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Wilson-Donaldson Stoneware Kiln Site (41DN19)

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Archaeological Investigations at the Wilson-Donaldson Pottery Kiln (41DN19), Denton County, Texas

Timothy K. Perttula, Nancy G. Reese, Bo Nelson, and Daniel J. Prikryl

Report of Investigations No. 148

Archeological & Environmental Consultants, LLC, Austin, Texas

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Cover Art: Kiln (Feature 1) at the Wilson-Donaldson Pottery Kiln

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Abstract

In July 1998, personnel from Archeological & Environmental Consultants volunteered one day to assist the Denton County Historical Commission in their investigation of the 1850-1880 Wilson-Donaldson stoneware kiln (41DN19) near Sharon Lake, Bryant Branch, and Hickory Creek in the upper Trinity River basin a few miles south-southeast of Denton, Texas. This is one of a number of 19th century stoneware potteries making salt-glazed and natural clay slip vessels in Denton County, including the Cranston Pottery (41DN16), Roark Pottery (41DN18), Lambert Pottery (41DN74), and Serran Pottery (41DN75), all sites listed on the National register of Historic Places.

The kiln and associated archaeological deposits were in an area being proposed for private development, and it was considered imperative that as much archaeological information be gathered from the site before it was disturbed or destroyed; subsequently, the main kiln at the site (Feature 1) was dismantled—hopefully to be reconstructed in the future—while the remainder of the archaeological deposits were destroyed and removed.

During our short foray to the site, we produced a map of the various features at the site, including stoneware kilns, sherd waster piles, clay pits, and traces of structural remains in the vicinity of the other features. Drawings of the plan and vertical profile of Feature 1 were also completed at that time, along with surface collections of stoneware sherds from several features, supplemented with a few shovel tests to assess the character of the archaeological deposits and the excavation of a single 50 x 50 cm unit in the Feature 3 waster pile. In our work, we limited the recovery of artifacts to diagnostic rim sherds from the different vessel forms represented at the kiln, as well to any identified kiln furniture.

The stoneware sherds at the Wilson-Donaldson kiln are almost exclusively exterior salt-glazed jars, jugs, churns, and bowls. About 61 percent of the sherds we collected are from ca. 1840-1860 salt-glazed vessels that have a dry interior surface. Interior and exterior salt-glazed sherds are rare (3 percent) in the assemblage, but they are associated with pre-1860 stoneware manufacture. Thirty-six percent are sherds from salt-glazed vessels with a natural clay slip interior. It is likely that these vessels were made between 1860-1880, based on Lebo's (1987:Tables 8-9 and 8-10) seriation of stoneware interior and exterior glaze types and combinations. One sherd (0.5 percent) has a natural clay slip on both interior and exterior surfaces, and is most likely from a vessel made between 1860-1880, although examples are known from pre-1860 contexts.

The Wilson-Donaldson kiln also manufactured clay elbow pipes along with stoneware vessels. None were recovered in our limited work at the site.

Introduction and Historical Context

In July 1998, we carried out limited volunteer archaeological investigations at the Wilson-Donaldson stoneware pottery kiln site (41DN19) in Denton County, Texas (Figure 1), in conjunction with work being done at the site by Barry Vermillion of the Archeology Committee of the Denton County Historical Commission (DCHC). The kiln was established on property owned by an A. M. Serran from 1854-1880, who had come as a master potter from New York to establish his Texas business on a ridge slope (590 feet amsl) near Bryant Branch, a small stream that flows south into Hickory Creek and Garza-Little Elm Reservoir (Figure 2). Serran also owned property at nearby 41DN75 (Lebo 1987:Table 8-1) (see members.tripod.com/redbear_7/serren.htm), another stoneware kiln site a short distance to the northeast (Figure 3). The kiln site was then leased by Thomas Donaldson between ca. 1860-1880, and by William Wilson around 1880 (Denton County Office of History and Culture 2017). The pottery kiln sites are located on the clay deposits of the Eagle Ford formation. See also Denton County Texas Archaeology, Archaeology Committee, DCHC link to what is now called he Wilson Pottery Site (members.tripod.com/redbear_7/Wilson.htm, accessed August 17, 2020) for more information about the kiln site. The site has now been destroyed by a housing development, but the main kiln (Feature 1) has been disassembled and is in Denton County storage, hopefully to be reassembled and made accessible to the public.

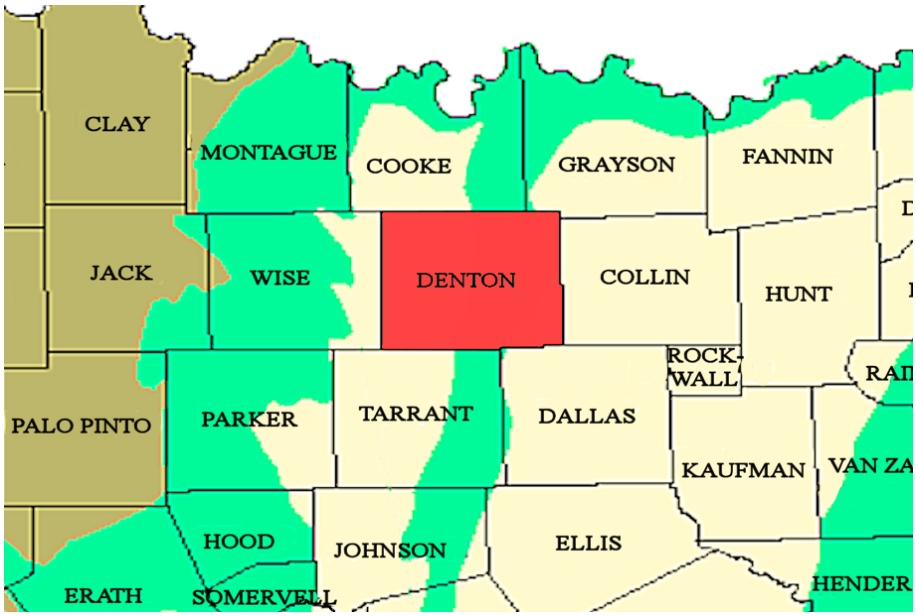

Figure 1. Location of Denton County in North Central Texas.

