

Barns of America

Barns impart a distinct sense of identity to a region. They are historic reminders of an area's agricultural past.

By Audrey Pavia

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[Barn Preservation Groups](#) It was a beautiful summer day, drier than most for July in the East. I was driving through eastern Pennsylvania on a business trip, enjoying the open highway before me.

As I passed through towns along the roadway, I noticed the scenery was becoming more rural. It wasn't long before great, green expanses lay on either side of the highway.

Every few minutes, a magnificent barn would come into view, rising above the landscape and punctuating the sky with its gabled roof and proud silo. The glory of these old barns was breathtaking, leaving me to realize the power of this very American piece of architecture.

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[Barn Styles](#)

Throughout American history, farmers have built barns to shelter their livestock and store their harvest.

A great number of barn styles can be seen throughout the United States, each suited to the environment where it resides.

"The design of a barn, especially if it is very old, is bound with the weather requirements of the area and the particular cultural traditions of the farmers in the region," says Nancy W. Ambrosiano, co-author of *Complete Plans for Building Horse Barns Big & Small*.

"A steeply peaked roof, for example, is relevant to regions with considerable snowfall since the weight of snow can bring a barn down. Such peaks only capture heat in the hotter, humid South, so while they'll still have a slope to shed rain and snow, more southerly barns add variations for ventilation such as the airy 'monitor' barns that ensure a breeze from floor to ceiling through the monitor's vents."

American farmers built their barns with not only practicality in mind, but also aesthetics. These barns were functional and their distinct looks provided a sense of identity to the regional farmlands on which they stood.

Certain barn styles have become synonymous with particular parts of the country; in many cases they are considered historic reminders of the area's agricultural past.

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[Bank Barns](#)

The Midwest is home to the bank barn, a rectangular building with two levels. Traditionally, the lower level of the barn housed livestock and draft animals, while the upper level provided storage and a threshing floor. Both areas can be entered from the ground.

[Barn Preservation Groups](#)

[Friends of Ohio Barns](#)

Fulton County Historical Society

Kentucky Heritage Council

The Iowa Barn Foundation

New York State Barn Coalition

Maine Preservation

Dutch Barn Preservation Society So named because the buildings were situated against the side of a hill, bank barns, most of which were built in the 1800s, permitted farmers direct access to the storage area with wagons loaded with wheat or hay. When built in an area where a hill was not present, a “bank” was created by building an earthen ramp.

The earliest bank barns featured gabled roofs, while later bank barns were built with gambrel roofs.

Bank barns were primarily constructed with their axis parallel to the hill on the south side; this allowed livestock to have a sunny spot to gather in the winter. To take advantage of this protection, the second story is extended over the first; the overhang sheltered animals from harsh weather.

In certain areas of Wisconsin, where glaciers once moved during the Ice Age, bank barns were constructed with fieldstones. In non-glaciated areas of the state, primarily southwestern Wisconsin, the barn walls were made of quarried rock. In other areas of the country, bank barns were built from wood.

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Round & Polygonal Barns

Round or polygonal barns, first built by the Shakers in the 1800s, are the rarest of barn types in terms of numbers and are scattered from New England to the Midwest. Though constructed early in the 19th century, these barns became popular during the 1880s when experiment stations and agricultural colleges taught progressive farming methods based on their great efficiency.

Round barns were encouraged for many reasons: circles have greater volume-to-surface ratios than other barn forms (square or rectangular), therefore they use less materials and save on cost.

Also, they offer greater structural stability because they are built with self-supporting roofs, which also opens vast storage space. The circular layout was viewed as more efficient—a claim that was overstated, demonstrated in the lack of round barns today.

In the final stage of round barn development, a center silo was added, allowing gravity to move feed from the barn’s top level to the floor.

Made from wood or occasionally brick, round and polygonal barns typically housed cattle on the ground floor and hay in the loft above.

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Tobacco Barns

Seen throughout the South and East, tobacco barns served a unique function when first erected nearly four centuries ago. Their role was to provide a place for tobacco farmers to hang and dry their crop after harvest.

