

2. PROJECT AREA HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

*The project area was part
of a large part of the Range
owned by the Denney family.*

The project area includes part of the Loockerman plantation, once owned by a socially prominent and politically powerful family during the eighteenth century. Loockerman's Range was the

home farm of the estate east of St. Jones Creek. The family mansion still is located in the portion that is the Delaware State University campus.

Loockerman's Range was not the whole original Range tract, which was patented by speculators and subdivided. One of the larger subdivisions became the Denney farm (Figure 4), separated from the Loockerman tract by White Marsh Branch and a dividing line. The project area is almost entirely on this tract.

White Marsh Branch no longer appears on maps, except as a bump in topographic contours. Early deed descriptions all refer to the branch as if it were a major feature. The proposed connector road will cross the branch near its head, at a stone marking the point that divided the Denney and Loockerman plantations. The stone by a cart road, shown in Figure 4, remains a property corner for the Cedar Chase apartment complex today.

The history of the Denney farm, now the campus of Delaware Technical and Community College, has been discussed at length in an earlier report for the Delaware Department of Transportation (Heite and Blume 1992). The Denney parcel was detached from the Range before 1741. A half-century later, the adjacent Learned farm was detached from the Loockerman estate during a division.

THE LEARNED FARM

In May 1794, an Orphans Court commission set aside the widow's lifetime dower third for Mary Loockerman, widow of Vincent. Her son, Vincent Emerson Loockerman, received the 453-acre mansion plantation in the estate division, except fifty acres that were assigned to be part of the widow's dower for her lifetime (Orphans Court book E-1, page 123).

Vincent E. Loockerman conveyed part of his inheritance to Nathaniel Boyer (Figure 4) and another part to Charles Harper. The largest part, including the mansion, he sold to Nathaniel Drew of Philadelphia in 1813 (Kent County Deed Book O-2, page 75). Drew moved to St. Jones [now Dover] Hundred and took out a mortgage on the property in 1817 to John Reibsam of Philadelphia for \$4,000 (Kent County Deed Book R-2, page 182).

Drew defaulted on debts that totalled \$25,000. In August 1822, the sheriff conveyed Drew's holdings to Frederick Frering of Philadelphia.

The 443 acres of the old Loockerman home place, including part of the proposed road project area, was described as containing "a large brick dwelling-house, a small brick house and outhouses and saw mill and mill seat thereunto... ." It brought less than the stated debt.

The large brick house is now known as Loockerman Hall of Delaware State University. The smaller house is the former Jason Library, which had been the earlier Loockerman family home. The whereabouts of the sawmill and its dam cannot be immediately determined, but it may have been at or near the present College Road bridge. Its impoundment may have been on the location of the wetland visible at the bottom of Figure 8 (Kent County Deed Book W-2, page 32).

After a series of transactions involving investors, the Loockerman mansion property was conveyed by a Philadelphia bank in 1834 to Caleb H. Sipple and Robert O. Penniwell, Dover merchants who did business as the firm of Sipple and Penniwell (Kent County Deed Book H-3, page 228).

Penniwell made his home at Loockerman Hall. In 1847, the firm of

Sipple and Penniwell dissolved its partnership holding with a pair of deeds to one another (Kent County Deed Book U-2, page 221).

In 1854, Penniwell's son Caleb conveyed 205 acres to Isaac Baker. This tract, outlined by dashed lines in Figure 7, was said to contain a "messuage or tenement" that may have been the house later standing at the head of White Marsh Branch (Kent County Deed Book G-4, page 45). Both parties to this sale were local residents for the first time in more than a century.

Just two years later, in 1856, Baker conveyed the same tract to Samuel and Henry Umstead of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania (Kent County Deed Book K-4, page 166).

Henry Umstead died in 1859, and in 1865 his executor and his brother conveyed the farm to Hervey D. Learned (1830-1916) of Dover (Kent County Deed Book Z-4, page 102).

In 1884, Hervey Learned and his wife Lydia (d. 1928) conveyed 83 acres, the southeast part of the property, to Robert D. Dawson, who had moved here from Pennsylvania (Kent County Deed Book P-6, page 170). The Dawson tract now contains Service Merchandise and other mercantile establishments.

When the Orphans Court settled Hervey D. Learned's 130-acre estate in 1918, the widow's dower was set aside to include the house and a small parcel. The residue was kept in the family

(Figure 5). In 1929, Lewis D. Learned (1873-1963), their son, obtained clear title to the whole farm (Kent County Deed Book S-13, page 52).

In 1944, Jacob Zimmerman bought the old Denney farm, later the DelTech campus (Kent County Deed Book X-19, page 158; Book N-16, page 219). In 1954 he conveyed a quarter-acre patch of land behind the Learned home place to Lewis D. Learned, Sr. (Kent County Deed Book K-20, page 170).

Over the ensuing years, the neighborhood evolved from a largely agricultural and residential district into a commercial district, including hotels and several large retail stores as well as apartments. In the course of all this development, it became necessary to terminate deed covenants that restricted the former Learned farm to residential uses, required a uniform setback, and forbade the sale of alcohol. These restrictions had been imposed by the Learneds.

Among the occupants of the old Learned farm was a mobile-home facility called Trailer Village, which occupied roughly the space now enclosed in the Cedar Chase apartment complex.

A series of deeds dated May 15, 1987 extinguished the deed restrictions and realigned all the property holdings in the area, in preparation for further development. Current property lines in the project area are a result of those transactions.

Ensuing years were marked by development, on the former Learned farm, of a hotel, restaurants, and the Cedar Chase apartment complex. White Marsh Branch, or ditch, is the southeast boundary of the apartment property, which includes the quarter acre Louis Learned obtained in 1954 from Jacob Zimmerman.

At the back end of the apartment property, an old fence line marks the former boundary of the DelTech property. Beyond the groomed landscape of the apartments is a wooded parcel that bears few marks of human intrusion. Framed by White Marsh branch on the south and a smaller ditch on the north, a distinctive peninsula or finger of sandy high ground points toward St. Jones River.

The first proposed route of the connector road would follow the old fence line, running from Scarborough Road to the shopping complex on the south.

A second possible route of the road, later adopted, was sited farther out in the woods, away from the apartment complex.

As currently designed, the connector will follow the north bank of

White Marsh Branch, now the north boundary of the Sam's Club property.

On the following pages are plots that delineate the recent ownership history of the project site and adjacent properties. These complex real-estate maneuvers would complicate the archaeological planning, and confuse researchers trying to trace the history of specific places on the property.