

2.0 HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Delaware's historic past, comprising over three and one-half centuries, has been compartmentalized into seven temporal study units that form the basis of a chronological framework for the investigation of the state's historic resources:

- Exploration and Frontier Settlement (1630-1730)
- Intensified and Durable Occupation (1730-1770)
- Early Industrialization (1770-1830)
- Industrialization and Early Urbanization (1830-1880)
- Urbanization and Suburbanization (1880-1940)
- Suburbanization and Early Ex-urbanization (1940-1960)
- The Modern Period (1960-present day)

A complete historical context organized within these study units for Kent County may be found in the previous investigations noted in the Introduction chapter of this report (McVarish et al. 2005; Catts et al. 2004). Rather than repeat all of the information here, this section focuses on the history of Milford.

Milford is a small city located in Kent and Sussex counties, with the Mispillion River serving as the county boundary. The area north of the river is within Kent County, including the project area, and Sussex County is south of the Mispillion River. The city is located within Milford Hundred, Kent County, and Cedar Creek Hundred, Sussex County, between Dover and Georgetown. The lands along the navigable Mispillion River were the earliest granted in the area. Early patents in the area include a 2,000-acre tract called "Saw Mill Range," patented in 1680 to Henry Bowman (the site of North Milford today), and tracts in Cedar Neck in 1676 and Slaughter Neck in 1677 (Hurley 1962:9; Kenton 2001:7).

Waterways were important to transportation and commerce as early roads were limited in number and of poor condition. The few existing roads led to landings on rivers and the Delaware Bay where produce and goods were shipped by cheaper and more efficient water transport. The Delaware River and Bay served as a major focus of water transportation because the majority of Delaware's streams flow eastward to these bodies. For this reason, the large port city of Philadelphia, and to a lesser extent Wilmington and New Castle, exerted major commercial influence on the Delaware counties throughout the eighteenth century and later. Wilmington, New Castle, and Lewes were also ports for ocean-going vessels involved in export trade. Overland transport was limited to a few major roads, such as the eighteenth century post road connecting Philadelphia-Wilmington-New Castle-Odessa-Middletown-Dover-Lewes with a western branch at Milford linking it to the Chesapeake Bay.

In an attempt to improve the roads in the Lower Counties, the General Assembly in 1752 and again in 1761 called for the repair of the "King's Road" between the New Castle-Kent County border and Lewes which was present in the 1680s. The eighteenth-century laws called for the road to be 40 feet wide with all but ten feet cleared. The King's Highway passed through the village of Milford, crossing the Mispillion River at the headwaters of Silver Lake (Kenton 2001:9). This road is the predecessor to the current US 1, west of the project area.

Milford was founded in 1787 by Joseph Oliver at the confluence of the Mispillion River, Bowman's Branch and Clark's Branch. The village grew from a landing site and later included a dam and grist mill along the Mispillion River. The original part of Milford, "old town" or North Milford, was located along the north side of the Mispillion, within Kent County. Milford obtained a town charter in 1807 (Kenton 2001:7). Settlement on the south side of the Mispillion River, in Sussex County, did not occur extensively

until after 1820 and the expansion of Milford's shipbuilding industry. The vessels built in Milford were mostly used in local trade in the Delaware Bay region (Del Sordo 1982:8-2). The arrival of the Junction and Breakwater Railroad in 1859, connecting Milford to Harrington and the Delaware Railroad, opened new markets for area agricultural produce and spurred further development in Milford. Milford's pre-Civil War industry included a woolen mill, foundries and machine shops, fruit drying plants and canneries, and a phosphate factory (Del Sordo 1982:8-3).

Throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the agrarian Delmarva Peninsula was considered an area of production and transshipment between the Chesapeake Bay markets (Annapolis and Baltimore) and the Delaware River and Bay markets (Philadelphia and New York). As local markets prospered, so too did the hamlets and other unplanned towns that had sprung up at crossroads and around taverns, mills, and landings. Landings, as well as towns and hamlets in the project area, formed, grew, and sometimes declined according to local and regional economic conditions.

The 1868 Beers *Delaware State Atlas* shows NE Front and NE Tenth Streets in their current alignment. These roads met northeast of the project area at New Wharf Landing on the Mispillion River. Scattered buildings were shown along the roads and were denoted as owned and/or occupied by the Potter Est., W. N. W. Dorsey, S. Paister, J. Davis, and C. Fleetwood (Figure 3).

