

**The Changing Landscape of the St. Jones Neck  
Under the Influence of the Dickinson Family, 1680-1850:  
An Exhibit Script**

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## Preface

The John Dickinson Plantation, owned and administered by Delaware State Museums as an historic house museum with living history programming, occupies approximately thirteen acres of land on the St. Jones Neck in Kent County, Delaware (Figure 1). This small slice of land represents only a minuscule fraction of the landscape once owned and controlled by John Dickinson, Esquire, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Over the last fourteen years, Delaware State Museums has conducted a massive primary source research project designed to expand their understanding of Dickinson and their interpretation of his home to the public. This segment of the larger research agenda focuses on Dickinson's occupation of the landscape of the St. Jones Neck and the ways in which he created new landscapes of agricultural tenancy, land management, and to some extent, the development of a new community of individuals and families on the land.

This narrative forms the first part of an exhibit script intended to illuminate for visitors the changes wrought on the landscape over time and the incredible influence held by the Dickinson family over the St. Jones Neck community. The exhibit will contain a series of maps with graphic images of buildings, landscape features, and patterns in acquisition of land. Each map in the series will deal directly with a particular theme:

- 1) Acquisition and Disposition of Land, 1676-1857
- 2) Agricultural Tenancy and Land Management, 1780--1820
- 3) Construction and Repairs, 1790-1808
- 4) Diversification and Land Reclamation, 1790-1850
- 5) Hurricane Damage, 1880s
- 6) Twentieth-century Influences on the River, 1900-1940

This narrative covers the first four themes in detail. The last two will be dealt with at a later date in connection with work currently under way by the Delaware National Estuary and Riverine Research project.

This exhibit planning project received financial support from a bequest to the Dickinson Plantation by Charles R. Cook. The authors and Delaware State Museums wish to express their gratitude to Mr. Cook for his generosity and his interest in supporting the public interpretation of important elements of Delaware's history.



## I. Acquisition and Disposition of Land, 1676-1857

In the late eighteenth century, John Dickinson, Esq., represented the largest landowner on the St. Jones Neck, possessing more than 3000 acres divided into tenant farms. The accumulation of those lands began in late seventeenth-century Maryland and required the participation of several generations of Dickinsons before John added his particular personality to the picture.

Two types of action occurred related to the land: the acquisition of new parcels of land to enlarge the holdings, and the transfer of different sections of the land between individual members of the family. Real estate represented a valuable part of a person's estate and often a death in the family resulted in a redistribution of land. This chapter traces the history of land transactions between 1676 and 1852 by various members of the Dickinson family. It is divided into two major sections, the first dealing with actions occurring prior to John Dickinson's inheritance of a segment of land on the St. Jones Neck from his father in 1760, and the second covering changes undertaken during John's life and by his daughter, Sally Norris Dickinson.

### 1676-1760

The first member of the Dickinson family to purchase land on the St. Jones Neck was Walter Dickinson (I).<sup>1</sup> Between 1676 and 1682, he bought three tracts of land previously patented by other settlers: Mulberry Swamp or Merritts, Whartons, and Youngs or Shrewsbury.<sup>2</sup> Each tract consisted of 400 acres and the three lay adjacent to one another along the northeast side of the St. Jones River (Figure 2).

The original patent for Mulberry Swamp, or Merritts, belonged to Thomas Merritt, but when he failed to settle on or improve the land, the governor revoked his patent and granted it to Walter Dickinson (I). Dickinson acquired the second tract, known as Whartons for its original owner, for settlement of debts in 1672 and received the official patent from the governor in 1676. Walter (I) bought the third

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<sup>1</sup> Three individuals named Walter Dickinson took part in the purchase and sale of land on the St. Jones Neck. To provide clarity for present-day readers, the men are identified by Roman numerals following their names. Probably born in London, England, Walter Dickinson (I) emigrated to Virginia's Eastern Shore in the 1640s and moved to Maryland around 1654. His second marriage produced Walter Dickinson (II). Walter Dickinson (II) had only one son, Robert, whose son in turn became Walter Dickinson (III).

<sup>2</sup> In order to make the text easier to read, the authors chose not to surround the tract names with quotation marks.

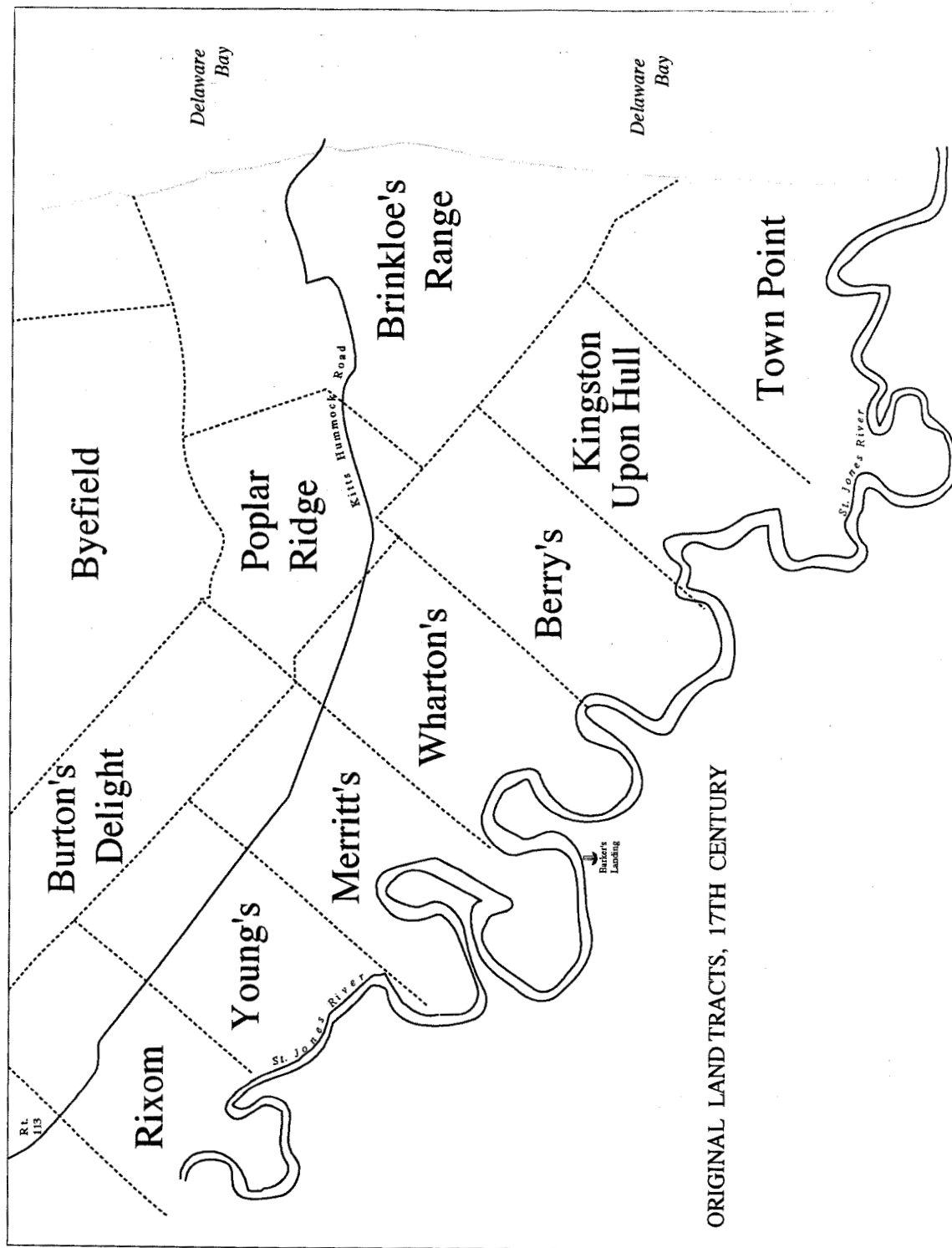


Figure 2: Seventeenth-Century Tract Locations on the St. Jones Neck.



tract, Youngs, from its owner, Richard Leverett.

When Walter Dickinson (I) died in 1680, he left all of his real estate to his three sons, but entailed it to the eldest, William. One of the boys, Charles, died without issue. William chose to remain on the Maryland plantation, Crosiadore, where he lived with his family until his death in 1717. He took no action on the Delaware lands, apparently leaving them to the management of his younger half-brother, Walter Dickinson (II), who evidently moved to the St. Jones vicinity after his father's death. This arrangement continued peacefully until William died in 1717, bequeathing much of his real estate to one of his two sons, Samuel. At this point a controversy arose over Walter (I)'s will: did the entailment mean that Walter (I)'s lands would pass to William's son or to Walter (I)'s only surviving son, Walter (II)? The two survivors, Samuel and Walter (II), settled the dispute with an agreement, recorded in 1720, that gave all of Whartons and Youngs (800 acres) and 100 acres of Merritts to Walter (II) while Samuel kept the remaining 300 acres of Merritts. Neither Walter (II) nor his son Robert added to the holdings on the St. Jones Neck during their brief time on the land. Walter (II) died in 1721, shortly after reaching his agreement with Samuel Dickinson; Robert survived only a few years longer. Upon Robert's death his son, Walter Dickinson (III), inherited his father's share of the St. Jones Neck lands.

In 1728 Walter Dickinson (III) conducted his first land transaction when he bought forty acres of land known as Bartletts Point from John Bartlett. This land adjoined the southeastern boundary of Whartons. Four years later, Walter apparently faced some financial difficulties and he began to slowly sell off most of his real estate. In 1732 he sold his rights to Merritts, Youngs, and half of Whartons to his cousin Samuel for £50; a deed dated the same day recorded his purchase of half of Whartons (200 acres) from Samuel for only £10. In 1735, Walter sold half of that 200 acres back to Samuel for £95. When Walter's wife, Katherine French, inherited 50 acres of a tract known as Lisbon or White Hill, the couple promptly sold that land to Katherine's brother-in-law, Benjamin Brown. Only a month later Walter sold the 40-acre parcel called Bartlett's Point to Samuel Dickinson. Finally, in 1737 Walter (III) again conveyed all of his rights in Merritts, Whartons, and Youngs to his cousin Samuel for £100. In 1739 and 1743, the two men participated in a common recovery suit intended to clear Samuel's title to the St. Jones Neck lands once and for all.

*Circa 1745-48*, Katherine French Dickinson inherited another 50 acres in Lisbon when her brother Robert died. This time, Walter and Katherine chose to sell

the land to Samuel Dickinson rather than to Katherine's brother-in-law. This transaction finished Walter (III)'s role in the acquisition and transfer of lands in St. Jones Neck. Apparently he and his wife continued to live in a house on the Whartons tract, probably under some form of a lease arrangement with Samuel Dickinson. Walter died in 1769, survived by his wife and probably one child, John Dickinson, Jr., both of whom continued to lease land from Samuel and his sons, John and Philemon.

Samuel Dickinson's connection with the St. Jones Neck began in earnest following the death of his father, William Dickinson, in 1717 (Figure 3). Born on the family plantation of Crosiadore, Samuel attended school in England, returning to help his father manage the family's lands *circa* 1708. Married to Judith Troth in 1710, he fathered six children but only two of them survived to adulthood (John and Philemon). As described earlier, Samuel negotiated an agreement with his half-uncle Walter in 1720 to divide the St. Jones Neck holdings. In 1722, following Walter's death, his son Robert sold all of his rights to the St. Jones lands to Samuel as well.

Between 1720 and 1740, Samuel's activity on the St. Jones Neck focused on the solidification of his title to Youngs, Merritts, and Whartons. This included the previously mentioned transactions with Walter (III) as well as a payment in 1723 to Jacob Gray, great-grandson and sole living descendant of Thomas Young, for any rights he inherited from the original patentee of the Youngs tract. Two years later Samuel sold 60 acres, located along the western corner of Youngs and the edge of the St. Jones River, to John Pleasanton. Samuel made no other changes in his holdings, except for securing his title to the St. Jones lands until after 1740. At about that time he and his second wife, and their two sons John and Philemon, moved into their newly constructed brick mansion on the Merritts tract.

Following his move to the St. Jones Neck, Samuel began slowly expanding the boundaries of his holdings. In 1742 and 1745, he purchased two adjoining 50-acre parcels in Burton's Delight, later known as Hart's Field. Between 1745 and 1754 he focused on acquiring lands in the tract that lay to the north and west of Youngs, Rixom. In 1748 he bought 25 acres from Mary Ware located along the border with Burton's Delight and Youngs. In that same year Dickinson purchased 115 acres (also in Rixom) from James Gordon. These two parcels combined contained 140 acres, all but six acres of the Rixom land located on the northeast side of the Kitts Hummock Road.

In the 1750s Samuel began to focus on the Rixom land south of Kitts Hummock

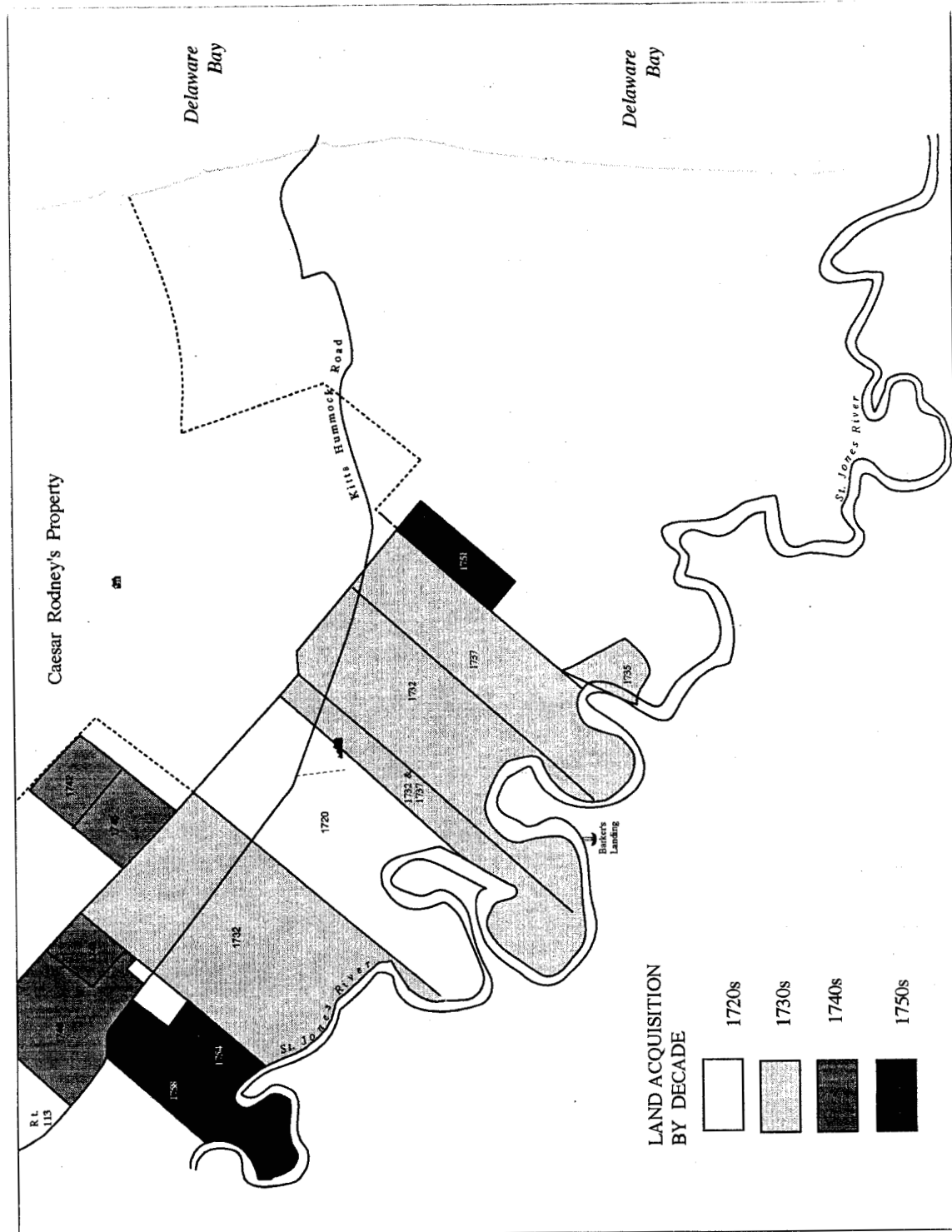


Figure 3: Location of land acquired by Samuel Dickinson between 1720 and 1760.

Road, beginning with the purchase in 1751 of a slim piece of five acres from Robert Boswell (Baswell/Bazwell), located on the north boundary of a small piece owned by Griffith Gordon. Three years later Benjamin Chew acquired 50 acres previously owned by the Ware family. During her widowhood following the death of her husband William, Mary Ware incurred a debt to Benjamin Chew; the debt increased after she married Moses Lucas. When it became apparent that the Lucases could not pay their debt, the court ordered the sale of the land Mary had inherited from her father (George Lester the Elder) and brother (George Lester the Younger). When no one else would purchase the land, Chew bought it and the court returned the purchase money to him. Chew quickly resold the land to Samuel Dickinson in 1754 for £200. Four years later, Dickinson purchased 92 acres at a sheriff's auction to settle the debts of William Mason. In 1759, one year before his death, Samuel transferred the Mason property to his son Philemon as a gift. All told, between 1750 and 1760 the Dickinson family acquired a total of 147 additional acres of the Rixom tract. Some of the purchases made by Samuel Dickinson in the Rixom tract appear to overlap in their boundaries. The realignment of the Kitts Hummock Road frequently caused this problem to occur, particularly in Rixom, where the small size of many of the parcels along the road made the differences very noticeable. Part of Samuel's strategy included making sure that his title to each of the sections he purchased faced no impediment due to someone else's ownership of a different small piece of land near the road.

Two other transactions occurred prior to Samuel's death that concerned the St. Jones holdings. First, in March 1748, Samuel sold 25 acres of Youngs to Mary Ware for £30. Lying adjacent to the land he sold to John Pleasanton in 1725, it made up part of the 135 acres sold to Samuel by Benjamin Chew in 1754. Second, in 1751 Samuel purchased 50 acres in Berrys through two exchanges, one with Ebenezer Manlove and the other with John Courtney.

The first phase of land acquisition by the Dickinsons ended in 1760 with Samuel Dickinson's death. In his will he described a division line that ran through his St. Jones Neck lands, dividing them into two sections of approximately 1000 acres. Each of his two sons, John and Philemon, received one section (Figure 4). John obtained the lands that fell on the southeastern side of the line, including Whartons, most of Merritts, and parts of Berrys and Youngs; Philemon acquired the lands to the northwest, including parts of Rixom, Merritts, Burton's Delight, and Youngs.

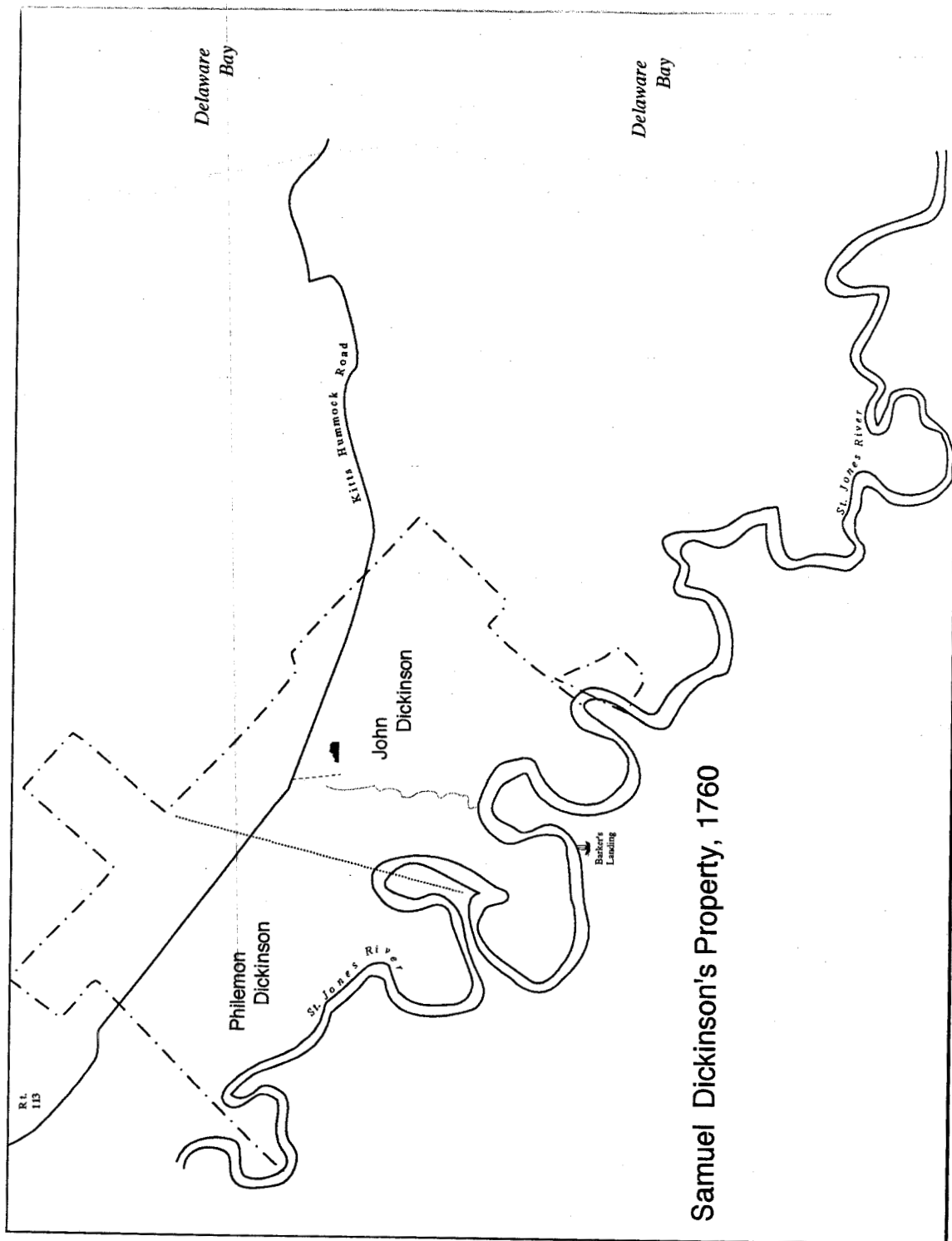


Figure 4: Division of Samuel Dickinson's lands, 1760.

Philemon also inherited 50 acres in Lisbon (White Hill) after his mother died, as well as 300 acres known as the Cove. (The location of this tract within the St. Jones Neck cannot be definitely established at this time.) About six years after Samuel's death, Philemon sold the Cove to Benjamin Coombs and bought 31 acres in Rixom from Coombs at the same time. This transaction represents Philemon's only purchase of land on the St. Jones Neck.

### 1760-1857

The two brothers managed the entire property jointly from 1760 to about 1772, at which point a dispute occurred over the placement of the division line. Once they settled the dispute through a petition to the court, Philemon sold two parcels of land totalling 300 acres, located in both Youngs and Merritts, to John for £2500. This transaction probably represented one part of a trade in which John acquired the St. Jones Neck land and Philemon received other land in western Kent County. Philemon then arranged to lease or sell another 360 acres to Joshua Gordon; the deed for this transaction did not appear on the books until 1792.

