

VLR - 9/16/80
 NRHP - 11/29/80

**United States Department of the Interior
 Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
 Inventory—Nomination Form**

For HCRS use only

received

date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
 Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic Abijah Thomas House

and/or common

2. Location

street & number South of Adwolf, on State Route 657 not for publication

city, town Adwolf vicinity of congressional district Ninth (William C. Wampler)

state Virginia code 51 county Smyth code 173

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military
			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> other: <u>vacant</u>

4. Owner of Property

name George Murray

street & number P. O. Box 105

city, town Chilhowie ~~Marion~~ state Virginia Zip Code 24319

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Smyth County Courthouse

street & number

city, town Marion state Virginia Zip Code 24354

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

Virginia Historic Landmarks
 title Commission Survey has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date 1968, 1973, 1980 federal state county local

depository for survey records Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission, 221 Governor Street

city, town Richmond state Virginia Zip Code 23219

7. Description

Condition

excellent
 good
 fair

deteriorated
 ruins
 unexposed

Check one

unaltered
 altered

Check one

original site
 moved date _____

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

Prominently sited on a low hill surrounded by mountains, the Abijah Thomas House, Smyth County, is the finest example in Virginia of a 19th-century octagonal house. Built in 1856-57, this sophisticated structure has retained important graining and painting schemes in spite of years of weathering and neglect.

The structure's eight elevations are laid in stretcher bond, except for the northeast wall which has been rebuilt with cinder blocks. The brick face is in good condition. Although several areas have been crudely patched, the building is structurally stable. Scarring on the south (facade), southwest, and southeast elevations indicates that at some point a porch shielded these walls. No glass and few mullions remain intact. A simple lintel with cornerblocks extends over each original exterior opening. The south elevation is distinguished by its first- and second-story center doors which are framed by tall windows. The first-story door was bordered by sidelights and capped by a transom. The right sidelight has been completely removed. At the second level only the framing exists to indicate that at one time this opening also had a transom and sidelights. The southeast, east, northwest, west, and southwest elevations are identically composed of four symmetrically placed windows, arranged two per story. A single door opens the rebuilt northeast elevation. A door has been positioned between the north (rear) elevation's first-floor windows. The structure is encircled by a box cornice and a molded frieze which stops just above the second-story window lintels. Four chimneys break the roof line which is capped by a standing-seam metal roof. The brick wall extends directly to the ground. There is a thirty-inch crawl space beneath the structure.

The interior of the Abijah Thomas house has been apportioned into seventeen spacious rooms and numerous closets. Most rooms are nearly square with triangular closets fashioned from the remaining angled space. All walls are plaster on lath and, according to local newspaper accounts, were once covered by oil-painted landscape murals. No evidence of these murals remains. A substantial amount of plaster has fallen throughout the house. The marbled plaster wall in the south/southwest room is of special note. The grained and marbled baseboards, which are different in every room, are the outstanding feature of this house and evidence the availability of artists and competent builders in the area.

The two-part baseboards are composed of a lower marbled board and an upper board that is either painted a complimentary color or, as in one room, is stenciled with flowers and leafy vines. A few chair rails remain, and where they occur they are painted the same color as the upper board. The Greek Revival door and window moldings are identical. All doors are grained and each window is set into recessed panel jambs. The mantels which remain are conservatively rendered Greek Revival. Although the rooms are identically dimensioned there is a patent attempt to introduce a regularity and balance into the spatial organization. The most curious space is the small, second-story room offset to the left of center. This room is unlighted by windows or light fixtures and its use remains unclear. Two sets of stairs lead to the second story. The primary stair is just to the right of the center of the house. Most of the balusters of this quarter-turn-with-landing stair are missing. The graceful handrail and Greek Revival newel are in place. A grained, recessed panel wainscot extends up the stair wall. A secondary quarter-turn-with-winders stair is positioned in the east/northeast room. While its overall condition is deteriorated, its chair rail is intact.

