21. LEATHER AND OTHER ANIMAL PRODUCTS

Moisture in the wells preserved leather and other organic materials. Shoe parts, shoemaking tools, and discarded leather scrap illustrated the cordwainer's craft.

There were no whole shoes in the Bloomsbury wells, but there were plenty of shoe parts and leather scraps, indicating that leather was worked on the site, most probably for the manufacture or repair of shoes, but there were other uses for leather, including old shoe leather, that must be considered.

Leather, or other skins, served more purposes in early America than as a material for shoes and harness. Leatherworkers were important and numerous members of every community. Leather and other animal membranes provided hinges and other building "hardware," drinking vessels, food storage containers, sewing fiber, and contraceptives. It also was used in places where we use rubber today, as a gasket material. Pumps, for example, depended until very recently for suction provided by the action of a "leather" or plunger.

Leather is a meat by-product. Meat generally was slaughtered on the farm, both for home consumption and for trade. Salt pork was so easily traded that it was accepted as legal tender, together with wheat and tobacco.

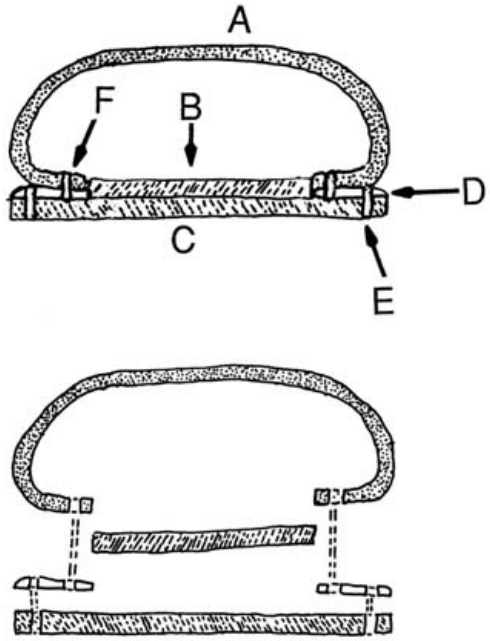


Figure 174

Principal parts of the shoe, according to this illustration adapted from one in the eleventh edition *Encyclopædia Brittanica,* are:

a. The upper.
b, The insole.
c, The outsole.
d, The welt.
e, The stitching of the sole to the welt
f, The stitching of the upper to the welt.

Farm-based hog butchering must have produced skins that found their way into tanyards. In order to trade pigskins, the farmer needed to preserve the hide, which meant cleaning and salting or smoking. Many farmers were engaged in the salt pork trade, as evidenced by the many pounds of salt meat found in estate inventories.

Muskrat and deer skins, collected from the wild, also needed to be preserved for future conversion into money. At the time the Bloomsbury site was occupied, deer were no longer abundant on the east coast, in no small part because of the skin trade. Fur skins were traded without tanning to furriers, who tanned them.

The trapper or farmer would clean the flesh residue from the inside of the hide or pelt, and then would put it out to dry.

This usually involved stretching the skin on a frame or a wall away from direct sunlight and then salting it for temporary storage (Hobson 1977).

The salted, or "green" hide could be kept through the winter trapping season. Many farmsteads in marshy

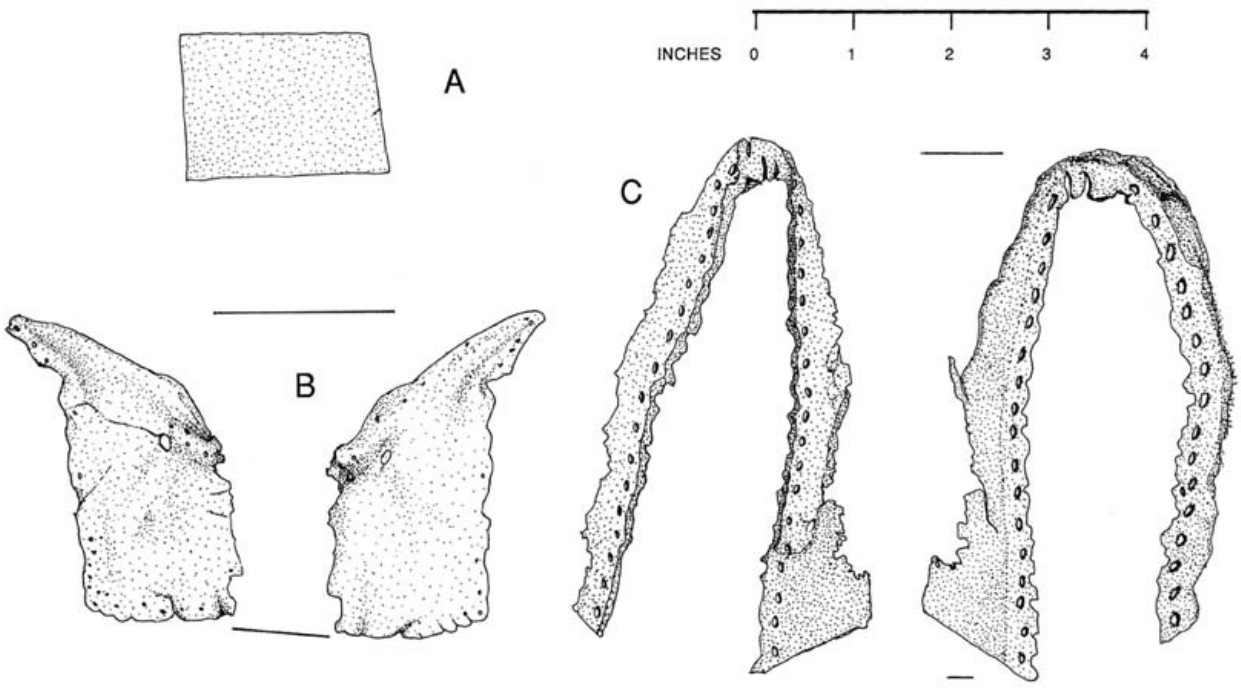


Figure 175
Upper fragments

Evidence of a shoemaker at work included these fragments. A is an irregular offcut from the east well. B is a piece of a used quarter. and C is a vamp from which most of the usable leather has been cut away.

parts of Delaware included a muskrat house, where skins and trapping tools were kept. One such muskrat trapper's workshop building is preserved at the Corbit-Sharp House in Odessa, and another is at the Port Penn interpretive center.

