

RICHMOND HILL PLANTATION (Henry Ford Plantation)
East of Richmond Hill on Ford Neck Road
Richmond Hill Vicinity
Bryan County
Georgia

HABS No. GA-2348

HABS
GA-2348

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historical American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Southeast Region
Department of the Interior
Atlanta, Georgia 30303

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

RICHMOND HILL PLANTATION, Henry Ford Plantation

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Location: East of Richmond Hill on Ford Neck Road, Richmond Hill vicinity, Bryan County, Georgia. USGS Richmond Hill Quadrangle UTM Zone 17

Point 1	E 473809	N 3532218	Point 15	E 474691	N 3531256
Point 2	E 473990	N 3531991	Point 16	E 474649	N 3531316
Point 3	E 474169	N 3531832	Point 17	E 474589	N 3531313
Point 4	E 474380	N 3531765	Point 18	E 474340	N 3531509
Point 5	E 474614	N 3531808	Point 19	E 474169	N 3531698
Point 6	E 474848	N 3531927	Point 20	E 474272	N 3531726
Point 7	E 475108	N 3532029	Point 21	E 474072	N 3531812
Point 8	E 475267	N 3532034	Point 22	E 473935	N 3531676
Point 9	E 475374	N 3531940	Point 23	E 473891	N 3531653
Point 10	E 475294	N 3531716	Point 24	E 473758	N 3531669
Point 11	E 475168	N 3531612	Point 25	E 474512	N 3531261
Point 12	E 475016	N 3531505	Point 26	E 474445	N 3531284
Point 13	E 474832	N 3531259	Point 27	E 474480	N 3531356
Point 14	E 474795	N 3531213	Point 28	E 473600	N 3532042

Present Owner: Ford Plantation L.L.C. 12511 Ford Avenue, Richmond Hill, Georgia 31324

Present Use: Planned residential development

Significance: Henry Ford's personal estate, Listed on National Register of Historic Places Contributing buildings in the NRHP district include the Ford Mansion, Laboratory/Powerhouse and Chimney, Oyster House, Stable/Garage, Caretaker's House, Sterling Creek Lettuce Shed, Dynamite Shed, Cherry Hill Lettuce Shed, and the Chute Building. A Civil War earthwork, the Richmond Battery, and a historic landscape, the Sterling Marsh, are also located in the historic district.

General Context

Henry Ford, the great American industrialist, first visited the Savannah area in 1917. In that year, Ford explored the Georgia coast and Ogeechee River by yacht with his close friend and famous naturalist, John Burroughs. By that time, Henry Ford was a household name for the great automobile dynasty he founded in Detroit, Michigan. He was also the world's first billionaire. On occasion, Henry Ford, John Burroughs, Harvey Firestone, and Thomas Edison subsequently took camping trips up the Ogeechee River and elsewhere.

Henry and Clara Ford had a winter home in Fort Myers, Florida. During the 1920s, however, they were tiring of it because of a lack of privacy (Bryan 1990:186). Henry and Clara Ford explored the Savannah and Ogeechee Rivers during a trip in 1925. The Fords discovered the ruins of the Richmond Plantation main house, burned by Sherman's Federal troops in 1864. The site was surrounded by giant live oaks on a picturesque bluff overlooking the river, Mrs. Ford decided she wanted to build a southern-style home in that exact spot (Bryan 1990:186). By that time, there was very little wealth in the area. It was only a poor agricultural community surrounding a railroad depot known as Ways Station.

Soon after their visit, Ford's agents purchased the tract containing Clara's building site and additional surrounding property. The property comprising the Ford's personal estate contained the acreage historically associated with the Richmond, Cherry Hill, and Silk Hope Plantations. Ford obtained options to buy many other larger tracts on the Ogeechee Neck. His agents tried to disguise Ford's identity, but word spread quickly that he was purchasing massive acreage in the Ways area (Bryan 1990:186). Newspaper articles soon appeared which demanded to know his intentions. Henry Ford was a complex man, and he had several reasons (besides privacy) for establishing himself on the Ogeechee Neck in lower Bryan County.

