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# Exploring Turkey River Mounds

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## Exploring Turkey River Mounds

In the spring of 1885, a hardy surveyor by the name of Theodore Lewis mapped Indian mounds near Guttenberg, Iowa. An account of the significant Lewis-Hill search for Iowa antiquities is told by Dr. Charles R. Keyes in the May 1930 issue of *THE PALIMPSEST*.

As Lewis tramped across a great ridge north of the Turkey River, he encountered many mounds and saw a most spectacular view. A high, narrow, limestone ridge extends one full mile along the Mississippi River and forces the Turkey River to sweep around it. The ridge towers 200 feet above the two rivers and is rimmed with jagged, precipitous cliffs. On this vantage point one can see for miles across rugged bluffs and water, a view among the most beautiful in Iowa. Lewis spent two days mapping 45 mounds. Some were great circular shaped mounds 40 to 50 feet in diameter and four feet high. Others were long or linear mounds 120 feet in length. Some combined a row of round mounds with an earthwork forming a chain. This was a rare type. Near the cliff edge overlooking the Mississippi, he discovered an effigy mound built in the outline of a giant animal with a long tail.

Even before Lewis visited the site, vandals looking for relics had dug into a number of the mounds, and as time went on other mounds were disturbed and partially destroyed. In an effort to preserve this major site in the 1930's, a group of public spirited citizens from Dubuque purchased the ridge and gave it to the State of Iowa. The landowner not only cooperated but reduced his price substantially in order to make the transfer possible. The site is now officially known as the Turkey River Mound Preserve and is under the jurisdiction of the State Conservation Commission. It is protected by law which prevents digging, destroying, or disturbing of Indian sites on state property without written authorization from the State Conservation Commission. Violators of this law are subject to heavy fines. Relic hunters have destroyed much of Iowa's prehistoric heritage by their thoughtless digging.

The State Conservation Commission, lacking funds to open the park to the public, did the next best thing. It allowed the ridge to revert to a wilderness, which gave some protection to the mounds. The author's visit to the ridge during the spring of 1964 was almost 80 years to the day after the original survey. The ridge top was worth the visit in spite of the underbrush and poison ivy. The size, variety, and number of mounds clearly indicated the importance of this site in prehistoric times. The great mound is the largest now exist-

ing in Iowa. A broad, but shallow and irregular ditch encloses the great mound on three sides. Who built the mounds and ditch? For what purpose? How long ago? I decided to find out the answers.

In June 1964 a field party of ten University of Iowa students and I went to the ridge top and stayed five weeks excavating the mounds and the surrounding ditch. The first day and a half was spent clearing out underbrush. Before digging, the ground surface was carefully searched for clues about the builders of the mounds. Oftentimes sites are marked by a litter of flint chips struck off while making arrowheads and other stone tools. In some instances, just a few fragments of pottery can furnish a reasonably close identification of the cultural affiliations and time when the Indians lived at a site. However, nothing was found on the surface of the ground, not a single stone flake. The crew put in long hours digging great trenches but usually the entire day passed without finding a single artifact. Work in the large central mound proceeded slowly, the soil was so hard packed that our largest two-handed picks were in continual use. It rained almost every day. The trench bottoms often turned into a morass of mud and the farm lane to the top of the ridge became impassable. While these trenches were being dug other crew members excavated in two adjacent mounds but again nothing of interest

was found. A part of the crew began to work on a third mound. A typical entry in the author's expedition log reads:

*June 12, Friday* Made contour map of two mounds named Mound 37 and Mound 38 on Lewis map. Laid out trench across ditch adjacent to these mounds for soil profile. No chipping waste or other finds reported, and no features in this trench. . . .

Mound 37 had the remnants of a large irregular hole put down in its center. The hole had originally been dug by relic hunters more than 80 years previously since Lewis noted its occurrence on his 1885 map. It seemed that enough of the mound was left so that it would repay excavation.

*June 14, Monday* Rainy morning. Mound 37. Friday's excavation square shifted because rock feature extended in all directions beyond it. Limit of feature to be exposed first and then a string grid will be used for mapping. Four artifacts found in mound fill and positions noted; including side-notched arrowhead, hafted scraper, side scraper, and worked bone tube made from a human leg bone (tibia?). . . . Stones lay at different levels, are irregularly placed and are difficult to clean off and expose in position. It is slow work. Reddish burned soil mixed with brown soil. Red-burned limestone slabs present. Most rocks are unburned limestone slabs. . . .

With the finding of the rock slabs in Mound 37 luck began to change for the better. The adjacent mound also began to yield burials, rock features, and artifacts. Burials were found in the large mound as well. These finds provided encourage-

ment. The crew worked hard for the remainder of the month with the exception of one undergraduate student—who left without giving advance notice, to take a job digging sewers in Cedar Rapids.

The rest of the students ranged in field efforts from very good to excellent, and being a mature crew took responsibility well. Almost all of them were graduates of the University of Iowa 1964 class who were continuing graduate studies in various fields. They were: John Hanson, B. A., drama; Charles Ebel, B. A., history; Robert Alex, B. A., zoology; Dean Straffin, B. A., anthropology; Harry Neyens, B. A., journalism; Beryl Gillespie, B. A., anthropology; and Bert Pape, B. A., M.F.A., fine arts. The only undergraduates were Sally Patton and Charles Pyle. Marlyn and Arnold Brawner, undergraduate majors in anthropology, joined us for a week. They were a great help.

By early July most of the work was finished. On July 6 two students, Robert Alex and Dean Straffin, were left in charge of finishing the excavation of Mound 38. The remainder of the crew was shifted to Lansing in order to explore another site, the Hartley enclosure.

Two days later, Alex sent word about some new and surprising discoveries. A number of shell beads of exceptional interest had been found. Indians made the beads of marine shell from the Gulf of Mexico and traded them as far away as

Iowa. Meanwhile, Straffin, his wife, Marita, and Arnold Brawner remained at Turkey River to continue excavation and also to watch over the burials and artifacts. Word of the discoveries had become known and large numbers of visitors were coming to view the excavation.

A student and I rejoined the field crew at Turkey River at the earliest opportunity. By this time a series of burials had been uncovered. The log notes:

*July 15, Wednesday . . .* The burials in Mound 38 seem to be in separate areas. The center of the mound contained a stone alignment consisting of a double row of limestone slabs which overlay a headless skeleton. In addition a child's skull, skeleton of an adolescent, and scattered human bones were found. The only associated artifacts were 32 shell beads found in the mouth of the adolescent. Beyond this, lying S. E. of the mound center, Alex and Straffin uncovered a cluster of six skeletons in a cramped burial pit. . . .

