

# **DIGGING EVERYDAY LIVES**

## **AT THE FIRST CAPITOL HISTORIC**

### **The Presence of Our Past**

Why would you want to study the past? Studying the past enlarges the range of human experience and enriches the quality of our lives. It reaffirms our place in humanity. Only through knowing the course of events that have shaped individual communities can we understand who we are and what we have the opportunity of becoming. Studying the past promotes respect for other people and assists in the preservation of our cultural heritage.

As individuals and communities, we are interested in studying the past for many reasons: to learn from past experiences; to help us define our identities in the present; and to give us a sense of place. In this way, studying the past is not really about the past, but about how a part of the world we live in works right now. There are many different perspectives of the past and each group of people has its own views. Some of these perspectives are passed down through oral traditions, written records, and photographs. Others are passed down in the form of the objects we make and use, the houses we live in, and the communities we build.

### **Archaeology**

Archaeology is frequently presented as something that occurs in faraway places and that involves peoples that lived long ago. Like many popular images, this image distorts the nature and extent of what archaeology is and what archaeologists do. Some archaeologists do study very old cultures located in faraway places, but others study the people who lived at the village, farmstead or logging camp located just down the road. Archaeological deposits occur figuratively and literally under our feet.

Even today when we are deluged with information from radio, TV, and the newspaper, the day-to-day lives of most people are not well known and are poorly recorded. In the past there were even few alternatives to the written record. Archaeology is a method that is well suited for studying of the lives of people who are not well represented in the written record because archaeologists approach the past through the study of the things that people threw out, lost, or left behind. Archaeologists can and do use written records if they are available. But, their primary focus is on the material culture: the objects people make and use.

Archaeology has the unique ability to: compare the written record of what people **said** they did; with the record of what observers **said** these people did; with what the archaeological record reveals they actually **did**.

# ***DIGGING EVERYDAY LIVES !***

## **ARCHAEOLOGY:**

- is the scientific study of human culture through investigation and interpretation of artifacts and other cultural remains. *Artifacts* are any objects made, modified, or used by human beings. An artifact may be an arrowhead, pottery vessel, a glass bottle, a pork-chop bone, a pull-tab, or a house foundation.
- is a discipline that uses cross-cultural comparative perspective to search for universal aspects of human behavior. It is one of four subfields of study that are part of *Anthropology*. Anthropology is made up of Archaeology, Biological Anthropology, Cultural Anthropology, and Linguistic Anthropology.
- is multicultural and strongly promotes respect for people and their culture in the present and in the past.
- is a method for understanding and preserving our shared cultural heritage.
- is cumulative. It often takes work at many sites, usually done over several decades, to develop a more complete picture of the past.
- is inter-disciplinary. Archaeologists work with researchers from many fields including geology, geography, human ecology, and history to piece together an interpretation of the past.

## **GOALS OF ARCHAEOLOGY:**

- to broaden people's perspective of human beings;
- to reconstruct past lifeways, particularly of people whose daily lives remain a mystery;
- to place these reconstructions into a sequence of past events, regional developments, i.e., chronologies;
- to identify changes in life-styles in order to seek answers to the basic questions of why change takes place;
- to verify the "facts" of particular historical events; to aid in site reconstruction, site interpretations, and heritage preservation.

## **The First Capitol Historic Site**

The First Capitol Historic Site marks the location of Wisconsin's first capitol. The Territorial Legislature met at this location between October and December of 1836. The historic site, the monument and museum to commemorate this event, was established in 1911 by the Wisconsin Federation of Women's Clubs and was developed as a museum by the Women's club, several southwestern Wisconsin groups, the Wisconsin Historical Society, and the State Legislature over the next 90 years ([Figure 1](#)). When Governor Dodge chose this as the location for the first capitol in September of 1836 there was already a farm, tavern, and another house in the vicinity ([Figure 2](#)). The Ho Chunk had ceded the land in southwestern Wisconsin to the U. S. Government in 1829, forfeiting their homes, fields, lead mines, and sacred sites. The owner of the property in 1836, John Atchison - who purchased the land from John Moore who in turn had bought it from the Federal government - was in the process of building at least three buildings just for the Territorial legislature. Atchison called his buildings, and those buildings already there, Belmont ([Figure 3](#)). Others came to this new community and built other businesses to serve the legislature and share in the economic potential of the moment ([Figure 4](#)). Even after the legislators left in December of 1836 many people remained in the small community. They stayed until 1867 when the Platteville Branch of the Mineral Point Railroad by-passed the town. At that time, many of the residents moved to a spot about 3 miles to the southeast to start a new town adjacent to the new railroad line. Not only did they take themselves and their lives they also took the old town's name! The new town became Belmont. What little remained of the old community of Belmont was given a new name: Grandview. Grandview? The land surrounding the site dips slowly to the south creating a "grand view" of the tri-state area. In 1884, the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad established a station on the north side of "Old" Belmont and the community received yet a third name, Leslie.

Belmont, "Old" Belmont, Grandview, Leslie, and the First Capitol Historic Site raise the question: What's in a name? The First Capitol Historic Site refers to the area now designated as an official state historic site. It serves to commemorate the events of 1836 that occurred at this location. It does not, and it was not meant to encompass all of what was the community of "Old" Belmont. In fact, we are not sure exactly where to draw the boundaries for "Old" Belmont. What are the borders of the community you live in and where would you draw the line? This is one of the questions that we hope the archaeological and related investigations at the site will eventually answer.

## **DIGGING OLD BELMONT: The Document Work.**

Much of the following text is taken from a report prepared by Sherry Huhn. Sherry was a curator for the Wisconsin Historical Society. The selections focus on the buildings present at “old” Belmont. For the sake of clarity, some additional text and these are noted by an “\*”.

### **“OLD” BELMONT BUILDINGS**

\*How many buildings stood at Belmont and where were they located (Figure 5)? The historical record is not clear on the first point and is vague on the second. Henry Baird, one of the legislators, said the following:

*The village of Belmont is laid out upon a beautiful high prairie, near the foot of a mound or hill....Its situation for a prairie country is handsome...the greatest objection to it the want of two essential requisites, wood and water. From the description, which I had previously heard of it, I had made up my mind to see but two or three houses and those of an inferior quality...I was agreeably surprised, upon emerging from the wood to see 6 or 8 very pretty framed buildings, neatly painted, together with several other frames in a state of forwarding.*

Baird also noted:

*We have a very comfortable framed house for a boarding or eating house, and the members from our county have a good room in another comfortable building as lodging apartments--A council house, very respectable in appearance, and pretty commodious, all things considered, has been erected and is finished--Two or three house are in progress destined for the accommodation of members.*

Baird also alluded to the existence of another building in Belmont, the Governor’s residence:

*There is no family here, except that of the house where we board--and the Governor. At the latter I am quite intimate, I generally spend about 2 evenings there during the week. I am always cordially received, but I hope you will not feel uneasy when I add that there are a couple of very fine handsome ladies there.....*

\*Sherry Huhn had the following comments.

In 1836, “about a half dozen well built frame houses” stood in Belmont, including several businesses. James Clark and John Russell published the Belmont Gazette, using a small

one-story structure as both office and residence. On November 23, Ephraim Lobaugh first advertised his blacksmith shop in Belmont. Patrick Dillon owned a store just north of the Council House where he sold an assortment of items, such as books, stationary, clothing, and liquor. Other businesses in the Belmont area included: Colonel John Moore's tavern to the north; John R. Coons' store, about one-half mile to the east; and Postmaster James H. Gentry's residence, approximately three-fourths a mile to the southeast (Figure 3).

John Atchison constructed the Council House and the Lodging/Court House adjacent to each other on Block 15 of Belmont, with the former situated north of the later, the reverse of their current relative position to each other. Both structures faced west, separated by several empty lots. \*Block 15 appears on the town plat that Atchison had made. Unfortunately, the plat was never tied into any known reference point so we do not know where Block 15 was located.

\*A Postal Service map of the area shows that the post office was located well south and east of the "downtown" of Belmont.

## POST SESSION BELMONT

After the session, Belmont's prominent position in Wisconsin Territory quickly faded as legislators and lobbyists departed. Area businesses soon followed the exodus. Within a few weeks, Patrick Dillon relocated his store to Galena. James Clarke discontinued publication of the *Belmont Gazette* in April 1837, and moved to Burlington to establish a newspaper, naming it the *Wisconsin Territorial Gazette and Burlington Advertiser*. Not everyone departed Belmont immediately; business continued at the Belmont post office, John Coon's store, and Ephraim Lobaugh's blacksmith shop.

