

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form

This form is used for documenting property groups relating to one or several historic contexts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin *How to Complete the Multiple Property Documentation Form* (formerly 16B). Complete each item by entering the requested information.

 X New Submission Amended Submission

A. Name of Multiple Property Listing

Mail Pouch Tobacco Barns of West Virginia

B. Associated Historic Contexts

“Chew Mail Pouch Tobacco” Barn Sign Painting, 1925-1993

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Special thanks to Meredith Dreistadt, Jessica Eichlin, Michelle Norman, Susan Pierce, Tom Bloch, and Laura Carroll for their support and research assistance for this project.

D. Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this documentation form meets the National Register documentation standards and sets forth requirements for the listing of related properties consistent with the National Register criteria. This submission meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR 60 and the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards and Guidelines for Archeology and Historic Preservation.



Signature of certifying official

Acting Deputy SHPO

Title

November 24, 2025

Date

West Virginia State Historic Preservation Office
State or Federal Agency or Tribal government

I hereby certify that this multiple property documentation form has been approved by the National Register as a basis for evaluating related properties for listing in the National Register.

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

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E. Statement of Historic Contexts

“Chew Mail Pouch Tobacco” Barn Sign Painting, 1925-1993

History of the Bloch Brothers Tobacco Company

In the mid-1800s, the community of Wheeling in the northern panhandle of what is now West Virginia was a thriving industrial city. It served as a vital transportation hub and inland port of entry; manufactured a wide array of metal, glass, and tobacco products; and hosted a large European immigrant population. German immigrants in particular had a substantial presence, forming the largest German American community in West Virginia. By the early twentieth century, almost a quarter of Wheeling’s population either originated from Germany or had German ancestry. Many German families were pioneering leaders in the city’s social and business affairs. Among these were the Bloch family. German Jewish immigrant Solomon Bloch arrived in Wheeling around 1840 and opened a successful liquor distribution business. Later, his sons Aaron and Samuel became involved in the wholesale trade.¹

By 1879, Samuel and Aaron Bloch owned a wholesale dry goods and grocery store on Main Street. On the second story of the building, the brothers ran a small cigar-making enterprise on the side. One day, noticing that their employees would take and chew the leftover cigar clippings, the Blochs began to flavor, package, and sell the clippings as a separate product. Allegedly, the Bloch brothers held a contest to come up with a name for their chewing tobacco. A mailman who serviced their building provided the winning suggestion: Mail Pouch. Descendant Stuart Bloch alternatively claimed that the name was a nod to the excitement and anticipation people experienced when packet boats on the river arrived with bags of mail. The first sale of Mail Pouch tobacco was made on October 15, 1879. It proved so popular that the Blochs soon stopped making cigars altogether and focused solely on chewing tobacco.²

In 1884, a massive flood destroyed the Bloch Brothers’ inventory of groceries and dry goods. The brothers decided to leave the wholesale market altogether and opened a large chewing tobacco plant at 40th and Water Streets in Wheeling’s south side. In 1890, they formally incorporated their business as the Bloch Brothers Tobacco Company. The business enjoyed significant growth in its early years, expanding its facilities multiple times and employing as many as 500 workers.³

¹ Bernard L. Allen, “Germans,” e-WV: The West Virginia Encyclopedia, February 12, 2024, accessed May 19, 2025, <https://www.wvencyclopedia.org/entries/2042#:~:text=Between%201848%20and%201860%2C%20two.had%20appeared%20in%20Lewis%20County.>

² “Bloch Brothers’ 75th Anniversary,” *Building Blochs: The Monthly Bulletin of The Bloch Brothers Tobacco Company* 3, No. 5 (July-August 1954), accessed March 19, 2025, <https://www.ohiocountylibrary.org/wheeling-history/bloch-brothers-75th-anniversary/2708>; Margaret Beltz, “Treat Yourself to the Best: Bloch Bros. Has Been Around Since 1879,” *Horizons*, Wheeling, WV, February 2001; Lunch With Books, “Lunch With Books: ‘A History of Bloch Brothers Tobacco’ presented by Stuart Bloch – April 27, 2010, June 27, 2019, YouTube, 36:17, accessed March 20, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zF8npojw-zs>.

³ “Bloch Brothers’ 75th Anniversary.”

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Thanks to the Bloch Brothers' successful sales tactics, Mail Pouch became one of the most popular chewing tobacco brands in the American Midwest, the Ohio Valley, and parts of the Northeast. In a nod to its Wheeling origins and strong taste, the tobacco was colloquially referred to as "West Virginia coleslaw." In 1930, Bloch Brothers established a subsidiary company, the Mail Pouch Tobacco Company, to oversee the marketing and sales for Mail Pouch tobacco. While Bloch Brothers manufactured Mail Pouch, the subsidiary advertised the chewing tobacco and sold it to wholesalers. At times, Bloch Brothers used other entities to advertise Mail Pouch, such as the Columbia Advertising Company and Whitehall Products, Inc. Each used the same address as Bloch Brothers.⁴



Figure 1 Mail Pouch Logo Trademark 1900. Courtesy Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2024664809/>.

In response to a perceptible decline in chewing tobacco sales in the late 1930s, the company began to diversify its product line through corporate acquisitions. In 1939, Bloch Brothers re-entered the cigar market and purchased fellow Wheeling company Augustus Pollack, Inc., which manufactured Pollack Stogies. In 1943, it entered the pipe tobacco market by acquiring the Penn Tobacco Company of Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania. Various other regional tobacco companies were purchased in the 1950s. Bloch Brothers even experimented with some non-tobacco endeavors. In 1953 it began marketing the Sans-Sol brand of sunglasses, and in 1956 it invested in a machine shop company called the Valley Machine Company, Inc.⁵

By the 1960s, Bloch Brothers had grown into a regional powerhouse, offering a wide range of tobacco products. In 1968, it merged with the Helme Products Company, a manufacturer of snuff tobacco based in Helmetta, New Jersey, and rebranded as the Helme Tobacco Company. A series of mergers, acquisitions, rebranding, and reorganizations followed over the next several decades. In the 1990s, the business came under the ownership of Swisher International, Inc., based out of Jacksonville, Florida. As of 2025, the former Bloch Brothers Tobacco factory complex in Wheeling manufactures all of Swisher's smokeless tobacco products, including Mail Pouch. The complex was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2020 as part of the South Wheeling Historic District for its association with the city's industrial history.⁶

⁴ Mail Pouch Barn Lease Records, Helme Tobacco Company, Wheeling, WV; *The Art and Advertising of Bloch Bros. Tobacco Co.* (Wheeling, WV: Creative Impressions, 2002).

