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## **Analysis of Field Test Results for Single-Axis Tracking Solar Collector Foundations**

**H.E. Auld**

**Higgins, Auld, & Associates**

Prepared by Sandia Laboratories, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87185  
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ANALYSIS OF FIELD TEST RESULTS FOR  
SINGLE-AXIS-TRACKING SOLAR COLLECTOR FOUNDATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Five reinforced concrete cylindrical piers, typical of foundations utilized for single-axis-tracking solar collector systems, were tested to determine eccentric horizontal and vertical failure loads. The results from these tests were found to compare favorably with the results from theoretical calculations which incorporate the geotechnical parameters of the test site. Recommendations are made for the incorporation of these results into the design of foundations for future solar collector systems.

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SECTION I  
INTRODUCTION

Single-axis-tracking solar collector systems are normally supported by rows of pedestals which rest on reinforced concrete cylindrical pier foundations (see figure 1). The Department of Energy's solar irrigation project in Estancia Valley, near Albuquerque, New Mexico is a typical example of such an installation in use today. The pier foundations for these systems are relatively expensive and they result in a significant percentage of the overall cost of the collector field. Therefore, Sandia Laboratories has funded studies to attempt to minimize foundation costs for future systems (refs. 1 and 2).

Reference 1 studied several alternate foundation concepts and concluded that the reinforced concrete cylindrical pier is the most economical design and should be utilized whenever site conditions permit their construction. This study also indicated that the aerodynamic wind loads which have been used may be somewhat over conservative and that the full strength of the insitu soil may not have been included in foundation designs. Therefore, a standardized design procedure for reinforced concrete cylindrical pier foundations was developed.

Reference 3 presents a standardized procedure for estimating the aerodynamic loads on a typical single-axis-tracking solar collector system. The loads obtained from this procedure are very similar to those previously reported in reference 1. In addition, reference 3 indicated that shielding effects from both the presence of multiple collector rows and perimeter fencing could result in significant wind load reductions.

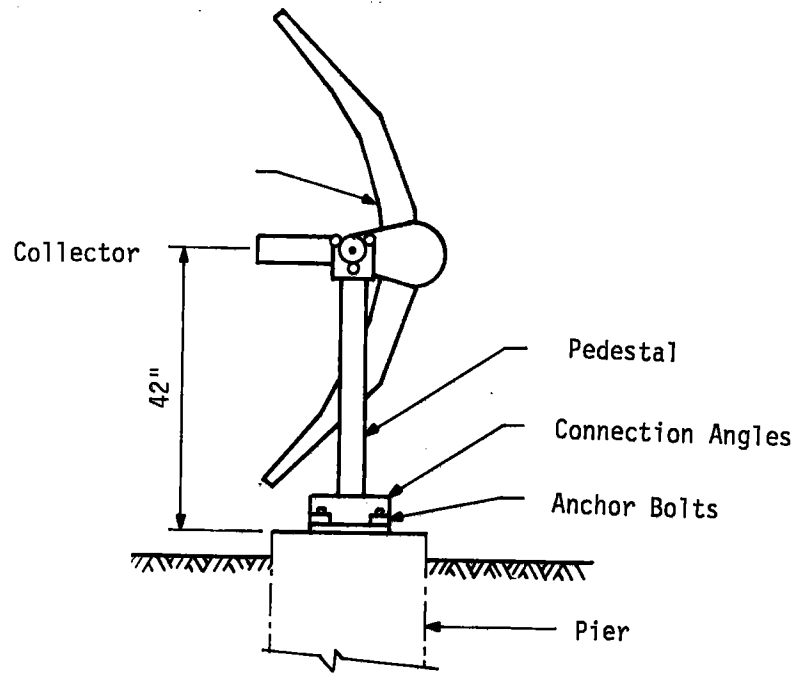


Figure 1. Typical Single-Axis-Tracking Solar Collector System Installation

Reference 2 studied the implications of reduced loading conditions on foundation designs.

Because these studies indicated that the size of foundations could be reduced for future systems, Sandia Laboratories undertook a foundation test program. The objectives of this program were to obtain field test results on the strength of typical foundation installations and to provide data for the evaluation of the analytical design procedures developed in reference 1, thereby providing increased confidence for the design of future systems. This report documents the results of the foundation test program conducted by Sandia Laboratories on May 15, 1979.



SECTION II  
SUMMARY OF TEST CONDITIONS

1. CONSTRUCTION DETAILS

The test site was located in Sandia Laboratories' Solar Collector Test Area, just south of F Street on Kirtland Air Force Base, New Mexico. Five reinforced concrete cylindrical pier foundations were constructed as shown in figure 2. The piers were numbered consecutively, from east to west. Table 1 provides data on the pier dimensions and number of anchor bolts. The piers were constructed in drilled uncased holes utilizing 3000 psi concrete, grade 40 reinforcing steel, and A307 steel anchor bolts. Figure 3 depicts a typical 12 inch diameter pier and figure 4 depicts a typical 18 inch diameter pier. Figure 5 illustrates the general configuration of the anchor bolt placement. The piers were constructed approximately 60 days prior to the test date.

TABLE 1. PIER CHARACTERISTICS

Pier Number*	1	2	3	4	5
Diameter, inch	12	18	18	12	12
Length, feet-inch	4-6	6-5	7-5	5-6	7-3
Number of Anchor Bolts**	2	4	4	1	2

