

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form**

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Decker's Chapel

other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number Southwest corner Earth Road & State Route 255 N/A not for publication

city or town St. Marys N/A vicinity

state Pennsylvania code PA county Elk code 047 zip code 15857

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this X nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property X meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide X locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Brent Glass
Signature of certifying official

Brent Glass, E. Dir.
Title

10-5-98
Date

PA Historical And Museum Commission
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

 entered in the National Register.
 See continuation sheet

 determined eligible for the National Register.
 See continuation sheet.

 determined not eligible for the National Register.

 removed from the National Register.

 other, (explain.) _____

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously-listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1		buildings
		sites
		structures
1		objects
2		Total

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RELIGION/religious facility

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RELIGION/religious facility

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

MID-19TH CENTURY/Greek Revival

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation STONE
walls WOOD
roof ASPHALT
other

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets)

Refer to continuation sheets

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "X" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or a grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

RELIGION

ETHNIC HERITAGE: EUROPEAN

Period of Significance

1856-1948

Significant Dates

1856; 1928

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Decker, Michael

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other state agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property less than one acre

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

	Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing
1	17	703940	4485900	3		
2				4		

N/A See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title David L. Taylor, Principal

organization Taylor & Taylor Associates, Inc. date May, 1998

street & number 9 Walnut Street telephone 814-849-4900

city or town Brookville state PA zip code 15825

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

- A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white** photographs of the property.

Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name _____

street & number _____ telephone _____

city or town _____ state _____ zip code _____

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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Decker's Chapel
Elk County, PA

Section Number 7 Page 1

Decker's Chapel is an 1856 one-story gable-end-oriented and clapboard-clad wood frame church, 12' x 18', containing a single, plastered room (Photos 1-4). The property is on State Route 255, which connects St. Marys with Penfield and DuBois to the south. The Chapel is built on a triangular plot and faces northeast, with a private paved road ca. thirty feet to the south, Earth Road ca. ten feet to the west, and Route 255 ca. seventy feet to the east. In addition to the Chapel, one contributing object, a 1928 granite commemorative marker, is on the property northeast of the building (Photo 5). The property retains a high degree of integrity.

Built in a vernacular adaptation of the Greek Revival style, Decker's Chapel rests on a foundation of sandstone and is capped with a gabled roof sheathed in asphalt shingles. A rectangular steeple with an open belfry rises from the roofline at the front of the building and is capped with a cross-tipped pyramidal roof (Photo 6). The main door to the Chapel is centered on the facade and measures 3' x 6'11". The door opening is flat-topped, with a four-paneled single wood door above which is a three-light transom sash. A ramp of treated wood extends outward from the front door ca. ten feet. A single wood service door is in the pediment of the gable on the facade and leads into vacant space providing access to the joists of the ceiling and the roof rafters. The simple molded cornice has a partial return on the gable ends. Each of the lateral side walls is punctuated by a flat-topped window measuring 5'5" x 2'9" with simple surrounds and heads and containing the original nine-over-six double-hung wood sash. There are no openings on the rear elevation.

The Chapel's ca. 11.5' x 17.5' interior is sparsely arranged, with walls and ceiling of smooth-finished, unadorned painted plaster. Up to thirty worshipers can kneel at eight wooden kneelers (original to the building) and face a modest wood altar draped with linen and devoid of ornamental finishes (Photos 3-4). Religious art is displayed on the interior walls. The most significant alteration to the building occurred when the deteriorated floor was replaced with pressure-treated yellow pine two-by-four boards. It is not known if the previous floor was original or was itself a replacement.

Also on the site, about twenty feet northeast of the Chapel, is a contributing granite monument erected in 1928, with a bronze plaque memorializing Monsignor Michael Joseph Decker, who was the son of the builder of the Chapel and who became an important Roman Catholic religious leader in northwestern Pennsylvania. The monument features rock-faced sides, a smooth-dressed face, and a smooth-dressed hipped top. It measures 3'10" in width, 5'3" in height, and is 1'3" deep, and rests on a rock-faced base, 4'8" long, 2'1" deep, and 7" above grade.