⁵ *The Art and Advertising of Bloch Bros. Tobacco Co.*; "Bloch Brothers' 75th Anniversary."

⁶ *The Art and Advertising of Bloch Bros. Tobacco Co.*; "Our Story," Swisher, accessed April 7, 2025, <https://swisher.com/about/swisher/>.

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State*History of Mail Pouch Advertising Campaign*

Aaron Bloch, the company's first president (from 1890 to 1902), pushed for an extensive advertising campaign to market their chewing tobacco. Beginning in the 1890s, Mail Pouch tobacco was promoted in newspaper ads, on trading cards, three-piece cardboard store displays, thermometers, and even trolley car signs. Their most successful form of advertising, however, was with signs painted on buildings.

The practice of hand-painted advertisement signs has existed for thousands of years, with examples found even in the ruins of ancient Pompeii. By the nineteenth century, the act of painting advertisements on the sides of buildings had become an established practice in urban areas of the United States. It was most widespread between the 1880s and 1950s. Unused wall space on the sides or corners of commercial buildings, especially in downtown business districts, were frequently appropriated for advertising. Sometimes the property owner would paint signs advertising their business, or sometimes companies would pay to rent the space for their own promotion. These signs were primarily textual in nature and advertised a wide array of products, services, and businesses, large and small, local and regional.⁷

It was in this world of marketing that Bloch Brothers first began advertising Mail Pouch tobacco. Adopting the practice employed by other businesses, it commissioned painted Mail Pouch signs on buildings, most often commercial properties in towns and cities, starting in the 1890s. The early painted Mail Pouch signs were more elaborate than the more recognizable ones in the mid-twentieth century. They read "Mail Pouch Tobacco," "Bloch Bros. W. VA.," and sometimes with the phrase "For Chewing and Smoking." They included the Mail Pouch logo, which was a circle with a depiction of a mailbag in the center (Figure 2).⁸

⁷ "Painted Advertising Signs aka 'Ghost Signs,'" Preservation Texas, accessed June 12, 2025, <https://www.preservationtexas.org/mep/ghost-signs>; Better Letters, "What is Sign Painting? Or Even Signwriting?" *BLAG Magazine*, October 24, 2024, accessed June 12, 2025, <https://bl.ag/what-is-sign-painting-or-even-signwriting/>.

⁸ Harley E. Warrick, *The Barn Painter*, (Cincinnati, OH: ST Media Group International, 2007); William G. Simmonds, *Advertising Barns: Vanishing American Landmarks* (St. Paul, MN: Motorbooks International, 2002).

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Figure 2 Early example of a Mail Pouch sign on a commercial building in Grafton, WV. Courtesy Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2015631667/>.

Around 1910 the design of the signs was simplified so they would take less time to paint, and so consumers would remember them more easily (Figure 3). It consisted of the phrase “Chew Mail Pouch Tobacco, Treat Yourself to the Best” in a simple font, against a black background, sometimes with a blue border to frame it. The words “chew” and “treat yourself to the best” would be painted in white, while “Mail Pouch Tobacco” was yellow. If the sign background was not painted black (such as with red barns, for example) the text would often be shadowed in black. In rarer instances, the phrase “treat yourself to the best” would be swapped with “regular or sweet,” or “chewing serves to steady the nerves.”⁹

As the company expanded, Bloch Brothers commissioned painted signs advertising their other products, such as Kentucky Club pipe tobacco, WOW chewing tobacco, and Melo Crown cigars, but on a much smaller scale than Mail Pouch. Their designs were very similar to Mail Pouch, utilizing a black or red background with the product name painted in large, yellow letters and the remaining text painted in smaller, white letters. A Kentucky Club sign usually read

⁹ Warrick, *The Barn Painter*; Simmonds, *Advertising Barns*.

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Barn advertisements were tailored to catch the attention of people traveling in automobiles. It was important to make the signs large because, as National Park Service historian Michael J. Auer writes, “when it comes to signs, speed alters scale. The faster people travel, the bigger a sign has to be before they can see it.”¹⁴ The signs were simple and easy to read, since they usually remained within a car’s line-of-sight for only a matter of seconds. Many businesses large and small, local and regional, commissioned barn signs. Some painted a handful; others made hundreds. Some advertised products that could be bought at roadside stores, such as tobacco and soda brands, automotive supplies, clothing, and medicine. Others promoted nearby restaurants, hotels, stores, or regional tourist attractions. Rock City, a tourist site in Lookout Mountain, Georgia, commissioned up to 900 “See Rock City” barn signs across the South. Many even stated how many miles Rock City was from the specific barn.¹⁵



Figure 3 The Hutchinson-Parsons-Fulk Barn in Sandyville, WV is a well-preserved example of the typical Mail Pouch Barn. Courtesy Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2015631964>.

¹⁴ Michael J. Auer, *Preservation Brief 25: The Preservation of Historic Signs*, National Park Service, October 1991, accessed June 12, 2025, <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1739/upload/preservation-brief-25-signs.pdf>.

¹⁵ Simmonds, *Advertising Barns*.

