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Star Barn(s): When the iconic structure was moved and rebuilt, a second building went up around it



TOM KNAPP | Staff Writer

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The Star Barn grounds in Elizabethtown.

DAN MARSCHKA | Staff Photographer

There's a Star Barn inside the Star Barn on Stone Gables Estate.

The original barn, built near Middletown in 1877, was carefully disassembled, moved and rebuilt to exacting standards at a new location near Elizabethtown.

But just slapping up the old woodwork wasn't sufficient, according to new owner David Abel. The iconic barn, known worldwide for its unique architecture, needed a host of improvements to restore the sagging structure, meet modern design codes and preserve it for future generations.



The Star Barn's journey from Middletown to Elizabethtown

“Basically, we built a second Star Barn,” Abel said. “We cocooned the original Star Barn with new wood. It’s a complete second building.”

Although nearly 90 percent of the original Star Barn was reused to rebuild it, Abel said an entirely new Star Barn was built around it — in part to protect the original structure, and in part to to conceal the steel beams, wiring, insulation, climate control, glass and other amenities that a modern structure requires.

“So the barn grew about 10 inches all around, and it’s about 3 feet taller,” Abel said.

“One day, about three years ago, my wife suddenly said, ‘We should save the Star Barn.’ I politely told her, ‘That’s impossible.’ She didn’t accept that answer.”

Also, he said, the Star Barn in recent years had one cupola, but the barn originally had three. So they used old wood to recreate the missing cupolas and restore the original look.

Falling to pieces

The Star Barn was slowly falling to pieces along Route 283 despite many attempts to save it over the years. In 2007, the barn was the focus of [an ambitious plan to move it to Grantville](#) as the centerpiece of a massive agrarian museum.

Grand opening July 3-4

The Star Barn Village will be open to the public from 4 to 10 p.m. Tuesday and 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Wednesday.

Admission ranges from \$10 to \$25. Children under 5 are free. Parking is free and a shuttle service is available.

Admission includes access to all buildings in the Star Barn Village and Ironstone Ranch, plus yard games and demonstrations, pony and wagon rides, wine tasting, children's activities and a petting zoo. Guests also will receive a commemorative Star Barn booklet with before and after photographs.

On Wednesday, the event will conclude with a fireworks display at 9:30 p.m.

When that project **ran out of money**, the barn's future looked grim. Funding to preserve the deteriorating structure dwindled, and it looked like the barn might simply collapse where it stood.

Then Abel, founder of the Palmyra-based truck stop supplier DAS Inc., stepped up.

"I've driven by it all my life, and I just marveled at its architectural style," he said.

Buying it wasn't his idea, he admitted, nodding at his wife, Tierney.

"One day, about three years ago, my wife suddenly said, 'We should save the Star Barn.' I politely told her, 'That's impossible.' She didn't accept that answer."

To make it work, Abel had to convince seven creditors — including three banks and the state and federal governments — to walk away from the debt. To his surprise, they did.

"I believe we were chosen to be the stewards, the caretakers of these iconic treasures. My wife and I are honored to be able to do this."

He bought the land and everything on it for \$130,000, he said. After removing the structures, he resold the land for the same price.

He declined to reveal the cost of restoration, although he said it was more than he'd planned.

Take a photo tour of the iconic Star Barn

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A scene from the Star Barn Village in Elizabethtown.

DAN MARSCHKA | Staff Photographer

19th-century standards

The Timber Framers Guild took the barn and outbuildings down “the old-fashioned way — peg by peg, beam by beam, board by board,” Abel said.

The Lincoln train

The train that carried Abraham Lincoln's body from Washington, D.C., to Illinois for burial in 1865 passed through 180 cities and seven states. Part of the journey passed through what is now Stone Gables Estate.

The old rail bed is still visible, Abel said. And to mark its history, he's bringing an 1860s steam locomotive for permanent display on the site.

The locomotive will arrive in time for the grand opening this week, Abel said. A replica of Lincoln's funeral car will be added to the display in September.

RGS Associates of Lancaster oversaw land development, he said, and B&D Builders of Paradise handled reconstruction with meticulous care.

The public also lent a hand [at a three-day festival last July](#).

"I'd never experienced an actual barn-raising," Abel said. "It was an incredible, once-in-a-lifetime experience."

Nearly all of the wood and stone from the original structures was reused, Abel said, including hand-carved stones, cedar shingles and 65-foot-long summer beams — made of white oak, felled in the 1870s in New York and floated down the Susquehanna to a Wrightsville lumber mill. The beams bear the massive weight of the superstructure.

