Archaeology at Fort Burgwin

Background
In 1956, Ralph Rounds, who owned the land on which Cantonment Burgwin was located, believed that Cantonment Burgwin was in fact on his property and contacted archaeologist Fred Wendorf. Wendorf originally wanted to conduct field work at the prehistoric site Pot Creek Pueblo, which was also located on Rounds’ property. In their bargain, Rounds gave Wendorf permission to investigate Pot Creek Pueblo as long as he could find the exact location of Cantonment Burgwin. Wendorf was successful in locating the site, and excavations of Cantonment Burgwin (TA-8) began in 1957. Over the years, many of the buildings, including the main fort, officers’ quarters, commander’s quarters, and hospital, were excavated and reconstructed using the original vertical log construction method.

Taos Collaborative Archaeological Program
In 2009, the Taos Collaborative Archaeological Program (TCAP) was created as a collaboration of Southern Methodist University (SMU), Dallas, Texas, and Mercyhurst Archaeological Institute (MAI), Erie, Pennsylvania. The 2009 MAI field school was conducted at SMU-in-Taos and excavated the Laundresses’ Quarters of Cantonment Burgwin. The focus of the excavations was the suspected northeast quadrant of the structure. Excavations at the Laundresses’ Quarters continued in the summer 2010 MAI field school, which focused on the southwest corner of the structure, including exposure of the southern fireplace, exploration of the in situ floor, and soil sampling from the area north and east of the Laundresses’ Quarters.

Importance of Archaeology
Archaeology plays a vital role in reconstructing the past. Specifically, archaeology conducted at Cantonment Burgwin has given insight into the daily lives of the soldiers stationed there as well as the lives of the laundresses. The daily hardships of frontier life in general can also be better understood from the archaeological investigations of the cantonment. It is through archaeology that the material culture of our past is recovered and interpreted. It is the archaeologists and historians that make the past come alive through the material culture that is recovered. Archaeology is extremely valuable and without it we would not know anything about Cantonment Burgwin or the people who were stationed there.

A wide variety of artifacts were recovered from the excavations of Cantonment Burgwin. These include architectural materials (e.g. nails and window glass), kitchen-related items (e.g., glazed and unglazed ceramics, eating utensils, faunal bone, bottle glass), and military artifacts (e.g. buttons, percussion caps, and mini balls).
The Laundresses’ Quarters

U.S. Army Laundresses of the Mid-19th Century
In the spot in which you are now standing, women would have spent hours a day washing the soldier’s clothes in water collected from the nearby river, hanging them to dry, and tediously ironing them. Their fingers would become numb and blistered from all the hard work but they endured because it was an honor to serve for their country.

Typically at nineteenth century military cantonments, the company’s laundresses would wash, hang to dry, and iron the soldiers’ clothing. These laundresses’ quarters were usually located away from the main cantonment and were often referred to as ‘Soap Suds Row.’ The tradition of company laundresses originally came from the British military; however, it was not until March 16, 1802 by an Act of Congress, that laundresses were officially recognized by the U.S. Army. Initially, the Act stipulated that one company could have four laundresses but over the years, that number changed to one for every nineteen and a half men. A majority of the laundresses were the wives of the enlisted soldiers and they earned wages and rations for their work. Many women were attracted to be Army laundresses because they could earn money and still be with their husbands. In addition to washing clothing, the laundresses would also serve as midwives and part time maids or cooks for the officers. On June 19, 1876, General Order 37 abolished company laundresses for the Army. Despite the issuance of this order, women continued to accompany the troops; however, eventually the use of laundresses slowly disappeared.

Archaeological Excavations
In 1965, the Laundresses’ Quarters were excavated by Ron Wetherington of Southern Methodist University but were never reconstructed. During the 1965 excavations, two fireplaces and the log footprint of the structure were exposed. After these excavations, the Laundresses’ Quarters were neglected and became overgrown with brush and weeds. It was not until 2009 that the Laundresses’ Quarters received more attention.

