

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 Sussex County may be found in McVarish et al. (2005, 2006). Rather than repeat all of the information here, this section focuses on the history of the town of Millsboro.

As noted by Sussex County historian, Richard B. Carter, Millsboro's origin was an accident of geography (Carter n.d.). It is located at the first point inland on the Indian River narrow enough to allow construction of an earthen dam and bridge using late eighteenth-century technology. In 1792, Elisha Dickerson dammed the headwaters of the Indian River at a point known as Rock Hole. Most early colonial residents were second or third generation residents of the Maryland or Virginia Eastern Shore (Institute for Public Administration [IPA] 2004:60).

Among the early industrial enterprises that gave their name to the community were large grist and saw mills owned by Dickerson. These mills were only two of the more than 15 grist and saw mills that existed within a four-mile radius of Millsboro in the early nineteenth century. The community officially became known as "Millsborough" in 1809, and during this same year the area's first postal service was started. Originally, this name applied only to the area on the northeastern side of the river where Dickerson's gristmill was located. The community on the southwestern side of the river was known as Washington, in honor of the Revolutionary hero and former first President, until 1837. In that year, the two villages joined (IPA 2004:60; Murray 2007:2, 15).

A prominent early industry of the community was Millsborough Furnace, a blast furnace that William D. Waples established in 1817 to process bog ore. This furnace, which operated until 1936, supplied iron to an adjacent foundry. This foundry became best known for providing iron pipe for the Croton Water Works of New York City, as well as for Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia. The foundry operated until 1879 relying on imported bog iron in its last years (Eckman et al. 1938:387).

By 1822, as seen on plans for a road alignment submitted that year, the only roads in Millsboro were current-day Main Street (labeled "Road from Capt'n Benjamin ... Burtons Store to Washington Del."), Washington Street (unlabeled), and State Street to the west of Main Street (labeled "Road from Benjamin Burtons Mills to Washington). No buildings are depicted on any of these roads (Sussex County Road Papers 1822). State Street to the east of Main Street is shown on a road plan submitted in 1842, at which time the town was labeled "Washington," and there were several buildings shown along State Street. The road led from Main Street (labeled "County Road to Georgetown over Head of Indian River and Doe bridge") toward the east. In 1868 "Millsborough" was depicted on the Beers Atlas (Figure 3), showing a dense downtown at the crossroads of State, Main, and Washington Streets. Main,

