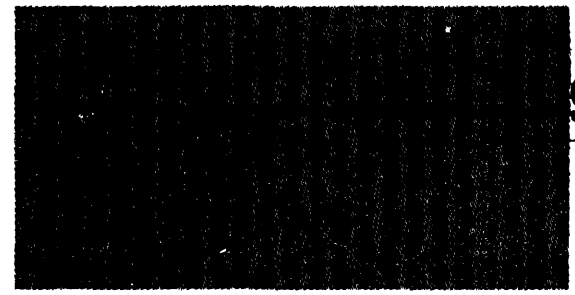


United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form



982

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*  
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic <sup>oliver</sup> (Commodore Perry) Farm

and/or common Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry Birthplace, "The Commodore"

2. Location

street & number 184 Post Road. not for publication

city, town South Kingstown N.A. vicinity of #2 - Hon. Claudine Schneider  
Congressional district

state Rhode Island code 44 county Washington code 009

3. Classification

<b>Category</b>	<b>Ownership</b>	<b>Status</b>	<b>Present Use</b>	
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> museum
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial	<input type="checkbox"/> park
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private residence
<input type="checkbox"/> site	<b>Public Acquisition</b>	<b>Accessible</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment	<input type="checkbox"/> religious
<input type="checkbox"/> object	N.A. in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government	<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name Mrs. Wisner Townsend

street & number 184 Post Road

city, town Wakefield N.A. vicinity of state Rhode Island 02880

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Town Clerk, South Kingstown Town Hall

street & number High Street

city, town Wakefield state Rhode Island 02880

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title See Continuation Sheet #1 has this property been determined eligible?  yes  no

date  federal  state  county  local

depository for survey records

city, town state

## 7. Description

<b>Condition</b>		<b>Check one</b>	<b>Check one</b>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved date _____
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		

### Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The Commodore Perry Farm encompasses approximately 250 acres of gently rolling fields and woodland on the west side of Post Road (U.S. Route 1). Approximately 21 acres immediately surrounding the house and outbuildings are included in this nomination. A pair of gravel drives, joined at each end, lead up from Post Road to the farm buildings, with a spur leading up to the north side of the house (see site plan). On a rise near the center of the property -- with a large old barn (now converted to a guest house), a caretaker's house, and other outbuildings nearby -- stands a picturesque one-and-one-half-story, gambrel-roof, shingle-clad dwelling with a massive stone center chimney, an atypical three-room plan in the main block, and a one-story, gable-roof ell complex extending northerly from its west side (Figures 1 and 2). The house has had a number of changes made to it over the years.

The age of the main block is uncertain, with either 1785 or 1815 given as the construction date in various available sources. The overall form and proportions of the gambrel-roof mass are more characteristic of earlier dwellings and would normally seem to indicate an early or mid-eighteenth-century date. Numerous changes in the building fabric, however -- such as replacement of the first-floor joists and subflooring, concealment of framing members, and removal of interior partitions -- make structural analysis difficult and inconclusive. By the time local antiquarians became interested in the Perry House in the early twentieth century, the original massive brick center chimney (visible in old photos) had been removed, the interior had been altered, and the entire structure had fallen into a state of extreme disrepair. A rather freely conceived "restoration" executed in the 1920s was followed by another period of neglect and decay. After its acquisition by the present owner in 1944-45, the house was thoroughly rehabilitated once again and has since been well maintained.

The north and south sides of the main house each contain a central entrance flanked by asymmetrically spaced windows. The southern doorway, with a five-light transom, was originally the main entrance. The plain doorway on the north, oriented to a vehicle court in the angle between the house and the ell, and the gabled dormer breaking up through the eaves over this doorway are both additions made in the 1950s. The varied massing of the ell complex is the result of multiple additions over a hundred-year period. The portion immediately west of the main house, with its gable parallel to the gambrel, was added in the 1860s. The wing extending north from this earlier section, with its gable roofs perpendicular to the aforementioned one, was added in two stages: the part closest to the 1860s ell in the 1920s, the outer part in the 1950s. On the east side of this northerly wing there is a rear entrance into the 1920s section and a modern overhead door opening into a garage occupying part of the 1950s section. The most recent portion of the ell complex, abutting the main house on the south side of the 1860s ell, is a solarium completed about 1971, with window walls composed of sliding plate-glass doors and bubble sky lights in a shed roof formed by reconstructing and extending part of the old ell's gable roof.

