

A Walking Tour of Des Moines Archaeology

Bill Whittaker, OSA, 2015

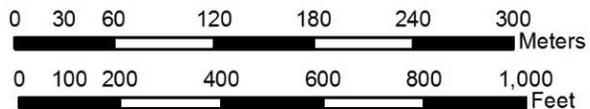
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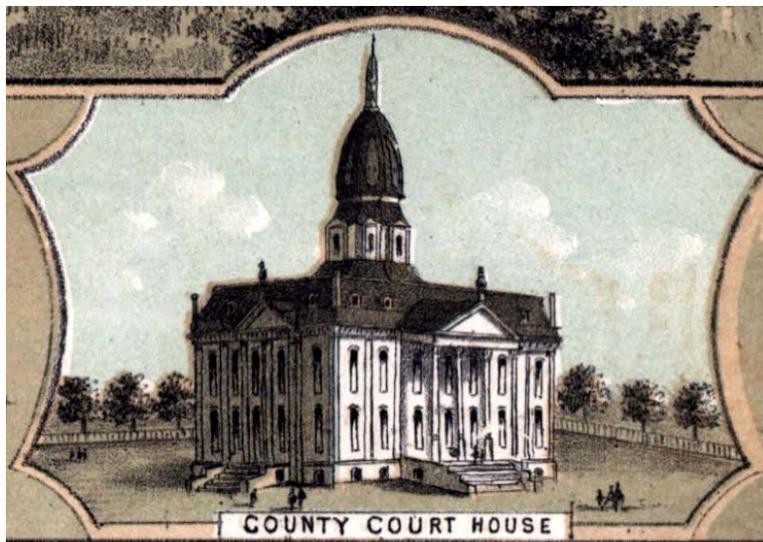
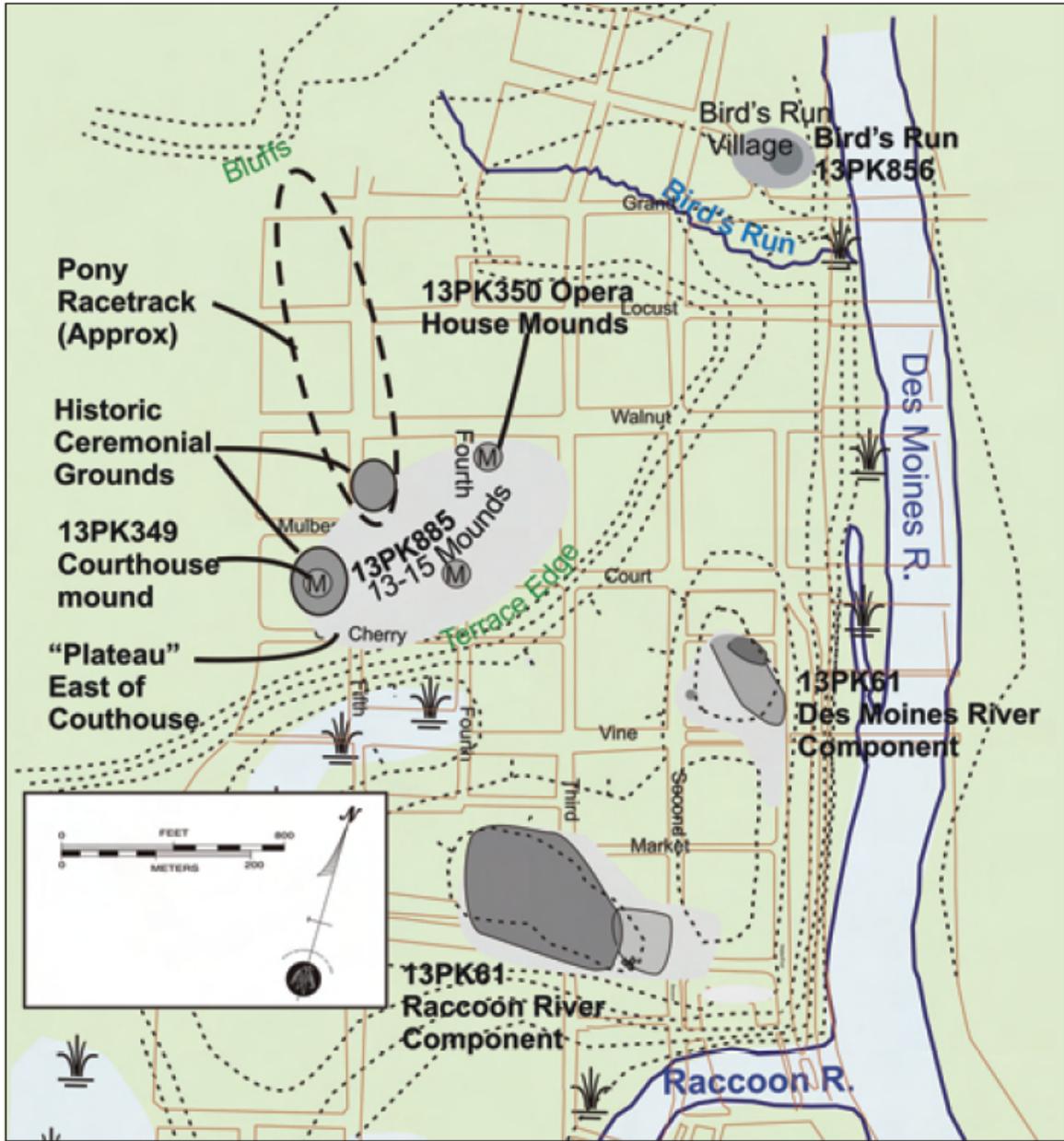
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1-3. Woodland Indian Mounds



