

III. HISTORIC CONTEXT

SETTLEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROJECT AREA

The settlement of Delaware by Europeans began in 1631 with the establishment of the Dutch whaling community of Swanendael in the vicinity of Lewes. Over the following decades the Dutch, Swedish, and British would all claim parts of the state of Delaware. By the end of the seventeenth century, the British established firm control over the territory, with proprietary rights granted to William Penn in 1682.

The area of Sussex County around the Indian River and its tributaries is one of the oldest settled rural areas in the state of Delaware beginning with a patent granted to Nathaniel Carr in 1667 for "Cruders Neck." By 1692, there were enough settlers in the area to support a ferry crossing of the Indian River, known as Warwick Ferry (Fitting, Weir, et al 1978:24). Interestingly, border disputes between William Penn and Lord Baltimore caused both to make grants to settlers in Baltimore Hundred, with Lord Baltimore granting a large, early parcel of 500 acres to Matthew Scarborough in 1688 (Mulchahey, Siders, et al. 1990:1).

A 1740 map entitled *A Map of the Provinces of Pennsylvania and Maryland with the Counties of Newcastle, Kent and Sussex on Delaware* shows the area south and east of the Indian River as the only rural platted area in the state at the time (Figure 3.1). This map identifies John Kipphaven as the owner of a plat extending southward from the Indian River and encompassing much of Blackwater Creek, where Bridge 447 would be constructed centuries later. To the southeast, along the shore of the Atlantic, were William Penn's Manor (encompassing 4,790 acres) and the Duke of York's Manor (10,000 acres).

The area directly around Blackwater Creek, at the crossing of present-day State Road 54, was already settled by the mid-eighteenth century. By 1763 there were enough families in the vicinity to found a congregation of the Presbyterian Church. In 1767, the Blackwater Presbyterian Church (S-179) was constructed. Church founders included Joseph Miller, Ebenezer Evans, John Evans, William Tunnell, John Aydelotte, Thomas Wingate, and Thomas Harnig. The graves of many of these families' members are found throughout the small cemetery that surrounds the church. Partially rebuilt in 1893, the Blackwater church is the oldest Presbyterian church in southern Delaware and was listed in the National Register in 1976 (National Register Nomination Form, Blackwater Presbyterian Church 1976). Both the church and the road that would become State Road 54 appear on an 1801 map of Delaware (Figure 3.2). The road served several families residing in the area at that time, including the Tunnells, Halls, Millers, and Dickinsons, leading from their farms to the church, the coast, a mill on Vines Creek, and the nearest town of Dagsboro.

Families in Sussex County, and in Blackbird Hundred in particular, farmed primarily at a subsistence level during the eighteenth and much of the nineteenth century, clearing forested areas and draining swamps on their property. Since livestock were not penned, crops had to be fenced in to protect them. Fencing occupied an important place in the minds of area farmers, as documented in Orphans Court records in which every land valuation counted individual fence

