BACKGROUND RESEARCH

Environmental Setting

The Robert Ferguson House is located in the eastern section of White Clay Creek Hundred, New Castle County, Delaware. Physiographically, the area is transitional between the Atlantic Coastal Plain Province and the Piedmont Province. The topography is level to gently sloping and is alternately poorly- and well-drained. The primary drainages are the Christina and White Clay Creeks, both major tributaries of the Christina River. The soils in the upland area of the Ferguson House are deep, well-drained silt loams with a silty clay loam subsoil. The natural vegetation in the area was mixed hardwoods, particularly oak, which has been replaced by a wide variety of non-native vegetation patterns.

The vicinity of the Ferguson House retained its essentially rural character through the 19th and into the early 20th century, with only the addition of a couple of rural farmsteads along this portion of Chestnut Hill Road during the late 19th century marking any sort of change. In 1942, Jasper Lynch sold 82 of his 144 acres on the north side of Chestnut Hill Road, including the Ferguson House, and retained 64 acres on the south side of the Road. This marked the beginning of a change in the area from rural to suburban, as a few single family houses began to appear in the area. When Jasper Lynch sold his remaining holdings for the construction of the Todd Estates housing development in 1955, the area was altered considerably. The immediate vicinity of the Ferguson House now includes single family houses, tract house developments, a church, a school, a steel water tower, and a grocery store.

Previous Archaeological Investigation

As required by the Scope of Work, Mid-Atlantic Archaeological Research (MAAR) performed a Location and Identification (Phase I) survey of the proposed Route 4 construction corridor. The plan also required archaeological test excavations and architectural recording of the Ferguson House. The Phase I survey located several prehistoric and historic sites within the general area of the Ferguson House (Thomas 1980). A prehistoric site supposedly located in the vacant field to the east of the property was not identified by this archaeological survey.

On June 8 and 9, 1979, MAAR conducted posthole testing and made a Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) architectural recordation of the Ferguson House. A total of 68 posthole tests were excavated on a 10 ft. grid system (Map 2). An attempt was made to recover a sufficient number of artifacts to allow for the construction of a frequency distribution map and the determination of activity areas within the property. However, activity areas could not be determined from this testing, as only 41 ceramic sherds, approximately a dozen nails, and little other diagnostic material were recovered (Appendix 3, Map 2).

Two subsurface features were located by the posthole tests. Holes T-6, T-7, and T-8 uncovered quartz cobbles and mortar approximately 5 in. below the surface, indicating the presence of a structural foundation. Test S-1, placed in an obvious depression, showed evidence of the demolition of a structure, as tarpaper and shingle siding was found resting on rocks 12 in. below the surface. Otherwise, the posthole testing revealed unstratified deposits, with historic artifacts from the early 19th century mixed with mid-20th century material.

Architecturally, the Ferguson House is representative of the development of building techniques from the early nineteenth through twentieth centuries (Appendices 1, 2, and 4). The interior trim and construction details suggest that the two-story, two bay west portion of the residence was constructed in the 19th century. This single-pile, 21 ft. by 16 ft. section, presently covered by asphalt siding, features an interior gable end chimney, box cornice, field stone foundation, and a full basement. Unlike the other portions of this structure, its framing consists of mortise and tenon joining.

A lower, two story, one-room deep section, 18 ft. by 16 ft., adjoins the earlier structure and retains its original six-over-six double hung sash windows and interior end chimney. Examination of the original hardware found in this section and its building techniques suggests a mid to late-19th century construction date. A 20th century basement has been added under this section to house heating equipment.

Sometime in the early 20th century circa 1940, a third section was added to the east end of the structure. This is a one-story, two-bay section presently containing kitchen, pantry and bathroom facilities.

The interior of the structure retains its original molded door and window surrounds, baseboard trim, four-paneled doors, and painted fireplace mantels. The staircase wall within the earliest section retains its original vertical sheathing with beaded edge. The staircase railing features a square handrail and balusters and terminates with a columnar newel post surmounted by an Ionic capital with an egg-and-dart motif.

