

BENJAMIN CARR FARM
Route 138 (Eldred Avenue) and Helm Street
Jamestown
~~Conanicut Island~~
Newport County
Rhode Island

HABS No. RI-394

HABS
RI
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
Northeast Region
U.S. Custom House
200 Chestnut Street
Philadelphia, PA 19106

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

BENJAMIN CARR FARM

HABS No. RI-394

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Location: Intersection of Route 138 (Eldred Avenue) and Helm Street, south of Route 138 (Eldred Avenue) and east of Helm Street, Jamestown, Conanicut Island, Newport County, Rhode Island

USGS Wickford, RI Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates:

A: 19.300900.4599690

B: 19.301140.4599690

C: 19.301140.4599580

D: 19.300900.4599600

Present Owner: The land comprising the original Benjamin Carr Farm is under multiple ownership, including Cyril B. Joyner, the State of Rhode Island and other various private owners.

Present Use: Historic residence and contemporary residential subdivision

Significance: Eldred Avenue (Route 138) is the northern boundary of the Windmill Hill National Register Historic District. The district is significant for its excellently preserved eighteenth and nineteenth century architecture, including agricultural, religious and residential structures and its unspoiled rural landscape. The district is the best example of an eighteenth century Quaker farming community extant in Rhode Island. The Benjamin Carr Farm is one of six farmsteads that comprise the district. The Carrs were early proprietors of Jamestown, prominent for their involvement in state and local politics, and prosperous from their farming and business exploits on the island.

Note: Sections of the text below have been adapted from the Windmill Hill Historic District National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, Leslie J. Vollmert, Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, February, 1978; Phase I/II Cultural Resource Survey, Jamestown Drainage Alternative/I-895, Wilbur Smith and Associates, Inc., April, 1985; and Phase I Cultural Resource Survey, Jamestown SEIS (Route 138), Wilbur Smith and Associates, Inc., July, 1985.

PART I BENJAMIN CARR FARM - DESCRIPTIVE INFORMATION

The Benjamin Carr Farm is located within the Windmill Hill Historic District, which was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1978. The district includes approximately 772 acres on Conanicut Island bounded by Eldred Avenue on the north, East Shore Road on the east, Great Creek on the south and Narragansett Bay on the west. The district is comprised of rolling fields and forests containing six farmsteads, an eighteenth century burial ground (HABS No. RI- 398), an eighteenth century Quaker meetinghouse and an eighteenth century windmill and miller's house. The cleared land is used primarily for pasture and is divided by numerous stone walls and three seventeenth century roads. North Road is the principle north/south artery that bisects the district, Weeden Lane connects North Road with East Shore Road, and Eldred Avenue is the northern boundary of the district. Picturesque, tree-lined farm lanes provide access to the farms on the west side of North Road. The district also contains the archaeological remains of several Indian settlements.

The Benjamin Carr Farm, located at the northwest corner of the historic district, is adjacent to the George C. Carr Farm (Cedar Hill Farm)(HABS No. RI-395). Little remains of the original acreage of the Carr Farm, which has been platted into house lots. The remaining five-acre farmstead is now flanked to the west and south by contemporary suburban construction.

The farmhouse was probably constructed by Benjamin Carr about 1760 on a 115-acre parcel given to him by his father, Thomas Carr. The residence is a two-and-a-half story, gable roofed, center chimney, four bay, Georgian farmhouse with an early nineteenth century, one-and-a-half story ell on the west side. The building, now covered with wood shingles, had its fenestration altered and a mid-twentieth century balcony added above the early nineteenth century vestibule on the south elevation. The property contains a mid-nineteenth century stable consisting of a one story, gable roofed, shingled building with a lean-to addition. The property also contains a mid-twentieth century, one story, concrete block garage.

Part II BENJAMIN CARR FARM - HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Conanicut Island was purchased from the Narragansett Indians by a group of 98 Newport colonists in 1656, primarily for its value as pastureland. The Indians, who had inhabited the island for centuries, had at one time lived within the boundaries of the Windmill Hill Historic District along the shores of Great Creek and Narragansett Bay.