Within the APE of the current project area is a property owned by the Potter Estate (on the southeast side of NE Front Street), and W. N. W. Dorsey (set back from the southeast side of NE Front Street, closer to the Mispillion River) (Beers 1868) (Figure 3).

Throughout the nineteenth century, and into the twentieth, agriculture in Delaware continued to focus on perishable products with a decrease in staples. The planting and harvesting of more diverse crops, including tomatoes, apples, potatoes, and other garden produce increased in response to the demands of markets in Philadelphia, Wilmington, Baltimore, and other cities. The number of acres cultivated in Kent County rose from approximately 283,000 acres in 1850 to 338,000 acres by 1900. Poultry and dairy production also increased significantly in this period, particularly in Kent and Sussex counties. Concurrent with the rise in importance of truck crops and dairy products in the late nineteenth century was the improvement of transportation throughout the state. The completion of the Delaware Railroad trunk line through to Seaford in 1856 encouraged the production of such goods by providing quick and cheap access to regional markets. Prior to the Delaware Railroad, steamboats and other water craft provided areas of Kent County with cheap and efficient transportation.

Prior to 1832 and the planting of the state's first commercial peach orchard, Delaware's agricultural products were primarily grains. Fruit and vegetable crops were of lesser importance. However from the 1830s to the 1870s, Delaware was the center for peach production in the eastern United States. Rich soil, favorable climate and rainfall, excellent transportation facilities, and strategic locations near large markets made peach production a lucrative enterprise. The peach industry was hindered in Kent and Sussex counties until the 1850s due to transportation limitations. Early attempts there failed because producers could not move fruit to market economically. Rail service into the area and the absence of the peach blight in the southern counties made peach production profitable into the 1870s. In the 1880s, Milford was the center of Delaware's peach industry, with an estimated 500,000 peach trees in the vicinity and over 100 fruit drying operations (Del Sordo 1982:8-4). By the end of the "peach boom," massive harvests were being shipped by rail and steamship lines to New York where the produce was readied for resale to the northern states. The spread of a disease known as the "Yellows" in the early twentieth century devastated orchards throughout the state and brought an end to the boom. However, until the peach blight curtailed production, the peach industry proved profitable for a large number of peach growers, as well as a variety of support industries (Hancock 1932; 1947).

