NPS Form 10-900-b
(Jan. 1987)

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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form

This form is for use in documenting multiple property groups relating to one or several historic contexts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900-a). Type all entries.

A. Name of Multiple Property Listing

Sweet Potato Houses of Sussex County, Delaware

B. Associated Historic Contexts

Agricultural Trends of Delaware's Lower Peninsula/Cypress Swamp Zone 1880-1940

C. Geographical Data

Sussex County, Delaware: Little Creek Hundred
Broad Creek Hundred

(Though potato houses listed in this nomination are located specifically in Little Creek and Broad Creek Hundreds, examples will likely be found in adjoining areas of Sussex County. For this reason the whole of Sussex County is designated the geographical area for this property type- the sweet potato house.)

☐ See continuation sheet

D. Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this documentation form meets the National Register documentation standards and sets forth requirements for the listing of related properties consistent with the National Register criteria. This submission meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60 and the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Planning and Evaluation.

Daniel W. Griffith - SHPO — 9/25/90

Signature of certifying official — Date

Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs

State or Federal agency and bureau

I, hereby, certify that this multiple property documentation form has been approved by the National Register as a basis for evaluating related properties for listing in the National Register.

for Patrick Andrus NA — 11/15/90

Signature of the Keeper of the National Register — Date

E. Statement of Historic Contexts

Discuss each historic context listed in Section B.

Agricultural Trends of Delaware's Lower Peninsula/Cypress Swamp Zone 1880-1940

As early as 1868, the Delaware State Directory acknowledged the propensity of Sussex County soil for sweet potato cultivation. The directory reported, "the sweet potatoes of Southern Delaware, have a richness and sweetness of flavor, which we do not find in the Carolina potato nor even those grown on the rich fresh soils of Texas. This excellence is due doubtless, to the peculiar character of the soil, and the mildness and uniformity of the climate..." (Hancock, p. 130) The author further elaborated, "Delaware ought to raise one hundred bushels of sweet potatoes, where it now does one; and the farmers of Sussex County, instead of growing a few bushels for their own use...ought to supply in a great measure the markets of Philadelphia and New York..." (Hancock p. 130) These statements would prove prophetic, for at the turn of the century the cultivation of the sweet potato was begun in earnest. It had remained a consistent secondary crop with an annual average of 100,000 bushels throughout the last half of the nineteenth century. However, in the first years of the twentieth century it was produced in unprecedented quantities. Between 1901 and 1920 the average number of bushels grown per annum rose to 440,000,four times the quantity of the preceding decades. Sweet potatoes remained a chief crop of the area until the 1940s when black rot, a highly destructive root disease, and rising labor costs frustrated further attempts at profitable sweet potato cultivation.

Agricultural statistics recorded in Delaware Agricultural Statistics, Historical Series, 1866-1974, Bulletin No. 419, track the rise of the sweet potato in Delaware. Between 1868 and 1900 a consistent 2,000 acres of sweet potatoes were harvested yielding an average of 50 bushels per acre, and having an average annual value of production of $126,000. Beginning in 1901 the acres of sweet potatoes harvested, yield per acre, and value of production steadily rose. Sweet potatoes became a dominant crop between 1901-1940 and experienced a special heyday in the years between 1915 and 1925.

During this period (1901-1940), the acres of sweet potatoes harvested climbed from 2,000 to an average of 6,000 acres per year. The yield per acre rose to as much as 96 bushels in 1922, while the general average was 77 bushels per acre.

[X] See continuation sheet

The average value of production jumped from the $126,000 of 1868-1900, to $779,000 between 1901 and 1940. These figures are related to corresponding fluctuations of the seasonal price per bushel and the quantity of the crop grown. For example in 1910 a 40% increase in price ($.84 to $1.25 per bushel), and 300% increase in units of production are responsible for the 490% increase in the total value of production. Farmers were growing more sweet potatoes and getting a higher price per bushel in 1910 than in 1900. On the other hand, in 1930 one sees a 50% decrease in annual value of production while the price increased 2% from $2.13 to $2.18 per bushel. Such a decrease must be due either to the quantity produced or the price received. In this case the price per bushel actually increased. The 50% decrease in annual value must therefore be attributed to a smaller quantity of potatoes grown, and not to a decrease in price. In this year (1930) there was a 51% decline in bushels produced. 592,000 bushels were grown in 1920 and only 287,000 in 1930. This drastic decline may be a result of the devastating stem rot or black rot which would soon wipe out large scale growing in the area. The accompanying graphs reveal these, and other production related statistics in Delaware quite clearly. The most evident trend reflected in the graphs is the emergence of the sweet potato from its status as a minor (but consistent) staple crop in the nineteenth century, to a major cash crop in the first three decades of the twentieth century.

A similar pattern of production is apparent nationwide. Between 1879 and 1909 the national acreage of sweet potatoes increased 44.2 percent while the national number of bushels produced increased 77.5 percent. Statistics of Agriculture in the 12th (1900), 13th (1910), 14th (1920), and 15th (1930) censuses provide a comprehensive picture of the status of the sweet potato crop in the United States. The dominant sweet potato region was the Southern Atlantic States. The 1900 census reported that "the area of its [sweet potato] extensive production is confined mainly to southern

states". Georgia, North Carolina, Alabama, South Carolina, and Texas cultivated 52.6 percent of the sweet potato acreage in 1899. The crops of these five southern states combined with the crops of Virginia, Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee, Florida, New Jersey, Kentucky, Arkansas, Missouri, and Illinois, comprised 93.1 percent of the country's sweet potato crop. The 25 counties growing the largest quantities of sweet potatoes in 1899 were located in Virginia, New Jersey, North and South Carolina, Maryland, Louisiana, and Alabama.

Delaware's contribution to the national sweet potato crop does not appear too substantial in comparison with the major sweet potato producing areas listed above. In 1920 Delaware was cultivating 9,813 acres of sweet potatoes and producing 1,500,000 bushels while southern states such as Georgia, North Carolina and Alabama were growing well over 50,000 acres and producing over 5,000,000 bushels.