(See Continuation Sheet # 2)

## 8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/ humanitarian
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> other (specify) Preservation, Folklore
<b>Specific dates</b>	ca 1785, ca 1815, 1929	<b>Builder/Architect</b>	Carl F. Hartmann (?)	

### Statement of Significance (In one paragraph)

The Commodore Perry Farm is a property of unusual significance. Its historical importance is largely symbolic, stemming primarily from its status as a landmark popularly associated with historical figures, as a widely recognized historical site, and, briefly, as an historical museum. Architecturally, the Perry farmhouse is less important for the quality and condition of the original building fabric than it is for the character of certain subsequent alterations which provide a fascinating historical perspective on architectural restoration standards of the early twentieth century. Although the Perry Farm is notable primarily as a memorial or commemorative monument, its connection with local tradition and elements of its architectural design invest it with its own particular significance.

The Commodore Perry Farm is generally perceived to be a fine example of Colonial domestic architecture historically noteworthy as the birthplace of Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry, the commander responsible for the decisive American victory at the Battle of Lake Erie during the War of 1812, and possibly of his brother Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry, a distinguished naval officer best known for opening Japan to western trade in 1853-54. As discussed in the Description section above, the date of construction of the existing Perry farmhouse is in question, but it is most probably not colonial, and, with its numerous alterations, certainly cannot be characterized as an important surviving example of a standard Federal period farmhouse. Regarding its status as the birthplace of Perry, the available evidence tends to refute this contention. There is considerable disagreement in historical sources regarding the location of Perry's birth. The Rhode Island Historical Society, wishing to place a marker at the Perry birthplace, made a thorough study of the question in the 1920s and concluded that the property nominated herein, once the homestead farm of Oliver H. Perry's grandfather, Freeman Perry, was indeed the birthplace of Oliver. However, Oliver Perry was almost certainly not born in the present farmhouse. Though some sources maintain that Perry was born in this dwelling in 1785 soon after it was completed for his father, Captain Christopher R. Perry, certain nineteenth-century sources -- relying in part on the testimony of relatives and close friends and presumably more accurate -- state that Oliver himself or his father built the present house about 1815 on the site of Freeman Perry's dilapidated old "mansion house" of 1743, which had been Oliver's actual birthplace and which was torn down to permit construction of the existing house. The noted Providence architect and antiquarian John Hutchins Cady examined the farmhouse in the 1920s and dated it in the

## 9. Major Bibliographical References

Dorr Obituary Scrapbooks (unpublished, at R.I. Historical Society) I, p. 122; XI, p. 150.

(See Continuation Sheet # 8)

## 10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property approximately 21 acres

Quadrangle name Kingston

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

### UMT References

A 

1	9	2	8	8	6	2	0	4	5	8	8	4	0	0
Zone		Easting				Northing								

B 

1	9	2	8	8	5	6	0	4	5	8	8	3	1	0
Zone		Easting				Northing								

C 

1	9	2	8	8	6	4	0	4	5	8	8	2	1	0
Zone		Easting				Northing								

D 

1	9	2	8	8	5	3	0	4	5	8	8	0	4	0
Zone		Easting				Northing								

E 

1	9	2	8	8	3	2	0	4	5	8	8	0	4	0
Zone		Easting				Northing								

F 

1	9	2	8	8	2	9	0	4	5	8	8	2	0	0
Zone		Easting				Northing								

G 

1	9	2	8	8	3	9	0	4	5	8	8	2	0	0
Zone		Easting				Northing								

H 

1	9	2	8	8	5	2	0	4	5	8	8	4	7	0
Zone		Easting				Northing								

### Verbal boundary description and justification

The boundary of the nominated property is delineated by the straight-sided polygon whose vertices are marked and situated as listed above.

(See Continuation Sheet #9)

