

ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORICAL SURVEY OF THE POULTRY HOUSE AT THE LOS PEÑASQUITOS RANCH HOUSE: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS FROM THE FALL 1991 EXCAVATION SEASON

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ABSTRACT

This report focuses on the poultry house that stands in Los Peñasquitos Canyon Preserve. By examining the wooden structure from a historical and archaeological perspective, the construction date and primary function of the building can be clarified. Also, it is possible to make an estimate of the time period by looking at the redwood material that was utilized in the construction. Due to the use of redwood in the building's construction, a possible construction date has been narrowed down to 1875-1900, but further analysis is necessary before an exact date is assigned. A total of 6 units were excavated inside the poultry house, containing an array of artifacts. The artifact assemblage, at the time of writing, is still being analyzed, so results are preliminary. Still, with every artifact that we uncover, historians and archaeologists are closer to better understanding rural homestead lifeways in early California.

INTRODUCTION

The 1991 Archaeological Field Excavation season at Los Peñasquitos Ranch House incorporated the efforts of the County of San Diego Department of Parks and Recreation, the San Diego County Archaeological Society and San Diego State University. Lynne Christenson, Ph.D., professor of Anthropology at San Diego State University, utilized undergraduate and graduate students for the excavation process. Registered with the State as SDI-8125-H, this site has the unique characteristic of sustaining human occupation in a continual sequence that began with the La Jollan period. Occupation spans the Spanish period, the Mexican/California era, and ends up with the influx of Anglo/European people.

The focus of the 1991 season's excavations was the wooden structure approximately 45 m southeast from the datum corner of Wing C. Most recently, this building was used as a Poultry House, but due to excessive deterioration the roof and other por-

tions of the "chicken coop" have been dismantled.

Under the supervision of Dr. Christenson, the season began in September, 1991, and lasted through the entire fall term. The objective was to remove the soil within the confines of the Poultry House. The excavation was monitored by assistant crew chief Roman Beck, a graduate student at San Diego State University (SDSU). He divided the floor into 6 equal units, labeling them 1-6. Taking all precautions to avoid any type of fungus that might have germinated in the top soil, all excavators wore protective masks and gloves. A sample of the soil was taken from each level and went through a water screen. This process allowed the screener to break down the compost-like material and prevent large quantities of possibly noxious dust from being inhaled.

METHODOLOGY

With the beginning of the 1991 excava-

tion season at Los Peñasquitos Ranch House, my main task was to try to positively identify the building located on quadrants E40 S20 and E40 N0. It has commonly been known as the Poultry House, but that is no doubt only the last function of this building. In this paper I look at the preliminary results of the 1991 excavation for clues to try and define the construction date and the primary function of this structure. Also, through extensive research of the available materials, I provide factual evidence that will support the archaeological record. Approaching this project, I established a working research design to aid me in my results. They were as follows:

1. What are the general dimensions of the building? Will the excavation define the initial construction date and function?
2. Does this building show characteristics of a poultry house of the late 19th century? If not a poultry house, what? And how does the use of redwood in the construction of the building reflect economic times at the ranch house?

By looking at these questions this paper comes to a conclusion concerning this structure. By hypothesizing on the function of the building, further research and identification can be accomplished.

RESULTS

Looking at the results of the 1991 season, I am reminded that they are only preliminary findings and the artifact assemblage must be thoroughly looked at to further understand the function of this building. With this in mind, my research revolved around the available literature on this subject to define this building's function.

The redwood structure, which is approximately 45 m southeast of wing C, was thoroughly studied and documented by C.F. Buchanan in January 1991. His blueprint drawings are an excellent document and he gives a step by step guide for the restoration process.

Buchanan originally recorded his measurements in feet and inches, so for the purpose of this paper I converted his numbers into metrics. The building is 4.3 m long, 3.7 m wide and 4 m tall (4.3 m x 3.7 m x 4 m). There are 2 door frames, one on the east side and the other facing the west. Their composite frame width is 87 cm and their height is 2.1 m. The door on the west end is presently missing, but I assume it followed the same specifications of the door on the east end. The east end door is 86.1 cm x 190 cm and is 2.5 cm thick. Also made out of redwood, the door is hung by 4 different hinges, and C.F. Buchanan believes that this was not the original door (Buchanan 1991).

The most notable trait of this structure is the series of wooden slats that go around the building. Hand sawn, these slats are 1.1 m off the ground, 7.6 cm wide and have a 3.8 cm gap between one another. Below these slats are the bottom wooden planks which are 1.1 m in height and vary in width from 23.5 cm to 30.5 cm. Excellent craftsmanship went into the construction of this portion of the building. There was specific intent for the function of this building when it was built, as seen in these unique slats (Buchanan 1991).

