

Abandoned Farmsteads in North Carolina: Lost History and Wasted Housing

You're driving down one of the state's secondary roads -- it might be SR 1005 in southern Alamance County -- and you see a two-story, white frame farmhouse in its grove of tall trees. From a distance, the prominence of the house and its pleasant setting suggest that it might be the seat of a prosperous family farm. But as you come closer, you see that the windows are broken, the chimney tops are crumbling, and the house is slowly falling apart. No one lives here anymore. This fine old family homeplace, once the most substantial building in its community, has been left to rot away.



The scene reflects a problem that North Carolinians are just beginning to recognize and understand -- abandonment and neglect are destroying the well-built farmhouses vital to North Carolina's rural heritage and landscape. In rural communities across the state, people build new houses, many of poor quality and construction, and purchase mobile homes, while older, usable dwellings -- often of excellent quality materials and craftsmanship not affordable today -- are left to fall into ruin. Our history is lost, and valuable housing stock is wasted.

The problem is especially troubling in North Carolina because here our roots are in our farmland. North Carolina's history is that of an agrarian, rural people who worked and lived on small and middle-sized farms. As late as 1900, 90 percent of the state's population was found in rural areas. Farmsteads therefore com-

pose much of the valuable, irreplaceable historic architecture of our state. If North Carolina loses most of its historic farmsteads, it will lose much of its special sense of place.

There is a very real danger -- indeed a probability -- that this will happen. Few rural families find continued maintenance of an older farmhouse as attractive as building a new one. One survey of historically significant farmsteads conducted by the Department of Cultural Resources found one out of three such properties deserted, and fewer than half facing a reasonably secure future.

The Abandonment Process

A look at a typical chain of events leading to abandonment illustrates some of the forces at work. A typical story begins with the well-maintained farmhouse occupied by a landowner actively farming adjacent lands. As time passes, the family may abandon the dwelling as

"THE HOUSE HAS BEEN CONVERTED TO A BARN WITH STABLES AND SHELTER ADDED. IT'S NOT FIT FOR A HOUSE" (A RETIRED FARMER)

younger family members leave the farm, either because they cannot operate the farm profitably or want to pursue other occupations, or because they want to live in a nearby town. Traditionally, the family will not sell the property to another farmer. Instead, the house and land will probably pass to a tenant who leases the acreage from the landowner. As the house becomes older and is seen as outmoded, this tenant may decide to construct a new house or move into a mobile home. Or the owner may let the land to another tenant to whom this parcel is only one of several he rents and who works them all from a central base of operations. Only sheer chance determines if the "old homeplace" is ideally located to become this central base.

If the tenant moves to a house on one of the other parcels, he may pass the homeplace along to one of his hired laborers. The laborer may work in a nearby factory or in town, although he retains use of the house in return for

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labor during peak periods. From this stage, the house may become abandoned or it may be used for seasonal labor -- occupied only a few weeks annually and standing vacant the remainder of the year. Before total abandonment, the structure may serve as a barn, storage facility, or animal shelter.

Rural decay is not a simple matter. It cannot be dismissed as the fault of apathetic, insensitive landowners, or as a result of poverty. Deteriorating farmhouses are vestiges of what has become an obsolete settlement pattern, one reflecting a rural way of life that required



a large labor force living on or near the farm. Decaying farmsteads are also casualties of suburban growth around the state's cities and towns, and of obstacles to rehabilitation that discourage even people who want to live in an old farmhouse.

Some of these forces are beyond the control of planners, but there are some hopeful trends that planners can do much to encourage. This article will review the causes of farmhouse abandonment, discuss some of the signs that could herald a more optimistic future for old farmhouses, and take a look at what can be done to stem the tide of rural decay.

Changing Settlement Patterns

To understand why abandonment has occurred, one must look beyond the disturbing symptoms to changing rural settlement patterns and sometimes formidable obstacles to rehabilitation. The changing rural settlement patterns that result in farmhouse abandonment spring from 1) changing agricultural practices; 2) migration of rural residents; 3) more housing, ostensibly of "better quality"; 4) changing ways of life and expectations among rural people; and 5) changing land uses in rural areas.

The changing agricultural practices that most directly affect the fate of farm dwellings are mechanization, farm enlargement and consolidation, and the increased popularity of soybeans and corn. These crops are far less labor-intensive than the customary crops of tobacco, peanuts, and cotton. As a result of these trends, the need for farm housing has declined; for example, the 1980 census revealed that only 3.2 percent of North Carolinians still live on working farms. Changing technology has also eliminated the need for traditional farm out-buildings such as the tobacco barn, which are among the most distinctive features of the state's rural landscape.

