BACKGROUND RESEARCH

Physical geography and environment

Saulsbury Road runs roughly parallel to the main branch of Saint Jones River north of Dover. The river here is a free-flowing freshwater perennial stream until it falls into the artificial impoundment at Silver Lake. Mudstone Branch and other minor tributaries flow from the west. The site itself is a sandy knoll on the north bank of the branch. West of the road, a modern drainage ditch has largely obliterated a freshwater marsh that once formed the western boundary of the knoll.

Geologists report that the Pleistocene Columbia Formation is about twenty feet thick here, overlying the Miocene Calvert Formation (Pickett and Benson 1983). Sand and gravel of the Columbia Formation has had considerable economic importance. The Mudstone Branch site, for example, adjoins a deep sandpit that operated for many years. Jordan (1964) described the Columbia sediments as fluvial deposits, placed and shaped by a succession of different streams flowing down from the mountains to the north during the Pleistocene.

Soils here belong to the well-drained Sassafras-Fallsington association. The Sassafras soil type is found on the site itself. This type is well-drained, sandy soil with a relatively low clay content (Soil Conservation Service 1971). Several areas of high clay concentration were found during excavation, but they were within he range for this soil type.

Prehistoric cultures of the region

Man has lived in the vicinity of the project area for ten millenia or more, under constantly changing ecological and cultural conditions. Delmarva is a relatively new landmass, from a geological point of view. The oldest dated environmental record associated with man in Delmarva comes from the Dill Farm (7K-E-12), where a tree trunk and pollen samples from ten millenia ago were found.

These earliest Paleo-Indian people were hunter-gatherers who used the finely-finished "fluted" points. Although they hunted large mammals, they probably used the entire larder provided by the grasslands and the spruce-hemlock forest that pioneered the Delmarva forest cover (Tirpak 1980).

After the Paleo period ended, about 8,500 years ago, Delaware's residents became more sedentary and more densely settled. Hardwood forests advanced, supplying smaller game animals, nuts, and berries. This period, known as the Archaic, is characterized by stone tools that exhibit variety of workmanship

and diversity of purpose (Handsman and Borstel 1974).

The Woodland I period, from about 3,000 BC to about 1,000 AD, is characterizeF by more sedentary lifestyles, larger populations, and the beginnings of horticulture (Custer, Catts, and Bachman 1982). A developed horticultural economy marked the Woodland II period, which ended with European conquest in the seventeenth century.

Postcontact history of the region

All of Delaware south of Bombay Hook was originally part of a grant called Swaanendael, which a company of Dutch patroons tried unsuccessfully to colonize in 1631.

The first settlement in Swaanendael was near the mouth of Delaware Bay, where Lewes now stands. For the first half-century of settlement, Lewes was the center of population and seat of government on the bay below Bombay Hook. About 1670, Englishmen began settling in the valley of the Saint Jones River, previously known as Wolf Creek.

In 1680, responding to increased settlement along the Saint Jones, Governor Andros created a new court jurisdiction between Bombay Hook and Cedar Creek. In 1683, William Penn chartered Kent County as the successor to the Saint Jones court. Penn ordered his surveyors to lay out a court town. A courthouse was built on the townsite in 1697, but the town of Dover was not finally plotted until 1717 (Jackson 1983; Hancock 1975-76).

Eighteenth-century Kent County was a small-grain farming region, valued during the Revolution as a breadbasket for the Continental forces. Although many of the citizens were British sympathizers or conscientious objectors, only a few minor skirmishes took place here.

In 1777, the legislature moved to Dover, thinking that the inland town would be safer than the old capital of New Castle from British attacks. The Delaware constitution of 1792 finally made Dover the permanent capital. In a tavern on the Dover Green, a Delaware convention on December 7, 1787 ratified the Federal Constitution. Because it was the first to ratify, Delaware, "the First State", has ceremonial precedence on all national occasions.

Depleted by generations of poor farming practices, the sandy soil of Kent County became less productive during the Federal period. Just before the Civil War, however, agriculture revived. The new era began in 1836, when the General Assembly authorized the first state geological survey under the direction of James C. Booth. He analysed the soils, sought sources of fertilizers, and advised farmers throughout the state.

This effort was part of a nationwide movement to apply scientific principles to the art of agriculture. Its adherents were called scientific farmers. Operating on a large scale, scientific farmers introduced grafted peach trees and systematic fertilization. The Delaware Railroad, finished to Dover in 1856, opened Kent County to a national market for its products and encouraged even more research and experiment into new methods (Passmore 1978).

Richardson and Robbins opened their cannery at Dover in 1855, processing a variety of local products. Other food processors located along the Delaware Railroad, until canning became Kent County's principal industry. Agriculture and related industries remained the area's principal economic base until the present century. The first non-agricultural major industry to locate in Dover was International Latex, now Playtex, in 1939. Since that time, many light industrial firms have located in the Dover area, several of them along the Saulsbury Road corridor.

