

The Barn

The barn at Wilcox Park has stood sentinel over a broad expanse of acreage for over 130 years, its purpose changing as the land itself changed. Depicted in an 1895 map of the Town of Westerly, it served as a working barn on the property of Mrs. Edwin R. Brown. Though it is not clear whether it was a dairy barn or a horse barn, it tells us that animals may have once grazed upon the rolling hills.

Sitting on a foundation of granite block, the two-story structure has an array of unexpected architectural features. Early photos depict the front as having three barn doors and a standing seam metal roof, but today, only the center door remains as a lifting garage door. The front facade still sports the hay hoist above and a grand arch serves as a focal point. Two barn doors on the second floor still roll open on the original hardware.

Inside the second floor, an old-fashioned pull ring lifts the trap door that permitted hay to tumble down to the stall area. Recently awarded grant money allowed for the replacement of the hayloft floor and louver doors, as well as clapboard repairs and painting. Horizontal slat-board walls divide the areas of the barn, and original twelve-pane, true-divided light windows delineate where the overseer would attend his paperwork duties. Today, this area of the barn serves as a hub where Park Superintendent Alan Peck organizes the days' priorities and communicates these responsibilities to his staff and volunteers.

The next time you are strolling by the barn, take time to note the unique details not typically seen on a utilitarian structure. An impressive cupola sits atop the roof. Prominent windows are arched, with large panes of glass not generally used for a livestock barn. These large windows allow light to penetrate the interior on both the first and second floors. The window trim measures a hefty 4 ½" with a keystone detail at the top. There are nearly one hundred elaborate scrollwork corbels under the roof eaves. These details, which are strictly ornamental in nature, may suggest the prominence the Brown family had in the community.

Mrs. Brown's property was deeded to the Westerly Library & Memorial Association in 1905. In combination with the Rowse-Babcock property, it formed the basis of Wilcox Park. A 1908 postcard shows that by this point, the cottage had been moved to its current location and orientation (the back door became the front door) adjacent to the barn.



A twentieth-century addition to the barn's footprint is a 10' x 32' greenhouse. Currently used by the park staff as a holding area for incubating seedlings or overwintering fragile plants, its foundation recently underwent a meticulous restoration utilizing a mason mesh, high-quality mortar and protective painting. The barn today houses twenty-first century equipment unheard of in the 1800's, such as a leaf vacuum, electric chain saw, and array of battery-powered hand tools.

This strong and sturdy building has witnessed the landscape as it changed from working farm to sophisticated Victorian strolling park to a recognized arboretum of note, all the while serving as a hub of activity that makes Wilcox Park what it is today.

By Mary Jo Girard, Westerly Library & Wilcox Park Board of Trustees Secretary and Park Committee member

