

MID-ATLANTIC HISTORIC BUILDINGS SURVEY

BELL FARM

Walker School Road, Blackbird Hundred
Taylor's Bridge Vicinity
New Castle County, Delaware

By

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I. Site Information

Site Name: Bell Farm

CRS Number: N-13558

Location: West side of Walker School Road, 0.75 miles southwest of the intersection of Walker School Road and Flemings Landing Road (Route 9)
Taylor's Bridge vicinity
Blackbird Hundred
New Castle County, Delaware

Date of Fieldwork: November 1998 – April 1999

Type of Documentation: Level II: partial intensive
annotated field notes (6 sheets)
pencil drawings (5 sheets)
ink-on-mylar drawings (2 sheets)
large format black and white photos (12)
architectural data sheet

Significance: The Bell House is significant as an example of a typical mid-nineteenth-century small farm dwelling. Built circa 1840, the earliest portion of the house is based on a hall-parlor plan with a paneled winder stair and fireplace in the hall. The house is remarkable for the level of original finish that survives in the Period I section, including original decorative paint on the interior of the cabinet doors in the hall.

II. Architectural Description

The Bell Farm is located on the west side of Walker School Road, approximately 0.75 miles from the intersection of Walker School Road and Flemings Landing Road (Route 9), and is surrounded by primarily agricultural activities and some twentieth-century housing. The 183-acre farm includes a mid-nineteenth-century frame dwelling and four early-twentieth-century outbuildings. Situated on the north side of the farm lane, the dwelling faces the road 83 feet away, while the outbuildings form a line along the same side of the lane stretching to the west and facing south. A few large trees and flowering shrubs mark the edges of the front and side yards, while planted fields lie on either side of the farm lane and outbuildings.

The dwelling is composed of two main sections: a two-and-a-half story frame three-bay main block (measuring 32 by 16) and a two-story frame kitchen ell off the west or rear elevation (measuring 20 by 15). A small frame shed on a concrete block foundation expands the kitchen ell at the west end and an enclosed porch covers the first floor of the west side of the main block and the south side of the kitchen ell.

The main block is a two-and-a-half-story, gable-roofed, frame structure with two gable end interior chimneys. The frame sits on a fieldstone foundation and is presently covered with aluminum siding that extends around the kitchen ell also. The original wood shingle roof is covered with corrugated metal. The two-story, gable-roofed, frame kitchen ell extends off the northwest corner of the west elevation but the roof ridge only reaches as high as the cornice of the main block. The foundation of the ell is not readily accessible. The roof is covered with corrugated metal and is pierced at the west gable end by an interior chimney stack.

The east or front elevation of the main block is divided into three equal bays. On the first floor a central door is flanked by two six-over-six light, single sash windows. The door is reached by three steps creating a small platform. The door has two elongated panels, with

pointed tops and bottoms, and is topped by a three-light transom. The second floor has three six-over-six light, single sash windows equally spaced in the elevation. All the windows are flanked by shutters, held in place by shutter dogs with a shell motif. The shutters on the first floor are solid, while those on the second floor are louvered. A plain box cornice terminates the elevation, wrapping around the gable ends. The chimney stack on the southern gable end is corbeled out at the top; three layers going out and the top one going back in. The chimney stack on the north gable end appears to have been altered.

The north elevation of the main block has only one window on the first floor, located in the eastern half of the elevation. The single window on the second floor is not aligned with the window on the first floor, but is located towards the center of the elevation. Two square, four-light, casement windows light the attic, flanking the interior chimney stack. The kitchen ell has four six-over-six-light, single sash windows, two placed symmetrically on each of the first and second floors. The western window on the first floor, however, is slightly bigger than the eastern window. A plain boxed cornice terminates the elevation of the kitchen ell.

