“Montgomery’s Puzzle”

Finding this old barn represents the meaning of serendipity in its truest sense. In early September, 2020, my wife Laura asked me to enter our suburb’s annual holiday art contest. My reply was that I was heavily involved in a project on America’s round barns. Her reply was that Montgomery had plenty of old historic buildings. My reply was that I just wasn’t interested.

After a week of guilty feelings, I remembered seeing an old barn across the road from where my late wife and I raised our children in the 1980s. I wondered if it happened to be still standing. A few days later, I drove by, delighted to see it again. From a distance, the barn – nothing special at first sight – appeared to be circa early 20th century. *Nothing special*, I thought, *but worth checking out.* So I approached a group of men near the barn and asked if one was the owner. “Yes, I am,” one of them replied. After explaining my Ohio Barn Project, I asked if he’d take me inside. As we entered through the tiny door-inside-the-big door (often called a “man-door”), a rarity in old barns, a throwback to medieval times when wickets were used, small, narrow doors inside or next to either a castle’s large double doors or the entry gates of a city. In the case of an old barn, entering through a “man door” would be easier than trying to pull open large barn doors, especially in inclement weather. The long iron hinges were old, too.

Once inside, I couldn’t believe my eyes. The entire barn, a small two-bay English one, typical of the pre-Civil War era in the Midwest, was timber-framed: hand-hewn oak beams, some 30-50 feet long, mortise and tenon joints, and wooden pegs, still in place after 150-200 years. I told Tom Baker, the new owner at the time, that this barn was extremely historic, especially in a suburb, where houses built in the 1960s were being torn down – due to lack of vacant lots – for larger contemporary homes.

Yes, the barn was old. The upper floor, the haymow, was gone, evidenced by the many mortise slots gaping open, slots that once held tenons, hand cut by the early barn builders, whose names, unless a miracle happens, will be lost in history. These builders didn’t have college degrees and they weren’t engineers or architects, yet they could build a barn out of a forest, as early Ohio used to be.

In the early 1800s when this barn was probably built, Ohio – with the exceptions of the first cities – was a massive forest. In his journal, dated June 18, 1817, Norris Birkbank, an Ohio pioneer, wrote, “Yesterday I measured a walnut, 7 in. in diameter, clean and straight as an arrow. Before we entered flat country, there were some hills (near Chillicothe) covered with the grandest white oak[s] I suppose[sic] in America. They measured 14 or 15 feet in circumference, their straight stems rising without a branch to 75 or 80 feet – thousands of them …”

Thus was early Ohio – a forester’s paradise … and a farmer’s nightmare. When the typical farmer arrived, he’d cut down trees, build a log house, and remove trees to clear the land for farming. Then came the barn, though sometimes the pioneers built the barn first and lived in it until they built a farmhouse.

They knew which trees were good for the beams – usually oak or chestnut – and they knew which were good for flooring (oak) and siding (yellow poplar or pine). Next they’d fell a tall, straight tree and, using axes and adzes, shape it into a perfectly square beam. Into the beam they’d cut a slot, called a mortise, and into another beam they’d fashion a tenon, a tongue-shaped projection, which would be inserted into the mortise. Next, they used a hand auger (such 19th century tools are available on Ebay) to drill a hole through the tenon and the mortise, which had to be precisely located. When all the major beams were finished, they’d call upon their neighbors for a barn raising, which meant everyone would pitch in to raise the barn’s framework into place. Wooden pegs, usually of green wood, would be inserted into the mortise and tenon joint and, in time, when the wood swelled, would become a perfect joint, one that’s been used by carpenters for thousands of years. These builders, usually passing down such expertise from one generation to the next, would use either the scribe rule or the square rule method of construction. Unfortunately, though their work has lasted for centuries, photos showing the 19th century builders hewing the logs and cutting the joints are rare.

Montgomery was founded in 1795, seven years after Judge John Cleves Symmes of New Jersey made his famous Miami Purchase of over 300,000 acres in what is now Hamilton, Butler, and Warren counties. Symmes and his associates paid Congress about 67 cents per acre and, after President Washington approved the land patent in 1794, they began selling parcels to settlers. Thanks to a historical report on this old barn, researched by Beth Sullebarger, a historical preservationist, more light has been shed on the ownership.

