

PHO 358932

# DATA SHEET

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

FOR NPS USE ONLY  
RECEIVED JAN 5 1977  
DATE ENTERED AUG 16 1977

## NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS  
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

### 1 NAME

~~HISTORIC~~ The Austin Homestead Farm & The Lewis Place

AND/OR COMMON  
Austin Farm Road Historic District (preferred)

### 2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER  
north-side Austin Farm Road west of I-95

CITY, TOWN  
Exeter  
VICINITY OF  
District # 2 Rep. Beard

STATE  
Rhode Island  
CODE  
44  
COUNTY  
Washington  
CODE  
009

### 3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	PRESENT USE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DISTRICT	<input type="checkbox"/> PUBLIC	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OCCUPIED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE
<input type="checkbox"/> BUILDING(S)	<input type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE	<input type="checkbox"/> UNOCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSEUM
<input type="checkbox"/> STRUCTURE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BOTH?	<input type="checkbox"/> WORK IN PROGRESS	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCIAL
<input type="checkbox"/> SITE	<b>PUBLIC ACQUISITION</b>	<b>ACCESSIBLE</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATIONAL
<input type="checkbox"/> OBJECT	<input type="checkbox"/> IN PROCESS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES: RESTRICTED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE RESIDENCE
	<input type="checkbox"/> BEING CONSIDERED	<input type="checkbox"/> YES: UNRESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> ENTERTAINMENT
		<input type="checkbox"/> NO	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGIOUS
			<input type="checkbox"/> GOVERNMENT
			<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRIAL
			<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENTIFIC
			<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
			<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER:

### 4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME  
Multiple ownership

STREET & NUMBER

CITY, TOWN  
VICINITY OF  
STATE

### 5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

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

STREET & NUMBER  
Victory Highway

CITY, TOWN  
Exeter  
STATE  
Rhode Island

### 6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE  
Preliminary "Broadbrush" Survey of Exeter

DATE  
1975  
FEDERAL  STATE  COUNTY  LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS  
Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission  
CITY, TOWN  
Providence  
STATE  
Rhode Island

# 7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED      DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

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## DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Austin Farm Road Historic District comprises some 105 acres of rolling fields and woodland in north-central Exeter. The district is bordered by the Exeter-West Greenwich town line on the north, by Interstate Route 95 on the east, by Austin Farm Road on the south and by a north-south line west of Austin Lower Pond, commonly known as Austin Farm Pond (see maps). A parcel of land on which a recently built house stands (Map # 17) has been excluded from the area to be nominated. Despite its proximity to Route 95, the proposed historic district is located in a still sparsely populated rural region. Much of the land in this section of western Rhode Island was cleared during the mid-eighteenth century for farm use but is now densely forested. The Austin Farm Road district is one of a relatively small number of extant examples of traditional open farm landscape.

The adjoining Austin and Lewis farms form the core area of the district and date from the mid-eighteenth century. In the late nineteenth century, John Austin acquired both and developed them as a single property which he titled "the Austin Homestead Farm"-- an expansive "gentleman's farm" and summer retreat for himself and his family. Though the farms are again in separate ownership, the character they achieved under Austin's proprietorship remains and is predominant.

No early structures survive on the west-sloping Austin farm property. The buildings here (see sketch map, and photographs) were erected by John Austin, either to provide new facilities or to replace earlier deteriorated or burned-out structures. As it stands, then, this is a late nineteenth-century farm complex.

Close to the road stands the rather nondescript, two-and-a-half-story, gable-roofed farm house (#1). After being damaged by fire early in the 1890s this mid-nineteenth-century cottage was much enlarged and elaborated. Early in the twentieth century, it was remodelled again and simplified: the three interior chimneys were removed and replaced by exterior chimneys, most nineteenth-century trim was removed and unpainted wood shingles replaced the original clapboard siding. A carriage shed (#4, c. 1890), now used as a rabbit hutch, stands to the rear of the farmhouse ell and, just to the north and east facing the semi-circular entrance drive, is the gable-roofed, shingle-clad, 36'-by-100-foot barn (#3, 1890) which has wagon entrances at both ends; An early twentieth-century silo is attached to its southwest corner. On the lane running past the barn north into the pastures and fields is a one-and-a-half-story bunkhouse (#2, c. 1890) set into the hillside; beyond it, also set into the bank, is a one-story shed (#5, c. 1890) which may

