

## II. Historic Background of Central Hotel/Sterling's Tavern

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### *Background*

Sterling's Tavern (N-6333.146) is a circa 1830, irregularly shaped, four story, hip-roof Flemish bond brick building that formerly functioned as The Central Hotel in Delaware City, Red Lion Hundred, New Castle County, Delaware. Situated at the east corner of Clinton and Canal (Front) Streets on a triangular lot, the building has sustained many additions, including a two-story concrete block wing added during the mid-twentieth century. The Sterling Tavern is a contributing feature to the Delaware City Historic District, listed in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) on December 15, 1983 (*Please see the attached National Register Nomination for further information*). The Delaware City Historic District is listed in the NRHP under Criterion A for its relationship to the Chesapeake and Delaware (C & D) Canal and under Criterion C for its architectural significance. The level of significance for the Delaware City Historic District is state level, and the period of significance is c. 1826-1930.<sup>1</sup>

Based on previous scholarship, the Central Hotel/Sterling's Tavern appears to have been constructed c. 1830 by Mr. Samuel Van Amringe. Mr. Van Amringe bought the undeveloped, triangularly shaped lot from Manuel Eyre on November 24, 1829 (Deed Book G-4, Page 511). By April 1830, Van Amringe had started to build a brick dwelling and storehouse on the lot, which was described as a "three-story brick messuage or tenement store house and lot" in a mortgage (Deed Book H-4, Page 302).<sup>2</sup> In January 1834, the Sheriff of New Castle County took possession of the property and sold it at public auction for \$2,500 to Robert Polk, a merchant in Delaware City (Deed Book U-4, Page 20). By 1845, the property was owned by John Ashurst, who in turn sold it to George and Jane Cleaver in 1847 (Deed Book U-5, Page 373).<sup>3</sup> Upon the demise of George Cleaver in 1865, Jane Cleaver inherited the property (Orphans Court Record Z-1, Page 71). Jane Cleaver held the property until her death in 1893, when her heirs (Hugh Brown) took control (Deed Book D-9, Page 441; Deed Book D-16, Page 450). In 1903, the property passed to William and Josephine Hagan (Deed Book D-18, Page 402; Deed Book H-19, Page 126; Deed Book I-95, Page 569; Deed Book I-95, Page 571). Under the Hagans' ownership, the property functioned as the Central Hotel and Restaurant (See **Plate 2**). In 1913, the Hagans sold the property to the Joseph Stoeckle Brewing Company (Deed Book I-24, Page 426). Max Schaffer bought the hotel in 1926 from the Joseph Stoeckle Brewing Company; in 1931, the property was repossessed and sold at a sheriff's sale (Deed Book S-33, Page 348; Deed Book N-37, Page 235). George and Emma Clark bought the building for \$2,500, and went on to lease the property to George and Theresa Sterling from 1933 to 1942 (Deed Book W-37, Page 127). In 1942, the Sterlings bought

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<sup>1</sup> The above information was taken from the *National Register of Historic Places Inventory Nomination Form* for the Delaware City Historic District prepared by Valeria Cesna, August 1983 and included in Appendix A.

<sup>2</sup> Deed Book G-4, Page 511 and Mortgage H-4, Page 302 was transcribed by Ann Blackmore in February 2001. Found on file at the Delaware City Town Hall.

<sup>3</sup> This citation was found on 09/30/2004 at CHAD, under the Sterling House File at Allison Hall, University of Delaware.

the property outright from the Clarks (Deed Book I-43, Page 411). Following the death of Theresa Sterling in 1980, the property passed to her son, George (Will Book WR07, Page 4797).<sup>4</sup> Today, the building is owned by Delaware City, and is the subject of a proposed renovation project.

