

Port Gibson Historic Resources Survey

Town of Manchester, Ontario County, New York

sponsored by

the Town of Manchester

with funding provided by

Preserve New York

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survey conducted by

The Landmark Society of Western New York, Inc.

submitted July 15, 2019

SUMMARY: Based on our historic resource survey of the hamlet of Port Gibson, The Landmark Society finds (A) basis for individual National Register listing for the Port Gibson Rural Cemetery and the former electric trolley line transformer structure at 141 County Rd. 7; and (B) a number of opportunities for attracting attention and investment to the community by capitalizing on historic built environment resources at a local level. These opportunities include encouraging recreational activities like fishing and boating on the canalway and its historic basins in the hamlet; increasing connectivity to existing and potential recreational trails along historic transportation corridors; and preserving the hamlet's dense walkable nineteenth century street grid and surviving architectural details.

A separate, more detailed history of the hamlet, written with information collected in the course of completing this survey and facilitating a May 2019 guided walking tour, will be submitted to local stakeholders under separate cover.

Methodology

In Summer 2018, The Landmark Society of Western New York contracted with the Town of Manchester to conduct a historic resources survey of the town's hamlet of Port Gibson, funded in part by a Preserve New York grant awarded in July 2018. The primary purpose of the survey was to evaluate the potential for National Register of Historic Places designation for hamlet properties so that property owners might take advantage of historic tax credits to rehabilitate their properties. More broadly, the Town commissioned the survey to generate data that might inform local planning efforts, marketing, and promotion of the hamlet's historic resources.

Based on information gathered from a September 25th meeting with key project stakeholders, a general public meeting on October 23rd, a "windshield tour" on March 21, 2019, and research regarding the hamlet's historical development using primary and secondary resources online and at the Ontario County Historical Society, a survey area coinciding with the "Port Gibson Area" used in local government planning was established for the project (see Figure 1). Outside the boundaries of this survey area – and even within the area to some extent, with large agricultural parcels included on the west and on the east – the development pattern quickly transitions from the hamlet's relatively dense street network and small, mostly residential lots, to large, sparsely- developed and networked agricultural lots, as well as generally non-historic residential construction lining major thoroughfares. The Town of Manchester being the survey's sponsoring entity, the survey area's northern boundary coincides with the Town's northern boundary, accounting for what may otherwise appear to be an arbitrary cut-off. In total, the survey area encompassed approximately 450 acres and roughly 170 properties, with the two aforementioned large agricultural properties accounting for roughly 200 of those acres.

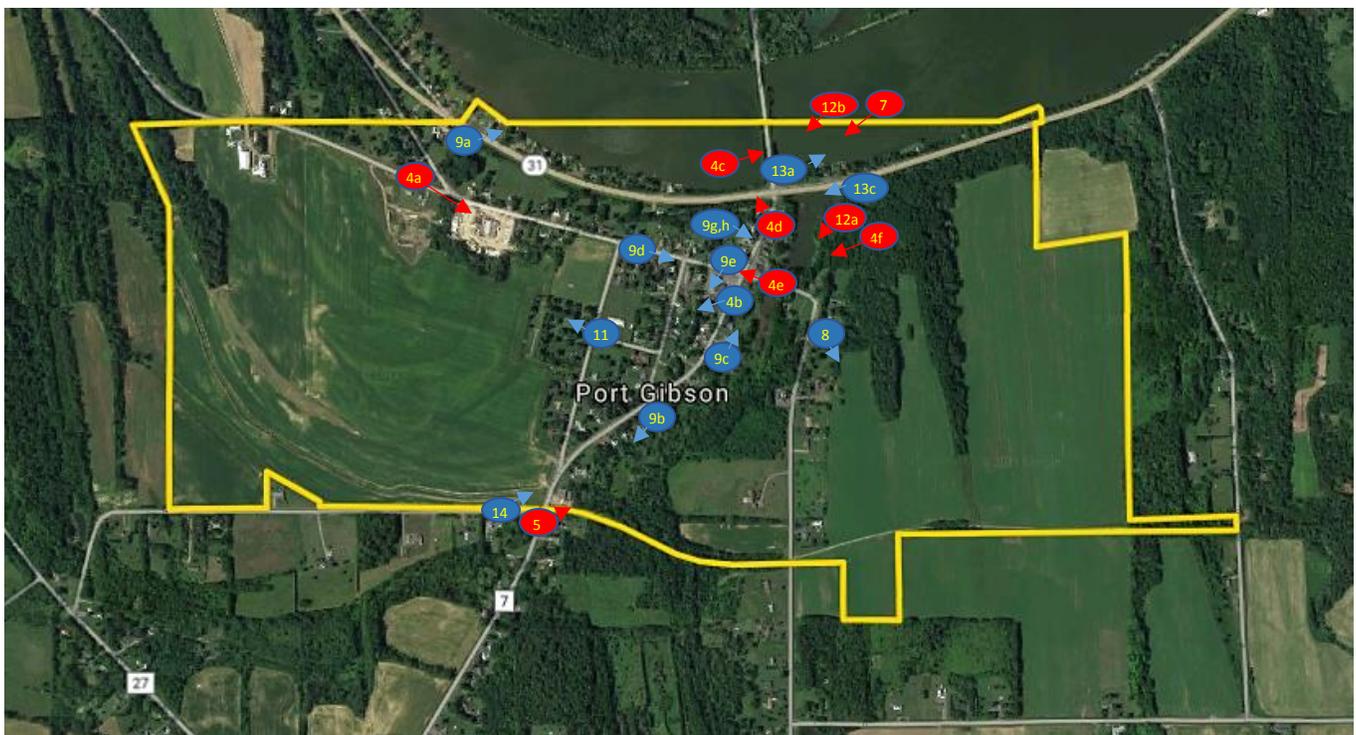


Figure 1. Survey Area, within yellow boundary; note transition to sparsely distributed settlement outside boundary. Numbered ovals and arrows show vantage point of this report's figures – red are historic photos, and blue are current views.

