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Excavations at Stage Stations in Southwest Wyoming and the Stage Station at Fort Bridger

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Accepted: 7 November 2021 / Published online: 1 June 2022

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Abstract Stage stations were self-contained operations linked with other similar facilities via stage and freight lines that passed along the road system they served. Here we look at these self-sustaining stations in terms of their foodways and material cultural remains recovered through excavation. Excavations at the Fort Bridger Stage Station and Black Rock Stage Station in southwestern Wyoming allow us to provide some tentative conclusions about foods consumed at the stage stations. The excavations inform a growing body of data about lifeways in a sparsely populated part of the West in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Resumen Las estaciones de diligencias eran operaciones autónomas vinculadas con otras instalaciones similares a través de líneas de carga y de diligencias que pasaban a lo largo del sistema de caminos al que servían. Aquí observamos estas estaciones autosuficientes en términos de sus formas de alimentación y restos culturales materiales recuperados a través de la excavación. Las excavaciones en la Estación de Diligencias de Fort Bridger y la Estación de Diligencias de Black Rock en el suroeste de Wyoming nos permiten brindar algunas conclusiones provisionales sobre los alimentos

consumidos en las estaciones de diligencias. Las excavaciones informan un creciente cuerpo de datos sobre formas de vida en una parte escasamente poblada del Oeste estadounidense a fines del siglo XIX y principios del XX.

Résumé Les postes d'étape étaient des entreprises autonomes liées à d'autres établissements similaires via les lignes de diligence et de fret qui passaient le long du système routier qu'elles desservaient. Nous examinons dans cet article ces postes autonomes au regard de leurs habitudes alimentaires et de vestiges culturels matériels découverts dans le cadre de fouilles. Les fouilles entreprises aux postes d'étape de Fort Bridger et de Black Rock dans la partie sud-ouest du Wyoming nous permettent de tirer certaines conclusions provisoires sur les aliments consommés dans les postes d'étape. Les fouilles enrichissent un corpus croissant de données sur les modes de vie dans une partie de l'Ouest où la population était rare à la fin du 19ème et au début du 20ème siècle.

Keywords stagecoach stations · 19th-century stagecoach travel · 19th-century frontier foodways

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Introduction

Stage stations are iconic symbols of the “Old West.” Their actual operations involved a great deal of work, and, viewed from the day-to-day operational standpoint, the stage station is most recognizable as a “get ’er done”

kind of place. Stage stops served vital functions in remote areas. They proved crucial in providing food and water for travelers and animals, and most doubled as small ranches. Their primary roles included tending horses, repairing wagons, providing shelter, and looking after the needs of travelers. In southwest Wyoming, many served as post offices, trading posts, and, later, telegraph stations. And while all stations did not serve the same functions, the archaeological record indicates most met the variety of needs travelers and animals had.

To understand stage stations, it is illuminative to compare their functions (Sechrist 2014; Scheiber and Burnett 2020). Here we will compare the differences and similarities among 19th-century stage stations in southwest Wyoming by looking at the larger station at Fort Bridger, located on a transcontinental stage route, and the smaller, remote Black Rock Station in the Red Desert, located along Point of Rocks to South Pass stage road. We will also compare these two stations to other excavated stage stations in the area to illustrate their nature and function.

There are multiple ways to classify stage stations. A simple classification is to consider them in terms of whether they served transcontinental travel or local transportation needs. The transcontinental stage routes connected eastern settlements with the west coast. Lateral stage lines split off the transcontinental lines and served population centers in the interior West. After 1868, in Wyoming, these lateral lines originated at the Union Pacific Railroad and went to settlements not served by railroads. As more railroads were built in the West, the lateral routes went from those railroads to remote areas needing wagon freight and stage services. Transcontinental stage lines had swing and home stations. In a generalized sense, at home stations passengers were fed, horses changed, stagecoaches repaired, and, where available, telegraphs were used. Swing stations generally were places where horses were changed. Lateral stagecoach systems often did not have home stations. Each station on a lateral stagecoach line served multiple purposes.

Brief Historical Context

In the late 1850s and 1860s, stage stations were constructed at regular intervals along the major transcontinental stage routes through the state of Wyoming (Dines 1961; Erb et al. 1989). From the Platte River to Fort

Bridger along the Overland Trail, for a stretch of roughly 200 mi., 20 stage stations were built or upgraded between 1861 and 1862 (W. T. Jackson 1979, 1982; Frederick 1989). Each one of these buildings left an archaeological signature, and an analysis of what they contained provides insights into mid-19th-century life on a high-elevation steppe. These were not the only stage stations built in mid-1800s Wyoming. However, because the Overland Stage Company stations were efficient, they became a model for what was needed at a stage station in Wyoming (Figs. 1, 2).

Initially, the mails and stages from the east and west coasts passed over South Pass. From its inception in 1850 until 1862, mail stagecoach traffic from the Missouri River towns to Salt Lake City and San Francisco went up the Platte River Road to the Sweetwater River and across South Pass to Fort Bridger. As early as 1860, however, the idea of moving the route south gained traction. With the discovery of gold in Colorado in 1858 and the growth of Denver, merchants pressed to connect the city to California. The favored route connected Denver, Salt Lake City, and San Francisco via the “Cherokee Trail,” which roughly paralleled but was south of Bridger’s Pass (*Rocky Mountain Daily News* 1861a; Hafen 1969:219). The Central Overland California and Pike’s Peak Express Company preferred a route through Bridger’s Pass and made a direct proposition to Colorado settlers that the mail company would run its line west through Denver “if the citizens would agree to build the stations from that point to Fort Bridger and bridge the North Platte and Green Rivers” (*Rocky Mountain Daily News* 1861a; Hafen 1969:219). The *Rocky Mountain Daily News* “took the proposition seriously” and explained that “there should be hundreds willing to provide mail stations because of the abundance of work that would be offered by the mail company” (Hafen 1969:219–220). The company sweetened the proposal with the idea that “the company would pay the men for keeping stock, buy all the produce they could raise, and give each station keeper 160 acres of the mail company preemption claim” (Hafen 1969:220); compare *Rocky Mountain Daily News* (1861b). While the plans to build a new line percolated in 1861, the moving of the Overland Stage Company south to the “Cherokee Trail” did not occur. Mail would travel over South Pass until well into 1862.

