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-20th 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street and number	425 Kent Narrows Way North	__	not for publication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
____district
_X_building(s)
____structure
____site
____object

Ownership
____public
_X_private
____both

Current Function
____agriculture
____commerce/trade
____defense
____domestic
____education
____funerary
____government
____health care
_X_industry
____landscape
____recreation/culture
____religion
____social
____transportation
____work in progress
____unknown
____vacant/not in use
____other:

Resource Count

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	2	buildings
0	0	sites
1	2	structures
0	0	objects
2	4	Total

Number of Contributing Resources previously listed in the Inventory
0

7. Description

Inventory No. QA-557

Condition

___ excellent ___ deteriorated
X good ___ ruins
___ fair X altered

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

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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-20th 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.[1] 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-20th 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.

[1] 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		
__ 1600-1699	__ agriculture	__ economics	__ health/medicine	__ performing arts
__ 1700-1799	__ archeology	__ education	x industry	__ philosophy
__ 1800-1899	__ architecture	__ engineering	__ invention	__ politics/government
x 1900-1999	__ art	__ entertainment/ recreation	__ landscape architecture	__ religion
__ 2000-	__ commerce	__ ethnic heritage	__ law	__ science
	__ communications	__ exploration/ settlement	__ literature	__ social history
	__ community planning		x maritime history	__ transportation
	__ conservation		__ military	__ other: ____

Specific dates 1945 (H. C. Harris bought Kent Oyster Co.)
1947 (W. H. Harris bought neighboring oyster co.)

Architect/Builder unknown

Construction dates late 1930s, 1981, 1991

Evaluation for:

_____ National Register _____ Maryland Register __X__ 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

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RESOURCE HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

W. H. Harris Seafood began in 1947 when William Holton Harris bought an oyster packing house in Kent Narrows.[2] 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

[2] Harris's brother, Holton Carroll Harris, had bought the adjacent Kent Oyster Company in 1945.

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

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.[4] 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.[5]

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."[6] 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.[7] 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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[3] Johnson, Paula J., ed. *Working the Water: The Commercial Fisheries of Maryland's Patuxent River.* pp. 35-37.
[4] Dredging, preferred method of New Englanders, had been outlawed in 1832. Chesapeake watermen traditionally harvested oysters using tongs.
[5] Brugger, 219, 314, 322, 324, 326, 381, 786; conversation between Julie Darsie (Betty Bird & Associates) and Karen Oertel (Harris Seafood) on July 21, 2005.
[6] Quoted in Brugger, 408.
[7] Spat are oysters in the larval stage that have settled onto beds of existing shell.

shortage of shells and seed oysters.[8] 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.[9]

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.[10] Finally, W. H. Harris Seafood has been involved in conservation efforts, particularly replanting of oyster beds.[11]

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[8] Brugger, 408, 461, 462, 561, 786.

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

[10] 90% of the oysters packed at W. H. Harris Seafood come from out-of-state.

[11] Conversation between Julie Darsie (Betty Bird & Associates) and Karen Oertel (Harris Seafood) on July 21, 2005.

9. Major Bibliographical References

Inventory No. QA-557

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.

10. Geographical Data

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

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 encompases 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.

