

Field Work: Reinterpreting and Reconstructing the Gendered Landscape

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The Cultural Landscape

New readings of the cultural landscape have emerged as space has become viewed as a social product (Yaeger 5) and not just a place for the re-enactment of historical events. Cultural studies in general “reinvent the story it sets out to critique...” (Yaeger 15) because it draws from and negotiates divergent fields such as social history, architectural preservation, environmentalism, public art — fields which all “draw on public memory” (Hayden 45). According to Warren, new interpretations of “culture” have mainly stemmed from anthropology in two related forms including, “the idea of a culture as a fluid entity always being created, contested and recreated and the dynamics of cultural practices within the confines and resources of a mass-mediated world.” (175). Because the cultural landscape is viewed as a continually active rather than passive it becomes a “storehouse of culture and history rather than as a scientific problem” (Hayden 66).

Historic Traces

In 1810, following a great fifty year period of religious revivalism concentrated in the mid-west colonies (Woloch 129), the Shaker Village of West Union, Indiana, was founded, thirty four years after the creation of the first Shaker village near Albany, New York (1776) and thirty six years (1774) after the founding leader of the Shakers, Ann Lee, arrived in America. As the most western community ever developed by the Shakers, the West Union village was dissolved, though, in 1827 after only seventeen years of development, an unusual decision by the Shakers whose optimism rarely kept them from giving up on any endeavor.

Numerous setbacks caused the abandonment of the West Union village from the swampy surrounding lowlands which caused incessant malaria to conflicts with other settlements near the village. Deaths from “the fever” were the primary cause of a drop in community membership from a high of three hundred at the settlement’s beginning to only one hundred forty members at the end. Sited between a major military post and numerous Native American villages, the pacifist Shakers, despite attempts to befriend both sides, also became caught between the invasions and cross attacks, culminating in The Battle of Tippecanoe, the first battle in The War of 1812 signaling the symbolic end to any cooperation between the two sides (Dowd 183). Because the life of this village was so brief and because there are no physical building remains, historians have given little in-depth

attention to this site. It is also not generally within the thinking of most Americans to reconstruct or reconsider their ‘failures’.

The planning of Shaker villages stems from a religious belief in function and usefulness through orderliness, most clearly evident in the overriding sacred spatial geometry of Shaker villages: the orthogonal or “four square”. This geometry originated with a central belief in a dual god (mother and father) and dual messiah (Jesus Christ and Ann Lee). The translation of this sacred doctrine into the physical landscape can be seen everywhere in Shaker landscapes from, for example, their architecture which is built orthogonally with entry paths, sidewalks or main thoroughfares; the fencing and trees located orthogonally to the fields and barns and; the endless cultivated fields and pastures. Emphasis on the orthogonal meant that the spatial order between architecture and landscape was always maintained, a concept further emphasized in Shaker village maps.¹ While there was a desire for uniformity in the total reading, the Shakers dually held a temporal view of the community as a place which should always be evolving. This is evidenced by the ease with which Shakers would change the use of a building or move it if necessary.

The grid can be viewed as an expression of power and precision over the gendered landscape, the vast Indiana prairie of the West Union site becomes ‘neutralized’ through its economically efficient and rational form (Sassen 144). This can be viewed both positively and negatively. The siting, for example, of smaller groups of members or ‘families’ as they were known throughout the vast gridded site kept the idea of community intact because they were spatially linked by a geometric system of enclosure.² While an overall sacred grid unites the members, though, it also nullifies the individual ‘family’ sites by often making them bland, repetitious constructions. The rigorous set of rituals and rules which Shakers were required to follow did not encourage active sites of difference within their communal order.

Mapping

On the site today, only surface fragments of the original village are visible and since its abandonment by the Shakers in 1827, the 2600 acre area (Conlin 57) continues to be used for agriculture. The two main roads defining the original Shaker village are still in use and help to visualize the vast limits of their territory. A drawing overlay of the original West Union Shaker village (in gray tone) with the present day landscape (the city of Oaktown, Indiana, is nearby) shows the extent of their holdings in 1827. Note that 1300 of their 2600 acres were located in Illi-