The Central Overland California and Pike’s Peak Express Company, which controlled the eastern end of

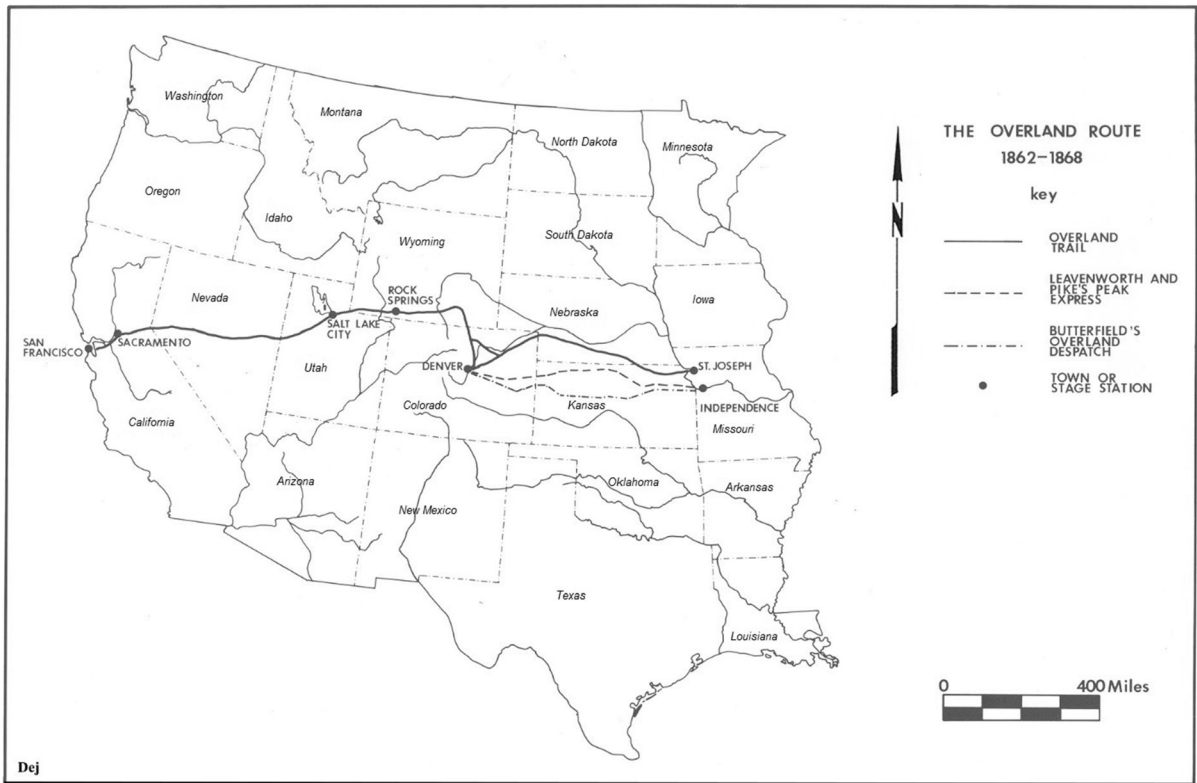


Fig. 1 Overview of the Overland Stage Company routes. (Map by David E. Johnson and A. Dudley Gardner, 2021.)

the mail line over South Pass, went deep into debt and borrowed money from Ben Holladay, “giving him a mortgage upon the line and equipment” (Hafen

1969:227). In historian LeRoy Hafren’s words, the “line was forced to the wall and at a public sale, Holladay purchased it for \$100,000 on March 21, 1862.

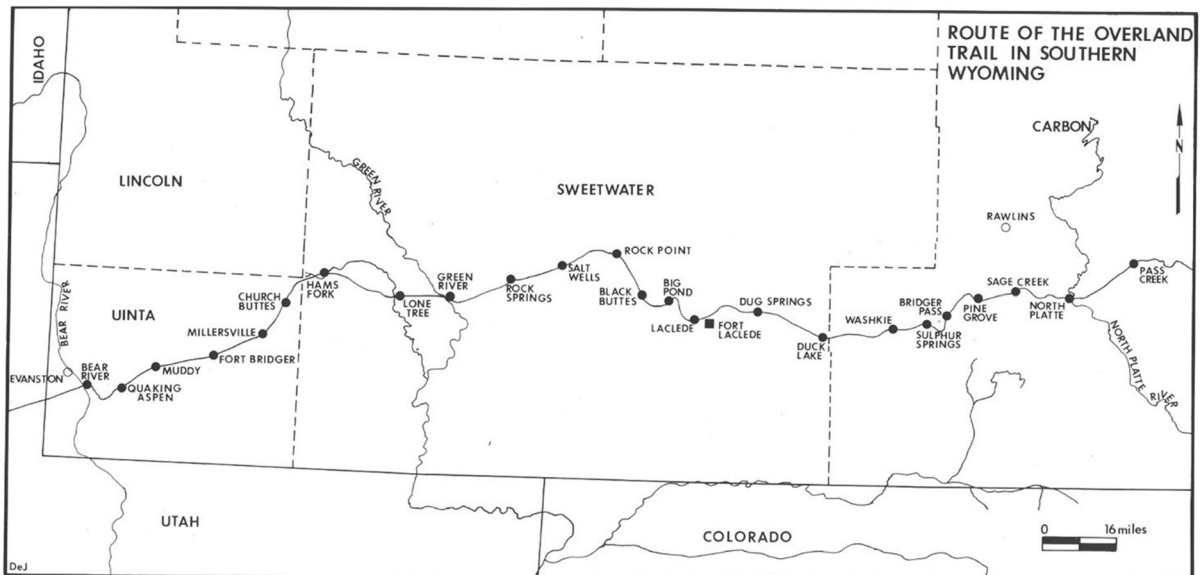


Fig. 2 The route of the Overland Trail from the North Platte to Bear River, Wyoming. (Map by David E. Johnson and A. Dudley Gardner, 2021.)

The company at that time owed him \$208,000” (Hafen 1969:227). Holladay knew how to organize and get things done. His goal: to get the stage and mail line operating at a profit.

In July of 1862, the Overland Stage Company was transferred from the North Platte Road south to the route over Bridger’s Pass. The reason, as stated by Hafen, was “[t]he Indian disturbances during the proceeding April and May upon the northern course was the excuse given by the Post Office Department for transferring the line” (Hafen 1969:231). But Hafen was wise enough to note there were other factors at play. A change had been seriously considered in 1861, and the route was shorter (Hafen 1969:231). Other reasons need to be considered, including the proximity of the trail to the Denver and Colorado goldfields (Hafen 1969:231–232). More significant, however, was that President Abraham Lincoln signed the Homestead Act on 20 May 1862 and the Railway Act on 1 July 1862, which provided federal subsidies in land and loans for the construction of a transcontinental railroad and authorized the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific to build these lines. The Union Pacific Railroad would travel along much of the same route as the Overland Trail. Mail, freight, and passenger travel would soon increase along this trail, as logistics had to be provided for railroad construction. Anyone raising cattle near the rail line could sell beef to the railroad crews. More importantly, land values would go up, if even only briefly. While most of the railroad construction activity would not occur until after the Civil War, a shrewd investor could see the potential for profits.

