

## Chapter IV Description of Existing Conditions

### A. Biophysical Elements

#### Landforms and Water Courses

The natural processes at work in the coastal plain region of Virginia create a very dynamic environment. The landscape of the Eastern Shore is constantly changing, thus raising the question of changes of the landforms and spatial relationships of Woodlands Farm and Thomas's Wharf. A typical cross section of Northampton County includes upland, tidal marsh, and water. (Figure 4.1) Upland is defined as land ranging in elevation from 25 to 40 feet above sea level, and includes cultivated land or hammocks, and wooded areas. The upland then slopes down to the tidal marshes. These marshes form a transitional boundary between the upland and the sea. (Figure 4.2) The tidal marshes are "flooded regularly by saltwater and are drained by an extensive system of meandering creeks."<sup>1</sup> (Figure 4.3)



Figure 4.1 Looking south across Upshur Creek to Brownsville. Author. August 1997.

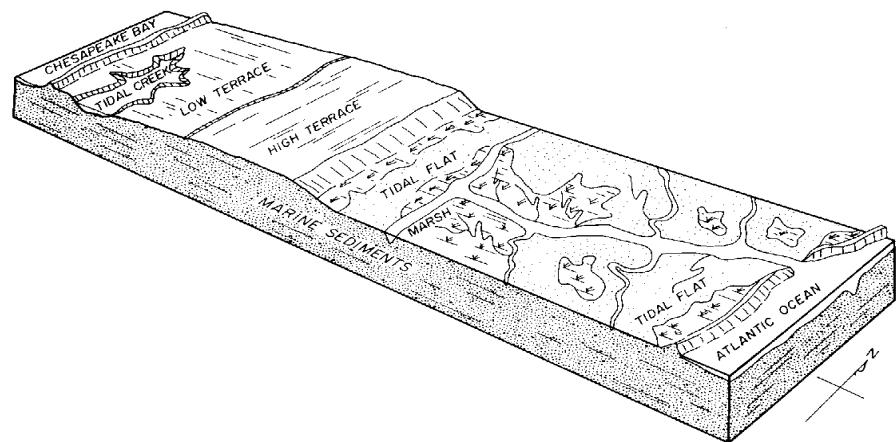


Figure 4.2 Landforms of the Eastern Shore. Soil Survey of Northampton County.

<sup>1</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, Soil Conservation Service, *Soil Survey of Northampton County, Virginia* (Washington, D.C.: The Service, 1989), 2-3.

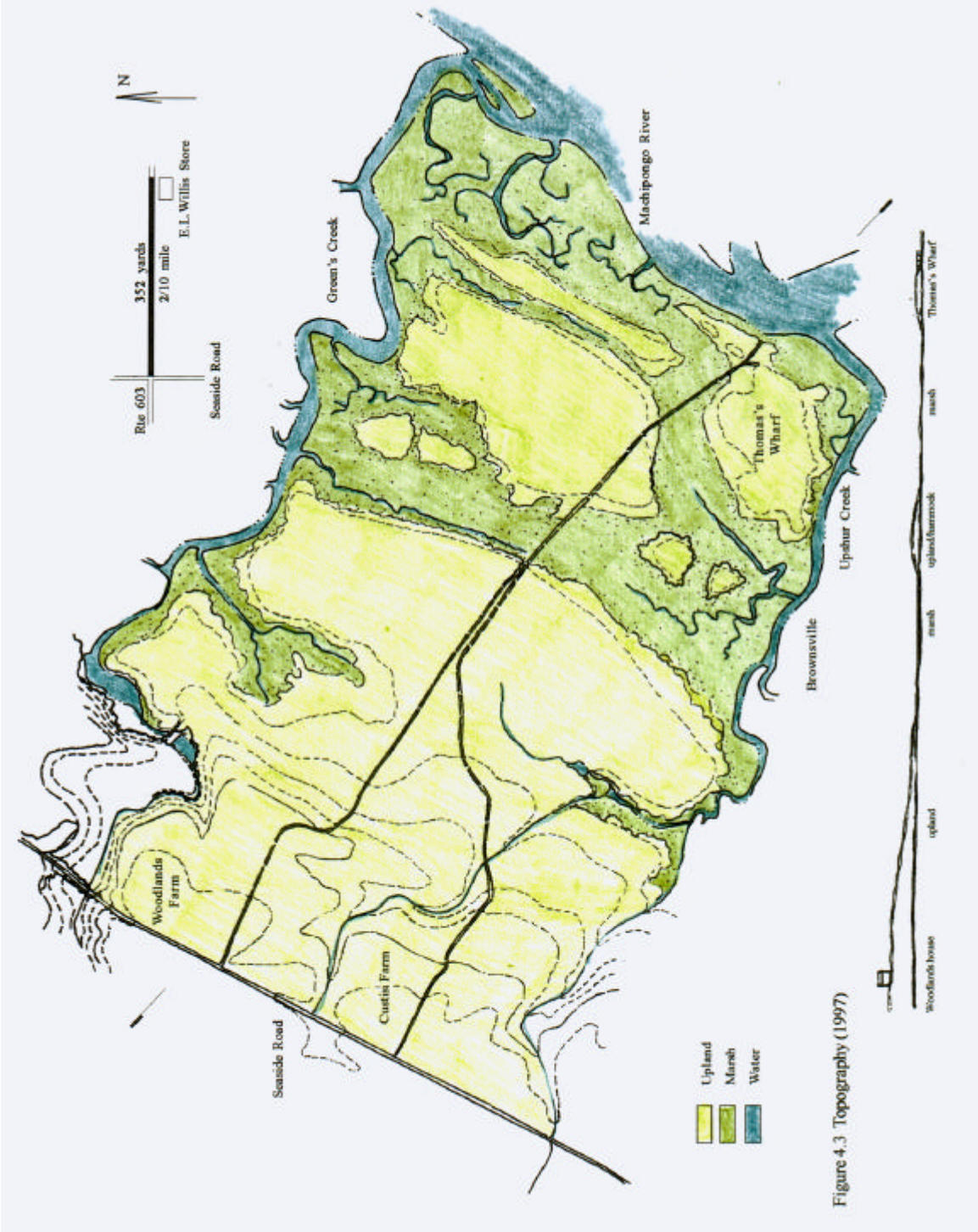


Figure 4.3 Topography (1997)

The topography of the Eastern Shore has significantly influenced the regional development of transportation. Lands surrounding water inlets on the bayside of the Eastern Shore were the first areas to be settled. The first settlements were on Old Plantation Creek, King's Creek, and Cherrystone Creek, they then moved steadily north up the bayside of the peninsula.<sup>2</sup> It has been speculated that bayside land was first patented because "compared to the seaside, the bayside was more sheltered from the severity of ocean storms, it was closer to the seat of government at James City, and its many creeks and inlets were more easily navigable and hospitable to settlement than the treacherous waters and exposed islands of the seaside."<sup>3</sup> Other influencing factors may have been the opportunity which the creeks and inlets provided for easy transportation among the Shore, as well as trade and transport with the Western Shore of Virginia and England. Ferry services were available in the mid 1630's, horses were not common until the mid 1640's to the 1650's, and the first bridges "across the creeks near the headwaters of navigation" were constructed. Hence, we see evidence of the reliance on water transportation as opposed to an extensive overland transportation system during the Eastern Shore's early development.

Having an extensive trade with the Western Shore of Virginia, New England, England, and Holland, the people of the Eastern Shore developed a network of transportation by which to exchange goods and information. During early settlement of the Shore transportation was limited; overland travel and accessibility to water carriers was not always easy. As mentioned previously, evidence exists of ferry services in the 1630's. In 1705 Virginia's General Assembly authorized the first ferry franchise across the bay and in 1815 a second ferry began operation.<sup>4</sup> The first order for the construction of public roads was conferred in 1657, as is evidenced by the present day Seaside and

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<sup>2</sup> James R. Perry, *The Formation of a Society on Virginia's Eastern Shore, 1615-1655* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 28.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 36.

<sup>4</sup> Ralph T. Whitelaw, *Virginia's Eastern Shore: A History of Northampton and Accomack Counties* (Richmond, Virginia: Virginia Historical Society, 1951), 39; Nora Miller Turman, *The Eastern Shore of Virginia, 1603-1964* (Onancock, Virginia: The Eastern Shore News, Inc., 1964), 163.