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 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 type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian
<input checked="" 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 1856-57

Builder/Architect

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

Commanding a panoramic view of the South Fork country of the Holston River in Smyth County, the Abijah Thomas House is a rare expression in Virginia of the concept of octagonal domestic architecture that caught the imagination of Americans in the great reform ferment of the 1850s. The originator of the concept, Orson S. Fowler (who constructed his own octagonal house near Fishkill, Dutchess County, New York, in 1853), introduced readers to the functional, stylistic, and humanitarian advantages of an eight-sided dwelling through successive editions of his book, A Home for All, first published in 1843. Of more than a thousand buildings which were constructed in the United States emulating Fowler's ideas, the Thomas House is Virginia's most sophisticated example. Built in 1856-57 by Smyth County's foremost antebellum industrialist, Abijah Thomas, the distinctive brick structure retains a notable variety of grained and marbled baseboards, as well as a rare marbled plaster wall. With its unusual design, once-beautiful interior decoration, and mountain view, the residence is symbolic of the rise to prominence of a pioneer family of southwestern Virginia in the years just prior to the Civil War.

The South Fork of the Holston River is one of three which divides Smyth County into three valleys. Once called the Indian River, the Holston was surveyed as early as 1746; but not until 1768 was the surrounding area legally opened to settlement by the terms of the Treaty of Fort Stanwix. Settlers came from as near as the Shenandoah Valley, eastern Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania, and from as far as the northern colonies and the British Isles.

John Thomas, the progenitor of this family in Virginia, came from New England ca. 1761 when the area still lay within the bounds of Fincastle County (now extinct). Sometime later he was granted modest holdings on the South Fork of the Holston River in Washington County. These formed the nucleus of the enormous tracts assembled by two succeeding generations.

His son, Thomas Thomas, is first recorded as a landowner in 1800 when he received grants for two tracts. The first was located "on a branch of the South Fork of the Holston River...." The second was "...adjoining the survey whereon he now lives...." ¹ Throughout his life he enlarged his holdings to more than 7,000 acres. The first grant remained his home tract until his death in 1838 and would have served as the site of his dwelling house. A surveyor and blacksmith, as well as a farmer, Thomas Thomas was a sheriff of Washington County and a justice of the peace. When Smyth County was formed from Wythe and Washington counties in 1832, a commission was appointed to select a site for the new county seat. After the site had been chosen and surveyed, the commissioners spent the night at the Thomas home. Thomas' wife, Freelove Thomas, is said to have remarked to her guests that it would be fitting to name the town in honor of General Francis Marion, the southern hero of the American Revolution. The story is apocryphal but there is no question that, upon the commission's recommendation, Marion became the name of Smyth's county seat. ²

9. Major Bibliographical References

- Carner, Clara Hill. "Octagonal Brick House Near Adwolf One of Smyth's Noted Landmarks." The Roanoke Times, 2 August 1952, p.4.
- Fowler, Orson. The Octagon House - A Home for All. New York: Dover Publications, 1973. Richmond, Virginia. Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission Archives. Abijah Thomas House File. (See Continuation Sheet #3)

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property 2 3/4 acres

Quadrangle name Marion, Virginia

Quadrangle scale 1:24000

UMT References

A

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4	4	9
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Zone Easting Northing

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Zone Easting Northing

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Verbal boundary description and justification Beginning at a point 800' NW of intersection of State Routes 656 and 657, W of Jefferson National Forest, 2000' N of South Fork of the Holston River; thence extending 600' due E from E side of said route 657; thence extending 200' due S; thence extending 450' W to said side of said route; thence extending 200' NW along said side of said route to point of origin.

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 Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission Staff

organization Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission date September 1980

street & number 221 Governor Street telephone (804) 786-3144

city or town Richmond state Virginia 23219

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national state local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature *Tucker Hill*

title Tucker Hill, Executive Director date SEP 16 1980

For HCRS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

date

Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

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Abijah Thomas House, Smyth County, Virginia

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Continuation sheet #1

Item number 7, 8

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7. DESCRIPTION

Because of exposure and neglect the house is in poor condition. The present owner is interested in selling the house.

A smokehouse which is located northwest of the house and is currently used for storage is the only dependency associated with the Abijah Thomas house. A tenant house is located to the north of the house.

BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION:

The total nominated acreage for the Abijah Thomas house is 2 3/4 acres and includes the house, smokehouse and tenant house.

8. SIGNIFICANCE:

Abijah Thomas, born in 1814, married Priscilla Scott in 1838, two weeks before his father's will was recorded at the county court. Thomas Thomas bequeathed to his son a two-thirds interest in tracts amounting to 833 acres on the north side of the South Fork of the Holston River. His father's will also provided that the other one-third interest in these lands would devolve to him on the death of his mother.³ Within a few years Abijah began to acquire land adjacent to these tracts, first buying 3,000 acres from his father's estate and then a mill from his brother. In 1849 he inherited his mother's one-third life interest in the lands he shared with her according to the terms of his father's will. By the mid-19th century he had increased his total holdings to more than 3,600 acres. The 1850 census reported that he was a thirty-six-year-old farmer who had seven children and owned real estate valued at \$10,000. The 1850 personal property tax collectors noted that he also owned six slaves, ten horses, and such luxury items as a pleasure carriage, two metallic clocks, and a piano.

