

Benjamin and Miranda Shreve Homestead,
Cabin
North of County Road 25
Decker Vicinity
Big Horn County
Montana

HABS No. MT-106-A

HABS

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
Intermountain Support Office - Denver
National Park Service
P.O. Box 25287
Denver, Colorado 80225-0287

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
BENJAMIN AND MIRANDA SHREVE HOMESTEAD,
CABIN

HABS No. MT-106-A

I. INTRODUCTION

Location: The Benjamin and Miranda Shreve Homestead is in Big Horn County, Montana, in the south-central portion of the state. The homestead site is in the upper Tongue River Valley, and near the eastern shore of Tongue River Reservoir. Access is via Otter Creek Road (County Road 25), which heads eastward from Montana Secondary Highway 314, just above the southern end of the reservoir. Within one mile, a private mine haul road branches north from the county route, and accesses an unimproved two-track lane leading to the site. The homestead is about 1¾ miles northeast of the Highway 314 junction, and is approximately 3½ air miles north of the Wyoming border.

The cabin is near the southeastern corner of the homestead complex, and is the first major feature visible from the access route.

Quad: Decker

UTM: Zone: 13; Easting 358040; Northing 4989350

Date of Construction: ca. 1886, with additions to ca. 1920

Present Owners: Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation
1520 E. 6th Avenue
Helena, Montana 59620

Present Use: Abandoned

Significance: The cabin contributes to the overall significance of the Benjamin and Miranda Shreve Homestead. As the primary residence of the Shreve family for some fifty years, the cabin was the historic focal point of the homestead operation. As such, it is an important reflection of the site's role in the agricultural and settlement history of the upper Tongue River Valley. The standing portion of the cabin is also an excellent example of period vernacular log cabin construction. The well-crafted dovetail corner notching is particularly noteworthy, as is the building's use of unusually large, heavily-hewn timbers.

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Historian: Mark Hufstetler
Renewable Technologies, Inc.
Butte, Montana
March 1999

II. HISTORY

As with the other surviving resources at the Shreve property, precise historical information on the cabin is limited. Benjamin Shreve is reported to have constructed a one-room log cabin at his new ranch in the summer of 1886, soon after his arrival.¹ Shreve's testimony supporting his application for a homestead patent stated that he constructed a "log house 14 x 34" on his property sometime between 1886 and the date of the patent application in 1893.² While the dimensions given do not precisely match the size of either the surviving cabin or the adjacent cellar area, it is possible that this early cabin may have comprised one or both of these building masses. Shreve's patent application also notes the construction of a root cellar, possibly the one at this location.

The original homestead cabin was enlarged at least once between 1886 and about 1921. A photograph taken in 1921 or 1922 shows the building at what was likely its fullest extent. The building's primary (southwest) elevation featured a well-built, 1½-story building mass, framed and sided with sawn lumber. This building area, probably the newest addition to the overall cabin, had a gable roof and a large, screened front porch. This portion of the cabin was removed following the abandonment of the property, and only a concrete-walled basement (see below) survives to mark its site.

The surviving log cabin room (see below) was immediately to the rear of the 1½-story building mass. The 1921-22 photograph also pictures a second hewn-log building mass—also with a low gable roof—behind the surviving cabin. The stone cellar area remaining at the building site marks the former location of this now-vanished building mass.

III. DESCRIPTION

This feature includes a largely-intact, single-room log cabin, two basement/cellar areas marking the sites of former building additions, and a collapsed root cellar. The four components are situated roughly end-to-end, with offsets, on an approximate northeast-southwest axis.

The cabin is constructed of very heavy cottonwood logs, measuring between 14 and 21 inches in diameter. The logs are axe-hewn on both their interior and exterior faces, producing nearly-flat walls with an average thickness of 6 inches. The cabin's sill logs rest on a course of flat sandstone slabs; there is no other foundation. The corners of the cabin exhibit a full-dovetail notching pattern. The east and west walls are each broken by intermediate vertical log posts, with grooves to accommodate the tenoned ends of the log walls. Wood-strip chinking is used in the wall interstices, and some non-original cement mortar is also visible. Minute traces of whitewash remain visible on the exterior walls. The building has a shallow-pitch gable roof, supported by a

massive log ridgepole, log purlins, and a log tie beam. The roof surface itself includes rough-cut wood boards covered with a layer of dirt.

Much of the southerly wall of the cabin was removed during the historic period to allow interior passage between the cabin and the wood-framed addition that once abutted it. The remaining portion of this wall was heavily damaged during the early 1990s when a large cottonwood tree fell onto the southwestern corner of the building. The weight of the tree is also causing the building's roof to partially separate from the walls.

The remainder of the cabin's historic fenestration pattern remains intact, with a doorway on the west wall, and large window openings on the north and east walls. Some milled wood framing remains in the openings, but the doors and windows themselves are missing.

The cabin's interior consists of a single room. No floor remains, but spots of white and blue paint/whitewash are apparent on the walls. This, combined with the wire nails and remnants of primitive wood shelving on the walls, suggests that the room may have been historically used as a kitchen. A concrete interior stairwell at the southeast corner of the room leads downward to access the basement of the former wood-framed addition to the south. A vertical board door remains in place at the foot of these stairs.

A large, 1½-story wood-framed addition once stood immediately south and east of the cabin. This addition was removed following the abandonment of the house, but its former location is indicated by a surviving poured-concrete basement. The foundation measures approximately 26 feet (east-west) by 18 feet (north-south). Concrete interior walls in the basement divide the space into three rooms. Remnants of an interior chimney include fire bricks marked with the incised lettering *C.P.B.* The basement walls are buckling inward, probably due in part to water table changes caused by the creation of the reservoir.

Immediately north of the cabin, a rectangular cellar area marks the former location of a second, smaller building addition. The cellar is approximately 14 feet square, with walls of irregularly-sized stacked sandstone slabs. Most of the cellar stonework appears to be dry-laid, although some areas of mortar are also present. The cellar was approximately 6 feet deep. There is a small opening (probably a coal chute) near the north end of the cellar's west wall. A heating stove stood in the cellar, as indicated by a brick chimney built into the north wall. The cellar is topped by a deteriorated, wood-framed floor structure, partially surfaced with diagonally-laid tongue-and-groove boards. A single, partial course of hollow clay tile remains atop the cellar walls. No other trace of the former building superstructure remains. Access to the cellar from the room above was by a set of wooden stairs near the southwest corner of the cellar area.

A large, horseshoe-shaped earthen berm immediately north of the stone cellar indicates the location of a now-collapsed dugout root cellar. Access to the root cellar was via the stone-walled cellar to the south. A series of vertical timber posts inside the berm are probably former roof supports for the cellar.

A variety of plantings and other landscape features remain evident near the house. To the south, the former front yard is delineated by a double row of evenly-spaced cottonwood trees. The trees are old and very large; some have died and fallen. Other planted trees are found east of the house. To the west, a concrete sidewalk leads from the doorway of the surviving cabin past a former well to the icehouse (MT-106-B).

IV. ENDNOTES

1. Big Horn County Historical Society, *Lookin' Back Big Horn County* (Hardin, Montana: Herald Publishers, 1976).
2. General Land Office, Miles City, Montana. "Final Certificate No. 291, Homestead Application No. 506: Benjamin F. Shreve," October 1893. On file, General Land Office Records Group, National Archives, Washington, D.C.