

Village of Port Byron

HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE VILLAGE OF PORT BYRON

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Port Byron

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# HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF PORT BYRON

## Part I

## HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE VILLAGE OF PORT BYRON

### Beginnings

The story of most upstate New York towns is one of the development of transportation and commerce. Like so many of its neighbors, Port Byron began as a tiny settlement on a convenient creek. Roads were few in the eighteenth century, so navigable waterways were very important to settlers. The Owasco Outlet attracted Philip King and his family to settle here in 1795 and other families soon followed. By 1800 a road had been built to the settlement and a grain mill had been opened to serve area residents. The town did not grow rapidly, however, until the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825.

### The Erie Canal

Within a decade of the opening of the Canal, Bucksville (as Port Byron was formerly called) had a population of 1500 people, and could boast a cooper shop, a drydock, a large grist mill, a woolen mill, nine dry goods stores, and four taverns. In 1832 the village changed its name to Port Byron. The first part of its new name announced its proud position as a port on the busy Erie Canal; the second part commemorated the English Poet, Lord Byron, who was so popular in the second quarter of the 19th century.

The center of town in those days was near the southern end of the present village (Fig. 1). The original Erie Canal passed through town south of 101 Main Street, continued across the street through the lot where the small building housing the Shopping Guide stands today (Fig. 2) and continued west across an aqueduct over

the outlet. Ample evidence of this early canal still exists in the buildings which were built on its banks. The white frame building formerly owned by Tom Crane is one of these (Fig. 3). Its south wall is not perpendicular to its front wall, but angles northeast to accommodate the path of the canal. The loading doors on both the first and second floors of this south wall were designed to make the transfer of cargo from canal boat to warehouse more convenient. Across the Main Street is a similar early canal building. Originally this grey frame house was a store, (Fig. 4) and had store fronts on both the street level and down at the level of the canal on the north side of the building. This second canal-related store front still exists and can be seen clearly from the sidewalk (Fig. 5).

Many other buildings were constructed during this period to serve the canal or to house industries that benefited from the convenient transportation provided by the canal. One Hundred and Eight Main Street which now houses the barber shop is an early building from this period. The Eagle Hotel once stood near the corner of Main and Pine Streets. The mince meat factory once flourished in two buildings near the canal which were torn down only in the last few years (Fig. 6). The old hotel which still stands at the intersection of Main and Utica Streets was built during this era.

The designers of the Erie Canal seriously under-estimated its popularity, and within a few years of its opening there was much pressure to improve it by making it deeper and wider, by replacing the small locks with larger ones, and by eliminating many of the twists and bends in its original alignment. Port Byron

was rather dramatically affected by these improvements, for the "enlarged" canal was rerouted through the northern end of the village and the old canal bed was abandoned and eventually filled in. Business and industry moved farther north and west to be near the new canal and its large lock, No. 52. A grocery store and meat market were located on the south side of the lock, with a dry dock to the east of it. The Erie House Hotel was built in 1894 north of the lock. Warren's Coal Yard (now Port Byron Lumber and Fuel) was built on the enlarged canal, and many other shops such as that of Lorenzo Ames who built horse bridges, situated themselves near the canal that provided them with their trade.

The rest of the village continued to grow, too. The Masons built their Masonic Block on Main Street (Fig. 7) around 1860. The Howard House Hotel was erected on Utica Street (where the Food Mart and its parking lot are today). The large Dixon flour mill (now the Warren mill) was built in 1875 to replace one that had burned. Shops lined Main Street. Many of these were destroyed by the numerous fire which plagued the small village. Some of these were rebuilt in brick, such as the handsome commercial building that houses Clark Automotive (Fig. 8), built in 1918 to replace a building that burned in 1913. Fires were such a problem in the village that money was raised to organize a fire company, the Port Byron Hose Company No. 1, in 1871. In 1890 the Company built a brick hose house to house its equipment and meeting rooms. Although it ceased to function as a fire house after 1948, it still stands on the west side of Main Street (Fig. 9), and the old fire bell still hangs in its belfrey.

