

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

1. Name of Property

Historic name: Union Chapel

Other names/site number: Union Sunday School

Name of related multiple property listing:

N/A

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

2. Location

Street & number: 5258 E. Porter St.

City or town: Port Clinton

State: Ohio County: Ottawa

Not For Publication: ☐

n/a

Vicinity: ☐

x

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this ___ nomination ___ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

___ national ___ statewide ___ local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

___ A ___ B ___ C ___ D

Signature of certifying official/Title:

Date

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

Description

The Union Chapel is located on the south side of East Porter Street, approximately midway between the East and West Catawba Roads, in a rural residential setting at the northern end of Catawba Island. Despite some changes, Porter Street still conveys much of the appearance it had at the time Union Chapel was erected, perhaps more so than any other part of Catawba Island today. The Chapel is a one-story, wood frame vernacular building on a foundation of local rubble limestone, basically rectangular in plan with a front gabled, asphalt shingle roof. A centrally located belltower, square in plan and originally with a wood double-door front entry, projects from the facade. A small kitchen wing built in the 1890s off the rear elevation is connected by means of a 1957 addition to another, smaller rectangular building, constructed in 1942-43 with no architectural style or embellishment, that was moved to the east side of the Chapel ca. 1955 (photo #s 1, 4-6). Union Chapel's site was originally restricted to the footprint of the building itself; additional purchases and a donation of land in the 1940s subsequently allowed the construction of a gravel parking lot bounded by a split rail fence on the west side of the Chapel and the addition of a frame "annex" relocated from nearby Port Clinton in 1955 on the Chapel's east side and connected to an expanded kitchen wing in 1957.

Constructed by volunteer Catawba residents in a simple vernacular style, Union Chapel's original drop siding was later covered with asbestos siding at an unknown date, but no later than July 1951, as confirmed by a photograph of that date. The alignment of the asbestos siding generally follows the linear pattern of the wood drop siding underneath. Tall 4/4 double-hung wood windows with simple wood surrounds are original, with single windows flanking the bell tower and four bays on each side (photo #s 1, 4). The windows are currently protected by aluminum storm windows. On the facade, the two windows and doorway are capped by angled wood drip molds with scrollwork embellishments under the molds (photo #3). The belltower's low-pitch pyramidal roof supports a wooden cross and has two single corner brackets on each side over a plain frieze faced with vertical beadboards (photo #2). Fully-louvered doors below the tower cornice open into the belfry from all four sides. Installed in 2020, they replaced deteriorated half-louvered doors and more closely resemble the fully-louvered doors shown in a 1951 dated photograph. The only notable loss of integrity on the exterior was the replacement of the five-panel wood front doors and four-light transom by a single glass door with narrow sidelights in 2017. The wood doors matched the five-panel doors in the 1957 addition, and may have replaced earlier doors when the addition was built.

The Union Chapel interior still retains its early appearance, with pine wood floors, beadboard wainscoting and chair rails (photo #8), and paired four-panel interior vestibule doors. The vestibule is finished in horizontal beadboards, and the original attendance and donation board is still in place next to the inner doors (photo #7). Single five-panel wood doors flank the former location of a central raised platform against the rear wall (photo #9) that measured about 9 ft. 10 inches deep by 10 ft. 10 inches wide; the platform and a large drawer that held Bibles and other books and papers were removed in 2017 due to their deteriorated condition. The Chapel never had pews or an altar, and the chairs, tables, and pulpit that furnished the Chapel were all

removed to a chapel in nearby Gypsum when the Union Chapel closed (Don Rhodes, personal communication, 6/2020). A false ceiling (date unknown), with angled sides, above narrow crown moldings, that follow the slope of the roof, is the only notable alteration to the interior. Current museum exhibits consist of selected artifacts and a series of eight-foot panels flanking both sides of two parallel aisles.

