

## Chapter 3

### HISTORIC BACKGROUND

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#### A. SUMMARY

The history of the area and the project corridor was treated in considerable detail in the Phase IA report (Hunter Research, Inc. 2009: Chapter 4). The following is a condensed summary of the overview section of that chapter. Of particular importance for the whole U.S. Route 301 project in the Colonial period is the influence of a network of cart roads established in the late 1600s to improve transportation between the head of the Chesapeake Bay with the Delaware River. These continued to heavily influence economic and settlement patterns until about 1800.

The individual tract and property histories included in the Phase IA report will be referred to when relevant in the following two chapters.

#### B. THE HERRMAN AND RUMSEY LANDSCAPE, CIRCA 1660 TO 1800

Documented attempts by Europeans to settle this portion of the Mid-Peninsula Divide commenced with the acquisition of lands around the Bohemia River in Maryland by Augustine Herrman in the 1660s. At this time Herrman was granted 6,000 acres of land as “Bohemia Manor” on the Bohemia River by Lord Baltimore. Later additions to Herrmann’s holdings included the St. Augustine Manor which extended from the eastern boundary line of Bohemia Manor over to the Delaware River (Bedini 2001:469). Herrman was well aware of the importance of this overland corridor and established a network of roads that was further developed by his successors in the area (Fernow 1877:337).

Charles Rumsey’s purchase of the “Adjunction” Tract from Herrman’s son in 1695 marks the beginning of the influence of the Rumsey family in the same area (Rumsey Family Papers, Box 4, Folder 15). It was only a short distance overland between Bohemia Landing, which was situated next to Adjunction, to a landing at the head of the navigable waters of the *Appoquinimink* Creek (near modern Odessa), which flowed into the Delaware Bay. Thus a cart road from Bohemia Landing to the landing on the Appoquinimink was less than eight miles long and was the shortest overland route between the Delaware Valley and the Chesapeake Bay region. With his purchase of Adjunction, Charles Rumsey was uniquely positioned to exploit the expected rise in traffic along this key length in the primary overland route between the northern and southern British colonies.

Although the precise location of the historic alignment of Herrman’s cart road from Bohemia Landing to the *Appoquinimink* River has been the subject of some scholarly debate, *the Rumsey Family map of circa 1740 (Figures 3.1 through 3.3) shows with a fair degree of accuracy the alignment of the road between Bohemia Landing and the site of modern day Middletown, in addition to several other roads in the area.*

Another important road that ran through the project area in the 17th century that was definitely constructed by the Herrman family was the “cart road to Reedy Island.” This route began on the Appoquinimink Path and ran eastwards to Casparius Herrman’s plantation on the Delaware on the south side of Augustine Creek near Reedy Island (Scharf 1879:430). The Reedy Island road was constructed by Casparius Herrman to link his plantation with his father’s house (James and

Jameson 1913:113). It crossed east to west through the project area north of modern day Armstrong Corner Road. It shows up as an unidentified dotted line on the Rumsey map. Another unidentified road is shown extending from the east side of Choptank Road north of the Bohemia Landing cart road and heading off to the northeast but it is unclear both when this road was constructed and what its intended destination was.

Charles' son William Rumsey died, in 1742, and left his lands at the head of the Bohemia River to his son, William Rumsey, Jr. (Rumsey Family Papers, Box 4, Folder 15). William Rumsey, Jr., his brother Benjamin Rumsey and his son Nathan Rumsey were all active in the struggle for American independence (Chesnutt and Taylor 1990:210). In the years following the war's close, elements of the family seem to have relocated to the more stylish urban centers of Philadelphia, New Castle, Wilmington and Georgetown, Delaware. It was during this same period that the significance of Bohemia Landing and the cart road went into its last phases of decline. The eventual construction and opening of the full length of the Chesapeake & Delaware Canal in 1829 was the final blow to any cross peninsular trade along the old cart road (Snyder and Guss 1974:15-17).

### **C. THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY: TRANSPORTATION AND SETTLEMENT PATTERNS**

Over the first few decades of the 19th century the landscape of the project corridor changed relatively little. The Heald map of New Castle County Roads (Figure 3.4) documents a few alterations to the local road network. The road today known as Armstrong Road had been laid out between Choptank Road and the Middletown Road. At the southern end of the study corridor, the section of the Choptank Road that extended south of its intersection with the Bohemia Landing to Appoquinimink Landing cart road is not

depicted, suggesting that it had may have begun to go out of use by that date. The segment of roadway had not entirely gone out of existence because it appears again on a map of 1836 showing the proposed alignment of the Delaware Railroad.