## Architecture

Port Byron's architectural heritage is broad. Several houses, a few commercial buildings and the Port Byron Hotel are rare survivals of the Greek Revival style and display the simplicity and classical details of this style that was so very popular throughout upstate New York in the middle decades of the 19th century. (Fig. 10). After the Civil War Victorian eclecticism swept the nation and many Port Byron commercial buildings display Victorian details in wood, cast iron, and brick. An excellent example of this is the large hardware store building on Main Street (Fig. 11). The wooden brackets under the eaves and the cast iron lintels and window sills are typical Victorian elements. This building also incorporates an interesting social phenomenon. By the 1870's civic-minded businesses and builders were providing space for public activities in their newly constructed store buildings. Sometimes these were meeting rooms for clubs and organizations, or a large open room for dances or socials; occasionally an opera house or theater would be built on the upper floor.

The twentieth century brought new styles. The old trolley station (the American Legion Post) (Fig. 12) is typical of many train stations built after the turn of the century: its overhanging eaves and facades of "half timber" are typical of the Craftsman movement active during the first two decades of the 20th century. Concrete blocks became a very popular building material by the First World War. Early blocks were molded to look like stones. Julian's Bakery building (96 Utica Street), which was originally constructed as a garage, is built of such blocks (Fig. 13). It also is topped by a stepped gable, a standard element of

concrete block buildings , and one which can be seen also on the gas station on Rochester Street and the Bergner's Auto Service building (Fig. 14) on Utica Street. This last building retains a feature very popular during the 1930's and 1940's , black Carrara glass. This glass was used to cover plain block walls to lend an air of elegance and richness which was so appropriate to the auto showroom that this building originally housed. Port Byron has retained examples of architecture from many different periods and can be justifiably proud of its rich architectural heritage.

### Changes

Port Byron prospered until the early decades of the 20th century. In 1917 the Erie Barge Canal was opened far north of Port Byron and the enlarged canal was abandoned as its predecessor had been sixty years before. By this time the railroads , which has been operating in the area since mid-century , had captured most of the canal trade and Port Byron was surviving on the strength of its small industry and as a packing and distribution center for local farm produce. Transportation from the village was improved in 1907 when an electric trolley line was opened connecting Rochester to Syracuse and Port Byron to Auburn. The trolley station still stands and issued today as the American Legion Post.

### Port Byron Today

The Depression and World War II took their toll on Port Byron, as they did on the rest of the country. The trolley line was discontinued in 1930. The mince meat factory and other small industries closed. The New York State Thruway bypassed the town in the early 1950's. Presently only the flour mill, the foundry,

and a small number of shops and businesses provide employment for Port Byron residents. A large proportion of town and village residents commute to jobs in Auburn and Syracuse.

Although the apparent lack of "progress" may be of concern to village fathers, the village has, in many ways, reaped the benefits of 20th century life while managing to avoid many of the less pleasant results of 20th century development. With only a few exceptions Port Byron today looks largely the same as it did in its hayday. It has a fine collection of old buildings from various periods of its growth and these buildings have, for the most part, retained their architectural character -- that is, they still have their original form, details, cladding plan -- two major streets converging and forming a "Y" so that the village seems to focus on an important landmark, the old hotel -- is quite unique (Fig. 15). In the nineteenth century many villages began this way, but very few have survived into the 20th century. Some, like Rochester, Syracuse, and Utica, have grown into large cities and all traces of their origins have long ago disappeared. Others located near large cities have been transformed by suburban development and have been so overrun with shopping centers, fast food restaurants, car dealerships, huge parking lots, large highways, traffic and congestion, that their identity as an individual town has been completely lost.

Port Byron is fortunate, then, to be in its current state. The village has a lot to work with in terms of its buildings and its village plan. Through intelligent planning, sensitive design, sound marketing techniques, good quality con-



struction, and attention to the principles of historic preservation, Port Byron can regain its appearance as a thriving and most attractive upstate village.