Four of the six skeletons were also headless. Several interesting artifacts were associated with the skeletons. One headless fellow had a limestone slab on his chest. Another had a very large ceremonial blade, beautifully flaked, in place of his missing skull. A third had a copper awl, or dagger, rammed into him from above and behind. It had cut into a neck vertebra, split a rib, and protruded out the chest underneath the right clavicle (collarbone). When this man was buried the

Indians apparently left a complete spear thrower with him. No trace of wood remained, but a very large and perfect spearhead rested on his chest and beside it, partly covered by his left arm, was the perfectly fashioned stone weight originally attached to the spear thrower handle. The fourth headless skeleton may have died a violent death. A crudely fashioned projectile point appeared in the man's rib cage; the tip just barely poking out beyond the ribs as if it had been shot into him from behind. The crude appearance of this projectile point was in marked contrast to the perfect forms of the other associated artifacts found with the burials. It suggests this projectile point was made for use rather than as a grave offering. No artifacts appeared with the other two skeletons in the pit that had their skulls intact. Red ocher or hemetite (a powdered iron mineral) was scattered among the burials.

The two days, July 15 and 16, were hectic ones. They were spent in photographing burials, mapping and measuring the excavations. Fortunately, Professor Theodore Anderson of the University of Iowa sociology department arrived and he was pressed into service. The number of visitors to the mounds continued to increase. It was not uncommon to look up and see twenty visitors at the edge of the pit during the last days. This was surprising because Mr. Elmo Behrend's farm road, which led to the mounds, was barely passable for car

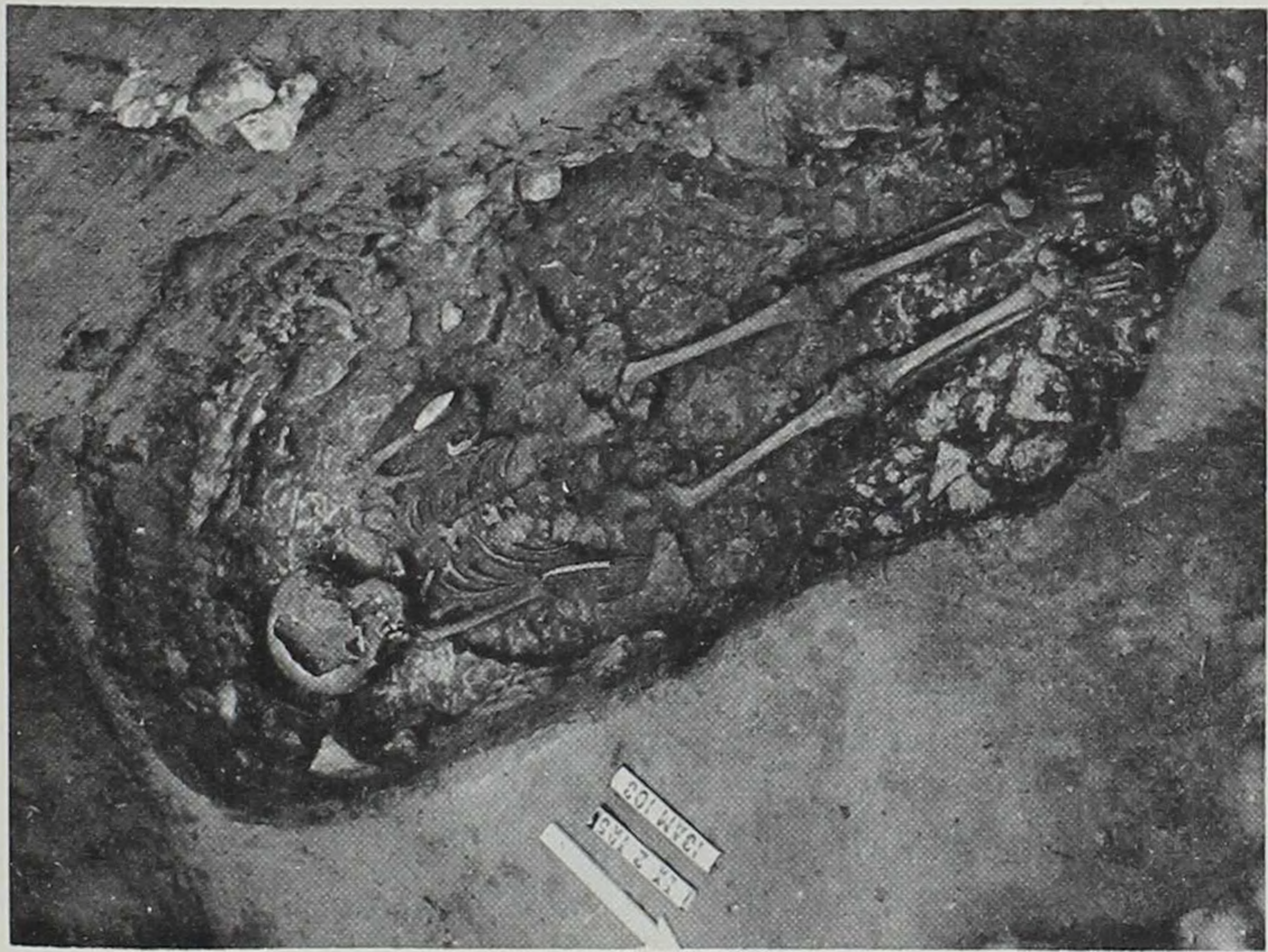


travel and this was followed by a hike across the ridge. The crew had become local celebrities.