Tanyards were found in every community of any size, and tanning was conducted in surroundings that would surprise and horrify stench-conscious modern Americans. Governor Stout kept a tanyard within two blocks of the State House in Dover, and William Corbit built his Odessa mansion just uphill (but also upwind) from the tanyard that was the source of his wealth. For the most part, however, tanners settled on the wetlands at the fringes of town, as was the case in New Castle and Lewes. The most convenient tanyard to Bloomsbury probably was the Torbert yard on Denney's Road near the present Delaware Technical and Community College.

In each community there was usually at least one "cordwainer" or shoemaker, who made and repaired shoes. Undoubtedly some amateur, untrained, or part-time practitioners filled gaps in market coverage in less populous areas.

ANATOMY OF A SHOE

"Welted" shoes, made by professional shoemakers (or cordwainers as they were known), were complex creations, made of different leathers with the aid of a wooden form called a last, which is a wooden model of a foot. The shoe fits tightly over the last, which must be equipped with a shim, called an instep last, that can be removed to release the finished shoe (Saguto 1981).

The structural core of any traditionally-constructed shoe is the welt, a strip of leather to which the sole and the upper are attached.

In making a handmade shoe, uppers are formed of soft leather, and the various parts are sewn together. Then the welt is sewn onto the upper and the insole.

In order to make a shoe, one must first assemble at least two, usually three weights of leather, which may have been recycled, as was apparently the case at Bloomsbury. Thick sole leather, supple upper leather, and soft insole, were required for each shoe.

The three parts of the upper are called the vamp, which covers the front of the foot, and the two quarters, which join at the rear and frame the heel of the wearer's foot. These three parts are sewed together and stretched to keep them from losing their shape. A lining of softer leather is frequently sewed into the upper before it is attached to the insole.

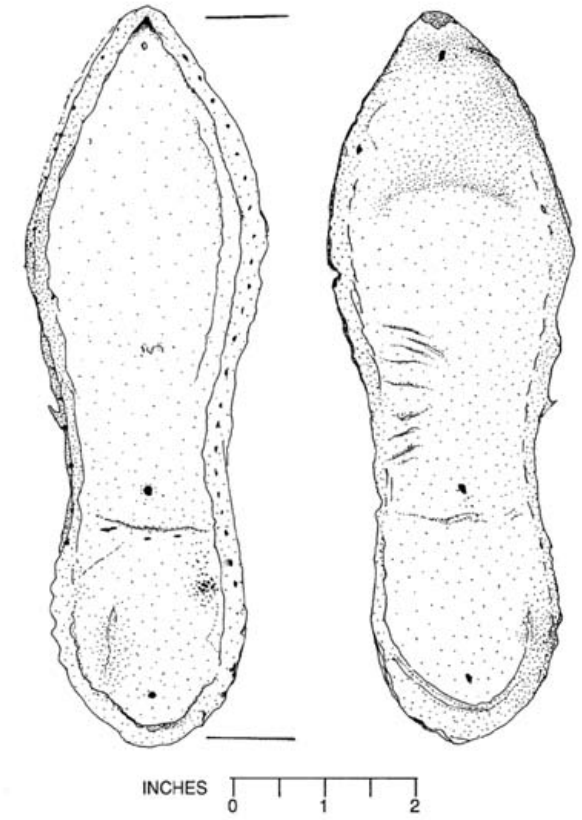


Figure 176

This insole exhibits the tack holes whereby it was attached to the last. It was found in the bottom of the east well.

A moistened "first," or insole, is tacked to the bottom of the last, usually with three or four tacks down the midline. The insole is made of softer thin leather.

The upper is then drawn over the edge of the insole, and the welt is placed over that. These three parts may be tacked to the last before they are sewn together. The stitches did not go all the way through the insole, which meant that the inside of the insole was usually smooth.

The cordwainer then draws a line across the insole, at the point where the quarters and the vamp are stitched together. This line marks the breast, or front, of the "seat" of the heel. The welt, made of heavy leather, is attached to the insole and upper under the vamp. Under the seat, where the heel will be built, a strip of soft leather called the "rand" serves the same purpose.

In some earlier examples, the welt went all around the shoe (Thornton 1972:95; Good 1987:115)

As the parts are stitched together, the lasting tacks are removed, until the shoe is released. Once the upper and the insole are stitched to the welt, the shoe is pasted to the sole, which is strapped to the last.

The sole is stitched to the welt. A groove is cut in the bottom of the sole, and the stitches are made inside the groove,, so that the stitching will be below the wearing shoe sole surface.

In the heel area, a horseshoe-shaped piece of heavy leather called the split-lift is sewed in. This is called the seat-stitch, which forms the foundation for the heel.

The split-lift creates a concavity in the heel area, so that the wearer's rounded foot will fit comfortably over the square hard leather heel. The heel itself is built up from layers of heavy leather that are glued and pegged in place. After the parts are trimmed and finished, the last is removed and the shoe is ready.

