

Abstract
Vessels for Growth
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2011
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This written report supports the creative thesis entitled Vessels of Growth. My work in clay and mixed media references southern culture with particular interest in the tobacco barns and buildings of the southern landscape because of the stories and activities they contain. These barns and outbuildings contrast with our modern lifestyle, yet they are still a visual part of our contemporary life. My work imparts the poetic, emotional qualities of these physical forms while revealing the beauty that occurs with their decay. These buildings are often surrounded by crops of tobacco, cotton, soybeans or corn. My work uses the imagery of the southern landscape as subject and incorporates the crops and plants of this region. These vessels constructed of clay are inspired by the barns and the land on which these buildings are supported. I will also describe my research into the agriculture and agricultural architecture of this region, particularly the thriving cotton, corn and tobacco crops.

Vessels for Growth

A Report of Creative Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Art and Design

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts in Ceramics

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April 2012

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Preface

My art captures the transitory nature that is evidenced of the evolving agrarian culture of eastern North Carolina. I explicitly reference the decaying farm structures that stand as relics of a passing time as well as the various crops growing around and over them. I find the variety and multiplicity of decaying barns in the eastern North Carolina landscape to be iconic. They are honorable and important not only for their aesthetic qualities, but also because their varying states of decay are juxtaposed with varying states of growth. It is fascinating to me how many abandoned barns still stand amidst fields planted with growing crops or remain in developed areas next to contemporary homes. I am seeking to visualize the tension between the natural world's generative qualities, as seen in seeds, plants and crops, with the barns that serve as reliquaries from a time now past. My goal is to capture both the fragility and resilience inherent in the present moment, emphasizing transience. The work is my response to my experiences and the connections I have made with the eastern North Carolina environment and culture.

Introduction—Moving to Eastern North Carolina

I want though to indulge myself in the truly sensual pleasure of savoring these things in their quiet honesty, subtlety, and restrained strength and in their refreshing purity. There is something enlightening about them, as ranged here; they seem to write a new little social and architectural history about one regional America (the deep South). In addition to that, each one is a poem. (Walker Evans discussing the rural farm structures in *Of Time and Place*)

I moved to Greenville, North Carolina after having lived in Florida for many years, and in northern Pennsylvania. My visual environment influences me. The connection with my environment inspires my work. Upon moving to North Carolina, I sought out aesthetically pleasing places in nature that would offer visual and emotional fulfillment. In spring I ventured beyond the city center and into the rural areas. On rural roads in every direction I came across vast fields with decaying barns and growing crops of tobacco, cotton, soybeans and corn. The barns struck me as the most prominent features in the eastern North Carolina landscape, standing out like the rolling hills do in the northeast. They are often the tallest structures in this rural landscape of eastern North Carolina. In the summer the seven-foot tall, beautiful, large leafed plants begin to fill vast spreads of farmland. As a newcomer to this place, I learned that this was the aptly named Bright Leaf tobacco plant that eastern for which North Carolina had been so well. I was surprised to learn that an agrarian product that has been the recipient of so much controversy for health and ethical reasons could offer such a lush and pleasing sight in the field. The decaying tobacco barns that are particular to this area were often in close proximity, even surrounded, by the fields of Bright Leaf plants. These barns are in varying stages of decay. I was

captivated by the barns' visual structure and the materials used their construction. The weathered wood, the rusty metal collapsing roofs, the holes in the sides, the remaining remnants of ventilators and manufacturers' names are aesthetically interesting. Each barn seemed to have its own personality. Perhaps these barns were representative of the families that built them and farmed the land surrounding them in times past. I began to pay more attention to the seasons and to notice that there are quite a variety of crops that are grown throughout the year in the fields and farms in this area. The flora and seeds of the tobacco, cotton, peanuts, corn, soybeans are the inspiration for the growth that is within my work.

Enculturation

To place my work in the context of eastern North Carolina I felt the responsibility to fortify my visual intuition with a foundation of factual knowledge. I began photographing the farms and the barns. The continued visual stimulation led me to learn more about the various crops and how the soil and climate was so obviously suitable for their growth. It was my need for a connection to place that led me to research the culture of eastern North Carolina. I documented long drives in the surrounding farmland to record farms and barns for reference material.

