

Introduction

The Dorchester Village Site is an Iroquoian village occupied between 1300-1400 AD—the Middle Iroquoian period (Freeman, 2019). The village site is located in the town of Dorchester, Ontario. After its excavation in 2004 by Timmins Martelle Heritage Consultants, a total of seventeen longhouses were documented on the village site (P. Timmins: personal communication, 2022). Within these longhouses, a variety of different feature types were documented in each house, including hearths; storage, refuse, and ash pits; posts; and sweat lodges. In this report, a comparison of the artifact types found in the basal and infill layers of the House 6 sweat lodges will be presented with the goal of understanding the use-life of these structures in the Dorchester site.

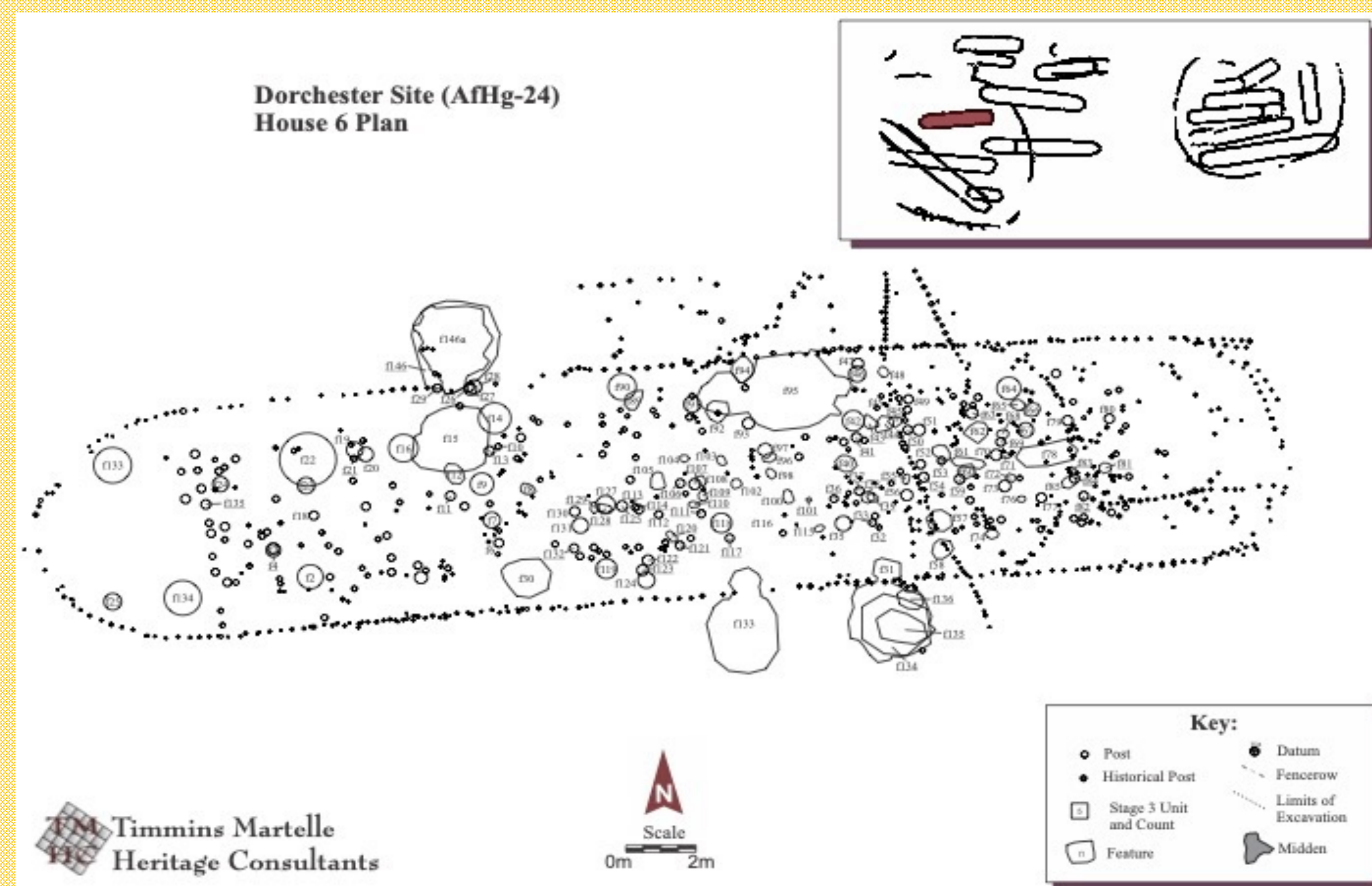


Figure 1: Dorchester Village Site Map by Timmins Martelle Heritage Consultants Inc.

