



NEW HAMPSHIRE DIVISION OF HISTORICAL RESOURCES

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THE NEW HAMPSHIRE BARN SURVEY

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The New Hampshire Barn Survey began three years ago, when the NH Division of Historical Resources and the Historic Agricultural Structures Advisory Committee kicked off a farm reconnaissance inventory project.

The Advisory Committee was formed the year before, with the legislative charge to slow the loss of New Hampshire's historic agricultural structures – barns, silos, corn cribs, poultry houses and more – by helping property owners preserve these important cultural landmarks. The barn survey was initiated to determine how many and what types of agricultural buildings remained in the state

In the past three years, hundreds of barn owners from every part of New Hampshire have completed inventory forms, documenting the richness and diversity of the state's agricultural heritage, as well as its losses to time and nature. But the goals of determining what New Hampshire farmers built and what remains are elusive. New Hampshire's agricultural history does not fit neatly or quickly into a table or database.

However, survey teams in Franconia, Deerfield and Charlestown have tackled the task with a town-wide approach, completing surveys of barns and other agricultural outbuildings in all three communities. These town-wide surveys are invaluable, both for the data they contain and as an advocacy tool for preserving historic buildings, open space and agricultural landscapes. Although each town used the Division of Historical Resources' *Farm Reconnaissance Inventory Form* to record data, each project proceeded in a different fashion and uncovered distinctive historic properties and historical patterns of development. Their stories are inspirational and instructive for everyone hoping to preserve historic agricultural structures.



**WALLACE FARM (PIONEER FARM)
COLUMBIA, NH**

Photograph by Christine E. Fonda

Franconia

The Franconia Historical Society was among the first to contact the Division of Historical Resources for ideas on how to complete a town-wide barn survey. Franconia had a head start on its project: a town-wide survey of all types of historical properties completed in 1990 as a masters degree project by Gregory E. Thulander. Although its emphasis was not on agricultural structures, the 1990 survey did provide high quality black and white photography of most of the barns in town, along with their location and some historical information. Starting with the 1990 data, the historical society's barn survey team drove every road in town to make sure that no barns were missed and to determine what had changed in the past ten years. In all, the team identified 86 barns in Franconia. Then the site visits began.

The project's coordinator, Kris Holmes, stressed the benefits of a team approach for fieldwork; "one set of eyes is not enough." The survey team usually included three people; often a person "who knew a lot of people in town," a person with an agricultural background to identify structures, their uses and tools, and a person who recorded information in an organized and consistent way. Information was uncovered by investigating the barn and its landscape, by talking with the

property owner, and by checking the town history and old photographs – a tall order for just one person. With practice over a year and a half, the team devoted an average of three hours to every barn, including fieldwork and assembling the inventory form in its final format.

The historical society advertised the barn survey in the local newspaper to let property owners know what was happening. Although some property owners initially worried that the project was somehow related property to tax assessments (a common fear for any historical survey work!), the society found that most everyone was thrilled that the town's agricultural buildings were being cataloged. Recently, "many properties have rapidly changed hands in town," Kris Holmes reports, "and the farm family histories are being lost." These oral and written histories are now captured and recorded in one place with the farm's location, photographs and sketch maps as they exist today. For the town's smaller farms in particular, the Franconia Barn Survey may be the only place their histories are documented.

Charlestown

By acreage, Charlestown is not among the largest towns along the Connecticut River. But surprisingly, the hard-working Charlestown Historical Society found 166 barns in town, and documented 22 others that are no longer standing, but for which some information and photographs were still available. About half of these buildings were "horse-and-buggy barns" – small barns in the village built to house a horse, buggy and perhaps a cow or chickens. The survey offers a great deal of insight into this often overlooked type of agricultural building. As in other towns in the region, a good number of Charlestown barns are small English style barns that have been updated or added to over time.

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The Charlestown Historical Society was very fortunate to receive a grant from the Connecticut River Joint Commissions to defray project costs. Volunteers completed fieldwork and compiled and formatted the survey data; grant funding largely covered the cost of photography and producing the inventory forms.

