

State of the Tobacco Barns of Southern Maryland

Report

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Executive Summary

The tobacco barns of Southern Maryland played a central role in the agricultural economy of the region for almost four hundred years. The architectural evolution of the barns provides a fascinating glimpse into both the persistence of traditional barn framing methods and innovations that were implemented over time in response to changes in the cultivation of tobacco. Further study of the tobacco barns will continue to yield valuable information about the history and culture of Southern Maryland.

Although the successful implementation of the Tobacco Crop Conversion Program (Tobacco Buyout) has rendered the barns obsolete for their original use, they retain the potential for new uses. Finding these uses is the challenge facing farmers today. While there is no exact count of how many barns remain, it is estimated there may be as many as five thousand. They fall into various categories as to their location, condition and current use.

The remaining barns face a variety of human and natural threats including obsolescence, pressure from rapid residential growth, animal and insect damage and the like.

Recent agricultural data indicate urbanizing farmland and a rapid change in the dynamics of land use in the fast growing Southern Maryland region. The viability of farming in Southern Maryland is an important issue highlighted by the data. County governments and their planning departments are also monitoring these statistics as they implement their land use policies.

It is clear that land use decisions will affect the survival of tobacco barns. The preservation strategies listed at the conclusion of this document are merely suggestions with which to begin a dialogue. The purpose of today's meeting is to generate new ideas from as many perspectives as possible and to take steps to translate ideas into preservation actions.

Tobacco Barns of Southern Maryland

The tobacco barns of Southern Maryland are the defining architectural characteristic of the rural landscape of the region. For almost four hundred years the barns were essential to the production of Maryland's money crop. English settlers who first came ashore in what is now St. Mary's County were quick to understand that the "sotweed" cultivated by the Piscataway people could be a profitable crop for sale to European and domestic markets. By the turn of the eighteenth century, settlers had scattered across the Southern Maryland landscape and established themselves on large and small plantations devoted almost exclusively to the production of tobacco.

So great was the settlers' preoccupation with the production of tobacco that the Maryland



Assembly was forced to enact legislation requiring growers to plant at least two acres in corn for food. Regulation of the crop, the establishment of quotas, and the implementation of inspection standards remained a contentious issue not only in Maryland, but also among the colonies of Maryland, Virginia, and the Carolinas. In 1732 the Maryland Assembly made tobacco legal tender in the colony. An article entitled "Tobacco and the Rise of Writing in Colonial Maryland" by Capper Nichols, which appeared in the *Mississippi Review*, argues that the first printing presses were established in Maryland to air the controversy about the "social and financial crises brought about by a series of depressions in the tobacco market." Later the presses turned to more literary works, such as Ebenezer Cook's poem "The Sotweed Factor," which still focused heavily on the world of tobacco growing.

Architecture of Southern Maryland Tobacco Barns

To cure their tobacco, the colonists constructed barns in a manner similar to that employed by the Piscataways, but with an eye toward producing a much larger crop. While no seventeenth century barns remain, a few barns from the eighteenth century survive. By far the largest number of tobacco barns date from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Later barns that have been documented by architectural historians demonstrate the use of traditional English timber framing methods but also indicate a steady willingness to change and improvise over time to adapt to agricultural conditions and economic forces.

The tobacco barns of Southern Maryland are emblematic of this region and cannot be easily compared with other barns in the United States, for one important reason. Southern Maryland tobacco was air-cured, while growers in Virginia and the Carolinas implemented flue (heat) curing methods that required a different barn construction. Kentucky primarily grows Burley tobacco which is also air-cured so barns there are somewhat similar, but on average much smaller than Southern Maryland barns.



Unlike feed or stable barns, which always contain a center aisle with storage lofts located above, tobacco barns are configured into “rooms” that are typically four- or five-foot bays, where the tobacco plants are hung impaled on stakes. The tobacco is hung up to the full height of the barn to maximize the use of all available space for optimal drying of the leaves.

Because tobacco barns are designed to support hanging weight from their rafters, it can be very difficult to reconfigure them for “alternative” uses. Tobacco barns are essentially compartmentalized throughout. The tiers that extend across the barns at all levels make it difficult to readapt the barns for new uses, even for storage of large farm equipment.

