

# GRAND ANTIQUES

At the New Jersey Barn Company, historic barns find new homes

BY TARA NURIN

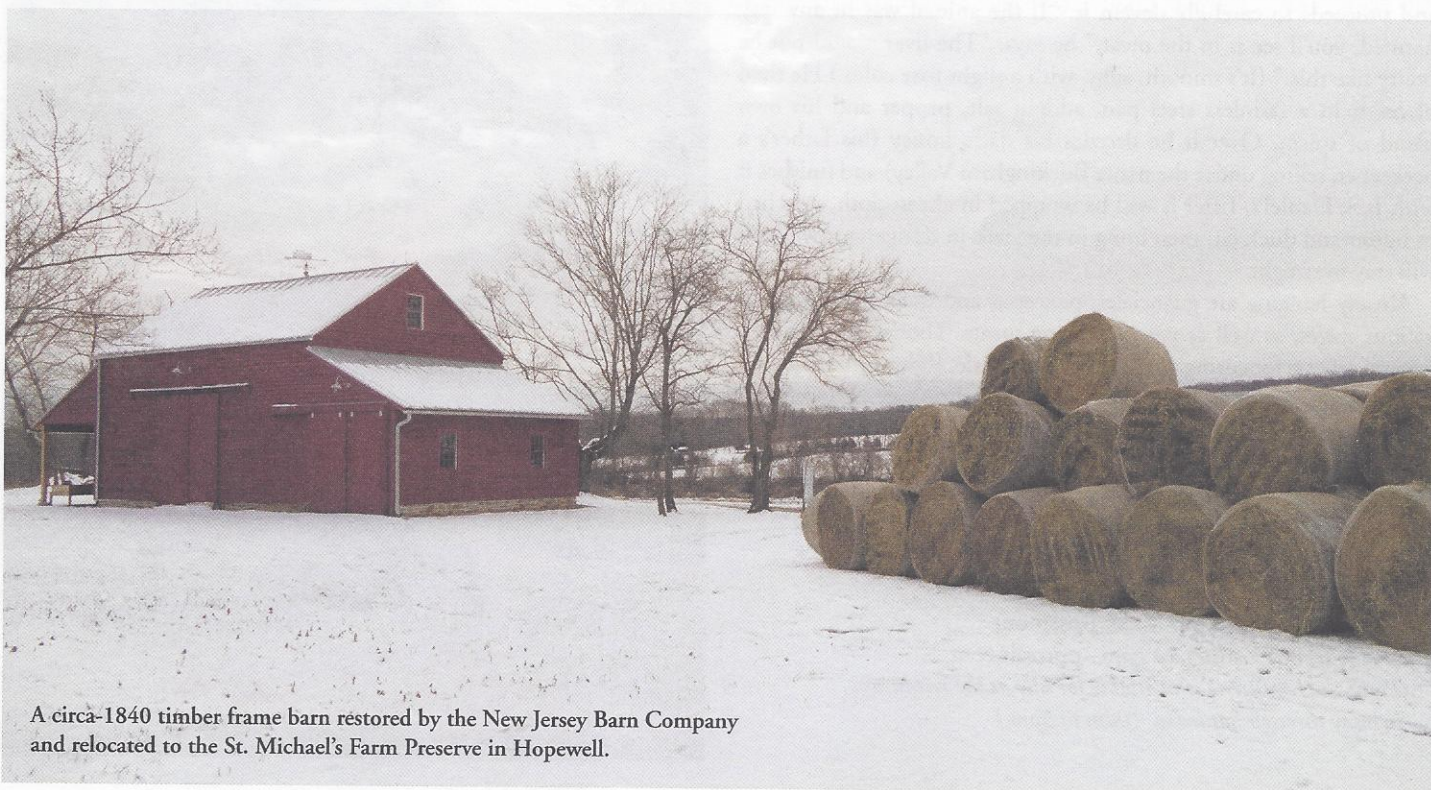
**A**lex Greenwood and Elric Endersby save barns for a living—old barns. Their small team of carpenters disassembles historic timber-frame barns in danger of collapse or destruction and rebuilds them for clients as homes, visitor centers, museums and, sometimes, barns.

