NPS Form 10-900
(Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

HA-525

"NR Form"

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property

historic name: Sion Hill

other names/site number: HA-525

2. Location

street & number: 2026 Level Road — N/A ☐ not for publication

city, town: Havre de Grace — ☒ vicinity

state: Maryland code: MD county: Harford code: 025 zip code: 21078

3. Classification

Ownership of Property	Category of Property	Number of Resources within Property	
		Contributing	Noncontributing
☒ private	☒ building(s)	4	____ buildings
☐ public-local	☐ district	1	____ sites
☐ public-State	☐ site	1	____ structures
☐ public-Federal	☐ structure	____	____ objects
	☐ object	6	0 Total

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: 0

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this ☒ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☒ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. ☐ See continuation sheet.

Signature of certifying official — Date: 3/12/90

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. ☐ See continuation sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official — Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

☐ entered in the National Register.
☐ See continuation sheet.

☐ determined eligible for the National Register. ☐ See continuation sheet.

☐ determined not eligible for the National Register.

☐ removed from the National Register.

☐ other, (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper — Date of Action

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)	Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)
DOMESTIC/single dwelling	DOMESTIC/single dwelling
DOMESTIC/secondary structures	DOMESTIC/secondary structures
AGRICULTURAL/agricultural field	AGRICULTURAL/agricultural field
LANDSCAPE	LANDSCAPE

7. Description

Architectural Classification (enter categories from instructions)

Georgian
Federal

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation stone
walls brick
roof slate
other wood

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

DESCRIPTION SUMMARY:

Sion Hill is a three-part brick Georgian/federal house with a superb location at the crest of a long hill whose open fields, and an occasional patch of woods gently slope down to yield panoramic views of the city of Havre de Grace about a mile and a half away, and, just beyond, to that point at which the Susquehanna River broadens out to form the Chesapeake Bay. These expansive vistas are an integral and essential feature of the house, as will be discussed in the Significance Section. The house was begun c. 1785 by John Ireland with the 2 1/2-story, five-bay, gable roof center section as his dwelling flanked by two matching two-story, single-pitched roof wings: the western wing was built as a private boys' academy and the eastern wing was--and--is for service. The house was completed c. 1800 by Gideon Denison and/or his daughter Minerva Denison Rodgers who gave the main facades a richness of period details such as keystoned splayed stone window lintels, and sophisticated architectural treatments unique in Harford County and worthy of urbane centers such as Philadelphia or Georgetown. The grounds contain a vestigial garden (some ancient boxwood, a formal sweep of lawn, several specimen trees) which seems to be contemporaneous with the house. There are two c. 1930 stone outbuildings (a garage and a pump house), a c. 1900 frame barn, and a c. 1800 brick tenant house.

[X] See continuation sheet for GENERAL DESCRIPTION

8. Statement of Significance

HA-525

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:
[XX] nationally [ ] statewide [XX] locally

Applicable National Register Criteria [XX] A [ ] B [XX] C [ ] D

iteria Considerations (Exceptions) [ ] A [ ] B [ ] C [ ] D [ ] E [ ] F [ ] G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)
Architecture
Military

Period of Significance
c. 1787- c. 1805
1806-1933

Significant Dates
N/A

Cultural Affiliation
N/A

Significant Person
N/A

Architect/Builder
unknown

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY:

Sion Hill is of architectural and military significance. Architecturally, Sion Hill, a 1790s Georgian plan house with elegant Georgian and Federal influenced decorative detailing is the finest building known to have been constructed in Harford County in the eighteenth century. It is comparable in its treatment to contemporary structures in more sophisticated urban areas such as Philadelphia or Georgetown, D.C. or Alexandria, Virginia. Important features are the symmetrical central block with flanking wings, Flemish bond facade, with elaborately decorated second floor and attic windows below a modillioned gable, a broad center hall with a pilastered segmental arch, and bold trim and mantels. Militarily, Sion Hill achieves significance as the seat of the Rodgers family which is described in the Dictionary of American Biography as one of the most noted naval families in the United States. Rodgers played leading and vital roles in naval developments from Commodore John Rodgers' (1772-1839) campaigns against the Barbary pirates and service as head of the Board of Navy Commissioners from 1815 until 1825 to Admiral John Rodgers' II (1848-1933), role in the Navy accepting wireless telegraphy, to significant contributions by Commodore John Rodgers (1812-1882) as president of the United States Naval Institute and the first Naval Advisory Board, to pioneer efforts in naval aviation by Commander John Rodgers (1881-1926). Although posted around the world on various assignments, these naval officers resided at Sion Hill. Sion Hill is still owned by the Rodgers family though the surname ended in 1933.

[XX] **See continuation sheet** for HISTORIC CONTEXT and MARYLAND COMPREHENSIVE HISTORIC PRESERVATION PLAN data.

9. Major Bibliographical References

HA-525

Dictionary of American Biography, Vols. VII and VIII, (New York; Charles Scribner's Sons; Dumas Malone, editor).

C. Milton Wright, Our Harford Heritage, (Bel Air, MD: Privately printed, 1967).

Building by the Book, II, (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1986, Mario di Valmarana, editor).

Land and Probate Records, Harford County Courthouse, Bel Air; Interviews with Mr. and Mrs. Montgomery Meigs Green.

Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties, Harford County, Maryland Historical Trust, Annapolis, MD.

☐ See continuation sheet

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☒ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # MD 13-Hav.v-2-1, 2-2, 2-3, 2-4
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

Primary location of additional data:

- ☒ State historic preservation office
- ☐ Other State agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☐ Local government
- ☐ University
- ☐ Other

Specify repository:

10. Geographical Data

creage of property 315 acres more or less

USGS quad Aberdeen, MD; Havre de Grace, MD

UTM References

	Zone	Easting	Northing
A	18	403900	4379950
B	18	403770	4378330
C	18	402550	4379510
D	18	402950	4380490

☐ See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

☒ See continuation sheet No. 10.1

Boundary Justification

☒ See continuation sheet No. 10.2

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Christopher Weeks; Preservation Planner
organization Harford County Government date November 1989
street & number 220 South Main Street telephone (301) 879-2000, ext. 207
city or town Bel Air state Maryland zip code 21014

★U.S.GPO:1988-0-223-918

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The 315-acre Sion Hill estate crowns a gentle hill about a mile and a half north of Havre de Grace in eastern Harford County, Maryland. For generations owners of Sion Hill have kept that sweep of ground in open fields and pasture land to yield expansive vistas down to the city and to the Susquehanna River and Chesapeake Bay beyond; these views are and always have been important to the house.

MAIN HOUSE, c. 1785

The three-part brick mansion was begun c. 1785 by John Ireland, who ran a private boys' academy in the western wing, and used the center block as his main living area; services are in the eastern wing. The Flemish bond brick center block measures five bays across and 2 1/2 stories tall. The main (south and Bay-facing) facade is axial around the entrance door and pedimented porch, a three-part second story window (with an exceptionally elaborate arrangement of pilasters and dentiled and incised entablature), and a lunette (with a delicate keystone) attic window which is centrally placed within a modillioned and pedimented attic gable. This not only

See Continuation Sheet No. 7.2

serves to mark the center of the house and heighten the symmetry, it also accurately suggests the center hall plan within. Side windows, two per floor, are nine-over-nine beneath flared stone lintels with bold keystones . Massive interior end chimneys heighten the overall effect of verticality and impressive grandeur. (The rear or land facade displays the same general theme in a less formal manner, i.e., the center second-story window lacks the three-part enrichment and the attic lunette is slightly simpler.) Both main facades have two-brick high beltcourses.

The flanking wings are two stories tall; they are as deep as the main section and are one bay wide beneath sloping, single-pitched roofs. The wings' roofs' slopes are not as sharp as the main section's but nevertheless visually work well to lead the eye centrally upwards, heightening the monumental effect.

