

Test Excavations of a Stone Foundation at
Ayr Mount Historic Site, Hillsborough, North Carolina

by

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INTRODUCTION

In July 2000, a short-term archaeological investigation was conducted in Hillsborough, North Carolina on the grounds of the Ayr Mount Historic Site, the location of William Kirkland's circa 1814 home and surrounding plantation (Figure 1). This project focused on a site (31Or441) located northeast of the main house at the edge of the woods within approximately 100 feet of the remains of an old trading path. This site consists of a roughly rectangular arrangement of fieldstones scattered upon and around a low, rectangular embankment (Figure 2). It has been speculated that this stone feature represents the remains of a foundation for a barn or an 18th century tavern (Stine and Hargrove 1999:48). The tavern is of special interest to the history of the Kirkland family because tradition holds that the Kirklands and their 10 children lived in this building during the construction of the extant mansion at Ayr Mount (Bill Crowther 2000, personal communication).

PRELIMINARY FIELDWORK

Once it was cleared of underbrush, a 50 ft (east/west)-by-80 ft (north/south) grid oriented to magnetic north was established on the site. The dimensions of the grid were sufficient to encompass all of the stone visible on the surface. The point at the southwestern corner of the grid was arbitrarily designated 100R100 and subsequent points on the grid were named based on their distance to the north and east. For example, the grid point 110R140 was located 10 ft north and 40 ft east (to the right) of 100R100. Excavation units were named based on the grid point located at their southeast corner.

A transit was used to produce a contour map of the site.¹ In addition to documenting the site prior to excavation, this map, along with the grid, should allow our work to be related to any work that may occur at the site in the future. Toward this end, re-bar spikes were left in the ground at the 100R130 and 150R130 grid points to facilitate the reestablishment of the grid in the future.



Figure 1. View of the main house from 31Or441.



Figure 2. 31Or441 prior to investigation.

Split-core auger tests were placed at 10-ft intervals along the grid lines in an attempt to locate subsurface deposits. These cores indicate that deposits at the site are shallow, consisting of approximately 3-5 inches of topsoil above an undisturbed, orange clay subsoil. Although the auger could not be used in a number of places, presumably due to stones located below the surface, the cores that were taken (n=43) did not reveal any subsurface features or artifacts.

EXCAVATIONS

Excavations were conducted in two areas of 31Or441 (Figure 3).

Unit 110R140

This is a 10 ft² excavation unit opened because it encompassed what appeared to be a gap in the stone feature's southern wall. This observation along with the fact that the gap was located approximately in the center of the southern wall led us to speculate that this might have been an entrance. While removal of 3 to 4 inches of topsoil showed that this gap was not total in the sense that stones were present, the stones that did exist in this area were much smaller than those in the wall on either side (Figure 4). This course of smaller and larger stones sat upon a course comprised of two rows of much larger stones. While our limited excavations did not expose the entirety of this lower course of stones in 110R140, the two stones that were uncovered were the largest stones encountered at the site.

Gaps in the distribution of smaller stones scattered around the southern end of the stone feature provide further support for the idea that an entranceway existed in this area (Figures 4 and 5). These gaps occurred inside and outside of the stone feature adjacent to the smaller stones in the upper course. A lens of yellowish brown clay mixed with gravel, small pieces of stone, and small brick fragments was present within this gap on the southern side of the feature. This lens was about 7 inches thick and rested on subsoil. Due to our limited investigations, it was unclear as to whether this lens extended below the scattered stones. This lens also was present in between the scattered stones on the north side of the feature, but it was not excavated. If an entrance was located in this area,