Even Governor Dodge lingered in Belmont for several months, issuing proclamations there as late as April 1, 1837. Dodge left Belmont sometime that spring for George Featherstonhaugh recalls visiting him at his home near Dodgeville on May 29, 1837.

Dog and horse racing at the mile-long track around Little Mound undoubtedly drew spectators to the area in 1837. On August 29, William Smith visited Belmont and recorded that "frequently races are run here--two days since a race was run for 1500 dollars a side--from the top of the mound a person can see a dog run all around the course."

Despite losing to Madison in the competition for the seat of government, Belmont did not come away from the session empty-handed. The legislature passed an act incorporating the Belmont and Dubuque Railroad Company, and also established a university at Belmont. In praise of these acts, James Clarke reported in the *Belmont Gazette*, "These are advantages, which, in our estimation, are of infinitely more importance to any town in possession of them, than the seat of government ever could be." Belmont's landholders probably agreed with Clarke and expected the town to flourish as a result of the railroad: "The proposed work will unquestionably exert a most favorable influence on the whole country thought [*sic*] which it passes, but more especially on Belmont, it being the place of beginning." Neither the railroad nor the university was ever

developed. On his visit to Belmont William Smith commented, "This place since it has lost the chance of being selected as the Seat of Government, is going down ... it cannot at present as the Country is not sufficiently farmed, be supported as a town or place of business." Only sixteen months had passed since Belmont was established.

After creation of Lafayette County in 1849, the county auctioned most of the lots in Belmont for unpaid taxes. Although a few individuals purchased lots, the county ended up with much of the land. In 1867, the Platteville branch of the Mineral Point Railroad came through the area, bypassing Belmont and laying tracks three miles to its southeast. This time, Belmont not only lost a chance for prosperity, it lost its name. Residents called the new settlement along the railroad lines Belmont, and old Belmont received the name Grandview. In 1884, the Chicago & Northwestern Railroad established a station bordering old Belmont, and the tiny community received yet another name--Leslie. Following cessation of train service, "Old" Belmont again declined.

## ADAPTIVE REUSE

Once the territorial government left Belmont, John Atchison had to find alternate uses for his buildings. The boarding house operated by Mrs. McArthur served as a private residence for a few years, then burned down in 1839 ([Figure 5](#)). According to the *History of Lafayette County*, the first district school met in the governor's house in 1842. The structure disappeared by 1881, leaving "a small clump of trees on the north side of the plat, not far from the Leslie railway station" to mark the site. But through the years, two of Atchison's buildings remained, the Court House and the Council House.

**Court House.** As for the identity of the current "Court" House, it appears to have had its humble beginnings as a lodging house for the legislators. It is clear that the Supreme Court never met in the building. As scheduled, Chief Justice Dunn and Justice Irvin convened as the supreme court "on the eight day of December...in the Council Chamber of the Legislative Assembly at Belmont, in the County of Iowa." Since the court had no appeals to hear, the session lasted only one day. Dunn and Irvin appointed a clerk and reporter, approved licenses for sixteen attorneys and counselors to practice in the territory, and then adjourned. The supreme court did not meet in 1837, and in 1838, held its second session in Madison." The building probably received its present name due to its association with "the court"--Chief Justice Dunn.

Following the legislative session, Charles and Mary Dunn purchased the Court House as a residence for their family. They reportedly moved the one-story office of the *Belmont Gazette*, attaching it to the rear of the house as a kitchen. In January 1848, their nine-year-old son, Henry Dodge Dunn, died in Belmont. Local tradition holds that on December 18, 1849, daughter Catherine married Nelson Dewey, first state governor of Wisconsin, in the Dunn residence. The following year, the 1850 U. S. Census records indicate that only James Francis, age four, and three servants, resided with Charles and Mary Dunn; their other children, Charles Jr., John, and Tarleton, had already left home. The 1850 census records list the following individuals residing in the Dunn household: "Charles Dunn, age 50; Mary Dunn, age 45; Francis Dunn, age 4; James Garber, 14; Sally Watts, age 22 (black); and Mary Jones, age 10 (black)."

Garber, Watts and Jones probably worked for the Dunn's. Wisconsin had abolished slavery in 1848, although how this affected many of the former slaves is not entirely clear. Living two doors away from the Dunn's was the African American family of Wilson Joplin consisting of Wilson, Ann, Lewis, and Maldree Joplin, and Ellen Watts, age 5. Were Sally Watts and Ellen Watts, sisters or mother and daughter? It is possible that the Joplin family worked for the Dunn's as well.

A cholera epidemic spread through the Belmont area in February 1859, striking down several members of the Dunn family. Charlie, the firstborn son of Catherine and Nelson Dewey, grew ill while visiting his grandmother and never recovered. Within a week, two other members of the Dunn household succumbed to the sickness. On February 26, Nelson Dewey recorded in his diary, "This day in Belmont our Mamie Dunn died this morning ... making it the third death within ... a week in Father Dunn's House. It is a sorrowful house and many hearts are sad and full of grief. . . ." Catherine Dewey also suffered from the disease, but recovered.

Charles Dunn died on April 7, 1872. A year later, Mary Dunn and her children sold the house at Old Belmont to Owen Wright. Either Wright or the subsequent owner moved the Court House south to the opposite side of the road.

In 1878, Fritz Harbis of Platteville purchased the Court House, renting it out to tenant farmers. John Garber occupied the Court House in 1881, following by Chris Cordt, who resided in the building for the next twenty-five years. \* Was John Garber related to the James Garber that worked for the Dunn's? Sometime after 1906, Charles C. Arthur purchased and occupied the Court House. When he constructed a new house around 1922, Arthur relocated the Court House about 100 feet southeast of his home and began using it as a horse barn.

**Council House.** Although little information has surfaced regarding the ownership and use of the Council House, Jonathan Evans reported tallying votes there for the 1848 presidential election. The building reportedly served as a residence, which locals called "Noah's Ark" because a half-dozen families simultaneously lived in it. Along with the Court House, Fritz Harbis purchased the Council House in 1878, moving it about 100 feet southwest of the Court House. During Chris Cordt's twenty-five year occupancy of the property, he used the Council House as a cattle barn.

## DIGGING OLD BELMONT: The Dirt Work.

### *The first shovel fulls!*

During 1990-91 the Department of Natural Resources completed archaeological investigations associated with reconstruction of the foundations for the two buildings at the site - the Court House and the Council House - a new well, and the building of new restrooms. No one new if there were any remains from the territorial capitol at the historic site, but because of the nature of the site the law required that an **archaeological survey** be completed. The survey actually began in Madison when Dr. Victoria Dirst, the staff archaeologist for the DNR, completed a literature and records search for the First Capitol Historic Site property. This search involved a check of records available at the DNR, the Office of the State Archaeologist, the Archives Division and the Library Division of the Wisconsin Historical Society. This provided Dr. Dirst with the historical **context** of this important Wisconsin site. After this careful review of the historical record, the archaeological fieldwork began.

The impacts of the new well were minor as were those of the new foundations for the Court and Council buildings. The new restrooms, however, called for extensive ground disturbing activities. The new restrooms included a new building, a sewer line, and the construction of an above ground mound drainage system. The initial phase of the archaeological work involved producing a detailed map of the site. This was followed by the excavation of a series of carefully spaced **shovel tests**. Shovel tests are small circular excavations that are about 1.5 ft. in diameter and are dug down into the soil until no more artifacts are recovered. At the First Capitol site, this was about 16 inches deep. The dirt from these shovel tests was pushed through a screen with 1/4 inch holes to search for artifacts. **Artifacts** are anything made, altered, or used by human beings. Artifacts recovered from each hole were bagged separately in labeled specimen bags and notes were kept describing the location of each shovel test, what was recovered, and what the soil or fill in each hole looked like. Artifacts were found in the majority of the shovel tests (Figure 6). In addition to the general scatter of artifacts, concentrations of artifacts were noted in three shovel tests ([Figure 6](#); Shovel Tests #1, #4, and #18). These concentrations of artifacts may be parts of buildings.

It was clear from this work that the area designated as the “First Capitol Historic Site” did contain archaeological deposits from the community of “Old” Belmont. Following long standing procedures, this area of artifacts was designated as an **archaeological site**. The term, **site**, is used by archaeologists to refer to a specific geographical space that contains artifacts, and is the initial step in establishing **spatial control**.

A site number of 47 LT-204 was assigned to the site using the Smithsonian Trinomial System. This system was first applied in Wisconsin in 1961 and replaced a system where different museums and universities used different numbering systems. (Imagine the confusion of trying to coordinate several different numbering systems!) The three-part Smithsonian system represents the following: 47 stands for Wisconsin in an alphabetically arranged list of states; LT designates



Lafayette County; and 204 means that the site is the 204th site recorded in Lafayette County. A site form was completed and submitted to the WHS and the number assigned. The information was entered into a computerized database and the locational information mapped in a GIS program. WHS maintains the database and maps to assist individuals, families, and local, County, State, and Federal units of government in planning.