The barns and my vessels are containers for meaning, memory and growth. Though the farm structures are not often preserved and appreciated in this region, I am aware of other communities that do preserve and restore their farm buildings. I appreciate those in this area that have maintained and restored and value their barns. I appreciate the barns for their historical meaning, as well as their beautiful and pleasing architecture. The barns were once prized by the farmers who depended on them for their utilitarian purpose of drying the tobacco for market. The barns now sit in the landscape and serve as reminders of a past, a time when tobacco was still hung and cured.

As an artist, I desire to find a sense of place. What would it mean to me to find beauty and inspiration here? In answering that for myself, I have also discovered

what others find beautiful and inspirational in this landscape. Art can send conceptual messages and also can be simply about creating beautiful objects that engage the viewer's sense of connectedness. It is my desire that my works do both; that the aesthetics of the pieces work in conjunction with the concept. I

am interested in how my work inspires conversation, invites connection, and also how it might inform the viewer. When my work has been shown, I enjoy the stories the works invoke, particularly from people that are from this region.

By bringing nature into the gallery and museum setting it takes on the politics of space. This encourages a focus that many might choose to escape or simply ignore in our fast-paced world. The space of the gallery and museum are venues where people can go to be visually stimulated and educated.

I am also interested in humankind's manipulation of nature and what is valued by a particular region or area. I learned how, during times of prosperity in this area, new construction was deemed to be valuable and made way for the demolition of many of the historical buildings that once existed. Though there are still many farming families dependent on agriculture in this area, the historical farm buildings have not retained a sense of value for most. In the ever-changing landscape, many new subdivisions are established with a decaying barn nearby. As creative observer, it is interesting to see what is acceptable culturally and

visually. The value of the farm is still retained in this culture, yet many of the wealthiest citizens move into subdivisions to be separated from the agricultural crops. There is a distancing from agriculture, a significant difference compared to the last 100 years, when many houses were located in the center of farms.

My appreciation and celebration of crops led to their inclusion in my work. As literal and metaphorical symbols of the harvest they discuss prosperity, hope and promise. The seeds of these crops are something I began to collect partially due to my interest in seeds and cultivation, but also because of my great appreciation for their individual forms. To get seeds from a cotton boll one has to patiently pull the thick cotton apart. Tobacco seeds, some of the tiniest seeds known to the botanical world, have to be very carefully gathered from the small seed heads the flowering plants produce.

Growing my Own:

Seeds and promise of the harvest: Regional Crops of eastern North Carolina

I decided that an important part of my work would be the actual growing and harvesting of crops. Growing and harvesting tobacco, soybeans, cotton, peanuts, corn, peas, cabbage and other crops directly influence my art making process as well as my field research. It became important to understand what the “stickiness” of the tobacco was, the blooms and then bolls of cotton, the planting and long waiting period of soybeans and the peanuts that grow beneath the ground. I planted these crops to further inform my work and my appreciation for farming. I wanted to understand more about the crops that people described. I experienced some of the work involved as I removed grass, tilled and amended soil, and located Bright Leaf tobacco and other seeds. This work was research as well as ritual and artistic expression. My participation in plant growth and harvesting related to my art making. By growing the crops myself, I could better understand the process and the work. As with the making of my vessels, my direct contact with the clay and crops became my work.