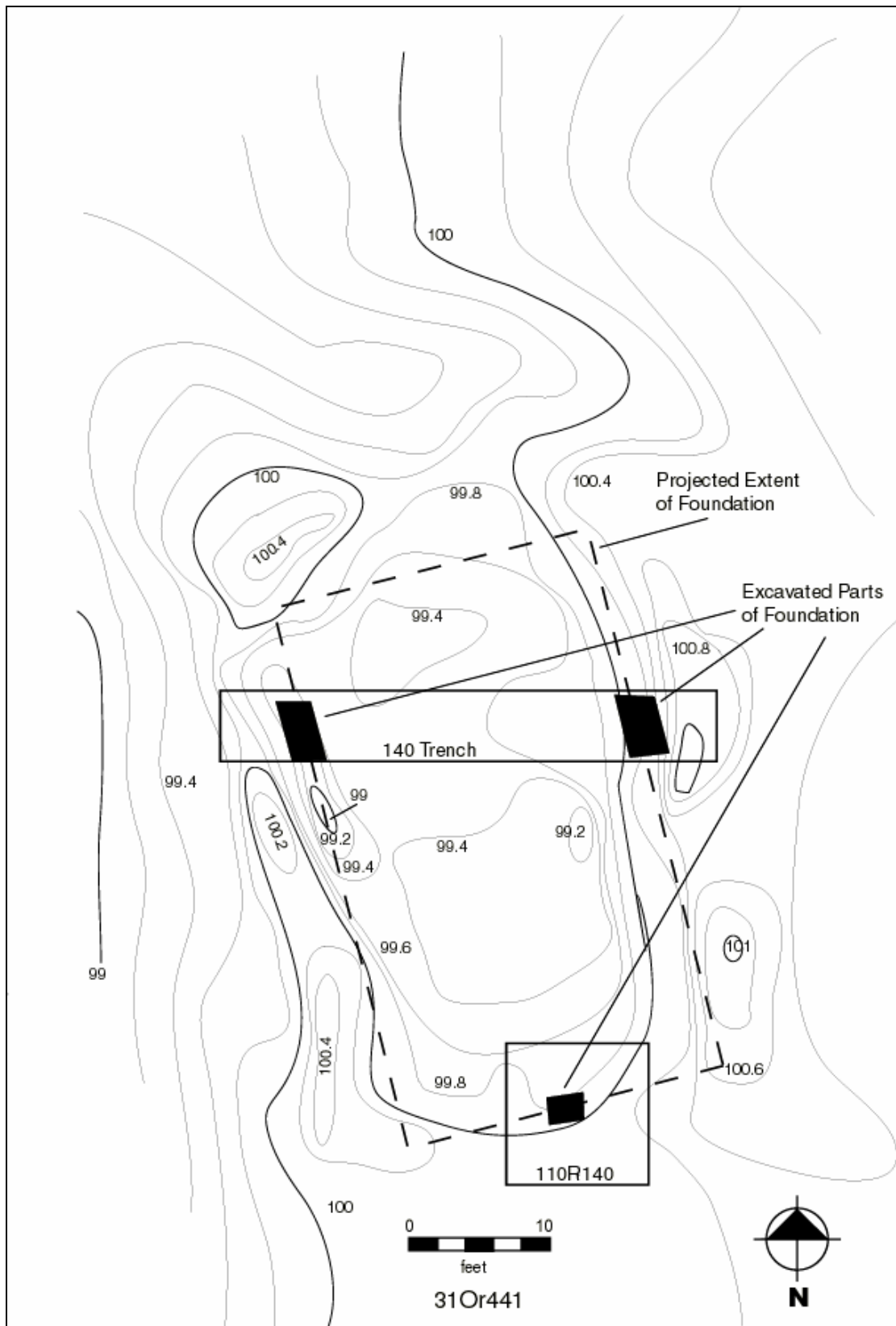


Figure 3. Topographic map showing areas of excavation.