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Bloch Brothers may not have been the first company to advertise products with barn signs, but their campaign was the most prolific and sustained. Barn signs formed the crux of their marketing efforts for decades. Barn painter Harley Warrick explained the logic behind the advertising effect of Mail Pouch barns in a 1976 interview:

Say the guy chews some other brand of tobacco, you know. He's chewed all his life, far as that goes. But he's riding down the road, and he keeps seeing this Mail Pouch, Mail Pouch, Mail Pouch. And then after a while, maybe he comes up short. He hasn't got a pack of tobacco *he* wants. What's the first one he's going to think of? It's going to be Mail Pouch, see. He just, you know - if he drives past it every day, he's going to remember that name, see. If he goes in a store, and then maybe he tries it, he'll keep on using it, see.¹⁶

Bloch Brothers employed private contractors to develop the barn sign advertisements. These contractors would hire paint crews, provide them with equipment, and dispatch them to paint barns in assigned territories. Sometimes the contractor employed a "space salesman" to identify desirable barns and negotiate leases with the owners, and sometimes the paint crews did that on their own. They traveled around a given area to find barns that were easily visible from roads and were sure to be seen by the most people.¹⁷ "The best locations were on well-travelled roads that farmers took to town. Barns were a convenient place for such signs," said a *Goldenseal* magazine article in 1976.¹⁸

Farmers signed leases for their barns to be painted, which could be renewed periodically. They were compensated with either magazine subscriptions, free supplies of tobacco, or money. Usually, \$1 or \$2 was offered in the beginning, but by the barn painting campaign's later years it was as much as \$20 a year. Contrary to popular belief, paint crews did not paint the entirety of the barn as part of the compensation, only the side(s) where the sign(s) would go. Bloch Brothers tried to have paint crews return to a barn every few years, once the paint started to fade, to renew the lease and touch up the sign.¹⁹ Some states required outdoor roadside advertising licenses for the barn signs and other billboards. In West Virginia, the Department of Highways (also known as the State Road Commission) required metal license tags to be placed on barns with Mail Pouch signs.²⁰

Barns were likely first painted very early in Bloch Brothers' history, but the company's mass barn advertising campaign really began in earnest by 1925. That summer, the company hired contractor Harry Herig, who assembled six painters in Syracuse, New York. These men were Bill Bucks, Bill Hart, Kenneth Walkerman, Carl Wunelle, Maurice Zimmerman, and an

¹⁶ Harley E. Warrick, interview by Tom Screven, *Goldenseal* 2, No. 4 (October-December 1976), 16-19.

¹⁷ Warrick, *The Barn Painter*.

¹⁸ Tom Harvey, "Treat Yourself to the Best," *Goldenseal* 2, No. 4 (October-December 1976).

¹⁹ Warrick, *The Barn Painter*; Gerald P. Carl, "The Barns Remain But the Artists are Forgotten!" Mail Pouch Barnstormers, 1984, accessed May 21, 2025, https://mailpouchbarnstormers.org/wp/?page_id=33.

²⁰ Michele Norman, interview with Meredith Dreistadt, Jessica Eichlin, and Cody Straley, March 18, 2025; Warrick, interview with Tom Screven.

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unknown sixth person. From Syracuse, they divided into three crews of two, each with painting supplies and a Ford Model T truck. The crews traveled west along major routes, finding and painting as many barns as they could.²¹

Bloch Brothers paint crews created thousands of barn signs across the United States, mostly concentrated in the Ohio River Valley and the Midwest. The majority were painted in Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Kentucky, Illinois, Indiana, New York, Michigan, and Maryland. At one point, paint crews were also dispatched to paint some barns in Washington, Oregon, and California. Estimates for the number of individual Mail Pouch barn signs painted vary widely, from as little as 4,000 to as many as 20,000, although some calculations may include repainting pre-existing signs.²² In West Virginia, there were reported to be around 1,000 Mail Pouch signs painted, though that number could include repaintings.²³

Bloch Brothers' barn painting endeavor took a substantial hit from the passage of the 1965 Highway Beautification Act. The federal legislation came amidst growing opposition to what was perceived as an oversaturation of billboards and advertisements along major roadways. "Billboards and display signs are the most obvious instances of private interests appropriating values which public expenditure has created and in the process, impairing or destroying substantial public values," Chairman Irston Barnes of the Audubon Society fumed in a *Washington Post* opinion piece.²⁴ The act was intended to create more aesthetically pleasing scenery for motorists, and to regulate the size, number, and content of billboards. Among other requirements, it prohibited the presence of billboards within 660 feet of interstates and highways. Preexisting billboards within that 660 foot range were required to be dismantled.

Mail Pouch barns were considered billboards and thus subject to the Highway Beautification Act's regulations. Hundreds, if not thousands, of the barns were adversely affected as Bloch Brothers limited its painting and repainting activities to secondary roads not covered under the legislation. With their leases canceled and maintenance discontinued, many of the barns had their signs painted over or were demolished. In 1969, Bloch Brothers (having just reorganized into the Helme Tobacco Company) largely ended its barn sign painting program. The company retained one of its painters - Harley Warrick - for special assignments and occasional repainting, where allowed.²⁵

It was around this time that Mail Pouch barns began receiving recognition for their historical value and even as examples of rural American folk art. "It seemed no one paid much attention to

²¹ Carl, "The Barns Remain But the Artists Are Forgotten!"; Dennis Niederkohr, "Inside the Business Side of Mail Pouch Signs – The Previously Untold Story of the Business Side of Mail Pouch Signs," *The Barnstormer* (Spring and Summer 2021), accessed March 20, 2025, https://mailpouchbarnstormers.org/wp/?page_id=38954.

²² "Mail Pouch Barns," e-WV: The West Virginia Encyclopedia, February 8, 2024, accessed May 16, 2025, <https://www.wvencyclopedia.org/entries/1427>.

²³ Sarah Moore, "Mail Pouch barns fading into advertising history," *Clarksburg Exponent-Telegram*, January 25, 2011.

²⁴ Irston R. Barnes, "The Private Interests Are Still Exploiting the Public's Roads," *Washington Post*, March 28, 1965.

²⁵ Warrick, *The Barn Painter*; Simmonds; *Advertising Barns*.