Polk County Courthouse, 1868, built on Indian mounds.

1–3. Woodland Indian Mounds

Historic accounts mention numerous mounds as having stood in downtown Des Moines. The estimates range from 15 to 18 or more. We know the specific locations of at least three, and the general location of the others can also be inferred.

Fifteen mounds, the works of a pre-historic race, dotted the surface on the original site of Fort Des Moines. One of these ancient relics stood near where Moore's Opera House now stands [Corner of Fourth and Walnut, 13PK350], on the summit of which was erected the old residence of W. W. Moore. Another once stood on the site of the Court House [13PK349], and others were scattered about in different localities (Dixon 1876:15).

Where Moore's Opera House stands were several Indian mounds, which were about five feet above the surface of the soil [13PK350]. On the summit of one of these mounds Joseph Davis erected a house in which he lived. Another mound was where the court-house stands [13PK349]. There were fifteen of them on the plateau. Some of them were excavated and bones of human beings and other articles of antiquity were found. By whom they were erected is unknown. The oldest Indians found them here when they came and they had no legends concerning them (Union Historical 1880:747).

A biography of William W. Moore confirms the location of the Opera House Mound [13PK350].

In 1852, business having moved westward, he [Moore] purchased the southeast corner of Walnut and Fourth streets, extending to the alley east and south, for six hundred dollars. Reserving the corner, he sold the remainder for about twenty thousand dollars, and on what was supposed to be an Indian mound, erected a two-story frame, fronting Walnut street, and re-opened the 'Hoosier Store,' where he remained several years, the leading dry goods dealer in town. In the early Seventies he moved the store east, and on the corner erected 'Moore's Hall,' a three-story brick, the first exclusive amusement hall in the city (Andrews 1908:21).

Thirteen of the 15 mounds stood just east of the court house. East of the court-house was a cleared plateau where the Indians were wont to congregate for their war-dances and games. Of the latter, pony racing was a favorite. The starting point was where the Fifth Street Methodist church stands, thence they rode to the bluff near the water-works (Union Historical 1880:747). "On the plateau, or second bench, were several mounds, which I hold, and think I can prove, were the fallen residences of Indians—not graves," recalled A. D. Jones, the first town surveyor

(Union Historical 1880:752). Jones may have observed features in the mounds, such as log crypts or stone cists, which led him to think they were house remnants. A biography of Cyrus A. Mosier gives the location one of the mounds in the plateau.

[Mosier] was a prodigious reader and always a zealous student. He early began to investigate the subject of Indian mounds, so many of which existed in the Des Moines Valley, and that of the Mississippi. There were fifteen of them on the plateau abutting the two rivers here, one near the corner of Fourth and Walnut, on which 'Billy' Moore built his dwelling-house [13PK350]; another where the Court House now stands [13PK349] (the Sacs and Foxes had a war dance there in 1854); another at the corner of Fourth and Court Avenue, opposite the Register and Leader building. The others were scattered in various localities (Andrews 1908:443–444).

4. Woodland and Oneota Indian Occupations near the Science Center



Late Prehistoric Oneota vessels (ca. A.D. 1300) excavated near the Science Center (Schoen 2003).

Around the site of the Science Center, rushed excavations revealed glimpses of an early historic, Prehistoric Woodland, and Oneota habitation site excavated 2000–2002.

