

# Shaker Trail

Hancock Shaker Village  
Pittsfield State Forest

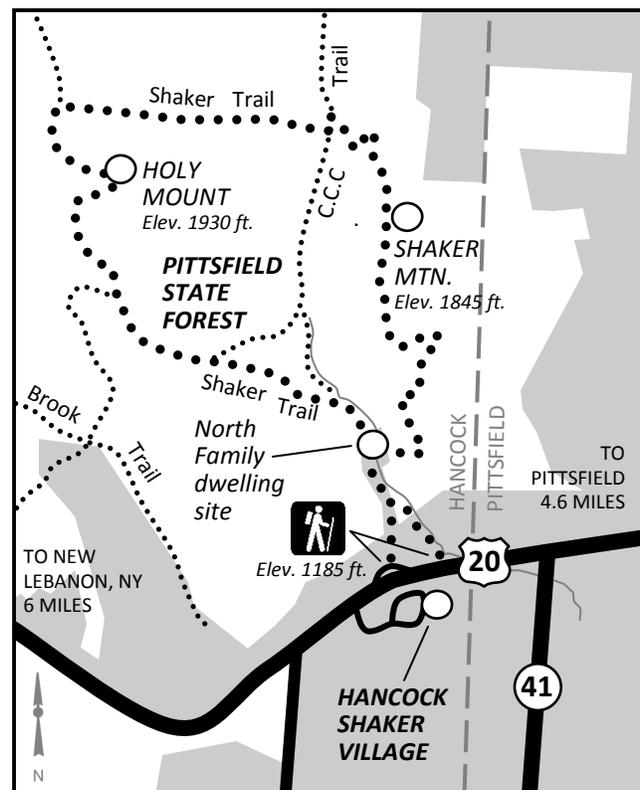


## SELF-GUIDED TOUR & HIKE

**WELCOME.** Encounter the remains of a former Shaker religious settlement and sacred site. Experience the site of a vibrant and prosperous village in the 1800s, remnants of the former landscape use are yours to discover on this moderate-strenuous ability hike.

**HANCOCK SHAKER VILLAGE** offers hands-on history, from April through October. Visitors may roam the Village at their own pace. Talk with interpreters and choose from a variety of Shaker craft demonstrations and programs. An admission fee is charged. Plan accordingly when visiting Hancock Shaker Village to allow enough time if you desire to take this hike.

**PITTSFIELD STATE FOREST**, adjoining Hancock Shaker Village, is an 11,000 acre property managed Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR). Located along the Taconic Mountain Range, the state forest has almost 40 miles of hiking and multi-use trails. The camping and day-use area is accessible off Cascade Street in Pittsfield, a seasonal parking fee is charged. Access to Pittsfield State Forest from this trailhead is free.



*The Shaker Trail, full route, is **6.5 miles (10.5 km) long, round-trip**, and **moderate to strenuous** for average hiker ability, with **1,165 foot (355 m) elevation gain**. Footing is uneven and wet in places. Plan about **4 hours** to complete the entire loop; or less if you do a portion. The trail is marked with blazes: **green triangle with a white dot***

**HIKE DESCRIPTION.** The Shaker Trail has several options for distance/difficulty/ability and what you desire to experience. Trailhead is located at Hancock Shaker Village on U.S. Route 20. The difficulties varies from **easy to moderate to strenuous** for the average hiker depending on your route choice. Sturdy walking or hiking shoes are recommended. The lower section has open views across

fields, the upper section is heavily wooded with better distance visibility when the leaves are off the trees in fall or winter. The trail is beautiful during fall foliage in early October. Dogs are welcome on a 10-foot maximum lease, updated rabies vaccine certification and attended to at all times.

### HIKE OPTIONS:

Depending on your available time and ability level you may choose from the following options.

