

CHANGES IN HISTORIC SITE FUNCTION:

THE JOHNSON-TAYLOR ADOBE

Susan M. Hector
San Diego County
Department of Parks and Recreation
5201 Ruffin Road, Suite P
San Diego, CA 92123

ABSTRACT

This paper describes archaeological investigations at the Johnson-Taylor adobe in Penasquitos Canyon, San Diego. These studies are focussed on determining changes in the use and function of the adobe area through time. Although these changes actually began about 5500 years ago, with the occupation of the adobe area by native groups, this paper concentrates on the historic period.

BACKGROUND

Archaeological studies began at the adobe in the fall of 1983. At that time, RECON was under contract to the county to conduct exploratory excavations inside the northern wing of the adobe and at a prehistoric site on the knoll behind the ranch house (Hector 1984). The ultimate goal of the county was to restore portions of the ranch, including buildings and landscaping; no one was really certain what archaeological remains were hidden inside or beneath the buildings.

To provide context, the historic documentation available for the adobe will be briefly reviewed. A recent publication by Mary Ward of the County Parks and Recreation Department (Ward 1984) presents all of her original research much more completely and should be consulted for details. Historical documentation discovered by Mary Ward indicated that a structure already existed at the ranch prior to 1862. Correspondence and testimony suggested that a small settlement, shepherd's camp, or way station may have been built before the major construction phases at the adobe. In 1862, George Johnson and his wife Estefania were given title to Rancho de los Penasquitos; Estefania was an Alvarado (of the Ruiz-Alvarado adobe at the mouth of Penasquitos Canyon). Johnson and his family lived at the ranch until around 1885, when he sold the property to J.S. Taylor. Taylor remodeled portions of the ranch and promoted it as a resort. In 1913, the ranch burned; it was rebuilt and used as a bunkhouse until around 1940, when a modern kitchen and bathrooms were

added.

In consideration of the limited historic documentation found for the project area, a research question concerning identification of historic site functions over time was proposed for evaluation. There were basically two types of non-urban settlements in 19th century San Diego: the self-supporting ranch community, which was established to export livestock but was itself the center of many activities; and the satellite or special activity settlement or site, which was focussed on producing or processing a particular item for export. It was proposed that the adobe area fulfilled both of these functions over the past century and a half.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The goal of a research design prepared for the adobe area during the 1983 excavations was to classify historical periods, as identified through documentation and artifact and architectural analyses, as either specialized or focussed activity periods. To identify a function or range of functions for the site, the artifacts and architecture will be used to evaluate expectations in four topical domains. These domains are Site Users, Subsistence, Location, and Activities. Using information derived from historic and artifactual data, tests for each domain have been generated. For example, if the Site Users were a family group, artifacts representative of the range of functions of a family should be found. If the Site Users were shepherds or cattle herders, a more limited array of artifacts should be recovered. To summarize, the goal was to be able to determine who was living at the site during which period, and what the function of the site was at that time.

RESULTS

The analyses and test evaluations completed as a result of three phases of investigation at the rancho complex (Hector 1984; Hector and Van Wormer 1986; Hector, Wade, and Manley 1988) indicate that emphasis on site function did shift over time, and that a complex sequence of activities occurred at the site. This proposition was first tested in 1983, and continues to be evaluated as additional archaeological studies are completed at the park.

The main part of the ranch house is divided into three parts, each representing a wing of the building. The A Wing is the northernmost building, and consists of an adobe section flanked by wooden additions. Wing B is the largest building, and is on the western side of the ranch house complex. Wing C is a small adobe structure that is not at present connected to the other two wings.

When RECON excavations began in 1983, the wooden floor had been removed from Wing A, exposing a silty ground surface. Excavation through the upper layer of silt and disturbed building materials revealed historic artifacts and architectural evidence that the adobe was not what it appeared to be.

When the floor was removed by the architect in preparation for restoration, plaster was knocked from the wall. In one area, removal of the plaster revealed a seam in the northern wall of Wing A. Excavation units were placed in the floor below this seam. A cobble foundation was exposed.

