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THE SEARCH FOR THE LOST AND ALLEGED FRENCH FORT SITES
ON PRAIRIE ISLAND GOODHUE COUNTY MINNESOTA(U) INSTITUTE
FOR MINNESOTA ARCHAEOLOGY INC MINNEAPOLIS D A BIRK
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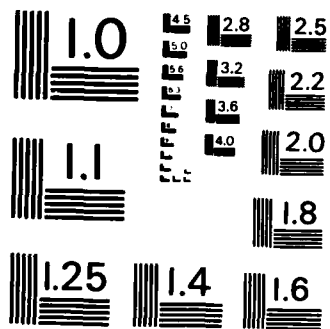
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THE SEARCH FOR THE LOST AND ALLEGED
FRENCH FORT SITES ON PRAIRIE ISLAND,
GOODHUE COUNTY, MINNESOTA: AN INTERIM REPORT

THE INSTITUTE FOR MINNESOTA ARCHAEOLOGY
REPORT OF INVESTIGATIONS
NUMBER 1

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November 8, 1984

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In 1885 archaeologist Theodore Lewis mapped the remains of site GD-88, an "old palisaded work" on Prairie Island near Red Wing, Minnesota. Lewis' description led many scholars to believe that he had found the site of an early French trading center that was guessed to be either Pierre Le Sueur's 1695 post or Paul Marin's 1750s Fort La Jonquiere. Despite the obvious importance of such a discovery and the apparent detail of Lewis' observations, no one has ever duplicated his find. The site of the "old palisaded work" has become lost and even after a century continues to elude archaeologists. This report summarizes recent efforts by the Institute for Minnesota Archaeology to relocate GD-88 and assess the extent of French presence on Prairie Island.

Lewis Records GD-88, The Alleged Site of Le Sueur's Post

Any inquiry into the whereabouts and nature of GD-88 must start with Lewis' original observations made on October 24, 1885. Lewis was a highly competent land surveyor whose principal contribution to Minnesota archaeology was to map several thousand of the state's prehistoric burial mounds. It is usually with a sense of confidence that one considers his records, especially when dealing with such routine matters as bearings, distances, and legal descriptions. Therefore, when Lewis said that GD-88 was located in the SW $\frac{1}{4}$, SE $\frac{1}{4}$, Section 32, T114-15 overlooking Sturgeon Lake (Figure 1) one can probably be assured that the designated parcel is correct.

Lewis described GD-88 as the visible remains of a rectangular enclosure measuring 80 by 110 feet. Three sides of the enclosure were formed by a compact series of buildings while the fourth side, facing the lake, consisted of a palisade depression and gateway. The site was situated "on a high bank near a mound" and in 1885 the old fireplaces and foundations of the fort were being mined for rocks by local residents. At least some of the site was also under cultivation.

Lewis first entered Section 32 on October 16, 1885 when he began mapping GD-75, a group of prehistoric mounds lying along the west shore of Sturgeon Lake (Figure 1). Of this group of 45 embankments only that identified as Mound One is actually located in the SW $\frac{1}{4}$, SE $\frac{1}{4}$ of the section and shares a common legal description with site GD-88 (Figure 2).

There is further reason to believe that GD-88 is near Mound One. In a letter written by Lewis on October 17, he revealed that the mound near GD-88 was a "large mound." From his field notes it is learned that Mound One, reported as a circular conical structure 80 feet in diameter and 8 feet high, was easily the largest embankment in group GD-75. Also, in 1885 only Mound One and parts of GD-88 were said to be under cultivation. Finally, the elevation of the lakeside terrace in the S $\frac{1}{2}$ Section 32 increases to the south, placing Mound One opposite the section of highest bank in that vicinity.

With all this evidence there would seem little doubt that GD-88, the "old palisaded work" found by Lewis, was in close proximity to Mound One and should be an easy target to relocate.

Upham "Discovers" Le Sueur's Post

After his excursion to Prairie Island, Lewis failed to publicize his discoveries and GD-88 was quietly forgotten. Then in May, 1901, Warren Upham, the Secretary of the Minnesota Historical Society, traveled to the island in an attempt to find support for his theories regarding the travels of Radisson and Groseilliers and to determine the exact location of Le Sueur's post. Acting on a tip, Upham quickly found the remains of what he thought was "the old fireplace in the hut" used by Le Sueur. Recent cultivation of this feature had uncovered "several good-sized pieces of burnt clay" that Upham first mistook as "parts of crockery dishes and kettles." These discoveries were made near a mound "on the southwest bank of Sturgeon Lake, near the middle of the south half of section thirty-two" on land owned by farmer Michael Erickson. It appeared that Upham had unknowingly "rediscovered" the site earlier mapped by Lewis.