A summary of MAAR findings indicated that several outbuilding foundations existed behind the structure, that a capped 30 ft. deep well existed under the house itself, and that the house now standing on the property

is indeed a structure recorded in early documents as owned by Robert Ferguson. From the excavations, MAAR recommended that the site be slated for mitigation if the site could not be avoided by the proposed Route 4 reconstruction.

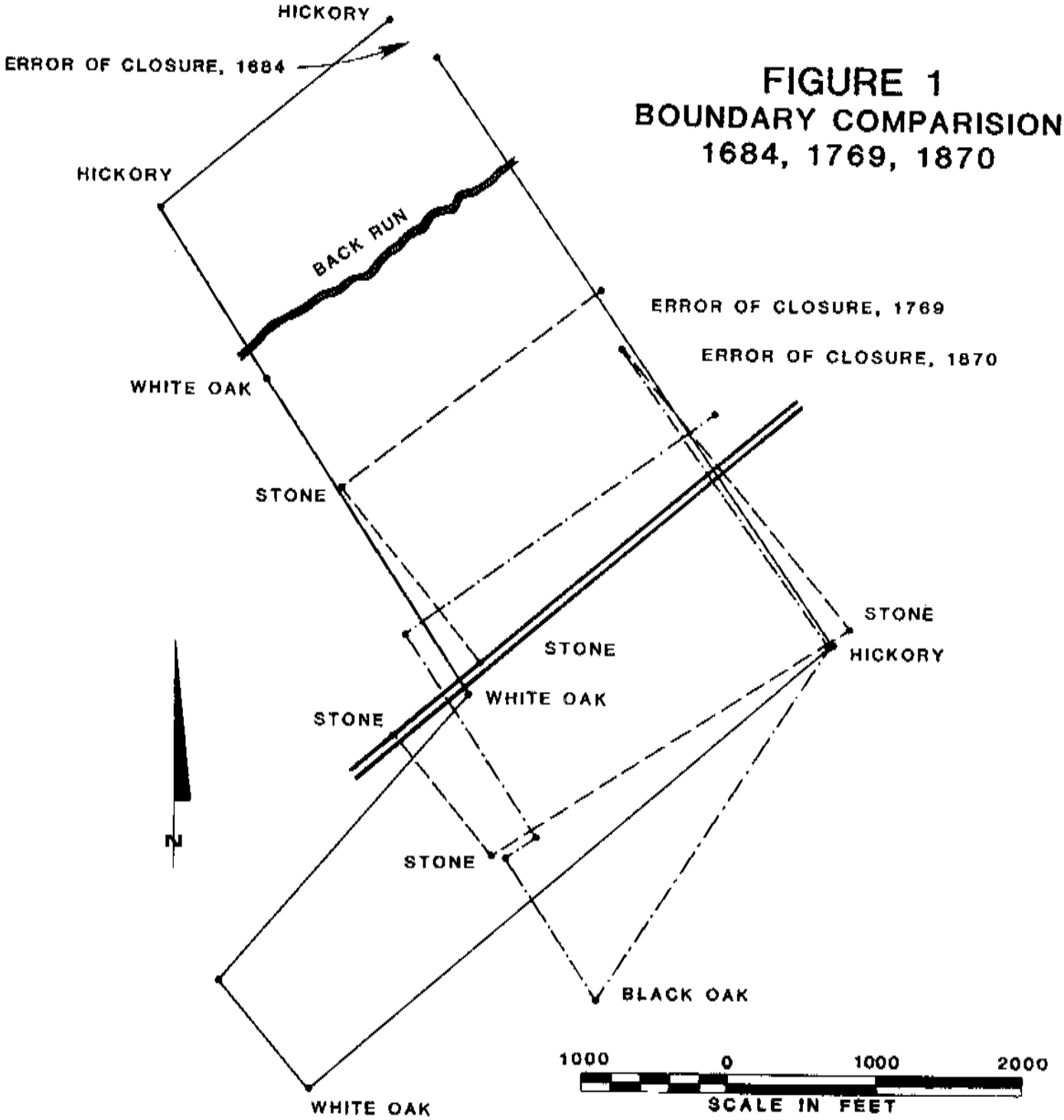
Documentary Research

The earliest deed of record relating specifically to the Ferguson property dates to January 27, 1684 when John Kirksey petitioned the Commissioners of Property for a warrant to a 300 acre tract of land called "Midland". This warrant was purchased on August 13, 1685 by Charles Bailey, who obtained a patent to the land as a result of a land survey dated June 11, 1686. From a map of the survey (Figure 1), the 300 acre tract, still called "Midland", was shown to extend northward to Back Creek, a still extant tributary of the White Clay Creek.

