

The New England Connecting Barn

Focus on New England highlights various geographic aspects of the region in anticipation of the 2008 AAG Annual Meeting in Boston, April 15-19. Register for the Annual Meeting on-line at www.aag.org/annualmeetings.

An eye-catching type of farm house still found across parts of the New England landscape and unique to the region is the "connecting barn," a style also known as "continuous architecture."

After the initial farm house was built, additions came in stages as family resources grew, often beginning with a separate kitchen, a privy, and later turning to any sequential combination including a big barn for animals and hay storage, smaller barns, a carriage house, woodsheds, milk house, and miscellaneous workshops.

Originally, all doors and most windows opened on the south side of the complex, while solid walls on the north side provided protection against the cold winds and blizzards of the infamous New England winter. Although continuous architecture created the potential for catastrophic fire,

it helped farmers avoid the constant need to shovel snow to create walkways to outlying structures.

The New England connecting barn does not fall into straight neat lines. Built at different times with varied materials, these unusual structures often stepped uphill or down as the topography dictated, creating irregular lines with different sizes and shapes.

In some areas where prolonged conflicts with native American tribes lasted for more than a century, as in the Connecticut River valley of western Massachusetts (1640s - 1760s), connected-barn farmsteads served as fort-like defenses, especially when four were clustered at a crossroads, or three were located where Y-shaped road forks converged.

Many early farmsteads had no inside door connections. This prevented enemies

who breached one area from having a direct corridor of access throughout the entire complex. A limited number of doors also kept smells and animal sounds from freely entering the main farmhouse. However, after 1800 internal doors were constructed on many farmsteads to help farmers avoid going out into the deep snow and sub-zero temperatures during the winter. ■

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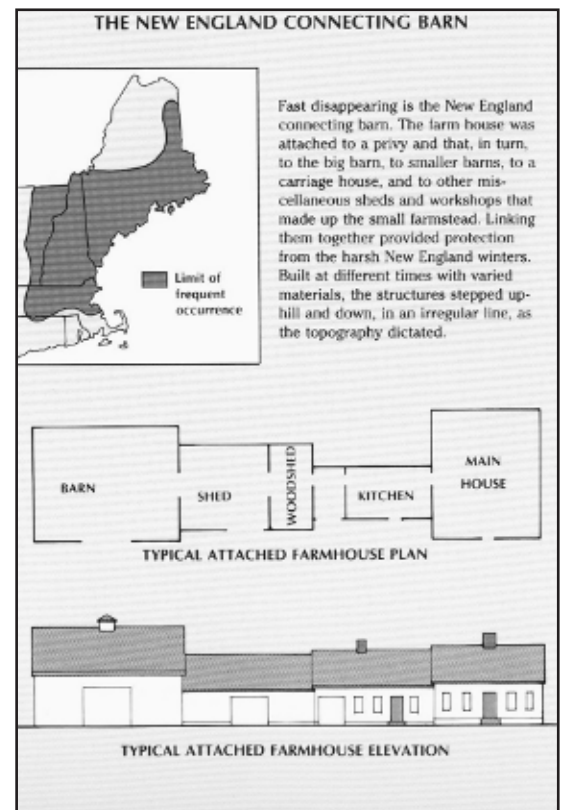
Sources: Wilkie, Richard and Jack Tager (Eds.) *Historical Atlas of Massachusetts*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991, 116. Zelinsky, Wilbur, "The New England Connecting Barn," *Geographical Review*, Vol. 48 (1958), 540-553.



A connecting barn complex in Sunderland, Massachusetts contrasts sharply with several recent suburban houses on adjacent lots. Photograph by Richard Wilkie.



A connecting barn complex in Hadley, Massachusetts. Photograph by Richard Wilkie.



Adapted from the *Historical Atlas of Massachusetts* (1991, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst) with the permission of the authors, Richard Wilkie and Jack Tager.