



Town of Stow
HISTORICAL COMMISSION

Stow Town Building
380 Great Road
Stow, Massachusetts 01775
www.stow-ma.gov

February 1, 2010

Ryan Maciej, Technical Consultant
Massachusetts Historical Commission
220 Morrissey Boulevard
Boston, MA 02125-3314

Re: MHC# RC 47391 – Pompositicut / Center Elementary School, 403 Great Road,
Stow, MA

Dear Mr. Maciej,

Since we know that in your letter to James Warren of SMMA, dated December 11, 2009, you requested additional information from Stow's Elementary School Building Committee about the Larsen Apple Barn and Blacksmith Shop at the Center School site, the Stow Historical Commission would like to submit relevant information as well.

To aid in your evaluation of the Center School site and Larsen farm buildings, the SHC has gathered as much information as possible within the present review schedule. Our sources are as follows:

- Stow historical records
- Stow history books
- Residents who remember the Larsen working farm
- MassHistPres members

Stow Historical Records:

The 1980 Reconnaissance Survey Town Report for Stow indicates that the Apple Barn and Blacksmith Shop were parts of a working farm operated by Peter Larsen on this site near Stow's center (the "Upper Village") from the early 20th Century through World War II. Mr. Larsen was one of a number of Danish immigrants who settled in Stow around the turn of the 20th Century, beginning as a blacksmith. In 1908 he purchased his farmland, now the site of Center School. In 1928, after serving as a constable, he became the town's first police chief, running the police department from his home.

During the first half of the 20th Century, apples and agricultural products were important industries in Stow, and the Upper Village continues to be populated by historic homes and other structures from this period. As the century progressed, agriculture began its decline, a trend that has continued to the present.

The 1982 inventory form for the Center School Grounds at 403 Great Road (STW.180 in MACRIS) shows the addition of a brick school to the site (1956-1958). It dates the stone barn as approximately 1918.

Visser's *Field Guide to Barns* suggests that this type of stone structure was common in Scandinavia and reflects the wave of immigration from that region to New England in the late 1800s-early 1900s. Its three-foot-thick walls of fieldstone were designed to keep apples fresh, preserved for sale throughout the following months. Residents familiar with the old barn recall that apples were stored in its cellar, with the ground floor used for sorting, crating and other activities.

An inventory form for the Blacksmith Shop at 403 Great Road dates the building as 1914, built by Mr. Larsen with hand-hewn timbers that came from Maynard [Mass]. This form is not recorded in MACRIS and is believed to have been written after Stow's last historic properties inventory in 1982.

The 2006 DCR/Freedom's Way Heritage Landscape Report contains an appendix, "Heritage Landscapes Identified by Community." Under Agriculture, it lists the Apple Barn as used for storing apples on the Peter Larsen property before the land was acquired for the school. Under Institutional/Military, the Center School is listed with the following description: "Built in 1954 on property of Peter Larsen whose stone Apple Barn and Blacksmith Shop remain on the property. The Colonial Revival style school houses Grades 3-6."

The town of Stow purchased the Larsen Farm in 1953 with the goal of constructing the new Center School there. A Special Town Meeting on June 21, 1954 considered whether to authorize the Selectmen to sell or dispose of the buildings on the site. The Town voted in favor of Warrant Article 5 specifically excluding the Blacksmith Shop and Apple Barn from sale or demolition, expressing its desire to preserve the buildings. In Article 6, the Town voted to construct, equip and furnish a new elementary school on the site, with the two farm buildings remaining in place.

The Larsen farmhouse was moved to adjacent property just to the west of the site, and continues to be used as a residential structure. A large dairy barn was removed. The stone Apple Barn, the Blacksmith Shop and the Center School building are among numerous historic structures remaining in the Upper Village, woven into Stow's rural character. Along with the farmhouse next door, the two Larsen buildings remain in their original locations and are clearly visible to drivers, bikers, and walkers, still valued today as part of the Great Road streetscape.

Stow History Books:

We are fortunate to have four books on Stow history, all of which make note of the Larsen farm buildings:

"Stow, Massachusetts – 1683-1933," compiled by the Rev. and Mrs. Preston Crowell in honor of the Town's 250th anniversary, notes that Stow is located in "the Nashoba Fruit

Belt,” with fruit being Stow’s big industry. At that time, apple growers were renting space in large plants for cold storage, the follow-on technology to the Larsen Apple Barn. The book also notes that the Larsen Blacksmith Shop “located on Great Road just beyond the Post-office and store is still in use.”

