

K-545

## Thomas Cuff House

### **Architectural Survey File**

This is the architectural survey file for this MIHP record. The survey file is organized reverse-chronological (that is, with the latest material on top). It contains all MIHP inventory forms, National Register nomination forms, determinations of eligibility (DOE) forms, and accompanying documentation such as photographs and maps.

Users should be aware that additional undigitized material about this property may be found in on-site architectural reports, copies of HABS/HAER or other documentation, drawings, and the “vertical files” at the MHT Library in Crownsville. The vertical files may include newspaper clippings, field notes, draft versions of forms and architectural reports, photographs, maps, and drawings. Researchers who need a thorough understanding of this property should plan to visit the MHT Library as part of their research project; look at the MHT web site ([mht.maryland.gov](http://mht.maryland.gov)) for details about how to make an appointment.

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***Last Updated: 05-14-2004***



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 "message,"

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 daughters, 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

# Maryland Historical Trust State Historic Sites Inventory Form

MARYLAND INVENTORY OF  
HISTORIC PROPERTIES

Survey No. *K-545*

Magi No.

DOE  yes  no

## 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
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture <input type="checkbox"/> museum
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial <input type="checkbox"/> park
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private residence
<input type="checkbox"/> site	<b>Public Acquisition</b>	<b>Accessible</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment <input type="checkbox"/> religious
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government <input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial <input type="checkbox"/> transportation
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> not applicable	<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military <input type="checkbox"/> 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

repository for survey records

city, town \_\_\_\_\_ state \_\_\_\_\_

# 7. Description

Survey No. K-545

<b>Condition</b>		<b>Check one</b>	<b>Check one</b>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site	
<input type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved	date of move _____
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> 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.

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, windows 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 H hinges. Other doors were reproduced to match it.

In the course of rebuilding 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.

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

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

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

check: Applicable Criteria:  A  B  C  D  
 and/or  
 Applicable Exception:  A  B  C  D  E  F  G  
 Level of Significance:  national  state  local

Prepare both a summary paragraph of significance and a general statement of history and support.

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;" 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 subdivided his land, selling to other free African-Americans, many of whom were co-founders in 1828 of nearby Bethel A.M.E. Church. 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,'" a description corresponding to the site of the Cuff House. Dr. Murray bequeathed four houses on Town Lot Number Five to his four daughters, including a house "now without a tenant" in this location. After Dr. Murray's death his daughters sold to Thomas Ringgold, 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. He gave Lot Number Five and other Chestertown properties to his daughter, Mrs. Deborah Wright, who died soon thereafter. The property was subdivided 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 in 1832 including buildings. He bought on August 8, 1832, 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, export porcelain, other ceramic and glass shards, shoes, coins, etc. dating from the last quarter of the 18th to the 20th

# 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 Cannon St. Chestertown, MD." North American Archeologist, Vol. 12, 199, p. 155.

# 10. Geographical Data

Acreege of nominated property 3,678 sq. ft.

Quadrangle name \_\_\_\_\_

Quadrangle scale \_\_\_\_\_

UTM References do NOT complete UTM references

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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) 778-3499

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  
 100 EAST MAIN PLACE  
 CROWNSVILLE, MD 21032-1023  
 (410) 326-7100

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.

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. His 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.

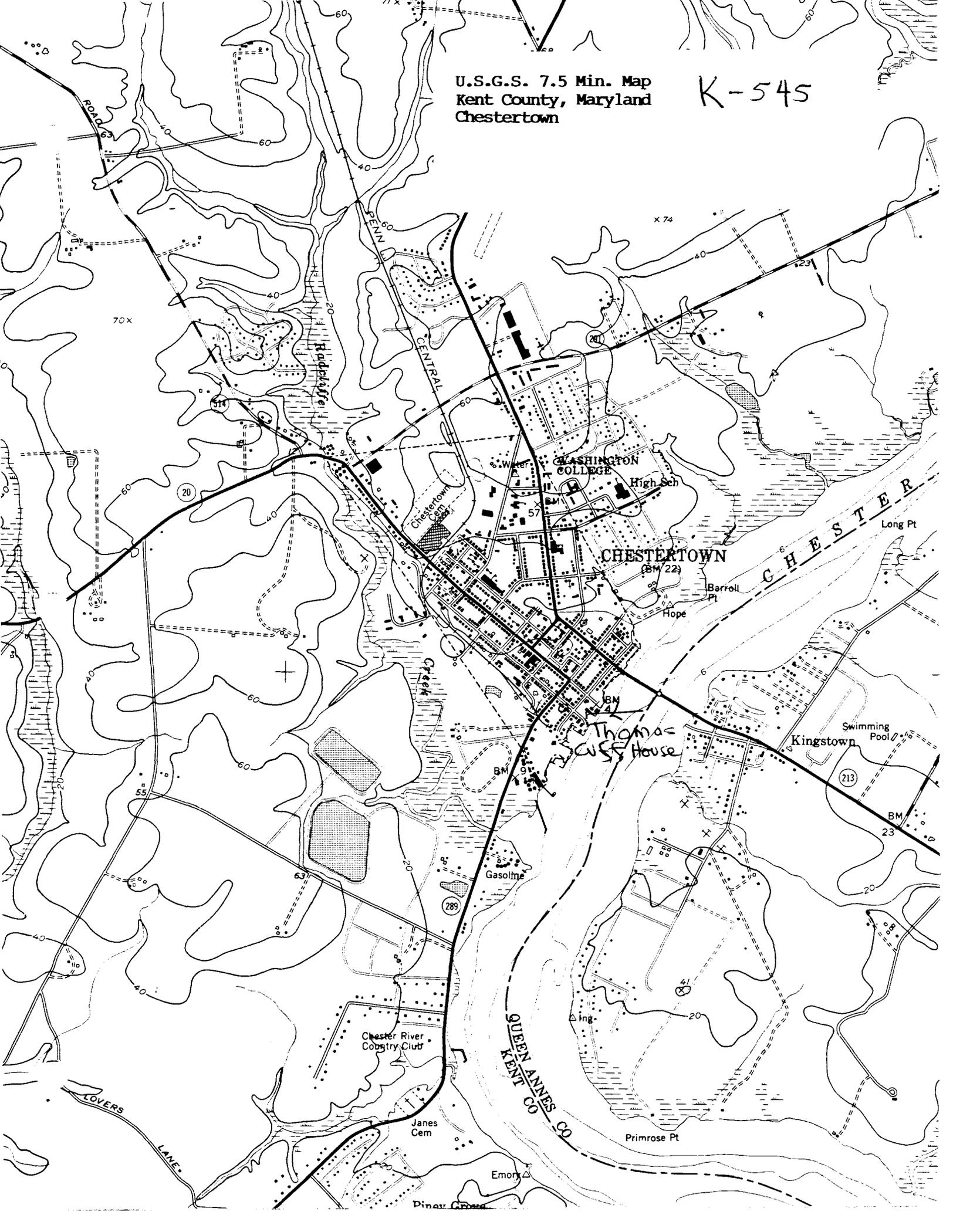
The house is significant as the residence of a comparatively well-off free African-American in the pre-Civil War era, whose life style emerges from the records and from the archeological evidence. The University of Delaware has compared Cuff's life style to those evidenced by contemporary digs in Maryland,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

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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



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1996  
Thomas Cuff House