

Exploring Urban Landscape Change at Fort Recovery, Ohio

Christine Thompson, Ball State University
Mark Groover, Ball State University
Amanda Balough, Commonwealth Heritage Group
Bryan Mitchell, Air Force Reserves

Abstract

Urban landscapes are dynamic depositional environments that present unique interpretive challenges during site investigations. During summer 2011 and 2016, students and staff with Ball State University conducted excavations at the site of Fort Recovery, an early Federal period fort constructed in 1793. Site investigations in the town lot consisted of two GPR surveys and the excavation of a ca. 40 square meter area. Field results revealed the town lot was intensively used from the 1790s to the 1940s. Based on archaeological information, the town lot contains possible remains from the 1793 fort. A house was also located in the lot from the 1830s to the 1930s. Results indicate a combination of remote sensing and standard excavation is needed to adequately document urban landscape change. Further, by using a phasing approach, the field results reveal the dynamic landscape events that occurred in the town lot during an approximately 160-year interval.

Historic Context

In order to settle the Northwest Territory after Brigadier General Josiah Harmar's failed attempt in 1790, Major General Arthur St. Clair was tasked with building forts every 20 miles from Fort Washington (Cincinnati) north to the Miami stronghold of Kiihkayonki (Fort Wayne). He built Fort Jefferson in October 1791, before continuing north.

The Battle of the Wabash 1791

On November 3, St. Clair's army of 1200 soldiers and 250 camp followers arrived on the banks of the Wabash River, unknowingly ~60 miles southeast of Kiihkayonki. Camp was set up with no fortifications.

At 6:30 the next morning, an American Indian alliance of 1500 warriors under the command of Weyapiersenwah (Blue Jacket, Shawnee) and Mihšihkinaahkwa (Little Turtle, Miami) attacked from an initial crescent formation. St. Clair's main camp quickly became an area of confusion and disorder, with Indians

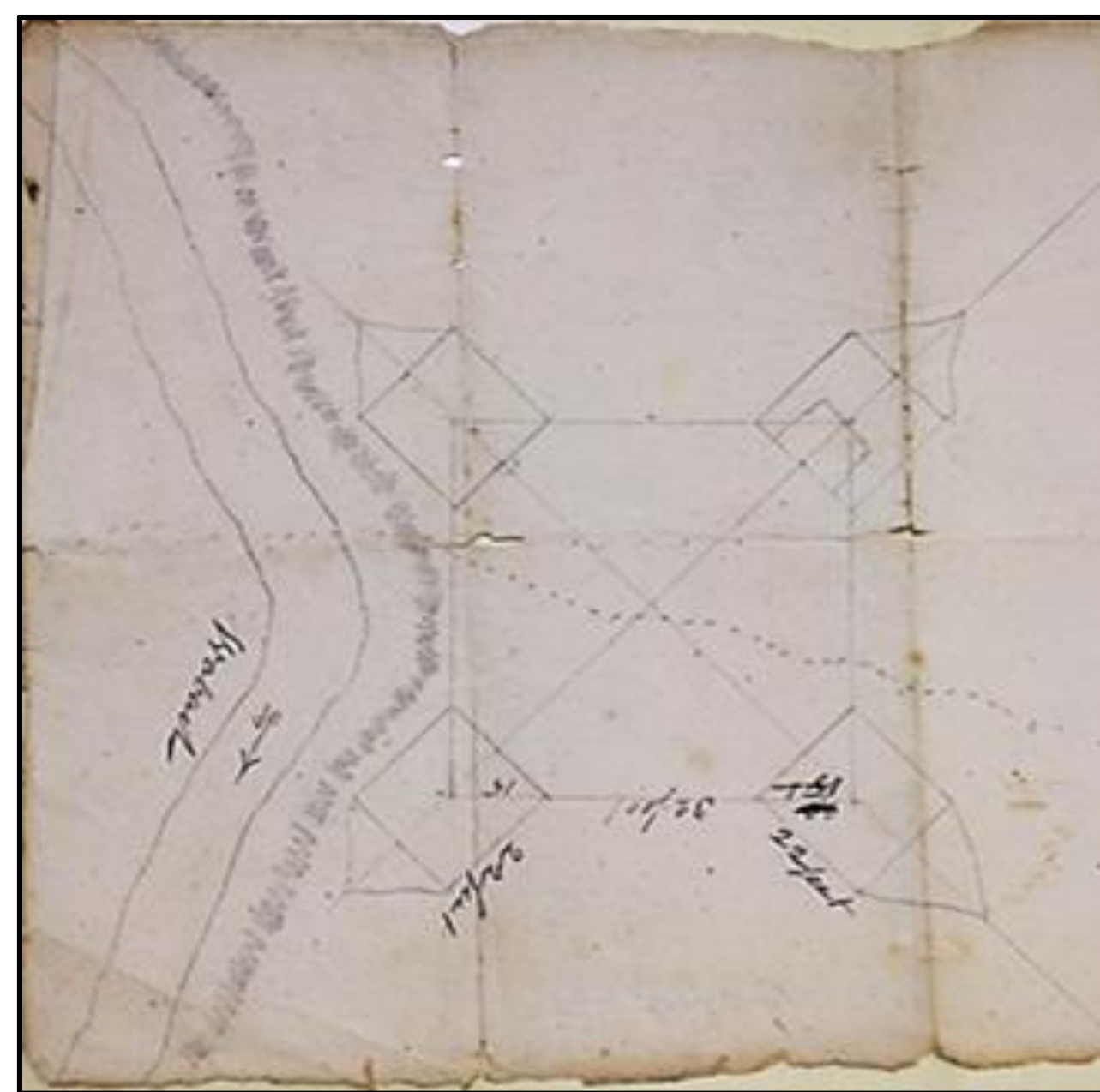
attacking, camp followers scattering, and soldiers attempting to find battle positions. After being completely surrounded within 15 minutes, St. Clair ordered a retreat by 9:30 am. Approximately 900 soldiers and 150 civilians perished, with 35 to 70 Indians killed.

