United States Department of the Interior
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service

National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form

For HCRS use only
received
date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic: Betterton

and/or common: Betterton Historic District

2. Location

street & number: multiple streets — n/a not for publication

city, town: Betterton — n/a vicinity of — congressional district: First

state: Maryland code 24 — county: Kent — code 029

3. Classification

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

4. Owner of Property

name: multiple public and private owners (more than 50 private)

street & number:

city, town: ___ vicinity of — state:

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc.: Kent County Courthouse

street & number: High Street

city, town: Chestertown — state: Maryland 21620

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title: Maryland Historical Trust Historic Sites Inventory — has this property been determined eligible? ___ yes X no

date: 1984 — ___ federal X state ___ county ___ local

depository for survey records: Maryland Historical Trust, 21 State Circle

city, town: Annapolis — state: Maryland 21401

7. Description

Condition		Check one	Check one
___ excellent	___ deteriorated	___ unaltered	X original site
X good	___ ruins	X altered	___ moved date n/a
___ fair	___ unexposed		

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

Number of Resources Contributing	Noncontributing	
157	35	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
157	35	Total

Number of previously listed National Register properties included in this nomination: 0

Original and historic functions and uses: commercial, park, residential

DESCRIPTION SUMMARY

The Betterton Historic District consists of a collection of vernacular victorian resort structures lying within the incorporated town of Betterton, Kent County, Maryland. The town is situated on tree covered bluffs overlooking the confluence of the Sassafras, Elk, Bohemia and Susquahanna Rivers with the Chesapeake Bay, approximately 15 miles north of Chestertown. The streets are laid out in an irregular grid pattern. Several deep ravines run through the town and many of the buildings are oriented towards the beach or sited to respond to the terrain. No major changes have occurred in the street pattern. The examination of a post card, postmarked 1914, of the shoreline up the Sassafras, shows that Betterton's shoreline has changed very little in 70 years. The district is roughly bound by the Chesapeake Bay to the north, Gut Marsh to the east, Howell Point Road to the south, and farmland to the west. The area of Betterton outside the historic district includes large estates and modern buildings. The district includes many of the homes, hotels and cottages built to accommodate steamboat passengers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Historically, the town was entered from the water. The town is oriented towards the beach and existing piers. The two major streets of Betterton, Main Street and Ericsson Avenue, descend the bluffs to meet at the beach near the location of the piers and pavillion. Notable buildings within the district include the hotels and boarding homes which catered to the steamboat passengers, several churches, and summer cottages, dating from the golden age of the passenger steamboats on the Chesapeake Bay.

For General Description, see Continuation Sheet No. 1

GENERAL DESCRIPTION:

Betterton's natural features played a major role in the town's development. Steamboat passengers traveled to Betterton to enjoy the spectacular views, excellent fishing, and nettle-free swimming. To accommodate these tourists, the town created several parks. These included the beach (Photo No. 7), a quaint foot-bridge connecting Bayside Boulevard and Boulevard Street and a small area with beaches facing the Sassafras River along Bayside Boulevard.

Prominent Buildings

Rigbie Hotel (Photo No. 2, 5, 6)
Perhaps the most glamorous of the major hotels during Betterton's Golden Age, the Rigbie is sited on a bluff overlooking the water at the corner of Main Street and Ericsson Avenue. It is a 3½ story gambrel roofed structure with a superb view of the Chesapeake Bay. Fronting the water are broad one story porches; to the rear of the building is a long gambrel roofed ell, 2½ stories. The Rigbie, ca. 1915, was the last of Betterton's large hotels to open and was known for its excellent food. Like many of the popular hotels, the Rigbie later built an annex. This 2 story frame structure still remains.

Anchor Inn (formerly The Atlantic) (Photo No. 25)
This structure, located on the west side of Ericsson Avenue near Belmont Place, retains the historic quality of Betterton's small hotels. Two story porches, a generous shingled gambrel roof and a home-like atmosphere must have accounted for the popularity of this hostelry. The Anchor Inn, still open for business, is the best preserved of Betterton's small hotels.