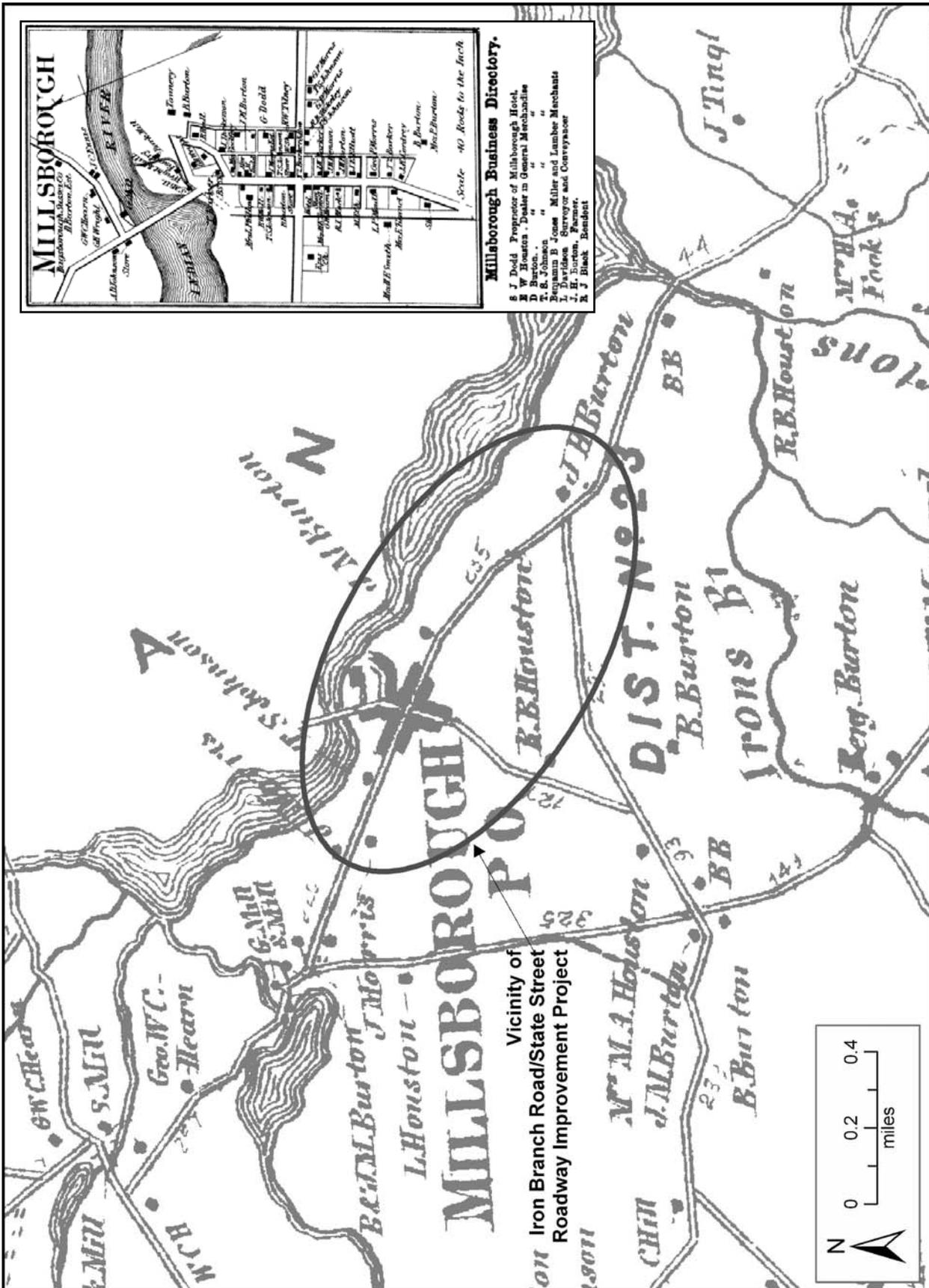


Figure 3. Millsboro as illustrated in the 1868 Beers atlas (main map, Dagsboro Hundred; inset from Georgetown Hundred).

Washington, and State Streets are the main thoroughfares south of the Indian River. Central and Morris Streets are depicted as secondary roadways, lying north-south, parallel and east of Main Street.

Millsboro had always been a market center for the outlying area because of its proximity to the river, and in the years following the Civil War the railroad came through town, boosting the growth of the area (Carter n.d.). The line was the Breakwater & Frankford Railroad, which reached south all the way to Selbyville by 1872. It connected to the Junction and Breakwater Railroad at Georgetown, which, completed in 1869, curved eastward toward Lewes on the south side of Georgetown. Charles C. Stockley served as president of the Breakwater & Frankford before he became governor of Delaware. The two railroads were consolidated, along with the Frankford and Worcester, as the Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia Railroad in 1882 (*New York Times* 1882; Scharf 1888). By the turn of the century, the line was part of the Philadelphia, Wilmington, and Baltimore Railroad, which eventually became part of the Pennsylvania Railroad. The construction of the railroad through Millsboro in the 1870s opened new markets for Sussex County and made possible the growth and diversification of an important agricultural industry. Fruits and vegetables became an important facet of the agricultural economy and were transported directly to distant markets in Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York or shipped to canneries and evaporators for processing within Delaware (Edmonson 1976:2).

On March 9, 1893, the formal name “Millsboro” (dropping the “ough”) was adopted, and the Town of Millsboro was incorporated. Over the next seventy years, the town would be expanded and re-incorporated three times, in 1908-1909, 1922-1923, and 1963 (Hudson 1975:1-2).