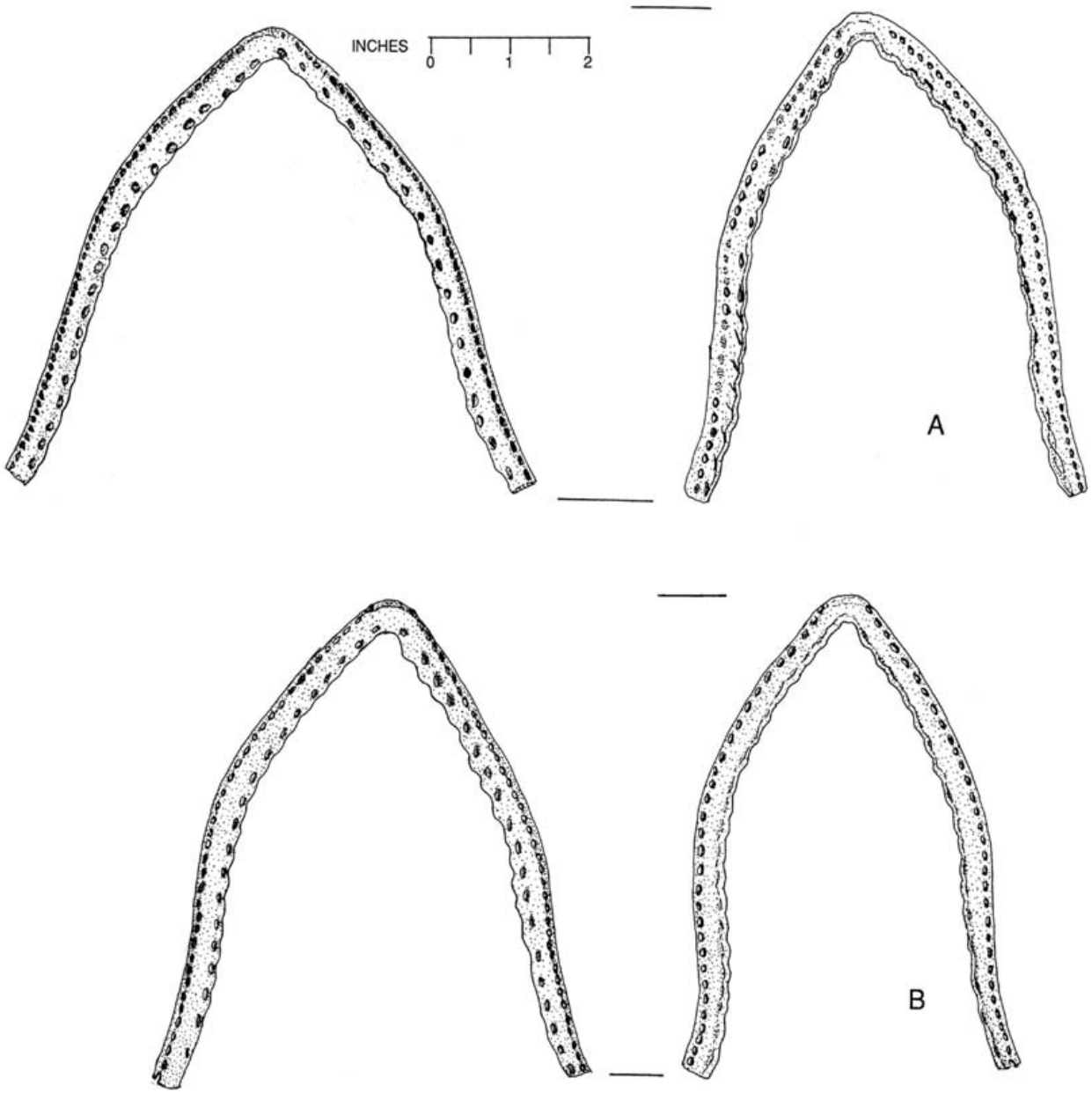


Figure 177
Welts

These two welts, from pointed-toed shoes, were found in the bottom of the east well. They have been removed from their shoes and discarded, probably during the reuse of the more productive materials.