The historical landscape of the project area was more significantly altered between 1849 (Figure 3.5) and 1868 (Figure 3.6) when the Delaware Railroad Company built a railroad that connected New Castle and Dover, and the Armstrong family developed their property at the intersection of Armstrong Corner Road and the Road to Middletown.

By 1850, a railroad that had been authorized in 1836 was finally completed between Dover and New Castle. When chartered in 1836, the Delaware Railroad was meant to connect the New Castle and French Town Railroad to the southern boundary of the state, including branches to Lewes, Seaford and other important towns in Delaware. The construction of the railroad facilitated the shipment of the area's agricultural produce and fostered the growth of Middletown from a rural crossroads to large village. Today, the tracks cross the proposed U.S. Route 301 alignment at the northern part of Section 2 (Hayes 1882).

Although the Armstrong family had held land at the intersection of Armstrong Corner Road and the Road to Middletown since 1820, the only building they had constructed on their property was the main house situated to the north of the crossroads. By 1868, however, they had built a number of buildings including a shoe shop and store at the intersection and the place was acquiring an identity of its own (Figure 3.6). Benjamin Armstrong also built a brickyard in the vicinity of Armstrong Corner that he operated from about 1878 (Scharf 1888:992). In 1888 historian J. Thomas Scharf described the village as follows, "Armstrong's Corner is a small village situated between Middletown and Mount Pleasant. It