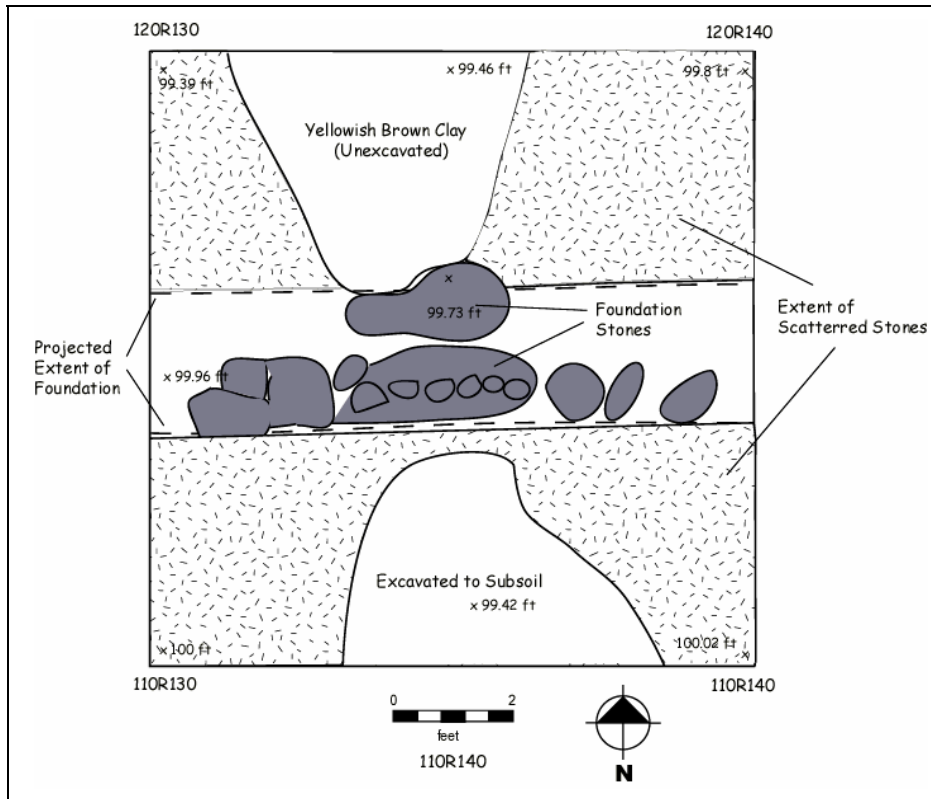


Figure 4. Excavation Plan of Unit 110R140.



Figure 5. Chris Rodning excavating clay lens between gap in stones in 110R140.

this lens of yellow clay mixed with rock and brick may represent a more resistant surface that was placed in a high-traffic area.

140 Trench

The second area of excavation at the site consisted of a 5 foot wide (north/south) and 40 foot long (east/west) trench, the southern edge of which extended from 140R110 in the east to 140R150 in the west. This trench intersected the east and west walls of the stone feature, providing us with a complete cross-section of the site. In the western part of the excavation trench, the removal of the smaller stones revealed a roughly north/south oriented builder's trench within which were set two parallel rows of large stones (Figure 6). Portions of two courses were visible, but it is unclear if the lowest course visible to us was actually the lowest course of stones in the trench (Figure 7). On the western side of the foundation, our excavations revealed an empty builder's trench (Figure 8), signs of which are visible on the surface in the form of a linear depression along the western part of the foundation (Figure 9).

The soil adjacent and exterior to the builder's trench on both sides of the foundation was slightly higher in elevation than the surrounding subsoil. This is clearly visible on the surface as a rectangular embankment that roughly corresponds to the distribution of fieldstones. While we initially thought that this low mound was comprised of shallowly buried stones from collapsed walls, our excavations indicate that this mound consists of spoil dirt from the builder's trench that was placed adjacent to what would become the exterior of the foundation.

Excavations at the center of the 140 Trench removed only 2 to 3 inches of topsoil before exposing the orange, clay subsoil. Relatively few stones were encountered in this area, especially when compared to the areas around the foundation walls. It seems that the few stones that were in the center of the foundation probably were the easternmost edge of the stones piled along the robbed out builder's trench on the west side of the foundation.



Figure 6. Portion of east foundation wall exposed in 140 Trench.

