

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY - NOMINATION FORM

(Type all entries - complete applicable sections)

STATE:	Rhode Island
COUNTY:	Providence
FOR NPS USE ONLY	
ENTRY DATE	JUN 13 1974

1. NAME

COMMON:
Union Church

AND/OR HISTORIC:
"The Christian Church in the Town of Portsmouth"

2. LOCATION

STREET AND NUMBER:
Northwest corner of Union Street and East Main Road

CITY OR TOWN:
Portsmouth

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT:
#1: Fernand J. St. Germain

STATE: Rhode Island 02781 CODE: 44 COUNTY: Newport CODE: 005

3. CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY (Check One)	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	ACCESSIBLE TO THE PUBLIC
<input type="checkbox"/> District <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Building <input type="checkbox"/> Site <input type="checkbox"/> Structure <input type="checkbox"/> Object	<input type="checkbox"/> Public <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Private <input type="checkbox"/> Both	Public Acquisition: <input type="checkbox"/> In Process <input type="checkbox"/> Being Considered	<input type="checkbox"/> Occupied <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Unoccupied <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Preservation work in progress
PRESENT USE (Check One or More as Appropriate)			
<input type="checkbox"/> Agricultural <input type="checkbox"/> Commercial <input type="checkbox"/> Educational <input type="checkbox"/> Entertainment	<input type="checkbox"/> Government <input type="checkbox"/> Industrial <input type="checkbox"/> Military <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Museum	<input type="checkbox"/> Park <input type="checkbox"/> Private Residence <input type="checkbox"/> Religious <input type="checkbox"/> Scientific	<input type="checkbox"/> Transportation <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Specify) _____ _____ _____

4. OWNER OF PROPERTY

OWNER'S NAME:
Portsmouth Historical Society

STREET AND NUMBER:
Northwest corner of Union Street and East Main Road

CITY OR TOWN:
Portsmouth

STATE:
Rhode Island 02871

CODE:
44

5. LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE, REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.:
Portsmouth Town Clerk's Office

STREET AND NUMBER:
East Main Road

CITY OR TOWN:
Portsmouth

STATE:
Rhode Island 02871

CODE:
44

6. REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE OF SURVEY:
none

DATE OF SURVEY: Federal State County Local

DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS:

STREET AND NUMBER:

CITY OR TOWN:

STATE:

CODE:

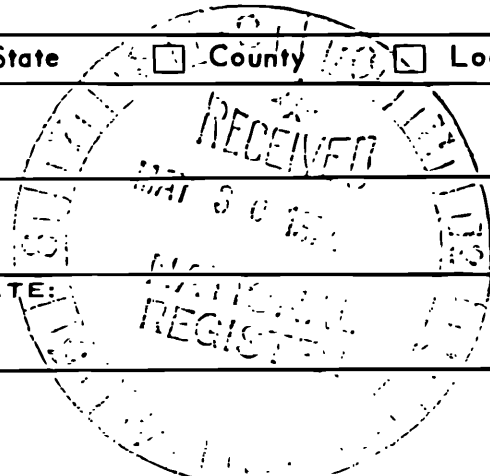
STATE:

COUNTY:

ENTRY NUMBER: JUN 13 1974

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7. DESCRIPTION

CONDITION	(Check One)					
	<input type="checkbox"/> Excellent	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Good	<input type="checkbox"/> Fair	<input type="checkbox"/> Deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> Ruins	<input type="checkbox"/> Unexposed
	(Check One)			(Check One)		
	<input type="checkbox"/> Altered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Unaltered		<input type="checkbox"/> Moved	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Original Site	

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (if known) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Union Church was built in 1866 by the "Christian Church in the Town of Portsmouth." It is a simple rectangular steeple-less clap-boarded building, three stories high, set gable end to East Main Road. This eastern gable end is the front of the church and has a central flat-headed plain double door flanked by a pair of narrow windows at the first-(basement) story level and paired nine-over-nine double-hung windows at the second- and third-story levels (the sanctuary). All the windows on the east wall display the structure's unique exterior architectural feature: a molded triangular "eyebrow" frame protruding from the clapboards above the flat head of the window itself. The front door is similarly defined, with an oculus inserted between the door head and the "eyebrow." The three windows at the main level of the church on the north and south sides repeat the "eyebrow" treatment. The fourth (west) wall is blind.

