

The archaeology of Eskimo Hütte (IkDb-2): Inuit sovereignty in the Torngat

Stephen Loring*

Résumé: L'archéologie du site Eskimo Hütte (IkDb-2): souveraineté inuit dans les monts Torngat

Cet article montre comment une recherche faite en collaboration entre les Inuit du Labrador et des archéologues a eu comme résultat la découverte de nouvelles informations concernant le mode de vie des Inuit du nord du Labrador à la fin du XIXe siècle. Cette découverte, qui ajoute un autre point de vue aux sources déjà existantes (celles des Moraves et de la Compagnie de la Baie d'Hudson), documente aussi la souveraineté culturelle des Inuit du nord du Labrador qui refusèrent de déménager dans les missions.

Abstract: The archaeology of Eskimo Hütte (IkDb-2): Inuit sovereignty in the Torngat

This paper shows how a collaborative research by Labrador Inuit and professional archaeologists resulted in the discovery of new information on the way of life of northern Labrador people at the end of the 19th century. This discovery, which adds another viewpoint to other accounts (those of the Moravian Brethren and Hudson's Bay Company, documents the cultural sovereignty of the northernmost Labrador Inuit, who refused to move to the mission stations.

To write of the Eskimos as they were in bygone days would be a fascinating thing, but it would mean building upon a slender foundation. No, the past of the Eskimo people must always remain something of a mystery.

S. K. Hutton (1912)

* Arctic Studies Center, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Introduction

With the successful establishment of the first Moravian Mission at Nain in 1771, the Moravian and Inuit identities became inextricably linked. At least that is the way the Qallusaat (*i.e.* the Whites) would have it. Notwithstanding the fact that the Thule Inuit ancestors had preceded the Moravians by at least three hundred years, mid-19th century eurocentric perceptions had reduced the Inuit to helpless wards from the wilderness, dependent on Moravian management and benevolence:

By their [the Moravian's] means the Eskimos have been preserved from extinction, have been civilized, educated, and brought to the knowledge of their Creator and Saviour (Gosling 1910: 316).

The Inuit probably told a different story.

A collaborative archaeological research initiative on 19th century Labrador Inuit culture was launched by the author in association with the Labrador Inuit Association and the Torngâsok Cultural Centre in 1989 (Loring and Baikie 1992). Interest in the culture history of Labrador inevitably brings one into contact with two substantial corpuses of archival records pertaining to the social and economic relationships between colonial and post-colonial Europeans, and the Inuit of Labrador and adjacent Ungava, these being the archives of the Hudson's Bay Company (established in 1670) and those of the *Unitas Fratrum* — the church of the Moravian Brethren (in Labrador continuously since 1770). The *Periodical Accounts* of the Moravian missionaries (Taylor 1974, 1977) and the account books and post ledgers of the Hudson's Bay Company (Elton 1942; White 1926) provide a sometimes vivid insight into the dynamics of culture contact and the beliefs, aspirations and motivations of both Europeans and Inuit. Nevertheless, these records are inherently biased in that it is the perspective of European mercantile and parochial interests that tell the story. Theoretically it is believed that archaeology has the potential to provide insights on Labrador Inuit socioeconomics, philosophy, ideology and subsistence strategies that are not dependent on these obviously biased accounts. The archaeological record is derived from the material cultural residue of Inuit choices and actions. In the absence of Inuit written accounts and records, archaeology affords an opportunity to provide an Inuit voice in the construction of local history and to encourage northern Natives to participate in research that has cultural relevance to them.

Archaeological research on the Labrador Inuit and their immediate ancestors has for the most part focused on the earlier aspects of Inuit adaptation; on the conditions surrounding the Thule invasion and colonization of Labrador in the 14th and 15th centuries (Schledermann 1972; Kaplan 1980, 1983, 1997); and on the subsequent period of early contact dynamics between the Inuit and European fishermen (Bird 1945; Jordan 1978; Kaplan 1983, 1985). The appearance of communal longhouses at 17th and 18th century Inuit sites has been interpreted as signaling the emergence of a group of powerful "middlemen" or "Big Men," as Inuit entrepreneurs sought to consolidate social and political power by managing the flow of European manufactured products and raw materials (Jordan 1978; Jordan and Kaplan 1980; Schledermann 1976). Labrador Inuit territorial expansion into the Strait of Belle Isle

resulted in armed confrontations between the Inuit and the Europeans and attested to the aggressiveness with which the Inuit sought access to European goods (Auger 1991a, 1991b; Martijn 1980; Trudel 1978).

