

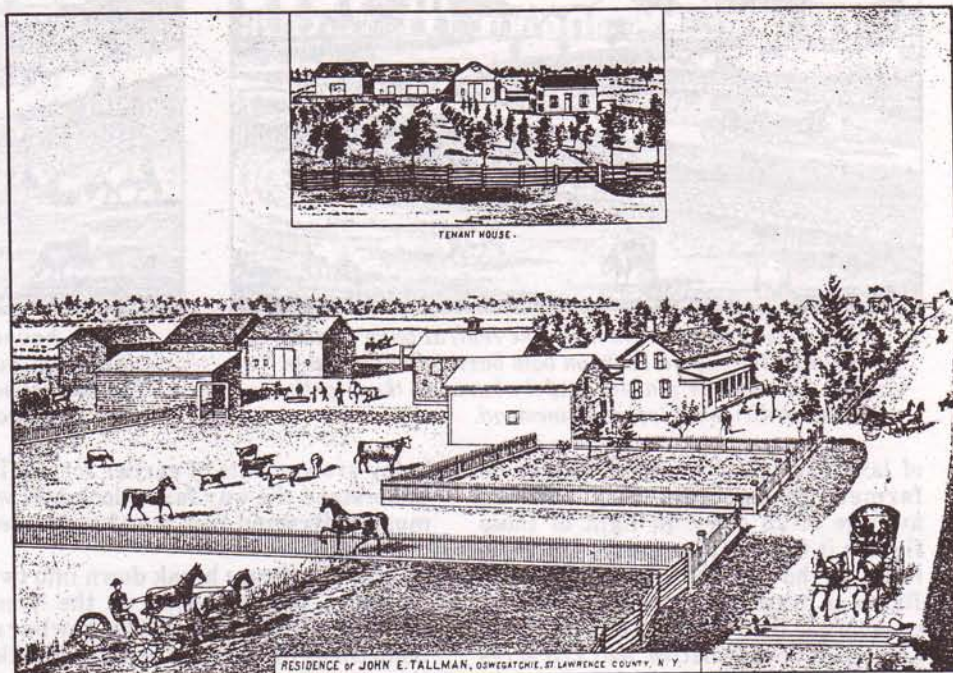
The Enduring Tradition: Notes on St. Lawrence County Farmsteads

by Robert H. McGowan and David Zdunczyk

For a county where locals jokingly used to describe the population as "more cows than people," one might add that at one time there were more farmsteads than any other architectural forms. The authors here present an interesting and helpful report of their findings in a survey of vernacular farm architecture in the County, subsidized by the New York State Council on the Arts. What we have taken for granted - the houses, barns, silos, granaries, corn cribs, etc. - take on new meaning as we begin to think about and look at all the examples around us. Sketches used to illustrate are selected from Everts History of St. Lawrence County, 1878; photographs were taken in 1983 by David Zdunczyk.

Unlike the way most of us live today, farmers live in the midst of their work. The words farm and farmstead have never meant just a house or barn - they have meant house and barns together. On the farm daily life and daily work are the same. Both center around the production of food. In one sense farm buildings are food factories - places where grain becomes milk and beef. The larger a farmer's barns the more successful a producer he or she is (or appears to be). Yet if farm buildings have an economic and symbolic importance, many of them are also valuable in their own right as works of craft. Farm buildings are the most common artifacts that St. Lawrence County's early residents left behind.

Because farm buildings do have artistic significance, the New York State Council on the Arts has provided funds to the St. Lawrence County Historical Association for a county-wide farmstead survey. The survey has three goals. The first is to produce an historical record of rural architecture in the county so that future generations will not lose sight of county traditions. Already over seven hundred slides of farm buildings have been taken, and are stored in an archive at the Silas Wright House and Museum. The Historical Association invites contributions of slides or photographs of farmbuildings to this archive. The second and third parts of the farmstead project grow out of the first. The society has



On the Tallman farm English side opening barns were arranged around a courtyard or barnyard. Note that the scale of farming in the 19th century made the use of several small barns more effective than resort to one or two very large barns. Note also the absence of silos from all the Evert engravings in 1878.