These barns are heavily ventilated since air flow was needed to cure the hanging tobacco leaves. Multiple vents are typical of tobacco barns, which can be seen in different styles depending on the type of tobacco, the time period when tobacco became a crop in the area and local building styles, such as conventional tobacco barns that have long, vertical doors that

open along the sides. They are made from oak, poplar or other regional timber.

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English Barns

One of the first barn styles built in the states, English barns were a simple and popular design in New England during Colonial times, particularly in Vermont.

Reminiscent of barns in England, the English barn is usually small and rectangular in shape with an A-frame roof.

These barns were traditionally made from wood, are not usually more than 30 x 40 feet in size and feature hinged wagon doors. The barn was usually located on level ground with no basement and unpainted, vertical boards on the walls.

The interior of the English barn has a center aisle and threshing floor. Livestock were kept on one side of the barn while feed was stored on the other.

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Dutch Barns

Dutch barns are among the oldest and rarest American barns and are known for their broad, gabled roofs, corner stock doors, clapboarding and center wagon doors.

Popular in New York and New Jersey in the 1700s, these barns have a distinctive, H-shaped structure, which provided a rigid core to support the broad, gabled roof and walls. Dutch barns feature a spacious center aisle with a plank floor for unloading wagons and for grain threshing. The Dutch-style half doors were situated to allow prevailing winds to disperse chaff when threshing on the barn floor. A pent roof (or pentice) over the center doors gave protection from the elements. Flanking animal doors at the corners and holes near the roof to admit swallows and martins are typical Dutch barn elements. The side aisles were used to house cattle and draft animals, as well as to store feed and hay. Unlike most other barns, the internal structure of the Dutch barn is relatively protected from the elements and can often survive exterior decay.

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Crib Barns

Common in the South, crib barns are most often seen in the mountainous areas of North Carolina, Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee and Arkansas.

The name of this barn comes from the one to six cribs built inside the structure for storage or for housing livestock. Smaller crib barns were used exclusively for feed storage.

Crib barns were built primarily in the 1800s and were most often made from unchinked logs occasionally covered with wood siding and wood-shingled, gabled roofs.

Crib barns with roofs that were later replaced can be seen with tin or asphalt coverings. "Double-crib" barns feature a second-story loft; they were the simplest barn to build for their size and stability.

Similar to dog-trot houses, the double-crib barn, commonly found in Appalachia, consists of two cribs separated by a breezeway and covered by a single roof. The doors could either face front or toward the breezeway. The first story was used for stabling with the breezeway usually used for grain threshing. The second story loft was used for hay and grain storage.

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Prairie Barns

One of the most common barns in the American landscape, prairie barns, also known as Western barns, were the barn of choice for farmers in the West and Southwest because large livestock herds required great storage space for hay and grain.

These large, wooden barns provided plenty of storage space for feed and could house livestock if necessary.

Long roofs that often reach nearly to the ground created ample space; these barns were built throughout the 1800s as agriculture spread westward.

The prairie barn is similar to the Dutch barn with regards to the long, low rooflines and the internal arrangements of animal enclosures on either side of a central, open space.

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Preserving Historic Barns

Despite their age, many old barns of classic American style are still standing. Some are still functional, while others are mere shells of once-proud structures.

People who treasure America's early architecture are working hard to preserve these barns. A number of barn preservation groups can be found throughout the United States, encouraging government and private citizens to restore historic barns to their original glory.

"The New York State Barn Coalition is one of about two dozen groups around the country that is dedicated to continuing the use of older barns, some of which are rather remarkable survivors," says Michael Tomlan, board chair of the New York State Barn Coalition in Ithaca, N.Y.

"As a non-profit organization, the Coalition provides information to the general public, holds conferences around the state, sponsors exhibitions and publishes work that explains the role of the agrarian landscapes."

The Wisconsin Barn Preservation Program, part of the University of Wisconsin cooperative extension, is another program designed to help raise awareness of the need to preserve historic barns in the state.