### List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state	code	county	code
-------	------	--------	------

state	code	county	code
-------	------	--------	------

## 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Robert O. Jones, Jr., Senior Historic Preservation Planner

organization R.I. Historical Preservation Comm. date May, 1982

street & number 150 Benefit Street

telephone 401-277-2678

city or town Providence,

state Rhode Island 02903

## 12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national  state  local

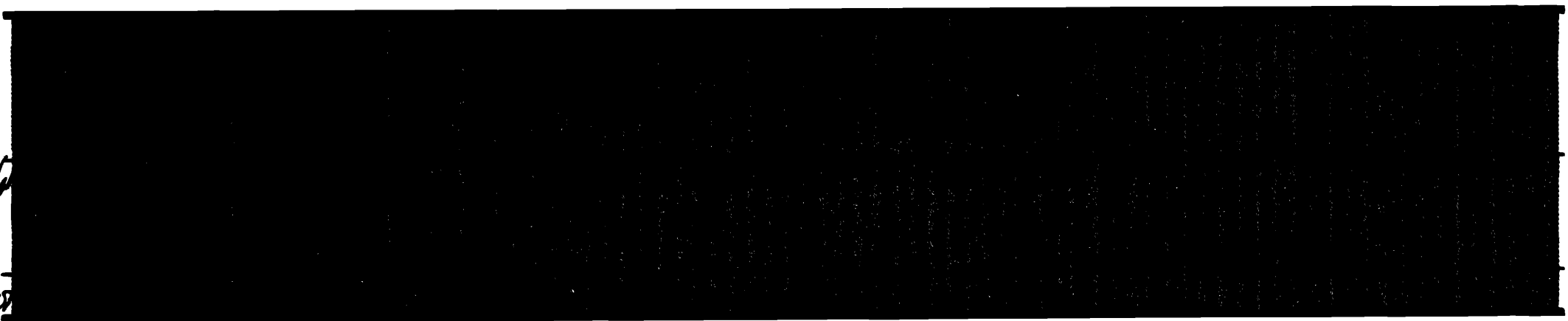
As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature

*Frank C. Williams*

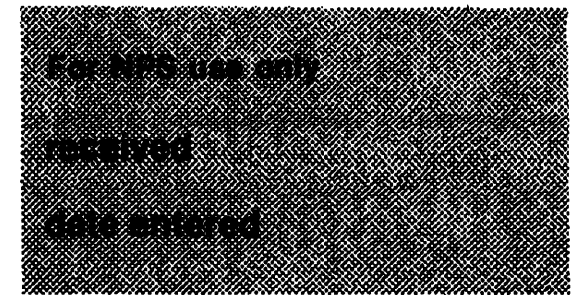
title

date



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Continuation sheet 1

Item number 6

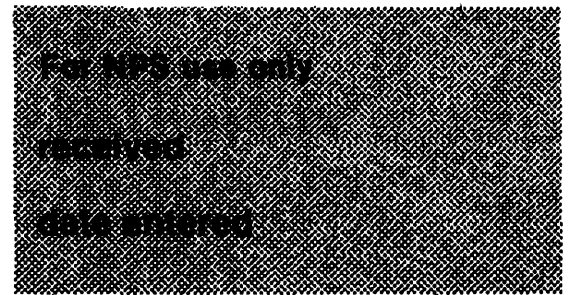
Page 2

Historic American Buildings Survey  
1956, 1959  
Library of Congress  
Washington, D.C.

Preliminary Survey Report--Town of South Kingstown  
April 1975  
Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission  
Providence, R.I.

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Continuation sheet 2

Item number 7

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The interior of the house has been considerably altered over the years. The first story of the original part of the house now comprises three relatively large rooms. The old main entrance on the south once opened into a small central stair hall containing a steep staircase with a plain, square newel and stick balusters. The partition between this hall and the southwest corner room was removed and a new neo-Colonial staircase was installed in the 1950s. The larger space is currently used as a library and informal sitting room with the staircase at the east end.

The present main (north) entrance opens into a handsome and spacious hall with paneled walls, a cupboard in the northwest corner, and a stone fireplace in the southeast corner with a bolection molding around the firebox (Figure 3). The wall paneling is composed of old doors and was installed, together with the corner cupboard and corner fireplace, during the 1920s restoration. At that time the room was used as a dining room. A window in the north wall was closed up and the new front doorway was cut in the 1950s. The hall connects to the library through a door next to the fireplace. A narrow space between these two rooms is divided into closets opening into each room and a powder room opening off the library.

East of the hall and library is a living room occupying the entire east end of the house (Figure 4). This space was probably once divided into two rooms, but the partition between has long since been removed. A large fireplace, added during the 1920s restoration, projects into the room at the center of the east side. It has a molded architrave firebox surround, a bulbous mantel shelf resembling a piece of an overscaled cyma recta molding, beveled overmantel and side panels, and cupboards on each side of the chimney mass opening sideways rather than forward. Some cased corner posts and a massive cased summer beam in this room are the only visible evidences of timber framing in the house.