The national rank of Delaware among the 39 sweet potato producing states fluctuated only slightly between 1900-1930. National ranking was as follows; 1900-23rd, 1910-17th, 1920-14th, and 1930-22nd. Delaware, largely by virtue of size, did not make a lasting impact on the national crop, though its rank as the 14th largest sweet potato producing state in 1920 was a significant achievement and is clearly reflected in the accompanying graphs as well as in the number of potato houses built in Delaware around 1920.

The Delaware sweet potato crop should perhaps be considered as a part of the aggregate crop from the Delmarva region. The combined crops of Maryland, Virginia, and Delaware did impact the national market. Virginia was consistently in the top five sweet potato producing states and the combined bushels from the Delmarva Peninsula between 1900-1930 exceeded the crops of all sweet potato producing states except the Carolinas and Georgia.

Though Delaware's contribution to the national sweet potato crop was not

large, the impact of the sweet potato crop on Delaware was tremendous. A statistical comparison illustrates its impact quite clearly. Between 1900-1910 the national average of sweet potato acreage increased 19.3 percent, the number of bushels produced increased 39.3 percent, and the price per bushel rose 78 percent. In Delaware at the same time, sweet potato acreage increased 150 percent, bushels produced rose 296 percent, and the price 49 percent. The escalated scale of sweet potato production was substantially higher than that found on the national level. The significance of the sweet potato crop to Delaware agricultural history is best understood on a statewide, rather than a nationwide basis. The substantial escalation of sweet potato production in the state impacted the landscape and culture in very tangible ways.

In southwestern Delaware, particularly in Little Creek and Broad Creek hundreds, Sussex County, the economic emergence of the sweet potato led to the development of a corresponding farm building - the potato house. The potato houses are a disappearing property type. No longer representative of a dominant crop they are falling into disrepair and being pulled down. Those which remain have been adapted to contemporary farm use and transformed into barns, storage sheds, stables, and in rare cases into houses. Much of the knowledge and understanding of both the construction and function of the potato house came from numerous interviews with ex-sweet potato farmers, while many architectural details of surviving houses were determined by construction "ghosts" such as nailing patterns and stud markings. Extensive photographs of potato house exteriors revealed typical identifying features including minimal fenestration and chimneys. From the data collected it is possible to reconstruct the architectural and agricultural historic context of sweet potato cultivation and marketing in southwestern Delaware.

A sweet potato house is a tall (two or three story), narrowly proportioned frame building heated with either a coal or wood burning

stove. The buildings typically present gable-end fronts. Examples range in size from the Stanley Potato House measuring approximately 17 x 23 feet (CRS# 6723) to the Chipman Potato House measuring 24 x 36 feet (CRS # 5873). A main entry and second floor loading door generally occupy the main gable end while a single window on first and second floors may often be found on the rear gable elevation. Loading wagons drew up beneath second floor loading doors and the potatoes were passed into and out of the house in baskets by laborers standing on the wagons. In rare cases such as at the Hitch Potato House (CRS# 5859,) a pulley was rigged above the second floor door while a projecting platform was constructed for workers hoisting potatoes into the second floor. In many houses a small ventilation window was placed in the attic story of the front and rear gables. The Collins (#6754), Rider (#6820), Moore (#6664), Ralph (#6800), and Wright (#6758) potato houses all accord with this description.

Potato houses were designed exclusively for the storage and curing of sweet potatoes. During the months of potato habitation (October-February) the building had to be kept at a constant temperature of 50 degrees fahrenheit. This constant temperature insured the long life of the harvested sweet potato. Much of the building's structural design results from this climatic necessity of temperature control. Floors and ceilings were often slated, and occasionally platforms which Norman Lowe and Marshall Phillips called palettes were installed in the storage bins in order to allow warm air to circulate beneath the bins and to prevent the damp and cold of the ground from seeping in. The Phillips Potato House used palettes (#6786). In addition, a gap of approximately four inches between the side walls and the ceiling is characteristic and further facilitated the circulation of air into the second story. Norman Lowe described a type of false wall installed for the same purpose. The potato house at the Lowe farm (destroyed in the 1960s) employed such a wall which separated exterior wall layers from interior sheathing with three or four inch studs creating

in effect a hollow wall. This system is still in evidence at the Chipman Potato House (#5873). A final ventilation element is frequently found in the attic floor where a trap door or a sliding panel allows the air from (open) gable end windows to enter the lower floors. The ventilation provided by the trap door was particularly important in the early spring when there was a danger of the house becoming too warm. The Rider Potato House (Crs# 6820) has a good example of this feature.

The wood or coal burning stove was placed towards the center or back of the house and according to Mr. Speare and Mr. Phillips, frequently set about eight inches into the floor (generally cement). A stove pipe often ran through the center of the first floor under the ceiling, while an interior chimney drew warm air up to the second floor. As mentioned above, climate control within the house (maintaining 50 degrees fahrenheit consistently) was a primiary concern. One of the chores well remembered by sweet potato farmers is the tending of the stove. After the first frost (generally October) the stove had to be checked and fueled each morning and evening. Pauline Carmean remembers that for her father "the last thing he did before he went to bed was walk down to the potato house and check the stoves." When he was 13 or 14 years old Marshall Phillips was responsible for the stove at his father's house (#6786). He recalls, "It was my duty to walk from the other farm just about a mile, fix the fire (shake the ashes, put the coal on, and set the draft) go back home and walk one and a quarter miles in the other direction to the country school.. every morning and then again in the evening."

Insulation was a primary concern due to the necessity of maintaining a constant temperature. Potato houses have up to three layers of siding, generally weatherboard nailed to diagonal board, nailed again to interior planking. There is evidence that further insulation was found in the use of sawdust, and in a paper known as "red rosin" or "sissle craft". All windows had tightly fitting hatches, while both first and second level

doors often had an exterior hinged door, and an interior sliding door.

The gable fronted potato house set out on a center aisle plan is the most frequently encountered potato house design. However, within this basic type one discovers subtle variations. The two areas which reflect significant variety are the fenestration and the plan of the building. It has been mentioned that minimal fenestration is characteristic of potato house construction. Blank walls were a sensible means of retaining heat in the house because they presented a unified front against drafts and inclement weather. At the Phillips (#6786) and Chipman (#5873) Potato Houses however, there are an inordinate number of windows on all walls. This approach gives the building a distinctly "house-like" appearance and one wonders if the motivation was one of aesthetics, pride, or model.

