“The Land Speculator”

Towards the end of a long day of barn hunting, we stopped at this gray barn, its red paint fading, and met Steve Barthelmas, who owns the barn with his wife Denise. Steve, a trustee of the historical society, had kindly prepared a fact sheet about the farm. Oozing with character, it traced back well into the 1800s. In fact, the farm was listed on the National Register in 1980, a listing that includes the Greek Revival style farmhouse with monitor roofs and a smokehouse, both built in 1825, as well as the barn and a blacksmith shop. The log barn is one of only a few left in Ohio.

The story began with a survey of the land, part of the Virginia Military District. Arthur Fox surveyed 1,000 acres for John Jordan, who may have been a land speculator as many were in that time, hoping to sell parcels of their tract to settlers. Some succeeded; others didn’t. One glaring example is Robert Morris, signer of the Declaration of Independence, a Founding Father, and the financial genius behind the American Revolution. After purchasing land wherever he could, Morris at one time owned over a million acres, more than any other American has ever owned. Unfortunately, he couldn’t sell the lots quickly enough, went bankrupt, ended up in debtor’s prison in Philadelphia, and didn’t even get a funeral.

Fox surveyed this land in June, 1794, three months before the Battle of Fallen Timbers, which, thanks to General Anthony Wayne, concluded the Indian Wars in Ohio and led to settlement of land in western Ohio. In fact, this tract of land became Wayne Township, named after this general who led his army to victory in this battle. Some settlers arrived in 1798.

Abraham and Rebecca Stipp settled here and operated a distillery, which continued for about 10 years. The Stipps then sold 183 acres of this land to Stephen Horsey, who eventually increased the farm to 229 acres. Horsey served as a captain in the War of 1812.

An entrepreneur, Horsey built an inn and tavern in 1825, which served travelers on the old Chillicothe-Columbus Road. Today, the Barthelmas family has converted this historic inn to their residence. It’s also likely that Horsey was involved in building some of the Ohio-Erie Canal system, which was completed in 1832. He also probably worked a grain mill. Records show that he sold a “raccoon burr mill,” powered by a horse. Additionally, Horsey was a land speculator, selling lots to setters to create the communities of Westfall and Montgomery, which never became actual cities. Unlike Morris, he was successful.

His estate of 1837 passed 183 acres to his son Smith Horsey, who owned it until 1865 when he moved to Kansas and sold the farm to Robert Campbell. Interestingly, Robert had been a private under Captain Horsey in the War of 1812. Campbell then sold the farm to George Barthelmas in 1877. Since then, it has been passed down from one generation to another in the same family.

Unfortunately, (revamp this after June visit) due to time constraints, we couldn’t stay to let George show us some interesting features of the barn: a chamfered center post, the L-shaped notched door frame mortise, which secured the bay doors. The barn probably dates to the 1810s, which could be verified by dendrochronology.

With a footprint of about 60x40 feet, the log barn shows that the farmer had a pretty good farming operation going. Most Ohio log barns of that era were small – about 20x24 feet – and reflected subsistence farming. In this one, it’s a joy to examine the neatly-hewn half-dovetail joints along the end walls and to try to visualize the builders cutting them out of trees on the property.

According to Eric Sloane in *An Age of Barns*, by the end of the 1700s, there were about 9,000 log barns on the tax records of Pennsylvania. Less than 2,000 were stone and presumably about half of all American barns during the Revolutionary years were made of logs. Though some log barns started out as cabins for the settler, this one likely did not since the logs show no evidence of chinking. Log barns needed space between the beams for ventilation. Over the years, vertical siding was added to enclose the log structure and the barn was expanded. (must see to describe). Hand-forged metal hinges connect the doors and offer one more glimpse into the past.

Regardless of its year built, this grand old barn remains a testament to the early founders of Pickaway County and in particular to one occupation that many attempted after the conclusion of the American Revolution – the land speculator.