West of the present entrance hall the space in the 1860s ell has been converted from a kitchen into a dining room. The fenestration has been changed by moving the two windows in the south wall closer together to make a double window and by cutting a window in the west wall and installing the sash from the window closed up in the entrance hall. From the dining room doors lead into the solarium on the south and the remainder of the ell complex on the north. The part of the ell adjacent to the dining room was added as a maid's room and bath in the 1920s and was converted in the 1950s into a large kitchen with a breakfast area. At that time an addition containing a large kitchen closet, a mudroom, and a garage was added off the north end of the new kitchen.

(See Continuation Sheet # 3)

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Continuation sheet 3

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The second story of the house originally contained four small bedrooms opening off a walkway surrounding the staircase. One of the bedrooms was turned into a bathroom in the 1920s. This arrangement was changed during the 1950s renovations and the staircase now rises to a small hall with a bathroom straight ahead in the gabled dormer addition and one large bedroom on each side.

The barn, west of the house, comprises a tall one-and-one-half-story, gable-roof, early nineteenth-century main section with a lower one-and-one-half-story, gable-roof, twentieth-century addition to the south side (Figure 5). It has been renovated for residential purposes. Most of the main section is given over to a large all-purpose living and dining area with a two-story central space, open to the roof, flanked on the east and west by one-story spaces where the original animal stalls have been removed. The lofts above the old stall areas have been partitioned off from the central space and are furnished as bedrooms, reached by separate corner staircases leading up from the low side spaces. On the north side, filling the original large wagon doorway, are French doors flanked by relatively wide multi-pane sidelights, the former opening out onto a screened porch. In the main section the hewn post-and-beam structural members are left exposed with wall panels of rough plaster or planks between the timbers. The addition, once a milking shed, contains a kitchen adjacent to the main section, a bedroom beyond the kitchen at the south end, and a large dormitory-like bedroom above reached by a staircase running up from the kitchen.

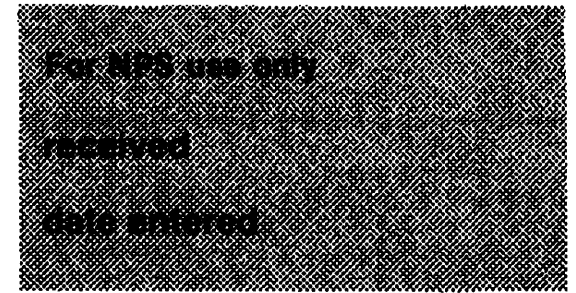
The other buildings on the property include a one-story, gable-roof, shingle-clad caretaker's house, converted from an early twentieth-century garage by the present owners; a small, one-story, gable-roof, shingle-clad barn with exposed rafters articulating the eaves overhangs; a one-story, gable-roof, shingle-clad shed; a very small, gable-roof, board-and-batten structure resembling a springhouse or wellhouse; and a low, rectangular, gable-roof, wooden chicken house. These structures have no notable exterior trim or interior finish. A swimming pool with a screened pavilion on a terrace at its west end is located north of the driveway leading up to the north side of the main house.

A complex configuration of stone walls divides the grounds near the house and large barn (guest house) into lane, orchard, night pasture, and field. These walls, which contribute considerably to the scenic quality of the property, are important artifacts indicating previous use patterns of this old farm, a portion of which is still used to raise hay. About 1000 feet north of the main house, across a cleared field, is the old Perry family cemetery, a plot about fourteen feet square bounded by granite fence posts lacking their original iron rails. Most of the graves, following Quaker custom, are marked by unscribed headstones and footstones of rough-hewn granite. The resting places of Oliver H. Perry's

(See Continuation Sheet #4).

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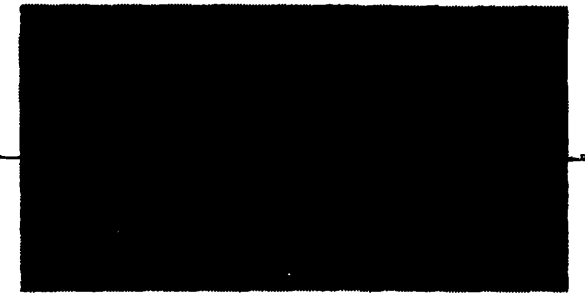
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grandparents, Freeman and Mercy Perry, are the only ones marked with inscribed slate stones.



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early nineteenth century, lending credence to the latter story. Thus Oliver was probably born on the property but not in the house now standing. Matthew Perry was almost certainly born in Newport, not on the Perry Farm.