The entire roof structure (ridge beam, rafters, sheathing, fascia and shingles) was deteriorated beyond repair and had to be removed. Buchanan recorded the measurements before the roof was torn down.

The shingles were cut redwood and had a random width. They were spaced .64 cm apart with a 10.2 cm exposure. Each shingle was nailed to the sheathing with 2 or 3 square-head nails (Buchanan 1991).

Approximately 10 cm below the ground surface the floor structure was uncovered. A detailed report and drawings of the un-earthed floor structure must be analyzed to further understand this building. Two beams are located at the base of each wall, 2 are parallel with the width of the door frames and there is one beam situated in the center of the building. Only sections of the floor remain, predominately in the southwest corner, and they are in poor condition. The rest of the floor has been torn out or

completely deteriorated. The wood floor was well built, extremely level and very sturdy.

Although the floor does not provide information about dating the construction of the building, it does provide more information concerning its primary function. The existence of the floor automatically rules out the possibility that this building was originally built as a poultry house. The floor is well defined and, by looking at the support structure, it could have been used for a storage facility, where it had heavy traffic moving across the threshold. But there have been no artifacts to point in that direction.

The artifact assemblage consists of: prehistoric ceramics, groundstone and flake debitage, links from a chain, horseshoes, historic glass, square head nails, a sheep hook, a hair pin, an aluminum cup and a large mason "Ball" jar. Further analysis will be done on these artifacts.

At the preliminary stage of analysis, the excavation was not able to define either the construction date or primary function of this building.

Does this building show characteristics of a poultry house that might have been built in the late 19th century? And if not a poultry house, what? I was unable to uncover any material that pertained to the construction of poultry houses in California in the late 19th century, or for that matter any material on the construction of outbuildings. However, an analysis of the results of the 1991 excavation season support a conclusion that the structure was not originally a poultry house. This conclusion was reached because a poultry house would not require the substantial floor found during excavation. The floor was probably built at the same time as the rest of the structure; the floor boards were also redwood. There might have been some replacing and remodeling over the years, but having a floor of this quality built for the chickens of the rancho would be highly unlikely.

Although I did come across descriptions of poultry houses in New England, they are of little help to our problem. Generally, the

poultry houses back east were more lavishly constructed and followed a more European style. So their comparison value is of little aid.

I was unable find any type of descriptions of wooden structures in late 19th century California. There are wooden structures throughout America dating from this time period: corn cribs, smokehouses, stables, barns, tool houses, wash houses, bath houses, and privies. The wooden structure at Los Peñasquitos could have originally been built or later used as a corn crib, a smokehouse, a wash house, or a bath house.

These last 4 ideas seem the most reasonable. Montell and Morse describe corn cribs in rural Kentucky extensively. They said that wooden cribs were seldom built after the 1900s and that these structures were easily translated into frame structures of a more contemporaneous nature (Montell and Morse 1976).

The possibility of it being a corn crib or any other type of storage facility must take in the fact of the slats. The slats lend the use of the building to utilize air current for some purpose, possibly a smokehouse, as Evangeline Mohnike Heisig remembered when she visited the ranch house on 4 May 1991. Mrs. Heisig lived at the ranch house after her father purchased it in 1910. But her memory was not totally clear, and the smokehouse possibility was framed in a persuasive fashion and she simply agreed.

This structure does not resemble a classic smokehouse. A smokehouse from the 19th century is described in Country Architecture by Lawrence Grow. He stated, "A well designed smokehouse was nearly airtight...had no windows...ideal building was constructed of brick or stone rather than inflammable wood" (Grow 1985:44). The structure at the ranch house does not fit that description, and the possibility of the structure being a drying shed is more likely.

At different times at the ranch house, there were large quantities of fruit grown in the orchards. The purpose of the building may have been to house the fruit before it

was sent off to town. It has also been suggested that its function might have related to the production of wine from the grape orchards in the canyon.

The other 2 reasonable possibilities are the wash and bathhouse theory. These 2 ideas must be further examined before they can safely be ruled out. I did examine the bathhouse that is well documented at Rancho Guajome, and the only comparison that could be inferred is the proximity of the cistern. The wooden structure at Los Peñasquitos is 10 m west of the cistern, so the correlation is possible but more investigation is necessary.

