LOVE LIVE WORK: A Tribute to the Sister Printers of Canterbury

LOVE LIVE WORK is a letterpress portfolio of seven brief selections from the 1890s log books of the Printing Office in the Shaker community in Canterbury, New Hampshire. The limited edition of twenty copies, printed on Flurry Cotton paper on the Village's Golding Pearl platen press, was created in September 2021 by artist- and curator-in-residence (and spouses) David Comberg and Christine Nelson. In this post, Christine describes their experience conceiving and developing the project in partnership with Village printer Jim Macnab and Collections Manager Renée Fox.

We arrived at Canterbury Shaker Village in September 2021 with open hearts and without a plan. During the seven-hour drive from Philadelphia to New Hampshire, I read aloud to David from a published history of the United Society of Believers. Executive Director Leslie Nolan had kindly invited us to spend a month on-site, offering space and support to allow us to learn and create. Within days, we discovered our purpose: to co-create a letterpress project in honor of a group of Sisters who had worked side by side in the community's Printing Office during the 1890s, laboring together, as one of them put it, as "friends of God, and friends to each other whose love never waxeth cold."

Image: Christine and David in the Village print shop. Behind them is a portrait of Elder Henry Blinn, who was the lead printer at Canterbury for decades beginning in the 1840s. Photograph by Constance Old.

I'd spent thirty years as a curator of literary and historical manuscripts at the Morgan Library & Museum, studying and caring for records of everyday life and creativity, and I wanted to learn how the Canterbury Shakers had documented their lives in diaries and

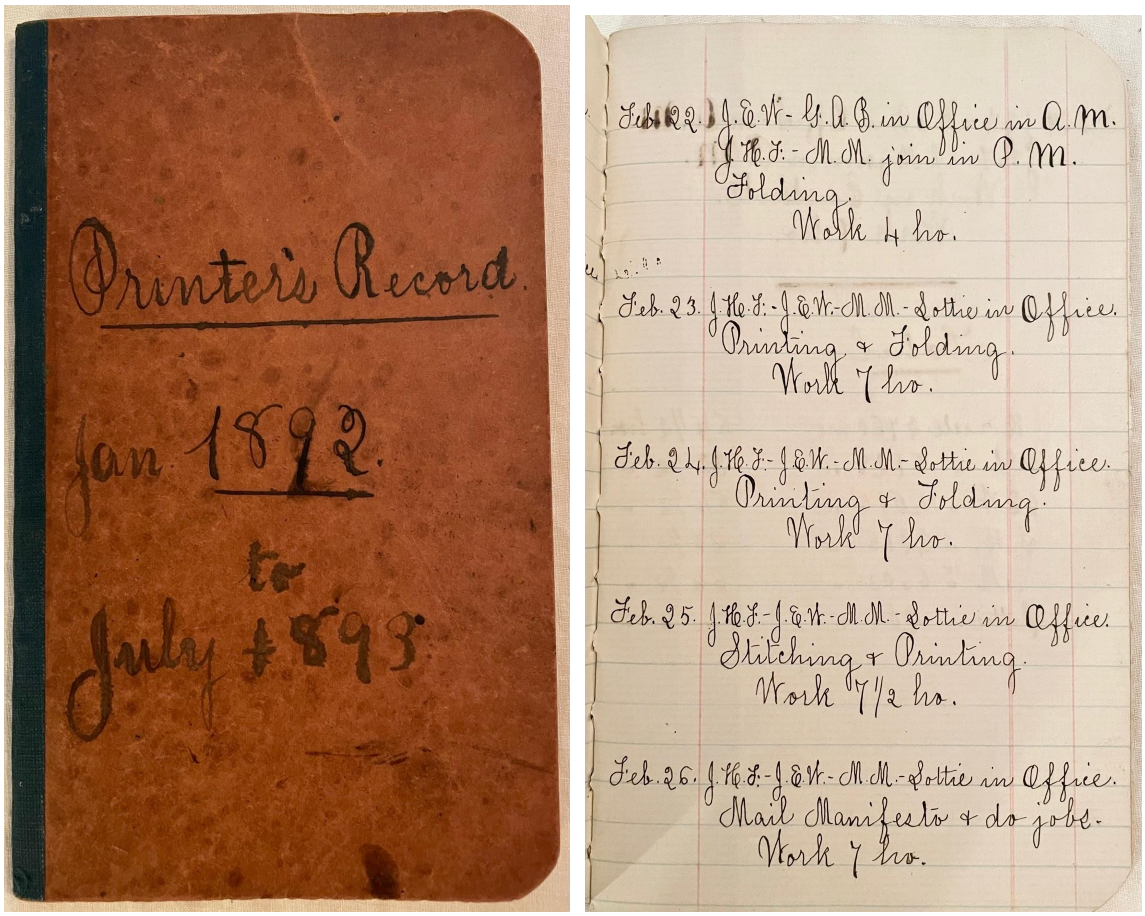
log books. David had co-founded the letterpress studio at the University of Pennsylvania and worked for years as a practicing designer and artist. He didn't know what tools he would find to work with in the Village print shop and decided to haul a Line-O-Scribe tabletop press from home just in case. He wouldn't need it.