No outbuildings are associated with the Chapel. The property is located on the west side of Pennsylvania State Route 255, officially named the Million-Dollar Highway. Throughout much of its history, the land lay in rural Benzinger Township, about two miles south of the St. Marys municipal limits. Today, the building is within the municipal boundaries of the City of St. Marys; Benzinger Township ceased to exist in 1995 when a consolidation referendum was passed. Significant commercial development is occurring along this thoroughfare, including the construction of a Wal-Mart immediately across the highway east of the Chapel and a new motel immediately to the north.

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Decker's Chapel
Elk County, PA

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Decker's Chapel is significant under National Register Criterion A for its role as a locally-important facet of the religious and ethnic heritage of this European Roman Catholic- (specifically, Bavarian-) derived community and for its position as the last remaining of the several wayside chapels which were built on private property around the community in the mid-nineteenth century. The chapel meets Criterion Consideration A, since it is locally significant to the religious history of St. Marys, is directly associated with the broader pattern of ethnic heritage in the community, and as being associated with traditional cultural values. The Period of Significance begins in 1856, the date of the Chapel's construction, and ends in 1948; throughout this entire 192-year span, the Chapel stood as the tangible reflection of the beliefs, values and customs of the Bavarian Catholic St. Marys community.

The existence of St. Marys, Pennsylvania is due to the settlement efforts of Baltimore and Philadelphia Roman Catholics during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Early in 1842, a church-based committee purchased several warrants in parts of Jefferson, Clearfield, and McKean Counties, Pennsylvania (Elk County not having been yet formed). Traveling by rail, canal, and cross-country on foot, a small group of pioneers arrived on the banks of Elk Creek—the site of present-day downtown St. Marys—on December 8, 1842. That day being the feast day of the Immaculate Conception, and since the first non-indigenous woman to enter the settlement was named Mary, the settlement was christened St. Marys. In 1845, a group of Bavarian Catholics arrived and became the first majority of the fledgling settlement. Over the next years, more German Catholic emigrants came to establish their homes, including a group of German Benedictine nuns who in 1852 established the first Benedictine Convent in the United States at St. Marys; St. Joseph's Convent remains in existence to this day.

To a degree, St. Marys itself is the embodiment of Bavarian heritage. Decker's Chapel stands as one of the icons of this heritage, which is also represented by the Convent and its associated Monastery, St. Marys Roman Catholic Church (the Bavarian Catholics' principal place of worship), Sacred Heart and St. Marys Schools, and the German House Building on the "Diamond" in the downtown.

Among other traditional practices, the Bavarians who settled St. Marys erected crosses and chapels along roads and paths in celebration of their religious convictions and to commemorate specific events. Within the St. Marys environs several of these wayside shrines once dotted the cultural landscape of the community and were tangible reminders of the relationships which the emigrants had forged with their God. Among these were a chapel of bark, erected by a lay brother of St. Joseph's Monastery on the side of Cross Road, a large cross for which that road was named, a chapel on the Gross farm on Windfall Road, and Decker's Chapel on the road to DuBois. Only Decker's Chapel survives as a wayside reflection from those early days of fervent frontier Catholicism.

Michael Decker was one of the settlers who came into the wilds of Elk County through the efforts of the Philadelphia-based German American Catholic Brotherhood, whose mission was to promote the welfare of German-American Catholics. They were also dedicated to the liberation of European German Roman Catholics from the economic and religious oppression which beset the peasants living in Germany at the time. Arriving in 1846, Decker established himself as a farmer and erected first a log house and later a more substantial home of native sandstone. Early in his life here, he suffered from a potentially-crippling fall from a tree which caused severe damage to his neck. Fully aware of the serious nature of his injury, Michael Decker followed the custom of his native Bavaria and vowed to build and maintain a chapel in praise of God if his injury would heal. His

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***Decker's Chapel
Elk County, PA***

Section Number 8 Page 2

recovery was complete and in 1856 he built Decker's Chapel in fulfillment of his pledge. The regular pattern of use of the Chapel is not known; however, its survival over more than 130 years and its pristine condition make it apparent that the diminutive building has occupied a significant position in the religious heritage of the community