The foundation consists of two rows of large cobbles extending all the way across the approximate center of Wing A. The area between the two rows is filled with rubble and soil. The foundation was found to be thicker on the south side, consisting of three parallel rows of cobbles; the westernmost row was composed of very small cobbles. A foundation of this size supported an exterior wall; when this wall was knocked down, the adobes at the corner were sheared off, and an eastern extension wall was built abutting the original wall.

The finding of a foundation from a former exterior wall indicated that the eastern half of Wing A had been outside a smaller building at one time. With this hypothesis, excavation was continued on both ends of A Wing. In 1983, a large earthenware ceramic vessel was found just below the surface in the eastern portion of Wing A. It was buried right side up just below the surface of the ground, and contained only sterile soil (not midden). This vessel measures approximately 60 centimeters in length and 40 centimeters in diameter in its widest area. The walls at present are 1.5 centimeters thick, and it was thrown on a wheel. Besides its size, the amphora-like shape is of interest. Vessels of this form were used throughout Europe and the Mediterranean for shipping and storing oils, wines, and other foods. Many vessels of this form have been found in shipwrecks off the coast of southern Europe, and were also used in rubble filler in cathedrals and other large constructions. However, references to this form in the United States were not found after extensive research and correspondence (Hector 1984). Because it was thrown on a mechanized wheel, it must have come from a large, industrialized area. Suggested identifications such as olive jar or water filter have been evaluated, but to date a positive identification on this object has not been possible. The origins and function of this vessel remain a mystery.

Other important evidence for the existence of an earlier building at the site was found by studying the compacted earth in Wing A. The western half of the main room had a compacted earthen floor that exhibited a complex structure. Dirt floors in rural Mexico are maintained by a daily sweeping, augmented by a scattering of water to settle the dust. Eventually a hard

surface results, similar to a heavily used dirt road. Through time, a series of thin layers are formed; these are composed of silt, ash, dust, and whitewash. Layered surfaces of this type up to ten centimeters thick were found in the western portion of the main room in Wing A.

There are two other parts of Wing A with adobe walls. One is the eastern half, which was mentioned above; this is where the large ceramic vessel was found. The other area is a small room west of the large room. In both this west room and in the eastern half of the main room compacted surfaces were found, but they did not exhibit the layering of the western half of the main room. The compacted surface were simply hardened dirt with no internal structure. These areas were labeled Patio Activity Areas, since they must have been outside the original building; they were covered over by subsequent construction phases at the site. Interestingly, all of these compaction layers were cut through when the joists for the wooden floor were added to Wing A.

Remains found in the eastern half of the main room supported the hypothesis that this was an outdoor activity area. Bottle and ceramic fragments were found, as well as cow bone butchered in the Mexican style.

In the spring of 1984, different areas were tested (Hector 1984). Excavations were planned in front of the adobe, and in the parking area. Both of these areas yielded abundant prehistoric archaeological materials and, significantly, a limited but important historic deposit outside the eastern end of the A Wing. One unit placed in this area yielded butchered cattle bones, and fragments of kaolin clay pipes. This area would have been outside the bedroom of the latest version of the adobe, but would have been a reasonably distant trash deposit when only the western part of Wing A was occupied. Below this historic deposit, prehistoric midden was found.

Beginning in January, 1985, San Diego County Archaeological Society (SDCAS) volunteers began mitigation excavation in Wing A in preparation for the restoration project. Testing by RECON crew members also began in Wing B, an area previously unexamined. The results of these investigations were reported in Hector and Van Wormer (1986), along with the results of an investigation of another site located on a hill behind the adobe. Findings by the volunteers in Wing A have supported the proposition that an earlier building stood in the western half of the main room. More compacted soils were found, and a cement and cobble trough feature was discovered. This shallow, rectangular feature may have been used to hold water or for storage; it was set into the ground, constructed in place, and contained a piece of wood with square nails that may have been a cover. A low adobe wall, made of three courses of adobe bricks, was found on the surface at the eastern end of the main room. This wall had been disturbed during later building episodes, but remains relatively intact in

the central areas of the end of the room. A smaller wall was found approximately two meters west of the longer wall; this was probably an internal divider on the patio. Similar low walls are used in rural Mexico to separate patios from the rest of the outdoors. This patio appears to represent an exterior kitchen associated with the first adobe room.

