



Frequently Asked Questions: Barns

1. Why save barns?

Why are barns important? Barns and agricultural buildings help tell the Massachusetts story over the last several hundred years. From carriage barns in city or town centers, tobacco barns in the Connecticut River valley, cranberry screen houses on the Cape, to dairy barns across the state, they help us read the landscape and connect us to the life and work of our communities through the generations. Most barns, especially those of timber frame construction, are well-built and have open floor plans that make them useful today for farming or for a wide variety of new uses. Yet, barns are disappearing at a rapid rate from the landscape. With some planning, patience, and creativity, older and historic barns can continue to serve their original function or be put back to use.

2. Why is knowing the history of my barn important?

Knowledge about when a barn was built and how it evolved will help guide and inform any work that is done to it. The character of any building depends partly on its age and partly on its distinctive features, which will be important to keep. Features that represent later alterations may be less important, or in some cases, may have taken on a significance of their own. But either way, they provide the physical history of when changes were made to the barn, and suggest what should be retained when work is done.

3. How do I find out the age of my barn?

Most of the information may be contained in the building itself. Since building techniques and materials changed over time, and many outbuildings were enlarged at least once, barns can often be “read” by looking carefully at their construction. For instance, while timber-frame (post-and-beam) construction continued longer in barns than in houses, “scribe-rule” framing (with individually fitted joints) was replaced by “square-rule” framing with interchangeable joints after 1830 in most areas of New England. At around the same time the New England barn, with lengthwise aisles and the wagon entry in the gable end, began to replace the English barn plan, which had the large wagon doors in the long sides. Some of the resources listed below give good explanations and illustrations of the evolution of barn design and construction.

Local knowledge and documents such as town histories, tax records, and Mass. Historical Commission historic properties survey forms that have been prepared under the guidance of the local historical commission may also contain information about when a barn was built or enlarged. Additional clues are often provided by historic maps, old newspaper articles, and oral histories.

4. Where can I find someone to repair my historic barn?

The following is a list of online directories of preservation contractors and consultants. Most are searchable by keyword and/or contractor specialty. This list is a place to start—it is not intended to be comprehensive, nor does the inclusion of a business or organization in any of the listed resources serve as an endorsement. As with any contractor, be sure to check credentials and get references.



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- *Preservation Massachusetts Consultants Directory:*
<https://www.preservationmass.org/preservation-directory>
- *Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation's Restoration Services Directory:*
<https://www.cttrust.org/directory>
- *See also their barn restoration directory:* <http://www.connecticutbarns.org/3942>
- *Historic Windsor Inc:* <http://www.preservationworks.org/directory.shtml>
- *Marlborough Historical Society:* <http://www.historicmarlborough.org/Restoration.html>
- *Maine Preservation Directory:* <https://www.maine Preservation.org/preservation-professionals>
- *Greater Portland Landmarks Maine Restoration Directory:*
<http://www.portlandlandmarks.org/preservationdirectory>
- *New Hampshire Preservation Alliance Preservation Directory:*
<https://nhpreservation.org/directory>
- *Preserve Rhode Island Preservation Directory:* <https://www.preserveri.org/preservation-services-directory>
- *Springfield Preservation Trust Contractor Directory:*
http://www.springfieldpreservationtrust.org/index.php/resources/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=26&Itemid=39
- *Preservation Trust of Vermont Restoration Directory:*
<http://ptvermont.org/vermontrestorationdirectory/>
- *Slate Roof Central:* <http://jenkinsslate.com/>
- *HistoricPreservation.com "Preservation Marketplace":*
<http://www.historicpreservation.com/index.html>
- www.PreservationDirectory.com
- *Restoration Trades Directory:* <http://www.restorationtradesdirectory.com/>
- *Traditional Building Product Database:* <https://www.traditionalbuilding.com/>
- *TradWeb:* <http://restorationandbuildingservices.com/>

5. I have been told my barn might be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. What does that mean?

For a privately-owned barn that is not used for commercial purposes, listing in the National Register is an official recognition of the building's importance in architecture and/or history. As a rule, however, National Register listing for a privately owned building does not make it eligible for any public funding, and would not place any restrictions on what can be done with or to the building. National Register-listed barns that are owned by municipalities or non-profit organizations, however, may qualify for grants, when available, from some funding programs such as the Massachusetts Preservation Projects Fund administered by MHC and Community Preservation Funding in communities which have adopted the Massachusetts Community Preservation Act. Owners of barns used for rental or other income producing purposes that undergo substantial rehabilitation may be eligible for a 20% federal tax credit on the cost of a certified rehabilitation. Contact the Massachusetts Historical Commission (MHC) for details.



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6. What are Barn Condition Assessments and Preservation Plans?

Barn condition assessments are reports made by professionals who evaluate the condition of your barn by looking at its structural members, siding, roof, foundations and interior spaces and determining first their history of use, their materials, and present physical condition. When all the conditions are known the professional who is often a timber framer, architect or preservation contractor will then identify the work to be done to preserve the barn and arrange it by priority. With work listed by priority, the owner can then schedule work in a logical order that will avoid re-doing tasks, and will take care of the biggest threats first. The condition assessment also contains an estimate of the cost of the work items – often provides alternatives to their accomplishment – so that owners can budget for work and also have a basis from which to evaluate competing prices from contractors.

A preservation plan for a barn takes into consideration its long term viability. It builds on the condition assessment, current use, funding needs and sets out a plan for its future by recommending preservation, rehabilitation, restoration or reconstruction activities. It will study alternative uses, funding sources, and will project the financial viability of the barn associated with alternative uses. Based on this information the plan will make recommendations for the long term life of the building in its larger context.

7. I want to sell my old barn. Where can I advertise it?

The following websites post ads for people looking to buy and sell old barns:

The Barn Pages – <http://www.thebarnpages.com/>

National Barn Alliance – <http://www.barnalliance.org/>

The Barn Journal – <http://www.thebarnjournal.org/>

8. Our modern farming machinery will no longer fit into our 100-year-old barn, so we are considering tearing it down. Do you have any advice on how to save this barn?

This is a common problem that farmers face. We would recommend that you get a copy of a National Trust for Historic Preservation publication called, Using Old Farm Buildings: adaptations for new agricultural uses, available at Barn Again! Moreover, Barn Again and the Barn Journal feature articles on altering trusses, changing opening dimensions and floor levels that farmers have used successfully to adapt older barns to modern agriculture. The economics of adaptation vs. construction weigh heavily in favor of adaptation, so it is worth the time to research techniques.

11. Where else can I find information about preserving barns and rural landscapes?

Lots of information from the National Trust for Historic Preservation about barn rehab projects – especially helpful are the publications and resources, with booklets on foundation, siding, and roof repair, and more: <http://www.preservationnation.org/information-center/saving-a-place/rural-heritage/Barns/#.U7Lk3PIdU1I>