

Historic Trash Dumps and their Potential to Enhance our Understanding of Local History: an Example from Fort Stanton

Historic trash dumps, trash deposits that date to the historical period in New Mexico, can provide valuable, supplemental historical information. While written history is often biased toward discussions of grand events and famous individuals, trash dumps can tell us much about the daily life of the not so famous. One recently discovered trash dump at Fort Stanton Historical Site has excellent potential to provide information regarding the everyday lives of soldiers stationed at the fort just after the Civil War.

Established in 1855 as a military post to control the Mescalero Apache Indians, the fort was abandoned to Confederate forces in the early stages of the American Civil War in 1861. The retreating forces tried to burn the fort, but a rainstorm extinguished the fire. The Confederates completed the destruction when they left after only a month's occupation. When the fort returned to the Union in 1862, under the command of the Christopher (Kit) Carson, it was rebuilt. During the 1880s, Black soldiers from Fort Stanton helped pursue Apache bands led by Victorio and Geronimo. John J. "Black Jack" Pershing served two tours of duty at Fort Stanton in the 1880s.

The history of such military installations is largely based on military administrative reports and, at a more personable level, soldier's diaries. Administrative sources tell us a lot about the large-scale functions of the fort (numbers of soldiers stationed, military maneuvers and actions fought, as well as official purchasing). Soldier's diaries may fill in the gaps, giving finer detail about maneuvers and daily life. Neither of these sources offers detailed information regarding a soldier's mundane life, what they ate and drank, and the kinds of utilitarian items they used. This is especially true in the period just after Fort Stanton was re-occupied by Union forces.

While fort administrative records may tell us something about what the post sutler offered for sale and how much beef the fort purchased, it cannot inform us about overall diet, what, and how much, the soldiers ate and drank, and where many of these items may have been produced. That's where an intact trash dump comes in handy.



Figure 1: cut bone, bottle glass, and metal container fragments from an historic dump at Fort Stanton

One such dump was recently uncovered during the installation of a water line at Fort Stanton. The dump was buried about two feet deep and was not visible on the ground surface. The water line trench exposed a portion of the dump, which was rich in butchered bone, no-seam glass bottles (dating to the 1850-1870s) and bottle fragments, the remains of metal cans and other items.



Figure 2: intact and broken wine bottles



Figure 3: Ash and charcoal lens at Fort Stanton dump site

The dump also contained ash and charcoal deposits, the latter of which will help date the dump deposits. The presence of ceramic whiteware fragments can tell us about the types of food serving vessels that were used at the fort. The presence of intact and broken wine bottles indicates that wine was an essential component of the diet. The metal can fragments can tell us what canned food items were utilized. The dump even contains a portion of a calvary spur issued in 1859.



Figure 4: 1859 issue US Cavalry spur

Future excavation and analysis of this dump site promises to reveal substantial information regarding the daily life of the soldiers stationed at Fort Stanton in the immediate aftermath of the civil war. It will tell us what they ate, what they drank, what they wore (beyond their standard uniforms), and perhaps what tools they used. It may also provide information concerning where these items were manufactured. The wine bottles are intriguing, and they may indicate the presence of local vineyards in the region.