

Aiken-Rhett House: Summary of Archaeological Research

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Introduction

The Aiken-Rhett house has been the subject of an initial archaeological testing project and three very modest archaeological salvage projects. The first, conducted in October 1985, was funded by The Charleston Museum and a Survey and Planning Grant administered by the South Carolina Department of Archives and History. This was designed to assess the integrity and clarity of the archaeological record, and to amend the National Register form to include the archaeological component. The second, conducted for two days in April 1991, was a brief salvage project inside the north room of the kitchen building, conducted in association with repairs to the structure and dismantling of a failing chimney following Hurricane Hugo. The third project monitored restoration of and salvaged materials from the northeast privy in December 1992. Finally, a small test unit was excavated in the western basement room in April 1996, as part of renovation of this space by Historic Charleston Foundation. Only the first project is the subject of a final report.

The initial archaeological testing in 1985 was the first residential site excavation in Charleston conducted by the author, and thus the site report will appear somewhat dated in its organization and interpretation. Our cumulative knowledge of the urban archaeological record, particularly at townhouse sites, has expanded dramatically in the past fifteen years. The archaeological projects have all been quite limited in scale, and therefore results from each should be considered tentative. Certainly a reassessment of the archaeological evidence at the Aiken-Rhett house is appropriate at this time.

1985 Testing

Initial archaeological testing at the Aiken-Rhett house was funded under a Survey and Planning grant administered by the South Carolina Department of Archives and History. This project was designed to assess the nature, extent, and integrity of the archaeological component at the site, and to amend the National Register nomination to include the archaeological component. The testing consisted of placement of six dispersed units in the rear yard, beyond the limits of the brick courtyard.

An auger test was also conducted in this area. A hand-operated bucket auger with a three-inch diameter bit was used to test at 10' intervals in the south half of the yard and at 20' intervals in the north half. Materials retrieved from the auger tests were screened through 1/4" mesh. The auger testing revealed that artifacts were concentrated along the east side of the site, with a heavy concentration about 30' north of the back of the kichen building. The western third of the site, in contrast, was relatively sparse.

Excavation units in the eastern portion of the yard revealed three zone deposits: zone 1 was a dark brown sandy soil, .4' deep, dating to the 20th century. Zone 2 consisted of medium brown, grey, and yellow mottled soil, flecked with charcoal and mortar, in varying depths across the site. This zone consistently contained c. 1840s artifacts. Zone 3 was present only on the eastern side of the site, and may represent filling of low areas. The zone 3 deposits contained artifacts dating to the 1820s. No extensive midden deposits were encountered, and low artifact density characterized much of the site.

A number of features were encountered in the yard. Most dramatic was a network of drainage features, revealed in N95E145 and N108"E138. The first unit revealed Feature 2, which consisted of a drain with brick sides and bottom, covered by a cap of large, irregularly-shaped paving stones. The drain was connected to feature 1, a circular basin 3.6' in diameter and 1.0' deep. The interior of the basin was lined with plaster, and the base featured a square stone with a small hole in the center. This allowed the basin to empty into an underlying drain line. The drain system continued due north, and was again encountered in N108E138, but not in N172E150. A well-defined builders trench for the drain, feature 3, contained artifacts post-dating 1830.

The drain system also connected to the rectangular entrance vault present at the northeast corner of the kitchen building. At the time of the project, this vault, designated feature 4, was filled with loamy soil and a heavy cap of lime. The soil was excavated 2.5' deep to the base of the drain. The final destination of the drain line remains unknown.

Beneath the drain system, in N95E145, were two additional features, including a brick foundation running northeast/southwest. Feature 6 was a single brick wide in a construction trench of tan sand, with a TPQ date of 1820. Feature 5, an anomalous pit of mixed soils, dated to the 1840s. Feature 6 is worthy of further investigation.

N172E150 was excavated in the vicinity of the northeast privy. The three zone deposits were encountered here, as were a variety of amorphous stains at the base of zone 3. These were not defined as features. N135E145 was excavated near the posited northwest corner of the rectangular building, reputed to be the cow shed. The previously defined zone deposits were present, but the zone 3 deposits were loose and unconsolidated. A rectangular, sand-filled feature was located in the southeast corner of the unit and may be a builders trench for the structure. This was designated feature 10, and bears further examination. Feature fill contained transfer print pearlware and may date to the 1830s.

Two units were excavated in the eastern portion of the yard. N95E90 was located at the

rear of the carriage house and revealed shallow deposits of zones 1 and 2. Feature 11 was a brick walk or drive way dating to the 20th century. Feature 12, which initiated at the base of zone 2, was a deep pit filled with artifacts and building rubble, suggesting deposition of construction debris. This feature was the earliest encountered on the property, and may date to c. 1817.

