S-421 c. 1889
Baker Sterling House
Crisfield vicinity
Private

The Baker Sterling house is a distinctive late nineteenth century frame house that stands on the eastern edge of Crisfield. Built around 1889, the house was designed in deliberate Gothic Revival taste with steeply pitched gable roofs and pointed arch windows. The asymmetrical ell-shape is not unusual for the period, but the numerous gabled elevations give the house an identity different from most Victorian houses in Crisfield. The house stands in the vicinity of Asbury Methodist Church, a region that is located outside the incorporated limits of Crisfield but developed at the same time due to the burgeoning seafood industry during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Captain Noah Sterling, a local ship captain who mastered a schooner that plied the waters between New England and the Carribean, is thought to have financed the construction of this house for his son, Baker Sterling, who married Ella Moore around 1889 when the couple moved into this house. Baker Sterling occupied this house with his wife until his death in 1940, and Ella remained there until she died in 1952. The house remained in Sterling family hands until 1980. (The research on the Sterling family was compiled by the current owner, Gerard R. Williams, and is included with this form.)

HISTORIC CONTEXT INFORMATION

Resource Name: BAKER STERLING HOUSE

MHT Inventory Number: S-421

MARYLAND COMPREHENSIVE HISTORIC PRESERVATION PLAN DATA:

1) Historic Period Theme(s): ARCHITECTURE

2) Geographic Orientation: EASTERN SHORE

3) Chronological/Developmental Period(s): INDUSTRIAL-URBAN DOMINANCE 1870-1930

4) Resource Type(s): Single-family dwelling, c. 1889

Survey No. S-421

Magi No.

DOE ___yes ___no

Maryland Historical Trust
State Historic Sites Inventory Form

1. Name (indicate preferred name)

historic BAKER STERLING HOUSE

and/or common

2. Location

street & number 236 Asbury Avenue ___ not for publication

city, town Crisfield x vicinity of congressional district First

state Maryland county Somerset

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use	
___ district	___ public	x occupied	___ agriculture	___ museum
xx building(s)	x private	___ unoccupied	___ commercial	___ park
___ structure	___ both	___ work in progress	___ educational	xx private residence
___ site	**Public Acquisition**	**Accessible**	___ entertainment	___ religious
___ object	___ in process	x yes: restricted	___ government	___ scientific
	___ being considered	___ yes: unrestricted	___ industrial	___ transportation
	x not applicable	___ no	___ military	___ other:

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

name Mr. and Mrs. Gerard R. Williams

street & number P. O. Box 4 telephone no.:

city, town Parkerford state and zip code Pennsylvania 19457

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Clerk of Somerset County Court liber

street & number Somerset County Courthouse folio

city, town Princess Anne state MD 21853

6. Representation in Existing Historical Surveys

title

date ___ federal ___ state ___ county ___ local

depository for survey records

city, town state

7. Description

Survey No. S-421

Condition		Check one	Check one
___ excellent	___ deteriorated	___ unaltered	_x_ original site
_x_ good	___ ruins	_x_ altered	___ moved date of move _____
___ fair	___ unexposed		

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

The Baker Sterling house stands at 236 Asbury Avenue on the eastern edge of Crisfield, Somerset County, Maryland. The story-and-a-half, ell-shaped frame house faces south with the principal gable roofs oriented on an east/west axis.

Believed by family tradition to have been built around 1889, this unusual story-and-a-half Victorian house was moved to its location before World War I from a site farther back on the lot. Supported by an infilled brick pier foundation, the frame dwelling is sheathed with asbestos shingles, and covered by steeply pitched asphalt shingle gable roofs. Standing in the back yard is a late nineteenth century summer kitchen that was also moved.

The south (main) facade is an uneven three-bay elevation with repeating gable front walls. A recessed front entrance and flanking two-over-two sash windows are sheltered by a Tuscan columned porch which stretches across the ell-shaped front elevation. A turned baluster handrail is located between the columns. Piercing the upper gable ends are pointed arched sash windows fitted with corresponding shutters. The eaves are extended. Rising through the center of the house are narrow brick stove chimneys. Distinctive to this house are the number of cross gables that mark the sides of the gable roofs.

