Thomas Cuff House **K-545**
108 Cannon Street
Chestertown, Maryland Mid-18th century

The Cuff House was probably built by the mid-eighteenth century, a dating supported by Kent County Wills and Land Records for that site, remaining interior woodwork, and an archeological survey. The house was restored in 1987. On the exterior deteriorated circular-sawn siding was replaced by new beaded siding corresponding to old siding fragments found under the eaves. The deteriorated tin roof was replaced with a wood shingle roof similar to several shingles found under old flashing around the chimney. The house as restored is a simple frame, two-story structure, with a central doorway, flanked on each side by 6/6 windows. Two similar windows are on the second story front and three on each gable, one on each floor. The door and window frames have a simple ovolo backband molding. The rear of the house, invisible from the street, is a modern frame wing with similar windows and siding.

The original interior plan of the front four rooms, up and down, remains. There are two rooms on each floor, each with a fireplace built into the large central chimney. The partitions between the rooms are vertical beaded-board panelling, probably original to the house. The upstairs room on the right retained all the original woodwork, window and door frames with simple molding, simple mantel with shelf, and exposed beaded corner posts. The room below also retained an early mantel - a shelf supported on a simple molding and flat pilasters between the opening surround and the bottom of the shelf. The original stairway had been built around the corner of this room, but had been removed. A fragment of the railing - simple with a beaded edge along the bottom - was found during the archeological exploration. The left-hand rooms had lost in a fire all original wood trim except the panelling. Locally found

replacement mantels from the late 18th or early 19th century have been installed, as well as corresponding period corner cupboards in each of the first floor rooms. One original door remained, with four raised panels, cross-pieces mortised together and fastened with wooden pegs and the shadow of HL hinges. Other doors were reproduced to match it.

In the course of re-building the unstable rear wing, the remains of a brick pavement were found back of the first floor room on the right side. This was left exposed, with shattered bricks replaced. The new rear wing has a three-story hall with staircase rising against four walls from first floor to third, where the attic is lighted by a 6/6 window at each end. A large new room was built across the back, trimmed with an early Federal style fireplace (from a demolished late 18th century house near Kenton, Delaware), flanking bookcases with keystone arches, and jib doors leading to a screened/glassed-in porch.

Thomas Cuff, a free African-American, purchased in 1820 "all that western-most half of lot Number 5", fronting "90 feet 9 inches on Cannon Street and running back 148 feet 6 inches together with all singular improvements; " 56/ this includes the site of this house. In succeeding years he bought additional adjoining tracts, including the waterfront between Cannon Street and the dead end of South Water Street. Over the years he sub-divided his land, selling to other free African-Americans. The records, architectural remains in the house, and archeological evidence provide an unusually well documented record of the living standard of a relatively well-off free African-American in Chestertown during the pre-Civil War era.

Although the house was owned and occupied by Thomas Cuff from 1820 until his death in 1858, it was probably built in the mid-eighteenth century. The will of Joseph Mann, "bricklayer," recorded on 19 February 1748, mentions a "messuage,"

which was sold by his executor to Dr. William Murray and described "as 1/3 part of Lot Number 5 on Cannon Street, being the uppermost part lying furthest from the 'Chester River.'" 57/ , a description corresponding to the site of the Cuff House. Dr. Murray bequeathed four houses on Town Lot Number Five to his four daughers, including a house "now without a tenant" in this location. 58/ After Dr. Murray's death his daughters sold to Thomas Ringgold, 59/ who had already bought the large brick house across the street (Hynson-Ringgold House). Ringgold's grandsons sold out their Chestertown property in 1808 to Richard Snowden Thomas, a wealthy landowner from Chestertown and Philadelphia. 60/ He gave Lot Number Five and other Chestertown properties to his daughter, Mrs. Deborah Wright, who died soon thereafter. 61/ The property was sub-divided and sold by the trustees of her minor son, Gustavus Wright, to among others, Dr. Peregrine Wroth, a local physician and professor at Washington College, James Edmondson Barroll, a prominent lawyer who by then was living in the Hynson-Ringgold House, Henry Tilghman, and Joseph Gordon.

Cuff purchased four acres adjoining his Cannon Street property from Dr. Wroth on August 8, 1832, 62/ just two months after Wroth had bought a larger tract including Cuff's purchase from Gustavus Wright's trustees. Cuff eventually owned the land running from Cannon Street, along Front Street (now South Water) to the swamp and freshet now under Railroad Avenue, as well as the adjoining waterfront lots.

