

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places  
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date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number

Page

N+5170

Property Name: Riverside (W.B. Diehl, 1868)

Location and Verbal Boundary Description:

Situated approximately 400 feet southwest of the intersection of Bay View Road (route 423) and Silver Run Road (route 424). The nominated area is an elongated rectangle extending 800 feet from the back of the lot to the edge of route 423 and is 300 feet wide running from the entry lane to the north side of the present yard. The nomination includes the privy in the back yard but not the modern group of farm related structures further to the west.

Owner: Roger D. Brenegan

R.D.2, P.O. Box 452

Middletown, Delaware

Description:

The rectangular core of the house is four bays wide and a single room deep. There is a 22 foot two-story L-shaped extension projecting from the northern section of the back wall of this core, and the central portion of the south wall of this extension supports a small lean-to enclosure. The house core has a gable roof with single flush brick chimneys at each gable end. The modern extension also has a gable roof, but it is without chimney projections. The center of the core facade has a small enclosed porch.

The facade is completely symmetrical with four second story windows aligned over two central balanced doors and two end windows. All the windows are double-sash vertical rectangles with six over six panes of old glass. Each window on the facade has two louvered shutters; however, the original first floor window once had

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form

|                  |
|------------------|
| For NPS use only |
| received         |
| date entered     |

Continuation sheet

N-5170

Item number

Page

solid paneled shutters. The recessed molded doors are surmounted by four pane transom lights. The back wall of the house core has three second floor and three first floor windows of the identical type and placement as those on the facade, without shutters. Each long wall of the extension wing contains two second floor and three first floor windows of the same type, while the lean-to holds three smaller windows of the same pane configuration.

The ground floor plan of the house core consists of two equally proportioned sixteen foot square parlors separated by a single wall with a central passage. Each of the front doors offers access to one of the parlors, in a balanced variation of the Pennsylvania I plan. The north wall of the northern parlor contains a built-in cupboard and a closet flanking the now dismantled fireplace. Adjacent to the closet toward the back wall is the door to a recessed spiral staircase to the second floor and attic. Adjacent to the protruding bottom steps is the entrance through the back wall into the modern kitchen wing. The south parlor contains only a modern brick fireplace, in place of the dismantled original. Both parlors retain their original beaded chair-rail and baseboard mouldings. Flanking the northern hearth area is a single corner beaded moulding which was constructed as an integral part of the lath structure before plastering. The lean-to on the south wall encloses the exterior steps to the basement.

The second floor of the core contains three bedrooms off a back hallway. The northernmost fireplace is intact, while the southern fireplace appears to have been walled in. All these rooms and the hall retain their original beaded baseboard molding. The door of each room has an intact iron box-lock. The second floor of the extension contains a modern bath and two additional rooms. The attic is unfinished and divided into two sections by a rough battened door fastened with hand-wrought nails. The house core has a full brick walled basement of white-washed common bond. The floor and wall framing is exposed and a number of notched and locking lap joints are visible. The basement floor is constructed out of yellowish brick in an unusual "herringbone" bond.

United States Department of the Interior  
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**National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form**

For NPS use only

received

date entered

Continuation sheet

U-5170

Item number

Page

At this time, the house is covered with aluminum siding and the roof is covered with asphalt shingles. These cover the original horizontal clapboard exterior and a roof of cedar shingles, and have been added in the last decade. The enclosed aluminum porch was also added at this time onto the existing cement foundation of an earlier porch. A photograph from the early twentieth century shows an open porch of the same size supported by two wooden end poles. Circa 1930: the original two-story kitchen wing with two upstairs bedrooms was dismantled and the extension and leanto which now exist were constructed, overlapping the original. Also removed at this time was a lattice-work, enclosed, brick floored leanto porch which enclosed the remainder of the back wall. The only clearly identifiable interior alterations include the very recent removal of both first floor parlor fireplaces, and an earlier paneling over of the upstairs southern bedroom fireplace.

