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Ralph Richardson Sr., a sixth-generation descendant of Daniel Richardson, is shown near the barn in the 1950s. *Photo courtesy of the Richardson family*

The Richardson Family English Barn

By Frederick Biebesheimer

Introduction

Northwest of Somesville near the intersection of Oak Hill Road and Indian Point Road, a four-bay English barn stands where Daniel Richardson built it two centuries ago. The old building has deteriorated to the point that a heavy snow or high wind could bring it down. Yet for now, it is a prime example of Maine's agricultural heritage and a legacy of many generations of Richardsons, who regard it as a symbol of their family's presence on the island.

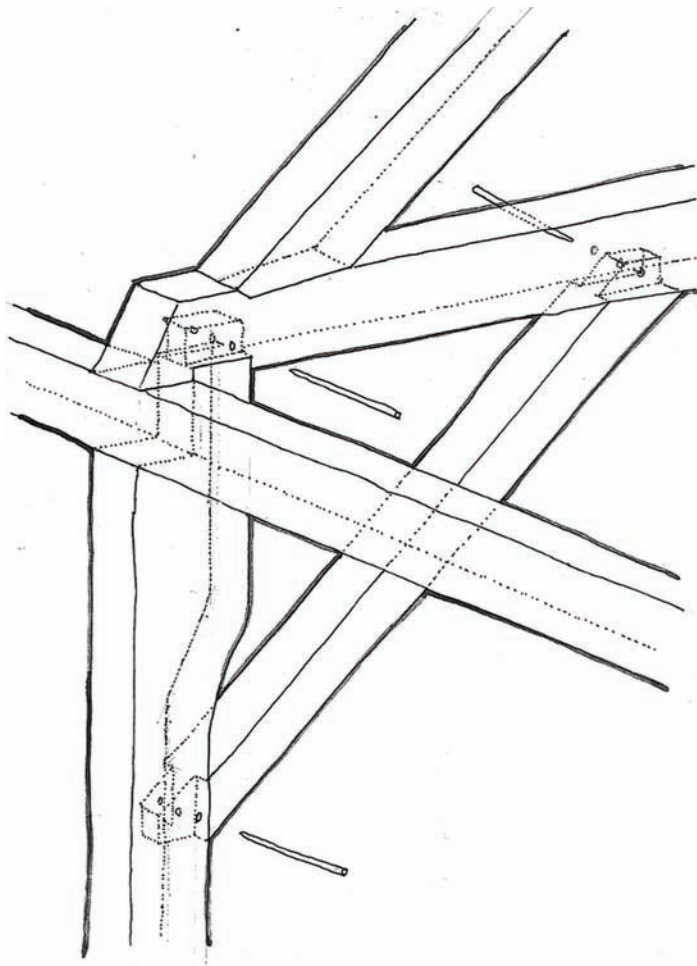
Daniel, born on August 27, 1756, was the second son of James and Rachel Richardson, who migrated to the District of Maine from Gloucester, Massachusetts in 1761. James set up his farm and lumber mill on a hillside overlooking Richardson Brook near the head of Somes Sound.

We do not know precisely when Daniel Richardson left his father's place to set up his own farm about four miles to the west. The date must be after 1807, when a map shows that Daniel did not own the property, and before 1830, when Daniel died.¹ Most likely, he began his work on the land shortly after 1807, when he would have been more than forty-four years of age. Daniel's wife, Sarah, and their six children must have labored together to clear and harvest a forest of white pine, red and white spruce, balsam fir, red oak, white birch,

northern white cedar and red maple. A Richardson tradition holds that Daniel originally lived on the site in a log cabin before building a Cape Cod style house and later the four-bay English Barn. The family cleared enough land to make room for pasturing animals, growing hay and straw, planting a vegetable garden, and the construction of their buildings. Lumber for such projects was never hard to find. A road through the woods led to a stand of white pine trees that they cut with a crosscut saw and used for building materials or sold.