The proprietors, who were mostly Quakers, divided the most of the island's 6000 acres and laid out a township of 260 acres in the center of the island near the site of present-day Jamestown Center. Most of the land was held for speculation until the 1670s when the first settlement began to occur. By 1675, a ferry was in operation between Conanicut and the town of Newport on Aquidneck Island to the east, and the island gradually became settled.

The early history of the Benjamin Carr Farm overlaps with adjacent properties, including the George C. Carr Farm (Cedar Hill Farm)(HABS No. RI-395) and the Nicholas Carr Farm (HABS No. RI-396). The

land encompassing the three properties, as well as other parcels surrounding them, was purchased by Caleb Carr (1624-1695) in the mid-seventeenth century, and was in ownership and farmed by the Carr family into the twentieth century. The land was inherited by Caleb Carr's son Nicholas (1654-1709), who in turn left it to his son Thomas (1696-1776). Thomas Carr subdivided the land and left it to his sons Benjamin (Benjamin Carr Farm) and Nicholas (George C. Carr Farm (Cedar Hill Farm) HABS No. RI-395). The Benjamin Carr Farm passed out of Carr family ownership when it was sold to Jeremiah Hazard in 1783. The George C. Carr Farm (Cedar Hill Farm)(HABS No. RI-395) was in Carr family ownership until 1972; and the Nicholas Carr Farm (HABS No. RI-396) was sold from Carr family ownership in the mid-twentieth century. The Carr family continues to own property on the island outside of the Windmill Hill Historic District.

Caleb Carr (1624-1695), a Newport merchant, Quaker leader, and governor of the colony in 1695, was one of the original proprietors of Conanicut. In 1678, he was one of several Newporters who signed a petition asking the General Assembly to incorporate the island into a township.

The property presently known as the Benjamin Carr Farm went through several ownerships until about 1680 when this lot, along with two others to the south and east, were acquired by Caleb Carr. The property, near the intersection of North Ferry Road (now Eldred Avenue) and North Road, was located at the hub of the Windmill Hill area in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The Town House (demolished) was also located at this intersection. These roads provided the vital transportation link with the north and south ends of the island and with the outside world by means of the ferries that had been established at either end of Eldred Avenue as Conanicut's increasing population and agricultural production required new water links with nearby Aquidneck Island and the mainland. The Howland Ferry at the east end of Eldred Avenue connected the Windmill Hill area farms with Newport, while Slocumb's Ferry at the west end of Eldred Avenue provided a link to the mainland at North Kingstown as early as 1707.

Caleb's son Nicholas (1654-1709) erected a house on one of his father's lots (HABS No. RI-396), and managed his father's Conanicut properties. A large portion of the three lots, totaling about 175 acres, was probably grassland and was most likely used for pasturage. Nicholas Carr received his father's island properties by will at his death. He probably leased these lots, for his will, probated in 1709, refers to them as "Thomas Fisher's Field". The property, along with 50 sheep, three cows, and two oxen went by will to his son Thomas (1696-1776).

The Thomas Carr Farm (present-day Benjamin Carr Farm and George C. Carr Farm (Cedar Hill Farm) HABS No. RI-395) was established in the early eighteenth century and attained its peak of prosperity before the Revolution. The farm was settled by Thomas, who built a substantial frame house in the first quarter of the eighteenth century (now demolished). The Thomas Carr Farm was typical of the farms of the period on Conanicut and produced corn, barley, oats, and livestock.

Thomas Carr married Hannah Weeden in 1720, and it was probably around this time that he erected his house on the property. He built his house on the south side of the North Ferry Road (Eldred Avenue) and about 200 feet west of North Road. The farmland was suitable for raising sheep and its prime location bordering on North Ferry Road facilitated the transportation of wool and sheep to the Newport market.

Thomas Carr also held several public offices, including that of deputy to the General Assembly in 1746-47. Of the 91 island landowners assessed in 1760, Thomas Carr was rated the fourth highest and paid a tax of 19 pounds. The Carrs, like most of their prosperous neighbors, kept slaves, usually between three and eight. The colony census of 1774 indicates that Thomas Carr owned eight blacks, four adults and four children. These servants labored alongside their masters in the fields and usually

lived in the attic of the farmhouse or in outbuildings, as on the Carr Farm. A burial plot of unmarked stones on the farm is said to be the Carr slave cemetery.

