

QA-553

Harvey Ruth Oyster Packing House
Grasonville vicinity

Constructed ca. 1937

Privately owned

SUMMARY DESCRIPTION

The Harvey Ruth Oyster Packing House is located immediately east of Kent Narrows and south of Maryland Route 18 in Queen Anne's County, Maryland. The Packing House stands on the south end of a peninsula that juts into Wells Cove and has a dock that extends into the water. The 1- and 2-story, masonry, U-shaped building was constructed beginning ca. 1937 and continuously altered. The Packing House closed in March 2003 and was badly damaged by Hurricane Isabel in September 2003.

SUMMARY STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Harvey Ruth constructed an Oyster Packing House in Kent Narrows in 1937. Although oyster harvests in the Chesapeake Bay began dropping during the 1890s, they remained sufficient to support a significant packing industry in Kent Narrows through the 1970s. The Harvey Ruth Oyster Packing House is significant as a rare surviving remnant of the once thriving oyster packing industry on Kent Island.

Maryland Historical Trust Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties Form

Inventory No. QA-553

1. Name of Property (indicate preferred name)

historic Harvey Ruth Oyster Packing House (preferred)

other B & S Fisheries Packing House

2. Location

street and number 200 Wells Cove Road __ not for publication

city, town Grasonville vicinity

county Queen Anne's

3. Owner of Property (give names and mailing addresses of all owners)

name Schulz Associates, LLLP

street and number P.O. Box 118 telephone (410) 827-8807

city, town Grasonville state MD zip code 21638

4. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Queen Anne's County Circuit Court liber SM 1148 folio 22

city, town Centreville tax map 57 tax parcel 337 tax ID number 05-015952

5. Primary Location of Additional Data

- Contributing Resource in National Register District
 Contributing Resource in Local Historic District
 Determined Eligible for the National Register/Maryland Register
 Determined Ineligible for the National Register/Maryland Register
 Recorded by HABS/HAER
 Historic Structure Report or Research Report at MHT
 Other: _____

6. Classification

Category	Ownership	Current Function	Resource Count
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	Contributing
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce/trade	Noncontributing
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> defense	<input type="checkbox"/> buildings
<input type="checkbox"/> site		<input type="checkbox"/> domestic	<input type="checkbox"/> sites
<input type="checkbox"/> object		<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> structures
		<input type="checkbox"/> funerary	<input type="checkbox"/> objects
		<input type="checkbox"/> government	<input type="checkbox"/> Total
		<input type="checkbox"/> health care	
		<input type="checkbox"/> industry	
		<input type="checkbox"/> landscape	
		<input type="checkbox"/> recreation/culture	
		<input type="checkbox"/> religion	
		<input type="checkbox"/> social	
		<input type="checkbox"/> transportation	
		<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	
		<input type="checkbox"/> unknown	
		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> vacant/not in use	
		<input type="checkbox"/> other:	
			Number of Contributing Resources previously listed in the Inventory
			0

7. Description

Inventory No. QA-553

Condition

excellent deteriorated
 good ruins
 fair altered

Prepare both a one paragraph summary and a comprehensive description of the resource and its various elements as it exists today.

SUMMARY DESCRIPTION

The Harvey Ruth Oyster Packing House is located immediately east of Kent Narrows and south of Maryland Route 18 in Queen Anne's County, Maryland. The Packing House stands on the south end of a peninsula that juts into Wells Cove and has a dock that extends into the water. The 1- and 2-story, masonry, U-shaped building was constructed beginning ca. 1937 and continuously altered. The Packing House closed in March 2003 and was badly damaged by Hurricane Isabel in September 2003.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The Harvey Ruth Oyster Packing House is located immediately east of Kent Narrows and south of Maryland Route 18 in Queen Anne's County, Maryland. The Packing House stands on the south end of a peninsula that juts into Wells Cove. A boat yard lies to the north, a paved parking area lies to southeast, and Prospect Bay lies to the southwest. The Packing House is in deteriorated condition. The Packing House closed in March 2003 and was badly damaged by Hurricane Isabel in September 2003.

The Packing House fronts directly onto Prospect Bay. An L-shaped wood dock extends from the west end of the building into the water. Shell heaps border the water to the west and south of the building. At least one other building stood north of the Packing House; it was destroyed by Hurricane Isabel. Debris litters the site.