Relocated Barn Calvert County

Tobacco Barns Today

Architectural historian Orlando Ridout V of the Maryland Historical Trust estimates that there are approximately five thousand tobacco barns in Southern Maryland in 2004.

- ***Categories***

The barns in Southern Maryland fall into the following categories:

1. Barns on private land, either farms or residential lots, that were abandoned for tobacco years before the Tobacco Buyout was implemented

2. Barns on public property such as county and state parks
3. Barns owned by private non-profit foundations such as Sotterley Plantation in St. Mary's County and Samuel Mudd House in Charles County
4. Barns on private farms included in the Tobacco Buyout
5. Barns on private farms still in use for tobacco production

- ***Condition***

The barns in each of these categories are in varying condition. Some have been well maintained, even restored, while others have been abandoned to the elements and have nearly collapsed.



- ***Threats***

The remaining tobacco barns, including those in relatively good condition, are threatened by a number of factors.

Human

- The success of the Tobacco Conversion Program, which has removed most tobacco barns from agricultural use
- Rapid residential growth in Southern Maryland, which has consumed thousands of acres of formerly agricultural land

- Neglect
- Demolition for weathered lumber
- Arson and other vandalism

Natural

- Fire
- Natural aging
- Animal and insect damage
- Rain and snow
- Vegetation damage



Agricultural Land Information

The data below on acreage in farms for each county in Southern Maryland was obtained from the Maryland Department of Planning. These are the most recent data available.

<i>County</i>	<i>Farmland (number of acres)</i>		<i>Decrease (percentage)</i>	<i>Decrease (number of acres)</i>
	<i>1997</i>	<i>2000</i>		
Anne Arundel	36,348	35,218	.03	1,130
Calvert	35,274	30,032	.14	5,242
Charles	56,648	52,056	.08	4,592
Prince George's	49,257	45,462	.07	3,795
St. Mary's	71,920	68,153	.05	3,767

Sources: Chart prepared by the Maryland Department of Planning, July 2000, and Census of Agriculture, 1997

Strategies for Tobacco Barn Preservation

These are suggestions that could be undertaken to ensure the survival of tobacco barns.

1. Establish a fund administered through Preservation Maryland that would make small grants available to farmers.
2. Work with Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Fund and private land trusts to increase the funding available to preserve agricultural land.
3. Work with the Tri-County Council for Southern Maryland to promote alternative crops.
4. Invite the University of Maryland Agricultural Extension program to take part in barn and farm preservation efforts.
5. Convince local and state politicians of the need to preserve traditional agricultural buildings and the rural landscape.
6. Join with Barn Again! and barn organizations in all the states to lobby for passage of federal historic barn preservation legislation.

Brome Barn in St Mary's County

circa 1785



Tobacco Barn Summit
November 15, 2004
Community Solutions for Preserving Historic Tobacco Barns

Break-out Group #1 Threats

Question 1: Does our "State of the Tobacco Barns" report identify the key threats to Southern Maryland's historic tobacco barns and the surrounding landscape? Are there threats that the report does not cover? Threats identified include:

- Sale of land: Tobacco Buyout agricultural use requirement expires in 5 years.
- Retirement money: buyout participants will sell land to fund retirement
- Difficulty of adaptive use will result in more barn demolition
- Removal of barns to make way for residential and commercial growth
- Liability issues are forcing barn owners to demolish unused barns.
- Lack of a comprehensive list of qualified barn repair people.
- Lack of a complete tobacco barn inventory in Southern Maryland
- Political will to support barn preservation must be developed.
- Few tax incentives targeted at tobacco barns to encourage voluntary participation in preservation efforts.
- Underestimation by barn owners of the historical and cultural value of barns.
- Ignorance of newcomers who own barns of their historical significance.
- Cost of preservation scenic landscape must be shared by all citizens.

Question 2: What organizations and agencies are actively addressing these threats at the local, state and national levels? How are they addressing these threats? Responses to threats include:

- The Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Program saves productive agricultural land and woodland.
- Tax credits for ag use buildings
- Transfer of Development Rights programs in Southern Maryland
- Maryland initiatives like Program Open Space save land-indirect help for barns.