"Just look at the artistry in this," Abel said. "The craftsmanship is remarkable."

Most of the wood used to cocoon the buildings came from other 19th-century barns, Abel said.

The stones of a 56-foot-long cold cellar also were moved and reassembled, although Abel said he opted for a brick floor for easier maintenance.

Even the mortar was mixed with old aggregate to retain the original look, Abel said.

“I’d never experienced an actual barn-raising. It was an incredible, once-in-a-lifetime experience.”

Now, the Star Barn has been repurposed for weddings, corporate events and proms, etc. Abel said it holds up to 1,000 people.

The first event there — his nephew’s wedding — was in May, Abel said. They are already booking dates in 2020.

The cost of leasing the space ranges from \$5,000 to \$12,500, he said.

Hope and prosperity

John Motter was a faithful man, Abel said, and that faith inspired Abel to resurrect the Star Barn for future generations.

Motter, according to a timeline at thestarbarn.com, purchased Walnut Hill Farm in Middletown in 1872 and built the Star Barn five years later [to showcase his horses](#), many of which he sold to the U.S. Cavalry.

His faith was reflected in many design elements, Abel said — especially its trademark five-pointed stars, which symbolize hope and prosperity for the nation, but also the five wounds of Christ.

The Star Barn has cathedral-style windows, he said. And, while cupolas weren't uncommon on barns, spires were. The spires point to God, Abel said, and they're topped by fleur-de-lis finials to represent the trinity.

“I believe we were chosen to be the stewards, the caretakers of these iconic treasures,” Abel said. “My wife and I are honored to be able to do this.”

The Star Barn as it looked along Route 283 in Middletown in 2008.

TOM KNAPP | Staff

Along with the historic Ironstone Ranch, Klein family homestead and St. Michael's Vineyard already situated on the 275-acre property, the Abels will use the facility's net profits to benefit Brittany's Hope, a nonprofit named for an adopted child of Abel's who died in a car accident in 1999.

The organization helps special needs children around the world.

“We don't believe we own it,” Abel said, gesturing at the gleaming white barn. “We are keeping this for future generations.”

Besides, he added with a laugh, “I really didn't need another barn.”

It takes a village

The Star Barn Village covers 50 acres, Abel said.

Although the barn is its centerpiece, he took pains to restore the entire Motter complex.

Outbuildings were dismantled and rebuilt along with the barn, he said. Other structures — demolished in 1970 to make way for Route 283 — were built “with a certain amount of poetic license” based on old photos and drawings of the site.

Even then, measurements had to be exact.

“When we put up the hog barn, we found we were off by 13 feet” from its original distance from the Star Barn, he said. “We had to lift it up and move it 13 feet to comply” with the mandates of the National Historic Register and the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

The chicken coop, hog barn and carriage house are preserved “exactly the way they were in 1877,” he added. “It’s a time capsule, a living museum.”

“Just look at the artistry in this. The craftsmanship is remarkable.”

In a few cases, history went out the window. The milk house, for instance, was built in the 1920s with concrete blocks.

“We used poetic license to build it the way Motter would have done it in 1877,” Abel said. Now, it serves as a bridal quarters.

The hay barn contains a Star Barn museum — including a highly detailed model of the barn and outbuildings and an exhibit of famed local artist David Brumbach’s Star Barn paintings — and a commercial kitchen to service the event space.

The neighboring corn crib contains ADA-compliant restrooms. The spring house is now a honeymoon suite.

Belmont is next

Abel isn’t finished with his barn projects.

Next will come [the 1867 Belmont barn](#) which stood on Fruitville Pike, opposite the Shoppes at Belmont shopping center.

Abel disassembled and moved it to Elizabethtown in 2014 because the Shoppes at Belmont developer, which bought the site of the barn and a homestead next door, said the barn would interfere with the shopping center's entrance.

(The barn site now [is being developed as a hotel.](#))

Abel said the barn's distinctive cupolas and windows are also under wraps and awaiting restoration on his land.

But first, he's taking a break to work on a book on his historic barns and a documentary on the Star Barn's journey.

Abel said he expects reconstruction of the Belmont barn to begin in March.

Meanwhile, he said, its pieces "are in a cocoon, safe and sound."

In a few years, he hopes to build a 16 bedroom B&B near the Star Barn — patterned after the residence where workers who built the original barn lived in the 1870s.

The Star Barn museum.

DAN MARSCHKA | Staff Photographer

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