Using 19th century plat maps, records of the Hamilton County Recorder, and the booklet, *History of Montgomery: 1795 to 1995,* Beth traced the barn back to one of Montgomery’s pioneer families, the Smethursts, who moved here from Pittsford, New York, in 1824. Six years later they purchased a 20-acre lot for $500 from Jesse Stevens, who was the third owner, and may have been farming at the time. In 1844 Lloyd Smethurst bought another lot of nine acres, presumably to expand his farm. In fact, the Montgomery booklet reported that the Smethursts farmed on present-day Cooper Road and that their house, built in the last years of the Civil War, has been preserved. In 1850 Pardon Bowen, an ancestor of current Montgomery resident Jon Schlosser, farmed on 50 acres across the street. Further towards town, the Wilder-Swaim house, circa 1832, sat on a 224-acre farm, which was converted to a golf course in the early 1930s. Its “19th Hole,” a restaurant and bar, was built with lumber from two old barns. Nearby, the Yost Tavern, circa 1809, was located further east on Cooper Road, formerly the junction of two Indian trails, traveled by the Shawnee and Delaware tribes.

Although both Smethurst deeds noted that “appurtenances” (a term likely denoting a house or barn) were present, it’s not known where the barn was located. Over the next 86 years the Smethursts continued ownership, selling in 1916 to Frank Oberle and his wife Emma. At the time, the lot was just over 25 acres.

For the next 70 years the Oberles held the land, selling four parcels in the early 1950s, which might explain the large metal sign inside the barn’s add-on (also having hand-hewn beams though probably built in the late 1800s). The sign advertised “12 acres for sale by owner,” with a phone number of SY 9452. The “two letter and four number” system of phone numbers changed in the late 1940s to two letters and five numbers. In 1930, New York City converted to a 2L-5N plan, though most smaller communities, including one like Montgomery, would have used only four numbers.

In 1985 Thomas G. Baker and his wife Sarah bought the property, now reduced to less than an acre. Wisely he placed a heavy tarp over the roof – which still had the original wood shingles – thereby preserving the barn’s integrity. A leaky roof spells the end for old barns. When Tom died in August, 2020, the lot passed to Thomas, Jr., Charles, and their sister, Gloria Bechtold. Tom said the barn was for sale, granted permission to show Montgomery officials the barn, and gave me some barn siding for the picture frame. I reciprocated with a study painting.

A few weeks later I took city officials – including an architect and Beth, the historic preservation consultant – through the barn and explained the timber framing, as well as the barn’s significance as the last vestige of Montgomery’s farming past. In October I took one of my neighbors through the barn since his ancestors – the Bowens – had farmed across the street, as early as 1850. In October, Tom told me, the adjacent Tree of Life Church purchased the lot, including the barn and farmhouse. Later that month I had a phone chat with the assistant pastor, explaining the barn’s significance and offering a tour to explain its construction. But so far, no tour.

Tom called me in the middle of December, explaining he was returning to his home in Kentucky and had a photo of Oberle as a child that I could have. The next day, Tom was leaving as I arrived and he handed me an impressive professional portrait, 19x15 inches, protected by glass in an ornate gilded frame, 25x29 inches. Hardly the 5x7 inch Kodak print I’d envisioned.

Tom said that he had met Mr. Oberle in the 1970s when he visited his uncle who lived a few doors away and judged that he was around 80 then. Fifteen years later when Tom’s dad bought the house and barn in 1985, Tom again met Mr. Oberle, who had left this portrait hanging on the wall, apparently not having anyone to pass on this family heirloom to – if indeed it was a picture of one of his relatives. He would have been in his late 90s then, which could date the photo to the 1890-1900s. The wide-brimmed hat he wore was typical of Ohio farm boys in the 1890s, as evidenced by a photo, dated 1893, on the website of the Ohio Department of Agriculture. The two lads, posing next to a team of oxen, wear identical wide-brimmed hats.

His dog posed as well, although the boy was holding it with a leash made of rope. The portrait, in its elaborate frame – with a three-inch recessed mounting – indicated that the family was prosperous. Such a large portrait – with its frame – probably cost hundreds of dollars, a considerable amount in those years. Was it Frank Oberle? If so, why would he leave it? Was it a Smethurst? If so, why would they leave it behind? Perhaps someday answers will surface.

Another piece of the puzzle is the farmhouse, which dates to 1896 on a deed recorded in Hamilton County. Does the farmhouse conceal a log cabin, built in an earlier era? Tom said that in 1985, when he helped his dad build a deck, they noticed some huge logs under the foundation.

And, is this barn the oldest one in Hamilton County? Although this is possible and perhaps even likely, a dendrology analysis could date the beams to a specific year, ending speculation, and a media blast might trigger other old barn owners to step forward – if they think they have an earlier one. There are probably answers, hidden somewhere, that may someday shed some light on this historic puzzle.