

TALES of the TRAIL: Research unveils major discovery on Santa Fe Trail

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ABSTRACT

With artifacts, records and backing from experts, Lawson lays claim to owning a key location along the Santa Fe Trail -- the 19th century wagon train route to the Southwest. Today, the area where Becknell made the ferry crossing is dry due to the river's changing course, but in the 1800s the area provided one of the narrowest crossing points on the Missouri River -- a site known not only to Becknell, but to explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark.

FULL TEXT

Sep. 21--WARRENSBURG -- Historians have something new to add to the story of Western expansion, based on Rich Lawson's findings.

"It's one of the biggest discoveries on the Santa Fe Trail probably in the last hundred years," he said.

At the National Trails Systems Office for the National Park Service in Santa Fe, N.M., historian Frank Norris said the site is especially important to the first decade of trail use.

"During those critical years when the Santa Fe Trail began in old Franklin ... they would head off to Santa Fe, and the first and indeed only river crossing was right there at Arrow Rock. People would head across at Todd's Landing," Norris said.

With artifacts, records and backing from experts, Lawson lays claim to owning a key location along the Santa Fe Trail -- the 19th century wagon train route to the Southwest.

"My property is the easternmost terminus of the Santa Fe with any visible remains," Lawson said.

ACQUIRING THE PROPERTY

Lawson said he had no interest in buying the property near Arrow Rock and knew nothing about the land's history in 2005. The closest town, Franklin, has about 120 residents.

"It was one of those things -- a funny thing happened on the way to Arrow Rock. I already owned property down there," Lawson said, "and was not looking to own any more, but..."

Lawson's brother-in-law talked him into looking at the property.

"We drove up on top of the bluff and I said, 'Oh, my God, this is gorgeous. I just can't believe this.'"

Lawson bought the land for less than expected at an auction. Afterwards, he considered the topography and

wondered whether the river ever reached his bluff.

Lawson needed to research records and turned for guidance to William Foley, a Missouri historian, author and professor emeritus at the University of Central Missouri.

Foley said Todd's Ferry Landing appears to have been on Lawson's land.

"There's a very good case to be made that indeed that was probably the crossing based on some of the historical records that are there. It's pretty significant," Foley said.

Foley helped locate a map from the early 1800s that showed the river reaching Lawson's property -- something the river did then, but not now.

"In doing all this research ... I kept seeing these references to the ferry," Lawson said, and the Boonslick Road that Santa Fe Trail pioneers took to Franklin. "I'm thinking, if the ferry crossed onto my property and the Santa Fe Trail started in Franklin, they had to cross onto my property."

The land's first owner, Howard County Judge David Todd, uncle of Mary Todd Lincoln, gave his name to the ferry and the landing.

Using Todd's Ferry in the same year Missouri achieved statehood, William Becknell left for what is now Santa Fe, N.M. Becknell's path became known as the Santa Fe Trail.

"1821 was when William Becknell led the first group to Santa Fe and he was really pretty surprised when the Mexican government, or the people in Santa Fe, let him in," Norris said.

If Becknell had left for the trip earlier, he would have been turned away. The pre-revolutionary Spanish government of Mexico, Norris said, enacted a severe trade barrier and would have rejected Becknell, Norris said.

Today, the area where Becknell made the ferry crossing is dry due to the river's changing course, but in the 1800s the area provided one of the narrowest crossing points on the Missouri River -- a site known not only to Becknell, but to explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark.

"Lewis and Clark camped out right across the river from my property on their expedition, and in their journals they describe my property and how it's the best place for crossing. It's the narrowest point in the river and Indians had been crossing there for hundreds of years," Lawson said. "After the Lewis and Clark expedition, William Clark camped out on my property on his way to build Fort Osage. ... He talked about walking across my property, and carving in a tree, and firing off guns, and camping out."

Lawson's research makes such name-dropping easy, with notables associated with the property including Kit Carson and Daniel Boone's two sons, who ran the nearby Boonslick salt licks.

"There was a whole host of real important historic people who came across my property ... camped out up on top of my ground for a few days until the next wagon train ... headed on out across the prairie," Lawson said.

PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

Physical evidence brings the history of Lawson's land to life. After researching records, he realized an abandoned path on his property held great historical significance.

"What I thought was an old farm road contains the actual ruts and swales of the Santa Fe Trail," he said.

Bearing the weight of people and goods loaded into heavy wagons, wooden wheels by the thousands packed down the earth upon which they rolled, leaving an indelible impression on Lawson's land.

