

Delaware Valley Threatened Buildings Survey

**BUTTONWOOD
NEW CASTLE VICINITY,
NEW CASTLE COUNTY, DELAWARE
HABS DE-71**

Prepared by

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1996

Delaware Valley Threatened Buildings Survey Documentation

Site Name: Buttonwood
CRS Number: N-356
HABS Number: DE-071

Location: One mile northeast of the town of New Castle, northeast of the intersection of Buttonwood Avenue and Cherry Lane, on the Delaware River.

Date of Fieldwork: February 1996

Threat: Currently vacant and deteriorating, Buttonwood was threatened by neglect and possible removal to a new site. Following the documentation process, the dwelling was moved to a new location with the industrial park.

Type of Documentation: Level II: Partial Intensive
annotated field notes (4 sheets)
4" x 5" black and white photographs (14)
architectural data sheet

Significance: Buttonwood is a significant example of the type of rural dwelling associated with residents of the town of New Castle who owned both urban and rural residences. Buttonwood also exhibits a unique floor plan with two sets of double parlors as well as fully integrated service facilities located in the basement. Previously thought to date to the late eighteenth century, architectural evidence now shows that Buttonwood was built in the 1830s. Buttonwood clearly exhibits architectural significance in addition to its traditional significance as a house associated with James Booth, Sr., a Delaware legislator and Supreme Court Justice .

Physical Description: Located on the banks of the Delaware River, north of the town of New Castle, Buttonwood sits on a low rise surrounded by open agricultural fields. Oriented toward the east, overlooking the river, the dwelling house remains isolated and without its original outbuildings.

The one-and-one-half story, five-bay brick dwelling, measuring approximately 45 feet by 35 feet, rests on a full raised basement. Laid in seven course common bond, the walls rise to a boxed

cornice supporting the gambrel roof. Six-over-six, double-hung sash windows flank the central double-leaf door, with a four-light transom, on the east or primary elevation. Symmetrically aligned below, five six-over-six sash windows light the basement and above three gable-roofed four-light dormer windows light the half-story. Plain architrave surrounds with quarter round back bands decorate all the exterior openings. Evidence on the east elevation indicates that a full porch once sheltered the first floor.

Two interior end chimney stacks rise from both the north and south gable ends, topped by later diamond-shaped chimney tops. A pair of four-light fixed sashes pierce both elevations between the stacks in the half-story. Three irregularly spaced sash windows light the basement space in the south end, while a centrally-located pair of later second period windows pierce the north end. No other decoration elaborates the gable ends.

The west elevation reflects the same fenestration pattern as the east elevation on all floors. A frame porch, set on brick piers, shelters the southern three bays. A small frame room measuring 9 by 8 feet, positioned over the central door above the porch, is a later addition. Beneath the porch, a door located between the southern two bays leads into the basement.

Laid out on a double-pile, central passage plan, the main entrance on the east elevation leads into the passage. A double-run stair rises up the north side of the space, leading to the second floor. Four centrally located doors lead into the four rooms to the north and south of the passage, each measuring 16 by 17 feet. A unique configuration, the first floor contains double parlors on both sides of the passage.

Greek Revival trim, including molded door and window surrounds, as well as paterae corner blocks, decorate the interior openings. Large double-leaf doors open between the parlors to create the double-parlor effect. Marble fireplace surrounds and mantle shelves appear in situ on the fireplaces that remain open on the first floor. Originally a fireplace heated each parlor room. Currently, the fireplaces in the two rear parlors are blocked up.

The finished half-story above reflects a similar floor plan, with four rooms surrounding the central passage, each with a fireplace and each measuring 15 by 16 feet. Above the entry on the east side of

the house, a small storeroom was created from the central passage space, measuring 8 by 7 feet. Original shelves, approximately one foot in depth, line both walls of the room, which is lit by a single window on the front elevation. Off the west end of the central passage, a frame addition houses the bathroom.

The basement displays the same plan as the second floor, a double-pile central passage, with a small room below the entry on the east end of the passage. Two doors open off the passage, leading into the two northern rooms, each measuring approximately 16 feet square and finished as living spaces. Both contain fireplaces and built-in closets. In addition, shelves originally hung on the west side of the partition wall separating the two rooms. Although visible only in the gable end built-in closets, a brick floor originally extended across the two northern rooms. Currently, joists laid directly on the ground support wooden flooring. The Period Two windows on the north gable end, one lighting each of the two rooms, may have been added during the same phase as the change in flooring, and possibly function, as the rooms became living areas rather than work areas.