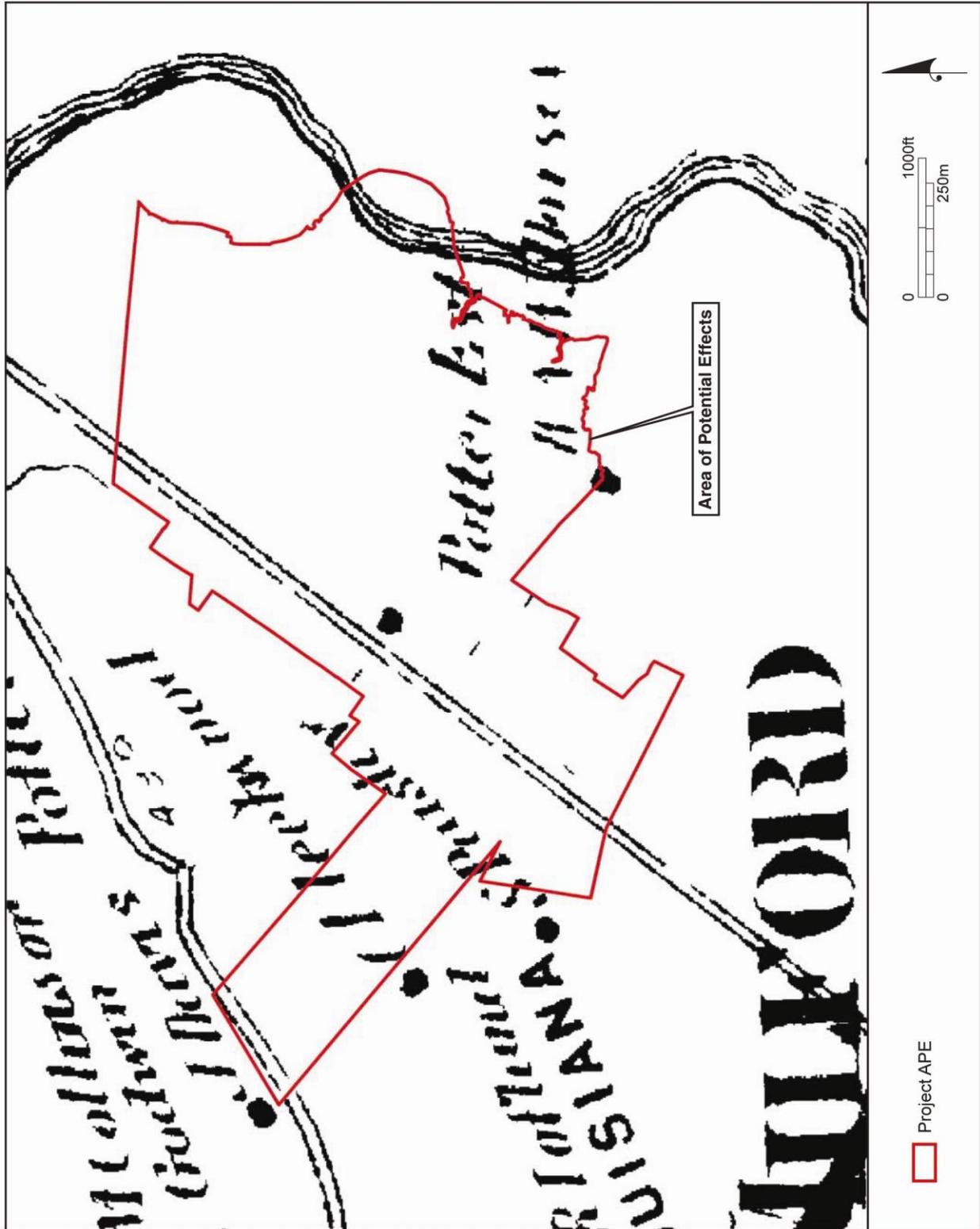


Figure 3. Project APE overlaid on 1868 Beers atlas (Beers 1868).

After the Civil War, Milford was regarded as one of the largest and most active towns in Delaware, competing for the honor of second largest town with Smyrna. The town benefited from its excellent water and rail connections that permitted regional farming and timber production. By 1875, Milford businesses included grist, saw, and flour mills; two newspapers; several fruit evaporators; and two machine shops, schools, churches, and thriving businesses (Hancock 1976:64). Its shipyards were mostly located along the south bank of the Mispillion River and included the Carlisle, Scribner, Deputy, and Lank & Son yards.

The agricultural trends identified in the late nineteenth century continued relatively unchanged well into the twentieth century. Corn and wheat declined in importance due to competition from the western states. By 1880, alfalfa, legumes, and truck crops were increasing in importance, and by the mid-twentieth century had become more profitable than wheat. Dover was still the largest city in Kent County, although smaller than Wilmington and Newark.

In 1880, Milford was identified as the "most considerable point in the state south of Wilmington (Hancock 1976:64). With a population of 3,719 Milford was the fourth largest community in Delaware by the end of the period (Eckman et al. 1938:208). In 1900 Milford was reputedly growing faster than any other community in Kent County and was said to be progressive in its outlook (Hancock 1976:64). While Milford had expanded to the south side of the river (South Milford) into Sussex County in 1819 (Eckman et al. 1938:209) that portion of the town was not incorporated until 1887 (Davis, Bowen, & Friedel, Inc. 2003:17).

The late nineteenth century, especially 1850-1890, was a boom time for Milford's shipbuilding industry (Davis, Bowen, & Friedel, Inc. 2003:16). Most of the ships built at that time were two and three-masted schooners, which were used for coastal shipping and trade (Emory 1997; Scharf 1888:1190). The portion of Milford situated in Sussex County, known as South Milford, especially became known as a shipbuilding area. By the start of the twentieth century over 400 wooden schooners and sloops were constructed along the Mispillion (Hancock 1976:63).

By 1900, over 50 percent of all farmers in Delaware were tenants or sharecroppers. Tenancy remained a dominant but locally variable farming practice into the first half of the twentieth century in Kent and Sussex counties. For example, in 1935 approximately 43 percent of Kent farms were tenanted compared to about 32 percent of Sussex farms (Bausman 1940:42; Bausman 1941:31). Conversely, owner-occupied farms were more common in Sussex County than in Kent. The vast majority of rural residents within the project area on the eve of World War II were native Delawareans, and in most cases were farming within the county where they were raised (Bausman 1941:46). This characteristic of the project area has been steadily declining as large numbers of people from other parts of the country relocate to Kent.

