MICHIGAN BARN PRESERVATION NETWORK

Summer 2026 – No. 114

MI BARN

Inside: exploring MBPN's history and future!

Promoting Appreciation, Preservation, and Rehabilitation of Michigan Barns, Farmsteads, and Rural Communities

Photo by John Cole

Fall colors...and Michigan barns—a perfect combination.

Join Us for a Fall Barn Tour on October 9th!

As the calendar moves from summer to fall, it is once again time for a Barn Tour! For those who have joined the MBPN on previous Fall Barn Tours, you know what those tours bring to our collective knowledge of Michigan's rural heritage. For example, the 2024 fall barn tour, also held in October, featured four examples of barns that were part of Lapeer County's agricultural history and tradition. Likewise, the 2025 MBPN Fall Barn Tour visited properties in Michigan's Thumb that transitioned from logging to farming, with history as a focus, and the narration took into account not only the barns, but also the land and the people who farmed it.

This year, we once again visit the Thumb's Lapeer County, focusing on the Northeast quadrant of the county. The date is set for Friday, October 9 —for an all-day bus tour with registration from 8:30–9:00 AM. The tour will start at the Imlay City Historical Museum, 77 N. Main Street, Imlay City, MI 48444.

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President's Message

Looking to the future… with a little help from our friends?

Tom Irrer

As I mentioned in the last newsletter, we owe the success of MBPN to individuals like Vera Wiltse, Steve Stier, and Julie Avery. After 30 years of exceptional and visionary leadership, MBPN is facing a generational shift that requires creative assessment of options that will build on the decades of dedication exhibited by its founders and stalwarts. Perhaps the solution lies in our proverbial back yard.

We are fortunate to have an organization in Michigan that is focused on preserving traditional agricultural skills. Tillers International is situated on 200 acres near Scotts, Michigan, slightly south of, and midway between, Kalamazoo and Battle Creek. There, they conduct many classes throughout the year including a six-day class on traditional Timber Framing. Tillers also has a large barn that they acquired in the Grand Rapids area. They dismantled it, moved it to their grounds, and reconstructed it where it stands proudly in use today. They also have moved at least one smaller barn to their campus, and that barn is also in use. In short, they are no strangers to barn preservation.

As Keith Kehlbeck points out in his article on page 6, the board recently met to discuss how, during this period of transition for the MBPN, we can build capacity to allow us to fulfil our mission. In a collateral piece, new MBPN board member, Fred Johns, has taken the lead to learn how MBPN might work with Tillers to accomplish our administrative tasks. Tillers has a paid staff and offices on their property. They are experienced with modern forms of communication. They share our love of Michigan's traditional and historic rural culture, and there is already some overlap with MBPN members participating in Tillers' activities and programs.

To further explore the possibilities of collaboration, we have formed a committee of two long-standing board members and two new members of the board. Their charge is to explore changing how we serve the community and our stakeholders. Be sure to read the analysis that Fred Johns has prepared on page 7 regarding a possible partnership between MBPN and Tillers. And stay tuned!
—Tom Irrer, MBPN President

Quick Takes

- Have you considered a lifetime MBPN Cupola membership? Your Cupola membership directly helps our growing Endowment. For more information, visit our website: https://mibarn.net/support/membership/#CUPOLA.

- Would you like to nominate a barn for the prestigious MBPN Barn of the Year Award? Stay tuned in the next newsletter for information on how to nominate a barn. The nomination window will occur later this year.

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Gathering at the museum begins at 8:30am. The bus will leave at 9:00am and return no later than 5:00pm.

In terms of our mission ("Promoting Appreciation, Preservation, and Rehabilitation of Michigan Barns, Farmsteads, and Rural Communities"), Lapeer County is a perfect place to have a barn tour. The county has a strong agricultural presence, with a focus on crops like corn, soybeans, and wheat, along with livestock and dairy farming. It also has active agricultural organizations and participates in statewide initiatives like the Michigan Farm Bureau, which supports farmers' interests and provides related resources.