Throughout the late-18th and 19th centuries, as formerly autonomous Inuit communities gradually gravitated towards Moravian mission settlements, the Inuit found themselves increasingly participating in an expanding world economic system. Inuit labor and Inuit goods, including fish, furs and marine mammal products, were exchanged for European raw materials and manufactured commodities. Archaeological research at 19th century Inuit sites has been conducted at a number of localities including Hamilton Inlet (Jordan 1974, 1977), Saglek (Schledermann 1972), and along the north coast of Labrador (Kaplan 1983; Plumet and Gangloff 1991). Nineteenth century Labrador Inuit components have been excavated at a number of Moravian mission stations including Zoar (Loring 1985), Nain (Cabak 1991), Hebron (Loring 1990) and Ramah (Kaplan 1983).

The archaeological research initiated with this project seeks to broaden the study of the 19th century Inuit and European socio-economic relations. Specifically, it recognizes that the Inuit of Labrador and Nunavik (Northern Quebec) continued to advance their own agenda. The historical perspective provided by the Moravian literature, full of the conflict between Heathen and Christian Inuit, clearly attests to the presence of continued friction and resistance to the Moravians (Brice-Bennett 1981; Kleivan 1966; Richling 1978). The materialistic bias of an archaeological perspective has the potential to empower a new voice, that of the Inuit themselves, in interpreting Labrador Inuit history. Archaeological deposits contain materials that testify to the choices made by 19th century Inuit families, and shed light on the nature of "resistance," as well as accommodation, to Western manufactured products and trade. The Moravian side of the story is preserved in mission documents and records, but the Inuit side, if it is to be told, must be derived — at least in part — from archaeology.

It did not take the Moravians at Nain long to realize that the varied resources on which the Inuit depended necessitated a high degree of mobility (Kleivan 1966: 28). Not only did a wandering, rootless existence threaten the pastoral idyll that the Moravians envisioned for their "flock," it was readily apparent that once removed from the missionary presence the Inuit would revert to their "traditional," *i.e.* "heathen" ways. The Moravians sought to control these tendencies and practices by aggressively expanding their mission. Pushing out from their centre at Nain, the mission at Okak was founded in 1776, followed in 1782 by the mission at Hopedale. The expanded Moravian presence had several objectives: 1) it sought to extend the influence of the Moravian mission to areas where the Inuit could move in response to social and ecological factors; 2) it sought to counter the necessity for Inuit to travel down the Labrador coast to intercept European traders and fishermen; and 3) it provided a buffer for the "civilized" or "Christian Inuit" from their heathen, "barbarous" relatives in the north (Brice-Bennett 1981; Hiller 1971; Kleivan 1966). This last reason figured significantly in the 19th century expansion of the Moravian Mission in Labrador (Loring 1998).

By 1824, Nain and Hopedale were Christian communities, successfully isolated from neighbouring heathen influences. The Moravians brought social and economic pressures to bear on their Inuit congregations in order to encourage the Inuit to settle at or near the mission stations in an attempt to minimize the disruptive influences of their northern relatives. Despite the growth of the mission in the early 19th century, the Moravians at Okak were constantly being undermined by the visits of northern Inuit traveling south to acquire materials at the Moravian posts. In order to assure some tranquillity to Okak, a mission further north, at Hebron, was established in 1830 (Gosling 1910: 294).

In 1861, a Moravian census estimated the Inuit population along the Labrador coast at 1500 persons, of which 1163 were "Christian," that is affiliated with one of the mission stations (Gosling 1910: 303). The remaining 350 persons mostly comprised the small scattered family groups who lived and hunted in the Torngat Mountain region of northern Labrador, between Saglek and Cape Chidley. These were the "Heathen" Inuit who figure significantly in the Moravian documents as an affront to the basic precepts by which the missionaries constructed their life and by which their world view was affirmed.