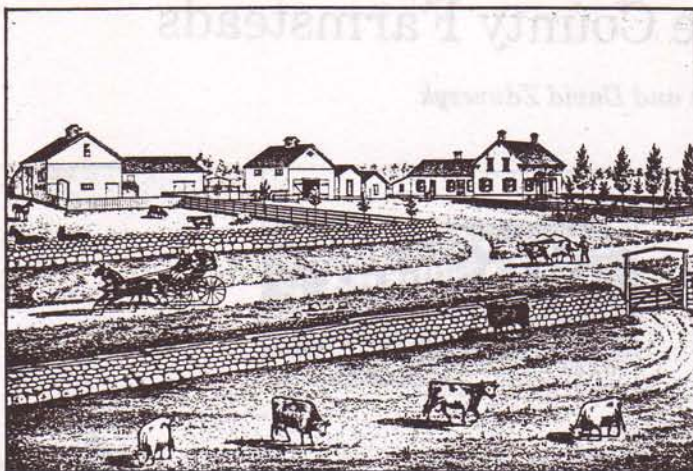
developed a slide-tape program to briefly explain the architectural and cultural value of county farmsteads to visitors to the Museum, school classes and other groups. The third step of the project is this article - an attempt to put county farm architecture in historical perspective.

In a county the size of St. Lawrence (2,842 square miles) an in-depth and very detailed study of farmstead architecture would have been a massive undertaking. We chose to begin with a broad survey of farm buildings past and present, in hopes that others will continue our efforts and give these buildings a closer look. We traveled down side roads that appeared on an 1870s map of the county, hoping that on old highways we would find old farms as well as new ones. Throughout the county we recorded abandoned farms and farms boasting new metal pole barns. Included in this study are farms on the outskirts of Ogdensburg and Canton and farms isolated in the countryside.

Through conversations with members of the Historical Association and with Don Huddleston, formerly of the Co-

operative Extension office, we learned of several farms with a particularly rich assortment of buildings. These were termed "control farms," and we spent more time photographing these farms, talking to their owners, and measuring buildings than we did at other farms. Control farms are important because together they illustrate the continuities as well as the changes in local agricultural construction.

Many of St. Lawrence County's farmsteads began between 1812 and 1850, when immigration into the county seems to have been heaviest. During those years people from New England, Canada, the British Isles and even other areas of New York came here to find better land and new opportunities. By 1894, when Curtis composed his *St. Lawrence County, New York* still only 54 percent of the 994 biographies in that book were county born. Surprisingly, 147 of the 994 came from other counties in New York, while 108 had been born in New England, usually in Vermont. Ninety-three of the biographies were from Canada. A sample of 125 farmers selected from Curtis's biographies owned an average of 251 acres



Note the diamond window in the central barn's gable end, and the cupola vents on both barns. Contrast this with the absolute plainness of the barns in the slightly more traditional Crouch homestead.



Here house and barns seem very close together, although not connected, as they might have been in Massachusetts or New Hampshire. The house and one of the barns have similar lean-tos on the rear.

of land each. Another sampling of 55 farmers reveals that they kept an average of 23 cows. In light of those figures it was not illogical for Curtis to refer to the 300 acre farm of James Baum as "vast", but there were farms even larger than that. Anson Hall, a St. Lawrence County native, had 225 acres in 1846 and 450 acres and 25 cows in the 1890s. Nelson Rutherford, born in St. Lawrence in 1827, owned 360 acres and 35 cows, a farm which Curtis calls one of the largest in Waddington.

Of course the value and productivity of a farm does not depend only on the size of the farm acreage. Harvey West, who was born in Michigan in 1834 and came to St. Lawrence in 1857 bought 160 acres of land in 1860. By the 1890s he had 23 Durham and Holstein cows on his farm. While dairy cattle were and are the mainstay of St. Lawrence County agriculture, early farms were remarkable for the diversity of livestock they supported. Peter Allen, son of William who came from Scotland in 1818, bred Jersey cattle, Oxfordshire sheep, Cheshire hogs, Clydesdale horses, while Plymouth rock and White Leghorn hens, and was a butter maker as well.

The many small barns on early North Country farms illustrate the different jobs a farmer had to do to keep his farm running. There were barns for horses and cows, machinery and grain, corn, chickens and pigs. The work represented by the cowbarn and the granary were essential to the farm's - and the farmer's - survival. Today the long metal cowbarns and Harvestore silos that dominate the rural landscape are even more central to the farmer's life than were their wooden counterparts of the last century. While the difference in scale between past and present working farms is clear, the buildings and layouts we see

