“Johnny’s Legacy”

In the spring of 2018, after touring the barns of Trumbull County and after driving through torrential rain on I-76 through the Akron area, I visited two barns in northern Wayne County, drove about half an hour to the southern part of the county, and arrived at the Blue Barn Winery. It was pouring again.

*No problem*, I thought, the rain would give me a chance to chat with the owner, Brett Urian, who greeted me in the parking lot, offering an umbrella. We escaped the rain inside the farmhouse, “a pioneer house,” as declared by a metal plaque on the brick wall – “More than 100 years old, 1834, Wayne County Historical Society.” Another plaque, not far away and also awarded by the society, states, “County Historical Landmark, Blue Barn, 1868.” It was nice to see that historical preservation has been recognized.

Brett and his wife Marcia have worked magic in this old farmhouse, bringing out its charm, keeping its rustic flavor, but not modernizing it too much. I enjoyed walking through it. I’m not sure who the original farmer was and I don’t know if he built an earlier barn, but, according to records in the county office that Brett found, the blue barn was present in 1868, not long after the end of the Civil War. Perhaps they painted it blue, a highly unusual color for a barn, to honor the many Ohioans who gave their lives in that bloody conflict.

Brett, who owns a busy environmental clean-up company, moved here to escape city life and relax in the peace and serenity of rural Ohio. They also liked the idea of restoring an old barn and farmhouse, goals which they have accomplished. In 1999 when they purchased the farm, the bank side of the barn had caved in, requiring major work. But, unlike many old barns, this one didn’t require a new roof. In fact, the roof may be the original, made of tin shingle plates, which rarely last over 100 years, unless painted on a regular basis. Thomas Jefferson, an American Founding Father, principal author of the Declaration of Independence, and third president of the United States, advocated this type of interlocking tin shingles and used it on his mansion, Monticello, which he began building in 1769 and finished in 1808.

Inside, there’s evidence of local sawmills – all the beams are saw-cut – somewhat unusual in an Ohio barn this old, where hand-hewn timber was the norm. Brett guesses the barn may have been used for dairy cows, common in that era, crops, and hay. The livestock were kept downstairs and grain was threshed upstairs.

Even though neighbors remember the barn always in blue, when Brett had it repainted, he found white paint underneath the original blue. Some of the old timers said it was painted blue as a symbol of patriotism around the time of World War I. So, perhaps this barn honored both the Civil War vets and those of the first World War.

A few years after they moved in, a neighbor, Andy Troutman, suggested that they turn their barn into a winery. Brett told me that he hesitated, not wanting to compete with Troutman Vineyards, a short jog down the road. But Andy reassured him, believing that two wineries would attract more tourists than one could and that would mean better business for both. So, Brett studied, took classes, and became a wine maker, planting the vineyard in 2008, and turning “old blue” into a vibrant scene, one with live music on most weekends.

Today they have five labels – Barn Dance Red, Barn Dance White, General Wooster Red, Lady Wooster White, and Rumspringa. The last one, named in honor of Brett’s Amish friends, conjures up the time when Amish young people are given a chance to “taste” life outside the community before deciding to join. The two Woosters, whose name was taken for the Wayne County seat, revive the memory of Major General David Wooster, a 1738 Yale grad and a hero in the American Revolution, the only American general to lose his life in the war. His wife Mary, daughter of the president of Yale, may have been a spy for General Washington after the death of her husband. Possibly because of this and because her husband had won victories, in 1779 British troops attacked New Haven, targeted Mary’s home, abused her, and destroyed her furniture. Actions like that spurred Connecticut loyalists to enlist on the American side. Even though in her later years, she became destitute and had to appeal for relief aid, she is remembered in the Mary Clap Wooster Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, which was organized in 1893 and is based in New Haven. Hooray, the Blue Barn Winery has given an old barn a new purpose.

But, although these are wonderful examples of labors of love, the real story, as related to me by Brett, involves a fellow who may have walked here – passing the farmhouse – in the early 1800s, preferring walking to riding, showing his love for his fellow creature, the horse. The trail, today’s Ohio Route Three, was formerly an Indian trail and the farmhouse was originally a trading post. The fellow was Johnny Appleseed, a real person, not a folklore legend like Paul Bunyan, Pecos Bill, or John Henry. And, yes, he might have walked this trail, in front of the Laske’s farmhouse. Barefoot.

John Chapman, his real name, born in 1774 in Massachusetts, was a child during the American Revolution. He died in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, in 1845. After serving in the War, his father brought his family of twelve children to Ohio in 1805. John was 31 then but he started his life’s work much earlier, working as an apprentice in an apple orchard, which is how he learned the trade of nurseryman.

Popular image depicts Johnny, barefoot and raggedly dressed, tossing apple seeds along the roads wherever he walked. Close, but not quite right. Using his knowledge from working in an orchard, he planted trees in nurseries, put fences around them to protect the plantings from livestock and deer, and left them in care of a local, who sold the trees on a sharecropper basis. Johnny returned every year or two to tend the nursery, which he owned. According to Brett, he also allowed the sharecroppers to live, rent-free, as long as they would care for animals, notably horses, that he rescued. Johnny was not only an early environmentalist but an animal rights person as well.

He started his nursery business in Warren, Pennsylvania, a small village, founded in 1795, alongside the Alleghany River and bordering today’s Alleghany National Forest. From Pennsylvania, he moved to Ohio, starting nurseries in Ashland, Richfield, and Columbiana counties. Along with seeds of apple trees, Johnny also spread the gospel of the Swedenborgian church – both to white settlers and to Native Americans, who respected him, feeling that he was someone who had been touched by the Great Spirit, according to Jeffrey Kacirk in his book, *Forgotten English*.

By the time he died in 1845, even though the financial crisis of 1837 affected his tree business, his sister received 1,200 acres of his nurseries in Ohio and Indiana. According to Brett, the sharecropper of some of the nurseries often was able to buy the land by paying the taxes owed.

It’s fun to think that perhaps, 200 years ago, Johnny Appleseed, stopped in at this trading post on the old Indian trail, preached a little, and, in return, got a hot meal and a room for the night. Anyway, Brett and Marcia continue the tradition by keeping horses and donkeys that have been rescued – saving them from the glue factory – and honoring Johnny’s legacy. Even though he’s long gone, his spirit lives on.