

Fort Davy Crockett?: An Archaeological Mystery Browns Park National Wildlife Refuge – Northwest Colorado

Summarized from: A Report on the Results of Limited Subsurface Testing at 5MF5478, a Proposed Site of Historic Fort Davy Crockett, Moffat County, Colorado

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Introduction

The follow excerpts are from a 2004 report documenting archaeological testing at the possible location of Fort Davy Crockett on the Brown's Park National Wildlife Refuge. Many studies and much research has been conducted over the years to try and determine if the remains found on a bluff overlooking the Green River on the Browns Park National Wildlife Refuge are indeed those of the Fort. This research adds additional insight into the mystery.

Fort Davy Crockett

In 1837 three fur trappers, Prewett Sinclair, Philip Thompson, and William Criag, formed a partnership and reportedly built Fort Davy Crockett that same year. The Fort was named after the famous Tennessee frontiersman who died at the Battle of the Alamo in Texas the previous year. Kit Carson, another famous frontiersman, trapper and scout is reported to have been employed by the owners of Fort Davy Crockett. In 1839 members of the Peoria Party on their way to Oregon reported staying at the Fort. A description of the Fort was provided in the recordings of Thomas Jefferson Farnham, leader of the Peoria Party. He described the Fort thus:

The fort, as it is called, peered up in the centre, upon the winding banks of the Sheetskadee. The dark mountains rose around it sublimely and the green fields swept away into the deep precipitous gorges more beautiful than I can describe. ...We rode into the hollow square and received St. Claire (Prewett Sinclair), the person in charge, the hearty welcome of an old hunter to "Fort Davy Crockett" (Farnham 1843)

The fort is reported to have been active until about 1840 when disagreements between the partners resulted in disbanding the fort. All three partnership left the area soon after. In 1839, F.A. Wislizenus, returning to St. Louis from the Oregon country, painted a bleak picture of the fort even referring to it as Fort Misery - a term applied to the fort by trappers in the area. After 1839 the area remained vital to the independent fur-trading industry for a few years following the dissolution of the American Fur Trading industry's Rocky Mountain rendezvous system. However, when John Charles Fremont, a famous explorer, entered Browns Park in 1844, the fort was abandoned and in ruins. Fremont had this to say about the fort:

According to information, the lower end of the valley is the most eastern part of the Colorado; and the latitude of our encampment, which was opposite the remains of an old fort on the left bank of the river [the ruins of Fort Davy Crockett], was 40°46'47", but by observation, the elevation above the sea 5,150 feet. The bearing to the entrance of the canyon below was south 20 east. Here the river enters between lofty precipices of red rock, the country below is said to assume a very rugged character; the river and its affluents passing through canons which forbid all access to the water (Jackson and Spence 1970).

Background Research

Site 5MF605 is locally accepted as the original location of Fort Davy Crockett. It was discovered by Glade Ross, a National Park Service Ranger stationed at the Gates of Lodore within Dinosaur National Monument. Mr. Ross noticed the site eroding from the bank of the Green River and on lands administered by the Browns Park National Wildlife Refuge. The site was first officially recorded by Bauxar, Blee, and Loendorf in 1976 as part of the National Park Service Historic Preservation Division and was subjected to very limited testing (Bauxar and Bee 1976; Bauxar et al. 1976). It was the recommendation of these archaeologists that this was the location of Fort Davy Crockett based on surface artifacts that were compatible with the fur trading era, and limited subsurface testing. The archaeologists recognized that the artifacts were compatible with the fur-trading era.

In 1976, a National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) nomination form was completed on the site, which was named the *White-Indian Contact Site, Browns Park*. The site was then placed on the NRHP on March 8, 1977. The nomination form was written by Frank B. Sarles, Regional Historian, Rocky Mountain Region of the National Park Service. In this form, Sarles acknowledged that the site "...on the basis of preliminary archaeological investigation, to be a white-Indian contact site connected with fur trade activities in Browns Hole. It is the archaeologist's professional judgment, based on surface artifacts, that his site may very well be the site of Fort Davy Crockett..." (National Register Nomination Form, 1976). It was then noted by Sarles that positive identification would need to be established through detailed archaeological excavation. Regardless of this statement, the perpetuation that this is the location of Fort Davy Crockett remains.

Subsequent to the NRHP listing, the site was subjected to test excavations conducted in June of 1980 by Science Applications Inc. (Eddy 1982). The purpose of this testing was to mitigate the impact of the Green River that was encroaching into the site. A 24.38 meter by 2.74 meter strip adjacent to the river bank was excavated in an effort to stabilize this portion of the site. In addition, three backhoe trenches were excavated away from the bank to determine the limits of

the site. Evident in these excavations were three cultural layers between 3 - 12 centimeters below the surface. The cultural stratum was covered by alluvial sands and a recent soil. Artifacts and features were discovered during these excavations. Artifacts recovered were representative of the fur-trading era and included gun flints, beads, glass, and a significant amount of faunal remains including those of dog and bison. Architecturally related artifacts included window glass, nails, and adobe chinking. The archaeologists concluded that some type of structure must have been present in the area based on the presence of the artifacts, but they did not discover a structure during this testing phase. They further concluded that although the artifacts were definitely associated with the fur-trading activities in Browns Park, they could not positively conclude that this was the location of Fort Davy Crockett.

