

**The Role of the Landscape and Master Plan  
in the Cultural Heritage of the Koreshan Unity Settlement**

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12 April 1991

This study was made possible through a grant from  
the Florida Endowment for the Humanities  
for the study of

**The Cultural History of The Koreshan Unity Settlement in Estero, Florida**

awarded to

the Koreshan Unity Alliance Inc.

and

The Fort Myers Historical Museum



AC-0111

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## **The Role of the Landscape and the Master Plan in the Cultural Heritage of the Koreshan Unity Settlement**

### **Introduction:**

This study is one of four studies done under the auspices of a 1990 Florida Endowment for the Humanities grant, awarded to the Koreshan Unity Alliance and its co-sponsor, the Fort Myers Historical Museum, to conduct a comprehensive study of "*The Cultural History of the Koreshan Unity Settlement in Estero, Florida.*" The focus of this study is the role of the landscape in the culture of the settlement.

Our research leads us to believe that the design of the landscape is integral to the Koreshan philosophy. We will briefly review aspects of the Koreshan beliefs and values which influence the landscape, in order to establish the context for our investigation. We'll follow with an analysis of the importance of the form of the master plan and subsequent spaces, and conclude with our recommendations.

The Koreshan philosophy is founded in concepts of correspondence between the physical world and the divine. Therefore, we look to gardens which explore the themes of centrality, geometry and boundary, as expressions of divine presence in the physical world, to offer possible models. In this regard, the gardens of medieval Western Europe provide the closest parallels.

Admittedly, this research is somewhat limited in scope, involving primarily a review of a small segment of the Koreshan community's own literature and period photographs, and secondary sources, such as Elliot Mackle's unpublished thesis and the Herbert and Reeves report. All of the material we have read and seen, validates the importance of physical design to the culture of the community.

We therefore recommend that the Koreshan Unity Alliance complete the process of research and begin restoration of the original grounds in order to best illustrate the unity of philosophy and physical design which characterizes the Koreshan culture. A thorough study of related materials, such as a search of contemporary periodicals, a call for private diaries, photographs and papers, and any other archival material which can be gathered, should be examined, in concert with field studies, in order to recreate this inspired landscape.

### **General Context: American Utopian Communities**

Historically, American utopian communities often represented the settler's vision of the New World as earthly paradise. Dolores Hayden, in her study, *Seven American Utopias*, notes that "sectarian communities tended to emphasize pastoral themes." (14) Hayden identifies the period from 1820 through 1850 as the most popular for "Communitarian thinking," and she relates this



to the "decades of agitation for abolition, labor rights, equitable land policies, women's rights, educational reform, and penal reform." (9)

The depression of 1893 motivated further communal ventures (Hayden 1976, 14) and the continued challenges of the industrial revolution acted as further inspiration for the opportunity to re-create the city, free of its pollution and ill health. In addition to the new social and economic order, communards also sought a new relationship with Nature. The landscape offered an opportunity to physically represent the new order.

## **Koreshan Unity Settlement**

### **Philosophy**

The focus of this study is the significance of the landscape within the culture of the community. Other participants in this study of the cultural heritage of the Koreshan Settlement will discuss the philosophy and social order in detail. However, a brief overview of the tenets of the society is important to an understanding of the landscape. The Koreshan Unity Settlement was founded as a utopian community based on religious and fraternal commonwealth, and offers a complete system of religious, scientific and social beliefs which compose the Koreshan Universology. The settlement was founded in Chicago in 1888 by Dr. Cyrus Teed (Mackle 1971, 17-18).

In 1894 Dr. Teed and his disciples, numbering between sixteen and twenty (Mackle 1971, 30) decided to settle in Estero, Florida to build a New Jerusalem. From this base, the Unity would practice the doctrines of Koreshanity and spread its theories and teachings throughout the world until the whole world was converted (Mackle 1971, 25).

The land that was to become the New Jerusalem was still a wilderness in 1894. Upon arrival, settlers turned to the nearby cypress swamps to clear the land, and cut logs for building material. The early Koreshans established an area called the Home Grounds, designed to become the center of the new city. Most of the buildings which would provide for their physical comfort and basic needs were sited in the Home Grounds, until the New Jerusalem could be constructed (Mackle 1971, 11-20).

Dr. Teed ([1922] 1983, 12) described the "language of causation manifest in the form of symbolism." He explained that humans needed to understand the "structure and function" of the universe, God's handiwork, in order to know God, which is "the supreme demand of all intellectual research and development." "Koreshanity," Teed ([1922] 1983, 16) explains, "is universal science applied to the concerns of practical life, involving the science of immortal life in the body. . . It is predicated upon an absolutely demonstrated premise, a geometric figure which embraces three simple elements- the arc, chord, and radius."

The patterns which we will examine in the landscape clearly reflect the concept of applied geometry, which is at the heart of Koreshanity. The measurements of the earth form the base

for this "radical astronomical revolution" (Teed [1922] 1983, 16). The alterations of the earth in the settlement pattern reveal the ideal community. In order to better understand the importance of the three geometric elements and the principle of centrality which governs the plan, one must realize the layered and centralized properties of the universe as Dr. Teed ([1922] 1983, 18) described it.

*- The universe is a shell composed of seven metallic, five mineral, and five geologic strata, with an inner habitable surface of land and water. This inner surface . . . is concave. The seven metallic layers . . . are the seven noble metals, -gold constituting the outermost rind of the shell. This shell or crust is a number of miles in thickness.*

*Within this shell are three principal atmospheres, the first or outermost (the one in which we exist) being composed chiefly of oxygen and nitrogen; the one immediately above that is pure hydrogen, and the one above the hydrogen atmosphere we have denominated aboron. Within this is the solar electromagnetic atmosphere, the nucleus of which is the stellar center. In and occupying these atmospheres are the sun and stars, also the reflections called the planets and the moon.*

Dr. Teed patterned the social order of the community after the form of the natural cosmos, as a "natural expression of the laws of order" (*Flaming Sword* 1901, XV:2). The Pre-Eminent Concilium; part of the governing body; was composed of six women of the Planetary Chamber, four men of the Stellar Chamber, and six men and six women of the Signet Chamber (Mackle 1971, 98).

The early Koreshans advocated communism " ...not only of the goods of life but of life itself." "The bond of the true communism is the true religion, and the central personality of the divine communism is the Messiah" (Mackle 1971, 94). We'll see that these theories also find expression in the landscape through the presence of the inner circle and the centralized geometries of the important features.

### Master Plan

The site for the New Jerusalem was selected strategically, to become the center of the world, much as the old Jerusalem was often depicted in medieval times as the navel of the world. The issue then of centrality is a theme recurring throughout the physical design and landscape. The site is bounded by Estero Bay and the Gulf of Mexico, embracing the mainland and islands of that locality. (fig. 1)

*- The situation is on the natural line of commerce from North to South America, and transversely east and west from Asia, across Nicaragua, the Gulf of Mexico, through a ship canal across the peninsula of Florida, to New York and across the Atlantic ocean (*Flaming Sword* 1896, 10:226).*

The design goal of the early Koreshans was to build the New Jerusalem, a nine square grid containing six square miles, and eight to ten million people. (fig. 2) The city was to consist of a