Twentieth-century growth in Milford was largely influenced by the construction of the Coleman du Pont Highway (now US Routes 13 and 113), built through the city in the early twentieth century as part of the Good Roads Movement (Lichtenstein Consulting Engineers 2000:9). The highway system allowed farmers to get produce to urban areas such as Wilmington and Philadelphia (and their expanding suburbs) far easier than the more restrictive railroad system. Sussex and Kent county farmers adjusted their agricultural produce to meet the needs of the urban market, for example, shifting to broiler production and liquid milk production (Munroe 1984:203). These roads also became the focus of new residential and commercial development, rather than the earlier railroad- and waterway-centered development.

The 1918 and 1938 USGS topographic maps show the project area with the same road pattern as shown in the 1868 atlas. A few more dwellings have been built along NE Front Street, but the area remains sparsely developed (Figure 4). Aerial photographs of the area taken in 1937 show mostly cultivated fields

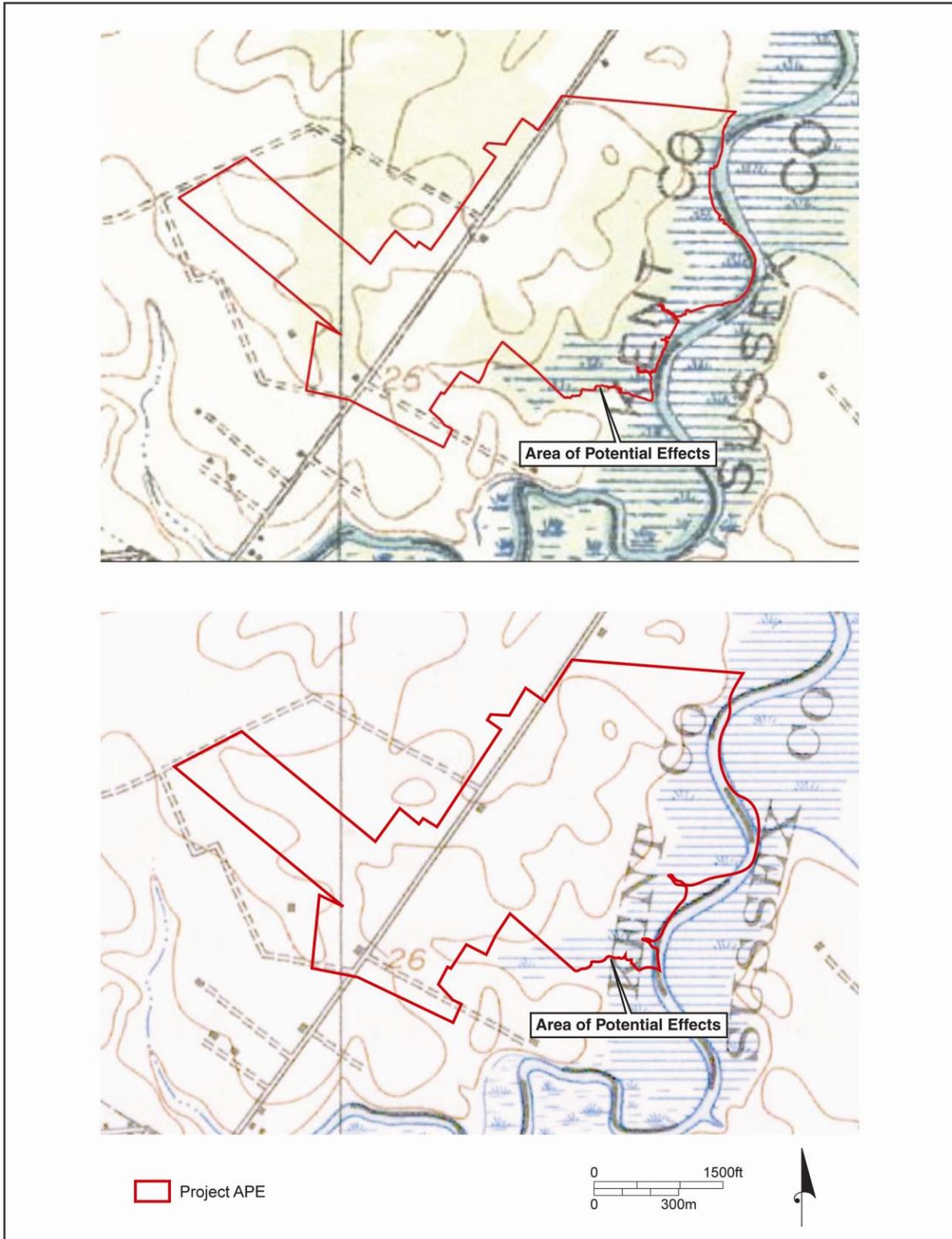


Figure 4. Project APE overlaid on 1918 and 1938 topographic quadrangles (USGS).

in the project area, with swaths of woodland along the Mispillion River and in the north central part of the project area. The current parcel boundaries largely follow the field boundaries shown in these photographs (Figure 5).

Mapping from 1944 shows largely the same development pattern as depicted in 1918, 1937, and 1938. There are a few buildings shown along NE Front Street. The wooded areas shown in the 1937 photographs are also shown on the 1944 map (Figure 6). The topographic map from a decade later and aerial photographs from 1957 and 1961 show few changes (Figures 6, 7, and 8).

The construction of the Route 1 Coastal Highway in the early 1970s brought the greatest change in the project area's development, as shown in the 1982 photorevisions to the 1954 topographic map (Figure 6).