- 1) **Easy. 1.0 mile** (1.6 km) round-trip walk takes you to the North Family dwelling and mill sites and return to trailhead. Total elevation gain is 65 feet/20 meters. Allow **1:25 hour** to complete. Ideal if you have small children or limited time.
- 2) **Moderate to strenuous. 2.6 mile** (4.5 km) round-trip route takes you to the North Family sites, then to the holy site atop Shaker Mountain in Pittsfield State Forest and return to trailhead. Total elevation gain is 663 feet/ 202 meters. Allow **1:45 hours** to complete.
- 3) **Strenuous. 6.5 mile** (8.0 km) the full loop hike on the Shaker Trail takes you takes you to the North Family sites, then to both holy sites atop Shaker Mountain and Holy Mount in Pittsfield State Forest and return to trailhead. Total elevation gain is 1,165 feet/355 meters. Allow **4-5 hours** to complete the full loop.
- 4) **Strenuous. 4 miles** (6.4 km) round-trip hike takes you to the North Family sites then to the Holy Mount site in Pittsfield State Forest and return to trailhead. Total elevation gain is 743 feet/226 meters. Allow **2:30 hours** to complete. This requires that you do a portion of the hike in reverse, trail blazes may not be consistent or present.

*Please remember to **carry-in, carry-out** all your personal belongings, including trash. Please use care, **avoid disturbing historic structures, foundations and stone walls**; they are protected by law (MGL: Chapt. 9, Sec. 27c). Please leave wildflowers in their natural environment for all to enjoy. Thank you.*

**THE SHAKERS** were ardent believers in the millennialism principal, that “heaven on earth” is possible. This religious order believed this concept could be achieved through communal living, pacifism, celibacy, gender equality and the public confession of sin. Today this utopian sect is renowned for its plain architecture and furniture.

The Shakers trace their origin to the religious ferment of Manchester, England, in



*The Shakers in ecstatic dance with visitors watching.*

1747. They called themselves *The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing*. Worship could take the form of singing and ecstatic dance, which is why they were popularly called the "Shaking Quakers," or "Shakers." They believed that Christ's second coming was personified in their leader Ann Lee, whom they called Mother Ann.

Misunderstood and persecuted in England, the Shakers gathered a small group of enthusiastic followers to their new Christian lifestyle and beliefs. In 1774, Mother Ann Lee led eight Shaker converts from Manchester, England, to America, seeking freedom to live, work, and worship.

The Shaker community here at Hancock officially "Gathered into Gospel Order" in 1790. This was the third of nineteen major Shaker villages established between 1783 and 1836 in New England, New York, Kentucky, Ohio and Indiana. The Berkshire region was a particular concentration of Shaker settlements in addition to Hancock: New Lebanon, Canaan, Chatham and Watervliet in New York, and Tyringham, and Savoy in Massachusetts.

By the mid-1800s the Hancock community had grown to a vibrant 300 members and 3,000 acres. Usually, land for the community was consolidated by neighboring farmers who had converted to the Shaker faith. They named their utopian village *The City of Peace*, and organized the large community into six smaller communal groups known as *Families* for efficiency of work, worship, and administration. The leading senior village group was called the *Church Family*, the site of the museum restoration today at Hancock. It was surrounded by satellite families corresponding to points on the compass rose. The entry level Novitiate Order *East Family* and Junior Order *Second Family* sites east of here; Novitiate Order *South Family* closer to Richmond; nearby to the west the Junior Order *West Family*. Further over the mountain in New Lebanon, NY was the *Central Ministry* at Mount Lebanon, the spiritual leadership center for all the Shaker communities spread from Maine to Kentucky.

Along the Shaker Trail we shall visit the site of the former (Senior Order) *North Family* at Hancock.

The Hancock Shakers erected communal dwelling houses, barns, workshops, and other buildings, and developed a large and successful farm. With the 1826 Round Stone Barn as the center of a thriving dairy industry, and with many acres of medicinal herbs, vegetables, fruits, and other crops. The Hancock Shakers enjoyed a simple, peaceful, and hard-working lifestyle, separated from the ways of the World.

The Shakers developed a wide variety of crafts, trades, and industries, including woodworking and metalworking, basketry, broom making, and much more. They developed their own water-powered mills for grinding grain, sawing wood, and manufacturing textiles. The Shakers were highly regarded for their honesty and industriousness, and for the quality of their products, which were marketed throughout the region as an important source of income for the communal society.

The Shakers believed in racial and gender equality, simplicity, and pacifism. As the Shakers grew in

numbers and influence in the 1800s, these virtuous principles challenged the existing social and religious structure and economic order of the new nation. Curiosity of the Shaker utopia attracted many worldly visitors to Hancock and New Lebanon, including Henry David Thoreau and Charles Dickens.

