

The Bowman Barn

Comments: While preparing the barn project, I have received many e-mails and phone calls offering to help with the project. Below is an offering by Jake Palowchak regarding the Bowman Barn in Briar Creek Township, just off Route 93. He was raised on this farm and has recently built a 3/4" to 1' replica of the barn. The replica has earned numerous awards which he will tell us about in the last piece. The photos of the replica are his. All other photos are by Donna Laubach. Steve Varonka



John and Jesse Bowman, sons of Thomas Bowman, built the barn around 1803. Thomas Bowman moved his family to Briar creek in 1790 from Mount Bethel Pa. Thomas was a Methodist preacher and spent a great part of his time preaching in Pennsylvania and New York. Two of his sons, John and Jesse, ran the farm in his absence forming a business partnership in their teens that would last most of their adult life.



The barn as originally built was 70' long by 35' wide and 14' high at the eaves. Framed in Red or Pitch pine for the beams, rafters, flooring and studs, the posts were oak. The original siding was clapboard of unknown wood. The original roof was undoubtedly wood shakes but again the

species is unknown. It is a bank barn as were most Pennsylvania barns. Meaning built into the side of a hill allowing ground level access to both floors. The posts and beams were hand hewn with axes. A sash saw sawed all the smaller framing members studding, braces etc. A sash saw moved up and down in a frame (like a window sash) and pre-



dated circular saws, which really did not come into their own until the 1840s. Here I must point out a common misconception that many people have about hewn timbers, believing they were hewn with an adze. An adze is a finishing tool and it would be unusual for anyone to spend all the extra time adzing a beam when a perfectly acceptable finish could be done in much less time with various types of axes. Of all the barns I have examined I have yet to see one that showed adze marks on the framing. The roof truss, called a Principle Rafter Side Purlin, is a style that began to appear in Pennsylvania circa 1780 and is not

common. It is a four bay barn, the bays being the divisions in the main barn floor. It was built with a swing beam, which is a very rare feature on Pennsylvania barns. A swing beam allowed



widening the threshing floor making it possible for animals to tread out the grain. As originally built, the barn does not appear to have had a forebay. A forebay is the projection of the main barn floor over the stable wall and probably the most familiar feature of a Pennsylvania barn.

One of the things about the barn that had always puzzled me was the different qualities of the handwork in the framing. Some of the timber hewing and jointing was quite well done and some other parts were rather crude. On researching



the Bowman family move to Briar Creek, I learned that they had moved there along with several other families from Mount Bethel. One of those persons was Jacob Mack. Jacob was apparently very skilled in the building

trades and had helped erect buildings for many of the early settlers. While walking through the cemetery at the old Stone Church I found Jacob Mack's grave marker showing that he died in 1815. I then began to wonder if he had been involved in the construction of the barn and had passed away while it was still incomplete. This might account for the different skill levels I noticed. This did however date the barn a few years younger than what I thought it was. Based on the evidence I had, I assumed a circa 1807-build date. Then several years ago I was able to purchase a copy of *The Bowman Family History* published in 1886. In the book, they spoke of the barn and the fact that it was built by John and Jesse while they were still in their teens, which made the latest construction date 1803. I now believe that the different skill levels shown were the result of these two young men learning and developing skills as they worked on the construction.

The barn has undergone many changes over the years. The Stable wall was set back 4 feet to form a forebay. A

35'x50' straw shed was added. In 1954, Hurricane Hazel took off half the roof and downed the east bent (a bent is a framing section in a timber frame building). The roof was replaced but the east bay was not rebuilt to its original height.



When I look at the barn today, I feel many emotions. I feel the sense of pride of John and Jesse Bowman when, as teenage boys, they built such a structure. I feel sadness when I look at Ray Stiener's name carved on the harness room wall knowing that he died along with some siblings when the stone house on the farm burned (also built by the Bowmans). I feel the joy that myself and many other children over years felt as we played in the barn. I feel the satisfaction that we got from a hard days work well done. I feel sadness knowing that after providing service to many families the barn's time is ending, powder post beetles and rot are taking their toll. Finally, I feel honored to be a part of one of the families that had this barn as a part of their lives. The Bowmans, The Millards, The Pilkingtons, The Freases, The Stieners, The Shellhammers, The Polowchaks. It has served us all well.



I asked Jake to tell us why he built the barn. The following is his story. Many thanks to Jake for his story. sv

Even when I was a young boy, I was always interested in old things and how things were done in the “old days”. I was constantly asking the old people that lived near the farm where I was raised about how they used to do things, local history etc. I used to love talking to my grandparents, Arthur and Iva Redline, about how things were when they were growing up. I developed a special interest in old farm buildings; barns, pig pens, smokehouses, chicken coops, springhouses, mills etc..

One year, when I was at the Bloomsburg Fair, I was about 12 years old (1967,) I saw a replica of a covered bridge that someone had made. I must have spent hours looking at it. I thought it was about the greatest thing I had ever seen. At some point, I got the idea that it would be great to build a similar replica of the barn that was on our farm. I started, unfortunately at 12 years of age my skills did not match my dreams. I actually started two replicas over the next 8 years or so, neither of which suited me.

Over the next 30 or so years, the idea was always in the back of my mind. I studied timber frame construction and barn architecture. I kept studying our barn learning more about it and about the people who had lived on the farm. I also became a semi professional cabinetmaker and spent some time working in construction, so my skills were starting to catch up with my ideas. A few years ago, I decided that if I was going to do it I had better do it soon while the

barn was still family owned and still standing.

I tried to build the replica, as it would have appeared in early 1800s. The replica was built to a scale of 3/4 ” = 1'. The replica features mortise and tenon construction. The floorboards, beams, and rafters were made from material taken from the original barn. As much as possible all the wood in the replica matches the species that were used in the original. Where the original species could not be determined (i.e. shingles and siding) woods that matched the period, grew locally, and were appropriate to the application were used. Such as White oak shingles, American chestnut basement sill and posts, and White Pine siding. Several hundred hours later it was finished.

A friend suggested that I enter it the county fair, so I tried it. It won 1st place in decorative woodworking, 1st place in overall woodworking, and best of fair, which sent it to the New York State Fair as the Wayne County Fair representative. There it won first place in New York State. I also entered it in Palmyra Canal Town Days, a local arts and crafts festival where it won another first place.

That is the story of the Bowman barn replica. It was my way of preserving a piece of American history. I have plans to build At least one more barn and a pigpen replica.