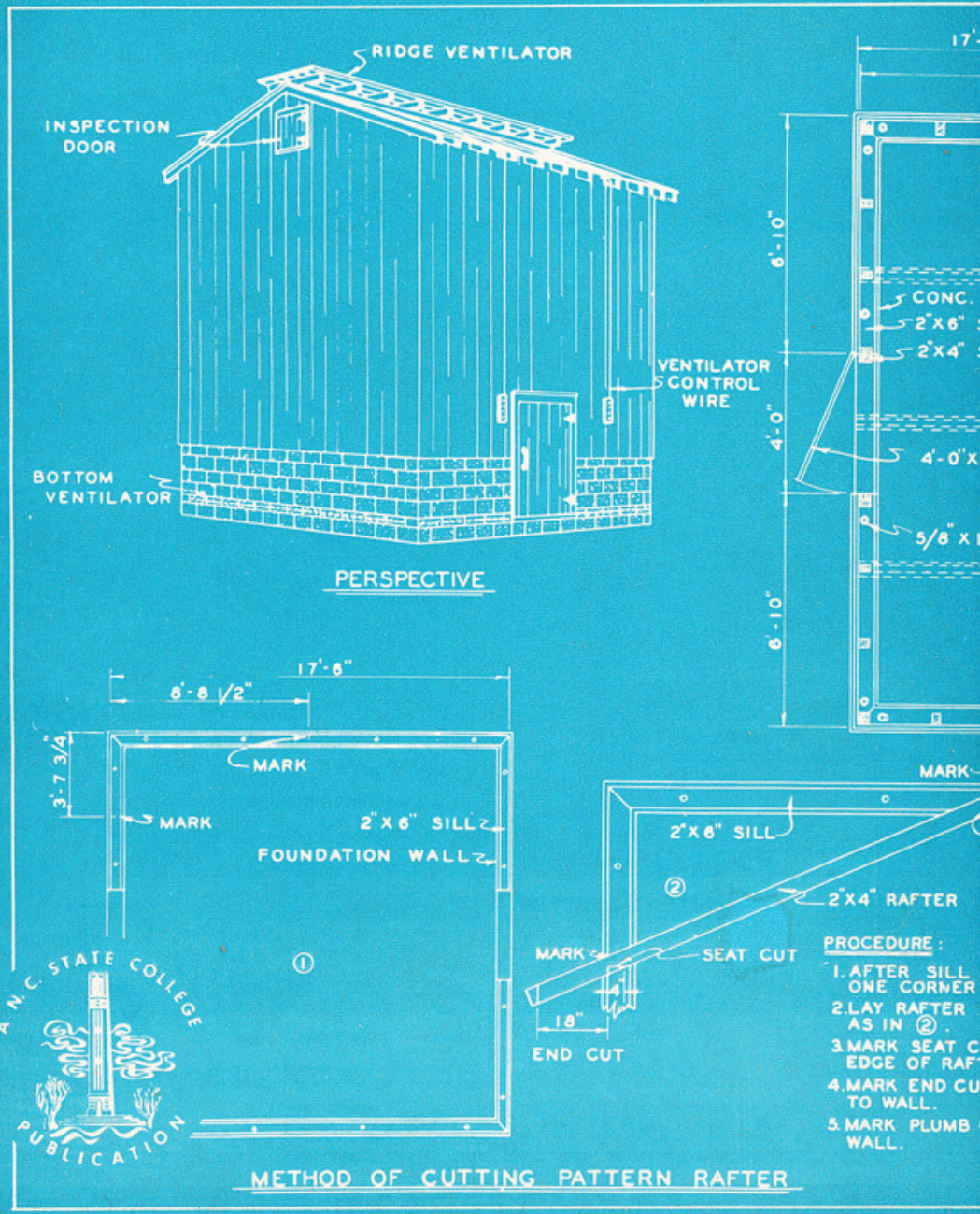
With no use of chemical fertilizers, I dealt with the mildew on the beans, the weevils on cotton and hand picked tobacco hornworms from the tobacco. This

gave me further understanding but also inspiration. I saw the growing and harvesting of the crops as a recording of process and an important part of my work. I harvested all my crops by hand. I topped my tobacco and followed the process of curing the tobacco. I stripped the leaves, I laid them out to dry, I tied it to sticks, and I put it in a room with humidity and heat, and then untied the leaves again. To learn more about a newer crop to this region, I harvested some of the kenaf crop on a Falkland farm.

I documented the process predominately through photography. I have also “put back” several of the harvested crops for inspiration and incorporated them in my work. By using the actual plants or seeds of these crops, My work in brings attention to the agricultural history of this region and the beauty of the crops.

As the artist Jackie Brookner states “Changing people’s minds and behavior is important, (yet) people respond to beauty, so I aim to make works that people want to look at.” I am interested in invoking thoughts regarding the rich agricultural heritage of this community, perhaps suggesting the unique and special qualities of farming which is vital to humanity and the preservation of historical farm buildings so they are not forgotten.

