

QA-557

W. H. Harris Seafood  
Grasonville vicinity

Constructed late 1930s

Privately owned

#### ***SUMMARY DESCRIPTION***

The W. H. Harris Seafood property stands on the east bank of Kent Narrows north of U.S. 50 near Grasonville, Queen Anne's County. The property consists of a heavily altered seafood processing house that was constructed beginning in the late 1930s, a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century concrete dock, a 1960s refrigeration and sorting building, a 1991 pavilion, a 1991 restaurant, and a 1991 wood dock. All of the buildings and structures are in good condition.

#### ***SUMMARY STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE***

W. H. Harris Seafood began in 1947 when William Holton Harris bought an oyster packing house in Kent Narrows. The company has operated continuously since that time and is now managed by Harris's children. W. H. Harris Seafood has survived in part to constant adaptation to changes in technology and oyster harvests. W. H. Harris Seafood is significant for its association with oyster packing in Kent Narrows as one of few surviving remnants of the once thriving oyster packing industry. W. H. Harris Seafood is the last year-round seafood packing plant in Maryland.

# Maryland Historical Trust Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties Form

Inventory No. QA-557

## 1. Name of Property (indicate preferred name)

historic W. H. Harris Seafood (preferred)

other N/A

## 2. Location

street and number 425 Kent Narrows Way North     not for publication

city, town Grasonville X vicinity

county Queen Anne's

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

name Karen Oertel, Harris Family Properties, LLC

street and number P.O. Box 145 telephone (410) 827-8104

city, town Chester state MD zip code 21619-0145

## 4. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Queen Anne's County Circuit Court liber SM 1025 folio 349

city, town Centreville tax map 57 tax parcel 313, 314 tax ID number 05-010330, 05-007801

## 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	<u>1</u> buildings
<input type="checkbox"/> site		<input type="checkbox"/> domestic	<u>0</u> sites
<input type="checkbox"/> object		<input type="checkbox"/> education	<u>1</u> structures
		<input type="checkbox"/> funerary	<u>0</u> objects
		<input type="checkbox"/> government	<u>2</u> Total
		<input type="checkbox"/> health care	
		<input checked="" 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 type="checkbox"/> vacant/not in use	
		<input type="checkbox"/> other:	
			<b>Number of Contributing Resources previously listed in the Inventory</b>
			<u>0</u>

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## 7. Description

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Inventory No. QA-557

### Condition

excellent       deteriorated  
 good             ruins  
 fair               altered

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

### *SUMMARY DESCRIPTION*

The W. H. Harris Seafood property stands on the east bank of Kent Narrows north of U.S. 50 near Grasonville, Queen Anne's County. The property consists of a heavily altered seafood processing house that was constructed beginning in the late 1930s, a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century concrete dock, a 1960s refrigeration and sorting building, a 1991 pavilion, a 1991 restaurant, and a 1991 wood dock. All of the buildings and structures are in good condition.

### *ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION*

The W. H. Harris Seafood property stands on the east bank of Kent Narrows north of U.S. 50 near Grasonville, Queen Anne's County. The narrow peninsula has been heavily developed with restaurants and marinas. Harris Seafood fronts directly onto the water. A large parking lot occupies the land between the road and the buildings. The complex includes a heavily altered seafood processing house that was constructed beginning in the late 1930s, a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century concrete dock, a 1960s crab sorting building, a 1991 pavilion, a 1991 restaurant, and a 1991 wood dock.

The seafood processing house, the northernmost building in the complex, is an L-shaped building. It faces the water to the west and consists of a row of shops parallel to the water and a processing house extending west from the shops. The 2-story processing house, constructed beginning in the late 1930s and continually altered, has a concrete block first floor and wood-frame second floor with a compound gable and flat roof. Vinyl siding covers the second floor, and corrugated metal covers the roof. There is a shed dormer on the west slope of the roof. The first floor has only small, fixed-sash windows. The second story has 1/1 vinyl windows. There are entrances on the south and west elevations of the processing house. On the interior, the first floor of the processing house has a shell stack room, shucking room, packing room, and multiple refrigeration rooms. All have concrete floors with drains, fiberglass-panel walls and ceilings, overhead fluorescent lights, water lines, electrical lines, and conveyors, and stainless steel furnishings and equipment. The second floor of the processing house contains the offices of W. H. Harris Seafood.