In 2000 trenches were excavated prior to the construction of MLK, Areas between 2nd and 7th, Louis Berger and Associates encountered numerous prehistoric features. Middle and Late Woodland pottery was recovered in the AB and B horizons, primarily between SW 2nd and SW 3rd streets, but no Woodland features were observed. Four Late Prehistoric feature clusters were documented, including one midden, two pot clusters, one partial house and hearth, postmolds, and storage pits. The Oneota material was located between Market, Elm, SW 2nd and SW 4th streets (Schoen 2003).

During trenching of a small portion of the Science Center in 2002, three Late Prehistoric Oneota pits and more than 40 historical features were uncovered, including a small sandstone cabin foundation. Normally, when features are exposed they are carefully mapped, photographed, excavated in levels, profiled, and soil samples taken for flotation analysis. In the lab, artifacts are analyzed, soil samples floated for tiny seeds, charcoal, bone, and other artifacts and all this data is included in a report. This did not happen to most of the Science Center features. They were left to be crushed beneath machinery during construction.

The Science Center refused to investigate further, but they did allow archaeologists to monitor construction, but only under extremely restrictive conditions.

Archaeologists could watch the destruction as much as they liked, but they were not allow to stop construction unless human burials, prehistoric pits with pottery, or very early historic foundations were observed. If a human burial was found, it would be dealt with as required by law, if anything else was found, it was up to the Science Center to decide if any excavation would be allowed. “The decision of the Science Center would be final,” no appeals allowed (Harvey and Gregory 2006:78). During this monitoring, five features were found, historical foundations, a well, and a pit, but little is known about them, because they were never excavated.

5. Archaic campsite



Archaic tools excavated along MLK near the Science Center (Schoen 2003).

A small Archaic Indian occupation was excavated here in 2000, showing people lived here several thousand years old. A large number of stone flakes, 235 total, showed that people were making stone tool here, probably during the Middle or Late Archaic period, more than 3,000 years ago. Recovered nearby were a T-shaped trill and two nice scrapers. This feature was between SW 2nd and SW 3rd streets, 1 m below the surface, and 70 cm below a buried topsoil horizon (Schoen 2003).

6. Raccoon Row



Raccoon Row Feature 20 fireplace (Schoen 2003).

The enlisted men's barracks of Fort Des Moines (1843-1846) was called Raccoon Row, which ran along what is now MLK from 2nd to beyond 3rd Streets. Features from the fort era include two barrack fireplaces, three barrack foundations or floors, a drainage line, a storage pit or sump, and a midden.

The Feature 20 hearth, probably associated with barracks 1, was 45 cm below surface. Artifacts associated with the hearth date from 1830 to the mid-1840s, including two coins. The other hearth, Feature 93, was identified 40 cm below surface, and was probably associated with the second barracks, it was less well preserved.

7. First Paved Road and First Newspapers



Ca. 1850 paved road, made of recycled fort bricks.



Examples of lead newspaper type excavated from this area.

The oldest-known paved road in Des Moines was excavated near the northeast corner of MLK and 2nd, probably made from bricks scavenged from Fort Des Moines ca. 1850, the bricks' material and size compare favorably with fort-era bricks. Bricks in the east side of the feature were broken up, apparently in place,

after being crushed by east-west oriented damage, such as by heavy wheels or plow. The bricks were probably laid around 1849–1850; lead newspaper typeface were found just below the bricks, the *Iowa Star* and *Fort Des Moines Gazette* operated nearby 1849–1850. The *Star* is believed to be a direct ancestor of the modern *Des Moines Register*. The *Star* was published from one of the old fort buildings, probably one of the barracks along Raccoon Row. The *Gazette* was also somewhere nearby, north of the confluence of the Raccoon and Des Moines rivers, also reportedly in one of the deserted Raccoon Row cabins (Whittaker 2012; Whittaker and Peterson 2009).

8. Fort Headquarters



Top of a wooden box used for safekeeping in the Fort Des Moines headquarters floor; selected artifacts.



