The Rich History of Lot 11

By Korbi Roberts
The Rich History of Lot 11

History is often well hidden. However, if you proceed to the juncture of Coventry Road and North Park Boulevard, a tremendous amount of the past may well come alive. Shaker Family bridges, dams, entry posts, building foundations, and of course, the magnificent Lower Lake all remain for visitors’ viewing pleasure. And if you squint and imagine, all four of the intersection’s corners may once again be populated with Shaker sheds, barns, privies, smithies, orchards, corn cribs and chicken coops.

For it is here that the North Union Shaker Colony built their “Mill Family” village.

At that time (the early 1820s), the area was legally known as Lot 11 of Warrensville Township of the Connecticut Western Reserve. And Coventry Road was a narrow, muddy, rut-filled thoroughfare soon to be known as the Shaker Road. Lot 11 is a square 163-acre plot, one half mile in length along each side. It is bordered by the current Scarborough Road on the North, Larchmere Boulevard on the South, Marlboro and Arlington Roads on the East and roughly Demington Drive and Warwick Road on the West. At the lot’s western end, the land begins a dramatic descent towards Cleveland. Doan Brook runs through diagonally from Southeast to West, and the ravine deepens.

Given its well-watered and sloping topography, Lot 11 attracted the earliest residents of Cleveland for its value as a mill site. In fact, the early succession of purchasers for Lot 11 all had connections with milling—families with names such as Doane, Dodge, Rockwell, Smith and Russell. In the early 1800s, the daughter and son-in-law of Timothy Doane owned the lot and put up a sawmill with a small dam across Doan Brook. By 1823 the Russell family (founders of the area’s Shaker community in 1822) took over the sawmill and added a pair of grinding stones (called a “run of stone”) with which to mill grain. By 1829 yet another mill (this time built by the Shakers) went up near the western border of the lot. The structure had two run of stone and an oil mill for grinding flax seed. All these early mills were driven by overshot water wheels (vertical wheels turned by falling water hitting near their tops).

(See page 14 for a photo of a typical overshot wheel from the 1800s.) The next mill on Lot 11 went up in 1836, just east of Coventry Road, and it is the foundation of this structure that is clearly visible though the bushes on the east side of Coventry about 75 yards south of the street’s intersection with North Park (Figure 1). Figure 2 illustrates a Shaker sawmill at Ayer, MA, which likely resembles the mill erected by the Shakers in Lot 11.

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Figure 1: Foundation stones from the Shaker sawmill near Coventry Road and North Park Boulevard. The earthen dam separating the mill from the lake is visible on the left behind the stones. The bench-like structure was not part of the mill, but erected in conjunction with a wildflower garden by the Shaker Lakes Garden Club of Shaker Heights in the 1920s. In all likelihood, stones from the mill were used to create the benches (a second bench exists outside the picture to the right). A portion of the mill area, including one fourth of its foundation area and an access road to the mill, is now buried under present-day Coventry Road.

Figure 2: Postcard showing a Shaker sawmill at Ayer, MA.
The Shakers—the united Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing (“Believers” for short)—were the last owners of Lot 11 before suburbs began appearing in the 1890s. Thus the North Union Village (also referred to as “The Valley of God’s Pleasure”) existed in this area for about three quarters of a century—from 1822 to 1889. The Shakers were gentle, charitable people who lived in a communal manner and practiced a Bible-based form of “Original Christianity.” They were followers of the sect’s founder Ann Lee (1736-1784), a “Shaking Quaker” who fled persecution in Manchester, England to create her own following in America around 1774.

According to Shaker beliefs, God is dual in nature, being both male and female. Thus they believed that the appearance of Christ was to be in both male and female forms. As the male form had appeared already as Jesus, Ann Lee was thought by her followers to be the female form of the Christ.

All Shakers committed themselves to a life of celibacy, confession of sin and “consecrated work” as a way to grow ever closer to God. They believed in “Millennialism,” a conviction that the Kingdom of God can be created here on Earth. They strove to live rightly, and avoid worldly influences and the committing of sin. They achieved this by orderly, simple living and becoming like “little children” under the guidance of the Shaker ministry. The Shakers are considered the first and longest lasting utopian Society in the U.S. (6,000 converts by the 1840s). A Shaker settlement is still surviving today in Sabbathday Lake, Maine with three remaining members.
When the Shakers first settled in America, they endured beatings, ridicule, charges of treason, and accusations of witchcraft. Eventually the sect gained public respect and enough converts to start at least 18 colonies. The Shakers took in all races, religions and nationalities. They insisted on the equality of women long before it was accepted elsewhere. The North Union Settlement had many important woman leaders, and the US Federal Census shows four members of color listed in 1840.

