

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AT THE
MAYER HOUSE
(41 BX 326)
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS

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Center for Archaeological Research
The University of Texas at San Antonio
Archaeological Survey Report, No. 59

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INTRODUCTION

The Maximilian B. Mayer House (41 BX 326) once stood on the corner formed by King William Street, South Saint Mary's Street and Durango Boulevard (Fig. 1). It was torn down about 1967, but its foundations and other subsurface structures still remain in the ground.

The recent acquisition and renovation by the San Antonio Conservation Society of the Anton Wulff House (at 107 King William Street) included landscaping and the planting of trees over the site of the Mayer House (at 101 King William Street). Since the land is part of the King William Historical District, this alteration of the earth necessitated a preliminary investigation by an archaeologist to determine what cultural resources might be affected and to mitigate the effects of this disturbance on any such cultural resources.

The San Antonio Conservation Society entered into a contract with the Center for Archaeological Research, The University of Texas at San Antonio, to conduct these archaeological investigations. The results of the investigations are presented here.

All field work was conducted under the supervision of Dr. Thomas R. Hester, Director of the Center, and Mr. Jack D. Eaton, Assistant Director. The field work was done by James E. Ivey, assisted by Waynne Cox.

PURPOSE OF THE INVESTIGATION

Since the landscaping would involve little earthmoving, our major concern was to locate as precisely as possible any surviving foundation traces of the Mayer House. This was done to permit the planting of trees on the lot without endangering the structural remains, with an allowance for subsequent root growth.

With this end result in mind, a simple procedure of investigation was devised. A series of controlled excavations within specific units of a measured grid of three-foot squares was conducted; the excavations were carried out to a minimum depth that would permit clear delineation of the foundation structure within the unit, and no deeper. After the major elements of the structure were determined, all connecting foundation wall tops would be cleared to make visible the complete plan of the foundation in the ground. Finally, certain selected areas were excavated in depth. This last step was aided by an investigation and recording of a sectional cut across the Mayer House foundations which had been carried out in 1974, when the trench was being dug for the present enclosure wall on the Wulff House grounds adjacent to Durango Boulevard.

The earth removed from test pits and other excavations was screened through 1/4-inch hardware cloth. All artifacts found were placed in marked bags indicating their provenience. They were later washed, catalogued and labeled in the laboratory. A listing of these artifacts is presented herein.

As a supplement to the excavations, and to aid in the understanding and interpretation of the structures and artifacts found, sufficient historical research was carried out to permit the construction of a short historical background of the house, the land and its owners.