Primary documentary research in project area

The name Mudstone is a corruption of "Maidstone", a tract of 877 acres granted in 1681 to John Albertson and John Mumford. The first resident owner probably was John Miller, who bought the property in 1742. A later owner built a mill on the tract, which eventually belonged to Charles I. duPont. His mill stood near the point where Mudstone Branch crosses the Dover-Kenton Road. The road now called Denny's Road usually bore the name of the mill owner. In nineteenth-century documents, this road is often described as the road from the mill to Leipsic, the area's deepwater port. The Delaware Railroad maintained duPont Station, where Denny's Road crosses the railroad today (Scharf 1888, II, 1082; Beers 1868, 44). Charles duPont was a major stockholder in the railroad and a scientific farmer.

John Reed bought this part of the Maidstone tract in 1833 but did not live there. According to his estate papers, this farm was occupied by Timothy Killen and George Till. Killen occupied a one-story house, kitchen, and outbuildings that were in tolerable repair; Till's house was not described. One house, shown on figure 7 of this report, stood on or near the site under study. A private road over the branch is also shown near this site. Reed died without a will in the early 1840's. In 1846 this tract was awarded by Orphans Court to his elder daughter Elizabeth. She and her husband Daniel Cowgill disposed of this property through a transaction with Cowgill's brother Clayton Cowgill. The land passed through a rapid succession of absentee owners, until it came into the hands of William F. McKee of Brandywine Hundred in 1865. McKee seems to have been the first resident landowner on the tract since the middle of the eighteenth century.

McKee sold two parcels totalling 71 acres in the early years of the twentieth century but retained the bulk of the tract. At that time, the farm extended across the present McKee or Saulsbury road. He died in 1908; his survivors were his wife Clementine and his three children: Helen F. Broyles, Mary S. Harper, and William H. McKee.

The heirs petitioned for a division of the lands, but after laying out a ten-acre dower lot that encompassed the present site, the court-appointed commissioners determined that further divisions of the property would be detrimental to farming it. In their division of the property, the commissioners referred to the present Saulsbury Road as "the new road known as the McKee and Geisers Road." The partition map, reproduced on the cover of this report, shows farm buildings between the house and the branch, together with a lane from the road to the barns near the bridge.

During the 1930's the farm was once again consolidated by McKee descendants Lemuel and Grace Covington. They sold the tract in question in 1964 to David Buckson, the first nonresident landowner in a century. Covington heirs still reside in the family's newer farmhouse (built before 1919), on the portion they retained west of Saulsbury Road. During the next few years, the parcel, now bounded by McKee and Denny's roads, again passed through a succession of nonresident owners. The present owners, Osias and Helene Peterseil, bought it from James McGinnis in 1967. According to local informants, the house stood vacant until it burned about twelve years ago.

TABLE 1
DESCENT OF TITLE

James D. McGinnis et ux
to
Osias Peterseil et ux

November 21, 1967 Deed Book Y-24, page 387
45.9 acres

David P. Buckson et ux
to
James D. McGinnis et ux

February 14, 1966 Deed Book G-24, page 20
Two parcels: 10 acres and 39 acres 88 perches

Lemuel Covington et ux
to
David P. Buckson et ux

September 1, 1964 Deed Book R-23, page 131
Two parcels: 10 acres and 39 acres 88 perches

William G. Bush, sheriff
to
Lemuel Covington et ux

October 29, 1939 Deed Book X-14, page 3
Recovered by attachment from William H. McKee et ux. One-third interest in the ten-acre dower of the widow of William F. McKee.

Joseph G. Broyles et ux
to
Lemuel C. Covington et ux

April 27, 1933 Deed Book K-14, page 81
Two parcels: 53 acres six perches; and 39 acres 88 perches adjoining the dower.

TABLE 1, continued

Robert A. Saulsbury, sheriff
to
Joseph G. Broyles et ux

April 24, 1933 Deed Book K-14, page 59
Two parcels: 53 acres six perches; and 39 acres 88 perches adjoining the dower. Recovered by attachment from Lemuel Covington et ux.

Partition of the estate of William F. McKee

August 28, 1909 Orphans Court Book O2, page 107

Heirs: Wife, Clementine, daughter Helen Broyles, daughter Mary Harper, and son William H. McKee.

McKee died seized of 102 acres 96 perches on the south side of the road from duPont Station to Morgan's [Moore's] Corner and on both sides of the new road known as the McKee and Geiser Road.

Commissioners laid off a ten-acre dower and declared that division of the residue into three parts was not practical. They laid off one parcel of 53 acres six perches west of McKee Road, and another parcel east of the dower containing 39 acres and 88 square perches.

Richard M. Griffith et ux
to
William F. McKee

December 8, 1865 Deed Book L-5, page 81
Two parcels totalling 174 acres: Four acres and 169 acres 136 poles

William Bright et ux
to
Richard M. Griffith

June 12, 1860 Deed Book R-4, page 468
Two parcels: "One designated as No. V," on road from Reed's Mill to Leipsic: Four acres and 169 acres 136 poles

TABLE 1, continued

George Lobdell et ux
to
William Bright

March 20, 1860 Deed Book Q-4, page 400
One-third share in two tracts, numbered IV and V, and also four acres along the railroad.