\* See figure 2 for site plan

\*\* See figure 5 for anchor bolt placement

2. GEOTECHNICAL PARAMETERS

Two ten foot deep soil investigation holes were drilled in line with

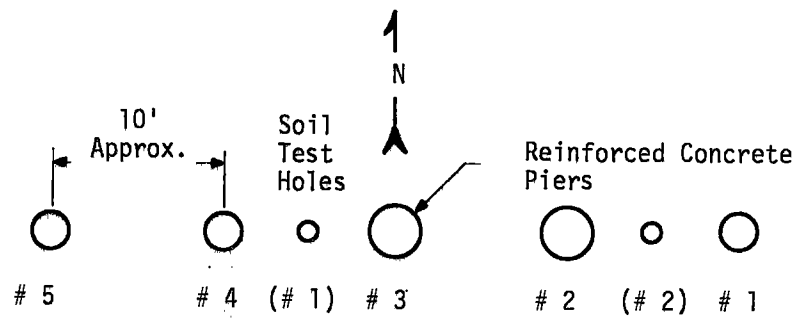


Figure 2. Site Plan of Test Area

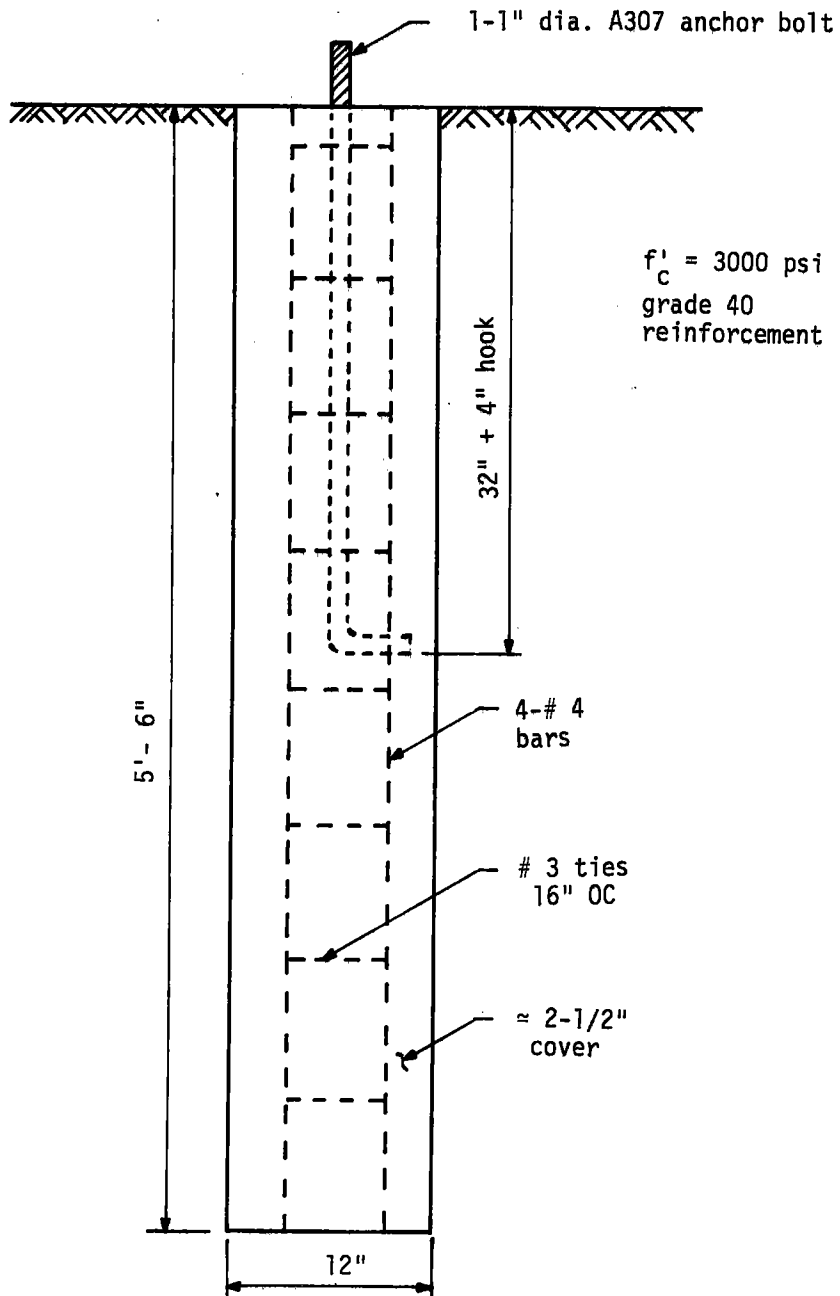


Figure 3. Typical 12" Diameter Pier (#4)

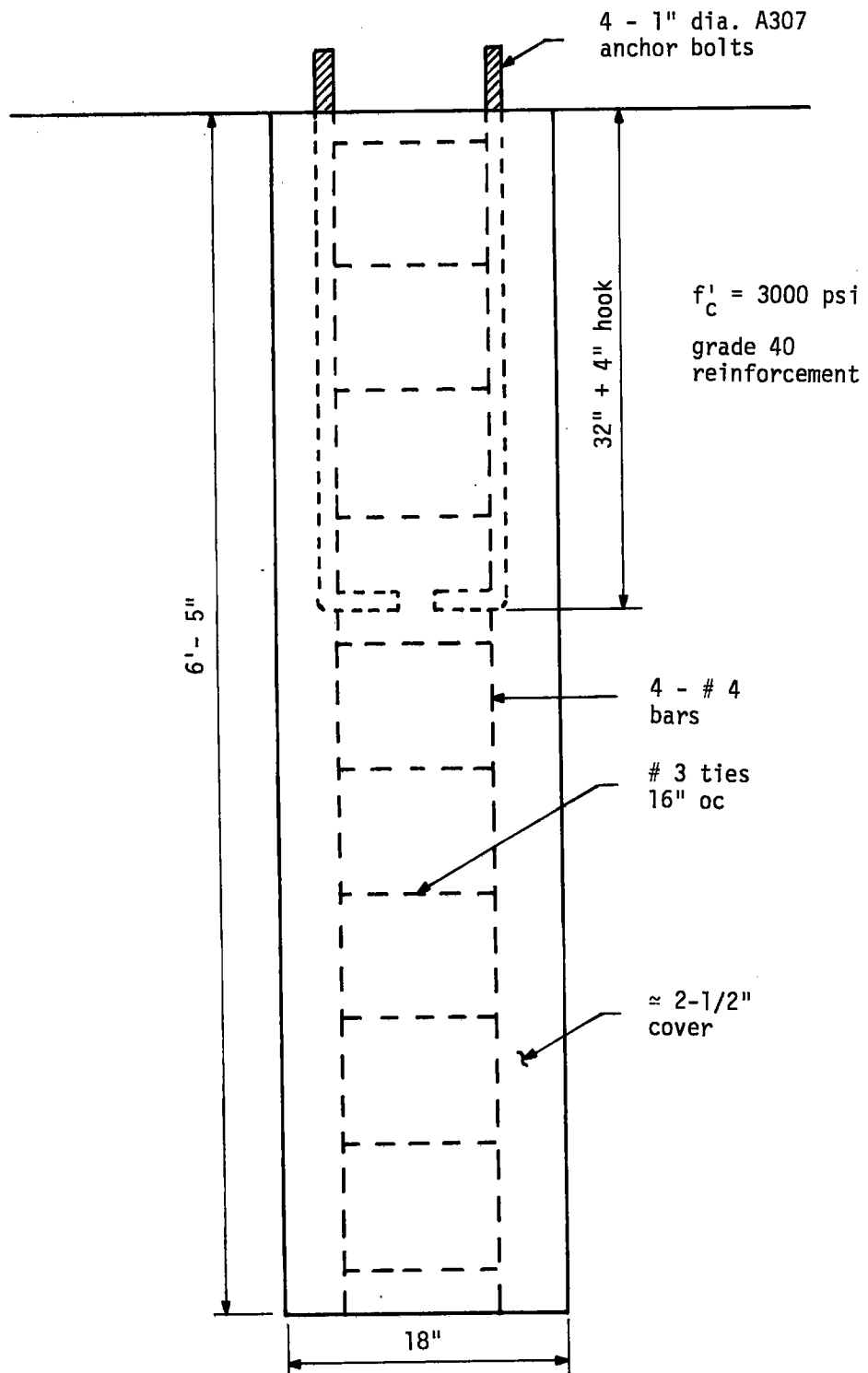


Figure 4. Typical 18" Diameter Pier (#2)