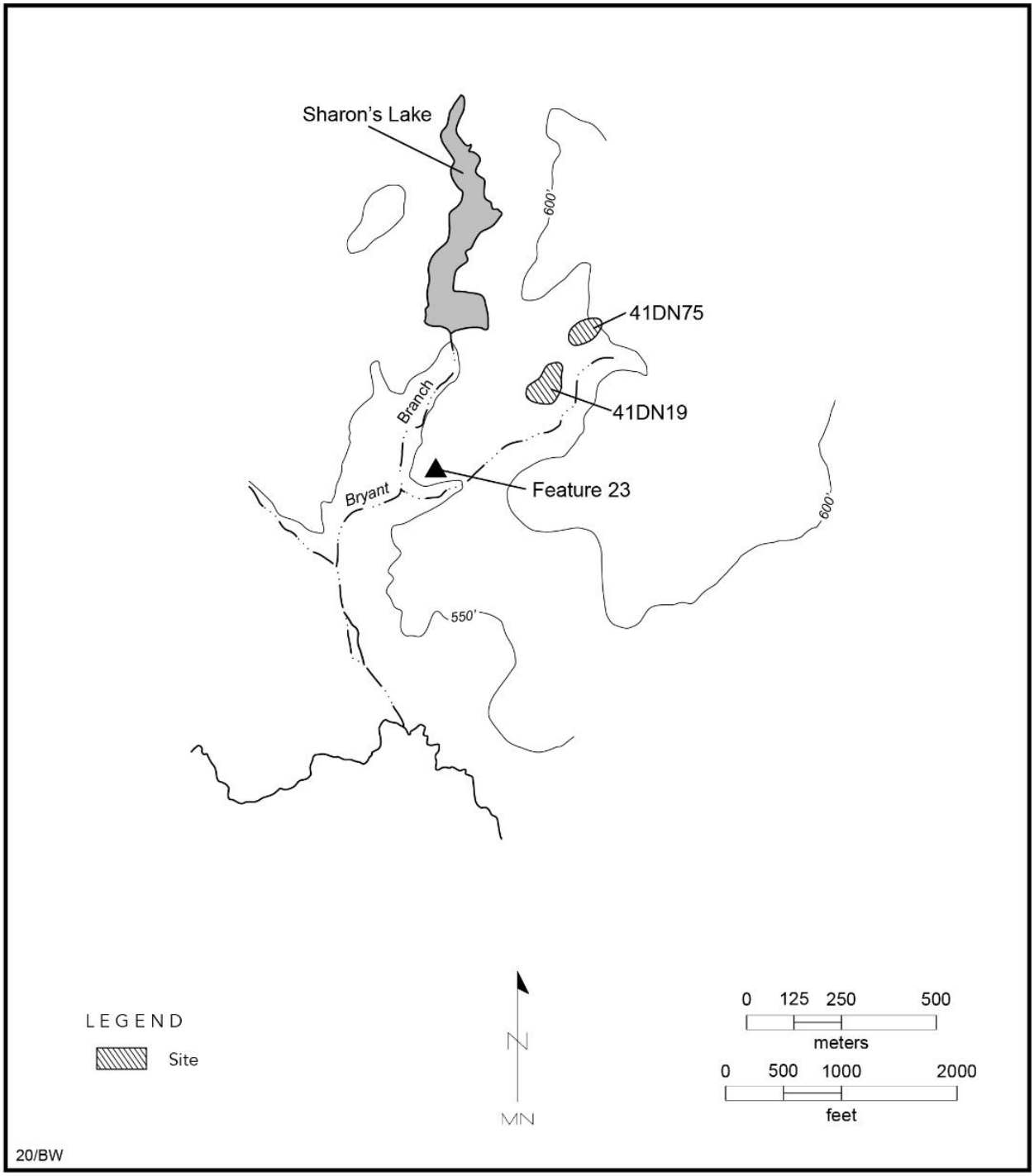

Figure 2. The topography in the area of 41DN19 and 41DN75, modified from the Denton East 7.5' topographic quadrangle.

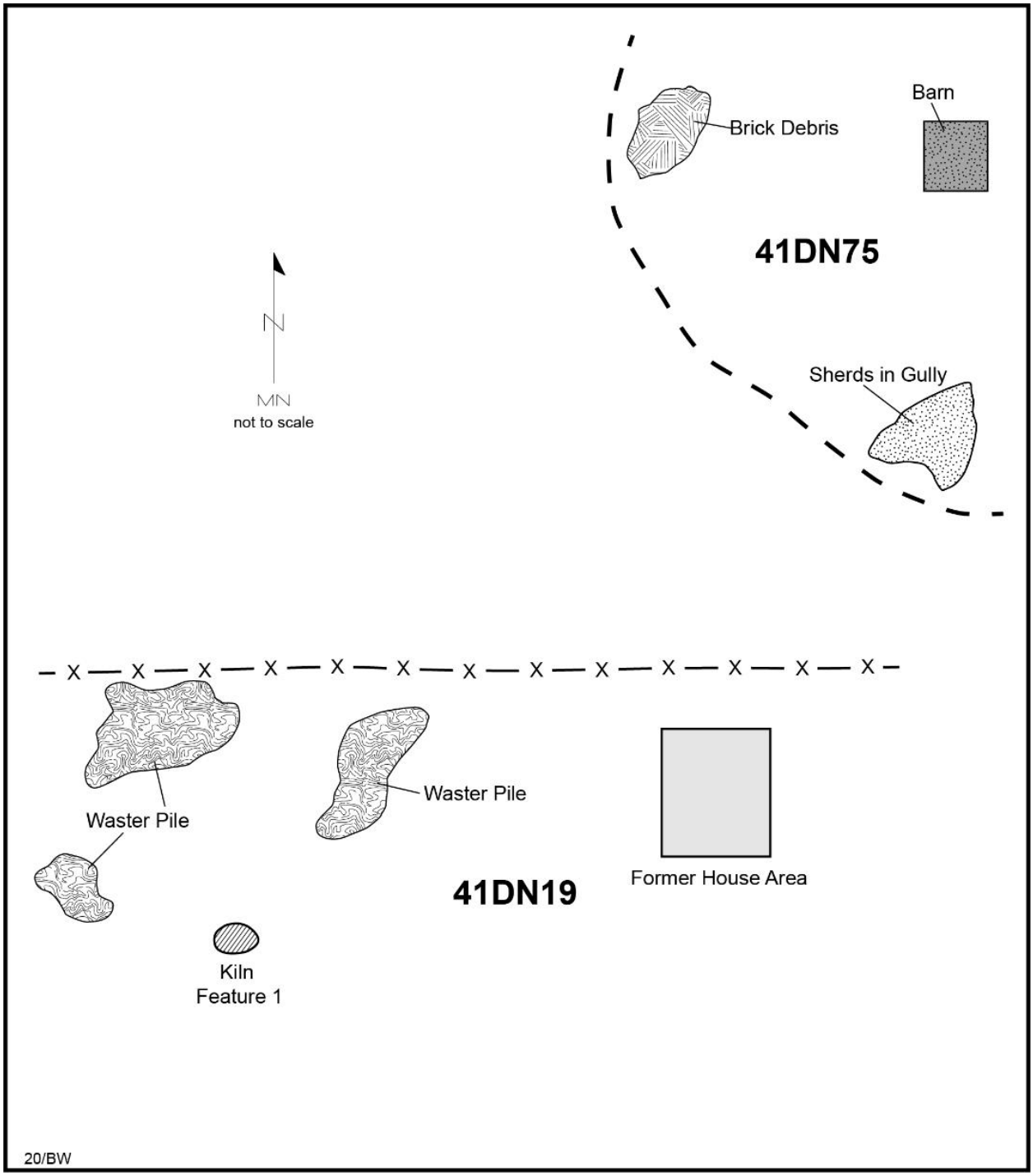

Figure 3. Sketch map of 41DN19 and 41DN75, modified from the 1972 National Register of Historic Places nomination form.