The survey proceeded with “feet-to-the-street” fieldwork in Spring 2019. This work followed a hybrid reconnaissance- and intensive- level methodology in accordance with National Register (NR) guidelines as well as guidance gleaned from late September 2018 conversations with SHPO employees. Within the areas where contiguous properties showed sufficient integrity and historical relevance and relatedness for a historic district, representative streetscape photos were taken, and all individual properties were documented using SHPO’s reconnaissance-level survey forms in the CRIS Trekker application. Resources outside of potential districts that appeared to be eligible for *individual* National Register listing were documented using a hybrid approach, with streetscape photos to establish context as well as completion of both CRIS Trekker application’s reconnaissance-level fields and the physical description and statement of significance fields on the intensive-level form. Those properties that did not appear to have the integrity, context, history, or age to be eligible individually or as part of a historic district received cursory documentation, with streetscape photographs taken to justify those judgements.

This survey report summarizes the findings of our research and fieldwork; our recommendations for National Register listing, including recommendations and justifications for any potential district boundaries; and general recommendations for using Port Gibson’s historic architecture as a resource in local planning and development.

Historic Context & Associated Property Types

During the earliest Euro-American settlement of the Finger Lakes area in the 1790s through the 1810s, Canandaigua became the region’s urban center, with natural geographic advantages concentrating people and capital at the head of Canandaigua Lake. In the early 1820s, however, the creation of the artificial Erie Canal waterway to the north threatened to cut Canandaigua out from regional trade, causing consternation among its most prominent merchants and citizens. As the region’s population grew in anticipation of the Canal’s completion, and Wayne County was formed from Ontario County – of which Canandaigua was the seat – in 1823, care was taken to ensure that concerned Canandaiguans would still have access to the Canal trade: in drawing the county boundaries, the southern boundary of Wayne’s Town of Palmyra was moved north slightly so that the southernmost portion of a bend in the Canal between Newark and Palmyra would enter Ontario County (see Figure 2).

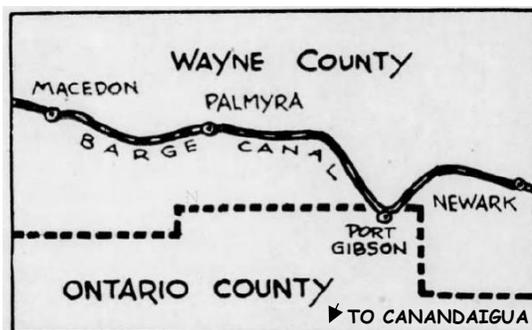


Figure 2. Port Gibson’s is Ontario County’s only canal port

Henry B. Gibson, the wealthy cashier of Canandaigua’s Ontario Bank involved in many of the area’s speculative ventures, saw a business opportunity in Ontario County’s small Canal frontage and coordinated the purchase of the adjacent land by Canandaigua men in the mid- to late 1820s. A street grid was laid out to accommodate a small port village and survives to the present day; that the streets where and continue to be named for men prominent in Canandaigua at the time (John **Grieg**, Judge Moses **Atwater**, Francis **Granger**, James D. **Bemis**, in addition to Canandaigua Street) attests to the early connection between the two communities (see Figure 3).