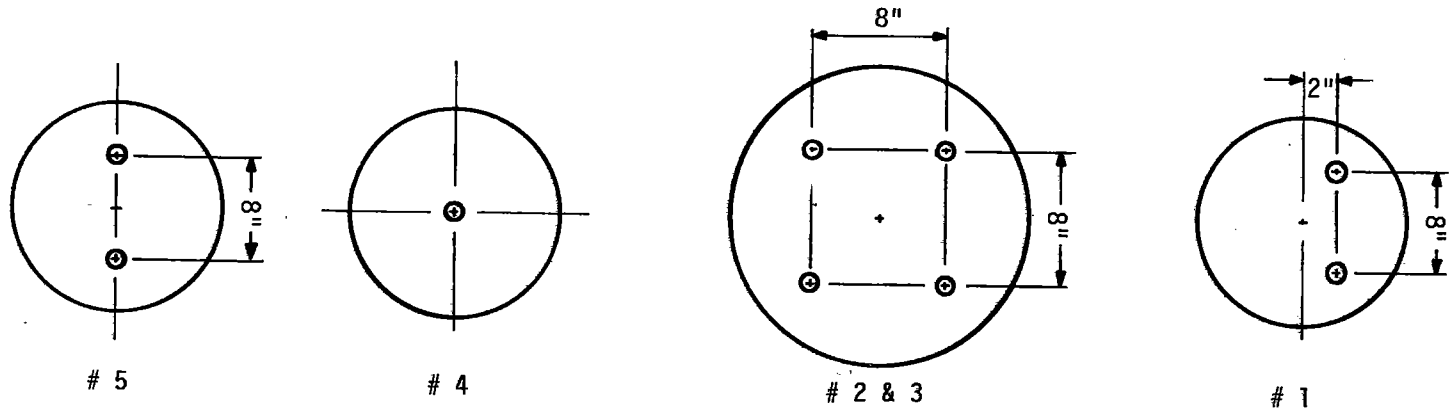


Figure 5. Anchor Bolt Placement

the test piers, as shown in figure 2. The logs from these borings are shown in figure 6. The material to a depth of seven feet can generally be described as a medium plastic, sandy clay with properties as given in table 2.

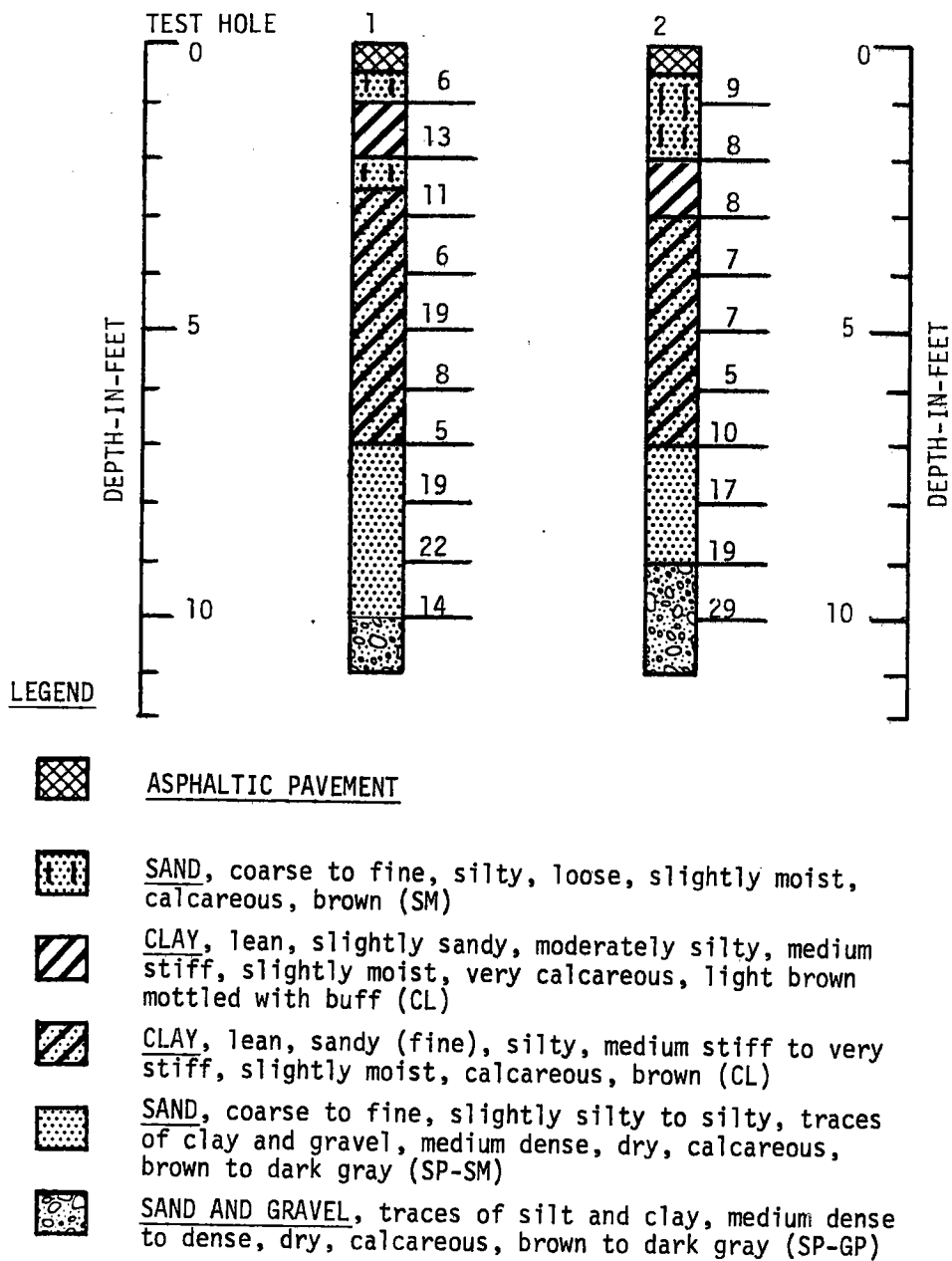
TABLE 2. SOIL PROPERTIES

Dry Density pcf	Moisture Content %	Atterberg Limits	
		LL	PI
103	14	35	16

The observed average standard penetration resistance of ten blows per foot, to a depth of seven feet, correlates with an angle of internal friction of approximately 30 degrees for a cohesionless soil or an unconfined compressive strength of approximately 1-1/4 tons per square foot for a cohesive soil (ref. 4). These correlations are in reasonable agreement with the results obtained from direct shear tests on undisturbed samples, which indicate an angle of internal friction of approximately 35 degrees and a cohesion value of approximately 1500 pounds per square foot (ref. 5). Based upon reference 1, this site would fall approximately midway between the classification of a poor site and a typical site.

### 3. TEST PROCEDURES

Two test frames were fabricated to permit the application of horizontal loads 42 inches above the base plate and vertical loads through the center of gravity of the anchor bolt pattern. The loads were applied with a hydraulic jack, utilizing a forklift as the reaction weight. Loads were measured with a load cell which had a maximum capacity of approximately 20,000 pounds. Displacements were measured utilizing a transit. Figure 7 is a photograph of one of the test frames being prepared for the application of a horizontal load.



NOTES

1. (6) indicates location of Penetration Resistance Tests and number of blows with a 140-pound hammer, falling 30 inches, required to drive the sampler 12 inches.

Figure 6. Soil Boring Logs

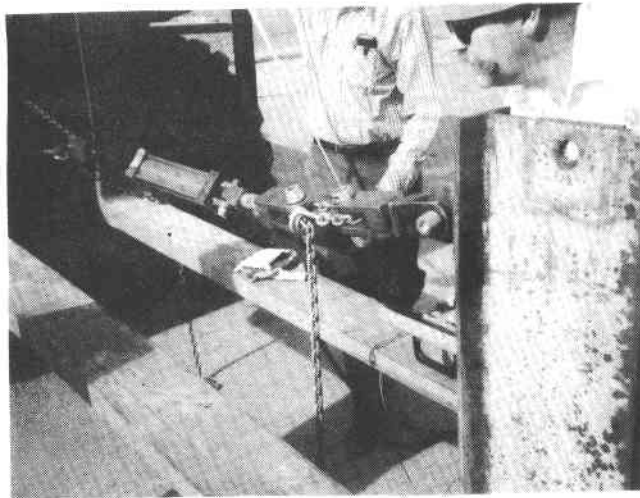


Figure 7. Preparing to Apply Horizontal Load to Heavy Duty Test Frame



A heavy duty test frame fabricated from a S 12 x 35 structural steel member was utilized to apply the loads to the 18 inch diameter piers (# 2 and 3). The standard pedestal, which is fabricated from 4 inch x 4 inch x 1/4 inch square structural tubing, was utilized to apply the loads to the 12 inch diameter piers (# 1, 4 and 5).