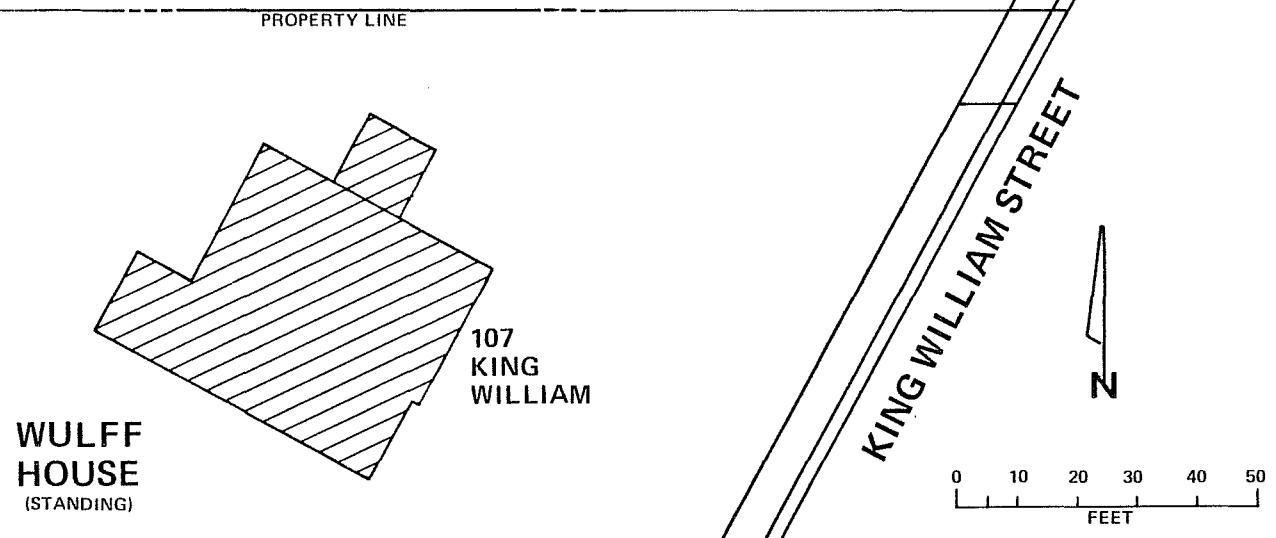
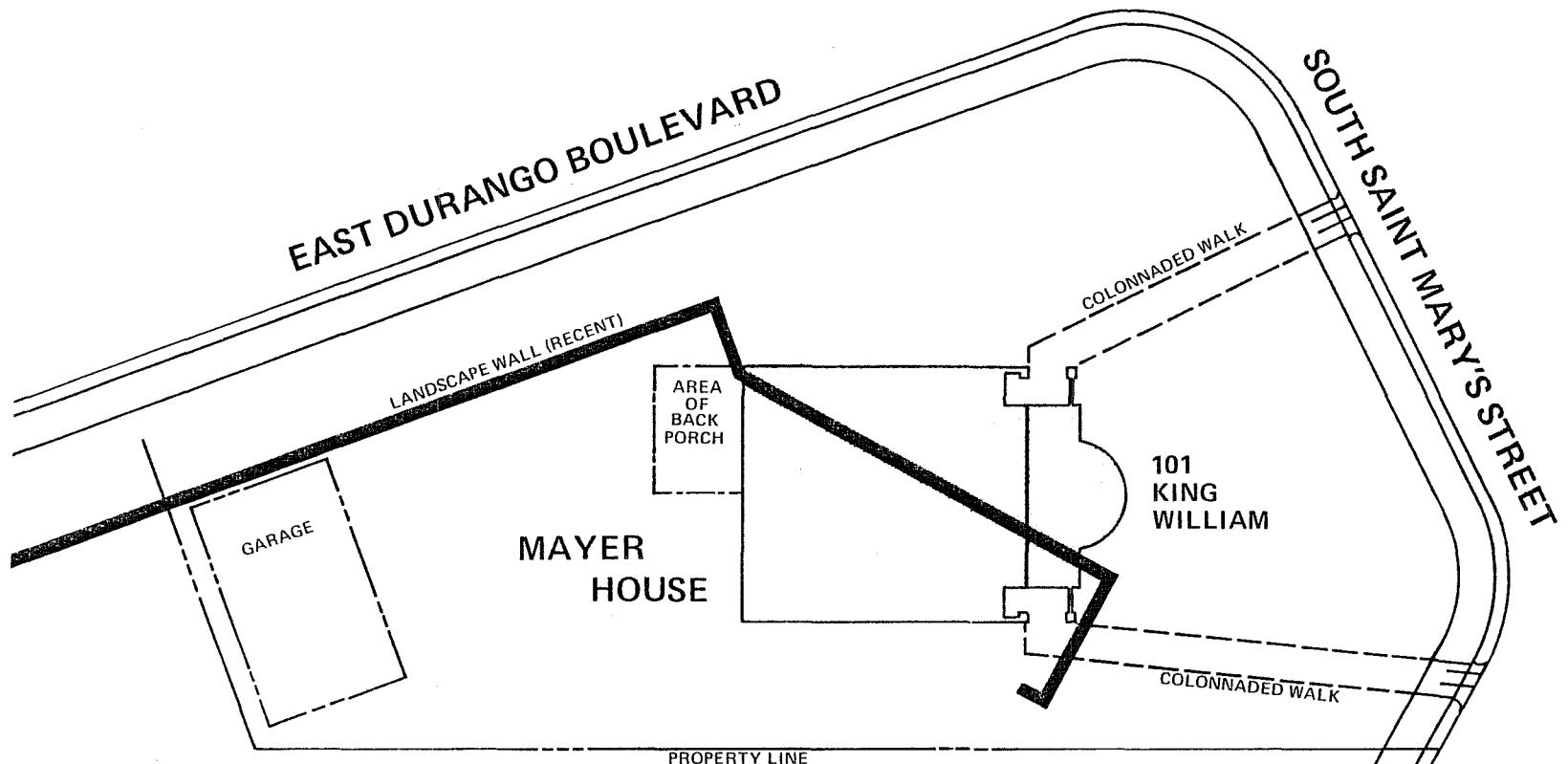


Figure 1. Location of the Mayer House.

When all the information from each of these enterprises had been assembled, certain general conclusions were possible concerning the history and description of the Mayer House. These are presented along with some recommendations for future work.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Maximilian Barnhardt Mayer was born in Darmstadt, Germany on February 9, 1861 (Chabot 1937:209). He came to the United States in 1877 at the age of 16, and lived for brief periods in New York City and in Macon, Georgia. He moved to San Antonio in 1878 (*San Antonio Express* 1921). From 1878 until 1896 Mayer worked in merchandising and manufacturing, eventually becoming co-owner of the firm of Mayer and Adler, with his business partner, Monroe Adler (BCDR 155:120).

With the purchase in August 1896 of the entire stock and all fixtures of the Horner Saloon, located at 324 West Commerce Street (BCDR 158:110), Mayer entered the liquor business. He continued in this business until his death on January 2, 1921, after a long illness (*San Antonio Express* 1921).

Mayer married Maria Helene Wulff, the fifth child of Anton Frederick Wulff, in December 1885 (Chabot 1937:209; BCMR I:129, #8288). Anton Wulff died in July 1894, leaving his wife as executrix of his estate (Chabot 1937:109; Clark 1974: 6,8). On February 2, 1902, Helene Wulff Mayer bought lot A-1, New City Block 894, from her father's estate. The lot was between her father's house and the north corner of the block.

This land was originally part of the *Labor de Abajo* of Mission San Antonio de Valero. With the secularization of the mission in 1793, the lot passed, with the surrounding land, to Pedro Huisar, surveyor for the secularization. By 1836 much of the property on King William Street north of Turner Street was the property of John Groesbeck (Clark 1974:5).