FLUE CURED TOBACCO BARN CONSTRUCTION



The Tobacco Barn-Inspiration for my work

The Work

Where tradition is not clearly verbalized, an unarticulated cosmology can still be perceived in the culture's visual and spatial language. Inscribed into the built environment is a cultural aesthetic which wordlessly embodies and then in turn defines, cultural identity. -Rebecca Walker

My barns are inspired by the aesthetic qualities as well as the historical significance of eastern Carolina barns. I have created these vessels that are challenging in scale that have tactile surfaces. Manually working with the clay allows direct contact so that there are no tools between me and the material. I chose to use clay because of its malleability and plasticity. I can shape, form, build and put textures on my structures with my hands. My work is built with stoneware clay using coiling and pinch methods. The coils are like long ropes of clay that are layered on top of one another as the surface is built. Pinching is the use of the fingers to squeeze and compress the clay that leads to many of the vessels retaining my hand marks. Clay is a material that requires patience, correct timing and confidence, similar to farming. It is slowly added from the bottom up to build the vessel. As the lower portions of a piece begin to dry it can then support subsequent layers of clay. Timing is extremely important. Clay that is too soft will slump and fall apart, clay that is too dry cannot be added to. Each piece is allowed to dry slowly until it can be bisque fired. This is the first firing, making the clay changing the clay to a chemically through heat to a structurally strong state. After the bisque firing, the pieces are glazed and then fired again. Some are fired multiple times with multiple glazes to achieve desired surface

effect.

Some of the vessels have been wood fired, a process that is multiple-day, labor intensive and requires the work of many participants gathering and cutting wood, loading and bricking up the kiln, and many people to stoke the kiln with wood.

The wood fire creates unique effects of color and surface as the ash becomes a glaze on the pieces. The wood firing is a community process, and relates to farming in that it takes many to make a large endeavor successful.

The Work

Leaning barn

Vessel
Texture
Patina
Hope



In this vessel, I pinched the coils together and smoothed the clay progressively as I built up the form. When the structure was completely constructed, I used various tools to draw on the surface in an abstract manner. This piece references some of the barns that I have viewed that have various vines and decaying areas that, from a distance, appear to be drawings on the walls of the barn. This vessel has an opening on one side and it leans. The lean is suggestive of many of the barns that have begun to bend due to time and decay. Squash vines grow in the opening. This references barns in the landscape that have growth coming up,

through and out of the barns.

Cotton Barn

Fragile
Weathered
Birth
Resilience
Hard
Lush



This barn was built by rolling coils of clay that I used the whole of my hand to squeeze and form. I then connected these together by scoring (roughing up the edges with a tool similar to a needle) the edges of the coils and using slip, a liquid clay that acts as the glue. I built this piece up slowly as each level dried enough to then support more coils. This is a frame barn that I glazed to cone 6 in an electric kiln with various oxides. After that firing, I then sawdust fired the barn to get areas of charcoal black. The coloring used was to reference decay and to

contrast with the cotton that I harvested to fill the barn. The cotton is an important local crop and when harvested, is packed together in huge bales. This inspired filling the barn so that it serves as a container for a bale, and to suggest the abundance of the cotton. The cotton as a crop is almost contained yet it is bursting between the supports of this fragile yet strong structure.

It Grows on You

Texture
Humor
Greenville
Hard
History
Experience



The walls of clay were slowly built up and are very thin. After the structure was built, I used wet clay (slip) on the outside and pushed from the inside out as I built it to give the exterior a crackle like surface. I carved openings of various sizes on all sides of the vessel. The roof was left with a large opening then was painted with oxides and fired three times to achieve the desired surface. The colors are shades of yellow, brown and green. I filled the structure with humus and soil. I then filled the holes and the roof with moss. This barn was inspired by a shaded barn in the woods that had areas of moss growing at the base and up

the sides of the structure. It was also strongly inspired by a conversation I had with a woman who has lived in Greenville for 20 years. She shared how she moved here from western North Carolina for employment purposes, and how she initially missed the mountains. She had now made this place home. She said, "Greenville grows on you like moss". As the moss grows, it is slowly covering the vessel, much like many of the barns in the landscape, where the plants and crops have outgrown the structure.

Grows on You Like Moss

Hard
Wood
Strong
Texture
Green
Soft



The walls of clay were built with coils. After the structure was completed, I used various tools to make a textured surface that somewhat mimics the grain of wood. I again carved openings of various sizes on all sides of the vessel. The roof was left with a large opening and this was glaze fired three times to achieve the desired surface, with shades of brown and green. I then sandblasted the pieces to achieve a weathered surface. I filled the structure with humus and soil and then filled the holes and the roof with moss. This barn was also inspired by the woman's quote, "Greenville grows on you like Moss". This is a further exploration of the concept and the visual impression that I wanted to make using

clay and moss.