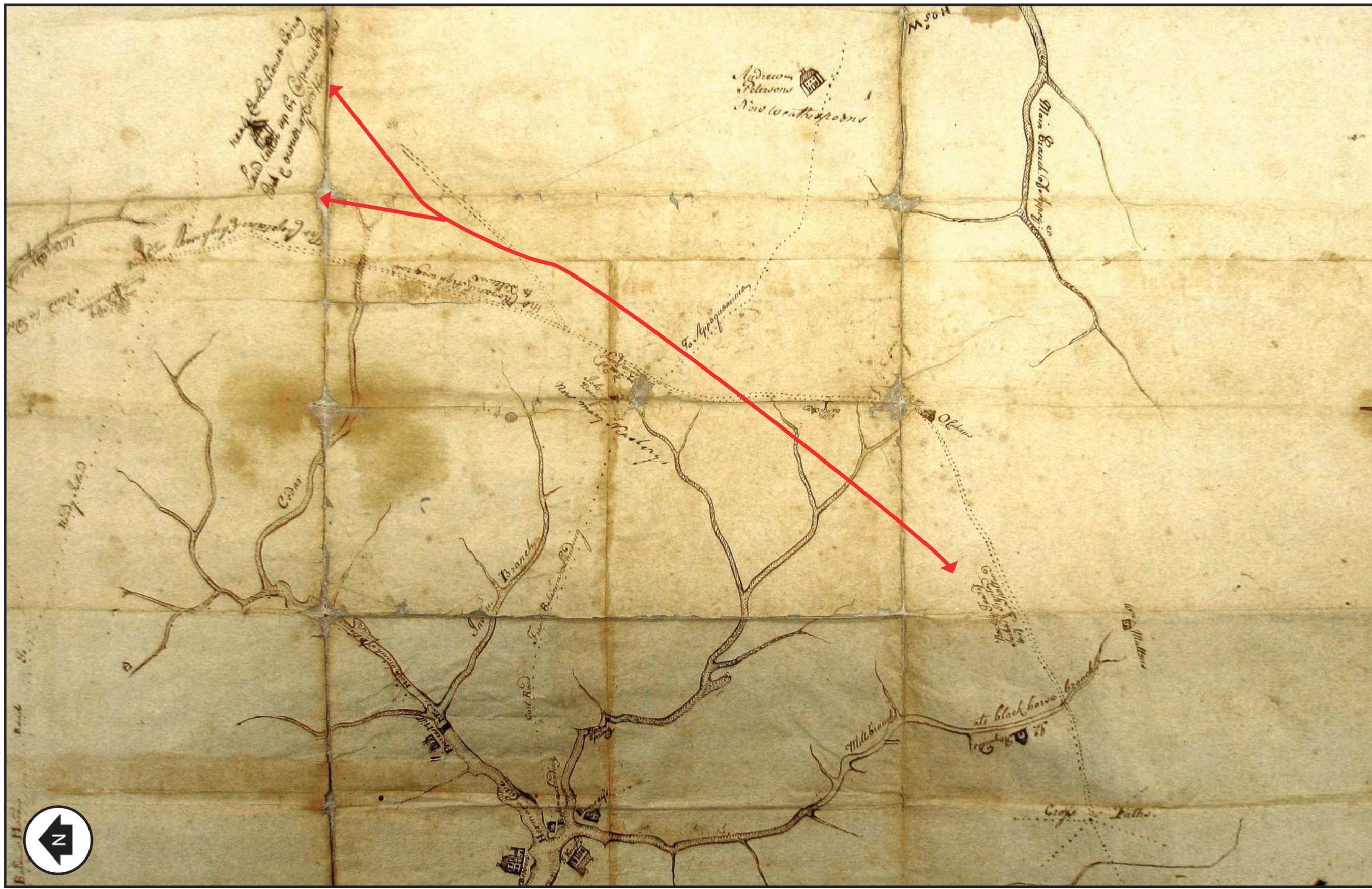


Figure 3.1. Manuscript Map of Bohemia Landing and Adjacent Lands at the Head of the Bohemia River. Circa 1740. Scale: 1 inch= 2,000 feet (approximately). Study corridor indicated. (Source: Rumsey Family Papers, Box 5, Folder 2, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.).



Figure 3.2. Manuscript Map of circa 1740 Overlaid on Aerial Photograph of 2007, Southern Portion of Project Area. Scale: 1 inch= 1,400 feet (approximately). Study corridor indicated (Base Photography Source: Delaware DataMil Aerial Imagery).