Two distinct floor plans emerge in surveys of existing houses. The distinguishing elements of the plans relate to the arrangement of the potato houses' storage bins. Two primary plan types have been recorded in the field. The first plan consists of a central hall flanked by deep, narrow, three-sided bins rising to ceiling height as seen in the Collins (#6754), Chipman (#5873-first and third floors), Wright (#6758) and Hearn (#5761) houses. The second plan placed the narrow, three-sided bins back to back in the center of the house with a two or three foot walkway around the bins providing loading access. This plan was used in the Phillips (#6786) and Chipman (#5873-second floor) houses. Five houses being nominated were found with bins intact, the Hearn (#5761), Chipman (#5873), Collins (#6754), Wright (#6758), E.L. Hitch (#5859) houses.

The architectural origins of the potato house are unclear. Interviews with contemporary farmers reveal that the buildings were frequently copied from farm to farm. Mr. Carl Hastings remembers that his potato house (destroyed in the 1960s), built in the late 1920s was used directly as a model for the Spear Potato House (#7421) which is no longer eligible due to deterioration, is a two-story, gable fronted frame structure with triple

sheathing and tri-part fenestration on gable ends (including first and second floor loading doors and small gable ventilation windows). Builders were sent to view Mr. Hasting's building in order to replicate it for Mr. Spear. The recollections of Pauline Carmean, whose father Ernest Chipman built the Chipman Potato House (Crs #5873), also reflect that architectural duplication was a common practice. She reported that if a farmer had need of a particular, new building he hired a carpenter and the carpenter built the building according to his own experience or on a model of his or his employer's choice. In the latter case he would "go to get a good look at the building to be copied and proceed." From these and other oral confirmations, it may be assumed that architectural duplication was a building custom common to southwestern Delaware. On the Chipman Farm, Ernest Chipman himself was the carpenter. In building the potato house he hired his friend Alva Hudson who came and stayed on the farm while the house was built. What model was used is unknown, but with its attention to detail both structurally and decoratively (window moldings,6/6 light windows) the Chipman Potato House, built in 1913, represents a rather high style potato house. According to Mrs. Carmean, her father was extremely proud of this building.

The yearly cycle of "getting out" a sweet potato crop (sprouting, transplanting, harvesting, curing/storing, and marketing) was the lengthiest of any crop of the period. Begun in February, a crop was not completely ready for market until early November. The first step of the cycle was seeding the potato beds in February or early March to produce potato sprouts which would grow to be the final potato plant and fruit. Seed potatoes (the most perfect products from the previous crop) were fragile, and their successful sprouting was necessary to the continuation of the planting process. They were planted in heated potato beds where they remained until late April or early May.

These potato beds were usually long, narrow, and framed in wood. A width of four feet was common. Norman Lowe explained, "you could have them as long as you wanted- for width the general rule was that you keep your knees out of the bed but could reach to the center, just about four feet".

As in their storage, sweet potatoes required heat during the sprouting process as well. Two systems were employed in heating the beds. The first was water based and involved the laying of terra cotta pipes beneath the bed and supplying heat with a "firebox" built on one end of the bed. The firebox was fueled by slow burning oak wood. Water fed into the pipes was thus heated and circulated. A second procedure was detailed by numerous farmers and involved the generation of heat by compost. A bed was lined with corn shucks and covered with manure. The sandy soil necessary for potato seedlings was then laid on top of the manure, seeded, and covered with eight inches of pine shats (needles). A final measure of insurance in this hothouse system was covering the whole with a muslin tarp treated with linseed oil. Tarps were laid over a wooden tent-like frame running the length of the bed and standing approximately one foot high. The tarp prevented the sprouts from being smothered while containing the heat produced. The beds were closely tended through the early months of spring to insure against freezing and burning.

The beginning of May brought the transplanting season when sprouts were moved (by hand) from the heated beds to larger unsheltered fields. The fields were first laid out with a mule drawn marking machine consisting of a triangular metal frame with adjustable scoring spokes at the base. These spokes, set approximately 32 inches apart for sweet potato fields, delineated the future rows. Transplanting was a long and tiring process. Marshall Phillips recounted his experiences with this stage of sweet potato production. He recalls, "the transplanter that I got familiar with was operated by three men or three persons, sometimes it was women...be two seats down near the earth, riding close to the earth like these race

cars...one man sitting up on a barrel of water driving horses or mules, in most cases mules". The seats were reserved for the laborers who from their low vantage point planted sprouts every 16 or 17 inches, dousing each with a portion of water from the water barrel. These laborers were generally the lighter and younger members of the work force who even with combined weights would not "be heavy on the mules" which were already pulling a large water barrel and driver. Marshall Phillips, who of his own description was "nothing more than a midget at the time" frequently occupied the left hand seat on the transplanting machine (being also left handed), while a young boy from a neighboring farm occupied the right hand seat. Norman Lowe, who also transplanted from a similar rig pointed out the concentration required and discomfort endured. "You couldn't be looking out and counting the birds flying around while you were doing it [transplanting]," he explained and "if it was awful dry, when you got out nobody knew who you were-the dust just turned you a different color." Throughout the summer months (June-August) the fields were watered and weeded. Pauline Carmean remembers that "digging grass out was a job".

The harvest of the mature sweet potatoes began in early October. The potatoes were loosened by mule drawn plow, "scratched out" (loosened potatoes pulled from soil), piled by hand to the side of the rows, and gathered in 5/8 baskets which were then loaded on a wagon and brought to the potato house. (5/8 baskets were the common basket size at the time and equaled approximately a single 1/2 bushel) "To start with" said Norman Lowe, "you plowed them out". Then it would "take you most time to noon time to scratch 'em out and then after lunch time we'd start picking up in the 5/8 basket and haul them to the house and put them in the potato house". Pauline Carmean relates the same sequence. "We had a plow that went down under them [potato plants] and lifted them up and then somebody went along and pulled these plants up with the potatoes [scratching out], and you picked them up and threw them in a pile and then we'd come along

with baskets and pick them up". Full baskets were loaded on a wagon which carried the load to the potato house.