According to newspaper accounts, Upham's exploration party included a photographer who took a view of Erickson's farmhouse from atop the mound near the alleged fort site. A copy of this photograph, later found in the archives of the state historical society, unexpectedly revealed that it had been taken from the crest of Mound Three in a northwesterly direction towards Erickson's farmhouse (Figure 2). Mound Three and Erickson's farmhouse are in the $NW\frac{1}{4}$, $SE\frac{1}{4}$, of Section 32 about 400 feet north of Mound One where GD-88 was originally supposed to be. In all other respects the basic locational descriptions given by Lewis and Upham seemed interchangeable. Could there possibly be two alleged French fort sites within such a small area, or had Lewis simply erred when he listed the legal description in 1885?

The prevailing attitude was that pictures do not lie. The photograph obviously pin-pointed the location of Upham's find and, assuming that was GD-88, suggested that Lewis' site was slightly north of where he said it was--in a different quarter-quarter section, near a different prehistoric mound, and on an adjacent stretch of somewhat less elevated shoreline.

Brower Storms the Island

One of the first skeptics of Upham's work was a pioneer archaeologist named Jacob Brower. Though Brower made several important contributions to Minnesota archaeology his belligerent manner has left him open to criticism. A careful assessment of Brower's writings has shown that he was given to hair-trigger analyses, had trouble identifying historical sites (such as early fur trading posts), and let personality conflicts color his judgment. By 1902 when he visited Prairie Island to make his own surveys, he was in his declining years and seemed quick to lash out against anyone and everyone who raised his ire. Earlier in his career Brower had been on good terms with both Lewis and Upham and in 1895 had even honored Lewis by giving his name to a prehistoric mound group at Itasca State Park. After 1900, Brower seemed less rational, openly assailing Upham for his theories about Radisson and Groseilliers and calling Lewis a scallawag whose work was in constant need of review.

Thus, when he met Upham at Prairie Island in April, 1902, Brower's reaction seemed almost predictable. His investigations included a quick walkover of the mounds and fields about Erickson's farm and the excavation of an ash heap and pile of burned clay and debris at Upham's alleged fort site. From these efforts Brower concluded that the area about the inlet and along the west side of Sturgeon Lake was part of a large prehistoric site complex. He pooh-poohed any notion that Upham's "fort" was either French or historic and instead pronounced it to be the site of "an ancient potkiln used by [prehistoric] Indians for the manufacture of clay vessels." Finally, he noted that the "big mound" near Upham's site locus (i.e., Mound Three) had once been excavated by resident Indians and used as a horse stable.

Satisfied by his investigations, Brower led his procession southward into the area now occupied by the Northern States Power nuclear generating plant where he seized upon an L-shaped mound as being a more likely candidate for a French fort than anything he had seen in Section 32. When excavations in and around this unusual feature produced only prehistoric materials, Brower insisted that it still "looked European" in origin (Figure 1).

Upham was obviously swayed by Brower's appraisals yet secretly clung to the idea that the locus near Mound Three might be French. When he accessioned pieces of burnt clay from this site into the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society he listed them as being "from (perhaps) Fire-place of Mound Builders, or the Old French Trading Post, on the South-West side of Sturgeon Lake."

1902-1980: The Intervening Years

The hope of finding early French fort sites on Prairie Island did not end with the investigations of Lewis, Upham or Brower, even though their work influenced all who followed. Geologist Newton Winchell, who compiled the voluminous Aborigines of Minnesota in 1911, was obviously inspired by Brower when he stated that the L-shaped mound was part of an extensive French fort used for 10 or 15 years as a place of trade. Winchell also felt that the burnt clay lumps collected from the Upham site locus were from collapsed Dakota earth lodges and had nothing to do with the French. Ironically, despite his studious consideration of Lewis' field notes when writing the Aborigines, Winchell somehow missed the 1885 records pertaining to GD-88. Winchell's ignorance of GD-88, rejection of Upham's locus as historic, and acceptance of the unproven L-shaped mound as French, followed Brower's lead and enveloped the issue of French presence on Prairie Island in a smoke screen of confusion.

