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# TEXAS CREEK OVERLOOK: EVIDENCE FOR LATE FREMONT (POST A.D. 1200) OCCUPATION IN NORTHWEST COLORADO

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#### INTRODUCTION

During June of 1983, Western Wyoming College and the Colorado Bureau of Land Management's White River Resource Area conducted archaeological excavations of a prehistoric masonry structure. The site, Texas Creek Overlook (5RB2435), named for its panoramic view of the surrounding region, looked to be relatively undisturbed when first discovered, a rarity for prehistoric habitation structures. The purpose of the excavation was to investigate and document the cultural manifestations at this unique site before it was lost to looters. Although the site remains unknown to pothunters at present, its location, within a developing natural gas field and in an area where pothunting is a major problem, means it is only a matter of time before the site is discovered and destroyed.

Évidence from the excavations indicates the remains represent a Fremont occupation dating to A.D. 1500. Site usage centers on generalized collecting activities and possible more intensive animal procurement. This site, and other recent data from northwest Colorado, provide convincing evidence of the occupation of the region by the Fremont well beyond A.D. 1100-1200, when the Fremont occupation was previously believed to have ceased.

#### SITE LOCATION AND SETTING

Texas Creek Overlook is located in Rio Blanco County, Colorado, south of the town of Rangely (Fig. 1). The site is located within the Colorado

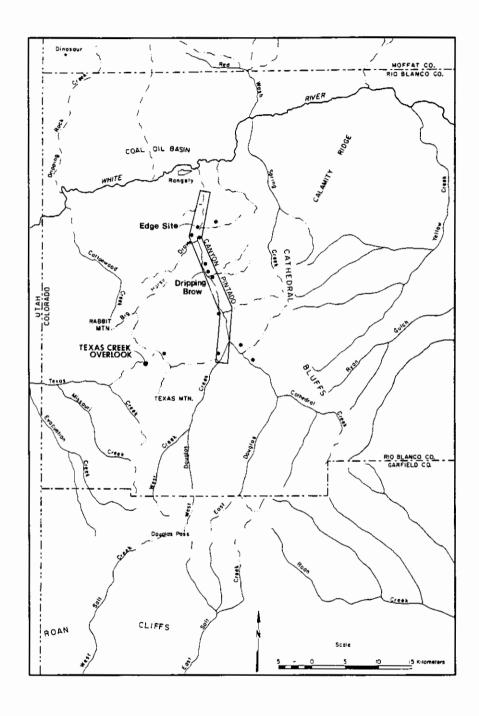


FIGURE 1. Map showing the location of the Texas Creek Overlook site in relationship to other masonry structures in Douglas Creek and Dripping Brow Shelter.

Plateau physiographic province near its extreme northern end where it abuts the Uinta Basin. A dendritic drainage pattern has incised deep valleys with narrow, flat alluvial floors, and formed rugged canyons and steep escarpments in the region. Texas Creek Overlook is situated approximately 2 kilometers west of the divide between Texas Creek and Douglas Creek. The divide is part of the ridge system that connects Texas and Rabbit Mountains. Texas Creek is part of the Evacuation-Missouri-Texas Creeks drainage basin that flows west to the White River.

The modern climate of the region is semiarid, with abundant sunshine, low precipitation and relative humidity, and warm summer temperatures. The greatest monthly precipitation occurs as snowfall from late September to April. Average annual precipitation is approximately 30.5 cm, and the annual temperature range is 90 to 100°F during the summer, but frequently drops to below 0°F during the winter. Frost-free days range from 66 to 157 days in Raugely.

Vegetation communities dominating the landscape in the vicinity of the site are mid-elevation big sagebrush shrubland, high-elevation pinyon-juniper woodland, and mid-elevation saltbush-grassland bottomland. The latter two communities cover the largest surface area.

