NPS Form 10-900
(Rev. 10-90)

OMB No. 1024-0018

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 for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Airy Hill

other names/site number K-94

2. Location

street & number 7909 Airy Hill Road not for publication n/a
city or town Chestertown vicinity x
state Maryland code MD county Kent code 024 zip code 21620

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this x 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 x meets ____ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ___ nationally ___ statewide x locally. (___ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

_____ 11-8-96
Signature of certifying official Date

_____
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ____ meets ____ does not meet the National Register criteria. (___ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

_____
Signature of commenting or other official Date

_____
State or Federal agency and bureau

4. 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 Keeper Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property (Check as many boxes as apply)

__x__ private
___ public-local
___ public-State
___ public-Federal

Category of Property (Check only one box)

__x__ building(s)
___ district
___ site
___ structure
___ object

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing	
2	3	buildings
1	_____	sites
_____	_____	structures
_____	_____	objects
3	3	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

Name of related multiple property listing n/a

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat:	Sub:
DOMESTIC	single dwelling
DOMESTIC	secondary structure
FUNERARY	cemetery

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat:	Sub:
DOMESTIC	single dwelling

7. Description

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)
EARLY REPUBLIC/Federal

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)
foundation BRICK
roof WOOD
walls BRICK
other WOOD

Narrative Description (Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria (Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

____ A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.

____ B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.

_x_ C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.

____ D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations (Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

____ A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.

____ B removed from its original location.

____ C a birthplace or a grave.

____ D a cemetery.

____ E a reconstructed building, object,or structure.

____ F a commemorative property.

____ G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions)
ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance ca. 1790-ca. 1804

Significant Dates _____

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above)
n/a

Cultural Affiliation n/a

Architect/Builder unknown

Narrative Statement of Significance (Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

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 # _____
___ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary Location of Additional Data
___ State Historic Preservation Office
___ Other State agency
___ Federal agency
___ Local government
___ University
___ Other
Name of repository: _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 128.34 acres
USGS quadrangle Chestertown, MD
UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
A	18	406020	4338780	C	18	405230	4338120
B	18	406010	4338320	D	18	405120	4338510
E	18	405340	4338900				

___ See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Michael O. Bourne

organization Maryland Historical Trust date May 1996

street & number 100 Community Place, 3rd floor telephone (410) 514-7600

city or town Crownsville state MD zip code 21032-2023

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional items (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name Mr. & Mrs. James J. Berna

street & number 7909 Airy Hill Rd. telephone _____

city or town Chestertown state MD zip code 21620

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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DESCRIPTION SUMMARY:

The house at Airy Hill is a two-section dwelling consisting of a 1½-story frame wing and a two-story Federal-style brick house. Evidence indicates that the old kitchen at the east end of the frame wing was originally a small, freestanding house, and that the Federal brick section was built in the early 1790s, together with a middle section that now connects the two. The side- passage, double-pile plan house retains a high degree of integrity, and exemplifies the Federal style in its Flemish bond brickwork with rusticated jack arches, molded water table, and belt courses; pedeimented frontispiece; and fine interior decorative detailing including an elegant stair, early mantels and paneling, crossetted door architraves, and enriched cornice, chair rail, and baseboard moldings. Also on the property is a brick smokehouse, probably contemporaneous with the house, and an early nineteenth century cemetery. A shed and a guest house of recent date do not contribute to the significance of the resource.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The house is built on an east-west axis, with the principal façade facing north. A tree-lined driveway leads up to the house from Airy Hill Road, called Quaker Neck Road in the 18th century.

THE FRAME WING

The present kitchen at the east end of the frame wing apparently was originally a small freestanding house. It has exposed hand-hewn ceiling beams and appears to have been divided into two rooms with a stairway in the center ascending to two bedchambers above. The fireplace originally had a tall, square opening with a wood lintel and iron bar in the throat of the chimney for hanging cooking pots. This house may predate the Rowleses' acquisition of the property or--as is less likely--may have been built by the Rowleses as an initial dwelling before they built the main house. When the brick house was constructed, the earlier house was extended by the addition of a "keeping room" (now a small living room) connecting it to the brick wing, with two small bedchambers and a narrow hallway above. This addition continued the form of the original house, and the entire north façade of the expanded frame house became a symmetrical five-bay building with a central door and three dormers, creating the impression that the entire structure had been built at one time. Closer examination, however, has revealed that this is not the case. The manner in which the new keeping room and its upper bedrooms are constructed (without a framed west wall but adjoining the plastered brick wall of the Georgian house into which their fireplaces are keyed) indicates this section is contemporary with the Federal section.

When the frame wing was expanded and remodeled, the original center stair and

partition in the kitchen were removed, and a new stair was installed in the northeast corner of the kitchen next to the fireplace. The new center door on the north side opened into the old section, but into a new, plaster-ceilinged vestibule created with board partitions. Meant to keep visitors from entering directly into the kitchen, the vestibule had doors to both kitchen and keeping room. The bedchamber above the kitchen was accessible only from the kitchen stair, and the two new chambers above the keeping room were accessible only from the keeping-room stair.