Between 1774 and 1777, Philemon systematically sold off all of his remaining lands in the St. Jones Neck. First, in 1774 he sold the 50 acres in Lisbon to John Gordon. One year later he transferred 80 acres in Rixom to John Dickinson for £600. Finally, in April 1777, he sold 357 acres of Rixom and Youngs to John Dickinson for £2000 along with his rights to any and all lands in St. Jones Neck not already contracted or sold to Joshua Gordon. This transfer of rights represented Philemon's last act in connection with the St. Jones Neck lands. He built a new home, Bellville, in New Jersey, and lived there until his death in 1809. Through this series of transfers, John Dickinson secured for himself all of the land in Rixom south of the Kitts Hummock Road originally owned by either Samuel or Philemon Dickinson (roughly 172 acres) as well as approximately 100 acres on the northeast corner of the tract (Figure 5).

Although John Dickinson's only major acquisitions of land on the St. Jones Neck during the period that spanned the Revolutionary War (1773 to 1786) came from his brother Philemon, he did conduct business that resulted in ownership of a few other small pieces of land. In 1773 he settled a dispute with Jonathan Pleasanton over a 26-acre parcel in Berrys by agreeing that each of them would receive a 13-acre chunk. In 1779 he purchased a triangular piece of land in Burtons Delight

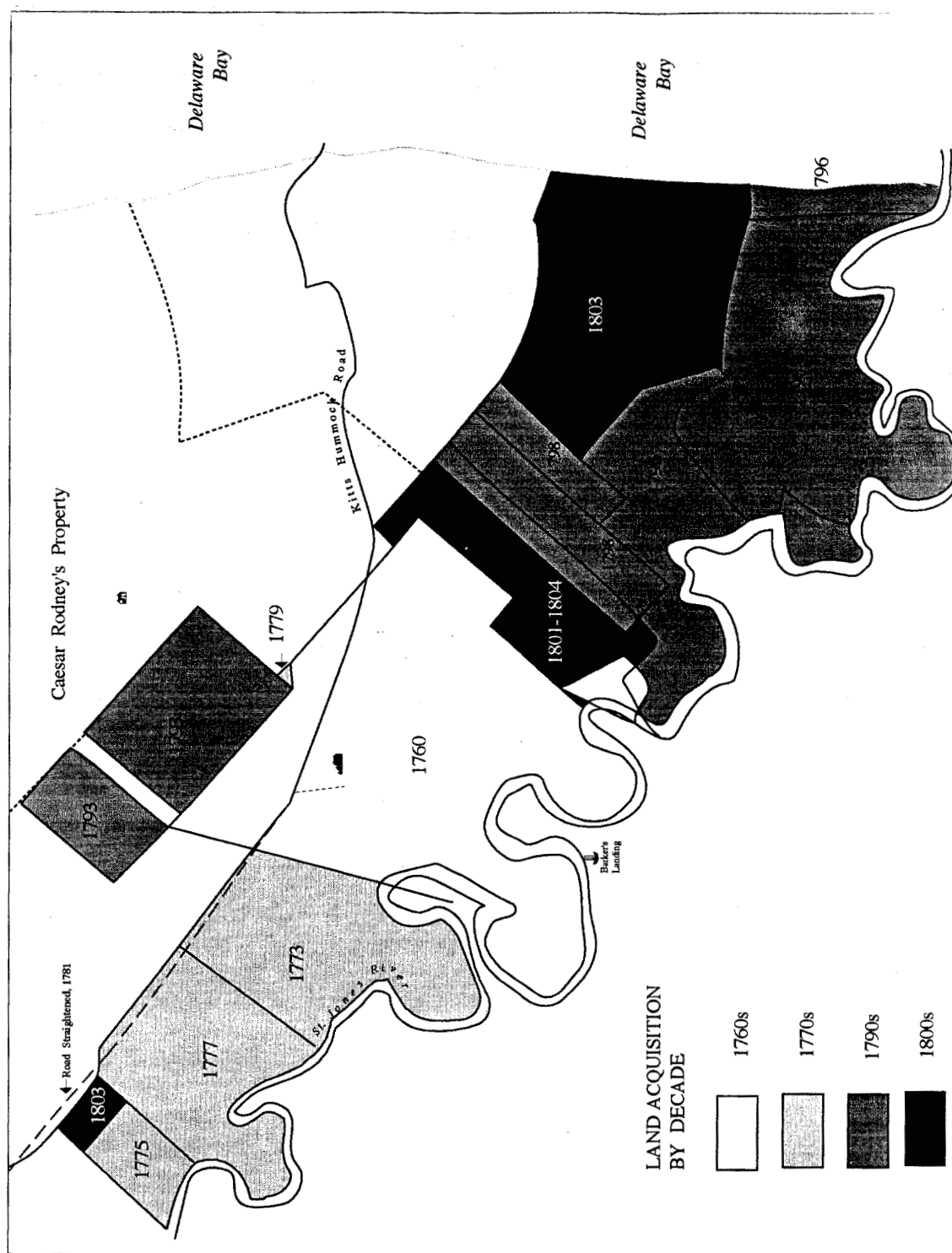


Figure 5: Locations of land acquired by John Dickinson, 1760-1808.

comprising twelve acres from Caesar Rodney for £120. In 1781, while attempting to straighten the Kitts Hummock Road where it passed through Rixom and Youngs, Dickinson exchanged parcels of 3-4 acres with Joshua Gordon so that the boundary lines for both men's property remained intact. Finally, in 1786 Dickinson initiated a common recovery suit similar to the one carried out by his father, Samuel, in 1739. This time the suit concentrated on clearing John's title to the lands left to him by his father's will. This action may have been prompted by claims brought against him by the descendants of Walter Dickinson (II).

With the end of the war and the conclusion of the Constitutional Convention, John found himself with more free time to devote to developing his holdings on the St. Jones Neck. He began a campaign of purchases designed to expand his holdings southeast towards the Delaware River and north towards the lands owned by the Rodney family. In 1793 he bought two parcels of land in Burton's Delight--107 acres known as Hart's Field, and 230 acres called Crawfords. These lands came on the market following the death of Caesar Rodney. Dickinson paid £2000 to a conglomerate made up of Thomas McKean, George Emlen, Thomas Fisher, Samuel Fisher, and Meirs Fisher, who originally purchased the land from Rodney's estate. He also obtained a conveyance of rights for the same two lots from Joshua Gordon, Rodney's brother-in-law, who held a debt claim against Rodney's estate.

Between 1796 and 1798, Dickinson worked on securing title to the land between the Delaware Bay and his existing holdings in Berrys. This included the tracts of Berrys, Kingston-Upon-Hull, and Town Point. In March 1796, Dickinson purchased four parcels of land (totalling 767 acres) in Berrys, Kingston-Upon-Hull, and Town Point, from Nathaniel Luff for £2500. Two months later he bought 650 acres of Town Point and Kingston-Upon-Hull from Thomas Fisher for £1500. Then in June of the same year he obtained 177 acres of Berrys and 50 acres of Kingston-Upon-Hull from John and Mary Wethered and their son, Peregrine. After these initial purchases, Dickinson negotiated several deeds to clarify his title to the lands, including three with Nathaniel Luff and one with John and Elizabeth Johnston. In each case Dickinson made every effort to assure himself that no possible claim could arise to lands that he now owned.

By 1798 Dickinson possessed several sections of Berrys as part of his move to own all of St. Jones Neck from the Bayside to Barkers Landing. The Pleasanton family's holdings in Berrys represented a gap in that stretch of land so Dickinson set



out to buy it. His earlier relations with Jonathan Pleasanton had not been particularly pleasant or neighborly. The two men quarreled over the location of the boundary between their properties and ended up in court for a division of the land. Dickinson may simply have decided that he would have better luck in obtaining the land he wanted if he just waited for Pleasanton to die. When Jonathan Pleasanton died in the 1790s his son Stephen handled the settlement of the estate. The heirs included several daughters still underage and Stephen protected their interests as best he could from his job in Washington, D.C.. In 1801, following negotiations conducted with Stephen Pleasanton by mail, Dickinson acquired Stephen's rights to all Pleasanton land located in the Neck except for a property known as Troy; in 1803 and 1804 Dickinson executed similar agreements with Stephen's younger sisters, Hannah and Elizabeth.

The only remaining piece of Berrys not owned by Dickinson was a 20- to 32-acre parcel on the northeast end of the tract. William Meston purchased the land from William and Naomi Berry in 1688/9, and incorporated it into his other holdings in the nearby tracts of Poplar Ridge and Brinckloe's Choice. Between 1801 and 1804, Dickinson systematically purchased the rights of every living descendant of William Meston that he could find. This included the Pleasanton heirs, Thomas Rodney, Sarah Rodney Wilson, Sarah Rodney Ferguson, and Elizabeth Gordon Brinckloe and her husband John. With these final purchases, John Dickinson owned all rights to the entire tract of Berrys.

The reasoning behind Dickinson's expenditure of such large amounts of time and money to acquire clear title to land became very clear in 1802 when the Ware family challenged his ownership of Rixom. That year John Dickinson received a visit from Joseph Taggart, husband of Lydia Ware, a granddaughter of William and Mary Ware (later Mary Lucas). Taggart claimed that his wife and daughter were entitled to a portion of the land that Mary and Moses Lucas had been forced to sell to Benjamin Chew in 1754. This claim prompted Dickinson to begin an intensive investigation into the Ware family's genealogy and the transactions between the family and Benjamin Chew. In the long run he decided that the safest course of action was to pay each of the surviving members of the family for any possible rights they might claim to have in the future. He executed deeds for this purpose with the descendants of William and Mary Ware: Ann Barber Ware (widow of David Ware) and her children--James Ware, Mary and Jacob Andrews, David Ware, Ann and John Allen,

JohnWare, and William Ware; the surviving children of William Ware--John Ware, Mary and Jeremiah Pearson, Sarah and Mark Fulton, Anne Ware, and Elizabeth and John Freeman. William and Mary Ware's third child, John, married Ann Barber, widow of Abraham Barber, but died intestate and without children; all of his rights in his parents' property reverted to his two brothers (William and David). Surprisingly, Joseph and Lydia Taggart apparently were the only heirs who did not receive payment for their rights from Dickinson.

John Dickinson's last two purchases of new land in the St. Jones Neck occurred in 1803. In May of that year he bought another 500 acres of Kingston-Upon-Hull and Town Point at a sheriff's sale to settle the debts owed by the estate of John Gordon. In December he purchased 40 acres in Rixom from Francis Barber for £300. Each of these pieces of land bordered his existing holdings. During the last five years of his life, Dickinson acquired no more new lands along the St. Jones River, but focused on rebuilding the brick mansion built by his father, badly damaged by fire in 1804. Failing health and other business matters drew his interest to other locations, such as Wilmington and Philadelphia. When he died in 1808, Dickinson left all of his St. Jones Neck property to his daughter, Sally Norris Dickinson.

Sally Norris Dickinson maintained the lands as tenant farms throughout her life, making no substantial reductions or increases in the size of the holdings. She apparently sold the 250 acres known as Crawford's sometime between 1830 and 1850. She and her executor, James Vaux, advertised the entire property for sale in 1816 but found no takers. The newspaper advertisement described the property as follows:

*FOR SALE,*

THAT VALUABLE

*Landed Estate,*

LATE the property of John Dickinson, Esq. deceased, situated about six miles from Dover, in Jones's Neck, Kent County, State of Delaware,

It is bounded Eastwardly, by Delaware Bay, Southwardly by Jones's Creek, Westwardly by Lands of Francis Barber, Northwardly by those of Doctor John Brinckle, George Laws, Isaac Davis, and others, and is divided into six Farms, which are well provided with good dwelling Houses, and out houses.

The Creek is navigable for Shallops, some miles above the Farms, and affords at least six convenient Landings on the premises.

The Timber is principally oak, poplar, hickory and some walnut, and the soil, naturally good, is capable of great improvement from its own resources, as an inexhaustible fund of manure might be drawn from the adjoining marsh.

The whole premises are very compact and comprise about 4775 acres, about 680 acres of which are woodland and 1780 acres marsh--a large part of the latter might be rendered highly valuable by banking.

At her death in 1854, Sally's will divided the property between her nephews, beginning the cycle of breaking up the Dickinsons' control of the St. Jones Neck (Figure 6).

### **Map Information**

The maps for this section focus on the ways the lands changed hands between family members and the expansion into new areas, using different fills to represent individual people. Division of the activity into maps for the two periods associated with Samuel and John Dickinson clarifies the process without trying to put too much information on one map.

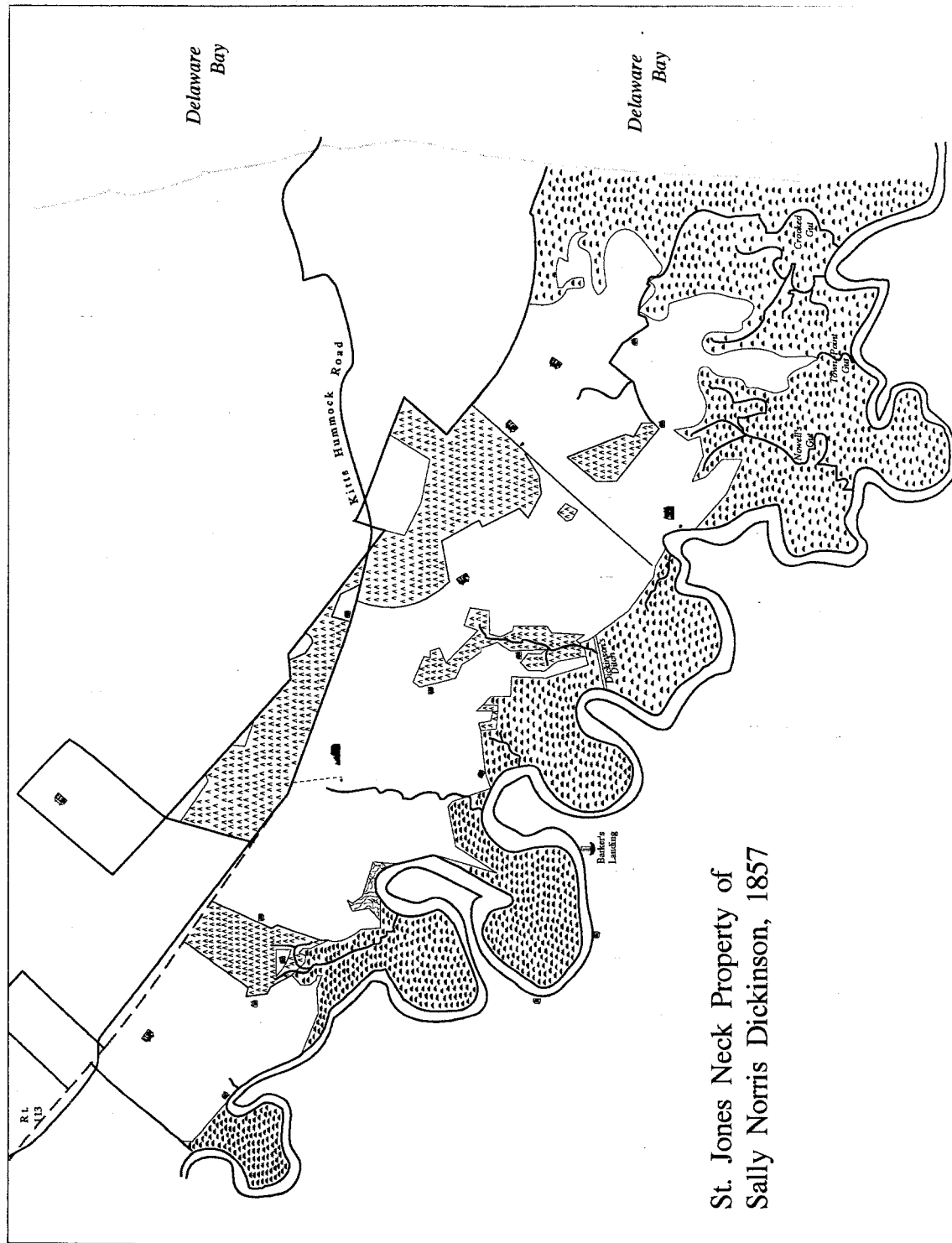


Figure 6: Land owned by Sally Norris Dickinson's estate in 1857.

## **II. Agricultural Tenancy and Land Management, 1780-1810**

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, John Dickinson began to consolidate his holdings on the St. Jones Neck into individually operated tenant farms. After his wife refused to live in the unhealthy atmosphere of mosquitos and seasonal fevers prevalent in St. Jones Hundred, the family moved its primary home first to Philadelphia and then to Wilmington starting in 1785. Dickinson then shifted his St. Jones Neck holdings into an era of intensive land management and tenancy.<sup>3</sup>

He divided the massive property on St. Jones Neck into smaller tenant farms and leased them to local farmers for cultivation and management. Tenant correspondence, leases, and public records for the period between 1780 and 1810 provide extensive documentation of agricultural indentures, cultivation methods, and crop production on the Dickinson lands. Though tenants occupied sections of the Dickinson family's lands in St. Jones Neck both before and after these dates, the geographical boundaries and terms of tenancy used by the Dickinsons well into the nineteenth century took shape during this thirty-year period.

Dickinson's move toward absentee ownership and tenancy as a land management alternative typified mid-Atlantic agriculture in this era. Tenant farms accounted for approximately half of the farms in Delaware from the late eighteenth century through the nineteenth century and played a major role in the region's agricultural development. Under a typical tenancy arrangement the landowner leased his land to an independent farmer or farm family in return for a cash or crop rent payment. Tenancy offered advantages to both landlords and tenants. Landlords contracted for the improvement of depleted agricultural lands and avoided seasonal shortages in farm labor. Tenants gained access to larger, more productive farms, and the chance to acquire more livestock and farming equipment.<sup>4</sup>

### **Tenant Farms and Geographical Features**

Between 1780 and 1810, John Dickinson gradually shaped his expanding acreage in St. Jones Neck into six tenant farms and one field, ranging in size from

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<sup>3</sup> Agricultural Tenancy in Central Delaware 1770-1900+/-: A Historic Context, Center for Historic Architecture and Engineering; University of Delaware, 1991, p. 65.

<sup>4</sup> Agricultural Tenancy, p. 3.

106 to 970 acres. Frequently identified by the names of their previous owners, these tenant farms included the Dickinson family Homestead, Upper Place, Fisher-Manlove farm, Luff's plantation, Pleasanton's farm, Crawford's Place, and Hart's Field (Figure 7).<sup>5</sup> John Dickinson's tenants sometimes leased more than one of his farms, renting cleared tracts of land for cultivation in combination with woodland and marsh.<sup>6</sup> Other tenants leased only a single farm, living on and working the same property. Some of Dickinson's tenants stayed for many years, renewing leases annually. Several of these men remained tenants of John Dickinson until they died, moving from one of his farms to another as others tenants departed or found themselves evicted. Other tenants signed one or two year leases, then moved away and Dickinson replaced them with new candidates.

### **Homestead and Upper Place**

When Samuel Dickinson died in 1760 he divided his land on the St. Jones Neck between his two sons. Philemon received the westernmost lands, known as the Upper Place, and John received the family homestead. As early as 1767, John and Philemon jointly leased their St. Jones Neck properties, an area approaching 2000 acres, to William Howell. Extending northwest from the St. Jones River, both the Homestead and Upper Place farms included extensive acres of woodland, marsh, and cleared land. A peach orchard enhanced the landscape of Upper Place.

As an absentee landlord, John Dickinson included arrangements for rent payments, crop shares, and maintenance in his tenant leases. When William Howell signed his seven-year lease with the Dickinson brothers in 1767, he promised to pay £200 rent annually and "as often as Need shall require [to] sufficiently repair support sustain maintain and amend the Messuages Tenements and all the Houses Edifices Buildings Barns and Stables on the Premises." Howell also agreed to mend fences, to keep gardens and orchards in good order, to care for livestock, to treat resident slaves with "tenderness and care," and to clear woodland from the "Place called Courtneys, and also the Trees growing on the Point near the

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<sup>5</sup>In this text the Dickinson tenant farms will be referred to as the Fisher-Manlove farm, Luff's plantation, Pleasanton's farm, Crawford's Place, Hart's Field, Upper Place, and Homestead. All of the land tracts, including Hart's Field which contained no buildings, will be referred to as tenant farms.

<sup>6</sup> Agricultural Tenancy, p. 3.

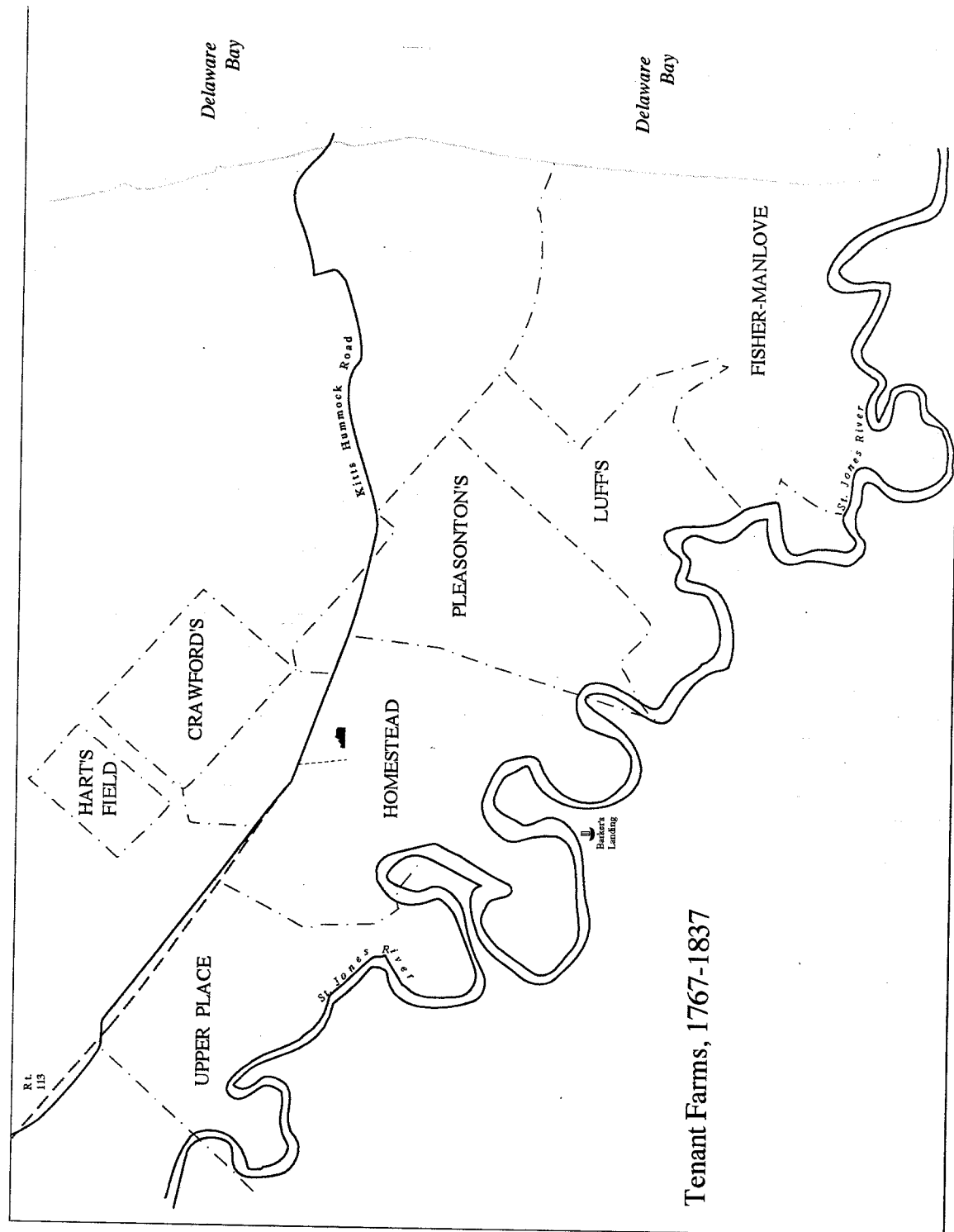


Figure 7: Locations of tenant farms on St. Jones Neck.

landing." Having so agreed, the lease also obliged Howell to give both brothers and their families free access to the land and mansion house (where Howell and his family lived) at any time and without prior notice.