Orange Cat greeted us at the doors to the Trustees' Office, where we would sleep. Village printer Jim Macnab greeted David at the print shop, on the ground floor of the Carpenters' Shop. Inside, we saw a reproduction of a portrait of Elder Henry Blinn (1824–1905), the endlessly energetic 19th-century Shaker leader. It was fitting to find him there. Elder Blinn had learned to print during the 1840s when he was still a teenager. With next to no experience, he was charged with typesetting and printing a massive Shaker treatise, and he went on to shepherd printing efforts in the Canterbury community for decades.

But there was more to the story of 19th-century printing at Canterbury, Jim explained. He handed us copies of an article by Thomas Bigelow and John Kneis and an unpublished paper by Tracy E. Adkins, both from the mid-1980s. The authors noted that a Shaker Sister named Josephine E. Wilson (1866–1946) had run the shop from 1892 to 1900. Why, then, we wondered, was Elder Blinn conspicuously honored in today's Village print shop while Sister Josephine, who had done significant work as a Canterbury printer, remained absent?

The next day, Collections Manager Renée Fox welcomed me into Enfield House, where the Village archives is housed. After consulting the excellent finding aids she provided, I had the original printing logs of the 1890s on the study table before me within minutes. The form was familiar: there were three slim notebooks with brown paper covers and rounded corners, much like those we use to jot down notes or shopping lists today. Inside I found—and delighted in—the neat, upright cursive of Sister Josephine.

Image: Sister Josephine E. Wilson (1866–1946), lead printer at Canterbury during the 1890s and later a longtime Trustee. From an album in the archives of Canterbury Shaker Village.



Images: The cover and a sample page from the first of three surviving logs of the Printing Office kept by Sister Josephine E. Wilson during the 1890s. Sisters are identified only by their initials; Josephine is "J.E.W." Archives of Canterbury Shaker Village.

She had made a brief note of what the Sisters had completed on each working day in the "Office." On January 20, 1892, one Sister set "5580 ms," a measure of the quantity of individual pieces of metal type (or sorts) prepared for printing. On March 1, four women spent eight hours "distributing" (doing the tedious but essential work of returning individual sorts into a storage case with compartments for each letter). And so on and so on, day after day. These humble logs contained a remarkable record of collective labor.

Who was doing all this work? We knew Sister Josephine's name, to be sure, but who were her partners in "the Office"? In the log books, the typesetters and other workers were referenced only by initials—E.Y., M.M., L.H., etc.—and occasionally by first name. When David and I conferred at the end of the day, we wondered if our project should be one of historical recovery: to identify the women printers of Canterbury and honor them

in a letterpress-printed broadside, typesetting their individual names and ensuring that they all had a presence in today's print shop alongside the portrait of Elder Blinn.

I was determined to match initials to names. Renée provided an extraordinarily useful notebook compiled by Susan Maynard and entitled "Who Lived Here?" I cross-checked the initials that appeared in Sister Josephine's printing logs against Maynard's list, eliminating people whose life dates or gender didn't fit, and ultimately identified some fourteen women who did significant work typesetting or printing in the Office during the 1890s. (Others came in from time to time to work on other production duties such as folding and stitching.) E.Y. was Elsie York. M.M. was Mary Maud Clarke. L.H. was Lizzie Horton.

We now had what we needed to create a letterpress project naming these women. David had already begun setting wood type for a broadside that read JOSEPHINE WILSON, PRINTER. But we soon realized that was not the direction we wanted to take. Everything changed when we walked to the graveyard.

Image: David created a large-format "business card" for Sister Josephine and placed it in the Village print shop to ensure that she, along with Elder Blinn, had a presence there.

