

Charles Sheeler and the Shaker Influence in South Salem

Who would have guessed? The sleepy little hamlet of South Salem is a hot bed of Shaker traditions.

The quest for proof of this all started with a phone call about 2013. John Keith Russell of John Keith Russell Antiques in downtown South Salem wanted to know what information I had on the Shaker influence in town and, especially, the artist Charles Sheeler. My answer was a dull-sounding “Nothing.” Then he began to explain that there were indications that there was a great deal of Shaker tradition in our area. He should know, being one of the most respected dealers in Shaker furniture and American Folk Art. Mr. Russell’s shop is a virtual museum of Shaker items and he is a member of the Board of Trustees of the Hancock Shaker Village in Pittsfield, Mass. John offered to do a presentation about the subject and I took him up on his offer and invited him to speak at the Lewisboro Library’s annual meeting that year. His presentation inspired a collaborative investigation by me and several of the attendees on that January Sunday.

It turned out that a great deal of the clues leading to the whereabouts of the Shakers and artist Sheeler hidden in our midst led right to my own Spring Street neighborhood. The most visible was the Lewisboro Landmark home of the late Axel Horn, a noted WPA artist and sculptor, situated near the eastern end of the street. Axel named his beloved 18th century home Shaker Hollow, after the influence of a former owner, Juliana Force, a collector of Shaker furniture and a moving force (no pun intended) in the establishment of the Whitney Museum in New York City. That was a known fact. Sandy Kewley of Twin Lakes came forth with another clue – she had visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art recently and had stopped to rest near a Sheeler painting and noticed South Salem indicated in reference to the painting. She did some research and led me to articles from the internet about Charles Sheeler, a prominent American artist and photographer of the mid twentieth century. As I looked through the article and then at pictures of his group of four paintings known as “American Interiors”, I noticed what seemed to be the interior of a Spring Street neighbor’s home. With mounting excitement I showed the photos of the paintings to my neighbor and together we measured and scoured his living room for the placement of windows and doors and the staircase seen in the paintings and concluded that Charles Sheeler had, indeed, once lived in his home, from 1926 – 1932, in fact.

But now to really clinch the reality. Sheeler’s American Tradition is a series paintings based on rooms displaying his collection of Shaker furniture, hooked rugs, and American collectibles, and were painted between 1926 and 1939, probably from photographs taken by the artist. That was how we could place the arrangement of windows, etc., in my neighbor’s home. This attractive home was once one of the barns on the Spring Street property of miniaturist Elizabeth Bacon and was converted to a home in the 1920s. The other Bacon barn was moved to Rte. 35 and became the Hayloft Restaurant; the “cottage” was home to Charles and Katherine Sheeler, and is now home to Patrick Daigle.

How did Sheeler find South Salem you wonder? He was known for his Bucks County, Pa. influence and had lived there for years. He moved to New York and was part of the artist society of New York City and was friendly with Peggy Bacon and Alexander Brook, well-known artists and writers. Peggy was the daughter of Elizabeth Bacon. The Bacon-Brooks family lived in Cross River. This was most likely the pathway to Spring Street. Library Board member, Jay Luzzi, joined in the search and came up with a reference to an article about Juliana Force that

mentioned the Bacon-Brook-Sheeler connection, and stated that Peggy Bacon's mother was a "Well-to-do-collector of Americana". Thank you, Mr. Luzzi.

Babette Kiesel of Truesdale Lake, an artist and lover of things funky and historical, sent me a reference to the Sheeler sojourn in South Salem that she found in the *Autobiography of American Poet and Physician William Carlos Williams*, who came from her home state of New Jersey. Apparently, Williams knew Charles and Katherine Sheeler during their tenure here. He wrote about their move to the country, "But the best was when, fed up with the city they went up to South Salem, New York, a bungalowlike building out in the hills by an old church and graveyard surrounded by a stone wall, with a convenient bootlegger down the road. Applejack was about the best you could buy in those days." A fine tribute to our town in the days of prohibition and a subject for another column!

And not too long ago, a series of stamps was issued that included one of Charles Sheeler's iconic photographs. Mr. Sheeler is perhaps the first South Sailemite to be so honored. Other references to the Shaker influence in our town would be appreciated!