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Archeological Test Excavations at  
Fort Ross SHP

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Cultural Heritage Section

Resource Preservation and Interpretation Division

For:

Architectural Unit

Development Division

State of California

Department of Parks and Recreation

June, 1978

Sacramento, California

## Introduction

This special report was prepared to aid the Development Division in planning for an upcoming project at Fort Ross SHP. A visitor's center is proposed for construction on a knoll in the cypress grove near the north end of the parking lot. Also, a foot and wheelchair path will be established from the present parking lot to the west "sally port" of the fort. This path will connect to the new visitor's center and will require a bridge to cross a small creek at the east edge of the grove.

An archeological testing project (subject of this report) was designed to determine the nature and location of any subsurface cultural values which may be disturbed by construction. A crew of four archeologists were in the field from May 22 to June 2 on this assignment. One test unit and 463 core samples were excavated and analyzed.

## Cultural History

The earliest known inhabitants of the Fort Ross area were the Kashaya Pomo; members of the ancient Hokan language family. These Native Americans once occupied about 30 miles of coastline and their territory extended inland for 5 to 13 miles. Aboriginally, the main villages were in the redwood zone atop ridges; away from the coastal fog and winds, and densely forested river valleys. A Kashaya village called sulme-way is known to have existed in the Timber Cove area. The Kashaya are unique among the Pomo groups in that their first contact with Caucasians was with the Russians at the Fort Ross colony in 1811-1842 (McLendon and Oswalt:277-79).

In 1812 the Russians began constructing a permanent settlement which became known as Fort Ross (Guthrie). They brought along Aleut hunters to aid them in harvesting sea otters for the pelt trade and employed local Kashaya Pomo for managing their grain crops.

The fort and vicinity were extensively settled by the Russians. There were about thirty buildings outside of the stockade, as well as numerous gardens, a grain field, and two orchards. The first ships built in California were made by the Russians in Fort Ross Cove.

By 1841, local otter hunting was no longer profitable and the grain crops were failing. The Russians sold their property to John Sutter and moved from the region.

Sutter had some of the buildings dismantled and moved to Sacramento. He also had the livestock relocated.

In about 1843, William Benitz purchased the property from Sutter. He raised crops and animals and harvested timber. He sold the property in 1869 to Fairfax and Dixon.

Lumber became the main industry in later years. The cove served as the shipping point for a nearby lumber mill.

In 1873, George W. Call purchased the property from Fairfax. The Call family continued the lumbering business into the 20th century. They also utilized the fort as an attraction for tourists and maintained a hotel within the

stockade. During their occupation there were over forty buildings on the property outside of the fort.

In 1906 the State of California purchased the fort itself and portions of the Call Ranch were acquired in 1973. This acquisition brought most of the historic Russian and early American period sites comprising Fort Ross into State ownership (Fort Ross Advisory Committee).

#### Field Methods

Archeological sampling was achieved by using hand powered soil augers, which are capable of excavating a two inch diameter hole to a maximum depth of thirty inches. The size and arrangement of previously excavated historic post holes in the fort area indicated that an interval of three feet between auger holes was appropriate.

Core samples were extracted along the route of the proposed foot path, from the west fort wall to the visitor's center site. At the proposed bridge location, cores were excavated in a grid formation at each stream bank and at the approximate locations of bridge footings. Between the visitor's center site and the parking lot, cores were spaced at approximately ten foot intervals. At the visitor's center site, core samples were extracted in a grid formation; spaced about three feet apart. In addition, six samples were excavated at the site of a proposed leaching field just east of the parking lot. A total of 463 core samples were analyzed (see Table 1). The soil from the samples was sifted through one-quarter inch mesh screens and all artifactual materials were collected.

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One test unit was excavated during this project and it was located in the visitor's center site. The test area was determined by the discovery of an obsidian flake in the soil extracted from an auger hole. This hole formed the southwest corner of the test unit, which was excavated down into a sterile yellow clay stratum. All artifacts were collected and archeological features were mapped.

#### Field Observations

The first twenty feet of the trail alignment, from the west sally port of the fort, was not tested. This area is enclosed by two fences. The soil here is hard packed and it was possibly disturbed by the stockade construction.

There were three locations (A, B, and C) within the entire test area that yielded artifacts (see map). Area A is between 20 feet and 80 feet from the west sally port. Area B starts about 220 feet northwest of the northern bastion and continues in that direction for about 150 feet. Area C is the proposed site for the visitor's center. Its location is about 100 feet east of the northeast corner of the existing parking lot.

In Area A, there were approximately twenty auger holes which produced a total of 18 glass fragments, 16 ceramic fragments, 4 bits of rusted iron, 11 pieces of burned bone, and one broken piece of obsidian. The auger holes were located only a few feet north of a large depression, which is probably the remnant of an historic structure. In this area, sterile yellow clay was encountered between 24 and 30 inches below the surface.

From Area B, nine glass fragments and three ceramic fragments were recovered from ten of the fifty core samples. In this vicinity, the augers penetrated to a depth of 30 inches without encountering the yellow subsoil. The soil here is dry and hard.