The Fall Barn Tour provides a day of touring with fellow barn enthusiasts and visits with owners at several sites. You'll learn about barn styles and architecture, timber framing and other traditional construction methods as we explore the current use of old barns and the potential for saving or repurposing old structures. And if you are wondering how to fix up your barn, you can get plenty of ideas on our barn tours. Many old barns have the same problem areas and you can talk to builders, preservationists and barn owners who have solved these problems.

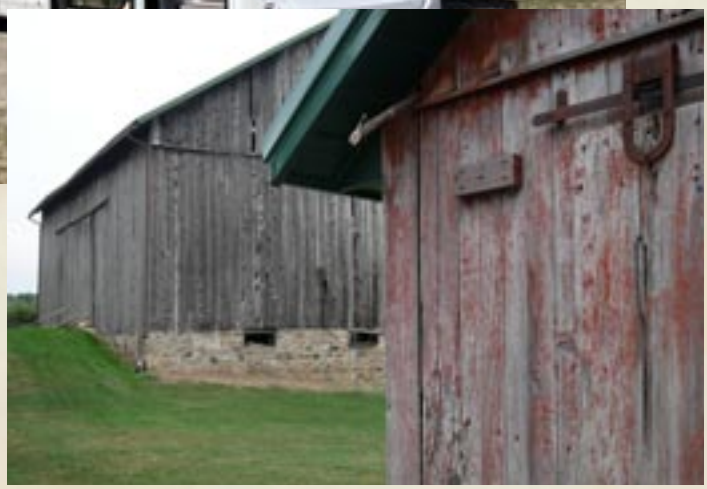
The cost for the tour is $75 for MBPN members and includes lunch. Registration starts in September. MBPN membership gives you priority registration for barn bus tours. Visit our website at www.mibarn.net for membership information (and other great resources for barn lovers). The tour currently will be limited to the space on one tour bus, so make your reservations now by going the MBPN website to register, pay, and to reserve your space on the tour bus. Registrations (with name, phone, and address) may also be mailed to our P.O. Box 614, Mt. Pleasant, MI 48804. Registrations are first-come/first-serve. If registrations exceed the capacity of the bus, we will begin a wait list.

Lapeer County Barn Tour Committee—Laurie Sisco, Tammis Donaldson, and Melissa Jaskiewicz

Fall foliage, friends, and barns…What more could anyone want? Please plan to join us for this celebratory day of Michigan barn appreciation!

—Keith Kehlbeck and Tammis Donaldson

The barn tour starts at the Imlay City Historical Museum.



MBPN Bus Tours include barn enthusiast camaraderie, learning, and ideas for how to preserve your barn.

Photos by Keith Kehlbeck and Tammis Donaldson

Photo by Tammis Donaldson

Barn Workshop at Maple Bay Barn in Grand Traverse County.

Photo by Julie Avery

Steve Stier presented with the prestigious Michigan Heritage Award.

The History—and Future—of MBPN's Technical Committee

When the Michigan Barn Preservation Network (MBPN) was founded more than 30 years ago, its leaders were focused on one goal: creating an organization that could bring together people who cared about preserving Michigan's historic barns. Annual conferences became the centerpiece of that effort, attracting as many as 200 participants in the organization's early years and providing opportunities to learn from preservation experts and one another.

What no one anticipated at the beginning was the steady stream of calls and emails from barn owners looking for practical help. Who could repair a stone foundation? How do you know if a timber frame is failing? Where do you find someone qualified to work on a century-old barn? Questions like those ultimately led to the creation of MBPN's Technical Committee.

From Idea to Action

Steve Stier, past MBPN president and longtime chair of the Technical Committee, recently recalled that the committee was the brainchild of then-president Brad Brogren. "Brad was getting lots of calls," Stier remembers. "He called me and said, 'We need a technical committee.'"

