

Archaeological Assessment of the Thiebaud Property

As part of the Switzerland County Historical Society Agriculture Museum Center Masterplan, an archaeological assessment of the Thiebaud property in Craig Township was conducted by a team of investigators led by Dr. Robert G. McCullough of Indiana University-Purdue University at Fort Wayne. Survey by IPFW-AS personnel was conducted over the course of three non-sequential days and consisted of pedestrian survey throughout the extent of the property. The following excerpts are from a 70 page report that may be viewed in its entirety at www.ipfw.edu/archsurv/ROI_305_lowres. The excerpts here relate to the manmade features on the property.

Stone Walls

A total of four limestone wall segments are located on the Thiebaud property. Three of the four walls are of the “plantation fence” type and were constructed in an identical manner. Plantation fences were dry-laid, that is, constructed without the use of mortar. Most were built between the 1770s and the first half of the 1800s, though they did not come into wide use until the early nineteenth century, a fact which suggests that the Thiebaud fences were constructed relatively early in the Euroamerican use of the property. Though the exact purpose of the Thiebaud fences is unclear, plantation fences were typically used for a variety of purposes such as barnyards, stockyards, paddocks, house yards, graveyards, pastures, or fields (Murray-Wooley and Raitz 1992:23). All of the fences on the Thiebaud property were likely made of locally available limestone.

Plantation fences were ordinarily built by a skilled mason with the assistance of one or more helpers. The fence was begun by digging a trench onto which foundation rocks were placed. Double walls of stone were lain upon the foundation, comprising the two sides of the fence. The width of the fence tapered slightly toward the top. Most of the rocks were only slightly modified from their quarried shape. The creation of the two outside faces left a gap in the center of the fence. This space was filled with chinking, comprising small, irregularly-shaped rocks. Tie rocks were placed within the wall face at periodic intervals. These were large rocks whose longest dimensions ran the entire width of the wall. Their purpose was to add strength by connecting the two sides of the wall together. The final step in stone fence construction was the placement of large triangular coping rocks on the top of the fence. These rocks were placed on their edges and were angled slightly, such that each adjacent rock served to support the next. Coping rocks were placed with their tops angled downhill.

Fences on the Thiebaud property were in various states of preservation. Though some sections appear essentially intact, many more sections are completely collapsed or nearly so. Preserved portions of the fences stand approximately 1.4 m high. Fences are about 80 cm wide at the bottom, tapering to about 45-50 cm wide at the top course. The vast majority of stones do not appear to have been greatly modified from their natural shape.

The first of these, Wall A, runs roughly north-south for approximately 115 m along the western edge of the ridgetop. The wall rides the very edge of the flattest portion of the ridge. The ridgetop drops off precipitously on the outer (western) side of the wall. Its proximity to a probable agriculture outbuilding suggests that the wall may have been constructed for holding livestock.

Wall B is a short segment of plantation wall only 60 m in length. It is located at the southernmost tip of a long bluff finger and runs roughly east-west, perpendicular to the axis of the ridge. The fence runs along the top of the ridge, which is very narrow at this point, and downslope for some distance on either side of the ridgetop. The topmost portion of the fence, at the very top of the ridge, appears to have been intentionally dismantled at some point in the past, perhaps to allow the passage of farm equipment or livestock. The fence is otherwise intact. Those portions of the fence that run downslope are constructed with the courses on a horizontal axis rather than running parallel to the slope itself. According to Murray-Wooley and Raitz (1992:33), this was done in order to avoid directing the weight of the fence downhill. It

appears to have been an effective means of construction, as both segments of Wall B located on steep slopes are also intact.

Wall C, the longest wall found on the Thiebaud property, was constructed on the edge of one of the hillside terraces above the house and press barn. This fact indicates that the terraces were likely constructed in the early to mid-nineteenth century. The majority of Wall C runs southwest-northeast for approximately 225 m. There is a short hiatus in the wall at the point where a deep ravine crosses its path. The wall continues on the opposite side of the ravine. It then turns and runs for another 50 m. Though the vast majority of the wall is either partially or completely collapsed, remaining portions indicate that it was constructed in the same manner as the other walls on the property.

A fourth wall segment was identified at the edge of the terrace at the point where the eastern ravine enters the bottomland...less formally constructed and does not have coping rocks along the top.

Check Dams

A total of 34 so-called “check dams” were identified on the property. All were built along the western ravine and its sub-drainages to the west of the press barn. Each was constructed by piling horizontally-lain, roughly-shaped limestone slabs along the bottom of the ravine. The dimensions of the dams vary widely according to the immediate topography. On average they measure about 1.0 meters in height and are anywhere from 5 to 12 meters wide. All appear to have been a single stone in thickness. No mortar was noted on any of the dams. In contrast to the stone walls, the workmanship on the dams is not of great quality, indicating that they could have easily been constructed by the landowners, rather than by a professional mason. Most of the check dams are relatively intact, suggesting that more or all were accounted for during the current survey. Occasionally, small portions of the dam were destroyed by water flow, especially in the lower sections of the ravine. In other cases, the stream eventually bypassed the dam altogether. The vast majority of the check dams are found on the upper reaches of the slopes, sometimes spaced as little as 5 to 10 meters apart. Along the lower portion of the ravine the check dams are spaced at much wider intervals.