The Battle of Fort Recovery 1794

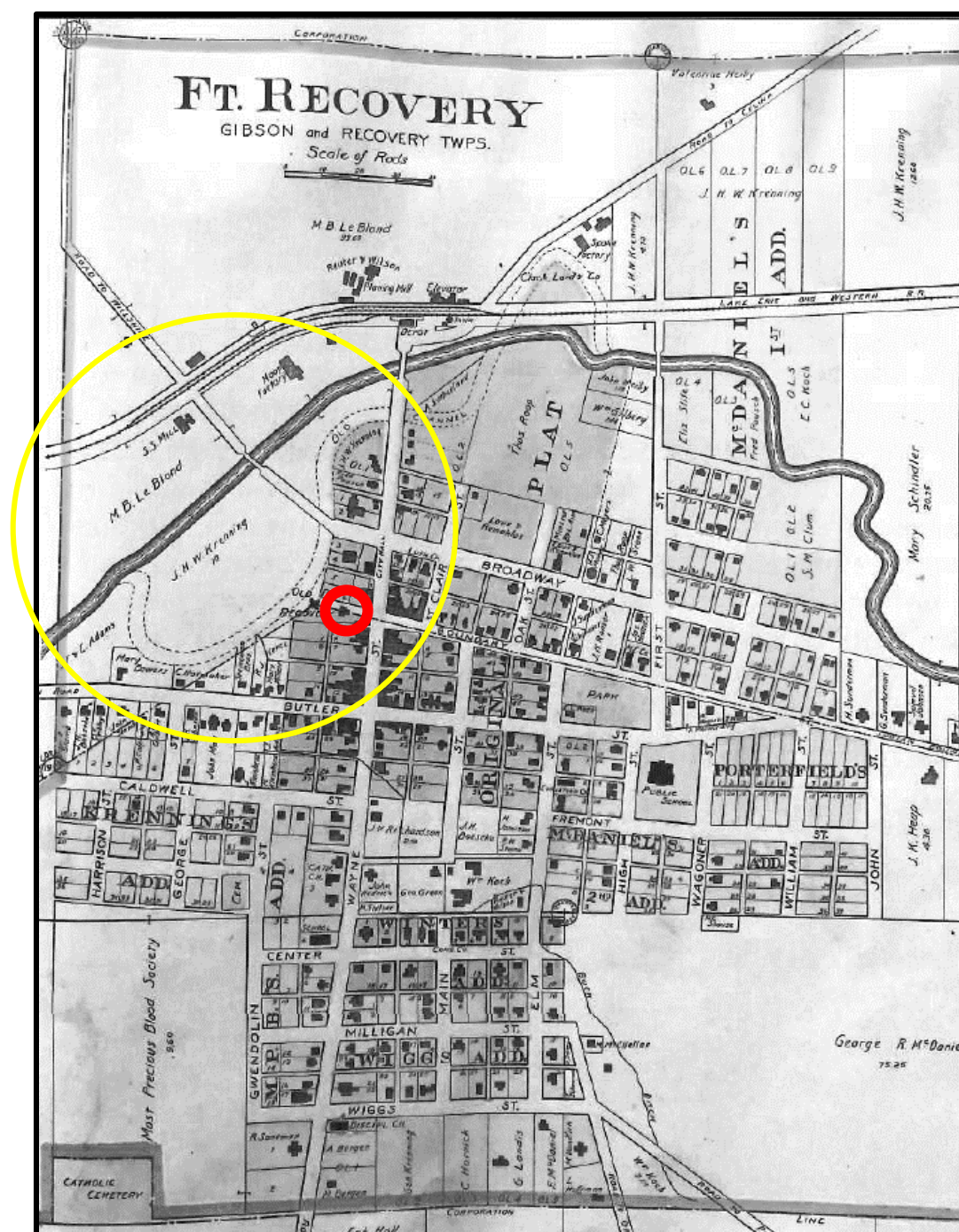
In December 1793, Major General Anthony Wayne built Fort Recovery at the site of St. Clair's defeat. On June 30, 1794, an American Indian alliance of 2000 warriors attacked a convoy returning to Greenville. The Indian alliance was defeated after a fierce two day battle and attack on the fort. This battle marked the defeat of the largest American Indian force ever assembled and led to the Treaty of Greenville in 1795.



