

Dan Cohen's Digital Humanities Blog » Blog Archive » Nineteenth-Century Open Source



Near where we're staying on vacation there is a small but excellent Shaker museum^[1]. As a historian who in part studies nineteenth-century religion, I know a bit about the Shakers, one of the more remarkable and unusual revival Christian sects. (Note to those wishing to create a new sect that flourishes: eschew celibacy, even if you do make amazing furniture.) It is easy to think of the Shakers as from another age (or perhaps world), living in massive "families" of 50 to 100 "brothers and sisters" and focusing on the simple life of agriculture and crafts (in addition to very serious and often ecstatic forms of worship). But the museum brings to life the Shakers' less well-known technological sophistication. They were innovators of the first order, constantly refining the efficiency of their families' production (the simple lines of Shaker furniture made them easier to clean, important when your dining room seats 100).

What really struck me was their *patented* technologies. That's right, the sect occasionally took advantage of U.S. patent law. The Shaker family near us invented a massive, semi-automated washing machine, among other things. And what they did with their patents is most interesting. They patented these machines so that no one would steal the designs, and then they licensed the designs for free to other Shaker communities, which did the same in return with their innovations. Sound familiar?

[*Photograph of a Shaker chair by chrisjfry*^[2].]

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References

1. ^ [a small but excellent Shaker museum](#)
(www.shakermuseumandlibrary.org)
2. ^ [chrisjfry](#) (flickr.com)
3. ^ [View all posts in History](#) (www.dancohen.org)
4. ^ [View all posts in Open Source](#) (www.dancohen.org)
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