Though they obviously served to check the flow of water down the ravine, the ultimate function of the check dams is not entirely clear. It has been suggested that they were constructed for the purpose of growing crops, possibly grapes. This is unlikely, as grapes require well-drained soils and much sunlight. The bottom of the ravine offers neither. Other alternatives are that the check dams were built to pool water for livestock, protect the road that runs parallel to the ravine, or alternatively, to control runoff. Any of these possibilities are considered conceivable, and there is no current reason to rule any of them out. The upslope end of nearly all of the check dams is thoroughly silted in, probably as a result of heavy runoff. As the slopes were farmed and logged often over a long period of time, it is a result of the reckless land use practices common in the nineteenth century.

Local sources report that check dams have been noted at other properties in the Switzerland County area (Leon Hostetler pers. comm. 2004). The number of check dams present on the Thiebaud property, however, is much greater than present elsewhere. Quarrying the needed material, hauling it to the side of a steep hill, and the construction of these dams represents a remarkable amount of labor on the part of the landowners.

Terraces

One large-scale Euroamerican modification to the property was the construction of a series of terraces along the southeast facing slopes above the house and barn. It appears that at least four terraces were constructed, running from just above the structures to about one-third of the way up the bluff. Each terrace is approximately 4.0 m wide. Though the date of terrace manufacture is not known, the fact that one of the stone walls runs along a terrace edge suggest that the wall postdates its construction. Most stone fences of the plantation type were built in the first half of the nineteenth century, and the terraces can be therefore roughly dated based upon this information. The most obvious use for these terraces

would have been to prevent erosion from the slopes. Given the amount of logging that must have taken place after Euroamerican arrival in the area, this would have likely been an important concern.

I have argued above for the possibility that these terraces may have been used for viticulture (i.e., growing grapes for wine production.). This conclusion is based on two points. First, the terraces are located in the most favorable location on the property for grapevine cultivation (Bordelon 2001; Zabadal and Anderson 1997). The slope, its aspect, and the loose, rocky soils all would have offered beneficial conditions for grape production. Secondly, it is obvious that great expense in terms of time and labor went into terracing the hillside. This would likely not have been undertaken in order to grow non-specialized crops like hay, corn, or wheat, as these crops could have been grown elsewhere on the property. As there is no record of grape production in the earliest available agricultural census (1850), we have no means of confirming this suggestion. At any rate, if the terraces had been used for viticulture, it was abandoned relatively quickly.

Conclusions

Dufour (The Swiss Settlement of Switzerland County, Indiana) remarked that “if ever a family could be said to be industrious the Thiebauds as a family could be so called.” The results of this survey confirm this characterization. The numerous improvements to the land (e.g. check dams, walls, structures, and terraces) all represent a considerable amount of time and labor invested in the farm. Our survey has also shown that the Thiebaud family made the most out of land that was, for the most part, on highly dissected slopes and therefore not suitable for long-term production of row crops. The construction of check dams and terraces appears to be two measures taken to compensate for these problems.

The presence of at least two structures and two livestock ponds indicate that the upland areas were, at one time, actively utilized for agricultural and/or livestock production. Agriculture census data confirm the productivity of the Thiebaud farm in the mid to late nineteenth century. Unfortunately, however, this level of production could not be sustained. In the 1880s, the soils of Switzerland County were showing signs of severe depletion and agricultural yields were declining. It is likely that the Thiebaud family and subsequent owners of the property suffered similar declines in productivity. The lack of recent structures on the ridgetops suggests that the uplands and ravines may not have played a major part in the agricultural use of the property in the more recent past, as improvements to the land do not seem to continue into the twentieth century.

Agricultural census data provide independent confirmation of upland land use for agricultural purposes. Data indicate that in 1880, 120 of the 180 acres owned by Justi Thiebaud were “improved.” Of the improved land approximately 42 acres were reportedly used for row crops such as winter wheat, corn, and potatoes. Another 6.25 acres were used for fruit trees such as apples and peaches. As the bottomland/terrace comprises only about 10% of the total property it is certain that during the late nineteenth century, some portion of the ridgetops were used for row crops. How long this practice remained tenable in light of continued erosion and soil depletion is uncertain.

In terms of the prehistoric history of the property, our survey indicates a significant degree of activity along the extreme edge of the terrace, near the point at which it drops off into the river bottom. This activity does not seem to extend much beyond the edge of the terrace, however, suggesting that prehistoric occupations were limited to intermittent and ephemeral camps along the edge of the Ohio River. Sites such as these are ubiquitous in Switzerland County and reflect the fact that the Ohio River was a prehistoric “highway” that ferried people and trade goods throughout the region. Through the millennia, individuals stopped off at any number of favorable high spots along the river. At these temporary camps, visitors likely erected temporary shelters, built fires, and sharpened stone tools. Though each visit would likely leave little trace, the accumulation of many camps over millennia left a light, but persistent, scatter of materials across the length of the terrace.