

## BACKGROUND

The Route 7 corridor is located in the Upper Coastal Plain of Delaware and is bisected by the Christina River. Current land use remains noticeably agricultural, although this is changing rapidly, and extensively, as a result of large-scale residential development.

The Upper Coastal Plain is characterized by gently rolling terrain which rises and becomes more varied as it approaches the lower edge of the Pennsylvania Piedmont zone. The land is cut with relatively broad creek and river valleys, with occasional low-lying areas that are wet on either a seasonal or year-round basis. The hydrology of the area is dominated by the Christina River, the principal tributary of which is Eagle Run, which empties into the Christina from the northwest. The soils in the vicinity of the Christina are characterized by tidal marsh sediments on the north side (the river is tidal for a distance of about 15 miles from its mouth) and deep redeposited sandy soils on the south. Beyond the river, silty and clayey soils derived from Pleistocene deposits are the norm.

State Route 7, on which the four properties included in this study are located, runs through northern New Castle County from the Pennsylvania line southeast to Stanton, then south through Christiana to U.S. Route 13. Three of the properties (the Silver Hill farmhouse and the Davis and Simmons farmsteads) lie toward

the southern end of Route 7, between U.S. 40 and I-95, in what was historically an agricultural hinterland with the town of Christiana as its immediate commercial focus (Figure 2). The fourth property (Harlan-Chandler mill complex) is situated toward the northern end of Route 7 at Milltown Road in Mill Creek Hundred, an intersection still known as Milltown for the small crossroads hamlet that once occupied this location.

Christiana was during most of the 18th century an important participant in the Philadelphia-Baltimore trade and transportation network (Figures 3, 4, and 5). Strategically sited at the head of navigation on the Christina river and on major overland routes across the peninsula from New Castle to Elk River in Maryland, Christiana emerged as a prominent transshipment point by the second quarter of the 18th century (Catts et al. 1987:20-21). With shipping as its economic base, Christiana also functioned as a social and economic center for the surrounding agrarian community. Establishments such as the Christiana Tavern and Shannon Hotel provided not only sleeping accommodations but opportunities for social intercourse. A post office was opened in Christiana in 1793, further connecting area farmers with the places and events beyond their immediate environment. The religious needs of the community within and around Christiana were early supplied by the Society of Presbyterians, whose first church was erected by 1738. A second denomination, the Methodists, joined the community in 1827. A school was established in Christiana by 1752, incorporated into the state educational system in 1804 (Dunn 1974).