At the potato house the potatoes were dumped from 5/8 baskets and kept loose in the house bins. Some bins held as much as 400-450 5/8 baskets (approximately 220 bushels) of loose potatoes. A tag with the potato owner's name was nailed to the appropriate bin along with the number of baskets deposited. On very good years, or in very prosperous potato houses, both upper and lower halls were packed tightly with full 5/8 baskets in addition to the full bins. Once they were dumped in the house's storage bins the process of "kiln-drying" began.

The sweet potato is not edible when it is first harvested. It must be thoroughly dried in order to assure the evaporation of moisture within the potato which will lead to rot if not properly extracted. The ventilation within the house was crucial to the kiln-drying process, as was the careful and continual tending of the stove during the colder months of storage. Before the cold weather set in windows and doors of the house were left open to facilitate air circulation. It was preferable that the kiln-drying process be conducted naturally, however after the first frost, window and door hatches were secured, and the stove in the house was fired up. Marshall Phillips explains; "We kept the house open to dry the potatoes, but after it got so cold, say mid-October early November then you had to close the house and you hoped you had gotten rid of most of the moisture and let nature kiln-dry the potatoes, but after that to keep them from freezing you had to close it and then that's when you built your fire. And that fire was continuous, it didn't go out. When you started say the 20 October, 1 November until April that was a continuous fire".

A kiln-drying period of no less than one month was required. Potatoes were ready for market in late November or early December though frequently parts of the crop remained in the house through March and as Mr. Phillips exclaimed, "The month didn't govern when you sold, the price governed when

you sold. If you found a ready market in November you sold then".

Before going to market potatoes were dumped on a burlap covered table (to prevent bruising) and sorted. Types of sweet potatoes included the common Big Stem, Up-the-River, and Little Stem varieties used in sweet potato pies, as well as the Nancy Hall, Hayman, and Southern Queen considered too expensive to use in pies and remembered best as big, juicy, baking potatoes. Mr. Phillips favored the Nancy Hall which he described as a "round, reddish juicy potato, and when you put it in the oven and baked it you almost had to clean the oven out cause of the juice-and oh boy was it good!" All of these varieties were grown in southwestern Delaware.

The women of the surrounding farms were often responsible for sorting the potatoes by size and type, packing them in bushel hampers, and "capping" the hampers off. "Capping off" was a term used for making the top "look pretty" as Mrs. Carmean explained and involved a variety of deliberate patterns. (Similar practices are found today in any produce display.) The men helped packing, loaded the wagons, and delivered orders to box cars and barges in Laurel and Seaford.

The economics of sweet potato production varied widely. In gathering oral history it became clear that two levels of collection and distribution were at work in the area. The first was the level of the small farmer who might have a horse, a cow, a single plow, a cultivator, and 30-40 acres. This farmer grew a modest sweet potato crop and rented a storage bin in a nearby potato house. This "small" farmer depended on family and local labor. As Mrs. Carmean recalls both she, and friends spent many hours tending the potato fields (hoeing and weeding) while an older group of hired hands (often the same group year-to-year) were responsible for scratching the potatoes out and transferring them to the house. "A group would come along and scratch them out for so much a basket" she said. Norman Lowe recounts that at his family's potato house (destroyed in 1960s)

older neighbors were generally hired for the harvest work, but he also did his fair share. "In the fall of the year when they're taking up sweet potatoes you had any number of jobs", Lowe said, "I worked in the field, I helped load them [the potatoes] on the wagon, and I helped bring them up to the house, and helped sometimes hand them into the potato house sometimes didn't, sometimes I was in the potato house putting them in the bins".

There was some of labor trading amongst the local farms as well. One farmer (or family member) would help with a part of the production on a neighboring farm and the favor would be returned in kind. Marshall Phillips recalls that his father traded labor with Reuben Collins, a neighboring farmer. "Gene Gurley worked for Reub Collins, Gene would help us put the plants out [transplanting], then I had to go help Mr. Reuben put his plants out".

Not every farm had a potato house and in many cases running a house depended upon its use by neighboring farmers. Generally, a farmer rented a bin for a season, (2 cents per 5/8 basket during the 1930s) and extracted his crop en masse or piecemeal as markets were located. Occasionally a farmer grew sweets strictly for his own consumption. In such instances he would also rent a bin, but remove potatoes only as his family needed. There were those too, who owned a house but filled it with only their own produce. A case in point is the Phillips Potato House (Crs# 6786) where only Phillips sweet potatoes, or sweet potatoes purchased by Mr. Phillips Sr. were stored and cured. "If we had a vacancy" explained his son "or could see that we had had a poor crop and there were spaces available then my father might go out to some of the local farmers and buy enough potatoes so that at the end of the digging season [harvest] the potato house was full". Massing a quantity of potatoes in this manner was directly related to a second level of collection and distribution which involved the entrepreneurial energies of the hugely successful produce brokers of the region. And indeed Marshall Phillips says that his father and Mr. J. A.

Morgan (largest produce broker of the era) worked closely together.

Throughout the 1920s and early 30s the dominant figure in the sweet potato market was James A. Morgan of Seaford. As retired farmers remember "Morgan was king." He apparently had an uncanny sense for the most profitable distribution of sweets. He played the market in a very real sense. It is reported that he always knew how large the area's crop was going to be, and speculated with considerable accuracy how best to unload the crop on the market. (For Morgan these markets included Pittsburgh, New York, and Boston, as well as Philadelphia and Baltimore) Many of the farmers worked closely with J. A. Morgan who purchased their harvest in full or in part.

Morgan crews were sent to the various potato houses under the supervision of a crew chief to "pack out" and haul orders to waiting box cars in Laurel or barges on the Nanticoke River in Seaford. A days work for these crews could consist of packing and loading as much as 600 bushels, the amount needed to fill a "D-6" box car. Linwood Hastings of Little Creek Hundred worked on one of Morgan's crews and reports, "There was a crew here, a crew over there, and maybe you worked in different crews every day". There were no set hours for the job. Crews worked until the assigned job was completed. Members of the crew received 10-12 cents per hour. Vic Moore of Seaford, and Harvey Hastings of Laurel were the top produce brokers of the 1930s and early 40s who dealt in sweet potatoes. Indeed Vic Moore ran what Linwood Hastings termed "the biggest potato house in the world". This house still stands on the bank of the Nanticoke River in Seaford but is now transformed into offices and has lost considerable integrity. It is not part of this nomination.

