

DEPARTMENT OF
ANTHROPOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

The Moundville Palisade

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DRAFT REPORT

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The site of Moundville is located on a high terrace above the Black Warrior River in west central Alabama. Within the 300 acres of the state park there are 20 pyramidal platform mounds surrounding a large central plaza. A wooden stockade once surrounded a large portion of the site, forming an arc intersecting the high bluffs of the river. This wall, nearly five kilometers in length, garded the landward approaches to the town.

The major occupation of Moundville in prehistoric times occurred during the Mississippian Period approximately 1050 to 1550 A.D. The Mississippian Period is characterized by locating sites upon river terraces adjacent to rich bottomland. For subsistence the Mississippians relied primarily on maize agriculture supplemented by beans, squash, and other crops as well as on hunting, fishing, and gathering wild plant foods. Other diagnostic traits of the Mississippian Period include the building of pyramidal platform mounds arranged around a plaza, rectangular wattle and daub houses, shell tempered ceramics, and a complex of distinctive ceremonial artifacts.

Settlement pattern during Mississippian times was one of small farmsteads and hamlets, larger villages, and a few large civic ceremonial centers such as Moundville. The population in and around the site of Moundville during the Mississippian Period has been estimated at nearly 3000 with another 7000 living in neighboring villages and hamlets.

Mississippian society existed at the chiefdom level in which people were born to status positions based on kinship ties. The paramount chief in the area would reside at the large center such

as the one at Moundville. Although hereditary ranked classes based on one's relationship to the chiefly lineage were present, there were ways of improving one's status. Using ethnographic analogies, it seems likely that one way an individual's status could be increased was by his performing meritorious deeds in battle (Gibson 1974:132).

Warfare, or the threat of warfare, appears to have been a regular feature of daily life in the Southeast (Larson 1972:383). There are a number of arguments as to the primary purposes of Mississippian warfare (Peebles 1978:60; Larson 1972:389; DePratter 1983:44; Gibson 1974:132). These include as possible objectives the seizure of limited areas of self renewing bottomlands (Larson 1972:389), seizure of stored crops, acquiring prestige by individuals or the group as a whole, and preempting attacks of neighboring groups by preventing their build up of strength.

The nature of warfare in these prehistoric Southeastern chiefdoms has been the subject of conjecture. Basing his ideas primarily on early ethnohistoric accounts, DePratter (1983:44-67) suggests that the Mississippians maintained organized standing armies capable of seige warfare. Larson (1972:389) believes the seizure of limited prime agricultural land was the objective of Mississppian warriors. Peebles (1978) and others have argued that prestate societies do not seize and hold land. The object of Mississppian warfare may have been to maintain boundaries and buffer zones for hunting. That these buffer zones exist has been demonstrated both archaeologically and historically.

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Fortifications are an obvious component of warfare. Most large Mississippian sites appear to have been fortified for the protection of the inhabitants, ~~from the ravages of warfare.~~ Mississippian defensive works included one or more of the following features: ditches, earthen embankments, and wooden stockades with bastions. Bastions are projections from the main wall which allow those inside to bring cross fire on the enemy. In order to be effective, bastions cannot be spaced further apart than twice the maximum range of the weapons employed by the defenders (Lafferty 1973:16). The most effective weapon of the Mississippians was the bow and arrow. Average bastion spacing on Mississippian palisades is 25 meters, well within half the range of an aboriginal archer.

Stockade walls were constructed of closely set verticlé posts either set in single post holes or in trenches. Often these walls were of open palisade construction. Alternatively, the walls might be reinforced with cross pieces and plastered with clay. From the depths of the post holes and trenches and from ethnographic accounts of Southeastern Indian palisades from the early European contact period, walls are presumed to have been between 12 to 15 feet high.

Gates are the weakest points in all fortifications. Mississippian gateways were restricted in width and were reinforced by passageways, additional towers, or bastions located in the immediate vicinity of the gate.

The relative complexity of Mississippian fortifications has led Lafferty, an authority on prehistoric defensive works, to argue that there were military specialists at the largest sites. There is a consistent application of detailed information concerning military tactics such as spacing of bastions and gates and also their correct tactical use (Lafferty 1979:6).

Before going on to discuss the evidence of fortifications at Moundville, I would like to read you a translation of an account written by Garcilaso, one of the chroniclers of the DeSoto^o entrada, describing an aboriginal palisade at Mauvila:

Situated upon a very beautiful plain, the town of Mauvila was surrounded by a wall as high as three men and constructed of wooden beams as thick as oxen. These beams were driven into the ground so close together that each was wedged to the other; and across them on both the outside and inside were laid additional pieces, not so thick but longer, which were bound together with strips of split cane and strong ropes. Plastered over the smaller pieces was a mixture of thick mud tamped down with long straw filling up all the holes and crevices in the wood and its fastenings, so that properly speaking, the wall appeared to be coated with a hard finish such as one might apply with a mason's trowel. At every fifty feet there was a tower capable of holding seven or eight persons who might fight within it, and the lower part of the wall, up to the height of a man, was filled with the embrasures of a battery designed for shooting arrows at those outside (Varner and Varner 1951:353-54).

Admittedly, Garcilaso was not an eyewitness of the battle of Mauvila and his account does seem to have some exaggerations. However, this description corresponds closely to the archaeological evidence of Mississippian stockades including the one at Moundville.

The first reference to Moundville's fortifications is by ~~Nathaniel T. Lupton~~ ^{Insert 3a} recorded in ~~1869~~ ^(map 1). Lupton was a chemistry professor at Southern University in Greensboro, Alabama. At the request of the Smithsonian Institution, Lupton began exploring the Indian mounds on the Warrior River. In his records describing Moundville he states, "Beyond the mounds towards the south are the remains of an irregular earthwork with occasional elevations along its course as of small mounds

^{3a} Maxwell began his research at Moundville in 1840. In his history of Tuscaloosa County published in 1876 he describes an earthen embankment which enclosed the mounds except on the side facing the Warrior River. A map of this earthwork was recorded by Nathaniel T. Lupton in 1869.

or towers." He also has this embankment drawn on his map (Steponaitis 1983:129-130).

Larson (1972:384) believes that embankments may not have been intentional constructions in Mississippian fortifications but may result from the accumulation of debris originating with the excavation of a ditch or may be from the remains of a collapsed and decayed palisade. If Lupton's embankment represents the latter case, it would suggest two possibilities; that the walls were daubed and that they were abandoned with no attempt to retrieve the support posts for other purposes.

The next possible evidence of Moundville fortification comes from an 1882 map of the site.^(map 2) This map was drawn by James D. Middleton. Middleton visited Moundville as part of the Bureau of American Ethnology's program of mound exploration directed by Cyrus Thomas. His map is much less accurate than that of Lupton. Steponaitis (1983:134) has questioned the state of Middleton's sobriety while composing this map but charitably concedes that it may not have been made on the site but compiled later from field notes. Middleton shows a ditch and a line running west by mound L. This line may represent a moat. Further confirmation of this possibility can be seen in an aerial photo interpretation of palisade line placed by Peebles on a 1969 map.^(map 6) Peebles has a line running northwest from the borrow pit by mound L. ^(see maps 6+7) _(29 map not included)

Clarence B. Moore visited Moundville in 1905 and 1907. While his map of the site is quite accurate, he mentions neither Lupton's embankment nor Middleton's ditch.