South of the central passage in the basement, a kitchen measuring 16 by 17 feet occupies the southeast corner room. A large kitchen fireplace and built-in cabinets, as well as direct access to the exterior through the east elevation, indicate the original function of the space.

The southwest room contains a similar work space, measuring 13 by 16 feet. The original brick floor, laid in a herringbone pattern, and the remains of a deteriorated well clearly indicate the special functions of this room. The only basement room without a fireplace, a large relieving arch occupies the south wall supporting the stack above. Only two windows on the east elevation light the interior of the room. The combination of these factors suggests this space functioned as a dairy or spring house, keeping stored items cool and providing a source of water.

Clearly the house retains architectural integrity and demonstrates its function as a secondary residence used primarily for entertainment, with two sets of double parlors on the first floor and service space relegated to the basement. The HABS team in the 1930s recorded a brick tenant house, brick barn, and brick privy on the property in addition to the mansion. The tenant house, possibly built in the late

eighteenth century or early nineteenth century, may be the structure on which earlier sources based their dating. The large three-and-one-half story brick barn indicates the extensive agricultural and dairying activities that were carried out on the farm in the nineteenth century. None of these three buildings survive today.

History:

The mansion house at Buttonwood has been dated to different periods by a number of scholars. Historic American Building Survey (HABS) documentation completed in 1936 by Laussat Rogers describes the main house as built in 1831. Eberlein and Hubbard's 1962 Historic Houses and Buildings of Delaware claims a mid-eighteenth century date for the dwelling. A 1986 study by Arthur Jackson Wheeler argues that the dwelling was built by James Booth, Sr., prior to 1828, as a second residence. In general, these sources cite documentary evidence, such as an association with James Booth, Sr., of New Castle, as evidence for these earlier construction dates. In addition, the exterior appearance of the structure contributed to its assessment as a late eighteenth century building.

Yet the architectural evidence within Buttonwood supports a late 1830s or early 1840s construction date. The massing itself exhibits a seven-course common brick bond throughout, indicating a post-1830 date. Interior features such as the double-parlor floor plan, Greek Revival trim, and sash sawn framing members, all reflect later styles and technologies as well. The gambrel roof form, often associated with earlier periods, is constructed with butt-joined rafters and fastened with machine cut nails, dating the construction after 1820.

No major additions or changes have altered Buttonwood from its original plan to confuse the dating. On the basis of similar molding profiles and construction techniques, it is clear that minor alterations such as the two north gable windows came shortly after initial construction. Similarly, the diamond-shaped chimney top additions can be dated to the mid-1840s when the owner built another dwelling in New Castle exhibiting similar details.

A review of the documentary evidence supports the argument for the later date of construction. A title trace for the property indicates that James Booth, Sr., purchased the farm prior to his death in 1828, and most likely prior to the tax assessment of 1816. At that time, Booth was assessed for no less than three farms in

New Castle Hundred, all containing brick dwellings and all occupied by tenants. The brick dwelling referenced in the tax assessment was probably the brick tenant house that stood on the farm until 1972, described by Laussat Rogers as an eighteenth-century dwelling. Booth himself lived in a brick dwelling located in the town of New Castle.

Booth was an important figure in Delaware political and judicial history, serving as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Delaware from 1799 to 1828. He also acted as Secretary for the Delaware Constitutional Conventions of 1776 and 1792, and actively supported the abolition of slavery. During the period of the Revolution and the formation of the new nation, Booth filled a number of positions both in the navy and in the government of the new state, as well as participating in the committee that established the boundaries of the town of New Castle. Booth died in 1828, prior to the construction of the mansion at Buttonwood. Although he never occupied the surviving dwelling, he may have used the earlier dwelling (later the tenant house) as a secondary residence in the countryside.

When James Booth, Sr., died, all of his real estate passed to his three children: James Booth (married to Hannah), Maria (married to James Rogers), and Elizabeth Booth (unmarried). In 1836, the three siblings and their respective spouses transferred the Buttonwood farm to James Rogers' brother, Molton C. Rogers of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Rogers probably constructed the mansion at Buttonwood after he purchased the property in 1836. The Rogers family owned the house until 1879, when it was sold at sheriff's sale for settlement of debts. The large brick barn and privy that once stood on the property were most likely constructed during the period of the Rogers' ownership. Both of these buildings were demolished by Lukens Steel in 1972.