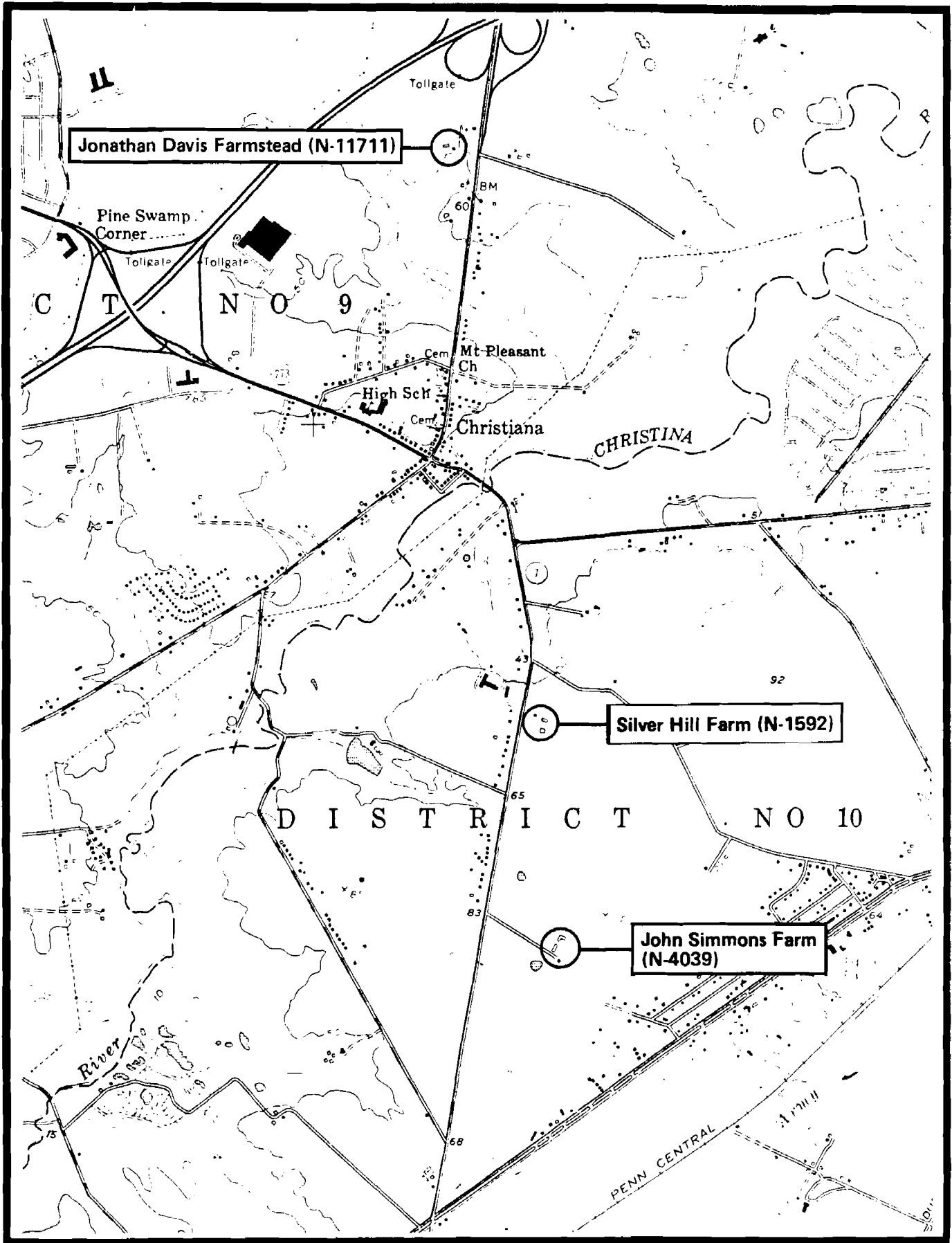


FIGURE 2: Location Map

SOURCE: USGS Newark East Quadrangle

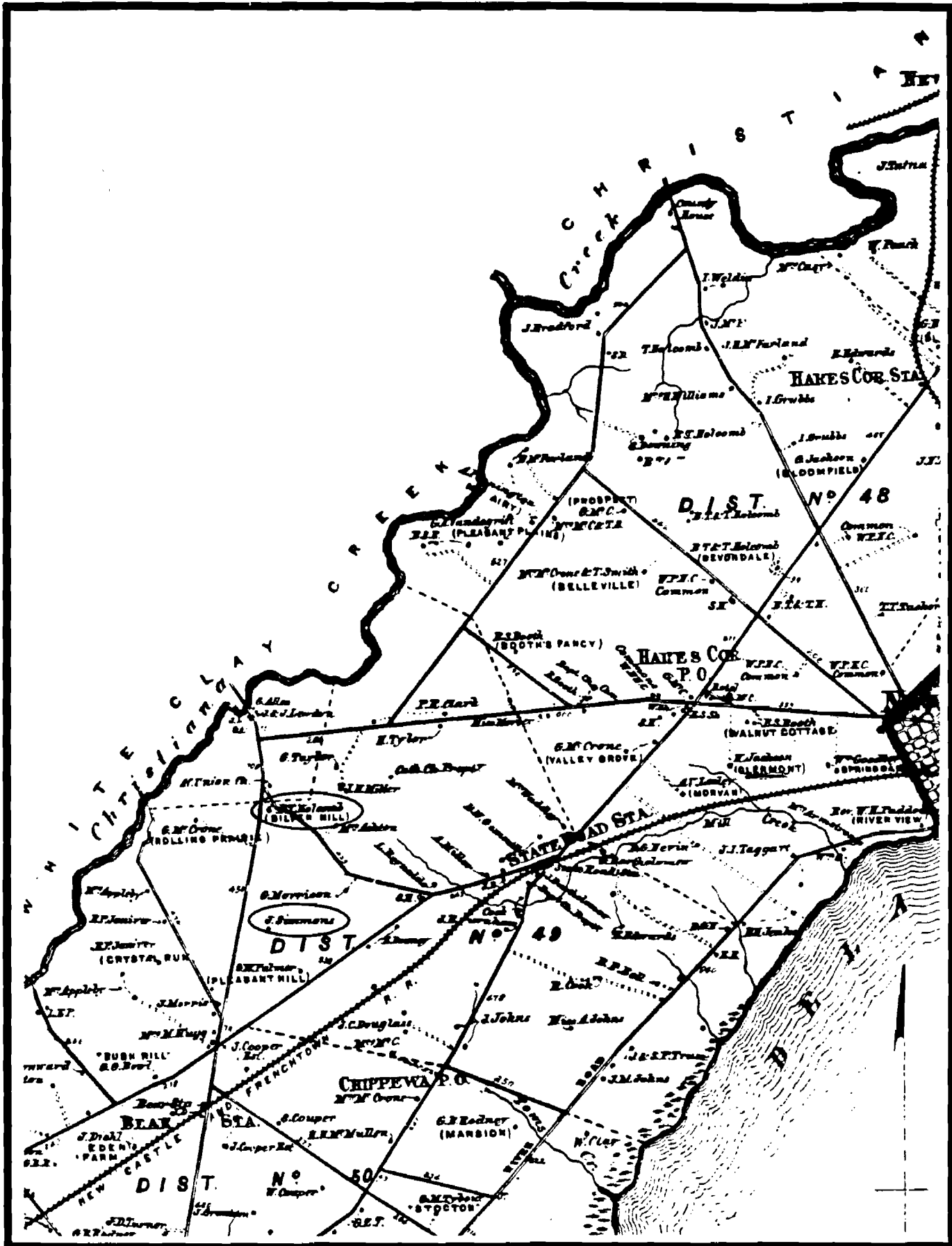


FIGURE 3: Project Area, 1868

SOURCE: D.G. Beers, Atlas of the State of Delaware, 1868

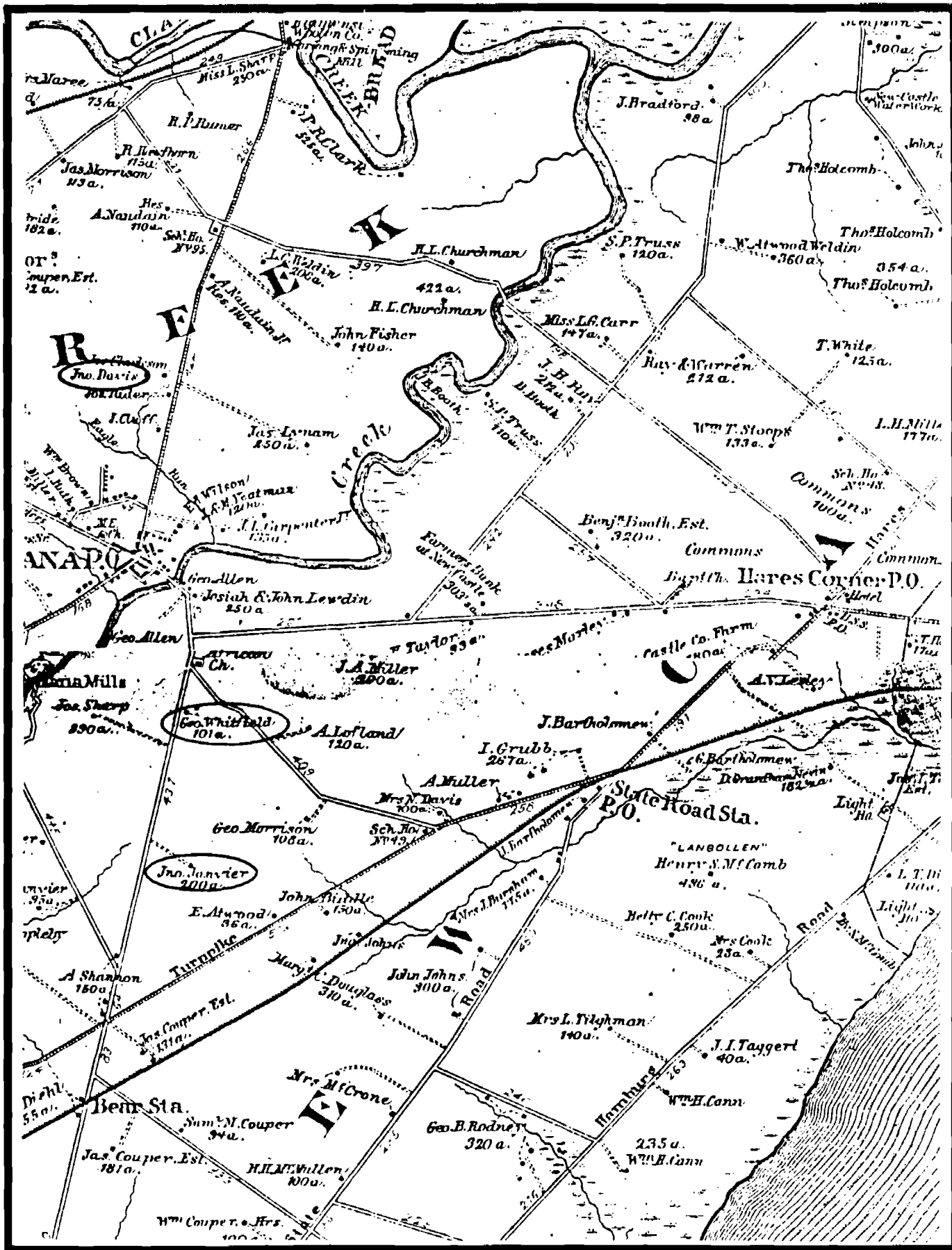


FIGURE 4: Project Area, 1881

SOURCE: G.M. Hopkins, Map of New Castle County, Delaware, 1881

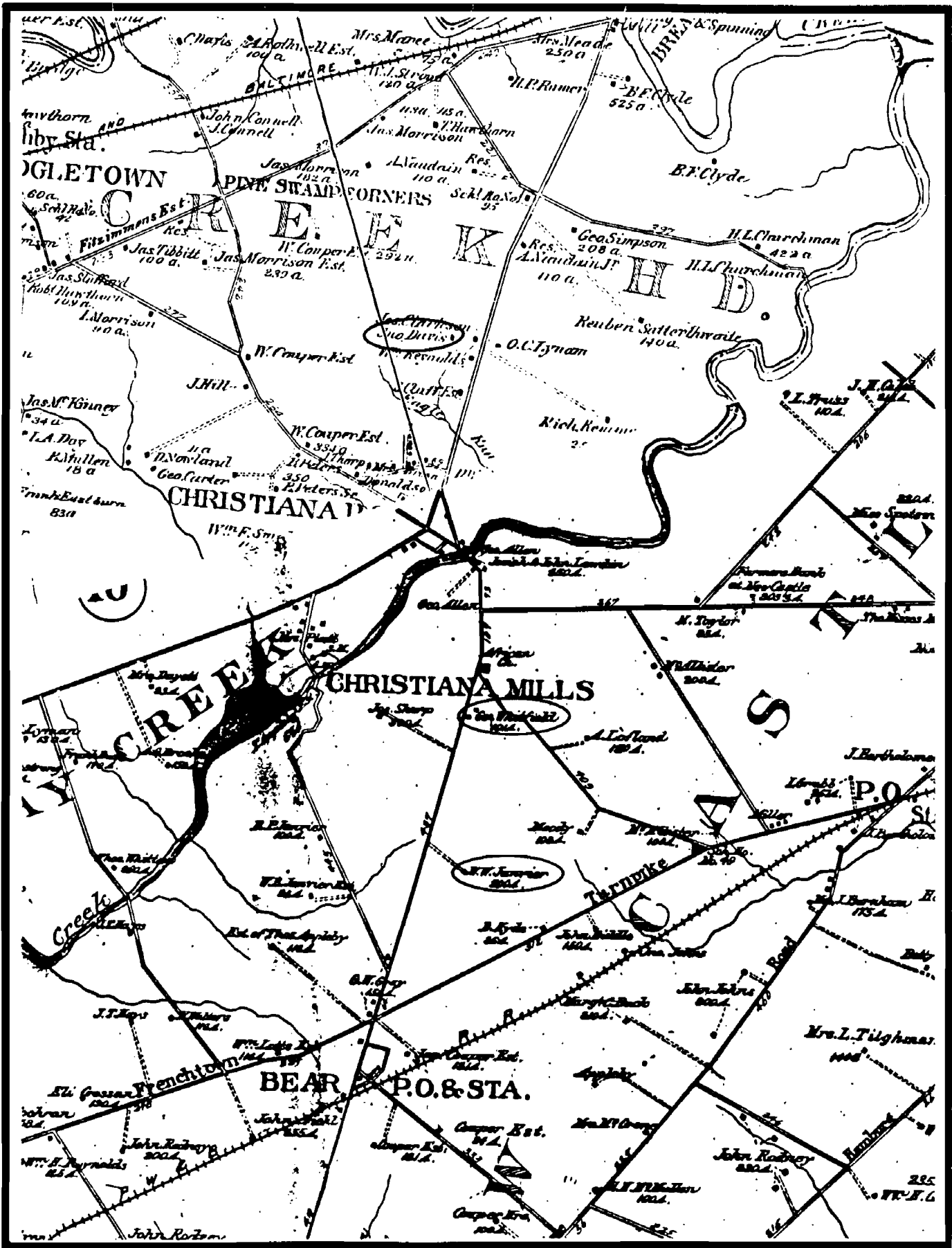


FIGURE 5: Project Area, 1893

SOURCE: G.W.Baist, Atlas of New Castle County, Delaware, 1893

The settlement pattern outside Christiana and other New Castle County towns was predominantly one of dispersed farmsteads, their sites chosen with attention to the drainage characteristics of soils and to proximity of navigable water or, as overland routes improved, of those reasonably passable roads (Custer 1986:44). Originally geared to simple subsistence, New Castle County farms were even by the end of the 17th century shifting toward a pronounced market orientation. Mixed farming was the common form of agriculture in which cultivation of grains (with wheat as the principal crop) was combined with livestock raising, much of the latter focused on cattle feeding (Catts et al. 1987:16,24). Into the early 19th century, farmsteads were characterized by wood (particularly log) construction. Farm dwellings were for the most part simple structures, one or two rooms in plan, with interior gable-end chimneys. Associated with them were numerous outbuildings, both agricultural (barns, chicken houses, stables, etc.) and domestic (kitchens, smoke-houses, milk houses) (Herman 1984:6).