This tract of land changed ownership a total of 13 times between the survey of Charles Bailey in 1686 and the purchase of the tract by Samuel Bradford in 1769 (Appendix 5). These rapid transactions represent an era of speculative ownership witnessed throughout northern Delaware (Scharf 1888). It is unlikely that the land was improved for agricultural use during much of this time period. The earliest indication of agricultural use of the land is a 1761 article of agreement between Richard Thomas, then owner of the property, and Thomas Robinson, tenant farmer. No details were given regarding the amount of acreage tilled, crops raised, or improvements to the land. Deed and tax records of this time failed to shed any further light on this subject.

Samuel Bradford purchased the property in 1769 and he died in 1774. His will states that he was a resident of White Clay Creek Hundred at the time of his death and an inventory dated October 23, 1775 indicated that he owned a

FIGURE 1
BOUNDARY COMPARISIONS: 1684, 1769, 1870



1682 - 300 ACRES

1769 - 169 ACRES

1870 - 144 ACRES

ROAD FROM OGLETOWN TO ELKTON, PRESENT BY 1766
(RT. 4 - EAST CHESTNUT HILL RD.)

house containing a common room, a lodging room, and an upstairs, plus a barn and crops in the field. Among the latter were 66 bushels of rye, 11 bushels of oats, 42 bushels of wheat, plus Indian corn in the field, wheat in the ground, and hay and flax in the barn (Appendix 6). Income tax assessment records for Samuel Bradford's estate dated 1777 to 1794 show values of ±10 in 1777, ±20 in 1786, and ±8 in 1794, the last year Samuel Bradford appears in the listing. Jackson T. Main (1965:32-33) indicates that a substantial farm owner of this time would be assessed ±10 to ±50 and a poor farmer assessed less that ±6. Thus Samuel Bradford's estate would be classified in the lower end of the "substantial" scale but above the "poor" designation.

His son James Bradford is listed in the 1798, 1801, 1803, and 1807 tax assessment records with a single holding, a 150-acre parcel in White Clay Creek Hundred. This is assumed to be land inherited from Samuel Bradford. It is also assumed that James is residing on the property, since no other properties are listed in his name, and that he is residing in the house mentioned in Samuel Bradford's inventory of 1775. This places a dwelling on the property by 1775. On the 1816 tax assessment list, James Bradford's estate is listed as containing 157 acres near Christiana Bridge (present day Christiana) in the tenure of J. Davis. Of the acreage, 137 are listed as improved, with 20 acres of woodland. Included in the improved land is one log dwelling and a barn. If this is the dwelling mentioned in the 1775 inventory of Samuel Bradford, then it is too early to be the Robert Ferguson house. MAAR's archeological testing and the architectural details of the house tend to support this contention, as there is no evidence for an 18th century occupation in that data. Further, informant Charles Lynch stated that a section of the former Lynch farmstead, which stood on the south side of Route 4, was of log construction.

It is understood that the Ferguson house is not a log structure. Therefore, it is felt that the former Lynch farmstead is the dwelling mentioned in the Samuel and James Bradford documentation.

Although the 1816 tax assessment records suggest that James Bradford was a prosperous yeoman farmer, other information provides a different interpretation. In 1822, John Reed purchased the property, the proceeds of which went toward satisfying a debt of $2,750 owed by Bradford's estate to the Farmer's Bank of Delaware (Appendix 5).