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the Mail Pouch barns until the do-gooders started regulating them,” Harley Warrick opined.²⁶ In 1971, Warrick was invited by the Smithsonian Institution to paint a model Mail Pouch barn sign at the “Man and His World” exposition in Montreal, site of Expo 67. His was part of a series of live demonstrations by various American craftsmen and artisans representing different parts of the United States. In 1974, Warrick and Mail Pouch barns were the subject of a segment in the CBS documentary series *On the Road with Charles Kuralt*. The Bloch Brothers and its successor organizations, motivated by the marketing potential of nostalgia, encouraged the notion of Mail Pouch barns as an important part of American culture. “It’s our tie with the past and part of our image . . . It’s real Americana,” said the company’s director of advertising in 1973.²⁷

Public pressure to make an exception for Mail Pouch barns and other similar signs prohibited by the Highway Beautification Act prompted Congress to intervene. The Senate Committee on Public Works in 1974 declared:

While a major objective of the highway beautification program is the control of outdoor advertising, including the removal of billboards, there are some types of outdoor advertising of a unique character that justify preservation. Some firms advertise their products or services exclusively with signs painted on the sides of rural barns . . . Some of the advertising has been used for many years and has become part of the American folk heritage.²⁸

West Virginia Senator Jennings Randolph spearheaded the effort to amend the Highway Beautification Act. The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1974, signed on January 4, 1975, included a special exemption for Mail Pouch barns and other similar resources. The amended code allowed the 660 foot rule to be waived for “signs lawfully in existence on October 22, 1965, determined . . . to be landmark signs, including signs on farm structures or natural surfaces, or historic or artistic significance.”²⁹ While this amendment recognized the historical significance of Mail Pouch barns, it did not convey any formal designation upon them, such as inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places.

In 1979, the West Virginia Department of Highways received a waiver from the Secretary of Transportation to exempt 44 Mail Pouch Barns from the 660 foot rule, in accordance with Title 23, United States Code, Section 131(c). “These Mail Pouch signs, we believe, are an important part of West Virginia’s heritage,” wrote Department of Highways Commissioner Charles L. Miller.³⁰ The West Virginia State Historic Preservation Office supported the action, and SHPO Clarence E. Moran wrote, “We believe these signs are true representations of American Art and

²⁶ Warrick, *The Barn Painter*, 49.

²⁷ Quote by David Weiss; see Frank M. Heaster, “A Good Way to Paint Your Barn and Part of Americana,” *Sunday Dominion-Post Wetzel Democrat Panorama*, April 8, 1973.

²⁸ Harvey, “Treat Yourself to the Best.”

²⁹ “23 U.S.C. 131(c),” U.S. Code 2023, accessed March 27, 2025, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCODE-2023-title23/pdf/USCODE-2023-title23-chap1-sec131.pdf>.

³⁰ Charles L. Miller, letter to Clarence Moran, August 15, 1979, West Virginia Department of Highways

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Social history, and are certainly worthy of preservation.”³¹ The 44 exempted Mail Pouch barns did not include those located on secondary roads, which were not subject to the highway beautification regulations.

Helme Tobacco Company resumed painting some barns following the new Federal-Aid Highway Act exemptions, but on a greatly reduced scale. The declining rural population and the expansion of television and radio marketing reduced the effectiveness of barn signs as an advertising tool. The number of barns available to paint also declined as more farmland was lost to new development. Helme Tobacco continued to paint barns primarily for their nostalgic value and “to maintain a corporate image,” as *Goldenseal* magazine put it.³² It kept Harley Warrick employed as their sole remaining barn painter. Working without any contractor or salesman, Warrick bought his own supplies, found barns to paint, and negotiated leases with the property owners himself.³³



Figure 4 Harley Warrick painting a barn in Decatur, IN, 1972. Courtesy of Roger Warrick.

As time went on, Warrick created fewer new barn signs and focused more on repainting pre-existing ones. In the later years of his career, he narrowed his work to Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia. The barn painting program finally came to an end when Warrick retired in 1993, though he continued to paint on occasion until his death in 2000. While no longer painting, Swisher (owner of Helme Tobacco) continued paying leases to interested property owners with surviving signs on their barns. Owners were regularly sent checks with the lease amount agreed to decades ago - ranging from \$1 to \$20. Swisher canceled all remaining leases in 2023 because the cost of administering and disbursing the lease payments was higher than the lease amounts themselves.³⁴

³¹ Clarence E. Moran, letter to Charles L. Miller, September 6, 1979, West Virginia Department of Culture and History.

³² Harvey, “Treat Yourself to the Best.”

³³ “Mail Pouch Barns,” e-WV.

³⁴ Warrick, *The Barn Painter*; “Mail Pouch Barns,” e-WV; Michele Norman, e-mail to Meredith Dreistadt, Cody Straley, and Jessica Eichlin, March 25, 2025.

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Barn Painters and Their Techniques

Vital to not only the creation of Mail Pouch Barns but also their regular maintenance was a team of painters who spent their weekdays on the road, traveling along major roadways looking for barns and occasionally an unadorned wall of a storefront building to paint. The number of Mail Pouch sign painters was always small because it was such a specialized, niche occupation. Known painters included Bill Bucks, Bill Hart, Kenneth Walkerman, Carl Wunelle, Maurice Zimmerman, Joe Fitzgerald, Harley Warrick, Bob Dunn, Harry Baugh, Henry Apostolick, and John Sigmund. The painters referred to themselves as “walldogs,” “barn massagers,” or “barn lizards.”³⁵

Some of the men who painted Mail Pouch signs were professionally trained sign painters like Maurice Zimmerman. “Zim,” as he was known, traveled from southwestern Ohio to Youngstown, Ohio in 1924 to take night classes at the YMCA and work by day as an apprentice at a sign studio. Others were untrained laborers who learned on the job by working with seasoned painters. Harley Warrick, for example, was working on his family’s dairy farm in 1946 when he met and joined a crew of Mail Pouch sign painters. He learned the skills of the trade while working with Zimmerman. Regardless of their professional backgrounds, most of the Mail Pouch painters became highly skilled in their craft. Many worked this job for decades.³⁶

The painters would be split into groups of two and each crew was given basic tools of the trade: a Ford Model T truck to travel in, large six-inch brushes that the men called “mops,” thinner inch and a half inch brushes called “cutters” to perfect lettering, and overalls or “skins” which would become stiff with paint over time.³⁷ 100 pound kegs of white Dutch Boy lead-based paint was sourced and purchased by the painters themselves, mixing the thick paste-like material with linseed oil or gasoline to thin it slightly. As Zim noted in an interview, “We put it on just as heavy as it would go on. You couldn’t make your paint thin because some of those barns would soak it in.”³⁸ Dry lampblack was added to the linseed oil that was mixed with the paint to create the black paint used for the background of the signs. Yellow paint used for the “Mail Pouch Tobacco” letters and sky blue for the border, a later addition to the design, were purchased separately. Occasionally a barn owner would ask that a barn be painted red, so the painters would purchase more expensive red paint for the background of the design.³⁹

An average barn could be painted by a two-man crew within several hours. When conditions were ideal, they could paint two or three barns a day. They began by erecting a scaffold on the wall of the barn, which consisted of ropes, a swing stage, and a pulley system to raise and lower

³⁵ Simmonds, *Advertising Barns*; Mail Pouch Tobacco Barns Lease Records, Helme Tobacco Company; Carl, “The Barns Remain But the Artists are Forgotten!”; Niederkoher, “Inside the Business Side of Mail Pouch Signs.”

