



1981

## 7-An Archaeological Survey of the Approaches and Bridge Relocation along US-12 over the Fawn River, White Pigeon Township, St. Joseph County, Michigan

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DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY  
WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

TECHNICAL REPORT NO. 7

1981

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF THE APPROACHES  
AND BRIDGE RELOCATION ALONG US-12 OVER THE FAWN RIVER,  
WHITE PIGEON TOWNSHIP, ST. JOSEPH COUNTY, MICHIGAN

PREPARED FOR  
THE MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION  
AND THE MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF STATE

WILLIAM M. CREMIN

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## INTRODUCTION:

Pursuant to the signing of a cooperative agreement (dated 4 Sep 81) between the Michigan Department of Transportation, the Michigan Department of State and Western Michigan University, authorizing an archaeological survey of the approaches and bridge relocation along US-12 over the Fawn River near White Pigeon in St. Joseph County, Michigan, a team of archaeologists from the Department of Anthropology initiated a literature and documents search and on-site evaluation of the project area in order to ascertain whether road improvement activities planned for this segment of the US-12 corridor would adversely impact cultural resources. There follows a report of this research program, together with recommendations based upon our findings.

At the onset it should be understood that the opinions, findings and conclusions expressed in this publication are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Department of State, or Divisions thereof, or the Michigan Department of Transportation.

## PROJECT PERSONNEL:

The following individuals participated in the project:

Principal Investigator - Dr. William M. Cremin, Associate  
Professor of Anthropology, WMU

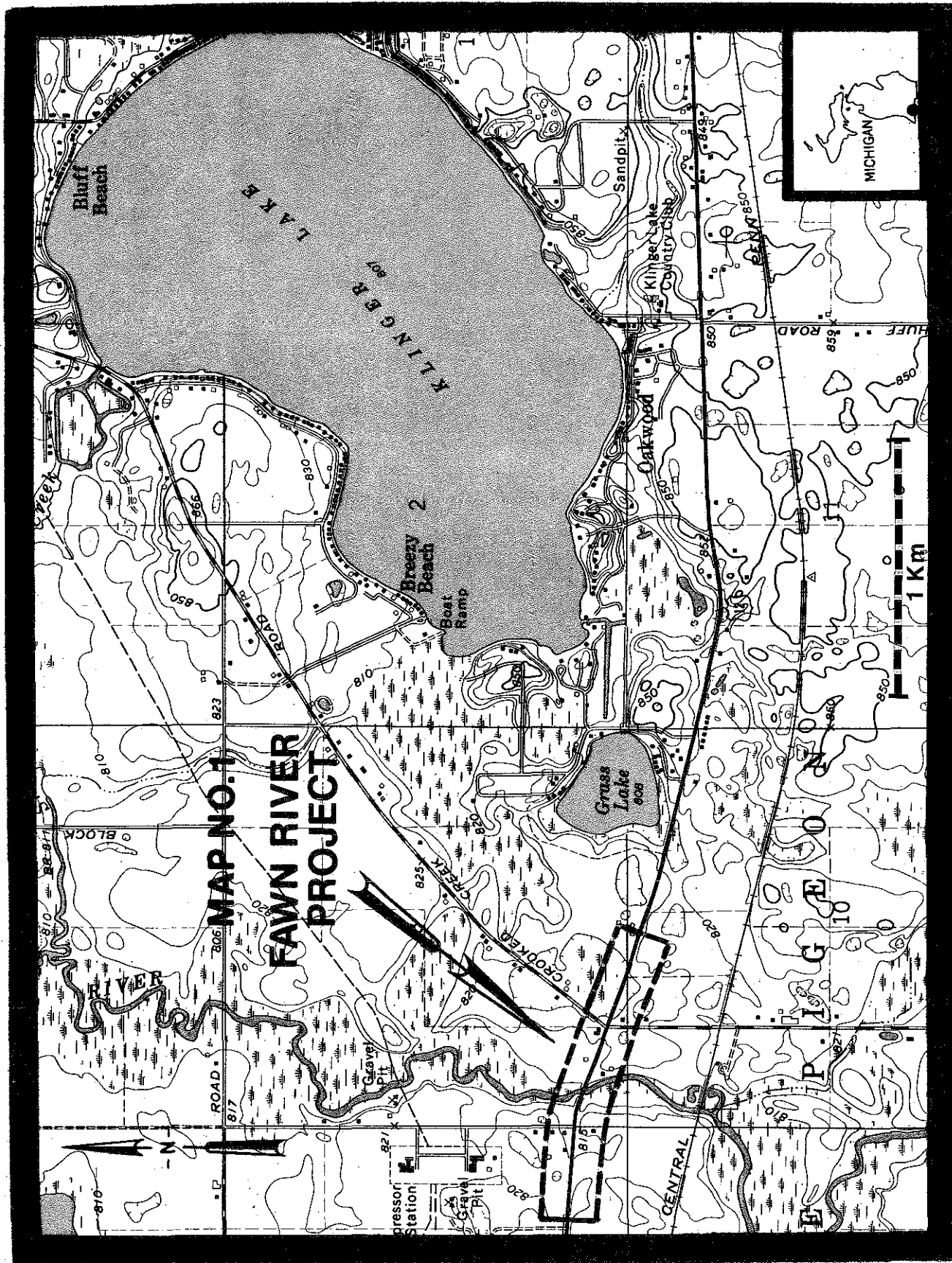
Field Assistants - Mr. Michael Murphy, Graduate  
Student in Anthropology, WMU  
- Mr. Charles Stout, Graduate  
Student in Anthropology, WMU

## DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT AREA:

The research area of this study consists of an irregular and discontinuous strip of land lying in the expanded US-12 corridor over the Fawn River. The project is located about 4.8 km east of the Village of White Pigeon in the S 1/2, SW 1/4 of Section 3, SE 1/4, SE 1/4 of Section 4 and N 1/2, NE 1/4, NW 1/4 of Section 10, White Pigeon Township, T7-8S R12-11W, St. Joseph County, Michigan (Map No. 1). Within the 1.1 km long portion of the US-12 ROW delineated on the project map, it is estimated that approximately 4.4 ha required systematic and intensive archaeological investigation.

Examination of the relevant topographic map reveals that the uplands flanking the Fawn River Valley are level to only slightly undulating, with elevation above sea level in the project ranging between 240-246 m. The gentle roll of the terrain is broken only by the river trench, traversing the project from south to north, and several sizable depressions occurring both within and immediately adjacent to the US-12 ROW in the eastern portion of the project. These were observed to hold water and support dense stands of wetland vegetation at the time that our fieldwork was conducted.

The dominant feature on the landscape in the general vicinity of the project is Klinger Lake, a body of water which covers an estimated 285 ha and lies at a distance of little more than a kilometer east and north of the study area. Klinger is the largest lake in the township and is drained by a small stream which joins Fawn River about 2 km downstream and north





of the US-12 bridge. A second, much smaller body of water known as Grass Lake lies intermediate between Klinger Lake and the study area. It is estimated that this lake covers an area of no more than 16 ha (Map No. 1).

The soils of the project consist principally of silt clay loams and sandy loams and formerly supported extensive stands of oak and oak-hickory forest (Brewer 1979). According to the St. Joseph County history (Anonymous 1877; Cutler 1911), which was frequently consulted during the course of our investigation, bur oak and white oak openings once dotted the landscape and together with White Pigeon Prairie, an area of grassland covering about 405 ha and located just south of the present village of the same name, provided the major attraction for Euro-American settlers entering the township during the late 1820s. Stream bottoms like those flanking Fawn River supported, in addition to oaks and hickories, mixed hardwoods such as beech, maple, ash, elm, black walnut, butternut and cherry.

Of historic importance is the fact that US-12 (and our research area) follows the military road established across southern Lower Michigan in 1825 to facilitate travel between Detroit and Chicago. And the basis for the laying out of this road was the "Old Chicago Trail", a route long used by Indians traveling between these two points (Cutler 1911; Hinsdale 1931). Hence, the area which we had contracted to investigate was also potentially significant from the standpoint of the settling of a larger portion of the Middle West.

## PREVIOUS RESEARCH IN THE PROJECT AREA:

An extensive literature, documents and site file search has revealed that no archaeological, historical or architectural sites have thus far been reported for the study area. In fact, the State site files maintained by the Michigan History Division contain no archaeological sites from White Pigeon Township. Be that as it may, at least one frequently cited source, W.B. Hinsdale's (1931) Archaeological Atlas of Michigan, locates on the map on page 4 not only the "Old Chicago Trail", but also two circular enclosures, one mound and a village site in the general vicinity of the US-12 project. If the locations collected and presented by Hinsdale are correct (albeit none of these sites has since been confirmed), the apparent focus of aboriginal interest in this area appears to have been either Klinger Lake or White Pigeon Prairie.

With respect to the latter area, it is perhaps noteworthy that both versions of the St. Joseph County history (Anonymous 1877; Cutler 1911) indicate that this was a great camping ground and village of the Potawatomi Indians prior to occupation of the rich prairieland by white farmers in 1827 and the subsequent establishment of the Village of White Pigeon nearby. Of course, it is entirely possible that this one reference in the county history provided the basis for Hinsdale having located a major Indian village site on the prairie just south of this town.

In short, although a concerted effort was made to gather all available information pertaining to the prehistoric and historic aboriginal occupation of the township, we found nothing specifically relating to the immediate area of the project.