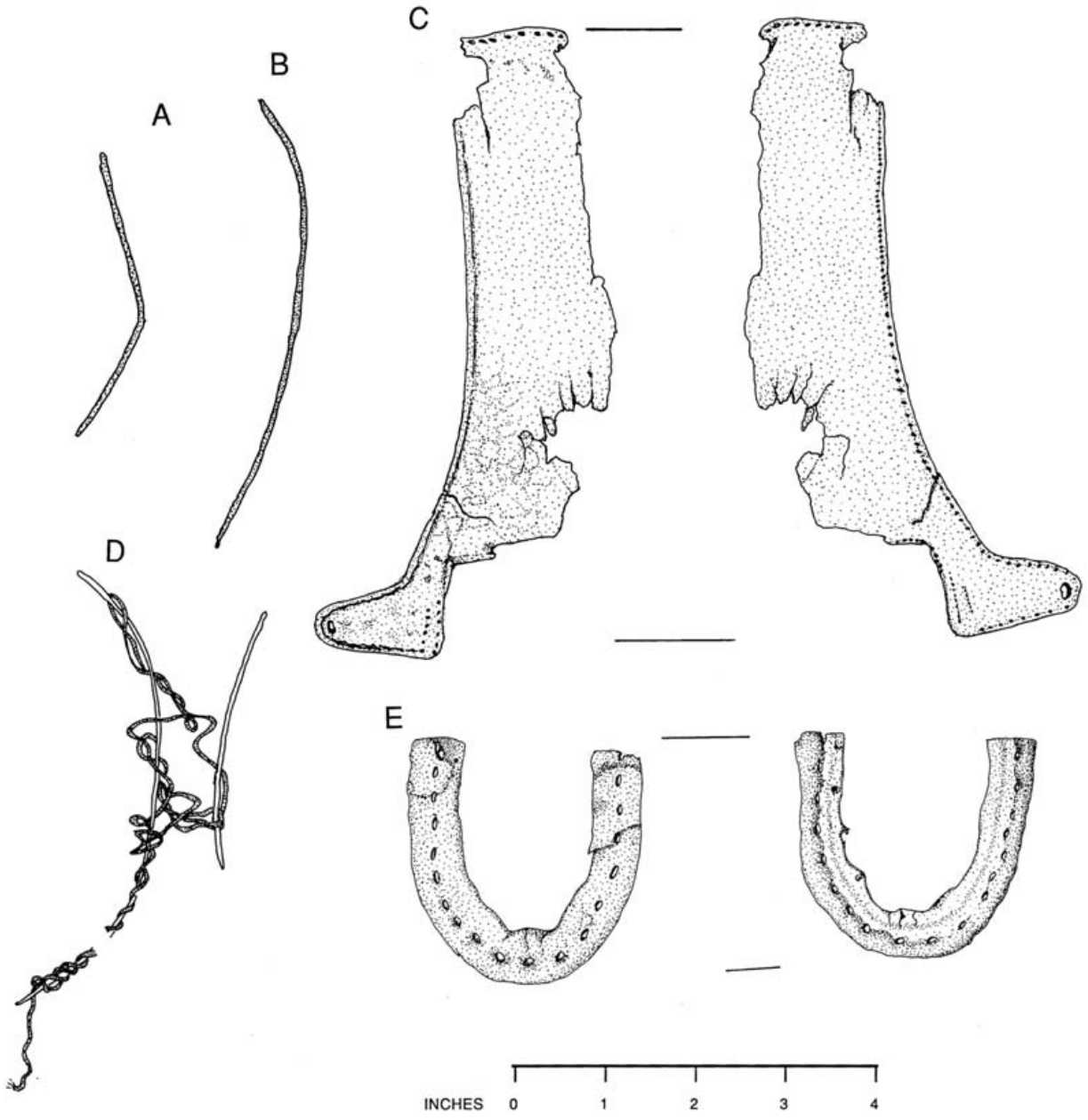


Figure 178
Needles, threads, and a laced quarter

Long curved needles, A, B, and D, were used by shoemakers to sew leather, where it was often necessary to sew through the edge of a piece of leather without piercing it all the way. Stitches were pulled tight by sewing in both directions at once. Both needles were inserted from opposite directions through the same hole and pulled taut. A pair of needles, D, survived in the east well, still threaded. Lacing was just beginning to replace shoe buckles at the end of the eighteenth century. The quarter shown here,C, has been cut or torn away from the sole, but it retains the tongue with the early style of hole for a single lace. On a buckled shoe, this feature might have been larger. The split-lift, E, shows stitches and tack holes from lasting.