The organized labor force and sophisticated system of collection and distribution represented in the businesses of James Morgan and Vic Moore reflect the establishment of modern agricultural marketing and reveal the development of a production hierarchy within the sweet potato culture. One

can imagine a hierarchical ladder with farmers producing for their own consumption occupying the bottom rungs, those with modest, saleable crops ranked a bit above, and those with potato houses or large crops at the top of the ladder. Produce brokers headed the hierarchy controlling the ultimate distribution patterns and determining possible profits and risks. Thus the sweet potato culture of southwestern Delaware functioned on both a community and an inter-state level, involving seasonal traditions and practices as well as economic realities based on the new developments in agricultural marketing.

The potato house is a direct reflection of prevalent agricultural trends in southwestern Delaware during the first half of the twentieth century including the emergence of truck farming, the growth of perishable produce crops, and the development of agricultural marketing. The transformation of the sweet potato from a local staple to a cash crop created the need for a distinct building type. Special problems of storage and curing, especially ventilation and heating systems, created unique and ingenious elements within that building type.

Distinguishing characteristics of the potato house include double or triple siding, tall and narrow proportions, minimal fenestration (typically on gable ends only), interior chimney, tightly fitting window and door hatches, interior ventilation devices (i.e. trap doors, gaps between walls and floors), and in rare cases evidence of interior potato bins. The building is generally a two story balloon frame structure of dimension cut lumber, sheathed with 6 inch weatherboards.

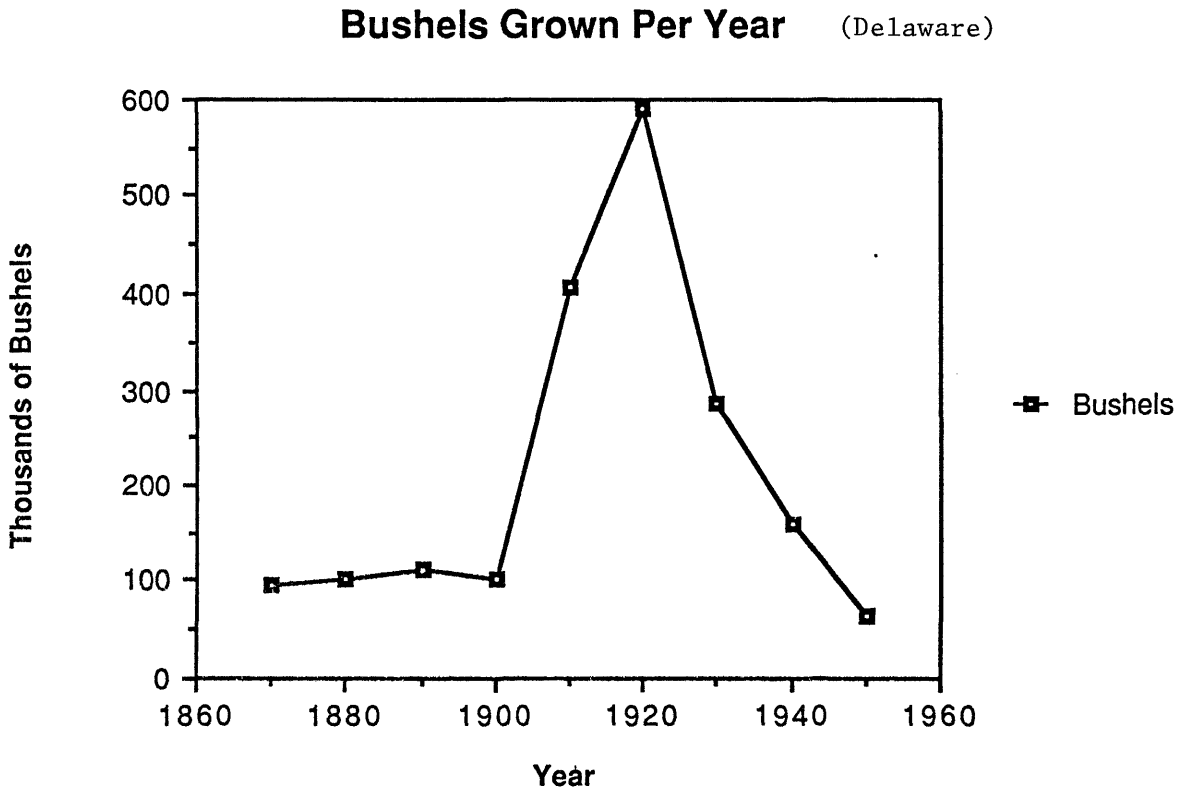
The potato houses listed in this nomination exhibit a variety of the characteristic elements listed above. Over time, as the function of the potato house became obsolete, alterations were made to the structures to render them useful to the modern farmer. The removal of potato bins and heating unit are the most frequently encountered alterations. Their removal

opens the interior for machine and implement storage. (The most common use of potato houses today) Other alterations include the replacement of the original shingle roof with a metal or asphalt shingle roof, and occasionally the moving of the entire building to a site in closer approximation to other outbuildings. (Crs# 6820-Rider, # 6723-Stanley)