As noted above, the initial archaeological work at LT-204 indicated that this was an area where people lived and worked. In addition to the scatter of artifacts, some foundation or building basements were also found. It was clear from the type and style of artifacts found that the site dated to the period of the 1830s -- 1860s, the period when “Old” Belmont was occupied. While it is true that artifacts were recovered from across the site, it was clear that the artifacts were densest in the area between the Council House and the parking lot. This initial phase of archaeological work indicated that the historic site encompassed a large portion of what was “Old” Belmont.

### *A Bigger Shovel, Bigger Artifacts!*

The importance of the discovery of the artifacts and building remains dating to the mid nineteenth century was immediately recognized. Archaeologists from the DNR and Wisconsin Historical Society decided that before the toilet system could be built additional archaeological fieldwork needed to be done to determine more precisely the importance of the finds. Few archaeological sites dating to the 1830 - 1870 period have been identified in Wisconsin and even fewer have been investigated. These years encompass the transition from Native American ownership to statehood and thus cover a very important period in Wisconsin history. As a result, before the toilet system was built, it was decided that additional fieldwork needed to be done.

In 1991, a series of trenches were dug at the site using a backhoe. These trenches were dug in areas that would be directly affected by the construction of the toilet and associated facilities. The use of large machinery is not unusual in archaeology. Its use allows the crew to expose large areas in a short period of time. Hopefully the larger exposures will reveal concentrations of artifacts or parts of foundations. The trenches were about 30 inches wide. The work was carefully monitored by an archaeologist and when artifacts were encountered or a **feature** was seen the backhoe was stopped and the area carefully examined. The term “**feature**” refers to a somewhat arbitrary and often intentionally vague area. A feature: 1) may contain a concentration of artifacts; or 2-) may be a stain in the soil, representing some decomposed concentration of plant or animal remains like a trash dump; or 3-) may be the remains of a house or a building such as a wall, or cellar.

The monitoring of the backhoe work resulted in the recovery of numerous artifacts and Dr. Dirst identified three features ([Figure 7](#)).

Feature #1 appeared as a stain of mixed soils, crumbled rock, and mortar. This mixture also contained pieces of dishware, glass, metal, and pieces of charcoal. The stain measured ca. 1 ft. long. It may be the remains of earlier pit toilet for the Historic Site.

Feature #2 appeared in the backhoe trench as a 36.0 inch wide crushed rock path. It is located behind the present buildings and has the same orientation as these buildings. This crushed rock probably served as a pathway from the buildings to the pit toilets that were situated along the northern edge of the site for many years and were built for the visitors to the site.

Feature #3 was identified near the western end of the backhoe trench in the area where the toilet mound system was to be placed. It was made up of several pieces of limestone and a dark soil stain. These were interpreted as the remains of a building foundation.

While the identification of these features had provided important clues regarding the archaeological deposits at the site, what did these results mean to the proposed sewer line work? The impact on Feature #1 would be limited to digging a narrow trench for the sewer line and it was felt that this was a minor disturbance. The impact on Feature #2 was not seen as a concern because this was a gravel path and little more could be learned with additional archaeological work at the Feature #2. Feature 3, however, was a different story. It was decided that more work needed be done around Feature 3 to determine the age and function of this possible structure.

This work was completed in 1991 by the DNR and members of the Wisconsin Conservation Corp. The first task during this phase of the work was to establish a **grid system**. A grid system, or coordinate system, is a traditional and convenient method to establish and maintain **horizontal spatial control** over a site and in this case the area around Feature 3. It consisted of a series of 1 meter by 1-meter units. 14 of the 1-meter by 1-meter units were excavated. All of the soil removed from the units was pushed through 1/4-inch screen to search for artifacts. An attempt was made to uncover any stones or rocks **in situ**, or in place without moving them because they might be the remains of a foundation. The work revealed a discontinuous scatter of limestone rocks, a posthole, and many artifacts. Obviously, the crew had uncovered the remains of a building ([Figure 8](#)).

The building was facing west toward CTH "G." The northwest wall was 14.5 ft. long. The building's width in the other direction is not entirely clear from the archaeological work. It may be as little as 9.5 ft. wide or as great as 14.0 ft. in width. A trench or some other type of digging was done to build the foundation because it was clearly built below the original ground surface. The foundation may have consisted of a series of piers -pillars-, or a series of piers and posts. The artifacts collected in the work around the foundation did not provide many insights on what activities took place in the building. Which of the several buildings noted in the written record is this? At this point we are not sure, it may have been one of the general merchandise stores, a small house, or an unidentified building.

As a result of this work, and with the removal of the important archaeological deposits, the plans for the toilet improvements were approved and the project was cleared for construction. As the plans for the transfer of the property from the DNR to WHS neared, staff expressed concern about the maintenance cost associated with the new toilet. Finances were limited and it was decided that a new pit toilet rather than one with running water would make more sense in the long term. The archaeological work had cleared the way for the construction of the toilet building and building was completed. In addition, the DNR work

established a solid basis for any future archaeological or development work at the site. This background was critical to the next phase of archaeological work.

*More shovel fulls, but back to a smaller shovel!*

A second phase of archaeological work at the First Capitol Historic site was completed by archaeologists from the Wisconsin Historical Society and members of the Wisconsin Conservation Crop in 1996. This work was part of preparations for the installation of an interpretative display. The first task during this phase of the work was to establish a new **grid system**. The grid system established at LT-204 in 1996 consists of a series of 1-meter square units oriented on magnetic north. An arbitrary point --well actually it was not completely arbitrary since the location was selected so that the grid could easily be extended over all portions the site-- was chosen and designated as the datum. This permanent steel post was used as the origin for the grid of 1 meter squares. The datum was labeled N100/E100 ([Figure 9](#)). A transit was set up over the datum and the grid lines were extended across the site. Each of the excavation units has a set of coordinates that indicate its relationship to the datum. For a variety of reasons, the coordinates at the southwest corner of each unit were used to designate the excavation. For example, a unit located 11 m south and 1 m east of the datum would be labeled N89/E101. By using the coordinate system, that the horizontal and vertical positions of the artifacts were preserved and their **context** recorded.

The datum is also used as the reference point for the absolute elevation and this is the measurement we use as a **vertical control**. The elevation of the corner of each unit is recorded and then the levels in the unit are measured from this point. Thus by using the datum we can record the horizontal and vertical position of each artifact --its context--.

Recording the horizontal and vertical position of the artifacts, soil conditions, excavation techniques, the archaeologists' interpretations, and other information is vital to putting the story of what happened at the site back together. This information was recorded using several different forms. A **Level Form** was completed by the excavators for each level removed in each unit. If a feature was encountered, a **Feature Form** was filled out. Maps are made of each feature and of the floor and walls of the unit when it was completed ([Figure 10](#)). Both color and black and white photographs of features and the excavation units were also taken. Finally, the site director also maintained a diary style field notebook where they noted the general progress of the excavations and posed interpretations and questions. All of the forms, notes, maps, and photographs are part of a continuous and crosschecked system of recording data in the field. Without this information, lab analysis and report preparation is nearly impossible.

As the initial step in the preparation for the new interpretative signs, a 7 ft. by 7 ft. pit was dug. As the excavation continued, a concentration of light gray soil was observed. It was labeled as Feature #4 (Figures 7 and 9). Part of this feature was excavated and the remainder was removed in 1998. We are not sure what Feature #4 represents.

In association with this work, two excavation units were opened in 1996. In N89/E10 a limestone foundation wall (Feature #5) was unearthed and more building materials, household goods, and personal items were recovered ([Figure 11](#)). In fact, a very large amount of material was found on one side of the wall and no material was found on the other side of the wall. So, what does this mean? Did we find the inside and outside of a house? A second unit was opened to find the north end of the foundation wall. While we recovered a large quantity of artifacts, we did not find the northern end of the wall. After this failed attempt, the crew used a solid metal probe to search for the wall and traced out the general location of the wall, we think. As part of the 1998 research, this was investigated

This work revealed that substantial foundation remnants were present in the area proposed for the signs. As a result, the location for the signs was temporally changed.

#### *A walking search for the remainder of “Old” Belmont*

During the first and second phase of the archaeological work at the site, all of the archaeological investigations were confined to the area of the First Capitol Historic Site. This was intentional since the developments that prompted the work were focused in that area. It was not clear, however, if the historic site area and the area of “Old” Belmont were one and the same. In the spring of 1997, the landowners of the property surrounding the site were contacted and asked for permission to look for any remains of “Old” Belmont that might be on their property.