The Harvey Ruth Oyster Packing House is a 1- and 2-story, masonry, U-shaped building that was constructed beginning ca. 1937 and continuously altered. The building is constructed of concrete block with a brick façade facing the road to the east. The compound gable roof is covered in standing-seam metal. Asbestos shingle covers the exposed gable ends. There are 6/6 and 1/1 double-hung wood windows on the east wing and steel double casement windows on the center and west wings.

The east wing is 2-stories tall. The first floor contains an office on the south, a large packing room in the center, and cold storage rooms on the north. The office has a tile floor, knotty pine paneled walls, and a plywood ceiling. The packing room has a concrete floor with a trough running east to west, concrete block walls, and a fiberglass panel ceiling. The packing room is outfitted with fluorescent lights and overhead water lines. A winder stair in the northeast corner of the office leads to the second floor. The second floor has a small bedroom and bathroom over the office. The rest of the space is unfinished.

The center wing is 1-story tall and contains two shucking rooms and a small utility room in the northeast corner. The shucking rooms have concrete floors with troughs running east to west, concrete block walls, and fiberglass panel ceilings. They are outfitted with fluorescent lights and overhead electric outlets for each shucking station. The shucking rooms still contain the metal frames of shucking tables. The rows of steel casement windows on the north and south elevations of the center wing and the row of openings in the wall dividing the two shucking rooms create a system of cross-ventilation. A short hall extends south from the center wing and has two restrooms on its west and a paymaster's booth on its east.

The west wing is 1-story tall and contains the shell stack room. The shell stack room has a sloped concrete floor, concrete block walls, and an unfinished ceiling. Used for storage of oysters prior to shucking, the shell stack room contains cold storage rooms and the remnants of sinks and skimming tables. The shell stack room opens into the loading room. The loading room has a sloped concrete floor, concrete block walls, and an unfinished ceiling. The loading room opens onto a shell heap and the L-shaped dock.

The Harvey Ruth Oyster Packing House closed in March 2003 and was badly damaged by Hurricane Isabel in September 2003. Attempts to mothball the building have failed, and vandals have removed most equipment. Still, the building retains its utilitarian, function-driven design, as exemplified by the sloped floors and the troughs for drainage, the concrete floors and walls and the stainless steel tables that could be hosed down at the end of each day, and the long, narrow rooms with overhead electric and water lines.

8. Significance

Inventory No. QA-553

Period	Areas of Significance	Check and justify below		
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> health/medicine	<input type="checkbox"/> performing arts
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> invention	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-1999	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment/ recreation	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 2000-	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> ethnic heritage	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/ settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> social history
	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> maritime history	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation		<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> other: _____

Specific dates ca. 1937 (opening), 2003 (closing)**Architect/Builder** unknown**Construction dates** ca. 1937

Evaluation for:

 National Register Maryland Register not evaluated

Prepare a one-paragraph summary statement of significance addressing applicable criteria, followed by a narrative discussion of the history of the resource and its context. (For compliance projects, complete evaluation on a DOE Form – see manual.)

SUMMARY STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Harvey Ruth constructed an Oyster Packing House in Kent Narrows in 1937. Although oyster harvests in the Chesapeake Bay began dropping during the 1890s, they remained sufficient to support a significant packing industry in Kent Narrows through the 1970s. The Harvey Ruth Oyster Packing House is significant as a rare surviving remnant of the once thriving oyster packing industry on Kent Island.

RESOURCE HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

Harvey Ruth constructed his Packing House in Kent Narrows ca. 1937 and enlarged it during the 1940s and 1950s. Ruth sold the Packing House and associated shanties (see QA-554) in 1963 to Jean Stelmach. Stelmach operated the Packing House as a branch of B&S Fisheries Inc. until closing in March 2003. Betty Schulz, niece of Harvey Ruth and owner of the neighboring Fisherman's Inn, bought the entire B&S Fisheries property in September 2003. The Packing House is currently vacant and suffered extensive damage during Hurricane Isabel.

In *Working the Water: The Commercial Fisheries of Maryland's Patuxent River*, Paula Johnson describes the oyster packing process as follows:

After donning aprons and gloves and grabbing buckets and knives, [the shuckers] started opening oysters, dropping the meats into separate buckets according to size: standards (smallest), selects (larger), and counts (largest). When a shucker's buckets were full, he or she carried them to the window separating the shucking and packing rooms. There another person they called the skimmer man dumped the shucked oysters into a skimmer, rinsed and drained them, "skimmed" them into another container and weighed them. The weight was duly recorded on a tally board in plain view of the shucker, who proceeded to rinse the buckets and return to the stall to repeat the process.

