

“Privies, Privies, Everywhere:” An Historic Archaeologist Ponders Three Decades of Privy Excavations In Illinois

by
Floyd Mansberger

Fever River Research
Springfield, Illinois

South Suburban Archaeological Society
Homewood, Illinois
November 19, 2015



Archaeology is a methodology that brings a *material culture approach* to the study of past lifeways. It is the goal of archaeologists to understand the past through the study of the artifacts used and discarded by people in times past. By adding the dimension of time to the study of mankind, archaeologists are, in essence, creating ethnographies of the past.



And ultimately, archaeology is about people...

—whether prehistoric Native Americans or more recent European Americans—

... and their adaptation to the environments in which they live in.



Archaeologists study artifacts and artifact assemblages. Although individual artifacts can often be significant, to the archaeologist *artifact assemblages* (a collection of artifacts from a single *context*) often contain greater research value, as they convey information relevant to a specific *time* and *place*. Archaeologists use the term “feature” in reference to non-portable artifacts such as pits and structures. These “archaeological features” often contain large artifact assemblages.



Middle Woodland pit (100 A.D.)



Euro-American house basin (1840 A.D.)

So, what does that have to do with our current discussion about privies?



Right: Frame privy at the Lincoln Home., Springfield. This privy was built for Hiram Rutherford in circa 1847, and was donated to the State of Illinois in 1953 by Charles Crawford. In February 1954 it was moved from Oakland, Illinois to Springfield, where it was placed on top of the Lincoln family's privy pit (left), which had been excavated in 1951 by Richard Hagen (Bearss 1969).

Privy pits are a specialized feature designed for the disposal of human wastes, and are one of the most common feature types encountered by historic archaeologists in Illinois—particularly in urban areas. When investigated using professional archaeological methods, the privy pit offers great research potential for historic archaeologists and social historians.



Some definitions are in order:

Human bodily waste—consisting of feces and urine—is a byproduct of digestion. All humans produce it, and ultimately discard it.

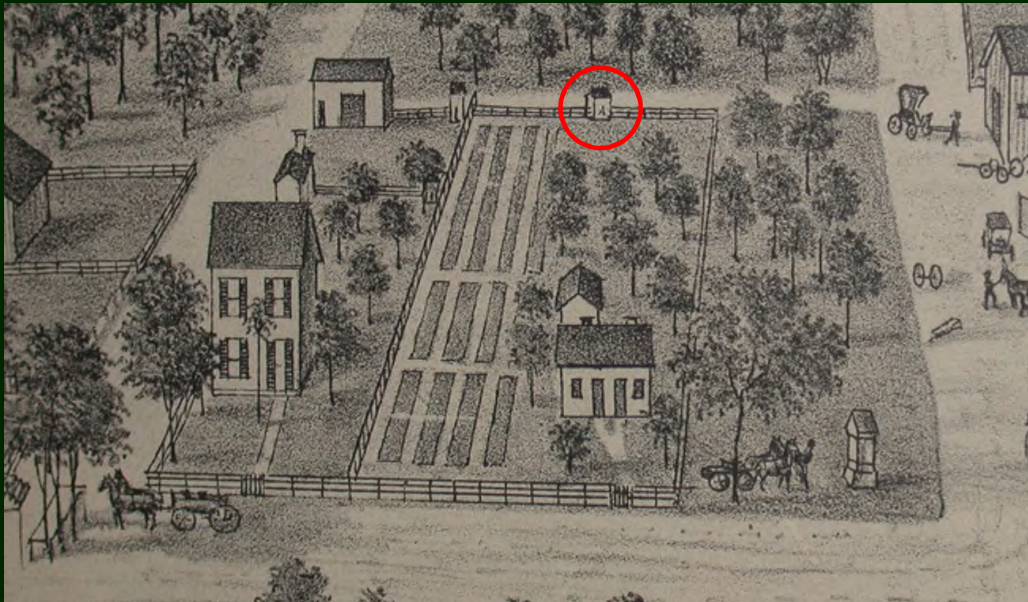
Both “privy” and “necessary house” were nineteenth century terms used to describe a small outbuilding that was used by the individual for relieving themselves, in private, of bodily waste (urine and feces).

Webster (1854) notes that the primary definition of the term “privy” is as an adjective implying “private; pertaining to some person exclusively; assigned to private uses; not public” (as in *privy counsel*).

Webster (1854) also notes that the word “privy” was used as a noun meaning a “necessary house,” and that the noun “necessary” was defined simply as a “privy.”

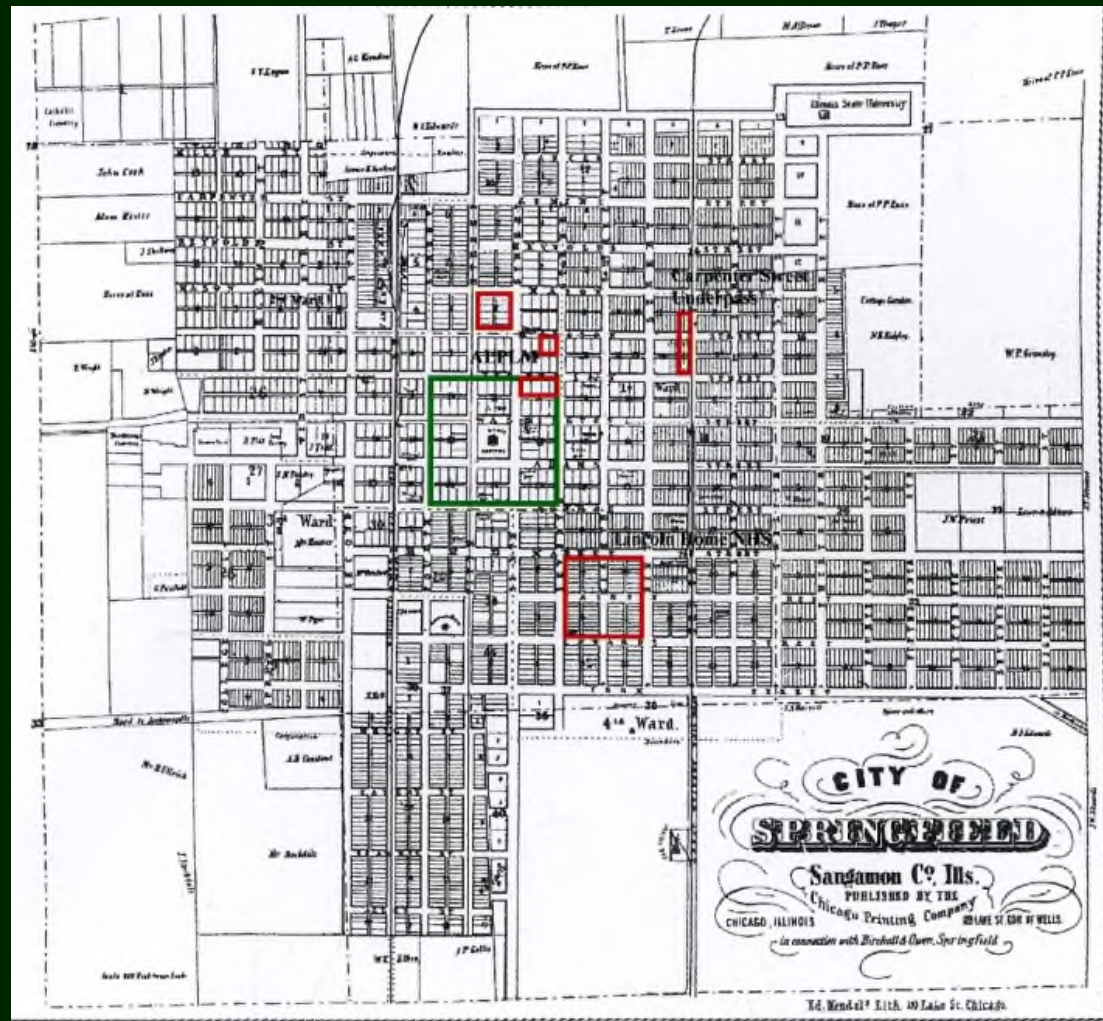
Webster (1854:104) notes that the term bathroom simply implied “an apartment for bathing”—which was a specialized room associated with the wealthy for use with a “bathing tub.”

During the nineteenth century, the “privy” or “necessary house” was a very small structure generally located along the side or rear property line that contained a subsurface pit for receiving human waste. Although “privies” or “necessary houses” were generally detached and removed from the dwelling, they sometimes were incorporated into the fabric of the dwelling or an ancillary outbuilding (such as a summer kitchen, woodshed, or carriage barn).

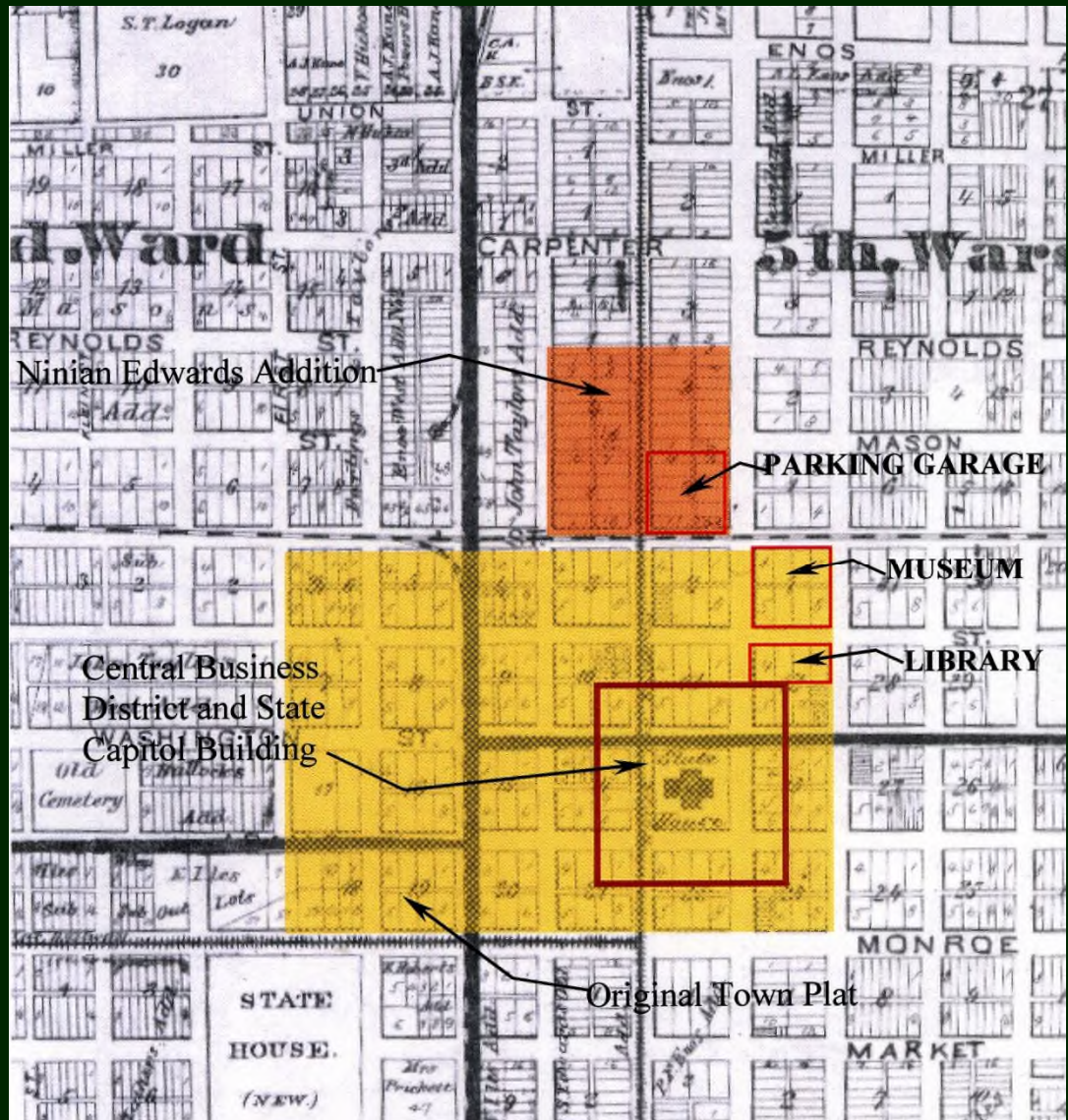


Detail of village lots in the small village of Cantrall, Sangamon County, Illinois (Warner and Beers 1874).

Springfield in 1855, illustrating the location of the Central Business District (green) and the various projects discussed in this presentation.



Between 2000 and 2004, four major archaeological mitigation projects were undertaken within three city blocks in an anticipation of the construction of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum complex.



Each project began with backhoe trenching (left) to assess integrity. This was followed by the removal of overburden with a large track hoe in select areas that had good integrity (middle), and subsequent excavation of features within those block excavations (right).



Over 370 subsurface archaeological features were recorded and/or excavated—often under some fairly adverse conditions. The vast majority of the features pre-dated the circa 1890s.