The west side of the house is two rooms deep with single and paired two-over-two sash windows lighting the first and second floors. Each cross gable is pierced by a pointed arch window.

The interior has survived largely intact with a center stair hall, two rooms to the west and a single room to the east on the first floor. The mantels in each room follow the plain late nineteenth century post-and-lintel design. The stair is typical for the period with a boldly turned newel post and a series of turned balusters that support the continuous molded handrail.

The second floor is plainly finished, but the interior angles of the ceilings in each bedroom allow for unusually shaped ceilings.

8. Significance

Survey No. S-421

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
___ prehistoric	___ archeology-prehistoric	___ community planning	___ landscape architecture	___ religion
___ 1400–1499	___ archeology-historic	___ conservation	___ law	___ science
1500–1599	___ agriculture	___ economics	___ literature	___ sculpture
___ 1600–1699	xx architecture	___ education	___ military	___ social/ humanitarian
___ 1700–1799	___ art	___ engineering	___ music	___ theater
xx 1800–1899	___ commerce	___ exploration/settlement	___ philosophy	___ transportation
___ 1900–	___ communications	___ industry	___ politics/government	___ other (specify)
		___ invention		

Specific dates **Builder/Architect**

check: Applicable Criteria: __A __B x C __D
and/or
Applicable Exception: __A __B __C __D __E __F __G

Level of Significance: __national __state x local

Prepare both a summary paragraph of significance and a general statement of history and support.

The Baker Sterling house is a distinctive late nineteenth century frame house that stands on the eastern edge of Crisfield. Built around 1889, the house was designed in deliberate Gothic Revival taste with steeply pitched gable roofs and pointed arch windows. The asymmetrical ell-shape is not unusual for the period, but the numerous gabled elevations give the house an identity different from most Victorian houses in Crisfield. The house stands in the vicinity of Asbury Methodist Church, a region that is located outside the incorporated limits of Crisfield, which developed at the same time due to the burgeoning seafood industry during the second half of the nineteenth century.

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9. Major Bibliographical References

Survey No. S-421

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property _____

Quadrangle name _____ **Quadrangle scale** _____

UTM **References** do NOT complete UTM references

	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
A				B			
C				D			
E				F			
G				H			

Verbal boundary description and justification

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state	code	county	code
state	code	county	code

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Paul B. Touart, Architectural Historian

organization Private Consultant **date** 5/20/91

street & number P. O. Box 5 **telephone** 301-651-1094

city or town Westover **state** MD 21871

The Maryland Historic Sites Inventory 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
Shaw House
21 State Circle
Annapolis, Maryland 21401
(301) 269-2438

CAPTAIN NOAH'S FANCY
A history of 236 Asbury, Avenue, Chrisfield, Maryland

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Chrisfield's House of Seven Gables has a New England origin as did Nathaniel Hawthorne's, but the story is different. Captain Noah Sterling, Master of a three masted schooner, sailed not only to ports in the Carribean but to those in New England. On a trip north, perhaps with Chrisfield oysters bound for the Boston or Glouster market, his eye caught "a New England summer house" on a seaside bluff. The design caught his fancy; plans were drawn up; the house built, ready for its first occupant in 1888 or early 1889. After the marriage of his fifth of eleven children, William Clark to Ella Moore, the newlyweds moved in (now 236 Asbury Avenue). The exact date is not recorded; however, Edna, their first child, "was born nine months to the day after their marriage". Her stone in the Sunnyridge cemetary, along with husband Layton E. Powell, shows only 1889 as her birth year - hence, the conjecture on the marriage date.

"Baker" Sterling, as William Clark was called, lived in the house from his marriage in 1888 until his death in 1940. His wife Ella stayed until her death in 1952.

Their fifth child, Doris Sterling with husband George Wilson, took title in early 1953; she lived in the house until 1980; at that time she moved to a nursing home where she died about 1987.

In October, 1980, Carol and the late Bruce W. Scott (son of the current Mayor of Chrisfield) bought the house. Their marriage dissolved; the house was reclaimed by the Maryland Housing Fund in 1987.