Whatever the reasons, in July of 1862 the mail and stage route was moved south. From 1862 to 1869, the Overland Trail benefited from having the U.S. Mail travel over the route. Constructing and stocking the stage stations involved incredible logistical organization. According to historians Frank A. Root and William E. Connelley (1901:486): “To manage all these lines ... required, on a rough estimate, about 500 coaches and express wagons, fully as many freight wagons, and some 5000 horses, mules, and cattle, the latter being used for freighting supplies for the stage company.” In terms of what was required at these stations, “[e]verything in the way of grain, hay, provisions, etc., had to be hauled over the line in wagons” (Root and Connelley 1901:486). In many cases, hay could be grown near the facilities. In his autobiography, William Henry Jackson, famed photographer of the West, noted in 1866 that cutting and putting

up hay at the South Bend Station¹ was as tough work as he ever did (W. H. Jackson 1940). South Bend was fortunate to have grass; places that did not have hay had to have it freighted in. All stage stops grazed horses near the station, turning the station into a ranching operation.

The stage stations had to be set at intervals to allow for a change of horses. Root and Connelley (1901:486) note: “The stations in the later years averaged about ten miles apart. About every fifty miles there was a ‘home’ station, so called because the driver’s route ended there. It was also the eating place for the passengers.” The stage stations between home stations came to be known as “swing stations.” The swing stations were smaller: “[T]hey consisted of a stable, granary, and room for two or three stock tenders. The ‘home’ stations were commodious buildings, arranged with sleeping-rooms, dining-room, office, telegraph office, barn, etc.” (Root and Connelley 1901:486).

The first through Overland stagecoach reached Denver on 12 September 1862 (Hafen 1969:232). Beginning in October of that year, the Denver *Rocky Mountain News* began to run ads for the “Overland Stage Line,” and this became the name by which the trail became more commonly known. Ben Holladay was awarded the mail contract from the Missouri River to Salt Lake City (Fig. 1). The contract was awarded for \$365,000 and ran from 1 October 1864 to 30 September 1868 (Hafen 1969:276). The same period saw an increase in passenger and express traffic. The *Daily Alta California* (1864:1) reported: “The travel from Denver to Salt Lake City is not so great, but from Salt Lake City to Virginia City [Nevada], the passengers are often in excess of the capacity of the coaches.”

With the completion of the transcontinental railroad through Wyoming in 1868, stage lines were developed north and south of the railroad to serve communities not served by rail. Unlike the transcontinental rail lines, these did not have the goal of crossing the nation but were designed to serve points not previously served by stage. The distance the stagecoach traveled north and south of the transcontinental railroad varied, but here we refer to these as “laterals.” Lateral stage lines were longer lived than the transcontinental lines, and some

¹ Also known as the Ham’s Fork Station and ultimately called “Granger” (Tanner 2009).

of the stage stations operated as such into the early 20th century (Burnett 2013).

Here we will compare the Carter Stage Station on the transcontinental stage line and the Black Rock Stage Station, located on the lateral stage line that served the South Pass mining district and Lander. Our goal is to briefly compare the archaeological signatures of both transcontinental and lateral stage stations from the standpoint of what they contained and how they evolved. The Carter Stage Station can be seen as prototypical of home stage stations built after 1862, while the Black Rock Stage Station evolved to contain elements similar to swing stations.

Fort Bridger (Carter) Stage Station

Few stage stations exemplify the nature of a home stage station better than the one at Fort Bridger. Dignitaries, such as Horace Greeley (in 1859) and Mark Twain (in 1861), went through this station prior to the Overland Stage Company taking over the facility (Greeley 1860; Twain 1872). The Pony Express (1860–1861) operated through there, and it became a mainstay of the Overland Stage Company (1862–1868). It was also through Fort Bridger that the first transcontinental telegraph passed. In one capacity or another, Fort Bridger Stage Station served travelers from 1858 to 1890 (Figs. 3, 4). After 1890, there is evidence of the other facilities adjacent to the stage station serving as a way point for travelers, with old fort buildings serving as gas stations and motels on the Lincoln Highway. In one way or another, Fort Bridger provided services for travelers from 1843 until the arrival of automobiles in the early 1900s. We will focus on the archaeological signature left by services to travelers in the 19th century.

Excavations at Fort Bridger

Archaeological excavations began at Fort Bridger in the late 1960s (Frison 1969; Walker 1979; Hauff and Scott 1983; Hauff 1984, 1985). Since the early 1980s, an attempt has been made to provide a more formulaic approach to understanding the stratigraphic contexts at the historical site (Gardner, Johnson, and Allen 1994; Gardner, Johnson, and Lammers 2011; Gardner and Lammers 2016). The largest block area was excavated within the area where Jim Bridger's original trading post, the Latter-day Saint Stone Fort, and the 1858–1865 U.S. military fort were all located.

There we excavated an area of 258 m², generating 109,101 artifacts (Gardner, Johnson, and Allen 1994; Gardner, Johnson, and Lammers 2011; Gardner and Lammers 2020). Significantly, the large-scale excavations were able to stratigraphically identify occupation sequences and attribute the artifacts to timeframes tighter than normally possible. Thus, such things as slag from blacksmith shops could be directly tied to specific timeframes, and generally non-diagnostic artifacts could be tied to a time sequence. Because of significant burning episodes in the area excavated and subsequent flattening of the floors for reuse, the burn horizons that seal occupation layers give a stratigraphic demarcation that provides, with a high degree of reliability, the time when an artifact was discarded or deposited at this location. The historical map reproduced in Figure 3 shows the location of Latter-day Saint fortifications and the "Sutler's Premises," also called the "Carter Complex," where a stage station operated from 1858 through the end of stage services in the late 19th century.² The complex was named after William A. Carter, who was the camp sutler for the U.S. Army in 1857. Carter began building the complex shortly after his arrival. It was here that stagecoaches stopped, the telegraph operated, and freight moved in and out of the facility.

Within the area of Jim Bridger's trading post and the Latter-day Saint fortification, five clearly definable archaeological sequences were identified. The block excavations associated with this endeavor are located south of the 1888 barracks, which serves as the current museum. Because of the significance of what was found in this area, the excavation results and the materials recovered in components dating from 1843 to 1890 should be briefly summarized (Gardner, Johnson, and Bower 1985; Gardner 1990, 1993a; Gardner, Johnson, Lindmier 1991; Gardner, Johnson, and Allen 1994; Gardner and Lammers, 2001, 2020). The deepest component, the Bridger occupation horizon (1843–1855), had 7,022 artifacts; the Latter-day Saint component (1855–November 1857) generated 23,571. The early military period (1857–1868) produced 39,286, and the late military period (1869–1890) contained

² It is difficult to set a terminal date on stagecoach services at Fort Bridger. In the early 20th century, Fort Bridger became a service center for early automobile travel on what would become the Lincoln Highway, and the structures at Fort Bridger, on the northeast end of the site, became a gas station and motel. In some ways, the fort transitioned to serving automobiles rather than vanishing as a travel center.