The skimmer man stored the oysters in a larger container, and when there were enough to process, he dumped them into one of the huge blow tanks, where the oysters were rinsed again and agitated with air. After about twelve minutes he dipped them from the tank into another skimmer, where they were drained and packed into consumer or storage cans. The cans of oysters were then wheeled into cold storage or loaded directly onto a truck for shipment.

Meanwhile, at the dock behind the building, watermen unloaded their oysters. A company employee kept the tally as each waterman shoveled his oysters into a bushel measure and hoisted it to another company worker, who emptied the contents into the receiving room [shell stack room]. Workers, "floor men," in the receiving room shoveled oysters into wire baskets placed inside wheelbarrows, then wheeled them into the shucking room and dumped them onto the tables. They also removed the empty

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Continuation Sheet

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shells that collected around the stalls, shoveling them into wheelbarrows, wheeling them outside, and dumping them onto the huge shell pile.¹

The Harvey Ruth Oyster Packing House illustrates the oyster packing process. The Packing House fronts directly onto the water and has a dock where watermen could unload their oysters. Directly east of the dock is the shell stack room, which leads to the shucking room. In the shucking room, workers stood along long, narrow tables. They stood on wood crates in order to keep their feet dry. Although shuckers originally split the oyster shells with hand-held blades, in the late 1970s they began using circular saws known as "choppers". Window openings between the center and east wings allowed the shucked oysters to be passed into the packing room.

Oyster packing houses in Maryland rose and fell based on oyster harvests in the Chesapeake. Once considered a subsistence food, oysters became a delicacy during the late 1700s. By the early-19th century, New England watermen had depleted their oyster beds and were venturing into the Chesapeake. In 1820, the Maryland General Assembly outlawed oyster harvesting by non-Maryland residents. Several enterprising New Englanders then opened oyster packing houses in Baltimore, enabling them to skirt the law. The canning process, introduced in Baltimore in 1826, and the opening of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad in 1830 opened distant western markets to oysters. As a result, oyster harvests climbed steadily through the mid-19th century, reaching about 3.5 million bushels in 1860. In 1865, the General Assembly passed a law permitting sailing craft to dredge in public waters between September 1 and June 1.² Oyster harvests spiked, reaching 9 million bushels by 1870. In 1877, Johns Hopkins University biologist William Brooks published a paper warning against depletion of oyster beds and appeared before the General Assembly to promote regulation of oyster harvests. His warnings were not heeded, however, and oyster harvests continued to climb, peaking at 15 million bushels in 1885. There were more than 300 oyster packing houses in Maryland at this time.³

During the 1890s, though, oyster harvests dropped dramatically and totaled less than 6 million bushels in 1900. Desperate watermen clashed with the State Oyster Police over poaching to the point that the state conservation commissioner commented "many weeks during the oyster season marked the departure from this life of as many as five or six men."⁴ Finally acknowledging the need for more regulation, the General Assembly passed a bill in 1900 to increase penalties for unmarketable oysters, increase inspections, forbid packing houses to purchase oysters at night (when pirates worked), and promote dumping of shells to increase spat.⁵ 1906 saw the establishment of the Board of Shellfish Commissioners, intended to lease and regulate private seed beds. Watermen, however, greatly resented any attempt to privatize the waters, and lobbied to have the private beds reopened after World War I. Harvests remained low, though, totaling less than 5 million bushels in 1920 and less than 3 million bushels in 1930. Although the Department of Conservation enacted an oyster tax to rebuild seed beds in 1922, Johns Hopkins President Isaiah Bowman declared in 1940 that watermen lost an

¹ Johnson, Paula J., ed. *Working the Water: The Commercial Fisheries of Maryland's Patuxent River*. pp. 35-37.

² Dredging, preferred method of New Englanders, had been outlawed in 1832. Chesapeake watermen traditionally harvested oysters using tongs.

³ Brugger, 219, 314, 322, 324, 326, 381, 786; conversation between Julie Darsie (Betty Bird & Associates) and Karen Oertel (Harris Seafood) on July 21, 2005.

⁴ Quoted in Brugger, 408.

⁵ Spat are oysters in the larval stage that have settled onto beds of existing shell.

