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NATIONAL REGISTER ELIGIBILITY STUDY

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**FRENCHTOWN PIKE (RTE. 273)
BETWEEN RTE. 141 & U.S. 13
NEW CASTLE COUNTY
DELAWARE**

by

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- **ABSTRACT**

This eligibility study provides a document which can be used by the Delaware Department of Transportation (DelDOT) to partly comply with the Section 106 review process presented in *36 CFR Part 800: Protection of Historic Properties*. Specifically, Section 4(b), Locating Historic Properties, and Section 4(c), Evaluating Historical Significance, of *36 CFR 800* are addressed. This document examines an approximately 1.4 mile study corridor of Frenchtown Pike (State Route 273), between State Route 141 and U.S. Route 13 and determines if any of the resources (i.e. buildings, sites, objects, structures, and districts) are National Register-eligible. The study concludes that two of the six properties examined appear eligible for the National Register. The two properties are:

- Bellanca Aircraft Corporation Hangar, 648 Frenchtown Pike (N-402), and
- Penn Farm, 807 Frenchtown Pike (N-405),

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• INTRODUCTION

This eligibility assessment was undertaken to comply with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended (*36 CFR 800: Protection of Historic Properties*). The project entailed an architectural/historical investigation to identify and evaluate properties that are eligible for or already listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Specifically, Section 4(b), Locating Historic Properties, and Section 4(c), Evaluating Historical Significance, of *36 CFR 800* are addressed. The identification and evaluation processes followed the standards and guidelines set forth in *Archeology and Historic Preservation: Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines*, as well as *Identification of Historic Properties: A Decisionmaking Guide for Managers*.

The resources that were investigated consisted of only those potentially impacted by road improvements proposed by the Delaware Department of Transportation (DelDOT). The project area consists of properties bordering Frenchtown Pike (State Route 273), between U.S. 13 and State Route 141 (see Figure 1). Within this area, properties fronting the road or within a proximity potentially impacted by widening of the road were examined.

The principal landowner within the project area is the Trustees of New Castle Common. Both the Penn Farm (N-405) and the former Bellanca air hangar (N-402), the two resources identified in this document as appearing eligible for the National Register, are located on land owned by the Trustees. The unique nature of the Trustees of New Castle Common's management policies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries makes standard archival research impossible. Standard research tools such as deeds, mortgages, and census records are largely ineffective since all records only reference the Trustees or Common lands collectively. In addition, the Trustees' archives are not catalogued and the Trustees have confirmed that records of leases, expenditures, and income from tenant properties were, in most cases, not recorded or, if such a record exists, would require a costly and time-consuming search. Nomination forms have been prepared for these properties based on information gathered from other sources.

The general criteria used in determining the National Register eligibility of these resources were those set forth in *36 CFR 60.4*. More specific criteria is listed in the research design.

The quality of significance in American history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture is present in districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects that possess integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association, and:

- A. that are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history; or
- B. that are associated with the lives of persons significant in our past; or
- C. that embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or
- D. that have yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

This report includes a history of the area, a research design, an accompanying analysis concerning the identified resources, and a presentation of qualifications as per 36 CFR Part 61. Appropriate survey forms are located in the appendix.

• CULTURAL HISTORY

The New Castle Turnpike Company, responsible for establishing the portion of Frenchtown Pike that contains the project area, was chartered by the Delaware General Assembly on January 30, 1811. Prior to the establishment of turnpike companies, Delaware was traversed by common roads, not much more than paths, and more improved post roads. Since pre-Revolution times, New Castle has served as a primary stop between the larger cities of Philadelphia and Baltimore. For example, stage lines to Baltimore from Philadelphia went by way of boat to New Castle, stagecoach across the peninsula to the head of the Elk River, and then again by boat to Baltimore. This stage route line, established by Joseph Tatlow in the mid-eighteenth century, was the same route eventually adopted by the New Castle and Frenchtown Turnpike (Scharf 1888: 421).