The number of anchor bolts provided was varied to permit the evaluation of various options for connecting the pedestal to the pier foundations. Piers # 2 and 3 each had four anchor bolts and are typical of current field installations. A one inch thick rectangular steel plate, welded to the bottom of the heavy duty test frame, was utilized to connect the test frame to the pier anchor bolts. Leveling nuts were installed under the plate and both washers and nuts were installed above the plate, as shown in the photograph in figure 8. Note that the asphalt pavement has been removed (approximately 3 foot x 3 foot square) to minimize its effect on the test results.

The remaining piers had less than four anchor bolts (either one or two). A 3/8 inch thick adaptor plate was utilized to connect the 4 inch x 4 inch x 3/8 inch angles, welded to the base of the pedestal, to the anchor bolts. The tops of these piers were grouted to provide a level surface. The adaptor plate was then fastened to the anchor bolts utilizing leveling nuts under the plate. Four each one inch diameter A307 bolts were then installed through the angles and the adaptor plate and positioned to provide equal bearing against the grout surface. These four bolts (outriggers) were utilized to provide additional bearing and thereby stiffen the connection. Figure 9 is a photograph of this connection installed on pier # 1. Note that the pier in this photograph has already failed under the application of both the horizontal and vertical loads.

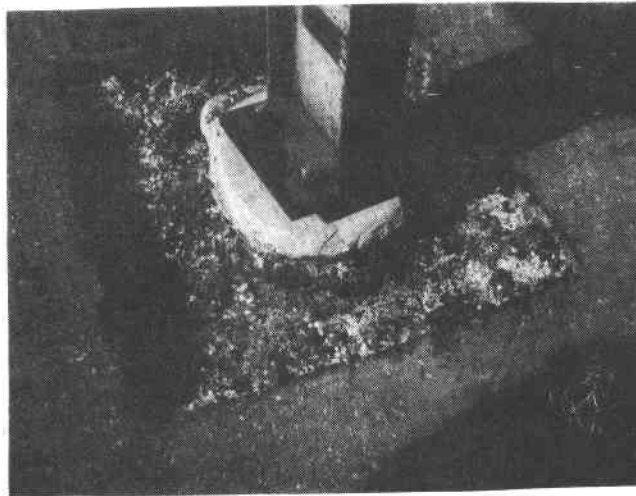


Figure 8. Heavy Duty Test Frame Installed on Pier # 2

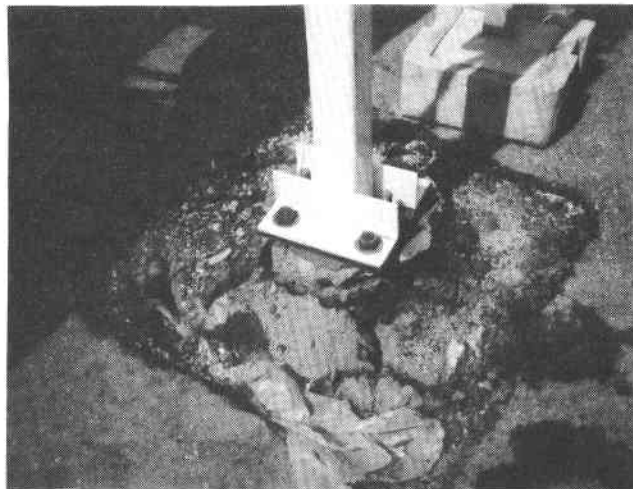


Figure 9. Standard Pedestal Test Frame Installed on Pier # 1

In each test, the horizontal load was applied first. The load was applied in uniform increments and the test frame was allowed to reach displacement equilibrium prior to applying the next increment of load. An unload-load cycle was applied when the load reached approximately 1/3 to 1/2 of the predicted failure load. When the apparent failure load was reached, deflections were measured for 30 second intervals to give an indication of time rate effects.

The vertical load was applied in a similar manner, after failure was achieved from the application of the horizontal load. However, hysteresis loops were not obtained during the vertical loading cycle. In some cases, the maximum vertical load was limited by the capacity of the load cell. After reaching either failure or the capacity of the load cell, the load cell was disconnected and the forklift was used to remove the pier from the ground. Because of space restrictions from nearby solar collectors, pier # 5 was not tested with vertical loads or removed from the ground.

### SECTION III

#### TEST RESULTS

Horizontal load-displacement curves were obtained for each pier/test frame unit. It was obvious from the test results that the standard pedestal test frame (4 inch x 4 inch x 1/4 inch square post with connection angles) was much more flexible than the rigid boundary conditions assumed for prediction calculations. Therefore, this test frame was loaded in the laboratory with conditions approximating those utilized in the field test. A horizontal load-displacement curve for the standard pedestal test frame is shown in figure 10. The frame remains elastic until a load of approximately six kips.

Figures 11 through 14 present the horizontal load-displacement curves for piers # 1, 2, 3 and 5. The curves for piers # 1 and 5 have been corrected to remove the displacements resulting from the standard pedestal test frame flexibility. The displacements remaining after these corrections have been made should result from pier rotation. The horizontal load-displacement curve for pier # 4 is not shown. Excessive horizontal displacements of the test frame were observed under small increments of load. Since the single anchor bolt was incapable of transmitting the applied load to the pier foundation, the horizontal load test was discontinued.

Figure 15 presents a summary of the vertical load-displacement curves. No vertical load test was conducted on pier # 5, as previously explained. The results for pier # 4 appear to contain an anomaly. Post-test inspection of the apparatus for this test revealed that there was a bearing failure in the area of the adaptor plate/washer.