### *Physical Description*<sup>5</sup>

Originally constructed as a combined dwelling and storehouse, the Sterling Hotel is situated on a triangular lot bounded by Canal Street and the old channel of the Chesapeake and Delaware (C & D) Canal on the east, Clinton Street on the west, and Front Street on the south. The apex of the triangular lot faces the junction of Canal and Clinton Streets, and points toward the outlet of the canal into the Delaware River and beyond to Fort Delaware on Pea Patch Island. Because of the irregularly shaped lot and the orientation of the building to the Canal, the Clinton Street commercial area, and to the old wharf area, the Sterling Hotel does not have a single primary elevation - rather, it has three elevations that feature primary access into different parts of the building. The brick on these three elevations is laid in Flemish bond, with headers and stretchers alternating within each row of brick. On the south side of the building, which is irregularly shaped and may be considered to be the back of the building, the brick is laid in common bond, with multiple rows of stretchers for every one row of headers.

The Sterling Hotel incorporates four separate construction periods, ranging from the 1830s to the mid-twentieth century. The initial period of construction resulted in a three-story, irregularly shaped, six-sided brick building that conforms roughly to the triangular shape of the building lot. This Period I building is composed of two connected blocks that are differentiated by their rooflines, orientation to the C & D Canal and surrounding streets, and by their uses. The southern block, which appears to be a conventional side-passage plan dwelling, is appended to the southeast end of a large, irregularly shaped five-sided storehouse and commercial building (See **Figures 1-4**).

The east elevation of the Period I building faces the C & D Canal. The north end of this elevation was used as a storehouse and commercial space, and the south end was used as a residence. Doors placed along the east elevation reflect the division of functional spaces. A wide, double-leaf door, flanked on the north side by two regularly spaced six-over-six-light double-hung sash windows, provides entry into the commercial section of the building. A single-leaf door with a fanlight, flanked by two asymmetrically placed six-over-six-light, double-hung sash windows, provides entry into the residence. The second and third stories of the east elevation have five symmetrically placed windows. The three windows towards the north end of the elevation light the warehouse and commercial space; the two windows on the south end light the stair hall and second and third floor chambers of the residence. All of the windows are six-over-six-light double-hung sash with stone lintels and sills, and windows on the third floor are smaller than

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<sup>4</sup> This citation was found on 09/30/2004 in the CHAD Sterling House files at Allison Hall, University of Delaware.

<sup>5</sup> The following exterior physical description was taken verbatim from the working draft of the *Mid-Atlantic Historic Building Survey Sterling Hotel* by David Ames, et al., September 2004.

those on the lower stories. Towards the south end of the roof, on the dwelling, there are two arched dormer windows with six-over-six-light double-hung sash and, like all other dormer windows on the first period building, feature fluted surrounds with carved bulls-eyes.

The north elevation of the Period I building lies at the apex of the triangular-shaped lot, and faces the intersection of Clinton and Canal Streets. At the first story, a wide double-leaf door is flanked by two six-over-six-light double-hung sash windows, and leads into the commercial space. The second and third stories each have two symmetrically placed windows. All of the windows are six-over-six-light double-hung sash; the lower story windows have stone lintels and sills while the third story has only stone sills. A single arched dormer window rises from the center of the hipped roof of this elevation. A one-story wooden porch with square posts and an asphalt-shingled roof shelters the first floor of the elevation.

The first floor of the west elevation, which faces Clinton Street, features two doors at its southwest end. One is a single-leaf door with a two-light transom and stone lintel and sill; the other is a double-leaf door with a modern corrugated metal overhang. Both doors have two stone steps, and open into the commercial section of the building. A plate glass window with a shed-roofed overhang has been added at the center of this elevation. There are four windows symmetrically placed on the second and third floors of this elevation. All of the windows on this elevation are six-over-six-light, double-hung wood sash; windows on the second floor have stone sills and lintels; those on the third floor have stone sills. The third floor windows are smaller than those on the second floor. Two arched dormer windows are situated at roof level and are aligned with the third story windows that are second and fourth from the northeast side of the elevation. Although the north end of the roof of the Period I building is hipped, the south end is clipped to form an irregular-shaped gable and contains an interior end chimney.