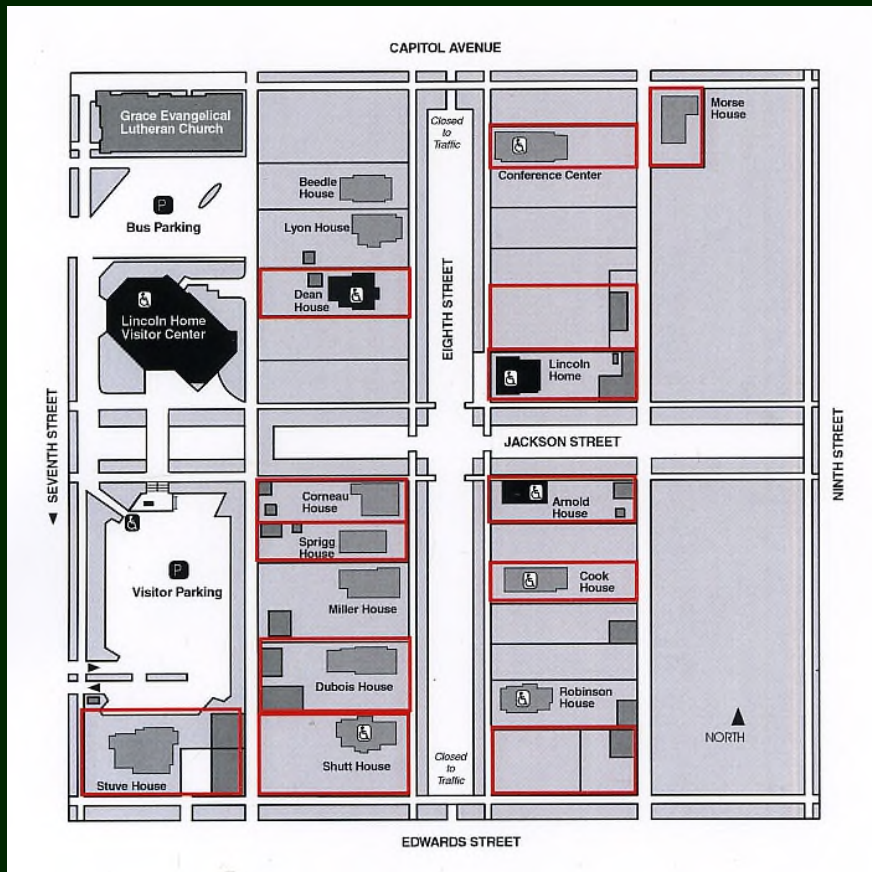


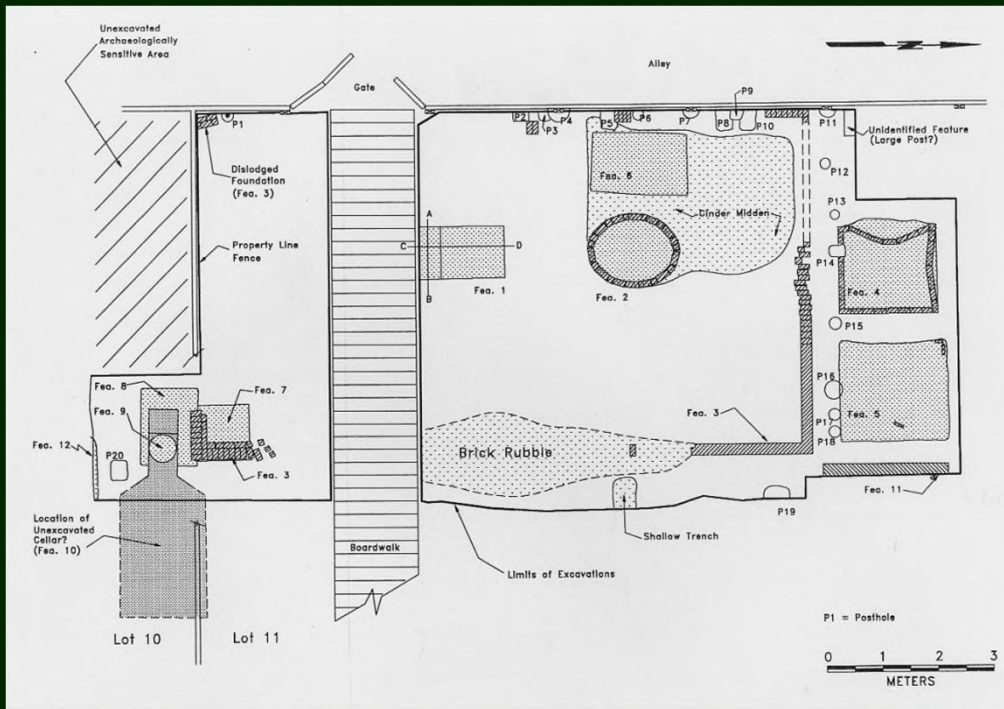


Privy pits represented one of the more common feature types discovered during the investigations. Over 110 privy pits were excavated during the course of these investigations.



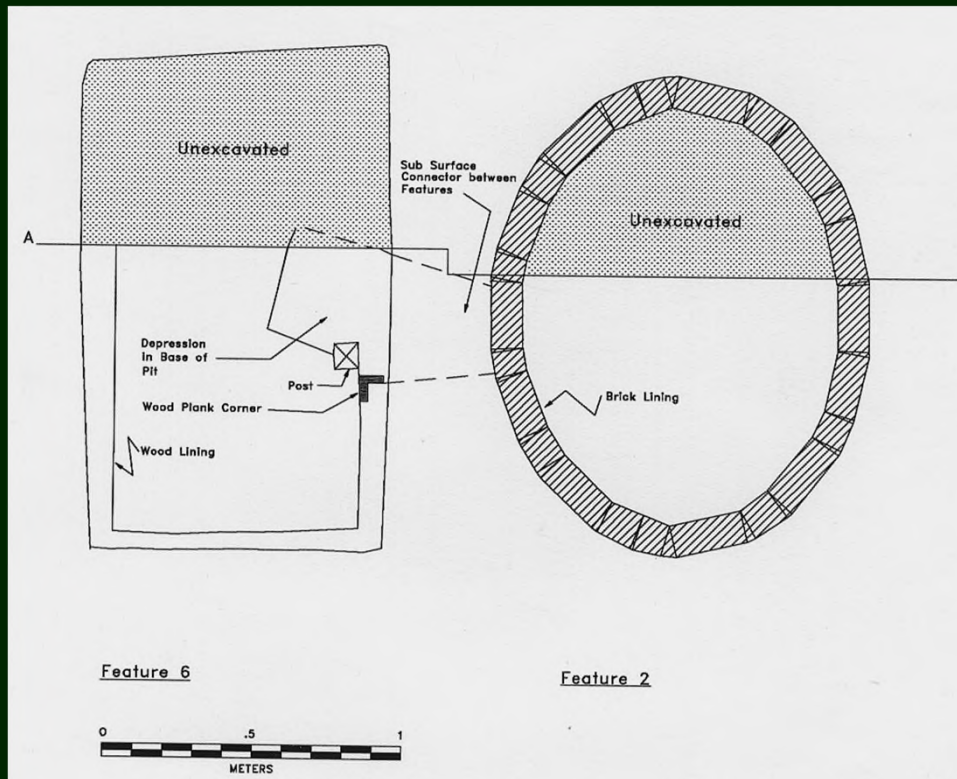
Over the past 30 years, Fever River Research has conducted extensive archaeological investigations within the Lincoln Home neighborhood for the National Park Service. The firm has conducted excavations on all the properties marked in red.

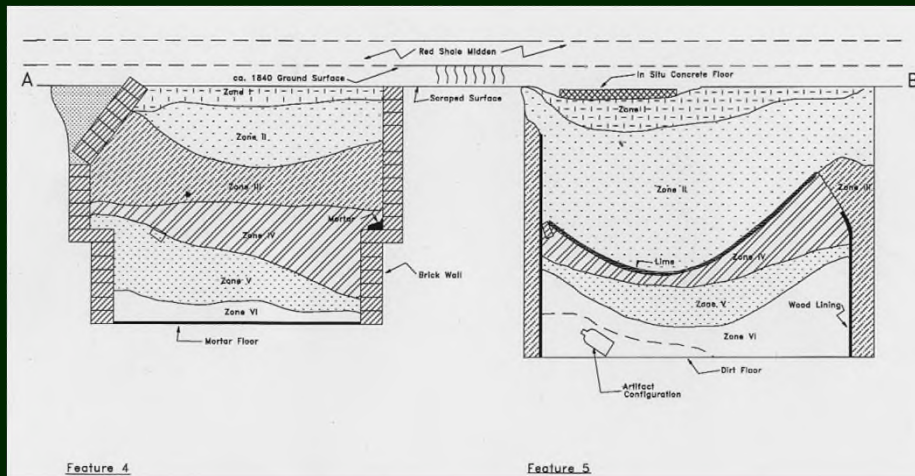
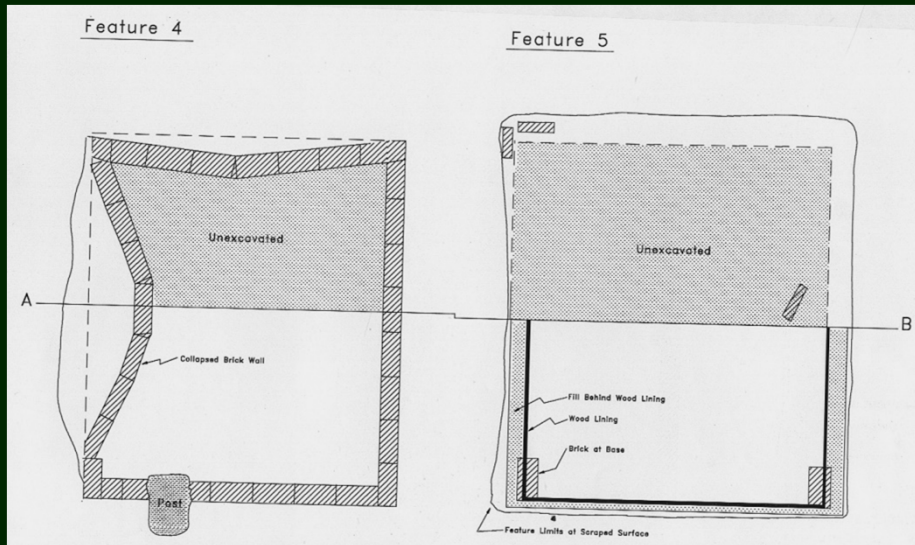




Excavations were undertaken at the rear of the Dean House in 1997. These investigations documented six sequential privies dating from circa 1840 through the 1920s.

Feature 2 (a brick-lined shaft) and 6 (a wood-lined shaft) were located side by side in the center of the lot, and dated to the middle nineteenth century.

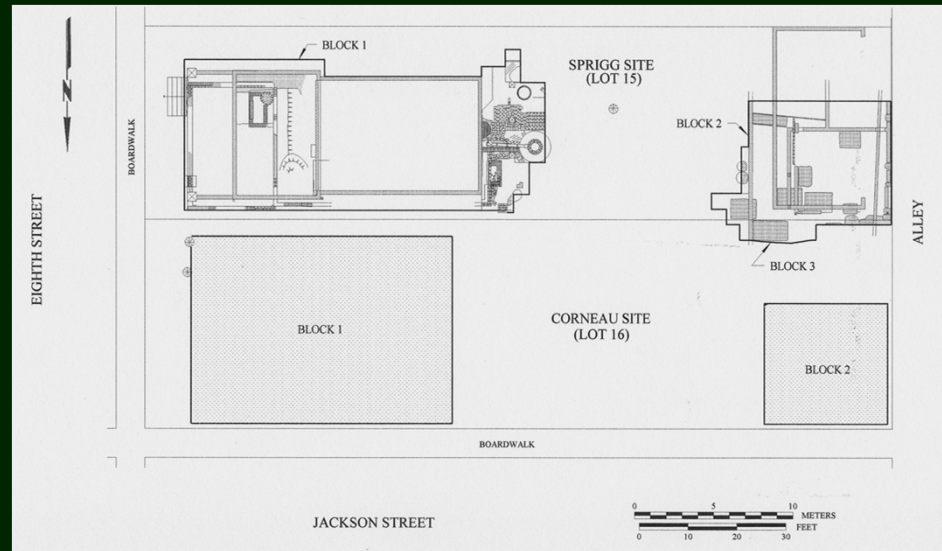




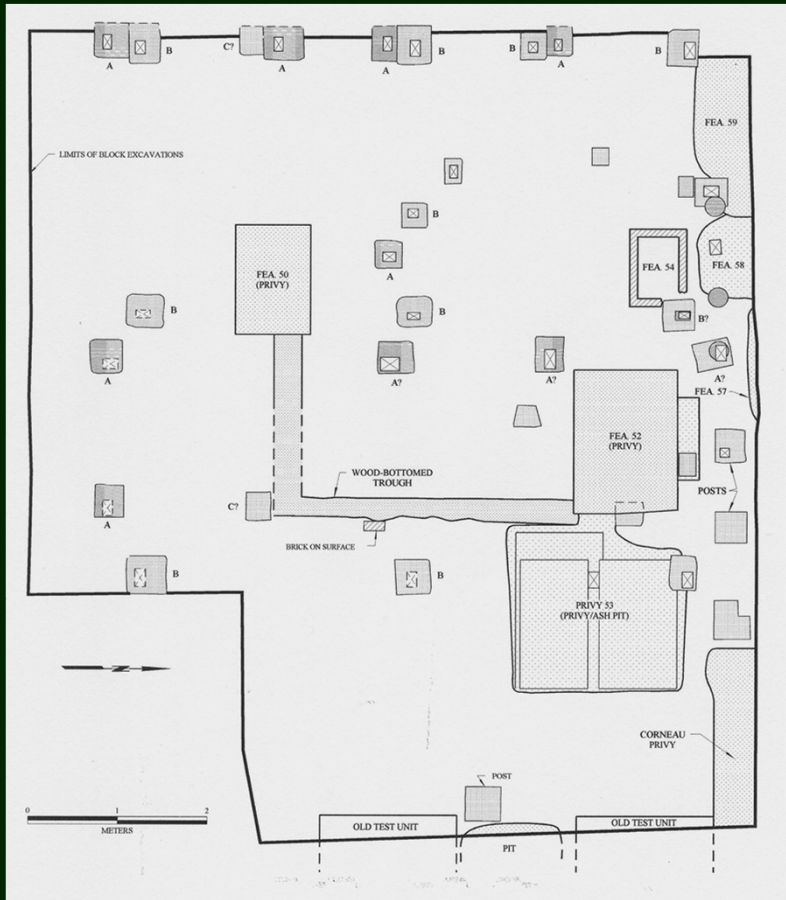
Features 4 and 5 were side-by-side brick lined and wood lined privy pits at the Dean House Site.