Groesbeck's widow sold five lots of New City Block 894 to Anton Wulff on November 9, 1868. Wulff built a house on lot 2.

The purchase by the Mayers of lot 1 was finalized in February 1904 (BCDR 221: 188). Soon thereafter construction began on a large house on the lot (*San Antonio Express* 1950). It was designed and built by Harvey L. Page, a local architect, featuring a colonnaded facade and walks to King William and Saint Mary's Streets (Ebers and Wurtz 1907:96). The house was built of brick (Fig. 2), and had a "living room, reception room, library, dining room, breakfast room, kitchen, butler's pantry and maid's room on the first floor, and five bedrooms, glassed-in sleeping porch, two baths, and room for storing clothing on the second floor" (*San Antonio Express* 1950).

Upon Max Mayer's death on January 2, 1921, his estate passed to his wife, Helene, and the house remained her property until her death in March 1932 (*San Antonio Express* 1921; BCPR #11080; BCPR #20283). In May and June of 1950 the house was purchased from her heirs by Kathryn and F. G. Antonio, who intended to convert it to an apartment house (BCDR 2879:101,109,112; 2911:91; *San Antonio Express* 1950). The Antonios soon sold the house to Roy Akers and his wife, along with the Wulff House and lot, and several surrounding lots (BCDR 3493:18). The two

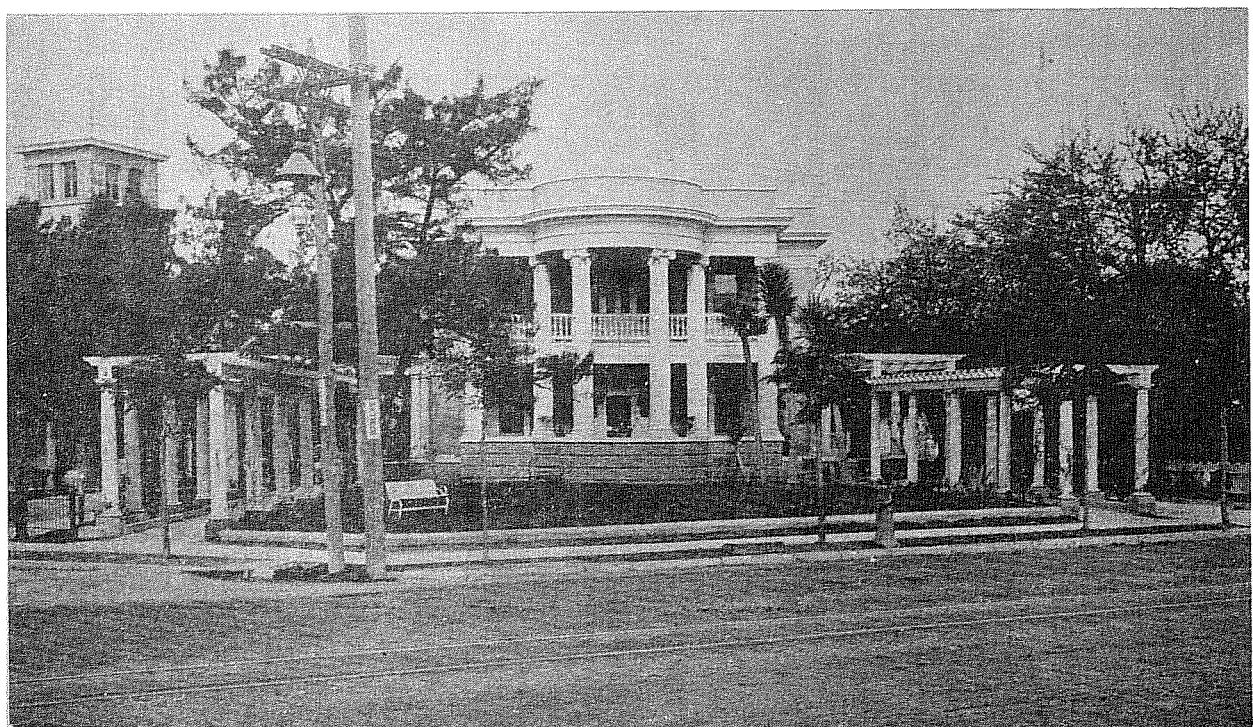


Figure 2. *The Mayer House in 1907.* Photo taken soon after its construction.

houses were eventually sold to Local #14 of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America (BCDR 5263:285, 10 November 1964). Throughout this period the Mayer House was apparently unoccupied and deteriorating. In 1967, with the initiation of construction for Hemisfair, the UBCJ sold part of the Mayer House lot to the city for the construction of Durango Boulevard (BCDR 5827:13). Apparently it was at this time that the Mayer House was torn down and the lot paved for tourist parking. Finally, in June 1974, the UBCJ sold the Wulff House and surrounding land, including the Mayer lot, to the San Antonio Conservation Society (BCDR 7357:981).

PREVIOUS ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORK

During August 1974, John W. Clark carried out a series of excavations in the immediate area of the Wulff House (Clark 1974). His report, although dealing primarily with the history and archaeology of the Wulff House itself, contains important information about the early history of the Mayer lot, and some idea of what sort of stratigraphy to expect in the area.