Between 1850 and 1860, Thomas enlarged his land holdings to some forty-five tracts consisting of more than 10,000 acres and laid the foundations of an iron industry along the South Fork and nearby Staley's Creek. Developing mines, furnaces, and foundries, he also invested heavily in the mill tract he had purchased from his brother. He erected a saw mill, a burr mill, and, finally, a woolen mill, for which he bought excellent equipment and brought in expert labor.⁴

In the course of expanding his interests in land, crops, machinery, and labor, Abijah Thomas planned and built his octagonal house. There is no known document extant to associate Thomas with Orson S. Fowler; however, it is certain that Thomas occasionally traveled to New York as an agent of the Douglas Land Company, which controlled thousands of acres of timberland in the Smyth County area. Since it is known also that one of the Douglas heirs married a Roosevelt of Dutchess County, it seems possible that Thomas, like many other tourists of his day, may have visited the octagonal house which Fowler built overlooking the Catskills and the Hudson, and that this experience may have inspired him to build his own impressive residence in Virginia.⁵ Whether Thomas borrowed directly from Fowler or became acquainted with Fowler's ideas by some other source, the house he began to build in 1856 well accorded with Fowler's belief that every man should be his own architect and should use nature's building materials.⁶ Thomas was an experienced

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Abijah Thomas House, Smyth County, Virginia

Continuation sheet #2

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8. SIGNIFICANCE:

blacksmith, carpenter, and surveyor and probably used these skills in drawing plans and supervising construction of the house. Moreover, many of the materials used in building the residence came from his surrounding lands. Completed in 1857, the new brick dwelling substantially increased the value of the 400-acre "home tract." Assessed at a value of \$1,000 in 1850, the land, with buildings and improvements, was appraised at \$5,000 in the Smyth County Land Tax Books of 1857.

On the eve of the Civil War, Thomas was a wealthy man who owned - apart from his house, his land, his iron works, and his mills - eighteen slaves, ten horses, 100 cattle, three carriages, one watch, two clocks, one piano, and gold and silver plate. When the war broke out he converted many of these holdings into Confederate notes. During the next four years he saw his iron works at Staley's Creek destroyed by Stoneman's Raiders, his liquid assets rendered worthless by the fall of the Confederacy, and his woolen mill closed for want of buyers, leaving him a bankrupt man.⁷ According to Smyth County historian Goodridge Wilson, "...if the Civil War had not destroyed these properties and involved him heavily, he would in all probability have amassed one of the great fortunes of the state, and have set his county 50 years ahead of industrial development."⁸

Deedbooks from 1860 through the end of the 19th century tell a story of tract after tract of Thomas' property pledged as collateral for cash advances. Death in 1875 delivered him from court litigation, which was not to be settled until 1903. His wife lived in the house until her death in 1885.

For much of this century the house served as a barn. The present owner intends to sell it to someone with the means to restore it.

VDS/RAC

1

Grants, No. 45, p. 148; No. 46, p. 396.

2

Goodridge Wilson, Smyth County History and Traditions (Kingsport: Kingsport Press, 1932), p. 78.

3

Smyth County Will Book A, p. 101.

4

Mitchell Sandos, "Abijah Thomas Left a Legacy of Industry, " Smyth County News, 1976.

5

Orson S. Fowler, The Octagon House - A Home for All (New York: Dover Publications, 1973), ppix, xi.

(See Continuation Sheet #3)

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Abijah Thomas House, Smyth County, Virginia

Continuation sheet

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8. SIGNIFICANCE:

6

Ibid., p. v.

7

Sandos, "Abijah Thomas Left a Legacy of Industry."

8

Wilson, Smyth County History and Traditions .