The historical society started its barn survey by consulting the town tax list, but found that it didn't "begin to tell the whole story," according to the project's director, Joyce Higgins. "Barns or former barns will be listed as garages, sheds, houses, business, etc. It is necessary to look at every building in town on site to try to determine if it began life as barn." To unravel the barn origin question, the historical society also relied on two published town histories, oral histories, and the 1987 National Register of Historic Places nomination for the Charlestown Main Street Historic District. Even with these resources, the barns' dates of construction were difficult to establish; two or three conflicting dates of construction were often found for the same structure.

As in Francestown, the Charlestown volunteers found very little written history for most of the barns in town, but a great deal of public interest. The historical society thoroughly searched for historical photographs. "These photos provided visual evidence of barns' changes of use and design," explains Joyce Higgins, "They were extremely interesting, and of interest to everyone who saw them." For duplicating historic photographs, surveyors found Kodak's Photomaker "invaluable" and affordable: 48 cents for a 4x6 reproduction. (Photomaker and similar technologies are available at many drug and department stores.)

The barn survey is now available for the public's use in the historical society's archives room at town hall. To date, most of the visitors have been descendants of families who owned a particular barn at one time. Joyce Higgins feels that the most important result of the survey was to bring barns, and particularly "vanished" barns, to the forefront of people's attention. Without this increased visibility and public participation in the survey, many of the historical photographs and oral history "are lost forever." Despite the impressive total of 166 barns surveyed, the historical society remains convinced that many

more barns once stood in town. Joyce Higgins writes, "Another thing to consider is how many old houses have vanished. Those old houses usually had barns."

Deerfield

In Deerfield, a subcommittee of the town's Heritage Commission took on the task of surveying the community's barns. Beginning in November 2000 and finishing in July 2002, the four-member team found 80 barns and described their project as "a slippery task...twenty years earlier we would have had much more history."

As in Francestown, the team approach worked very well for the Deerfield project. Comprising the team was a representative from the select board, a photographer, a scheduler and chronicler, and a "reader" of old barns and their construction methods. Setting aside a four or five hour block for fieldwork, the team's goal was to visit four barns a day. About twenty-five weekend days were devoted to field visits, scheduled around good weather conditions. About one-fourth of the buildings were what the subcommittee called "legacy barns" – barns still owned by long-time families in town. The remaining three-quarters highlighted the need to record the town's agricultural history before it dissipated with time and change.

As expected in an agricultural community, the survey team recorded a large number of mid-19th century gable-front barns, commonly called Yankee or New England barns, as well as twenty to thirty connected farm complexes. Change may not have been as continuous in Deerfield as in a place such as Charlestown. Many outbuildings remained, such as a cheese aging building, cooper shops and milk houses, and many barns retained interior features such as silos, water tanks and floor scales, as well as a large number of outhouses. With interior inspections, the survey subcommittee also discovered some unique examples of adaptive reuse, such as a barn housing an organ repair shop and another being used as a pottery shop.

The Heritage Commission is already using its survey data for purposes in addition to documentation and advocacy. For holiday gift-giving, it produced a 2003 "Barns of Deerfield" wall calendar. Look for another in 2004!

The Survey Continues

A number of other towns and cities in New Hampshire are planning and implementing town-wide barn surveys, each based on the community's historical agricultural resources and planning needs. The Division of Historical Resources also continues to encourage individual property owners to complete *Farm Reconnaissance Inventory Forms*. They are available on the DHR's web site, at <http://www.state.nh.us/nhdhr/barnsurveyproject.html>, via e-mail to emuzzey@nhdhr.state.nh.us, or by calling the office at 603/271-3483. In order to make the barn survey data more accessible and quantifiable, the Division is developing a barn survey database. If you have an interest in barns and databases, please consider volunteering some time to this effort. The Francestown, Charlestown and Deerfield projects each provided a second copy of their survey to the DHR for this purpose.

Although the surveyors in Francestown, Charlestown and Deerfield all modestly maintain that their projects were not without error or omission, each expressed a great satisfaction, and perhaps even relief, in compiling so much historical data before change and development erased the physical record of their town's agricultural heritage. Several noted that the hardest part was figuring out how to start, whether by driving every road in town, consulting tax cards, or making property lists organized by streets. By the conclusion of the Francestown project, Kris Holmes reported that "I think it is important for people to know that they don't have to be experts in this field in order to carry out the survey. I have a 'barn' book list which I found very helpful and also found local contractors very willing to answer questions about construction features. After doing a little reading, and doing a few surveys, it all comes together."

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