

Pentagon Site, Pentagon 1
Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area
West of Barry's Landing off Highway 37
Fort Smith vicinity
Big Horn County
Montana

HABS No. MT-105-A

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MONT
2-FOSMI.V
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORIC AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPY OF MEASURED DRAWING

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

PENTAGON SITE, PENTAGON 1

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Location: West of Barry's Landing off Highway 37, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area, Fort Smith vicinity, Big Horn County, Montana.

Present Owner: United States Department of Interior, National Park Service

Present Occupant: Vacant (archeological site)

Significance: Hundreds of crib-style timber structures were once found in the Northern Plains. Today only about 50 or 60 structures remain in upright positions. The structures were made as a temporary house by all the northern Plains tribes. They housed Indian war parties and were most common during the historic period when northern Plains Indians increased their expeditions to steal horses. They were likely built between A.D. 1825 and 1875.

Pentagon 1 is an archeological feature constructed in a pentagonal-shape and made of deadfall timber laid up crib style. It was approximately 5 feet high with an interior floor area of 350 square feet. Holes in the walls were strengthened by chunks of rocks and limbs of broken pieces of deadfall trees. There was no openings or roof on the structure.

History/Description: Pentagon 1 is situated on a small and relatively flat bench 50 feet north of a permanent spring. A dense stand of limber pine, juniper, sage, others forbs and grasses grow around the spring while the place where the structure was built is rocky with limited top soils that support grasses and sage with lesser numbers of juniper and limber pine. A large limestone boulder is found to the south of the structure where it would have offered some protection from the wind.

The structure is partially collapsed making it difficult to determine the height and precise configuration of the walls. It is clear, however, that it was constructed of limber pine and juniper deadfall with five walls. The most intact wall, on the southeastern side remains standing 3.5 to 5 feet and it is probably close to the original height of the structure. The bottom tier in the crib style construction was made of relatively large deadfall with maximum diameters of about one foot. It was placed directly on the ground without any excavation for leveling or the use of rock for support. Five or six succeeding tiers of slightly small diameter deadfall were placed into the walls. Because each deadfall piece is twisted and not of a uniform diameter, they were fitted together more like a bird nest than a log cabin. Although some may have been broken to fit none were notched. The unevenness of the deadfall leaves holes between the tiers. Some of these holes, especially those near the bottom of the walls, were filled with chunks of limestone. This may have been an attempt to weatherproof the structures or the rocks may have been filling holes where bullets could penetrate.

Deadfall pieces were stacked or laid against the outside of cribbed structure, presumably for added protection. These upright leaning pieces are more prevalent at the corners than they are along the span of the walls. These outer leaning pieces may have been to increase the protection from the wind or they may have served to fortify the corners of the structure.

Each wall was about 10 feet in length enclosing an interior floor area of about 350 square feet. The maximum dimension of the structure, including the collapsed wall fragments, is about 22 feet. There are no doors or windows. The structure never had a roof. Entrance and egress was over the walls.

Archeological test excavations were conducted both inside and outside the structure. The one-meter square inside the structure was placed in the northeastern quadrant after removing some of the collapsed wall. The soils were rocky and shallow. The excavation was abandoned at bedrock about four inches below the surface. Evidence for a prepared floor was not found nor was there any compacted soils from extensive use. However, these sorts of clues would be hard to distinguish in the rocky ground.

Moderate amounts of charcoal recovered in the excavation suggest a nearby hearth. It is likely near the center of the floor area, a few feet southwest of the excavation unit. Two gunflints were the only artifacts recovered. Both are made of the dark brown flint of the Brandon quarries in England. Their size compares most favorably with the flints made for single shot sporting rifles, pocket pistols, and horse pistols. Of course the flints could have been adapted for use on several different weapons, but horse pistols were popular among Plains Indians.

Flintlock guns were in general use in Europe in the early 1600's and used throughout portions of North America a short time later. Flintlocks reached the Bighorn Canyon region about A. D. 1750, when they were traded from the northeast, through the French trade with the Cree Indians (Secoy 1953). They were not in general use, however, until several decades later when the Northwest Company fur trade increased the supply. By A.D. 1830 to 1840 the percussion cap was used throughout the northwest, but flintlocks remained in use after the introduction of cartridges and breech loading guns. About A.D. 1865, for example, the Crow Indian warrior, Two Leggings, had a flintlock given to him by his brother and he used it for several years (Nabokov 1969).

Archeologists also undertook an intensive effort with a metal detector to locate any iron or other metal artifacts but none were found. The absence of other iron tools and cartridge cases suggests the structure was constructed before these items were in widespread use in the region. Using this information it seems likely the structure was built between A.D. 1825 and 1875.

Deadfall timber structures like Pentagon 1 were constructed and used by the native peoples of the Intermountain west for centuries. The structures were built as temporary sites and used by hunting parties, expeditions of warriors, and individuals who were on vision quests. The artifacts recovered in Pentagon 1 and its locations suggest it was likely used by a group of Plains Indian warriors.

To sum, the Pentagon 1 structure is an archeological feature constructed in a pentagonal-shape and made with deadfall timber that was laid up in crib-style walls. The remaining walls suggest a structure with a maximum height of about 5 feet. The interior floor area was about 350 square feet. Holes in the crib-style walls were strengthened by chunks of rocks and limbs or broken pieces of the trunks of deadfall trees were leaned against the corners of the structure. Gunflints recovered in an archeological excavation inside the structure indicate it was built about A.D. 1850 during a period when horse raiding was paramount among western Plains Indians.