

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

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National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form

received MAY 19 1987

date entered JUN 18 1987

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

1. Name

historic Joseph Briggs House/Coventry Town Farm

and/or common

2. Location

street & number Town Farm Road

N.A. not for publication

city, town Coventry

N.A. vicinity of

Congressional District #2,
Hon. Claudine Schneider

state Rhode Island

code 44

county Kent

code 003

3. Classification

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

4. Owner of Property

name Mr. Thomas Marcotte, Crystal Restorations

street & number 1 Coventry Shoppers Park

city, town Coventry

N.A. vicinity of

state Rhode Island 02816

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Coventry Town Hall

street & number Flat River Road

city, town Coventry

state Rhode Island 02816

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title Preliminary Survey Report -
Town of Coventry

has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date 1978

federal state county local

depository for survey records Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission

city, town

state

7. Description

Condition		Check one	Check one
<input type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input checked="" 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

Built about 1790 and enlarged in 1851, the Coventry Town Farm is a two-and-one-half-story clapboard structure with a gable roof. The main body of the house, rectangular in plan and five bays wide, faces Town Farm Road behind a small front yard and a picket fence. A one-and-one-half-story, gable-roofed ell extends from the rear of the main house. The main barn of the farmstead, which originally stood next to the main house, was destroyed by fire several years ago, and much of what was once farmland surrounding the site has been developed with single-family houses.

The Federal-period architecture of the front portion of the house is exceptionally elegant for what was once a remote rural location. The cornice below the eaves of the main roof is treated with a Greek key molding, and the heads of the windows at all floors are treated with splayed lintel caps, characteristic of Federal-period houses in Rhode Island. The focal point of the facade is the central entrance, with its triangular pediment broken by a semicircular fanlight above the door. The pediment, supported by fluted pilasters, is trimmed with dentils and modillions. The fanlight, divided into segments with wood muntins and swags, is capped with a carved wood keystone. Windows on the front portion of the house are six-over-six, double-hung. The foundation is primarily rubblestone, although a portion of the foundation along the southeast side is constructed of roughly finished ashlar blocks.

The rear ell, built after the Town of Coventry acquired the property in 1851, is Greek Revival in style. The southeast and northwest elevations of the ell, which are identical, are trimmed with a wide cornice board with a horizontal molding to resemble an entablature, and with corner boards capped with moldings at the top to resemble pilasters. Six-over-six windows on the first floor are simply framed. Short three-over-three windows at the second-story level break into the entablature. On both principal facades there is an entrance which is surmounted by a three-light transom and projecting horizontal cap. The doors are treated with four recessed, flat panels. On the southeast end of the ell there are three very small three-over-three windows at the first floor level.

The interior of the main portion of the house is laid out on a five-room, center-chimney plan, typical of Rhode Island houses built during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The front entry hall retains its narrow stair which winds up to the second floor against what was the wall of an original massive central chimney (this chimney was removed around the turn of the

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

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

For NPS use only

received

date entered

Continuation sheet 1

Item number 7

Page 2

century). The stairway is treated with turned newel posts, simple rectangular balusters, and a closed string. The entry hall leads to parlors on either side.

The west parlor is the most elegantly detailed room in the house. The focal point of this room is the wood mantelpiece. Panelled pilasters on either side of the covered fireplace opening support a broad horizontal board and a mantel shelf. This horizontal board is articulated into panels with delicate applied moldings, and is trimmed at the bottom with a band decorated with a pattern of vertical gouges. The mantel shelf is treated like a cornice with moldings carved in a Greek key pattern. The room retains a wood cornice at the ceiling which is treated with a carved frieze to match that found in the mantel. The frames surrounding the six-panel doors in this room break out at the top to form square "ears."

The east parlor on the first floor is more simply treated. The door frames do not have "ears," and like all of the rooms of the house, the projecting corner posts are cased with simple wood casings. A portion of the original mantel here was removed when an entrance was made for the closet created when the central chimney was removed.

Characteristic of houses of this type, a large kitchen, often referred to as a keeping room, extends across the middle of the house at the rear. To the east of the kitchen is a small room, now used as a bathroom, and a rear entry hall with a rear stair. To the west are a small room and pantry. The partition between these two rooms is not original. The keeping room retains its very wide and tall mantel which frames what was originally an immense cooking fireplace. The wide board below the projecting mantel shelf is divided into three panels with applied moldings. This room also retains a wainscot of flat horizontal boarding capped with a simple bullnose molding. Doors in this portion of the house are four-panel in type.

