A Saltbox-Style Shed

by Gordon Tully

I freely confess to learning as much from my clients as they do from me. A case in point is the shed featured here. It was basically designed by my client Hadley Reynolds, who at one time was a contractor. Hadley called me up one day and suggested I help him work out the design for a combination barn/garage, to be built near his new house. It should be "like one of those sheds with a short overhanging roof in front and a long roof in the back." He assumed I would surely know about these things, as they were scattered all around the area.

I was taken aback, because I had no idea what he was talking about. What had gone wrong with my education? Had I driven the roads of New England for 35 years in vain? In retrospect, I decided that Hadley must have been taking note of all sorts of things that people like myself miss. I tend to be task-oriented in my viewing, and only see things relevant to what I am thinking about at the time. In any case, Hadley took me on a tour, and sure enough, he had found an astonishing number of outbuildings that exhibited one or more of the characteristics he wanted in his new shed.

Most of the examples we saw had a characteristic roof with the ridge well off center. This creates a saltbox effect on a one-story building. (In a true saltbox, the front is two stories high while the rear is one story.) The example we imitated for the Reynolds shed is a beautiful carriage shed, part of a church complex in Weston, Mass.

Beside the off-center ridge, the Weston building sports an overhanging front roof supported on brackets, stone retaining walls on three sides (since it is built into the hillside), an open front, very low eaves in the rear, and handsome Richardsonian detailing.

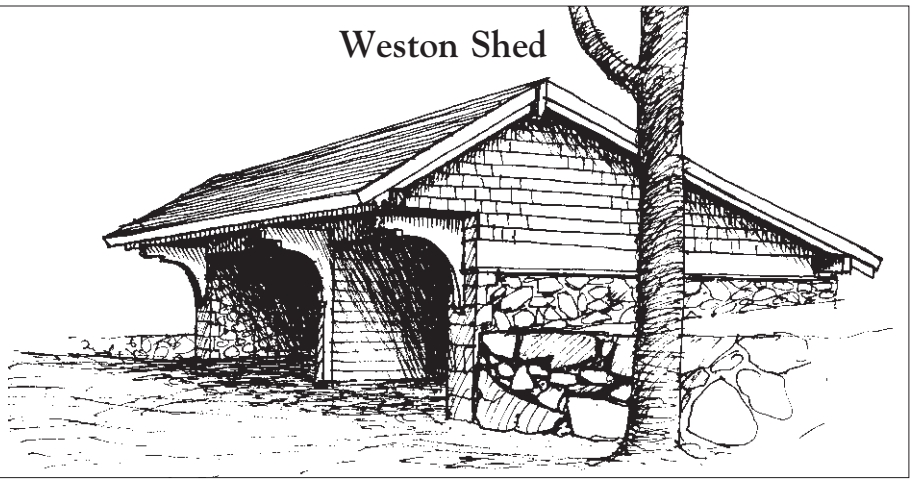
The other auxiliary buildings we saw on the tour lacked one or more of the characteristics of the Weston shed. All of the modern buildings with this shape, for example, were fully enclosed. Only a few had an overhanging front roof. The off-center ridge is so striking that it is hard to believe that shed builders created the form from scratch over and over: There must be prototypes in old farm outbuildings.

Searching for the historical model for these buildings, I checked in the 1967 book *An Age of Barns* by Eric Sloane (reprinted in 1990 by Henry Holt, New York, about $30). The book is filled with wonderful sketches, paintings, and sketched details of barns and outbuildings.

In his book, Sloane shows a hop barn with a similar form but lacking the front overhang. He also shows a carriage shed with a low off-center ridge, but it is open on the low side instead of the high side, and lacks the overhang. I know of a woodshed with an open side and overhanging roof on a farm in Virginia, but I believe the roof is symmetrical. Hadley and I would enjoy learning anything readers might know about the origins of this unique building type.

