

Hamilton College Library

“Home Notes”

Conservation of the Earliest Known Shaker Architectural Image: The Ambrotype of the South Family, Harvard, Massachusetts

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In 2011 Hamilton College Library acquired the earliest known image of Shaker buildings. The ambrotype was acquired by trade from the Shaker Museum at South Union, Kentucky. Both Hamilton and South Union were eager to facilitate the trade in the interest of conserving—and ultimately preserving—this extremely important photograph.

The image is of the South Family buildings at the Harvard, Massachusetts, Shaker community. Taken from a hillside just south of the site, the view is looking back to the north. Seven buildings from the South Family are visible, as well as four from the Church Family that are revealed under high magnification through a gap in the trees.

The 164-acre property that originally comprised Harvard's South Family was purchased by the Church Family in 1813 for \$2,900. The farm had belonged to Jeremiah Willard, but the Believers bought it from one Daniel Jeffits. As the “Journal Record of the South and East Family of Young Believers” states: “Many young believers came [to the East Family] when they were first gathered in from the world, and afterwards were moved to the South Family.” This comprehensive record of events at the site provides details about many of the structures in the ambrotype.¹

First of all, let's take a look at the painstaking process used to restore the image. Shaker scholars were first made aware of this image when it was published in 1974 of *The Shaker Image*² (see fig. 1).

As can be plainly seen, the image was already badly deteriorated when

1. Western Reserve Historical Society, Shaker Collection, V:B-35. All subsequent references to events and structures in this article are sourced from this journal.

2. Elmer R. Pearson and Julia Neal, *The Shaker Image* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1974), 14.



Fig. 1. The ambrotype as published in 1974

it was photographed in the early 1970s for *The Shaker Image*. Pearson and Neal described it thus: “The earliest photograph in this book, an ambrotype made about 1860.” An ambrotype is a positive image created on a sheet of glass. The early photographic process used to do this was called the wet-plate collodion process. Landscape photography usually necessitated a variation of the true wet-plate process—which was suited to portraiture in a studio setting—called the moist, or dry form which necessitated a much longer exposure time. Ambrotypes came into use in the United States by the early 1850s, and were gradually supplanted in popularity by the tintype by the mid-1860s.

When Hamilton College staff first viewed the ambrotype at South Union in 2011, it appeared in much the same condition. Upon completion of the exchange with the Shaker Museum at South Union, the ambrotype was hand-carried back to Hamilton for fear of further damaging it by shipping. The photo was then hand-delivered to the photo conservation studio The Better Image in New York City. Following evaluation by conservator Peter Mustardo, treatment was carried out by conservator Amanda Maloney.

Before treatment, archival images were made of the object. Conservator Maloney then removed the image from its stamped leather case, and carefully folded back the brass mat which encloses the glass plate. She found that the glass plate was bound to the mat with paper tape, likely original to the piece. The tape was severed to allow access to the glass plate for treatment. Areas of the photographic emulsion layer that were still attached to the plate were consolidated with a 7% solution of Aquazol in water. The front of the plate (non-image side) was cleaned with a cotton swab using water and ethanol. Following stabilization of the emulsion, the main forms of the image were blocked out on a piece of polyester film with Liquitex acrylic paint. This painted piece of polyester was placed behind the plate to reintegrate losses in the image without directly impacting the original image material. The plate package was reassembled with a new



Fig. 2. The ambrotype as scanned in 2011.

piece of borosilicate cover glass on the front and the painted polyester film, toned Renaissance paper, and a sheet of clear polyester on the back.

Following successful treatment of the image it was again hand-delivered to Chicago Albumen Works in Housatonic, Massachusetts, for archival digital capture of the image. Conservator Doug Munson completed the capture of the glass plate at a resolution of 935 dots per inch.