(see continuation sheet # 1)

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originally have been an icehouse. At the southeastern edge of the complex is a fenced corral and a small shed (# 6, c. 1890) formerly used as a hen house. North and west of the barn are walled-in pens for cattle, poultry and pigs. Surrounding this compact area are planting fields, an orchard, a family cemetery (#8) pastures and woodland. Roaring Brook runs from north to south across the farm and, in the late nineteenth century, it was dammed in two places, creating two ponds. Austin upper Pond provided power for a turbine-driven sawmill (#7, c. 1890) - a two-story, gable-roofed building (set into the bank forming the dam) which has been converted into a summer house with the addition of a picture window and a rustic fieldstone fireplace. An unspoiled, stone-walled lane runs from the main complex to the mill. Austin Lower Pond, with fine cut-stone dam, was probably created to provide a convenient source of ice.

The unpretentious buildings in the Austin farm complex are all of wood frame construction, gable roofed and clad with clapboard and/or wood shingles. They are either painted white or are left unpainted with only the trim in white. In John Austin's day all the buildings were clapboard and painted red with white trim. Austin erected a small general store-post office and a blacksmith shop along the road at the southeast corner of his semi-circular driveway; neither of these buildings survives. Excepting these changes, however, the Austin farm complex remains largely as it was in the late nineteenth century. Though on a much smaller scale than in former times, it continues in use as a "hobby" farm producing honey, eggs, feed grain and vegetables, as well as hogs and poultry.

The Lewis farmhouse (#9) is the only extant structure on the "Lewis Place" which predates John Austin's ownership of the property and his consolidation of it with the Austin farm when he created "Austin Homestead Farm." The Lewis house dates from the mid-eighteenth century. It is a one-and-a-half-story gambrel-roofed structure with a large, off-center chimney, a lean-to addition across the back and a projecting, late nineteenth-century rear ell. The entrances to the house are in the east or rear facade and in the south-facing gable end. A late nineteenth-century porch runs across the altered, frontal, west elevation, which has no entrance at present. The house stands at the top of a rise, from which the land descends westward to the Austin farm complex and Roaring Brook. It is set well back from the road on a straight, sandy lane. The lane makes a dogleg turn around the house and leads to the barn (# 12, c. 1898) and a shed (#13; northeast of the barn stands a large hen house and shed (#s 14 & 15); a second hen house has been demolished. All the extant outbuildings were erected for John Austin

(see continuation sheet # 2)

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and were once painted to match the red and white color scheme of the Austin farm buildings.

The "Lewis place" portion of John Austin's "Homestead Farm" became a separate poultry operation in the twentieth century; as many as 18,000 birds were raised at a time. Though all farming activity has ceased here, the orchard and meadow are maintained, and a vegetable garden is in use.

In architectural terms, the most ambitious new building John Austin put up was the Christian Union Chapel (# 10, 1892) erected along the lane leading to the old Lewis house. This small, gable-roofed structure has cobblestone walls, a wood belfry (now partially removed) and roundheaded windows and main entrance. It was built to serve as a chapel, free to all, maintained by Mr. Austin, with the regular services of visiting ministers provided by him. It has since been converted to use as a dwelling. Behind the chapel is a stone-walled, shed-roofed carriage shed (# 11, c. 1892) now altered, which once was used in conjunction with the chapel.

District Schoolhouse #5 (#18, c. 1860), located just east of the lane leading into the Lewis place, is also included in the district. The school was essentially obsolete by the late nineteenth century, but Austin, who attended school there as a boy, maintained it at his own expense and kept it open as an educational facility. Though abandoned and in very poor condition, this typical one-story, gable-roofed schoolhouse retains the red and white exterior color scheme favored by Austin.

Key elements, both visually and historically, in the Austin Farm Road historic district are the unimproved lanes which traverse the area and the stone walls bounding them and the fields between. Dry walls, built as much as repositories for rocks removed from planting fields as for boundaries, typify the Rhode Island rural landscape. The well-preserved walls in the Austin Farm Road district are unusually massive, in places reaching a breadth of sixteen feet. Again, John Austin was responsible. According to a Newspaper account published in 1899, he had 13,000 boulders taken from his fields and added to existing walls. Today, dirt lanes and lichen-covered walls help to define the spacial complexity and continuity of the district's open, rolling terrain.

