

GUARDROOM AND “DUNGEON”

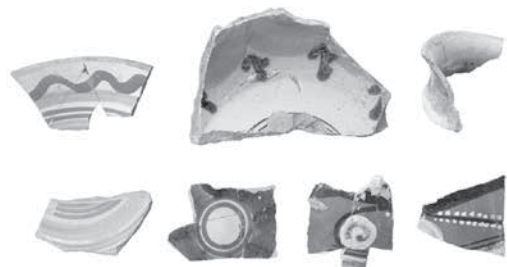
Local lore states that both Ben Leaton and John Burgess operated a “dungeon” where they incarcerated debtors. While the front room may have been used as a guardroom, the back room has one door and air vents located high on the walls. Was this design intended to prevent prisoners from escaping? Can you think of any other uses for these peculiar rooms?

BLACKSMITH SHOP

Blacksmiths were the mechanics of the 19th century, shoeing horses and outfitting wagons. This space and the two rooms to the north were tack rooms where various metal implements were crafted.

UNRESTORED ROOMS

These rooms are left unfinished to preserve a historic viewshed and provide insight to what Fort Leaton looked like prior to restoration. Several of these rooms functioned as holding pens for stock 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 provide important information for archeologists.



Artifacts collected at Fort Leaton

GRANARY

This room was used as a storehouse for grain and goods that were sold to travelers journeying along the Chihuahua Trail. The large doors make this room accessible to *carretas*.

MAUSOLEUM AND CEMETERY

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.

THE STORY CONTINUES ...

Each rainfall reveals new artifacts at Fort Leaton. Pottery sherds are the most common items recovered. If you find an artifact, please practice Leave No Trace™ ethics. Leave the piece of history where you found it and report it to a ranger for further research. Artifacts are plotted on a site map to determine dispersion patterns.



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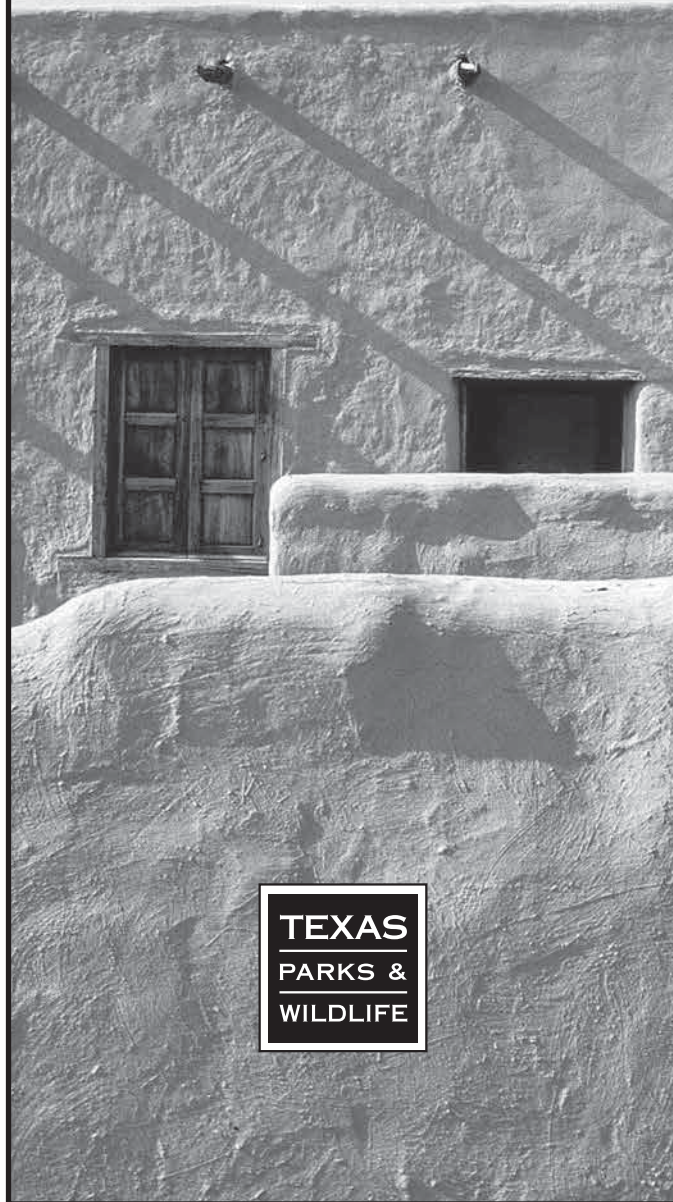
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SELF-GUIDED TOUR