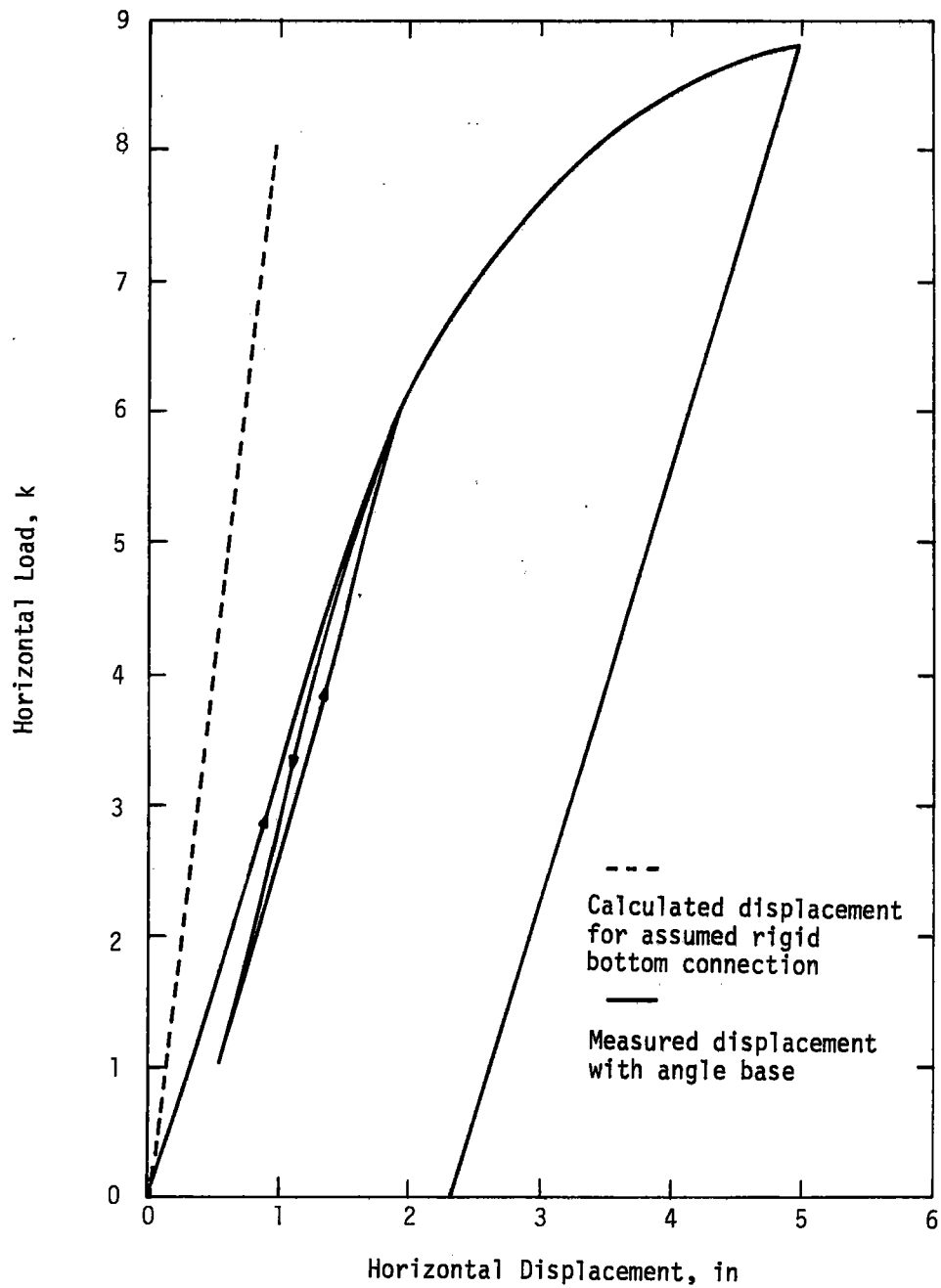


Figure 10. Horizontal Load-Displacement Curve, 4" x 4" x 1/4" Square Post

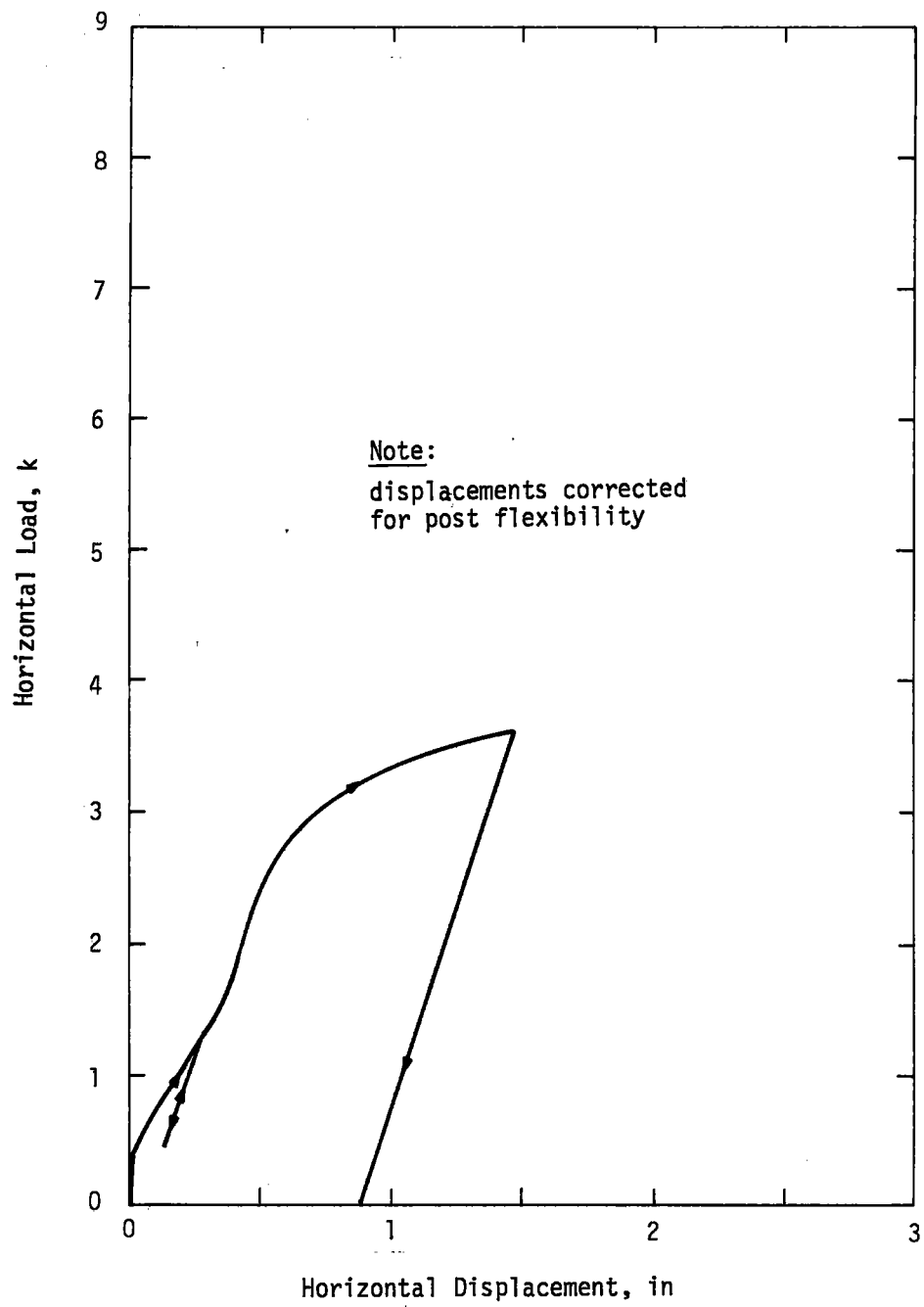


Figure 11. Horizontal Load-Displacement Curve, Pier # 1

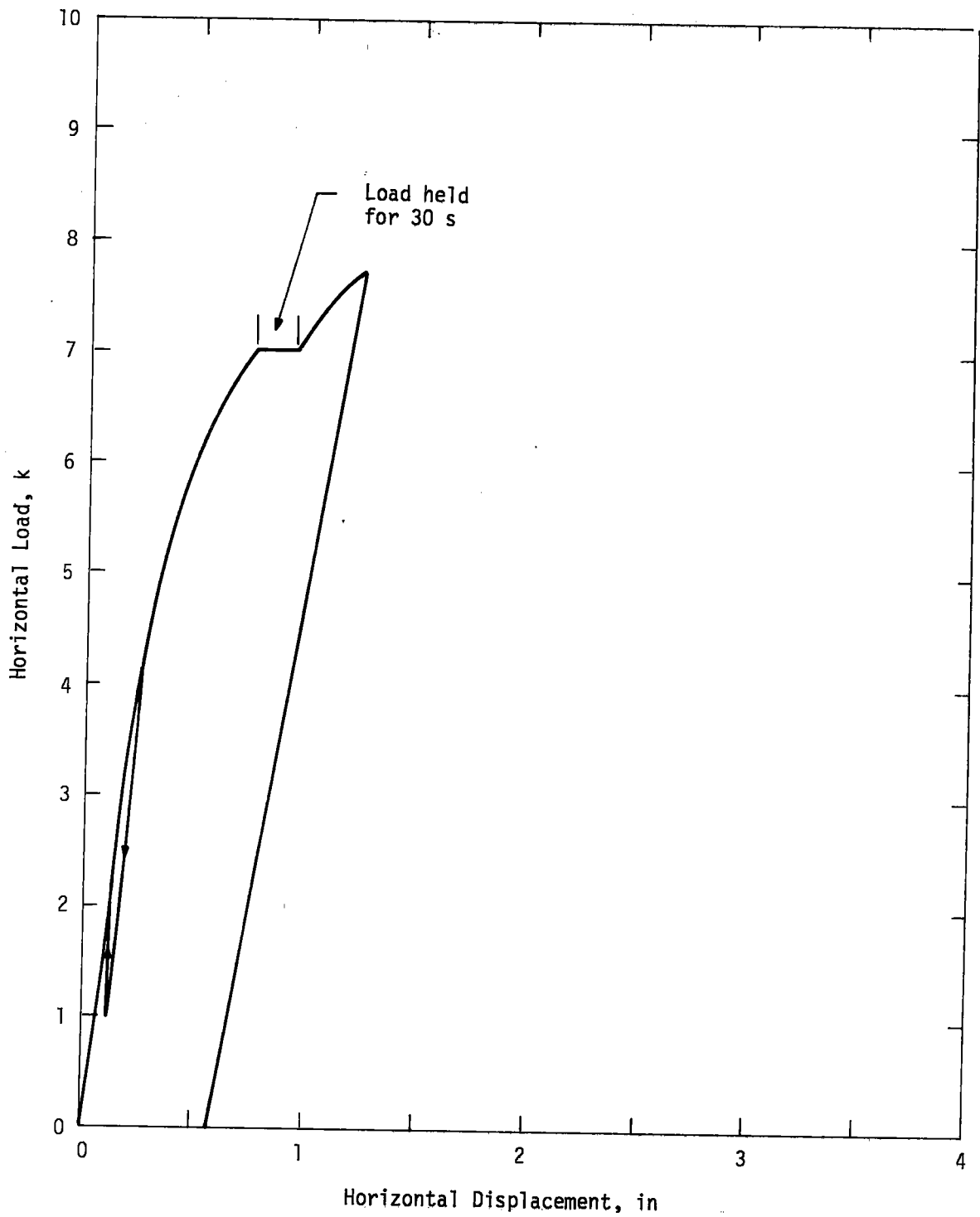


Figure 12. Horizontal Load-Displacement Curve, Pier # 2