The west gable elevation of the kitchen ell is covered on the first story by a modern shed addition. This shed has one four-over-four-light, single sash window in the northern half of the elevation and two six-light casement windows in the southern half, creating a double window. There are no windows on the second floor of the kitchen ell gable elevation. A one-story enclosed porch, on a concrete foundation, covers the south elevation of the kitchen ell and west elevation of the main block. Two six-light casement windows, creating a double window, are located in the west elevation of the enclosed porch closest to the kitchen ell. The west elevation of the enclosed porch against the main block has two windows. One six-light casement window is located at the north corner, while a smaller four-light casement window is located towards the southern corner of the porch. There are two windows on the second floor of the west elevation of the main block. One six-over-six-light single sash window is located roughly in the center of the elevation. To the north end of the elevation there is a slightly smaller four-over-four-light single sash window.

On the south elevation, all of the various periods and sections of the dwelling are visible. The shed addition has a single opening, a door located towards the kitchen ell. Four openings pierce the elevation of the enclosed porch: starting from the west end these are a six-light casement window, a door, and two six-over-six-light casement windows. The second floor of the kitchen ell has two six-over-six-light single sash windows spaced evenly across the elevation. The south elevation of the main block has one six-over-six-light single sash window located on the first floor, near the eastern corner of the elevation. There are no windows on the second floor, and the attic has two square four-light windows flanking the interior chimney stack.

Interior

The central door on the east elevation opens into the larger of the two rooms on the first floor of the main block or Period I section, which is organized on a hall-parlor plan. The partition wall stands immediately to the south of the entry door, with a central door opening into the southern room. The northern room measures approximately 17 by 15 feet, with a fireplace centrally placed against the north wall. An enclosed winder stair with a closet underneath fills the northwest corner next to the fireplace. Plain four-panel doors access the stair and closet. The interior side of the closet door is finished with a painted faux graining. Two steps extend outside the winder stair box into the room. A cabinet is built into the east side of the chimney stack. The fireplace has an accolade surround over the opening, underneath a plain mantel. Two windows light the room, one in the northeast corner of the north wall and the other on the east wall. A door in the west wall leads into the kitchen ell.

The southern room, which measures approximately 13 by 15 feet, features a fireplace with an **accolade** surround, similar to the one in the other room, on the south wall. Cabinets are built into each side of the chimney stack. One window lights the room on the east wall and a second one fills the space next to the chimney stack in the east corner of the south wall. On the west wall a door opens into the enclosed porch.

The first floor of the kitchen ell contains a single room, measuring 15 by 19 feet. Two

different sets of windows light the kitchen. Two original six-over-six-light windows pierce the north wall, evenly spaced over the length of the room. On the south wall, the original windows were replaced by a six-over-six light, single sash, double window in the eastern half and a door in the western half that gives access to the enclosed porch. The west wall of the kitchen ell contains a central fireplace flanked on the north by a closet and a narrow enclosed winder stair. The molding around the windows and doors is very simple in this room. The doors on the stair box and closet are plain boards. The chimneystack is covered with as asphalt brick veneer. To the south of the fireplace is a door that opens into the modern shed addition. Half of this shed is occupied by a bathroom, measuring about 8 by 15 feet. A door in the south wall of the kitchen opens into an L-shaped enclosed porch. The southern end of the enclosed porch consists of a small frame shed, measuring roughly 5 by 6 feet.

The second floor of the main block is divided into three rooms across the front of the dwelling and a passageway that runs along the west or rear wall from the winder stair in the northwest corner to a room at the south end of the house. This room, measuring approximately 9 by 15 feet, has a window in the east and west walls. The south wall has a central chimney stack and is flanked by a built-in closet in the southwest corner.

The central room in the main block, measuring 9 by 11 feet, has a door in its west wall and a window in the east wall. The northern room, measuring 11 by 9 feet, has a window in its east and north wall and the northwest corner is occupied by the chimney stack. Besides the doors opening into the rooms of the main block, the passageway also has a winder stair in the northwest corner that provides access to the attic and a door in the west wall that accesses the second floor of the kitchen ell.