Like his neighbors, Michael Decker was a deeply-religious practitioner of the Roman Catholic faith, and he reared his children accordingly. Decker's second child, Michael Joseph Decker, became a widely-recognized religious leader and in the collective history of the St. Marys religious community has always been closely linked with his father's chapel. Michael J. Decker (1839-1913) was seven years old when his family emigrated into north-central Pennsylvania. He began religious studies at St. Vincent's College, Latrobe, Pennsylvania in 1850, at the age of eleven. Following his education, he was ordained in 1862 and celebrated his first mass at St. Marys Church on the campus of St. Joseph's Monastery in St. Marys. Local history records that the priest-to-be practiced for his first Mass in his father's Chapel. Decker went on to more than a half-century of service in the priesthood, serving in the New York City area and eventually spending many years in northwestern Pennsylvania, including parishes in the rough-and-tumble oil region boomtowns of Pithole and Shamburg in the 1860s and '70s. From 1873 until his death he served in the Diocese of Erie (Pennsylvania). In 1903 he was recognized as a Domestic Prelate of the household of Pope Pius X and the following year was elevated to the station of Monsignor. A talented musician, Decker not only performed on a number of musical instruments but also composed a variety of religious pieces.

Monsignor Decker returned to his home town often and seldom failed to celebrate Mass in the tiny chapel erected by his father when he was a youth. In addition, the Chapel was the destination of numerous pilgrimages by the faithful from the St. Marys area, who came *en masse* with umbrellas in their hands to pray for rain and abundant crops. Fifteen years after his death, on September 23, 1928, the St. Marys Knights of Columbus No. 567 erected a monument on the property and dedicated it to the memory of Monsignor Decker. The placing of the memorial was organized by M. H. Walsh, who was a Special Officer with the Pittsburg, Shawmut, and Northern Railroad and served as Faithful Navigator of the local Fourth Degree Knights of Columbus. The dedication was a major event both for the community and for Roman Catholics in general in northwestern Pennsylvania, with more than 2,000 making the trip to the tiny chapel to commemorate the community's most illustrious son.

The Chapel remained in the ownership of Michael Decker's descendants until 1990, when title was transferred to the Elk County Historical Society.

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***Decker's Chapel
Elk County, PA***

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Major Bibliographical Sources

"Famous Wayside Chapel Holds Unique Place in Historical Annals," *The Carbon Copy* [newsletter of the Stackpole Carbon Company] (St. Marys Pennsylvania: n.d.).

History of McKean, Elk, and Forest Counties, Pennsylvania, 2 vols. (Chicago, J. H. Beers Company, 1890).

St. Marys Press, September 24, 1928, p. 1.

Wessman, Alice D., ed. **A History of Elk County, Pennsylvania** (Ridgway, Pennsylvania: Elk County Historical Society, 1981).

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***Decker's Chapel
Elk County, PA***

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Verbal Boundary Description

Being that tract of land described in a deed from Alice Schneider and Frances Burfield to the Elk County Historical Society dated December 29, 1990 and recorded in the Deed Records of Elk County, Pennsylvania in Deed Book 266, pages 31 and 32.

Boundary Justification

These boundaries encompass the single parcel which contains the Chapel and the one object associated therewith.

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Decker's Chapel
Elk County, PA