The gable-front Junior Chapel was constructed ca. 1942-43 under wartime exigencies as essentially a simple shell building with no architectural features or embellishment. Utilized as an annex to Port Clinton's St. John's Church, it was moved to its present site on the east side of the Union Chapel ca. 1955. It is lower than the Union Chapel, parallel to it and set farther back from the street (photo #s1, 6). In 1957 the kitchen extension at the rear of the Union Chapel was expanded and a new addition was built connecting the east side of the kitchen to the annex (photo #s 5-6, 10-11). This addition also included restrooms, a storage closet, and a secondary exit. Cupboards and formica counter tops in the kitchen date to the 1957 expansion, but the interiors of the annex and addition are otherwise entirely plain and utilitarian. The annex retains its original open floor plan (photo #12), with the exception of a small room inside the southeast corner, added within the past year to provide environmentally controlled storage for part of the museum's document and artifact collections. Wood floors and wood 1/1 double-hung sash are original to the annex & the expanded kitchen connection. Asbestos siding matching the linear lines of that already on the Chapel was applied to both the annex and the new addition at the time of the latter's construction. A replacement front door was installed in the annex in 2020.

The Union Chapel still retains significant historic integrity. A plain building, the interior maintains the appearance familiar to the Chapel's generations of members, and the exterior changes - asbestos siding, annex, and new addition - were all undertaken by the Chapel membership more than 60 years ago, and reflect the growth and long active life of the Chapel into the 1970s. The annex, with its lower profile and massing, set-back siting, and its connection to the Chapel from its rear kitchen wing, does not detract from the Union Chapel's integrity of design and original footprint. Original siding on the Chapel survives underneath the asbestos, which was applied both because the old siding was deteriorating and as a means of reducing long-term building maintenance costs which have always been a financial challenge to the rural membership of Union Chapel. The fundamental elements of the Chapel's design, both interior and exterior, are still largely intact in terms of its massing, fenestration, minimal ornamentation, flooring, and open interior design. Materials, including wood floors, windows, local limestone foundation, even the attendance board, are all original and still convey the original feeling and purpose of Union Chapel, and its association with the non-denominational religious role in the lives of Catawba Island's rural farming residents. These elements are further enhanced by the Chapel's location on Porter Street, which retains the rural residential appearance it had at the time Union Chapel was built; many of the houses, including the one that once served as one of Catawba Island's first schools, are contemporaneous with the Chapel and provide what is today, despite various alterations, arguably the most intact historic street setting left on the island. In short, the Union Chapel's elements of location, setting, feeling, materials, and association are all present to a high degree, and combined with the Chapel's significant association with Catawba Island's agricultural and social history, merit its listing on the National Register.

Statement of Significance

The 1887 Union Chapel is nominated under Criterion A as a significant representative of Catawba Island's social history and agricultural development at the heart of Ohio's "Fruit Belt," serving as the religious and social center of Catawba throughout the period of significance. From its initial settlement in the late 1830s into the 1960s, the principal theme in Catawba Island's economic and social history was the cultivation of fruit, initially grapes and then peaches. Viticulture dominated into the early 1870s, after which grapes were superseded by tree fruits, overwhelmingly peaches, as well as apples, pears, and plums. Catawba Island and adjoining Danbury Township were Ohio's leading producers of high-quality peaches for more than 50 years. Religious education played an essential role in the life of Catawba Island's peach-growing community, and the nonsectarian Union Chapel, constructed as the expansion of peach orchards on the island accelerated, was the center of Catawba Island social and religious life. It is today the sole surviving religious and community building representing the formative years of Catawba Island's history. Union Chapel is being nominated at the local level of significance.

Ottawa County was organized on March 6, 1840, from portions of three surrounding counties (Erie, Sandusky, Lucas) as growing Euro-American settlement of the region followed the final removal of its native Indian inhabitants (Hardesty 1989). Catawba Island, historically more a peninsula than an island, was part of Van Rensselaer Township. The first permanent settlers arrived there in 1836, the first school classes were held in 1838, and the first church, non-denominational but operated by the Methodist-Episcopal Church, was located near Cemetery Road. In 1861 the Bass Islands in Lake Erie were separated from Van Rensselaer Township to form Put-in-Bay Township, and in 1863 the Catawba peninsula was renamed Catawba Island Township by the Ottawa County Commissioners. With a total area of just over 3,400 acres, Catawba Island was named for the Catawba grapes that were already replacing subsistence farming in local agriculture. Within Ottawa County, grape growing was largely confined to Catawba, Put-in-Bay, Danbury, and Portage Townships.