Sometime around WWI Fred Mecklenberg acquired the lakeshore property surrounding Mound Three and built a small cabin on the location of Upham's site locus. This cabin was set on stilts or pilings about two feet off the ground. Later, as Lock and Dam No. 3 was nearing completion on the Mississippi below Prairie Island, the Corps of Engineers purchased a 100-foot strip of shoreline on the west side of Sturgeon Lake in the SE $\frac{1}{4}$, Section 32. In March, 1930, the Mecklenberg cabin was moved to its present location about 70 feet back from the eroding bank (Figure 3).

Since 1930 a steady stream of amateur and professional archaeologists have searched Prairie Island for signs of French presence. Records show that several investigators from the University of Minnesota, Hamline University, and the Minnesota Historical Society have conducted surveys in the SE $\frac{1}{4}$, of Section 32 without finding evidence of either GD-88 or the Upham site locus. Questions of methodology aside, this impotence may have resulted from a blind faith in the interpretations forwarded by Brower and Winchell, and by the pervasive belief amongst today's islanders that the French fort was actually located at the boat landing near the nuclear generating plant (Figure 1).

1983 Investigations

In 1982 the Institute for Minnesota Archaeology initiated archival and field studies in an attempt to relocate, date, and identify GD-88, the "lost" fort site in the SE $\frac{1}{4}$, of Section 32. Permission to proceed with the survey was obtained from the St. Paul District Army Corps of Engineers, the Prairie Island Community Council, and the State Archaeologist's office, and in 1983 funding for this purpose was received from the Corps and the Goodhue County Historical Society.

On November 7, 1983, Dakota spiritual leader Amos Owen, field assistant Diana Mitchell, and IMA archaeologist Douglas Birk drove to the old Erickson farmhouse, walked over to Mound Three and found a layer of burnt clay eroding out of the bank just north of the mound. Laboring under the assumption that both Lewis and Upham had described the same "fort site" in Section 32, Birk reached the conclusion that at long last GD-88 had been rediscovered.

On a return trip to the island the following day, Corps Archaeologist David Berwick visited the site and provided information regarding the Corps' land holdings about Sturgeon Lake. At the same time, Mitchell and Birk made a map of the site area, including selected mounds of GD-75 (Figure 3).

It is clear that while some of the mounds in the south half of group GD-75 are visible, none has escaped damage. Mound One has been leveled and used as a platform on which to build a house. Mound two has been nearly flattened by the plow. Cultivation and the construction of the horse stable on Mound Three has increased its diameter from 50 to about 75 feet and reduced its height from 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ to about 3 feet. Shoreline erosion, exacerbated by the construction of Lock and Dam No. 3, has caused the northeast half of Mound Three to slump into Sturgeon Lake. The location of other smaller mounds in the vicinity of Erickson's abandoned farmhouse can only be surmised from Lewis' original notes (Figure 3).

1984 Investigations

Investigation of the Upham site locus was resumed in May, 1984, when Birk excavated nine formal one-meter pits and seven shovel tests centering on the area where burned clay was found eroding from the bank

(Figure 4). These excavations were placed in consultation with members of the Dakota Indian community in locations five or more meters north of the original limits of Mound Three. All soils displaced by excavation were processed with a No. 3 screen (three openings to the inch) with lesser samples being passed through a No. 10 screen to check for smaller artifacts (such as glass embroidery beads or lead shot).

Excavation revealed a dense though uneven concentration of burned clay spread across an area of about 140 square meters just north of the visible remains of Mound Three. The deepest and densest parts of this concentration were found at the south end of the tested area in excavation units 7 and 9. The thinnest and shallowest quantities of burned clay were uncovered in X-6 and X-8. Of six shovel tests placed to the west of the formal excavations, only shovel tests 1 and 4 contained burned clay or other artifacts, thus revealing the approximate western edge of the site locus. The eastern edge of the locus is marred by lakeshore erosion, the southern edge is obscured by the alteration of Mound Three, and the northern edge is suggested by the limits of burned clay eroding from the bank and one negative shovel test placed 100 feet grid north of X-1.

