NEW DEAL AND RIVER BASIN SURVEY ARCHAEOLOGY AT FORT LARAMIE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

Danny N. Walker, PhD, RPA, Wyoming State Archaeologist’s Office

New Deal archaeology happened across Wyoming between 1930 and 1941 with a formal WPA program titled the “Wyoming Archaeological Survey” (Beebe and Pulley 1990). The survey was authorized in November 1930 (figure 1). The Wyoming Archaeological Survey was an extensive WPA project covering all portions of the state with field offices at Dubois, Laramie, Casper, Sundance and Lander. Most work was completed at known archaeological or historical sites, but several areas were surveyed for new locations. Investigations occurred at 36 sites, including such well known sites as Dimmwood Cave, Spanish Diggings, Caste Gardens, Medicine Hat Cave, and Fort Casper, among others (Iverson 1941). At least preliminary results were presented for most of these projects in the form of monthly reports, but we have been unable to determine what was exactly done at the sites nor their exact site locations because of missing monthly reports. As with many other WPA projects, the survey closed with the advent of World War II, but provided a basis for future archaeological research.

Other New Deal archaeology was also conducted in Wyoming, including Fort Laramie National Historic Site. Architectural and archaeological studies of the fort structures began while the fort was still state property (Matthews 1930-128-129) with a CCC project “topographic and Building Survey of Fort Laramie” between November 29 and December 25, 1937 (Figure 2). This project was to map the boundaries of the National Monument and all standing structures and features within its boundary. Part of the mapping project was also to “clean up” the monument area of all “trash” from the 40 years of homeowner occupation following the military abandonment in 1909. G. Hubert Smith, a WPA archaeologist, was detailed to Fort Laramie to supervise this 1937 project “to coordinate clean-up work to ensure against the accidental destruction of bone and hide features (Matthews 1930–120). Twenty CCC enrollees were transported daily from the Lake Guernsey Camp for the project. Based on the records, this and later Fort Laramie CCC projects were not associated with the Wyoming Archaeological Survey, but were specifically funded for Fort Laramie after the site was donated to the National Park Service in 1938.

With that goal of intensive research in mind before restoration disturbances, formal archaeological studies began between June and August, 1939, at Fort Laramie National Monument by a WPA work force of 15 enrollees from Camp Bf-63, Veteran’s (a small site camp of Lake Guernsey), under the direction of G. Hubert Smith. The three buildings examined were the powder magazine (Figure 3), an adjacent officer quarters, and the infantry barrack on the north end of the Parade Ground (Figure 4). No detailed analyses of the recovered cultural material were ever conducted, but the artifacts were collected for storage, interpretive displays and later research (Smith 1939).

Following Smith’s 1939 work with the CCC, archaeology was conducted by WPA crews hired specifically on NFS or on other federal program funds for various projects. Excavation was undertaken in the fall of 1940 by Officer’s Quarters 2 (figure 5) and the Butcher’s Block (Hendron 1941). This document is one of few early reports which discusses details about artifacts recovered in the excavations and basically was for future archaeological reports at Fort Laramie: provide as much detail as possible with the available funding. Archaeological investigations, at Fort Laramie then ceased during World War II and did not resume until 1941 when the WPA resumed archaeological work at the fort in response to building restoration compliance and research needs (Matthews 1989).

Figure 2: 1937 CCC mapping crew from Camp Guernsey on parade ground at the minor Officer’s Quarters, Fort Laramie National Historic Site (Courtesy, National Park Service, Fort Laramie National Historic Site).

Figure 3: 1939 excavations at Arsenal Building, Fort Laramie National Historic Site (Courtesy, National Park Service, Fort Laramie National Historic Site).

Figure 4: 1939 excavations at Three-company Barracks, north end of parade ground, Fort Laramie National Historic Site (Courtesy, National Park Service, Fort Laramie National Historic Site).

The 1950s and 1960s saw a major restoration period at the fort where all standing structures had at least stabilization projects, and after major restoration as well (Matthews 1989). These projects were either conducted after archaeological investigations—as keeping with the original concept of active archaeology being a necessity or exploratory discoveries (see Walker and De Vore 2008). The volume of archaeological data gathered over the past 70 years is phenomenal and has provided more questions than answers about the history of Fort Laramie.

As can be seen by these brief discussions of this early work, the major goal of the National Park Service in these dates of the National Monument and all standing structures through archaeological studies. While some today may question excavation techniques used by the WPA and NFS (note use of photography in Figures 3), following the accidental destruction of bone and hide features (Matthews 1930–120). Twenty CCC enrollees were transported daily from the Lake Guernsey Camp for the project. Based on the records, this and later Fort Laramie CCC projects were not associated with the Wyoming Archaeological Survey, but were specifically funded for Fort Laramie after the site was donated to the National Park Service in 1938.

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