

Barn deconstruction aims to save Madison's history

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A local nonprofit dedicated to preserving Madison County's rural past hopes a unique tobacco barn will live long into the future after volunteers carefully tear it down one piece at a time. The Appalachian Barn Alliance plans to store salvageable segments of one of the county's few fire-cured tobacco barns until the historical structure can be reconstructed, ideally on the site of a long-planned heritage farmstead.

Appalachian Barn Alliance (ABA) research shows the Jarvis-Ray Barn, named for the families who constructed and tended to it for generations, has stood for more than a century in Mars Hill. Located on land near the intersection of Main Street and Parkway View Road in Mars Hill, the structure will move in pieces to space donated in the Bosch Glen community until a permanent reconstruction site is secured.

"I guess this will be the last time we gather around this barn here, but it is far from the first," Elaine Ray Thomas told ABA supporters at a different kind of groundbreaking Oct. 26. Before heavy machinery moved in to gently take down the barn's moety chestnut logs, Ray Thomas spoke with emotion about how the site served as a smoking point for Sunday school classes and a field trip destination for Mars Hill Elementary School. "It was a working barn, but it was also a playing barn."

Though the barn looked to be losing its battle with time and gravity, it actually survived a strong storm within the last five years that took down barn structures that Ray Thomas's father, James Hughie Ray, had built around it. "A man of music couldn't take it down," Ray Thomas said, relating words her father used to describe the 18th log barn. According to Ray Thomas, it was the only structure on the site when Ray and his wife, Lana Beckley Ray, purchased the acreage in the 1940s. The Ray property was one tract of a parcel included in one of the first land grants in



Taylor Barnhill pulls a large log out of the Jarvis-Ray Barn during its deconstruction. COURTESY EVAN PHILLIPS

the late 18th Century, according to the ABA's deed research.

For Taylor Barnhill, an architect and ABA's lead researcher, the barn was an historic find. His studies found that the Jarvis-Ray Barn likely came to life in the 1870s, backed by a post-Civil War stimulus program aimed at reviving an economy decimated after the war between the states.

Of the 10,000 or so barns in Madison, the Jarvis-Ray Barn is one of just 12 documented fire-cured tobacco barns within the county, Barnhill said.

"It's also unique because of the size of the barn," Barnhill said in his brief

presentation to the roughly 20 gathered on the clear, crisp fall morning. He pointed out a small opening, less than four-feet high, which served as the only access to the barn's interior.

The original builders used mud to chink between the logs, Barnhill said, a building technique that helped dry tobacco leaves by trapping heat inside the barn from fire burning in the stone ovens built beside it. "The fingerprints from those who built it are still a part of the history of this barn," Barnhill said.

Preserving evidence of common agricultural practices motivated the ABA to

preserve the barn. Developing a heritage farmstead where visitors can see the barn back in its 19th Century state is the nonprofit's long-term goal. "I don't know where it will be or when it will happen, but it will happen," ABA President Sandy Stovenson said of the long-planned site in her opening remarks.

"It's a testament to whom we came from," Ray Thomas said, speaking of both her family's roots and the shared agricultural roots of Madison. "My parents would be proud and I'm proud to share this gift from Mom and Dad to the people of Madison County."