This **archaeological site survey** of the area surrounding the First Capitol Historic site was identified a light scatter of materials in the field to the north of the historic site. This is not surprising since shovel testing of the Historic Site property indicated that there were materials close to the north property line. Excluding this location, only one other area contained any artifacts. This other area is located west of CTH “G” and north of CTH “B.” A dense concentration of building materials and domestic debris was found in this area. This scatter of material is referred to locally as the “Old Hotel.” No other building locations were identified along CTH “G” and CTH “B” indicating that the First Capitol Historic Site does include a majority of the community of “Old” Belmont.

In May of 1998, archaeologists from the Wisconsin Historical Society monitored the reconstruction work done for the parking lot. This work called for the excavation of four areas around the lot using large machinery. The monitoring of this work resulted in the identification of Feature 6. This gravel lens and pieces of limestone are similar to Feature 2 in some respects. Its age and function await further investigation.

The staff of the Wisconsin Historical Society received a Sesquicentennial grant to carry out additional archaeological work at the First Capitol Historic Site in 1998. The grant had four parts.

First the archaeological fieldwork gave the public a chance to dig up their “roots” through participating in an archaeological dig at the site. Their participation in the work was important because without it the archaeological work could not have been completed. The public participation phase of the work was part of a long-term archaeological project that will try to answer specific questions about the lives of the everyday citizens of “Old” Belmont (Part two of the grant.) The third aspect of the grant was the development of a set of educational materials for use in the schools. This packet is available from the staff at the Pendarvis Historic site. Finally, the grant was used to expand the interpretative displays at the site.

In addition to the actual digging at the site, we also contacted the staff of the Historic Preservation Division of the Ho-Chunk Nation. Ron Wilber and George Garvin spent two days at the site in mid June. They completed a ground penetrating radar (GPR) survey of the area between CTH “G” and the Court House. This “x-ray” of the ground was done at one-half meter intervals and could reveal the location of foundations, and other types of ground disturbances. The initial interpretations indicate that few, if any features are present in this area. They may have located part of a foundation, but a more solid interpretation awaits excavations in this area. They also “found” the 1991 DNR excavations. While the results are somewhat disappointing, in that we did not find the foundations we hoped to find, they certainly were informative. The survey emphasized the importance of the foundation that was found and it saved time and expense.

We continue to talk to people who are long time residents of the area. This added much to what we know about the site already and additional interviews hold much promise.

Another part of the project, will include an attempt to re-establishment the legal boundaries of the original town plat. This will require the help of a trained surveyor and a little luck.

### Larger Questions

The archaeological work at the First Capitol Historic Site has revealed many things about the site that we did not know. We now know that the First Capitol Historic Site is the location of “Old” Belmont and that foundation walls from the community are present at the site along with a wide range of artifacts. Analysis of these artifacts -dishes, plates, serving bowls, bottles, animal bones, buttons, pipe stems, building hardware- should provide us with many insights about life at “Old” Belmont, insights that we would not otherwise have. We have also begun to learn where buildings stood at the town site. The exact location of the buildings was not known. In fact, we are not sure how many buildings once stood at the old town site. With more work, and hopefully with the work we have planned in 1998, we may be able to learn how the foundations that were found were used. If we can establish the position of individual buildings like the Council House we can then begin rebuilding the layout of the community. With the available written records, we may be able to tie individual families to the buildings and look closely at their everyday lives.

Ultimately, the archaeological information from the First Capitol Historic Site can be used to answer even broader questions. How did these new Wisconsin residents adjust to their new home? How do their adjustments compare to the adjustments of people moving into others areas

at the same time? How do their adjustments compare to the adjustments of people moving into northern Wisconsin a 100 years later? Both groups were moving into what was for them an unknown area, a frontier. How do their adjustments compare to the adjustments of Wisconsin's newest residents? "Old" Belmont was really a boom and bust community. It rose and fell quickly with the departures of the legislators and after being by-passed by the railroad. How does it compare with other towns in Wisconsin who went through similar boom-and-bust cycles? For example, how does it compare to lead mining towns located in the southwestern part of the state, mining towns in the northeastern part of the state, and logging towns located throughout northern Wisconsin?

prepared by

John H. Broihahn

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.

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TO VISIT THIS SITE GO TO  
[TIME TRAVEL TICKET](#)

## FURTHER READING AND MORE INFORMATION

*Archaeology: Exercises Using Documentary, Oral, and Material Evidence.* Russel J. Barber, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1994. [As the title suggests this book is a compendium of exercises, or lesson plans, for historical archaeological projects. Originally written for college level courses, the plans can be adapted to fit other circumstances.]

*Native American Communities in Wisconsin, 1600 - 1960: A Study of Tradition and Change.* Robert E. Bieder, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1995. [A well-written and comprehensive work.]

*The Young Scientist Book for Archaeology*, Barbara Cook and Sturan Reid. EDC Publishing, Tulsa Oklahoma, 1987. [This is a lively written and illustrated introduction to archaeology for upper elementary and junior high school grades.]

*The Adventure of Archaeology*, Brian M. Fagan, National Geographic Society, Washington, D. C., 1989. [A general introduction to archaeological methods, techniques, history, and findings.]

*Ancient North America: The Archaeology of a Continent.* Thames and Hudson, New York, 1991. [A general introduction to the archaeology of North America.]

*Time Detectives: How Archaeologists Use Technology to Recapture the Past.* Simon and Schuster, New York, 1995. [Interesting accounts of recent archaeological investigations with descriptions of how archaeologists reconstruct the past.]

*A Village of Outcasts: Historical Archaeological and Documentary research at the Lighthouse Site*, Kenneth L. Feder, Mayfield Publishing Company, Mountain View, California. [A carefully considered and wonderful account of the lives of the people who lived in the Village of Lighthouse as revealed by archaeological and documentary research.]

*The Land Remembers*, Ben Logan, Viking Press, New York, NY, 1985. [Ben Logan recounts his memories of growing up on a farm in southwestern Wisconsin.]

*The Flavor of Wisconsin: An Informal History of Food and Eating in the Badger State, Together with 400 Favorite Recipes*, Harva Hachten, The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, 1981.

*The Rise of the Dairy Industry in Wisconsin: A Study in Agricultural Change, 1820-1920.*, Eric E. Lampart, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, 1963. [A detailed history of the dairy industry.]

*Digging and Discovery: Wisconsin Archaeology*, Diane Y. Holliday and Bobbie Malone. Office of School Services, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, 1996. [This book was written especially for Wisconsin's fourth graders and offers an excellent introduction to archaeology and the early history of our state.]

*Research Project First Capitol Historic Site*, Sherry Huhn, Manuscript on File, Historic Sites Division, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, 1995. [A thorough and well written report on the history of the first legislature and of the First Capitol Historic Site.]

*Teacher's Guide and Student Materials for Digging and Discovery: Wisconsin Archaeology*, Bobbie Malone. Office of School Services, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, 1996. [This guide has lesson plans for each chapter in the book "Digging and Discovery."]

*Agricultural Diversity in Wisconsin: A catalog to Accompany the Cooperative Exhibit Culture and Agriculture.* Tom McKay and Deborah E. Kmetz, eds. State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, 1987. [An excellent introduction to Wisconsin agriculture.]

Wisconsin Archaeology, Robert A. Birmingham, Carol I. Mason, and James B. Stoltman, editors. *The Wisconsin Archeologist* 78 Nos 1-2, 1997. [This NEW and completely revised "Handbook" provides the reader with a detailed, but not too technical, look at the state of archaeological knowledge in Wisconsin.] NEW

*Introduction to Wisconsin Indians.* Carol I. Mason, Sheffield Publishing Company, Salem, Wisconsin, 1998. [This book is an excellent introduction to the Native American's who live or who once lived in Wisconsin.]

*Historical Archaeology*, Charles E. Orser, Jr., and Brian M. Fagan., New York: Harper-Collins College Publishers, 1995. [This textbook was intended for use in entry level college courses. It is an excellent account of the origins, methods, and theory of historical archaeology.]

*I Can Be an Archaeologist*, Robert B. Pickering, Children's Press, Chicago, 1987. [An introductory text on archaeology and physical anthropology for the beginning reader.]