After reaching peak membership in the 1840s, the Shaker movement gradually dwindled, partly due to urban migration that followed the Industrial Revolution. By the early 1900s, the population of the Hancock village had fallen to around 50, most of which were children. Excess land was sold, and many buildings were dismantled.

One of the most intriguing religious movements in American history, the Shakers are considered by many to be the most successful of utopian societies that have flourished in this country. The Shakers have made important contributions to American culture including art, architecture, craftsmanship, music, government, agriculture, and commerce. Today, the only remaining active Shaker community is Sabbathday Lake, Maine.

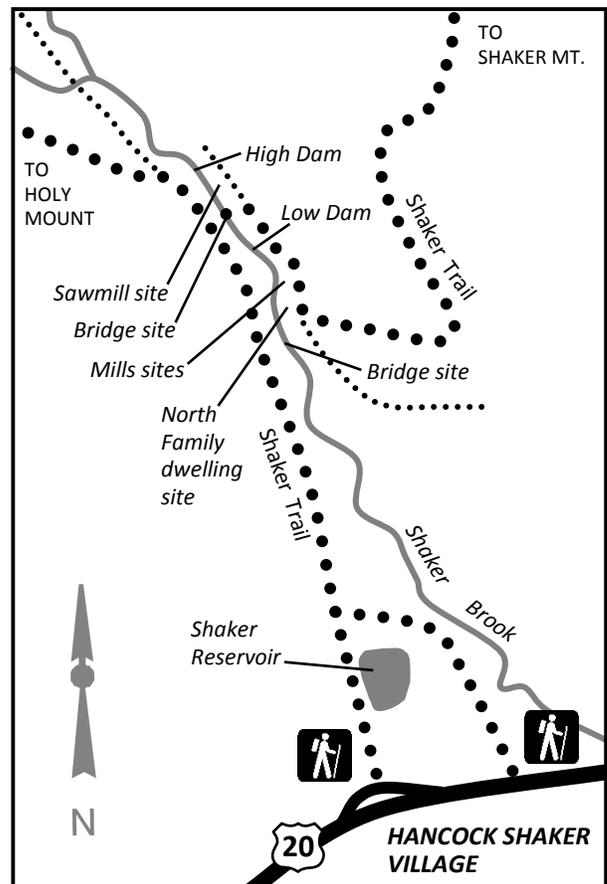
### THE SHAKER TRAIL

The Shaker Trail hike begins behind the Meeting House, or at the pull-off along US Route 20. The trail is marked with green triangle metal blazes with a white dot in the center. Look for them at intervals along the trail and at intersections.



The peak activity of Shaker use of this land dates to about 1845. As you walk allow yourself to be transported back to the mid-1800s, using your visit to Hancock Shaker Village as a reference, to envision the Shaker experience and the landscape. Directly north of here is Mount Sinai (Shaker Mountain). The flat area to the west of the summit is the Shaker “holy ground”.

By joining the Shaker community you gave up all worldly belongings to exemplify God’s world on earth. Foremost, as a rule, the Shakers were celibate. You would not marry. Men and women were considered equals, but they lived in separate quarters. Instead, your mind and body were preparing for God’s kingdom. You may have decided to convert from a former faith, you might be an orphan accepted by the community, you may be a local



*The Shaker Trail to **North Family** settlement site, **easy** route, **1 mile long, round-trip**. Here you may decide to continue on to Shaker Mountain or Holy Mount for a more strenuous hike.*

youth learning a skill or trade until you were old enough to live on your own. Membership to the Shakers was not coerced or forced, rather it was a personal choice. As a new member to the church you were required to live in outlying Novitiate or Junior Order families: South, East and West to the central Church Family. Novitiates learned the Shaker faith under the tutelage of an Elder and Eldress, preparing to join the Senior Order Church Family.

*Let's start on the path to the North Family community.*

### **Reservoir.**

About 1818 Shaker Brook was dammed north of the village and piped underground to this reservoir to supply water to the Village. Water was then conveyed from here through another underground aqueduct to middle of the Village to power machinery, supply the washing rooms, water the stables, and afterward drained into distant fields to water the cattle and livestock. Water was not wasted. In 1894 the reservoir was enlarged to add about 2 million more gallons of water. It took the work of 12 men, 6 horses and 2 yoke of oxen to cart the earth from one side of the reservoir to the other to heighten the banks. During droughts this reservoir was essential to continue the flow of water to power the mill. It is still in use today. Continue along the path. You soon join the other path to the leading to the Village and then come along Shaker Brook. Along the way notice the scraggly apple trees, descendants of the former orchard. Shaker-built stone walls line this former road to the North Family community.