Unit N160E100 exhibited very different stratigraphy from the rest of the site. Zone 1 was immediately followed by sterile clay, and zone 2 was present only as a thin lense. Intruding into the subsoil were a series of amorphous and circular stains, all of which appear to be plant stains. All intrusions were mapped, but only two were designated and excavated. Features 8 and 9 were both less than one foot deep and contained very few artifacts.

Several of the features encountered in the 1985 project bear further investigation. This includes the drain system (features 2 and 3), the foundation underlying the drain (feature 6), the possible construction trench for the yard building (feature 10), and the plant stains in N160E100.

1991 Kitchen Investigations

Salvage excavations in the northern room of the kitchen building accompanied the rebuilding of the northern chimney following general degradation accelerated by Hurricane Hugo. Renovations as planned at that time called for completely rebuilding the chimney. The chimney was completely dismantled to the ground, the restoration specialists began to excavate around the chimney foundation to pour cement for rebuilding. The crew encountered dark soil full of large artifacts and animal bone, and so suspended excavations and called the archaeologists. The excavated trenches were cleaned and recorded, and an undisturbed column of dirt in the center was excavated and screened in a controlled manner. The soil excavated by the restoration specialists was also screened.

The excavation of the dirt column inside the hearth and on either side of the exterior of the hearth revealed mixed and mottled sands, a large collection of animal bone, and a moderate collection of 19th century artifacts. Excavation on the north side revealed a brick feature which appeared to predate the brick fireplace foundation. This was an unusual 'keyhole-shaped' brick foundation, five courses deep. Its function is unknown (see photos).

Based on these discoveries, reconstruction of the chimney was cancelled, and the area backfilled and secured. No further excavation or research was done at that time, and none has been conducted since. All of the features encountered bear further research. Further, the wealth of artifacts recovered in the room suggests that this may be a significant area for future archaeological research.

1992 Privy Restoration

In December 1992, Ron Anthony of The Charleston Museum, aided by volunteer Larry Cadigan, spent two days monitoring restoration of the northeast privy building. This restoration

entailed excavation of trenches along the exterior walls of the building. Soil from previously excavated areas was screened, and archaeologists excavated the remaining portions of the trenches. The soil followed the general stratigraphy noted during the 1985 excavations, and contained few artifacts. Two trenches were excavated on the interior of the privy, following removal of a great deal of debris. This cleanup revealed an additional, inner brick foundation which ran north/south and may predate the gothic facade of the present structure. It is possible that this represents an original west wall of the privy building, before the gothic renovation. Alternately, it may define the below-ground vault of the privy proper.

1996 Builders Trench Excavation

In April 1996, Martha Zierden was invited by Robert Leath of Historic Charleston Foundation to sample the soil floor in the western basement room. The old wooden flooring had been removed as part of renovation of this area as restrooms, and the ground was slated for some disturbance. Unlike the other rooms of the basement, there was no brick paving here. Leath suggested it was possible that soil and artifacts may have accumulated here in a manner similar to the kitchen building.

A small (2' x 2') test unit was excavated adjacent to the southeast corner of the room. This excavated revealed a disc of wood, about 5" in diameter, on top of a whole brick, which may have served as some sort of temporary foundation. The loose soil beneath this contained a c. 1840 cathedral-style decanter stopper. Beneath this was a mottled yellow and dark grey sand, excavated as level 2. A builders trench was visible along the west wall. It was well-defined, and excavated to 1.4' below surface. The profile revealed a second, later builders trench, which initiated in the level one soils and may be associated with the wooden column. The earlier builders trench contained no artifacts. No photographs were taken due to the light conditions in the room. Profile drawings are available.

Suggestions for Further Research

The limited archaeological data recovered in the last fifteen years suggests that the Aiken-Rhett property contains an archaeological record of sufficient clarity and integrity to inform on a number of issues. The data recovered is, however, poorly understood. Initiation of an historic structures study presents an opportunity to re-examine all aspects of the property. Though the site is well-documented, and the surviving architectural evidence remarkable, little is known about the layout or function of the yard. For example, the long-held assumption that the rear yard was for service only was questioned at the recent Advisory Team meeting. Clearly, additional archeological research, coupled with re-analysis of the existing collections and comparison with other townhouse sites, can contribute to a more thorough understanding of the site.

A phased approach to archaeological research is proposed. Such work should begin with a dispersed testing project, conducted as part of the historic structures analysis. Excavation of ten dispersed units are proposed for this first stage of work; location and rationale for these units

should be a joint decision of the Advisory Committee, following the suggestions of the project architects. In addition, the features encountered in N100E160 (the possible plant stains) and in N95E145 (the drain system) should be re-exposed and re-examined. Additional details will follow the May 10-12 research visit by the architects.