Ferncliff (Photo No. 43
One of the many boarding houses in Betterton, Ferncliff, ca. 1890, with its shingle mansard is the best preserved structure in town. Quite ornamental, the building has eaves edged with delicate "carpenters lace," shed dormers with applique work, and a front porch enriched with sawn brackets and drops. Ferncliff is located on the west side of Main Street near 2nd Avenue.

Price Cottage (Photo No. 30, 31)
Located on the east side of Ericsson Avenue, Price Cottage., ca. 1903, is another example of Betterton's boarding homes. This 3½ story frame structure has a gambrel roof and generous front porch with ornamental gingerbread detailing.

Bayside Inn (Royal Swan Building) (Photo No. 45)
Sited on Betterton's highest hill, located between 1st and 2nd Avenues, the Bayside Inn, ca. 1905, was constructed by the Betterton Bayside Land Company. This turreted Victorian structure was purchased by the Royal Swan Club in 1931. This building's most distinctive features are its round corner tower and deep one story porches. Much Victorian landscaping remains on the property. Several small cottages, known as the Bayside Cottages, are located near the Inn.

See Continuation Sheet No. 2

GENERAL DESCRIPTION (continued)

Bungalow on East Side of Ericsson near Idlewidle Avenue (Photo No. 20)

One common house type of the early 20th century is the bungalow. This house is 1½ stories high with a shallow gable roof. The front porch is covered by the main roof and there is a large central, gable roof dormer lit by two pairs of sash windows.

Cliffholme (Photo No. 60)

Another example of the early resort cottages, Cliffholme is square in plan, covered by a hipped roof with dormers. Found near the Rigbie on Boulevard Street and overlooking the water, the cottage has one-story porches on two facades and is of frame construction. An adjacent cottage, Longview (Photo No. 61), is almost identical to Cliffholme. Both of these were used as boarding homes.

St. John's on the Bay (Photo No. 12)

Constructed due to pressure for an Episcopal Church by returning summer visitors, particularly a Mr. Groves, St. John's on the Bay, ca. 1915, commands a beautiful view of the Bay and Sassafras River. This one story frame structure, constructed on land donated by Mr. Groves, is located on Ericsson Avenue, near Idlewidle Avenue.

Betterton Methodist Church (Photo Nos. 38, 39)

One of the two stucco churches on Main Street, the Methodist Church, ca. 1914, is one story in height with an expansive gable roof and an engaged square bell tower. The walls are tan stucco and the trim around the lancet arch window and door openings is painted white. The stained glass windows have opalescent glass, predominantly lavender, green, and beige in tone, with a screen or a fleur de lis in each panel. The old Crew Homestead was used as the Methodist Church from 1868-1914. The existing church is located on the corner of Main Street and 3rd Avenue.

House on Belmont Place (Photo No. 29)

Belmont Place is one of the residential streets of Betterton consisting of four frame vernacular Victorian structures. The first house on Belmont Place is a 2½ story frame structure with a steep gable roof and one story front porch with decorative detailing. This building is typical of Betterton's boarding homes and residential structures.

Knollwood Cottages (Photo No. 54)

Located at the end of First Avenue, Knollwood consists of two rows of tiny one story cottages facing an open green. Built as rental cottages, returning summer visitors bought these cottages and Knollwood developed into a group of private cottages with a private boat house and pier.

See Continuation Sheet No. 3

GENERAL DESCRIPTION (continued)

Four Houses at the End of Main Street (Photo No. 49)

Like many of Betterton's popular hotels, the Betterton Hotel, built several annexes. Although the fire of 1949 destroyed the Betterton, the annexes survived. The first four Victorian frame structures on the west side of Main Street served as annexes to the Betterton Hotel. One of these faces the public beach; the others are oriented towards Main Street.

Most Precious Blood Catholic Church (Photo No. 48)

Located on the corner of Main Street and 1st Avenue, the Catholic Church, ca. 1911, is the other stucco church in Betterton. This church is distinctive for its rock and marble engravings, stained glass windows and an open portico which marks the entrance to the church.

