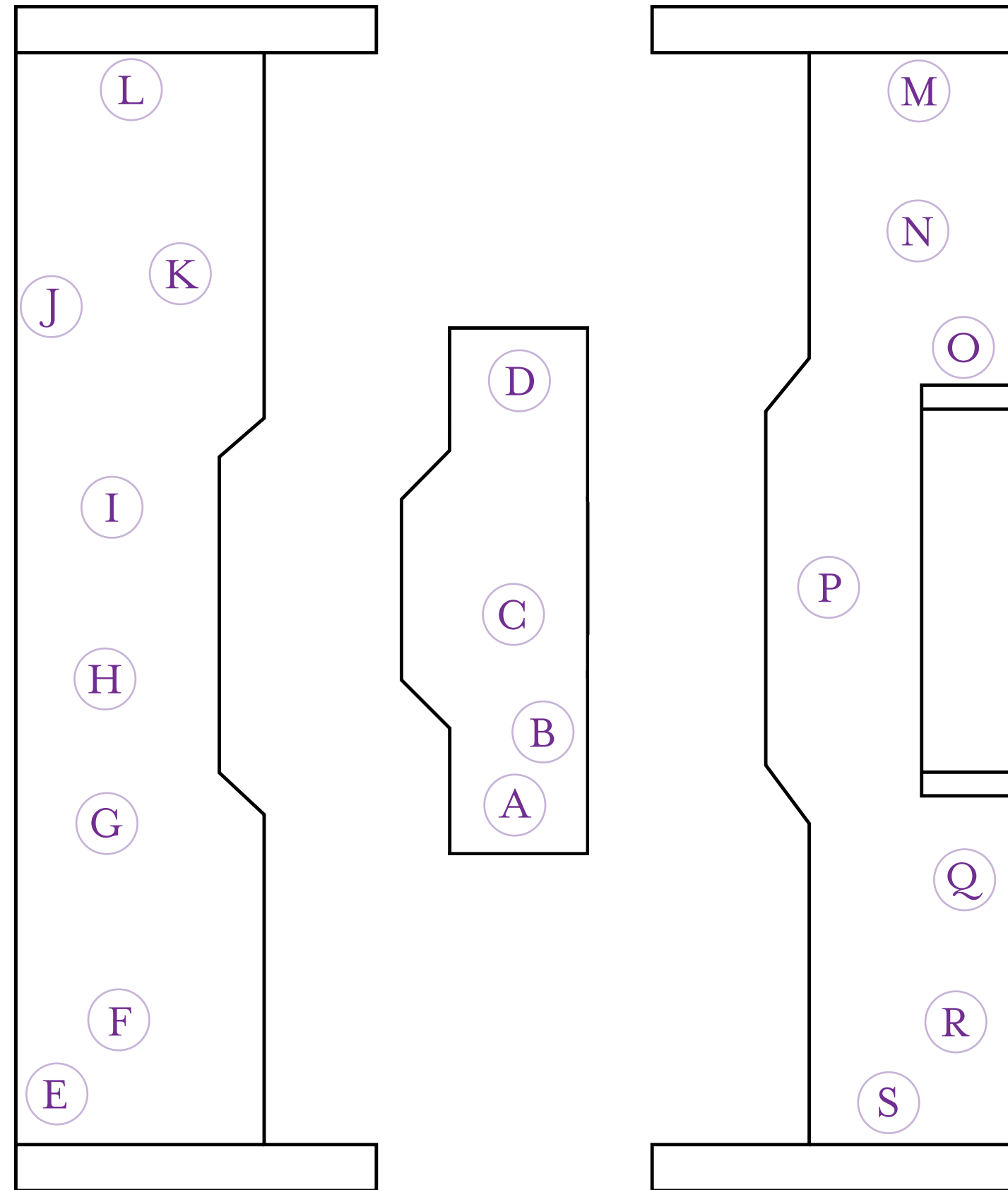


# the SHAKER GALLERY



## About the Enfield, Connecticut Shakers

**This** community was founded in 1792, one of the first of the eventual eighteen long-lived Shaker villages. Several large farms, comprising thousands of acres, owned by the Meacham, Pease, and Allen families were joined to make up most of the community. All Shaker villages were, in reality, large communal farms and Enfield was no different. Blessed with relatively flat and fertile land, and easy access to the Connecticut River, Enfield's economy was based on farm, not craft, products: Hay and oats; garden seeds and dried herbs; cattle and dairy products; poultry and eggs all allowed the members to purchase what they could not produce themselves. By 1803, there were 146 members "gathered" here.