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Continuation Sheet

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estimated \$30 million per year by refusing to cooperate with recultivation efforts. He also noted a dangerous shortage of shells and seed oysters.⁶ Oyster harvests have continued to drop, totaling approximately 2.2 million bushels in 1950, 1.9 in 1960, 2.2 in 1970, 2.1 in 1980, 0.4 in 1990, and 0.4 in 2000.

Despite the losses in harvest, as many as 21 oyster packing houses in Kent Narrows survived through the 1950s and 1960s, in part because their proximity to Route 50 and the Bay Bridge gave them a competitive edge when trucks became the primary means of transport. As many as 35 oyster packing houses survived in Maryland into the late 1970s when disease and sedimentation from waterfront development wiped out many remaining oyster beds. At present, Harris Seafood is the only packing house left on Kent Island and the only packing house in Maryland that operates year-round.⁷

The Harvey Ruth Oyster Packing House is significant for its association with oyster packing in Kent Narrows. Once mainstays of the Kent Island economy, oyster harvesting and packing have nearly disappeared. The Harvey Ruth Oyster Packing House, along with W. H. Harris Seafood, is one of few surviving remnants of the oyster industry.

⁶ Brugger, 408, 461, 462, 561, 786.

⁷ Shaum, Kent Narrows oyster shucking house closes; conversation between Julie Darsie (Betty Bird & Associates) and Karen Oertel (Harris Seafood) on July 21, 2005.

9. Major Bibliographical References

Inventory No. QA-553

- Brugger, Robert J. *Maryland, A Middle Temperament, 1634-1980*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988.
- Emory, Pat. 25 shanty dwellers evicted. *Bay Times*. January 27, 1987.
- Freedman, Janet. *Kent Island: The Land that Once Was Eden*. Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 2002.
- Johnson, Paula J., ed. *Working the Water: The Commercial Fisheries of Maryland's Patuxent River*. Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1988.
- Queen Anne's County Land Records: Liber SM 1148, folio 22; Liber CWC 3, folio 436.
- Shaum, Jack. Kent Narrows oyster shucking house closes. *The Star*. March 9, 2003.
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10. Geographical Data

Acreage of surveyed property	<u>0.77 acres</u>	
Acreage of historical setting	<u>unknown</u>	
Quadrangle name	<u>Queenstown</u>	Quadrangle scale: <u>1:24,000</u>

Verbal boundary description and justification

Parcel 337 on Queen Anne's County Tax Map 57 has two separate parts. The Harvey Ruth Oyster Packing House occupies the western part of this parcel. It is bounded on the north by the boat yard of Harris Yacht, on the southeast by a parking lot, and on the southwest by Wells Cove. This constitutes all land still associated with the property.