#### THE SITE

Texas Creek Overlook is a wet-laid masonry structure located on top of a small sandstone pinnacle (Figs. 2 and 3). The pinnacle is a portion of a bench feature that has been isolated by erosion. A causeway still connects the pinnacle to the bench, but it lies some 4 m below the top of the bench and pinnacle. Access to the site is gained by crossing the causeway from the bench. A small natural tunnel in the north side of the pinnacle pierces the floor of the structure. The tunnel is steeply cut and only large enough to allow the passage of a single person. Other access to the site is barred by the steep faces of the pinnacle and a high wall constructed along the northern edge of the pinnacle. The face of the pinnacle ranges in height from 4-15 m. The lowest point occurs where the causeway connects to the pinnacle. The causeway, however, is narrow with a sheer face to the west and a very steep slope to the east. The width of the causeway is about 2 m.

In addition to the masonary structure, trash areas occurred at the base of the pinnacle along the east and south sides. These areas are primarily situated at runoff points coming from the pinnacle top. Artifacts and bone fragments also are scattered around the base indicating that trash also was pitched out of the structure.

A single firepit and several pieces of lithic debitage were noted on the bench north of the pinnacle. An intensive search of the area within a 0.5 km of the structure produced no additional cultural remains, although this survey did discover the location of a seep 100 m up the canyon from the site. The seep is currently used by a small herd of wild horses and may have provided water for the site inhabitants.



FIGURE 2. View of the north side of Texas Creek Overlook (a-entry way).



FIGURE 3. View of the structure looking northwest; a, Room 1; b, Room 2; and c, Room 3.

#### **FEATURES**

Texas Creek Overlook consists of 11 cultural features. Three features were designated as rooms within the structure. Six features were post holes located in Room 1. Another feature was a trash area (excavated) at the base of the pinnacle below the southwest corner of Room 1, and a final feature was a set of honing marks located on a bedrock knob in Room 1.

The masonry wall built atop the sandstone pinnacle did not completely enclose the entire pinnacle top (Fig. 4). The wall generally follows the edge of the pinnacle along its north, east, and south edges. In several areas the construction incorporated or adjoined hedrock exposures. On the west side of Room 1 a large bedrock knoh extends approximately 3 meters above the floor of the room. The south wall abuts this knob. The west wall of Room 2 also abuts a knob that forms the remainder of the enclosure. Only a small crack hreaks the continuous nature of the bedrock along the west side of Rooms 1 and 2.

Inside the structure the hedrock floor rises in three steps (see Fig. 3). The lowest is on the south side of the pinnacle and defines Room 1. Going to the north, the hedrock rises approximately 1 m to Room 2, and then rises another meter to the northeast to Room 3. The large knob west of Room 1 and the knobs abutting the walls forming Room 2, rise 50-100 cm higher than the floor of Room 3 which is the highest floor inside the structure.

The north wall of the structure faces the bench and is the most massive of all the walls. Interior wall height measures 2.1 m at the northeast corner. Wall thickness ranges from .5 to 1.0 m. In Room 2, the base of the wall extends about 1.5 m below the level of the floor, filling a hollow in the bedrock. The wall is built of undressed sandstone slabs placed in an interlocking fashion (Figure 5). The slabs are mortared with mud. Only on the interior portion of the wall in Room 3 are vertically placed slahs used. In several locations, horizontally placed logs have heen used in wall construction. These appear to have been used as anchors where the wall is the highest and thickest. Three juniper posts were built within the north wall, positioned at each corner and near the center.

All other walls are generally much smaller than the main north wall. The west wall abuts a sandstone knob and fills a small hollow in the bedrock. The interior height is 1.1 m, 1.0 m lower than the northwest corner of the north wall. The east wall is the longest wall of the structure, but is not as thick or as high as the north and west walls. In Room 3, the wall stands .9 m and is .7 m thick. In Room 1, the height drops to about .6 m. The condition of the east wall suggests that it was never much higher. The south wall, enclosing Room 1, ahuts sandstone knobs and is very similar to the east wall in size. In general, the walls enclosing Room 1 are very low. The construction techniques described for the north wall were used throughout the structure, except the other walls lacked the upright support posts built into the north wall.