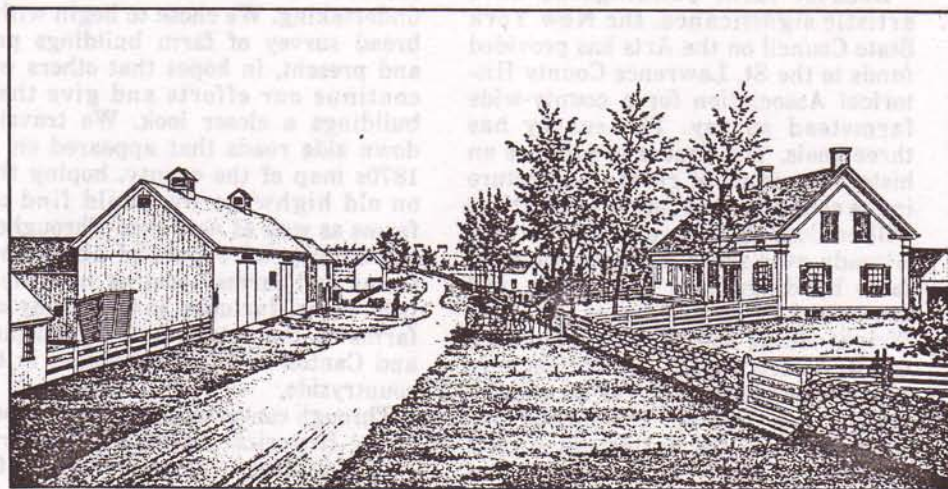
today are variants of earlier forms. To understand the way farms look now we must understand how they have looked in the past.

Typically farms break down into two clusters - one centering on the house and the other around the cowbarn. Sometimes the clusters are sharply distinct, as when the farmhouse is on one side of a road and the barns belonging to it are on the other. Such "Split" farms are a significant minority locally: most farms are arranged along one side of the highway. While the farmhouse may boast Greek Revival or Victorian trim, it may also have a series of unpretentious minor buildings attached to it. Tacked on to the house may be a woodshed, outhouse, carriage house, even a horse barn. A typical house complex includes the woodshed with a connected outhouse attached to the far end. In St. Lawrence County, however, the house and the main barns are almost never joined. Connected farms are a feature of New England architecture which did not survive immigration

westward. In the cold climate of Northern New York why didn't farmers latch onto the New England custom with which many of them were familiar and build connected farms? The answer is really one of the mysteries of American cultural geography.

Located functionally, if not always physically, between the house and barns was the smokehouse. Few farms actually had such structures, because salt pork rather than smoked pork was a staple meat in the county. When smokehouses did exist they served a transitional purpose on the farm, taking raw agricultural product and turning it into food useful for the farmer and his family. The large scale processing of farm products took place off the farmstead - at the butter factory, grist mill and stockyards.

Just as the farmhouse had its dependencies so the cowbarn was surrounded by other buildings large and small. The granary and corncrib were "feeder" barns, storing the fodder which the cows gave back as milk. The milkhouse,



A split farmstead with a very well developed classic cottage, complete with eyebrow windows, was the farm of W.H. Wright of Buck's Bridge.

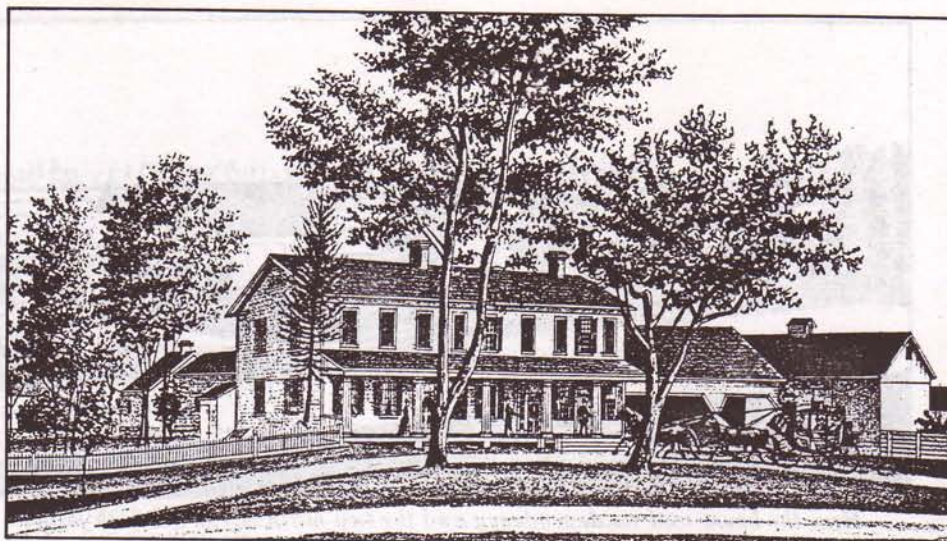
where milk was stored before going to the butter factory, was very close - and in later years attached - to the cow barn.

While the buildings on a farmstead were built to serve each other efficiently, county farms do not conform to rigid patterns. The initial impression of most farmsteads is that they were laid out at random. The number of different structures on a farmstead, their roofs jutting out at all different levels, give complexity and interest to buildings not ordinarily thought of as artistic. We shall now look more closely at the chief components of the farmstead: the house, main barns, and outbuildings.