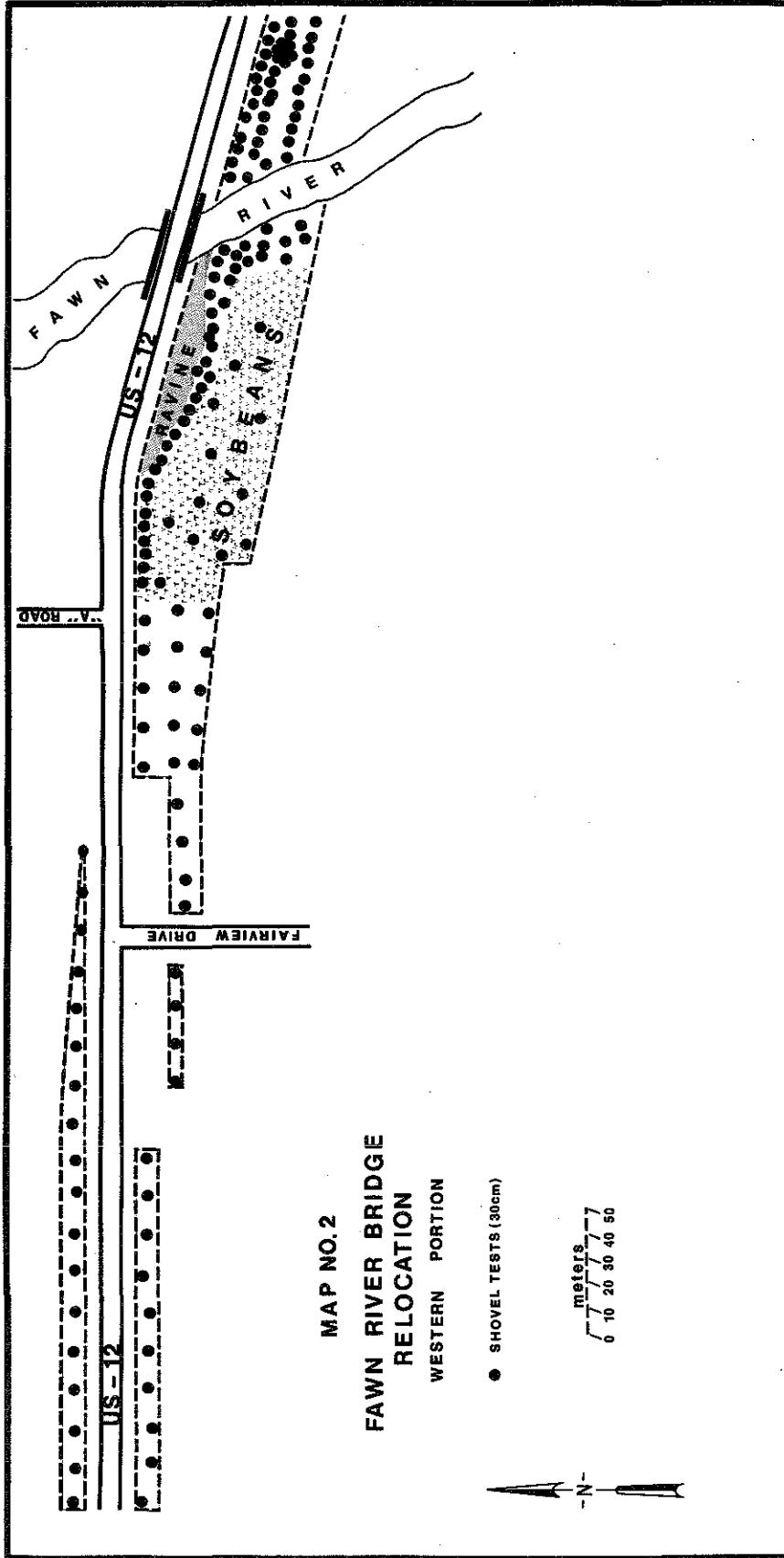
And, with respect to the matter of Euro-American settlement, neither persons nor places associated with the study area over the past century and a half appear to have left a "mark" on the ensuing course of history and, hence, are without significance from the standpoint of National Register criteria.

SURVEY FIELD PROCEDURES:

The project survey team consisted of the Principal Investigator and two Field Assistants. Survey procedures employed were those outlined in the proposal and project application submitted to MDOT by the author prior to the awarding of a contract to WMU.

