



Walnut Township Historic Barn Tour

A 2-hour drive around Walnut Township, NC

A project of the Appalachian Barn Alliance

The Walnut Township Barns Story

The Walnut township is a large, long township divided by the French Broad River. Its historic barns quietly tell the lifestyle stories of the farm families who settled here over the past two hundred years. On the west side of the river, the Big Pine Creek valley is generally steep and narrow, and the visitor will be struck by its remoteness and lack of tillable land, a testament to the resourcefulness of its farmers. The known history of these older barns is limited, as they have survived with few family descendants remaining to tell their stories. Many barns are referred to by a historic owner's name, yet that barn's history and ownership may be several generations removed. In general, the barns were built by the farmer with the help of neighbors, one or more carpenters, and were often influenced by "new" barn designs seen elsewhere.

While very few barns of the 1800's have survived, an important exception is the now rare, flue-cured tobacco log barn. Mountain subsistence farming changed dramatically when flue-cured or "bright leaf" tobacco was introduced as a Civil War recovery program in the 1870's. It was the first commercial cash crop in the mountains and was called flue-cured because it required a specialized wood-fire heated barn built of logs sealed with mud chinking. The markets for flue-cured tobacco in the mountains began to diminish around 1915, yet several of these very old log barns are still visible from the road.

The introduction of burley tobacco in the 1920's replaced the flue-cured era and brought a major change in the function and design of local barns. Prior to this time, all barns were either general purpose livestock barns, or the small, square, flue-cured log barns. With their large hay lofts and lattice siding, the livestock barns were well suited for this new air-cured tobacco and were retrofitted with horizontal tier poles to allow the hanging of the burley tobacco. The old flue-cured tobacco barns were also adapted to burley tobacco by the removal of the mud chinking to allow for better air flow, and became the first generation of burley tobacco barns.

The Walnut township barns have a similarity to those in other townships on the west side of the French Broad River. While many 19th century hewn log *houses* remain here, as evidence of the Appalachian hewn-log building tradition, there is a notable absence of barns built with heavily hewn log cribs supporting large timber-framed loft structures above. Instead, *unhewn round* log barn construction was the norm, and continued as late as the mid-20th century. Also like other townships, builders made appropriate use of the abundant chestnut trees, the wood of which was rot resistant and often used for hewn sills and for log barns. The chestnut blight, which made its way into Madison County in the 1920's, eventually killed all the

chestnut trees, and the log scars left from the blight fungus serve as a way to determine the age of a log barn: if chestnut logs do not have blight scars, the barn was likely built before 1920.

A distinctive barn type in this township is the monitor roof livestock barn. While found in other areas, the Big Pine valley has many of this type, likely introduced to the county by the Wild family, who were award-winning innovators in many of their farm practices. These barns also demonstrate a prevalent use of lapped board siding and lattice work.

Also similar to other townships in Madison County, these farms enjoyed a surge in the construction of burley tobacco barns following WWII, and were built exclusively for burley tobacco, with little or no accommodation for livestock. Like the John Baird McDevitt barn, these burley tobacco barns are large rectangular barns with a shallower roof slope utilizing the newer metal roofing. The Walnut township barns are great examples of many barn types creatively built for the specific needs of the day.

Knox Brigman Barn Burley Tobacco (1940s)

1

Junction of US 25/70 & Ten Point Lane
N35-49.488 / W82-42.322

This barn is known to many local folks as the "Wall Drug" barn. For many years its roof was painted with a large "Wall Drug" advertisement sign (contracted by the Wall Drug Store in Wall, South Dakota) after Knox Brigman and his wife had visited that area as part of a cross-country bus tour. By the 1980s the paint was beginning to flake, and since Mrs. Brigman wanted to replace her living room furniture, she negotiated with the Sterchi Furniture Company in Asheville to repaint the barn roof with a large "Sterchi's" ad in exchange for a piece of furniture. The barn advertisement tradition was once prevalent throughout the mountains for barns adjacent to roadways, and served to provide the owners with freshly painted barns. The property is known by many as the Talton Farm. The barn is a thoughtfully designed burley tobacco barn, and is one-of-a-kind in its use of ventilation doors and other features. To safely view this barn, drive into the Dry Branch FW (Free Will) Baptist Church parking area during non-church hours.



