



Letting the Landscape Speak: Values and Challenges of “Historic Abandonment” Design and Management at Fort Bowie National Historic Site

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This Ill-fated Pass, the name of which has long been a terror to the hapless white man who must make his way through. It was no less an object of dread and bloody memory to the Apaches themselves, for in its treacherous windings, many a brave has met his death.¹

Introduction

Set in the exposed heartland of Chiricahua Apache territory, Fort Bowie played a major role in the Indian Wars (Figure 1). Abandoned in 1894, Fort structures were dismantled by scavenging neighbors and the remaining adobe walls began to crumble, returning slowly to the soil. Congress authorized acquisition of 1,000 acres in 1964 to preserve the fort’s ruins and the landscape of Apache Pass. Mission 66 plans for a road, picnic area, parking lot, visitor center—and even an aerial tramway—came and went. Because of landscape challenges and politics, development funds did not materialize until decades later. Without funding, planners instead proposed what was, at that time, an original development philosophy called “historic abandonment.” They would leave the landscape untouched and unobstructed by the usual park facilities. This philosophical decision still protects one of the most unusual historic parks. Today, visitors discover the landscape’s ongoing influence and the ruined fort on their own as they hike the dreaded Apache Pass. Yet that decision has in the past and still presents significant ecological and management challenges to park managers who strive to preserve viewsheds and ruins and provide minimal facilities for visitors and staff.

Apache Pass is a narrow valley squeezed between north and south components of the Chiricahua Range (Figure 2). It offered a tiny opening to westward travelers during the California gold rush.

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Figure 1. Fort Bowie as seen from Overlook Ridge was located at the eastern end of Apache Pass. Until 1886, Fort Bowie played a central role in the execution and conclusion of the Indian Wars. Image by A.F. Randall, September 1886, at the conclusion of the Geronimo Campaign. View looking southeast. Fort Bowie National Historic Site Photo Collection

Apache Pass's most important feature, however, is Apache Spring, a rare perennial water source in the southeastern Arizona desert.² Possession and control of that water and surrounding landscape were critical for both Chiricahua Apache who regularly camped at Apache Pass and for the U.S. Army who recognized its strategic military value during the Civil and, later, Indian Wars.

History

This landscape was acquired with the Gadsden Purchase in 1854. John Butterfield proposed a stagecoach line across the Southwest and through the pass to carry mail and passengers between Saint Louis and San Francisco. Cochise, the Apache leader of the Chokonon band, allowed Butterfield to build a stage station near Apache Spring and to transit unmolested.

In 1861, that agreement fell apart when a young lieutenant from Fort Buchanan falsely accused and deeply offended Cochise of abducting a young boy. The confrontation at the stage station rapidly escalated into seized hostages on both sides; both sets of hostages were murdered later in retribution. The confrontation and murders aroused a 12-year conflict between Cochise and the U.S. military and all Americans who passed through or settled in the Chiricahua territory.³

Shortly thereafter, southern states declared war on the North, and all military troops departed from the region. In 1862, California Volunteers marched eastward to defend Arizona and New



Figure 2. Apache Pass is a narrow defile squeezed between north and south components of the Chiricahua Mountain Range. The Spanish Army called it “El Puerto Del Dado” or the Gate of Chance. It offered a tiny opening to westward travelers during the California gold rush. This western approach to Apache Pass illustrates the wildness of the park landscape. View looking east. Arrow points to location of historic Fort Bowie as seen in Figure 1. Photograph by R.L. Pinto, 2017.

Mexico from incursions by Confederate troops. After a long trek across a waterless plain, 300 Volunteers with their animals approached the stage station and spring. Cochise’s band supported by other Apache reinforcements were ensconced in the surrounding hills; they attacked, firing down upon the men from behind constructed stone breastworks. Finally, with the aid of two mountain howitzers and a daring assault up the nearby ridge, the troops routed the Apaches and gained access to that critical water. Those killed at the Battle of Apache Pass became the first of many interred in Fort Bowie’s cemetery.⁴

Commander Carleton, recognizing the importance of Apache Pass as a transportation route and a vital source of water, ordered establishment of a permanent fort to secure its location. Fort Bowie played a central role in the execution and conclusion of those Indian Wars through 1886. From the summit of Bowie Mountain, heliograph messages were transmitted to those troops who trailed and finally captured Geronimo and the last of the Chiricahua Apaches.⁵

Development

Fort Bowie was originally proposed as a national monument in 1937. World War II and the Korean War, however, intervened before the proposal could receive serious attention. Finally, in 1964, Congress passed legislation authorizing NPS to acquire private lands in Apache Pass. The legisla-

tion limited the park to 1,000 acres and allocated \$500,000 for purchase and development of the site. The incipient unit would be administered by Chiricahua National Monument, 30 miles away.

