

Archeological Dig at the Mahaffie Farmstead Utilizes Volunteers

The Mahaffie Farmstead and Stagecoach Stop Historic Site at Olathe was the scene of archeological excavations during the summer of 1988. The project involved 160 volunteers from the local area and across the state and was a joint venture of the Kansas State Historical Society and the City of Olathe. Professional supervision was provided by Society staff archeologist William Lees.

The Mahaffie Farmstead, as its name suggests, focused on agricultural production. It was established in 1858 along the Santa Fe Trail. By 1865 the Mahaffies owned 570 acres and had an extensive livestock herd. Between the years 1865 and 1869, J. B. Mahaffie

responded to the large number of travelers who passed the farm and began to operate a stagecoach stop. Stagecoach routes served in this fashion were Westport to Lawrence, Westport to Fort Scott, and Westport to Santa Fe, New Mexico.

The limestone dwelling house built by Mahaffie in 1865 still stands and serves as the focal point of the Mahaffie Farmstead and Stagecoach Stop Historic Site, which is operated by the City of Olathe as a museum. Other standing, historical buildings on the property include a limestone icehouse, thought to date to 1865, and a wood peg barn. The 1865 dwelling, icehouse, and peg barn are listed on the National Register

of Historic Places.

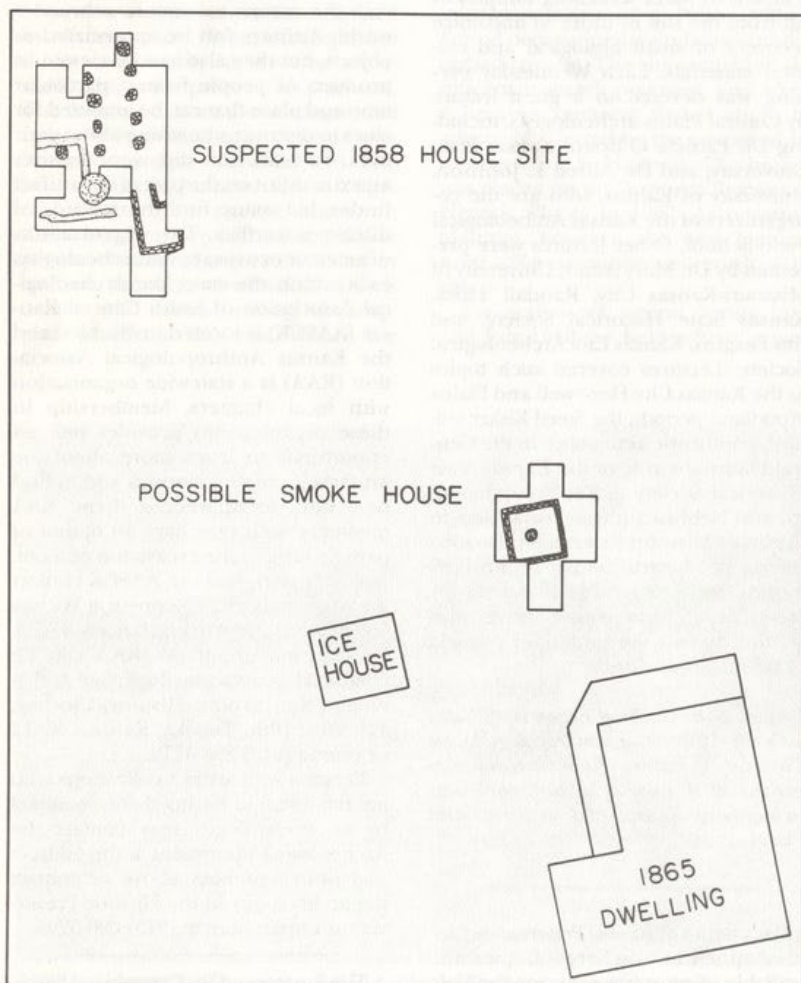
In 1985 the Kansas State Historical Society was approached by the manager of the Mahaffie Farmstead, Michael Duncan, who was interested in developing an archeological program at the site. He desired to undertake this work with the use of local volunteers, an approach which meshed well with the Society's strong commitment to public outreach and education. The next two years were spent in obtaining funding from the city to underwrite fifty percent of the Society's expenses on this project and in planning the project.

