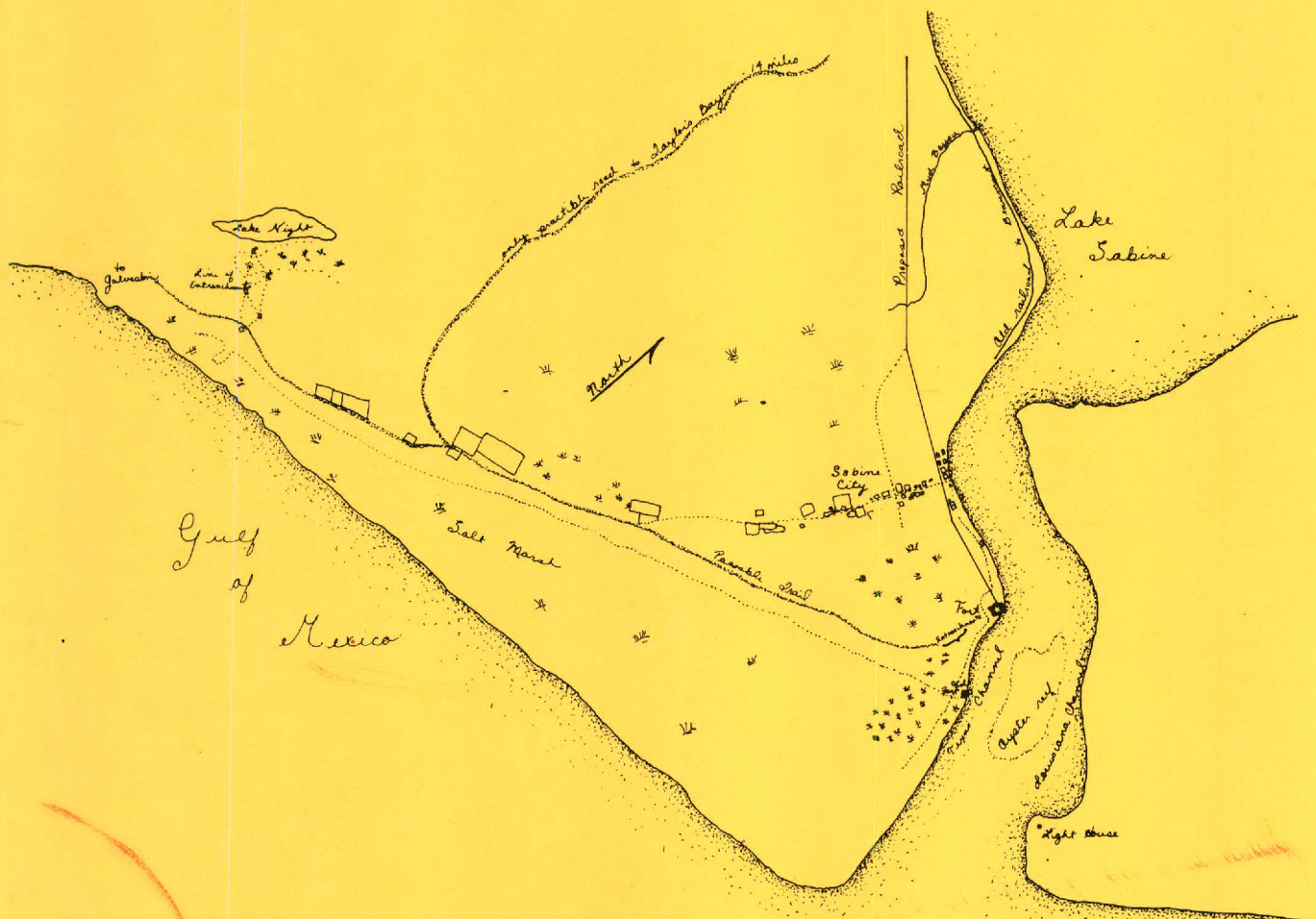


# SABINE PASS BATTLEGROUND

## STATE HISTORIC PARK

ARCHEOLOGICAL REPORT #8  
ANTIQUITIES PERMIT #21



TEXAS PARKS AND WILDLIFE DEPARTMENT  
PARKS DIVISION  
HISTORIC SITES AND RESTORATION BRANCH  
AUSTIN, TEXAS



SABINE PASS BATTLEGROUND STATE HISTORICAL PARK

JEFFERSON CO., TEXAS

ARCHEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

T. Holtzapple and Wayne Roberson

ARCHEOLOGICAL REPORT #8  
ANTIQUITIES PERMIT #21  
TEXAS PARKS AND WILDLIFE DEPARTMENT  
HISTORIC SITES AND RESTORATION BRANCH  
AUSTIN, TEXAS  
SEPT. 1976

0000048



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## ABSTRACT

Archeological investigations began in July, 1972 at Sabine Pass Battleground State Historical Park to determine the location of the Confederate earthwork fort. A reconnaissance trip took place in 1973 with further investigations following in February, 1974.

The investigations did not reveal the location of the original fort site. Lack of Confederate fort period evidence may be attributed to a series of disturbances beginning as early as 1875 with the U. S. Corps of Engineers channel dredging activities.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank Dessamae Lorrain, Robert Burnett, Douglas Comstock, David Ing, and Ron Ralph for contributing to the archeological investigations at Sabine Pass Battleground State Historical Park. Thanks go to Lillie Arnold who managed to type the report despite her busy schedule. Also, we appreciate the time David Ing spent to do special editing.

## ERRATA

- p. 5 last paragraph, 6th line should read "...Confederate ordnance..."
- p. 9 Figure 3  
A, B-South Section Profile, D. Lorrain 1972  
C-North Section Profile, D. Lorrain 1972
- p. 11 Figure 4
- p. 18 3rd paragraph, 2nd line should read "...just after expulsion of..."

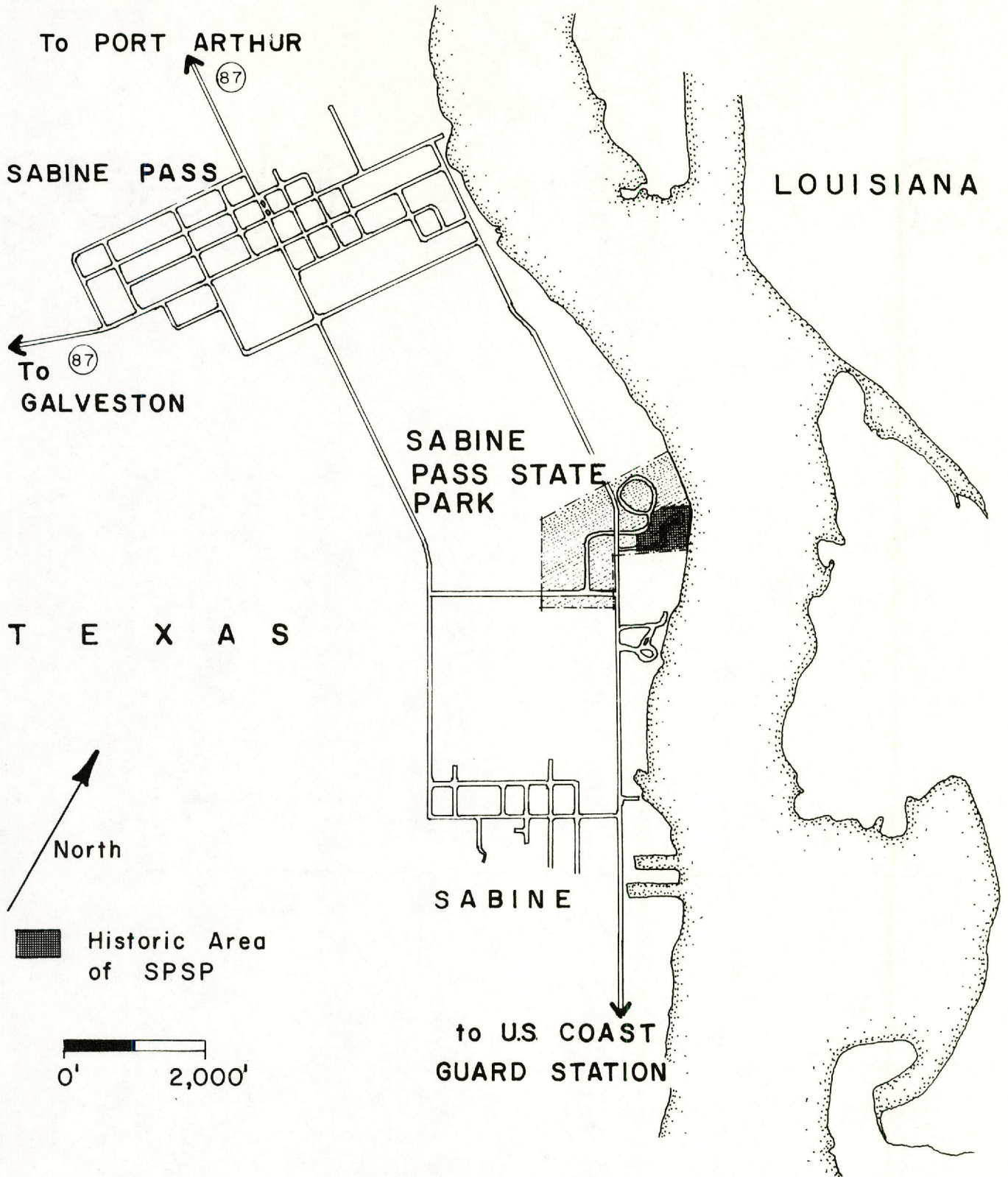




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**SITE LOCATION MAP**

FIG. I



## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Sabine Pass is the natural channel which drains Lake Sabine into the Gulf of Mexico. Originally the channel rarely averaged more than seven feet deep, with numerous sandbars and oyster reefs making navigation hazardous (Williams 1827; Eaton 1838; Lee and Pillans 1840).

In 1861 plans were initiated by Sabine Pass area citizens in cooperation with Texas State troops to construct a fort to command the pass. An earthwork fort was built on the shore of the pass about two miles downstream from the settlement at Sabine City. When defense of the pass became a concern of the Army of the Confederacy, Confederate engineer Getulius Kellersberger designed an earthwork to be constructed upstream a mile from that first "Fort Sabine" (Kellersberg 1863).

In September, 1862, the older fort, with four cannon, was shelled by U. S. Navy ships (Spaight's Report, in: Official Records, Armies, Series 1, 15:144-145). The fort's guns could not match the Federal barrage, and the fort was abandoned and its four guns spiked. Construction on the new fort was hastened.

Federal Navy forces landed several times at Sabine Pass in September and October, 1862, once burning the important railroad bridge over Taylor's Bayou (Pennington's Report, in: Official Records, Navies, Series 1, 19:221-224; Crocker's Report, in Official Records, Navies, Series 1, 19:227-229). On one occasion they scattered a Texas cavalry squad and burned military facilities near Sabine City. During this period the older battery still had "two 42-pounders and two-24 pounders" (Pennington's Report, in: United States 1921, 19:223).