**At** their peak years of the 1840s-1850s, more than 200 "Believers," divided among five "families," lived at Enfield. Since the Shakers were celibate, these families were political, rather than conjugal units. Each family was designated for a specific purpose: one took in prospective converts and was called the "Gathering Family" while the "Church Family," at the other end of the spectrum, contained the most committed, stalwart members. For example, of the 48 members present here when the community was first formed, 90% remained for life.

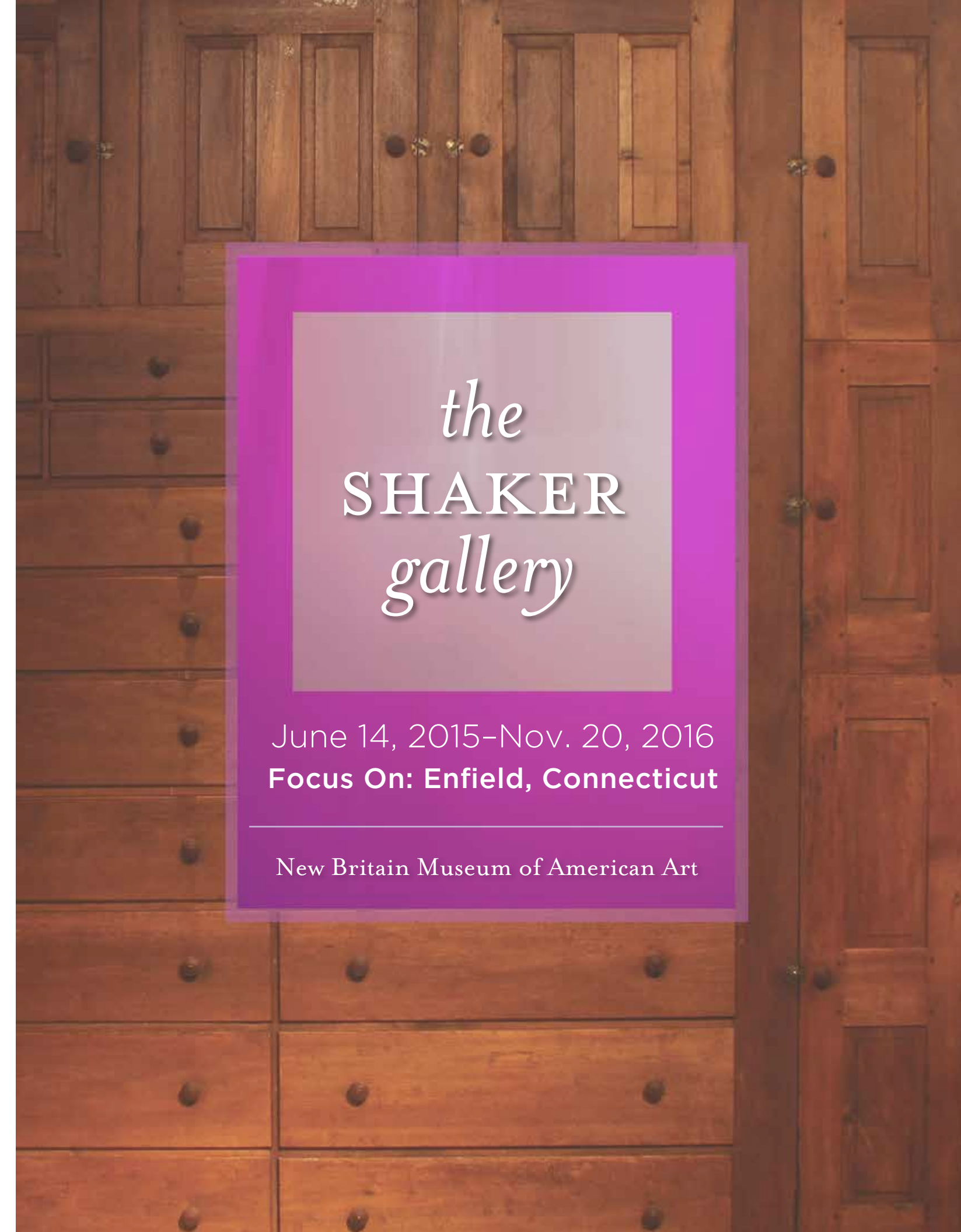
**After** the late 1850s, the population at Enfield experienced a rather rapid decline. This was due, in part, to their practice of taking in children without their parents; these youngsters did not develop strong bonds with the community. Another reason was Enfield's reliance on southern markets for their seed sales. These were cut off during the Civil War embargo and their industry never recovered. Finally, there was a preponderance of aged members whose effective leadership skills were not gradually replenished as they died off.

