

Heritage/History

# Before Tobacco, There Was the Appalachian Barn



Story by Taylor Barnhill | photos by Don McGowan

It's October 1870 and the livestock drovers along the Buncombe Turnpike choke through the dust behind their herds of hungry hogs, cattle, geese or turkeys. The stock stand at Barnard, only half-a-day's wagon ride from your mountain farm, is paying cash money for your corn and wheat. For the first time since the war, you feel the promise of prosperity. Your old log barn, built by your great-granddaddy, has succumbed to gravity, rain and snow. It's time to build a new barn, grand and state-of-the-art.

This scenario played out among farm families across Western North Carolina during the late 19th century, as a new economy emerged from the desolation of the Civil War. But you may notice something missing from this story: tobacco and the tobacco barns that now spread across the hills of this region. The first century of European immigrant history in the mountains was without commercial tobacco; farmers grew small amounts of tobacco for their personal use, requiring no specialized barn.

Settlement era farm families built sturdy livestock barns to house the animals, hay and grains that kept the family fed and clothed. Most barns were massive structures employing the age-old log building traditions of the Germans, Swiss and Scandinavians who first settled in Pennsylvania. These traditions were eventually adopted by the Scots-Irish who made their way down the Great Wagon Road along the Appalachians to WNC.



*The classic Wallins log crib animal stall with large hewn logs and half-dovetail notching.*

Now becoming more and more rare, these “pre-tobacco” livestock barns can be spotted among the older farmsteads by their telltale steep “A” gable roofs. Although they are covered in “tin” roofs now, these barns pre-date metal roofing and were once covered with hand-split, white oak wood shingles. To shed water and snow quickly, and to allow the shingles to dry, the roofs had to be steep.

The most basic component of these barns was the log crib: an enclosure of logs notched at the corners to serve as an animal stall. It sat at ground level, on a rock foundation, with a stall door just large enough for a horse, ox or mule. Most barns had at least two log cribs, while the largest had as many as six, which flanked a long hallway. The old tradition required that the logs be hewn flat on the sides. This removed the sapwood, which was vulnerable to rot and bugs. The corner notching of the 19th century was typically half dovetail, an elegant chisel-cut method that locked the logs in place while shedding water.



The log cribs were then tied together across their top logs with square hewn beams, or plates, which ran the length of the barn. The 1890 Stokes Ledford barn has more than a dozen of these eight-inch square timbers, each hewn from one tree, running the full 52-foot length. The six log cribs of this barn required 180 12-foot long logs, while the roofing required more than 8,800 oak shingles.

On top of the plate timbers, the voluminous hayloft was erected. The older barns utilized the “timber frame” techniques from northern traditions, in which square timbers formed the open framework. Timbers were connected by mortise and tenon joinery, in which a squared male tenon fit into a female mortise opening. The larger of these joints were locked into place with wood pegs. Finally, this massive loft space was sided with delicate strips of chestnut wood lattice, and poplar boards on the gable ends.



*Adapted to burley tobacco with horizontal tier poles in the 1920s, this timber frame barn loft floats above the loft floor within the beautiful latticework.*

All of this monumental work began with the selection of trees from the farm, cut by the signs of the zodiac, the dark of the moon, by hand and by horse. As you travel the back roads of our mountain home, watch for the antique barns from the century before tobacco, with their steep roofline, the hewn logs, and the fine chestnut lattice work.

*Taylor Barnhill is an architect and research historian with the Appalachian Barn Alliance, which will present the Steve Davidowski Trio March 19 at 3 p.m. at Mars Hill's Episcopal Church of the Holy Spirit. For more information visit [appalachianbarns.org](http://appalachianbarns.org). Don McGowan is a photographer and instructor through his company, EarthSong Photography.*