HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the historical research was to provide support to the archaeological and architectural components of this project and to summarize (in this chapter) the historical development of Hares Corner. The intersection was believed to typify similar communities found historically in rural environs, now subsumed into the suburbs of major cities. Engineering drawings and maps supplied by DelDOT were used in developing the field strategy, and a title search or property history was provided for Walnut Cottage. The principal results of the latter have been included in the results of architectural fieldwork and evaluation.

An intensive cartographic review was conducted for the study area and records relating to road and turnpike construction were located. Property histories were then compiled for the blacksmith/wheelwright's shop and the tavern/hotel that historically occupied the intersection as well as for Walnut Cottage. While an in-depth examination of the regional and sub-regional systems was clearly beyond the scope of this project, this approach enabled LBA to sketch the historical development of the transportation system and three of the functions (industrial, residential, social) associated with this area. Data were found at the Recorder of Deeds, City/County Building, Wilmington; Historical

Society of Delaware, Wilmington; Hall of Records, Dover; and University of Delaware, Newark.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF HARES CORNER

The Hares Corner Interchange is partially contained in and immediately adjacent to the 1,068-acre New Castle Commons. The policy of erecting these Commons, or public lands held by the local hundred, dates to William Penn's proprietorship, and the New Castle Commons is the last still in legal existence in Delaware. Clearly no longer kept as open land, portions of it have been let in long-term leases since the eighteenth century. George Read (the Declaration of Independence Signer) was among the thirteen original trustees of the Common and his son, a local landowner, also served on this committee. The earliest of these leases was granted in 1797 to John Haire (or Hare), who maintained a farm and tavern at or near this intersection (Figure 2).[5]

Hares Corner was known in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as Clarks Corner. Purchased from the Clark family in 1790 by George Read II (1765-1835), the son of George Read who signed the Declaration of Independence and a U.S. District Attorney for 30 years, the tract was included in the sales that accompanied probate of the estate of George Read II's estate in 1837 (Figure 3).[6] The property at that time consisted of approximately 200 acres known as Hill House Plantation, which surrounded the intersection and contained a frame dwelling and a frame barn in addition to other improvements. The family