Gerard R. and Margaret R. Williams took title in January 1988; thus tracing ownership for the first one hundred years of the Baker Sterling House at 236 Asbury Avenue.

Since Sterling descendents owned the house all but eight years of

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the first century, it is of interest to trace this prolific, local family to its roots in England.

John Sterling (1638-1701) and his wife, Alice Bassett came from England and "settled on the Annemessex River on the North end of Pocomoke Sound to South across from Virginia".

Their son John (1676-1741) married Mary Martin.

Issue, again, John (circa 1700-1779) married Mary Todd and "lived on the homestead of his father and grandfather at Little Annemessex." He had two royal grants:

1. 38 acres 1748 "Sterling Chance"
2. 9 acres 1762 "Sterling Fancy"

Their son Ephriam (? - 1845) married Esther Sterling in 1782. They lived near Lawsonia, the general "Neck" area where the house is today. Could one or both of the royal grants have provided land for the newlyweds to get a start?

Noah (earlier referred to as Captain Noah) (11/20/34-6/10/1926) married his third wife, Mary Ann Sterling (1838-1893), after Nancy, #2 died (1857-1890). First wife Alice died in childbirth. The first two bore his children. They lived their lives in the Neck Area. "Baker" William Clark Sterling (1867-1940) -fifth of eleven children- married Ella Moore. Their first and the first child born in the house was Edna (1889), as stated earlier, exactly nine months from the day of their marriage.

Family association with the house and property continued after "Baker" and Ella's children grew up. Following the youngest, Lucy Virginia's divorce of Ringgold Sterling, their daughter Joann at aged twelve in 1937 moved in with the grandparents. Here she lived about four years until Tangier Islander Lester Crockett came along. His father for whom he worked, operated a commission boat that hauled about one

hundred tons of oysters at a time to the Baltimore Market. Father Crockett moved to the mainland when Lester was eight years old. He met Joann at school and courted her in "Baker's" livingroom, married her, and spent their wedding night in what had been the parlor (at that time used as a bedroom). She was sixteen. Lester eventually left the water to work for a local bakery. They live -still- on Asbury Avenue.

Originally, the house was built at the rear of the property. The outhouse and chicken house were on the side away from Asbury Methodist Church. The vegetable garden, the outline can still be seen today, lay on the church side. Ed Thornton use to plough this each spring with his mule.

As the area developed and the Baker Sterling's family sold off building lots; the new houses were placed close to the road. Evidently Ella Sterling was feeling out of step or isolated, for she had the house moved to its present place, closer to the road. However, she was quite disturbed when the builder of Purnell's placed the house about a foot from the property line.

Joann Sterling Crockett has a snapshot of the house in its present location taken around World War II. The house was supported by brick piers with lattice work in between, which was painted white - as was the clapboard siding. Wooden steps led from the ground to porch. The chicken house was moved up to a point just behind the current wooden fence stretching to the Purnell's. The several pine trees in that area - now over 2' through the butt - were planted by Ella Sterling's sons (Wm.) Kirk and Harvey.

Behind the house, maybe 10' from the back door is the outkitchen where cooking and preserving were done in the summer on an oil stove. In summer, too, on the hottest days a canopy was stretched between these

two buildings to keep off the sun. This, the coolest place, seemed to channel whatever air was moving. Here family and friends gathered to talk, and eat their meals.

In talking with Joann Sterling Crockett, speculation is that the lands of John and Mary Todd Sterling were extensive. Part of their holdings not only covered 236 and a number of properties on either side, including the Asbury Methodist Church, but moved north towards the location of Tom Jones' General Store. The house behind 236 but on Main Street Extended, was owned until recently by the family. Its siding is similar to the wood siding - hidden under the shingles on the Baker Sterling house - it too, was built by Captain Noah.

In the vicinity of Jones' store stood the Sterling Plantation. A snapshot shows a white frame building with wide porch on the first floor and a veranda on the second. Behind were a number of small frame, white painted, slave quarters. The house was abandoned in the 1930's; later, vagrants burned it down.