The second floor of the kitchen ell is three steps below the second floor level of the main block. This space is divided into two almost equal rooms, each measuring approximately 9 by 15 feet. Each room is lighted by a single window on each of the north and south walls. A door in the center of the partition wall provides access between the two rooms. The western room has

a chimney stack centered against the west wall; the winder stair to the first floor is located in the northwest corner. The eastern room is unheated.

The attic space of the third floor is an undivided space with a knee wall on the east and west walls. The roof consists of 15 sawn rafters which are butt-jointed.

Outbuildings

There are four outbuildings on the property, three small frame sheds and a modern machine shed. They are arranged along the north side of the farm lane, west of the dwelling.

Roughly 65 feet to the southwest of the house sits a square frame shed, measuring roughly 9 by 11 feet. The roof slopes from south to north. The sill rests directly on the ground. Originally the shed had four four-light casement windows covered by a plain pediment, one in each of the four elevations. Three of the four walls are covered with plain tongue and groove vertical siding. The east elevation, however, is covered with beaded tongue and groove siding. The door in the southeast corner of the southern elevation also consists of beaded boards. On the interior the four corner posts are connected by rails below the windows.

To the west of the shed, only inches away, sits a frame gable-roofed work shed supported by concrete block piers. The shed is divided in two equal parts. The eastern half has no floor. The western half has log joists and a sill resting on stone, brick, and concrete piers, raising the floor approximately one foot above the ground. There appear to be a lot of reused materials in the shed. The western section has square corner posts with upbraces and downbraces along the west wall. The eastern section just has downbraces. The central posts are log. The rest of the structural elements appear to be circular-sawn. The partition between the eastern and western sections consists of three tree trunks and a series of widely spaced boards.

The collapsed remains of a frame tool shed sit eight feet northwest of the work shed. The floor is raised on concrete block. The roof sloped from east to west and the door was located in

the western elevation.

A large modern machine shed is located 28 feet to the west of the second shed. It is built of log posts set in the ground. The western half is enclosed with plywood siding. The eastern half is open.

III. Property History

The documentary history of the Bell House property is difficult to piece together and raises significant questions regarding the extant house and its origins, specifically the question of whether the house was originally built on this property or moved there at a later date.

The first identifiable owner of the Bell Farm property was Richardson H. Armstrong who purchased 300 acres along Blackbird Creek in 1853. Following this initial purchase, Richardson sought to expand his farm in 1855 by purchasing 200 acres from Juliann Chambers, as well as an additional 200 acres from John H. Faulkner.