Excavation also revealed the presence of a plow zone in the upper 22-26 cms of topsoil. As the burned clay was scattered throughout the plow zone and most densely concentrated at the base of the plow zone, it is obvious that its deposition pre-dated the period of cultivation. This condition is verified by Upham, who reported the first cultivation of this tract in 1901. Contrary to the theories of prehistoric origin advanced by Brower and Winchell, the burned clay has been found to result from an historic structure.

Table 1 shows the various kinds of artifacts recovered from the formal excavations and the provenience or source of those artifacts by level. From these raw data, it is possible to reconstruct three major phases of site use (Table 2).

1. A prehistoric component, probably contemporaneous with the mounds of GD-75, is represented by a sparse sample of stone waste flakes and ceramic sherds. Most of these items (81%) were found at a depth greater than 20 cms, generally at or below the base of the plow zone.
2. A late historic component dating to the period ca. 1810-1840 is evidenced by a collection of nails, animal bone and other items that appear to be stratigraphically and temporally associated with the burned clay (daub or chinking) deposits. Seventy-three percent of the late historic materials were found 10-30 cms below the surface.
3. A modern historic component represented by round wire nails, two coins (1936-1937), and other debris probably post-dates WWI. Most of these items (86%) were found in the 0-10 cm level and were obviously deposited after the period of cultivation. This component is probably associated with the Mecklenberg cabin and later site use.

Conclusions

The IMA's 1984 excavations revealed Upham's site locus to be unrelated to the "old palisaded work" observed by Lewis. The locus consists of spatially concentrated late historic and modern historic components overlying a thin prehistoric component, all of which have been variably disturbed by cultivation and bank erosion. The historic component that attracted the attention of Upham and Brower can now be confidently dated to the first half of the nineteenth century.

The artifact sample recovered from the late historic component (ca. 1810-1840) is remarkable for the kinds of items that are both present and absent. The presence of food refuse (animal bone), architectural items (clay daub or chinking and forged nails), gun-related artifacts, and a porcelain doll fragment suggest that the site was a simple, cabin-sized, log structure where people lived. A collection of eleven unclinched machine-cut nails, all the same length (ca. 1½ inches) are probably from a trunk or piece of formal furniture. Missing are such commonplace items as window glass, tablewares and clay smoking pipes usually associated with European settler or trader's cabins of this period (e.g., Jean Baptiste Faribault's 1820s habitation on Pike's Island below Fort Snelling). Instead a small number of tinkling cones and carved catlinite objects are present that suggest an Indian or metis (half breed) occupation. Lewis himself saw the remains of many such cabin sites in southeastern Minnesota during his surveys in the late 1800s.

To date the IMA's investigations have relocated and identified the Upham site locus that has long escaped detection by modern archaeologists. There is no evidence linking these archaeological remains with early French presence on Prairie Island or with the palisaded fort complex observed by Lewis in 1885. The search for GD-88 should now be refocused on the area where Lewis' somewhat cryptic notes suggested it was all along: near Mound One in the SW¼, SE¼, Section 32. To mark the centennial of the site's 1885 discovery, the Institute for Minnesota Archaeology is already planning to renew its field investigations in 1985.

If GD-88 is of French origin, it could be of immense importance to our understanding of early French presence in the Upper Mississippi Valley. If the site can be assigned a date earlier than 1700, GD-88 would be the oldest European habitation yet identified in the state of Minnesota. Conversely, if GD-88 marks the site of Marin's 1750s Fort La Jonquiere, it could be contemporaneous with MO-20, another French fort site under investigation by the IMA near Little Falls, Minnesota.