Their business is the New Jersey Barn Company—though when they first started their work more than 30 years ago, it wasn't New Jerseyans who seemed particularly interested. Most of their first clients lived in far-flung places like the Hamptons, Martha's Vineyard, Texas and Montana, and some had recognizable names like Steven Spielberg, Bill Murray and Larry David.

"When we first got going, very few people in New Jersey cared about these buildings," Endersby says. "We took them to other places where people were beginning to appreciate these grand antiques. We stuck our necks out and saved quite a few before we had a regular stream of clients."

But of late, New Jersey residents have started to come calling.

"Once the barns became endangered and rare, people took a special interest in them," Greenwood says. "There's been something of a revival." ▶



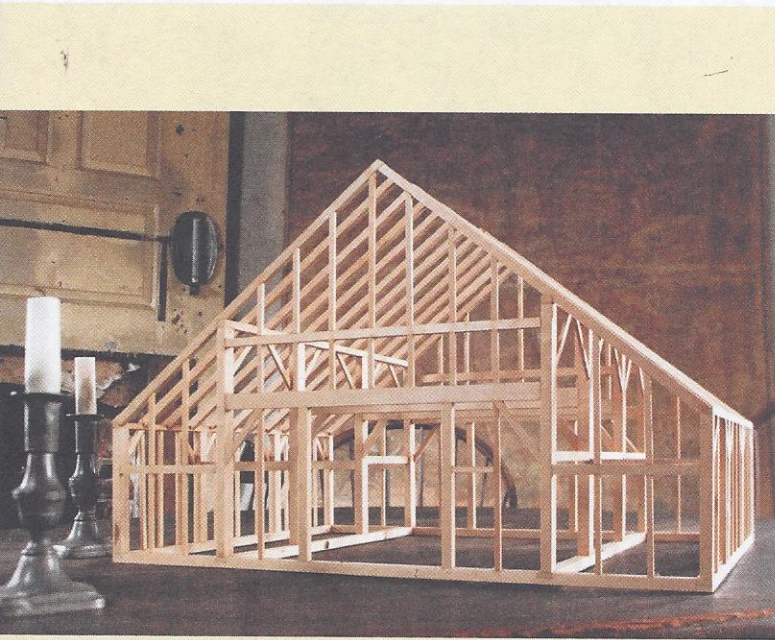
A circa-1840 timber frame barn restored by the New Jersey Barn Company and relocated to the St. Michael's Farm Preserve in Hopewell.

Photographs: left, Jared Flesher; right, Cie Stroud



“The tradition was almost gone and there was hardly anybody left who knew how to do this.”

—Elric Endersby



### New Jersey's Barn

Unique to New Jersey and parts of New York—wherever the early Dutch settled—is a style of barn known for its distinctive broad shape, huge anchor beams, and large doors located on the gable walls. **New World Dutch barns**, as they've come to be known, are now some of the rarest barns in the country. The New Jersey Barn Company has helped save quite a few.

In 1748, a Swedish traveler described the peculiar barns he observed on a trip between Trenton and New Brunswick:

“The main building was very large, almost the size of a small church; the roof was high, covered with wooden shingles, sloping on both sides, but not steep. The walls which supported it were not much higher than a full grown man; but on the other hand the breadth of the building was all the greater. ... In both ends of the building were large doors, so that one could drive in with a cart and horses through one of them, and go out at the other.”

Often the most impressive aspect of a New World Dutch barn is the formidable oak beams which support the structure, cut from ancient forests that have long since disappeared. New World Dutch barns are also known for their utilitarian design, often down to the smallest details. Small holes cut into the sides of the barn, which may look decorative, were made large enough to encourage martins and barn swallows to enter; but too small for unwanted pigeons.

