

Hamilton College Library

“Home Notes”

Hamilton College Library’s Special Collections: An Overview

By Randall Ericson

This article is the first in a series which will focus on the Hamilton College Library (HCL) Communal Societies Collection. In this article I will provide some background information on HCL’s special collections and lay out the general characteristics of the Communal Societies Collection. In future articles I will focus on specific parts of the collection, for example the Shakers, Amana, Harmonists, and House of David.

The primary purpose of any college library is to support the curricular needs of the school. Faculty and librarians select materials geared to the specific courses offered. HCL is no different than other college libraries in this respect. Our general collection has been built over a period of 150 years through such a selection process, augmented by many gifts from faculty, alumni, and friends of the college. We also support the basic research needs of our faculty, and as our curriculum has increasingly required research by students, we have responded to this need as well. We currently have a collection of over 625,000 volumes and subscribe to approximately 1,900 print and 2,000 electronic periodicals. In addition, we subscribe to over 160 databases, many of which contain the full texts of the articles they index.

What sets college libraries apart from one other and makes them unique are often their special collections. Each library has specific areas of interest, related perhaps to the history of the college, the particular passions of previous librarians, or major gifts to the library. Such collections contribute to the reputation of the library and determine its usefulness to scholars and researchers beyond the institution.

At HCL we hold a number of notable special collections. The Beinecke

Lesser Antilles Collection was a gift of Walter Beinecke, Jr., a life trustee of Hamilton College until his death in 2004. This magnificent collection of books, manuscripts, maps, and prints relates to the Lesser Antilles during the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries. A bibliography of the collection was published in 1994.¹ A reviewer of the bibliography commented: “The Beinecke Collection is renowned for its importance and thoroughness, for including major early rarities as well as modern ephemera.”²

Ezra Pound graduated from Hamilton College in 1905 and was awarded an honorary Litt.D. in 1939. Hamilton College Library has one of the best collections of the published works of Pound anywhere. We seek to collect all editions of every one of Pound’s works in any language, and we have over one hundred first editions of his works in English. We also have a collection of manuscripts including letters by Pound, most of which are to members of the Hamilton College faculty or administration (including his letter to Hamilton College President Ward McEwen in 1956 attempting to return his honorary degree). We also hold a comprehensive collection of secondary writings about Pound.³

HCL is fortunate to own a collection of sixty-eight incunabula—the earliest printed books published between 1455 (Gutenberg’s Bible) and 1500. Our most utilized incunabulum is *Liber chronicarum*, published in 1493 and commonly referred to as *The Nuremberg Chronicle*—a history of the world up to 1492 with six blank pages at the end for the reader to fill in the remainder of world history! Our copy was once owned by a sixteenth-century Jesuit priest who added marginalia notes identifying cities and houses that were safe or hazardous for Catholics.

Reflecting the particular geography of the college is our extensive collection of material on the Erie Canal. Last spring we had an exhibit of these materials coinciding with a public presentation by Peter Bernstein, who had recently authored *Wedding of the Waters*, a history of the Erie Canal and its influence on American life. Bernstein viewed the exhibit before his speech and as he looked at the various texts on display he commented that it was like seeing old friends again. He lingered so long at the exhibit that he was thirty minutes late for his presentation!

We also possess the love letters from Grace Brown, who died at Big Moose Lake in the Adirondacks in 1906, to Chester Gillette, by whom she was expecting a child and who was convicted of her murder and executed in 1908. Their story served as the basis for Theodore Dreiser’s novel, *An American Tragedy*, and also for the 1951 film *A Place in the Sun*, starring

Elizabeth Taylor, Shelley Winters, and Montgomery Clift. In addition to the letters, we hold many legal documents from the case, hotel registers showing where they stayed in the days before Grace's death, and dozens of newspaper clippings reporting on the trial. This material was donated to Hamilton by Ward Halverson, a Hamilton alumnus and great-grandson of George Ward, the District Attorney for Herkimer County who prosecuted the case.

Despite the richness and value of these other collections, I personally take the greatest delight in our Communal Societies Collection. It was begun in 1989 by my predecessor, Ralph Stenstrom. Ralph was seeking a suitable subject for concerted collection building, one connected in some way to local history. Intrigued by the events of the Second Great Awakening and the flames of religious revival that swept across New York State spawning new communal groups and influencing established communities, Ralph settled on communal societies as the focus for this new collection. Over the past eighteen years, the collection has grown from a handful of notable publications into one of our premier collections. It includes tens of thousands of items, including 8,500 published works, several hundred manuscripts, approximately 2,500 images (postcards, cartes-de-visite, cabinet cards, and contemporary photographs), thousands of pieces of ephemera, correspondence, and research notes, and approximately 250 artifacts. Initially the collection was limited to nineteenth century communities, but recently it has expanded to include twentieth century communities as well.