Post holes drilled into the bedrock cap of the pinnacle were discovered in Room 1 (see Fig. 4). The largest, located near the south wall, measured

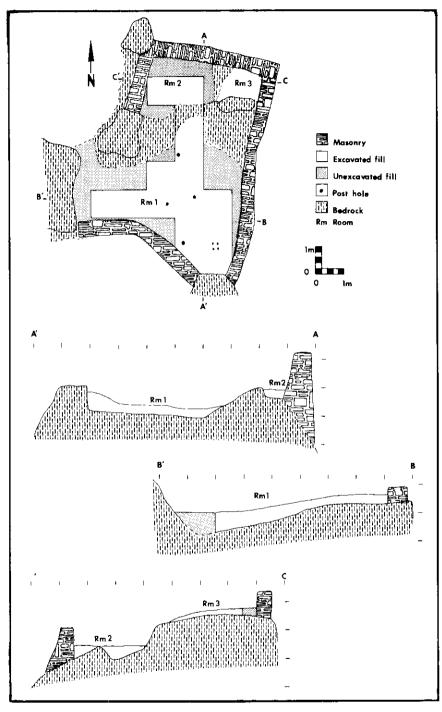


FIGURE 4. Plan and cross sections of the masonry structure at Texas Creek Overlook.



Figure 5. Detail view of the interior of the north wall looking into Room 3 from Room 2: a, posts; b, horizontal logs; c, vertical slabs; and d, entry way. Scale equals 15 cm.

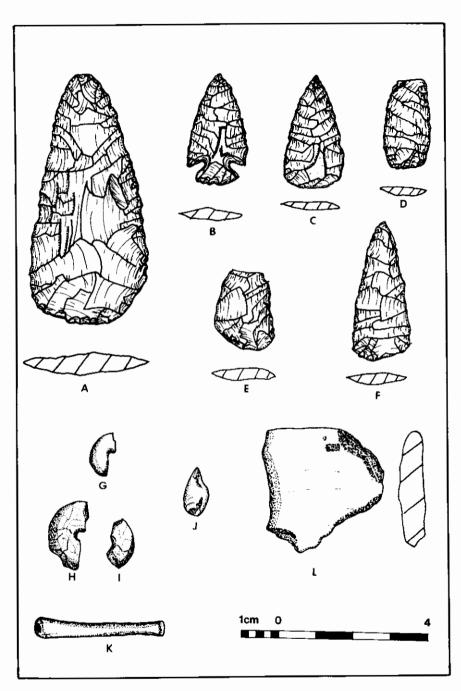


FIGURE 6. Artifacts from Texas Creek Overlook: A, bifacial knife; B-C, projectile points; D, preform; E-F, blanks; G-I, disc beads; J, shell bead; K, bone tube; and L, Uinta Gray rim sherd.

16 cm in diameter and 18.5 cm in depth. Although not forming any definite pattern, the occurrence of the post holes and the support posts in the north wall suggests that some type of roof covered at least a portion of the structure. The roof probably consisted of small poles covered with brush or bides. Adobe was found not anywhere on the site indicating a wattle-and-daub roof was not used.

The structure was excavated by rooms. Each room was isolated from others by differences in elevation. The fill of each room was very similar, consisting of windblown sand and cultural material. The color of the fill in each room, however, was slightly different due to charcoal content. Fill from Room 1 had the greatest discoloration and Room 3 had the least.

In terms of the types and variety of artifacts and faunal remains recovered, all rooms were very similar. All contained hutchered animal hones and quantities of flakes, hut only in Room 1 were the larger pieces of hone, flakes, and pot sherds found close to the walls, indicating an intentional clearing of the interior floor. No indications of prepared or plastered floors were found in any of the rooms. The fill of the rooms represents a fairly steady buildup of cultural debris and windblown sands.

#### **ARTIFACTS**

Three thousand, two hundred, and fifty-four artifacts were recovered from the site (Tahle 1). Ninety-eight percent of the items recovered were flaked lithic debris. The flaked lithic waste materials represent all stages of lithic reduction from the initial trimming of raw material to final tool refinement.

TABLE 1. Distribution of Artifacts from Texas Creek Overlook.

