

The Ramsey House  
Brandywine Hundred,  
New Castle County, Delaware

Prepared by

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## I. Introduction

The Ramsey House is located just north of Ramsey Road (County Road 224) and east of Brandywine Creek in Brandywine Hundred, New Castle County (Figure 1). The dwelling stands as a two-story, rubble stone dwelling reflecting two major periods of nineteenth-century construction activity and a third modern remodeling episode. Overall, the house is in sound condition with the greatest degree of historic architectural integrity associated with the first construction phase in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. The high state of preservation for the earliest period of the building coupled with subsequent changes made to the second period addition of circa 1835 suggest that modernization efforts including the introduction of a modern kitchen, bath, and other amenities including utilities should be introduced into the structure's north or rear rooms. Moreover, any introduction of wiring, heating and cooling systems, or other utilities into the south or front of the building should be inserted with the absolute minimum of disturbance to existing historic fabric. The following assessment follows the historic evolution of the house through its two main construction periods and concludes with a set of recommendations for the renovation and preservation of the Ramsey House.

## II. Historic Background

The Ramsey House appears to have been built in two major phases in the first three decades of the nineteenth century. Tentative deed and tax research for the property does not resolve the construction date for the earliest period of the building which will be discussed below. Preliminary findings indicate that the property on which the house stands was one of several acquired by William and Isaac Smith from Curtis and Mary Talley around 1816. Although the chain of title from the Ramsey family back to the Smith family in 1856 is clear, the firm documentation of earlier transactions remains unresolved. Until further deed research is completed, the actual property trace will remain clouded. Tax lists for 1803 through 1824 provide little additional concrete information clearly identifying the house and its owners. William Smith and Curtis Talley both appear in the assessment lists for 1816, but their architectural holdings are noted simply as "Buildings." Similarly, probate records associated with the property have yet to be identified.

### III. Physical History

The Ramsey House reflects two major periods of nineteenth-century construction activity. The following physical history of the house addresses each of these periods in sequence as well as subsequent modern alterations.

**Period I: 1800-1816.** The Ramsey House began as a rubble stone dwelling built at the base of an earthen embankment. Although the documentary record has yet to reveal firm dating evidence for the house, the consistent use of hand-headed cut nails, exposed framing elements, and Federal period woodwork strongly suggest a construction date in the early years of the nineteenth century. Facing south, the 30 by 19 foot Period I dwelling included a cellar kitchen with more formal rooms and sleeping chambers in the two upper stories. Openings in the north cellar wall of the Period I dwelling indicate that the original slope was sufficiently low to allow for a full window and likely a bulkhead cellar entry on the uphill elevation. The three-story south elevation of the building was provided with a full length porch which sheltered the principal cellar entry and provided external access to the main living rooms on the floor above. Existing evidence suggests that a porch configuration of this sort was supported on stone piers original to the design of the building and simply abutting the south wall of the cellar.

The cellar of the Period I house was divided by a finished vertical board partition into two rooms which retain their original configuration (Figure 2). Separate exterior entries opened under the porch into each of these spaces which served very different functions. The smaller west room was roughly eight feet wide by 16 feet deep with an opposing door at either end. A corbeled corner chimney support occupies the northwest corner while the board partition bears the ghost of a peg rail for hanging stored items. A single door, hung on strap hinges toward the southern end of the partition, opened into a large cellar kitchen. As built, the nearly 16 foot square kitchen was the largest room in the house. A second door in the south elevation provided independent external access to the kitchen from a work area under the porch which adjoined a three-and-a-half foot diameter stone-lined well. The kitchen was lit by sash windows in both the north and south elevations. On the interior the east end of the room was dominated by a large open fireplace eight feet wide and over three feet deep. The present segmental arch carried on wrought iron bars appears to replace an earlier timber lintel more closely associated with

eighteenth-century construction practice. The fireplace was closed down in Period II with one half of the flue sealed and the other half modified to take a brick-lined bake oven. Although the kitchen walls were plastered at an early date, the plaster coat may cover earlier whitewashed surfaces. The ceiling in the Period I kitchen exhibited exposed and chamfered joists and planed floor boards. The Period I flooring for the room was not determined, but both paved and wooden floors have been recorded in other comparable dwellings. Finally, the northeast corner of the fireplace wall contains a small storage closet and a winder stair leading to the main floor above.

The main floor of the Period I Ramsey House contained two rooms originally divided by a vertical plank partition (Figure 3). The partition, removed in the mid to late twentieth century, may have been lathed and plastered like those on the floor above. Situated over the kitchen below, the larger of the two rooms was 16 feet deep by nearly 12 feet wide with the northeast corner of the east wall containing a winder stair leading to the cellar kitchen below and a lobby landing for the sleeping chambers above. A small fireplace accented with a reeded and gouge-decorated Federal period mantel occupied the center of the east wall while a double-door display cupboard completed the scheme in the southeast corner. Chair rail and baseboard completed the remaining wall treatments. In contrast to the level of wall finish were the ceilings which, like those on the floors above and below, consisted of exposed joists finished with beaded edges and planed floor boards. Access to this room was provided by a stair from the cellar or through opposing doorways which opened out onto the front or south porch and a rear or north porch of unknown size.