At the core of our Communal Societies Collection is the Shaker material. This material surpasses all the rest in quantity, in part because the Shakers were prolific writers and artisans and because so much has been published about the Shakers. Hamilton has one of the strongest collections of Shaker imprints—second only to Western Reserve Historical Society when measured by the number of titles listed by Mary Richmond in vol. 1 of her *Shaker Literature*.⁴ In addition we have a significant number of publications by Shakers that are not recorded by Richmond, along with an extensive collection of secondary literature, a very large postcard collection, manuscripts, ephemera, and artifacts. Greater detail on this material will be provided in a future article.

While the greatest strength of our Communal Societies Collection may lie with the Shaker material, also included in our holdings are materials by and about many other American intentional communities,

most prominently those listed below.

Amana Communities

Bethel & Aurora

Bishop Hill

Brook Farm

Ephrata Cloister

Harmony Society

House of David

(& Mary's City of David)

Hutterites

Icaria

Koreshan Unity

Mennonites

New Harmony (Robert Owen)

Oneida Community

Zoar

Whereas the Shaker material includes objects and artifacts, material related to these other communities generally does not. Our primary emphasis has been on printed works, with a secondary focus on securing manuscripts, photographs, and ephemera. Hamilton is fortunate to have secured a large and important collection of hymnals and psalters compiled by the Amana societies, extensive materials published by Koreshan Unity, an exceptional collection of publications relating to the Oneida Community, and a large number of monographs and ephemera published by the groups associated with the House of David.

We also have publications by individuals who were leading proponents or supporters of the movement to organize intentional communities, including Robert Fourier, Robert Owen, Bronson Alcott, Andrew Jackson Davis, Adin Ballou, John H. Noyes, George Rapp, James Peebles, and others.

Finally, the Communal Societies Collection includes works pertaining to other American religious denominations—groups and sects that gave rise to, or were closely associated with, the Shakers and other intentional communities. These include the Baptists, Freewill Baptists, Spiritualists, revivalistic sects active in central and western New York during the early nineteenth century (the “Burned-Over District”) and others active in Kentucky and adjacent states during the same period (the “Kentucky Revival”), the French and English Prophets; as well as works about Revivalism, Transcendentalism, Spiritualism, Mesmerism, Communism, and Social Cooperation.

* * * * *

It is difficult to compare HCL's Communal Societies Collection to

similar collections held by other public and private institutions; however, I believe there exist very few as comprehensive as ours. There are, of course, a large number of collections located in university and local libraries and local historical societies that focus on regionally specific communities. To the best of my knowledge, however, only Hamilton College Library, the Sabbathday Lake Shaker Library, the Library of the University of Southern Indiana, and the Syracuse University Library have collection policies that include acquisition of works by and about American intentional communities in a broad and unrestricted manner. Our Communal Societies Collection is the fastest growing of all our special collections (thanks in part to a gift by Walter A. Brumm which will be described in a future article), and we continually seek new ways to enhance it and promote its use by researchers.

Notes

1 Samuel J. Hough and Penelope R. O. Hough, *The Beinecke Lesser Antilles Collection at Hamilton College: A Catalogue of Books, Manuscripts, Prints, Maps, and Drawings, 1521-1860* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994).

2 Roger E. Stoddard, Curator of Rare Books, Harvard College Library, quoted on back cover of Hough, *Beinecke Lesser Antilles Collection*.

3 See Cameron McWhirter and Randall L. Ericson, comp., *A Selected Catalog of the Ezra Pound Collection at Hamilton College* (Clinton, N.Y.: Hamilton College Library, 2005).

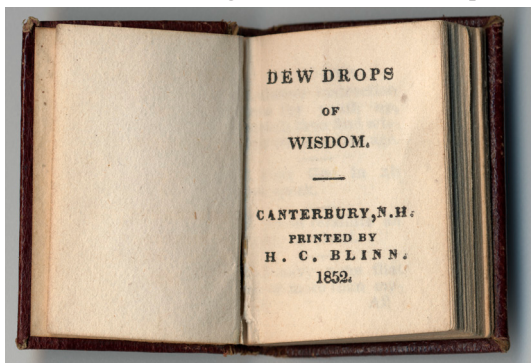
4 Mary L. Richmond, *Shaker Literature: A Bibliography* (Hancock, Mass.: Shaker Community, Inc., 1977)

Communal Societies Collection: New Acquisitions

Following is a selection of recent acquisitions to Hamilton College Library's Communal Societies Collection. This issue's sampling illustrates the broad scope of the collection, as well as the wide diversity of American intentional communities represented therein.