According to Lebo (1987:Table 8-1), the Serran pottery operated from the 1850s-1880s, and produced similar kinds of stoneware as those made at the Wilson-Donaldson kiln. The Cranston pottery kiln (41DN16) on Hickory Creek produced pottery similar to both the Serran and Wilson-Donaldson pottery kiln sites.

Cultural Features

The focus of our archaeological interest covered a ca. 140 (east-west) x 45 m (north-south) area south of a barbed wire fence/property boundary. In this area are a number of features related to the manufacture of stoneware vessels, including two kilns (Features 1 and 13) ceramic waster piles, and clay pits. A third kiln (Feature 23) is about 245 m southwest of Feature 1 (Figure 4).

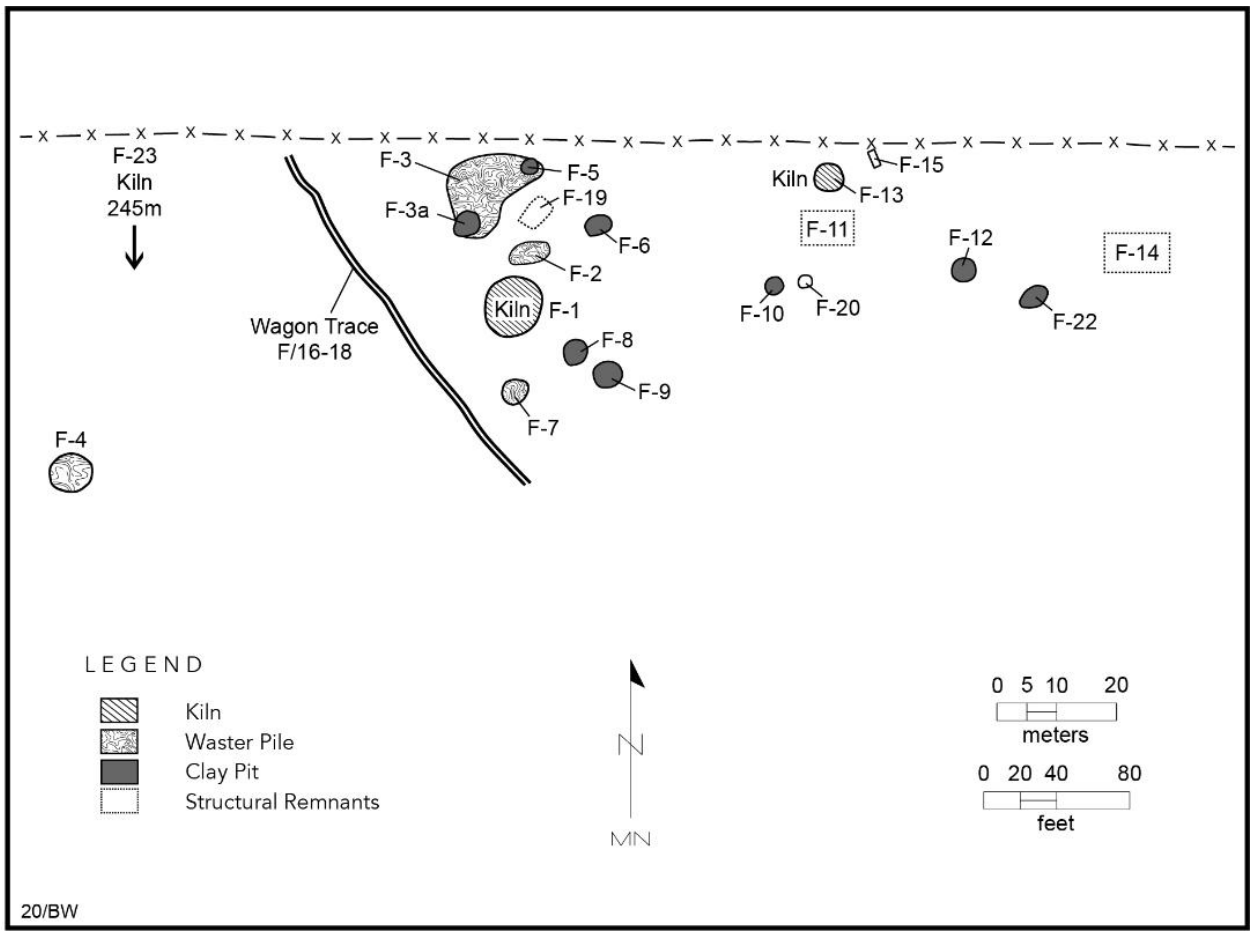

Figure 4. Distribution of features at the Wilson-Donaldson site (41DN19) as mapped in July 1998.

Feature 1

Feature 1 is a round kiln made from walls of hand-made bricks and a mortar covering. The kiln stands 6 feet in height with a circular brick and mortar roof (Figure 5). It is 6 feet 4 inches to 6 feet nine inches in diameter, east-west and north-south, respectively. It is set within a 50-cm deep pit that ranges from 13 ft. 5 inches to 13 feet 10 inches in diameter. Connecting the exterior and interior brick walls are a series of brick and mortar supports (at least four of these supports are still apparent) that are set 2 feet

off the ground surface (Figure 6). The supports are 1 foot 9 inches in length, 9 inches in width, and 7.5 inches in thickness. The kiln is entered through an open door, while the upper level of the kiln has an arched opening marked by a row of glazed bricks (Figure 7).