THE MAIN HOUSE

The main house is a large (35′ x 32′), two-story brick structure built onto the remodeled frame wing. Direct dating evidence is not available, but land records indicate that the property nearly tripled in value between 1790 and 1804, strongly suggesting that a major improvement was made during this period. Architectural evidence is consistent with this date: the Federal style flourished in Maryland during the final decades of the 18th century and early years of the 19th century, and Airy Hill is the finest example of this style in rural Kent County. It is comparable in the refinement of its design and workmanship to River House (1784-87), located in the early port of Chestertown. Like that town dwelling, Airy Hill features a well-executed modillion cornice and rusticated jack arches over the windows on the north and west façades, which are laid in Flemish bond above and below the ovolo-molded water table and have a three-brick-deep string course between floors. The last has been painted white since the 19th century, possibly in an attempt to imitate the effect of the stone string courses at River House, perhaps beginning when both were owned by the Thomases. The south and east façades are laid in common bond. The entry architrave on the north façade is exceptionally fine.

The interior plan of the brick house has a large side hall with two parlors on the west. Interior detailing is finely executed. The delicate stair, ascending the east wall to a landing and then to a balcony above, is situated so the second flight divides the stair hall visually into front and back hall. The balustrade consists of turned-column newels with a handrail that ascends up and over each intermediate newel. An engaged half-rail with half-newels on the wall mirrors the balustrade. A delicate double-ogee fret design decorates the step ends. Beneath the landing is a short closet door. The wall plane created by the spandrel and closet door continues in a straight line to the rear exterior wall, enclosing headroom for the cellar stairs below, as well as for a full-size closet, now a lavatory.

Of the parlors, the north room featured a higher level of finish, with a built-in cabinet on the left side of the fireplace and a window on the right. Later, in the late 19th or early 20th century, the mantel and cabinet were

removed. A plain mantel from the third quarter of the 19th century was replaced in 1980 with an appropriate antique mantel from Somerset County. As in many Federal houses, the north-wall windows had panels beneath them, which were recessed into the depth of the brick wall. (In the 1980s radiators were installed in the recesses, with a vented wall constructed from floor to window sills in the same plane as the main wall. The south wall of the south parlor was similarly altered, while the recesses beneath the west windows there were used for bookshelves.) The chair rail, with its gouge-and-drill-hole design of flutes and swags, forms the base on which the window trim rests. Paneled shutters can be folded into the window jambs. A boldly molded baseboard and a dentil cornice similar to those on the first story of River House complete the room. On the cheek of the chimney next to the west window is a small door to a cabinet fitted with vertical divisions and cubby holes similar to the interior of a desk, suggesting the possible use of this space as an office.

Connected to the north parlor by a wide opening with double doors is the south parlor, a room of nearly equal size. The opening has a different molding profile, one used any time after 1800, suggesting that the Rowleses or a subsequent owner later created or enlarged the opening. However, the crossettes of the architrave echo those employed on the parlor side of each parlor's opening to the stair hall. Neither parlor's windows have crossettes.

The south parlor originally had a fretwork cornice, which was removed about 1915 to the Wickes House in Chestertown, where it was installed in the river-side front parlor, formerly a study but now a dining room. According to a local story, Judge Joseph A. Wickes removed the original cornice and placed it in his town house in Chestertown, but this seems to have been done by his widow after his death. An oval fretwork design on the chair rail employed a different technique from that used on the north room chair rail. The workmanship is similar to that on the cornice at Rose Hill, an installation that took place about the same time.

The hallway stair ascends to the second floor in a way that leaves space on both north and south for a small room, each lighted by one large window. The bedrooms above the parlors are slightly smaller than the rooms below and have closets flanking the fireplaces. The outer closets of these two rooms have full-size windows. The north room has a full wall of paneling with mantel shelf supported on fluted plinths with gouge-work frieze. The design of the shelf is similar to the one used in the Chestertown Room at Winterthur, removed from River House. The fireplace has a cast-iron fireback with a stove plate bearing the date 1769. The south chamber has a plain mantel with crossetted trim and a paneled filler, flanked by two closet doors.

The stair ascends more steeply to the third floor, where a balcony overlooks three sides of the stairwell. A vertical-board wall separates that space from an

unfinished attic. The plaster ceiling of the stair hall is very gently arched, a feature not found elsewhere in the county.

Although Airy Hill has been well-maintained throughout most of its history, it fell into serious disrepair after Judge Wickes' death in 1915, when the property was rented for a time to tenant farmers. Sketches made by Elizabeth Stirling when she and her husband purchased the property in 1934 show that the roof of the bedchamber above the kitchen had collapsed. The kitchen itself had been converted into a blacksmith shop, as confirmed by the late Mr. Wilbur Ross Hubbard, owner of Widehall in Chestertown, whose fox-hunting stables were located a half-mile up the road. Mr. Hubbard told the present owners that he personally brought horses to be shod at Airy Hill during the 1920s. The ceiling beams near the fireplace where the forge presumably was located are partially blackened. It was the Stirlings who began the renaissance of Airy Hill, with reconstruction of the kitchen, rebuilding of the south porch, and installation of interior plumbing and electricity.

