

History of the Barn

One of the most recognizable facades on an ever-evolving campus, the fabled Barn at Roger Williams University has played host to thousands of performing artists and patrons over the past 25 years.

First raised in Glocester, R.I., in 1894, the Barn was given a new lease on life in 1981 when a group of historic preservation students and faculty rescued the deteriorating structure. Piece by piece, the Barn arrived on campus in 1983, ready for its revival. Nearly a century after it was first built, the Barn doors opened once again – this time as the RWU Performing Arts Center – to a new generation of theatre, dance and music students.



The barn that became the Barn originally sat on the Whipplespear Farm in Glocester, R.I. Built by Henry Salisbury in 1894, it was disassembled, rebuilt and adapted for contemporary use at RWU nearly a century later.



The Performing Arts Center is actually composed of two barns. The smaller barn, now on left facing side of the PAC, originally was attached to the right facing side of the larger barn, pictured here.



The cupola was stabilized, and a crane brought in to remove it fully intact, to avoid damaging the structure.



It took more than a year to document and disassemble the barn, which was taken apart piecemeal. Here, the roof peak is removed, window frames still intact.



Students meticulously numbered every architectural element (including clapboard, beams, posts, and, here, sheathing) to ensure proper reassembly.



The granite foundation was brought to the RWU campus over a span of three months courtesy of the Rhode Island National Guard Corps of Engineers, who used the project to fulfill their monthly weekend of service.



The ledge site where the Barn now sits was excavated with dynamite. A French drainage system was installed to prevent water from coming up into the building.



Students push up the two-story post frame – a process called “timber raising” – as they begin to reassemble the Barn. New material was used to brace the historic materials, which constitute the majority of the structure.



Plywood sheathing was applied to the sides of both barns. Here, the smaller barn takes shape.



Students were involved in every aspect of the Barn preservation – including roofing the building once it was reassembled.



Bringing the Barn to campus was a five-year project, beginning in 1981. Professor Kevin Jordan trained a new group of senior historic preservation students each semester for their capstone experience.



The iconic cupola also serves a practical purpose: in the original barn, the cupola was a venting system that prevented combustion in the hayloft.



The 1983 architectural preservation group was the first group of students to work on reassembly. The pieces arrived on campus that year, stored in plastic inside trailer truck, which the faculty affectionately referred to as a "barn in a baggie."



The completed Performing Arts Center in 1986. The quintessential American musical "Guys and Dolls" was the first main season production to take place in the black box theatre, under the direction of Professor William Grandgeorge.