Table 1
Provenience Guide

FS#	Provenience	Function	TPQ	Date of deposition
2	N95E155, zone 1	zone	safety pin	20th century
22	N160E100, zone 1	zone	cement	20th century
23	N160E100, zone1-2	zone	annular w.ware	20th century
32	N135E145, zone 1	zone	whiteware	20th century
39	N95E90, zone 1	zone	decaled w.ware	20th century
40	N95E90, zone 1 under fea 11	zone	pencil top	20th century
45	N172E150, zone 1	zone	whiteware	20th century
3	N95E155, zone 2, level 1	zone	flow blue ware	1850s
5	N160E100, zone 2 level 2	zone	hand paint whiteware	1840s
6	N95E155, zone 2 profile	zone	spring	antebellum
8	N95E155, zone 2 level 3	zone	purple trans. print ww	1840s
13	N95E155, zone 2 around fea 1	zone	nail	antebellum
15	N95E155, zone 2 level 3 trowel	zone	red trans. print ww	1830s
16	trench 1, zone 2	zone	handpaint whiteware	antebellum
17	N95E155, zone 2 level 4	zone	handpaint whiteware	1830s
24	N108E138, zone 2 level 1	zone	blue sponged whiteware	1840s
26	N108E138, zone 2 Level 2	zone	coin 1847	1840s
33	N135E145, zone 2	zone	blue trans. print ww	1840s
41	N95E90, zone 2	zone	blue trans. print ww	1840s
43	N95E90, zone 2	zone	flow blue whiteware	1840s
46	N172E150, zone 2	zone	green trans. print ww	1840s
34	N135E145, profile	zone	blue trans. print ww	1840s.
30	N108E138, zone 3	zone	creamware	1820s
35	N135E145, zone 2	zone	green trans. print ww	1830s
47	N172E150, zone 3	zone	trans print whiteware	1830s
36	N135E145, trowel	zone	whiteware	1830s

Table 1, cont.

FS#	Provenience	Function	TPQ	Date of Deposition
6	N95E155	fill?	flow blue whiteware	1840s
7	N95E155, pm 1	postmold	annular ww	1830s
9	N95E155, fea 2	drain fill	whiteware	1880s
10	N95E155, fea 3	builders trench	purple trans. print ww	1830s
11	fea 4, zone 1	privy?	pipe	early 20th cent.
12	fea 4, zone 2	privy?	dispensary bottle	early 20th cent.
14	N95E155, fea 1	basin fill	pencil top	20th century
18	N95E155, fea 6	builders trench	annular ww	
19	N95E155, fea 5	pit	button	1840s
20	N95E155, fea 6	builders trench	whiteware-1842	1840s
27	N108E138, fea 2	drain fill	undecorated porcelain	late 19th century
28	N108E138, fea 7	pit	green trans. print ww	1850s
29	N108E138, fea 3	builders trench	purple trans. print ww	1840s
31	N160E100, fea 8	pit	shoe rivets	late 19th century
37	N160E100, fea 9	pit	green glass	early 19th century
38	N135E145, fea 10	builders trench	blue trans print pw	1830s
42	N95E90, fea 12	constr. pit	annular pw	1820s
44	N95E90, fea 12	constr. pit	trans. print pearlware	1820s

FS# = Field Specimen number (assigned sequentially to excavated proveniences)