The work of restoration was carried on by the Rusks, who owned Airy Hill from 1951 to 1974, and was completed by the Bernas, the present owners. The Rusks installed central heating, repaired the north façade of the frame section, replaced a termite-eaten floor in the north parlor of the brick house, and installed a quite plain cornice in the south parlor. The Rusks also opened a doorway in the room above the kitchen, originally sealed off from the other bedrooms. Alice Rusk planted the beautiful boxwoods that still grace the front lawn, and Harrell Rusk and his son dug the circular pond with its island center near the entrance on Airy Hill Road.

The Bernas have carried on the restoration work, repairing cracked plaster walls and ceilings, restoring floors, and repainting the interior with traditional colors. Changes to make the place more livable include conversion of one of the small upper bedrooms in the frame wing into a bathroom and removal of the original corridor partition above the keeping room to enlarge the bedroom. The south porch was widened slightly and enclosed to form a sunroom. One of the dirt-floor cellars was converted into a bedroom. Despite these alterations, Airy Hill has changed remarkably little over the years and retains all its essential architectural features.

Opposite the frame section on the south side is a brick smokehouse, probably contemporaneous to the house; noteworthy features include a beam with hooks for hanging meat, and perforated brickwork at each end of the structure which allowed the smoke to escape. A cemetery dating from the early nineteenth century is located northwest of the house. Non-contributing resources include a shed located southwest of the house, a barn which was moved to the property to replace one that burned in the 1950s, and a log guest house of recent construction.

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SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

Airy Hill is significant under Criterion C for its architecture. Constructed at the turn of the nineteenth century, during the peak of the Federal style in Maryland, Airy Hill is the finest example of this style in rural Kent County. It is comparable in the refinement of its design and workmanship to River House (1784-87), a National Historic Landmark located in the early port of Chestertown. On the exterior, Airy Hill features such Federal-period details as a well-executed modillion cornice and rusticated jack arches over the windows on the north and west façades, which are laid in Flemish bond above and below the ovolo-molded water table and have a three-brick-deep string course between floors. The entry architrave on the north façade is exceptionally fine. The interior is laid out in a side-passage, double-pile plan, and features an elegant stair, early mantels and paneling, crossetted door architraves, and enriched cornice, chair rail, and baseboard moldings. The house retains a high degree of integrity and has benefited from a careful and accurate restoration.

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HISTORIC CONTEXT

MARYLAND COMPREHENSIVE HISTORIC PRESERVATION PLAN DATA

Geographic Organization: Eastern Shore

Chronological/Developmental Period(s):

Rural Agrarian Intensification 1680-1815 A.D.

Prehistoric/Historic Period Theme(s):

Architecture/Landscape Architecture/Community Planning

Resource Type:

Category: Building(s)

Historic Environment: Rural

Historic Function(s) and Use(s):

Domestic/single dwelling
Domestic/secondary structure
Funerary/cemetery

Known Design Source: none

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RESOURCE HISTORY AND HISTORIC CONTEXT

In the 17th century, the Eastern Shore of Maryland was densely forested, as is known from the reports of Captain John Smith, who carried out the first English explorations of the Chesapeake Bay area early in that century. The Indian tribes who inhabited the area lived mainly by hunting and fishing in the numerous rivers and streams that flowed westward into the bay. Game was abundant, and bears, wolves, and deer roamed the wilderness.

A group of Virginians led by William Clayborne (or Claiborne) established the first English settlement on the Shore on Kent Island in 1630. Two years later, King Charles I granted Maryland as a proprietary colony to Cecil Calvert, Lord Baltimore, who appointed his brother Leonard first governor of the colony. Leonard arrived with his entourage at St. Clement's Island, on the Bay's western shore, in March 1634 to begin colonization of what became the Province of Maryland.

The Calverts and their successors employed a land-grant system to attract settlers and promote development of the province. Under this system sizable tracts of land were conveyed by "patent" to persons of means who had the resources to develop them (and who no doubt were well connected politically). A map of the land grants made in upper Quaker Neck in the vicinity of Airy Hill during the 17th and 18th centuries is on the facing page; early roads are also shown. Few towns and roads marked the landscape in those days, and travel was generally by water.

The conversion of forests into agricultural land was a slow and arduous process requiring considerable labor, and in some cases these grants were made with the stipulation that the new landowner bring a certain number of people with him to accelerate development. One example is Godlington Manor, a tract of land patented to Thomas Godlington in 1659 on condition that he transport 20 people to America and settle them on the property within four years. (He failed to do so and the property eventually passed to an official of Kent County in 1686.) The first houses on these tracts were generally small, simple structures, often incorporated later into a grander house, as happened at both Godlington Manor and Airy Hill.

Tobacco became the most important crop on the Eastern Shore as the woodlands were turned into farms; grain (predominantly wheat and corn) was originally second in importance but succeeded tobacco as the major crop by the mid-18th century. Tobacco (sometimes referred to as "sot-weed") was exported in large quantities to England and served as the first currency of Maryland until the English pound finally replaced it towards the middle of the 18th century. The sailing ships that carried tobacco and grain from Maryland to England, the West Indies, and other ports returned with cloth, glassware, utensils, furniture, and other

manufactured goods needed by the colonists, as well as slaves.