Opposite the east room stood a smaller 11 by 16 foot parlor with a corner fireplace finished with a molded surround and mantel cornice. The best lit room in the house, the west parlor was furnished with sash windows in its south, west, and north elevations. Chair rail, baseboard, and ceiling treatments similar to those in the adjoining room completed this space. In both rooms the Period I north windows were altered in Period II. For the parlor, this alteration converted the window into a cupboard; for the main room, remodeling opened the window into a connecting doorway.

The second or chamber story of the Ramsey House consisted of three spaces: a roughly 12 by 6 foot northeast lobby, a 12 1/2 by 9 1/2 foot southeast chamber, and an 11 by 16 foot west chamber (Figure 4). The lobby provided access to both rooms as

well as to the winder stairs that led up from the main floor below and continued to the attic. All three spaces were divided by lath-and-plaster vertical board walls and finished with plaster walls and exposed ceilings displaying beaded edge joists and planed flooring. Like the floor below, the best lit room was the west chamber over the parlor. The southeast room contained two windows in the south elevation, and the lobby possessed a single window in the north elevation as well as a small window lighting the winder stair. The second floor contains additional features of note. First, there is no evidence that the sleeping chambers ever possessed fireplaces. While it is possible that the two rooms were heated with cast iron stoves connected by stove pipes to the flues for the open fireplaces below, the evidence for such an arrangement is far from conclusive. Second, the method for seating the partition dividing the southeast chamber and the lobby exhibits an interesting construction technique. The builders solved the problem of attaching the partition boards by nailing a decoratively-edged nailer to the underside of the exposed joists in the southeast chamber. The vertical boards were then secured with nails driven in from the lobby side.

Finally, the original attic consisted of a common rafter roof covered with wood shingles. Gable windows in the east and west elevations lit this unfinished space which may have served as storage or a rough sleeping loft. The Period II extension of the house involved the complete removal of the Period I roof and the construction of the present through-purlin common rafter arrangement. Like the Period I attic, the Period II space was left unfinished and set aside for simple storage.

In sum, the Period I Ramsey House stood as a banked dwelling with a full three-story south elevation. The cellar floor was dedicated to cooking and cellared storage. The main floor contained the most finished rooms including both a parlor and a main room which likely served as the main sitting room and a formal dining and entertaining area. The main room may well have served the additional function of an office for the business of the farm and other economic pursuits. The upper story with its modest finishes was intended as sleeping chambers, and the attic above for storage and even rougher accommodations, possibly for resident laborers. The Period I Ramsey House has several architectural parallels in the immediate region. Embanked cellar kitchens were built in the early colonial period as seen in the Levis House (circa 1695), Delaware County, Pennsylvania, and the Richardson House (circa 1730), New Castle County, Delaware. These early arrangements, however, utilized

siting that placed the gable end in the embankment. Houses with the long, rear wall embanked and cellar kitchens fronting on work yards appear with greater frequency at the close of the eighteenth century. A house with a comparable date to the Ramsey House stands in the White Clay Creek Preserve. This dwelling follows much the same pattern of the Ramsey House in its overall layout. Somewhat different, but contemporary to the Ramsey House is the Kelton House near New London, Chester County, Pennsylvania. The Kelton House exhibits the same vertical organization as the Ramsey House, but differs in the details of its plan.

**Period II: circa 1830-35.** The Period II enlargement of the Ramsey House ran the entire length of the north elevation and extended the house 16 feet to the rear and further into the north embankment. Like the Period I dwelling, the addition was a full two stories in height and built of locally quarried stone. Unlike the Period I house, which was built with exposed exterior walls with raised mortar joints, the Period II extension appears to have been roughly parged from the period of its construction. In plan, the Period II extension consisted of an earthen floor, an unfinished stone cellar divided by a stone partition into two rooms, and two upper stories consisting of two rooms each divided by an enclosed stair.

The Period II cellar consisted of a roughly 14 by 15 foot northwest room gained from the southwest room via a Period I doorway (Figure 2). The northwest room exhibits evidence for at least one storage cupboard in the southwest corner, but the overall space was originally unfinished although it may have contained either a packed clay or paved floor. The adjoining 14 by 10 1/2 foot northeast room was separated from its neighbor by a stone partition and board-and-batten door. The original use of this space is unclear, but the overall arrangement suggests the storage and preservation of dairy products like butter or cheese. Of additional note is the absence of any exterior communication for the Period II cellar. All communication to the outside or the floor above took place through the Period I cellar spaces.

The Period II plan on the main floor consisted of two rooms with the larger 15 by 14 1/2 foot room in the northwest corner containing a transitional late Federal/early Greek Revival mantel and plain plaster walls (Figure 3). The rounded window jambs and use of cut nails in this room and throughout the Period II extension confirm its post-1830 date. The smaller 8 1/2 by 14 1/2 foot northeast room



housed contained no fireplace. Both rooms were entered from the exterior by doors in the east and west gable ends with one jamb placed on the seam between the Period I and II phases. The opposing gable doors created a lateral passage running the full length of the house. Doorways leading from the Period I southeast front room provided internal access to Period II back rooms. An enclosed 3 foot wide stair between the two rooms rose to a second floor landing.

The second floor of the Period II extension mirrored the first in its arrangement, consisting of a larger northwest room, smaller northeast room, and enclosed stair leading downstairs (Figure 4). Access to the attic could only be gained through the Period I northeast lobby. Both the main and upper floors of the extension contained no direct interior communication with the adjoining southwest Period I rooms. The second floor of the Period II extension is the most heavily damaged area of the house. Exposure to the weather and roof leaks have induced some degree of deterioration in both the floor and ceiling. This damage, however, can be contained and mitigated through the replacement of flooring, plaster, and structural reinforcement.