# 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 checked="" 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 type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY) Historic Geography
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES

BUILDER/ARCHITECT

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Austin Farm Road Historic District is primarily significant as a well preserved example of the once pervasive rural agrarian landscape of Rhode Island. Seen from the viewpoint of an historic geographer, the area preserves the basic form and (to a large extent) the function it achieved in the eighteenth century as modified and developed in the nineteenth century. The natural terrain, the streams and ponds, the woodlands, fields, meadows and orchards, the meandering lanes and stone walls, the clusters of simple buildings, the crops and livestock raised here--all, in essence, relate to lifeways and the physical embodiments those lifeways took on in the colonial period. Though most of western Rhode Island supported a rural agrarian society in that era, this social order has largely disappeared. Not only are there few people still farming the land, but the area has lost its agricultural character visually, for hundreds of abandoned farms have reverted to woodland.

The town of Exeter was an agricultural community in 1742 when it was set off from North Kingstown, and, by 1820, Exeter had achieved its most extensive agricultural development. From that time on, farming began to decline as it did in neighboring towns as well. A number of factors contributed to this decline: a general shift in the economics of agriculture from a subsistence to a commercial farming base, the competition New England farmers experienced from new and better Western farms which came to dominate Eastern markets with the help of rail transportation and the brighter social and financial opportunities available in industrial cities and villages which drew many ambitious young people. John Austin himself left the family farm for the city where he made a fortune, returning later only out of sentiment. When improving his Exeter farm late in the nineteenth century, Austin did so with the knowledge that the life of the country farmer he knew as a boy was fast disappearing. That trend is now almost complete. Forests cover the land; there are but six farms left in Exeter. The Austin Farm Road District is the most representative and best preserved agricultural area in town; and, consequently, protecting it is important if the visible evidence of Exeter's heritage is to be retained.

Architecturally, most buildings in the Austin Farm Road district relate in a very typical fashion to the agricultural character of the area. They are late nineteenth-century replacements for earlier structures as is true of so many buildings on long-established Rhode Island farms. In design and construction they are representative vernacular

(See cont. sheet # 1)

## 9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

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Beers, J. H. & Co.; Representative Men & Old Families of Rhode Island.; V. 2, p. 1108; Chicago, 1908.

Beers, J. H. & Co.; Rhode Island Atlas, 1870. (see cont. sheet # 5)

## 10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY 105

UTM REFERENCES

A | 19 | 278320 | 4608420 |

ZONE EASTING NORTHING

C | 19 | 278140 | 4607720 |

ZONE EASTING NORTHING

B | 19 | 278260 | 4607790 |

ZONE EASTING NORTHING

D | 19 | 277590 | 4607820 |

ZONE EASTING NORTHING

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

E 19 277600 4608440

See section 7 (Description) paragraph 1.

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

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

## 11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

David Chase, Chief of Field Services

ORGANIZATION

Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commissio

DATE

December 15, 1976

STREET & NUMBER

150 Benefit Street

TELEPHONE

(401) 277-2678

CITY OR TOWN

Providence,

STATE

Rhode Island

## 12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL     

STATE     

LOCAL X

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

*Frederick Williamson*

TITLE

State Historic Preservation Officer

DATE

December 27, 1976

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DIRECTOR OF ARCHITECTURE AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

ATTEST:

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

8.11.77

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farm buildings of the period. This is true of the Austin farm house as well as the much-added-to, mid-eighteenth-century Lewis house -- the one extant building here which may date back to the beginnings of these farms and which, with all its alterations, lends a sense of continuity to the area. The only nineteenth-century structures deserving special architectural note are the Austin barn, unusual for its size and double entrance plan, and the intentionally rustic cobblestone-walled church. Built by John Austin in 1890 and 1892, respectively, they embody the pragmatism and the idealism which colored Austin's approach to his Exeter farm.