Several magazines regularly publish articles concerning archaeology. They are: *Archaeology*, *National Geographic*, *Natural History*, *Scientific American*, *Smithsonian*, and for the younger reads *Cobblestone* and *Faces*

**Office of the State Archaeologist**

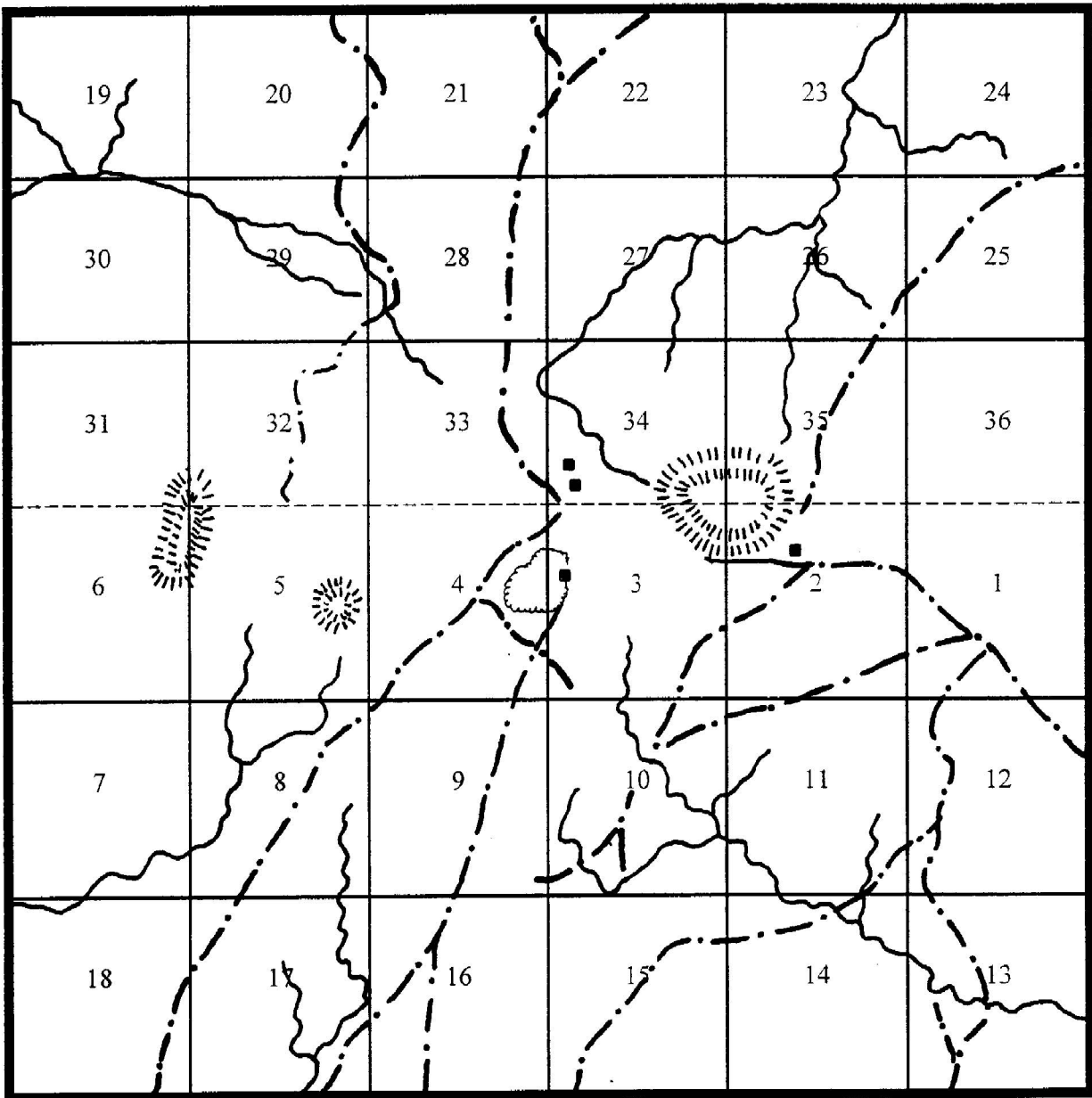


## **PRESERVATION EFFORTS AT THE FIRST CAPITOL HISTORIC SITE**

- 1996-97 Archaeological excavations by the Wisconsin Historical Society.
- 1994 Wisconsin legislature transfers the site to Wisconsin Historical Society.
- 1990-91 Archaeological excavations carried out by the DNR.
- 1971 Mr. Art Jones donates a parcel of land for a parking lot.
- 1967 Wis. legislature appropriates Money for more restoration work.
- 1957 Dedication of Court House.
- 1955 Wisconsin Federation of Women's Clubs purchases the Court House and initiates restoration work.
- 1924 Dedication ceremonies for Council House.
- 1922 The Court House/Lodging House is converted to a barn.
- 1921 Wis. Leg. Appropriates money for restoration of the council house.
- 1919 Capitol Commission moves Council House back to site.
- 1917 Wisconsin legislature establishes Belmont Capitol Commission.
- 1912 Wisconsin Federation of Women's Clubs puts marker at site.
- 1911 Wisconsin Federation of Women's Clubs purchases the site.
- 1906 Local support generated by Martin P. Rindlaub and a suggestion by the State Historical Society that the site be acquired and developed into a historic site.

**Figure 1.** Preservation efforts for the First Capitol Historic Site

T 4 N -- R 1 E



T 3 N -- R 1 E

Figure 2. A 1832 map of the "Old" Belmont area. (The small squares are buildings.)

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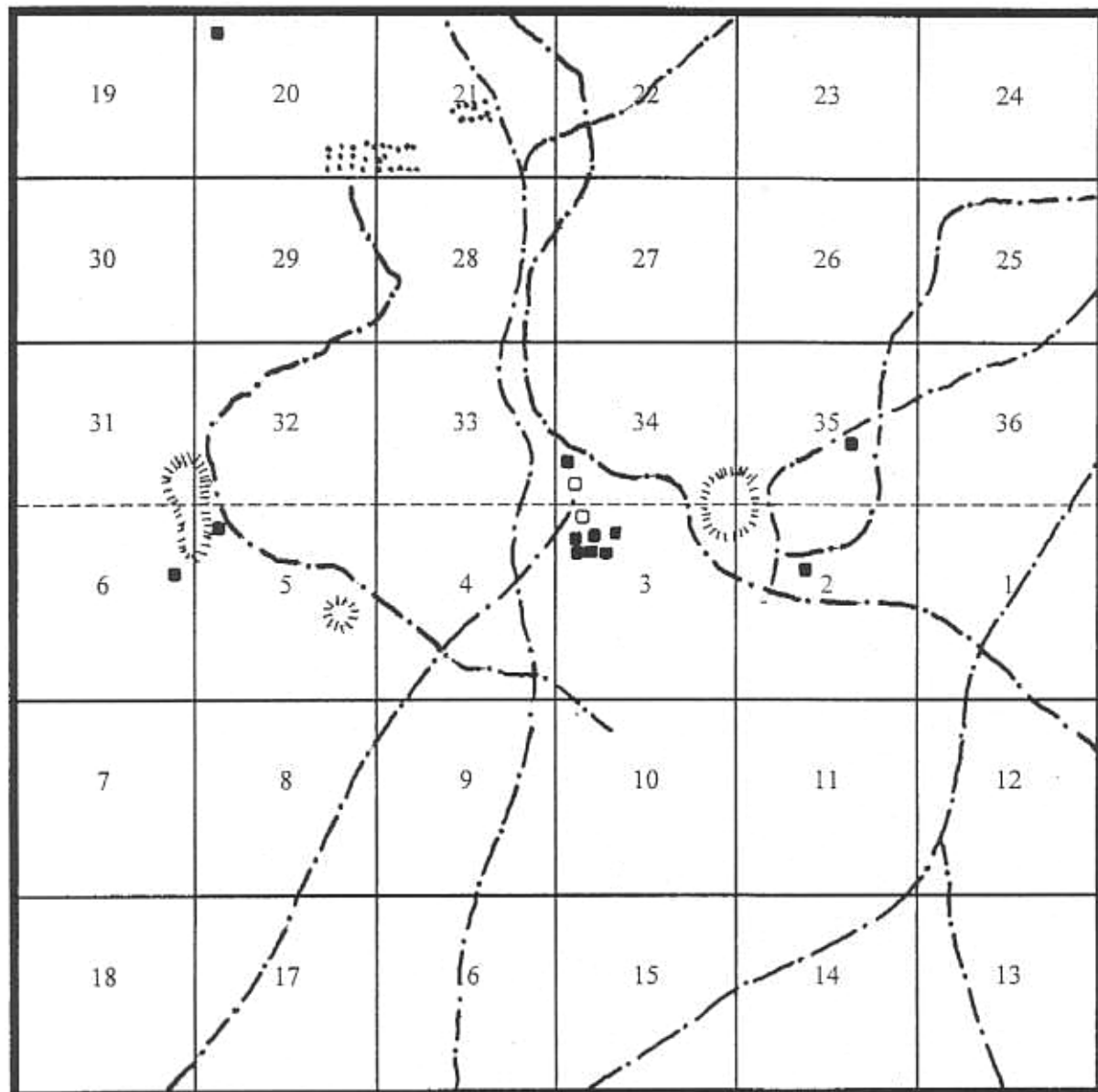


Figure 3. A 1839 map of the "Old" Belmont area. (The small squares are buildings. If the square is hollow, we are not sure if the building was present.)