The Heathen Eskimos (*Okpingetut Inuit*)

Throughout the 19th century, accounts of the winter visits of the "Heathen Eskimos" to the northern mission stations figure significantly in the pages of the Periodical Accounts (an ecclesiastical newsletter published continually since 1790, summarizing Moravian mission activities worldwide through excerpts from missionary letters and station diaries). On the one hand, the visits afforded a chance for scattered family groups to renew kin relations and acquire European manufactured products. They also provided the northern Inuit groups with an opportunity to observe the social and economic consequences of an intimate association with the Moravians.

The social upheaval and disruption caused by these visits was a stern trial for the Moravians, who saw the facade of their "civilizing" influences on their congregations severely tested. However the visits of the heathens was also seen as a challenge to the furtherance of their mission in Labrador:

I have taken much interest in the Northlanders who occasionally visit this settlement [Hebron]. Among them are often men with long hair and beards, while others wear amulets, and the women usually carry the infant-children naked in their hoods. As they refuse to leave their native district, the only way by which they can be benefitted, would be, the establishing of some new Mission stations among them (Private correspondence from A. Ribbach at Hebron, Periodical Accounts, 23, 1858: 86).

One man said, that they knew the same things of their Torngak, which we told about our Jesus, as the former had recalled to life not a few angekoks who were quite dead, etc. [...] Upon this, the man cut the conversation short, by saying, laughingly, that they had heard enough of such matters, and would like to see some of our European articles (Private correspondence from F. Erdman at Hebron, Periodical Accounts, 23, 1858: 300).

As soon as they [Northlanders from the Ungava and Kangiva districts] had procured the articles they wanted, they hurried back, some of them declaring that the Torngak was angry with them for listening to what was told them of Jesus. "We want presents," said some of them; "of Jesus we do not want to hear" (Private correspondence from Hebron, Periodical Accounts, 24, 1861: 471).

One of the last heathen "strongholds" was the region around Eclipse Channel and North Aulatsivik Island in the Torngat Mountain region of northern Labrador (Hantzsch 1932; Kaplan 1983: 370, 788). Historical records describing the Inuit of this region are rare for the early part of the 19th century.

The first Europeans to visit the area and provide a description of it were Benjamin Kohlmeister and George Kmoch, a pair of Moravian missionaries in 1811 who, with the help of their Inuit guides, journeyed along the north Labrador coast and around Cape Chidley to Ungava Bay (Kohlmeister and Kmoch 1814). Their party met several Inuit families (50 people in seven tents) fishing for char at the mouth of the rivers and creeks in Nachvak Fiord and at Komaktorvik. They sailed past Aulatsivik without stopping (except briefly, inadvertently, when they struck a rock) to rendezvous with some Inuit families from Saglek north of Kikkavik.

In the summer of 1860, the United States Government sent a small scientific party to northern Labrador to conduct observations during a solar eclipse (Alexander 1861). Like Kohlmeister and Kmoch, the Eclipse Expedition did not meet any Inuit during their stay at North Aulatsivik Island, however, in the course of their explorations in the region, expedition members did discover the remains of a recently abandoned Inuit winter camp. A description of the Inuit house survives in the journal of Oscar Lieber (Lieber n.d.), the expedition's geologist.

Oscar Lieber and the U.S. Eclipse Expedition to Northern Labrador, 1860

The U.S. Eclipse Expedition to Northern Labrador was comprised of some of the leading American astronomers and physicists of the day. The expedition was funded by an act of Congress and a steamship, the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey vessel Bibb, was made available to transport the scientists to northern Labrador.

Among the illustrious personages aboard the Bibb was a young man from Columbia, South Carolina, Oscar M. Lieber (1833-1863), former State Geologist for South Carolina and a remarkably gifted natural historian (Merrill 1924: 323-325; Krumpelmann 1965; Schuette n.d.). Lieber had no specialized astronomical experience to contribute to the expedition, but he was selected both for his willingness to assist the other members as needed, for his mapping and cartography skills, and for the opportunity to expand the science agenda of the expedition with geological and natural historical observations and collections. Lieber kept a detailed journal of his trip to Labrador, a journal which upon his return to South Carolina he was editing for publication (Lieber n.d.). Unfortunately, the American Civil War intervened. Lieber, an ardent believer in the South's cause, enlisted in the Confederate Army. He died in 1863 from wounds sustained in battle.