For more information on the barns, go to

<http://appalachianbarns.org>

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2 John Baird & Eva Reeves McDevitt Barn Burley tobacco (1930-40)

691 Upper Brush Creek Road
N35-50.755 / W82-42.583

Seen across the broad bottomland of Upper Brush Creek, the John Baird McDevitt barn is the largest, and one of the earliest barns in Madison County built for air-curing burley tobacco as its primary use. Prior to the 1930s, burley tobacco was cured in the lofts of livestock barns or in tall log barns that were adapted from flue-cured tobacco barn types. John Baird McDevitt, known as “Beard” to his friends, along with his brother Roy McDevitt, accumulated much of the land in the Upper Brush Creek valley during their lives, and grew or leased many acres of tobacco. The barn is a full 80 feet long, 40 feet wide, and 37 feet high, with a large equipment shed addition. The height allows for at least seven tier pole levels and is higher than other burley barns in the county. An unusual characteristic is the lack of ventilation for air flow, necessary for effective air curing of the tobacco. This perhaps indicates that the need for air flow was not yet fully understood for this new type of barn. Another feature of this barn is the well-constructed concrete foundation.



3 Theodore & Margaret Plemmons Log Barn Flue-cured Tobacco (Early 1900s)

695 Sharp Hollow Road
N35 – 50.450 / W82 – 44.308

The Theodore Plemmons barn is a rare example of a log, flue-cured tobacco barn, and includes the old tradition of continuing the log end walls into the triangular gable area of the roof. This requires that the two gable ends be part of a roof structure of round pole “purlins” that span the distance between log walls, and lock the gable end logs in place. Remnants of the mud chinking used to fill the spaces between logs are still present, a surviving feature found in less than ten barns in Madison County. The upper log barn may also be a flue-cured tobacco barn, but alterations have changed its original form. The two barns were adapted to air-cure burley tobacco after the 1920’s, and were later connected by shed additions built to add to the tobacco hanging capacity and multi-purpose work areas. The grapevine growing on the north wall represents an old mountain tradition of growing grapes on a barn wall. Plemmons bought the farm in 1948, but nothing is known of its history or previous owner.



4

Harrison Roberts Log Barn

Tobacco barn

(Early 1900s)

7596 Big Pine Road

N35-48.308 / W82-47.796

Researching the history of this large, log tobacco barn exemplifies the difficulty in dating and documenting these older barns. Oral tradition has this barn being built by Joe Worley prior to 1907 for landowner Harrison Roberts. That period predated the introduction of burley tobacco, indicating this barn was built for flue-cured tobacco, a conclusion supported by the spacing of tier poles at 24" to 30", and the close spacing of the logs to accommodate mud chinking. Other information, however, conflicts with those dates: the existence of chestnut blight scarring on some of the chestnut logs would indicate it was built after 1920; the rectangular footprint of this barn, at 28' X 21', differs from the square footprint of a flue-cured tobacco barn; Joe Worley would have been 65 years old in 1920, perhaps too old to build this massive log tobacco barn. Regardless of the details, this is a wonderful example of a large log tobacco barn on a steep mountain farm on Big Pine Creek.



5

Rubin (Rube) McKindley Caldwell & Ruth Caldwell Log Barn

Livestock barn

(early 1900s)

8578 Big Pine Road

N35-47.807 / W82-48.416

The Rube Caldwell barn is one of the five distinctive monitor roof barns in the Big Pine Creek valley, with the signature diagonal lattice work and milled lapped board siding. Unlike the other monitor roof barns, however, this variation continued the tradition of using logs for the lower level for animal stalls, in four log cribs. Like the Claude Wild barn it is also a bank barn, providing drive-in access to the second level hay loft for unloading horse-drawn wagon loads of hay. The farm includes the remains of an old flue-cured log tobacco barn that was revered by Rube's son Mac Caldwell who, until his death, enjoyed telling about the original but long-forgotten flue-cured, or "fire-cured" tobacco that was an economic boon to the mountains in the late 19th century, well before burley tobacco was introduced.