Changing agricultural practices have forced many rural residents to find jobs elsewhere, and many have left of their own accord to seek higher wages and better opportunities in cities. Between 1960 and 1970, 72 of North Carolina's counties experienced outmigration, especially from rural areas. This movement took place principally among hired laborers, but also extended to farm owners themselves. North Carolinians continue to leave agriculture as they find the cost of entering the field or of maintaining a family farm prohibitive.

Even for those who remain in rural areas, many forces discourage the use of older houses. Chief among these is the new housing that has



become readily available since the fifties. Government programs, particularly those of the Farmers Home Administration (FmHA), have fostered the construction of thousands of new units in rural North Carolina, most of them variations on the brick ranch house. A 1976 study found an overwhelming preference for one-story brick houses among rural North Carolinians, especially



in the eastern part of the state. The mobile home has also become an integral part of the rural landscape -- often parked in front of a vacant farmhouse.

Changing ways of life among rural residents often cause them to leave the older home behind. Today's "sidewalk farmer" need not live on his farm but can live in or on the periphery of a town and be closer to other people, schools, and shopping. With the automobile, the traditional pattern of self-sufficient farmsteads distributed evenly over the landscape has become obsolete, and the isolated locations of many older houses make them less desirable. Changing family living patterns often spell doom for large farmhouses. When aunts, uncles, grandparents, parents, children, and perhaps a hired man composed a household, a big house made sense. Today, families are smaller and children seldom remain in their parents' home once they reach adulthood. Grown children are also unlikely to return to the old homeplace when their parents die, even if they are living in the immediate area, for they no longer perceive the need for a larger house.

During the past thirty years North Carolinians have seen much of the state's land converted from agricultural to nonfarm use, and farmhouses continue to disappear right along with surrounding cropland. Large urban centers in the Piedmont and smaller cities scattered throughout the state spread at low densities into the countryside. Industrial firms continue to find rural locations attractive, and they often purchase sites that are far larger than the immediate needs of their plants. Recreational development along the coast and in the mountains takes still more land out of agriculture and claims many farmhouses.

Obstacles to Rehabilitation

Changing settlement patterns make major contributions to the problem of farmhouse abandonment, but there are steps in the process of rehabilitation that make decay very difficult to reverse once it becomes a fact of life.

Absentee ownership and the unwillingness of some owners to sell their property, even when potential buyers are available, often prevent rehabilitation. Whether vacant or occupied, farmhouses are often owned by someone who lives on another parcel of land, in a nearby town, or in the common case of ownership by heirs, in another part of the state or country. These owners gain most of their return on the property from the land; they have little incentive to rehabilitate farmhouses they may rent to laborers for nominal amounts in exchange for work during peak periods. These owners also see little advantage in selling a small parcel within a larger tract for someone else's residential use. One of the sad ironies of the rural abandonment problem is that many people refuse to sell old farmhouses they do not occupy out of reverence for heritage or regard for family associations, but find it impossible to prevent the houses from falling into disrepair.

Even if a person is able to overcome the obstacles to purchasing an older farmhouse, he still faces another hurdle before he can begin work -- financing. Credit is generally more difficult to obtain and more expensive in rural North Carolina than in the state's urban centers. City dwellers have often found that housing rehabilitation can be a radical notion among lending institutions; the small size and limited lending capacity of rural banks and savings and loans reinforces their reluctance to make loans on rehabilitation projects. *Cont. on page 45*

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Because of credit difficulties in rural areas, many rural residents look to government-sponsored programs for assistance in financing shelter, particularly those of the Farmers Home Administration. FmHA's programs, notably its Section 502 Home-ownership Loans, offer one potential source of credit for farmhouse rehabilitation. The program has generally been used to finance new construction, however, because many FmHA officials consider rehabilitation more expensive than new construction and feel that past efforts to use the program for existing housing have been subject to abuse. In addition, the 502 program and others that could be used to rehabilitate North Carolina farmhouses have been cut back by the Reagan administration.

A final obstacle to the rehabilitation of old farmhouses may appear once work has begun. Rehabilitation is not always the rosy picture of a completed project that optimistic and evangelistic preservationists are apt to paint. It is a difficult undertaking that can be much harder to estimate and manage than new construction; often it is not appreciably cheaper. Perhaps most seriously, there is a shortage of people with the necessary skills to do sound rehabilitation work.

A More Optimistic Future

The problem of farmhouse abandonment may appear overwhelming, but several trends offer the possibility of a brighter future for the old homeplace. The first and most basic of these trends is that people are moving back to North Carolina's rural areas in ever-increasing numbers. Final 1980 census counts show that the Mountains, the Piedmont, and the Coastal Plain are all attracting people from other parts of the country. The reversal of outmigration from the Coastal Plain has been particularly dramatic.