Jewels Cottage (Photo No. 23)

This simple two story frame structure, located on the west side of Ericsson Avenue, epitomizes the overgrown homes of Betterton. Additions were constructed to popular boarding houses to accommodate more boarders. Jewels has a one story porch and steep gable roofs.

8. Significance

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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	X architecture	___ education	___ military	X social/humanitarian
___ 1700–1799	___ art	___ engineering	___ music	___ theater
X 1800–1899	X commerce	___ exploration/settlement	___ philosophy	X transportation
X 1900–	___ communications	___ industry	___ politics/government	___ other (specify)
		___ invention		

Specific dates 1880–1930 **Builder/Architect** various unknown

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

Applicable Criteria: A, C
Applicable Exceptions: none
Level of Significance for Evaluation: local

SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY:

The significance of the Betterton Historic District lies in its association with the passenger steamboat on the Chesapeake Bay. Bayside resorts such as Betterton, developed during the last two decades of the 19th century, in response to the emerging middle class demand for leisure time recreation. These resorts served as an escape from cities such as Baltimore and Philadelphia. Betterton, along with Tolchester and Love Point on the "Upper Shore," sprang up along the steamboat lines of the Chesapeake Bay and grew with the popularity of the cruises. Betterton is the last intact community of the steamboat's golden age. Other resorts, both on the Western and Eastern Shores have either been destroyed or dramatically altered. Although several hotels were constructed during Betterton's hayday, it was the cottages and rooming homes that created the "quaint, unpretentious charm which combines the atmosphere of the Eastern Shore countryside with that of a seaside resort."[1]

For History and Support Documentation see Continuation Sheet No. 4

HISTORY AND SUPPORT

Betterton was once known as "Maryland's Foremost Bayside Resort."[2] The town developed solely in response to the emergence of the recreational steamboat on the Chesapeake Bay. It is the best preserved of the 19th century resort towns.

Steamboats appeared on the Chesapeake Bay during the early 1800's, but did not begin catering to passengers until the 1870's. These ships originally transported freight up and down the Bay. During the Civil War, the steamboats were converted to battleships and played important roles in the blockade of ports. After the war, the ships were returned to their owners. Many of the ships were not useable and steamboat lines went out of business.

Several of the lines expanded to include passenger service but it was not until the 1870's that the steamships began to cater to passengers. The Centennial Celebration in 1876 was a catalyst for the growth in passenger steamboats, particularly for those lines traveling between Philadelphia and points south.

From the 1870's to the 1930's steamboats traveled up and down the Bay. Many small lines opened with one or two boats, serving specific rivers to connect with rail stops. Several lines dominated, running daily trips from major cities to points along the Bay.

The Ericsson Line ran steamboat excursions in the Upper Bay. The steamers would leave Philadelphia at 8 a.m., arriving in Baltimore at 6 p.m., and vice versa. These boats would stop at Betterton, Town Point, Chesapeake City, Lorewood Groves, St. George's, Delaware City, and Chester. It also ran night trips. The Maryland and Eastern Shore lines ran steamers from Baltimore to points south, many of which connected to railroad lines heading towards Ocean City. The Pennsylvania Railroad, concerned over the competition of the steamers, purchased several lines in the early 1900's. They ran the steamers to ports connected with the railroad. The Tolchester Line, incorporated in 1878, worked the Upper Bay with the Wilson, Weems, and Ericsson Lines. The Tolchester line is particularly notable due to its association with the Tolchester Amusement Park, and the temperance rule which governed the activities at the park and on the steamers. The Tolchester line later became the dominant line on the Upper Bay. The side wheeler Louise, owned by the Tolchester line, was popular with Baltimoreans. The screw steamer, Susquahanna, was built in 1898 by Charles Reeder & Sons for the Tolchester line to run the Havre de Grace - Betterton excursion.[3]

Every steamboat had its own personality with most being regal and stately. Sidewheelers gracefully traveled across the Bay. Screws, which allowed navigation in the narrow rivers and locks in the C&D Canal churned in the rivers and on the Bay. No expense was spared when outfitting a new steamer. The designers mounted plaques or stem decorations on either side of the stempiece. These bore fancily carved flourishes. Few pilot houses were without spread-winged eagles leafed in gold.