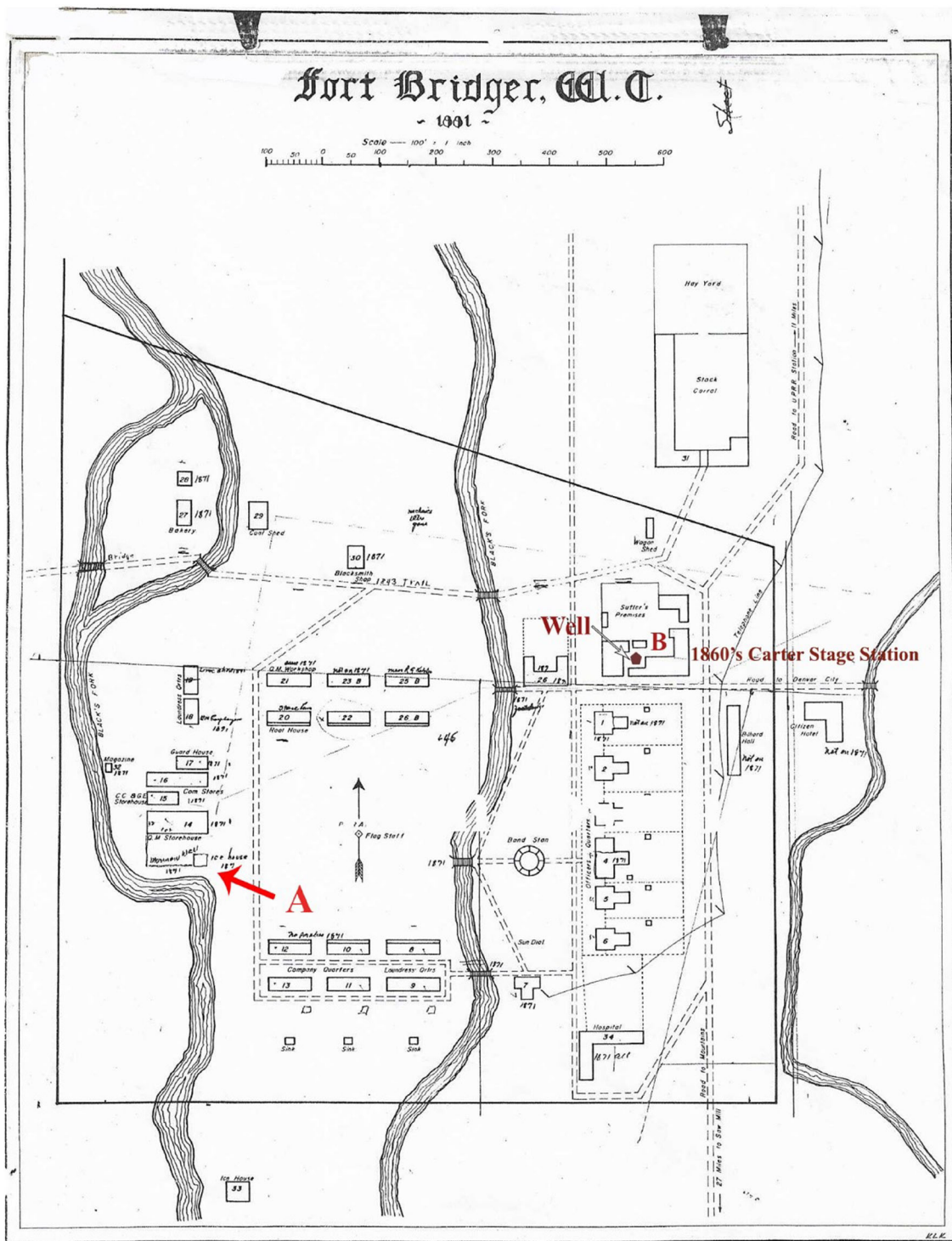


Fig. 3 An 1881 military map of Fort Bridger: The arrow at A points to the former location of the southeast wall of the Latter-day Saint fortification. Portions of the northern and western walls of the Latter-day Saint fortification are still intact. B is in the Carter Complex with the stage station below the letter and the well

marked by a polygon and arrow. This is the Carter well, shown in Figures 4 and 5. The milk barn in Figure 4 is north of the well, and the stage station is to the east of the well (Gardner, Johnson, and Allen 1994; Gardner and Lammers 2020). (Map courtesy of the Fort Bridger State Historical Site Archives.)



Fig. 4 The milk house at the Carter Complex at Fort Bridger with the water well in the *lower left foreground*. (Photo by A. Dudley Gardner, 2020.)

27,002. Because these artifacts can be attributed to a specific time period at Fort Bridger with a high degree of reliability, we can compare them to other areas at the fort and other sites within the region dating to the same period. This is particularly illuminating, not only in the types of artifacts used over time, but in the nature of the food consumed at the site. For example, because of the tight timeframes analyzed, we can compare the type of meat consumed by the military at Fort Bridger from 1857 to 1868 to that provided to stagecoach travelers at the Carter Complex during the same time period.

Food resources available to the inhabitants of Fort Bridger differed from those elsewhere in the area during the period from 1843 to 1868. Residents and stagecoach travelers had ready access to beef and, to a lesser degree, mutton. The tradition of cattle raising at and around the site developed early. Jim Bridger, in 1843, quickly became a cattleman, trading healthy animals to emigrants for their tired animals at a rate of two or three tired horses or oxen for one rested and well-fed animal. The profits were high in this trade. And, in his stage trip west, Horace Greeley commented on this trade, writing:

Eighteen miles more of perfect desolation brought us to the next mail company's station on Black's Fork, at the junction of Ham's Fork, two-large mill-streams that rise in the mountains south and west of this point, and run together into Green River. They have scarcely any timber on their banks, but a sufficiency of bushes—bitter cottonwood, willow, choke-cherry, and some others new

to me—with more grass than I have found this side of the South Pass. On these streams live several old mountaineers, who have large herds of cattle which they are rapidly increasing by a lucrative traffic with the emigrants, who are compelled to exchange their tired, gaunt oxen and steers for fresh ones on almost any terms. R. D., whose tent we passed last evening, is said to have six or eight hundred head; and, knowing the country perfectly, finds no difficulty in keeping them through summer and winter by frequently shifting them from place to place over a circuit of thirty or forty miles. J. R., who has been here some twenty-odd years, began with little or nothing, and has quietly accumulated some fifty horses, three or four hundred head of neat cattle, three [Native American wives], and any number of half-breed children. He is said to be worth seventy-five thousand dollars, though he has not even a garden, has probably not tasted an apple nor a peach these ten years, and lives in a tent which would be dear at fifty dollars. I instance this gentleman's way of life not by any means to commend it, but to illustrate the habits of a class. (Greeley 1860:66–67)