The first excavation records of possible Moundville palisade wall comes from January 1936 when the WPA crew was working at the Rhodes site.^(map 3) The Rhodes site was discovered on the property of Oliver Rhodes. His farm was located just north of the southern area of the Carthage Branch and shared the Branch as a common boundary with Mound State Monument. Unfortunately, though the maps of the excavation units are still extant, the exact location of the Rhodes site and upper

Rhodes site have been lost. This is due to the fact that the WPA excavators neglected to put north arrows on their maps and were prone to use as datum points such references as two gum trees and an oak stump. One of the Rhodes excavation units has a twelve meter long section of wall trench. This trench was recorded as being two feet deep. This large wall has a number of shorter intersecting walls and the maps of this area, which are on two pages, do not match up properly.^(map 4) This evidence may represent a bastion, as Peebles (unpublished manuscript on file at MSM) has suggested or possibly, when viewed from a different angle, a gate.

In February 1936 two other large area excavations were conducted by the WPA on the western edge of the Moundville site. In one area located north of mound N, a stretch of wall trench approximately 30 meters long is represented. Northwest of this unit and west of mound P, the second unit contains a 23 meter length of wall trench.

In the summer of 1976, Dr. John Walthall directed the University of Alabama field school in a search for evidence of the Moundville palisade. He excavated in an area on the western edge of the site in between the two WPA excavations believed to contain scars of palisade walls.^(map 8) According to Lafferty (1979:3), Walthall uncovered evidence of a typical single flank Mississippian gateway complex, a catwalk along two flanks, and possibly a tower. Walthall himself mentions the presence of bastions. While it certainly seems likely that palisade trench should be present in this area, there may be alternative explanations than the ones given of Walthall's maps, photos, and field notes.

The 1978-1984 palisade excavations began during the summer of 1978 when the University of Alabama field school excavated in the vicinity of the David L. DeJarnette Archaeological Laboratory and its parking lot. Since that time approximately a 130 meter length of the fortification system has been uncovered.^(map 9) The evidence consists of three roughly parallel lines_{or systems} of wall trench palisades,

each with bastions. These were not contemporaneous as can be seen by overlapping sections of walls. In this area no sign of a ditch or embankment is apparent.

In excavation areas where there has not been severe erosion, the wall trenches exceed a depth of one meter. From post stains within the trenches, the average post diameter seems to be about 20-25 centimeters. Spacing of the posts has been difficult to determine due to the fact that many posts have been removed prehistorically, leaving no discernible trace. From the available evidence, logs do not seem to be placed directly against each other. Whether the posts were lashed together with bark, withies and other cordage and plastered with clay has yet to be determined. Although, no daub has been found associated with the walls there has been considerable plowing and subsequent erosion on the site. Daub might not be recognizable here unless it was fired, and presumably, one of the purposes of the daub would have been to keep the walls from catching fire.

Five burned wood posts from the excavation have been identified as pine. Pine is a very soft, light, resinous wood. The resin in pine helps to preserve the wood and to resist water decay. This same property, however, makes the wood more flammable. The use of pine in the Moundville walls is an indication that they may have been daubed. It may also indicate use of secondary growth forest as a source of building supplies.

The palisade walls uncovered during the 1978-1984 excavations all have bastions. These bastions average four meters in width and project seven meters from the curtain wall.^(map 13) They are spaced 35-40 meters apart. This is close to the maximum recorded distance between bastions on Mississippian stockades but is still within the effective range of the aboriginal bow and arrow. Of the six bastions uncovered, two on each system, all but one appear to have supports for an interior tower.

The three systems of wall trench represent five building stages.^(map 9) The superpositions of one trench upon another shows their stratigraphic relationships

and relative chronological sequence. The outermost trench, system 1,^(map 10) was built only once with no signs of repair. The innermost trench, system 2,^(map 11) was also built only one time again with no signs of repair. The center trench, system 3,^(map 12) was rebuilt three times with signs of a fourth repair in some areas. The section represented of system 2 has one gate. System 3 also has one gate and system 1 has two. Of these two on system 1, one has a protective guard wall to the rear and one is a very narrow opening allowing only one person to pass through at a time.

Construction on these stockade walls most likely occurred during the Moundville II-III phase, approximately 1250-1550 A.D. This was the period of intensive moundbuilding at the site. Very few artifacts and virtually no features were directly associated with the palisade until the project moved east of mound G at the close of summer 1983. Presumably, this is the result of the Moundville inhabitants not living in close proximity to the walls.

In the excavation area east of G there has been considerable prehistoric construction. From an initial test trench, it was determined that the three palisade wall systems overlie an earlier stage of moundbuilding. The different layers of the mound can be seen in profile in the test trench. It appears that in the final stage of construction a prepared white clay facing was carefully deposited as a covering on the north side of the mound. An earlier mound ramp with steps was preserved by this clay and can be seen in the test trench profile.

The analysis in progress of features and artifacts recovered in these excavations should place this series of palisades more firmly in the history of the site.

(summary map 14)

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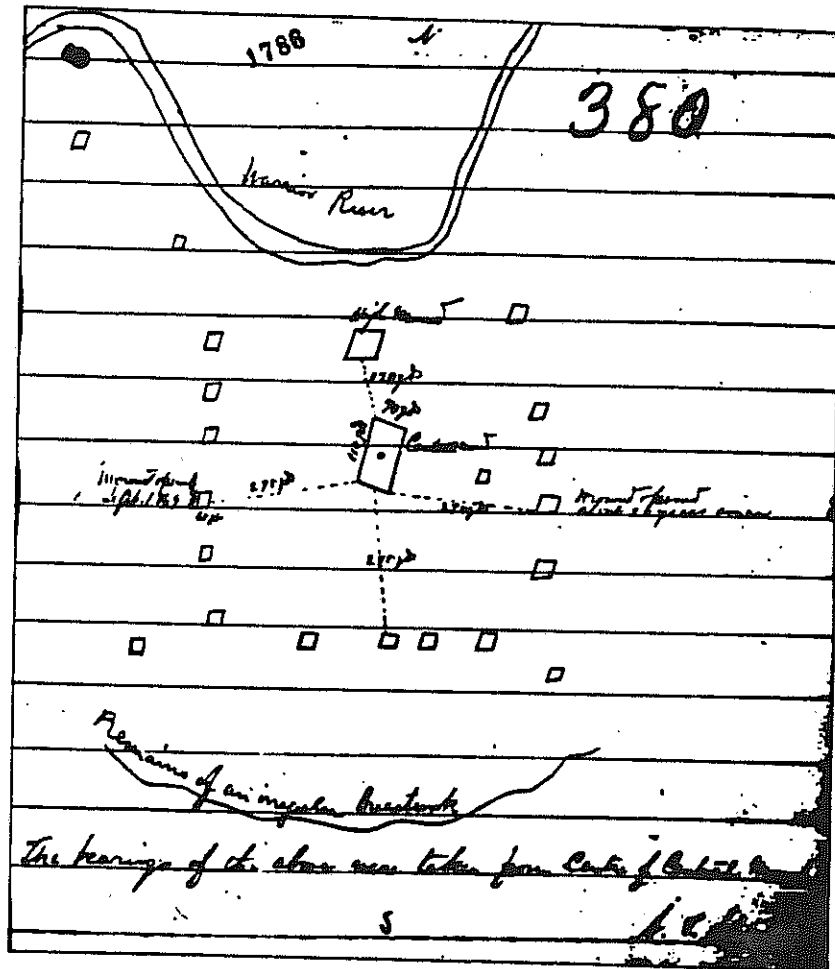
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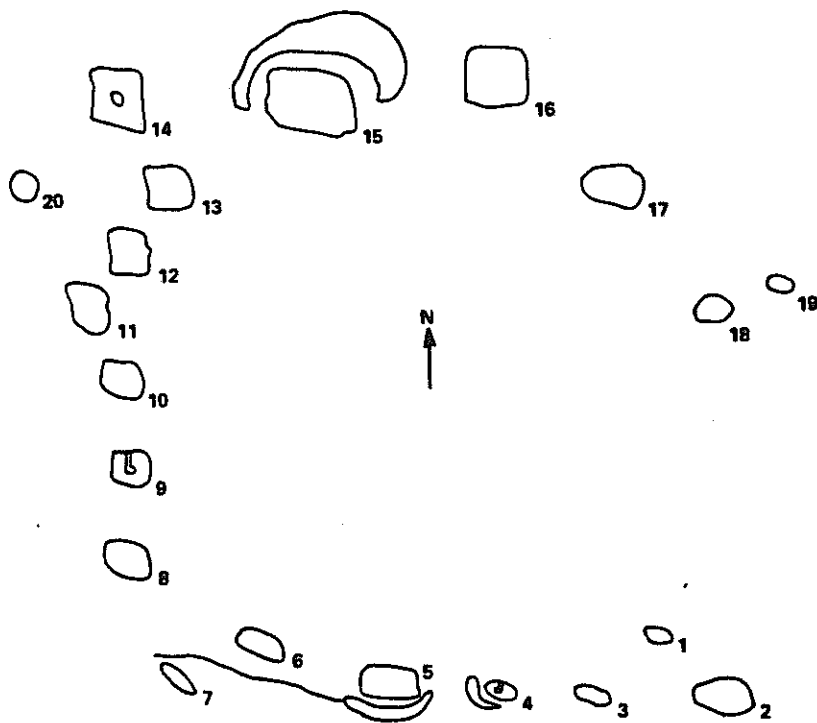
WPA