Work on the turnpike commenced August 1, 1811 in New Castle and was completed to Clark's Corner (now known as Hare's Corner) on January 8, 1813. Hare's Corner is located at the intersection of State Route 273 and U.S. 13. Impetus for the completion of the turnpike was provided by the establishment of steamboat service between Baltimore and Frenchtown, Maryland in 1813. Soon after, the turnpike was extended from Clark's Corner to the state line, where the state of Maryland, under a similar charter, completed the turnpike to Frenchtown, near Elkton, on the Chesapeake Bay. This second section was completed in 1817 by the New Castle and Frenchtown Turnpike Company, a separate organization from the New Castle Turnpike Company (Scharf 1888: 417). For a period, the two companies jointly operated the toll-road.

Authority was granted in Maryland in 1827 and Delaware in 1829 to build a railroad along or near the turnpike. This was an attempt to compete with the new Chesapeake and Delaware Canal. Completed in 1831, the railroad paralleled the turnpike for most of its length, however its track is several miles south of the project area. In 1830, an act was passed authorizing the union of the New Castle Turnpike and Railroad Company and the New Castle and Frenchtown Turnpike and Railroad Company, and became officially known as the latter (Scharf 1888: 428).

At the time of the establishment of the turnpike, the character of the project area was largely rural and the chief occupation was farming. The principal landowners in the area were and continue to be the Trustees of New Castle Common, a civic organization that maintains the New Castle Common, a large tract of common land set aside for the inhabitants of New Castle in the seventeenth century. In the early nineteenth century, the Trustees established numerous tenant farms on the land of the Common. One such farm is the Penn Farm (N-405). A small crossroads community developed in the 19th century at Clark's Corner, eventually renamed Hare's Corner, at the western end of the project area. This included a few dwellings, a blacksmith shop, post-office, and tavern/hotel. Hare's Corner and the project area in general did not experience much growth throughout the nineteenth century. The general lack of development can be partly contributed to the land management policies of the Trustees of the New Castle Common, as well as this area being left out of the railroad development schemes of the era.

Walnut Hill or Cottage (N-404), established in the 1840s, illustrates the popularity of villa construction in the middle to late nineteenth century in New Castle County. This property had previously been part of Claremont, George Read's country estate, and was subdivided upon his death. The Holcomb family purchased the property in 1870, rebuilt the house in the Colonial Revival style following a fire in 1912, and remained owners until 1980.

The 1868 atlas (see Figure 2), reveals the nature of Frenchtown Pike and the surrounding countryside. The small crossroads community of Hares Corner was surrounded by farms belonging to the Trustees of New Castle Common and estates. The project area was largely agricultural in nature. This would remain the case throughout the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century (see Figures 3 & 4). The area slowly transformed in the 1920s and 1930s. The incorporation of Route 13 into the DuPont Highway, linking northern and southern Delaware, provided impetus for development at the western end of the project area (Cavallo, et al. 1988: 27). During this era, four resources (two residential, one commercial, one industrial) were constructed in the project area. A limited number of lots were developed on the eastern end of the project area, near Route 141, including two residences (N-12711 and N-12712) and a gas station (N-12710). In the fall of 1927, the Bellanca Aircraft Corporation established an airfield and plant on Frenchtown Pike. An air hangar (N-402) used by Bellanca is located on land owned by the Trustees. G.M. Bellanca, founder of the corporation, was a noted airplane designer, and a number of prominent pilots from aviation's halcyon era traveled to Frenchtown Pike to meet with Bellanca. Bellanca operated his plant through World War II and, shortly afterward, ceased operations. Nevertheless, through the years, the Penn Farm and Walnut Hill properties retained the rural character of this section of Frenchtown Pike and development was mostly limited to the fringes of the project area.

