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Protecting Older and Historic Barns through Barn Preservation Programs

by Jennifer Goodman and Bill Kimball



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In communities across the country, older and historic barns are taking on new life, thanks to innovative programs that encourage owners to preserve their historic farm buildings. At least 11 states have developed barn programs to draw attention to historic barns and to help owners find ways to reuse and rehabilitate them. Two national programs have assisted this movement with information, guidance, and networking support. Hundreds of barn owners from all 50 states have benefited from these efforts. And countless rehabilitated barns dot the landscape thanks to these special initiatives.

How do these barn preservation programs work? Would it be possible to develop such a program in your state, region, or county? This publication is designed to help individuals and state and local preservation organizations get started in developing a barn preservation program. It will also help existing barn preservation programs fine-tune or expand their efforts.

Threats to Older and Historic Barns

Even though many barns are being upgraded, travel in any region of the country will reveal numerous barns in disuse and deterioration. The roofs are sagging, the siding is loose or missing, and the foundations are crumbling. A variety of factors—from changing agricultural practices to urban sprawl—are contributing to the demise of older barns.

Changing Agricultural Practices

Today, almost any discussion with a farmer about his or her deteriorating barn will elicit the following response: “That barn just doesn’t fit anymore since we’ve changed our operations.” The operation changes usually involve a different method of feed handling or a different kind of housing for the livestock. In the Midwest where a large number of barns were built for dairying, the practice of baling hay (instead of putting it up loose) means there is no need for the huge, high dairy barns. In addition, there has been a substantial shift from dairying to cash crop production, which requires a different kind of building. Similar changes have taken place in the Northeast and other dairy strongholds. Many tobacco barns in the Southeast, which were designed with slatted sides for air curing tobacco, are no longer in use as result of less demand for tobacco products.

Consolidation of Farms

A second major factor contributing to barn deterioration is the consolidation of farms. Mechanization has made it possible for many more acres to be farmed at the same time. Thus several farms are combined or consolidated to make a larger unit. As a result, scattered farmsteads are abandoned or sold for non-farm residential purposes. In either case the barns involved are often seriously neglected.



Barn preservation enthusiasts visit the Houston Barn in Contoocook, N.H., during a tour sponsored by the New Hampshire Preservation Alliance.

— Photo courtesy of the New Hampshire Preservation Alliance.

Quest for the Newest and Latest

Another factor contributing to the disrepair and disuse of old barns is the overwhelming tendency of Americans for wanting something new instead of using or adapting the old. In agriculture, farmers have built pole-barns or new low-framed structures instead of making changes to the older barn. Across the country these low,

Cover: The Poore Farmstead in northern New Hampshire operates as a nonprofit museum as part of an ongoing effort to save and interpret historic farm buildings.

— Photo courtesy of the New Hampshire Preservation Alliance.



In 2004 the National Trust listed the tobacco barns of Southern Maryland on its 11 Most Endangered Historic Places list. Scores of tobacco barns now stand unused and deteriorating as a result of Maryland's 2001 "tobacco buy-out" state policy, which encouraged farmers to stop cultivating tobacco.

— Photo courtesy of the Maryland Historical Trust.

often brightly-colored metal-sided buildings have replaced or stand in front of older farm buildings.

Complexities in Barn Maintenance

It required skilled workers and high quality materials to build barns that have lasted for many years. The artisans and craftsmen who built these structures have gradually disappeared and very few replacements have been trained. Barn owners often have to search far and wide for good stonemasons to repair old foundations, timber framers to repair beams, and competent roofers who can handle high steep roofs. Understandably, such skilled tradespeople are somewhat costly. The materials for barn maintenance and repairs often have to be custom made, further adding to the cost. The equipment for handling the heavy loads and great heights is also expensive. During times of economic uncertainty and declining farm incomes, it is easy to understand why many farmers

have put off barn maintenance and repairs. The situation is not greatly different for non-farm barn owners in rural areas.

Threats of Urban Sprawl

As cities expand outward, barns face increasing threats as new housing and commercial developments crop up on what was formerly rural or agricultural land. The various building codes and zoning restrictions often make it difficult to find a new use for barns in these mushrooming areas. Furthermore, barn owners frequently hesitate to undertake barn maintenance if they feel that urban sprawl and the resulting development is inevitable where they live.

The Importance of Barns

Some people may ask: "Why all this attention to old barns? Why not just let them go or replace them with modern buildings?" There are at least three important

reasons—economic, symbolic, and aesthetic—for rehabilitating older and historic barns.

Economic Reasons

There can be real financial pay-off in repairing a barn and keeping it in use. Spending a little time reviewing the barn deterioration problems, considering adaptations, and finding the right contractors to do the rehabilitation can bring surprising results. If a building owner believes that it is cheaper to tear the old one down and build anew, a careful consideration of the following costs most often leads to a different conclusion:

- The cost of razing the old building.
- The cost of materials for a new building.
- The cost of actual construction.
- The cost of insurance for a new building.
- The cost of taxes for a new building.

The economic savings in rehabilitating old barns for agricultural purposes have been well documented. Publications and case studies illustrating examples of barn rehabilitations for agricultural purposes and including cost comparisons with new buildings have been prepared by the BARN AGAIN! program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation (See resources, page 15). The examples were drawn from the annual winners of the National BARN AGAIN! Farm Heritage Awards.

Symbolic Value

Another reason for keeping old barns is their symbolic value. Preserving a community's agricultural heritage is important to many people. One farmer expressed it this way: "It just wouldn't be our farm without that barn. Nor would it be our community without the old barns." Another farmer said: "I just want my kids and grandkids to have some idea of how it was over time." Attendees at a public meeting in Michigan summarized their beliefs this way: "The barns are the largest, most visible symbol of the importance of agriculture in this area. We ought to make a real effort to keep them—at least some of them." A rural, non-farm barn owner stated: "We bought this place because of the whole farmstead. The barn is a key part of it. We want to keep it, and put it to the best use possible so it can continue to be an essential part of our farmstead."