### **Bridge site**

The faint traces of a bridge footing may be seen on the bank of the brook. This bridge disappeared sometime before 1960. This lower bridge once led across to the North Family dwelling and mills on the opposite bank and also the route taken to Mount Sinai (Shaker Mountain) and the Holy Ground.

*Continue upstream along the path.*

### **Low Dam**

Built before 1818, this low dam provided the water supply first to the North Family mills on the opposite bank. Later it was modified to supply the Village's reservoir through an underground aqueduct. Look for the riveted iron aqueduct pipe.

*Cross Shaker Brook at the foot bridge.*

### **Bridge site**

Once the site of a substantial wagon bridge, look for the stone bridge footings. Glance upstream and notice the remains of the High Dam and sawmill.

### **High Dam and sawmill.**

The High Dam was built around 1810. Below the dam is the foundation remains of a sawmill built sometime after 1858, and still in use after 1876. The mill was straddled over the stream. Whereas the dam provided a good head of water to power the saw, steam power might have been added later to sup-

plement in dry conditions. We can imagine the logs being rolled into mill from the staging area on the east bank of the stream. The sawmill burned down in 1926.

*Continue across the bridge, turn right, downstream (south) and follow the path. Between the path and the brook are a mill site and North Family dwelling site.*

### **Mill sites**

The Low Dam provided water supply to power a complex of mills here, in use before 1818: A thrashing mill, a gristmill and below that a saw mill. In 1845 a brick-built carding and fulling mill was added to process sheep wool before it was woven into fabric. The mill was destroyed by fire in 1865 and never rebuilt. You may carefully examine the site, sometimes obscured over by vegetation. The wheel pit for the water wheel is evident. Although it is not known how the headrace from the low dam fed the waterwheel, the stone-lined tailrace back to the brook is still visible.

### **The North Family dwelling site.**

Not much is known about the North Family and its members, records are scarce. An archeological survey was done in 1983, from this we know something of the life of the Shakers here. The North Family was active at this site from about 1821 to 1867, when it was dissolved and the dwelling was salvaged and moved to the main Village. The wood framed house was most likely 3-and-a-half stories tall, and housed 28-40 people. For comparison, the layout would be very similar to the family house found at the main Village: kitchen, food storage and dining room in the basement; meeting room, chapel and bedrooms on the first floor; and bedrooms (4-8 people each) on the second and third floors. The attic was used for clothes storage and perhaps a few bedrooms. A wing was later added on the north end in the 1830s-40s to accommodate a growing family as conversions to the Shaker faith increased. At the time the North Family lived here this was all open land with views across the field to the main Village.



*This image of the Enfield (CT) Shaker Village provides an idea of the style of buildings that may have formerly stood on the North Family site.*

### **HIKE OPTION**

*At this point decide if you would like to hike the entire route via Shaker Mountain and Holy Mount (6.5 mile loop), continued below; or only hike up to Holy Mount and back (4 miles round-trip) and continued on page 10; or return to Hancock Shaker Village (0.5 mile) by simply retracing your route back. **Reference the hike options on page 2.***

## The trail to Shaker Mountain

What compelled the Shakers to climb mountains? Perhaps it is best said in the words of the Shakers and period observers of them, as the following quotes describe these period experiences along the trail.

Every society (village) in this denomination (Shaker) has a place for meeting in the open air, usually at some little distance from their village. Where they assemble twice in the year, and sometimes oftener. These meetings are very curious, and at them this people manifest many of their eccentricities and have some wonderful revelations. About the year 1841 or '42, a very important revelation was received requiring every society in God's Zion upon earth (Shakers), to prepare a place upon some mountain, or hill, in its vicinity, for a Holy place of worship. (1843)

Indeed, the inspiration for this movement throughout all the Shaker communities in the United States was divined from messengers from Heaven through Isaiah 2:2:

“And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains and shall be exalted above the hills, and all the nations shall flow into it.”