FORT LEATON

State Historic Site

BIG BEND RANCH STATE PARK COMPLEX



WELCOME TO FORT LEATON STATE HISTORIC SITE

You are standing in a reconstructed fortification that served as a trading post on the Chihuahua Trail from 1848-1884. Fort Leaton is situated in La Junta de los Rios, a remote and isolated floodplain located in *el Des poblado*—a nickname for the Big Bend region which means “the uninhabited place.” In 1848, La Junta became a borderland recently acquired by the United States.

CHRONOLOGY OF KEY EVENTS

1848

Ben Leaton and Juana Pedrasa acquire the property, expand buildings, and open the trading post.

1848-1851

Travelers, including military and exploratory expeditions, visit Fort Leaton.

1851

Ben Leaton dies; his family continues living in Fort Leaton.

1852

Juana Pedrasa marries Edward Hall. They continue to operate the trading post.

1872

Edward Hall defaults on the Burgess loan, refusing to vacate the fort. Burgess' son murders Hall. Burgess family expands the structure and operates the trading post until 1884.

1925-1927

Burgess family sells the property and abandons the site.

1936

The Historic American Buildings Survey is completed. The State of Texas erects monuments on site.

1940

Works Progress Administration conducts excavations and produces measured drawings.

1967-1969

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department acquires the site and conducts restoration work before opening the site to the public in 1978.



Adobe brick making during restoration

ADOBE CONSTRUCTION

Fort Leaton is a “living structure”—it is always changing! The fort was constructed from the materials available in La Junta: earth, grass, water, rock, and wood. *Adoberos* created their own building supplies.

The fort's walls vary in height from 18-22 feet and are comprised of large sun-dried adobe bricks sealed with mud plaster. Built to retain heat in the winter and cool air in the summer, the mud walls range in thickness from 18-44 inches. The adobe bricks—a mixture of straw, water, and clay—were cast in wooden forms. After setting, the adobes were removed from the forms to dry in the hot desert sun. Interior walls were plastered and finished with a heavy coat of whitewash.

All jambs, headers, lintels, sills, and roofing joists (*vigas*) were built of hand-hewn cottonwood, a tree native to the area. The door and shutter hinges were forged from iron, likely by the resident blacksmith.

WHERE DO PARK RANGERS GET THEIR INFORMATION?

Written records from Fort Leaton are scarce and the Borderland's rich oral history tradition has produced many legends about this frontier outpost. Room labels shown in this guide reflect possible uses based on archeological reports.



SERVANTS' QUARTERS 1, 2 AND 3

Leaton's employees likely lived here. The walls were not plastered during the restoration to expose the "building blocks" of Fort Leaton. Can you find differences between the old and new adobe bricks?

The doorsills and lovely salmon floor tiles in these rooms are original. The tile is named "Saltillo," originating from Saltillo, Coahuila, Mexico. In Spanish, the verb "saltar" means "to skip" or "to jump," which is a nod to the tiles' unevenness.

A double fireplace with a common chimney served the two rear rooms. Treasure hunters searching for a legendary stash of gold severely damaged the fireplace in Servants' Quarters #3 before Texas Parks and Wildlife Department acquired the property.



Ben Leaton and Juana Pedraza. University of North Texas Libraries, *The Portal to Texas History*, <https://texashistory.unt.edu>; crediting Marfa Public Library.

FORMAL PARLOR

This room is arguably the grandest in the structure and is likely where the Leatons hosted balls and other community gatherings. Do you see any differences between this room and the servants' quarters? The chandeliers held tallow candles, which along with oil lamps and fireplaces, provided the only sources of light.

