

II. HISTORIC CONTEXT

A. ST. GEORGES HUNDRED

1. *First Settlement to 1800*

Each of Delaware's three counties is subdivided into smaller political units called "hundreds" that are the equivalent of the townships or parishes of other eastern states. There are 10 hundreds in New Castle County, and the Dale Site, along with most of the U.S. Route 301 project, is mostly within St. Georges. St. Georges Hundred is bounded on the north by the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal, which follows the route of the old St. Georges Creek, and on the south by the Appoquinimink River.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries St. Georges Hundred was a prosperous agricultural landscape, crisscrossed by roads and dotted with small towns. The land is nearly flat, with no hills to speak of. The main streams drain east toward the Delaware Bay, which is bordered by extensive marshes. Much of the soil is well-drained loams well suited for grain or truck farming, with pockets of poorly-drained soil and even swamp scattered throughout.

The first European settlement in St. Georges Hundred was established by Dutch and Swedes from New Castle who patented land along the Appoquinimink River in the 1650s. The Appoquinimink River was important to the Dutch as part of a natural portage from the Delaware River to the Chesapeake Bay; in the seventeenth century it was less than 5 miles from the head of navigation on the Appoquinimink River to the head of navigation on the Bohemia River, and an important trade between the Dutch in Delaware and the English settlers in Maryland was carried out along this route. The patents of the Dutch settlers were so-called "long lots," stretching from the Appoquinimink River to Drawyer Creek. A few lots were also established on the northern bank of Drawyer Creek. These settlements were conceived of as a town, called Appoquememen. Although the houses of this town were scattered on the various lots, the town was a functioning administrative unit and probably also an important social reality.

The Dutch patents were confirmed by the English conquerors in 1671. The English granted further patents in the area, using their own "metes and bounds" system instead of the Dutch long lots. Because of the new settlement pattern and other administrative changes, the old town of Appoquememen effectively disappeared, and there is very little continuity between it and the future towns that occupied the same location (De Cunzo 1993; Heite 1972).

An archaeological site occupied during this period was excavated on the Appoquinimink River near Odessa during the SR 1 project (Bedell et al. 1999). The Appoquinimink North Site, or the McKean/Cochran farm, included the cellar of a house with a cellar and stone foundations measuring 15x18 feet. This cellar produced a large collection of artifacts that appear to date to the 1690 to 1770 period. The early material includes numerous vessels made of decorated Delftware and etched stemware (drinking glasses), suggesting a degree of wealth and material comfort.

In the eighteenth century a new town grew up at the site of Appoquememen, called Cantwell's Bridge, after a bridge constructed over the Appoquinimink River in 1731 by Richard Cantwell. Cantwell, son of the first English sheriff of New Castle County, owned extensive lands that included about half of the current town of Odessa. The town grew very slowly until the 1760s and 1770s, when several large brick houses were constructed along the Middletown Road not far from the bridge. Two of these, one built in 1774 by William Corbitt, who operated a tannery at the bridge, and the other built by David Wilson in 1769, are still standing in Odessa. A frame tidemill was situated at the eastern end of town. Settlement also increased in the surrounding area, and most of the available land was brought under cultivation in this period.

Archaeology along the U.S. Route 301 corridor has shown that the area was densely populated by the mid-eighteenth century. Numerous farm sites dating to the 1730 to 1770 period have been identified. At the time much of the land was in the hands of speculators who each owned thousands of acres, and the majority of the residents seem to have been tenants of these absentee landlords. It seems likely that the presence of the Bohemia Cart Road and the associated smuggling route helped draw settlers to the area.