In December 1974, Clark and Ivey visited the Wulff House briefly to observe the reconstruction work being carried out. They noticed that excavations were being done for the construction of the wall which was to enclose the Wulff House grounds. Clark, aware that the Mayer House had been in this area (see Clark 1974:6), examined the excavated ditch and found traces of a brick foundation. On December 16, Ivey returned to the site, and with the assistance of Lee Sappington prepared a section drawing of the south wall of the trench throughout its length. Later visits supplied further information about the foundations, and these were noted on a measured sketch-plan of the trench and building foundations (Figs. 3 and 4).

THE EXCAVATIONS

The field crew, consisting of James Ivey assisted by Waynne Cox, began work on the Mayer House site on March 28, 1977. Work continued through April 1. A rough estimate of the house plan was laid out on the ground with nails and flagging tape, based on the Sanborn map of this area (Sanborn 4:348) and a point selected as our coordinate grid datum. The datum point was selected so that the grid square of which it formed the southeast corner would center on the northeast corner of the Mayer House. Measurement of a section of visible foundation wall indicated that the house was oriented to magnetic north. The grid forming the basis of excavated squares was therefore laid out with this orientation. Grid squares were 3 x 3 ft, the foot being selected as the basic unit of measurement since it was likely that the house had been built using that unit. The use of foot-units for excavation allowed most major structural features to occur within units rather than across unit lines.

During the course of these excavations 13 measured grid units were excavated to an average depth of 2-1/2 inches to the top of undisturbed soil. With the completion of unit 13, it was felt that all the major details of the foundation plan were located, and the tops of the foundation walls were cleared of earth along their entire lengths. An additional 4-inch-wide area was cleared along the inner and outer faces of these walls to locate any crosswalls. Soil from units 1-4 was screened, but few artifacts were found. It soon became apparent

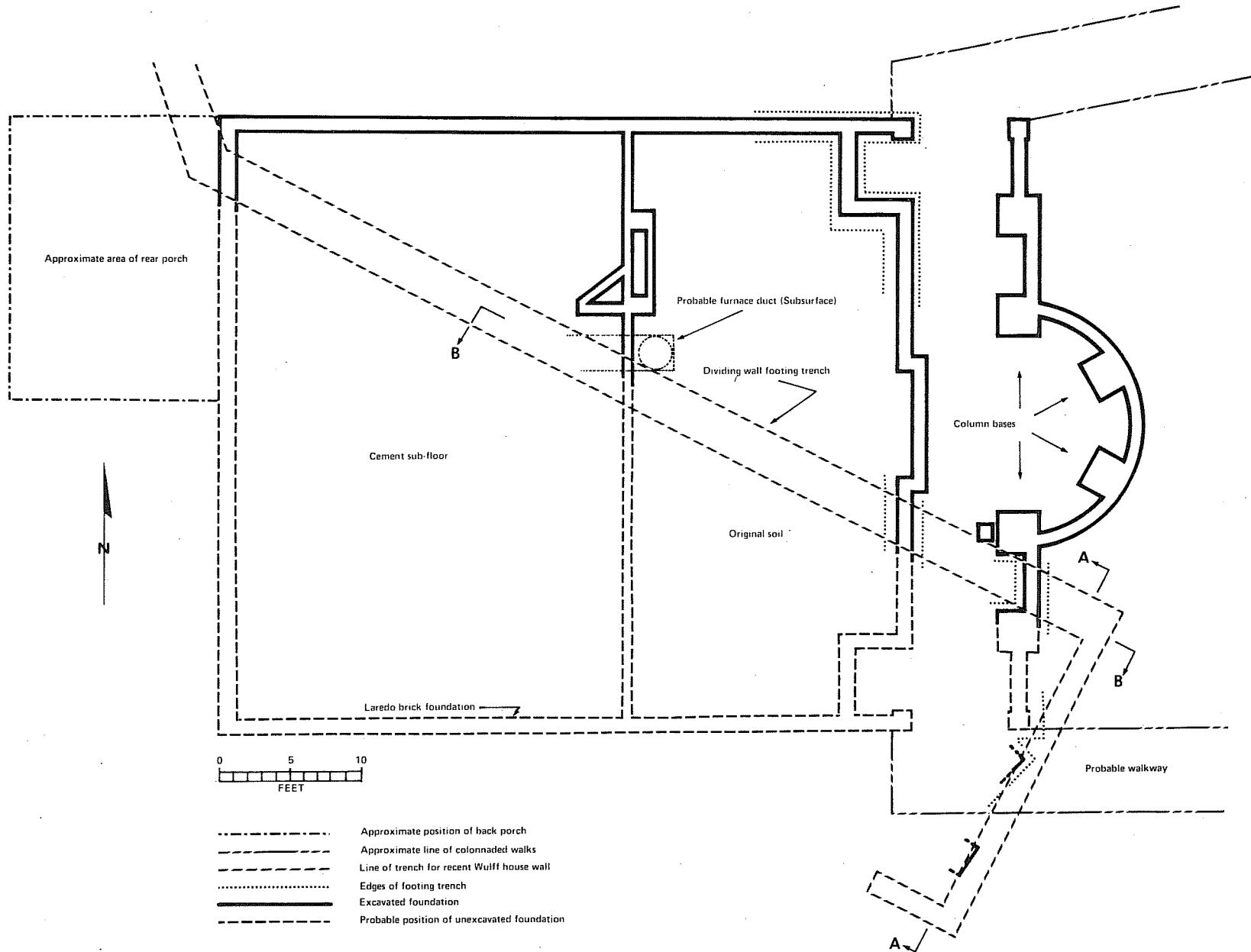


Figure 3. Plan of the Mayer House Foundations.