**There** were still 87 members present in 1900 but a series of internal conflicts, fueled by the transfer to Enfield of members from other closing Shaker villages, led to a further and rapid decline. The community finally closed in 1917 with the remaining members relocated to other communities. Their lands were sold first to a tobacco syndicate. The syndicate, in turn, sold the land to the State of Connecticut which built the present correctional facilities there. Today, only the former South Family land, and a few of its buildings, remains in private hands.

The above is adapted from the *Historical Dictionary of the Shakers*, Stephen J. Paterwic.

**This present exhibit is the only large-scale one to be devoted to this single important Shaker community. We hope you enjoy it and return for other "Focus On:" exhibits in the future. For more information, please visit the Museum's website.**

M. Stephen Miller,  
Curator, Shaker Gallery



## The Shaker Gallery 2015-2016

### WHO ARE THE SHAKERS?

**The Shakers** are a Christian sect whose roots extend back to England in the mid-1700s.

In opposition to the dominant religion, the Church of England, they believed—then and now—that an individual can relate directly to God without a professional priesthood, without the trappings of any formal religion, without even a church building. Furthermore, they believe that God is both male and female, with Jesus and Ann Lee both representing the fullness of the "Christ Spirit." Today they refer to their deity as "Mother Father God."

**Ann Lee**, a low-born, illiterate woman from the slums of Manchester, became the leader of a small group of dissenters in the 1780s. This group became known to the English authorities for expressing their relationship to their God through "ecstatic" worship: whirling, shouting, jumping, and "speaking in tongues" (incomprehensible words and sounds.) All of this was regarded as heresy to the Anglicans and the early Shakers were persecuted, even imprisoned. Now called Mother Ann by her followers, Lee had a revelation while in prison: only in the "New World" could a more "authentic gospel" be opened to the common people.

**In 1774**, Mother Ann sailed to New York City with seven followers and soon after, with funds provided by one wealthy follower, purchased land near Albany, NY. From this base Ann Lee and some of her new converts went into the countryside of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New York spreading their gospel message. They encountered more persecution, some of it very violent. Mother Ann died in 1784, perhaps as a result of beatings. Still, a dedicated core of followers continued on with her mission. By 1787, the first of their communities was formed at New Lebanon, later called Mount Lebanon, NY. The members believed that their safety depended upon separation from "the World." Thus, each Shaker village was assembled as a largely self-sufficient, communal farm and soon seventeen more long-lived communities were formed, stretching from Maine in the northeast to Kentucky in the southwest. By the 1840s there were some 4,800 members. But soon after the Civil War their numbers began to decline.

**Today**, only one Shaker village, with just a few Believers, remains at Sabbathday Lake, Maine. Yet, even after 240 years, the core values of Shakerism persist: communal ownership of all property, celibacy, and confession of sin; along with equality of the sexes, pacifism, the spiritual value of labor, and modesty and moderation in all things. Still, while simplicity remains their by-word, they have never shunned modernism or innovation. And while their faith is no different from what it was when this country was still a collection of English colonies, they live fully in the present. Furthermore, unlike some Protestant sects, they view progress as a gift from God, something to be embraced and even celebrated.

M. Stephen Miller,  
Curator, Shaker Gallery

### Sewing Desk, c. 1870

**A** Walnut with poplar drawers and porcelain knobs, H-41¼” W-31” D-25½”  
The Shakers adapted a much older Sheraton form of desk for a group of sewing desks in the second half of the nineteenth century. The design of this desk, with drawers facing in two directions, allows it to be used by two sisters at the same time. It is an example of function determining form. Enfield had a large grove of walnut and butternut trees and these woods were often used in their furniture.

Miller Collection, NBMAA



**B** This photograph was taken in the sewing room at Enfield, CT, c.1907. The sewing desk (above) is seen in the rear left, with a group of sewn and knitted items on top. The young girl posed in front of the piece is Hazel Robinson. Born in 1902 and left with the Shakers, she left them for the “World” in 1921 when she was 18 years old. The practice of leaving children without parents was a major factor for the decline of Enfield.

Miller Collection, NBMAA



### Large Octagonal Table, c. 1880

**C** Oak, chestnut, and cherry, H-30” Diameter-36”  
This table was probably made by Brother Thomas Fisher (1823–1902). Br. Fisher was schooled by others in traditional furniture construction but after around 1875, he was influenced by worldly designs. When Enfield closed in 1917, some of their furniture was shipped to the Canterbury, NH Shaker community. This table is one of four nearly identical ones found there today, three of them close to this size.