Inside the church, as one enters from the east, are paired curving stairways, with vertically-wainscoted railings, which sweep from the front door up to the main level of the church. The curve of the plaster walls follows that of the stairs, augmenting the feeling of being gathered in to worship.

Three doors lead from the foyer into the three aisles of the sanctuary under the gallery at its eastern end. This gallery was originally open above its vertically-wainscoted one-and-a-half-foot railing, but has since been closed in and is now used for display purposes.

The sanctuary itself is a large two-story rectangular room full of light from the three tall windows on each side. At its western end are a raised platform and a simple pulpit. The architectural treatment of the two brick chimneys set behind the platform as flanking pilasters is unusual and effective. They frame the focal point of the altar area: a large plaster plaque with shell-scrolled corners painted with the Lord's Prayer. To the right or north of the platform is the original pipe organ, still operable and purchased from Hook and Hastings of Boston shortly after the completion of the church. Its pipes retain their original delicate stencilled decoration.

The walls of the sanctuary have vertical strip wainscoting to a height of three feet. Above this the walls were originally stencilled in an overall floral design with an eighteen-inch base band of foliate scrolls and flowers. Enough of this Victorian stencilling remains to make its restoration a very real possibility.

The cornice and ceiling of the sanctuary are surprisingly well preserved. They are made of tin, painted blue and gold to resemble gilding of a Renaissance manner, and "panelled" in alternating snub-cornered rectangles and squares, each embossed with curvilinear motifs.

SEE INSTRUCTIONS

8. SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD (Check One or More as Appropriate)

- | | | | |
|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pre-Columbian | <input type="checkbox"/> 16th Century | <input type="checkbox"/> 18th Century | <input type="checkbox"/> 20th Century |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 15th Century | <input type="checkbox"/> 17th Century | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 19th Century | |

SPECIFIC DATE(S) (If Applicable and Known) 1866

AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE (Check One or More as Appropriate)

- | | | | |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Aboriginal | <input type="checkbox"/> Education | <input type="checkbox"/> Political | <input type="checkbox"/> Urban Planning |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Prehistoric | <input type="checkbox"/> Engineering | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Religion/Phi- | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Specify) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Historic | <input type="checkbox"/> Industry | losophy | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agriculture | <input type="checkbox"/> Invention | <input type="checkbox"/> Science | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Architecture | <input type="checkbox"/> Landscape | <input type="checkbox"/> Sculpture | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Art | Architecture | <input type="checkbox"/> Social/Human- | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Commerce | <input type="checkbox"/> Literature | itarian | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Communications | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Military | <input type="checkbox"/> Theater | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Conservation | <input type="checkbox"/> Music | <input type="checkbox"/> Transportation | _____ |

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Union Church occupies a lot located at the junction of Union Street and East Main Road, two of the earliest roads to be laid out after Portsmouth's founding in 1638. The location in itself is significant as the site of one of the first skirmishes between British and American forces in the Battle of Rhode Island on August 29, 1778.

The Church is the second religious structure to occupy this site and traces its history as a congregation back to 1810. By 1821 the congregation had grown considerably and solidified the religious principles which it wished formally to espouse. "The Rhode Island Union Society" was incorporated in June, 1821, and its charter was amended in May, 1824.

The members of the Society subscribed to tolerant religious principles, the heart of which were that devotion should be measured only by belief in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and that each member had a right to interpret the words of Scripture according to his own understanding. Because the members felt that man-made creeds and the names by which churches were frequently called had a divisive effect on the Christian community as a whole, they wished to call their church the Union Meeting House. The structure they built later in 1824 was to be open to devout Christians of any denomination.

On May 27, 1834, a group of citizens of similarly tolerant religious beliefs met in the Union Meeting House to form yet a third congregation of worship. This congregation met for many years preceding its formal incorporation in 1861.