On the interior, the main section has a broad center hall plan; the two largest and most formal rooms (the equal-sized Summer and Winter Dining Rooms) are to the east while two small twin parlors rooms and a stairway are to the west; the mathematics of this scheme are interesting (a three-part composition with one third kept a single unit, one third divided in half, one third divided in thirds) but in a broad context it is a slightly different

See Continuation Sheet No. 7.3

arrangement when compared with some other high-style late 18th-century five-part houses in Maryland which use the "Annapolis Plan"[1]; these would include Wye House in Talbot County and the Hammond-Harwood House in Annapolis. The stair is in an open alcove reached from the hall through a segmental and pilastered archway. The stair, entirely original like almost every other feature of the house, rises in four open flights to the attic and has simple, federal balusters, rail, and newel post. The main feature in the hall is the pilastered segmental arch which is identical to the one leading to the stair alcove. Walls are plastered throughout; the plaster is original as is the bountiful amount of high quality and high style woodwork such as chairrail, mantels and over mantels, cornices, panelled doors and hardware, etc. Trim in the Winter Dining Room is particularly notable, as befits the space used for formal entertaining; the elaborate fireplace is not known to have a specific book source for inspiration; the opening is bordered by original blue and white Delft tiles; the entire fireplace is flanked by cabinets, all original.

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[1] See Michael F. Trostel, "The Annapolis Plan in Maryland" in Building by the Book, II (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1986; Mario di Valmarana, editor),. pp. 1-34.

See Continuation Sheet No. 7.4

The west wing retains its original spatial configuration (a schoolroom on the ground floor with dormitory cells above) although the schoolroom was remodeled into an informal living room in the 1940s. The east wing is the service wing; originally the larger north room was the pantry and the small south room was the kitchen; the present owners have reversed this arrangement; in addition, the original kitchen led to the Summer Dining Room by means of a small hall; that hall was made into a downstairs powder room. Otherwise, and except for necessary modernizations such as plumbing and electricity, the house is all but entirely unchanged from its c. 1800 appearance. This is doubtless at least partially because it has been owned by the same family since that time.

TENANT HOUSE, c. 1790

Almost certainly cited in the 1798 Federal Direct Tax, this two-story, gable roofed, common bond brick building is located about 200 yards northeast of the main house. It measures three bays by one with a small frame addition on the southern end; there are two rooms per floor. Presumably built at the same time as the main house, the tenant house (servants' quarters) has a brick beltcourse and flat arches over the windows-- surprising touches of enrichment on a utilitarian structure. The six-over-six pegged windows, doors, and plain box cornice all appear to be original.

See Continuation Sheet No. 7.5

GROUNDS

Not surprisingly, Sion Hill was originally set off by elaborate gardens, traces of which remain; original (or very early) plantings include a formal boxwood garden southwest of the house (several ancient bushes remain but the overall design is largely lost), a park-like swath of open grass to the northeast of the house (possibly used for evening walks), and several speciman trees such as beech, holly, magnolia grandiflora, and osage orange. The gardens remain an integral part of the overall design of the estate, although the system of driveways has been changed: originally the driveway circled the house so one arrived at the main (Bay front) facade and a service drive branched off it to lead to the rear facade and kitchen wing; this invited "sightseers" and the present owners took out the drive to the main facade and relaid a driveway to the north facade, which is how one approaches today; the service drive is still in place. The views from the house southward to the Bay are virtually unchanged since c. 1800 and also contribute to the significance of the resource as will be discussed in Section 8. The once formal area around the main house (which has now taken on a rather romantic quality) is separated from the tenant house by a cedar hedge of great age, a rail fence, and a pasture.

See Continuation Sheet No. 7.6

BARN, c. 1900

A variety of farm buildings once stood in the pasture/farmyard between house and tenant house, but they deteriorated and most have been removed. Remaining is a c. 1900 one story plus attic frame barn; it is unused.

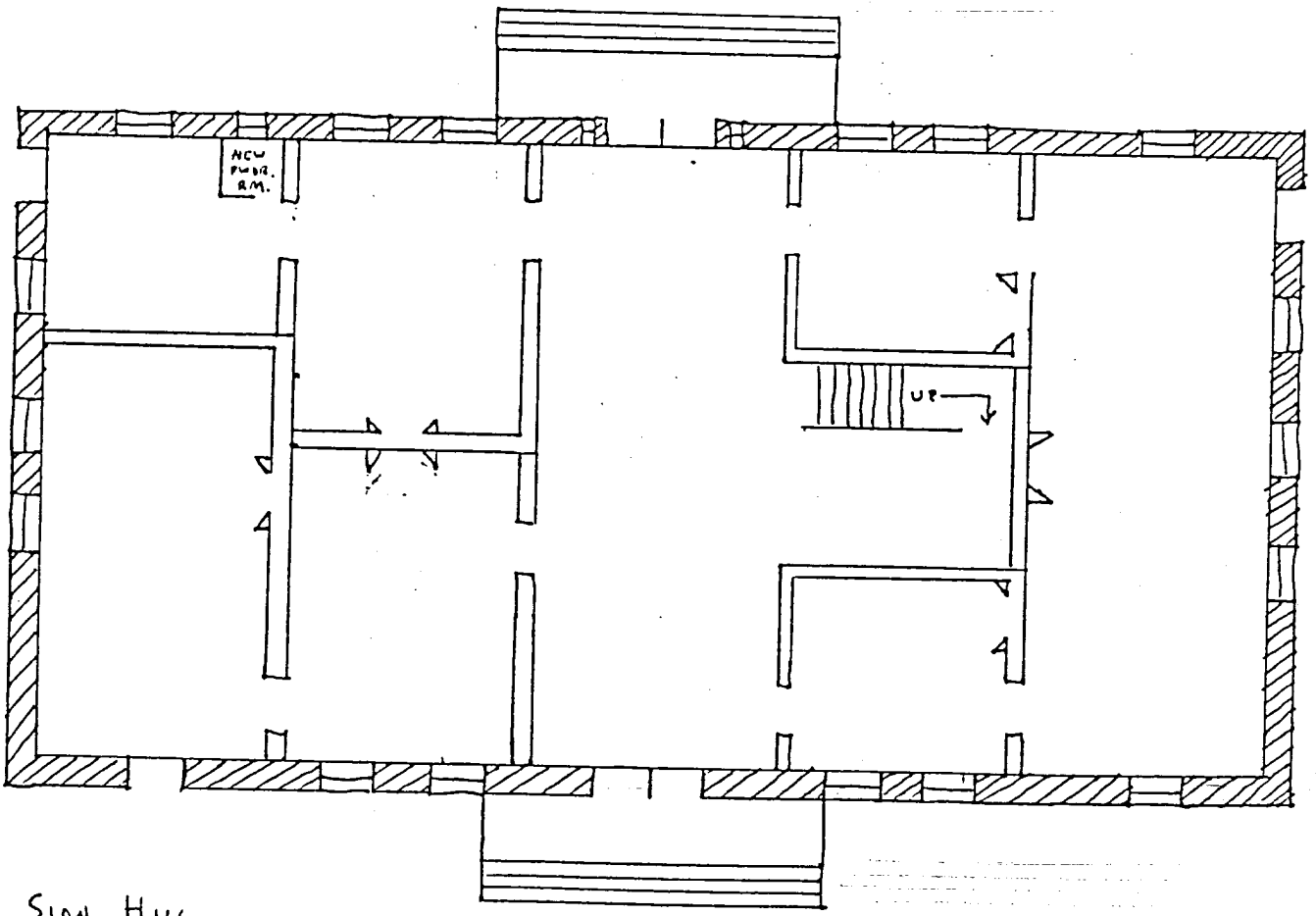
GARAGE AND PUMP HOUSE, (2 resources) c. 1930

Nearer the house is a stone garage and a stone pumphouse; both are c. 1930 one-story structures of utilitarian use and design. Robert Rodgers, son of John Augustus and Elizabeth Chambers Rodgers, was the architect.