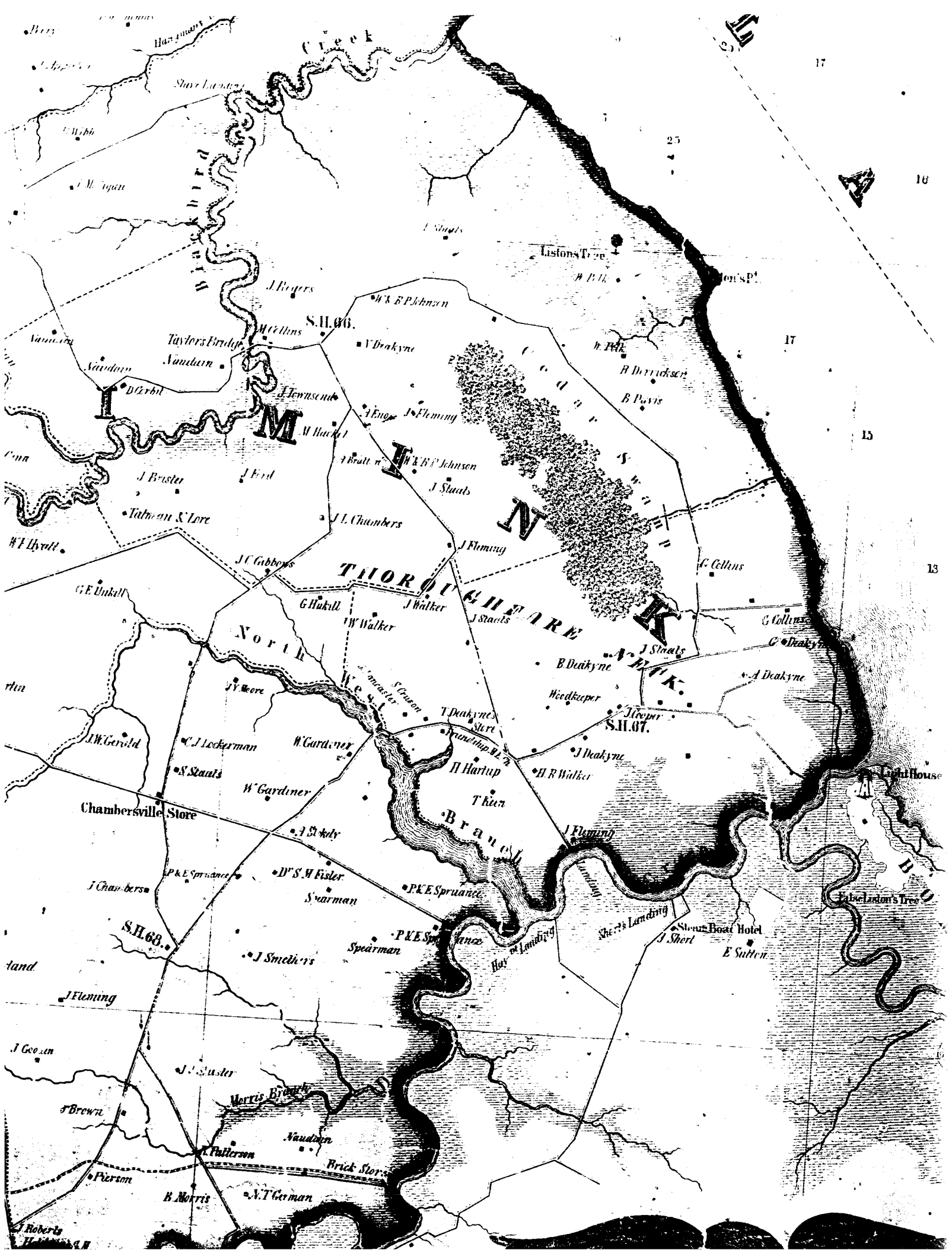
A short while after these purchases, in 1856, Richardson H. sold 200 acres including land formerly belonging to Juliann Chambers, along the road from Taylor's Bridge to Smyrna, to Samuel A. and Anna A. Armstrong. Records are unavailable to clarify any family relationship between the two Armstrongs. The 1861 tax assessment described the Armstrongs as living in a log dwelling, that also possessed a frame stable. During Samuel Armstrong's ownership of the property he made several deals involving various pieces of real estate. In 1871, he sold 200 acres to John C. Armstrong, relation unknown, only to buy it back again in 1875 for the same price. Likewise, in 1882, Samuel sold 200 acres of upland and marsh to Anna E. Macy for \$4,000.