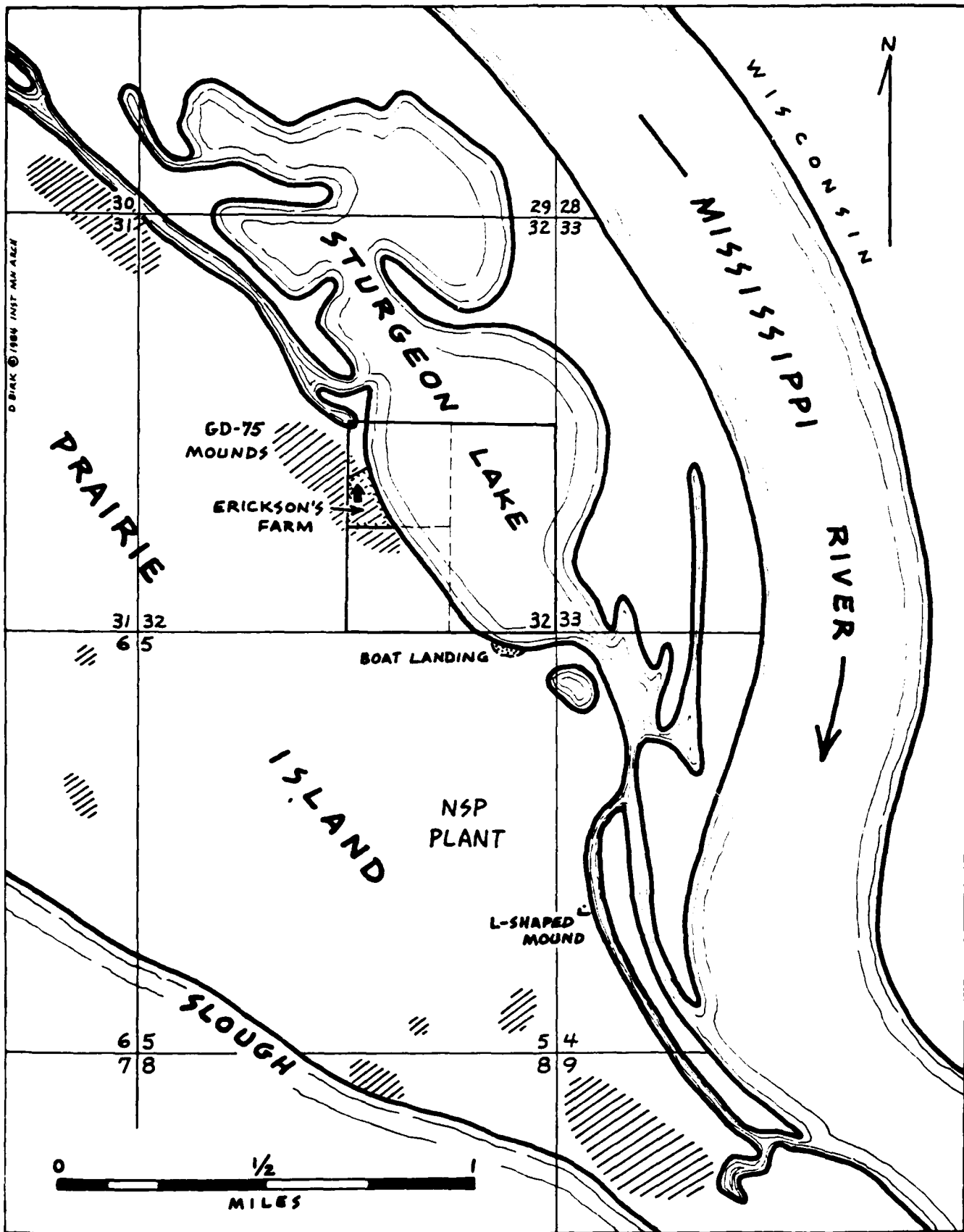


Figure 1. A map of known archaeological properties on the south end of Prairie Island, Goodhue County, Minnesota (adapted from Winchell 1911). The location of the L-shaped mound is conjectural.