Farmhouses

The name farmhouse is almost a misnomer. It indicates that houses on farms were somehow different from houses in town. Yet it is characteristic of St. Lawrence County and of the Northeast in general that houses which happen to be located on farms would fit right in with their surroundings if suddenly transported to a village street. Greek Revival trim, Federal mouldings, and Victorian scrollwork were not limited to the towns. Even as the nineteenth century drew to a close and houses became more elaborate than ever before carpenters and builders continued to treat farmhouses and village houses much the same.

It is always tempting to assume that the first generation of settlers in any American region lived in log cabins. While some immigrants to St. Lawrence County did build log houses, most of them seem to have replaced log with frame construction as soon as possible.



The Ira French tavern and homestead, Town of Potsdam, is a good example of an early New England Georgian structure.

One indication of the rarity of log construction is Curtis's pains to note, in his *History*, that Fisher Ames and Washington Adams, two settlers of the 1820s, built log houses. There were many other settlers who came earlier or at the same time, but there is no indication they all built with logs. As the number of sawmills in the county increased it is likely that settlers coming about 1850 were able to build frame houses immediately. The number of early frame barns in the county suggests that if settlers could use sawn boards to shelter their animals, they could use them to shelter themselves as well.

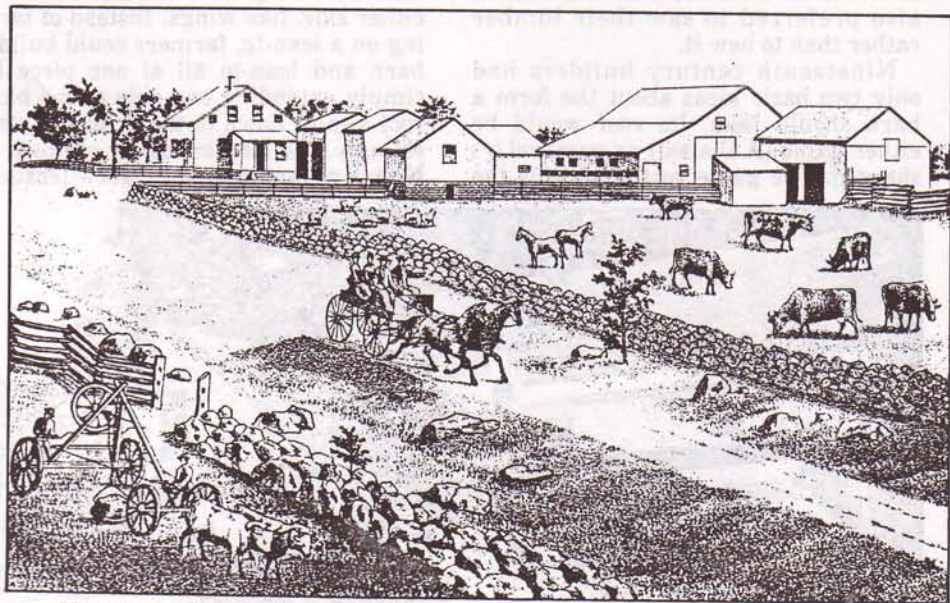
When early residents built houses they generally used the New England architectural vocabulary. We know

that French Canadians, Irishmen and Scots settled in St. Lawrence, but their houses by and large have a New England, not a European look. New England contributed three basic house types to St. Lawrence County and Northern New York.

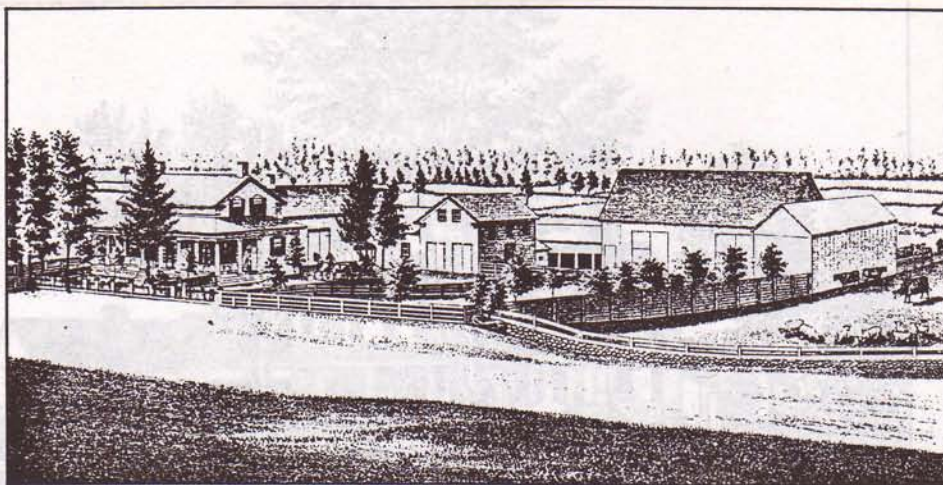
Dwellings in the Georgian style stood a full two stories high and ran parallel to the road. Five windows looked out from the upper story and four windows and a central door ran along the lower level. This door usually opened into a central hall running to about the midpoint of the house. A good example of an early New England Georgian structure is the old Ira French inn, now owned by the Anderson family, on the Potsdam-Canton road. Any two story stone house in St. Lawrence County is also likely to be a classic example of the Georgian style. Builders seem to have followed more conservative and formal patterns when working with stone instead of less permanent wood.