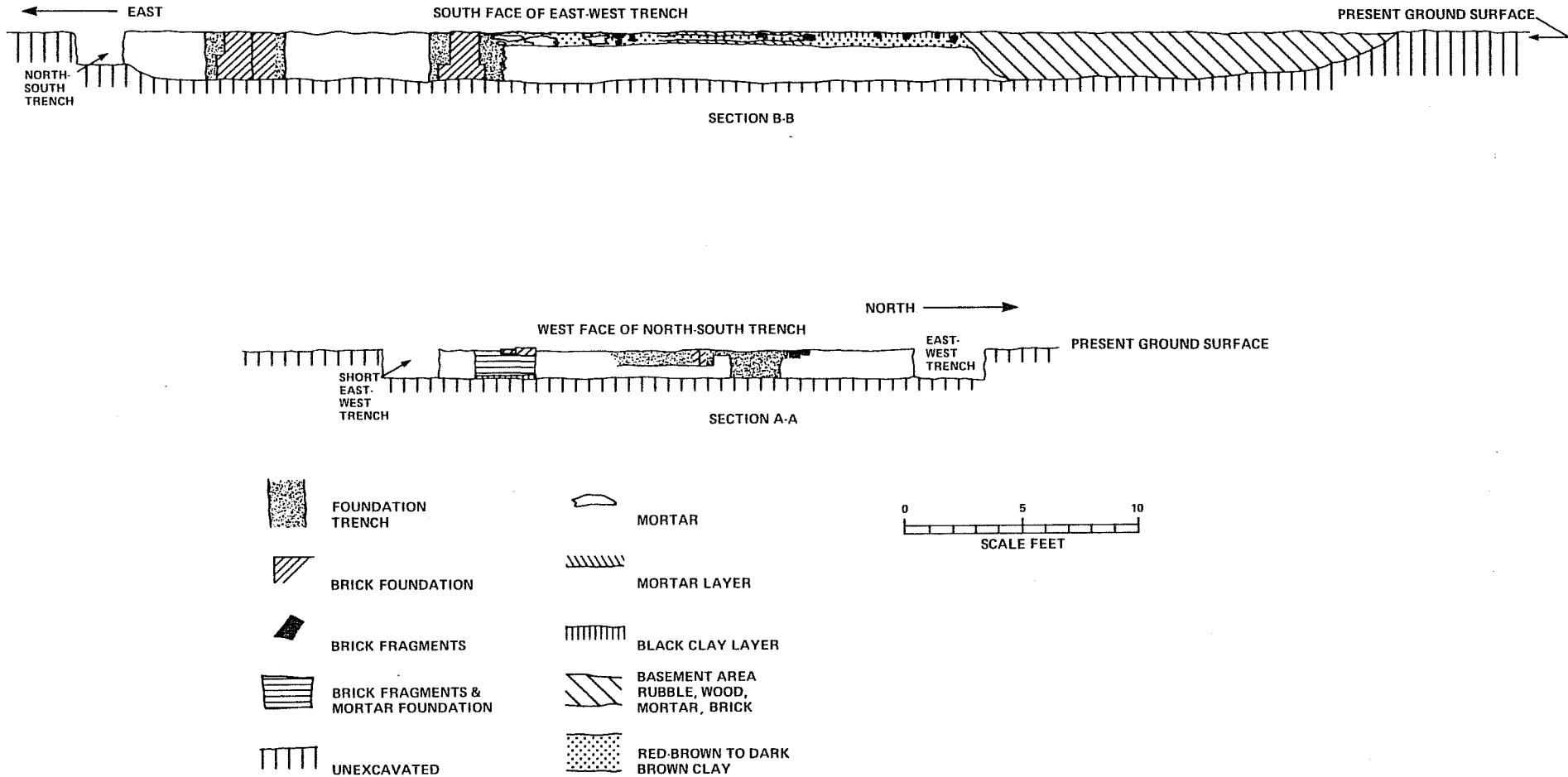


Figure 4. Section Drawings of Landscape Wall Trench.

that the top 1-2 inches of soil was recent fill, and below was undisturbed. The underlying surface of the undisturbed earth showed numerous signs of having been scraped by heavy earth-moving machinery, and in many places bricks of the foundation were crushed and broken by the same machinery having moved across them. In several places the gouged scars left by the teeth of a backhoe bucket or bulldozer blade were visible on the brick. This implied that the undisturbed surface to which we excavated most of our units was an artificial surface, and that several inches of superposed earth are gone. These several inches include the original surface through which the foundation trenches were dug, together with all their artifacts telling of those past events which occurred here before the construction of the Mayer House. Only the Mayer House foundations, their foundation trenches, and some deep structural details remain.