About 1760, Thomas Carr set off the west half of the farm, consisting of 115 acres to his son, Benjamin, who shortly thereafter, erected a dwelling (extant: HABS No. RI-394). At his death in 1776, Thomas Carr left the remaining 70-acre farm to his other son, Nicholas (1732-1813) (extant: George C. Carr Farm (Cedar Hill Farm) HABS No. RI-395). Thomas Carr also left to his son Nicholas farm animals which included 41 sheep, four hogs and eight cows, as well as five black slaves.

The Benjamin Carr Farm was located on the south side of Eldred Avenue and west of his brother Nicholas' farm (George C. Carr Farm (Cedar Hill Farm) HABS No. RI-395). Benjamin received the western part of his great-grandfather Caleb's property, and erected a two-and-a-half story, center chimney dwelling.

By 1760, the growth and prosperity of the community necessitated the expansion of ferry service to the island, the construction of a new grist mill and the construction of a larger Quaker Meetinghouse. Conanicut Island reached the peak of its prosperity as an agricultural adjunct of Aquidneck Island by 1775. The slave owning Quakers had much of the island under cultivation and their fortunes rose with the ascendancy of Newport over New England trade before the Revolution. In 1775, however, the British invaded Newport and Jamestown. The occupation of Conanicut began with the burning of Jamestown Village and the surrounding farms on December 10, 1775 and continued until the departure of the British Fleet in 1779. Most of the Quaker inhabitants evacuated the island in 1775 and upon their return four years later they found a ruined, deserted island of burned farmsteads that had been totally deforested by the occupying forces scavenging for firewood. Newport's trade had been destroyed by the long British occupation and with it went the basis for Jamestown's prosperity.

The Carrs, who were Quakers, survived the war relatively unscathed. An assessment of island farms, taken in September, 1783, reveals that 60 acres of the adjacent Nicholas Carr Farm (George C. Carr Farm (Cedar Hill Farm) HABS No. RI-395) were used as pasture and 10 acres were under cultivation. Nicholas Carr also had 46 sheep, four hogs, six cows and two oxen on the farm, roughly the same number of animals that he had received from his father, by will in 1776. The farm, consisting of the house, one stable, one corncrib, lands and personal estate, was valued at 725.9.0 pounds in the 1783 assessment.

A brief flurry of building activity ensued in the late eighteenth century as the islanders struggled to rebuild their community. The 1780s and 1790s witnessed the rebuilding of the Windmill Hill area after the depredations of war. The period included the construction of the present windmill, miller's house and meetinghouse. The optimism of the rebuilding period belied the loss of Jamestown's economic base. The market vanished with Newport's maritime trade, and the decline of Newport was reflected in the dwindling population of Jamestown to less than half the 600 inhabitants of 1774. Gradually, the Conanicut farms sank into self-sufficiency. The remarkable preservation of the buildings in the Windmill Hill District can be attributed to the thrifty and conservative nature of the Quaker farmers and to the economic stagnation the island experienced throughout the nineteenth century.

In 1783, the Benjamin Carr Farm was acquired by Jeremiah Hazard, and has passed through several subsequent owners. The farm remained in agricultural use in the late eighteenth, through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. The property underwent minimal changes until the mid-twentieth century.

The widening of Eldred Avenue (Route 138) in 1941-1942 required the taking of some of the Benjamin Carr Farm property fronting the road by the Rhode Island Department of Public Works. The stone walls

along the south side of Eldred Avenue were relocated outside of the newly designated state right-of-way to their current location at the state highway line. Eldred Avenue was widened to accommodate the traffic from the new Jamestown Bridge. The completion of the bridge in 1940-1941 resulted in increased movement of through, east-west, vehicular traffic along Eldred Avenue and East Shore Road. The completion of the Newport Bridge in the mid-1960s produced an even heavier movement of traffic along this route.

The Benjamin Carr Farm was platted into house lots in the 1970's, which claimed much of its acreage. The remaining five-acre farmstead is now flanked to the west and south by contemporary suburban construction. The farmstead consists of the original Benjamin Carr house of ca. 1760, a mid-nineteenth century barn and a modern garage.

