



The Building
History of
Blandford Nature
Center



*We aim to change lives through fun
and engaging learning
experiences in the natural world.*

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Dr. Mary Jane Dockeray



Dr. Mary Jane Dockeray is the visionary who brought Blandford Nature Center (BNC) alive for everyone in the Grand Rapids area to enjoy. She spent her childhood days playing in the woods and streams with her friends in what was known then as Collins' Woods. While working for the Grand Raids Public Museum as a naturalist, she would sometimes take children to the woods to explore and learn about nature. Discussions with land owner Victor Blandford led to the Blandford's donating a total of 17 acres. With the museum's help Blandford Nature Center was opened in 1968 and Dr. Mary Jane Dockeray served as curator-naturalist until 1990. Additional land was acquired through a 1968 Recreation Bond, the MI. Land Trust, and private donations totaling 143 acres. Over the years, the numerous buildings on site became part of the BNC complex. Come take a walk and explore the buildings in Grand Rapids' treasure known as Blandford Nature Center.

Visitor Center



Our walk begins at the Visitor Center, which was opened in September of 1968 and was the first building to be erected on Nature Center property. With funding raised by the Grand Rapids Public Museum Association, the building was able to be constructed for only the cost of materials. All of the labor involved during the construction was donated by the West Michigan Contractors and Suppliers Association. A retired stone mason, Thomas Damstra, gathered and supervised the placement of 44 tons of fieldstones used in the Visitor Center construction. In 1982, with funding received by the Grand Rapids Jaycees, a much needed addition was constructed which included a project room, two offices, and a staff/volunteer lounge.

General Store / Learning Lab



Upon exiting the Visitor Center, the General Store / Learning Lab is directly across the parking lot and quite possibly the most noticeable building seen from here. It was built by staff, volunteers, and college interns in 1986-87. The project was made possible by a grant from the Grand Rapids Junior League. The outside of the store has an aged look and was designed to reflect styles from the pioneering age of the late 1800s. Inside, many people take notice of the antique ceiling tiles which are actually made of tin. But something special most people may not notice is that the floorboards are crafted from maple and were donated from Engine House #5 of the Grand Rapids Fire Department. In 2012, this building is being converted to include needed classroom space and will be known as the Learning Lab.

Log Cabin



As you exit the front entrance of the Learning Lab, you will see the Log Cabin off to the right across the parking lot. The log cabin arrived at Blandford Nature Center in the summer of 1971 making it the first historical building on the property. It was originally built near Wayland, Michigan in 1866 by William Tyler Robinson. The Robinson family raised 11 children in the cabin before it became home to the Kuhtic family. Ivan Kuhtic's son Joseph donated the Log Cabin to Blandford Nature Center. The Log Cabin was moved to the Nature Center by disassembling it piece by piece and then reassembling it where it stands today. In 1985 it was disassembled again for repairs and a kitchen area was added. The Log Cabin is used to demonstrate how people like the Robinson family lived in the late 1800s.

Homestead Barn



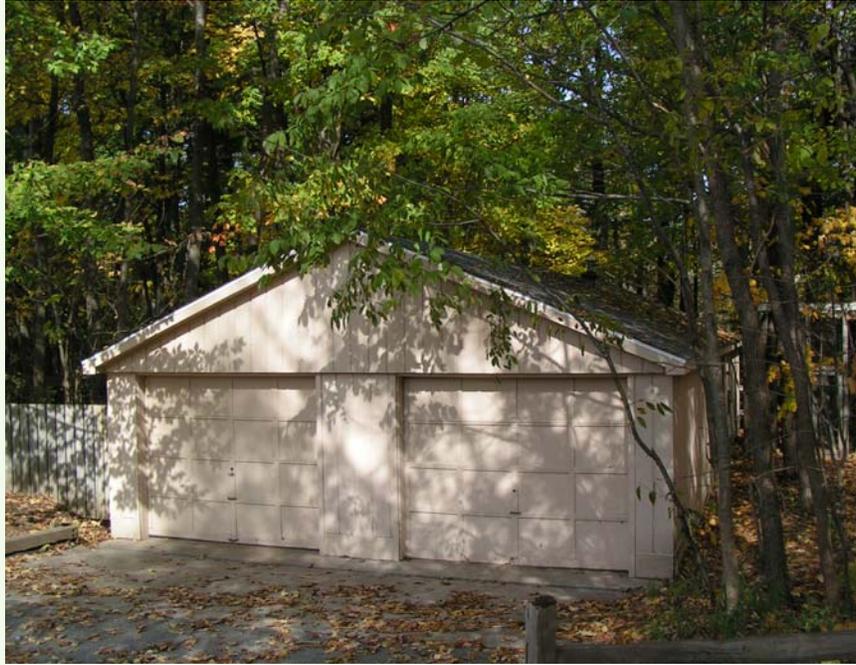
After exploring the Log Cabin look to the right and you will find the Homestead Barn. Built in the late 1800s, this structure was originally located in the North Park area of Grand Rapids. It was used as a carriage barn for many years. Blandford Nature Center began looking for a small barn to fit the pioneering theme and in 1974 this one was donated by Steve and Sue VanHouten. The barn was cut in half to facilitate the move to this location. The original siding was replaced with pieces of siding from other scrapped barns in the area. The Homestead Barn is used to hold pioneering aged tools that were donated over time to the nature center.