Just up the road from the Village, we came upon a neatly groomed lawn. At the center was a single granite stone with the word SHAKERS carved in relief. Here, an extraordinary group of people who had formed a chosen family of faith had made the decision to honor their collective, rather than individual, dead. At the start of the twentieth century, they had literally removed the headstones of their forebears and replaced them with this single marker. From our 21st-century, non-Shaker perspective, the creation of a splendid list of fourteen now-forgotten individual women had initially seemed like a gesture of honor, but as we learned more about Shaker communitarianism—as exemplified by this gravestone—we decided we needed to create a more fitting tribute. We had to honor the Sisters on their own terms, as a collective, not a series of feminist heroes.

Image: A single granite stone, placed in 1904, marks the graves of a community of faith.

And so I returned to the printing logs. With some difficulty, I chose just seven entries (representing an imagined week) from Sister Josephine's log books. Simple as they were, each conveyed something essential about the women's work. And each would allow Sister Josephine to speak, directly, to our contemporary readers. On February 27, 1893, she wrote, "Distribute 100 lbs. of new type"—a reminder that the typesetters' work was labor-intensive and repetitive. On November 3, 1893—a rare day when Sister Josephine referenced a fellow printer by name—she wrote, "Louisa Allen comes into Shop as apprentice." This entry conveyed the important fact that the Office was a space of training in which experienced typesetters and printers shared their expertise. On February 1, 1898, Sister Josephine entered a single word: *Blizzard!* On another day, at a

different time of year, she and the other Sisters printed together for “9-and-a-half hours with thermometer at 100 in the shade.” Importantly, there was also time for sweetness and delight: on June 27, 28, and 29, 1893, the printers were “Off to the woods picking strawberries.”

With Jim Macnab’s indispensable guidance, David began setting in type the log book entries I had selected. And then came a surprise: Jim was off to a family wedding for the next ten days and we were on our own in the meticulously organized Village print shop he ran without any assistance! While David had previously printed plenty of projects on a Vandercook press, his experience with 19th-century platen presses was, well, limited. It didn’t help that Jim warned us that the platen press was known as a “finger eater.”

Image: Village printer Jim Macnab guides David in the use of the platen press.

We decided that the seat-of-the-pants, figure-it-out-as-you-go nature of our project was entirely appropriate. In the preface to the first book printed at Canterbury in 1843, Henry Blinn (then a novice printer) had acknowledged that “the mechanical execution may not be perfect in all respects.” We took that as our motto, and Blinn as our historical partner in learning (and in error).

We pressed on. Our entire project was defined by constraints. We had one month. We started out without a plan and conceived one in a short amount of time. I delved into an unfamiliar archives and quickly identified a historical source we could transform into a letterpress project. David worked with unfamiliar equipment in an unfamiliar shop. It was impossible to find certain essential supplies (such as paper for the portfolio enclosure) in nearby stores. As we began to set type together after Jim left town, we discovered another constraint. Some fonts had very limited quantities of certain letters. So we took that as a challenge. Could we find enough appropriate type to set even the brief lines I had chosen?

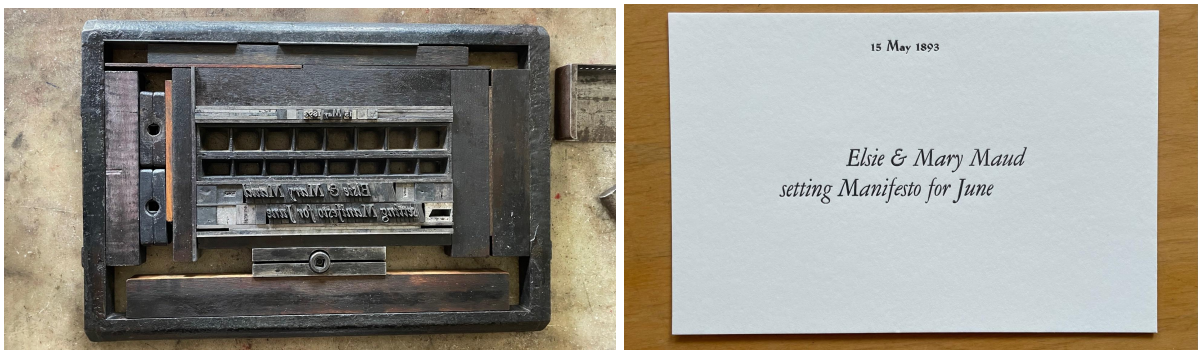
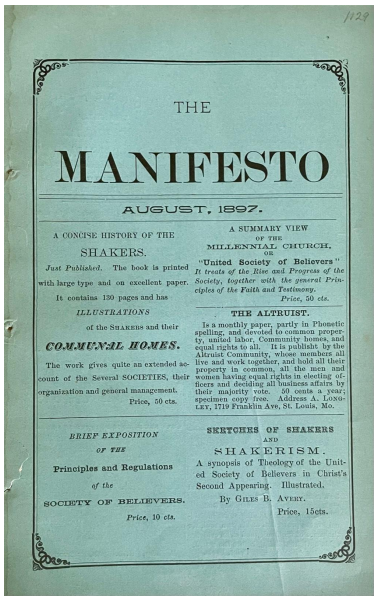


