

FORT ATKINSON

ARTIFACTS

by Marshall McKusick

For the archaeologist and the historian the most commonplace objects of everyday life become, with the passing of time, valuable artifacts of the past. This maxim is well demonstrated by household goods recovered from a most unglamorous place—the officers' privies of old Fort Atkinson.

The military post was established in the early nineteenth century to deal with problems of Indian policy. The Sioux, living in what is now southern Minnesota, periodically fought the tribes to the south—the Sauk, Fox (Mesquakie), and Ioway. In an effort to bring stability to the Indian country, the federal government attempted to define more clearly the tribal territorial boundaries. In 1825, the government arranged for the survey of a line across northeastern Iowa, beginning at the mouth of the Upper Iowa, which then entered the Mississippi through a slough considerably south of its present location. From this point the line ran southwest to the Cedar River and west to the Des Moines. The tribes ignored the boundary and the government subsequently arranged in 1830

for the tribes to cede land for 20 miles on both sides of the line. The 40-mile-wide strip from the Mississippi to the Des Moines was named the Neutral Ground, and by treaty, hunting was permitted, but fighting forbidden. The tribes on both sides ignored the provisions of the agreement, and the government was without means of enforcement.

Meanwhile, the Winnebago of Wisconsin were relocated in the eastern half of the Neutral Ground, providing a buffer between the Sioux and the tribes in Iowa. In theory this seemed to be a reasonable solution, but the Winnebago were reluctant to move and place themselves between their enemies. In 1840, despite protests and delays, the Winnebago were finally settled in northeastern Iowa along the Turkey River in Winneshiek County and provided with an Indian agency and school. A company of infantry was sent over from Fort Crawford at Prairie du Chien to establish a military camp, later named Fort Atkinson after U.S. General Henry Atkinson. Troops were needed to protect the Winnebago from their Indian enemies and also from trespassing whites. The next year, a company of dragoons—mounted infantry—joined the other troops. Correspondence from the Fort shows they were needed to bring back discontented Winnebago who periodically attempted to return to Wisconsin.

The major buildings, stockade, and fort well were built between 1842 and 1845. Limestone, quarried in the area, was used extensively, since it was believed at the



The surviving barracks building at Fort Atkinson, now a museum.

time that this would be a permanent military post. Masons and carpenters were employed to assist and direct the soldiers, so the stone and timber buildings had a much more elaborate appearance than the usual frontier fort. A military road began at the ferry landing on the west side of the Mississippi, below what is now Effigy Mounds National Monument, and traces of this road can still be seen. It usually took two days for supply wagons to reach Fort Atkinson, so a half-way house was built on the road. Just after the Fort was completed, the Mexican War began in 1846, and the regular U.S. Army troops at Fort Atkinson were withdrawn to join the conflict. They were replaced by volunteer Iowa troops which garrisoned the Fort until 1849. By the mid-1840s, the settlers in



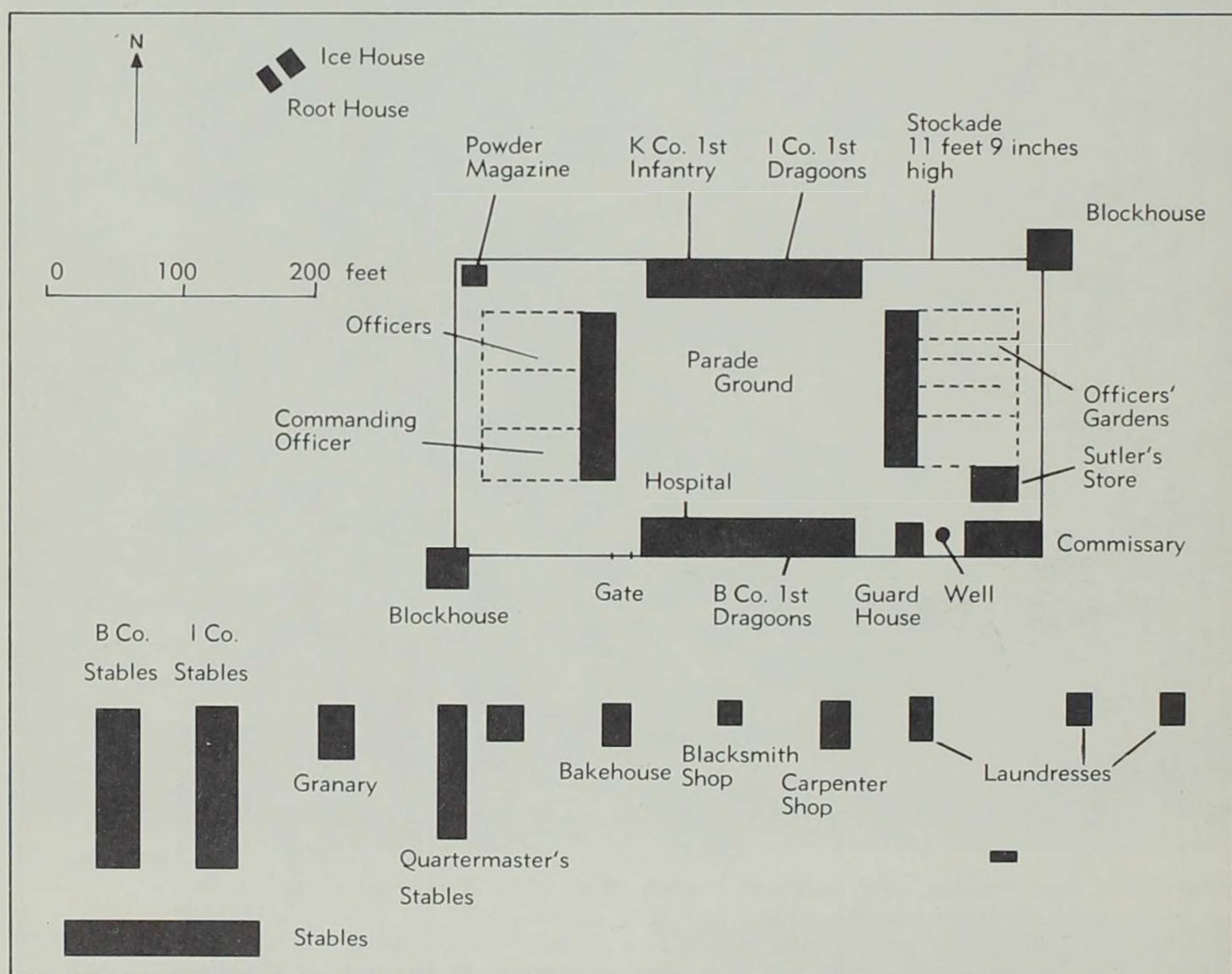
One of the officers' privies with the Fort's powder magazine in the background.



