

# Living with antiques

*Shaker adventure*

BY CHARLES AND HELEN UPTON

IN MARCH of 1950 we moved from a Troy apartment to a century-and-a-half-old farmhouse near the village of Eagle Mills, New York. Among the problems arising from this transition was that of finding furniture suitable for a simple dwelling with unusually spacious rooms. Quite by accident we happened on an auction that September where we purchased two Shaker rockers, one black, the other golden maple. Their color and airy frames were so flattering to our wide pine floors that it seemed they had always been a part of our household.

Not only was Shaker furniture appropriate, but it had for us a deeper significance than mere utility and beauty. Professors of American history at Russell Sage College, we could gratify our urge to preserve the culture of one of America's most unusual religious experiments—one still in existence after almost two centuries. The possibility of

combining history with contemporary living seemed most exciting.

We met discouragement almost everywhere. Aside from chairs and footstools made for sale to the public, Shaker furniture was limited to that used by the Shakers in their communities, most of it antedating the Civil War. Knowledgeable friends and antiques dealers assured us that we were twenty years too late for serious collecting. In 1953, however, we were encouraged by a visit to the Canterbury society in New Hampshire, where we purchased our desk. Since the Shakers had already disposed of most of their furniture because of dwindling numbers and economic pressures, we were able to obtain only an occasional piece from them. A few finds at antiques shops sustained our hopes until 1957, when we were so fortunate as to be first on the scene at the demolition of the Sisters'

Almost one entire wall of the living room is occupied by a 9-foot maple tailoring counter on six large wooden rollers with drop leaf in back. This piece can accommodate 54-inch material and was very likely employed in the making of the Shaker cloaks so popular with the fashionable set at the turn of the century. The yellow wooden bowl, painted white on the inside, probably was used in the herb shop at Hancock. Directly under a 10-foot pegboard which by lamplight casts a pleasantly intricate shadow on the white plaster wall hangs a reproduction of the Shaker spirit drawing *A Bower of Mulberry Trees—City of Peace*, by Hannah Cohoon. One sister recalls that the butternut desk between the

windows, which came from Canterbury, stood for some seventy years in one spot there; it displays blue and white Canton china, an accessory used throughout this house. A swivel chair from the Sisters' Shop at Watervliet has a plank seat and delicate wooden spindles fashioning the back. To the left is a child's rocker (size No. 3) and a shawl-back maple rocker (No. 7), our first Shaker acquisition. A rare four-drawer child's chest of butternut at the far side of the sofa serves as an end table. The simple low bench in front of the sofa which is used as a coffee table has the Gothic arches, mortised construction, and long overhang customary in such Shaker pieces. *Photographs by William H. Tague.*



Hancock was the source of the 10-foot cherry harvest table in the dining room, thought to have been made between 1820 and 1840. A 10-foot meetinghouse bench substitutes for chairs along one side; directly in back, a 9-foot counter with two sliding doors and a hinged one provides ideal storage for china. A 6½-foot-high chest in the original deep red paint stands, as do many Shaker chests, flat on the floor. To its right is a small tailoring counter, also reddish in color, and above this hang a mirror in a Shaker holder, a row of Shaker baskets, and a yellow bucket. The wide-board floor, recently installed, came from the Sisters' Shop at Hancock, as did the yellow door opening to the kitchen. The chairs are from a set of eight from the Watervliet society.



Shop in Hancock, Massachusetts. Here we obtained stairs, paneling, floor boards, doors, windows, and pegboards. The closing of this community in 1960 offered additional opportunities. In that year we finally achieved our goal of furnishing our home in Shaker—with the deliberate exception of a sofa and two wing chairs. Then began the inevitable process of improving the quality of our collection, which continues to this day.

Many frustrations and disappointments common to collectors, especially of Shaker things, have been more than compensated for by the interesting persons we have encountered and the friends we have made, but most of all by the privilege of meeting and knowing the remaining members of the Hancock, Canterbury, and Sabbathday Lake (Maine) Shaker communities. In all too short a period this opportunity will be a thing of the past; inevitably, we tend to reproach ourselves for not having been more alert in the years before 1950.