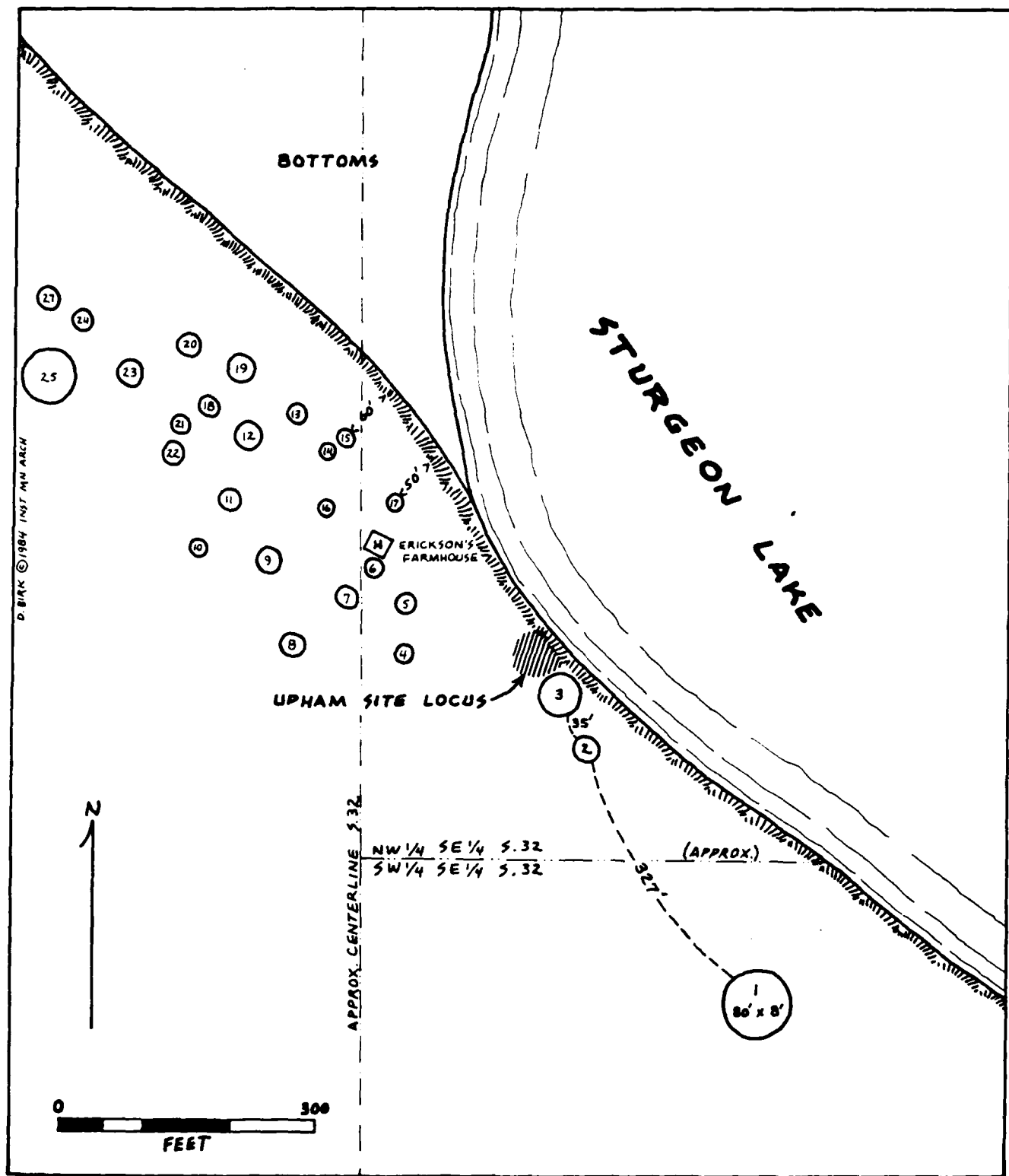


Figure 2. A map of the south half of site GD-75 (adapted from Winchell 1911). This sketch shows the location of Erickson's farmhouse and various archaeological features in the middle of the south half of Section 32, T114-15.

