

# Volunteers work to restore White Water Shaker Village

## Buildings date back to early 1800s

By Steve Kemme

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**CROSBY TWP.** – After two-lane Oxford Road passes through farm land as it runs north in this northwestern Hamilton County township, it bends sharply and suddenly becomes a dividing line between two distinct worlds.

On one side stands a line of modern brick ranch houses with neatly mowed, nicely landscaped front yards. On the other side are two large brick buildings that had been focal points of a Shaker community that lived in the area from 1827 to 1916.

The Shakers made the bricks used for both buildings. The meeting house, where the Shakers held their religious services, was built in 1827. The other building was what they called their dwelling, with the males sleeping in separate quarters from the females. That was constructed in 1832. The dwelling still contains two separate staircases to the second floor, one for each gender.

A group of volunteers called the Friends of White Water Shaker Village is working to save and restore those two buildings and the eight other structures on the eight-acre site so they can be opened for public view. In addition to restoring the buildings, the plan calls for the placement of a visitor's center in part of the Shaker barn and a 30-car parking lot. The center would have an audio-visual room and a gift shop.

The entire project will require more than \$500,000 and an enormous amount of volunteer labor.

Rich Spence, president of Friends of White Water Shaker Village, said there is no set timetable for this project. The group has applied for \$500,000 from the state and has applied for grants from other sources. Restoration will proceed at a deliberate pace, regardless of how soon the group raises the money it needs, Spence said. The first building that's being restored is the meeting house.

"We're all so respectful of this building," said Spence, who lives in Glendale. "We want to take the time to do it right. We don't want to do anything that will damage the original Shaker material that's there."

He's saddened that a 166-year-old Shaker building in Warren County's Turtlecreek Township will be torn down soon. The Otterbein Retirement Living Communities, which owns 1,600 acres of what had been the Union Shaker Village, plans to build a \$3 million fitness and community center on the ground now occupied by the Bethany House.

Jim Innis, vice president of Friends, said he hopes the publicity concerning the demolition of the Bethany House will prompt more people to donate money and time to the refurbishment of 10 buildings his group wants to restore.

"We hope it draws more attention on this surviving Shaker village," said Innis, who lives in Crosby Township near the Shaker site, which is owned by the Hamilton County Park District and is part of the Miami Whitewater Forest.

The park district began leasing it to the Friends three years ago so that group could try to restore the buildings. The park district's mission prohibits it from funding the preservation of historic buildings, said Joy Landry, spokeswoman for the park district.

The site is the north sector of what had constituted the Shaker community. The other two sections are owned by the park district and contain 10 buildings as well as a Shaker

cemetery. The park district owns both and leases the south section to the University of Cincinnati, which operates a research center there for geology and biology students.

But the oldest and most significant buildings are in the north sector. In addition to the meeting house and the dwelling, it contains a large barn, a milk house, an ice house, a chicken coop, a turkey coop, a smokehouse, a wagon shed and a woodworking shop.

All three sections make up the most complete surviving Shaker community in Ohio, Spence said. Farming families acquired the former Shaker land after the Shakers left in 1916.

The Friends have been concentrating their initial restoration efforts on the meeting house.

The farm family that owned the north sector stored grain in the meeting house's first floor and installed living quarters on the second floor. The building the Shakers called the dwelling was their house.

The Friends are undoing the many alterations that took place in the meeting house. They're replacing the wooden paneling on the lower part of the meeting room's walls. They have replaced most of the building's modern windows with period windows. They're going to wall up doorways that were added after the Shakers left.

"We're taking it back to the way it was," Spence said.

The Shakers' name stemmed from the frenzied dancing and shaking that were an integral part of their worship services.

Dedicated to celibacy and communal life, the Shakers came to the United States in 1774 from England, where they had suffered persecution.

The frenzied dancing is the reason the large worship room in the meeting house is totally open, with no interior wooden supporting posts.

"It enabled them to do their dances without bumping into a post," Spence said. "They would be spinning, jerking around and dancing as if divinely possessed."

After the Civil War, the dances became less exuberant and more carefully orchestrated, he said. The Shakers' worship services also included marching songs and hymns they composed.

The Shakers would invite the public to their services in hopes that some of the visitors would join the community. Because of the celibacy requirement, they depended solely on recruiting for their community's long-term survival.

The entire Shaker village had about 200 members at its peak in 1850. The north sector, which the Friends are leasing, contained about 60. In the second half of the 19th century, the Shaker movement as a whole faded.

Spence's group has to satisfy zoning regulations for historic sites and provide the necessary amenities required of public facilities, including handicapped restrooms and parking space.

"We take it a step at a time," Spence said.

"We want to open the meeting house and the dwelling at the same time. We want people to get their money's worth when they come here."