

Imagine their surprise as they discovered unbelievably large bones...

For the Shaker farmers working in the Grimes farm field one November day in 1860, it seemed like a typical day of work. The weather was cloudy and cool. They used simple tools to turn the soil. They piled large limestone rocks to the side as they dug a drainage ditch around the field.

But on this day, their plows struck something curious. Something much larger than the limestone with which they were familiar. They stopped their work to investigate what was located just under their feet.

Imagine their surprise when they began to uncover unbelievably large bones, unlike those of any animal they had ever seen before. Much bigger than the deer that roamed their woods or the cattle and horses they tended on their farms.

+Kentucky farmers are accustomed to uncovering large rocks as they work the soil. More than 50 percent of the surface rocks in Kentucky are limestones. The rocks are composed of the mineral calcite (calcium carbonate), but may contain small amounts of clay, silt, chert and dolomite. Most limestones are layered and contain fossils of shellfish and other animals that lived millions of years ago in shallow seas.

This is the story of “Those Large Bones: The Shaker Mammoth.”

The Shakers believed they had discovered the bones of a mammoth. News of the exciting discovery quickly spread. The fossils were put on display in the Carpenters’ Shop, and people from surrounding towns came to see them.

After the initial find, the Shakers returned to the Grimes farm field many times to continue their exploration. A few weeks later, they made an even more thrilling discovery...

“...they came on the head of one of the animals, but they could not get it up; when it was exposed to the atmosphere it would crumble to pieces...it was 3 feet between the eyes. The tusks were 9 inches in diameter, the length was not exactly known, though over 7 feet; we found a great many pieces of bones, but no whole ones.”

Z. Burnett, December 16, 1860

+ The Shakers detailed accounts of their mammoth fossil discoveries, including the date, location and measurements of the remains, in their handwritten journals. In some ways, they were recording important data just like today’s paleontologists. They reasoned the fossilized bones they found were the remains of a mammoth, which they also referred to as the American Elephant. This deduction was influenced by popular scientific theories they read at the time.

What did the Shakers think?

The Shakers were a well-educated community. They were prolific readers, and it is likely that they were knowledgeable of the mammoth and other large fossils found at Kentucky’s Big Bone Lick only 100 miles away.

The discovery of these ancient fossils challenged the religious beliefs of many early Americans. Most Christians accepted the literal interpretation of the Bible, including the idea that earth and all life was perfect and unchanging. Mammoth and mastodon fossils provided the first evidence that one of God’s creatures could become extinct, and some Americans began to alter their beliefs because of these findings.

The Shakers were a Christian sect. They studied the Bible and sought to live perfect Christian lives. What did the Shakers think about finding fossils from an extinct species? There are only a handful of Shaker journal entries accounting the events of late 1860—none of which leave evidence of how the encounters influenced their beliefs. The more than 70 surviving Pleasant Hill Shaker journals offer just a glimpse into their lives. There remain many unanswered questions.

+ While Christians today share many similar beliefs as the Shakers, there are many important distinctions.

Aspects of Shaker religion include:

GOD IS MALE AND FEMALE

God created man and woman in his own image.

LIVING IN THE FAMILY OF GOD

Believers live side by side as brothers and sisters and do not get married or have children.

UNION WITH THE CHRIST SPIRIT

Emulation of Christ would lead one to spiritual perfection.

CONFESSION OF SIN

Sins must be confessed publicly as a sacrifice and to humble one's self before God.

Did the Shakers really discover a mammoth?

We will never know for sure. Though the Shakers identified their discovery as a mammoth in their journal entries, they may have found a mastodon. Both have very similar skulls and tusks, and fossils of both have been found in this region.

Mammoths and mastodons once roamed North America together, and while they have a lot in common, they also exhibit unique differences. Fossils indicate that mastodons were slightly smaller than mammoths. Both species stood between 7 and 14 feet tall and were covered with long, shaggy hair. They also were both herbivores, but mastodons had cone-shaped cusps on their molars to easily crush leaves, twigs and branches, while mammoths had ridged molars that allowed them to graze like elephants.

In 1860, the Shakers refer to uncovering “two jaw teeth or grinders.” Though it is difficult to differentiate from this simple description, they may have found the ridged molars of the mammoth. While the Shakers would not have been able to make the distinction at the time, they clearly believed they had discovered mammoth fossils, as described in their journals.

+ Mammoths and mastodons lived during the Ice Age, when glaciers could be found as far south as northern Kentucky. The area was inhabited by all types of large Ice Age mammals, including giant beavers, bison, elk, short-faced bears and ground sloths. Fossils from these animals are still found in fields, swamps, caves, ponds, rivers, salt licks, sinkholes and mineral springs throughout the state.

Where is the Shaker Mammoth now?

The mammoth fossils discovered by the Shakers are no longer at Shaker Village. After putting them on public display in the Carpenters' Shop, the Shakers donated the fossils to Daughters College in 1873. Today, this gift is viewed as a thoughtful social action, perhaps demonstrating the Shakers' respect for education, sharing knowledge and building relationships with the world outside of their community.

Daughters College existed as an educational institution until the early 1900s. It is unclear what became of the fossils after the college closed. The college may have donated them to another educational institution in Kentucky or perhaps they were purchased by a private collector.

Unfortunately, objects that share important and inspirational stories from the past are lost every day. Shaker Village is home to a remarkable story, and the nonprofit organization is dedicated to preserving and conserving the objects, architecture and stories of the Pleasant Hill Shakers.

+ From 1855 until 1894, Daughters College was a school for young ladies located 7 miles west of Shaker Village. During this time period, the college was under the direction of John Augustus Williams, the former president of the University of Kentucky. The school was purchased by Colonel Thomas Smith and operated as Beaumont College until 1916, when it was bought by Mr. and Mrs. Glave Goddard and converted into an inn. Today, the fourth and fifth generations of the Goddard family continue to operate Beaumont Inn as a bed and breakfast country inn.

Does history ever change?

Have you ever heard about the Shaker Mammoth before? Probably not. There are always new things to learn from the past. New information about historic events is uncovered every day through the research of collections and archival materials.

The Pleasant Hill Shakers lived on this site from 1805 until 1923. There are countless untold stories hidden in their journals, artifacts and buildings. Together, these important items paint a diverse and inspiring picture of the community and individuals who lived here.

Today, Shaker Village is working diligently to care for these significant collections and to expand public access to them. Through continuous research and investigation, new ways to share the Shaker story are being discovered and introduced. The site is redefining its approach to sharing the legacies of the Kentucky Shakers in order to inspire a new generation.

+ Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill is a landmark destination whose mission to inspire generations through **D I S C O V E R Y**, by sharing the legacies of the Kentucky Shakers.