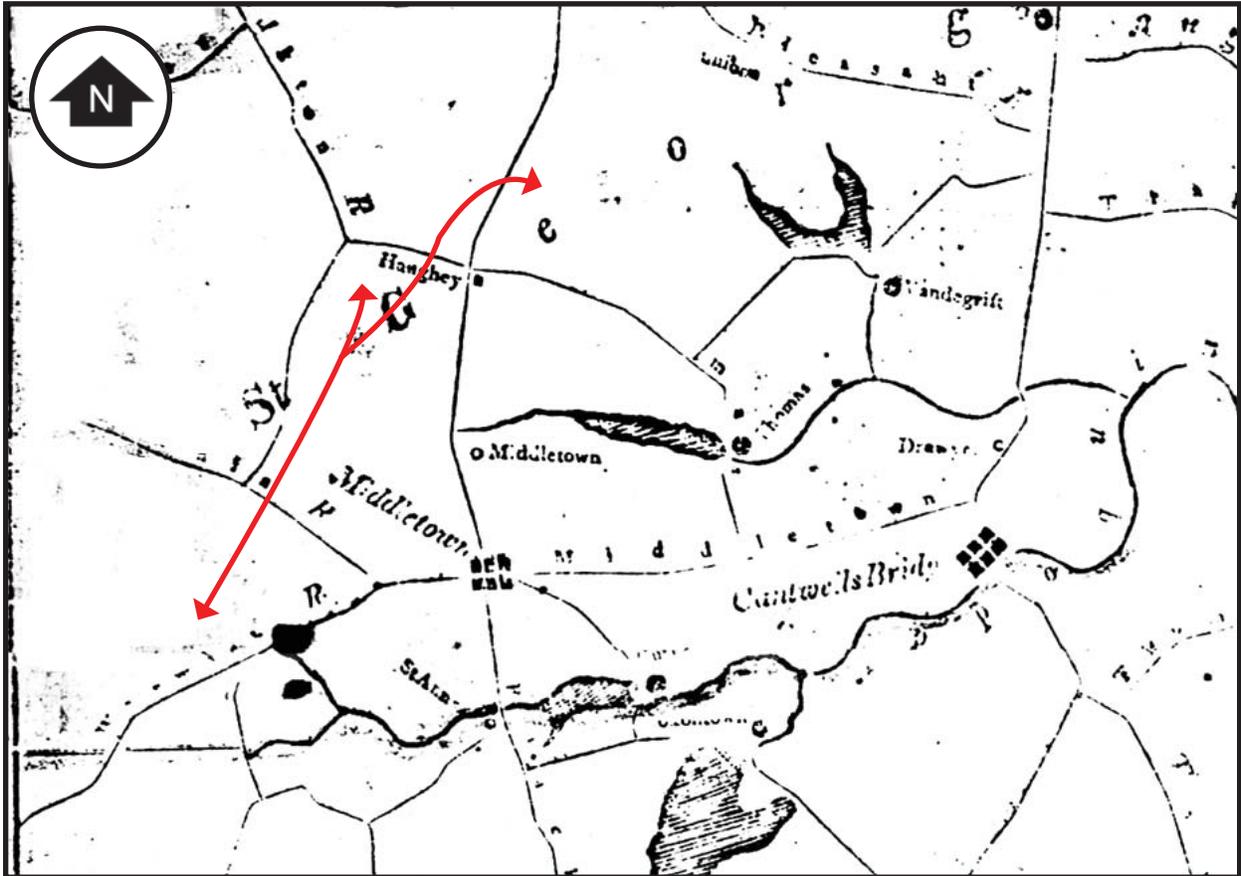


Figure 3.4. Heald, Henry. Roads of New Castle County. 1820. Scale: 1 inch= 1.3 miles (approximately). Study corridor indicated.