TPQ = Terminus Post Quem

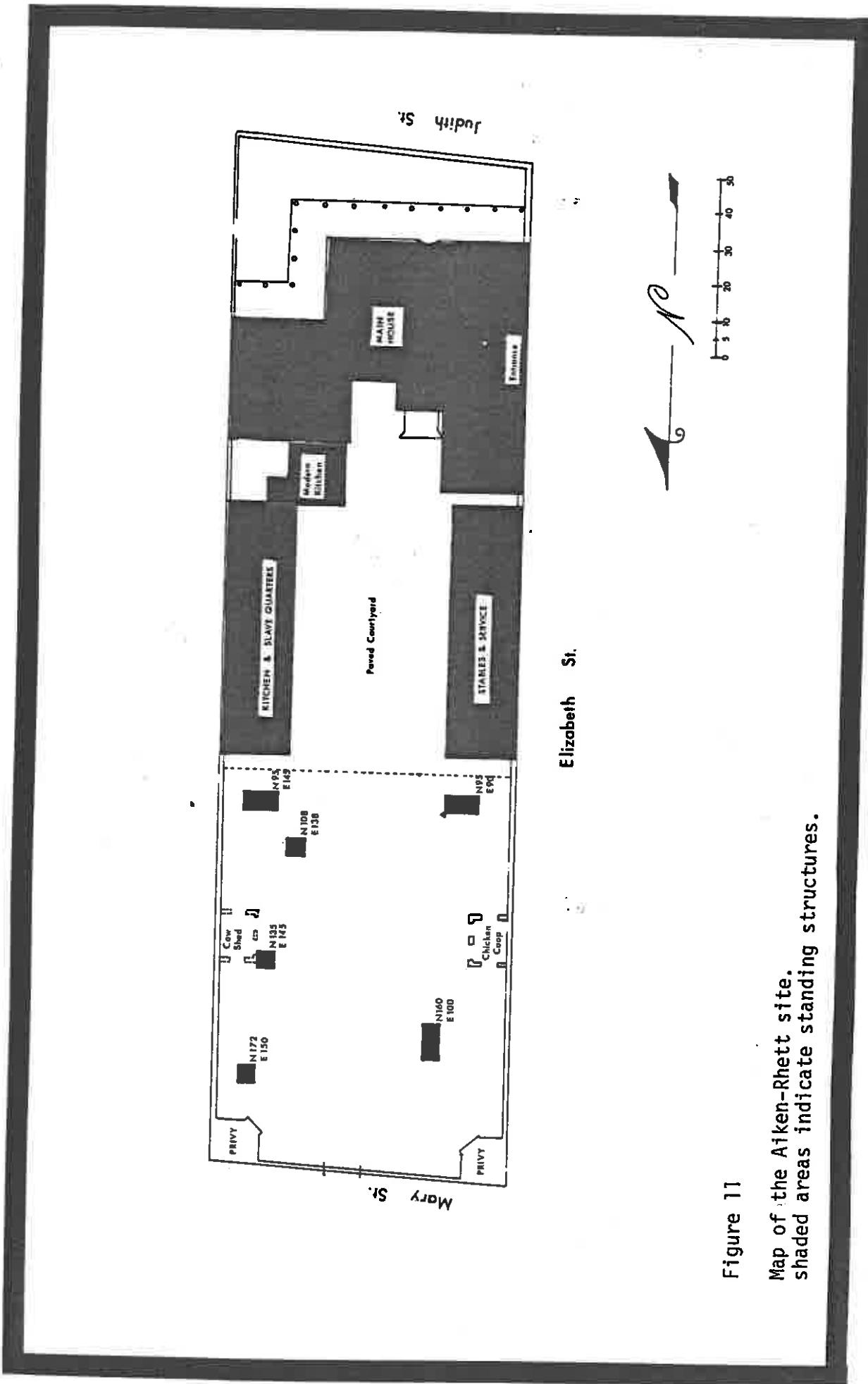
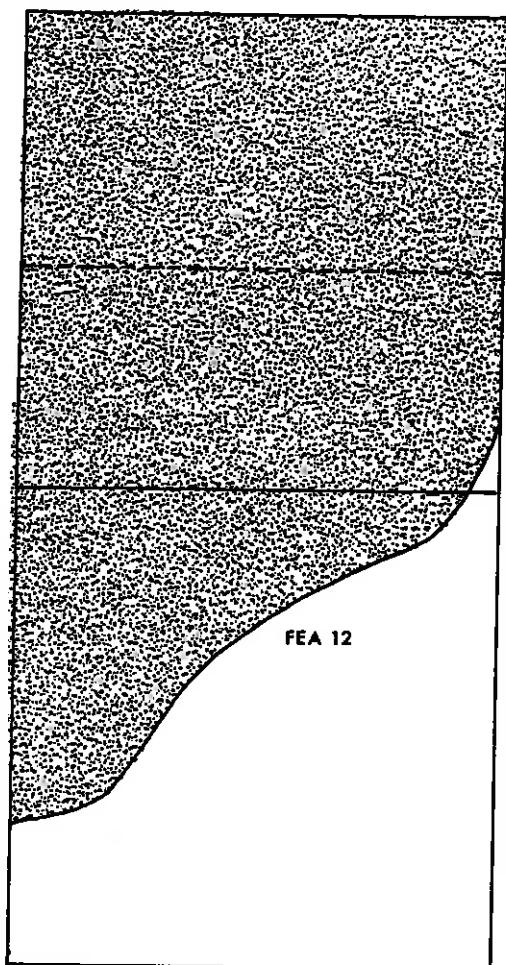
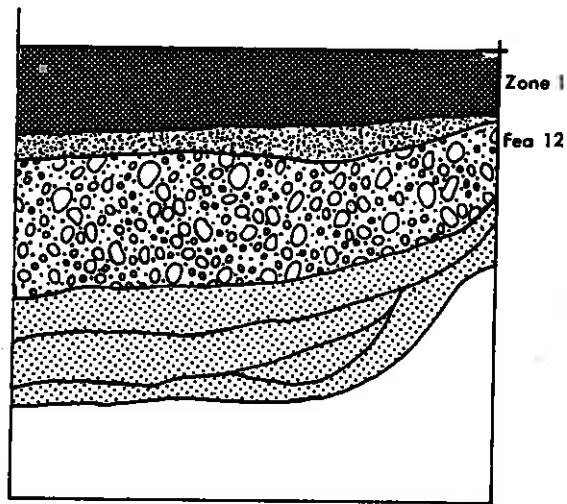