1936 Field maps of Works Progress Administration excavations on file at Mound State Monument, Moundville, AL.



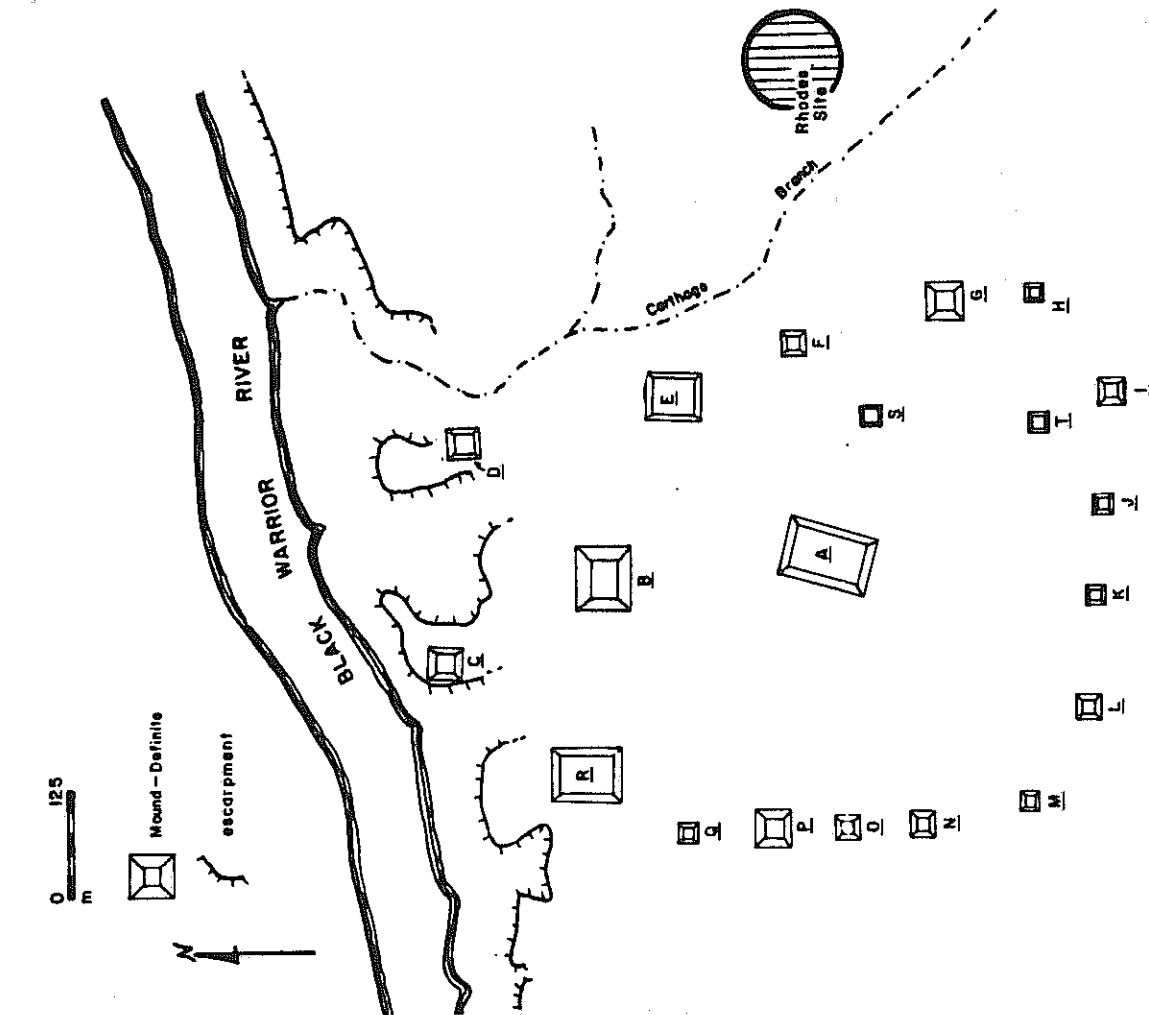
Map of Moundville made by Nathaniel T. Lupton in 1869 (reproduced from Lupton 1869 by Steponaitis 1983:144)