The second New England form is a variant of the full Georgian type. Called the Cape Cod, it was one or one and a half stories high, and usually aligned parallel to the road like its Georgian ancestor. That the Cape Cod was a more informal house than the Georgian appears from the often asymmetrical arrangement of windows and doors which it presented to the road. Early in the nineteenth century builders began to raise the Cape Cod's roofline, often putting diminutive "eyebrow" windows in the newly available space between the eaves and the main windows. With their higher rooflines and the addition of Greek revival trim around the doorways and at the corners, Cape Cods became Classic Cottages, the most common house form in St. Lawrence County to this day.

The third popular house type in nineteenth century St. Lawrence County



Harrington's is quite a traditional farmstead. The house has a Cape Cod form without the classic cottage ornamentation seen on the W.H. Wright house. The window arrangement in the house's gable end is often seen in New England. The second building to the right of the house is a corner barn with characteristic tapered sides, and set on blocks. Note the lean-to roof on the main barn.



Here the house and its dependency and the two main barns are both joined in a T shape. The large barn is a double version of the English side-opening barn.

was the Temple Front. A combination of forms that already existed separately, the Temple Front consisted of a Georgian sized main block with Greek Revival trim and a wing the size of a small Classic Cottage. As the nineteenth century passed Temple Fronts became smaller and simpler. By the end of the century versions of the Temple Front were being built more often than Classic Cottages.

The houses of rural St. Lawrence County say something about the people who built them. They were traditional, but willing to change old patterns if it could be done gradually. They drew on ideas that were circulating in the culture at large - Greek and Gothic revival trim, for example - but wedded those innovations to old forms. As a result the St. Lawrence countryside shows visible evidence of a nineteenth century cultural phenomenon: the melding as well as the conflict of traditional ways of life with the ways of mass production and the popular ideas of national agricultural and architectural publications.

Barns

If early county houses were sometimes built of stone or brick, the same was not true of barns. Wood was almost the only material used in barn construction in the nineteenth century, and only recently have metal barns begun to rival wooden ones. While a few log outbuildings still exist in the county, there apparently are no log barns. It is the framing timbers of barns (and houses) not their exteriors, which testify to the ability of nineteenth century farmers to work with logs. The king posts and queen posts that held up barn roofs were the squared-off trunks of trees, while secondary posts were often small trees left in the round, with the bark still on. Upon these log frames farmers hung walls of sawed lumber. The same reasons which explain the absence of log houses in the county probably also

explain the scarcity of log barns. Not only are boards easier to handle than logs, in the long run it probably was more economical to pay the sawmill for boards than to spend the human energy needed to hew logs oneself. Cultural influences, however, may have proved as strong as economic calculation. The English, Irish, Scottish, and Yankees who settled St. Lawrence County carried a culture from which log construction was largely absent. Log architecture is found chiefly in those areas of the country where German influence is strong - Pennsylvania and the upper South. While French Canadians may have been more adept at log architecture than Yankee settlers, there are so few log buildings in the county that one is forced to conclude that the French also preferred to saw their lumber rather than to hew it.

Nineteenth century builders had only two basic ideas about the form a barn should take. Its roof would be either gable (A shaped) or gambrel (∩ shaped). The gable roofed style is the

most traditional for barns, while the gambrel style was long used in England and the American colonies for houses, not barns. Only in the late nineteenth century, as farms grew larger and farmers needed more hay storage space, was the gambrel adopted for barns.