William Howell's signed indenture with John and Philemon exemplified Dickinson's arrangements with all his tenants at the Homestead from 1780 to 1810. Robert Johnson, his wife, and family leased the Homestead from 1775 to 1777. Following Johnson, the Homestead came under the tenure of William White (1782-1788), John Emory (1787-1797), Charles Ryan (1797-1799), Joseph Kimmey (1800-1803) and, his son, James Kimmey (1803-1809). In 1781, Johnson's indenture identified the boundaries of the Homestead in the following terms:

all that Plantation and...parcels of Land and Marsh...bounded by Jones Creek by the Division Line established between the said John...and his brother...by Land late of John Smith by Land of Caesar Rodney by Land late of David Pleasanton and by Land and Marsh of Jonathan Pleasanton...

The lease specified that Johnson would hold the land for twenty-five years. But less than a year later William White signed a lease for the same land and buildings, promising to pay a crop rent of:

eight hundred Bushels of good sound clean merchantable Winter Wheat to be delivered to the said storehouse or shallop at Christiana Bridge  
...five Tons of good Clean well cured and well kept red Clover Hay of the first Crop, one hundred pounds of good sweet potted Butter...

In 1787 Dickinson leased the Homestead farm to John Emory. At the time Emory enjoyed "a spacious dwelling house and every other building needful of a farm." In 1797, the Homestead came under the tenure of Charles Ryan and, in 1800, Joseph Kimmey. At the time of his lease, Kimmey held a total of 970 acres, 600 cleared with some marsh. After his death in 1803, his son, James Kimmey took over the lease. In 1822, Thomas Canday was leasing the Homestead and by 1828 the Tomlinson family had replaced him. Also, in 1781 John Dickinson, Jr., leased a few acres of the Homestead farm. After his death, his wife took over the lease. In 1807, William Dickinson appears to have leased this same small parcel.

Between 1775 and 1780, John Dickinson convinced his brother Philemon to sell him the Upper Place, so called for its northwestern position in relation to the mansion. After William Howell's tenancy expired, Dickinson began to lease the Homestead and the Upper Place as separate tenant farms. William Maxwell, the first tenant to occupy only Upper Place, signed his lease in 1779. In March 1781,



Dickinson recorded Maxwell's rent payment of 300 bushels of wheat and corn. Deborah White (widow of William White) leased Upper Place for one year, beginning in 1793. She paid Dickinson a rent of "forty eight Bushels of good sound clean shell'd Indian Corn and forty five pound of good clean wool." The land passed under the tenure of Charles Murphy in 1794. After Charles' death in 1796, Jenkins and Charles Murphy, Jr., leased the property. The Murphys made use of a dwelling house, kitchen, smokehouse, stable, corn cribs, and a barn. Also on the property was a peach orchard. Dickinson allowed "several families of negroes" to live near the peach orchard in small dwellings. In 1797, Marcy and David Beauchamp leased the property and, in 1804, ceded tenure to Samuel and Susannah Moore. The Moores held 325 acres, 200 of which was cleared land. Between 1804 and 1822, 524 acres of Upper Place came under the tenure of Thomas Brown. During his tenure, Brown lived in "a one story framed dwelling house," which Dickinson insured for \$1,000 in 1807. In 1828 Upper Place came under the tenure of the Anderson family and, in 1837, the Chipmans.

### **Luff's Plantation**

Nathaniel Luff referred to his St. Jones Neck plantation as "Kingston-Upon-Hull." Bordered by land belonging to the Fishers, Manloves, Pleasantons, and Caesar Rodney, Kingston-Upon-Hull included approximately 368 acres of upland and 400 acres of marsh. Luff, a long time neighbor and devoted family friend of the Dickinsons, sold the property to John Dickinson in 1795. Dickinson immediately turned Kingston-Upon-Hull into an additional tenant farm. Peter Patten, a free black, tenanted part of Nathaniel Luff's plantation before Dickinson purchased the land. After the purchase, Dickinson retained Patten as a tenant on a small portion of the land. He leased "all land lately purchased from Nathaniel Luff except those parts rented by Luff to Peter Patten" to Charles Ryan on December 1, 1795. Ryan lived in the Luff mansion, a brick dwelling "with a new room and an adjacent one story kitchen." He used a log granary, smokehouses, four corn cribs, a stable, and a one story barn. Two years later, Ryan moved to the Homestead and Luff's passed into the tenure of Daniel Walker. Walker agreed to pay four hundred bushels of wheat, six hundred bushels of corn in rent, to clear no more land and "that no waste or destruction of any kind shall be done...upon the premises." John Furby, a free black man, leased the property in 1802. His tenant farm included 250 acres of cleared land,

worth \$14 per acre, and 400 acres of marsh. At the time Furby leased the Luff Plantation, his brother, Peter Patten, continued to lease a portion of the property. Furby continued to rent the Luff Plantation from John Dickinson until 1812. After 1822, the Day family leased the Luff property and in 1828 it came under the tenure of a farmer named Lofland.

### **Fisher-Manlove Farm**

The Delaware Bay marked the eastern boundary of John Dickinson's Fisher-Manlove tenant farm. To the west, it bordered Luff's Plantation and to the north, the old Kitts Hummock Road. Dickinson purchased Thomas Fisher's farm on St. Jones Neck in the 1790s. The farm included 150 acres of upland and 500 acres of marsh with a dwelling house, kitchen, smokehouse, corn cribs, stable, and barn. Dickinson combined the Fisher property with the unoccupied acreage of Luff's plantation and leased the two properties as a unit, first, to Charles Ryan and, later, to Daniel Walker. Both the Luff Plantation and the Fisher farm came under the tenure of John Furby and Peter Patten during 1802 and 1803, when Furby agreed to pay £200 annual rent and to take care of the land, buildings, trees, and fences. Patten surrendered his part of the lease after only a few months, but Furby remained on the land until his eviction in 1812.

Dickinson purchased the Manlove family's property on St. Jones Neck from the executor of Ebenezer Manlove's estate in the late 1790s. In the 1790s, James Faulkner and Samuel Bennett, a carpenter, leased part of the Manlove farm from Dickinson. Dickinson paid Bennett \$100 annually, allowing him to farm, use livestock, and gather firewood. In return, Bennett agreed to work exclusively for Dickinson, making repairs to buildings and constructing a kiln. Dickinson made a similar arrangement with Stephen Dougherty in 1799, providing land and housing in return for ditching. A different James Faulkner leased Dickinson's Manlove farm between 1803 and 1809. Though few records of his occupation survive, Faulkner evidently paid Dickinson an annual percentage of his crop of wheat and corn. After Faulkner's death in 1809, Dickinson's successors converted the marsh along the bay adjacent to the Fisher and Manlove tracts into common land. They combined the remaining upland of both tracts, amounting to 336 acres, to create the single Fisher-Manlove tenant farm. It is unclear who rented the Fisher-Manlove farm after Faulkner's death (1809) and Furby's eviction (1812). Records indicate that by at least 1822 the

Swigett family leased the land and continued to do so through 1837.

### **Pleasanton's Farm**

Dickinson purchased the land of several members of the Pleasanton family between 1795 and 1805. Adjacent to the Dickinson Homestead to the west and the Luff Plantation on the east, the Pleasanton lands stretched from the marshes of the St. Jones River north across the Old Kitts Hummock Road. In the 1790s, John Dickinson leased a portion of his Pleasanton lands to Isaiah Wharton. The 1797 tax assessment described Wharton's tenant farm as "not in so good repair," with one old dwelling house and kitchen. Soon after David Pleasanton sold his St. Jones Neck property to John Dickinson in 1803, he leased a small portion of the property and became one of Dickinson's tenants. Between 1802 and 1808, Dickinson leased Pleasanton's as two farms, one 370-acre farm under the tenure of Thomas Canday and one 250-acre farm under the tenure of Joshua Turner. The Candays remained on the land until at least 1822 when they moved to the Homestead. The farm leased by Joshua Turner included 160 acres of cleared land, a dwelling house, and some outbuildings. Turner remained on this farm until his death in 1808 when Grace Turner, his widow, and Charles Brinckle took over his lease. Brinckle stayed on the Pleasanton farm until his death in 1817. After that date, it appears that the Dickinson family leased the Pleasanton tenant farm as a single unit of 450 acres. In 1822 the Pleasanton farm passed into the tenure of the Cullen family; by 1828 a family called Milloway resided there.

### **Crawford's Place**

John Dickinson purchased a tract of land bordering the northeastern edge of the Homestead from his St. Jones Neck neighbor, Caesar Rodney, in 1778. The following year he leased this land, known as Crawford's Place, to James Graham. Graham agreed to pay Dickinson "one half of all the produce of that premises" and to "make a new and substantial fence...parallel to the Fence of the wheatfield." It is not clear how long Graham remained at Crawford's, but between 1781 and 1795 Dickinson most likely merged the farm into other leases. Isaiah Wharton leased Crawford's Place in 1795, two years before he leased part of the Pleasanton farm. Dickinson evicted Wharton from both farms on St. Jones Neck in 1798. The 1797 tax assessment describes the 230-acre farm as having 150 acres of cleared land, a dwelling house, corn cribs, stable, granary, and barn. William Canday leased Crawford's Place from

1799 until his death in 1803. After his death, the land passed into the tenure of Thomas and Sophia Canday as an addition to their Pleasanton's lease. Crawford's Place remained under the tenure of the Canday family until at least 1811 and possibly through 1822, when they moved to the Homestead. By 1822 a man named John Brown leased the property.

### **Hart's Field**

Dickinson also leased out Hart's Field, an isolated tract of land lying northeast of Upper Place and northwest of Crawford's. The property consisted of 106 acres of cleared land with no buildings. Dickinson's 1796 rent roll book indicated that David Smith leased Hart's Field, paying 500 bushels of Indian corn in rent. Evidence indicates that Patrick Corran leased Hart's Field from 1799 to 1804. When Thomas Canday leased part of the Pleasanton property and all of Crawford's Place in 1804, he also leased Hart's Field. The Canday family continued to lease Hart's Field until they moved to the Homestead in 1822. In 1822, John Brown's lease included the Upper Place, Crawford's, and Hart's Field. The land passed under the tenure of the Palmer family in 1828 and B. Henson in 1837. No buildings were constructed on the property and tenants used it primarily for growing wheat, corn, or hay.

### **Tenants**

Agreements between landlord and tenant could take one of several different forms in late eighteenth century Delaware. John Dickinson's tenants and lease agreements for his St. Jones Neck properties reflected a number of those forms of agricultural tenancy. Through either verbal or written contracts, landowners arranged for the cultivation and maintenance of their lands. The tenant who occupied that land obligated himself to meet specified requirements including land clearance and cultivation, building and enclosure improvements, and, of course, either a fixed rent or a share in the harvest. These tenants represented a class of nonlandowning but land-holding farmers and farm managers. Other tenants occupied the farm with the landowner or manager and worked at specific seasonal tasks. These individuals, who were typically provided with a small house and garden plot, received wages but seldom profits from the harvest. Known as cottagers, these people supplemented the agricultural and domestic labor force on a seasonal as-

needed basis. Nonresident, nonlanded day labor represents a third category that augmented the work force of resident tenants and cottagers. Slaves represented a significant but diminishing segment of the agricultural work force from the eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup>

While tenants and landlords in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Delaware typically formalized arrangements by lease, individual terms and situations varied. Tenancy represented a broad spectrum of social as well as economic circumstances. Tenants contracted themselves for varying lengths of time and they came from all walks of life--some owned their own livestock and or slaves, some even owned land that they rented to others. White nonlandowning males made up the majority of John Dickinson St. Jones Neck tenants from 1770 to 1810 (Figure 8). These men varied in occupation, wealth, and landholding status. Typically, Dickinson's tenants could be characterized as white males, married with children, and some wealth in the form of personal or landed property.

When Robert Johnson moved to the Dickinson Homestead in 1775 he transferred the title of his property in Pencader Hundred to Dickinson. Johnson moved from being a property owner to a landless tenant and, apparently, acquired the use of Dickinson's livestock, furniture, and utensils. Tenant status from 1781 until his death in 1793 obscured William White's financial condition. A well-to-do man who owned 387 acres of land in nearby Little Creek Hundred, White gained prestige by serving as Dickinson's business agent in Kent County while managing and living on the extensive Dickinson Homestead. At the time of his death, White owned an eight-day clock, expensive furniture, a gentleman's carriage, and nine slaves. On the other hand, John Emory's tenure at the Homestead did not enhance his reputation. John Dickinson terminated Emory's lease after investigating the degree of his indebtedness. Most of Dickinson's tenants fell somewhere between these two extremes. Many held or accumulated a moderate degree of material possessions and financial security. When he died, Samuel Moore left an estate valued at \$688. He owned no land or slaves. In a letter recommending Charles Murphy as a tenant to Dickinson, John Emory described him as "a thriving man and has bot before hand a good deal for a man that has raised children." When Jenkins and Charles Murphy signed their indenture for Dickinson's Upper Place in 1794 they owned horses, cows,

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<sup>7</sup> *Agricultural Tenancy*, p. 3.

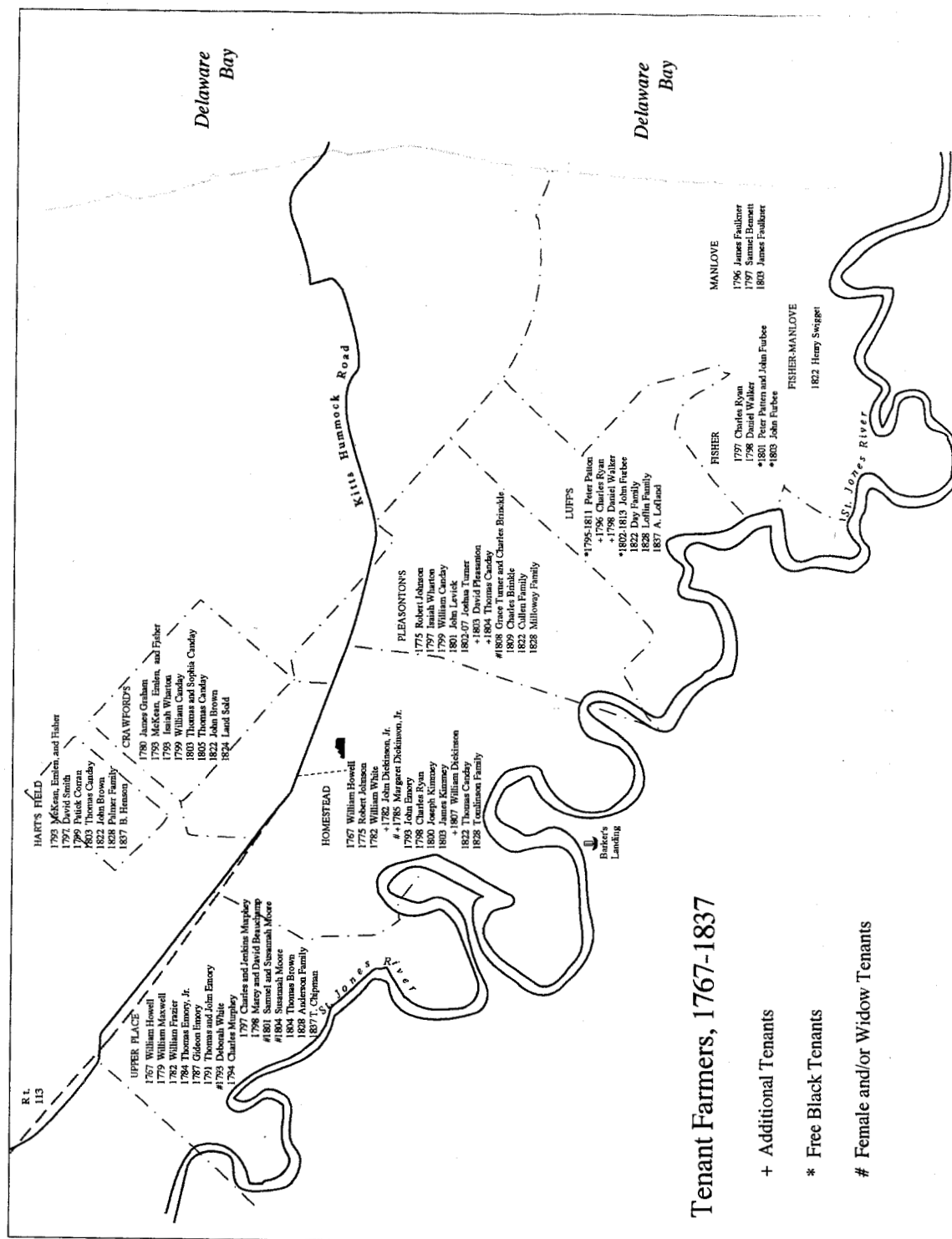


Figure 8: Tenants associated with Dickinson tenant farms.

oxen, sows, pigs, and other property with a total taxable value of £369.

John Dickinson did not always lease his St. Jones farms to white males. He also contracted with free blacks, such as Peter Patten and his brother John Furby. Patten leased portions of the Fisher and Luff tracts from Dickinson, beginning in 1803. The 1797 tax assessment attributed only sheep and cows to Patten's taxable property. By 1804, he also owned horses and pigs. When he died in 1833, assessors valued Patten's property at \$186. John Furby began his tenure on Luff's Plantation in 1802 and stayed for ten years. According to his will, Furby owned two tables, six chairs, a loom, three iron pots, one cupboard, two chests, and two spinning wheels. His will also suggested that Furby owned twenty acres of land.

Tenants did not account for all the blacks living on Dickinson's St. Jones Neck property between 1780 and 1810. A substantial slave community resided on the various farms and worked for Dickinson and his tenants. In 1777 Dickinson promised to free his thirty-seven slaves after they served him for twenty-one years. Housing for the slaves existed in different forms on each farm, generally dispersed about the farm in a variety of buildings rather than in purpose-built slave quarters. For example, the peach orchard at Upper Place contained several small dwellings used for slave housing. When James Graham leased Crawford's Place in 1780, he gained access to the entire plot "except the House where black Betty lives & three acres of clear ground next to it." Many of Dickinson's agreements with tenants included clauses that protected resident slaves and made provisions for their services as well as their care. In William Howell's indenture, Dickinson wrote:

Howell shall have the Negros herein after mentioned with the Premises aforesaid to wit Violet, Ned Abraham, Flora, Hannibal to serve the said William Howell for himself...that all said negroes...shall be treated with Tenderness and Care, both in Sickness and Health, well fed and warmly and properly cloathed...

While Dickinson considered slaves an appropriate element to include in a lease agreement, he felt sufficient responsibility for his blacks to insist that they be properly cared for.

In some isolated cases, Dickinson leased his St. Jones Neck tenant farms to women. Usually this practice occurred in the wake of the death of a husband who already held a lease with Dickinson. For an annual rate of 20 shillings, John Dickinson, Jr., and his wife Margaret lived on ten acres identified as the "little old field near the schoolhouse in Jones Neck where Edward Loteman lately lived." When

John, Jr., died in 1795, Margaret continued to lease and work the small farm until her death in 1803. When William White, Dickinson's tenant at the Homestead from 1782 to 1793, died, his widow, Deborah, settled her debts with John Dickinson and then arranged to lease the Upper Place plantation under her own name. She remained at Upper Place, giving most of her attention to wool production, until her death in 1794. In a letter to Dickinson, she wrote:

If the old Blacks say that I picked the woll offered them it is notorious false for I weighed all the woll that come off the Sheep Except three flucies to make their compliment which I never opened to see Whither it was good or bad. the articles mentioned clean woll but I expected no Cleaner than come of the Sheep's Back but if they must have it washed it will be Ready at any time if they will assist in washing of it...

When Samuel Moore died in 1804, his wife continued as a tenant for three years on the Upper Place farm. Susannah Moore wrote to Dickinson:

I am desirious to know from you if I can have your place. . . I would wish to have it one year longer, if no more, as to your rent due when Saml. Moore died I Expect to have ready when you come. . .

Apparently both Dickinson and Mrs. Moore considered it appropriate for Susannah to remain as the primary tenant on the farm beyond the end of the lease year.

Another form of tenancy that occurred under Dickinson's management can be characterized as a cottager or "house and garden" arrangement. A "house and garden" was a dwelling contained on a plot of land large enough to incorporate a small garden (usually five acres or less) and represented a strategy by Kent County landowners to ensure that farm laborers would be available whenever they were needed. The wheat crop grown by Kent County farmers in increasingly larger amounts after the first quarter of the nineteenth century demanded intensive seasonal labor for sowing in the spring and harvesting in late summer. Providing laborers with dwellings on or immediately adjacent to farmsteads in exchange for seasonal work in the wheat fields made sound economic sense for farmers. These dwellings included a small plot of land, or garden, where laborers raised vegetables to sustain themselves and possibly to sell any surplus at local markets.

Dickinson maintained house and garden type arrangements with a number of tenants between 1780 and 1810. In his case these arrangements provided for specialized labor agreements rather than general agricultural harvest support, or simply provided a place for indigents. For example, Samuel Bennett, a carpenter, occupied a one-story frame house with a small amount of land. One indenture



referred to "poor persons who pay no rent with seven small wooden tenements and several acres of cleared land assigned to them." Also, Dickinson set aside several small buildings near the Peach Orchard where his slaves and former slaves resided. The 1797 rental agreement between Dickinson and Charles Ryan reserved the lots "where black Nathan lives" and "where black Liverpool lives" for their permanent use. Dickinson seemed to make use of this method, not just to retain farm laborers for planting and harvesting season, but to retain skilled artisans close at hand.

Dickinson sometimes made arrangements with tenants to pay their rent in labor. In particular, he indentured carpenters, brickmakers, bricklayers, and other skilled craftsmen and laborers to make improvements on the various farms. For example, in July 1799 Stephen Dougherty, a ditcher, agreed to "rent of John Dickinson Esquire the Premises within mentioned for one year...covenanting to...do all his Ditching."

### **Tenant Farm Dwellings and Agricultural Outbuildings**

The variety and location of tenant dwellings and agricultural outbuildings on Dickinson's St. Jones Neck farms also reflected the different types and degrees of agricultural tenancy. Of particular interest in the Dickinson tenant records is the wide variety of dwellings and structures identified for the various tenant farms. Farm dwellings reveal some interesting information about the status of tenants. Tenants did not necessarily live in one-story, one-room-plan broken-down log cabins.<sup>8</sup> On the contrary, tenants at the Homestead occupied a three-story brick dwelling originally built for the Dickinson family in 1740. In 1804, a carpenter described the Homestead mansion as follows:

Said brick Dwelling House was 45 feet long 25 feet broad and two Stories high, besides two Chambers in the Attic...that the Hall and Largest parlour have wainscotted every Room in House was plastered and painted...the whole of the Said Dwelling house was finished in a very substantial compleat and Elegant Manner... Chimney of the Large parlour had four uncommonly large Marble Slabs, and three of the Chambers had each large marble Slabs...that the Hall and Parlour had wainscotted Seats to the Windows and the said parlour had two very large scalloped Beaufetts [buffet] with glass Doors...