The English Barn Type

The barn that Daniel built typifies a style of building that has a long lineage, the English Barn. The word "barn" evolved in medieval times from the term "bere," meaning barley, and the term "earn," meaning storage house. Colonial farmers brought plans for the English Barn on their journey to America and up the east coast when they settled in Maine after 1760. The barn was the center of farm production in an era of the self-sufficient farmer. The early farmers initially acquired a minimum of twenty acres of forest, with or without a deed.² Arriving at first without their families, they cleared the land, cutting down and shaping tree trunks into one-foot diameter logs that they used to build simple cabins so their families could join them. The farmers scattered limbs and brush over the land and "good burned" them to create a soft and fertile layer of soil for the initial planting of crops without ploughing. In the fall, they planted winter rye or wheat. In the spring, they planted mixed vegetables like corn, beans and squash. By hunting in the forest or fishing



The gunstock post was designed to firmly hold the frame of the barn together, using carefully shaped joints and tree nails.
Drawing courtesy of Crispin Mason

in the rivers, they added meat and fish to their diets. Family members worked hard through all seasons of the year to provide food, primarily for their own use rather than for sale in the market. As the farms developed over time, families planted additional mixed crops in the gardens and acquired a small number of cows and pigs. They harvested crops in the fall and slaughtered, treated, and stored one or two animals for winter. They built English Barns to provide storage space for crops, hay and animals.³

Daniel's barn had four bays rather than the customary three and, at thirty feet wide and forty-six feet long, was a little longer than the typical English Barn, which was thirty feet by forty feet. The interior details of Daniel's barn generally match earlier descriptions of the English Barn though the standard plan was malleable. Daniel used a post-and-beam system to make the barn's frame, the timbers all hand-flared with extraordinary labour and skill. Like the standard English Barn, the corners and side walls contained gunstock hardwood posts, also known as English tying joints. The posts were approximately eight inches by eight inches at the base and eight inches by twelve inches at the top and rested on unfinished wood sills supported by stone footings or underpinnings. He flared the wood posts at their tops to provide more support for the attached framing. He installed wood cross-beams between the columns for added stability. At the eaves, he set horizontal wood plates to support rafters. With the use of a mortise and

tenon system, he connected timbers to the columns. He inserted pointed hardwood pegs, known as tree-nails, through holes in the members for firm attachment. He hewed the oak structural pieces with an adze and inscribed them with Roman numeral "marriage marks" to indicate how the timbers should be fit together.⁴

Daniel installed wood purlins over the rafters to support the roof boards and placed angled wood struts between the columns and beams to reinforce the structure. Unfinished log joists supported the wood flooring. The hayloft floor was spaced with four-inch diameter wood beams for ventilation.

With hand-wrought iron nails, he attached wall grits to exterior columns and on top of them fastened siding of rough-sawn unpainted wood. He placed glass transom windows, the only source of interior light, below the eaves over the main pair of doors and on each of the gable peaks. Daniel positioned the long sides of the barn to face north and south with a pair of hinged folding wagon-doors located at each side.

If the Richardsons carried on the traditional uses of English barns, at harvest time, they cut hay and grain with a scythe, allowed the crop to dry in the fields, and then transported it to the barn in a wagon made on the farm. The wagon could enter one side of the barn with its harvest and exit the other when unloaded. The Richardsons would have stabled livestock in one of the side bays and threshed harvested grain in a central bay with mows on either side, separated by a waist-high

wall. With both hinged doors open on a windy day, they threw grain into the air and beat it with a flail to separate the chaff from the stock, allowing the grain to fall on the floor where it could be swept up to be stored. A board at the base of the door that kept the grain from blowing out was called a threshold.

The kind of barn that Daniel made persisted until the 1830s when the New England Barn style came into vogue, with more functional doors on the gable ends to avoid having rain and snow from the eaves fall down to the base of the doors. In time, harsh Maine winters convinced farm families to keep all their buildings connected, a style called "Big House, Little House, Back House, Barn."⁵ This enabled interior access to the barn from the house in inclement weather but increased the chance of fire spreading between buildings. In the early twentieth century, farmers developed the Gable Roof Barn type to allow more hay storage in the loft and they added more headroom on the ground floor by changing the shape of the roof.

Daniel's Legacy

After Daniel's death, new generations of Richardsons adapted the building to new needs and farming methods. They covered the original siding with wooden shingles for more moisture protection and in the 1950s, added a pair of sliding doors to the east wall and additional single doors and windows.