Officers and their families used imported English china, often of very good quality. Broken pieces were discarded into the privies, leaving a jigsaw puzzle for archaeologists 120 years later. The china shown here includes plates, a teacup, and a covered chamber pot. The miniature teapot was most likely the property of a child. To the right of the silver teaspoon is a special inkwell with a reservoir for use of a quill pen. When the cork of the inkwell was removed, ink trickled slowly into the shallow basin below.

A plain white water basin contrasts with the bold design of a cottageware chamber pot and blue striped coffee mug. These are typical of pieces discovered in the privies of Fort Atkinson.





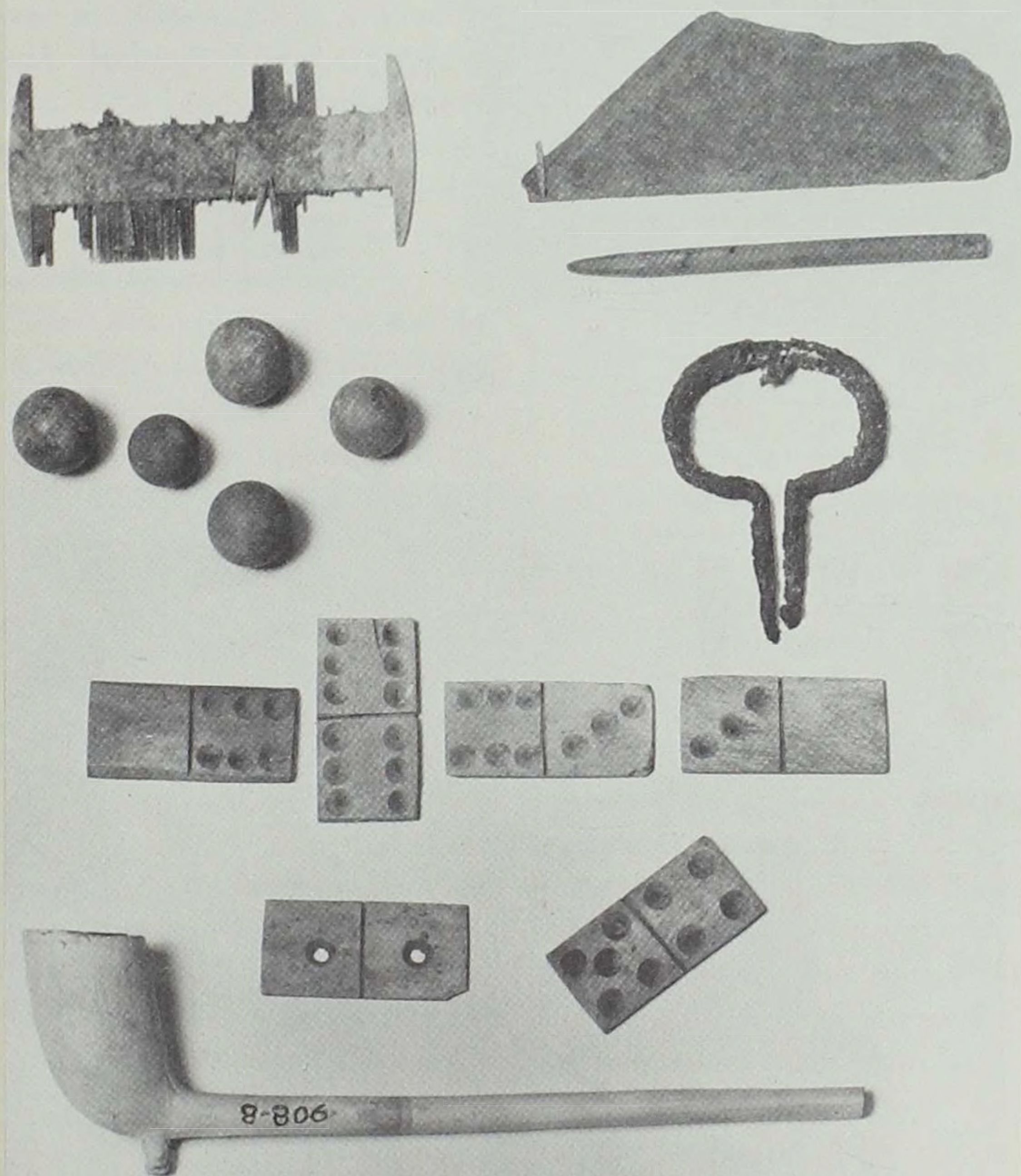
A map of Fort Atkinson, redrawn from a plan by Lieutenant Reynolds, 1842.

