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ARCHEOLOGICAL PROGRESS REPORT
OF THE OLD COMMANDANT'S HOUSE
EXCAVATIONS 1976 FIELD SEASON

FORT ROSS STATE HISTORIC PARK
SONOMA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

By
Bryn H. Thomas

A report on archeological investigations in the
old Commandant's House area carried out by the
Central California Archeological Foundation under
contract with the State Department of Parks and
Recreation (Contract No. 30-30-014)

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INTRODUCTION

This is the second and final report prepared according to a contract between the Department of Parks and Recreation and the Central California Archeological Foundation on the 1976 excavations at Fort Ross S.H.P.

The first report was concerned with descriptions and interpretations of the 1976 Officials' Quarters excavations. The second report will describe and interpret excavation in the area of the old Commandant's House. Recommendations for future historical and archeological research on these two buildings and other excavations which may be undertaken at Fort Ross will be included. Neither the first nor the second report should be considered a complete and final statement on this year's excavation, but as an assessment of the work done and a guide for final reports.

Many individuals were responsible for the success of this season's excavations and their participation and assistance are gratefully acknowledged: Norman Wilson, President of the Central California Archeological Foundation; F.A. Riddell, Supervisor and Senior Archeologist; John Foster, Assistant State Archeologist; Joe Hood, Supervisory Ranger and Virgil "Bud" Luckey, S.P. Ranger 1, Fort Ross S.H.P.; and the members of the State Archeology crew; Greta Bingham, Archeological Specialist, plus Archeological Aids: Jane Adams, Paulette Barclay, Kathleen Davis, Nicholas Del Cioppo, William Kirk, Deborah Nissen, Gary Reinoehl, Eric Richardson, John Rummig, Rae Schwaderer, Robert Stillinger, and Jo Thomas, volunteer.

Project Description

The goals of the Fort Ross archeological project have been discussed previously (Thomas 1976).

An immediate aim of the excavation at the old Commandant's House was the verification of the historical descriptions of the building, including its location and dimensions. Since the historically known dimensions of the building varied considerably, it was important to document them archeologically. Another goal was to find the location of the powder magazine and wine cellar historically associated with the house. Finally, the excavations were directed towards completion of the artifact collection from the building which could provide a basis for the reconstruction of the life-style for the majority of Commandants at the Fort.

Archeological methods used in the excavation of the old Commandant's House have been described previously (Thomas 1976). However, due to a lack of time and the absence of architectural feature recovery, a tractor and blade were used to expose the unexcavated sections of the house. It was assumed that the building's perimeters would be destroyed during construction, so that archeologically supervised mechanical excavation was acceptable. Sections of the south foundation area and all portions previously excavated were uncovered in this manner. Mechanical excavation allowed us to examine the building site for a cellar and to locate several new features.

Historical Summary

The old Commandant's House was one of the first buildings constructed within the stockade. Construction may have begun in 1812 but the house was completed in 1814 (Haase 1955). The house remained standing until circa 1843-1845 when it was torn down by the American Period owner(s).

Historic sources list the building variously as; the house of the commandant, Manager's house, house of the command of Kuskov, Governor's house, and the old Commandant's house (Haase 1955).

The 1817 map of Fort Ross locates the Commandant's House in the center and parallel to the north stockade. All illustrations until 1843 continue to show the building here. The new Commandant's house listed on the 1841 inventories is described as Rotchev's House and is situated in the Fort's southwest corner area.

Historic descriptions and illustrations of the House indicate that it had a hipped-roof and was built of logs with board siding with windows on the front and back walls. In 1814 Gabriel Morgana noted that there was a wine cellar in the basement and storage space in the attic (Haase 1955). The 1817 map of the Fort illustrates the living floor of the House and in the legend notes it as:

...rooms, passage hall, two storerooms, and at lower level, storage rooms and powder magazine. (Rokitiatsky 1972.)

