

IV. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

A. INTRODUCTION: GOALS AND METHODS

The goals of the historical research component of this project are to describe the historical setting of the project area, establish the cultural parameters of development, and identify any known historic resources or locations within the study area likely to contain significant archaeological or architectural properties. Relevant sources were found at the Historical Society of Delaware, Hall of Records, University of Delaware, and the Bureau of Archaeology and Historic Preservation.

B. SUMMARY OF SUSSEX COUNTY HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

The study area is located two miles north of Georgetown in Sussex County, and it is contained in the Georgetown Hundred. The earliest European occupation in Sussex County occurred in 1659 when the Dutch established a block house, called Company's Fort, at Hoerenkil, later Lewes (Hancock 1976:14). The outpost expanded to include a small agricultural settlement under the Mennonite leadership of Cornelius Plockhoy in the early 1660s. The Anglo-Dutch war interrupted the growth of the fledgling colony when Sir Robert Carr occupied New Amstel and Hoerenkil and confiscated all of the possessions of Plockhoy's community. Plockhoy later moved on to Germantown but some of his followers remained in Sussex County, where they swore allegiance to the English crown (Hancock 1976:14-15).

The three southern counties that became Delaware were contested by English proprietors as well as by rivaling English and Dutch imperial claims. No sooner had the English supplanted the Dutch than Lord Baltimore, proprietor of Maryland, challenged the claim of the Duke of York. In 1672, Captain Thomas Jones led raids on Hoerenkil on behalf of the Maryland proprietor, forcing settlers to swear allegiance to Lord Baltimore or suffer imprisonment and confiscation of their property. In the meantime, the Dutch fleet sailed into New York harbor in July 1673 and repossessed the city and the settlements on the Delaware. Maryland took advantage of the confusion to tighten its hold on Hoerenkil. Thomas Howell, acting under commission to Lord Baltimore, led another raid on the settlement on the grounds that the inhabitants had taken the oath of allegiance to the Dutch. A second raid led by Howell resulted in near destruction of the settlement except for a single barn (Hancock 1976:15-16).

Peace between England and Holland was restored in 1676, and Holland ceded its possessions in New York, New Jersey, and Delaware to England. Lord Baltimore continued to issue competing patents to land in what become Sussex County, known in Maryland as Somerset County; Governor Lovelace of New York, acting on behalf of the Duke of York, also issued patents to land in the county. Finally, in 1682, the three lower counties were confirmed to William Penn of Pennsylvania, which seems to have brought the contest among the contending proprietors to an end (Hancock 1976:17-18). Penn changed the name from Somerset to Sussex, organized a government, and instituted the system of hundreds.

By 1700, the county is believed to have contained about 1,000 persons. With Lewes as the only town and the commercial and administrative center of the county, settlement was dispersed along the Indian River, Mispillion River, and Cedar Creek. Most families were engaged in agriculture with tobacco, corn, wheat, and rye as the principal crops. There were few roads and occupants relied primarily on water transport (Hancock 1976:20-21). Benjamin Eastburn's map of 1737 suggests that settlement was still fairly thin in Sussex County in the early eighteenth century although roads did connect the major settlements. The Indian River appears to have been navigable by small vessels for about ten miles inland (Munroe and Dann 1975:225).

The town of Lewes prospered as a maritime, commercial, and administrative center, but the gradual growth of western settlements led to familiar agitation by the so-called back country for a county seat that was more centrally located. In addition to agriculture, bog iron deposits and processing sites had led to some economic development west of the original coastal settlements along the headwaters of the Nanticoke after 1763. By 1763, Jonathan Vaughn and other entrepreneurs from Chester County, Pennsylvania, had established the Deep Creek Iron Works, a complex of forges and foundries, located about seven miles northwest of the present site of Georgetown, which was supported by a 5,000-acre plantation, a system of roads, and a stone wharf on Deep Creek which afforded access to ocean-going vessels (Tunnell 1954:87-88). Other furnaces and forges in the area included Unity Forge, located three miles above Concord (the site of the Deep Creek Iron Works), and Collins Forge on Gravelly Branch. Operated successively by Captain John Collins, his son Governor John Collins, and his grandson Theophilus Collins, Gravelly Delight was the last of Sussex County iron works to manufacture iron using the traditional blast technology, shutting down some time in the 1850s (Tunnell 1954:88; Hancock 1976:62).

