5. Development of the Pleasanton Tract

In 1818, John Pleasanton bought 286 acres in Dover Hundred from heirs of the wealthy Loockerman family. The property had been described in 1804 as containing only a one-story weatherboarded log dwelling and "old" outbuildings. It clearly was not a prosperous farm.

The tract had never benefitted from resident ownership. During most of the eighteenth century, it belonged to three generations of the Loockerman family, whose home place was the present Loockerman Hall on the nearby Delaware State College campus.

East of the river, where the former Loockerman mansion still stands, farmland was high, flat, and well drained. West of the river, in the project area, much of the acreage was freshwater wetlands, producing little more than hardwood timber and scattered subsistence plots for tenants. In 1796, only 20% of the land was cultivated. Geography forced agriculture to take the form of small well-drained patches surrounded by wooded wetlands.

Pleasanton's tract was separated in 1804 from the larger Loockerman holdings during the division of the estate of Susannah Stoops, daughter of Vincent Loockerman the younger. Because Susannah died a minor with no surviving children, the law provided that her siblings, rather than her husband, should inherit her property. Her sister, Elizabeth Davy, inherited 286 acres in the middle of the Stoops property. By the time the property was sold to Pleasanton, Loockerman heirs had lived in Philadelphia for two decades; the property had suffered all the indignities of absentee ownership.

During Pleasanton's twenty years of ownership, the property received some attention, even though it was not his home place. When he died in 1838, the court divided the tract among his three daughters and two daughters of his deceased son. One daughter, Mary DuHamel, received all the arable land except the lot described as being "lately" in the tenure of Nathan Williams, a free Negro. Her sisters, Eliza Webb and Ann Cubbage, received rear tracts (FIGURE 9).

Ann's 39-acre allotment was hers only during her natural life. Then it passed to her three children and Mary's son. In 1874, the heirs divided it into three parcels.

This process of division among heirs created relatively insignificant small holdings of little value to their absentee owners. The ground was swampy and wooded. Since sawmills stood near the tract, it probably had been heavily exploited for timber. The 1867 Beers *Atlas* map shows only two houses on the whole Pleasanton tract, apparently in the locations shown on the 1840 estate map. Mary DuHamel died in 1877.

In 1881, the county laid out the present McKee Road across the tract. It split the Nathan Williams lot and the Eliza Webb allotment, providing valuable road frontage to landlocked parcels (FIGURE 10).

Mary DuHamel's land was conveyed by her estate in 1882 to her son-in-law William Denney. Two years later, Eliza Webb's heirs sold her 39 acres to Jacob Mosley. Mosley and Denney immediately squared their boundaries and made them congruent with the new road by trading small parcels.

Denney in 1888 sold his mother-in-law's farm to Emory Scotten of Sussex County, whose descendants still own it and reside there. Jacob Mosley began a subdivision process and land reclamation efforts that resulted in a community that still exists west of McKee Road (FIGURE 11).

The last decade of the nineteenth century witnessed new construction on both sides of McKee Road. For the first time, the Pleasanton tract was occupied by its owners. That first generation of owner-occupants eventually bought out the remaining absentee owners and brought considerable waste land under cultivation. They created small farms from neglected wilderness.

Mosley and his neighbors west of the road belonged to a minority ethnic group known locally as the moors, more correctly identified as descendants of Native Americans. Their origin has been discussed elsewhere in this series (Heite and Heite 1985). Their first settlement had been a short distance to the north, at Maidstone Branch and the present town of Cheswold.

For two or three generations the community west of McKee Road remained a moor enclave. Some infill occurred as family members built houses on the paternal tracts. Eventually, after World War II, the process of estate settlement again ushered in a period of subdivision and ethnic change.

The new residents were African-Americans who created a suburban strip development in the spaces between the older houses. Behind the suburban houses, the agricultural fields that were carved from the swamps by the moors remain largely fallow but undisturbed by development.