The information for this chapter on Port Byron's history was obtained from the following sources:

Port Byron Bicentennial Report, A Birthday Salute,

published by the Bicentennial Committee of the  
Town of Mentz and the Village of Port Byron, 1976.

Article published in the Syracuse Herald Journal.

Syracuse, New York, April 8, 1951.

Personal interviews conducted July 18, 1980 with:

Misses Marie and Teresa Van Detto

Mr. Robert Blake

Mr. Ted Weston

ILLUSTRATIONSFigure No.

- 1 Old map (dated 1857) showing alignments of old Erie and enlarged canal
- 2 View of shopping guide site of route of Erie Canal
- 3 South wall of frame building showing loading doors used originally for canal.
- 4 View of grey frame building street level
- 5 View of grey frame building showing canal level store front.
- 6 Old view (c. 1900) of Main Street looking north showing mince meat factory (second and third building from left) and fire house with belfrey (fourth building from left)
- 7 View of Masonic Block Building built around 1860.
- 8 View showing Clark Automotive brick building (c. 1918)
- 9 View showing the old brick hose company no. 1 (c. 1890)
- 10 Detail showing Greek Revival details: Store front cornice of simple classical moldings; corner pilasters with capitals, plain window architeaves. The brackets under the eaves were added later in the 19th century
- 11 View of hardware store building (c. 1880's)
- 12 View of American Legion Post, formerly the old Trolley Station
- 13 96 Utica Street, Julian's Bakery, formerly a garage built of concrete blocks.
- 14 Bergner's Auto Service (c. 1940) showing the use of black Carrara glass formerly an auto showroom.
- 15 View of Village Plan with focus on the Old Port Byron Hotel

