3. VI.4 | Michigan peninsula (M)

The first heavy settlement of the region lying between Lake Michigan and Lake Erie occurred after 1815 when the territory began to be surveyed and plotted. By 1831 the survey of over 10 million acres was complete and the land divided into ‘townships’ which each measured 6 mi (9.7 km) square. Each township was composed of 36 equal one-by-one mile plots of land, called ‘sections’, along the boundaries of which Michigan’s original road system was constructed. This grid imprint is retained to date, particularly in agricultural areas, where main roads are one mile apart. The Homestead Act of 1862 granted (for a small fee) farms of 160 acres, a quarter of a section, to the original settlers. Later immigrants, buying land from homesteaders, bought lots of 40 or 80 acres, that is, a quarter or a half of the original quarter section. This is reflected in the checkerboard of rectangular fields characteristic of the farmscape in Michigan’s lower peninsula.

Michigan farmsteads may be classified into five types related to the extent of the markets for which they produced, the commodities produced, the means of production, and the technology used in constructing the farm buildings (Dandekar and Schoof). These types evolved chronologically but are rarely to be found in ‘pure’ form as farm buildings were modified continuously in responses to changes in the technology of agriculture, building and transport (Dandekar). Buildings from various periods are to be found integrally linked to, and used
with, structures of subsequent periods. Farmsteads thus reflect the
evolutions in land settlements in the Midwestern region of North America and the resourcefulness of its pioneer settlers.

During the late-19th and early-20th centuries the characteristic farm type in lower Michigan was that of scientific farming
catering to a regional market. The buildings on the Raab family
farmstead in Bridgewater township are typical of the collection
of structures to be found on such farms. The Raab farm, in its
prime from the turn of the century to the 1920s, boasted the full
array of buildings deemed necessary for a successful diversified
farm which met the subsistence needs of the farm family and
produced for the local and regional markets. The buildings
included the farmhouse, big barn, old barn, horse barn, car-
tage house, hogshed, chicken-coop, windmill, smoke house,
granary, ice house, corncrib and tool shed-cum-wood-shed.
The main crops were corn, wheat, oats, hay and barley. Sturdy
farmhouses usually replaced an original log house. These two-
storey houses generally had a parlour, dining room and kitchen
on the lower floor, and bedrooms on the upper floor. The base-
ment was usually directly accessible from the kitchen yard out-
side and served to store crops, canned meat and other foodstuffs. Some of the first structures to be built on the farm-
stead were theouthouse, the woodshed, the smoke house, the
windmill, the ice house, and the big and smaller barn. The
woodshed generally had a fireplace and a workbench and was
used as a shop and for storage. The smoke house was used for
curing meat. The ice house was used to store large blocks of ice
in winter for use during the following summer.

The big barn was usually built with the help of neighbours
in a traditional barn raising. The barn bents were raised first,
the sections having been put together on the ground, and the barn frame erected in a single day. A gambrel roof, providing
more space for hay storage, often replaced earlier gable roofs.
Three-level bank barns in the German tradition were typical
in this region. They sheltered animals on the lower level
which was often built into the side of a hill. The middle level
was used for storing grains and for tool storage. It was accessed
by an earthen ramp allowing thrashers and other machinery
to be wheeled inside. Hay was stored on the upper, or third,
level.

The third level was a loft space created by the tie-beam in the
bents between which joists and flooring were added. This loft
floor was important for the structural stability of the barn. The
loft space was usually accessed by ladders but sometimes, in
the larger barns, by very small stairs. Hay was thrown down
chutes descending from the loft space, through the middle
level down to the basement. There were access doors in the
middle level as well. Feed grain from the granaries on the mid-
dle level or from the attached silos which delivered feed-corn to
the middle level could also be thrown down to the basement
level.

Stylized doorways were sometimes outlined in white paint
on the long sides of the big barn and the master carpenter
would at times cut out, as his signature but also to allow venti-
lation, a circle, star or other simple shape in the peak of the
gable. Most structures on the farmstead were utilitarian and
functional, with little ornamentation or decoration. The wood
siding of farm buildings was often painted ‘barn red’ with a
pigment of iron oxide but this was as much to protect the wood
dz as to embellish the structure.

HEMALATA C. DANDEKAR

Left
Basement and first-floor plans and section of the
Big barn, Raab
farmstead, Bridgewater
township, Michigan, 1913.

See also
1 L 3 A/S
Ourbuildings/Farm
Buildings (Kazakhstan)

References
Dandekar, Hemalata, and
School, Daniel F. 1988
Dandekar, Hemalata, 1994