MIDDLETON'S MAP OF MOUNDVILLE 1882

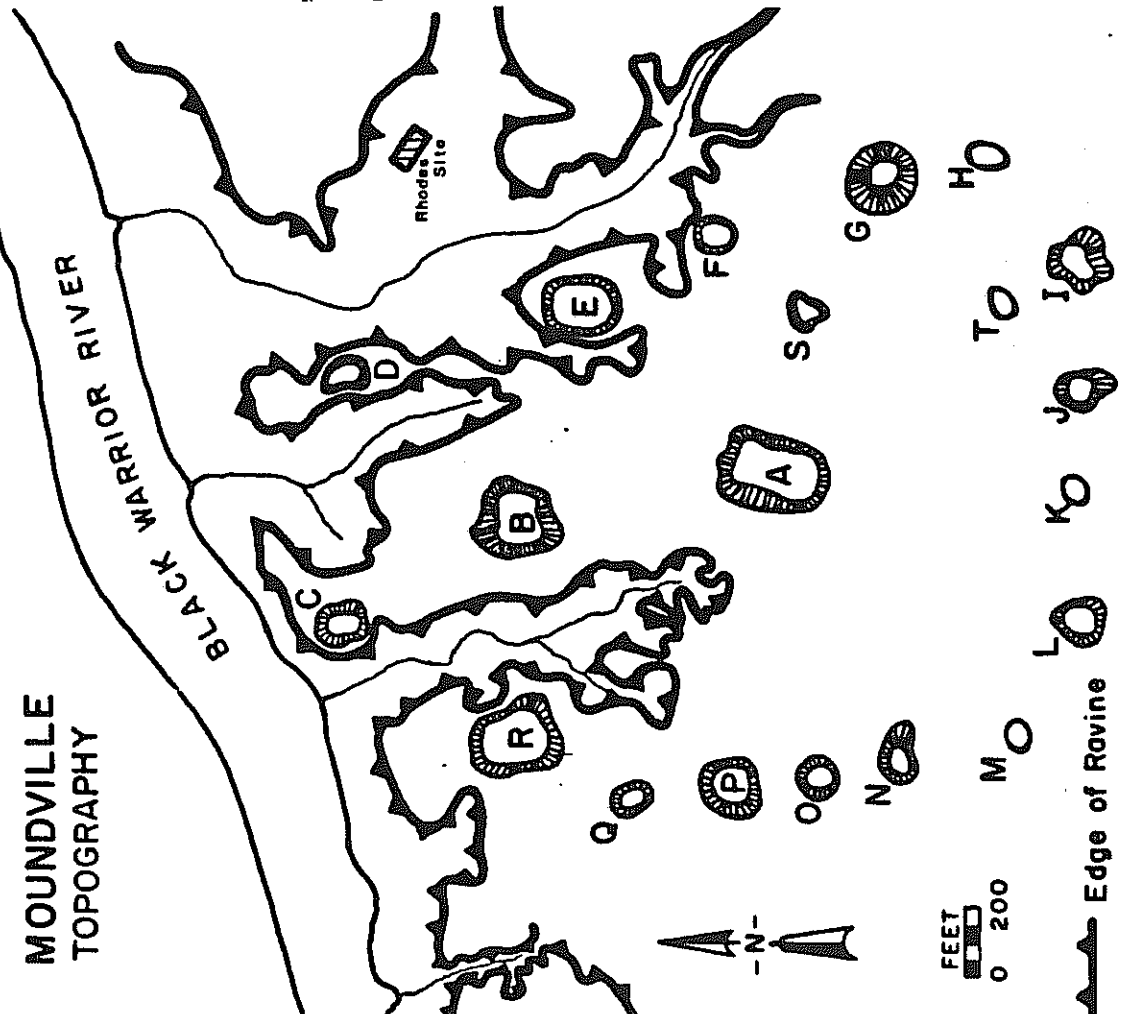


Map of Moundville made by James D. Middleton
in 1882 (redrawn from Middleton 1882 by
Steponaitis 1983:148)

LOCATION OF RHODES SITE



MOUNDVILLE TOPOGRAPHY



Steponaitis (1983)

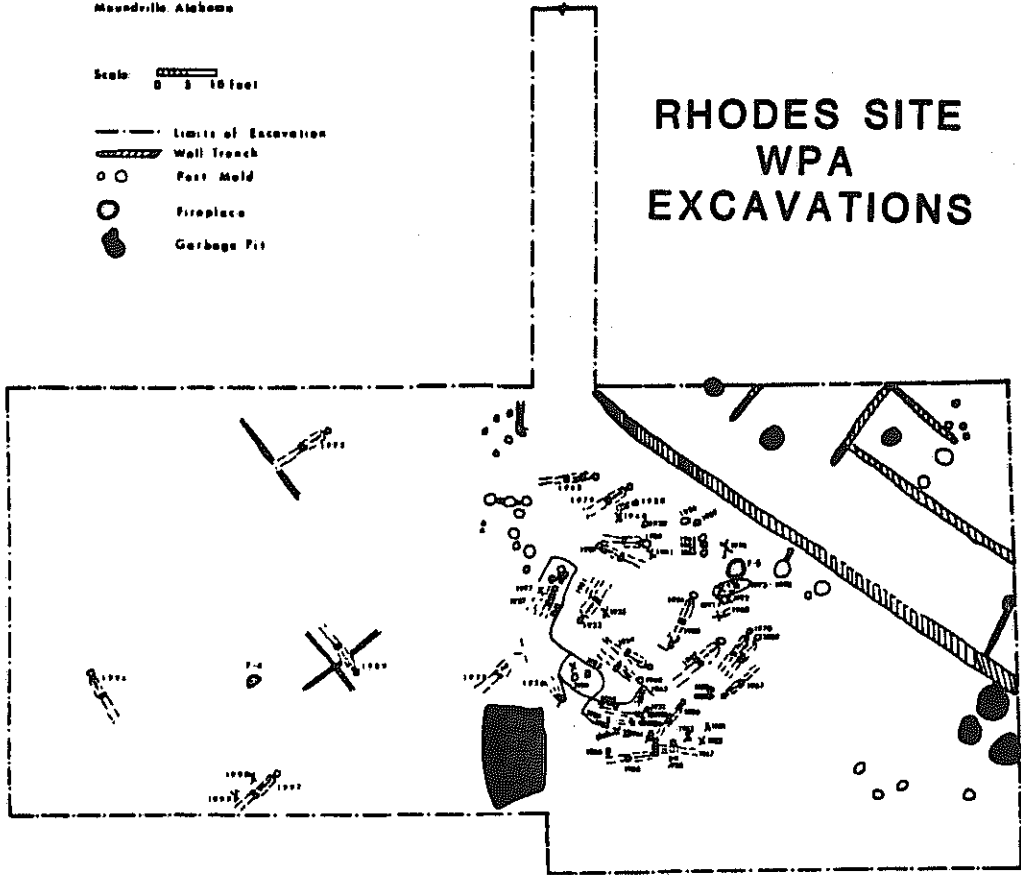
Peebles (1978)

