BERKSHIRE COUNTY

“Hands to Work … Hearts to God”

This slogan identifies the builders of this round barn, the Shakers, and it summarizes their philosophy, similar to that of the Trappist monks – ora et labora. The Shakers, called this name – perhaps irreverently – because they incorporated animated whirling and swirling dancing, trembling, and fainting into their religious services, originated in England and came to America in 1774. Led by a woman, Mother Ann Lee, who suffered the loss of her four children and left an unhappy marriage in Manchester, the group of eight founded a colony in Watervliet, New York, in 1776. Their pacifist religion upheld equality of gender and race and it stressed the importance of confession of sin, communal life, and celibacy, which meant that any children would have to come from outside the group. Converts had to give all their worldly goods to the commune, where they were shared by all. Despite these stringent rules, the Shakers grew.

By the 1830s there were about 300 members in the Hancock community in Berkshire County, the third of 19 Shaker villages throughout the United States, and this group had accumulated 3,000 acres of land and built a handsome red brick dormitory, which housed more than 100. They also erected the round barn, farmed, and, using precise workmanship, built furniture, which became popular, evoking high quality and yet simplicity. Yet, despite the spread of the Shakers throughout New England, New York, Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky, this round barn was the only one they ever built. Furniture was a common thread but round barns weren’t.

They built the barn in 1826, choosing a true circular design, which they considered as the most perfect shape. Since they originated in Manchester, they may have been aware of several round stone churches in England, which date to the 12th century and were probably inspired by Crusaders, who were impressed by the round rotunda in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. The Hancock leaders also thought on a large scale when they built this barn with a circumference of 270 feet and a diameter of 95 feet. They also wanted it to last and had enough funds to construct stone walls 30 inches thick. The original design provided stanchions for 52 dairy cows and a central tower 55 feet wide and 30 feet high. Despite its sound foundation, its wooden section burned down in 1864.

Undaunted, members rebuilt the barn, finishing the reconstruction by 1883, this time making improvements by adding trapdoors behind the stalls so that manure could be scraped and dropped below to wagons. To prevent combustion of hay – which may have been the cause of the fire – they built a central octagonal ventilation shaft that rises above the roof in a cupola with windows. Just below the cupola, a 12-sided clerestory provided much needed light to the interior, another addition.

By 1850 the American Shaker population had reached an estimated 4,000 to 5,000 members but after the Civil War it began to decline. Young people (they adopted orphans) left for the world outside the community. Fueled by the industrial revolution of the late 19th century, jobs became more plentiful, contributing to this urban migration, and in 1874 only 98 members were left at Hancock and by the early 1900s only 50 members remained. As their numbers declined, they began selling land and dismantling excess buildings until they stopped farming completely in 1959.

A group of local citizens, realizing the historical importance of this commune, organized into a nonprofit, Shaker Community, Inc., located in Pittsfield, purchased the site, and began restoring buildings. They rebuilt the barn in 1968 and added the complex to the National Register.

The group now operates the 750-acre property as a museum and a working farm. Again, in 1986 the barn got a facelift, which, as the highlight of the farm, continues to draw visitors all year round. Today there are four rings inside the barn: the innermost provides ventilation, the next ring stores hay, the third allows workers to distribute the hay to the cows, and the outermost ring is where the cows stand in their stanchions.

The Hancock Shaker Village functions as a living history museum with an extensive collection of Shaker furniture, rotating exhibits, a mile-long hiking trail, a full schedule of events, held in many of the 20 restored buildings, including this iconic round barn. Oddly, though it was probably the first truly circular barn in America, it didn’t stimulate other farmers to follow suit. Circular barns didn’t catch farmers’ attention until Wisconsin’s Professor King’s barn plans were published in farm journals in the early 1890s.

Undoubtedly the Shaker round barn attracted visitors from the early 1800s but farmers may have felt – and rightly so – that such an undertaking was beyond their means. Regardless, today’s Shaker nonprofit organization, for the past 60 years, has wisely undertaken a formidable task to preserve a memorial to a most unique religious sect. In a much smaller way, this painting and essay will remember its round barn, which served the commune for many years and, in a sense, symbolized its proverb, “Hands to Work … Hearts to God.”