



Two centuries of mountain barn evolution

by Taylor Barnhill

Our rural mountain landscape is punctuated by a variety of barns, each with its own unique history. How did each of these barns come to be—and why? European settlement made its way into the Cherokee highlands in the late 1700s and barn traditions followed the influence of Pennsylvania German, Scots-Irish and other European traditions. In the austerity of remote farmsteads, however, barns adhered to the subsistence principle of “form follows function,” using the materials homesteaders had on hand. Add 200 years and you have southern Appalachian barn evolution.

The earliest barns were built of logs to house livestock and equipment and to protect grains and hay. It wasn’t until 1870 that the first new barn type appeared: a mud-chinked, wood-heated log barn to cure a new cash crop: flue-cured “bright leaf” tobacco. After 40 years of boom, followed by the inevitable soil depletion, and ten years of struggling markets, flue-cured tobacco was replaced by air-cured burley tobacco in the 1920s. Existing log tobacco barns and livestock barns were adapted to the promise of this new cash crop and morphed through half a dozen new shapes and roof types until the end of the federal tobacco support program in 2004.

Referred to by the names of the people who designed and/or built them, here are some prime examples of various forms in Madison County.



NOAH WALDROUP

Noah (Keb) Waldroup was born in 1887 on a remote spur of Bluff Mountain above the Spring Creek Gorge. His log-crib barn itself is not that old (1930s) but it illustrates the way an early pioneer barn built around 1800 might have looked. With no access to a sawmill, Waldroup split the boards from logs by hand into rough slabs, puncheons and split-oak shingles for the roof, floor, siding and stall doors. Half of the loft area is floored in thick slabs of chestnut bark.



THEODORE PLEMMONS

The most lucrative cash crop of the 19th century, flue-cured tobacco began its post-harvest journey in a classic and now rare type of log barn. This example rests on the Theodore Plemmons farm. The hewn log walls continued into the gable ends in “the old way” and were chinked with clay to hold in the heat from a rock wood-fired furnace on the dirt floor. Grapevines on the barn walls are remnants of the mountain tradition of “ranging” the heirloom blue grape.



CARSON ROBERTS

By 1877, the Civil War Reconstruction era had ended and mountain farms enjoyed a surge in the construction of large, log-crib livestock barns like the Carson Roberts barn. It is a classic mountain “bank” barn, built into the slope of the hill to provide an embankment upon which horse-drawn wagons and sleds could access the upper loft level for threshing grain and the storage of hay. Roberts and his daughter built the wood frame addition at the far end of the main barn for burley tobacco in 1924.



NELSON ANDERSON

D. Nelson Anderson was born in this log cabin in 1857 and built the large log-crib livestock barn in 1903. His grandfather bought this 600-acre farm in 1797, and it was still actively used at the time as a Cherokee trading route. The log-crib bank barn exemplifies the classic Appalachian livestock barns with large haylofts that were readily adapted in the 1920s for hanging the newly introduced crop, burley tobacco.



JOHN DANIEL SHELTON

John Daniel Shelton, who lived to be 99 years old, built his barns and farmed “by the signs.” This is an exceptional example of a barn built to make the transition from a log flue-cured tobacco barn to the new air-cured burley tobacco barn of the 1920s. The 100 near-perfectly round logs were carefully selected and felled by Shelton and his daughter-in-law Pearl, and dragged by horse team from miles away on Doe Branch.



BURGIN AND MOLLY MEADOWS

The Burgin and Molly Meadows livestock barn was built around 1923 and features many early 20th century innovations, including what appeared to be Spring Creek Valley's first gambrel roof, made possible by the introduction of metal roofing. Prior to this, the standard split-oak wood shingle roofing required a continuous steep slope to quickly shed rain and snow. This is not a true gambrel roof, however, since it is not freestanding and is supported by interior posts.

RUBIN CALDWELL

The Rubin Caldwell barn is one of many distinctive monitor roof barns in the Big Pine Creek Valley, with its signature vent roof, diagonal latticework and milled lapped-board siding. Caldwell built this bank barn in 1924 and was likely influenced by the 1918 barn of his neighbor, Claude Wild. According to family tradition, Wild built his barn using a "fancy" set of blueprints that he acquired as a salesman while driving around the region in his 1917 REO Speedwagon.




DELBERT SHELTON

This true gambrel roof barn built by Delbert Shelton has a roof shell supported by shallow trusses. Delbert did his shopping over the border from Shelton Laurel in Greene County, TN, where he discovered an open-span gambrel-roof barn that whetted the "engineer gene" shared by mountain farmers, cathedral builders and beavers. With his brother, Charlie Shelton, he crafted a duplicate just in time for summer haymaking in 1951.

JOHN BAIRD MCDEVITT

The John Baird McDevitt barn is the largest and one of the earliest barns in Madison County built exclusively for air-curing burley tobacco. Known as "Beard" to his friends, McDevitt acquired much of the Upper Brush Creek Valley, building this barn in the late 1930s. The barn is 80 feet long, 40 feet wide, and 37 feet high, the height allowing for at least seven tier-pole levels, higher than most burley barns in the county.



Today most of our barns stand in weathered yet graceful repose, loaded to the tier poles with the grandkids' discards. Based in Madison County, the Appalachian Barn Alliance is made up of an advisory board of passionate people who know and revere our region's barns and farmsteads. With the goal to identify and document historically significant and at-risk barns, ABA envisions a greater regional geographic scope for its future work, ultimately documenting barns and farmsteads in neighboring counties, including those of east Tennessee. 

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