

The Ruins referred to in the Journal for August 23, 1776

By Rand Greubel

Note: I have been asked to NOT refer to the ruins by any name given to them or give any specific information helpful to identify their location. Several different archeologists have sent me hundreds of pages of archeological reports. Some reports are conflicting with others. So, I hope to provide you with a simple but accurate summary of the ruins that the Expedition saw on August 23, 1776. When I visited the site, I was with the ranch's hunting guide and an archaeologist with a permit. The account below is written by another archaeologist, Rand Greubel, who has studied the site.

—Carol Hunter

The site that is believed to be the ruins encountered by the Expedition on August 23, 1776 is perched on the rim above a valley overlooking a tributary stream of the San Miguel River (Figure 1 and Figure 2). It is one of several contemporaneous sites clustered together in the valley, which together represent the remains of a prehistoric community. The sites have been known since the days of the early Anglo settlers but were probably first examined by archaeologists in the late 1930s. The earliest professional excavation at the ruins believed to have been observed by the Expedition was carried out in 1947 by C.T. Hurst. The excavation focused on one of several separate but contiguous “houses” within the site (Figure 3). The excavated house had four rooms and produced a substantial quantity of artifacts, including pottery and arrow point types nearly identical to those made by Pueblo II-period Anasazi people in southwestern Colorado. Despite the relatively early scientific interest in the site, it remained largely untouched by professional archaeologists until the 1970s, when most of the remaining unexcavated portions were excavated by archaeology students from Metropolitan State College (MSC) under the direction Dr. Jiri Vondracek. No report of the excavations was ever written by MSC.

One of the mysteries of the ruins and their companion sites is the identity of the people and culture who built them. The earliest archaeologists assumed it was the Anasazi. Several later researchers came to believe that the culture represented by the sites could be best understood as a variant of the Fremont culture (for example, see McMahon 1997, 2000). Yet others felt that this culture was something entirely different and previously undefined, perhaps a local tribe influenced by their Anasazi and Fremont neighbors who took up corn farming. Alan Reed embraced

this interpretation in a 1997 article in which he defined the Gateway tradition (Reed 1997). Reed included the following major attributes for the Gateway tradition:

- Limited reliance upon corn horticulture.
- Manufacture of small corner-notched arrow points similar to those used by Anasazi and the Fremont.
- Pottery obtained in trade in small quantities from the Anasazi and possibly the Fremont.
- Apparent lack of local pottery manufacture.
- Circular stone masonry architecture with low walls.
- Rock art that exhibits both Anasazi and Fremont influences.

The artifacts and other materials excavated by MSC in the 1970s languished for almost 30 years before Alpine began a full analysis of the collection as part of the Uncompahgre Plateau Project. One of the goals of the analysis was to determine if the people who built and lived in the sites were best characterized as Anasazi, Fremont, or Gateway tradition. The results of the analyses were published in 2006 (Greubel et al. 2006). The report concluded that the preponderance of evidence suggests that the stone masonry structures were built by Anasazi settlers during the AD 900s. The original cultural identity of the occupants is revealed by their ceramics (Figure 4). Careful analysis of the pottery by a Southwestern ceramics expert revealed that some is Anasazi pottery from the northern Southwest as Reed had maintained, but some are locally manufactured versions of Anasazi pottery, which Reed had not anticipated. The dates of the occupations, falling between AD 900 and 1010, are revealed by the radiocarbon dating of maize remains excavated from the sites. Petroglyphs present nearby (Figure 5) tend to support the Anasazi origin of the site occupants, as they resemble Anasazi rock art of the Pueblo II period. Despite the likelihood that the sites were established by Anasazi colonists, their isolation and interactions with local hunting and gathering people resulted in cultural changes that ultimately transformed their society and lifeway into something different from the parent culture. For this reason, it was concluded that use of the name “Gateway tradition” was justified to indicate their differences from contemporaneous Anasazi people to the south.



Figure 1. One of the prehistoric stone structures that is part of the ruin complex.



Figure 2. Part of the main ruin complex.

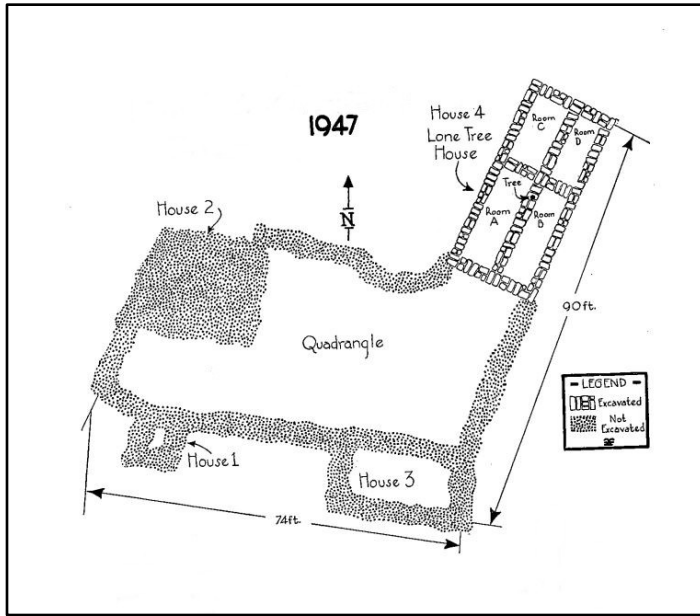


Figure 3. Plan map of the ruin excavated by C.T. Hurst in 1947.



Figure 4. Example of Anasazi pottery of the Pueblo II period excavated from the site.



Figure 5. Rock art panel near the site.

Since the publication of the 2006 report, archaeologists have continued to refine their ideas about the Gateway people and to debate where they came from, who they were, and where they went. The best available evidence suggests they were a hybridized culture, a mixing of the Anasazi culture of the Pueblo II period with local, indigenous hunter-gatherer traditions. Meanwhile, the Gateway tradition has been redefined as the Gateway *phase* to reflect its short-lived nature, because the archaeological term *tradition* implies a long-enduring culture, and it is now apparent that it did not endure long (Greubel 2018). Other researchers continue to maintain that it is best regarded as a variant of the Fremont culture. Ongoing research may eventually resolve these questions, but it should be remembered that these are merely labels that archaeologists use to refer to a package of cultural traits that differ to some degree from the cultural traits of other groups in ways that are recognizable to archaeologists. These labels may indicate distinct tribes or societies in prehistory, or they may not. The people, of course, did not think of themselves as Anasazi, Gateway, or Fremont. They may have considered themselves all one people. Alternatively, groups that archaeologists regard as part of the same culture may have seen no relationship between themselves and the other groups that archaeologists lump them in with.

Rather than concern ourselves about which archaeological label is most accurate, it is best to focus on understanding how people in the past obtained their food, made their tools, worked their crafts, built their dwellings, and used the landscape and its resources. In other words, how they made their living. We also want to

understand the practical economic relationships between groups of people, to identify the factors that affected those relationships, and to discover if it is possible to trace histories of specific groups of people across time and space. Ultimately, we would like to know how people in the distant past were related linguistically and genetically. These are the broad goals of archaeology. The labels we attach to the groups we study are only useful if they can help us to achieve these goals. After that, they can be discarded for better descriptors or dispensed with entirely. Regarding the small, ruined pueblo that Dominguez and Escalante viewed on that August day almost 250 years ago, even then it was ancient and long abandoned. One can only imagine the sense of mystery they may have felt as they gazed upon the lonely and isolated ruin.

—Rand Greubel, Alpine Archaeological Consultants, 2021

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