“History of Stow,” written by Ethel Childs for Stow’s 1983 Tercentenary celebration, describes the Town’s purchase of the Larsen Farm in 1953 for the site of Center School and how the “baby boom” necessitated several successive additions to the school: eight rooms in 1956, four in 1957, and six in 1964. Childs writes: “The architects planned so as to keep the Stone Building that Peter Larsen had built for apple storage. It has seen a variety of uses and continues to add much aesthetically to Center School.” Today, in the 21st century, the Stone Building is used for art classes for the elementary school students.

“Recollections of Stow,” written by Francis Warren, one member in generations of Warren family farmers, describes Peter Larsen in a section entitled “The Danes.” “It is told,” he begins, that a Stow resident gave a group of Danes a ride home from neighboring Maynard and learned that one, Peter Larsen, was a blacksmith. He pointed Larsen to a blacksmith job in town and Larsen was hired. In 1896, Larsen returned to Denmark and was married, then returned to Stow in 1908 and bought his Great Road farm. In 1928, according to the author, Larsen built the stone building, with walls three feet thick, for apple packing and storage. At the time Mr. Warren wrote his book, the building housed school department offices. In 1974, Town Meeting voted to fund repairs.

It is worth noting that in the 1990’s Town Meeting once again approved spending to stabilize the Blacksmith Shop, using CPA funds.

“Stow Things: A New England Town Primer” is the most recent Stow history book. Written in 2009 by Stow Historical Commission member Ralph N. Fuller, it has photos of Police Chief Larsen and the Apple Barn at Center School. The caption reads: “Center School was built on the site of Peter Larsen’s Great Road farm and ‘the Stone Building’ was a landmark for generations of kids. Historically, the building was ‘the Apple Barn,’ constructed by Larsen in the 1930s with extra-thick walls and a recessed floor to store his and other farmers’ produce.” In a telling conclusion, it reads: “The structure was due to be razed in 2010 as part of Center School’s expansion. Larsen’s farmhouse was long ago moved next door, where it’s still in use as a private residence.”

Residents’ Recollections of the Larsen Farm and early Center School:

On January 16, 2010, a tour of the Apple Barn building was led by John Makey, lifetime Stow resident, long-time SHC chair and retired Superintendent of Streets for Stow. Mr. Makey worked on the Larsen farm as a youngster and knew the barn well. He noted some changes involving windows and doors, and especially the fact that the recessed cellar had been filled in and grade outside the building had been changed.

But he also noted some aspects that had been preserved, including the building’s basic structure of very thick stone walls. He noted that the building is solid functionally, with a roof that doesn’t leak. The former Apple Barn has served as the town treasurer’s office, school administrative offices, classrooms, and is currently used for art classes.

Comments from MassHistPres Members

Responses to our request for observations about stone Apple Barns on the MassHistPres list serve suggested that while they are not unknown, they are relatively uncommon and that they represent a style of building and evolution from root cellars

A response from a preservationist in Acton noted the presence of a very similar stone Apple Barn near the center of that town, and others were noted.

Thomas Durant Visser's *Field Guide to New England Barns and Farm Buildings* has photos and a description of stone Apple Barns that could be describing the Larsen building.

A March 8, 2009 New York Times article entitled "Saving the Barns, Before They Vanish," aptly describes the issue we are faced with here. Writer Wendy Carlson interviewed historic preservationists, architects, artists, and restoration experts who describe how barns throughout New England are being lost to suburban sprawl. According to the article, Visser, author of the previously cited "Field Guide to New England Barns and Farm Buildings," said that 25 percent of the buildings he photographed for the 1997 edition of his book were not longer standing in 2009.

Today's Issue: New Elementary School and Larsen Farm Buildings:

The question is how to balance the needs of a new school project with those two historic agricultural structures. As the local historical commission, we want to ensure that the history of the Larsen buildings is properly weighed in any decision about their future.

Stow has not done an historic properties inventory since 1982 – nearly three decades ago. If timing were different, these buildings would be on the inventory today. In fact, Stow Town Meeting has approved the use of CPA funds to prepare a new inventory and an RFP for the project has just been issued.

A promising step forward is the development is an alternate site plan by SMMA, which we received from the school building co-chairs at our January 7 meeting. This alternative plan shows the Apple Barn in its present location, with the parking lot and children's play yard adjusted to accommodate it. The plan is similar to the one drawn by former Town engineer Bruce Fletcher, which you received with our December 9, 2009 letter.