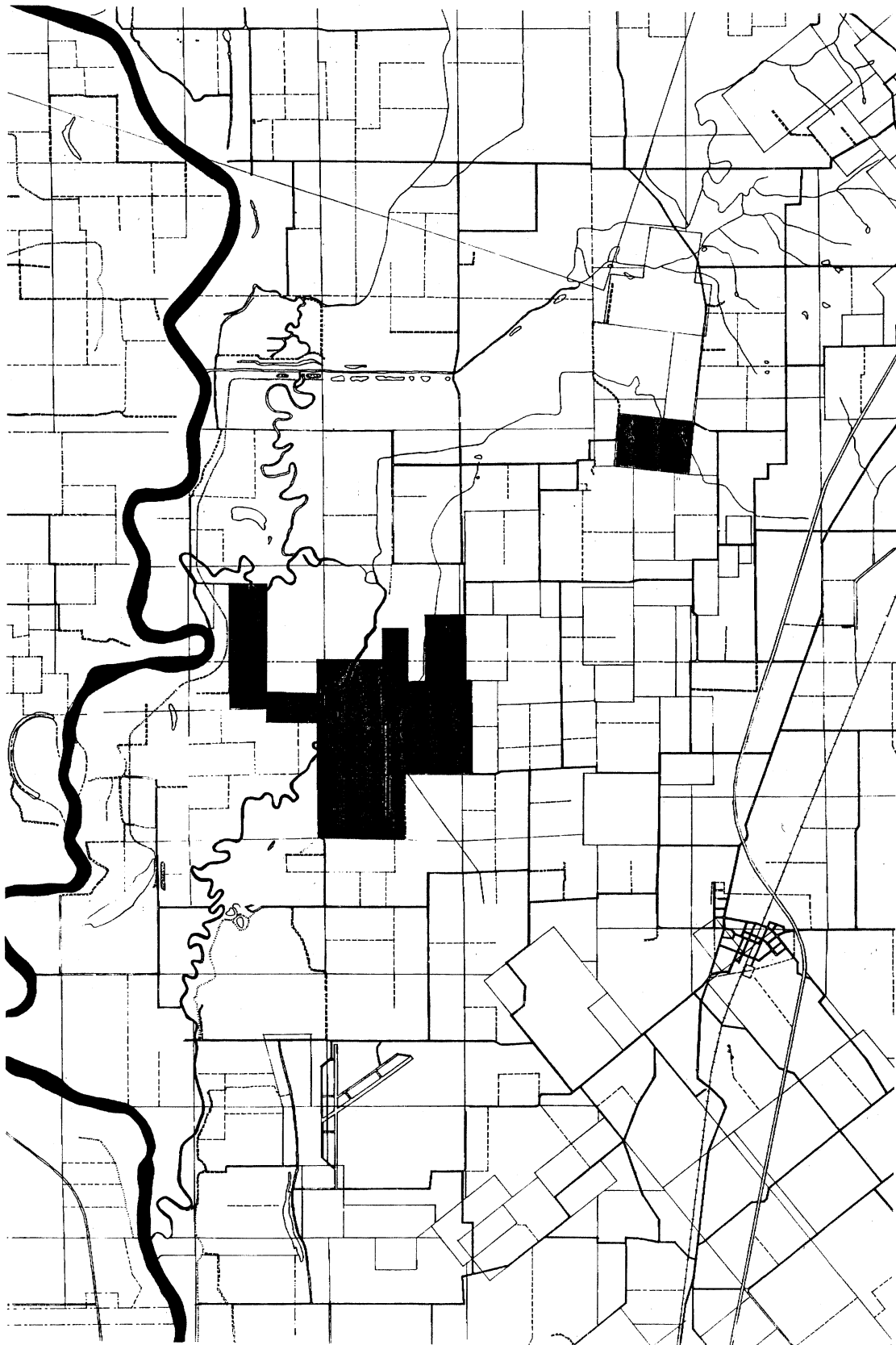


Fig. 1. A drawing overlay of the original West Union Shaker village (in gray tone) with the present day landscape (the city of Oaktown, Indiana, is nearby) shows the extent of their holdings in 1827.