During the early 1920s, Henry Ford was distressed that the British, who controlled the world's rubber production, arbitrarily doubled its price. During a conversation with his close friend Harvey Firestone, the two industrialists decided to begin a research project to find a domestic source for rubber to break the British monopoly (McCaskey 1988:25). They sought help from another mutual friend, Thomas Edison. Together, the three men organized the Edison Botanic Research Corporation in 1924 and set up an experimental laboratory and agricultural fields in Fort Myers, Florida. Ford established a similar complex near his home in Dearborn, Michigan and established a rubber tree farm in the Rio Tapajos region in Brazil (Bryan 1990:152). It was soon apparent to locals that Henry Ford must be establishing yet another "experimental farm" at Ways Station, Georgia. Ford's agents eventually purchased over 70,000 acres in and around Bryan County (McCaskey 1988:26).

Henry Ford was not a single-minded industrialist, however. He was a philanthropist and genuinely concerned with people's welfare. When Ford asked his agents what most local residents

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did for a living, they said “they make moonshine liquor” (Bryan 1990:186). Ford stated that he intended to give them better employment opportunities. He established a sawmill at Ways Station and lumbering soon became the area’s primary industry. The chief product of the mill was prefabricated tenant houses which were provided to employees at reduced costs (Bryan 1990:192). An associated carpenter shop also produced crates, wooden forms for concrete fence posts, caskets, furniture, kindergarten toys, and church pews (Bryan 1990). The carpenters even constructed *Little Lulu*, a 28' cabin cruiser powered by two Ford V-8 automobile engines.

Although Henry Ford had only completed the sixth grade, he strongly valued education. On his arrival in Bryan County, Ford immediately provided funds to local schools and announced his intention to establish a boys trade school at Ways Station (Bryan 1990:188). He also ordered construction of a consolidated school for whites which provided a standard high school education, and an equivalent George Washington Carver School for blacks.

Malaria was rampant in the region and the population suffered from abnormally high cases of typhoid fever, syphilis, smallpox, diphtheria, and hookworm (Bryan 1990:190). Ford supported the Ways Station Health Clinic; he assumed control of it in 1935 and tripled its capacity. Citizens received treatment and medication at no expense. Doctors told Ford that sanitation was one of the root causes for the area’s poor health. He purchased cement-enclosed “sanitary” privies specified by the county and provided them to every family free of charge (Bryan 1990:189). For Henry Ford, these philanthropic enterprises provided a challenging hobby and intense personal satisfaction.

While at Ways Station, the Fords resided at the Cherry Hill House, the residence originally constructed by Thomas Arnold in the 1870s. This house was adjacent to Clara’s “dream house” site on the Richmond bluff. Planning began on Henry and Clara’s “Southern style” residence in 1935 and it was finally completed in 1937. The Cherry Hill residence became a guest house. Ford converted an old rice mill into a personal research laboratory and a powerhouse. They named their new winter estate Richmond Hill Plantation. Of course, “Richmond” was the historic plantation name of their building site. When asked about the “Hill” part of his estate’s name Ford commented “Anything not a swamp around here is named a hill” (Sullivan 2000:325). Although Henry Ford is often quoted as saying “history is bunk,” it is clear he was interested in the area’s history. He purchased and paid for restoration of nearby Fort McAllister, he likewise had a number of old plantation and former slave houses restored, and he commissioned a written history of Bryan County plantations on the Ogeechee Neck.

In 1937, Ford hired one of Edison’s chief chemists at Fort Myers, H.K. Ukkelberg, to supervise the farm crops and to direct a newly constructed research laboratory at Richmond Hill (Bryan 1990:192). Rubber experiments were no longer a priority since synthetic rubber seemed the most viable alternative to breaking the British monopoly. Instead, Ford instructed Ukkelberg “to find new crops or better varieties of old crops grown in this section, and to develop new uses for these crops and for available waste materials” (Bryan 1990:192).

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Some of the most notable projects included extraction of starch from sweet potatoes and water chestnuts, soybean yield experimentation, and the use of slag as a soil conditioner. Many oil producing plants such as tung trees, perilla, chia, castor beans, and abutilon were planted and tested. Alcohol was distilled from rice and sweet potatoes and mixed with gasoline for use as fuel. The old rice dikes were restored and the fields were used for experimental acreages of English peas, carrots, mustard, turnips, beets, broccoli, rutabagas, onions, cabbage, Irish potatoes, okra, cucumbers, cotton and other crops (Bryan 1990:193). The most favorable results on the old rice fields were made with Iceberg lettuce. It was found to have "a particularly better flavor" than lettuce grown on uplands, and it made a better profit than other crops. Specialized lettuce packing sheds were constructed adjacent to the marshes and the crop was grown commercially.