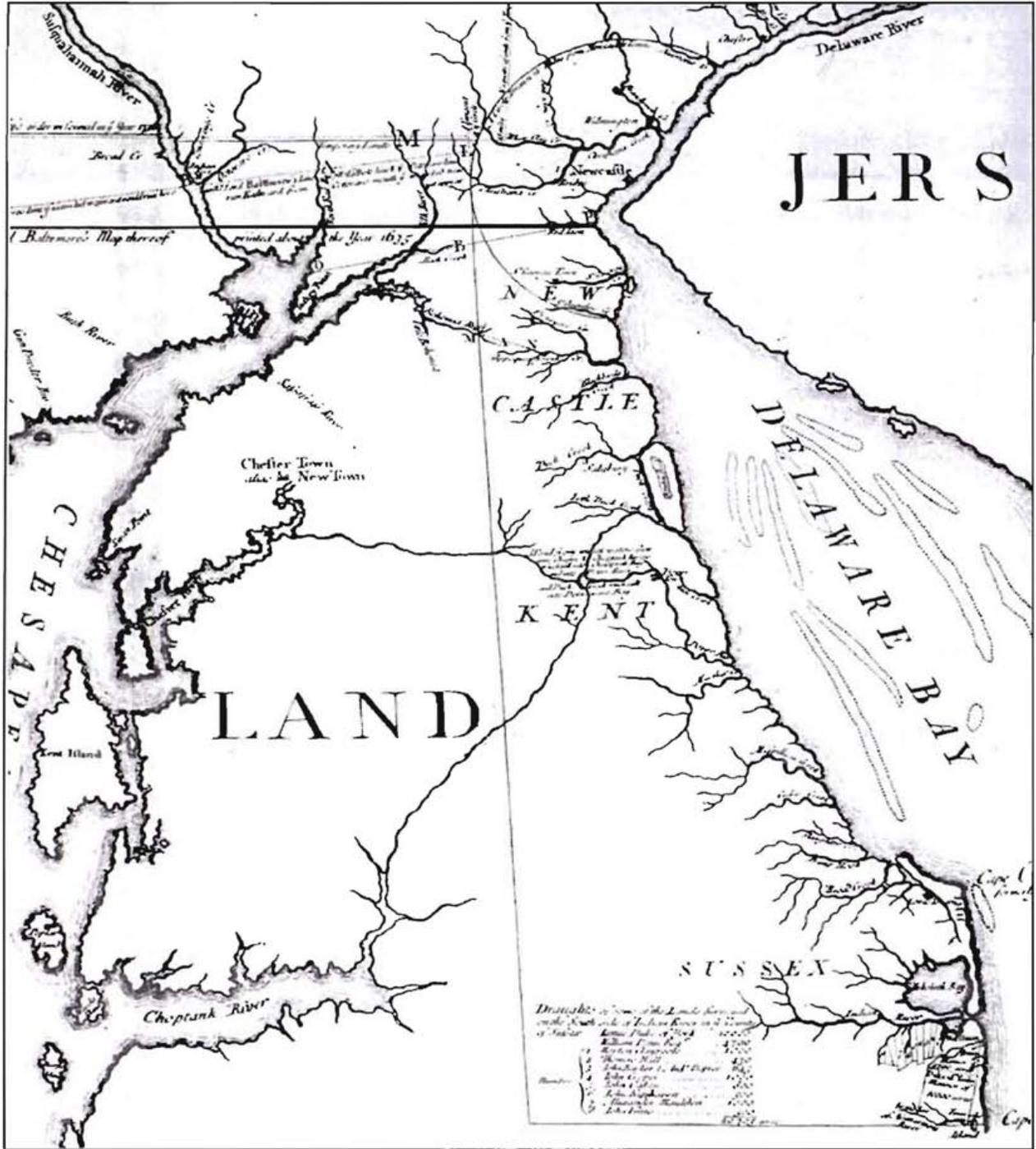


Figure 3.1 *A Map of Parts of the Provinces of Pennsylvania and Maryland with the Counties of Newcastle, Kent and Sussex on Delaware* (John, Thomas, and Richard Penn 1740)