Image: The log book entry for 15 May 15, 1893 (Elsie & Mary Maud setting Manifesto for June) *set in type in a locked chase and ready for printing, and the completed sheet.*

As I typeset the line *Elsie and Mary Maud setting Manifesto for June,* I found only four lower-case *a*s in the case in the typeface and size I wanted. I needed five. As I prepared to distribute the type and start over with a different font, I went back to the manuscript source and discovered that Sister Josephine had in fact written an ampersand, not the word "and." Hurrah! The font had a lovely ampersand, and I could complete the line with only three *a*s.


THE

MANIFESTO

AUGUST, 1897.

A CONCISE HISTORY OF THE SHAKERS.
Just Published. The book is printed with large type and on excellent paper. It contains 130 pages and has ILLUSTRATIONS of the SHAKERS and their COMMUNAL HOMES.
The work gives quite an extended account of the Several SOCIETIES, their organization and general management.
Price, 50 cts.

A SUMMARY VIEW OF THE MILLENNIAL CHURCH, OR "United Society of Believers"
It treats of the Rise and Progress of the Society, together with the general Principles of the Faith and Testimony.
Price, 50 cts.

THE ALTRUIST.
Is a monthly paper, partly in Phonetic spelling, and devoted to common property, united labor, Community homes, and equal rights to all. It is publisht by the Altruist Community, whose members all live and work together, and hold all their property in common, all the men and women having equal rights in electing officers and deciding all business affairs by their majority vote. 50 cents a year; specimen copy free. Address A. LOXLEY, 1719 Franklin Ave, St. Louis, Mo.

BRIEF EXPOSITION OF THE Principles and Regulations *of the* SOCIETY OF BELIEVERS.
Price, 10 cts.

SKETCHES OF SHAKERS AND SHAKERISM.
A synopsis of Theology of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing. Illustrated.
By GILES B. AVERY.
Price, 15cts.

What was this "Manifesto" that Elsie and Mary Maud and the other the Sisters were busy typesetting month after month during the 1890s? It was a monthly Shaker newspaper that kept them working long hours. The United Society of Believers had a vigorous tradition of publishing community news, articles on doctrine, and even music and poetry during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The monthly Shaker newspaper launched in 1871 went through various title changes and editorial responsibilities before it landed in Canterbury in 1882 under the leadership of Elder Blinn (whose portrait we had encountered during our introduction to the Village print shop). In its final incarnation, the newspaper was entitled *The Manifesto*.

Image: An issue of the monthly Shaker newspaper The Manifesto, *typeset at Canterbury. Archives of Canterbury Shaker Village.*

When he took over editorial responsibility for the newspaper in the 1880s, Elder Blinn (who was also busy with many other Church Family duties) had a great deal to do: soliciting and editing contributions, managing the sale of advertisements, and overseeing the newspaper's production and distribution. Various members of the Church Family went on the road to sell subscriptions, ensuring that this major venue for

Shaker thought reached non-Shaker readers as well as believers. But by the 1890s Elder Blinn was in his seventies and needed help. He had trained many apprentices and must have seen particular promise in Sister Josephine. He continued with his editorial duties throughout the decade but entrusted printing management to her.

During our month in Canterbury, David and I would walk through the Village at sunset, sometimes with Orange Cat following behind us. Some evenings I would read *The Manifesto*. (I'm grateful to colleagues at Hamilton College, who have created an exemplary digital portal of Shaker sources with full text of the newspaper.) It was there that I discovered our project title.

Image: Sunset over the Trustees' Office, where David and I stayed during our residency. During her time as Trustee, Sister Josephine likely slept in the room at top left. In the room just below, she and Blanche Gardner would sew aprons for sale in the decades after they closed up the Printing Office.

The Manifesto regularly printed open letters from one Shaker to another. In one issue, I found a letter dated June 24, 1897, from Josephine Wilson to B.L.G. From my investigation of printers' initials, I knew that B.L.G. (who Josephine addressed as "My Eternity Sister") was Blanche Lillian Gardiner. That summer, Blanche was away visiting a nearby Shaker community. "So short a time since you left us for your long-anticipated, happy visit to our dear friends at Enfield," Josephine told her, "yet we have missed you. How could it be otherwise!"

