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Bent's Old Fort

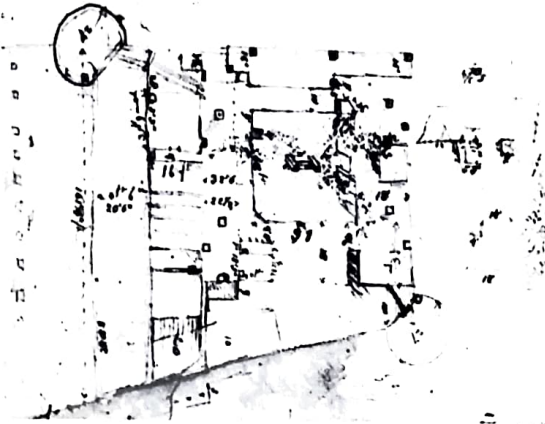
Colorado National Parks

The Rediscovery of Bent's Fort

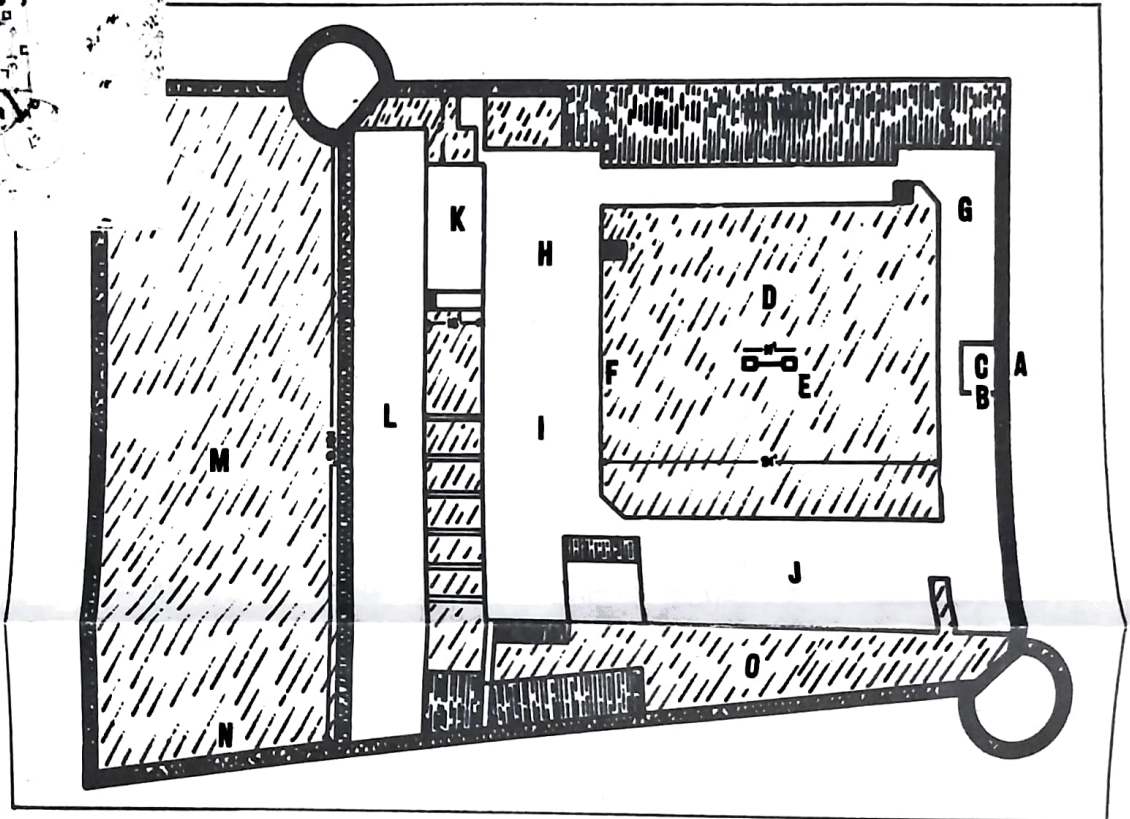
Denver Post Empire Magazine

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The rediscovery of



Above is a sketch of Bent's Fort by Lt. J. W. Abert. At right is a key to the sketch.



A Main entrance. **B** Sentry station with telescope. **C** Belfry with flagpole. **D** Courtyard. **E** Hide press. **F** Passageway through to corral. **G** Blacksmith shop. **H** Traders' room. **I** Bent's rooms. **J** Men's quarters. **K** Billiard room and bar. **L** Wagon house. **M** Cattle yard. **N** Gate facing river. **O** Corral.

By GENE LINDBERG

LIEUT. J. W. Abert hadn't been stricken with "the fever" while riding upriver from Kansas that hot summer of 1846, the mystery that swallowed up his meticulous measurements of Bent's Old Fort on the Arkansas might never have cropped up.

But again, if Abert's fever hadn't forced Gen. Stephen Watts Kearny to leave him behind, even a soldier-artist-topographer as devoted to duty as Abert, then 25, mightn't have had time to take measurements at all. He'd have pushed on with Kearny, southwest across the Rocky Mountains to Santa Fe at the outbreak of the Mexican-U.S. War. But he did take the measurements, recording them — oddly enough — along the margins and on the back of a watercolor portrait he'd made of a Cheyenne Indian chief.

Somehow that sketch became separated from Abert's official travel diary. Not till 1953 did Fred Rosenstock, Denver rare book collector and dealer in Americana, discover it among the Abert papers he'd bought from an Ohio dealer.