The Period II appearance of the overall house is what we see today minus the full length south porch. As completed the house gained two additional rooms per floor and a second stair between the main floors of the house. As a double-pile farmhouse, the dwelling continued to house service functions in the cellar kitchen with an increase in adjoining storage areas. The main floor doubled in depth and gained a second stair. The functions of the new back rooms remains unclear although it is likely that the northwest room served as a secondary parlor and the unheated northeast room as supplementary space for the old Period I main room. On the second floor, the new spaces simply provided additional sleeping chambers.

Mid to late twentieth-century changes to the Ramsey House, with the exception of the demolished Period I partition, have been concentrated in the north extension. Modern cooking and bathroom spaces have already been inserted into the main floor north rooms and a heating plant into the northwest cellar room.

Given the modest woodwork in the extension, the deteriorated state of floors and ceilings and the presence of an unfinished attic overhead and unfinished cellar below, the Period II extension is the obvious choice for the placement of utilities, modern kitchen, bath, and other amenities.

#### IV. Ramsey House Recommendations for Renovation

The following recommendations reflect on site discussions and are intended to provide basic guidelines for the renovation of the house with particular attention to preserving its architectural integrity and to making it useful in a modern context. Following the recommendations are reduced copies of the scaled and dimensioned plans for the cellar, main, and upper levels of the Ramsey House. Also appended is an annotated chain of title and abstracts from nineteenth-century tax assessments.

##### **Research:**

- Complete deed and related documentary research for the history of the property prior to 1856.

##### **Period I House:**

- Approach the renovation of the Period I sections of the Ramsey House with extreme caution for minimizing impact on historic fabric.
- Reopen Period I exposed ceilings.
- Restore main floor partition.
- Rebuild galleried porch.
- Repair (or replace if necessary) damaged floor boards.
- Place utilities wherever possible in the north extension of the house.
- Replace missing sash and other elements with materials comparable in design and appearance.

##### **Period II House:**

- Preserve existing Period II woodwork in northwest room.
- Place new kitchen in first floor northeast room.
- Place new master bath in second floor northeast room.
- Add new second floor doorway between Period I northeast lobby and Period II northwest chamber.
- Introduce full size storage closet into southwest corner of the second floor northeast room. Preserve Period II peg rail in this space.
- Partition attic and create one or two finished rooms between existing purlins.
- Build finished closets in attic under south roof slope.
- Divide heating and cooling system for overall house by story. Place heating and cooling plant for cellar and main floor in northwest cellar room. Place heating and cooling plant for second story under the north slope of attic roof.

