

RURAL HERITAGE DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE  
CASE STUDY

*Preservation/Restoration of Historic Rural Structures*

PEARCE-WHEELER FARM



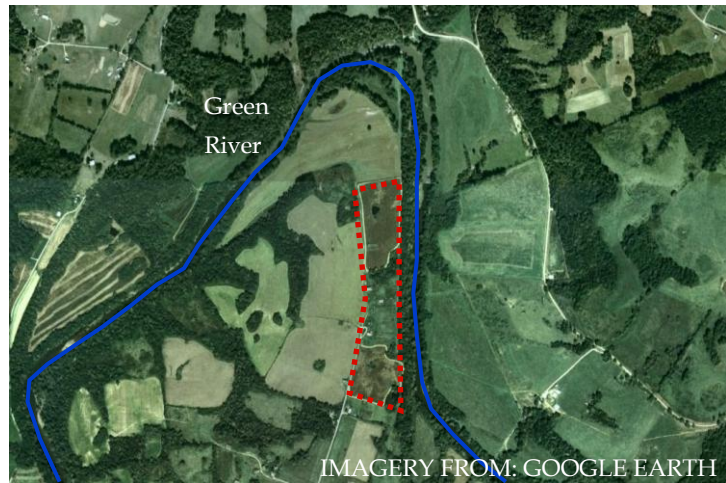
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LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE, HISTORIC PRESERVATION

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## PROJECT LOCATION

640 Sims Cemetery Road  
Hart County, Kentucky  
Located at the end of Sims Cemetery Road  
approximately 7 miles Northeast of Canmer,  
KY. The site is bound on the North, East, and  
West by the Green River in an area called  
Davis Bend.



This site is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

## PROJECT TYPE

Farmstead including log house with a frame ell, a log meat-house, a log barn, a frame mule barn, and the ruins of a slave house

## GOAL OF THE PROJECT

To preserve the rural historic structures by creating a “contemplative retreat” open to the public for groups such as the Boy Scouts of America, The Nature Conservancy, historic organizations, hiking and kayaking groups, and classes, as well as individuals who wish to spend time on their own, such as artists or writers

## BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SITE

Originally a 1,000-acre land grant awarded to General Jonathan Clark for his service in the Revolutionary War, this property was passed down to his daughter, Ann Clark Pearce and eventually to her son Edmund Pearce in the late 1840s. Edmund Pearce was responsible for building four of the five structures on the farm, around 1847. As indicated by agricultural tax records and the U.S. Census, Pearce reduced the size of the farm to a more manageable size in 1853, to 391 acres. With the help of 10-12 slaves Pearce utilized the fertile land of the Davis Bend on the Green River to raise horses, cows, hogs and later, around 1859 the addition of mules, tobacco, corn, and wheat. Tax records show that production numbers were much higher than that of the typical farm in Hart County during this time period.

Edmund Pearce was able to continue to run the farm for two years after the Civil War without slaves, but eventually sold the property to Mr. Claiborne Harlow in 1868. Mr. Harlow continued to run a less productive farm, but still well above the averages for Hart County during the time period, raising horses, cattle, hogs, tobacco, corn, and wheat until his death in 1885. Claiborne Harlow’s daughter, Olevia and her husband William Richard Wheeler inherited 215 acres of the farm after Mr. Harlow’s death. W.R. Wheeler continued farming, but began to shift towards the mule trading industry. Around 1903 he had the frame mule barn built to support his growing mule trading business. It is noted by living members of the family that the barn was so large that people came from miles around to see it (Wheeler, 2004).

W.R. Wheeler died unexpectedly in 1910, leaving the farm to his widow, Olevia and one of their 13 children, Claiborne Harlow Wheeler. Claiborne Harlow Wheeler died in 1933 leaving the youngest of Olevia's children, Wood Bowling Wheeler and his family in charge. The property eventually was passed down to Ruth Wheeler Weed and then had various other owners until 70 acres were acquired by the Nature Conservancy in 2000. Bruce Cohen bought the property from the Nature Conservancy under restrictions of a conservation easement in 2004 and has since been working to restore the property (Trammell et. al., 2005).

## EXISTING CONDITIONS BEFORE THE PROJECT STARTED

The farmstead was in disarray when Bruce Cohen acquired the property from The Nature Conservancy. As for the main house, parts of the foundation had caved in, causing the floors to sag; the chinking was, for the most part, gone; many of the windows were broken; the doors were hanging askew; and the roof was in poor condition. The barns were in an even worse state. Parts of the roofs were completely missing, causing water to damage the barns' structural integrity. This included floor joists as well as much of the floors themselves. Exterior pieces were missing or rotted, and a corner of the roof of the tobacco barn had collapsed, destroying two sides of that barn.