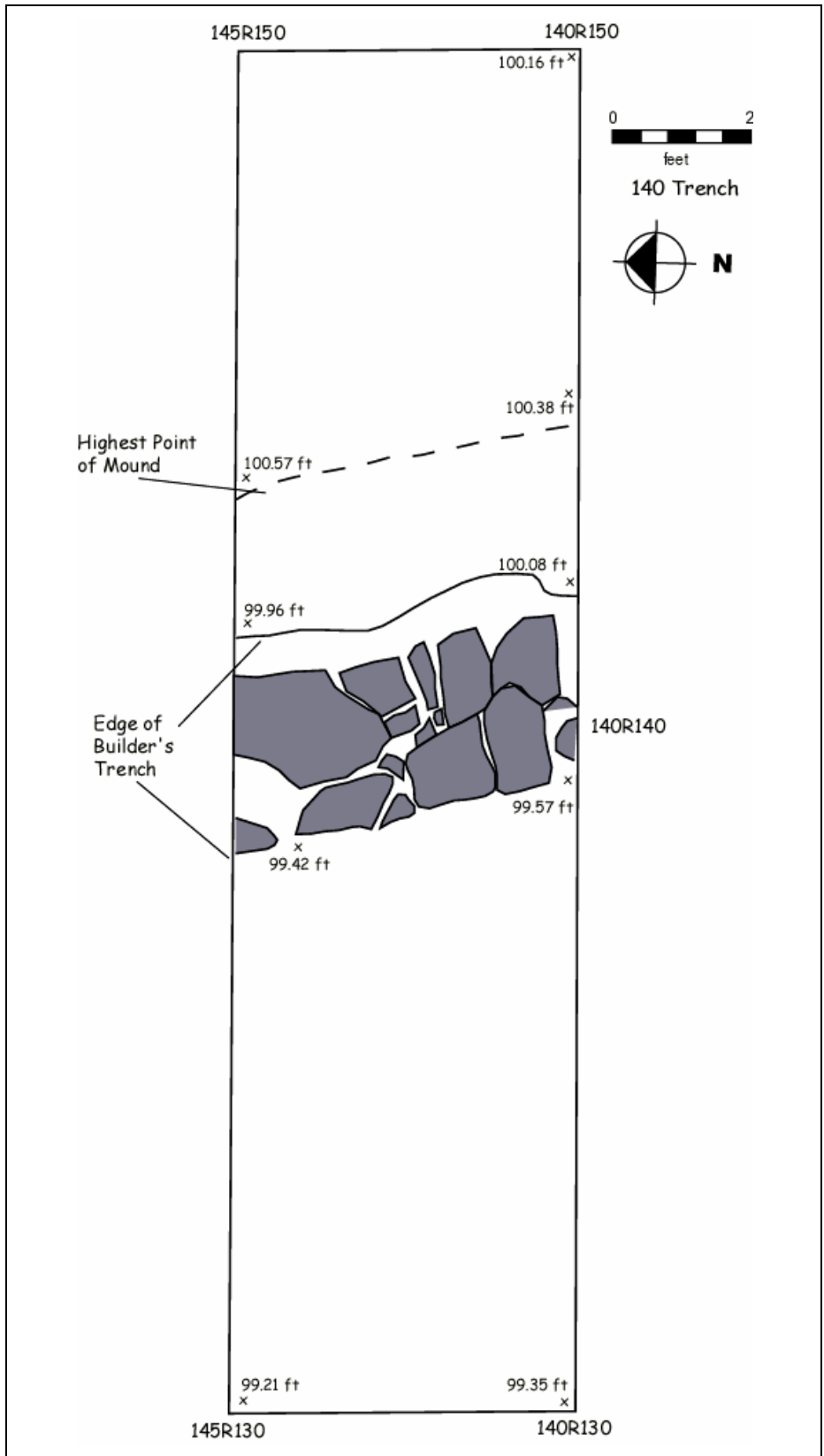


Figure 7. Eastern part of 140 Trench.

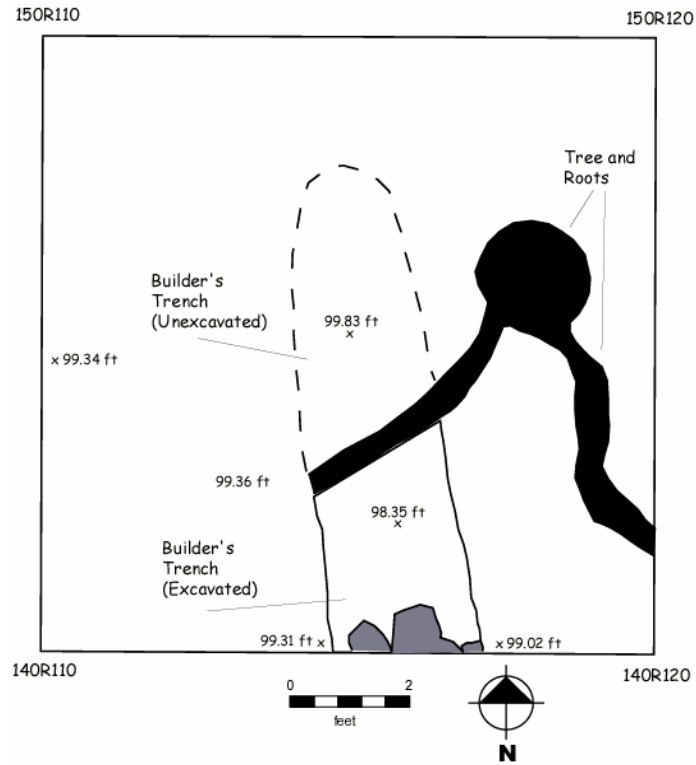


Figure 8. Western part of 140 Trench.



Figure 9. Chris Rodning in depression formed by builder's trench in the western part of the site.

ARTIFACTS

All of the artifacts found during our excavations are listed in Table 1. A number of cut and wire nails were found and they give us a gross indication about when the site was used. While cut nails are still in limited use today, they were commonly used during the nineteenth century (Edwards and Wells 1993:13). Wire nails, on the other hand, were not widely used until the end of the nineteenth century (Edwards and Wells 1993:13). The nails at 31Or441 were largely limited to the areas immediately around the foundation. This can also be said of the two hinge fragments that were found. Both of these observations are consistent with the presence of a wooden structure on top of the stone foundation.