Figure 9

John Pleasanton's Land, as divided in 1840

Redrawn from the division plot, Orphans Court Plot Book "1826," page 290

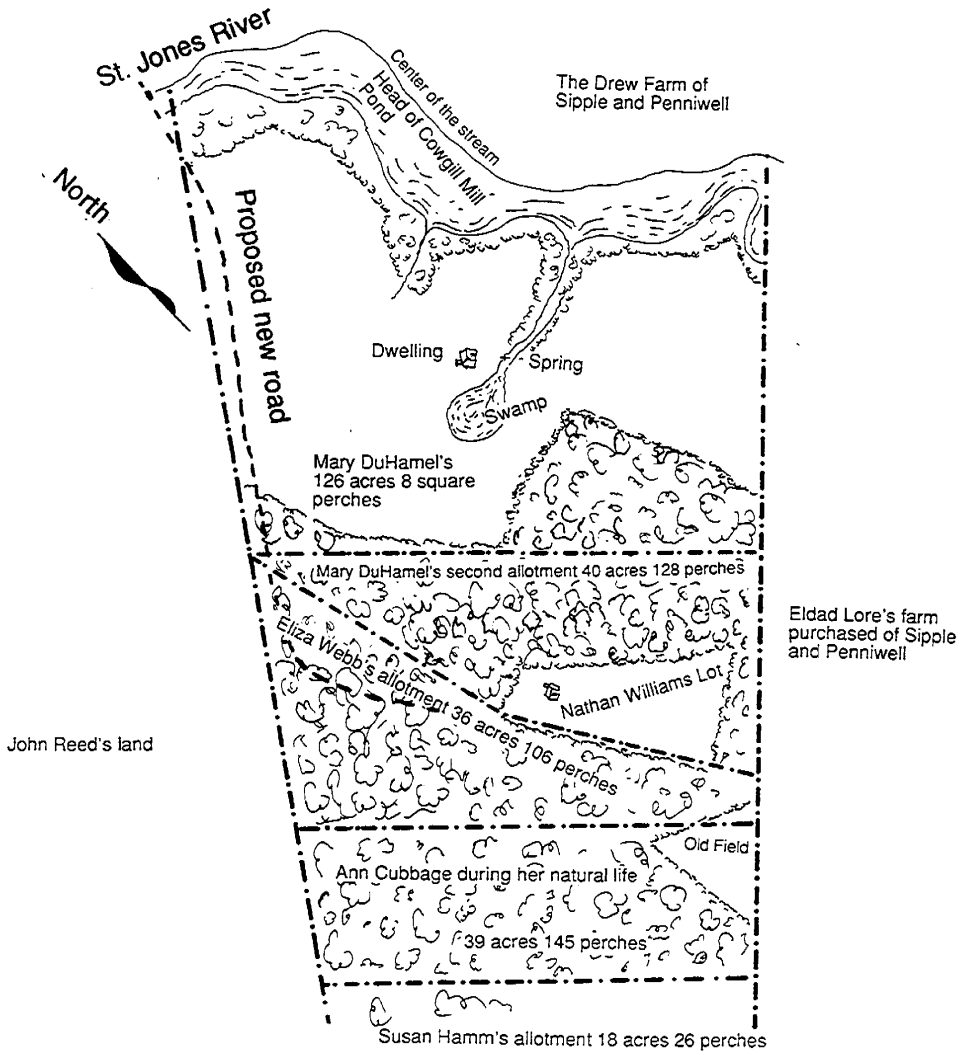


Figure 10