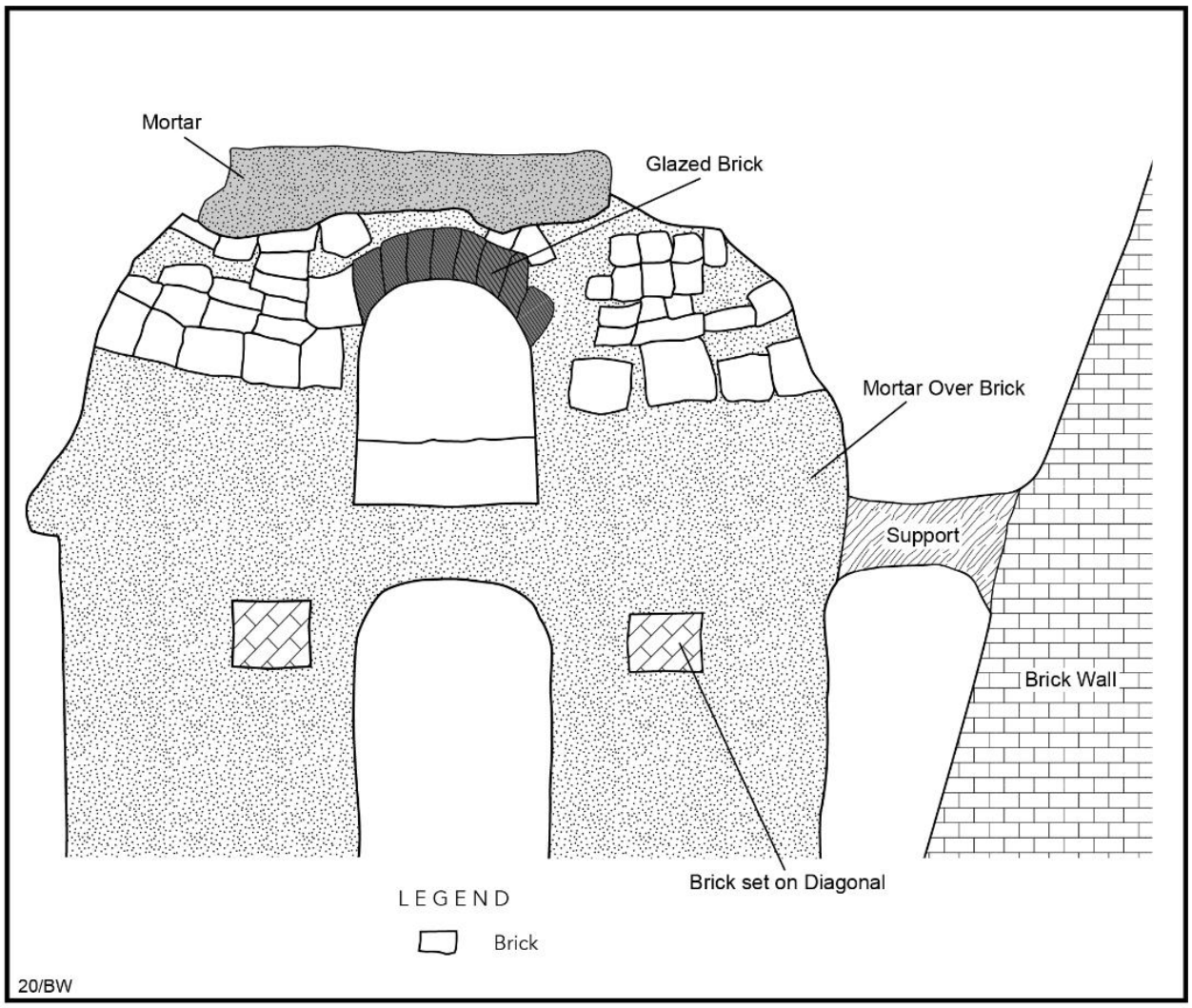

Figure 5. Sketch drawing looking north at the Feature 1 kiln. Modified from a July 1998 drawing by Nancy G. Reese.

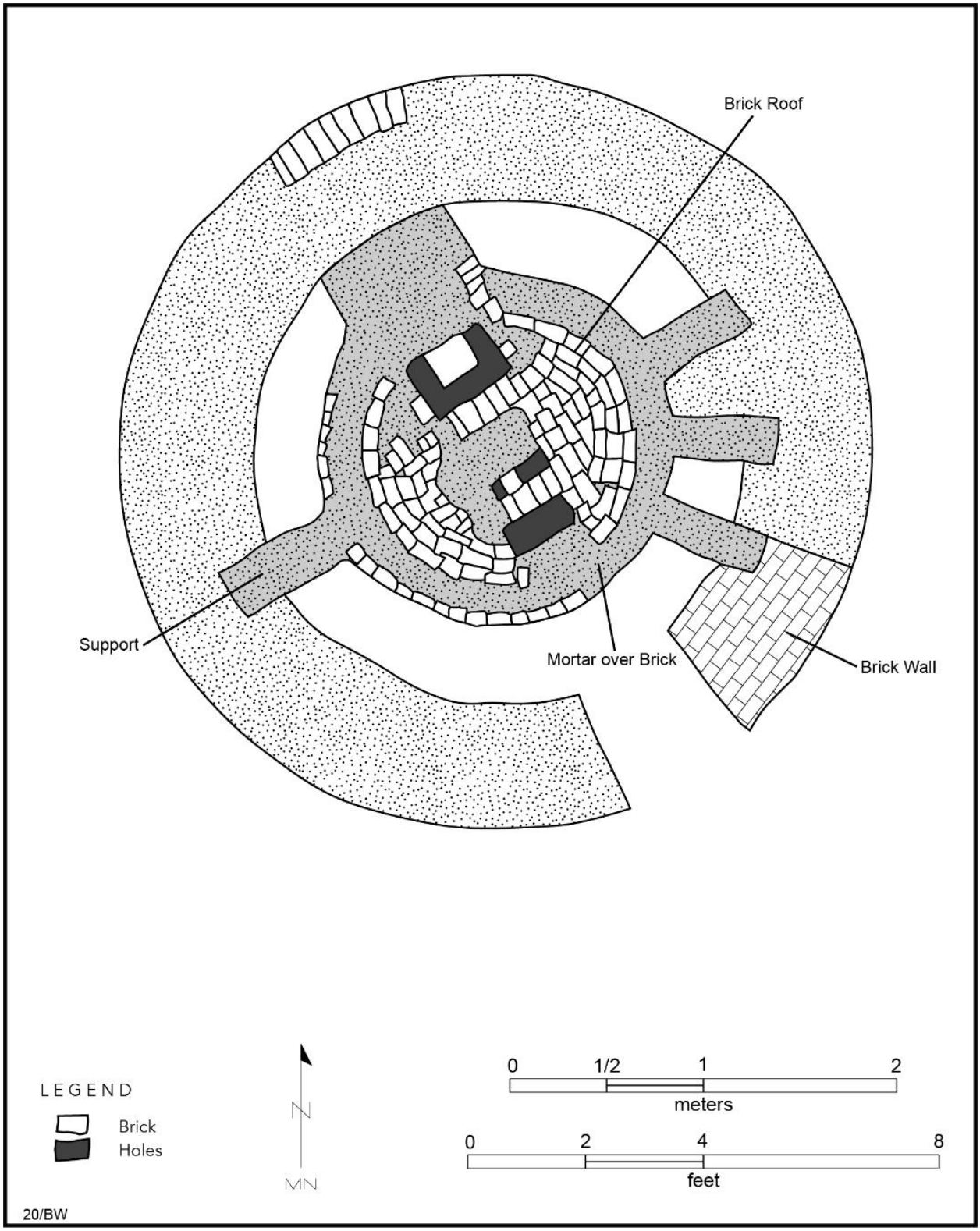

Figure 6. Top-down sketch of the Feature 1 kiln. Modified from a July 1998 drawing by Nancy G. Reese.