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<sup>8</sup> Agricultural Tenancy, p. 35.

Tax assessments described the existence of the Homestead dwelling and "every other building needful of a farm," including barns, granaries, stables, corncribs, smokehouses, and dwellings for slaves. Luff's Plantation came with the original Luff house, a two-story brick mansion with a new room and a one-story kitchen. In addition the farm contained several log structures, including a granary, smokehouses, four corn cribs, a stable, carriage house, small brick shop, and two barns. Crawford's Place offered a dwelling house, corn cribs, stable, granary, and barn in 1797 and 1804. Similarly, the Fisher farm included a substantial dwelling house, kitchen, smokehouse, corn cribs, stable and barn. Dickinson described a dwelling he wished to build for a tenant with the following specifications:

A Frame House 22 feet by 18, with a partition - upper and lower floors of best second rate pine Boards - 2 twelve Light Windows below; one in Front, the other back - the whole House to be underpinned with Brick, and the chimney to be of Brick - All the joists and Rafters to be sawed - the roof to be the best Cedar Shingles, showing nine inches - A passage of ten feet wide between the House and Kitchen.

Dickinson hired William Garner to build a new barn at Crawford's Place in 1794. The specifics of their agreement described the barn:

forty feet long and twenty feet wide - thirteen feet between Joists and a Square Roof - to be covered with the best Cedar...Shingles to be only nine Inches- the whole \_\_\_\_\_ of the best two inch yellow Poplar, one door to be on one side of the Barn and the other Door on the other side - one third at least of the Length to be ceiled with half price Boards - about six feet high-the Barn to be placed upon a sufficient number of good substantial Blocks, two feet from the ground...

Obviously many of Dickinson's tenants lived in agricultural complexes built earlier in the eighteenth century for owner-occupant farmers of middle to upper economic status.

Yet not all of Dickinson's tenant farms offered such extravagant accommodations and service buildings. One of Dickinson's tenants wrote to him expressing a desire for more adequate housing:

this is to let you know that the dwelling house has got so bad that with out thee will get it repard or alow me out of the Rent for getting it don I must leve the place this faul for I nor no one else can live in the house another winter Please to rite back what you intend to do...

The Manlove farm included only a small log house, possibly indicating why Dickinson chose to combine the Fisher and Manlove acreage into one farm. In 1797, the Pleasanton farm included only "one old dwelling house and kitchen... not in so

good repair" to accommodate tenants. By 1804 improvements appeared to have been made. The Pleasanton farm under Isaiah Turner's tenure included a dwelling house and several outbuildings. When Marcy Beauchamp moved to Upper Place in 1797, he lived in a frame dwelling house and used several log structures, including a kitchen, smokehouse, and granary. Tax assessments described the wooden barn as being "in a ruinous state." Records also indicated a wooden loom house, probably an addition made by Deborah White. Hart's Field contained no buildings, consisting only of land cleared for farming.

### Leases and Agricultural Methods

John Dickinson executed written lease agreements with nearly all of his tenants, specifying rental payment terms as well as the guidelines that governed a tenant's occupancy of Dickinson's land. Tenants usually agreed to pay a cash rent as well as a portion of their wheat and corn crops and wool yield. Lease years began around the middle of March and rent payments (whether crops or cash) came due after harvest time (November). In addition to the land and buildings, tenants often obligated themselves to Dickinson for the use of his laborers and livestock.

John Dickinson's St. Jones Neck tenants usually grew wheat and corn as their cash crops (Figure 9). Other crops specified in indenture contracts and leases included flax, oats, and barley. Many of his tenants raised sheep and produced an annual supply of wool.

On December 1, 1795, Charles Ryan leased a portion of Luff's Plantation, agreeing to plant winter wheat and indian corn. Mark Irons paid a rent equal to one-fifth of all the grain raised and one acre planted in flax to Dickinson. In 1789, William White made arrangements to ship Dickinson's wheat rent to him in Philadelphia by the "first Shalop in the spring." Benjamin Dill, Dickinson's agent for tenant farms in Murderkill Hundred, reported the bushels of corn rent paid by Dickinson's tenants in May 1799: Robert Arthurs 200; Charles Townsend 200; Nathaniel Smithers 250; and Samuel Turner 400. At the same time, he informed Dickinson that both Turner and Arthurs "say that thir rents is to high and if you cannot take a less rent that they shall be obliged to leve you." John Dickinson gained a reputation for charging his tenants high rents. When Arthurs followed through and left, Dill found it difficult to replace him because, as he told Dickinson,

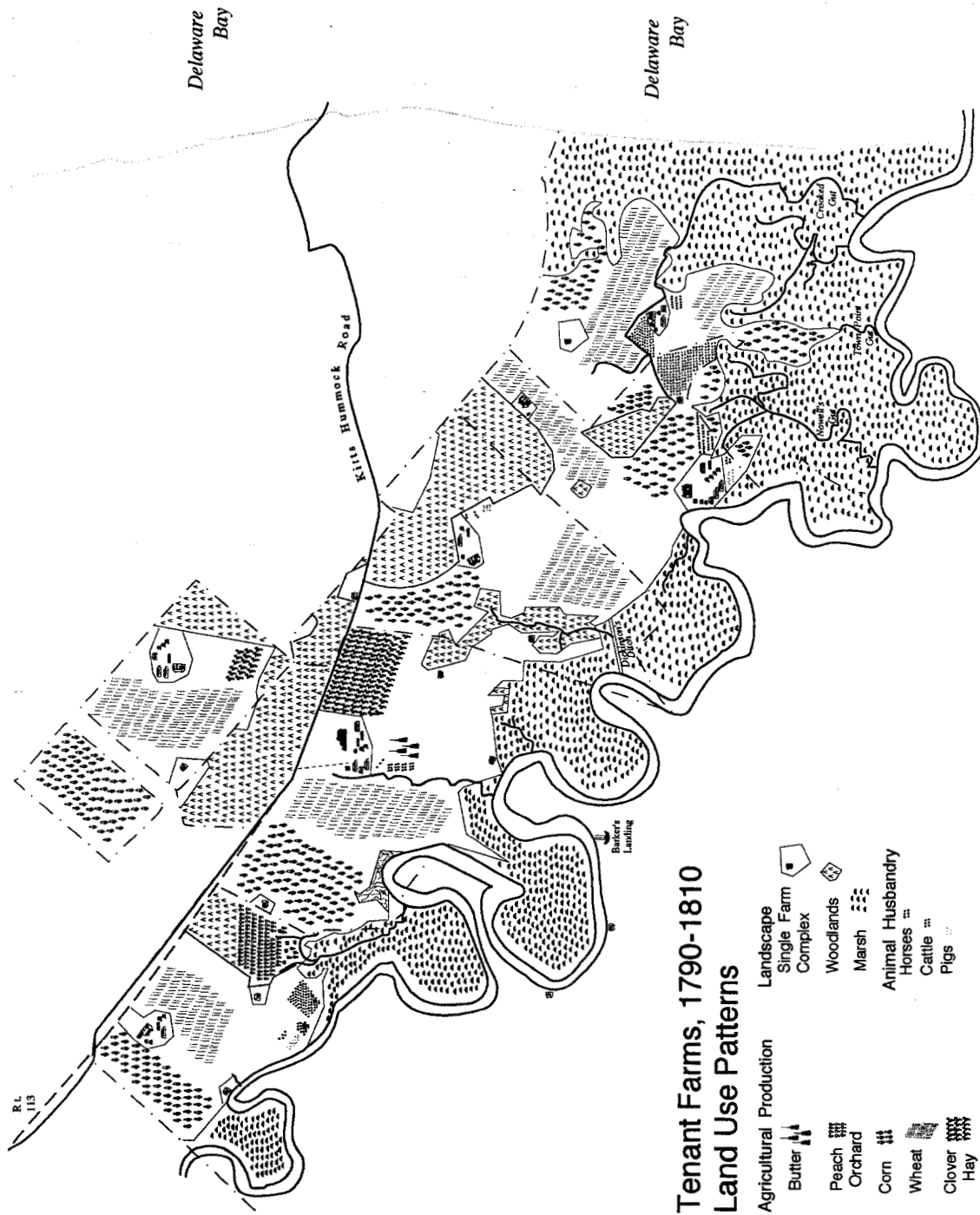


Figure 9: Schematic map showing distribution of crops and livestock on Dickinson tenant farms.

"no person will give the rent you ask."

Dickinson almost always required a corn and wheat payment. Depending upon the location of the tenant farm and the skills of the tenant, he sometimes required tenants to pay a portion of the rent in wool. In 1797, Marcy and David Beauchamp agreed to pay £120 in cash, 30 bushels of Indian corn and 30 pounds of good clean wool in rent. Elizabeth and James Kimmey paid £300 in cash to John Dickinson in June 1797, for rent due on the Homestead.

Besides the house and land, Dickinson often agreed to furnish necessary livestock, draught animals, laborers, seed, and equipment. In 1780 he provided Mark Irons "a good team of horses & a plough a Farrow & two Oxen a Boy to drive them, a Boy in planting time & all expenses of seed & smith's work." In 1798, Marcy and David Beauchamp received 27 sheep and 17 lambs from John Dickinson and agreed to return them at the end of their lease. In the case of John Dickinson, Jr., Dickinson agreed to furnish the wood, bricks, and windows needed to construct a home for his new tenants in 1785.

As a result of suffering special hardships, tenants sometimes found themselves unable to meet their lease obligations and asked Dickinson to extend credit beyond the lease agreement. Mary Hays wrote to Dickinson after her husband died and William Garner purchased the farm where she lived. "I have neither house nor home to put my head in now I have nothing to trust to but the Almighty God and your honour," she wrote in December 1770. In May 1785, Elizabeth Howell asked for a loan after the loss of her four children and suffering herself from an extended illness. In 1800, Nathaniel Smithers requested additional time needed to make delivery on his corn and wheat rent.

The other common element in Dickinson's leases consisted of admonitions and guidelines about the proper use and husbandry of his lands. These ranged from directions about rotation of crops, maintenance of fences, preservation of woodland, and the preparation of ditches for boundary lines and drainage. Through these types of regulations, the crop rents he required, and his careful selection of tenants, John Dickinson rigorously controlled the use of his lands on the St. Jones Neck.

On July 29, 1816, the *Delaware Gazette* advertised the sale of the former John Dickinson's lands in St. Jones Neck. In that advertisement, property conveyancer William Allinson described the Dickinson holdings:

...divided into six Farms, which are well provided with good dwelling

Houses, and out houses...the soil, naturally good, is capable of great improvement from its own resources...The whole premises are very compact and comprise about 4775 acres, about 680 acres of which are woodland and 780 acres marsh...

Dickinson's St. Jones Neck property took on this form and identity during the years 1770 through 1810, a period highlighted by absentee landlord tenancy, agricultural renewal, and farm formation.

### **Map Information**

The available records concerning John Dickinson's agricultural and business activities and the physical concentration of his holdings in St. Jones Neck lend themselves to a cartographic presentation of tenancy and land management. An examination of available sources suggested several analytical themes through which tenancy and land management on the Dickinson plantation might be represented on the second map.

First, easily identified tenant farm boundaries can be illustrated with chains of tenant occupancy indicated for each farm. Second, structures found on each farm, including dwellings, barns, and other functional buildings, can be represented on the map along with geographical features (cleared land, marsh, or woodland), crops, and livestock associated with particular farms.

It may also be possible to distinguish between the occupation of landscape in terms of race and sex. Slave housing in the Peach Orchard and various other locations throughout the property may also be identified. Similarly, house and garden arrangements spread throughout the property could be indicated in one or two places. While the cash payments would be difficult to show on a tenant map, the crops grown and animals raised could be easily represented.

Tenancy and land management practices on the Dickinson tenant farms in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries can be interpreted visually on the map also. The seven individual tenant farms can be easily identified. The important geographical areas of the farms, including upland, cleared land, woodland, and marsh, can be represented along with structures such as dwelling houses, barns, corn cribs, stables, and loom houses. The prevalent crops cultivated and animals raised or used might be represented with symbols for wheat, corn, flax, sheep, orchards, and others.

### III. Construction and Repair, 1790-1808

John Dickinson moved his St. Jones Neck property over to tenant farming in the 1780s and 1790s. Increasingly, the value of his land came to depend upon the quality of tenants indentured to plant and harvest wheat and corn crops. As his tenants and crops became financially important to Dickinson, he found it necessary to pay greater attention to the upkeep of tenant houses and farm structures throughout his 4500 acres. No longer investing in the acquisition of new land, Dickinson began to invest in improving his existing properties. He paid particular attention to reducing the marshlands, preserving the wooded areas, and enhancing the productive capacity of cultivated property on his six St. Jones Neck tenant farms. At the same time, Dickinson began an intensive, and apparently unending, process of repair and construction. Between 1790 and 1808, he hired numerous carpenters, sawyers, and other skilled craftsmen to improve tenant dwellings and farm structures. This cycle of repair and construction appeared throughout Delaware in this period. Orphans Court records for all three counties consistently recorded the need for repairs to keep dwellings in "tolerable" condition and to prevent agricultural and domestic outbuildings from falling down.

As early as 1786, William White wrote to Dickinson: "I am about repairing the Barns and shall want some money to pay the Carpenter." In March of that year, Dickinson agreed to make allowances for repairs to "the granary, for haling material & every other expense concerning repairs to be made by masons & carpenters & work by sawyers." The sawyers' work at the Dickinson homestead included planing and planking the stables, smokehouse, and corn cribs with yellow poplar. The masons agreed to underpin the two barns, the west end of the house, and the two chimneys. While a tenant at the Homestead, William White arranged the repair of grounds and buildings. By the 1790s, Dickinson's concern for the upkeep and improvement of his tenant dwellings and farm structures moved beyond the original homestead to encompass all of his tenant holdings.

Construction and repair projects on Dickinson's tenant farms between 1790 and 1808 represented a substantial investment of money and time. Repairs and new construction occurred on all Dickinson's St. Jones Neck tenant farms, with numerous projects underway on any given date (Figure 10). Serving as overseers, a few of Dickinson's tenants coordinated an impressive array of repairs to dwellings, corn cribs, stables, and smokehouses. They helped to locate and employ artisans, including

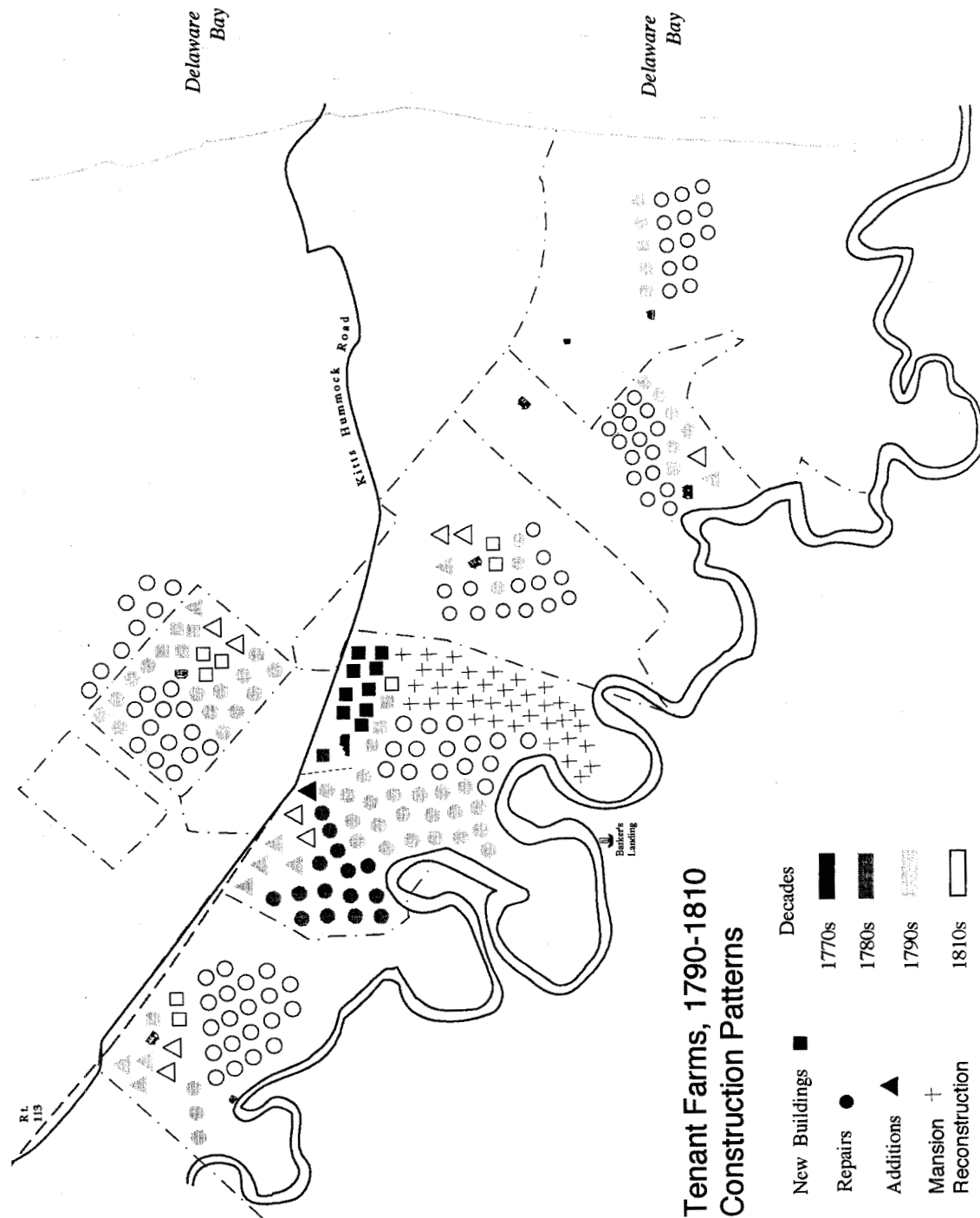


Figure 10: Distribution of new construction and repair projects on Dickinson tenant farms.



carpenters, painters, sawyers, bricklayers, and other trained craftsmen. Many of these artisans lived on Dickinson's St. Jones Neck property, exchanging housing and small garden plots for their labor and a cash wage. The repairs themselves often included additions to dwelling houses and barns. They also involved replacement of entire structures or parts of structures. In particular, Dickinson arranged to have old chimneys torn down and new ones built in their place. Other repairs included the replacement of worn out roofs, underpinning, and siding on dwellings, barns, corn cribs, and stables. Dickinson sometimes ordered the construction of new homes and outbuildings on his tenant farms. He replaced inadequate tenant dwellings on some farms and constructed barns and dwellings where none existed before. The largest construction project undertaken came in response to a disastrous fire in 1804 that damaged the Dickinson family mansion on the Homestead.

Dickinson's construction efforts in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries represent an important era in the economic development of St. Jones Neck. His approach to carrying out a great number and variety of simultaneous construction projects on his tenant farms provides a unique opportunity to illustrate this development process to museum audiences. In doing so, attention should be given to contract methods and the type of repairs and new construction initiated by Dickinson on his St. Jones Neck tenant farms from 1790 to 1808.

### Contracts

Dickinson planned the repairs and new construction projects on St. Jones Neck down to the smallest detail. His contracts with tenants, craftsmen, and merchants allowed him to maintain a high level of control. His construction contracts and agreements specified the work to be completed, but also the materials needed and how they would be supplied and delivered to construction sites. In particular, bills of work submitted by craftsmen and tenants listed work to be done, materials to be used and the cost of supplies and labor. Dickinson's 1793 contract with William Rees demonstrated his attention to detail:

The Dining Room at the western End of the Mansion House, and the kitchen adjoining that Room, to be pull'd down by me - the Bricks to be perfectly. . . cleaned by me, and. . . laid by me in building a large Room in their place - to extend with the Eves from the front of the Mansion House to the Back thereof and in Depth from the Mansion House thirty feet - to have two doors one in the middle of the front and the other in

the middle of the back and one window of 10 lights on each side of each door and one window of 24 lights in the middle of the eastern end - to have a kitchen under it, with 3 windows in front and 3 in back...

Two types of contracts dominated John Dickinson's construction agreements for his St. Jones Neck property: those concerned with the purchase and delivery of building supplies and those concerned with hiring, payment, and supervision of craftsmen to carry out planned repairs and construction. Dickinson acquired building supplies by purchasing them from local merchants and arranging for resident tenants to make them. Bills of payment indicated his use of local merchants. For example, on 2 April 1798, John Dickinson "Bot of James & Jackson Lafferty 5000 shingles and 5500 ft. Hart Pine and 1 hundred [lbs.] lime." Similarly, on 7 November 1807, Dickinson paid a bill for materials "Bot of Manlove Hayes," including maple and cedar boards, nails, hinges, cupboard locks, spring bolts, and putty. Local merchants supplied specialty items or those Dickinson's tenants found difficult to manufacture. On 19 May 1804, William Brinckle reported "the delivery of supplies for rebuilding [the] mansion from James Pauthry," including nails, english sashboard, ring latches with belts, brass knob locks, hinges, pulleys, wood screws, glue, and copper.

Dickinson did contract with his tenants and resident craftsmen to provide a large quantity of the building supplies used on St. Jones Neck. Tenants made use of the naturally occurring trees, clay, water, and stone of the St. Jones Neck to make shingles, sideboard, and bricks. Dickinson contracted with individual tenants to supply and deliver these items to appropriate repair and construction sites. For example, when William Garner contracted to build a tenant house for Dickinson in 1793, he also agreed "to do all the sawing work." He provided five hundred feet of joists for a building 30 feet wide and 25 feet long. In 1794, Garner delivered 20,000 bricks to the "house where John Emory lives" and, at the same time, as many salmon bricks as possible "to him at Crawfords... for filling up between the weather boards and plastering." In 1798 Dickinson hired John Clem to build a brick kiln on Dickinson's property. Clem then collected the clay, fired, and delivered bricks to construction sites on the plantation. He continued to make bricks for Dickinson through 1799. In 1800, Geoffry Bawley used the same kiln to "make 60,000 bricks of the Philadelphia size." He also cut and hauled wood and bricks to construction sites and, in return, enjoyed the privilege of "lodging and cooking [in] the old brick kitchen."

To supply his construction workers at St. Jones Neck, Dickinson routinely requested a great quantity of building materials between 1790 and 1808. When William White agreed to oversee repairs on the Homestead in 1786, he required 270 feet of new silling, 750 feet of sleepers, 1500 five feet of boards, 100 feet of large stock timbers, and a large number of nails. In 1793, materials needed to construct the "Rees House" included 550 feet of plaits, sills and joists; 1020 feet of studs and rafters; 50 feet of framing; 100 feet of lathes; 52 feet of eaves; 30 feet of barge board; 12 feet of post; 2000 shingles; casing; doors; and windows.

### Repairs

Dickinson not only kept several repair projects going at once, he contracted constantly for new projects. When one project neared completion, he began planning another. In November 1793, carpenters reported progress on an addition to John Emory's dwelling, a frame house at Crawford's Place, and miscellaneous repairs at the farm under Isaiah Wharton's tenure. In August 1794, craftsmen worked on a barn at Crawford's Place, a new dwelling at Isaiah Wharton's, and an addition to the Homestead mansion.