This is where Captain Noah lived, the grandson of John and Mary Todd. After he left the sea, Noah ran the farm. Ed Thornton as a boy picked produce for the Captain - "he was a tough, tough task master".

Not too much is known about the Baker Sterlings. Ed Thornton remembers Baker as a quiet waterman who walked down Johnson Creek Road or to Apes Hole to his boat, where he crabbed, oystered and fished close to shore.

Ella Sterling used the only existing original closet on the first floor - the one under the stairs - for her canned goods and jellies. After her family had grown, her bedroom was the large second floor room over the livingroom; Baker occupied the small one, behind Ella's at the top of the stairs.

Evidently she was loved and respected in the community. The record

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shows at the "Court House door in Princess Anne, Maryland, offer for sale at public auction, for cash....on Tuesday, August 3, 1948 at or about the hour of two o'clock p.m." Her property was sold to "the highest bidder", whom we can find with no family relationship - a Raymond (Clerk of Courts) and Sallie E. Woodland - bought 236 Asbury Avenue for $21.24 to cover Ella Sterling's indebtedness of $1.00 state and $16.00 county taxes. Evidently Noah left all real estate, according to Joann Sterling Crockett, to his children in perpetuity; the only way to break this was to put the property up for public auction for taxes. Five days later, the record also shows title in Ella Moore Sterling's name.

To substantiate Joann's point, no recorded deed to the property could be found in "Baker's" name. In fact, only one was recorded - "July 19, 1887. Lot of land 70'x95' on the N.E. Corner of the Public Road running from Asbury M.E. Church to Apes Hole Creek Landing; and road from Byrdtown to J.J. Lawson's residence...."

Within the next year or so, the fifth of her six children, Doris Sterling Wilson, came home to care for her mother who was nearly seventy. She not only came back, but moved her belongings from Mexico where husband George Norman Wilson managed a gunpowder plant for the Dupont Company. The frame building behind the outkitchen was built to take the overflow belongings not useable in the house.

Doris set about to make the house functional and comfortable - esthetics were not of the highest priority. The drafty clapboards were covered with durable asbestos shingles. Front and back wooden steps were replaced by brick - note the pipe railing at the back door. (Iron railing in front was added for my 96 year old mother). Lattice work around the foundation was filled in with brick to help reduce the draft from the floors. A cement sidewalk in front and back were laid. Inside,

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she added the bathroom where a back door from the center hall had been. This room included what is now the utility room. Here, an invalid aunt, Molly Moore, was brought from a state facility in Cambridge to spend her remaining years in comfort. We assume Doris built the chimney on the northeast corner, so the old aunt might have the basics close at hand - comfortable bed, plumbing, and warmth - to say nothing of the T.L.C. of her neice.

In the kitchen, we assume she put in the cabinets and the Hot Point stove with "real" enamel and an oven with adequate insulation. One can actually lay a hand with comfort on the stove top while the oven registers 400°!

The downstairs floors - yellow pine, which remain upstairs - were covered with hardwood. The doors - front, parlor and sitting room were replaced with glass paneled ones for more light.

Lights, too, were added in front and back - even a front yard light with an electric eye for automatic on and off!

