

# THE PLEASANT HILL SHAKERS



SHAKER VILLAGE  
OF PLEASANT HILL

By all accounts, the “Second Great Awakenings,” or “The Kentucky Revivals,” which began in 1801 at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, was the largest camp meeting ever held in the Ohio Valley. No one knows precisely how many, but possibly ten to twenty thousand people flocked to this mass encampment. Hundreds of wagons gathered on hilltops; preachers climbed on stumps and shouted their doctrines; thousands of people sang, cried, danced, whirled, fell into trances, barked like dogs, spoke in tongues, proclaimed visions and were saved. No doubt, the Shakers in New England saw the phenomena as a fulfillment of Mother Ann’s prophesy that “the next opening of the gospel will be in the south-west; it will be a great distance, and there will be a great work of God.”

Three Shaker missionaries, Benjamin A. Youngs, Richard McNemar and Malcham Worley left Mount Lebanon, New York on New Year’s Day in 1805, and traveled on foot to Kentucky. In August of that year, they found three Kentuckians who were willing to listen to their testimony. They left the Cane Ridge Meeting House for a private meeting with Elisha Thomas, Samuel Banta and Henry Banta, who soon became the first Kentucky Shaker converts.

Within a short time, Believers began moving to Elisha Thomas’ 140 acre Mercer County farm. On a site near the banks of Shawnee Run, a small communal family took shape. In December 1806, forty-four persons signed the first family covenant. Two years later, they moved to a nearby hilltop with beautiful vistas and started constructing a permanent village they named Pleasant Hill.

The Pleasant Hill Shakers were hardworking farmers, first or second generation descendants of pioneers who settled the early 1800s Kentucky River frontier. Many of their fathers and grandfathers had come from Virginia following Daniel Boone and James Harrod up the Wilderness Road. Some had come by river from Pennsylvania. They were accustomed to overcoming hardships by using strong will, ingenuity and determination. Their hard work served them well in establishing a utopia in the wilderness.

The venture flourished at an unbelievable rate. By 1823, there were 491 Shakers at Pleasant Hill. They bought more and more of the adjoining land to use as fields and orchards. Their land holding reached approximately 4,500 acres. In 1833, a report states, “We have between 2,000 and 3,000 acres of wheat, rye and oats. Besides our flax and 100 acres of Indian corn, broom corn and potatoes.” There were extensive fruit orchards with 400 to 800 trees planted at one time.

As early as 1816, they were producing enough surpluses to begin regular trading trips via the Kentucky, Ohio and Mississippi rivers to New Orleans. The brethren made brooms, cooper ware, weaving implements, shoes, tanned skins and raised livestock. The sisters produced woolen goods, pressed cheese, sweetmeats (preserves). Together, they produced medicinal products and packaged seeds.

The Shakers’ devotion to conservation, excellence and productivity led them to improve the quality of their livestock by importing bloodstock. They purchased a bull from England in conjunction with Henry Clay

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and owned one of America's largest herds of registered Durham Shorthorn cattle. In 1856, Shaker brethren were cattle judges at Kentucky's first state fair and wrote pamphlets for distribution for the United States government. Pleasant Hill became a leading agricultural experimental station.

Over a 105 year span, the Shakers of Pleasant Hill constructed more than 260 structures of all kinds. (Thirty-four buildings remain.) In 1833, the innovative Shakers contrived a municipal water system operated from the Water House. A huge, cypress cistern, elevated on stone piers, was filled from a spring one-half mile downhill. Horsepower on a treadmill pump accomplished this. Then water was distributed by gravity flow to kitchens, bathhouses and wash houses through lead pipes. It is thought to be one of the earliest municipal water systems in Kentucky.

Throughout the 19th century, industrialization changed America almost as drastically as had the American Revolution, less than one hundred years before. Population shifted from the farm to the city and interests shifted from seeking security in the hereafter to financial security in the here and now. During the flourishing years there was close to an equal division of numbers between men and women in Shaker communities; that changed when the able-bodied men began leaving. Their commitment to celibacy meant that their ranks grew through conversion; by the late 19th century fewer and fewer converts came to live the Shaker way of life. By 1840, second generation Shakers replaced the strong, early elders and, in 1860, most of the pioneer stalwarts had died. Each succeeding generation of elders and eldresses seemed to grow weaker. Death depleted the ranks and morale.

With the advent of the Civil War, the society at Pleasant Hill felt the tension of a border state where neighbors and families divided over the issues of secession and slavery. The Shakers believed in emancipation of the slaves, and favored the cause of the Union, but as pacifists, they refused to bear arms. Their Federal neighbors could not understand the Shakers' pacifist views. Secessionists were equally intolerant of the Shakers who offered African-Americans full brotherhood in their community as early as 1811.

With the Confederate invasion of Kentucky in August 1862, wave after wave of soldiers advanced and retreated through Pleasant Hill. The climax came with the battle at Perryville, the largest fought in Kentucky, which occurred only 17 miles from Pleasant Hill. The Pleasant Hill Shakers were inadvertent participants in the campaign that culminated at Perryville, when soldiers came pouring in by the thousands. "Our feeding them rose from 300 to 1000 per day and night with thousands of others begging for a small bit to eat." The Shakers carried supplies and provisions to the wounded in Harrodsburg. Because of their generosity and compassion, they were spared any wanton destruction. However, their stores of food, cattle, horses, wagons and boats were depleted. Perhaps their greatest loss was the stagnation of all business and the blockade of southern markets during the war and through much of the Reconstruction period.

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The end of the Civil War marked a watershed in Pleasant Hill's history. Their population remained fairly stable at more than 300 and the economy was somewhat improved. However, with the reopening of river markets, there seemed to be no awakening of conviction. The ministry wrote to Mt. Lebanon in December 1865, "The blighting effects and demoralizing influence of the late unholy war are yet conspicuously visible on society's surface both in and out of Zion."

With a vacuum of leadership, by 1881 the community was \$14,000 in debt and membership was composed of the very young and very old. New converts were often widowed women with small children or freeloading men. The latter were "Winter Shakers" who converted after the harvest and abandoned their faith before planting time.

Finally the inevitable happened. By 1910, the Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill closed its doors as an active religious society. The twelve remaining members deeded their last 1800 acres to a local merchant with the agreement he would care for them until their death. The last Shaker, Sister Mary Settles died in 1923. The land, building and furnishings passed into private hands, and Pleasant Hill became a small country town called "Shakertown" until historic restoration began in 1961.