Besides the excavations inside the main room in Wing A, volunteers have been excavating in the mostly-prehistoric deposits in the wooden bedroom additions on the east side of the wing. A joist has been found in these units that may represent a porch that existed in this area before the wooden additions were built. A cement-lined pit was also found beneath the floor of the bedrooms. This pit was excavated through the prehistoric deposit, 40 centimeters into the sterile clay subsoil. The cultural affiliation of this pit is not known.

Before archaeologists could investigate the historic materials inside Wing B, wooden floors, ceilings, and additions postdating 1940 were removed under SDCAS volunteer supervision by the California Conservation Corps. Each room was observed separately; all wood removed was labeled, and examined for square nails and other fasteners.

Given the results of the excavations in Wing A, it was expected that the archaeologists would find evidence beneath the floors of Wing B for Patio Activity Areas. No compacted areas had been found beneath the wooden additions of Wing A that were adjacent to Wing B. However, these areas were added to the ranch after 1913, and probably caused a great amount of local surface and subsurface disturbance.

Compacted soil surfaces were indeed found beneath the floors of Wing B. These surfaces are most well developed in the northernmost room, where a feature was also found. This feature, which has only been tested in a limited way, appears to be an adobe construction with a plastered surface. It is not level, but has a slanted side. This feature is scheduled for complete exposure in the next excavation phase. The compacted soils extended south downslope inside the wing.

Although this evidence of the earliest periods of history at the adobe was found, the historic artifacts recovered in abundance from Wing B represent the period between 1865 and 1913. In 1913, a fire occurred at the adobe; we know this from historic documentation. However, the history does not tell us how extensive the fire was, nor what happened to the building afterwards. Such evidence was found within Wing B.

When the fire occurred, probably beginning in the kitchen at the southern end of the adobe, the wooden floor burned and collapsed. With it, it carried everything that was inside the building at that time. When the floor was rebuilt after the

fire, all this older material was sealed below. In the area that had been the kitchen at the time of the fire, glassware, crockery, and ceramics were found, broken and melted as they lay within the room.

The pantry was in the room adjacent to the north wall of the kitchen. Against one wall, shelves of canning jars, full of beans and other seeds and plant materials, fell and broke, scattering broken canning jars and charred plant remains over the ground. Other household items, such as clocks, were also caught in the blaze. The adobe acted like an oven, melting and charring everything inside. Burned pieces of the original wooden floor and other burned building materials such as door lintels were also found on the ground surface. Adobe bricks were scorched and burned. Interestingly, there was no evidence of this fire in Wing A. The adobe construction, while increasing the temperatures inside Wing B, probably isolated the fire. The original outside porch was also destroyed during the fire, leaving burned adobe supports beneath the later porch.

To sum up the findings about the changes and functions of Wings A and B, a series of figures is presented. Figure 1 shows the adobe as it was before Johnson began any additions. There is a Patio Activity Area on both sides of the adobe room. This shows where the large pot was found, and where the concrete and cobble trough is located. The low wall made from adobe blocks is also shown as the eastern end of the activity area. This eastern end was probably the exterior kitchen. This period appears to represent use by a small Mexican family settlement, since artifacts and features are most typical of that type of household.

Figure 2 shows changes made by Johnson in 1862, when he arrived at the ranch. The room was enlarged, and another small adobe room was added to the western end of the main room. The scatter from this period forms another concentric ring around Wing A. This great intensification of use in the area implies a large ranching community in development. Artifacts and features from this period indicate a remaining orientation towards the Mexican style of ranch development.