In the mid-nineteenth century, before development by John Austin, the Austin and Lewis farms were unremarkable. Each was operated by a single family, in the case of the Lewis place with the help of a hired man. On each there were oxen to do the plowing and hauling; a horse for transportation; two or three cows to produce milk, butter and cheese; and a few beef cattle and swine. The Lewis place, the larger of the two, also supported a small flock of sheep. The farms produced corn, oats and hay, seed grain, large quantities of potatoes and small amounts of peas and beans. In the late nineteenth century, John Austin modified this mixed agricultural approach slightly and expanded it greatly. He made the combined farms more productive than they had ever been before.

John Austin grew up on the Austin Farm which had been acquired during the Revolution by his grandfather. As a youth he moved to Providence, learned the precious metals smelting and refining business (important in the city's jewelry industry), established his own firm and became a financial success. His business, John Austin & Son, produced 1½ million dollars worth of precious metals per year in the 1890s and was a nationally known concern. Austin also was involved in banking, becoming president of Citizens Savings Bank in 1879. After acquiring the family homestead and buying the neighboring farm, he set out to create a highly productive agricultural showplace. "Austin Homestead Farm," as he called it, contained 208 acres. The enterprise required the supervision of a boss farmer who directed the work of several hired hands. The livestock included four horses, thirteen cows, pigs, hens, ducks and turkeys. The "Homestead Farm" produced as much as 100 tons of hay per year and 1100 bushels of potatoes. Austin introduced pomoculture, planting one thousand apple trees of all varieties, and established peach, plum and pear orchards. Grapevines were planted, as well as berry bushes of several kinds, and a large vegetable garden was kept. Each week a wagon would take fresh produce from the farm to Austin's large house on Westminster Street in Providence.

(see cont. sheet # 2)

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But beyond creating a showplace and source of food, Austin cared deeply about his rural agrarian heritage. He attempted to preserve and enhance a way of life he knew as a boy. He provided a church, school, post office, general store and blacksmith shop-- the nucleus of a small village -- which he hoped would improve the lot of local farmers in this rather inaccessible area and induce them to stay on their farms. He believed that hearing sermons and reading newspapers were uplifting activities, and he provided both church services and newspaper subscriptions for his neighbors. He even tried to improve the economic viability of the farm community by attempting to bring in a railroad spur, but in this effort Austin failed. Much ahead of his time, John Austin realized that if anything of Exeter's agricultural heritage was to continue to exist, specific positive efforts would have to be made to protect it. That perception is even more true today.

