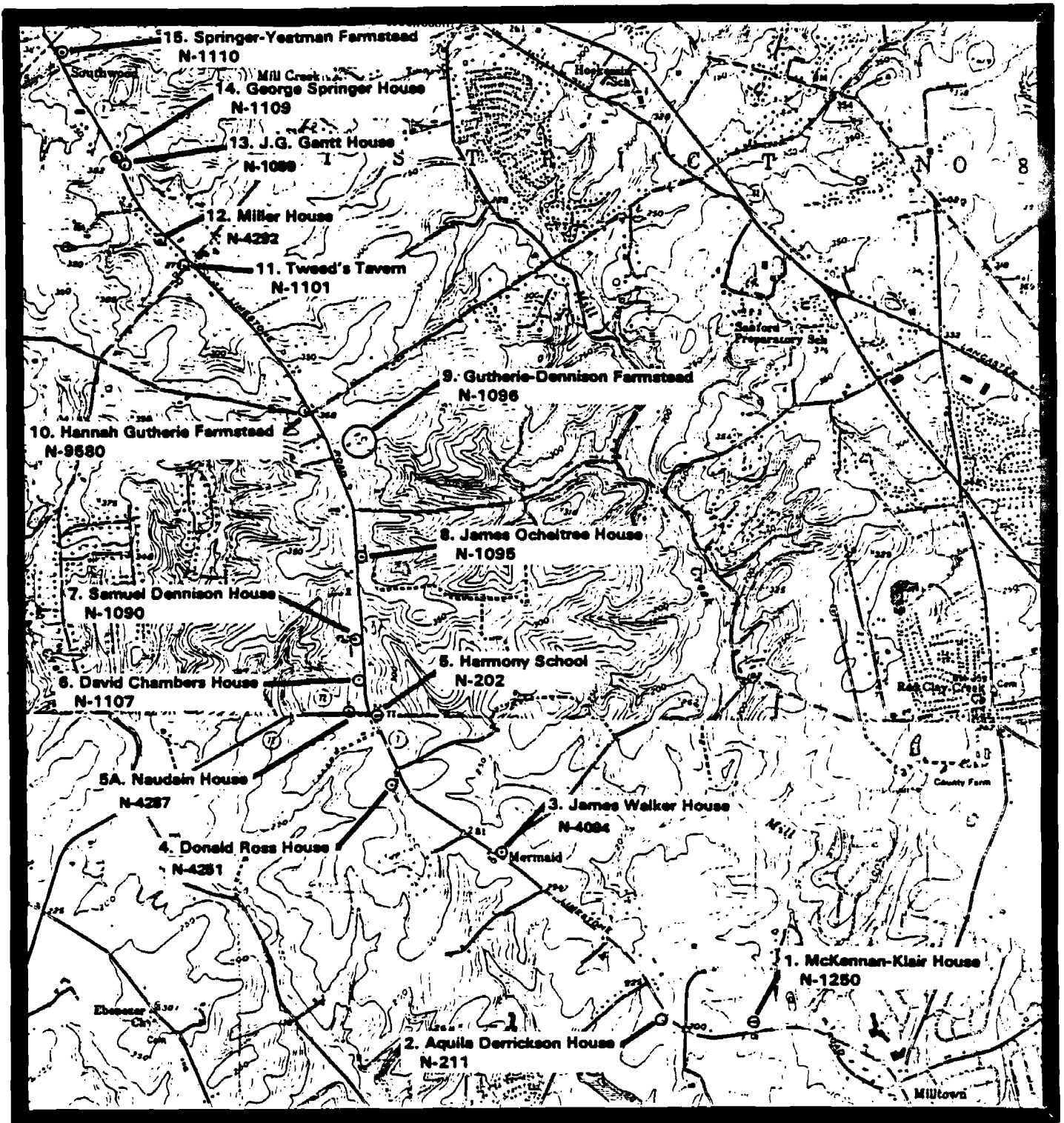


## LIMESTONE ROAD: AN INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

Delaware State Route 7, known for much of its history as Limestone Road, traverses approximately five miles of northern Delaware's upland piedmont, running roughly northwest through Mill Creek Hundred between Milltown and the Pennsylvania state line (Figure 1). For most of its length, the road lies on the high ground between Pike Creek on the west and Mill Creek on the east, with brief descents into the Mill Creek and Hockessin Valleys. At intermittent points, roads branch off from Limestone Road, leading to valley communities such as Hockessin, Brackenville and Red Clay Creek on the east, and Corner Ketch and Pleasant Valley to the west.