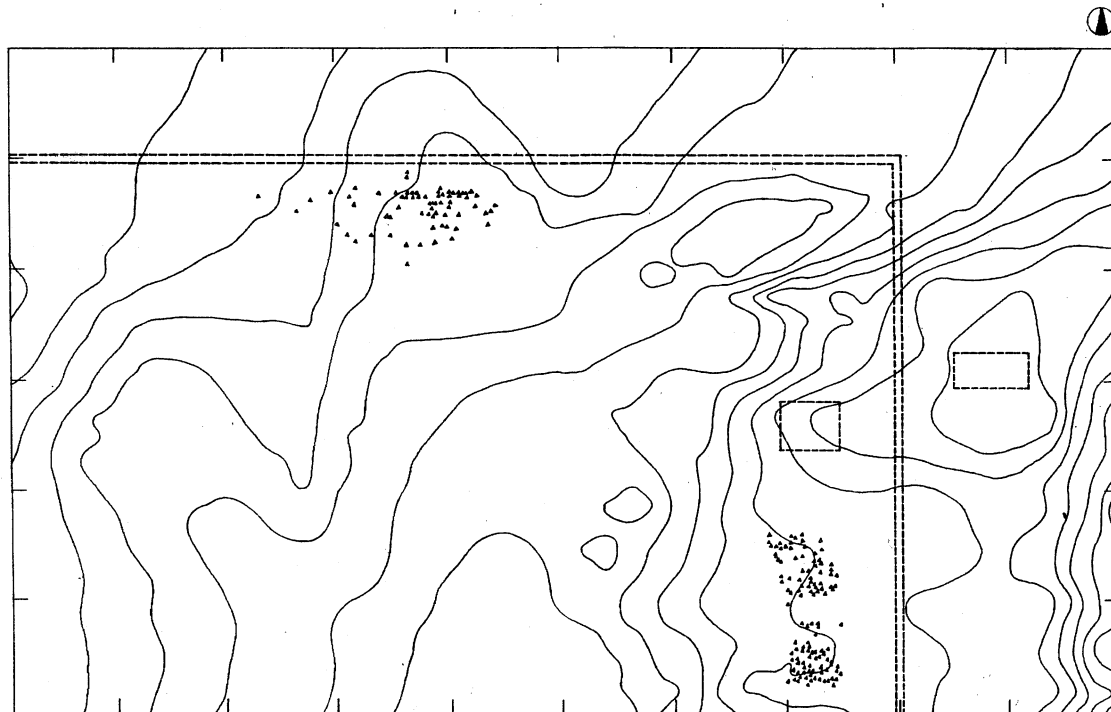


Fig. 2. A composite drawing of the archaeological findings by the author shows the two main village roads, the outline of the buried foundations of the meeting house and dormitory, and numerous other building fragments.

nois Territory and were relatively undeveloped; this area is not shown on the map. Limited archaeological drawings on the site were completed in 1992 in the “Center Family” area where some building foundations were located below ground (Janzen 7, 12, 20, 22). A composite drawing of the archaeological findings shows the two main village roads, the outlines of the buried foundations of the meeting house and dormitory, and numerous other building fragments.

The only surviving historic visual documentation of the village is a hand drawn surveyor’s map in ink with watercolor washes overlaid made between 1824 and 1827 near the end of the village. Single lines on this map indicate property owned by the Shakers and double lines show their widespread drainage system. Descriptive text alongside the map also catalogues buildings and their locations within the site.

As in many Shaker villages, the West Union settlement is laid out along a primary north to south axis where the most important buildings spiritually to the community are located, the meeting house (the place of worship) and the dormitory (where the ministry dwelled). These two buildings are the only ones shown in elevation on the surveyor’s map, further emphasizing their significance to the community. A flattened, abstract technique is used to exaggerate the scale of their building forms. The west to east orientation of the dormitory to the meeting house is also significant spiritually. Their west to east liturgical movement is directed toward the rising of the sun, symbolically the site of resurrection (Pullman 33). A second main road or axis in the village is also directed west to east and leads over the Busseron Creek to the Wabash River. This is where the majority of goods made by the Shakers were transported by barge. A reconstructed drawing based on the historic surveyor’s map made between 1824 and 1827 and current archaeological findings show a general village layout, building types, and cultivated lands

Like most Shaker maps, the West Union example is not constructed topologically, that is, it does not represent actual distance. Nor does the map establish particular viewpoints; the entire community is pictured to reinforce the communal nature of the religious order. While often much more artistic and complex in detail than the West Union example, village maps in general held no decorative value for the Shakers (Emlen 4). They were made by select male brethren as planning and communication tools for their own village and distant Shaker villages both to promote kinship ties beyond (Emlen 3) and to assure uniformity in the structuring of the landscape. Village maps also strengthened community memory by helping believers to organize and comprehend their complex social structure and vast property areas. Women were not actively involved in map making because the central ministry forbade them from the study of architecture, horticulture, mill complexes, granite working, surveying, or building and farm trades, the skills required to be actively involved in the structuring of their own landscapes. While women had no active role in map making, a few maps made by the male brethren do document some of their daily patterns, showing how work and prayer were ritualized through the landscape. Maps then, are one source for extending a historic site’s social history by reclaiming gender issues in more detail.