—Jared Flesher

The New Jersey Barn Company, headquartered in an old tavern in Ringoes, has saved some 150 barns since its founding in 1980, including many dating to the 1700s. Endersby and Greenwood typically visit barns after being notified by owners or historic preservation groups that the barn is in danger of collapse or demolition. When they deem a barn salvageable and worthy, they dismantle it at no expense to the owner in exchange for the materials.

Greenwood and Endersby have led countless teams of young employees, volunteers, architects, carpenters, woodcrafters and fellow members of the Timber Framers Guild through the laborious process of researching, photographing, drawing and taking notes on old barns before disassembling the structures piece by piece. Once taken down, the barns either get rebuilt somewhere new or are neatly stored in warehouses until an interested client comes along. One pile has been waiting for a new owner since 1983.

The two founders of the New Jersey Barn Company have worked together since meeting in the late 1970s. It started when Greenwood, a Rider University graduate who'd been restoring houses, relocated an old barn to a historic property in Princeton that is now home to the Inn at Glencairn. Greenwood found the barn in Dutch Neck, where Endersby was living, working and volunteering as a collector of oral histories and a writer of historical articles. After the two joined to raise the barn, they became friends and started collaborating on barn preservation projects in their off-hours. The new partners, who weren't trained as architects or engineers, taught themselves to redesign and rebuild the barns for modern uses by reading extensively, working with the Timber Framers Guild, and interviewing old-timers who'd helped erect New Jersey's barns as kids.

“The tradition was almost gone and there was hardly anybody left who knew how to do this,” Endersby remembers.

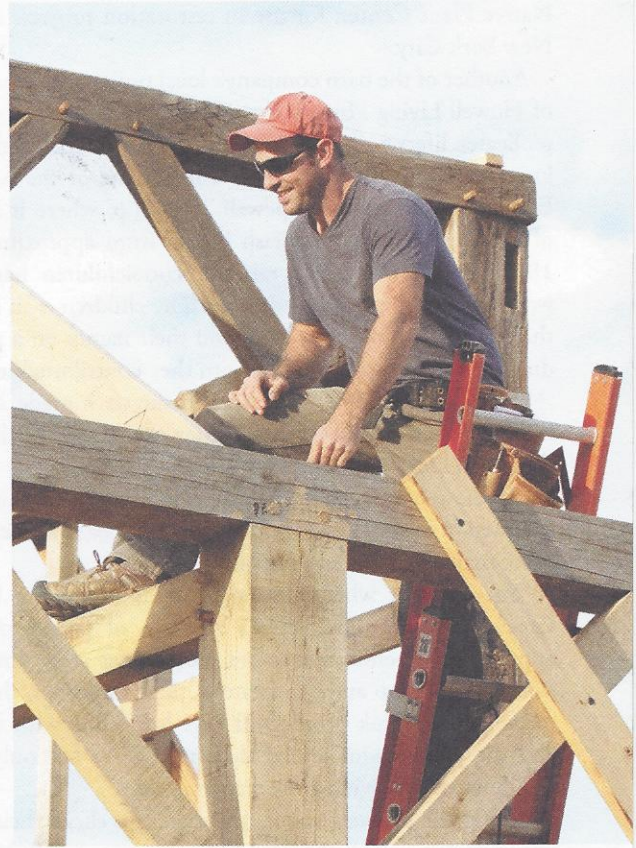
Though they admit to making “a lot of mistakes” in the early years, Greenwood and Endersby eventually acquired enough of a following to quit their day jobs and put all their efforts into the New Jersey Barn Company. Since then, the core of their team has expanded by one. Around ten years ago, they hired a college student named Dale Emde to strip a crumbling house of some wood flooring they wanted to save. Emde, who was studying finance at the time, never left. Though he says Greenwood and Endersby will probably keep preserving barns “forever,” he expects he'll likely carry on the company's work in some form after they retire.

“It's nice to have bosses who listen to you and whom you're friends with,” he says. “It's nice to wake up in the morning and have a purpose; to feel like you're doing something good.”