The 1-story wing of shops, constructed in 1981, extends across the west elevation of the processing house.<sup>1</sup> The shops are constructed of wood-frame with an asphalt-shingle shed roof and a variety of window and door openings. Used seasonally, they are converted to box assembly rooms during the winter. Containers serving as adjunct refrigeration rooms fill the space north of the processing house and east of the shops. A mid-20<sup>th</sup> century concrete dock creates a walkway along the east elevation of the shops.

South of the seafood processing house is a 1960s wood-frame building that is used for sorting and refrigerating crabs. The building rests on a concrete pad and has plyweave siding and an asphalt-shingle gambrel roof. South of the crab sorting building is a 1991 wood-frame pavilion used for outdoor restaurant seating during the summer. South of the building is the 1991 restaurant. A wood dock constructed in 1991 forms a walkway along the east elevations of the sorting building, pavilion, and restaurant.

The W. H. Harris Seafood complex is in good condition. Although most of the complex is recent construction, it represents continuous use over more than 60 years and exhibits adaptations necessary to survive in the rapidly changing seafood industry.

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<sup>1</sup> The shops were originally the Harris Crab House restaurant. They were converted to shops when the new restaurant was constructed in 1991.

## 8. Significance

Inventory No. QA-557

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** 1945 (H. C. Harris bought Kent Oyster Co.) **Architect/Builder** unknown  
1947 (W. H. Harris bought neighboring oyster co.)

**Construction dates** late 1930s, 1981, 1991

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

W. H. Harris Seafood began in 1947 when William Holton Harris bought an oyster packing house in Kent Narrows. The company has operated continuously since that time and is now managed by Harris's children. W. H. Harris Seafood has survived in part to constant adaptation to changes in technology and oyster harvests. W. H. Harris Seafood is significant for its association with oyster packing in Kent Narrows as one of few surviving remnants of the once thriving oyster packing industry. W. H. Harris Seafood is the last year-round seafood packing plant in Maryland.

### RESOURCE HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

W. H. Harris Seafood began in 1947 when William Holton Harris bought an oyster packing house in Kent Narrows.<sup>2</sup> The company has operated continuously since that time and is now managed by Harris's children. W. H. Harris Seafood is significant for its association with oyster packing in Kent Narrows as one of few surviving remnants of the once thriving oyster packing industry. W. H. Harris Seafood is the last year-round seafood packing plant in Maryland.

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

<sup>2</sup> Harris's brother, Holton Carroll Harris, had bought the adjacent Kent Oyster Company in 1945.

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empty shells that collected around the stalls, shoveling them into wheelbarrows, wheeling them outside, and dumping them onto the huge shell pile.<sup>3</sup>

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-19<sup>th</sup> 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-19<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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."<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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 estimated \$30 million per year by refusing to cooperate with recultivation efforts. He also noted a dangerous

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<sup>3</sup> Johnson, Paula J., ed. *Working the Water: The Commercial Fisheries of Maryland's Patuxent River*. pp. 35-37.

<sup>4</sup> Dredging, preferred method of New Englanders, had been outlawed in 1832. Chesapeake watermen traditionally harvested oysters using tongs.

<sup>5</sup> Brugger, 219, 314, 322, 324, 326, 381, 786; conversation between Julie Darsie (Betty Bird & Associates) and Karen Oertel (Harris Seafood) on July 21, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Brugger, 408.

