

The Historic Dimension Series

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Standing Tall: The Endangered North Carolina Flue-Cured Tobacco Barns

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"Those who seek the spirit of America might do well to look first in the countryside, for it was there that the spirit was born."

-Eric Sloane, "An Age of Barns"

For the traveler, rural, vernacular farm buildings create a regional awareness, a context that allows for recognition and acknowledgment of a distinct sense of place. These structures harken back to a time that seems to represent simplicity, decency and the intimacy of America's agrarian past. Barns tell this story, but they also tell more intimate ones.

For rural dwellers, it is not the romantic abstraction of national identity that these structures represent, but rather the site of their vibrant communities and every day hard work--their local heritage. These stories don't get written in the history textbooks, they don't get learned in the classroom; they are only told through the built environment. And it's those songs that are so eloquently sung by the barns that dot the fields. These barns aren't just utilitarian buildings or the inspiration for romantic projections, but they are also story-tellers and intimate landmarks of use and meaning.

This brief, in several distinct steps, examines the problem of preserving flue-cured tobacco barns, a regional vernacular structure determined in form by its role in the harvesting and curing of tobacco. By 1950, there may have been half a million tobacco barns in the state, one for every two acres of the crop. 60 years later, though the exact figure is unknown, perhaps no more than 40,000 remain. They are disappearing at an exponential rate. The distinct steps necessary to curb their complete devastation include:

recognizing these barns in the landscape, understanding their intimate cultural significance and broader historical significance, identifying the unique obstacles that stand in the way of their preservation, and finally, devising creative solutions and preservation plans.

Identifying Flue-Cured Tobacco Barns

The first step in ensuring the survival of these barns is the recognition of them in the landscape. Often, flue-cured tobacco barns stand right beside well-travelled country highways, offering a daily opportunity for passers-by to connect to the past. For them to tell their stories, their forms must be identifiable. Even among other types of tobacco barns, flue-cured barns have a distinctive vernacular grammar. Like every barn, though, their form is determined by their function. For tobacco barns in particular, the specific kind of tobacco and the particular curing process determines their design and form.

Flue-cured tobacco barns have been compared to the log cabin homes of early English colonists. They are generally sixteen foot square, but in some cases twenty or twenty-four foot square. Most barns were originally constructed of wooden logs, most often pine though, in some rare cases, oak. The logs, just like in colonial cabins, were most commonly oriented horizontally and the space between the timber was filled in with mud or mortar chinking. There are general considerations given to the measurements of tobacco barns, proportionate to the number



Fig. 2: A wrap-around shed obscures the shaft of the barn, but provides protection from the elements whether for farmers or their machinery.

of rooms, or the horizontal space between the poles, or the tiers. Their eaves generally ranged from fourteen feet to twenty feet and depended on the curing capacity desired by the builder.

The interior construction is far less important to the identification of these barns than their exterior features, as one normally experiences the barns from the outside. Also, the exterior has the most variety, demonstrating a wealth of information about the life of the barn. Sheds can cause the greatest variation in a barn's appearance, with some only covering the furnace end of the barn to protect the fire, and others covering all sides to create shade for the farmers and crew. These sheds do the most to alter the shape and silhouette of the barn, sometimes obscuring the core of the shaft, or the body of the barn (Fig. 2). These can give the barns a UFO effect, as Michael Southern has observed a barn appearing to be ready for takeoff. Nevertheless, sheds broaden the stance of the barn and change their visual effect. Generally, flue-cured tobacco barns have gabled roofs and doors on the shed side, mainly for the overnight fire attendant to have access to the stove and protection from the elements.

