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## Become a Barn Detective (the basics) . . .



*Many people think the Gambrel roof barn is the most picturesque style. The barn in this charming winter scene is on the Francis Oehlke farm on Manning Avenue South in Woodbury. Photo courtesy of the author.*

*By Bill Schrankler*

Bill Schrankler is a Woodbury Historical Society board member and retired St. Paul Public Schools principal. He is the author of *Shadows of Time... Minnesota's Surviving Railroad Depots*, published in 2013. Bill has been instrumental in documenting and helping save Washington County historic structures, such as the Miller Barn (see page ?). He wrote this article to provide the reader with rudimentary tools to look at barns in a different light.

The Washington County countryside is populated with large structures which we call barns. But few know the story behind these behemoth buildings that dominate the farmstead.

The word "barn" is derived from two Old English words "bere" for barley and "aern" for enclosure. The words merged to become "bereaern," then with the passage of time morphed into "beretun" and finally shorten to barn. Enough of the etymology; why are they shaped as they are? and why are they usually painted red?

### In This Issue . . .

. . . we trace the early railroads in the southern part of the Washington County and learn about efforts to restore our oldest school building.

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As the country was settled from east to west the architecture of barns reflected the culture of the European settlers. English threshing barns were familiar in New England and Dutch barns in the Mid-Atlantic States.

Most of the barns in Washington County fall into one of four styles or combinations thereof. These are the Gable Barn, Gambrel Barn, Bank Barn and Monitor barn styles.

*BARNs*-- Continued on page 6

**The Gambrel Barn** (Dutch Style Barn, shown on page 1), is defined by the double slope of each side of the roof, with the lower slope usually steeper than the upper roof. This type of barn has a maximum of attic space. The Gambrel Barn is the most numerous barn style in Washington County and, in the view of some, the utmost picturesque

*Right: Gable barn on the former Ted Oehlke farm in Woodbury.*

*Below, Typical Bank barn with entrances on two levels, on the Fromer Heintz farm, Brookwview Road, Woodbury.*

*Photos courtesy of author.*



**The Bank Barn** is a unique two story building in that it is accessible at ground level on each floor. This is accomplished by building the barn on the side of a hill or using a ramp, allowing one entrance area at the top of the hill and the other at the bottom. German and English Settlers brought this design to the New World. Banks Barns cost 20 to 30 percent more to build than either the Gable or Gambrel style.



*Left The octagon Round barn, that was in Afton on Neal Avenue South. Photo by Elroy Quenroe, 1972, courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*



**The Gable Barn** has a roof that is triangular in shape, like the letter “A.” Most of the gable barns roofs are steeply pitched to accommodate the heavy snowfalls of our region. These barn are the most economical to construct.

**The Monitor Barn** has a raised central section with a pushed up roof supported by knee walls (short walls) on both sides. This configuration is trademarked by having three noncontiguous roofs. Its unique architecture can provide for more windows and ventilation. The down side of this type is the loss of loft space



*Above: Monitor Barn style (from a catalog). If you know of a Washington County barn in this style, please contact the author, who would love a local example.*

**The Round Barn.** A fifth and rare style of barn is the “round” barn, which may be octagonal, polygonal, or circular in plan. The first round barn in America was designed and built by George Washington. The plan was promoted by agricultural schools as being more efficient and cheaper to build as well as more resilient to Midwest thunderstorms. A tongue-in-cheek advantage is that *mice couldn't survive in round barns because there were no corners in which to hide.* The last remaining round barn in Washington County, located in Afton, fell victim to a fire set by vandals in the 1980s

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## Dating Barns Is an Art

It is difficult to date barns through the usual means of research. Barns built in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries usually were not required to have building permits or to file plans. Indeed, most of the barns in the county were constructed without formal drawings, relying instead on the memory and skills of few farmers who became known “barn builders.” Large barns often required more than a single summer to build. Teams of “barn-raising” neighbors would construct the barns during the brief time each year when work in the fields was at a minimum. The completion of a barn was celebrated with partying including barn dances.

Dating of a barn requires some forensic skills. Other than relying on the fading memories of senior citizens, a reliable dating method is the examination of the nails used in the construction of the barn. Thomas D. Visser states that “Nails provide one of the best clues to help determine the age of historic buildings, especially those constructed during the nineteenth century, when nail-making technology advanced rapidly.” The following drawing from Visser’s publication provides an excellent guide for this technique. Type A and wire cut nails are found in Washington County barns.