The south end of the Period I block is irregularly configured due to the junction of the two blocks (the commercial block and the residential block) that compose the Period I building. The south elevation of the commercial block joins with the rear (west) elevation of the Period I residence. This juncture forms an oblique angle that faces roughly southwest. The south elevation of the Period I commercial block is pierced by one window between the first and second stories. There are a total of eight six-over-six-light double-hung sash windows on the rear (west) elevation of the Period I residence, with two windows lighting each chamber and two lighting the stair halls. The stair hall windows are offset from the chamber windows.

The Period II section of the Sterling Hotel is a two-story, gable-roofed brick residential addition on the south end of the Period I residence. This addition is flush with the east elevation of the Period I dwelling, and faces the C & D Canal. The first floor features a central door flanked by two windows on each side. The second story fenestration, three windows, is asymmetrical in comparison to the first story. Windows on both floors are six-over-six-light double-hung wood sash with stone lintels and sills. There are two windows in the south gable end of this block. The first and second stories of the south

end are obscured by a two-story, triangular-shaped brick addition. The east wall of this addition is flush with the east wall of the Period II block. The south wall is built at an angle, conforming to the triangular shape of the south end of the lot, and joins the rear (west) elevation of the Period II residence. There are two small windows on the first floor and one six-over-six-light double-hung wood sash window asymmetrically placed on the south second-story wall of this addition. A brick wall extends from the southwest corner of the addition and runs along the south edge of the building lot. This wall at one time extended along the east side of the lot, joining with the brick side wall of the Period IV shed addition and enclosing a small yard that occupies the southwest corner of the lot.

The Period III building is composed of a two-story, shed-roofed, concrete block addition, which is attached to the west (Clinton Street) side of the second period residence. There is a door located towards the center of the west elevation, with a single one-over-one-light metal sash window asymmetrically placed on each side. On the second floor, there are two sets of paired one-over-one-light metal sash windows. There is a pedimented dormer with six-over-six-light double-hung sash wood windows at the north end of the roof, and a brick chimney pierces the roof at the southwest corner of this block.

A Period IV building is represented by a one-story shed-roofed frame addition that is attached to the south end of the Period I commercial block. The shed has an asphalt-shingled roof, one stationary window on the west elevation, and two six-over-six-light double-hung wood sash windows on the south elevation.

### *History*<sup>6</sup>

At the time of its incorporation in 1851, the “Town of Delaware City” had a “compact plan with ten major streets and nine cross streets of carefully graduated widths.”<sup>7</sup> Washington Street was laid out as the central axis of the town, and was lined with residences. The 1851 town plan also included two wharves positioned on the banks of the Delaware River on the northeast edge of the new town, along with two public squares.<sup>8</sup> Clinton Street became the Delaware City’s main commercial thoroughfare, thanks to its direct access to the wharfs and canal lock.<sup>9</sup> The history of the Sterling Hotel is therefore closely tied to the development of Delaware City and the construction of the C & D Canal.

Delaware City was established on the Delaware River in Red Lion Hundred during the first quarter of the nineteenth century. The site was part of a larger tract granted to Henry Ward in 1675 by the Duke of York, reputedly for the sum of “four and a half bushels of winter wheat.”<sup>10</sup> In 1801, a descendant of Ward sold the tract that would later become

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<sup>6</sup> The following history of Delaware City and the Sterling Hotel was edited and taken directly from the *Mid-Atlantic Historic Buildings Survey Sterling House*, David Ames, et al., September 2004.

<sup>7</sup> The above information was taken from the *National Register of Historic Places Inventory Nomination Form* for the Delaware City Historic District prepared by Valeria Cesna, August 1983; Scharf, p. 972.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Delaware City: A Historic Past, A Bright Future*. Delaware City Area Historical Society, 1979; Scharf, p. 971.

