

# Barn by barn: Statewide census of agricultural icons under way

Staff Writer

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The old dairy barn at the Peckham Farm in Pownal may be around 175 years old, according Burt...



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KEITH WHITCOMB JR.

**POWNAL** — The state of Vermont is trying to determine how many barns it has.

Eve Pearce, of Pownal, is one of the local volunteers participating in the statewide Barn Census, funded by a Preserve America grant through the National Park Service to the Vermont Division of Historic Preservation. She said the preservation division has planned four official weekends where volunteers will roam across the Vermont countryside counting barns and collecting information and stories about them.

Two census weekends have gone by, one in early August, which Pearce was able to participate in, and the other Oct. 18 and 19.

She said one weekend will be held in the spring and another in the summer. Even though there are official weekends, Pearce said volunteers were counting barns on their own or in groups whenever they had the time.

She said that as far as she knew, Pownal has at least 20 to 30 barns. She said the census takers had been focusing on North Pownal, but wanted to count the entire town. All agricultural buildings are being counted, with a slight focus on structures over 50 years old. "We are going to count everything we can find," she said.

Pearce said that to participate in the Barn Census, a person should visit [www.uvm.edu/~barn/](http://www.uvm.edu/~barn/) where they will be able to download or print of the necessary forms and be briefed on the exact procedure the state would like volunteers to follow while conducting the census.

Among the things Pearce said she has done to prepare is to attend workshops on barn census taking. She said that even with the workshops, barn census taking could be challenging. Participation in the census is voluntary, so she said the amount of information she and the Pownal group are able to collect at each individual site varies.

Pearce said sometimes all they are able to get is a photo of the barn, as the owner doesn't want to let anyone in, isn't home, or isn't aware of their barn's history. She said sometimes a stop at a barn can take up a few hours, as the owner has many stories about the barn's history.

Dating a barn can be a challenge, Pearce said. She has learned a little about different architectural styles that have changed throughout the years, providing clues to a barn's age.

She said one way to spot an old barn from the outside, aside from it simply looking old, was to note its size. She said old barns tended to be small barns that predated the more commercial farming activities in the state. They only had to provide for one family, and wouldn't hold a lot of livestock.

When looking at the inside, check the framing. She said an old method of framing involved cutting out pieces individually and sizing them. Later, the method became more of an assembly line technique. With the old method, joints were marked with Roman numerals so the framers would know which piece connected to which. Pearce said while she was no expert, those kinds of markings might mean the structure pre-dates the mid-1800s.

Pearce said vertical marks on cut beams indicated use of a hand saw, while curved arc marks meant the board had been cut with a more modern circular saw. She said nails were often a good indicator, as the fashion they were made in changed over time.

She said even with an extensive knowledge of period architecture, finding out how old a barn is can be difficult. She said it was because pieces of barns were often recycled when new ones were built, so an individual barn might be composed of three different barns built at different times.

"What I've learned is that even people who know a lot about this sometimes have trouble telling a barn's story," she said.

Pearce said it often required further research before any conclusions could be made about a barn or other agricultural building.

She said she became interested in the Barn Census partly because she lives on the Maple Wind Farm. She said she had lived on it for 35 years, but the barn near her home is around 150 years old. She said her farm has about 14 old buildings on it, which makes it unusual.

Pearce said her work with the Barn Census had made her realize how quickly history could be lost. She said it had only been 200 years, but in that time much of what is known about agricultural life in early Vermont has been forgotten.

Contact Keith Whitcomb at [kwhitcomb@benningtonbanner.com](mailto:kwhitcomb@benningtonbanner.com).