Greeley's depiction of what would come to be called "Granger" describes a stage station on the Blacks Fork about 30 mi. east of Fort Bridger. This station evolved over time; in 1859 it may not have been an elaborate establishment (Tanner 2009), but, nonetheless, had cattle available for trade or sale. Based on the faunal assemblage at the trading post at Fort Bridger and associated with the Carter Stage Station, cattle were not only traded, but consumed in large numbers. And, while Greeley notes First Nations women and children, he does not capture their role in trading along the route nor their engagement in food preparation for travelers and traders. Joel Palmer camped near Fort Bridger on 25 July 1845. He writes: "Here [there] are about twenty-five lodges of Indians, or rather white trappers' lodges occupied by their Indian wives." They had "dressed deer, elk, and antelope skins, coats, pants, moccasins, and other Indian fixens, which they trade low for flour, pork, powder, lead, blankets, butcher-knives, spirits, hats, ready-made clothes, coffee, sugar, and etc." The traders' wives were, according to Palmer, "mostly of the Pyentes and Snake Indians." For a horse, the going rate at Fort Bridger was "twenty-five to fifty dollars in trade" (Palmer 1847:35). According to the 1850 and 1860 U.S. censuses (U.S. Bureau of the



Fig. 5 The well in the Carter Complex (“Sutler’s Premises”) after excavation. The walls are made from limestone, and the conical-shaped well flairs outward at the bottom, making the bottom wider than the top. (Photo by A. Dudley Gardner, 2020.)



Fig. 6 Butchered large-mammal bone from the Carter well. More than likely this is from a cow (*Bos* sp.). (Photo by Martin Lammers, 2021.)

Census 1850, 1860), First Nations residents continued to contribute to trade at Fort Bridger.³ The pollen in the archaeological record implies the possibility that they continued to grind wild grasses, along with corn and wheat, with the manos found in the trading post (Cummings 1992a, 1992b). And, based on the lithic remains found in the Bridger horizon (1843–1855) and Latter-day Saint occupation component (Gardner 1993b, 1993c, 2000a, 2000b; Gardner and Lammers 2001), a mix of stone and iron tools was used to process meat, but cuts made by metal dominate the faunal assemblage from 1843 to 1868.

The Carter/Fort Bridger Stage Station had access to more local resources than did other stations along the Overland Trail. One obvious difference was that trout could be caught in the streams that flowed through the fort. Also, berries and biscuit root were available and could be processed by Shoshoni and Bannock inhabitants; this food was used to augment the diet of visitors and settlers, particularly in the years from 1843 to 1857. Among the things to which they had access were locally grown vegetables. Burned tomato seeds, for example, were found in the Carter well (Fig. 5). Also, Latter-day Saint settlers had grown wheat in the Bridger Valley and had even constructed a gristmill south of the fort (Gowans and Campbell 1975, 1976; Gowans 2003). When the Latter-day Saints left the valley in November of 1857 as part of a scorched-earth policy initiated by Brigham Young during the 1857 Utah War,⁴ they burned their fields and the gristmill, but, based on Greeley’s (1860) account, farmers had returned to the valley in 1859. Greeley writes that the Latter-day Saints “this season ... put under cultivation, with flattering prospects ... oats, barley, potatoes, peas, etc., ... and the enterprising growers have contracts for the supply of Fort Bridger at prices which will insure them a liberal return in case they realize even a moderate yield” (Greeley 1860:68). Earlier evidence of the farming skills of

³ The 1850 U.S. census for Fort Bridger shows over half of the 46 residents at the fort were First Nations. Of the 27 First Nations residents, 19 were female, with the oldest male in this group being 15. Essentially, the older females were raising their children at the fort. In 1850 there were six First Nations females over 18 at the trading post. These six individuals were generally married to traders at the fort. Joel Palmer (1847) claims it was the Indian wives who were the principal traders at the post. As an aside, all 27 First Nations residents were listed as being born in Utah Territory. In the 1860 census, in the totals for the Fort Bridger Post Office, 39 are listed as “Indians” and 31 as “W[hite].”

⁴ Historically this is also called the “Mormon War.” The scorched-earth policy was designed to deprive the U.S. Army of food and grass for the troops when they marched into Utah in 1857.

the “Saints” was found in the paleobotanical record from the excavations south of the museum and the excavation of the Carter well adjacent to the original Carter Stage Station (Cummings 1992a, 1992b; Puseman [2023]). Wheat, barley, and corn (maize) are evident in the macrobotanical assemblage, along with possible turnips and biscuit root in the Latter-day Saint fortification (Cummings 1992a, 1992b; Puseman [2023]).

The Carter well, which provided residents and stagecoach passengers water, was dug to a depth of 2.5 m below surface. Where the well was excavated the water table is shallow and can be encountered at a depth of 1 m in wet years and at about 1.8 m in dry years. The well, dug into a Pliocene gravel bar, had a natural gravel lining at the bottom. At a depth of 2.1 m, a circular limestone block wall was built that extended from that depth to the surface. The limestone wall is conical, with the diameter of the wall at the water level wider than at the top of the well. In terms of food resources, the well waters preserved both bone and macrofloral remains extremely well. In the Carter well, peach pits, peanut shells, pecan shells, and hazelnut shells were found (Puseman [2023]). A variety of faunal remains was also found. From the well, we recovered cut large-mammal bones, chicken bones, and turkey (Fig. 6). The faunal and floral assemblage points to a diverse diet, but the number of cut large-mammal bones indicates beef was a principal part of the diet, which correlates with the historical accounts.

Carter’s well also contained several personal items. We recovered a fine, thin, wired hairpin and a variety of seed beads ($n=5$). We also found a belt buckle with a thin brass tarnish and a zipper pull with the word TALON impressed (Fig. 7). What is interesting is that the residents dumped ash into the well. Sorting out when the ash was thrown in the well is challenging, since William Carter’s former home west of the well burned down in 1931, and ash from that fire fell into the water.⁵ Nonetheless, slag and clinkers found at the bottom of the well probably came from either the cooking and heating stoves in the complex or from the blacksmith shop.