Hidden Histories

The understanding of how religious beliefs and practices structure the landscape is a hidden history within the development of American culture. The formation of gendered sacred landscapes, in particular, have remained even more concealed from the public presence, thereby limiting insight into women’s own unique spatial environments. It is important to understand how past re-

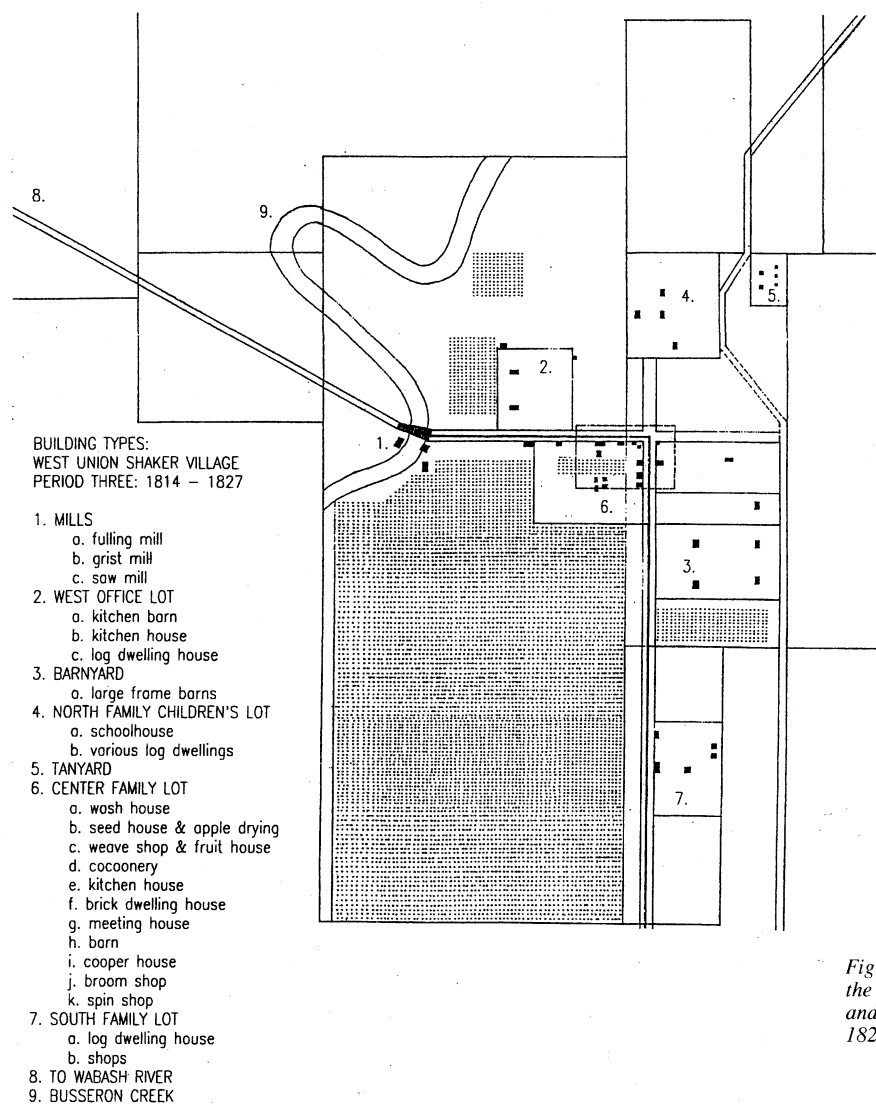


Fig. 3. A reconstructed drawing based on the surveyors map shows the building types and general layout of the site in 1824 or 1827.

ligious beliefs have roots in our own contemporary culture because diverse populations need to have available sites that relate a history of diversity of beliefs. “Places trigger memories for insiders, who have shared a common past, and at the same time places often can represent shared pasts to outsiders who might be interested in knowing about them in the present” (Hayden 46). Too, there are few historic sites committed to telling the history of religion and especially women’s connection with the sacred. In her survey Miller found that only five percent of national, state and local landmarks focus on any aspect of women’s history (Hayden 54).³ It is significant, then, in a country where there are “...few traces to link pilgrims back to the long history of their religion” (Bharwajand 23) to be able to learn about or experience the sacred by locating ourselves in a historic place where the sacred has occurred.