<sup>7</sup> 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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shortage of shells and seed oysters.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

W. H. Harris Seafood has survived the decline in Chesapeake oysters by constantly adapting. During the 1950s, the company added refrigeration and switched from packing in the 5-gallon containers used for transport by rail to the 1-gallon containers used for transport by truck. During summers, Harris Seafood bought soft-shell crabs and clams from watermen for sale to Baltimore, Washington, and Philadelphia wholesalers. In the 1970s, they switched from the hand-held blades traditionally used to split oysters to circular saw "choppers." Also in the 1970s, they set up picnic tables and began serving crabs during the summer. In 1981, they opened the first year-round Harris Crab House, and in 1991, they built the current restaurant (on the site of the former Kent Oyster Company) and converted the previous restaurant to seasonal shops. As Chesapeake oyster harvests declined, W. H. Harris Seafood began buying oysters from other regions, particularly the Gulf of Mexico and Asia.<sup>10</sup> Finally, W. H. Harris Seafood has been involved in conservation efforts, particularly replanting of oyster beds.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Brugger, 408, 461, 462, 561, 786.

<sup>9</sup> Shaum, Kent Narrows oyster shucking house closes; conversation between Julie Darsie (Betty Bird & Associates) and Karen Oertel (Harris Seafood) on July 21, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> 90% of the oysters packed at W. H. Harris Seafood come from out-of-state.

<sup>11</sup> Conversation between Julie Darsie (Betty Bird & Associates) and Karen Oertel (Harris Seafood) on July 21, 2005.

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## 9. Major Bibliographical References

Inventory No. QA-557

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- Brugger, Robert J. *Maryland, A Middle Temperament, 1634-1980*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988.
- Conversation between Julie Darsie (Betty Bird & Associates) and Karen Oertel (Harris Seafood) on July 21, 2005.
- 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.
- Shaum, Jack. Kent Narrows oyster shucking house closes. *The Star*. March 9, 2003.

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## 10. Geographical Data

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Acreage of surveyed property 1.37 acres  
Acreage of historical setting approximately 1.37 acres  
Quadrangle name Queenstown Quadrangle scale: 1:24,000

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### Verbal boundary description and justification

The boundaries of W. H. Harris Seafood follow the boundaries of Queen Anne's County Tax Map 57, Parcels 313 and 314. The property is bounded on the north by a marina, on the east by Neighborhood Road, on the south by warehouses of the United Shellfish Company, and on the west by Kent Narrows. The property encompasses 1.37 acres and includes the processing house, sorting building, pavilion, restaurant, and all associated docks. The non-contributing pavilion and restaurant were included within the boundary because although they were not historically part of the property, they represent the continuous adaptation that has allowed W. H. Harris Seafood to survive.