	Room 1	Room 2	Room 3	Trash Area	Total
Projectile Point	2				2
Bifaces	9	I	1	2	13
Retouched/	14	2			16
Utilized Flakes					
Drill/Punch	2				2
Cores			1	1	2
Debitage	2657	154	90	281	3182
Groundstone	10			3	13
Pottery Sherds	11	I		3	15
Bone Áwl	I				- 1
Bone Tube	I				1
Gilsonite Beads	2			1	3
Shell Bead	I				1
Clay Pieces	3				3
TOTAL	2713	158	92	291	3254

Of the 70 finished artifacts, 33 or 47 percent are chipped stone tools. These include projectile points, bifacial knife, biface blanks and preforms, retouched/utilized flakes, and drills. Other artifact types recovered include groundstone, pottery, a bone awl, a bone tuhe, gilsonite disc

beads, and a shell bead. Figure 6 illustrates the variety of artifacts recovered from the site.

Ceramics from the site consist of 15 dolomite-tempered body and rim sherds (Fig. 6L) and 3 untempered fired pieces of clay. The sherds fall within the range of variation for the Fremont ceramic type Uinta Gray (Madsen 1977). The three fired pieces of clay are possible fragments of gaming pieces or figurines.

The projectile points from the site, Rose Springs (Fig. 6B), Uinta Side-Notched and Cottonwood (Fig. 6C), fall within the general range of points recovered from various Fremont village sites in the Colorado Plateau and Uinta Basin (Holmer and Weber 1980).

#### **FAUNAL AND FLORAL REMAINS**

Over 1500 pieces of bone were recovered from Texas Creek Overlook (Scott and Rood 1986). Identifiable animals include 11 Sylvilagus, 2 Lepus, 1 Odocoileus, and 1 Bison bison (Tahle 2). The condition of the faunal remains indicates that the number of mule deer and bison are probably underrepresented (Table 3). Most of the large mammal bone has been broken for the extraction of marrow and then smashed for use in bone juice and possible bone grease production. This latter processing activity makes it very difficult if not impossible to identify elements to genus and species. Based upon the types of bone elements recovered, primarily long

TABLE 2. Summary of Identifiable Faunal Remains.

Taxon	Number of Elements	MNI	
Sylvilagus sp.	162	11	
Spermophilus sp.	29	3	
Lepus townsendi	17	2	
Odocoileus hemionus	4	1	
Neotoma cinerea	3	1	
Mouse sp.	2	1	
Eutamias sp.	1	1	
Bison bison	1	1	
Canis sp.	l	1	
Pica pica	1	1	
Buteo sp.	1	1	
TOTALS	222	24	

TABLE 3. Summary of Faunal Remains Unassignable to Taxon.

Category	Total Bone	
Bird		
Small mammal (rabbit size)	664	
Medium mammal (dog size)	4	
Medium-large mammal (antelope-deer size)	416	
Large Mammal (elk-bison size)	11	
Mammal	213	
Unidentifiable	49	
TOTAL	1360	

bone, the initial processing of large game animals took place at the kill site. The animals probably were quartered there and the final processing of the animals took place at the structure. It is interesting to note that much of the rabbit bone also was smashed.

Soil samples for plant macrofossil and pollen analysis were collected from various areas in the site (Scott and Rood 1986). Results of the analyses indicate a number of plants were used probably as food by the prehistoric inhabitants (Table 4). These are Zea, Opuntia, Chenopodium, Cheno-ams, Physalis, Helianthus, Mammillaria, and Umbelliferae. One pollen grain of Zea was found. This would suggest only minor use of corn at the site. Evidence for the prehistoric use of native plants is based on an inflated pollen count, above background, from room fill, and the presence of charred seeds (Scott and Rood 1986: Fig. 1), although no plant was the focus of intensive collection or processing. Their use was probably the result of gathering for daily consumption and not for winter storage.

TABLE 4. Economic Macro and Microfloral Remains.

