

Obed: Death of a Mormon Colony

Alan Ferg, Arizona State Museum

AN APPARENTLY IDEAL LOCATION turned dangerous not long after the Mormon colonists chose the site on which to build the Obed Fort in 1876. The site was located next to two freshwater springs feeding a lush cienega, full of cattails and fish, that the Mormon colonists named Obed Meadow. With a source of easily quarried sandstone nearby, the colonists, including Edmond Nelson (see page 3), built a stone fort in about six weeks in the withering heat of the summer. Colonists' journals recorded that it was 12 rods (198 feet) on a side, with bastions on the northeast and southwest corners, and walls 9-10 feet tall that were two to three feet thick at the base and tapered toward the top. It is unclear if the south wall was ever built to its intended height.

Then people started getting sick. In the fall of 1877, the settlers recorded an outbreak of "Malaria fever and ague," with so many falling ill that there were not enough healthy people to care for the sick. By December, the most massive of the Little Colorado forts lay abandoned, the majority of the survivors moving to Brigham City.

What happened? The mosquito species known to carry malaria, *Anopheles freeborni*, is present in the area today, and could also have been present in the 1870s. But nearby Joseph City did not suffer from this outbreak, and it has been argued that the culprit was more probably typhoid, resulting from inadvertent contamination of the springs. Obed was the only colony that used surface water for domestic use; the other three all used wells. Whatever the cause, Obed's proximity to its springs and Obed Meadow was its undoing.

After 1884, the abandoned fort was reportedly used as a corral by the Hashknife cowboys of the Aztec Land and Cattle Company and was later torn down. Its stones were first reused to line a farming reservoir, and then utilized as riprap for the bridge across the Little Colorado River to Joseph City. When archaeologists

were working at Brigham City (see page 6), they often heard about Obed, but no one could pinpoint where it was located. Research using historical documents and maps led to the "rediscovery" of Obed in 1995 (see page 3), about three miles south of Joseph City. It was bisected by a Navajo County road adjacent to DeSpain's LX Ranch. With permission from the landowners—the Aztec Land and Cattle Company, Arizona Public Service, and the Navajo County Highway Department—and the encouragement of Milton and Jay DeSpain—test excavations over the next three years by Arizona Archaeological Society members revealed most of the foundations of the Obed fort.

It was exciting to prove that the historical descriptions of the fort were extremely accurate, including the improbable-sounding three-foot-wide foundations. The layout of Obed was virtually identical to those of the Brigham City and Sunset forts: a square with circular bastions on the northeast and southwest corners. Evidence for only one internal structure was found. Because the structure was so well preserved, it may have been built later by the Hashknife cowboys, though its fireplace was identical in construction to those found at Brigham City and to a nineteenth-century Mormon house in nearby Woodruff. Artifacts were extremely scarce; with such a short occupation, and systematic abandonment, probably few items were left at Obed.

Obed Meadow dried up after the 1960 construction of the Cholla Power Plant lowered the local water table. The mosquitoes are gone, but so are the cattails and fish. Now this part of the valley is like much of the rest—a marginal pasture for cattle browsing among the camelthorn, with fourth- and fifth-generation ranchers hoping for rain.



Looking down on the foundation of the southwest bastion, with an interior diameter of 10 feet, and the 3-foot-wide western wall extending to the north.



The southeast corner of the fort, looking down the length of the south wall, with Arizona Archaeological Society volunteers spaced every 20 feet.

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