The siding varies from barn to barn and communicates a lot about the farmers' evolving ideas and the changing trends in the flue-curing process. Originally, log construction with mud insulation was the standard skin, but as technologies changed and incomes ebbed and flowed, other siding was patched onto the barns. Stucco and metal siding are the most common materials to see on the exterior today. In an interview, a local Caswell County tobacco farmer explained that it was much easier to cover roofs and sides with metal instead of having to go through the annual process of replacing individual cedar shingles and mud chinking. He explained that



Fig. 3: A barn's exterior is its most unique feature, showing on its very skin the many layers of its history and the changing ideas and needs of its owner.

there is a patchwork of metal siding on most tobacco barns because, through trial and error, individual farmers learned which metals wasted the least amount of heat. (Fig. 3) Often the best insulation was expensive, so they would create their own recipes that increased heat efficiency without costing too much capital. As Frank Fowlkes noted in an oral interview, there's an art to constructing these barns and their sturdy construction is a source of great pride to the inheritors of these family heirlooms.

Tobacco Barns as Witnesses and Story-tellers

The next step towards saving the flue-cured tobacco barns is recognizing their dramatic associative significance for the communities who built them. North Carolina is still recognized as the greatest producer of tobacco, thus these communities are far less rare than the decay and disappearance of these barns may imply. Though technologies and demographics have changed, tobacco remains a lucrative crop for North Carolina's rural counties, particularly those along the Old Bright Belt. These counties used to be the richest in the state, and though they now account for some of the poorest demographics, the identity and collective memory of these communities rely heavily on their tobacco producing history. No amount of national vilification of the crop can undermine its influence on their regional and local livelihoods nor the pride they take in producing the revered and desirable Bright Leaf Tobacco (Hart & Mather, 1961).

During harvest time, from mid-summer to early Autumn, tobacco harvesting and curing was an around the clock enterprise that required the efforts of everyone in the community, regardless of gender, race or age. In an oral interview, Mr. Dick Fowlkes, a lifelong tobacco farmer and buyer from Caswell County recalls the men cutting in the fields, the women and children string-



Fig. 4: Structural elements give these seemingly simple barns a complexity that illuminates their uniqueness and the mastery of their builders.

ing the leaves to sticks and the teenagers straddling the tiers to hang the sticks for curing. Older women would cook large meals, often Brunswick stew, and everyone would eat outside of the barns. Time was of extreme importance for the curing process, so eating schedules and locations were tailored to maximize production. Mr. Fowlkes even recalls that school schedules were organized around the tobacco harvest. This was their livelihood, encompassed by the saying that “children’s shoes were made of tobacco.” Cured tobacco was removed from pack barns, where it was stored after curing, and brought to market in late Fall, just in time to buy new shoes to protect children’s feet in colder weather.

Like most farmers, tobacco growers’ lives were spent working, so all socializing and fun was woven into tobacco-related labor. Barn raisings were major social events that involved twelve to fifteen men in the actual construction process, but the whole community would come out in support of the effort. This is where, Mr. Fowlkes explains, neighbors became family members. The same community effort was involved in the harvesting and curing process, during which neighbors would alternate helping each other. The work was so endless that farmers had to rely on their children, their wives and their neighbors. Everybody worked. The result was a close-knit, often egalitarian community. This was the site of men and women working together, as well as some of the first instances of racial integration. Mr. Fowlkes explains the irreplaceable values this community involvement instilled. He recalls that tobacco farming was “a sharing thing. During the Depression, it was very low economic times, you didn’t have money, so it was a family thing, a community thing...the union between country people--they were very close.”

Choppings or *cutting matches* were another source of fun and work. Young men would get together to *shoot the bull* and get a healthy dose of competition, sawing four



Fig. 5: Barns like this one were witnesses to the hard work and social atmosphere of the tobacco harvest. Today, they are story-tellers.

to six foot lengths of timber from the woods to fuel the wood-stoked fires. These events fed the flue in the curing process and also cleared more land for crops, but they were experienced as entertaining, social events.

Corn shuckings were further opportunities to play and interact while also working to feed cows and horses, and occasionally themselves. They would hide a couple of five-gallon jars of *home brew*, or corn whiskey, among the long rows of corn and whoever found it first would be able to *cap it*. Despite the fun and games Mr. Fowlkes describes within the times of extremely difficult work, when asked about his most important tobacco barn memory, he talks of an August afternoon in 1945. All day, as he watched the fire in his flue-cured tobacco barn, he had been noticing that the few cars traveling along the nearby road had been honking their horns. Finally, a friend of his, the driver of one of the honking cars, came by, lowered his window, and announced to Dick that World War II was finally over. Mr. Fowlkes experienced this incredibly significant historic moment with the flue-cured tobacco barn as his witness (Fig. 5).