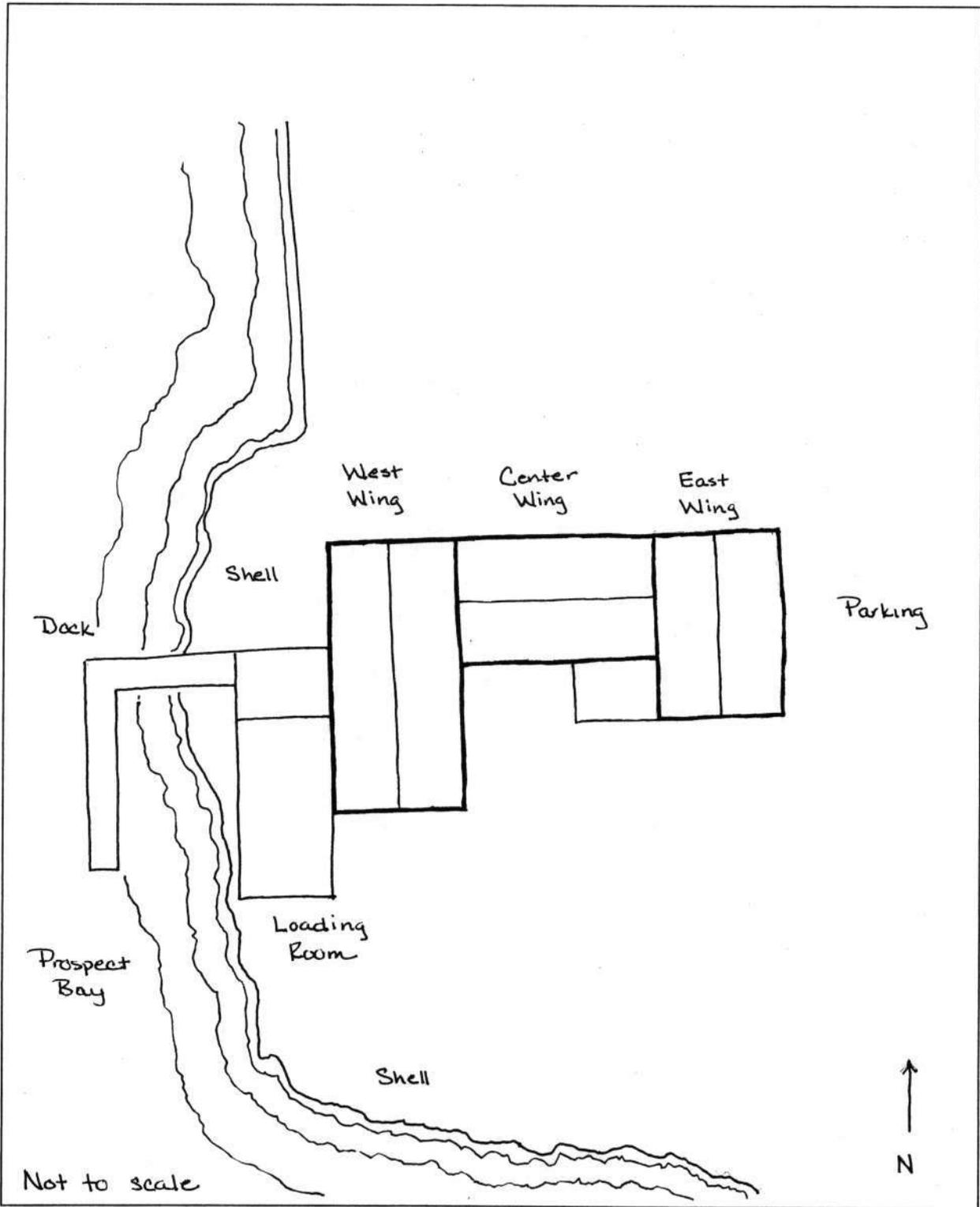
11. Form Prepared by

name/title	Julie Darsie		
organization	Betty Bird & Associates LLC	date	May 2005
street & number	2607 24 th St, NW, Suite 3	telephone	(202) 588-9033
city or town	Washington, D.C.	state	N/A