The new Confederate fort was partially finished in September, 1863, when the Battle of Sabine Pass took place. At that time it had six gun positions, four magazines, and five bombproofs (Dowling's Report, Official Records, Armies, Series 1, 26(Pt. 1):310-312). Entrenchments were being dug some 600 yards south of the earthworks when the Federal invasion fleet arrived. These installations were designed to command the pass and the first stretch of hard sandy beach on the Texas shore available to ships moving up the pass. The first fort had been built on this natural landing where once existed a warehouse and a wharf (Kellersberg 1863; Fig. 15).

The Federal invasion fleet of twenty-two vessels was assembled off the coast of Sabine Pass on September 7, 1863. In command of the fort was Lieutenant Dick Dowling, with forty-two fellow Irish-born volunteer artillerymen from Galveston, and Engineer Corps Officer Lieutenant N. H. Smith, who assumed second command. Four other officers, including Dowling's superior, Captain F. H. Odium, arrived at the fort and assisted during the main assault (Dowling's Report, in Official Records, Armies, Series 1, 26(Pt. 1):310-312).

In the mouth of the pass were eighteen other federal ships, including transports carrying about 5,000 infantry, with three field batteries and two heavy Parrott batteries. Elsewhere thousands of other troops were preparing to board Union transports destined for Sabine Pass (Bank's Report, in Official Records, Armies, Series 1, 26(Pt. 1):286-290). The intention of Union commanders was to have the fort's guns silenced by the gunboats, land the invasion troops on the beach to storm the works, then march to some point on the railroad between Houston and Beaumont.

Dowling and his men had six cannon when the fight began, ("two 32-pounder smooth-bores; two 24-pounder smooth bores; two 32-pounder howitzers.") (Dowling, in *Official Records, Armies*, Series 1, Vol. 26, Part 1, p. 311). Remaining behind the fort in the pass during the engagement was the Confederate "cotton clad steamer" *C.S.S. Uncle Ben*, which with its three 12-pounder smooth bores was unable to bring the Union attackers under fire.

The main assault began when four gunboats of the Union fleet steamed up the pass in the afternoon of September 8, 1863. The *Sachem*, followed by the *Arizona*, advanced up the Louisiana channel, attempting to flank the Confederate battery. The *Clifton* moving up the nearer Texas channel, was followed by the *Granite City* with 500 U. S. Army troops aboard for the first wave landing (Crocker's Report, in United States 1921, 20:546).

The *Clifton* was an armor plated side-wheel steamer, an ex-New York ferry boat 210 feet long with a beam of 40 feet. It had eight heavy guns, all with greater range than any cannon at the fort. The *Sachem* was a "screw steamer" 121 feet long by 23.5 feet, armed with five cannon. The *Arizona* was a side-wheel steamer 200 feet long with a beam of 34 feet; it had six cannon. The *Granite City*, an iron side-wheel steamer 160 feet by 23 feet, had six howitzers and a small pivot cannon (United States 1921, Series 11, 1:39, 59, 97, 195).

The *Sachem* advanced up the Louisiana channel at 3:40 in the afternoon of September 8, 1863, firing at the fort. Dowling concentrated his fire on her as she came within his range stakes 1,200 yards away. The *Clifton* came up the Texas channel directly toward the fort, using fused shell and grapeshot. In the third or fourth barrage from the Texas artillerymen, a shot exploded the *Sachem's* steamdome, causing her crew to run up a white flag and begin abandoning the vessel. All the fort's guns, trained now on the *Clifton*, began to hit the gunboat. Her steering was damaged and she ran aground although she maintained her firing for some thirty minutes. In desperation to train more guns on the fort, commander Crocker had one cannon shoot out a hole in the vessel's side to serve as an additional gunport. However when a shot pierced the *Clifton's* boiler, Crocker was forced to surrender. The *Arizona* and the *Granite City* immediately backed out of the pass, and with the rest of the fleet, returned to New Orleans (Crocker's Report, in *Official Records, Navies*, Series 1, 20:546).

The Union fleet had lost two warships with thirteen heavy guns, two dozen killed and wounded, about 37 missing (including several "colored men"), and 315 men captured. None of the Texas defenders were killed or wounded (Dowling's Report, in United States 1901, 26(1):310-312).

The Battle of Sabine Pass was an embarrassing disaster for federal forces. In haste to subdue Texas, the U. S. Army organized the invasion without proper coordination with the Navy. False confidence was created the year before when Crocker's men harassed the pass with minimum resistance but when the invasion fleet arrived a year later the Sabine fort was garrisoned and it guarded the only feasible landing site. With their two lead gunboats silenced by the Confederate artillery, the assault commanders knew troops could land only in range of those same cannon.

The Union gunboats of the Battle of Sabine Pass were complemented by "acting" officers and shipmasters, and irregular crews. Before the engagement the U. S. Secretary of the Navy predicted a failure for the invasion (Welles 1911, 1:441-442), and apparently some Navy officers avoided the action altogether.

Confederate volunteer artillerymen in Texas during the Civil War captured four or five Union gunboats with shore batteries, and helped Texas cavalry and infantry capture several other U. S. Navy vessels—at times mounting light field pieces on decks of river boats.

Galveston was recaptured from the Federal fleet largely through Confederate General Magruder's tactical use of artillery supported by infantry, cavalry, and available naval forces (Young 1949; Barr 1962).

The successful defense of Texas against invasion at Sabine Pass was praised by the Confederate Congress as "one of the most brilliant and heroic achievements in the history of this war" (Official Records, Armies, Series 1, 26(Pt. 1):312). After the war, Jefferson Davis, much impressed with the "success of a single company which garrisoned the earthwork," called the defenders' action "marvelous" (Davis 1881: 236).

Confederate troops after the battle manned Fort Manhasset, then under construction some seven miles to the southwest (Marchland's Report, in: Official Records, Navies, Series, 1, 21:197). Fort Griffin at Sabine Pass was garrisoned also but neither of these earthworks saw more action in the war. The Civil War officially ended April 1, 1865, at which time the Confederate post was abandoned. Today Fort Manhasset's five eroding redoubts with their magazines still packed with live Confederate ordinance are the only obvious physical reminders of the Battle of Sabine Pass.

## ARCHEOLOGICAL NARRATIVE

Archeological investigations at Sabine Pass Battleground State Historical Park have been conducted on three occasions by Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. These brief explorations were an effort to locate remains of the earthwork fort at Sabine Pass, built during 1862-1863 by the Confederacy. Despite the excavations, no evidence of the original earthworks has been discerned and no period artifacts identified, although documentary data indicate that the present park encompasses the site of the fort or includes some major portion of the original Confederate military post.

### 1972 Investigation

Under supervision of Dessamae Lorrain, archeological testing began in July, 1972. Two sections along the shoreline were cleaned and the profiles were recorded (Fig. 2). Four test units were excavated within the historic area (no investigations outside park properties are authorized).

The upstream (north) portion of the shoreline profile showed a hump in the mottled grey-brown clayey sand layer (Fig. 3C). This was possibly remains of a parapet wall or other mounded earth part of the original fort. A few pieces of iron were recovered but were of little help in identification of the feature.

A few feet inland from this profile, Unit 4 was placed in a successful search for continuation of the hump feature (Fig. 4A). A pair of pliers and a file were found in this unit but neither could be assigned to the Civil War period. Deposition of these artifacts appeared to be recent.

Trench 1, 70 feet by 3 feet, 6 feet deep, was placed southward from the Dick Dowling Memorial Statue (Fig. 4B). Two fragments of brick, with a pink sandy paste, were recovered in this unit. Historical records do not remotely suggest that bricks were used in construction of the Confederate fort and no other brick fragments were found.

Trench 2 (Fig. 4C), as Trench 1, showed no obvious features in the contact lines between the mottled layer and the overburden topsoil. Exposed in Trench 2 was a fragment of an iron wagon wheel rim and a badly corroded iron object which may be the remains of a cannonball.

Trench 3 yielded no more locational data about the fort than the other two trenches. No unusual features were discerned and no identifiable artifacts were recovered (Fig. 4D).

The July, 1972 excavations concluded with no helpful data about the fort's precise location. If indeed any of the artifacts were of fort period, their deteriorated condition made them unrecognizable as such. Evidence of the original earthworks was not found. Lorrain recommended that future investigations include testing the hump of earth seen in the north shoreline profile.

### 1973 Investigation

Investigation began again in December, 1973. Roberson and Ing made test profiles at various locations along the shoreline where previously Lorrain had cleaned the long profile. Exact datum points of the older profile could not be located since the shoreline had eroded as much as five feet in some places. The small hump feature in the mottled layer was less pronounced, and did not appear to be manmade. Artifacts weathering from upper layers along the profile were of post-1930 manufacture.