The second floor of the main body of the house is virtually identical in plan to the first floor, although the detailing of the rooms is simple. The two front chambers above the first-floor parlors are similarly treated with simple frames around the doors and windows. In the east chamber, the mantelpiece is treated with a horizontal panel supporting a shelf, with projecting flat blocks at either end to serve as pilasters. In the west chamber the mantel is flat and a backband molding is used to create an architrave around what was the original

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

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

For NPS use only

received

date entered

Continuation sheet 2

Item number 7

Page 3

fireplace opening. Interestingly, the mantel remaining in the chamber above the keeping room is nearly as large as the one below, suggesting that the fireplace in this second floor location might also have been used for cooking. Doors throughout this floor are of the four-panel type, and many retain their original wrought iron hinges. There are two plastered chambers at the west end of the otherwise unfinished attic.

Built to meet the needs of a municipal poor farm and asylum, the rear ell is unusual in plan. A hallway between the two entrances bisects the ell on the first floor. It is lined on the southwest side by three cells. The entrance to each cell has two doors: a solid plank door on the hallway side, and a wood door with barred openings on the inner side. The small window in each cell is also secured with wood bars. On the northeast side of the ell corridor is a larger room, which connects to the front of the house, once a common room, and another smaller room. A single-run stair, now removed, originally ran from the ell corridor to the second floor. Detailing throughout the ell is very simple. The hallway retains a horizontal chair rail on one wall, and the partition forming the bank of cells is built of vertical wood planks.

The second floor of the ell was originally composed of six very small chambers lining a narrow corridor. Several partitions have been removed from these rooms to create two larger rooms and a bathroom.

The farm was closed by the town in the 1930s and later sold. Over the years, the house was severely damaged by the elements and by a fire which caused the partial collapse of the rear wall. The structure was recently acquired and restored by a new owner and is now used as a two-family residence.

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 checked="" type="checkbox"/> social/
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	humanitarian
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)

Specific dates c. 1790, 1851 Builder/Architect Unknown

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The Coventry Town Farm is significant as a well-preserved and, considering its formerly remote rural location, elegant example of Federal-period domestic architecture in Rhode Island. It is of particular significance as an example of a municipally sponsored poor farm and insane asylum. While such institutions were once common in Rhode Island towns, few remain today in such a relatively unaltered state. The Coventry Town Farm was built as a private house and farmstead by Joseph Briggs about 1790. It was purchased in 1851 by the Town of Coventry and subsequently enlarged. With its addition constructed by the town, the Town Farm stands as an excellent and rare example of a structure adopted for use as a municipal public-welfare institution in the mid-nineteenth century.

Although built as a private residence, the farm was already being used to accommodate the poor farm when the Town of Coventry purchased the property from James Briggs in 1851. According to J.R. Cole in his History of Washington and Kent Counties, the town purchased for \$2,000 four lots on which a poor house and asylum were already located. The town subsequently enlarged the structure with the addition of a rear ell so that it soon furnished "ample accommodations for the town's dependent citizens." The ell provided six very small chambers for residents on the second floor, with two additional chambers and a larger common room on the first floor. Three cells secured with wood bars on the first floor would have housed the insane or those temporarily incarcerated for breaking house rules. The main house was used for the cooking of meals and to accommodate the "Master" of the asylum and his family, although additional inmates may have been housed there as well.

The history of the farm illustrates a typical pattern in the treatment of dependent citizens in New England. Based on British tradition, it was the obligation of local governments in the colonies to provide for the poor and infirm. As early as 1642, the Plymouth colony issued a law requiring every town to support its poor. Most towns "put up" their charges with private citizens, often "bidding off" the poor and insane to those who would care for them at the lowest cost to the town. Such a system resulted in irregular and often inferior care, and by the early nineteenth century local town governments were establishing their own institutions. There was an expectation at the time

9. Major Bibliographical References

Cole, J.R. History of Kent and Washington Counties. New York; W.W. Preston and Company, 1889.

Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission. Historical and Architectural Resources of Coventry, R.I. 1978.