Blacksmith activities were essential to operate a stage station effectively. From 1843 until the fort closed in

1890, a blacksmith shop of some sort operated at Fort Bridger. It appears that, at times during the military period spanning 1857–1890, two blacksmith shops operated at the site. The first was the military smithy, the second was the one in the Carter Complex. Good blacksmiths with forges or shops made available to them were key to a well-run stagecoach line. Carter’s blacksmith shop served to repair freight wagons and stagecoaches, shoe horses, make nails, and repair and even make tools. Blacksmith shops found in excavations at stage stations (Tanner 1995:29, 2009:113; Burnett 2013:185,199,210) are often identified by the slag associated with them. The Carter Complex exhibits slag on the surface and in the well. We think, however, that the blacksmith shop was in or near the stables, not near the well.

Horace Greeley, in 1859, did note the coach stopping for repairs at a makeshift blacksmith shop west of Fort Bridger, along the Bear River. He writes:

[D]rove down to Bear River, only three or four miles distant, for breakfast. We halted before crossing, beside what is here called a grocery, the only other structure on that side of the river being a blacksmith’s shop (consisting, I believe, of a bellows and anvil under the open sky), to which some part of our rigging was sent for repair, while we prepared and ate breakfast. (Greeley 1860:69)

The Carter Complex, as a home station for the Overland Stage, had a more elaborate shop, but repairs had to be made whenever needed, and even small stations like Black Rock in the Red Desert had blacksmith facilities of some sort.

Black Rock Station

The Union Pacific Railroad was completed across the future state of Wyoming in 1868. Almost overnight, stagecoach lines were created that ran from the railroad to South Pass, where gold had been discovered in 1866. One of those lines ran from Point of Rocks, east of present Rock Springs, across a section of the Red Desert to the new mining areas (Fig. 8). Black Rock Station was created along that line.⁶

⁵ As a result of the 1931 fire, the well was closed by the stuffing of timbers from the burned home into the well. This complicates sorting out the earlier ash deposits from the 1931 deposits.

⁶ Because of past vandalism at this stage stop, we are using a regional name for the station, not the site’s formal name.

Fig. 7 Zippers, buckles, and beads from the Carter well excavation. (Photo by Martin Lammers, 2021.)



The stage station was built near a spring in the desert. However, nearby there was little grass, wood for building, or coal for blacksmithing. The sole reason for constructing the station where it was built was that it was the only place along the line near water. Also, there was sandstone nearby that could be shaped and made into good walls. There, in late 1868, a two-room stone structure was built. The stone proved durable in the desert. Black Rock, with its two rooms, was built very much like a swing station along the Overland Trail.

Based on excavations, it appears the structure that served as the historic stage station was in use from the late 1860s to the early 20th century. Sometime in the late 19th century the building burned, and the timbers that made up the flat roof collapsed to the floor. These timbers were aspen, and many were not removed. Instead, the home's occupants left the timbers in place and leveled the floor by covering it with a white clay from the creek banks to the south. This clay layer above the burn was likewise leveled and packed down. After the fire, a new roof was set in place, and when the structure was abandoned, the sandstone walls and roof material fell on the more recent floor covering. The more recent floor is now covered with wall fall and roofing material.

Our excavations centered around the interior of the building. The two-room structure measured roughly 12 m from north to south and 5 m east to west.⁷ The structure and rooms are rectangular in shape and orient along a north–south line with the front door facing south toward a small creek. The road to South Pass is just about 20 m east of the building. Excavation units were set up in each room and a total area of 4 m² excavated.⁸ In all, 6,277 artifacts were recovered; of this number, 4,452 are iron fragments, 1,229 glass fragments, and 151 items of brass. Slag ($n=5$) and coal ($n=5$) were found inside the structure. We found 52 window-glass fragments, suggesting the structure had windows at one time. Mold-blown glass fragments ($n=157$) were found in the excavation, reflecting the bottles and glass containers inside the structure (Figs. 9, 10, 11).

Food resources found in excavation are not as diverse as they were at the Carter Complex. In terms of faunal

⁷ These are incomplete measurements due to wall fall and unexcavated collapsed walls.

⁸ This does include a 60 cm × 1.5 m area that was excavated to clean up a pot-hunter's trench. This trench was excavated, we think, after a metal-detector gave a solid strike and the pothunters exposed a 1 m long iron "grader blade." This blade was left in place by the looters and collected during our excavation. We think it is a blade from a horse-drawn road grader.

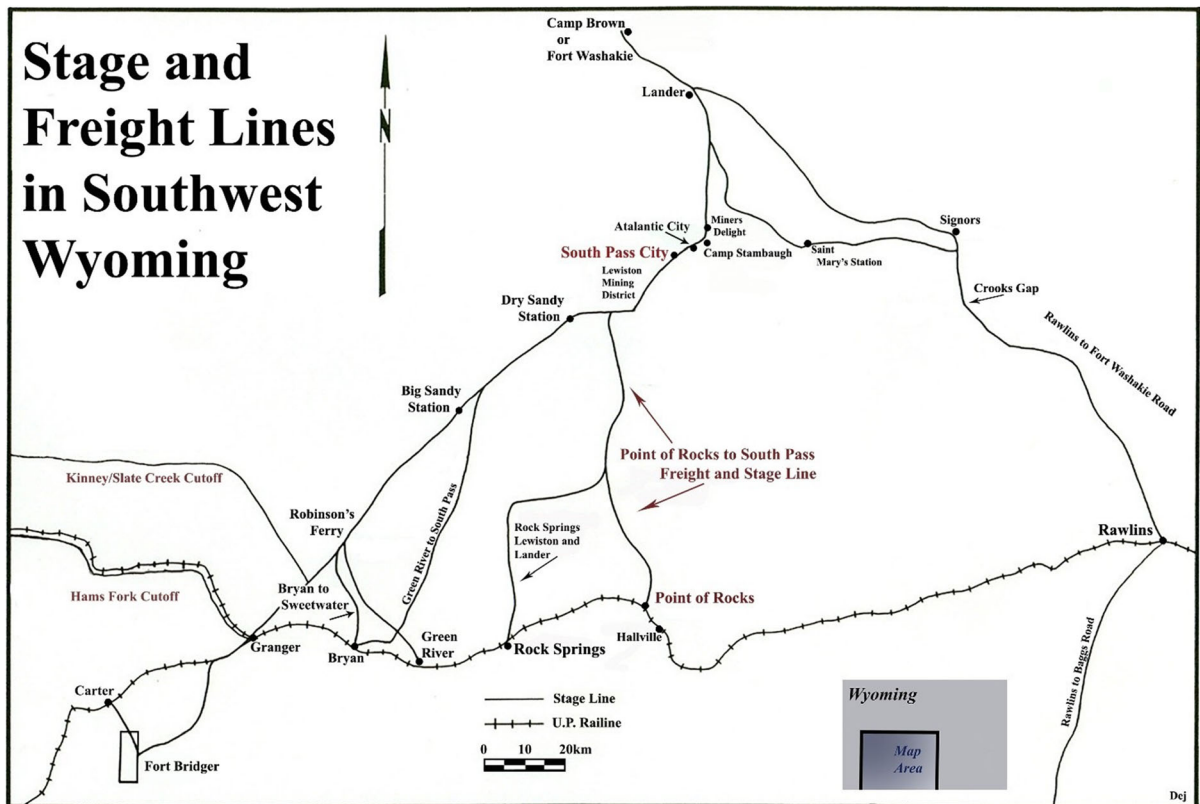


Fig. 8 Stagecoach and freight lines off the Union Pacific Railroad line after 1868. (Map by David E. Johnson and A. Dudley Gardner, 2021.)

