

**SAVING AMERICA'S
AGRARIAN PAST,**

**ONE BARN
AT A TIME**

BY ILENE DUBE



Alexander Greenwood (left) and Elric Endersby founded New Jersey Barn Company in 1980. (*New Jersey Barn dog Remus is pictured on preceding page.*) Their fascination with architectural history led to a business that serves clients from Steven Spielberg to Bill Murray. New Jersey Barn offices are filled with models and plans to help rebuild barns Greenwood and Endersby salvage.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW WILKINSON



he traffic on Route 31 in Ringoes is roaring, but once you enter the little lane under a sign for New Jersey Barn Company, the noise softens and you go back in time.

There are vintage green Chevrolet pickup trucks with the New Jersey Barn Company logo, and sheep graze on the rolling 15 acres.

The farm buildings, too, suggest a pre-industrial era. In a white stucco building, a former tavern, an antique sign on the back porch says “Office Upstairs,” but when you peer through the screen door and see a kitchen, you can’t help wondering if the sign is informational or ornamental. Are you in the right place?

A white-haired Elric Endersby greets you and leads you into a wood-furnished room where, on a warm September day, a fire is blazing. “Do you live here?” you ask.

“Oh, no,” says Endersby, who has residences in Ewing and the Dominican Republic, and introduces his long-time business partner, Alexander Greenwood, a Harborton resident, and a yellow lab named Remus.

Endersby and Greenwood started New Jersey Barn Company in 1980 when, as they say, “We were much younger.” You attempt the math -- two men starting a business in their late 20s, 30 some odd years later—yet they look strong enough to raise a barn or two. Endersby is 66, Greenwood 62 (“and Remus is 7,” adds Greenwood).

Both men are fascinated by local history, especially architectural history. They bought the tavern and surrounding property from a chicken farmer in 2000, and learned it was built between 1737-1740. The tavern keeper was John Anderson, head of the local militia.

We are looking out the window at sheep because Endersby and Greenwood lease pasture land to a farmer in the Sourlands. “We’ve also had cattle here,” says Endersby. The land is the missing part of a contiguous parcel preserved by D&R Greenway Land Trust, and New Jersey Barn Company is in the beginning stages of preserving this connecting piece.

To restore the building, Greenwood and Endersby dropped the ceiling, peeled away paneling, and established molding profiles from “ghosting” on the walls. “We like detective work,” says Endersby. The five-paneled doors came from an 18th-century house that had fallen down.

A room on the other side of the

center hall is filled with small wooden models of more than 100 barns they have disassembled. These are, essentially, maps to help document how the barns will be put back together. Upstairs, the offices are filled with books and files of drawings with measurements and plans for reassembling the barns.

When developers take over farmland, New Jersey Barn Company comes to the rescue, saving historic structures and Colonial-era wood -- the forests that supplied that wood no longer exist, they point out. Once documented and disassembled, the structures go into storage until the right client comes along.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS WITH STEVEN SPIELBERG

One of New Jersey Barn’s more high-profile clients is Steven Spielberg, who had a residence built in the Hamptons from an old New Jersey barn. Artist and filmmaker Julian Schnabel had New Jersey Barn salvage a building that would have become his studio, but was ultimately denied the variance he needed (ironically, the barn was reconstructed a mile away for another client). Other clients have included Larry David and Bill Murray. The men scratch their heads, trying to call up a few. “If there are names I can remember I’ll drop them,” says Greenwood.

They supplement each other’s failing memory. “We’ve been partners for so long we have to finish each other’s sentences – or they wouldn’t get finished,” jokes Endersby.

These days, business has expanded to the Dominican Republic, where Tragaluz, a subsidiary of New Jersey Barn Company, is building structures in the vernacular style of the Dominican Republic. Also in the works is a pilot for a TV series that is something like *This Old Barn*.

STEEPED IN HISTORY

Endersby has had a passion for old houses since his childhood in Princeton. He made drawings, models, even collected miniatures. With dreams of becoming an architect Endersby studied architectural history and fine arts at Trinity College, but became more interested in the history.

Returning home, the long-haired, bearded young man wandered into Bainbridge House – it had been the library during his childhood, but had

since become home to the Historical Society of Princeton – fascinated by a door restoration project. He left with an assignment: to collect oral histories.

Thus began the Princeton History Project, a non-profit organization Endersby founded separate from HSP. As a self-described “brash young man,” he did not want to report to a board (although he served on that board for a good number of years).

Five years later, Endersby and friends launched *The Princeton Recollector*, a monthly journal of local history with subscribers in 48 states. They dedicated themselves with no pay, working brutally long hours while also holding day jobs. Endersby worked as a teaching assistant at Livingston College, was a guinea pig at Bristol Myers-Squibb and wrote a column for *The Princeton Packet*, “Princeton Yesteryear.” “We weren’t driving new cars or wearing new clothes, but that is so unimportant compared to loving what you’re doing,” he says.

Meanwhile, Greenwood, an Abington, Pa., native who’d studied sociology at Rider University, had been restoring old houses, including Glencairn, now a B&B, with Clifford and Stephen Zink. It had an old barn that collapsed, so they looked through the *Princeton Recollector* and relocated one from a farm in Dutch Neck, where Endersby had been living. They re-erected it in a two-day barn raising, followed by a barn dance.

When the project was over, a friendship had sparked. Greenwood and Endersby reminisce how they had felt so fulfilled pouring themselves into the project, they were saddened when it was over. Having seen many other barns available, they decided to pursue their love of historic architecture, carpentry, and restoration.