The White Clay Creek Hundred tax assessment for 1828 lists John Reed as taxable for one 145 acre tract of land with a log house and barn assessed for $2,900. An inventory made on March 22, 1833 for a public sale of Reed's "goods and chattels" gives some information about his possessions and agricultural land use. Among the items on the list are 50 bushels of corn, 105½ bushels of oats, 175½ bushels of corn, 1 lot of wheat in the ground, 1 shoat, 2 cows, 1 calf, and 13 sheep (Appendix 7). The crops are all very typical of what was grown throughout New Castle County during this time period. More interesting are the 13 sheep owned by Reed at the time of the sale. Along with peaches and silk-worms, sheep were the livestock some farmers turned to for quick wealth when faced with competition and lowered profits from the more ordinary crops such as wheat and corn. It thus appears that the structure known as the Ferguson House had not yet been built. After Reed's death in 1833, his wife Hannah appealed to the New Castle Orphan's Court for widow's dower. In 1834 she became the wife of Joseph Cranston, who sold the property to Robert Ferguson in the fall of 1834.

The tax records for 1835 show that Robert Ferguson was assessed for 145 acres, a log house and a frame barn. The valuation is given at $2,900. In 1837, he is assessed for 144 acres, 2 frame houses and 2 frame barns. The valuation

is $4,317. It is concluded that the additional dwelling mentioned in the 1837 list is the newly-erected structure now known as the Ferguson House (Figure 2).

Very little is known about Robert Ferguson, for whom the house and site is named, and who owned the property from 1834 to 1870. The Rea and Price map of 1849 and Beer's Atlas of 1868 show the Ferguson property as lying on both sides of Route 4 with structures present on both sides as well (Map 3 & 4). These are the Ferguson and Lynch farm houses. In the U.S. Census for Agriculture, 1850 Robert Ferguson, Sr., born in Scotland is recorded in White Clay Creek Hundred. He is listed under occupation as a "gentlemen", with a 144 acre farm valued at $10,000 and one slave and one bonded servant. His son, Robert Jr. is tabulated next as a farmer and manager of the above farm. It is probable that Robert Sr. was living in the former log dwelling house of James Bradford and Robert Jr. was living in the newly constructed Ferguson House.

The property was sold by Robert Ferguson to Jacob Currinder in 1870, who held the land for only three years before selling it in 1873 to Robert J. Morrison. Tax assessment records for 1881-1885, 1893-1897, and 1897-1901 provide significant information on the property during this period (Figure 2). In 1881-1885, a frame house, a frame barn, and a tenement are listed. It appears that the log dwelling, now framed over, is still the living quarters of the farm owner (Morrison), and that the tenement corresponds to that structure now referred to as the Robert Ferguson House. Assessments for the period 1881-1901 show a decrease of the property value by one-half. The reason for this sharp decline is not known.

Baist's Atlas 1893, (Map 5), show the 144 acre property as being occupied by three structures, two on the north side of Chestnut Hill Road and one on

FIGURE 2

WHITE CLAY CREEK HUNDRED TAX ASSESMENT 1835 - 1901

TAXABLES	NUMBER	ACRES OF LAND	HOUSES & LOTS	LOTS	BUILDINGS & SITUATIONS	EACH PARCEL OF REAL ESTATE	AMOUNT OF REAL ESTATE	STOCK	PLATE	M. SLAVES	F. SLAVES	VALUE OF SLAVES	POLL TAX	TOTAL ASSESMENT
Robert Ferguson (1835)	1	145			Log House Frame Barn	$2900		-	-	-	-	-		$2900
Robert Ferguson (1837)	1 2	144 -	- 1	- -	Fr. House & Barn " " " "	3500 200	$3700	$217	-	-	-	-	$400	4317
Robert Ferguson (1840-1845)	1 2	144 -	- 1	- -	Fr. House & Barn " " " "	3500 200	3700	42	-	-	-	-	500	4242
Robert Ferguson " "	1 2	129 -	- 1	- -	Fr. House, Fr. Barn Fr. House	7740 500	8240	70	-	-	-	-	600	8910
Robert Ferguson, Jr. (1854-1856)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	389	-	-	-	-	300	689
Robert J. Morrison (1881-1885)		144	1	-	Frame House, Barn, & Tenement		8640	866	-	-	-	-	400	9906
Robert J. Morrison (1893-1897)	1 2 3	100 40 -	1 - 1	- - -	Frame House & Barn Wood & Bush Frame House	6000 600 200	6800	985	-	-	-	-	400	8515
Robert J. Morrison (1897-1901)	1 2 3	100 40 -	1 - 1	- - -	Frame House & Barn Wood & Bush Frame House	4000 400 200	4600	280	-	-	-	-	-	4800

the south side. These represent the Robert Ferguson House and the barn known from archaeological and informant information (north side) and the ca. 1774 structure (south side).

