Fort Owen
Off US Route 93, north of
Stevensville
Stevensville
Ravalli County
Montana

HABS No. MON-12

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
801 19th Street, N.W.
Washington, D. C. 20006

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FORT OWEN

Stevensville, Ravalli County, Montana

ADDRESS: North of Stevensville, Montana, off U.S. 93.

OWNER: State Parks Division, Montana Highway Department

OCCUPANT: none

USE: State Monument

ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Fort Owen in the Bitterroot Valley of Montana is located at the site of the first church established in the State, the first permanent settlement of the whiteman in Montana. Here the first cattle herd, the first sawmill, the first flour mill, the first irrigation project and the first public school were begun. John Owen also was the first to record the discovery of gold in Montana when he made the short notation in his Journal in February, 1852: "Gold hunting -- found some".

The history of Fort Owen is intertwined with that of the first church, St. Mary's Mission (MON-10). The Jesuits had settled the Mission in 1841 and the following year planted and harvested crops of potatoes, oats and wheat. They also inauguarated irrigation and built a grist mill and sawmill.

John Owen bought the first St. Mary's Mission from the Jesuits in 1850 when they temporarily left the area and built his trading post here. He was appointed special agent for the Flathead Indians in 1856, and throughout his career as agent and proprietor of the trading post he fought corruptness in Indian policy. The post was a major trade and travel center in the valley, and Major Owen was renowned as a genial and accommodating host.

Fort Owen became a State Monument in 1956 and is administered by the State Park Division of the Montana Highway Department.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

John Owen was born in Pennsylvania on June 27, 1818, but practically nothing is known of his history prior to the founding of the fort. The title of "Major" is a civilian designation and not a military rank.

Owen, in the capacity of sutler, accompanied a Rifle Regiment commanded by Col. William W. Loring bound for Oregon City from Fort Leavenworth. The troops went into winter quarters (1849-50) about six miles above Fort Hall, Idaho, and the next spring Owen resigned his sutlership to trade with the Indians and emigrants. His wife Nancy, a Snake Indian woman accompanied him to the Bitterroot Valley. When the Jesuits ordered St. Mary's Mission closed he was anxious to settle in the area.

Father Joset sold the Property and improvements to Major Owen on November 5, 1850, for $250.00. The bill of sale is the first legal document of its kind in the territory of Montana.

Owen set about making a well fortified and luxurious (by frontier standards) trading post. The Fort never served as a military post nor housed army troops. He improved the sawmill and the grist mill and enlarged the farm.

The first known drawing of the Fort was made in 1853 by a topographer named Stanley. It depicted an establishment of two or three central buildings surrounded by a square log stockade. There were about fifteen log cabins adjacent to the fort; these were inhabited by the Indians who had been converted by the Jesuits. Here they raised poultry, cattle, potatocs, grain, etc.

By 1860 Owen had made improvements and numerous additions to the original Mission property. Buildings were constructed of adobe bricks and lined with hewn lath and plastered over. The original log palisades had been replaced by a high adobe wall, the major opening of which was located on the south side and guarded by heavily timbered portals surmounted by an arch. Thcse fortifications of the trading post were not erected in fear of the Flathead Indians, who more than twenty years earlier sought the teachings of the "Black Robes", but were to protect the settlement against the attacks of the dreaded Blackfeet Indians.

While the Fort was in its final stages of construction, a new sawmill and a new grist mill were built. The volume of business increased from $4,936 in 1857 to $9571 in 1859. Much of the money earned in 1857, 1858 and 1859 was spent on improvements of the settlement, according to the accounts of the Fort. A school teacher was employed in the winter of 1861 to train the half-breed children of Major Owen's employees -- the first public school in the Territory.

Throughout Major Owen's career as a trader in the Bitterroot Valley he remained a friend of the Indians, of the white settlers who were beginning to penetrate into the very homeland of the Indian. He was appointed special agent for the Flathead Indians in 1856 and served for six years. His relationship with them was one of sympathy toward their problems and their dealings with the white man. He repeatedly called to the attention of the Indian Bureau the corrupt features of the government's Indian policy.