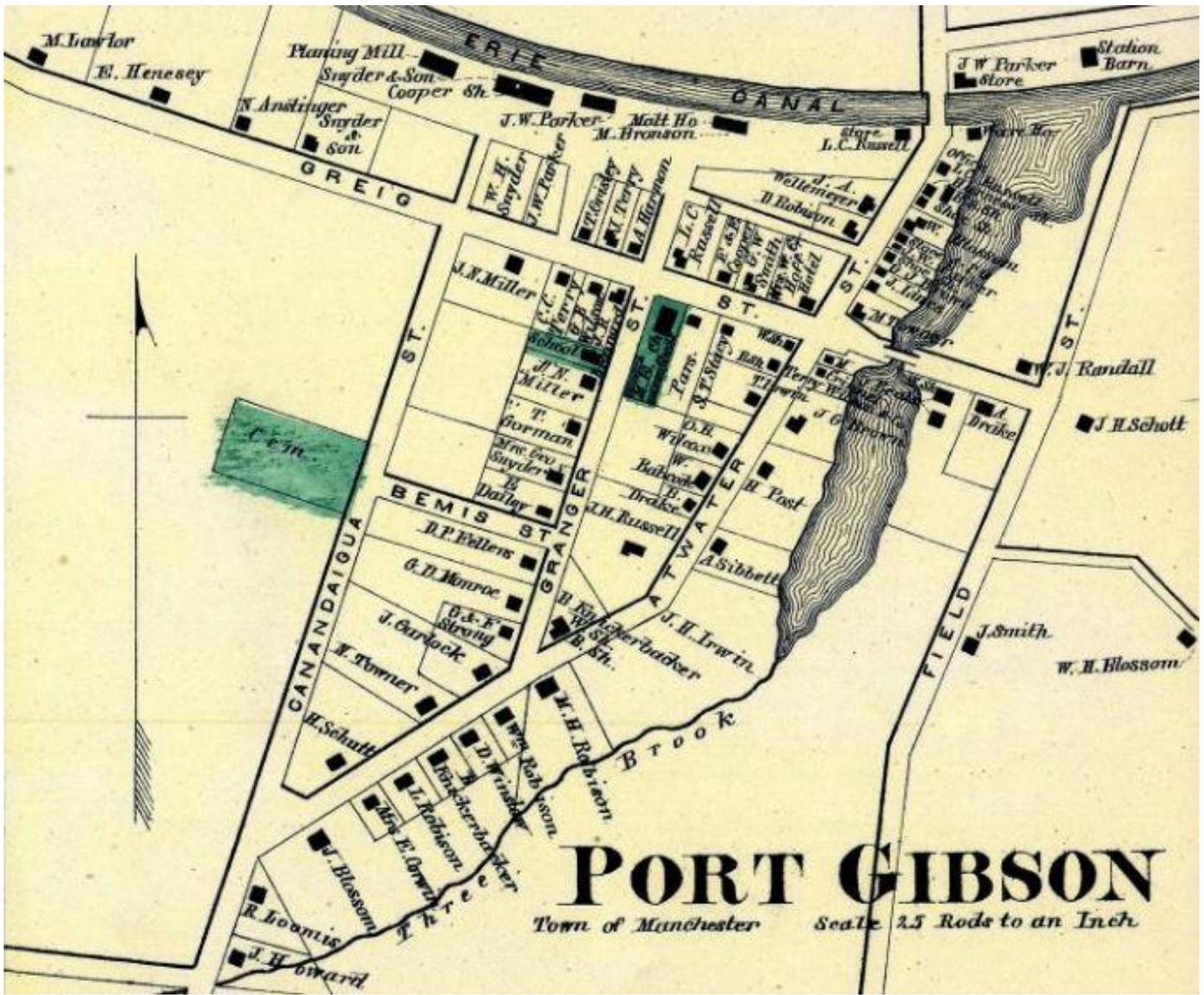


Figure 3. Port Gibson in 1874. Note concentration of industrial structures along canal, commercial structures on E side of Atwater St. backing up to the canal basin, and street grid similar to today's. Present-day cemetery in place.

Economic opportunities along the Canal readily attracted settlers, causing considerable early growth. In fact, Port Gibson's population was on par with the neighboring village of Manchester in 1842, when both settlements were reported to have roughly 45 dwellings¹. As the nineteenth century progressed, Port Gibson's residences – almost exclusively wood-frame – concentrated along Atwater, Granger, and Grieg Streets, and occasionally display modest original stylistic details like gable fan ornaments and decorative bracketing today (see Figures 4b, 16a&b); James Field's brick high-style Federal house overlooking the settlement from a hill just to the east (105 Field St.) is the only notable extant exception to this general distribution and styling, if significantly altered from its original form (see Figure 8). As is to be expected in a community whose *raison d'être* was canal trade in regional agricultural goods, the hamlet's industrial developments – including at various times a malt house, a planing mill, fruit drying facilities, and merchants' warehouses – were concentrated along the canal's course (see Figures 3, 4a). A

¹ John W. Barber and Henry Howe, *Historical Collections of the State of New York...*, (New York: S. Tuttle, 1842), 408.

commercial strip, which included at various times a shoe shop, a wagon and harness shop, a blacksmith, a creamery, and usually two groceries operated by rival canal merchants in the hamlet, developed along the east side of Atwater Street backing up to large canal basins, which offered easy loading and unloading (see Figures 3,4d&f,9g&h) . A hotel operated at the northwest corner of the hamlet’s main intersection from the mid- nineteenth century into the early twentieth century (see Figure 4e&f), accompanied at this center by an 1871 brick Methodist church (extant and National Register -listed) that replaced an earlier c.1834 cobblestone structure, as well as a 1908 two-room schoolhouse that replaced a 1832 school built on land donated by Henry Gibson. Indeed, the development shown in historic maps and photographs and suggested in historical documents indicates a modest though dynamic canal-oriented community.



Figure 4a. View of hamlet from W, c. 1900. Labeled for ease of identifying locations referenced in this report: extant in yellow, lost in red.



Figure 4b. Example of house retaining some historic details (gable fan ornament) despite significant loss of integrity overall.

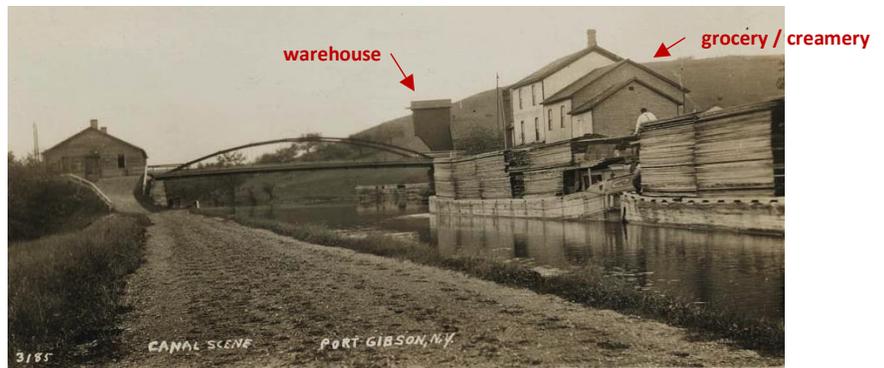


Figure 4c. Lumber on canal boats at Port Gibson, c.1895, looking E; note warehouse oriented toward canal immediately behind bridge R