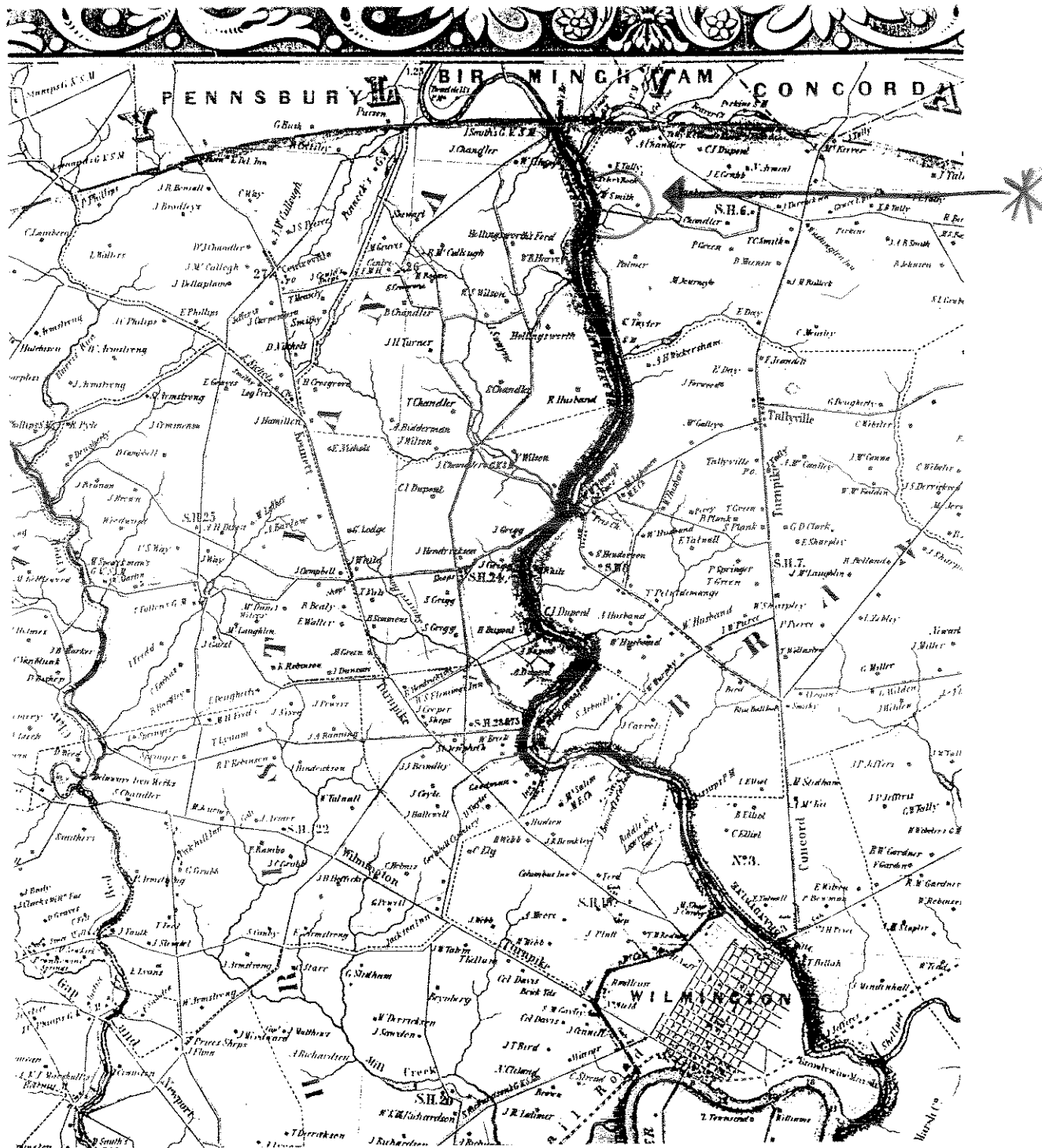


Figure 1. Samuel M. Rea, Map of New Castle County, Delaware, 1849. Copy from Hagley Library located in the Greenville Vicinity of New Castle County, Delaware.

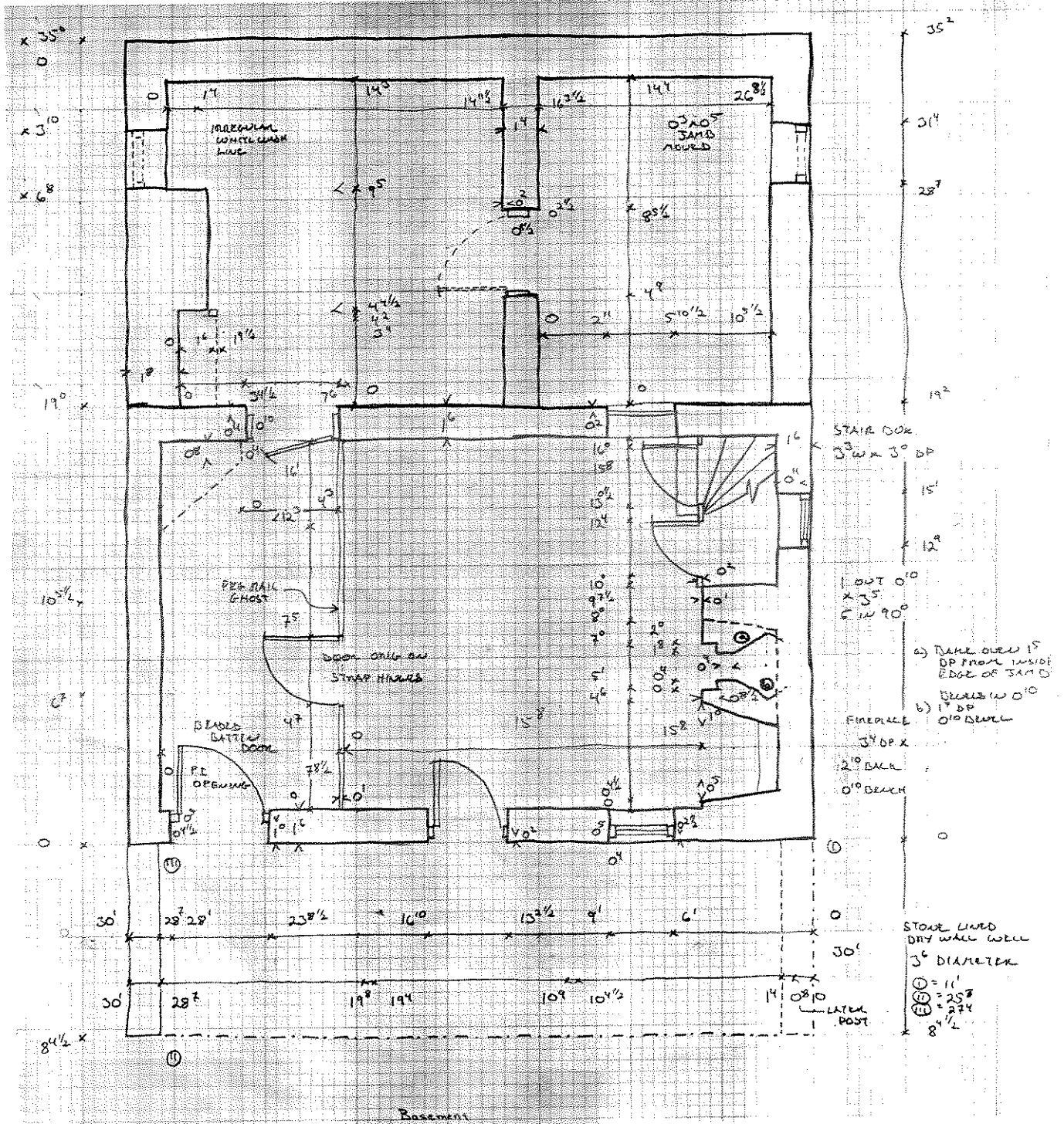


Figure 2. Ramsey House fieldnotes--basement (kitchen) plan. Drawn and measured by Bernie Herman, Deidre McCarthy, and Lewis Nelson. Originals are presently located at the Center for Historic Architecture and Engineering, College of Urban Affairs and Public Policy, University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware.