# SABINE PASS STATE PARK ARCHEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

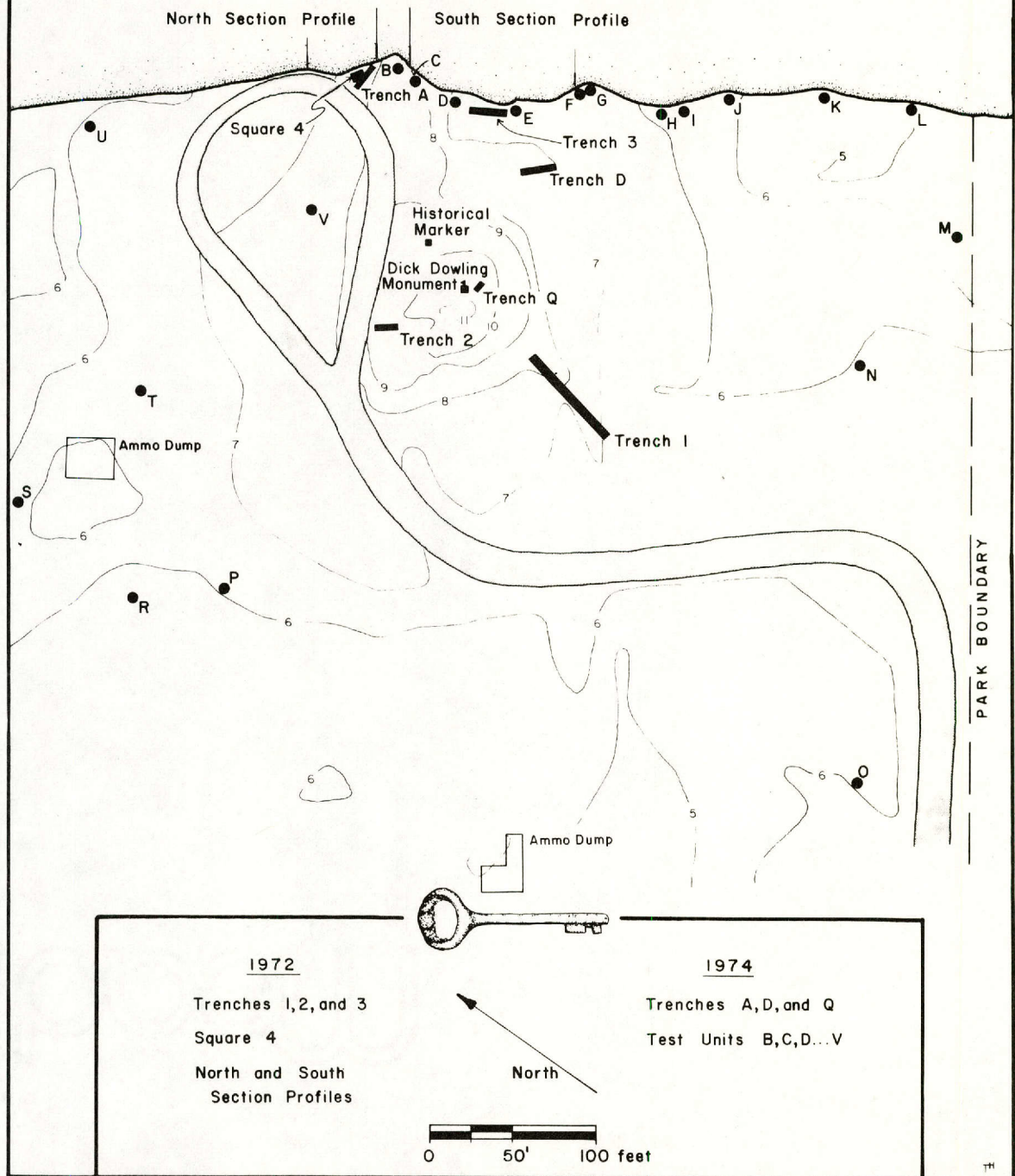


FIG. 2

STATE POLICE INVESTIGATION

REPORT OF OFFICER

NAME

NO.

DATE

LOCATION

TYPE OF VIOLATION

REMARKS

SIGNATURE

OFFICER'S NAME

OFFICER'S NO.

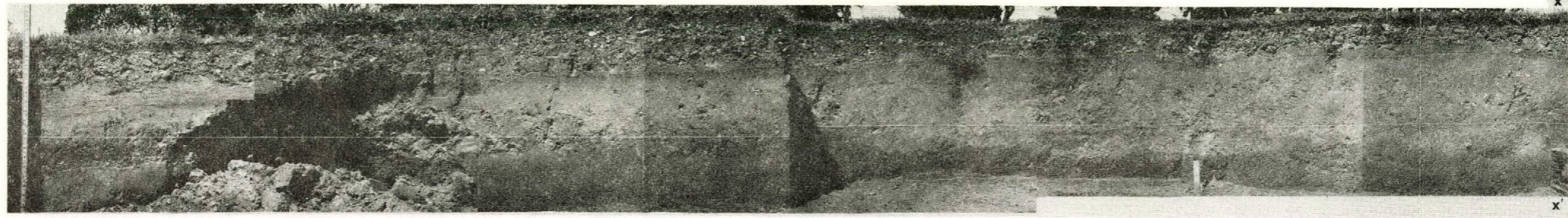
OFFICER'S DIVISION

OFFICER'S RANK

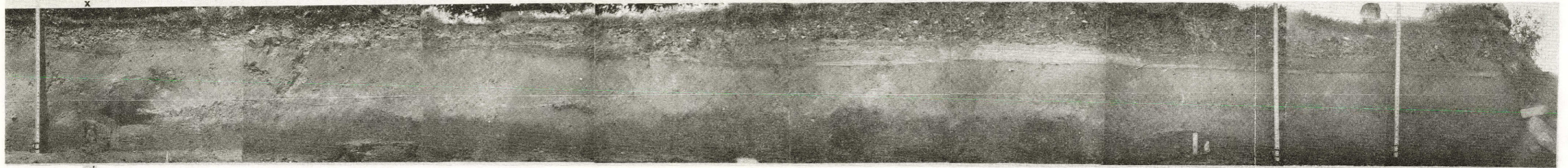
OFFICER'S ADDRESS

OFFICER'S PHONE NO.

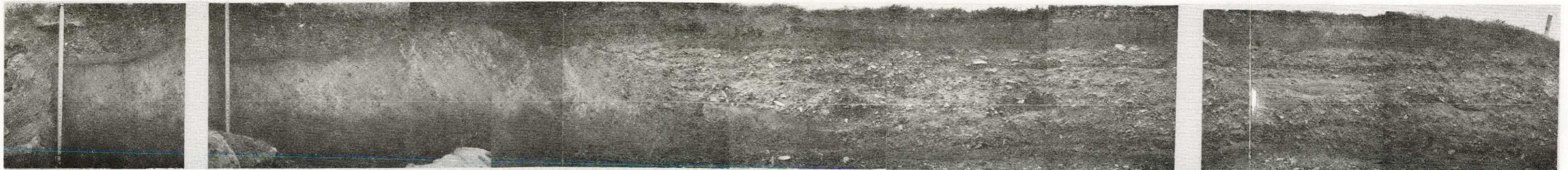
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A



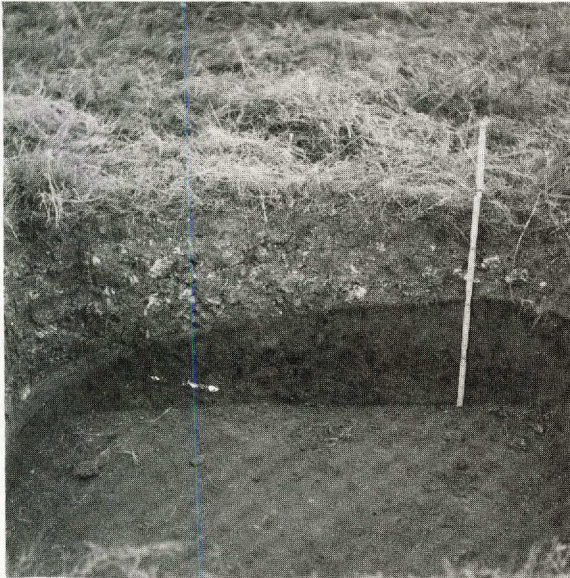
B



C

FIGURE 3: A – North Section Profile, recorded  
by Dessamæ Lorrain in 1972  
B, C – South Section Profile, recorded  
by D. Lorrain in 1972





**A** Unit 4



**B** Trench 1



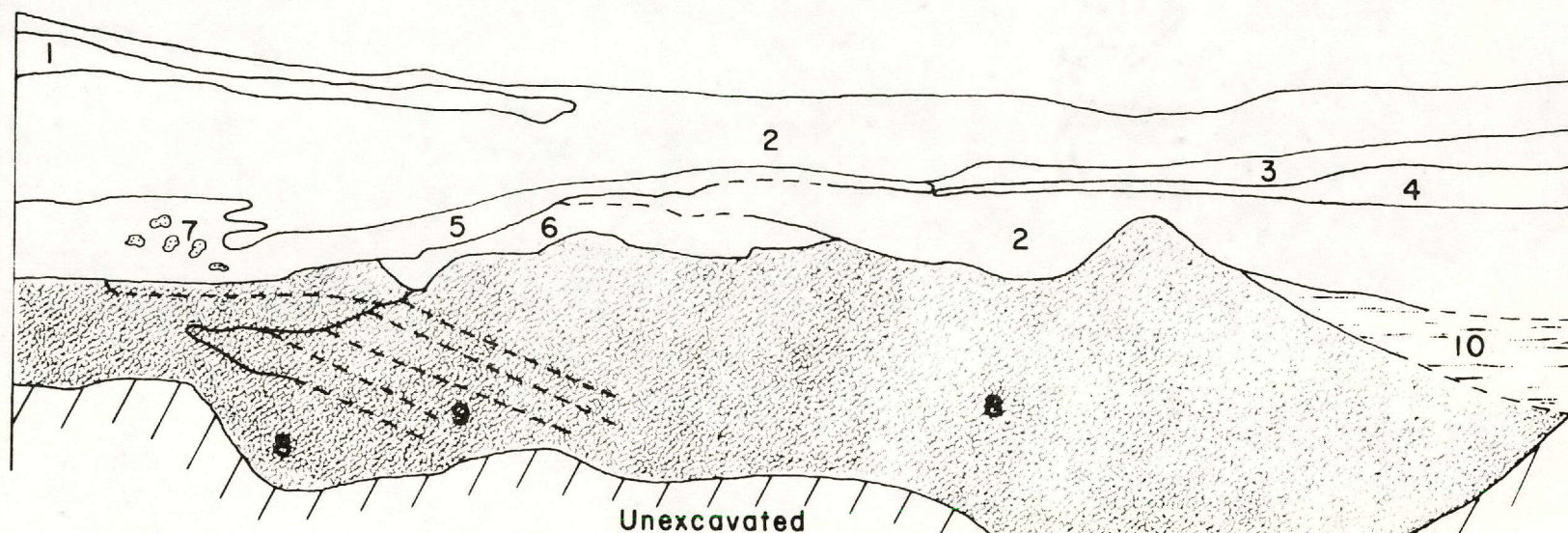
**C** Trench 2



**D** Trench 3



SABINE PASS STATE PARK 1974  
TRENCH A - FACING WEST



- |                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
| ⊙ 95.00'        | 6 Mottled gumbo                         |
| 1 Red sand      | 7 Clay bodies in sand                   |
| 2 Black gumbo   | 8 Mottled grey brown clayey sand        |
| 3 Crushed shell | 9 Zones indicating slight color changes |
| 4 Layered clay  | 10 Dredging fill                        |
| 5 Layered sand  |   |

0 1' 2' 3' 4'

RWR 1974 by TH '76

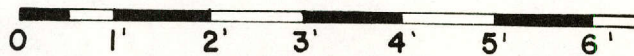
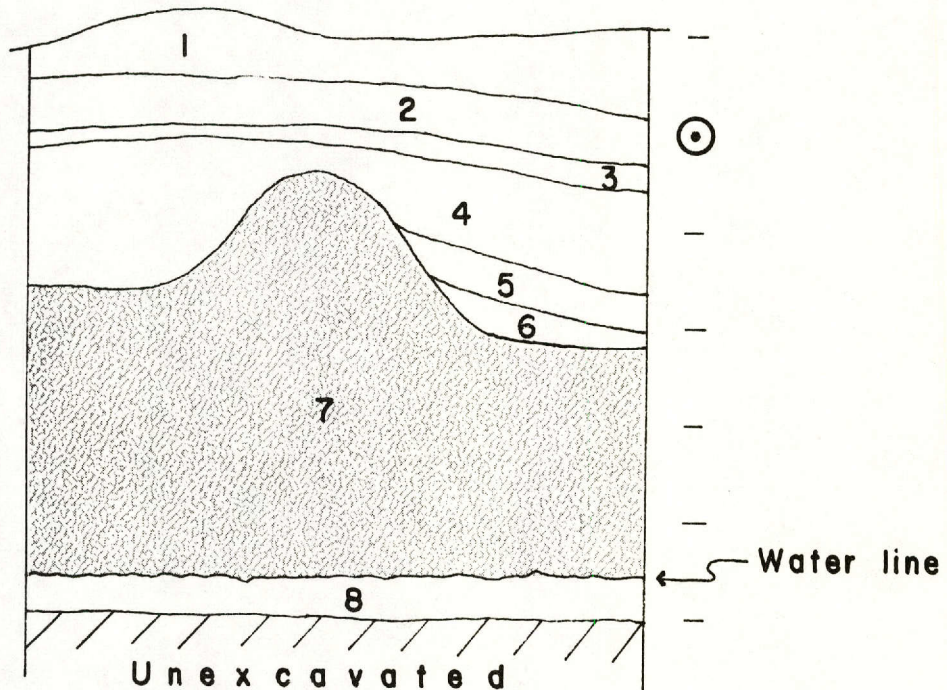
FIG. 5