Bayside Roads.<sup>5</sup> Local landowners provided the labor needed to clear ten feet wide roads. Connecting the established towns on the bayside and seaside of the Shore, secondary crossroads provided access to public wharves, mills, churches, and courthouses.<sup>6</sup> (Figure 4.4)

Prior to the use of steamboats in the 1840's for shipping goods, planters would pool their resources to purchase sailing vessels to insure that their products got to market.<sup>7</sup> Steamboat service revolutionized transportation in and around the Chesapeake, as well as up and down the East Coast. Transporting both travelers and marketable goods, steamboat service allowed for fast and relatively consistent travel between urban and rural areas. Travel across the bay to the mainland and northern Chesapeake cities was relatively easy, thus opening up greater markets for Eastern Shore produce. Unlike the early private shipping enterprises of Eastern Shore planters, large companies (and many eventually in conjunction with the railroad) serviced the wharves along the rivers, creeks, and inlets. Access to wharves was limited by water depth, but many steamship companies provided vessels for feeder lines, providing service to distant and less accessible wharves.<sup>8</sup> (Figure 4.5)

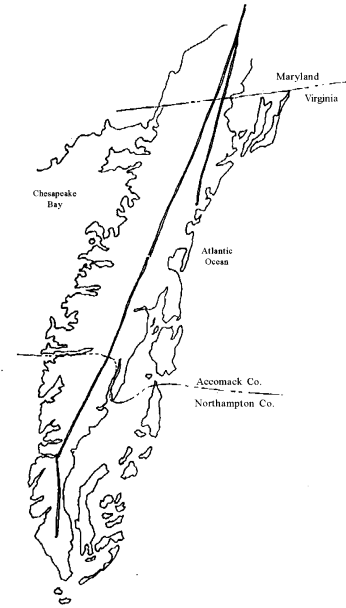


Figure 4.4 Early Roads (1781)

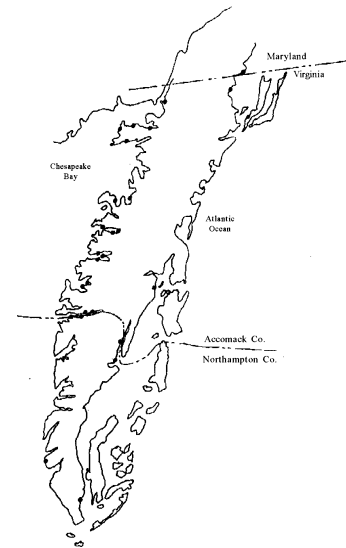


Figure 4.5 Wharves and Water Travel (1917)

<sup>5</sup> Jennings Cropper Wise, *Ye Kingdome of Accawmacke or the Eastern Shore of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century* (Richmond, Virginia: The Bell Book and Stationery Co., 1911), 291.

<sup>6</sup> Turman, 92-94.

<sup>7</sup> Wise, 293.

<sup>8</sup> Richard E. Prince, *Norfolk Southern Railroad, Old Dominion Line and Connection* (Millard, Nebraska: R.E. Prince, 1972), 225-226.

In an attempt to connect the Delaware and Maryland areas of the peninsula with Accomack and Northampton Counties, the New York & Norfolk Air Line Railway surveyed for a proposed railroad in 1855. Had the rail line been built it would have stretched from “Snow Hill, Maryland to Eastville in a straight line, the one branch to terminate at the steamboat landing at Cherrystone and another to go to the tip of the peninsula.”<sup>9</sup> Eventually the rail line was completed to Cape Charles in 1884, and the modern State Route 13 was constructed after 1930. Whitelaw aptly summarizes the interaction of traditional water transportation with the improved overland methods of travel; “The coming of the railroad brought hard competition for the old steamboats, but they continued to play their part in commerce until the highway was completed, then the rapid development of truck transportation soon spelled their doom.”<sup>10</sup> (Figures 4.6 and 4.7)

**Soils**

Cultivated areas or hammocks on Woodlands Farm and Thomas’s Wharf site are dominated by the Bojac-Munden series, commonly found on broad flats and depressions. (Figure 4.8) They are composed of moderately drained sandy and loamy soils. Wooded areas are composed of Molena-Bojac-Munden series,

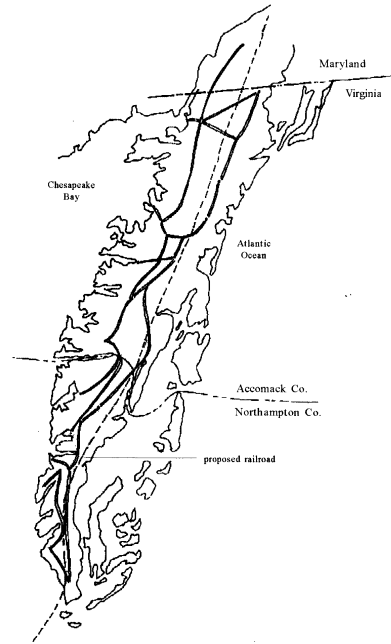


Figure 4.6 Roads and Proposed Railroad (1855)

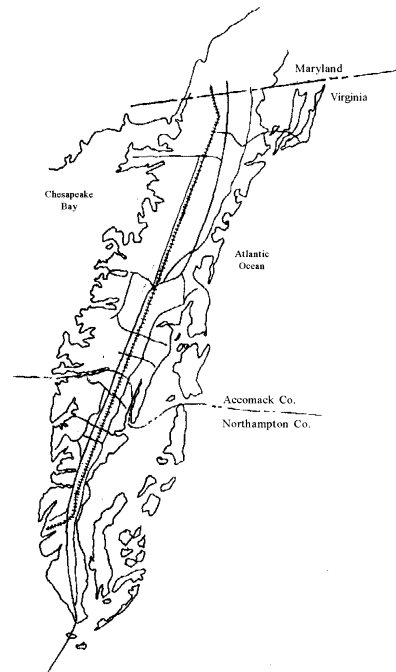


Figure 4.7 Regional Transportation Patterns (1990’s)

<sup>9</sup> Mear’s Scrapbook ,Volume 7, 179.

<sup>10</sup> Whitelaw, 46.

characterized by moderately drained soils on broad flats and side slopes. (Figure 4.9) Chincoteague-Magotha series is characteristic of tidal marshes with poorly drained silty and loamy soils.<sup>11</sup> (Figure 4.10) Soils typical of the present cultivated and wooded areas have a high level of productivity of loblolly pine, as well as good soil composition for agricultural production. Either land use can be supported on these soils; thus lands that are presently wooded could have been in cultivation at one time. Aerial photographs from the 1960's support the claim that certain hammocks were much larger than they are today. (Figures 4.11 and 4.12)



Figure 4.8 Typical Eastern Shore hammock. Author. May 1997.



Figure 4.9 Loblolly forest. Author. May 1997



Figure 4.10 Tidal marsh. Author. August 1997.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.