By Peter Dennis in Winkler 2011, Courtesy of FRHS, FRSM



Wayne's 1793 Sketch Map of Fort Recovery.



1900 map showing rerouting of the Wabash River, general location of "old Recovery", and two-story house on Parcel 8.

Archaeological Methods

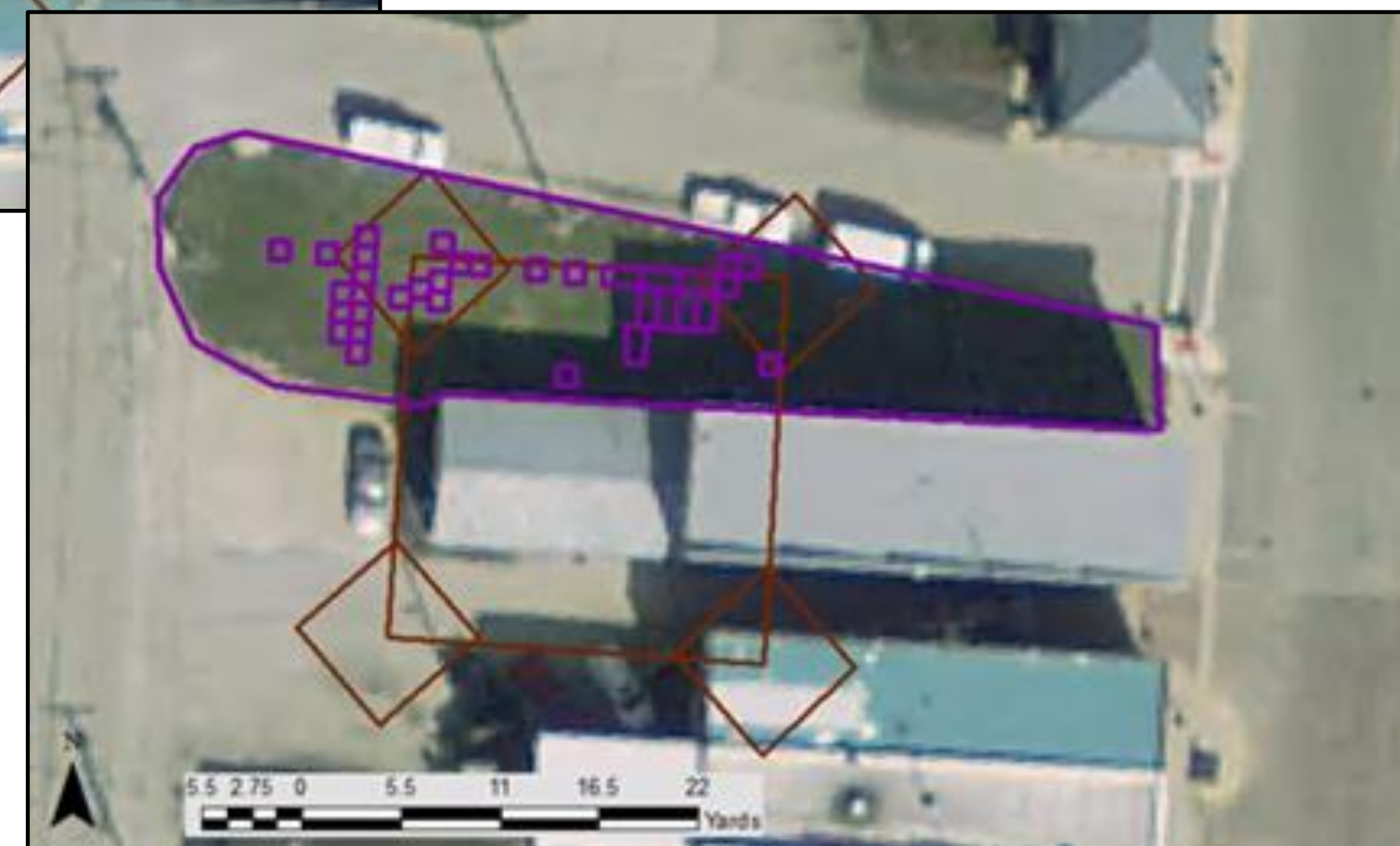
In 2011, Ball State's Department of Anthropology field school explored the probable location of the 1793 fort using ground penetrating radar (GPR) survey and excavation. GPR survey results showed several anomalies. Excavation units were located in what became known as Parcel 8 to explore these anomalies. A 17 foot trench feature with post holes was discovered, possibly a palisade wall of the original fort. Several artifacts from the fort era were found near the trench feature including a Charleville musket center band, a strike-a-light, and a possible pistol cleaning jag.