Figure 7. Partially exposed Feature 1 kiln, July 1998.

Feature 2

Feature 2 is a large sherd waster pile just north of the Feature 1 kiln (see Figure 4). The waster pile is approximately 8 m in length and 7 m in width, and the sherd pile stands to a maximum of 80 cm on its north side. Two trenches had been excavated to between 28-45 cm bs in Feature 2 by the DCHC (Figure 8); these were approximately 3-4 m in length and 1 m in width.

Figure 8. Looking at the Feature 2 waster pile.

Feature 3

This large sherd waster pile is about 10-20 m north of the Feature 1 kiln (see Figure 4). The pile is ca. 20 x 12 m in size, with a distinct mounding in its central and western ends. The pile is about 80 cm thick, and has two clay pits (the Feature 3a pit is 4 x 3 m in size) in it, including Feature 5 (see below). The DCHC excavated two trenches in the waster pile, one 4.5 x 1 m in length and width and extending to 70 cm bs, and the other 2.75 x 1 m in length and width, and 80 cm bs. The DCGC recovered a complete jar in Feature 3 (Figure 9a).

We excavated a 50 x 50 cm unit in Feature3, placing it at the intersection of the two DCHC trenches (Figure 9). In addition to encountering many large stoneware sherds to 70 cm bs in a grayish-brown sandy loam and below that an orange-colored soil matrix, there was brick rubble between 17-21 cm bs. Below the brick rubble the soil returns to a grayish-brown sandy loam with a quantity of ash to 78 cm bs. Between 30-40 cm bs were encountered a number of sandstone rocks (8 x 5 cm in length and width), bricks, and mortar; these may represent a remnant of a dismantled kiln. A large stoneware bowl was recovered between 60-70 cm bs. The yellowish-brown clay subsoil was reached at 78 cm bs

Figure 9. Feature 3: a, complete stoneware jar from Feature 3.

Figure 9b, profile of the Feature 3 waster pile at the intersection of the DCHC trenches.

Feature 4

Feature 4 is another waster pile at the kiln site. It is approximately 7.5 x 7.5 m in size, and 70 cm in height. The DCHC excavated an L-shaped trench, 8.5 m long and 1 m wide, through the waster pile.

Feature 5/21

This is a small clay pit at the northeastern end of the Feature 3 waster pile (see Figure 4)*.* The pit is about 4 x 2 m in length and width, and extends to 40 cm bs.

Feature 6

This clay pit is about 10 m northeast of the Feature 1 kiln (see Figure 4). The pit is about 4 m in length, 2.5 m in width, and had been dug to ca. 61 cm bs.

Feature 7

Feature 7 is another sherd waster pile about 10 m south of the Feature 1 kiln (see Figure 4). The waster pile is approximately 9 x 6 m in length and width, and there is a possible clay pit at its western end. The pit was between 40-58 cm bs.

Feature 8 and Feature 9

These two adjacent features are clay pits ca. 5-10 m southeast of the Feature 1 kiln (see Figure 4). They range from 4.-4.25 m in length and 3-3.5 m in width, and range up to 50 cm bs in depth.

Feature 10

Feature 10 is another clay pit about 40 m east of the Feature 1 kiln and 15 m south of the Feature 13 kiln (see Figure 4). The pit is approximately 4 x 2 m in size.

Feature 11

This feature is thought to be a barn or shop associated with the pottery business. The area is marked by a 7 x 6 m east-west oriented scatter of ceramics, brick, rocks, nails, and other metal artifacts (i.e., a hinge, a hook, and a plow part (see Figure 4). Three shovel tests were excavated in and near Feature 11, and a 3 x 1 m trench was excavated by the DCHC along the western side of the feature.

Feature 12

Feature 12 is a clay pit about 4 x 4 m in size near the eastern end of the site (see Figure 4). The pit is about 70 cm in depth. The DCHC excavated a small trench into the western side of the pit.

Feature 13

Feature 13 is thought to be the second of the round brick and rock kilns at the Wilson-Donaldson Kiln site, more than 40 m northeast of the Feature 1 kiln (see Figure 4). The possible kiln is 5 x 4 m in size, with a 2 x 2 m rock core that stands about 40 cm above the surface. The DCHC excavated a 3 x 1 m trench into the feature rubble, reaching to the central rock core; areas of ash were encountered at ca. 10 cm bs. In this trench, they recovered numerous stoneware sherds, square nails, non-stoneware ceramic sherds, bottle glass pieces, and possibly a brown snuff jar about 7-8 cm in height. The recovery of non-stoneware sherds at Feature 13 suggests that it is not a kiln site, but another sort of feature, possibly a forge.

Feature 14

This feature appears to be a mounded chimney base constructed of sandstone rocks, bricks, and mortar that is likely associated with another structure on the site (see Figure 4). The chimney base is ca. 4 x 3.2 m in length and width (Figure 10). DCHC recovered numerous cut nails and glass sherds. We excavated three shovel tests nearby, and artifacts noted in the feature include bricks, stoneware sherds, ironstone sherds, window glass sherds, and a barrel strap.

Feature 15

This is a rectangular trench of unknown function a few meters east of the Feature 13 kiln (see Figure 4). A sandstone rock wall was exposed at this feature by the DCHC. Cut nails and pieces of glass were also found there.

Features 16-18

These features represent the remnants of wagon traces that run northwest-southeast across the kiln site, running near but west of the Feature 1 kiln (see Figure 4).