See Continuation Sheet No. 5

HISTORY AND SUPPORT (continued)

The steamboat trade changed during the 1920's. The beautiful sidewheelers were replaced by steamers which could carry automobiles. Fires were a constant hazard to the wooden-superstructured boats. In 1937, the Ericsson Line went out of business due to declining business and the cost of installing fire safety equipment (especially sprinkler systems). The Tolchester Line merged with the Wilson Line and continued business on a much smaller scale, running the Bay Belle from Baltimore's Pier 5 to Betterton. In 1951, the Bay Belle became the first American Boat with a television show when station WBAL broadcast the popular dance show, "Aboard the Bay Belle."[4] By this time the pace of America had changed and the attraction of the slow, graceful steamboat had waned.

During the steamboat's hayday, they stopped at cities and towns up and down the Bay. Each of the towns, like the steamers, had its own personality. Many of the stops, such as Annapolis, were established communities with interesting histories. Others, such as Love Point and stops on the lower Eastern Shore, served as both steamboat and railroad stops. Many of these areas functioned only as a stopover for the steamboat passenger on the way to Ocean City or other Atlantic Coast beaches. Some functioned as resorts in their own right.

Sharps Island, Betterton and Tolchester were all popular resorts during the steamboat days. Tolchester consisted of one hotel and a 155 acre park. Amusements and rides were added. Later, Tolchester was particularly popular for church picnics. Sharps Island consisted of a solitary hotel and scenic vistas. Betterton was a particularly unique resort. While most of the resorts consisted of one hotel or a smattering of boarding homes, Betterton was the only major concentration of resort buildings.

As the steamboats began to decline in the 1930's, the Bay resorts also declined. Tolchester was sold to a developer in 1931. The hotel and park were destroyed. Tolchester is now a marina and residential area. Other resorts closed or changed. Betterton continued to attract a few tourists but in essence went to sleep.

The town of Betterton developed in response to the steamboat on the Chesapeake Bay. In 1877, Betterton was a small fishing village consisting of nine homes on the west side of Main Street, a steam saw mill, a store, a warehouse, a church, and a school. During the 1880's, the wives of watermen began serving meals and renting rooms to passengers from the first boats to stop at Betterton. The word spread about Betterton's excellent food, spectacular views, and gracious hospitality. By 1883, one of the earliest resort hotels, "Chesapeake House," had been established. A deed of 1892 mentions a passenger wharf which indicates the tourist trade was well developed by that time. The early boarding homes expanded and hotels were built as Betterton's popularity grew. Throughout most of Betterton's golden age, those rooming homes were actually overgrown houses.

See Continuation Sheet No. 6

HISTORY AND SUPPORT (continued)

The 1890's saw the beginning of a construction boom which continued until World War I. Beginning with the construction of the Chesapeake in 1883 and ending in 1915 with the construction of the Hotel Rigbie, Betterton grew into a major bayside resort. Hotels such as the Bayside Inn, Hotel Betterton and particularly the Hotel Rigbie prospered from the tradition of gracious hospitality and excellent food which was established by the earlier boarding homes. The boom included the construction of homes on the inland streets and the expansion of resort-related businesses. The town incorporated in 1906 and "Betterton on the Bay" was born.

The town thrived during the first two decades of the 20th century. Orchestras played in the ballrooms of the hotels and the watermen began running daily fishing trips for the tourists. At least eight steamers stopped at Betterton daily. The Ericsson Line built its own pier on the west end of the beach and the Tolchester Line pier was constructed near the old town wharf. Steamboats such as the Susquahanna, S. S. Belle, and the Bay Belle brought thousands of visitors to the town that only 200-300 people called home.

The steamboat lines ran several excursion trips from Baltimore to Betterton. These trips enabled the citizens of Baltimore to spend the day enjoying Betterton's nettle-free swimming and scenic vistas without the expense of an overnight visit. Many times, these daytrippers returned to spend a weekend in Betterton.