At other sites along the Santa Fe Trail -- from Missouri to New Mexico -- wagon tracks ruined by progress or vegetation can be difficult to make out. Lawson said his swales remain clear more than 160 years after Conestoga wagons pulled by oxen rumbled across his land.

"My tracks are deep. They cut down into a bank and then lead on across my property. You have no trouble seeing in fact that this is road track," Lawson said.

Norris said he visited Lawson's land.

"I'm reasonably convinced that those are the tracks. ... History happened right there," Norris said.

Lawson's land contains another physical feature of historical importance.

"Just west of the ferry landing itself, there are two manmade rock piles. I believe that those were places where, when the ferry came across, they unloaded. ... That's going to be one of the first area for archaeological digs. I'm hoping there we will find chains or cables or rings or some sort of metal fragments that will say, yes, this is where they tied up."

Missouri River flooding a couple of years ago gave Lawson an "ah-ha" moment. In the 1920s, the Missouri changed course and left Lawson's land dry, but the swollen river in 2007 returned to lap at the old bank on his property.

"The water comes up right to where it's supposed to be and the tracks of the trail go right down into the water," Lawson said. "The river's about a mile from me now, but when it floods it comes right back up to where it was."

ARTIFACTS

In addition to finding swales and the rock landing, pioneers left items at the site -- not the kind of materials to make a pirate drool, but items that help put the area into historical context.

"We've got a lot of artifacts that have been identified and categorized and dated by an archaeologist," Lawson said.

An archaeologist and the Fort Osage National Historic Site museum curator, John Peterson, reviewed items Lawson excavated from the site, including salt-glazed stoneware and pearlware fragments.

"They were from over a wide time period -- I would say from most of the 19th century," Peterson said. "Pottery is good for dating sites because the styles change so often."

Each style represents a period, and what Peterson viewed dated from the 1700s to the late 1800s.

Lawson also showed Peterson metal tomback buttons for clothing.

"He had a nice little collection," Peterson said. "They were common metal buttons that were made ... early to middle 19th century."

Various items match the pioneer period, he said.

"Without a doubt he had stuff that dated from the Santa Fe Trail era," Peterson said.

Some material predates the pioneers, which makes sense for a site used for millennia by natives and white explores, Peterson said. Items include glass trade beads and arrowheads.

"He had some prehistoric Indian stuff that dates back thousands of years and that wouldn't be uncommon in a nice site like that," Peterson said. "In fact, he had ... an early archaic point that goes back about 8,000, 9,000 years ago."

Lawson said he did not have to work hard to uncover the items.

"There's a lot of different things that have just scratched up on the surface and this is without any archaeological digging to get to those," Lawson said. "I'm sure that property has lost many, many artifacts because people have wandered over it for years. Whatever was on the surface, people have picked up."

Lawson is cautious about letting people on the site.

"I don't want many people swarming on my property on an archaeological dig. I want a smaller group, a professional group."

LOST STRUCTURES?

Whether Becknell or someone else built a cabin, animal pens or other structures on the site is speculation for now, but that could change. Lawson said the National Park Service, Department of the Interior, plans to use ground-penetrating radar imaging to look at what, if anything, exists underground.

Norris said he is not sure the Missouri River, known for wild fluctuation in size, would leave remnants of a structure, if built near the river.

"I'm pretty skeptical that anything would remain either surface or subsurface," Norris said. "You recognize that right at the base of that bluff you had intermittent Missouri River floods for 180 years since that 'period of significance.' ... When a flood comes along, sometimes it deposits materials and covers up archaeological material, and sometimes scrapes away."

Lawson said most river people understand flooding and would build on higher ground. He said he believes structures likely existed on the site.

Norris said the site will receive further review.

"We have not had an archaeologist come out there yet to give a good look at interpreting other things that may be up on the hill, there," he said.

In the meantime, Norris is working with Lawson to nominate the site to the National Register of Historic Places.

"That's the government's way of recognizing the historic importance of sites," Norris said.

THE NEXT CHALLENGE

With recorded evidence and experts giving credence to the claim that the Santa Fe Trail crossed his land, Lawson said he is beginning the task of retelling history.

"What I'm left with is cleaning up many, many years of inaccuracies in the trail story," Lawson said. "One of the big ones is that the Santa Fe Trail started in Independence. ... We predate that by 10 years."

"Historically, it began right here."

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