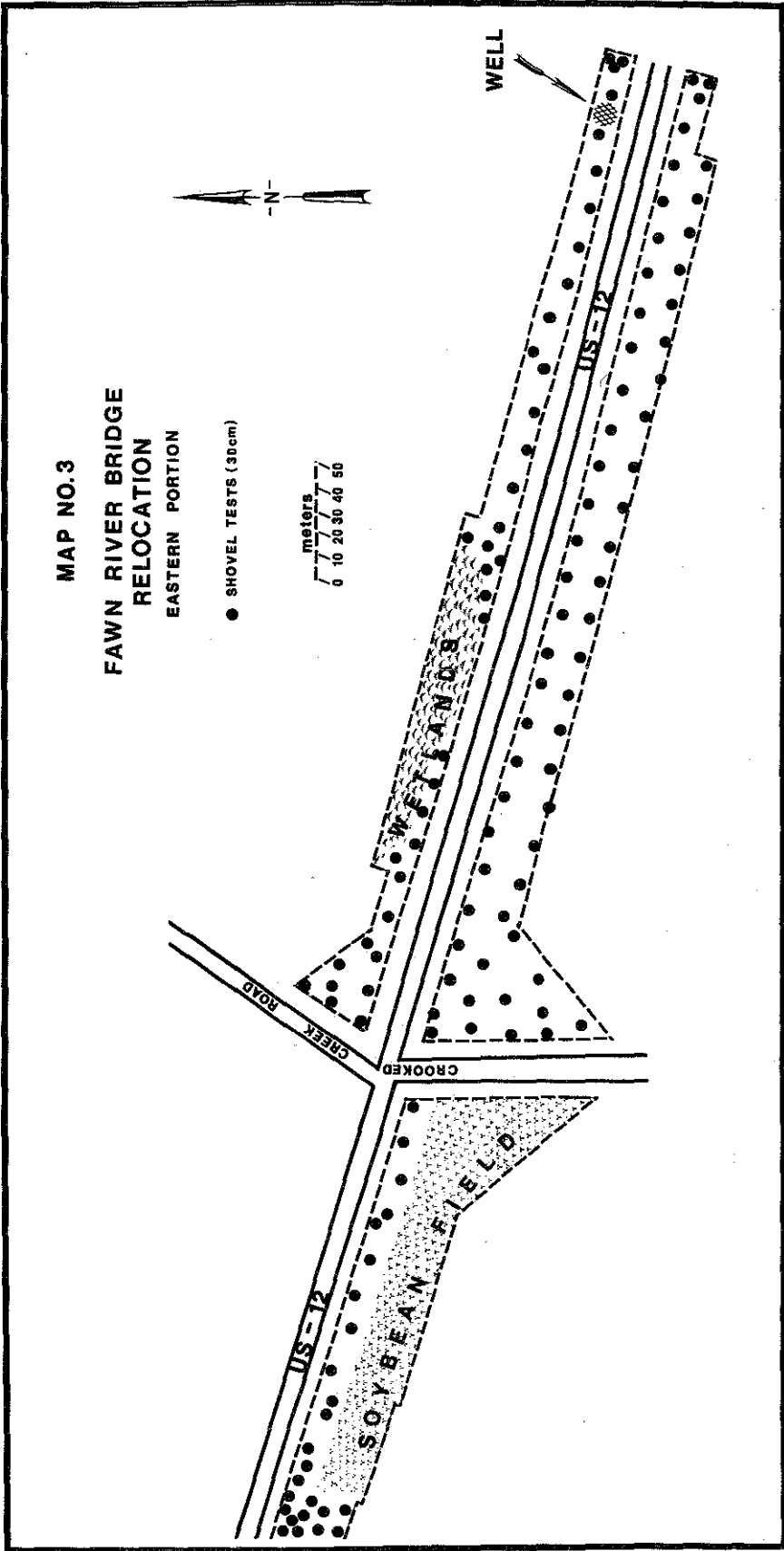
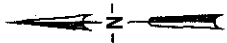
The entire study area was traversed from west to east along transects or lines of survey spaced from 5-15 m apart. In those portions of the US-12 corridor where surface visibility was observed to exceed 50%, surveyors emphasized surface reconnaissance procedures together with some judicious shovel testing for the purpose of examining the soil profile to determine the depth to which the plow had penetrated and the depth at which deposits of Pleistocene age would be encountered. In areas where surface visibility was less than 50%, and surface water and/or pavement did not effectively prohibit surveyor evaluation, we systematically shovel tested along transects at intervals varying from 5-15 m.

As is indicated in the research proposal, our program of survey called for greater intensity of shovel testing in those areas of the project lying in close proximity to Fawn River. Map No. 2 and Map No. 3 which follow show the approximate locations of 267 shovel tests. Observe that as surveyors approached



**MAP NO.3**  
**FAWN RIVER BRIDGE**  
**RELOCATION**  
**EASTERN PORTION**

● SHOVEL TESTS (30cm)



to within 100 m of the river, the distance between transects and shovel testing intervals along transects diminished from 15 m to 5 m or even less.

Shovel testing usually involved exposing the soil profile to a depth of 50-60 cm, or to a depth judged to be consistent with the post-Pleistocene depositional history of local soils. We are quite confident that testing to this depth was more than sufficient to ensure that any potential culture-bearing deposits beneath the modern surface would be exposed to view. However, as a precautionary measure, we did on occasion all along the route shovel test to a depth of 80 cm or even 1 m.

In addition to shovel testing those areas supporting dense ground cover and examining by means of surface reconnaissance procedures the soybean fields located on either side of the river, we did routinely examine all "raw" areas or erosional features, such as the deep ravine flanking the highway immediately west of the bridge (Map No. 2), and road cuts entering the expanded ROW. By these various methods, the survey team completed on-site evaluation of the study area which was both systematic and intensive. Observations derived from the fieldwork, together with information retrieved from the literature and documents search, provide a firm foundation upon which to make those recommendations which appear later in the report.