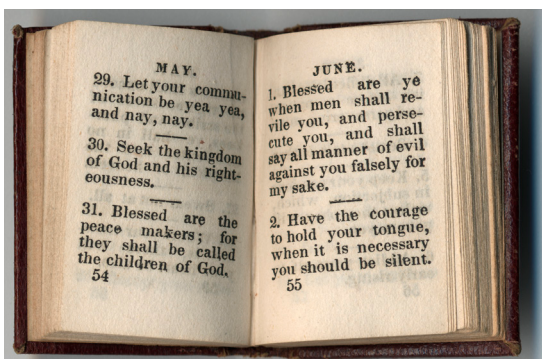
1. [Blinn, Henry C.], compiler. *Dew Drops of Wisdom*. Canterbury, N.H.: Printed by H. C. Blinn, 1852. 125 p. 4 1/2 x 3 1/2 cm.

Contained within its original full calf binding, its pages measure only 4 1/2 x 3 1/2 cm., making it the smallest book printed by the Shakers. It contains



a combination of scripture verses (unattributed) and moral sayings—some general, some more specifically Shaker in orientation—for each day of the year. For February 17 is found the admonition: “You may shine but take care not to scorch.” The entry for November 12 sums up

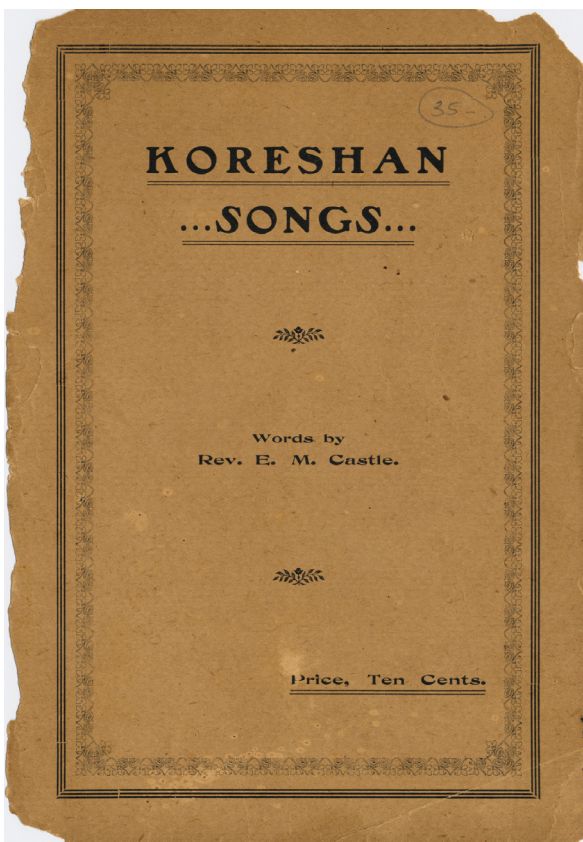
Shaker theology in a single sentence: “Put your hands to work, and give your hearts to God.” This wonderful imprint is as rare as it is diminutive, with OCLC WorldCat recording only two other holdings (Western Reserve Historical Society and the University of Indiana Library). Richmond (*Shaker Literature*, no. 95) records two additional holdings. The Fruitlands Museum copy includes a manuscript note by Sister Ethel Peacock, “They



printed just a few of these.”

2. Castle, E. M. *Koreshan Songs*. [N.p.: n.d.]. 16 p. 20 cm.

This rare hymnal, containing words but no music, and bound into its original printed wraps, comes from the Koreshan Unity Settlement in Estero, Florida. The society was founded by Cyrus Teed (known to the faithful as “Koresh”) in 1880 at Moravia, New York. By 1886 it had relocated to a large communal home in Chicago, and by 1894 had made its final move to Florida. Most members were celibate. Among the more remarkable Koreshan doctrines was their belief that the earth was a hollow sphere and that mankind lived on the inside of it. Like the Shakers, the Koreshans held that the deity was both masculine and feminine. One hymn opens with, “Dearest Mother, to you appealing, Hear your children! We cry for rescue” A very rare work with OCLC WorldCat locating copies only at the libraries of the University of Florida and Hamilton College.