By 1871, acreage devoted to grapes on Catawba totaled 345, decreasing to 215 acres by 1875. Over the same period grape acreage increased to over 1,000 in Danbury Township and more than 700 in Put-in-Bay Township (Magruder 1875). The reason for this disparity was the development of peach orchards on Catawba. In 1872 and for decades thereafter, "there were only two industries on Catawba. One was farming - fruit growing; the other was commercial fishing" (Schraidt 2014, p. 79), often carried out by many of the same peach farmers to support the variable financial returns from farming. Because of its combination of limestone based soils and moderating lake effect climate, with cool springs and mild autumns, Catawba Island is uniquely suited to the growth of high-quality peaches, and peach cultivation rapidly supplanted all other agricultural and commercial pursuits on Catawba. The first 2,000 peach trees were planted by James W. Gamble and Andrew S. Reynolds, followed soon thereafter by John Rofkar and George Ellithorpe. By 1898 Catawba Island had 300,000 peach trees and produced

over 400,000 bushels of peaches (Anon. 1898), and in 1900 Ottawa County, led by Catawba Island, produced more peaches than any other county in Ohio, with 600,000 - 700,000 bushels shipped out annually. Early varieties of peaches included Waterloo, Mountain Rose, Early and Late Crawford, and Salway, but by 1900 Elbertas comprised three-fourths of all Catawba trees.

In the orchards, bushel baskets of peaches were loaded on horse-drawn wagons equipped with racks to support the baskets, up to five rows high, without damaging the fruit. Farms in the southern two-thirds of the township hauled peaches to nearby Gypsum and Port Clinton, Ohio, where they were sorted, graded, and shipped out in refrigerator cars on the Lake Shore & Michigan Southern Railroad (after 1914 the New York Central Lines); after the Gypsum Fruit House burned, more wagons were unloaded at the fruit house beside the Danbury railroad station. Some farmers also auctioned wagon loads of peaches on the main streets of downtown Port Clinton. Farmers in the upper third of Catawba took their peaches to the Catawba Island Dock on Lake Erie, at the north end of the island. Lake steamers, notably the *Frank E. Kirby*, loaded up to 5,000 bushels per trip for the short voyage across the lake to Detroit, where merchants noted that they could "get 25 cents more per basket from Catawba Island peaches than for any other" (Anon. 1889/1890).

In the 1920s and '30s there were between 75-100 orchards on Catawba (Schraidt 2014, p. 81), with a population of fewer than 500 people. Catawba farms were "small and people could make a living on small farms with the production of fruit where that would be difficult with 10 acres of beans or oats or alfalfa" (Rhodes 2003, p. 34). By the 1930s, with improved roads and more widespread ownership of automobiles, peaches were increasingly hauled by trucks or sold directly to customers at roadside stands. "People came from Toledo and all over to buy three or four bushels of peaches. Just a parade of cars, one after the other" (Wonnell & Stevens 2008, p. 88). Farmers also contracted with truck drivers who purchased and drove their trailer loads of peaches to Toledo, Detroit, Cleveland, and other markets.

Following World War II, peach cultivation on Catawba declined as new houses, summer homes, and subdivisions encroached on the orchards, and the total year-round population of Catawba Island grew from around 450 in the 1930s and 1940s to 780 in 1950 and 1769 in 1960. Peach farming was a difficult way to earn a living, and younger generations were less willing to continue the family farms. A single hail storm or rapid overnight drop in winter temperatures could ruin a season's crop. Wet, humid springs fostered the growth of fungi, and birds and insects were constant threats to damage the fruit. Peach trees, which only averaged about ten years of productive life, needed pruning annually. New trees had to be planted regularly to maintain a steady crop, brush had to be cleared from the orchards every year, and spraying with ever more expensive chemicals for fungus and insects had to be undertaken every 10-14 days (Schraidt 2014, pp. 83-84). An entire year's income rested on a harvest of hand-picked peaches that had to be completed in 2-4 weeks. "It was not uncommon to have 500 and 1,000 bushels of peaches come in over a weekend. They had to be graded, packed, and moved out" (Rhodes 2004, p. 68). According to local historian and life-long resident Don Rhodes, on average, one year out of three yielded a profitable, good-paying crop (Rhodes 2003, p. 34). Through the late

1950s and into the 1960s and 1970s and beyond, the concomitant trends of growing tourism and development, and shrinking agricultural acreage, only accelerated, ending the long reign of peach farming as the dominant economic theme in Catawba Island history from the 1870s into the 1950s.

