

EARLY HISTORIC SITES IN THE BIG PLATTE AND PLATTE  
RIVER VALLEYS OF GRANT COUNTY, WISCONSIN

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ABSTRACT

*Archaeological survey and test excavations were conducted in Grant County during the summer of 1974 by the University of Wisconsin-Platteville resulting in the identification of 95 archaeological sites. Three of these sites were early nineteenth century European settlements, the towns of Gibraltar and Paris and a European farmstead referred to as the Siefker site. In this paper the archaeological materials recovered by test excavation from the Siefker site and by surface survey from the towns of Paris and Gibraltar are described and the results compared with relevant information gleaned from early county historical documents.*

INTRODUCTION

During the summer of 1974, excavations were made into the remnants of an early historic European farmstead (the Siefker site) and an associated prehistoric Woodland component. The excavations were made in conjunction with an archeological survey project centering in the Big Platte and Platte River valleys which led to the identification of 95 archeological sites, five of which were historic, including the early European towns of Paris and Gibraltar. The projects were carried out by students from the University of Wisconsin-Platteville under the direction of the author and Mr. Michael Loftus. This report considers data derived from certain of the historic sites visited and the implications they have for the early European settlement of the area.

The Siefker site (H-11) was brought to the attention of the researchers by Henry Siefker, the present owner. It was through his cooperation and assistance that the excavations were carried out. Mrs. Susan B. Stuessy of Platteville, Wisconsin, provided considerable time and effort in searching out data regarding the historic occupants. Mr. Robert Camardo of Mineral Point, Wisconsin, graciously assisted by identifying and dating the ceramic artifacts. Cynthia Hinde and Paul Franzmann, students at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville contributed their time in cataloging and sorting the recovered artifacts.

THE SIEFKER SITE

Locale

The Siefker site (H-11) is placed on the erosional remnant of a high sand ridge located in the bottomlands along the east bank of the Big Platte River at a point where it makes a marked horseshoe curve to the west, briefly interrupting its southward flow (Fig. 1). Since 1900, the terrain features in the area have undergone extensive disruption. According to Mr. Siefker, early in this century an ice dam formed which blocked the channel of the Big Platte forcing it to the east and causing it to cut a second course across the broad flood plain. While the specifics of the incident are not available, the effects of the river's action on the local terrain are clear.

Terrain scars suggest that prior to the above mentioned flooding and erosion, a well developed sand ridge, standing five to six feet above the present flood plain, extended west from a series of high terraces (Fig. 1) into the curve of the horseshoe bend. When the channel was blocked and the river forced to change, its new course moved east, paralleling the original, rejoining the entrenched channel of the Big Platte about 1/2 mile to the south and east of the present site (Fig. 2). The new channel cut deeply into the sand ridge, destroying a large part of it and lowering the other parts significantly. Remnants of the ridge now exist near the base of the high terrace and in the region of the Siefker site along the river.

With the disruption of the sand ridge a large portion of the Siefker site was destroyed. While the distribution of site debris covers approximately one and one-half acres of land east of the Big Platte (Fig. 2), the only undisturbed section is in an area 35 feet long and five to ten feet wide that parallels the present river approximately 150 feet east of it. Excavations (discussed later) show that a large limestone fireplace is at the north end of the site remnant. This structure apparently forced the current to split in a manner illustrated in Figure 2, preserving the site area south of it, while areas less than five feet east and west of it were eroded to depths six to seven feet below the preserved surface. Thirty-five to 40 feet south of the fireplace, secondary river action gradually cut into the sand bank removing the upper components of the site.

A second event having an unknown effect on the site involved the use of an area 100 feet north of the remnant as an historic gravel quarry. There is no indication that these activities had destroyed the site, though it may have removed evidences of secondary activity areas associated with it.