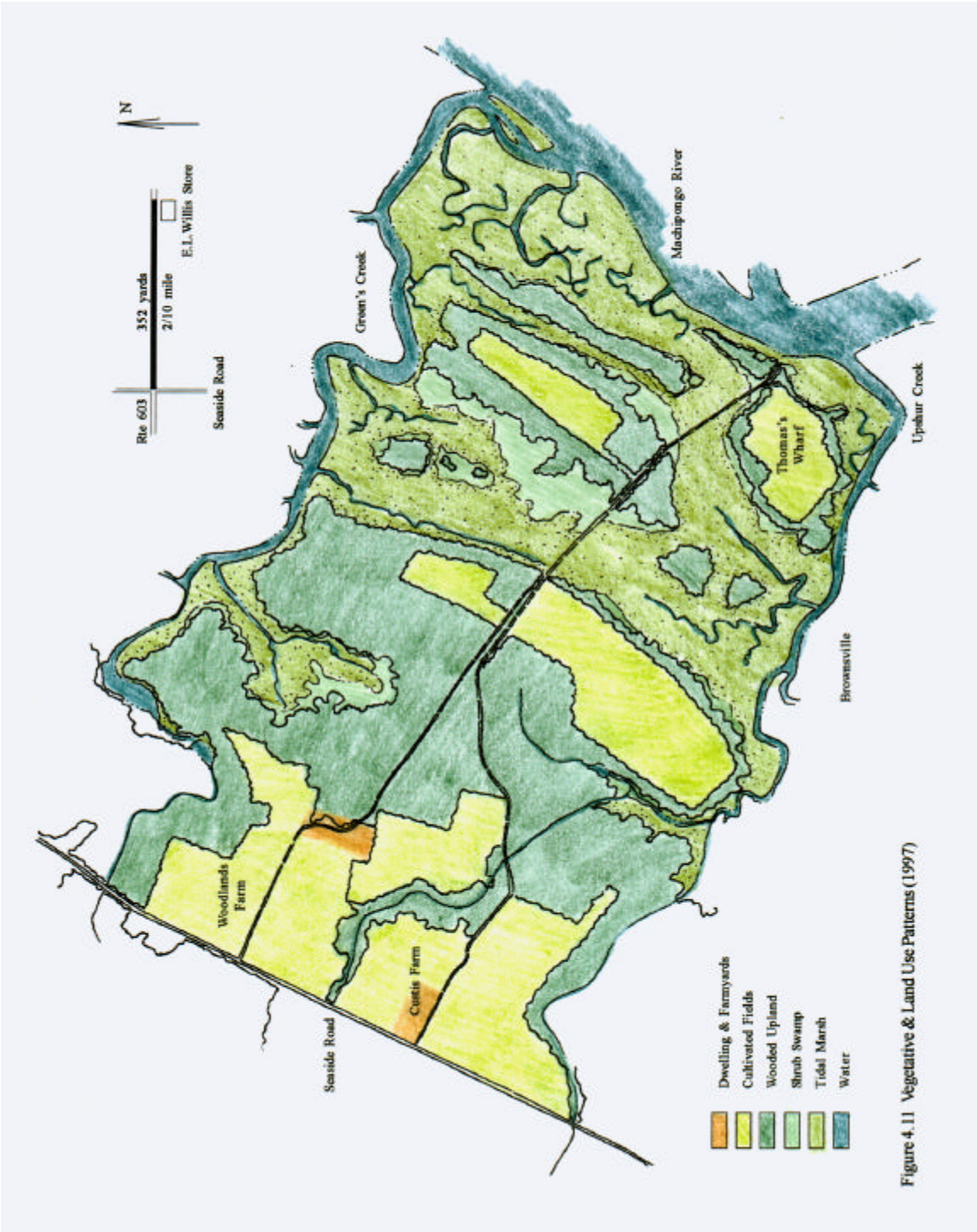


Figure 4.11 Vegetative & Land Use Patterns (1997)

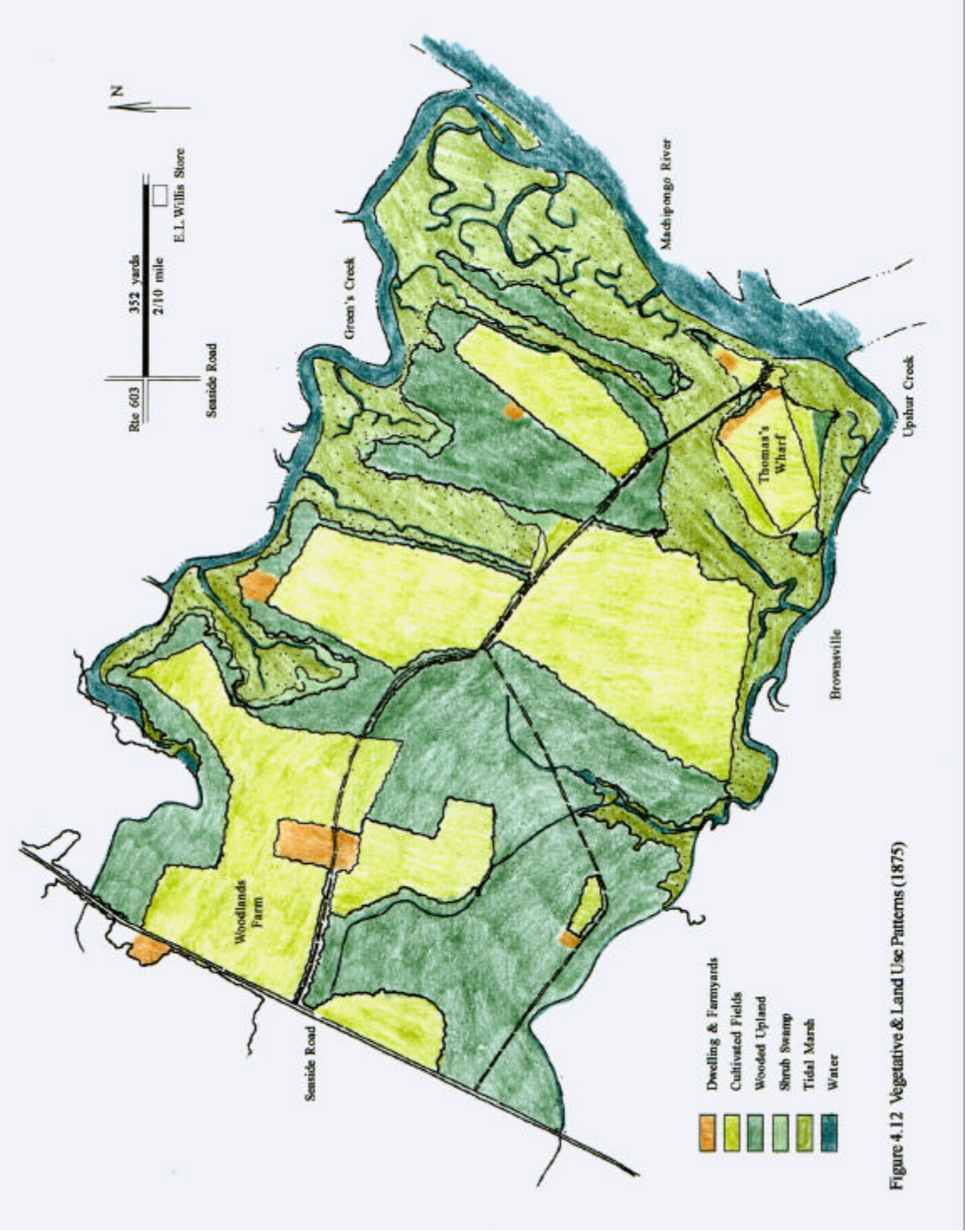


Figure 4.12 Vegetative & Land Use Patterns (1875)



## Vegetation

Geometric sections of the abandoned fields lying adjacent to presently cultivated hammocks are easily recognized by the size of tree and understory growth, as well as the type of vegetation growing. (see Figure 4.8) Successional species in the tidewater forest of the coastal plain include loblolly pine (*Pinus taeda*) and atlantic white cedar (*Chamaecyparis thyoides*), with a gradual shift to hardwood species including sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*) and white oak (*Quercus alba*).<sup>12</sup> The abandoned fields surrounding the hammocks are loblolly forest with a mixture of hardwoods containing sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*), american holly (*Ilex opaca*), and sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*), among other species, and were abandoned after 1875. This existing vegetation implies that these areas are in the process of succession from an old field to tidewater forest.

Adjacent to the forest and also bounding the marsh is shrub swamp characterized by wet and salt tolerant species. (Figure 4.13) The shrub swamp “is an intermediate step in the slow succession of a wetland from marsh to tidewater forest;” hence the difference between marsh and upland can be determined by size and type of vegetative species.<sup>13</sup> Bayberry (*Myrica pensylvanica*) is common to the shrub swamps that form the transitional zone between salt marshes and the wooded and cultivated areas. Significant in this process of succession is the inundation of the land at high tide. (Figure 4.14) At the wharf area the high tide water line follows the five foot contour line. Barren areas in the plowed hammock, as well as shrub swamp vegetation surrounding the upland



Figure 4.13 Looking over the marsh with shrub swamp in foreground. Author. August 1997.

<sup>12</sup> Christopher P. White, *Chesapeake Bay, Nature of the Estuary: A Field Guide* (Centreville, Maryland: Tidewater Publishers, 1989) 27-39; Roland Monette and Stewart Ware, “Early forest succession in the Virginia Coastal Plain,” *Bulletin of the Torrey Botanical Club* 110, no. 1 (January-March 1983): 80.

<sup>13</sup> White, 28.

indicate the occasional presence of salt water. It is estimated that the rate of sea level rise is 0.5 feet per century.<sup>14</sup> Changes in sea level results in changes of the tidal marshes and upland, as well as an the increase of inland swamps.