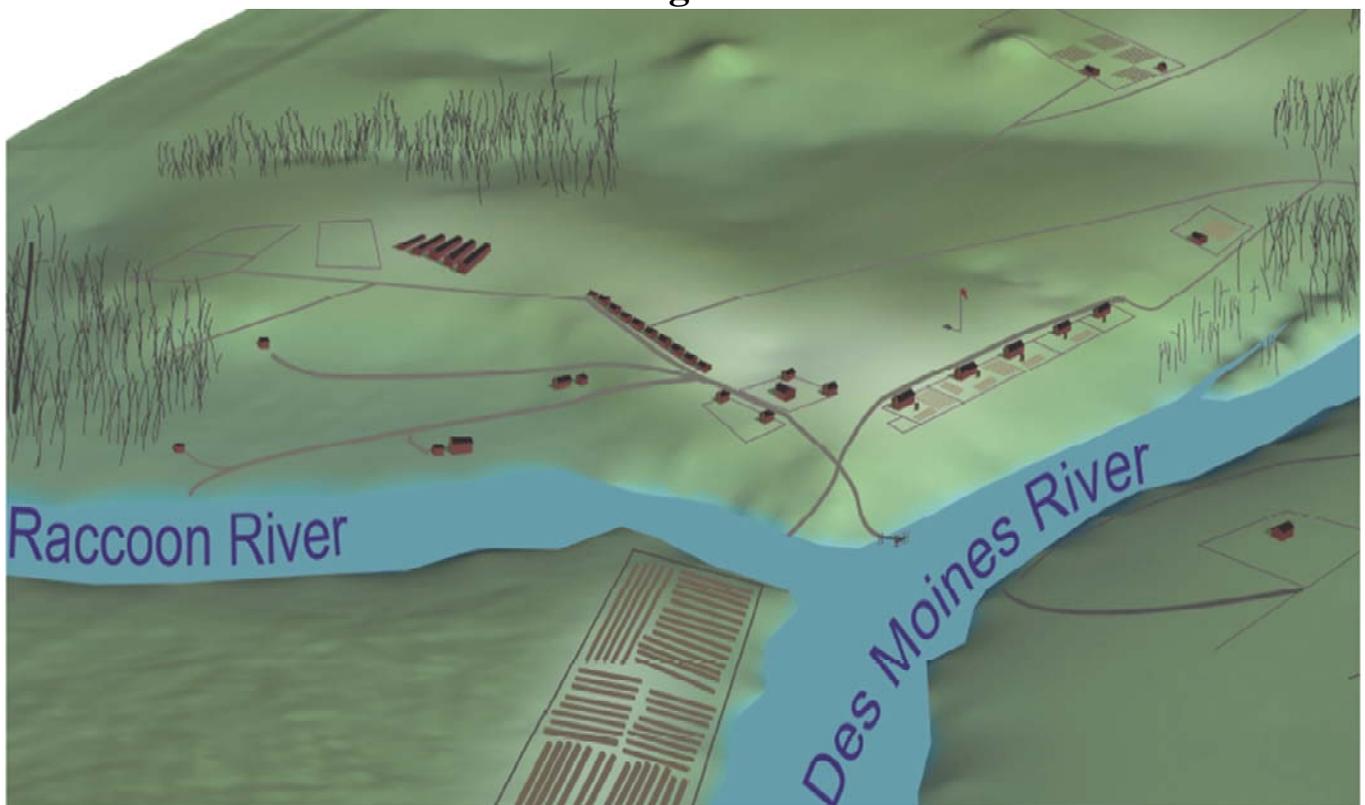
Foundation of headquarters chimney; fort-era privy excavation

The headquarters of Fort Des Moines (1843-1846) were excavated here, including two chimney foundations, a buried safe-keeping box, and a privy latrine (Whittaker and Peterson 2009). Two side-by-side hearths suggest the headquarters building was a larger structure than is shown on the one surviving map of the fort, probably more than 40 feet wide.