By the early 18th century, trade had expanded sufficiently to require new ports, and in 1706 "An Act for Advancement of Trade and Erecting Ports and Towns in the Province of Maryland" was enacted. It designated certain locations where "all ships and vessels trading into the Province shall Unlade and put on Shore, all Negroes, Wares, Goods, merchandizes and commodities whatsoever." One of the places cited for the laying out of a town and port was "in Chester River." The town, designated the new county seat for Kent County, was first called New Town, later changed to Chestertown.

As the 18th century progressed, Chestertown became a thriving seaport and center of commerce. The town lay on a principal route from Virginia to Philadelphia, New York, and New England. Travelers from the south crossed the Chesapeake Bay by ferry from the western shore to what is now Rock Hall, about 12 miles southwest of Chestertown, and continued their journey mostly on horseback or by carriage to their northern destinations, staying overnight at a string of inns and taverns along the way. George Washington made numerous journeys along this route between 1756 and 1793, including, according to his own diary, an overnight stay on March 23, 1791, at Worrell's Tavern in Chestertown on his way back to Mount Vernon from Philadelphia. The tavern no longer exists, but a sign at the intersection of Cannon and Queen streets marks the site. He also appears to have stayed in 1773 at the Hynson-Ringgold House on Water Street. Part of the route between Rock Hall and Chestertown may have followed what is now Airy Hill Road. If that is so, George Washington may have caught a glimpse of Airy Hill from the window of his carriage as it rolled by, possibly when the main house was under construction.

As Chestertown grew, the merchants who prospered built mansions along the river; most impressive among these are Hynson-Ringgold House (c. 1744, c. 1768), Widehall (c. 1770), and River House (1784-87). The old Customs House, built about 1746, still survives, with its underground vault for the storage of goods. In the countryside, landowners also prospered and built beautiful homes, one of which is Airy Hill. A small group of families connected by marriage and property transactions played a prominent role in the life of Chestertown and Kent County. These include the Wilmers, Wickeses, Tilghmans, Piners, Ringgolds, Lethrburys, and Thomases, among others. A number of these names appear and reappear throughout the history of Airy Hill.

During the American Revolution, Chestertown played an important role as a terminal and transshipment point for both the southern and northern divisions of the Continental Army. By this time regular boat service connected the town with Baltimore, and troops and supplies enroute to Baltimore and Philadelphia passed through the port. By August 1776, a barrack in Chestertown housed 1,000 soldiers.

The surrounding countryside supplied food and clothing to the army. Shoe manufacturing developed in the town, as well as the manufacture and repair of arms.

The Revolution had a downside for Chestertown, however. Many of the supplies shipped to the army apparently were never paid for, and the suppliers who were paid probably found the money "not worth a continental." The quartering of troops in the town also represented a serious financial burden. In short, the resources of the area were overtaxed during the war, and even salt became scarce. Financial distress followed for many local residents.

An important and uplifting milestone for Chestertown after the war was the establishment in 1782 of Washington College, which grew out of the Kent County Free School, with the active support of George Washington, who agreed to serve as a member of the college's first Board of Visitors and Governors. A number of former owners of Airy Hill have been connected with the college, as either students or officials, as noted in the biographical sketches that follow.

During the 19th century, Chestertown declined as a trading and commercial center. Ocean-going ships became larger and no longer found the Chester River navigable. Trade shifted to the western shore, where Baltimore offered better port facilities, as well as railway connections to the developing west and to the north. The decline has had its benefits. The great old houses have not been torn down to make room for development, and the area has retained its rural charm. Washington College continues to flourish as a vibrant educational and cultural center on the Eastern Shore. Historically minded individuals have moved in to restore and preserve the old houses and farms, keeping alive for future generations the memory of Maryland's colonial past.

Resource History

The property associated with Airy Hill today comprises about 128 acres, consisting of portions of three adjoining early land grants, namely Sanford (250 acres, patented 1678); Kemp's Beginning (320 acres, 1688), the largest portion; and Chigwell (200 acres, 1695). In the ensuing years those three land grants were divided and subdivided numerous times. The present tract of Airy Hill was assembled by Dr. George W. Thomas between 1827 and 1841. The name Airy Hill first appears in an 1827 advertisement announcing the sale of the property at public auction, the auction at which Dr. Thomas purchased the property.

The house at Airy Hill was probably completed in the last decade of the 18th century. In 1790, John Rowles purchased the portions of Sanford and Kemp's Beginning that are now part of Airy Hill for £481.1.3; after Rowles' death, the same property was sold in 1804 for three times that amount. This steep increase

in value suggests that a major improvement was completed during Rowles' ownership, and the fine Federal-style design and workmanship of the brick section of the house is consistent with the 1790s period.

Little personal information on John Rowles and his wife Anna Maria is available. John was listed in the 1783 tax assessment as an "able bodied male" and was accordingly taxed 15 shillings. Shortly thereafter, he married Anna Maria Frisby, daughter of James and Rebecca Frisby of Violet Farm, a tract with a 1762 dwelling on the upper reaches of the West Fork of Langford Creek near St. Paul's Church.