## WORK DONE TO ACCOMPLISH THE PROJECT

Over a span of approximately five years Mr. Cohen has brought in a number of people to assist him in restoring these buildings similar to their original state. Amish builders helped lift the barns and the ell addition to the main house on jacks in order to shore up the remaining foundations and rebuild what was completely destroyed. They also repaired the frame barns using salvaged wood that Mr. Cohen had recovered from similar barns of the time period.

Several general contractors have also assisted Mr. Cohen in the restoration of the structures by rebuilding the original front porch for the main house, refinishing the floors, installing new windows, re-hanging the doors, fixing the gutters, and constructing missing mantels, among other things. Craft specialists were brought in to repair more difficult items, ensuring the authenticity of the repairs. For example, a mason from Louisville, Kentucky, who specializes in historic structures, was brought in to re-point the chimneys and repair the chinking in the walls. A blacksmith was also commissioned to make replica door hinges, handles, and locks from the time period.

**How the Project achieved its Goals while meeting the Secretary of the Interior's Standards:** A major goal of Mr. Cohen's was to update the buildings with basic amenities in order to make them livable. This included adding running water, electric, and heat and air-conditioning to the main house. Special attention was paid to conceal these utilities as much as possible, by placing them in the attic and running them through the ceiling and down a chase in the corner of one room. Water and electric were added to the barns, and a kitchen and bathroom were added to both the log barn and the mule barn. The addition of the kitchens and bathrooms came under scrutiny by The Nature Conservancy because they believed Mr. Cohen was adding "residences" to the property. Guidelines suggest that only one residence is allowed to be added per 50 acres of land. Mr. Cohen explained that he was "...not adding any residences. They were already [there]." And so he was able to add these kitchens and baths to make the structures livable.

The lack of air-conditioning was accounted for in the barns by cutting windows on the second floor of the barns. This would not normally be acceptable by the Secretary of the Interior's standards. However, Mr. Cohen made covers for the windows with the barn siding that was cut away and placed them on hinges to give the appearance of a solid

exterior when the windows are closed. Distressed glass from windows of the time period was salvaged and used to fabricate the windows for all of the buildings.

## DESCRIPTION OF COMPLETED PROJECT

From the entrance to the property and across an open field stands the main house, the outside adorned with freshly painted siding, a new porch, and two large brick chimneys. The inside is reminiscent of a typical 19th century log home, and includes most of the original material. Giant hewn logs sealed by mortar chinking create the interior walls in which several inscriptions are carved from previous owners. Original hardwood floors and fireplaces provide even more authenticity to the house. Finished drywall ceilings, baseboard, and trim gives a clean look to the interior. Utilities are concealed as much as possible, and simple light fixtures were chosen to provide functionality, but not interfere with the aesthetic quality of the building. The frame ell addition to the main house has a few newer elements such as new hardwood flooring and a refrigerator. Other elements such as an old gas stove and custom built cabinets were added to match a bygone era. Sleeping quarters are provided on the second floor of the ell.

The smokehouse stands just behind the main house, far enough away to prevent a fire, but close enough to easily serve the kitchen. Bone remains of hogs still sit inside the walls around the main fire pit where meat used to be smoked. The log barn and the larger frame mule barn stand towards the back of the property. Wood and windows collected from similar barns, for future restoration of these buildings, are stored on the ground in the first floor of each barn, while the loft in each barn is where guests are intended to stay. The loft in the log barn is equipped with a kitchen and bathroom and enough room to accommodate 10 - 15 people comfortably. The mule barn loft is also equipped with a kitchen and bathroom, but is much larger and is intended for groups as large as 50. This loft is separated by an open central passage, but is connected with a bridge that spans the gap. The names of previous owners and residents painted and carved into some of the barn doors remind guests of the long history of these barns.

## HOW TAX CREDITS HELPED THE PROJECT

Renovations to the structures on the Pearce-Wheeler farm were more intensive than Bruce Cohen had originally thought when he took on the project. The total cost for this project was approximately \$450,000. With tax credits available from the State and Federal governments, Mr. Cohen is recouping some of the cost of the restoration. The Federal government offers a 20% tax credit of the cost spent on historic renovations. This would award Mr. Cohen \$85-90,000 in tax credits. The State offers up to a 20% tax credit based on the number of people who have applied for the year. Mr. Cohen is expecting a tax credit of approximately 8% of the cost of the project. This would total a \$30-36,000 tax credit. Both credits were useful because they allowed the renovations to be done thoroughly and authentically.

### SOURCES:

Cohen, Bruce. (2010). Recorded interview with James Calitri. March 7, Pearce-Wheeler House and Farm, Hart County, Kentucky. Copy of recording in possession of James Calitri.

Trammell, J., Dawson, M., & Fuqua, Ross. (2005). Pearce-Wheeler farm national register nomination. Frankfort, Kentucky: Kentucky Heritage Council