Lieber's journal provides a wonderful narrative of the Eclipse expedition. In addition to chronicling the events of the expedition, it provides a colorful glimpse of some aspects of Inuit life in Labrador beyond that derived from Moravian sources. The expedition encountered Inuit near Battle Harbour and outside of Nain, but it is his description of the Inuit winter house on Eclipse Channel that is of interest here.

Delayed by bad weather, the expedition reached North Aulatsivik Island, some seventy kilometers south of Cape Chidley, on July 14th and immediately set about building an observatory and setting up the tidal gauges and base lines needed for eclipse related measurements. In the fashion of 19th century explorers, the American scientists promptly renamed all the area's significant landmarks after patrons and friends; the large fjord-like bay south of their anchorage is today called Eclipse Channel, after their expedition.

July 18th, the day of the eclipse, dawned gray and overcast but cleared partially so that most of the desired observations were obtained. With the main goal of the expedition accomplished, several days were given over to relaxing, disassembling the equipment, and exploring in the immediate vicinity (Figure 1). On July 20th a small party set off in the ship's gig to explore the head of Eclipse Harbour and the broad channel which had been spied out as lying beyond:

[...] After unsuccessfully shooting at some wild swans(?) which looked like gigantic loons we took to the gig again and sailed westward to the mouth of a bold snow creek which dashed rapidly into the salt water inlet.

Here we landed. The first thing we saw on the beach was what appeared to be a dead young seal. Kicking it over, however, we saw that it was something sewed up. One of the sailors split it open with his sheath knife, when its contents were discovered to be an Esquimaux sealskin shirt and a well worn very short pair of trousers of the same material. Not far off was seen one of the stone huts they build for killing seal and, while we were yet speculating on the fate of the owner of the bundle which was evidently washed up, we came upon an Esquimaux hut, the first we have seen. It was scarcely visible except at a very short distance. Built up against the low hill it seemed to form a part of it and a little bare earth and rock and a square black hole was all that betrayed its existence. The hut was deserted and thus admitted of our free inspection. The entrance was about 3 feet at the outside and 26 inches on the inside, so that we had to stoop and crawl in. 20 feet wide 16 ft. from inner entrance to back. 9 feet deep in the middle. Surrounding bench about 18 inches high. Over the centre of the regular floor in other words of the whole structure were two open square skylights along side of one another. The roof was fir poles the crevices stuffed with moss and grass and all covered with moss turf and earth. The benches and floor were of stone. Bones were sticking in every hole and cranny representing all the animals of this region, from the walrus and polar bear, to the wolf, fox and wolverine. Moose, deer remains, or those of rein deer were also abundant. Besides these we found cast off moccasins, half putrid skins of deer, bear, seal and wolf (white), an instrument apparently for music constructed similarly to a banjo and shaped like a pair of bellows, some walrus tusk spearheads, an iron ditto, a tin can, all and everything blackened and reeking with the rancid seal oil, covered with soot and filth, altogether the nastiest, dirtiest most greasy concern imaginable. Dry dirt is nothing to look at — wet dirt can be viewed without absolutely turning one's stomach but this greasy dirt is fearful. It is incredible that human beings can subsist in such terrible filth. No words can describe it. A hog-pen would be a parlour compared with it — greasy,