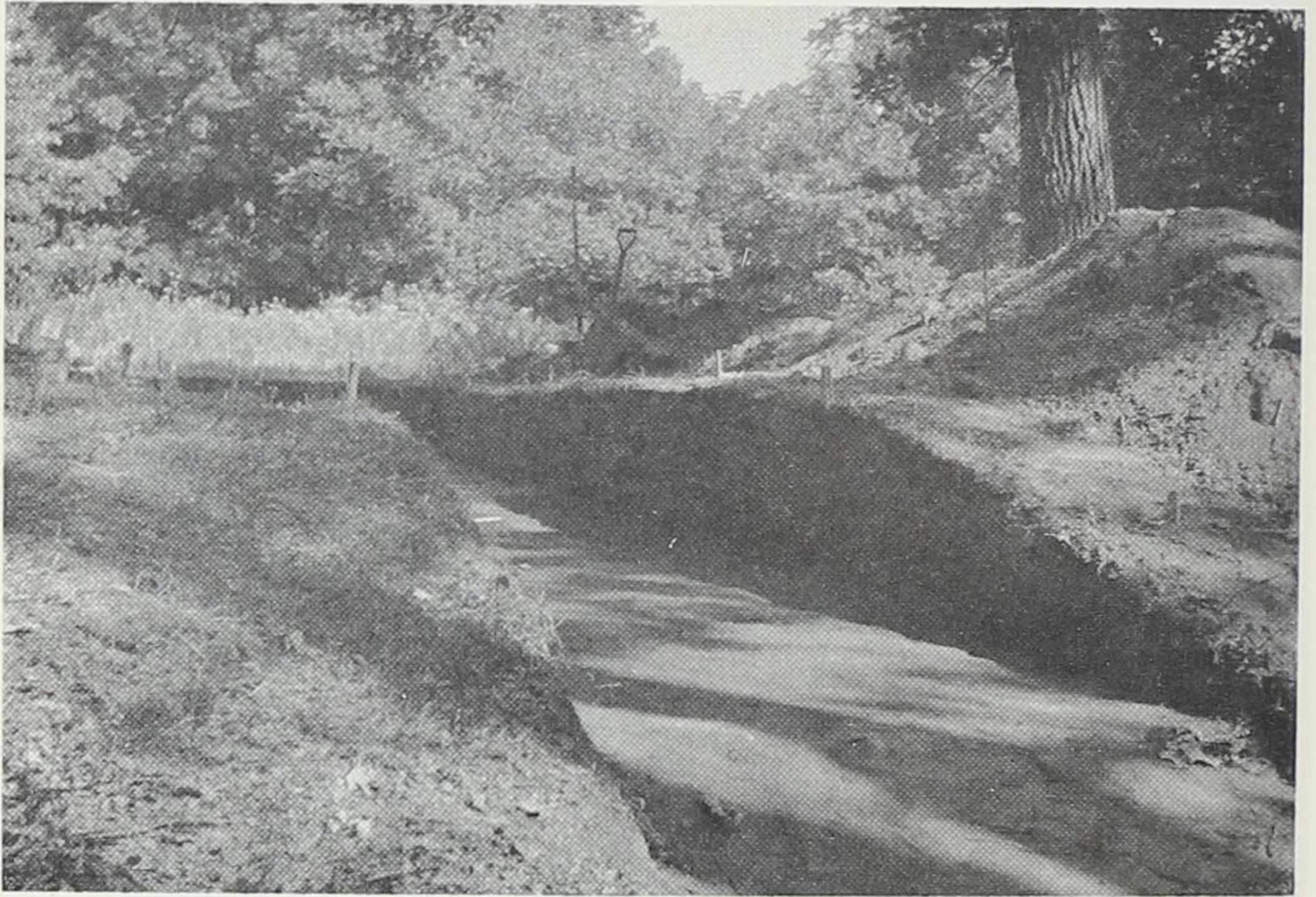
By mid-afternoon, all measurements were completed and the skeletons were carefully removed bone by bone, to be added to the permanent study collections of the University of Iowa Archeological Laboratory. It was an unexpectedly slow job because the soil which had hardened in the sun had become almost rock hard and the bones were soft and very fragile. It took three hours to carry all the equipment, specimens, tent, and personal gear to the road. Just at dusk, we left for Lansing. It had been a long day, but an interesting one, and little did anyone suspect that a major discovery at the Lansing site was to be made soon.

#### *Significance of the Turkey River Excavations*

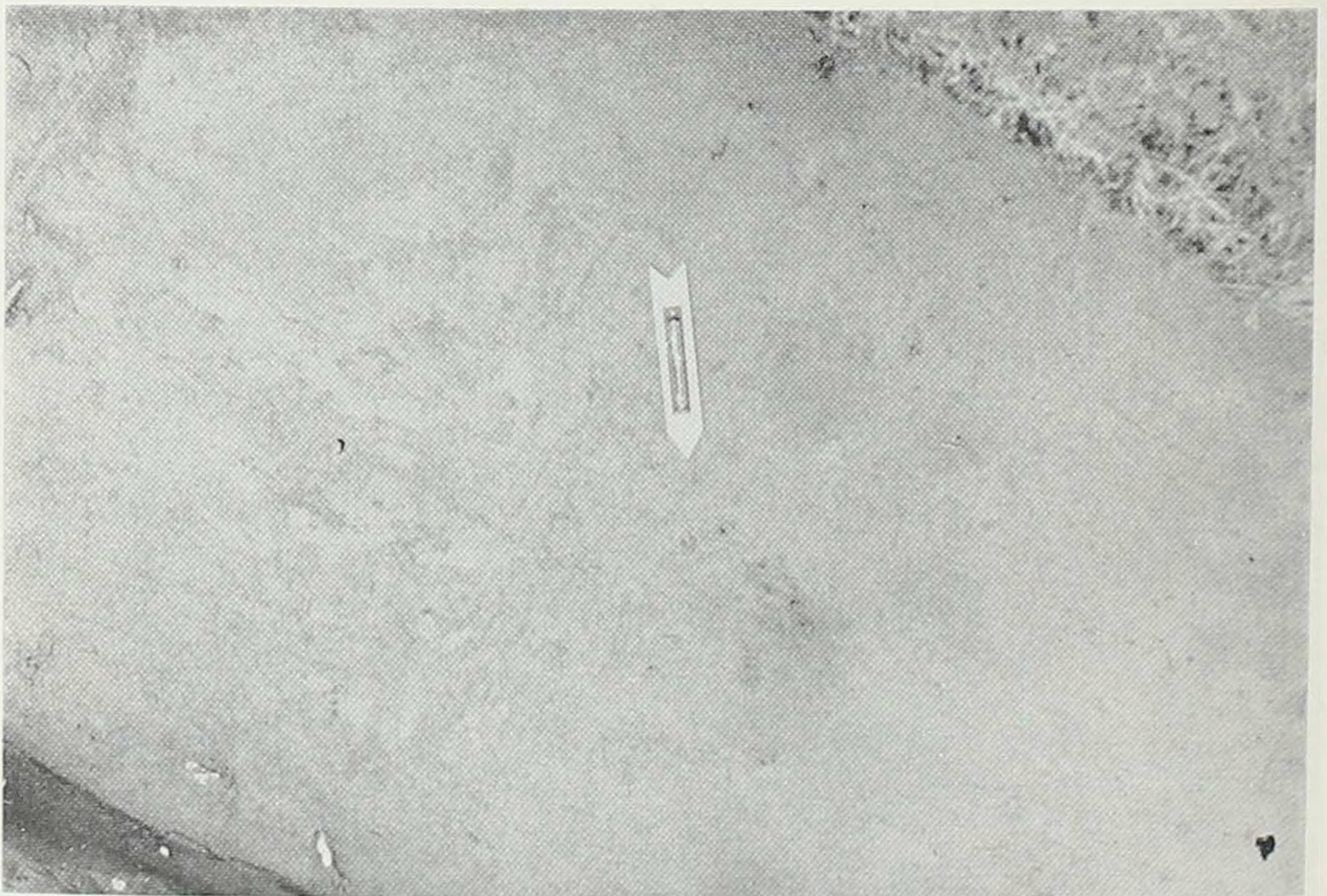
The complex mechanics of running a field expedition often make it difficult to reach valid scientific conclusions while the digging is underway. Continual attention must be given during this time to equipment, payroll, photographing, mapping, excavation procedure, and visitors — to name a few. After the excavation the specimens need to be cleaned, catalogued, and safely stored. Samples require analysis and specimens need identification. Specialized technical publications and professional colleagues need to be consulted before an evaluation can be made of the expedition. Most of an archeologist's time is spent in a laboratory and library rather than out digging.