In the 1890s two large lumber mills opened, both headed by members of the Houston family, prominent local farmers. The company that eventually prevailed was the Houston-White Company, whose managing partner was William J.P. White (Carter n.d.). The Houston-White Company was the community’s most important twentieth-century industry, and was one of Delmarva’s largest manufacturers of baskets and other containers for fruits and vegetables. Great gum logs were “cooked” in tanks and veneer peeled from them on heavy lathes. The basket industry nearly exhausted the state’s supply of gum timber, and most of it came from Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina (Eckman et al. 1938:387). The company offered a variety of wooden produce containers including quart baskets, trays, and crates for berries, 5/8 and 1/2 bushel baskets for larger fruit and vegetables, and precut boxes in bundles. Transportation had a key role in the company’s successful development; shipment of timber and finished products to and from Millsboro was aided by the Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore Railroad, which ran beside the mill (Edmonson 1976:4). Since the early 1930s, the leading agricultural product of the Millsboro area has been the broiler. The leading local poultry producer was Townsend’s Inc. (IPA 2004:61).

By the turn of the century, the Town of Millsboro had progressed with “modern” infrastructure. Gasoline street lamps were installed throughout parts of town by 1908 (primarily at the main intersections). Early streets that had previously been constructed of dust, mud, or ice (depending on the season) were repaired with oyster shells or coal dust. By 1913, the main thoroughfares were paved. The side streets remained covered in shells or dust, but were widened so that “...two double horse teams could pass comfortably...” (Hudson 1975: 3; Murray 2007:15). Mapping of the local area from 1917 (Figure 4) illustrates a cluster of development along the railroad line. Significant development also flanks Main, Washington, State, Union, Central, Jones, and parts of Old Landing roadways. The town’s municipal boundaries are depicted, noted within a hexagon.