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Bibliography

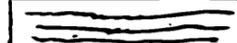
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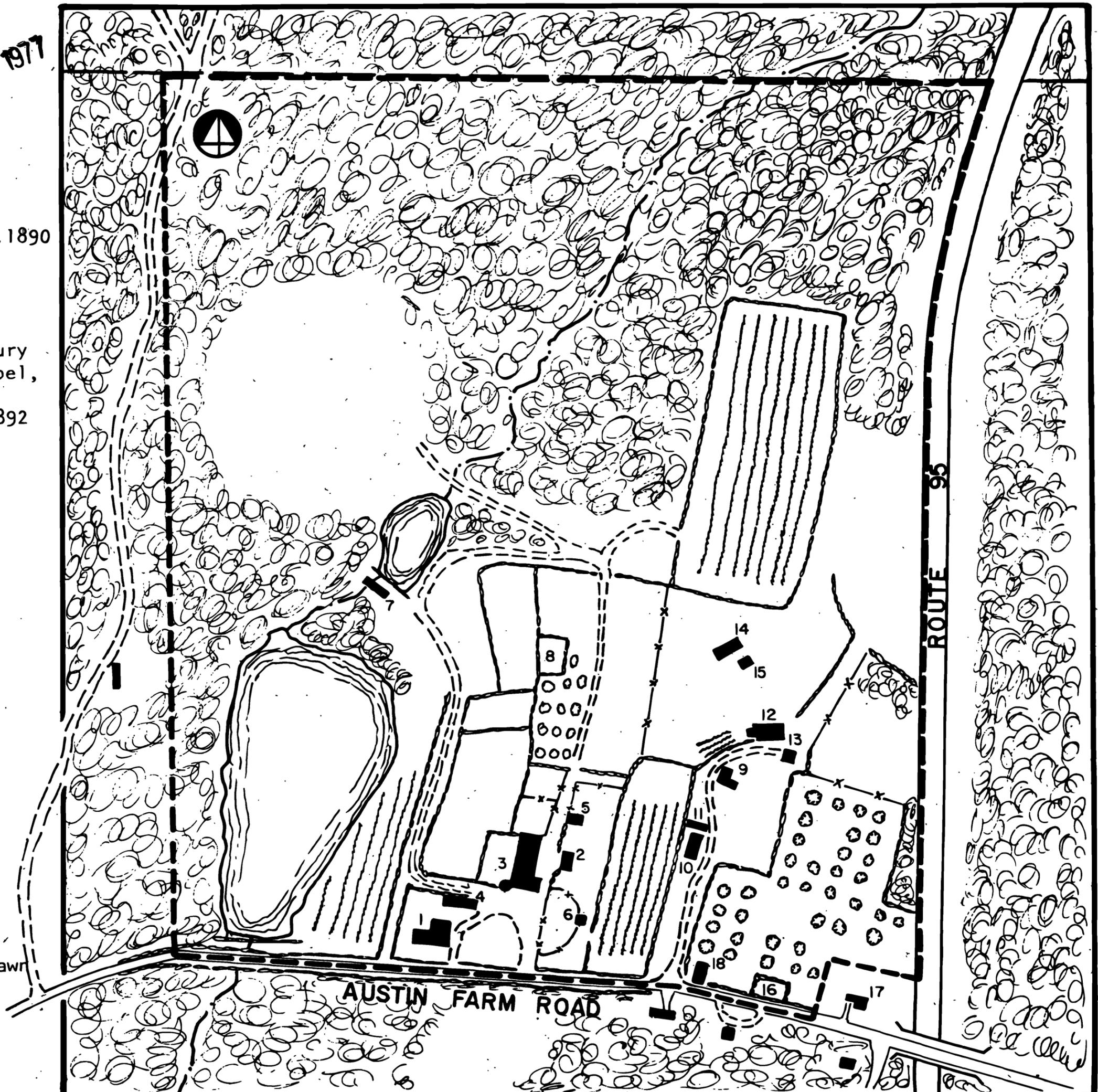
SKETCH MAP  
 AUSTIN FARM ROAD  
 HISTORIC DISTRICT  
 EXETER, R. I.

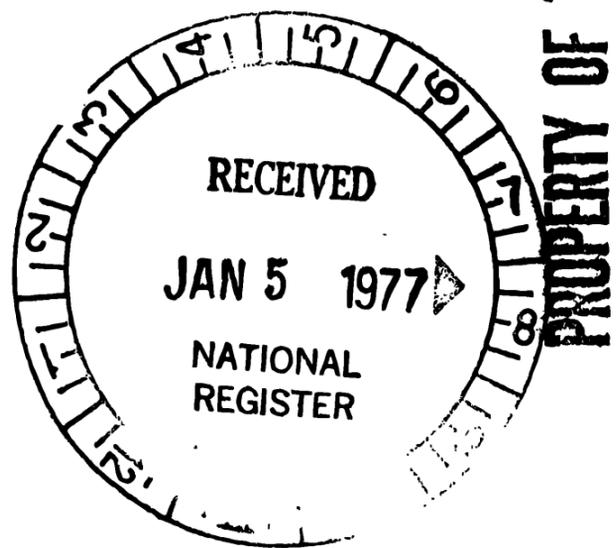
JAN 5 1977

1. Austin House, c.1850/1895
2. Austin bunkhouse, c.1890
3. Austin barn, 1890
4. carriage shed, c.1890
5. shed (former icehouse?), c.1890
6. shed, c.1890
7. sawmill, c.1890
8. Austin-Straight cemetery;  
mid-19th century
9. Lewis House, mid-18th century
10. Former Christian Union Chapel,  
1892 (now a residence)
11. altered carriage shed, c.1892
12. Austin-Lewis barn, 1898
13. shed, c.1900
14. & 15. chicken houses
16. Lewis cemetery, mid-19th  
century
17. Avizinis House, c.1970
18. District School #5, c.1860

-  Town line
-  District boundary
-  Paved road
-  Dirt lane
-  Stone wall
-  Fence
-  Brook
-  Structure

-  Woodland
-  Open field/meadow/lawn
-  Orchard
-  Cultivated field
-  Pond





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