³⁶ Carl, “The Barns Remain But the Artists are Forgotten!”; Warrick, *The Barn Painter*.

³⁷ Harley E. Warrick, *The Barn Painter*.

³⁸ Carl, “The Barns Remain But the Artists are Forgotten!”

³⁹ *Ibid*; Warrick, *The Barn Painter*.

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it by hand. A tall ladder was also used to reach some parts of the wall. The newer of the two painters would paint the background of the sign, while the more experienced one focused on the lettering. This was the most challenging part of the process and required the most technical skill.

The exact methods of lettering may have differed slightly by painter but followed a similar format. They determined the centering of the sign, and the size and spacing of letters entirely by eye. “We’d get back and visualize the barn and picture that sign in your mind. You’d pick out a board or window, or something to use as a guideline, and spot on the letters, like CHEW, and always begin at the top,” said Maurice Zimmerman.⁴⁰ All the lettering was done without using stencils or measuring tools. “Stencils are a dirty word to a sign painter,” said Harley Warrick.⁴¹

They usually began by painting “Chew” at the top of the sign; Harley Warrick liked to do the “H” and “W” first because they were his initials. They started the next line by painting the “P” in “Mail Pouch,” because it was at the center, then the rest of the letters to the left and right. For “Tobacco,” they painted the “A” first. The “L” and “F” in “Treat Yourself to the Best” were painted first for the bottom line. The painter used a large brush to “spot on” rough letters. Then they used a smaller brush to fill in and smooth out the letters (called “cutting in”) with the background color paint, creating clean, sharp lines. If the sign had a red background, the painter would carefully add black shadowing to the letters. When they were finished, the painters would sometimes add their initials and the year to a corner of the sign or eave of the barn.⁴²

⁴⁰ Gerald P. Carl, “The Barns Remain But the Artists Are Forgotten!”

⁴¹ Simmonds, *Advertising Barns*, 44.

⁴² Simmonds, *Advertising Barns*; Warrick, interview by Tom Screven, *Goldenseal*; R. Dudley, “ZIM (1977) – Maurice Zimmerman, An Original Mail Pouch Barn Painter,” July 26, 2015, YouTube, 21:53, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DIPP81FTGoU>.

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Figure 5 Retired painter Maurice Zimmerman and a helper demonstrated Mail Pouch Sign painting in the 1977 documentary "Zim."

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Crews tried to repaint the signs about every three to five years depending on the exposure of the paint to the weather. Even when they stopped being repainted, the quality and thickness of the paint caused many Mail Pouch signs to linger for decades after they first began fading. On some barns, the fading of the most recent paint layer has exposed earlier versions of the sign underneath, creating fascinating and multilayered ghost signs.⁴³



Figure 6 Example of Multi-layered ghost signs on a fading Mail Pouch Barn. Courtesy Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2015631527/>.

Cultural Impact and Popularity of Mail Pouch Barns

In the decades following the end of Bloch Brothers' barn sign advertising campaign, Mail Pouch barns became a popular cultural icon. Images of an old barn emblazoned with the words "Chew Mail Pouch Tobacco" are often regarded as emblematic of the early-to-mid-twentieth century rural American countryside. Many writers, artists, and other observers have commented on the nostalgic and artistic appeal of Mail Pouch barns. Midwestern artist Ray Day said, "The Mail Pouch barn is nostalgia. For many it is a part of a youthful memory, but for all it is a rural man-made monument worth cherishing for years to come."⁴⁴ William Simmonds wrote, "Through the years, these rustic billboards have become treasured by those who see them as a vital piece of Americana, something as nostalgic and important as a Normal Rockwell painting."⁴⁵

⁴³ Wheeling History, "Mail Pouch on the Road," at 14:04-12.

⁴⁴ Harvey, "Treat Yourself to the Best."

⁴⁵ Simmonds, *Advertising Barns*, 18.

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Several institutions have preserved or displayed Mail Pouch signs for educational purposes, demonstrating their perceived historic, artistic, and cultural value to the public. The American Sign Museum and the Hillsdale County Historical Society each disassembled and installed a Mail Pouch barn sign in their respective facilities to preserve them.⁴⁶ Harley Warrick, on request, painted Mail Pouch signs for exhibition at places such as the West Virginia State Museum, and a barn at Ohio's Barkcamp State Park.

In 2002, a group of Mail Pouch barn enthusiasts formed the nonprofit Mail Pouch Barnstormers, to advocate for the preservation and appreciation of the barns. The organization hosts an annual conference, publishes a newsletter, and sponsors grants for repainting Mail Pouch signs. Additionally, members travel around the country photographing Mail Pouch barns and documenting their locations and conditions. They maintain a publicly accessible online database of all known Mail Pouch barns. The status of each barn is updated every few years with newer photographs, known facts about its history, and notes about its current condition, including whether it remains extant.⁴⁷

Decline of Mail Pouch Barns and Threats to Preservation

The number of Mail Pouch barn signs began steadily declining in the 1960s. Many were lost due to the regulations of the 1965 Highway Beautification Act. Even after exemptions were made through the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1974, barn losses mounted since fewer were being repainted. In West Virginia, the number of Mail Pouch barns plummeted from a peak of up to 1,000 to fewer than 200. Steve Shaluta, who photographed barns for a coffee table book, identified 147 surviving examples in West Virginia in 2005.⁴⁸ Data compiled by Mail Pouch Barnstormers indicates that as of 2025 there are approximately 62 confirmed surviving examples in the state. More may exist but have yet to be identified.⁴⁹