Dale Richardson, Daniel's seventh-generation grandson, recalls from his childhood that the property contained many acres of open pastures but the soil was poor, sloping southward from the barn to several acres of fenced-in cattle pastures enclosed by fences of northern white cedar. Farm animals could stroll along the fence on a well-worn pathway to drink from a natural spring and to graze. Today, the forest has reclaimed most of the pasture.



The barn still contains venerable old tools, such as this plow. *Photograph by the author*

Generations of Richardsons dug wells in several places and took advantage of natural springs on the property. There is a hand-dug well, and a small rock-lined spring-fed well near the farmhouse. Stables for farm animals were on the ground level of the barn with small windows in each stall. Dale recalls that his father, Ralph Sr., stabled Guernsey milking cows in the barn and that his grandparents, Melville and Gertrude, drove a horse-drawn "Express Wagon," still preserved by the family, to Bar Harbor and Ellsworth for grain and staples. Dale and his wife, Barbara, and their children maintained various farm animals on the property in the 1970s. These included Hereford-Guernsey hybrid steers for personal beef production along with occasional sheep and pigs. They raised a single steer each year and left it free-ranging in the pasture. The first three were affectionately named Chuck, Big Mac, and Little Mac. Recreational horses, Barbara's passion, were always present.

The family stored farm equipment and other accessories on the ground floor. A long shed attached to the south elevation contained a blacksmith shop, storage for feed grain, and a stall for composted manure to be used as fertilizer in the fields. They

kept harvested hay stored in the barn loft, a place that also contained a workbench with a wood vise. The barn interior still contains a hand crafted wood plough and other old tools that were used on the farm.

Decline

The role of the family farm in Maine's economy has declined since the nineteenth century. As funds available for barn maintenance and repair have decreased, many old barns have fallen into disrepair or have been lost entirely. The cost of stabilizing and restoring the Richardson barn would be considerable. Though much of the building's frame appears to be in stable condition, the list of necessary repairs is long.

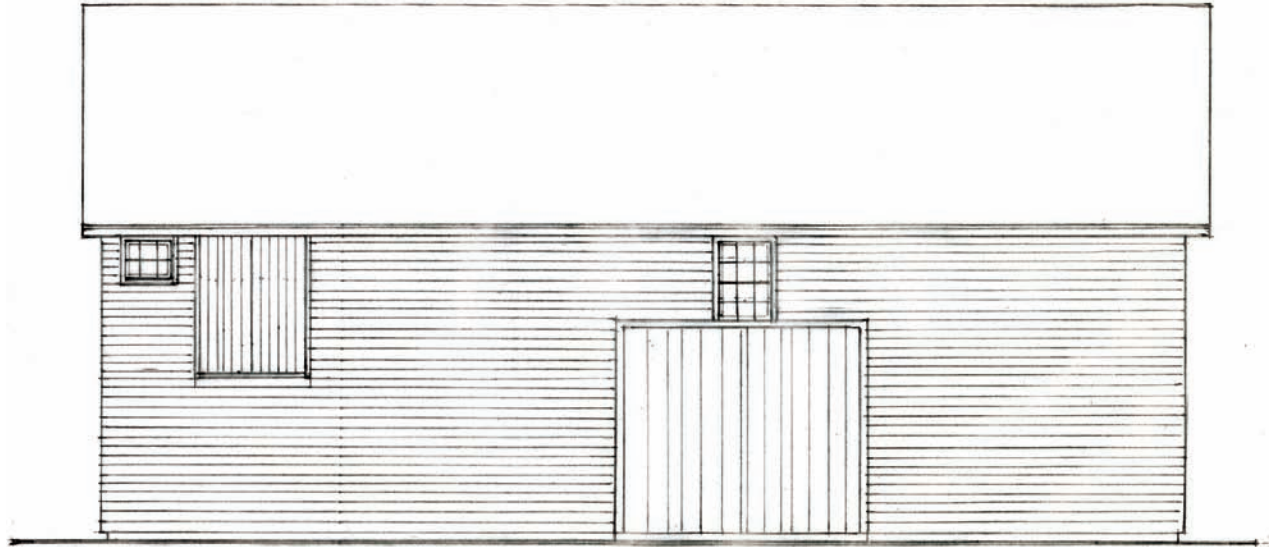
The roof ridge has dropped in one section and the eaves are in poor condition. Holes in the roof allow rain to enter and contribute to interior damage. The wood flooring has deteriorated and many sections have collapsed. The shingle siding and trim have weathered and need restoration or replacement. Windows need repair and re-glazing. Though the north and west elevations are in relatively good condition, the northern wagon-doors require stabilization. The east elevation, exposed to centuries of sun and storms, is in poor condition. Shingles have fallen off sections of the wall to expose the original wood siding, and the original doors have been lost. The south elevation is also in poor condition. Sections of the wall have collapsed and the attached sheds are on the ground. Repair of the south wall would require complete replacement