Taxon	Charred Seeds	Pollen		
		Room Fill	Groundstone	
Cheno-ams	44	x	x	
Chenopodium	1			
Mammillaria	1			
Opuntia	x			
Physalis -	x			
Umbelliferae	x			
Helianthus	x			
Zea	x*			

x present

#### DATING THE OCCUPATION

A single radiocarbon age of  $430\pm50$  years B.P., A.D. 1520 (Beta-7199) was returned for the occupation of the site. The date was obtained from a single 20 gm piece of charcoal recovered 10 cm above the bedrock floor of Room 1. The sample may have been a portion of a post from the roof material. An attempt to tree-ring date, what appears to be juniper post, was unsuccessful.

#### DISCUSSION

Texas Creek Overlook can be assigned to the Fremont Culture based on architectural style, diagnostic cultural material, such as Uinta Gray ceramics, and the occurrence of cultigen pollen. However, the site is not like other Fremont habitation sites on the Colorado Plateau. The typical Fremont site is a farmstead generally composed of one to two dwellings situated on a low rise overlooking arable land and occupied on a permanent to semipermanent basis (Jennings 1978; Lohse 1980; Madsen 1975;

<sup>\*</sup> represented by I grain

Marwitt 1970; Schroedl and Hogan 1975). The remains at such farm-steads have demonstrated that a wide variety of activities took place at or near the site, but the primary focus was gardening or farming activities. Although remains from Texas Creek Overlook suggest that a variety of activities took place there, the site functioned primarily as a faunal procurement camp which is not typical of Fremont sites. The artifact assemblage recovered from the site demonstrates a bias toward hunting and faunal processing activities. Much time and energy was expended on hunting-related tools, based on the large quantity of lithic debris. By comparison, the numbers of groundstone and ceramic artifacts are quite small.

Plant macrofossil and pollen analyses indicate that the plants used at the site were consumed as part of daily meals and that no intensive plant processing occurred. The limited *Zea* remains indicate that the site was not used for gardening activities.

The faunal evidence would suggest that animals were procured for more than just daily consumption. The condition of the bone indicates intensive utilization of the animals procured, as illustrated by the evidence of marrow extraction and the rendering of bone juice and/or bone grease, both labor intensive activities.

Although Texas Creek Overlook appears to be an atypical Fremont habitation site, this really is not unexpected because differences in the subsistence and settlement patterns have been recognized for all Fremont variants. Sites similar to Texas Creek Overlook in terms of architecture and setting are found in the Nine Mile Canyon area but their function is unknown (Gillen 1938; Gunnerson 1969). J. D. Jennings (1978:231-234) believes that these differences merely reflect adaptations to local environmental factors such as the availability of game and plant resources. This position is supported by evidence from the Canyon Pintado area to the cast, where the local Fremont groups apparently practiced more hunting and gathering than farming (Creasman 1981; LaPoint et al. 1981). What appears to be genuinely atypical is the ca. A.D. 1500 date of occupation. J. D. Jennings (1978:162-163) summarizes the dating of the five Fremont variants as:

Great Salt Lake Fremont
Levee phase, A.D. 1000-1350 +
Bear River phase, A.D. 400-1000

Uinta Fremont
Whiterock phase, A.D. 800-950
Cub Creek phase, A.D. Pre-800

San Rafael Fremont
No phase recognized, A.D. 700-1200

Sevier Fremont
No phase recognized, A.D. 780-1260

Parowan Fremont
Paragonah phase, A.D. 1050-1300
Summit phase, A.D. 900-1050

The dating of the Uinta and San Rafael Fremont is of greatest concern here because they occupy the region east of the Wasatch Mountains or more specifically, the Colorado Plateau. Currently it is believed that Fremont occupation ended on the Plateau first in the Uinta Basin around A.D. 950 and in the San Rafael area around A.D. 1200. Lindsay (1986:241-242) would extend the period of occupation of the Uinta Fremont to A.D. 1150. Creasman (1981:296-308) suggests that, although the Douglas Creek area sits on the boundary line between the San Rafael and Uinta variants, it should be classified within the San Rafael hased on architectural styles and other attributes. If the dating of the Texas Creek Overlook holds true, then the use of at least a portion of the area hy the Fremont continued for an additional 300-350 years longer.

The cultural material recovered from Texas Creek Överlook displays no stylistic changes that would indicate that the site was reoccupied by a different cultural group, for example, the Ute or Shoshoni. This would mean that two possibilities exist to explain the date: the sample was intrusive or contaminated; or the date is accurate. I helieve that the date is

accurate.