Sources:

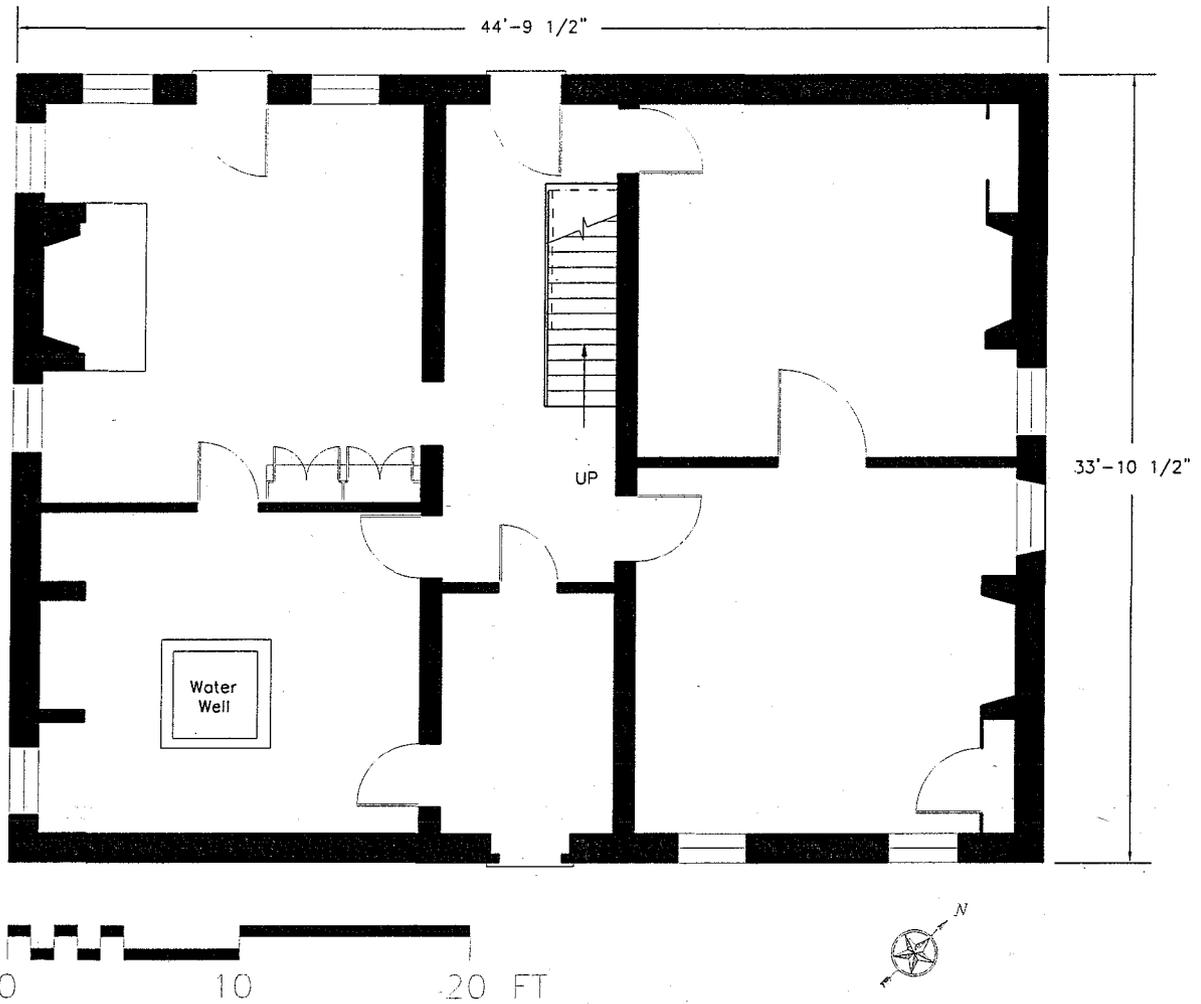
HABS documentation, Buttonwood, DE-71; Library of Congress.

Eberlein, Harold Donaldson, and Cortlandt V. D. Hubbard, Historic Houses and Buildings of Delaware (Dover, DE: Public Archives Commission, 1962.)