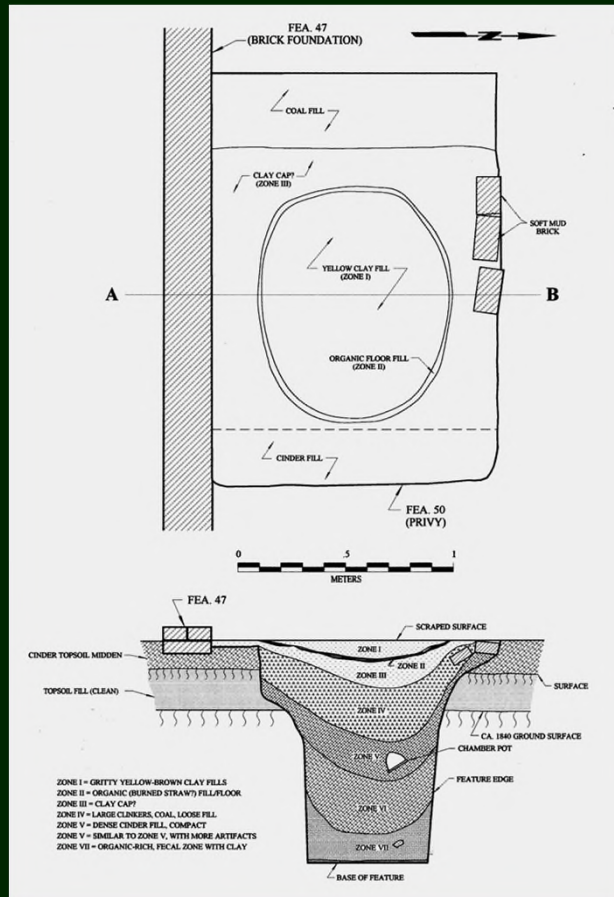
Excavations at the Sprigg and Corneau Sites were conducted in 1997 and 2003, and resulted in the excavation of five privies and the identification of potentially three others (which remain intact and unexcavated on the Corneau Site lot).



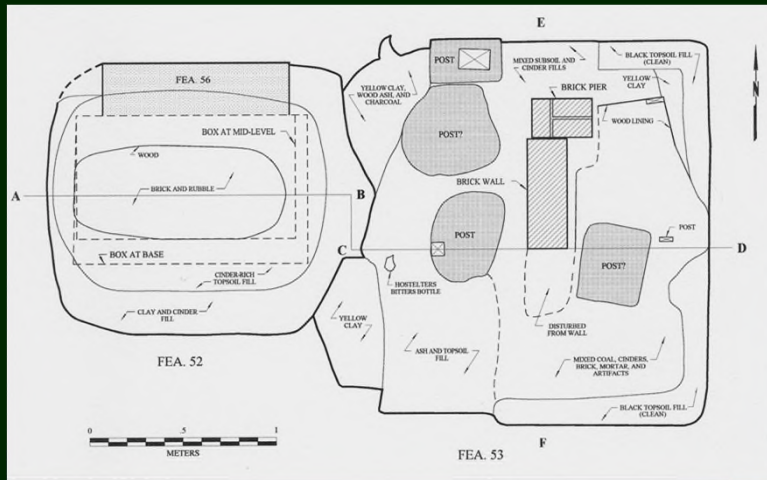
The majority of these privies were located on the rear of the Sprigg Site, and excavated in the summer of 2003.



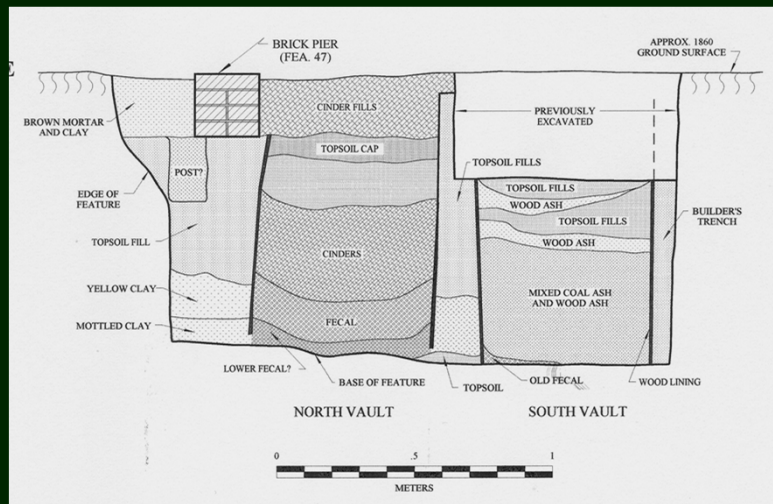
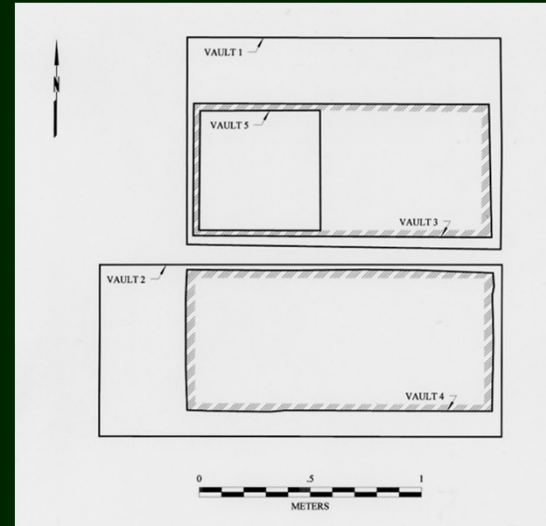
This is Feature 50, one of the mid-century privies uncovered at the Sprigg Site...



... and this is Feature 52, one of the later nineteenth century privies from the site.



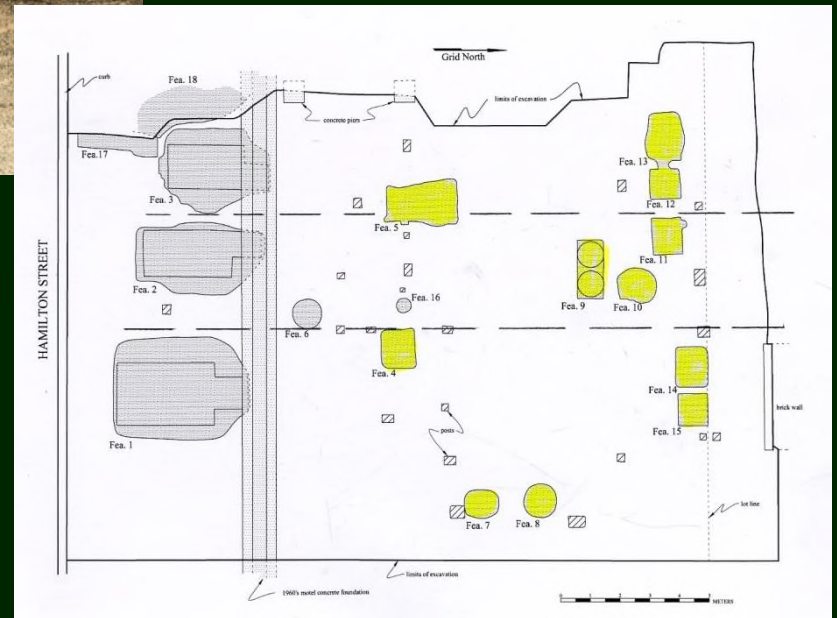
Feature 53 was a complex feature consisting of two side-by-side vaults, each of which had been re-built multiple times . It appears that one vault was used for human waste (fecal) while the other was used for fuel waste (coal ash and clinkers).



Detail from *Bird's Eye View of Peoria* (Ruger 1867).



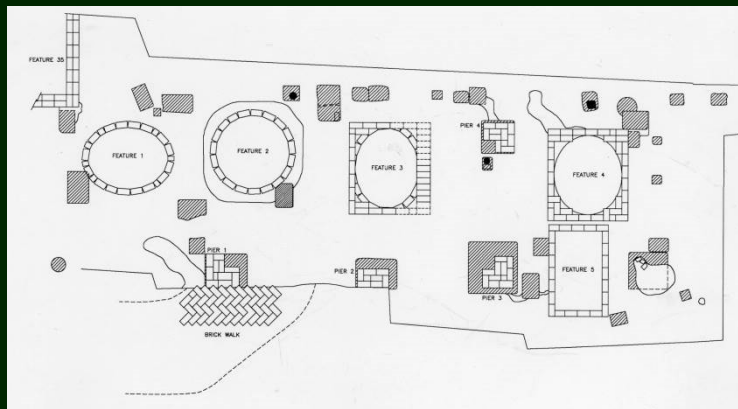
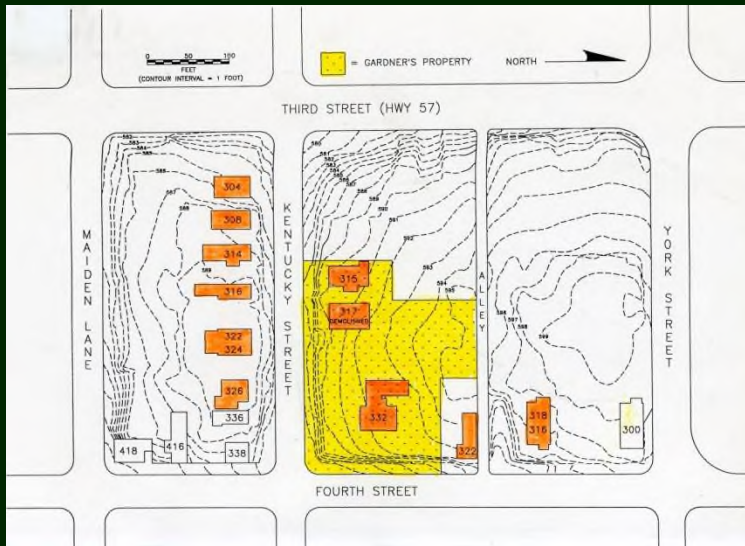
Excavations in Peoria undertaken in 2001 documented three side-by-side cellars (representing three distinct families and/or dwelling units). Each cellar had a suite of sequential privies (highlighted in yellow) associated with it. The site was occupied from circa 1835-62.

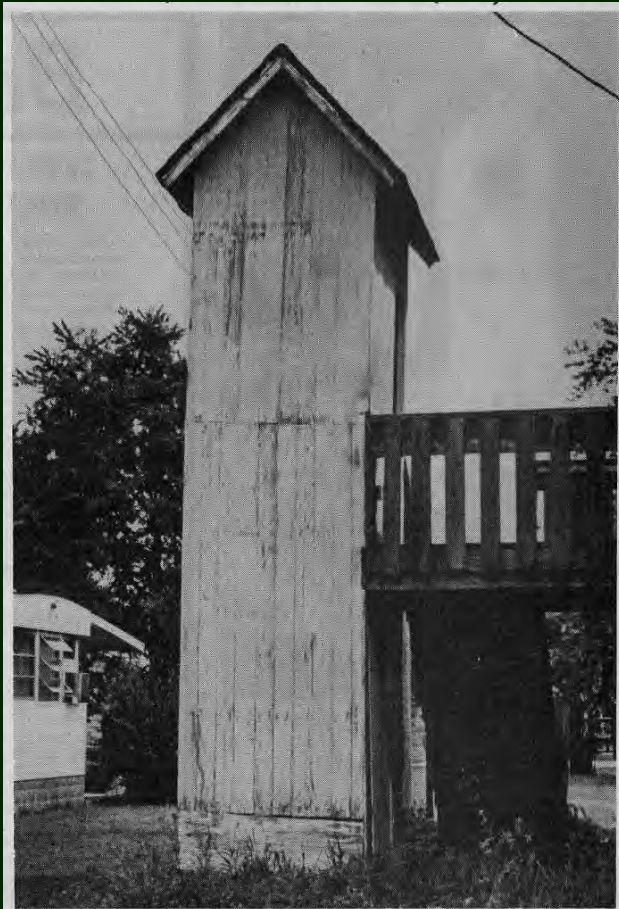




A total of 11 privy pits were excavated in Peoria, and represent a unique 1830s-50s urban assemblage for Illinois.

Research in Quincy in 1992 resulted in the excavation of five sequential privy pits (spanning the 1830s-1910s)—all associated with the same urban lot.





Would You Believe...?

GAYS, ILL. — One of only three double-decker outhouses in the United States is located in Gays. Residents say the outhouse was built in 1866 behind a building which housed a store and a hotel.

Townpeople are so proud of their double-decker outhouse they have built a replica of the original which they use in the annual Fourth of July parade. (UPI)

(Pekin Times, August 22, 1981)

Now, to change direction. Let's look at the variation in privies design.