Pierced Barn

Memory
Empty
Full
Strong
Thin
Textured
Rough



This Barn was constructed using thin coils of clay embedded with soil that were then pinched to become very thin. Soil was mixed into the clay while still wet to achieve a rough, gritty texture as found in the eastern North Carolina soil. The soil after the firing leaves the rough impression in the vessel. There are openings in the structure, inspired by ragged rough worn away areas in many of the barns. This was wood fired, giving it patinas of brown, black and orange. Set beside it is harvested wheat.

Pinched Barn

Weak
Strong
Confident
Textured
Thin



This vessel was built by using coils of clay that were pinched to be strong, yet thin. I pressed sharp objects and soil into the clay as it was drying to achieve a rough, gritty texture that is reminiscent of the eastern North Carolina soil. The soil burns away in the firing but leaves the rough impression in the vessel. There are openings in the structure, inspired by large holes in many of the barns. I have incorporated cotton seeds around the base of this vessel.

Gravity wins barn

Precarious
Strength
Patina
Scary
Supportive
Vessel



This vessel was built and then rebuilt two times because it is a dramatically leaning form, with part of the bottom of the vessel rising upward. This vessel was also constructed using the coil and pinch method. Once the structure was complete, I added coils of similar thickness going horizontally around the barn. This suggests vines growing up and around the vessel, similar to barns that have vines and growth surrounding them. This piece was painted with oxides and then pit fired in sawdust to achieve various color and surface results. I left an opening

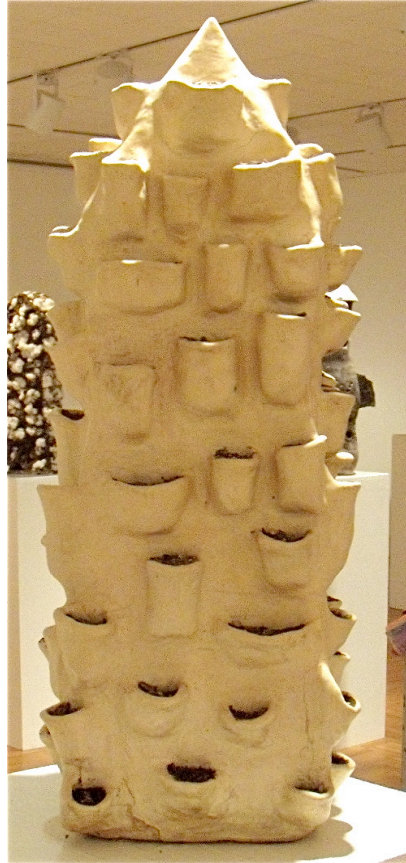
at the top of the barn, referencing barns that have lost their roofs. In this open area I have planted crowder peas, which have long vines, and develop pods.

Crowder peas are a food crop that is popular with many native eastern

Carolinians. I have grown and harvested soybeans and harvested seeds are planted in this vessel.

Pocket barn

Fragile
Strong
Confident
Humorous
Thin



I constructed this vessel with the coil and pinch method and as it began to dry I added thin pockets completely surrounding the barn. It was glazed and fired twice. This piece was inspired by those barns with plants that have taken root on the exterior walls of the barn as well as referencing planters, which the barns become with this growth. I have planted several types of seeds in these pockets including tobacco, corn and soybeans.

Fungi Barn

Seeds
Shells
Growth
Strength
Crops
Vessel



After building the basic structure of this piece I made many small pod or shell like forms that were attached to a large portion of the surface area of the vessel. I carved openings between some of the pods. The pods are to suggest the shells of seeds, as the barns in many instances have become shells for decay and/or growth. Cotton seeds have been planted in the openings.

Terraced Barn

Terrace
Barn
Vessel
Storage
Patina
Container
Seeds



This vessel is a wood fired, heavily textured, and curved structure with horizontal openings that hold various seeds. These are levels that hold crowder peas, a crop that thrives in Greenville. While some of the barns age and weather, many are also structurally intact and house crops, seeds or retired farm equipment.

This piece suggests the barn's function. The barn and the seeds are containers for future use.

Burnt

Figure
Dark
Barn
Vessel
Resiliency
Strength



This piece was built with thin coils. It has a slight figurative shape, representing the barns that seem to have personalities, like the people who built them. This piece has a series of vertical holes that serve as openings for growth. The vessel was pit fired in sawdust to achieve a dark varied patina.