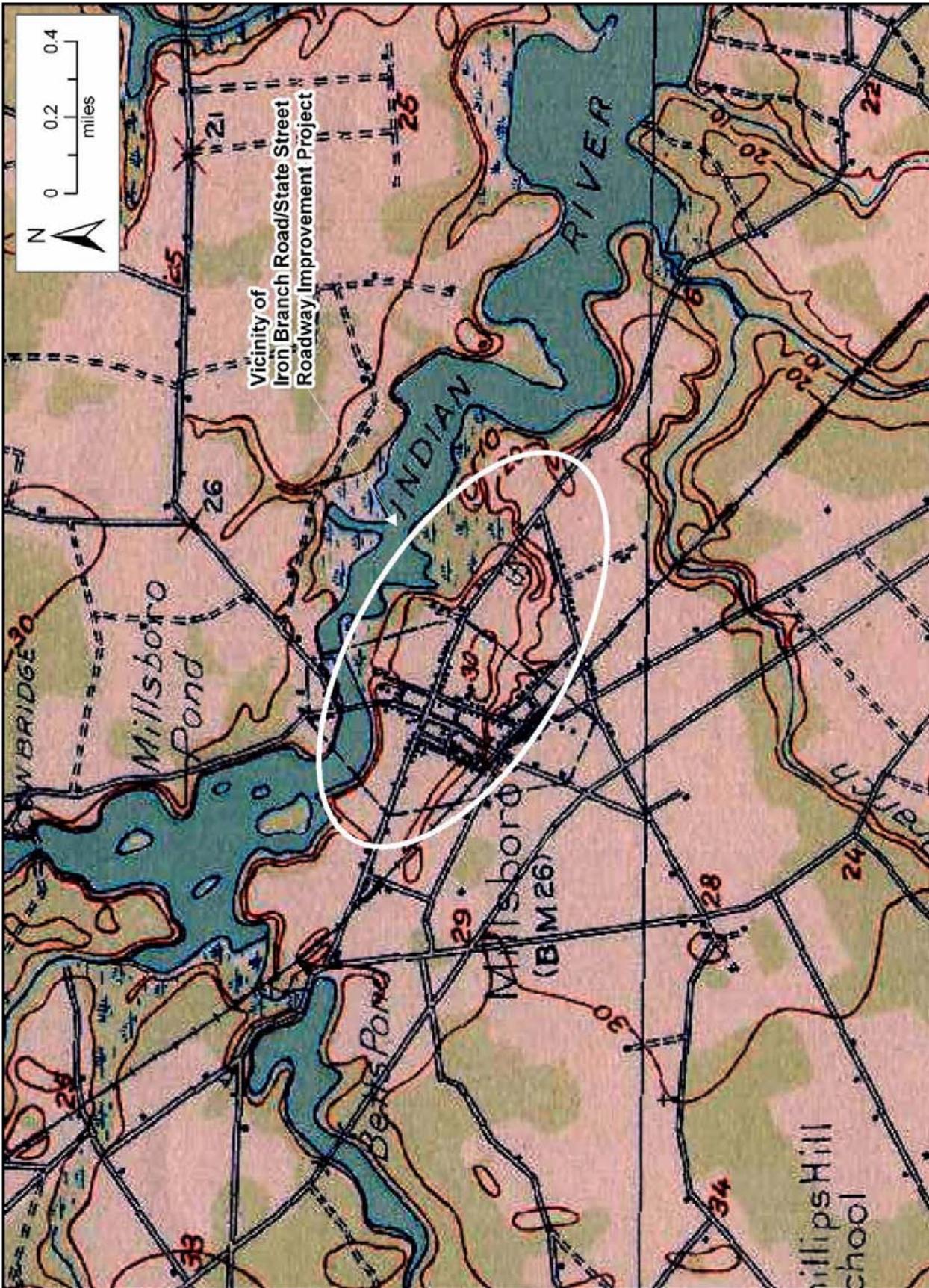


Figure 4. Millsboro and vicinity in 1917 (USGS, Millsboro quadrangle).

Between the 1920s-1930s more improvements were made around town. Main Street was paved in concrete, and by the early 1930s the side streets were also paved. In 1931 the State Highway Department paved State Street from Main Street eastward to near the current location of River Road (State Highway Department 1931). Cement sidewalks existed in certain areas of town as early as 1921. By 1922, the street lamps were converted to an electric system. A new high school was built at the eastern end of State Street in 1928 (Hudson 1975:3; Murray 1987:23, 2007:15). A historic aerial of the area taken in 1937 clearly shows the dense development throughout town (Figure 5). According to the 1938 WPA guide to Delaware,

Millsboro....the capital of the Christmas holly industry and one of the most important shipping centers for holly wreaths in the United States. The town is also a distributing point for hundreds of carloads of poultry feed and coal for the broiler chicken industry....Here are manufactured crates, baskets and other containers for berries, fruits, and vegetables that are shipped by truck and train from Millsboro and other points in Delaware and Maryland. A tomato cannery, a water-power flour-and-feed mill, and a hatchery add to the activity of this little but important place. (Eckman et al. 1938:385)

Over the last several decades, the Town of Millsboro has continued to grow. In 1960, the population was 536 people (IPA 2004:10). Fifteen years later, in 1975, the population had grown to 1,250, and the town limits contained approximately 840 acres. This same year, the Town Commission began preparations for the purchase of the water rights, pond bottom, and several small islands in Millsboro Pond. Council approved the acquisitions, giving the community utilization of these resources for recreational purposes and fresh water supply (Hudson 1975:2). In the year 2000, the population of Millsboro had grown to 2,360. Among the major industries of the area are Mountaire, Inc., Vlastic Foods, Inc., and the veterinary research and development companies of Intervet and Schering-Plough. All First Bank uses the old National Cash Register plant as the source of its credit card operations (IPA 2004:16, 61).



Figure 5. Project APE overlaid on 1937 aerial photograph.