The two 1841 inventories describe it as having six rooms, a corridor, and a kitchen (Dufour, Essig and Ogden 1933).

The dimensions given for the House differ considerably as noted above. The 1817 insert map, which was drawn to scale, shows the House as being 42 x 56 feet maximum. The 1841 inventory dimensions were alternately 36 x 48 feet and 12 x 16 meters (39.36 x 52.48 ft) (Dufour, Essig and Ogden 1933 and Duflot de Mofras 1937).

From the scaled 1817 insert map it is known that the west wall of the House was approximately 119 feet east of the west stockade, and the north House wall was 14 feet south of the north stockade. These measurements would be expected to convert to units of Russian linear measurement since the map was scaled to the Russian sazshen (7 foot increments); 119 feet equals exactly 17 sazshens and 14 feet is equal to 2 sazshens.

Archeological Summary

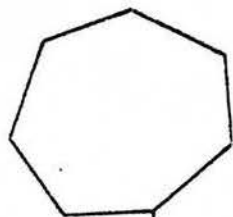
Two archeologists, William E. Pritchard in 1972 and Karl Gurke in 1975, conducted excavations prior to ours in the area of the old Commandant's House. Due to lack of time, there were no reports prepared for these excavations. Although this research has not been completed and cannot be included entirely in this report, a thorough search and interpretation is being conducted of their field records (Fig. 1).

Pritchard's excavations were carried out by a Sonoma State field school. The purpose of the work was to instruct the students in basic field techniques, and to note the building's dimensions and location. A total of 32 units were opened and 14 features recorded. Excavation units were 5 x 5 feet, oriented perpendicular to the reconstructed north stockade. Unit designations were a combination of letters and numbers (i.e., F4, J6, M9) with features numbered consecutively from number 1.

Gurke's excavations were conducted with Department of Parks and Recreation seasonal employees. Another 32 units were opened and 15 features recorded. Excavation units were the same size, orientation, and designation as Pritchard's. Two 2 x 2 meter units were opened which were keyed to B.M.-L208. Features were alphabetically recorded from letter A.

A total of 11 excavation units were opened during the 1976 field season, in addition to the area dug by machine. Three features were exposed in the units, with an additional 17 located in the machine excavated area; ten of these had been recorded in previous excavations (Table 1).

Two features recorded and tentatively identified as foundation remains were Feature J, a west sill fragment, and Feature E, a putative north sill remnant. There is a remarkable correlation between the location of these features and the situation of the house depicted on the 1817 Russian insert map. For example, Feature J was 119 feet east of the reconstructed west stockade wall and both Feature J and Feature E were approximately 14 feet south of the exposed north stockade remains. As reported above, these are the same measurements noted on the 1817 insert map.