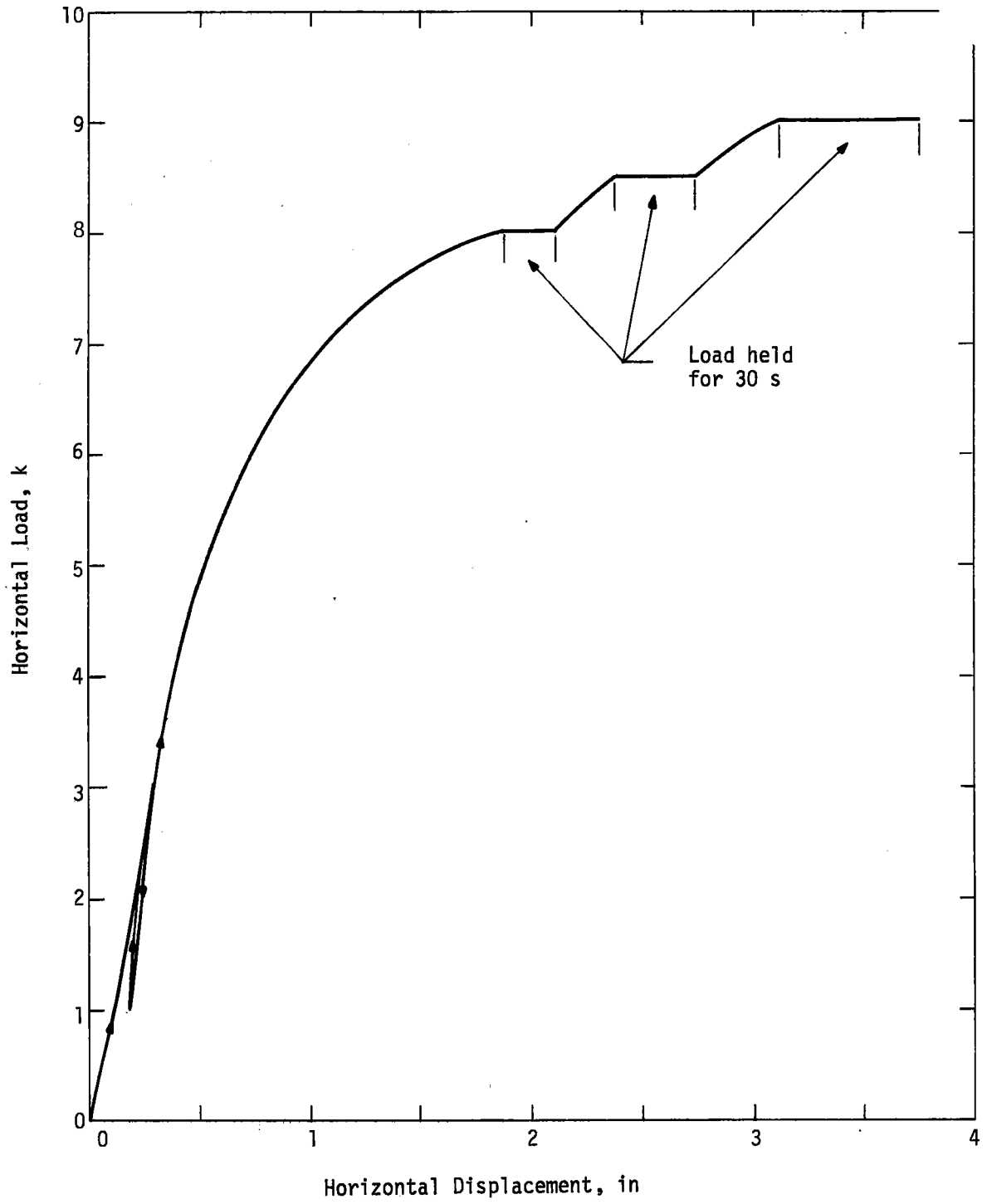


Figure 13. Horizontal Load-Displacement Curve, Pier # 3



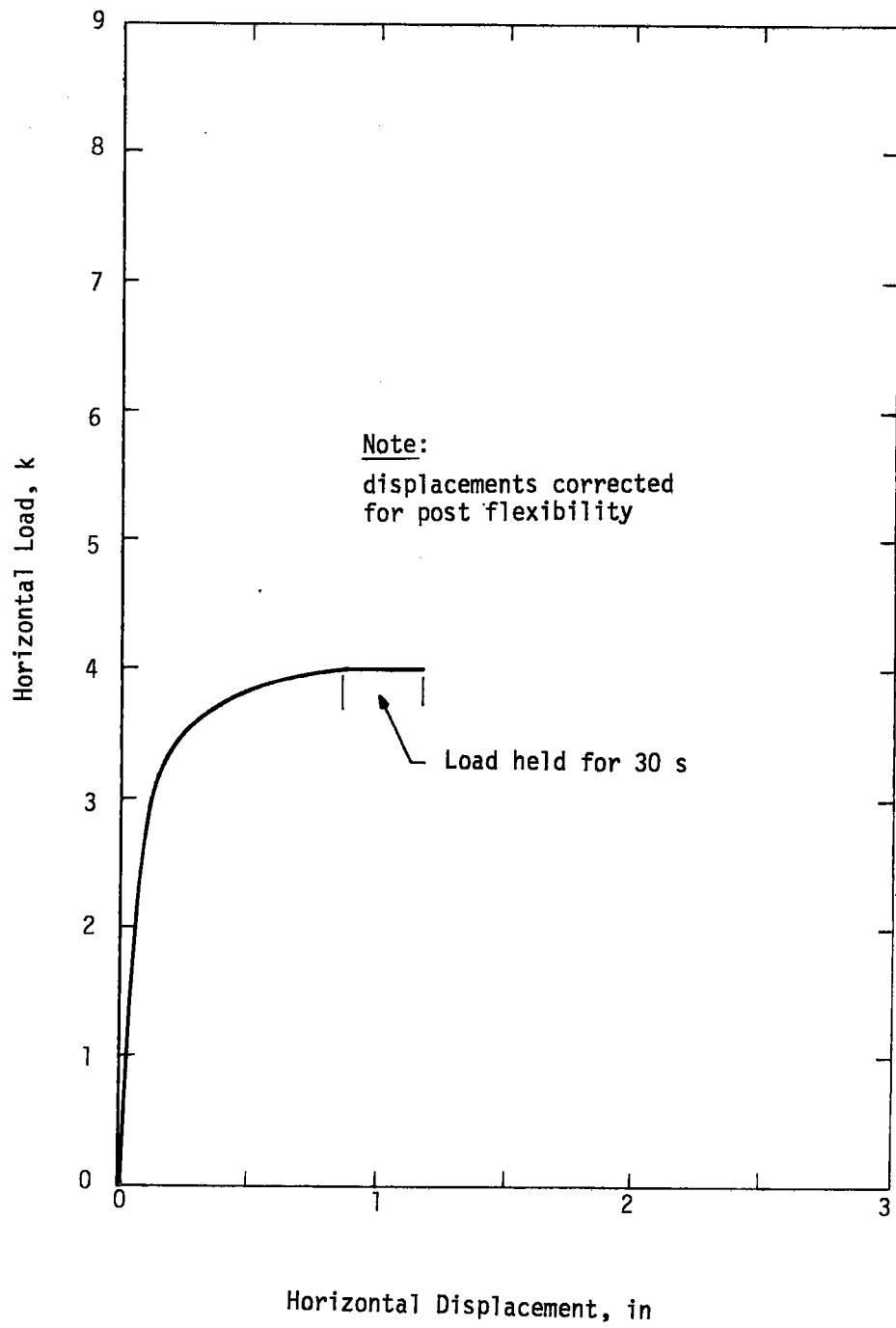


Figure 14. Horizontal Load-Displacement Curves, Pier # 5

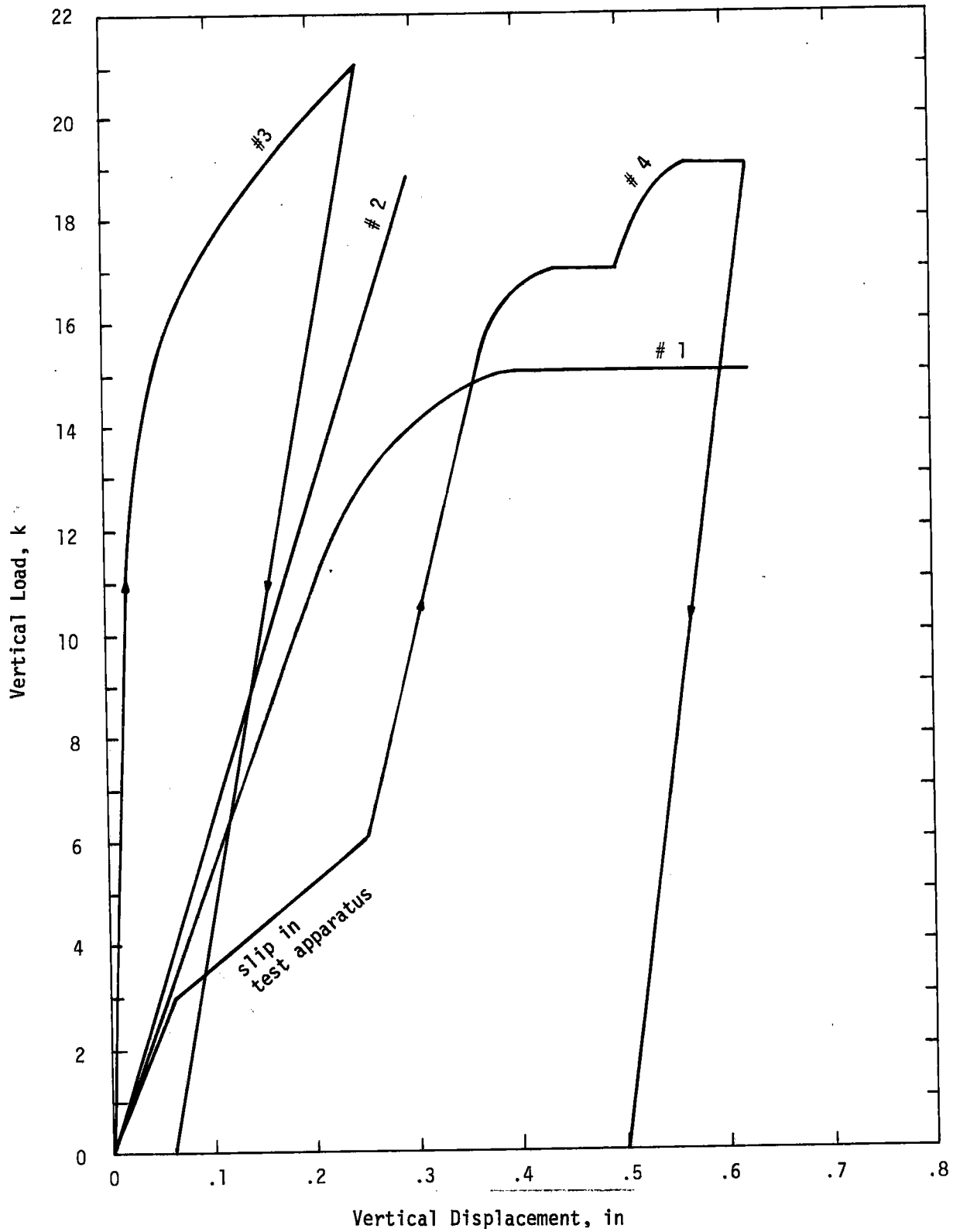


Figure 15. Summary of Vertical Load-Displacement Curves

For the purposes of this report, failure is defined as an obvious break in the load-displacement curve or the load corresponding to a displacement equal to ten percent of the pier diameter. The initial slope is calculated for one-half of the failure load or the maximum applied load, whichever is smaller. The test results are summarized in table 3.