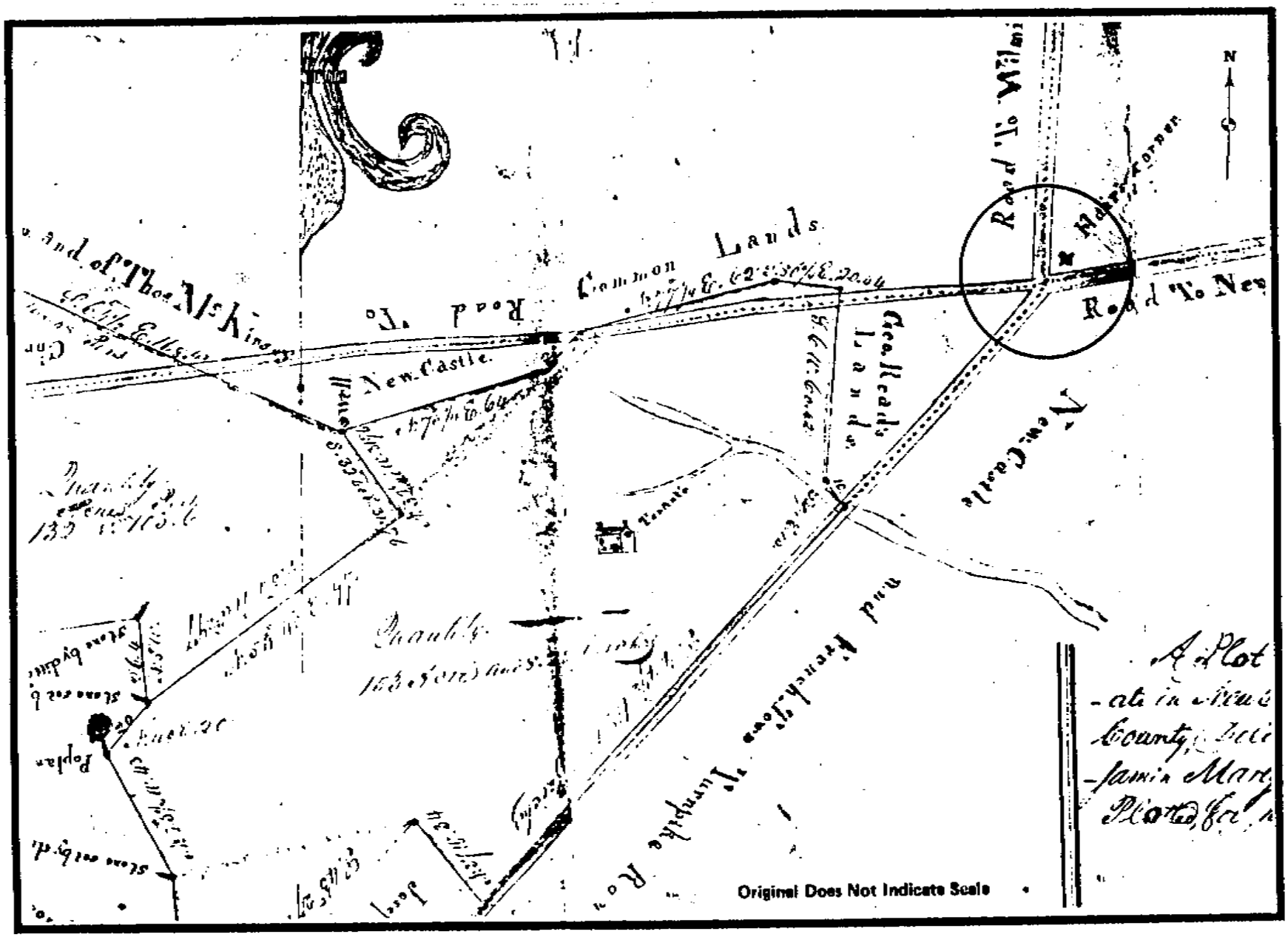

FIGURE 2: Vicinity of Hares Corner Showing Landowners, June 1826

SOURCE: Survey of Two Tracts of Land Belonging to Benjamin Harly, June 1826, Holcomb Collection