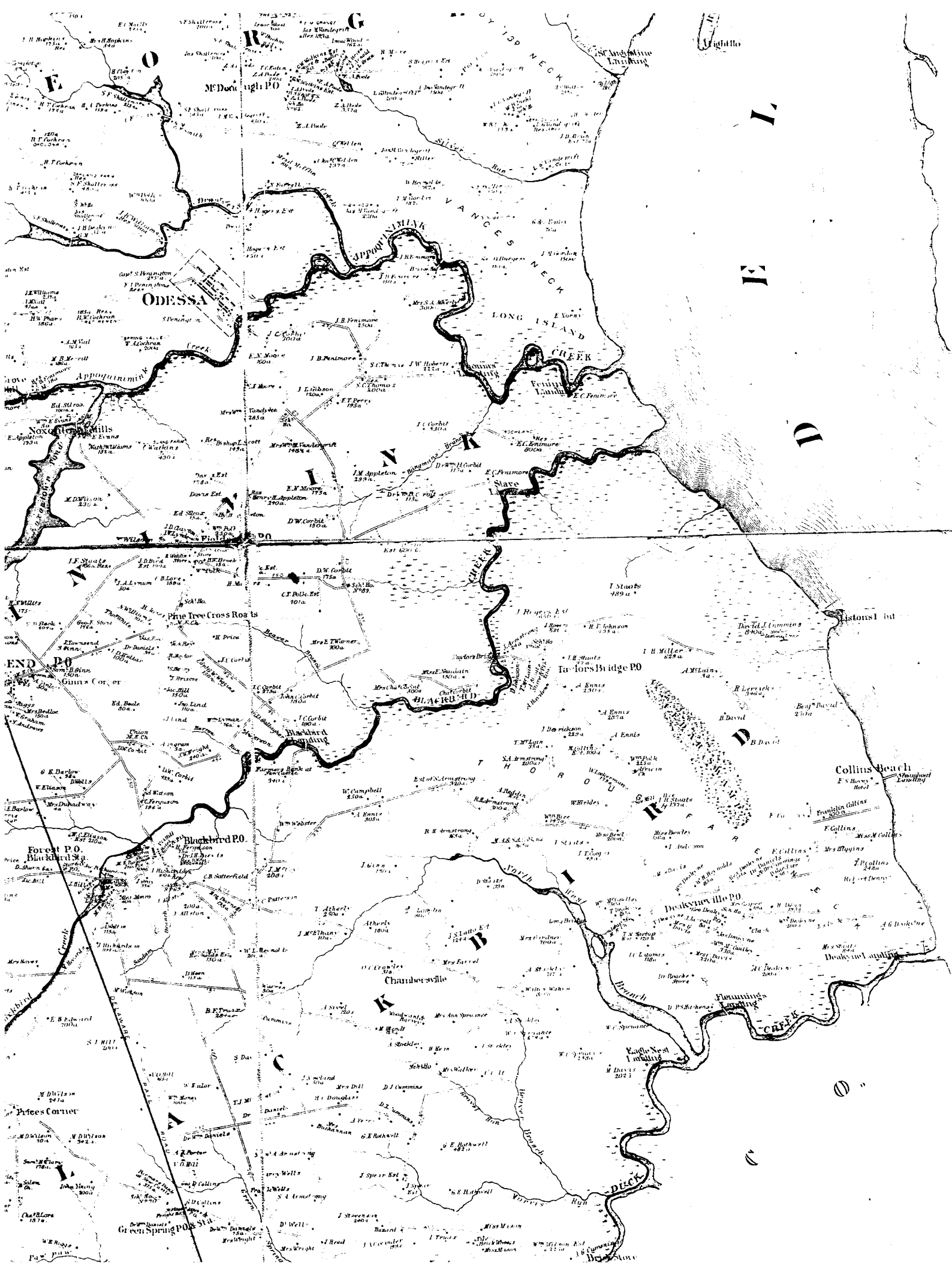
Early in Samuel's tenure, the farm produced primarily indian corn and oats, but by 1880 its production had diversified to include a variety of orchard products, such as apples and peaches. The production of butter also increased greatly during this time, suggesting that Armstrong was involved in the dairy industry. Samuel, listed in census records as being 45 years old in 1870, appears to have died between May 3, 1882, and January 23, 1897, when Anna A. Armstrong's name appears on the deed for a land acquisition.

On July 14, 1898, Anna A. Armstrong ended the family's ownership by selling the land to John C. and Jennie E. Bell. Five years after taking over the property, John transferred the title to Jennie. She inhabited the property until her death in 1958, when it was purchased by Laura M. Lentz. Shortly after Jennie's passing, Laura sold the property to Charles Avery Bell. The Bell

family held on to the property until Virginia M. Bell, to whom Charles had sold the land in 1965, died in 1980. William and Frances Bradley, along with Charles and Ethel B. Schway, inherited the house and maintained it before finally selling it to the State of Delaware.