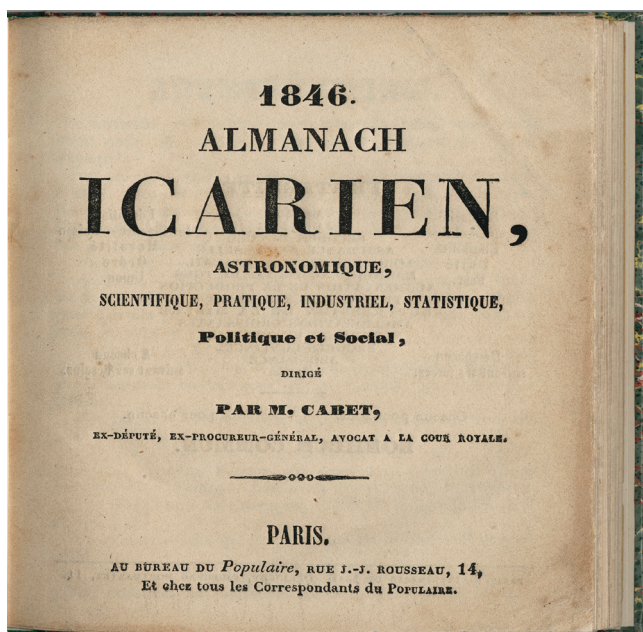
3. [Two Shaker Seed Boxes from the New Gloucester, Maine Community]. The wider box: 4" x 24" x 9". The taller box: 5¼" x 14¾" x 7¼". Both are pine with applied paper labels, nailed construction and metal hardware (hinges and/or hooks and eyes).

By 1800, the United Society of Believers had established profitable seed industries at most communities. Shaker garden seeds were renowned for their quality and excellent rate of successful propagation. The Shakers were the first in America to package their seeds in paper envelopes, not unlike the garden seed packets available in stores today. Seed boxes, such as the ones pictured here, contained a variety of seed packets, and were sold or consigned to stores and shops within peddling range of the several Shaker villages, as well as mailed to more distant locations. Both labels state that the seeds were "raised and put up by the United Society" at West Gloucester, Maine. Both boxes show evidence that they were recycled, as each has two labels – one applied over an earlier example. The wider box is divided into six interior compartments and has breadboard ends to the lid. The taller box has stenciled letters ("LKS") on one side, as does the wider box ("S BSS"). The New Gloucester, Maine community was later called West Gloucester at the time a post office was established there about 1850. In 1890, the Postmaster General changed its name to Sabbathday Lake. The taller box probably dates to ca. 1850-1865, the wider box to ca. 1870-1885. Shaker seed boxes from the Maine communities are very rare. From the Walter A. Brumm Collection.



4. Cabet, Etienne. *Almanach Icarien: astronomique, scientifique, pratique, industriel, statistique, politique et social*. Paris: Bureau du populaire, 1842-1852. 14 cm.

Following the 1837 publication of his *Voyage en Icarie*, where he outlined his plan for a utopian society founded on the principles of evolutionary communism, the French socialist Etienne Cabet organized an Icarian colony in Texas in 1848. The experiment lasted less than one year and was an utter failure. When the remaining Icarians met up with Cabet in New Orleans in the winter of 1849, they divided, with one group of frustrated settlers returning to France and the rest following Cabet to Nauvoo, Illinois. Here they established a colony on old Mormon land, which lasted until 1857. Cabet began to publish his *Almanach Icarien* in 1842 and continued annually through at least 1852 (none published in 1849-1851), along with a supplement for 1848. The *Almanach* provided a venue for Cabet to continue promoting his ideas for a perfect utopian community. OCLC WorldCat locates eight holding libraries, most with scattered holdings. Hamilton holds the 1844, 1846, and 1848 issues.





5. [Photograph, Cabinet Card]. [The Meetinghouse, North Union, Ohio Shaker community]. “North Union Church, Warrensville, O.” (inscription on reverse of mount). Photographer unknown, ca. 1880-1895. 11½ x 17 cm., mounted on board 14 x 19 cm.