• RESEARCH DESIGN

The goal of this study was to evaluate Frenchtown Pike to determine if, within an area of potential effect, there are resources eligible for the National Register. This was accomplished by determining relevant historic contexts, consistent with the *Delaware Comprehensive Historic Preservation Plan* and applying general evaluation criteria set forth in 36 CFR 60.4. This study will contribute and expand upon the Comprehensive Plan.

The eligibility assessment consisted of on-site visual analysis and photographic documentation. This was supplemented by primary and secondary research to assemble the historic context of the study area. Among the references examined were historic atlases and written histories. Of particular importance for this study was the information received from several local historians who were familiar with the area. Each property or resource was then profiled in Delaware BAHF survey forms or National Register nomination forms, included in the appendix.

The property types identified in this study represent a disparate group: an agricultural complex, a country house, an airplane hangar, a gas station, and two small suburban tract houses. The project area had never truly experienced a period of growth and development until the last 50 years, and that growth was less than dynamic. The project area still retains much of its open space. A reconnaissance survey revealed the types of resources to be found on Frenchtown Pike. Certain knowledge of the area was brought to the project area by the authors, who via related projects in New Castle County, were familiar with the patterns of development and resource types typical to New Castle County.

Relevant historic contexts, as established in the *Delaware Comprehensive Historic Preservation Plan*, are presented below for each identified resource.

- 1) 648 Frenchtown Pike (N-402)
 -) Transportation in the Upper Peninsula Zone, 1880-1940
 -) Manufacturing in the Upper Peninsula Zone, 1880-1940
 -) Architecture in the Upper Peninsula Zone, 1880-1940
- 2) 830 Frenchtown Pike (N-404)
 -) Architecture in the Upper Peninsula Zone, 1830-1940
- 3) 807 Frenchtown Pike (N-405)
 -) Architecture in the Upper Peninsula Zone, 1770-1940
 -) Agriculture in the Upper Peninsula Zone, 1770-1940
 -) Government in the Upper Peninsula Zone, 1770-1940
- 4) SW corner of Frenchtown Pike and Route 141 (N-12710)
 -) Architecture in the Upper Peninsula Zone, 1880-1940
- 5) 608 Frenchtown Pike (N-12711)
 -) Architecture in the Upper Peninsula Zone, 1880-1940
- 6) 616 Frenchtown Pike (N-12712)
 -) Architecture in the Upper Peninsula Zone, 1880-1940

• ANALYSIS

1) 648 Frenchtown Pike (N-402)

This c. 1927 airplane hangar is one of only a few surviving buildings from the tenancy of the Bellanca Aircraft Corporation, an airplane manufacturer that was located on the Frenchtown Pike between the late 1920s and the late 1940s. Giuseppe Mario Bellanca, founder of the company, was a very influential airplane designer and designed a number of superior aircraft that held the world endurance, speed, and distance records. This hangar was used by the Bellanca company as its upholstery and finishing shop. The hangar has experienced some minor alterations, but still retains its historic massing, notably the distinctive shape and truss-work of the roof. As an example of local aviation history, as well as for its national and international association with G.M. Bellanca, 648 Frenchtown Pike appears eligible for the National Register under Criteria A and B.

2) 830 Frenchtown Pike (N-404)

Walnut Hill or Cottage was originally built circa 1843 as a classical villa style dwelling. This residence was gutted by a fire in 1912, and was rebuilt, under the direction of New Castle architect Laussat Rogers. The post-1912 Walnut Hill incorporated many of the characteristics associated with the early-twentieth-century Country House Movement. Most notably, the reconstruction was designed principally in the Colonial Revival style. Since then Walnut Hill, presently the location of a plastics landfill, has experienced a loss of integrity in, essentially, three areas: the surrounding landscape, the outbuildings, and character defining details. The surrounding landscape, formerly consisting of highly designed gardens, has either become overgrown or has been replaced with a landfill, which has also claimed the outbuildings that contributed to the country house complex. The abandonment of the dwelling has resulted in the loss, through vandalism and theft, of the majority of the building's character-defining features. The no longer extant veranda was intrinsic to the front facade, and helped to define the exterior as Colonial Revival. The most important interior Revival element was the Georgian Revival mantelpieces, which have been stripped. The general lack of full stylistic integrity (classical villa, Colonial and Georgian Revival, Craftsman), and the loss of distinguishing country house characteristics mentioned above contribute to the recommendation that Walnut Hill does not appear eligible for the National Register.