Bent's Fort was a large adobe structure built in 1833-34 by the fur trading firm of Bent, St. Vrain and Co. It stood some 10 miles northeast of the present city of La Junta, Colo., on the north bank of the Arkansas River.

Lieutenant Abert first visited

the post in the fall of 1845. Sketches he made then "gave us our most satisfactory published drawing of the post," according to Dr. LeRoy R. Hafen, former Colorado historian, now of Provo, Utah.

In late July of the next year Abert passed through the Bent gates again, this time flat on his back in an Army wagon, burning with fever. In his memoirs he recalls seeing the walls and towers swimming and swaying above him.

Abert's carefully kept travel diary goes blank from July 24 to Aug. 26, 1846. Then he was just able to note in a shaky hand, "Arrived Bent's Fort July 29." But by September he was making daily entries again in his customary vigorous script. On the

eighth day of that month he wrote:

"This morning with the assistance of Dr. Hempstead (Dr. E. L. Hempstead, the fort physician) I took the dimensions of Fort William or Bent's Fort as it is more commonly called. It required some time to complete all the measurements as the structure is quite complex; they may, however, be useful in giving one an idea of the forts that can be built in this country."

Next morning, according to the diary, Abert set out for Santa Fe, hoping to rejoin Kearny.

Abert had been assigned to the Army of the West, at Fort Leavenworth, to go with Kearny to New Mexico following the outbreak of the Mexican War in May 1846. Abert's duty was to observe, map and record what he

saw along the route, noting plants, animals and natives in explorer fashion. His record was published in 1848 as the *Report of Lieut. J. W. Abert, of his Examination of New Mexico, in the Years 1846-47*.

There was a wealth of nature sketches, Indian portraits, and details of Abert's convalescent activities at the fort, but the measurements mentioned in his diary were missing.

Dr. Hafen first noted the omission in 1925 and for 28 years sought the dimensions without success in the odd corners of western Americana. Meanwhile the original Abert diary and sketches came to light in the Cincinnati area, and Fred Rosenstock bought them from Ernest Wessen, of Mansfield, Ohio,

Bent's Fort



a dealer specializing in Americana.

In 1953, Hafen renewed his quest for the measurements after the La Junta chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution turned over the Bent's Fort site to the State Historical Society.

"With plans being considered for its ultimate reconstruction," Hafen wrote in the society's *Colorado Magazine*, July 1956, "the matter of the precise dimensions ... has become a pressing problem.

"Knowing that Mr. Fred Rosenstock of Denver, connoisseur of Western Americana, has the original Abert diary and a book of his drawings, I telephoned and asked if the diary contained a record of the measurements.

"He then thumbed through the book of drawings and noticed for the first time some unlabeled lines and figures on the back of a watercolor portrait of the Cheyenne Indian, 'Ah-Mah-Nah-Co, The Bear Above'. Abert gives a full account (in his diary) of making this painting at Bent's Fort.

"Close inspection of the lines and figures brought the welcome revelation that here was Abert's ground plan of Bent's Fort with its detailed measurements of walls, rooms, etc. Now at last we get the important information necessary for an accurate reconstruction. The walls as measured on Sept. 8, 1846 were 14 feet high; the bastions (towers) 18 feet. The front gate was 7 feet high and 6½ feet wide. The east wall measured 137 feet, the north wall, 178."

That portrait was the sitter's idea. It seems the Cheyenne chief talked Abert into doing it as a status symbol. The previous August, on his first visit to the fort, Abert had made similar portraits, including one of Cheyenne chieftain, Yellow Wolf. So The Bear Above demanded equal time, wanting his likeness, too, preserved for posterity.

Faintly sketched around the edges of the portrait is the room layout of the fort in tiny squares, some of them overlapping

Abert's title lines, giving the sitter's names in Cheyenne and English.

On the back of the sheet is the over-all ground plan of the entire fort and grounds, with all pertinent figures.

Why did the topographer choose that page from his sketch book for notations? Perhaps he considered the picture of little value and used it as scratch paper, wanting to save scarce supplies for the long trek ahead.

With Rosenstock's permission, the sketch was photographed by Orin Sealy, *Empire* photographer, at a time when there was hope the fort's reconstruction could be made a State Historical Society program. Rosenstock eventually sold the diary and sketches to another nationally known dealer and collector, John Howell of San Francisco. Howell in turn sold the material to John Galvin, a wealthy Irish collector, in whose possession they are now.

Meanwhile, the state of Colorado turned over the original Bent's Fort site to the U.S. National Parks Service. Plans for reconstruction again are under serious consideration, says Mrs. Virginia McConnell of the State Historical Society's research staff. With her cooperation, Jackson W. Moore of the Parks Service is writing a new book, *Bent's Old Fort* to be published in 1972 jointly by the Parks Service and the State Society. It is an archaeological study of the site based on excavations as well as contemporary reports.

Excavations, according to Mrs. McConnell, show evidence of fire, lending support to the tale that William Bent blew up the fort when he abandoned it in 1849, after the Mexican War. One report is, he asked \$16,000 for the post and when the U.S. Army offered him no more than \$12,000 he moved out and destroyed it, later building a second post which eventually became known as Fort Lyon. As Mrs. McConnell points out, he couldn't go away and leave it intact to be taken over by competitors in the fur trade.

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