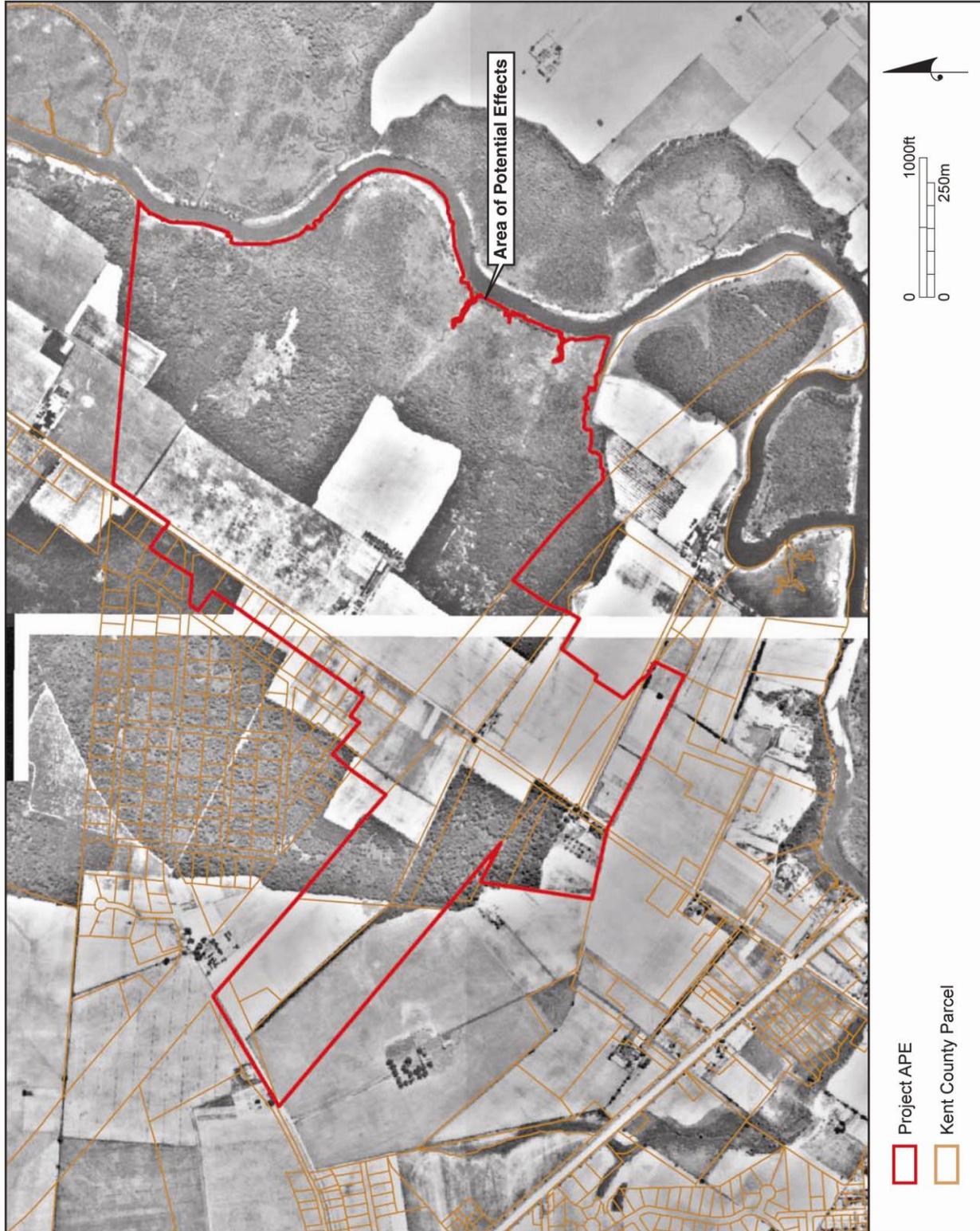


Figure 5. Project APE overlaid on 1937 aerial photograph (Delaware Datamil 1937).