Our home has nothing of a museum atmosphere. The walls have been painted white to avoid competition with the occasional Shaker green, red, yellow, and blue painted pieces and to allow our brown and yellow waxed floors to provide the background for the austere furniture. Blue Canton china used throughout the house for decoration, and for company dining, softens the stark lines of the Shaker tables and counters, and at the same time blends most pleasantly with these somewhat primitive American pieces. Oval boxes and carriers, coat hangers, brushes of a dozen varieties, pegboards, seedboxes, and tinware remind one of the numerous Shaker industries that flourished in the nineteenth century and add depth to our collection.

During the past few years several of the Shaker sisters, including Eldress Emma B. King of the Canterbury society, have come to see us, and have approved our efforts. The sisters were pleased to see the furniture that was once theirs used and cherished outside their own society. One

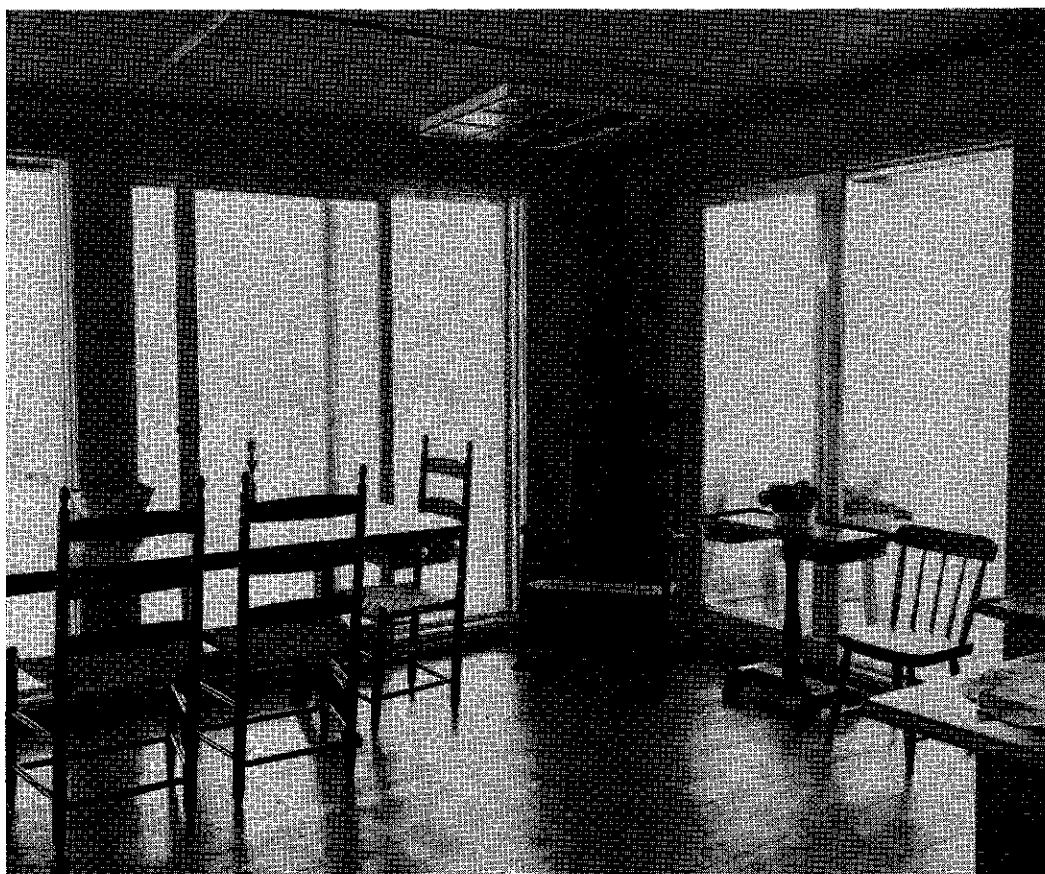
confessed that she had never slept in a Shaker bed until she came here, because even before her arrival at Canterbury a half century ago the beds had all been sold. Another told us that of the collectors' homes she had visited, ours had the most Shaker-like atmosphere. We have not consciously striven to create such an atmosphere; rather, we have concentrated on adapting massive as well as delicate tables, cases, counters, and benches to our everyday needs. For us the effect is one of peace and serenity—obviously Shaker qualities.