Anna Maria appears to have been a woman of considerable means. The house her father and mother built in 1762 was large and well-appointed. By 1783 James Frisby owned 1,674 acres of farmland in Kent County, and by the time of his death, even more. The 1790 census reveals that he owned 30 slaves; only nine heads of households in Kent County owned more. Rebecca Frisby was a sister of Thomas Ringgold, the most successful attorney and merchant in mid-18th century Chestertown, whose town house was what is now known as the Customs House. Such was the environment into which Anna Maria was born and grew up, the fourth child of James Frisby and his second wife, Rebecca.

Given her status in life and the family's resources, it is probable that Anna Maria received a substantial dowry from her father when she married John Rowles. It also appears that she was the beneficiary of her uncle James Ringgold in 1767. John Rowles' ownership of 14 slaves, according to the 1790 census, also indicates a degree of prosperity. In any event, when John and Anna Maria Rowles purchased the Airy Hill property in 1790, they were secure enough financially to construct a fine, beautifully designed Federal dwelling.

John Rowles appointed Thomas Anderson trustee of Airy Hill for his wife's benefit in 1790, suggesting it was his wife's money that bought the farm. When he wrote his will in 1793, leaving the farm to Anna Maria, his neighbors Joseph Garnett, Jr., and Joseph Garnett, III, witnessed the document. The will was probated in 1802, and two years later Anna Maria and her daughter, Caroline, who were then residing in Baltimore, sold the Airy Hill property to Samuel Ringgold, a distant cousin and a scion of one of the best- known early families of Kent County.

The first owner of Airy Hill after the Rowleses was Samuel Ringgold, who purchased the property in 1804 and held it until 1813. In 1813 Airy Hill was purchased by Jonathan Harris, who sold it a year later to James Houston, who owned the property until his death in 1817, when the property was sold to Thomas Worrell.

Airy Hill Farm in its present form was assembled by George W. Thomas (1781-1842), who purchased the property at auction in 1827 from the estate of Thomas Worrell. It was in the advertisement for that sale that the name Airy Hill first appears. The property at that time comprised 177 acres, including the 167 acres of Kemp's Beginning and Sanford purchased by John Rowles in 1790 from Joseph Garnett, Jr. Dr. Thomas subsequently added several additional parcels of land, bringing his holdings to 234 acres by 1841. He was a member of Emmanuel Church in Chestertown, and served in 1823 he was a Justice of the Orphan's Court of Kent County. The title "Doctor" that often precedes his name may indicate that he was a physician as well.

In 1804 or 1805 George married Mary Lethrbury, daughter of Peregrine Lethrbury, a leading citizen of Chestertown. After their marriage, George and Mary resided mainly at River House, one of Chestertown's most notable Federal-period dwellings, which had been owned by Mary's father, and which she inherited in 1802.

George Thomas died on March 4, 1842, "weak in health" as he noted in his will, and was buried at Airy Hill. In his will he bequeathed Airy Hill, then composed of about 241 acres, including the wood lots, to Mary.

At the time of her death in 1850 Mary Thomas was a person of considerable wealth. In addition to River House and Airy Hill, she owned a number of other properties in and around Chestertown, including a 590-acre farm at Worton. In her will, Mary Thomas left Airy Hill to Colonel Joseph Wickes, requesting that "the farm remain in the family forever as the family burying ground is there and must be kept up and attended to forever."

Colonel Joseph Wickes was born in Kent County in 1788, the son of Joseph and Mary Piner Wickes. He was a descendant of the Wickes family founded in Maryland by Major Joseph Wickes, who emigrated to America in 1650 when 30 years old. Major Wickes soon became a large landholder, a prominent public figure, and presiding judge of the Kent County Court.

Colonel Wickes attended Washington College in Chestertown and after graduation began the study of law in the office of James Houston, who purchased Airy Hill (from Jonathan Harris in 1814) and who later became his brother-in-law.

After his admission to the bar in 1810, Colonel Wickes began a successful practice in Chestertown. He served as deputy attorney general of Maryland for Kent and Cecil counties until about 1850, when he retired from legal practice. During the War of 1812 he fought in the battle of Caulk's Field (1814); he was subsequently commissioned colonel of a regiment of the state militia, a commission he held for many years. In 1821 he married Elizabeth Caroline Chambers.

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At the start of the Civil War, Colonel Wickes was active in the organization of a federally-sponsored militia for Kent County. The counties of Maryland, including Kent, had begun forming militia units in 1860 for protection against outside interference in their local affairs.

For many years Colonel Wickes was a communicant member of Emmanuel Episcopal Church in Chestertown. He was also one of the Visitors and Governors of Washington College, his alma mater. At his death in 1864, Col. Wickes willed Airy Hill to his son, Judge Joseph A. Wickes, who owned the property until his death in 1915.

Judge Wickes attended Washington College in Chestertown and then Princeton University, from which he graduated in 1845, at the age of 19, with honors in a class of 80. He studied medicine at the University of Maryland, receiving his degree in the spring of 1848. In the same year he married Anna Maria Tilghman. Under the persuasion of his father, he then studied law and was admitted to the bar in 1852. He entered into a successful legal practice in Cumberland, Maryland.