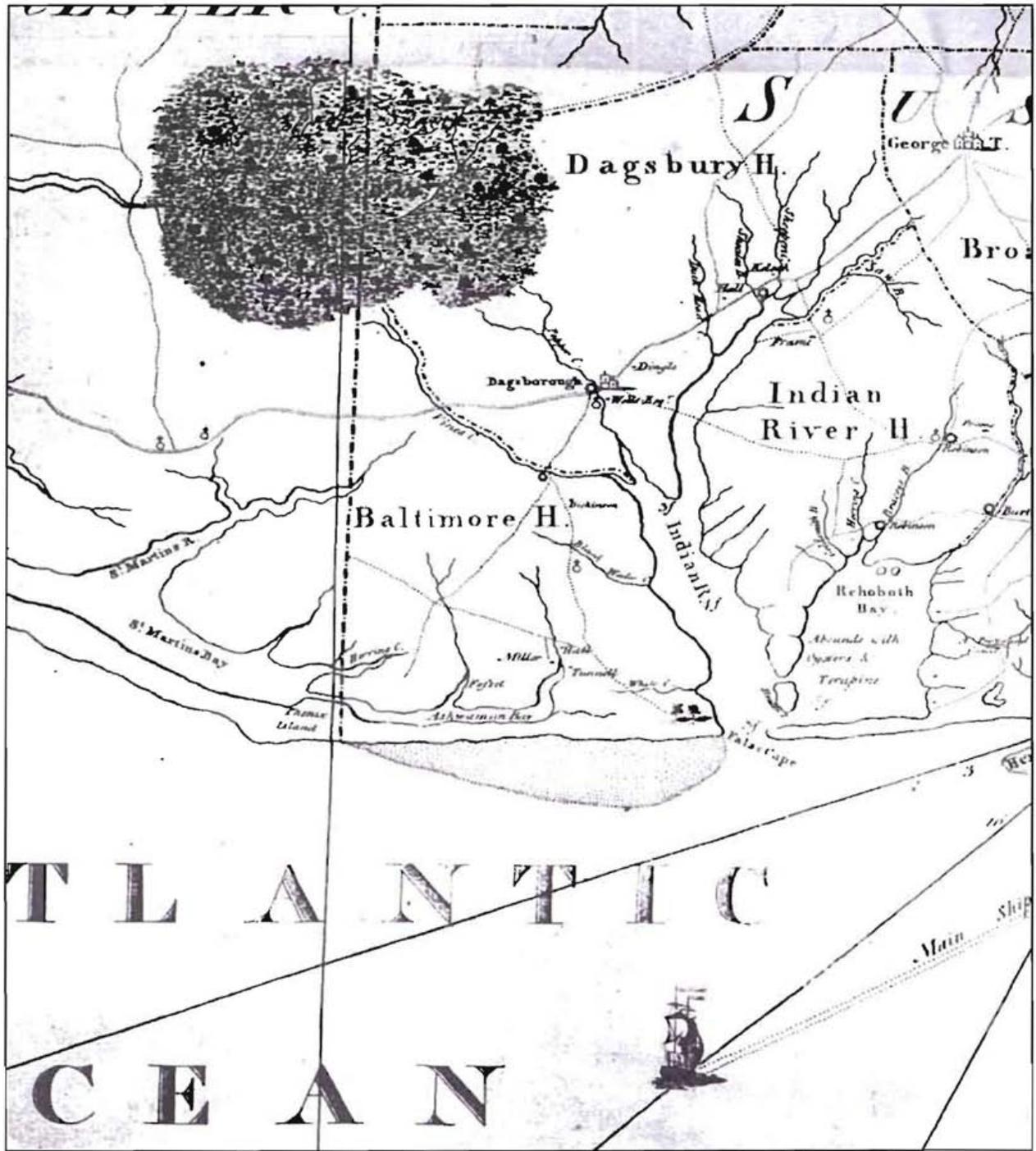


Figure 3.2 *Map of the State of Delaware and Eastern Shore of Maryland*
(Peter Charles Varle 1801)

panels and rails (Mulchahey, Siders et al. 1990:5). The numerous fences would have created a very different looking landscape than the unfenced, single-crop farms of Sussex County today. The quality of the existing farmland had never been particularly good. Decades of use depleted the soil further (Mulchahey, Siders et al. 1990:7). Cottage industries such as weaving, smithing, and sailmaking abounded to supplement incomes (Mulchahey, Siders et al. 1990:8). Some Sussex County settlers also engaged in foresting. Because of the dense forests found in Sussex County, trees could be harvested to manufacture such products as shingles, boards, barrel staves, and other wood wares. A large number of sawmills were built throughout Blackbird Hundred from the late eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth century (Mulchahey, Siders et al. 1990:8). These forestry, milling, and cottage industries went hand in hand with the need to clear swampland within Baltimore Hundred to create more arable lands in an attempt to make agriculture more profitable.

By 1865, the desire to procure greater amounts of higher quality farmland led to the incorporation of the Beaver Dam Ditch Company to drain large parcels of marsh and swampland in Baltimore Hundred. These efforts did little, however, to improve agricultural output in the hundred (Mulchahey, Siders et al. 1990:22). What may have helped spur an increase in agricultural profitability was the construction of railroad lines in Sussex County and improved farming techniques promoted throughout the state by such agricultural groups as the Patrons of Husbandry (Mulchahey, Siders et al. 1990:21).

The increase in productivity is reflected in the numerous late-nineteenth-century farms found throughout the region (Figure 3.3). Several of these have been inventoried in the vicinity of Bridge 447. The Paul Lathbury House (S-2399), formerly the property of George P. Rogers (State Highway Department 1948) and J. Tunnel (Beers 1868), is located immediately south of the Blackwater Presbyterian Church. Originally this property faced the main road, but was set back behind the church when the road was realigned in 1924 to run on the north side of the church. Several historic outbuildings accompany the house (Plate 3.1).

