3. Detailed Local History

The project area lies along the "Bay Road" known today as Route 113, in "Jones Neck," a peninsula or sandy ridge defined by St. Jones River and Little River.

Initial Settlement

The valley of St. Jones River was settled late in the frontier period, after the Dutch and Swedish colonial enterprises. Not until 1670 did settlers begin to take up land in Jones Neck.

Many of the first landowners were not settlers, but speculators who claimed large tracts and lived elsewhere. During the first year of land granting, thirteen patentees claimed 5,300 acres (Jackson 1983:9).

The subsequent history of the project area is typical of the fate of these early speculative grants along the St. Jones. Captain John Brinkloe, the first grantee, was preeminent among the speculators.

In 1679, he obtained from the Whorekill court a grant of 600 acres he called Lisbon, northeast of St. Jones River. William Penn confirmed the grant after it was surveyed. Brinkloe sold 400 acres of Lisbon, including the project area, to another absentee, Benjamin White, in 1699. White divided his 400 acres in half, so that Lisbon became the three tracts that would characterize its later history.

This study is concerned with the inland portions of the two southeastern tracts derived from White's 400 acres. A detailed descent of title is provided as an appendix, with the appropriate references to primary sources.

The northwestern tract, outside the present study, was 370 acres sold to Robert French in 1706 and separately studied by the University of Delaware Center for Archæologial Research (Catts and Sandstrom 1993:7).

White sold the northwest half of his part to Henry Barns, who conveyed it to Thomas French. This was generally the portion north of the Lebanon road (Figure 4). From then onward, the two parts of Lisbon that encompass the project area were divided roughly by the road from Lebanon to Little Creek, later county roads 351 and 357.

These two segments of the road jogged at the Bay Road because of intestate succession, which helps to explain many strange quirks of Delaware rural history.

Abraham Barber bought the south third from Robert Gordon in 1729 and settled there. Barber expanded his holdings, adding part of Christopher Jackson's adjacent Wrixham tract and a parcel of marsh where the Lebanon causeway now runs.

Barber's house was located on the high ground south of the Lebanon road, in the vicinity of the present Air Force dependents' school.

By the second quarter of the eighteenth century, the frontier period was over, and agriculture was settling into ownership patterns that would survive in Kent County for another century. Large farms began to emerge as the dominant property type on the Neck.

Like many other Delaware farms, the Lisbon tract ran afoul of Delaware's laws governing intestate succession. If a landowner died without a will, his eldest son would be entitled to a double share, and his wife would be entitled to a life estate in a third share. While any children were minors, the estate would be subject to guardianship supervised by the Orphans Court. If any orphan died before reaching his or her majority, and without living children, the siblings would share the estate. Estates could become hopelessly entangled if parents died young, leaving minor children, especially if their own interests in other estates had not yet been settled.

Convolutions of chancery cases, so bitterly portrayed by Charles Dickens, were a commonplace of life in Jones Neck. During the middle years of the eighteenth century, titles in the project area were rearranged several times by intestate succession.

On the other hand, all these court proceedings left a paper trail that can provide details of life in earlier times.

After Abraham Barber died, his six children were left to sort out their claims. Neighbor John Ware bought the claim of Abraham Barber, Jr., in 1767. Ware still owned only two-sevenths in 1776, when he asked for his part of the tract to be set apart.

INTENSIVE / DURABLE OCCUPATION

Large - scale, frequently absentee, landowners bought up the estates of their less affluent neighbors, cornering the market for the best grain land. During the generation before the American Revolution, Delaware became the breadbasket of the southern colonies. Sugar planters in the Caribbean bought flour and biscuit from mills on the Delaware, releasing their slaves for more lucrative work in the sugar cane industry.

Small grains were still cultivated by single-bottom plow and harvested by hand with a scythe and cradle. In St. Jones Neck, the labor for these farm chores was provided by African-American slaves and poor white laborers. Small landowners who could not hire laborers could not compete; many probably lost their land and became laborers themselves.

When he died, Samuel Dickinson left his Kent County properties to his sons John and Philemon. To facilitate division among them, the will established a dividing line approximately where Route 9 now runs. The land east of this line would belong to John, while Philemon inherited the family land west of the line.

John remained on the farm, at least part time, but his brother moved to New Jersey and began to sell off his Delaware holdings. One that he sold was the fifty acres of Lisbon that his father had bought from his Walter, whose wife had inherited it from her brother.

John Ware bought the tract, which was next to the Abraham Barber tract he owned in part. Here he lived, possibly because his deed from Dickinson was more secure than his undivided interest in the Barber farm. In 1803, he sold his dwelling tract to Francis Barber, who had consolidated title to the Barber farm and had bought the Gordon farm adjacent (Figure 5).

EARLY NATIONAL PERIOD

Neither of the Dickinson brothers was able to pay much attention to Kent County affairs during the early national period. The farms were managed by overseers and tenants, with infrequent visits from the owners (Powell 1954).

Governor John Dickinson's children and grandchildren were Philadelphians, with little connection to the ancestral soil. The Barbers were living on the land, but many of the local farms were owned by absentees. The Barber farms would also fall into absentee hands in the next generation.

