clustered around a chimney. These likely were used in the production of candles, preserves, and possibly even smoking pipes, in addition to heating water for washing clothes.

More interesting was the discovery of a lead pipe that ran the length of a channel dug into limestone bedrock beside the house. With the help of gravity, the lead pipe brought water from a nearby spring into the washhouse. Outside the building, they found another channel lined with limestone that was used to drain the wastewater. This discovery was "a complete surprise," said Larrie Curry, Pleasant Hill's curator. The Shakers were known for developing new tools and techniques to make their work more efficient, McBride said, and this water delivery and drainage system is a good example of that.

Other excavations over the years have uncovered remnants of an 1808 log cabin where the Shakers initially lived when they moved to Pleasant Hill, a village post office, a boys' dormitory, the Centre Family's smokehouse, a brick kiln, and a number of foundations for buildings whose purposes are unknown.

Since 1990, McBride searched for Holy Sinai's Plain, an outdoor worship area the Shakers used beginning in the mid-1840s for sacred dances and services. Shaker leaders ordered Pleasant Hill and all other communities to destroy their outdoor worship areas. McBride said that most scholars believe this was a reaction to negative publicity these worship services had attracted at some of the Shakers' Northeastern villages.

The Shakers kept detailed journals dating back to 1806, and these documents described Holy Sinai as an oval-shaped area enclosed by a fence, but they offered conflicting accounts of its location. McBride had been focusing on hilltops because, according to some journal accounts, the Shakers' leadership encouraged their communities to place worship areas there. But Philippe Chavance, a French architect who was then a visiting scholar at the University of Kentucky, toured a number of other Shaker villages, and



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he observed that their outdoor worship areas were not all situated on hilltops.

In 1996, at Chavance's suggestion, McBride turned her attention to a flat area about a half mile southeast of the village that was mentioned in one account. She found three nails that were likely used to build a fence. The area had been disturbed by years of farming, so she hired a backhoe to remove about 18 inches of plow zone. That done, McBride discovered numerous postmolds from a fence that was arranged in an oval pattern. The post molds, in combination with the nails and journal account, were proof she had found Holy Sinai.

A review of the journals and historical photographs helped McBride accomplish one of her latest research goals: to identify the exact locations of the village's first meeting house, built in 1810, and the 1812 Centre Family dwelling. The journals told of these structures having faced each other across the north-south road without pinpointing where they once stood. In early May, McBride and a group of 14 University of Kentucky anthropology students began a six-week field school during which they endured 90-plus-degree heat for eight hours a day, Monday through Friday.

Ever conservation-minded, the Shakers often salvaged building materials from structures that were no longer useable. This resourcefulness initially hampered the researchers' efforts to locate the precise footprint of the meeting house, which burned down in 1839. "We were looking for the kind of intact dressed stone formation you usually see in a building foundation, but instead we found only very small, jagged pieces of limestone," said McBride. She soon realized those small stones were in fact the vestige of the foundation, and she suspects the Shakers dug up the foundation stones to use elsewhere when the building burned.

The students also uncovered the foundation of the 1812 Centre Family dwelling, which turned out to be intact and in many places just inches below the surface. As the front wall of the dwelling was exposed, it became clear that it roughly lined up with the Meeting House.

Most of the excavations McBride has led at Pleasant Hill have involved exposing a deeply buried building foundation to determine its footprint, and then backfilling it. However, the nature of the Centre Family dwelling foundation, being near the surface, coupled with its location—just yards from the visitors' entrance to the restored village—offered

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A glass bead, clay marble, and an animal bone button were among some of the artifacts discovered during the excavation of the 1810 meeting house.

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A student excavates the corner of the limestone foundation of the 1812 Centre Family dwelling, which burned in 1932. The researchers determined this corner was precisely aligned with the northeast corner of the opposing 1810 Meeting House.

FORD ALBUMS COLLECTION, UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVES 1977.01.158.

This historical photograph shows the 1812 (left), 1824 (center), and 1809 (right) Centre Family dwellings.

an interesting opportunity. The team uncovered the entire foundation of the main part of the house. "By exposing the full foundation, we hoped to give the visitors a better sense that Pleasant Hill had changed drastically over time, and that it had a dynamic history of experimentation as it developed," McBride said.

The most drastic of those changes was reorienting the entire village from a north-south alignment to east-west, which the Shakers did sometime in the 1810s. This resulted in building another meeting house in 1820, and another Centre Family dwelling in 1824, which, in McBride's estimation, is the Shakers' finest stone structure in the U.S. The two stand opposite one another on the east-west road and are within view of the 1812 building's foundation. The Shakers' journals, curiously, don't reveal why they took on this Herculean project, but McBride surmised that the lay of the land was such that the east-west alignment was more conducive to expansion.

The old Centre Family dwelling and meeting house were turned into workshops, the former used by the sisters, the latter by the brothers. A number of the artifacts found there—including a bone button and a rare bone button "blank" (a flat piece of bone with circular cut outs), and a thimble, and spool could indicate they were making or repairing clothes in the workshops.

Over the years, McBride has uncovered more than 10,000 artifacts, most of which are fragments of nails, wooden pipes, and window and bottle glass. One of the few intact artifacts is a wrought iron bootscaper that was found a few yards outside the old meeting house. This artifact could have been installed at one of the meeting house doorways—most Shaker buildings have two front doors, one for women and one for men—and it's an example of their obsession with cleanliness, which is seen in various aspects of their lives, including "cleansing" dances that were commonly performed in mid-19th-century worship services. They were so clean that they hauled away their trash rather than dumping it near their homes, thereby depriving McBride of a rich source of archaeological information.

McBride hopes to excavate the remains of the Centre Family washhouse. The documents state it had two cisterns, one of which is visible, and the other marked by a stone. Large trees have grown around the cisterns and other parts of the foundation, so the excavation will be difficult, but the research potential is significant. Washing the clothes of up to 100 people was burdensome, and the journals suggest that innovations to increase the Shakers' efficiency were implemented first at the Centre Family washhouse, and then at West Lot and the other washhouses. "With the Centre Family washhouse site, we could really focus on the interpretation of the Shakers' propensity to innovate and try to make these arduous tasks like laundry for a communal family easier," she said. This could also give Pleasant Hill's thousands of visitors a greater appreciation for the Shaker's desire to achieve perfection.

Pleasant Hill was an "incredibly busy 19th-century village," said Larrie Curry, and McBride's work has been very helpful in understanding its activities. The Centre Family washhouse is just one of the projects on McBride's wish list, one that continues to grow with every new discovery she makes. "Even after doing (archaeology) for 30-something years, there's still that thrill of discovery," she said. "I think I'll always feel that way."

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