Although iron resources contributed to the economic development of the area, the nature of the early iron industry, particularly the vast quantities of timber needed to manufacture charcoal, did not stimulate rapid population growth. The terrain in the Georgetown vicinity was low and swampy and the land was held in large tracts by largely absentee landholders, further discouraging rapid settlement by farmers (Wade 1975:5). The relatively desolate swamps in the area afforded refuge to Tories during the Black Camp Rebellion of 1780. Most of the activity during the War for Independence affected the ports along the Delaware. However, insurrectionists mainly from Cedar Creek and Slaughter Neck Hundred led an uprising in 1780, having established their headquarters in a swamp about six miles north of Georgetown. Kent County militia dispersed the uprising, which involved about 400 men. The eight leaders were condemned to death for treason but pardoned in November 1780 (Hancock 1976:43-44).

Among the grievances that had become intertwined with economic complaints during the Revolutionary years was the continued sense of political isolation that the back country had felt in the years leading up to the war. This was finally resolved in 1791 when Georgetown was surveyed in John Pettijohn's field "sixteen miles from anywhere" and designated the county seat (Wade 1975:5).

Except for Georgetown, whose genesis was essentially political, a series of small towns in the county developed in a similar pattern of houses clustered around mills, ports and fords, followed by schools, churches, post offices, and other industries (Hancock 1976:56). What frequently began as small transportation hubs with mills, combined central places of services for the outlying farmers. Fleatown, later renamed Federalsburg, was initially a small crossroads community defined by two taverns that served the stagecoaches. The advent of the railroad, however, precipitated the slow decline of the taverns and then the village (Conrad 1908:695). Other small towns in Sussex County dating to this period include Seaford (1799), Laurel (1802), Bethel (1800), Dagsborough (ca. 1780), Millsboro (1792), Frankford (1808), Selbyville (1842), and Milton (1807) (Hancock 1976:58-59).

Growth in the vicinity of Georgetown was slow in the 1790s, due in part to the absence of networks of transportation and communication (Wade 1975:6). In 1796, the General Assembly authorized construction of three county roads the first ran from Milford Bridge through Georgetown and Dagsborough to the Maryland state line; the second from Lewes through Georgetown to the Maryland state line; and the third line from Georgetown "to the west line that divides the hundred of Little Creek, in the said county from Maryland" (as quoted in Wade 1975:7).

Corn had been the principal crop cultivated in Sussex County during the Colonial period and retained its primacy during the first half of the nineteenth century, followed by wheat and other crops. Farmers appear to have practiced a mix of relatively small-scale subsistence/commercial agriculture (Hancock 1976:59). Wheat prices were initially inflated by European demand during the Napoleonic Wars, but after 1819, this market vanished leaving economic depression in its place. Migration to new lands further west accentuated the depression and agriculture stagnated until about 1830. Thereafter, urban demand for fruits, vegetables, and dairy products slowly stimulated the state's agricultural economy, assisted by improved agricultural techniques that enhanced farm productivity (Hancock 1947:374). This transition to farming suited to the domestic urban market was felt first in New Castle County but with the growth of the rail system begun to spread to Sussex County by the eve of the Civil War (Hancock 1947:I:376). Farmers in Sussex County did experiment with raising silk cocoons and mulberry trees in the 1830s and 1840s, encouraged, no doubt, by a state bounty on the production of cocoons and silk in 1837 (Hancock 1976:30).