The repairs recorded by Dickinson and his hired laborers revolved around dwellings, barns, and other important farm buildings, such as corn cribs and stables. Carpenters completed the same type of repairs on all tenant farms; the lists varied very little. Repairs to dwelling houses typically included new roofs, siding, floors, cellars and, occasionally, new chimneys. Early in 1797, Charles Murphy received payment for making one porch, hewing 126 feet of rafters, 160 feet of framing, 42 studs, 32 feet of cellar beams, framing studs, putting up a smokehouse and covering it with clapboard. In a 1797 letter to Dickinson, John Emory assured him that the carpenter "says's he will cover the house where Ryan lives & board him self for fifteen pounds." One year later, repairs at Marcy and David Beauchamp's dwelling required that two kitchen chimneys be equipped with "exceeding thick Backs and... mended in other parts and... carried each of them three feet higher." In 1805 a bill of work at Furby's called for ripping off the old roof and putting on new shingles, construction of the cornice and pediments, new bargeboard, and the installation of three dormer windows.

Most contracts called for repairs to the dwelling house and surrounding

structures, including barns, stables, granaries, and corn cribs. Farm structures often required new siding and roofs. They might also need to be underpinned or raised. One bill for work on the Fisher barn called for "480 feet barn floor, hewing 300 feet sleepers, repairing door and boxing corners." At the same time, repair of tenant John Furby's barn required "hewing 109 feet sills, 1176 weather boarding, two doors-weather boarded with clabboards and moving the barn." In 1794, William Garner agreed to make "the following repairs to... [Dickinson's] plantation now in the tenure of John Emory in the most substantial and workmanlike manner." He agreed to install new sills of the best white oak, to put in new sleepers, studs, and braces, to mend and complete the weather boarding, to make two new doors for each barn, and to raise each barn two feet from the ground. A year later Garner agreed to repair the stable, corn cribs, and carthouse on another tenant farm. He provided new blocks for the corn cribs, two new sides for the carthouse, two standing brass doors, hanging braces for the stable, and new weather board of yellow poplar for all the structures. In 1807 Charles Brinckle's bill for work at John Furby's included hewing, silling, ripping off old weatherboarding, squaring weatherboarding, making corner casings and new bargeboards, raising and blocking up the barn, patching the roofs, raising windows, putting a handrail at the head of the stairs, making and hanging barn doors, and mending floors.

At other times, tenants and craftsmen agreed to less typical jobs. In 1793, William Louis calculated "that a wall rond the graveyard of 25 long...breadth, 10 inches deep in the ground, and 3 feet and a half above ground, will take nine thousand and five hundred Bricks." In April 1798, William Jones, a bricklayer, agreed to sink a well in the "corner of the piazza to be built at Ryans." Most likely, this skilled craftsmen lined the inner walls of the well with brick. Nathan Burrows made repairs on the Pleasanton farm dwelling and outbuildings in 1802. In addition to replacing the cellar and barn doors and raising the floor level of the barn, Burrows built two new porches for the tenant house.

### **New Construction**

Dickinson's construction projects at St. Jones Neck from 1790 to 1808 primarily involved repairs to dwellings and/or existing farm buildings, but on occasion, he commissioned the construction of a new dwelling, barn, or other outbuilding.

William Garner agreed in 1793 to saw the joists and lumber for Dickinson's "new building to be erected at the West End of his Mansion house where John Emory now dwells." Garner went on to specify that he would do no inside work, "except frames of the dormant windows and cellar windows and fixing every part of the frame and digging the cellar and doing the brick work." Garner completed a small, plank tenant dwelling on Crawford's Place early the next year. In August 1794, Isaiah Wharton reported good progress on a new barn being built at Crawford's Place. Nathan Burrows indicated in an 1801 agreement with Dickinson that he constructed a new stable on the "plantation where Samuel Moore now dwells." He placed the stable near the "eastern end of the barn," with eight large hanging gates and four small gates. In 1804 Dickinson paid Samuel Guy and Benjamin John in advance for constructing a new tenant house. In December 1807, Joshua Turner submitted a bill for a one-story tenant house measuring forty-eight by twenty feet. He estimated the cost of materials and labor in constructing such a dwelling at \$450. In 1808, Turner constructed a multi-function building that included two corn cribs, eight by twenty feet, a carriage house, nine feet wide, and "a tight loft over the whole." The largest new construction project centered on the reconstruction of the mansion house after the 1804 fire.

### **The Homestead Mansion**

After he moved his St. Jones Neck property into tenancy in 1767, Dickinson routinely requested that his tenants make additions and repairs to the Homestead mansion and outbuildings. The number and frequency of these requests increased after 1790. In March 1793, James Wakeman agreed to work on the "additions to be made to [Dickinson's] Mansion House where John Emory now lives." In the early 1790s, the Homestead probably received more attention than the other tenant farms. A 1798 list of work "to be done on Big House" called for the installation of ten window frames, five pair of shutters, sashes for the same, four doors frames, shutters for same, two partitions, a trap door, and more. In 1799, William Jones, a bricklayer, received payment for repairs in the cellar of the Mansion House, then under Charles Ryan's tenure.

On 3 March 1804, the Dickinson mansion caught fire. Isaac Davis wrote to Dickinson on 5 March: "I am sorry for the loss of your house in Jones by fire." A

letter from James Kimmey dated 13 March 1804, noted:

the accident happened Saturday, about 12 o'clock...I suppose a spark falling from the chimney [started the fire]...it was about 3 o'clock [when] I returned home [from business] at which time the old part was entirely consumed the new part of the house sustained very little injury.

In April of that year a carpenter reported that the mansion "burnt down" and was "destroyed." In an 1806 letter to his insurance company, Dickinson described the damage to his St. Jones Neck mansion: "the peaks in the Front and the Back... were so much weakend by the Fire" they had to be taken "down... to the Square, and exchange[d] for Gable Ends." He continued, describing the destruction of "two Chambers in the third story, with all their plastering, [and] windows" and "the porch at the Front Door."

To repair the damage caused by the fire, Dickinson initiated an extensive construction project. Soon after the fire, he hired tenants "to hale to the sawpit or sawpits all the trees in his woods that have been or shall be cut down for rebuilding his house lately burned and to hale beams to the said house after they shall be planed." He also made arrangements to have boards, shingles, lime, nails, and other building materials delivered to the mansion. On 11 April 1804, Dickinson wrote to his children: "You cannot imagine, what an accumulation of Labor it is to build a large House in the Country. Building in Town is more play in Comparison." John Dickinson remained very involved in the reconstruction process. He approved every detail, down to the type of wood and paint colors to be used in finishing.

The individuals most heavily involved in rebuilding the mansion included Thomas and Edward Collins and William and Charles Brinckle. On April 4, Dickinson explained that he received "Thomas Collins proposals for repairing... of the burnt House" and "afterwards I made a more particular agreement with Thomas Collins & [his] son Edwards." The Collins' earliest jobs on the damaged mansion included:

Lathing and plastering the ceiling & partitions of the new room to be taken off from the present large room, & of the stone room. The said partition to extend [the length of the room]... [A] Large Room at two shillings per square [foot]... The Corner chimney in the said new Room to be built for five pounds... taking down the two small windows... & removing the door.

After agreeing to do the carpentry work for the rebuilding project in April 1804, Charles and William Brinckle provided the lathes wanted for the "new room and

mansion house" and purchased nails from Manlove Hays "toward rebuilding of the Mansion House." In 1805, the Brinckles made an additional agreement, contracting to build an additional room at the mansion and "to put up two good strong little window frames with strong shutters fastened to them with hinges in the east end of the old brick kitchen." Other craftsmen besides the Collins and Brinckles worked for Dickinson in the reconstruction of his mansion. Some, like John Clem, supplied building materials, including bricks and lumber. Others worked as carpenters, masons, or painters. David Train contracted to do the painting and glazing at the mansion, agreeing to use a "handsome stone color...in the hall... doors and hand rails in imitation mahogany." Train received \$100 "in full satisfaction for painting [Dickinson's] mansion house in Jones Neck... lately burnt."

It took over two years to rebuild the mansion. Charles Brinckle reported in March 1805: "We are pretty near finishing of the house except the doors we have got them all framed but have not stuff enough to panel them." In July 1806, Dickinson informed Charles Petit, a representative of the Insurance Company of North America, that "The House in Kent has been rebuilt... I have forborne stating several Charges that might justly have been made." When Dickinson wrote to his insurance agent, he requested \$2400 to cover the cost of repairing the damage done to his mansion by the fire.

During the reconstruction of the mansion and afterwards, repairs to other Homestead structures continued. In 1806, a carpenter agreed "to do all the work... mentioned for repairing the Smoke House near the Mansion House." In August of that year, Charles Brinckle promised to build one six by ten foot porch on one of the Homestead structures and continued to make changes within the mansion, "hanging three sets [of] inside shutters."

## Conclusion

John Dickinson embarked on extensive construction and repair projects in the 1790s and early 1800s. These projects centered on improving tenant dwelling houses and updating necessary farm structures, including barns, stables and corn cribs. While some new structures were built, improvements and repairs made up the bulk of Dickinson's construction efforts. The biggest construction project during this twenty-year period was, without question, the reconstruction of the Dickinson

mansion after the 1804 fire. Dickinson employed at least nine craftsmen in rebuilding his mansion, including three masons, two carpenters, two painters, a roofer, and a brickmaker. Four of these men, the Brinckles and Collins, worked almost exclusively on the mansion. In rebuilding the mansion, Dickinson ordered over 200,000 bricks and a flood of other construction materials. Merchants shipped window panes, shutters, nails, sashboards, latches, brass knobs, pulleys, wood screws, glue, sheet copper, hinges, rivets, hooks, staples, and shingles to the construction site. Between 1804 and 1806, Dickinson spent close to \$3000 to rebuild the mansion.

Dickinson gave serious attention to construction projects on his St. Jones Neck properties. He carried out many building and repair projects simultaneously. One 1798 document indicated that William Jones did brickwork at the Nash, Beauchamp, and Ryan tenant farms simultaneously. Dickinson did not hesitate to remove and replace unproductive craftsmen. When William Garner's efforts proved unsatisfactory, Dickinson told him to leave and handed over the repairs of his barn to James Thornton. Many of the projects were urgent not only for Dickinson, but also for his tenants. In September 1798, one tenant worried at the slow progress made in repairing his dwelling. He asked Dickinson to provide new carpenters because the house was in such poor condition that "it is not possible I can winter in the house."

Other tenants, such as Joshua Turner in 1802, contracted to make repairs in return for rent deductions. The construction and repairs undertaken by Dickinson between 1790 and 1808 represented a serious investment in his tenants and in tenant farming. This investment in building repairs and new construction indicated a shift in his focus from land acquisition to land improvement.

### **Map Information**

The construction and repair efforts lend themselves to a cartographic presentation. The map will highlight those farms receiving the most intensive repair and construction efforts at particular periods in time.



#### **IV. Diversification and Land Reclamation, 1790-1850**

During the last two decades of John Dickinson's life, farmers in central Delaware began to feel the impact of nearly a century of agricultural use of the fertile lands opened in the early eighteenth century. Desperate to regain the crop yields once produced by their fields, they sought new methods of agriculture and new types of crops for changing markets. Crop rotation, new fertilizers, conservation of declining woodlands, diversification of crops to take advantage of the marshes represented only a few of the strategies put forward by various "scientific farmers" over the next half-century.

##### **Harvesting the Marsh and River**

One of the alternative crops that developed in the early nineteenth century along the marshland region of eastern Kent County consisted of the wild resources that could be taken from the marsh and river, including sturgeon, shad, muskrat, oysters, and wild fowl. Wild food played an essential role in the diet of St. Jones Neck residents through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but did not become a marketable commodity until the early 1800s. When leasing his lands along the St. Jones Neck, John Dickinson often reserved to himself "the privilege and Right of fishing in the Creek" through the building of stages and drawing nets along the banks. When providing for his slaves in residence on the tenant properties, or after granting them freedom and a small house, Dickinson often allowed the African-Americans to fish the river and trap in the wild salt marsh in order to supplement their families' diets. These supplemental activities continued as a part of daily life for many Jones Neck residents until the early nineteenth century, when pressure on the agricultural economy prompted many of them to begin harvesting muskrats, oysters, turtle, shad, sturgeon, and other delicacies from the river, marsh, and bay for commercial market. For many people the waterborne harvest meant only a seasonal supplement to agricultural production and profit but for others, particularly those who lived especially close to the water, working the water became a full-time (albeit seasonally driven) occupation. To ensure a relatively steady income, watermen mastered a knowledge of the natural and biological patterns of fish, muskrats, waterfowl, and the marsh. By making full use of the seasonal changes in the estuary, a waterman could stay busy in a year-long cycle of activities.

Muskrat trapping ran from early December through early March while oyster harvesting fell between September and March; rock fishing or net fishing from March through April; shad fishing occurred in the mid to late spring followed by crabbing on the Bay; sturgeon fishing occurred in spring and early summer; turtling came in June, July, and August, and clamming in July; and in the fall the focus moved to wildfowl gunning and eel fishing. Repair and construction of nets, boats, and other equipment filled empty hours throughout the year.

These commercial market and dietary supplement activities continued into the twentieth century, affected at times by declines in the natural population of the creatures and also by fluctuating demand for their products in the urban markets. At one time, for example, wild fowl were in high demand by urban restaurants and hotels, prompting the use of punt guns that could kill 10 to 20 geese or ducks in one shot. Some watermen sold their catch, dressed and ready to cook, at local markets like the one on King Street in Wilmington; others met the "Tidewater Express," a seafood trucking chain that made regularly scheduled stops on its way north from Chincoteague to Philadelphia and New York.

### Changes in Agriculture

Seventeenth and early eighteenth century settlers in Kent County began by planting tobacco as their cash crop, a carryover for many of them from their origins in Maryland. Very quickly they shifted their focus to mixed farming of grains such as wheat, hay, and rye, along with livestock such as cattle and swine. This pattern of agriculture remained intact through the early nineteenth century.

Early colonists also used portions of the extensive tidal marshes for agricultural purposes. These activities ranged from banking and ditching to drain the marsh so that traditional crops could be grown, to ditching as a form of fencing to keep marauding hogs away from crops, to the controlled harvest of the salt hay that grew naturally in the marsh.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Two of the best sources for this subject in the mid-Atlantic region, providing much more detail than is given in this report are Kim Sebold's work for HABS/HAER, *From Marsh to Farm: The Landscape Transformation of Coastal New Jersey*, and David Grettler's Ph.D dissertation, "The Landscape of Reform: Society, Environment, and Agricultural Reform in Central Delaware, 1790-1840," particularly Chapter 5 on ditches, dams, and reform. Sebold deals primarily with New Jersey in the mid to late

From their earliest arrival in the late seventeenth century, Delawareans maintained a practice of reclaiming, or “improving,” otherwise useless marshland for agricultural use. The Dutch and Swedish colonists who settled in New Castle County brought with them to the new world a culture with much experience at keeping the water away from low-lying agricultural fields. Although a great deal of rich agricultural land existed near the early settlements, colonists quickly began ditching and banking their lands along the river. A dyke was built at New Castle and regulated by law in 1712; other banks to the north and south of New Castle followed in the next twenty years.<sup>10</sup> Once the effectiveness of this method was proven, other colonists adopted the practice in marshes all along the Delaware River and Bay.

Reclamation work in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries consisted primarily of private individual attempts to drain one’s own land, usually for the purpose of creating usable pasture for cattle. Many farmers also believed that draining the marshland would reduce the problem of mosquitos by removing the stagnant water that created their habitat. Finally, the ditches sometimes served as division lines between properties. Occasionally two neighbors agreed to dig and maintain the necessary ditches cooperatively. John Dickinson and his neighbor, Francis Barber, signed an agreement in 1803 to dig a ditch along the boundary between their properties from the Kitts Hummock Road to the creek. Each of them was responsible for maintaining one half of the ditch—basically keeping it clear of obstructions so that the water could continue to drain.

By the late eighteenth century, agriculture in central Delaware faced the problem of severe soil exhaustion. Productivity rates plummeted and farmers, both landowners and tenants, expressed growing interest in experimenting with methods of preserving and protecting their lands. John Dickinson’s land proved no different from any other. After his death in 1808, his executor, James Vaux, wrote to Sally Norris Dickinson regarding the best way to proceed in managing the St. Jones Neck lands:

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nineteenth century but much of her research is also applicable to the Delaware side of the river. Grettler’s work focuses directly on central Delaware and addresses the conflict in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries between advocates and opponents of marsh reclamation.

<sup>10</sup> Scharf, Thomas J., History of the State of Delaware, 1609-1888, Philadelphia: L.J. Richards and Company, 1888, p. 439.

A future day must prove whether the plans adopted will be productive of good or not or whether our experiment will fail. One thing is certain which is that by the former mode of conducting the farms, the fields would not in a short time have produced more wheat than the seed sown upon them, and the corn nothing like a crop except in very good season the soil would have been worn out, and the timber in a few years burnt up.

Public records also document landholders' concerns over the depletion of woodland and the proper husbandry of agricultural land. The valuations of land brought to the Orphans Court by local freeholders repeated over and over their directive that land should be farmed in rotation. The most frequently described system included three fields, one planted in corn, one in wheat and one allowed to lie fallow each year. The field farmed in corn was sowed in wheat the following season. The size of a farm or the quality of the farm land apparently did not matter in this respect. Neighbors prescribed this system for the 600-acre farm held by George and Hunn Jenkins, but also applied it to the 186-acre parcel tenanted by David Vining, a free black. While 115 acres of Vining's land was arable,"much bordering on the margin of the marsh, [it was] low and wet and poor not worth cultivating." The "farm is divided into three fields and should stay that way."<sup>11</sup>

People responded to this agricultural problem in several ways. They could emigrate to places such as the Ohio Valley frontier, newly opened for settlement; they could remain on the Neck and try to make their land more productive; or they could invest in new methods of agriculture and diversify their market crops to include products from the river and bay. Many chose the alternative of migration. An analysis of Quaker meeting records for the meeting that served the St. Jones Neck area indicate that certain groups of people were more likely to emigrate than others. Single men and women, orphans, and families with children old enough to help work the land emigrated in large numbers between 1780 and 1830. Their departure alleviated some of the population pressure on the region, leaving those who remained behind to find ways to reclaim the cleared land and marsh that lay on the

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<sup>11</sup> Kent County Orphans Court Records, Book G p. 205 (1815) and Book H p. 245 (1820).

St. Jones Neck.<sup>12</sup>

In the early nineteenth century, marsh reclamation acquired a more formal nature. Individuals or groups applied to the General Assembly for permission to ditch and bank certain areas to create new agricultural land from the fertile soil in the marshes. The legislature granted permission in almost every case, often allowing the marsh companies to levy taxes for the improvement on any landholder whose marsh land benefitted from the work. This attitude on the part of the legislature created a considerable conflict between the wealthy landowners who saw the reclamation process as one that would benefit everyone and would not damage their pocketbooks too severely, and the poorer landowners and tenants who could not afford the marsh taxes without great hardship. In the long run, the legislature sided with the marsh companies and the taxes were levied. After the initial controversy died down, people became resigned to the taxes and eventually recognized that they did receive some benefit in the form of increased property values and larger amounts of arable land. These efforts also resulted in the formalization of landholdings along the river. Surveys plotting the marshlands of individuals and marsh companies clarified rights to the marsh and its harvest.

The process of reclaiming the marsh was fairly straight-forward, but very labor-intensive. First, a system of embankments along the water's edge prevented the tide from flooding the area. Second, a series of deep ditches drained the existing water from the marsh through sluice-gates that allowed water to flow out of the marsh but not back in. In theory this sounded very simple, but in reality the implication of digging, and then maintaining miles of ditch and bank often proved prohibitively expensive and time-consuming. Ditch sizes varied greatly, ranging from John Dickinson's specifications of approximately 5 or 6 feet wide at the top, 3 feet deep, and anywhere from 1 to 3 feet wide at the bottom, with a footing of 12 to 18 inches at the top of the ditch, to the main canals for reclamation which stretched 20 feet across the top and 5 feet in depth. "Prong" ditches fell in between these two extremes, measuring 9 to 12 feet wide and 3 feet deep.<sup>13</sup> In order to keep tidal waters out, banks had to be at least 3 feet higher than the average high tide. For most of

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<sup>12</sup>Siders, Rebecca J., unpublished manuscript, "The Outmigration of Quakers from Central Delaware, 1775 to 1830," 1993.

<sup>13</sup> J. Grettler, "The Landscape of Reform," p. 167.

central Delaware, 6 to 8 feet in height sufficed; but in the St. Jones Neck, a bank of 12 feet was needed.<sup>14</sup> The earth to create the banks came from areas other than the marsh, by the cart load.

The actual ditch-digging was performed by laborers and slaves, later by self-proclaimed "ditchers." Stephen Dougherty, for example, rented a house from John Dickinson for one year for the sum of \$1.00 and the promise to dig Dickinson's ditches at a rate of half a bushel of Indian corn per perch. Dickinson recorded numerous payments to several of his former slaves for ditch-digging at various locations on the St. Jones Neck. In 1781 he hired Joseph Wheeler to build a bank at Hay's Point; the bank was to be 12 feet from side to side and 12 feet high, but also "so high as to turn all tides effectually so that the marsh and cripple above the bank may be perfectly thereby dried improved and turned completely into good meadow and cultivable land."

Once the marsh had been drained, the land could be used for cultivation of traditional crops such as corn and wheat, or with controlled flooding, the owner might allow the natural salt hay to flourish before he harvested it in the late summer. The resulting crop could be used to make rope, as packing material for breakable goods, as lining for coffins, or as fodder for livestock. Marsh planting involved certain risks. Flooding by the salty or brackish water could kill traditional crops. But many farmers felt the risk justified due to the high fertility of the drained marsh and persisted in their efforts to keep the land.

In the early nineteenth century, St. Jones Neck farmers needed to make the most intensive use of their land in order to generate sufficient crops for market. The harvest of salt hay and the reclamation of the marshlands for traditional crops represented a part of the scientific agricultural movement to make the most of the existing land. The intensive use of the marsh for agricultural purposes began to decline in the late nineteenth century, following the hurricanes of the 1870s and 1880s. In the 1930s another massive hurricane swept along the estuary, flooding the banks and ditches and restoring the marsh to its earlier appearance. Following this hurricane, the few remaining salt hay farmers gave up the battle with the tides and allowed the land to remain as natural marsh. Farmers no longer recognized the incentive for the costly back-breaking work necessary to maintain the ditches and

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<sup>14</sup> Grettler, "The Landscape of Reform," p. 166.