Hartley fort grave before and after excavation. This Oneota Indian child was buried hundreds of years after the fort was abandoned by an earlier tribe.



Hartley fort excavation explores east rampart.



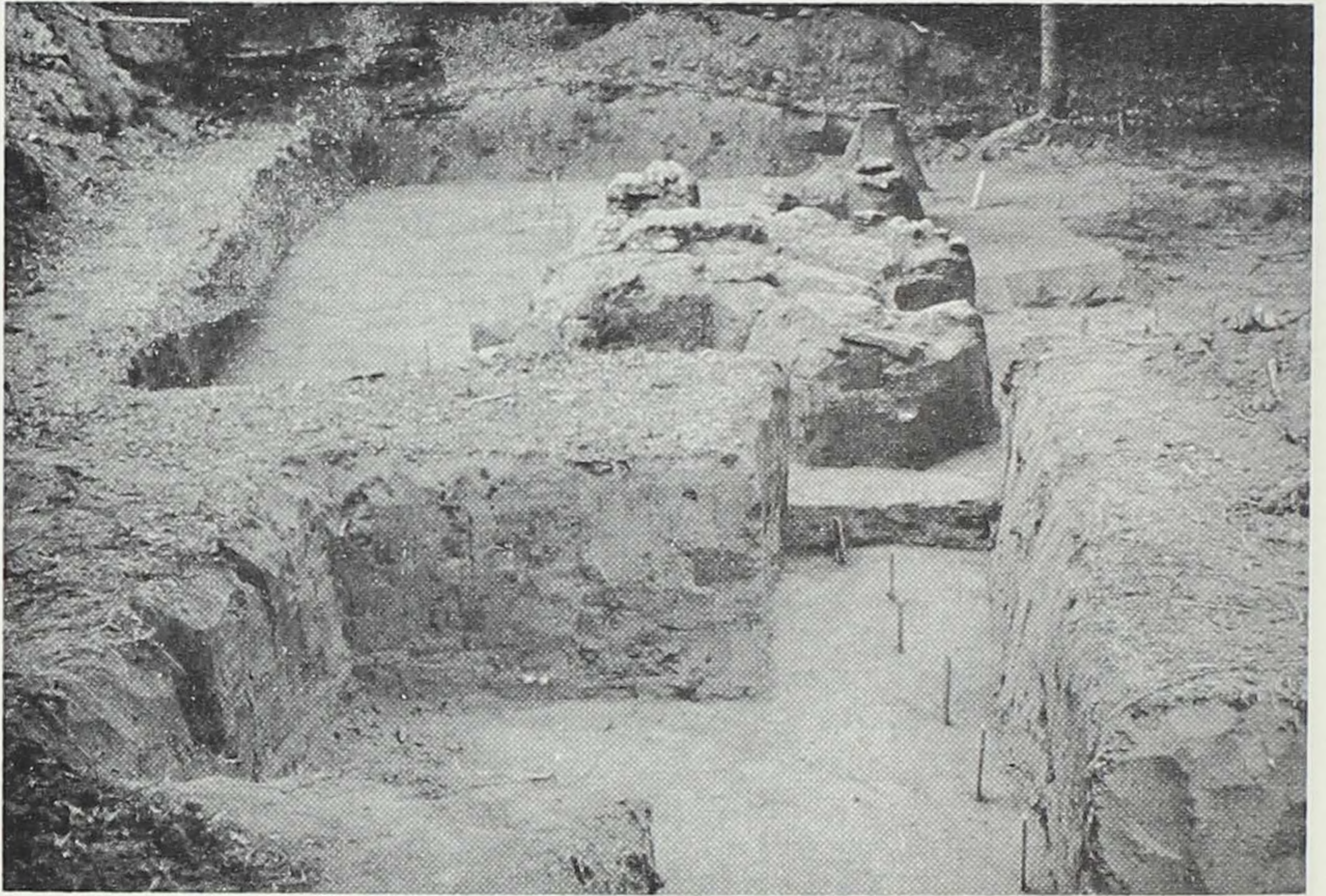
Three Hartley fort post holes reveal ancient stockade.