# SABINE PASS STATE PARK 1974 TRENCH Q - NORTH PROFILE FACE

- |   |                     |                                  |
|---|---------------------|----------------------------------|
| ⊙ | 94.95'              | 5 Lenticular sand                |
| 1 | Gumbo & shell       | 6 Shell & sand                   |
| 2 | Sandy clay lens     | 7 Mottled grey brown clayey sand |
| 3 | Very black - humus? | 8 Mud, sand, and shell mix       |
| 4 | Black gumbo         |                                  |



RWR '74 by TH '76

FIG. 6



A surface reconnaissance also was conducted within the boundaries of the park's 54 acres. No evidence of Civil War habitation was discovered.

The northwest portion of the park was the site of a dump used by Jefferson County residents from about 1950 to 1970. Here were noted tens of thousands of artifacts from the past two decades. In this area and further upstream from park property are slight mounds of earth and dredged material. Some of the earth in these mounds originally may have been part of the Confederate earthworks.

South of the park should lie the entrenchments constructed in 1863 (Fig. 15), but this area has not been investigated. Southeast, and downstream, along the shoreline of the pass, would be the sandy beach where the pre-Confederate fort had been built by Texas State troops, and where the first wave of Federal assault troops landed during the battle of Sabine Pass.

### **1974 Investigation**

Roberson began archeological testing in February, 1974. To further investigate the hump feature reported by Lorrain, Trench A was placed a few feet inland from the hump noted in the mottled layer visible in the shoreline profile and again in Unit 4 (Fig. 5). In Trench A, a slight rise in the mottled layer was seen, but the feature could no longer be seriously considered as a parapet wall remnant.

Trench Q was placed near the Dick Dowling Memorial statue (Fig. 2), a large granite monument with a bronze statue atop, dedicated in 1936. The monument sits on a terraced earth mound prepared with heavy machinery in 1935. Trench Q was excavated through about 6 feet of disturbed matrix before the water table was encountered. In profile, the mottled layer showed a rise toward the center of the terraced mound suggesting that the layer represents earth scooped up from the surrounding area to build the mound. Artifacts recovered from the trench (all from the disturbed upper layers) included a base of a post-World War 1 glass canning jar, a chip or two of rotting lumber, and some small pieces of rusted iron.

Trench D was placed about 40 feet inland from the south (downstream) portion of the 1972 shoreline profile and was designed to intersect a location of the fort's forward parapet wall. If a hump in any layer was noticed, then that feature was to be investigated further, probably with a backhoe trench. However, no hump was noted in the trench walls and no artifacts were recovered (Fig. 7).

The remaining test pits opened during the 1974 investigations were placed at arbitrary radial distances from the monument (Fig. 2). These units varied in depth from 1.0 feet to 2.5 feet below surface, taken down through a dark gumbo topsoil into a sandy beach layer. No unusual differences in layer depth or features were noted in any of the small test pits.

The monument base today is about eleven feet above sea level. World War II construction activity—leveling the area and mounding earth over the concrete ammo dumps (which are still standing, see Fig. 2)—probably removed most of the remaining platform of the Confederate earthworks.

A wharf at the Confederate fort was mentioned in Dowling's official report of the Battle (Fig. 16; Official Records. . . Armies, Series 1, Vol. 26, Pt. 1, p. 312). Local citizens report that various wharfs have been located along the shore at or near the present historical portion of the park. Square post remains protruding from the narrow beach adjacent to the statue were noted by Lorrain in 1972 (Fig. 8) and again by Roberson and Ing in 1973 and 1974. No evidence suggested the construction date of the wharf represented by those post remains.

In 1976, park staff recovered several beams, 1 foot square and 20 feet long, during construction of an erosion control seawall along the park shoreline. Apparently these were fastened with mortise and tenon joints. Date of their use is not determined, but most likely they pertain to a post-1900 wharf.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Three investigations at Sabine Pass Battleground State Historical Park have not verified locations of Confederate earthworks within Texas Parks and Wildlife Department property. The analysis of maps in the following section of this report, however, confirms the present location of the historical area of the park representing the probable location of the Confederate fort at Sabine Pass.

Confederate engineers, assisted by hundreds of slaves, began construction of the fort at Sabine Pass in spring, 1863, just after the expulsion of the Federal Navy from Galveston Bay. The fort's bombproofs as reported at war's end by U. S. Navy occupation forces, were constructed of 2 feet of logs plus 2 feet of railroad iron covered with earth (Scharf 1887:529). Construction was still in progress when the Federal fleet arrived in September, 1863.

Several circumstances following Confederate abandonment of the Sabine Pass fort help explain the lack of remains today. The fort basically was of mud and wood, materials which deteriorate rapidly without maintenance. The railroad iron and other materials used for magazines and bombproofs most likely were salvaged shortly after the war. Whereabouts of the Confederate cannons is unknown, but some may have been buried in the vicinity of the fort. Channel dredging operations begun in 1875 may have affected the earthworks and certainly had an effect on the old shoreline and wharf facilities. The 1935-36 construction activity associated with the erection of the Dick Dowling Memorial accounts for much earthmoving in the area. Site leveling in World War II further would have removed evidence of the fort, and park construction activities recently have leveled areas around the small historic area.

Any further archeological investigations should be preceded by research into deed records to ascertain the history of property ownership along the pass shoreline. Many features of the Confederate post, including possibly the fort itself, may be mentioned in the county records. Excavation should be done in the quarters area where most of the occupational debris can be expected or in search of entrenchments, rather than in search for earthworks in the disturbed historic area of the park. Before further excavation, magnetometer and metal detection surveys should be conducted in an area subtended by a radius of 2000 feet from the Dick Dowling statue. Despite disturbances to the earthworks during World War II there is a strong possibility the cisterns associated with fort construction could be located through a magnetometer survey. The cisterns (Fig. 17) could then be used to locate other original features at the Confederate fort site.

SABINE PASS STATE PARK 1974  
TRENCH D - FACING SOUTHWEST

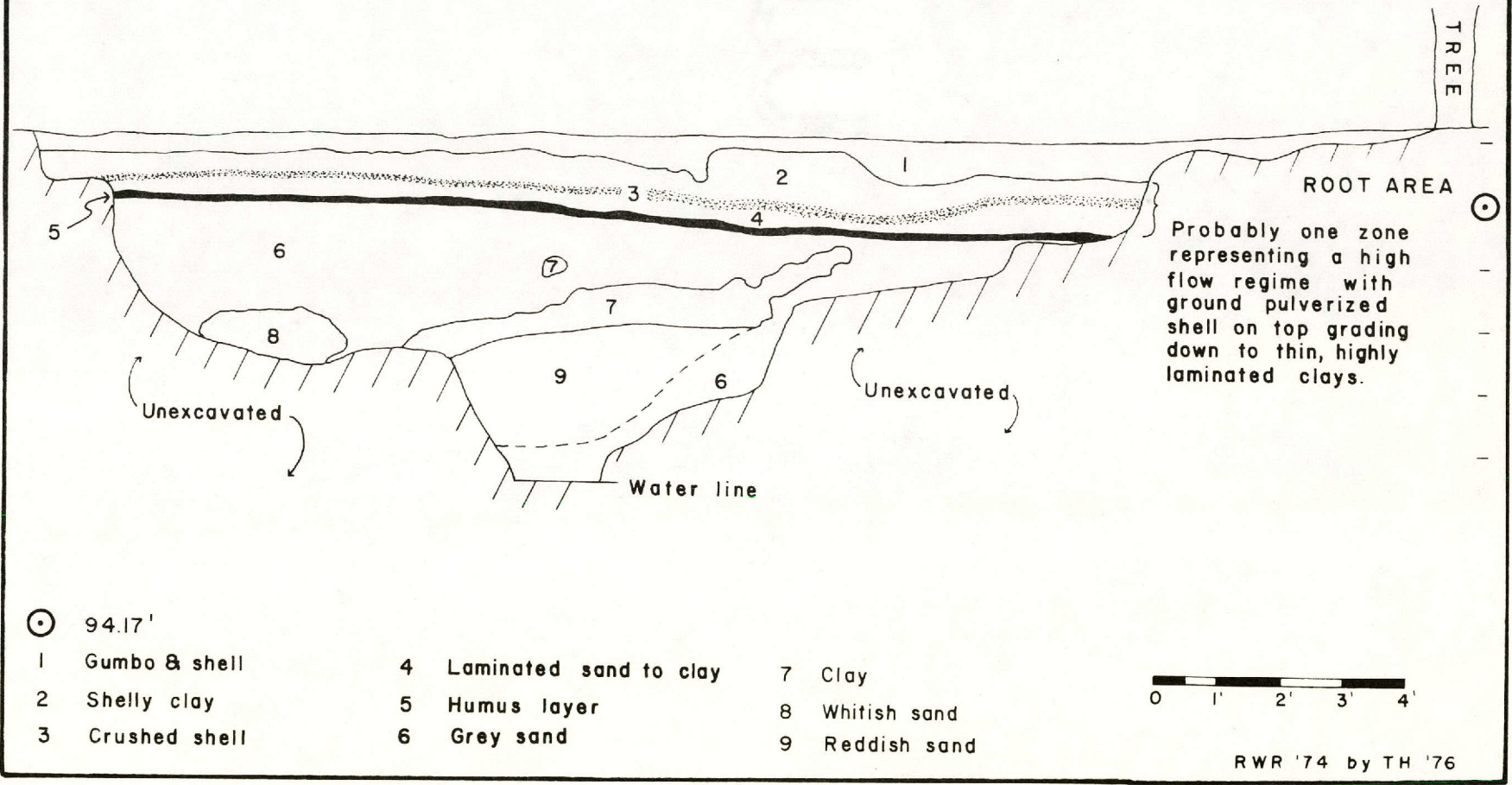
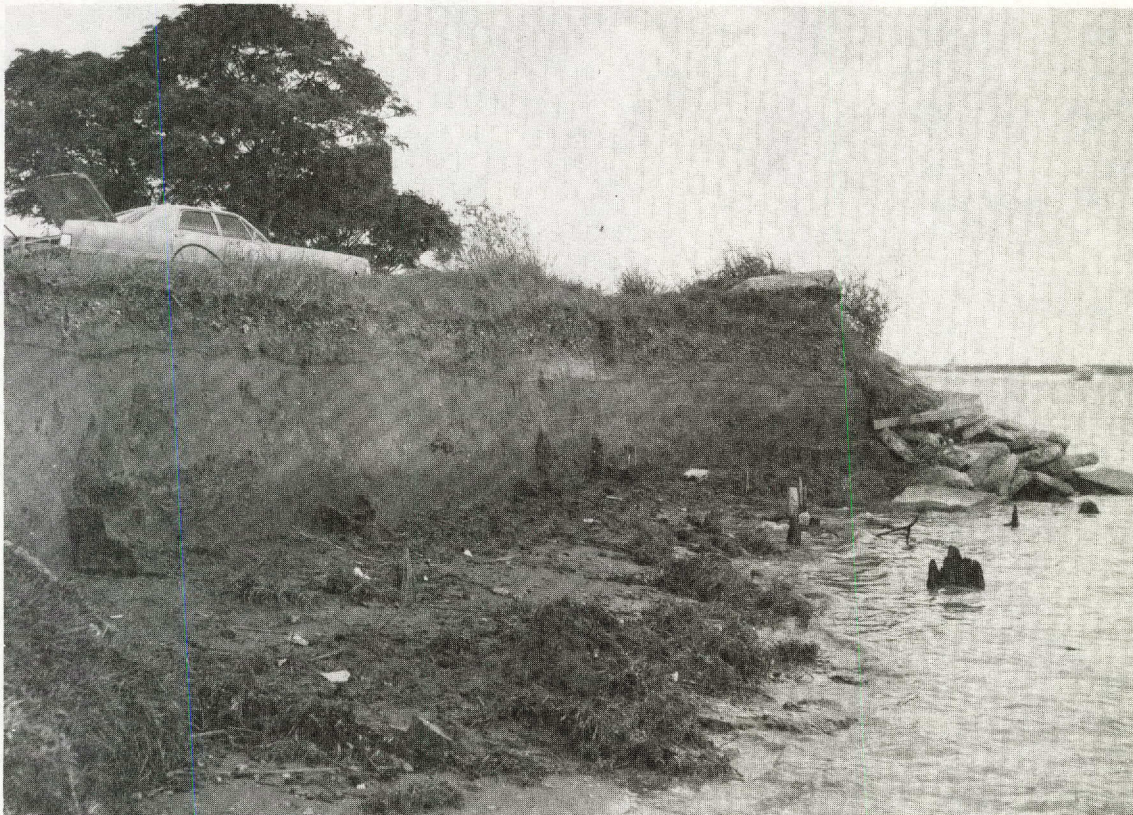