In 2009, the Taos Collaborative Archaeological Program (TCAP) was created as a collaboration of Southern Methodist University (SMU), Dallas, Texas, and Mercyhurst Archaeological Institute (MAI), Erie, Pennsylvania. MAI decided to re-investigate the Laundresses’ Quarters because this was one of the only buildings at the fort not reconstructed after the 1960s excavations.

A variety of artifacts were discovered during the 1965, 2009, and 2010 excavations. These artifacts include nails, utensils, clothing fasteners, window glass, and bottle glass. Many military related items were also recovered. Military buttons, cap insignia, and a horse breastplate are most notable.

The Laundresses’ Quarters at Cantonment Burgwin were located east of the main fort building and consisted of four rooms. This is consistent with the 1802 law that stipulated four laundresses per company. The configuration and placement of the Laundresses’ Quarters remained the same throughout the occupation of the Cantonment.
The Hospital at Cantonment Burgwin

Hospital Overview
One hundred and sixty years ago, Dr. Anderson spent his days treating cholera, gangrene, and scarlet fever with opium and quinine in the spot in which you are standing. Despite his valiant efforts, not all of his patients survived.

The hospital was an essential component of Cantonment Burgwin. Military personnel, as well as local citizens and visitors were treated at the hospital. Dr. William Wallace Anderson, head surgeon at Cantonment Burgwin, arrived in November 1856, four years after its establishment, and stayed until May 1860. He earned 115.50 dollars per month for managing the hospital. During his time at Cantonment Burgwin, Dr. Anderson kept extremely detailed journals about his experience. Dr. Anderson’s journals show a record of who he treated, how much he charged, and whether the patient lived or died.

Journal Entries:

“June 23...Fight with Indians – one man killed, several wounded and nearly all horses killed. Received letter from brother”

“July 5...Dragoons arrived. River begins to rise again. Rose during night about a foot”

“July 12...Fuss among camp women. Premature labor – one infant born and two or three more coming”

Diseases and Illnesses Facing Mid-19th Century Soldiers and Civilians
The general belief at this time was that disease and illness came from koino-miasms, which is the origination of disease from impurities in the air. These so called impurities were thought to result in typhoid, cholera, and gangrene. Other illnesses included dysentery, measles, scurvy, scarlet fever, whooping cough, and chronic diarrhea. Sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis and gonorrhea were also common. A variety of cures and treatments were offered to the afflicted, including most frequently perhaps, opium and quinine. Whiskey, wine, and other types of alcohol were also offered to ease the pain of patients. Dr. Anderson kept his hospital well stocked with all of these medicines as seen in an 1858 medical supply list:

“Glycerine, 2 oz.  
Finet-ferric Chloride, ¼ lb.  
Spirits of ether nitric, ¼ lb.  
Aromatic Sulphuric Acid, ¼ lb.  
Pith. Of Sasafras, ½ oz.  
Citric Acid, ¼ lb.  
Brandy, best quality, 2 gal.  
Arsenic, 3 lb.  
Sodae. Bicarb, 2 lbs.  
Potass. Nitrat., ½ lb.  
Alcohol, 2 gal.  
Lycopodium, 1 lb.  
Wine, sherry, 1 doz. Bottles  
Port, 1 doz. Bottles  
Whiskey, Scotch or Irish, 1 gal.”

Archaeological Excavations
In the summer of 1979, archaeological investigation revealed that the hospital consisted of four wards – two on either side of a central hallway. A large fireplace with adobe hearth bricks was also discovered during the excavation. A few aqua and amber colored medicinal bottles were found, as well as soda bottle fragments. Soda was an ingredient often used in medical prescriptions. Fragments of beer, wine, and whiskey bottles were the most commonly found artifact in this excavation. After the completion of the excavation, the hospital was reconstructed.