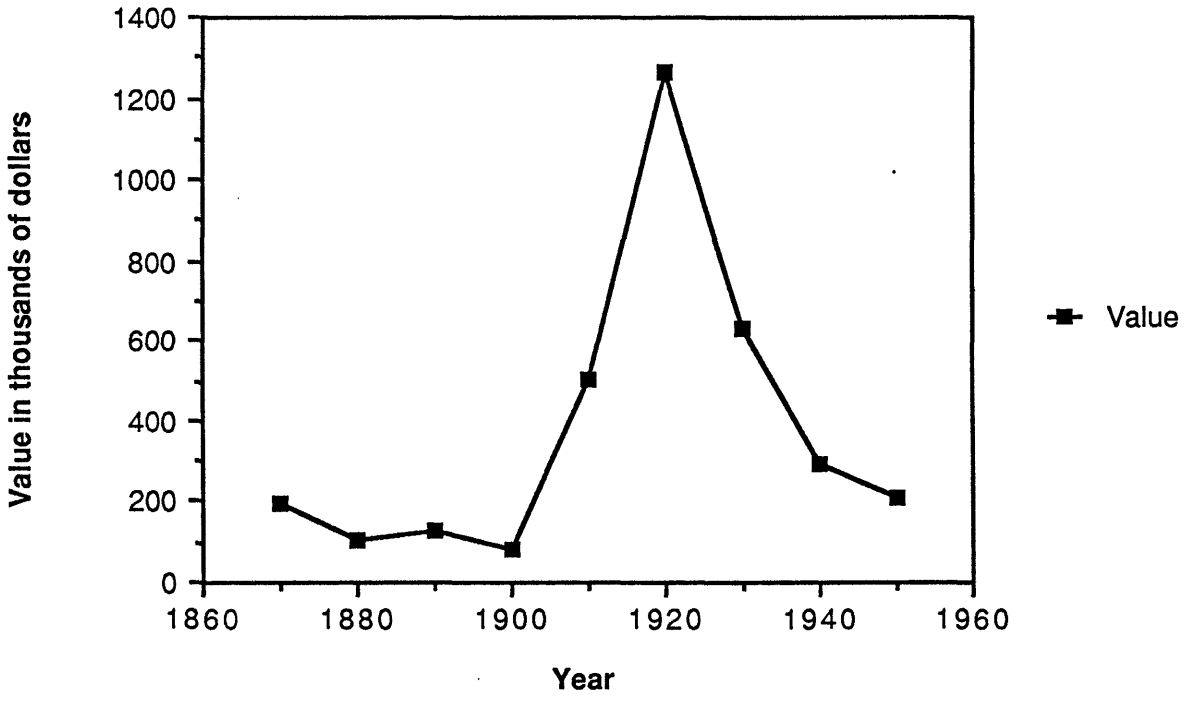
Rarely does one find any structural alterations. As a rule the potato houses continue to exhibit the basic form and appearance (described above) which makes them easily identifiable as a specific property type. Even in the rare instance where additions have been made such as with the Collins (#6754) and Rider (# 6820) houses there are no alterations to the original structural system. Both of these examples have lean-tos added to a lateral side, however, they abut the original structure and are not integrated with it.

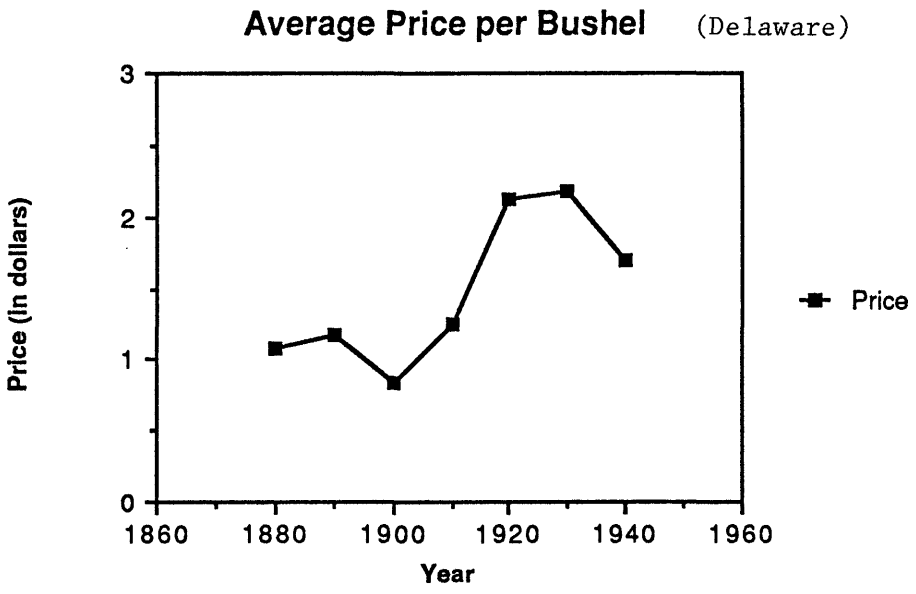
The most radical alterations are found in the large houses of the produce brokers in Seaford and Laurel. In Laurel a potato house was converted into a four family housing unit and in Seaford into office headquarters for a local business. Neither of these remodeled potato houses are listed for consideration in this nomination. They stand as good examples of the adaptation of potato houses to modern functions but no longer retain their integrity as potato houses.

As the inhabitants of Little Creek and Broad Creek Hundreds repeatedly observed during oral history interviews, the potato house was to the landscape of the 1920s and 1930s as the broiler house is to the landscape today. They were everywhere. Norman Lowe explained, "Now the chicken business is carrying the people, then it was the sweet potato". As the only visible reflection of a once dominant form of agriculture, the potato houses of southwestern Delaware are highly significant both as an architectural type and as a vehicle for reconstructing elements of the sweet potato culture in Broad Creek and Little Creek Hundreds.

