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

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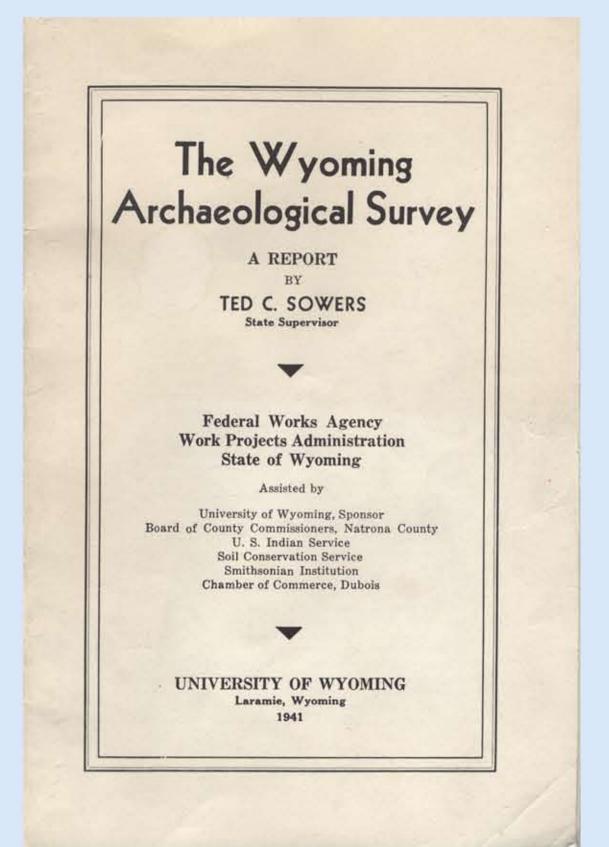


Figure 1: New Deal era
Wyoming Archaeological
Survey final report cover.

New Deal archaeology happened across Wyoming between 1938 and 1941 with a formal WPA program titled the "Wyoming Archaeological Survey" (Sowers 1941) authorized in November 1938 (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 site locations. Investigations occurred at 38 sites, including such well known sites as Dinwoody Cave, Spanish Diggings, Castle Gardens, Medicine Hat Cave, and Fort Caspar, among others (Sowers 1941). At least preliminary results were presented for most of these projects in the form of monthly reports, but for many, 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 (Mattes 1980:128-129) 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 48 years of homesteader occupation following the military abandonment in 1890. G. Hubert Smith, a NPS archaeologist, was detailed to Fort Laramie to supervise this 1937 project "to . . . coordinate clean-up work to ensure against the accidental destruction of bona fide historic features (Mattes 1980:134). Twenty CCC enrollees were transported daily from the Lake Guernsey Camp for the project. Based on available 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 disturbance, formal archaeological studies began between June and August, 1939, at Fort Laramie National Monument by a WPA work force of 15 enrollees from Camp BR-83, Veteran, Wyoming (a side camp of Lake Guernsey), under the direction of G. Hubert Smith. The three buildings examined were the powder magazine/arsenal (Figure 3), an adjacent officer quarters, and the infantry barracks 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 RBS crews hired specifically on NPS or other federal program funds for various projects. Excavation was undertaken in the fall of 1940 on Officers' Quarters D (Figure 5) and the Sutler's Store (Hendron 1941). This document is one of few early reports which discusses details about artifacts recovered in the excavations and basically set the tone for all future archaeology reports at Fort Laramie: provide as much detail as possible with the available funding. Archaeology, and restorations, at Fort Laramie then ceased during World War II and did not resume until 1949 when the RBS resumed archaeological work at the fort in response to building restoration compliance and research needs (Mattes 1980).



Figure 2: 1937 CCC mapping crew from Camp Guernsey on porch of Commanding 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 often major restoration as well (Mattes 1980). These projects were either conducted after archaeological investigations—in keeping with the original concept of active archaeology being a necessity—or archaeologists were called to Fort Laramie because of inadvertent 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.



Figure 5: 1941 archaeological excavations in progress at Officer's Quarters D, Fort Laramie National Historic Site. (Courtesy, National Park Service, Fort Laramie National Historic Site).