Wheeler, Arthur Jackson, "The Buttonwood Plantation Mansion House," unpublished manuscript, 1986.

Historian:

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Newark, Delaware
June 4, 1996



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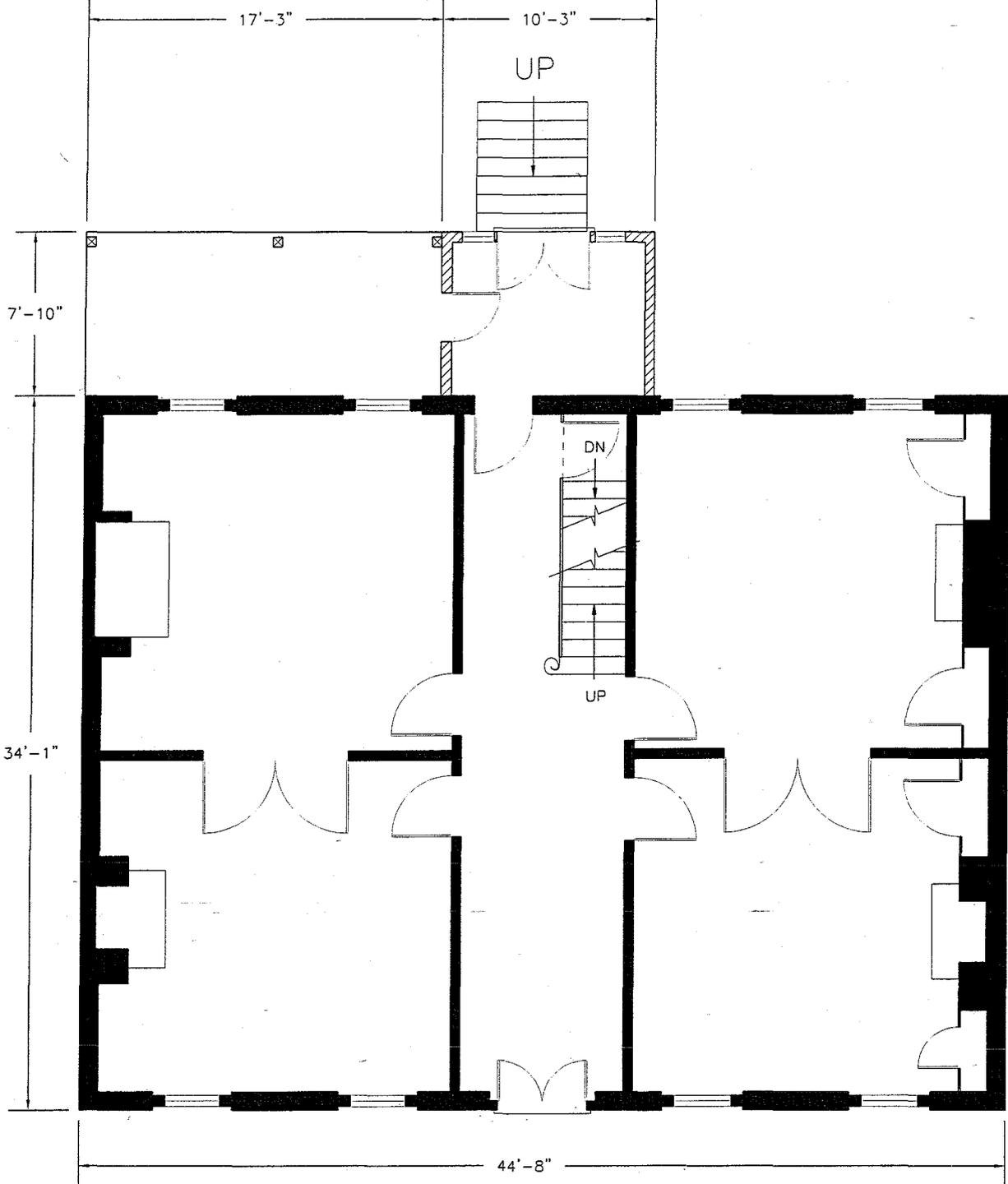
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The Buttonwoods

Forrester Ave.
New Castle Vicinity
New Castle Hundred
New Castle / DE

Basement Floor Plan

PROJECT #:1996.01.0001.01	SCALE: As noted
DRAWN BY: R. Van Antwerp	DATE: 25 - Oct - 2007