Background

During the Middle Iroquoian period (1300-1400 A.D.), semi-subterranean sweat lodges were structures commonly built on the inside of longhouses in Southern Ontario (Parks, 2018). Sweat lodges tended to be circular or sub-rectangular in shape with an attached, round ramped extension acting as an entranceway (MacDonald). Therefore, sweat lodges are identifiable by their keyhole-like shape, and are sometimes called “turtle pits” (MacDonald & Williamson, 2001). It has been suggested by other archaeologists that stratigraphically, the basal layers of sweat lodges yield symbolically charged artifacts that were used during shamanistic rituals and social ceremonies that took place within the structures (Parks, 2018). The types of artifacts found in the basal layer in comparison to the ones found in the infill layers of each sweat lodge can help provide further insight into the use-life of these structures.

Research Methods

Three sweat lodges from House 6 at the Dorchester site were analyzed in this study (Features 31, 95, and 133) using the following methodology.

1. Determining the Basal Layer

The basal layers were identified by examining the feature profiles that were drawn when the features were excavated, finding the lowest layers in each sweat lodge, and then considering their thickness and soil composition. Sweat lodge basal layers tend to be comprised of a dark soil mixed with charcoal and ash (MacDonald). Basal layers have been suggested to be about 10 cm thick and are typically overlain by one or more depositional infill layers (MacDonald & Williamson, 2001). The lower infill layer usually contains fire cracked rock and few artifacts, while the upper layer tends to be rich in artifacts (Parks, 2018). The basal layers can be interpreted as the living floor of the sweat lodges (when the feature was in use), whereas the infill layers were likely deposited after the sweat lodges stopped being used for sweating and may have transitioned to use as refuse pits (P. Timmins: personal communication, 2022).

