“Safeguarding Sorrick”

New York opened its Erie Canal in 1825, after eight years of construction and volumes of angry comments by voters, who called the project, “Clinton’s Folly.” Yet, Governor DeWitt Clinton’s vision opened up commerce from the port of New York City on the Hudson River to Lake Erie at Buffalo. At that time Ohio was the third poorest in the Union, a state mostly agricultural where farm families tried to support themselves and bartered with any excess goods. However, when politicians viewed New York’s success, they vowed that Ohio would follow. In 1825 construction began in Cleveland on the Ohio-Erie Canal.

In July, 1827, two years later, the first stretch was finished, connecting Cleveland with the new city of Akron, founded in 1825 by Paul Williams and Simon Perkins, who learned of the canal project a few years earlier. The canal reached the Ohio River near Portsmouth in 1832 and revolutionized Ohio: farmers could buy supplies much more cheaply and they could sell their excess production. Cash replaced the barter system. By the 1840s Ohio was the third most prosperous state in America. Homes, inns, taverns, and grain mills sprang up around the canal as it meandered through Ohio’s southern counties. The Akron area was one of the first to benefit.

The Conrad Mentzer family moved to Ohio from southeastern Pennsylvania – as many did – and purchased 80 acres of land in Franklin Township for $400 in 1831. Apparently a successful farmer, he built an impressive eight-room farmhouse and a German forebay bank barn in 1840, an extremely large one (70x40 feet) for that era, proving that he was taking advantage of the canal’s logistics. He eventually sold the barn to Adam Sorrick, Senior.

The many Sorricks were early pioneers in Summit County and one of them, Alfred, constructed this barn on the original Mentzer barn footprint – after it burned in 1890. An 1856 map of Summit County shows that Mentzer’s 80-acre farm was bordered by farms owned by five Sorrick family members. Altogether, the families farmed 642 acres.

One of the earliest Sorricks was Solomon Sorrick, a grain merchant who founded a store in 1846 in the nearby Village of Clinton, which is the only historic structure that survived the fire of 1909 and is also listed on the National Register, thanks to the village being a major stop for grain and coal shipping on the canal. He sold it to Henry Oster, whose son Charles took over the store when Henry died in 1846. Shortly after inheriting the store, Charles became upset with a customer for his delinquent payments and beat him to death. Convicted, he served two years in prison for manslaughter and then returned to the store. Chances are that no other customers were late in their payments.

Adam Sorrick’s son Alfred took over the farm in 1890, when lightning struck the Mentzer barn, burning it. However, the footprint remained as did the thick white oak floor and cut sandstone foundation, making it a bit easier for him to build a new barn, which he did a year later. He, too, was apparently a prosperous farmer like his father, whose production in the 1870 agricultural county census was listed at $808. They raised sheep for wool, dairy cows for butter and milk, and grew corn, wheat, oats, Irish potatoes, and hay.

When Alfred died in 1895, only four years after building his new barn, his wife Marietta took over. At the turn of the century they farmed nearly 100 acres. Their son, Jesse, took charge at some point, possibly when his mother died in 1912. In 1915, he built the towering 30-foot-high cement silo, a small garage, and a milk house, which he attached to the barn – showing that he might have operated a small commercial dairy. Jesse continued farming into the years of the Great Depression and, when he died in 1939, his wife Mary sold the farm.

The barn that Alfred built in 1891 still sits on the original solid sandstone foundation, the mark of expert stone cutters and a master stonemason. It’s original white oak floors continue to defy Father Time and show the wisdom of Conrad Mentzer, who chose this wood, one often chosen for durability, especially since it is virtually insect resistant. Built into a bank, the barn shows the Pennsylvania heritage of the 18th-century settlers near Philadelphia, who brought their timber-framing skills and a cantilevered-overhang design with them when they emigrated from Germany and Switzerland.

The barn hints that the farm was a busy one – with stalls on the lower level for livestock, Dutch doors that opened in the summer for ventilation, two hay mows on either side of a sizeable threshing floor, and four granaries. The silo and attached milk house indicated farm prosperity. Earlier, when he built the barn, Alfred added a touch of class with a decorative triple point ventilation louver, though the barn sat a good distance from the road and the fancy louver may have been seen only by family members. But that was good enough.

Not much is known about the ownership in the decades following Jesse’s death and, with disuse, the barn deteriorated. Thanks to a notice about its National Registry listing in *Echoes*, the state historical magazine, I became intrigued and when barn scout Leianne, director the Summit County Historical Society, and I visited in September 2023, the barn, despite its sturdy construction, appeared to be on its last legs – with missing siding, warped boards, broken and boarded-up windows, and a faded paint job. The nomination form for the national listing mentioned that the barn showed “some deterioration,” which was a huge understatement. However, the skeleton was intact, the oak floor was still in great shape, and the stone foundation hadn’t cracked. Regardless, it was a barn urgently calling for rehabilitation and a new purpose.

On our visit, we chatted with carpenters who were working on restoring the 1840 farmhouse and who were nice enough to spend a few minutes with us. Jason explained that an investor from Cleveland had purchased the farm and had plans to restore the house and the barn. Kindly, he gave me the owner’s phone number.

When I called Dave Perkowski, he, too, spent time and explained his plans. He told me that his company had recently finished restoring an historic building in Cleveland that he had repurposed for office space. And, when this farm came on the market, he thought he’d save this one as well. He hopes that it will become a venue for weddings, reunions, and similar events. Though his plans are ambitious, they’re not impossible. And, if he can gather Sorrick and Mentzer descendants, he’ll have one rental sold.

Unquestionably, old wooden barns, too small to house large farm equipment, have outlived their usefulness. Many vanish from Ohio’s landscape every month and, with them, their stories, often describing the early days of statehood. But, every once in a while, a noble soul steps forward to save one – just as Dave Perkowski has done, hoping to give this one a new function, which will safeguard the work of Conrad Mentzer and the legacy of the Sorricks.