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On November 14, 1871, President Grant ordered the removal of the Flathead Indians from the Bitterroot Valley. This was the formal inauguration in the Montana Territory of the government's new reservation policy. In 1872, the Secretary of the Interior appointed James A. Garfield (later to become president of the U.S.) to arrange for the removal of the Flatheads to the newly established Jocko Reservation, situated north of present-day Missoula.

Garfield, together with J. A. Viall, territorial superintendent of Indian Affairs and William H. Claggett, territorial delegate to Congress, reached Fort Owen on August 21, 1872. There the next morning they held a council with the Flatheads who were represented by Charlot, first chief; Arlee, second chief; and Adolf, third chief; plus a number of the principal men of the tribe. The Indians were unanimous in opposing the proposal to move them from the Bitterroot, but finally agreed to go with Garfield's party to inspect the Jocko Reservation. They found the reservation undeveloped and unimproved, and it was nearly twenty years before the tribe was finally moved there.

Major Owen suffered many reverses during the period of 1871-72. New trading forts along the Mullan Road brought increased competition, and the failure of the government to keep its word in dealings with the Flatheads were contributing factors to his mental and physical decline. It is reported that he had been a heavy drinker for some time, and he finally had a serious mental breakdown. The sheriff was ordered to sell the property to settle large debts accumulated by Owen, and on December 30, 1872, the Fort was sold to W. J. McCormick. Friends of John Owen placed him in a hospital in Helena, Montana. In 1877 he was moved to Philadelphia, Pa., his eastern home, and there he died in 1889.

In the same year, 1889, McCormick was killed during a violent windstorm while trying to save the roof of the west barracks. A strong gust of wind lifted both roof and man and threw them to the courtyard.

After McCormick's death the land was purchased by the May brothers who used it as a cattle ranch. Thereafter the property was leased in part to a Mr. Moore who lived with his family in the east barracks. This is the sole building standing today. The other buildings were unoccupied and soon fell into ruins.

In 1937 one acre of property containing the east barracks was purchased by a small group of citizens for the purpose of establishing a historic site. The land was then donated to the State of Montana. Today the restored east barracks building -- the only project undertaken to date -- is administered by the Montana Highway Department.

In 1957, archaeologists from the University of Montana in Missoula undertook an intensive study and excavation of the ruins to determine the extent of the Fort. Hundreds of fine specimens reminiscent of life at the Fort were uncovered during the excavations. The group, under the direction of Professors Carling Malouf and William Smurr, also prepared a map showing the outlines of the fort, building locations, etc.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL AND SOURCES

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ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

Major John Owen purchased the St. Mary's property in 1850 and began promptly to expand and improve the facilities. The trading fort itself is located a few hundred yards on a slightly higher section of ground. A sketch of the fort made in 1853 revealed a log stockade containing several buildings and several log buildings nearby outside the walls.

Construction of the fort in its final form began in earnest in 1857, with adobe bricks replacing the original logs. In 1860 the root cellar was completed as was a well house; a flag staff was raised, and the gates on the north and south sides of the fort were hung. The original main entry gate was located on the south wall, but later the north entrance became the main gateway.

Leeson, in his History of Montana, 1739-1885, describes Fort Owen in this way:

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"The Fort covers an area of 125 by 150 feet, is built of adobes, the walls eighteen feet high and two feet thick, with ponderous gates at the north and south ends. High bastions, twenty-seven inches thick, portholed for musketry, flanking the fort and commanding all approaches, stand at each corner. Within are quarters capable of accommodating 150 men, shops, well, armory, and all fixtures and appurtenances of a well-regulated garrison, including flag staff, parade ground, a six-pounder howitzer and broken bottles."

