



NEW HAMPSHIRE DIVISION OF HISTORICAL RESOURCES

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EXPLORING THE ROLFE BARN IN PENACOOK

New England's newly awakened love of old barns has spawned a lucrative traffic in barns and barn materials. In late August, 2002, the recent purchaser of part of the Rolfe farm in Penacook, New Hampshire, signed an agreement to sell a sturdy barn on that property to a broker from Newbury, Massachusetts, and applied for a permit to remove the structure. The broker, in turn, quickly resold the building where it stood to another barn dealer from Windsor, Vermont. By the time the second dealer had acquired title to the barn, he had already entered into a contract to deliver the structure to an undisclosed well-to-do buyer who wanted to add the building to a private compound, reportedly in a western state.

The historic Rolfe property lies in that half of Penacook Village that is part of Concord. Nearly two years ago, Concord passed a demolition review ordinance that calls for public notification whenever removal of a historic building is proposed in the city. As this review was triggered, neighbors were shocked to discover a threat to a



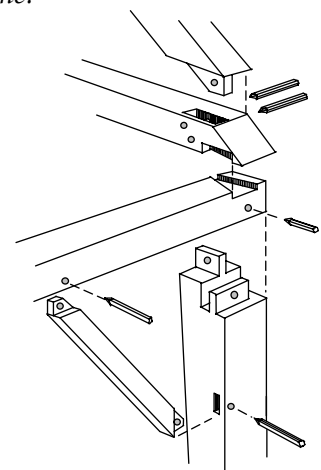
The Rolfe Barn, Penacook (Concord), NH
(Courtesy photograph)

generations. Built by Nathaniel Rolfe, the first white settler of Penacook, the barn has endured for over two hundred years.

The Rolfe barn looks like a large but ordinary New Hampshire barn until we step inside. As our eyes adjust to the darkness of this almost windowless structure, the eighteenth century begins to appear.

The first thing we notice is the size of the building. When we climb to the hayloft and look down the 85-foot-long axis of the barn, the immensity of the structure and the regular repetition of its framing members impress the mind with their powerful geometry.

Then we notice the scale of the great pine frame. Each of the twenty-six wall posts of the building is huge. The front and rear wall plates, tenoned to the tops of the posts, are made up of two solid timbers, each more than forty feet long, pinned together at scarf joints at the center of the building. In the manner of the best buildings of the seacoast, each member of the frame has been smoothed with an adze after being squared with a broad axe. But this is a barn, not a merchant's dwelling. Such care in finishing the frame bespeaks an expenditure of time and money. This investment proclaims the Rolfe family's determination to remain rooted in the soil of Penacook and to bequeath a staunch legacy to the generations to come.

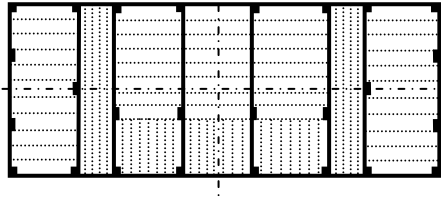


Corner framing of the Rolfe Barn

(Drawing by James L. Garvin)

Then we notice the pervasive evidence of the sawmill. All the sheathing boards are sawn on a reciprocating or "up-and-down" water-powered mill, as are the diagonal braces. This is typical of an eighteenth-century building. But the girts that link the posts at the hayloft level are also sawn, as are the purlins to which the roof boards are nailed, and the diagonal wind braces that keep the roof from racking in the wind. This is not typical. Then we remember that a sawmill had stood at the present-day village of Penacook, about a mile from the Rolfe barn, since 1760, processing the ancient stands of pine that grew thickly along the banks of the Contoocook River.

The eye adapts quickly to the dark interior, but the mind adjusts more slowly. It takes time to comprehend the absolute symmetry of the great frame on each side of a central axis. It eventually becomes clear that this building was planned as a matched pair of barn frames of the type that New Englanders knew in the eighteenth century. This cavernous building is contrived so that the two mirror-image frames reach out and link across a central bay, becoming one structure of immense capacity.



First Floor Framing plan of Rolfe Barn

(Drawing by James L. Garvin)

Each half of the building is an example of the type of structure known as an English barn. The typical English barn is a rectangular structure, with its doors on the long sides. A central driveway passes through the building from front to back.

Haylofts or platforms create an upper level on each side of the driveway. Stables for horses and cattle are enclosed below the tons of insulating hay. Unlike later barns, eighteenth-century English barns have few windows and no ventilating cupolas on the roof.

It is finally clear what this building is. The Rolfe barn is a complex artifact passed down from the 1700s. It is a testament to faith in the future, made by a family more than two hundred years ago. It is that family's response to the bounty of the rich alluvial lands at the confluence of the Contoocook and

Merrimack Rivers, built to provide twice the capacity for hay and livestock as the average New Hampshire barn of the time. It is that family's investment of time and skill in felling the huge pines that had stood nearby for centuries, in hewing those trees into massive timbers, in rallying the community to raise the largest and heaviest frame yet seen on a Penacook farm, and in cladding the mighty skeleton in thousands of feet of boards sawn in the nearby mill. It is that family's careful stewardship of their inheritance, protecting the building from the decay or fire that claimed so many New England barns over the years.

The barn's form and fabric embody the three great themes of life of the eighteenth-century settler in the upper Merrimack Valley: the fertility of the soil, the wealth of the forests, and the power of water to run the machinery of a nascent industry. The barn stands mute, but its lineaments tell an eloquent story to the awakened eye.

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