See Continuation Sheet No. 7.7

FIRST FLOOR PLAN
(not to scale)

1989



SION HILL
HA-525
HARFORD CO., MD.
EXCEPT FOR NEW POWDER ROOM
ALL INTERIOR WALLS ORIGINAL

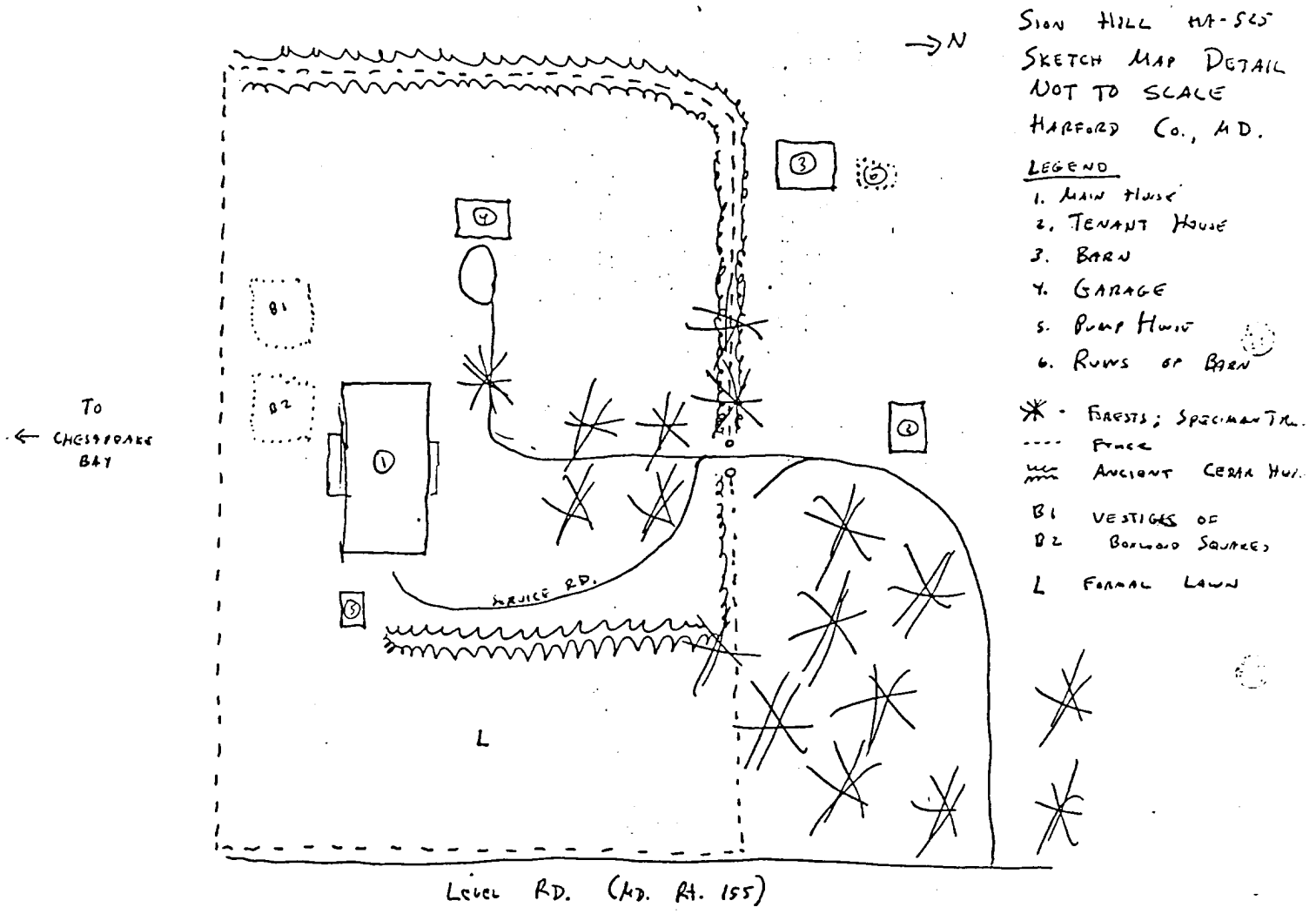
N

NOT TO SCALE
C. WEEKS
NOV. 27, 1989

See Continuation Sheet No. 7.8

RESOURCE SKETCH MAP

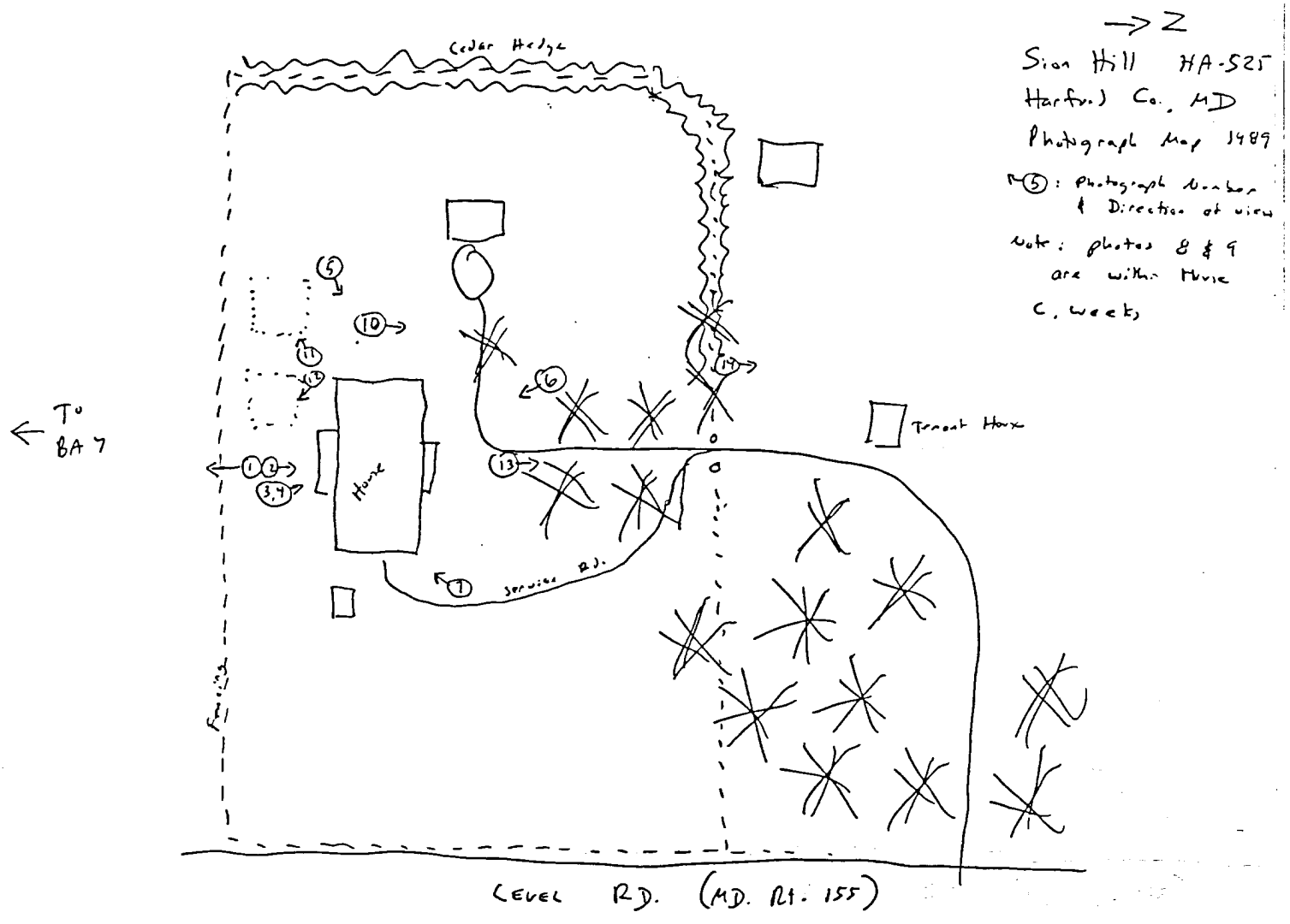
1989



C. WEEKS
11/27/89

See Continuation Sheet No. 7.9

PHOTOGRAPH MAP



HISTORIC CONTEXT:

MARYLAND COMPREHENSIVE HISTORIC PRESERVATION PLAN DATA

Geographic Organization: Piedmont

Chronological/Developmental Period(s):

Rural Agricultural Intensification 1680-1815

Agricultural-Industrial Transition 1815-1870

Industrial/Urban Dominance 1870-1930

Historic Period Themes:

Architecture, Landscape Architecture

Community Planning

Military

Resource Type:

Category: Buildings

Historic Environment: Rural

Historic Functions and Uses:

DOMESTIC/single dwelling

DOMESTIC/secondary structures

AGRICULTURE/agricultural field

AGRICULTURE/agricultural buildings

LANDSCAPE

Known Design Sources: None

See Continuation Sheet No. 8.2

HISTORIC CONTEXT:

Although the history of the land that includes Sion Hill can be traced back to the early 18th century, the tract's importance begins in 1787 when the Rev. John Ireland, rector of St. George's Episcopal Church near Perryman, bought the land[2] and began building the present house. Ireland lived in part of the house and used the western wing as a boys' academy called Sion Hill Seminary.[3] This was in keeping with the practice at St. George's, rectors having maintained schools in Perryman, or at other nearby sites in what is now Harford County, since 1720 and the church is known as "the

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2 Harford County Deed Book JLG K Page 413.

3 C. Milton Wright, Our Harford Heritage, (Bel Air, Maryland: privately Printed, 1967), p. 231.

See Continuation Sheet No. 8.3

mother of church schools."[4] The Seminary appears to have been an imediate success; Dr. John Archer of Medical Hall (HA-2; National Register) attended to the youths' medical needs, according to entries in his ledger; in 1790 it is known that Robert Harris Archer, a son of Dr. Archer's, was a pupil at Sion Hill and studied Latin, French, and mathematics; the same year Ireland took on a "singing master", paying him $100 "a session"[5]; in February 1792 Ireland took out a newspaper advertisement in which he stated that "Sion Hill Seminary is now in a very flourishing condition."[6] The present west wing of the house still suggests its school era; the ground floor classroom is still there, although remodelled into an informal living room, and cell-like dormitory rooms are above. Ireland lived in the rest of the house.

It is not certain if the very elegant late Georgian/Federal touches which characterize the present Sion Hill date to Ireland's tenure or to that of Sion Hill's next owner, Gideon Denison, a wealthy

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4 Wright, Harford, p. 231.

5 Wright, Harford, p. 231.

6 Clipping in the archives of the Historical Society of Harford County, Bel Air.

See Continuation Sheet No. 8.4

Connecticut merchant whom the Dictionary of American Biography describes as "a descendant of Capt. George Denison, called 'the Miles Standish of Connecticut.'"[7] Gideon Denison bought Sion Hill from Ireland in 1795.[8] Denison is cited in the 1798 Federal Direct Tax as living--"owner and occupant"-- in Sion Hill, described as a "Brick dwelling, two stories, 10 ft. piazza on one side and each end 15 ft. wide, 40 x 42." It is also described as being in an "unfinished state" which is doubtless simply due to the slow contruction process at that time. "Owner and occupant" would seem to be the key phrase. One assumes that the "10 ft. piazza" is the south porch and that the fifteen-foot wide one on "each end" are the school and service wings.

Some sources have suggested that Denison "was attracted to Havre de Grace, thinkiig it might be the site for the new national capital" and that he added the elegant and stylish federal period touches.[9] But the District of Columbia had been selected as the site in

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7 Dictionary of American Biography, Vol. VIII, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons; Dumas Malone, editor), p. 77.

8 Deed JLG M/281.

9 Undated (probably c. 1965) story on Sion Hill from the AEgis in the Historical Society of Harford County.

See Continuation Sheet No. 8.5

1790. Instead, it might be better to assume that Ireland desired an elegant building for his school--and with good motivation: during his ownership Havre de Grace was given serious consideration as the site of the new Capital City, losing the honor by one vote in 1789. It seems reasonable to think that Ireland would have wanted a stylish location for the leading boys' seminary--complete with a "singing master"-- in what might become the national capital.[10] Recent studies have shown that several other property owners in Havre de Grace were sprucing up their houses in the 1780s, but no building in the city (or in the county) even begins to approach the elegant Sion Hill.

For "stylish" and "elegant" are assuredly what Sion Hill is; no other extant building in Harford County displays such a thoroughly complete and correct understanding of period design dicta. Nor is there any evidence that any building ever did. In overall massing and design and in scale and in refinement of stylish details (see description), the house is the finest building of its time in the

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[10] Conversation with Marion Morton Carroll, who prepared the Havre de Grace Historic District Nomination to the National Register of Historic Places.

See Continuation Sheet No. 8.6

county and is equal to the best of the era's dwellings in more cosmopolitan areas such as Georgetown or Philadelphia.

When Sion Hill was erected, ambitious house-builders in the Chesapeake region favored a five-part plan; one architect/scholar has recently stated that "between roughly 1760 and 1815 the vast majority of the major agrarian manor houses built in Tidewater Maryland and Virginia were five-part houses."[11] Some well-known examples include Kennersley (c. 1790) in Queen Anne's County, Homewood (c. 1801) in what is now Baltimore City, Tudor Place (c. 1815) in Georgetown, Washington, D.C., the Teackle Mansion (1801) in Somerset County, and Wye House (c. 1785) in Talbot County. Sion Hill's three part plan suggests but does not complete the massing of those larger houses. The sloping roofs of Sion Hill's wings effectively terminate the dwelling but do so in a somewhat gentler manner than the five-part houses' customary end pavilions. A few contemporary three-part houses are known to have been built in Maryland, the best-known may be Bachelor's Hope in St. Mary's

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[11] Warren J. Cox, "Four Men, the Four Books, and the Five-Part House," in Building by the Book, II, p. 118.

See Continuation Sheet No. 8.7

County (it also has sloping-roofed wings; National Register; dated to "between 1753 and 1790").[12]

The facade treatment of Sion Hill also merits some attention. Its use of keystoned stone window lintels as a means of (among other things) achieving a lively contrast with the dark red brick would have desireable in the late 18th century. Among surviving houses, this motif seems more popular in town than in the country and some area townhouses comparable to Sion Hill in this regard include River House (c. 1753) in Chestertown, the Powel House (1765) in Philadelphia, the Neal House (c. 1800) in Easton, and Dumbarton House (begun c. 1800) and some houses in "Cox's Row" (c. 1815, 3327-3339 Prospect Street) in Georgetown, Washington, D.C. The Teackle Mansion is a good extant example of this use of contrasting materials in a semi-country house; it has been called a "magnificent" house, critics taking pains to point out that "the reeded cornice, keystone lintels over the windows...add to the elegant

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12 Mark Edwards and Pamela James (eds.), Inventory of Historic Sites in Calvert County, Charles County, and St. Mary's County, (Annapolis: The Maryland Historical Trust, 1980), pp. 114-115.

See Continuation Sheet No. 8.8

appearance of the house."[13] Interestingly, the political/social sites of the two houses (Teackle and Sion Hill) are similar, one being on the edge of a county seat, the other overlooking a city in contention to be the national capital. One might call them suburban.

And perhaps the best context in which to place Sion Hill is as a federal era suburban villa. Evident in several cities (one thinks of villas that formerly lined the Schuylkill and of Gore Place outside Boston), the phenomenon of a town ringed with suburban villas certainly characterized Baltimore c. 1800. For example, the 1801 Warner and Hanna map of the city shows dozens of elegant villas surrounding the growing town; each is often on its own hillock; many are set off by formal gardens. One of these, labeled "C. Garts" and placed in the southwest corner of the map, is a three-part villa.

That massing brings up an important point: not only was what Ireland and Denison were doing at Sion Hill (the "Hill" part of the

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[13] Edward C. Papenfuse et al. (eds.), MARYLAND: A New Guide to the Old Line State, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 189.