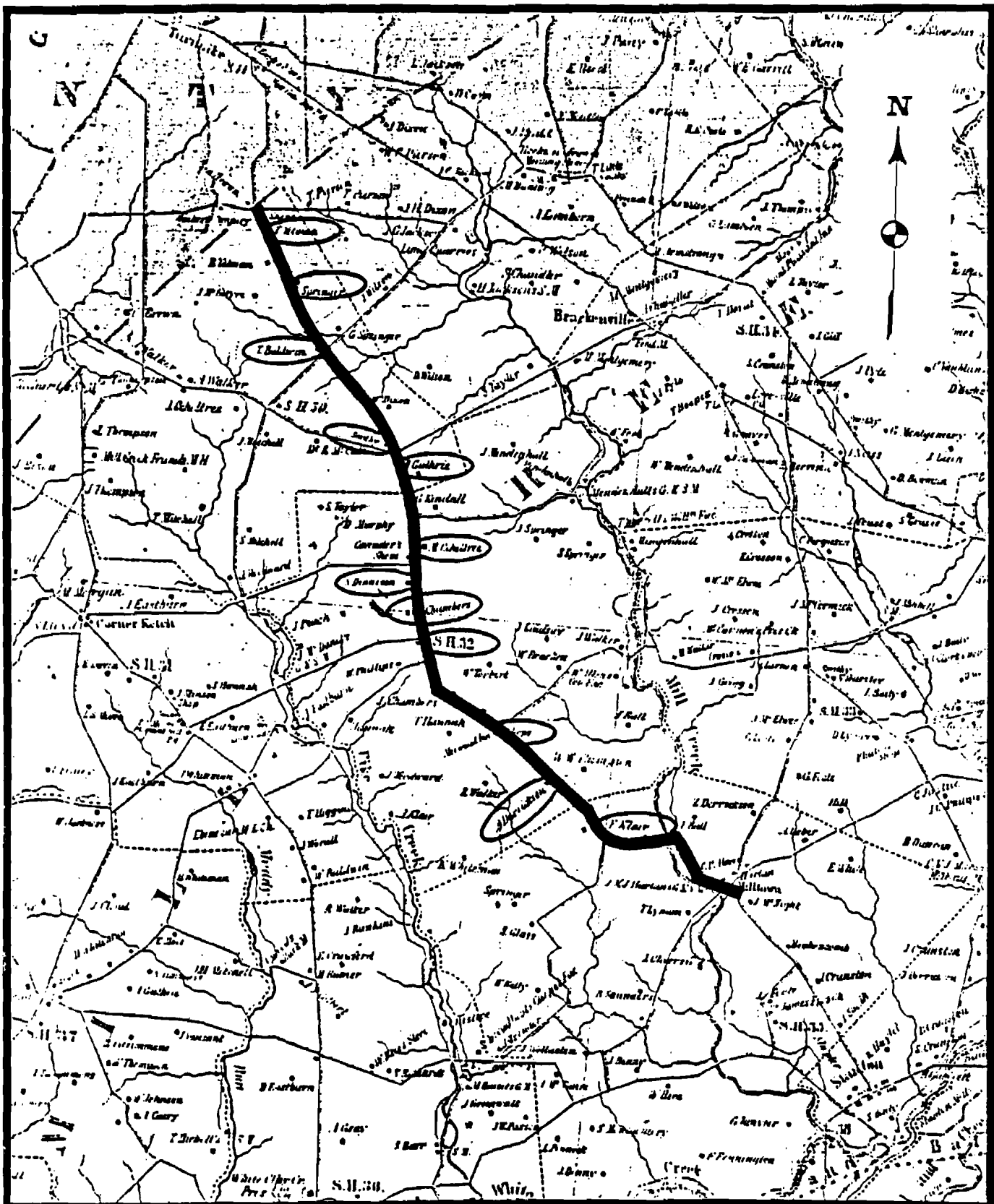
Limestone Road, in existence since at least the mid-18th century, (Coleman et al. 1985:25) ran from Stanton through Milltown to Kaolin, Pennsylvania (Figures 2,3,4,5). As such, it was an important route from the agricultural hinterlands of southeastern Pennsylvania and northwestern Delaware to shipping points, such as Newport and Stanton, from which area farmers' bounty could reach the markets of Philadelphia (Catts et al. 1986:20; Lemon 1967:526). Despite the opening of the Newport and Gap Turnpike (Route 41 today) in 1808, Limestone Road retained its importance as a transportation route. Indeed, its popularity may have been enhanced among teamsters and other travelers by its lack of tolls, its relatively gentle up grades, and existence of only one