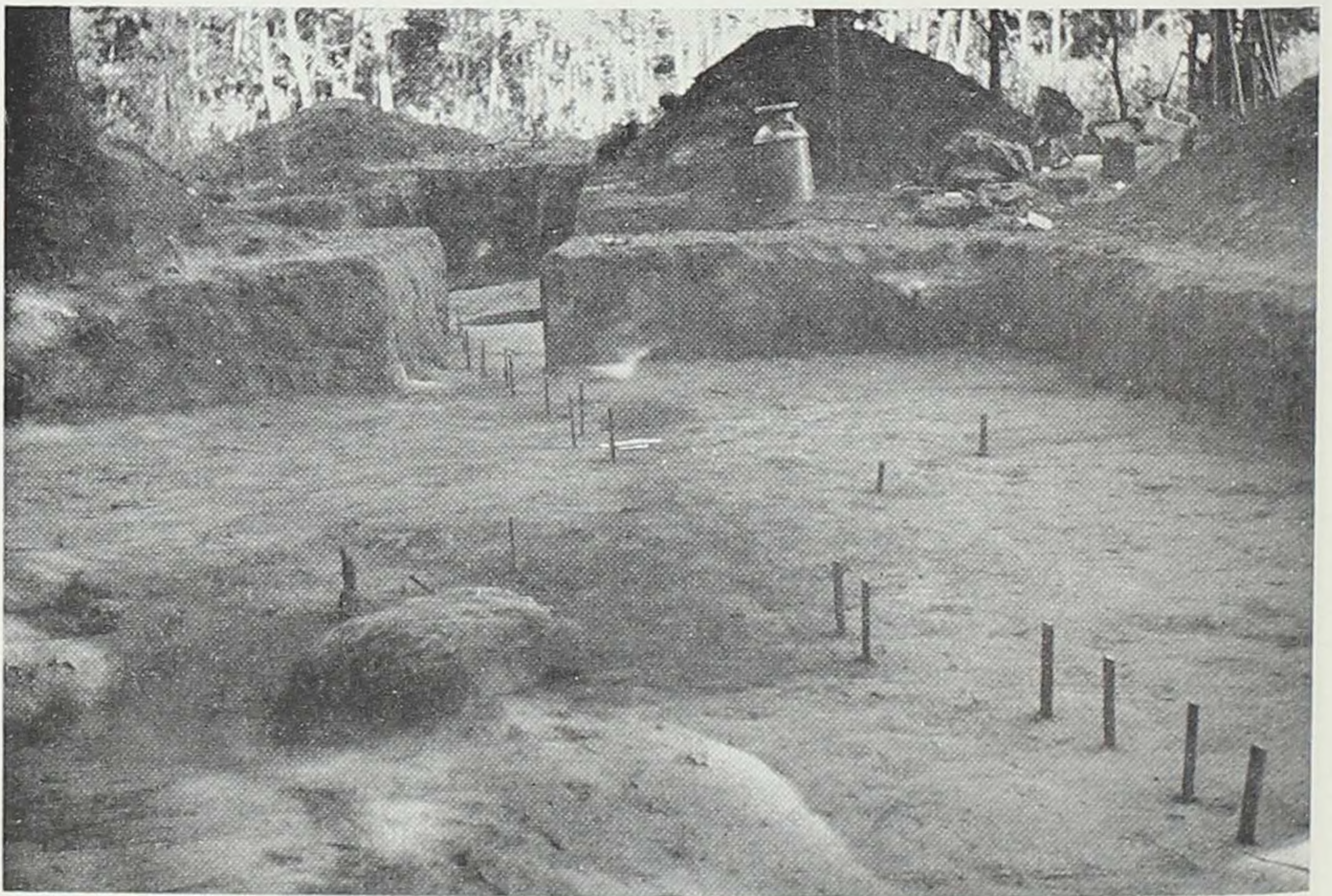
Glen Hartley excavates inside stockade wall.



Inked arrows show post holes of main gate.



Hartley fort south stockade line and rock pile.



South stockade line after stones removed.



Grave found under rock pile at south stockade line.



Excavation of grave uncovers skeleton of Oneota child.



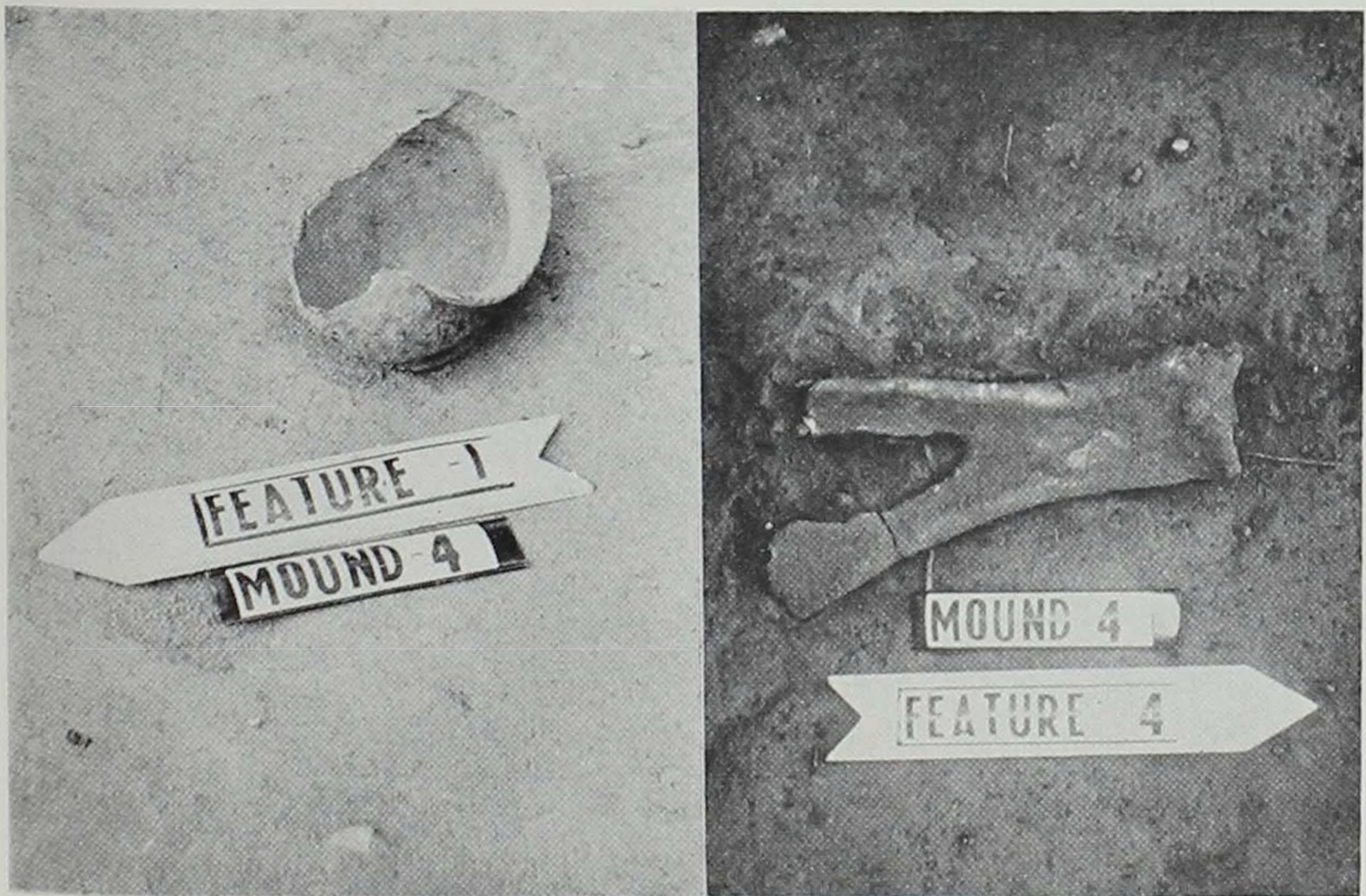
Another rock pile in the south stockade rampart.



Skeleton of adult Oneota Indian found beneath rocks.



Hartley fort partial skeleton of Oneota Indian.