A variety of other factors contributed to the decline of Mail Pouch barns aside from the Highway Beautification Act. Some property owners, if they did not renew their leases, painted over the Mail Pouch signs. Some barns were demolished to make way for new development. Public backlash against tobacco advertising may also have motivated the removal of some signs. In the 1990s, West Virginia Commissioner of Public Health William Wallace strongly criticized barn signs for promoting unhealthy lifestyles. He blamed them for contributing to West Virginia being a leading consumer of smokeless tobacco. "It doesn't help to have [barn signs] that say

⁴⁶ American Sign Museum, "Installing the Mail Pouch Barn at the American Sign Museum," March 30, 2011, YouTube, 12:01, accessed March 20, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DXahifimIEo>; "Mail Pouch Tobacco Barns," Hillsdale County Historical Society, accessed June 27, 2025, <https://www.hillsdalehistoricalsociety.org/mail-pouch-tobacco>.

⁴⁷ "Mail Pouch Barnstormers Timeline," Mail Pouch Barnstormers, accessed August 15, 2025, https://mailpouchbarnstormers.org/wp/?page_id=36914.

⁴⁸ Moore, "Mail Pouch Barns Fading Into Advertising History."

⁴⁹ "West Virginia," Mail Pouch Barnstormers, accessed May 20, 2025, https://mailpouchbarnstormers.org/wp/?wpbdp_category=48-westvirginia.

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“Treat yourself to the very best” . . . It isn’t [the very best] from a health perspective,” he said.⁵⁰ Wallace and others in West Virginia encouraged the creation of anti-tobacco barn signs as an alternative to Mail Pouch signs. In the 2010s, a substance abuse prevention organization called Community Connections painted several barns around the state with anti-tobacco signs, including slogans such as “Treat Yourself to Health.”⁵¹

The biggest threat to Mail Pouch barns, however, is demolition by neglect. After the final discontinuation of the barn painting program in 1993, many signs have suffered from lack of maintenance. Some, not being repainted for decades, have faded away entirely. Due to the decline of rural populations and active farms, some barns were abandoned or otherwise left unused. Many collapsed from deterioration or became so structurally unsound that they had to be demolished. These issues persist today and remain a challenge to the preservation of Mail Pouch barns.



Figure 7 Many Mail Pouch Barns, such as this example in Wayne County, WV, suffer from neglect, both to the signs and the physical integrity of the barns themselves.

⁵⁰ Rochelle Olson, “Official targets Mail Pouch signs,” *Dominion-Post*, October 23, 1994.

⁵¹ Holly Leleux-Thubron, “Move Over, Mail Pouch,” *Wonderful West Virginia*, January 2021.

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F. Associated Property Types

Mail Pouch Barns, Sheds, and Other Rural Outbuildings

“Chew Mail Pouch” advertising signs are most commonly located on the exterior walls of roadside barns. On rarer occasions, garages, sheds, and other outbuildings were used in the absence of a well-positioned barn (for simplicity, all such buildings will be referred to here as “Mail Pouch barns”).⁵² Usually of wood frame construction, these buildings were made for agricultural or personal use unrelated to Mail Pouch tobacco. Signs are painted on the side elevation of a barn with the most visibility from the road. Occasionally two or more sides are painted when the angle of the barn and the angle of the road make it favorable. Signs are very rarely painted on the roofs of barns and other outbuildings; no such examples are currently known to exist in West Virginia.

The signs have specific, uniform designs and colors. The background is usually painted black, but occasionally red is used instead. The message written always states “Chew Mail Pouch Tobacco” and usually the slogan “Treat Yourself to the Best.” Sometimes the phrases “Regular or Sweet,” or “Chewing Serves to Steady the Nerves” are included as additional text or in place of the “Treat Yourself” slogan. The slogan and the word “Chew” are painted in white, while “Mail Pouch Tobacco” is painted in yellow. If the sign has a red background, the yellow letters usually have black shadowing. Some black signs have blue or yellow borders, while the red signs sometimes have white borders. The text is usually centered, and the words “Mail Pouch Tobacco” are written in a larger size than “Chew” and the slogan. On rare occasions, the word “Chew” is written in a stylized font. Sometimes the size and positioning of the text deviates from the sign’s standard design to conform with the size and shape of the wall being used.

On occasion, a Mail Pouch barn will have a second advertisement (usually on a different side of the building) paired with it to promote an additional Bloch Brothers product. This will usually be either Kentucky Club pipe tobacco, Melo Crown cigars, or WOW chewing tobacco. These additional signs contribute to the significance of a Mail Pouch barn. Like the Mail Pouch signs, these other signs will have a black or red background, with text painted yellow or white.

Significance

Mail Pouch barns are significant under *Criterion A: Commerce*. They played a critical role in the marketing of Mail Pouch chewing tobacco, forming the backbone of the Bloch Brothers’ advertising campaign for decades. Bloch Brothers was one of the first companies to utilize barns for widespread outdoor advertising, and their campaign was the longest and most prolific. Indeed, Mail Pouch barns comprised perhaps the most successful advertising campaign in rural

⁵² One example is a cinderblock garage painted with a Mail Pouch sign in rural Wayne County, West Virginia. Its positioning along a curve in WV-152 made it an ideal advertising spot aimed at passing motorists. See “MPD 48-50-01,” Mail Pouch Barnstormers, accessed May 23, 2025, https://mailpouchbarnstormers.org/wp/?wpbdp_listing=mpb-48-50-01.

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America during the twentieth century. Bloch Brothers was a pioneering force in the practice of barn sign painting, so much that Mail Pouch became synonymous with barn advertisements. Mail Pouch barns are considered a ubiquitous part of the rural landscape, both in West Virginia and large swaths of the United States.