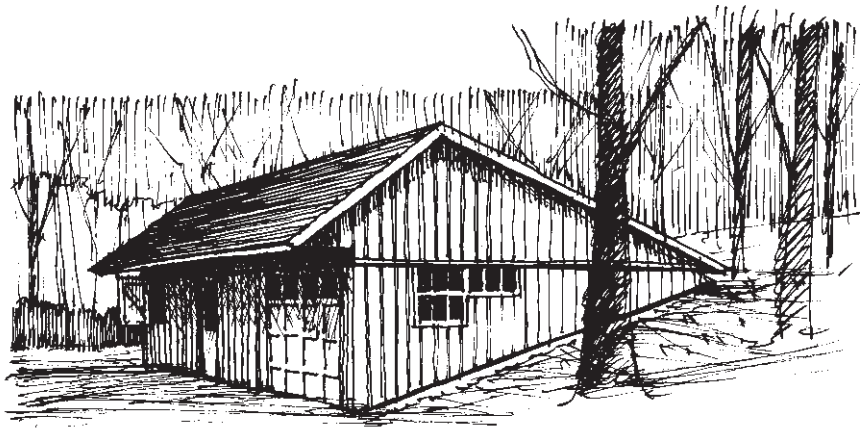
Regardless of its history, the form offers terrific advantages to anyone building a garage. The rear plate can be set low, to hold down the overall height of the building, while the front can be as high as you like, without creating a monumental roof. Unlike a normal low-pitched gable or hipped

Weston Shed



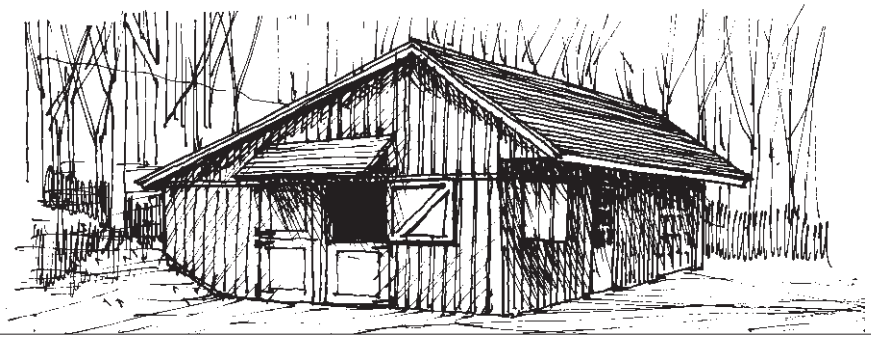
The well-maintained original, built as a carriage shed for the adjacent church, can be seen near Weston Center, Mass.

Reynolds Shed



This view from the extrance side shows the front and side visible from the driveway, which is cut back into the hill to minimize its size. The 24x32-foot structure pays proper respect to the house opposite, and doesn't dominate the site.

Reynolds Shed
Stall Side



The grade at the opposite side of the shed is cut away to accommodate the doors for two horse stalls. A small pent roof protects these doors.

roof, which emphasizes the great size of a double garage and often competes for attention with the house, the short, steep front roof makes the building look smaller.

The front overhang is a great addition. Not only is it functionally nice, providing generous shade and protection from the rain, but it helps visually balance the asymmetrical roof. If you cantilever the front rafters off the front wall, you don't need the brackets, but they add a lot to the appearance. We reluctantly omitted them for cost reasons: They can be added later. (The ones in the Weston original were structural.) In a fully enclosed building, the big shadow created by the overhang suggests the open doorways of the original.

We first tried framing the roof with wood I-joist rafters on the rear roof and 2x6 rafters on the front roof, cantilevering over the front wall to create the overhang. These were supported by a massive ridge beam, which had to span the width of a two-car garage. When the estimate came in, we quickly switched to trusses. While the trusses cut down on the headroom toward the rear, they were about a third the cost of the engineered lumber roof.

The Reynolds shed is designed to be built into the hillside like the Weston shed, using concrete retaining walls instead of the gorgeous stone wall used at Weston. Siding is handsome and economical board and batten, chosen after the initial brick and shingle skin (imitating the stone and shingle walls of the Weston original) proved too costly.

This building form adds style and a more modest scale to what often turns out to be a bulky and unattractive element in a suburban site plan. I recommend that you consider it the next time you build a detached garage or shed. ■

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