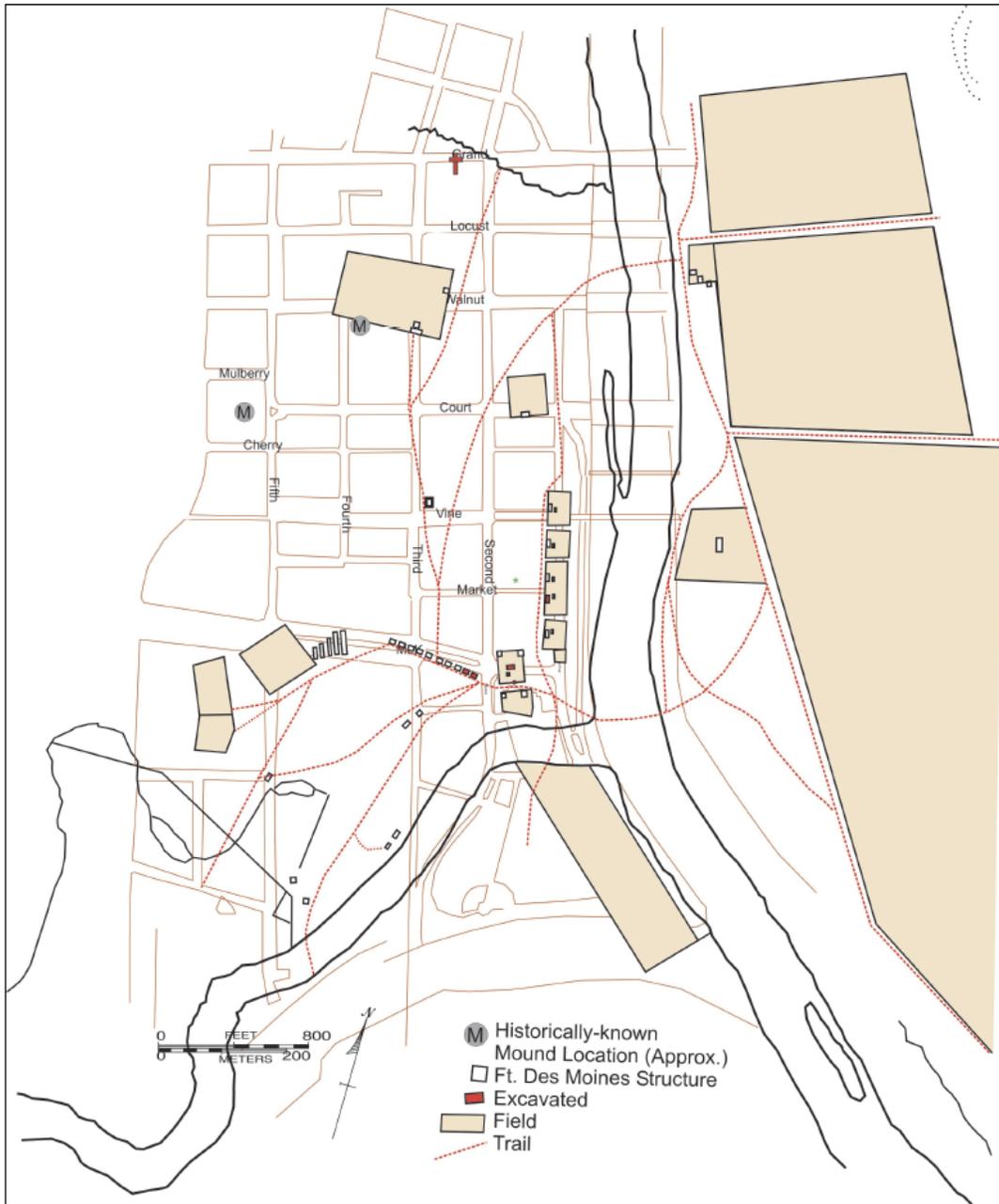
A wooden box in the center of the headquarters floor contained mainly floor sweepings: lots of ash, food waste, trade beads and personal items, including a military button, Indian trade beads, and pipe fragments. Hidden floor boxes are known from other forts, they probably held a lock box with money, annuities, and other valuables.

The latrine reveals that during the fort's occupation and early town, people ate beef, pork, and fish; seed remains include brassica (mustard family), coffee, melon, garden bean, peach, and grape seeds. Strangely no evidence of corn or other common grains were found.

9. Raccoon Point and 10. Log Cabin



Reconstruction of Fort Des Moines, 1845.



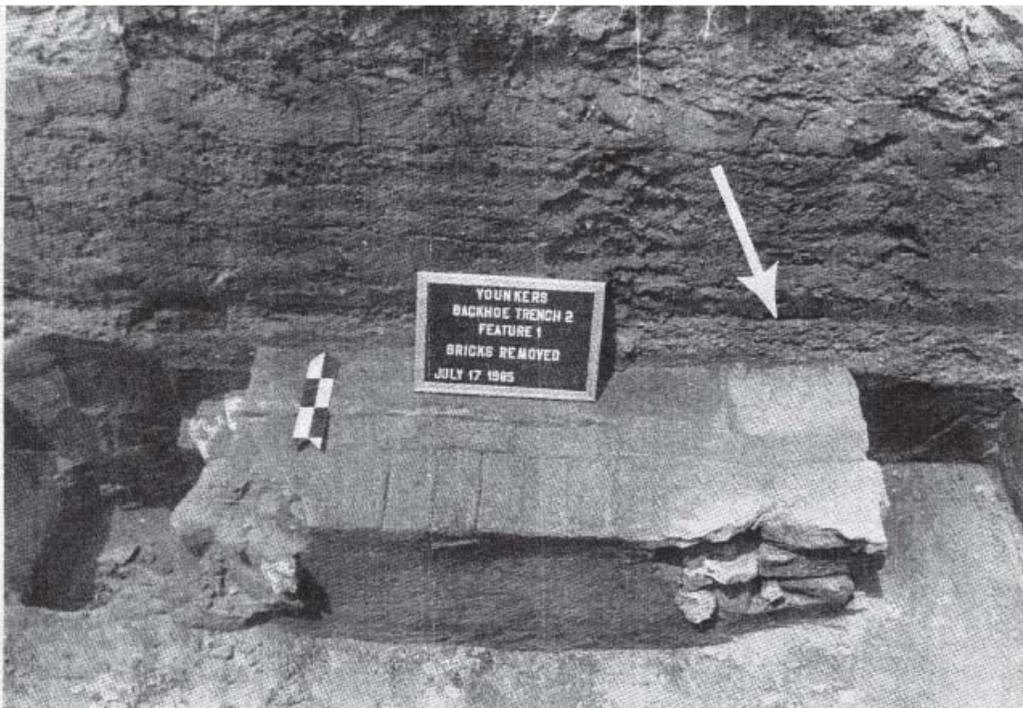
Location of fort features, from 1840s Army map and excavations, superimposed on modern street grid of Des Moines.