F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T

Old Commandant's House
Excavations

--- 1972

— 1975

-.-.- 1976

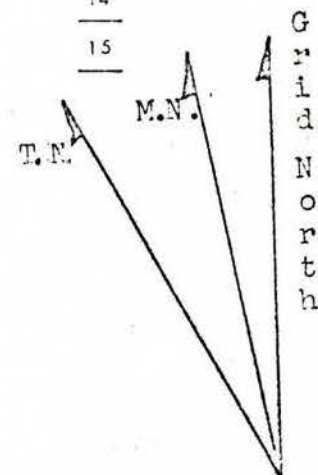
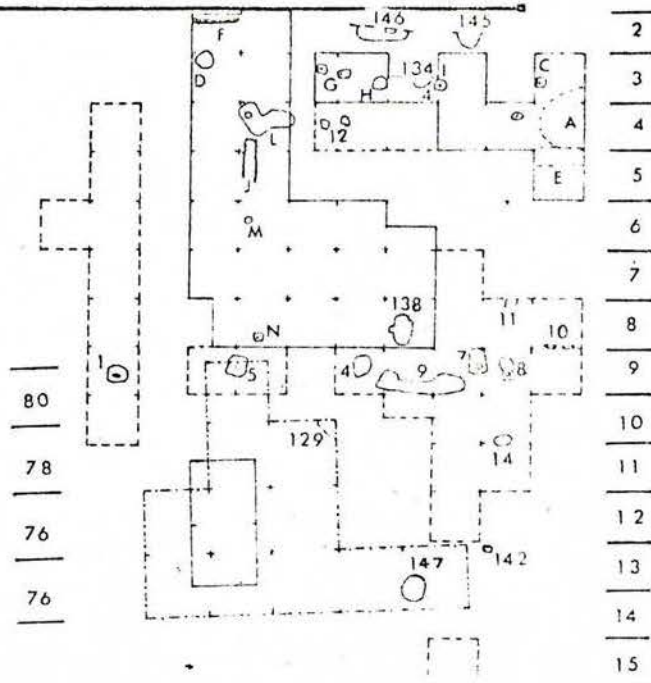
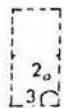
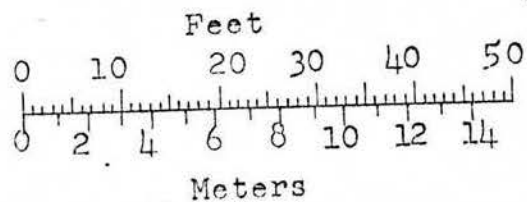


TABLE 1 - FEATURE CHARACTERISTICS IN THE OLD COMMANDANT'S HOUSE AREA

FEATURE	EXCAVATION UNIT	TYPE	DIMENSIONS W x L x D	EXCAVATOR	REMARKS
A	T-3, T-4	Sandstone Concentration	48 x 72 x 11 in.	Gurke	
B	S-4	Post Hole w/4 x 4 in. wood stake	12 x 18 x 12 in.	"	Feature 141 1976 excavation
C	T-3	Post Hole Wooden Post	12 x 12½ x 16 in. 5 x 5 x ? in.	"	
D	M-3	Intrusive Basin	21 x 24 x 3 in.	"	
E	T-5	Trough w/ sandstone at perimeters	24 x 60 x 6 in.	"	Putitive north house wall sill
F	M-2	Russian north stockade trench	7 x 60 x ? in.	"	
G1	P-3	Post Hole Wooden Post	15 x 17 x 8 in. 4½ x 4½ x ? in.	"	Feature 144 1976 excavation
G2	O-3	Post Hole Wooden Post	13 x 13 x 7½ in. 4¼ x 4¼ x ? in.	"	Feature 143 1976 excavation
H	P-3	Post Hole	18 x 19 x 6 in.	"	Feature 133 1976 excavation
I	O-3, R-3	Post Hole Wooden Post	12 x 16 x 25 in. 7 x 7 x 25 in.	"	Feature 135 1976 excavation

FEATURE	EXCAVATION UNIT	TYPE	DIMENSIONS W x L x D	EXCAVATOR	REMARKS
J	N-4, N-5	Sandstone lined trench	36 x 72 x 6 in.	Gurke	West house wall sill
K					No records available
L	N-4	Post Hole	7 x 9 x 10½ in.	"	Feature 132 1976 excavation
M	N-6	Post Hole	10 x 10 x 7 in.	"	
N	N-8	Post Hole Wooden Post	14 x 15 x 22 in. 6 x 6 x 22 in.	"	
1	K-9	Post Hole Post	1.9 x 2.4 x ? ft. .9 x 1.0 x ? ft.	Pritchard	
2	F-9	Post Hole	.8 x 1.0 x ? ft.	"	
3	F-9	Post Hole	1.2 x 1.5 x ? ft.	"	
4	P-9	Post Hole	2.1 x 2.2 x ? ft.	"	Feature 136 1976 excavation
5	M-9, N-9	Post Hole	2.0 x 2.0 x 2.0 ft.	"	
6					No records available
7	R-9	Post Hole	2.0 x 2.4 x ? ft.	"	Feature 139 1976 excavation
8a	S-9	Post Hole	1.4 x 1.5 x ? ft.	"	
8b	S-9	Post Hole	1.3 x 1.4 x ? ft.	"	Feature 140 1976 excavation