Land survey notes (N.W. Territory, T3N R2W) made in 1831 record observations of remnant terrain elements, and discussions with local residents show the original site locale to

Pipes similar to those of the Siefker site have been found at the DuBay site, a fur trade post in Portage County on the Wisconsin River which dates to the 1830's and 1840's (Abler 1964:135-138). A number of bowls with the TD lettering were located at that site as were forms having the pillar motif, one fragment having a design almost identical to that of the fragment illustrated in Fig. 9 k. A base from a wood or reed stemmed pipe similar to that of the Washington effigy pipe was also found. In fact the word "President" was written on the right side of the DuBay form.

Pillared pipes comparable to those illustrated in Fig. 9 (h, i) are also found at the Mero site in Door County, Wisconsin, and are dated from ca. 1825-1875 (Omwake 1965:139).

#### IV. Buttons

Ten buttons, three of bone, four of white glass, and three of metal were found:

- A. Three machine turned clothing buttons (Fig. 11 b, c, d) with a centering hole for a cutting tool (1.6 cm. in diameter) dating to between 1837 and 1865 (Hume 1970:90).
- B. Four, four-hole, white glass clothing buttons (Fig. 11 l, m, n), each being 1.1 cm. in diameter.
- C. One, one-piece, stamped, brass button with soldered eye (Fig. 11 j). The button is 2.1 cm. in diameter and has an inner inscription that reads, "A. Bene Co. 1\*. Waterbury \*. "Extra\*. Rich\*.".
- D. Two, two-piece brass buttons, one being a flat disc with a crimped on rim and outer face (Fig. 11 i, k). Forms are 1.7 and 2.3 cm. in diameter.

#### V. Glass Artifacts

Glass artifacts include three categories: window glass, bottle glass, and miscellaneous. Ninety fragments of window glass having a green-blue cast were identified, as were two fragments of a circular, opaline colored glass disc. The disc is .2 cm. thick and approximately 7.5 cm. in diameter.

Twenty-six fragments of glass bottles were identified:

- A. Two body fragments of thick (.6 cm.) green-black bottle glass.
- B. One shoulder, two body and one base fragment from a clear glass bottle having a blue cast and a form consistent with types made ca. 1834 (Hume 1970:68).
- C. One rim fragment of a blue cast, clear glass, blown bottle. The rim is folded (Fig. 12 d).
- D. One base, one shoulder and six body fragments of a finely blown (walls 1 cm. thick) cylindrical, pharmaceutical bottle. The bottle glass is clear with a blue cast. The bottle diameter is 2.2 cm. (Fig. 12 i).