In 1941, local citizens voted to change the name of Ways Station to Richmond Hill to honor Ford. This was not a good year for the community however. The Richmond Hill laboratory (not to be confused with Ford's personal laboratory/powerhouse) burned later that year and was not rebuilt. Most of the research projects were abandoned. By then, World War II had diverted Henry Ford's attention. The U.S. Army obtained several hundred acres for the establishment of an anti-aircraft gun training facility, Camp Stewart (Bryan 1990:195), and the Coast Guard even requisitioned *Little Lulu* for patrol duty. Henry probably did not notice these changes, however. He spent much of his time in Detroit overseeing the production of aircraft, tanks, trucks, jeeps, landing craft, and all the items necessary for a full-scale war. Henry Ford suffered a stroke in early 1945 and he gave control of the Ford Motor Company to his grandson, Henry Ford II (McCaskey 1988:46). Mrs. Ford assumed direction of the Richmond Hill operations.

By all accounts, the spirit at Richmond Hill changed markedly after Henry's stroke. In late 1945, Clara ordered a confidential assessment of the operations and ordered nonprofitable projects closed down. Many philanthropic donations ceased, and even the expense for upkeep of Fort McAllister and several small cemeteries on the estate were questioned (Bryan 1990:196). The trade school and girls school were closed in 1946 and costs in general were drastically reduced. Henry Ford died in April 1947, and he willed the Richmond Hill property (with the exception of Clara's house and grounds) to the Ford Foundation. He had invested \$4,267,000 for the Richmond Hill property which was appraised at \$3,000,000. According to tax returns, he had lost \$3,525,600 on operations and contributed \$429,235 for education (Bryan 1990:196).

Except for the sawmill, all of the Richmond Hill operations were gradually closed down and sold. Clara died in September 1950 and the Richmond furnishings were removed to Dearborn and auctioned (Sullivan 2000:325). The most profitable enterprise, the sawmill, burned on May 11, 1951. The Ford Foundation announced a complete discontinuance of operations on September 6, 1951. School properties were transferred to the Bryan County Board of Education. The rest of the Richmond Hill property was sold, most of it to the Southern Kraft Timberland Corporation and the International Paper Company (Mitchell 1984; McCaskey 1988:49).

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After Clara Ford's death, the Ford mansion remained unused for almost a decade. In 1959, the house and 1200 acres was sold to a New Hampshire industrialist (McCaskey 1988:49). The property changed hands several times over the next two decades with various schemes to utilize the impressive estate. In 1978, the mansion was used as a restaurant, but failed after only one year of operation (McCaskey 1988). The condition of the Ford House deteriorated to a point around 1980 when became dilapidated and it was used only to store hay.

The house was rehabilitated in 1981 when a Saudi Arabian entrepreneur, Ghaith R. Pharaon, purchased the estate. Like others associated with this tract, Pharaon is an interesting individual. He was educated in France and Lebanon in his younger years, while his university education was in the United States with degrees from the Colorado School of Mines, Stanford University, and an MBA from Harvard (McCaskey 1988:50). Pharaon owned homes in Paris, London, Jeddah, Hong Kong, Borneo, Cannes, and a castle in the Dordogne at Montfort, France. He purchased the Richmond Hill estate and converted the Ford House into his residence. He also remodeled Ford's old powerhouse/laboratory into offices for InterRedec, the corporation which controlled his business interests in the United States (McCaskey 1988:50).

Pharaon caused many changes to the Ford estate in the 1980s. He rehabilitated the Ford House and Laboratory, constructed a new garage building near the mansion, moved and rebuilt the Cherry Hill House, and expanded Ford's yacht basin into a marina which could accommodate larger vessels. He made significant changes to the estate's landscape, including the addition of numerous plantings. Pharaon ordered roads constructed and paved; he also modified the original Ford house entrance into a formal drive, complete with iron fences salvaged from New Orleans. Other modifications included placement of numerous statues and concrete balustrade fences, and construction of a swimming pool (McCaskey 1988:51).