The next phase, shown as Figure 3, was a major building period at the ranch. From circa 1865 to the fire in 1913, Wings B and C were added. Interestingly, Wing B is made in an American style, while Johnson's additions to Wing A were continued in the Mexican style. Wing B is an adobe set on a mortared stone foundation; it is on a slope that required a foundation of up to five feet in height at the southern end. In contrast, Wing A is set flat on the ground, on a cobble foundation. As part of a later phase of study, project archaeologists collected and processed adobe blocks from all proposed periods at the ranch to identify temper and any floral materials that might indicate differences in time or place of construction. Three adobe block

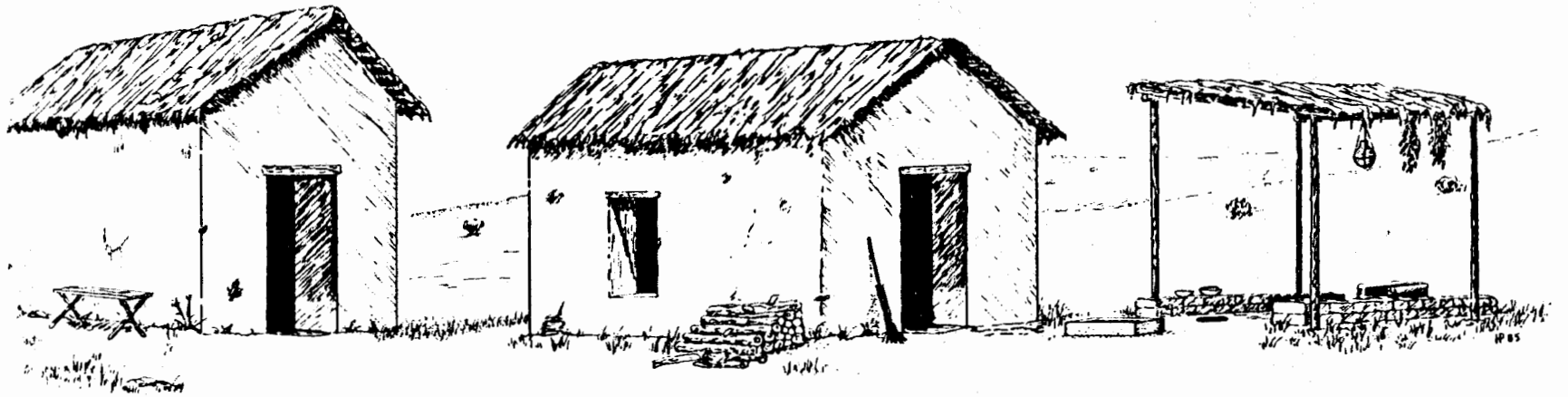


Figure 1. Artist's reconstruction of Mexican Period adobe settlement.

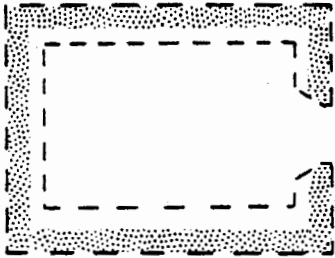
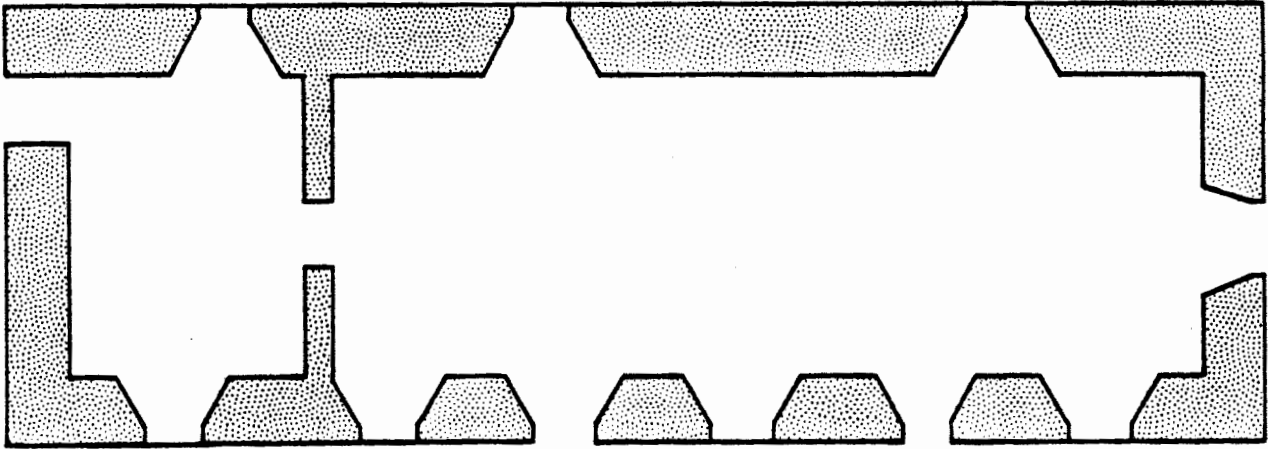