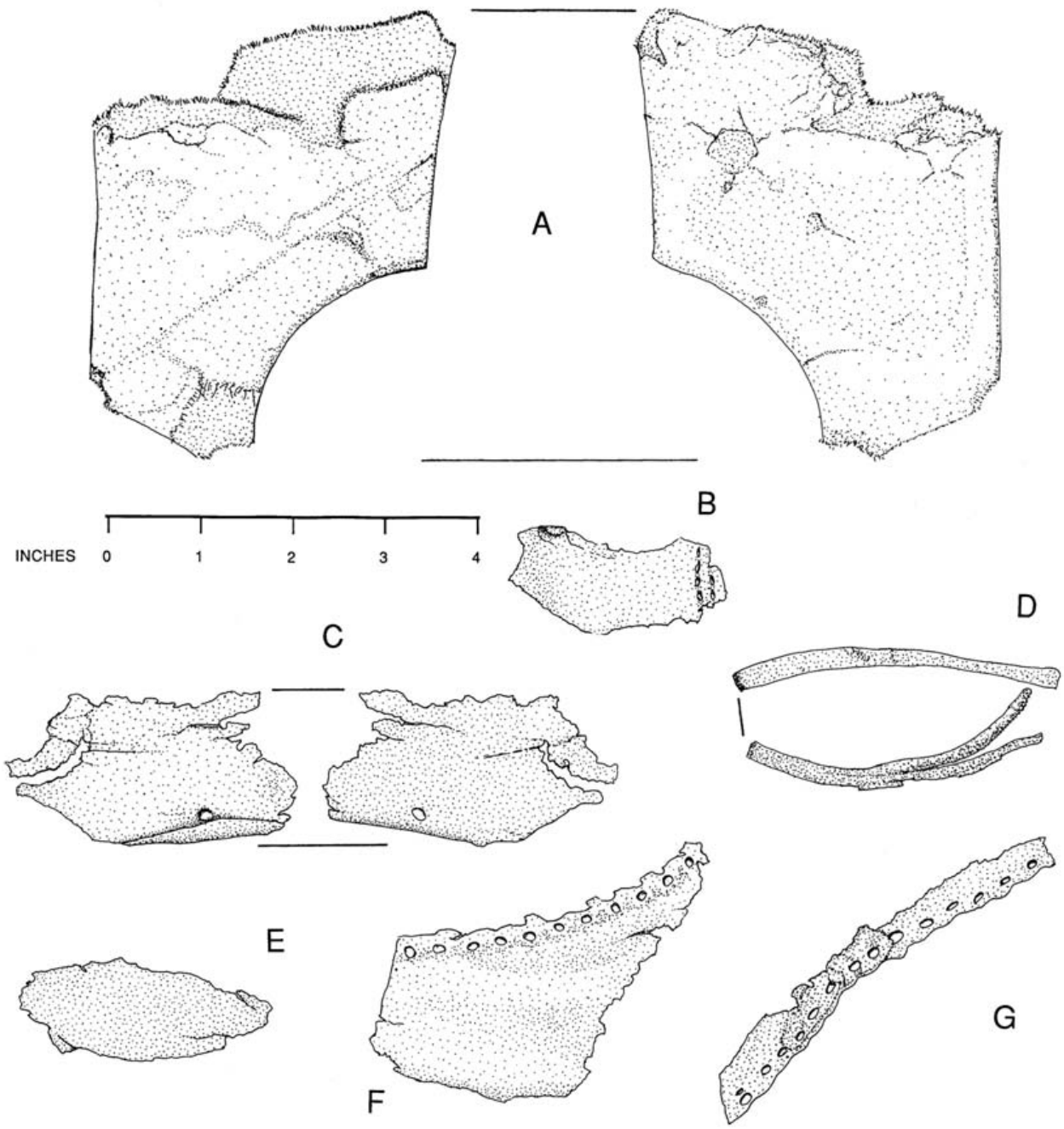


Figure 179
More Shoe Making Waste

These pieces of shoe and leather are more indication that someone on the site was doing leatherwork. The piece of sole leather, A, was found in a deposit at the bottom of the east well with the other items in this picture, 180ab. These all appear to be scraps salvaged or removed from old shoes during the repair process.

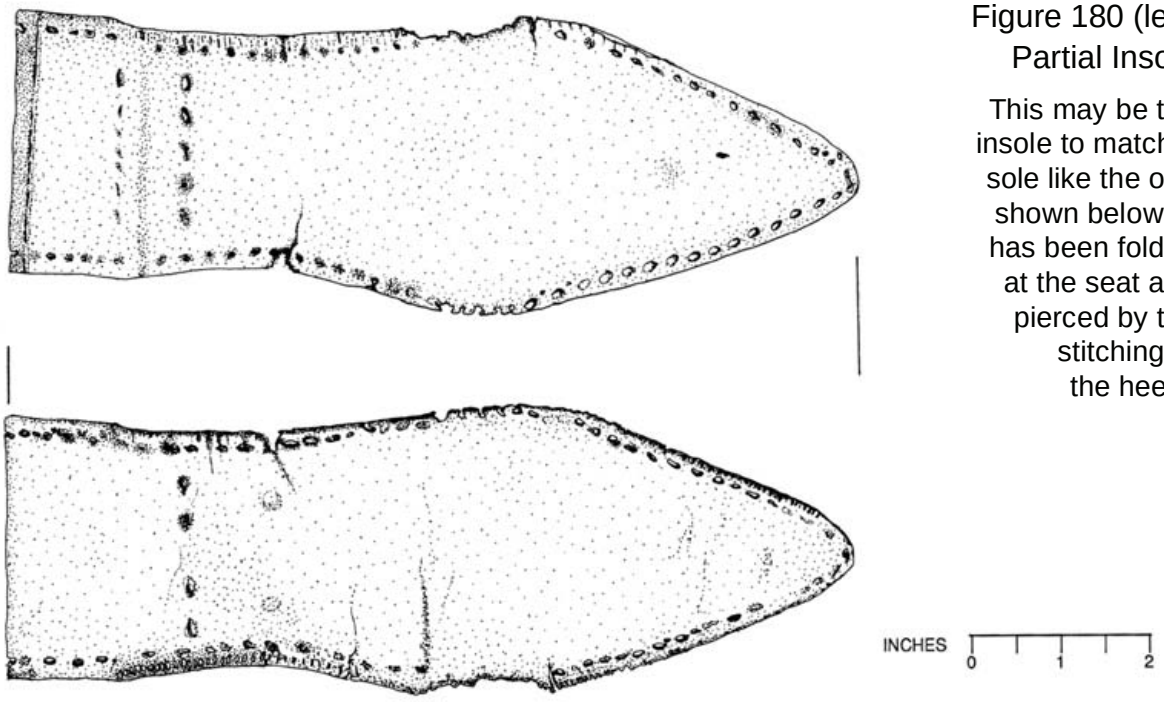
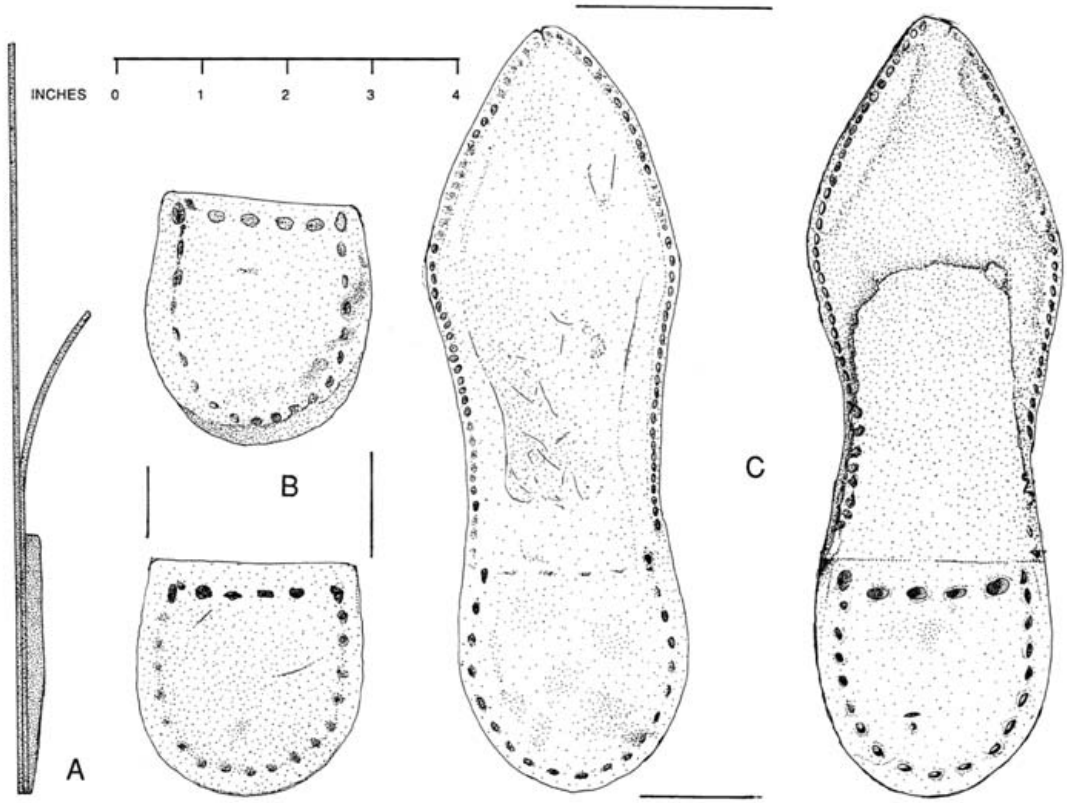


Figure 180 (left)
Partial Insole

This may be the insole to match a sole like the one shown below. It has been folded at the seat and pierced by the stitching of the heels.