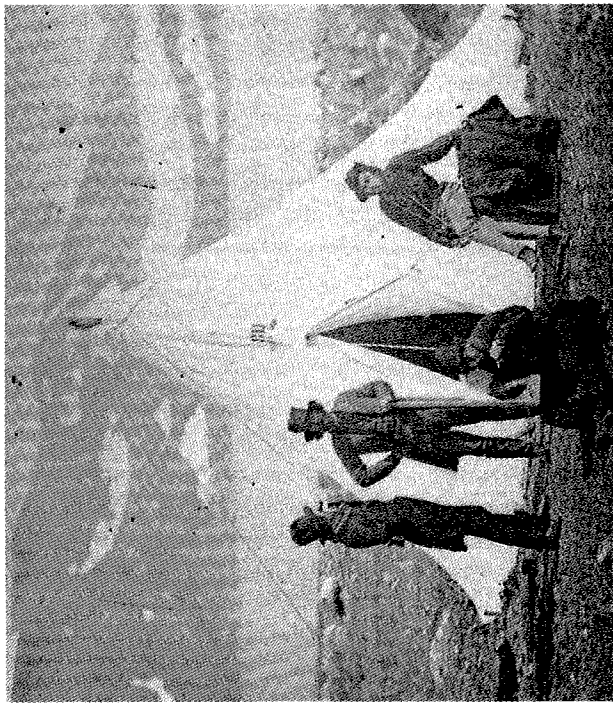


Figure 1. Oscar Lieber (right) and members of the U.S. Eclipse Expedition lounging in camp, North Aulatsivik Island, Labrador, 1860. *Photography Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, Collection of Photographic History, National Museum of American History.*

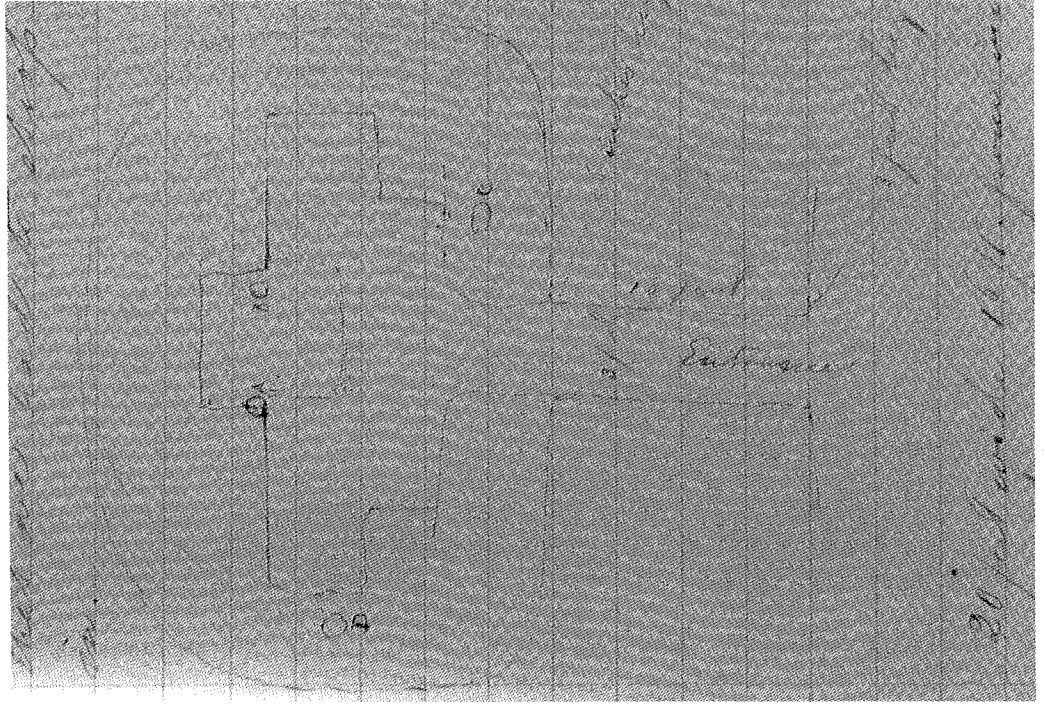


Figure 2. Oscar Lieber's plan drawing of the Eskimo house on the mainland west of North Aulatsivik Island, July 1860 (A and B are interior house posts, C and D are seal oil lamps). *Photograph of page in Oscar Lieber's journal, The South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.*

smearly, sooty, rancid, putrid as it was. A few things we selected to take on board and then hastened to enjoy the fresh air again. Very large excrements by some considered as of bear, by me though of large dogs (or wolves) lay scattered in profusion (Lieber n.d.).

The location of the Inuit house ("Eskimo Hütte") appears on the sketch map in Lieber's journal (Figure 2) and on a report Lieber wrote of the expedition that appeared in Petermann's, a distinguished European geographical journal (Lieber 1861). The ruins of the house Lieber visited in 1860 were rediscovered on the south side of Eclipse Channel by Patrick Plumet (Plumet and Gangloff 1991) during a preliminary archaeological reconnaissance of northernmost Labrador in 1967. Plumet's "LAB 4" was revisited by members of the Smithsonian's Torngat Archaeological Project (T.A.P.) in 1977. T.A.P. personnel named the site Goose Run, after the small flock of molting Canadian geese that held title to the grassy hillside and river. The site (IkDb-2) was found to contain the remains of six sod houses grouped around a shallow ravine overlooking the mouth of a small river (Figure 3). Several large stone cairns were found along the shore just below the houses. The results of the T.A.P. survey are contained in Susan Kaplan's dissertation (1983: 782-788). On the basis of test pits placed in four of the six houses, it was determined that the structures were the remains of 19th century Inuit houses.