Through much of the 18th century, agriculture in New Castle County was based on extensive, rather than intensive, use of the land, in which crop rotation and use of soil restoratives such as lime or manure were practices largely unknown or ignored. By the 1750s however, crop rotation became relatively widespread, with corresponding improvements in yields (Catts et al. 1987:25). Perceived agricultural opportunities, rural population growth, as well as practices that fostered degradation of once fertile

soils, led farmers to bring more marginal lands into cultivation as the 18th century progressed. At the same time, traditional patterns of inheritance led to subdivision of once large tracts into increasingly smaller and less productive units. During the first decades of the 19th century, rural New Castle County experienced widespread depression, with significant out-migration to cities or to new lands in western states. Those agriculturalists who remained, however, bought up the farms of their less fortunate neighbors, thereby reassembling larger and potentially more productive holdings (Herman 1984:5). Thanks to the significant educational and promotional efforts of the New Castle County Agricultural Society, organized in 1818, agricultural practices significantly improved by the mid 19th century to include fertilization, use of new machinery and better drainage techniques. Production was also expanded to include more dairying in response to demands from the region's expanding urban centers (Catts et al. 1987:28; Herman 1984:5).

In New Castle County, as in other areas of North Central Delaware, the revival of agriculture was accompanied by a major rebuilding of the agricultural landscape. This rebuilding, which "left no farm untouched" (Herman 1984:5) included transformation of existing structures (where they were not completely removed) as well as erection of completely new structures, both domestic and agricultural. This period saw the introduction of the crib barn/granary and the bank barn (the latter already well established in the Piedmont region to the north) into the archi-



tectural vocabulary of farm builders in the area, increasing use of center-passage dwelling plans and application of fashionable details, and incorporation of specific functions, such as cooking, within houses, often by locating them in rear ells (Herman 1984:6; 1987:146,148,206). The reconstruction also extended to houses of tenant farm managers and laborers, as earlier log and frame "tenements" were replaced with new dwellings which could, particularly for managers, resemble those of a middling farm owner in size and finish (Herman 1987:162).

Toward the end of the 19th century, competition from agricultural areas of the midwest and plains troubled the agricultural economy of many areas of the northeast and mid-Atlantic regions. North central Delaware farmers responded with a shift toward diversification, with increasing emphasis on fruits and vegetables. In addition, the introduction of pasteurization and improved methods of refrigeration enabled a significant expansion of the dairy industry throughout northern Delaware (Passmore 1978:41-2). Whereas in the Piedmont uplands this development was expressed, architecturally, by expansion of existing bank barns with large hay sheds (see Jicha and Cesna 1986), it was represented further south by the use of a "new" material (concrete) and erection of new barns, specifically for dairy activities, as well as remodeling of existing structures with concrete block ground stories and concrete floors.

The town of Christiana did not share in the economic revival enjoyed by the surrounding agricultural community in the mid 19th

century. In effect, the services it provided as a transshipment point between water and overland routes were rendered obsolete by important transportation developments of the 1820s and 1830s. The Chesapeake and Delaware Canal, originally planned to connect the Elk and Christina Rivers, was ultimately built south, below New Castle, in 1829. Soon thereafter, additional competition emerged with the construction of railroads, the New Castle and Frenchtown line opening in 1832, the Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore in 1838, neither of which passed through Christiana. Christiana remained a local service center through much of the 19th century, but only the churches, hotels and dwellings of its more prosperous citizens remain to suggest its former importance in the commerce of the region (Catts et al. 1987:29-34).

Unlike Christiana, Milltown, toward the opposite end of Route 7 (Figure 6), never achieved more than hamlet status. Though located at the intersection of five roads, its emergence as an identifiable "place" was based on the existence of water power, brought by ditches from Mill Creek, that encouraged erection of a grist mill by 1746 (Scharff 1888:924) (Figures 7,8,9, and 10). Through the 18th and most of the 19th centuries, area farmers brought their grain to be ground at Milltown, much of which, particularly in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, was then shipped south to market through shipping points such as Stanton and Newport.

