

THE SHAKERS: Remedies and Crafts

Starting in 1774, the Shakers, a celibate religious society originally founded in Manchester, England began establishing several communal settlements in what is now the Eastern and Midwestern United States. During this time, medicinal “quackery” and “cure-alls” were common to find in the United States. In contrast, the Shakers’ disciplined communities brought about a certain level of respectability to herbal remedies. By the 1800’s Shaker communities were playing a major role in the systematic classification and distribution of seeds, the semi-industrial production of medicinal herbs, herb extracts, ointments and other early remedies. Notably, they were especially careful in diagnosing and dispensing medicines while keeping detailed records. Many of these herbal-based remedies became forerunners of “patent medicines” and similar preparations some of which are still available today. The Shakers with their laboratories, innovative processes, standardization methods and large scale production were among the first capable to supply enough raw materials to the pharmaceutical industry in the United States.



A visit to the former Shaker communities at Hancock, Massachusetts and Mount Lebanon, New Lebanon, New York in the early 1980s kindled my interest in Shakers’ herbal remedies, innovations and crafts. I have been particularly impressed by the craftsmanship of their wood products, wood finishes and the overall simplicity, although elegant design, of their furniture. My interest focuses on taped-seat chairs, tables of various designs and more recently in the restoration of original pieces. Although to build chairs and small tables I use modern tools, I often take advantage whenever possible of published Shaker techniques, wood finishes and if necessary, even reproducing some of their tools.

I have put together several pieces of Shaker furniture or Shaker-style furniture usually combining maple, oak, clear cherry and other rare woods (e.g., cocobolo). Examples of some of these pieces may be found below.



Fabric tape and weaving tools: The flat needle-like instrument at center is a modern reproduction of those used by Shakers to weave the seats (and backs) of chairs until the 1930s. This flat needle was perhaps originally made of polished brass and measures approximately 38.3 cm long, 1.5 cm wide and 3.5 mm thick. The instrument facilitates weaving tape through the woof. Fabric tapes are woven using yarn-dyed cotton.



Chairs modeled after those found in Shaker communities at Harvard and Hancock, MA, Watervliet and Mount Lebanon, NY. Top center panel: shawl back chair. Bottom left panel: weaving chair. Except for top right and bottom center panels, all are slat back chairs. Top left panel: clear cherry, oil finish. Bottom right panel: hard maple, water-based wiping stain finish (mahogany). All others: hard maple, oil finish.



Harvard community-style back post's finials of three straight slat back chairs. Hard maple, oil finish (left). Hard maple, water-based (mahogany) wiping stain finish (center). Hard maple, oil-based paint (wild bayberry) finish (right).



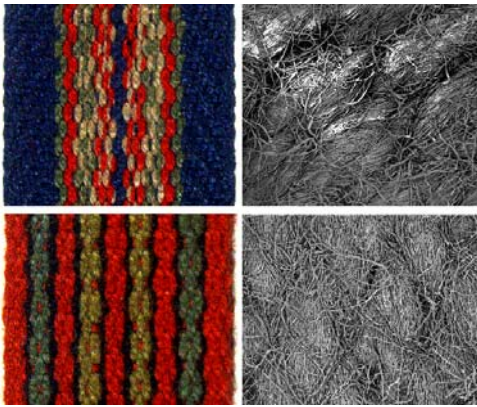
Weaving detail of four Shaker chairs. Chair woven with evergreen 1" tape (top left). Chair woven with navy blue and beige 1" tape (top right). Chair woven with red/bayberry stripe 5/8" tape (bottom left). Chair woven with flame stitch (Canterbury, NH) 7/8" tape (bottom right). Chairs, hard maple. Fabric tapes, yarn-dyed cotton.



Low table. Table top, 27 1/4" long by 26 3/4" wide, hard maple and red oak. Legs and apron, hard maple. 18" high. Oil finish.



High table. Table top, 51" long by 20" wide, hard maple and black walnut. Legs and apron, hard maple. 29" high. Oil finish.



Fabric tapes. Flame stitch (Canterbury, NH) 7/8" tape (top left). Red/bayberry stripe 5/8" tape (bottom left). Scanning electron micrograph showing thread fibers and weaving detail from a flame stitch 7/8" tape (top right). Scanning electron micrograph showing thread fibers and weaving detail from a red/bayberry stripe 5/8" tape (bottom right).