Delaware City to John Newbold. Newbold constructed a wharf to facilitate trade for hunters and trappers, and by 1827 his sons laid out the town, then called Newbold's Landing, in a grid plan.<sup>11</sup> The Newbolds and subsequent landowners and developers in the town believed that they had settled upon a location that was bound for prosperity as a port city. This dream was supported by the selection of Newbold's Landing as the site of one of three locks for the new Chesapeake and Delaware Canal, which was constructed between 1824 and 1829 to link the Delaware River and Chesapeake Bay, creating a major new trade and transportation route between Philadelphia and Baltimore.

Soon after laying out the town, the Newbolds sold their land holdings to Manuel Eyre.<sup>12</sup> Samuel Van Amringe purchased the undeveloped triangular-shaped lot at the intersection of Clinton, Canal, and Front Streets from Eyre in 1829. Local tradition asserts that Van Amringe used the warehouse to store grain, and he or his tenants presumably lived in the residential portion of the building.<sup>13</sup> The location of the building near both the wharves and the Clinton Street commercial area made it an ideal site for the storage and trade of commercial goods, as well as for accommodations for workers and travelers along the river and canal. By 1845, the property was in the hands of John Ashurst, who sold it to George and Jane Cleaver in 1847. The property remained in the Cleaver family until 1903.

Under the ownership of the Cleavers (1836-1903), the building saw many uses. An 1885 Sanborn Fire Insurance map indicates that N. G. Price's Store occupied the ground floor of the storehouse portion of the building. Following their purchase of the property in 1903, the Hagans remodeled the ground floor of the storehouse for use as a restaurant and dry goods store. William Hagan's initials were inlaid into the tile floor of the new enterprise. Under William Hagan's occupancy the building operated as a dry goods store, restaurant, and fur factory.<sup>14</sup> There is indication that an oyster cellar business was operated in the building; one of the past owners, Mr. George Sterling, stated "oyster shells covered the basement floor when his mother acquired the property."

The building changed hands frequently during the early twentieth century, and housed a number of activities, including a hotel and tavern. In 1908-1909 William Hagan was listed as the proprietor of the "Central Hotel," and a 1910 Sanborn Fire Insurance map also identified the property as the Central Hotel. The Sanborn map indicated that a frame one-story icehouse had been added in the rear yard and a frame one-story porch off the back of the building (See **Figure 3**). In 1913 the Joseph Stoeckle Brewing Company bought the Central Hotel and Restaurant from William and Josephine Hagan for \$20,000. On October 11, 1919, under the ownership of the Brewing Company, the Atlantic Deepwater Association held a canal celebration at the hotel to commemorate the federal government's acquisition of the canal and the proposed "Federal sea level canal."<sup>15</sup> The most recent occupants, the Sterlings, purchased the property from the Clarks in 1942. The

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> New Castle County Recorder of Deeds, K-4, Page 518 (1828).

<sup>13</sup> *Delaware City: Port of History*. Delaware City Town Hall Offices, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Edward Kenney "Peeling back the past." *The News Journal*, March 17, 2001.

<sup>15</sup> *Delaware City: Port of History*. Delaware City Town Hall Offices, 2001.

Sterlings operated an inn and tavern in the building (renamed Sterling's Tavern), while renting out rooms on the second floor.

The significance of Sterling's Tavern and its progression from a personal residence to a hotel (and later tavern) is linked to the construction of the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal and the development of Delaware City. This canal connected the Delaware River and the Chesapeake Bay. Construction of the C & D Canal occurred in 1824 and it opened in the summer of 1829. Three years before its completion Daniel and William Newbold had laid out a plan for Delaware City and ten houses had been built. The canal played an important role in the development of the town, as Delaware City was one site for the canal's locks. In the first year of the canal's operation one-fifth of the transits through the canal were passengers, while the remainder was cargo. Delaware City flourished as a result of the commerce as it became a location for stop for excursion vessels and commerce. Retail and wholesale dealers increased and hotels were established to accommodate the growing number of visitors. The Central Hotel (or Sterling's Tavern) arose out of the needs of the town and adapted to new functions as those needs changed over time.