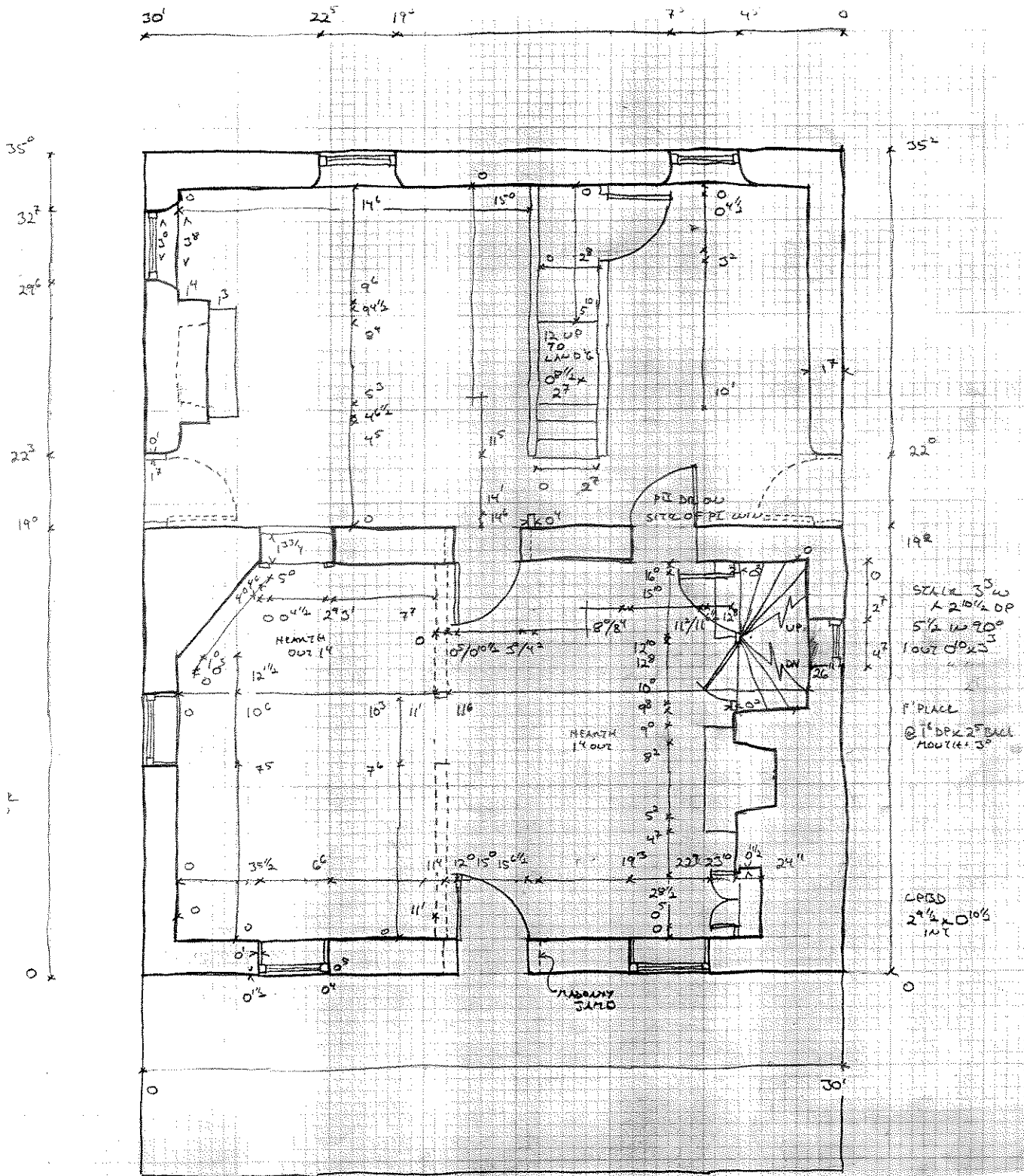


Figure 3. Ramsey House--fieldnotes--first floor plan. Drawn and measured by Bernie Herman, Deidre McCarthy, and Lewis Nelson. Originals are presently located at the Center for Historic Architecture and Engineering.