Privy to the Past



H-W Photo/Joe Liesen

Going where most men wouldn't want to might best describe Floyd Mansberger, shown digging in a 19th-century privy hole on the Eaton Littlefield property at 332 S. Fourth. Mansberger, an archaeologist from Springfield, said privies can

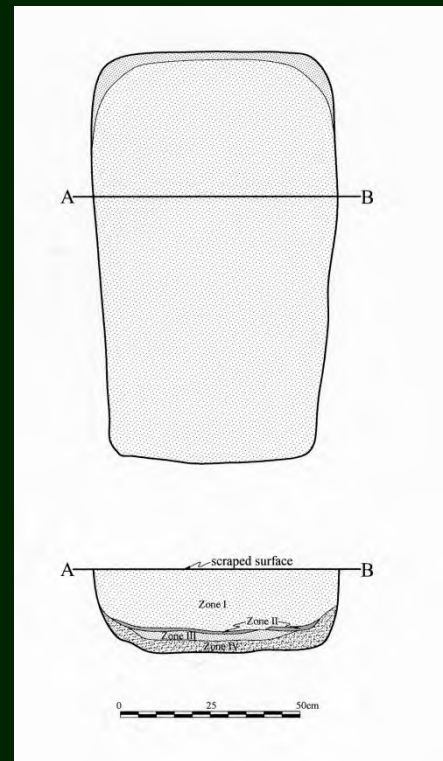
reveal much about the day-to-day life of early residents. The Littlefield house is being torn down to make way for the Quincy Convention Hall/Theater Complex.

The author from a long time ago (1992).

The earliest privy pits documented in our research were shallow, unlined pits that were often trapezoidal in plan. As expected, a distinctive characteristic of these shallow pits was the presence of an organic-rich fill (fecal material) in their bases.



Feature 57 Museum (Photo board is incorrectly labeled Feature 32).



Plan and section of 36 Museum.

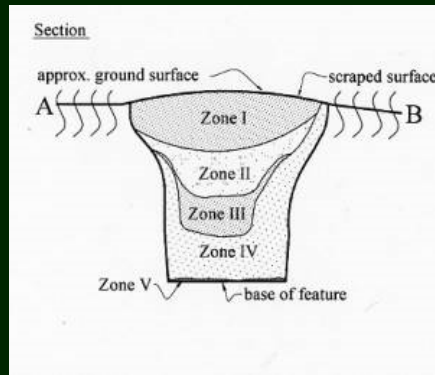


Feature 34 Library (Photo board is incorrectly labeled Feature 30).

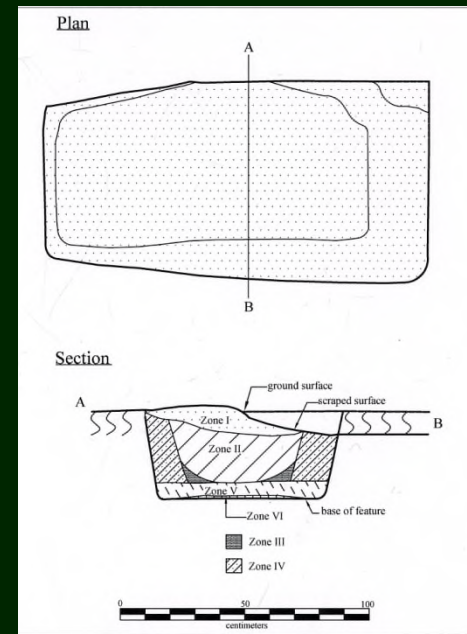
Two examples of small, unlined privy pits from the Presidential Library investigations. These two pits were probably used by the Simeon Francis family (editor of the local newspaper). Although the artifact content was generally low in these early privy pits, they nonetheless contained some of the earliest artifacts recovered from the investigations.



Feature 5 Library (Photo board is incorrectly labeled Feature 2).



Section of Feature 5 Library.



Plan and section of Feature 6 Library.

Feature 5



Primary artifacts from Feature 5 dated from the mid-to-late 1830s.

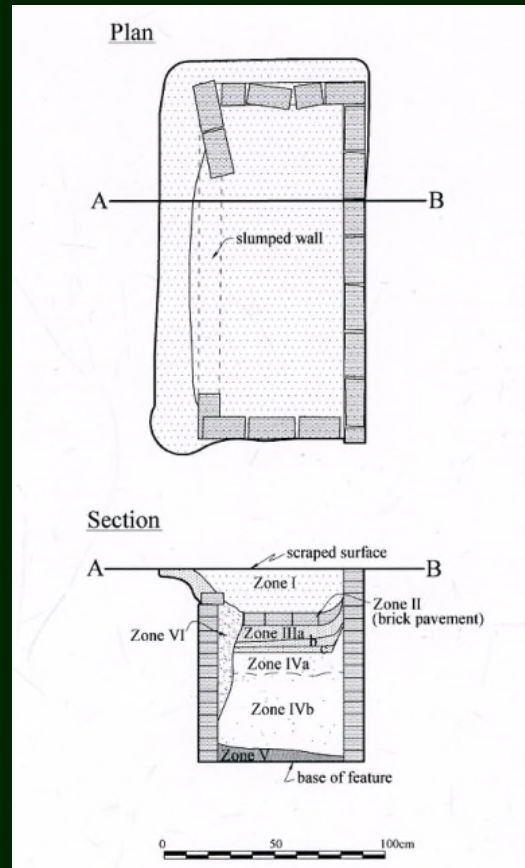
Primary artifacts from Feature 6 dated from the 1840s.

Feature 6

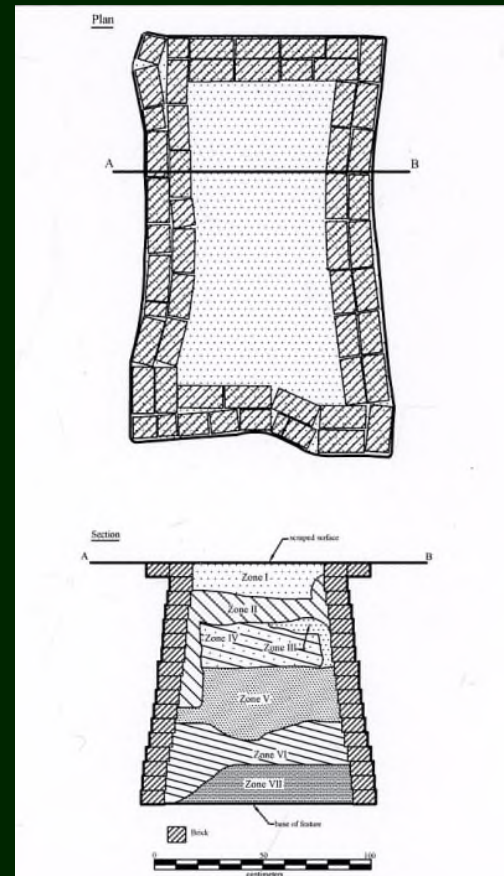


Both features document a fairly well-to-do household. Note the increase in the number and variety of artifacts during this time period—both of which suggest increased access to goods by the Francis family during these years.

The privy pits associated with higher status families were often rectangular brick-lined pits. These features were slightly larger (with greater holding capacity) than the contemporary unlined pits.



Feature 63, Parking Garage East



Feature 58, Parking Garage West
As originally constructed, the walls of this privy were vertical.

Feature 63



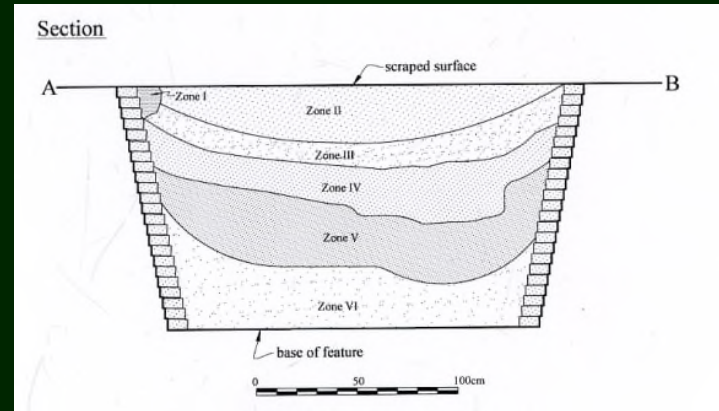
Primary artifacts from Feature 63 (top) were few in number and consisted solely of glass artifacts. The glass bird waterer and whale oil lamp (top right) are fairly unique items. Archival evidence suggests this is probably a later 1840s assemblage.

Feature 58



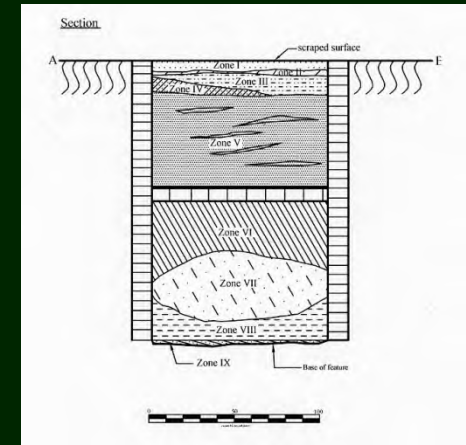
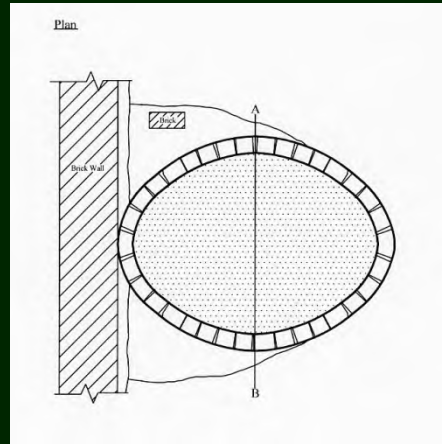
Primary artifacts from Feature 58(left) were much more numerous, and consisted of a diverse assemblage of ceramic and glass vessels from late nineteenth century (ca 1880s).

One of the more unusual mid-century features was this *oval* brick-walled pit with its distinctive truncated cone shape (Feature 59, Parking West). It is unclear whether this feature was constructed as a privy, as the fecal deposits (Zone V) were located above a non-fecal layer of fill (Zone VI).



Artifacts from Feature 59 were numerous and included a diverse mid-century assemblage associated with a fairly upscale family.

Although round and/or oval brick-lined privy pits were relatively uncommon in Springfield, a few examples were found. Feature 2 (Library) was located behind a commercial structure (potentially a bar or store). Artifact density was low, and atypical of a domestic occupation.



Although round brick-lined privy pits were relatively rare in Springfield, they were a common feature type in Quincy (Adams County). Excavations in Quincy have resulted in the documentation of numerous deep, brick lined shaft privies—which got deeper with the each rebuilding.



Feature 4 (317 Kentucky St.)

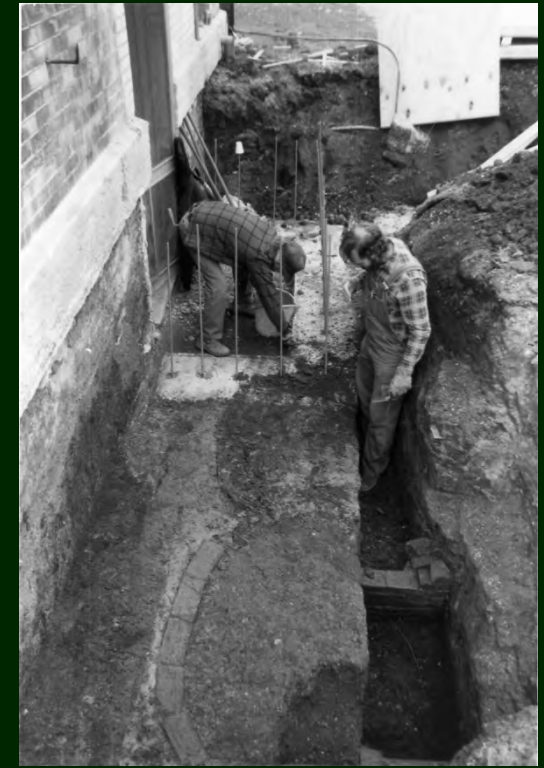
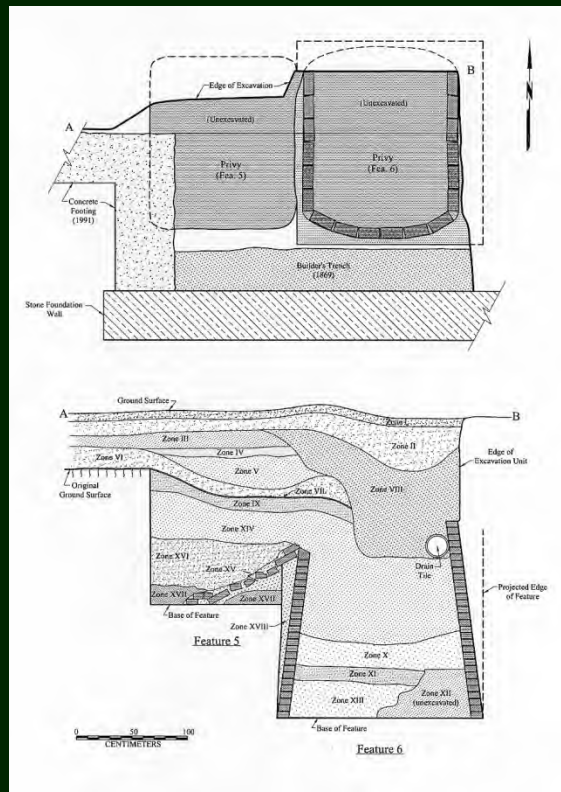


Feature 2 (317 Kentucky St.)