#### RESULTS OF THE SURVEY:

Briefly, the survey team did not record a single archaeological site in the US-12 corridor over the Fawn River. Nor did we observe any standing structures or foundations within the zone of impact, although it is quite clear to us that a

residential structure has recently been removed from the southeast corner of the intersection of US-12 and Crooked Creek Road (Map No. 3).

A total of 11 shovel tests placed along this segment of the highway produced cultural debris, but in eight instances the fragments of bottle glass, brick, porcelain and iron particles can easily be accounted for in terms of the current land use. For example, bottle fragments and pieces of wire fencing are a common occurrence along any road and are to be anticipated in a roadside survey program such as this one. And the presence of recent debris such as pieces of mortar, brick, glass and machine bolts in the front yards of two currently occupied residences on either side of the river, most certainly attest to or can be accounted for by reference to land leveling and lawn maintenance activities on the part of the landowners.

However, following an interview with Mr. Lee Saunders, who resides on property fronting the ROW near the eastern end of the project, the survey team did very carefully investigate two areas within the zone of impact which he indicated were related to a very old, semi-dismantled house (see Plates 1-3) situated but 3 m outside of the ROW. This structure, about 110 years old, and the Saunders Family residence until some 20 years ago, formerly served, according to our informant, as a way station for horse-drawn coaches traveling the highway, as well as a residence. A well (see Map No. 3) from which both people and horses received water is situated to the front

of this house and within the ROW. Now completely filled with soil and accumulated cultural debris spanning the period from the turn of the century until about 1965, the well itself was not probed inasmuch as Mr. Saunders cautioned that a collapse was a real possibility. However, a shovel test placed near the well produced a fragment of plate identifiable as blue edgewear.

Our informant also called the team's attention to a slight mound of earth nearby and also within the ROW. This feature, too, he claimed, was related to the occupation of the old house. The mound clearly evidenced recent "potting" activity, reflecting the attempt of several persons to determine just what this feature might represent. The two shovel tests which we placed along the margins of the heap of earth clearly showed a soil profile disturbed by mixing and yielded two fragments of saw-cut bone, three heavily corroded iron pieces, a second plate fragment of blue edgewear and six small particles of brick.

In light of Mr. Saunders' comments and our own observations, we feel quite safe in concluding that the well and the refuse heap are related to the occupation of the old residential structure located outside of the ROW. This house is now being dismantled and the construction timbers salvaged by Mr. Saunders. He also indicated similar intentions with respect to the barn situated about 30 m east of the house. This structure has long been associated with the house, according to our informant, and the platbooks and maps which we have examined suggest that both the house and the barn were erected at about the same time.



## SIGNIFICANCE OF OBSERVATIONS:

In this section of the report comments will be directed only toward the situation encountered near the eastern terminus of the project where the US-12 ROW fronts the Saunders property. For, clearly, with respect to the remainder of the study area, the question of potential cultural significance need not be further addressed.

Regarding our observations in this one area of the project, it is certainly quite possible that the two features identified as a well and a small mound of refuse might, if tested, yield some cultural information bearing upon the long occupation of this farmstead by the Saunders Family. The well, for example, can be anticipated to yield items of material culture discarded or deposited in this convenient receptacle over a period of more than half a century. Furthermore, careful examination of this feature might also provide information regarding aspects of internal construction potentially useful in illustrating the manner in which wells of the period were excavated and prepared for use. Be that as it may, without the greater cultural context afforded by the residence and outbuilding comprising the major structural features of the farmstead, it remains most difficult to make a recommendation that Phase II archaeological investigations (i.e. test excavation) be undertaken in this portion of the US-12 ROW.

Perhaps the more interesting and potentially important aspect of the problem at hand relates to Mr. Saunders' claim that the family farm had once also functioned as a way station

for coaches using the highway. Were his contention to be established beyond doubt, certainly the potential significance of the old house and its associated features (specifically the well lying within the ROW) would be greatly enhanced.

According to the guidelines established for the National Register program by the Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation (Jandl and Cole 1975), determination of the potential significance of historic sites ultimately rests with the application of explicit criteria. And, with respect to Mr. Saunders' assertion, the criterion of significance which may be applicable is:

that the use to which the site and associated structure(s) were put prior to abandonment and/or destruction warrants explication as unusual, unique or even possessing especially good representative qualities.

The initial literature and documents search and the additional fact that the house (and associated barn) lies outside of the ROW and is now being razed, do not appear to be strong points in support of an assessment of potential significance. In order to assure that the Saunders Family and property would not be written off prematurely, additional documentary research was undertaken and the results incorporated into this report and the recommendations which follow.