Work by Colorado State University in Canyon Pintado, the National Park Service in Dinosaur National Monument, and the original work of Gil Wenger provides evidence that helps to confirm the Texas Creek data for late occupation of the area by the Fremont.

The Edge Site was tested in 1979 by the Laboratory of Public Archaeology (LaPoint et al. 1981). The excavation, carried out primarily within a surface masonry structure, revealed that the single-room structure had partially plastered walls and two superimposed prepared floors. Two radiocarbon dates were obtained from samples of what appeared to be roofing beams. These dates are A.D.  $1000~(950\pm70~\text{B.P.},~\text{UGA-3378})$  and, A.D.  $1430~(520\pm75~\text{B.P.},~\text{UGA-3377})$ .

The structure at the Edge site appears to have been used at least on a semipermanent basis. The cultural material recovered from the structure displays no change through time, suggesting that the uppermost floor represents a remodeling episode at the site, rather than a later Shoshonian reoccupation. If the later date is accepted it places the last occupation of the site in early A.D. 1400.

The artifact types collected from the Edge site are almost identical to the Texas Creek Overlook assemblage. These include Uinta Gray ceramics, gilsonite disc beads, and Uinta side-notched projectile points. The correlation of material culture items demonstrates that both sites were used by the same cultural group.

In terms of subsistence, the Edge site functioned as a base camp. The high frequency of *Zea* pollen, 3 percent on the lower floor and 7 percent from the fill, demonstrates a heavy reliance on cultigens. Pollen analysis also indicates that intensive wild plant processing, especially of Cheno-Ams, took place at the site. The flaked lithic tool kit found at the site also indicates that hunting was an important activity. However, faunal material from the structure indicates the procurement of animals, especially rabbits and fish, was only for daily consumption.

Another site in Canyon Pintado that provides evidence of Late Fremont occupation is Dripping Brow Shelter which was tested by the Laboratory of Public Archaeology in 1978 and 1979 (Creasman 1981; LaPoint et al. 1981). The work at the shelter focused on completing deep stratigraphic tests and collecting chronological and paleoenvironmental data. The documented occupation span extends from ca. 450 B.C. to modern times. For most of its history, the site served as a location for the procurement and processing of faunal resources, especially mule deer and rabbit.

Creasman (1981) summarized the Fremont occupation as follows:

Occupation II dates from A.D. 500 to just after A.D. 1225, overlapping the range for the Fremont. During this period, occupation levels increase dramatically in number and there is a marked decrease in the intervals between occupation zones. Based on the increased number of cultural levels, it appears that the site was more intensively used during occupation II than in previous times. However, it does seem that the use still remained seasonal.

There is (sic) little hard data to show that occupation II is Fremont, although we know that Fremont or Fremontlike groups were occupying the area during at least a portion of this period. The only hard data comes from the 1979 excavation which recovered macro-maize remains from a feature dated at A.D. 1225 (A.D. 1217 corrected [Damien et al. 1974]), which falls at the very end of the period.

The inhabitants' preference for mule deer continued during occupation II times, but the utilization of cottontail shows a marked increase from occupation I. There are also indications of the use of ground squirrels, based on charred bone elements. There are no significant changes in total hone counts throughout this period. Age determinations were made on two mule deer, and both were classified as six months of age. These age determinations would place the occupation during the fall of the year.

It does not appear that the site's use was associated with horticultural activities. The Zea polleu recovered from the site consisted of only two grains. However, the Zea pollen occurs in levels postdating the end of occupation II, and above the scant macro-maize remains found in the feature. The low Zea pollen counts also indicate that maize was prohably not stored at the site.

(Creasman 1981:271-272)

### Creasman (1981:272) goes on to note:

A very short period of time elapsed from the end of occupation II to the beginning of occupation III. It appears that the beginning of occupation III dates to nearer A.D. 1300. The beginning of this period may prove, with additional research, to be part of occupation II. However, for the time being they have been divided because of a definite stratigraphic break.