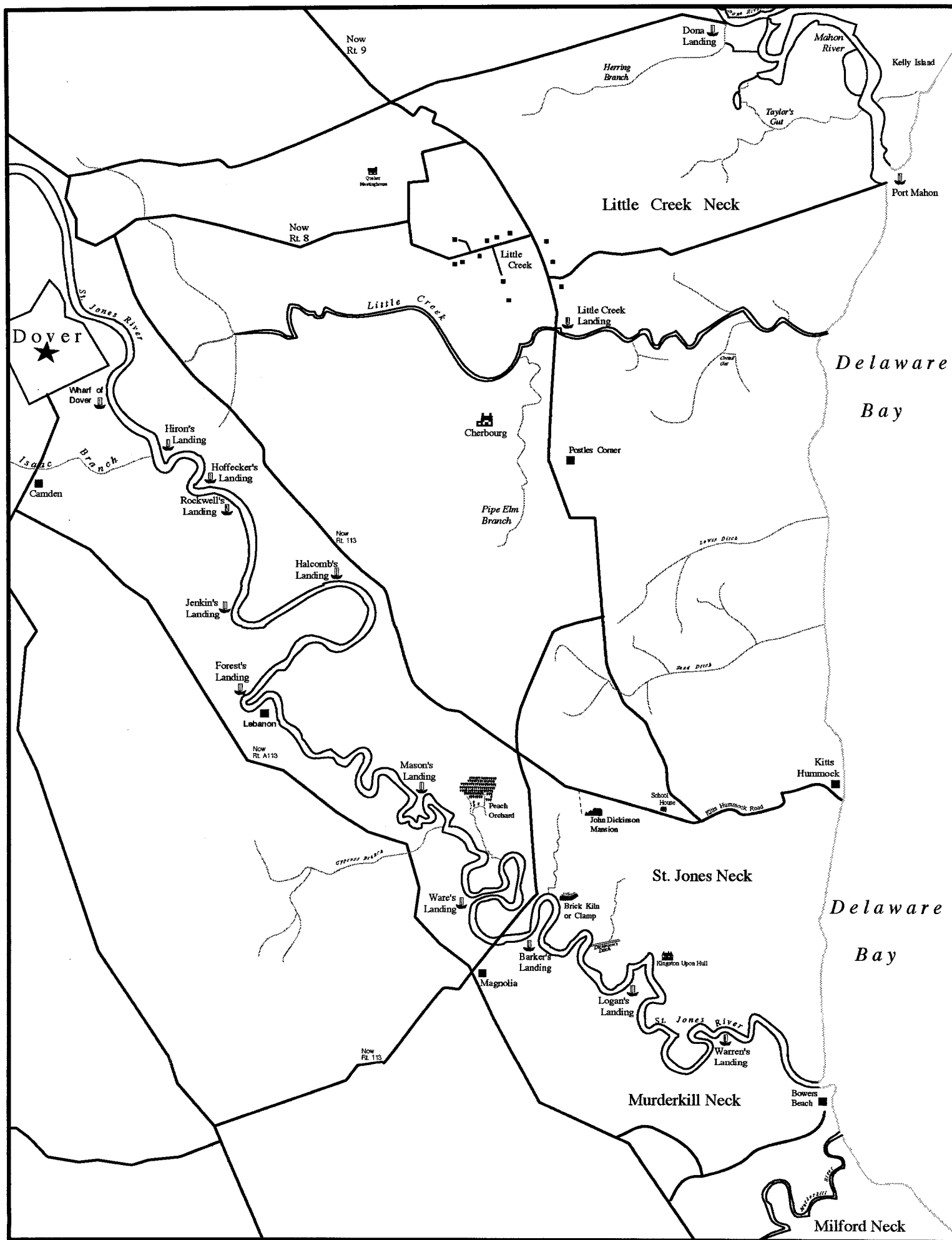
banks in adequate repair. Over time, the marshes returned to a more natural state, although a few people still harvest turtles and muskrats from the area.

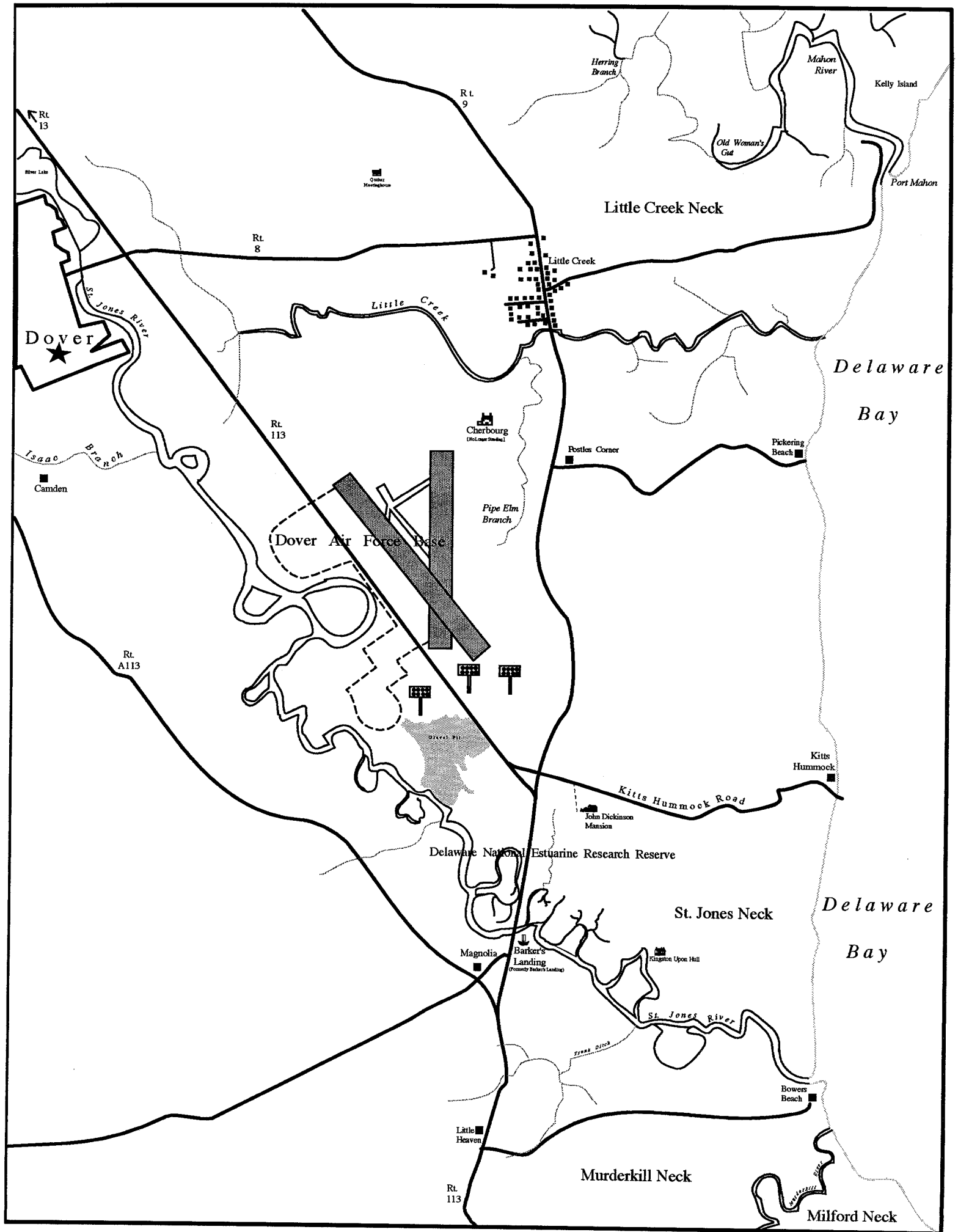
Although John Dickinson did not proclaim himself as an agricultural reform farmer or engage in active experimentation, he did recognize the value of some of the suggestions put forth by men like John Spurrier. As part of his standard lease agreements, he began to require improved agricultural methods from his tenant farmers. One improvement included the use of the three-field system of rotating crops. In their indenture with Dickinson, Marcy and David Beauchamp pledged "not to plant more than one [third] part of the clear land in grain in one year, nor more than one-third in winter grain." In 1804, Thomas Brown prepared to take possession of Upper Place. At the time, Dickinson planned to divide it into four fields, hoping to improve the soil quality. Thomas suggested "by the addition of a good clover lot it may be farmed as neat as if it was in four fields." Dickinson also made arrangements with his tenants to do ditching and banking, which helped to diminish and combat the spread of the many acres of marsh. Indicative of Dickinson's efforts to preserve the available woodlands and natural fertilizer on his land, tenants agreed to be "sparing and careful in cutting wood" and not to "carry off manure." In 1797 Charles Ryan agreed not to clear more land on Luff's farm when he took possession from John Emory. Dickinson went so far in his efforts at wood preservation as to require his tenants to use wood burning stoves rather than fire places.

Much of the intensive land reclamation and reform agriculture occurred in the years following John Dickinson's death. Records for the period of Sally Norris Dickinson's absentee ownership of the St. Jones Neck lands do not provide the wealth of detail left by her father about day-to-day operations of the farms but we do know that the activities that occurred on other rivers such as the Leipsic and Little creeks also appeared on the St. Jones River and its marshes. Sally Norris Dickinson's name appears on an 1818 map of marsh land held by companies and individuals, and the map of the lands left in her estate show ditches used for draining marsh. Ultimately, the people of the St. Jones Neck, regardless of their relationship with the Dickinson family, found themselves forced to diversify their approach to the market and find new ways to make use of the lands they held as either owners or tenants.

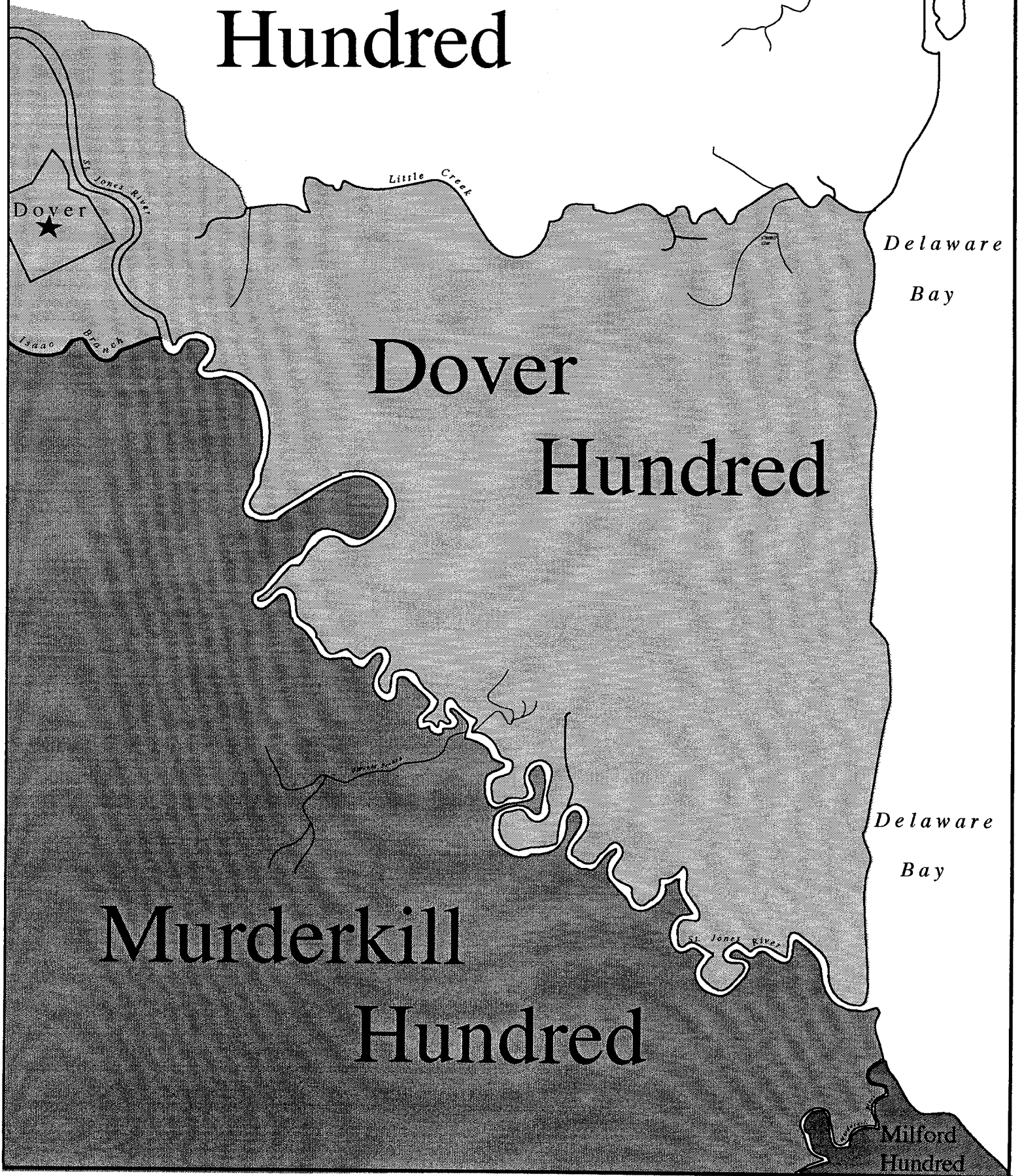
# Appendix A







# Little Creek Hundred





A map of Delaware showing its divisions into Hundreds. The map is divided into several regions: Little Creek Hundred (top center), East Dover Hundred (center), Murderkill Hundred (bottom left), South Murderkill Hundred (bottom), and Milford Hundred (bottom right). The map also shows the Delaware Bay to the east and the St. Jones River flowing through the western part. Other features include the Herring Branch, Taylor's Gut, Kelly Island, and the city of Dover marked with a star. The map uses different shades of gray to distinguish the various Hundreds.

# Little Creek Hundred

# East Dover Hundred

# Murderkill Hundred

# South Murderkill Hundred

Delaware Bay

Delaware Bay

Milford Hundred

Seaton Hundred

Dover

Isaac Branch

Little Creek

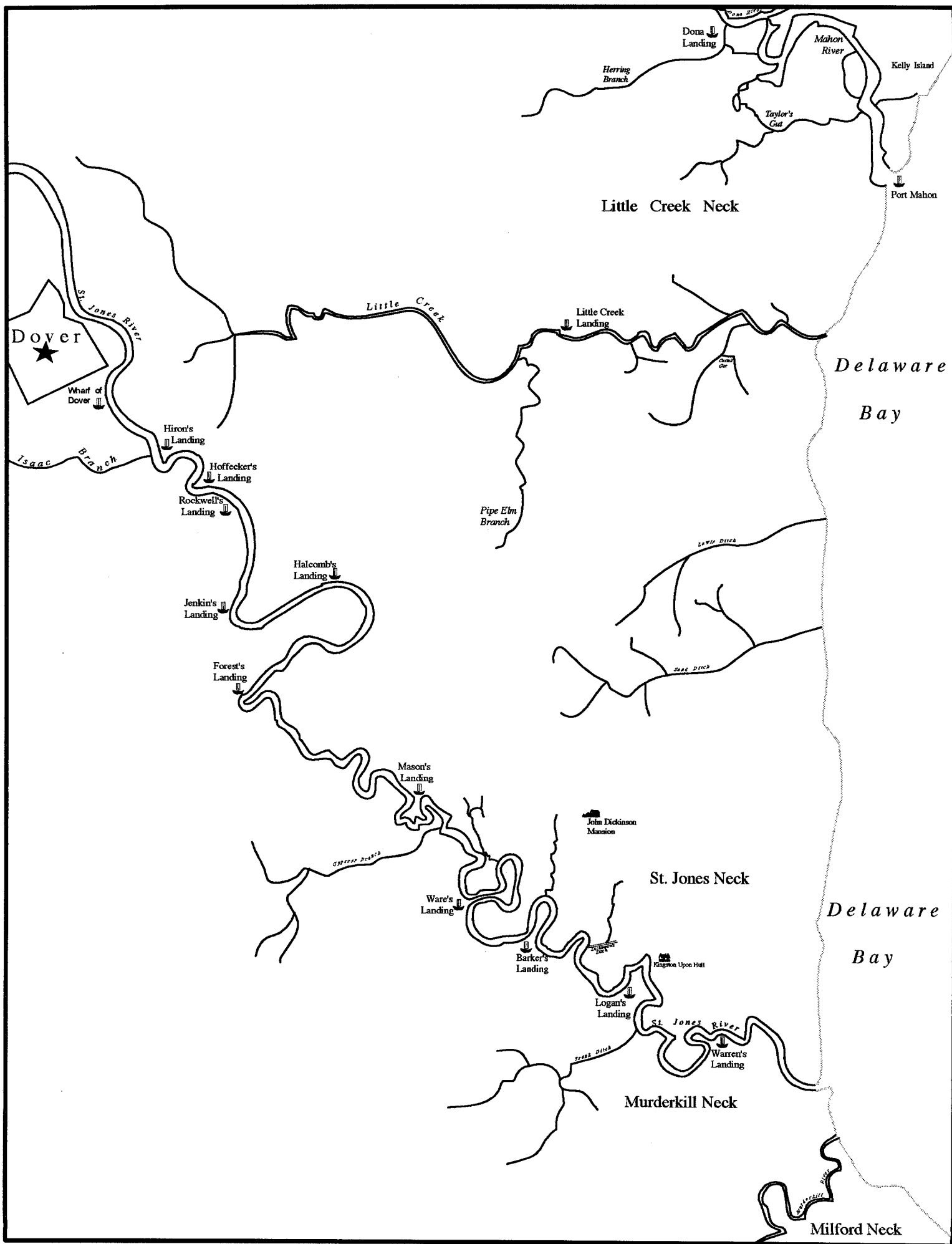
Herring Branch

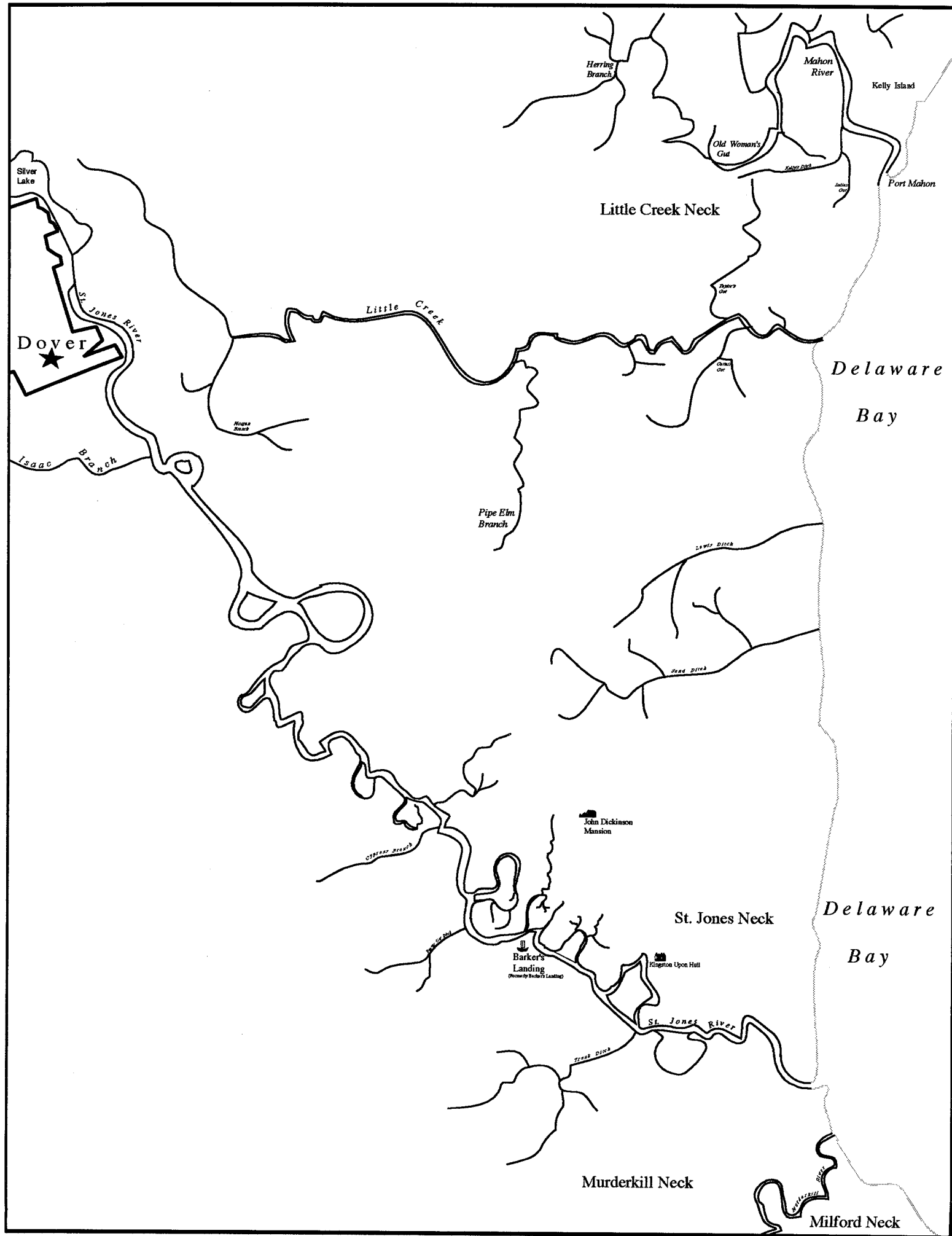
Mahon River

Kelly Island

Taylor's Gut

St. Jones River





Silver Lake

Dover

St. Jones River

Isaac Branch

Little Creek

Herring Branch

Mahon River

Kelly Island

Old Woman's Gut

Port Mahon

Little Creek Neck

John's Gut

Chubb's Gut

Delaware Bay

Bay

Pipe Elm Branch

Lewis Ditch

Pease Ditch

John Dickinson Mansion

St. Jones Neck

Delaware Bay

Bay

Barker's Landing  
(Formerly Barker's Landing)