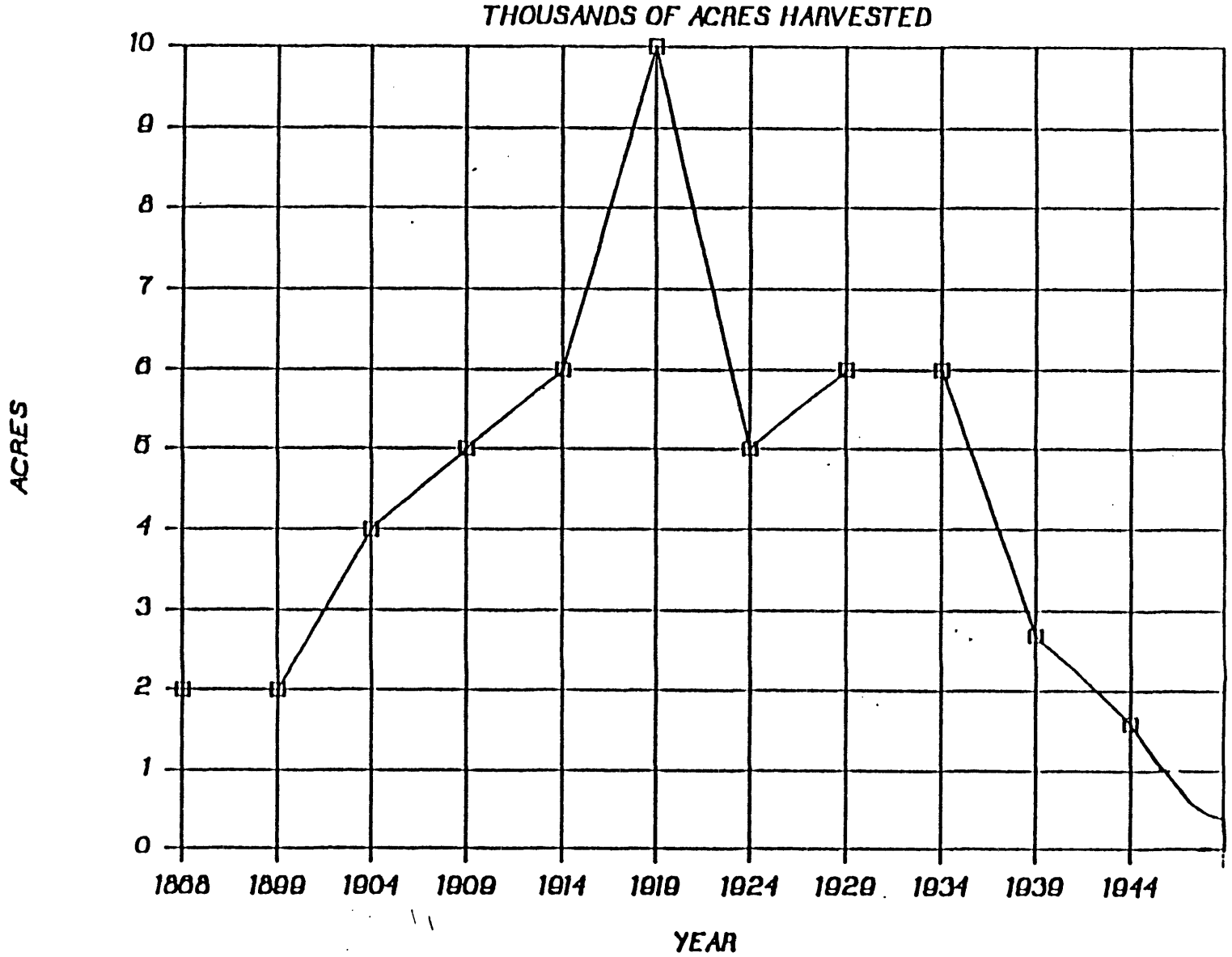

Bushels Grown Per Year (Delaware)
Thousands of Bushels
600
500
400
300
200
100
0
1860
1880
1900
1920
1940
1960
Year
Bushels

Annual Value of Production (Delaware)

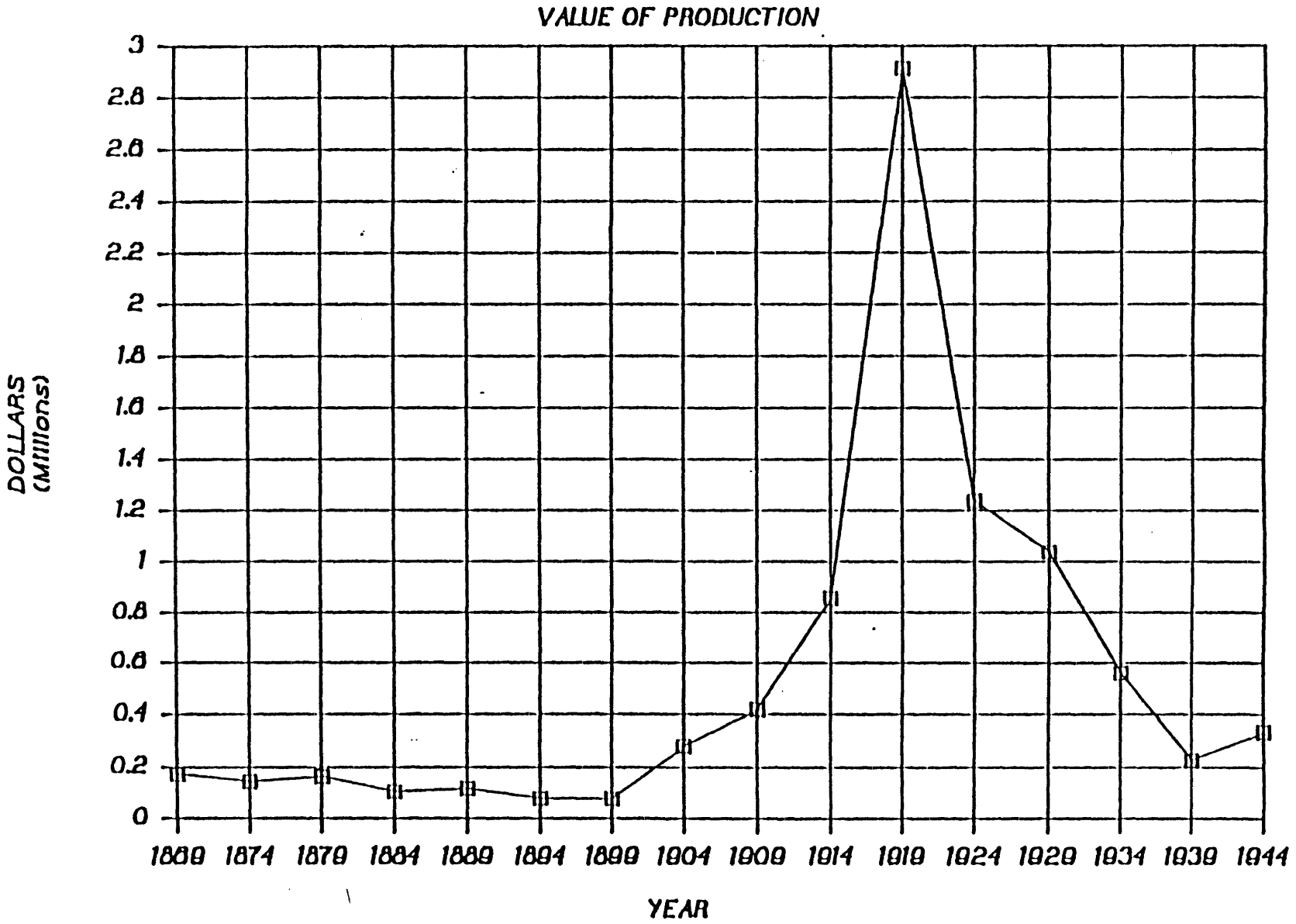



Average Price per Bushel (Delaware)
Price (In dollars)
3
2
1
0
1860
1880
1900
1920
1940
1960
Year
Price

