

Historic barns speak of state's heritage

By LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, March 22, 2002

LAKE PLACID — Driving through the rolling hills and open fields of the Adirondacks, the sight of beautiful old agricultural buildings — some abandoned and disintegrating, like weathered remnants of ghost farms; some proudly preserved; and some part of still-working family farms — reminds us all that the North Country is more than just a sweetly serene getaway destination: it's a place where people have settled for centuries, tilling and sowing the land to make their living, like anywhere else.

Several initiatives have been taken in the last few years to save New York's historic barns. Prime among those initiatives was the creation of the New York State Barn Coalition in the fall of 1997. Today the group is made up of 13 state government and private organizations dedicated to architectural preservation.

"For some Barn Coalition members, the driving force is a concern for protecting the lands and buildings associated with agriculture, this state's primary industry," the group explains on its Web site. "For others, the barn is a beautiful but threatened building type that reveals much about New York state's origins and historic development. Yet others are concerned with rural economic development and the role that barns might play in its support."

The Barn Coalition's membership roll reads like a Who's Who in New York Preservation. The group's roster includes the New York State Office of

Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, the Preservation League of New York State, the New York State Historical Association, Cornell University's Graduate Program of Historic Preservation Planning, and Adirondack Architectural Heritage, the prominent Keeseville-based Adirondack preservationist organization.

First annual barn awards

Another initiative designed to encourage historic barn preservation is the Preservation League of New York State's annual "Barn Awards" program. The awards are given to those who have gone the extra mile to save a historic agricultural structure.

A couple of years ago, Diana and Timothy Fortune were awarded the Preservation League's Stewardship/Maintenance Award for their work on the Fortune Barn, located in Bloomingdale.

In 1997, despite one contractor's advice to "tear it down and build a new structure," the Fortunes made the decision to keep the late 19th century barn that stood on their 35-acre property north of Saranac Lake. Tim and Diana took their role as stewards of the family farm seriously and contacted Woodford Brothers, who advised them that the barn could be stabilized and put to a future use.

The barn was jacked up and cabled, new posts were installed, rafters repaired

and other work completed to make the barn structurally sound. According to Diana Fortune, "saving the structure for its historical value and beauty were the motivating factors behind this renovation. One day we may be able to use it as a working artist's studio."

Artist Tim Fortune owns and operates the Small Fortune studio on Saranac Lake's Main Street.

State supports barn preservation

New York's state government has found several ways to back barn preservation with financial support.

One of them is the New York State Barns Restoration and Preservation Program. The program provides applicants with up to \$25,000 for projects that preserve the historic character and extend the useful life of historic agricultural buildings. Applicants must provide from 10 to 50 percent of the project cost themselves.

About \$2 million was up for grabs in last year's Barns Restoration and Preservation grant cycle. About 100 awards were made. Among them were David and Rhonda Brunner, the owners of Asgaard Farms, artist Rockwell Kent's former home outside Au Sable Forks.

News about funding for this year's Barns Restoration and Preservation Program should be released later this spring. Applications will be made available at the end of September. They will be due near the end of October of 2002.

Another way in which the state of New York has provided economic incentives for barn preservation is through an income tax credit. The credit covers 25 percent of the cost of rehabilitating historic barns built before 1936. The credit has only one proviso: a project must not materially alter a barn's historic appearance.

A third channel for state support to barn preservationists — one which, unfortunately, does not yet reach as far as Essex County — is the Central New York Agritourism and Education Project. The program is designed to draw urbanites out to the farm for short tours or extended stays.

Farmers in Onondaga, Oneida,

On the Web

To learn more about historic barns and barn preservation:

- The New York State Barn Coalition has a Web site at www.crp.cornell.edu/projects/nysbc/
- A detailed National Park Service Preservation Brief, "The Preservation of Historic Barns," by Michael J. Auer, can be found at www2.cr.nps.gov/tps/briefs/brief20.htm
- The Barn Journal is an on-line magazine about historic barns and barn preservation that has been published since 1996. Find it on the Web at thebarnjournal.org.
- Barn Again! is a national program to preserve historic farm buildings sponsored by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. You'll find its Web site at bar-nagain.org

Madison, Cortland, Chenango, Otsego and Schoharie counties are eligible to apply for one of three levels of grant money to help them make their farm into educational tourist attractions.