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## **CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS AT “OLD” BELMONT, WISCONSIN’S FIRST CAPITOL.**

- 1878 The Council House is purchased and moved near the Court House/Lodging House and used as a barn.
- 1873 Mary Dunn sells the Court House/Lodging House and it is moved across the road and used as a residence.
- 1867 Platteville Branch of Mineral Point Railroad bypasses Belmont.
- 1859 A cholera epidemic hits the Belmont area.
- 1837 Charles and Mary Dunn purchase the Court House/Lodging House as a residence.
- 1836 Some people leave as soon as the legislature adjourns, but not all people or businesses move.
- December Public sale of items purchased for the legislative session. James Gentry and his crier, an African American, take care of the sale.
- December 9 The legislature adjourns.
- November 28 The legislature names Madison as seat of government and Burlington as the site of the next legislative sessions. It meets there once in 1837. In 1838 it is in Madison.
- October 25 The legislature convenes at Belmont and uses the Council House.
- September 9 Governor Dodge proclaims Belmont as the location of the legislative session.
- September Buildings are under construction at Belmont.
- 1836 April John and George Atchison pd \$5000 for 80 acres of land that becomes Belmont..

Figure 4. The history of “Old” Belmont.

## BUILDINGS AT OLD BELMONT

Council House / “Noah’s Ark” faced west	Built by Atchison in 1836, north of Court house,		
Lodging House / Court House. faced west	Built by Atchison in 1836, south of Council House,		
Boarding House/Mrs. McArthur’s	Built by Atchison in 1836?, Burned 1839, located??		
<i>Belmont Gazette</i> Building 1837	Built in 1836, moved to rear of Council House in		
Lobaugh’s Blacksmith Shop	Built in 1836,		
Dillon’s Store.	Built in 1836, north of Council House		
Moore’s Tavern	Built in 1833?	located to north	
Coon’s Store	Built in 1836	located 1/2 m. to east	
Gentry’s House (Postmaster)	Built in 18__?	located 3/4 mile to SE	
Governor’s House	Built 1836	gone 1881	site of present school
Another boarding house?			
Other Houses?			

Figure 5. List of buildings reported for “Old” Belmont.

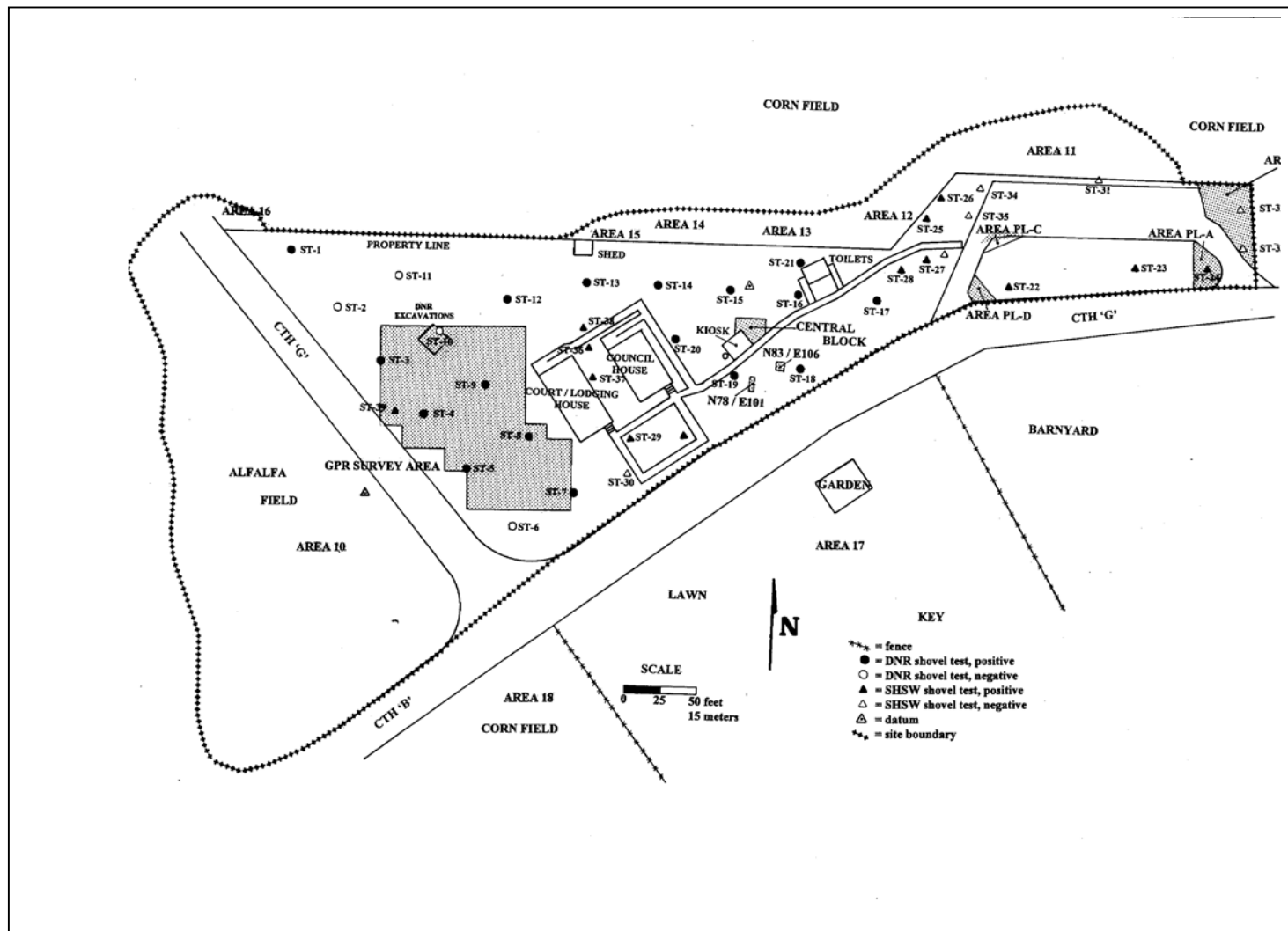


Figure 6. Results of the DNR archaeological field work at the First Capitol Historic Site.