When experiencing Shaker villages today, the ‘limiting’ associated with the pursuit of self-knowledge often occurs in three forms: 1) an overriding emphasis on the religious order as utopian to the exclusion of commonly-held histories between Shaker sisters and other nineteenth century American women; 2) the re-

vealing of only fragmented parts of Shaker culture to create a unified tourist experience and; 3) the theme of enclosure in Shaker women’s landscapes through an exploration of the tension between natural and cultivated gardens. A drawing reconstruction of the Center Family area, a portion of the overall West Union Shaker village, further illustrates these three concepts. The drawing is based on Shaker day books chronicling construction and land improvements over time, archaeological findings, and general knowledge of Shaker building practices in the West.

Emphasis on Reconstructions as Utopian

As feminist historian Marjorie Proctor-Smith stated, even though the Shaker order was founded by a woman, Ann Lee, because her leadership lasted for only ten years and she named no successors, the organization became institutionalized and controlled by men (Proctor-Smith 11). While women had access to leadership, a unique aspect in and of itself of nineteenth century communities (Procter-Smith 19), the male ministry assumed real

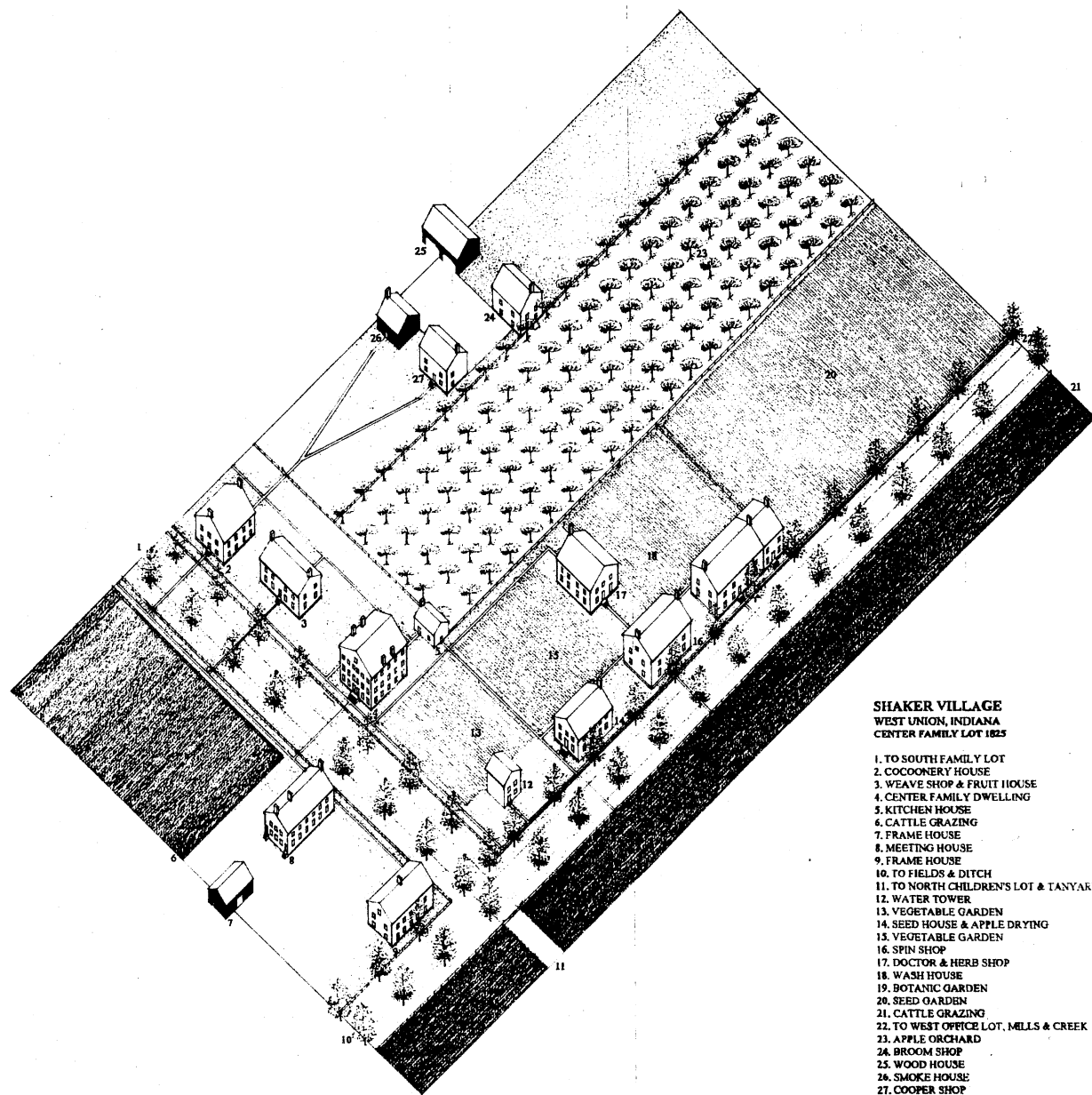


Fig. 4. The drawing reconstruction of the Center Family area of the West Union site shows how women were regulated to strict traditional kinds of work in the kitchen, laundry, spin shop, and gardens.

power in the community, controlling most political, economic, and social aspects of the society through their writing of letters and spiritual texts, allocation of funds, and structuring of the physical landscape. Women, then, were positioned both inside and outside the power and authority of the community. While gender identity in the outside world is continuously being negotiated and contested (Rose 3), within the private sphere of the Shaker community power relations were largely controlled by select male Brethren.⁴

In addition to inequalities in leadership, limitations of economic opportunity for Shaker women shaped the gendered landscape, sometimes in ironic ways. Although the Shakers are a religious order viewed by modern day tourists as "utopian" in every respect, Shaker sister's work follows the standard divi-

sions of labor for women commonly found in the outside world during the nineteenth century. The drawing reconstruction of the Center Family area of the West Union site shows how women were regulated to strict traditional kinds of household work in the kitchen, laundry, spin shop, and gardens (See Figure 4). Because there are no labels or tour guides to tell one otherwise, the decision to take on such jobs appears as a "rational choice" by Shaker women (Hanson 4). While the cocoonery and herb shop represent unique industrial specializations not found outside Shaker settlements, the work women performed in these shops too were especially repetitive and task oriented.