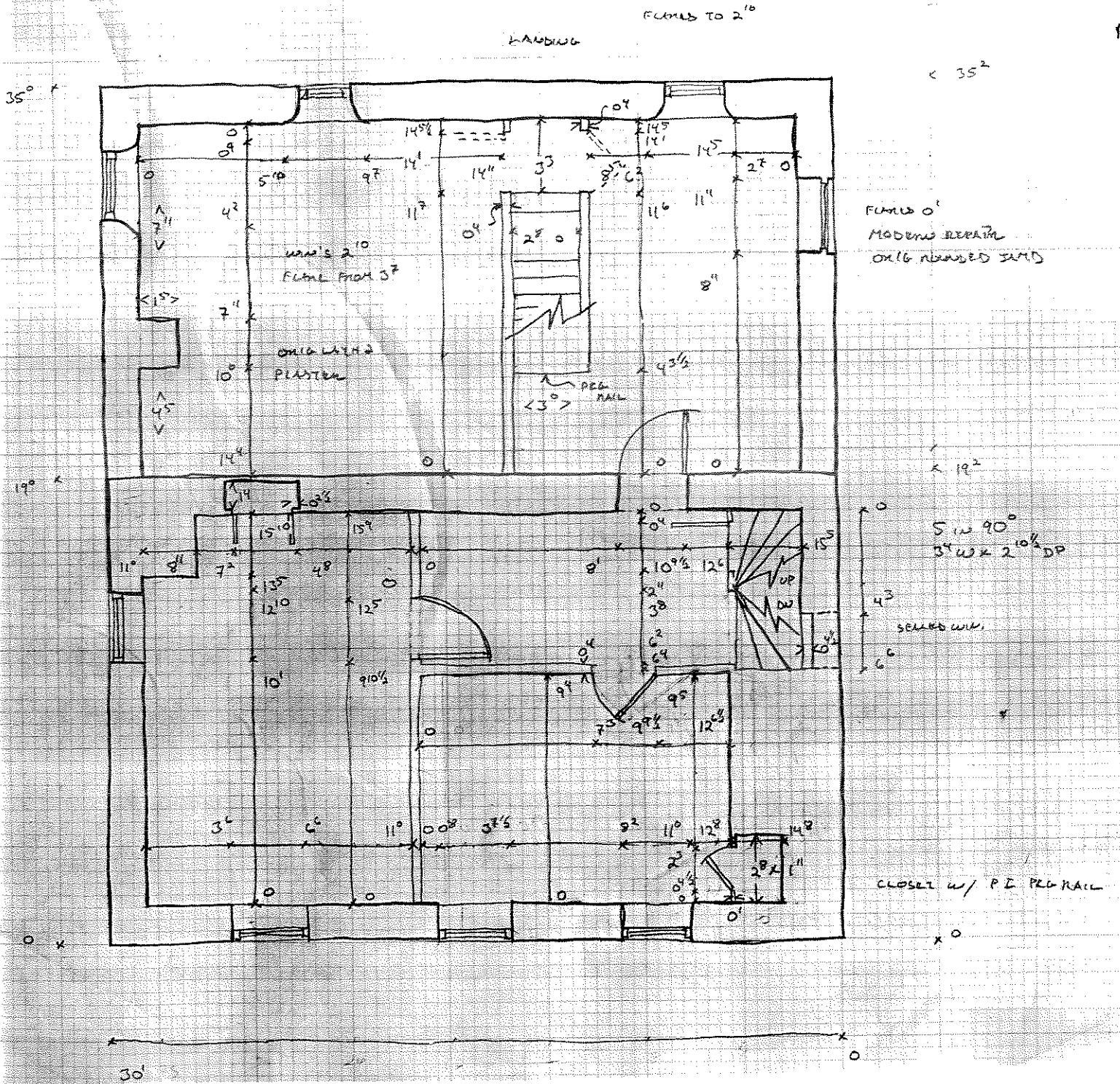
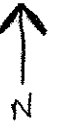


Figure 4. Ramsey House—fieldnotes—second floor plan. Drawn and measured by Bernie Herman, Deidre McCarthy, and Lewis Nelson. Originals are presently located at the Center for Historic Architecture and Engineering.

**Appendix A: Field Notes**

Fieldnotes for the Ramsey House. Written by Bernard Herman. Originals can be found at the Center for Historic Architecture and Engineering.

Kitchen floor  
 E room - supported arch fireplace, supported on wrought iron bars -> maybe robbid link  
 over cut through center - beaded joists (1830s)  
 beaded board wall original  
 had look window  
 W room - corbel support for chimney  
 had support original chimney way  
 doors - beaded frames - original beaded doors (maybe period d) strap hinges  
 partition wall w/ peg rail (originally) had strap hinges  
 was yard behind - cranked to each embankment  
 this story gallery on 3 side  
 work space / dairy production  
 bottom doors, stairs original

1st Floor  
 two doors to back - originally w/ transoms - set incidental light to light stair  
 joist + floorboards beaded - painted red earth / maybe brown stain  
 irregular chimney line - but about 25  
 originally crown molding runs right under joist  
 joist come down 2" beaded (1/2") on underside  
 O 2 1/2" x 1 1/2" joist  
 two inch crown - fillet, some narrow, arranged fillet - sets back as part of crown molding  
 plaster plaster covers top fillet  
 needed muddle w/ dove work (panels, shelves original)  
 partition wall originally (all floor notes)

2nd Floor  
 expand beaded ceiling beams throughout w/ plank partitions - original given both plaster w/ hand beaded curtains  
 chimney corner w/ peg rail original - 3 panel door original  
 ledger board under joists on N wall irregular to fabric - serves as nailer for vertical plank support  
 door way leading up from lobby never had door  
 to paint door on butt hinges - for E. W. doors - best faces of doors into lobby - missing door to S. room may have had best face to room  
 visible through 2 E chamber floor are 1st floor -> vertical board wall w/ boards nailed to E face of joist  
 no heat on second floor  
 partition joist on 1st floor -> vertical board wall w/ boards nailed to E face of joist



**Appendix B: Photographs (Contact Sheet)**



Contact sheet of black and white photographs showing interior and exterior views of the Ramsey House. Taken by Bernard Herman. Originals are located at the Center for Historic Architecture and Engineering.