remains, cut bones from cattle (*Bos* sp.) and possibly sheep (*Ovis* sp.) were recovered. We also found eggshells. Underneath the floor in the burned remains, we found remnants of a charred burlap sack with wheat grains inside.

Based on the historical record, the operators of the station ran a sheep, horse, and cattle venture, with sheepherding being the dominant enterprise (*Rock Springs Miner* 1893:4, 1915:1). Charles Rador ran the sheep and freighting enterprises at the site in the later part of the 19th century. In the historical record, station owner/operator Charles Rador is known to have had horses at Black Rock for his freight and stagecoach operations. The archaeological excavation generated a large number of horseshoe and cut nails ($n=411$).⁹ While the excavations were confined to the interior of what appears to have been the home and main room for the stage keeper, the assemblage suggests horse tack

⁹ Further work needs be undertaken to refine the use of the cut and forged nails in this assemblage.

was kept in the building. In addition to the nails, leather and seven fasteners, possibly for bridles, were recovered. Only one horseshoe was recovered, but since we were not excavating in the blacksmith shop, this might be expected.

We do know that women and children probably lived at or visited the site. This is confirmed in part by the historical record and items recovered in excavation. Charles Rador had one daughter and three sons (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1910) (compare *Rock Springs Rocket* [1918:1]). Charles and wife Mary possibly lived at Rador Springs only briefly. The 1900 census lists him as a freighter at Point of Rocks, the railroad terminus for the stage and freight lines to the goldfields at South Pass. Mary Agnes Taggart married Charles in Rock Springs on 8 January 1890. She first appears in the 1880 census in Wyoming at Point of Rocks. Born in England in 1871, she spent most of her early life in and around Point of Rocks. Charles first appears in Point of Rocks in the 1890s (*Rock Springs Miner* 1892:1), but it is possible he arrived earlier, as he was 33 when he got

Black Rock Station 48SW3328

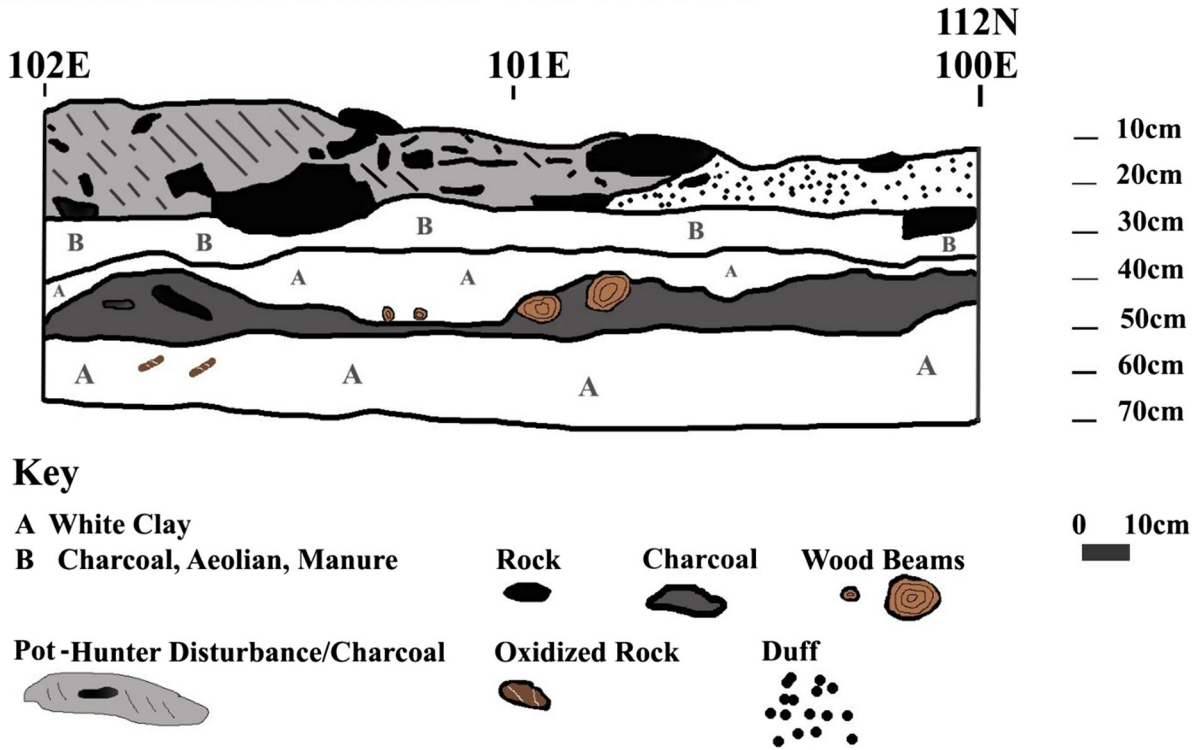


Fig. 9 Profile of 100E to 102E along 112N at Black Rock Station. (Drawing by A. Dudley Gardner, 2021.)

married. Together, they had four children: Joseph (b. 1890), Mamie (b. 1891), Clarence (b. 1892), and Charles (b. 1898). In the 1900 census, Charles is listed as working on a “road ranch.” He owned his house (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1900). Charles ran both sheep and freighted goods north from Point of Rocks through the western Red Desert. It may be that freighting provided

more profits than ranching because, in the 1910 census, Charles’s occupation is listed as “freighter hauling with teams.”

What we do know is that, at the turn of the century, Charles Rador used the Overland Stage Station at Point of Rocks for his freight operations. We also know from newspaper accounts that he ran sheep near the Black



Fig. 10 Silver necklace piece found during the excavation at the Black Rock Station. (Photo by Martin Lammers, 2021.)



Fig. 11 Clay marble found during the excavation at Black Rock Stage Station. (Photo by Martin Lammers, 2021.)