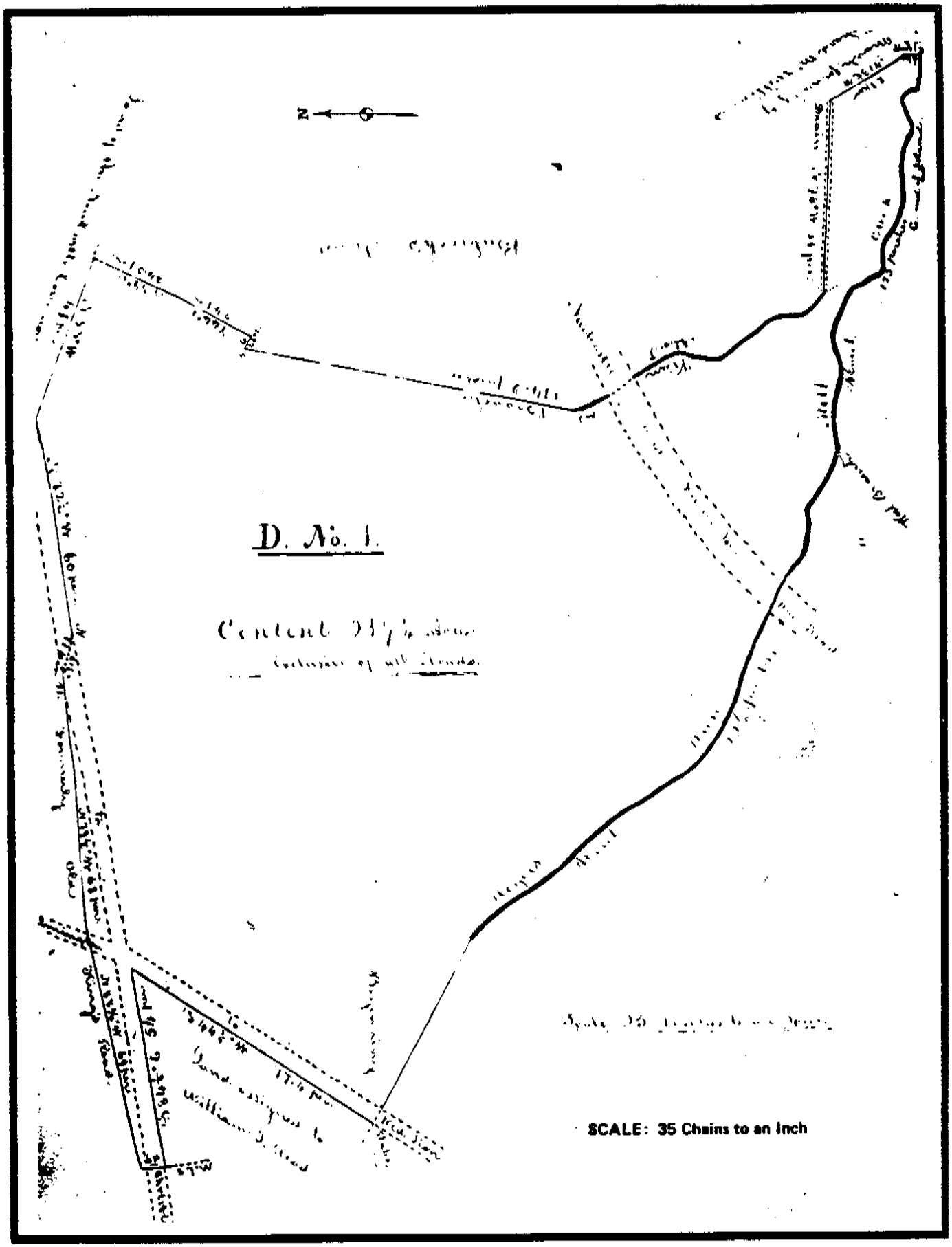

FIGURE 3: George Read's Land, 1838

SOURCE: NCC Orphans Court Q1:516-521

had extensive holdings in New Castle County, most of which was rented to a series of tenants. The family's principal residence was in New Castle; the property in the vicinity of Hares Corner was leased to Jesse Hastings and Peter Spencer.[7]

In the eighteenth century, the 200-acre plantation had been occupied by two successive generations of the Clark family. William Clark acquired the tract in 1745. He then sold it to his son John in 1772.[8] Mary Clark, the administratrix of John Clark's estate and probably his widow, was sued for his debts in 1787. U-able to meet the payment, she sold the property at a sheriff's auction in 1790.

The route eventually incorporated into the Frenchtown turnpike was originally part of the Colonial roads, both known as Kings Road (Figures 2 and 3). One ran from Christiana Bridge to New Castle and the second from New Castle to Maryland.[9] In 1808-1809, the state legislature passed "An act to incorporate a company to make an artificial road from New Castle to French town on Elk River in Cecil County, Maryland". George Read was among the appointed commissioners of the turnpike company.[10] Efforts to create the turnpike predated actual passage of the act; in October 1807, John Bird reported to Read that the bill to create a turnpike to Frenchtown had not passed during the recent session.[11] In the early years of the century, George bought out other heirs to family property in the vicinity and continued to add to his real estate over the next two decades.[12] Most of this land was leased out to various tenants.[13]

The turnpike was completed by 1813. At Hares Corner the turnpike turned south and the intersection consisted of three routes: the turnpike route, from New Castle to Frenchtown; the road from New Castle to Christiana Bridge; and an extension of the road from Red Lion northeast to the river, which merged with the turnpike a few miles south of Hares Corner (Figure 4). The transportation system remained the same for the next decades, and the intersection was bypassed by the railroad, although a station was eventually established a few miles southwest of it where the state road from Red Lion merged with the turnpike.[14] The principal addition to the transportation system in the later nineteenth century was construction after 1873 of another public road from the Christiana River to the turnpike road, which completed the triangle formed by the turnpike, the state road, and the new road (Figures 5 and 6).[15]

The earliest structures directly associated with Clarks or Hares Corner were taverns run by John Haire and Nicholas Quinn. In 1809, John Haire of New Castle Hundred petitioned the court for a license to operate a tavern.[16] He claimed that he occupied "the house at Clark's Corner on [the] road leading from Wilmington to Red Lion, 5-1/2 miles to Wilmington and within 5-1/4 miles of Red Lion" and that "since the road has been opened," he had "been called on frequently by travellors [sic] to entertain them." Among the 115 subscribers to Haire's petition was George Read.

In May of 1818, Nicholas Quinn of New Castle Hundred also petitioned the court for a license to maintain a "Publick