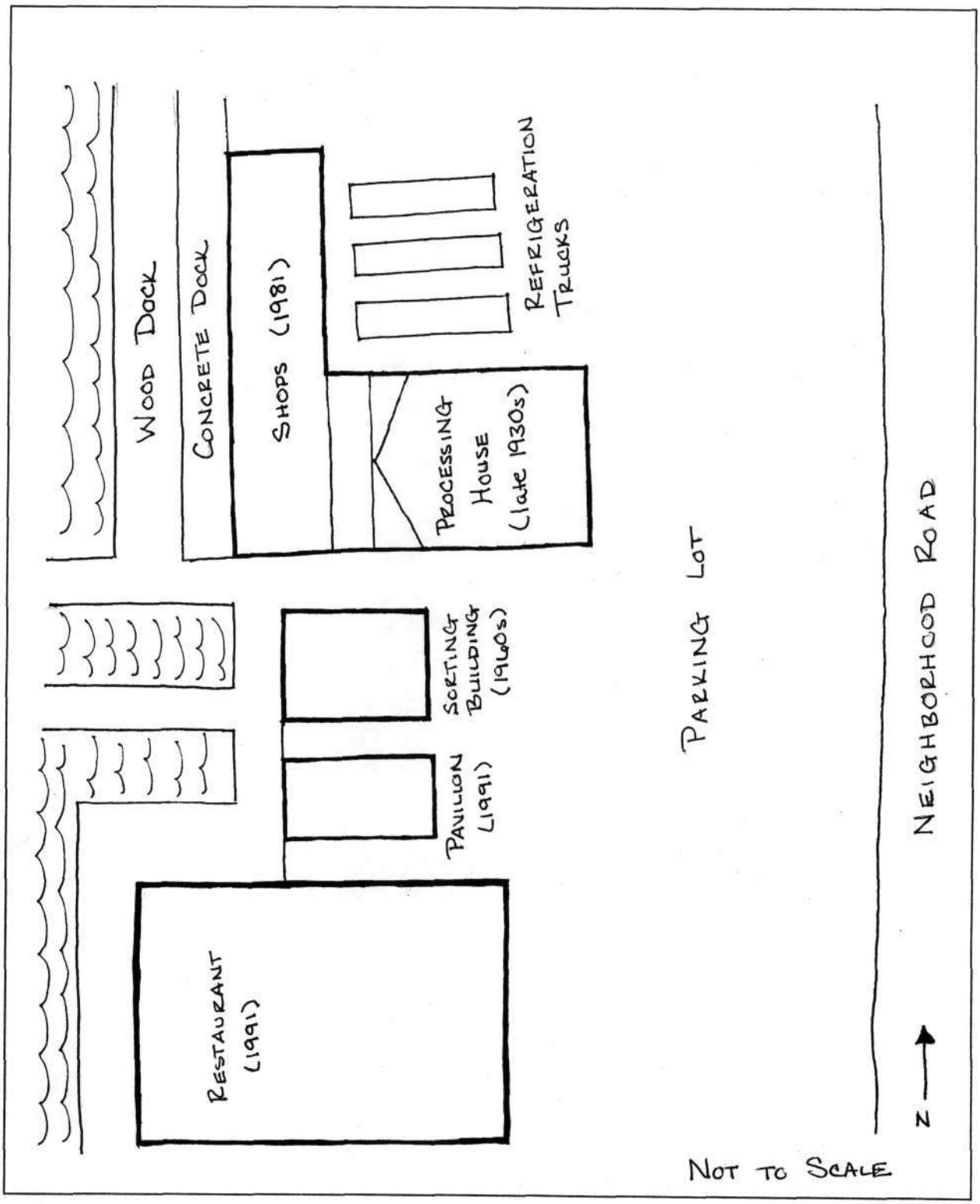
11. Form Prepared by

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

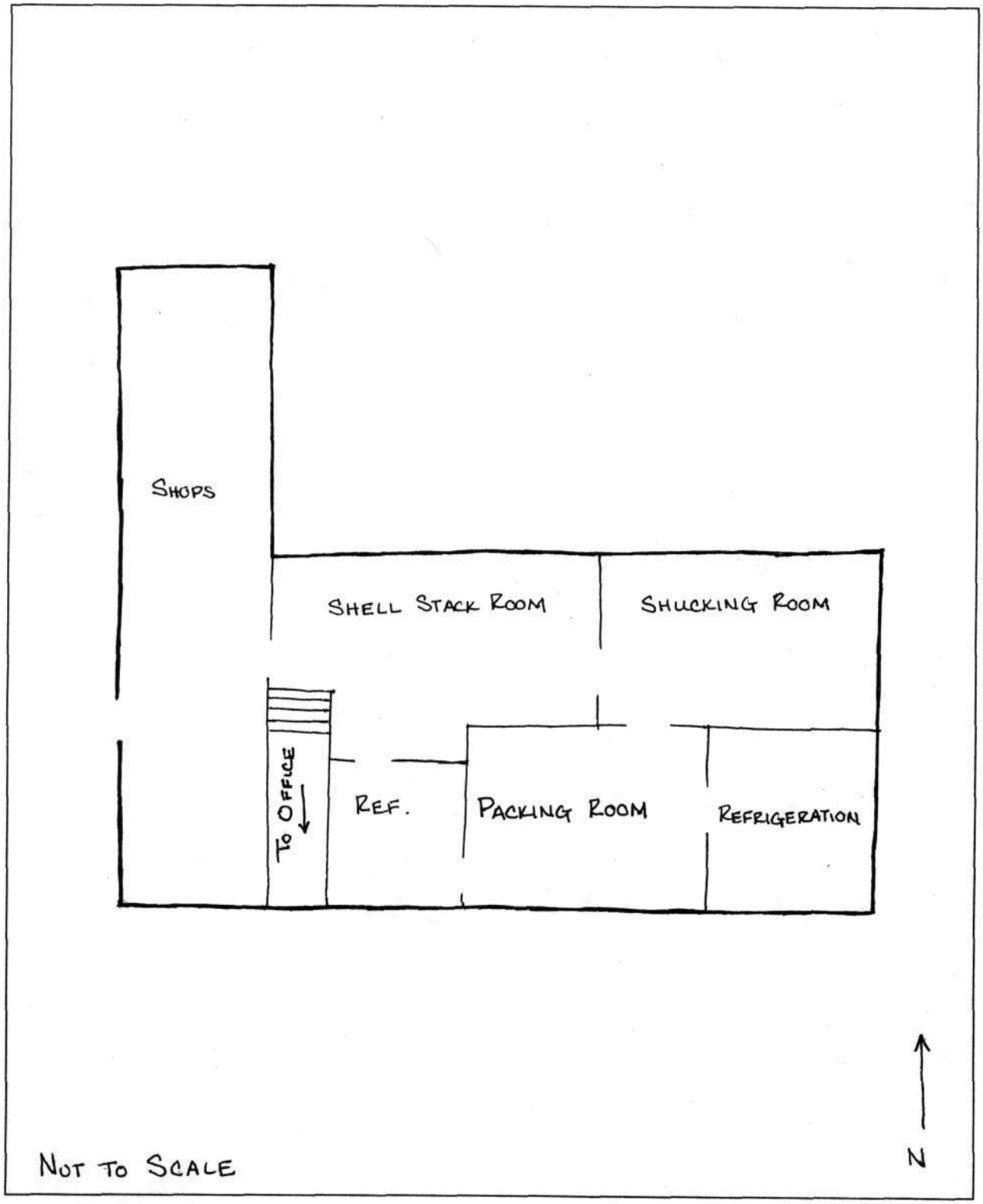
The Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties was officially created by an Act of the Maryland Legislature to be found in the Annotated Code of Maryland, Article 41, Section 181 KA, 1974 supplement.

