

Big barn regains a little of its 1890s dignity

Crooked, rotted structure at Matthaei Botanical Gardens gets a lift back onto its foundation

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The big barn at the side of Dixboro Road is standing a little straighter these days.

It's got a new roof, a new oak threshold and new floors inside.

Repair work on the barn, part of the University of Michigan's Matthaei Botanical Gardens, included moving it back onto its foundations and bringing it nearly back into plumb, says Terry Stitt, owner of Terry's Barn Restoration and Repair in Three Rivers.

That meant the structure had to be jacked up and eased over, up to about 13 inches in one spot, he says. The barn itself was leaning backward as well.

Workers replaced beams, adding 15 to a front section that was rotted out, and rebuilt the floors in the barn that was probably built in the 1890s.

Barns show the craftsmanship of local builders, says Stitt, with pieces that fit together like the parts of a car's engine. But they need to be kept up, he adds. The botanical gardens barn, Stitt says, "needs TLC, maintenance and it needs to be used."

This week, the crews move on to a smaller barn that stands next to the larger structure. The smaller barn, probably built before its larger neighbor, needs new floor beams, which have rotted from water damage, says Stitt. It will have to be jacked up off the ground entirely, in order to replace rotten beams.

The foundation needs a little attention in one spot, he says, and crews will hang new doors on the front and install new windows.

"We're trying to protect the timber frame structure," says Mike Hommel, Matthaei superintendent. "It buys us time to look at a restoration effort."

In the long term, the botanical gardens would like to incorporate the farm, which includes a house built in 1824, into its network of trails. The site is along an interpretive trail that shows plants used by Native Americans.

The barn was supposed to be the site of a restoration workshop in June sponsored by the botanical gardens and the Michigan Barn Preservation Network. It was canceled because not enough people signed up to attend.