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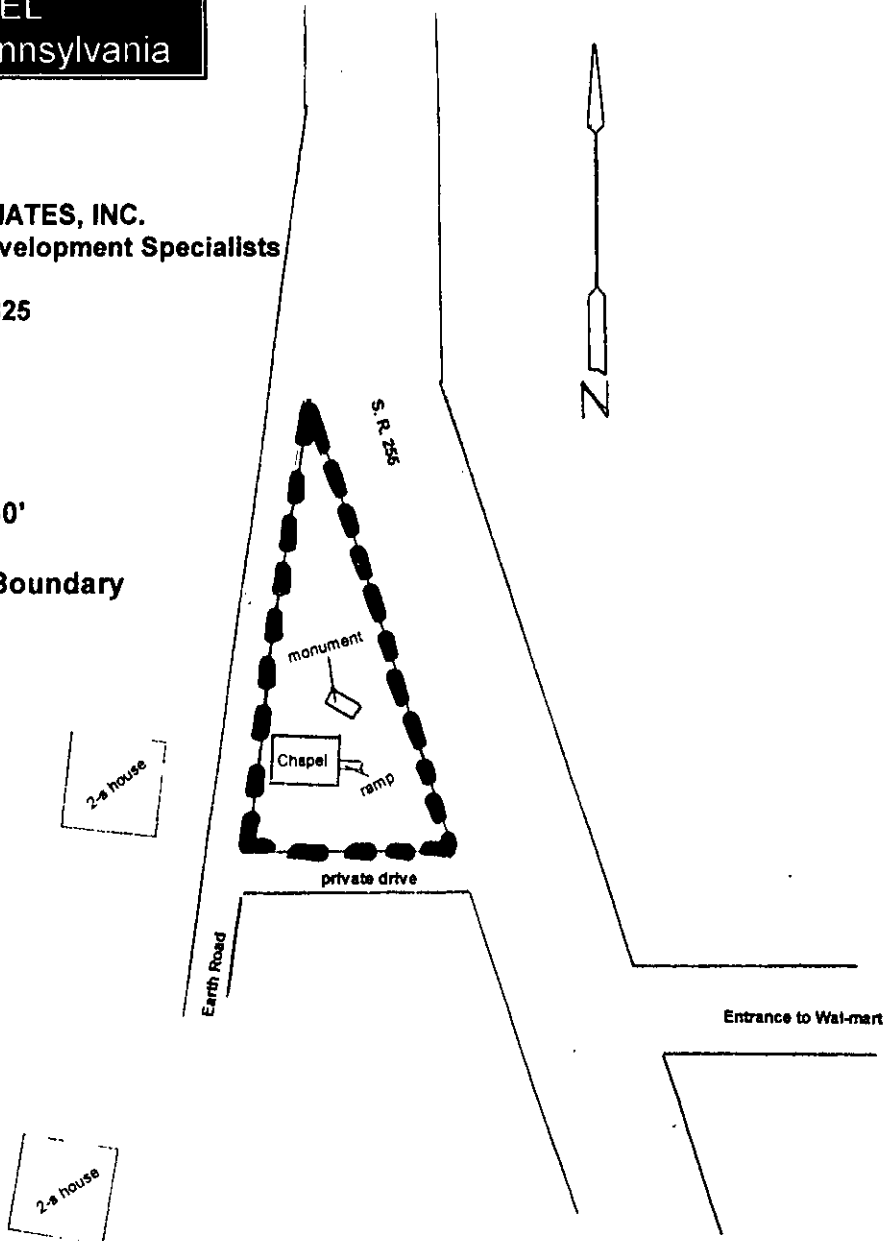
DECKER'S CHAPEL
St. Mary's, Elk County, Pennsylvania