Briefly, the expanded literature and documents review has emphasized those sorts of records available in the WMU Archives and the St. Joseph County Courthouse in Centreville which might

shed light on the former function of the property in question. From the initial search it has been possible to ascertain that the Saunders Family occupied the land and erected the house and barn as early as 1872 (Lake 1872). However, the materials then consulted were silent with respect to the matter of how the land (and structural features) was used.

Briefly, the literature and records consulted and the sorts of information retrieved regarding the Saunders property are summarized below:

1. The 1858 Map of St. Joseph County, produced by Geil, Harley and Siverd of Philadelphia, clearly shows two structures in the approximate location of the Saunders house and barn as indicated in Lake's (1872) platbook and also as observed during the course of fieldwork. Unfortunately, that portion of the map bearing the landowner's name is illegible.
2. The St. Joseph County tax records which were next consulted did not produce evidence unequivocally associating the Saunders Family with this property prior to the Civil War. In fact, given the condition of many pages in this document, it has not been possible to precisely determine the year in which the Saunders did occupy the land.
3. The General Records of the Township of White Pigeon (1852-1890) yielded no information at all with respect to this family and the property in question.
4. The St. Joseph County Directory for 1880, compiled by T.M. Sherriff, provides scant information bearing on

this problem. From this document it is clear that the family was actively farming 141 acres in that year. However, no other sorts of activity are indicated as taking place on the farm.

5. Finally, a variety of general historical sources were examined, including the Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society Collections, Michigan History Magazine and Fulmer's (1924) Historic Michigan. These, too, failed to provide any information regarding the family or the parcel of land in question.

In aggregate, the data available for examination do not shed any light on the role which Mr. Saunders ascribed to the old house and the nearby well with respect to travel along the highway. If the Saunders house did serve as a way station in the past, we have only hearsay to offer as evidence of this activity.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

On the basis of a systematic and intensive on-site evaluation of the US-12 corridor over the Fawn River, together with a very thorough examination of the literature and documents relating to the history of the township and, more specifically, to the Saunders property near the eastern terminus of the project, it can only be concluded that the proposed road improvements will not have an adverse impact on significant cultural resources. Be that as it may, construction equipment will undoubtedly turn up some late 19th century cultural debris in that area of the ROW adjacent to the Saunders house and especially near the well located on Map No. 3.

With respect to this feature and perhaps the nearby refuse heap, it is quite possible that accumulations of debris will be encountered. Moreover, there may be preserved within the well aspects of internal construction worthy of recording. The potential significance of these two features cannot be greater, as they lack the cultural context of the major farmstead structures which lie outside of the zone of impact.

While the potential significance of these two features is not felt to be great enough to warrant Phase II archaeological test excavation in the ROW adjacent to the old house, it may be prudent on the part of MDOT to consider having an historic archaeologist on site when earth moving equipment is employed in this area of the project. When and if the well, in particular, is encountered by machinery, it would then be possible to make a determination as to whether the condition of this feature warranted an attempt to at least record the sorts of debris it contains and make note of the preservation of the timbers and stones used in its construction for potential illustration.

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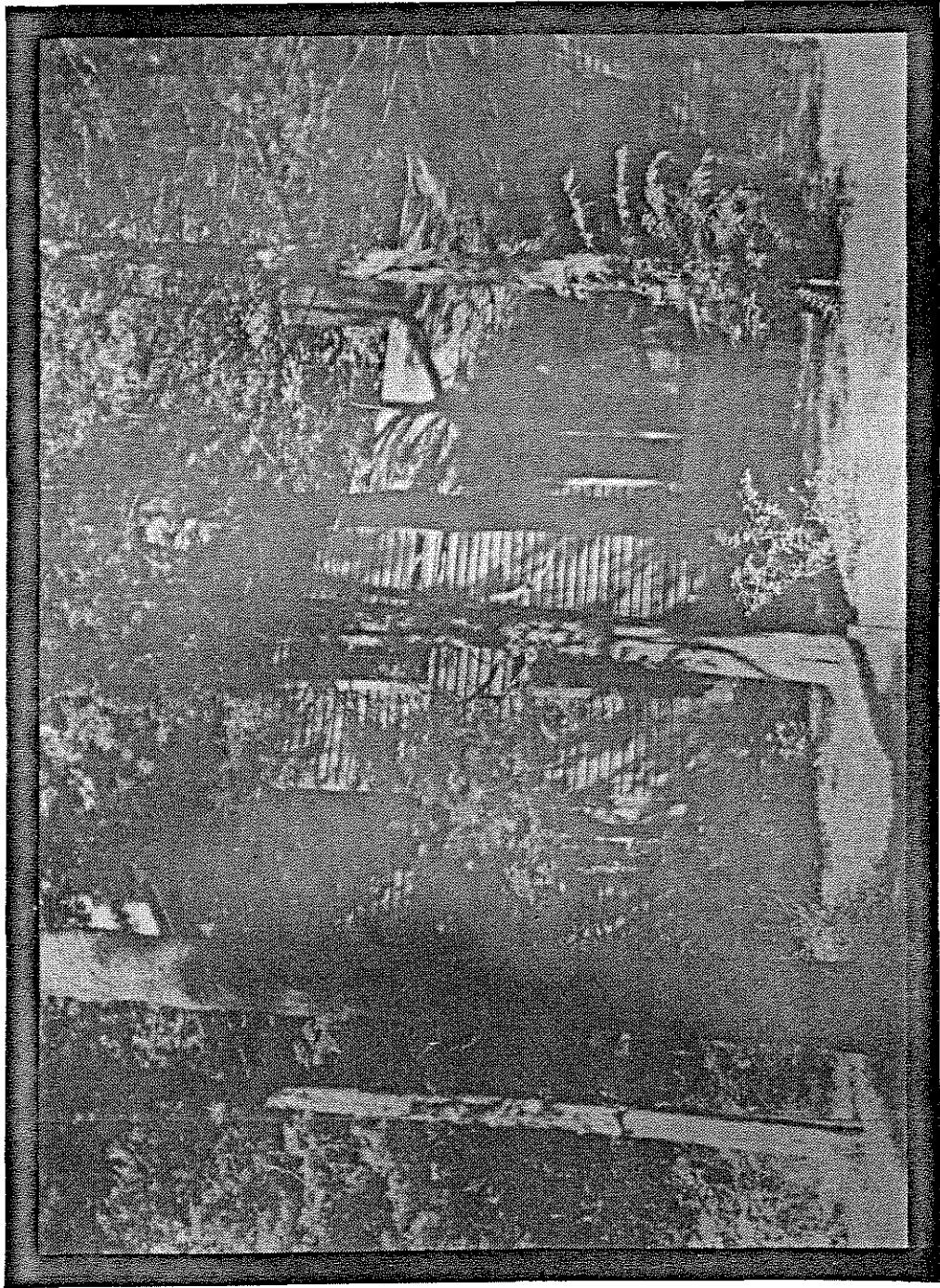