This sturdy furniture has proved extremely versatile. To the surprise of some of our friends we have used a sewing table as a kitchen one, a workbench as a filing cabinet, a laundry table as a desk. And to our own surprise we have found that Shaker furniture can be used in one room for one purpose and in another for quite a different one. Prior to its present location in the study, our double wash bench stored phonograph records and served as a side table in the dining room. One sewing stand functions as just that, while another is a night table in the master bedroom. A five-foot-eight-inch drop-leaf table, once used for kitchen dining, is now a library table in the study. We almost believe that the Shaker pieces have caught the spirit of our enterprise and respond to the use to which they are put.

Each summer we make pilgrimages to the Shaker communities located at Canterbury and Sabbathday Lake. Here we renew our friendships and admire the beautifully proportioned buildings, the inventive genius, and the master craftsmanship of the early Shaker pioneers. Each visit serves to increase our respect and deepen our appreciation of the ideals and achievements of this tiny group of men and women who sought to live a truly Christian, celibate, communal life while awaiting the second coming of Christ. We have come to value these friendships more and more. For us the collecting of Shaker furniture has been transformed into a real Shaker adventure.



The kitchen is an unusually bright and colorful room. Shown here is a massive double-door cupboard in dark green. The Shaker shelf displays ceramics, and examples of Shaker tinware. The round table with two convenient drawers, used for meals, is one of few sewing tables of this type made at New Lebanon, probably as late as 1860. Its top, 40 inches across, is walnut; its base and legs are maple. The "stepping" chairs—small chairs of normal height—from Canterbury were used to reach high cupboards. The one in the right foreground is labeled *D 21*, indicating that it belonged in Room 21 of Building D at that society.



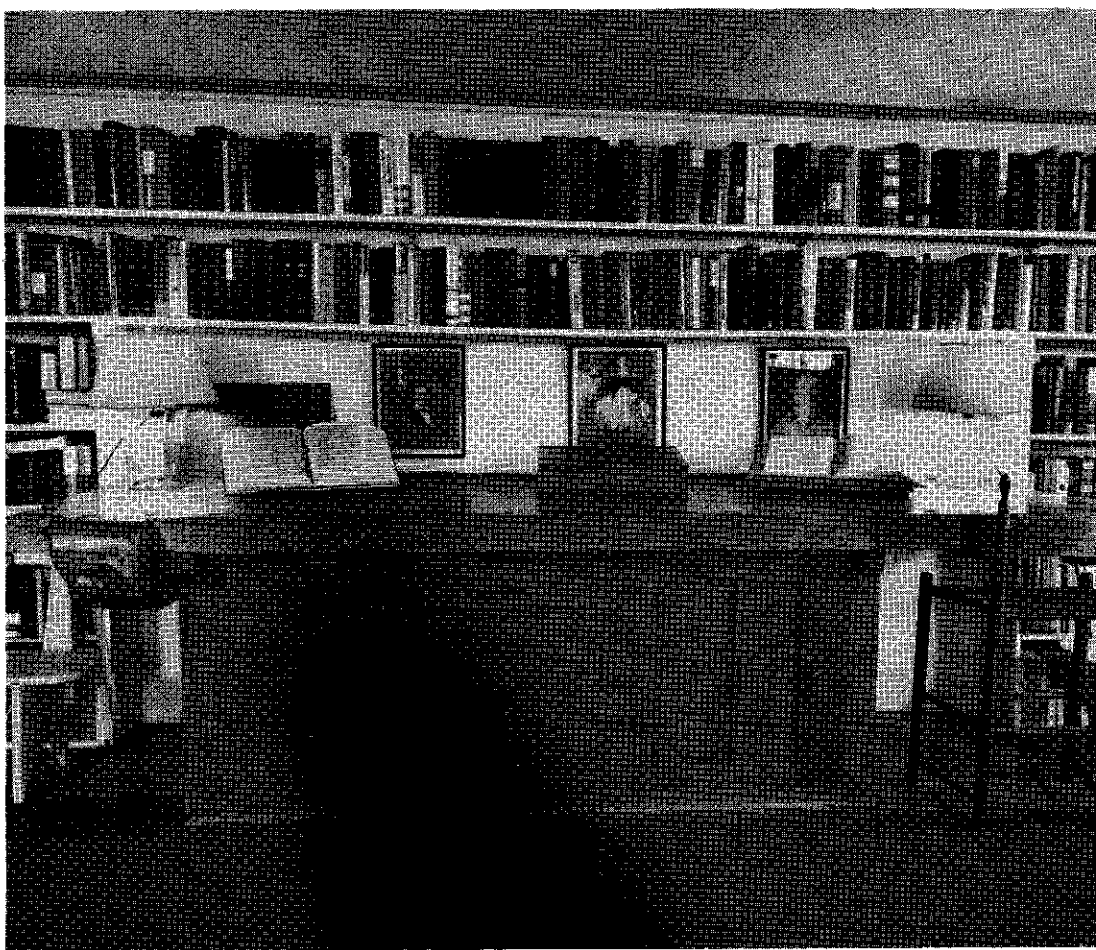
Adjoining the kitchen and recently converted into a year-round room with sliding glass doors and electric heat, the porch serves as an informal dining-living space. Wide mellow floor boards were salvaged from the Sisters' Shop at Hancock, which also provided the floor for the dining room and the stairs. The trestle table, of cherry, has a one-board 35-inch-wide top with bread-board ends. Together with six matching walnut chairs equipped with "teeters" designed to protect the floor, it was used for many years in the ministry dining room at Hancock. The width of the table top and the long, handmade bolts used to fasten the trestle feet to the frame indicate that the table was made as early as 1820. The small butternut drawer with white ceramic knob is one of three that could have been added around 1860, when the chairs were probably made; conceivably, the drawers held knives, forks, and spoons respectively. An early sewing stand from Watervliet, distinguished by its rimmed top, tiny drawers, and heavy arched base, is flanked by a black shawl rocker and a stepping chair.



