

Thomas Ludham House
New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail
Delsea Drive, .25 mile South of County Road 657
South Dennis Vicinity
Cape May County
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-1205

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20016-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

THOMAS LUDLAM HOUSE

HABS No. NJ-1205

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Location: West side of Delsea Drive (State Route 47), .25 mile South of Dennisville/Cape May Court House Road (County Road 657), south of South Dennis, Cape May County, New Jersey

Significance: Representative of mid eighteenth-century houses occupied by the small population of Cape May County at this time and erected by a member of the founding family of nearby Dennisville, it is a modest, wood-frame structure; in original and modified form it conforms to a colonial English mid-Atlantic pattern of symmetrical interior and exterior organization.

Description: Probably erected in three phases, beginning in 1743. Originally a two-room hall-and-parlor block--the leftmost three bays that terminate at the chimney--this two-story, side-facing gable-roof dwelling was substantially enlarged, probably in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. The block to the right of the chimney, and the slightly lower addition, were undoubtedly added after the 1740s. The original space was a hall-and-parlor plan, the most common eighteenth-century arrangement. In keeping with the Cape May locale, the house is clad with weatherboard and wood roof shingles. The first-story fenestration is six-over-six-light double-hung wood sash, while the lay-on-your-stomach second-floor windows tucked under the deep eaves are six-light single sash. The only front entrance is in the original dwelling block; the single wood door has a latch-lock and strap hinges. The reworked foundation of brick and masonry is the result of the structure having been moved to this site.

History: The areas that today consist of Dennisville, North Dennis, and South Dennis were collectively known as Dennis Creek until the second half of the nineteenth century. Dennisville-Dennis Creek was deeded to John Dennis after he purchased the land from an Indian named Panktoe in 1687. Sometime between the 1690s and 1726, Jacob Spicer owned the land; in 1726 he sold it to Joseph Ludlam. Ludlam's sons, Anthony and Joseph, settled on both sides of the creek, and the foundations of the town were in place. In 1774, more than twenty individuals lived in the Dennis Creek area, including one Thomas Ludlam, who co-owned a sawmill near the village. Members of the Ludlam family--Christopher (see HABS No. NJ-1206) and Thomas (perhaps the builder of this house)--erected dwellings in the area. The history of this property is linked to that of Dennisville, much of which is designated an historic district; this area includes the Ludlam family burial ground, which contains approximately three-dozen headstones.

Industrially, Dennisville was known for two things: lumber and shipbuilding. Many residents mined cedar trees out of the local swamps. The trees were cut for siding and shingles--much of which was exported via schooner. Among the lumber mills that existed in the early twentieth century were those of Ogden Gandy, Jesse D. Ludlam, and Derien & Campbell. Associated with the cedar lumbering, Dennisville boasted several talented shipwrights. Two important yards were the Leaming Yards and the Isaac Gandy and Jesse Diverty shipbuilding operation. Ships were built lengthwise along the narrow creek and launched sideways into the water, moving farther out with each high tide. Cape May County was the third-largest producer of ships between 1870 and 1935, after Camden and Cumberland counties, respectively. Between 1870-99, shipwrights were responsible for forty-four vessels from shipyards in Dennisville, Goshen, Tuckahoe, and Marshallville. When yards in the latter two towns shut down in 1883, Dennisville builders compensated by producing twenty-six three-masted vessels between 1871-91. Cape May County ship production fell off in the 1880s-90s due to the demand for larger ships than what could be built locally, coupled with a depleting lumber supply.

Several prominent captains acquired great wealth from shipping lumber and produce. These men, in turn, built elegant frame homes that date to the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Today, sixty-nine sites are included in the Dennisville Historic District; fifty-eight are historically significant. In addition to its houses, Dennisville is known for being the first Cape May County town to have a post office, established in 1802.

This house was moved in 1972 from North Dennisville to its present site below South Dennis.

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McLaughlin, James M. "Maritime History of Cape May County." Cape May Magazine of History and Genealogy 7 (1980): 653-58.

Sebold, Kimberly, and Sara Amy Leach. Historic Themes and Resources within the New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail: Southern New Jersey and the Delaware Bay. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1991.

Project Information: The project was sponsored by the New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail (NJCHT) of the National Park Service, Janet Wolf, director. The documentation was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), Robert Kapsch, chief, under the direction of Sara Amy Leach, HABS historian. The project was completed during summer 1992. The project historian was Kimberly R. Sebold (University of Delaware). The photography was produced by David Ames, University of Delaware, Center for Historic Architecture and Engineering.