Today, the experience of woman's workhouses or cultivated landscapes at historic sites fails to adequately reflect the mass quantities of goods produced by Shaker women, thereby pre-

venting an understanding of the vast economic contribution sisters made to the society as a whole. Every Shaker village was a complex production site with a diverse combination of industries, supplies, and markets. Some contributions made by women can be quantified through the economic value of products such as hats or barrels of applesauce. Other domestic chores are less easily assigned a 'wage' value such as cooking, the care of brethren's clothing, or tending of kitchen gardens. At historic sites today the "supposedly 'separate' spheres of private domesticity and public labour" (Rose 120-1) are maintained. Instead, a very genteel approach to women's economic production is recreated where a visitor might see a small herb garden, a few candles being dipped or fragments, cloth being woven, or clothes boiled for washing.

Yaeger suggests that we are often misdirected into thinking that a constant flow of narratives and objects can recreate the experience of 'place' (20) where "the illusion of a relation between things takes the place of a social relation" (22). Through her study of Susan Stewart's work on museum culture, Yaeger found that a curator's role is to "add motives or concepts to things" so that one object seems to attest to the social history of an entire culture - "...where an Ibo mask promises a covenant with all Ibo culture, while a ten-minute movie of China pretends to survey the vast differentiations of all Chinese history" (22)⁵ At Shaker historic sites visitors have the advantage of being able to directly experience the historic landscape. Yet information imparted about the society is largely centered on the beautiful yet functional objects they produced from chairs to oval nested boxes to brooms. The emphasis on objects as representative of the culture also has the effect of placing an overriding emphasis on interior spaces and not the landscape. There is little recognition of the unique enterprises at individual sites which arose from their geographical location such as the West Union site, for example, which was largely centered on growing of fruit. The Shaker's overriding emphasis on crafted and beautiful objects as a conduit to God is indeed something to be celebrated and imparted. Because women's work, though, was not centered on such objects but on household duties and other tedious tasks, their direct economic value to the society has largely been ignored.