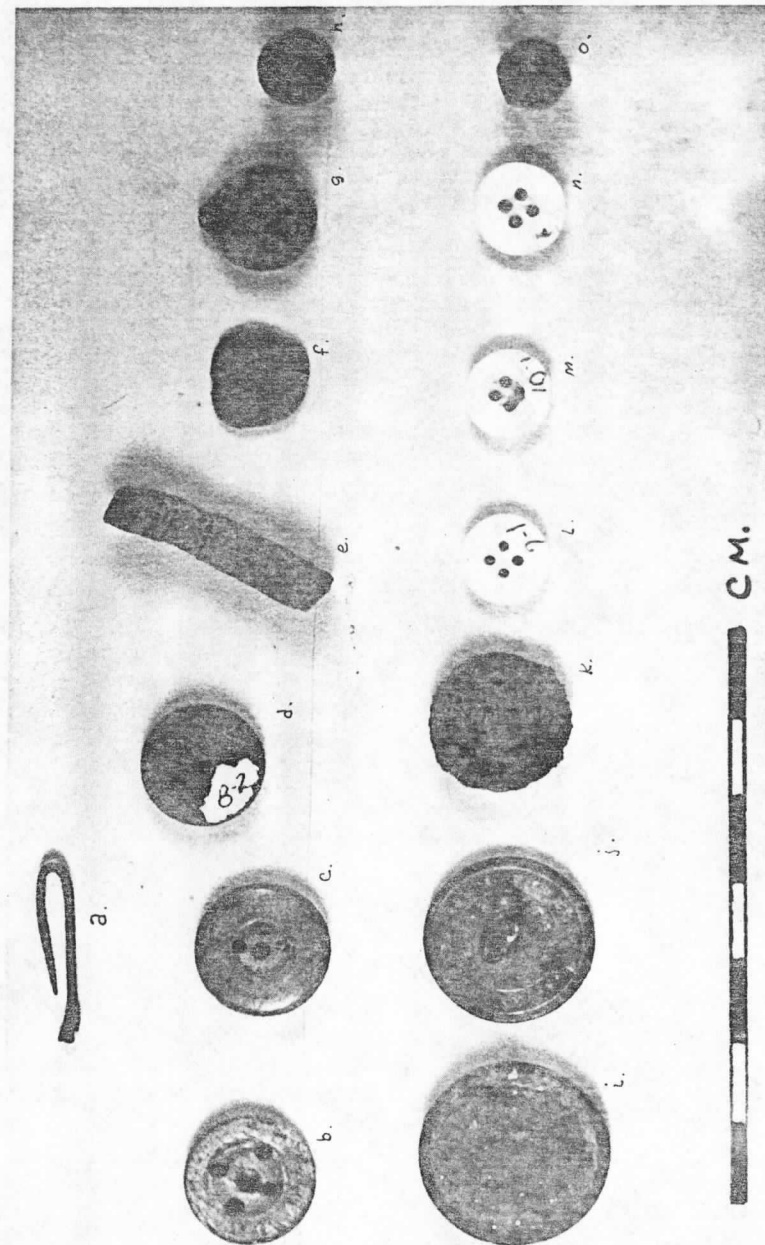


FIGURE 11

Buttons and Miscellaneous Historic Artifacts from the Siefker Site

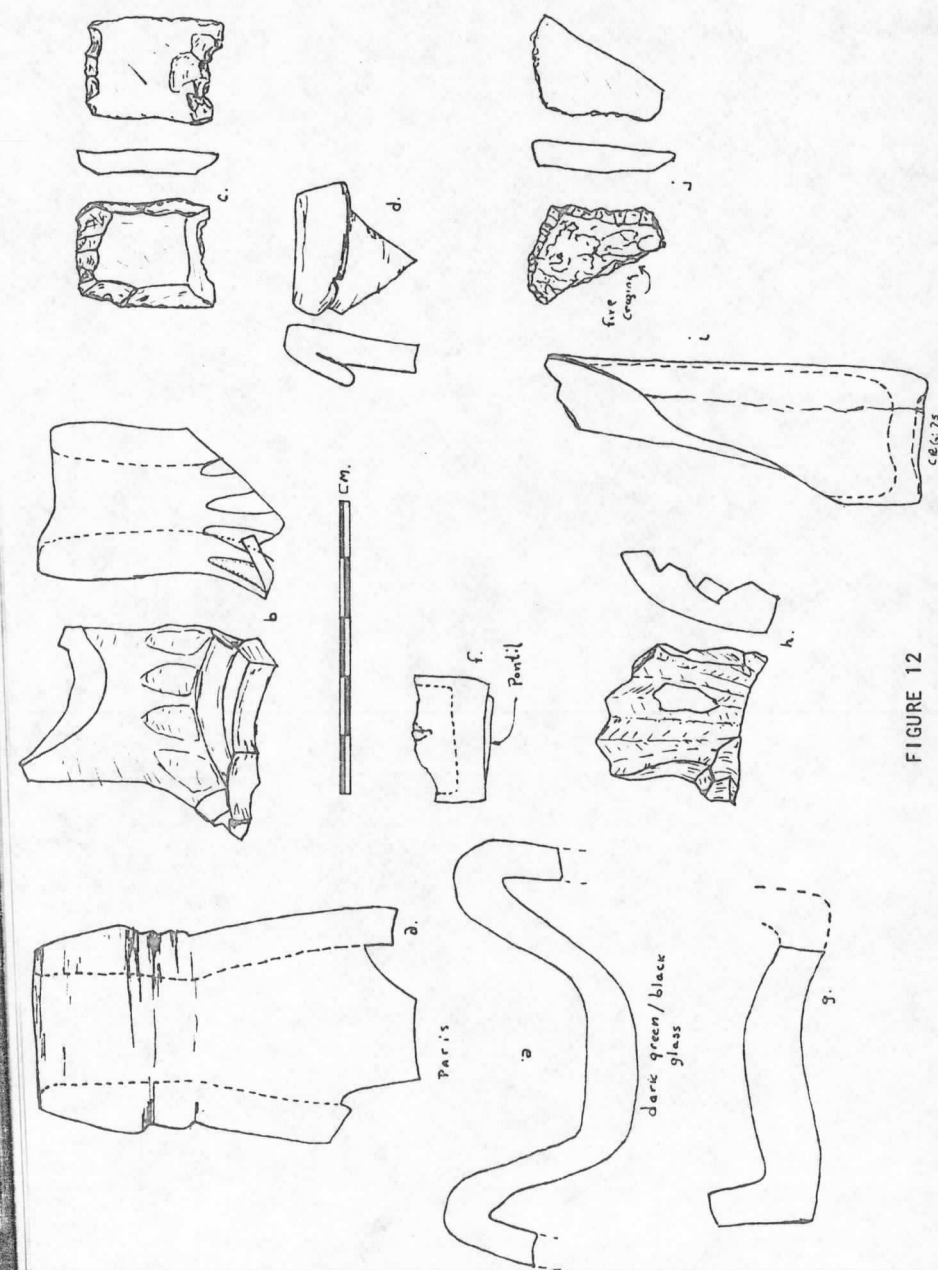


FIGURE 12

Glass Artifacts and Gun flints (c, j): Paris, a, b, e, f, g, h; Stiefker, c, d, i, j

- E. Five fragments of bottle glass of a size too small to allow description.
- ✓ F. One hexagonal glass bead, black or very dark red in color (Fig. 11 o). The form is .9 cm. in diameter, .7 cm. long and has its edges beveled to produce ten cut faces at the bead ends. The string hole is .35 cm. in diameter.

#### VI. Chert/Lithic Artifacts

Six fragments of a piece of shaped and ground mica schist were identified, as were two gun flints made of grey English flint (Fig. 12 c, j). The gun flints were produced for use in a pistol or flintlock, and one shows evidence of heavy use though it is not re-touched. English flints were commonly used in the early nineteenth century (Hume 1970:220). One of the flints appears to have been discolored and crazed as a result of contact with intense heat.

#### VII. Metal Artifacts

The following metal artifacts were identified:

- A. Scythe blade (Fig. 13 d). Two fragments of an iron scythe blade having its back end ribbed to within 2½ inches of the pointed end.
- B. Metal bit of an iron hoe or dough scraper (Fig. 13 b).
- C. One iron, strap end, buckle.
- D. Iron base plate and handle from an old trunk or wooden box of a type commonly found on immigrant chests from the early nineteenth century (Fig. 13 e).
- E. Metal accoutrements and heel from a woman's or child's high-heel lace boot (Fig. 14 j,k) (18 brass eyelets, 20 fragments of cobbler's nails, one heel with nails in place).
- F. Hinges (Fig. 13 a). Two iron hinges with rectangular faces having three beveled machine cut holes for placement of screws.
- G. One fragment of an iron cover for the opening of a stove burner.
- H. Cutlery and Spoons:
  1. Iron dinner knife with riveted bone or wood handle (Fig. 14 f).
  2. Two large, sharpened butchering knives made to be socketed into a solid wood or bone handle (Fig. 14 h).
  3. One brass fork handle (Fig. 14 i) apparently cut from brass sheeting and formed.
  4. One two-pronged iron fork head (Fig. 14 e).
  5. Five pieces of large iron spoons; two large egg-shaped bowls (7.6 x 4.7 cm.) and three iron handles, one having a circular hole for hanging (Fig. 14 a-d, g).
  6. Eleven fragments of knife (?) blades.