



Fort Leaton in 1971 during archeological investigations and restoration work

Room 23

This and the two rooms immediately to the north were identified as probable tack rooms in early architectural and archeological reports. Room 23 has been set up as a blacksmith shop, to depict the setting where tack fittings and other metal implements and tools would have been made.

Rooms 26–31

These rooms were not reconstructed, but stabilized as they existed in 1967. Based on archeological excavations, several functioned as holding pens for barnyard animals, and one contained a watertight trough system that may have been used for bathing.

At least two of the rooms contained household trash pits, which are very important to archeologists. The oldest artifact excavated here is a Mexican coin dated 1833. Otherwise the range of datable artifacts extends from approximately 1850 to 1920 and coincides most closely with the Burgess occupation (ca. 1860–1927). Excavated items include gun cartridges, ink and other glass bottles, various dishes and tableware, buttons, metal tools, pipe bowls and ceramic doll heads.

Mausoleum

First erected as a chapel by the Burgess family in the 1920s, the mausoleum contains the remains of John D. Burgess and Thomasa Baeza Burgess within the Burgess Family Cemetery.



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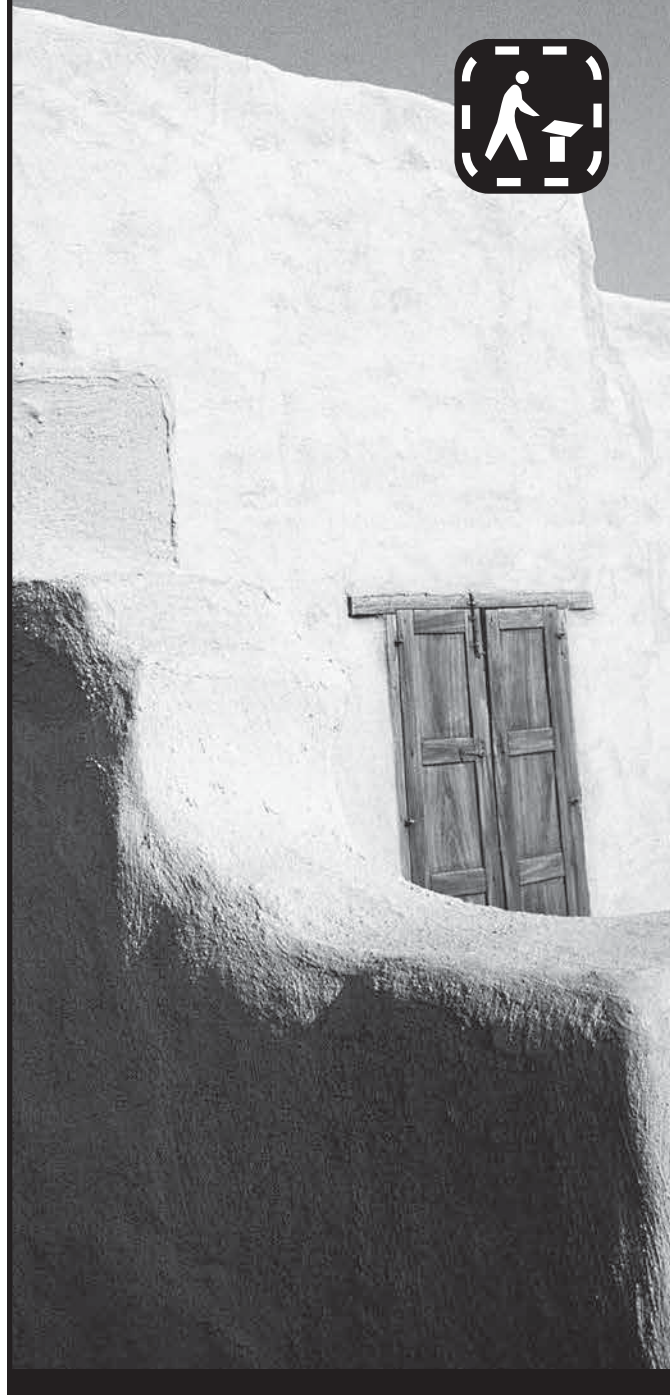
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TEXAS PARKS AND WILDLIFE

Self-Guided Tour

Fort Leaton

State Historic Site



WELCOME TO FORT LEATON STATE HISTORIC SITE

The structure you see around you is a reconstructed fortification that served as a trading post on the old Chihuahua Trail from 1848 to 1884, when it was known as El Fortin. The fort went on to be occupied until the mid-1920s. As you wander through the rooms, reflect on what life here would have been like during those bygone days.

