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Preserving Barns the Free-Market Way **by Scott McPherson**

There is a conflict over barns in New England. A man named Ken Epworth, a New Yorker, has formed a business called the Barn People, which specializes in disassembling 18th-century and 19th-century barns and reassembling them as attachments to expensive homes elsewhere.

Locals are reacting angrily, accusing Epworth of taking away their heritage. “They want a little bit of New England history,” said Vince Kuharik, of Meredith, New Hampshire, of those who purchase the old barns. “But it’s our history, not theirs.”

Unfortunately, people such as Kuharik fail to see that it isn’t “history” that’s being moved; it’s a piece of property, and ownership of that particular asset rests, rightfully, with whoever has purchased it.

In the case of the barns, the purchaser/owner is a business called the Barn People, and as soon as the deed is handed over, the barn becomes the property of the business to do with as it pleases.

No one is stopping New Englanders from purchasing these barns themselves to prevent them from being moved away. Clearly, the owners of the barns feel that they are of little or no value in their present location and condition, which is why they sell them to Epworth.

In a sense, then, Epworth’s business is actually doing a good historical deed — by purchasing, restoring, and selling the barns to wealthy homeowners, he is engaging in a form of historical preservation.

Obviously the locals don’t see it that way. Fine. They are free to purchase the barns themselves, and face the responsibility of “preserving history” themselves. This would require that they expend the resources necessary to maintain these old structures, just as Epworth’s Barn People are now doing. Instead, they would rather browbeat Epworth for investing his own resources in the buildings, which New Englanders claim to love so much but often leave to decay and ruin. One town is even using eminent domain to stop his efforts.

The Barn People could just as easily have been a private New England preservation society dedicated to the ownership and upkeep of historical properties.

Ken Epworth should not be blamed for the failure of New Englanders to fully understand the value of “their” own history or for profiting from the wisdom they lack.

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