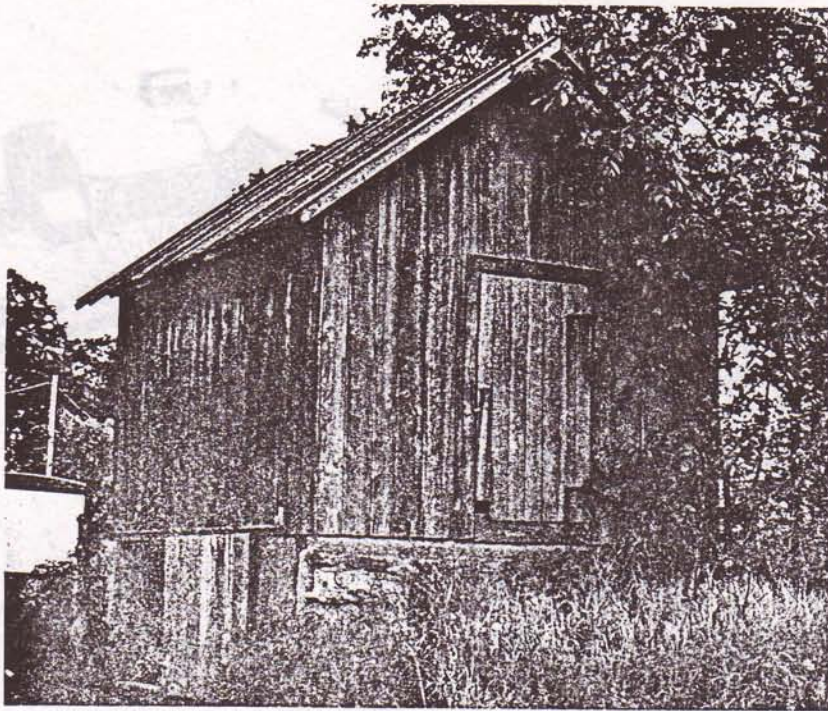
The "old fashioned" gable roofed barn of St. Lawrence County and much of the Eastern United States is what folklorists have termed the English side-opening barn. Early examples are usually quite small, in keeping with the herds of 10, 15 or 20 cows that local farmers kept. An average English side-opening barn would be 40' by 60'. It would have three sections, or bays. The farmer drove his wagon into the central bay and pitched hay into the hay mows, the second story bays on either side. One side bay on the first level housed livestock, the other often served as a granary.

Few farmers could get by with just one barn, so it is rare that we see any barn, whether gable or gambrel roofed, standing alone. In St. Lawrence County it is very common for a "barn" to actually be two barns joined together. Sometimes the barns are connected end to end, or very commonly in a T shape. The trunk of the T may be a long cow-barn, and the crossing a smaller hay barn or horse barn. At other times barns were joined together like a Temple Front house - a main barn and a wing (-I).

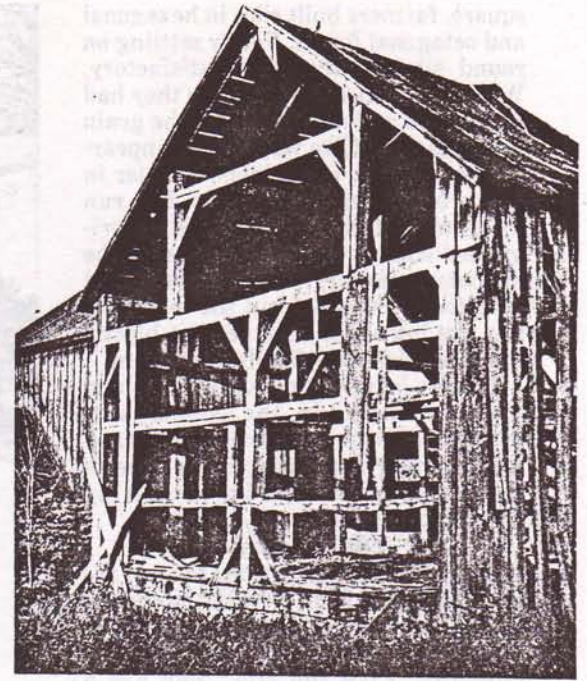
If a farmer did not build two barns together he would often build a lean-to onto an existing barn. In rare cases barns have symmetrical lean-tos on either side, like wings. Instead of tacking on a lean-to, farmers could build a barn and lean-to all of one piece by simply extending one side of the barn roof almost down to the ground. Interestingly, the lean-to roof is common in New England domestic architecture,



Farmhouse, Roger Huntley farm, Pierrepont. View of rear with attached woodshed and enclosed outhouse.



Abandoned granary (upper portion), Rte. 58, Gouverneur. Owner unknown.



Detail of barn framing, abandoned barn, Rte. 58, Gouverneur. Owner unknown.

but full lean-to roofs are more common on St. Lawrence County barns than on local houses. In the first half of the nineteenth century, at least, domestic architecture changed more quickly than barn styles. What was too old-fashioned for a house would still do admirably for a barn.