Loan Courtesy of Canterbury Shaker Village, Canterbury, NH



### Work Table with Drawer, 1835

**D** Cherry with pine secondary, H-28” W-42½” D-28”  
Inscribed under the top: “February 15 1835 Was/ Made By Abner Allen/ In the 58 Year of His/ Age.” A master craftsman, Brother Abner Allen (1776–1855) worked alongside Brother Grove Wright (see #K). Both used tapered drawer sides in their furniture construction but the top edges of Br. Allen’s were flat, Br. Wright’s were rounded. The drawer was added a short time later.

Loan courtesy of Miller Collection



### Trustee’s Desk, c. 1840

**E** Pine with iron hardware, H-72” W-42” D-26”  
Desks of this design were intended to allow two Trustees—either brethren or sisters—who were responsible for business dealings with the “World” to work side by side. Their interiors were designed to store their papers and account ledgers. Enfield had five “families”—North, South, East, West, and Center or Church. Each one was actually a political division of celibate Believers rather than a biologically related group and each family had its own Trustees.

Loan courtesy of Ed Clerk Collection



### Side chairs, c. 1840

**F** Maple and hickory with rush, H-41¼” W-18¾” D-14”  
All of the side chairs made at Enfield, CT before about 1850 are similar in form and dimensions. Seats were made of either rush, a marsh plant, or woven wool tapes. One of these two chairs also has “tilter buttons” on the bottom of the back posts. A Shaker invention that was later patented, these ball-and-socket devices allowed a chair to be tipped back without marring the floor or damaging the rear posts.

Miller Collection, NBMAA



### Armless Rocking Chair, c. 1840

**G** Maple and hickory with wool, H- 35 ½” W-17 ¾” D-21”  
The most distinctive feature of all the rocking chairs made at Enfield, Connecticut is the shape of the rockers themselves; they do not extend beyond the front posts. The reason for this design “quirk” is unknown but in the World, these were known as “suicide rockers” because if the sitter was not careful, he would fall on his/her face! The seat is old and possibly original; it was made by the Shakers from homegrown and home-dyed wool on a small tape loom.

Gift of Claire and Malcolm Knowles, NBMAA



### Work Stand, c. 1840

**H** Cherry, maple, and pine with clear varnish finish, H-22 ½” W-20” D-17”  
This style of work stand was a common form in the Connecticut River Valley. Eldress Caroline Tate (1859–1937), who was the leader of the community when it closed in 1917, gave this piece to her non-Shaker sister. A later family member gifted it to the NBMAA. The stand has two outstanding design features: the sides of the two drawers are planed down from single boards of wood with lips left at the upper edges to engage slides attached to the underside of the top and a metal plate with “fingers”—a Shaker innovation under the legs called a spider—keeps them from spreading.

Gift of Claire and Malcolm Knowles, NBMAA



### Octagonal Table, c. 1880

**I** Oak and chestnut, H-27½” Diameter-23”  
This is diminutive version of #C that was intended for use as a small side table or lectern. It was also made by Br. Thomas Fisher. Although many Shaker designs in the second half of the 19th century have a Victorian “look,” they were influenced more by Englishman Charles Eastlake’s *Hints on Household Taste*, 1868. The pieces made at Enfield lack carved surface ornamentation and are rather more restrained, less “fussy” than their worldly counterparts.

Loan Courtesy of Canterbury Shaker Village, Canterbury, NH



### Drying Rack, c. 1880

**J** Pine and walnut, H-64½” W-30” (each of three sections)  
This relatively fragile rack was probably intended for drying herbs and other plant material. It now holds a group of linen towels with “S.C.” embroidered in cross-stitch. These belonged to Eldress Sophia Copley (1846–1898). She born in England, came to both America and Enfield in 1852, and lived the rest of her life at the community. The community’s laundry was done in large batches and it was common practice to have items marked with an individual’s initials.

Gift of Claire and Malcolm Knowles, NBMAA



### Youth’s Rocking Chair, c. 1830

**K** Maple and hickory with splint, H-34” W-15½” D-22”  
This chair is remarkable for the excellence of craftsmanship that went into a piece that was not designed for an adult’s use. Although all of the elements of a full-size rocking chair are present, they are beautifully scaled down for a youngster. The seat is made of thin wood splints. There is an old, Shaker-made repair at the bottom of the right post; a forged iron “collar” that wraps the post to prevent any further splitting.