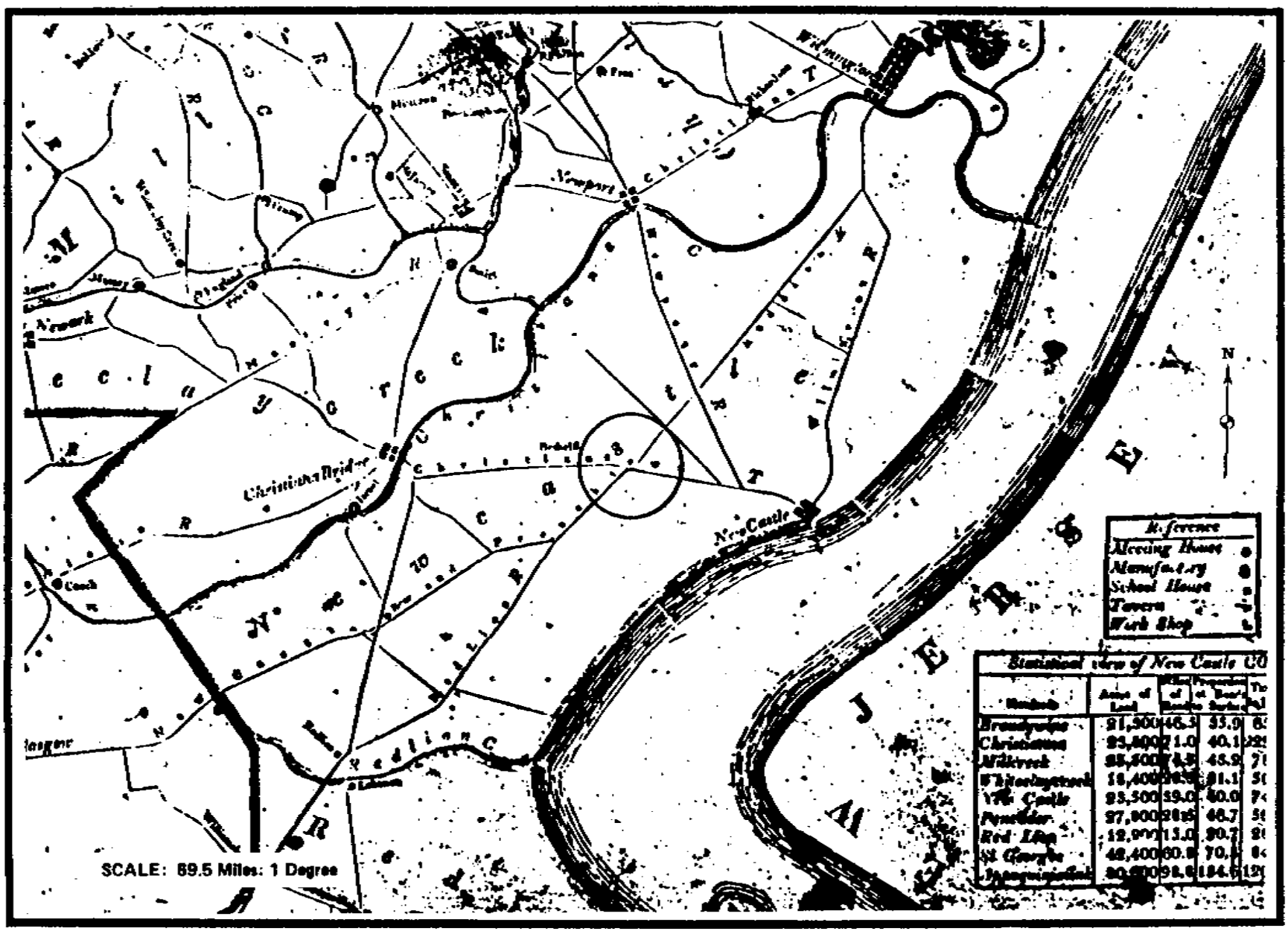

FIGURE 4: Hares Corner and Vicinity, 1820

SOURCE: Heald 1820

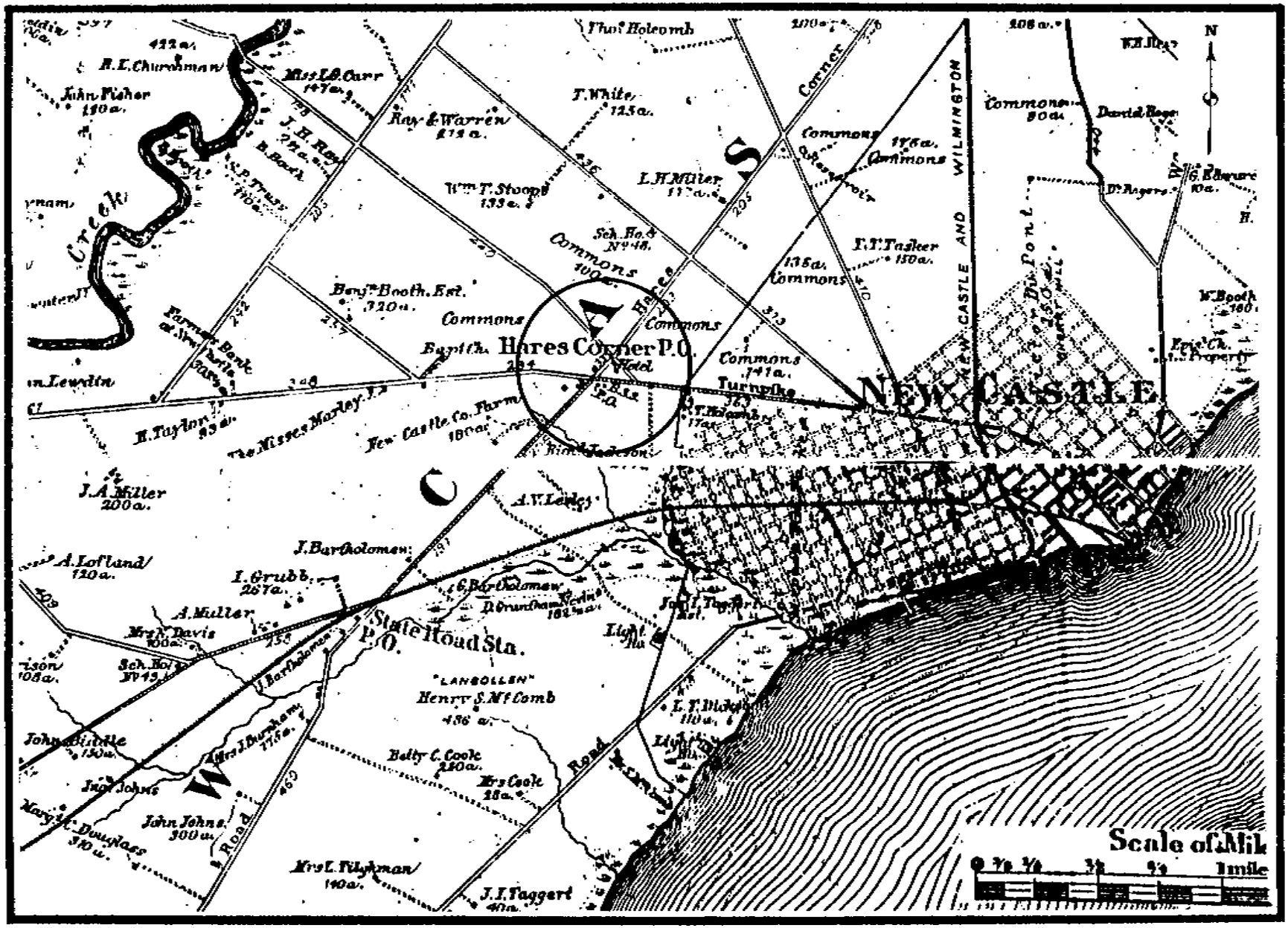

FIGURE 5: Hares Corner and Vicinity, 1881

SOURCE: Hopkins 1881

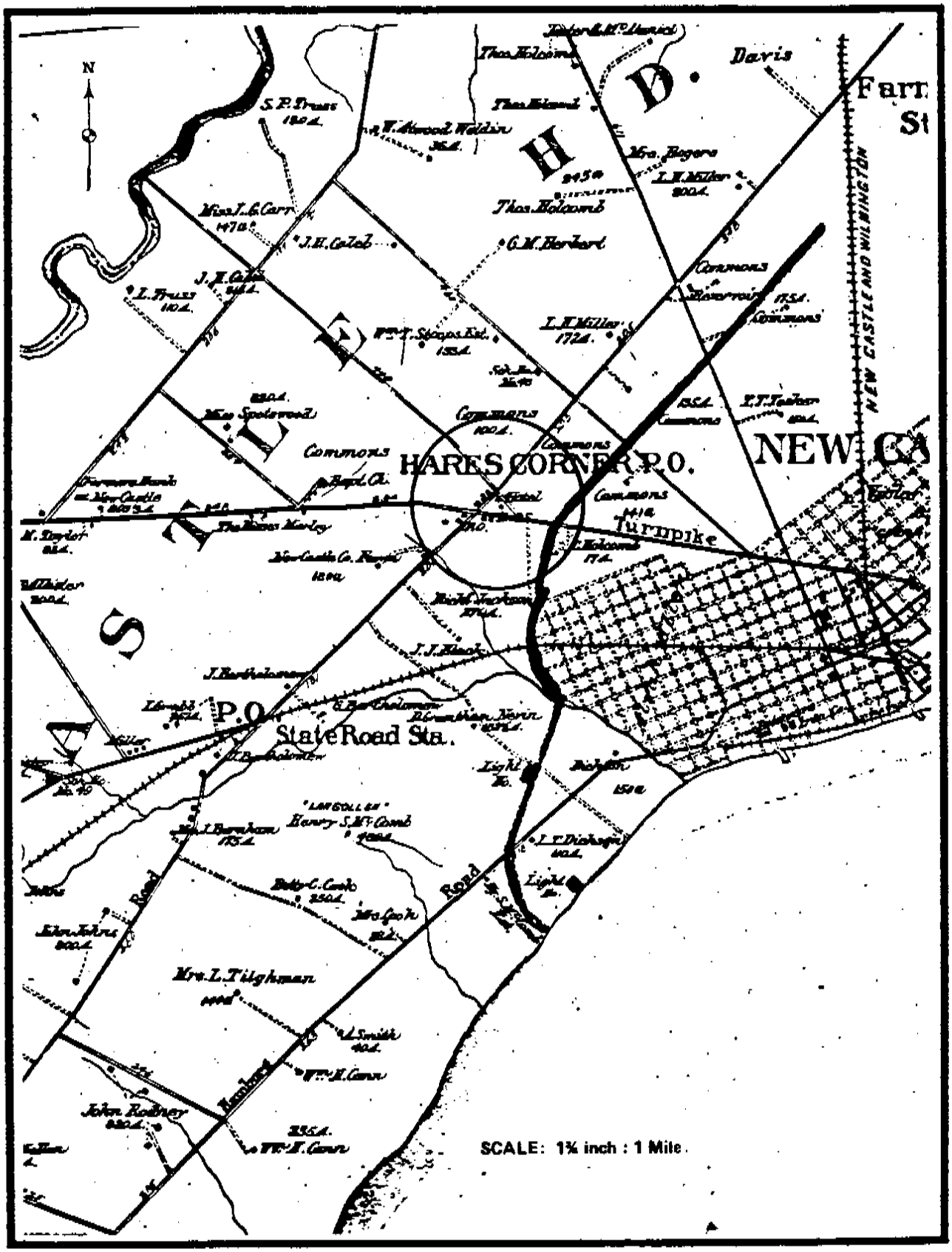

FIGURE 6: Hares Corner and Vicinity, 1893

SOURCE: Baist 1893

House".[17] The subscribers' justification for Quinn's request continued:

> The utility of well conducted Inns are [sic] obvious and in few situations would they be more so, than at so public a place as Clark's Corner, where so many roads meet and intersect and the place approved by law for holding the general election, We understand Mr. Quin [sic] has purchased his present residence and improved it with a view to keeping an orderly, comfortable and respectable public House of Entertainment and that his House shall maintain this character, has thus become his interest as well as his desire and we are satisfied that his establishment if license is granted him) will be accommodating and satisfactory to the traveller and of general public utility.

Quinn apparently occupied the property on a long term lease. In 1823, public sale of the lease occupied by John Quinn, "successor to Nicholas Quinn, dec'd," was advertised in The American Watchman of May 9, 1823. The notice described a property consisting of 100 acres of well-cultivated arable, woodland, and a "dwelling house and building, which for 20 years have been occupied as [a] Tavern, situate on Hare's Corner, 2 miles westward of New Castle where the Frenchtown Turnpike joins Buck