The fort was sold in 1872 after Major Owen suffered a mental breakdown. The new owner, Washington Jay McCormick, had many other interests and made an attempt to continue the fort as a trading post. The buildings gradually fell into a state of disrepair as time and weather attacked the adobe bricks. The year 1876 saw the walls of the fort being hastily repaired, however, because of the fear of an attack by the Nez Perce. Chief Joseph and his followers passed not far from Fort Owen under a white flag of truce.

In the 1880's, the construction of a highway into Stevensville destroyed the north wall and gate, and in 1889 a severe wind storm ripped off a roof and further damaged the buildings. Some time in the early 1900's the bastions were removed, and in 1912 George May, then a young man, was ordered by his father to level what remained of the unoccupied west barracks. With a team of horses and logging chains, he pulled the refuse inward into the plaza. Excavations on the site in 1957 revealed old timbers beneath the soil.

Only the restored east barracks stand today. The archaeological excavations of 1957 have established the perimeter of the fortified adobe walls, location of the bastions, main gate, well house, root cellar and the foundations of other buildings -- all of which are now gone. Possibly some day Fort Owen will be fully restored with its adobe walls, bastions and buildings, and could thus become a major historic site and tourist attraction.

A physical description of the east barracks is given below.

EXTERIOR

Overall Dimensions - A rectangular building, the east wall measures 86'-11", the west wall 87'-4", the north wall 19'-0" and the south wall 19'-2". It is one story in height, with five rooms.

Foundations - rubble stone. Excavation indicates a trench 3' wide and 18" deep was dug and filled with stone and sand. The stone extended above grade, doubtless to protect the adobe brick from the soil.

Wall Construction -- Adobe bricks 18" thick served as bearing walls for the one story structure. The adobe bricks were made a few hundred yards south of the fort. Reference is made in Major Owen's Journals to fencing this brickyard in the year 1852.

Openings - The long narrow building, one room in depth, had four exterior entrances opening onto the courtyard. Beginning on the north, a double doorway led into the dormitory area, and the other three doors opened into what was probably the living room, into Major Owen's bedroom, and into the office-library area respectively. It can be safely assumed that the doors and windows are not original.

Windows: simple framed 2/2 light double-hung windows; probably reconstructed in the old rough openings.

Roof - shed roof sloping approximately 7° inward (west) towards the courtyard. Today a corrugated iron roof has replaced the original roof.

Chimney - brick.

INTERIOR

Floor Plan - A rectangular structure of five rooms running north and south, a single room in width. The first room at the north end was a dormitory having a double doorway to the exterior (on the west) and connected to another dormitory room (no. 2) by an interior door. Room no. 2 does not have an exterior entrance but is connected to room no. 3 by an interior door. The wall partition between rooms no. 1 & 2 is a stud wall and plaster; it probably is a later addition because all other interior walls are 18" thick adobe brick. Room no. 3 was probably a living room for both the dormitory rooms and for Major Owen. It has a large fireplace constructed back-to-back with a fireplace in room no. 4, Major Owen's bedroom. The assumed living room and Major Owen's bedroom are connected by an interior doorway, and each has its own outside entrance. Room no. 5, at the south end, was connected to room no. 4 by an interior doorway. It served as Major Owen's office and library and has its own fireplace. Located to the east of each of the fireplaces is a storage closet. Today the living room and office-library have been partially restored and serve as a museum.

Flooring - stamped earth.

Walls and Ceiling Finish - adobe brick walls exposed in the dormitory rooms and living room, while the bedroom and office-library have plastered walls and ceiling. A horizontal ceiling,

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probably a later feature, conceals what may have been the original shed roof, and is now plastered.

Doors - interior doors now gone.

Trim - little remains, and what there is was probably added during restoration.

SITE

Fort Owen is located several hundred yards north of the new highway approach into Stevensville in the midst of a cultivated farm that surrounds the fenced Fort Owen Monument property that belongs to the State of Montana.

Prepared by,

John N. DeHaas, Jr.

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Architect

May 1967

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