**FIGURE 1 Project Area and Location of Recorded Architectural Resources**

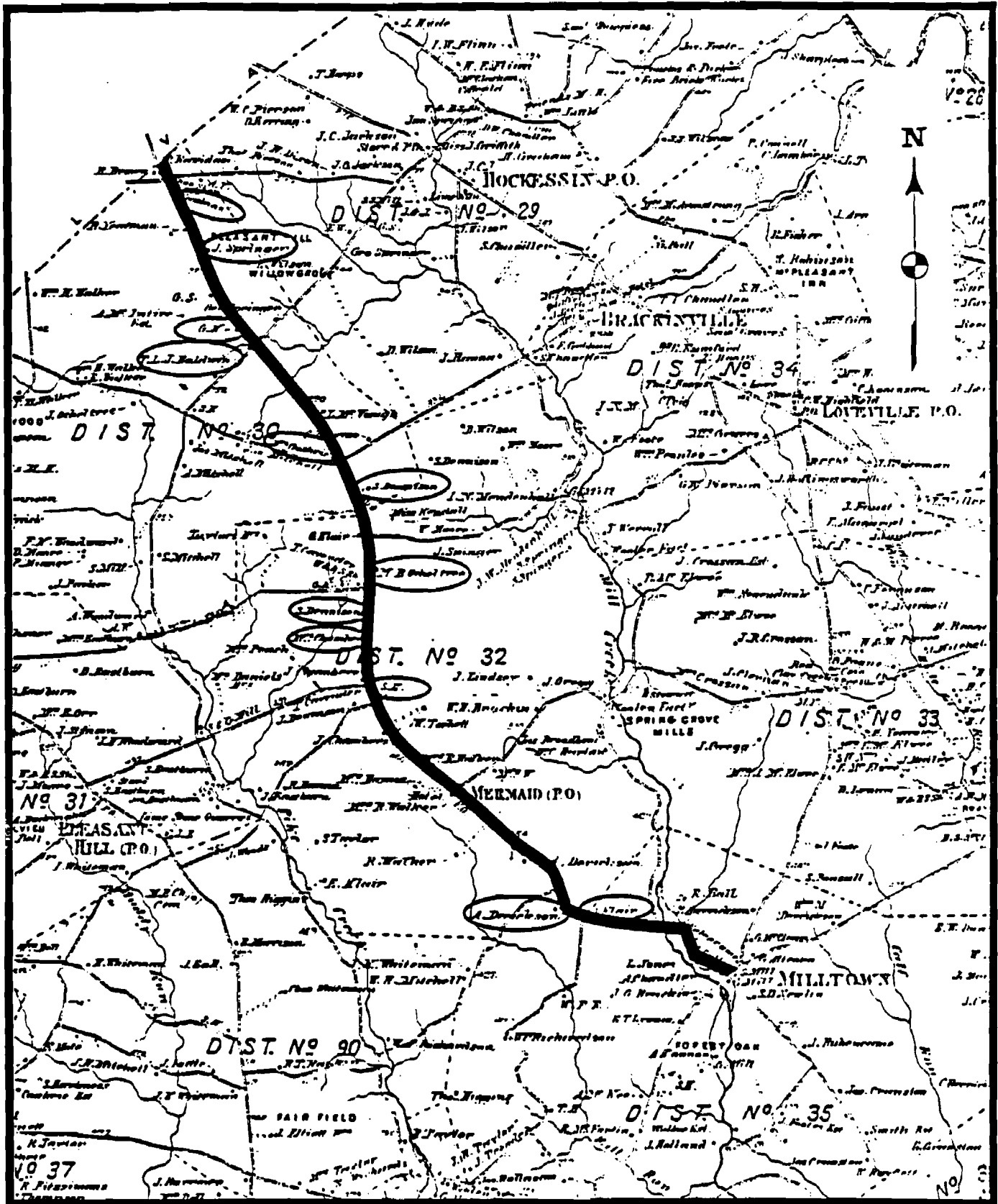