Judge Wickes' public life commenced very soon after his admission to the bar. In the summer of 1852 he was nominated by the Democratic party of Maryland to be one of the electors of the president and vice-president of the United States. In the summer of 1855, while he was absent from Kent County, the local Democratic party without his knowledge nominated him as a candidate for the Maryland House of Delegates. He was elected and became a member of the House Judiciary Committee. After the legislature adjourned, he returned to Cumberland, where his law practice continued to grow. The damp climate of Cumberland gradually undermined his health, however, and in 1858 he abandoned his practice and returned to Chestertown. Following a period of recuperation, he opened an office there and quickly developed an extensive practice. After the death of his first wife, he married Anne Rebecca Wickes, daughter of Colonel Simon Wickes, in November 1865. Their only son died in infancy, and Anne Rebecca died in 1889. In 1893, four years after the death of his second wife, Judge Wickes married the much-younger Gladys Robinson, daughter of Joseph T. Robinson.

As mentioned above, Judge Wickes enrolled as a lieutenant in the State Guard unit organized by his father under federal auspices in May 1861. Only a few months earlier, in February, he had been a leading participant in a meeting held in the Chestertown Court House organized to select delegates to a convention proposed to be held in Baltimore to seek an "honorable compromise" that would both preserve the Union and protect the rights of the slave-holding states. Judge Wickes served as chairman of the committee that drew up 10 resolutions to be submitted to the Baltimore convention.

In 1866 Judge Wickes was appointed a delegate to the post-Civil War Peace

Convention in Philadelphia, and in 1867 served as a member of the Maryland Constitutional Convention, that assembled in Annapolis in May to revise the Constitution of 1864. Following the convention he was elected for a 15-year term to the office of Circuit Judge of the Second Judicial Circuit, comprising Cecil, Kent, Queen Anne's, Caroline, and Talbot counties. In the fall of 1882, before the expiration of his term, he was elected to a second term of 15 years.

Throughout his career Judge Wickes maintained his ties with Washington College, serving for many years as president of the Board of Governors and Visitors. The 1877 property atlas for the Fourth District of Kent County shows Judge Wickes owning Piner's Grove in Quaker Neck and the Wickes House at High and Water streets in Chestertown, as well as Airy Hill.

Judge Wickes died in 1915, stipulating that his estate be administered by his relative Lewin Wickes and that Airy Hill be rented to "suitable tenants for a grain rent and one half of the other products." He also stipulated that the property not be sold until his son Joseph, product of his third marriage, reached age 25.

Airy Hill was occupied by tenants from 1915 to 1934. Sometime during this period, the frame wing of the house fell into serious disrepair. What is now the kitchen was converted into a blacksmith shop. When Mathiot and Elizabeth Stirling purchased the property in 1934, the roof of the room above the kitchen had collapsed. The Stirlings initiated the restoration of the house, which otherwise might have deteriorated beyond repair.

A native of Baltimore County, Mathiot Stirling was a salesman for W. E. Robinson & Co., a canning and brokerage firm. His wife, Elizabeth (nee Christian), was raised on a farm in Fayetteville, North Carolina; a talented artist, she was best known for her many meticulously detailed dolls representing fairy-tale characters and historical figures.

The Stirlings sold Airy Hill in 1948 to Hugh and Mary Miller. No information has been found about the Millers, except that Hugh was a professional photographer and Mary a painter. They owned Airy Hill for only four years and sold the farm to William Harrell and Alice Lee Sullivan Rusk in 1951.

Harrell Rusk, a cousin of Dean Rusk, President John F. Kennedy's secretary of state, was a civil engineer associated with Raymond Concrete Pipe Company (subsequently Raymond International), a large New York-based construction firm specializing in foundation work. His 40-year career with the firm culminated in the position of vice-president in charge of overseas construction. The frequent travel involved in this position impelled the Rusks to seek a change in lifestyle, and in 1950 they began looking for a working farm on the Eastern Shore of Maryland

or in the Tidewater area of Virginia. They finally selected Airy Hill, which they purchased in 1951 from the Millers.

On New Year's Day 1955 the barn at Airy Hill, filled with hay, caught fire and burned to the ground, apparently because hot ash from a fireplace had been dumped too near the building. An open shed (now used as a farm equipment shed) was constructed as a replacement.

Harrell Rusk retired in 1970 and settled at Airy Hill. The Rusks played active roles in various local organizations and Old St. Paul's Church, and continued the improvements to Airy Hill that the Stirlings had started. They also operated the farm, growing corn, soybeans, wheat, and rye, and, in one year, five acres of tomatoes from seed.

The present owners, James J. and Maria C. Boria Berna, purchased the property in 1974, and took up full-time residence at Airy Hill in 1981. Since that date, the Bernas have continued the program of restoration and improvements undertaken by the Stirlings and the Rusks. They removed a small cottage which had been added to the smokehouse sometime in the 1920s or '30s. The Bernas constructed a log guest house and two wildlife ponds. They also had an old barn moved to Airy Hill from a nearby farm, to replace the one that had burned down. Other restoration work has been described in Section 7. To preserve the rural agricultural setting of the property, the Bernas have sold the development rights to the State of Maryland, under the Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Act.