Smokehouse



Between the Homestead Barn and the General Store rests an odd looking tree trunk that is actually a smokehouse. The Smokehouse was hand-hewn from a maple tree stump and covered with a metal top. Large wooden pegs were placed on the inside of the tree stump where food would be hung as it was being smoked. This smokehouse was used to smoke different kinds of meat like fish, pork, and beef and is still functional today. The Smokehouse was donated in 1971 by Dr. Jerry Grover and was moved from his farm in Scotts, Michigan to the Blandford Nature Center.

The Garage



The staff-only equipment garage is to the left of the Visitor Center. This garage was built in the fall of 1968 with funds received from the Grand Rapids Public Museum Association, known today as the Friends of the Public Museum. The front half is used mainly for storage while the back half is a workshop for the Nature Center.

The Garage is not open to the public.

Star Schoolhouse



Facing the garage, walk to the left where the South Farm Trail begins and the Star Schoolhouse stands. The schoolhouse was originally built in 1853 at the corner of Lincoln and 8th Avenue. It was donated to the Nature Center by Cecil Doyle in 1972. Contributions from Dr. and Mrs. Jacob Vanloo and Mrs. Dorothy Cassada funded the move of the building. Even though the structure was only a couple of miles away, the roof had to be removed to clear electric and phone lines that were less than 18 feet above the ground. The schoolhouse sat on blocks for one year in an area where the General Store is located, until land at its current location became available. Then, Blandford Nature Center volunteers and Grand Valley State University students worked together to construct and rebuild the schoolhouse to the condition it is in today.

R.B. Stilwill Horseshoer Shop



Just a few steps away on the South Farm Trail from the Star Schoolhouse, the R.B. Stilwill Horseshoer Shop can be seen nestled in some trees. This building was originally built in 1889 and was a working shop in Jamestown, Michigan. Mrs. Stilwill donated it to the public museum in 1970 with everything in it. The public museum placed it behind the old museum on Jefferson. In 1983, the R.B. Stilwill Horseshoer Shop was moved to the Nature Center. During festivals and programs, volunteer blacksmiths show how to work with metals in a fully functional forge. The floor in this building has withstood the tests of time and is the original floor from the 1880's.

Sugarhouse



From the R.B Stilwill Horseshoer Shop, take the South Farm Trail to the Sugarhouse. This building was built on site by staff and volunteers in 1981. Funding was donated by Louis Kenyon in the memory of his wife Anastasia. It opens to the public yearly in late February through the month of March for maple syrup production. The maple syrup produced here is sold on site. Around the back side of the Sugar House you will see two stainless steel holding tanks. These tanks hold maple tree sap during the “Sugarbush” season in March. The sap is collected by Nature Center staff, with assistance from students of the Blandford Environmental Educational Program (BEEP) and students at C.A. Frost Environmental School.

Bicentennial Barn



Continue west on the South Farm Trail from the Sugarhouse (taking the right fork when the trail splits, going under power lines), to the end at the farm where the Bicentennial Barn is the largest building seen. In the 1970s, Blandford Nature Center began looking for a barn and asked the public for a whole barn or parts that could be pieced together. Many phone calls were received from people willing to donate parts of old barns that had fallen down. With enough material to build a barn, thirty five volunteers were trained to help raise the frame during a United States Bicentennial celebration in 1976. The majority of the barn supplies were donated by the VanStrien-Alman Joint Venture from the Harold Edison farm which is the current site of Shawmut Hills Funeral Home. The Bicentennial Barn housed many different farm animals until the farm closed in 1989. It is currently used to store supplies for the BEEPs.

Farm Barn



A little bit further on the farm, just to the west of the Bicentennial Barn is the Farm Barn. It was originally owned by the Frost's, who used it as a dairy barn. The Farm Barn houses farming supplies for the newly renovated farm program. The Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program uses this barn weekly as a distribution point for produce grown on the nearby plots during farming season.