Many of these people are moving to the countryside not in pursuit of better-paying jobs but instead a better quality of life. They possess more education and have attained higher incomes than those who remain in cities. As urban preservation movements in North Carolina and elsewhere have shown, these better-educated professionals are the people who most commonly rehabilitate older homes.

Changing patterns of land use destroy many farmsteads, but they also indicate potential markets for old farmhouses. Two groups of new potential buyers of farmhouses are city dwellers seeking vacation homes and retired people who want to settle permanently in North Carolina.

Historic farmhouses enjoy pleasant settings that make them attractive candidates for use as second or vacation homes. In South Carolina, preservation planners working in the state's regional planning offices report that recreation

is a significant alternative use for plantation houses in their areas. Such homes could serve individual owners or they could become a valuable amenity and focus for a larger development. One example is Kenmure, in Flat Rock near Hendersonville, which has been adapted for use as a golf club-house in a vacation community.

Many of the affluent retired people seeking permanent homes in North Carolina may find restoring an old farmhouse a rewarding pastime. The Historic Preservation Fund of North Carolina, Inc., the statewide preservation revolving fund, advertises historic farmhouses nationally. Responses from such ads include retirees and people who want to buy an old farmhouse for future retirement.



Potential consumers for old farmhouses need not be found solely among newcomers to rural North Carolina. During her 1979 survey of historic buildings in Perquimans County, architectural historian Dru Haley encountered several county natives who had spent the majority of their lives outside the county and who had come back to "fix up the old homeplace" in their retirement. Others who remained in their native counties are taking on retirement rehabilitation projects. Working farm owners and tenants are another group that remained in rural areas who could herald a more optimistic future for old farmhouses. Today's North Carolina farmer is in many respects as professional as his urban executive counterpart; his outlook, and that of his family, is increasingly sophisticated. Many of these professionals are likely to move into town and become "sidewalk farmers," but others may find renovating an old farmhouse a satisfying alternative.

Preservation Initiatives

These trends offer -- but they do not ensure -- a brighter future for North Carolina's historic farmhouses. Without concerned state and local efforts to take advantage of these trends, most of North Carolina's rural historic architecture will disappear within our lifetimes. The concluding section of this article will consider policies that can address some of the problems described earlier, and will look at a promising rural preservation initiative in Edgecombe County.

Many roots of North Carolina's rural preservation dilemma lie in attitudes: from the skepticism of lending officials toward rehabilitation to the preferences of rural residents for brick ranch houses; from the shortage of rehabilitation skills among contractors to the inexperience of would-be farmhouse owners in filling out credit applications. Education programs can help remove some of these obstacles to farmhouse rehabilitation; in today's climate of government budget cutting at all levels, an emphasis on education may prove to be most productive.

A cornerstone of rural preservation efforts should be close cooperation with the North Carolina Agricultural Extension Service, one of the most influential institutions operating in the state's rural areas. By working with the service, preservationists and sympathetic planners have the opportunity to avoid the pitfall of simply circulating information among themselves. The credibility of the Extension in rural North Carolina cannot be overstated; just as important are the strong local roots of the program in 100 county offices.

State-level education efforts should produce materials that can be used throughout North Carolina. Among the most useful materials could be: a rehabilitation textbook for classes in rural technical institutes, a study of ways to

make old farmhouses more attractive and functionally satisfying for rural families while respecting their architectural integrity, and a local applicants' handbook to assist preservationists in developing effective credit applications for rehabilitation projects.

At the local level, one of the most useful educational projects can be an inventory of farmsteads and other historic buildings by a trained architectural historian. Inventories provide a permanent record of many farmsteads that would otherwise vanish without a trace. The identification and evaluation of historic resources can furnish invaluable guidance for local preservation efforts. Perhaps most important, the full-time presence of a surveyor in the community raises public awareness and appreciation of historic resources, especially if the results of the inventory are later published in an attractive form. Inventories have been completed for much of the state, but some counties where the problems of farmhouse abandonment are most severe remain unsurveyed. The North Carolina Division of Archives and History, which is responsible for compiling the statewide inventory of historic buildings, is giving high priority to assisting rural counties that want to survey their historic resources.

Of course, state and especially local initiatives must move beyond educational efforts to stem the tide of farmhouse abandonment. As shown earlier, the lack of credit is a major obstacle to farmhouse rehabilitation; the state could help alleviate the credit problem by establishing a below-market interest rate loan program for farmhouse rehabilitation with funds from the issue of tax-exempt bonds by the North Carolina Housing Finance Agency. The potential for setting up a rehabilitation loan fund administered by the Historic Preservation Fund of North Carolina, Inc., the private revolving fund that operates throughout the state, should also be examined.