Zadock Townsend et ux
and George P. Townsend et ux
to
George Lobdell

July 28, 1859 Deed Book Q-4, page 325
One-third share in two tracts, numbered IV, containing 213 acres 12 poles, and V, containing 169 acres 136 poles, and another tract containing four acres

George Jones and George McCorkle et ux
to
Zadock and George Townsend

March 25, 1857 Deed Book N-4, page 112
Two tracts being land formerly of John Reed, which had been left to his daughter Elizabeth who married Daniel Cowgill, Jr. The Cowgills had conveyed it "in trust for certain purposes" 27 December 1853 to Clayton Cowgill.

Clayton Cowgill
to
George Jones and George McCorkle

June 11, 1855 Deed Book I-4, page 124
Parcels IV and V of Reed's division

Division of the estate of John Reed

April 27, 1846 Orphans Court Book Q, page 75
Tracts IV and V were allocated to Elizabeth Reed.

FIGURE 4
1983 aerial photograph
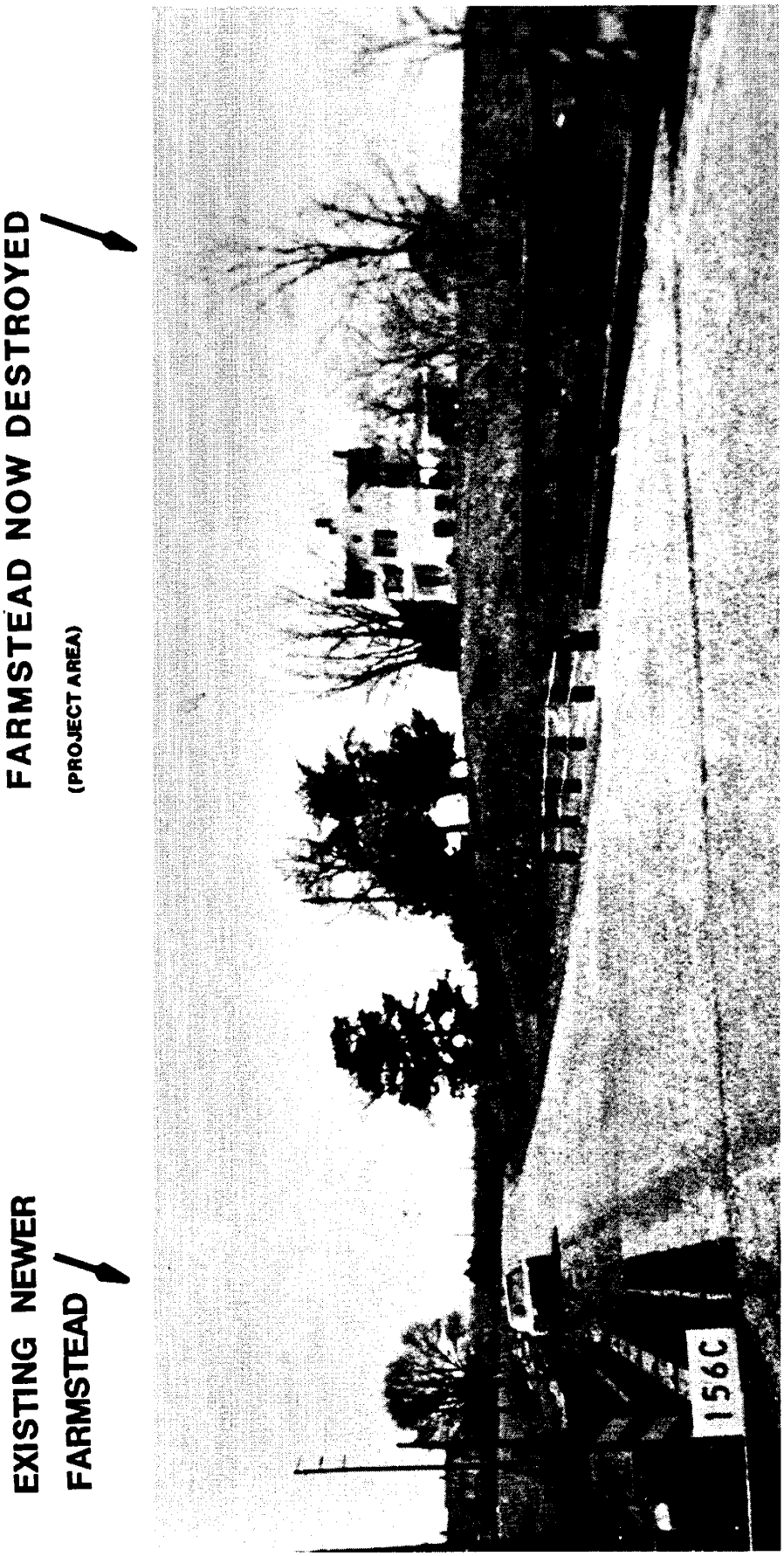
FIGURE 5
1967 photograph