According to U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey maps, the composition of upland and marsh changed considerably since the late nineteenth century. What began as upland changed slowly over the last 120 years or so to marsh and shrub swamp. (Figures 4.11 and 4.12) High points of land supporting loblolly pines surrounded by tidal marsh is all that remains of the previous upland. This natural process of change significantly impacted the landscapes of Woodlands Farm and Thomas's Wharf. Changing creek patterns and marsh edges altered views to and from the property. Also lost to encroaching tidal marsh are artifacts, such as old dwellings, buildings, and wharves.



Figure 4.14 High tide at Thomas's Wharf. Author. August 1997.

## B. Cultural Elements

### Circulation

Existing circulation on the site is indicative of the modes of transportation throughout the history of the Eastern Shore. Significance is placed on overland travel with an entrance from the Seaside Road, as well as water transportation, with a road that binds the farm dwelling and yard with the wharf area. The existing approach to



Figure 4.15 Entrance road to Woodlands Farm from Seaside Road. Author. August 1997.

<sup>14</sup> J. Mark Wittkofski, "A Summary of Cultural Resources and Environmental Variables of the Virginia Eastern Shore," *Archaeological Society of Virginia* 37, no. 1 (nd): 3.

the farm is from Seaside Road through a cultivated field to the dwelling and yard. (Figure 4.15) Aerial photographs from the 1960s show the entrance road to the south of the present road along a property/tree line. Some speculation as to the original entrance to Woodlands Farm abounds. Also visible on the aerial photographs are remnant roads that are no longer visible. They include a road from the dwelling and yard through the loblolly forest and marsh to the west edge of the first hammock. It appears that another road went across the marsh to the second hammock. Just east of this second hammock, there are remnants of a corduroy road that bridged the marsh to another area of narrow upland. (Figures 4.16, 4.17, 4.18, and 4.19) Finally a small length of road diverges from the shell road that leads to Thomas's Wharf. (Figures 4.20, 4.21, and 4.22) This was most likely the entrance to a dwelling and oyster house associated with commercial businesses at the wharf. Adjacent to this remnant road is a lone utility pole with the old insulator laying at its base.



Figure 4.16 Looking north towards narrow strip of marsh between two masses of upland that once was bridged by a corduroy road. Author. February 1998.



Figure 4.17 The limits of the edge of the corduroy road can be seen by the crossed timbers. Author. February 1998.

## Archaeological Resources

Archaeological resources of Woodlands Farm and Thomas's Wharf include both prehistoric and historic sites. Several sites were identified in the 1960s and 1970s, and several more were discovered during the survey completed by The College of William and Mary's William and Mary Center for Archaeological Research during the summer of 1997. Identified sites are held in confidence at the request of the Virginia Coast Reserve. Further site visits conducted by the author identified the locations of several other potentially significant sites. Continued research and documentation needs to be undertaken to determine the significance of these sites.



Figure 4.18 Wooden timbers for the road are held in place by stakes. Author. February 1998.



Figure 4.19 Many of the timbers are just under the surface layer of the tidal marsh. Author. February 1998.

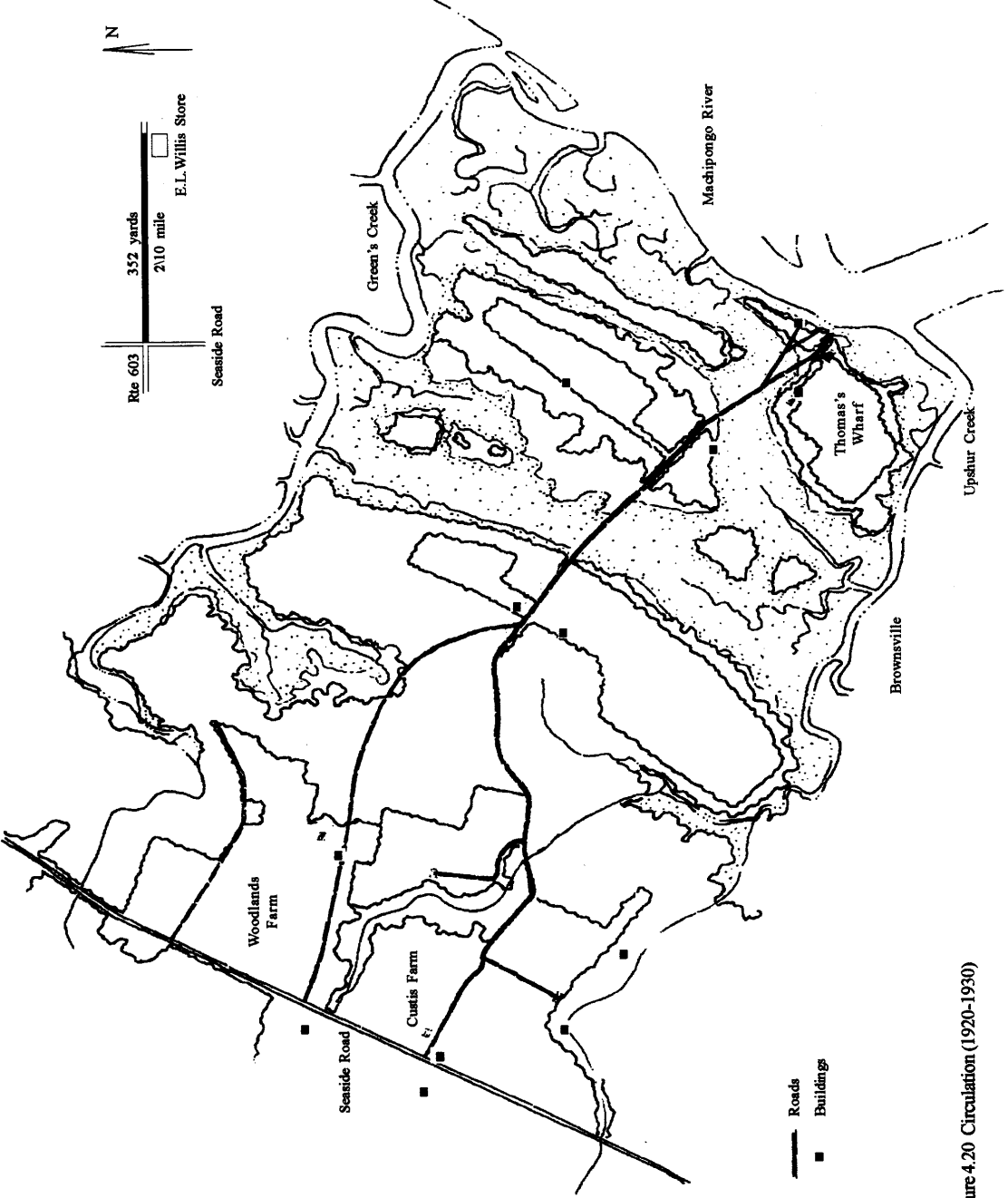


Figure 4.20 Circulation (1920-1930)