Josephine went on: "I am sitting at the type case and as I think of you and your dear companions, there rushes to my mind so many thoughts of days of happy interchange, now past, yet to be renewed in days to come, that I can set them in type as readily as I could write with the pen." Imagine: Josephine is telling Blanche, and us, that she is *composing her letter directly in type*, rather than typesetting a handwritten text! It was

the following line that gave us our project title: “I shall be glad to welcome you again to the dear old Printing Office where you and I have loved and lived and worked together.”

That phrase–*loved and lived and worked together*–beautifully exemplified, we thought, the Shaker commitment to an essential life balance that sustained them as a community. It also evoked the well-known dictum *Hands to work, hearts to God,* which derives from the words of the Society’s founder, Mother Ann Lee. As David and I excavated the type cases in the Village print shop, we found among Jim Macnab’s well-organized drawers an ornamental device that would perfectly frame our title: a triangle with a wide base that recalled the gables atop the stairways of Enfield House: the archival home of Josephine Wilson’s printing logs and of a run of the *Manifesto* that she and her Sister printers had brought into being.

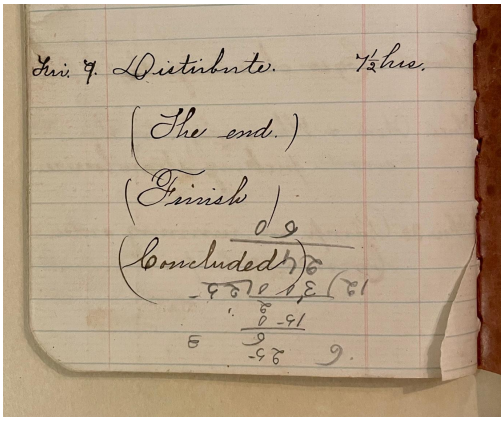
Image: For the title page of our portfolio, we chose an ornamental device that calls to mind the gables over the stairways of Enfield House, where the Village archives is held.

As Elder Blinn grew more infirm, *The Manifesto* ceased publication in 1900. The Sister printers moved on to other assignments, many contributing in various ways to the community's thriving business making and selling Shaker cloaks and other products. Sister Josephine became a longtime Trustee, responsible for the community's dealings with the outside world, and Sister Blanche the Church Family's longtime bookkeeper. Having grown close during their countless hours together in the Printing Office during the 1890s, they became lifelong best friends, both residing in the Trustees' Office where David and I would sleep during our residency. Blanche planted a Spruce tree south of the building and imagined sitting beneath it, knitting, with Josephine when both grew old. They were buried side by side, their graves marked with that single stone acknowledging a Shaker community that had loved, lived, and worked together.

Image: Sisters Blanche Gardner and Josephine Wilson, with friends, outside the Trustees building later in their lives. During the 1890s, they had spent long hours together setting type.

Just as we had begun our portfolio with a tripartite title, LOVE LIVE WORK, we closed it with a three-part colophon. We chose Sister Josephine's final entry in the first of her handwritten printing logs, written just after a July day spent distributing type for seven-and-a-half hours:

(The End)
(Finish)
(Concluded)



Christine Nelson is a curator, librarian, and author who studies the textual artifacts of everyday life. As the longtime Drue Heinz Curator of Literary and Historical Manuscripts at the Morgan Library & Museum, she curated major exhibitions about the history of diary keeping, the journal practice of Henry David Thoreau, and the life and work of Charlotte Brontë. Her essay "Five Thousand Walks to Thoreau's Journal," appears in the new anthology *Ways of Walking* (New Door Books, 2022). She now manages the research fellowship program at the Library Company of Philadelphia, founded in 1731 by Benjamin Franklin.

David Comberg is a graphic designer living and working in Philadelphia. He taught design in the Undergraduate Fine Arts and Design Program at the University of Pennsylvania for sixteen years and in 2006 co-founded the Common Press, Penn's letterpress and book arts studio. In 2018 he was awarded a grant from the Sachs Program for Arts Innovation for his public art project Walt Whitman and the People's Press, an undergraduate seminar and mobile letterpress studio.

Acknowledgments. We are profoundly grateful to Leslie Nolan, Executive Director of Canterbury Shaker Village, for inviting us to live, love, and work together on-site. Village printer Jim Macnab and Collections Manager Renée Fox were endlessly generous with their time, expertise, and good will and became our partners in developing this project.