3) 807 Frenchtown Pike (N-405)

Penn Farm was established in the first decade of the nineteenth century and is the last surviving farm of the eleven farms established at that time by the Trustees of New Castle Common. New Castle Common is a large tract of land set aside in the seventeenth century for use as pasture land and a source of wood for the benefit of the people of New Castle. It is believed to have originated with Dutch settlement of Delaware, circa 1660. As the last surviving farm of New Castle Common, and for the unique historical nature of New Castle Common, Penn Farm appears eligible under Criterion A. The Penn Farm farmhouse, along with its associated outbuildings, represents a nineteenth century tenant agricultural complex, and as the last remaining agricultural complex on Common land, appears eligible for the National Register under Criterion C.

4) SW corner of Frenchtown Pike and Route 141 (N-12710)

This c. 1925 service station originally consisted of a two bay garage. Sometime in the 1930s, the garage was expanded with the addition of an office and was modernized in the

popular Moderne fashion with the application of enameled metal panels. As an example of a common gas station style. This building does not represent any innovative or stylistic elements associated with early-twentieth-century road side architecture. This building does not appear eligible for the National Register.

5) 608 Frenchtown Pike (N-12711)

The significance of this c. 1925 Bungalow building is low: it is a standard architectural style, prevalent in suburban communities, built with stock items. This particular example has been extensively altered and the majority of its character defining features have been lost. Therefore this building does not appear eligible for the National Register.

6) 616 Frenchtown Pike (N-12712)

The significance of this c. 1925 Comfortable House-style building is low: it is a standard architectural style, prevalent in suburban communities, built with stock items. This building has undergone numerous alterations that have adversely effected its integrity. This building does not appear eligible for the National Register.

- **CONCLUSION**

Six individual sites were surveyed in the field. None of these sites were previously listed in the National Register. Of these, two are recommended to be individually eligible for the National Register, 648 Frenchtown Pike and 807 Frenchtown Pike. 648 Frenchtown Pike (N-402), is an airplane hangar, dating from the 1920s, and associated with G.M. Bellanca and the Bellanca Aircraft Corporation. 807 Frenchtown Pike (N-405), is the Penn Farm, an early-nineteenth farm established by the Trustees of New Castle Common.

- **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The main contribution to the *Delaware Comprehensive Historic Preservation Plan* from this study is one that was not available to the authors at the time this study was undertaken: the records of the Trustees of New Castle Commons. The survey form provided for the Penn Farm (N-405) provides a sketch of the architectural development of one of the Trustees farms. However, access to the records would have almost certainly further developed this information. Overall, there appears to have been little research done concerning the holdings of the Trustees of New Castle Common. The unique nature of the Common and the Trustees appears to warrant research into various subjects concerning their development of the land. These could include such topics as the Trustees' land management policies, the agricultural practices and associations of the eleven farms, leases and architectural specifications, builders and architects, etc. Therefore, with access to the records, a fuller context concerning New Castle Common and Penn Farm might be developed.