One of the main goals of the archeological investigation was related to the city's planned reconstruction of the original Mahaffie dwelling, which was moved from Olathe to the farmstead in 1858. Conventional wisdom held that this original dwelling remained at the farmstead until the 1920s, when it was moved to another location in Olathe. A cistern and depression, thought to be a filled cellar, were alleged to be remains of this dwelling. It was hoped that the archeological project would verify this site as the location of the early dwelling and provide needed details for reconstruction and interpretation. Although this was an overarching goal, an important ancillary goal was to investigate other areas of the property where evidence for subsurface features had been identified.

The excavations at the Mahaffie Farmstead were conducted in two, ten-day periods in June and July of 1988. Project objectives were structured to provide a different focus for each of these sessions. The initial focus was on the site hypothesized to be the location of the original 1858 Mahaffie dwelling house.

A total of eighty-eight square meters were excavated in this area, with all excavation conducted in two-meter squares. As a result, a number of architectural features were documented. The brick-lined cistern was the most obvious feature prior to excavation. The most substantial feature encountered during excavation was, however, a cellar located beneath the shallow depression mentioned earlier. It measured about seven by eight feet, and a stairwell, measuring about three feet in width, exited through the north wall. The cellar was lined with a substantial limestone masonry wall, most of which had been salvaged, and was floored with a flagstone pavement which had been covered with a thin layer of cement.

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This map indicates the relationships of the various foundations uncovered during excavations at the Mahaffie Farmstead.

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Two architectural features may be related to the cellar although such an interpretation remains speculative. These features are both "ghost" foundations; that is, they consist of subtle outlines of rock and mortar rubble which mark the locations of continuous limestone masonry foundations that have been totally removed. The first of these intersects the western side of the cistern, proceeds north for about six and one-half feet, and then takes a sharp ninety degree turn to the west.

The second "ghost" foundation is an alignment which runs east-west for at least fourteen feet. This foundation trace is less distinct than the other "ghost," but this alignment is in line with the northern wall of the cellar. Unfortunately, because of slumping around the edge of the cellar, it could not be determined if this alignment was in fact once associated with the cellar.

The relationship between the cellar, the cistern, and the "ghost" foundations is thus uncertain. Both "ghosts" are continuous foundations, and both appear to have been made of mortared limestone masonry. This type of construction is consistent with that observed for the cellar. The fact that one of these "ghost" features intersects the cistern and that there was no evidence that the cellar and "ghost" foundations were ever joined poses problems of interpretation.

An interesting complex with no demonstrated relationship to the other features in this area consists of three parallel alignments of limestone pier sub-footings. These features are consistent in a general sense but are somewhat irregular in their configurations. They consist of a concentration of angular, fist-sized limestone rocks which were apparently dry-laid. These concentrations are typically square-like, although corners are often rounded and rarely approximate ninety degrees. Their dimensions are generally within the range of two to three feet. These are interpreted as intentionally prepared subsurface footings, or sub-footings, for the placement of aboveground pier footings, none of which remain.

A total of ten of these sub-footings were uncovered during the project, and the location of what are probably an additional three were identified by solid core probing. The only alignment that was completely exposed was about twenty-one feet in length, composed of five



The foundation of an outbuilding, possibly a smokehouse, was found at the Mahaffie Farmstead site. Artifacts found on the floor of this structure indicate it was used during an early period in the operation of the farmstead.

regularly spaced piers. To the west of this alignment was another for which four piers were uncovered and a fifth identified. Still further to the west another pier was uncovered and the locations of what are probably two additional piers were identified. Although the westernmost alignment appears to be missing two piers in its midsection, the three alignments all appear to be roughly equal in length. Thus, these piers would have supported a building which measured approximately twenty-one feet north-south by eighteen feet east-west.

Looking at all the features encountered in this area, a very speculative interpretation is possible which posits the cellar, the cistern, and the "ghost" foundations as being related to a single structure or two related, contemporary structures. The frame dwelling reported to have been moved from this site in about 1920 is presumably also associated with these foundations. The structure delineated by the ten sub-footings is, however, hypothesized to represent a later building not associated with the other architectural remains in this area. This is suggested by the fact that the building founded on the piers conflicts with one of the "ghost" foundations; that is, they cover the same turf.