SWEET POTATO CROP:



SWEET POTATO CROP:



F. Associated Property Types

I. Name of Property Type Sweet Potato House

II. Description

The potato house is a distinct property type exhibiting repeated architectural features. A potato house is generally of tall, narrow proportions. The typical balloon frame construction is frequently oriented on a gable-end to gable-end axis. Building materials are invaribly dimension cut lumber. Five inch weatherboards are the common siding material. The houses are from 1 and 1/2 to 3 stories tall with minimal fenestration. Lateral walls are frequently unfenestrated while front and rear gable ends often have a first, second, and attic story opening. All opeinings (windows and doors) were originally tightly shuttered. All potato houses contained an interior chimney (facilitating a coal or wood stove) as well as slated storage bins. All potato houses were double or triple sided for insulation purposes. Every potato house reflects a preoccupation with ventilation. Ventilation features encountered include large trap doors accessing attics, shuttered openings, slated storage bins,

III. Significance

The potato houses listed in this nomination are eligible for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places as excellent examples of buildings reflecting a broad historical trend, and as a significant architectural type. The potato house, as a functional type, relates to the Delaware Comprehensive Historic Preservation Plan's property type 1B reflecting major economic and cultural trends relating to agriculture.

The broad historical pattern to which the potato house is directly linked is the modernization of agricultural practices in southern Delaware during the first half of the twentieth century including the emergence of truck farming, the growth of perishable produce crops, and the development of modern agricultural marketing. The growth of sweet potato cultivation in Sussex County was one of the major manifestations of these changes in production practices and crop choices. The potato house is the remaining physical evidence of this important trend in Sussex County's agricultural history when the sweet potato was "king".

Sweet potato cultivation dominated the region particularly in the years between

IV. Registration Requirements

Features which make a particular potato house eligible for nomination include minimal fenestration, multiple siding, interior chimney, ventilation features, extant storage bins or evidence of bins, tightly fitting window and door hatches, gable-end to gable-end axis (plan), and triple tier fenestration on gable ends (i.e. first and second floor loading doors or windows and attic ventilation window).

An eligible potato house should have at least three of the above features for consideration. In addition condition of the building must be stable and any alterations must not interfere with the original structural system or significantly change exterior integrity. The potato house has become obsolete as a crop related agricultural building. As a result, building interiors rarely retain their original appearance. The weight of historical and architectural integrity thus must be borne by exterior appearance. Any potato houses which do retain portions of original interiors are invaluable but rare.

Deterioration due to neglect is a common occurrence within this property type and a reasonable amount of loss through deterioration can be sustained. However, if a building appears beyond repair it is not eligible and has not been listed.

☒ See continuation sheet

☐ See continuation sheet for additional property types

G. Summary of Identification and Evaluation Methods

Discuss the methods used in developing the multiple property listing.

The multiple property listing for the Sweet Potato Houses of Sussex County, Delaware initially includes sweet potato houses in Little Creek and Broad Creek Hundreds, Sussex County. It is based on the Little Creek and Broad Creek architectural surveys and evaluations now located with the Delaware State Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation.

The typology of significant property types has been based on function and association with the agricultural trends of Sussex County in the period 1880-1940. The property type identified is associated with the context of Agricultural Trends of Delaware's Lower Peninsula/Cypress Swamp Zone 1880-1940 which has been identified in the Delaware Comprehensive Historic Preservation Plan. It was selected for its close association with the theme and its illustration of a structural type and functions relating to important aspects of agricultural developments in Sussex County in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The standards of integrity were based on the National Register standards for assessing integrity. Information from research literature, survey data, field work, and oral history interviews was also used to assess the relative condition and scarcity of the property type and to determine the degree to which allowances should be made for alterations and deterioration.

☐ See continuation sheet

H. Major Bibliographical References

Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900. Washington D.C.: United States Census Office, 1903.

Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910. Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1913.

Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922.

Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1932.

Delaware Agricultural Statistics. Historical Series 1866-1974, Bul. no. 419, Newark: University of Delaware, Agricultural Experiment Station, 1976.

☒ See continuation sheet

Primary location of additional documentation:

- ☒ State historic preservation office
- ☐ Other State agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☐ Local government
- ☐ University
- ☐ Other

Specify repository: _____

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II. Description continued

and four or five inch gaps between walls and ceilings. The potato house is easily distinguishable from other agricultural outbuildings, appearing quite "house-like" in proportions and architectural features.

III. Significance continued

1910-1940, and was one of the first crops to benefit from truck farming and modern agricultural marketing. The long (eight month) and multi-phased process of sweet potato production impacted the culture and economy of the rural community in Sussex County during the years of its prominence as one of the area's cash crops.

The potato house is significant as an architectural type. It was essential to the process of sweet potato production in both curing and storage capacities and was developed as a distinct building type designed to provide the functional needs required for a successful, saleable sweet potato crop. Potato houses share common construction elements and are recognizable on the landscape as belonging to this specific property type. The potato houses listed in this nomination are significant examples of the property type retaining elements characteristic of potato house construction and function.

Bibliography continued

Hancock, Harold B. The History of Sussex County, Sussex County Bicentennial Committee, 1976.

Herman, Bernard and Siders, Rebecca. The Delaware Comprehensive Historic Preservation Plan, prepared for the Delaware State Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, Dover, Delaware, 1987.

Oral History Interviews. Retired sweet potato farmers of Sussex County, August 1986. Tapes in the Center for Historic Architecture and Engineering, University of Delaware.

Scharf, Thomas. History of Delaware 1609-1888. Philadelphia: L.J. Richards & Co., 1888.