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• **PERSONNEL**

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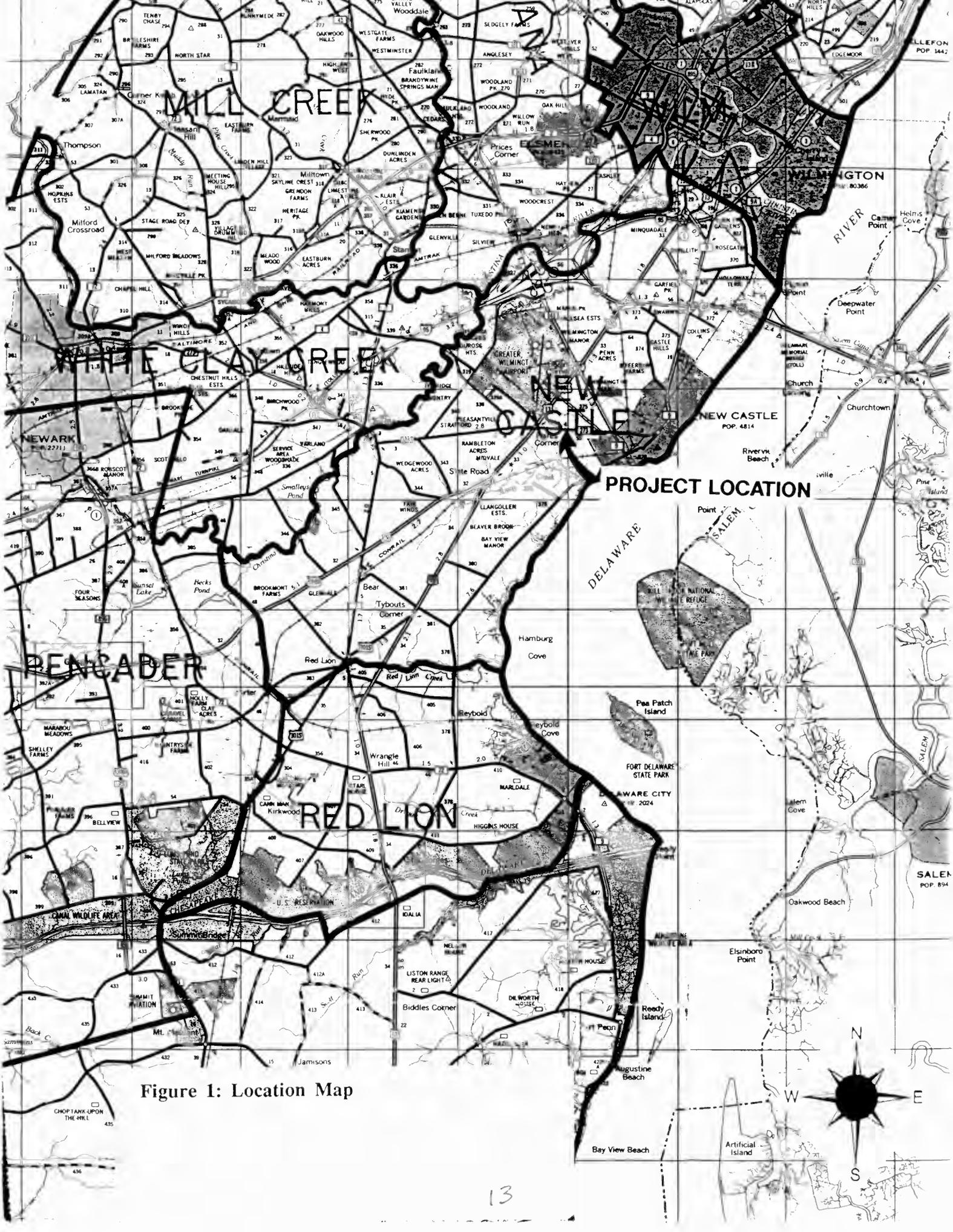


Figure 1: Location Map

STANTON
 Scale 30 rods to the inch
 Merchant Mill
 Corner St.
 Mills

Stanton Business Directory.
 Stanton... Proprietor of Stanton Hotel, Postmaster
 dealer in General Merchandise.
 Key... Dealer in General Merchandise.
 For... Manufacturer of Cloths, Fancy Cassimeres,
 Tweeds, Kerseys, Flannels and all kinds of Wollen
 Goods.
 Carriage Manufacturer.
 Miller.