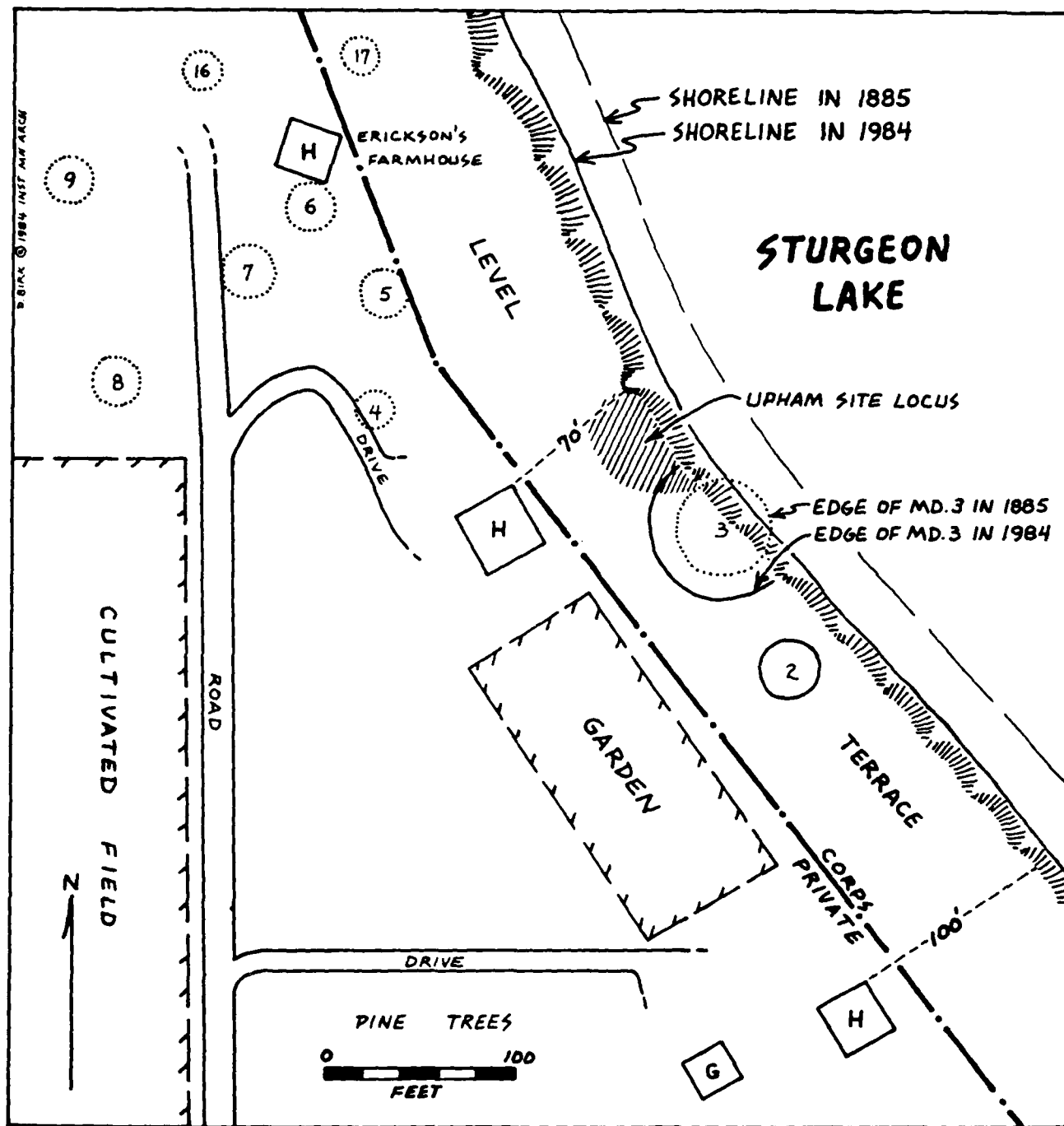


Figure 3. A map of the Upham site locus area. The 1885 shoreline on this map is projected from the erosion of Mound Three since the original survey conducted by Theodore Lewis in that year.