Loan courtesy of a private collection



### Chest of Drawers, c. 1870

**L** Chestnut, cherry, pine, oak and ash, H-42” W-40” D-21”  
Another Eastlake-styled piece, this chest was almost certainly the work of Brother Thomas Fisher. The drawer sides are tapered with flat tops, similar to those of his mentor, Brother Abner Allen (see # D). It came to the Shaker community at Canterbury, N H., along with the two octagonal tables in the exhibit, when Enfield closed in 1917. The use of commercial hardware in all Shaker communities was common after about 1850.

Loan Courtesy of Canterbury Shaker Village, Canterbury, NH



### Desk on Frame, c. 1875

**M** Walnut, butternut, oak, and pine with leather. H-34” W-25 ½” D-21”  
Another functional piece, this combines “classic” Shaker design from the first half of the 19th century (the desk portion) with later Eastlake elements (the base and shaped top pieces). The last eldress at Enfield, Caroline Tate, had the base made and gave the desk to her non-Shaker niece who was in college at the time. The two drawers in the interior have the tapered sides that once again identify the work of Brother Thomas Fisher.

Gift of Claire and Malcolm Knowles, NBMAA



### Adult’s Rocking Chair, c. 1820

**N** Maple and hickory with rush. H-46” W-21” D-24”  
This is essentially a larger version of the chair # K with similar shaped finials, slats, and rockers, only with four slats to accommodate a larger body. The loss of the varnish finish on the mushroom-shaped handholds and arms, and wear on the bottom of the rockers is exactly what one expects to find on a rocking chair that was in use for perhaps 80 years.

Loan courtesy of Ed Clerk Collection



### Wood Box, c. 1840

**O** Pine with brass side knobs, H-25½” W-27” D-15½”  
Every Shaker room had at least one stove, similar to the example nearby. Most stoves had a box that held split logs; this fine example also has a drawer for kindling. It was usually the responsibility of the community’s youngsters, boys and girls, to keep the wood boxes filled.

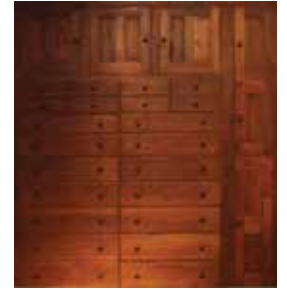
Promised gift of Vincent and Jackie Watson



### Built-in Case of Drawers and Cupboards, 1858

**P** Butternut and Pine. H-105 ½” W-96 ½” D-24 ½”  
This monumental storage piece was built by the Shaker master craftsman Grove Wright (1789–1861). It was installed on the second floor of the South Family Wash House, erected in 1858 (and removed in the fall of 2014 due to the building’s deteriorating condition.) As with all of Brother Wright’s work, the sides of the drawers are tapered, from a wide bottom to a narrow top and the tops of the drawer sides are rounded. A variety of linens and clothing would have been stored in its capacious spaces.

Collection of NBMAA



### Box Stove, 1820-1840

**Q** Cast and forged iron (with reproduction tin flue pipe). H-20 ½” W-12 ¾” D-33”  
The Shakers developed and used this general type of box stove to heat all of their rooms at Enfield. They made the wood patterns that were then cast by non-Shakers. The stoves at the South Family have a unique feature: three legs rather than four. The reason for this is not known. The long stove pipe radiated heat all along its length, making this a very efficient heating mechanism.

Loan courtesy of Miller Collection



### Work Stand, 1830-1840

**R** Cherry, maple and pine. H-26 1/2” W-15 ½ ” D-15 ½”  
This stand is similar in design to item # H. Unlike the other example, these drawers slide in both directions, allowing two sisters to use it at the same time. Also, these knobs are commercially-made brass instead of porcelain. Work stands and sewing desks (item #A) were made for the community’s sisters. By 1875, sister’s handwork was the economic backbone of Enfield and every other Shaker village.

Loan courtesy of Ed Clerk Collection



### Adult’s Rocking Chair, c. 1820

**S** Maple with rush. H-42” W-19” D-23”  
This spectacular rocking chair is a rare, if not unique, version of the brother’s rocker #N. Before about 1860, the Shakers scrupulously avoided all forms of “showiness” in their work—carving, inlay, etc. but delighted in the use of figured wood when it was available. After all, they must have reasoned, this was God’s own handiwork! All of the other elements that make up this chair are familiar, but the exuberant use of birds-eye maple throughout sets it apart.

Loan Courtesy of Clint and Pat Bigelow