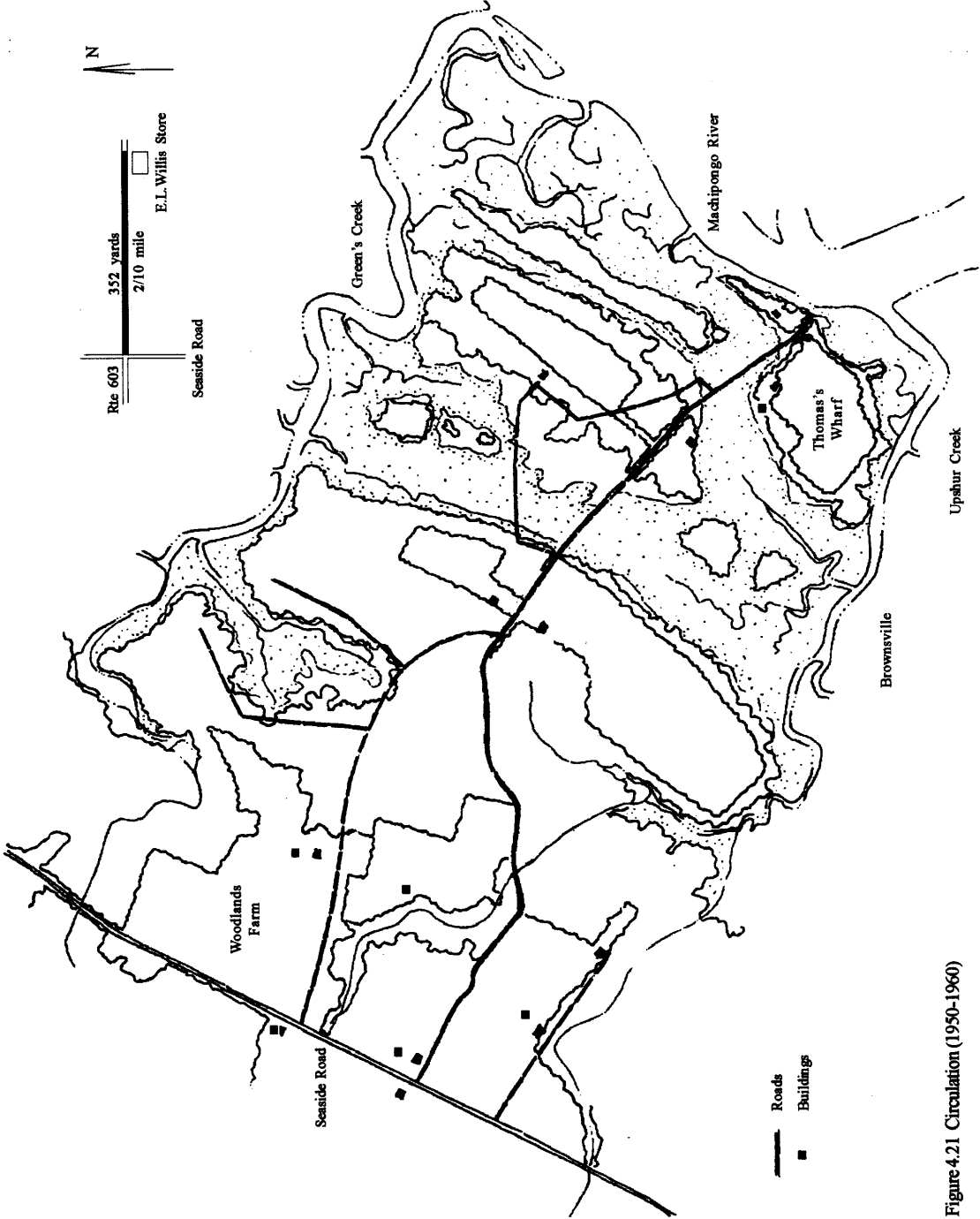


Figure 4.21 Circulation (1950-1960)

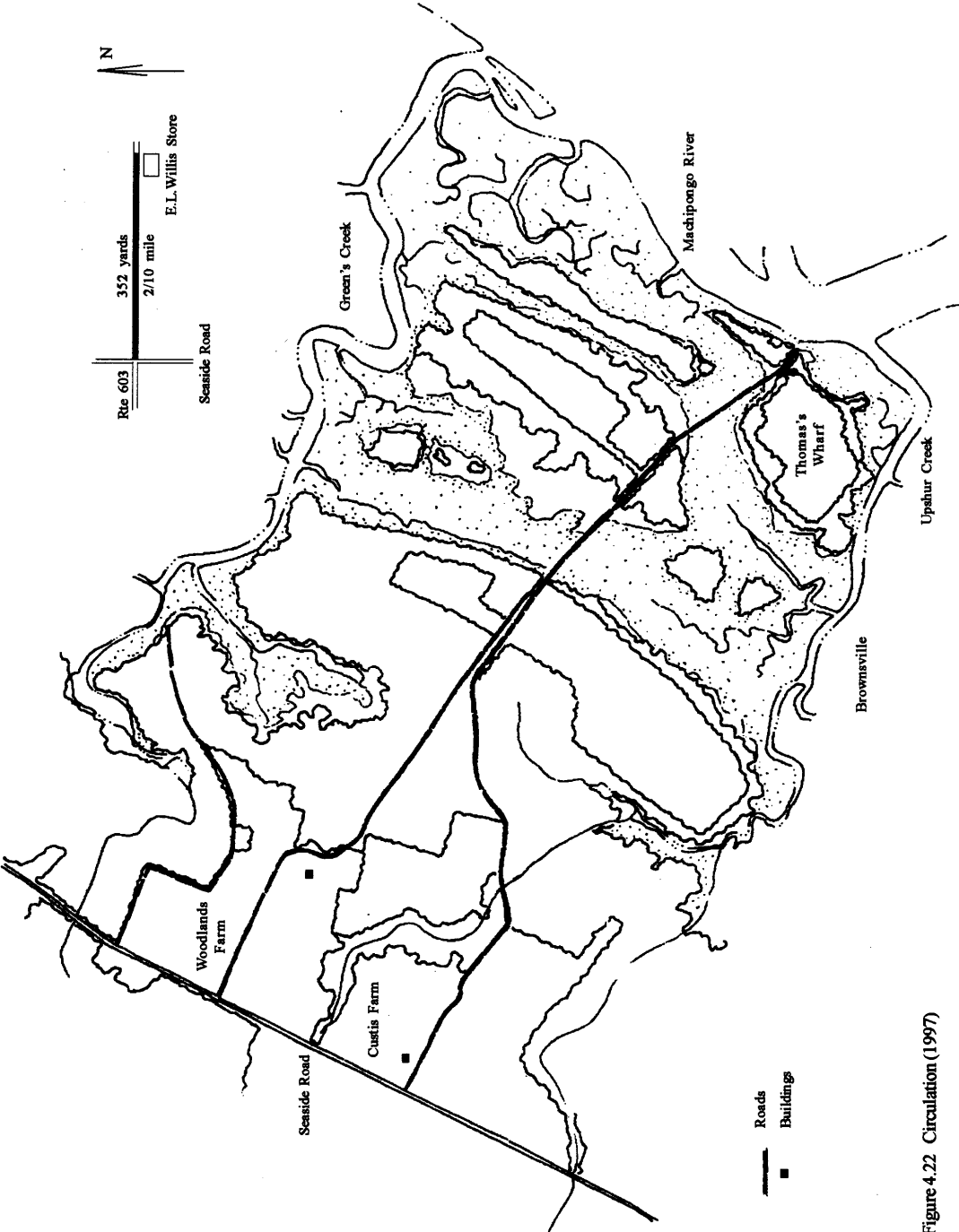


Figure 4.22 Circulation (1997)

## Views

The landscape is evolving and changing, but there is some concern about the loss of landscape context of Woodlands Farm. After emancipation of slaves, tenant farming became a viable option for working the many acres of these large plantation farms. Dotted throughout the landscape, along the edges of hammocks and the roads, late nineteenth and early twentieth century tenant houses are visible. This is an issue pertinent to Woodlands, for two such houses within view of the main house are now gone from the landscape, resulting in a lost layer of history and evolution of the Eastern Shore. (Figures 4.23 and 4.24) Another concern is the farm context with its outbuildings. We think of an intact farm as quaint, but meaning and integrity comes from the contextual landscape that supports the farm. At Woodlands the loss of the barn and decay of surrounding outbuildings, such as the schoolhouse and weaving shed, impact the integrity and completeness of the farm. (Figures 4.25 and 4.26) Since these photographs were taken in the early spring and fall of 1997, the barn was pulled down and the



Figure 4.23 View from Woodlands house without the tenant house. Author. August 1997.



Figure 4.24 View from Woodlands house with the tenant house. Author. May 1997.



Figure 4.25 Looking south towards the barn at Woodlands, barely visible through the brush. Author. May 1997.

schoolhouse collapsed due to severe storms in the spring of 1998. At Thomas's Wharf, aerial photographs show that the establishment and growth of successive vegetation changed many of the views to and from the property. (Figure 4.27) Views to the wharf from Brownsville were open; one could see Thomas's Wharf from Brownsville. Because of change in land use and activity at the wharf, the vegetation around the edges of the cultivated field have grown too large to see the wharf area. (Figure 4.28) Yards around the dwellings and other farm outbuildings, once clear from trees and shrubs, now are covered with cedars. The vegetation has enhanced the boundaries and edges of the cultivated field, as well as delineating the edge of the marsh and upland.



Figure 4.26 The weaving shed is in ruins and the schoolhouse in severe decline. Author. February 1998.



Figure 4.27 Aerial photograph showing the proximity of Thomas's Wharf to Brownsville. Most of the wharf is cleared and cultivated allowing for open views between the two properties. U.S. Department of the Interior. November 1967.



