

# Chapter 10

## Historic Preservation



### Overview

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Kent County contains a variety of cultural and historical resources, both archaeological and architectural, which serve as a record of the County's past. These resources directly relate to those individuals who lived, worked, and developed the County. The topography and natural resources of the region as well as social and political climates of the times influenced that development.

Delaware's proximity to the Delaware Bay and location on the Delmarva Peninsula within the Coastal Plain allows for a very distinct topography. This location and the presence of numerous natural resources such as waterways, wetlands, and woodlands clearly guided the earliest development of the County. The Lenni Lenape and the Nanticoke were the early inhabitants of the land and lived by a combination of hunting, fishing, and farming (Munroe, *History of Delaware*; 14). When settlement began, the early towns appeared along the navigable waterways and as overland transportation routes developed, settlement began moving west. Many of these western lands proved fertile for farming and agriculture began to play a significant role in the development of the County. Construction of railroads during the mid-to-late 1800's further affected settlement patterns as towns developed and grew along the railroad lines. These railroads moved not only people, but also the many crops grown in fields and orchards of Kent County.

Politics also played a role in the growth and development of Kent County. On June 15, 1776 Delaware officially separated from Pennsylvania; thereby declaring its independence from Britain. The town of New Castle in New Castle County served as the early seat of government or meeting place of the General Assembly. As it became increasingly dangerous during the years of the Revolutionary War to hold government proceedings in the coastal town of New Castle, the General Assembly began meeting throughout Delaware. Due to its central location, Dover became the permanent State Capital in October of 1781.

Delaware's status as a slave holding border state during the Civil War provided for a complicated cultural and political history. There were both Northern and Southern sympathizers throughout the state. As the central county and location of the state capital in Dover, Kent County was the home of much political debate regarding the issue of slavery. Its location between the Chesapeake and Delaware Bays, proximity to the border state of Maryland, proximity to the free states of Pennsylvania and New Jersey, its populations of Methodists, Quakers, Abolitionists, and of free African-Americans made it one of the major routes for the Underground Railroad.

The built environment or landscape of Kent County is a reflection of this history. The coastal towns contain many of the old homes, lighthouses, and maritime processing facilities. Evidence of the importance of transportation in the development of Kent County is evident at the many crossroad communities that still exist. These communities typically contain not only houses, but also central meeting spaces, such as churches and community halls. The larger towns located along the railroad lines also contain town halls, post offices, and in many cases evidence of large commercial or industrial enterprises, such as general or mercantile stores, mills, and canneries. The agricultural landscape is comprised not only of open fields and orchards, but of the domestic and agricultural outbuildings needed to store, shelter, and process the crops produced and animals raised on these farms. It is, therefore, a mixed landscape of rural and urban resources. These resources vary in size, shape, and form, as much as they vary in construction materials.

This landscape is forever changing to meet the demands of this growth and development. The primary mode of transportation changed from railcars to automobiles, adding to the landscape the highway system. The focus of agriculture has changed over the years with many of the livestock, fruit and grain producing farms shifting to the production of poultry and specialized crops such as soybeans and corn. The building of industrial enterprises has slowed over the years with a shift from heavy industry to more service-oriented industries. Many industrial parks are being replaced by or retrofitted as corporate centers. Where fields and pastures once covered the landscape, subdivisions and commercial centers now occupy the space. All of these changes have an impact on the built environment. The once primarily rural landscape of Kent County is changing to a mix of suburban and rural space.

The changes to the landscape due to a shift in economic focus, growth, and development have threatened many of the historical resources in Kent County. These resources include not only buildings, but lighthouses, schooners, and archaeological sites as well. Preservation of resources can happen many ways. One way is through the physical preservation of resources such as the restoration or rehabilitation of a building. Developing incentives and ordinances which encourage the incorporation of these historic structures into modern development when possible is an important element of the planning process.

Another manner of physically preserving these resources is shifting the lands from private to publicly held property. The Hunn Property and Brecknock Park are examples of Kent County owned properties containing historic buildings and archaeological resources.

In cases where resources cannot be preserved, documentation through photographs, measured drawings, and surveys can preserve many of these threatened resources on paper for future generations to see.

## **Identification, evaluation, and recordation**

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Kent County utilizes a three-part system to preserve its historic resources through documentation: identification, evaluation, and recordation or registration. Historic properties are identified as those properties over 50 years old. As resources age they are added to the Delaware Cultural Resource Survey (CRS), a systematic inventory of Delaware's buildings, structures, sites, and objects over 50 years old. Each property is assigned a Cultural Resource number and survey forms are completed for the property and all historic buildings on it. The Delaware State Historic Preservation Office/Delaware Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs maintains the Cultural Resource Survey.

The next step is the evaluation of these historic resources. All historic properties are evaluated using the National Register of Historic Places criteria. Not all historic resources over 50 years old are eligible to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places, however all buildings are important as a record of Kent County history. The Cultural Resource Survey is a crucial part of the preservation process because it includes recording all buildings over 50 years old and in many cases it is the only record we have of the many historical resources which have been lost to demolition and neglect.

If the resources are considered eligible, they must go through the process of being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places, which includes approvals by the State Review Board for Historic Preservation, the State Historic Preservation Officer, and the Keeper of the National Register of Historic Places.

## Resources

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Myriad historic resources are located throughout Kent County and include:

- 130 Listed Buildings / Building Complexes
- 17 Listed Archaeological Sites
- 30 Listed Boundary Markers
- 2 National Historic Landmarks
- Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad Byway
- Delaware Bayshore Byway
- 18 National Register Districts

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|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|
| Bannister Hall & Bayard House   | Byfield Historic District           | Camden Historic District               |
| Coombe Historic District        | Dover Green Historic District       | Duck Creek Village Historic District   |
| Felton Historic District        | Frederica Historic District         | J. H. Wilkerson & Son Brickworks       |
| Kenton Historic District        | Little Creek Hundred Rural District | Lower St. Jones Neck Historic District |
| North Milford Historic District | Raymond Neck Historic District      | Smyrna Historic District               |
| St. Joseph's Industrial School  | Victorian Dover Historic District   | Wyoming Historic District              |

With the exception of archaeological sites, all of the resources listed above are represented on [Map \\_\\_\\_](#).

## Threats to Historic Preservation

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In Kent County, 4 individual National Register Properties and 165 buildings within established National Register Districts have been demolished. With the recent losses of the Jehu Reed House, Thomas England House, and Durham Shores House, threats to historic resources have become more apparent in our community. There are two primary threats to historic resources in Kent County:

- **New Development** - As Kent County's population increases and the landscape continues to evolve, development pressure often leads to the demolition of historic buildings, such as historic farm complexes or properties located along the highway in commercial areas.
- **Demolition by Neglect** - Often historic buildings are more expensive to maintain or property owners do not have the knowledge of how to maintain a historic house properly. As historic houses fall under disrepair, demolition due to lack of maintenance is often times an outcome.

## Recommendations

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1. Explore incentives to incorporate historic structures into new development;
2. Through partnerships with state and nongovernmental agencies, design education and outreach materials to help property owners maintain their historic structures;
3. Continue to identify, evaluate, and update cultural resource surveys and provide survey data in a variety of formats including digital mapping and through the Kent County website; and
4. Enact ordinances that support the documentation, protection and/or preservation of important cultural and historic resources within the County.