Figure 4d. creamery just south of canal bridge, c.1905



Figure 4e. “four corners” from W, c.1910; Hoff’s Hotel at R

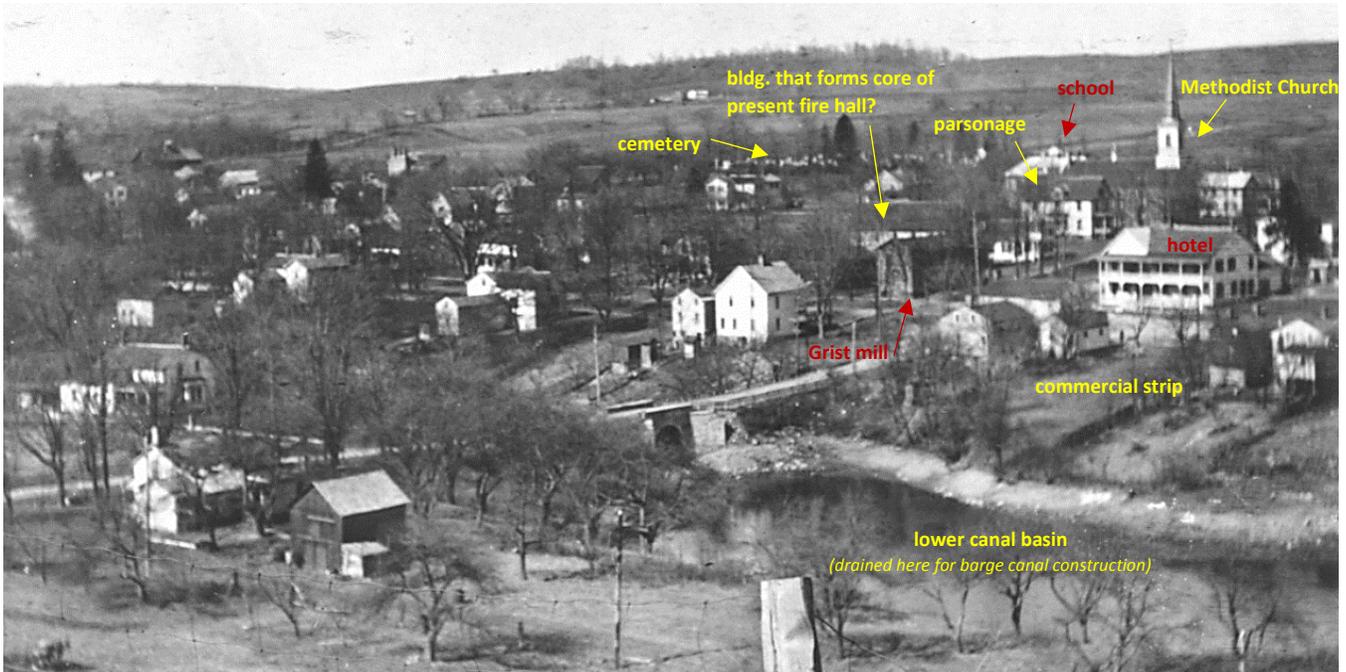


Figure 4f. View of hamlet from NE, c. 1918. Labeled for ease of identifying locations referenced in this report: extant in yellow, lost in red.

As the regional transportation network evolved, however, Port Gibson found itself slowly cut out of the traffic of goods that had sustained it, precipitating economic stagnation and a halt to further growth. Canal traffic peaked in the 1870s and then fell rapidly as rail lines – first paralleling the Canal in the 1850s

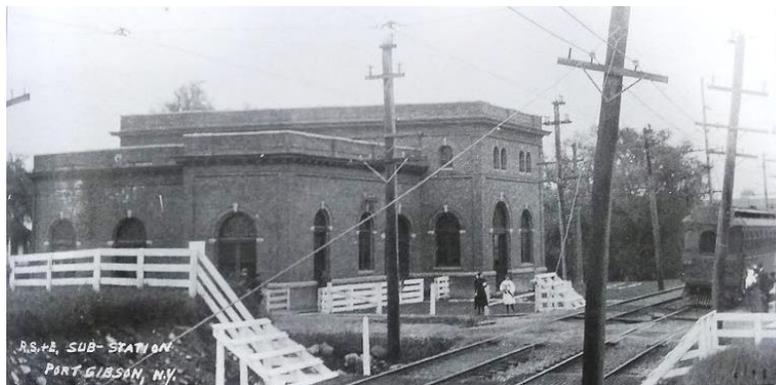


Figure 5. RS&E structure from SW, c. 1910; note trolley car at far R

– absorbed much of the traffic in goods across the region. The village of Manchester southwest of Port Gibson became a major rail processing center for the Lehigh Valley Railroad – including what was for a time the world’s largest division point and classification yard – while the rail lines bypassed Port Gibson. The Rochester, Syracuse & Eastern interurban electric trolley line that opened in 1909 *did* apparently maintain a passenger stop adjacent to its Neoclassical -style transformer structure at the south edge of the Port Gibson on Atwater Street (see Figure 5), but with no intact new commercial or industrial structures from this time period in the hamlet before the line’s abandonment in 1931, this stop appears to have done little to stimulate local development, instead encouraging investment to leave the community. Moreover, while the expansion of the canal to create the Barge Canal in the late 1910s may have been intended to bolster places like Port Gibson, it necessitated the destruction of many of the hamlet’s canal-side nineteenth century industrial and commercial buildings, and despite the creation of a “wide waters” in the canal bend adjacent to Port Gibson, the lack of new commercial or industrial buildings in the hamlet

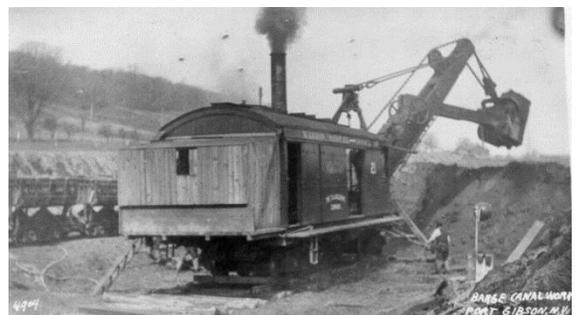


Figure 6. construction of Barge Canal at Port Gibson, c.1918; expansion necessitated destruction of several historic canal-side industrial structures

after the Canal's expansion suggests that economic development did not come. The routing of Route 31 along the canal's south bank off of the hamlet's street grid in the 1940s further insulated the hamlet from the transportation networks and regional trade that once sustained it, diverting automobile traffic and closing off the water entry to the old canal basins, rendering them inoperable (see Figure 7). Illustrating the effect of changing transportation technology on the hamlet, the electric trolley line transformer structure was outfitted at mid-century for use as an automobile repair shop with garage doors and workshop additions, a use that continues to the present.