See Continuation Sheet No. 8.9

name becomes important) near Havre de Grace similar in spirit to what the Howards and the Carrolls and other prominent Baltimoreans were simultaneously doing, the buildings themselves invite comparison. Actual, physical "comparison" is difficult since documentation is sketchy for most of the Baltimore villas, but one source does yield some insights. The famous Finlay suite of Baltimore painted furniture, made c. 1800-1810 and now at the Baltimore Museum of Art, uses images of several prominent Baltimore structures (generally houses) as decorations. Of them, some closely resemble Sion Hill. Among these, Rose Hill (dated 1798; five bays, 2 1/2 stories, brick with stone--or at least contrasting--keystoned lintels, attic pediment, modillion cornice but no wings), Willow Brook (three parts with what appear to be single-slope-roofed wings, pedimented attic gable but no accented axis and no lintels), and Woodville (five bays, 2 1/2 stories, brick with keystoned lintels, pedimented attic gable) may be the most similar to the Harford County house. In addition, St. Paul's Charity School (dated c. 1800) has some ties as well: it is brick with a pedimented attic gable and although it lacks lintels it does have a beltcourse; it is further related in that both it and Sion Hill have exteriors marked by a strong central axis defined by three-part motifs such as modified Palladian windows. Some of the larger houses shown on the furniture share some design features

See Continuation Sheet No. 8.10

with Sion Hill (Bolton, c. 1800, for instance, is brick with an attic gable and keystoned windows) but in general are more ambitious than the Havre de Grace villa. (It is sadly ironic to observe that by 1869 the once very grand and elaborate Mount Clare had apparently been reduced to three parts, based on its appearnace on the 1869 Sachse map of Baltimore in the lobby of the Maryland Historical Society.) Unfortuantely, except for Mount Clare none of above-cited Baltimore villas exisits.

A similar phenomenon was taking place at the same time around the new "Capital City" of Washington: extant examples include Tudor Place (c. 1815), Dumbarton House, Evermay (1801), and Prospect House (c. 1788) in Georgetown, the Octagon House (c. 1800 in Washington) and Riversdale (c. 1801 in Prince George's County).

All this is not to suggest that Sion Hill influenced or was influenced by the Baltimore or Washington villas; it is merely to point out that they seem to be products of the same ethos. They were all elegant villas built on the edges of growing cities; in the case of Willow Brook et al., on the edge of a booming port city; in the case of Sion Hill, on the edge of what was hoped would become the national capital; in the case of Tudor Place et al., on the edge of what was the national capital.

See Continuation Sheet No. 8.11

Moreover, Tudor Place, Mount Clare, and Sion Hill are all elegant villas which enjoy extensive views. And there may be some precedent for it: in describing the site of his Villa Rotonda, Palladio went into lengthy detail in his Four Books to point out that the Rotonda is a "country-house upon a hill, less than a quarter mile distant from the city" with a "site [which] is as pleasant and as delightful as can be found; because it is upon a small hill...and is watered on one side by the Bacchiglione...and on the other it is encompassed with most pleasant risings, which look like a very great theater...it enjoys from every part most beautiful views, some of which are limited, some more extended, and others that terminate with the horizon."

It is unlikely that Ireland or Denison or the Rodgerses actually used I Quattro Libri at Sion Hill (their thorough Estate Inventories don't list a copy) but it is certain that Palladian ideals were "in the air" among the wealthy of the Chesapeake region at the time, ideals which caused sophisticated people like Ireland here or the Peters (at Tudor Place) or the Carrolls (at Mount Clare) to abandon the practice common in rural areas of placing a farmhouse below the crest of a hill (where it would be sheltered from winds) and to follow Palladio ("it seems not improper to say something concerning the situation") who argued that the ideal site

See Continuation Sheet No. 12

for a villa was "upon elevated and cheerful places, where the air is, by the continual blowing of the wind, moved." (In fact Palladio actually argued against sheltering houses "in valleys...because edifices in valleys are hid, and are deprived of seeing at a distance, and...are without dignity and grandeur.")

Further, at Sion Hill the views from the house to that important body of water, the Chesapeake, seem linked to the history of the family most connected with the house, the Rodgerses; John Rodgers in the War of 1812 won one of his greatest victories on the Chesapeake--it was the defence of Baltimore from the British and the entire family has been called collectively "the most noted of American naval families" as will be discussed below.

To return to Denison: he was also assessed, in 1798, for several outbuildings including a "brick dwelling 1 1/2 stories, 33 by 23, no inside work" (which is probably the present tenant house) as well as a "carriage house, 18 x 16, wood" a "Necessary and Poultry House" and a "wood corn house, 22 x 9". Three tenant dwellings (no dimensions) and four tenants are listed. In all in 1798, Sion Hill with its 1820 acres, buildings, and 12 slaves was appraised at $7,756.50.

See Continuation Sheet No. 8.13

Denison died in 1799. Although his Estate Inventory contains a thorough appraisal, it was not done on a room by room basis making it is impossible to compare the present house with what Denison was living in. It is clear, however, that he was living in grand style for the Inventory lists the sort of furniture (several pairs of gilt looking glasses, gallons of imported wines, and dozens of mahagony and walnut pieces) one associates with upper class life at the time. Further, there is enough archival material to suggest what a flourishing merchant Denison was. His adminstrator listed various debts due the estate and these reveal far-flung enterprises (although of an indefinite nature): one man in Tennessee owed Denison $1411.99; a note "endorsed by Talbot of Connecticut and [unreadable] of N. York" was worth $1516; a note payable in Savannah was worth $86.69 and "other papers to collect in Georgia" were worth $474; the estate actually received $894 from one George Howell of Boston and "on account of goods sent from Knoxville to Natchez the exact amount of which cannnot be ascertained but it appears to be about $15,000." These and other similar entries totalled $29,510.71.[14]

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14 Material in the Orphans' Court of Harford County, Bel Air.

See Continuation Sheet No. 8.14

It is certainly likely that Sion Hill, even though it was in an "unfinished state" in 1798, would have been nearing its present completed state when Gideon Denison's daughter, Minerva (1774-1877), married John Rodgers (1772-1839) in the north parlor of the house on October 21, 1806. That event marks the beginning of the house's period of military significance. Minerva would inherit Sion Hill, and the Rodgerses made it their home throughout the years when John was earning himself the nickname "Father of the American Navy."

John Rodgers was a son of the Colonel John Rodgers who operated Rodger's Tavern (National Register), ran the important ferryline across the Susquehanna between Havre de Grace and Perryville, and, according to the Dictionary of American Biography, was the "founder of the most noted of American naval families"[15] --a significant value judgement for the normally cautious DAB. (Several of the naval John Rodgers's siblings also wed well: one sister, Maria Ann, married noted attorney William Pinkney and another, Mary, married Howes Goldsborough.)

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15 DAB, p. 75.

See Continuation Sheet No. 8.15

The only complete history of Harford County succinctly observes that "among the sons of Harford...there are none due greater honor than the members of the Rodgers family"[16] and the honors begin in earnest with Commodore John Rodgers. John was educated at home; "through his reading of books about the sea [he] received an impress that determined his career"[17] He entered the infant U.S. Navy in 1798 and was made a First Lieutenant on the frigate Constellation; in 1799 he was promoted to the rank of Captain, "the first lieutenant in the navy under the Constitution to be advanced to this rank"[18] and placed in chage of the sloop Maryland cruising first in the West Indies and then in the Mediterranean.

In 1805, the year before he married Minerva Denison, he was placed in command of the entire American squadron in the Mediterranean; during the wars with the Barbary Pirates from 1802-06, Rodgers wrecked havoc on the enemy, destroying ships and in general "playing a part exceeded in importance by that of no other naval officer...his conduct was cordially approved of by the secretary of

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16 Wright, Harford, p. 416.