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## 11. Form Prepared by

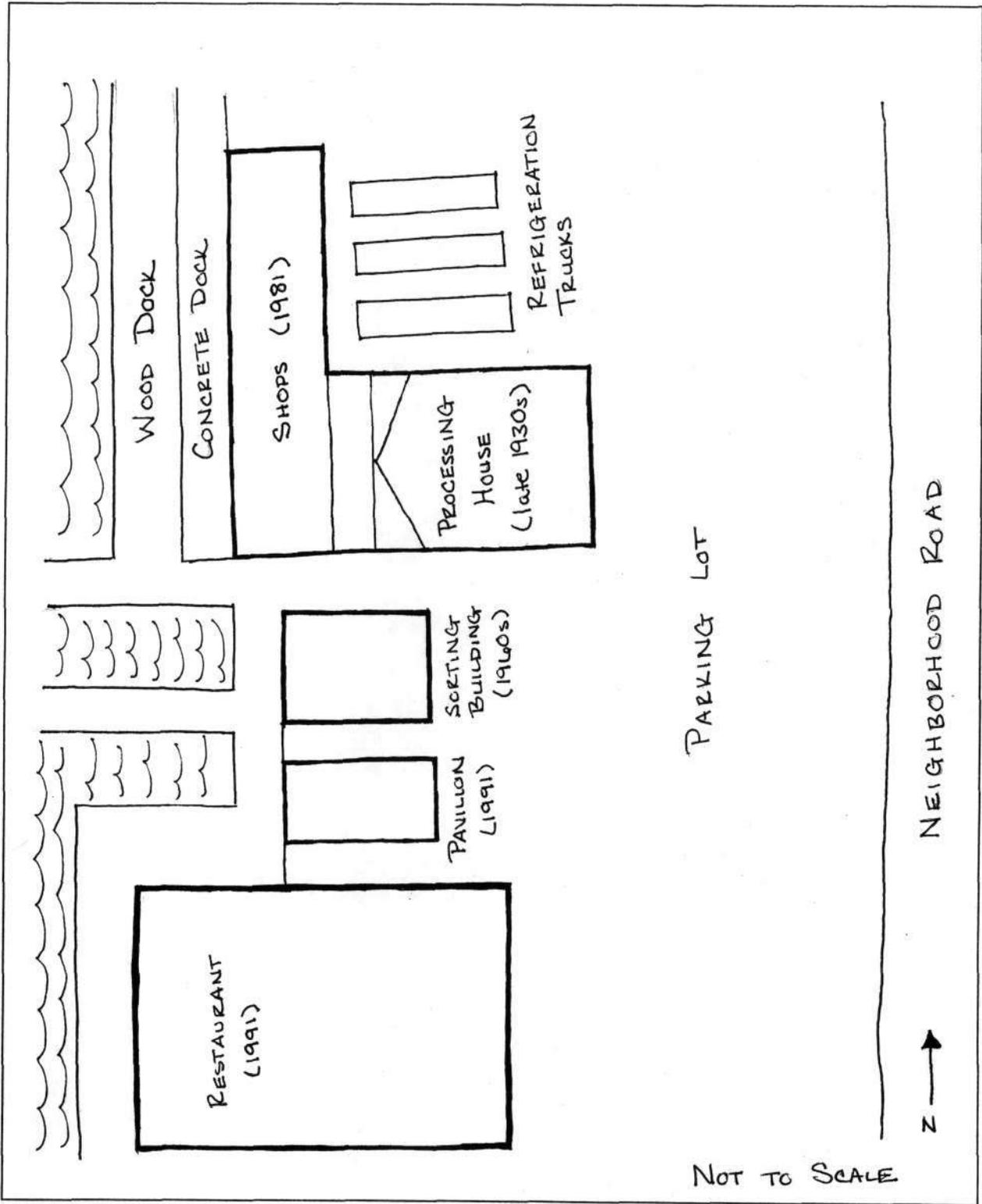
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name/title	Julie Darsie		
organization	Betty Bird & Associates LLC	date	September 2005
street & number	2607 24 <sup>th</sup> Street NW, Suite 3	telephone	(202) 588-9033
city or town	Washington, District of Columbia	state	N/A