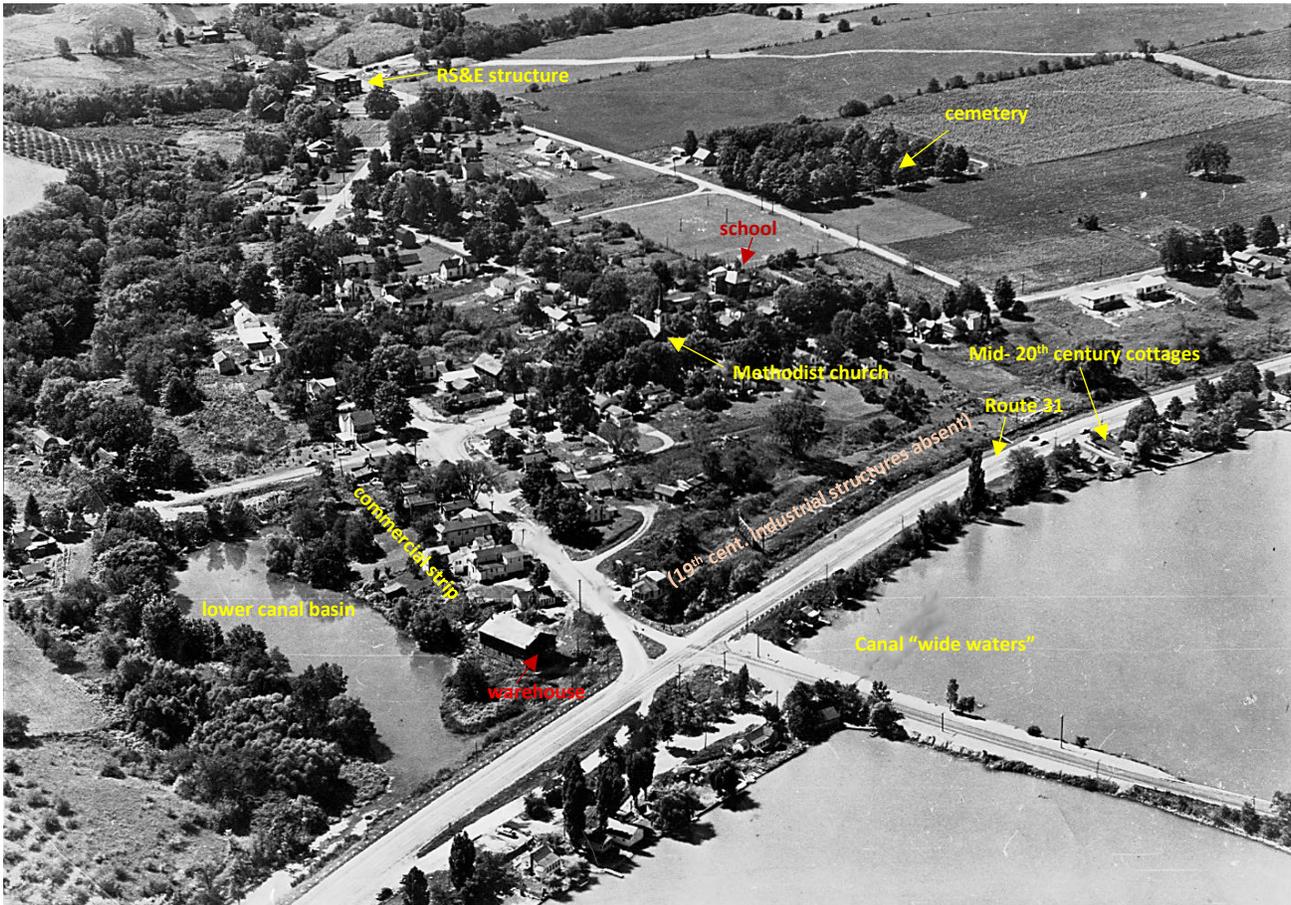


Figure 7. Aerial view of hamlet from NE, c.1955. Labeled for ease of identifying locations referenced in this report: extant in yellow, lost in red. Note Route 31 bypassing hamlet and closing off former canal basins. Widened canal, canal-side cottages.

Loss of the hamlet's historic integrity followed the decline in investment. Notices of structure fires – most notably that that destroyed the hamlet's hotel in the 1930s and irrevocably altered the c. 1829 Field House in February 1961, “the second major fire in this tiny Ontario County community in three weeks” (see Figure 8) – are common in Rochester newspapers from the early to mid- twentieth century. The organization of a local volunteer fire department in 1947 helped address this, and the construction of a fire station at the hamlet crossroads provided a physical civic rallying point for the community, but it could not encourage growth. The closure of the hamlet's Granger St. schoolhouse in 1960, and its



Figure 8. Field House (105 Field St.); note altered fenestration, loss of stepped gables and replacement w/ vinyl clad pitched gables

disappearance from the landscape soon thereafter, dealt a further blow to the community's identity and sense of place. Nevertheless, the relative lack of development pressure on the hamlet through the twentieth century generally preserved the relatively dense nineteenth century street grid through the automobile era, even if the historic integrity of individual residences suffered with the use of non-historic materials in the lack of investment in the community. The only significant additions to landscape after the early twentieth century have been mid- to late twentieth century canal-side cottages built as recreational interest in the canalway increased (see Figure 9a), and ranch house construction scattered through the hamlet (see Figure 9b,c,g); development in this period generally meant modification of existing structures, often using more durable, economical non-historic materials like metal roofing, vinyl siding, wrought iron porch posts, and cinderblocks, and adding comforts like enclosed porches and configurations of windows that brought more light into older structures (see Figures 9a-h).



