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Bent's Old Fort

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Bents Old Fort

La Junta Tribune Democrat

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BENTS OLD FORT

Bent's fort



A series by William Featherstone, superintendent

SPECIAL FEATURES NEAR THE FORT

Bent's Fort stood out boldly on the landscape. As English traveler Thomas J. Farnham noted in his book, the towers rose "over the uncultivated wastes of nature like an old baronial castle that has withstood the wars and desolations of centuries."

But the National Park Service's historical research over the last two years makes us fairly sure that other, smaller structures also existed at times around the main building. The archeological investigation, however, was not able to locate any evidence of these structures, and we accept this understandingly because the land on which they stood has been repeatedly worked in the intervening years.

Take, for instance, the ice house. Park Historian Dwight Stinson says that "the fact that ice was served at Bent's Fort was fairly well established, but the source of the luxury is not clear." When Susan Magoffin described the various rooms, she implied an interior ice house, but George Bent, who was only six years old when his father abandoned the Fort, recalled an ice house on a rise of ground on the river. He said (through Grinnell, the historian) that "about 200 yards west and south of the Fort and so toward the river bank, on a little mound, stood a large ice house built of adobes. In winter, this building was filled with ice, and in it during the summer was kept all of the surplus fresh meat."

Army Officer George R. Gibson stated in his journal that "they have a large dairy, and I saw some very fine calves near it." No other evidence points to an exterior structure for a dairy but we know milk cows were kept at the Fort.

Susan Magoffin said "they have a regular race track" and young William Boggs drew a sketch showing an oval race track due west of the Fort, and almost as long as that building. We can assume that there was a race track, for a considerable part of the activity at the Fort consisted of horse trading.

There was a grave yard near the Fort. Today we have a section roped off which was surely the place, but it may not encompass the whole area once covered by the grave yard. Lt. Abert recorded, "In the evening another volunteer died, and was buried. They were obliged to cover the graves with prickly pear or rocks to prevent the wolves from tearing the bodies out of the ground." Seventeen-year-old Lewis Garrard noted in his book, "Wah-To-Yah," that "the fort mud walls were abominably cheerless. Near were some men digging a grave." Today there is only one gravestone, and that dates from 1865, long after Bent left this area.

Archeologist Jackson Moore has also located about a dozen other places where flat adobe blocks indicate a burial.