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The 'big question' answered: How to determine which buildings are worth saving

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(Last week, we asked readers this question: How should society determine which buildings are worth saving? Here are some of the responses we received.)

Barns should be a priority

Since I'm somewhat of an agricultural historian and barn preservationist, my bias for saving old structures is toward old barns and the surrounding farmstead. These structures are a testament to the hard work and endurance of our forefathers who settled New Hampshire's rocky hillsides and endured long, cold winters to establish settlements around the state.

Preserving these old barns provides us an attachment to the agricultural roots that gave our state its reputation for honesty, hard work and Yankee ingenuity. When people travel around New Hampshire, they aren't admiring urban sprawl and industrial development, but they find solace in the open fields and mountains, and nearly as pure is the sight of beautiful farmsteads with old barns, which I call "constructed landscape."

In the 1700s the old English barn was usually the first structure erected almost simultaneously with a modest farm house on a newly settled farm. This was a small barn for subsistence agriculture that characteristically had a low-pitched roof and doors under the eaves. These were built from timber hauled in from the back fields and hand hewn to square 8-by-8 beams, often the full 40-foot length of the building. Crews of joinery carpenters came to the sight to meticulously create the mortise and tenon joints that would fit these barns together like a box. Then the local farmers would raise these sections into place and fasten vertical, pine boarding on the outside. Later in the 1850s, farmers shifted to the larger, "Yankee-style" barn, which had a steeper pitch roof and the doors at the ends of the barn. These were built in the heyday of New Hampshire agriculture and largely what you see today.

When I think of my favorite barn structures that have been preserved in the Concord area, my mind takes me to the Rolfe Barn in Penacook. I remember the dedication of time and money that citizens readily gave to save this piece of local history. This is a double English barn, which was built in the northern most area of settlement at the time. Its size and detail are an indication of what was a once successful farm operation. It is great that this is now open to the public and people can go inside and admire this symbol of agriculture that is still with us.

JOHN C. PORTER

Boscawen

(The writer is a UNH Extension professor and specialist emeritus.)

Hearts, minds and preservation

Preservation often begins with the heart rather than the intellect. But unless we own and can endow the building we love, we need to convince others of its value if we hope that posterity will sustain our personal stewardship into the future.

Sometimes, too, an architectural treasure can be invisible except to expert eyes, and unwittingly lost. Even when such a treasure is recognized, its long-term preservation usually requires a commitment beyond the ability of most private owners.

Not every building that society should save is beautiful, or even easily recognized as important. Well into the 1970s, scores of potentially significant buildings were bulldozed in New Hampshire, especially during urban renewal in the "blighted" neighborhoods of Portsmouth, Laconia and Claremont, with little effort to investigate their significance. Others are still being burned by local fire departments as training exercises.

In 2009, New Hampshire's preservation community was alerted to a "garrison house" in a rural area of Franklin. Inspection revealed what appeared to be an ordinary bungalow. But hidden under the shingled skin of that bungalow was a hewn log house of the type that predominated on the New Hampshire frontier in the mid-1700s. The only other known example of such a house, in Campton, had fallen down in the 1940s.

Here in Franklin stood what may have been the last surviving frontier log dwelling in the state.

Despite efforts to document its significance, the log house was eventually dismantled and removed.

But there is help. Many towns have heritage commissions, which are the first points of contact for surveying and protecting significant local buildings and sites. The New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources maintains the online “My New Hampshire,” a photo-sharing campaign that invites us to proclaim our affection for buildings or places in the Granite State. The division also maintains the State Register of Historic Places, a listing that formally documents such properties.

The New Hampshire Preservation Alliance, New Hampshire’s statewide nonprofit preservation advocacy organization, always tries to be responsive to pleas for help from local preservationists. The alliance hosts the “Seven to Save” program, an annual listing of the most endangered historic resources in New Hampshire, which has saved many a threatened structure. Together with a number of private preservation consultants, these organizations can help us to translate the inspiration of our own hearts into persuasive words that can open the minds and hearts of others.