Boundaries: Public and Private Space

The assignment of gender based on patterns of working, living, and prayer only begins to describe the community's overall social geography. This is because the distinction of some landscapes as female, male, or overlapping genders is limiting. As cultural geographer Rose has written, "Spaces constructed over many dimensions are necessary" (151). Similarly anthropologist Blunt believes that the structuring of gendered space has now come to be viewed, "less as a geography imposed by patriarchal structures, and more as a social process of symbolic encoding and decoding that produces 'a series of homologies between the spatial, symbolic and social orders.'" (Blunt 3)⁶ The

boundaries between public and private space in urban or rural nineteenth century America can not be so easily assigned to Shaker communities. When viewed from the outside world their overall spatial structure could be seen as totally private given their chosen isolation from American society. When looking from within Shaker communities themselves, though, space could be viewed as entirely public. This is because spiritual behavior was dictated in direct concert with daily patterns of living and working. Also, constant scrutiny between members assured that few spaces were ever private.

The drawing reconstruction of the West Union site illustrates more subtle and complex negotiations between private and public space which occur at a smaller scale while also showing what made this Shaker community unique in and of itself. Men worked in the barnyards, fields, small work buildings like the cooper and broom shops, and large industrial sites like the tanyard and mills. Only select male brethren met with outsiders to negotiate the marketing of their goods. Women worked, lived, and prayed in small pockets of the community called 'families' as seen in Figure Four. While this could be seen as a form of oppression similar to other frontier women who lived in extreme isolation, it also could be seen as a form of community where small groups of women lived together spatially sharing their resources. Kolodny's work on women moving to the western frontier before 1850 shows that women perceived the prairies as "ready-made gardens". "Always, 'they dreamed...of locating a home and a familial human community within a cultivated garden', and this dream was part of their social location as white bourgeois women and the concomitant importance to them of the distinction between the public and the private" (Rose 111).⁷

Fragments of Culture Revealed

Often the desire to create a totally unified tourist experience means that only fragmented parts of the culture are revealed. Modern reconstructions of Shaker sites, for example, neglect women's histories by only restoring male barn yards and fields to the exclusion of women's outdoor work spaces like kitchen gardens, physics gardens, orchards, or drying racks for dyed woolens. By reconstructing, then, only select areas of the built environment visitors are left to assume that Shaker sisters engaged in only the household tasks which are visualized or "re-created" within building interiors. It is interesting to also note that very few historic Shaker maps represent women's outdoor spaces of work.

The drawing reconstruction of the Center Family area of the West Union site shows how a site can be transformed by the inclusion of the vast garden landscapes worked by women. Because buildings are typically not hierarchical in the sense of having clearly defined front or back elevations, as one moves from garden to building, many points of entry allow for a contiguous experience of the landscape. Windows reinforce this idea further by being placed across from each other on opposite walls giving a sense of transparency between building and landscape.

Through the modern day reconstruction of women's outdoor spaces of work, then, entering into the garden, not through the workhouse, is the beginning act of entering into a feminine social order.

Shaker Village as Enclosed Garden

Layered between the spiritual texts and physical structuring of Shaker landscapes is a tension between the natural and cultivated landscape through a continuing theme of enclosure. The wilderness, for example, was broadly viewed by the Shakers as a site for cleansing or purifying through the "burning of vermin," where natural trees were to be replaced by the tree of life (or the spiritual self). The metaphorical naming of all Shaker villages as The Garden of Eden, New Jerusalem, or Zion continually reminded members they were in a place quite separate from other outside earthly dwellers. The biblical image of nakedness, for example, found in The Garden of Eden, interpreted as "purity" by most Christians, was viewed as "guilt" by the Shakers necessitating the making of a symbolic cover or "clean white garment" over the village (Sasson 43). The use of natural images was also evidence to the Shakers of "how God protects and nourishes humans" (Ross 107).

Daily life in a Shaker village was not led in preparation for the journey to Heaven but was seen as akin to living in Heaven itself. "The land itself represents the enduring presence of the sacred" (Ross 94) and this is what makes the visual experience of a Shaker village central to the religious reality of the believers (Promey 83). In the West Union site, women worked within contained, enclosed areas of the village in contrast to the large open fields and industrialized sites where male brethren worked. A grand open experience of the landscape is contrasted with the confined spaces within which the sisters lived and worked, showing the limits placed on them domestically.