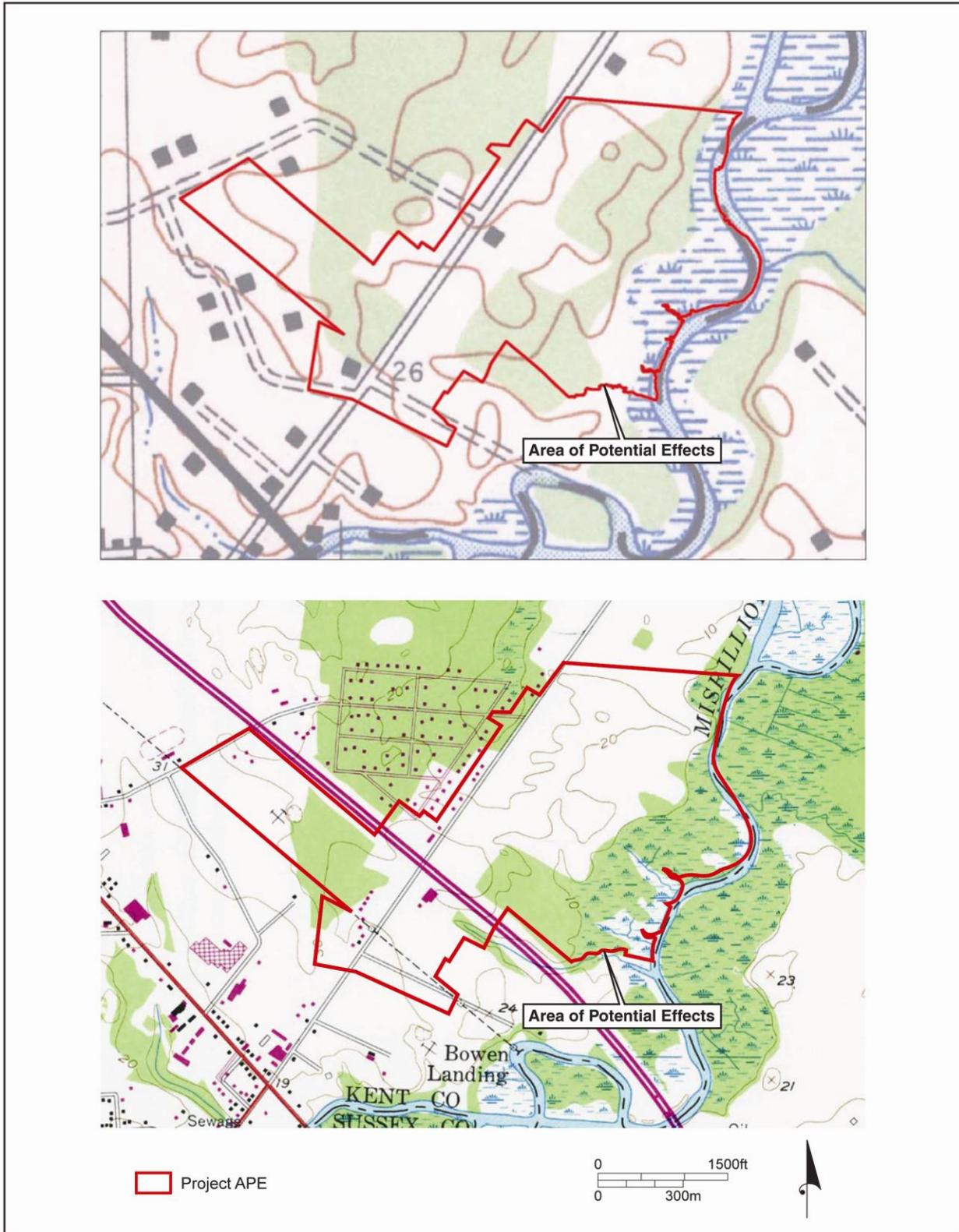


Figure 6. Project APE overlaid on 1944 and 1954 (photorevised 1982) topographic quadrangles (USGS).