Chronology of Key Events

1848

Benjamin Leaton and Juana Pedrasa acquire the property from Juan Bustillos, expand and fortify the existing buildings, and begin operation of a trading post.

1851

Ben Leaton dies; his family continues living at the site.

1852

Juana Pedrasa Leaton marries Edward Hall. The couple continues the trading business.

1862

John D. Burgess buys the property. The Burgess family expands the structure and continues its operation as a trading post until 1884.

1925–1927

Burgess family sells the property and abandons the site.

1936

The Historic American Buildings Survey, an architectural study, is completed and the State of Texas erects monuments at the site.

1940

Works Progress Administration conducts excavations and produces measured drawings.

1967–1969

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department acquires the site, initiates additional architectural and archeological investigations and conducts restoration work before opening the site to the public in 1978.

Construction Materials

Fort Leaton was constructed of the native materials on hand: earth, rock and wood. Large, sun-dried adobes laid on rubble stone foundations comprise its walls, which range in thickness from 18 to 44 inches, nearly four feet at maximum. The adobe—a mixture of straw, water and clay—were pre-cast in wooden forms. After setting and hardening somewhat, the adobe were removed from the forms and allowed to dry thoroughly in the hot desert sun.

Mud mortar served as a setting bed for the bricks. Exterior walls were plastered with a mixture similar to the adobe mud with a lime additive. Interior walls were plastered as well and given a heavy coat of whitewash. The thick adobe walls capture and hold coolness in the summer and warmth in the winter. All jambs, headers, lintels, sills and roofing joists (*vigas*) were built of hand-hewn cottonwood.

Can you imagine the manual labor needed to construct such a large building entirely by hand? Or the constant repair and upkeep required to maintain a house made of mud like Fort Leaton?

Adobe brick being made during restoration work.



Extremely few records exist to document exactly how Fort Leaton was used in the past. Archeologists and historic architects, however, have shed some light onto the most probable scenarios. The room numbering scheme used here reflects the one used in past architectural and archeological reports.

Patio

Given its proximity to the main entryway and protected location within the center of the structure, the patio presumably would have been a hub of activity. Archeological excavations revealed that the patio had a packed earth floor, without evidence of brush arbors or shade ramadas. The patio featured an intricate 40-foot water drain paved with rock. You can still see the drain's opening today.

Rooms 4, 5 and 6

These three rooms, presumably used as quarters for Leaton's employees, are the only spaces in the building that exhibit a greater percentage of original material than restored construction. They were not re-plastered during the 1969 restoration, to allow visitors to see the underlying adobe. Look carefully—can you see the difference between the new and old wall segments? Keep your eye out for patches of plaster that were applied during the 1930s restoration attempt. Also notice the original doorsills and salmon-colored floor tiles.

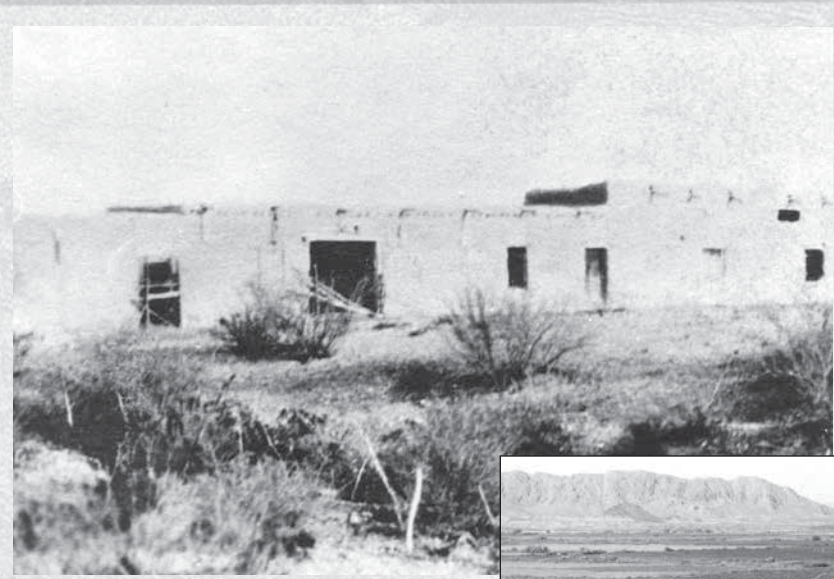
A double fireplace served both Room 5 and Room 6 with a common chimney. Unfortunately, treasure hunters looking for a legendary stash of gold severely damaged the fireplace in Room 6 before acquisition of the property by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