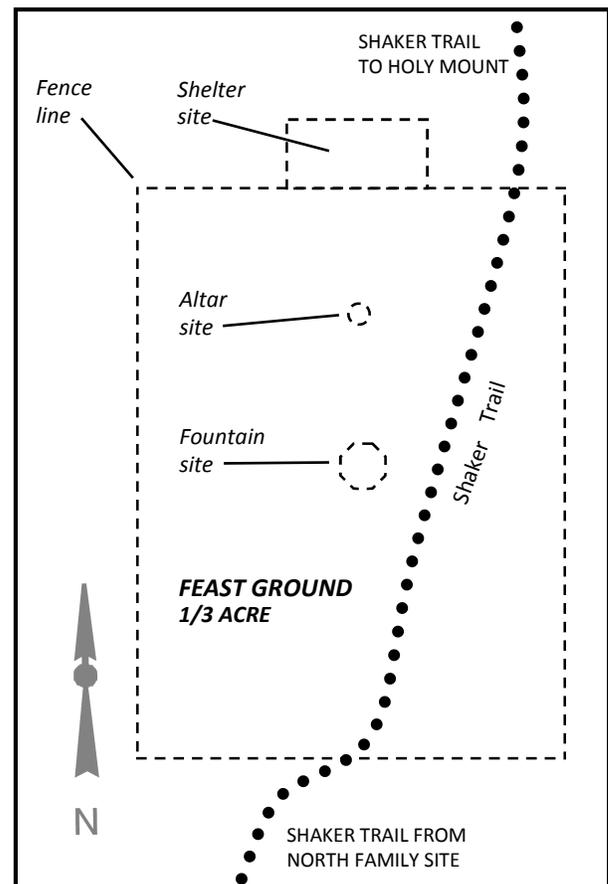
The sites were likely chosen by a dozen or so Shakers who set out from their village and stopped where the guiding spirit commanded them to do so.

### Shaker Mountain (Mount Sinai)

*After crossing the stream continue along the trail downstream (south) to a fork. Be aware to take the trail that bears left and starts up the slope of Shaker Mountain. This is the route the Shakers would have taken to reach their Holy Ground at the top.*

“Morning fair and pleasant and it is calculated to up to Mt. Sinai to meeting....We have a good road to the North Family, then begin to ascend the mountain. The path is tolerably good but the route is crooked or zig-zag...(1853)

About half-way up the mountain is an open level spot, the site of a **charcoal kiln**, one of few in this area. Charcoal was a valuable fuel source derived from the cutting of hardwood, stacking it in a dome, covering it with earth and slowly burning it



Mt. Sinai (Shaker Mountain) Feast Ground layout.

to create a high heat fuel, for use in iron work and making potash. This may have been the site of the “Walnut Grove.” Today, no walnut trees but shagbark hickory.

“...halt at the Walnut Grove, have some singing and some communication with the spirits. A part of Christ’s sermon on the mount was read here.” (1853)

*As you continue for 1.25 mile the trail passes an old logging road and later a power line, remain straight on the blazed trail. The trail levels off at and soon you be at the Feast Ground site.*

### **Mount Sinai Feast Ground**

Here at the summit of Shaker Mountain (Mount Sinai), 1,845 feet (562 m) the Hancock Shakers had reached their pilgrimage site, called a “feast ground,” for the spiritual nutriment they would partake of here. Twice a year, in spring and autumn the Shakers would eagerly climb up here “with songs of rejoicing” to hold services. What was then in the mid-1800s an open landscape, cleared by the Shakers, with fine views of the surrounding landscape, has since re-grown to forest. Take some time as you read along to fully imagine the obscured scene of the Shakers’ worship here. Nothing that the Shaker’s built remains visible to mark the site. The name for Mount Sinai (or Mount Horeb) is referenced in the Book of Exodus, where Moses received the Ten Commandments from God. This probably reinforced the meaning of this mountaintop worship for the Shakers.