JAMES L. GARVIN

Pembroke

(The writer is a retired state architectural historian.)

Let’s save as many old buildings as possible

I recently read your question of the week, “How should society determine which buildings are worth saving?” I must say that I strongly disagree with the question at hand.

The question should not be: Which buildings are worth saving? The question should be: Which one do we save first?

All old buildings can serve a purpose. Look at how well the city of Portsmouth has utilized all their old buildings. Their downtown is in excellent historic shape. Businesses seeking space should definitely at least consider old buildings that are vacant that may need some upgrading and repairs as opposed to building an entire new structure, which would likely be much more costly and take up more space. Use what is already there. Have doubts? Take a look at all the businesses that currently occupy old buildings, barns and houses and are running very successfully.

Here are just a few businesses that I personally have visited that occupy old buildings: Bittersweet Blessings, Chester; Dover Saddlery, Plaistow; Harris Family Furniture, Chichester; Lazy Lion restaurant, Deerfield; Manchester Music Mill, Manchester; Merrimack Street Volvo, Manchester; and Muse Paintbar, Manchester.

It's definitely not impossible, and old buildings should not be deemed obsolete just because they're old. Every time we lose an old building we lose a part of our country's history and it changes the landscape of the town or city in which it stood, which is very sad.

Please consider using an old building, house or barn for your home or business or both.

MEGAN RHEAUME

Epsom

A Belmont treasure

New Hampshire has many old buildings because we were settled early in our nation's history. How do we choose which ones to save? Which ones deserve our preservation efforts and our money?

Perhaps the most important consideration is the actual history of the building: When was it built, by whom, for what use and in what location? Further, what condition is it in and to what use can it be put if we save it? Lastly, is it recognized by historic preservation professionals as worth saving?

Here in Belmont, we have saved the Belmont Mill, bandstand, library and Province Road Meeting House for all of those reasons. Now, we are working to save the last of our major historic structures.

We are making real progress on saving and re-using the 1894 Gale School. It was built in the Victorian stick-built architectural style as Belmont's first central school and was built on a site overlooking the downtown by a renowned local builder with funds donated by Napoleon Gale. It needs some exterior repairs and painting, but the framing itself is in great shape. The bell tower stands some 70 feet high, and it is an imposing structure.

Although many Belmont residents attended the Gale School and have strong attachment to it, the school district no longer has a use for it. It is now in the way, and must be moved and repurposed.

The nonprofit Lakes Region Community Developers (formerly Laconia Area Community Land Trust) has agreed to take it over, restore it and repurpose it as a vibrant community asset. It is on the N.H. Register of Historic Places, will be on the

National Register once moved, has received some grant funding from the LCHIP program and was selected last year as one of the "Seven To Save" by the N.H. Preservation Alliance.

The Save Our Gale School group has agreed to accept the school, secure a site for it, move it to that site and then turn it over to LRCD. Arrangements have been made, many donations or pledges of money and services have been received, and we are now just seeking more pledges and donations in order to complete our phase of this historic preservation project. This one's worth saving.

WOODBURY P. FOGG

Belmont

Moultonborough's rural character is at risk

Statewide heritage commissions, which work toward the proper recognition, use and protection of significant historical and cultural resources in our communities, can play an important role in determining which historic buildings are "worth saving."

Heritage commissions encourage the reuse and redevelopment (rather than demolition) of existing historic buildings, which often define our communities. Saving community landmarks and retaining small-town character are seen as essential in statewide efforts to attract investment, draw new residents and visitors, support local businesses, and promote economic vitality and year-round tourism.

In Moultonborough, the heritage commission has focused recent attention on the future of at-risk community landmarks in Moultonborough Village, an area increasingly compromised by the encroachment of strip development along Route 25. Key character-defining village buildings, most noticeably the French-Taylor House and the Moultonborough Grange Hall, are now under threat by neglect, lack of planning and development pressures. Both buildings are significant for their community history and for their architecture, and both are on the N.H. Preservation Alliance's statewide "Seven to Save" most endangered properties list.