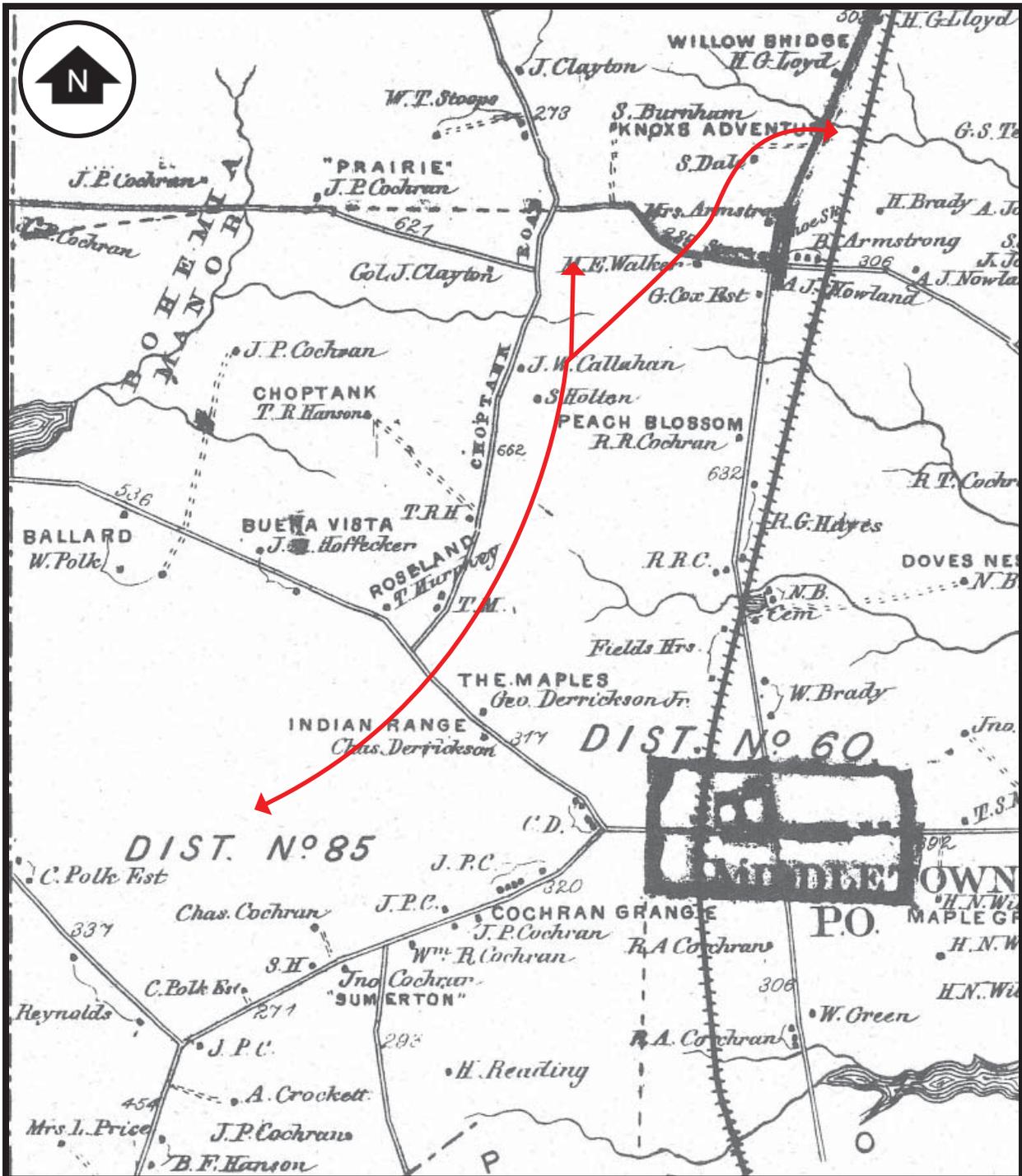


Figure 3.6. Beers, D.G. St. George's Hundred. Atlas of the State of Delaware. 1868. Scale 1 inch: 3,200 feet (approximately). Study corridor indicated.



contains a store kept by W.H. Science, a brick yard, a Presbyterian Chapel, a wheelwright and blacksmith shop and about twenty-dwellings” (Scharf 1888:993).

In apparent response to the growing settlement at Armstrong Corner, the State of Delaware created additional school districts in the vicinity. In the 1870s School District No. 96 was formed and a new school built just west of the crossroads (New Castle County Clerk of the Peace). Benjamin Vance Armstrong, to whom much of the Armstrong family land at Armstrong Corner descended, was very active in the school district. In 1897, he was appointed clerk of the district (Delaware General Assembly 1897).

The current project area was also home to several free African Americans in the 19th century. Samuel Dale purchased nearly 20 acres of land in 1854 on which he built a house. Adam Carsons owned just over 28 acres of land on Choptank Road from 1840 to 1850 while Amos Bell owned over 120 acres on Armstrong Corner and Choptank Roads from 1838 to 1865. Historian William H. Williams study *Slavery and Freedom in Delaware, 1639-1685* provides a context in which to view this pattern of settlement in the project area. According to Williams, in 1860 about 10 percent of free African American males in rural Delaware were tenant farmers while only 5 percent owned their own farms. The average size of the 141 African American-owned farms was 67 acres. Historian Patience Essah’s study of African Americans in Delaware found that the richest free black farmer in New Castle County in 1860 owned \$8,000 worth of real estates (Essah 1985:196; Williams 1999:202-203). Thus Samuel Dale and Adam Carsons likely serve as fairly typical examples of land-owning African Americans in ante-bellum Delaware. On the other hand Amos Bell, who in 1860 owned over 120 acres of real estate valued at \$5,000, would certainly have been considered to be of more elite status (United States Census 1860).

The general agricultural character of the project area remained relatively unchanged throughout the 19th century. St. George’s Hundred as a whole remained predominately agricultural. A large portion of St. George’s Hundred was devoted to peach production in the mid-1800s and many farmers gained a great deal of wealth from the cultivation of this crop for market. However, by the late 19th century many farmers went bankrupt when “peach blight” destroyed the crop throughout the region (Scharf 1888:981-982).

#### **D. MODERN CHANGES CIRCA 1900 TO 2009**

Those farmers that remained in a financially viable position retained their wealth by diversifying the production of their farms. Thus in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, farmers introduced new methods and types of production. In St. George’s Hundred poultry and dairy farming became increasingly important and this is certainly the case within the current project area (see for example, the discussion of the Holton Farm below). With the exception of the introduction of new products, the farms on the rural outskirts of Middletown remained remarkably unchanged through the 19th and 20th centuries (Figure 3.8). Twentieth century maps and aerial photography reveal a landscape that continued to be marked by medium-sized agricultural tracts and little development.

However, by the beginning of the 21st century, these large tracts of farmland that had characterized southern New Castle County were increasingly overtaken by residential and commercial development. Housing developments, shopping centers and office complexes were built along the eastern side of U.S. Route 301. In 2007, the new Appoquinimink High School and Spring Arbor Homes were built on the south side of Bunker Hill Road. Development continues to proliferate to the west and south of Middletown.