2. *1800 to 1940*

The population of St. Georges Hundred peaked around 1800 and then began a 30-year decline. The same thing happened in much of the eastern United States, as soil exhaustion led to falling crop yields and new lands in the West beckoned. The prime wheat lands in southern New Castle County held their value better than most farmland in the East, and the population decline in this area was not extreme. Still, the population fell by around 27 percent (Table 2). Wheat production was strong throughout this period, and Cantwell's Bridge prospered as the port for that grain. In 1825 six large granaries, holding about 30,000 bushels, could be seen on the Appoquinimink River waterfront, and up to 400,000 bushels of grain were shipped annually through the port in the 1840s (Scharf 1888:1005). In the busy season six sloops traveled weekly to Philadelphia, and three coasting schooners went to Boston (Watkins n.d.). By 1800 Cantwell's Bridge contained 26 dwellings and boasted a population of 211 (Rogers and Easter 1960:62). The villagers lived in houses arrayed on either side of the road that ran down to the landing. The dwellings ranged from brick mansions to one-room hewn-log houses. Each dwelling possessed outbuildings that typically included stables, carriage houses, smoke houses, and kitchens. Merchants' and local artisans' shops were interspersed among the outbuildings, and taverns provided lodging for travelers and spirits for all. At the western end of town was a Quaker meetinghouse, established in 1785. Farmers came to town often for business purposes and market days (Herman 1987:81).

West of Cantwell's Bridge was the village of Middletown, which appears on maps by 1778. Middletown remained a tiny place until the 1850s, when the Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore Railroad was built through the town. The first detailed map of New Castle County was published by Samuel Rea of Philadelphia in 1849 (Figure 5). Cantwell's Bridge was clearly the most important town in the vicinity at that time, still significantly larger than Middletown. However, by the time the 1868 Beers *Atlas of the State of Delaware* was made, Middletown had surpassed Cantwell's Bridge as the biggest town in the area (Figure 6). The Beers map also shows that numerous houses had been built along all the roads in the area.