While Delaware City "never became the thriving metropolis envisioned by its initial investors," it is well on its way to begin a new period of expansion.<sup>16</sup> The proposed renovations to the former Central Hotel/Sterling's Tavern will hopefully serve as the centerpiece for a new downtown revitalization.

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<sup>16</sup> Lala, et al. *Commercial Elements in the Development of Delaware City*, p. 3.

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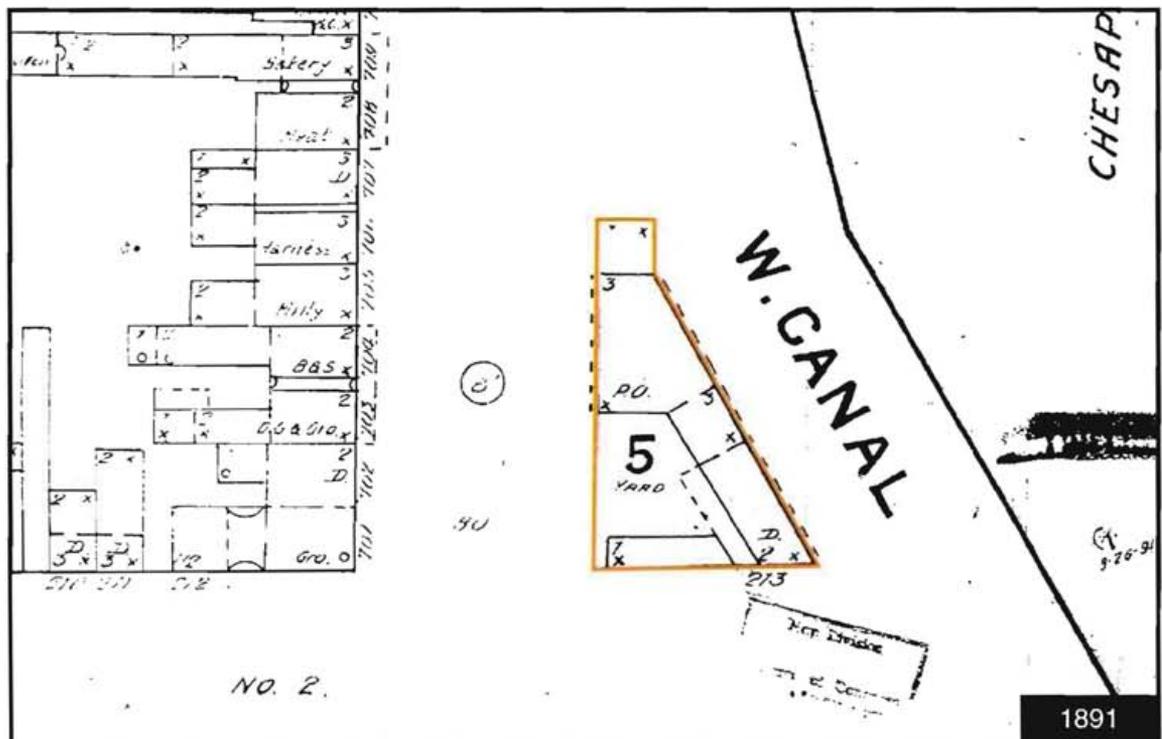
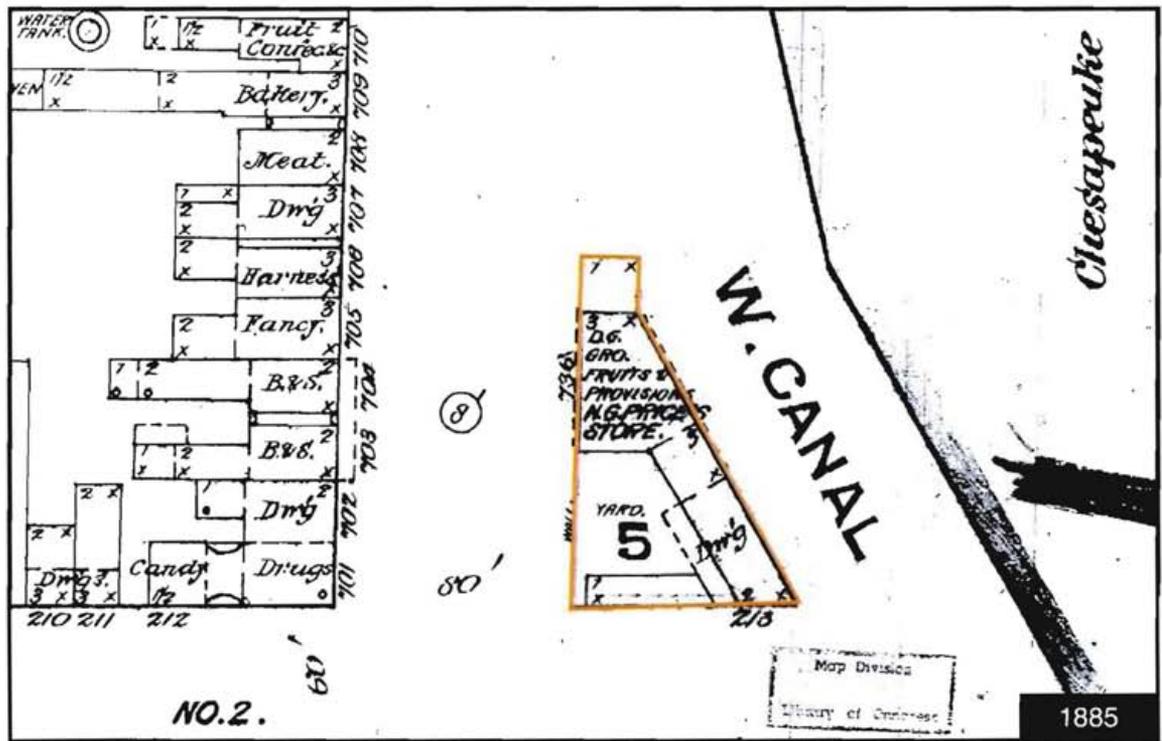