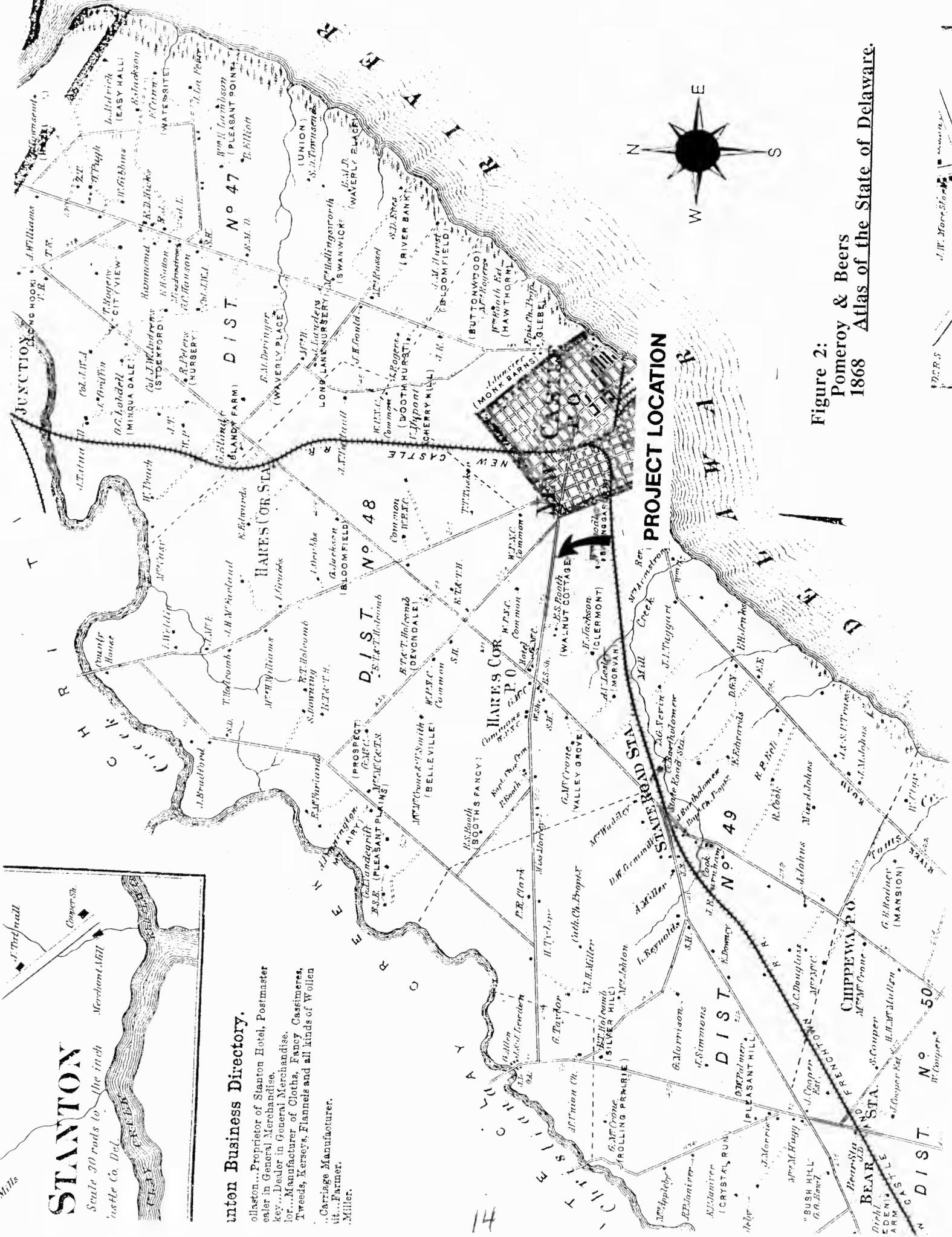


Figure 2:
 Pomeroy & Beers
 1868 Atlas of the State of Delaware.