RHODES SITE
Moundville, Alabama

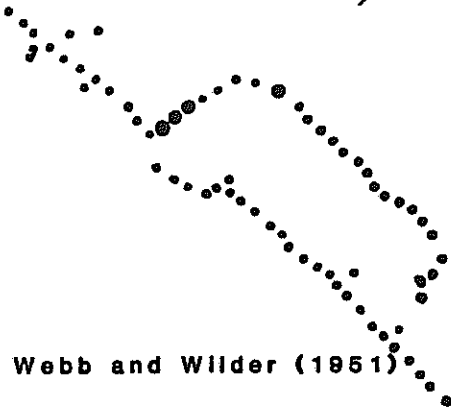
Scale: 0 5 10 feet

- Limits of Excavation
- ▨ Wall Trench
- Post Mold
- Fireplace
- Garbage Pit

RHODES SITE
WPA
EXCAVATIONS

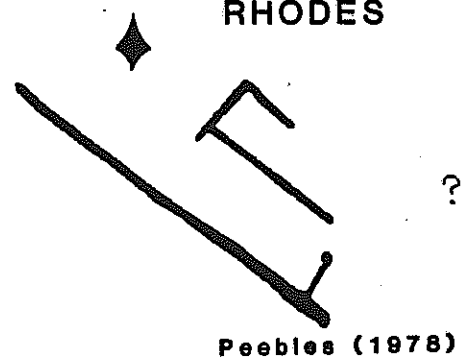


GUNTER'S LANDING,



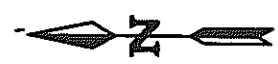
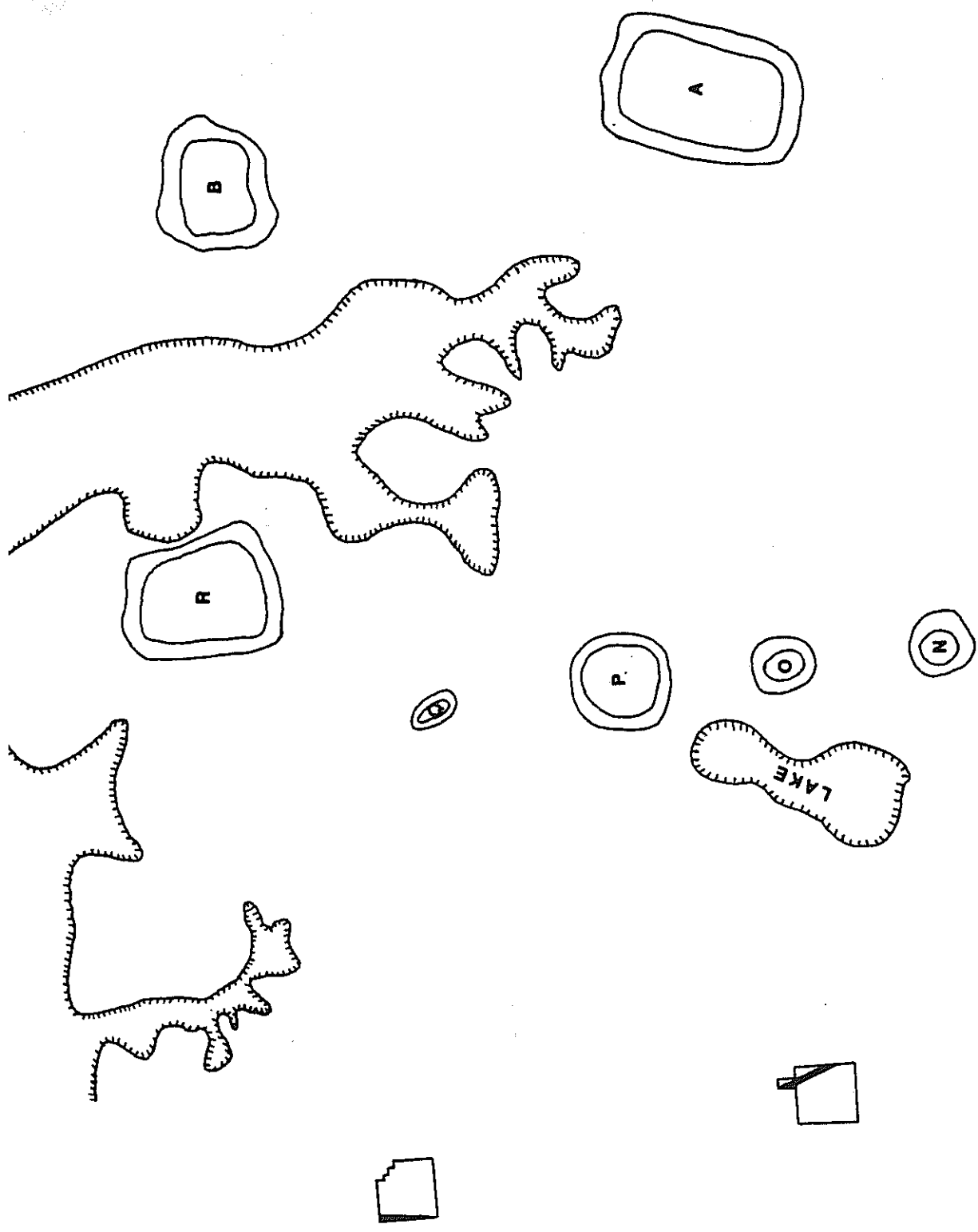
Webb and Wilder (1951)