The last major Shaker societies were established during the 1820s in New York and Ohio. The society at North Union, Ohio was located a short distance from Cleveland. The first converts there “embraced the faith” in 1822, and by 1826 the community was fully established. While it was among the last of “Mother’s children” to come into “gospel order” (i.e., communal living arrangements), it was the second of the major Shaker societies to be discontinued (in 1889). Because North Union was relatively short-lived, relevant imprints, objects and images are rare. The untidy appearance of the meetinghouse and adjacent picket fence suggests that this photograph was probably taken during the 1880s, or perhaps shortly after the community was closed and its members relocated to other Ohio communities. The architecture of the western Shaker meetinghouses varied considerably from their New England and New York counterparts. While of elegantly simple design, the western

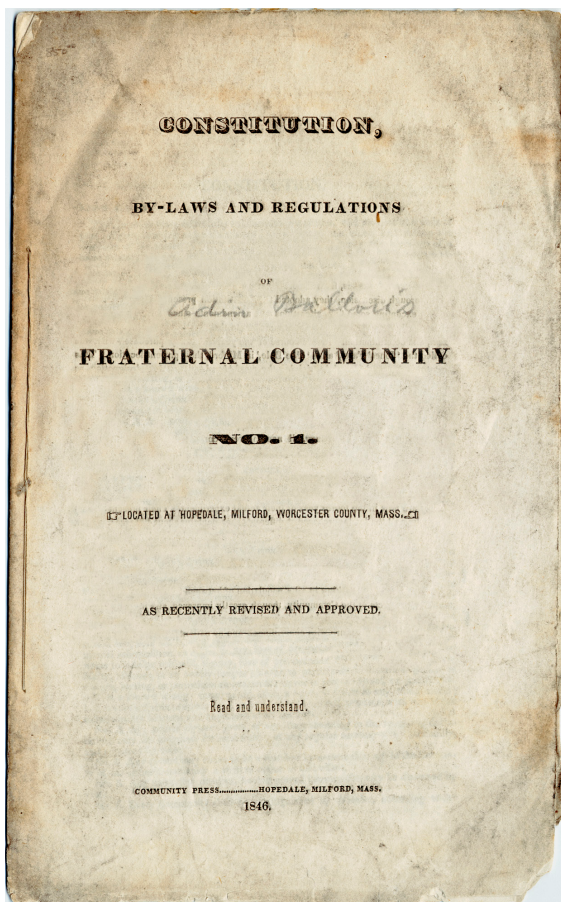
structures lack the traditional gambrel roofs and emphatically separate doorways for brethren and sisters. The building was razed sometime after 1890.

6. [Manuscript, bound volume]. *Journal of the Daily Proceedings in the South Family of Shakers, Albany County, N. Y.* Commercial blank book with 197 pages filled, with entries for September 13, 1896 through July 28, 1901. 36 cm.

This is the official journal of the Watervliet, New York South Family, with daily entries covering a period of nearly five years. It furnishes insight into the day-to-day activities of a Shaker family, and reveals the joys, sorrows, tensions and challenges of living in a large communal group. The South Family was a particularly vigorous and relatively youthful Shaker group. The journal was initially kept by Elder Napoleon D. Brown, who had joined the Pleasant Hill, Kentucky Shakers in 1865 after having served in the Union army during the Civil War. It is known that he left Pleasant Hill in 1896, apparently appointed by the Shaker Ministry to serve as the South Family's spiritual leader. A note on the front end paper states that on October 11, 1897, Sister Isabella Graves took over the task of keeping the journal. The entry for the following day gives some insight as to why this change occurred. Elder Napoleon had informed the church leaders that "he was going back to his western [i.e. Kentucky Shaker] home." Despite efforts to "get him to stay," the journal recorded that "we must let him go, but we are feeling very badly, but knowing he is partly insane we think perhaps it is for the best." Hamilton College Library has made the acquisition of manuscript records from the New York Shaker societies a priority, particularly items associated with the Sodus, Groveland and Watervliet communities. Acquired from the Edgar Crete Collection in 2006, this important journal joins an already impressive selection of manuscript diaries and journals from the Watervliet South and Second families.

7. Ballou, Adin. *Constitution, By-laws and Regulations of Fraternal Community No. 1 Located at Hopedale, Milford, Worcester County, Mass., as Recently Revised and Approved.* Hopedale, Milford, Mass.: Community Press, 1846. 16 p. 25 cm.

The Hopedale Community was founded by Adin Ballou (1803-1890) at Milford, Massachusetts in 1842. The members were mostly Universalists who “wished to put their Christianity to a practical test.” By 1852 they had over one hundred members living in a unitary home, and two hundred additional “associated members” who supported the commune. The community was actively involved in the various reforms of the day, particularly the peace and antislavery movements. This item is their



constitution and rule for community life—thoughtfully prepared and profoundly egalitarian. They declared that all members “shall stand on a footing of personal equality, irrespective of sex, color, occupation, wealth, rank, or any other natural or adventitious peculiarity.” The constitution was adopted about 1842 and the first printed edition issued in 1845, with another printing in 1846. Revised editions were printed in 1849 and 1850. All are exceptionally rare. OCLC WorldCat finds only the Hamilton College Library holding and three other copies worldwide.