Figure 2. Johnson Period, 1860-1880.

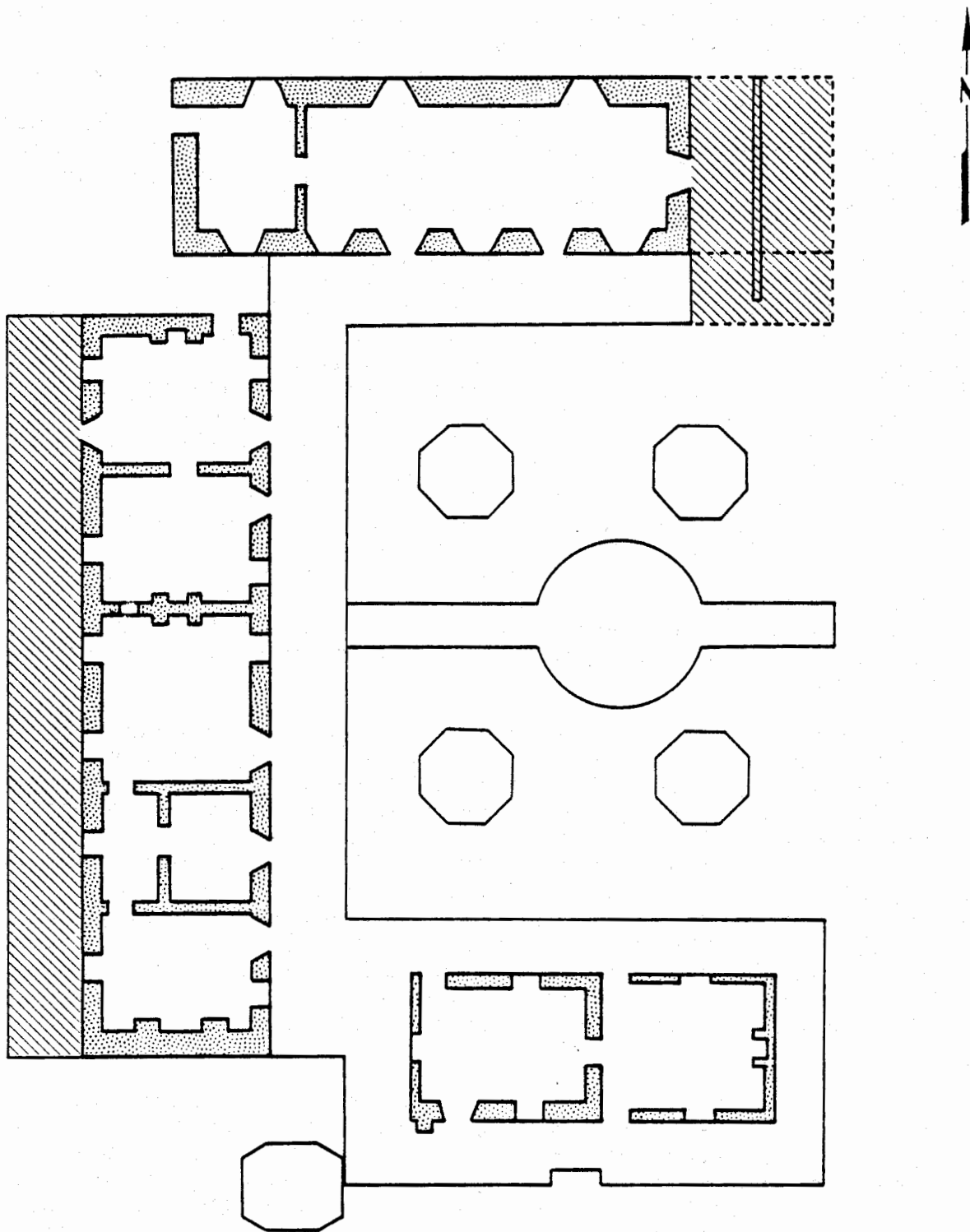


Figure 3. Construction between 1865-1913.

samples were analyzed for pollen. One sample was taken from the western part of Wing A, one sample was from the patio wall foundation in the eastern part of the wing, and the third sample was from the eastern wall of Wing A. All three contained different proportions of species, indicating that the blocks were made during different periods of construction (West 1989). Wood charcoal was found in two samples. These results support the building chronology presented in this paper.

During the 1880s, concrete patios were added in the courtyard of the ranch. Planters were also added at this time. Other outbuildings probably also date to the 1880s; these include the chicken coop, the spring house, and a stone reservoir near the creek. This period may represent a phasing from a functioning ranch to a more resort-oriented, specialized settlement. The addition of fish ponds, planters, and other amenities may indicate a change in the function of the ranch.

After the 1913 fire, wooden additions were made on both ends of Wing A. No charred wood has been found in these additions to indicate that wooden structures were present in those areas before the fire. After 1940 (Figure 4), other wooden additions along the western and southern ends of Wing B were built; these have been demolished in preparation for the reconstruction. The post-fire period marked a return in function to a multi-activity ranch settlement.

Besides the abundant materials found inside and near Wings A and B, other areas were tested and other historic resources were discovered and mapped (Hector, Wade and Manley 1988). South and east of the ranch house, foundations were found that represent buildings from the 1862-1885 period. Photographs and sketches from this period indicate that numerous outbuildings were present at the ranch; relatively few are still standing. Testing in these areas, conducted in 1988 by SDCAS volunteers and students from San Diego State University, provided significant information about the prehistoric period, since undisturbed deposits were found beneath the historic-period materials. The historic materials represented the demolished barn structures that stood east of Wing C.

North of the adobe, a low knoll was tested for historic remains; a 1928 aerial photograph on file at the county, as well as other historic illustrations, showed structures in that area. When investigations began on the knoll, a series of postholes was excavated. These postholes ran across the top of the knoll and down both eastern and western sides. In several of the postholes along the western side of the knoll historic artifacts were found. These included purple glass, and building materials such as nails and wood slivers (Hector 1984).

In January, 1985, three depressions located near the postholes were excavated, yielding shallow but rich deposits of