The Shakers allowed for different levels of commitment among their ranks. At the highest level, those spiritually “ready” signed a “covenant,” gave up their natural family ties (including marriage), and irreversibly turned their property over to the common use. When whole families joined up, the parents lost direct parenting rights and all in the family were assimilated onto the larger Shaker colony. Children were treated well and many orphans were taken in and raised. Shaker colonies divided up their growing populations into smaller manageable “Family” groups of about 60 to 100 members, with each group responsible for a particular industry such as milling or broom making. The Shaker’s settlement was governed by a presiding ministry (always of both sexes). Each Family was headed by two male Elders and two female Eldresses.

Any interaction between the sexes was carefully planned, and consisted of formalized “union” sessions for discussing religion and worldly news. Otherwise, males and females were always kept to separate sides of the dwelling houses, dining halls and the meeting hall. Anyone wanting to leave the sect could do so of his or her own free will, but they would not be spoken of again. Religious services were open to the public, and they worshipped by sermon, singing and dancing (men and women in separate lines). Their early practice of wild movements, running around, falling down, and shaking (hence the origin of the nickname “Shakers”) was eventually replaced by choreographed dancing, shuffling and expressive hand motions. The Shakers believed that “gifted” members had the ability to communicate directly with the angels and get guidance from departed spirits, such as their beloved Mother Ann and even Jesus.

Shakers of the North Union village often interacted with the larger Heights community. They sold fresh and canned produce, seeds, medicines, milk, livestock, tools, brooms, pails, churns, woolen socks, mittens and yarn. Shaker furniture was made mostly for the Shaker’s own use. Most importantly, the Shaker mills helped the area farmers grind their grain to flour and animal feed. Due to an aging population and declining membership, North Union was closed in 1889, with remaining members sent to live at other settlements.
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The 1836 sawmill in Lot 11 was framed in heavy oak timbers and measured 21 feet by 48 feet. It had a 15-foot overshot wheel covered by a shed to keep it from freezing in winter. In addition to functioning as a sawmill, the building housed a cooper shop on its upper floor to manufacture pails, churns and tubs using power supplied by the same main waterwheel. The main wheel was hooked up to a series of complicated gears, leather belts, and shafts running through the floors. These in turn connected with various machines, including the saws and woodworking lathes. Next to the mill, of course, was the largest dam on the lot—the western bank of the Lower Shaker Lake.

The dam was a major engineering feat. After clearing trees from the Doan Creek ravine, the Shakers hauled piles of the timber and cartloads of clay, rocks and mud to create a 500-foot long, 25-foot-high wall that, to this day, is strong enough to hold back tons of water from the lake. Stone reinforcements for the dam (and the mill foundations) were quarried from exposed rock in the ravine sides.

Figure 3: The last mill on Lot 11. Another Shaker structure was moved to the sawmill location in 1886 after the 1836 sawmill burned down. This new structure was leased out to businessmen in the community and used as a flour mill (grist mill). Note the dam at the rear left, behind which is the Lower Shaker Lake. Although the “headrace” for bringing the water to the mill is visible at far left, the water wheel itself is not visible.
further downstream. (Some of these stone reinforcements are visible near the sawmill foundation.) As with other Shaker dams, willow trees were planted along the top of the dam so the roots would grow and strengthen the dam.