NURSERY/FORMAL SITTING ROOM

Raised thresholds separate each room in Fort Leaton. According to legend, this design was incorporated to protect the fort from floodwaters and attacks from raiding Comanches or Apaches.

There are no documented attacks on Fort Leaton, but this room's central location and smooth floors suggest that the space was used as a nursery. Artifacts indicate that this room had a variety of purposes over the years, serving as a formal sitting room at one time.

FAMILY PARLOR

The family parlor was the Leatons' living quarters. Look at the ceiling. The *rajas* and *vigas* (beams) you have seen throughout the fort display an interesting design unique to this room. Can you spot it?

The pattern of the *rajas* changes three times! Historians believe this feature was incorporated to separate private quarters. Room separation was completed by arranging screens and furniture that designated the separate living spaces.

Look closely at the floor and you will find that the pattern of the Saltillo tile also changes! The changing tile patterns are linked to the Legend of the Devil's Cave, which was widely observed and is still honored through local traditions.



TRADING OFFICE

The center of business in the fort, this room is where Ben Leaton conducted trade operations. American military explorers who visited the Fort noted dried beef, cornmeal, stock animals, and peach brandy among the goods at this solitary desert outpost. To the ire of Mexican and American officials, Leaton also exchanged guns and ammunition with the Apaches and Comanches in return for goods stolen from Mexican ranches.

DINING ROOM

The dining room is the setting for one of the fort's stories of murder, mystery, and mayhem. After Ben Leaton's death in 1851, Juana Pedraza married Leaton's teamster, Edward Hall. Hall was a better gambler than businessman, which forced him to cover the fort's debts with a loan from John Burgess. When Hall defaulted on the loan, Burgess' son entered the fort and shot Hall while he was eating dinner. After the shooting, Thomasa Baeza Burgess convinced her husband (who was indicted for the murder) to add a chapel as atonement for the crime.



Women working in the courtyard of Fort Leaton, circa 1930s

COURTYARD

Located near the main entrance and the center of the structure, the courtyard was a hub of activity. Archeological excavations reveal that the courtyard had a packed earth floor and featured an intricate 40-foot water drain that is still partially visible today.