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

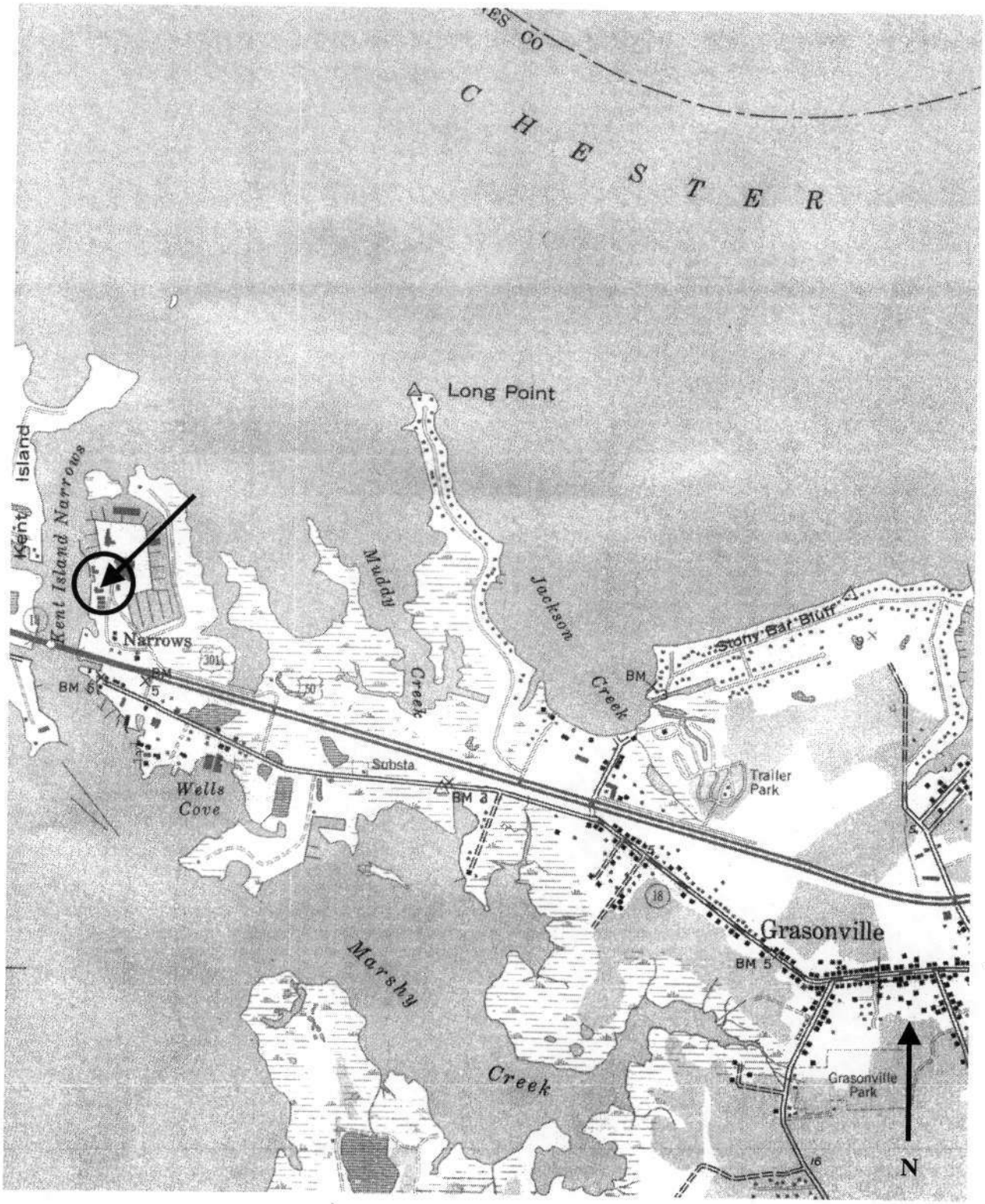
return to: Maryland Historical Trust
DHCD/DHCP
100 Community Place
Crownsville, MD 21032-2023
410-514-7600



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
Grasonville vicinity, Queen Anne's County, Maryland
Queenstown, Maryland Quadrangle (1:24,000)

Oyster
Recovery
Partnership

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

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 and processing house.
2 of 12

QA-559
W.H. Harris Seafood
Queen Anne's County, Maryland
Julie Darsie for Betty Bird & Associates
July 2005
MD SHPO
View to SE showing Sorting Building, Pavilion, and Restaurant.
3 of 12

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.
4 of 12

QA-557
W. H. Harris Seafood
Queen Anne's County, Maryland
Julie Darsie for Betty Bird & Associates
July 2005
MD SHPO
Complex from east. Restaurant on left, Pavilion, Sorting Building, and Processing House on right.
5 of 12

PARKING

QA-557
W.H. Harris Seafood
Queen Anne's County, Maryland
Julie Darsie for Betty Bird & Associates
July 2005
MD SHPO
View to NW showing south and east elevations of Processing House.
6 of 12

BUSH

QA-557
W.H. Harris Seafood
Queen Anne's County, Maryland
Julie Darsie for Betty Bird & Associates
July 2005
MD SHPO
Easthelevation of Processing House, Bagged oysters in foreground, refrigeration trucks in background
7 of 12

Morgan

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.
8 of 12

CATERPILLAR

QA-557
W. H. Harris Seafood
Queen Anne's County, Maryland
Julie Darsie for Betty Bird & Associates
July 2005
DLD SHPO
Interior of shell stage room
9 of 12

QA-557

W.H. Harris Seafood

Queen Anne's County, Maryland

Julie Dabsie for Kelly Bud & Associates

July 2008

MHA SHPO

Interior of shucking room

10 of 12

QA-557
W.H. Harris Seafood
Queen Anne's County, Maryland
Julie Darsie for Betty Bird & Associates
July 2005
MD SHPO
Interior of packing room
11 of 12

FRESH S
FRESH S

QA-551
W.H. Harris Seafood
Queen Anne's County, Maryland
Julie Darsie for Betty Bird & Associates
July 2005
MD SHPO
Interior of packing room.
12 of 12