Figure 2: Sanborn Insurance Company Maps  
Delaware City, Delaware

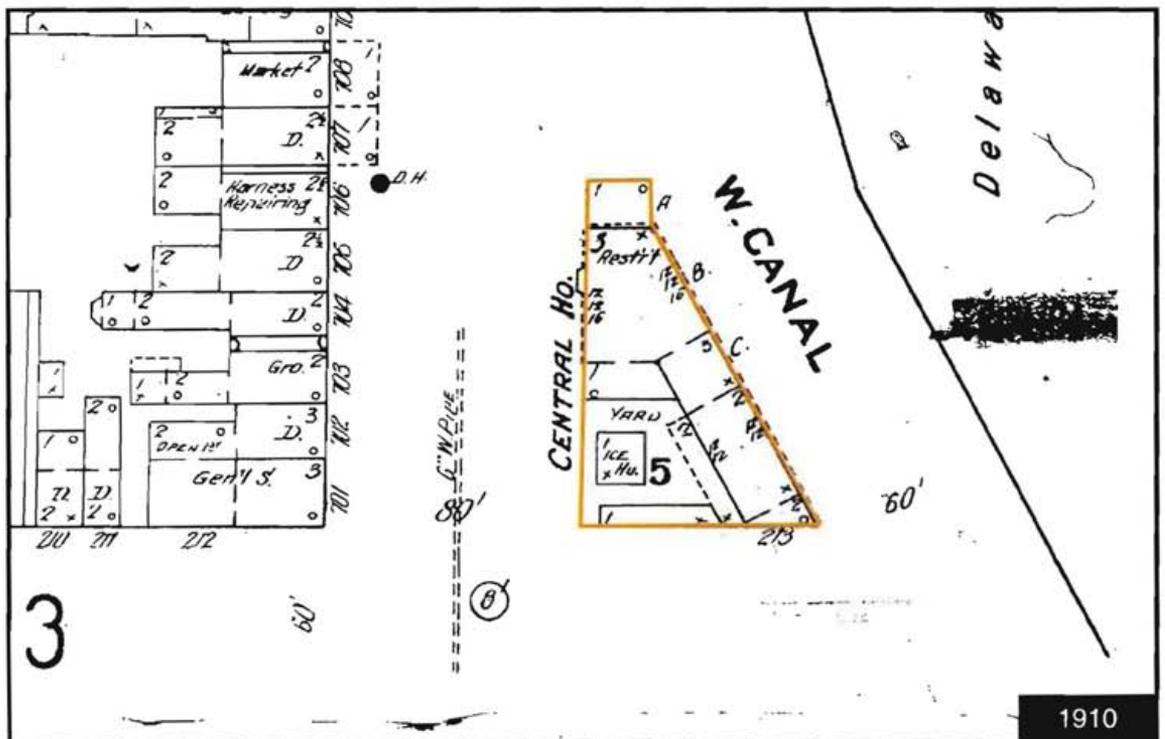
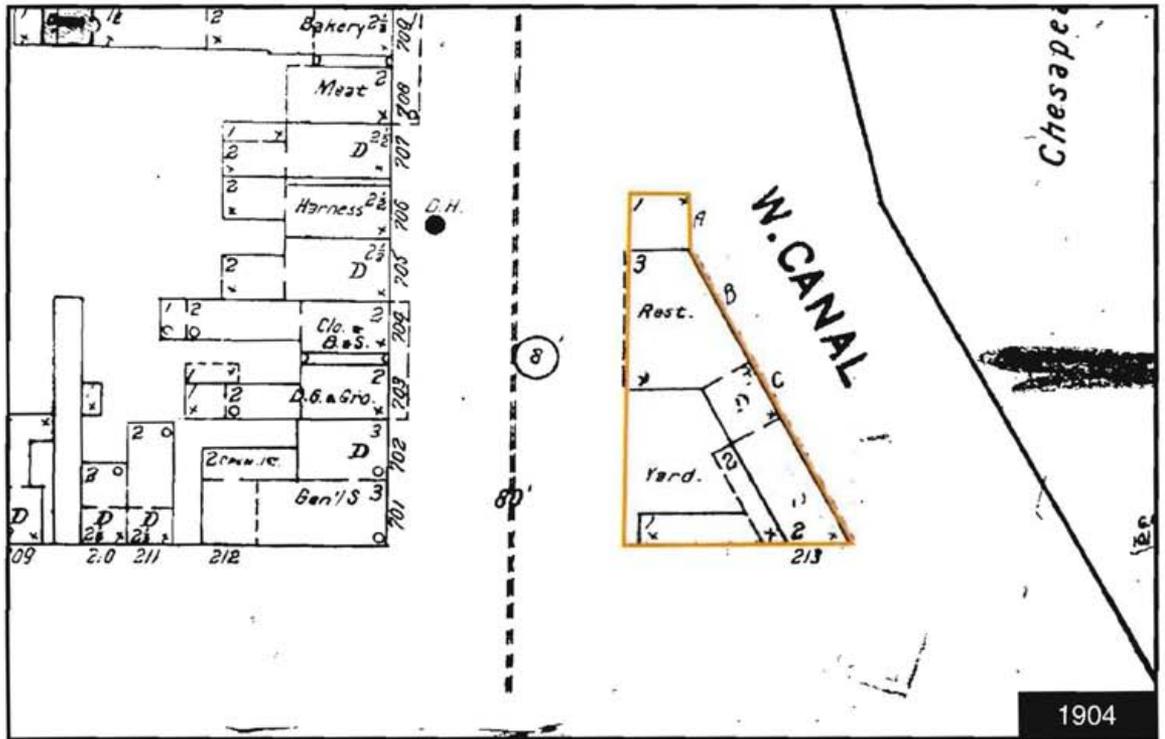