The clearing of the foundation wall tops permitted a clear view of the plan of the house foundation (Fig. 3). Footing trench traces were visible along most wall margins, averaging 6 inches in width. The undisturbed earth into which the foundation trenches were dug was a hard dark brown clay, while the trenches themselves were filled with chunks of this clay mixed with fragments of mortar and brick, the mixture being considerably grayer. All foundation walls were consistently 13 inches wide. It is notable that the bricklayers who built the house obviously took a great deal of care in the construction.

While clearing the foundation wall tops, a crosswall was found approximately midway along the length of the northern wall. This crosswall was 8 inches wide rather than 13 inches. As we followed it southward, a distinct difference was noted in the appearance of the earth on the west side of the wall. On the east the familiar dark brown clay appeared, while on the west, a great quantity of broken brick, concrete, metal fragments, glass, plaster, wood and other debris was uncovered. A difference was noted in the mortaring of the brick where it was visible in the foundation. On the west face the mortar was scraped after the brick was put in place, while on the east it was squeezed out in irregular ridges, as would be expected of a wall built in a trench with no major need for esthetic appearance. The implication was, of course, that the west half of the foundations enclosed a cellar, filled with rubble from the demolition of the house. It was determined that an excavation in depth was needed to verify this.

The clearing of the 8-inch wall foundation up to the wall surrounding the Wulff House soon provided us with an appropriate location for such an excavation. Near this new wall appeared a complex of structural features which in-depth investigation might help to identify, while at the same time answering the question of whether a cellar was present. The appearance of this complex can best be seen in the isometric drawing of Fig. 5. It consists of a rectangular feature on the east side of the 8-inch wall, adjacent to a triangular feature on the west. Both are hollow, the rectangular feature to a depth of 2 ft 8 in, the triangle to 1 ft 4 in. Excavation south of the triangular projection uncovered a smooth concrete floor at 2 ft 7 in. Also found were an edge to this floor and a deeper area with a floor at 3 ft 11 in. Examination showed that the deeper area was a channel in the floor of the cellar for a heating duct, which passed through the 8-inch wall and joined a circular duct about 30 inches in diameter. This circular duct originally ran vertically up into the house structure. Most of the joint box was still in place.

Certain features appearing in the cross-section of the ditch across the foundation deserve note. These include the small rectangular objects of brick and