Figure 9a. View N to NE along Route 31 near W intersection w/ county line – mid-twentieth century canal-side cottages. Modern materials, dissimilar spacing, massing, and form throughout



Figure 9b. View SW to W at intersection of Granger & Atwater Streets. Newer construction interspersed w/ historic; wide spacing; dissimilar massing + form.



Figure 9c. View N to NW from Atwater St. between Granger & Grieg. Note alterations to historic forms (e.g. garage doors in L of center bldg.), modern materials, intervening new construction



Figure 9d. View E to SE from Grieg St. W of Granger. Note altered fenestration (e.g. far L), modern materials (vinyl siding, added porches).



Figure 9e. View S to SW from Grieg & Atwater Streets. Note additions (e.g. enclosed porch far L), altered fenestration, modern materials, low density and loss of historic structures like hotel that once stood at far R, hinted at by concrete retaining wall.



Figures 9f-i/ii. Historic architectural details retained on occasion (L), but other changes to these structures usually compromise overall integrity (same house: wood-clad first story facade, added porch w/ wide eaves and simple wood posts & railing unsympathetic to house's overall historic form at R). (Address withheld)



Figure 9g. View NE to E on Atwater, N of Grieg. Historic commercial corridor. Note variegated cladding, often non-historic (e.g. faux-log at far R, brick and vinyl on post office); frequent altered fenestration and form, including added dormers, porches, etc.



Figure 9h. View E to SE on Atwater S of Route 31, historic commercial corridor continued. Note variegated cladding, often non-historic (e.g., vinyl and brick at center); frequent altered fenestration and form (added portico w/ wrought iron posts, brick piers at far L; altered form at center).

Recommendations

Based on our field observations, archival research, and discussions with local stakeholders, we are proposing:

- (A) the eligibility of two properties (the Port Gibson Rural Cemetery and the RS&E transformer structure) for individual listing on the National Register of Historic Places
- (B) local-level protection and investment for several historic resources whose presence can be key resources to the community's development, even if they do not have the historic integrity or significance to be listed to the National Register

We should acknowledge that, though Port Gibson's history and development are quite unique, because of the loss of many of the hamlet's key canal-oriented commercial and industrial structures during its economic stagnation over the twentieth century, and the liberal use of modern materials (e.g. metal roofing, vinyl siding, cinderblocks) and additions in surviving residential and commercial structures, belying their age and character (see Figures 9a-h), this survey did not find a concentration of historic structures that might, in our judgement, reasonably constitute a National Register historic district, as many stakeholders had hoped. Nevertheless, the hamlet's historic built environment still offers many local-level opportunities to attract interest and investment and improve the community's quality of life, which we outline here in turn.

Port Gibson Rural Cemetery (potentially National Register Eligible)

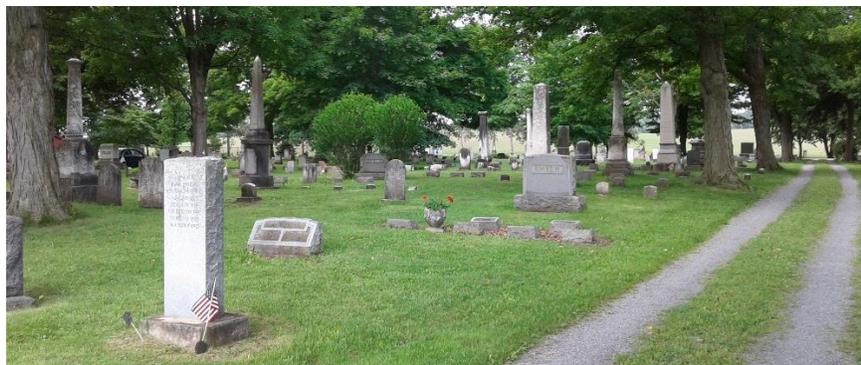
With the loss of many of the hamlet's historic structures, as well as the poor historic integrity of most



Figure 10. 1859 map detail, showing continuity of cemetery location over nearly two centuries

of the surviving structures, the Port Gibson Rural Cemetery, active at its current location since the settlement's earliest days (see Figure 10), takes on a heightened significance as the embodiment and record of the community's long, unique history. Moreover, this cemetery is exceptional in a larger sense for its relatively high number of larger monuments for a country cemetery, suggesting the early prosperity of the community; its adherence to the same grid plan over nearly two centuries; and the large number of veterans of early American wars interred there. For these reasons, we recommend a "National Register -Eligible" determination for the Port Gibson Rural Cemetery, which would draw attention to the historical significance of the site and potentially help attract funds for its upkeep.

Figure 11. Port Gibson Rural Cemetery interior, near middle entrance. Veteran's monument in L foreground; note high number of 19th century obelisks, suggesting relative community wealth, and continuous grid burial pattern