The 140 Trench revealed very few artifacts on the interior of the foundation beyond a couple of feet of the foundation itself. One artifact that did come from the interior of the foundation was a molded lead ball. In contrast, several artifacts were found around the possible doorway in 110R140. These include a horseshoe, an oxshoe, and an unclassified metal artifact that may be part of a bridle or other horse furniture. The horseshoe is similar in form to a type in use during the mid 19th century (Noel Hume 1991:Figure 74).

The most important characteristic of the artifact assemblage is its overall paucity, especially regarding items that would be considered domestic in nature (i.e., ceramics, kitchenware, food remains, personal items). With the exception of a few glass container and wine bottle fragments, essentially no domestic refuse was found at the site. The two artifacts classified as wine bottle fragments are made of thick, dark green glass, an indication that they came from bottles produced during the mid-17th to mid-19th centuries (Jones 1986:11). One of these was a body fragment that came from the yellow clay lens in 110R140. The other is the neck and finish of a bottle that came from the matrix of small stones immediately above the foundation stones of the east wall. The absence of mold seams indicates that this part of the bottle was hand-made. This characteristic along with the form of the bottle's rim and lip are consistent with a manufacturing date of ca. 1820 or later (see Group 3b in Jones 1986:68).

Table 1. Artifacts from 31Or441.

Artifact Type	110R140			140R120			140R130	140R140/150	--	Total
	North Half	South Half	Clay Lens	Above Foundation	West End of Trench	Center of Trench	East End of Trench	Surface		
KITCHEN GROUP										
<i>Wine bottle fragments</i>	--	--	1	--	--	--	1	--	--	2
<i>Glass container fragments</i>	--	1	--	--	--	--	--	1	--	2
ARCHITECTURAL GROUP										
<i>Brick fragments</i>	1	9	11	--	7	--	3	1	--	32
<i>Nails</i>										
Cut	7	3	2	--	5	--	7	--	--	24
Wire	17	6	1	2	17	1	10	--	--	54
Unidentifiable	8	--	4	--	3	3	1	--	--	19
<i>Construction Hardware</i>										
Hinge	--	--	--	--	1	--	--	1	--	2
ARMS GROUP										
<i>Lead ball</i>	--	--	--	--	--	1	--	--	--	1
ACTIVITIES GROUP										
<i>Can fragments</i>	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	1	--	1
<i>Stable and Barn</i>										
Horseshoe	--	--	1	--	--	--	--	--	--	1
Oxshoe	1	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	1
<i>Miscellaneous Hardware</i>										
Latch	--	--	--	--	--	--	1	--	--	1
Wire	2	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	2
UNCLASSIFIED GROUP										
<i>Unidentified artifacts</i>	1	1	--	--	--	1	1	--	--	4
<i>Metal fragments</i>	16	38	--	--	2	--	1	--	--	57
TOTAL	53	58	20	2	35	6	25	4	--	203

CONCLUSIONS

Excavations indicate that 31Or441 was a substantial stone foundation for a wooden structure with at least one entryway facing to the south. The foundation was formed by the excavation of a builder's trench, the piling of spoil dirt on the outside of this trench, and the placement of parallel rows of large stones in the builder's trench. At some point in the past, the stones along the west side of the foundation were removed from the builder's trench. The artifacts that were recovered are consistent with the use of this structure at least throughout the 19th century and possibly into the 20th century. We do not know, however, if the structure was used continuously throughout this period or sequentially during discrete episodes.

While there is little evidence to positively identify this structure's function, there is no evidence to support the idea that this was a domestic structure. Domestic debris, the residue of everyday life, is almost completely absent. Additionally, there is no evidence for the presence of a chimney, an essential feature for any pre-modern dwelling. The evidence that is available indicates that this was a non-domestic out-building, possibly a stable or storage building, associated with the 19th and possibly 20th century Kirkland estate. We suspect that 31Or441 is probably only one of many such sites on the Ayr Mount property that represent the buildings and activity areas that were once a part of the Kirkland plantation. This seems logical as a number of different kinds of buildings would have been necessary to accommodate not only the diverse activities performed on the plantation, but also the community of people that performed them.

NOTES

¹ The elevations on the contour map and plan-view drawings are not absolute. They are relative to the datum (100R130) which was given an arbitrary elevation of 100ft.

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