

VERMONT



HISTORY

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Thoughts on Basket Makers

At the end of 2009 the Vermont Historical Society became the fortunate recipient of a basket made during the late 1800s by Seymour Lamson Morehouse. The basket was given anonymously in honor of Linus Leavens who has been researching Morehouse's family history for years, trying to discover how the basket maker learned his craft. Morehouse baskets are made from ash, with uniform and beautifully proportioned lines. The VHS's new acquisition is signed on the bottom, "Seymour Lamson Morehouse/His Make/Westford Vermont." Morehouse was born in 1822 and spent most of his life in Chittenden County in Westford. At the end of his life he lived with his son in Calais. He died in 1908.

Documented Vermont-made baskets, from a time when baskets were a common but necessary household and work item, are rare. Baskets signed by the makers are rarer. Basket makers, like coopers (barrel makers) and blacksmiths, worked in most communities of any size until the early twentieth century. Examples of the thousands of baskets they produced, ranging from small thimble holders to large potato baskets, would have been found in every house and barn.

When Morehouse was recorded in the U.S. census (1860 and 1880), he gave his occupation as laborer. In Hamilton Child's *Chittenden County Directory, 1882-1883* (p. 526) he is listed under the heading of Basket Makers. A review of other Child's county directories and gazetteers from the 1880s under Basket Makers revealed a total of forty-three men and one woman. Of those basket makers, two names are known to me as members of basket making families: Switzer (or Sweetser) and Obum-sawin (or Obomsawin). The Switzer/Sweetser family worked in Morris-town and Waterbury, and the VHS owns baskets donated by the family that they made in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their work has been documented in Allen Eaton's *Handicrafts of New England* (1949, p. 51) and by the VHS in *News and Notes*, 24:3, [May-June, 1973]. The Obomsawin family is a well known Western Abenaki family that made and traded baskets in the Champlain Valley into the



*Ash Basket made by Belle Sweetser Perry,
1918, Waterbury, Vermont.*

mid twentieth century. Several examples of their work are owned by local historical societies and family members.

What about the other forty-two basket makers? Certainly many of their baskets were used up, broken, and discarded. But the names from the 1880s directories are intriguing, especially the lists with multiple members from the same families, such as the Harlows from East Barnard, South Pomfret, West Randolph, and East Bethel; or the Moses family from South Tunbridge. Are there documented examples of their work that survive? I'd be interested in learning about any information readers may have about Vermont basket makers.

JACQUELINE CALDER, *Curator*

Front cover photograph: Ash basket made by Seymour Lamson Morehouse, circa 1880, Westford, Vermont.

Back cover: Signature by Seymour Lamson Morehouse on bottom of basket.

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