

Oddfellows, orphans, asylums and the Ohio barn

Barns were such an expected part of every homestead along every roadway in Ohio that, although their importance was understood, they didn't hold any special place in the minds of early historians and preservationists. Many homes were deemed important for long-term protection because of the historic importance of a former resident. The barn's significance was typically overlooked even though barns played a key role in the life of the important Ohioan formerly inhabiting the homestead. Though an essential part of daily experience, it seems to have been taken for granted. The barn's presence and functions formed a part of the character and substance of these people.

The same goes with the many and varied institutions and industries that played an important role in Ohio's development. Since everyone had need of horses for transportation, field work, and other demands of the day, barns were a part of it all. Early fire departments had stables, barns and livery for their teams as did any business that used horses or mules for transporting goods or doing hard labor on some particular project like digging canals, building roads and bridges, mining coal, running gristmills, factories, breweries, and other enterprises. Expanding stagecoach roads and growing transportation demands required storage for feed and housing for the ever-present horse. Military reservations, the

National Guard and police training academies had housing for animals as well as barracks for soldiers and trainees. All had need of teams and barns for housing and caring for these animals.

Numerous institutions including asylums, county homes, orphanages, correctional facilities, agricultural colleges, deaf and blind schools, fairgrounds, convents and seminaries, and various communal settlements like the Shakers, Zoarites and others had barns and farm buildings as basic parts of their infrastructure. The Masons, Oddfellows and other service organizations built retirement facilities which included barns and many outbuildings.

For example, veterans of the War Between the States built a retirement home in Sandusky and the Old Soldiers and Sailors Orphan's Home in Xenia. These special places served the veterans and the many young people left without families following that lengthy and devastating conflict that we call the Civil War.

Nearly all of these institutions were developed as self-sustaining enterprises that produced all of their own food and materials. These institutions were surrounded by farm land where they raised crops, grazed livestock, grew gardens and met their daily needs. These institutions were typically graced with large architectural wonders that served for administration, housing and a large food service. A power generating facility was commonly located right on site. Surrounding all of the large institutional structures was a full complement of farm buildings — horse barns, dairy barns, poultry barns and piggeries. A smoke house, root cellar, springhouse, blacksmith shop, windmill, and greenhouse were common parts of the cluster of buildings. Structures for wagon and buggy storage, carpentry projects and other regular activities were also a mainstay on these vast and sprawling grounds. It was not uncommon that the entire complex

was surrounded by lakes, flower gardens, extensive lawns, a veritable arboretum of specimen trees and often a cemetery with the gravestones of patients, residents or nuns and priests.

All of these buildings were constructed with the same local materials that were used to build the nearby homesteads. The framing was done with the timbers hewn from the primeval trees of Ohio's early landscape. Bricks were made from locally-mined clays and often fired on site. Stone was cut from nearby quarries or shipped in by rail. These institutions were an enormous part of Ohio's rich heritage.



Above: The Athens Asylum was established in 1868 as a self-sustaining institution for the mentally disabled. The second dairy barn was saved from the wrecking ball in the 1970s and serves today as the Southeastern Ohio Cultural Arts Center. At one time, the facility held over a thousand acres including orchards, vineyards, truck gardens, grazing land on the slopes and crop lands in the flood plain. The dairy herd was at one time ranked the finest in the state of Ohio.

Right: The horse barn at the Athens Asylum was built in 1900 to house the Belgians and Percherons that were used to plow the fields and harvest the crops at the state hospital. The barn survives and is currently used as a daycare center in Athens. The corn crib was demolished in the 1990s.



St. Joseph's was the first Catholic church west of the Allegheny Mountains. The "cradle of faith" was begun as early as 1808. Located near Zane's Trace in Perry County, the church attracted German, Irish and Alsatia settlers. It was established with a 320-acre adjacent farm. Some of the farm buildings remain in use and beef cattle are grazed on the farm. At one time, the facility was accompanied by a convent. An extensive cemetery on the grounds serves as the burial site of many priests and nuns.

Below: The large slate-roof dairy barn and loafing barn at St. Joseph's with cattle in the doorway.



Left: The barn at Mount Aloysius in Perry County. Mount Aloysius was an orphanage for mentally disabled children and serves a similar capacity today without the self-sustaining farming operation. A cemetery near the barn has dozens of markers with the names of nuns. The oldest is a marker for Sister Mary Adelgoode, the first of the Mother Magdalen Damon's Daughters to die in the United States in 1879.



Above: This barn at the Soldiers' and Sailors' Orphans' Home near Xenia is U-shaped, with the central section not long like the end sections. The barn stands in disrepair and disuse while the administration building and other structures have been converted to a religious retreat.



Right and below right: Ohio's fairgrounds steward a number of Ohio's historic barns. This large round barn graces the Fairfield County Fairgrounds in Lancaster. The building below it was built in 1909 and has more than 40 dormers. It houses the needleworks, arts and crafts exhibits during the Fairfield County Fair.



Left: The slate roof on this building hints at the old timber-frame structure beneath the metal siding. It still serves as a livestock barn on the Perry County Fairgrounds in New Lexington.

Below: The barn at the Oddfellows Retirement Home.



Left: The Perry County Home and its barn still stand in New Lexington across from the Perry County Fairgrounds. The gambrel roof barn with dormer windows and a pair of cupolas remains in good condition and sports a recent paint job. The old county home now serves as an assisted living facility for the elderly.

Right: The Fairfield County Children's Home barn in Lancaster is currently used for storage. Its adjacent farm structure was recently demolished to make room for a new recycling center. The old administration building still stands and serves as headquarters for Fairfield County Children's Services.



Unfortunately, all that remains of a good many of these institutions are photographs and written descriptions of their majesty and elegance. Some have survived and have even been recognized for the history they represent. Most often only the administration building and some of the housing remains. Some stand empty and some have been converted to meet current needs. Barns were abandoned first as agricultural practices were curtailed on site. Groceries and other needs of the institutions were increasingly provided by growing agribusiness interests. Eventually large producers lobbied the governor and state legislature until farming was banned on state institutions. Neglected farm buildings fell into ruin.

In some cases, however, old barns and farm buildings survive to the present day. Occasionally they too have been recognized as valuable buildings and, sometimes, as valuable historical artifacts of an earlier Ohio. Such a rich and extensive heritage of institutional farm structures is worth searching out for remnants. Each county would do well to inventory remaining barns on family homesteads. But it would also serve the interests of Ohioans for each county to inventory the remaining agricultural buildings that once served as an integral part of the many institutions and organizations that built Ohio and the largest agricultural production center in America.

— Story and photos by Tom O'Grady