Greenwood’s interest was in early farmhouses, mills and churches. “A lot of what we do is design additions to old houses,” says Greenwood. They use architects with a familiarity with 18th-century structures. “Many of the buildings we moved got turned into houses, and we provided the design, using Christopher Pickell, a licensed architect, to do schematic design. He has CAD [computer assisted design] capability.”

After college, Greenwood had worked in an architecture office and realized his interest was more in traditional buildings. With New Jersey Barn Company, he says, he knows more about clients’ buildings’

A wagon house from Sergeantsville rebuilt on Cherry Valley Road in Hopewell Township, with a home office on the upper level and a mechanic shop on the first floor. Photo by Paul Rocheleau.



history than many architects. “Working on Glencairn, a long-neglected property, was the best post-undergraduate training we could have,” says Greenwood.

POOLHOUSES AND RESTAURANTS AND STUDIOS

It was when Endersby and Greenwood sold the barn to Spielberg in 1986 that they were finally able to give up their day jobs and make New Jersey Barn Company a full-time business. Since then, they estimate they have rebuilt more than 150 structures.

Construction and design projects have been in New York, Montana, Texas, Colorado, North Carolina and California. Clients in the Hamptons, Martha’s Vineyard and Nantucket were especially interested in repurposed barns for pool houses, antique cars, restaurants and artist studios. There was less interest in New Jersey.

“New Jersey was settled by people from different building traditions,” says Endersby. “Glencairn was built by the Dutch in 1697, and the property was bought by the English, who added on to it. New England, for example, was settled by only one ethnic group, so central New

Jersey has more diversity in architectural forms.”

With all that they’d learned, Endersby and Greenwood wrote two books: *BARN: The Art of a Working Building* (Houghton-Mifflin, 1992) and *BARN: Preservation and Adaptation* (Universe, 2003). Once the TV series is underway, they plan to do a companion book.

Sometimes they will disassemble a barn and store it for decades before finding a client. One house disassembled in 1983 is still in storage. In 2005, they reassembled a barn by hand to serve as the visitor center at Howell Living History Farm, and 13 years ago they disassembled a barn at Rockingham they will soon put back together.

RE-INVENTING THE BARN BUSINESS

By the mid 2000s, the business had many projects going, with up to 20 employees and interns taking down barns and doing consultation work. Then the Great Recession brought everything to a grinding halt. “We had five or six shovel-ready projects, when there was an economic tightening and people stopped building,” says Greenwood. “We thought

our clients had plenty of money -- their projects had been second houses, guest houses, caretaker cottages – but they were also on a budget and we had to cut back overhead. People didn’t want to be conspicuous in building, so we had to re-invent ourselves to keep up.”

They kept afloat with municipal jobs: Disassembling and reassembling a barn, building a wagon house and disassembling and reassembling a school house for the Schenck Farm, a historic site, in West Windsor. This project appealed to their fascination with history. In the restored barn, retired farmers would gather and share stories, reminiscing about events surrounding Orson Welles’ broadcast about Martians landing in nearby Grovers Mill.

Endersby and Greenwood have also taken down barns and a schoolhouse to rebuild for Monroe Township, and will rebuild a barn and wagon house for Millstone Township. In Cranbury and Readington, they moved barns from one side of the road to the other.

New Jersey Barn has its sights set on restoring the barn at the Historical Society’s Updike Farm.

Although the partners are reluctant to say much about the TV show – the producer is still seeking sponsors –

Clockwise from top right: Seawife Antiques in Barnegat Light, originally in an old schoolhouse building, gained new space with a barn from Pennington; Parsonage Schoolhouse in Dutch Neck, designed in collaboration with Kevin Rasmussen, A.I.A., and Back to Nature Landscape Associates; Clover Hill Barn in Bernardsville is a pool house; Schenck Wagonhouse, Dutch Neck; a barn from Neshanic Station rebuilt in Sonoma, California.



New Jersey Barn Company has expanded to the Dominican Republic, where Tragaluz, a subsidiary, is building structures in the vernacular style of the region. Drawings by Endersby.



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Endersby describes it this way: “We show young men looking at barns, and we pass the torch, teaching people what we know in 10 episodes. It combines history, architecture, and different projects.”

Shooting has taken place in the past year. Tentatively titled “Barn Struck,” the narrator in the promo piece describes barns as part of “America’s iconic agrarian past, a vital part of American history that if not saved will be lost forever.”

One of the young men describes Endersby and Greenwood as “in this for the love of it, whether it makes money or not.”

FROM RINGOES TO THE TROPICS

Endersby, an avid swimmer, has been going to the Dominican Republic since 1984, where he enjoys the beach and golf courses. He has been investigating the vernacular architecture, photographing and drawing it, and owns a home.

He befriended resort developers, and convinced them to design the beach club, bungalows, changing rooms and clubhouse in a form that reflects the local culture, with perforated wooden doors and window transoms, known as *tragaluz*. It provides an opportunity for local craftsmen to

hone their skills installing traditional woodwork, using locally available products. Endersby’s own home was built this way.

He spends up to three months of the year in the Dominican Republic, and hopes to spend even more time. “I would rather be looking at fireflies in January than shoveling snow.”

What if they run out of barns? “Not in our lifetime,” says Endersby. **P**

The 1787 Burroughs house originated in Hopewell. New Jersey Barn Company was happy to be able to find a new location for it in Hopewell.