FIG. 7





**A**



**B**

**FIG. 8** View of North end of South Section Profile before and after cleaning, (1972)





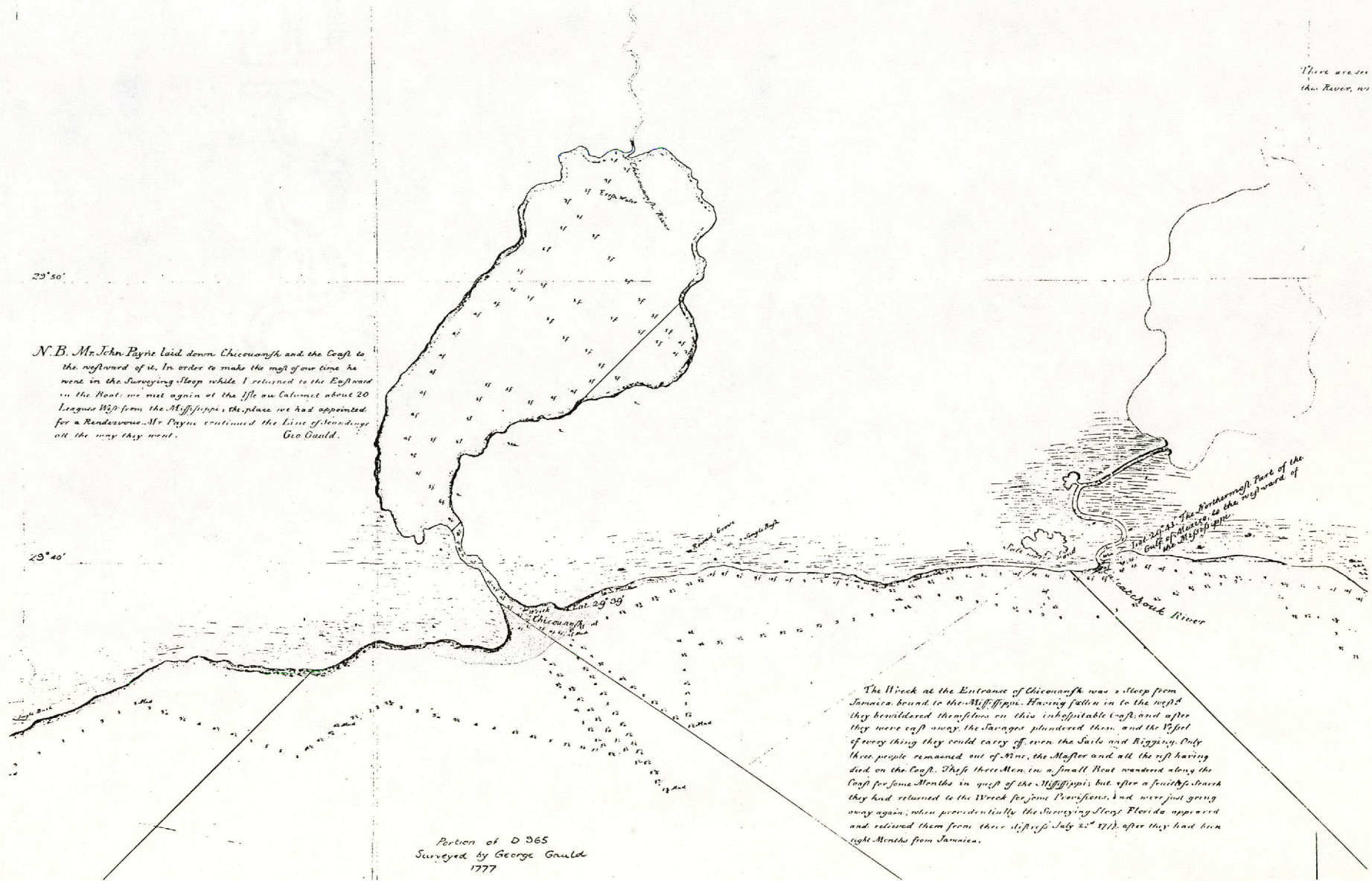


FIGURE 9: Surveyed by George Gould 1777,  
map of the wreck at entrance of Chicouansh





FIGURE 10: SABINE PASS AND MOUTH OF THE RIVER SABINE  
Surveyed in 1850  
This map was used as a base map by later cartographers



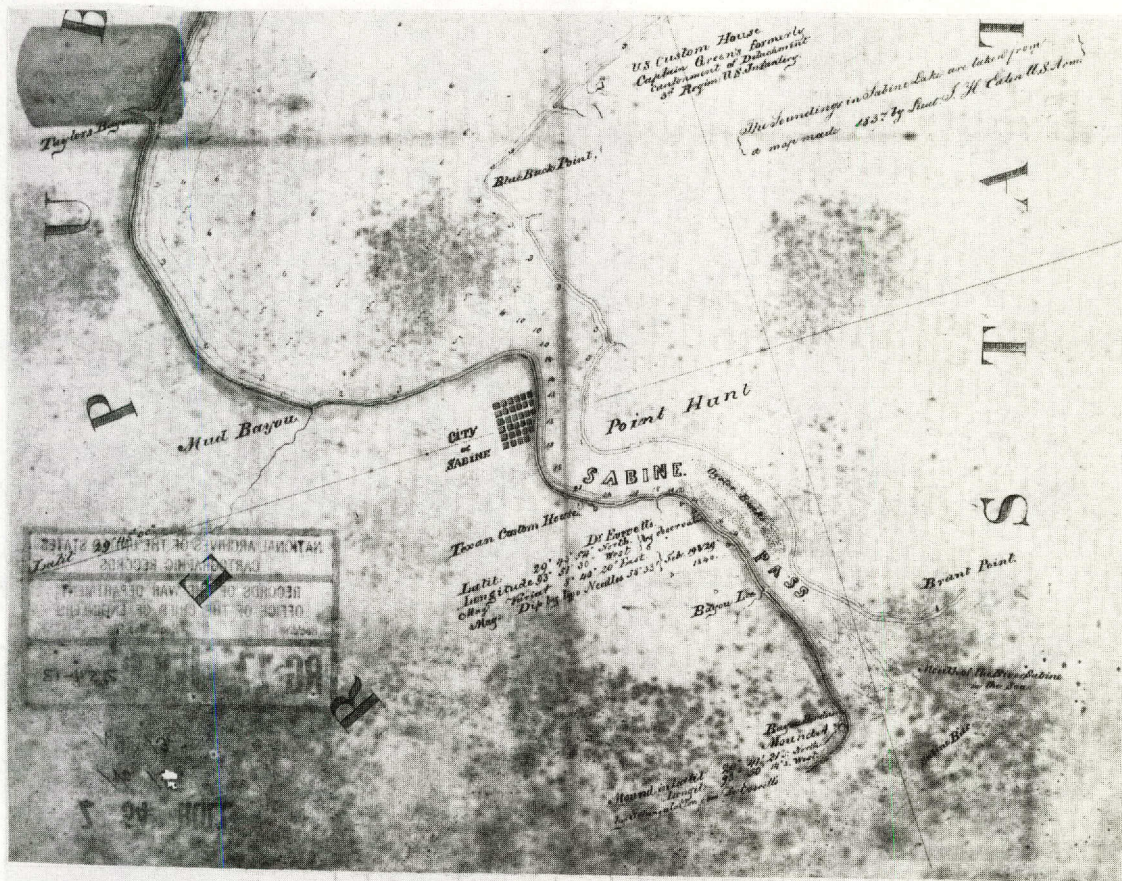


FIGURE 11: MAP OF THE RIVER SABINE (1863)  
(based on survey used in Fig. 11)