Road." Sharf's History of Delaware states that Hares Corners was the "oldest continuous tavern-stand" in New Castle Hundred. In 1820, according to Sharf, it was known as Quinn's Hotel, but soon thereafter, it was renamed the "Green Tree Inn."[18] The tavern was originally a two-story brick structure to which a third story was subsequently added. Later nineteenth-century documents indicate that the hotel complex included a barn and cattle yard.[19]

Although the earliest surviving tavern license associated with Quinn dates to 1818, the 1823 advertisement implies that Quinn had operated a tavern at this location since 1802 and that it contributed to the administrative significance of the intersection by serving as a polling place during the general elections. Further evidence of the administrative/political significance of the intersection was organization of a post office Hares Corner by the mid-nineteenth century.[20]

By 1850, the hotel (Plate 1) had been taken over by J.C. Morrison.[21] According to the deed records, Morrison did not own the land although the census records suggest that his adult sons may have worked rented property in the area. In 1850, Morrison described himself as a 67-year old "Hotel Keeper" who had been born in Ireland. His wife Maria was 57; she had been born in Pennsylvania. Three young men -- presumably his sons: John C., age 24; George W., age 21; and Robert, age 17 -- gave their occupations as "Farmer." Other residents of the Morrison household were Patrick Sayers, a 28-year old Irish laborer; Catherine McManus, a 19-year old woman from Ireland; and Isaac Backus, a 35-year old black laborer from Maryland.

PLATE 1: Hotel at Hares Corner, Looking Southeast. Undated [Early 20th Century] Provided by DELDOT

In addition to the hotel, the intersection contained a blacksmith's shop and wheelwright's shop. Southwest of town was the county poor farm and insane asylum. Throughout the nineteenth century, the hotel, blacksmith's and wheelwright's shops were owned by the same individuals, most of whom were absentee owners. The Lake and Beers map of 1860 shows "J. W. McCrone" at the northwest corner of the intersection. In 1841, William and George McCrone bought the property from John A. and Juliana Lockwood, who had bought it from the Read estate.[22]

The title chain then becomes tangled. It appears that George McCrone mortgaged his one-half interest in the property, which included both the hotel lot and the shops to Smith Sharpless of Chester County, Pennsylvania, in 1857.[24] The entire property was sold to Jesse Lane of Wilmington at a sheriff's sale in 1870.[25] Lane soon sold the property to Philip R. Clark and George W. Morison, who also went under, since the lots were again auctioned off to Emma Clark at a sheriff's sale in 1883.[26] By 1883, the lot south of the turnpike contained a two-story frame dwelling as well as the two shops.