The area around the foot of the MLK bridge was once a prominent point overlooking the juncture of the Raccoon and Des Moines Rivers; this point was occupied by Indians and Fort Des Moines. The 1840s log cabin, an import from Washington County, stands just north of the old mouth of the Raccoon River. The river was shifted south and the old channel filled in in the early 1900s. Fragments of an 19th century railroad roundhouse and turntable were excavated here in 2006, just north of the cabin.

11. Officer's Quarters



An officer's quarter north of Elm Street, now the east end of the Brown-Camp condo building.



Fort-era hearth excavated by Brice, Petrides and Associates (1985). Just south of Market Street and west of SW 1st Street, probably from the second officer's quarters. Arrow points to what they felt was the top of an alluvial gravel. It is now believed that this gravel is a fill episode.



Foundation 2 ft below the top of 1st Street, south of Vine Street. This was interpreted as a corner footing of a building or possible fragment of a hearth foundation of a fort-era building. It matches up very well with the location of an officer's quarters outbuilding on the projected map of Fort Des Moines.

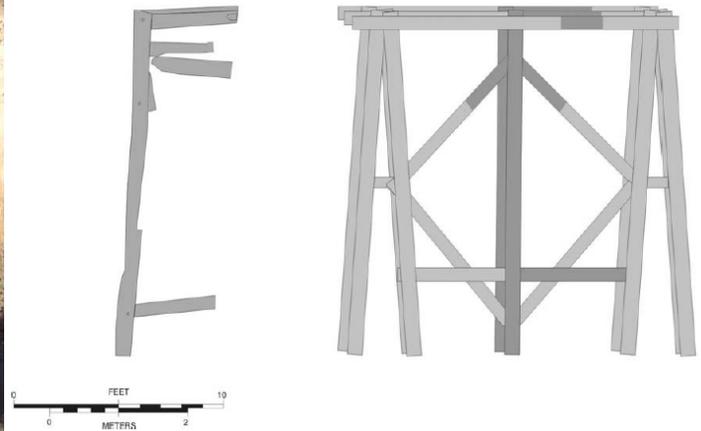
12. Oneota and Woodland Indian Site



Small amounts of prehistoric material were found in a trench south of Vine, that probably relates to the prehistoric site at the Vine Lofts Apartments.

Prior to the construction of the Vine Lofts apartments, excavations found artifacts of a Middle Woodland and Late Prehistoric Oneota habitation. The occupation was badly jumbled and no intact features were observed, but this site is another indication of the long occupation of Des Moines.

13. Buried bridge



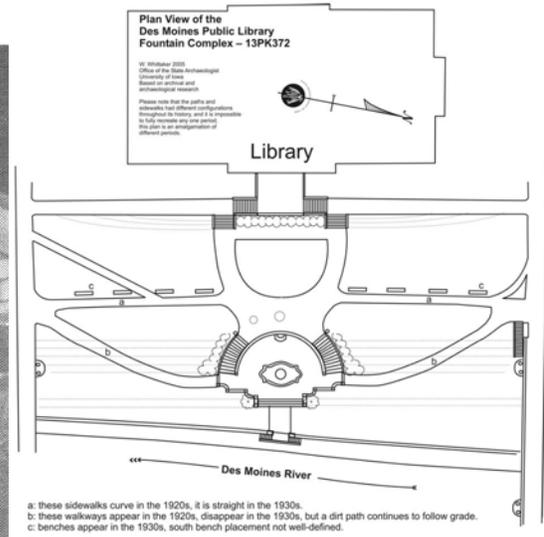
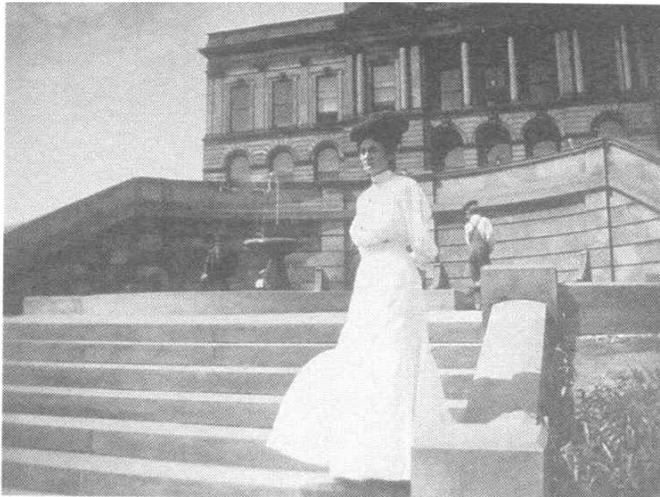
At the bottom of this trench, the timbers of an 1866 wooden bridge were found.