The following years would be game-changing for the tobacco industry, with gas and oil supplanting the wood-burning flue technology, tractors being manufactured and purchased in unprecedented numbers, bulk-curing methods replacing the intimate relationship between the farmer and his barn, and mass-production of metal barn kits rendering these older barns obsolete. Industrialization and mechanization were brutal on the individual growers of tobacco and the tobacco economy, not to mention what it meant for the tobacco barns. Mr. Fowlkes looked solemn as he admitted that on that afternoon



Fig. 6: The fingerprints fossilized in this late nineteenth century tobacco barn remind the onlooker of the personal stories literally embedded in each barn's foundation.

in 1945, which was filled with so much joy and excitement, he had no idea what the Post-War era was going to mean for his family's livelihood.

In the summertime, condensing what lifelong tobacco grower Glen calls "thirteen months of work into three months," harvesters would spend more time at the barns than they did at home. These barns were the centers of social life even more than their churches. All of these barns elicit highly personal memories of community, family and childhood--falling in love when young men and women were able to spend the most time side by side than any other time of year, learning the art of the trade from their fathers and other community elders, the passing down of traditions, and the forming of intensely close communities that endured the Depression and the World Wars by supporting each other and sharing all they had.

Their fingerprints and names are pressed and scribbled into the foundations and the mud that fill the gaps between the logs (Fig. 6 & 7). And the stories of their families and their communities are tied to those structures. Every tobacco barn in the area built before the inexpensive, mass-produced *Buck* barns and modern replacements, tell the distinct stories of their builders and those who used them in the work that defined their lives. There is no one tobacco barn that can sufficiently represent the others. There is no "perfect example" that can exhibit the fingerprints of all the tobacco farmers that produced this number one cash crop that propelled North Carolina into national and international prominence, or the communities that came together to make it all possible.



Fig. 7: The name of Frank Fowlke's great grandfather, Warner Davis, is signed into the plaster of this pack barn.

The Broader Significance of 'Bacco Barns

The third necessary step for the salvation of these unique barns is acknowledging their broader significance. The construction of these barns were so sturdy and their significance so renowned that some barns have been disassembled and reassembled in other areas for cabins. Mr. Fowlkes explains that some "bacco barns" from Caswell County have ended up all the way in Greensboro and even the Appalachians. The log construction isn't just sturdy, it also represents a national heritage. He explains that logs are "how this country was settled." This shows that not only does their tobacco act as a source of pride but the construction of their barns do as well. They revere the craftsmanship and stability of their barns as an expression of the hard work and efficiency of their community, demonstrating the broader significance of these barns.

North Carolina tobacco culture has national and even international significance. Bright Leaf Tobacco was said to have been invented in Caswell County, North Carolina by accident in 1839, when Abisha Slade's slave, Stephen, accidentally fell asleep while entrusted with the overnight maintenance of the curing fires. When he awoke, the fire was nearly out, and thinking that he would be punished by the owner, he quickly stoked the biggest fire he could build. This produced the most beautiful canary yellow leaves that became desired internationally for its flavor and smooth chewing qualities in the earlier days of Bright Leaf production. Later, during World War II, while local growers were using the floor sweepings of the Pine Hurst Tobacco Company for their own cigarettes, they were growing and curing the leaves made into cigarettes for American soldiers abroad. The intimacy of the community that surrounded these barns does not supplant or undermine the national and inter-



Fig. 8: An air-cured tobacco barn in the Driftless Region of Southwestern Wisconsin.

national reach of their efforts. So what makes this article more than just an obituary to a disappearing culture and the buildings that represent it? What to do with the problem of the disappearing North Carolina Flue-Cured Tobacco Barns?