# Enlargement of the Erie Canal

**MAP**  
Showing the relative position of 3 proposed lines,  
through the Village of

**PORT BYRON**

(as surveyed by the former) Surveyors

**1857.**

Scale of Chain & Gun Link

and is drawn by David Thompson

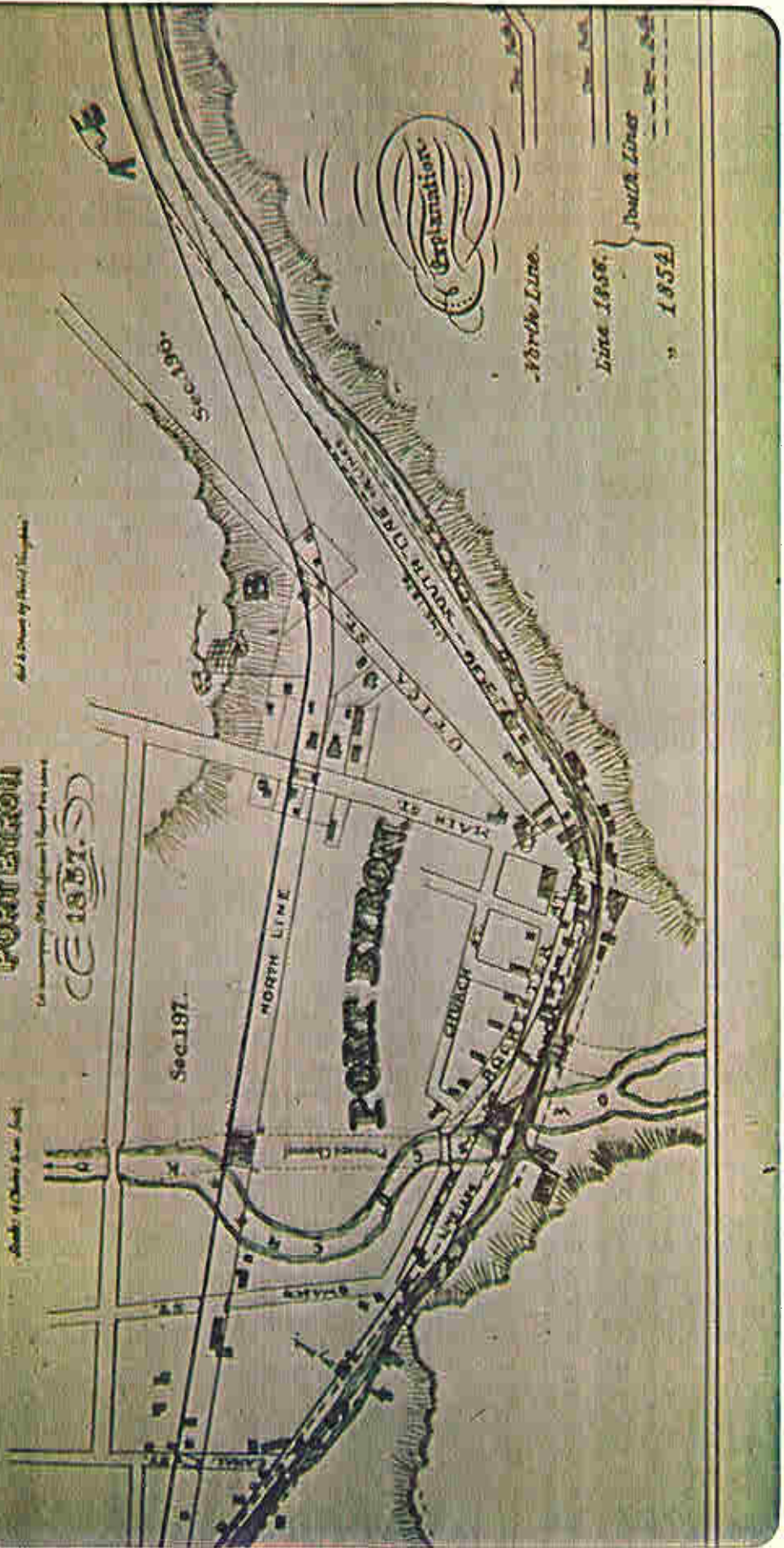


FIG. 1



FIG. 2

(SEE NEXT PAGE)  
FIG. 3



FIG. 4

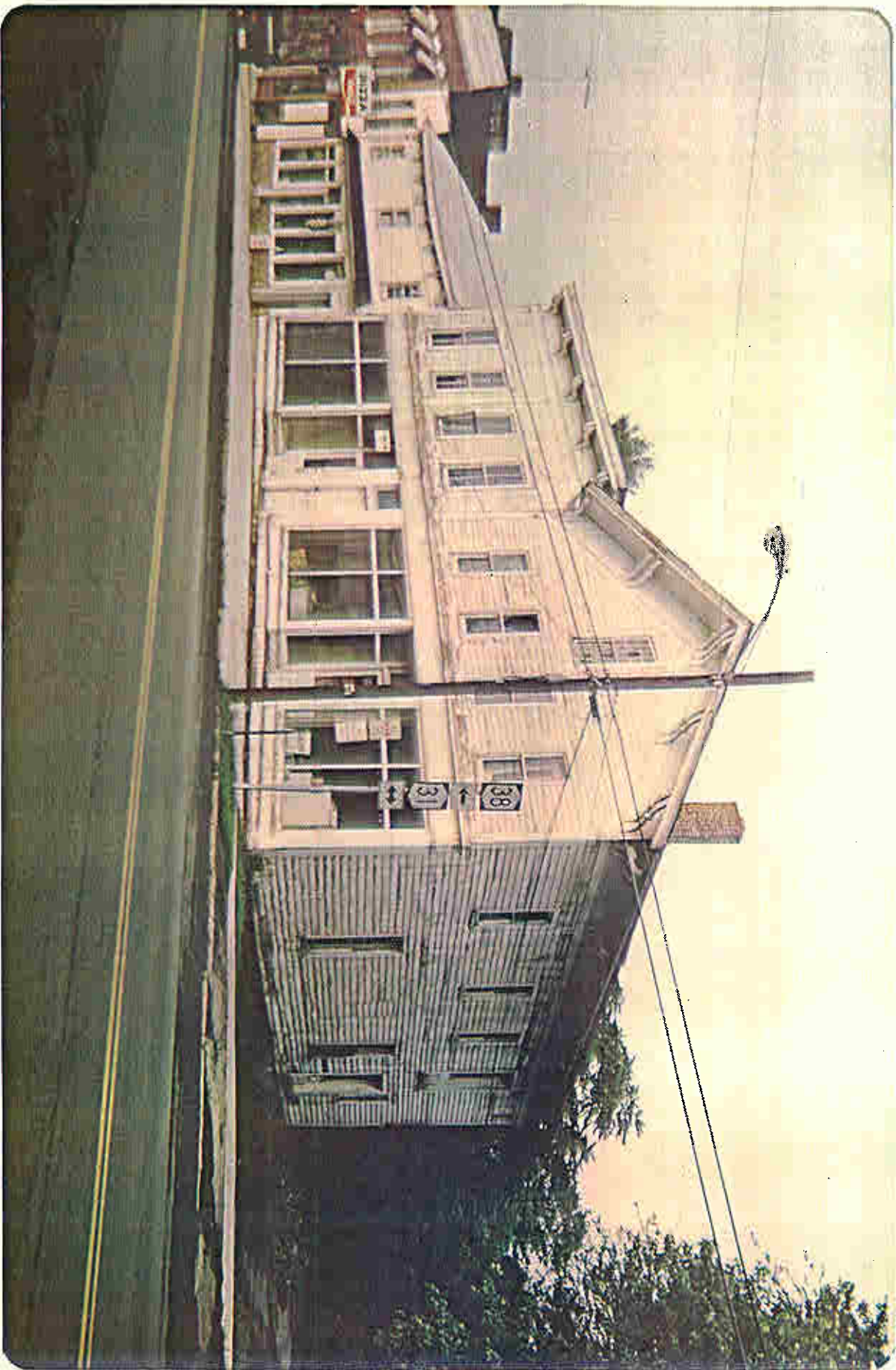


FIG. 3