Today, Brogren explains he joined MBPN around 1996 after purchasing a farmstead with a barn and several outbuildings. "I had always wanted a barn but had no idea how to maintain one. Joining MBPN and its Board put me in touch with a slew of Michigan's barn experts readily offering advise. When I became MBPN President, my organizational skills from many of the professional groups I belonged to helped formulate the committee structure we have today. Naturally, this could not have been achieved without the commitment of our outstanding volunteers."

Together, Steve and Brad established three simple but enduring goals:

- Answer technical questions from barn owners.
- Maintain a list of contractors and preservation resources.
- Offer hands-on educational workshops.
- More than two decades later, those three objectives remain remarkably relevant.

A Craftsman Finds His Calling

Stier brought an unusual background to the position. After spending six years in Maine working on large wooden sailing vessels, he returned to Michigan looking for similar work. "There are no large wooden vessels here," he jokes, "but it didn't take me long to figure out that barns are basically large vessels."

He learned traditional barn repair from experienced craftsmen, studied historic preservation, and secured his first master's degree in industrial arts from WMU. He subsequently earned a second master's degree in historic preservation from Eastern Michigan University. That combination of hands-on experience and academic training made him uniquely qualified to help guide barn owners throughout the state, focusing on education and historic preservation.

Helping Owners Help Their Barns

Perhaps the committee's most visible service has been helping owners know where to begin. Many callers simply wanted someone to point them in the right direction. "I've got this barn and I want to take care of it," Stier often heard, "but I don't even have a clue where to start."

Photo by Tammis Donaldson

Ongoing attention to barn maintenance is essential.

Photo by Tammis Donaldson

The 'Seeds' group—one of many led by Steve Stier at MBPN workshops.

To answer those questions, the committee assembled a statewide list of contractors, masons, timber framers, and other specialists. While MBPN never endorsed or guaranteed any individual contractor, the list gave owners an invaluable starting point when seeking professional help.

Maintaining that resource has become increasingly difficult, however. Many experienced barn contractors have retired, changed careers, or passed away, while few younger craftspeople have entered the field. Barn restoration also requires extensive travel and often involves physically demanding work and specialized skills—factors that discourage many potential contractors.

Learning by Doing

The committee's second major contribution has been its hands-on workshops.

Early workshops attracted only five to ten participants, but that was intentional. Small groups allowed instructors to safely teach specialized repair techniques while giving participants opportunities to perform the work themselves.

Each workshop focused on a single topic—repointing stone foundations, repairing timber posts, straightening and cabling barn frames, or other common preservation challenges. The goal was not necessarily to turn owners into professional contractors, but to help them understand how historic barns are built, recognize common problems, and communicate effectively with repair professionals. "We wanted to educate the consumer," Stier explains, "and spread the word and try to get some contractors involved."

Although the workshops successfully educated dozens of barn owners, the committee never fully achieved one of its biggest hopes: **inspiring enough new people to enter the barn restoration trades.**

A Network of Dedicated Volunteers

While Stier chaired the committee for many years, he is quick to credit others who contributed their expertise.

Architect Tammis Donaldson (also a past MBPN Board member) and other experts became frequent workshop participants and collaborators, helping to connect owners with resources and expanding educational efforts through MBPN's Barn School programs. Other contributors—including Tom Nehil, Stephanie White, Chris Newman, and Barry Jones—shared their expertise whenever possible, strengthening the committee through collaboration rather than in formal meetings. That spirit of cooperation has always been one of the committee's greatest strengths.

Looking Forward

Today's Technical Committee faces many of the same challenges that inspired its creation. Barn owners still need trustworthy information. Qualified contractors remain in short supply. Michigan continues to need people willing to learn traditional building skills.

Stier believes future educational efforts should continue focusing on the importance of ongoing attention to barn maintenance and also emphasizing practical repairs, particularly foundation work, which many owners can safely learn to perform themselves. He also sees opportunities to expand MBPN's Barn School programs, update educational publications, and, when suitable sites and instructors are available, revive hands-on workshops. His vision remains optimistic. While monthly workshops may not be realistic, even a few successful programs each year would educate more owners—and perhaps inspire a new generation of preservation-minded craftspeople.