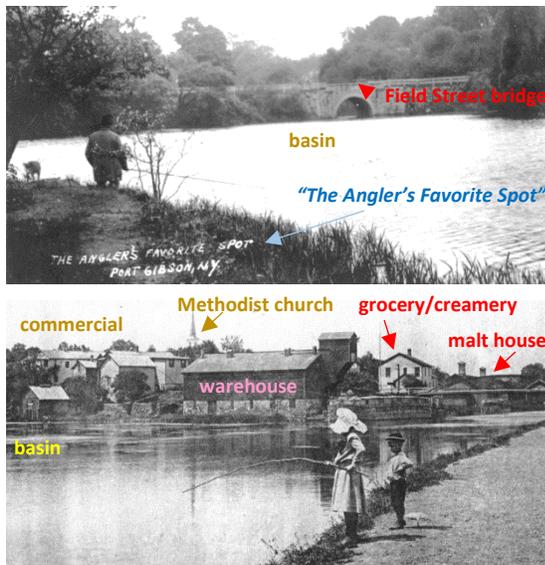


Historic canal basins, wide waters, and commercial strip

We believe the historic canal basins to be one of the hamlet's most underutilized historic resources: with investment and maintenance, these could be unique parklands, attracting visitors and encouraging spillover investment in the adjacent historic commercial area that, despite non-historic materials and additions that compromise much of its historic character, is made up of buildings densely arranged and appropriately scaled to sustain commercial activity. Unique programming of the basin parkland would strengthen this effect, and one idea that comes out of our historic research is to host *fishing-themed events* at the basins. Consider this quote from a 1945 article in the Rochester *Democrat & Chronicle*²:

Fluker recalls when there were two canal basins in the town, teeming with fish. Rochester fishermen would drive down there Sundays in horses and buggies after bullheads. Veteran anglers of the locality were the Salpaughs ... who in their nineties still fished on, through the ice in winter.

Indeed, our research uncovered a number of historic images of people fishing in the canal and the basins at Port Gibson (see Figures 12a&b), making the idea of fishing events in restored canal basins a doubly



Figures 12a&b. Fishing near Port Gibson basin, c.1900

historic way of attracting attention and investment to the hamlet. Another possibility on the community's historic, lake-like canal "wide waters" frontage is **boating and other water sports events** like a regatta, made possible from a public access point or parkland along the canal. No such access currently exists, but because the State owns both the basins and some parcels between them and the wide waters along the canal (see Figure 13b), it would seem establishing some access would be possible. Slowing traffic on Route 31 at the approach to County Rd 7 / Atwater Street would enhance the park-like character of this corridor, improve safety in anticipation of increased pedestrian traffic associated with a park, and also draw more notice to the hamlet that has been bypassed by this major thoroughfare. Indeed, we agree with the same 1945 article as to the attraction of the hamlet's natural setting, and believe restoration and more active programming of the historic waterfront, including the basins and the wide waters, would be a potential boon for the community:

There is no finer view along the Towpath than the one I saw from Port Gibson's peaceful, sun-kissed hilltop – a panorama of rolling [... and] shining Erie water, lined with cottages, and stretching as far as the eye could see.



Figure 13a. Barge Canal "wide waters"; note lake-like scale, tranquility; causeway / bridge to north shore at far L.

² Arch Merrill, "Towpath Traveler Finds Newark 'Dynamic Little City', Rochester *Democrat & Chronicle*, September 16, 1945, 56.

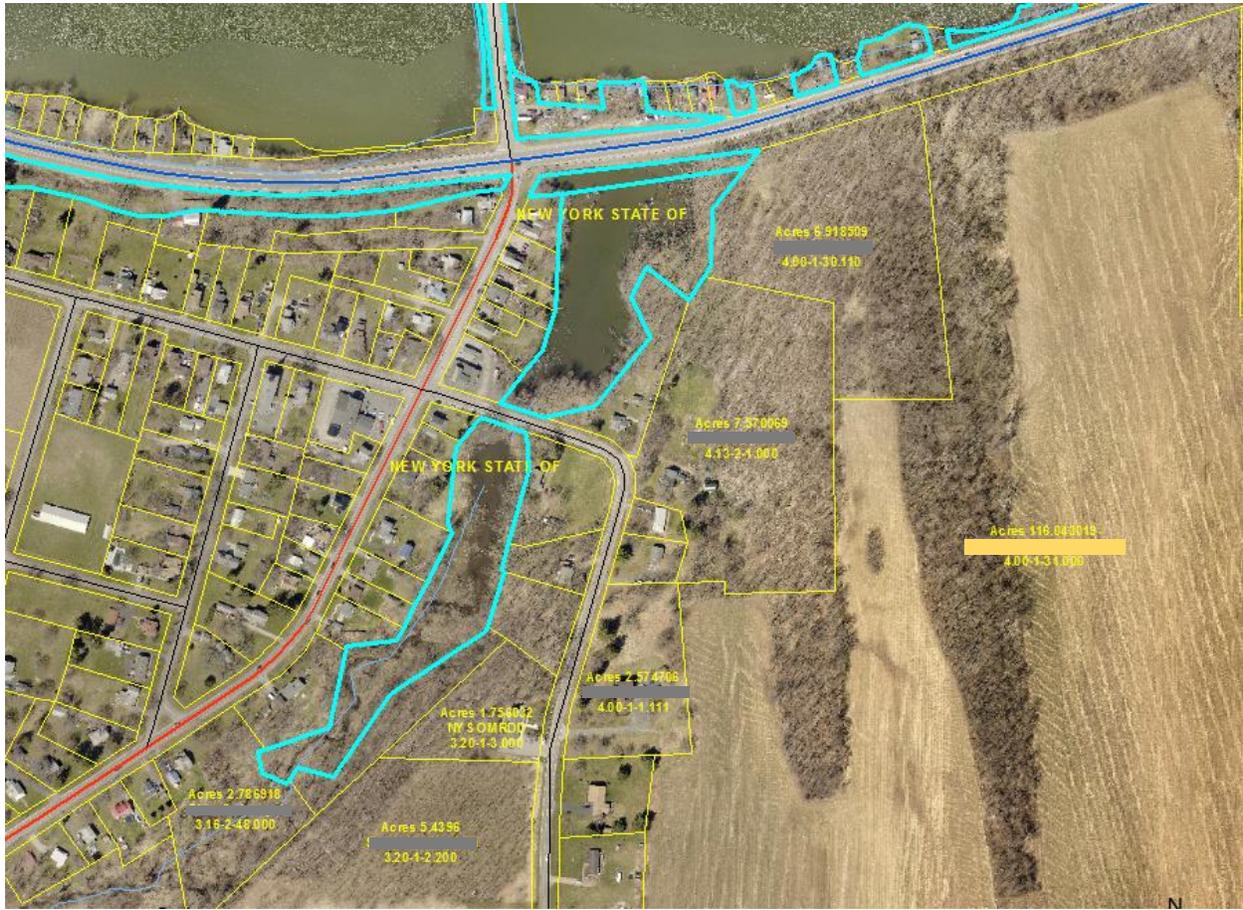


Figure 13b. Port Gibson property map, with State-owned properties outlined in neon blue. State ownership of basins and some canal-side parcels opens possibility for local public access and enjoyment of these historic water features. Courtesy Maria Rudzinski