Feature 3 (317 Kentucky St.)

Another unique pair of privies were documented at the David Davis Mansion in Bloomington—one was a brick “oval” with walls that flared outward with depth. Each privy was filled in circa 1870, when the current mansion was constructed, with gender-specific artifacts--one with items generally associated with females, the other with items generally associated with males.





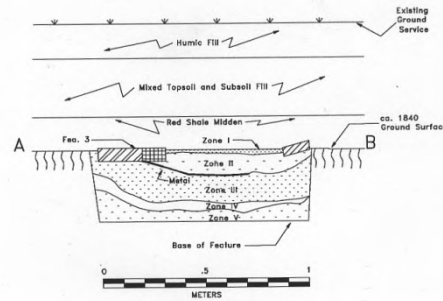
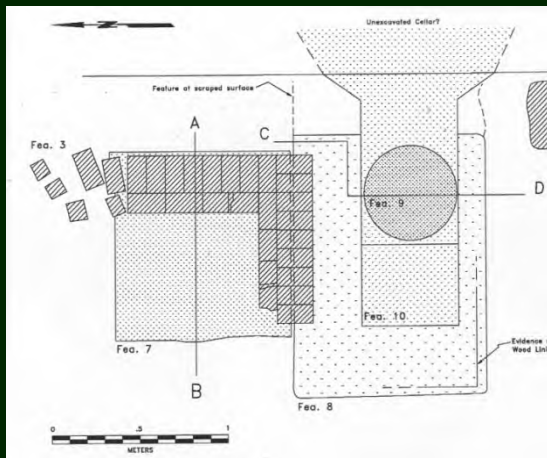
Feature 28 (315 Kentucky Street)

Stone-lined privy pits—
which have not been
documented in Springfield—
were also present in Quincy
(and in other stone-rich
areas).

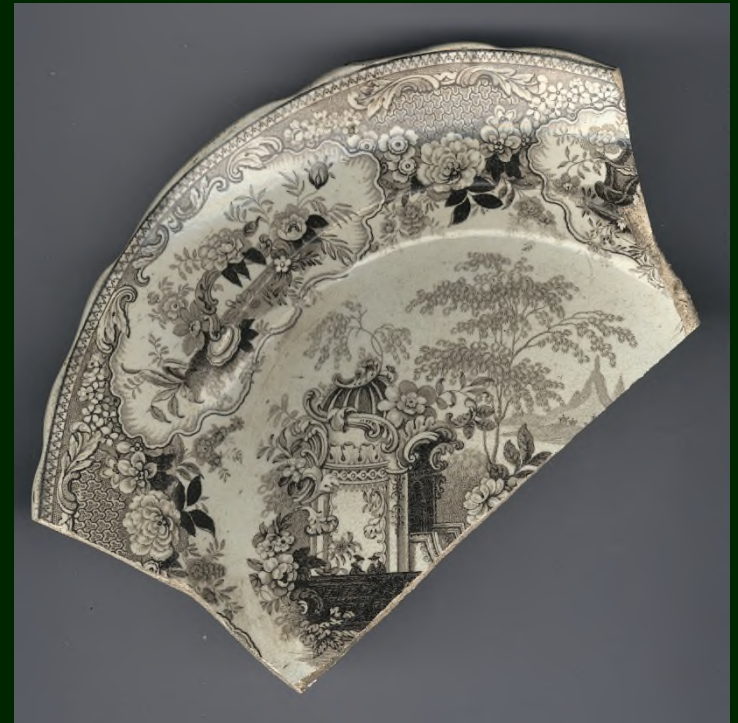
The most common type of privy pit uncovered during the investigations was the plank-lined box typical of the later 19th and early 20th centuries. These pits came in a variety of sizes and depths.



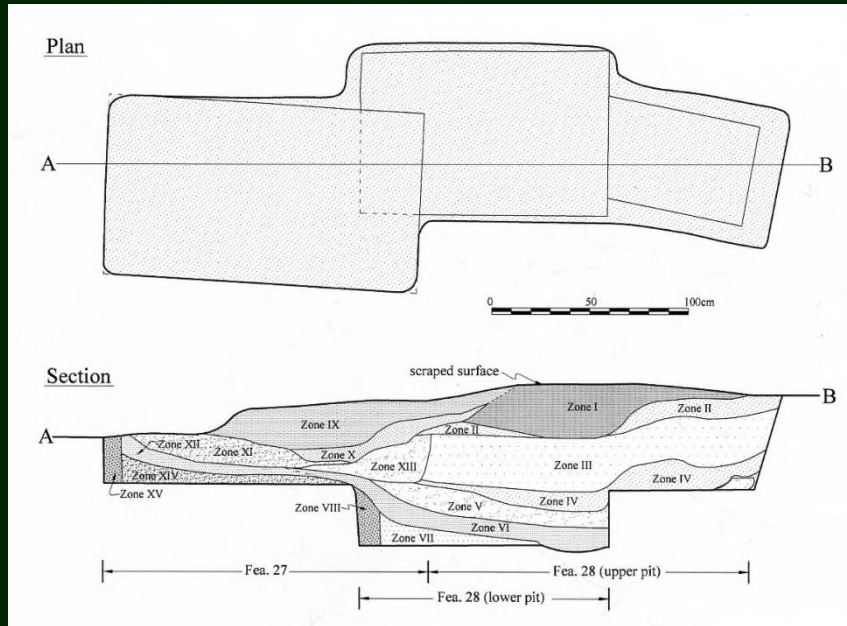
The earliest of the wood lined privy pits were small affairs, similar to—but significantly larger than—the early unlined pits. This small example was uncovered at the Dean House (LHNHS) (Feature 7). The brick resting on top of the pit represents the remains of a perimeter foundation from a structure that was constructed after the abandonment of the privy.



Artifacts from Feature 7 (Dean House, LHNHS) were few in number, but probably dated from the 1840s.



These three overlapping wood-lined box privies (Features 27, 28A, and 28B) were uncovered at the ALPLM Museum.

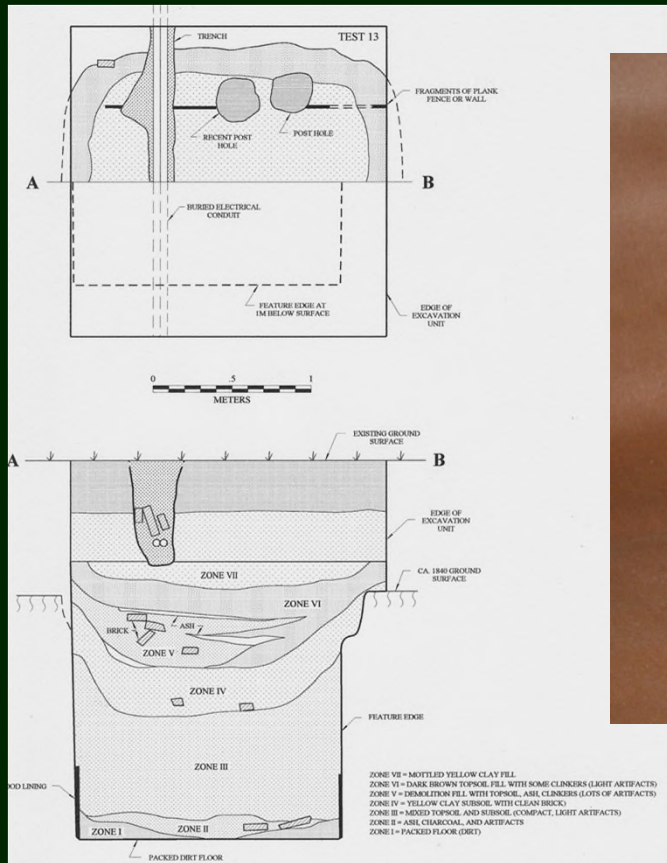


The contents of Features 27 and 28 (Museum) included ceramic and glass items typical of the late 1820s and/or early 1830s—representing one of the earliest assemblages collected from the ALPLM investigations.

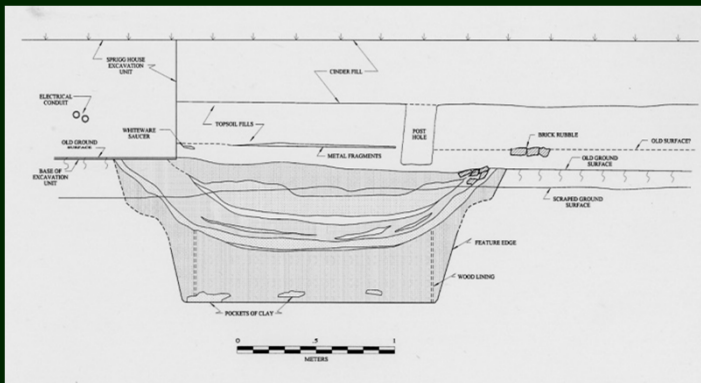
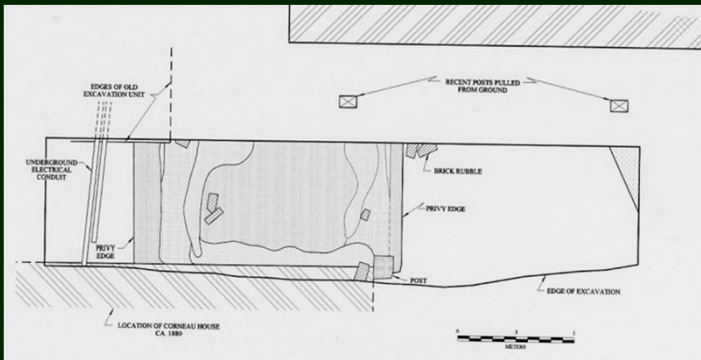


Feature 27 (Museum)

Another early, mid-century example from the LHNHS is Feature 32 (Sprigg House). Although considerably deeper, the number of primary artifacts in this pit were fewer in number—potentially documenting differential discard behavior than noted in the previous slide..



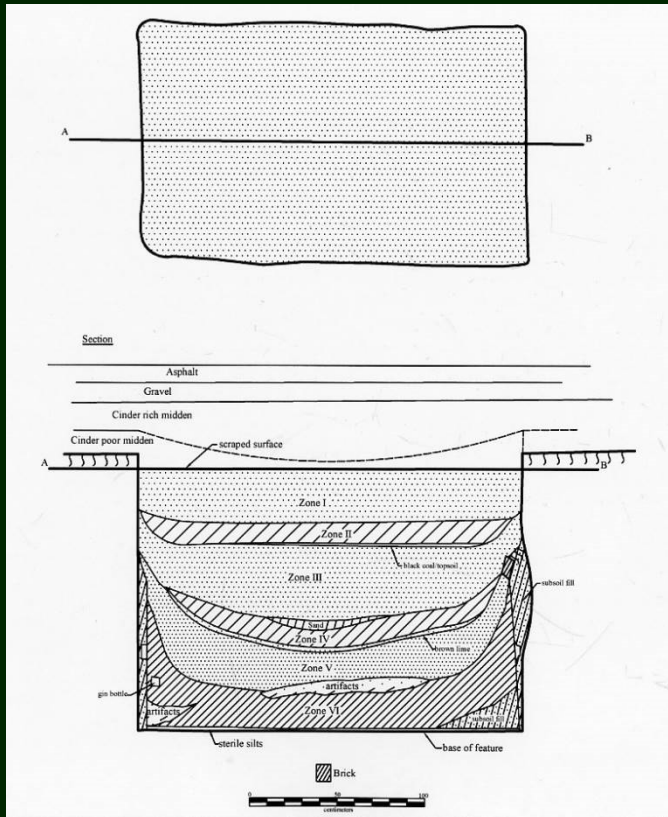
Yet another early wood-lined mid-century box privy from the LHNHS (Feature 33, Corneau House). This privy was used by the Corneau family, a prominent Springfield merchant.



The privy yielded a great number of artifacts potentially associated with the Corneau family's occupation of the property.



Feature 4 (Parking East) is a mid-century privy from that probably was associated with the Oliver Sheldon family—and represents the replacement privy for Feature 57 (which was previously illustrated).



Artifact density was high in Feature 4 (top right). The assemblage documented a well outfitted table setting from the circa 1860s (bottom left), as well as an extremely diverse liquor assemblage (bottom right)—not too surprising since Sheldon was a liquor merchant.





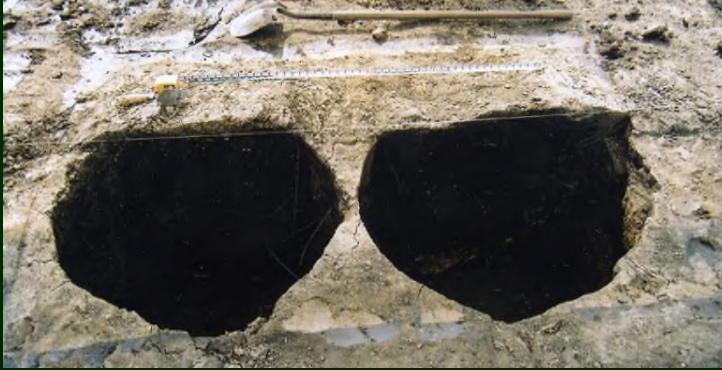
Another specialized form of wood-lined privy pit was the *barrel privy*, which consisted of simply setting a round barrel into a square or rectangular pit.

These two examples represent privies constructed with a single barrel set into a square pit.