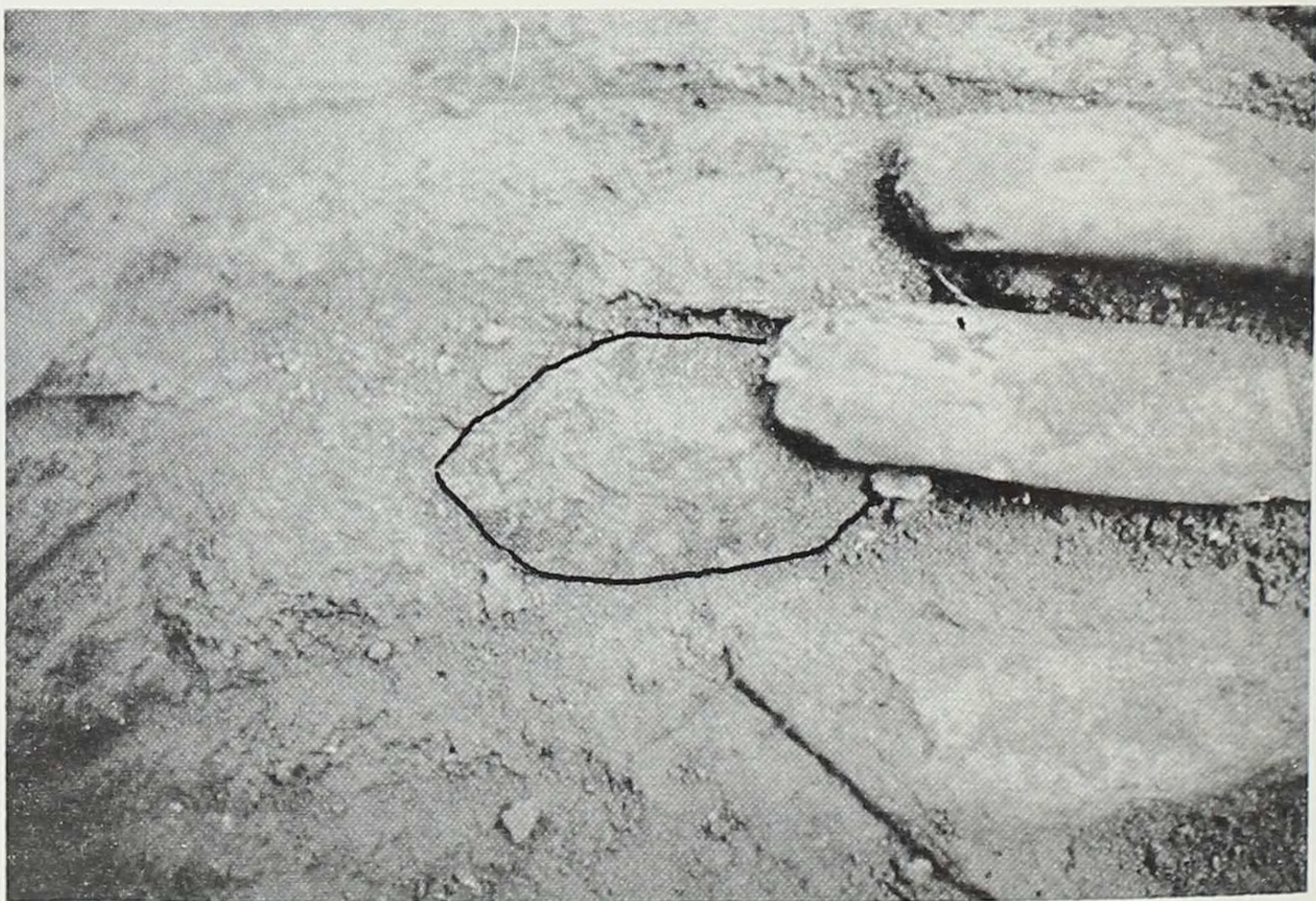


Oneota clay pot and bison bone hoe with skeletons.





Turkey River Mound 38, ceremonial blade at neck of headless skeleton.



Mound 38, arrowhead (outlined) protrudes from ribs of another burial.

For this reason, the significance of the Turkey River excavations is still in doubt. There are two possibilities. Either the Turkey River excavations were successful in a routine sort of way, or the finds may have striking significance for the interpretation of Midwestern archeology, filling a key gap in the prehistoric sequence.

It is quite clear that the site was a ceremonial center. The absence of trash, such as broken artifacts, stone flakes, and fragmentary animal bones, means that the Indians never had established a village on the end of the ridge we excavated. They only used the ridge to bury their dead. The puzzle of the wide ditch now seems to be explained. It apparently was a borrow pit from which the Indians obtained dirt to build the great central mound. Preliminary findings suggest that the Indians for some reason abandoned the mound and ditch before they completed it.

The extent of trade among these ancient Indians is remarkable. From Mound 38 the source of artifacts is extremely diverse: shell beads from the Gulf of Mexico, copper from Lake Superior, Knife River flint from South Dakota, and banded slate possibly from as far away as Ohio.

One possible interpretation is that the ceremonial center is about 2,000 years old. It fits within the Hopewell Mound horizon and fills an interesting gap in our knowledge about the ceremonial and political organization of the local tribes during

this period. If this first possibility is true, a solid, but not unexpected, scientific contribution was made to our knowledge of ancient Iowa. The site is of major importance because of its size and may eventually be developed into a public archeological park. It is extremely useful to have some information about its origin, cultural affiliation, and use. This provides some excellent examples of the religious cults which supplements earlier findings at other sites.