In spite of these facts, a considerable oral, written, and even graphic tradition has grown around the Perry Farm, and specifically the farmhouse, identifying it intimately with Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry. After his victory at Lake Erie, Perry became one of the most celebrated heroes of nineteenth-century America. He was lionized in articles and books, and his untimely death at age 34 in 1819 only seems to have increased public admiration and esteem for him. A woodcut of the present Perry farmhouse was included in Lossing's Field Book of the War of 1812 (1868; see photo number 6) as "the birthplace of Oliver Hazard Perry" and since then the picturesque little gambrel-roof dwelling has been so pictured in innumerable publications, souvenir prints and photos, and postcards.

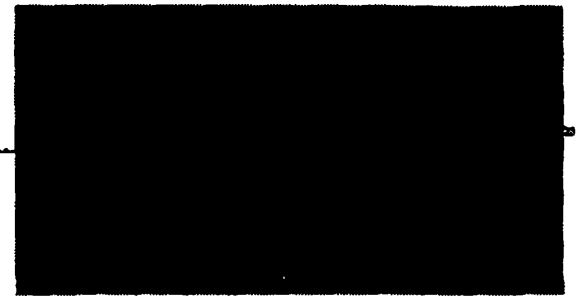
As might be expected the Commodore's fame had a special impact on his home town and a considerable body of local tradition developed concerning him, perhaps exacerbated by a regional peculiarity. South Kingstown lies in what is commonly known in Rhode Island as South County. The South County, corresponding roughly to what is officially designated Washington County, is not a corporate entity devised for political admiration, but exists extralegally in the perception of Rhode Island residents as an area defined by its environmental character and historical and cultural traditions. More than elsewhere in the state, local history has been an integral part of the popular culture of South County and has spawned a pervasive, rather nostalgic, anecdotal historical tradition -- transmitted in both oral and written form -- based in large part on intimate personal recollections of personalities and places. This rich body of folklore and legend is unique in Rhode Island and has an almost mythic significance. The tales long in circulation about Perry and the Perry Farm place the property squarely within this tradition and make it a South County landmark of major literary and cultural importance.

The Perry Farm's significance to the community is indicated by intermittent attempts to insure its preservation. By the time Oliver H. Perry reached adulthood, parts of Freeman Perry's homestead farm had been set off or sold off to various descendants, and a large parcel was put up for auction to pay debts of Freeman's estate in 1814. Oliver purchased this latter parcel and added it to two other parcels from the old farm (one acquired previously and one subsequently) to form a tract of about 162 acres surrounding the present farmhouse. This seems to have been motivated by a conscious effort to keep "the homestead" in the family. In 1824 Perry's widow Elizabeth C. Perry sold the farm to her uncle Christopher G. Champlin, who later sold it out of the family.

(See Continuation Sheet # 6 )

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In 1865, George Tiffany of New York, a son-in-law of Matthew C. Perry, purchased the farm, motivated by the fact that it had been the home of his wife's ancestors. Thus the property returned to the possession of Perry descendants. It was rented out to tenants, however, and by the early twentieth century had fallen into a state of terrible disrepair after undergoing destructive renovations.

Local historical and patriotic organizations called for preservation and restoration of the Perry house as a memorial, preferably under the auspices of the state. In 1929 Mayor Mortimer A. Sullivan of Newport, in an address to the Rhode Island Historical Association, spoke of the need to preserve memorials and landmarks to foster patriotism and specifically called upon the state to purchase the Perry Farm and turn it into a "historic shrine" to Oliver Perry. That same year Mrs. Perry Tiffany, widow of George Tiffany's son and then owner of the Perry Farm, had the old farmhouse rehabilitated under the supervision of her brother-in-law, retired U.S. Army Colonel Carl F. Hartmann. Mrs. Tiffany, while using it also as a country retreat, opened the house to the public as a museum in honor of both Oliver and Matthew Perry, with memorabilia relating to the two men. At the time the work executed on the house -- including the reconstruction of the missing center chimney, the wall paneling of old doors in the then dining room (present entrance hall), and the neo-Georgian chimney piece in the living room -- was referred to as "restoration," and contemporary accounts comment on "the particular care to preserve the simplicity and dignity" of the old house and the picturesque and thoroughly "colonial" ambience of its setting. The Farm still exhibits much of the character it had back when it was the "Commodore Perry Memorial." The freely handled "restoration" of this property, an isolated monument associated with a person of exceptional importance, for use as a house museum serves as a classic illustrative example of the most common early twentieth-century approach to historical preservation.