Figure 11

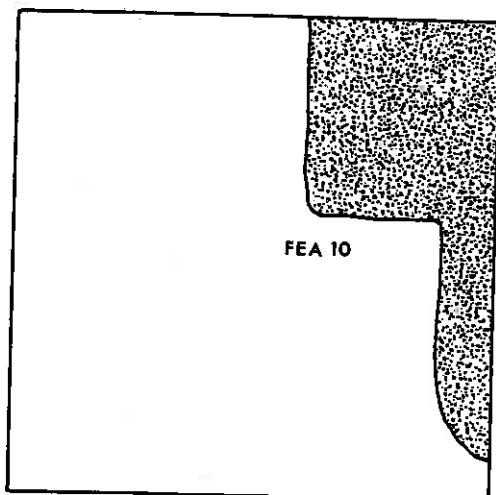
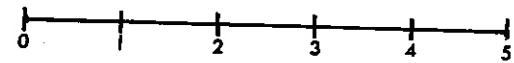
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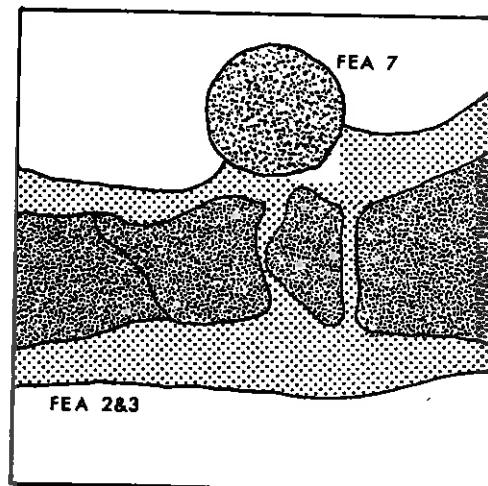
N95 E90