The middle decades of the nineteenth century were notable for the tremendous expansion in the cultivation of peaches. Peaches were introduced into the state by Isaac Reeves of New Jersey in 1832. New Castle County was initially the center of peach cultivation although with the construction of the railroad, peach orchards had spread to lower Delaware by the 1850s (Hancock 1976:60-61; Hancock 1947:I:382). The Delaware Railroad reached the Maryland border at Delmar in 1859. The Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia, which was extended from Harrington east to Milford and then south through Ellendale to Georgetown in 1869, encouraged not only cultivation of more perishable, market crops but also the establishment of processing plants and canneries in the town (Wade 1975:35; Delaware Division of the Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Wilmington Railroad 1914).

On the eve of the Civil War, the statewide transition away from grain had begun but was far from complete. Statewide, Delaware was still heavily invested in wheat and corn, and the most valuable farms and those with the greatest concentration in orchard products, market gardens, and dairying were located primarily in New Castle County (Hancock 1947:I:383). Sussex County lagged behind New Castle in the shift to new crops, and unlike Kent and New Castle Counties, where slavery was a dying institution, contained more than half of the state's slave population (Hancock 1976:64). The largest slave owner in the county on the eve of the war was Benjamin Burton of Indian Creek Hundred, owner of 28 slaves. Burton was the exception, rather than the rule; most slaves augmented relatively modest farm households where they worked as domestic servants or field laborers (Hancock 1976:65).

Sectional tensions were high in the county during the war, and residents of Broad Creek Hundred openly celebrated Confederate victories. Most people were unenthusiastic about the proposed compensated emancipation of slaves in 1861, and the Democrats carried the county in the 1862 elections. In economic terms, however, the war was fundamentally kind to the county, leading to higher prices for agricultural commodities and an expansion in shipbuilding facilities in both Milford and Milton (Hancock 1976:82-84).

The economic promise implicit in the extension of the railroad prior to 1860 became apparent in the decades following the war. Population growth in Sussex County was slow but steady, tourism to shore resorts increased, and by 1900, the county was the state leader in production of peaches, blackberries, and strawberries. Corn was still the leading crop, as it had been since the Colonial period, and Sussex County farmers derived additional income from livestock, poultry, and dairying (Hancock 1976:88-89). The railroads were responsible for other forms of development, as well. The growth of Lincoln and Ellendale, surveyed in 1867, were both direct responses to access to the railroad (Robinson 1976:62), and in 1875, the Fruit Preserving Company, a cannery, was established in Georgetown near the railroad depot, marking an industrial response not only to improved transport facilities but also to the transition in local agriculture (Wade 1975:35). In

1876, the Georgetown Packing Company was organized (Wade 1975:41). Industry in Georgetown expanded in the 1880s under the leadership of Charles H. Treat. Treat acquired the Fruit Preserving Company in 1883 and began to manufacture various wooden novelties and dishes. In 1885, Treat opened a second plant, which manufactured baskets, barrels, casks, lumber, and scroll and jig-sawing. Treat's manufactories were soon followed by several new canneries, a steam sawmill, and expanded consumer services, from insurance to ice cream parlors (Wade 1976:41-42). Not all functions were concentrated in the towns and villages, however, churches and schools were distributed across the landscape where they were easily accessible to the dispersed rural population.

Although Sussex County was the center of Delaware's peach growing in 1890, peach culture in the state was on the wane by 1900, partly as a result of disease, the cause of which was never identified (Hancock 1947:I:385-86). At the turn of the century and continuing up to World War II, corn and wheat were still important crops as were strawberries, tomatoes, lima beans, green peas, snap beans, cantaloupes, asparagus, watermelons, cucumbers, and sweet corn, particularly in the southern part of the state (Baker 1947:I:394). The state highway program, inaugurated in 1920, greatly stimulated dairying and egg sales in Sussex County in the period following World War I (Baker 1947:I:397,401).