RHODES

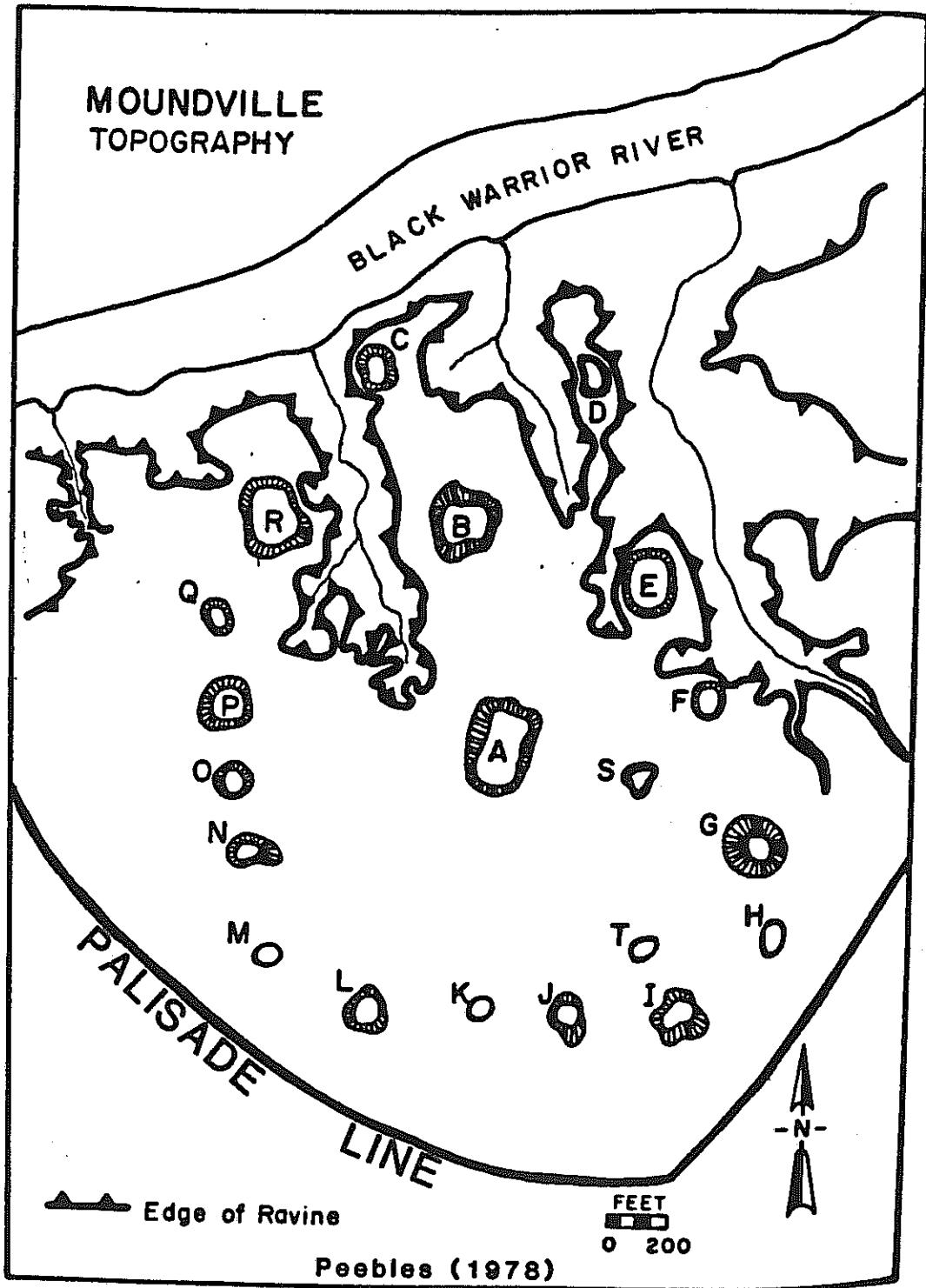


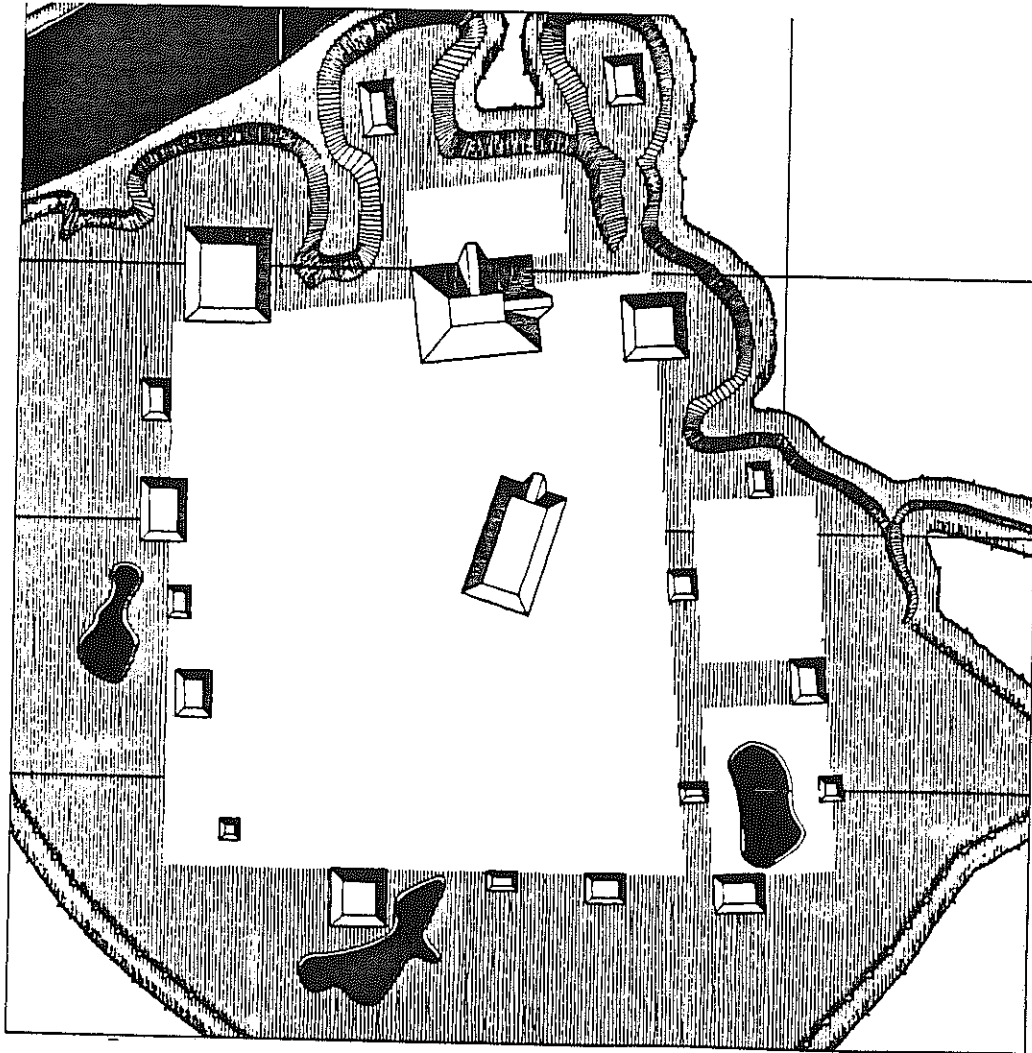
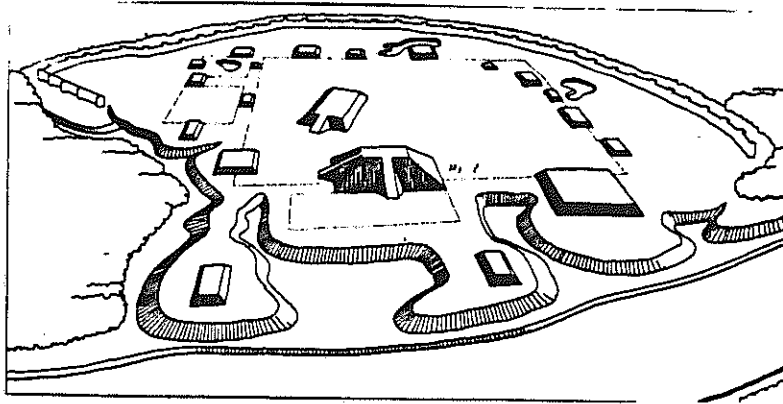
Peebles (1978)