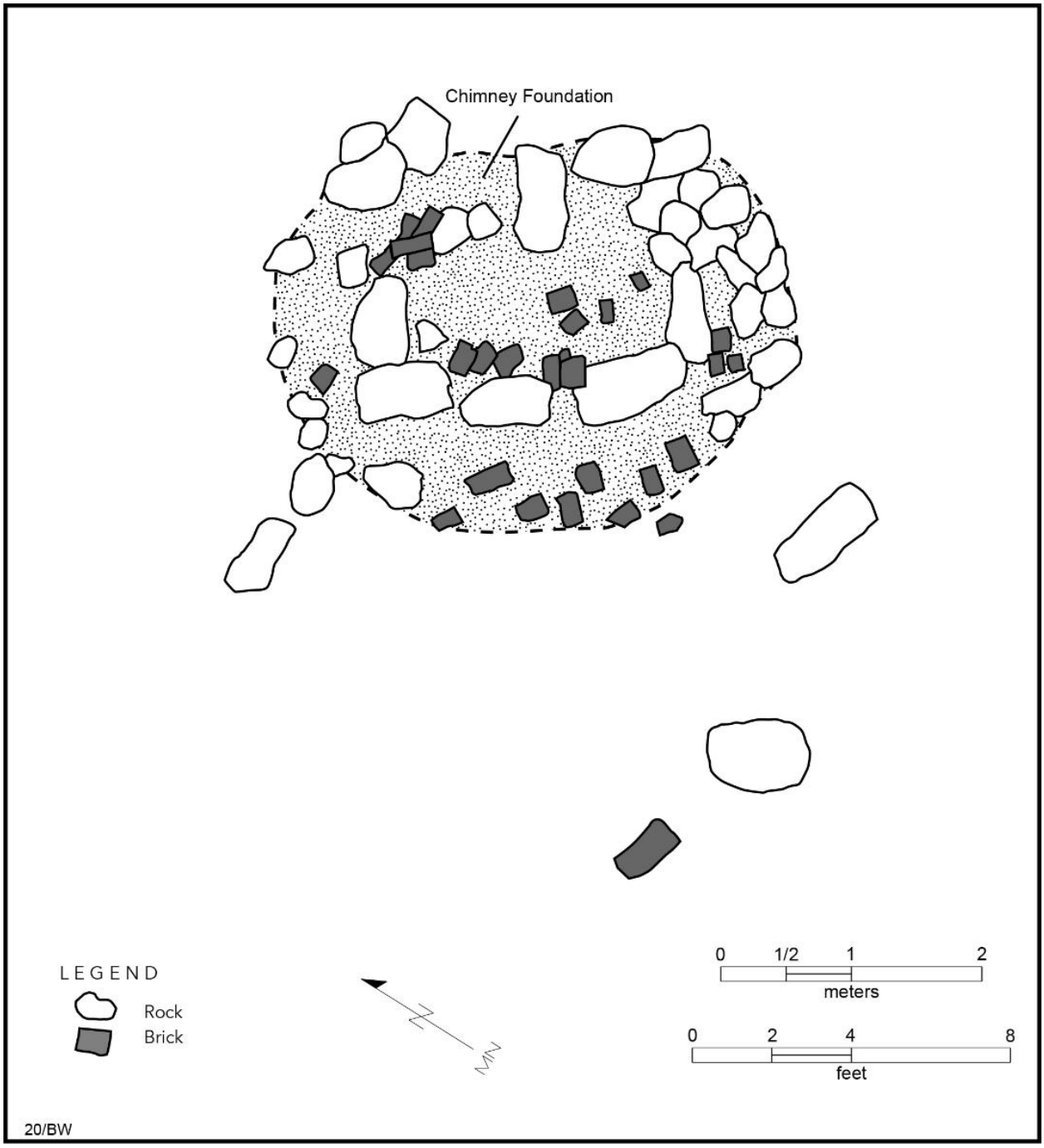

Figure 10. Plan map of the Feature 14 chimney base.

Feature 19

Feature 19 appears to be the outline of a 11 x 5 m rectangular structure foundation marked by sandstone rocks, bricks, and artifacts, including stoneware sherds and a bottle base (see Figure 4). It is between Feature 2 and Feature 3 sherd waster piles. The DCHC

excavated a 3 x 2 m trench into the northeastern corner of the possible structure foundation.

Feature 20

This is an area of flowers a few meters south of Feature 11 (see Figure 4).

Feature 22

Feature 22 is a clay pit ca. 6.5 x 5 m in size, with depths ranging between 100-140 cm bs. It is about 10 m southwest of Feature 14 (see Figure 4). We excavated a single shovel test in the deepest part of the clay pit. After the pit was used for clay, 19th century trash was thrown into it from the nearby structure area marked by Feature 14. Recovered in the shovel test were stoneware and ironstone sherds and glass sherds.

Feature 23

Feature 23 is thought to be the remains of a third stoneware kiln on the Wilson-Donaldson site. It is approximately 245 m southwest of the Feature 1 kiln (see Figure 4). The kiln area is marked by sandstone rocks and bricks, and numerous stoneware sherds. It was covered by a thick leaf mulch, but is estimated to be 5.75 x 4 m in size.

Recovered Ceramic Sherds

As was expected, stoneware sherds are very abundant across the site. As features were being mapped across the site, select samples of rims, handles, kiln furniture, and other potentially diagnostic ceramic stoneware artifacts were either documented on site or collected for future study and photography. Table 1 includes the breakdown of stoneware sherds by feature and interior and exterior glazes, if any. Common stoneware vessel forms that were being manufactured at the Wilson-Donaldson kiln and were identified from the large rim sherds included jugs, jars or crocks, churns, and bowls. Such stoneware vessel assemblages are also common in farmsteads in the region (Lebo 1996:139). The largest samples of stoneware sherds are from the Feature 2, Feature 3, add Feature 4 waster piles.

Table 1. Stoneware sherds from the Wilson-Donaldson site.

Feature No.	Dry/Salt*	Salt/Salt	NC/Salt	NC/NC	N
Fea. 1	2	-	1	-	3
Fea. 2	7	-	26	-	33
Fea. 3	70	1	2	-	73
Fea. 4	22	4	14	-	40
Fea. 5	5	-	-	-	5
Fea. 6	3	-	1	-	4

Table 1. Stoneware sherds from the Wilson-Donaldson site, cont.

Feature No.	Dry/Salt*	Salt/Salt	NC/Salt	NC/NC	N
Fea. 7	2	1	11	-	14
Fea. 8	6	-	1	-	7
Fea. 9	1	-	-	1	2
Fea. 10	4	-	11	-	15
Fea. 23	-	-	5	-	5
Totals	122	6	72	1	201

Int. Surface/Exterior Surface
NC=Natural Clay slip
*includes salt-glazed handles

There is no alkaline-glazed stoneware at the site, pointing to a preference4 for non-alkaline stoneware vessels made at the kiln for local residents (e.g., Lebo 1987:140). Post-1890 Bristol glazed vessel sherds are also absent from the site.

