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Bent's Old Fort

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### Bent's Fort Size Long Disputed

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# Bent's Fort Size Long Disputed

By LE ROY BOYD

## BENT'S OLD FORT (C-SJ) —

It is pretty well understood by now that Colorado air is intoxicating but it is not generally known that sometimes it can cause what the psychologists call visual hallucinations.

That such is true, however, is in a degree illustrated by the dissimilar description of Bent's Old Fort given by those who visited it when it was an outpost of civilization on the western plains.

Not until recently have fairly exact measurements been determined. These were obtained after Jackson Moore, archeologist for the National Park Service, and his crew excavated the ruins following the designation of the old fort as a National Historic Site. The crew dug deep and explored every inch of ground, and Moore is compiling his findings.

And the record of the measurements which is being included in the reports of William L. Featherstone, superintendent, are mostly different from those given earlier. The figures range from 122 feet to 180 feet for one side of the fort alone.

### Dimensions Listed

Dr. Nolie Mumey of Denver, physician, historian, poet and writer whose books of limited edition command premium prices, has listed some of the various dimensions in his book, "Bent's Old Fort and Bent's New Fort on the Arkansas River." He recites first the report of Thomas J. Farnham, who was at the fort in July 1839.

"The northern and southern sides," Farnham said, "are about 150 feet, and the eastern and western 100 feet in length. The walls are six of seven feet in thickness at the base, and 17 or 18 feet in height." Farnham said the towers were "about 10 feet in diameter and 30 feet in height."

Lt. J. W. Abert of the U.S. Army topographical engineers first saw the fort in 1845 when

he was with John C. Fremont, often called the Pathfinder. Abert returned in 1846 as one of Col. Stephen W. Kearny's command which was headed for Santa Fe in the Mexican War.

### Abert Left at Fort

Abert was sick with a high fever, saying that sometimes he wasn't sure that what he saw were delusions or fact, and he was left at the fort when Kearney moved on toward New Mexico. When he became better, Abert, who called himself soldier, archeologist, historian and naturalist, proceeded to measure the fort.

Abert also drew sketches of the structure and a floor plan. His sketch of the front of the fort is best known to readers of western history.

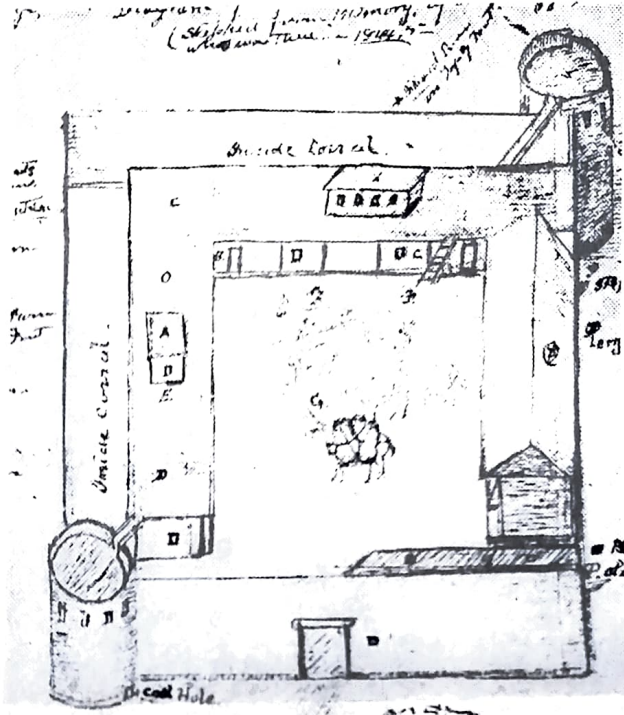
Abert claimed the towers were 18 feet high and 27 feet in diameter. "The complete area enclosed was trapezoidal in shape, the east wall being approximately 137 feet long, the north wall about 178 feet, and the west wall about 180 feet in length." Apparently Abert had no surveyor's instruments with him so he had to give approximate measurements.

### Hughes Gave Version

Another member of Kearney's expedition, John T. Hughes, said that same year of 1846 that "the exterior walls of this fort, whose figure is that of an oblong square, are 15 feet high and four feet thick. It is a 180 feet long, and 135 feet wide."

The following year Ceran St. Vrain, in a letter to Lt. Col. Aeneas Mackay dated July 21, 1847, described the fort as measuring 180 feet on each side, its walls are built of unburned or sun dried bricks and are 18 feet in height." St. Vrain was one of the members of the commercial firm that built the fort and surely should have known something about it.

One factor that probably has been overlooked is that the fort, being of adobe, was probably changed over the years, though



**DRAWN FROM MEMORY** — W. M. Boggs sketched Bent's Old Fort as he remembered it after spending the winter of 1844 there. Sketch was obtained from the State Historical Society of Colorado.

of course the linear measurements would have had to remain the same. W. M. Boggs, who spent the winter of 1844 there, later drew from memory a sketch in which the belfry over the gate was not shown. Boggs, by the way, said the fort was about 300 yards from the river; Abert said it was about 100 yards.

Featherstone, coordinating the reports of Moore, the archeologist, and Dwight E. Stinson, historian, gives the measurements as determined after the wall foundations were uncovered, and although some of his figures coincide fairly well with those given by the above mentioned men, others are quite different.

"As he approached the fort," Featherstone says, "the traveler saw the front of the building,

It was 122 feet wide, not including the tower, and had a doorway in the middle. At the left end was a round whose outside diameter was almost 20 feet."

It is interesting to note that while most writers said the two towers were round, one man said they were hexagonal.

"The fort was 179 feet from front to back," Featherstone says, "and at the rear, diagonally opposite from the one in front, was another tower about 27 feet in outside diameter."

The corral was behind the fort and stretched across its full width. Unfortunately this is one part of the ground plan the archeologist has been unable to measure since 20th century agricultural generations have removed all traces of the original walls.

According to Featherstone,

historical research has revealed that some changes were made in the facade of the fort in the 1840s, with the belfry being especially added. This addition was probably made after Boggs spent the winter here.

The large plaza inside the fort was about 85 by 60 feet. Around this plaza was a covered walkway from which one might enter one of the many rooms which surrounded the plaza.

### Rooms Varied

"Hardly any two rooms were of the same size," Featherstone says. "The smallest measured 7 feet, 3 inches by 20 feet, 4 inches and was one of a pair of adjoining rooms used by William Bent. The largest was 20 feet, 4 inches by 28 feet, 2 inches and was used as a dining room."

Several living quarters were located on the second story along the west side and at the southeast corner. "Also on the second story was, of all things, a billiard room! This was 2 feet long and 14 feet wide and the historian Grinnell, elaborating on what George Bent, William's son, told him, says that 'across one end of the room ran a counter or bar over which drinkables were served.'"

### Site Near Highway

Anyone interested in seeing just how big Bent's Old Fort was may visit the site, located on Colorado 194 between Las Animas and La Junta. The site is marked by a large gate erected by the Daughters of the American Revolution. On Saturdays and Sundays a ranger is on duty to be of assistance to visitors.

And those who make the trip to see the old historical site will note that the lines of the fort are about eight degrees off from the world's meridian. And by sighting along the northwest wall they find that the wall was not built in a straight line.

Colorado air is intoxicating, and that may explain it.