The timbers of the old Walnut Street Bridge (1866-1891) were found nearly 20 feet below the levee here prior to construction of a new sewer line. They were still solid. The Walnut Street Bridge was commissioned by a committee headed by Colonel S. F. Spofford. His interest in this bridge being built was to encourage residents of Des Moines to cross the river to frequent his business, the Desmoine House, where “one can buy liquor, cigars, and tobacco as well as stay for a night or two” (Henning and Beam 2003:7). The bridge was built in 1866 by the Clinton Street Bridge Company as a Howe wood truss bridge (Henning and Beam 2003). This wood type design was common on early railroads and is commonly found in covered bridges in

several states. Below is an account published by George Mills (1991:40–41) which discusses the collapse of the Walnut Street Bridge in 1869:

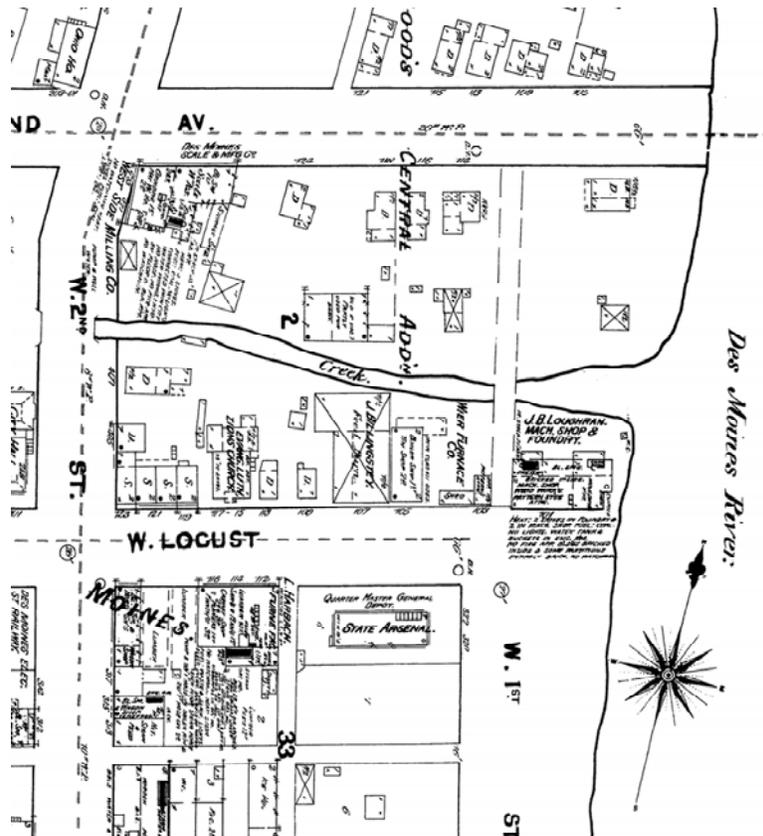
A drove of 200 horses clumped along unpaved Walnut Street in downtown Des Moines toward the Des Moines River...The horses belonged to A. H. Cummings of Des Moines. He had driven the animals up from Texas. He would be selling them to farmers...The horses had been in a pasture in the south side of town, Cummings decided to take them to a pasture on the east side. He was warned to divide the drove before crossing the bridge. He paid no attention. ...The bridge began to sway. A loud crackling of wood was heard. Supporting timbers broke like match sticks. The whole east span gave way. Panic-stricken horses scrambled wildly to keep from falling. They had no chance. A “great entangled” mass of horse flesh spilled into the flood-swollen river.

14. Library Fountain



A large fountain graced this area in 1905, until it was demolished in the 1950s. The font was excavated in 2005 and is now part of the renovated World Food Prize exterior. (Whittaker and Nagel 2010).