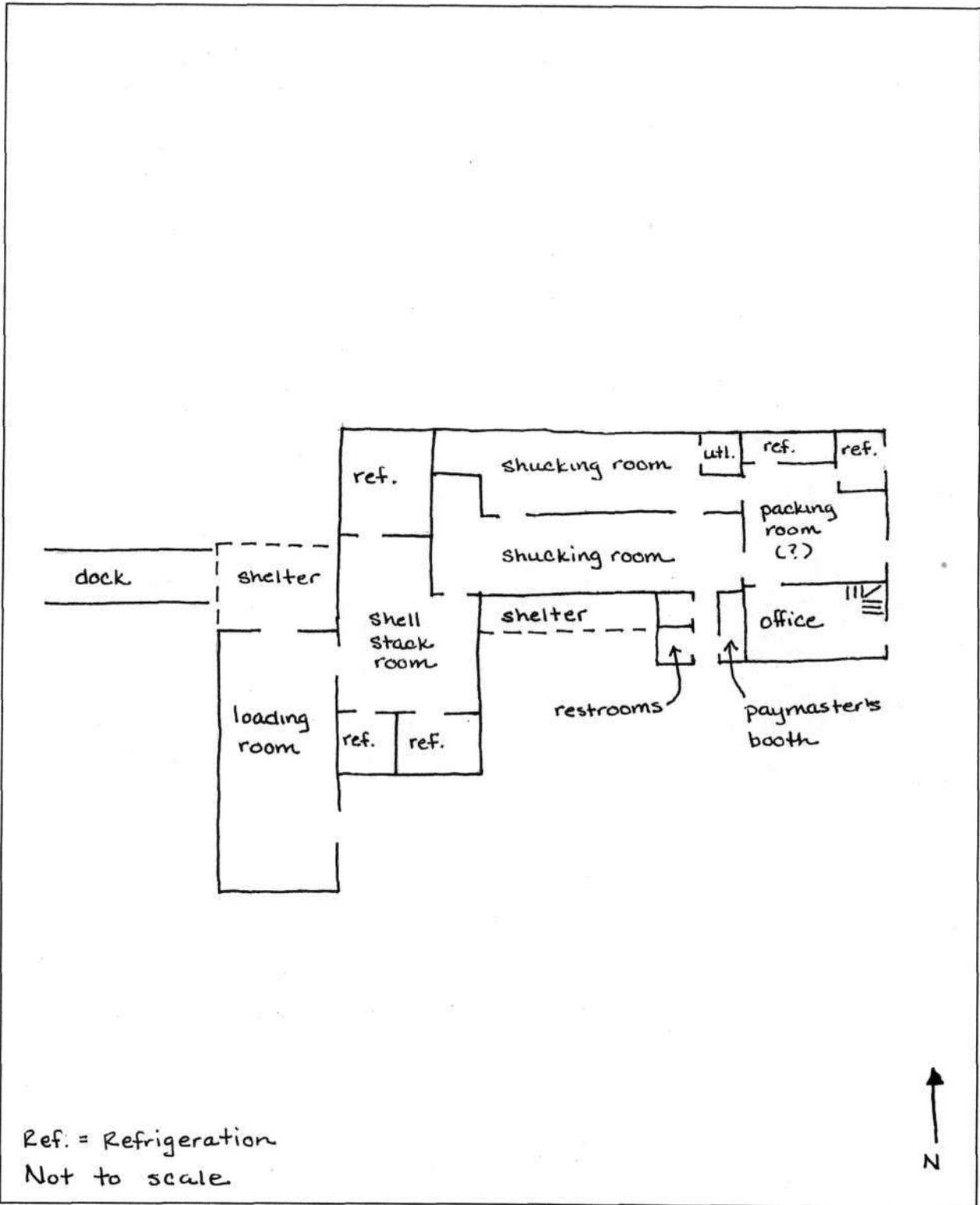
The Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties was officially created by an Act of the Maryland Legislature to be found in the Annotated Code of Maryland, Article 41, Section 181 KA, 1974 supplement.

The survey and inventory are being prepared for information and record purposes only and do not constitute any infringement of individual property rights.

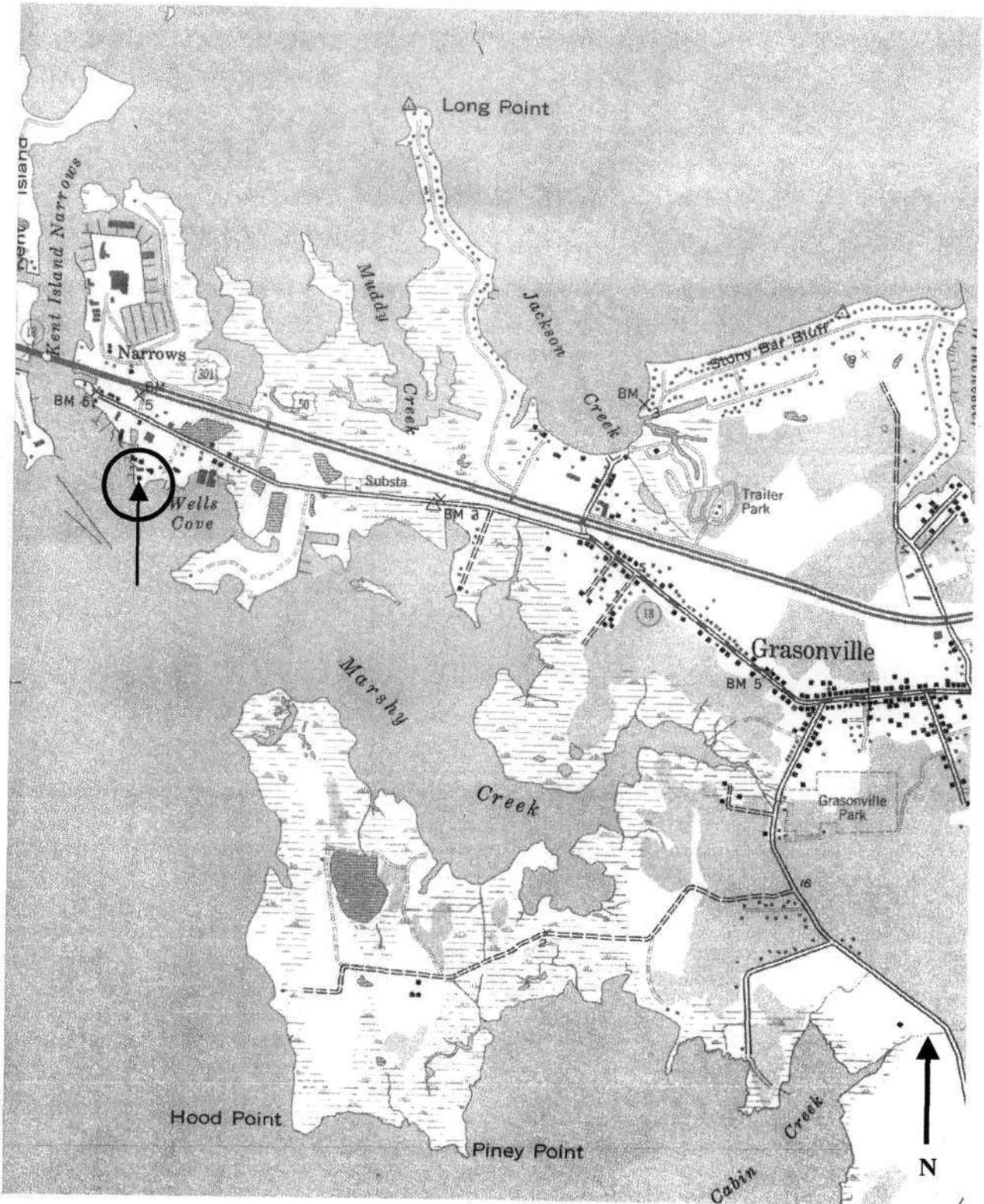
return to: Maryland Historical Trust
DHCD/DHCP
100 Community Place
Crownsville, MD 21032-2023
410-514-7600