9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES:

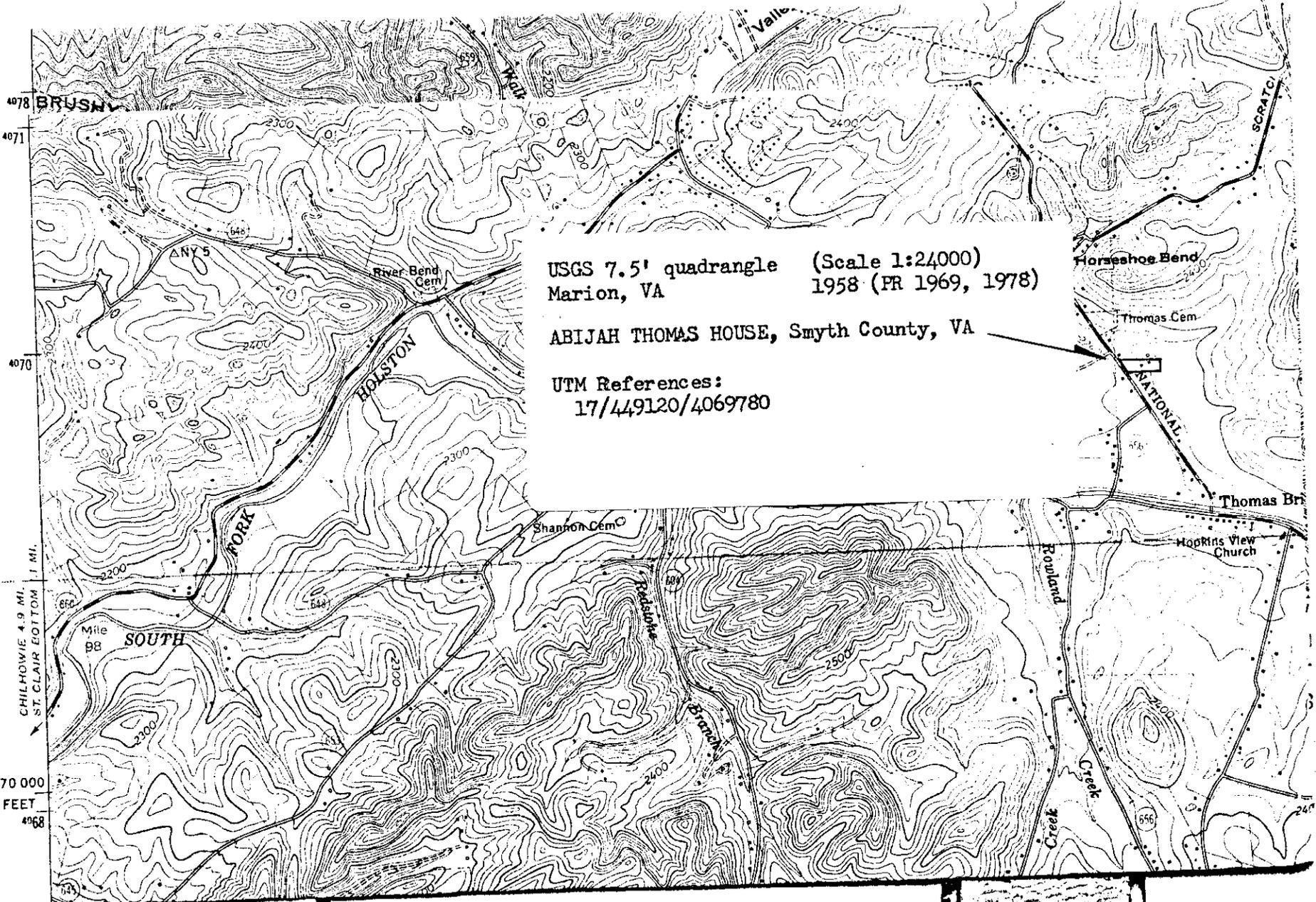
Sandos, Mitchell. "Abijah Thomas Left a Legacy of Industry." Smyth County News, 1976.
Smyth County Deed Books 3, 7

Land Tax Books 1832-1869; 1878

Personal Property Books 1845, 1850, 1855, 1860, 1861, 1862, 1863.

Will Books A, 2, 5.

Sturgill, Mack H. Route 3, Marion, Virginia. Interview, July 1980.



USGS 7.5' quadrangle (Scale 1:24000)
Marion, VA 1958 (PR 1969, 1978)

ABIJAH THOMAS HOUSE, Smyth County, VA

UTM References:
17/449120/4069780

4078
4071

4070

CHILHOWIE 4.9 MI.
ST. CLAIR BOTTOM 1 MI.

170 000
FEET
4968