Figure 4.28 View of Thomas's Wharf from Brownsville. Author. June 1997.

## Physical Structures

The Woodlands Farm landscape was comprised of a large eighteenth century house, big house, colonnade, kitchen, with several outbuildings including a dairy, detached kitchen with brick cellar (referred to as the weaving shed), schoolhouse, and a barn. Today, three of these four remaining outbuildings are lost, as well as the colonnade and kitchen addition to the house. An early twentieth century graveyard, manufactured by the Stewart Ironworks in Cincinnati, Ohio, presently exists and is marked as the Thomas family burial ground. (Figures 4.29-4.47) Little remains of the surrounding yard and garden, for much is filled in, graded, and moved around on the site. Other structures once existing such as the corn cribs and a large pit, believed to be the kiln for firing brick, are no longer visible.<sup>15</sup> (Figures 4.48 and 4.49)

Some confusion exists as to which is the front of the Woodlands house, the north or south side. Built with a central hall with somewhat identical doors and porches on each side of the house adds to the confusion. Since the 1960s the house has been approached from the south, but a road that came through the field and then cut into the woods north of Woodlands



Figure 4.29 North entrance of Woodlands. Department of Historic Resources, Richmond, Virginia. 1966.



Figure 4.32 Woodlands with new colonnade-kitchen addition. Author. June 1997.

<sup>15</sup> Arnold and Annabelle Carpenter, interview by author, 14 August 1997, Marionville, Virginia, tape recorded.



comes very near to the yard. It is conceivable that this was the original entrance to the property. However, evidence of it approaching the house no longer exists in aerial photographs or through visual observation. The last Thomas to own Woodlands, Miss Adah, considered the north side with the gardens the front of the house.<sup>16</sup> (Figure 4.50) Characteristics of the house also suggest that the north side is the front; a fine set of marble steps accompanied the porch on the north and not on the south side, the interior stairs to the second floor are on the south, and the most public room, the hall, is the northwest room of the house and easily accessed by the north entrance. North of the house is a patch of remnant vegetation suggesting a deliberately planted garden. This garden area includes boxwood (*Buxus sp.*), english ivy (*Hedera helix sp.*), magnolia (*Magnolia sp.*), and crapemyrtle (*Lagerstroemia sp.*). Other existing trees scattered throughout the yard include magnolia (*Magnolia sp.*), catalpa (*Catalpa sp.*), red cedar (*Cedrus sp.*), atlantic white cedar (*Chamaecyparis thyoides*), and black walnut (*Juglans nigra*).



Figure 4.31 South entrance of Woodlands. Department of Historic Resources, Richmond, Virginia. 1966.



Figure 4.32 South view of Woodlands. Author. June 1997.

<sup>16</sup> Janet Stone, telephone interview by author, 25 November 1997, Nassawadox, Virginia.



Figure 4.33 East side of Woodlands. Department of Historic Resources, Richmond, Virginia. 1966.



Figure 4.36 Woodlands in 1997. Note the difference in scale between the original colonnade-kitchen and the new addition. Author. June 1997.



Figure 4.35 Woodlands with the original kitchen . The kitchen was demolished in the 1980s. Department of Historic Resources, Richmond, Virginia. 1966.



Figure 4.36 Looking northeast towards Woodlands in 1997. Author. June 1997.



Figure 4.37 The dairy. Department of Historic Resources, Richmond, Virginia. 1966.

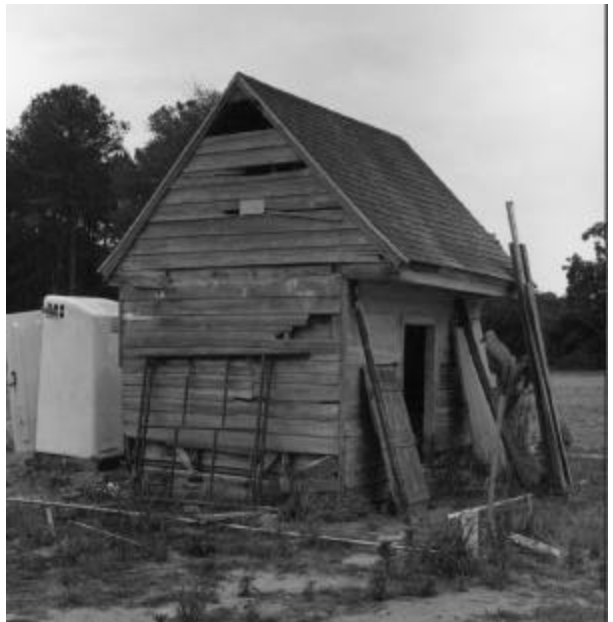


Figure 4.38 Looking southeast towards the dairy. In slight disrepair, but overall in good condition. Author. June 1997.



Figure 4.39 South face of outbuilding referred to as weaving shed. Department of Historic Resources, Richmond, Virginia. 1966.



Figure 4.40 Looking north towards ruins of weaving shed. Rubble includes a brick hearth, brick piers, and a brick pit. Author. June 1997.





Figure 4.41 Looking northeast towards schoolhouse. Department of Historic Resources, Richmond, Virginia. 1966.



Figure 4.42 The schoolhouse, looking northeast. Since this photograph was taken, the wood structure of the building has collapsed with only the chimney standing. Author. June 1997.



Figure 4.43 Looking south towards barn and another structure. The structure to the left of the photograph was not identified during the study and remains unknown. Department of Historic Resources, Richmond, Virginia. 1966.



Figure 4.44 Looking south towards area where barn was located. A pole barn was erected sometime in the 1970s and remains standing in disrepair today. The barn was in disrepair and pulled down in 1997. Barn timbers were used in the remodeling of Woodlands. Author. June 1997.



Figure 4.45 Thomas family graveyard located on the north side of Woodlands. Each of the stone piers were planted with vines.  
Department of Historic Resources, Richmond, Virginia. 1966.



Figure 4.46 Woodlands graveyard. Few of the vines are still growing, but many of the surrounding trees are mature, including crapemyrtle, hackberry, and magnolia. Author. February 1998.



Figure 4.47 Entrance gate to the graveyard, with Thomas inscribed in the threshold. A plaque reading "Stewart Iron Works, Cincinnati, Ohio" is located on the gate. Author. February 1998.