The Bloch Brothers Tobacco Company formed a network of thousands of Mail Pouch barns spread across over ten states, advertising their product far and wide. Once a common sight around West Virginia and neighboring states, surviving legible Mail Pouch signs have grown increasingly rare. The historical significance of Mail Pouch barns has been recognized by many since at least the 1970s. “The Mail Pouch signs . . . are essentially billboards that have become monuments worthy of preservation,” reported *Goldenseal* magazine in 1976.⁵³ *West Virginia Executive* magazine in 2013 described them as “Perhaps the country’s most well-known outdoor advertising tool,” and “important and treasured pieces of Americana.”⁵⁴

Mail Pouch Barns are also significant under *Criterion C: Art*. Since at least the 1970s, when their preservation first became a matter of concern, Mail Pouch signs have widely been considered to have artistic merit, with terms such as “folk art” and “Americana” often used to describe them. Even a Senate committee pronounced such barn advertisements to be “part of the American folk heritage.”⁵⁵ The simple, mass-produced, hand painted signs became an indelible part of the rural American landscape. Mail Pouch barns have often been replicated in paintings and other artwork depicting old farmsteads or country roads.

These signs were painted exclusively by a very small group of skilled craftsmen, each of whom painted and repainted hundreds if not thousands of barns over the course of their careers. The painters developed the ability to make signs quickly and efficiently, able to complete one in as little as a few hours. They painted freehand without stencils or measuring tools, using just their eyes to determine the position and dimensions of the letters. Though the signs had standardized designs, each took careful thought and skill to produce. “You created something, you know, yourself. It’s a carbon copy, I mean, one right after another, but still each one is an individual sign though, see. There are no two alike,” said Harley Warrick.⁵⁶ Mail Pouch signs are important representations both of American folk art and of the craftsmanship demonstrated by their painters.

Mail Pouch barn signs verified to have been painted by Harley Warrick can be considered the work of a master. From 1969 until his retirement in 1993, Warrick was the only painter making official Mail Pouch barn signs. Signs painted during this period are direct reflections of Warrick’s craftsmanship. By his own estimate, Warrick painted or repainted 20,000 barn signs

⁵³ Harvey, “Treat Yourself to the Best.”

⁵⁴ Rebekah Karelis, “Mail Pouch Tobacco Barns: America’s Early Outdoor Advertising,” *West Virginia Executive*, August 23, 2013, accessed May 20, 2025, <https://wvexecutive.com/mail-pouch-tobacco-barns-america-early-outdoor-advertising/>.

⁵⁵ Harvey, “Treat Yourself to the Best.”

⁵⁶ Wheeling History, “Mail Pouch on the Road with Charles Kuralt – 1975 Documentary Ohio State University Wheeling History,” December 31, 2022, YouTube, 18:54, accessed March 20, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yLrPHrJSAFk>.

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over the course of his career. His work contributed to the widespread recognition of Mail Pouch signs as American folk art.

As the sole painter for decades, Harley Warrick became ubiquitous with the history of Mail Pouch barn signs. He “became as much a part of the rural landscape as the barns he painted,” the *Wheeling News-Register* said.⁵⁷ One writer said of Warrick, “His artistic imprint on the American scene may be every bit as profound as Norman Rockwell’s or Andrew Wyeth’s.”⁵⁸ Warrick developed into a minor celebrity, featured in such national publications as the *Wall Street Journal*, *Smithsonian Magazine*, and *People Magazine*; painting Mail Pouch signs for museums, parks, and festivals; and even starring in a Mail Pouch television commercial.⁵⁹ He was the guest speaker for a Friends of Wheeling, Inc. party celebrating Preservation Week in May 1985. The group dubbed his painting work an “important and vanishing art.”⁶⁰ William Simmonds wrote that Warrick was “elevated to the status of a revered folk artist.”⁶¹

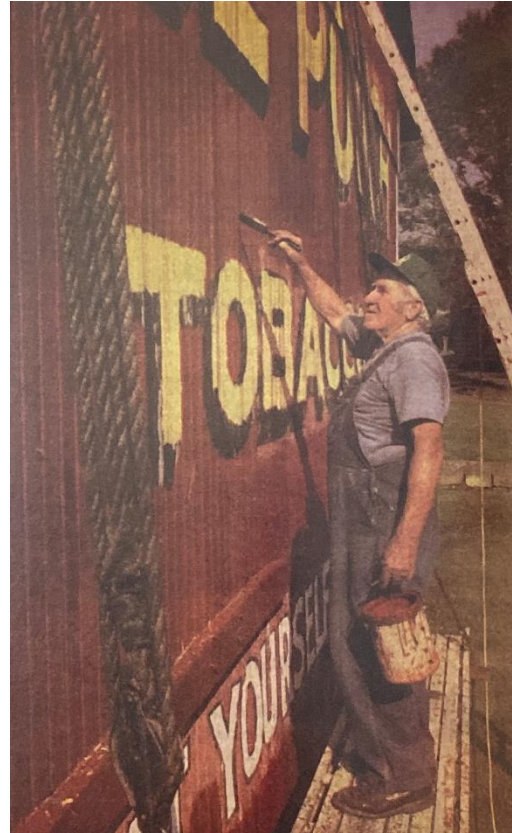


Figure 8 Harley Warrick painting his last Mail Pouch sign at Barkcamp State Park, Ohio, 2000. Courtesy of Roger Warrick.

The Period of Significance for each Mail Pouch barn under *Criterion A: Commerce* begins with the earliest known date that the sign was painted within the timeframe of 1925-1969. This 44-year span encompasses the Bloch Brothers’ most concentrated period of barn painting, when barn signs were the main focus of their marketing efforts. The Period of Significance for each Mail Pouch barn under Criterion A ends in 1969 when Bloch Brothers largely discontinued their barn sign advertising program. It was also around this time that Bloch Brothers reorganized into the Helme Tobacco Company and entered a series of mergers and acquisitions that lasted decades. Though barn paintings resumed on a reduced scale after 1974, they were treated less as significant advertising tools and more as nostalgic folk art. New government restrictions on outdoor tobacco advertising in the 1990s and 2000s virtually ended the possibility of creating new Mail Pouch barn signs for commercial purposes.

The Period of Significance for each Mail Pouch barn under *Criterion C: Art* is the earliest known year that the barn was painted, within the timeframe of 1925-1993. The additional 24 years beyond 1969 accounts for the years that Helme Tobacco resumed barn painting, on a

⁵⁷ John Wickline, “Mail Pouch Barn Painter Harley Warrick Dies at 76,” *Wheeling News-Register*, November 26, 2000.