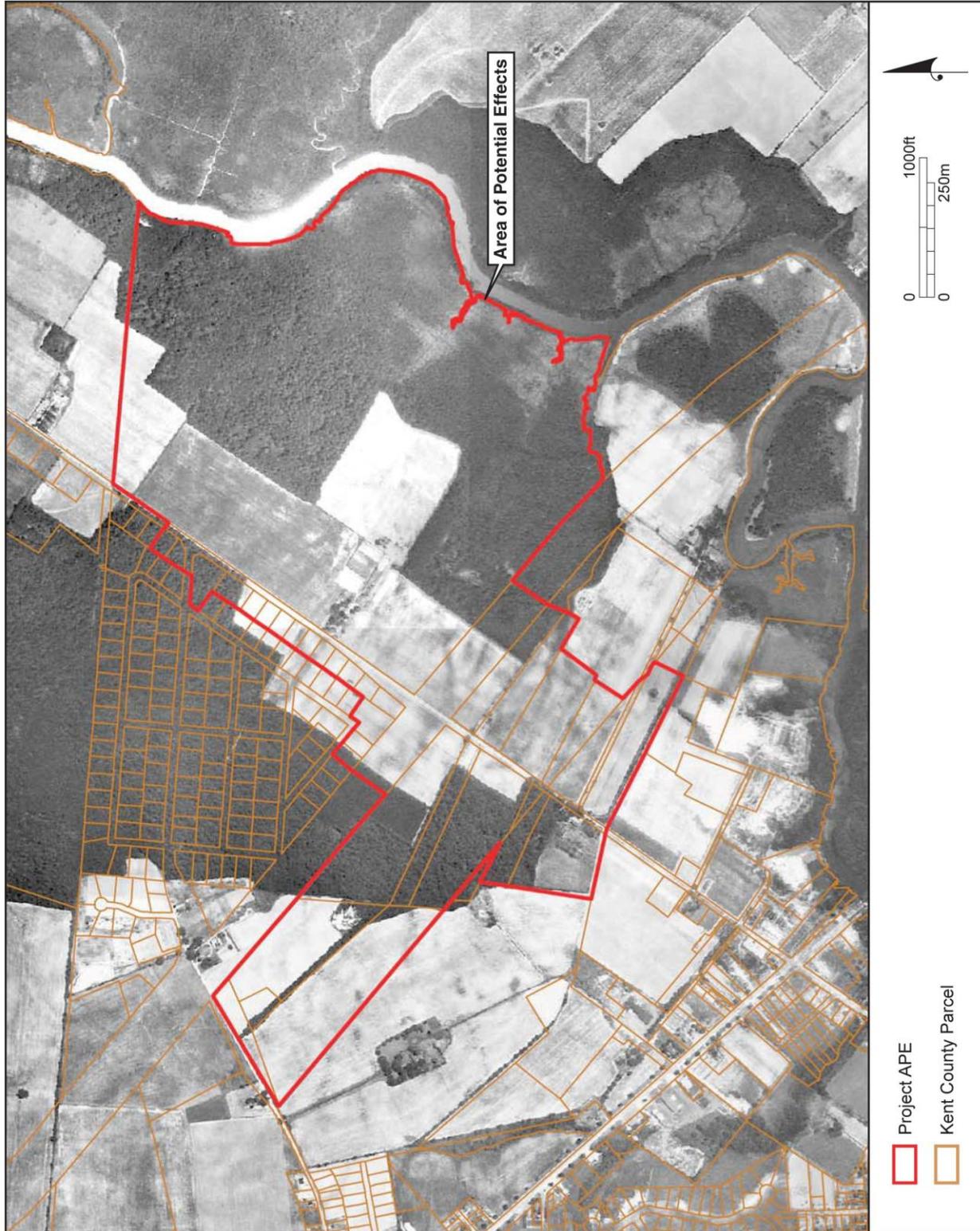


Figure 7. Project APE overlaid on 1957 aerial photograph (Delaware Datamil 1957).