Among the New Jersey Barn Company's satisfied clients is Dr. Dave Reynolds, an eye surgeon and history lover who was looking for someone to reconstruct two historic barns on his farm in Hopewell.

“Some of the best barn people in the world happen to be in my hometown and I read about them in *Architectural Digest*,” says Reynolds, who through the years has become something of a barn preservationist in his own right. He has hired the New Jersey Barn Company to move a total of four barns to his farm, and also spearheaded an effort to move a historic barn to the St. Michael's Farm Preserve in Hopewell, owned by the D&R Greenway Land Trust. Dedicated this past September, the St. Michael's barn will store native seeds grown on the property for sale to the Greenbelt

Photographs: Cie Stroud



Elric Endersby, Alex Greenwood and Dale Emde.  
Below: A New World Dutch barn under construction  
at the Rockingham Historic Site in Kingston.



Native Plant Center, for use in restoration projects in and around New York City.

Another of the barn company's local projects was the visitor center of Howell Living History Farm, just outside of Lambertville, which replicates life on a 1900s-era farm. The Charles Fish Barn, as it's known, was salvaged from the current site of the Mercer County Equestrian Center in Hopewell Township, where it had been part of a farm owned by the Fish family from approximately 1838 to 1880. Before this barn's raising, schoolchildren hand-shaved the wooden pegs that hold it together. The children each signed the peg they made, and they can now find their names on a plaque next to drawings of the section of the barn they contributed to.

"Some of those kids who were in the sixth grade at the time are in college now, and it's only a matter of time before they're bringing their own kids," says Endersby happily.

For the founders of the New Jersey Barn Company, much of the satisfaction in their work comes from the idea that they're preserving more than just wooden structures.

"So much of what is done today is not being built to last," Greenwood says. "But there's a group of people out there who appreciate authenticity and are looking for some integrity. Unless someone steps up and takes care of these buildings, they're all going to be gone. I think people will have lost a link with their ancestors and the people who settled this area. We're not only reviving the buildings, we're reviving the craftsmanship."

Asking the partners about craftsmanship elicits their most excited responses—in which they tend to interrupt and finish each other's thoughts as old business partners sometimes do. Unlike New England, which was largely settled by English Puritans, they explain, New Jersey was originally settled by immigrants from diverse parts of Europe. Harvesting timbers from virgin white-oak forests that no longer exist, the state's earliest carpenters worked together to erect buildings that blended the traditions they brought over from England, Holland, and

the region that is now Germany. Thanks to this micro-regional mixing, New Jersey's early architecture stands apart from that of its neighbors and even shows wide disparity within the state itself. By combining so many different approaches, these carpenters were able to apply the best timber-framing practices from all over Europe.

Yet sadly, some of the factors that make these barns so interesting to study render them obsolete in the modern era of farming, where large-scale, automated equipment often proves too big or advanced for an antiquated structure designed to house animals and hay.

And so, at a time when farm and open-space preservation have gained wide support from the public, the government, and private institutions, some architectural preservationists fear that historic farm buildings are being overlooked. New Jersey has 3,000 pre-1960 barns left, according to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and no formal statewide organization or mechanism for protecting them. Although some individual counties offer varying protections and permissions, a state official with expertise on historic preservation (who spoke anonymously because he's not authorized to talk to the media) says the preservation community resents the lack of engagement and funding for historic farm structures at the state level.

Even on farms preserved under the taxpayer-funded farmland preservation program, he says, "a farmer can tear down a historic barn tomorrow and there's absolutely nothing anybody can do about it."

To the founders of the New Jersey Barn Company, the loss of an old barn is a solemn occasion, just as saving an old barn is a cause for celebration (as the many barn dances they've attended through the years attest).

"They're not just utilitarian buildings," concludes Endersby. "They are, in fact, cultural icons." ❧

#### NEW JERSEY BARN COMPANY

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Photograph: Cie Stroud