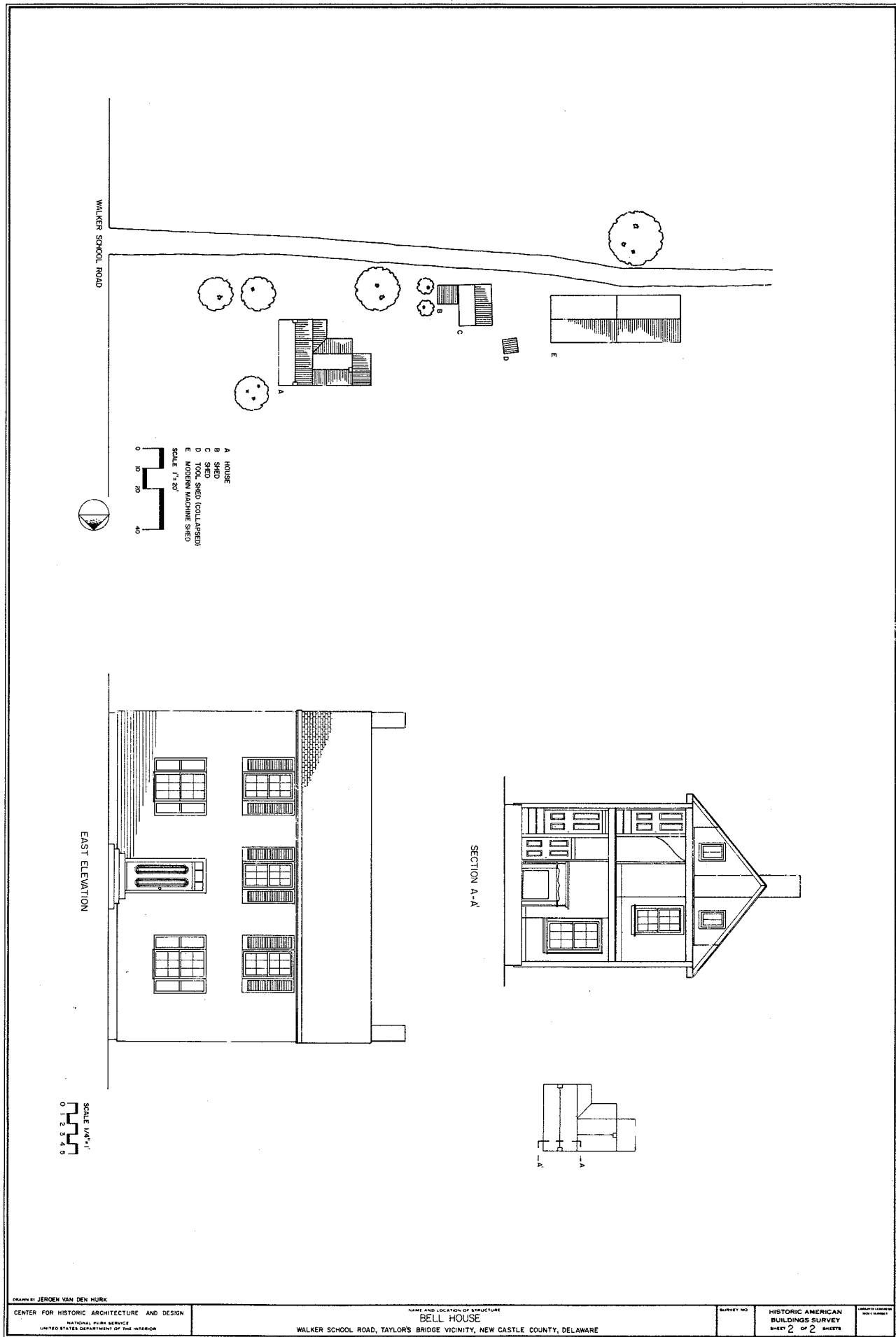
As late as 1861, the documentary sources describe the dwelling on the property as being made of log. But the Bell House is of frame construction, and architectural evidence suggests that it was constructed between 1840 and 1850. One possible explanation for this discrepancy is that the house was constructed at an earlier date and moved to its current site at some point after 1861. This might also explain why the Bell House lacks a cellar.