To the east of the back of the house is the cement foundation of an old privy. This was also the reported location of the earlier, more primitive, privy pit. Both the cement foundation of the privy and the cement foundation of the front porch most probably relate to the 1930's rebuilding period, as modernizations of earlier structures. Behind the privy stretched an extensive array of agricultural outbuildings. In the early twentieth century this complex included: a horse barn, a cow barn with lot, a pig shed, a poultry shed, a corn crib, a tool shed and a well with a windmill. All of these disappeared or were destroyed when the modern barn was constructed in this decade. The driveway is in its old location, which divided the house lot from the extensive orchards to the south. A picket fence ran along the house lot from the backyard out to the main road, forming a long rectangular enclosure of the house and yard. A separate split-rail fence enclosed the farm fields and complex. Nothing but uneven ground remains to indicate the location of the other outbuildings. A slight linear mounding of earth marks the old footpath from the front doors to the central gate in the fence by the road.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form

|                  |
|------------------|
| For NPS use only |
| received         |
| date entered     |

Continuation sheet 2-5170

Item number

Page

Historical Background and Significance:

The Riverside farm came to its active size of 144 acres when it passed to one of the heirs of a local land magnate in the first quarter of the century. Thomas Fitzgerald had amassed a large estate of land in New Castle County as a result of the land sales, foreclosures and bankruptcies brought about by the severe agricultural depression at the end of the eighteenth century. Poor soil conservation and over-farming had reduced the fertility of the land dramatically, precipitating a wide-spread depopulation of the farming heartland of New Castle County.

In the second quarter of the nineteenth century the land passed into the hands of the first in four generations of Diehls, a local farming family. This period saw a number of changes not only in the ways of farming, but also in the farmer's attitude toward the land. Smaller farm owners began to work their own land as the large tenant farming operations came into being. This brought an influx of what might be called an agrarian middle-class out into the country. This period was also marked by the rise of numerous agricultural innovations in methods, machinery and crops which allowed these farmers to consolidate the value of their land and continue to prosper. The Diehl family was just such a group; and the Diehl House, which was probably built in the 1840's, represents the small conservative dwelling of these comfortable farmers.

Throughout the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the agricultural picture continued to brighten. The regional trend to diversification was evident on the Diehl farm as the Agricultural Census documents showed the shift from a focus on grains in 1850 to include livestock and vegetables by 1870. These successful agricultural experiments resulted in a steady increase in the farm's cash value from \$5,000 to \$15,000 over the same period. This prosperity probably resulted in the renovation or addition to the house or farm buildings. It may be possible that the construction of the slightly elaborate basement brick floor or the lattice porch may date from this time.

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Inventory—Nomination Form**

|                  |
|------------------|
| For NPS use only |
| received         |
| date entered     |

Continuation sheet 2-5170

Item number

Page

In the last quarter of the century the farm continued the trend to diversity with the addition of poultry and fruit. Most notable, was the establishment of one of the extensive peach orchards which became so prevalent in the region at the middle of the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, a glutted peach market and severe blight in the 1870's reduced the profitability of most area orchards. The abrupt drop in the property value of the farm from \$15,000 to \$7,000 by 1880 dramatically illustrates the ruinous effect of this collapse. This probably accounts for the fact that W. B. Diehl, the farmer during this period, died in debt; thus his son had to buy rather than inherit the land. This particular depression eventually passed, and the farm continued to provide a profitable living and a comfortable residence for Diehl farmers until the land was partitioned in the middle twentieth century.

In summary, the stages in the development of the Diehl property through the nineteenth century seem to provide a series of tangible socio-economic indicators of regional agricultural trends. Architectural analysis, census and tax data, deed, will and probate records, historic maps and atlases, old photographs and oral history all mesh into a remarkably complete record of the evolution of the Diehl farmstead. The house and farm were established and steadily improved through the second and third quarter of the century as an agricultural revolution spread through the efficient family owned farm system. Finally, in the last quarter of the century, the Diehl farm, with the rest of the region, suffered the collapse of the peach industry. Due to the tight correlation between significant farm events and the broader regional patterns, it would appear that the Diehl property would be a valuable component of any thematic district which addresses a regional model for agricultural development in the nineteenth century.

Nomination by Henry Ward



Riverside  
N-5170