PALISADE GATES



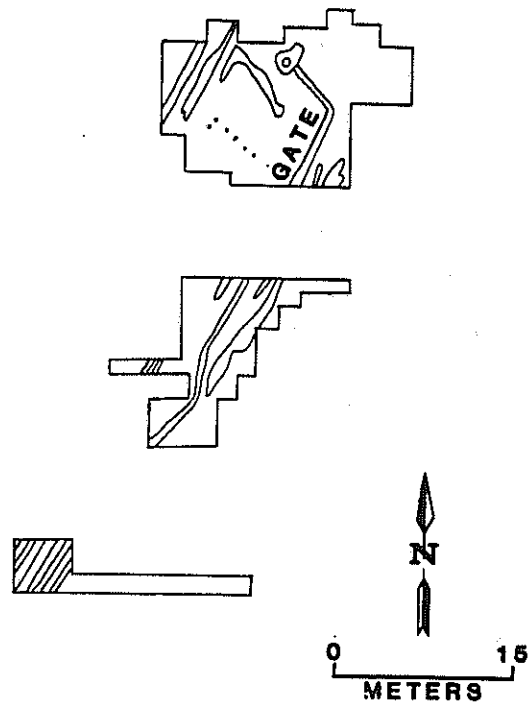
MOUNDVILLE PALISADE EXCAVATIONS 1936

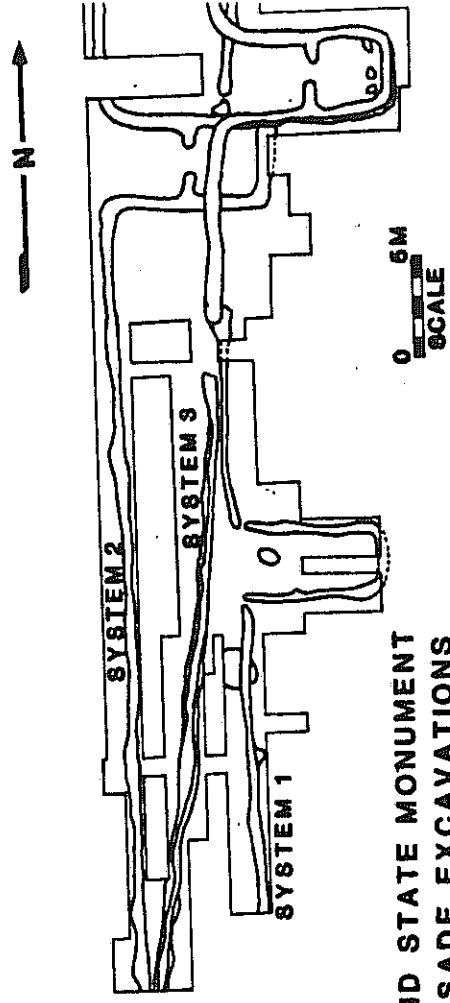
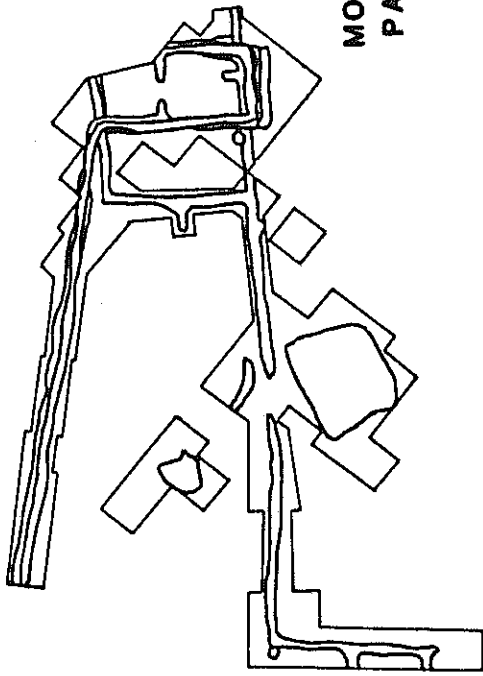




Artist's reconstruction of Moundville palisade
based on Peeble's (1969) map (Morgan 1980)