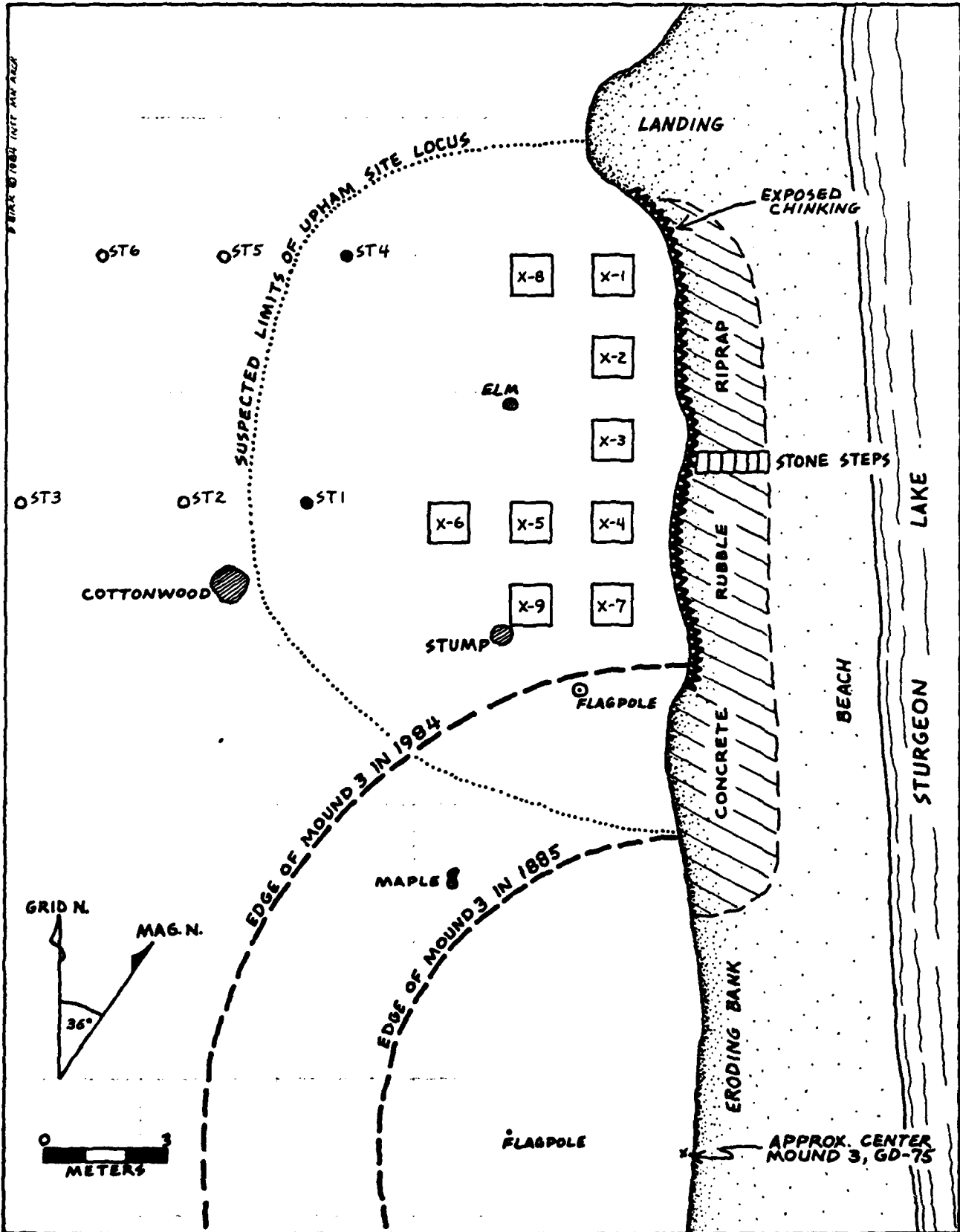


Figure 4. A map of the 1984 excavations at the Upham site locus. The excavations were placed to avoid Mound Three and test the "exposed chinking" (burned clay) deposit eroding along the shoreline.

Table 1. The Upham site locus artifacts from excavation units 1 through 9 consolidated by level.

Level (cms)	Burnt Clay	Animal Bone	Flakes	Pottery	Shell	Catlinite (Carved)	Tinkling Cone	Gunflint	Wise Jaw	Forged	Machine Cut	Nails	Wire	Misc. Modern Metal	Coins (1936-37)	Cartridge (.22/.32)	Lead	Buttons	Porcelain Doll Frag.	Brick	Piece Roofing	Aluminum Foil	Bottle Glass	Organ Reed	Iron Buckle
0-10	X	26	2	-	2	-	-	1	1	1	2	2	40	12	2	19	-	2	-	1	5	1	1	1	1
10-20	X	46	3	1	2	2	1			3	4	2	2	8		2	1								
20-30	X	32	9	3			1			1	5			2											
30-40	X	3	2	3			1																		
40-50	T																								

T = Trace

Table 2. The Upham site locus artifacts from excavation units 1 through 9 consolidated by level and separated by component.

Level (cms)	Prehistoric							Ca. 1810-1840										Modern								
	Flakes	Pottery	Burnt Clay	Animal Bone	Shell	Catlinite (Carved)	Tinkling Cone	Forged Nails	Machine Cut Nails	Gunflint	Vise Jaw	Lead	Porcelain Doll Frag	Misc. Modern Metals	Wire Nails	Cartridges (.22/.32)	Coins (1936-37)	Buttons	Brick	Pieces Roofing	Aluminum Foil	Bottle Glass	Organ Reed	Iron Buckle		
0-10	2	-	X	26	2	-	-	1	2	1	1	-	-	12	40	19	2	2	1	1	5	1	1	1	1	
10-20	3	1	X	46	2	2	1	3	4		1	1	1	8	2	2										
20-30	9	3	X	32			1	1	5					2												
30-40	2	3	X	3			1																			
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T = Trace

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