The only ornamentation that appears on English side-opening barns are diamond shaped openings in the gable ends. Often these are simply rectangular windows stood on end to look like diamonds, a practice directly carried over from New England. Sometimes in our oldest wooden barns one sees diamonds carved right into the wood of

the gable end. Usually there will be another design - a cross or a triangle - carved at the end of each point of the diamond - resembling a Maltese cross. Such designs are probably related to the "hex" signs famous in the Pennsylvania Dutch country. They appear as far west as southern Indiana, and are almost certainly European in origin.

After the Civil War barn architecture grew more elaborate. The large gambrel roofed "Victorian" barn on many prosperous farmsteads might boast two different colors of paint, round windows in the gable end, elaborate lightning rods and ventilators. Where English

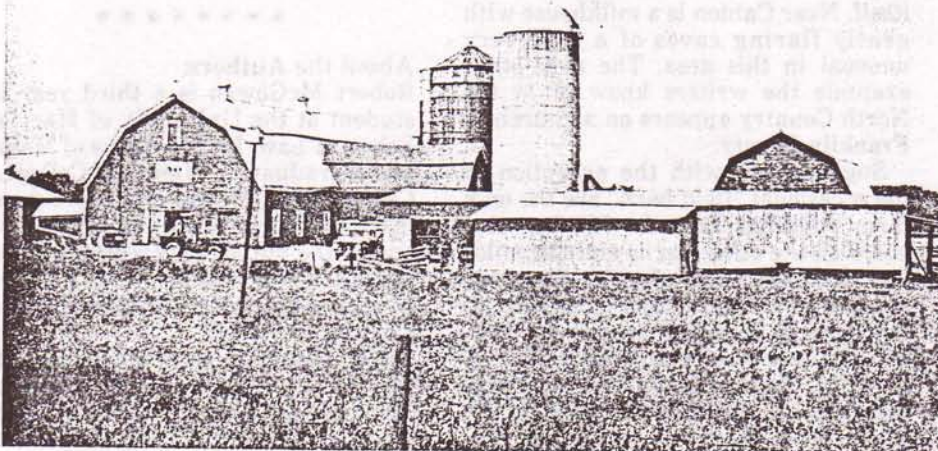
side-opening barns had none of the Greek Revival or Georgian trappings of contemporary houses, Victorian barns boasted many domestic details. There is as much stylistic distance between a gable roofed side-opening barn and its gambrel roofed Victorian counterpart as between a Classic Cottage and a gingerbread villa of the 1890s.

In the late nineteenth and throughout the twentieth centuries, farmers used more and more stone, concrete and cement for barn foundations, but not until the last twenty or so years have entire barns been built of material other than wood. Metal barns doubtless have more virtues than drawbacks, but as far as style is concerned they have none at all. They are significant in being a complete break with tradition, and as such have added a new chapter to the definition of the word barn.

Silos

More than in any other structure, the history of farming in St. Lawrence County is written in its silos. Silos did not appear in the county until after the Civil War, and the first were narrow square structures with gable roofs hardly taller than the barns to which they were attached. The first were often built-in the barn itself and appear as a kind of dormer window in the roof. When the silo "dormer" had a gambrel roof and the barn a gable roof, the effect could be complex and whimsical.

Perhaps because silos are small specialized structures they seem to have undergone more rapid changes than barns. In addition to building them



Courtyard farm layout, Roger Huntley farm, Pierrepont. Buildings group behind.

square, farmers built silos in hexagonal and octagonal forms, finally settling on round silos as the most satisfactory. Were round silos best because they had more room and no corners for the grain to compact in? (The very recent appearance of pit silos is the latest chapter in this progression.) When form had run the gamut of change, farmers experimented with new silo materials. In the nineteenth century wood had been used even for round silos, but the twentieth saw the introduction of cement blocks, tile, plexiglass and finally aluminum.

Today's large farm has tall silos and many of them. In the countryside around Lisbon this is particularly striking. Nothing has changed the face of our farms more than barns getting lower and silos higher.

