

Francis Hitchings House
Summit St.
Lockport
Niagara County
New York

HABS No. NY-6095

HABS
NY,
32-LOCK,
10-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

ARCHITECTURAL DATA FORM

STATE New York	COUNTY Niagara	TOWN OR VICINITY Lockport
HISTORIC NAME OF STRUCTURE (INCLUDE SOURCE FOR NAME) Francis Hitchings House		HABS NO. NY-6095
SECONDARY OR COMMON NAMES OF STRUCTURE		
COMPLETE ADDRESS (DESCRIBE LOCATION FOR RURAL SITES) Summit St.		
DATE OF CONSTRUCTION (INCLUDE SOURCE) 1834	ARCHITECT(S) (INCLUDE SOURCE)	
SIGNIFICANCE (ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORICAL, INCLUDE ORIGINAL USE OF STRUCTURE) A fine stone house of the vernacular style typical in the Lockport area which has Greek Revival and Federal characteristics		
STYLE (IF APPROPRIATE) Vernacular		
MATERIAL OF CONSTRUCTION (INCLUDE STRUCTURAL SYSTEMS) Cut and coursed gray limestone, quarried and cut near bank of nearby canal		
SHAPE AND DIMENSIONS OF STRUCTURE (SKETCHED FLOOR PLANS ON SEPARATE PAGES ARE ACCEPTABLE) Modified T-shape, rectangular main block two stories, 5-bay front, perpendicular rear extension in two stages		
EXTERIOR FEATURES OF NOTE Ionic distyle in antis entrance with entablature broken and recessed to the plane of door, sidelights and transom. Front and rear walls of main block carry a full wooden entablature, oval bull's eye windows in gable ends		
INTERIOR FEATURES OF NOTE (DESCRIBE FLOOR PLANS, IF NOT SKETCHED)		
MAJOR ALTERATIONS AND ADDITIONS WITH DATES Out buildings and west porch demolished at unknown date		
PRESENT CONDITION AND USE Tunnel leading from basement to canal bank no longer passable		
OTHER INFORMATION AS APPROPRIATE		
SOURCES OF INFORMATION (INCLUDING LISTING ON NATIONAL REGISTER, STATE REGISTERS, ETC.)		
COMPILER, AFFILIATION Jack Barker, Jr., HABS Historian	DATE 6/24/83	

ADDENDUM TO:
FRANCIS HITCHINGS HOUSE
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HABS NY-6095
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

ADDENDUM TO FRANCIS HITCHINGS HOUSE (Mount Providence)

HABS No. NY-6095

This short-form report is an addendum to the Architectural Data Form completed by Jack Barker, Jr., in 1983, for HABS.

Location: Summit Street, Lockport, Niagara County, New York.

The coordinates for the Francis Hitchings House are 78.708367 W and 43.154299 N, and they were obtained in April 2013 with, it is assumed, NAD 1983. There is no restriction on the release of the locational data to the public.

Present Owner/
Present Use:

Raymond E. Ruhlmann, III, owns the property. The house is vacant and the property is advertised for sale.

Date: 1834.

Description:

The two-story, five bay house faces north toward Summit Street. It has a full attic and basement. Its foundation and walls are made of Lockport dolomite (limestone) like that blasted for the canal nearby. The limestone was quarried on site, and is cut and coursed. To the rear of the main block is an ell, two stories under a gabled roof and with one chimney. The porch along the west façade of the ell was removed, leaving a scar where it joined with the stone wall. A garage abuts the rear of the ell and its southern façade has three bays. The wood gable of the garage (shown in the HABS photograph) has since been replaced with siding.

The windows are wood sash glazed with six-over-six lights and sealed with plywood on the interior. Windows in the side and rear elevations are boarded up. The cheeks of the window openings are splayed and there are interior shutters.

The main entrance, in the center bay is recessed about 18" and is distinguished by Ionic columns in antis with a broken entablature to align with the plane of the door, transom and sidelights. Other classical features include the oval bulls eye windows in the gable ends of the main block. These details lend a Greek Revival overlay to the otherwise Federal-style house.

The shingled roof is a side-gable. The wood eaves are deeply recessed and the four interior end chimneys the only source of heat; eight fireplaces warmed the interior and most had stoves inserted. The mantels were marble, remembered by a former resident as streaked with blue and white.