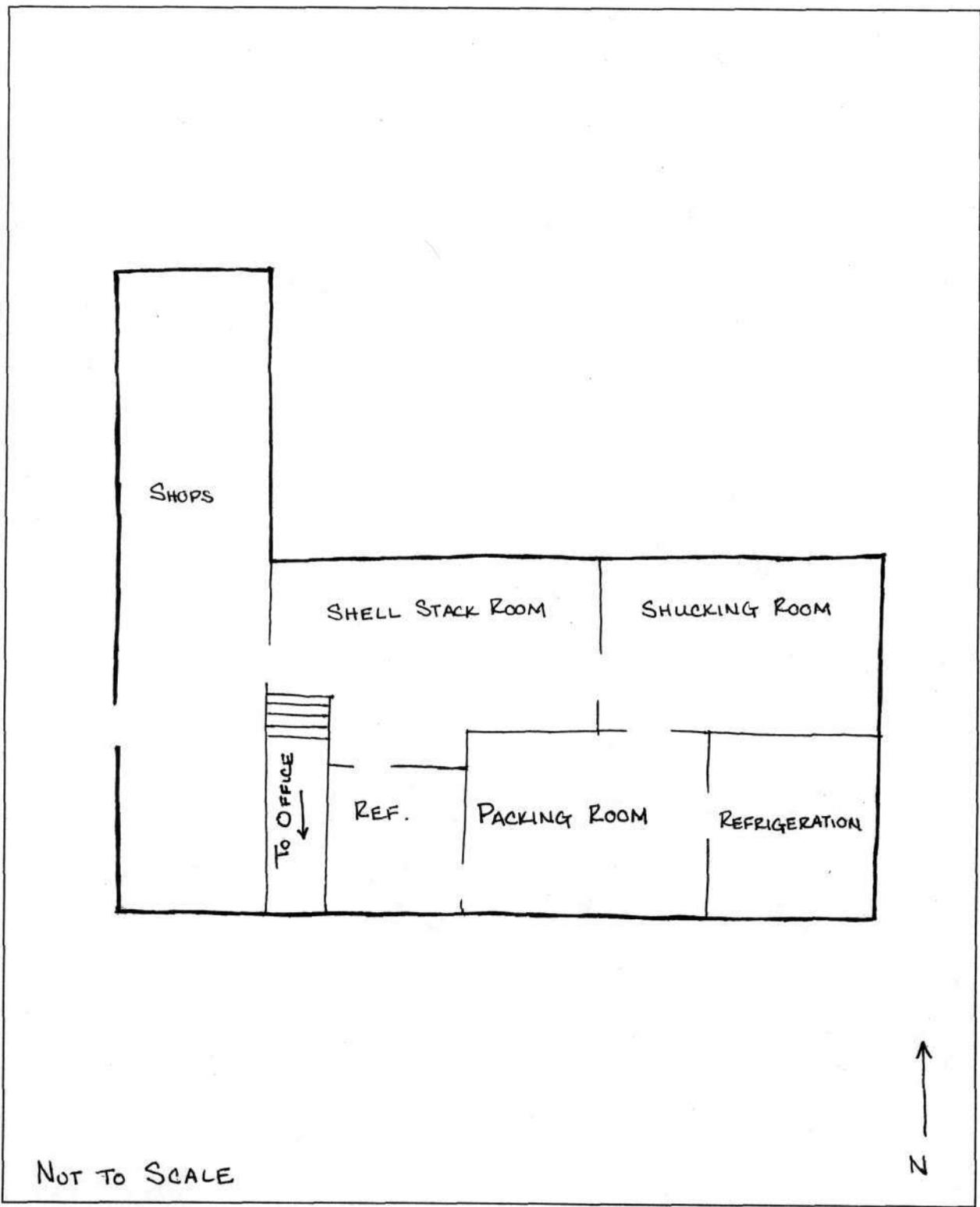
The Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties was officially created by an Act of the Maryland Legislature to be found in the Annotated Code of Maryland, Article 41, Section 181 KA, 1974 supplement.