The sawmill was kept busy hewing logs into boards for all the nearby Shaker structures going up at that time. As readers may know, there actually were three Shaker villages in the North Union community—the East, Center and Mill families—and the sawmill supplied the lumber for buildings in all three locations. It also supplied lumber to the surrounding non-Shaker farming community. The mill burned down in 1885 and soon after, another building from nearby was moved onto the same foundation. This new mill was rented out and used as a flour mill (Figure 3, below left). It was first rented by a former Shaker named Walter Dyke and then to Thomas R. Skove. Mr. Skove purchased the mill building in 1893 and moved it intact to Woodland Avenue. He later dismantled it and used the timbers to build a home at 11608 Woodstock Avenue, which still stands today. The millstone is on display at Shaker Square. The huge stone gristmill in Lot 422 (on the north side of the Doan Brook ravine near the intersection of North Park Blvd. and Roxboro Road) was ceremoniously blasted to bits with dynamite in 1886. A woolen factory on Lot 23 near Lee Road was torn down to make way for a new road—South Park Boulevard. And so ended Lot 11’s life as a “mill lot.” However, there is still a great deal of Lot 11’s history that pre- and post-dates the Shakers.

The Birth of Lot 11

Every segment of the Western Reserve has its own fascinating story. Lot 11 is no exception. Its boundary lines were established around 1797 by Moses Cleaveland’s surveying party. At the very end of the 18th century, the Western Reserve was obtained from Native American inhabitants by an unwelcomed treaty and paltry payment. The surveyors (who had signed on for a year’s service) hacked through virgin forest to mark out large squares of five miles on each side (designated by a township and range number) and then carved these townships into smaller sellable lots. The surveyors got to the Warrensville, Newburgh and Cleveland Township lines and pounded wooden posts into the packed-clay ground (Demington Drive and Cedar Road run exactly along these old township lines today.) Throughout their trek, the men waded through swamps and were harassed by clouds of gnats and bloodthirsty mosquitoes. So voracious were the bugs’ appetites that it was feared the horses would drop dead in their tracks from a loss of blood.

It is probable that, as the surveyors sloshed through the rocky-bottomed Doan Brook by Coventry Road (neither brook nor road were known by these names yet), they had to keep watch for the rattlesnakes, wildcats and bears known to inhabit the area. For a while, the surveyors followed a fresh Indian trail along the ravine bottom. A surveyor remarked about how clear and fresh the water flowed in the creek; however he also noted that the water flow did not seem strong enough to power a mill. Subsequent development would prove him very wrong.

When the survey was completed, the 163-acre square of wilderness forest around what is today the intersection of Coventry Road and North Park Boulevard was officially recorded continued on page 10
Part of the Mill Family neighborhood on the west side of the old Shaker Road (now Coventry Road) just south of its intersection with what is now North Park Boulevard. On the left are the horse and wagon sheds. Far right is the large communal dwelling house with the summoning bell on top. In accordance with their celibate ways, the men lived on one side and the women on the other.
as “Lot 11 in Township 7, in the 11th Range of the Connecticut Western Reserve” (Figure 4). The larger surrounding area, the whole of Township 7, would later be named “Warrensville” after the Daniel and Margaret (Prentiss) Warren family, the township’s first settlers. Early on, however, the Connecticut Land Company was unable to find buyers for many of the area lots. The Western Reserve at this time lacked the infrastructure and services (roads, bridges, mills, commerce)
that prospective buyers wanted and needed. The lots thus were sold in individual tracts to Eastern investors. Later the lots were divided further and sold to potential settlers.

It may help to visualize Lot 11 as having two parts: an upper one-fourth and a lower three-fourths (Figure 5). The upper one-fourth (the north-most segment) became two parcels of land. One of these upper parcels was four acres, and the other was 41 acres. This upper fourth encompassed the current intersection of Coventry Road and Fairmount Boulevard. The lower (southern) three fourths of the lot consisted of 118 acres and included Doan Brook, the Lower Shaker Lake and the mills previously mentioned.

In the early 1800s, pioneers Samuel and Nancy (Doane) Dodge (1783-1863) of Euclid, OH, owned the lower three-fourths of Lot 11. Nancy Dodge was the daughter of Timothy Doane (1759-1828), a former sea captain, and Mary “Polly” Carey (1763-1848). Nancy was also the niece of Nathaniel Doan, the well-known early settler and the person after whom Doan Brook is named.\(^1\) Nathaniel Doan was a member of Moses Cleaveland’s surveying party and brought his own family here to live in 1798. His brother Timothy and his family arrived in the Western Reserve about 1801.\(^2\) Nancy Doane married Samuel Dodge (1776-1854) in 1803.\(^3\)

