

Dairy History and Dapper Designs: Part 2 - Exploring the OAC Dairy Barns

Written by Emma Rutledge



In this month's blog post, we have an article written by Emma Rutledge, who is a history student at University of Guelph. Experiential learning is a great way for students to get out of the classroom and develop real-world skills informed by their studies. OBP was thrilled to partner with the University of Guelph to take a look at some familiar barns on the campus. Follow along on Emma's experience to learn more about these historic barns!

If you read my previous blog post [Education in Eramosa: Part 1 - Exploring Farmer Tim's Historic Barns](#), then you will know I am one of two students in Kim Martin's Experiential Learning Course that is working with Ontario Barn Preservation. This blog post will take a look at the three new-old barns at Guelph University.

If you are a University of Guelph student, odds are that you have seen these 3 barns before. Maybe you are an agricultural student frequently travelling here for class. Maybe you were walking down the cow path admiring the horses one day and happened to notice 3 barns in the background. These are the OAC Dairy Barns, and my classmate and I were lucky enough to get the opportunity to survey them.

Barn surveying has many purposes and a long history in Canada. We survey barns as a way to assess their structural integrity, identify potential issues like wood rot or foundation problems. It's important to ensure barns are safe for conversion into habitable spaces, especially if it's an

older barn. We also do it to learn about a barn's historical value, which can reveal architectural styles, historical knowledge and showcase heritage building methods.

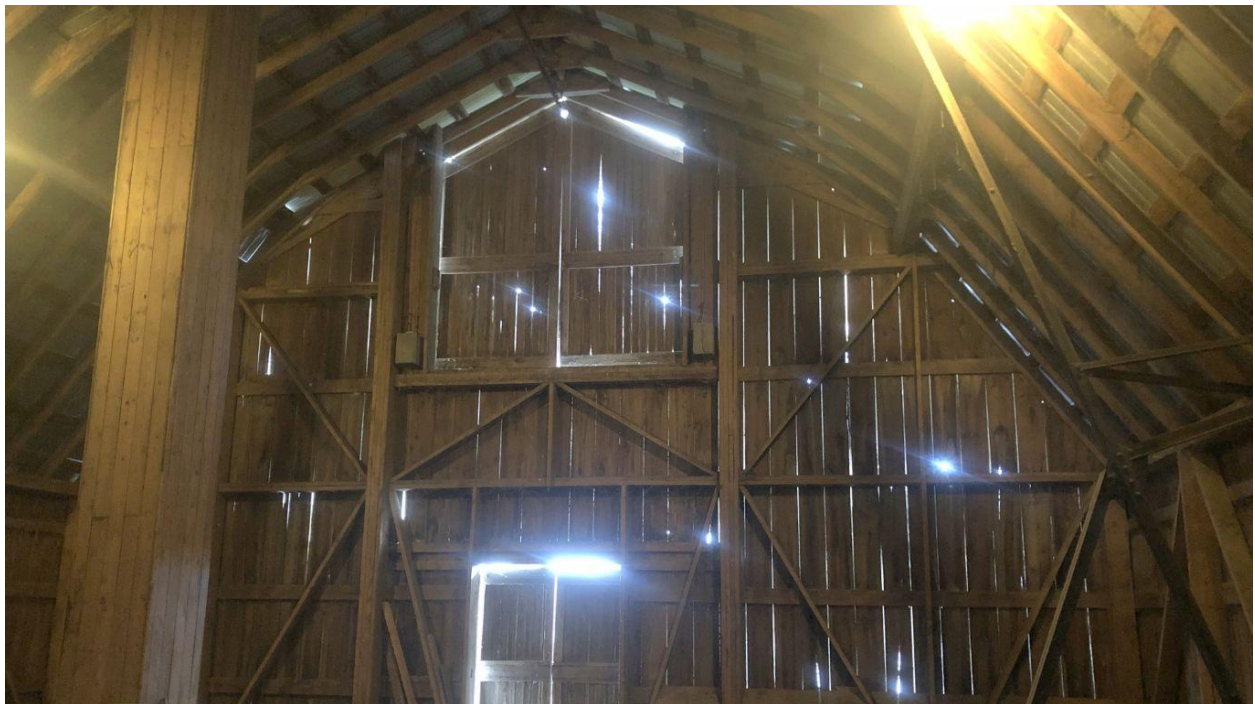
Approximately 193 years ago, surveying was a tireless job, as was farming. In 1831, John Wingfield was the owner of a 800-acre farm and one of the leaders of livestock breeding in the Guelph region. At this time, he sought out the advice of David Gibson, a famous surveyor. People like David are an important part of barn history. Documenting and preserving a barn was a time-consuming job, even requiring him to work through Christmas Day! The rebellion from 1837 to 1838 made this job more difficult, as many barns and buildings were burnt down. Any barns left standing had to keep pace with the growth of agriculture in Wellington County. At the turn of the century, larger barns like the 2 of the OAC, were often being erected, while the smaller barns were being recycled and incorporated into larger ones. The Ontario Agricultural College was founded a few years after all this history, in 1874. They took the lead in barn design research, and learning about specific barns - like the Truss Barn. Trusswork barns were slow to gain popularity, as the supply of usable timbers held out. Canada's largest supplier of these barns was Beatty Brothers in Fergus, leading to Wellington County having a large number of big early truss barns.

Upon entering the barns for the first time, I have to admit we were impressed but a little confused. As history students we wondered, where are the wooden beams? Rusty nails? The cobwebs? Although, once we were led upstairs we soon realized that above this spotless and modern barn sits a piece of history, frozen in time.