As can be seen by these brief discussions of this early work, the major goal of the National Park Service in 1938 was learning about the architectural and occupational history of these structures through archaeological studies. While some today may question excavation techniques used by the WPA or RBS (note use of pickax in Figure 3), you have to admit the crews discovered details we would not know if the projects had not been conducted before restorations began. Hendron's 1941 work was the last archaeology at Fort Laramie until after the end of World War II and funds became available for a major period of restoration at Fort Laramie (Mattes 1980). For the next 60+ years, a series of investigations were made (Walker and De Vore 2008) following the original mandate that no restoration would be accomplished without extensive archaeological research. This mandate continues today, drawing on updated survey techniques including extensive use of geophysical (Figures 6 and 7) equipment for field investigations (Walker and DeVore 2008). Knowing the history of archaeological work at a locality over the years is critical for proper interpretation of "modern" archaeological surveys, whether they be traditional walk-over pedestrian surveys or as at Fort Laramie in recent years, geophysical surveys. This knowledge is highly critical when modern studies are conducted at places like Fort Laramie National Historic Site in Wyoming with Euroamerican occupation that has been constant since 1834 and a prehistoric occupation dating back 10,500 years.

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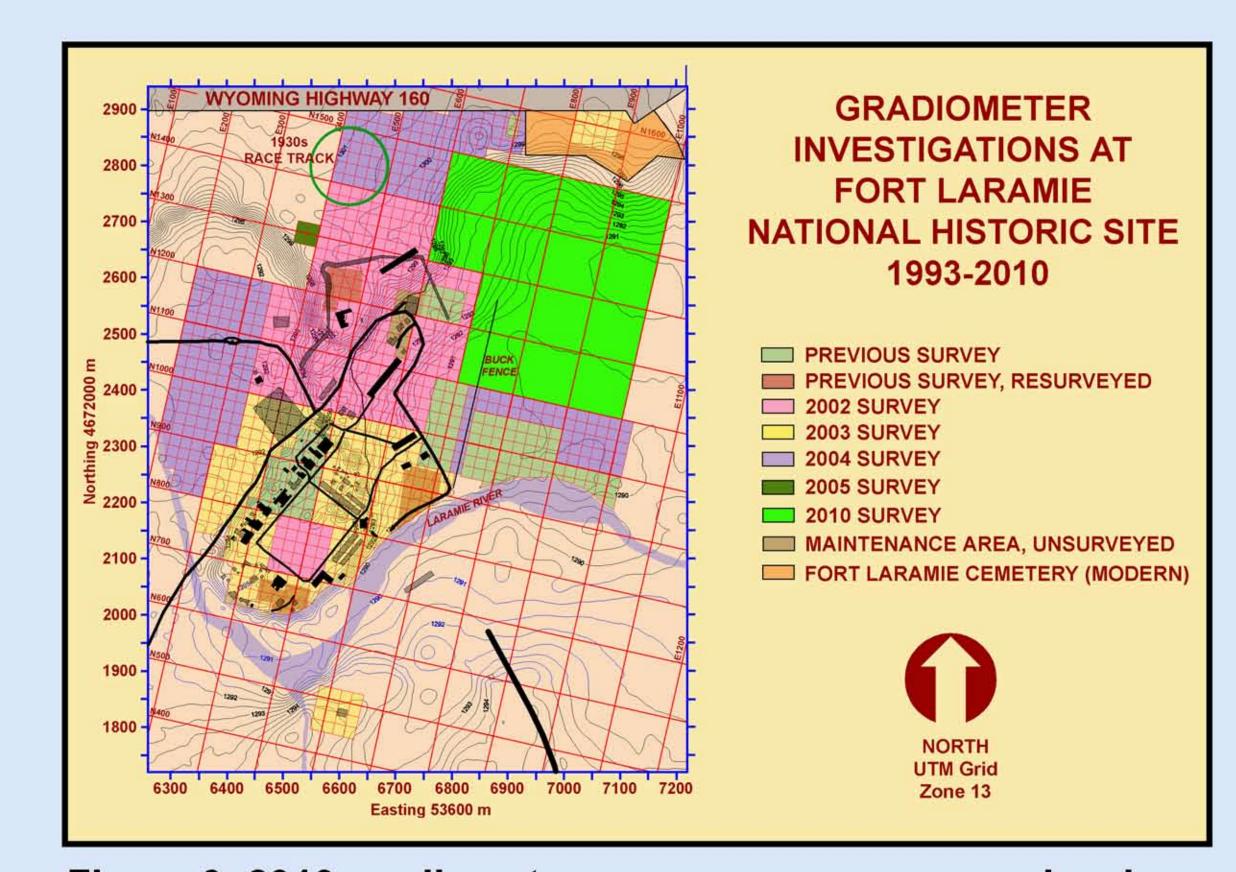


Figure 6: 2010 gradiometer survey coverage map, showing extent of geophysical survey coverage by year at Fort Laramie National Historic Site.

