

Overview of the Kentucky Shakers

The Society of Believers in the Second Appearing of Christ began in Manchester, England, in 1747. They were called “Shaking Quakers,” later shortened to “Shakers,” because of their vigorous religious practices of whirling, twirling, and stomping during their services.

In 1774, a charismatic blacksmith's daughter, Ann Lee, and eight followers brought the Shaker religion to the United States. The American Revolution was starting and the English Shakers were persecuted, beaten, and jailed for their beliefs and pacifist stance against war.

The Shakers did establish 19 communities in New England, Ohio, and Kentucky with a total of 20,000 converts overall. At its peak, in the 1820s, there were 500 Shakers living on 7,000 acres of prime farmland at Pleasant Hill (Mercer County) and 349 on 6,000 acres at South Union, Kentucky (Logan County).

Shakers believed in communal living and joint ownership of property and goods. When people joined, they gave everything they owned to the community. Shakers believed in equality of the sexes and races. The Shakers were celibate, with women living and working separately from the men. Community membership grew through conversions and adoptions. Orphans were often sent to live with the Shakers. Other children became part of the community when their parents joined. Children could choose to stay or leave when they turned 18.

The Shakers lived simply but were innovators. They created many inventions to make doing chores more efficient. They are credited with inventing the circular saw, flat broom, an early washing machine, and improving the plow.

They believed in good hygiene and sanitation and were not plagued by illnesses that ran rampant through other towns and communities like consumption (tuberculosis), cholera, and yellow fever. They established a good reputation for products they sold to “the World” (anyone outside the Shaker community): silk, garden seeds, baskets, and preserves to name a few. They're also known, today, for their fine craftsmanship of oval boxes, peg strips to hang clothes and furniture on the walls, and ladder-back chairs.

As pacifists, the Shakers did not take sides in the Civil War, although on the slavery issue they sympathized with the Union. They fed and supplied both Union and Confederate soldiers which placed a hardship on their supplies. During the Industrial Revolution, jobs in factories and mills lured many members away from the farming life. That caused membership to dwindle and communities to close, Pleasant Hill, which started in 1805, closed in 1910. South Union, settled in 1807, closed in 1922.

Many of the buildings fell into disrepair and were used for other purposes, like a mechanic's garage to fix cars. But, in 1961, preservation efforts began at Pleasant Hill. More than 30 original buildings have been restored and it's now a working living history farm where vegetables are grown and served in the village's restaurant, sheep are sheared, worship services are held, and guided tours by costumed interpreters are available. Similar efforts began at South Union in 1971 and it, too, is open to visitors.