MOUNDVILLE PALISADE EXCAVATIONS 1976
Directed by Walthall

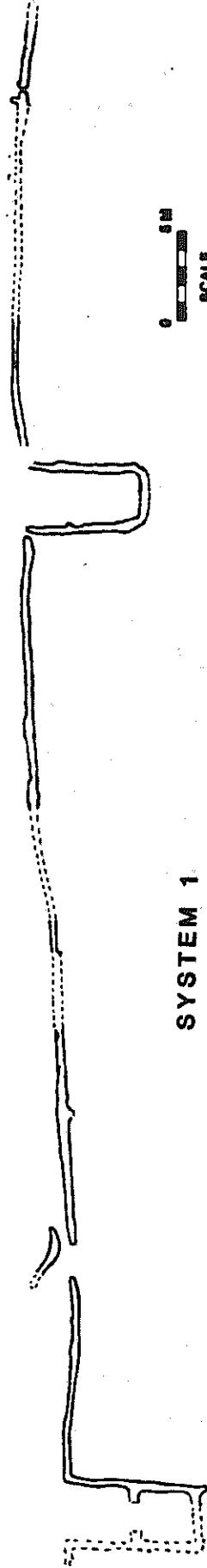


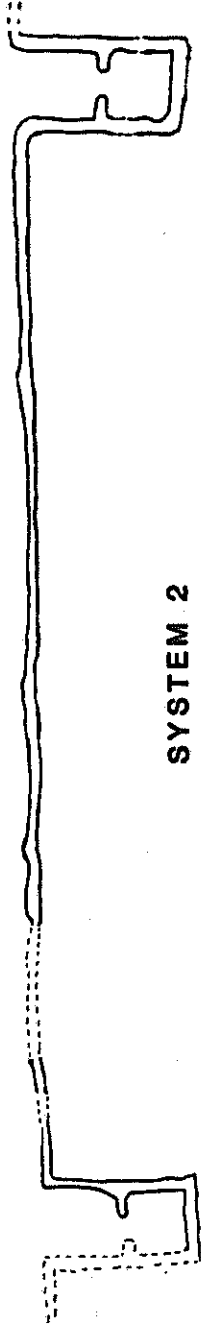


MOUND STATE MONUMENT
PALISADE EXCAVATIONS
NE & E OF MOUND G
1978-1984



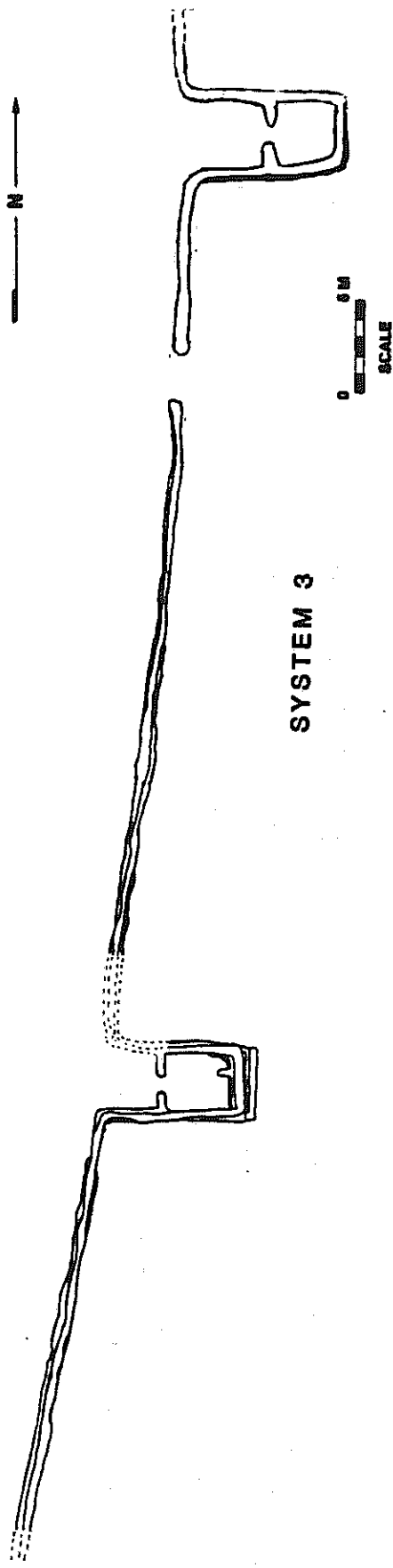
SYSTEM 1



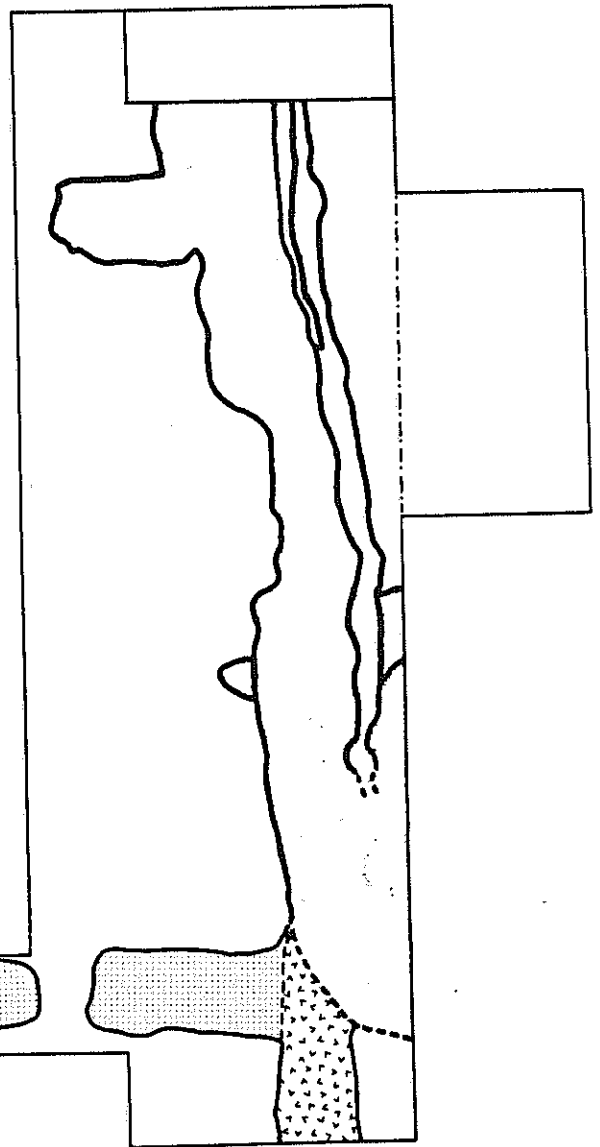
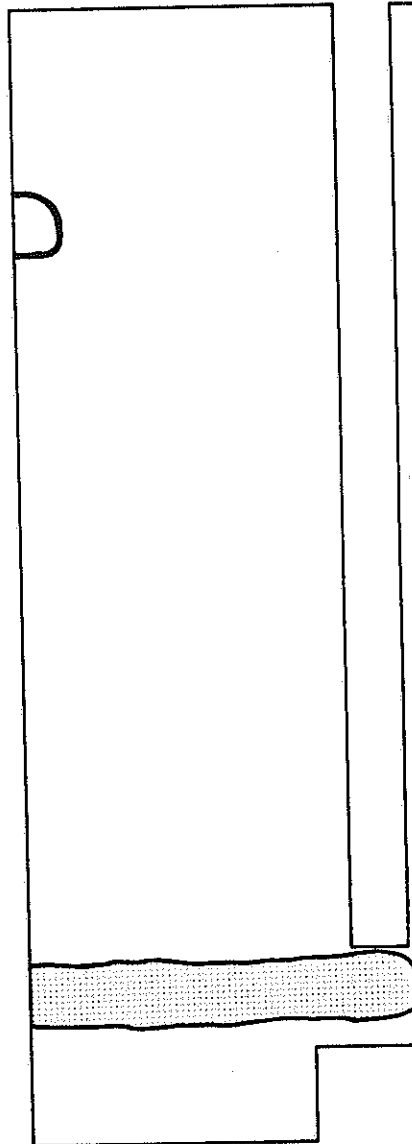
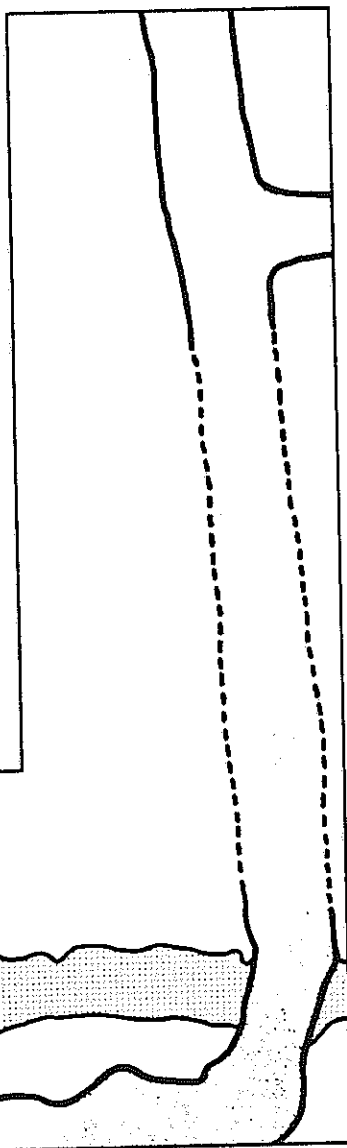
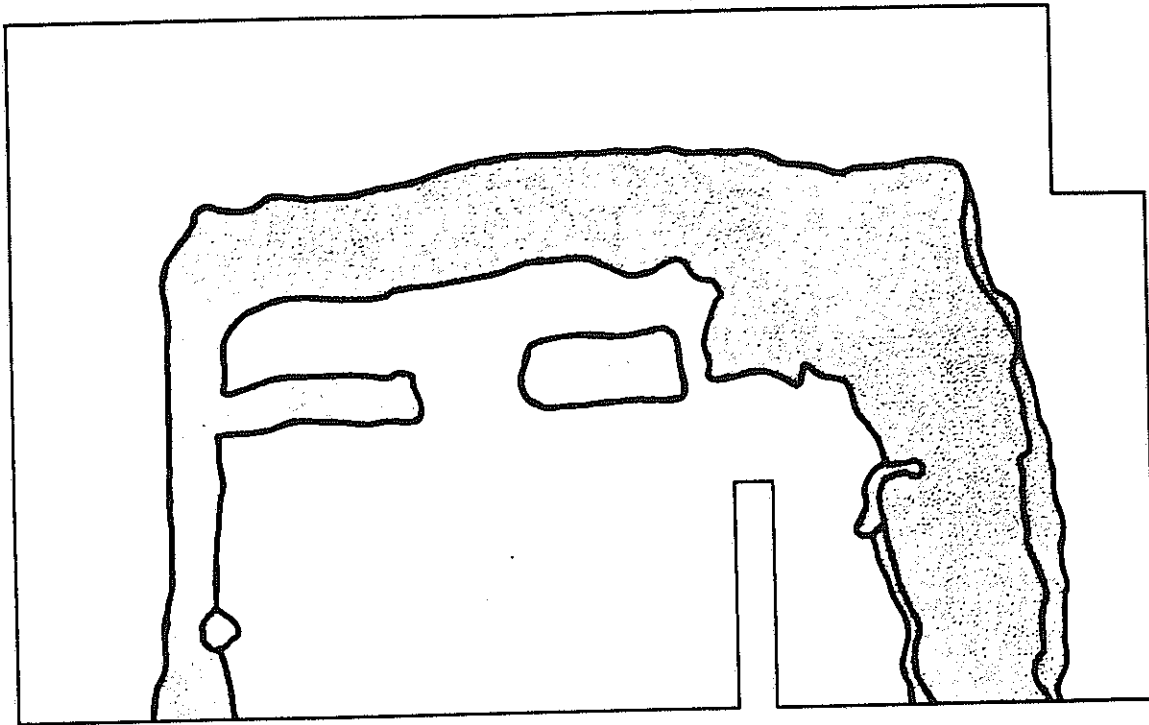


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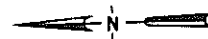




SYSTEM 3



**MOUND STATE MONUMENT
PALISADE EXCAVATIONS**



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PALISADE EXCAVATIONS AT MOUNDVILLE