The Barbara Gland House (S-2408) dates to the late nineteenth century and is located on the west side of State Road 346, near its intersection with State Road 54 (Plate 3.2). The George Harper House (S-2406) is located west of the bridge adjacent to State Road 54. This property also contains a large gambrel roof barn, located between the house and the bridge (Plate 3.3).

The Floyd Turner House (S-2407) is no longer extant. A newer ranch style house is located on the property, along with several historic and non-historic outbuildings. The property currently belongs to Doris D. Turner and appears to have remained in the Turner family for several generations, as it was the property of Elmer Turner in 1924 and Nan Turner in 1948. Bridge 447 itself was constructed on the property of Elmer Turner, who owned land on both sides of the road that would become State Road 54.

The nearest properties to the bridge are two houses of recent construction (circa 1990), one on each side of State Road 54 to the east of the Bridge. A circa 1925 bungalow is located to the east of these on the north side of State Road 54.

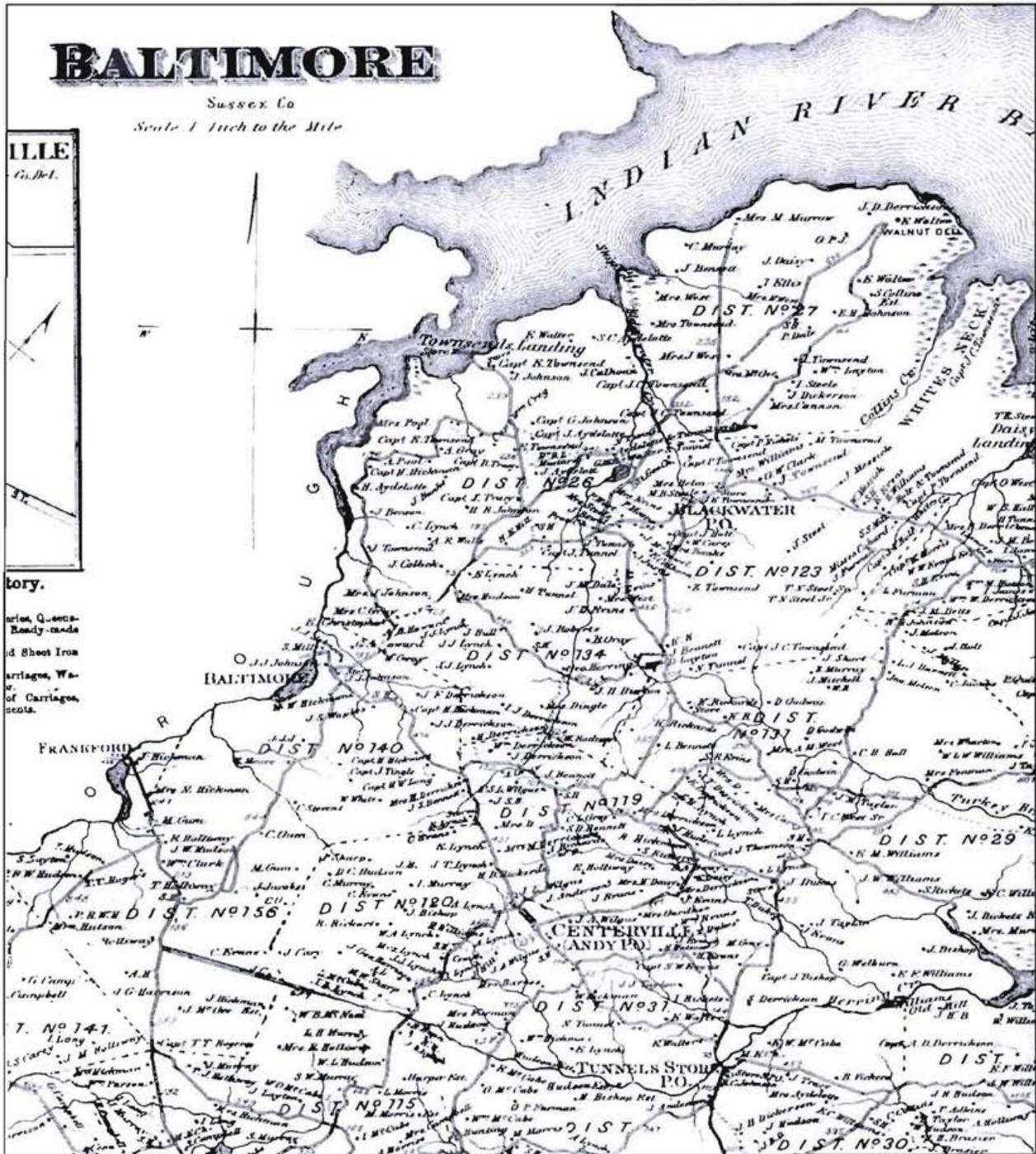


Figure 3.3 Atlas of the State of Delaware, Baltimore Hundred (D.G. Beers 1868)



Plate 3.1 Paul Lathbury House and Outbuildings (S-2399),
Located Southeast of Bridge 447



Plate 3.2 Barbara Gland House (S-2408), Located Northeast of
Bridge 447 on Road 346



Plate 3.3 G.C. Harper House and Barn (S-2406), Looking West on State Road 54 from Bridge 447

TRANSPORTATION CONTEXT AND THE HISTORY OF BRIDGE 447

In the early centuries of Delaware's settlement, road travel had been secondary to transportation by boat. However, the road that became State Road 54 is an exception, providing a very early overland route through Sussex County. A road running in the approximate location of today's State Road 54 was in place as early as the mid-to-late eighteenth century, when settlers began to arrive. The road appears on an 1801 map of the state (see Figure 3.2) and is clearly established by 1868, when the state was mapped by J.G. Beers (see Figure 3.3).