Religion has always played a major role in Betterton. The members of the Methodist Church were some of the major investors in the town. This church met in the old Crew Homestead from 1868 until 1914, when the existing church on Main Street was constructed. The Most Precious Blood Catholic Church was constructed in 1911. St. John's on the Bay, an Episcopal church was constructed in 1915 on a bluff overlooking the beach.

The Great Depression marked the beginning of decline in Betterton's tourist trade. As the popularity of the steamers declined so did Betterton. Although the hotels and businesses continued to operate in the 1940's, the steamboat trade had declined significantly. By 1950, most of the steamboat lines had gone out of business and the Wilson-Tolchester Line reduced their service to Betterton. The construction of the Bay Bridge which allowed rapid access to the Atlantic beaches, dealt the final blow to Betterton.

See Continuation Sheet No. 7

9. Major Bibliographical References

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See Continuation Sheet No. 7

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property approximately 285 acres

Quadrangle name Betterton, Maryland

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

UMT References

See Continuation Sheet No. 8

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

Verbal boundary description and justification

See Continuation Sheet No. 8

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

state	code	county	code
n/a			

11. Form Prepared By

name/title	Gail C. Webb, Planner		
organization	Kent County Planning Commission	date	30 January 1984
street & number	Courthouse	telephone	301-778-6104
city or town	Chestertown	state	Maryland 21620

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

___ national ___ state X local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature [illegible] 5-2-84

title STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER date

For HCRS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

date

Keeper of the National Register

Attest: date

Chief of Registration

HISTORY AND SUPPORT (continued)

Footnotes and MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

1. Robert C. Breen, "Betterton," Baltimore Sun, July 9, 1952.

2. Jack O'Brien, "The Resort with the Tear-Stained Face," The Star-Democrat Weekend Magazine, October 15, 1982, pp. 6-7.

3. H. Graham Woods & Robert Burgess, Steamboats Out of Baltimore, Cambridge, Md., Tidewater Publishers, 1968.

4. Richard V. Elliott, The Last of the Steamboats, Cambridge, Md. Tidewater Publishers, 1970.

BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION

The area within the Betterton Historic District contains most of the structures possessing historical or architectural significance. The district also includes significant waterfront open spaces which are important to the history of the community. This area has retained much of its late 19th/early 20th century appearance. In contrast, the area of Betterton outside of the district is composed of modern buildings, farms, wooded areas and a marsh. Specific boundary lines follow current (1984) property lines and street lines.

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The boundary of the Betterton Historic District is described as follows:

Beginning with the intersection of Gut Marsh and the shoreline, south along the edge of the marsh to the intersection with the corporate limit; thence west, following the corporate limits to 2nd Avenue; thence south along the center of Glen Street until it intersects with the south property line of Joan M. Hitchner; thence west along the southernmost property lines of Joan M. Hitchner and R. H. Werner until it intersect with the property of Richard G. Stems; thence south along the eastern property line of Richard Stems, James E. Walls, and Thomas W. Rigby until it intersects with 3rd Avenue; thence west along the center of 3rd Avenue to the alley, south along the alley to 4th Avenue; thence west to Main Street, and south along the center of Main Street until Main Street intersects with Howell Point Road; then west along the center of Howell Point Road to the east property line of Stanley Wilson; thence north along the east property lines of Carl Webb III and John Sorge until the north property line of John Sorge; thence west along the property line of John Sorge until it intersects with the east property lines of Robert Leigh; thence north along the east property lines of Robert Leigh and William Fritz, until it meets the shoreline; finally east along the shoreline until it intersects with the Gut Marsh.