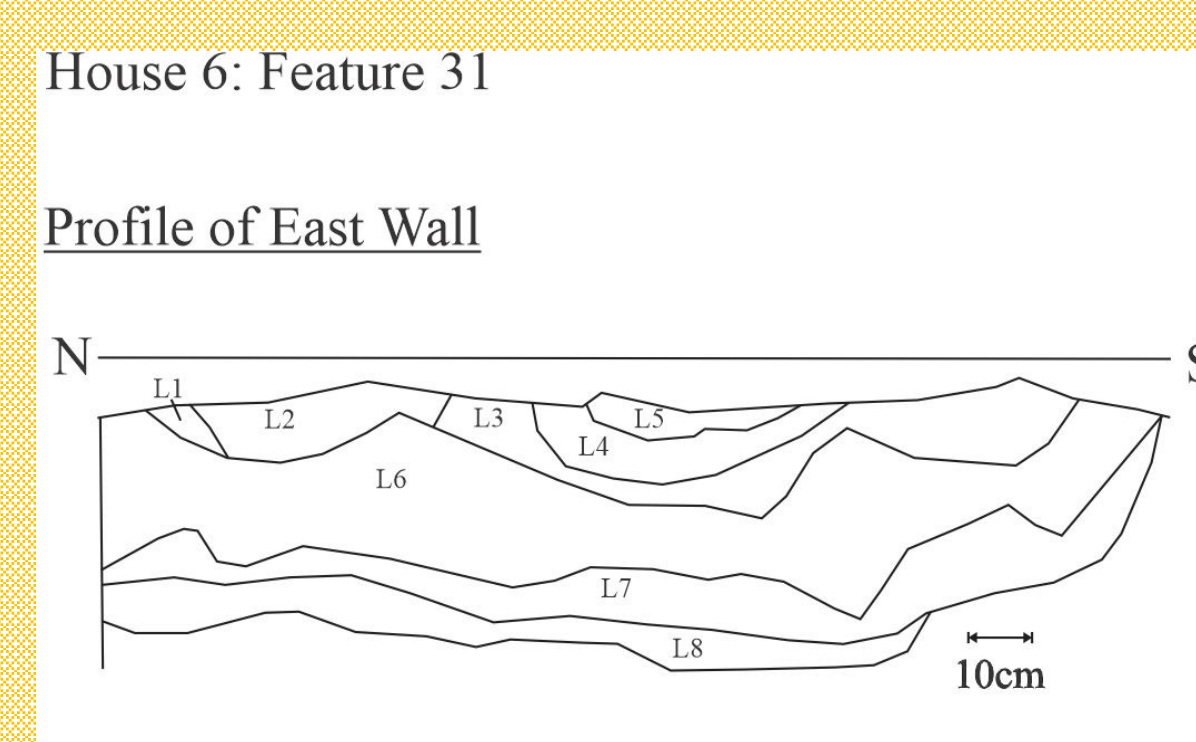


Figure 2: Feature 31 Profile Drawing



Figure 5: Feature 31 Profile Picture

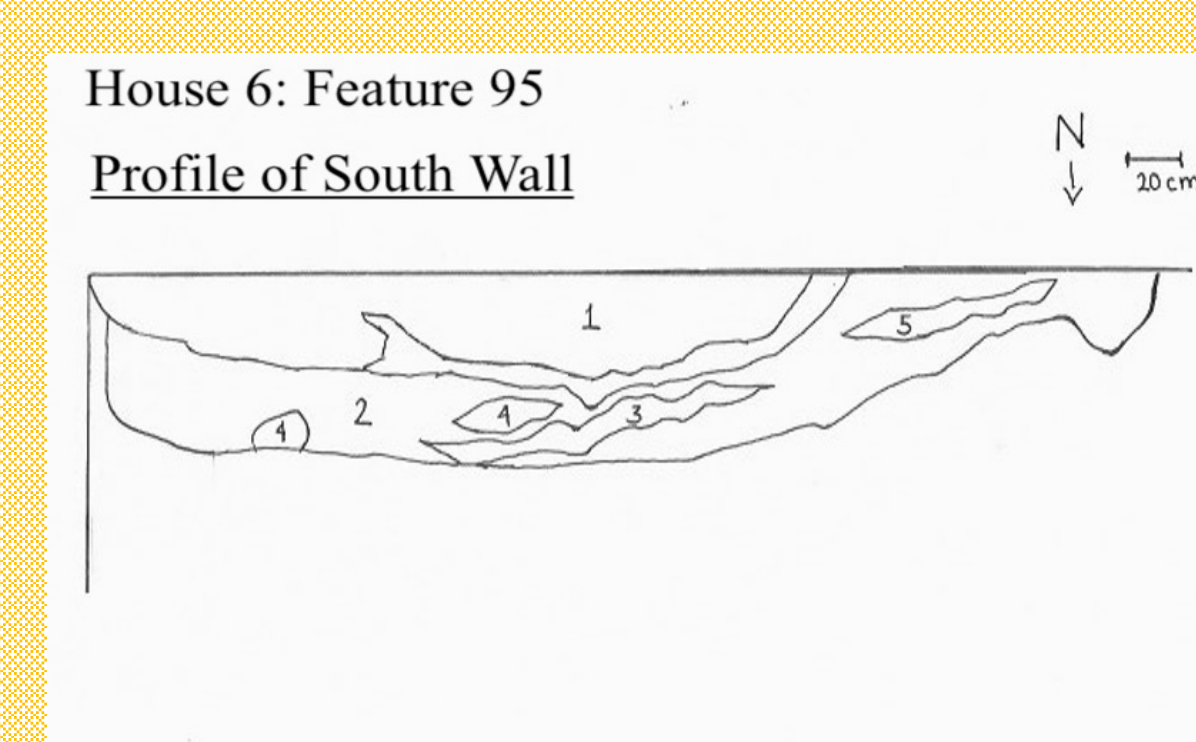


Figure 3: Feature 95 Profile Drawing



Figure 6: Feature 95 Profile Picture

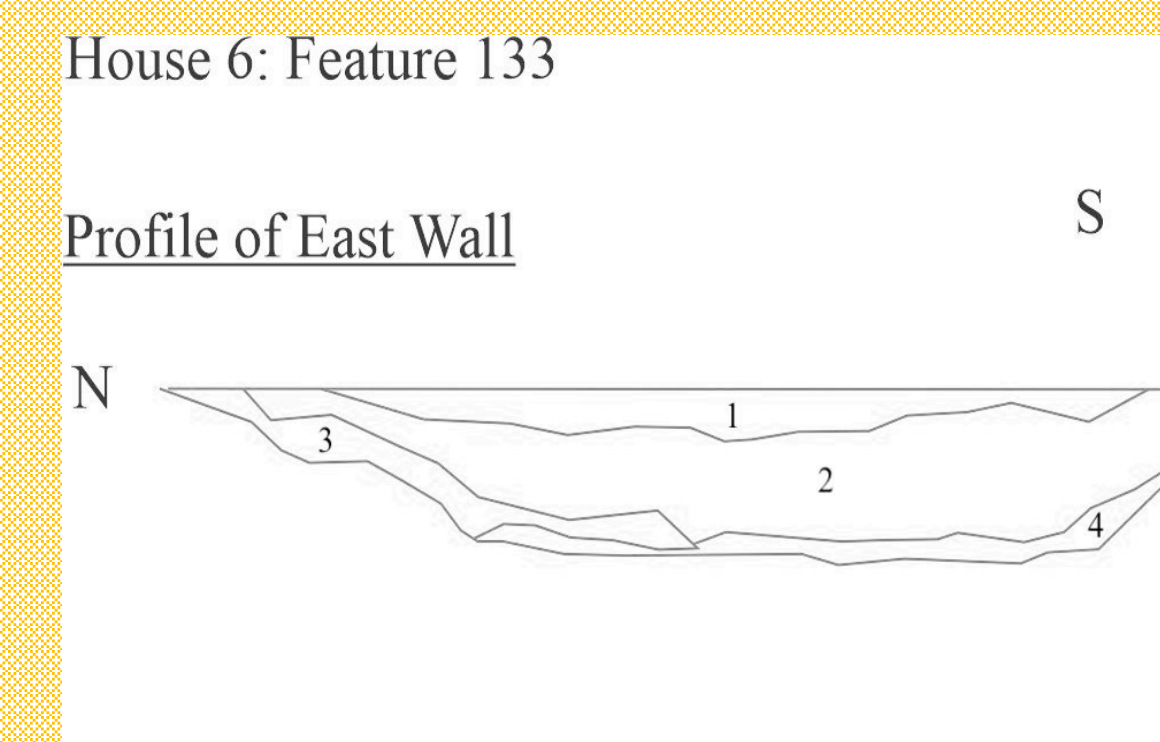


Figure 4: Feature 133 Profile Drawing



Figure 7: Feature 133 Profile Picture

2. Artifact Frequencies and Percentages

To determine patterns between the infill vs. basal layer artifacts of the sweat lodges, the artifact types were divided into the major categories of ceramic vessels, pipes, chipped stone tools, ground stone tools, faunal remains, and bone tools.