About 61 percent of the stoneware sherds have a dry interior and a salt-glazed exterior surface. According to Lebo (1987:Table 8-10, 1992), this kind of salt-glazed stoneware was most common on eastern Texas sites before 1860. This kind of stoneware was probably what was initially manufactured at the Wilson-Donaldson kiln. Salt/salt-glazed stoneware vessel sherds comprise only 3 percent of the sherd sample (see Table 1). Such glazed stoneware was produced before 1860 (Lebo 1987:140) in eastern Texas, and at the Wilson-Donaldson kiln.

Natural clay slip/exterior salt-glazed vessel sherds account for 35.8 percent of the site sample. Such stoneware was generally made before the 1860s, and these vessels were commonly manufactured until ca. 1870, and declined in popularity after that. Lebo's (1987:Table 8-10, 1992) frequency seriation of stoneware glazes suggests that the Wilson-Donaldson kiln was manufacturing this kind of stoneware before 1880. That is also the case for the one (0.5 percent) sherd with a natural clay slip on both vessel surfaces. These two wares may have been of later manufacture than the stoneware vessels simply made with a salt glaze, although Lebo (1987:141) indicates that the natural clay/natural clay stone ware was being "produced in this region as early as the 1860s."

Stoneware vessel forms at the site include bowls, churns, jars with wide and small mouths, and jugs; the jars are by far the most common form made at the kilns. The shape of the vessel forms are consistent with pre-1880 manufactured, based on Greer (1981:76, 84, 86, 94, 96; Lebo 1987:Figure 8-4).

Salt-glazed bowl sherds were recovered in Features 2 (Figure 11) and 3 (Figures 12-13). The Feature 2 bowl has an exterior salt glaze and a natural clay slip on the vessel interior (Figure 12), while the Feature 3 partial vessel and sherd have either a natural clay slip on the interior of the vessel or had an interior salt glaze (Figure 13).

Figure 11. Bowl from Feature 2, salt glazed-interior natural clay slip.

Dry/salt and salt-salt-glazed stoneware is proportionally most common at Feature 3 (97.3 percent), Feature 5 (100 percent), and Feature 4 (65.0 percent). These areas are found in the western part of the site (see Figure 4), and may point to loci where sherds were discarded during the initial use of the kiln. The natural clay slip/salt-glazed stoneware vessel sherds are also well distributed across the site (see Figure 4), being most common in the Feature 23 kiln (100 percent), Feature 2 (78.8 percent), Feature 7 (78.6 percent), and Feature 10 (73.3 percent). These may have been locations where ca. 1860-1880 stoneware vessel fragments were discarded in and around the Feature 1, 13, and 23 kilns. Perhaps the Feature 13 and 23 kilns were constructed and used some years after the Feature 1 kiln, the original kiln at the site.

Figure 12. Almost complete salt-glazed bowl from Feature 3.

Figure 13. Salt-glazed bowl from Feature 3, interior and exterior salt glaze.

Sherds from churns were recovered from Feature 2 (Figure 14-15), Feature 4 (Figure 16), and Feature 10 (Figure 17). These have an exterior salt glaze and dry or natural clay slip interiors.

Figure 14. Stoneware sherds from Feature 2: a, c, jar, salt-glazed/natural clay slip; b, churn, salt-glazed/natural clay slip.

Figure 15. Additional stoneware sherds from Feature 2: a-b, salt-glazed/natural clay slip jar rim sherds; c, salt-glazed/natural clay slip churn rim sherd.

Figure 16. Feature 4 stoneware sherds: a, churn, salt-glazed/dry interior; b, jar, salt-glazed/natural clay slip.

Figure 17. Feature 10 stoneware sherds: a, jug, salt-glazed/dry interior; b, jar, salt-glazed/natural clay slip; c, churn, salt-glazed/natural clay slip; d, salt-glazed/dry interior.

Sherds from salt-glazed jars or crocks were found in Feature 1 (Figure 18), Feature 2 (Figures 19-20; see also Figures 14a and 15a-b), Feature 3 (Figures 21-23), Feature 4 (Figure 24; see also Figure 16b), Feature 7 (Figure 25), Feature 8 (Figure 26), Feature 10 (Figure 27; see also Figure 17b). They have a mixture of either dry interiors or a natural clay slip on the interior.

Figure 18. Feature 1 stoneware jar sherd, salt-glazed/natural clay slip.

Figure 19. Feature 4 stone ware jar sherds, salt-glazed/natural clay slip.

Figure 20. Feature 4 stoneware rim sherd, salt-glazed/dry interior.

Figure 21. Feature 3 jar rims: a, no glaze; b, salt-glazed/dry interior.

Figure 22. Feature 3 stoneware jar rim sherd, salt-glazed/dry interior.

Figure 23. Feature 3 stoneware jar rim, salt-glazed/dry interior.

Figure 24. Feature 4 stoneware jar rims: a, salt-glazed/dry interior; b-c, salt-glazed/natural clay slip

Figure 25. Feature 7 stoneware jar rim sherds: a, salt-glazed/natural clay slip; b, salt-glazed/dry interior.

Figure 26. Feature 8 stoneware sherds: a, jug, salt-glazed/dry interior; b, salt-glazed and natural clay slipped jar/natural clay slip.

Figure 27. Feature 10 stoneware rim sherd, interior, exterior, and profile; salt-glazed/natural clay slip.

Jugs, and handles for jugs, have been recovered in our work in a number of features, including Feature 2 (Figure 28), Feature 3 (Figures 29-31), including several handles, Feature 8 (see Figure 26a), and Feature 10 (see Figure 17a). The jugs have an exterior salt glaze, and mainly have a dry interior, though one jug in Feature 2 has a natural clay slip.

Figure 28. Feature 2 stoneware jug sherds.

Figure 29. Salt-glazed stoneware jar rim sherd and handle attachment from Feature 3.

Figure 30. Feature 3 stoneware jug rim.

Figure 31. Jug handle sherds from Feature 3.

Not included in Table 1 are a few sherds that have no glaze on either interior or exterior surfaces (n=10) and five salt-glazed sherds with exterior painted lines (Figures 32 and 33). The sherds with no glaze are from Feature 3 (n=5), Feature 4 (n=3), and Feature 8 (n=2). The painted stoneware sherds are from Feature 7 (n=3) and Feature 23 (n=2). Painted stoneware was common by the mid-19th century (Greer 1981:166), and the free painted designs were applied with a cobalt slip before the salt glaze and before firing.