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

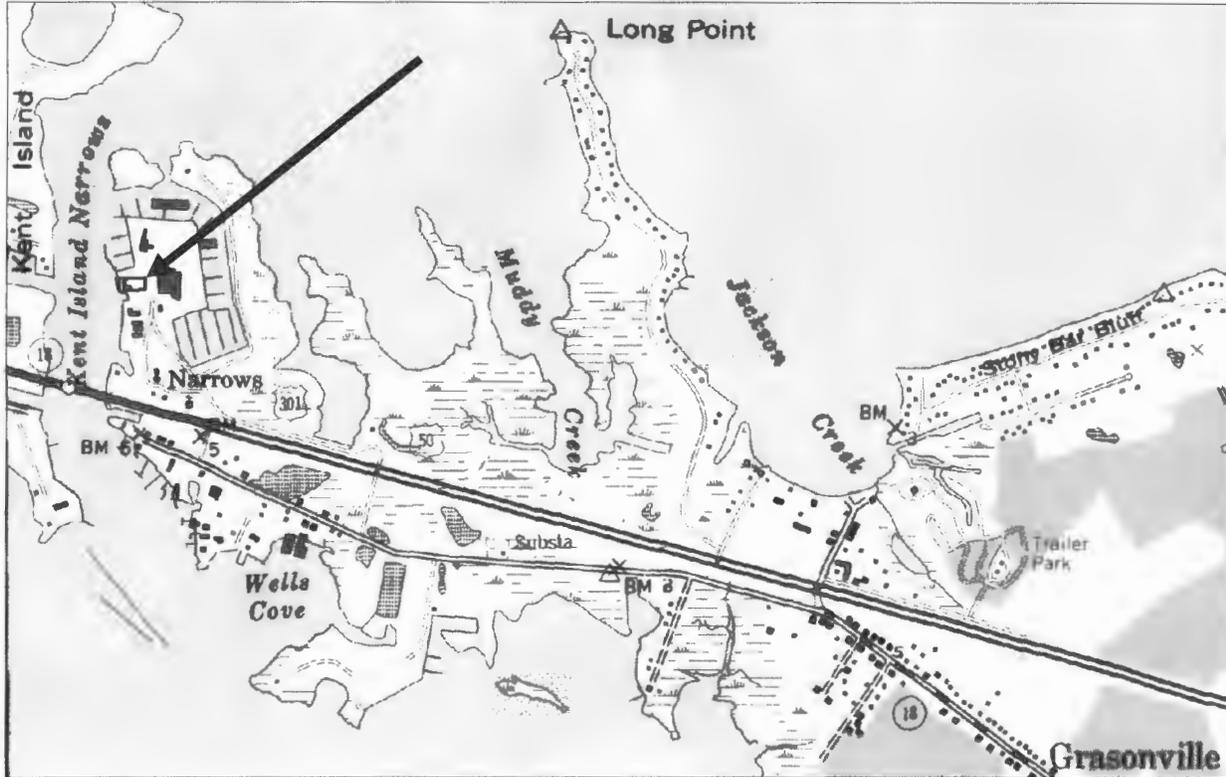


**Site Plan**  
**QA-557**  
**W. H. Harris Seafood**  
**Grasonville vicinity, Queen Anne's County, Maryland**

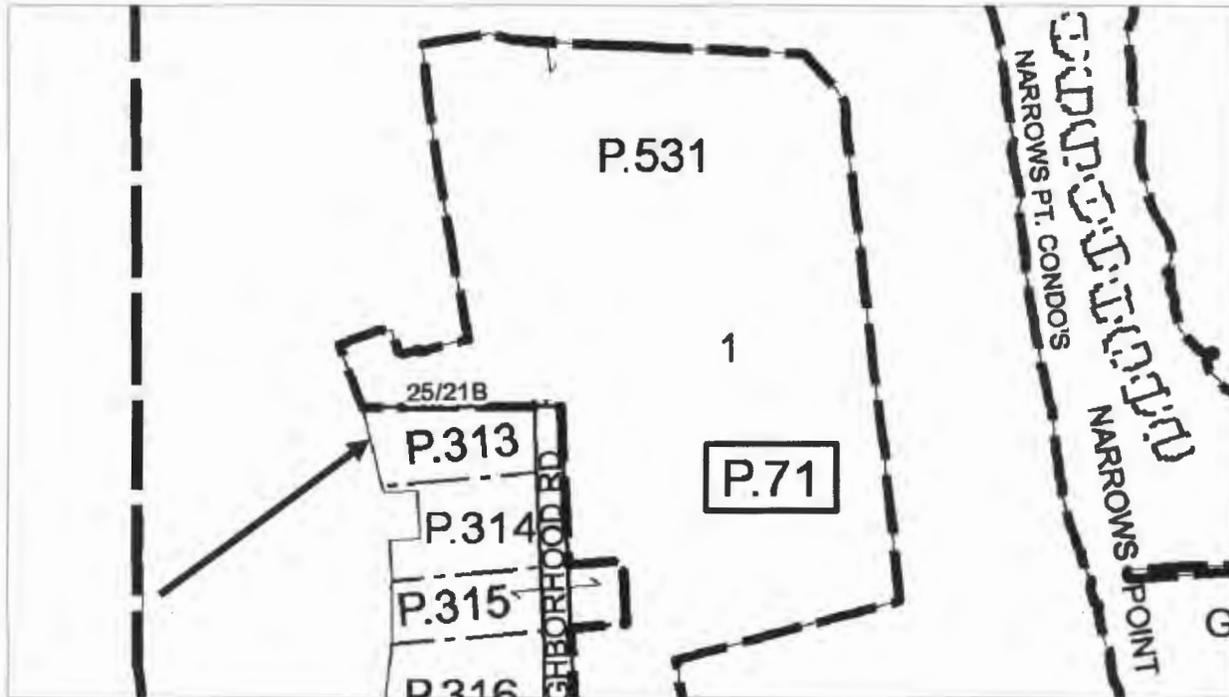


**Floor Plan**  
**QA-557**  
W. H. Harris Seafood  
Grasonville vicinity, Queen Anne's County, Maryland

QA-557  
W. H. Harris Seafood  
425 Kent Narrows Way North  
Grasonville  
Queenstown quadrangle 1942, Photorevised 1986



Tax Map 57, Parcel 313





Oyster  
Reception  
Partnership

Informational text panel on the building facade.

Informational text panel on the building facade.

Oyster Reception Partnership

Informational text panel on a wooden counter.

QA-557

W.H. Harris Seafood

Queen Anne's County, Maryland

Julie Darsie for Betty Bird & Associates

July 2005

MD SHPO

View to SE showing shops along dock. Restaurant  
in background

1 of 12



Harris  
WATERFRONT SHOPS

SNOWBALLS

ITALIAN  
WATER ICE

ADAMS

QA-557

W.H. Harris Seafood  
Queen Annel's County, Maryland

Julie Darsie for Betty Bird & Associates

July 2005

MD SHPO

View to NE showing shops and processing house.

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QA-557

W.H. Harris Seafood

Queen Annel's County, Maryland

Julie Darsie for Betty Bird & Associates

July 2005

MD SHPO

View to SE showing Sorting Building, Pavilion,  
and Restaurant.

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QA 557

W. H. Harris Seafood

Queen Anne's County, Maryland

Julie Darsie for Betty Bird & Associates

July 2005

MD SHPO

View to NE showing Shops, Processing House on  
left, Sorting Building and Pavilion on right.

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QA-557

W. H. Harris Seafood

Queen Anne's County, Maryland

