

Kentucky Barns

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Among the most distinctive and attractive elements of the rural landscape in Kentucky are its barns. These large, predominantly wood frame buildings are important reminders of our agrarian past. As you travel through the regions of the state, they vary in type, size, form, and even in color. Thus, they help to create the sense of place in each respective region.

It wasn't until the middle of the nineteenth century that Kentuckians began to construct specialized structures for livestock or crops. Prior to that period, the average farmstead consisted of the dwelling, some domestic outbuildings such as a detached kitchen, slave quarters, smokehouses and springhouses, and perhaps a few agricultural outbuildings. When a typical farmer of the settlement era, had a barn, it tended to be a multi-purpose shelter for livestock and grain storage.

Economic prosperity during the antebellum period meant that building construction increased and the earliest extant barns in Kentucky date from that era. Building on a historically diversified agricultural system, barns have historically been, and continue to be, multi-purpose structures.

Kentucky barns are used for storing crops; sheltering, feeding, or milking animals; curing tobacco, agricultural processing; and storing farm machinery. Most of them serve multiple functions, but some are more specialized, built mainly for the purpose of dairying or curing tobacco, for example. Barns vary by form as well as function, and the two are not necessarily related. Many are built for one function and later used for another, a dairy barn becoming a tobacco barn, for instance. (Photo examples: MN-518, Marion County; ME-4, stock barn, Mercer County; ME-156, stock barn, Mercer County; Prewitt Station, Montgomery County; James McAfee Stock Barn, Mercer County)

Utilizing plentiful natural resources, settlers might build a single pen log dwelling and single pen log barn to hold hay or corn. These log cribs, tucked away inside of a larger frame structure, are not an uncommon sight on the Kentucky landscape; often, the frame extensions or sheds around the log crib are original. While the log crib, raised off the ground on stone piers, would hold grain or hay, the sheds provided shelter for livestock. The crib served as a strong internal structural element around which a larger frame building could be anchored. (Pictures – WS-290, log barn in Bath county, BC-95, double crib log barn, Breckinridge County)

Besides log cribs, most Kentucky barns fall into three types: the English Barn, the Aisled Barn and the Bank Barn. The majority of these structures are of frame construction; over time, frame construction supplanted log construction for outbuildings just as it did for dwellings. There are some masonry examples, primarily brick, but these are rare. (Picture: Hamilton Brick barn, Bath County)

The English barn has its aisle running through the center across the gable rather than parallel to it and typically has three sections on the ground floor, the center aisle and the bays on either side of the aisle. The form was much more common in the antebellum period, so documented examples are sometimes early. In some cases, however, the form continues to be built late, even into the 20th century.

Aisled barns are the most common Kentucky barn type, either gable entry transverse-crib or transverse-frame barns. The form is very familiar: a long aisle down the center from one gable end to the other. The aisles on either side of the center may be divided into stalls or rooms as needed for various functions, and are often ceiled over to create hay lofts above. In cross section, the barn is a simple braced frame which will vary in construction detail over time and from builder to builder. The transverse frame type may serve variously as a stock barn, multi-purpose barn, hay barn, machine shed, or perhaps most commonly, as a tobacco barn.

Examples of bank barns in Kentucky may be transverse frame or English or some variant in plan. The distinguishing feature of the bank barn is that it is set into the side of a hill, so that access can be gained on two levels. The lower level, being partly under ground, has some measure of relief from hot or cold weather for sheltering farm animals.

All of these barn types can be observed on historic Kentucky farms, but perhaps the most ubiquitous and most commonly recognized barn in Kentucky is the 20th century tobacco barn. Although tobacco production has declined somewhat in recent years, tobacco fields are still a familiar site in Kentucky.



Tobacco and Corn, side by side – Jeff Brother farm, Montgomery County, Kentucky (photo by Janie-Rice Brother)



Tobacco field, Brother farm, 2004, Montgomery County, photo by Janie-Rice Brother

Two types of tobacco are grown in Kentucky, and each has its own barn type: smoke cured and air cured. Smoke cured tobacco barns are found mainly in the Western regions of the state, such as the Purchase area. Tobacco growing was not a significant part of the region's early agricultural economy, which was devoted to livestock such as hogs and mules, and the cultivation of hay and corn. Tobacco production grew significantly in the late nineteenth-early twentieth century, following the rise in popularity of cigarettes. Consequently, the majority of tobacco barns are predominantly from the twentieth century.

Tobacco is also frequently cured in barns originally designed for other purposes, such as dairy barns or even small outbuildings such as corn cribs and sheds. At the same time, many multi-purpose barns were designed to cure tobacco and simultaneously serve one or more other purposes.

The typical form for an air-cured tobacco barn in Kentucky is a large, transverse frame barn (MN 273, for example). Large doors at each gable end open into an aisle that runs down the center. There are typically vented louvers along the sides of the building (these are visibly open at MN 515). The interior frame is criss-crossed with poles from which to hang the tobacco, which is attached to tobacco sticks.

Tobacco barns are usually accompanied by stripping rooms where the tobacco leaves are removed from the stalks and tied to tobacco sticks for drying. Stripping rooms are typically small shed roof appendages to the front or side of the barn, accessible either from within the barn or from an exterior door. Detached stripping sheds are also common. In some cases, the stripping room may be of masonry construction in contrast to the frame of the barn. Stripping rooms commonly have some accommodation for heat such as a stove or electric heater.

Tobacco barns are frequently located well away from the house, in the agricultural area, grouped with other barns. It is also pretty typical to find tobacco barns in isolated locations well away from a house or agricultural complex, in close proximity to tobacco fields and situated on rises to take advantage of winds for drying. In some cases, they are situated near rural roads to facilitate loading tobacco from multiple locations.

Though designed for a specific crop, tobacco barns hold fast to the multi-purpose theme of Kentucky's historic barns. Many tobacco barns house tobacco up-above the aisles, while cattle are fed below, or horses are stabled.



(Tobacco/livestock barn, Montgomery County, photo by Janie-Rice Brother)

Sheds built to the side accommodate hay rolls (Picture: Keller Jones Tobacco Barn, Mercer County) or equipment. A distinguishing characteristic of a tobacco barn is the ridgeline ventilators, while the barn might also boast a hay hood and partial loft. (Picture: BH-281 Tobacco & Stock barn, Bath County).

The historic diversity of Kentucky's farms will play a key role in the preservation of our state's historic agricultural resources. Tobacco barns and their adaptive reuse may enable not only the barn itself to remain functional, but also allow a farmer to continue his livelihood. Through farming is not the mainstay of the economy that it once was, barns and other agricultural outbuildings tell the story of the development of the Bluegrass State – we hope you will attend the Barn Alliance Conference in May to see our heritage and our amazing rural landscapes!

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