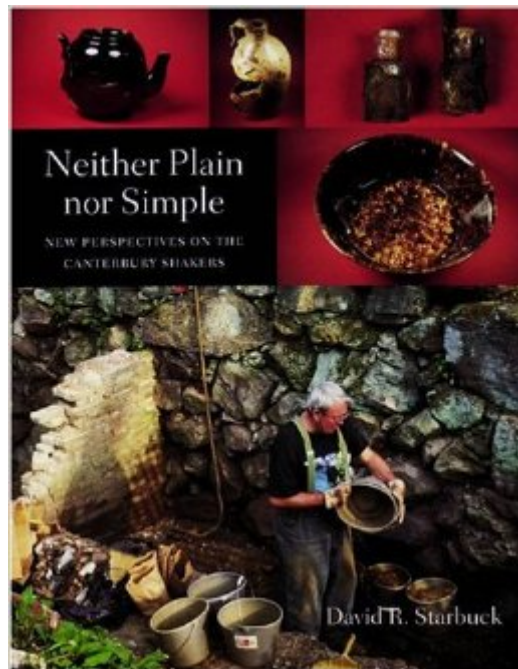


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Neither Plain Nor Simple: New Perspectives On The Canterbury Shakers



Synopsis

Canterbury Shaker Village, located in Canterbury, New Hampshire, just northeast of Concord, has seen more archeological research than any other Shaker community. David R. Starbuck has been digging there for over a quarter of a century. Beginning in 1978, Starbuck and his team mapped some 600 acres of the village, preparing sixty-one base maps, as well as dozens of drawings of foundations and mill features. Accompanying the maps were several hundred archeological site reports describing the history and present condition of every field, dump, foundation, wall, path, and orchard within the community. These documents offered the first comprehensive look at both the built and natural environment of any Shaker village. This above-ground study--with much updating--forms the second part of this volume. Through the 1980s, grant funding was available chiefly for above-ground recording and only rarely for excavating. Still, from the beginning Starbuck and his team speculated about what types of unexpected artifacts might be found if excavations were conducted in the Shaker dumps or in the nicely-manicured lawns behind the village's communal dwellings. With the 1992 death of Sister Ethel Hudson, the community's last surviving member, it seemed clear that Canterbury Shaker Village represented an unparalleled opportunity to use archeology as a cross-check on surviving nineteenth-century historical records and visitors' accounts. The Canterbury Shakers constitute one of the very best test cases for historical archeology precisely because they were a society that tightly controlled their internal descriptions of themselves. Because we know what the Shakers expected of themselves, we can use excavations to determine whether they actually lived up to their own ideals. Excavations into various dumps began in 1994. In the Second Family blacksmith shop foundation, for example, Starbuck discovered thousands of pipe wasters--evidence that the Canterbury Shakers manufactured red earthenware tobacco pipes for sale to the World's People. The Shakers' hog house contained numerous ceramics and glass bottles; at another dump almost a hundred stoneware bottles for beer or ginger beer were unearthed along with whisky flasks, perfume bottles, and false teeth. These new artifacts contradict the popular image of the Shakers as plain, simple, and otherworldly, thereby challenging existing paradigms about the nature of Shaker society. Starbuck's findings suggest that Shaker consumption practices were highly complex and that Shakers were perhaps more "human" than previously imagined. Neither Plain nor Simple, which brings together the original site maps with his most recent findings, will serve as the definitive archeological investigation of the Canterbury Shakers and their lifeways, and function as a model for similar archeological studies of communal societies.

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Customer Reviews

Starbuck's interpretation of archaeological data at Canterbury Shaker Village is self-serving -- simplistic at best, and in fact, nothing new. His book is an effort to put a sensationalist spin on the archaeological evidence which he interprets as indicating that the Shakers were more "worldly" and materialistic than popularly thought. He all but states that the Shakers were a community of hypocrites. In fact, the Shakers were not perfect, but the story is much more complex than Starbuck presents. No one ever denied that the Shakers were involved in dynamic commercial relations with the World - they were not self-sufficient and were not adverse to applying new technology to make their work more efficient. They were also, however, tempered by a very strong faith that called for moderation. They were human and balanced their lives as best they could. But Starbuck jumps to immediate conclusions. In his self-centered analysis, he very briefly mentions that other theories have been brought forth to explain the archaeological evidence, but unfortunately, he immediately passes these off as "sentimental." To offer one of a number of examples, he blatantly fails to take into account that the Shakers, a celibate order, sustained their population by conversion, and, as a communal group, those entering the Shaker life brought all their worldly goods with them. In the spirit of economy and thrift, what else could be expected than that the Shakers would then put those goods to use and throw them away when they were through with them? They certainly would not have carted off and secretly buried the refuse that would make them appear more worldly to future archaeologists! He would do well to consider the archaeological evidence in light of extensive historical documentation and other theories than his own.

The title, "Neither Plain Nor Simple", may be controversial. However, through archaeology, the author has been able to discover many new insights into Shaker life. This book has shown meticulous research and scholarship. The greatest strengths of this book are the base maps and site reports that describe the entire Shaker built landscape. This is not a book principally about Shaker history. Rather it is a book about Shaker archaeology and what can be learned by mapping a landscape.

"New Perspectives" says it all. Starbuck presents the results of his research and archaeological fieldwork in a concise manner that is understandable and interesting to follow. This is not a small task, given the amount of work that has been completed and painstakingly detailed. The resulting data is depicted through the use of a balanced number of professionally crafted charts, tables, drawings, maps, and photographs that bring life to the past and raise questions about our interpretations of what has been previously written related to Shaker life. Although the skillfully written text evokes questions, the author does not browbeat the reader with an overabundance of statistical data or single-minded conclusions. Instead, the reader is left to examine the results of the work conducted, wonder at the details presented, ponder the results, and consider a "new perspective" on the "old" story.

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