

# **The Unfortunate Shaker Cemetery at Watervliet, Ohio**

**Richard Spence**

After the Watervliet Shaker community closed in 1900, all Shaker land was sold to the State of Ohio and became known as the Dayton State Farm, or simply the State Farm, a division of the Dayton State Hospital. The State Hospital is a mental treatment facility, and the State Farm provided agricultural products, such as dairy, poultry, grains, and apples for the residents of the State Hospital.

The location of the community's cemetery, while well known to the Shakers, was lost after they departed. The view from an aerial photo taken in the early 1920s includes where the cemetery should be, but alas only contour farming is evident. The Shakers did not use headstones, per the comments of Moritz Busch who visited in 1851, finding a grassy plot with a few plain stones.<sup>11</sup> A few Shaker-looking headstones, simple slabs with initials, on display at the Kettering Museum in the 1980s and now in the collection of Dayton History, have no provenance and do not appear to be from the Watervliet Shaker cemetery. They seem likely to be from the burying ground at the Beulah Church, where the first converts worshiped before joining the Shakers in 1805.

The land was sold by the State of Ohio to the Miami Valley Research Park in 1980. According to the Research Park's website, it was founded as a non-profit, university-related research park affiliated with local academic institutions, including: Sinclair Community College, The University of Dayton, and Wright State University. Miami Valley Research Park is comprised of 1,250 acres of land in both the cities of Kettering and Beavercreek. By 1984 the site of the old State Farm was completely cleared of all Shaker structures., including the brick Center House, dating from 1821. The timber frame of a barn and the Shaker Office, called the Miller's House, were moved to the grounds of the Kettering-Moraine Museum, and the land was re-contoured for new construction.

In the summer of 1985, Melba Hunt, President-Director of the Kettering-Moraine Museum and Historical Society, placed a monument to the Shakers in the area that she believed to be the location of the Shaker cemetery. How Melba came to believe that the cemetery was in

this location is as lost as the cemetery; one account has it that she talked with an elderly gentleman employed by the State Farm who told her where it was, another is that it was on an unknown nineteenth-century cemetery atlas, still another that a man found it by dowsing. In any case, with the location of the Shaker cemetery clearly marked by Melba's monument on the crest of a hill south of Patterson Avenue, a month later Dayton Power and Light (DP&L) confidently proceeded to prepare the actual burying ground for construction.

As grading started and the back hoe dug, a skull unceremoniously rolled into the excavator's trench. With this dramatic event, the discovery, investigation, and eventual protection of the Shakers' burying ground came to be. Officials at the Miami Valley Research Park initially notified Melba Hunt at the Kettering-Moraine Museum, anthropologists at the Dayton Museum of Natural History (DMNH) who could consult on the discovery, and the Kettering Police. The Ohio State Historic Preservation Office (OSHPO) was notified. An archaeologist from OSHPO and an anthropologist from DMNH performed shovel tests to determine if other graves were present, which were inconclusive. No file on the Watervliet cemetery can be found at OSHPO's office in Columbus.

The discovery of the remains caused work to be halted and the Research Park then brought in Greenhouse Consultants to determine if there were only a few burials or if a larger cemetery was found. A few burials could be moved, allowing construction to continue. Greenhouse Consultants performed a geophysical survey in the area where the remains had been discovered to determine if a cemetery with multiple burials was involved, and investigated the area around the monument with trenches. Both areas occupy a pie-shaped lot, bounded by Patterson Avenue on the north, Founders Drive on the southeast, and Research Boulevard on the southwest. The pie shaped lot can be easily identified on Google aerial photos, although Patterson Avenue has been removed.

Greenhouse Consultant's final report went to some length to make clear that no one expected to encounter burials at the site chosen by DP&L to build a service facility:

A Shaker cemetery was assumed to be outside the proposed construction area by local historians, based on early oral histories, diaries, church records, and a cemetery atlas. A memorial monument to the Watervliet Shakers had been

erected along the crest of the ridge approximately 150 feet south of Patterson Road, and approximately 500 feet west of the encountered burials. The marker was erected one month prior to encountering these remains.<sup>22</sup>

The area around the monument was investigated with parallel trenches 6-8 feet deep. No burials and “very few artifacts were found from the 21 miles of backhoe trenches ... Nine historic artifacts were identified. These are nineteenth century ceramic, bottle glass, window glass, and an iron handle.”<sup>33</sup> Bill Mooney, an archaeologist and very knowledgeable on the history of Watervliet, believes that they might have discovered remnants of the Shaker West House, which the Shakers moved in 1847 as an addition to the Carding House, creating the Woolen Factory, located where Patterson Avenue crossed the Little Beaver Creek. The discovery of the burials, and the actual cemetery, forced DP&L to relocate their facility to area east of the monument, once it had been deemed clear of burials.