*The Shakers sisters and brethren at worship around “the Fountain” in the mid-1800s. This image is of the Feast Ground on Mount Sinai (Shaker Mountain), and would have been similar to Holy Mount.*

“But we are soon on Sinai’s top. The bowing (seven low bows [1843]) is done before we enter which is at the south end.” (1853)

This is consecrated ground, and no world’s man (non-Shaker), no one who has not confessed his sins before God’s witnesses, the elders, is allowed within the enclosure (1843)

The place is pointed out for our society was about a mile-and-an-half from our village upon the top of a mountain, and is named Mt. Sinai. It is in sight of the mountain chosen for their meeting ground, by the society at New Lebanon, called Holy Mount (off to the west). But they are too far distant from one another; there being a great gulf, or valley between them. The mountain was named Sinai, after divine revelation had designated the spot. The brethren

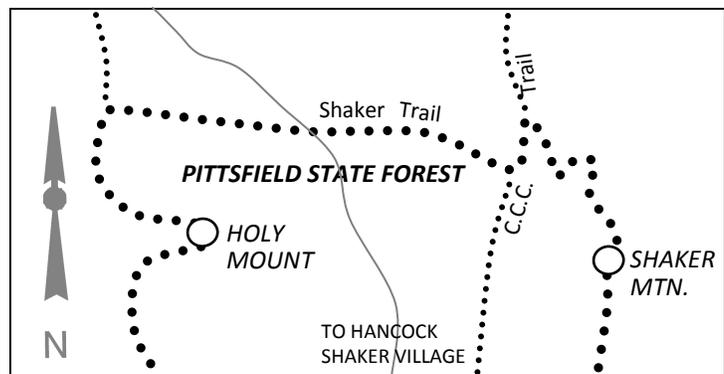
went to work and removed the trees and their roots, the stones and other rubbish, smoothed and prepared the ground. It is now covered with a greensward, and surrounded with a plain strip-fence, painted white. It is in the form of a square, and contains I should judge, about 3/8ths of an acre. Near the center is a little spot, enclosed with a fence of a single strip, about fifteen inches high, in the form of a hexagon. It is called "the Fountain." at the north end of the fountain is erected a marble slab 3½ or four feet high...

...There is also, a building erected on the north side of the ground with two apartments, or sitting rooms, one for the sisters, and the other for the brethren. But the fountain claims our particular notice. It is a fountain not of literal waters, but of the water of life, and is exceedingly productive of spiritual gifts. It serves also, as a center around which they march, and dance and sing and play." (1843)

Although non-Shakers were not allowed enter the Feast Ground, rows of seats were placed outside the fence for spectators to watch the services. Observers of these "mountain meetings" in the 1840s describe it as one of the most beautiful sights to behold, particularly when the New Lebanon Shakers held their simultaneous meeting on Holy Mount across the valley, less than a mile away...

"...so that the voices of the united brethren and sisters, on a clam still day, may be heard by each society, rising, like the twin-mountain-tops from which the sounds ascend, toward the Heaven to which they alike aspire." (1848)

*Tread mindfully over this sacred ground following the trail, north and then west. Descend 0.5 mile into the "great gulf" between Mount Sinai and Holy Mount. At the bottom intersect with CCC Trail. Turn left on CCC Trail, continue about 100 yards, then turn right Shaker Trail. Notice the carefully laid stone fence on the north side of the trail. This marked the former northern boundary of the Hancock Shaker Village.*



*Follow Shaker Trail along this stone fence-lined road for 0.75 mile. Trail comes to a "T" intersection, turn left and continue uphill for 0.3 mile. Along the way look for an cart path opening in the stone fence leading up from the west, perhaps a route leading up from the Mount Lebanon Shaker Village. Follow the trail through the corner of two stone fences entering the Holy Mount Sacred Lot.*