The principal innovation in twentieth-century agriculture was the expansion in raising broilers, that is, young birds weighing less than two and one-half pounds. The modern industry is associated with the experiments of Mrs. Wilmer Steele of Ocean View, Sussex County, with raising and marketing chicks in 1923. By 1928, broiler production had spread across Sussex County and into Kent and New Castle. The Steeles pioneered the timing of raising fowl, beginning the broods in February, as well as with the organization and sizes of the houses. The 2,000-bird unit, the standard in 1930, had by 1940 become considered a "back yard" flock, capable of being handled as a part-time activity (Baker 1947:I:402). The expansion in the production and marketing of broilers simultaneous led to an expansion in hatcheries and hatching-egg production as well as the processing, distribution, and retailing of feed (Baker 1947:I:403, 404). The broilers had initially been delivered live to urban markets. In 1938, Jack Udel established the first dressing plant in Frankford, Sussex County, which successfully slaughtered and dressed the birds and then shipped them to retail outlets (Baker 1947:I:405).

Since 1920, Sussex County has grown enormously although it retains its agricultural basis. In 1970, 85 percent of the residents were classified as rural, and more than one-half of Delaware's farms and cropland were contained in the county (Hancock 1976:101). Corn has remained an important crop but cultivation of soybeans together with corn and poultry has supplanted growing of labor-intensive fruits and vegetables such as tomatoes, lima beans, peas, and strawberries. Many canneries and processing plants shut down or were replaced by grain elevators, broiler houses, and poultry processing plants (Hancock 1976:100). Vlasic Foods maintained a food processing plant in Millsboro and Draper Foods employed about 1,000 people at another vegetable packing plant in Milton. In addition to food packing and processing, modern industries in the county include chemicals, instrument manufacturing, nylon, fertilizer, textiles, and electronics (Hancock 1976:103).

C. RESOURCE POTENTIAL

Documentary evidence indicates that the project area was not occupied until the late nineteenth century. There is no settlement on the property indicated on the 1868 Beers atlas (Figure 3), but a 1914 county map (Figure 4) indicates at least one farm or rural residence on the property (Farm Journal Road Map 1914). The initial occupant appears to have been William H. Ward, who purchased a 125-acre tract that included the project area in 1880.

The project area is most likely to contain resources associated with Delaware's Urbanization and Suburbanization period, 1880 to 1940, primarily property types associated with agriculture. The study area is contained in the Lower Peninsula/Cypress Swamp Zone, defined in the Delaware State Historic Preservation Plan (Ames et al 1989; Herman et al. 1989; De Cunzo and Catts 1990). Located on the periphery of Colonial settlement, this resource zone was exploited for timber, and there exists the potential for evidence, although ephemeral, of forest activities. Occupation of the area in dispersed farmsteads intensified by the end of the Colonial period, leading to agitation for relocation of the county seat to a more central location. This occurred in the 1790s. The landscape was, still quite open, particularly in the swamps and wetland areas. Associated with the economic development of the early nineteenth century was exploitation of bog iron deposits in the vicinity of the project area, but none of the known centers for this activity falls within the limits of the study area.

This section of Sussex County developed in the nineteenth century as an area of small mixed subsistence/commercial farms supported by a network of roads, railroads, and towns. As in most of eastern agriculture in the second half of the century, farmers in the vicinity of the corridor presumably began to specialize in market crops and commodities, either grain or the more perishable fruits, vegetables, or dairy products, depending on their relative proximity to transportation. First railroads and then highways facilitated the transition to increasingly perishable products destined either directly for urban markets or for the processing/packing plants that dispersed in local towns developed along the railroads.

Major developments in the nineteenth century include development of peach culture and other forms of market/orchard gardening and the extension of the railroads. This led to the formation of railroad towns and stimulated the fruit/vegetable processing/packing industry, which remains a feature of Sussex County's landscape and economy today. Peach culture reached its apex in about 1890 and then began to decline. The advent of the broiler industry in the 1920s, however, made available another commodity to be sold in urban markets.