Sometime between 1834 and 1861 the Union Meeting House structure had been divided in half and moved off its lot. Thus, the "Christian Church in the Town of Portsmouth," newly incorporated in 1861, was in need of a meeting place. The Church built what old records refer to as a "shed" across the north side of the Meeting House lot in April, 1861. This structure served until 1866 when the present building was erected.

SEE INSTRUCTIONS

9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Bayles, Richard M., ed.: History of Newport County, Rhode Island (New York, 1888).
Church Record. Handwritten record book from May 27, 1834 through October 2, 1859. Collections of Portsmouth Historical Society.
Record of the Church of Christ in Portsmouth. Handwritten records from March 11, 1810 through June 22, 1816. Collections of Portsmouth Historical Society.
Records of the Christian Church of Portsmouth, R. I. Handwritten record book from August 31, 1861 through June,

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA (See Continuation Sheet 3)

LATITUDE AND LONGITUDE COORDINATES DEFINING A RECTANGLE LOCATING THE PROPERTY			O R	LATITUDE AND LONGITUDE COORDINATES DEFINING THE CENTER POINT OF A PROPERTY OF LESS THAN TEN ACRES		
CORNER	LATITUDE	LONGITUDE		LATITUDE	LONGITUDE	
	Degrees Minutes Seconds	Degrees Minutes Seconds		Degrees Minutes Seconds	Degrees Minutes Seconds	
NW	0 . "	0 . "		41° 33' 30.33"	71° 15' 21.99"	
NE	0 . "	0 . "				
SE	0 . "	0 . "				
SW	0 . "	0 . "				

APPROXIMATE ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY: *less than 1 acre*

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE:	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

11. FORM PREPARED BY

NAME AND TITLE:
Ancelin V. Lynch

ORGANIZATION: **Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission** DATE: **April 1, 1974**

STREET AND NUMBER:
52 Power Street

CITY OR TOWN: **Providence** STATE: **Rhode Island** CODE: **44**

12. STATE LIAISON OFFICER CERTIFICATION

As the designated State Liaison 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. The recommended level of significance of this nomination is:

National State Local

Name: *Thomas P. Williams*
 State Historic Preservation Officer

Title: _____

Date: MAY 23 1974

NATIONAL REGISTER VERIFICATION

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

Ernest A. Ginnally
 Director, Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
 Associate Professional Services

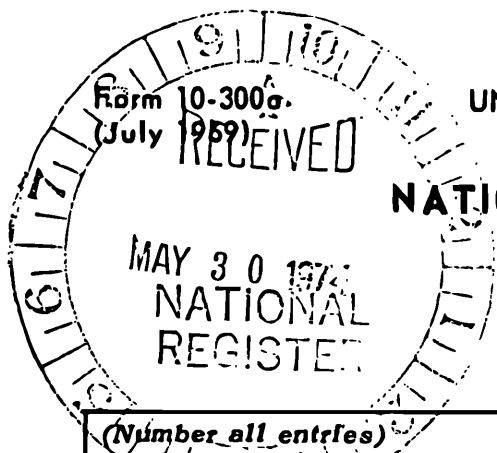
Date: JUN 13 1974

ATTEST:

Charles A. Stearns, Jr.
 Acting Keeper of The National Register

Date: 6-11-74

SEE INSTRUCTIONS



**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
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(Continuation Sheet) - 1

STATE Rhode Island	
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(Number all entries)

7. Description (Cont.)

This tin sheeting is not original but was added over an earlier plastered ceiling, most likely in the 1880's or '90's.

The sanctuary still displays many of its original furnishings. The sturdy oak pews with scrolled arm rests and the elaborately-carved Victorian chairs on the altar-end platform create a strong impression of the post-Civil War years when the church was new.

The Portsmouth Historical Society purchased the church in 1938 after the formal dissolution of the congregation. The Society's plans for restoration will further preserve the church as an interesting portrait of the Early Victorian period.