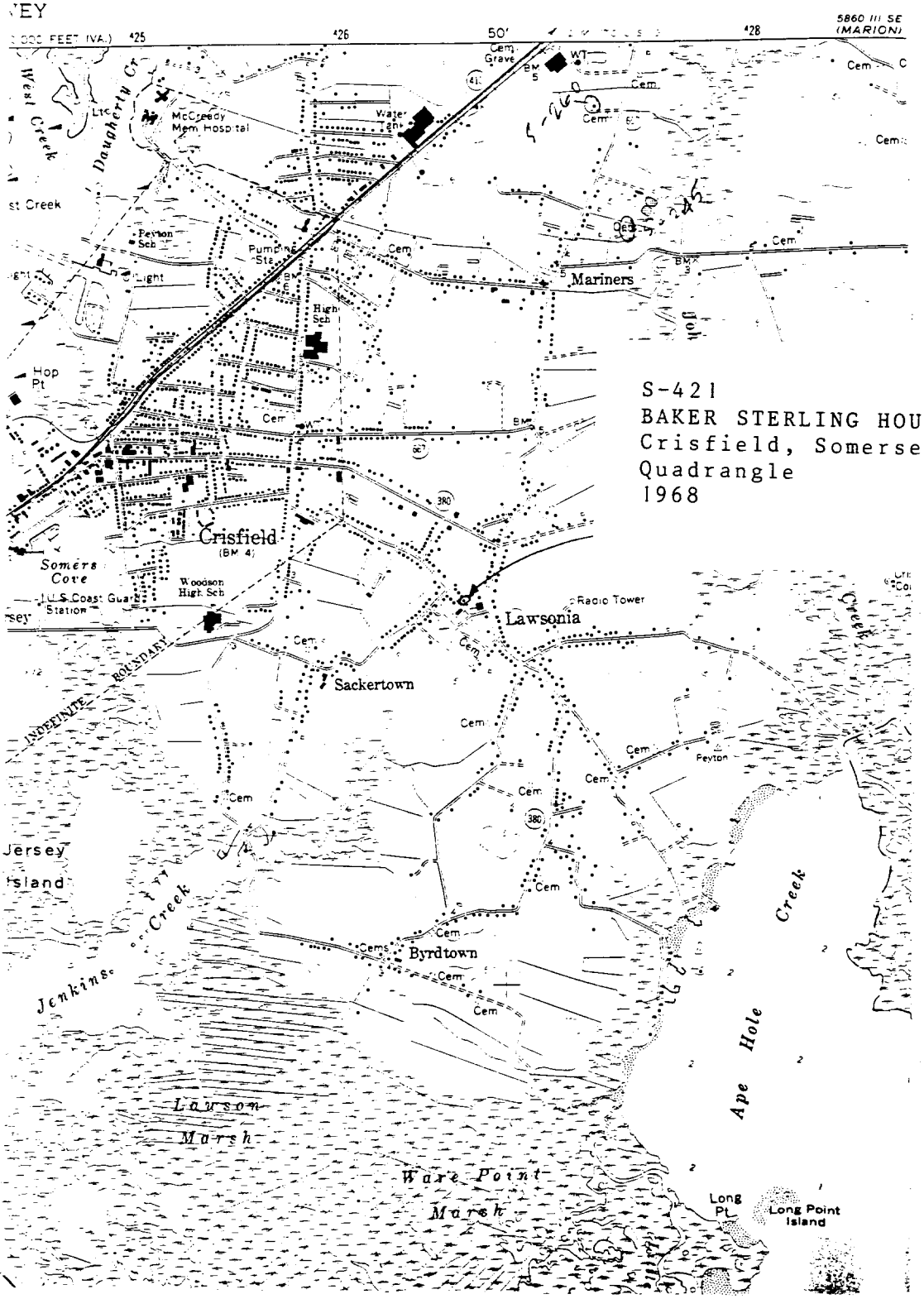
Doris Sterling Wilson comes through as a loving, practical, take-charge sort of person who added quality to the lives of her old mother and aunt. There is an "off the record" letter from her to one of her brothers - a scorching blast at his selfishness, greed and neglect for their mother. It is interesting that this is one of the few written possessions he left at his death.

The above is intended to be an as accurate accounting as possible of people and property. As information arises to refine, expand or correct, I plan to do so.

Gerard R. Williams
December, 1990

Thanks to: Joann Sterling Crockett
Lester Crockett
Edward Thornton
Harrison Tyler
Thirty four Families of Somerset County, Maryland
by Woodrow T. Wilson

3
INTERIOR
EY



S-421
BAKER STERLING HOUSE
Crisfield, Somerset County, Maryland
Quadrangle
1968

S-421
BAKER STERLING HOUSE
Crisfield vicinity, Somerset Co., MD
Southwest elevation
6/91, Paul Touart, photographer
Negative/MD Historical Trust

S-421
BAKER STERLING HOUSE
Crisfield vicinity, Somerset Co., MD
South elevation
6/91, Paul Touart, photographer
Negative/MD Historical Trust