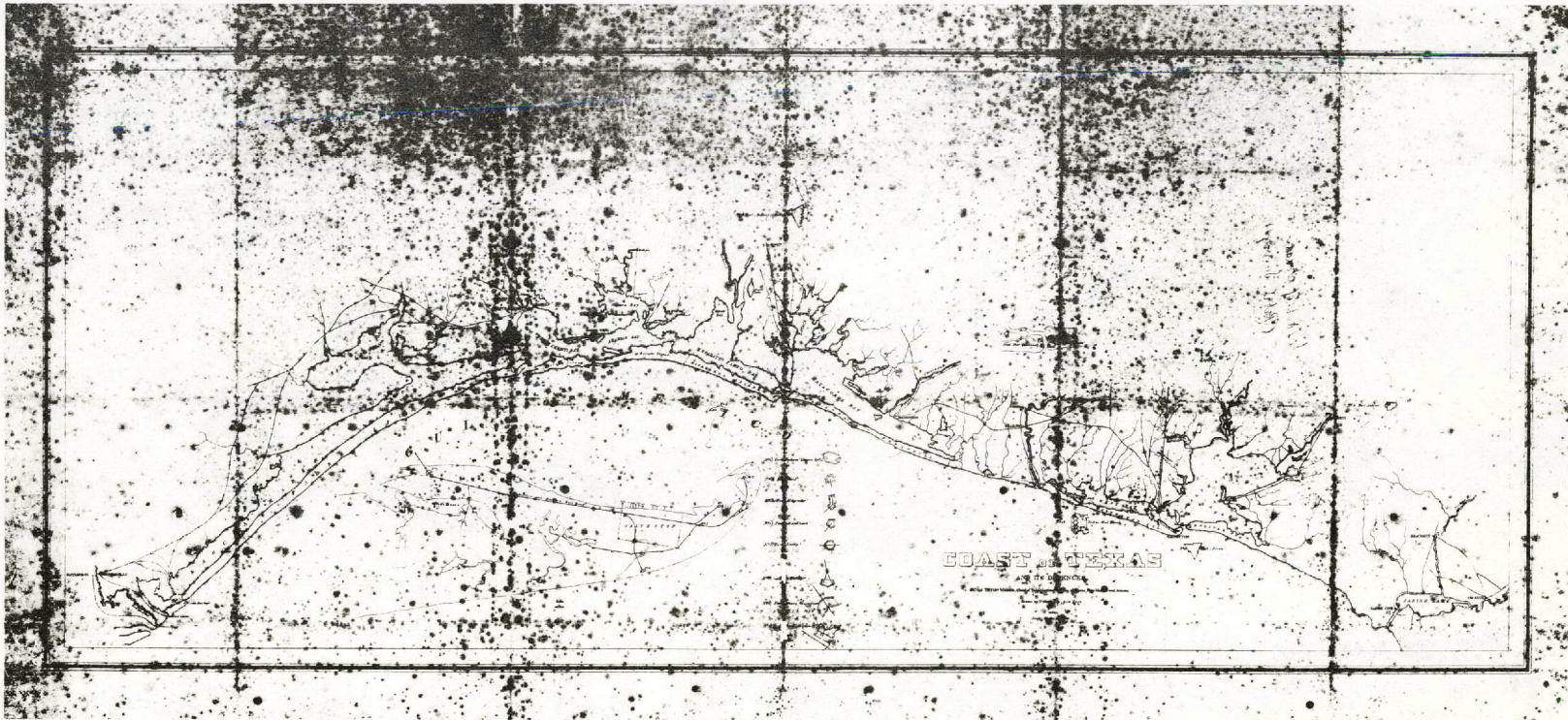


FIGURE 12: COAST OF TEXAS (1864)





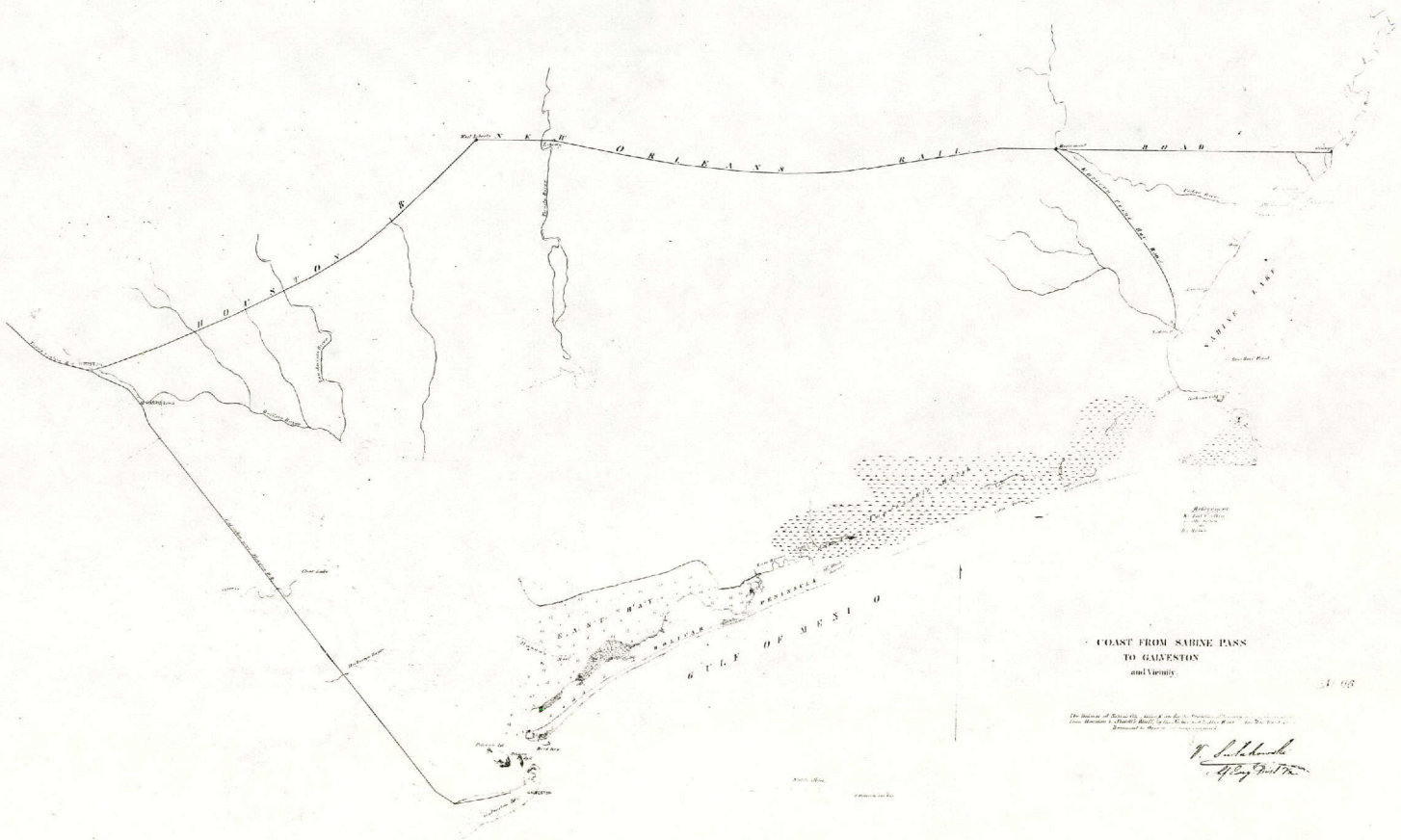


FIGURE 13: COAST FROM SABINE PASS TO GALVESTON probably mapped during the 1860's



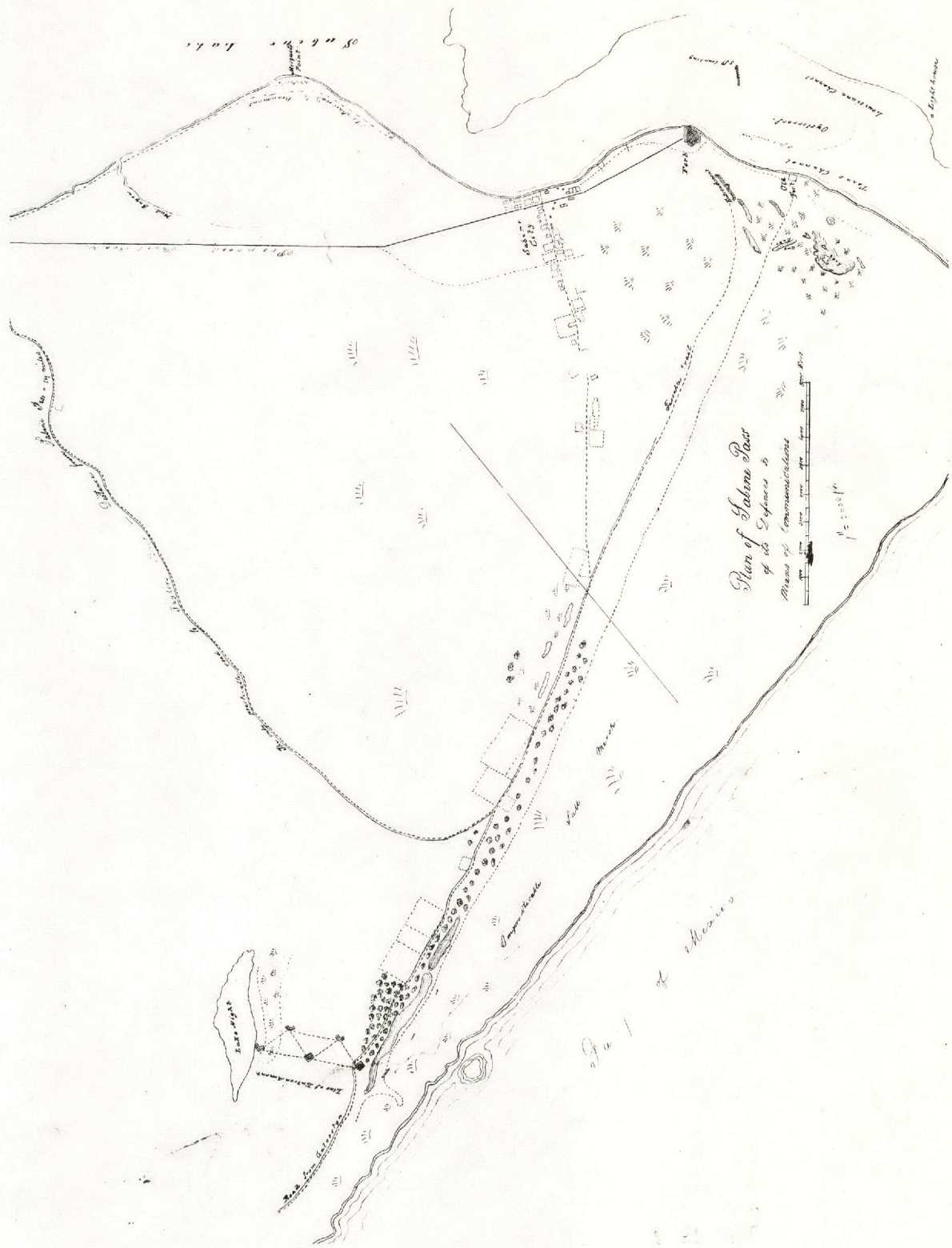


FIGURE 14: PLAN OF SABINE PASS  
 includes fort location and  
 lighthouse on Louisiana border  
 probably mapped in 1860's