Kington Upon Hull

St. Jones River

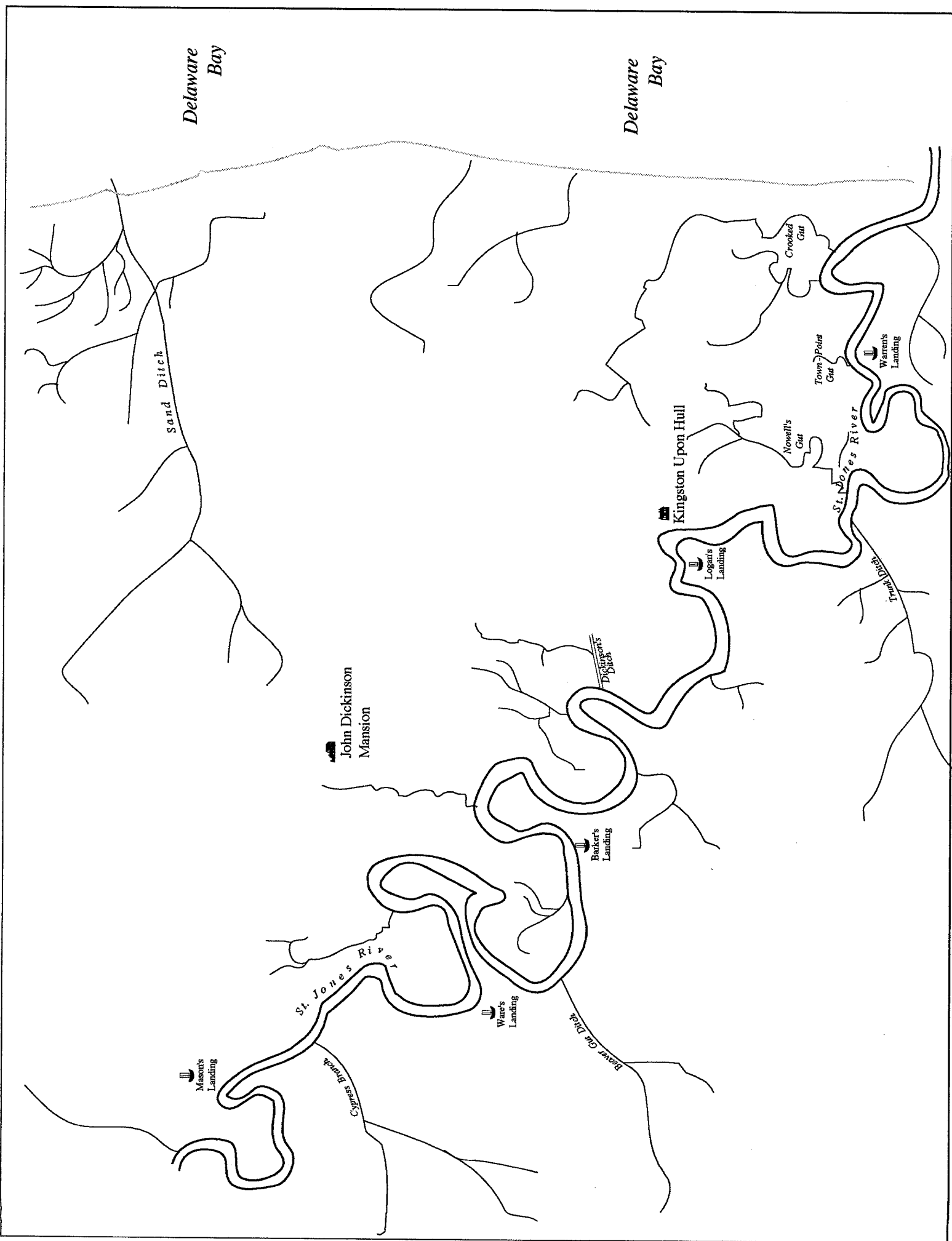
St. Jones Ditch

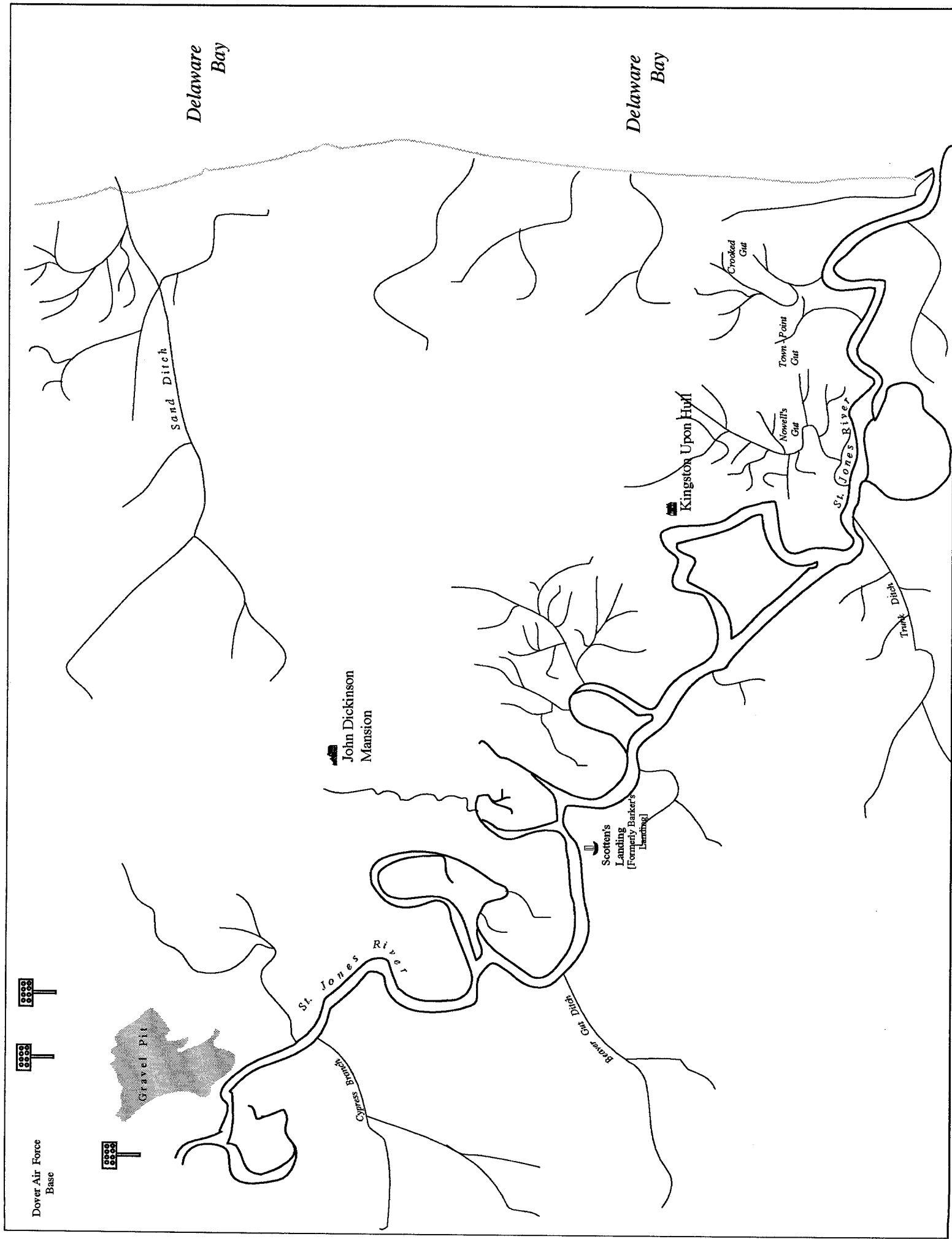
Murderkill Neck

Milford Neck

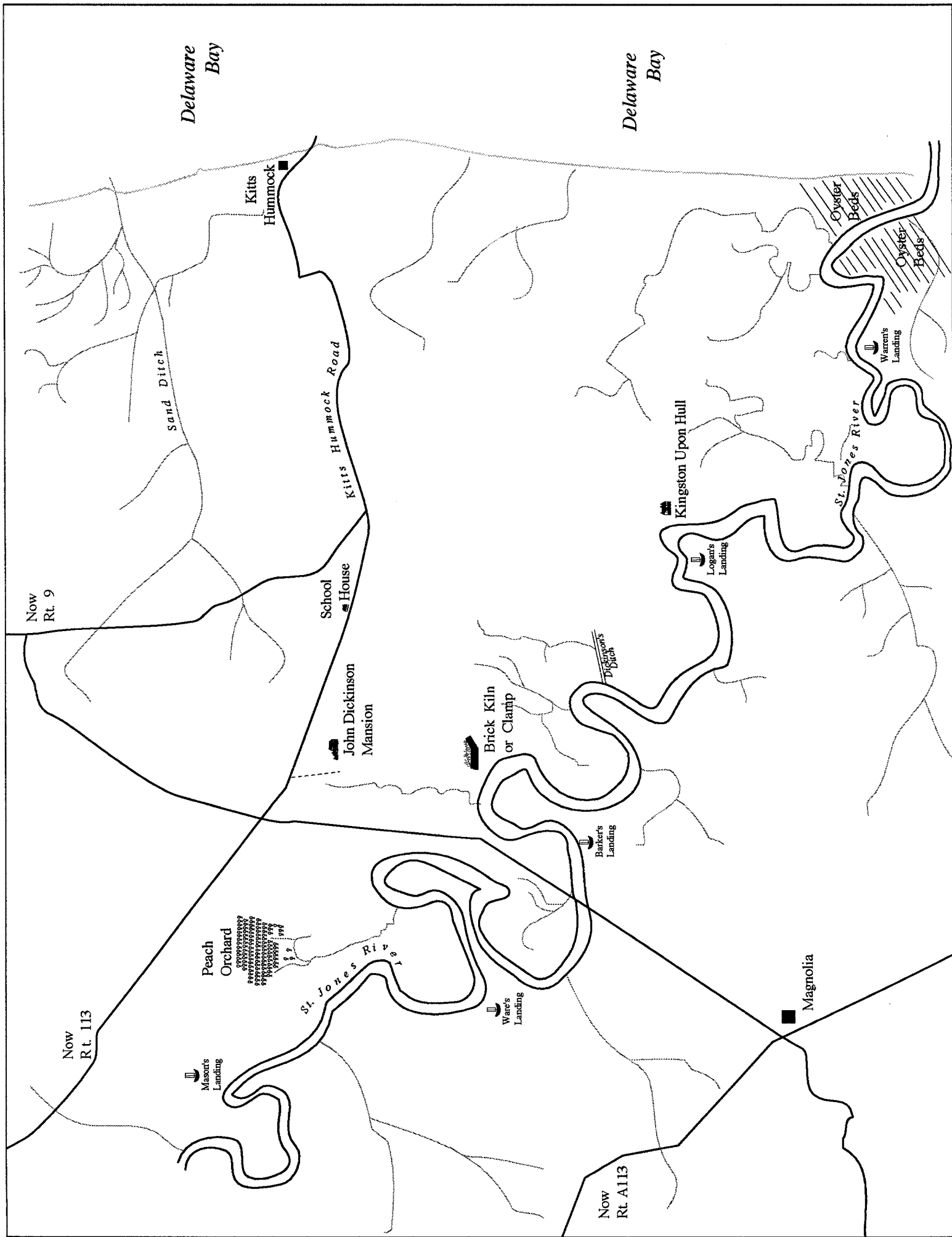
Delaware Bay

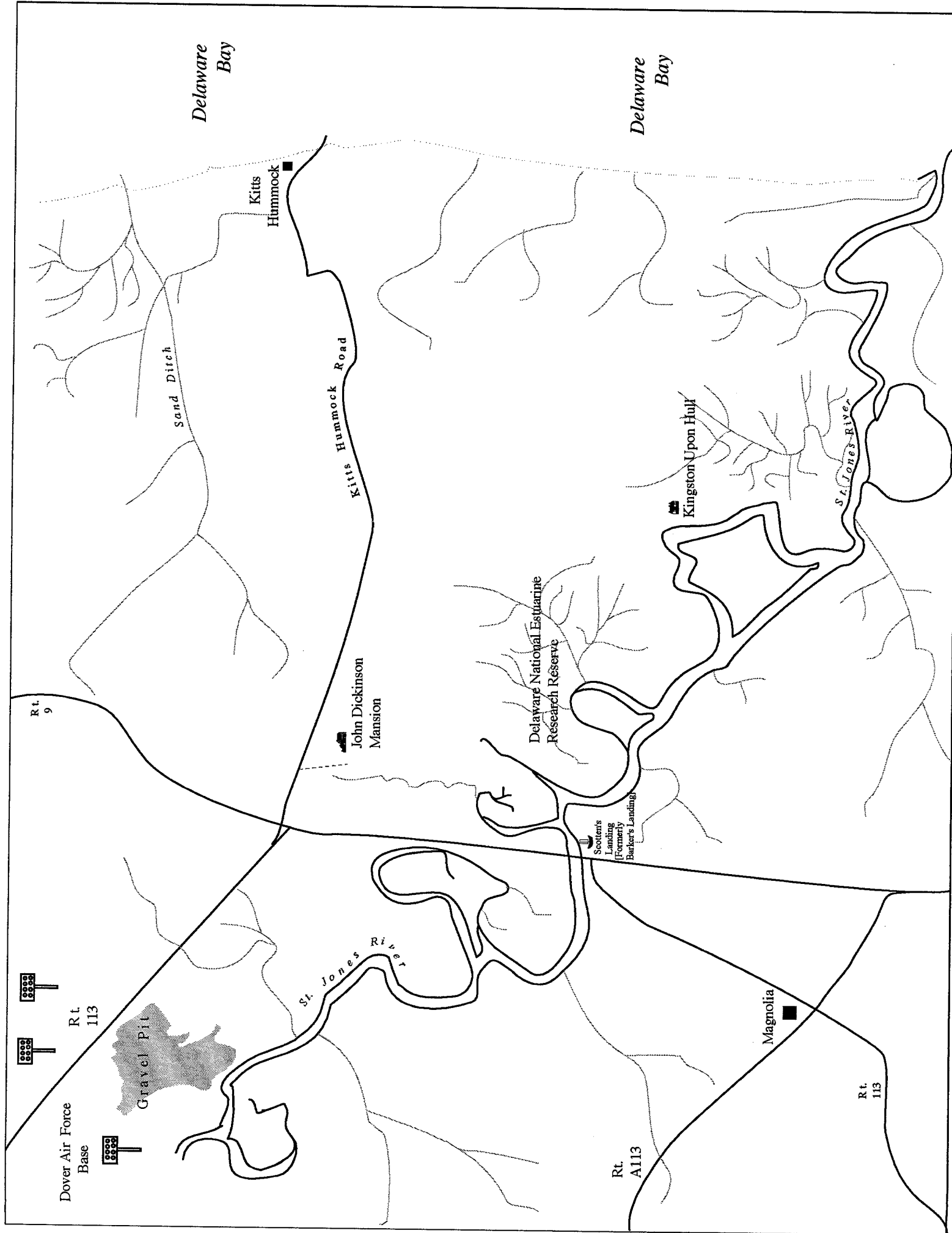
Delaware Bay

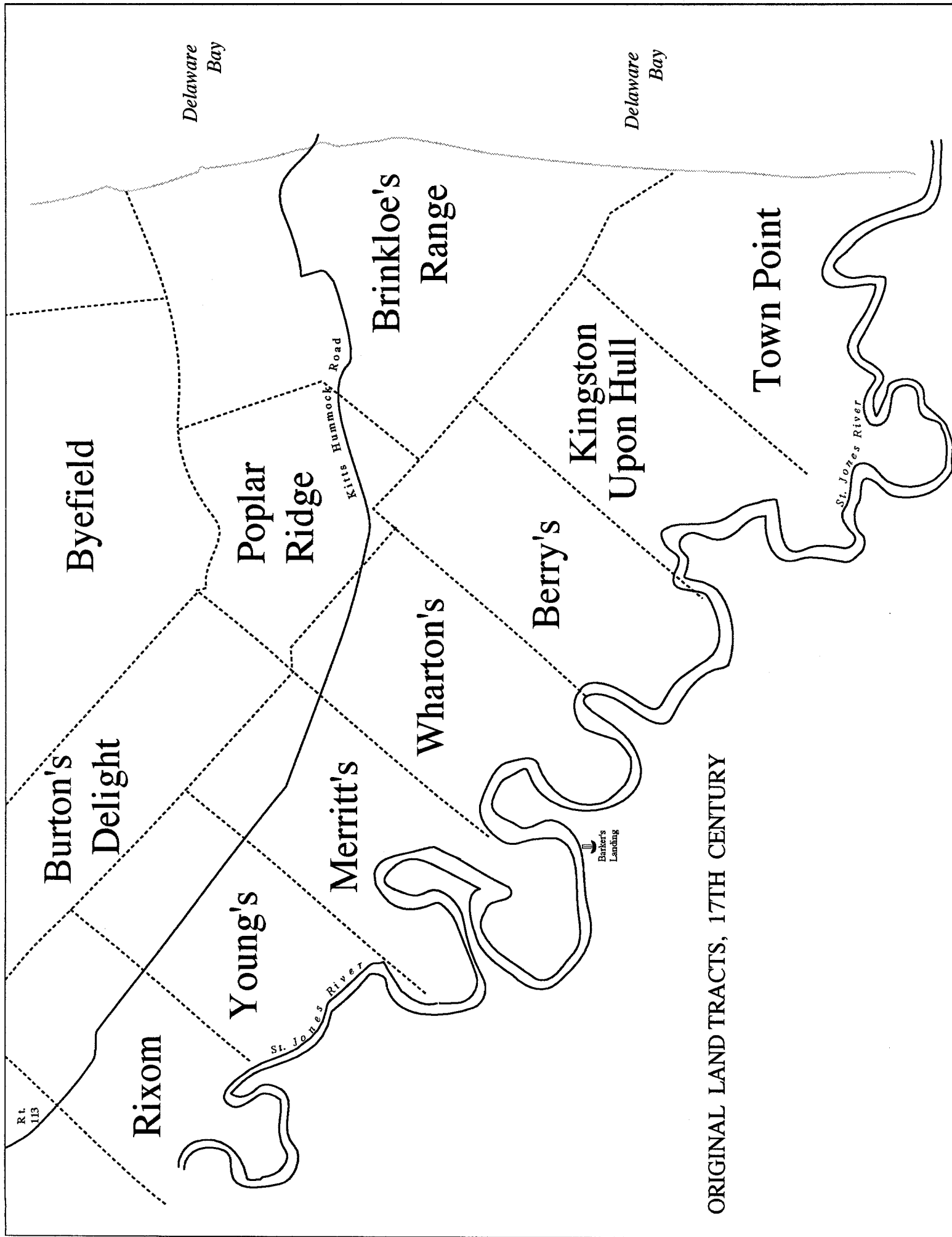




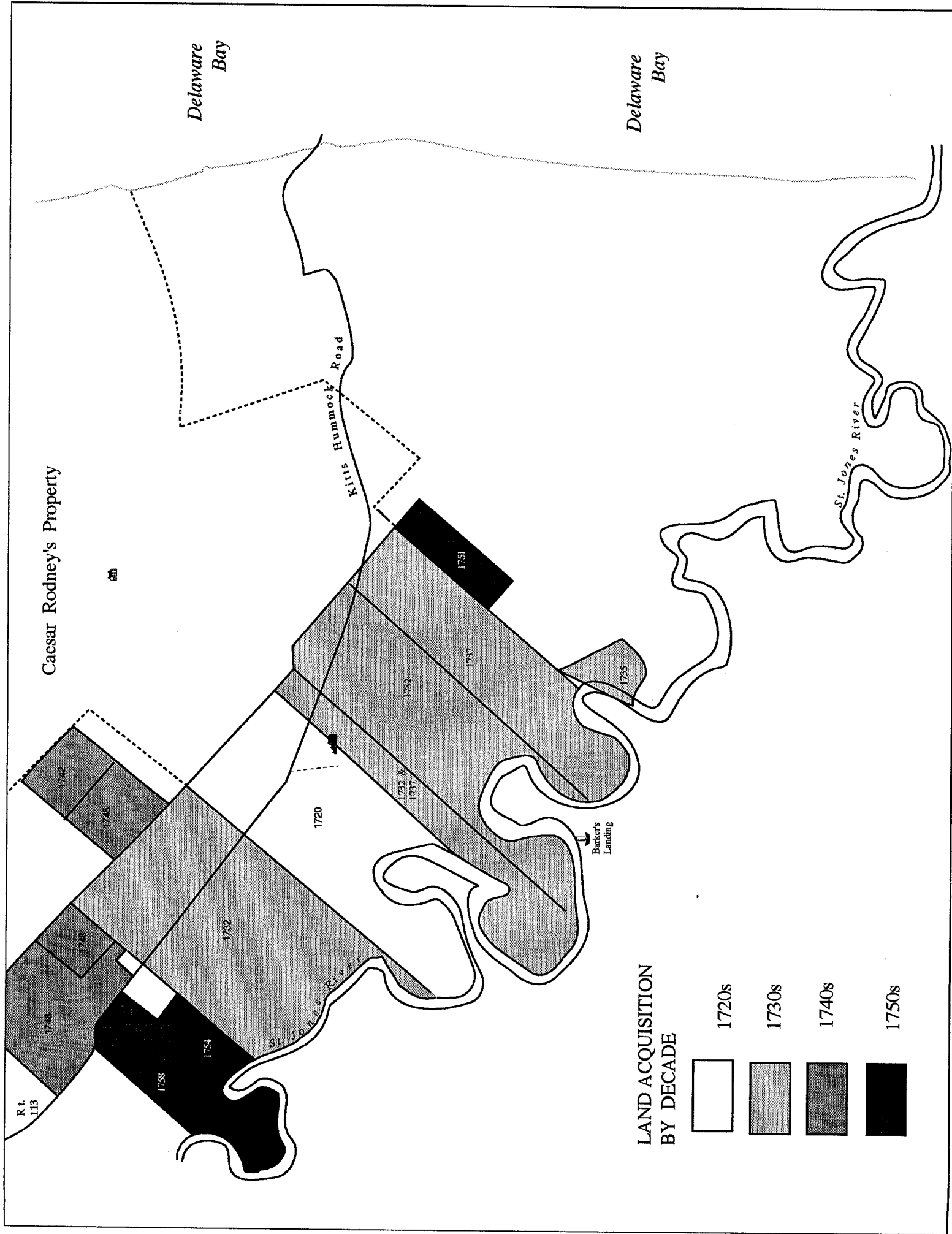


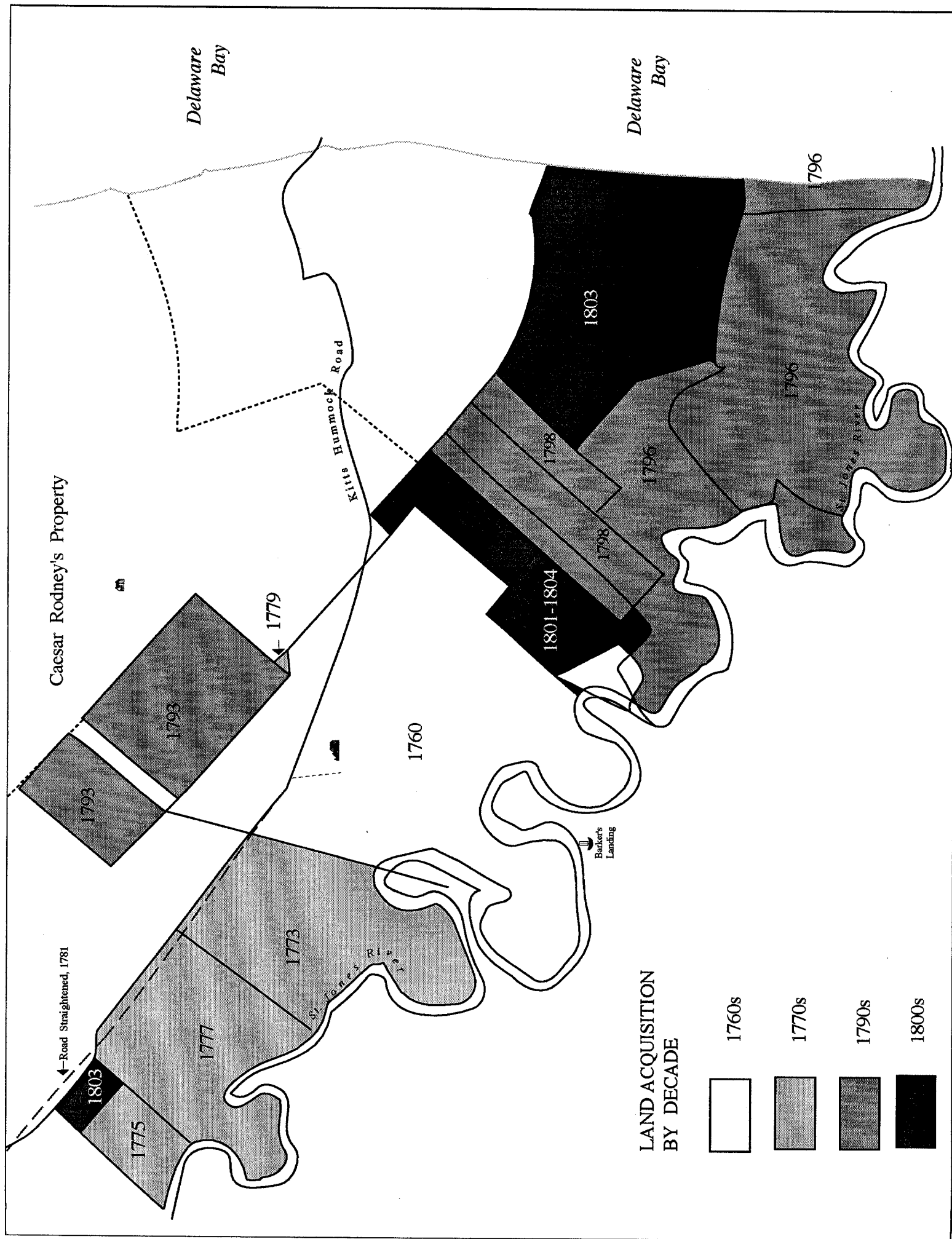


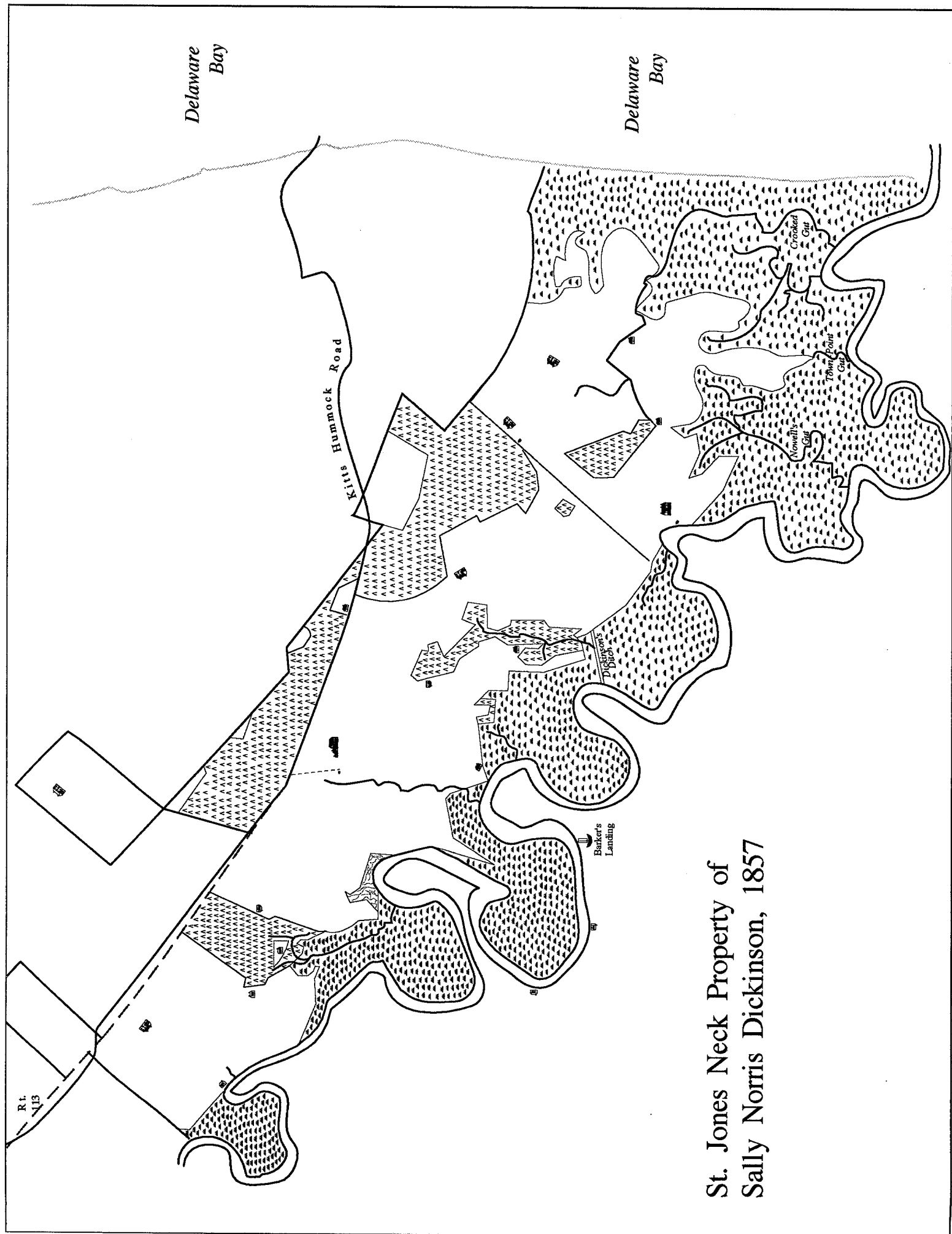




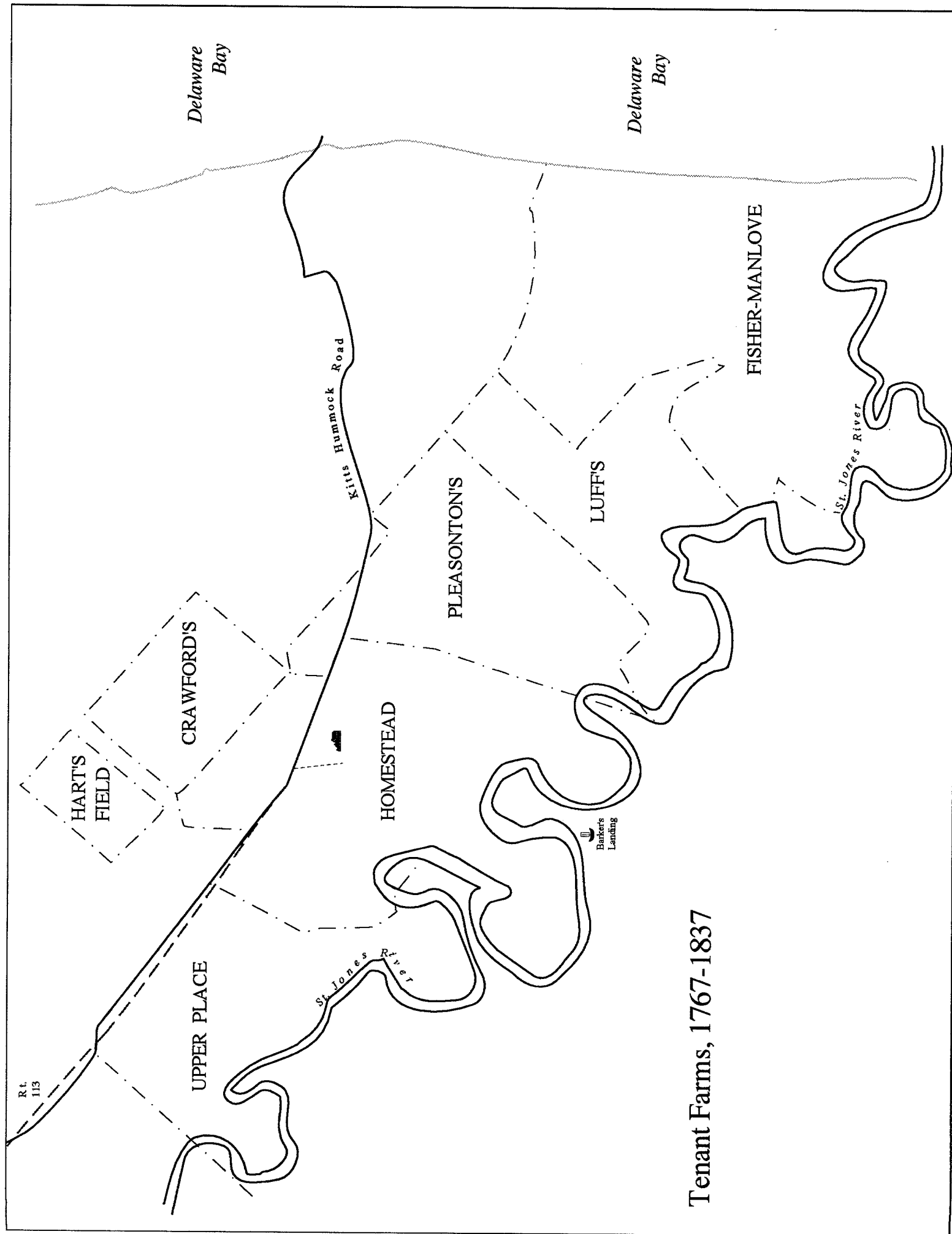