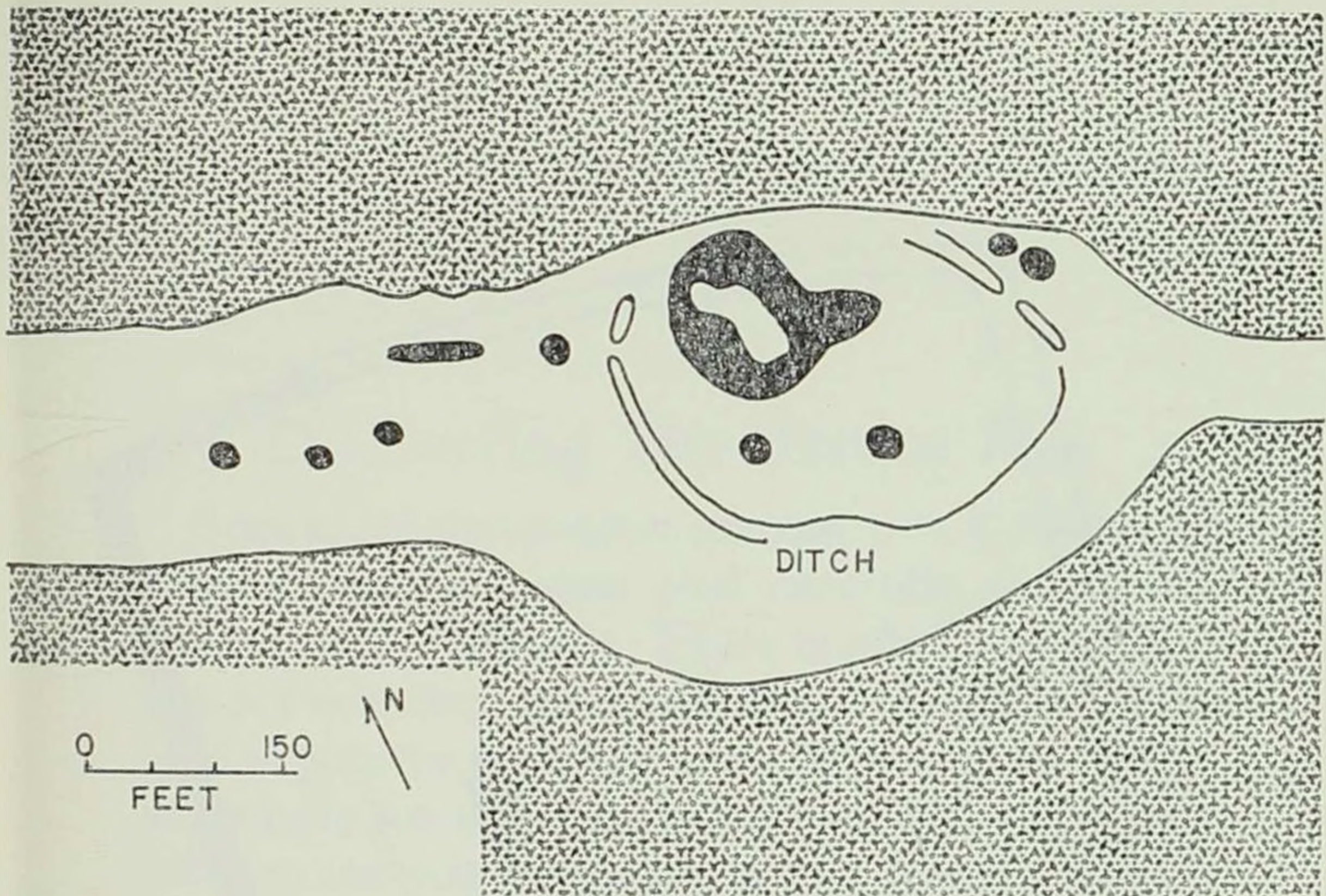
There is, however, a second possibility. If this second interpretation is correct then the results of the expedition are not only successful — they will be spectacular. The second alternative is very intriguing.

At the Midwest Archeological Conference held in the fall of 1964 at the University of Illinois, the author presented a brief illustrated report of this excavation. He suggested in his preliminary appraisal that this was a Hopewell mound center, about 2,000 years old. This was followed by a few slides of the great circle of stones from Mound 37 and the burial pit from Mound 38. When close-up views of the burials with the red ocher, the great ceremonial blade, the spear thrower weight, and the other artifacts were shown, a most unusual thing occurred. Several members of the audience began to call out "Archaic," "Archaic." A heated but good-natured controversy developed.

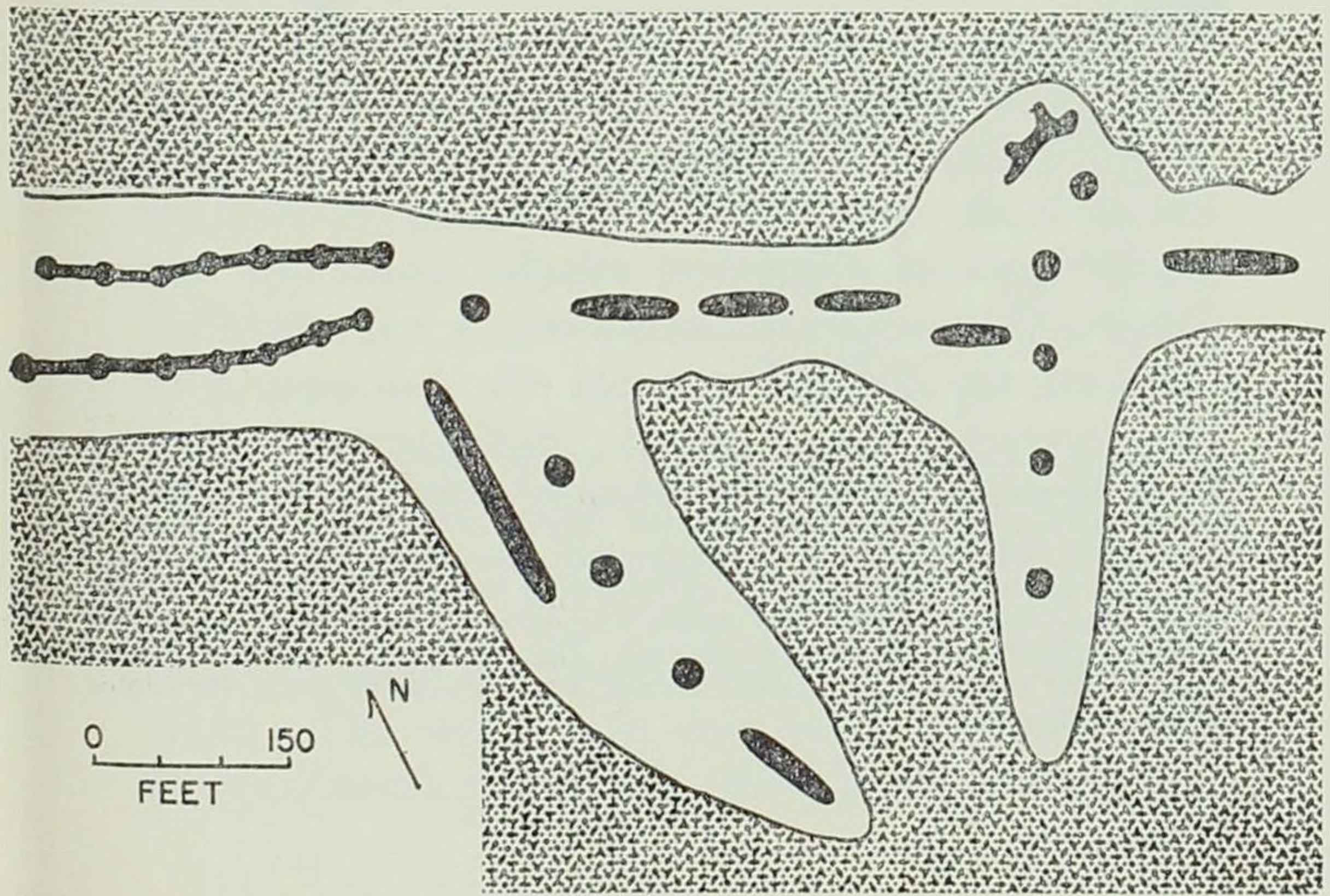
What was the controversy about? These archeologists thought the mound cults were not of Woodland cultural origin but were Archaic, possibly dating 3,000 years ago. If this were true, they would be among the earliest known burial mounds in the Midwest! This suggestion was put forward by a number of archeologists among them Wesley Hurt of the University of Indiana, Carl Chapman of the University of Missouri, and Louis Binford of the University of Chicago. The significance of this interpretation is that we still do not know very much about the Archaic to Woodland cultural transition. Turkey River has a complex series of burial sites and stone structures implying a highly organized political and religious organization. If built by the late Archaic Indians, an important new dimension has been added to our knowledge about these early times. Late Archaic culture was much more highly developed than previously suspected.

