

Lee's Ferry, Revisited

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Lee's Ferry is both the physical and spiritual heart of water history in the arid West. As a physical place, Lee's Ferry is the crucial dividing point between the Upper and Lower Basin states as defined by the Colorado River Compact of 1922. Measurements taken at Lee's Ferry govern the amount of water credited to each of the basins, as well as allocations between states within each basin.

As a symbol, Lee's Ferry represents the pivotal position of the Colorado River in the development water resources in the West. First settled as a remote place of exile for fugitive Mormon leader John D. Lee as he sought to escape Federal authorities, Lee's Ferry is now a symbol for Federal influence on the West. As the focus of Federal activities on the Colorado River, events at Lee's Ferry have made a decided impact on water history.

Despite its key role in history, the history of Lee's Ferry itself had been left relatively unexamined. Recent work by historian P.T. Reilly and others have only now added new chapters to the complex saga of Lee's Ferry. This new research provides support for the contention that Lee's Ferry is one of the most significant locales in the landscape of Federal water policy. P.T. Reilly's work, as edited and finalized by Robert Webb, has resulted in a substantial revision of how we interpret Lee's Ferry

In 1999, the National Park Service commissioned a historic buildings survey of the individual structures at Lee's Ferry. This provided an opportunity for synthesis of the nearly thirty-five years of historical studies at the site. Fortunately, the project coincided with the posthumous publication of P.T. Reilly's masterful summary of the wide scope of human history at Lee's Ferry. This enabled researchers to correct the interpretation of several buildings at the site. Specific major areas of revision are as follows:

Samantha Johnson Cabin (formerly known as Emma's Cabin): This building is almost certainly not related to John D. or Emma Lee as previously believed. The building was constructed in 1887 by Warren Johnson for his wife Samantha and her children. It was modified in 1897-8 to a schoolhouse by James Emmett, who built the upper part of the walls and the roof using salvaged lumber from J. Neilsen's boat, the *Nellie*, and added the floor inside the building. Leo Weaver rehabilitated the building as a guest lodge c. 1936, adding the ceiling and whitewashing the building. The porch on the east side postdates 1956.

Polygamist Era Cabin (formerly known as the Blacksmith Shop): This building was thought to have been built by Warren Johnson in 1887, but there is no evidence in support of this view. It most likely was constructed in 1925 by Warren Johnson's son, Jerry, as a dwelling for one of the polygamist families that occupied the site at that time. Photographs c. 1935 show a log building with a flat dirt roof and an open ramada on the north side. The modern gabled roof was added by Leo Weaver or by Gus Griffin after 1936, and most likely in the 1950s.

Weaver Ranch House: The building had been associated with the Bar Z Ranch, supposedly dating as early as 1916. In fact, the building was built by Leo Weaver and a Hopi craftsman, Poli Hungavi from 1935 to 1937 as part of “Paradise Canyon Lodge,” Weaver’s dude ranch operation.

Picture Window Shack (previously known also as Jackson’s Cabin): This building was previously attributed to James Jackson, c. 1884. Photographs taken from mesa-tops or aerially show that there was no building at this location at least prior to about 1940. While a physical inspection reveals that the structure is quite old, it appears to have been moved from another location and then altered. While no documentation has been found to establish the origins of this building, there are many structures known to have been on the Lonely Dell Ranch site at one time or another that are no longer extant, and it could be any of these. Possibilities include the John Emmett (later Carling Spencer) cabin; one of the cabins built after 1925 by Jerry Johnson as part of a polygamist commune; and a barn, granary, or other agricultural building.

Warren Johnson House Foundation: While the generally accepted history of this site has been mostly correct, the outlines of the foundation visible today do not appear to match the historic footprint of the house. Much of the original foundation was used by Leo Weaver in building the Weaver Ranch House.

Lee’s Ferry Fort: The significance and impact of alterations made to the Fort by Charles Spencer in 1910 and also by prior users have been underestimated in the past. Even before Spencer made his additions, the windows had been modified for use as a residence. Due to restoration of the window openings to loop-holes by NPS in 1976, the building now represents a mixed interpretation of history: part Fort and part Spencer Mess Hall.

American Placer Co. Office (formerly known as the Post Office): Contrary to previous belief, this building does not date to the Lee period. It was built by Charles Spencer in c. 1911 as the American Placer Co. Corporate Office. It served as a post office for about one year after Spencer’s abandonment of the site.

Spencer Bunkhouse: Previous histories correctly identify this as one of three bunkhouses built by Charles Spencer in 1911. However, the USGS substantially remodeled the building in 1950 as a laboratory and it no longer visually represents the Spencer period.

Upper Ferry Site: While most previous histories were in error regarding the function and origin of many of the structures at the Upper Ferry Site, a recent archeological stabilization project correctly interpreted and stabilized the site. Remaining structures all were constructed c. 1910 or in the several years following that date. Structure #1 was known as the “Louse House” and was a temporary guest lodging. Structure #2 was the Frank Johnson Cabin (1912-13). Structure #3, the Small Corral, probably served as Frank Johnson’s chicken house. Structure #4, the Large Corral, was probably used for that purpose. Structure #5, a Dugout Structure, may have been Charles Spencer’s powder magazine. Wooden structures, including portions of Structure #1 and Structure #2 were burned down in the 1950s.