The program's Web site notes that there are many threats to these buildings, including urban growth and roadway expansion, improper maintenance and upkeep, and new construction techniques, materials and design.

The approach to saving these barns is multi-faceted and includes involvement with the Wisconsin Trust for Historic Preservation and the Wisconsin Historical Society.

Strategies being pursued include The use of educational workshops The production of technical resource materials The support of non-profit organizations that can help orchestrate efforts to establish grants and other technical assistance programs aimed at helping barn owners interested in preservation.

"Nearly 20 years ago, representatives of the University of Wisconsin-Extension, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Trust for Historic Preservation and interested individuals began meeting to discuss barn preservation," says Jerry Apps, author of *Barns of Wisconsin*.

"An organization called Barns Network of Wisconsin resulted from those early meetings. Every year since, this group has sponsored barn preservation meetings, providing everything from technical information about roof and wall repair to the history of barns in the state. Well over 1,000 people have attended these meetings and workshops."

Grants are one of the ways barn preservation organizations are working to save old barns.

The Maine Historic Preservation Commission issues yearly grants to owners of historic barns to help them restore the structures to their original condition.

Grants are awarded on a competitive basis and applicants must meet certain criteria to be considered: The barn in question must be listed in or be eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places; Funds must be used only for preservation and restoration, not for renovation, rehabilitation, or any other project that would change the historic function or character-defining features of the building. Applicants also must be able to supply at least 50 percent of the project cost.

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Restoring Historic Barns

Bringing an old barn back to its original state is a rewarding experience that helps contribute to the historic legacy of rural America. Restoring an old barn takes time, research and dedication, but is well worth the effort.

“Historic barns are a treasure and a wonderful opportunity to keep the past alive,” says Ambrosiano. “If there is any way to protect and maintain an old barn, a property owner would do well to do so.”

Ambrosiano notes that safety of the humans and animals inside must take first priority when assessing an old barn for a new use.

“It might take considerable effort to rescue an old facility, such as inserting new footers and foundation materials, shoring up walls and most importantly, determining if the roof is going to come down around your ears,” she says.

If the ridgepole—the “spine” of the building—has lost its structural integrity and the roof is beginning to lean, it’s often a death knell for the building unless some expert intervention is introduced, says Ambrosiano. Likewise, supporting vertical members have to be closely examined, as they may rot at ground level, be chewed to pencil thinness or have termite damage that turns them into standing sawdust.

It’s also important to consider current standards for dimensions, ventilation, fire safety and the like when thinking about converting an old barn to modern use, according to Ambrosiano.

“Many older barns were cow barns with low ceilings, narrow doors and small windows,” she says. “These are not always disqualifying factors, but they are critical items to consider in revamping old into new if you plan to use the barn for horses, for example.

To provide safe head room for a horse, one might need to raise the barn or simply dig out the floor to achieve safe clearance. Ventilation fans might need to take the place of windows, inward-opening windows may need to be reversed to an outside angle and doorways might need to be reframed to allow the breadth of a warmblood where a sedate, little Jersey cow once stood.”

The current use of the barn should always be considered during restoration. Fortunately, historic barns often lend themselves to new uses. Such is the case of the tobacco barn, which is becoming popular as a barn for goat producers.

“Farmers are good at adaptive reuse,” says Bill MacIntire, survey coordinator for the Kentucky Heritage Council in Frankfort, Ky. “The tobacco barn is a basic barn, essentially the same type of barn as an aisled barn. It can be modified for any farm animal.”

Our nation’s rural heritage is stored inside these old barns. They are more than wood and stone, shelter and storage—they’re invaluable, irreplaceable monuments of history; symbols of our cultural and ethnic heritage.

When you see one from the roadside or when you walk through its doors, remember it’s more than just an old barn—our farm memories live in its lofts and stalls, and our history remains strong in its timbers.

About the Author: Audrey Pavia is a freelance writer in California who specializes in animal topics.

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