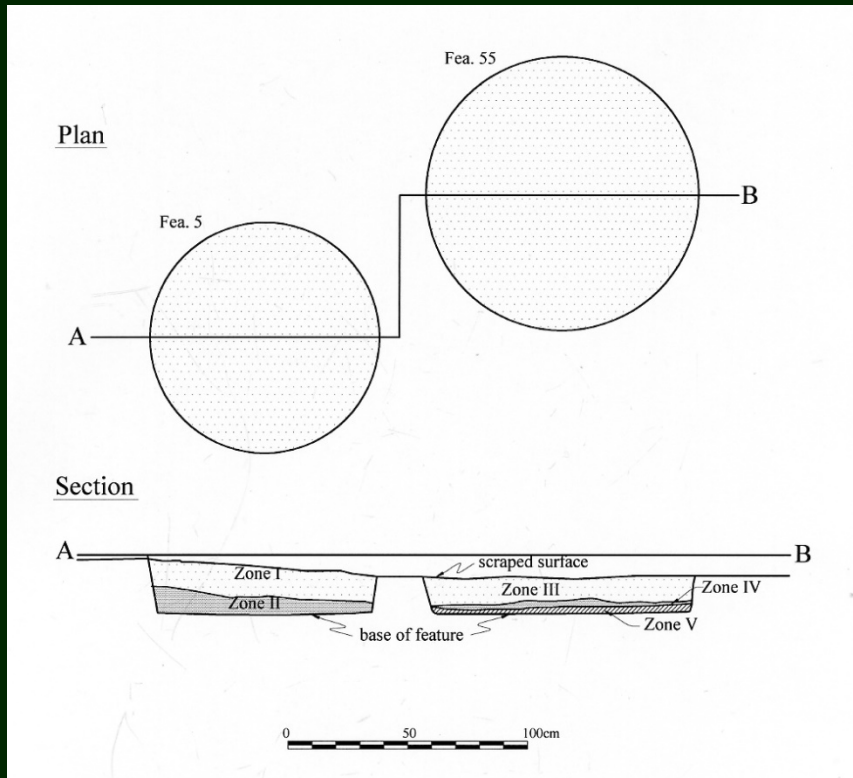
Top: Feature 92 (Parking West)
Bottom: Feature 25 (Parking West)

These three examples were constructed with two barrels set side-by-side into a larger, rectangular pit—and represent larger “two-seat” privies.



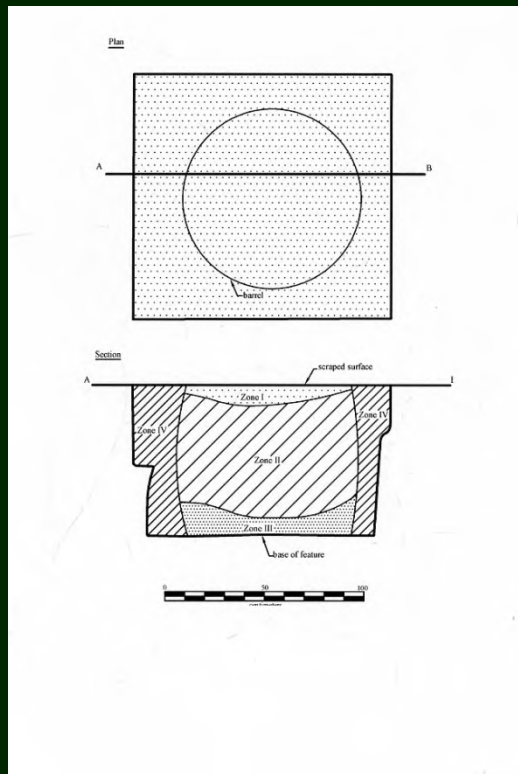
Top Left: Feature 84 (Parking East)
Top Right: Feature 9 (Peoria)
Bottom Left: Feature 12 (Parking East)

These two shallow privies probably represent tubs—or half barrels—set into the ground. Although close in age to one another, they probably were not contemporary.

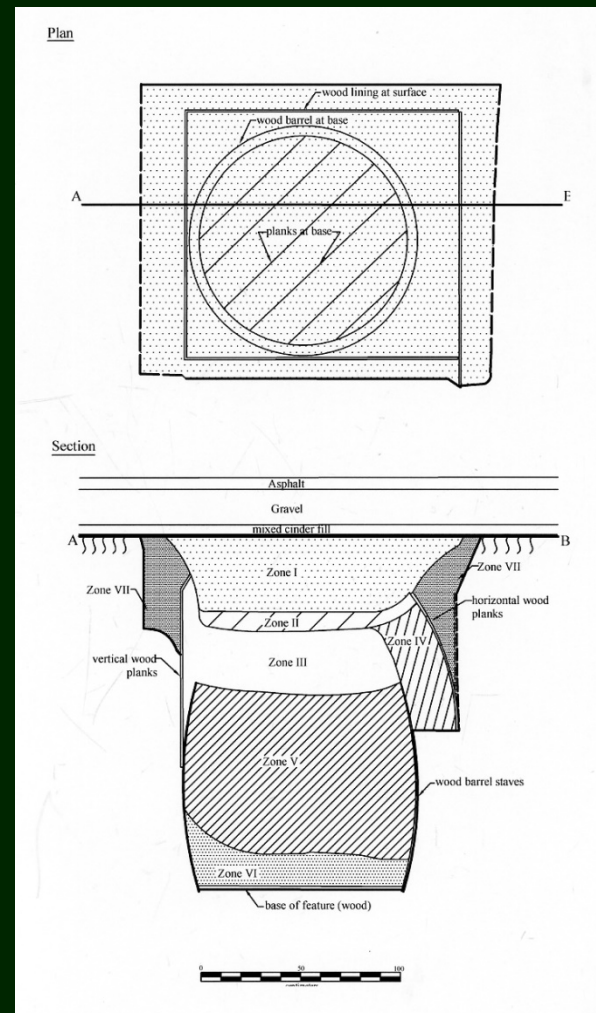


Features 5 and 55 (Parking East)

Barrel privies came in multiple sizes—size being dependent on the type of barrel being used. The drawings of the two privies illustrated here are drawn at the same scale.

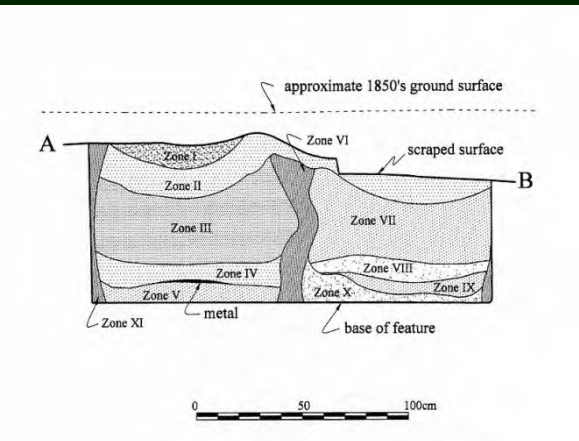
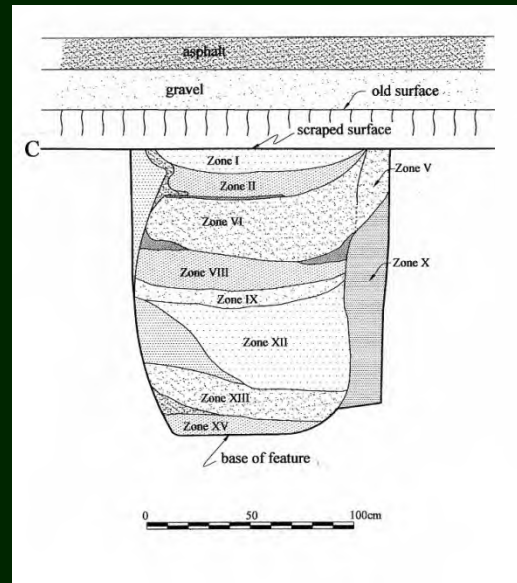
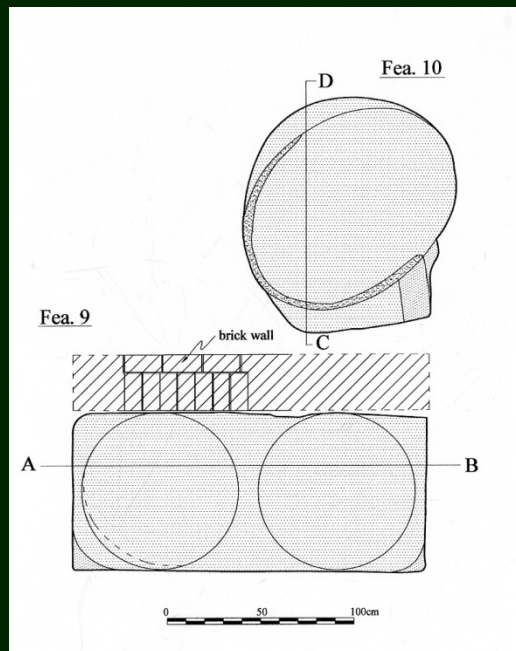


Feature 92 (Parking West)



Feature 10 (Parking West)

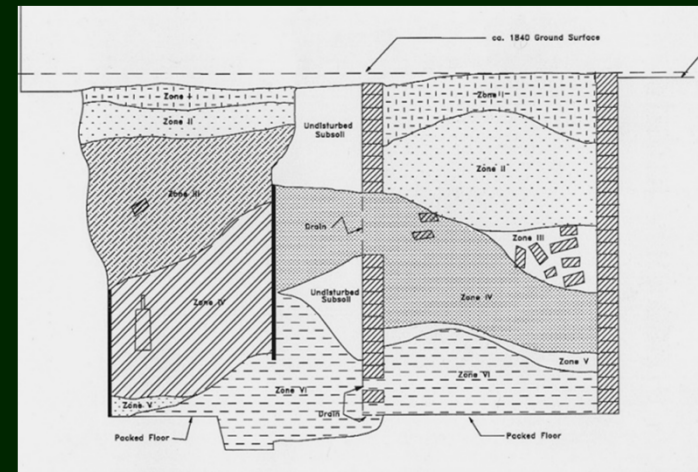
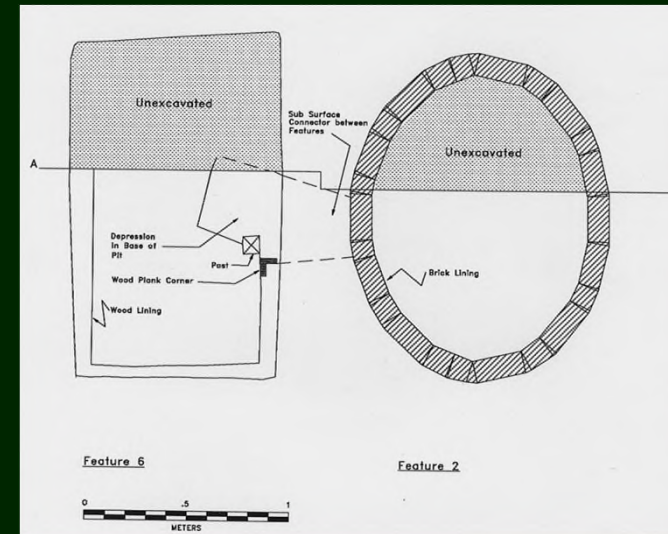
These two barrel privies (one constructed with a single large barrel, the other with two smaller barrels) were documented in Peoria. The double-barreled privy may document gender specific (male vs. female) use of the two separate vaults.



Feature 10 (Peoria)

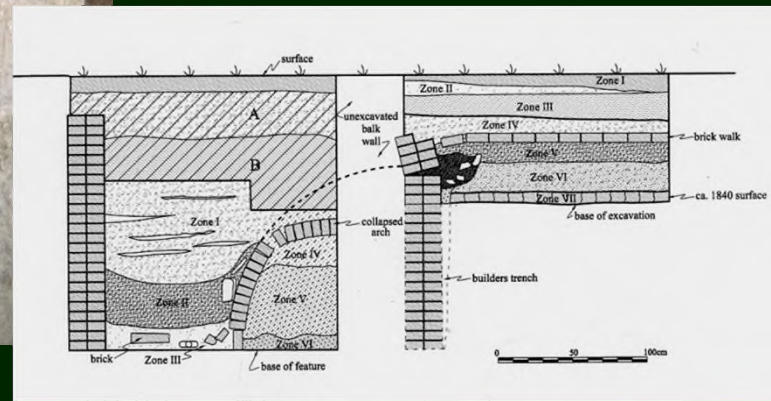
Feature 9 (Peoria)

Later nineteenth century efforts to improve drainage within a privy consisted of two side-by-side pits, with one draining into the other (and probably accessed by a standpipe and pump).

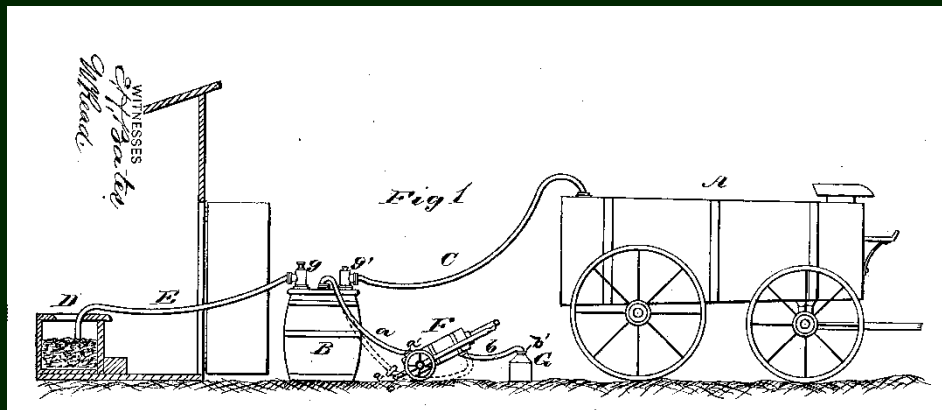


A similar strategy was integrated into the two mid-century privies (Features 20 and 21) documented behind the Franklin House (Parking East).