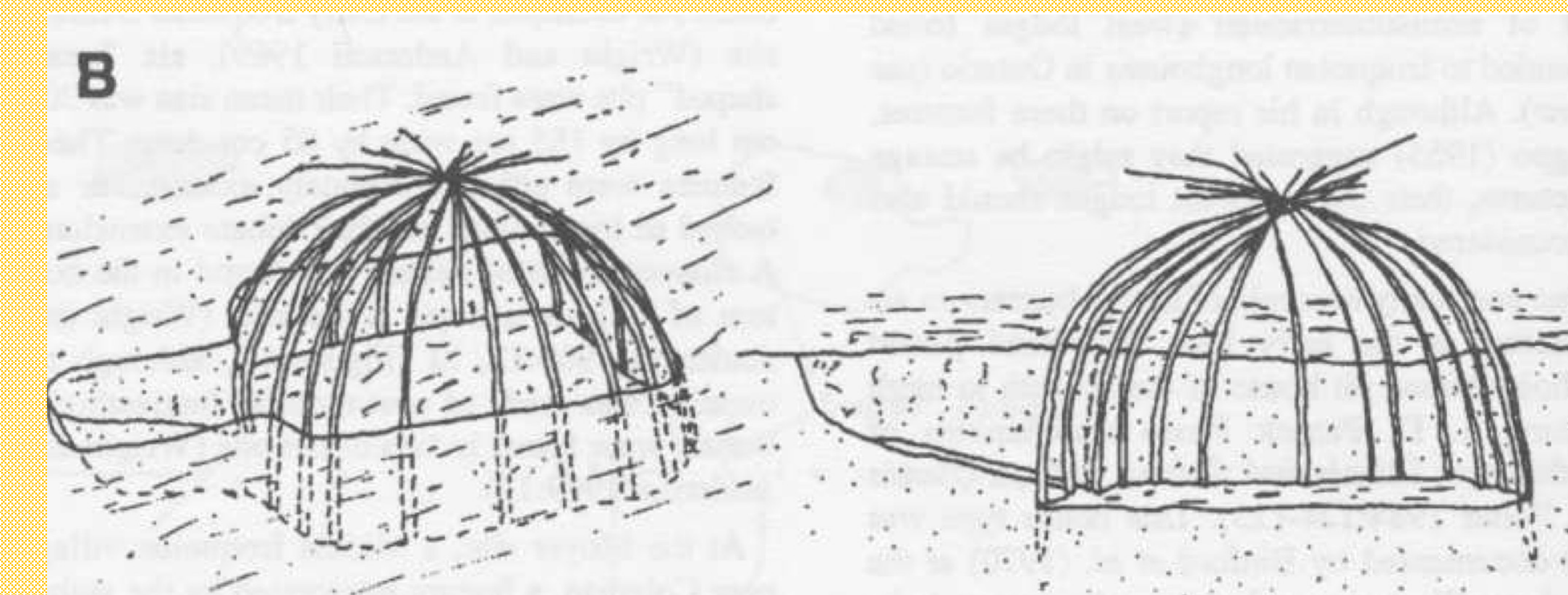


Figure 8: Example of Sweat Lodge (MacDonald)

3. Comparisons Between Basal and Infill Layers

Comparisons were then conducted between the contents of the basal layers and the overlying infill layers for each sweat lodge feature.

Table 1: Summary of Artifacts for SL 31

F31 Summary of Layers	Frequency	%
Layers 1-5 Infill	202	31.56
Layer 6 Basal	46	7.19
Layer 7 Basal	361	56.41
Layer 8 Basal	31	4.84
Total	640	100.00

Table 2: Summary of Artifacts for SL 95

F95 Summary of Layers	Frequency	%
Layer 1 Infill	1259	39.08
Layers 2-5 Basal	1963	60.92
Total	3222	100.00

Table 3: Summary of Artifacts for SL 133

F133 Summary of Layers	Frequency	%
Layer 1 Infill	21	9.86
Layer 2 Infill	7	3.29
Layer 3 Basal	107	50.23
Layer 4 Basal	78	36.62
Total	213	100.00

Results

- In general, more artifacts and ecofacts were found in basal layers than overlying infill layers (68% in SL 31, 61% in SL 95, and 87% in SL 133).
- The most common artifacts in all three sweat lodges were ceramic vessels, faunal remains, bone tools, and chipping detritus (formal stone tools were only found in SL 95).
- A significant fraction of each sweat lodge’s faunal remains were shells. Though not examined in this study, the bivalve mollusk shell is the most commonly type found in Iroquoian sites. This may be significant because shells are often used in ritual contexts (i.e. as grave offerings, in smudging, in medicine bags) (P. Timmins: personal communication, 2022).
- SL 133 appears to have been abandoned and naturally filled in (not used as a refuse pit) as very little material was found in the infill layers.
- SL 31 and 95 have similar infill/basal artifact and ecofact percentages in its layers, which suggest they could have both become refuse or midden features after their use as a sweat lodge ceased.