	Hand-wrought nail, before circa 1800
	Type A cut nail, circa 1790s-1820s
	Type B cut nail, circa 1810s-1900s
	Wire nail, circa 1890s to present

## Special Joinery

Joinery is the art of joining timbers with wood links. This is called precise mortise and tenon joinery. It is the strongest and most pleasing connection for post and beam barns. It is even more aesthetically beautiful when secured with wooden pegs. Wooden pegs have the advantage of contracting and swelling at same rate of the wood beams and post. Wooden pegs are always tight and never rust.



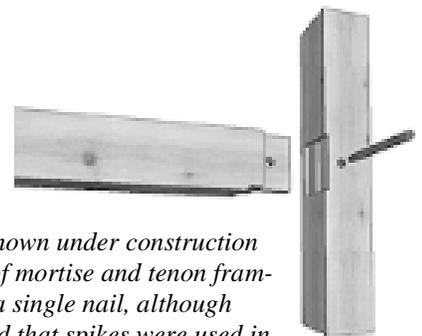
## Why Barns Are Painted Red

The earliest barns in New England were not painted at all. Paint was expensive and money was scarce. By the end of the War for Independence, the farmers realized the need to protect their barns from the elements. Using Yankee ingenuity, they devised a formula for an inexpensive paint. By mixing linseed oil, skimmed milk, lime, and red iron oxide, a rusty tinted paint was created.

The paint also has a serendipitous effect. Barns painted with this homegrown recipe kept the buildings warmer in the winter because of the darker color. The advantages of the red paint quickly spread throughout the country and have become the hallmark of American barns.

The next time you catch sight of a barn, remember that barns may have different architectures, but each was built with purpose and common sense to protect the crops and allow the animals to survive. This in turn provided for the survival of the early farmers.

Mortise and tenon construction with wood peg.



*The Miller barn is Woodbury, shown under construction below, is an excellent example of mortise and tenon framing. It was constructed without a single nail, although upon inspection the author found that spikes were used in later years to reinforce the joints. Photo of barn raising by Barb Jankovich, 1922, in author’s collection.*

The quotation and other images are adapted from Thomas D. Visser, *A Field Guide to New England Barns and Farm Buildings*, University Press of New England, 1997.

MORE ON THE STORY

## *The Saga of a Barn Gem*

### **An Endangered Barn in Woodbury**

By Bill Schrankler

The origin of the City of Woodbury can be traced to its early beginnings immediately before the Civil War. From that time until after World War II the area's economy and social life rested almost entirely on agriculture. Woodbury never had a railroad, a bank or even a grocery store during this period. It did have plenty of barns.

The Woodbury Heritage Society (WHS) has the opportunity to preserve and restore a barn that would serve as an exhibition space for early and large farm and city equipment from our past. The city-owned barn is located in Valley Creek Park near Valley Creek Road and Settler's Ridge Parkway.

That barn is the August Miller Barn, built in 1921-22. It combines several of the styles discussed in the previous piece about being a barn detective. It has a well-defined gambrel roof, it is a bank style barn resting on a hill, and it was constructed using post and beam techniques. There was not a nail used in the frame work, the joinery was secured with wooden pegs – although on closer inspection I found that spikes were added in later years to reinforce the joints. The Miller Barn is an excellent example of the early barns of Woodbury.



*The August Miller barn is now inf Valley Creek Park, near Valley Creek Road and Settler's Ridge Parkway in Woodbury. Photo from author's collection..*

### **Preserving the Miller Barn**

The WHS became aware of the barn six years ago and began a journey to preserve and restore it. The city government's enthusiasm for the project has waxed and waned over this time. There were suggestions made that the barn should be demolished. The barn is deteriorating and must be protected from further damage.

The barn is strictly sound; the most immediate needs are for reroofing and residing. To this end the WHS has embarked on a project to raise funds to "Save Our Barn". Members testified at a meeting of Parks and Natural Resources Commission on May 3, 2016; the commission voted unanimously to recommend to the City Council to grant the WHS four years in which to raise the funds to stabilize the barn. The Council considered the recommendation and approved it on a 4- to-1 vote on May 18. The WHS has embarked on a fund raising campaign to raise the necessary monies. The project will move forward as joint partnership with the City of Woodbury.

It is envisioned that the August Miller Barn will become a historical icon celebrating Woodbury's heritage and those families and people who founded the community and a site to educate the young and old on Woodbury's history.



*Above: The barn builders take a break in front of the nearly finished August Miller barn. Right: The barn in its original setting on the Miller farmstead near Valley Creek Road I Woodbury. Undated photos by Barb Jankovich, in author's collection.*