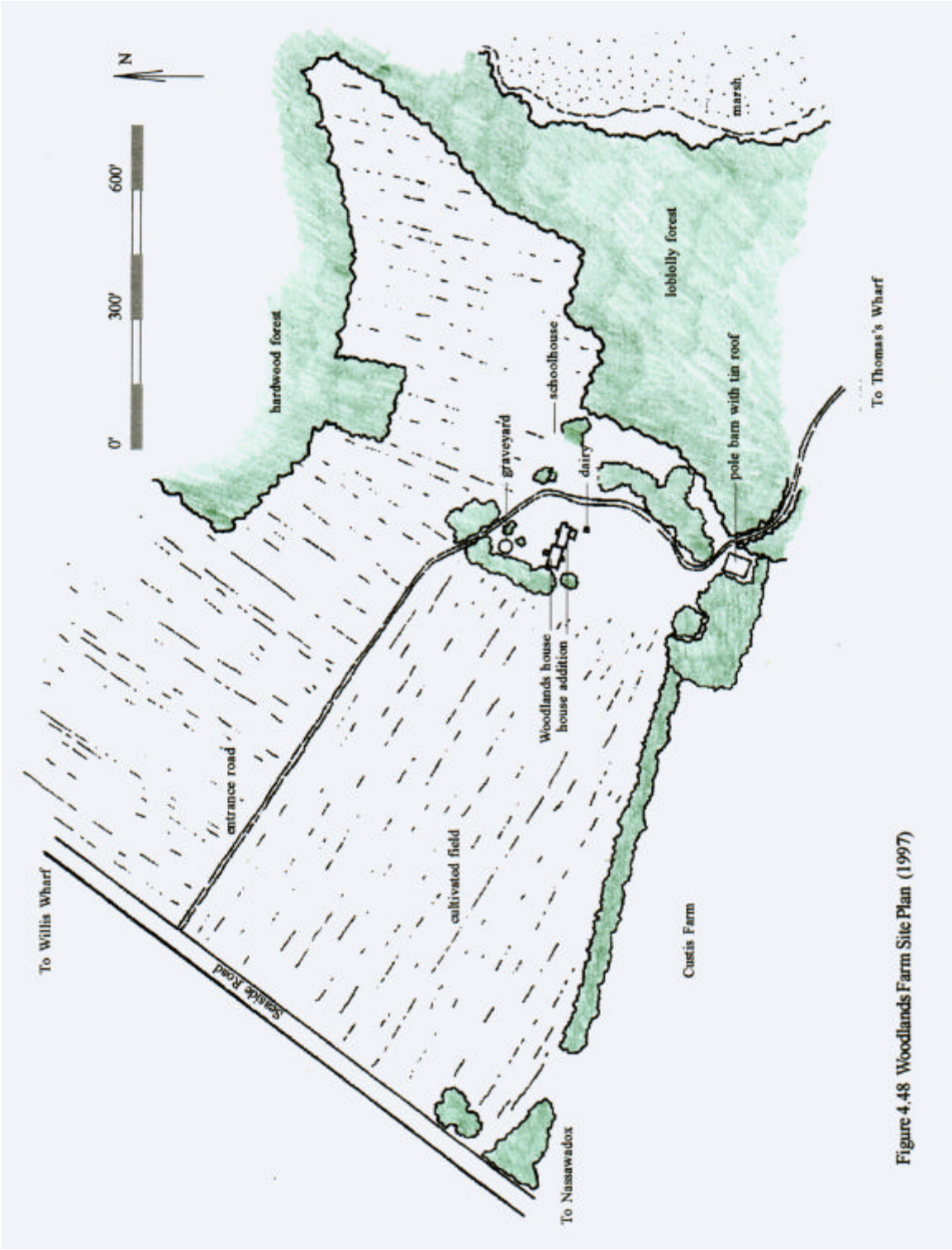


Figure 4.48 Woodlands Farm Site Plan (1997)

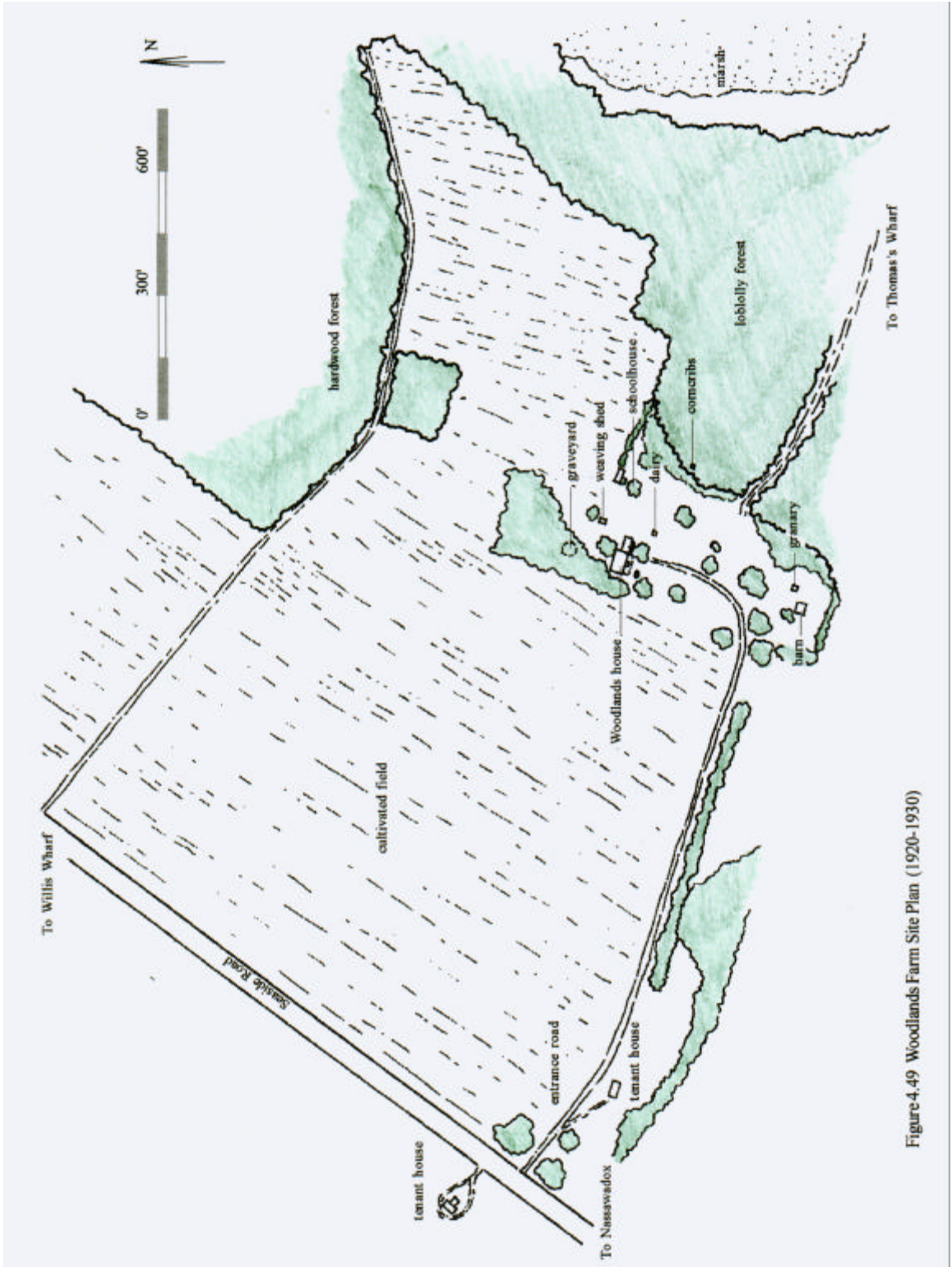


Figure 4.49 Woodlands Farm Site Plan (1920-1930)



The farmsite at Thomas's Wharf is in complete ruin. (Figure 4.51) The yard and cleared spaces, with the exception of the hammock which is still in cultivation, are in the early stages of succession. (Figure 4.52) There are two distinct areas at the wharf: the farm dwelling, yard, and outbuildings; and the remains of the wharf keeper's dwelling and outbuildings near the existing wharf. (Figures 4.53 and 4.54) Fence posts, still visible today, running across the marsh indicate the legal boundaries of Thomas's Wharf. Fence posts continue to denote yard and pasture from field, and the early successional vegetation also suggests the areas of the farm in use during the twentieth century. Located just near the dwelling and yard are ditches edging the western limit of the cultivated field. (Figure 4.55) Today that small triangle of field has grown up with shrub swamp vegetation. (Figure 4.56) Several introduced species are present in the yard surrounding the dwelling on the hammock and include daffodils (*Narcissus sp.*), crapemyrtle (*Lagerstroemia sp.*), daylillies (*Hermerocallis sp.*), weeping willow



Figure 4.50 The north yard taken from the second floor of Woodlands. The new entrance road is visible, bisecting the yard. In the top right of the photograph, behind the road, are old boxwoods in decline; the only remaining remnant of a garden setting. Author. February 1998.



Figure 4.51 Decaying twentieth century farmhouse at Thomas's Wharf. Author. March 1997.



Figure 4.52 Hammock at Thomas's Wharf, with farmhouse in the background on the edge of the edge of the field. Author. March 1997.

(*Salix babylonica*), hackberry (*Celtis occidentalis*), and persimmon (*Diospyros virginiana*).

There appears to be two wharf areas, one more recent and in usable condition, and the other only partially visible with a few remaining cedar posts rising above the marsh. (Figures 4.57 and 4.58) The posts indicate that the wharf structure covered a much larger area than what is implied by the long narrow shape of the modern wharf. Certainly a larger area was necessary for docking, unloading, and loading the shipments of produce, among other products during the active shipping periods of Thomas's Wharf. Little remains of the dwelling and outbuilding that were associated with the wharf. (Figure 4.59 and 4.60) Also built in the early twentieth century was an oyster house for the commercial fishing operation. Built close to the water and wharf, the forces of nature and neglect have left only a brick scatter.