ORIGINAL LAND TRACTS, 17TH CENTURY

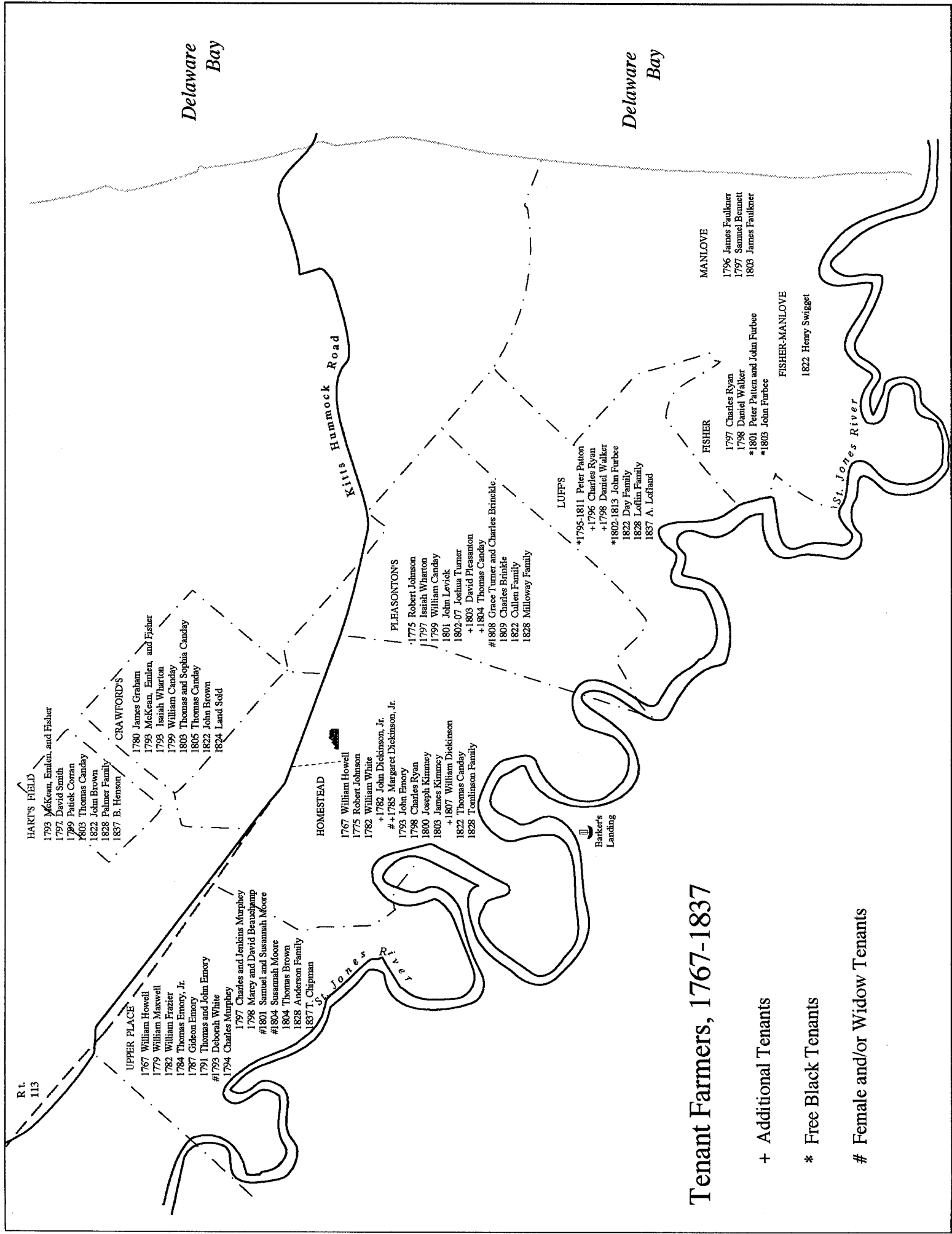




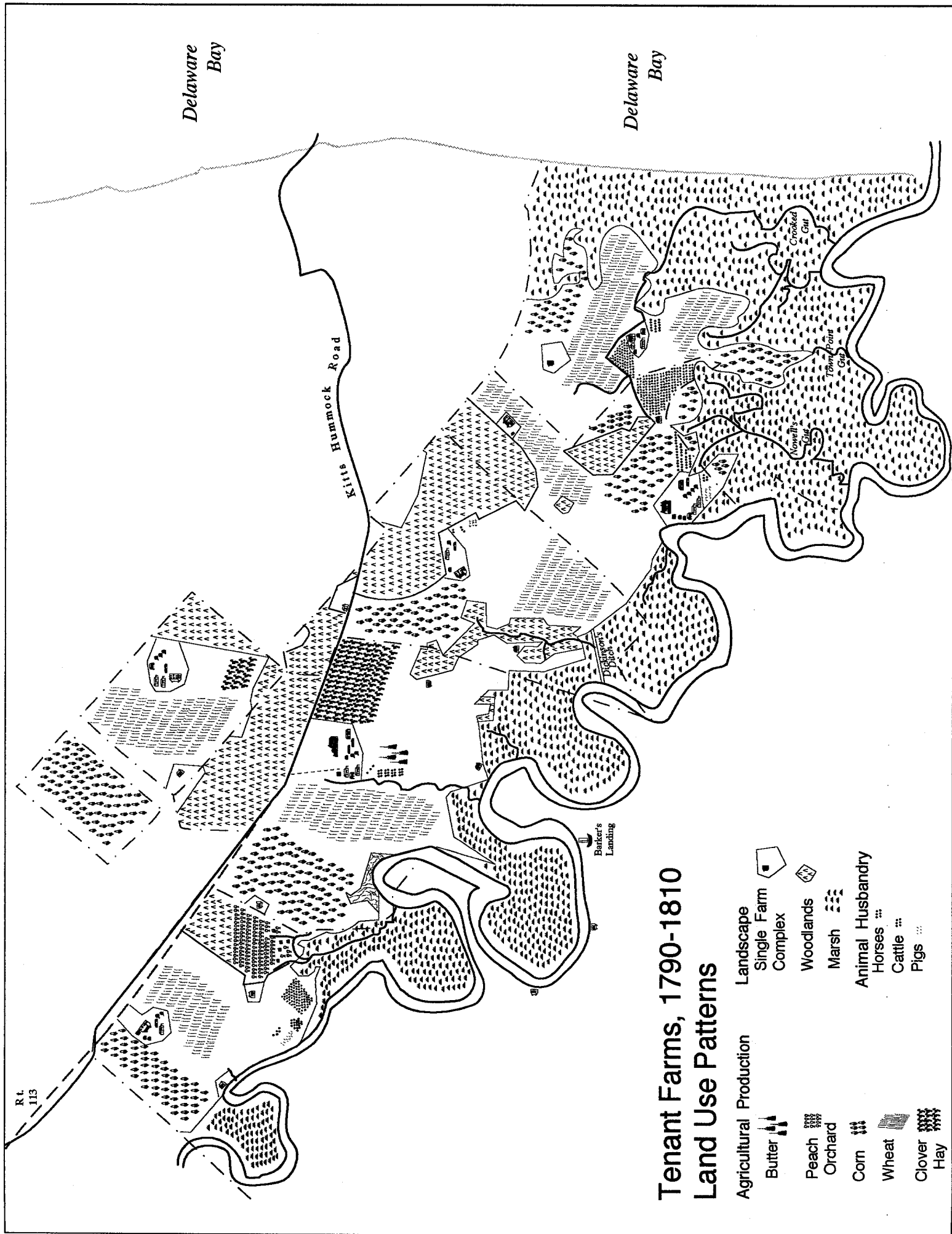


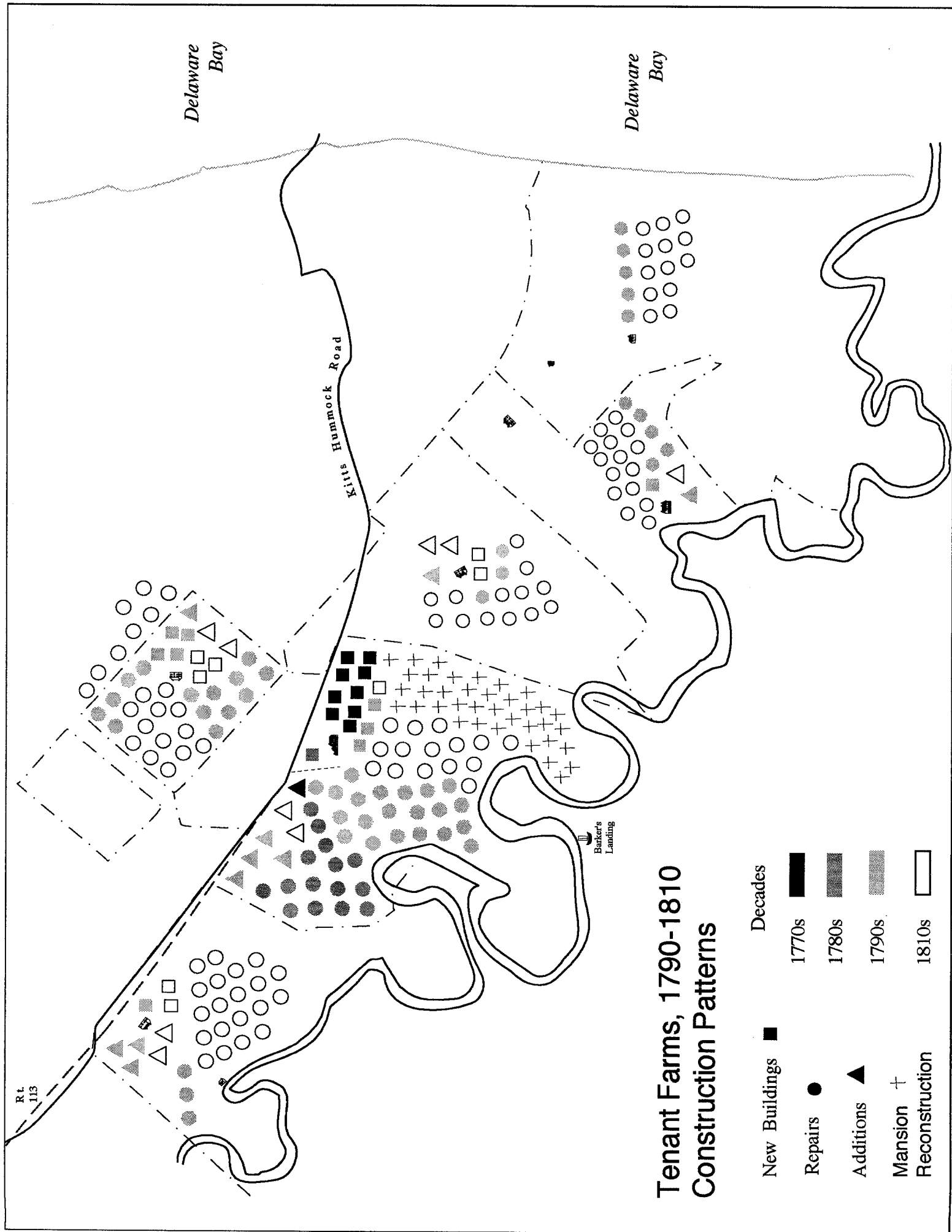
St. Jones Neck Property of  
Sally Norris Dickinson, 1857

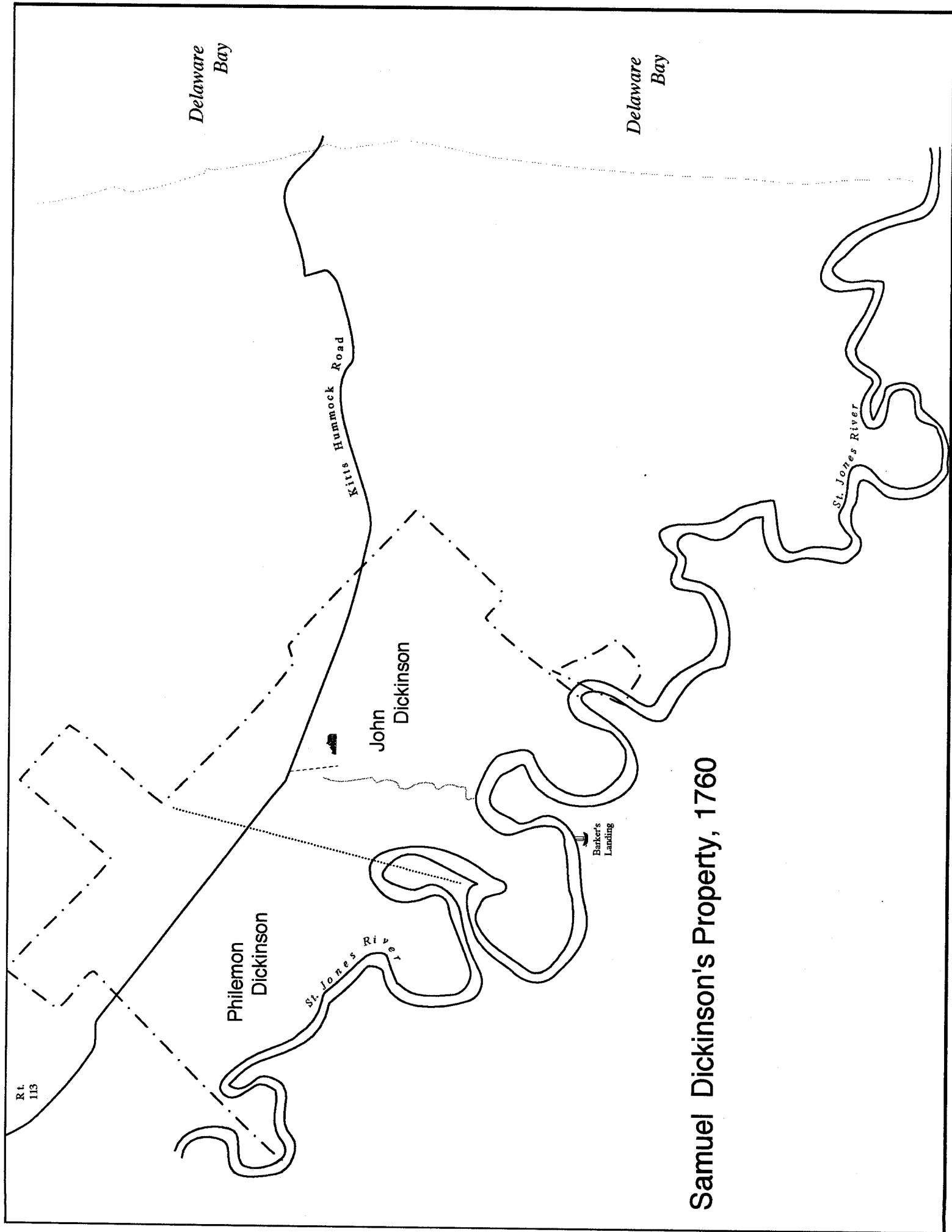












Delaware  
Bay

Delaware  
Bay

Kitts Hummock Road

St. Jones River

John  
Dickinson

Philemon  
Dickinson

St. Jones River

Barker's  
Landing

Rt.  
113

Samuel Dickinson's Property, 1760