From the 1870s to the present, few significant changes have occurred within the district, with the exception of the subdivision of the Benjamin Carr Farm and adjacent George C. Carr Farm (Cedar Hill Farm)(HABS No. RI-395). The Benjamin Carr house, along with the other meticulously maintained buildings in the district, still exist in a relatively unspoiled landscape of rolling fields and forests criss-crossed with stone walls, with only an occasional glimpse of the Newport and Jamestown Bridges to suggest the presence of the twentieth century. Much of the land continues in agricultural use by the same families who have owned it since the eighteenth century, though, as evidenced by the Benjamin Carr Farm, there is increasing pressure to subdivide the farms for development. The Windmill Hill Historic District, including the farmsteads, windmill and miller's cottage, Quaker Meetinghouse and Friends' Burial Ground (HABS No. RI-398), affords the most complete picture of eighteenth century Quaker farm life extant in Rhode Island.

PART III PROJECT INFORMATION

In the fall of 1992, The Public Archaeology Laboratory, Inc. (PAL, Inc.) of Pawtucket, Rhode Island was retained by Wilbur Smith and Associates, Inc. of Providence, Rhode Island to provide Historic American Buildings Survey documentation to the Rhode Island Department of Transportation for four properties within the proposed Route 138 Improvement Project, Jamestown, Newport County, Rhode Island. Under the Section 106 review process, as mandated by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended (36 CFR 800), consideration of historic and cultural resources is required for projects utilizing federal funds. A section of the project area, the Windmill Hill Historic District, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1978. The HABS documentation of four properties within the district (Benjamin Carr Farm, George C. Carr Farm (Cedar Hill Farm) HABS No. RI-395, Nicholas Carr Farm HABS No. RI-396 and Friends' Burial Ground HABS No. RI-398) is one component of a mitigation plan outlined in a 1987 Memorandum of Agreement among the Federal Highway Administration, the Rhode Island Department of Transportation, the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. Other mitigation includes the relocation of stone walls and the development of an acceptable landscaping plan.

This report was compiled between December 1992 and January 1993 by the PAL Inc. project team including Maureen A. Cavanaugh, Preservation Planner; Virginia H. Adams, Architectural Historian; and Leighlan Ranucci, Architectural Projects Assistant.

SOURCES

A. Architectural Drawings

Plat Showing Land in Town of Jamestown Taken on Behalf of the State of Rhode Island, By vote and order of the Department of Public Works on the 21st day of December A.D. 1939.

Plat 645, Sheet 4, North Road from 1.1 Miles North of Round Swamp Bridge to Eldred Avenue. Original plan located at the Rhode Island Department of Transportation, Drafting Section.

Plat Showing Land in Town of Jamestown Taken on Behalf of the State of Rhode Island, By vote and order of the Department of Public Works on the 26th day of June A.D. 1942.

Plat 711, Sheets 4-6, Eldred Avenue from Jamestown Bridge to North Road. Original plan located at the Rhode Island Department of Transportation, Drafting Section.

Plat Showing Land in Town of Jamestown Taken on Behalf of the State of Rhode Island, By vote and order of the Department of Public Works on the 13th day of May A.D. 1952.

Plat 852, Sheets 8-12, Canonicus Avenue, East Shore Road and Eldred Avenue from Narragansett Avenue to North Road. Original plan located at the Rhode Island Department of Transportation, Drafting Section.

Route 138 Improvements, Rhode Island Department of Transportation, Division of Public Works, Jamestown, Rhode Island.

Plans by Wilbur Smith and Associates, Inc., Providence, Rhode Island, October 30, 1992. Original plan located at the Rhode Island Department of Transportation, Providence, RI.

B. Historic Views

Aerial Photographs of Conanicut Island, Rhode Island, May 15, 1939.

Photograph numbers 500 and 502, RISWHPS Cont. No. 3903. Original photographs located at the Rhode Island Department of Administration, Division of Planning, Graphics Section.

State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, Ninth Annual Report of the State Department of Public Works. Providence, Rhode Island, 1943.