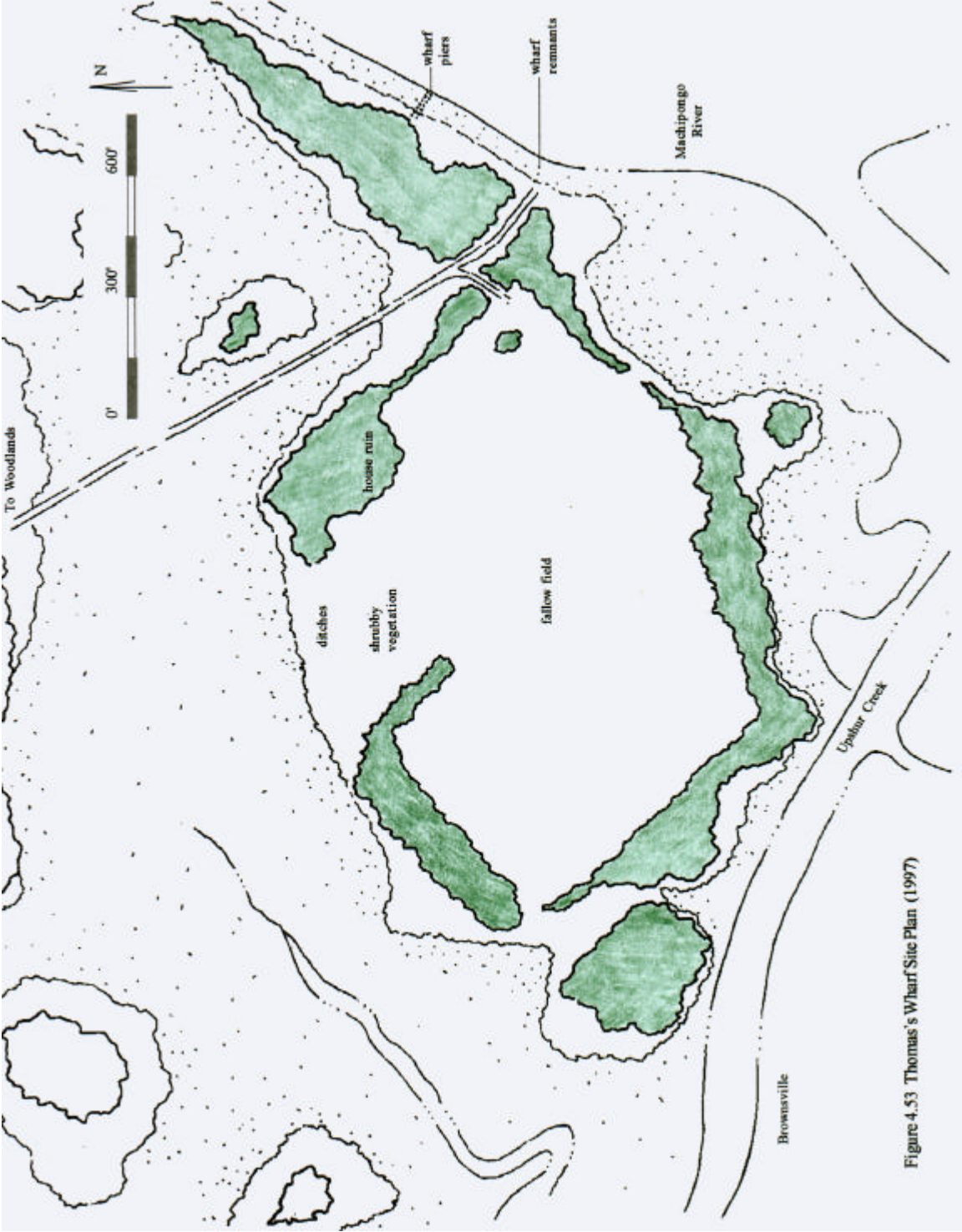


Figure 4.53 Thomas's Wharf Site Plan (1997)



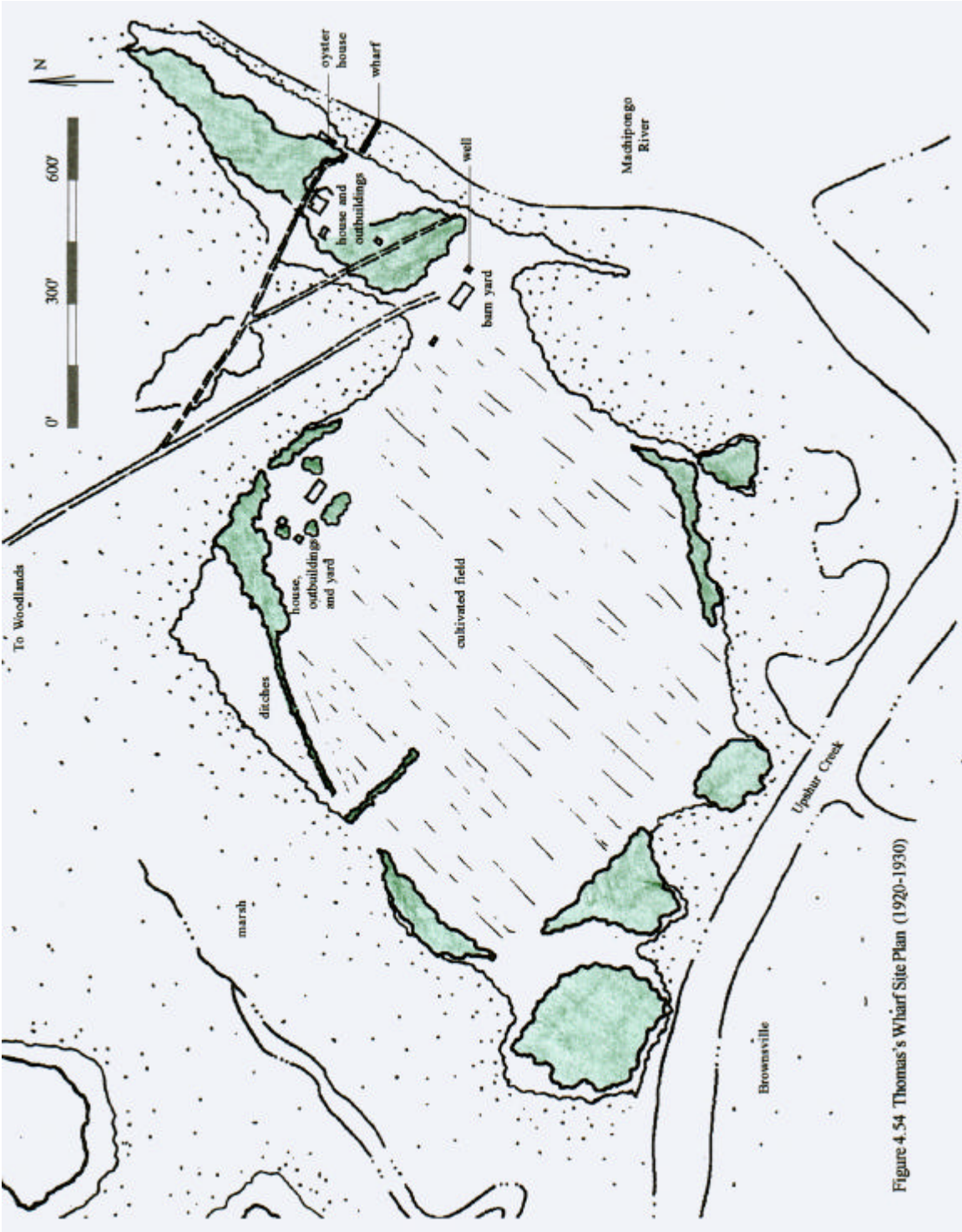


Figure 4.54 Thomas's Wharf Site Plan (1920-1930)



Figure 4.55 Looking along the length of an elevated strip of land with ditches on either side. Freshwater plants, including cattails, were found growing in standing water in the ditches. Frank Strassler. November 1997.



Figure 4.56 Looking north towards the farmhouse in the hammock at Thomas's Wharf. The triangle of field bordered by the ditches to the west and field to the east can be seen to the left of the photograph. Shrub swamp vegetation such as bayberry have taken over the old field. Author. March 1997.



Figure 4.57 Decaying posts protruding above the surface of the marsh and water at high tide. Author. May 1997.



Figure 4.58 Posts for a wharf structure, most likely built during the twentieth century for use by the Battle Point Fish and Oyster Company. Frank Strassler. May 1997.



Figure 4.59 Remnant of brick piers for the house located near the more modern wharf. Author. February 1998.



Figure 4.60 Wood shingled roof of a small outbuilding associated with the house near the wharf. Frank Strassler. November 1997.