Aesthetic Appeal

For many people, especially visitors, the attractiveness of barns and their aesthetic appeal is a prime consideration in saving old barns. The mix of geometric shapes, the range of designs and colors and the variety of colors and

materials are pleasing to residents and visitors alike. In addition, barns provide an appealing textural experience of sight, touch, and smell with their abundance of natural materials. Their appeal is often central for many state tourism promotion programs, especially in New York, Vermont, and Wisconsin.

Barn Preservation Programs: The National Landscape

In 2001, the National Trust conducted an assessment of barn preservation programs across the country. The resulting report, *The Assessment of Barn Preservation in the United States*, noted that, "barn preservation has gone from an idea to a movement." (To request a copy of the report, e-mail mpro@nthp.org.) This movement has led to federal legislation, media attention, statewide incentive programs, and innovative funding programs for older and historic barns.

Two key national initiatives—BARN AGAIN! and the National Barn Alliance—offer models as well as networking and direct assistance for both new and established barn preservation programs.

BARN AGAIN!

In 1987 staff in the National Trust Mountains/Plains office began to identify trends and attitudes associated with the loss of rural historic resources. From this research, the National Trust developed the BARN AGAIN! program in partnership with *Successful Farming* magazine to make a case for the continued use of historic farm buildings in modern agriculture.

The program assists barn owners in a number of ways. BARN AGAIN! has published six book-

Alternative Uses for Barns

The great majority of working barns continue in agriculture, serving a wide range of uses. When there is a switch of agricultural enterprises on a farm the barn use usually changes too. The conversion of a dairy barn to a hog-farrowing barn is a good example. The conversion of a dairy hay barn for the storage of cash crops or seeds is another.

Barns are also frequently adapted for commercial uses, most often for retailing of agricultural products. Urban and suburban dwellers flock to weekend farm markets in large old barns. Barns have also been converted into agricultural supply centers where farmers can purchase feed, equipment, and repair parts. Many barns are used for storage, especially for large items such as vehicles and boats; others have been adapted to antique outlets, studios for production and sales of art and crafts, restaurants and bars, lodging, and meeting places.

Some barns have been converted for residential use, although such adaptations can be difficult and costly. Odors and residues from livestock housing and the use of pesticides can be a potential hazard and need to be handled appropriately. In one publicized incident, a large dairy barn was converted into apartments. When the heat came on in the fall, the odors were highly offensive. A health department check uncovered serious pesticide residues, and the barn/residence was declared uninhabitable.

Barns have also been adapted for public uses such as community recreation facilities, golf clubhouses, summer theaters, park pavilions, exhibit halls, or as storage for park maintenance supplies and equipment. A number of barns have been converted to public meeting halls and conference centers.



Not all barns are located in rural areas. Preservationists need to advocate for the protection of agricultural structures located in towns, such as this barn in Harrisville, N.H.

—Photo courtesy of the New Hampshire Preservation Alliance.

lets on different aspects of barn preservation, including a guide to rehabilitation, and has sponsored four barn rehabilitation projects with funding provided by John Deere and Pioneer Hi-Bred International. These demonstration projects documented the methods and costs for converting barns to a new agricultural use and were later written up as case studies and published in *BARN AGAIN!*, *A Guide to the Rehabilitation of Older Farm Buildings*.

An ongoing annual award program for the best examples of barn preservation draws national attention to the efforts of barn owners. This program resulted in the identification of hundreds of new ideas on how farmers are adapting and using their old barns.

Successful Farming magazine highlights BARN AGAIN! award winners and publishes several articles each year on barn rehabilitation projects. The magazine editor notes that stories on barn preservation rank among the top 10 favorite articles among readers.

The BARN AGAIN! web site (www.barnagain.org) serves as a clearinghouse for barn preservation information, articles, referrals, and provides an interactive forum. Partnerships with Nebraska TV and the Smithsonian have resulted in popular and effective educational products such as a one-hour television program and a traveling exhibit on barn history and preservation.

BARN AGAIN! also responds to 1,200 callers per year through its hotline, answering questions about making repairs, finding contractors and funding, and providing advice on how to save an endangered barn.

National Barn Alliance

While BARN AGAIN! has positioned itself as a national advocate and a clearinghouse of information on barn preservation practices and techniques, the National Barn Alliance (NBA) serves primarily as an informal association of state and local barn preservation programs that pro-

vides assistance to emerging and established groups. Although it does not maintain a formal membership, its leaders encourage representatives from state historic preservation offices, statewide historic preservation organizations, state extension offices, and the National Trust to participate in meetings and activities.

State and Local Barn Preservation Programs

Over the past decade, 11 states—Colorado, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Michigan, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Vermont, and Wisconsin—have established statewide barn preservation programs. In addition, the Dutch Barn Preservation Society of New York focuses on preserving a specific barn type, and at least three Illinois counties, Kane County, McHenry County, and McLean County, have local barn programs. While their services, administration, and funding may vary, program staff work with barn owners, advocates, and decision-makers to help save old barns.

According to the 2001 *Assessment of Barn Preservation in the United States*, most state barn preservation programs are organized as partnerships of one or more organizations with one agency serving as the leader. The Ohio BARN AGAIN! Program is housed at the Ohio State University with the state historic preservation office serving as an important partner. Vermont's program is an informal association among the statewide historic preservation nonprofit organization, the state historic preservation office, and the state department of agriculture. Iowa, Michigan, and Wisconsin have statewide nonprofit organizations specifically dedicated to barn preservation