Another method employed to drain the privy vault was with an internal filter. In this cast, the filter was constructed using brick, a method also employed in contemporary cistern construction (Dubois House, LHNHS). Presumably, a standpipe and pump was also employed with this filter system.



By the 1860s, the City of Springfield had employed a “Scavenger System”—with each city ward employing a man with a city-supplied cart to clean up alleys and privies. By the 1870s, mechanical means for pumping out privy pits in a patented *odorless* manner were being utilized.



Details from an 1876 patent application for an improved apparatus for cleaning (May 1876).

SANITARY.
Look to Your Health !
CHAS. E. COOIL

is in town now prepared with a patent process
for
Removing Night Soil From Vaults.

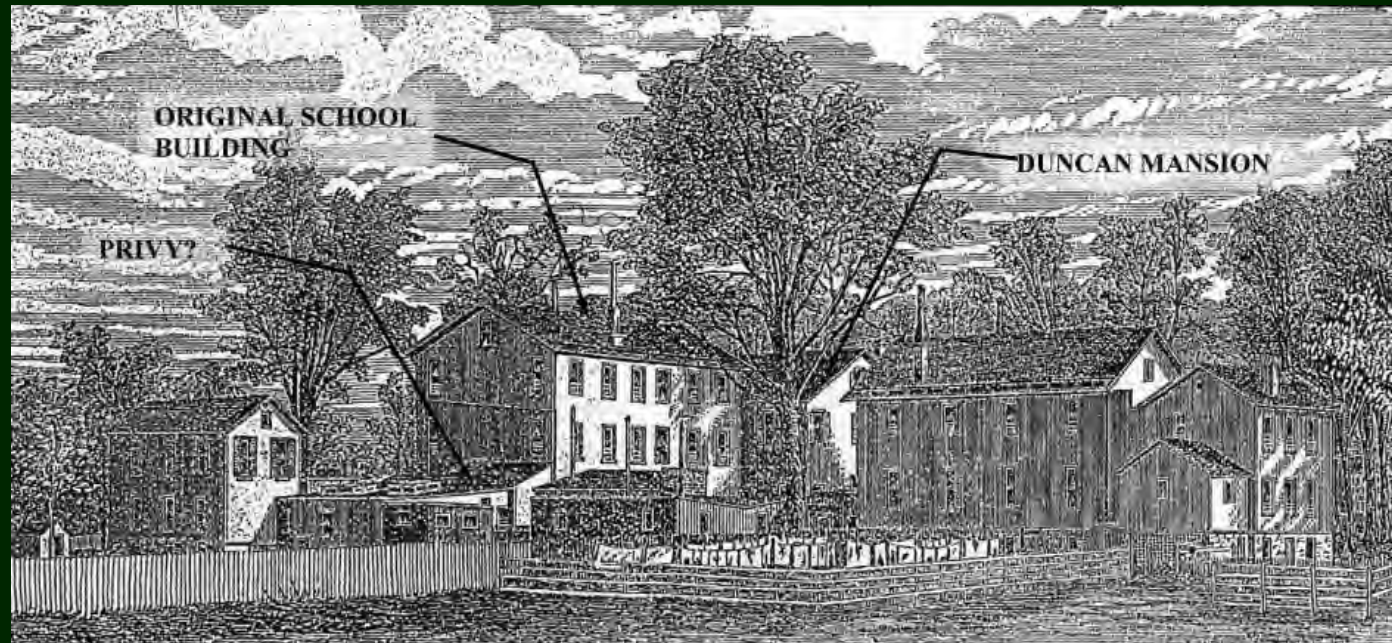
Also cleans Cesspools, Bowers, etc, The
work is thoroughly done in the day
time without creating any noticeable
effluvia.

The above is recommended by the Board
of Health everywhere.

All should avail themselves of this opportunity,
to have their homes disinfected, and
avoid all contagious diseases.
All requiring his services leave orders with
City Marshal or post box. feb27-1mo

Advertisement of a itinerant privy
vault cleaner in Springfield (ISR,
March 1885)

Large institutions presented unique problems for the disposal of human waste.



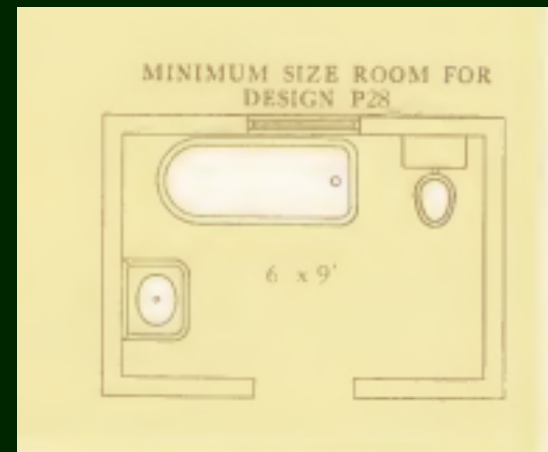
Top: Beginning in 1865, the Experimental School for Idiots and Feeble-Minded Children was housed in the old Governor Duncan Mansion in Jacksonville. It remained at that location through 1877, when the facility was relocated to Lincoln. In 1867, a large wing was constructed on the rear of the Mansion to house the growing number of occupants. At that time, an “addition” on the rear of the building was constructed for use as a washroom and water closet. This wing measured 10’ by 32’ in size. This image was drawn in 1873. Right: Duncan Mansion, early twentieth century.



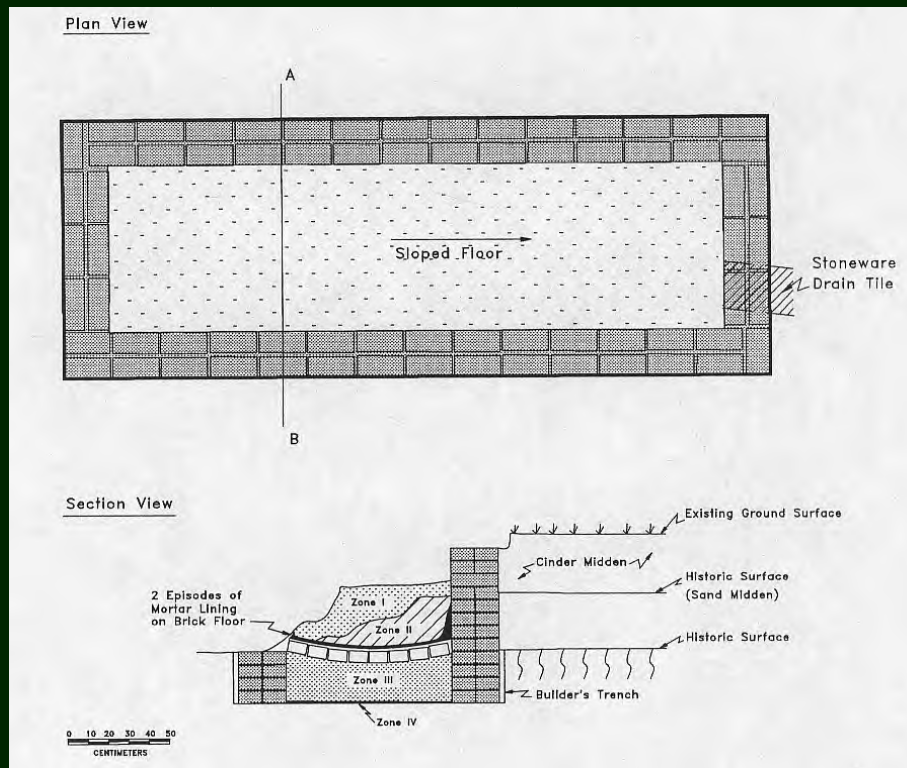
Archaeological excavations at the Duncan Mansion uncovered the remains of a large wood-lined box privy that measured *10' by 28' in length (and 7' deep)*. It was filled in circa 1877, and contained a large number of artifacts once associated with the school's pupils and workers.



With the introduction of city services—a potable water supply and sanitary sewers—the modern bathroom became available to many families by the turn-of-the-century, as illustrated in this catalog entitled *Modern Bathrooms* (Standard Sanitary Mfg. Co. 1909).



But not everyone made use of the indoor facility. This feature, which was constructed in East St. Louis in circa 1900-1905, is interpreted as a “flush privy” (Feature 11, Bareis Site). The sloped floor of the privy was connected to the sanitary sewer via a stoneware tile drain, and was periodically flushed with water to remove the human waste—and functioned as an alternative to indoor plumbing.





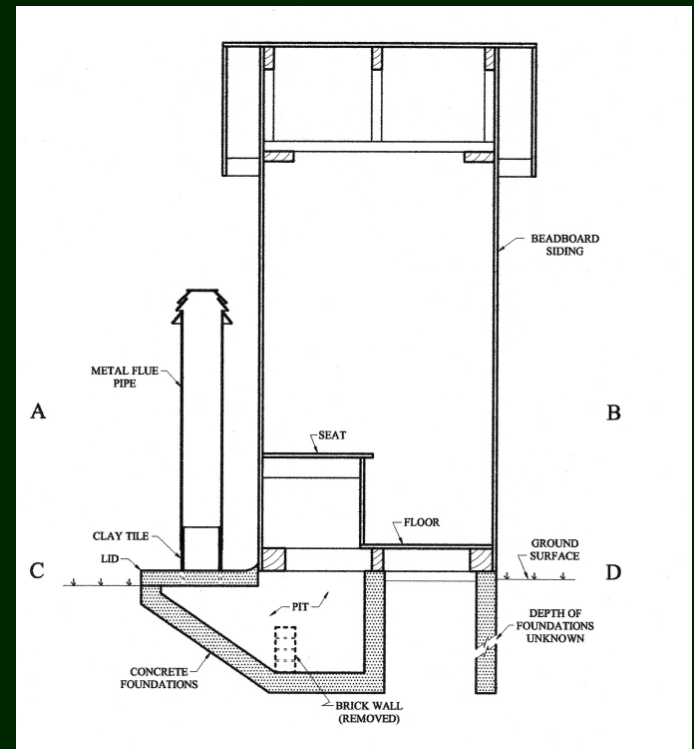
Detail of Springfield illustrating location of privies in 1914 (Springfield Survey 1915). This illustrates the great disparity between older eastern neighborhoods and newer western neighborhoods. By 1914, many of the newer homes on the west side had indoor bathrooms.



Privies in use in Springfield, 1914.
Left: Well and privies used by three families. Right: Toilet facilities in a food handling facility (*Springfield Survey* 1915).

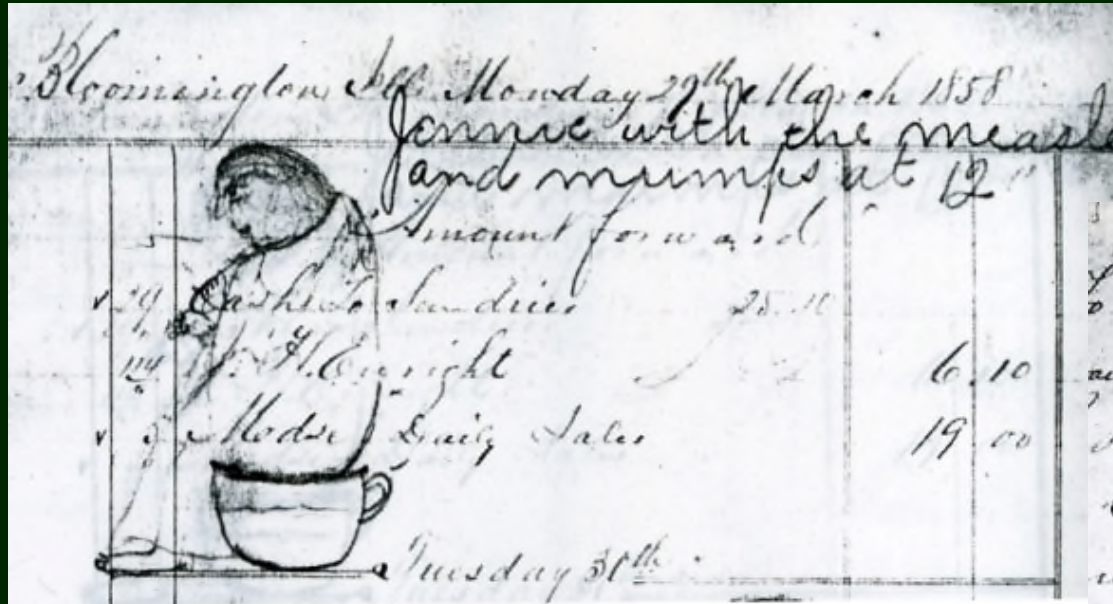


In many rural areas, the use of privies persisted through the twentieth century—as did these two. Right: Rural Montgomery County (Armentrout Site). Right: Rural St. Clair County (Moore-Knobeloch Site). Distinctive characteristics of these “sanitary” privies were their sealed concrete-walled vaults and ventilation systems—both of which became common during the early years of the century.