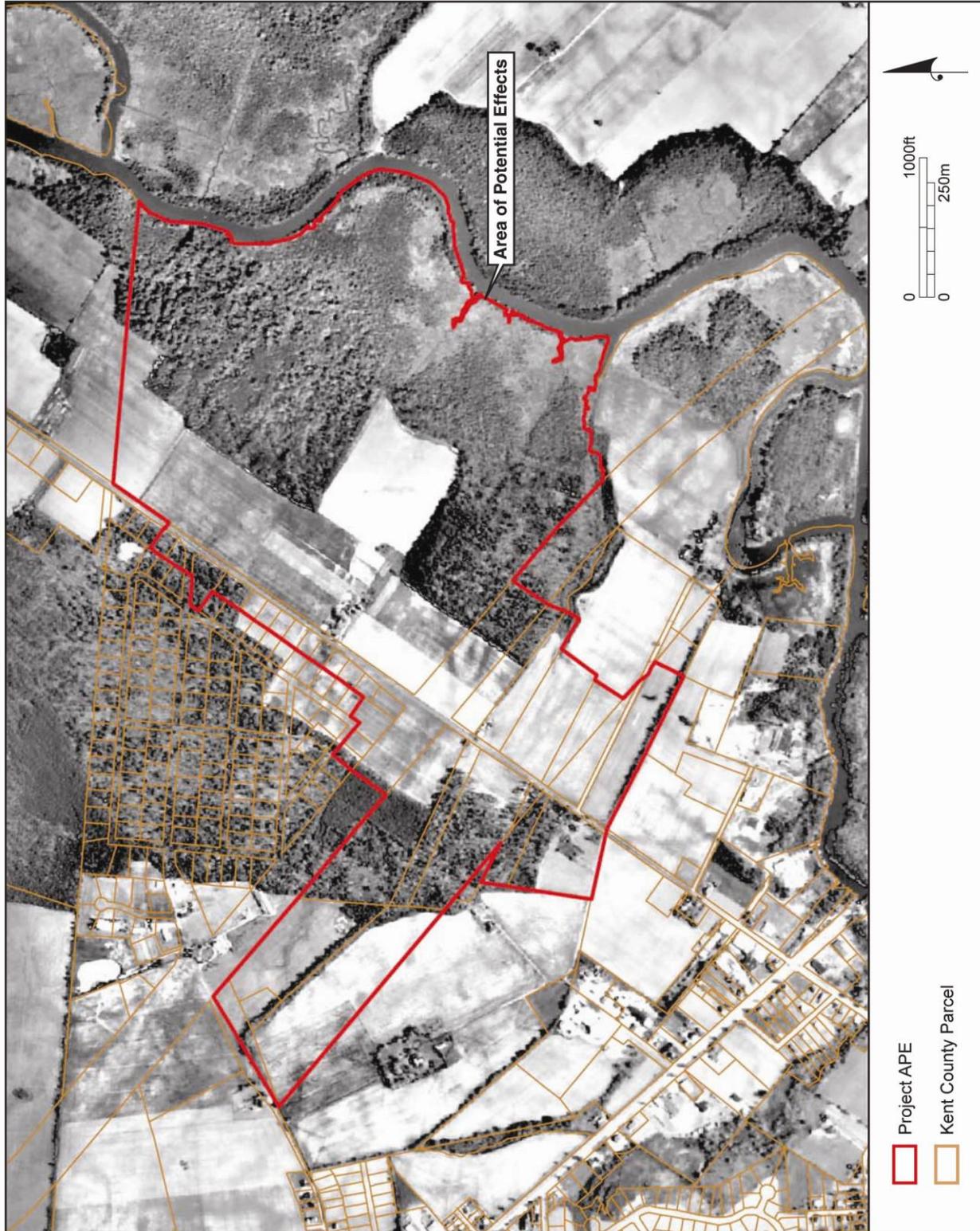


Figure 8. Project APE overlaid on 1961 aerial photograph (Delaware Datamil 1961).