A 7-foot pine laundry table probably from Hancock or New Lebanon, dated February 3, 1822, serves as a double desk in front of the north window of the study; a Shaker seedbox with its many partitions makes for orderly storage of small items. The matching pegboard from the Hancock Sisters' Shop encircles the room and displays small objects of Shaker craft, such as the single and multiple clothes hangers shown here. The high curved splash board on the yellow double wash bench from the infirmary identifies it as undoubtedly Shaker; two cupboards underneath provide space for paper and supplies. Wood for burning in the small box stove, a remarkably efficient heater, is kept in the yellow wood box behind it. The drop-leaf table of tiger maple—a wood not often found in Shaker furniture—with its slender legs and leaves slightly spread suggests a bird about to take flight. On its top a rectangular wooden carrier holds plants. The large straight armchair, of a type seldom seen, has Lebanon finials, teeters, and curved arm pieces without mushrooms.



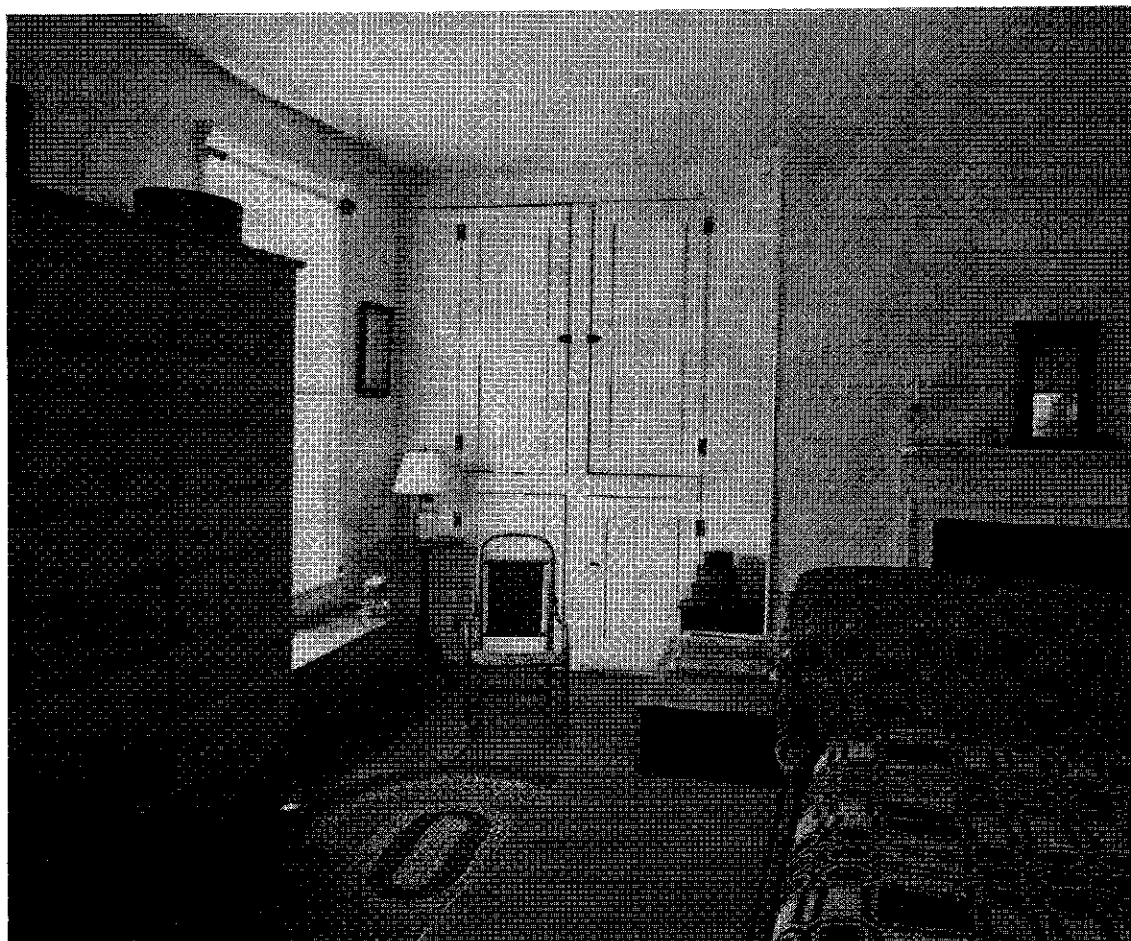
This 9½-foot-long, yard-wide carpenter's bench on the study wall belonged to the last elder at New Lebanon, and judging by its condition always received excellent treatment. The pine base with its eight drawers and cupboard adds immensely to our filing space, while the 4-inch-thick rock-maple top offers an excellent surface for writing, sorting notes, or consulting reference books. The surface directly above the loom chair was our son's desk during his years in grade and high school. Wooden vises in perfect working order at either end of the line of stops testify to the Shakers' craftsmanship and instinctive love of beauty. The one at the left, made from a maple knot and carefully mended with lead, runs the width of the bench and may be extended far enough to clamp a chair. Both vises are frequently employed in household repairs. At left, on top of the desk, is a lap-board signed C. Warner, 1864. The bookshelves were constructed to frame the carpenter's bench.