Peach farmers were engaged in a demanding and labor-intensive occupation, and Sunday religious education and services, as well as social gatherings and relaxation, played a vital role in their lives. Sunday School had been held in a nearby building also used as a school. Seeing the need for a better facility, Samuel and Louise Armstrong, who were committed to the religious education of young people, donated a lot on Porter Street at the north end of the island as the site for a Sunday, or "Sabbath," School as it was then known. Local volunteers completed the construction of the Union Chapel in 1887. It was never intended to be a "church" and was never dedicated as such (Rofkar 1969). However, provisions in the Armstrong deed permitted use of the building for other religious meetings as long as they were nonsectarian. Circuit ministers and clerics from churches in the region came to preach, and this melding of various Christian beliefs earned the Chapel its "Union" name.

From its opening on Christmas Eve, 1887, the Union Chapel has served as the social as well as religious center of Catawba Island life through the 1960s. "We did have a Methodist church on Cemetery Road and the Lutherans on Sunday were married and buried at the St. John's Lutheran Church in Danbury. But those of us that just believed in God and needed a place to worship along with our families and were baptized, married and buried, we used Catawba Island Chapel, commonly known as the Sunday School. It played a part in a lot of our lives because we met there every Sunday" (Rhodes 2003, p. 38). There were always Christmas, Easter, and Thanksgiving programs, and father-son and mother-daughter banquets. The Chapel "provided much community spirit and activity during those years" (*Ibid.*). PTA meetings and other functions were regularly held at the Chapel, which continued to serve Catawba as an occasional meeting place even after the brick Catawba Island Township Community Hall and Fire Station was built in 1951.

Although enrollment in the Sunday School grew steadily through the 1890s, it alone could not produce sufficient income to maintain and repair the Chapel. Recognizing the need for additional financial support, Mrs. John (Margaret) Burgderfer, elected in 1895 as the first female superintendent of the Sunday School, called a meeting of nine local ladies to form a support group for the Chapel. Taking the name Dorcas Society after a Biblical passage in Acts 9:36-40 about a woman who did good works, they initially raised money by quilting and sewing. Two nearby hotels had been asking local women to hem sheets, towels, and pillow cases, and knit comforters (Rofkar 1969). Still needing more funds, the Dorcas Society began holding dinners, box socials, and bazaars, including 25-cent oyster dinners in winter and 10-cent homemade ice cream and cake socials in summer. Seating in the Chapel was entirely by chairs - no pews were installed - which facilitated setting up tables and rearranging chairs for various community functions within the limited space available. In 1898 a day was spent sewing shirts for soldiers wounded in the Spanish-American War, a pot luck dinner and a pot luck supper were held, and

"a wonderful spirit of Christian service and fellowship was developed" (Dorcas Society secretary's book, 1898).

Over the following decades, community support of the Dorcas Society enabled them to pay for all the Chapel's insurance, utilities, and janitor expenses. Into the 1930s and '40s, "the local school, lacking a large enough auditorium, put on plays and other functions in the chapel" (Pakulski 1991). As the Sunday School membership and island population grew, the existing building became inadequate to serve all the attendees, so the Dorcas ladies partially financed the purchase in the 1940s of the lot adjoining the Chapel to the east for an addition; the original lot was only as large as the existing building. The St. John Church annex in Port Clinton, a 1942-43 building, was acquired and moved to the new lot in the mid-1950s as Catawba Island's population began its upward climb from under 800 year-round residents in 1950 to 2,882 by 1970. State law at the time prohibited situating it directly against the Chapel, so it was placed several feet apart and called the Junior Chapel. Land to the south of the Chapel was donated by the owner to provide room for a kitchen extension, and in 1957 the Junior Chapel was connected to the rear of the Chapel with an addition that included additional kitchen space, storage, and restrooms. At the same time, asbestos siding that roughly follows the horizontal lines of the drop siding was also added. The exterior configuration of the Union Chapel and its annex has remained unchanged since that date.