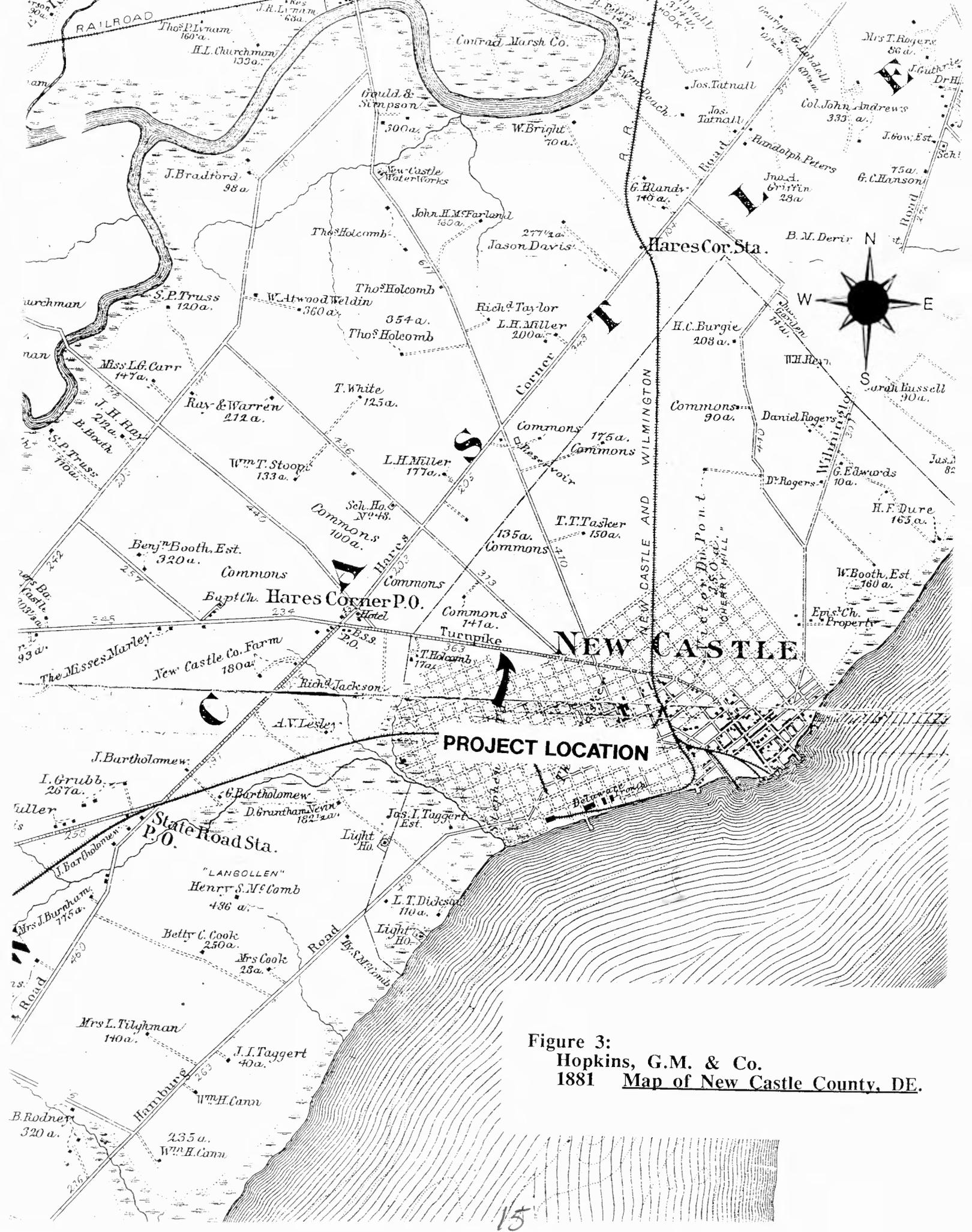


Figure 3:
Hopkins, G.M. & Co.
1881 Map of New Castle County, DE.