Scientific exploration of this huge ceremonial center is still very incomplete. Eventually it will require many summers with large crews to carefully excavate the numerous large mounds on the Turkey River ridge. Fortunately these mounds are protected by State law. The author feels certain that additional explorations will uncover spectacular discoveries about the ancient Indians. It is hard to predict what these discoveries will be, which is part of the fascination of archeology.

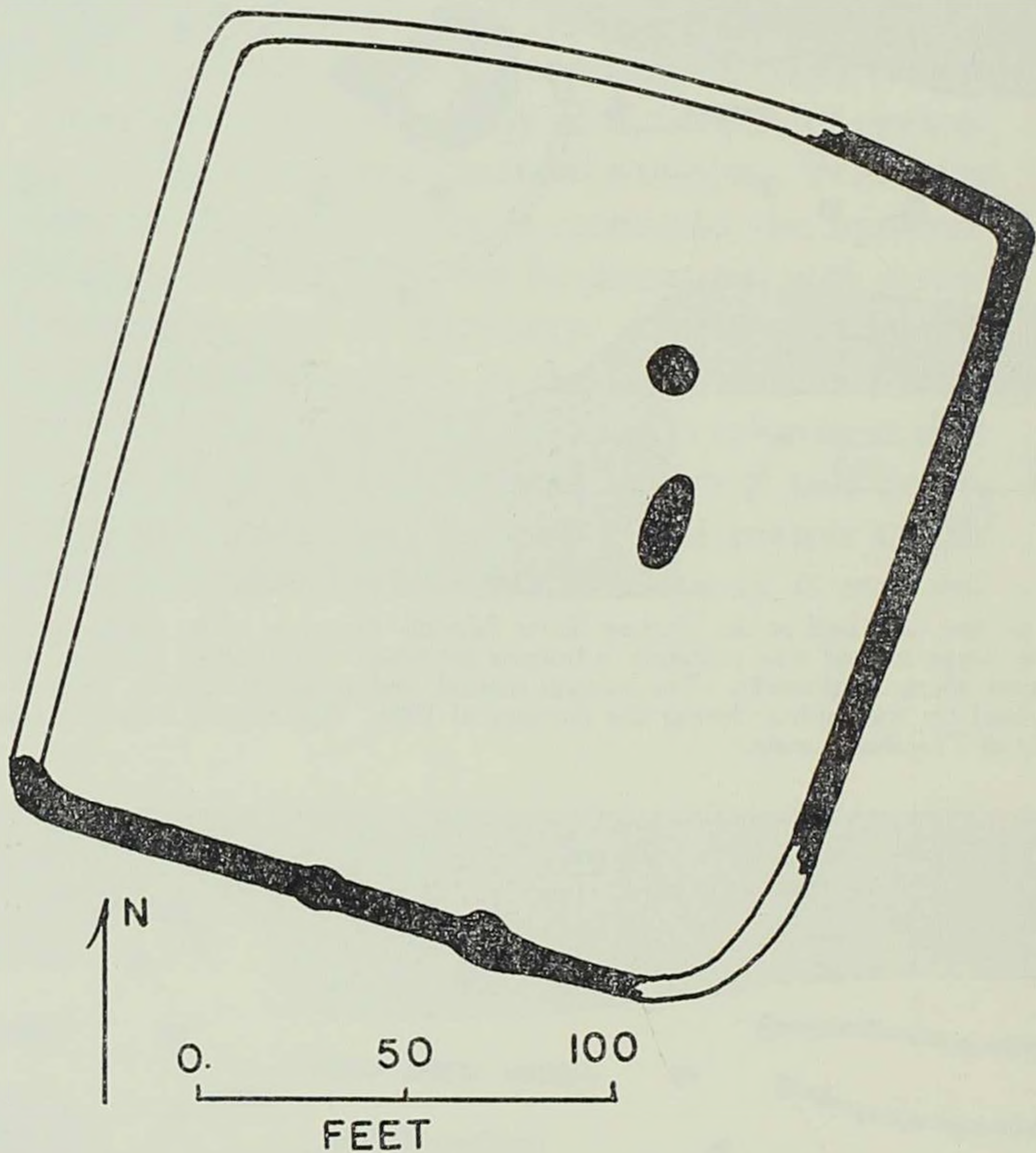
Are they Archaic or Hopewell Woodland? To a large extent, the issue can only be resolved by radiocarbon measurements of radioactivity present in the skeletons and charcoal samples. When the amount of radioactivity is measured the approximate age of the finds can be computed with a reasonable degree of accuracy. Unfortunately the radiocarbon laboratory at the University of Michigan has such a backlog of samples to process that it will be about nine months before it can determine the age of our samples. The answer to the puzzle of the Turkey River Mounds is not yet known.



Map of the east half at the Turkey River Mound Preserve. The ditch around the central, large mound was probably a borrow pit where the Indians obtained earth to construct these earthworks. The central mound and adjacent smaller mounds were excavated by the author during the summer of 1964. This map is redrawn from the survey of Theodore Lewis.



Map of the west half of the Turkey River Mound Preserve. This mound group is situated on a very high limestone ridge overlooking the junction where the Turkey River flows into the Mississippi River. Note the numerous linear and chain mounds. The small irregular mound is probably in the shape of a tailed animal. This map is redrawn from the survey of Theodore Lewis.



The Hartley fortified village was built by the Indians about 1,200 A.D. The fortification is strategically located upon the crest of a hill overlooking the entrance of French Creek into the Upper Iowa River in Allamakee County, northeastern Iowa. Archeological excavations in 1964 revealed the fort was built by a previously undiscovered prehistoric tribe now named the Hartley Culture. This map shows the earth rampart where post holes of the ancient stockade were discovered. The solid outline indicates where the rampart is poorly preserved. Several low mounds occur in the center of the fortification.