17 DAB, p. 76.

18 DAB, p. 76.

See Continuation Sheet No. 8.16

the navy and the president and he was hailed and toasted as a popular hero."[19] He also "forced Tripoli to sign a treaty to end slavery of Christians" in 1805.[20] For his many and varied accomplishments Rodgers was made Commodore (then the highest rank in the navy) and was placed in command of the naval flagship President. In July 1807 he was made commander of the "New York Flotilla and naval station...the most important office at the disposal of the naval department."[21]

By 1812 he was Chief Commander of the entire American fleet the "ranking officer in active service";[22] after war broke out, in 1812-'13 he fought (and won) several engagements with the British navy in the Carribean and in the North Sea where he raided the coast of Scotland. Scholars have determined that of all the American naval officers at the time, "he understood best the

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19 DAB, p. 76.

20 Who Was Who Historical Volume 1607-1896, (Chicago: A.N. Marquis, Co., 1943), p. 451.

21 DAB, p. 76.

22 DAB, p. 76.

See Continuation Sheet No. 8.17

principles of naval strategy."[23] After the British burned Washington and moved on Baltimore in 1813, Rodgers "saved Baltimore from attack by obstructing the channel, sinking vessels for that purpose."[24]

Rodgers retired from active service in 1815 and returned to Sion Hill, although he did serve as President of the Board of Navy Commissioners from 1815 until 1825; that body "ranked next to the members of the cabinet in the administrative hierarchy of Washington."[25] He died of cholera in 1838. (Rodgers was not only a war hero, he was punctilious in the extreme in his business life; in his Last Will and Testament he left his "beloved wife Minerva, all and Singular the Estate real, personal, and mixed of which I may die possessed" but took the trouble to remind her to pay his debts including one "due to Mr. Bennett of Georgetown of 15c" as well as three "small debts" to three grocers and "a small sum due [unreadable], apothocary."[26])

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23 DAB, p. 77.

24 Wright, Harford, p. 417.

25 DAB, p. 77.

26 Harford County Will WSR9/281.

See Continuation Sheet No. 8.18

In 1841 Minerva Rodgers gave 1800 acres and Sion Hill to a son, Robert Smith Rodgers,[27] and moved to Washington, D.C., where she lived in a house on Lafayette Square. While in the District, Louisa Rodgers, one of Minerva's and John's daughters, met and married Montgomery C. Meigs, future Quartermaster General of the Union Army in the Civil War and builder of such well-known Washington landmarks as the Pension Building; it is from this marriage that the present owner of Sion Hill is descended.

Minerva Rodgers lived on until 1877; in her Will--she identifies herself in that document as "the widow of the late Commodore John Rodgers"-- she left $20,000 cash bequests to each of several children ("that being the price of the house in LaFayette Square") and then set up a complicated Trust for the benefit of her children and grandchildren, with her son Commodore John Rodgers and son-in-law "General M.C. Meigs of the U.S. Army" to manage it. Excluded as a beneficiary of the Trust was "my son Robert, [he] having received the Gift of the Farm in Maryland called Sion Hill."[28]

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27 Deed HDG35/225.

28 Will WSR9/283.

See Continuation Sheet No. 8.19

Robert Smith Rodgers was born (1809) and died (1891) at Sion Hill. He chose to serve his country in the army; after earning his degree in engineering at the University of Pennsylvania "from 1830 to 1841 he served as an assistant civil engineer in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. Enlisting as a private in the United States Army at the beginning of the Civil War, he was soon promoted to the rank of Colonel and was engaged chiefly in the battles of the Shenandoah Valley."[29]

But the navy maintained its formidable presence at Sion Hill: in 1841 (the year he received Sion Hill and the year he retired from the surveying business) Robert Rodgers married Sarah Perry, daughter of Commander Matthew C. Perry (1794-1858) thereby creating a most impressive naval union. Interestingly, as a youth of 16--long before he was chosen in 1852 to "open" Japan, "the most important diplomatic mission ever entrusted to an American naval officer[30] -- Matthew Perry had served under Commodore John Rodgers during the wars with the Barbary pirates on the President; Perry was much influenced by his commanding officer, for "John Rodgers

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29 Wright, Harford, p. 418.

30 DAB, Vol VII, p. 488.

See Continuation Sheet No. 8.20

[was] a bluff disciplinarian who stamped many of his qualities upon the young subaltern."[31]

Connections between America's two premier naval families continued when Ann Maria Perry, sister of Matthew and Oliver Hazard, married George Washington Rodgers (1787-1832), a younger brother of Commodore John. The family's nautical contributions continued in that cadet branch, too, for G.W. Rodgers fought in the Barbary wars and in the War of 1812; "Congress recognized his services by voting him a silver medal and his native state rewarded him by giving him a sword."[32] George Washington Rodgers and Ann Maria Perry Rodgers had a son, Christopher, who was Superintendent of the Naval Academy from 1877-78 and then served as commander in chief of the Pacific squadron from 1878-80. "Several [of their sons] reached the highest naval rank."[33] An astonishing quantity of Perry memorabilia (prints and furniture from Japan as well as uniforms, a dispatch box, portraits, etc.) still fills Sion Hill.

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31 DAB VII, p. 487.
32 DAB, p. 73.
33 DAB, p. 74.

See Continuation Sheet No. 8.21

If Robert S. Rodgers was an agriculturalist and--inexplicably--an army man, his brother, Commodore John Rodgers, II, (1812-1882) continued the Rodgerses' naval traditions. Born at Sion Hill, he entered the Naval Academy in 1828 (after a year at the University of Virginia), was graduated and saw duty in the Mediterranean and in the Seminole War; promoted to Lieutenant, from 1842-1860 he "was in charge of vessels on surveying expeditions in the Mediterranean, North Pacific, and Arctic Ocean." In 1852 "he succeeded Commander Cadwalader Ringgold as commander of the North Pacific Exploring and Surveying Expedition", sailing into the Arctic Ocean "where he explored unknown regions and obtained information that corrected the Admiralty's charts."[34]

He started his service in the Civil War with the rank of Commander, but Lincoln had him promoted to rank of Commodore, citing the "zeal, bravery, and good conduct" so characteristic of the family. Serving under Admiral duPont, John Rodgers, II, was honored by being allowed to "hoist the first American flag on the rebellious soil of South Carolina." After the war, he was Commandant first at the Boston Navy Yard (1866-'69) and at the Mare Island Navy Yard (1873-'77) in California. In the interim, he was sent to the Pacific in 1871 to attempt to negotiate a treaty with Korea. (He

34 DAB, p. 78.

See Continuation Sheet No. 22

was unsuccessful.) Rodgers was president of the Naval Examining and Retiring boards, 1872-73; commandant of the Mare Island navy yard, 1873-77; superintendent of the Naval Observatory, 1877-82; and chairman of the Light-house Board, 1878-82. He secured for the observatory its present site and made certain its reconstruction on more ample lines. In the last years of his life his eminence led to his selection as president of the United States Naval Institute, of the Transit of Venus Commission, of the First Naval Advisory Board, from which dates the new navy, and of the Jeannette Relief Board.[35] At his death he was "the senior Rear Admiral on the active list."[36]

John Rodgers, II, contributed much to the navy and so, too, did his nephew, Robert S. and Sarah Perry Rodgers' son, John Augustus Rodgers. Born at Sion Hill in 1848, he entered the Naval Academy in 1863, eventually seeing duty in "European, Asiatic, and home waters."[37] During the Spanish-American War, he was executive officer of the U.S.S. Indiana, being advanced to the rank of Rear Admiral "for eminent conduct in battle."[38] In 1904 Admiral Rodgers was among the few navymen with vision enough to push for use of wireless telegraphy: he chaired and eventually convinced a

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35 DAB, p. 78.

36 Wright, Harford, p. 418.

37 Wright, Harford, p. 419.

38 Wright, Harford, p. 419.

See Continuation Sheet No. 8.23

committee to adopt that invention. In 1910 he retired from active duty to teach at Harvard and at the Institute of Naval Technology. He died at Sion Hill in 1933 and was buried in Arlington National Cemetary.