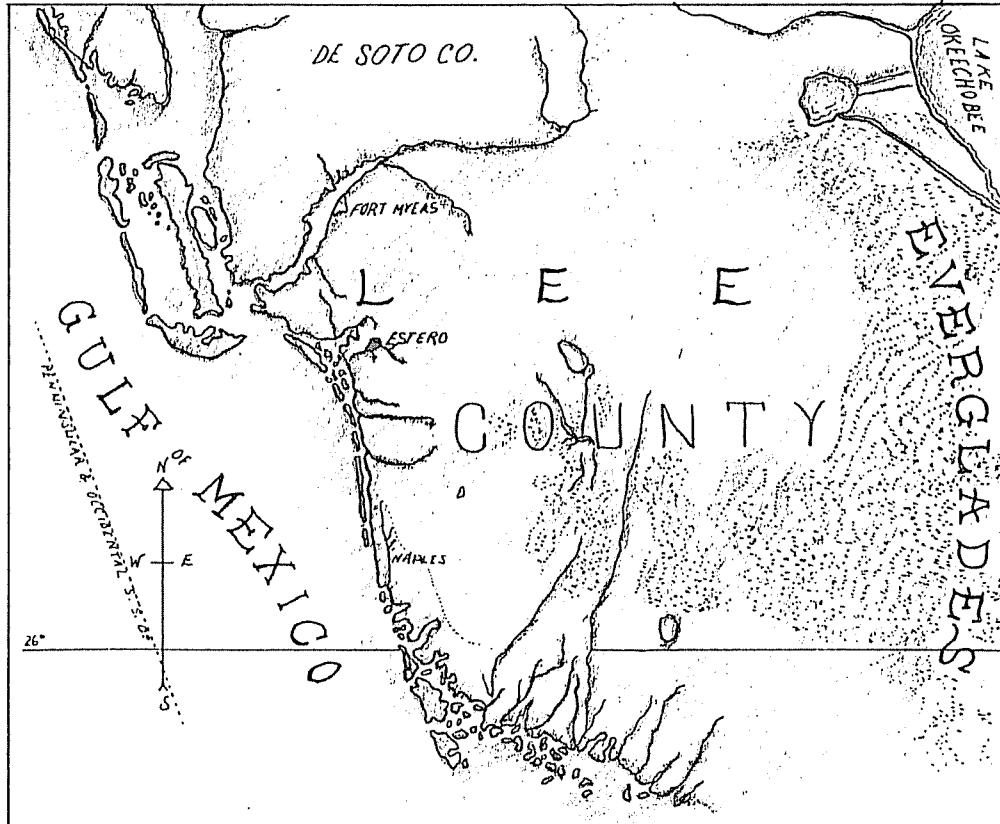


Fig. 1. Map of Estero Bay

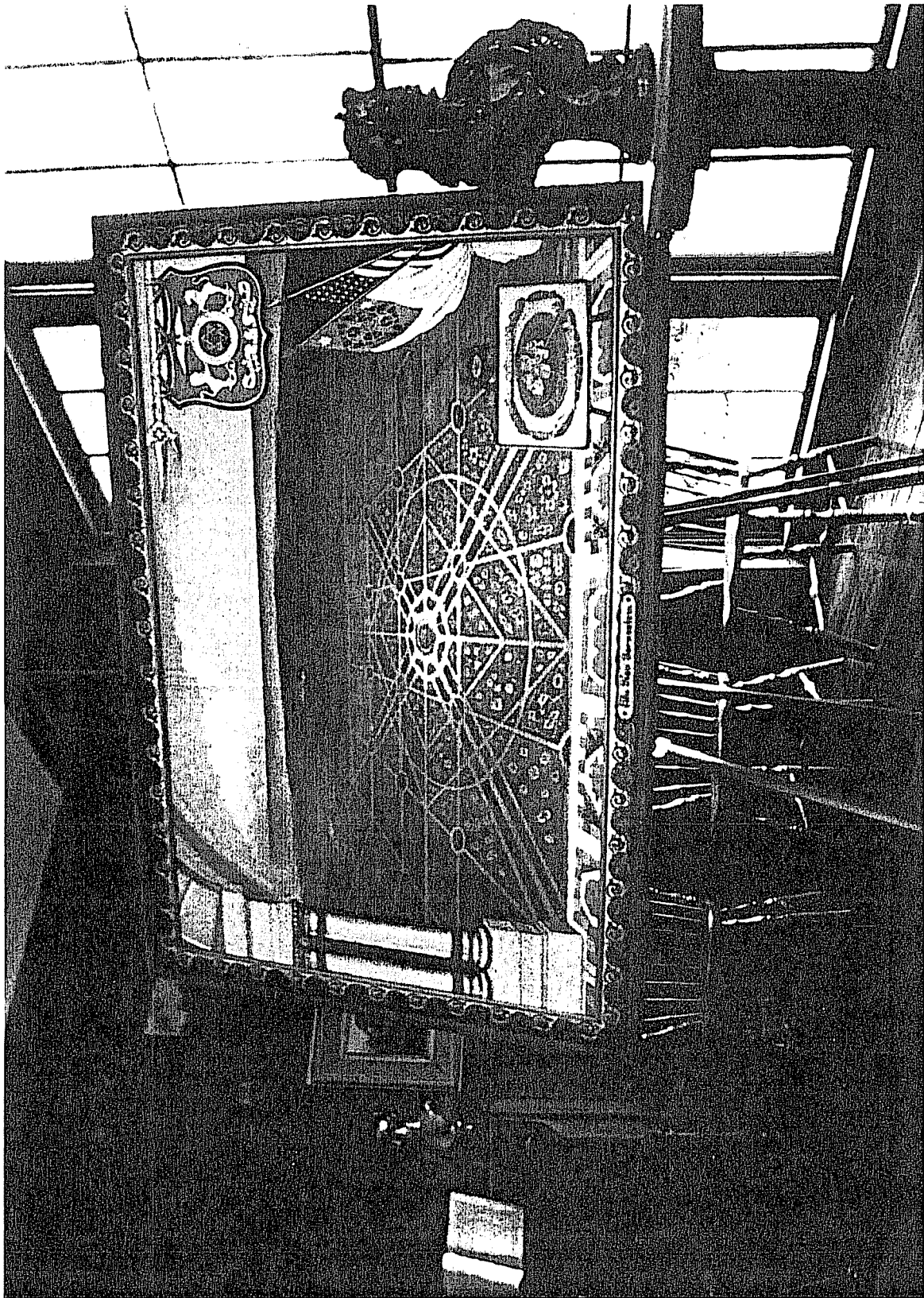


Fig. 2. Master Plan Painting



system of formal gardens laid out in geometric patterns, with buildings constructed of various architectural styles (Lloyd 1987, 8).

The *Flaming Sword* of October 1896 (10:226) describes a city of

*- such proportions of magnitude and progress in its development as to become permanent in its architectural creation, the underground or basement will be an excavation walled in to complete a system of intercommunication for cables, wires and perpetually moving platforms for the transportation of debris and offal, which will be deodorized with earth and chemicals and conveyed to a spot 40 or more miles from the city where it will be reduced to fertilizer and returned to the soil. There will be no dumping of the public waste into the rivers, bays, and gulfs. . . There will be no telegraphic or telephonic wires overhead to mar the beauty of the city. . . The various kinds of traffic, travel, and transportation will be arranged on planes of different elevations, so as to provide against the commotion, disorder, inconvenience, and danger that now characterize all large cities.*

The Koreshans' beliefs direct the layout of the master plan. The thirty six square grid is divided by two diagonals. These are the main streets which run north-south and east-west. At the intersection of the two diagonals is the temple, sixteen thousand feet in diameter. The temple is surrounded by a circular sea, three hundred feet wide. "Surrounding the crystal sea are eight parks in the shape of a parabola adjusted to an octagonal street" (*Flaming Sword* 1896, 10:226). (fig. 3)

The park system contained all other buildings with the exception of the barn. The park is described as planted with many fruit trees, nut trees and other kinds of plants (*Flaming Sword* 1896, 10:10) which allude to biblical descriptions of Eden (Genesis 1:11-31). The placement of the temple within the central circle reinforces the role of faith as paradigm for the physical landscape.

The grid is intersected by circles and half circles which imply an intention for the settlement pattern to grow out from its center in a rhythmic and repetitive manner. The overlapping of the geometric forms, the circle and square, further illustrates a relationship between the philosophy of centrality- of God, His creation the sun, and in turn the Messiah- and human needs, as expressed in the pragmatic relationships of movement and distribution of services such as that of the infrastructure of the city.

The three elements- the arc, chord, and radius resound through the landscape. The cellular nature of the universe is tangibly represented in the plan by concentric rings which encircle the center and by the joining of circles and squares which occurs at the intersections of the grid. These geometric relationships parallel the growth of the settlement, which reflects the model of the universe, cellular growth.

The intersections of the orthogonal lines are marked with circles. The intersection of the circle with the square forms an octagon, historically known to represent a Messianic symbol (Whittick 1960, 229) (Krautheimer 1942, 5:10) (Onians 1988, 69). The continuous circles in the plan refer to a common understanding of community, where there is no private ownership, and all resources are shared.