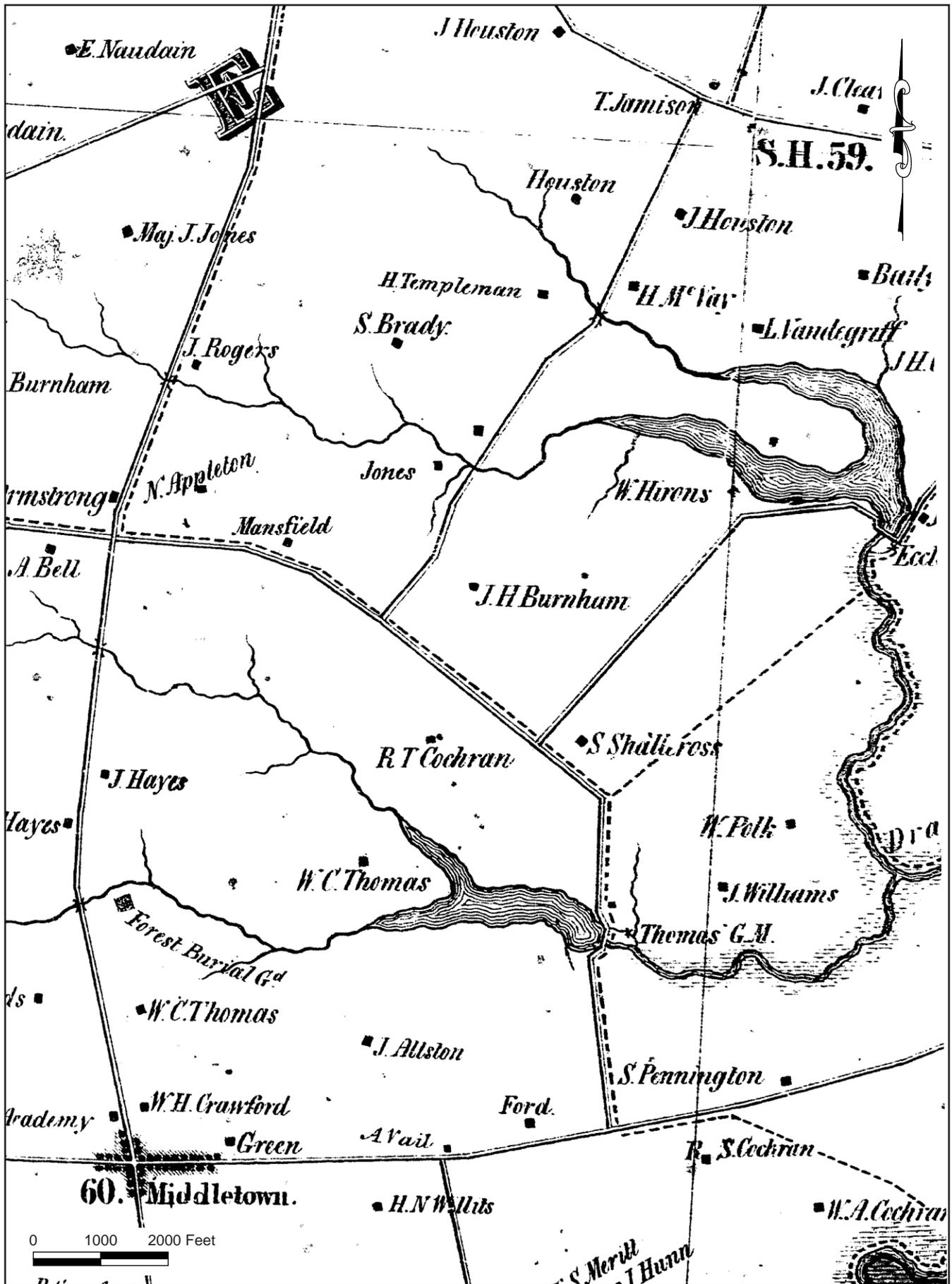


FIGURE 5: Central St. Georges Hundred in 1849

SOURCE: Rae & Price 1849

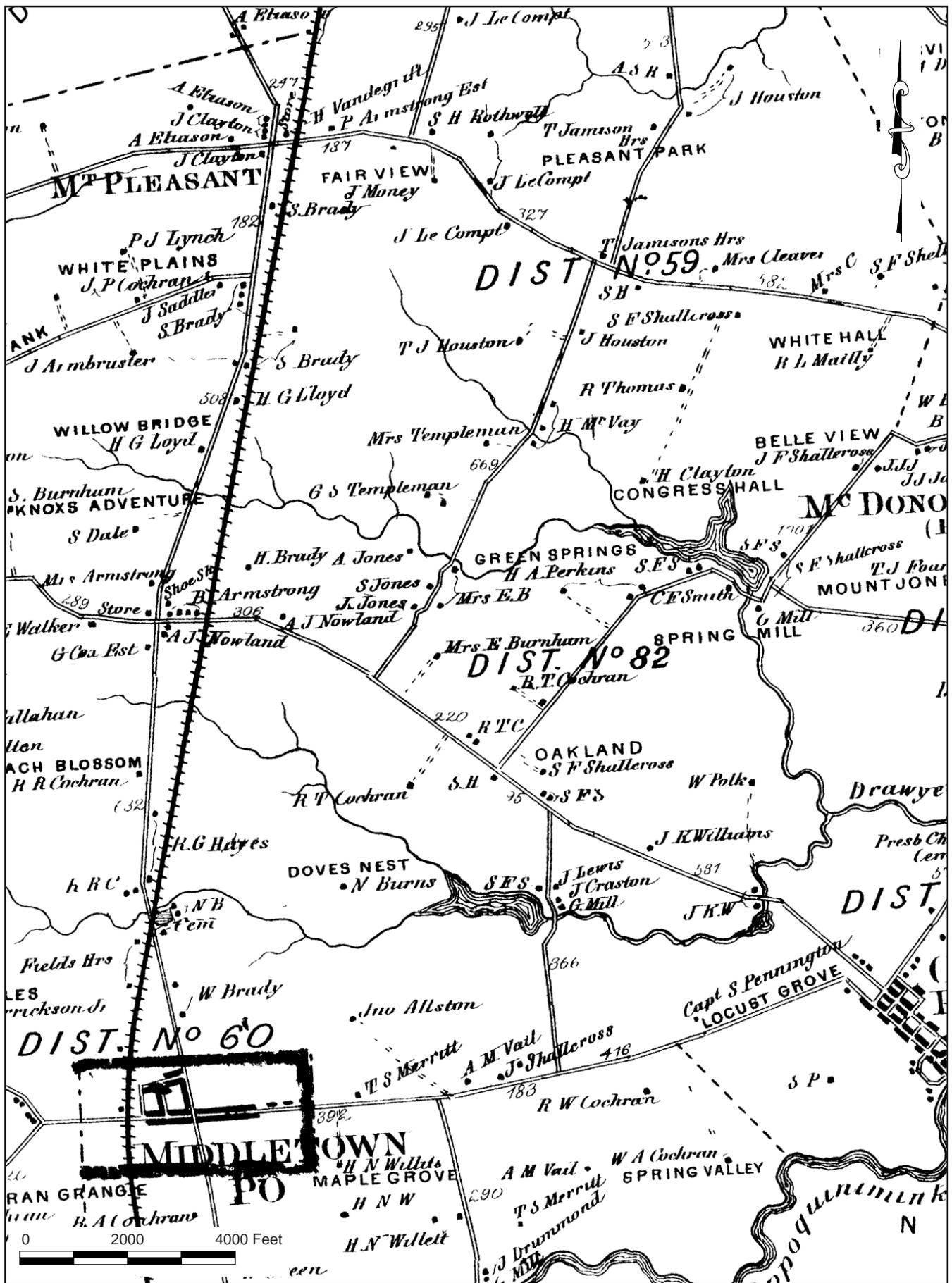


FIGURE 6: Central St. Georges Hundred in 1868

SOURCE: Beers 1868

TABLE 2

POPULATION OF ST. GEORGES HUNDRED BY RACE, 1800 TO 1860

CENSUS YEAR	TOTAL POPULATION	WHITE	FREE BLACK	ENSLAVED	PERCENT AFRICAN-AMERICAN
1800	3365	2400	484	481	29
1810	2879	1945	620	314	32
1820	2934	1963	587	384	33
1830	2468	1456	771	241	41
1840	3130	1969	1023	138	37
1850	3652	2436	1050	166	33
1860	4532	2856	1574	102	37

In 1829 the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal was dug across the Delmarva peninsula along the old course of St. Georges Creek. This project helped Wilmington grow into a major city. The canal, the railroad, the excellent road network, and the proximity of Wilmington and Philadelphia encouraged commercial farming in the area and helped set off a mid-century “peach boom.”

Detailed statistics available for the later 1800s allow some generalizations about the social side of agriculture in Delaware (De Cunzo and Garcia 1992). Approximately half of Delaware farms were occupied by their owners, the other half by tenants. Some tenants paid cash rents, others a share of their crops. The correlation between wealth and land ownership was not simple, and some tenants were better off than some owners. The 1880 U.S. Agricultural Census lists several big tenants in St. Georges Hundred, including James Gray, who leased a 443-acre farm worth \$35,000. Gray paid a share of his crop as rent, so he was a sharecropper, even though he was one of the biggest farmers in the county. In fact the smallest farms, those under 20 acres, were usually farmed by their owners. So while land ownership was an important goal for many if not most Americans, this had as much to do with security and status as with wealth or income. It was possible to be a tenant farmer but safely in the middle class, even modestly well-to-do. Farm ownership correlated with age, so it seems that the more successful tenant farmers were eventually able to buy their own land.

The majority of the rural people in Delaware were farm laborers. They worked for cash and board, either in the owner’s house or detached kitchen or in a small tenant house on the property. Account books show that a substantial farmer like William Mansfield of Achmester employed around half a dozen men at once.

Trends begun before the Civil War continued throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Delaware. Wilmington continued to grow, and in 1920 it held nearly one in two residents of the state. The peach orchards never recovered from a devastating blight in the 1870s, and much of the less productive farmland was abandoned. The farm population began to fall as mechanization made agriculture less labor intensive and competition squeezed out many smaller farms. On Delaware’s better soils, however, grain and truck farming remained profitable, and Delaware farmers benefited from the worldwide surge in food prices that enriched so many

American farmers in the 1890-1920 period (De Cunzo and Garcia 1992:28). New crops, such as strawberries and asparagus, helped many farmers.