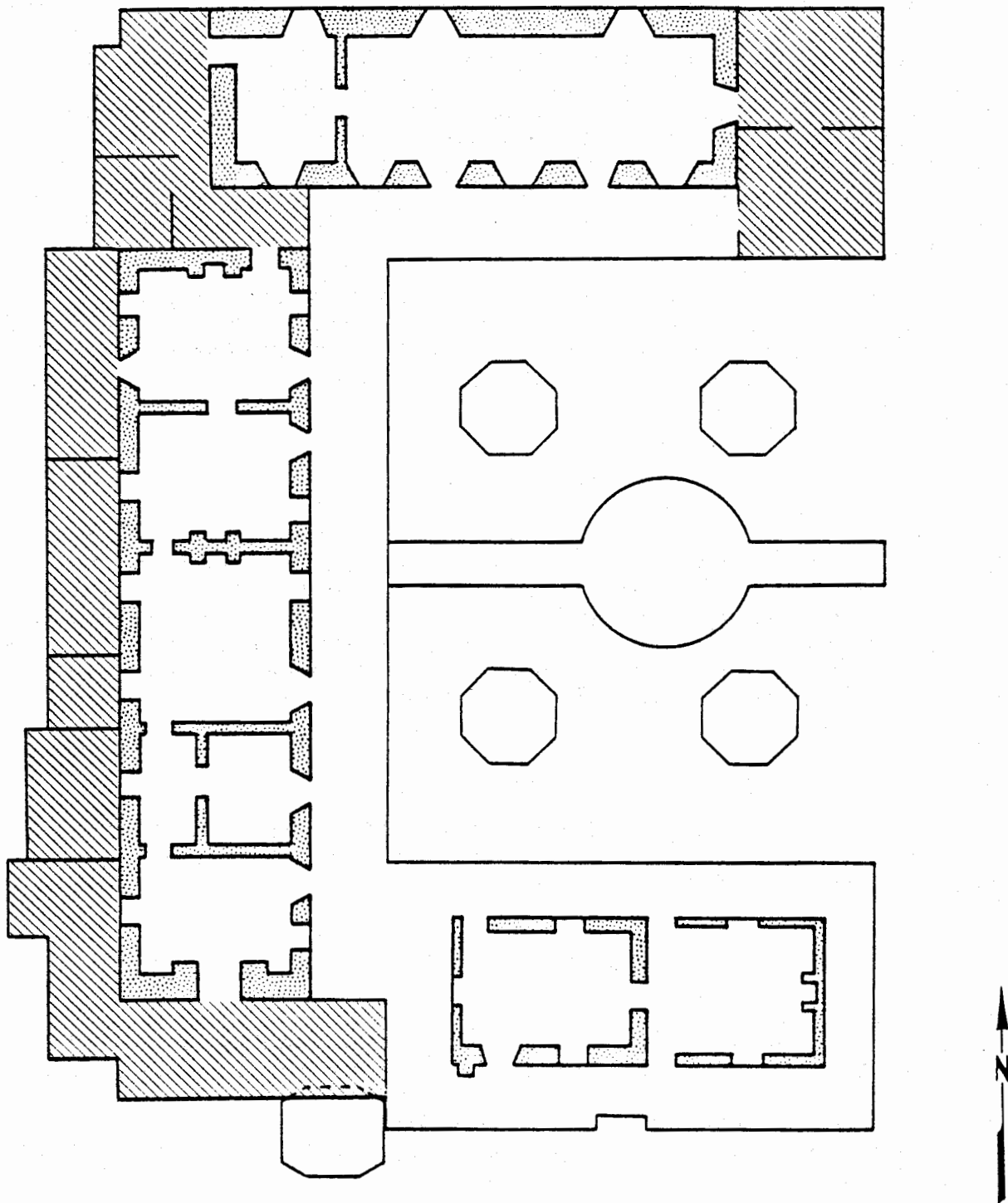


Figure 4. Wooden additions made after 1940.

historic trash dating to the 1880s (Hector and Van Wormer 1986). A fourth depression, representing a house foundation, is present nearby but has not been investigated. The three trash dumps contained over a dozen shoes, a Vaseline bottle, square cut nails, ceramics, and other materials representative of a household in this area. Two structures are shown on the knoll in a photograph from the period, but their functions are not indicated historically. Further investigation into the house depression and the surrounding knoll area may indicate the functions of these buildings and what, if any, relationship they had with the ranch.

Analysis and excavation of the adobe are not complete. The work described above is a part of a long-term commitment to study at the adobe that has been made by SDCAS. The research design and hypotheses will be re-evaluated over time and will be changed in response to new findings.

CONCLUSIONS

Most historic archaeological studies have concentrated on more urban areas, probably because of increased pressures by modern development. We have had little opportunity to discover past rural and ranch lifestyles. With the significance of the ranch and rancho system to the history of San Diego, it will now be possible to discover more about the day to day living and subsistence of the settlers of the county.

NOTE

This is a slightly revised version of a paper originally presented in 1985 at the Society for California Archaeology Annual Meetings held in San Diego.

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