East Profile



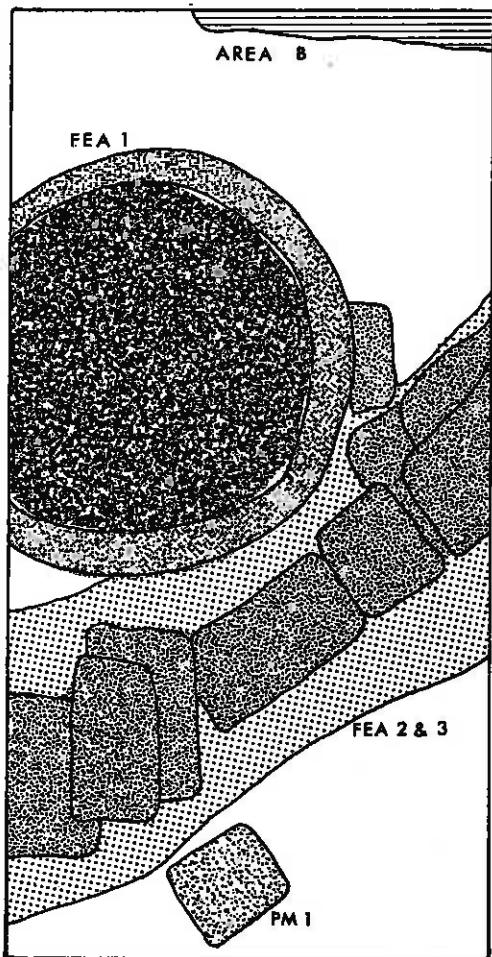
N 135 E145



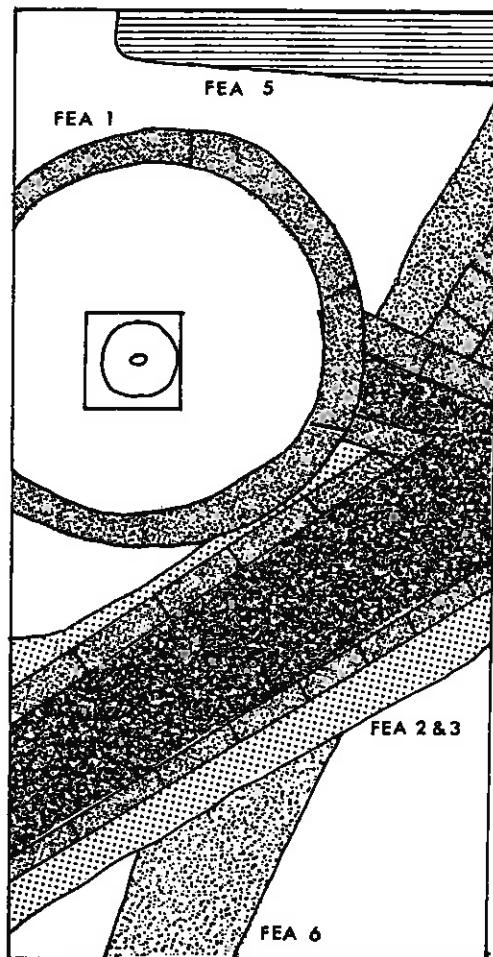
N 108 E138

Figure 17

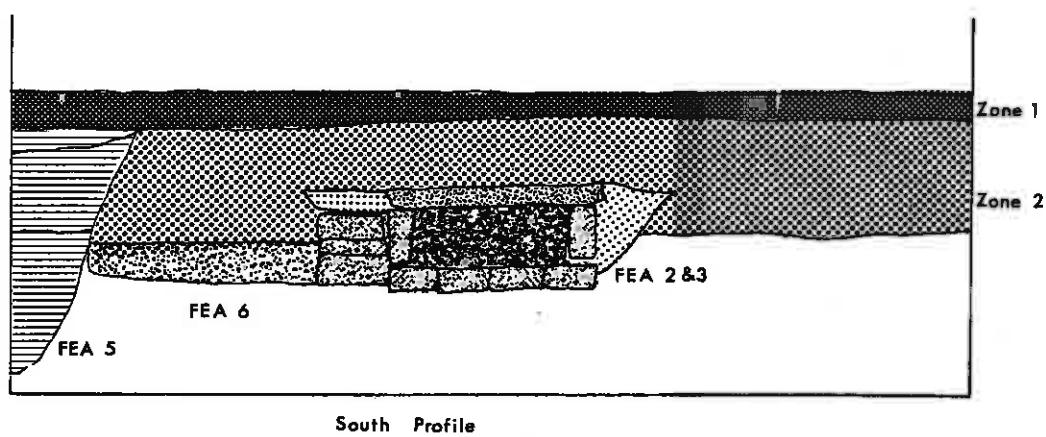
Planview and profile, N95E90,
planviews, N135E145, N108E138.