By the early nineteenth century, the state had begun to develop a turnpike system, beginning with the Newport and Gap Turnpike, constructed in north Delaware in 1808. In the 1830 – 60 period, the railroad became the primary method of transporting people and goods in Delaware. The Delaware Division of the Philadelphia, Wilmington, and Baltimore Railroad was the most important transportation route in the state. By 1868, the Delaware Railroad and Junction and the Breakwater Railroad had extended their lines into Sussex County, providing methods of transport for perishable goods to markets at considerable distances. This improved transportation system allowed for commercial cultivation of crops for the first time. Produce such as tomatoes, peppers, melons, strawberries, and peaches were grown and shipped via rail to urbanized markets. In the latter nineteenth century, produce was canned locally and then shipped (Mulchahey, Siders et al. 1990:27). In the vicinity of Bridge 447, however, it may have been easier for local farmers to haul farm products along an established road like State Road 54 to shore landings or to nearby towns.

It was not until the invention of the automobile and the growth of its use in the early twentieth century that road development again became a focus in Delaware. Road construction and improvements were further expedited by the passage of the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1916. This act spurred the creation of the Delaware State Highway Department, which then could receive federal funds appropriated under the act.

In 1924, the Delaware State Highway Department approved designs to realign what would become State Road 54 (although it would not receive this road number until later) and construct Bridge 447. The project is recorded as Federal Aid Project No. 26 under Contract No. CS-36. The plans realigned 3.73 miles of the county road from Omar to Clarksville. The new road leveled and straightened the existing route, which curved northwards and southwards towards property owners' dwellings (Figure 3.4). The realignment would put the road farther or nearer to several owners' homes and would relocate some properties, such as the Blackwater Presbyterian Church, to the opposite side of the road.

The bridge was designed by the State Highway Department Bridge Division, under the leadership of State Bridge Engineer Arthur Livingston, who headed the Division from 1918 through 1948. It is possible that Bridge 447 replaced an earlier bridge, although none is indicated on the plans or earlier maps. More likely, Bridge 447 replaced a ford as the form of crossing in this location.