Despite the construction of a newer community hall, the Union Chapel continued to meet the religious and social needs of Catawba Island through the 1960s. Monthly chicken dinners hosted by the Dorcas Society were especially popular. However, enrollment declined as an influx of new residents increasingly supplanted peach farmers and their closely knit community heritage on the island. The last religious services in the Chapel were held by the Firelands Presbyterian Church in the 1980s, and in 1992 ownership of the Chapel was transferred to the Catawba Island Township trustees. The building sat vacant until 2017, when the trustees and the newly-formed Catawba Island Historical Society renovated the Chapel and reopened it as the Catawba Museum at Union Chapel. Although use of the Union Chapel continued into the 1980s, the 1970 end date for the Period of Significance conforms to the National Register's 50-year cutoff for historic significance.

The Union Chapel stands today as the only religious and community building surviving from the formative period of Catawba Island's history when nearly all of Catawba Island was covered by peach orchards. With the exception of the front door, the Chapel's appearance is essentially unchanged since 1957; the 1955-57 additions reflect its continued active role as the focal point of the closely interconnected social, religious, and peach farming life that led to its construction and prevailed on Catawba Island throughout its period of significance. No other building on Catawba embodies all three aspects of life on the island in that era. All of the peach-era buildings at the Catawba Island dock, as well as the peach houses in Gypsum and Danbury (outside Catawba Island Township) either burned or were demolished decades ago. With two or three exceptions, all of the Catawba peach barns have been demolished or substantially altered, and the predominantly vernacular farm houses, other than the Ellithorpe house on the East

Road, have also had multiple losses of integrity and/or additions, as the rural farming heritage and "flavor" of Catawba Island is increasingly lost to the ongoing influx of wealthy new residents and commercial development.

Union Chapel
Name of Property

Ottawa, Ohio
County and State

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography (Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form.)

Anonymous

Illustrated Port Clinton and Environs. B.B. Krammes, Publisher, Port Clinton, OH, 1898.

Anonymous

23rd Annual Report of the Ohio State Horticultural Society. Columbus, 1889/1890.

Dorcas Society

Secretary's book, 1898. Unpublished, in possession of the Catawba Island Historical Society.

Goodman, H.S.

Illustrated Historical Atlas of Ottawa County, Ohio. Port Clinton, 1900; reprinted by the Ottawa County Historical Society, Port Clinton, OH, 1989.

Hardesty, H.H.

Illustrated Historical Atlas of Ottawa County, Ohio. Chicago, 1874; reprinted by the Ottawa County Historical Society, Port Clinton, OH, 1989.

Magruder, J.M. ("Att'y at Law, Land Agent & Broker," Port Clinton, OH)

Unpublished manuscript record of grape production & acreage between 1873-1875 in Catawba Island, Danbury, Portage, Put-in-Bay Townships, Ottawa County, OH. Personal collection of Jeff Brown, Catawba Isl;and Historical Society.

Page & Stage Oral History Committee

Along the Highways and Waterways of Ottawa County, Ohio. Ottawa County Historical Society, Port Clinton, OH, 2017.

Pakulski, Gary T.

"1887 island chapel's lights go off." *Toledo Blade*, Toledo, OH, pp. 11, 13; Dec. 22, 1991.

Rhodes, Donald

"Orchards and Vineyards on Catawba." *The People of Ottawa County*, Vol. I, pp. 33-39. Ottawa County Historical Society, Port Clinton, OH, 2003.

"Catawba Fruit Farms." *The People of Ottawa County*, Vol. II, pp. 68-70. Ottawa County Historical Society, Port Clinton, OH, 2004.

Rofkar, Blanche

"History of the Dorcas Society, 1896-1969." Unpublished manuscript, in possession of the Catawba Island Historical Society.

Union Chapel
Name of Property

Ottawa, Ohio
County and State

Schraidt, Bob

"Peach Farming on Catawba Island." *The People of Ottawa County*, Vol. VI, pp. 79-88.
Ottawa County Historical Society, Port Clinton, OH, 2014.

Sheere, Irene

"Peaches once were big Catawba Island business." *News-Herald*, Port Clinton, OH,
Aug. 31, 1970, p. 3.

