“The Saltbox of Ohio”

This tiny barn, nearly touching busy Ohio Route 229, attracted my attention immediately. Its rusted roof had just the right amount of red and brown in it and the occasional orange and red streaks in the siding enhanced its artistic flair. Some missing and warped boards added to its charm, as did the small window, its white paint still bright, and its haymow door, swung wide open, almost as if it were inviting strangers from the nearby road. The roof was dramatically asymmetrical – one side was short and the other was much longer, sloping down the hill. But my barn scout had no information on it. By luck, a neighbor noticed us milling around the barn and asked us for our credentials – since drug-related crime is on the rise in rural communities. After I explained our mission, the lady gave us contact information for Jeff DePolo, the owner. That was in August, 2015, a day after I played in my last Ohio Golf Association senior state championship, the main impetus for me to visit Mt. Vernon and Knox County.

I eventually contacted Jeff, the barn’s owner, who lives nearby on DePolo Road, which is named after his father, who maintained a prominent farm on this road for many years. Unfortunately, after owning this little barn for 30 years, Jeff didn’t know much it, except that the nearby farmhouse was built in 1892. And, sadly enough but not unusual for a structure that has outlived its usefulness, the barn will be dismantled. Jeff did point me to Larry Wise, a Knox County 74-year-old, who told me that Cecil Horn, the former owner, kept his horse and buggy in the barn. In the old days the horse and buggy competed with Model Ts for room on the dirt roads. He said that they kept a few milk cows and lived on what they farmed. There isn’t much more room in this small barn for anything else.

The next year, I picked up some barn siding that Jeff had given me and discovered that having a battery-powered saw is much better than using an electric one, if one must cut the long planks to fit into the car. The day was hot and humid and carrying the heavy load about 500 yards, with sweat coming out of every pore, convinced me to buy a cordless saw. Lesson learned. I did a few paintings of the barn and enjoyed each of them.

In 2017 I did more research on this interesting barn, trying to figure out why its sloped roof faced north – when the prevailing wind, rain, and snow come from the southwest. And, while the reason for that may remain a mystery, I uncovered the story of this barn. The saltbox of Ohio.

In one of my barn reference books there’s a photo of a barn with a roof like this one, though it’s located on Prince Edward Island, Canada. The author explained that the saltbox style of the roof “focuses the weather” on the north side of the barn. So I looked where one looks for information these days – into the crystal ball of Dr. Google. Thanks to Wikipedia and other sites – including one by a homebuilder who constructs such homes – I found that the saltbox style originated in England in the 1500s, where they were called “outshot” houses.

When English folks settled in New England, they brought this type of house with them, extended the roof, and eventually gave it the name, saltbox. This term came from the name of the wooden box where salt was stored in that era. Salt was important in preserving food, but it was expensive and caked up easily, which led some bright fellow to design a wooden box with a sloped lid, which was hung on the wall near the hearth to keep the salt dry. The sloped lid made it easier to remove the salt, when needed.

The first colonial saltbox house was built in 1638 and many others followed. Families found that they could add on – with a lean-to – to the square shaped house, thereby making the roof asymmetrical, if they needed extra room for storage or for new family members. Eventually the saltbox home was not added on; the roof was built long, sometimes to within six feet of the ground. Folklore attributed this to colonists desiring to avoid “Queen Anne’s tax,” a tax Mother England enforced on structures classified higher than one story. By building one level close to the ground, the saltbox was considered one level, sufficient to avoid the tax. However, Queen Anne didn’t rule England until 1702, making this a quaint New England myth.

By 1750 the saltbox style fell out of favor around Boston, which, in those days, was the fashion hub of the east coast. The last saltboxes were built on New England farms in the early 1800s, though farmers continued to built them in Nova Scotia, New York, and New Jersey. A few, including this one, made it to Ohio.

Why Knox County? Granville Gray, my first Ohio barn and the stimulus for my Ohio Barn Project, lies in Licking County, the county just south of Knox. Colonists from Massachusetts and Connecticut, two states where the saltbox home and barn were prevalent, founded Granville and much of Licking County around 1800, only a few years after General Wayne’s defeat of Tecumseh and the Indians.

Perhaps a few of these New Englanders drifted north into Knox County, founded in 1808. Did a relative of one of these early pioneers learn about the saltbox barn from his or her grandfather and decide to build this one a century later? Maybe.

That might explain why the Knox County farmer pointed the sloped roof north, deciding to ignore central Ohio’s southwesterly weather pattern. Maybe tradition was more important. Listen and you can hear his grandfather’s words, “Son, we always pointed the saltbox roof to the north.”

Why north? In New England storms called “Nor’easters” blow in from the ocean in a north-east direction, bringing wind, rain, and snow. They can be fierce. They wreaked havoc in the 1600s and they wreak havoc today. So the colonists made sure the sloped roof faced north or northeast – to withstand the storms. All the sloped roofs of these early saltbox homes and barns faced north. Yes, maybe tradition played a role when this barn was built.

Unlike his colonial cousins, which were timber-framed – nails were expensive in the 1600s – this Ohio saltbox barn is plank framed, with saw-cut boards nailed to one another. It probably dates to around 1900, not long after the adjacent farmhouse was built. And, it’s rare: I’ve seen hundreds of barns in many states but only one with a saltbox roof. So this is a legitimate Ohio treasure.

But, even though it’s been around for well over a century, its days – like those of many old Ohio barns – are numbered, no thanks to the car that crashed into it years ago. And, although it will be missed, it will survive in this essay and in the paintings, all framed in its own barn wood, thanks to Jeff, which will remind us of the early Ohio farmers as well as those patriots of 18th century New England who started the revolution that gave us our freedom. Goodbye, Saltbox of Ohio.