During restoration in 1987-88 the University of Delaware conducted an archeological survey and found under the house wine bottle fragments, Chinese export porcelain, other ceramic and glass shards, shoes, coins, etc. dating from the last quarter of the 18th to the 20th century, as well as a number of animal and chicken bones, oyster shells, etc. The house had originally been built on stone piers, but

remained open underneath. The foundation was later filled in with brick, leaving the archeological remains undisturbed. 63/

Cuff's will in 1857 directed that his property should pass through two owners for their lifetimes before vesting in a third. Dr. Wroth was named as executor. Cuff's will was not probated, however, until 1884, by which time his house was evidently in poor condition. It was repaired, divided into a double house and rented out. Under the ownership of absentee landlords it had deteriorated into near ruinous condition by its restoration in 1987.

The house is significant as the residence of a comparatively well-off free African-American in the pre-Civil War era, whose life style emerges from the records and from the archeological evidence. The University of Delaware has compared Cuff's life style to those evidenced by contemporary digs in Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Ohio, and concluded that Cuff lived at the upper level for free African-Americans, with a standard comparable to the lower range for middle class whites.

Directly to the rear of the Cuff House is the Cuff family graveyard, mentioned in several land records. In 1987 before site clearance, a stone step and remnants of a short picket fence were found there, although no gravestones were visible. In addition to Cuff's probable grave, James Chambers, a neighbor of Cuff's, was buried there in 1907. 64/ There may be others.

HISTORIC CONTEXT

K-545
THOMAS CUFF HOUSE

MARYLAND COMPREHENSIVE HISTORIC PRESERVATION PLAN DATA

Geographic Organization
1) Eastern Shore

Chronological/Developmental Period
10) Agricultural-Industrial Transition AD1815-1870
9) Rural Agrarian Intensification 1680-1815

Historic Period Themes
2) Architecture
7) Social Cultural

Resource Type
Category - building, private, occupied public acquisition - not applicable accessible, restricted, private residence
Historic Environment - Village
Historic Functions and Uses - dwelling
Unknown Design Source

Survey No. K-545

MARYLAND INVENTORY OF HISTORIC PROPERTIES

Magi No.

DOE __yes __no

Maryland Historical Trust
State Historic Sites Inventory Form

1. Name (indicate preferred name)

historic Thomas Cuff House

and/or common Same

2. Location

street & number 108 Cannon Street ___ not for publication

city, town Chestertown ___ vicinity of congressional district First

state Maryland county Kent

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use	
___ district	___ public	X occupied	___ agriculture	___ museum
X building(s)	X private	___ unoccupied	___ commercial	___ park
___ structure	___ both	___ work in progress	___ educational	X 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 Ronald and Susan Kerns

street & number 108 Cannon Street telephone no.: 410-778-1014

city, town Chestertown state and zip code MD 21620

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Kent County Courthouse liber EHP 240

street & number Cross Street folio 237

city, town Chestertown state MD

6. Representation in Existing Historical Surveys

title None

date ___ federal ___ state ___ county ___ local

depository for survey records

city, town state

7. Description

Survey No. K-545

Condition		Check one	Check one
X excellent	___ deteriorated	___ unaltered	X original site
___ 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.

This house was owned and occupied by Thomas Cuff, a free African-American from 1820 until his death in 1858, although it probably dates from the mid-18th century, based on the records, an archeological dig, and remaining architectural features. It is a simple two-story frame house with a central chimney, two rooms on each floor. A new rear wing was added in 1987.

The Cuff House was probably built by the mid-eighteenth century, a dating supported by Kent County Wills and Land Records for that site, remaining interior woodwork, and an archeological survey. The house was restored in 1987. On the exterior deteriorated circular-sawn siding was replaced by new beaded siding corresponding to old siding fragments found under the eaves. The deteriorated tin roof was replaced with a wood shingle roof similar to several shingles found under old flashing around the chimney. The house as restored is a simple frame, two-story structure, with a central doorway, flanked on each side by 6/6 windows. Two similar windows are on the second story front and three on each gable, one on each floor. The door and window frames have a simple ovolo backband molding. The rear of the house, invisible from the street, is a modern frame wing with similar windows and siding.

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In the 1987-88 restoration, a new rear wing was built to replace the old one. The new wing has a three-story hall with staircase rising against four walls from first floor to third, where the attic is lighted by a 6/6 window at each end. A large new room was built across the back, trimmed with an early Federal style fireplace (from a demolished late 18th century house near Kenton, Delaware), flanking bookcases with keystone arches, and jib doors leading to a screened/glassed-in porch.