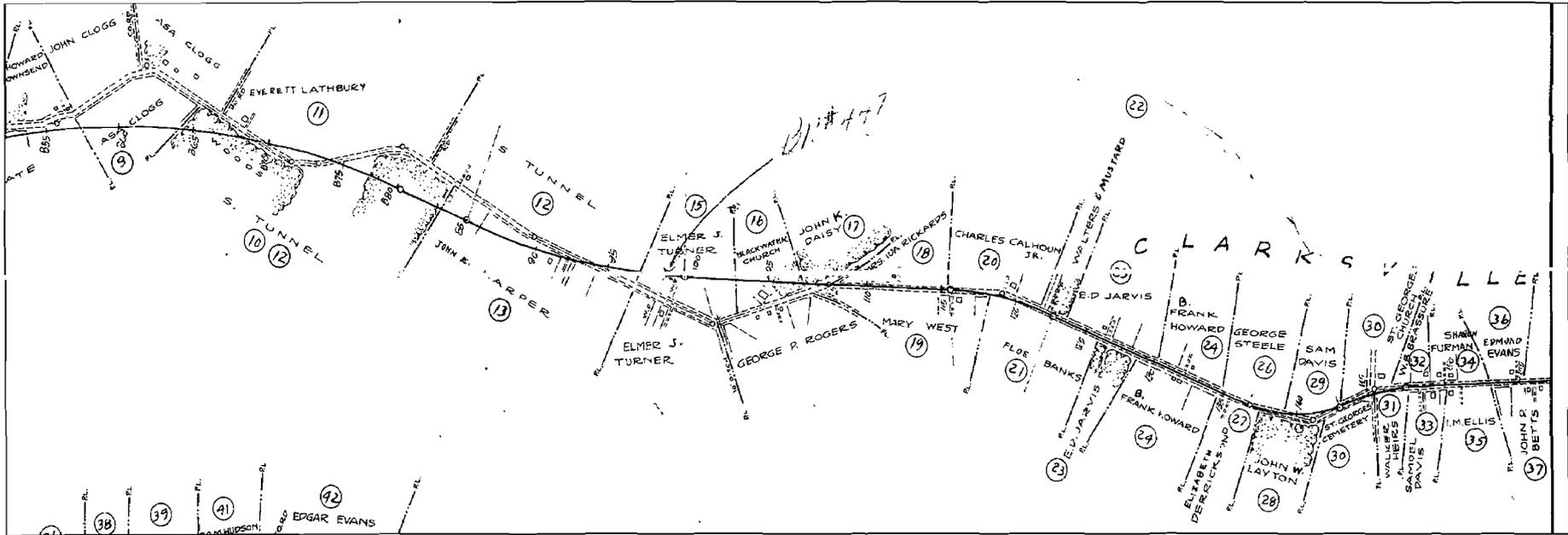


Figure 3.4 Road Improvement Plans, County Road from Omar to Clarksville, Detail of Bridge 447 Area (Delaware State Highway Department 1924)

The Bridge Division was responsible for the construction of bridges and culverts on Delaware's highways and major roadways. Many of the bridges constructed during this time were influenced by the design of engineer Daniel Luten, who patented over thirty bridge designs using reinforced concrete. Several Luten designs were built in Delaware, and many more were constructed using Bridge Division designs based on Luten's plans (Spero 1991:92 – 3). Such is the case for Bridge 447, which exhibits characteristics of Luten's simple form, style, and ornamentation.

In 1948, the Delaware State Highway Department made improvements to State Road 54, widening the roadbed and creating shoulders and, in some places, sidewalks. These improvements were carried out under Contract 998 as Federal Aid Project No. 173(3). The project also involved widening several bridges along State Road 54, including Bridges 445, 446, and 447. Bridge 447 was widened from 28 feet, 8 inches to 42 feet by extending the deck to the north and south and reconstructing the abutments, wing walls, and parapets. The new design is very similar to the original, with some streamlining and the appearance of two incised rectangles, rather than one, per parapet side.

It is likely that Bridge 447 was originally constructed to improve transportation for farmers in the area. Truck farming had developed early in Delaware as a profitable form of agri-business, but was dependent on decent modes of transportation. Truck farming would have been a successful venture for the farmers of Baltimore Hundred, with their smaller farms and inability to harvest large-scale crops such as grain. Strawberries and chickens are two notable products of Baltimore Hundred which were dependent on road transport to reach market or connect to rail lines. Today, the primary products of the area remain chickens, corn (chicken feed), and soybeans, farmed at a marginal/subsistence level (Fitting Weir et al. 1978:24).