

Tobacco Baskets

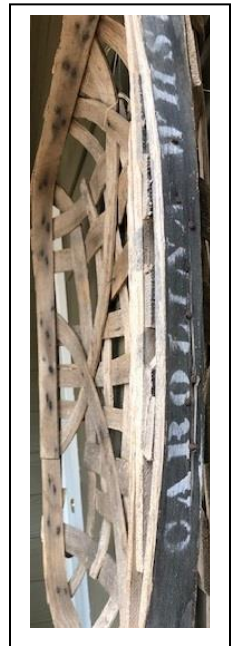
From your barn to the walls of your grandchildren's houses

By Cynthia G. McCabe, February 2021

December 2020 found me wandering Needful Things antique mall in Hendersonville, North Carolina as a way to get out of the house and get some exercise, safely. I am part of the “modern farmhouse” decorating trend and was delighted to find a tobacco basket, once a common utilitarian product.

The tobacco basket was stenciled with “CAROLINA WSHH” and “MADISON, N.C.” on its sides. My search for a genuine local tobacco basket for my collection was finally over. But, my curiosity was piqued about its origin which could be answered when I learned the meaning of the stencils.

Wanting to know more about the tobacco basket, I called Madison County library and eventually connected with Sandy Stevenson, the director of the Madison County Visitor Center and also the president of The Appalachian Barn Alliance Board (<https://appalachianbarns.org>). What luck to connect with her especially when she told me she could get some more information. Sandy contacted Ross Young whose idea it was to establish the ABA organization to preserve western NC's agricultural heritage (Ross is the Director of the Madison County Cooperative Extension). Ross said his family's Madison county barn was once full of tobacco baskets from a variety of sources and could only guess that the printing referred to the warehouse where the family delivered their tobacco for sale. Sandy also suggested Madison must refer to the town in Rockingham county as Madison County did not have any tobacco warehouses. She was right. Sandy asked that once I completed my research on the origin of the basket that I purchased to please share what I found with the ABA. So, here it is.....



Madison, in Rockingham county was a big tobacco town, located on a river. In 1896 it had six tobacco factories and three tobacco warehouses. The last of the warehouses was demolished in the late 1980s. Here is a bit more on the history of tobacco baskets I gleaned from historic newspapers of Rockingham, and Carolina Country.

The first baskets were made in Kentucky, but by the late 1800s, Yadkin county, North Carolina had six manufacturing plants and was "Tobacco Basket Capital of the World."

Tobacco baskets were part of distribution and marketing systems of the tobacco trade. Huge barrels known as “hogsheads” were originally used in the trade for export. These barrels held 1000 pounds of tobacco leaves and made inspections difficult and scams easy. Unscrupulous producers lined the bottoms with rocks, then came the inferior leaves, followed by the best leaves packed on top. Loose leaf tobacco auctions and private sales replaced the hogsheads method of marketing and R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company is credited with the idea of using large flat baskets to keep their tobacco clean in the busy, dirty auction houses. The better your goods looked at the auction warehouses, the better your prices.

The tobacco baskets (40" x 40") were made of oak that was split into strips. The oak strips were soaked in boiling soda water to make them bendable. The rim of the basket was fashioned with a double thickness

of the strips. The bottoms were woven by machine, and another machine helped with putting the bottoms and the rims together. Usually, the tobacco companies purchased the baskets, and stenciled their names on the baskets, but warehouses also purchased baskets as part of their services to farmers. By 1970, most of the tobacco making factories had closed. The market for tobacco was shrinking, and burlap wrapping of tobacco had replaced the use of tobacco baskets.

Check your barns for tobacco baskets that could be re-purposed as wall art for the popular “Modern Farmhouse” decorating style. Prices range from \$75 to \$300 depending upon the condition and can be sold on eBay, ETSY and Craig’s List, or at a booth at your local antique mall.



For further information:

<https://www.carolinacountry.com/departments/departments/feature-story/tobacco-baskets>

<http://tobaccofarmlifemuseum.org/>