- Historic Districts that include tobacco barns could play a larger preservation role.
- Local natural resources conservation group efforts indirectly help tobacco barns.
- Barns are being demolished and lumber reused: sale of salvage to fix or pay for survivors?)
- Lobby for the resubmission of the National Barn Preservation Bill

Question 3: What are the best ways to convey the consequences of these threats to the public? Educational opportunities include:

- A website on the Internet could convey regional or county specific information.
- Other media: newspapers, television, and radio can deliver the barn preservation message to the public. Free public service announcements may be a start.
- Expand the advocates for barn preservation beyond the preservation community.
- Art gallery shows featuring tobacco barns: public education and fund raising.

Break-out Group #2 New Agricultural Uses

Question 1: What are the most promising new agricultural uses for tobacco barns in Southern Maryland?

- Cut Flower Processing
- Grain Storage
- Horse Stabling
- Organic Farming Operations
- Equipment Storage
- Roadside Market/ Farm Products Retail/Agritourism
- Orchard Processing
- Exotic Animals and Livestock shelters
- Tobacco
- Non-Agricultural Uses
 - Boat and trailer storage
 - Education Center

Question 2: How can historic tobacco barns be adapted to serve these new uses? What are the key obstacles to adaptive use of the tobacco barns?

- Lack of technical support: need information on reuse options
- Lack of financial support: funding assistance for engineering/architectural fees and repairs
- Mistrust/misinformation: historic preservation restrictions/funding requirements
- Communication: preservation jargon
- Local zoning
- Agricultural vs. commercial use
- Parking and access
- Commercial use in rural areas/size limitations
- State restrictions for on-site retail and processing
- Insurance liability
- Encroachment-development in rural areas
- Neglect: owners that are not interested in options
- Finding raw material for repairs

Question 3: What are the best ways to integrate the preservation and adaptive use of historic tobacco barns into the on-going efforts to promote adoption of new agriculture?

- Direct mailing
- Farm bureaus/Extension Offices
- Newspaper
- County Fairs and other Special Events
- Fact Sheet with contact information (like other ag fact sheets)

Break-Out Group #3: Tourism

Question 1: What are the pros and cons of highlighting historic tobacco barns and the surrounding landscape as tourism attraction?

- Access to barns
 - Many barns on located on private property, under private ownership, which raises insurance and liability issues
 - There must be a benefit to owners to compensate for these costs

- Interpretation
 - Theme and significance must be determined in consultation w/communities and barn owners
 - Why are barns important and why should people visit barns
 - Cultural: expression of the Agricultural process
 - Architectural: expression of an evolution of design
 - Docents or self-guided, such as SMHA's driving tour
 - Combine theme of barn history/tobacco with other themes of So. MD history (SMHA themes, for example)
 - Integration of resources and formation of linkages
 - Play on heart-strings – market the 'endangered' status/designation
 - Stigma in barns' association with tobacco
 - Many contexts to develop – barns could be used to tie together these themes; used to direct and educate tourists—
 - Nostalgia
 - African American history
 - Family history
 - Economics
 - Agricultural history
 - Connection between environment and human activity
 - Discuss difficult or controversial elements of history; they are opportunities for healing
- Inventory
 - Comprehensive inventory needed first
 - basis for evaluation/prioritization
 - in addition to tradition HP survey components, consider criteria such as
 - public v private ownership
 - 'tourism-ready'
 - 'visitor-ready'
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Question #2: What existing "agri-tourism" programs could be applied in Southern Maryland to raise public support for preservation of the region's historic tobacco barns and agricultural landscape?