## Appendix C: Documentary Evidence

## Title Trace

County: New Castle, Brandywine HundredProperty Number: Ramsey House

Tax Parcel: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: 28 Feb. 1983Grantor: Bertha C. RamseyGrantee: Harold E., William A., Stewart, David J. Ramsey,  
Margaret A. PalmataryDeed Book: P/123Page: 193

Remarks: parcels 1-2 (tract 3.1 on 1908 survey done by Willis Passmore)  
same land which Henry W. Ramsey (Bertha's husband) got from Elizabeth H. Ramsey  
Jennie F., Henry F. Bartels

Date: 21 Mar. 1934Grantor: Elizabeth H. Ramsey (wife of Stewart)  
Jennie F. + Henry F. BartelsGrantee: Henry W. RamseyDeed Book: A/139Page: 308

Remarks: Stewart Ramsey got land in will of Hugh Ramsey 12 April 1916

Date: 1869Grantor: Stephen S. PriceGrantee: Hugh RamseyDeed Book: Z/8Page: 435

Remarks:

Title Trace

County: New Castle, Brandywine Hundred  
Property Number: Ramsay House  
Tax Parcel: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: 1866

Grantor: Samuel Nimmons and wife

Grantee: Stephen S. Price

Deed Book: E/8

Page: 490

Remarks:

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Date: 1865

Grantor: Edward G. James and wife

Grantee: Samuel Nimmons

Deed Book: Z/7

Page: 354

Remarks:

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Date: 1863

Grantor: Samuel W. Stockton and wife

Grantee: Edward G. James

Deed Book: V/7

Page: 6

Remarks:

## Title Trace

County: New Castle Brandywine  
 Property Number: Ramsey House  
 Tax Parcel: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: 1856 Grantor: William Smith + wife  
 Grantee: Samuel W. Stockton  
 Deed Book: X/6 Page: 272

Remarks: Smith got the land in 3 deeds and a will  
 will of Jacob Smith (father of William) 14 April 1845 U/257

Date: 1 April 1816 Grantor: Curtis Talley + Mary  
 Grantee: William Smith  
 Deed Book: T/3 Page: 23

Remarks: Talley's = neighbors to the Ramsey's

Date: 1 April 1816 Grantor: Lewis S. Talley + Perisella  
 Grantee: William Smith  
 Deed Book: T/3 Page: 20

Remarks:

Title Trace

County: New Castle, Brandywine Hundred  
Property Number: Ramsey House  
Tax Parcel: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: 15 March 1845 Grantor: Isaac Smith + Ann

Grantee: William Smith

③

Deed Book: 0/5 Page: 372

Remarks: Isaac gets the land from Talley when William gets his land from Talley in 1816

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Date: 1 Apr. 1816 Grantor: Curtis Talley + Mary

Grantee: Isaac Smith

③

Deed Book: T/3 Page: 23

Remarks:

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Date: Grantor:

Grantee:

Deed Book: Page:

Remarks:

PROPERTY 96.86 acres  
 Parcel, Nos 1-2 of  
 Deed P-123-153

STEVEN S PRICE  
 DEED 2-F-435 (10/15/1885) 133 acres

HUGH RAMSEY (d. 1914)

Testate - Nothing of Record of Will

STEWART RAMSEY (d. 4/23/32)  
 DEED W.R. 17033 96 acres

ELIZABETH H.  
 RAMSEY  
 DEED A-39-301  
 (3/21/34) 96.86 acres

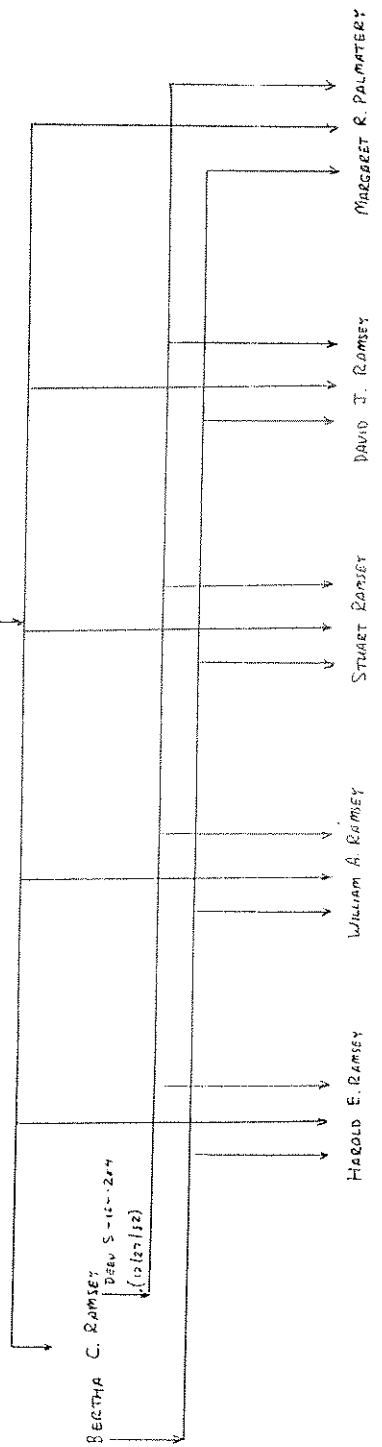
JENNIE F.  
 BARTLES

HENRY W.  
 RAMSEY

d. 4/4/78 Testate  
 W.R. 71436

BECYTHA C. RAMSEY  
 DEED S-12-244  
 (12/27/32)

DEED P-123-153  
 (2/25/33)