The site was then revisited and rerecorded by K. Moeller and B. Verhaanen of Argonne National Laboratory in June of 1992 for the Green River archaeological impact study (Moeller et al. 1993).

The most recent previous investigation of the site was by Alpine Archaeological Consultants, Inc. of Montrose, Colorado. Site 5MF605 was one of six sites tested for the Flaming Gorge Dam Flow Study and conducted for the Bureau of Reclamation (Pfertsch 2003). The site was rerecorded and tested. Forty-nine auger tests and two 1 meter by 1 meter test units were placed within the site. The purpose was to assess the amount of damage that has occurred to the site since the 1976 excavations, and to better determine the site limits. The results of this reevaluation were:

- 1) The site was receiving significant impact from the migration of the Green River to the rate of 18 centimeters per year.
- 2) Confirmation of the subsurface cultural stratum identified by Eddy (1982).
- 3) The site was definitely associated with the Browns Park fur-trading era, but not necessarily the location of the fort. They recommended, as one potential mitigative measure, a ground- penetrating radar survey of the site area.

2004 Project

The purpose of the project was to determine the probability that site 5MF605 was once the location of historic Fort Davy Crockett, an early 19th century fur-trading post and associated encampment. A geophysical survey of the land was conducted in May 2004, and results demonstrated the presence of geophysical anomalies and possible cultural features beneath the surface at the site. It was recommended that subsurface testing be conducted to determine the source of the geophysical anomalies and to determine the function of the large cultural feature apparent both from the surface and in the geophysical data.

Physiography and Geology

The south portion of Browns Park, where the site is located, is formed partially by the Green River which has snaked its way through the Miocene Browns Park Formation. This formation consists of sandstone, conglomerate, tuffaceous sandstone and siltstone. The formation is visible north of the site. North and south of the site area is the Precambrian basement complex of the Uinta Mountain Group and the Red Creek Quartzite. The Uinta Mountain Complex

contains sandstone, siltstone, and conglomerate. As the name implies, the Red Creek Quartzite is comprised mostly of quartzite, with additions of amphibolite and schist. The axis of the Iles Dome is directly to the north of the site in Browns Park (Miller 1975).

The site itself sits on a Quaternary deposit of alluvium containing gravels and cobbles reflecting a variety of origins as these were carried to their present location from the ancestral Green River and other alluvial systems that flowed north and south into the park. Blackwelder (1950) identifies four terrace sequences along the Green River and within Browns Park. These include, in ascending order, Warren Bottom, Goodman Gulch, Browns Park, and Red Creek. He suggests that terraces less than 24 meters above the current floodplain are Holocene in age. Those 40 meters above the floodplain are Pleistocene and all higher terraces are possibly related to the Bull Lake glaciation or older. These sequences and age correlates have not however been substantiated thorough field work. It was difficult to acquire information on the soils of the site, but from observation; there appears to be one shallow surface soil that is a silty loam. It is high in gravel content due to the terrace gravels below the soil. The soil is a combination of eolian and residual sediments.

The Yampa and Green Rivers converge south of Browns Park at Echo Park within the Dinosaur National Monument. The Canyon of the Yampa River cuts through Weber Sandstone as it winds its way to the confluence with the Green River. A fault near Echo Park adds a thousand feet to the depth of this already deep canyon (Chronic 1980). At the south end of Browns Park and not far from the site, the Green River cuts through the Precambrian rocks of the Canyon of Lodore.

Two other important drainages in Browns Park are the Little Snake River and Vermillion Creek. The Little Snake converges with the Yampa River and Vermillion Creek flow into the Green River as it turns south into the Canyon of Lodore.

Climate

The position of Browns Park is within the high altitude desert or cold steppe province that covers much of northwest Colorado, southwest Wyoming and northeast Utah. The climate of Browns Park is relatively mild but dry. The average annual precipitation is 4.7 centimeters (1.85 inches). The mean maximum temperature is 0° Centigrade (32° Fahrenheit) in January and 29° Centigrade (84° Fahrenheit) in July (Eddy 1982).

Fauna and Flora

Flora and fauna of this province reflect a great diversity of species; those related to the riparian environments and those to the uplands. Flora is a mix of riparian species (greasewood, cottonwood, willow, and big rabbitbrush) along the rivers and streams, low shrub species (sagebrush, shadscale, prickly pear, and little rabbitbrush) over most of the park, and upland species such as various grasses and flowering plants and Utah juniper. Historically the fauna of the area was quite plentiful. Many of these were of interest to the fur-trading industry, not only as economic resources to the industry but as staples for survival. Some of the mammals that were noted during the early trapping days are no longer prominent today. Species noted to have been or still are present within the park include bison, mountain sheep, wapiti, mule deer, pronghorn, various rabbits (cottontails and jackrabbits), bears (grizzly and black), gray wolves

and foxes, coyotes, mountain lions, bobcats, numerous rodents, and a variety of water mammals such as muskrat, beaver, and otter (Walker 1982). Along the river migratory and non-migratory waterfowl frequent the marshy areas, and the status of wildlife refuge provides sanctuary to these and many other animals.