- Look to others' experiences with resource types
 - Lowell, MA, where the initial investment in one mill complex lead to investment in and preservation of many, and the mill story has now been captured and saved
 - Smith Island, where Islanders wanted tourists, but weren't sure what to do with them when they got them

- Make sure farmers understand what is involved with accessibility
 - Address accessibility passively, through videos, museums, photos
 - Public investment may lead to private investment and engagement
 - How tobacco barns fit in the larger context of National tobacco heritage
 - Create a working tobacco farm museum
 - Tobacco barns as icon for larger issue – agricultural ecosystems and economic/environmental history of the Chesapeake region
 - This isn't just tourism – education must be tied in
- Current barn status
 - Barns will continue to be lost until new systems are put into place
- Adaptive Use
 - Other tourism uses are important
 - Not just education/interpretation
- Tourism Anchors
 - Capitalize on tourism hubs (for example, St. Mary's City) for barn tourism activities
 - Need to articulate what tourism can/cannot do for barns
- Preservation of barns -- priorities
 - Save those barns that are stable
 - Pick "low hanging fruit"
 - Market ready
 - Those that visitors want to visit (along byways, near hubs, are ready for visitors, etc.)
 - Protect barns along scenic byways
 - Establish systems to assist barn owners with maintenance (barn 'habitat for humanity' etc)
 - Preserve landscapes as well as barns
- Create constituency of barn lovers
 - Build on light-house model
 - Poster (regional tourism committee already has this underway)
 - Calendar
 - Book
 - Tours (driving tours, passport tours or 'barn challenges', National Register travel agenda, Scenic Byways map, etc.)

- Get visitor-ready barns into Maryland field-trip guide geared to state ed. requirements
- Get owners on board
 - Use the inventory to contact barn owners
 - Do owners want assistance maintaining barns?
 - Are owners willing to make their barns accessible?
- Stress that barns help So MD keep its sense of place and identity.
- Rural context is a draw.

Breakout Group # 4 Assistance, Incentives, and Resources

Question 1: What types of assistance, incentives, and resources (human, technical, and financial) are needed to encourage preservation of historic tobacco barns and the agricultural landscape?

- Contractor and technical support list for barn owners
- Creation of a how-to barn repair manual or guide
- Adopt a Barn Program: local businesses could fund repair of selected barns
- New agricultural uses such as stables for horses and cows
- Apply (Calvert) historic tax credits to barn infrastructure and façade work, and implement similar programs in other counties
- Expand “barn credit” tax adjustment currently available in St. Mary’s County to other Southern Maryland Counties
- Lobby local officials to create a local tax credit for barns being adaptively used
- Education for property owners about differences between local and National Register historic designation
- Establish a group insurance program for barn owners
- Survey and add more barns to the Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties and the National Register of Historic Places
- Prioritize what barns/land should be protected in each county
- Lobby for passage of a federal Historic Barn Preservation Bill
- Create a list of private foundations and other entities that provide financial support for barn preservation
- Investigate soil conservation income tax credits that may be applicable to barn preservation and new agricultural uses of barns
- Lobby the Maryland General Assembly to allot a portion of Tobacco Buyout money for preserving barns
- Urge Planning Commissions in Southern Maryland to require barn preservation as mitigation for subdivisions. Also possible: PCs could require “mini-endowments for any preserved structure, or require a

contribution to county park and recreation funds established to finance future repairs to preserved structures

- Work with non-profit organizations and government entities to coordinate activities. A loose affiliation of these groups would improve communication, and act as an information clearing house, particularly for grants

Question 2: What existing resources at the local, state and national level could be maximized in Southern Maryland? What new resources should be created for use in Southern Maryland? Existing resources include:

- Preservation Maryland Special Grant Program
- United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) funds for economic development
- Maryland State Highway Administration (SHA) transportation enhancement and scenic byways funding
- Maryland Historic Property Rehabilitation Tax Credit Program (administered by MHT)
- Federal Historic Preservation Tax Credits (administered by MHT), but only for income producing properties—this also includes a 10% tax credit for pre-1936 buildings not listed on the National Register
- Maryland Capital Grant Program (administered by MHT)
- New planning grants would be helpful, especially for groups with multiple barns

Question 3: What organizational partnerships should be formed to ensure the development and use of these preservation and conservation resources?

- Form a coalition of Southern Maryland Counties to establish and coordinate barn preservation resources
- The Southern Maryland coalition should maintain regular contact with state and national government agencies and local, state and national non-profit groups to develop a coherent tobacco barn preservation program.

List of Tobacco Barn Summit Attendees