Figure 181

This evidently is waste from a pointed-toe shoe, or part of a dismantled shoe. The parts were found together, as shown in the profile view, A, at left.



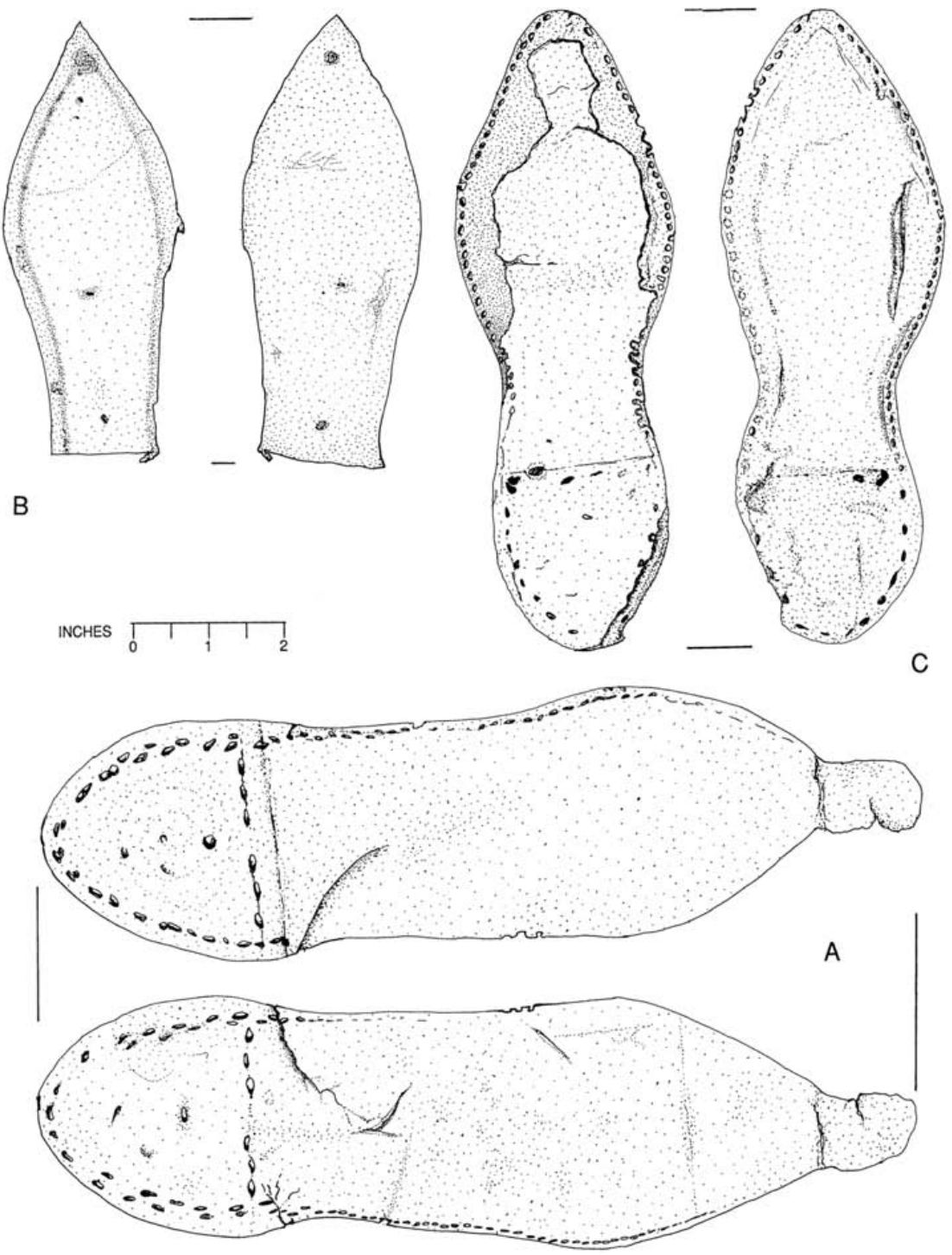


Figure 182
Worn Shoes

These sole elements were discarded after heavy wear had destroyed some of the stitching. The eared sole, A, has lost the line of stitching from one side. The insole, B, still has the holes from three lasting-nails, but no stitching. It has been rougly cut out. The heel of shoe C has worn away on one side, and repair holes can be seen next to the missing part.