The job of transforming Fort Bowie from paper to reality was handed to a young and energetic acting regional historian, Bill Brown. Bill, who recently passed away, was a wonderful, highly opinionated, and brilliant philosopher. A significant player at many historical sites in the Southwest, he became a key man during the early years of the Alaska parks. He also wrote for the George Wright Society journal, *The George Wright Forum*, in the guise of “Letters from Gustavus.”

Brown was captivated by the prospect of creating a park in this unaltered, windswept landscape. Before a planning team was assembled, he penned a philosophy for Fort Bowie that is positively lyrical among NPS documents. His words, besides being powerful, have defined this most unusual park ever since.

Long before the master plan is completed, decisions will be made affecting the ultimate development of Fort Bowie. Some decisions have already been made—in the form of commitments to Congress, landowners, and the Bureau of Land Management. Before the fate of the site is further sealed, the warp fully strung on the loom, it seems to me that a statement of doctrine is needed to establish a governing philosophy of development at Fort Bowie.

The eroded adobe ruins of the first and second forts, the ruins of the stage station, the Apache Spring, and the ruts in the soil by which emigrant and stage-coach may be followed, all set against a natural backdrop nearly untouched by the hand of man, afford a unique opportunity to visualize the drama and meaning of an important segment of frontier history.

The overriding fact about Fort Bowie is its impact on the emotions of the visitor. To be alone at Fort Bowie is to be frightened. The complex of looming mountains and rough terrain, of heat and hostile vegetation, of rattlesnakes and forsaken ruins in the setting of awful isolation produces an overwhelming unseen dread.... In short, Fort Bowie is haunted.

Fort Bowie and Apache Pass do cast a spell—a spell compounded of isolated, wild atmosphere and sinister mood. This is a fragile thing.... Here, at no other historic site in the system, the factors of isolation and covering topography make possible complete exclusion of intrusive developments from core historical sectors of the site.

To the extent possible, Fort Bowie should be left in its wild state. The ruins should not be cleaned up and manicured. Granted the central ruins of the Fort must be accessible, they must be stabilized, and bona fide trash and junk removed. But let our touch be subtle. Let us not desecrate the forsaken, lonely mood that smites today’s visitor.⁶

Despite Brown’s exhortations, this was still the era of Mission 66 when even basic development plans included access roads, visitor centers, parking lots, paved trails, and picnic areas. The challenge for developing Fort Bowie was, again, the landscape. Limited by the topography of the sur-

rounding hills and mountains, crossed by three separate washes that during summer storms became raging torrents, the property was already crowded with historic sites. Little room remained for the typical park facilities.

Planners did try, however. With expectations of hundreds of thousands, planners designed a road that would pass by every site and ruin. Visitors would be transported in a replica stagecoach or lifted to the Fort via an aerial tramway that would have been visible throughout the park.

Fortunately, fiscal tightening during the Vietnam War eliminated development funds and Fort Bowie went into a deep freeze. Nonetheless, the curious and the historically minded continued to venture down a primitive trail to find Fort Bowie's hidden ruins and its stories. With almost universal acclaim, these hikers loved the challenge of discovery and thrilled to this landscape of historic abandonment.