Munson captured the image as it actually looks (see fig. 2). Then he used Photoshop to enhance the tone and contrast of the photo, rendering the buildings much more visible (see fig. 3). Finally, at the request of Hamilton staff, he used Photoshop to digitally repair the sky in the image. Even as captured in 1974, the sky was the most heavily damaged portion of the image, which had a very negative overall effect for the viewer. We decided that for reference purposes it would be very useful to have the sky



Fig. 3. Scan of the ambrotype, digitally enhanced, 2011.



Fig. 4. Scan of the ambrotype, digitally enhanced and damaged areas digitally repaired, 2011.

digitally in-filled to mitigate its distracting effects on the image as a whole (see fig. 4).

One of the most enjoyable parts of having this image conserved and scanned at such a high resolution has been the ability to pull details showing particular South Family, and even Church Family, buildings.

The first detail (see fig. 5) shows the Wash House (left) and South Family Dwelling (right). The Wash House was first built in 1823. In August 1842 the Family “commenced repairing the Wash House, [they] first moved it back nearly its width, removed the stones and gravel for a basement story. [They] hired masons to do the stone work which consisted in laying a mortar wall on the north and east side which was carried 14 feet farther for an enlargement of the building.” In 1845 the Shakers began collecting materials, such as timber, boards, shingles, and clapboards, for



Fig. 5. Detail of Harvard South Family Wash House and Dwelling House.

the construction of the large Dwelling House. Beginning in March 1846 two Irish laborers began digging gravel for the cellar. In May dry wall was laid for the cellar, and carpenters headed by non-Shaker Ellis Harlow began constructing the frame. In June masons from Lowell pointed the stone foundation wall on the east side of the house, which stands over ten feet high. On June 24, the Shakers noted:

The frame of our new house was raised being assisted by the brethren from the Church, 2nd Family, and Shirley, all things moved forward in good order, no accidents occurred, finished raising at 6 P.M. There were about 60 hands present. From this time the carpenters went forward rapidly with their work on the house, such as boarding, shingling, and clapboarding, on the outside, when they commenced on the inside and continued their work till the 31st of Oct when they closed up for the season, having finished the basement and all but 3 rooms on the next two stories.

During this project a connecting building was constructed to join the Dwelling House and Wash House. All three of these structures stand to this day.



Fig. 6. Detail of Harvard South Family Dwelling House facade.

The South Family had their first meal in the house on September 30, 1846 (see fig. 6). On December 15, they recorded: “The Ministry, Elders, with some of the brethren and sisters from the Church meet with us in our new meeting room for the dedication of our new dwelling house. The meeting was very satisfactory to all present and it was very evident that the blessing of God rested upon the place. About 30 of the brethren and sisters from the Church were present. Ellis Harlow (the master workman) and daughter were also present.”



Fig. 7. Detail of (front to back) Harvard South Family Office, Brethren's Shop, and Barn.

The South Family had its own Office, built in 1830, which is located directly across the street from the Dwelling House in this image (see fig. 7). Visible beyond the Office are, first, the Brethren's Shop, built in 1836, and moved to that site in 1839; and second, the Stone Barn, constructed from 1834 to 1836. The Office and Brethren's Shop are gone today, but substantial portions of their foundations remain. The Stone Barn is a glorious and picturesque ruin. It is visible from the road, and major portions of the structure, including arches and corners, remain intact.

Just visible at the left side of the image are two buildings. The smaller one is probably the pre-Shaker Isaac Willard House, where Mother Ann once stayed. Today, only its foundation remains. The larger building is known as the "Apple Sauce House," and it still stands (see fig. 8).

Finally, visible in the distance are a handful of buildings from the Church Family (see fig. 9). I will not speculate as to exactly which buildings are visible, but perhaps our savvy readers will weigh in with their opinions.

We hope you have enjoyed reading about this exciting addition to the Communal Societies Collection at Hamilton College. It is our privilege to be the custodians of such important pieces of Shaker history.



Fig. 8. Detail of Isaac Willard House (left) and “Apple Sauce House” (right).



Fig. 9. Detail of Harvard Church Family buildings.