8. Significance

Survey No. K-545

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

Specific dates 1740-1770 **Builder/Architect** Joseph Mann (?)

check: Applicable Criteria: ___A X B ___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.

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9. Major Bibliographical References

Survey No. K-545

1. Kent County Land Records
2. Administrative Accounts and Inventories. Kent County Chattel Records; Usilton, Fred G. The History of Kent County, Maryland. Catts, W. and McCall, D. "A Report on Archeological Investigations at the House of Thomas Cuff, a Free Black Laborer at 108 Canron St. Chestertown, MD. "North American Archealogist. Vol. 12, 199, p. 155.

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property 3,678 sq. ft.

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	Davy H. McCall		
organization	Historical Society of Kent Co.	**date**	January 3, 1996
street & number	Church Alley	**telephone**	(410) 778-3409
city or town	Chestertown	**state**	MD

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

MARYLAND HISTORICAL TRUST

PS-2746

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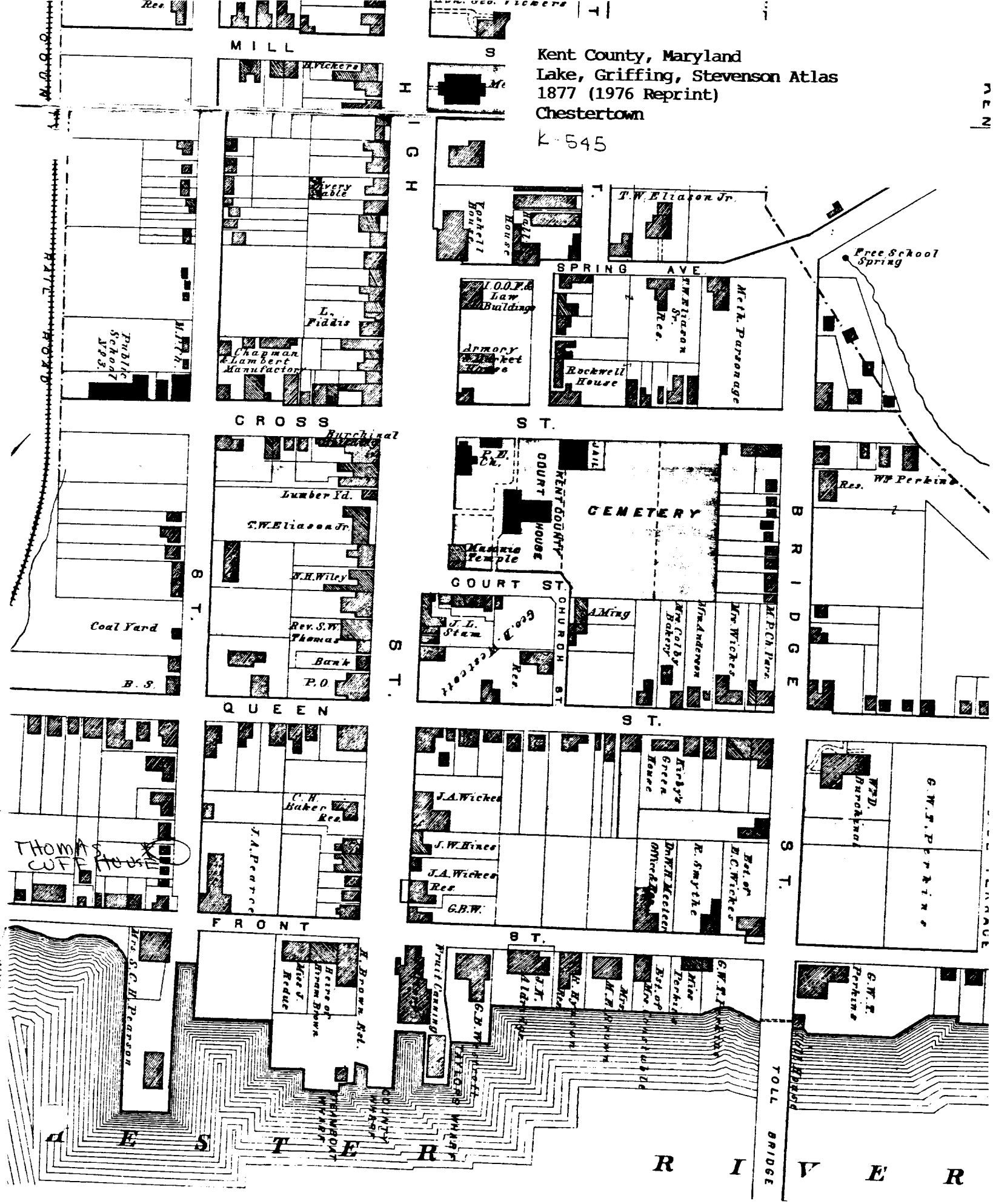
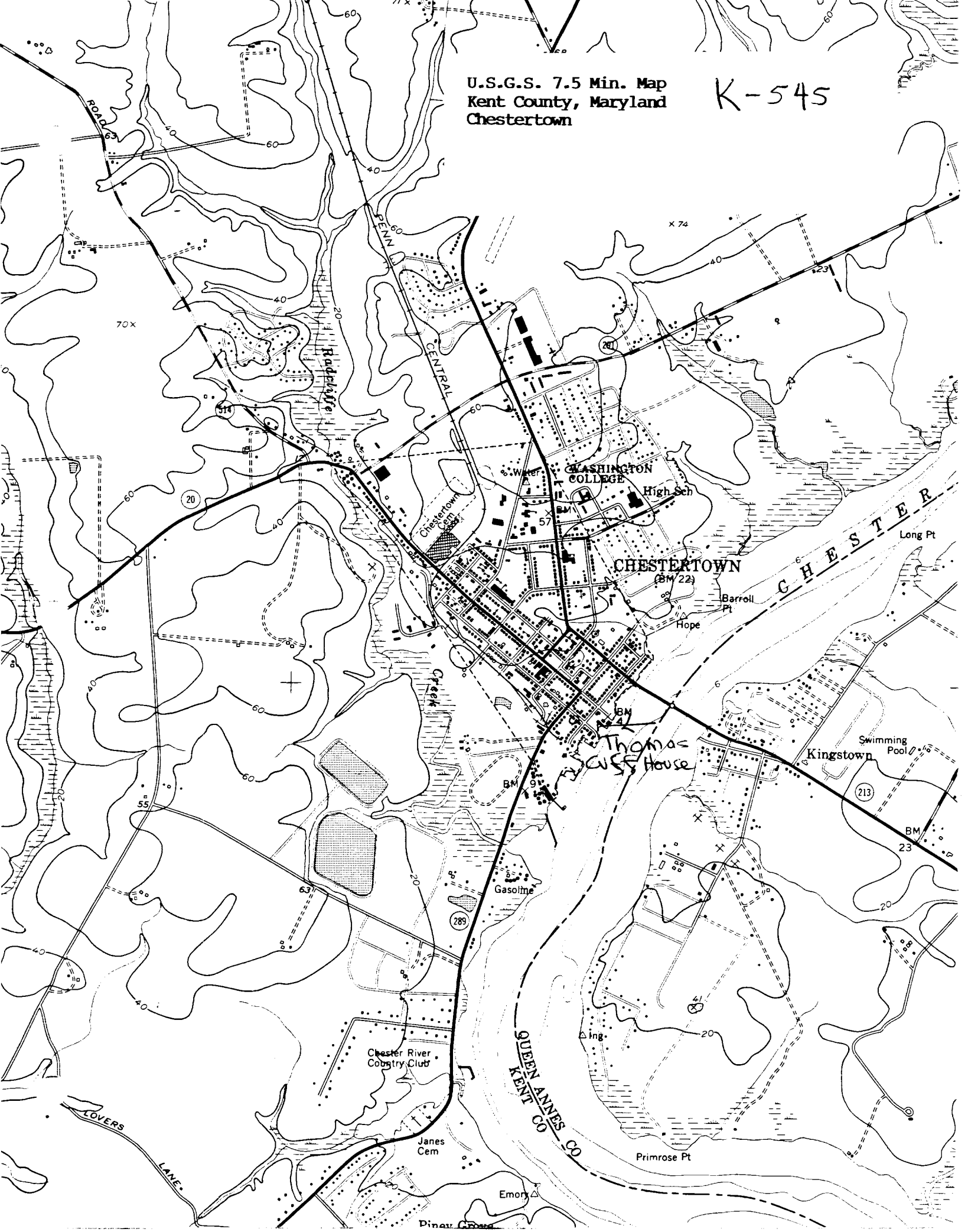
Kent County, Maryland
Lake, Griffing, Stevenson Atlas
1877 (1976 Reprint)
Chestertown

K-545



U.S.G.S. 7.5 Min. Map
Kent County, Maryland
Chestertown

K-545



Thomas Cuff House K-545
108 Cannon Street
Chestertown

from the east

M. Bourne

March 1996

1328-19
1-1996
K-545 Thomas Cuff House

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