Silo

Tall
Textures
Container
Metal
Patina
Texture
Whimsical



This was made with long clay coil coils and is circular in design. It has openings around and up the sides where cotton has been planted. This piece was inspired by the significance of cotton as crop before the discovery that tobacco would also thrive so well in this region. Planted in this vessel are locally harvested cotton seeds.

Growth Barn

Pattern

Moss

Flora

Patina

Soft

Whimsical

Textures

Strength

Growth



This was built with thick coils of clay that were smoothed and pinched to be strong and thin. It is organic in shape. It has openings around and up the piece where soft brushy stems from cover crops have been included. This references the barns, that while decaying, become vessels for the growth of new plants. In the crevices there is locally harvested wheat.

Fragile Barn

Tall
Fragile
Strong
Weak
Precarious
Skeleton
Texture
Smooth
Containment



This was built with coils that were very slowly and carefully attached to one another. The firing caused this piece to lean even further than it originally did before being fired in the kiln. It is on a base made of fired Greenville and Falkland clay and soil, a reminder that the soil is the strength and offers the promise of new growth.

Conclusion

The work celebrates the vernacular architectural history—the agricultural landscape, the people and the buildings of this vanishing way of life. By incorporating natural materials, the works are transformed into a visual dialogue that becomes a conceptual form of environmental discussion. My ceramic vessels are inspired by architectural structures that once served as containers for the crops that are important to the success and to the unique history of this community.

End Notes History of Tobacco Barns-The Vernacular Architecture of this region

Since my work stems from my research into tobacco barns and crops of this region, I am including historical information regarding tobacco barns. It offers information to increase the understanding of the architecture of these buildings that have strongly influenced my work. There is a particular shape to my vessels that stems from the tall barn structures in this area.

Studies of the Character and distribution of specific facilities are beginning to receive more attention.... specific settlement features, such as house types, the shapes of barns and the distinctive structures associated with different kinds of agriculture or industry that are important to understanding geography of an area and its settlement". (Fraser and Hart, 1961, 274)

The tobacco barns were once essential in the process of air curing tobacco. In the 21st century they are fast disappearing from the American landscape in places where they were once ubiquitous. The barns have generally declined along with the tobacco industry. When the American tobacco industry was at its peak, tobacco barns were found everywhere the crop was grown. Tobacco barns are as unique as each area in which they were found. Though tobacco barn designs varied greatly there were elements that were found in many American tobacco barns. Design elements that were common to American tobacco barns include: gabled roofs, frame construction, and a system of ventilation. Often, the venting system would be more elaborate, including a roof ventilation system. In addition, tobacco barns do cross over into other barn styles of their day.

Right after the tobacco is hung the vents are opened during the day in an effort to begin the important process of shedding water from the tobacco known as the curing of tobacco. Tobacco is often cured at specific temperatures and humidity, depending on where the tobacco is being cured, and also how the finished tobacco leaf is supposed to taste. The vents are used to slow the drying process down, allowing for a critical chemical break down to occur, turning the leaf from green to yellow to brown. To maintain ideal curing temperatures over the course of the curing process, farmers not only rely on the vents but on heat. While charcoal fires have been replaced in many barns with heaters, both methods help reduce moisture. With all of the variables that can impact the curing process, the unique design of the tobacco barn has remained constant as a time-tested method for drying tobacco.

The interior framing would be set up so that lathes (also called "tobacco sticks") with tobacco attached to them could be hung for drying. The tier poles were often supported by posts and cross beams, the space in between known as the "bents." The bents ranged in vertical spacing from 20 inches to five feet wide.

The bent itself became an important marker in determining crop volume. Farmers

would commonly refer to barn size in terms of bents. One bent would hang half an acre of tobacco. In some areas, bents were called rooms. This defined a narrow and tall division of the inside of the barn by the tier poles. A typical barn for curing flue-cured tobacco was four rooms in size.

Recent government buyout programs where commitment by the landowner to not farm certain crops has effectively discouraged the cultivation of tobacco. The buyouts are done to help maintain a certain cost of certain crops by eliminating competition. This has added to the hundreds of historic tobacco barns that are rendered instantly obsolete. Additionally, there are more modern ways of curing tobacco that are more efficient than hand hanging and curing in the tobacco barns.