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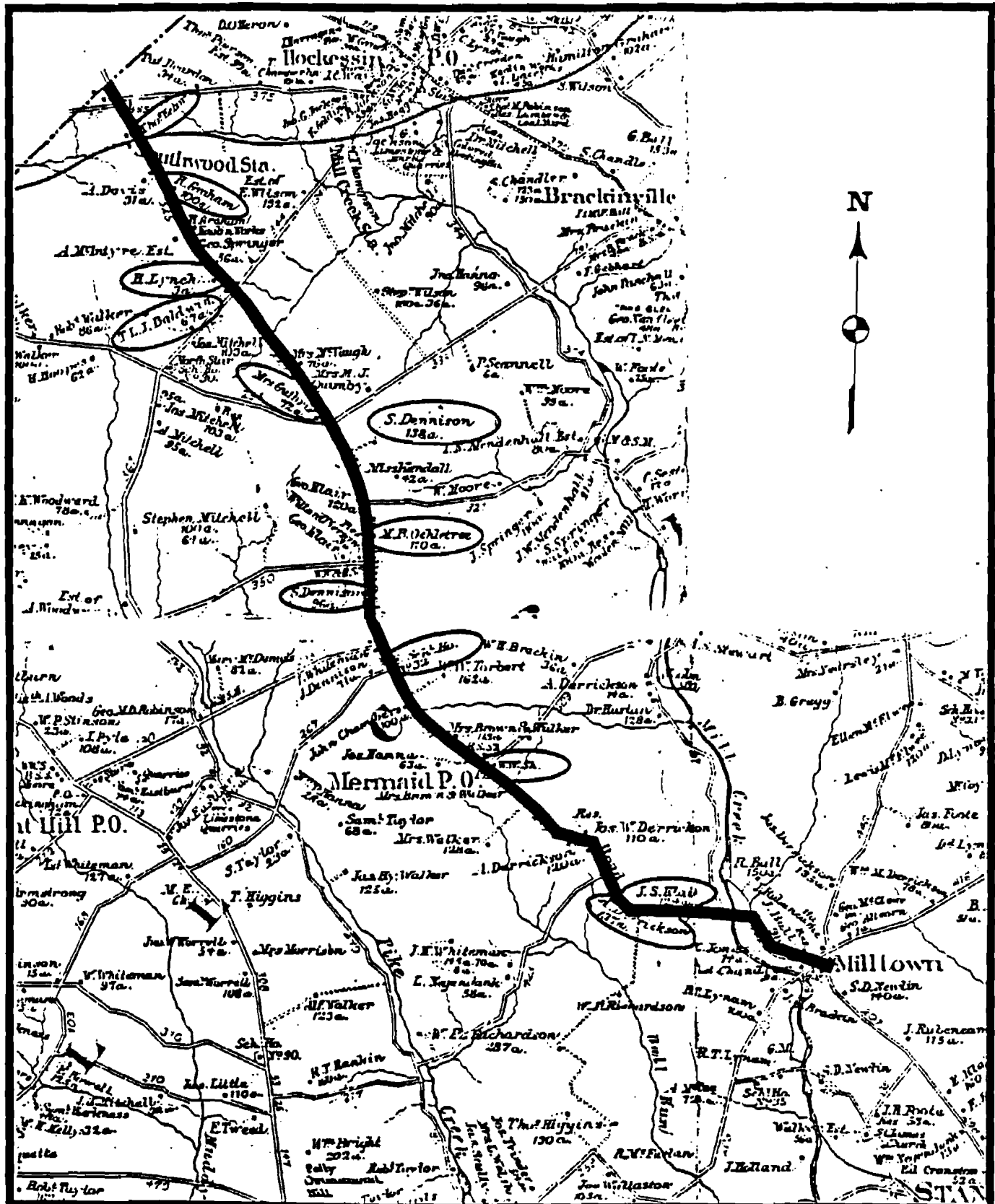
**FIGURE 2**  
**Detail of Limestone Road**