TABLE 3. SUMMARY OF TEST RESULTS

Pier Number	1	2	3	4	5
Horizontal Failure Load, kips	2.5-3.5	7-8	7.25	N/A	4
Horizontal Initial Slope, kips/inch	5	16	10	N/A	35
Vertical Failure Load, kips	15	>19	>21	17-19	Not Tested
Vertical Initial Slope, kips/inch	54	64	263	50	Not Tested

Tension cracks were observed in the soil behind each pier after the applications of the horizontal failure load. Figure 8 shows a typical tension crack. A considerable amount of soil adhered to the surface of the concrete as the piers were removed from the ground, indicating a soil/soil failure rather than a soil/concrete failure. In addition, the entire near-surface block of soil in the square pavement cutout, as well as the surrounding asphalt pavement, were observed to move upward just prior to the onset of large vertical displacements. Figure 9 illustrates this situation just as a circular failure pattern developed in the soil around pier # 1.

Post-test inspections of the piers, which had been removed from the ground, revealed that the concrete had failed at a depth of approximately 32 inches on piers # 2 and 3 and at a depth of 20 inches on pier # 4. No failure crack was observed on pier # 1, but it was impossible to remove all the soil from the pier and a failure crack may have merely remained undetected.

SECTION IV  
ANAYLSIS OF RESULTS

The theory developed in Appendix B to reference 1 and the following assumed soil properties were utilized to compute failure loads and to estimate initial horizontal slopes:

Wet Density,  $\gamma = 118$  pcf

Angle of Internal Friction,  $\phi = 35$  degrees

Cohesion,  $C = 1/2 q_{unfc} = 1500$  psf

The theoretical horizontal failure loads ( $Q_{um}$ ) are compared with the test results in table 4. It should be noted that the capacity of the reinforced concrete pier governed the failure load in every case and that there is good agreement between these computed capacities and the test results. Considerably more reinforcement would have been required to achieve soil failures. However, the standard pedestal support begins to yield at a load of approximately six kips and the 18 inch diameter reinforced concrete piers have approximately the same capacity. The failure in the reinforced concrete piers was observed to have occurred at approximately the depth of the theoretical maximum moment. After failure of the concrete, additional deflections will occur as a result of rotations about the failure depth.

The theoretical initial horizontal slopes ( $E_i$ ) are compared with the test results in table 5. The slope of the hysteresis loops in figures 11, 12, and 13 are not significantly different from the initial slopes. For the load-unload cycles shown, the permanent set would have been on the order of 0.1 inch or less.

TABLE 4. COMPARISON OF THEORETICAL HORIZONTAL FAILURE LOADS ( $Q_{um}$ ) WITH TEST RESULTS

Pier Number	1	2	3	4	5
Cohesive Material, kip	4.6	11.4	16.3	7.6	13.7
Cohesionless Material, kip	2.5	9.0	12.5	4.0	7.7
Summation, kip	7.1	20.4	28.8	11.6	21.4
Test Result, kip	2.5-3.5	7-8	7.25	Not Tested	4
Reinforced Concrete Pier Capacity, Kip	3.6	6.7	6.7	3.6	3.6

Note:  $e = 42''$

TABLE 5. COMPARISON OF THEORETICAL INITIAL HORIZONTAL SLOPES WITH TEST RESULTS

Pier Number	1	2	3	4	5
Cohesive Material kip/inch	6	10.2	11.9	Not Tested	10.3
Cohesionless Material kip/inch	1.3	3.1	4.4	"	4.1
Summation kip/inch	7.3	13.3	16.3	"	14.4
Test Result kip/inch	5	16	10	"	35

Notes:  $e = 42''$

$E_j = 1/8$  for 1 Kip

The theoretical vertical failure loads ( $Q_{uv}$ ) are compared with the test results in table 6. There is reasonable agreement for piers # 1 and 4. The vertical load tests on piers # 2 and 3 were stopped far short of their theoretical capacity. Note that pier # 3 was loaded to nearly 50 percent of its theoretical vertical failure load and had a permanent set of less than 0.1 inch. Additional calculations were performed to determine the behavior of the reinforced concrete piers under vertical loads. The applied vertical loads were of insufficient magnitude to have caused a tensile failure of the concrete and the elastic deformations of the reinforcing steel were insignificant compared with the measured displacements.

TABLE 6. COMPARISON OF THEORETICAL VERTICAL FAILURE LOADS ( $Q_{uv}$ ) WITH TEST RESULTS

Pier Number	1	2	3	4	5
Cohesive Material, kip	10.6	23.0	26.5	13.0	17.1
Cohesionless Material, kip	5.0	15.8	21.0	7.5	13.1
Pier Weight, kip	0.5	1.7	2.0	0.6	0.9
Summation, kip	16.1	40.5	49.5	21.1	31.1
Test Result, kip	15	>19	>21	17-19	Not Tested

It was anticipated that the failure of the soil from the application of an initial horizontal load would result in a significant reduction of the vertical failure load. This was not the case in the observed test results since the reinforced concrete piers failed prior to the failure of the soil.

## SECTION V

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

It appears that all of the reinforced concrete piers in this test failed, rather than the soil, under the application of the eccentric horizontal loads. Therefore, it can only be concluded that the soil had a capacity equal to or larger than the capacity of the reinforced concrete piers. The tensile failure cracks in the concrete occurred at depths approximately equal to the location of the theoretical maximum moment.

The comparison between the theoretical and observed initial horizontal slopes to the load-displacement curves is rather good. The maximum eccentric horizontal load for a typical single-axis-tracking solar collector system is on the order of three kips or less (ref. 2). For maximum loads of this approximate magnitude, the horizontal load-displacement curves display essentially elastic behavior and only minimal permanent sets ( $\approx 0.1$  inch) should occur for soils with strengths equal to or greater than the test site.

The theoretical vertical failure loads compared well with the test results, for those piers which did not exceed the capacity of the test apparatus. This suggests that when a material has a cohesion intercept and an angle of internal friction, both parameters should be included in the calculations of failure loads. The minimum test value of 15 kips, for the 12 inch diameter pier, is much greater than the typical maximum vertical load of three kips or less (ref. 2).



The single anchor bolt connection did not perform satisfactorily under the application of horizontal loads and is not recommended for field use. Both the two bolt and four bolt patterns performed well. The typical support pedestal, consisting of a 4 inch x 4 inch x 1/4 inch square post and connection angles, is fairly flexible. A one inch deflection can be expected under the application of a three kip horizontal load with an eccentricity of 42 inches.

Reinforced concrete cylindrical piers are normally the best foundations to support typical single-axis-tracking solar collector systems. The pedestal, pier, soil combination should always be considered in the design process to achieve a balanced design. The theory of Appendix B to reference 1 can be utilized, with appropriate soil parameters, to predict the response of short rigid cylinders subjected to inclined eccentric loads.

With adequately reinforced concrete, the smallest pier in this test series would have carried the maximum expected wind load for a typical system with a factor of safety for the soil greater than three. For soil conditions similar to the test site, the eccentric horizontal failure load ( $Q_{um}$ ) governs the design and was calculated to be approximately one-half the vertical failure load ( $Q_{uv}$ ).

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