Julie Darsie for Betty Bird & Associates

July 2005

MPA SHPO

Complex from east, Restaurant on left, Pavilion,  
Sorting, Building, and Processing House on right,  
5 of 12



Handicap  
PARKING

QA-557

W.H. Harris Seafood

Queen Annel's County, Maryland

Julie Darsie for Betty Bird & Associates

July 2005

MO SHPO

View to NW showing south and east elevations  
of Processing House.

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QA-557

W.H. Harris Seafood  
Queen Anne's County, Maryland  
Julie Darsie for Betty Bird & Associates  
July 2005.

MD SHPO

East elevation of Processing House, Bagged oysters  
in foreground, refrigeration trucks in background  
7 of 12



QA-557

W.H. Harris Seafood

Queen Anne's County, Maryland

Julie Darsie for Betty Bird & Associates

July 2005

MD SHPO

East and north elevations of Processing House.  
Refrigeration trucks in middle-ground. Bagged  
oysters on far right.

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CATERPILLAR

QA-557

W.H.R.

Harris Seafood.

Queen Anne's County, Maryland

Julie Darsie for Betty Bird & Associates

July 2005

DLD SHPO

Interior of shell storage room

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QA-557

W.H. Harris Seafood

Queen Anne's County, Maryland

Julie Daessie for Kelly Brad & Associates

July 2005

MA SHPO

Interior of shucking room

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QA 557

W.H. Harris Seafood

Queen Anne's County, Maryland

Julie Darsie for Betty Bird & Associates

July 2005

M.D. SHPO

Interior of packing room

11 of 12



100

100

FRESH S  
FRESH S  
FRESH S

QA-557

W.H. Harris Seafood

Queen Annel's County, Maryland

Julie Darsie for Betty Bird & Associates

July 2005

MD SHPO

Interior of packing room.

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