Outbuildings

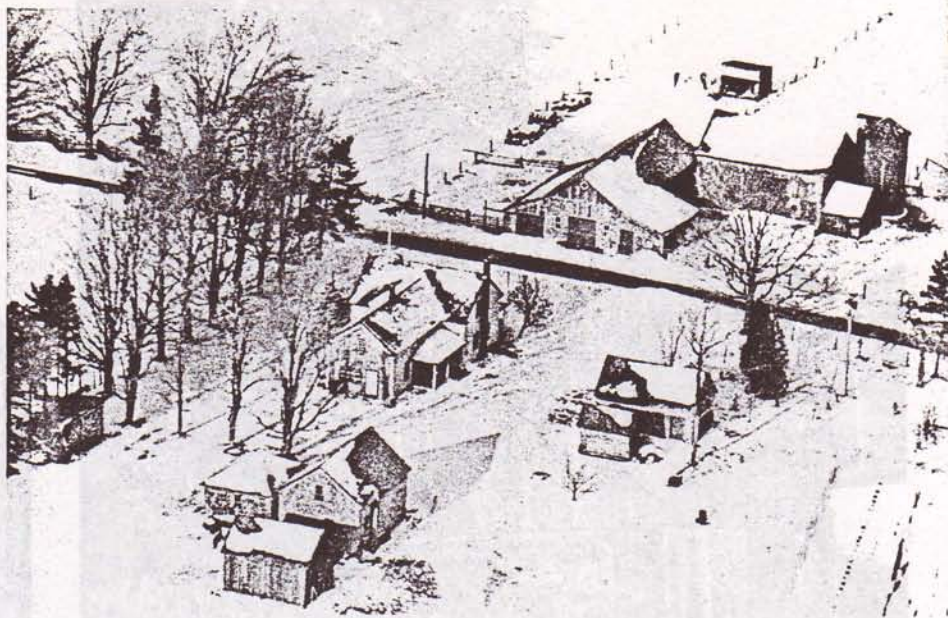
In the nineteenth century most of the structures on a farm were outbuildings. We tend to dismiss them as sheds which look all alike, but they are worth distinguishing. Like the silo, they are a record of how farming in St. Lawrence County has changed.

The most barn-like of the outbuildings was the granary - built like a small English barn but with a door in the gable end rather than on the side. Granaries, like silos, seem to have been a post Civil War development, and they appear to be more common in the North Country than downstate. Some early barns, like that of Don Smith on the Dezell Road, had built-in granaries over-hanging the central bay. Separate granaries must have become necessary as farms grew larger in the last half of the nineteenth century.

Solidly constructed and neatly fashioned, granaries usually have two stories, with bins on both levels for storing oats and grain. Occasionally one finds a building that served as both granary and corncrib, but what one does not find is a granary used for its original purpose. Now they are storage places for cast-off equipment and machinery.

Similar in function to the granary, the corncrib was distinctively different in appearance. Corncribs exhibit clear regional variations across the United States. The Eastern corncribs original to St. Lawrence County are built with tapering sides and are usually raised off the ground on blocks. They are small buildings; the casual observer may assume they are toolsheds.

The observer would make no such mistake about the newest corncribs being built in the county. Amish settlers from Pennsylvania and the Midwest are constructing the type of corncrib they knew in their former homes: large, open basketwork structures built of crisscrossed poles and covered with a roof. At first the Eastern and



Aerial view, Curtis Benham farm, Nicholville. Split farmstead. Notice ice house and corn crib to right of house. (Photo courtesy of Benham family)

the Midwestern corncrib seem totally unrelated. A closer look reveals that even though from a distance they appear tightly joined, the boards of European corncribs were in fact spaced apart for ventilation. The basketwork Midwestern corncrib merely takes ventilation to an architectural extreme. Together the Eastern and Midwestern corncribs are a good illustration of how different architectural traditions meet similar needs.

One of the most common outbuildings in this dairy country is the milkhouse; almost every farm has one. The older milkhouses seem to have been built away from the cowbarn, often over a spring where the milk was stored and cooled. Later milkhouses are attached to the side of the main barn, and are most often built of matched lumber (or now, of metal). Few farmbuildings were constructed with more care than the milkhouse. A small milkhouse might show more detail than the barn itself. Near Canton is a milkhouse with gently flaring eaves of a type very unusual in this area. The only other example the writers know of in the North Country appears on a church in Franklin County.

Sugarhouses, with the exception of the occasional "field barn" are the only farm buildings located with the crop, not with the other barns and outbuildings. Besides the farmhouse, the sugarhouse was the only other structure on the farm built solely for human use - and the only other one with "house" in its title. Sugarhouses are instantly recognizable - by their location in the sugar bush, their low, one story construction, and the long vent running along their roof ridges. Sugarhouses are one of the auxiliary buildings - like

cider mills, grist mills and butter factories - which were more or less essential to the operation of a farm economy. Curtis indicates that some farmers had small butter factories on their own property. Such buildings are gone now, or used for other purposes. The services they rendered are provided centrally.

What is also gone from farm life - if it ever existed - is the placid and seemingly untroubled modest prosperity reflected in the nineteenth century engravings that illustrate this article. Farming is now and probably was at the time these drawings were made a far riskier and more disorderly business than they indicate. To obtain a true picture of farm life we must study the farm buildings of yesterday and today first hand, observing closely their size, construction, details, and use. We will then have a more accurate knowledge of the past as well as the present.

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