The Final Leap towards Barn Preservation

Identifying the inherent preservation obstacles and devising a plan that overcomes them is the final destination of this article. Barns across America are at risk of disappearing because of the modernization and mechanization of agriculture. Metal, pop-up barns are quickly replacing the earlier maintenance-intensive barns that say so much about the ethnic groups that built them, their original uses and the communities that formed around them. The more the barns slip away, the more their distinctive stories giving way to a homogenized, romantic American regret of the loss of a simpler time. This broader national tale is also represented in the barns, and offer a significance that adequately justifies barn preservation. The micro-histories that barns are profoundly capable of telling, however, are harder to preserve.

Flue-cured tobacco barns are threatened by several distinctive issues. As Michael Southern, senior architectural historian in the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office explained in an online article for Architects and Artisans, “historic preservation exists on the mantra of adaptive use” (Wilder, 2010). Many barns offer a variety of adaptive use potentials, mainly because of their open volume that lends itself to reuse in other agricultural capacities and for conversion into homes and non-agricultural commercial spaces. Their design allows for creativity and personalization in the conversion process; their character, purity and authenticity allow for a more genuine space that enhances one’s connection to the land and appreciation for the organic and interesting forms. Flue-cured tobacco barns, however, are the result



Fig. 9: One of the largest flue-cured tobacco barns in Caswell County is demolished by neglect, serving as a graphic and strangely beautiful reminder of its anachronism.

of their highly specialized use, which is often the enemy of adaptive use. They are also too small for most adaptive purposes.

Air-cured tobacco barns, in comparison, are much more adaptable spaces, larger in dimension and more generic in form (Fig. 8) (Rooney, 2004). Conversion and adaptive use requires imagination even in the more obvious projects, but flue-cured tobacco barns present a great many limitations to their potential for reuse. The reality of preservation is that, often, a structure’s ability to expose the patterns of the past cannot be saved unless the building can pay its own way. Barns like flue-cured tobacco barns have less reuse potential and much less “sex appeal” than others, such as the grand Pennsylvania Dutch barns or the aesthetically appealing and traditional Vermont dairy barns. Flue-cured tobacco barns, in comparison, have a much harder time ensuring their own survival. Though flue-cured tobacco barns have been successfully converted into workshops, artists’ studios, cabins and farm storage, these are not the sort of projects that get the barns the publicity that they need to register on the professional preservation field’s radar, nor do they excite the general public.

There are more threats to these barns than their neglect and the overtaking of environmental forces. In 1984, the Eastern North Carolina Chamber of Commerce implemented a “Carolina Clean Countryside Campaign” to encourage farmers and land owners to raze and remove abandoned and decaying agricultural buildings such as sharecropper shacks and flue-cured tobacco barns to increase the countryside’s appeal to new parties interested in investment and development (Oleck, 1987). The significance of these structures permeates the landscape even in their decay, adding them to the limited ranks of America’s rare ruins. In an age of exponential progress



Fig. 10: Kudzu and other natural elements reclaim and camouflage this barn west of Winston-Salem.

and future-mindedness, as well as over-saturation in urban areas, only rural areas have a pace of growth that allows buildings the time to go through the full range of their life-cycles. It's not just kudzu that threatens the abandoned farm structures that evoke a deep sense of place in these communities (Fig. 10), it's also the fierce future-mindedness of people with expressly financial interests. The only way to ensure their survival is to breathe new life into them.

There must be a call for private owners, who have infinitely more access to and control of the state of these barns, to acknowledge the heritage they have been entrusted with and either make the efforts themselves, or reach out to preservationists for resources. Everyday passersby must begin to recognize the history that's apparent in their daily lives and become active in the communication of these stories. Preservationist groups must find creative ways to incorporate these tobacco barns into the projects they are already involved in, whether it be Main Street programs that are proximate to the barns, or other rural development plans. Preservationists and private individuals must create barn preservation initiatives, whether from inside the community, with the help of Tobacco companies that may have interest in preserving their own histories, or from the outside, with the actions of developers or anyone else who can envision the potential rewards of curbing the exponential disappearance of tobacco barns from the landscape. Counties that have the highest number of tobacco barns also have a wealth of other historical resources, such as Caswell County, which has a notably extensive and distinctive cache of antebellum architecture (Little-Stokes, 1979).