It was not until 1985, when I had the opportunity to read Lieber's journal (at the University of South Carolina's South Caroliniana Library in Columbia), that I determined the connection between the site that Lieber visited and the sod house remains at Eclipse Channel. The site seemed to be an excellent candidate for initiating an ethnohistorical-archaeological investigation of 19th century Labrador Inuit culture. Up until the mid-century, the Inuit living around North Aulatsivik Island were among the most isolated groups in northern Quebec and Labrador. Given Lieber's detailed description of the house and his accompanying plan, it seemed a particularly appropriate structure to excavate in order to derive information from a "heathen" Inuit camp that was known to be occupied in 1860. It was anticipated that fieldwork at Eskimo Hütte — acknowledging the precedent and preference for the earlier site nomenclature — would provide an excellent opportunity to compile data which could be compared with coeval sites that maintained a closer affiliation with the Moravian missionaries.

1989 fieldwork at Eclipse Channel

Fieldwork at Eskimo Hütte was conducted between 30th July and 8 August 1989 (Loring 1989). We hoped to be able to identify the structure that Lieber visited and to determine the temporal relationship between it and the other structures at the site (Figure 3). Lacking the time to completely excavate a structure, we hoped to be able to assess the conditions at the site and sample enough of the structures to determine the nature of the household deposits and the extent and preservation of associated middens.