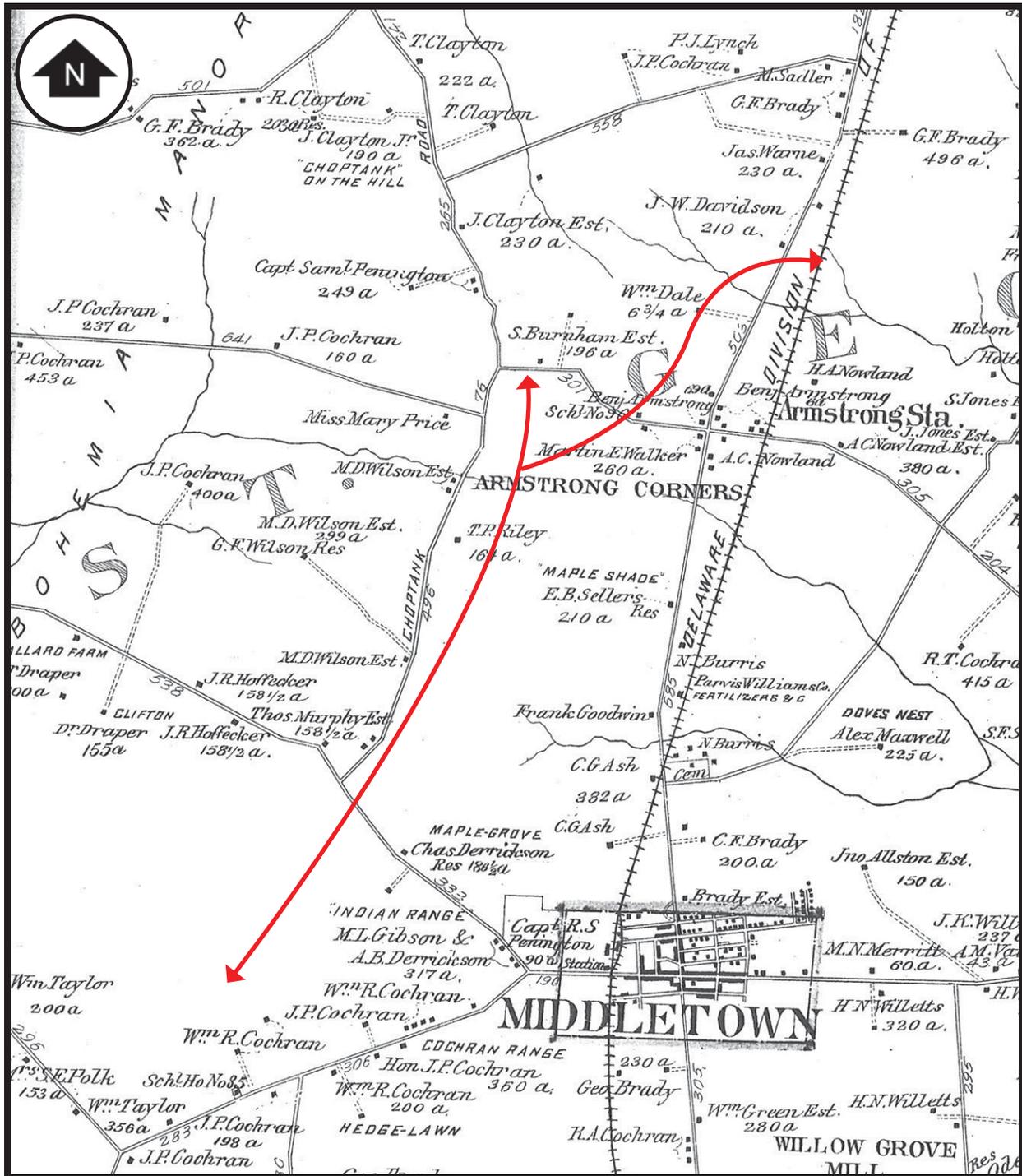


Figure 3.8. Baist, G.W. Atlas of New Castle County, Delaware. 1893. Scale 1 inch: 3,200 feet (approximately). Study corridor indicated.

This residential and commercial growth caused increased strain on the transportation infrastructure of rural Middletown. Thus in 2007, the Delaware Department of Transportation began a full reconstruction of Choptank Road from Bunker Hill to Bethel Church Road. Plans included the construction of three roundabouts, one at the intersection of Choptank Road. The roundabout, one of the first in the state, was meant to slow traffic and deter truck traffic. However, it quickly had to be reworked when it became evident that the roundabout could not accommodate the transportation needs of large farm equipment (Delaware Department of Transportation 2007; Henely 2008).