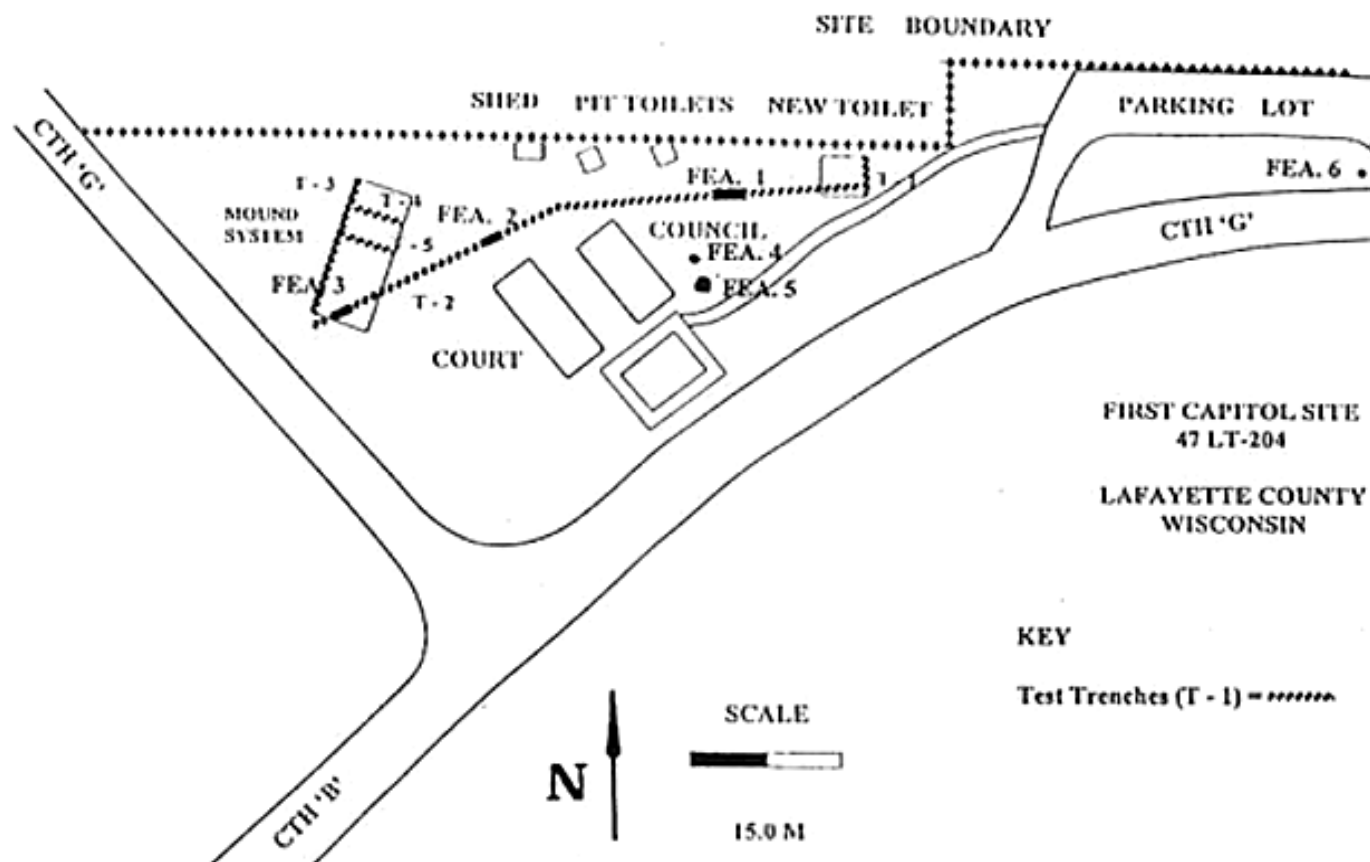


Figure 7. Results of the DNR trenching at the First Capitol Historic Site.

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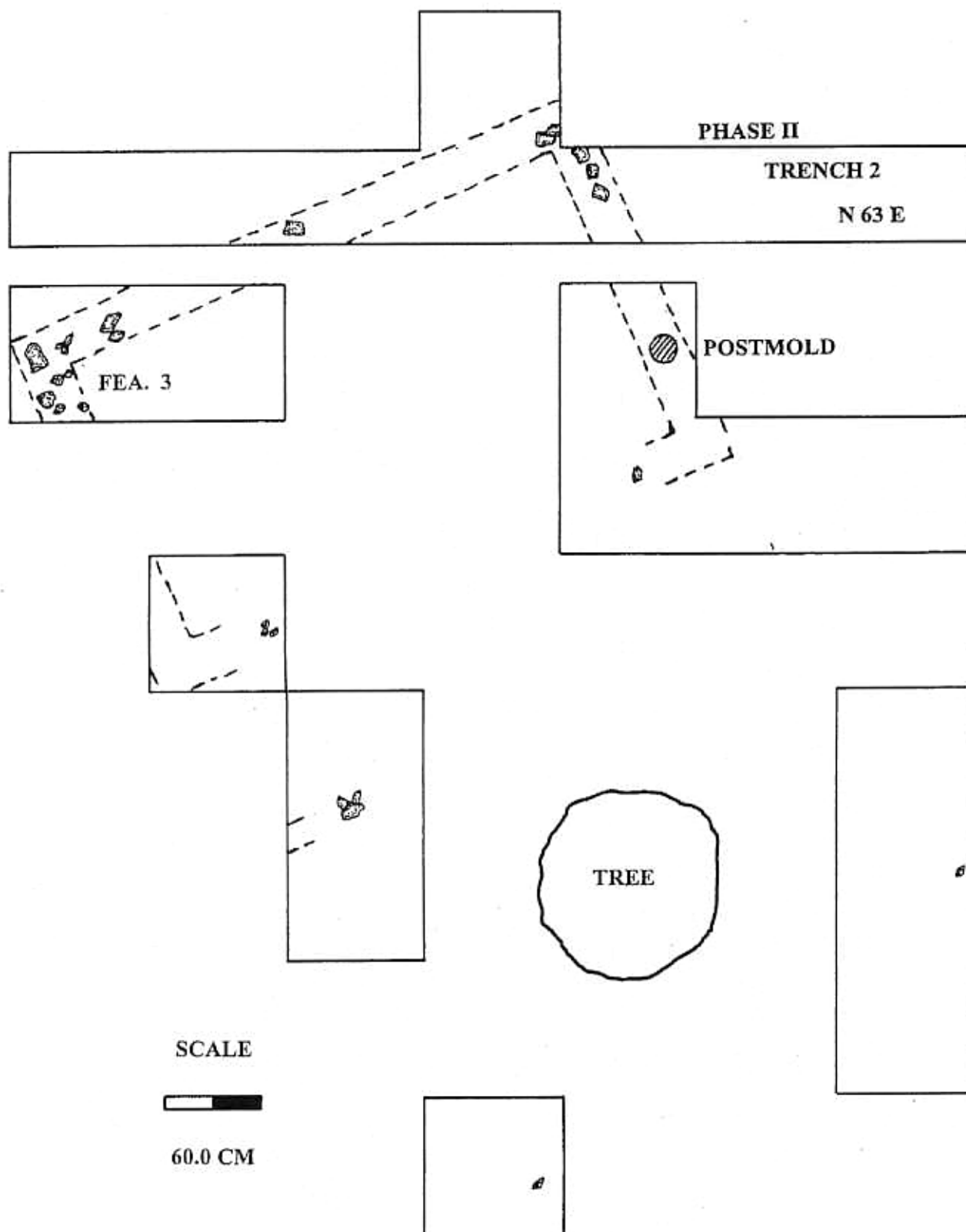


Figure 8. Results of the DNR work around Feature 3 at the First Capitol Historic Site.



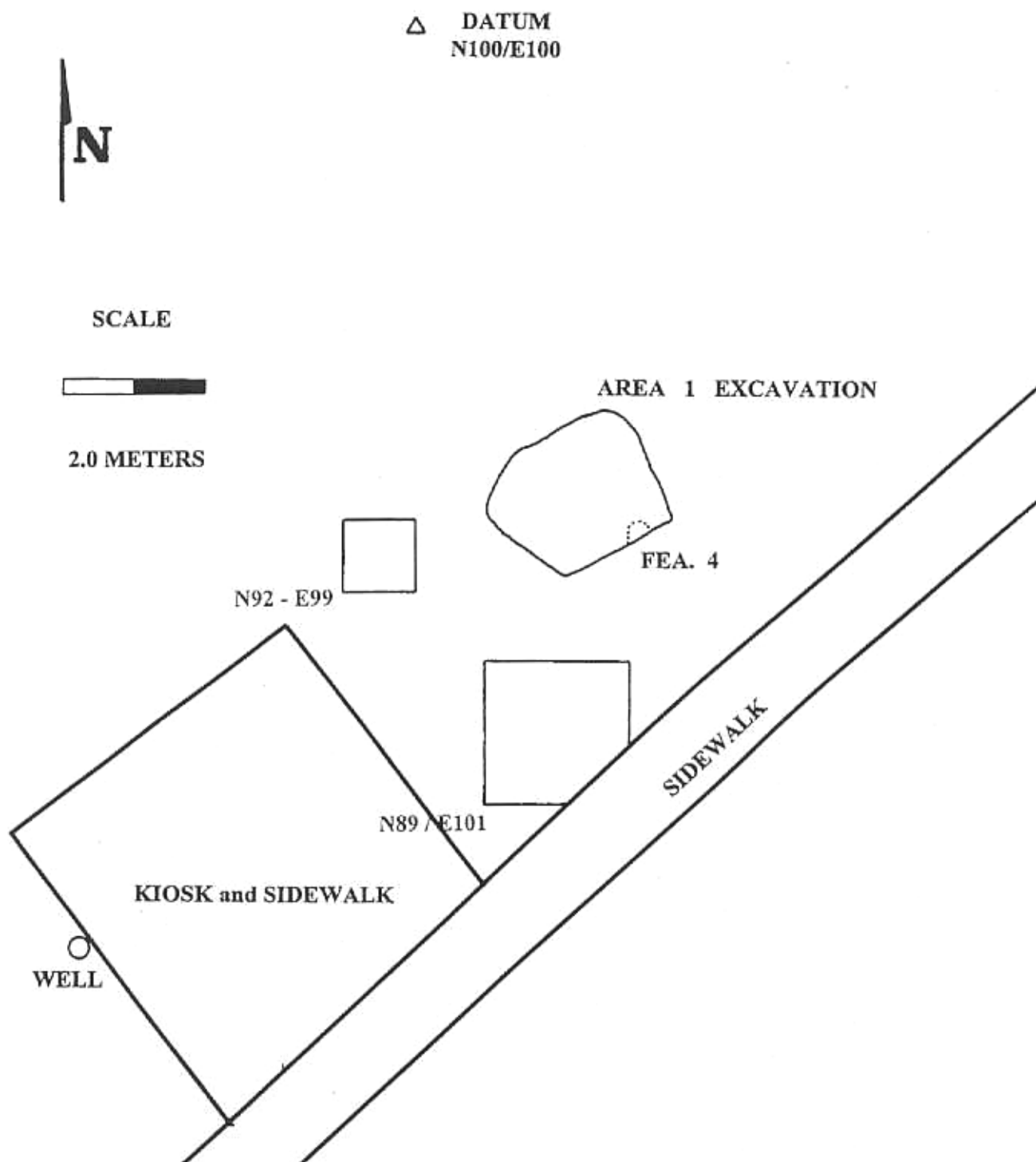
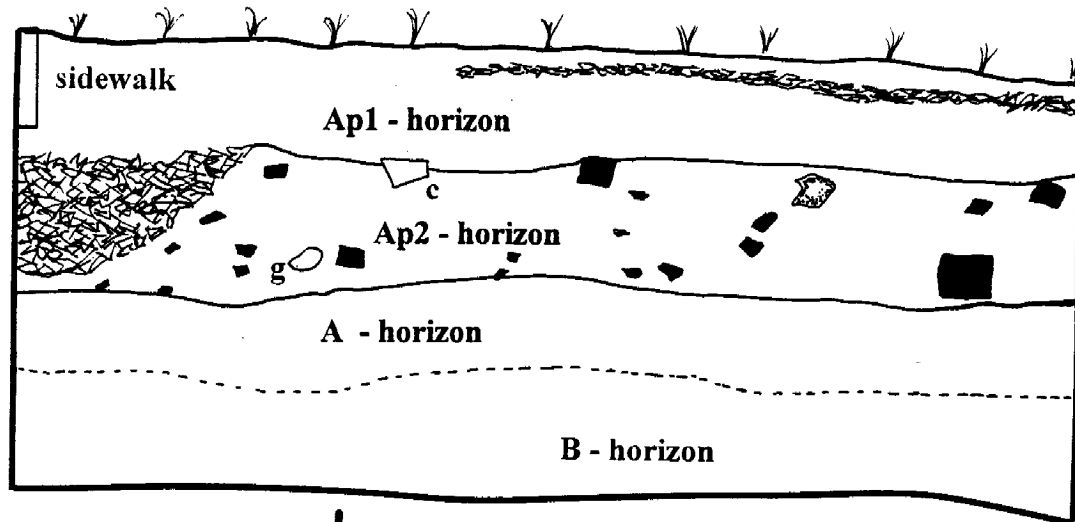