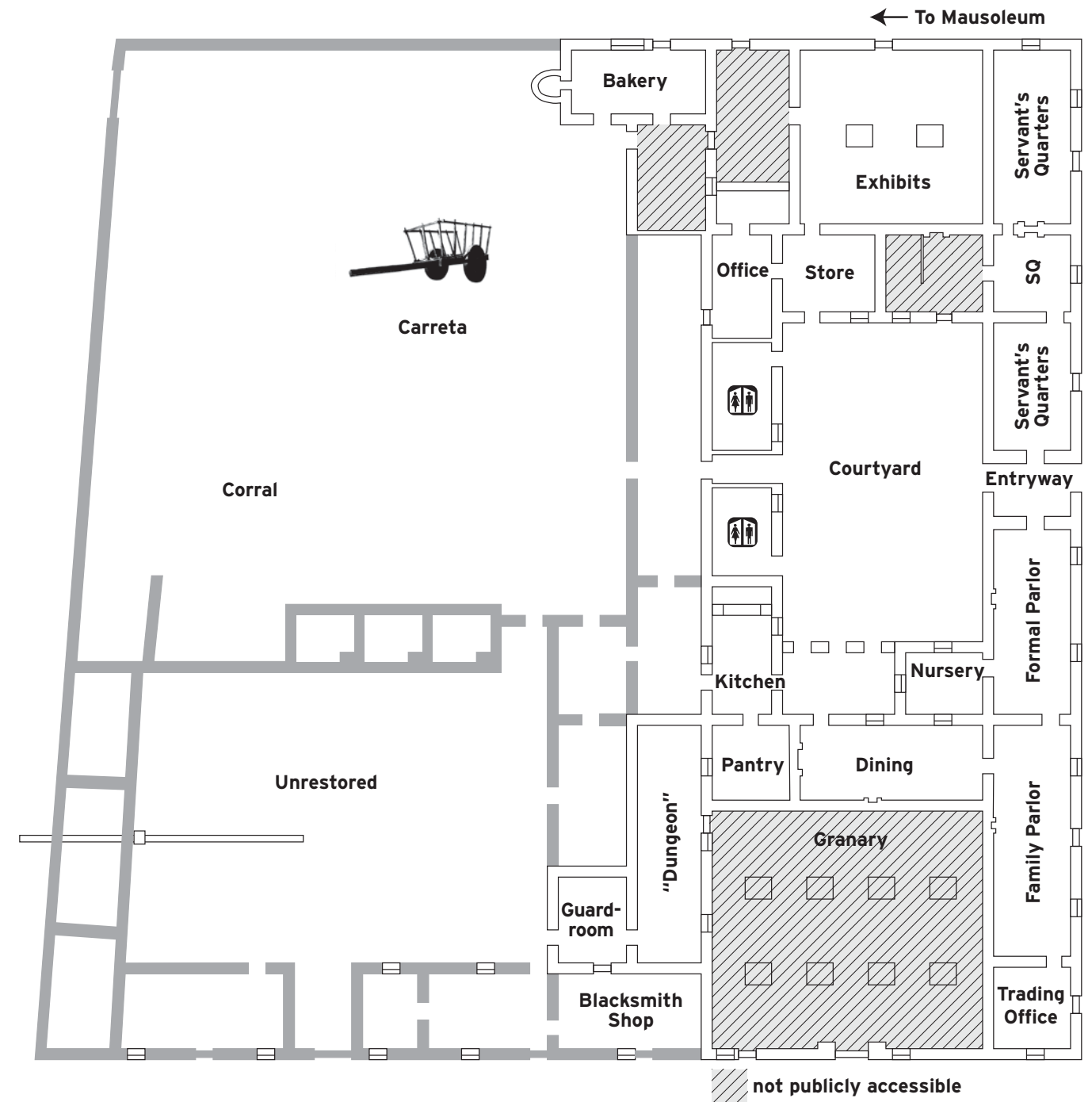
KITCHEN

The proximity to the dining room and the enormous fireplace help identify this room as the kitchen. Alice Jack Shipman, writing in the 1938 edition of *The Voice of the Mexican Border*, described this fireplace as "enormous...where a whole beef, a few goats and pigs might all be cooked at one time." The adjoining covered patio was used as an outdoor extension of the kitchen area.

PANTRY

How does it feel to stand in the oldest portion of the fort? Notice that the windows are high and small, and the doorframes are 12 inches shorter than those in other rooms. These clues reveal the age of this pantry, which was used for cool dry storage.

FORT LEATON ROOM GUIDE



CARRETAS ON THE CHIHUAHUA TRAIL

"What is that ridiculously large wooden cart?" It's a *carreta*! Arguably the first wheeled vehicle to enter the United States, the Spanish brought these ox carts to the region in 1590. The wheel on this replica is 6 feet tall. Some *carretas* had wheels 9 feet in diameter! Fully loaded *carretas* were so heavy that it took 10 to 12 oxen to pull them.

Carretas transported goods on the Chihuahua Trail, which connected San Antonio, Texas with Chihuahua, Mexico and passed very near Fort Leaton. One of the most common goods hauled up the Chihuahua Trail was silver bullion mined in Mexico.

The shade shelters, or *ramadas*, within the corral provided *sombra* (shade) for horses and other livestock. *Ramadas* were built from ocotillo or river cane, both native to the area.

THE BAKERY

This room served as Fort Leaton's bakery, as evidenced by the wood-fired oven on the north wall. Nearby rooms served as additional food preparation and storage areas.

A fire was built inside the oven and left to burn down to coals. The oven's thick adobe walls absorbed heat and radiated warmth into the oven chamber long after the fire had died. The ashes were pushed aside to make room for bread and other baked goods.

Why do you think that the bakery was built separately from the kitchen?