This pattern of the owner of the property living on the south side of Route 4 (Chestnut Hill Road), with the structure on the north side (Ferguson House) rented out is also present during the period 1920-1943. During this time the owner, Jasper Lynch, lived in the structure on the south side of the road (Plate 4), while his parents resided in the Ferguson House. Charles Lynch, Jasper's nephew, recalls much about both of the structures present and of the land use of the property during the period 1920-1960. During this time a small barn was present in the area of the present garage. The barn has a drive-in shed for a wagon and two box stalls for horses or mules with a small second story for storage of animal feed. Sometime in the mid-1940's this structure was moved to the adjacent lot on the west and coverted to a private residence. This building was demolished in 1979 after falling into ruin.

Also present during the period 1920-1943 was a "very old" chickenhouse, located behind the presently standing garage. This frame structure is shown in a 1920's era photograph taken from north of the chickenhouse looking southeast (Plate 5). The only other structure present within the yard area was an outhouse, present at the intersection of the eastern fence row and the edge of the yard. As in other rural locations, the privy was dug out periodically, and the contents were spread over the adjoining field.

Mr. Lynch stated that the crops raised during this period were very similar to that described for a much earlier period, i.e. 1830-1860. Cereal grains, principally corn, wheat, and alfalfa were the most important crops grown throughout the period, providing a fairly stable income. His uncle, like many farmers in the area, practiced extensive truck farming of fruits and