UTM References

U.S.G.S. quad does not have UTM ticks

	Longitude	Latitude
A	76° 03' 14"	39° 22' 13"
B	76° 03' 57"	39° 21' 34"
C	76° 04' 11"	39° 22' 15"
D	76° 03' 45"	39° 22' 19"

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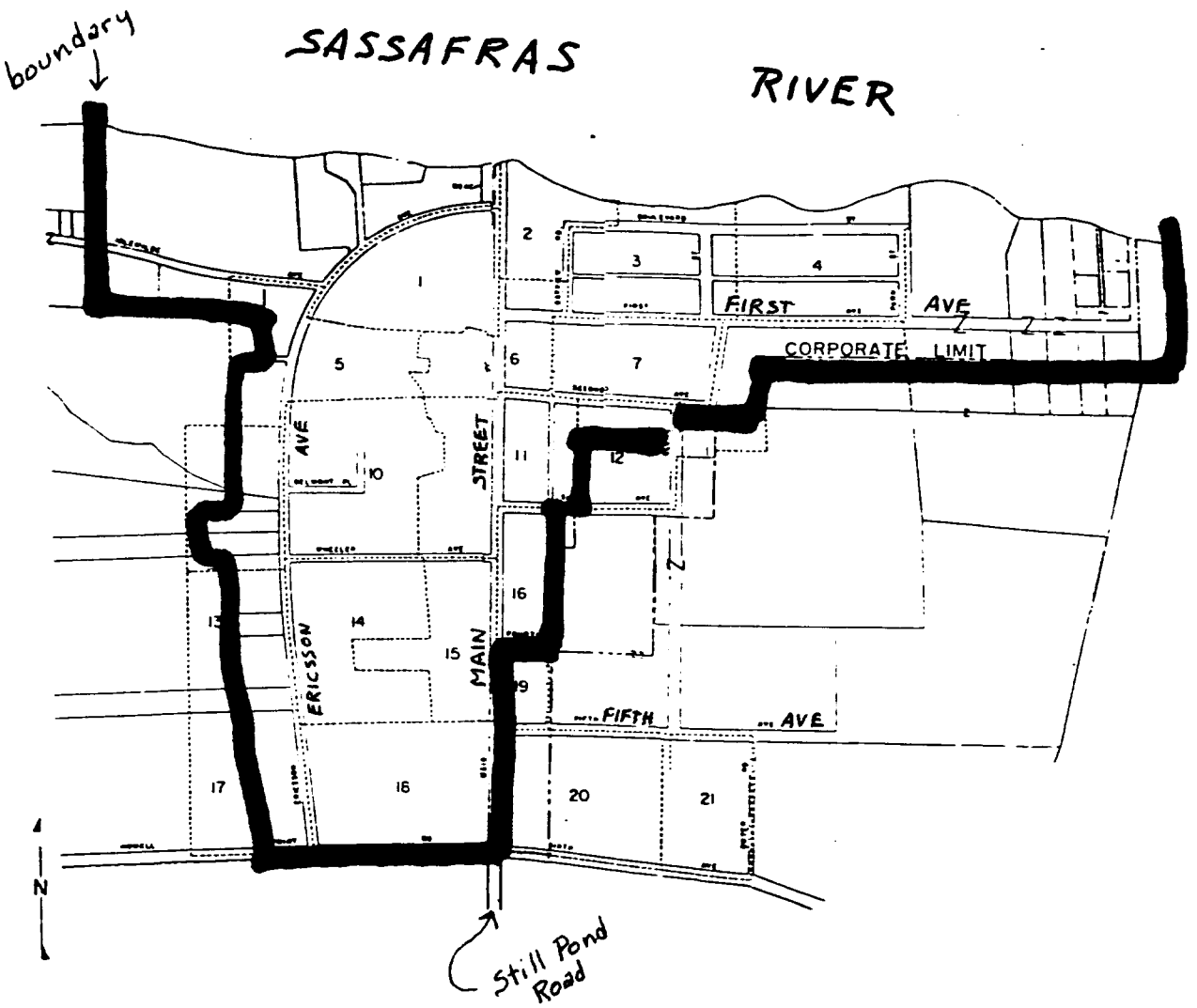

BETTERTON HISTORIC DISTRICT

Kent County, Maryland

boundaries for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, U. S. Department of the Interior, 1984

K-601

Betterton Historic District, Kent Co., Maryland

A. long. 76° 03' 14"
lat. 39° 22' 13"

B. long. 76° 03' 57"
lat. 39° 21' 34"

C. long. 76° 04' 11"
lat. 39° 22' 15"

D. long. 76° 03' 45"
lat. 39° 22' 19"

BETTERTON