Installation of the stairs in our hall presented such a problem that it was delayed for seven years after we acquired them. They had been used by the Shaker sisters in their shop at Hancock for over a century and a quarter; a similar set separated by a partition was reserved for the brothers. The treads, of an orange-red color, were carpeted and so show few signs of wear. Looking up the stairs one notices the pleasant pattern formed by the gracefully tapered cherry spindles. The 14-foot handrail on the left matches that on the right. The paneling and door below retain their original yellow wash, now somewhat faded.

The master bedroom is dominated by a golden-hued butternut chest believed to have been made by the Hancock Shakers. Measuring 67 by 50 by 17½ inches, and innocent of any ornamentation, it provides a generous amount of drawer space and looks typically modern. Although massive in one sense, the chest illustrates a feature characteristic of many large Shaker pieces: the depth is limited so the effect is not overwhelming. Two beds resting on 4-inch wooden rollers may be moved easily for cleaning. A dark cherry New Lebanon candlestand with a severely plain post stands in the corner behind a rare child's bentwood chair probably made by the New Lebanon Shakers in the late 1800's. Window shades operate on a springless roller which responds to the slightest pull on the cord to the right; they can be set in position with amazing accuracy. Simple blanket chests in natural pine provide storage and the water bench affords seating space.



The maple bed in our son's room has beautifully tapered legs and large wooden rollers; it was once part of the Edward D. Andrews collection. At its foot is a four-drawer pine blanket chest from Hancock. The low table from Canterbury is unusually pleasing with its wide overhang and slightly splayed round legs. The lamp is adapted from a pottery jug—these were used by the Shakers in their medicine business but were not made by them. The curtains are of Shaker-woven blue and red material, and the rug is also Shaker woven in the same colors. Back and seat of the armchair are made of tape in two colors, a Shaker technique. The low cherry candlestand has snake feet, and the small wooden dipper is one of a kind made by the New Lebanon Shakers as early as 1789.