The barns in eastern North Carolina are unique and particular to this area. Here the tobacco barns are called the flue-cured style, and this region is called the New Belt. These barns were built after discoveries were made of the most successful architecture in which to cure the tobacco that is unique to this region, Bright Leaf tobacco. Use of regional materials were important as well: though log barns may have been superior for expense and performance, the use of framing came into place due to lack of suitable logs in this region. To insulate the barns further, many of them were covered in green or black tarpaper which was held in place by thin vertical slats.

Eastern Carolina Agriculture-The history and the future

When settlers first migrated from Virginia to North Carolina, they struggled to grow any crop, much less tobacco, partially because of the dry, sandy soil. Because Londoners viewed tobacco as a desired luxury and bought it exclusively from Spain, the new North American colonists knew if they could raise tobacco, they could earn a living off of selling tobacco to England (tobacco was both rare and expensive). Growing tobacco proved to be troublesome, and the quality of the first crop of North Carolina was poor. Prior to the 1850's most tobacco grown in the US was fire-cured dark-leaf. This type of tobacco was planted in fertile lowlands, used a robust variety of leaf, and was either fire cured or flue cured. Sometime after the 1815 demand for a milder, lighter, more aromatic tobacco arose. Ohio, Pennsylvania and Maryland all innovated quite a bit with milder varieties of the tobacco plant. Farmers around the country experimented with different curing processes. The breakthrough didn't come until around 1839.

It had been noticed for centuries that sandy, highland soil produced thinner, weaker plants. Captain Abisha Slade, of Purley, North Carolina had a good deal of infertile, sandy soil, and planted the new "gold-leaf" varieties on it. Slade owned a slave, Stephen, who around 1839 accidentally produced the first real bright tobacco. He used charcoal to restart a fire used to cure the crop. Abisha Slade's farm was near the Virginia border in Caswell County. Stephen worked as

a blacksmith on the Slade farm. Another of his jobs was overseeing the curing process of the tobacco crop. On one occasion, due to the warmth created by the fire, Stephen fell asleep during the process. A few hours later, he woke up to find the fire almost completely out. To try to keep the heat going, he rushed to his fire, Stephen fell asleep during the process. A few hours later, he woke up to find the fire almost completely out. To try to keep the heat going, he rushed to his charcoal pit, which was part of his blacksmithing operation and threw hot coals on the fire, which created a sudden, immense heat. The heat from the charred logs cured the tobacco quickly, leaving it with a vivid yellow color. The trade press in the late nineteenth century investigated the discovery of the process, interviewing those still living with firsthand knowledge of the events. The account is one that has fascinated North Carolinians for generations.

The flue-cured tobacco became known as Bright Leaf tobacco and the variety became popular with smokers. Other farmers learned of and used the new process as well. Although the discovery took place on a Piedmont plantation, farmers in the coastal plains soon adopted the process and constructed curing barns by the hundreds. By 1857, Abisha Slade was harvesting 20,000 pounds annually and making some of the highest profits ever. Bright leaf tobacco led North Carolina to a dominant position in the tobacco industry. Slade made many public appearances to share the bright-leaf process with other farmers. Prosperous and outgoing, he built a brick house in Yanceyville, North Carolina, and at one time had many servants. News spread through the area pretty quickly. The infertile sandy soil was suddenly profitable, and people rapidly developed flue-curing techniques, a more efficient way of smoke-free curing. Farmers discovered that Bright Leaf tobacco needs thin, starved soil, and those who could not grow other crops found that they could grow tobacco. Formerly unproductive farms reached 20–35 times their previous worth. By 1855, six Piedmont counties adjoining Virginia ruled the tobacco market.

The success of tobacco ultimately fueled the economy in eastern North Carolina. Greenville has been a major beneficiary of the crops' success. Money from tobacco helped to fund the growth of East Carolina University as well as Pitt Memorial Hospital. Cotton rivaled tobacco to some degree as a crop in this region and many farmers grew both crops. In order to diversify and rotate crops, other crops commonly grown here are soybeans, corn and peanuts.

Tobacco has declined for several reasons in the past 30 years in this region. Many other countries are now growing tobacco. Modern ways of curing has permitted more farmers to plant the crop, so in some areas there are surpluses. The larger companies that purchase tobacco have more available sources, so the crop has less value.

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