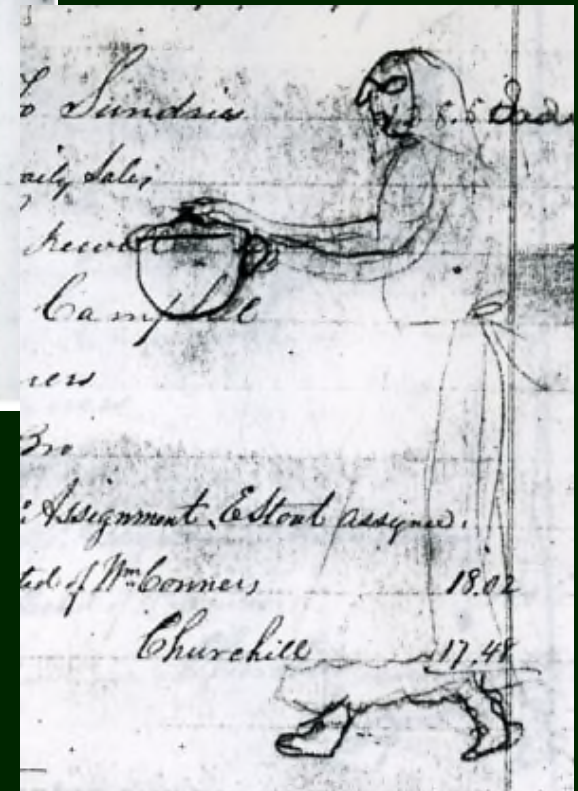


Privies and their use are a relatively taboo topic, little discussed in period sources...

Sitting on the pot: "Jennie with the measles and mumps at 12."



Carrying the pot outside for disposal: "Sadie."

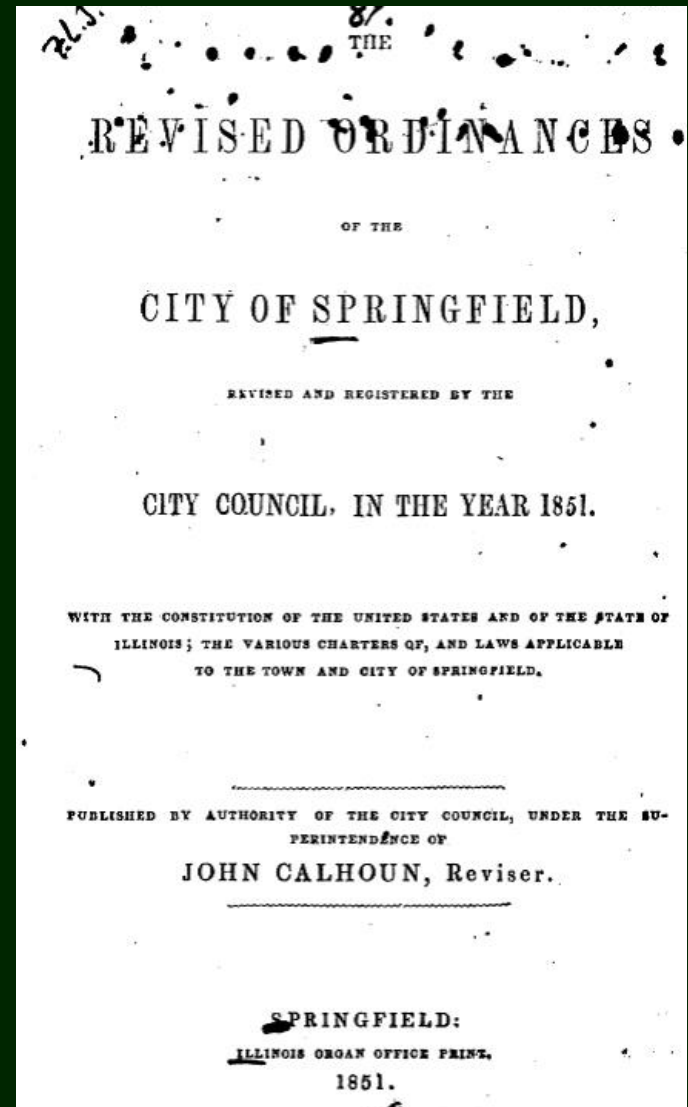


Use of chamber pots in nineteenth century Illinois, as depicted from sketches overwritten in old store ledger from Bloomington, Illinois. Ledger dates from 1857-1860; sketches probably drawn in early 1880s (McLean Museum of History, Bloomington).

...and when discussed, must be questioned as to its potential accuracy.

Springfield City Ordinances (1851) attempted to regulate the construction and use (cleaning schedules, maintenance, and abatement of nuisances) of privies.

Regulations mandate that all privies be at least six feet deep, walled with stone or brick, and at least two feet from adjacent property lines—much of which was not followed by nineteenth century families.



Archaeology contributes dramatically to our understanding of past lifeways.



Construction decisions related to privies included not only choices in the methods and materials used (as discussed earlier), but also to their location. Proximity to the residence and activity areas within the yard, as well as local topography and prevailing winds may have played a role in locating the privy.



Reconstructed rear yard landscape features at the Corneau Site (top) and Sprigg Site (bottom), Lincoln Home National Historic Site. The placement and size of these structures was based on the archaeological investigations.

Behavior associated with the use and abandonment of the Privy is of great research value—particularly in regard to household discard behavior (and the related artifact assemblage).

Fea. 57



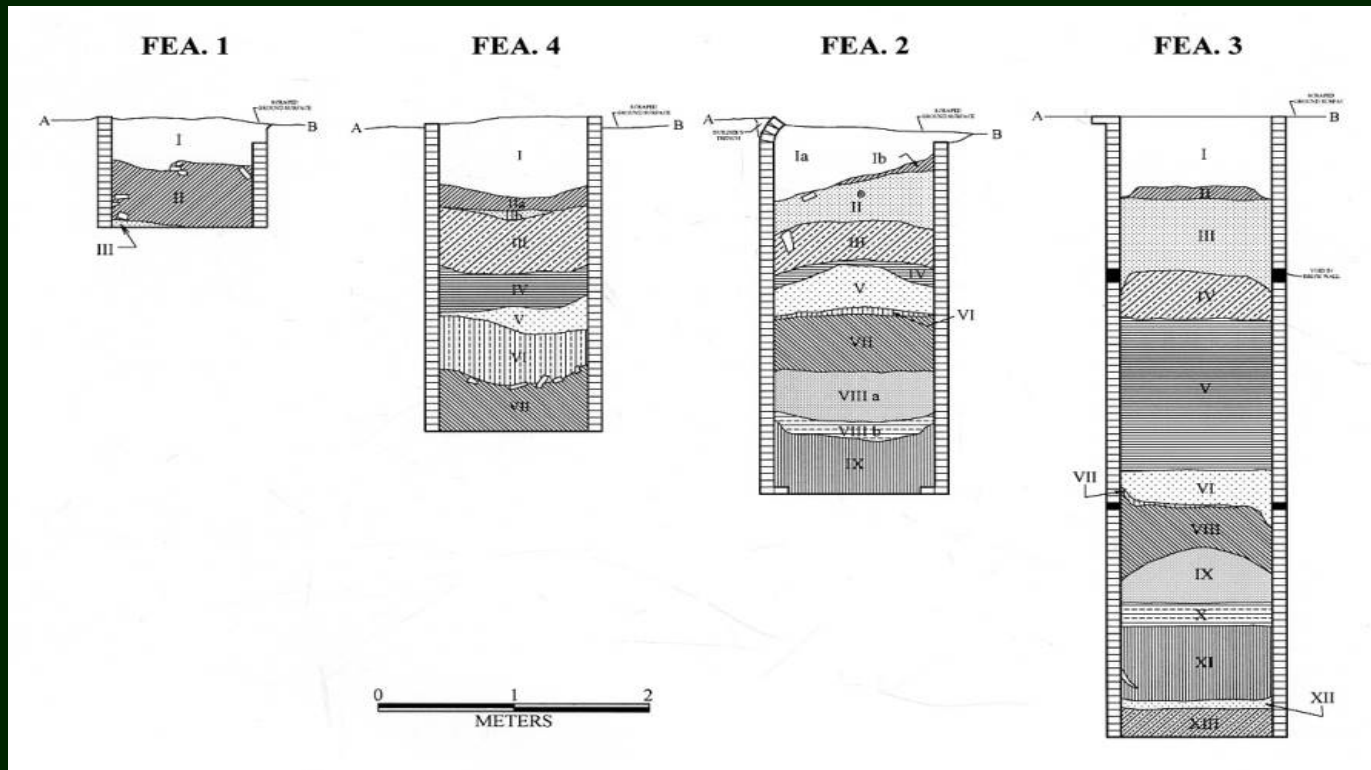
Primary artifacts from Feature 57 (left) were relatively numerous, and consisted of a diverse assemblage of ceramic and glass vessels from the 1850s. These were probably associated with the Lavelly or Sheldon family.

Fea. 4



Primary artifacts from Feature 4 were even more numerous, dating predominately from the 1860s, and no doubt associated with the Oliver Sheldon Family.

Increase in privy depth through time as illustrated by the round brick-lined shaft privies excavated at 317 Kentucky Street, Quincy (Adams County). Increased depth resulted in greater holding capacity—for both human waste and household trash.



Bones (or “*faunal remains*”) recovered from the archaeological features tell us a considerable amount about the diet and/or foodways of the past inhabitants of early Springfield. One area of interest to archaeologists is the variety of different species represented in each feature (*species composition*) and how it changes through time and between social groups.

Chicken bones from another feature.



Beef and other large mammal remains from a feature.



Additionally, *floral remains* (consisting of both small seeds, fruit pits, and larger plant remains) are extracted from feature fills using a water screening process known as “flotation.” These small scale remains also contribute to our understanding of the early foodway patterns of the city’s early settlers.

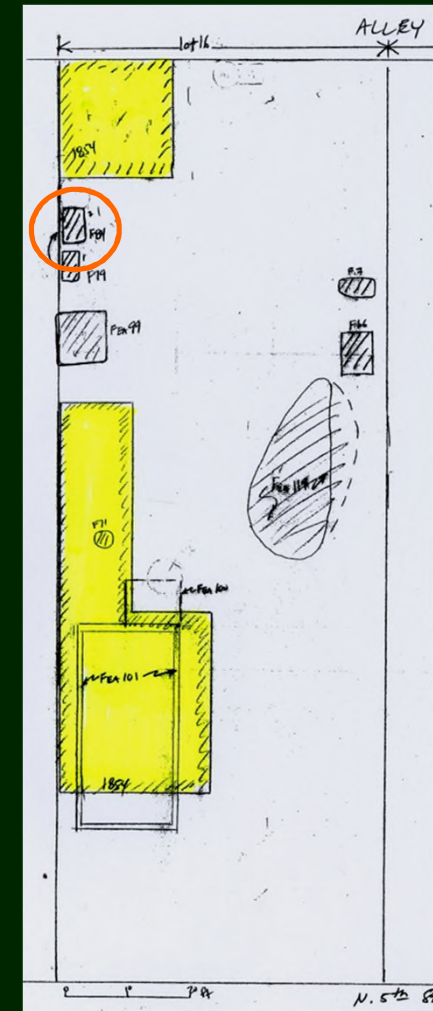


A Summary Example—One of My Favorite Privies From Springfield



Detail of 1867 *Bird's Eye View of Springfield, Illinois* (Ruger 1867). Feature 84 (Parking West) is of special interest to us today, as it contained an interesting assemblage of artifacts once associated with a German immigrant family.

As with most of the privies excavated during these projects, this pit was wood-lined and relatively shallow—clearly not meeting the requirements of the City Ordinance.





Primary artifacts from Feature 84 were fairly numerous and included a wide range of glass and ceramic household items. Archival research suggests that this assemblage was used and discarded by either the Thayer family (who occupied this parcel of land from circa 1851-1864) or the Lorch family (who occupied the property from circa 1878 to 1890). Although little is known about the Thayer family, Charles Lorch was a German-born butcher.



This large, circular “serving platter” (better known as a “charger”) was recovered from Feature 84. Chargers are rare in the United States, and are common within European society (Americans have preferred the use of platters). This particular vessel had a rounded base with no foot ring, and although the vessel was relief decorated, it had a blue transfer-printed mark with distinctive German-style crown and the words “WAECHTERS BACH / W. ST.”. This charger was manufactured at the German Waechtersbach Ceramic factory (which has produced ceramics from circa 1832 to the present).



Alcohol containers from Feature 84 consisted predominately of German-style “Hock” bottles (left), which are typically associated with wines associated with northern Europe (Rhine and Mosel varieties). The short tumbler (left tumbler in right photo) is a quality lead glass vessel (with ground base) of unusual design atypical of American manufactured wares (such as that on the right).



Intermingled with the artifacts in Feature 84 was a rather unique assemblage of German manufactured ceramics (including this large charger), distinctive glass stemware (such as this footed tumbler; probably non-American in origin), and yellowware pipkins (a rather uncommon vessel form in Illinois and potentially suggestive of a traditional German cuisine). Alcohol consumption was represented predominately by the presence of German hock-style wine bottles. This assemblage was probably deposited by a recent German immigrant who had brought both ceramic and glass tablewares from the Old World, and continued to consume food and liquor familiar to the family's cultural tastes.



Looted and backfilled privy pits excavated by illicit bottle hunters in Quincy, effectively destroying resource.

One final note—archaeological resources, such as privies, are a non-renewable resource.

Excavation—whether by professional archaeologists or bottle collectors—is a destructive process.

Privy digging by untrained, non-professional archaeologists is contributing to the destruction of a valuable non-renewable resource.



The results of the multi-year archaeological excavations conducted by Fever River Research in Illinois have contributed significantly to our understanding of the variability in the lifeways and/or quality of life associated with the early inhabitants of this state. The data is an invaluable comparative data base for understanding urban lifeways in Illinois.

A copy of this paper is available at: IllinoisArchaeology.com and

I can be contacted via email at fmansberger@comcast.net

Thank You.