B. AFRICAN-AMERICANS IN ST. GEORGES HUNDRED

Delaware had a substantial African-American population by the time of the Revolution. Roughly one quarter of the new state's inhabitants were black, and a majority of them were enslaved. However, Delaware had a strong Quaker tradition, and Quakers worked hard to persuade owners to liberate their slaves. Methodists and some other religious groups joined this push for abolition and freedom. By the time of the 1800 census, Delaware had more free blacks than enslaved people, and the number of slaves continued to decline throughout the antebellum years. However, attempts to make Delaware a formally free state were not successful. One approach adopted by many Delaware farmers was to ask enslaved people to "work off the cost of raising them," for example, by 10 years of adult service. Numerous examples survive, some enrolled in the county deeds, of agreements whereby African-Americans became free at the age of 26 or 28, after 10 years of labor.

The presence of many Quakers and other committed abolitionists made possible the activity of the Underground Railroad, and though such clandestine activity is hard to document, it seems that hundreds of enslaved people escaped through the state to freedom. The stories collected by William Still and published in 1886 include numerous examples of flight through Delaware, aided by the Quaker network:

In about 1850, a woman named Molly was caught while fleeing bondage in Cecil County, Maryland and jailed at New Castle. Her owner came to retrieve her and was driving home in his cart, with Molly lying bound in the back, when he fell into a drunken sleep. Molly rolled out of the back of the cart and into the bushes, where a passing "colored man" found her, cut the ropes off her feet, and took her to the house of Quaker farmer John Hunn near Middletown. Hunn helped her travel to Pennsylvania, where she hid for six months before traveling on to Canada.

Still 1886:714.

Most free African-American men in Delaware continued to work as farm laborers or carters. Many lived in a small tenancy called a "house and garden," containing a small frame or log house and one or two acres of land for gardening or raising livestock (Sheppard et al. 2001). The account books of nineteenth-century farmers contain many agreements with laborers that include the provision of housing. The agreement specified the wage to be paid for farm work by the month or the day, and sometimes they also included details such as where and when the tenant could cut firewood and who would pay for washing and mending the tenant's clothes. The houses were built to fairly standard designs, with one large room on the order of 16x20 feet and sometimes a second, smaller room or attached shed. One important detail for archaeologists is that these houses were built to be easily moved, and some of the surviving examples have been moved several times, and therefore they had flimsy foundations and no cellars. The houses were usually placed around the edges of the productive fields or in wood lots (Figure 7).