6

Claude & Katie Wilde Wild Barn

Livestock barn (1918)

9840 Big Pine Road

N35 – 47.227 / W82 – 49.052

The Claude and Katie Wild barn is one of six distinctive monitor roof barns found only in the Walnut Township, with all but one in the Big Pine Creek valley. Being a unique and progressive barn design for 1918 in Madison County, it is speculated that the design, like the George Washington Wild barn (#7), was built from a set of plans acquired in Tennessee by Claude Wild during his travels as a peddler. At the height of his travels, Wild drove a state-of-the-art peddler's truck (the first Big Pine resident to own one), an REO "Speed Wagon", and typically made \$75 a circuit, driving from Big Pine to Newport, TN to Asheville and back. He did not believe in buying food while on the road, and his wife made him ham biscuits to eat while traveling. Across the road from the front of the barn is a small concrete structure that Wild built as a spring box, receiving spring water piped from higher up the mountainside. It has his initials and year, "C. J. W. 1919" etched into the top, and still flows into the horses' water tub. He and his father, George Washington Wild also installed the first small hydro-electric generator, and thus had the first electric lights in the valley. The front of the corn crib is angled to follow the curve of the roadway.



7

George Washington & Laura Ratcliff Wild barn

Livestock/ Dairy (early 1900s)

31 South Fork Road

N35 – 47.130 / W82 – 48.677

The George and Laura Wild barn and silo represent uncommon innovations of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Born on Big Pine Creek in 1861, George Washington Wild later demonstrated the expert farming and business acumen of his father Jacob, operating a dairy and tobacco farm, a sawmill, grist mill, post office, blacksmith shop, and store. In 1919 Wild was elected to serve in the NC General Assembly, during which time he introduced a law to require fencing of livestock in order to end the tradition of livestock ranging free. He also had the first electricity in the valley, generated first by a kerosene engine, then by an overshot water wheel. The wooden silo, damaged by wind in early 2015, was the first silo on Big Pine Creek, and is the only wooden silo to survive in Madison County. This large barn measures 52 by 58 feet and has an unusual 3-sloped gambrel roof, thus taking advantage of the newly introduced metal roofing. Hidden within the rectangular barn is an octagon-shaped structure that forms eight animal stalls, coming together in the center to allow hay to be pitched into all eight stalls from a central hay chute in the hay loft above. G. W. Wild's grandson Don tells the story of the origin of this unique barn design: a traveling salesman, or "drummer," from Tennessee sold Wild a set of blueprints for the barn design, unheard-of for these remote mountains.



8 John & Belle Shelton Barn Livestock & burley tobacco barn (1930s)

Big Pine Creek Rd & Levi Branch

N35-50.095 / W82-46.693

John Daniel Shelton, born July 1882, lived to be 99 years old. He spent much of his life in the Wilson Cove area of Big Pine where he built at least three other large log barns, on very steep land, which were likely flue-cured tobacco barns. According to family history, Shelton always



built his barns and farmed “by the signs.” This barn is an exceptional example of a round log bank barn using a massive rock retaining wall, saddle notches and the old tradition of continuing the log wall into the gable end. The near-perfectly round logs form a barn 26 feet square, and run 25 logs high, totaling 100 logs, plus 24 tapered logs in the gable ends. The family recalls that his daughter-in-law, Pearl, helped fell and drag the logs by horse team from many miles away on Doe Branch. The barn is in very good condition considering it is over eighty years old and sits in a damp creek bottom. The old house also stood nearby until the new road was built.

