“The Preacher’s Barn”

Each week when I run in Sharon Woods Park, one of Hamilton County’s crown jewels, I pass this old barn, though, for years, I never paid much attention to it. One morning in the summer of 2015, the sun shone on it, lighting up its honey-brown siding and making me realize it might be a perfect addition to my Ohio barn project. I contacted William Dichtl, the director of this little village, one with several old buildings from the area, to see if I could paint it. He agreed and let me read many articles on how the Heritage Village Museum acquired this piece of Ohio history. It’s a good story.

Let’s go back to the 1700s in Baltimore County, Maryland, where Philip Gatch was born. The year was 1751, a few years before the beginning of the French and Indian War, which lasted until 1763, when Philip turned 12. The strain of England’s worldwide empire was draining its pocketbook, leading to more taxation on its colonists, including those in America. Taxation without representation, which seems to prevalent today as well, fueled our revolution, which began in April of 1775. Philip was 24 then, a convert to Methodism, and had become one of the first American-born Methodist circuit riders, itinerant preachers, which were common in those days. Colonists were becoming tired of England’s taxation, its rigid Puritanism, and its cherished concept of nobility. They wanted a religion that was down to earth. And so, Philip rode from town to town, preaching his Methodist faith, first in New Jersey, then in Maryland, and, during the war, in Virginia.

Once, while preaching in a town, another Methodist minister converted a woman but did not get her husband’s consent. Men ruled in those days. Outraged, the husband told his cronies that he would retaliate against the next Methodist preacher he saw. And, guess who came to town? Philip Gatch was in the wrong place at the wrong time: he was tarred and feathered for something he didn’t do. Despite the damage to an eye from the tarring, he recovered, married, and settled in Virginia, adding farming to his preaching. It was hard to raise a family on a preacher’s income in those days.

As many Virginians, Gatch used slaves to help farm his land. But he grew tired, and perhaps felt guilty, of using slave labor. He freed his eight slaves in 1780, three years before the war ended. Growing even wearier of slavery, and not wanting to raise his family in such an environment, Gatch, with three other families, moved to Ohio in 1798 and settled on farmland on the banks of the Little Miami River in Clermont County. After purchasing land from Jon Nancarrow, who earned the land through a Revolutionary War grant, Gatch built a log cabin in January of 1799, which shows that his family could handle Ohio’s harsh winters: they were hardy pioneers. Shortly before this – in 1794 and up in northern Ohio – General “Mad” Anthony Wayne defeated a coalition of Ohio Indian tribes in the Battle of Fallen Timbers, marking the end to Indian wars in Ohio. This was raw territory.

Rev. Gatch, probably together with his sons, built this barn in the early 1800s and lived here until he died in 1834. In 1800 the territorial legislature appointed him as a justice of the peace. But running the farm was his livelihood. It meant survival. In addition to farming, he spent 20 years as an associate judge in common pleas court, became a delegate from Clermont County to the new state’s legislature, and helped write Ohio’s first constitution. He probably voiced his opinion on slavery, which may have helped to make Ohio a free state. His youngest son, George, followed in his father’s footsteps, becoming a “circuit rider” preacher. Over the years the Gatch family expanded the farm boundaries and kept the farm in the family name until 2014 when a non-profit conservation group, Valley View, purchased the farm to preserve it and open it to the public.

In 1972, another non-profit, Miami Purchase Association, formed in 1964, added the first building in Heritage Village. The group acquired this barn in 1974, moving it from its home in Clermont County to Sharon Woods Park. Eleven other buildings followed, providing a glimpse into Ohioans’ life in the 1800s. Historic Southwest Ohio, yet another non-profit, runs the museum, giving tours and holding events here throughout the year.

The barn has been maintained exceptionally well, its original wood siding and stone foundation work still intact, although new wood shingles were replaced on the roof in 2004. Inside, there’s a massive hand-hewn wooden beam stretching across the interior, mortise and tenon joints, tobacco hanging from the rafters, an old wooden wagon, and many pieces of antique farm equipment. Standing inside the barn, I tried to imagine Rev. Gatch and his sons working in here. Well, they’re gone now, but their memories are preserved in this barn, in this essay, and in this painting – for future generations to enjoy.