Samuel Dodge has the distinction of being the fourth permanent resident of Cleveland, having arrived in 1797 from New Hampshire. He was one of the founders of the Early Settlers Association.\(^4\) A ship carpenter by trade, he used his skills to build barns and houses. Through this hard work and his business savvy, he amassed considerable land and wealth. Samuel and Nancy’s daughter Mary wed Ezra Smith, who was reported in a history on Warrensville Township as having a sawmill on the “Shaker Brook” in 1820 (most likely on the land belonging to his in-laws).\(^5\)

**Enter the Shakers**

The Dodge family sold their Lot 11 land to Return Russell in 1823 for $1,000 ($8.47 an acre). Although the land deed does not hint at the presence of a mill, other sources indicate a partially constructed sawmill on the lot.

Return Russell and wife Jerusha Osborn sold their parcel in 1828 to Shaker Union Village trustees Nathan Sharp and Daniel Boyd for the same price of $1,000. At this time, the deed mentions that the sale was to include “all improvements, watercourse profits, and appurtenances whatsoever to the said premise’s belonging.” This confirms that by 1828, Lot 11 had been “improved” with a mill and dam.

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The Russell Family

Ralph Russell (1788-1866) is considered the founder of the North Union Shakers. He was the brother of Elisha and Return Russell (owners of Lot 11) and one of 14 brothers and sisters. All were children of pioneers Jacob Russell (1746-1821) and Esther Dunham (c. 1750-1835) who arrived in the Western Reserve to the village of Newburgh, (now a part of Cleveland) in 1812. Jacob Russell had fought in the Revolutionary War and was a miller back east in Windsor Locks, Connecticut. His children grew up around mills. In 1813 Jacob purchased Lot 23 (the horseshoe-shaped lot encompassing the Upper Shaker Lake) from Lemuel Storrs (1753-1816) and Betsy Champion (1762-1845) of Connecticut, probably with the intention of starting a mill. It is this lot upon which the newly formed Shaker sect first erected their cabins after Jacob’s death. Jacob also purchased Lot 34 which became part of the Shaker lands.

When Jacob Russell died, he was buried on his land by the Doan Brook. His grave is on the north side of South Park Boulevard just east of Lee Road. It is marked by a small fence and boulder with historical plaque. Soon after, Ralph Russell took a trip to the Union Ohio Shaker Village (near Lebanon Ohio) to seek out the Shakers and investigate their religion and way of life. On the way home, he reported that he was followed by a horizontal ray of light that rose up into a tree of light beside his cabin. This vision marked his conversion to Shakerism and led to the startup of the North Union Village. Thirty eight Russell family members were soon indoctrinated. Other relatives, close friends and neighbors also joined. New converts increased the sect’s numbers to nearly 200 in their heyday (the 1840s), and periodically higher if you count the Winter Shakers, who expressed interest in becoming Shakers and abided by the rules, but often left as soon as their prospects improved. Ralph Russell was eventually replaced as leader. He parted ways with the sect and lived out his life with his mother, wife Laura Elsworth (who rejoined him) and some of their children in Bentleyville, OH. Most of the other Russells remained Shakers and played an integral part in Shaker history. Ralph’s nephew Samuel was a Shaker leader for more than 18 years. The graves of Ralph and his immediate family can be found in Bentleyville at the family’s Union Cemetery.

Russell family members belonging to the Shaker sect were originally buried in the Shaker cemetery on South Park Boulevard near Lee Road. When the Van Sweringen brothers bought the land, the individual hand-carved tombstones were discarded and the bodies dug up and dumped unceremoniously in a mass grave in the Warrensville West Cemetery on Lee Road. The Shaker Historical Society erected a plaque to help restore some respect and dignity to their memory and to their final resting place.
In 1836, the new sawmill with cooper shop would be built, along with the largest and final dam on the Lower Shaker Lake.

The four-acre parcel of the upper fourth of Lot 11 belonged to Solomon Rockwell (1764-1838) and his brother Martin Rockwell (c.1772-1851) of Windsor and Colebrook, CT. They were descendants of early colonial planters who had arrived in America in 1630. The two Rockwell brothers (along with other siblings) ran a water-powered “iron works” in the late 1700s in Colebrook. They never moved out to the Western Reserve but sold their four-acre investment near the Doan Brook to Elisha Russell and John Pomeroy Root in 1833. Elisha and John were already Shakers by this time. In 1848 the two transferred the land to the Shaker trustees at the Union Shaker Village near Dayton, Ohio. Union Village was the “parent” (overseeing colony) to the North Union Shakers.