The mitigation report is murky about what occurred while excavating in the cemetery. It appears that two complete burials were impacted by the contractors, which were excavated “archaeologically” by Greenhouse Consultants. A “series of body parts” were also exposed or impacted by the contractors, including the skull, which Greenhouse concluded belonged to four individuals. For reasons unclear, these skeletal remains were sent to a forensic anthropologist for analysis, which is included in the mitigation report. Out of respect for the Shakers, we will leave it at that.

The artifacts found with the internments consisted of wood coffin fragments, parts of handles and hardware. The coffins of the two graves excavated had fragments of glass ports to enable the viewing of the deceased. When reconstructed, one measured twelve and one-half inches wide by thirty inches long.

Of perhaps the greatest interest is the geophysical survey. The survey mitigation report states that possibility as many as sixty-four anomalies were found.

Not counting the graves found before the geophysical survey was done, (the six graves impacted by the contractor’s backhoe) excavation test showed that six geophysical anomalies were caused by burials. Similar geophysical anomalies strongly suggest that another 25 unexcavated

burials are likely in the area. Also an additional 33 anomalies could be caused by burials. It is likely that not all burials in the survey area have been detected by this survey.<sup>44</sup>

Figure 1 of the geophysical survey report “shows a pattern of irregular distribution of probable and possible graves, with some clustering and open spaces.”<sup>55</sup> This supports the proposition that Shakers did not use headstones, as reported by Moritz Busch in 1851. With unmarked graves and the resulting uncertainty where burials were, graves tend to be unequally spaced with clusters in places. The Shakers did not bury in orderly rows, as found at the White Water Center Family cemetery. Headstones are also not found at the large unmarked Union Village cemetery on the southwest corner of state routes 63 and 741 in Warren County.

The cemetery mitigation report includes a listing of burials at Watervliet. The source is not given; it is almost certainly from a list maintained by Union Village. Ninety six individuals are listed, with dates of death ranging from 1807 to 1899. Some of these burials may be at the Beulah cemetery as the Watervliet Shakers did not gather on land that would become the Watervliet community until about 1808. Such notable Shakers are listed as John Huston, the first convert in 1805, who died in 1817 and Eldress Peggy Patterson, who passed away in 1883.

Today the Watervliet cemetery lies unmarked on a grassy sloping hill southwest of the junction of Patterson Avenue and Founders Drive. The route of Patterson Avenue can be plainly followed by a line telephone poles; the road itself was removed by the Research Park. The cemetery is a quiet and tranquil place, and provides a view to the southeast to the center house and meeting house sites, as the Shakers would have liked.

## Notes

1. Busch, Moritz, *Travels between the Hudson and the Mississippi. 1851-1852*. “[A] simple grassy plot, without mounds, without crosses and without flowers. In general, it is marked as a place of burial only by a few plain stones betraying neither chisel nor style but having the appearance of having been simply picked up as they lay in the field a short distance away and put down here.”
2. William I Roberts IV and Nancy A. Stehling, *Cemetery Mitigation Report*, Dayton Power and Light, Research Park Center. Greenhouse consultants, Inc., New York, 1987, p. 1. The general timeline of the discovery is discussed in this report although there are significant suspected omissions in OSHPO’s involvement that cannot be corroborated.

3. Roberts, et al., Phase IB Archaeological Survey of the Dayton Power and Light Service Facility, Miami Valley Research Park, Kettering Ohio, p. 4.
4. Bruce Bevan, *A Geophysical Survey at the Shaker Cemetery*, August 25, 1985, p. 3.
5. Ibid.



*The red box indicates the approximate location of the Watervliet Cemetery.*



*Melba Hunt's Memorial Marker—view to the east, toward the site of the actual cemetery.*