The most significant alteration to the estate grounds was the construction of a world class golf course designed by renown golf course architects, Pete and P.B. Dye (McCaskey 1988:51). Although Pharaon did not play golf, he told the Dyes to "Give me a truly inspirational golfing experience that may encourage me to take up golf some day" (McCaskey 1988). More than half of the 509 acre Sterling Bluff Golf Course was constructed on the old Cherry Hill rice fields, which were filled in for the purpose. The Sterling Bluff Golf Course was named one of the "Top 100 Golf Courses in 1988 by *Golf Digest Magazine* (McCaskey 1988:51).

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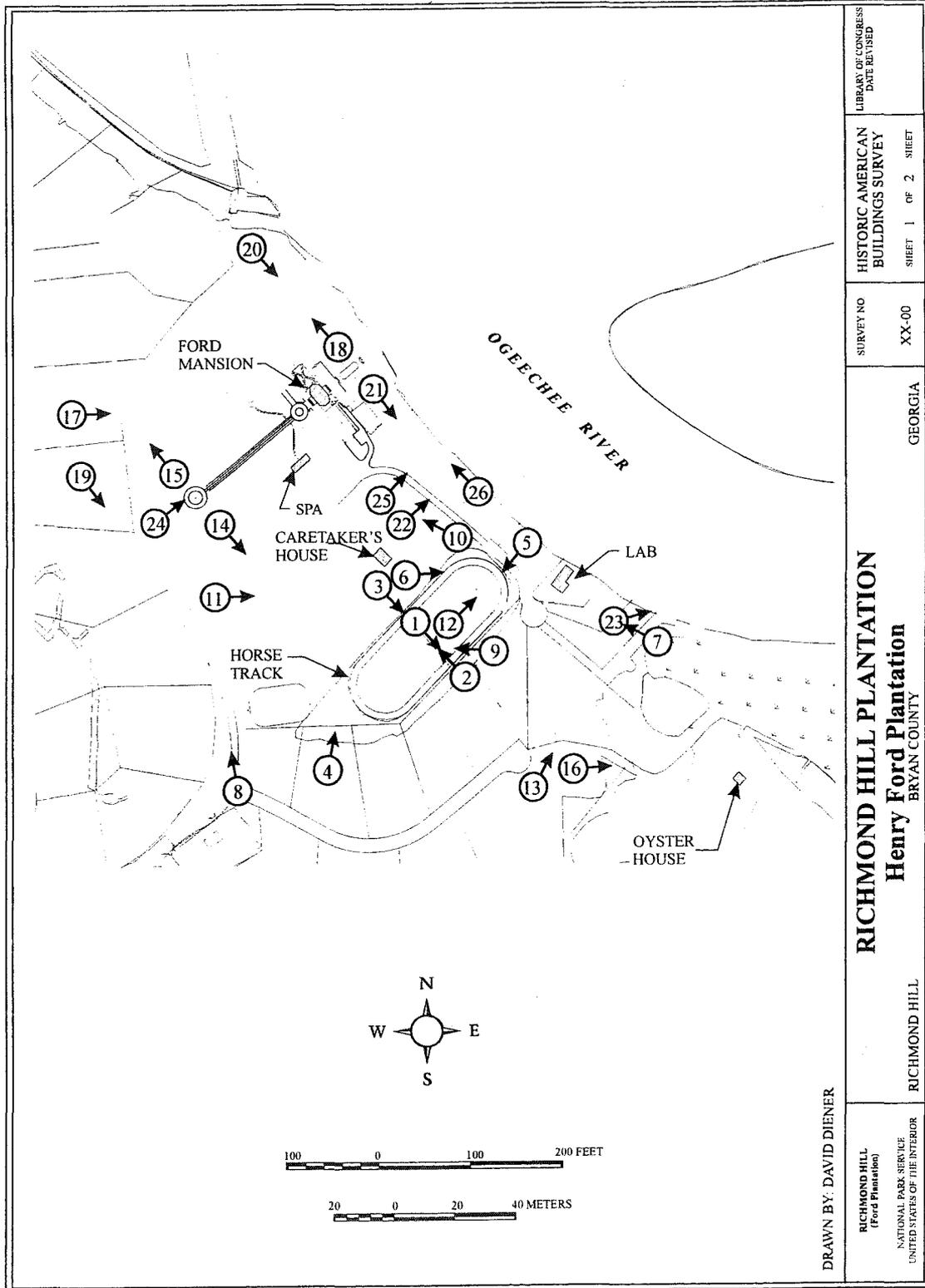
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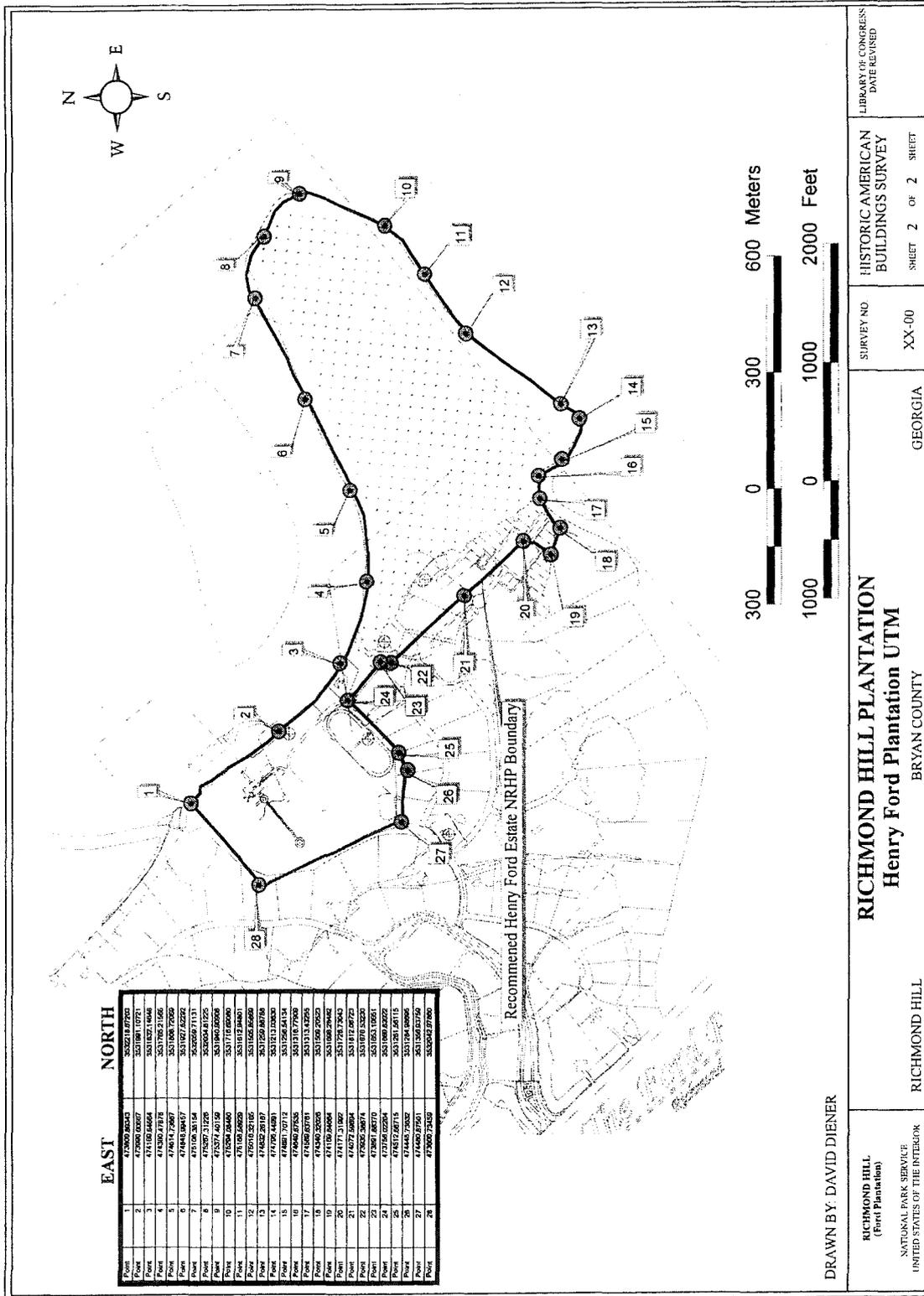
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY SHEET 1 OF 2 SHEET	
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RICHMOND HILL PLANTATION Henry Ford Plantation BRYAN COUNTY	
RICHMOND HILL	
RICHMOND HILL (Ford Plantation) NATIONAL PARK SERVICE UNITED STATES OF THE INTERIOR	

DRAWN BY: DAVID DIENER



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