Admiral Rodgers married Elizabeth Chambers and they had three sons. Alexander, following his father's role, was an explorer. (Unfortunately he was lost and presumably died in the Yukon.) Robert was an architect who designed a pump house and a garage for his parents. (He died a bachelor.) There was also Commander John Rodgers (1881-1926). By a quirk, he was born in Washington, D.C., not at Sion Hill and the compilers of the Dictionary of American Biography were quick to note this oddity and to point out that "the Rodgers' home was at Havre de Grace, Maryland."[39] Educated at Lawrenceville and at the Naval Academy (from which he was graduated in 1903), the young Rodgers saw action "during the World War...in the submarine service and on North Sea mine barrage duty."[40] Commander Rodgers was just as interested in new technology as his father Admiral Rodgers had been: the senior Rodgers advocated use

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39 DAB, p. 79.

40 DAB, p. 79.

See Continuation Sheet No. 8.24

of the telegraph; the younger Rodgers pioneered naval aviation. He was just the second American naval officer to be licensed as an aviator and from 1922 until 1925 he was "commander of the Naval Air Station, Pearl Harbor, Hawaii".[41] In 1925, while he and four other men were flying back to Hawaii after a trip to San Francisco, their plane crashed in the Pacific 400 miles short of their goal. After floating at sea for several days Rodgers was rescued and was then given a desk job as Chief of the Bureau of Naval Aeronautics, "in recognition of his sterling qualities as an aviator and his ability as a seaman and navigator."[42] But this did not suit his personality and he resigned in 1926 to resume flying and experimenting. That August, he was placed in command of a "new scouting seaplane squadron created for experimental purposes at San Diego."[43] After 11 days in San Diego, Rodgers was piloting a plane to Philadelphia, when it crashed in the Delaware River and killed him.

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41 DAB, p. 79.
42 DAB, p. 79.
43 DAB, p. 79.

See Continuation Sheet No. 8.25

Commander Rodgers had no children, thus 1933, the year his father, Admiral Rodgers, died, might serve to mark the end of Sion Hill's period of significance if for no other reason than that future owners have not borne the Rodgers surname--although these owners are all descendents of Commodore John Rodgers, I, and have all continued the naval traditions of their forebears.

These owners, moreover, have been always aware of how important the spirit of the first John Rodgers is to Sion Hill, and have kept the house and farm going almost as a memorial to him. For instance, the Last Will and Testament of Elizabeth Chambers Rodgers (the flying Rodgers's mother and Admiral Rodgers's widow), probated in 1944 takes a good deal of trouble to explain how she chose to "dispose of my estate known as Sion Hill...inherited by me from my late husband." Continuing, "I intend to make such disposition as, in my opinion, will most fully assure the indefinite continuance of the premises in the possession and control of a descendant of John Rodgers." To this end, she left Sion Hill to her nephew, John Meigs; he, in turn, passed the property to its present owner, Montgomery Meigs Green, in 1946.[44] Somewhat miraculously, these

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44 Deed GCB298/235.

See Continuation Sheet No. 8.26

later owners have been able to fulfil Elizabeth Chambers Rodgers's wishes and Sion Hill--mansion and outbuildings, gardens and Bay vistas--remains nearly unchanged since John and Minerva Rodgerses' day, an intact reminder of the 140 years when it was the seat of "the most noted of American naval families."

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

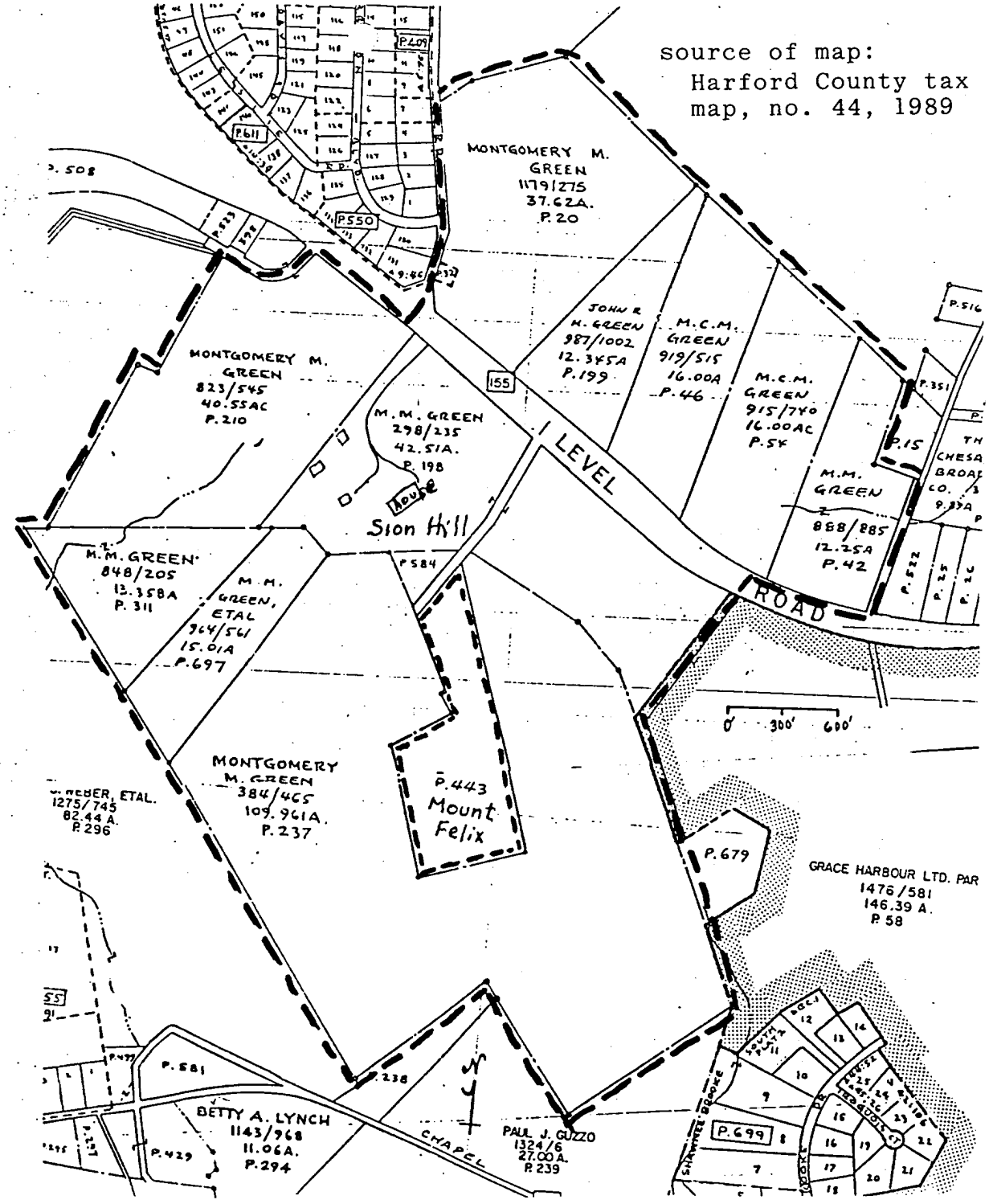
National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Sion Hill
Harford County
Maryland