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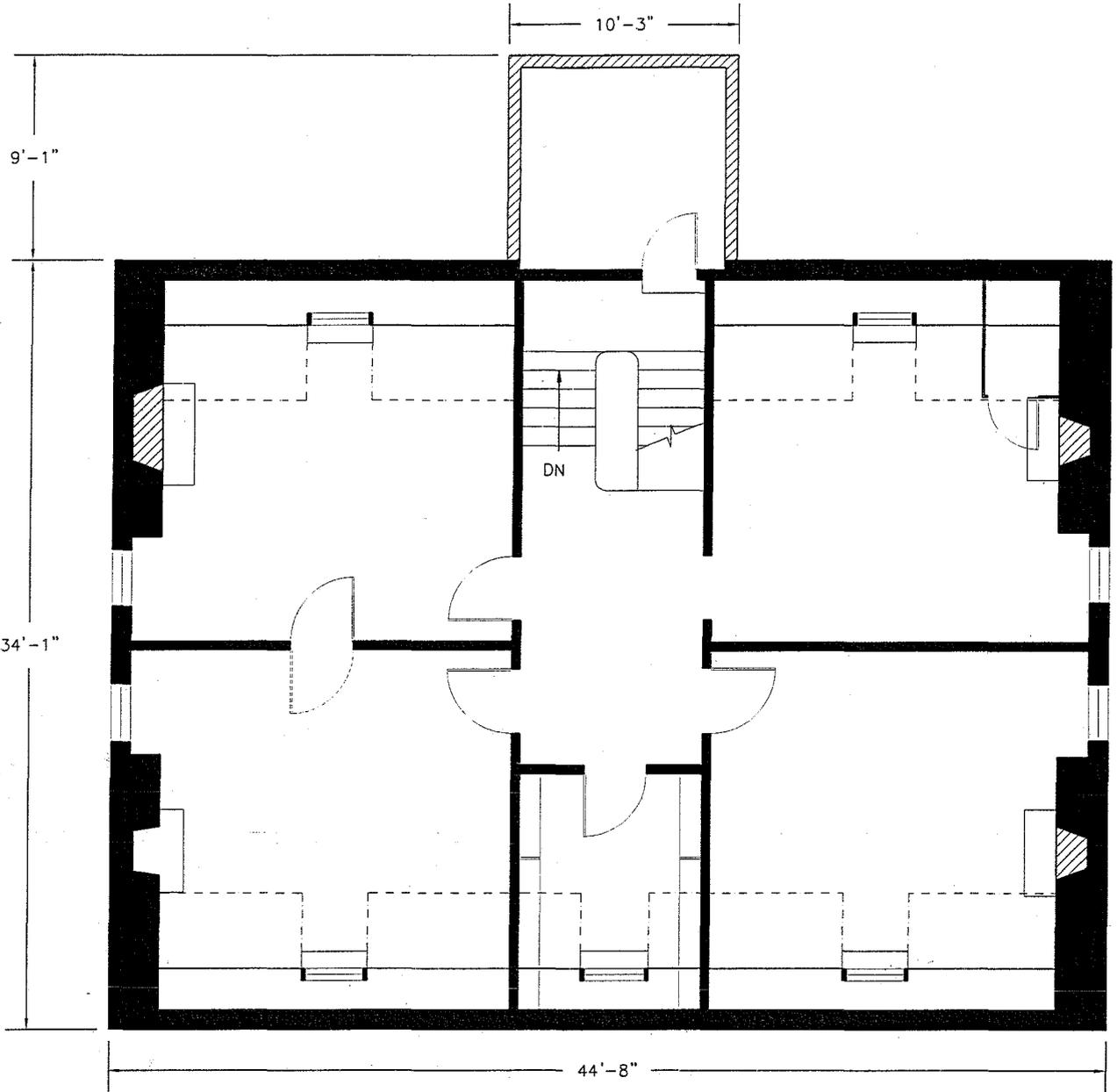
The Buttonwoods