The mill as a "magnet" was not, however, strong enough to draw other services for the surrounding agrarian community,

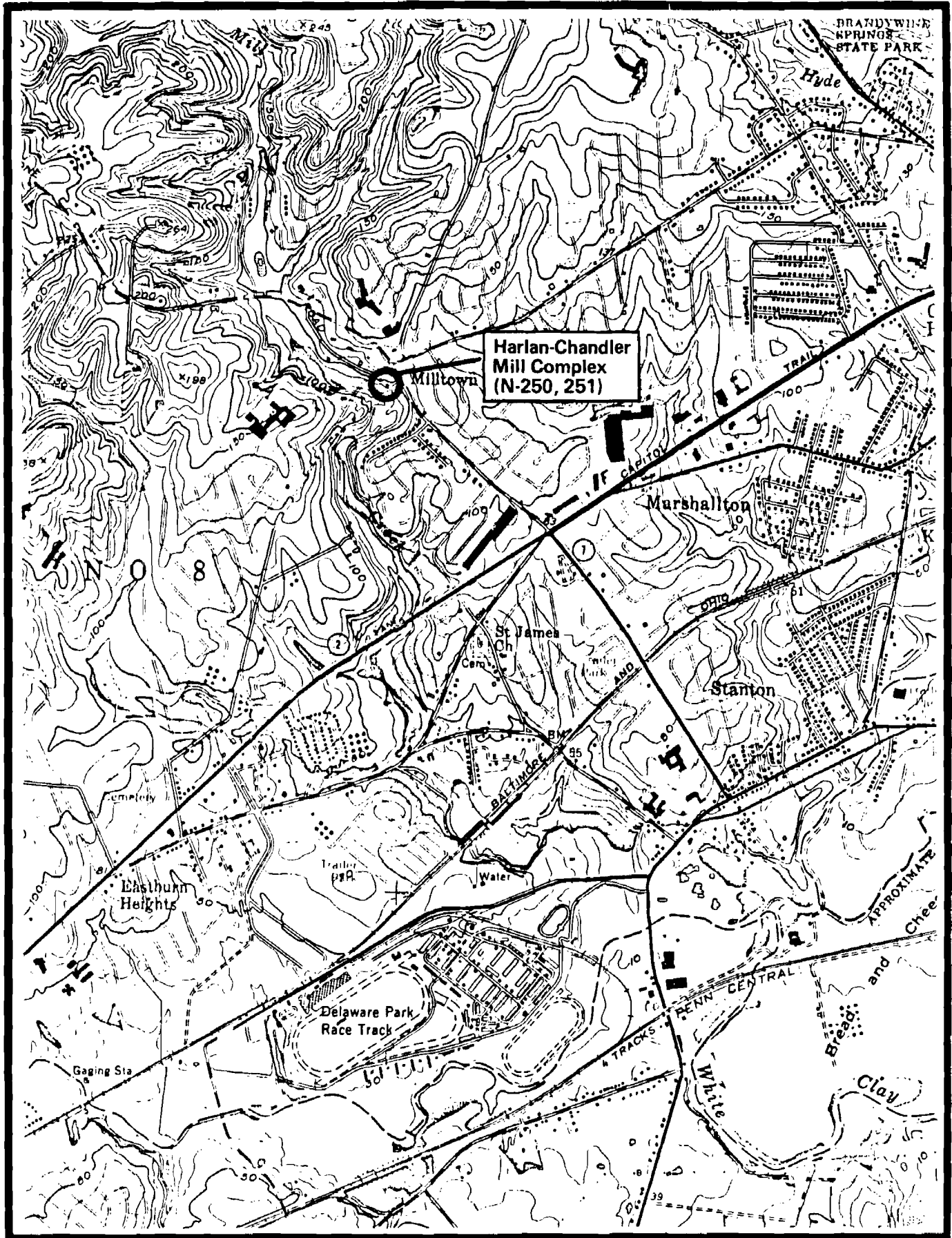


FIGURE 6: Location Map – Milltown

SOURCE: USGS Newark East Quadrangle



FIGURE 7: Milltown and Vicinity, 1849

SOURCE: Rea & Price, 1849



FIGURE 8: Milltown and Vicinity, 1868

SOURCE: Beers 1868

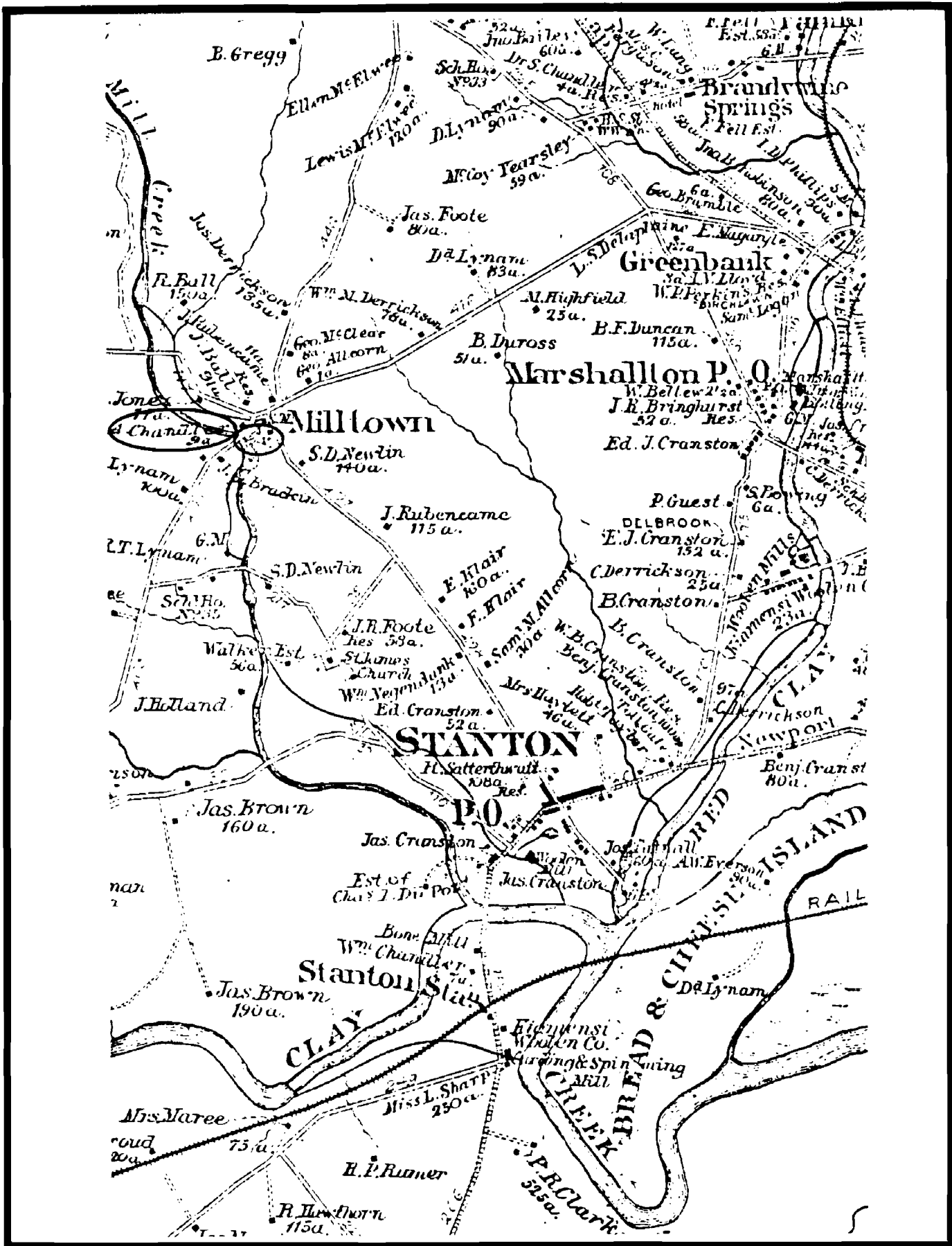


FIGURE 9: Milltown and Vicinity, 1881

SOURCE: Hopkins 1881

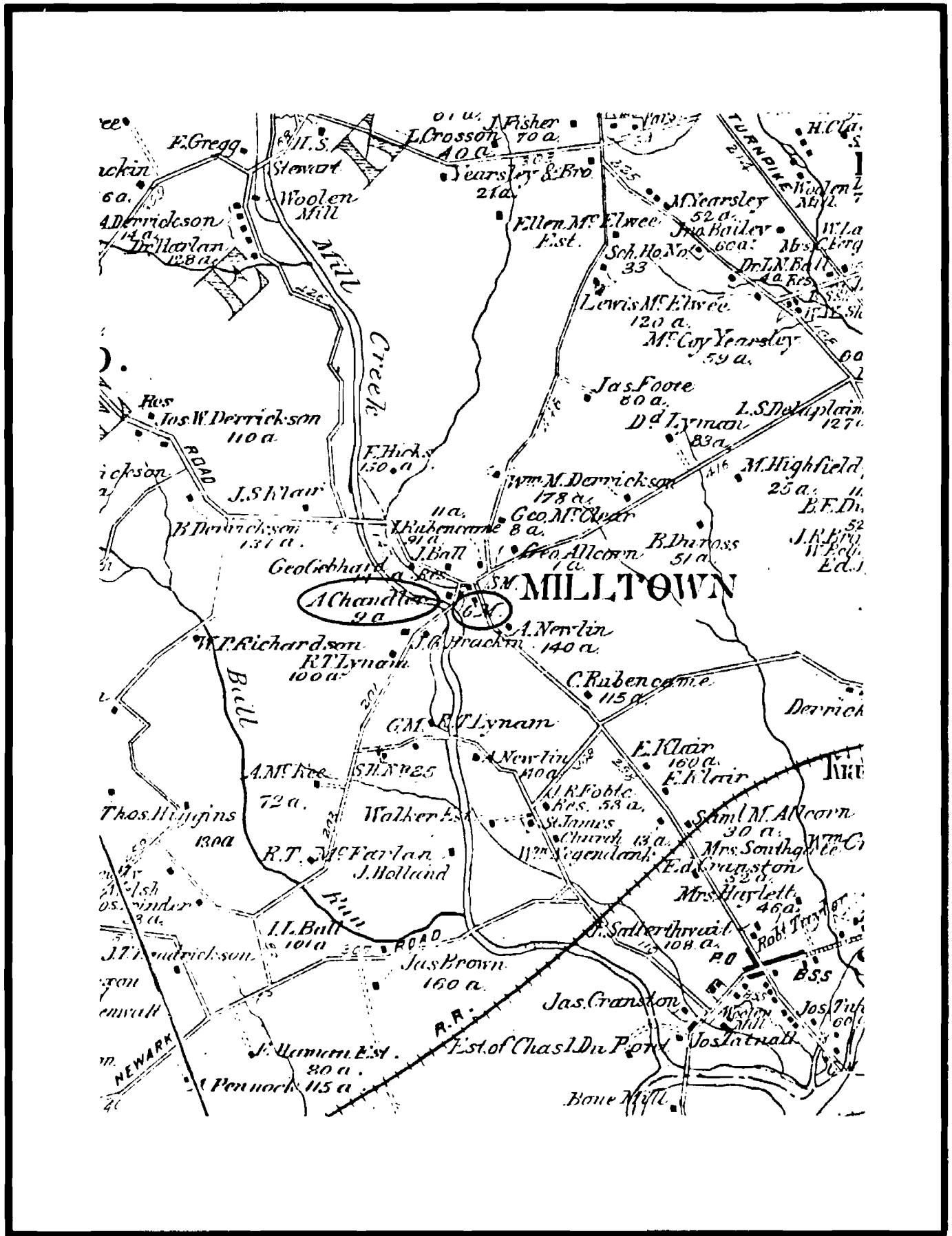


FIGURE 10: Milltown and Vicinity, 1893

SOURCE: Baist 1893

though at least one of the mill operators operated a store in conjunction with the mill, and at least one tavern was licensed for this location. The Mermaid, located only about a mile to the north on Limestone Road, persisted as the area's community center; its tavern first opened in 1746, in addition providing the services of a wheelwright and blacksmith. The Mermaid was also the local polling place and post office, and offered facilities for gatherings both occasional and regular, such as the periodic meetings of the local Grange (Catts et al. 1986; Bowers 1986). The importance of Milltown thus lay less in its contributions to the social fabric of agrarian life in Mill Creek Hundred than in its continuing ability to meet very specific economic needs. Although commercial grain production declined significantly as the 19th century progressed, due to competition from western states, area farmers continued to produce at least small amounts for local and home use, and for them the mill at Milltown remained an important element.

Those portions of Route 7 in the vicinities of Christiana and Milltown, though suffering serious development pressure, contain a variety of architectural resources listed in or determined eligible for the National Register. Much of Christiana itself is a National Register historic