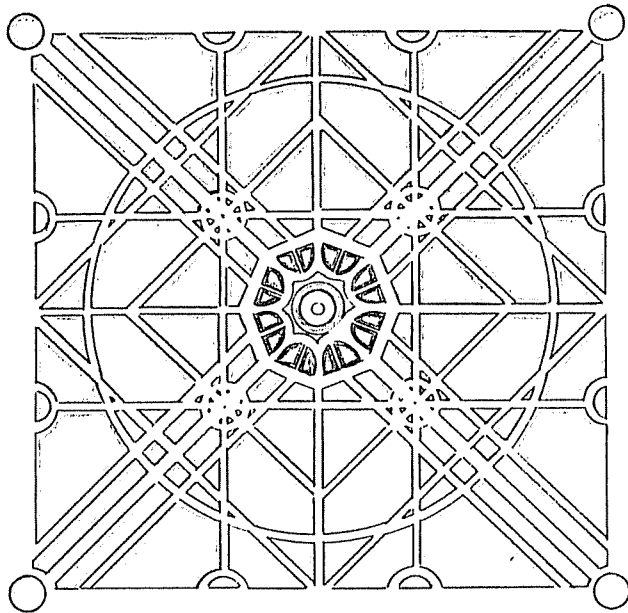


Fig. 3. Plan of the New Jerusalem

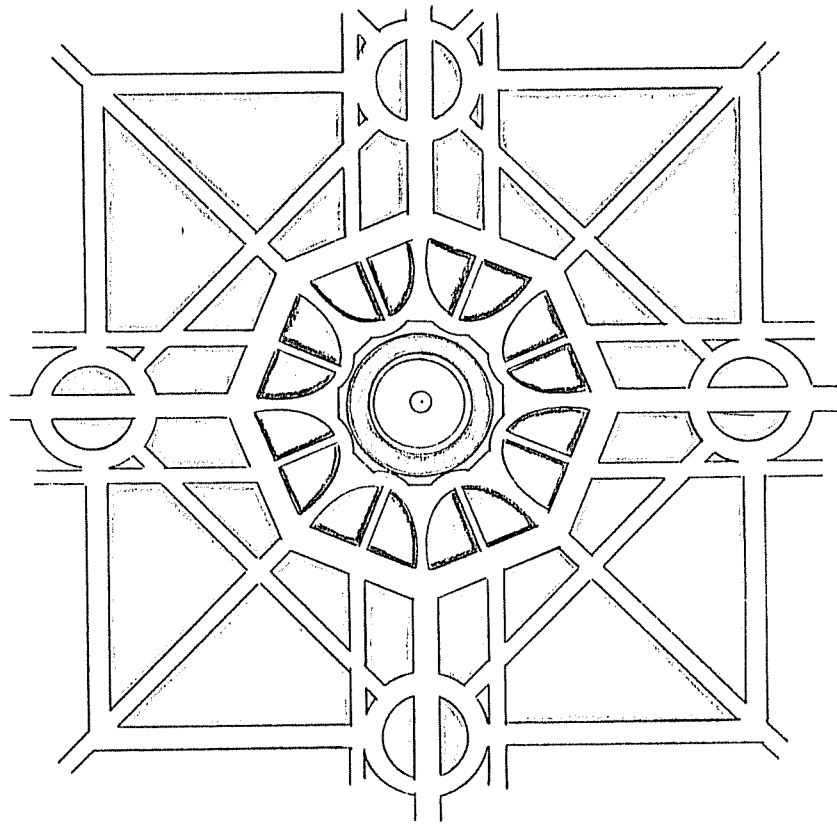


Fig. 3. The New Jerusalem, Central Square.

## Design Elements

### Architecture

The Home Grounds formed the beginning of the New Jerusalem (*Flaming Sword* 1896, 10:226). The buildings on the site consisted of a three story dining hall and dormitory, a Planetary Court, residence for the Unity's women leaders, smaller dorms for men and for women, a house for Dr. Teed, a bakery, a steam laundry, industrial buildings with adjoining dorms for men who worked there; a print shop, a school, a store, a boat house and a green house. (figs. 4, 5)

All of these structures were located within a park system. Barns for live stock, dairy and other necessary buildings were placed beyond the limits of the park (Mackle 1971, 68-71). Current speculation, based upon the painting of master plan, focuses on the possibility that the buildings located in the parks were slated to be transformed from wood to stone. The founder's house evidences aspects of such a process of transformation. (fig. 6)

### Landscape

The 1902 settlement plan illustrates the Home Grounds, also known as the Koreshan Tropical Botanical Gardens (Lloyd 1987, 8). The gardens were carved out of a thick grove of mangroves, pine trees, saw palmetto trees, and scrub oaks. (fig. 7) The early landscape may have reflected the medieval tradition of scholastic and religious communities, in which gardens served a specific purpose, such as that of cultivation and learning, and were integral to the spiritual and physical life of the community (Meyvaert 1986, 53).

### Vegetable Gardens

Dr. Teed ([1922] 1983, 116) "presented the vegetable kingdom as an illustration of the action of the four polate points or centers, having defined especially the two prominent poles and their fluences upon the function of respiration." The vegetable gardens consisted of patches of sweet potatoes, yam, cabbages, beets, turnips, beans, peas, tomatoes, eggplants, melons, onions, Irish potatoes (*Flaming Sword* 1896, 9:203). The layout may have been more utilitarian, as in rows, but, given the illustrative example of the vegetables and their geometric significance, it is possible that they occurred within regularly shaped geometries, as in medieval gardens (Hill [1590] 1987, 45).

### Orchards

In the Home Grounds, the 1902 plans demarcates orchards. One can also deduce vegetable gardens and mounds which were organized to sustain and inspire the community. Descriptions from various Koreshan publications (*Flaming Sword* 1895, IX: 204; 1906, 6) (Koreshan Unity 1907, 50) describe two types of orchards: the orchards which consisted of a single type of fruit tree such as orange or grapefruit, and those which mixed a variety of fruit trees, such as avocado, lemon, lime, mango, tamarind, fig, olive, banana, guava, date, gooseberry, sugar apple, cocoanut, as well as other types of nut trees.