FEATURE	EXCAVATION UNIT	TYPE	DIMENSIONS W x L x D	EXCAVATOR	REMARKS
9	P-9, O-9 R-9	Elongated Intrusion	2.5 x 9.2 x ? ft.	Pritchard	
10	T-8, T-9	2 Horizontal Wooden Timber	.5 x 3.0 x ? ft.	"	Feature 137 1976 excavation
11	S-8	Post Hole	.7 x 1.1 x ? ft.	"	
12a	O-4	Post Hole	.9 x .9 x ? ft.	"	
12b	P-4	Post Hole	.9 x 1.1 x ? ft.	"	
13					No records available
14	S-10, S-11	Post Hole	1.1 x 1.2 x ? ft.	"	
129	N78 x W16m	Intrusive Basin	.59 x .66 x 30 cm. minimum	Thomas	
134	Machine Excavation	Intrusion	.40 x .80 x ? cm.	"	
138		Post Hole	.36 x .38 x ? cm.	"	
142		Post Hole		"	
145		Post Hole	.85 x .85 x 60 cm.	"	North stockade
146		Post Hole	.37 x .56 x 23 cm.	"	North stockade
147	N74 x W12	Post Hole	.76 x .90 x 40 cm.	"	

Interpretation

Although portions of the old Commandant's House were found in the course of the excavation, it was not possible to document its full dimensions or perimeter. This was due to the intrusion of Highway 1 through the House site and the absence of any identified south foundation remnants.

Great care was taken in the 1976 excavations to locate the south foundation's position, indicated by historical sources at 36 ft., 39.36 ft., and 42 ft. south of the house's northwest corner (Feature J). Two units, N77 x W18.5 meters and N75 x W18.5 meters, were opened during Gurke's excavations to test the same hypothesis. Unit profiles in the building's southwest corner area indicated that a loose greyish-brown soil, with much rodent disturbance and relatively few artifacts, was the dominant layer between the sod and grass ground cover and sterile clay below. It would have been fairly easy to miss a wooden foundation sill in this type of soil. However, care and time were taken to note any wood fragments and associated stone alignments corresponding to the construction seen in Features J and E. No postholes like those of the Officials's Quarters were located in the south foundation area. Therefore, it is assumed that the southern portion of the house was probably totally removed by the American Period owner(s). However, the close correlation between the exposed north and northwest corner sill fragments and the 1817 insert map indicated that the dimensions of the house on the map should be used for reconstruction. The evidence strongly suggests that the house measured 42 x 56 ft. maximum, as depicted here. No structural remnants associated with the historically documented powder magazine and wine cellar were encountered in any of the excavations in the old Commandant's House, nor was there any evidence to suggest that the Russians dug out an area under the house to facilitate these functions. It is reasonable to assume that the natural ground slope in the building site provided space for the powder magazine and wine cellar. The "living floor" plan in the 1817 insert map was located near ground surface on the north, or high side of the house. The south, or low side, was elevated considerably due to the contour of the hill, thus allowing room space below. A sketch by Waseurtz auf Sandels in 1843 documents this arrangement, since it illustrates a relatively high series of steps leading to the front door (Dufour, Essig, Ogden 1933). Again, an explanation for the lack of structural remains associated with these two functions is probably due to their total removal by the American Period owner(s).