Though not targeted specifically at barn restoration and preservation, the Agritourism and Education Project helps farm owners who have restored their ag

buildings to attract paying visitors to their property for day trips or overnight encounters.

For more information on historic barn preservation, contact:

- *The New York State Barn Coalition, c/o Preservation League of New York State, 44 Central Ave., Albany,*

N.Y. 12206, or telephone (518) 462-5658 or (607) 272-6510.

- *Barn Again!, c/o National Trust for Historic Preservation, 910 16th Street #1100, Denver, Colo. 80202, or telephone (303) 623-1504.*

Historic barn types: how to tell the difference

By Curtis B. Johnson and Thomas D. Visser

Because farmers have traditionally remodeled or combined barns over the years to suit their needs and tastes, it is often a challenge to recognize these basic types today. There are also other types of historic barns and specialty outbuildings found on many farms. Consider this guide a starting point.

English Barns (before the 1770s to 1900s)

Early farmers built their barns based on a traditional barn design that the original colonists brought with them from England. The basic design remained popular for smaller barns throughout the 19th century. Measuring about 30 feet by 40 feet with a pair of large, hinged wagon doors on the long side and unpainted vertical boards on the walls, the English barn usually stood on a level site without a basement. Inside, these barns were divided into a center drive and threshing floor (onto which the pair of doors open) with hay and grain storage on one side and animal stables on the other.

Yankee Barns (1820s to 1870s)

By the mid-1800s, many farmers adopted a new design for their barns which allowed them to house up to 10 cows and shifted the main entrance to the gable end. Inside, the center drive floor followed the ridge of the roof, with cow stables in a row on one side and hay storage on the other. Usually built into a hillside so that manure could be pushed into and stored in a basement below, these barns could be expanded by adding additional bays to the rear. To reduce winter drafts, farmers rejected traditional vertical board siding in favor of tighter board-and-batten, clapboard or shingle sheathings. They soon found that rooftop ventilators were needed for fresh air and windows for light.

Late Bank Barns (1870s to 1900s)

Those farmers specializing in dairying soon needed space for more than 10 cows, and many built huge multi-storied bank barns to house cattle and other livestock and to store

winter forage and grain for them. At the uphill gable end, a covered bridge or “high-drive” often provided access for wagons to the upper hayloft. Cow stables with rows of wooden stanchions are in the story below, with manure stored in the basement. Most late bank barns are sheathed with clapboards and have elaborate wooden ventilator cupolas, often topped by decorative weathervanes.

Round Barns (1890s to 1910s)

Although fewer farmers built round barns than other types, the distinctive shape makes it noteworthy. Like a late bank barn, this design takes advantage of gravity to move hay from the loft down to the cow stable and manure to the basement. Often a silo rises through the center. The design was meant to save labor, with all cows facing into a central feeding point, and for a time was promoted by agricultural colleges as a progressive way to house dairy cattle.

Ground Stable Barns (1910s to 1950s)

After 1910 government health regulations for the production and handling of fluid milk required new barn designs. Agricultural college experiment stations promoted the gambrel-roofed, ground stable barn design, which was widely adopted throughout the country. These barns housed cows on a washable concrete floor in steel pipe stanchions at ground level. The gambrel roof made an ample hayloft and could be erected with pre-fabricated trusses. Ducts from steel ventilators atop the roof provided fresh air for the cows, and long rows of small windows gave light to the stable area. A small milk house was usually attached to the building.

Thomas D. Visser is also the author of “Field Guide to New England Barns and Farm Buildings,” published in 1997 by the University Press of New England, Hanover, N.H.

This article has been reprinted from “Taking Care of Your Old Barn,” a Web site maintained by the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation. Visit the site yourself at www.uvm.edu/~vhnet/hpres/publ/barnb/bbtit.html