HAROLD E. RAMSEY

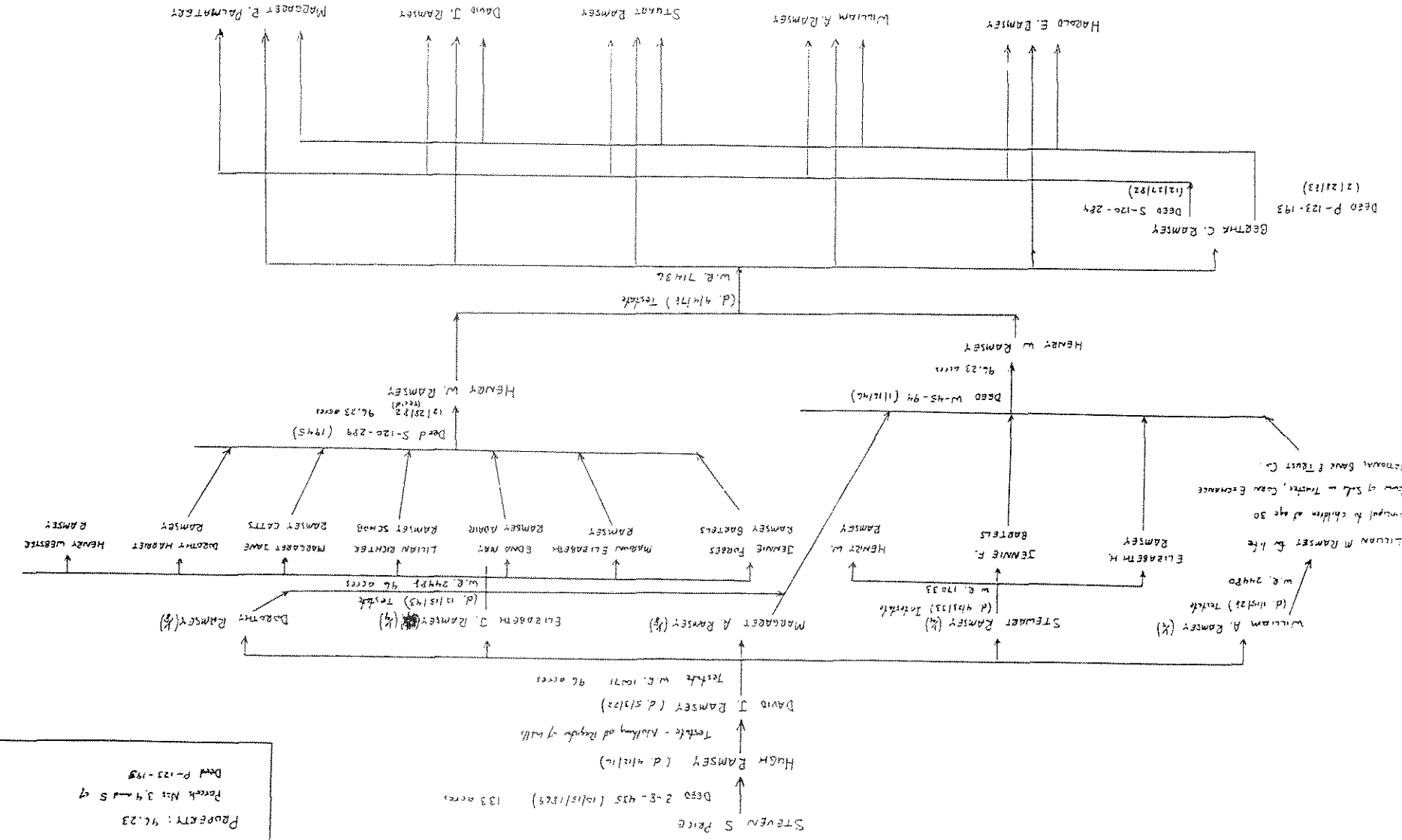
WILLIAM A. RAMSEY

STUART RAMSEY

DAVID T. RAMSEY

MARGARET R. PALMATEY





PROPERTY: 96.23  
 Acres  
 Park No. 34 and 5 of  
 Deed P-123-193

Property: Ramsay House

Tax Parcel:

County: New Castle, Brandywine Hund.

Date	Name	Listing	Real	Pers	Total	Acres	Remarks
1816	William Smith		\$10				Stock
	(Isudas Jacobs Son)		\$150		\$160		total personal
1816	Jacob Smith		\$850			85	Sawmill & buildings
			\$116				Stock
			\$134		\$500		total personal
1816	Lucias Tolley			\$715	\$43		total average: 800 improved, 193 unimproved
			\$151				Stock / total personal in
			\$800				total tax
1803-4	William Smith		\$340			34	total average - all improved - old mill race buildings 1 house lot lot on mt
			\$500				area in marsh
			\$46		\$140		Stock / total personal tax
					\$1066		total tax
1803-4	Lucias Tolley		\$1180			818	total average - 130 improved, 118 unimproved 4 old buildings
			\$193		\$134		Stock / total personal tax
					\$1437		total tax
							total tax list until 1808

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Probate 2087

Isaac Smith. I give & devise unto my son William Smith all that certain farm whereon  
1845 he now resides adjoining lands of Elisha Talley  
131 1/2 acres - pay debt of \$2944.00

gives to Isaac - farm which he occupies w/ mills & appointments bounded by  
Brandywine Creek

no inventory or other information