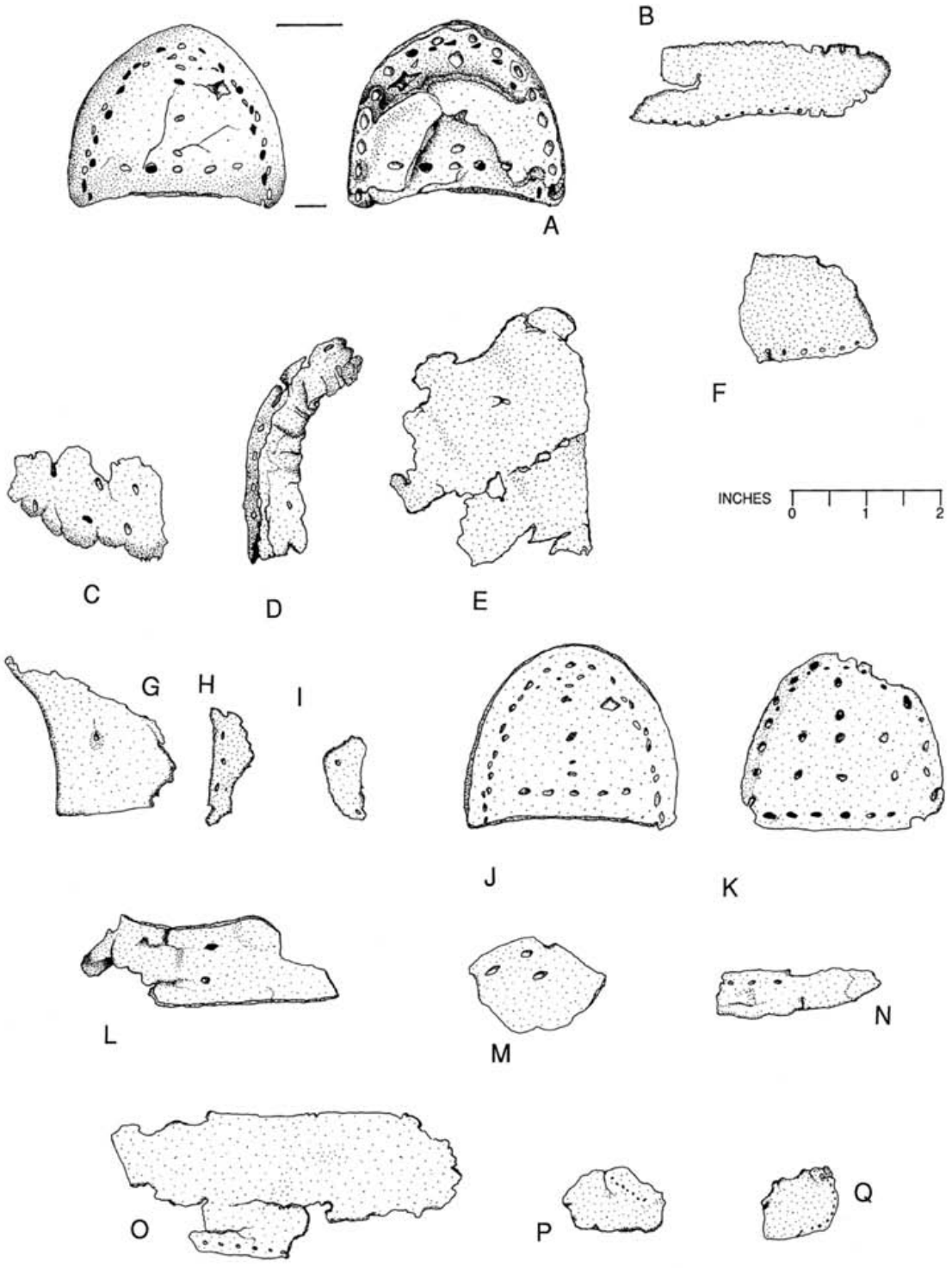


Figure 183
Shoe Parts from the West Well

These shoe parts were found at the bottom of the western well, which was abandoned near the end of the eighteenth century. Item D is a piece of a rand, the strip that runs under the insole in the heel area. Item L appears to be a tongue from a buckled shoe.