Rooms 1–3, 10 and 11

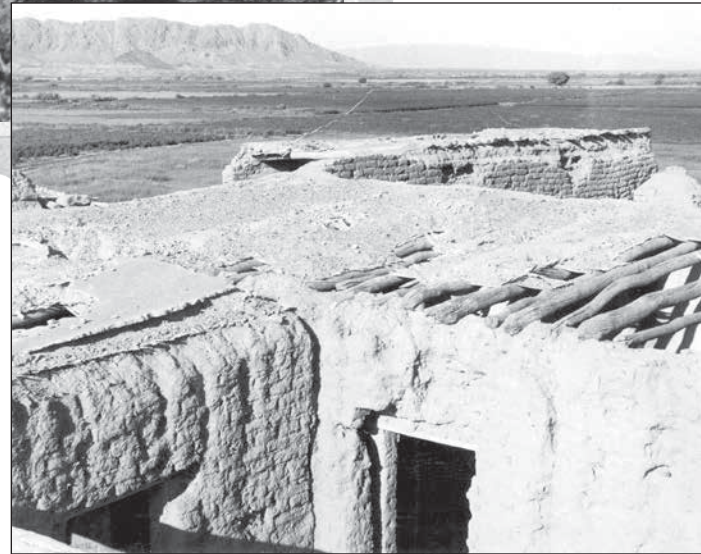
Constituting the major living space, these rooms would have served as Leaton's private quarters—the grandest in the structure. All of the plaster you see was applied during the 1969 restoration. Look above you and note the ceiling construction, with its hefty cottonwood *vigas* (beams) and smaller crosspieces called *latillas* or *rajas*.

Room 11 probably served as the main dining and living space according to architectural reports. This is the room of legend where Edward Hall was murdered about 1862, allegedly while eating his dinner. The story goes that after the shooting, Thomasa Baeza Burgess convinced her husband John D. Burgess (who was indicted for the murder) to convert the room into a chapel as atonement for the crime. It is depicted in this manner today.

Room 10 was once thought to be a nursery due to its centralized, protected location. Archeological excavations, however, revealed the absence of floor tiles in this room, a fact that casts doubt as to its use.



The earliest known photograph of Fort Leaton, ca. 1902.



The original cottonwood ceiling joists (*vigas*) were covered with river cane and then packed with up to 18 inches of adobe mud.