Figure 13c. View SW to W from Route 31, E of County Rd 7 / bridge. Historic canal basin at L, canal-side property at R on “wide waters”, divided by three lane Route 31. Both sides are State-owned, opening opportunity for continuous park offering public access to historic water features, perhaps with reduction in speed, road width at this point to increase safety and increase visibility of the hamlet.

Rochester, Syracuse & Eastern Railroad structure and right-of-way

Contrary to popular belief, this Neoclassical –style brick structure at 141 County Rd 7 functioned not as a passenger station but as housing for the electrical transformers needed to sustain the rail line’s current over its long rural course; similar transformer buildings are located along the former line in Macedon to the west and in Savannah to the east. Historic photographs and oral histories do suggest that

Dense settlement pattern

Beyond specific properties, much of Port Gibson’s surviving historic character and identity rests on the relative density of its settlement amidst more sparsely settled agricultural tracts; in this way, local planners would do well to preserve the agricultural tracts surrounding the hamlet (see Figures 1, 14), and to protect the dense, walkable street grid, which has remained remarkably intact over the community’s nearly two centuries, retaining street names suggesting its historically unique Canandaigua connection. In addition, the local-level preservation of isolated historic architectural details that survive in the hamlet’s houses will complement the walkable street grid and help Port Gibson retain its sense of place (see Figures 16a&b).



Figures 16a&b. Well-preserved architectural details that hint at hamlet’s history and help build sense of place along with density: fan ornament, hood brackets, and modest porch spindling and decorative brackets at 2958 Grieg St.; unique segmental arch dormers with decorative wood surrounds at 2948 Grieg St. While additions that obfuscate historic form and use of non-historic materials make these properties not eligible for National Register listing in our estimation, their adjacency compounds their surviving details’ contribution to the character of the hamlet.

* * *

In its recently adopted Community Vision, the Town of Manchester identifies the aspiration “to build a livable, sustainable community that is well-positioned to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century”; with the recommendations herein, we hope that Port Gibson and the surrounding community might be better positioned to reap the benefits of its historic built environment toward these ends.

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Properties Proposed as Individually National Register Eligible

Address / Property Name <i>(USN as applicable)</i>	Approx. Construction Date	Current Use / Comments
Port Gibson Rural Cemetery	Earliest burial c.1828; still active	Active for all of hamlet's two century history – physically records information on economic and social development of the community with loss of many structures and loss of integrity in surviving properties. Significant for relatively high number of early obelisks, suggesting prosperity engendered by canal trade, and for adherence to simple grid pattern over nearly two centuries. Mature maples.
Rochester, Syracuse & Eastern transformer structure + right-of-way / 141 County Rd 7	c.1909	Housed transformers for Rochester, Syracuse & Eastern electric trolley line. Brick, Neoclassical style, with rounded arch window openings. Mid-century additions and slight fenestration changes to accommodate its use as an auto garage since at least the 1960s make the structure emblematic of the historic shift from mass inter-urban transit to private transit by automobile over the course of the mid- twentieth century. Moreover, functions as a “visual gatehouse” delineating hamlet at its south entry, and adjacent right-of-way could form basis for recreational trail. Continues to house auto business, extending transportation history of hamlet on the landscape.

Other Properties of Preservation Interest

Building Name / Address <i>(USN as applicable)</i>	Approx. Construction Date	Current Use / Comments
Canal basins and wide waters	c.1830 basins; c.1918 wide waters	Basins once allowed canal boats to load and unload immediately behind commercial corridor that developed along east side of Atwater Street, but were cut off from canal with construction of modern Route 31 in mid- twentieth century and abandoned to nature. Lake-like wide waters created during Barge Canal construction. Public access to these historic water features might attract people and investment, perhaps with programming to promote fishing and boating. NYS-owned; wide waters included in New York State Barge Canal National Register Historic District.
Port Gibson United Methodist Church / 2959 Grieg Street	1871	Already listed on National Register. Early partitioning system, allowing adjustment of sanctuary space. Separate façade entries. Replaced 1830s cobblestone structure. Visual cornerstone.
2958 Grieg St.	c.1890?	Retains many historic details: fan ornament in gable, quarter pinwheel brackets on entry hood, modest spindling + ornaments on side porch, and original sash windows and window arrangement. Also historic shed outbuilding. Contributes to sense of place.
2948 Grieg St.	c.1855-1875	Retains segmental arch dormers w/ decorative wood surrounds; contributes to sense of place.
Field House / 105 Field Street	c.1829	One of the hamlet's first structures, originally Federal style, w/ stepped gables, but fires and remodels during the twentieth century have significantly altered its form and materials.
Historic commercial strip (E side of Atwater St., N of Grieg St.)	1850-1910	With groceries, cobbler, harness shop, etc., serviced canal traffic until scale of Barge Canal discouraged stops in the small hamlet. Integrity is low, with variegated, non-historic cladding, altered fenestration and form, but density and central location could again sustain small-scale commercial activity with investment and attention.