From the 145 auger holes in Area C, one obsidian flake was retrieved. Two chert flakes and one chert core were found in the test unit. The soil here is firm and is criss-crossed with cypress roots.

The remains of four small posts were found in the test unit, at about 17 inches (43.2 cm) below surface. These appeared to be redwood, and the largest was 1.5 inches (3.8 cm) square. They were situated in a straight line and spaced at about 6 inch (15.2 cm) intervals. The largest post was also the deepest; extending to a maximum depth of 24 inches (61.0 cm) below surface. All of the posts were tapered to a point.

#### Artifacts

Of the historic materials found, there are only two artifacts that give an indication of the manufacture date. The others cannot be ascribed to any particular occupation period.

One of the objects which can be dated is a small ceramic fragment with part of the Royal Arms marking on it. The type of Royal Arms indicates that it was produced after 1837 (Godden). The Russians left Fort Ross in 1841; consequently, this ceramic was probably used by either Bennett or by the Calls.

The other diagnostic artifact is a small fragment of a bottle lip. This type of lip was made between 1856 and 1930; limiting its time of deposition to the Bennett or Call occupation. Both of these artifacts were found in Area A.

The piece of obsidian found in Area A is an artifact from the Native American period. It shows considerable wear and the item was purposefully shaped. The specimen looks much like a projectile point tip, but the wear pattern indicates that it was utilized as a scraping tool; it is oval in cross section.

The artifacts from Area B are all from the European era. However, it cannot be determined, from the scant evidence, which of the cultural periods is represented (i.e., Russian or American).

The visitor's center site contained both historic and Native American materials. Of the latter, only undiagnostic lithic debris was found.

The historic features in this area consist of old fence remains and the cypress grove itself. The fence is very similar in design to the existing fences in the vicinity. The major difference is that the older fence had much smaller posts than the present one. These redwood fences are composed of a set row of posts which are stabilized by a rail attached along the tops. Part of the existing fence system outlines the original cypress grove. These trees were introduced to this area by the Call family and they were apparently planted in rows for a windbreak.

## Discussion

Three areas of archeological sensitivity, designated Areas A, B, and C, were identified during this survey (see map).

A Native American sweathouse pit (designated SON-174) and another site with a dance house pit (SON-175) are within 600 feet (183 m) of Area A and Area C. The proximity of these significant archeological sites to Areas A and C indicates that these areas are potentially important cultural resources.

There are other archeological sites that have housepits within a mile of the fort. However, the sweathouse pit, which has been partially destroyed, and the dance house pit are the only such features known to exist within the present unit boundaries.

Area C is along the same small drainage as site SON-174. It is located on the eastern side of a hill, as are many of the archeological sites in this vicinity, which would afford some protection from the wind. (The dense growth of trees in this area makes the surface contours difficult to determine.)

The exact nature and extent of the Native American remains in Area C was not revealed. The materials recovered from this area are inconclusive; the grove may conceal a significant habitation site.

The Native American artifacts found in Area A could be part of a prehistoric or Russian period site. The depression just south of this area may also be

from this period. However, the diagnostic historical artifacts from Area A are from the period after the Russian occupation.

In Area B, the historic period of deposition could not be determined from the scant artifactual evidence.

#### Recommendations

The proposed visitor's center and foot/wheelchair path will disrupt three areas which have been identified as archeologically sensitive. To mitigate any deleterious effects of construction on cultural values, we recommend the following:

1. During construction, fill should be used (versus cutting) whenever feasible to obtain proper grade within the archeologically sensitive areas.
2. The Native American Heritage Commission should be consulted during the planning stage of this development project.
3. Any necessary subsurface disturbance within the sensitivity areas should be monitored by an archeologist(s) from the Cultural Heritage Section.
3. Should cultural values be encountered during construction, all work must halt in the vicinity until a professional assessment of the discovery can be made.

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Fort Ross SHP  
 ARCHEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION DATA

* Footpath Datum Points	Distance (ft)	**Number of Core Samples
1) Sally Port (West Stockade)		
2) 21 deg. from point 1	20	0
3) 50 " " " 2	63	21
4) 36 " " " 3	78	26
5) 0 " " " 4	72	24
6) 30 " " " 5	84	28
7) 57 " " " 6	39	13
8) 62 " " " 7	303	101
9) 38 " " " 8	45	29
10) 104 " " " 9	60	0
11) 168 " " " 10	81	27
12) 34 " " " 11	96	28
13) 132 " " " 12	27	145
14) 90 " " " 13	177	15
Leach Field Area		<u>6</u>
		463 TOTAL

General Excavation Data

Visitor's Center Area	1 m <sup>2</sup> test unit	
	145 core samples	
Leach Field Area	6 " "	
Footpath	<u>312 " "</u>	
	1 m <sup>2</sup> test unit	
	463 core samples	TOTALS

\* In Degrees West of Magnetic North  
 \*\* Samples Excavated from 6" to 30" Below Surface

# FORT ROSS SHP

PROPOSED  
VISITORS CENTER  
FOOTPATH

AREA B

AREA C

LEACH  
FIELD  
AREA

AREA A

BM

Creek

150