In 1887, Edward Harman gained control of the hotel property as well as the dwelling at the northwest corner of the intersection, which he mortgaged to Alfred and Victor DuPont.[27] In the late 1890s, ownership of the two shops diverged, and between 1898 and 1977, when the lot that had contained the blacksmith's shop was bought by the present owner, Franchise Realty Interstate

Corporate of Illinois, the property changed hands eight times.[28] The former hotel lot is now owned by the Trustees of New Castle Commons.[29]

Because of the incidence of absentee ownership, relatively little is known of the nineteenth century occupation of the intersection in addition to the information contained in the maps, which has been verified by extensive deed research. Through the end of the century, there were a few dwellings, a hotel, two industrial sites (i.e., blacksmith, wheelwright), and a post office located at the cross roads. These provided services to the surrounding farms. Later in the nineteenth century, the intersection became the site of a popular cattle market, possibly held behind the hotel where there were cattle sheds. Also in the vicinity were important early nurseries and major market gardens.[30]

Based on the occupants of Walnut Cottage, some of the surrounding farms may have functioned more like gentleman's estates or rural retreats, rather than specifically agricultural units. Walnut Cottage or Walnut Hill was owner-occupied by 1860 by James Johns, a lawyer.[31] His household included his wife, three young children, and a domestic servant. Within the next ten years, he sold the 17-acre farm to Thomas Holcomb, a young farmer, whose family included his wife, infant daughter, and a domestic servant.[32]

The farm passed to Elizabeth Holcomb after Thomas died, and when she died, it went to her daughter Rebecca.[33] The estate

then contained a brick dwelling house, frame "tenant house" and a frame barn; her personal property was valued at $5173.72 and included furniture and furnishings, silverware, china, glass, and jewelry.[34] Rebecca Holcomb held on to the property until she died in 1946 but appears to have maintained a residence at #1709 Lanier Place, Washington, D.C. She may have used the farm as a country place as her will itemized several family heirlooms (e.g., Chippendale chairs) in the dwelling.[35] Other personal effects included Lowestoft china (circa 1800), several pieces of apparently ornate jewelry (e.g., emerald and diamond ring, seed pearl tiara) and various securities (General Motors, U.S. Steel, DuPont, war bonds).

Into the first decades of the twentieth century, the Hares Corner landscape remained essentially unchanged (Figure 6). Since the 1930s, however, the intersection has been intensively developed for various commercial uses. It is adjacent to the airport as well as an industrial park. In the vicinity are also a shopping center and farmers market.

The incorporation of Route 13 into the DuPont Highway in the 1920s, which provided a long-needed efficient connection between northern and southern parts of Delaware, initiated the process whereby Hares Corner, until then retaining its character as a crossroads hamlet, was gradually transformed into an intensively developed, modern-day intersection. The initial paving of U.S. 13 in 1920, followed by its widening in 1927-28, had little effect upon the frame houses and associated outbuildings then located in

the northwest, southwest and southeast quadrants of the intersection, nor on the old brick hotel (although A. Ingram's blacksmith shop, present in 1920, was no longer present (nor needed) by 1927). By 1933, however, a service station and gas pumps had replaced the residental complex in the southeast quadrant, and that year, the dualization of Route 13 resulted in demolition of the hotel. By 1944, the only buildings present at the intersection were a frame garage (northwest quadrant) and a service station located in the southwest quadrant. Subsequent commercial and industrial development, fostered both by proximity to the highway and to the Wilmington airport, occasioned construction and utility placement on a scale such that the undisturbed existence of historic period resources is extremely unlikely (Figure 7).

HARES CORNER AND THE DELAWARE COMPREHENSIVE HISTORIC PRESERVATION PLAN

Data collected during this project indicate that the project area historically functioned as one of the "corners" that have been characterized as "ubiquitous" in north-central Delaware (see for example, modern U.S.G.S maps of the state and Custer's overview of historic archaeological resources for the proposed U.S. 13 Corridor, Delaware Department of Transportation Archaeological Series 40). The emergence of "corners" in the nineteenth century appears to have been a phenomenon associated with transportation developments, evidenced by their location at the intersections of primary and/or secondary roads. The historical development of