district (Dunn 1974), with late 18th and early 19th century dwellings of brick and frame, the Presbyterian Church, the Christiana Inn and Shannon Hotel present to convey some of the past character of this former commercial and shipping center. Other National Register properties in the



vicinity of Christiana are the John Lewden house (Herman 1974), erected on the south side of the Christina River about 1770, and Public School 111-C (Nelson 1979), erected for the area's Black population in the 1920s as part of a statewide school building program promoted and largely funded by Pierre S. DuPont III. Among cultural resources identified by DelDOT in 1982 is the William Couper farmstead. The farmhouse (Plate 1), a frame dwelling of traditional I-house form with Gothic Revival details, is no longer extant, but the large bank barn, recorded with measured drawings by the University of Delaware Center for Historic Architecture and Engineering, still remains (Plate 2).

To the north, that portion of Route 7 north of Milltown, also known as Limestone Road, was subject to archaeological investigations by the University of Delaware for DelDOT in 1985 (Catts et al. 1986), followed by an architectural assessment DelDOT conducted by Louis Berger & Associates, Inc. in 1986 (Bowers 1986). At the time, the Mermaid Tavern was the only formally recognized historic property, having been listed in the National Register in 1972 (Wood and Troy 1973). As a result of these investigations, the McKennan Klair, Aquila Derrickson, and Samuel Dennison houses, Harmony School, and the Gutherie-Dennison, Hannah Gutherie, and Springer-Yeatman farmsteads were determined eligible for the National Register by the BAHP (see Bowers 1986). The Springer-Yeatman House has also been nominated to the National Register as part of a thematic group called "Agricultural Buildings and Complexes in Mill Creek Hundred,