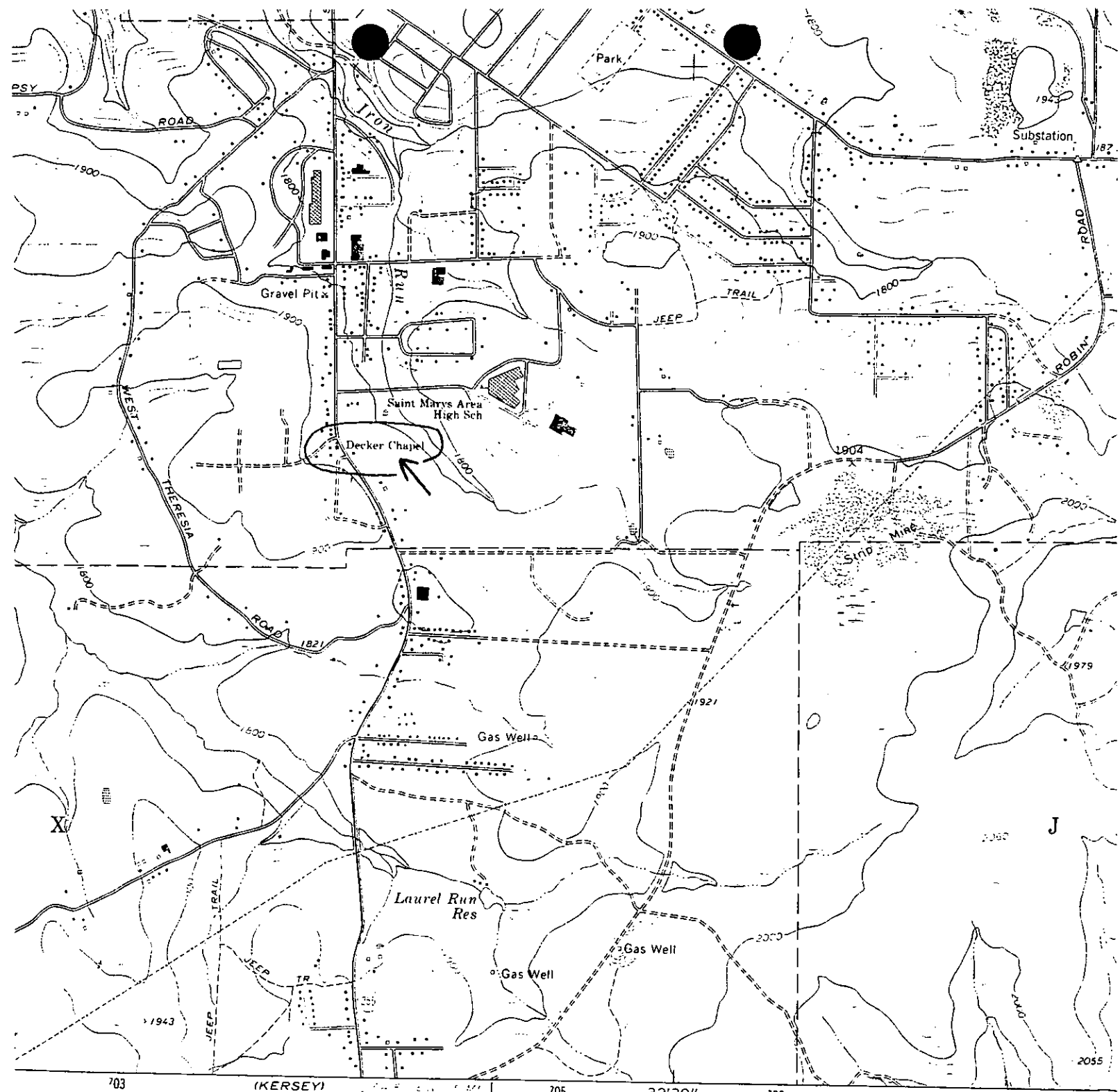
Prepared by
TAYLOR & TAYLOR ASSOCIATES, INC.
Historic Preservation & Community Development Specialists
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1998

SITE PLAN

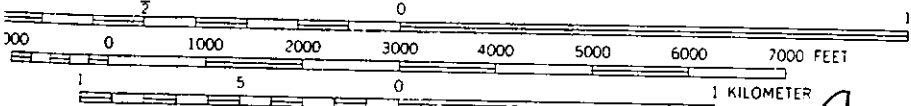
Scale: 1" = ca. 150'

 Boundary



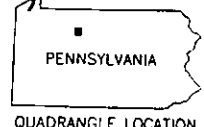


(KERSEY)
5266 1 SE
SCALE 1:24 000



CONTOUR INTERVAL 20 FEET
NATIONAL GEODETIC VERTICAL DATUM OF 1929

SAINT MARYS QUAD



QUADRANGLE LOCATION

Primary highway, hard surface
Secondary highway, hard surface
Interstate R

THIS MAP COMPLIES WITH NATIONAL MAP ACCURACY STANDARDS
FOR SALE BY U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY, RESTON, VIRGINIA 22092
LEADER DESCRIBING TOPOGRAPHIC MAPS AND SYMBOLS IS AVAILABLE ON REQUEST

Revisions shown in purple compiled in cooperation with Commonwealth of Pennsylvania agencies from aerial photographs taken 1977 and other sources. This information not field checked. Map edited 1981