Wonnell, Jeanne, and Robert Stevens

"Catawba Island." *The People of Ottawa County*, Vol. IV, pp. 85-95. Ottawa County
Historical Society, Port Clinton, OH, 2008.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- ☐ State Historic Preservation Office
- ☐ Other State agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☐ Local government
- ☐ University
- ☒ Other

Name of repository: Catawba Island Historical Society

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): N/AOTT-00990-11

Union Chapel
Name of Property

Ottawa, Ohio
County and State

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The nominated property, situated in the Township of Catawba Island, Ottawa County, Ohio, is a part of Lot No. Eleven (11) as shown on Steads Plat being a part of Main Lot No. Nine (9), Section Three (3) of said Township and more particularly described as follows: Beginning at an iron pin situated at the southwest corner of Lot No. One (1) of Waggoner's Allotment situated in Lot No. Nine (9) of Steads Plat; thence west in the south line of said Lot No. One and parallel to the center line of Porter Street, 80 feet to an iron pipe; thence north parallel with the west line of said Lot No. One and the east line of Lot No. Eleven, 100 feet to an iron pipe; thence continuing in the same course 20 feet to an iron pipe in the center line of Porter Street so-called; thence east in the center line Porter Street 80 feet to an iron pin at the northeast corner of said Lot No. Eleven and the west line of said Lot No. One extended; thence south in the east line of said Lot No. Eleven and the west line of said Lot No. One and said line extended 120 feet to the place of beginning, also Lot One of Waggoner's Allotment Subdivision A located in Lot 9, Section 3, Catawba Island Township, Ottawa County, Ohio. (Deed records of Ottawa County, Ohio, transferring the Union Chapel property to the Catawba Island Township Trustees, dated 31 August 1992).

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

Boundary is based upon the legally recorded lot description, and includes the property historically associated with the nominated building.

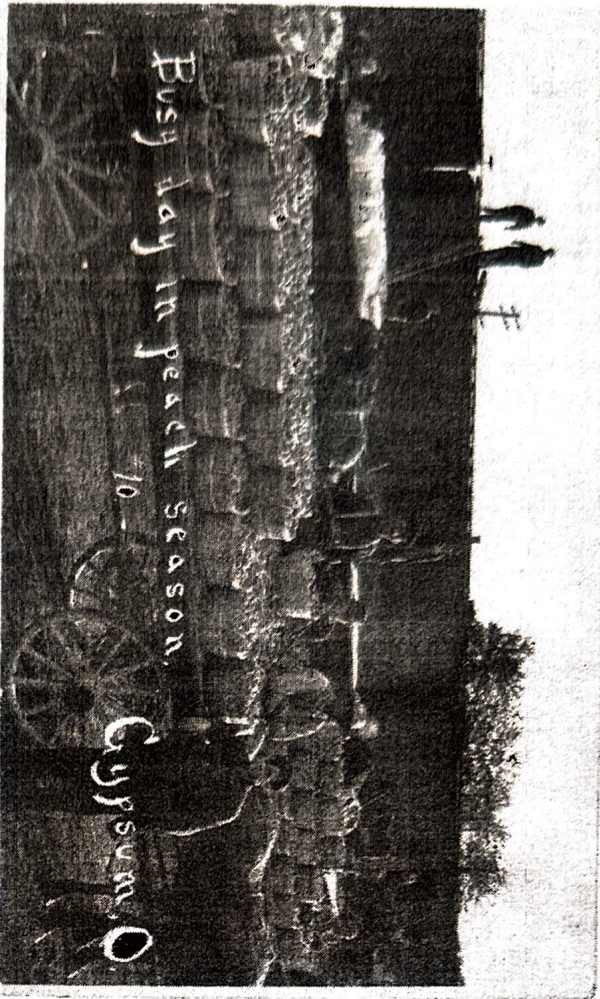
11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Jeff Brown/ Trustee
organization: Catawba Island Historical Society
street & number: 5258 E. Porter St., P.O. Box 396
city or town: Port Clinton state: Ohio zip code:43452