Forrester Ave.
New Castle Vicinity
New Castle Hundred
New Castle / DE

First Floor Plan

PROJECT #: 1996.01 0001.01 SCALE: As noted

DRAWN BY: R. Van Antwerp DATE: 1 - Nov - 07



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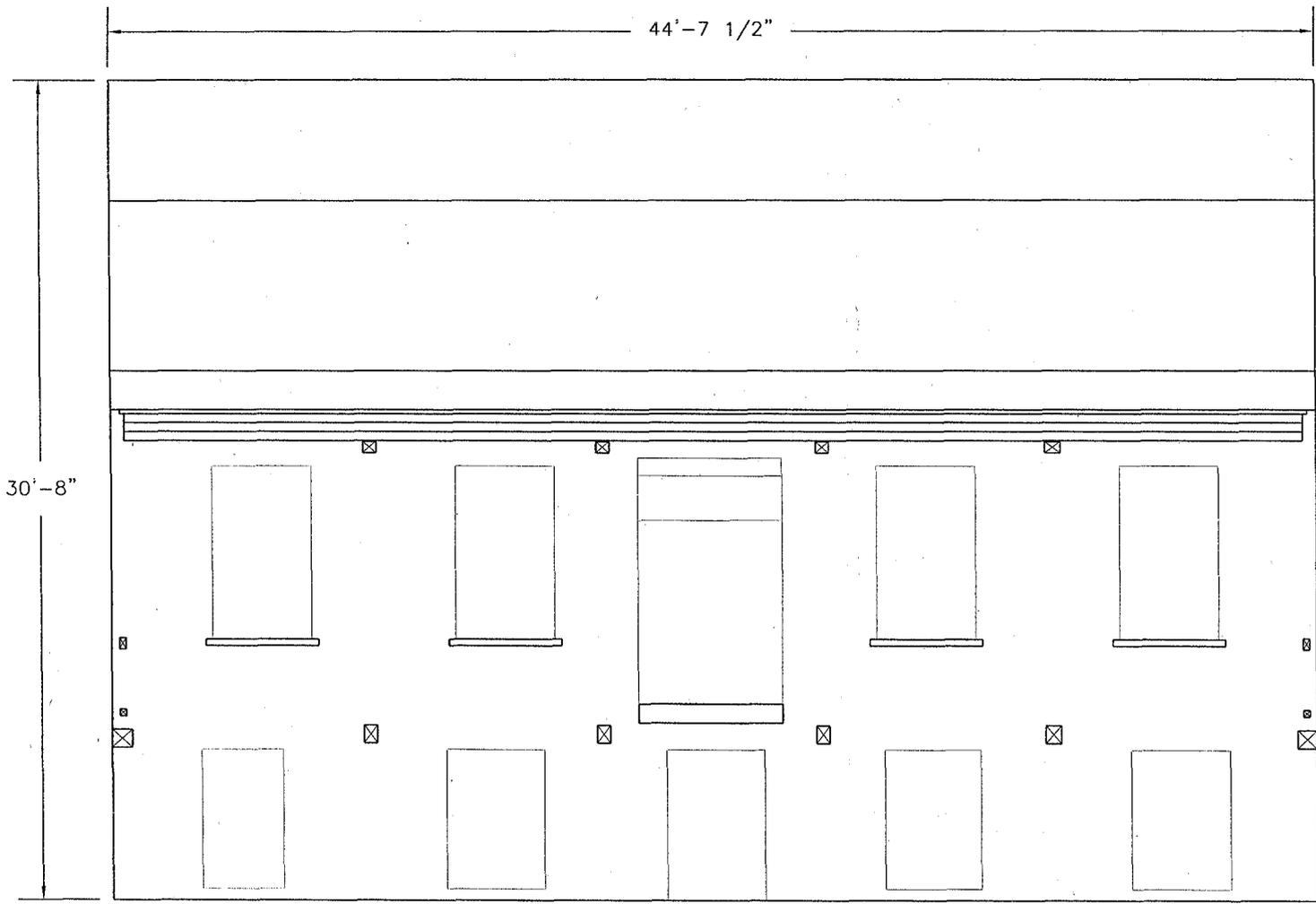
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The Buttonwoods

Forrester Ave.
New Castle Vicinity
New Castle Hundred
New Castle / DE

Second Floor Plan

PROJECT #: 1996.01.0001.01	SCALE: As noted
DRAWN BY: R. Van Antwerp	DATE: 3 - Nov - 07



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Project Name:
The Buttonwoods

Location: Forrester Ave.
 New Castle Vicinity
 New Castle Hundred
 New Castle / DE

Southeast (Primary) Elevation
 PROJECT #: 1996.01.0001.01 SCALE: As noted
 DRAWN BY: R. Van Antwerp DATE: 3 - Nov - 07