**SOURCE:**  
 Rea Price's "Map of New Castle County, Delaware", 1849



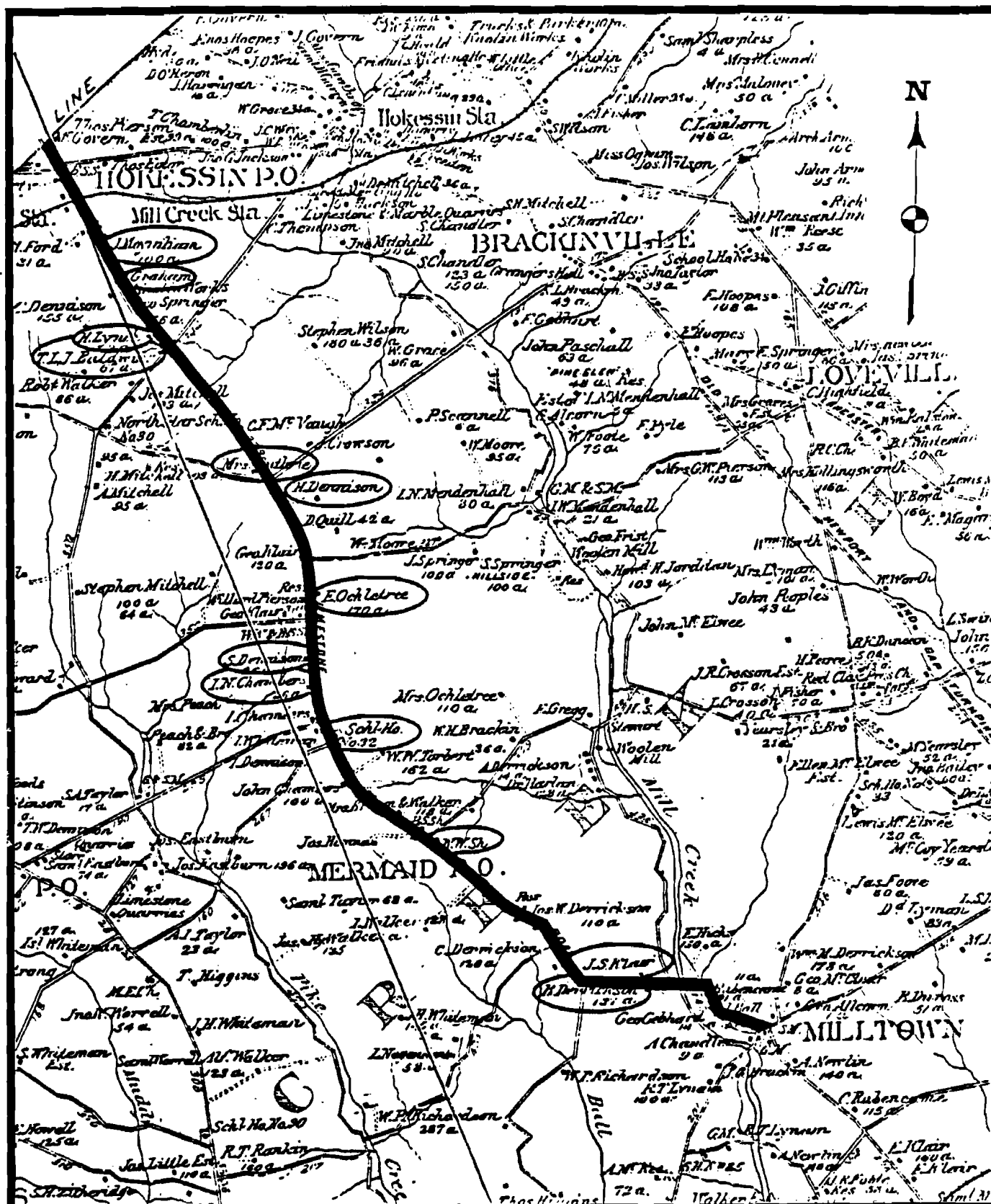
**FIGURE 3**  
**Detail of Limestone Road**

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



**FIGURE 4**  
Detail of Limestone Road

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



**FIGURE 5**  
Detail of Limestone Road

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

stream to ford -- Mill Creek, which was eventually bridged in 1836 (Cooch 1936:76-84; Catts et al. 1986:21).

Inevitably, enterprising individuals developed small businesses along Limestone Road that catered to those who traveled along it. Perhaps the earliest such establishment was the Mermaid Tavern, reputed to have opened its door in 1746 (Plate 1). By the late 18th century, another tavern (known from a 19th-century operator as Tweed's) had been established north of the Mermaid at Valley Road (Catts et al. 1986:65, 117-118, 153). As the pre-auto-era equivalent of the modern truck stop, the tavern keepers drew, or established themselves, stables, blacksmith, and wheelwright shops next door or across the road, thereby providing "full service" facilities for traveling patrons. Still other entrepreneurs set up smithies at other points along Limestone Road (like taverns almost invariably at intersections, perhaps in order to draw additional business from the Pike and Mill Creek Valleys), for example Thomas Yeatman, at Southwood Road, and Thomas Cavender, at the road to Corner Ketch (Rea and Price 1846; Beers 1868; Hopkins 1881; Baist 1893).