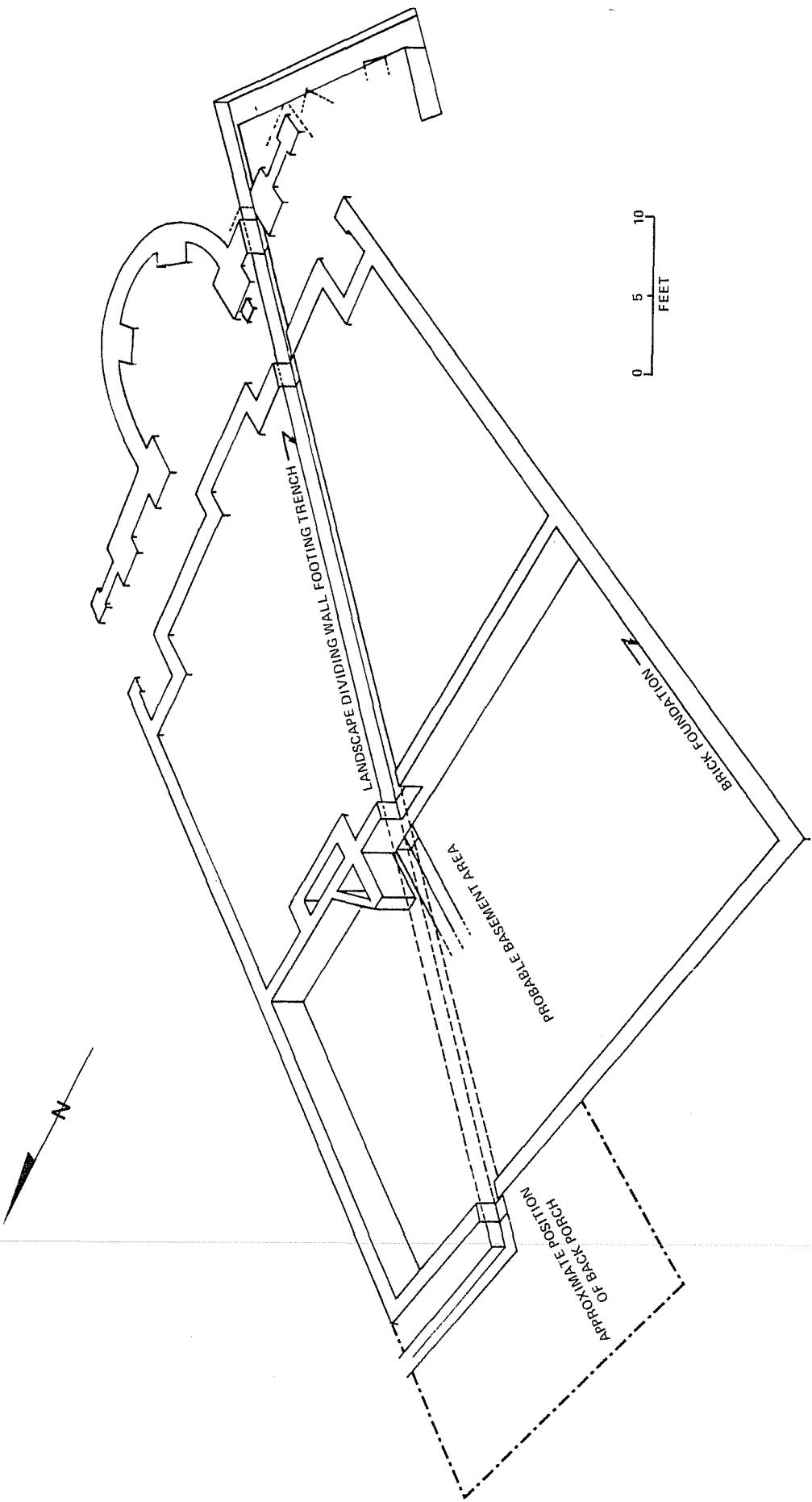


Figure 5. An Isometric Drawing of the Mayer House Foundations.

concrete appearing at the southeast corner of the house. They are the probable remains of the bases of columns lining the walk leading from the southern front porch stairs to the sidewalk along King William Street.

THE ARTIFACTS

The artifacts recovered during excavations at the Mayer House are listed below by category and quantity. Most date from the 20th century (Fig. 6). A few, however, need to be discussed briefly.

Under "Ceramics/Vessels," the 89 sherds of lead-glazed, red paste hand-painted pottery were all found together, lying on the present surface of the ground, and all from the same vessel. The 44 sherds of the flower pot are also from a single vessel. Both were apparently dropped on the site since 1974.

Under "Ceramics/Porcelain," several of the tiles have the maker's mark "A. E. Title Co." on the underside.

Under "Metal," the three square nails found are probably random debris which found its way into the Mayer House construction trenches while the house was being built.

In general, the artifacts are entirely consistent with a construction date after 1900. Since one of the primary purposes of artifact analysis from historical sites is to aid in dating the site, and since the chronology of this site is already known, no further analysis is required.

Ceramics

Vessels

Orange lead-glazed, red paste	1
Lead-glazed, red paste, hand decorated	89
Unglazed, red paste	44
White paste, clear glaze	1

Brick

Yellow Laredo brick	29
Red brick tile (Fig. 6,g)	11

Sewer pipe

Green lead-glazed	3
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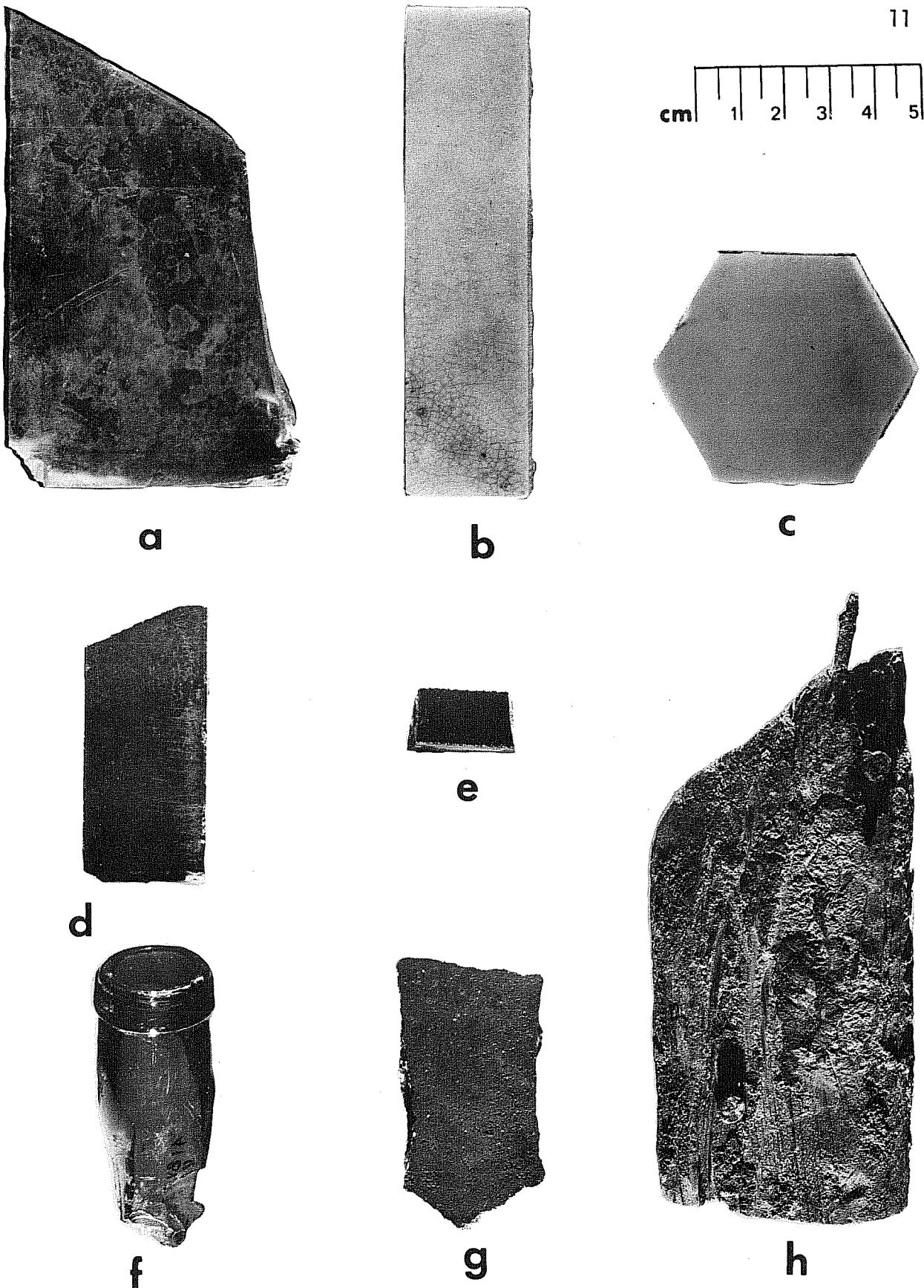