Above: The Daniel Richardson Barn, as it appeared in the summer of 2019.
Photograph by the author



Right: The barn as it appeared in 2004.
Photo courtesy of the Richardson family



The author is documenting old barns throughout Maine, creating detailed drawings such as this one. *Drawing courtesy of the author*

using original construction details and trim as well as a new pair of matching wagon-doors.

Legacies

I have roamed the farmland of central and eastern Maine to photograph and draw the variety of unique historic barns to preserve their memory for future generations. It is evident that many of them will soon be gone.

The loss of Daniel Richardson's barn would bring an end to an important site of agricultural history. The barn captures a moment in the

evolution of the English barn from the three-bay type to the four-bay type to the New England Barn.

But there is something more profound and personal going on here. The Daniel Richardson Barn has remained in the family since its construction over two hundred years ago. Today's Richardsons, including Dale and his sons Baron, Brent, and Eben, grieve the barn's deteriorating condition and its imminent collapse. Years ago, when the barn was in better condition, a young Brent wrote this poem:

Hewers of the Future

This old barn haunts me so.
In it I find those before me
whom I did not know.

This barn, with its hand
hewn beams,
wooden pegs and hay rake,
gives to me their dreams
and melancholy heartache.

It bounces me on its knee,
as if it was my great,
great grandfather
who did not cross the sea.

Its sills are going the way
of their hewers,
so I, as the generation on
the frontier of time, can
shore up this old barn
and avert the crime
that would leave the future me
bouncing no child on
my age old knee.

Eben, who lives on the land today, has
tried for two decades to preserve what he
calls, "this wooden member of the family."⁶
He watches over rambling children,
ninth and tenth generation descendants,
and teaches them the mysteries of this
ancient sentinel of family history.

Frederick Biebesheimer is a restoration architect who spent his career documenting and preserving historic structures in Connecticut and, more recently, in Italy. Since his recent move to Maine, he has travelled through Maine's rural landscape noting the unique variety of historic barn types, dating from the settlement of Maine through the early twentieth century. He documents historic barns to encourage their restoration or, failing that, so future generations will know their specifications and how they were used. He believes that our roots should be available to future generations, and his work might inspire some restoration. The Daniel Richardson Barn is a prime example of this subject.

Acknowledgments:

The research and documentation of the Richardson barn and family provided me with a clear example of the history and agricultural settlement of Maine. Dale Richardson and his sons, Eben, Brent and Baron, were very helpful in providing me with much information for the article from their family files and memories. The detailed editing assistance of Tim Garrity organized the article text so that the content was clear and easier to read. My sincere thanks to you all.

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1. The Salem Towne, Jr. Esq. Map is in the collection of the Mount Desert Island Historical Society.
 2. Clarence Albert Day, *A History of Maine Agriculture, 1604–1860* (Orono: University Press, 1954), 71–2.
 3. Don Perkins, *The Barns of Maine* (Charleston: History Press, 2012), 15–16; See also Alan Taylor, *Liberty Men and the Great Proprietors: The Revolutionary Settlement on the Maine Frontier, 1760–1820* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina Press, 1990).
 4. Thomas Durant Visser, *Field Guide to New England Barns and Farm Buildings* (Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 1997), 3–22.
 5. Thomas C. Hubka, *Big House, Little House, Back House, Barn* (Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 1984), 5–7.
 6. Eben Richardson, email to the author, January 26, 2020.