The patronage of these roadside establishments was not limited by any means to travelers. The taverns, and Limestone Road itself, also served the resident population of farmers, many of English and Anglo-Irish descent (Jicha and Cesna 1986), who lived as owner-operators or tenants with their families on farmsteads dispersed throughout this region of well-watered



**PLATE 1: Mermaid Tavern, View Looking West**



soils. The taverns offered convivial meeting places for relaxation and exchange of news, for formal gatherings (such as the local Grange, which met at the Mermaid for many years) and (again at the Mermaid) a place to vote and receive and send mail (Wood and Troy 1973). The blacksmith and wheelwright shops provided shoes for farmers' horses and oxen, wheels for their wagons, and sale and repair services for farmers' tools, implements and machinery.

Previous studies have indicated that until the later 19th century, northern New Castle County was largely oriented around a mixed farming economy which combined livestock raising and the growing in rotation of a variety of grains, including wheat, oats, corn and barley (Coleman et. al. 1985:37; Catts et al. 1986:21; Lemon 1972:150ff.) Such products contributed to the prosperity of rural "industrialists" located at strategic points along Pike and Mill Creeks. Farmers' grains could be ground at the McDaniels Mill on Pike Creek, the Harlan Mill in Milltown, or the Mendenhall Mills further up Mill Creek prior to shipment to urban markets. The existence of several woolen mills, also on Mill Creek, provided an incentive for some farmers, such as Alexander Guthrie, to raise sheep, as well as beef and, particularly in the later 19th century, dairy cattle (New Castle Co. Inventories, Alexander Guthrie, Nov. 16, 1810; Rea & Price 1846; Beers 1868; Hopkins 1881; Baist 1893).

When farmers decided to build, they could turn for lumber to many of the same mills that ground their grain, for example

McDaniel's, Harlan's and Mendenhall's. The geology of the Limestone Road area also offered an excellent source of building material in the crystalline schists and gneisses, commonly called fieldstone, that underlie much of this Piedmont upland (Lemon 1972: 34-35; Jicha and Cesna 1986). Lime for mortar (as well as for fertilizer) was also locally obtainable from the limestone quarries near Hockessin and the Eastburn-Jeanes quarries and kilns west of Pike Creek (Rea & Price 1846; Beers 1868; Hopkins 1881; Baist 1893; see also Heite 1976). The use of fieldstone in time came to characterize much of the rural architecture along Limestone Road, and indeed to distinguish northern New Castle County from much of the rest of Delaware (Herman 1982:179-80).

Through the 19th and into the early 20th centuries, life along Limestone Road maintained a certain continuity. Small adjustments occurred of course; the coming in the late 1870s of the Wilmington and Western Railroad through Hockessin and across Limestone Road to Southwood, PA and beyond may have caused a decline in the number of teamsters from southeastern Pennsylvania, to the detriment of the taverns, both of which appear to have ceased operation in the last quarter of the century (Catts et al. 1986:26). Access to a railroad line may also have encouraged the expansion of dairy herds in the area, as the railroad offered swift transport of fresh milk to urban areas, such as Wilmington. Heretofore, milk had to be made into butter or cheese for commercial sale, or was consumed on the farm (Gates

1960:239). Other agricultural pursuits included poultry raising and, increasingly during the 20th century, mushroom farming, which achieved the status of a primary crop through the efforts of commercial growers, most notably in nearby Chester County, Pennsylvania (Del Sordo 1984:7).

Limestone Road remained unpaved until the mid-1920s, and largely without electricity, until the 1930s (Sara P. Evans, personal communication). A narrow, two-lane macadam or concrete roadway then sufficed for some 40 years, until development and traffic along Limestone Road prompted a major project of widening and realignment in 1964 to broaden curves unsuited for increasing motoring speeds. That project in turn, along with expansion of the Wilmington metropolitan area, has within the last decade fostered the now well-in-progress redevelopment of Limestone Road for both commercial activities and various forms of housing.

This redevelopment has caused some notable architectural incongruities: an 1840s farmhouse isolated between a modern church and large parking lot on one side, and a massive "post-Modern" office block on the other; the venerable Mermaid Tavern now set against a backgroup of condominiums. Beyond Mendenhall Mill Road, however, something of the historic environment of Limestone Road remains in a handful of farmsteads and intermittent patches of fallow and cultivated field and woodland.