Mary P. DuHamel's Land, Redrawn from 1882 Plot

Orphans Court Plot Book 4, page 247

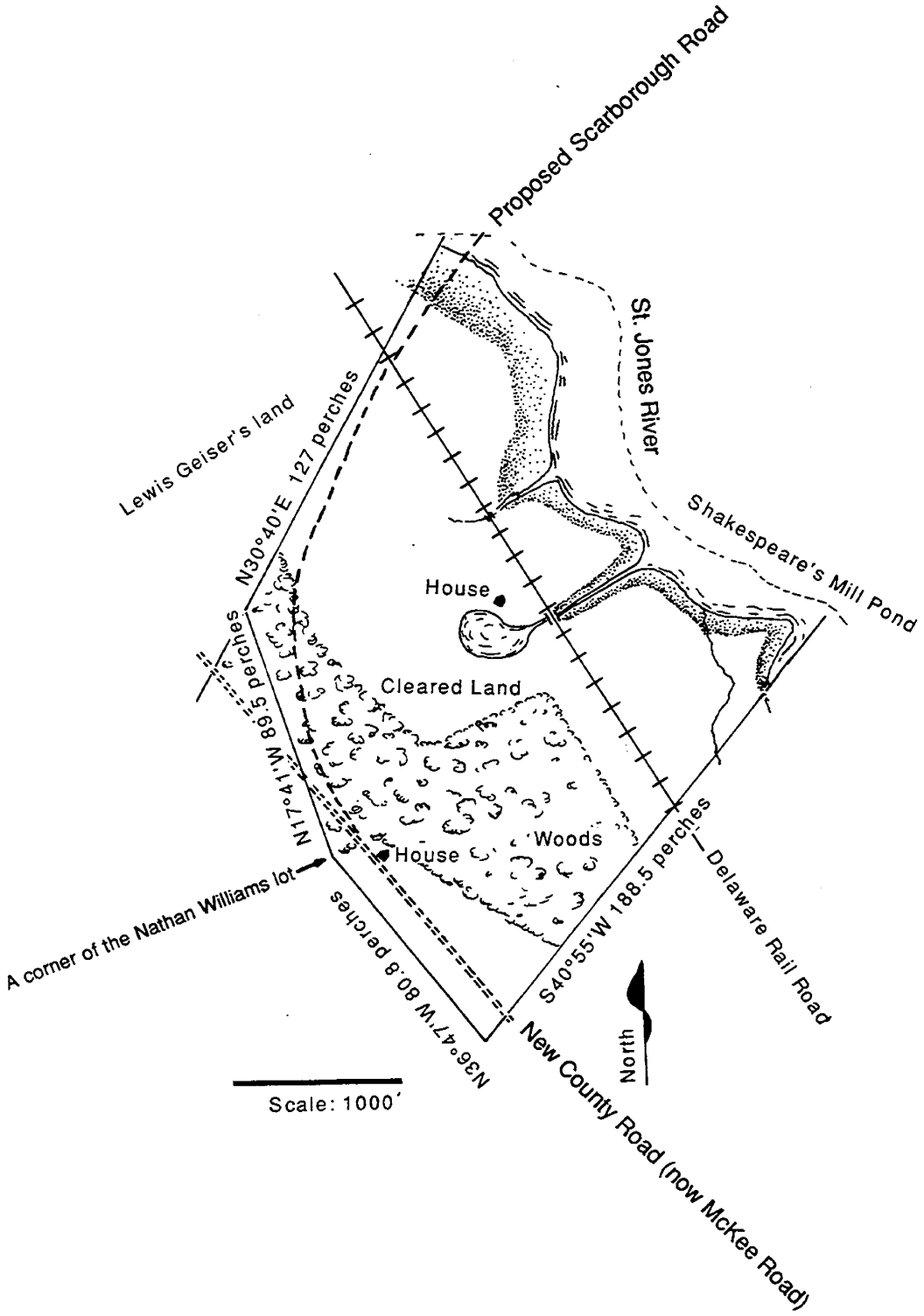
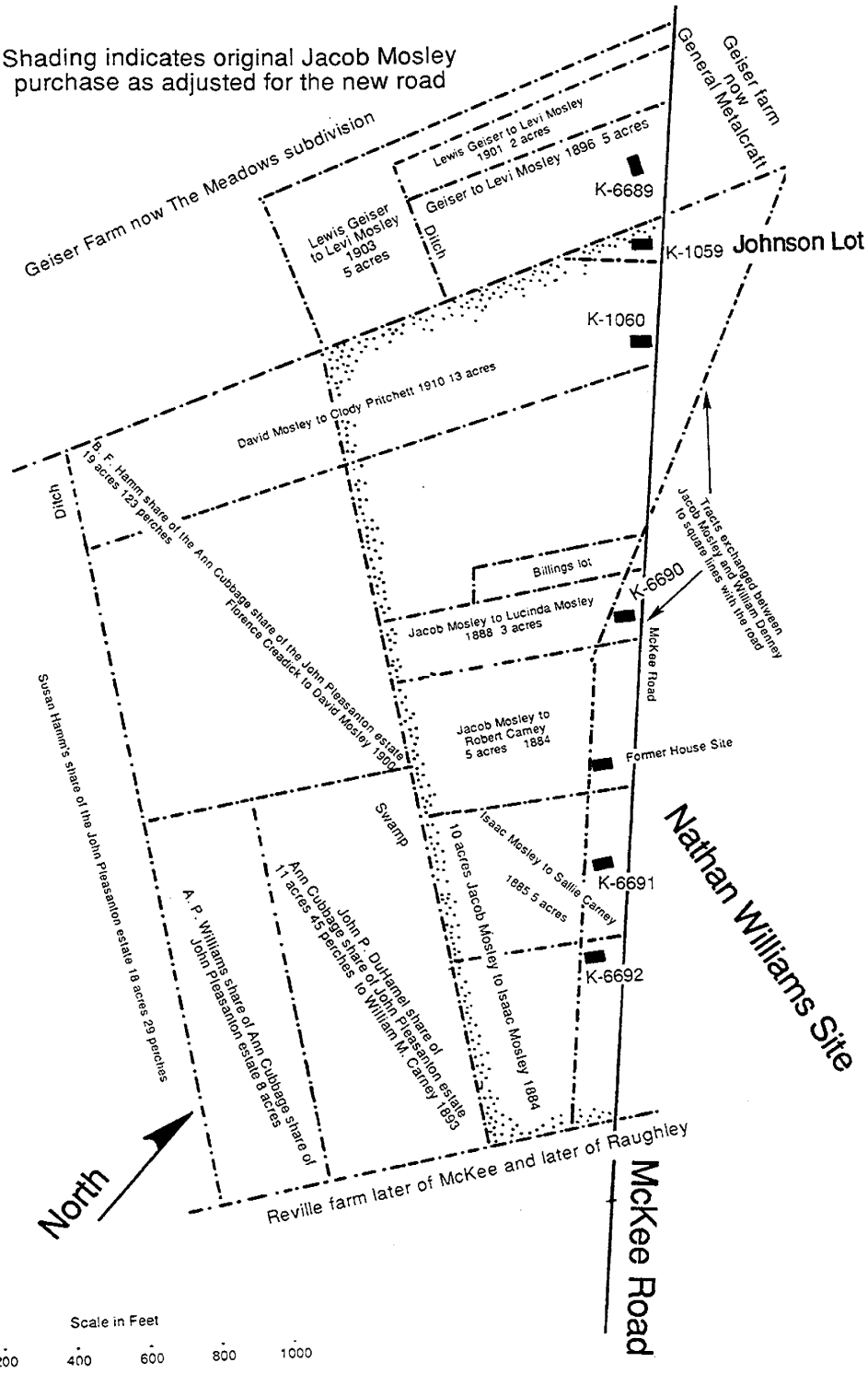


Figure 11
Mosley tract land ownership, 1884-1910

Reflecting construction of McKee Road and the Mosley development, with cultural-resource survey numbers identifying the tofts created after the subdivision.