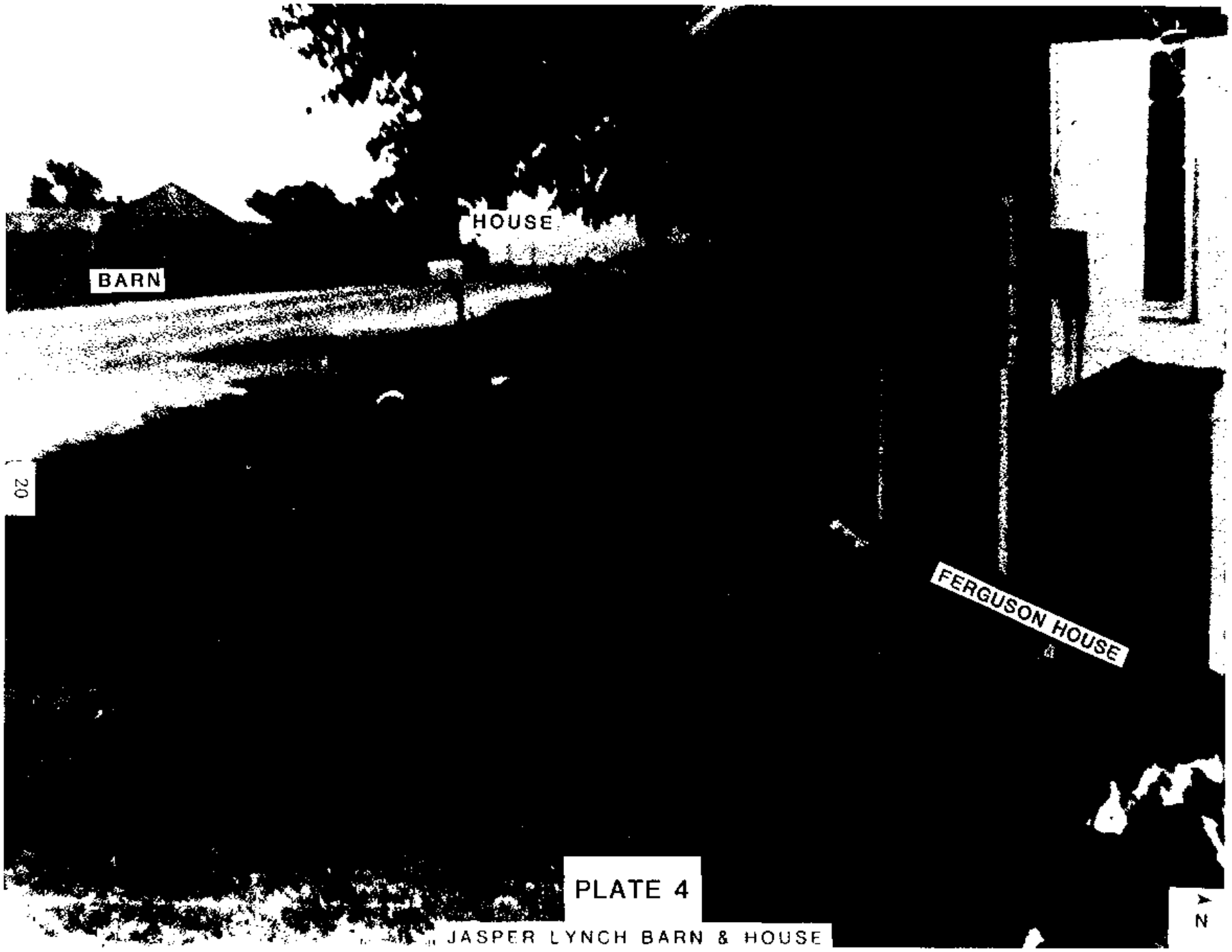


PLATE 4

JASPER LYNCH BARN & HOUSE

PLATE 5

CHICKENHOUSE

vegetables. During the growing season, daily trips were made on Route 4 transporting these goods to the markets in Wilmington. The income from this provided the "get ahead" money for the family.

Additional insight into the recent history of the site was provided by the most recent occupant of the site, Mrs. Alice Weber. At the time when she first occupied the house, 1948, the "old" chickenhouse was still standing. This was torn down and a new chicken house was constructed in 1950. This one is presently standing in the northwest area of the property. The Weber's were also responsible for the installation of a septic field in the area north of the yard. This system replaced the use of an outhouse which was located behind the right-hand (northeast) side of the garage. This was a double-hole privy approximately 2 ft. in depth. Mrs. Weber had the structure torn down and the pit filled with dirt and debris. However, a depression always remained, even after repeated fillings.

The Weber's continued the intensive agricultural use of the property practiced during the previous decades. The entire field behind the house was truck-farmed, and produce was sold from a stand in the front yard. At one time they raised 1,000 tomato plants in addition to a wide variety of other vegetables.

In summary, the cultural history of the present Ferguson House structure and archaeological site provides a valuable addition to information that can be obtained architecturally and archaeologically. From archival research it is evident that the Ferguson House was a structure occupied by tenants (with the exception of the last owner) and not by the property owners, who resided in a house south and west of the Ferguson House. The small size of the structure and the lack of out-buildings that would normally be associated with a 144 acre farm support this statement. The photograph (Plate 4) looking west from

the Ferguson House shows that the farm center was located surrounding the main dwelling on the south side of Route 4.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design was created to provide information on the archaeological and architectural characteristics of a tenant farm and the lifeways of the house occupants from the period 1837-1940. The objective was to generate a comparitive data base for use in future archaeological excavation and analysis. The general nature of the design was a deliberate step to afford compatibility with the developing State Preservation Plan for historic resources.

The background research indicated several areas for investigation of the Ferguson House and yards. When the house was built in the 1830's, the Lynch farm across the road had already been a working farm for several decades. The Ferguson house was constructed as a tenant farmhouse to be rented out to a farmer or laborer who helped work the larger farm. The building style and materials were likely to have been of lower complexity and quality compared to the main house. This secondary residence status is supported by the fact that there appear to be few outbuildings, or the remains of such in the immediate vicinity of the Ferguson House.

The research was concentrated on the three topics: the number and configuration of outbuildings, the associated artifact types, and the artifact distribution and concentration. From this data it was hoped that information could be obtained regarding the life of a tenant farmer, and specifically, on the ethnicity and economic status of the occupants. The following hypotheses formed the basis for the research design.