Figure 9. The datum point and excavation units set up by SHSW in 1996.

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N89 / E103

N89 / E101



limits of excavation

KEY

- = brick
- ⬢ = gravel
- ⬢ = limestone rock
- g = glass
- c = ceramic

SCALE



20.0 CM

N 89 - E 101  
SOUTH WALL PROFILE  
30.0 CM BS

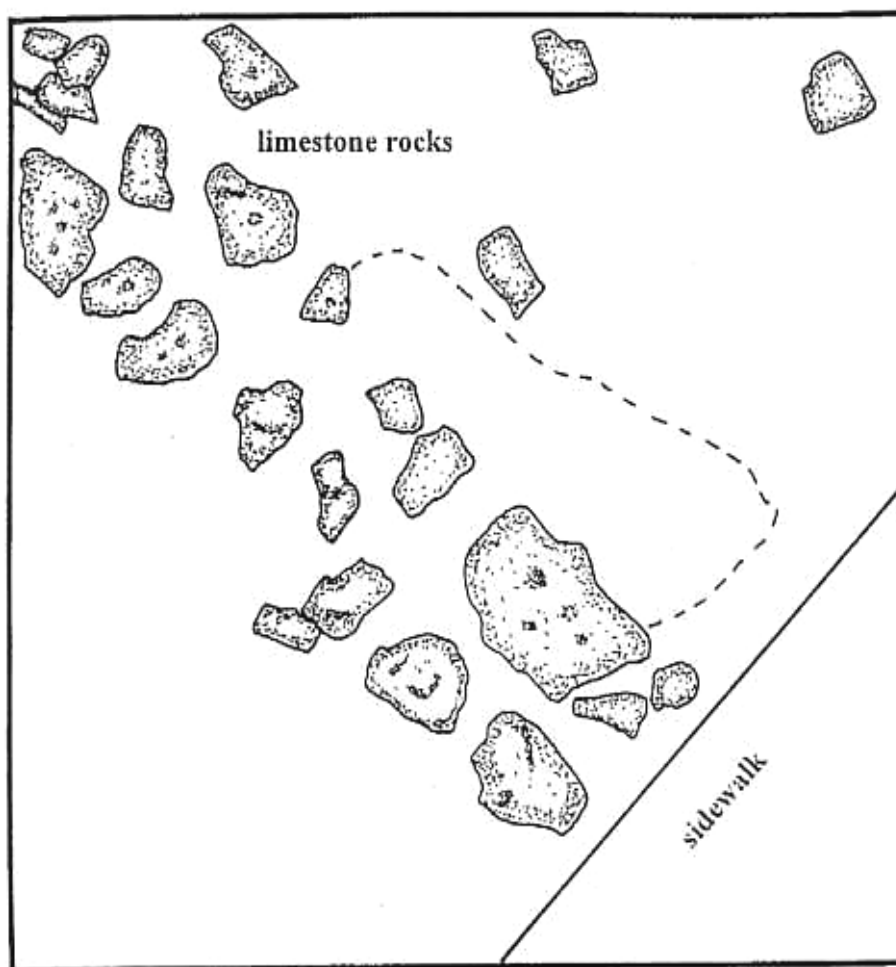
*FIRST CAPITOL SITE*  
*LT - 204*  
*SEPTEMBER 1996*

Figure 10. A vertical profile of the south wall of N89/E101.

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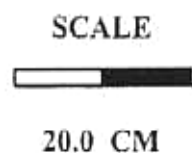
N91 / E101

N91 / E103



N89 / E101

N89 / E 103



N 89 - E 101  
PLAN PROFILE  
30.0 CM BS

*FIRST CAPITOL SITE*  
*LT - 204*  
*SEPTEMBER 1996*

Figure 11. Plan view of Feature 5 in N89/E101.

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## LAFAYETTE COUNTY

### *First Capitol Historic Site, Community of Belmont*

**Location:** First Capitol Historic Site is located on Count Hwy. “G” just west of Belmont, Wisconsin. Look for the signs along Hwy. 151.

**Site Description:** First Capitol Historic Site is the location of the first capital of the Wisconsin. The Territorial legislature met here from 25 October to 9 December 1836. After a long and acrimonious debate, the legislature decided that Madison would be the permanent seat of government for Wisconsin and that Burlington, Iowa would be the site of the legislative sessions until 1839. These decisions had an immediate impact on the community that had been built for the legislatures, now referred to as “Old” Belmont. Since “Old” Belmont was not going to be a territorial or state capitol, many people and several businesses left almost immediately after the legislatures. But not everyone moved on. “Old” Belmont maintained its post office, and several other businesses until 1867. At that time, railroad tracks were laid approximately 3.0 miles to the southeast for the Platteville branch of the Mineral Point Railroad. Residents of “Old” Belmont moved and began to set up a town along the Mineral Point Railroad tracks. This new community became Belmont, and what remained of “Old” Belmont came to be known as Grandview and eventually as Leslie.

**Comments:** Because of the momentous events that occurred at “Old” Belmont, many written records exist covering the political events during this period. What is missing from this written record is an account of the lives of Belmont’s everyday citizens. Archaeological investigations at “Old” Belmont have opened a window into the lives of these people. Walls from their houses and the remains of the dishes they used, the food they ate, and some of their personal possessions have been discovered during the archaeological work at the site. The houses were built on well-made limestone foundations. Despite complaints by some of the legislatures and later residents, dishes and tables settings were made up of high quality imports typical of those used on the East coast of the United States. Pork primarily, but also beef and chicken bones were found at the site revealing that the menu was varied. A display featuring many of the artifacts is present at the site.

**Season:** The site is open from 10:00 Am to 4:00 PM Wednesday – Sunday from June 15 – September 5. For more information call 608/987-2122, or write Site Director, First Capitol Site, 114 Shake Rag Street, Mineral Point, WI 53565. Check the Web at [www.wisconsinhsitory.org](http://www.wisconsinhsitory.org)

**Fees:** No fees.

**Accessibility:** The site is accessible for people with mobility impairments.

**Facilities:** Picnic tables, rest rooms and parking are available.