However, the *Stow Independent*, reporting on a school building committee visit with the Planning Board on January 27, quoted the committee as stating that the alternative plan would not be pursued.

Historic Value:

Although like most other historic buildings the Apple Barn has obviously been altered to meet the needs of subsequent users, the structure meets many of the criteria of historic importance.

- **Location** – The Apple Barn stands on the site of the Larsen farm, just down Great Road from Town Hall, Randall Library and First Parish Church. The Blacksmith Shop, established by Mr. Larsen in 1914, still stands nearby on the site. The Larsen farmhouse, moved to the adjacent lot when Center School was constructed, still serves as a residence. The Upper Village is abundantly populated with structures ranging from the Samuel Gates House (1730s), Town Hall (1848), the Conant House (c. 1800, remodeled 1840s) and many others. This is a significant area of Stow history and development and the Apple Barn reflects an important part of its agricultural nature in the early 20th Century.
- **Design & Integrity** – While the interior has been extensively modernized, the building still stands as a singular example of an early 20th Century apple storage barn, with three-foot fieldstone walls designed to provide an insulated interior. The walls and roof are quite sound. Its design also reflects the heritage of Stow’s significant period of Scandinavian immigration.
- **Setting** – The structure represents a period of Stow history in which commercial apple farming was one of the leading industries in the community. Its location drives home the fact that working farms were in operation in the very center of the town – the Upper Village. Its builder and owner was a prominent “mover and shaker” in the town, serving the town as a blacksmith and police officer as well as farmer.
- **Workmanship** – As noted, the building’s three-foot fieldstone walls represent a singular design of the early 20th Century. They remain sound and functional more than 90 years after they were constructed. Their design reflects the heritage of Stow’s significant period of Scandinavian immigration.
- **Feeling** – The Apple Barn is an integral piece of an historic area within Stow – a farming town that was coming to grips with 20th Century progress. Even as Peter Larsen was expanding his farming and blacksmithing endeavors, a trolley route was running down Great Road through the Town Center where, from east to west, it passed the First Parish Church and Randall Public Library, near the Town Hall and the Larsen farm. Moreover, the Apple Barn was used not just for Peter Larsen’s apple crop but by growers throughout the town.
- **Association** - It was a resource for the town, reflective of a time when growers were creating the orchards for which Stow is still known (although in a smaller, “pick-your-own” context today). The site is still used for blacksmith demonstrations during the town’s annual SpringFest celebration. It is a snapshot for its time, one of the Town’s few substantive relicts of early 20th Century agriculture.

Stow Master Plan:

The current revision of Stow’s Master Plan, the document that defines the town and guides our future, states that much of the town’s character is due to the remaining traces of its history over the 300 years since its incorporation. Using our historic structures, monuments, and the layout of Town Center as examples, the plan states: “We are

obligated as a community to support the preservation of this character, working both through organized groups and through stewardship or ownership of historic structures.” The plan directs us to look at today’s question about the Larsen buildings in the context of the town’s character and our responsibility to preserve it.

In Conclusion:

Our intention is to provide you with as much information as we have on the historical significance of the Apple Barn and Blacksmith Shop in the context of the town’s valued rural character. As the local historical commission, it is our duty to work for the protection of historic treasures and we feel that these structures are of special historical and agricultural significance.

Obviously, if it is feasible we would like these buildings to continue as part of the school design. If they cannot be incorporated into new school’s operations, we would hope to see them remain in place, separated from the school functionally. We would endeavor to find a new use for them. Town storage is one possibility. Another is use as a town history museum (the appeal of this idea is that such an operation would be open only on weekends and not interfere with school parking and other activities).

If you determine that these structures are not worthy of historic protection, we will accept your decision and move on.

Any of the Commission members will be pleased to answer any questions you have about this material or in general. Please do not hesitate to contact us.

We are grateful for this opportunity to participate in the process.

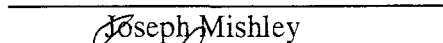
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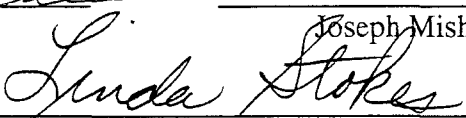
The Stow Historical Commission


Wayne Fletcher


Ralph Fuller


Susan McLaughlin


Joseph Mishley


Linda Stokes

Enclosure: Walking Tour of Stow brochure