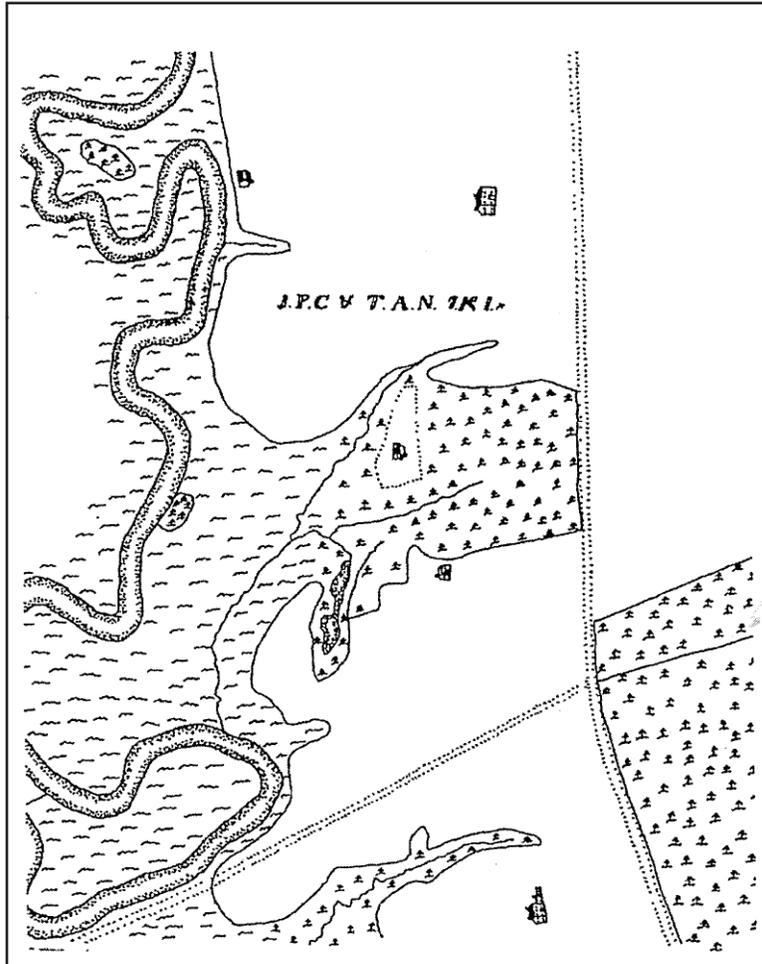


FIGURE 7: Plat Showing Three Small Tenant Houses

SOURCE: Hopkins Plots Collection, Delaware Public Archives

The quality and condition of these homes must have varied, but some of them at least seem to have been quite run down. Estate records for Delaware farms sometimes mention tenant cabins that seem like poor places indeed. The Eliza Evans estate near Glasgow, surveyed for the Orphans' Court in 1806, included three such homes:

. . . there are on the premises three small log tenements Viz., one occupied by David Biggs in very bad condition, no out buildings or fruit trees, and about two acres of cleared land, one occupied by John Bratten in tenantable order no out houses or fruit trees about two acres land cleared; one occupied by Stephen Augustus in bad order no out buildings about three acres cleared land part of which is in Meadow [Catts and Custer 1990:48].

Before the late 1800s only a handful of African-Americans were able to buy their own land. One of the pioneering African-American farmers in Delaware was Thomas Bayard, who owned 140 acres of land east of Odessa by 1840. It is commonly asserted that most land owned by African-Americans in the state was inferior, but this does not apply to the lands of either Thomas Bayard or Samuel Dale, who purchased his land in 1854. In the late 1800s some farmers sold the garden lots to their tenants for small sums, allowing many more African-Americans to become property owners. It is not entirely clear why the white farmers did so; perhaps changing economic conditions made it less advantageous for the farmers to continue owning these small, marginal plots, or perhaps they preferred to transfer responsibility for the aging houses to the people who lived in them.

Churches were central to African-American life in the nineteenth century. St. Georges Hundred had several African-American churches, the oldest founded by 1820 (Zebley 1947) (Table 3). Most were associated with the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, the largest organization of black churches in America, especially across the northern part of the country. These churches provided a focal point for the development of African-American communities. After the Civil War newly constructed schools served as another community focus (Skelcher 1995). Both Odessa and Middletown had African-American neighborhoods by 1880, and there were looser, rural communities at Summit Bridge and south of Delaware City, in the area known as Congo Town. Smaller clusters of African-Americans were found at Armstrong Corners and Boyd's Corner.

TABLE 3
AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHURCHES IN ST. GEORGES HUNDRED

CHURCH	FOUNDED	ADDRESS	COMMUNITY
Zoar Methodist Episcopal	1845	W. Front Street	Odessa
Mount Piggah Union American Methodist Episcopal	1820		Summit Bridge
St. Peter's Methodist Episcopal	1870	5th Street	Delaware City
St. James Methodist Episcopal	1886	Church Street	St. Georges
Zion African Methodist Episcopal	1834		Congo Town
Trinity African Methodist Episcopal	1894	Lockwood St.	Middletown
Mount Salem Union American Methodist Episcopal	1846	4th and Bayards Sts.	Delaware City
Dale's Methodist Episcopal	1869	S. Lake St.	Middletown