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property 2 acres

Quadrangle name Crompton

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

UTM References

A

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

B

Zone		Easting				Northing								

C

Zone		Easting				Northing								

D

Zone		Easting				Northing								

E

Zone		Easting				Northing								

F

Zone		Easting				Northing								

G

Zone		Easting				Northing								

H

Zone		Easting				Northing								

Verbal boundary description and justification

See Continuation Sheet #5

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

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

state	code	county	code
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11. Form Prepared By

name/title Clifford M. Renshaw, A.I.A.

organization Clifford M. Renshaw, Architects

date April, 1987

street & number 25 Main Street

telephone 294-6538

city or town Wickford

state Rhode Island 02852

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

title

date

4/23/87

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I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

date

6-18-87

Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

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

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

For NPS use only

received

date entered

Continuation sheet 3

Item number 8

Page 2

that all able-bodied inmates should earn their support, and the local institutions established in the rural communities were often farms where the inmates provided the labor for all of the farming activities. Apparently the Briggs family had taken responsibility for many of Coventry's charges, probably in a "bidding out" arrangement, before the town ultimately purchased and improved the farm.

In 1853, soon after establishing the Town Farm, the Coventry Town Council published their "Rules and Regulations for the Government of the Asylum in Coventry, R.I." This document provides insight into the life in the institution. The farm was run by a "Master of the Asylum," assisted by a matron, but all activities were closely monitored by the Town Council, to which detailed reports were made on a quarterly basis. The asylum was to provide food and lodging for the poor and infirm, as well as to the insane, and clean clothing was to be supplied at least once a week. All able-bodied residents were required to work the farm six days a week, or to perform other jobs as directed by the Council. Failure to obey the rules, or to adequately perform the required duties, would result in such punishment as deprivation of meals, extra work added to regular chores, or confinement in a cell up to a maximum duration of one week.

By 1850, fifteen of thirty-one towns in Rhode Island had established similar institutions. For the most part, these facilities were not progressive in their treatment of the poor and insane, and the conditions in many were found to be deplorable. In 1851, a report by Thomas Hazard entitled "Report on the Poor and Insane in Rhode Island" publicized these conditions. In 1864, the General Assembly appointed a committee to study the possibilities of establishing a state asylum in order to improve conditions for the inmates, and to relieve the municipalities of their obligations to care for the socially disadvantaged. A Board of Charities and Corrections was founded, and a "state farm" was established on two adjacent farms in Cranston, which were purchased by the state and became known as the Howard Reservation. By the turn of the century, the Howard Reservation accommodated institutions for the poor and the insane, as well as a workhouse and house of correction. Over the years these institutions grew in size and improved in their abilities to care for the residents, helped in large measure in the 1930s by a generous infusion of Federal funding through the Works Progress Administration.

Following the establishment and growth of these state

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

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

For NPS use only

received

date entered

Continuation sheet 4

Item number 8

Page 3

institutions, the need for local facilities diminished and gradually the locally sponsored institutions closed. The Coventry Town Farm was closed in the 1930s and after years of abandonment the property was sold. Although the house suffered serious structural damage in recent years, it has been acquired by a new owner and carefully restored.

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

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

For NPS use only

received

date entered

Continuation sheet 5

Item number 10

Page 1

The following lot includes the farmhouse, the site of the barn (no longer standing), and the original farm yard. No other structures or features related to the farm remain outside the boundaries of this lot.

That certain tract or parcel of land with all improvements thereon, situated in the Town of Coventry, County of Kent and State of Rhode Island, bounded and described as follows:

Beginning at a point, said point the northeasterly corner of the herein described parcel, said point being on the southerly street line of Town Farm Road, said point being two hundred twenty-five (225) feet as measured along the southerly street line of said Town Farm Road, from the northwesterly corner of lands now or formerly of Gregory Levett and Barbara J. Levett; thence running westerly, bounded northerly on said Town Farm Road, a distance of fifty-two and 34/100 (52.34) feet to a point; thence turning an interior angle of 1183 21'28" and running westerly, bounded northerly on said Town Farm Road, a distance of one hundred seventy-two and 66/100 (172.66) feet to a point; thence turning an interior angle of 83 10'14" and running southerly a distance of one hundred thirty-seven and 50/100 (137.50) feet to a point; thence turning an interior angle of 141 08'43" and running southeasterly a distance of six hundred fifteen and 99/100 (615.99) feet to a point; thence turning an interior angle of 22 19'36" and running northwesterly a distance of five hundred seventy-two and 05/100 (572.05) feet to a point; thence turning an interior angle of 196 29'50" and running northerly a distance of forty-five and 08/100 (45.08) feet to a point; said point being the point and place of beginning. The last four herein described courses are bounded by other lands now or formerly of Crystal Restoration, Inc. Said parcel contains 87,088 square feet, more or less.