Base Zone 2 level 2



Base Zone 2 level 4



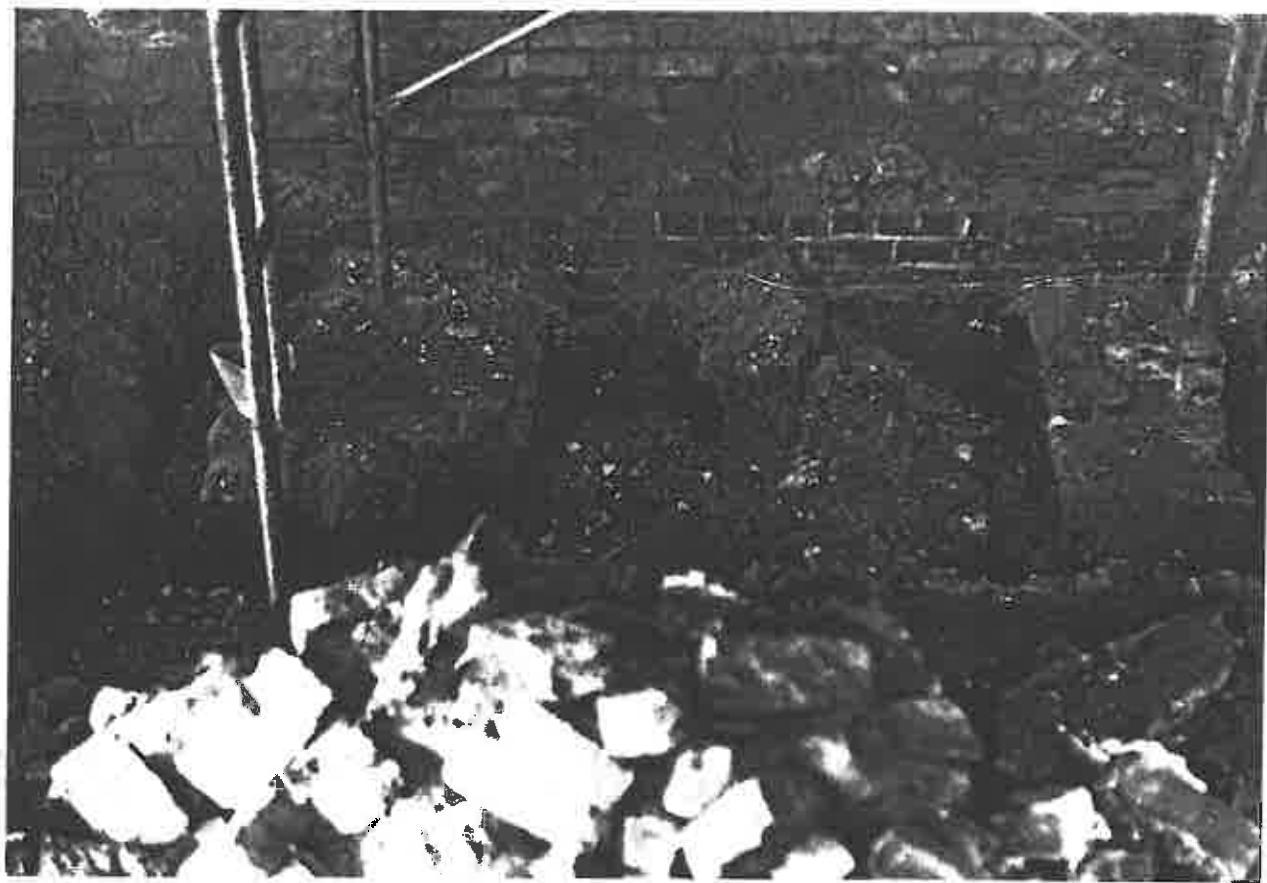
South Profile

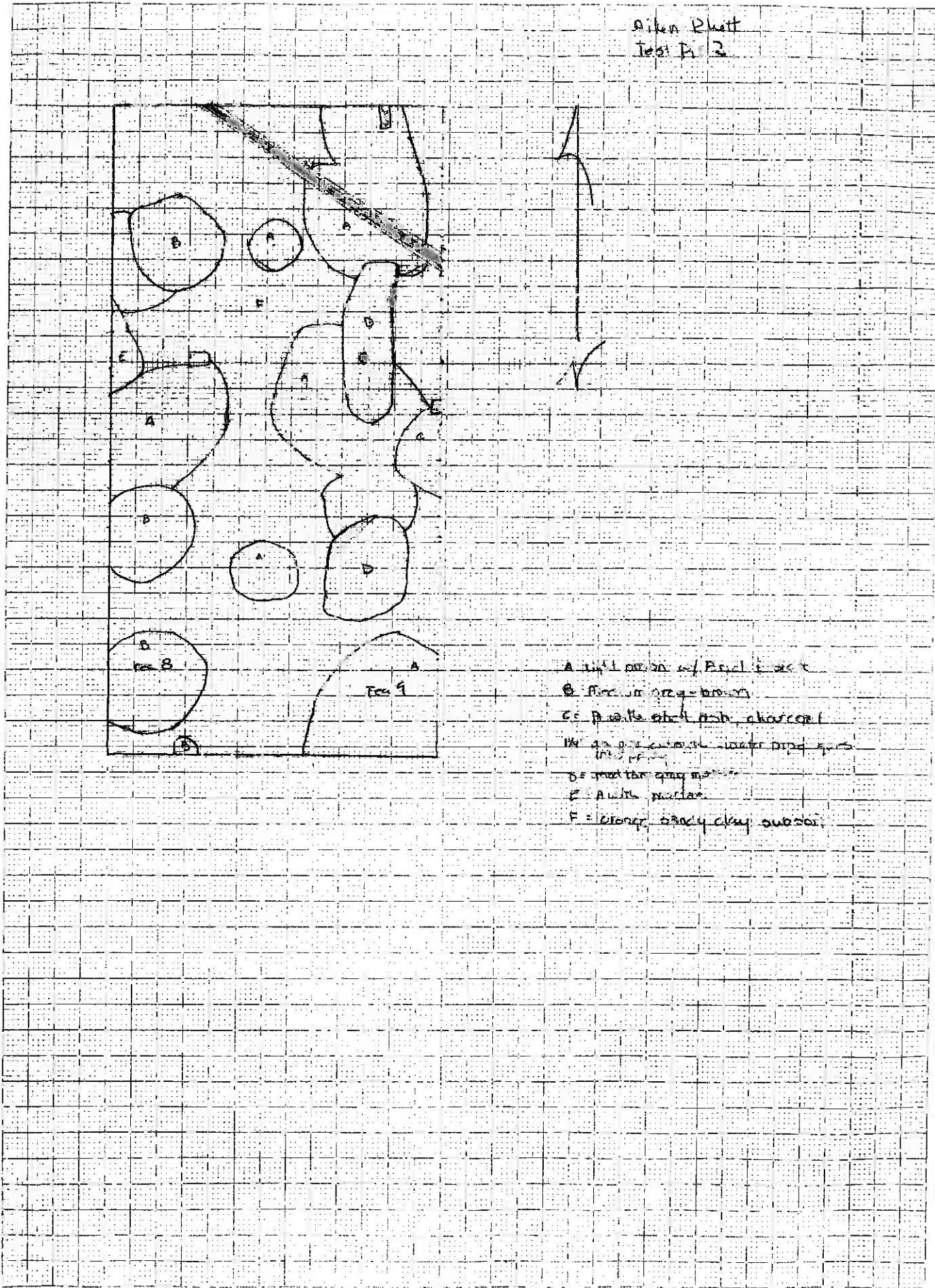
Figure 15

Unit N95E155 at the base of Zone 2 level 2
and Zone 2 level 4; south profile.



Figure 14
N95E155 at the base of excavations.





A = upper part of Fresh rock

B = fine, irregular, brown

C = pinkish, short pink, sharp

D = pinkish, irregular, water droplets

E = pinkish, irregular

F = pinkish, irregular

F = orange, sandy, clay, angular.

Table 3

Quantification of the
Nineteenth Century Assemblage

Kitchen	Zones	Features	Total
Porcelain, undecorated	77	20	97
Porcelain, decorated	16	8	24
Lusterware	3		3
Creamware	9	2	11
Pearlware, undecorated	35	3	38
annular	12	3	15
shell edged	1	1	2
hand painted	7		7
transfer printed	6	3	9
Whiteware, undecorated	227	50	277
blue transfer print	199	6	205
other transfer print	41	20	61
annular	52	8	60
hand painted	53	1	54
shell edged	26		26
sponged	8	1	9
flow blue	14	2	16
lead glazed earthenware	13	7	20
fine red bodied earthenware	4	2	6
Yellow ware	29	2	31
Grey saltglazed stoneware	2		2
nineteenth century stonewares	9	1	10
Alkaline glazed stoneware	7	1	8
Ginger beer bottle	1	1	2
Colono wares		3	3
Slipware, combed and trailed	3	1	4
Delft	3		3
White Saltglazed Stoneware	5		5