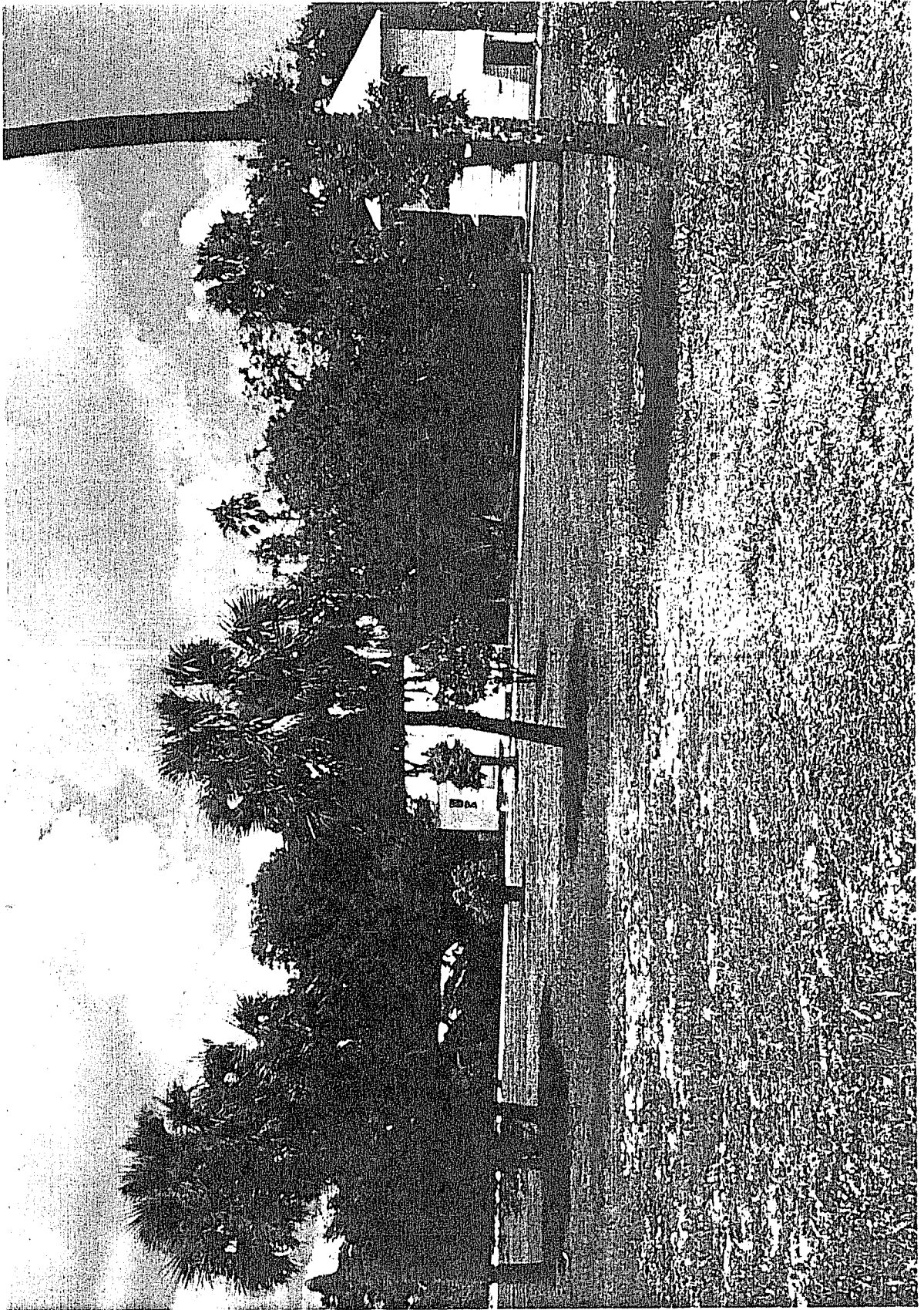


Fig. 4

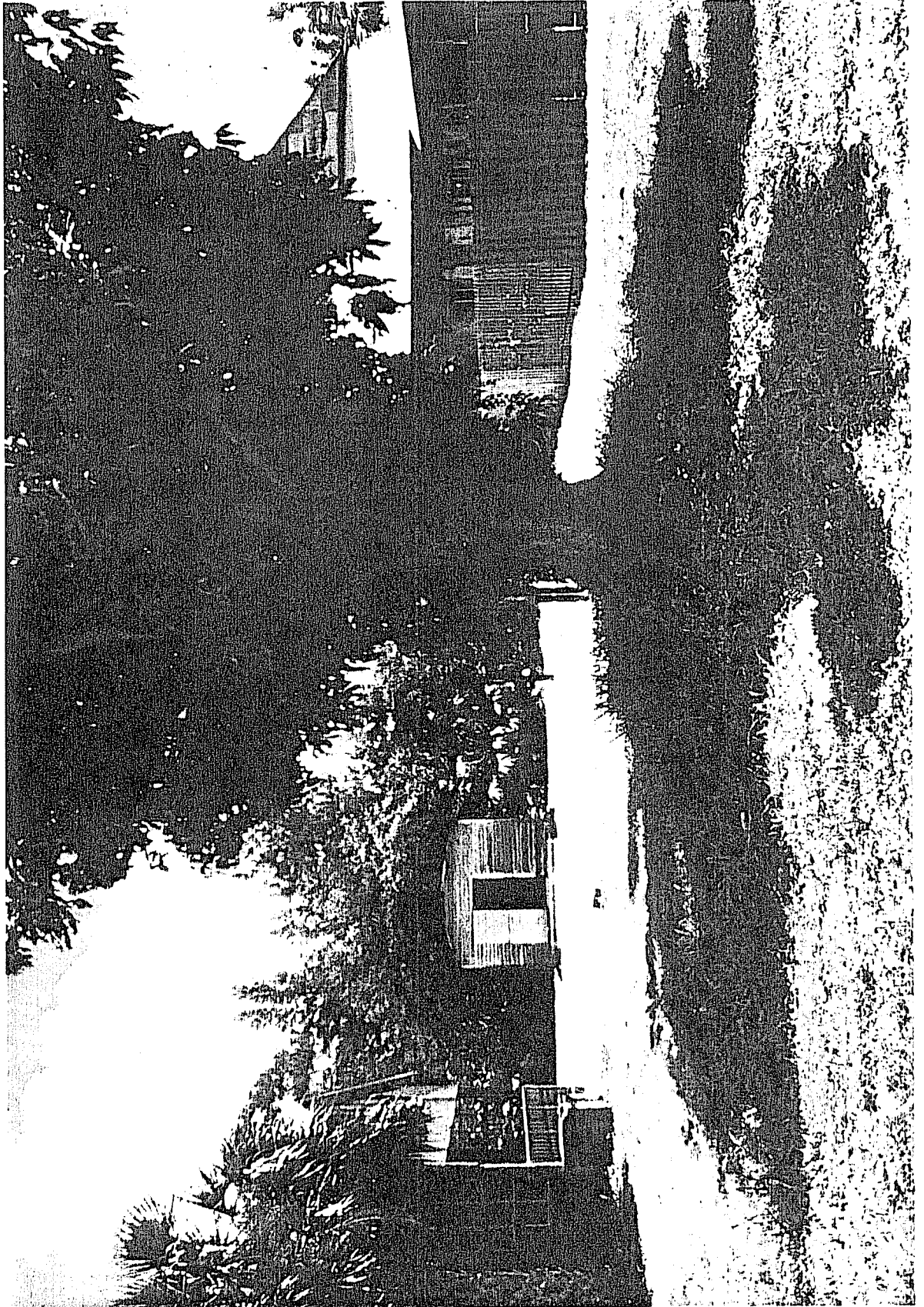


Fig. 5

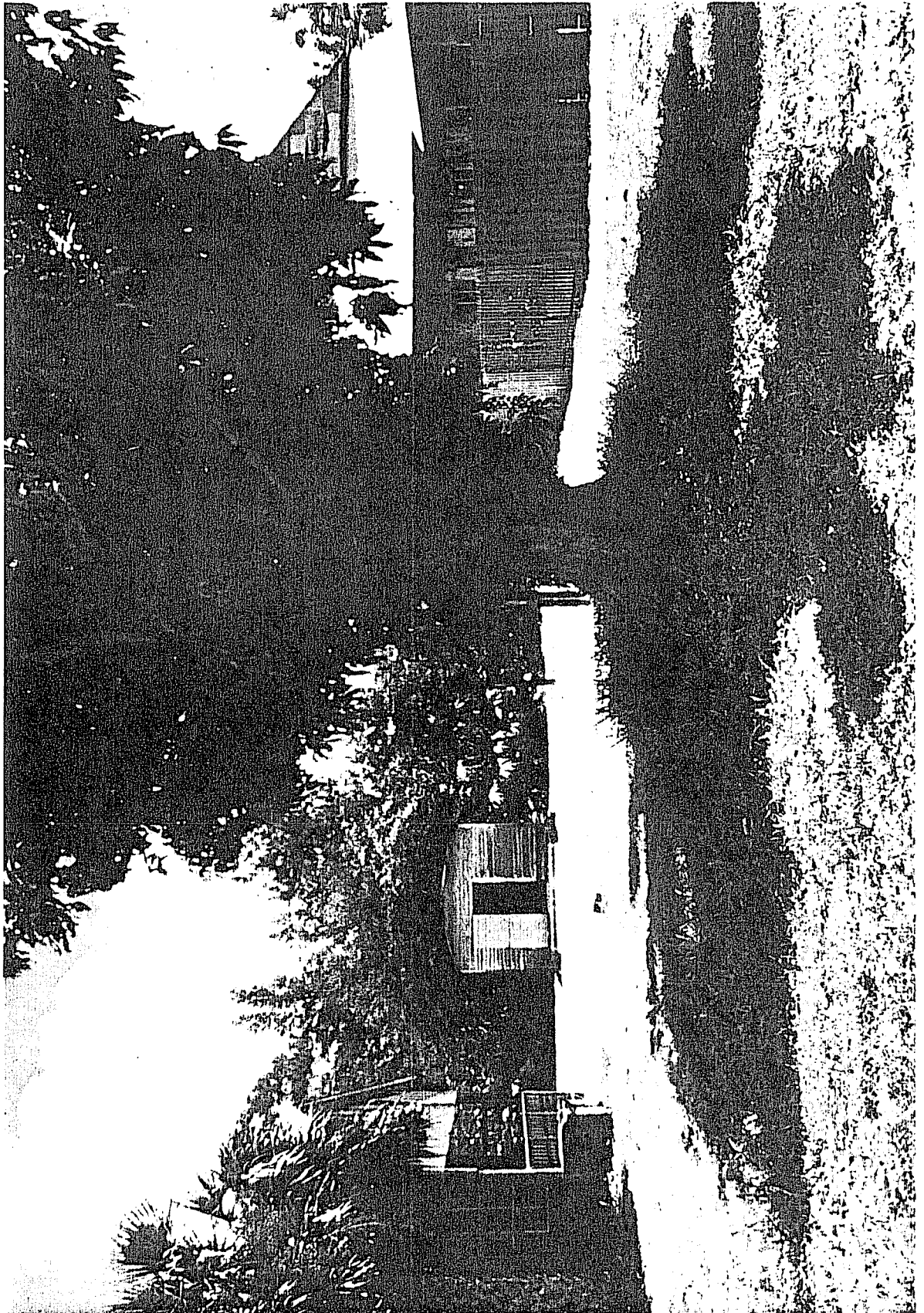


Fig. 5



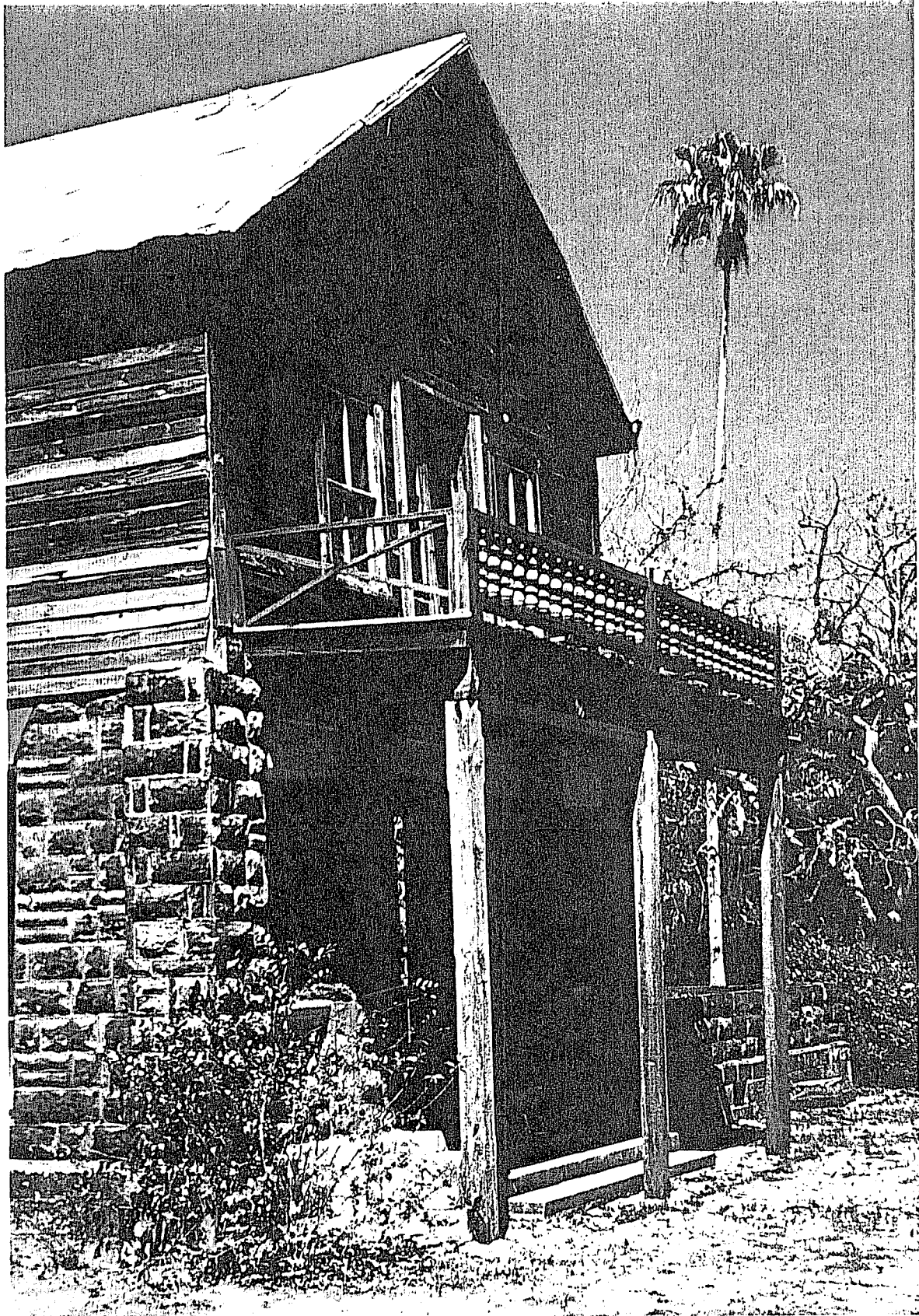


Fig. 6





Koreshian Unity, First Post Office,  
Barbershop, Dental Office and more.

Fig. 7

## Mounds

The four mounds (fig. 8) consisted of soil, built up about 3' from the ground and 10' in diameter. Period photographs of the mounds show concentric rings of crushed shell and grass. The mounds were crisp in definition and actually composed of what appear to be three distinct levels.

The four mounds may have played a didactic role in the community. Mrs. Jo Bigelow, President of the Koreshan Unity Foundation, recounted in conversation the general association of Dr. Teed, as the sun; a woman representing the moon, and children representing the stars. (August 16, 1990) The mounds may have figured in the enactment of that allegory.

The four mounds may have also represented the four poles; light, dark, morning and evening; which accounted for the origin of the stars and planets. The number four also makes reference to the four winds of heaven, the four foundations of earth, and the four seasons, all of which figure in the explanation of the Cellular Cosmogony. (Teed [1922] 1983, 88)

## Pleasure Gardens

The settlers also developed gardens which provided aesthetic pleasure, or perhaps had special spiritual connotations, but in any case were not strictly useful gardens, such as those which grew vegetable, fruits or product. The sunken gardens and the bamboo landing are examples of such designed landscapes. (figs. 9-11)

Herbert and Reeves describe the sunken gardens in detail, based on their analysis of photographs, oral interviews, and archival research. The sunken gardens were located

*- on the south bank at a bend in the river, just west of the drainage canal, and were constructed under the direction of Dr. Teed around 1904-5. They consisted of a series of terraces, mounds and steps leading down to a recessed area and the terraces were built up into triangular mounds which were covered with grasses from Cuba. The steps leading down into the gardens were formed with wood headers and packed with crushed shell as were the walks leading to it. There were banana trees adjacent to this area and other fruit trees . . . located just to the west of the gardens. (125-6)*

The bamboo landing was important aesthetically and functionally. Herbert and Reeves describe the use of the landing "for concerts by the Koreshan Unity band until the construction of the Art Hall about 1905. . . It was also used as a stage for a water pageant presented at the celebration of the Solar Festival." (124)

The use of the shell paths throughout the settlement is another example of an aesthetic and functional device. The crushed shells made walking considerable easier than the soft sand or dirt; footsteps can also be easily heard. Aesthetically, the patterns of the silvery

