

Moving history

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Shirley's last 'great barn' spared and heading to Martha's Vineyard

By Julie Masis, Globe Correspondent | January 20, 2008

SHIRLEY - While disassembling the last "great barn" in this town, David Ottinger, who has taken apart more than 200 historical buildings over the past 25 years, came across a small American flag folded up in a corner among old papers and bills.

The weathered flag, 8 by 12 inches in size and fashioned out of rough fabric, had 13 stripes but only 44 stars - arranged in eight columns and six rows, with four stars missing from the leftmost column. It's a version of the Stars and Stripes in use from July 4, 1891, to July 3, 1896, before Utah, Oklahoma, Arizona, New Mexico, Alaska, and Hawaii gained statehood.

"Either that, or someone got tired of printing stars," Ottinger said with a laugh.

He refolded the flag after showing it to a visitor and placed it in the glove compartment of his car. Like the other artifacts Ottinger has found here in the past several weeks - pieces of wood inscribed with employees' names and the numbers of hours they worked, old bottles, and a pulley for lifting hay - this piece of Shirley's history will soon be moving to Martha's Vineyard.

And with those relics will go the Hazen-Davis barn that has stood on Lancaster Road on a hill overlooking the elementary school since about 1850.

Saved from demolition, the barn is being taken apart plank by plank and transported to the Vineyard, where it will be reassembled in West Tisbury for use as a museum of old carriages and boats. The first shipment of the timbers arrived on the Vineyard Jan. 4, and by the end of the month, the rest will have left Shirley. Only the rock foundation will be visible where the big barn stood for more than 150 years.

This is the last surviving great barn built in Shirley after the construction of the Fitchburg railroad, according to the town's Historical Society. Constructed from oak and chestnut, it measures 105 feet long, 40 feet wide, and 37 feet tall - large enough to keep 40 cows, which supplied milk to Boston via the railroad from the middle to the end of the 19th century. Prior to railroad construction, barns were smaller and provided milk only for families.

The barn was owned by the Hazen family until 1910, when it was sold to Edward Mott Davis. Davis converted the farm into a fruit orchard and stored apples in the barn.

It was no small-time operation. According to a Sept. 5, 1919, Boston Daily Globe article, the Davis farm was "one of the finest young orchards in the state." Davis, the story said, apparently had the right touch, using "nothing but hen manure mixed with loam for fertilizer - a scoopful under each tree."

The abundance of apples aside, the barn retained the original architectural features meant for cows: a door in the floor that opened to let manure fall into the cellar and a rope pulley fixed to the ceiling to lift hay from a wagon to the top level.

"They would pack this whole barn with hay on the top [and] manure on the bottom. It was probably the warmest place around," said Ottinger on a recent Monday afternoon after climbing down from the top of the building. "Then they'd put the manure back in the fields and grow more hay."

Every historic building, Ottinger says, is uniquely put together, so one has to figure out how to take it apart. Often, he said, to break a building down, one needs to go in the opposite order to learn how it was built. It's nothing like modern construction, which is much more uniform, he said.

In disassembling the barn, Ottinger and his "right-hand man" Eric Banaszewski have wiggled out hundreds of rusty square nails from boards and dislodged hand-carved wooden pegs. In recent weeks,

they have drawn diagrams, taken scores of digital photographs, and labeled every board in the structure so that everything can be put back in the right place when the building is reassembled.

Winter slows the work, but the men work on warmer days, even as melting snow drips on them from the beams of the building, which are now exposed.

The barn will find new life on the 10-acre campus of the Martha's Vineyard Museum, scheduled to open in 2011. It will probably be used as an exhibition hall for 19th- and early 20th-century carriages and boats that were either built or used on the island.

"It will be a fabulous structure that will greatly benefit the museum," said Keith Gorman, the museum's executive director, of the barn, given to the museum by the Shirley developer for free. "It was an opportunity when we saw this amazing structure that needed a home. Its size allows for a lot of possible uses."

The old farm is now owned by GFI Shirley, which has built a subdivision, Apple Orchard Estates, on the property.

The spot where the barn sat is to remain as open space, according to an agreement with the developer, said Paul Przybyla, chairman of the Shirley Historical Commission. He said it will be a grassy area where people can walk their dogs and perhaps reminisce about what once stood there.

Rick Anderson, a contractor designing the museum, said supporters raised approximately \$70,000 to move the barn from Shirley to the island with a fund-raiser that lasted less than an hour. The fund-raiser involved a symbolic auction of the barn's timbers for \$1,000 each, he said.

The Hazen-Davis barn will not be the first Shirley building to travel to a different part of the state. In 1962, the Shirley Shaker Village meetinghouse, which was built at the end of the 18th century and last housed a reform school for boys, was cut into three pieces and trucked to Western Massachusetts to replace a meetinghouse that had burned down years earlier at the Hancock Shaker Village in Pittsfield, said Przybyla. A museum comprising some 20 buildings on 1,200 acres today, the Hancock Shaker Village was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1968.

Another notable move took place much earlier in the town's history, but the building did not have to move very far. Przybyla said residents in 1845 dragged Shirley's meetinghouse across the Town Common to the other side of the street after deciding they didn't like how it looked where it was. They "got a whole bunch of rollers and dragged it across the street," he said. "It was a case of civic pride."

Several years ago, Shirley passed a bylaw delaying demolition of old structures by six months, giving the Historical Commission time to determine whether such buildings are historically significant and worth preserving. Thus, the Lancaster Road landmark found a new home.

Statewide, though, many historic barns will not fare as well, according to Preservation Massachusetts, a nonprofit historic preservation advocacy organization. "They are very much endangered as development pressure increases all over the state," said Erin Kelly, assistant director of the organization. "Large tracts of open farmland are being bought up for housing; historic barns are demolished."

She said there is no way of knowing how many historic barns remain in the state. While some are still used for farming, others have been converted into offices or homes, she said. ■