

The Lofty Barn - A Farmer's Castle

Harford County's Rural Heritage



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Farmers who have passed away and working farms that have faded from production often leave behind an indelible imprint on the agricultural landscape – the lofty robust barn.

– THE AUTHORS

Introduction

Among the rolling hills of Harford County, it is still fairly easy to spot a barn – some still serving a farm while others have been deserted and are slowly succumbing to Mother Nature’s relentless incursions. With few exceptions, however, architects have had no role in designing these buildings as each is different and has its own personality being the product of the many farmers’ foibles and idiosyncrasies. In the words of the architectural community they are vernacular structures.

Over time, the barns have been enlarged, modified, torn down and rebuilt, having likely served different needs spanning several generations. The edifices of yesteryear, many of these hulking structures still evoke to the observant: simplicity, robustness, warmth, and texture. Often, it is their size juxtaposed against smaller outbuildings on the farm that first demands the attention of the viewer. Thereafter, eyes are drawn to the peeling paint or the weatherworn texture of the siding that has endured years of survival with little attention from its owners.

Inside, the mortise and tenon frame joints held securely by wooden pegs speak to an earlier century. The posts, beams, and bolsters with ax or saw marks have gracefully aged, tending to an amber color curiously polished by decades of rubbing hay – thereby creating a sense of warmth and feeling of welcome. Its construction shouts robustness, having survived perhaps dozens of decades despite animal antics occasionally inflicting damage.

Validating the impact barns have had on the consciousness of our culture are the sayings they have inspired. A few are “can’t hit the broad side of a barn” (reference to throwing a stone), “as broad as a Dutch barn” (a person’s physique), and “locking the barn door after the horse has escaped” (too little too late).

These unassuming landscape icons, which were indicators of a farmer’s wealth, make no pretenses to greatness, save their size and staying power, as they were built to serve relatively simple and well-defined functions and last to serve yet unborn generations. It was the place to store the seeds for next year’s planting, provide shelter for livestock, keep human and animal food safe, house farm implements, and provide a workplace for the farmer. Outside of his home, the barn was, and still remains, the farmer’s castle.

Preface

When the authors initially discussed the possibility of writing a book on Harford County barns, there was concern that not enough primary source material existed to support the effort. To use a couple of barnyard metaphors, the information appeared to be as scarce as hens' teeth and finding it would be as difficult as looking for a needle in a haystack.

Fortunately, an unexpected rich source was uncovered in the Register of Wills office in the Orphans Court Docket and General Entries books. This was augmented with Maryland General Assembly records, information from *The Maryland Gazette*, U.S. census, tax lists, and county newspapers, including *The Aegis*. Thus, it became possible to write a respectable account of Harford County barns and this history is chronicled in Chapters 1-4.

Nearly all barn books heretofore have been coffee-table picture books with a representative smattering of barn images from a region or from the United States. As barns were large it made sense that a large format book would better serve the project, so this 8½ by 11-inch size was adopted. The very mention of the word barn often conjures up a vivid mental image so the authors knew color photographs of barns in Harford County would be a necessary part of this effort.



With a digital camera close by, many road trips were taken making a methodical search crisscrossing the county looking for the next barn. One unfailing barn-finding rule that evolved was *all unpaved dead-end roads lead to a barn*. The location of one barn was made very easy as its owner posted a sign (see left). During this process, which began January 20, with snow on the ground and continued through early July, about a thousand barns were photographed. These were winnowed to several hundred and letters were sent to the owners requesting permission to publish. The results are found in Chapter 6.

During the research, a number of old black and white barn images were discovered, and by contacting others who had photographed, sketched or painted barns, this brought in more images. These are found in Chapter 7.

Appendix A is a list of carpenters and builders, some of which are known to have constructed barns. Appendices B, C, and D contain important information that was uncovered during research but did not easily integrate into the text. Lastly, Appendix E contains information about barn owners who requested their names, and in some cases the names of their farms be included.