Rooms 13 and 14

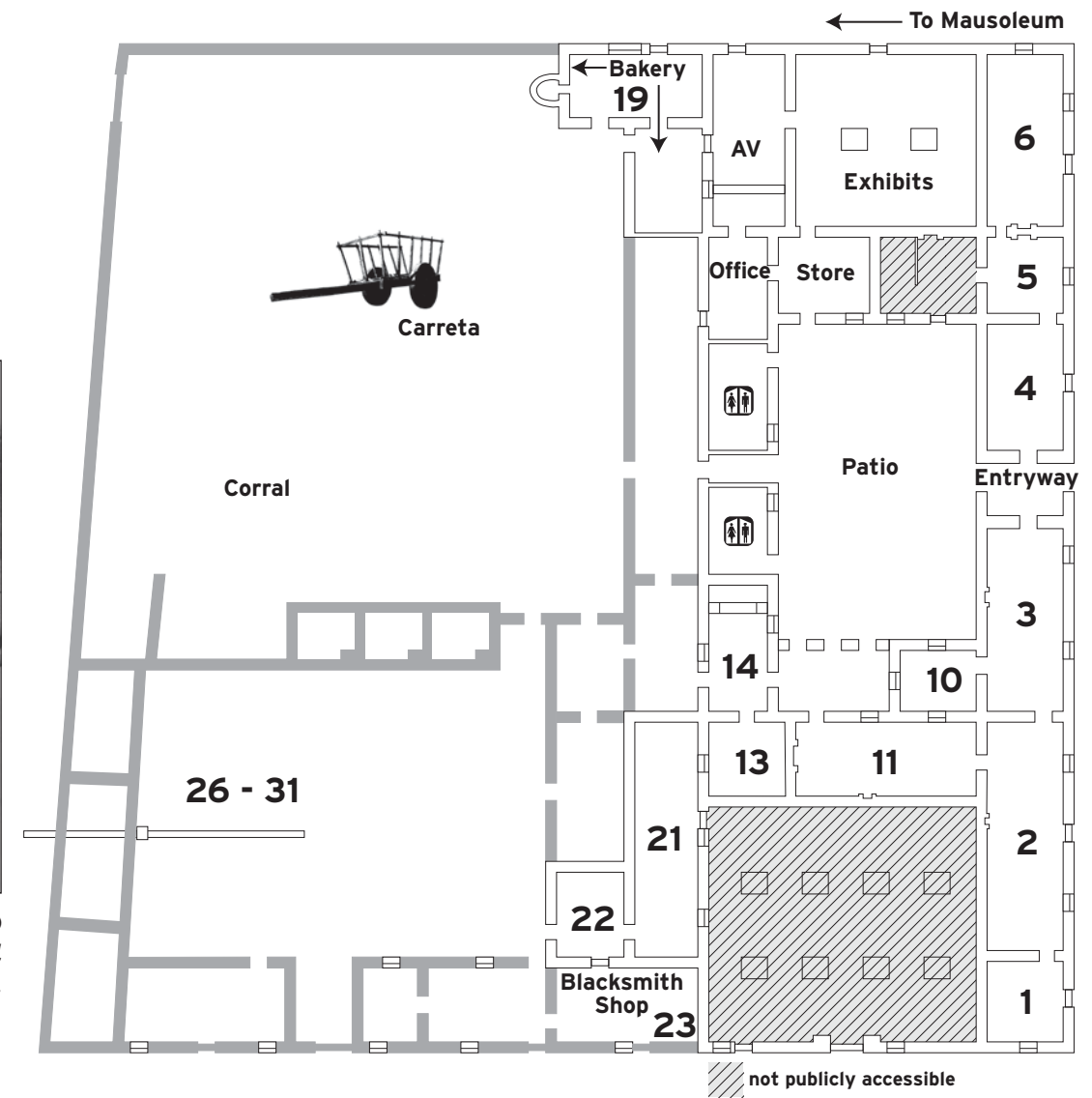
The large fireplace in Room 14 was undoubtedly used for cooking. Alice Jack Shipman, writing in the 1938 edition of *The Voice of the Mexican Border*, described this kitchen fireplace as “enormous... where a whole beef, a few goats and pigs might all be cooked at one time.” Not quite—but close! The adjoining covered patio was presumably used as an outdoor extension of the kitchen area.

Room 13 potentially served as a pantry given its small size and location. Notice that the door openings here are a foot shorter than those found in other parts of the structure, and the windows are high and small. These clues suggest that this is the oldest part of the fort.

Corral, Carreta and Ramadas

The Spanish brought ox carts (*carretas*) to the region in 1590—arguably the first wheeled vehicles to enter what is now the United States. *Carretas* transported goods on the Chihuahua Trail, which reached from San Antonio, Texas to Ciudad Chihuahua, Mexico and passed very near Fort Leaton. The large wheel you see on this replica is six feet high, but wheels on some historic *carretas* reached even higher at nine feet. Fully loaded *carretas* were so heavy that it took 10 to 12 oxen to pull them. Some say that a combination of prickly-pear juice and pig fat was used to lubricate the axel;

Fort Leaton Room Guide



others claim that women walked beside the wheels and greased them with twigs from the creosote bush. The shade shelters, or *ramadas*, within the corral provided shade for horses and other livestock.

Room 19

Use your imagination: can you smell the scent of freshly baked bread? This room was once the fort's bakery, as evidenced by the large wood-fired oven on the north wall. Nearby rooms would have served as additional food preparation and storage areas. The bakery is specifically referred to as *panaderia Francesa*, literally “French bakery”—a term that refers to the method of cooking. A wood fire was built inside the oven and left to burn down to coals, and then the ashes were pushed far aside. The oven's thick adobe walls absorbed so much heat that they radiated warmth into the oven chamber long after the fire had died down.

Rooms 21 and 22

Architectural research indicates that Room 21 could have been used as a “guardroom” based on location and size, but the researchers expressed some doubt as to this function. Interestingly, local lore has it that both Ben Leaton and John Burgess used the space as a “dungeon,” where they would incarcerate debtors. In contrast, the adjacent so-called “guard's room” was well outfitted with an ornate corner fireplace.

Alice Jack Shipman casually mentioned in 1938 that Fort Leaton contained, “a prison with a whipping post” but omitted any details. Others have referred to the high, barred openings as ventilation portals for jailed prisoners.

Was Ben Leaton indeed a jail keeper? There is no definitive archeological, architectural or historical evidence, although longstanding tradition suggests at least a possibility. Can you think of any other uses for these peculiar rooms?