e-mail: jeffdbrown51@gmail.com
telephone: 330 456 3963
date: June 30, 2020

Additional Documentation

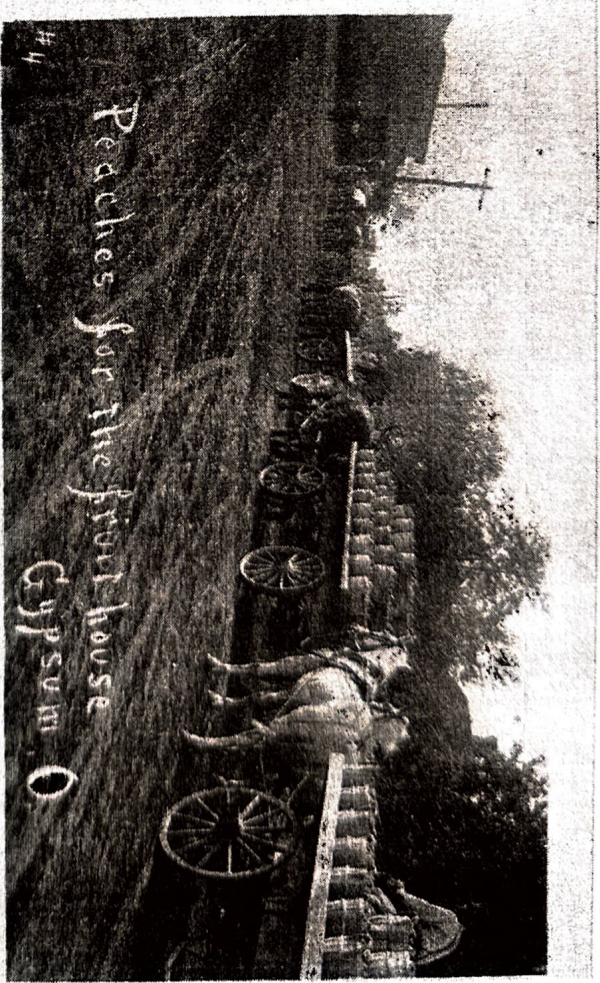
Submit the following items with the completed form:



Busy day in peach season.

10 -

Gypsum, O.

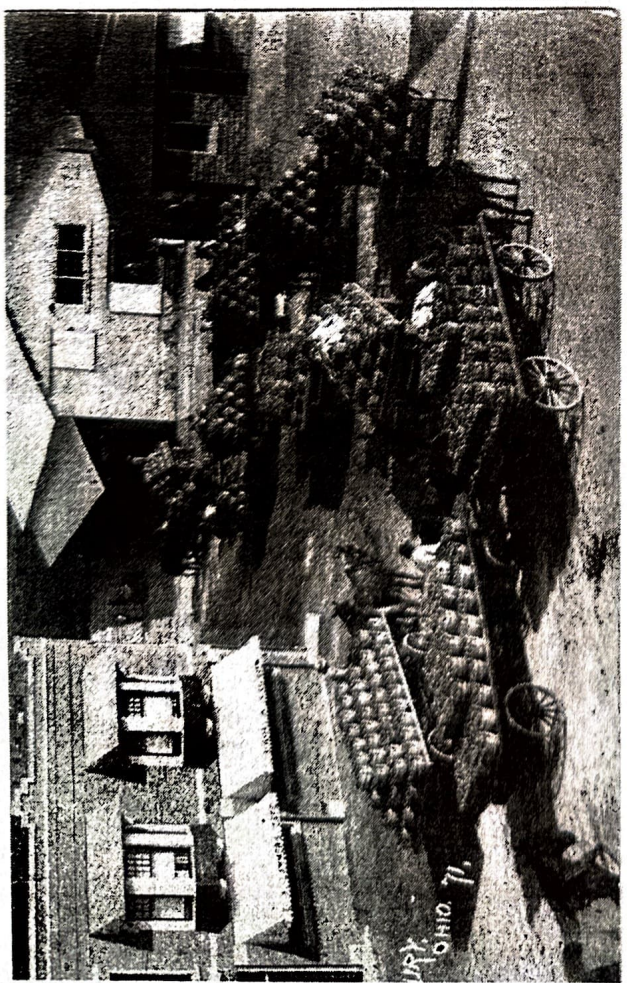


Peaches for the fruit house

Gypsum, O.



67. PEACHES
AT
DANBURY, OHIO.



OHIO 71