⁵⁸ Bill Shaw, “The Mail Pouch Man,” January 1982, republished in *The Art and Advertising of Bloch Bros. Tobacco Co.*, 15.

⁵⁹ David Hedges, “One painter is left,” *Spencer Times-Record*, August 2, 1984.

⁶⁰ *Friends of Wheeling, Inc. Newsletter* VI, No. 2 (April 1985).

⁶¹ Simmonds, *Advertising Barns*, 40.

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limited scale, using painter Harley Warrick until his retirement. To be eligible under Criterion C, the barn sign should be at least fifty years old. Mail Pouch barns created between 1969-1993 have to be confirmed to have been painted by Harley Warrick while employed by the tobacco company. Because each barn sign is equal in significance to the others, this MPDF does not provide justification for utilizing Criteria Consideration G to nominate barns under fifty years old.

To reiterate: Mail Pouch barns created prior to 1969 can be listed under both *Criterion A: Commerce* and *Criterion C: Art*. Those created after 1969 can only be listed under *Criterion C: Art*.

Integrity

To be eligible for the National Register under this MPDF, a Mail Pouch barn must retain most of the seven aspects of integrity as described by the National Park Service - integrity of location, setting, materials, design, workmanship, feeling, and association.

Location: Mail Pouch barns must remain in the same location they were at during the Period of Significance. If the barn has been moved, it must have been during the Period of Significance. Signs that have been moved to a different part of the barn after the Period of Significance, or signs/barns that have relocated for use as a museum display (either outdoor or indoor) are not eligible under this MPDF.

Setting: Mail Pouch barns were painted along roadways in rural areas. These sparsely developed landscapes should ideally remain intact, but changes such as new development or realignment of the road will not preclude National Register eligibility if most of the other aspects of integrity are retained.

Materials: Mail Pouch signs were painted using black, white, yellow, blue, and sometimes red paint, usually (but not always) on a wood frame wall. Most if not all of these materials must remain intact. During Bloch Brothers' barn painting program, Mail Pouch signs were repainted every several years when possible. Periodic repainting is considered maintenance and vital to the long-term preservation of these resources. If a color of paint is used that differs from what existed on the sign within the Period of Significance, the barn will not be eligible under this MPDF. Mail Pouch barns may be eligible even if their sign is faded as long as it is still discernable. A barn with a sign that has completely faded away will not be eligible.

If some of the sign's exterior surface materials have been replaced, the barn can still be eligible provided that the materials were replaced in kind and to as minimal a degree as possible. Changes to the materials for other parts of the barn, such as the roof, doors, windows, and foundation are acceptable if the building overall still conveys its historic appearance. If a barn is demolished but the portion of the wall with the Mail Pouch sign is saved and placed onto a new building constructed on the same spot, it will not be considered eligible under this MPDF.

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Design: Signs on Mail Pouch barns must retain the same overall design and appearance that they had during their Period of Significance. Historically, the design and content of Mail Pouch signs were sometimes altered during repainting, and such changes are acceptable if they occurred within the Period of Significance. If a sign's design, including the colors, font, size, and orientation of the text or background is changed from what existed within the Period of Significance, the barn will not be eligible under this MPDF. A barn may remain eligible if an addition to the building is constructed, provided it does not obscure the Mail Pouch sign.

Workmanship: Mail Pouch barns must exhibit clear evidence of workmanship on their signs to be eligible under this MPDF. If a sign has been repainted, it should have been done using hand brushes on the surface of the barn wall. Mail Pouch barn signs preferably should not be repainted using spray paint or other non-historic painting techniques.

Feeling: The National Park Service defines Feeling as "a property's expression of the aesthetic or historic sense of a particular period of time."⁶² Essentially, a Mail Pouch barn must convey the look and feel of early-to-mid twentieth century rural American outdoor advertising. A barn displaying most of the other aspects of integrity, such as materials, workmanship, design, and setting, will retain integrity of Feeling.

Association: Mail Pouch barns must have been associated with the Bloch Brothers Tobacco Company's Mail Pouch chewing tobacco sign painting program to possess integrity of Association. Barn signs must have been painted by a painter directly or indirectly employed by the Bloch Brothers Tobacco Company or its contractors, affiliates, subsidiaries, or successor organizations to be eligible under this MPDF.

⁶² *National Register Bulletin: How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation*, National Park Service, 1997.

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G. Geographical Data

This Multiple Property Documentation spans the entirety of West Virginia, the state where Mail Pouch Tobacco Barns originated and where many surviving ones remain.

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H. Summary of Identification and Evaluation Methods

No historic resource survey was conducted as part of this Multiple Property Documentation project. However, public interest in Mail Pouch barns has spawned many informal efforts at documenting what barns remain. Of these, the Mail Pouch Barnstormers has conducted the most comprehensive attempt at identifying barns. The organization maintains a database at www.mailpouchbarnstormers.org with individual entries for each known Mail Pouch barn. These entries are updated on a regular basis with new photos and notes on their condition gathered from volunteers. As of 2025, Mail Pouch Barnstormers has data on 280 Mail Pouch barns and signs in West Virginia, with a little over 60 believed to remain extant. WV SHPO frequently consulted this database to identify surviving Mail Pouch barns that met the criteria for National Register eligibility.

In March 2025, Swisher International granted SHPO staff permission to visit the Helme Tobacco Company archives in Wheeling, West Virginia. The company maintains records of many barn sign leases commissioned by Bloch Brothers and its successor organizations. Staff were able to identify some surviving barns by studying which leases were still in effect at the time of their cancellation in 2023. WV SHPO would like to thank Michelle Norman, administrative assistant for Helme Tobacco Company, for providing access to these lease records and other information for this project.

Social media groups and books such as Steve Shaluta's *Mail Pouch Barns of West Virginia* were consulted to find more Mail Pouch Barns. SHPO staff also verified the survival of some barns by using Google Street View and directly contacting property owners.

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- Tier 2: 120 hours (generally individual nominations by paid consultants)
- Tier 3: 230 hours (generally new district nominations by paid consultants)
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