Site Plan
QA-553
Harvey Ruth Oyster Packing House
Grasonville Vicinity, Queen Anne's County, Maryland



Floor Plan
QA-553
Harvey Ruth Oyster Packing House
 Grasonville Vicinity, Queen Anne's County, Maryland



QA-553
Harvey Ruth Oyster Packing House
 Grasonville vicinity, Queen Anne's County, Maryland
 Queenstown, MD Quadrangle (1:24,000)



GA-553

Harvey Ruth Oyster Packing House

Queen Anne's County, Maryland

Julie Darsie for Betty Bird & Associates

September 2005

MD SHPO

View from SE showing south elevation of packing house
lot 9



QA-553

Harvey Ruth Oyster Packing House

Queen Anne's County, Maryland

Julie Darsie for Betty Bird & Associates

September 2005

MD SHPO

South elevation of packing house from water.
Dock on left

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QA-553

Harvey Ruth Oyster Packing House

Queen Anne's County, Maryland

Juke Darsie for Betty Bird & Associates

September 2005

MD SHPO

North elevation of Packing House. Dock on right.

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GA-553

Harvey Ruth Oyster Packing House
Queen Anne's County, Maryland

Julie Darsie for Betty Bird & Associates

September 2005

MO 5170

Vistas from NE showing east and north elevations of
Packing House

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GA 553

Harvey Kull's Oyster Packing House

Queen Anne's County, Maryland

Julie Darsie for Betty Bird & Associates

0825 31 110 NNNN 5638

May 2005

MD SHPO

View to SE within office.

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QA-553

Harvey Ruth Oyster Packing House

Queen Anne's County, Maryland

Julie Darsie for Betty Bird & Associates

May 2005

< 022 31 109 HHHH-- 5638

MD SHPO

View to NW within front room (Packing Room?)

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QA-553

Harvey Ruth Cyster Packing House

Queen Annes County, Maryland

Julie Darsie for Betty Bird & Associates

May 2005

MD SHPO

View to west within south Shucking Room

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9295 - HHHHH 60+ 12 600< >



QA-553

Harvey Ruth Oyster Packing House

Queen Anne's County, Maryland

Julie Darsie for Betty Bird & Associates

May 2005

MD SITPO

View to east within north Shucking Room.

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9295 — HHHHHH 601 12 0101 >



QA-553

Harvey Ruth Oyster Packing House

Queen Anne's County, Maryland

Julie Darsie for Betty Bird & Associates

May 2005

MD SHPO

View to west within Shell Stack Room.

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