There are many ways to create cohesive preservation plans that result in the holistic conservation of a range of resources, such as backroad barn trails and architectural tours. America currently has the perfect climate for these efforts, with a growing *back to the land* movement and



Fig. 11: Doodad Farm's charming conversion proves the endless ways these barns can be creatively translated into something personal and relevant.

community-based initiatives. These barns are the perfect venues for community gardens, outdoor classrooms, experiments in permaculture and agro-ecology, and other community gathering spaces and events.

The local Greensboro Doodad Farm offers a wonderful example of a sympathetic and creative conversion. (Fig. 11 & 12) Dean Driver and his family converted one of their farm's flue-cured tobacco barns into a music performance space. It's nothing fancy, but these barns never have been. Using all original and salvaged material, they built a stage with an overhanging shed roof, and opened up the Northern wall to accommodate double doors that lead into a room perfect for jam sessions. (Fig. 11) The stage serves as a wonderful performance space that will serve the community well. Though certain liberties were taken with the building's physical form, this new use is perfectly representative of the building's historical, social significance. This conversion conjures up the fiddle music and social gatherings that were an enormous part of these buildings' histories. The Doodad Farm conversion will ensure that these aspects of the barn's past will not be forgotten, while also adding a vibrant new chapter to the barn's life.

As the Drivers demonstrate, the key to conversions, and thus preservation, is imagination and creativity. Guest-houses, cabins, cottages and other rustic accommodations would be relatively easy conversions. These small barns could be the perfect hosts for rural offices, antique shops, artisan vendors and showcases of local crafts and fare.

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Fig. 12: With a table made out of a tree trunk, trashcans out of rusted, old barrels, and Christmas lights warming the stage, the new barn is properly quirky and inviting.

Tobacco Barns in Conclusion: Our Inheritance

Flue-cured tobacco barns are the result of regional building traditions and a vernacular grammar that communicates the full range of individual farmers' needs and ideas. Characterized by their specialized use, flue-cured tobacco barns have much to teach about the world from which they come, a world filled with fiddle music, hard work, and a strong sense of community. They introduce unique preservation obstacles, shown through their exemption from so much of the The Secretary of the Interior's Preservation Brief on Historic Barns (Auer, 1989). So many of the Secretary's concerns, characterizations and advisories narrowly miss the particulars of the flue-cured tobacco barn. In a way this is limiting and thwarting to preservation efforts, but in so many ways this creates a blank slate and endless opportunities for preservation and conversion.

Forty years ago, these barns started disappearing from the landscape, a landscape that was so defined by them for over a century. When he sees these barns falling down, Mr. Fowlkes thinks, "that used to be a good working man's street, a good working man's community." He explains, "something is being lost... You know, the country, the responsibility of people, the way they interact, the way they commit themselves to work. Neighbors used to be a pride, they used to be family."

These particular barns face a growing vilification of tobacco that threatens to make these communities' histories obsolete through selective memory. This cultural bias is just as destructive to the tobacco barns as the invasive and choking nature of kudzu. As Michael Southern observes, regardless of what obstacles these structures present, their preservation is crucial in showing, a "respect for past generations and what we've inherited. The recognition of what it means to our history and where we came from." (Ladd, 2012). These tobacco barns



Fig. 13: Barns were nestled together for convenience, one for every two acres of tobacco. At one point, there may have been as many as half a million in North Carolina, but now, only about 40,000 remain.

represent the lifestyle and livelihood of the communities that built them, as well as all of North Carolina, the state that relied on them. Intervention is essential to the survival of these barns, the symbols of and landmarks for a culture that is far too significant to be forgotten.

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Fig. 14: These barns don't sit in isolation, but along roads and within the same communities whose ancestors built them--daily reminders of a collective identity.



Fig. 15: The Davis/Fowlkes barns are beautiful examples of flue-cured tobacco barns. The Davis/Fowlkes family is the beautiful example of barn preservationists.

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