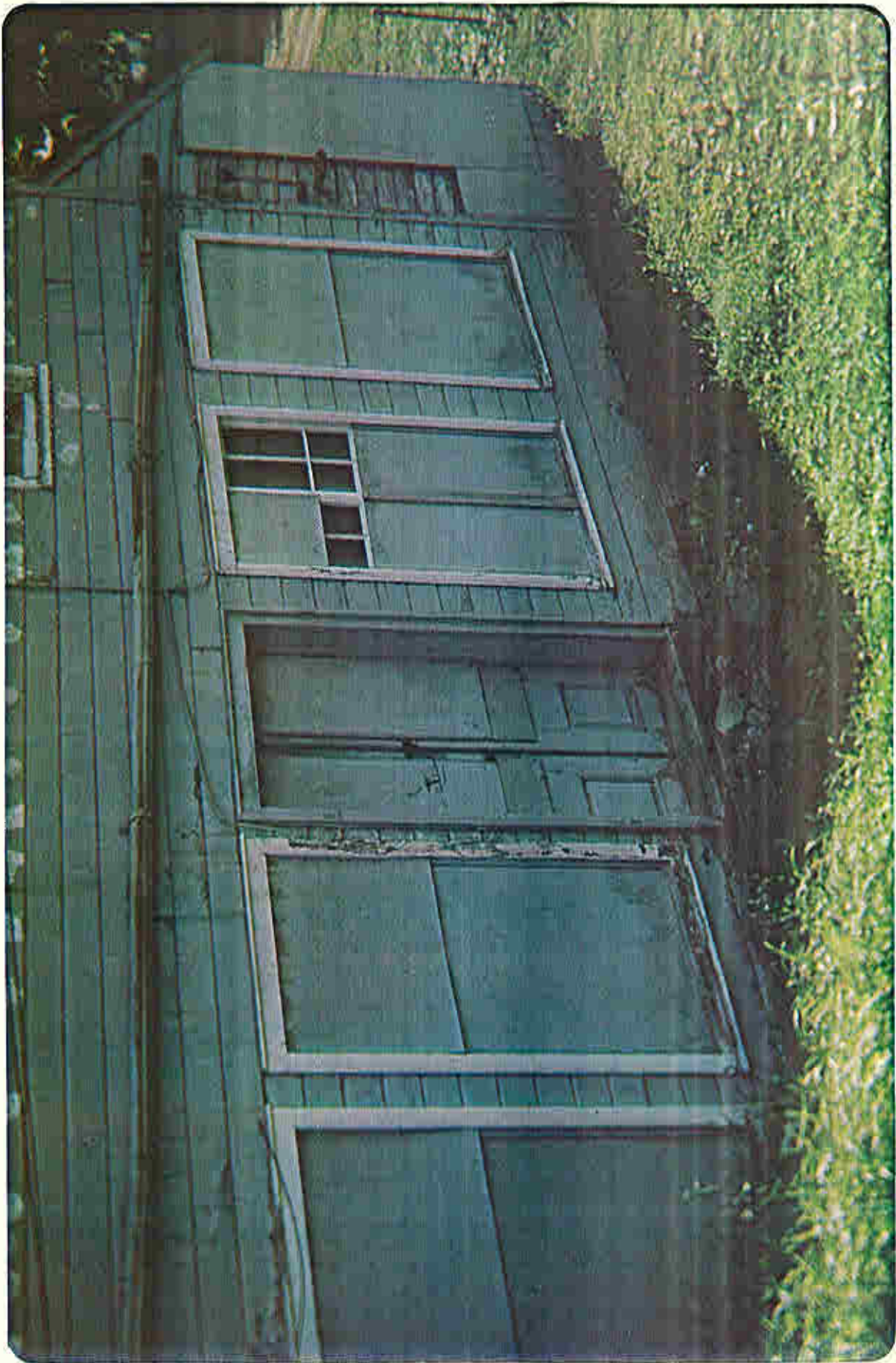


FIG. 5



FIG. 6



FIG. 7

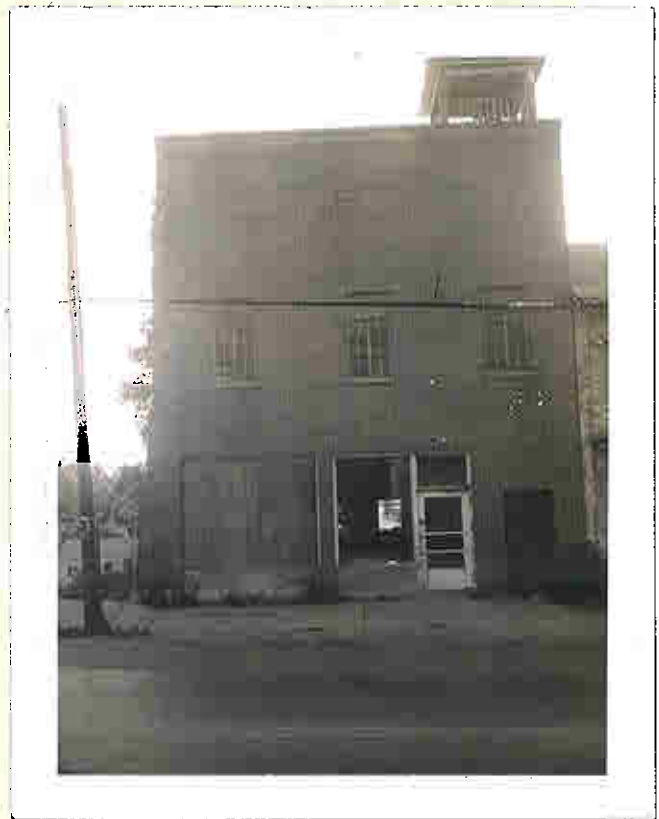


FIG. 9



FIG. 8





FIG. 10



FIG. 11



FIG. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15