The upper 41 acres of Lot 11 belonged to General Martin Smith III (1762- c.1850) and wife Sarah Kellogg (1763-1834) originally of Connecticut. The Smiths, who cleared 400 acres of native land in Vernon Township, OH, and raised a large family there, sold their distant Warrensville Township Lot 11 parcel in 1835 for $230 (about $5.61 per acre) to Elisha Russell who was already a Shaker member. Elisha sold the parcel in 1836 for $5.94 an acre, officially to the North Union Shaker trustees, who at the time were his nephew Samuel Russell, Riley Honey and himself.

By 1856 the Shakers owned all three parcels of Lot 11. They would eventually own almost 1,400 continuous acres across 14 different lots in this area. The Shakers had already been thriving since 1822 on land just to the east, and could now expand their village into this new lot. As shown in Figure 6, the village of the Mill Family (also called the “North Family” or “Second Family”), eventually had more than 20 structures—
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even more if one counts all of the outhouses. The Shakers replaced a log cabin they had been using near the mill with a large communal dwelling house (see pages 8-9). They soon built cow barns, a cheese house, spring house (built over the spring so the cool water could be used to “refrigerate”), blacksmith shop, ice house, laundry house (washhouse), meat-smoking and drying houses, chicken coops, corn cribs and, of course, the sawmill. Most of the surrounding forest was cut down for construction of the dam. Lot 11 was then planted in gardens (fruit, vegetables and herbs), and orchards (apples, plums, peaches, pears, quince and cherries).

Figure 7: A visitor to Lot 11 in the early 1800s might have chanced upon an overshot water wheel such as the one shown here.
Lot 11’s Next Life

The age of the mill would sadly come to an end. The mills of Lot 11, as well as the Shaker Mill Family buildings, were victims of decay, arson and the wrecking ball. The land was purchased by well known names such as Rockefeller, Deming and Van Sweringen—people whose vision focused more on the development of a suburban utopia (Figure 8).

Today the 163 acres of Lot 11 are crisscrossed with picturesque streets, one church (Fairmount Presbyterian) and roughly 150 homes. Still thriving is the Lower Shaker Lake, ever lovely and much patronized and appreciated. Today’s inhabitants include dog walkers, joggers, artists, nature lovers, ducks, Canadian geese, two grey herons, myriad deer, and innumerable squirrels and chipmunks. But even among the area’s human denizens, few have any inkling that the area was once populated by sheep, cows, orchards, gardens, a score of practical whitewashed buildings, multiple mills and several hundred quaint “Believers” with funny hats and bonnets saying “yea” and “nay.”

Notes:

1 It is very common in history for siblings to use different spellings of their surnames. This is the case with the Doan (Doane) brothers.

2 Timothy and Mary Doane’s gravesite, with its monolith marker, can still be seen in the East Cleveland Township Cemetery (directly across Euclid Avenue from Lake View Cemetery, but hidden by the elevated railroad track right-of-way).

3 Nancy Doane and Samuel Dodge’s tombstone is in the old Erie Street Cemetery in downtown Cleveland.

4 Dodge’s grandson (also named Samuel Dodge) was a well-known Cleveland attorney who built and occupied one of the great mansions that lined Overlook Road at the turn of the 20th Century.

5 No other deed for Ezra Smith pertaining to the Heights area could be found at the Cuyahoga County Recorder’s office, so the most likely place for his mill was on the in-laws’ land in Lot 11.

6 The shallow mill pond of this iron works factory contributed to a malarial outbreak and subsequent deaths in the town, and had to be drained.

7 General Smith fought in the Revolutionary War and worked as a surveyor and master mason. He and his wife purchased and cleared 400 acres of native land in Vernon Township, OH, and raised a large family on their homestead there. Their son Havilah Smith (1801-1886) described the pioneer life of his boyhood with a memory of “lying awake at night listening to hungry, desperate wolves tearing away at the bark of the log cabin trying to get in.”
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