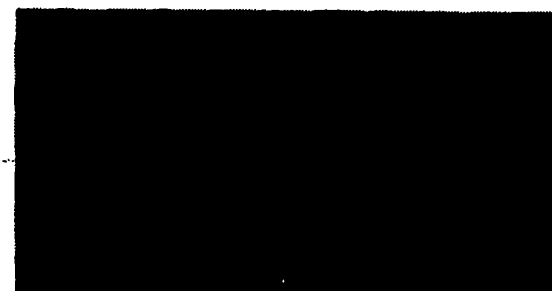
In 1936, a delegation from Japan visited the Perry Farm and planted several flowering cherry trees in memory of Matthew C. Perry. This ceremony, enacted at a location at best only occasionally visited by Matthew, if at all, attests to the substantial symbolic importance of this property's connection to the Perry family.

By the late 1930s Mrs. Tiffany had apparently lost interest in her late husband's family homestead. The property, which had been mortgaged to the Wakefield Trust Company for a decade, was conveyed to Mrs. Tiffany's sister, Mrs. Carl Hartmann. Upon Mrs. Hartmann's death in 1943 Wakefield Trust took title and sold the farm to Rowland Hazard of South Kingstown. Maintenance on the house was apparently deferred during these years. The farm was acquired by the present owner and her husband for use as a country house in 1944-45. Since then the farmhouse has been repaired

(See Continuation Sheet # 7 )

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and somewhat altered over the years (most extensively in 1955; N.J. Senesey, architect) but though these changes detract somewhat from the earlier fabric of the house, they do not eradicate the character of the earlier work. Today the Perry Farm stands as an important local landmark with symbolic, quasi-mythical associations with Oliver Hazard Perry which give it an unusual but real historical significance.

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Field, Edward, State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations at the End of the Century: A History (3 vols., Boston and Syracuse: 1902) II, pp. 618, 622.

Land Evidence Records, Town of South Kingstown (unpublished; deed transcripts by Marjorie Schunke, in possession of Mrs. Wisner Townsend).

Lossing, Benson J., The Pictorial Field-Book of the War of 1812 (New York: 1868) p. 521.

Narragansett Times, 8 February 1929, p. 4.  
26 February 1929, p. 3.  
1 March 1929, Supplement (n.p.).  
28 June 1929, p. 4.  
5 July 1929, p. 1.

New York Times, 17 March 1929, sec. 3, p. 1.  
27 June 1929, p. 28.

Page, Charles (unpublished thesis on history and architectural design of Commodore Perry farmhouse, Yale University, no date; photocopy in possession of Mrs. Wisner Townsend).

Providence Evening Bulletin, 29 June 1926, p. 2.

Providence Journal, 21 January 1906, p. 30.  
25 February 1929, p. 28.  
30 June 1929, p. 5.

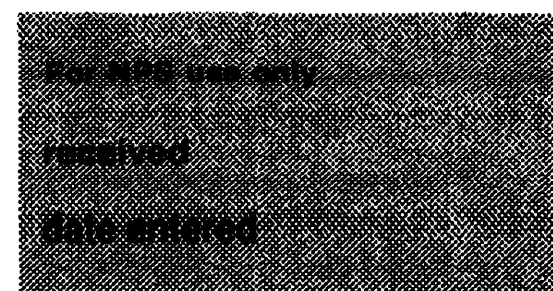
Providence Magazine, XXXVIII (September 1927) pp. 438, 452.

Rhode Island Historical Society Collections, XX, 4 (October 1927), pp. 113-14.

Rhode Island Historical Society, Graphics Collection (old photographs and postcards of Perry Farm).

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The boundaries have been drawn to include the Commodore Perry farmhouse and all outbuildings described in section 7, together with the cleared land visible from the farm complex. At the time the Commodore Perry farmhouse served as a museum in the early twentieth century -- one of its periods of major significance -- its surroundings were regarded as an element which contributed substantially to the property's "colonial" ambience and historicity (see continuation sheet # 6, second paragraph). The visual character of the land visible from the farm buildings, with its field, pasture, and woodland crisscrossed by stone walls and fences, is an important integral feature of this cultural resource, and the land has therefore been included in the nomination. The line segments AB and BC have been drawn to follow a boundary between the hay fields adjoining the house and a wedge-shaped field to the north known as the "pie lot." The "pie lot" was acquired by the present owners and is thus not historically associated with the Perry Farm; it is also visually separated from the hay fields by a hedgerow. The nominated property has been extended to line segment HA to encompass the limit of field visible from the house and also to include the old Perry family cemetery, located just beyond a small pond or bog, in a thicket of trees between two areas of cleared field. The line segment DE has been drawn to include outbuildings in the wooded land south of the drive through the farm (see site plan).