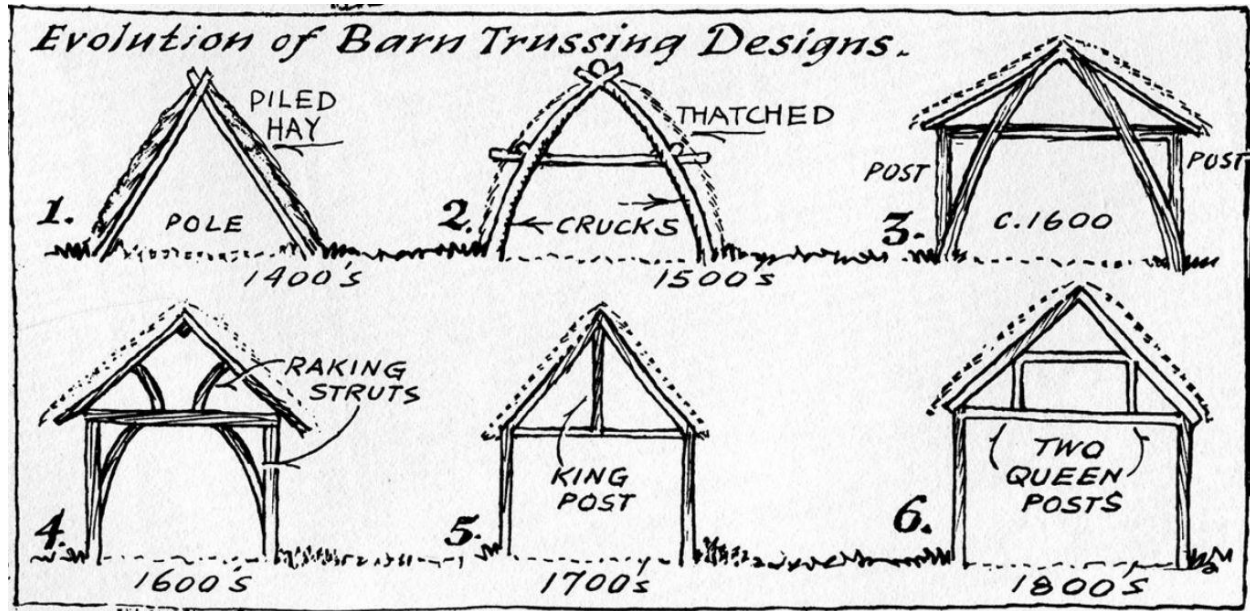
Caption: Photograph of interior of Hayloft in OAC barn (1). Taken at Guelph University.

These barns, although described as separate, are actually 3 buildings joined in a “U” shape. Prior to exploring the barns, we were informed that 2 of the structures are additions, the original building was constructed in 1912. For the sake of this post, I am going to refer to them as barns (1), (2), and (3). Barn (1) being parallel and closest to Gordon Street, was the first one we entered. It was shocking to see how grand the space is (image above). Some interesting details include a granary, cupolas, and a giant hay door. In terms of determining the age of all 3 barns, the beams are the most obvious indicator. In this barn specifically, the beams are quite thin and all of the wood appears to be in excellent shape. Our suspicions that this is a newer barn were confirmed when we entered the second structure (image below).



Caption: Photograph of interior of Hayloft in OAC barn (2). Taken at Guelph University.

This barn (2) is my favorite (image above), and the one that we believe to be the oldest of the 3 barns. It is the building running perpendicular that connects the other 2 barns. The ceilings are lower and wooden beams thicker and much less uniform in their shape and condition. The barn had a lot of interesting components, including an old conveyor belt for hay that runs down the center of the room. In addition, we found a scarf joint and mortise and tenon joints with very long pins. The roof was also significantly different in this building, obtaining more of a Gable shape, as opposed to that of a Gambrel seen in the other two.



Caption: Illustration of the Evolution of Barn Trussing Designs. Taken from Historic Ipswich website. 2023.

Even more amazingly, 3 adorable barn cats led us (more like they ran away from us) into barn (3), the final barn. This barn appears to be the newest and runs parallel to barn (1). Although it is very similar to the first barn, the wooden beams had metal components, which indicates that this is a more modern structure in comparison to the other 2. It obtains an interesting collection of small storage rooms or stalls that create a partial divide in the room.



Caption: Photograph of interior of modern OAC barn (3). Taken at Guelph University.

It was incredible getting the chance to explore these barns on our own and investigate them. It has really inspired me to research more about how they have evolved over the last one hundred years. When you are in a space like this - you can tell that these barns have such rich history that deserve to be preserved and shared. I think people would really take an interest in them if they knew what was hidden away in these lofts.

When the OAC and Experimental Farm was established in Guelph in 1874, it was modest. Situated on the farm of a Guelph cattle breeder, Frederick W. Stone, 28 students registered initially and the facilities were rudimentary. The very first chemical laboratory was set up in a single room, inside the veterinary science professor's converted farmhouse. It only had space for 6 students!



Caption: (Left) archival photograph of students at OAC. (Right) modern photograph of students at OAC. Taken at Guelph University.

Schooling for surveying and barn research has come a long way since then. Imagine what it will be like in the next 100 years? Imagine if these hay lofts could be converted into student housing? If the University is reading this, I think the Aggies need a new residence... I'm thinking - rustic chic?



Caption: Photograph of exterior of OAC barns. Taken at Guelph University.

Thank you for reading OBP's Blog! If you are interested in learning more about historic barns, you can follow us on Instagram as @ontbarn

Sources:

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