HA-525

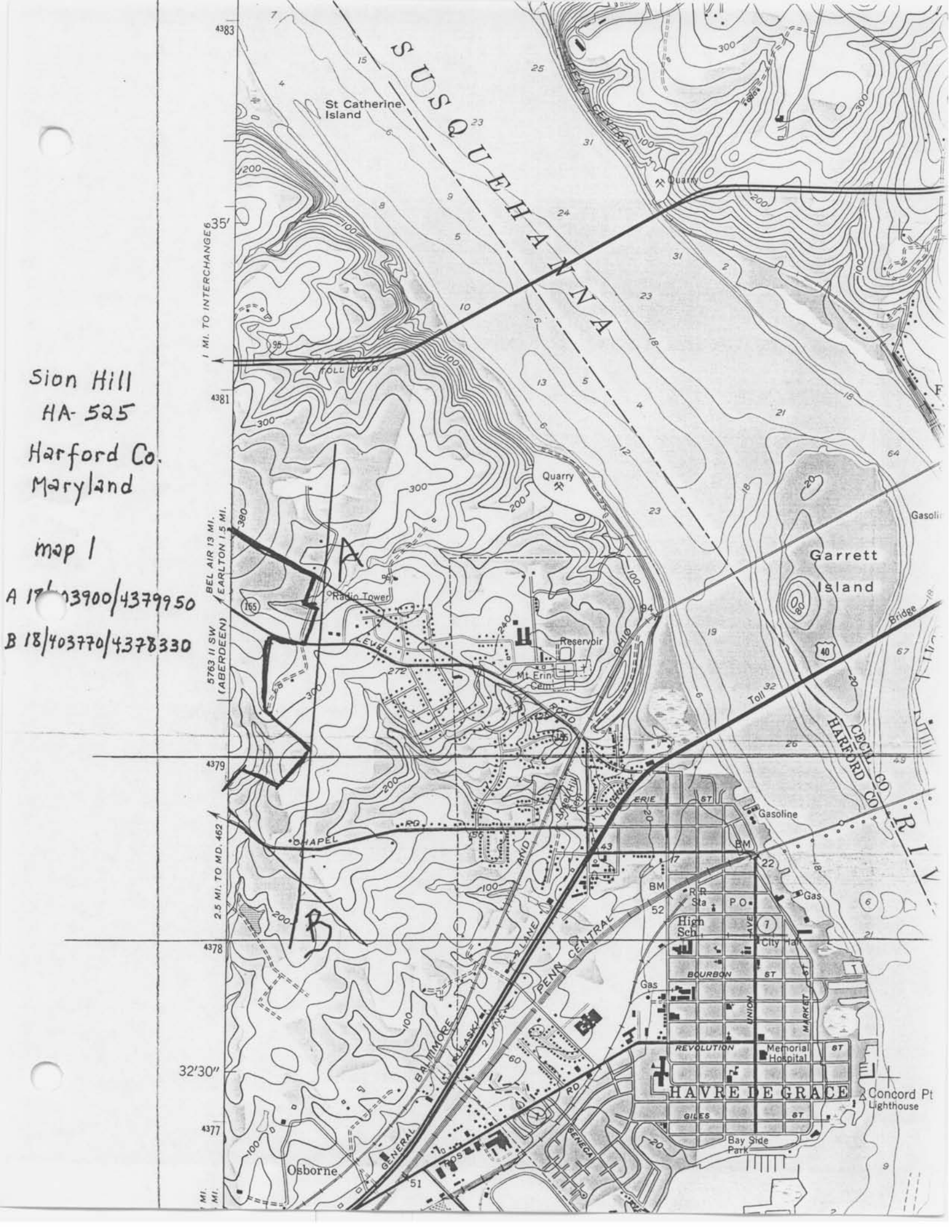
Section number 10 **Page** 10.1

The property consists of the parcels encircled by the broken line but excluding the Mount Felix property, parcel 443.



BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION:

The 315 acres included in this nomination constitutes all the land which has descended in family ownership with the house. It represents the full extent of the land directly associated with the resource during the periods and areas of significance. Although the present-day tax assessment maps for Harford County illustrate the property as being divided into multiple parcels, the property is visually one unit with the complex of resources standing on only parcel number 198. The remaining parcels are undeveloped with standing structures but are a part of the grounds and setting addressed in the significance section. Physically surrounded by the Sion Hill property but intentionally and expressly excluded from the nomination is the property called Mount Felix, parcel number 443 on the boundary map. The history of Mount Felix is separate and different from that of Sion Hill. Mount Felix was developed in the mid-nineteenth century on land acquired from the Rodgers family but not by the Rodgers family. No resources associated with Sion Hill are located on the Mount Felix property. As Mount Felix is distinctly separate historically from Sion Hill and physically concentrated in a clearly defined and physically non-intrusive area, the decision was made to exclude the property entirely rather than include it and mark it as non-contributing.



Sion Hill
HA-525
Harford Co.
Maryland

map 1

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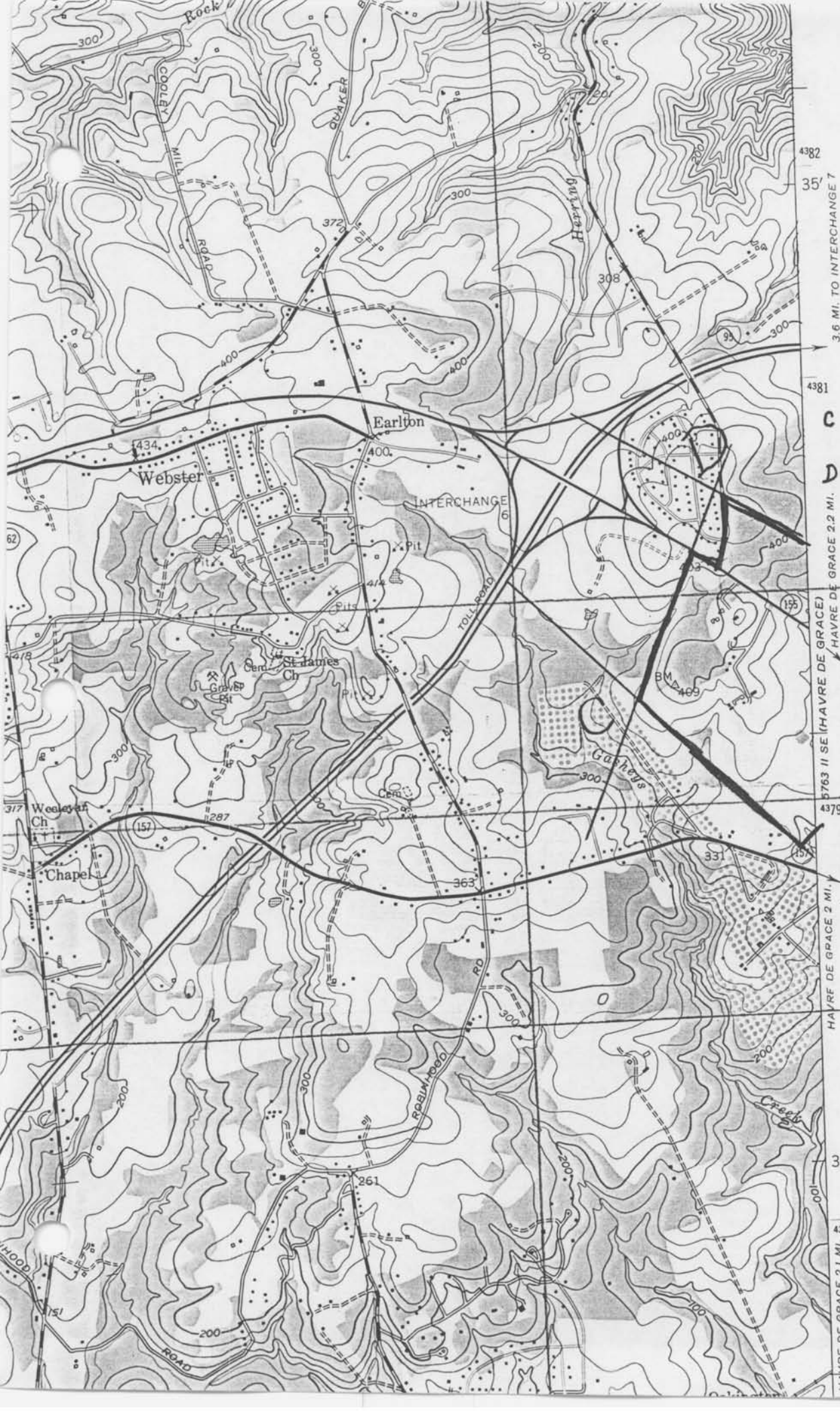
B 18/403770/4378330



Sion Hill
HA-525
Harford Co.
Maryland

map 2

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