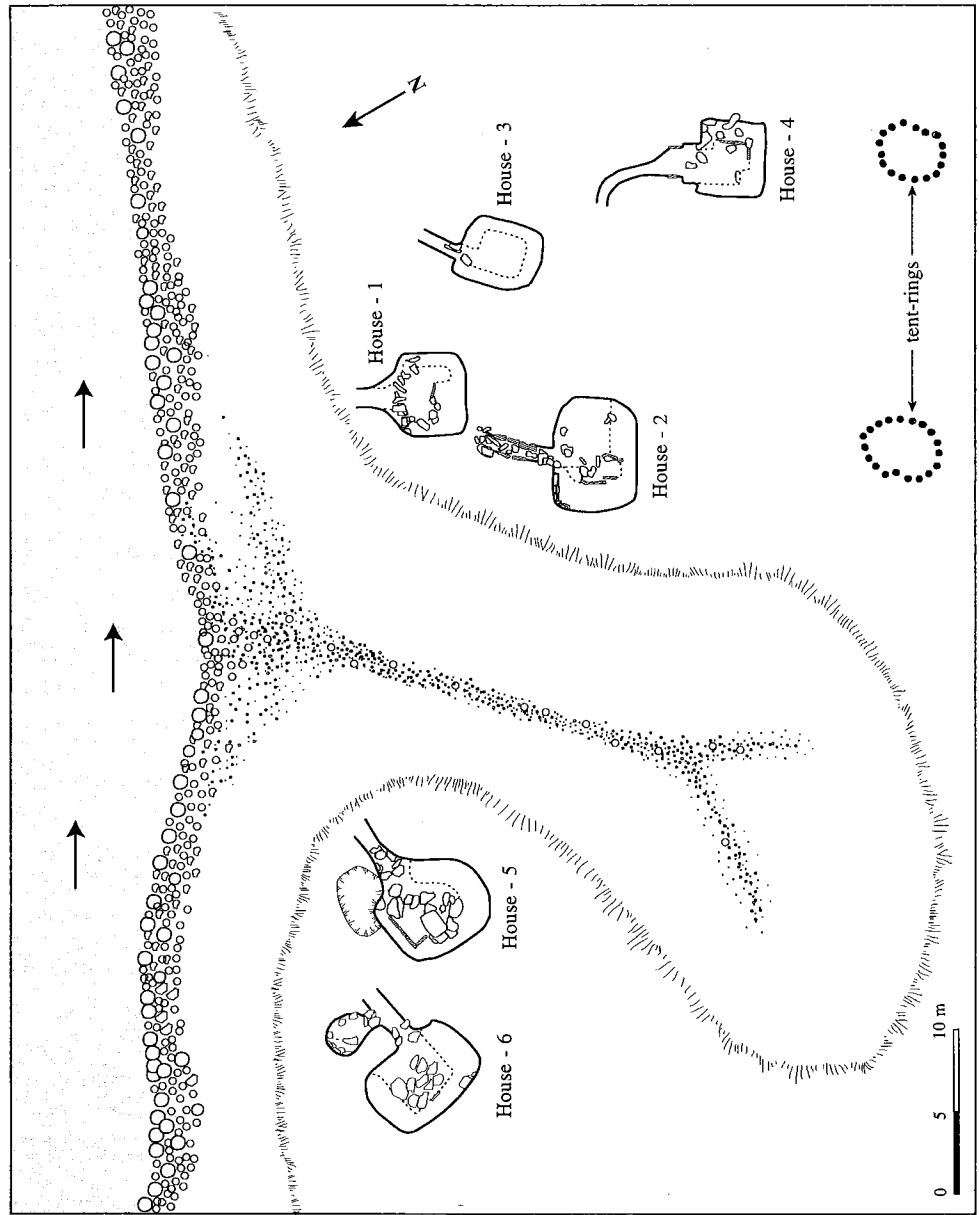


Figure 3. Site plan of Eskimo Hütte 1 (IkDb-2).

Because Lieber's account mentions only a single structure at Eskimo Hütte, he must not have noticed the already ruined remains of earlier houses, or the additional structures were built after 1860. We hoped to identify the 1860 structure by comparing Lieber's drawing with our own measurements and by limited excavations in the entrance passages of likely structures. Not surprisingly, none of the extent structures at Eskimo Hütte exactly coincided with Lieber's plan drawing, soil slumpage and collapsed walls having obscured the original dimensions. Furthermore, as our excavations revealed, many of the houses had more than one occupation, with subsequent renovations likely altering the original dimensions.

Excavation units

Comparisons between the ruined house remains and Lieber's drawing limited the possibilities of identifying the structure occupied in 1860 to one of three houses.

House 1 is a small rectangular structure built into the hillside, it has a short entrance passage and a rear sleeping platform. Walrus bones and iron sled runners were lying tangled in the grass on the surface in the house interior. Although House 1 is somewhat smaller than the structure described by Lieber, it was similar enough to warrant a test excavation. A 2.5 x 1.5 meter excavation unit was placed in the entrance passage immediately in front of a collapsed linteled doorway construction. The sterile overburden of fallen wall and roof sods was removed to expose a flat stone slab floor lining the entrance passage. A shallow midden composed of animal bone, fragments of wood (chips, chunks and cut pieces), and discarded artifacts was recovered from just above the floor.

Cultural materials included ceramic sherds, glass and iron fragments, nails, bullets and centre-fire cartridge cases, scraps of cloth, tin cans, tin cups, and beads. A celluloid (or vulcanite) mouthpiece for a pipe was perhaps the most temporally diagnostic piece recovered, as this was not invented until 1878 (Gradwohl and Osborn 1984: 154-155; Walker 1983). The House 1 assemblage is clearly later than 1860, a best guess for the date of the assemblage being between 1880-1890 (Figure 4).

House 1 midden, an 80 cm square excavation unit, was placed six meters from the end of the short entrance passage near the base of the knoll on which the house was situated. Beneath a shallow surface sod cover was a 6 cm thick pavement of well preserved animal bones intermixed with a few artifacts.

House 2 is a large rectangular structure with a six meter long entrance passage. Stone boulders are set at the mouth of the entrance passage which opens out directly on to the back wall of House 1. A lid to a large copper kettle which had been turned into a seal oil lamp was found on the surface in the interior of the house. An excavation unit was placed just inside the mouth of the tunnel extending into the latter for two meters. Excavation did not extend deeper than the top of the carefully prepared paved stone floor. There may be deeper deposits but we did not desire to disturb the existing architecture with our test unit. Bone and wood preservation was excellent.