### **Holy Mount Sacred Lot and Feast Ground**

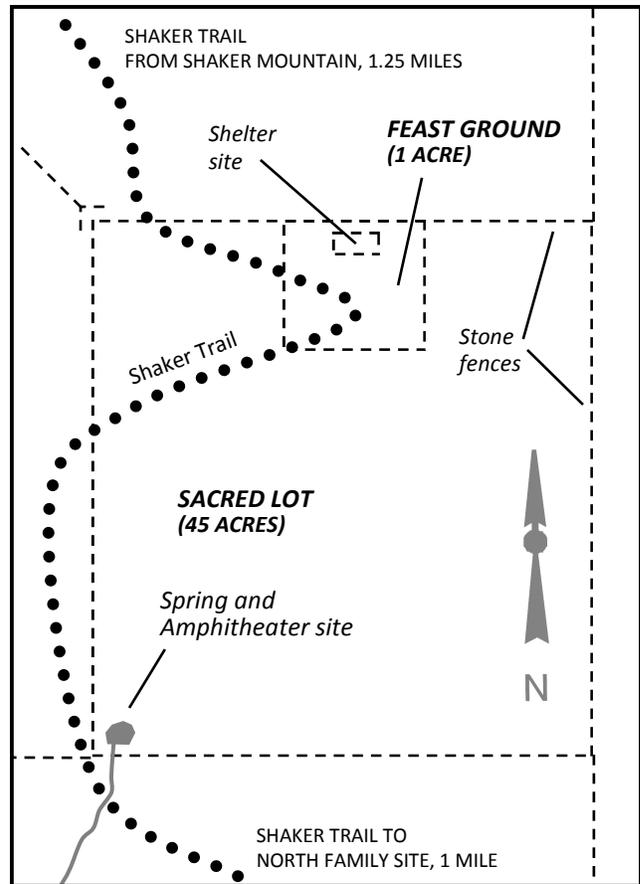
Holy Mount, 1,930 feet (588 m) was the Mount Lebanon Shaker Village's Feast Ground (1 acre),

located within a larger Sacred Lot (45 acres). It was dedicated on May 1, 1842 and used for about 10 years. Nearly two miles east of the village, it would have been challenging terrain for the Shakers to travel to get here:

“...we are left to wonder how the Society were ever able to take that march of two miles. Indeed, in many cases it must have been at the expense of health & even life. We, however, plodded along this exceedingly rough mountain passage, & finally reached the summit & were able to rejoice that it was no worse.” (1856)

The view from Holy Mount is somewhat open due to the climatic and soil conditions and provides some idea of the views when this was all cleared land.

“The sacred spot of ground was a few rods beyond the highest point & contains not far from an acre. All the trees and bushes have been removed and the place made suitable for the accommodation of several hundred people. It was known as a the Fountain, a spot selected by inspiration and consecrated to the worship of God. A fence extended around the entire acre as a protection against the intrusion of any cattle that might chance to be in the vicinity. At an earlier date, during the time when meetings were being held, the fence was painted white, but as the ground had not been used for several years, the Fountain as a whole had been neglected.....(1853)



Holy Mount (Mt. Lebanon) Feast and Sacred Ground.

Note the stone fence that surround the Sacred Lot. Most are 3 foot wide at the base, tapering to the top. A 12-18 foot section would have taken one man’s labor in a day. It is estimated the stone fence surrounding the 45 acre Sacred Lot required 350 man-days to complete.

*The trail continues south and west and then descends, exiting the Sacred Ground stone fence. The trail runs parallel to the Sacred Ground stone fence.*

### Spring and Amphitheater

You are at the southwest corner of the Sacred Lot. Here is a spring that is mentioned in Shaker records

that also served as the site of a natural amphitheater.

*Cross over the streambed flowing from the spring and continue south on the Shaker Trail. About 0.5 mile reach the Griffin Trail. Bear left on Griffin Trail for 0.3 mile until you meet the Shaker Trail and **bear right** from the Griffin Trail. Follow Shaker Trail 0.3 mile.*

### **Marble Quarry**

Located a couple hundred yards off west of the trail is one of several Shaker limestone/marble quarries. Active since the 1790s, this site was quarried for valuable marble for use in building material, such as foundations and flooring. Scant traces remain to indicate its use. Should you decide to explore this area beware of stinging nettle which is prevalent here, and especially if you are wearing shorts.

*Continue along the Shaker Trail till you merge with the main road leading back to the North Family Site. Continue to follow this route south back to Hancock Shaker Village and parking.*

**This ends your tour of the Shaker Trail.** We hope you enjoyed this walk back in time to visit these remote sites that were formative experiences to the Shaker way of life.

This guide is extracted from the text of the *BSA Guide to Hancock Shaker Trail* (1986), formerly administered by the Great Trails Council, BSA; today the Western Massachusetts Council, BSA. The historic trail guide provided a questionnaire to qualify those who completed the trail with and embroidered patch.

HANCOCK SHAKER VILLAGE  
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[www.hancockshakervillage.org](http://www.hancockshakervillage.org)



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UPDATED 2014