The Technical Committee was created to answer questions, connect people with resources, and share practical knowledge. Those needs remain every bit as important today as they were when Brad Brogren and Steve Stier first imagined the committee years ago. The number of barns and barn owners needing help is increasing at a time when the number of practical resources is decreasing.

As MBPN looks ahead, the committee's mission remains unchanged: preserving Michigan's barns by sharing the knowledge needed to save them.

—Keith Kehlbeck

Exploring a Partnership Between MBPN and Tillers International

Tillers International conducts regular classes on traditional agricultural building skills.

Photo by Tillers International

The Michigan Barn Preservation Network is entering an important period of transition. During a recent board discussion, members reflected on the organization's growing opportunities—and the practical challenges that must be addressed if MBPN is to serve more barn owners, strengthen its membership, and sustain its mission for the future.

At the center of the conversation was a familiar problem for volunteer-led organizations: MBPN has dedicated people and strong ideas, but limited capacity to carry them out. Board members spend substantial time on newsletter production, calendar preparation, event registration, membership communications, recordkeeping, storage, and other administrative work. That leaves less time for the work that volunteers are uniquely qualified to perform: educating barn owners, visiting properties, developing programs, sharing technical knowledge, and building relationships across Michigan.

As one board member summarized, the organization does not lack ideas or commitment—it needs help "executing things."

Strengthening Communication

The way people learn about organizations and become involved in their missions is increasingly digital. MBPN recognizes that its future depends on communicating more frequently and effectively through its newsletter, website, email, social media, and educational materials.

The organization already has valuable stories to tell. Technical committee members are visiting barns, advising owners, connecting families with contractors, and helping people divide overwhelming preservation projects into manageable steps. The challenge is turning those experiences into timely articles, online resources, and messages that reach a broader audience.

Board members discussed working with an outside shared-services partner to assist with graphic design, publication, communications, event promotion, and selected administrative responsibilities. Volunteers would continue to provide leadership, expertise, stories, photographs, and program ideas, while the partner would help prepare and distribute the finished materials.

This approach would allow board members to remain responsible for MBPN's mission and content without requiring them to personally complete every production and administrative task.

Proceeding Carefully

The board emphasized that any new partnership should be introduced gradually. Rather than transferring every responsibility at once, MBPN expects to begin with clearly defined projects, such as newsletter and calendar production, membership communications, and conference promotion.

The proposed relationship is not a merger. MBPN would retain its identity, governance, committees, and responsibility for setting priorities. Details such as social media responsibilities, content approval, project timelines, and costs will need to be worked out as the relationship develops.

Board members supported establishing checkpoints after six months and one year so the organization can determine whether the arrangement is improving communications, reducing the burden on volunteers, increasing membership, and helping MBPN reach more barn owners.

The board also acknowledged that outside assistance will succeed only if MBPN volunteers consistently provide the stories, photographs, technical information, and organizational direction needed to support the work. A service provider can help package and distribute information, but the knowledge and personal connections must continue to come from within the Network.

Clarifying the Role of the Endowment

Another major discussion concerned MBPN's growing endowment. The fund had reached approximately $358,000 at the time of the meeting, and members discussed a future membership appeal and matching campaign that could move it closer to the organization's $500,000 goal.

The board agreed that a clearer, long-range policy is needed to guide how endowment earnings may be used. Some members suggested that communications and organizational support could be considered investments in the future of the mission. Others emphasized that endowment resources should produce visible benefits for barn preservation and public education.

The endowment committee was asked to develop recommendations for board consideration. The discussion also clarified that MBPN cannot withdraw the endowment principal; only available earnings may be considered for organizational purposes.

Expanding Practical Help for Barn Owners

Beyond administration and communications, the board's discussion repeatedly returned to the people MBPN exists to serve: Michigan's barn owners.

Many owners face intimidating questions. Is the structure sound? Where should repairs begin? Which work is urgent? Who is qualified to do it? Can the project be divided into affordable stages?