Recommendations

Numerous recommendations can be made concerning future archeological research of the Officials' Quarters, the old Commandant's House, and Fort Ross as a whole based on the work started in the 1976 field season. Many of these recommendations are directed towards outlining the goals of the final report on these two buildings. Ideally, more historical research should be undertaken, particularly concerning the two buildings to be reconstructed. Locating additional Russian descriptions of exterior architecture and interior room arrangement and furnishings would greatly assist in reconstruction. At the same time, existing histories documenting trade, economy, indigenous and external manufacturing, and social stratifi-

cation should be incorporated in the archeological reports. The interpretations of the structural features presented in this discussion, and the previous report on the Officials's Quarters are preliminary in nature. For the final report, the feature records and map should be re-examined in terms of temporal, spatial, and artifact associations. Whenever possible this data can be used to substantiate or refute historical research concerning the two buildings.

Artifact analysis in the final reports should deal chiefly with construction material pertinent to architectural reconstruction and with the objects that furnished the two structures. The artifacts should be examined in relation to temporal periods, economy, trade and context of utilization. When there are enough artifacts of any given category, it is suggested that they be analyzed after Lyle Stone's "formal classification" (Stone, 1974). The use of this system would result in an objective classification of physical attributes for artifact categories found in the two buildings and provide a basis of comparison for future collections from Fort Ross.

Excavation and recording techniques used in the 1976 field season were found satisfactory for archeological work at Fort Ross. Therefore, it is recommended that the following techniques be re-employed in future excavations.

A. Excavation Units

1. Consistent 2 x 2 meters
2. Grid units set from B.M. L208
3. Grid units oriented to reported grid north or 26° 30' east of true north

B. Artifact Collection

1. Screen 1/4 inch mesh
2. Excavate in 10 cm. levels
3. Stratigraphic collection when possible still maintaining 10 cm. levels
4. All depth below surface measurements translated to depth relative to B.M. L208
5. All units excavated to native soil

C. Field Recording

1. Feature Mapping
 - a. Metric map scale
 - b. Consistent scale
 - c. Features mapped in plan and section
 - d. Use archeological feature record form DPR-253
2. Soil Profiles
 - a. Metric scale
 - b. Consistent scale
 - c. Minimum of one profile per unit
 - d. Soil description and interpretation

3. Field Logs

- a. Master field log kept by Director
- b. Unit level records (DPR 415 a,b) or notebooks kept by excavators

4. Photography

- a. Photographs taken of each feature
- b. Photographs of stratigraphic profiles

During the 1976 excavations, it was noted that the preservation of wood in the features varied considerably. Even with the best field recording techniques, the data obtained from wooden features could have been incomplete or inadequate in comparison with information from features of other material. To compensate for this problem, the wood remains were mapped on feature forms and photographed. Then the wood and surrounding loose soil was brushed away leaving a clean, hard soil-cast of the feature. This soil-cast reflected the feature's original shape and dimension, so that it could be compared with others of the same type.

The following outline is suggested for the final Officials' Quarters report:

FINAL REPORT: OFFICIALS' QUARTERS OUTLINE

I. PREFACE - PARAGRAPH CONCERNING 19th CENTURY FUR TRADE

Monopolies along Pacific North West coast

II. INTRODUCTION

A. Sequential history of Ft. Ross

1. Pomo at contact
2. Russian/Aleuts
3. American ranches
4. Park control

B. Research objectives

C. Research limitations

III. HISTORIC DESCRIPTION

A. Functional description

B. Architectural description

C. Test implications

IV. SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS ARCHEOLOGY

- A. McKenzie
- B. Wood
- C. Pritchard
- D. Curke

V. ARCHEOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION

- A. Methodology
- B. Stratigraphy
- C. Features
- D. Material cultural remains
 - 1. Inventory of artifact category
 - 2. Description of artifact categories, that is, classification by physical attributes or manufacturing technique
 - 3. Note - activity, temporal, and provenience association
 - 4. Column samples

VI. INTERPRETATION

Answer test implications

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Future work at Fort Ross in relation to Officials' Quarters excavations

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

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