Loss of either or both of these buildings on Main Street at the center of the historic village would severely impact Moultonborough's rural character, streetscape and sense of place. Since both are associated with important community leaders and key events in our town's history, our efforts focus on how such vacant landmark buildings could find appropriate and new public or commercial uses, in order to be

transformed into vibrant community assets once again. This approach is consistent with town planning goals, most recently articulated through last July's Plan N.H. community charrette that explored economic revitalization of the village area.

CRISTINA ASHJIAN

Moultonborough

(The writer is chair of the Moultonborough Heritage Commission.)

Five factors to consider

The 20/20 Vision for Concord report, published 17 years ago, called for building upon Concord's "city of villages" by wisely balancing economic development with quality of life. One critical component of a community's quality of life is the architectural environment in which its citizens live, work and play. The fabric that gives them a sense of place and identity.

As the *Monitor* has noted, not every old building can or should be saved. However, during five years on Concord's planning board I've found it useful to weigh the loss of historic infrastructure against new construction by considering five factors.

First, is the building to be razed architecturally unique or representative of an important period or style in the history of Concord's built environment?

Second, is the building iconic – does it help define who we are as a city? (The State House is one extreme example.)

Third, will this building be replaced by a structure of equal or greater architectural quality and distinction? (We should always "trade up," rather than down.)

Fourth, will the loss of this building significantly diminish the character and integrity of a city neighborhood or village center? (The impact of the loss, or significant change to a 19th-century building in downtown Concord or Penacook, for example.)

Finally, can this building be repurposed or renovated, rather than destroyed? Here, the state's Legislative Office Building, once our post office and federal court house, is a prime success story. Sacred Heart Church, now condominiums, is another.

Further, we should be as attentive to preserving our distinctive neighborhoods as to saving individual structures. Here, creeping demolition through neglect is a real danger. Witness the steady deterioration and recent razing of the Ruddy building on Centre Street, in the heart of our downtown, as just the most recent example.

(Creating heritage districts, in which residents establish guidelines that preserve what they value in their neighborhood, is one approach to this threat that has seen success in other communities.)

Each of us who owns property in Concord is a steward of both the past and the future; our decisions affect what connects us to yesterday, what enriches our lives today and how those who follow will remember us tomorrow. By weighing our choices carefully and intentionally, we can have economic growth and preserve our quality of life.

BYRON CHAMPLIN

Concord

(The writer sits on the planning board and recently joined the board of the New Hampshire Preservation Alliance.)

Preservation wisdom

So many factors shape what old buildings government, companies, and people like you and I should save. From someone's passion for a special place, to environmental health, to economic benefits of a reuse or revitalization. It could be one-room school house in Gilmanton, a former mill complex in Franklin or a historic farm in Concord.

Four things you might not think of: Studies show that millennials value a mix of old and new buildings where they live, dine and shop, and heritage travelers stay longer and spend more than other kinds of travelers. Investing in old buildings activity keeps more money in our communities than new construction because that investment is mostly local labor and local materials. And an old building may be the "greenest" one you know: Most old buildings were designed with climate (think south-facing facades, pitched roofs, and awnings and shutters) in mind, and it can take 10 to 80 years to recapture the energy lost when building a new building to replace an old one.

People have been wrestling with what to save since before today, before 1970s bicentennial fervor, before 1920s Colonial Revival reflection – frankly, ever since buildings were built. There's a basic human desire for memory and connection to the past to balance with a desire for change and evolving needs. We're so fortunate to have great buildings and great people engaged in that balancing act in the Granite State, and there is so much exciting historic preservation opportunity ahead.

JENNIFER GOODMAN

Concord

(The writer is executive director of the N.H. Preservation Alliance.)