Rock Station and to the north, along Jack Morrow Creek. Mary Rador had lived in the area for some time, and it was reported

Mrs. Charles Rador first lived in the [Point of Rocks Overland] Stage Station as a girl—later she occupied it for 14 years when her husband used it as his ranch headquarters. Her father, Lawrence Taggart, a pioneer section foreman of the Union Pacific railroad company, moved to the station buildings in 1877 from Washakie (now Wamsutter), occupying the place for several years before moving to Rock Springs. During the Taggart period, one room was used as a school building, with Mrs. Taggart as schoolteacher. Later, it was used as the freighting headquarters for Halter-Flick and Halter-Rador in freighting from Point of Rocks to mines and ranches at South Pass and in the Wind River Valley, through the Sands. (*Wyoming Trails* 1957:14)

The last statement in the newspaper article is significant, as the Black Rock Station provided fresh horses for wagons having to travel through the heavy sand of the Killpecker Dune Field to the north. We might never know whether the Rador family lived at the station. We do know that “in 1897 Charles Rador moved his family into [Point of Rocks Overland Stage Station] repairing it to make it habitable” (*Wyoming Trails* 1957:14). From that time to 1910, “when the Radors erected a home across Bitter Creek in Point of Rocks, the Radors occupied the station and based their sheep raising operations from it.” Mary kept the business running after Charles’s death in 1918, and in 1926 she sold it to Mr. and Mrs. Mike Zanoni (*Rock Springs Miner* 1953).

There is an indication that children and females were at the Black Rock Station either as visitors or residents. A clay marble and a part of a woman’s necklace were recovered inside the station (Figs. 10, 11); these could have been dropped by passengers, but they could also indicate a family lived here, even if only briefly. In addition to the necklace, we uncovered five mother-of-pearl buttons. One hundred and fifty-two ceramic sherds were found (earthenware), as were twenty-four pieces of crockery. While none of these items alone indicates the gender of the occupants, we know Mary was actively involved in the family business, and after Charles’s death in 1919,

she kept the company profitable enough to sell. There is little doubt that she knew how the Black Rock Stage Station fit into the freight and stage business operating out of Point of Rocks.

Discussion

There are striking similarities among the stage stations in Wyoming. All stations had to tend horses in one way or another. In fact, animal husbandry was an essential part of the duties of running a stage station. It made sense to diversify one’s herds and tend cattle and/or sheep along with horses. Since the station had to provide fodder for horses, it might as well have had other animals that that could be eaten or sold. It appears that, in southwest Wyoming, most if not all small stage stations became road ranches, and the operators used their herds to generate revenue.

The personal items the residents and travelers left behind included basic clothing accessories, such as buttons and buckles, but also beads for trading and adornment, jewelry, and even a child’s clay marble. Stage-station life was a hardworking life, but it would seem that there was room for play and a touch of finery.

One sure way to have a miserable winter in Wyoming is not to have adequate fuel. Wyoming stage stations shared the need to have fuel for cooking and heating. Where wood was absent, coal was burned. Even Jim Bridger had a coal mine from which he got coal for his blacksmith shop. At both Fort Bridger and Black Rock there was evidence of coal use in the archaeological remains.

We know that things changed dramatically at stage stations following the arrival of the transcontinental railroad in 1868. This is especially true of food consumption. One comparator illuminates this change: peaches.

The excavations in the Latter-day Saint fortification at Fort Bridger provided an extensive, dated data set that helps reveal changes in food consumption. As already mentioned, as a result of these large-scale excavations we were able to identify occupation sequences stratigraphically and attribute the artifacts to timeframes tighter than normally possible. The analysis also extended to food resources. From 1843 to 1853, the archaeological record indicates the site occupants at Fort Bridger had access to saltbush (*Atriplex* spp.); *Chenopodium* spp.; tansy mustard (*Descurainia* spp.); common fig

(*Ficus carica*); wild strawberry (*Fragaria* spp.), raspberry, blackberry, etc. (*Rubus* spp.); and wild grapes (*Vitis* spp.) (Puseman 2016). The Latter-day Saint occupation horizon (1855–1857) contains evidence of domesticates becoming an important food resource. Evidence of wheat was found in the excavations in the Latter-day Saint component (Cummings 1992a:2). Wheat became a staple in the area by the 1860s, but not all stage stations had equal access to that food resource. What is intriguing is that, by the late 19th century, remote stations like Black Rock had wheat stored at the station. And by the late 1800s, peaches and walnuts appear in deposits at the Carter Station, and peach pits were found in the excavation at Black Rock. These food sources are absent in the pre-1860 deposits in the areas we excavated at Fort Bridger.

With the arrival of the railroad in 1868, Black Rock Stage Station came into existence to serve northward-bound passengers traveling to the goldfields at South Pass and beyond. The Carter Station also served travelers to South Pass and south into Utah. The railroad not only brought passengers, it brought items like fresh peaches that were not readily available prior to the completion of the transcontinental railroad. Canned peaches must have the pits removed, so peach pits reflect fresh fruit on site for part of the year. In addition, cereal grains at the site reflected broader access to food resources. Wheat cannot be grown at Black Rock, but it can be grown in the Fort Bridger Valley. Places like Black Rock had to have grain and fruit shipped in, and the presence of both at the stage station suggests a supply system existed to bring food resources to the site.

The rich diversity of food resources found in pre-1860 occupation deposits at Fort Bridger shows that plant-food variety existed, but with the advent of the railroad the array of food types increased. The Carter well assemblage had pecan and hazelnut shells, peanuts, peach or apricot pits, tomato seeds, and watermelon seeds. Black Rock had peach pits. The Carter Stage Station was much closer to the railroad (13.7 km) than Black Rock (27 km).¹⁰ It would be natural to assume greater diversity at Carter was due to its proximity to the railroad. What is evident at both late 19th-century sites is that peaches began to appear in the archaeological record after 1868. In some ways, peaches are a luxury.

Near Fort Bridger in 1859, Horace Greeley notes the lack of peaches in this excerpt, mentioned earlier. He

writes on 8 July 1859: “He [J. R.] is said to be worth seventy-five thousand dollars, though he has not even a garden, has probably not tasted an apple nor a peach these ten years, and lives in a tent which would be dear at fifty dollars” (Greeley 1860). While he had much, the man named “J. R.” did not have peaches. The peach shortage in southwest Wyoming stage stations was remedied with the arrival of the railroad.

Stage stations, such as the home station at the Carter Complex and the smaller station at Black Rock, served as vital hubs for travelers and provided a livelihood for residents in southwestern Wyoming in the latter half of the 19th century. Recent archaeological excavations, combined with historical records, reveal much about how they were constructed and provide a window into the people, occupations, fuel, and food that sustained them.

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¹⁰ These distances are in a straight line.

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