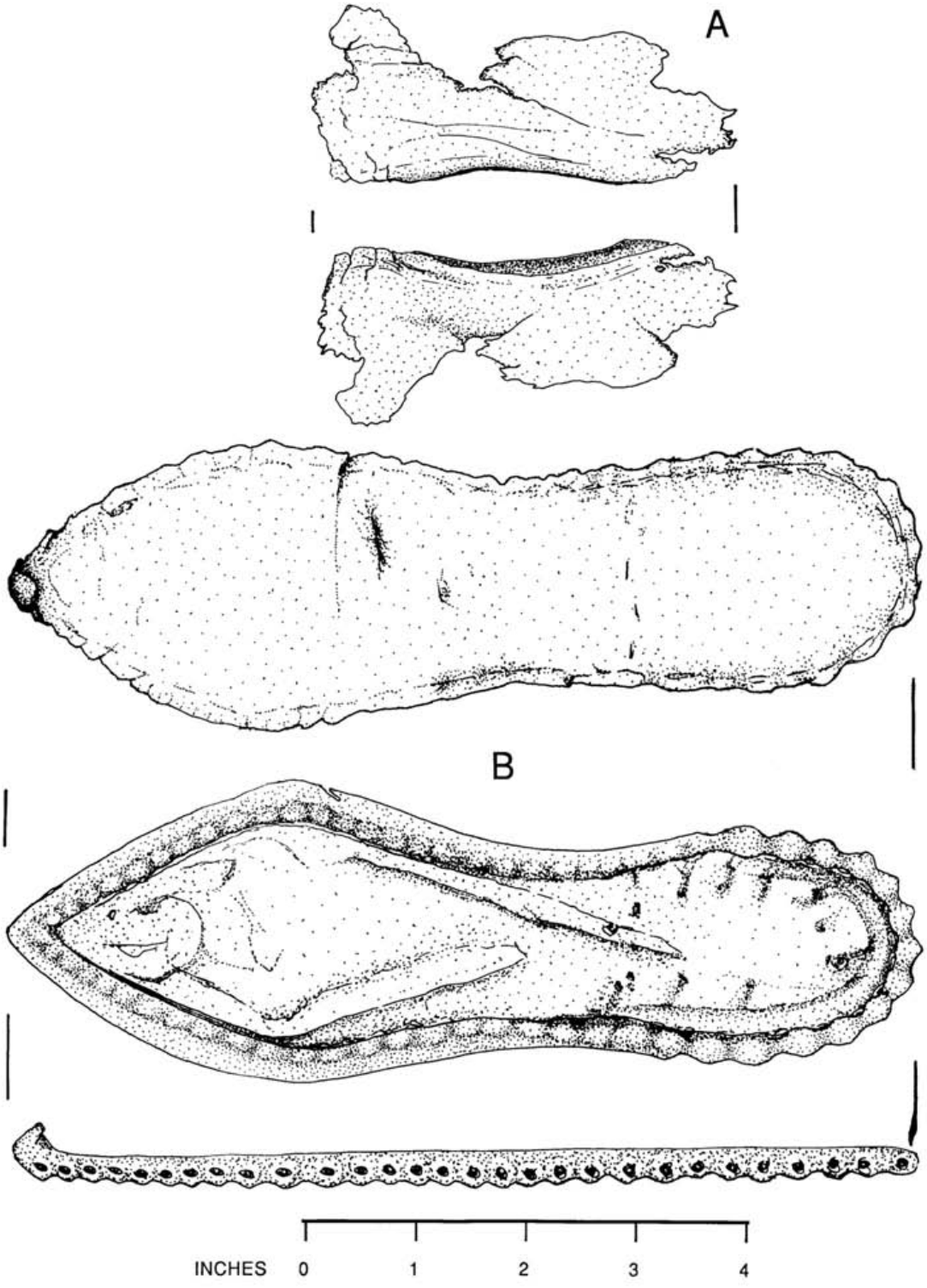


Figure 184
Insole

This insole with welt attached was found at the bottom of the east well. The small leather scrap appears to have been stuffed into a shoe at some place.

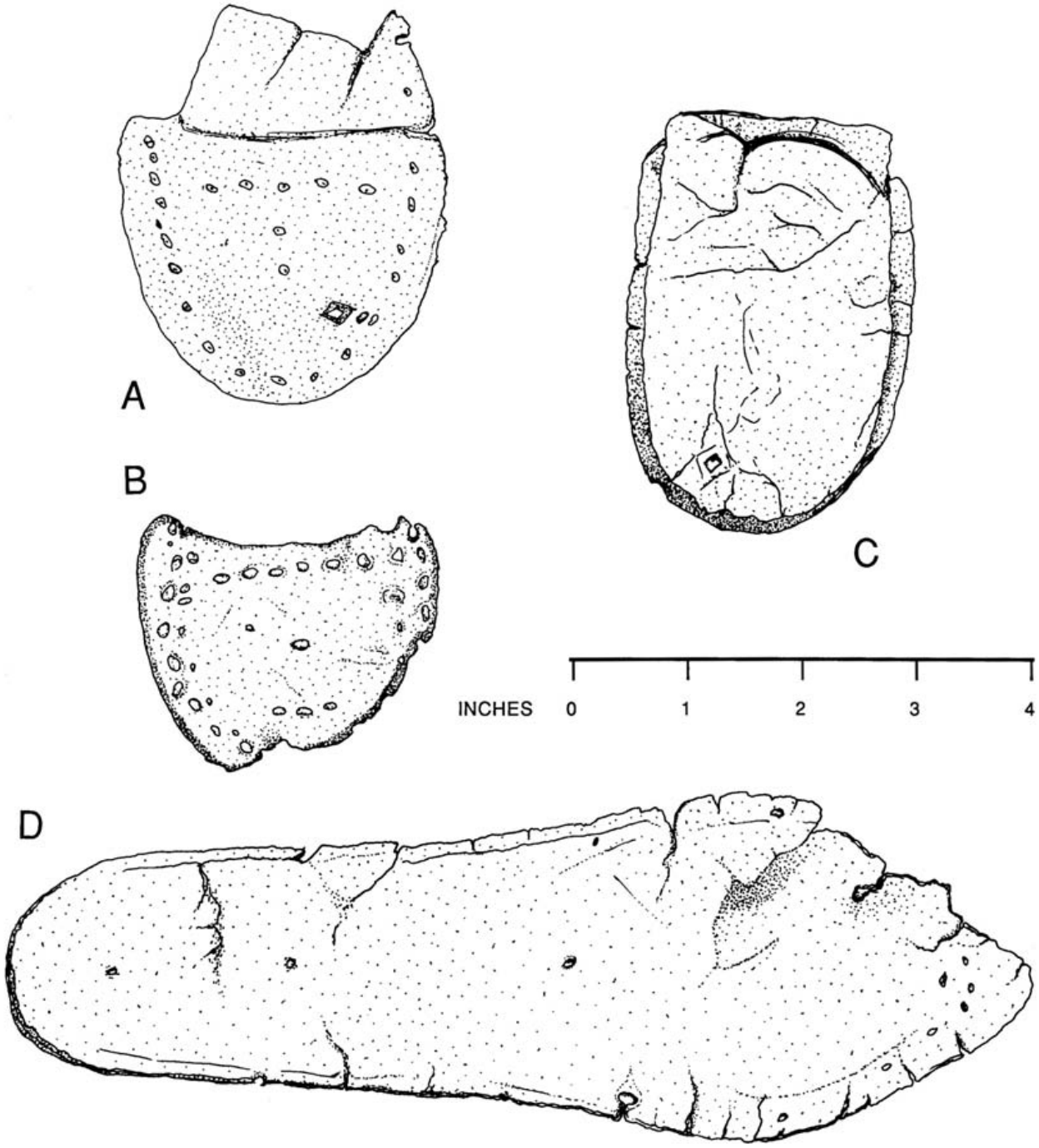


Figure 185
Signs of wear

These heel and insole fragments show signs of considerable wear, indicating that they probably were discarded during repair.