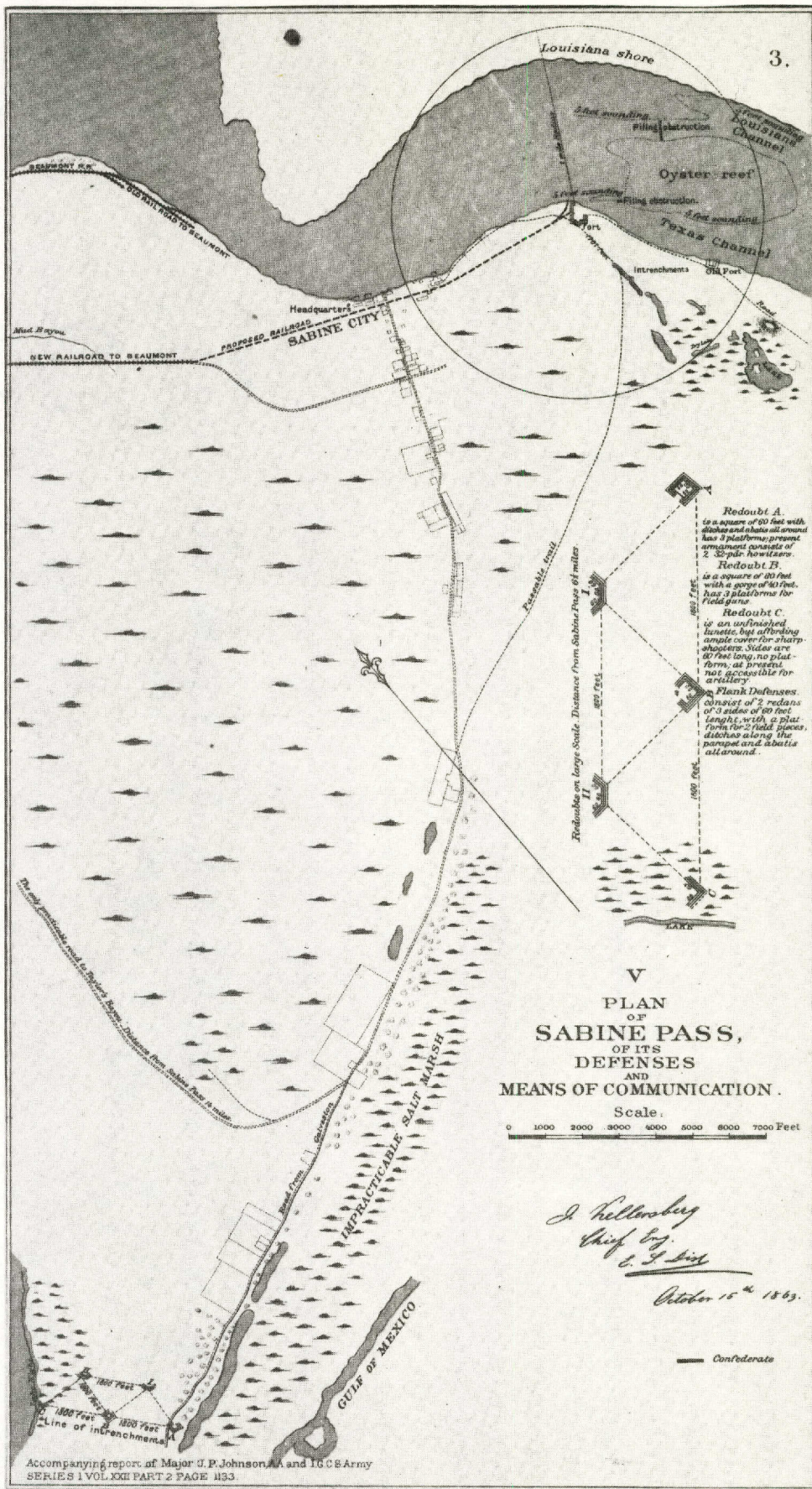


FIGURE 15: V PLAN OF SABINE PASS (1863)  
 locates fort, indicates area trails  
 and shows channel obstructions



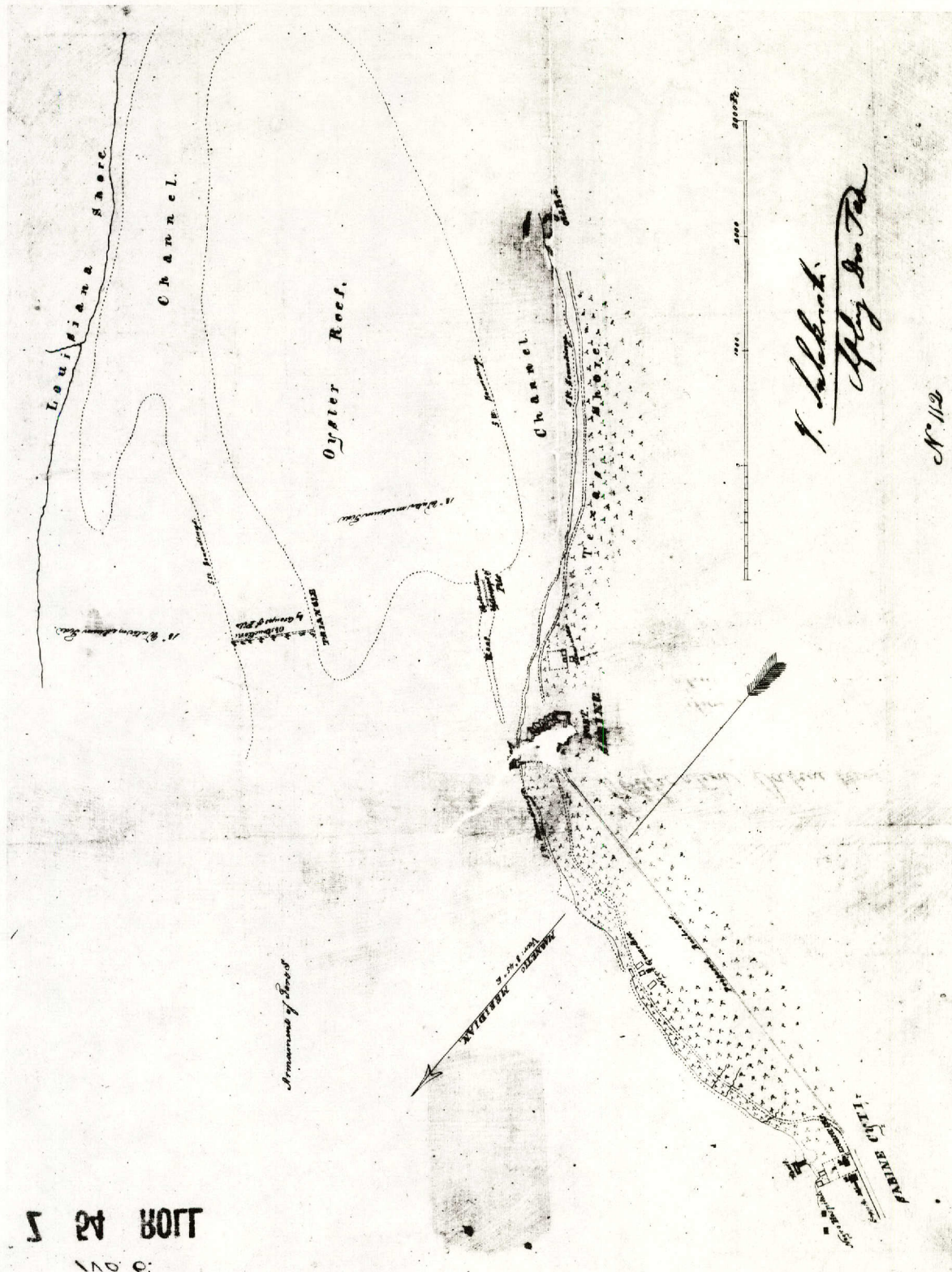
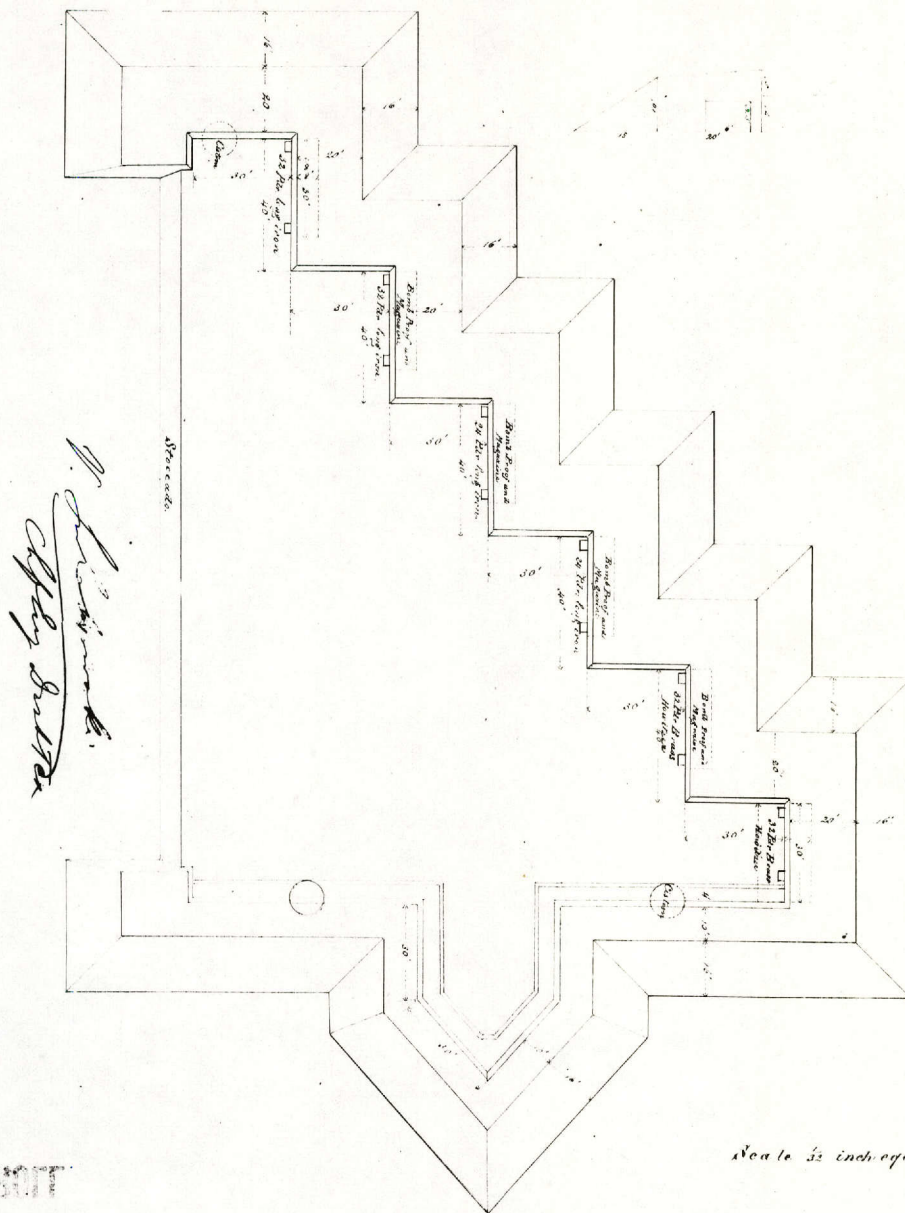