Redwood is the primary resource that was used in building this structure, so how can this reflect economic times? Redwood was not a common material in San Diego until the 1850s. Before this period this resource was not very accessible to the general population. With the onset of the California Gold Rush in 1849, this commodity found its market and also a work force to retrieve the redwood from Northern California. In September 1850 the first saw mill was built in Eureka and by 1853, over one hundred ships sailed from Humboldt Bay with 20 million board feet of this lumber. By 1863, there were over 300 mills over northern California, with the largest being in Mendocino (Anthrop 1977:17-32).

These dates give a reasonably accurate time frame of when large quantities of redwood started to be shipped off to San Francisco, Los Angeles and San Diego. With a jump in population and economic prosperity, San Diego had become a metropolis by the late 19th century. Long boats from the Pacific Northwest loaded with timber were making their way into San Diego Harbor to tap the market.

The ranch house had just changed hands in 1860 when Captain George Johnson bought half interest in the property from Diego Alvarado. The year before he had married Diego's sister Estefana (Ward 1984:4).

Johnson had made good money running a steamboat operation on the Colorado River

and he looked to San Diego for his future. The question of whether or not he built the wooden structure during his tenure is what we will examine first.

Economically, Johnson had the money to add onto and remodel the ranch. He was responsible for enlarging the adobe portion of the building, but the wooden structure's construction date was not mentioned in any records. Having searched the tax assessment records of the property from 1856 to 1873, there was only one record that mentioned buildings that were on his property. The tax assessment from 3 June 1865, under the heading of "other personal property" mentioned "house and outbuildings -- \$2,000.00" (San Diego Historical Society and Library Archives n.d.). But there was not a breakdown of the outbuildings at the ranch. This was common for the time period, because most tax assessments were only interested in cash.

The only inventory of buildings that I was able to find from the Johnson era was when the editor of the San Diego Union, W. Jeff Gatewood, visited the property to write a story. The story ran in the 26 April 1869 edition and Gatewood remarked:

The Captain's residence is not only commodious, but most conveniently planned and tastefully furnished; while the out-houses, barns, stables, milkhouse, wash-house and bathhouse are well adapted to the conveniences and pleasures of a gentlemen of taste and refinement (Gatewood 1869).

With no evidence of any other additions to the ranch house during the Johnson era, the question of construction moves into the hands of Jacob Taylor. Taylor acquired the land from the Commercial Bank of San Diego after Johnson defaulted on his payment on his deed to the land in 1882 (Ward 1984). Having searched the records of the transaction among the bank, Johnson and Taylor, there was no mention of any assets that took form in building property.

Taylor converted the ranch house into a hotel and made some improvements to the adobe buildings. Unfortunately there has

been no mention of any renovations other than to the main structures. It can be hypothesized that Taylor might have wanted to spruce up the ranch and might have installed new outbuildings for the tourists. But there is no definitive evidence to suggest such a happening. Redwood was available by the 1880s, so the possibility that this structure could have been built during this era cannot be ruled out.

With the new century upon San Diego, the ranch house changed hands once again. Charles F. Mohnike purchased the ranch in 1910 for \$150,000.00. He invested \$35,000.00 in "...corrals, stocks, barns and outbuildings..." (Ward 1984). With all of these new editions there is a high probability that the wooden structure might have been added at this time. An interesting correlation is that the existing barn at the Los Peñasquitos Ranch House is made out of redwood also. One might speculate that the left over wood was used in the construction of our smaller building. To further examine this question, a sample of each of the redwood needs to be analyzed to try and define any similarities in the origin of the wood. Until then, it can only be hypothesized that there is a correlation.

CONCLUSIONS

The 1991 Fall excavation season at Los Peñasquitos Ranch House has produced some important information concerning the poultry house. Although no definitive answer can be given concerning the original construction date and primary function of the building, the excavation provided a great opportunity to apply historical archaeology.

It can be summarized that the poultry house in Peñasquitos Canyon was most likely to have been built between 1882-1911. This period witnessed the exploitation of its beauty as a tourist get-away, and towards the end of this era, a return to a large live-stock ranch. The construction of new buildings and the remodeling of old ones were more common during this period.

The primary function of the Poultry House is still debatable, but there are 3 ar-

reas that must be further analyzed before a definitive answer can be given. First, the study of the floor structure in conjunction with the artifact assemblage must be completed. Next, the analysis of the redwood that was utilized in the construction of the poultry house and the large barn must be compared. Last, an intensive research program should be implemented to define the unique wooden slats and their utilitarian function.

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