The artifacts from this area have not yet been analyzed, but based on field observations they do not appear to contain the materials expected of a mid-nineteenth century occupation. While an occasional early artifact was encoun-

tered, the vast majority are consistent with an occupation dating from the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The artifacts thus suggest, once again based only on field observations, that the area excavated was not the location of the 1858 Mahaffie dwelling.

The focus of the second session was an area located between the 1865 dwelling and the excavation area described above. This area was covered with a dense sod cover and no indication was present on the surface of any buried archeological features. Evidence of a buried feature was encountered, however, in 1986 when a utility trench was excavated. The mechanical trencher hit a mass of limestone rubble, which site manager Duncan believed might represent a foundation. The utility trench was rerouted around this area.

A total of thirty-four square meters was excavated in this area in a block composed of two-meter-square units. The predominant feature revealed within this area was the limestone foundation of a building. This foundation was square, measuring about eleven feet on a side. The walls were composed of courses of relatively thin, tabular limestone, and were approximately one foot thick. The walls were founded on the clay subsoil at the same level as the sunken floor of the building. This clay floor was encountered at approximately sixty centimeters below the modern

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ground surface, and represents the actual floor of the building. In the approximate center of the clay floor was a basin-shaped hearth, filled with wood ash, which measured about one and one-half feet in diameter.

The stratigraphy of this area is informative. Approximately four to six inches beneath the ground surface was a dense layer of cinders which covered the building area. Intermixed with these cinders were late nineteenth-century artifacts, the first indication of the early nature of the building. Beneath this cinder layer and within the limestone foundation was a dense zone of large limestone rubble and soil, which appears to have been intentionally placed in the sunken interior of the building to level it after it was torn down. Until we were about six inches above the clay floor of the building, few artifacts were encountered. Beneath the limestone rubble and lying right on top of the floor of the building was, however, a rewarding zone of numerous mid-nineteenth century artifacts.

This zone of artifacts is interpreted to represent refuse which was on the floor of the building when it was demolished, an interpretation made easy by the artifacts' encapsulation beneath a mass of limestone rock. The artifacts included numerous bottle and ceramic

fragments as well as other, less numerous artifacts such as the head to a felling axe and an 1854 large cent. The presence of ceramics decorated with polychrome hand-painted floral designs, transfer decorations, and annular motifs, as well as many bottles with open glass pontil scars, indicates an early date for this deposit, most certainly prior to 1870.

Because of the hearth in the center of this relatively small, square building, an interpretation as a smokehouse is suggested. The presence of this building behind the 1865 dwelling and adjacent to the 1865 icehouse would appear to indicate a relationship of this outbuilding to the later, 1865 building episode at Mahaffie Farm. The early age of the artifacts in this building suggests, however, that it was demolished at about the same time that the 1865 buildings were being erected.

If this structure dates prior to 1865, as seems likely, its relationship to the hypothesized 1858 dwelling site is intriguing. This possible smokehouse is located between the suspected 1858 dwelling site and the Santa Fe Trail. It would thus have been in front of the 1858 dwelling, unlikely positioning for an outbuilding.

Research thus suggests that the suspected 1858 dwelling site may in reality be the location of a later building, and that the "smokehouse" originally suspected to post-date the 1865 building

episode may in fact be earlier. Taken together, these results seem to point to another location for the 1858 dwelling. It may be that the 1858 dwelling and the 1865 dwelling were located in the same general vicinity; indeed, it is not uncommon for an early dwelling to serve as the nucleus for a later dwelling or at least to remain attached to it.

This project seems to provide another example of what archeologists know all too well, that things are not always as they appear. If the artifacts bear out the arguments presented in this summary, a new interpretation of the layout and historical development of the farmstead will be in order. Regardless of the outcome of the analysis, the work of the volunteers at the 1988 archeological program at Mahaffie Farmstead will have provided information for a new chapter in Olathe and Kansas history. It also has served to bring a new group of Kansans into "hands-on" contact with their state's past.—William B. Lees.

Editor's Note: Dr. William Lees is an historical archeologist on the staff of the Archeology Department at the Kansas State Historical Society. He is the author of Jotham Meeker's Farmstead: Historical Archeology at the Ottawa Baptist Mission, Kansas, among other publications, and has directed excavations at a number of historic and prehistoric sites in the Central Plains.

Kansas State Historical Society

Historic Preservation Dept.
120 West 10th St.
Topeka, KS 66612-1291

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