In the drawing reconstruction of the Center Family area, the large concentration of sister's workshops shows the importance of these enterprises both economically and spiritually to the community (Ross 94) (See Figure 4). It also shows how "geographical categories and vocabularies" became a way to express their daily real encounters with the sacred" (Ross 94). Given their adjacency to the meeting house (the place of worship) and the dormitory (where the central ministry dwelling) it also shows the protected, sequestered nature of their working area and their ordered, controlled environment. Various other forms of cloaking protect the Center Family area. White picket fences and alleys of trees surround the buildings and stone fence posts protect the primary north/south and east-west axis all in orthogonal formations. The layering of apple trees in the Center Family area effectively veils the vision and interaction between women and the few males in workhouses at the edge of this site in the broom shop, wood house, smoke house, or cooper shop.

There is an irony in the Center Family area between the concept of enclosure and the continuous landscape, that is, the seamless experience between workhouse and garden effectively ends

at the moment of the first fence or boundary condition. The contiguous landscape, then, is only experienced within the defined area of the Center Family site. The main axial pathway reserved for collective religious experiences is where the continuity of the landscape is most preserved. Here is where believers from the three "Family" areas would walk once a week to join together for worship at the Meeting House. Through economic necessity, religious belief, and power relations, then, the social landscape of the Shakers literally begins to read like the community itself is structured, as both open (cultivated fields) and closed (fenced Family areas).

Dissenting Reconstructions

To address some issues related to the historic reconstruction of gendered landscapes, a modern day proposal for the West Union Shaker site is to rebuild women's workhouses in the Center Family as housing and planned outdoor spaces for migrant farm workers. Such a proposition would maintain some of the continuity of the original Shaker site while also allowing for its transformation by farm workers adding their own unique history and culture to add to the evolution of the site. This idea concerns a main criticism of historic reconstructions as being too stagnant by either representing only one time period or not designing for change over time. As Shakers constructed their buildings to be readily changeable (Hayden-2 81), the adaptability of the old structures to new housing would be an appropriate and interesting design challenge. This proposal also addresses some of the very real modern problems of sub-standard housing for farm workers in the area, just one of the difficult community issues modern historic reconstructions rarely attempt to solve.

A second proposal for the historic reconstruction of the West Union site is to approach the remaking of women's places of work as an abstract construction. Bowers would be constructed to represent the workhouses and spiritual houses of Shaker women in the Central Family area. Bowers, a series of twigs bent into arches resembling a passageway, were symbolic to the Shakers who viewed them as the gateway to heaven. Women's working gardens would also be reconstructed to work with the passages because in many ways the cultivated landscape is the 'monument' in Shaker villages. References to bowers occur in Shaker spiritual texts and images of bowers can be seen in the "gift drawings," spiritual outpourings made by Shaker sisters beginning in the mid 1800's. Ironically, there is also an affinity of the bower with Native American women who lived just north of the area of the West Union Shaker village and who had an important relationship with the Shaker village. As members of the Woodland tribes these women built their bowers or sacred temporary spaces much as the Shakers depicted them, as a series of bent twigs forming a long passageway positioned naturally in the landscape.

Conclusion

Public experiences which invoke historical memories by revealing, defining, and connecting Americans emotionally to the cultural landscape were compelling ideas put forth by Jackson in *The Necessity of Ruins*. Architects, cultural geographers, and anthropologists have extended this proposition, though, by calling for more integration of the forgotten or neglected memories of ethnic groups and women into the public landscape. The potential for modern reconstructions of sacred sites like the West Union Shaker village, by integrating more complex histories like those of Shaker women, hold promise for the future of the cultural landscape experience. This is not only because of the mystical, mythical appeal these sites already hold for many Americans, but the richness which the sacred storied landscapes of these women represent.

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NOTES

- ¹ See: Emlen, Robert. *Shaker Village Views Illustrated Maps and Landscape Drawings by Shaker Artists of the Nineteenth Century*. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1987.
- ² The term 'family' was used to describe smaller groups of members within a Shaker community who often were at various stages of religious development.
- ³ See: Miller, Page Putnam, ed. *Reclaiming the Past: Landmarks of Women's History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.
- ⁴ For a larger discussion of power relations in Shaker communities, see: Procter-Smith, Marjorie. *Shakerism and Feminism: Reflections on Women's Religion and the Early Shakers*. Old Chatam: Center for Research and Education Shaker Museum and Library, 1991.
- ⁵ See: Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984, 162-64.
- ⁶ Blunt cites the 1981 work of Shirley Ardener which attributed certain activities to certain gendered places.
- ⁷ See: Kolodny, A. *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers 1630-1860*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984.