A newly discovered sketch map from 1793 allowed us to hypothetically position the fort on the landscape based on the location of the 17 foot trench feature. In 2016, a second GPR survey and field school was conducted. No additional fort period features were located. Although the 2011 field school may have located fort related features, post-fort period landscape modifications appear to have impacted any additional original fort deposits. Multiple post-fort period features and artifacts were located in the 2016 field school.

2011 field school results aligned with possible fort location.



Photo ca. 1898-1907 showing Parcel 8 and house in left foreground.



2016 field school results aligned with possible fort location.

Landscape Reconstruction

A detailed reconstruction of the landform encompassing Parcel 8 was conducted, identifying the extent of modifications to the landform during the past 225 years. The results indicated that the probable location of the 1793 fort has been substantially modified, rendering the survival and discovery of fort-period archaeological deposits unlikely and very problematic at best. Landscape reconstruction of the study area effectively illustrated the dynamic character of urban environments. The 225 year history of the landform and Parcel 8 was divided into three 75 year periods.

Early Period (1791 - 1865)

The earliest known dates of Euro-American use of the field school Parcel 8, and probable site of the fort, was in in 1791 at Battle of the Wabash, the building of the fort in 1793, and the Battle of Fort Recovery in 1794. Based on a letter and a sketch map from Wayne to Major Henry Burbeck, the fort was to be built on high ground to the east of the Wabash River at the site of the Battle of the Wabash. The fort was destroyed by 1814. Aside from Wayne's sketch map, a gap in the record exists regarding Parcel 8 until 1834. Per records from the Mercer County (Ohio) Courthouse, William McDaniel purchased this parcel in 1834. In the mid 19th century, a portion of the Wabash River in proximity to Parcel 8 was rerouted to accommodate the railroad.

Middle Period (1866 - 1940)

A series of maps during this time period allow for a more in-depth analysis of land use and development of Parcel 8. From the Mercer County, Ohio, Atlas (1888), a two story house appears at the west end of Parcel 8. The 1898 Sanborn map of the village shows Parcel 8 in detail, with several extant structures in the vicinity. A later map (1900) shows the Wabash River rerouted a second time, moving the river northwest of Parcel 8, but leaving an old river channel intact. The two-story house on Parcel 8 is still shown. A photograph ca. 1898-1907 shows the house and structures designated in the atlases and Sanborn maps. By 1907, the Sanborn map shows that some of these structures have been removed. The 1914 and 1927 Sanborn maps show few changes to the area surrounding Parcel 8. The 1930s brought multiple changes to this area, including the building of a Works Progress Administration funded museum and fort reconstruction, and the demolition of the house on Parcel 8.

Late Period (1941 – present)

Sanborn maps from this era show Fort Site Street being constructed and then extended, running just west of the most likely location of the 1793 fort. The last modification of the Wabash River took place in the 1950s, and the original fort reconstruction was replaced in 1956, further disturbing the area immediately adjacent to Parcel 8.



Conclusion

Today, the previous channel of the Wabash River is visible behind the reconstructed fort. Original buildings are gone, replaced by modern structures. Though there is still a distinct high ground where the fort reconstruction stands today, we do not believe this is the original landform. Our research suggests that soil must have been brought in to raise the area to the north and west of Parcel 8, creating a heavily modified landscape. Road construction, demolitions, and digging of basements around the parcel caused mixing of artifacts and soils, making it difficult for fort-period archaeology.

It is estimated that at least 10 landscape events occurred on the investigated landform encompassing Parcel 8, consisting of the construction and razing of several 1800s structures, construction and rerouting of several streets and roads, 1900s elevation modifications with filling episodes, and the construction and razing of several fort reconstructions. Investigation of Parcel 8 illustrates the dynamic character of urban environments, and the challenges of archaeology conducted in these settings.



Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the National Park Service American Battlefield Protection Program, Ohio History Fund, and Ball State University, with support and cooperation from the Fort Recovery Museum, Fort Recovery Historical Society, Ohio History Connection, and Ohio Historic Preservation Office.