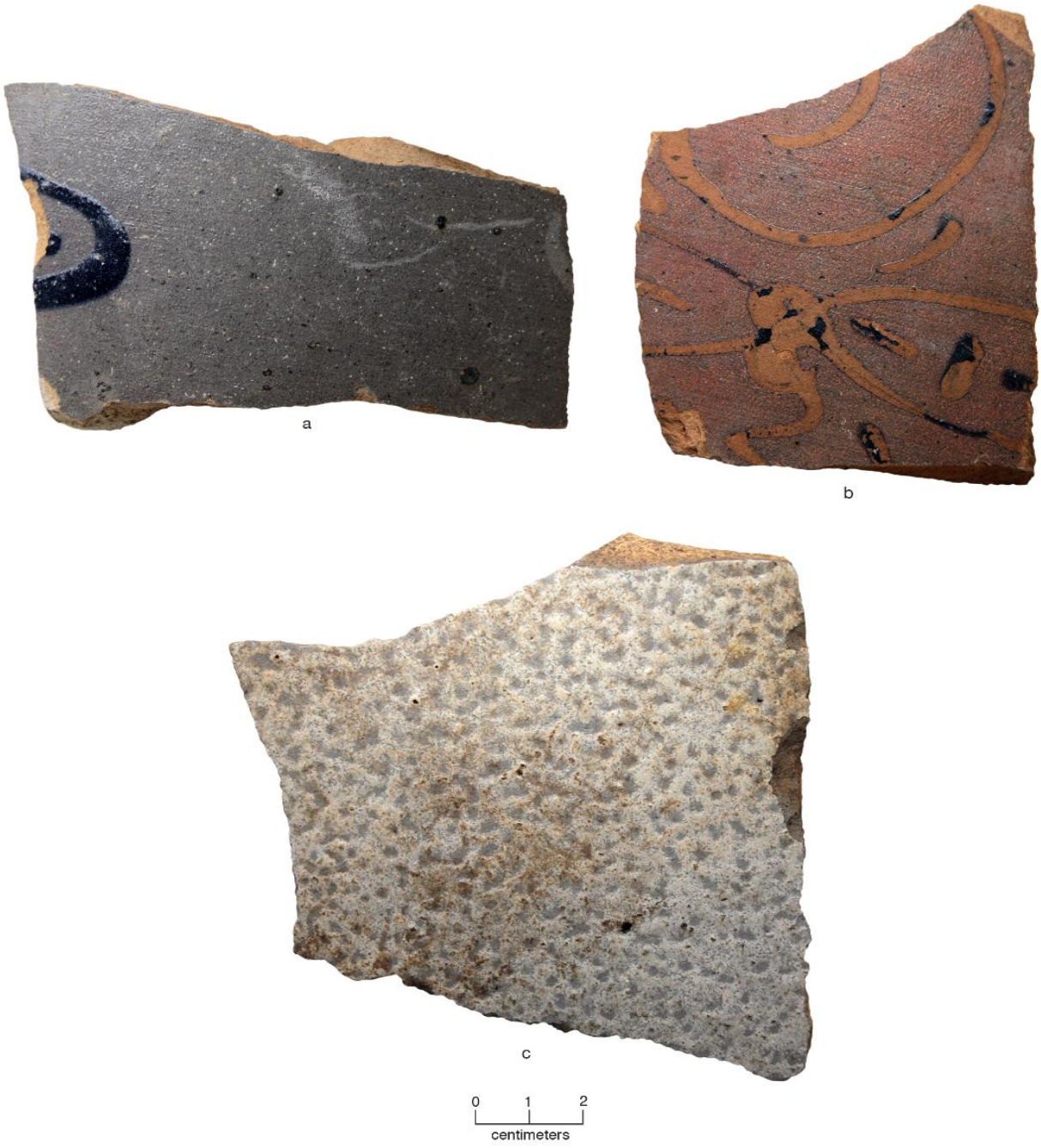

Figure 32. Stoneware jar sherds from Feature 23: a-b, salt-glazed and painted; c, salt-glazed/natural clay slip.

Figure 33. Feature 7 salt-glazed stoneware painted jar sherds.

Other Recovered Cultural Materials

The other recovered cultural materials in our work at the Wilson-Donaldson pottery kiln are several pieces of kiln furniture (Figures 34 and 35), two sherds that have melted together (Feature 3, 50-60 cm bs) and may have also served as kiln furniture, along with coils and spools (Figure 34a-c), as well as flat strips or squares or clay (Figure 35a-c) to be placed between vessels and "to assure the proper position of the pots" in loading the kilns (Greer 1981:217). The strip with a large hole (Figure 35d) is a draw-trial (Greer 1981:219).

Figure 34. Kiln furniture from Feature 1.

Figure 35. Kiln furniture from Feature 5.

Lastly there was one glazed brick from Feature 1 (Figure 36).

Figure 36. Glazed brick from Feature 1.

The Wilson-Donaldson kiln also manufactured shirt-stemmed clay elbow pipes, with glazes and without (Figure 37). However, we recovered no clay pipe sherds in our limited investigations.

Figure 37. Clay elbow pipe stem sherds from the Wilson-Donaldson kiln site. From members.tripod.com/redbear_7/artifact.htm, accessed August 17, 2020).

Summary and Conclusions

In July 1998, personnel from Archeological & Environmental Consultants volunteered one day to assist the Denton County Historical Commission in their investigation of the 1850-1880 Wilson-Donaldson stoneware kiln (41DN19) near Sharon Lake, Bryant Branch, and Hickory Creek in the upper Trinity River basin a few miles south-southeast of Denton, Texas. This is one of a number of 19th century stoneware potteries making salt-glazed and natural clay slip vessels in Denton County, including the Cranston Pottery (41DN16), Roark Pottery (41DN18), Lambert Pottery (41DN74), and Serran Pottery (41DN75), all sites listed on the National register of Historic Places.

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During our short foray to the site, we produced a map of the various features at the site, including stoneware kilns, sherd waster piles, clay pits, and traces of structural remains in the vicinity of the other features. Drawings of the plan and vertical profile of Feature 1 were also completed at that time, along with surface collections of stoneware sherds from several features, supplemented with a few shovel tests to assess the character

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The Wilson-Donaldson kiln also manufactured clay elbow pipes along with stoneware vessels. None were recovered in our limited work at the site.

Acknowledgments

We thank Barry Vermillion of the Archaeology Committee of the Denton County Historical Commission for the opportunity to participate in the archaeological investigations at the Wilson-Donaldson kiln site, even if for just one day. Lance Trask prepared Figure 1 in this article, Bo Nelson took several on-site photographs, and Brian Wootan prepared the remainder of the figures in this article, some based on sketches prepared in the field by Nancy G. Reese.

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