FIGURE 16: Armament of Fort Sabine includes fort location & quarters for the men, it also outlines suggested routes through channel, probably made in 1860's





N<sup>o</sup> 100  
 FORT SABINE,

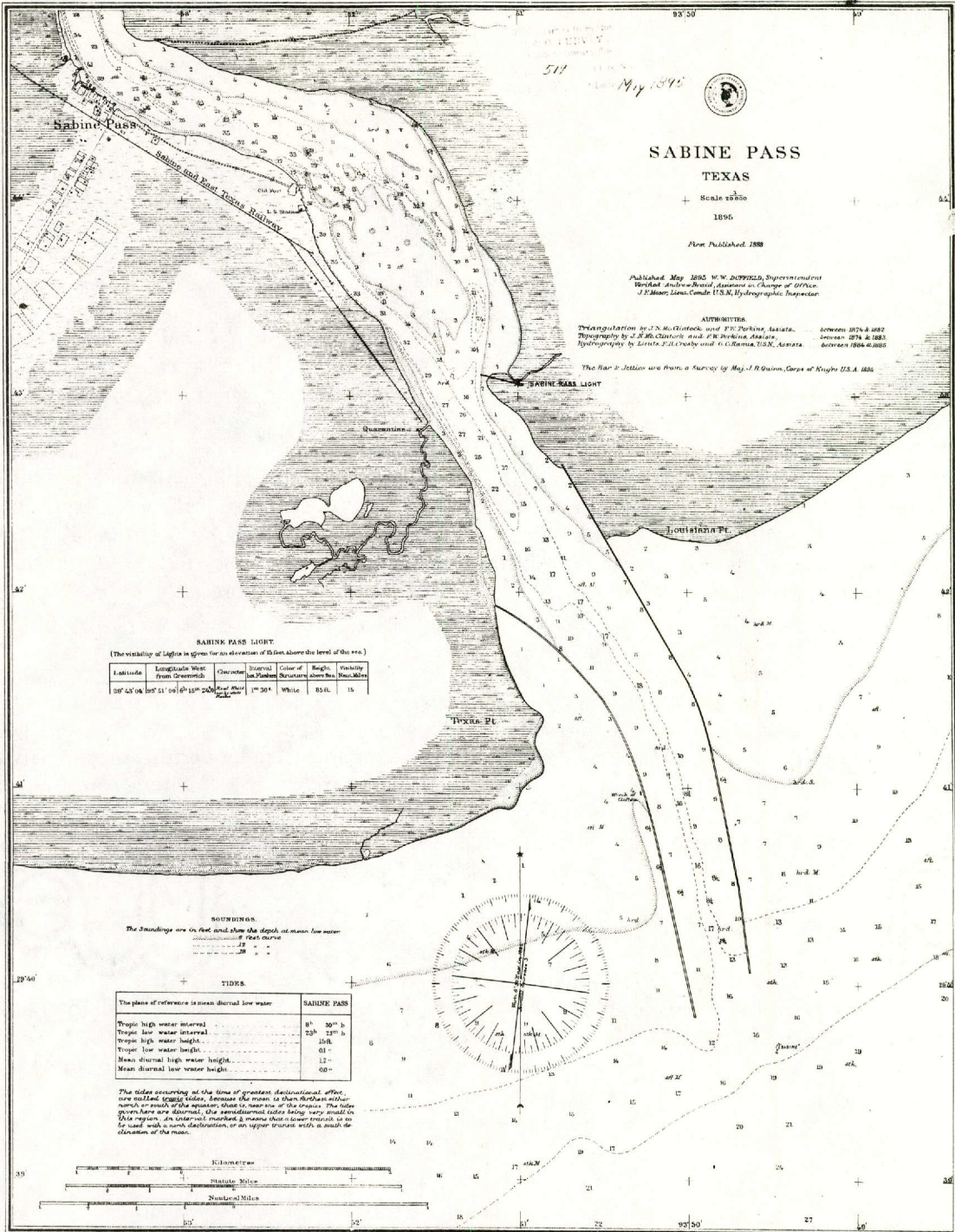


*W. L. ...  
 Copy ...*

5 24 1897  
 No. 1

FIGURE 17: FORT SABINE





PERMANENT FILE

FIGURE 18: SABINE PASS TEXAS 1895 (1888)

## ANALYSIS OF MAPS FIG. 19

Diagram *A* is an illustration of fort locations from several early maps. Fort locations were transferred from Figures 13, 14, 15, 16 and 18 to the U.S.G.S. Texas Point quadrangle map according to relationships in shoreline configuration. Areas representing Fort Sabine cluster in the vicinity now recognized as Sabine Pass State Park. Due to the method used to transfer the fort locations, two factors must be considered when viewing plan *A*. First, these areas are based on the assumption that the riverbank did not shift but remained the same from the mid-1800's to the present. The stability of the riverbank can neither be proved nor disproved, but is assumed for the purposes of diagram *A*. Second, the scales varied on all the maps concerned which made relocating the fort very difficult. Therefore, the "preciseness" with which these areas are plotted is based on similarities in topographic configurations.

Three locations were determined in plan *B* using one base map (Fig. 18) and three different methods. Point "A" was plotted using map coordinates. Point "B" was determined by triangulation, and Point "C" was located according to topographic configurations. Each location varies somewhat but does indicate a minimum range of about 2000 feet in diameter designating the vicinity of the fort. Points "A" and "B" represent the projected fort locations in the water.

Diagram *C* represents two locations of Fort Sabine determined by means of triangulation. The locations were triangulated on the early maps (Fig. 18 and Fig. 14) and then transferred to the U.S.G.S. map. The Light House, represented on each map, was used as the base working point. Compass bearings were used to locate and transfer various points. Distances were determined using the map scales. Specifically, Point "B" triangulated from Fig. 18 was 9075 feet from the Light House on a  $50^{\circ}$  west of North angle. Point "C", representing Fig. 14, was located on a  $60^{\circ}$  west of North angle from the Light House. It also was found to be  $95^{\circ}$  east of North from Point "B" and was plotted accordingly.

The composite diagram *D* represents multiple fort locations determined from early maps. The points cluster within a half mile diameter area, indicating the most likely vicinity of the original fort site. This diagram illustrates several possible locations for the Confederate fort site. However, the clustering of locations confirm the boundaries of Sabine Pass Battleground State Historical Park as best representing the Confederate fort site.

# Locations of Fort Sabine

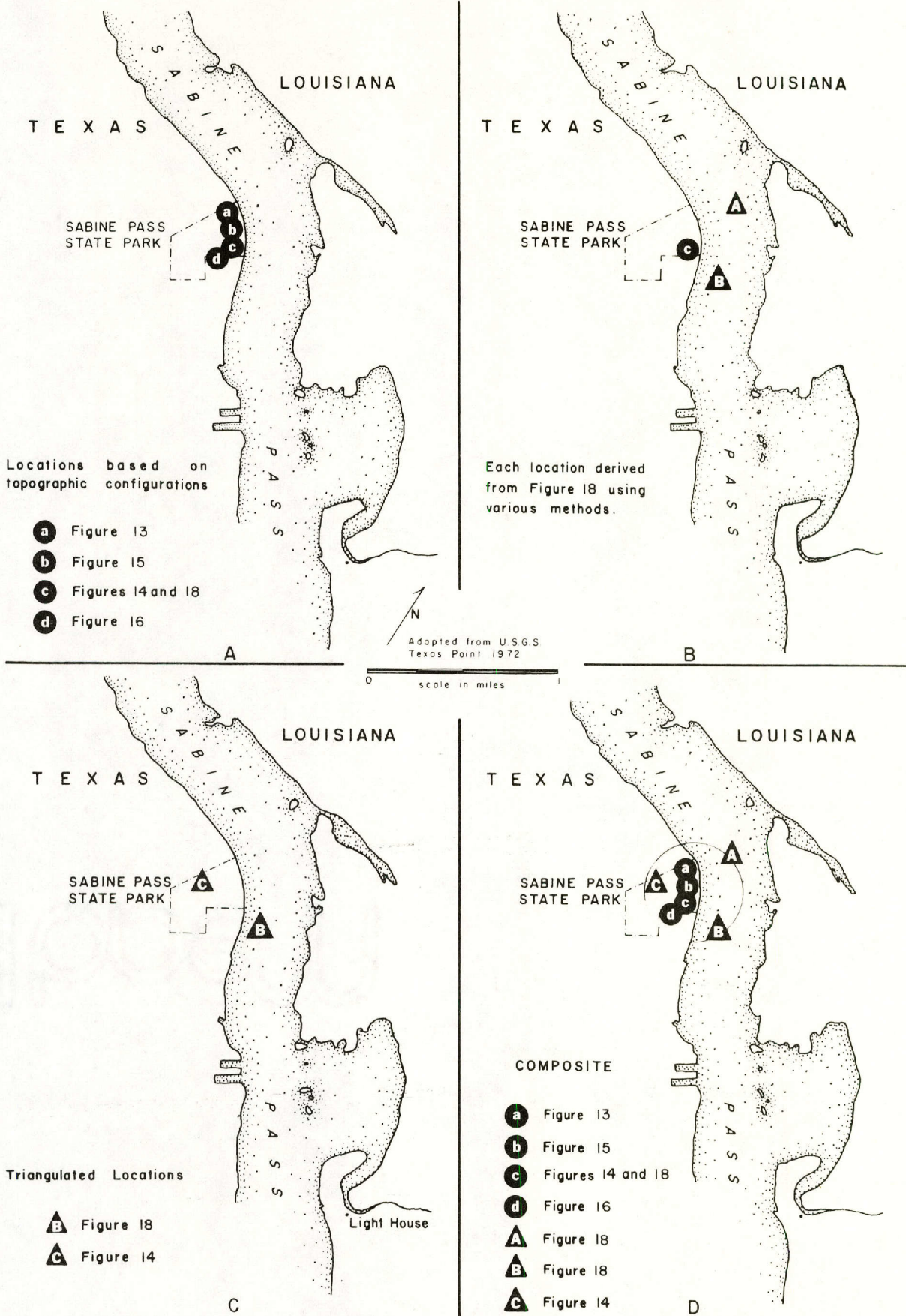


FIG 19



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