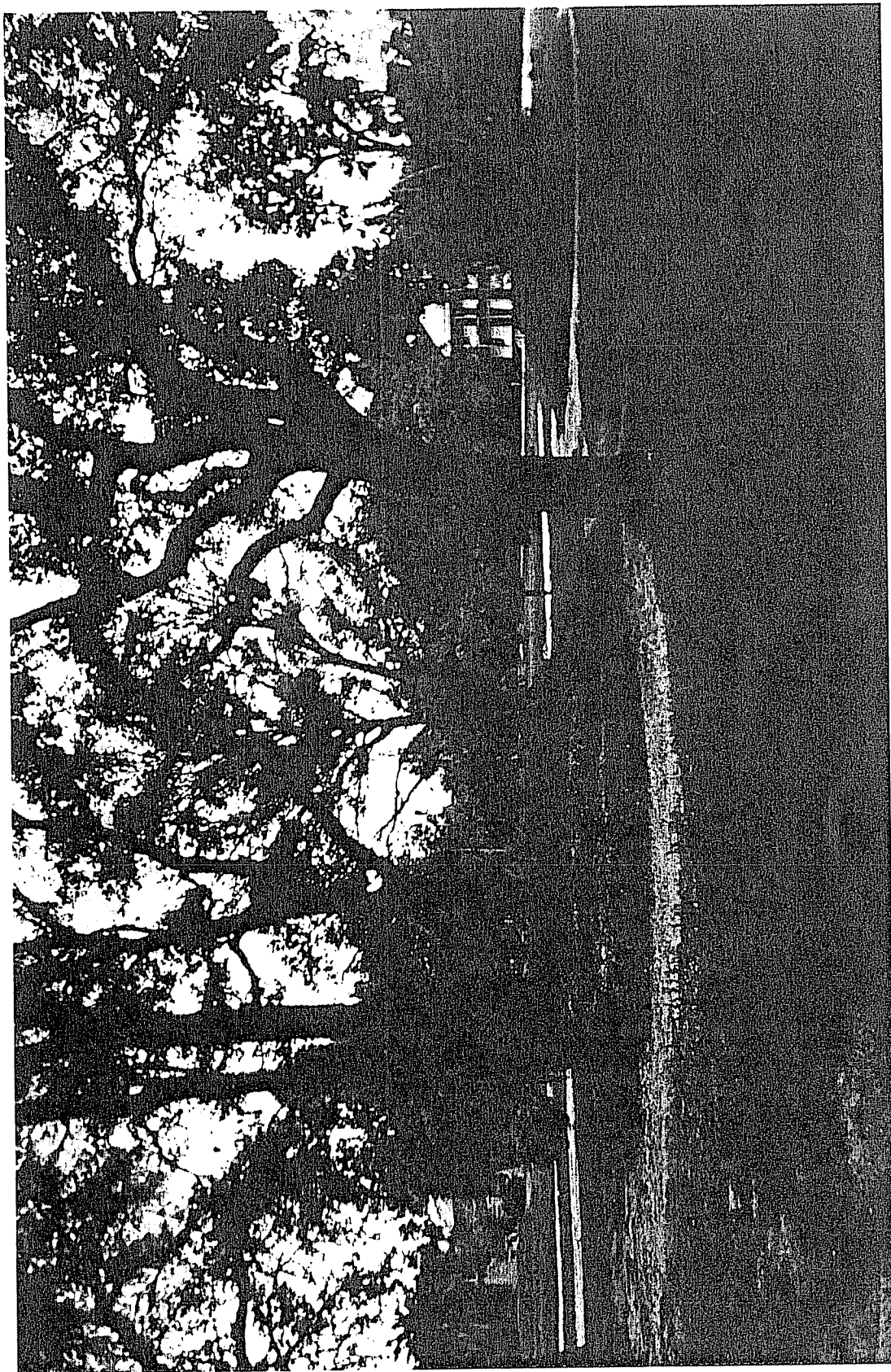


Fig. 8

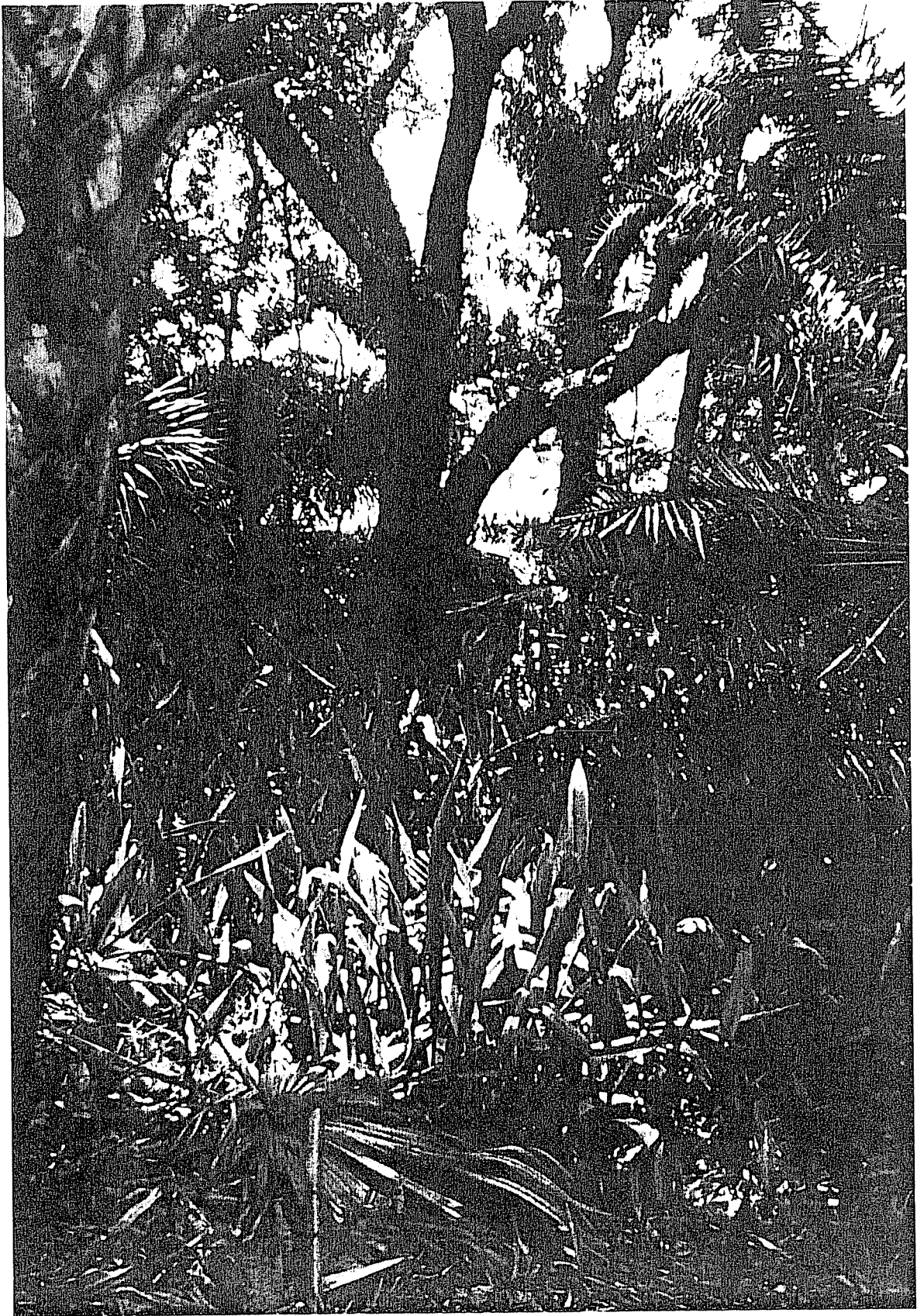


Fig. 9



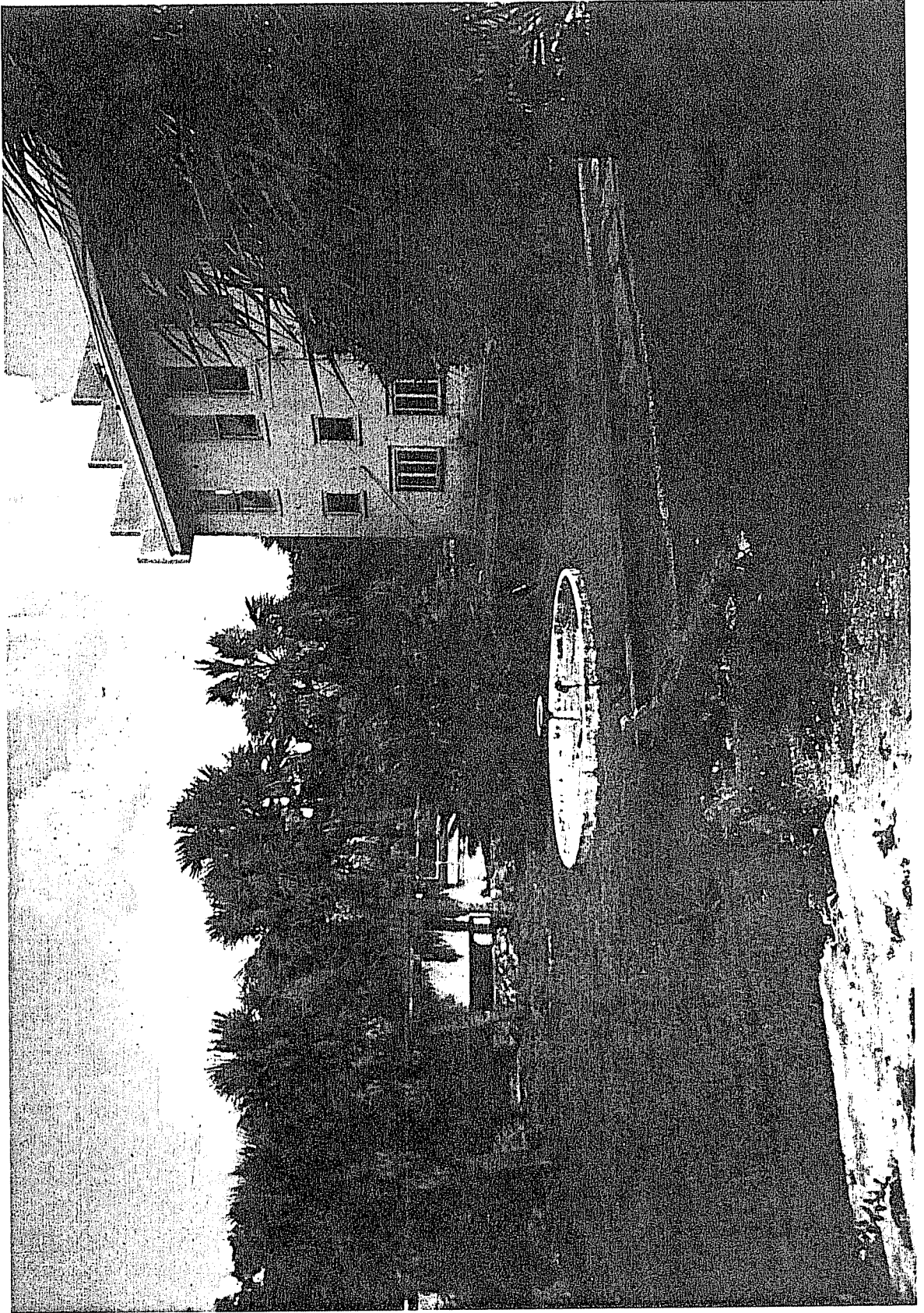


Fig. 10

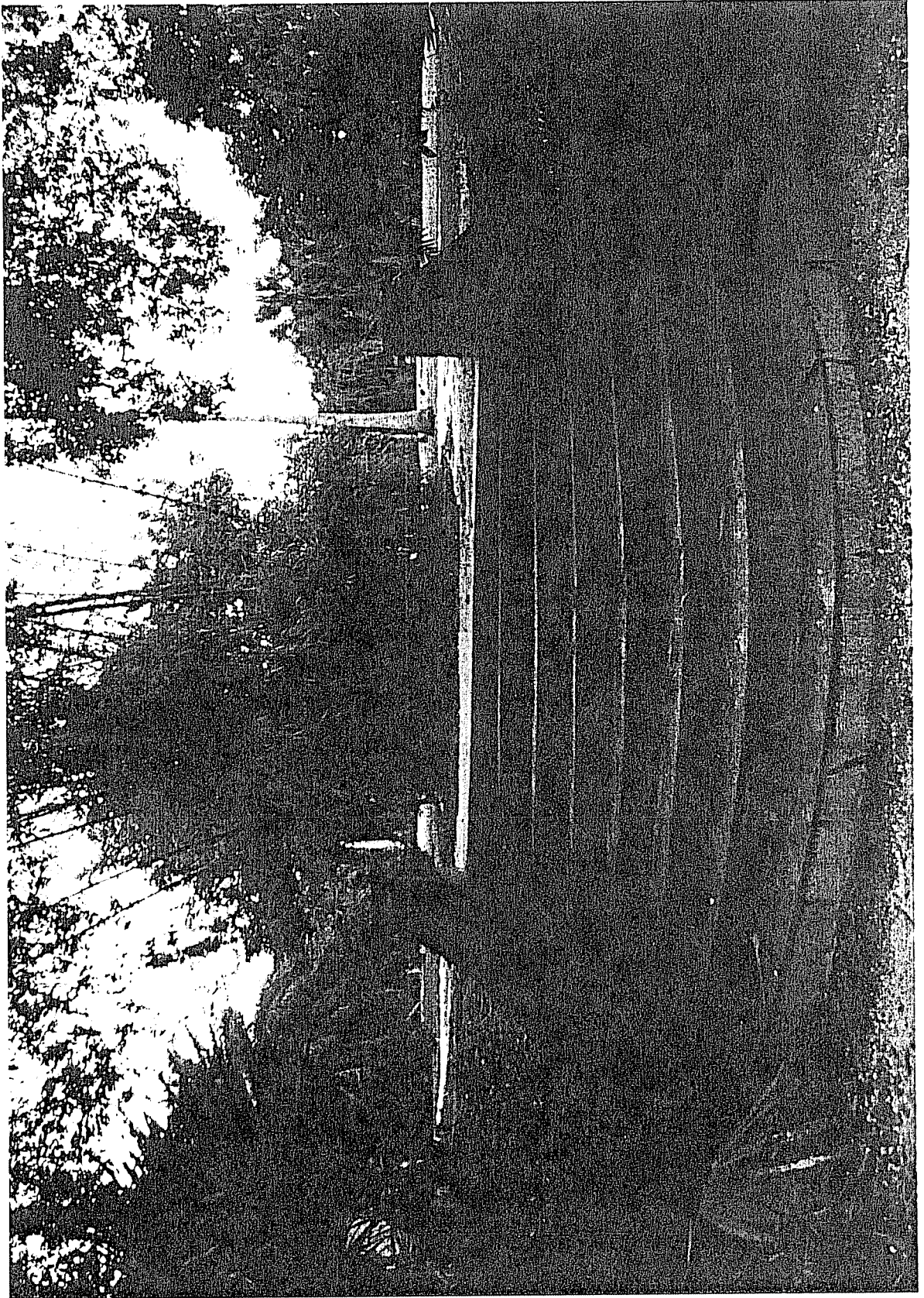


Fig. 11

paths glowing in the reflected moonlight make a nighttime composition dynamic with reflected light, both beautiful and useful.

### **Exotic Markers**

The monkey puzzle tree (fig. 12), the eucalyptus (fig. 13) and the bamboo, played a significant role in the community as they were often situated to mark certain points of entry to the community. The exotic trees demarcated points along the Estero River, figured against the background of an otherwise indigenous landscape.

### **Garden Ornaments and Architecture**

The footbridges of the garden were intricately detailed wood panels and masonry piers. The designs of the panels reflect the general preoccupation with geometric divisions as well as offering an aesthetic counterpoint to the more tropical foliage. The concrete works and the sculpture department of the community "busied itself making medallions, vases, urns, plaques, figure heads and all manner of ornamentation." (Herbert 1977, 129)

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The Koreshan Unity Settlement represented the early settlers' visions of the New Jerusalem as an earthly paradise. The philosophical, religious and social beliefs of the community were the foundation for the layout of the master plan and the gardens. The community, however, lost its center when Dr. Teed died in 1908. (Wertkin 1984, 1)

Dr. Teed was the sun and emphasized his central position figurally and physically. He occupied the house in the center of the community and his absence had profound impact. Many settlers lost faith and were unable to continue to build their ideal city. Although the Home Grounds was intended as a temporary settlement, anticipating the construction of the New Jerusalem, it functioned well as a community.

The correspondence between the philosophy of the Koreshan community and its physical representation in the landscape deserves more exacting study. The restoration of the original landscape gardens and perhaps, the re-creation of aspects of the ideal city would truly demonstrate the culture and heritage of the Koreshan Unity Settlement. We therefore recommend that following steps be undertaken to provide the basis for seeking funding to restore and re-create the original landscape vision of Dr. Teed and his early followers.

#### **1. Expand archival research base to establish early intentions.**

The images of the landscape as depicted in period photographs are the primary means of representation that is currently available on the gardens. An extensive search of news accounts from the period and published diaries and drawings should be undertaken.