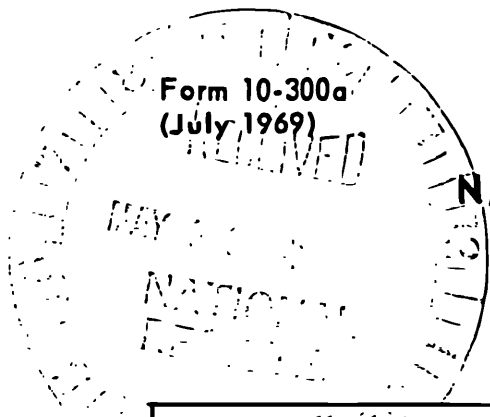
Just to the north of Union Church, on the same lot, stands the Southermost School, a small clapboarded one-story gable-roofed structure built between 1716 and 1725 as Portsmouth's first and most southerly one-room school house. It is also owned by the Portsmouth Historical Society and was moved to this location when it was given to the Society in 1952. The school is being included in the present nomination because it occupies a lot in common with the Union Church, and because the two buildings are owned and administered as museums by the Portsmouth Historical Society.

The schoolhouse faces east and has eight-over-twelve double-hung windows, two each on the east and west sides and one on the south end. An eight-over-eight window is set into the west side of the later northern extension of the building. The schoolhouse originally measured twenty-two feet by fourteen feet and had a stone end chimney, with a brick bake oven for the resident schoolmaster. In 1800 the school was moved from its original location on the south side of Union Street to the corner of Union Street and West Main Road. Its stone chimney was left behind at this time and replaced by a Franklin stove and brick chimney.

A four foot addition to the original chimney end of the building, now the north end, was probably made when the old schoolhouse was retired in 1860 and moved to a farm on Union Street, where it served as a harness shed for ninety years. The board and batten door of the schoolhouse now opens into this northern addition.

The treatment of the interior of the original school room is extremely simple. The walls are faced with horizontal sheathing to window sill level, and above, are plastered. Beaded corner posts support a rather unusual arched plaster ceiling. The arch rises from plastered-over support beams which protrude at window lintel level approximately six inches into the room on all four sides. These beams create an overhang effect and make the ceiling seem even lower than it actually is. One original bench, built

See continuation sheet 2



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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(Number all entries)

7. Description (Cont.)

into the eastern wall, and one original desk still remain in the class room.

The Hall family gave Southermost School to the Portsmouth Historical Society in 1952. An excellent restoration undertaken in 1969 and 1970 included such structural work as replacing a sill, adding two interior support beams under the sagging eastern and western plates, and reshingling the roof with wooden shakes.

8. Significance (Cont.)

The Church's Reverend William Miller was appointed to superintend the undertaking, with John Coggeshall employed as the actual builder. Church records reveal the extent of Miller's labors to price and procure various materials and to satisfy factions of differing opinion within the congregation. These records make fascinating and often amusing reading, and give an excellent picture of the steps and local resources involved in building in this period in Portsmouth.

Union Church, as this building is now called, has historic and religious significance as the physical home of a congregation more or less in spiritual existence from 1810 until 1938. The quirks of this congregation may be construed to be typical of many nineteenth century Rhode Island congregations. The basic quirk is the verbal espousal of tolerance and individualized religion set in sharp contrast to church records bulging with notations concerning bringing various members to see the error of their ways, and records of dropping many members "for neglect." Religious tolerance in principle but not necessarily in action.

The Union Church basement currently houses an excellent museum of Portsmouth history which includes such memorabilia as the last horse-drawn mail coach to be used in the town, local farm implements, a wealth of local historical documents, and various personal items of Julia Ward Howe, who for a number of years summered in Portsmouth in a house on Union Street.

The Southermost School is significant as the oldest schoolhouse standing in Rhode Island today. Talk of erecting a schoolhouse in the southern part of Portsmouth first began in 1716, and by 1725 the building had been completed.

The Portsmouth Historical Society has some of the early records of its building which not only reveal its original form but who did the work, how long it took, how much the materials cost in those days -- valuable information for a study of the practicalities of American architectural endeavors of the period.

See continuation sheet 3

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8. Significance (Cont.)

Southermost School is also architecturally interesting for its arched plaster ceiling, an unusual refinement to find in a one-room schoolhouse, although fairly typical of finer public buildings of the period.

9. Bibliography

1940. Collections of Portsmouth Historical Society.

West, Edward H.: Schoolhouses and Schoolmasters of Portsmouth, Rhode Island. Typewritten manuscript in collections of Portsmouth Historical Society.