MBPN members are already providing property visits, preliminary guidance, educational materials, and contractor referrals. Board members discussed expanding this assistance through additional "Barn School" resources, maintenance-focused publications, condition reports, and other services that help owners make informed decisions before deterioration becomes irreversible.

There was also discussion of connecting certain services to membership. A consultation or condition report might include an MBPN membership, encouraging those who receive assistance to remain connected to the organization and support its broader work.

These efforts would reinforce a central message: MBPN is not only an organization that celebrates historic barns. It is a practical resource for the people working to preserve them.

A Future Built on Mission

The path forward will require careful planning, clear expectations, sound financial decisions, and greater participation throughout the organization. Outside administrative help cannot replace volunteer leadership, technical expertise, or personal commitment. It can, however, free volunteers to concentrate on the work that advances MBPN's mission most directly.

The board's vision for the coming years includes stronger communications, more educational resources, increased membership, better support for barn owners, expanded public visibility, and a thoughtful strategy for using the organization's financial resources. We are resolved to find ways to offload administrative work and return the focus of board members and volunteers to the mission of MBPN—for example, the important work articulated in the article on pages 4 and 5 regarding the Technical Committee.

The challenges are real, but so is the opportunity. By strengthening the organization behind its mission, MBPN can help ensure that more of Michigan's historic barns—and the stories, landscapes, and communities they represent—are preserved for future generations.

—Keith Kehlbeck

Partnering with Tillers International: An Opportunity Worth Exploring

Not a Merger

As the Michigan Barn Preservation Network looks toward the future, our Board has been considering how we can strengthen the organization while continuing to rely on the knowledge, passion, and commitment of our volunteers. Like many volunteer organizations, MBPN has increasingly found that the demands of communications, marketing, and organizational support compete with the time our Board and committee members have available to focus on education, technical assistance, and preservation. As Tom Irrer notes in his President's Message on p. 2, the Board has formed a committee to explore options for providing more consistent professional support to the organization.

One opportunity we have been exploring is a partnership with Tillers International. As Tom describes in his President's Message, Tillers has a long history of teaching traditional agricultural and building skills and is no stranger to barn preservation. Our organizations share complementary missions centered on education, preservation of traditional skills, and stewardship of historic resources. Under the proposal being considered, Tillers' professional staff would provide selected administrative, communications, and marketing services to MBPN. Initial areas of support could include our quarterly newsletter, social media, annual barn calendar, press releases, marketing materials, and storage of selected MBPN materials. The goal is not to replace the important work of our volunteers and committees, but to give them better support—allowing more of their time and energy to be devoted to the work at the heart of MBPN's mission.

We believe a partnership between MBPN and Tillers offers an opportunity to combine MBPN's knowledge and passion for Michigan's historic barns with Tillers' professional staff, educational programs, and expertise in traditional building skills. It could help us communicate more consistently, expand our public outreach, engage a new generation interested in barn preservation, and strengthen MBPN for the future. The proposed relationship would begin as a one-year pilot, giving both organizations the opportunity to evaluate its effectiveness before determining how the partnership might evolve. We look forward to keeping our members informed as this proposal moves forward.

—Fred Johns, MBPN Secretary & Technical Committee Member

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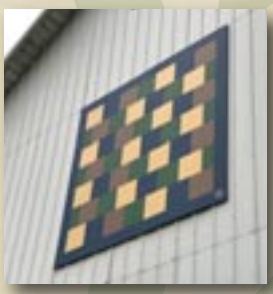

Photos by John Cole

Do You Have a Photo for the 2027 MBPN Calendar?

MBPN Calendar Chair Kristine Ranger notes that it's time to submit photos for the upcoming 2027 calendar. The next calendar will focus on Quilt Barns. If you have a photo you think might be worth submitting to the Calendar Committee, we need you to fill out a barn info/permission form, which can be found on the MBPN website at https://mibarn.net/calendar. That page on the website also includes photo submission guidelines for photographers. We strongly encourage interested parties to use this portal to finalize the process of having your picture (and barn) considered for next year's calendar!