Francis Barber died in 1810 and left the home farm to his son Francis.

After the younger Francis died in 1818, his widow spent 26 years fighting with her daughter over the title his farm. Widow Abigail Barber married Outten Davis, who proceeded to milk the estate for money. The Kent County farmers who had signed Davis' guardian bond petitioned for release from their obligation, citing the guardian's dissipation and bad character.

Legally, however, Outten Davis could claim guardianship of his stepdaughter, almost without challenge. When she reached the age of 14, little Abigail exercised her right to choose another guardian. She chose Benjamin Boulden, who sued Davis.

Boulden alleged that the guardian had charged Abigail's estate for frocks the girl had sewn herself, and that he had charged unreasonable room and board. Moreover, he alleged, Outten Davis had rigged the widow's dower division so that his wife received more than her legal entitlement of a third of the estate.

In the July 1829 term of Orphans Court, Abigail and Outten Davis sued her fourteen-year-old daughter for $1,500.77. They won, and the sheriff sold the farm to Benjamin Boulden, who died a few years later.

Daughter Abigail, now the wife of Dr. James Sutton, sued the estate of her former guardian. The New Castle County Court of Chancery assigned the property to the Suttons. They, in turn lost the property in another action in Kent County Superior Court in 1845.

Abigail Davis bought the land at sheriff sale in May 1845. She sold it a few months later in two parcels that would remain intact for another century. The northeastern parcel, which became known as the Paradee farm, went to Asa Lofland. This farm included land on both sides of the road, but did not include the old Barber farmstead.

The part nearer St. Jones River was sold to Bolitha Wharton, whose descendants sold it in 1948 to Christian Zimmerman.

While the non-resident Barber heirs were battling over the home farm, the farm northwest of the Lebanon Road settled into a period of owner-occupied prosperity.

Francis Barber the elder bought the farm in two parts, from John Gordon and Jabez Caldwell, who where heirs to the Griffith Gordon tract. The two shares totalled 437.75 acres on paper, but were later described as 300 acres.

In his 1809 will, Francis Barber left this combined farm to his son Benjamin. According the the will, Benjamin and Francis the younger were to pay cash to their brother Edward, who was to use the money to obtain a classical education.

Instead, Edward bought two farms a short distance closer to Dover on the Bay Road. He traded these to Benjamin and settled on the Gordon farm. In 1843, while his former sister-in-law was still scrapping with her daughter, he sold the farm to an absentee landowner, Chauncey P. Holcomb of New Castle.

Holcomb's sons divided the farm into two parts. The 130 acres northeast of the main road were sold to Joshua Wharton in 1868. This tract became the Raughley farm on which the main gate of Dover Air Force Base was eventually built.

Thomas Draper bought the portion between the Bay Road and the river, which he lost at sheriff sale to Jane Lane when he defaulted on a mortgage.

CANNED TOMATO ERA

Kent County was one of the places where the canning industry began in America. Tinsmiths in Dover and Camden, on the eve of the Civil War, began experimenting with new food preservation processes. These experiments paid off handsomely during the conflict, enabling troops to receive quality nourishment previously unknown in wartime. Postwar development of this technology would change the nation's foodways forever. Soon after the war, canneries began to spring up all over the Delmarva. Early canneries were situated in Lebanon, Barkers Landing, and Little Creek, convenient to the broad farms of Jones Neck (Heite and Heite 1989; Heite 1990).

Tomatoes from large farmers provided the volumes necessary to support a factory system. For nearly eight decades, canning dominated the industrial life of Kent County. Every village had its canning factory. Because the acidic tomato is easy to can, small canneries and those with poor quality control were able to produce a marketable product. The more forward-looking firms in the industry added other products, including peaches, meats, and plum pudding.

Development of dependable rail and highway communication with urban centers meant that large-scale truck farming would become increasingly important. "Eastern Shore" produce, even today, holds a premium position in the Baltimore and Philadelphia markets.

MILITARY ERA

Rapid change overtook Jones Neck in 1942. The City of Dover began to build a new airfield on the eve of World War II, east of town on the Horsepond Road. It was an ambitious project with three runways,

reflecting the optimism of airline promoters who saw planes replacing trains and buses. Dover had, after all, regular air mail flights, and it was the state capital.

After Pearl Harbor the nascent airdrome was scooped into the military construction net, and expanded. National Guard troops from Ohio and other states came to train here, while the Corps of Engineers threw up temporary buildings in the farm fields surrounding the new airport.

The part of the Paradee farm across the Bay Road was dug for gravel to build the runways. Timbers from the farmhouse were salvaged and resold in Dover. The golf course and the BOQ now occupy this tract (Charles Paradee, personal communication).

On the eve of base construction, the Delaware State Highway Department commissioned an ærial photographic survey of the entire state. This survey shows the existing conditions in the project area. By re-scaling the map and comparing it to the various land surveys, it is possible to locate 1937 features with considerable accuracy (Plate 1, Figure 8)