C. Bibliography

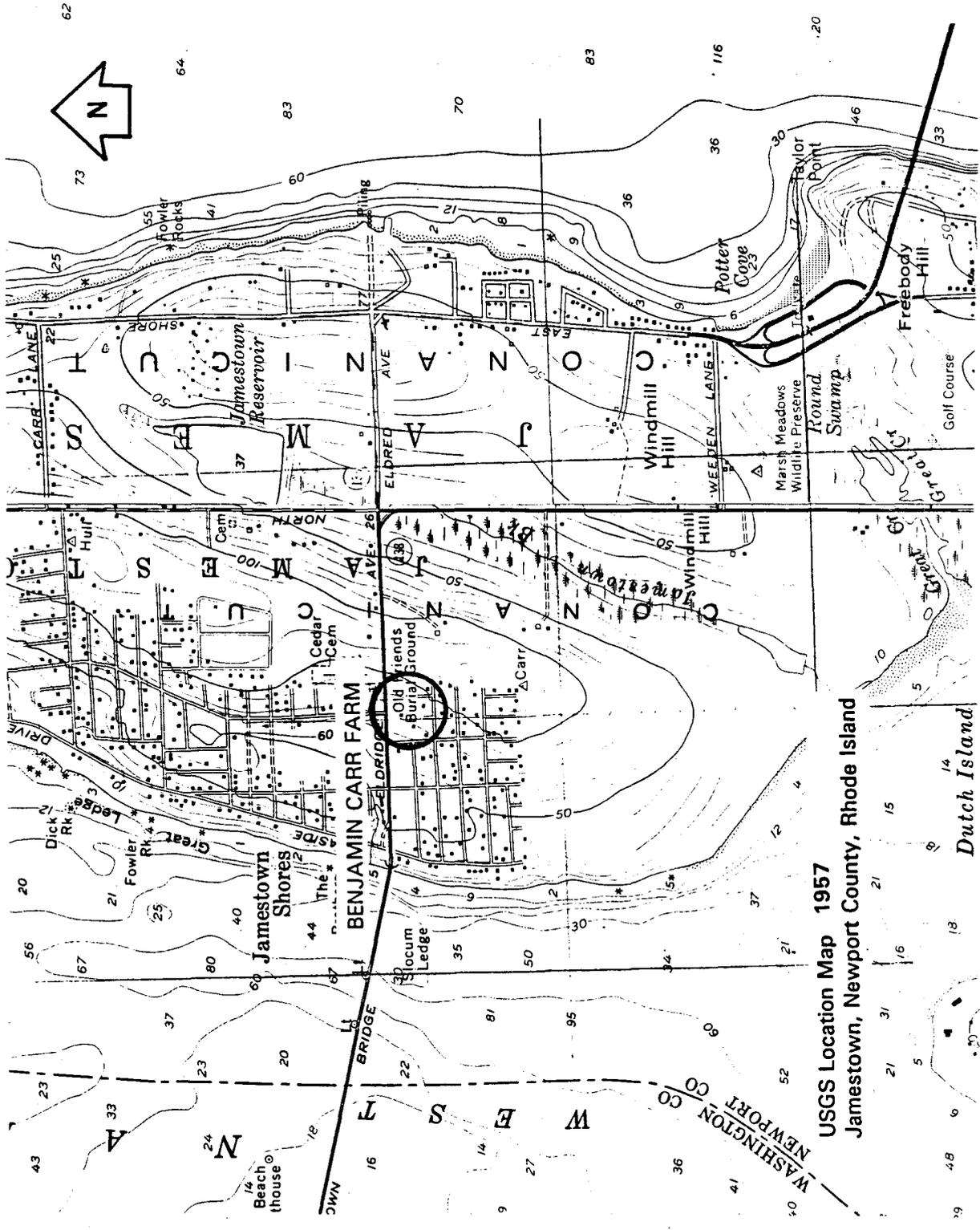
Vollmert, Leslie J., Windmill Hill Historic District National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form. Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, Providence, Rhode Island, February, 1978.

Wilbur Smith and Associates, Inc., Phase I/II Cultural Resource Survey, Jamestown Drainage Alternative/I-895. Providence, Rhode Island, April, 1985.

Wilbur Smith and Associates, Inc., Phase I Cultural Resource Survey, Jamestown SEIS (Route 138). Providence, Rhode Island, July, 1985.



Portion of a Map of Conanicut Island
by William Dame, Civil Engineer, 1875



USGS Location Map 1957
Jamestown, Newport County, Rhode Island