

Elizur Spencer of Sandisfield, Mass., and His Remarkable Apple Parer

By Ronald Bernard

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Elizur Spencer Apple Parer Circa 1810, Photo Lorraine German

Sandisfield Massachusetts

Most likely you have never heard of our town that lies in the extreme southwest part of the state bordering Connecticut. That would not be surprising. In fact, the unofficial town motto is "Where The Hell Is Sandisfield?" One may still run across the slogan on bumper stickers, which suggest that folks here do not take things too seriously.

Nowadays Sandisfield is a rural community of about 900 full-time residents plus a sizeable seasonal population. Only vestiges of our agricultural tradition remain, although a trend towards small-scale farming is encouraging.

Like many small towns in the Berkshire hills, Sandisfield has not recovered from the protracted economic and social decline due to The-Really-Great-Depression of the 1870s, now mostly forgotten. For years thereafter, farms and mills and handsome old houses were abandoned or bounced around between speculators. Today visitors are struck by the timelessness of this bucolic place of 57 square miles pretty much connected by original dirt roads through rolling reforested land. Ironically lack of development has had a benefit. Some one hundred vintage properties survive as a legacy to a golden age where sturdy, fiercely independent Yankee farm families and pre-industrial age craftsmen and mill workers proudly called Sandisfield home. Many of their houses have recently qualified to be considered for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

In 2012 we prepared a comprehensive town history in conjunction with Sandisfield's 250th anniversary. In the process of telling the stories of the founding families and their generations, I encountered one truly remarkable settler, Elizur Spencer. He was the most skilled artisan-woodworker who ever lived in Sandisfield and probably for many miles around.

Elizur Spencer

Elizur Spencer was born in 1779 about 20 miles south of Sandisfield in New Hartford, Connecticut, to Nathaniel and Lois Steele Spencer. In 1803/04, Elizur and his bride Mary (?-1822) bought an existing farm including an approximately 15-year old, 2½-story Federal-style house on 70 acres, a typical farmstead at the time. The recorded purchase price was \$588, a princely sum in an era when cash in the countryside was very scarce.

They raised three daughters, Eliza, born about 1803; Frances, 1805; and Sophronia, 1809. Mary, who was called Polly, died in 1822 of an unknown cause. Elizur apparently did not remarry despite his tremendous family burden. After daughter Eliza's death in 1851, by then in his early 70s, Elizur removed with Frances and Sophronia and her husband, Asa Smith, to Trumbull County, Ohio, apparently to join his relatives there. Mary Spencer and her daughter Eliza rest together in the historic Sandisfield Center cemetery.

The Master Craftsman

By all accounts Elizur, a humble man and a helpful and generous neighbor, was a wonder. Town historian George Shepard in 1885 remembered him as a prolific, first-rate craftsman who made important things to improve everyday life. Shepard wrote that Spencer made "spinning wheels, quill wheels, reels, swifts and paring machines." He added that Spencer "used a small stream to the south to power his turning shop."

A dam, small reservoir, beehive oven and remnants of his shop survive on the site, fig 1. The US census of 1820 lists his occupation as "wheelwright." Consider however that Spencer, like all his contemporaries, was of necessity a farmer. But unlike most others he was with neither sons *nor a wife*. Imagine how demanding his life was!



Figure 1 Spencer's Beehive Oven and Reservoir, Photos Ronald Bernard

Spencer's house stands today remarkably well preserved with above average original interior fabric and features including wonderful paneling, a Palladian window, and beaded-trim mantels, almost certainly his handiwork, fig 2.



Figure 2 Former Spencer place, rear elevation, as it appeared in about 1908. Spencer's turning shop was nearby. Photo R. Bernard *Sandisfield Then and Now*

Between 1804 and 1807, Daniel Sears, a neighbor and customer who was known for fastidious accounting, recorded Spencer's work for him to that point in a ledger. Among the varied things Elizur had made for Sears were, "a basket for helping me make a sled;" "a wagon for a child;" "a handle for a dung fork;" "a small chest;" "a hilting sword;" and "a desk."

However, Elizur's most important legacies are his exquisite, museum grade spinning wheels, also called back then "walking wheels." At least three are extant in town including one at the historical society and two in private residences, fig. 3. Considering that few of the multitude of mundane but essential household items made by hand from wood centuries ago survive, especially with a maker's attribution, Sandisfield is fortunate to have these beauties. Unfortunately, no examples of Spencer's other marvelous laborsaving devices, particularly his parers, were known to remain here.



Figure 3 Spencer Spinning Wheel, Photo R. Bernard *Sandisfield Then and Now*

Spencer's Apple Parer

Then in 2012, thanks to George and Cindy Short of Compton, New Hampshire, Sandisfield once again became home to a genuine Elizur Spencer apple parer in excellent condition, fig. 4.



Figure 4 Spencer Apple Parer with Label, Photo Lorraine German

The Shorts acquired the Spencer parer with original label at an antiques shop in their area. Research into Sandisfield and Elizur Spencer led them to me. Because of their awareness and generosity, they donated this precious item to the Sandisfield Historical Society where it joined its "big cousin," a Spencer spinning wheel, in time for Sandisfield's 250th anniversary celebrations in July of 2012.

About the Author

A former international pharmaceuticals industry executive, Ron in 2001 purchased the c. 1785 Josiah Hulet house in Sandisfield as a retirement home. He and his wife, Jean, also an old house enthusiast, moved there full-time in 2008. Ron serves as chair of the Sandisfield Historical Commission and is active in the local historical society. He is one of the founders of his community's monthly newspaper, *The Sandisfield Times*, now in its 7th year and is very active with it including writing the column "Historia" about town history. Ron is the principal author and compiler of *Sandisfield Then and Now: 1762-2012*, a history book prepared in conjunction with Sandisfield's 250th anniversary in July 2012.

The book features the histories of more than one-hundred historic houses and the families that lived in them.

Addendum

Mike Viney

Elizur Spencer's apple parer is truly remarkable. At first glance one might say it is a primitive, direct drive wooden parer with a hand crank and separate hand-guided paring knife. Upon closer inspection one may start to appreciate the craftsmanship exhibited by the wonderful carved threads that allow this parer to be mounted to a table. As illustrated in figure 4 the parer can be used by a left-handed person; however, flip the parer over and a right-handed person can use it—remarkable indeed!

An Elizur Spencer parer with original paper label is illustrated in Don Thornton's *Apple Parers*. The label on this example reads Elizur Spencer Sandisfield, No. 1518 Mass, (Thornton, p. 195). A parer with an identical design and original label is also illustrated on page nine of Thornton's book. The label on this parer is marked Daniel Fay, Chester, Mass. Manufactory. Daniel Fay's apple parer is noted on page 90 of the *Transactions of the New York State Agricultural Society*, Volume XII, 1852. Elizur Spencer was active as a craftsman in Sandisfield from 1803 to 1820. It may be the case that Daniel Fay was inspired by Spencer's apple parer design.

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