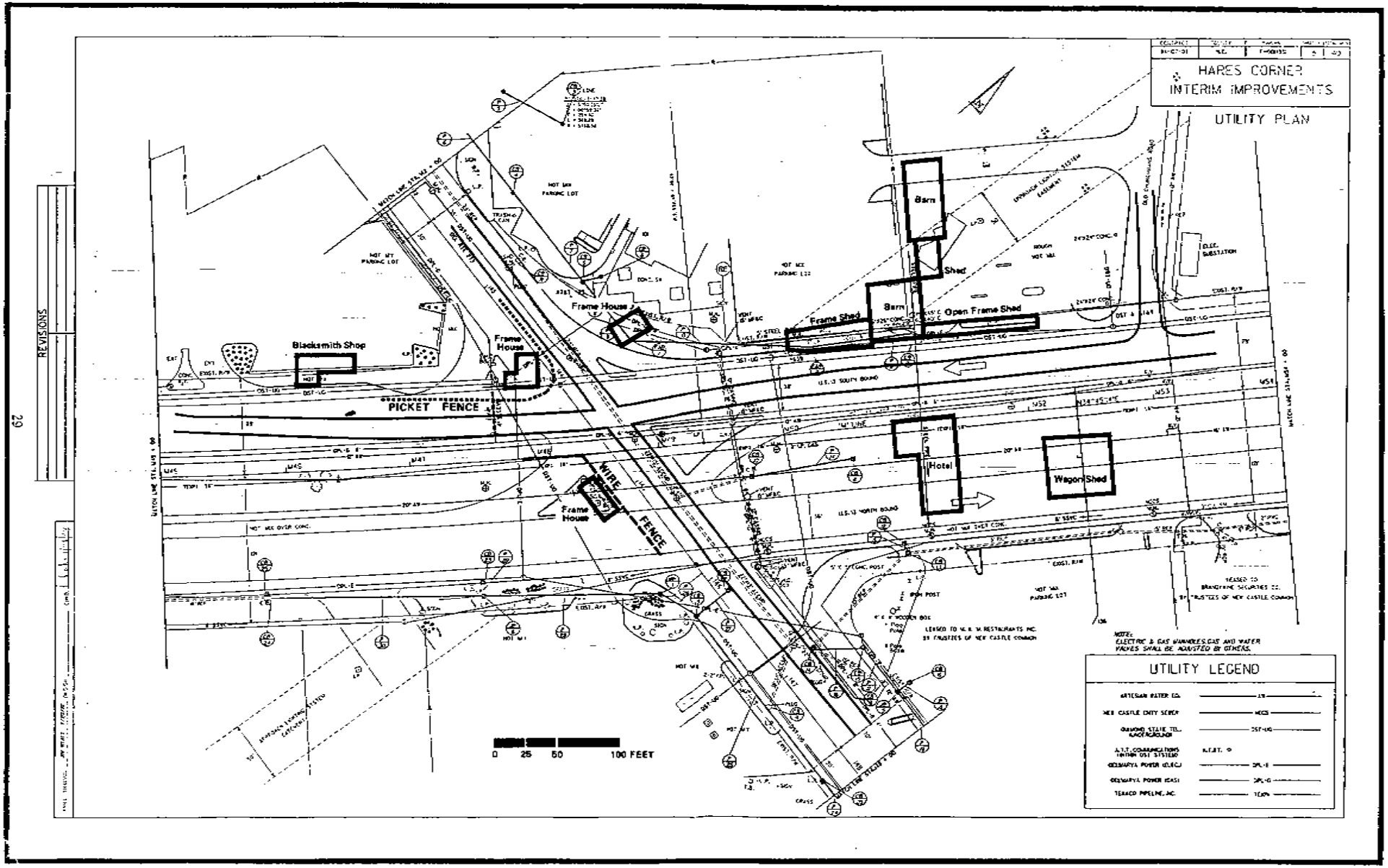

FIGURE 7: Hares Corner Intersection, Showing Roadways and Buildings as of 1920 Superimposed Upon 1987 Plan of Intersection with Utilities.

SOURCE: DELDOT

Hares Corner itself illustrates themes subsumed into three historic contexts defined in the state plan for the Upper Peninsula zone: Landscape, 1770-1830; Landscape, 1830-1880; and Landscape, 1880-1940 (Herman et al. 1986:57, 60, 66).

Transportation provided the impetus for establishment of the tavern, the first structure after the roads themselves to be built at this location. The resulting hamlet was sustained by the needs and interests of the surrounding agrarian community. Hares Corner was a polling place for general elections, had a post office, and its blacksmith and wheelwright shops provided services attractive to local farmers and travellers on the turnpike. As such it resembled other crossroads hamlets such as Blackbird Village (U.S. 13 and Salem Church Road), which in addition to a hotel, post office and store, had a church; and Mermaid (Route 7 in Mill Creek Hundred), which served as a polling place and post office as well as offering the services of a tavern, blacksmith and wheelwright.

Unplanned communities such as these helped create a sense of place for residents of areas beyond major population and commerical centers. Their names often derived from those of the hotel or tavern (Mermaid, Red Lion, Clark, Haire). As such, the names contributed a localized identity that has in many instances remained even though the physical fabric of the "corners" has not. Although twentieth-century improvements to U.S. 13 and SR 273 have obscured the physical identity of the earlier Hares Corner community, the continued use and upgrading of the older

route testify to its importance as a means of integrating older, outlying communities into the urbanized, sub-regional identity emanating from Wilmington.