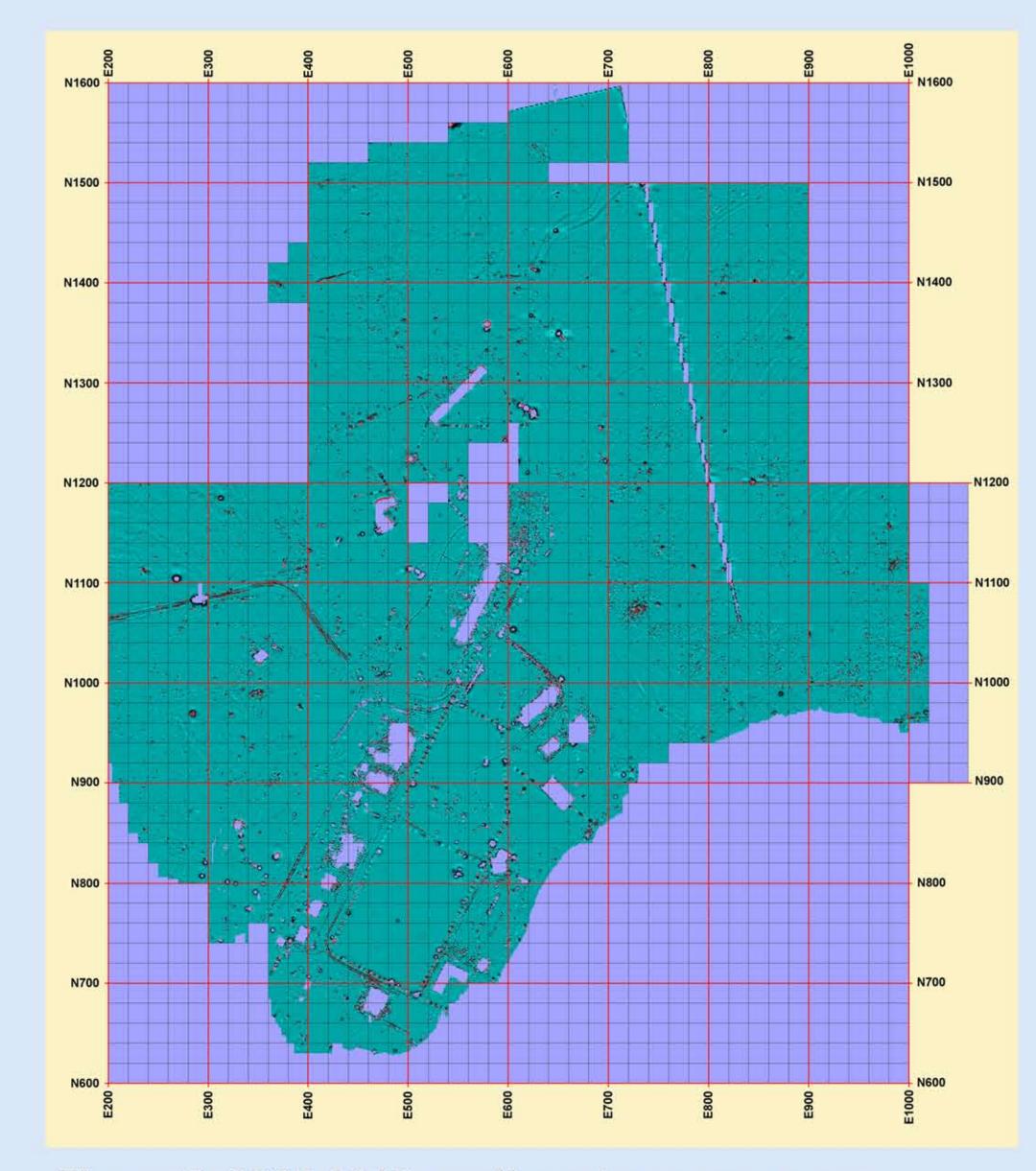
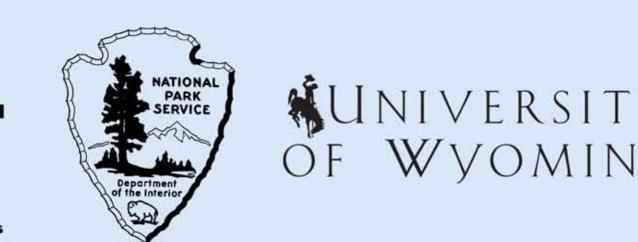


Figure 7: 2002-2010 gradiometer survey map, showing results of gradiometer survey at Fort Laramie National Historic Site. Area is 1000 meters by 800 meters in size.

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