9 Fidel & Laura Worley Baker Barn Livestock barn (Early 1900s)

1355 Barnard Road

N35 - 50.535 / W82 - 44.991

Fidel and Laura Worley Baker began their family on upper Big Pine Creek but later moved to the Walnut/Barnard community where they completed their family of fourteen children. Also known as the Major Marler barn, and more recently owned by the late Bill “Bro Rat” Stanton, this barn is the only one of the unique monitor roof barns of



this township that is outside of the Big Pine Creek Valley, and on the east side of the French Broad River. In addition to the monitor roof, it has the signature diagonal lattice work and milled lapped siding boards. Unlike the other monitor roof barns, it also has small triangular strips of wood in the V-grooves of the metal roofing, perhaps used as reinforcement for the nailing. This was very unusual and had never been seen before. This detail adds credence to the speculation that this style barn was built from a set of mail-order barn plans. As a livestock barn, it has four stalls of sawn framed lumber, and was adapted to air-cure burley tobacco after 1920. The adjacent smaller barn is a general purpose building serving many functions.

SAFE DRIVING SUGGESTIONS:

Before you drive, please remember that this is a DRIVING tour. The barn owners graciously participate but the public is NOT invited to venture onto PRIVATE PROPERTY, including driveways.

The scenic roads in the Walnut Township are narrow, winding mountain roads with many blind curves, few shoulders wide enough to drive onto, and ditches hidden by deep grass. In the early morning and late afternoon there is more local traffic, and Upper Brush Creek Road is especially busy with school traffic during that time. While observing the barns, please pull off, stop, or slow down ONLY where you know it is safe. Use your safety flashers to alert other drivers that you are stopped or driving slowly. Thank you, enjoy these wonderful barns, and be safe!

DRIVING DIRECTIONS FOR THE TWO-HOUR ROUND TRIP TOUR

Begin at the Ingles Market on the Hwy 25/70 in Marshall. Drive north toward Hot Springs for 2.3 miles

Turn left on Ten Point Lane into the parking lot of the Dry Branch FW (Free Will) Baptist. Park in their lot to view the Knox Brigman Barn #1.

Return to Hwy 25/70 and turn left to continue the same direction

Travel 1.3 miles to the traffic light at Upper Brush Creek road and turn right for 0.4 miles to John Baird McDevitt Barn #2 which is across the valley to the left

Continue to Indian Grave Gap Road to turn right to turn around and return to Hwy 25/70

Turn right at the light to continue in the same direction as before and travel 0.7 miles to turn left on Sharp Hollow Road (at the corner of the Walnut Volunteer Fire Department)

Travel 1.6 miles to the Theodore Plemmons Barn #3 on the left side.

Continue 0.4 miles to the T-Intersection at the stop sign and turn left onto Barnard Road

Travel down Barnard Road crossing the French Broad River and bear right to continue on Big Pine Road

After 6.7 miles you will arrive at the Harrison Roberts Barn #4 on the right side

Continue on Big Pine for 1.0 miles to the Rubin McKindley Caldwell & Ruth Caldwell Barn #5 on the right side.

Go another 0.9 miles and bear right onto Big Pine at North Fork Baptist Church

After 0.3 miles the Claude Wild & Katie Wilde Barn #6 will be on the left side.

Go 0.1 miles to turn around in the driveway on the right side and return to the pull off on the right where the sign is for the North Fork Baptist Church and park there for the safest view of

The George Washington Wild & Laura Ratcliff Barn #7 which is in front of you on South fork Road just down from its intersection with Big Pine Road

Return to Big Pine bearing left and travel 5.6 miles to the John & Belle Shelton Barn #8 on the right side where you will only see the top of the barn.

Continue on Big Pine Road to cross the French Broad River where the road becomes Barnard Road. At the point when you have crossed the bridge, travel 0.6 miles to the Fidel & Laura Worley Baker Barn #9 on the right across the lawn.

Continue on Big Pine Road to the T-Intersection and turn right on Sharp Hollow Road and follow it back to Hwy 25/70 and turn right to return to the starting point at the Ingles Market in Marshall.

A special thanks to the kind residents of the Walnut Township for their help in the research information that made this tour possible.