Methods

In August 2004, seven 1 meter by 1 meter test units and one test trench, 0.5 meter x 1.5 meters, were excavated at the site. Test unit placement was selected to investigate the nature of the two magnetic anomalies that were identified in May 2004 as well to better define the construction technique and perhaps function of the square historic feature. Units were laid out to magnetic north and corner locations were shot in with the Total Station. Vertical control consisted of excavating in arbitrary 10 centimeter levels and within identified stratigraphic layers (natural or cultural). Units were excavated parallel to the ground surface, and this was a general rule followed throughout the project.

Individual test unit excavations were terminated with the identification of culturally sterile strata. Feature excavations were terminated when sufficient data had been collected to determine its nature and its function. Recovered artifacts and samples from the surface and subsurface were transported to the Department of Anthropology at FLC for additional laboratory analysis and cataloging. The test units were backfilled at the end of archeological testing.

Conclusions

The subsurface testing at the site did not support the interpretation that this was the location of Fort Davy Crockett, a fur-trading post in operation in the 1830s in Browns Park. The newly discovered remains were assigned a new site number: 5MF5478. From all accounts of the fort, it would be expected that large amounts of durable artifacts such as glass, nails, wagon parts, bone, etc. would be left in the archaeological deposits. Structural materials like adobe chinking, chimney rocks and hearth remains would also be present. If there was metal present at the site, it would have been detected by the gradiometer. That no historic artifacts were observed on the surface and no metal was present in the subsurface is support against this site being Fort Davy Crockett. However, it is hard to image other more recent activities that involved a foundation, such as the one present at the site that would not have resulted in historic debris as well.

Certainly activities involved with agriculture and livestock rearing would have produced at least some metal artifacts such as wire, staples, and nails and it is doubtful that this trench would have been used for livestock. Early frontiersmen knew there was money to be made by raising stock in "Little Browns Hole" (Ghiglieri 2003). Sheep ranching was important to the economy of the area beginning in the late 1860s, and the mountain states boasted 43 percent of sheep and lambs in the country by 1920 (Paul 1976). Although sheep were most likely present in this location, their passing would not likely leave such a mark on the terrain unless it was an established base of operation (Paul 1976), which is not evidenced. Cattlemen entered this area in the 1880s (Paul 1976); however, the size of the hollow square would not seem sufficient for containing cattle even on a temporary basis.

Other explanations for the shallow square-shaped trench feature at 5MF5478 are offered.

Mr. Marvin Moore suggests that the trench represents the remains of a military redoubt constructed by Lt. John Fremont for his crossing of the Green River in 1844. According to Mr. Moore's research, the orientation and size of the ditch correlate with Army regulations for the construction of a redoubt. Mr. Moore believes Lt. Fremont and his men constructed the redoubt for protection during their crossing of the Green River. Lt. Fremont does not indicate in his journal that a redoubt was constructed in Browns Hole; however, his party did cross the Green River before coming upon the remains of Fort Davy Crockett (Jackson 1970). With the lack of more evidence this explanation is inconclusive.

Data was collected on three additional 20 meter by 20 meter geophysical grids to the east of the previous grids. Only gradiometer data was obtained from these grids. It was felt that by extending the grids to the east, additional anomalies might appear that would aid in the explanation as to how the trench might have been used. Due to human error the results were not as good as they could have been. Nonetheless, the data was good enough to conclude that there was no change in the consistency of the data collected from the previous survey. Data from the previous survey (Charles 2004) identified several subtle linear anomalies that might be related to the square feature; it is difficult to tell since they are so faint. One line comes into the feature at the northwest corner and may continue through the feature, but this is problematic because of the noise from the road. Two other linear anomalies enter at the southeast corner of the survey grid and trend generally northwest, but split on either side of the square feature. These look to be possible paths.

A last attempt was made to determine the possible age range for the trench feature. If we could establish a time frame for the feature, then this would at least narrow the possibilities. Historic aerial photographs were ordered for the site area. Two sets of photographs were received; one from 1938 and one from 1954. Both images were of good quality, but neither clearly showed the remains of the trench feature. We are not suggesting that the trench feature was not present when these photographs were taken, but that the scale and resolution are not sufficient to distinguish the feature's presence. It is not possible for us to take either way whether the feature was or was not there when these images were taken. We are unable to determine a time span for this feature and therefore, its function remains inconclusive.

Recommendations

Further testing of site 5MF5478 would most likely not yield further information. Unless new historic information comes to light, the use of the shallow square-shaped trench remains inconclusive. It is our recommendation that further investigation in the areas surrounding site 5MF605 could reveal better information on the location of Fort Davy Crockett. Geophysical survey and pedestrian survey of Hoy Bottom stretching from site 5MF605 to the south, towards Allen Bottom, is recommended.

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