In hindsight, it seems appropriate to classify the lower components of occupation III with occupation II. These components were radiocarbon dated to after A.D. 1220 and before A.D. 1550. The occurrence of an erosional episode at the site that correlates with the A.D. 1275-1300 drought in the Southwest would suggest that the components actually postdate A.D. 1300. The occurrence of *Zea* pollen in two separate strata within this time interval clearly demonstrates that corn was still in use well after A.D.

1200. Diagnostic projectile points recovered from this time are Uinta sidenotched and cottonwood types. As mentioned previously, these are the common point types found at both Texas Creek Overlook and the Edge site, which would indicate that Dripping Brow was occupied by the same cultural group.

Liestman (1985) recently reported the work undertaken in 1981 at a small rock shelter (42UN1103) in Dinosaur National Monument. Excavation data suggest that the shelter was used for storage and temporary habitation. A dry-laid sandstone wall was constructed across the front of the shelter. Inside the shelter were what appeared to be the remains of a slab-lined and a wattle-and-daub storage cists. Recovered from the fill of the shelter and incorporated within the wall were corn cobs and two kernels recovered from the fill. It is believed that the corn represents a late (evolutionary) variety of Fremont dent (Liestman 1985:30-31).

Three charcoal samples from the fill of the shelter dated to  $800\pm140$  B.P. (A.D. 1150 [Beta-8559]),  $600\pm50$  B.P. (A.D. 1350 [Beta-8560]), and  $430\pm50$  B.P. (A.D. 1520 [Beta-8561]). The latter two dates come from the uppermost layer of the fill. Two logs were collected from the dry-laid wall. Dendrochronological dates for these specimen were 1568 and 1585.

Little in the way of diagnostic artifacts were recovered from the site. The only item is the distal portion of what appears to be a Fremont blade (Liestman 1985:24-26). This artifact was recovered from near the base of the wall.

It appears that the wall was constructed about the time the site started to be used, for the wall was built starting on the bedrock floor. Radiocarbon data would suggest this occurred around A.D. 1150 and the occurrence of the Fremont blade in the fill near its base also would support this early construction date. The dendrochronological dates from logs in the wall probably indicates a time of reconstruction or repair around A.D. 1585. It appears that corn remains are associated with the later two radiocarbon dates A.D. 1350 and A.D. 1520, as well as the early date of A.D. 1150. Even disregarding the dendrochronology, hecause the dates cannot be directly associated with corn remains, the data from the shelter suggest the cultivation of corn was still practiced in the Jones Hole area of the Monument until A.D. 1500.

The final bit of evidence comes for the work of Wenger in the 1950s. Wenger (1956) conducted the first extensive study of the Blue Mountain and Douglas Creek areas. Wenger collected corn from two masonry graneries in the Blue Mountain area (5MF379 and 5MF373). The corn was radiocarbon dated at  $820\pm100$  B.P., A.D. 1130 (M-286) and  $400\pm150$  B.P., A.D. 1550 (M-285) respectively (Crane and Griffin 1959).

The data just presented clearly show that the Fremont continued to occupy the region around Douglas Creek and the Dinosaur-Blue Mountain area after A.D. 1100–1200. Corn continued to be cultivated but its overall contribution to subsistence economy may have decreased from earlier times. Creasman (1981) believes that subsistence patterns in the Douglas Creek area was primarily based on hunting and gathering supplemented by corn horticulture throughout the period of Fremont occupation. However, not all of the region continued to be utilized by the Fremont. Lindsay

(1986) presents evidence that the Uinta Basin proper, just northwest of Douglas Creek, was abandoned by A.D. 1150. Lindsay observed that there is a relationship between Fremont abandonment and a change in summer moisture. "This is consistent with the suggested southeastward withdrawal of summer moisture. It is possible that the reduction in the growing season also contributed to the abandonment of the Uinta Basin. . . ." (Lindsay 1986:248). The sites postdating A.D. 1150 are all situated in the canyon country, and at higher elevations, to the northeast and southeast of the Uinta Basin. These locations apparently retained environments conducive to at least limited corn horticulture and allowed the continuation of the Fremont lifeways.

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