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MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Bourne, Michael O. and James J. Berna. A History of Airy Hill, Chestertown, Maryland (1688-1996). Chestertown, MD: by the authors, 1996.

Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties, Maryland Historical Trust, Crownsville, Maryland.

Kent County Land Records.

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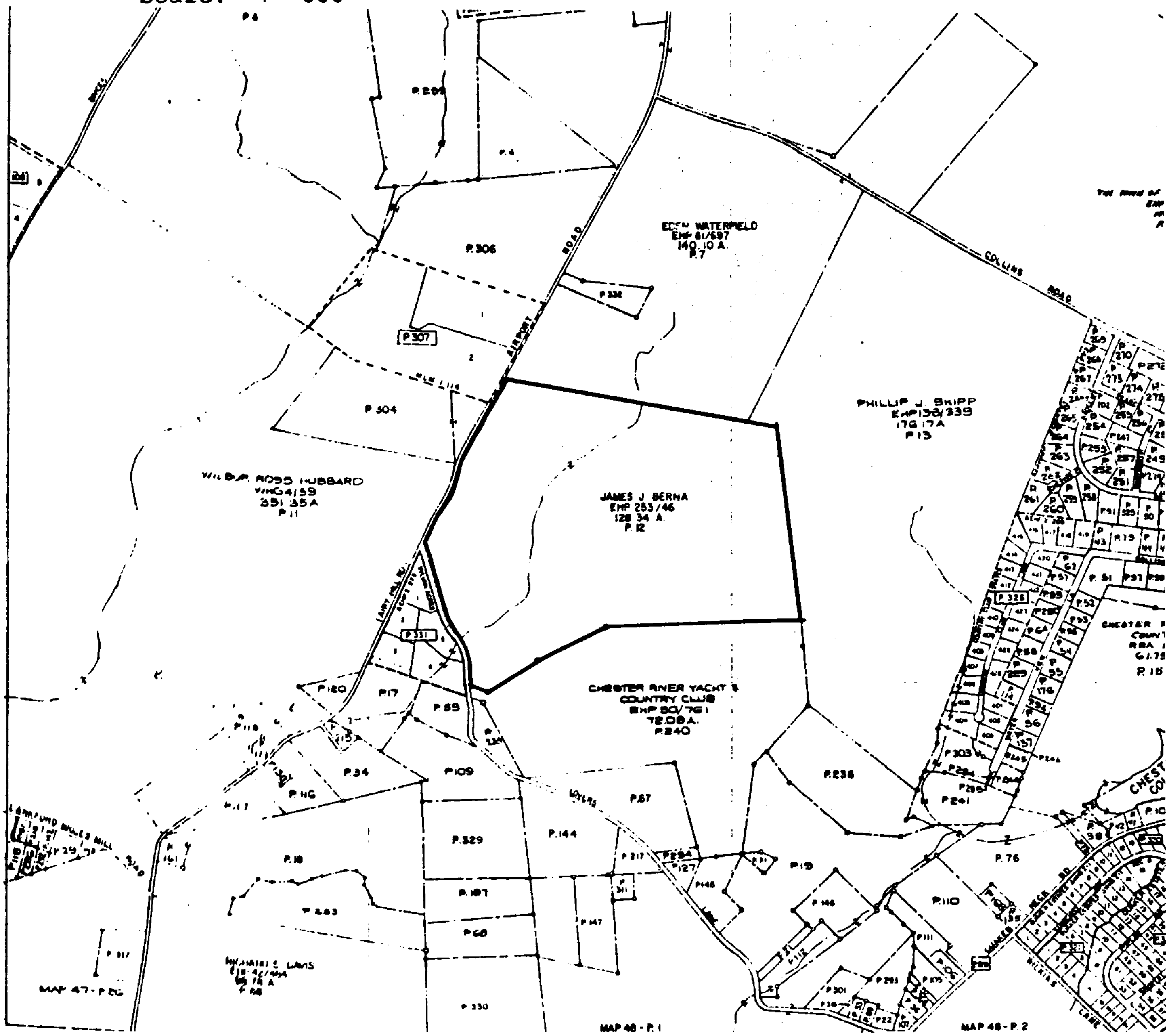
GEOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