Figure 6. Selected Artifacts. a, fragment of thick plate glass with beveled edges, letters KY on reverse in gold leaf, over-painted in red; b, white glazed porcelain tile; c, white unglazed porcelain tile, hexagonal; d, red glazed porcelain tile; e, black glazed porcelain tile fragment; f, neck and lip of a green wine bottle; g, red brick tile; h, fragment of white-painted wood molding.

Porcelain

Tile, unglazed

On concrete base:

dark blue (1" x 3" x 1/2") and white (1" x 1" x 1/2")	1
dark blue (3" x 3" x 1/2") and white (1" x 1" x 1/2")	2
dark blue (1" x 1" x 1/2") and white (1" x 1" x 1/2")	2
white hexagonal (1-1/8" per face x 1/2")	1
white (1" x 1" x 1/2")	1
Fragments dark blue (3" x 1" x 1/2")	1
Fragments dark blue (3" x 3" x 1/2")	1
Fragments white	5
White hexagonal (1-1/8" per face x 1/2") (Fig. 6,c)	12
Dark blue (3" x 3" x 1/4")	1

Tile, glazed

White (4-3/16" x 1-1/16" x 1/2") (Fig. 6,b)	2
Red (4-3/16" x 1-1/16" x 1/2") (Fig. 6,d)	4
Black (? x 1/2" x 1/2") (Fig. 6,e)	1
Electrical insulator	1
Electrical insulator, tubular	8

Aggregates

Concrete

Red concrete tiling	7
Aquamarine-painted concrete	2
Pale blue-painted concrete	2
Plain concrete	4

Plaster

Beige-painted plaster over wire mesh

4

Glass

Flat

Clear

6

Green-tinted

2

Thick, beveled edges (Fig. 6,a)

1

Vessel

Bottle

clear

39

dark green (Fig. 6,f)

1

light green (Coca-Cola)

1

light green (Dr. Pepper)

1

Tumbler

clear

15

Metal

Copper wire w/black woven insulation

3

Copper wire w/black rubber insulation

1

Copper wire w/blue rubber insulation

1

Lead chunk

1

Lead bullet (22 cal.)

1

Copper-jacketed bullet (30 cal.)

1

Iron

Door hinge

1

Door latch

1

<i>Stove hinge</i>	1
<i>Stove or furnace damper (9" dia.)</i>	1
<i>Galvanized sheet-metal</i>	2
<i>Automobile water-hose clamp</i>	1
<i>Unidentified iron sheet-metal fragments</i>	29
<i>Wire</i>	4
<i>Wire nails</i>	34
<i>Square nails</i>	3
<i>Wood</i>	
<i>White-painted molding (Fig. 6,h)</i>	1
<i>Green painted</i>	1
<i>Black-painted fiberboard molding</i>	3
<i>Unpainted</i>	16
<i>Miscellaneous</i>	
<i>Plastic bag</i>	9
<i>Plastic button, spherical</i>	1
<i>Asphalt shingle?</i>	1
<i>Slag chunk</i>	1
<i>Plant seed (bright red, unidentified)</i>	1
<i>Chert</i>	
<i>Flake</i>	1
<i>Cobble</i>	1

CONCLUSIONS

The Mayer House was a substantial, well-built brick structure. A virtually complete ground plan in the form of foundation walls is still present in the earth. A cellar approximately 2-1/2 feet deep is contained within the entire western half of the foundation and is still filled with structural debris from the house.

The purpose of the rectangle-and-triangle structural complex can only be hypothesized. It may be part of the base of a fireplace on the first floor above, or perhaps the support for some sort of cellar stairs, or something associated with the furnace.

Several photographs of the house as it once stood are known to exist. The house, then, is very well documented in location, appearance, ownership and history. Very little additional work should be necessary if any future modification of the area is required, and then only if some structural traces other than those shown on the plan are encountered. This may occur on the south side of the Wulff House wall, in the present San Antonio Conservation Society parking lot, where the southwestern quarter of the Mayer House foundation is estimated to lie. There may be, for example, a duplication of the rectangle-and-triangle structure in a symmetrical position on this side of the house. The house plan appears fully symmetrical in all other features so far examined, so this is a fairly good possibility.

Even though the Mayer House is entirely 20th century in origin and life span, it was part of the King William District for about 63 years. It was undoubtedly an impressive building and can be remembered as part of the complex of architectural flavors from many times and places which distinguishes the King William District.

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