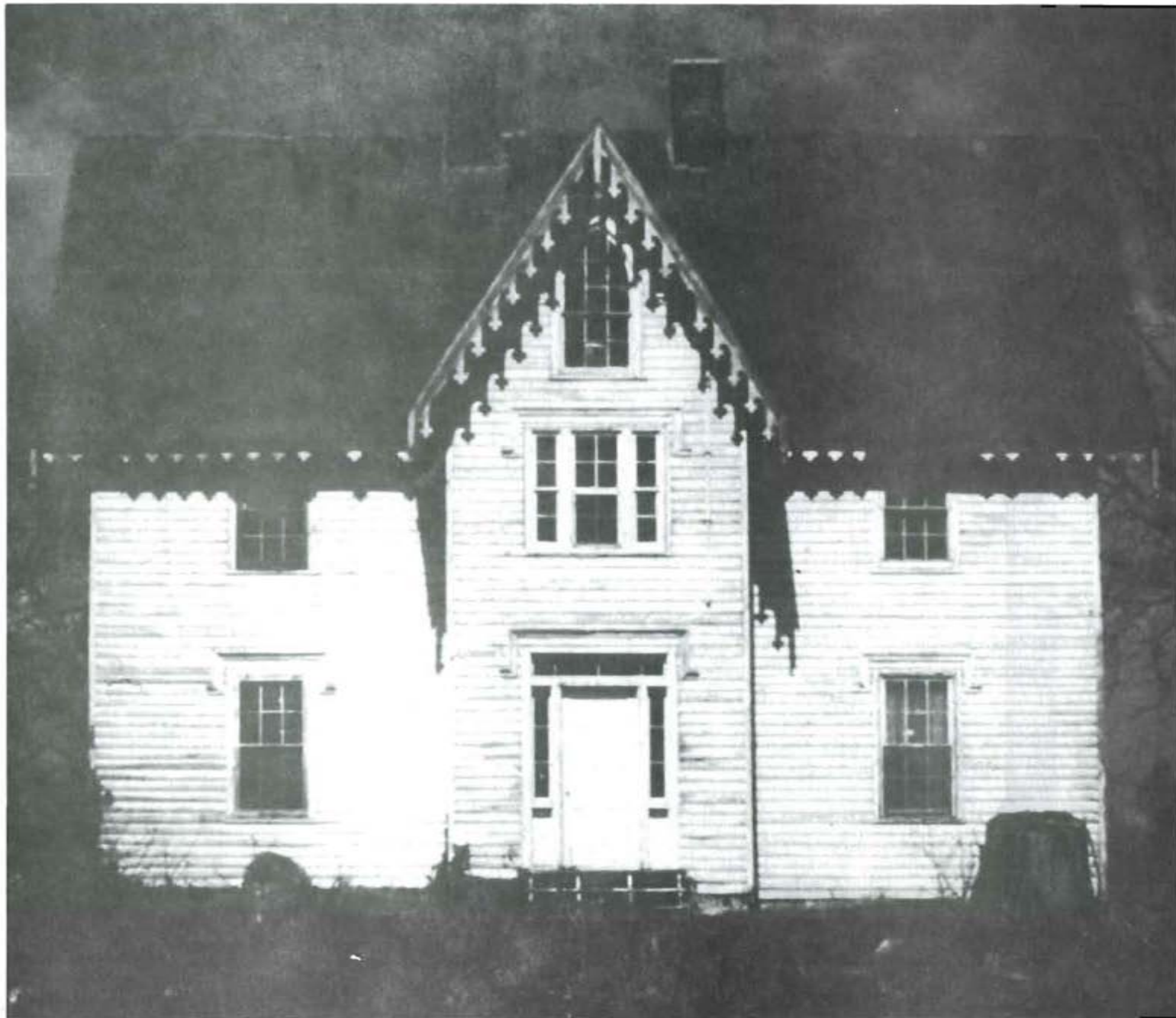
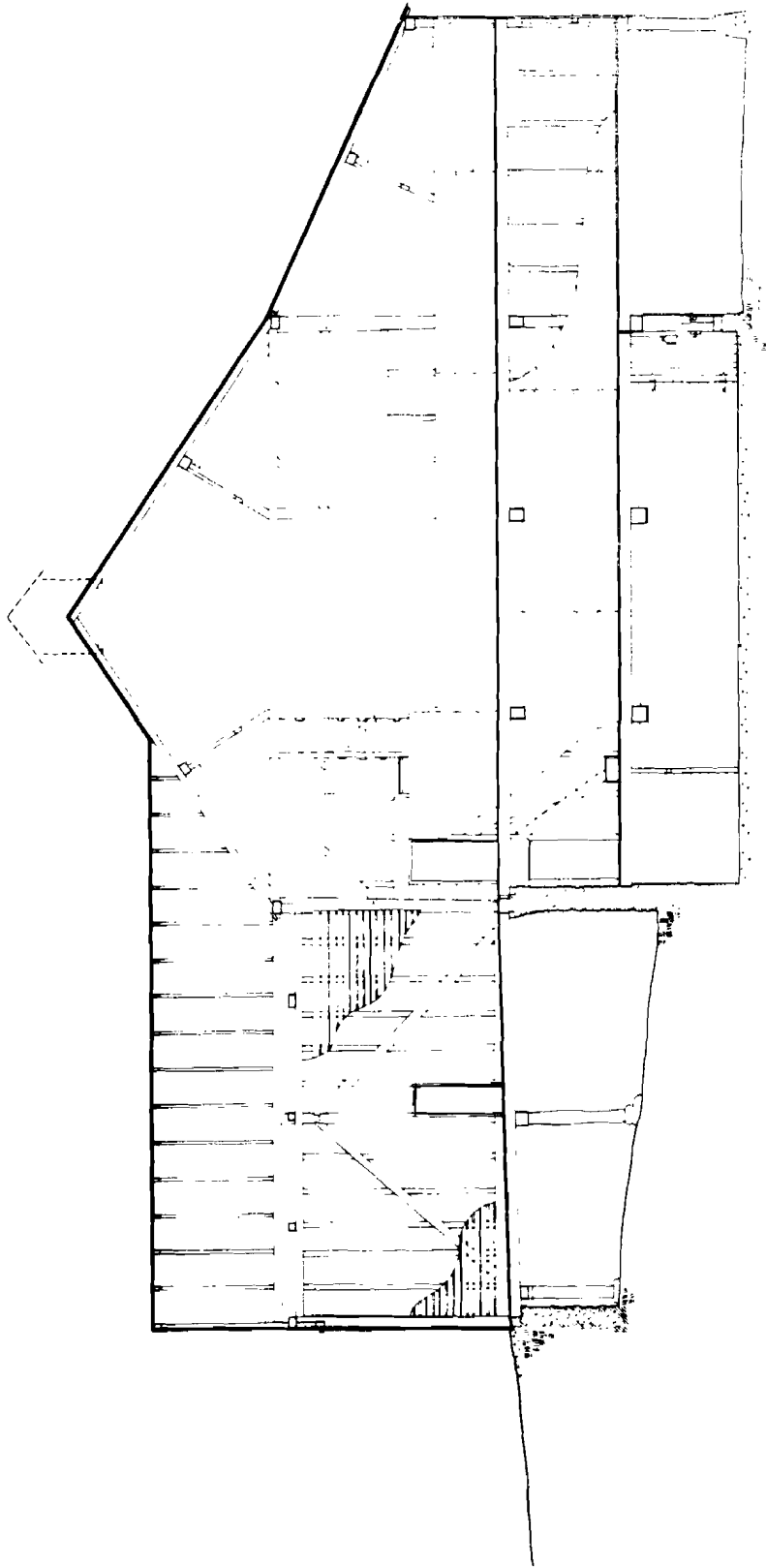


PLATE 1: William Couper House, View to Northwest



SECTION A-A

PLATE 2: William Couper Bank Barn, Section

SOURCE: Bernard L. Herman, *University of Delaware*

1800-1840" prepared by the New Castle County Department of Planning (Jicha and Cesna 1986).