Farm House



Hiding behind some trees beyond the barns and more easily seen from Milo Street is the original Farm House. This farm house was built in the 1940s by George Frost. The Farm House and property were bought by the Museum Association in 1972.

The house is under renovation and will be used as farm administration space.

Red Chicken Coop



Behind the Farm Barn and the Bicentennial Barn lies the Red Chicken Coop. Blandford Environmental Education Program (BEEP) students of Grand Rapids Public Schools use the chicken coop to study and learn the operations of a working chicken egg franchise. The original chicken coop was built with plenty of help from the BEEPs in the early 1970s. Chickens were kept here until the farm temporarily closed in 1989 at which point they were moved to the Brown Chicken Coop. The structure seen today replaced the original one and was built by Grand Rapids Public Schools in 2002. A totem pole hand crafted by artisans and BEEP students was placed in front of the chicken coop in 2011. It is a symbol of the pride and joy the children have for their chicken business.

Portable Classroom



Just to the northeast from the Red Chicken Coop are the Portable Classrooms used by the Blandford Environmental Educational Program of Grand Rapids Public School. The BEEP program and students were moved here from their location at C.A. Frost Elementary School in 1994 because of construction projects at the elementary school. The four portable classrooms house sixty sixth grade students every school year. Students spend a school year at this location for environment immersion. A new school building funded by Peter Wege and the Grand Rapids Public School District is scheduled to be built here in 2012.

Brown Chicken Coop



After exploring the buildings at the farm, take the South Farm trail to return to the Visitor Center and about half way back on the right change to the Wagon Trail and keep to the left. The Brown Chicken Coop was delivered to the nature center in 1989 by the Grand Rapids Public Schools. It housed the chickens for the BEEP's egg business while the farm's chicken coop was temporarily closed. Since then the Brown Chicken Coop has been used in rehabilitating various wildlife and serves as the winter home of the two resident vultures affectionately called "the girls."

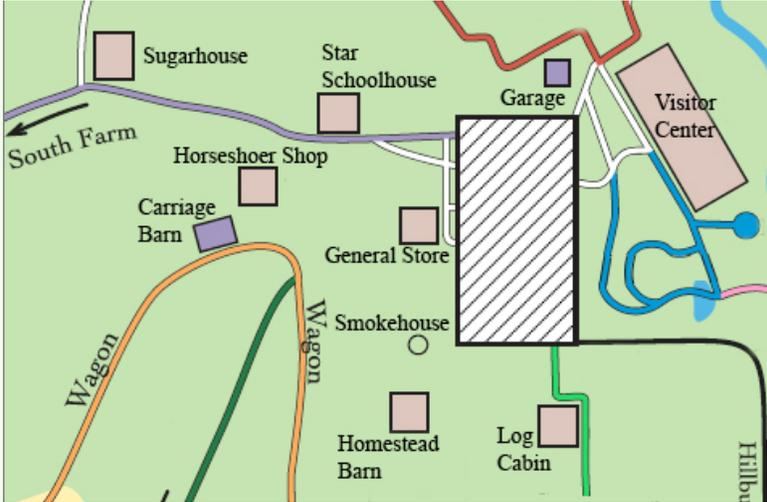
The Brown Chicken Coop is not open to the public.

Carriage Barn

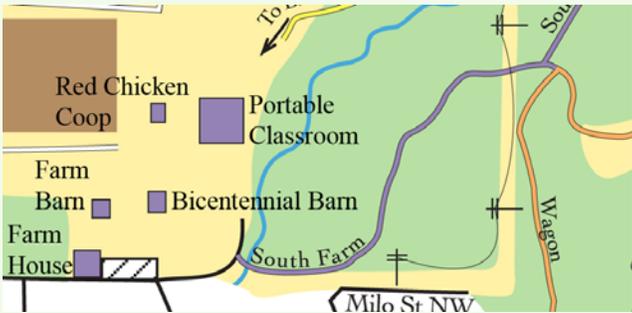


Lastly, you will find the Carriage Barn as you return to the main grounds of the Nature Center. Originally built between 1890 and 1910 it fits very well with the overall pioneering theme setting in the nature center. The Carriage Barn was donated by Theresa Staal in the fall of 1987. It was moved from its farm on Veteran's Memorial Drive near Maynard Avenue in Walker, Michigan to Blandford Nature Center. In order to make the move safely, the Carriage Barn was disassembled into several pieces and transported on a flatbed truck. It was reassembled on its foundation at the nature center and has since been used to store equipment. Continuing on the Wagon Trail from the Carriage Barn through a wooden fence returns you to the blacksmith shop and main area of Blandford Nature Center.

Main Area Map



Farm Area Map



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