Figure 3: Sanborn Insurance Company Maps  
Delaware City, Delaware

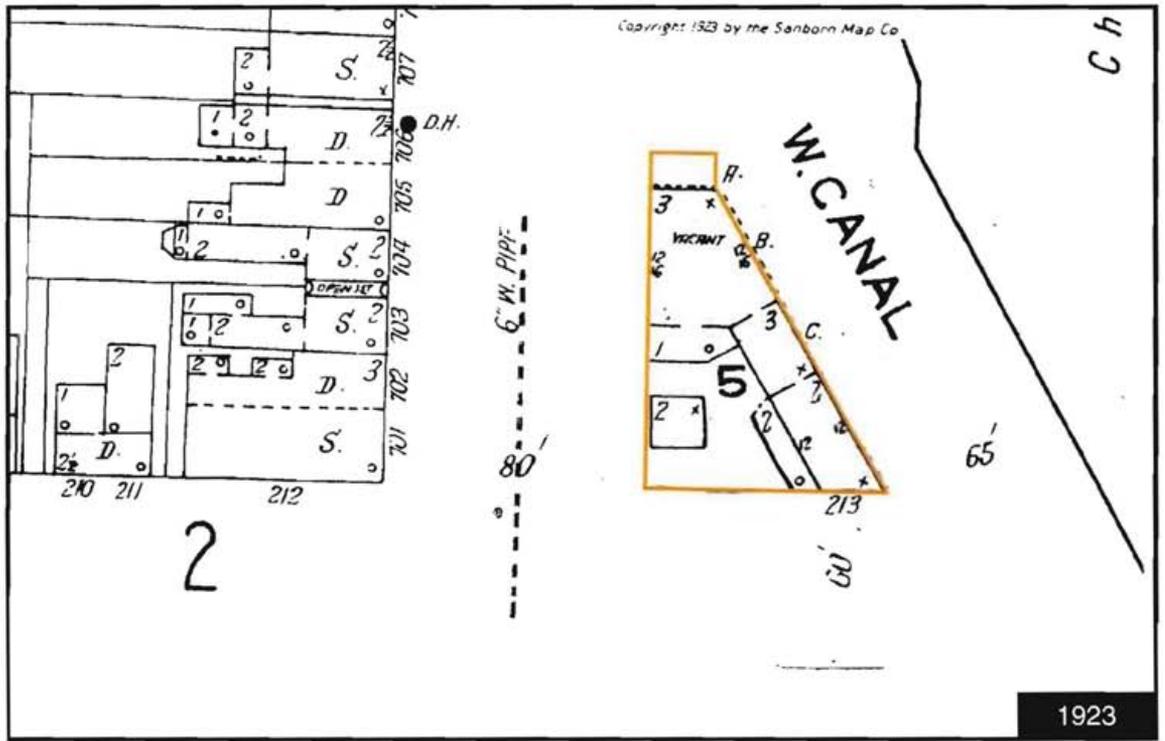


Figure 4: Sanborn Insurance Company Map  
Delaware City, Delaware



Plate 1: Clinton Street and the D & C Canal, c. 1900. The Central Hotel/Sterling's Tavern is visible to the right of center.



THE TRIANGLE, Delaware City, Del.

Plate 2: "The Triangle," c. 1910, showing the building with its Central Hotel sign and front porch.



Plate 3: Central Hotel, c. 1918. Note the dormers, front porch, and additions.



Sterling House, 2004. The D & C Canal is visible in the foreground.



Plate 4: Sterling House, rear and additions, 2004.