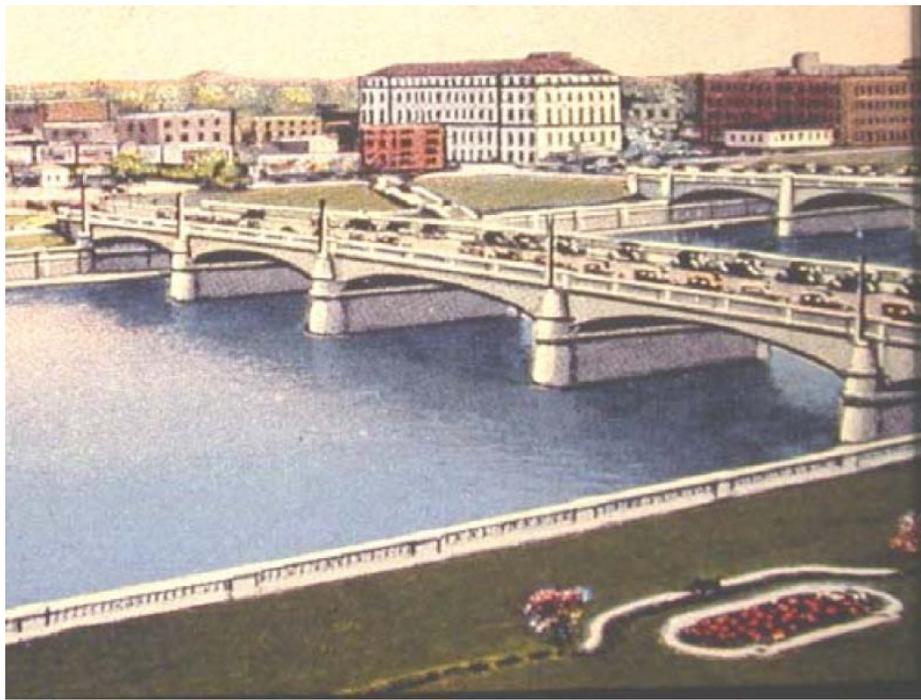
15. Bird's Run Outlet



Bird's Run is still there, but it is completely encased in brick and concrete below ground.

An early landmark, Bird's Run was a creek that meandered across downtown. Today it is completely encased in brick and concrete, and it runs underneath the old YMCA. Until 2006 it entered the Des Moines River via a hidden pipe, now it leads to a large sewer line that extends to the Des Moines Wastewater plant.

16. Coliseum Fountain



A small fountain was built in front of the old Coliseum, it was excavated in 2005. It was filled in after the Coliseum burned in 1949 (Whittaker and Nagel 2010).

17. Bird's Run Indian Site



Excavations in 2006 encountered Woodland and Oneota Indian remains in this small park, which overlooked the mouth of the since-buried Bird's Run Creek. The Late Prehistoric Oneota occupation dates to ca. A.D. 1700. Only a small portion of the site was excavated, but there appears to be a lot of disturbance from later construction. One prehistoric hearth was excavated, along with several late-19th- and early-20th-century features (Nagel 2007).

18. Des Moines Lost Cemetery



There have been accounts of an 1840s fort-era and early town cemetery in this area since at least 1874. There are conflicting accounts as to the spatial extents of the cemetery, the number of people buried in the cemetery, and the location where graves were encountered. It reportedly served the soldiers and families stationed at Fort Des Moines (Dixon 1876:33). On January 20, 1874, the Iowa State Register reported a “discovery of the grave of an unknown man underneath the side-walk in front of the city lot, Second Street. The statement was made at that time that the skeleton it contained was supposed to be that of a soldier that died here while Des Moines was a military fort” (Iowa State Register 1874). The article states that a soldier of Lieutenant Grier’s command was buried there, but his name was unknown. Two soldiers had been buried in that vicinity, one named Telhee and the other was unknown. This was supposedly the body of Telhee, but could have possibly have been the unknown soldier. The Mayor proposed the remains to be removed and reburied with military honors. In Dixon’s (1876:33) Centennial History of Polk County it is indicated that the “the soldiers’ cemetery, still visible at the time indicated [1849], extended from the Northeast corner of Third and Locust street, to a place just east of where the Engine House is located. There were but four or five graves located in it.” Dixon further mentions that the little daughter of Lieutenant Grier was buried in the cemetery, but Grier had the remains exhumed in

1862 and moved to his home in the East. This area was also the site of the 1856 German Methodist Church, which may be responsible for the early grave found. During utility improvements 2009–2011, numerous trenches were carefully excavated in this area to look for traces of the cemetery. None was found.

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