

## CHAPTER 2

### GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING

The Dunhams Block is situated in the center of downtown Trenton on the north side of West State Street, the city's principal east-west street. To the east and west, respectively, the block is bounded by North Broad and South Warren Streets, the two main north-south arteries within the urban core. On the north, the block is delimited by East Hanover Street. All four streets were part of the original town plan as formalized in the 1720s, although North Broad Street originated in the prehistoric period as an Indian trail (Figures 1.2 and 1.3).

The site is located on the eastern margins of the Piedmont physiographic province close to the Inner Coastal Plain. The underlying geology here consists of silts, sands and gravels which overlie bedrock of Precambrian gneiss. The term "gneiss" is used in a generic sense here, for this indigenous metamorphic material is also variously referred to as mica schist, schistose with muscovite and Wissahickon schist. Historically, the gneiss has been an important building material, being widely used for foundations, property walls and stone buildings until well into the 19th century (Widmer 1963; Wolfe 1977; Kalb *et al.* 1982).

The upper layers of silts, sands and gravels that overlie bedrock have been extensively re-arranged within the block owing to the intensity of historic and recent land use. Undisturbed silts, sands and gravels were, however, observed during the archaeological field investigations in most of the excavation units at depths ranging between two feet (in the alley between 12 and 14 North Warren Street) and 16 feet below the present ground surface (in the base of the ice house on the Trenton House property). Gneiss bedrock was not observed in any of the archaeological excavations (see below, Chapters 5B and 6B and Appendix B).

Soils are classified by the Soil Conservation Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, as Urban Land, Galestown Material, consisting of Galestown and Evesboro sands that have been altered for residential or commercial use. This material is characteristically fine to medium in texture and medium brown in color (Jablonski 1972).

The original natural topography of the site is now obscured by urban development, but this would have consisted of a very gentle, south to southwest-sloping terrain broadly reflecting the underlying geology. No surface drainage ever appears to have flowed through the site of the Dunhams

Block. Approximately 700 feet to the south of the block is Assunpink Creek, a first-order tributary of the Delaware River, the principal stream flowing through the city and historically an important source of water power. The confluence of the Delaware River and Assunpink Creek is located roughly 1800 feet southwest of the Dunhams Block. This is the location of the "Falls of the Delaware", where the gneiss bedrock outcrops in the valley floor and where the river was fordable in prehistoric and historic times. Elevations of the original pre-urban ground surface within the block ranged between roughly 45 and 55 feet above sea level. A 50-foot above sea level benchmark is located immediately opposite the southwestern corner of the block (Figure 1.2).

At the time of the archaeological field investigations, although partially abandoned, the Dunhams Block still reflected its maximum built-up condition, the result of more than 250 years of building and rebuilding (Plate 1.1). A detailed description of the architectural character of the block prior to its demolition can be obtained from the survey carried out by Acroterion (1988).