The floors are made of wood and the interior walls are plastered and painted. Wallpaper was applied and is peeling away from the walls today. Built-in closets augment the northwest room on the first floor. Throughout the house, interior doors are paneled and the architraves are either crossetted or have corner blocks in the Greek Revival tradition. Pocket doors separate the rooms on the east side of the hall. The main stair is a single run of eighteen steps along the east side of the entrance hall; there are two balusters per tread ascending the stair and a newel post at the foot of the stair. Secondary stairs connected the present kitchen/service area to the upstairs. These stairs are in disrepair. Another run of steps leads into the basement and is located beneath the main stair.

Secondary entrances are in the southwest corner of the south elevation, leading into the kitchen/service space and in the west elevation of the ell. (See floor plans in Appendix A).

History:

Construction of the large house made of limestone quarried on site is attributed to Francis Hitchings (Hitchins). Hitchings built the dwelling on a hill called Mount Providence that overlooked the canal. The property is located near the Hitchings Bridge (now Summit Street bridge) over the canal in south Lockport. Proximity to the waterway and Hitchings's abolitionist leanings spawned rumors that the house was part of the Underground Railroad providing safety to those seeking freedom. A tunnel leading from the basement to the canal contributed to this claim; in 1983 the tunnel was described as "no longer passable" and in 2011 blocked. It is not known if it extended to the canal bank at this time or if the tunnel was instead a "secret room."

What is known is that Francis Hitchings obtained the release of a free black, Chancellor Livingston, who had worked for him at the Lockport Glass Factory and who had gone to Kentucky. Livingston was captured and held as a runaway slave. Hitchings's help secured the man's release and the arrest of his captors. In Lockport, Hitchings employed many black laborers in his businesses, for the glass factory or for work on the canal.

Hitchings (born 1802) married Mary (born 1804) and their eldest child, a daughter named Mary, was born in 1826. The girl died at age eighteen, in 1844. Hitchings's brother John worked on the canal, at the Troy side, while Hitchings worked on the Lockport side, suggesting shared investments and engineering expertise. When their sister died, Francis Hitchings raised her son, John Darrison, who was married in the house.

In 1861 Hitchings won the bid to repair the Western Division of the Erie Canal and in 1866 was described as a farmer living near the city line and Canal. He evidently was a businessman and kept a farm on Mount Providence. The 1851 map of Lockport substantiates this interpretation for the property had orchards to the south (rear) of the house and outbuildings, including a carriage house, greenhouse, corn house and two sheds.

Later in the nineteenth century Michael Rodgers owned the property. He operated a dairy farm on the premises until his death intestate in 1910. The estate remained unsettled for years, and in the 1930s and early 1940s, the McAfee family lived on the property. Henry and Lenora McAfee resided in the house along with their nephew John Cull in 1941 and 1942, possibly into 1943, until Henry McAfee's sudden death. Lenora McAfee had to put the property up for auction, and she moved to Lockport proper. She died in 1970.

The Ruhlmann family purchased the property and owned it as late as 2011. The house was been unoccupied, according to present day owner Raymond Ruhlmann III, since the 1940s. His grandfather bought the property in order to farm the land, a practice his father continued. Ruhlmann's recollection is that the property was rented in the 1920s to 1940s era, raising the possibility that the McAfee family rented it and the auction John Cull remembered was the Rodgers' estate finally closing. Ruhlmann also dispelled the idea of a tunnel to the canal bank, given that the ground was solid dolomite (the same stone used for the house).

Tours of the house given through a ghost or paranormal theme were conducted ca. 2008-09, but a public use of the property – i.e., as a tour site - was not authorized.

Sources:

This summary is drawn from materials in the clipping files of the Niagara County Historical Society library. The house and its connection to the Lockport Glass Factory and to the Canal warrant

a special study. Similarities in construction between the house and the Lockport locks should be explored.

Historian: Virginia B. Price, 2011.

Project Information: The field measurements were taken in October 2011 by Virginia B. Price and Richard O'Connor and the drawing from those field notes was done in early 2012 by James Gosney (University of Delaware). Patricia Kennedy of Hunt Real Estate ERA and Ann Marie Linnabery of the Niagara County Historical Society in Lockport provided access to the house one cold afternoon and earned my lifelong gratitude.

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(page 5)

Appendix A. Floor Plans of the Main block delineated by James Gosney, 2012.

