GARDROOM 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.

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 curretas.

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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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 Despoblado—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.

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.

1895-1927
Burgess family sells the property and abandons the site.

1936
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 to the public in 1978.

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

Adobes varied 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 jams, headers, lintels, sills, and roofing joints (vigos) were made of hand-bewn 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.
The Portal to Texas History, https://texashistory.unt.edu; crediting Texas Parks and Wildlife Department acquired the property.

FAMILY PARLOR
The family parlor was the Leatons’ living quarters. Look at the ceiling. The vigas (beams) you have seen throughout the fort display an interesting design unique to this room. Historians believe this feature was incorporated to separate private quarters. The family parlor functioned as a formal sitting room at one time.

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 chandelier 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.

KITCHEN
The proximity to the dining room and the enormous fireplace help identify this room as the kitchen. Alice Jack Shuman, 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.

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 Pedrasa 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 Barza Burgess convinced her husband (who was indicted for the murder) to add a chapel as atonement for the crime.

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?