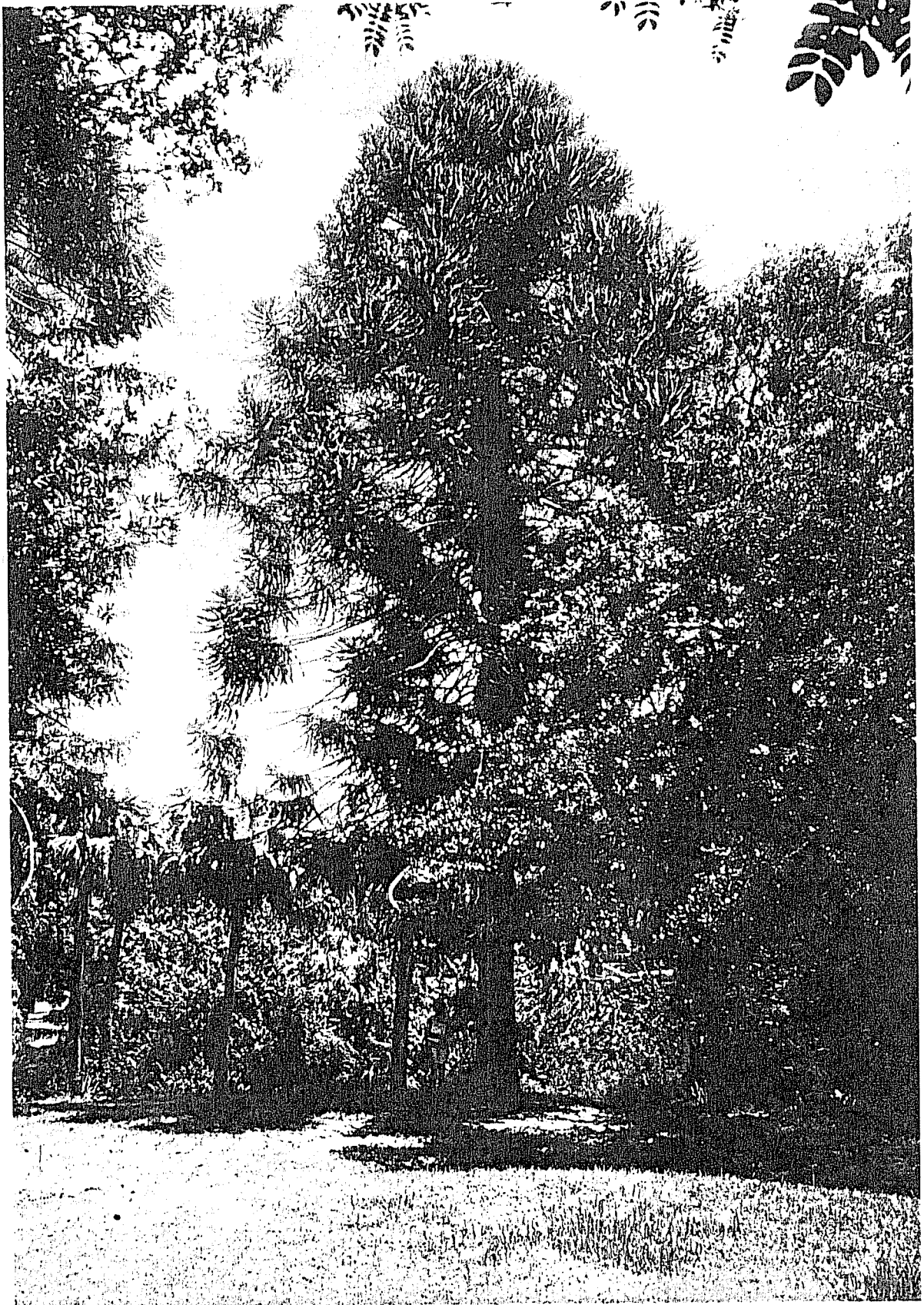


Fig. 12

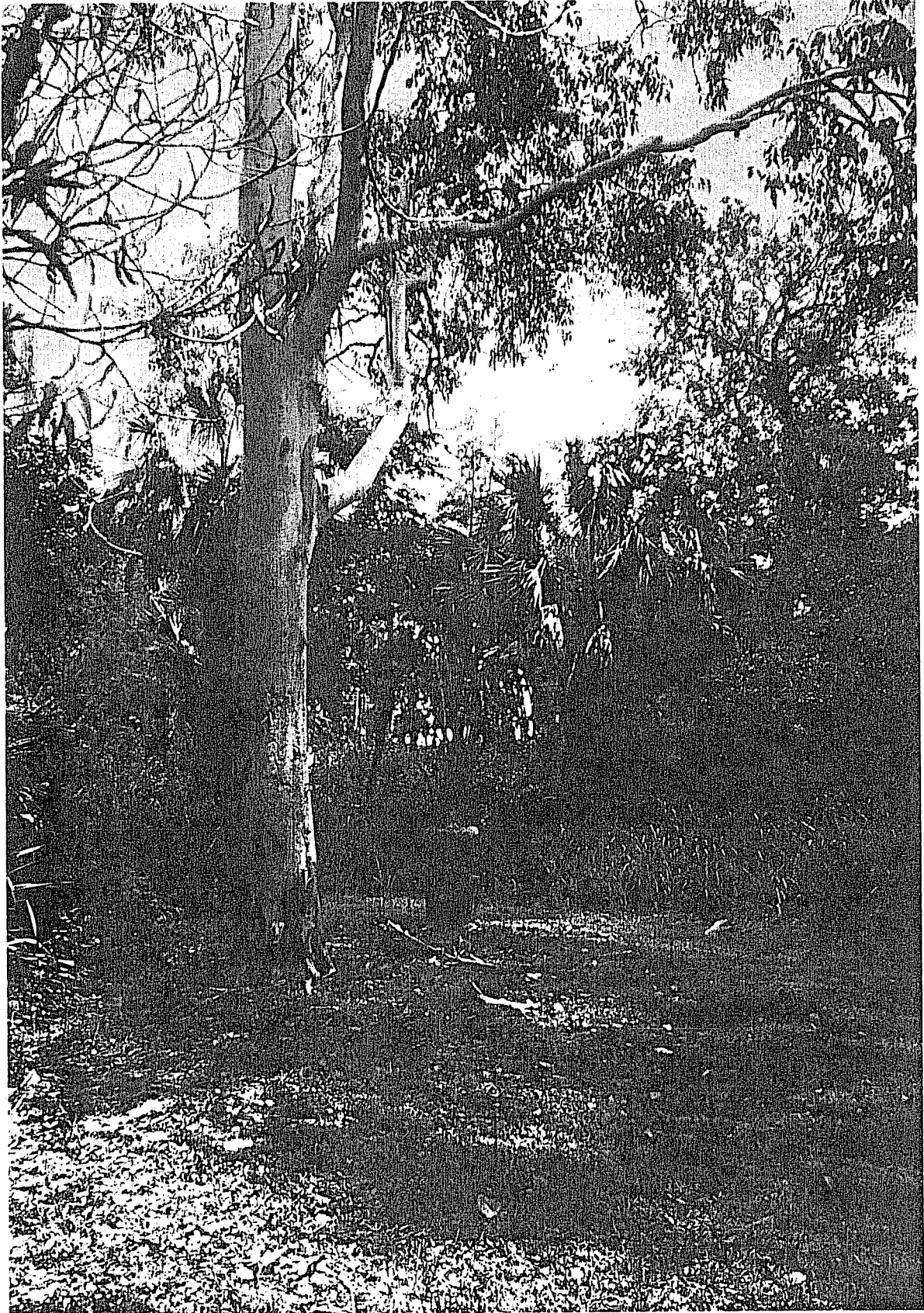


Fig.13

Also, inquiries should be made to all Koreshan related families to search private papers, diaries, sketches, photographs and descriptions to extend, amplify, and correct our impressions. It is important to study corroborating accounts from outside the Koreshan community.

**2. Undertake field analysis and study to determine original gardens.**

Current day observation can yield certain information. However, archeological methods can determine garden perimeters and layout more definitively. Ideally, a qualified team would study and map their findings which would then serve as a base for reconstruction plans.

**3. Develop a master plan for the restoration and re-creation of the Settlement.**

The restoration of a landscape involves a series of fundamental decisions (Phibbs 1983, 167-175) (Streatfield 1968, 198-204). Catherine Howett discusses the analogy of the landscape to a museum in her article "Second Thoughts." The Koreshan community could offer a "living museum," which illustrates the ideals of the community at one point in time, such as the period of the 1900's (1900-1908).

The Koreshan State Historic Site on U.S. 41 is the result of a 305 acre gift from the Koreshan Unity to the State of Florida. The Koreshan Unity Settlement includes areas outside the park and is listed as a district in the National Register of Historic Places. Clearly, the demarcation of the complete restoration site is imperative.

Obviously, this requires care and sensitivity to a myriad of issues. While all of the work may not be immediately funded, it is essential to work in organized phases toward the eventual implementation of the complete master plan.

The State of Florida has always figured in the imagination of the nation in tales of the settlement of land for profit. The Koreshan Unity represents the settlement of land for faith. The inspirational value of such a settlement, in conjunction with its educational value, reveals aspects of Florida which are currently little known. The Koreshan Unity settlement is a potentially powerful and effective demonstration of the beauty of the state, and can refocus the literary imagination on the ideal.

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