northeast Iowa put increasing political pressure on the government to relocate the Winnebago once again and open the Indian lands to settlement. The Winnebago were shifted north to Minnesota in 1848. The troops were disbanded, and a caretaker left at the Fort.

In 1848, when plans were made to vacate Fort Atkinson, the Iowa State Legislature passed an act requesting Congress to donate the site for a state agricultural college, to be a branch of The University of Iowa. The appeal was ignored, as were later requests in 1851 and 1853. The Fort was auctioned off in 1853 to private own-

ers. One barracks was partly dismantled and remade into a farmhouse, the east barracks accidentally burned down, and most of the other buildings were torn down. The stone and timbers were reused, and can still be seen today in buildings near the Fort and in the town of Fort Atkinson.

By the 1930s, when the State Conservation Commission acquired the Fort, the only original buildings still standing were the powder magazine, southwest blockhouse, and part of the north barracks. The northeast blockhouse was rebuilt in the late 1920s by volunteers from the town and the vicinity. The Commission hired a



Discarded everyday household objects provide a glimpse of life at frontier Fort Atkinson in the 1840s. The bone lice comb with close set teeth is a common frontier artifact. A piece of a slate tablet and slate stylus were used instead of scratchpaper. The jews harp and handmade bone dominos, used for off-duty diversion, are commonly found at frontier forts. The clay marbles were probably a child's toys. The pipe shown here is almost intact. Thousands of broken fragments of imported English pipes were found in the fort buildings.



The two large bottles may have contained pickles; the small vial was for medicine. The two ink bottles had glass stoppers, and a large, hardened ball of dried ink is visible inside one.



Bottles were standard throw-away items at Fort Atkinson. The variety shown here are typical. From left to right, contents were champagne, wine, olive oil, and brandy. Imported French wines were common at frontier forts, and the olive oil bottle has a glass seal proclaiming its French origin.

Luther College professor, Sigurd Reque, to undertake archaeological and historical investigations. From 1939 to 1941, he cleared the building foundations surrounding the parade ground, and part of the stockade was reconstructed in a more or less authentic fashion. The Commission also contracted with another man to restore the surviving barracks and develop the museum exhibits which are now on display. Unfortunately, Reque never wrote the report on his investigations.

In 1966, the Office of State Archaeologist made subsidiary excavations to bring Reque's work to a conclusion. After studying the artifacts from the main buildings, it was decided they dated for the most part from the period when the barracks were reused after the troops left.

An interesting contemporary collection of china, glassware, and other artifacts used at the Fort was obtained by excavating the officers' privies, where the officers and their wives routinely discarded broken household objects. Many of these items have now been restored and will be put on exhibit when the Conservation Commission remodels the Fort museum. The collection, including small fragmentary pieces, is of considerable historical



One of the necessities of life, a chamber pot, used to avoid a night journey to the privy.

and archaeological interest because it will be useful in identifying remains from other, less well-documented frontier sites. The investigation of 1966 also completed the mapping of all buildings, located the line of buildings outside the stockade, and brought together the unpublished notes and Fort correspondence. The artifacts provide an archaeological dimension to the Fort history. □

Note on Sources

The 1966 excavations are briefly described in an article by Marshall McKusick and David Archie, "Tale of Two Forts: Exploring Old Fort Madison and Old Fort Atkinson," *The Iowan Magazine*, 15, 1 (1966), 10-33ff. The most significant historical study of Fort Atkinson appears in a book by Bruce Mahan, *Old Fort Crawford and the Frontier* (Iowa City: State Historical Society, 1926), but a number of other sources are of interest, all listed in William Petersen's *Iowa History Reference Guide* (Iowa City: State Historical Society, 1952). The artifacts shown are in the Archaeological Laboratory, Office of State Archaeologist, Iowa City. None of the illustrations accompanying this article have been previously published.