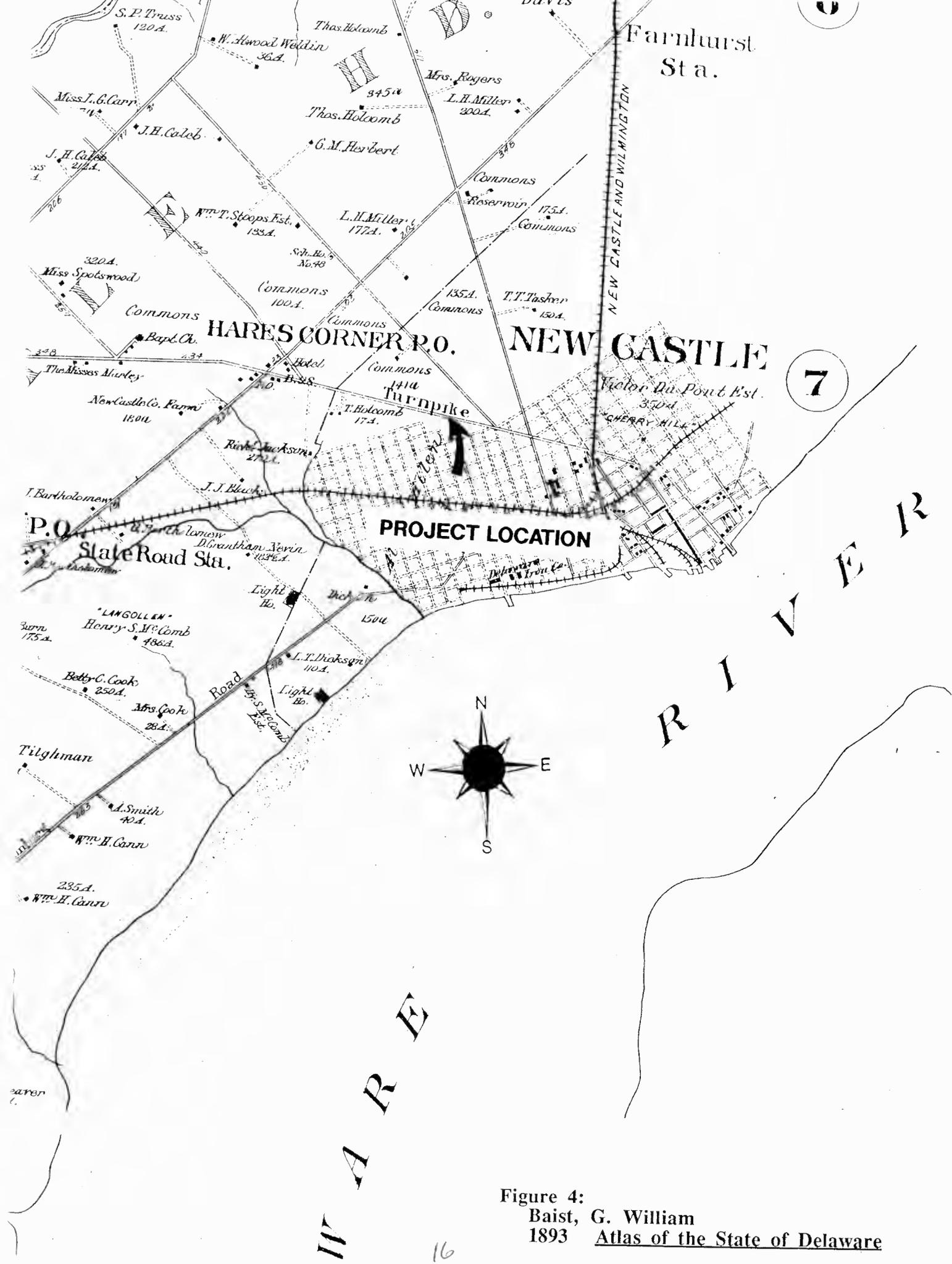


Figure 4:
 Baist, G. William
 1893 Atlas of the State of Delaware