In 1971, Brown offered a second proposal. "Why not view Fort Bowie's primitive condition as an asset for those visitors who like the primitive? Why not open it up on purpose to those sweat-it, hiking sons-of-guns who are always trying to get out of the crowd anyway?"⁷

The framework for management of Fort Bowie would be as a primitive historical area to preserve the atmosphere of wildness and the sense of historic abandonment. Subsequent planning abandoned Mission 66 concepts and embraced the notion of a light touch. Access would be restricted to a 1.5 mile trail leading from the county road to the spring and fort; the only non-historic structure would be a 10 x 10 ft homegrown, adobe brick contact station built near the ruins.⁸

Consequences

NPS administrators embraced the primitive framework in all its manifestations. Many assumed that a primitive site required only primitive funding. For years, the lone park ranger lived in a trailer off-site. Though frequently proposed, Fort Bowie never acquired its own superintendent, instead remaining an administrative subunit beneath Chiricahua National Monument. Plans for a legitimate visitor center were postponed for 20 years. The present one, built by the park ranger and maintenance man, is set on the hill overlooking the ruins and contains one small office and museum to display historic artifacts from the site and information.⁹

A second challenge arose from a 1960s belief that cattle were a historic component of the region and therefore should be part of the historic scene. During early negotiations, planners agreed to allow cattle grazing outside of the adobe ruins. The hike from road to fort exposed visitors to roaming animals including bulls. Many unfamiliar with western tradition were frightened by the large, and sometimes, aggressive animals. While the Park Service erected fences to protect the ruins, livestock often broke down those restraints and trampled fragile adobe remains. NPS was fearful of challenging the local ranchers, until, in 1997, a Department of the Interior solicitor's legal opinion confirmed NPS authority to exclude those cattle.¹⁰

The significance of Apache Pass rests in its visual impact; the landscape with its short and long views still inspires those same emotions of fear and impending dread as it did for historic travelers. By the mid-1980s, 120 years of cattle grazing, climate change, and fire exclusion had caused a significant shift in vegetation type and structure. Where once had been open grasslands, there are now valleys filled with mesquite forest. Visitors could not see the ruins for the thickets of shrubs and trees. Those visual impacts had been severely reduced. In the early 1990s, rangers began a

mesquite-cutting program and cleared 32 acres by hand to restore important viewsheds along the trail and around the Fort.¹¹

Preservation of the adobe ruins was a major directive from establishment legislation and the most difficult problem confronting park managers. Once exposed to the elements, torrential summer thunderstorms removed increasing percentages of adobe material. For over 20 years, material specialists tested quick-fixes to stop adobe loss including preservatives, water repellants, soil cement caps, and sacrificial mud caps. Finally, in 1988, rangers encapsulated the ruins with a mud coating covered by lime plaster (Figure 3). They colored the lime plaster to match the local soil and replaced the coating every 10 to 12 years. So far, the encapsulation provides 100% protection of historic materials.¹²

Conclusion

The concept of historic abandonment has always been the guiding light for planning and development of facilities and interpretation. But the devil is always in the details. The management balancing act has not always been successful. Development is still primitive but the administrative attention paid to larger protection issues at the historic site also remains primitive.¹³

Figure 3. Lime-plaster encapsulated ruins of the historic corral wall at Fort Bowie NHS. Rangers colored the plaster to match the local soil; the lime coating is beginning to wear away exposing the uncolored plaster. View looking southeast. Photograph by R.L. Pinto, 2017.



Do we have before us the untouched landscape that Bill Brown embraced 50 years ago? No. There have been trade-offs necessary to accommodate other park management needs. Yet to a significant degree, the landscape of Apache Pass appears much as it was 60 years ago.

Cultural landscapes and resources need protection and oversight; the present visitor center should be located within view of the ruins. Hikers need a safe environment during their journey of discovery and should be rewarded with appropriate learning opportunities once they have achieved that end. No one likes the lime plaster coating; it clearly does not add to the sense of Historic Abandonment. At present, the coating is the only option that preserves the remaining adobe resources, a legislation stipulation.¹⁴ Without the coating, specialists estimate the ruins would disintegrate within the next 20 years.¹⁵

Some experts have argued that the adobe ruins should be exposed and allowed to return naturally to the earth, perhaps a fitting conclusion within the concept of historic abandonment. Yet that perspective could also be interpreted as selfish for those who have already experienced the ruins. Cultural resources are unique and once eliminated are not reversible. Fort Bowie's historic site will only continue to tell its tales to those future hiking sons-of-guns as long as we preserve all of the character-defining elements within that landscape.

Endnotes

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12. Larry Ludwig (Fort Bowie NHS historian), in discussion with the author, April 4, 2017.
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