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Take your place in North Carolina history.



FULEWIDER-CARPENTER HOUSE
Catawba County

c.1830. Late Federal-style house with notable stair, mantels, and paneled wainscot. Good structural condition. Unrestored. Located in foothills within easy reach of several urban areas. 3.78 acres. Financing at 12%. \$31,000.



THE HOMESTEAD
Lexington

1834. Important Greek Revival-style house with sophisticated woodwork, Palladian windows, ornate plaster, and early hardware. In excellent condition. 1.1 acre on Main Street. Suitable for residential or office use. Potential tax shelter. \$110,000.



SPEIGHT HOUSE
Bertie County

1810 & 1828. Two early houses with connecting porch. 1828 Federal woodwork and interior paint intact. Early outbuildings. Homeplace of artist Francis Speight. 3.26 acres near Windsor and Albemarle Sound. Unrestored. \$29,000.

Free brochures available.

All of these properties are either listed in or being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places.



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14. The "feedback loop" represents a flow of information generated throughout the process by its participants as well as by regular collection of data on the implementation of objectives and community impacts by the Budget and Evaluation Office and the Planning Department.
15. The Planning Department collects information flowing along the feedback loop and develops proposals to revise elements of the process.

Key to this process are the criteria described in the five-year capital improvement framework and applied throughout the process of evaluating budget proposals. The criteria, matched to a point system in a rating form, are defined within three categories:

- spending priorities revised each year by the elected officials to judge proposals across program lines;
- priorities matched to the goals and objectives of the comprehensive plan; and
- cost and effectiveness criteria. The criteria are applied primarily by CLIC, using the Proposal Evaluation Form. Use of the form results in ratings which are not applied directly to funding decisions but instead used as a guide for discussion of decisions.

The main point about the Minneapolis capital improvement process is that it provides a priority framework for budget decisions which is shaped by the city's planning objectives. The process is driven by the comprehensive plan but does not threaten the authority of elected offi-

WHAT MAKES SENSE TO PLANNERS OFTEN DOESN'T
MAKE COMMON SENSE OR POLITICAL SENSE

cial. Although it requires the managers of line agencies to consider planning objectives, it also allows them to present and lobby for alternative agency needs. And finally, the process incorporates review by citizen groups with both city-wide and neighborhood perspectives.

The next step is to incorporate comprehensive planning objectives in the process to determine the operating budget. In Minneapolis, both the the City Planning Department and the Budget and Evaluation Office are working together to achieve that objective.

Every planning objective plays out somewhere along the line in budget decisions made by elected officials or other decision-makers. Efforts made by planners to structure the decision making process so that it will take account of planning objectives while facilitating the work of officials will always pay off.

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The Historic Preservation Fund, established in 1975, is currently doing more about the rural abandonment problem than any other agency, and provides a model for local efforts to save historic farmhouses. The Preservation Fund has been operating successfully for several years as a real estate broker in rural areas, obtaining purchase options on historic buildings and reselling or "revolving" them to new owners under protective covenants. The Fund has rescued dozens of rural properties from neglect and has been successful in tapping the market for historic farmhouses through local, regional, and national advertising.

Because it operates throughout the state, the Preservation Fund can have only limited impact in any given area. It is therefore essential that preservationists and sympathetic planners work to establish county and regional revolving funds focusing on rural properties. The Preservation Fund recently convened a meeting of the state's local revolving funds to establish a statewide organization that can furnish information and assistance to existing and prospective local funds.

A private revolving fund forms the heart of an encouraging rural preservation effort now underway in Edgecombe County. The newly formed Historic Preservation Fund of Edgecombe County has obtained two properties by donation and hired a full-time director. Eventually the Edgecombe Fund hopes to revolve five or six properties in the county each year. If the Edgecombe Fund can meet this goal and sustain it for several years, Edgecombe County will have taken a great step toward reversing the decline of its historic farmsteads. The Edgecombe County Historical Society, which created this revolving fund, is also mounting an education program that includes a quarterly newsletter, close cooperation with the county's agricultural extension agents, and research on the county's place names.

There is much that can be done to prolong the useful life of our state's historic farmsteads, but we do not have the luxury of delaying action for long. If we do nothing, the rural architectural heritage of this traditionally rural state will inevitably disappear -- and much of North Carolina's special identity will vanish along with it.

Editors note: This article is based on a study of historic preservation in rural North Carolina conducted by the North Carolina Division of Archives and History in 1980 and published as Historic Preservation in North Carolina: Problems and Potentials in 1982. Copies of the study are available from the Historic Preservation Society of North Carolina, Inc., 11 S. Blount St., Raleigh, NC 27601, for \$5.00.