“The Baker Barn”

This county has history and color to its credit, dating to its formation in 1791 and its name, taken from a Mohawk or Oneida word meaning “place of the rock,” which fits, considering the attractive fieldstone foundation of this barn and an adjacent building. What’s more interesting is the county seat of Cooperstown, well known for its Baseball Hall of Fame but lesser known for its founder, Judge William Cooper, father of author James Fenimore Cooper. Not only did young James serve his country in the early 1800s as a naval officer, he also captured rustic American history with his characters Chief Chingachgook and his friend and frontiersman Natty Bumppo in his series, *The Leatherstocking Tales*, which include *The Last of the Mohicans* *and The Deerslayer*, his last novel. In the 1700s this was indeed the land of the Mohicans, the Iroquois, the Seneca, and the Oneida Indian tribes. A time of adventure.

In 1806 when 17-year-old Cooper was beginning his tour in the Navy, patriarch Hamilton Baker, a blacksmith and carpenter, settled his family near Richfield Springs, about 14 miles north of Cooperstown. He acquired the farm site in 1838 and his son Norman changed paths and began dairy farming. While Cooper was writing his books about Chingachgook and Natty, Norman was increasing his herd to 40 cows, delivering milk to his neighbors, and making cheese on the farm. As the dairy operation grew, the Bakers needed another barn. They chose an octagon and built one in 1882, one of seven surviving examples of octagonal buildings in the county in 1980.

It’s always speculation to establish the reason that a farmer chose this design over a conventional one, though there were octagonal buildings in the area – one such house built in 1850 in Unadilla, only 45 miles away, still stands. New York’s Orson Fowler’s well publicized octagonal mode of building, beginning with an 1854 book, led to 125 octagonal houses being built from 1854 to 1860. His house in Fishkill was 130 miles south of the Baker farm.

However, a major influence might have been the writings of Eliot Stewart, who, after his fourth barn burned down, built an octagonal one and, even though being 240 miles away in Erie County, he spread the word in journals, first publicizing his plans in Buffalo’s *Livestock Journal* in 1876. Two other agricultural publications reprinted it, one of them, New York City’s *American Agriculturist*, presumably got a lot of distribution. By 1884 Stewart proclaimed that “30 or 40 have been built in various parts of the country.”

Norman Baker and his son Howard built the barn, using timber from the farm, hewing and fitting the mortise and tenon joints. According to an article in the Utica newspaper in the 1950s, a family descendant related that the builders cut down an elm tree and squared it with hand-hewing, using it as the main beam that runs the entire 60-foot length of the barn. The Bakers hired a stone mason, R. O’Brien, to lay the fieldstone foundation, which rises two levels and which matches the expert stonemasonry of the nearby building, both a corn crib with a forebay and a cheese house. Such stonework was unusual in this part but typical of Scandinavian barns of the Upper Midwest.

But, unlike the self-supporting roof of the Stewart barn, this one had four posts that extend upwards along all three stories and into the cupola, adding a margin of safety, which diagonal boards on the walls also provide. Their decision paid off: the barn has now survived nearly 140 years.

Another unique feature was building the barn into a hillside, rather than into a small bank, so that each level has an entrance: the bottom floor was used for cattle, the middle one was used for horses and threshing, and the top level served as a haymow. Ingeniously – and a bit ahead of their time since it was only in 1873 that a farmer in Illinois built the first silo – the Bakers constructed a silo, 18-feet square, extending from the second floor entrance to the ground. In fact, there were only 91 silos in the entire country in 1882. The silo made it easy for the farmer to drop the corn to the lower level to feed the cows.

The barn’s size wouldn’t be large enough for the mega-dairy farms of today but it was adequate for a modest herd: it rose 60 feet from basement floor to cupola and, with each side measuring 25 feet, it provided four parallel rows of stanchions. Milking 40 cows twice a day was hard work. In fact, the Bakers’ dairy farming business was still going strong in 1984 when it made a listing on the National Register: owners John and Jean Baker and Susan Ross were continuing the family tradition.

But, according to an article in the *Observer-Dispatch* newspaper, an artist, who grew up with the barn, was dismayed to see the barn in poor condition when he revisited it in 1978. He reported that it had, over a period of about 15 years, been deteriorating and so he began doing paintings on the assumption that it would soon be only a memory. Around 1999 Terry Damon, a real estate man, drove by the barn and noticed a for sale sign. A few months later he purchased it and began restoration. Fortunately, the New York State Restoration and Preservation Department issued a $25,000 grant, which Damon matched. A photograph taken in the autumn of 2020 shows matching green shingled roofs on the barn and two outbuildings. Today it still stands, just off Route 28 – the winding road connecting Richfield Springs with Cooperstown – the earliest known example of an octagonal dairy barn in the state, a testament to not only its early builders but the foresight of its current owner to restore and maintain it.