Brown saltglazed stoneware	3		3
Black bottle glass	291	41	332
Light green bottle glass	274	61	335
brown bottle glass	9	5	14
clear container glass	438	127	565
milk glass	11	3	14
purple glass	3		3
amber glass	6	3	9
aqua glass	18	10	28
blue glass	9	7	16
decorative table glassware	85	9	94
pharmaceutical glass	10	8	18
bottle cap	1		1
cutlery	2		2

Table 3, cont.

<u>Architecture</u>			
nail, unidentified	806	115	921
nail, cut			1
nail, wire	1	2	7
window glass	324	224	548
roof tile	5	1	2
screw	1	1	4
spike	3	1	1
pintle	1		2
delft tile	2		
<u>Arms</u>			
shells	6	2	8
shot	3		3
gunflint	1		1
<u>Clothing</u>			
lace bobbin	1		1
hook & eye	4	2	6
brass button	3	2	5
bone 1 hole button	5		5
bone 4 and 5 hole button	10	2	12
straight pin	1		1
porcelain button	8	2	10
thimble	1		1
bead	1		1
shoe eyelet		1	1
snap		1	1
collar stud		1	1
<u>Personal</u>			
gold jewelry	2		2
die	1		1
coin	1	1	1
slate pencil	5	1	6
comb	1	1	2
mirror		1	1
tooth brush	1	1	2
fan		1	1
<u>Furniture</u>			
lead tag	1		1
brass tack	4	1	5
escutcheon	1	1	2
<u>Pipes</u>			
river burnished		1	1
red clay		2	2
kaolin clay	23	7	30

Table 3, cont.

<u>Activities</u>			
barrel strap	1		1
marble	2	3	5
toy dish	2		2
doll	3		3
ud iron	6		6
ud lead	6	6	12
brass spring	1		1
hasp	1		1
nut	1		1
iron staple		1	1