Plate 1: Saunders house from E.

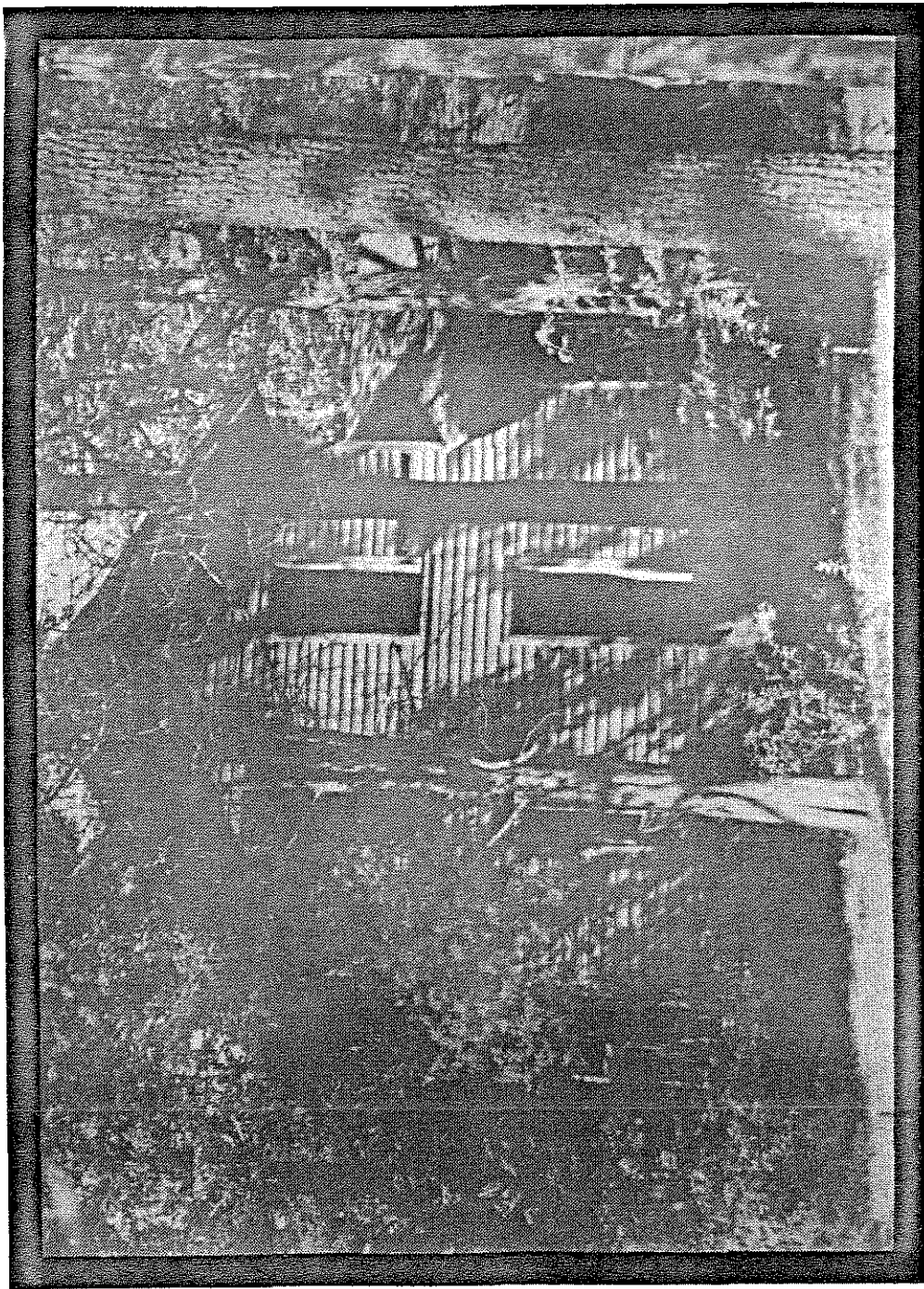
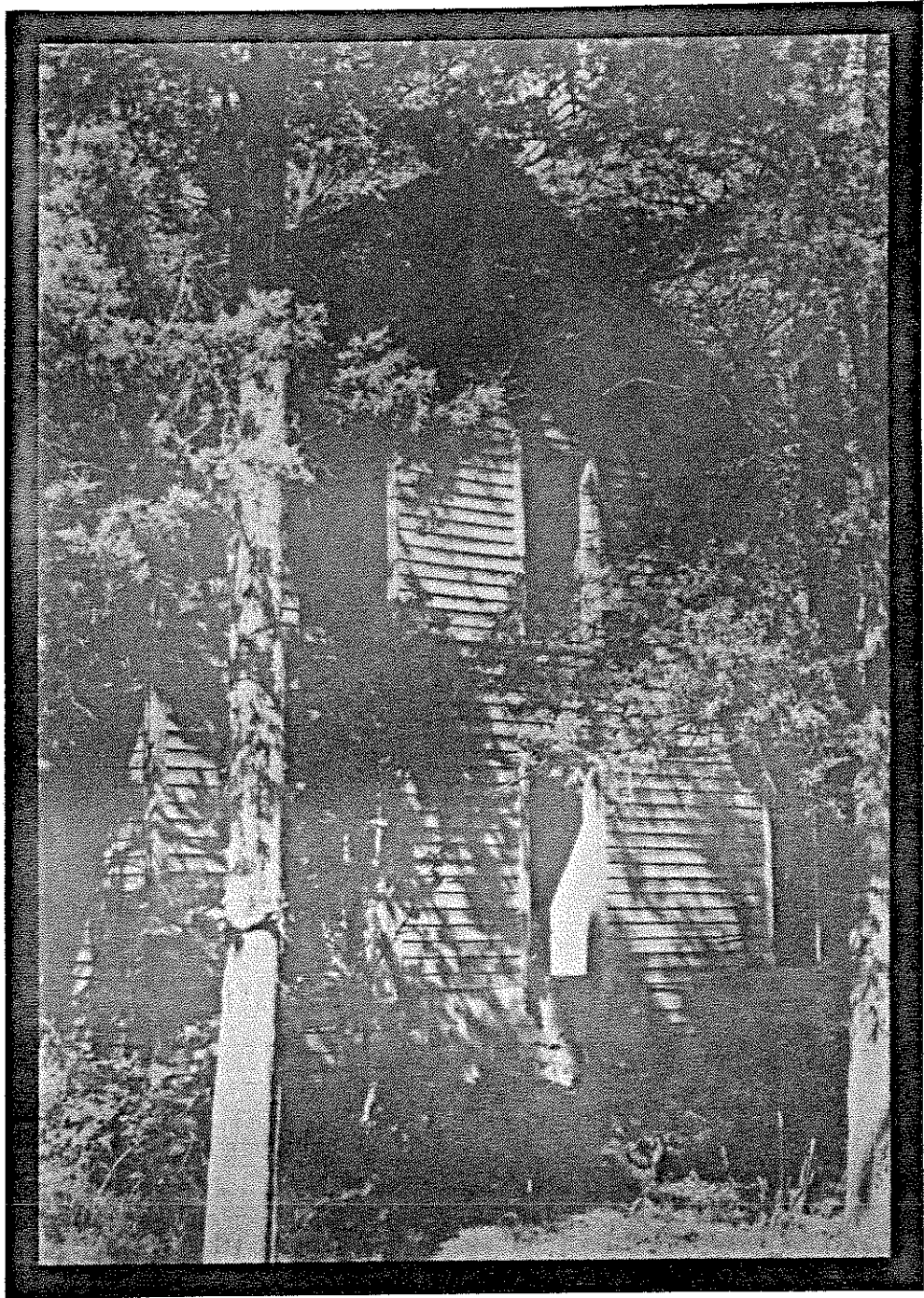


Plate 2: Saunders house from ESE.





**Plate 3: Saunders house from SSW.**