MEASURED DRAWINGS



DRAWN BY JEROEN VAN DEN HURK

CENTER FOR HISTORIC ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

NAME AND LOCATION OF STRUCTURE
BELL HOUSE

WALKER SCHOOL ROAD, TAYLOR'S BRIDGE VICINITY, NEW CASTLE COUNTY, DELAWARE

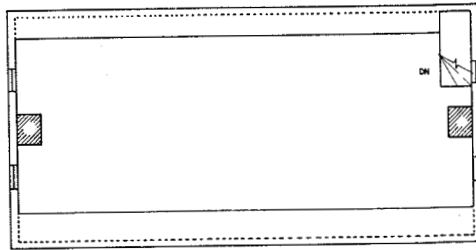
SURVEY NO.

HISTORIC AMERICAN
BUILDINGS SURVEY
SHEET 2 OF 2 SHEETS

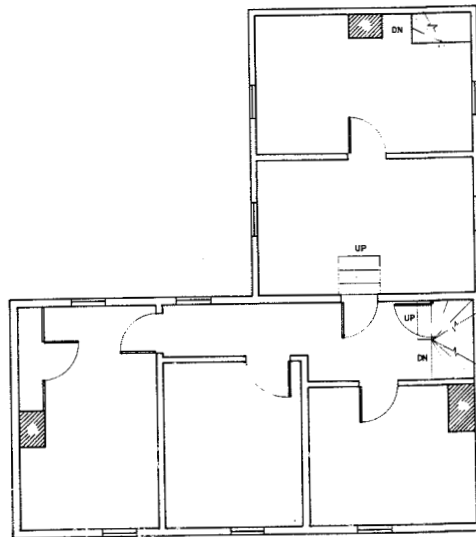
PROJECT NUMBER
BELL HOUSE

REPRODUCED FROM THE HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, FALL OF 1961. DATE OF THE DRAWING.

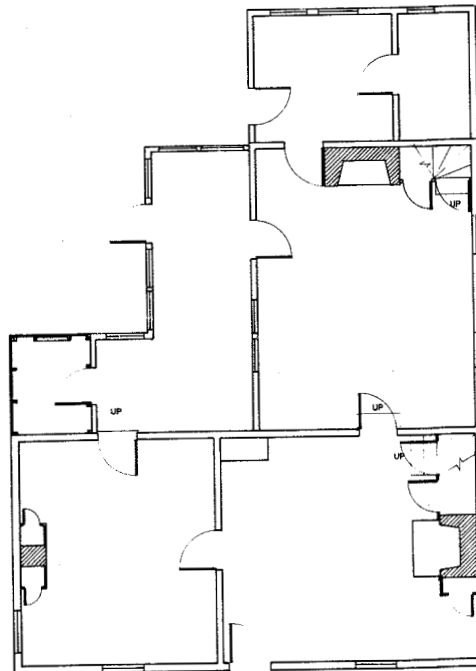
ATTIC PLAN



SECOND FLOOR PLAN



FIRST FLOOR PLAN



SCALE 1/4"=1'



PHOTOGRAPHS

MID-ATLANTIC HISTORIC BUILDINGS SURVEY

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Bell Farm CRS # N-13558
West side of Walker School Road, 0.75 miles southwest of the
intersection of Walker School Road and Flemings Landing Road (Route 9)
Taylor's Bridge vicinity
Blackbird Hundred
New Castle County, Delaware

Photographer: David L. Ames December 1998

- N-13558-1 Environmental view of the farm complex looking northwest
- N-13558-2 Perspective of the south and east elevations of the house, looking northwest
- N-13558-3 Detail of shutter dog on window of east elevation
- N-13558-4 Perspective of the north and west elevations of the house, looking southeast
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