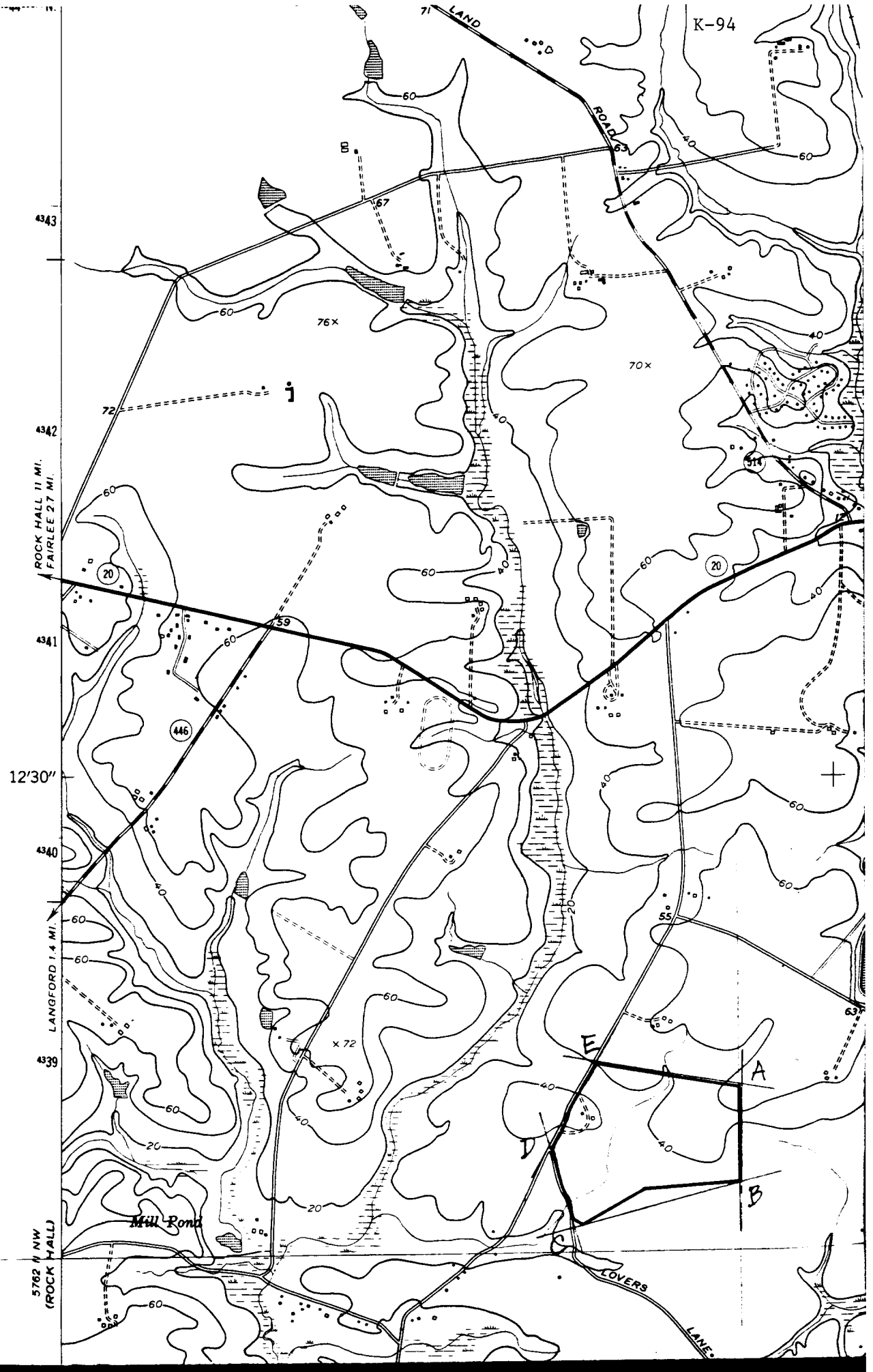
Verbal Boundary Description: The nominated property is shown on the accompanying map, and corresponds to parcel 12 indicated on Kent County Tax Map number 44.

Boundary Justification: The nominated property comprises the historic resource within the acreage with which it is has been associated since the second quarter of the 19th century. The agricultural fields surrounding the landscaped domestic yard have been placed under easement to ensure the preservation of the rural character of the setting.

National Register Boundaries

Source: Kent County Tax Map No. 44
Scale: 1"=600'





K-94
AIRY HILL
KENT COUNTY
MARYLAND

A: 18-406020-
4338780

B: 18-406010-
4338320

C: 18-405230-
4338120

D: 18-405120-
4338510

E: 18-405340-
4338900

K-94
AIRY HILL
KENT CO., MD
PETER E. KURTZE, 9/96
NEG AT MD SHPO
NORTH FACADE

#1 OF 8

[redacted]

K-94 Airy Hill c.1790

K-94
AIRY HILL
KENT CO., MD
PETER E. KURTZE, 9/96
NEG AT MD SHPO

VIEW FROM S.E.

2 OF 8

[redacted] TRUST
LIBRARY

K-94 Airy Hill c.1790

K-94
AIRY HILL
KENT CO., MD
PETER E. KURTZE, 9/96
NEG AT MD SHPO

STAIR

3 OF 8

K-94

AIRY HILL

KENT CO., MD

PETER E. KURTZE, 9/96

NEG AT MD SHPO

NORTH PARLOR, FACING WEST

#4 OF 8

K-94
AIRY HILL
KENT CO., MD
PETER E. KURTZE, 9/96
NEG AT MD SHPO
SOUTH PARLOR, FACING WEST
5 OF 8

K-94

AIRY HILL

KENT CO., MD

PETER E. KURTZE, 9/96

NEG AT MD SHPO

FRAME WING, WEST ROOM, FACING S.W.

#6 OF 8

K-94
AIRY HILL
KENT CO., MD
PETER E. KURTZE, 9/96
NEG AT MD SHPO

NORTH ROOM, 2ND FLOOR, FACING W.

9 OF 8

K-94
AIRY HILL
KENT CO., MD
PETER E. KURTZE, 9/96
NEG AT MD SHPO
SOUTH ROOM, 2ND FL., FACING W
#8 OF 8