

ANOTHER LOOK AT THE LLANO DEL RIO COLONY

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Vision and practice often clashed at the utopian community of Llano del Rio in western Antelope Valley, California. Professing ideals based on socialism, this community often found it difficult to resolve conflicts arising from the need for expediency and practicality. More times than not, issues dealing with community planning, industrial capacity, sanitation, and social organization were altered to fit the realities of the day. Recent archaeological investigations suggest that these compromises were often innovative and effective and were likely instrumental in the initial development of the colony.

The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) proposes to widen State Route 138 from 146th to 165th Street East in Los Angeles County from the existing two lanes to four 12-ft. lanes with a standard 16-ft. median and 8-ft. shoulders. The proposed highway construction project is located in the northeastern portion of Los Angeles County, an area comprising the southwestern portion of the Antelope Valley and skirting the foothills of the San Gabriel mountain range at the western limits of the Mojave Desert (Figure 1).

This investigation entailed a data recovery program to mitigate potential adverse effects to the Llano del Rio Colony (CA-LAN-2677H) from the proposed SR-138 widening project. The general approaches used to mitigate these adverse effects were a variety of techniques that addressed the values that qualified the Llano Colony for the National Register of Historic Places. The objectives were to recover significant data relative to the research areas of community planning and colony industry. The goal of this work was to gain a more complete understanding of the scope, layout, and characteristics of the colony as a whole and to recover important information in the areas of community planning and the colony's metalworking industry that will be lost as a result of project implementation.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

More than 130 communitarian settlements were founded in North America between 1663 and 1860. Most were founded by sectarian religious groups. Alternative-living colonies proliferated in the second half of the nineteenth century, motivated by the temperance movement, Christian socialism, inspirational books, and charismatic leaders (Hine 1966:3-11). Most were short-lived. A diversification of political debate occurred contemporaneously with the burgeoning inventory of alternative living communities. Feminism and socialism intersected with the growing temperance movement, Christian social activism, and a sentimental longing to go "back to the land" among economically struggling city dwellers.

The Socialist Party of America was founded at a joint convention of the American Railway Union and the Brotherhood of the Cooperative Commonwealth in 1897. Eugene V. Debs was elected Chairman of the Social Democracy of America (Hine 1966:55). The party was committed to developing socialist colonies to demonstrate the superiority of its ideas, which resulted in the nomination of Eugene V. Debs for President and Job Harriman as his running mate (Figure 2).

After losing several political contests, Job Harriman reconsidered his belief that political activism was the better path toward a socialist society. He decided to try the model colony approach to implementing his beliefs, launching the Llano del Rio Colony in 1914 (Van Bueren and Hupp 2000:7).

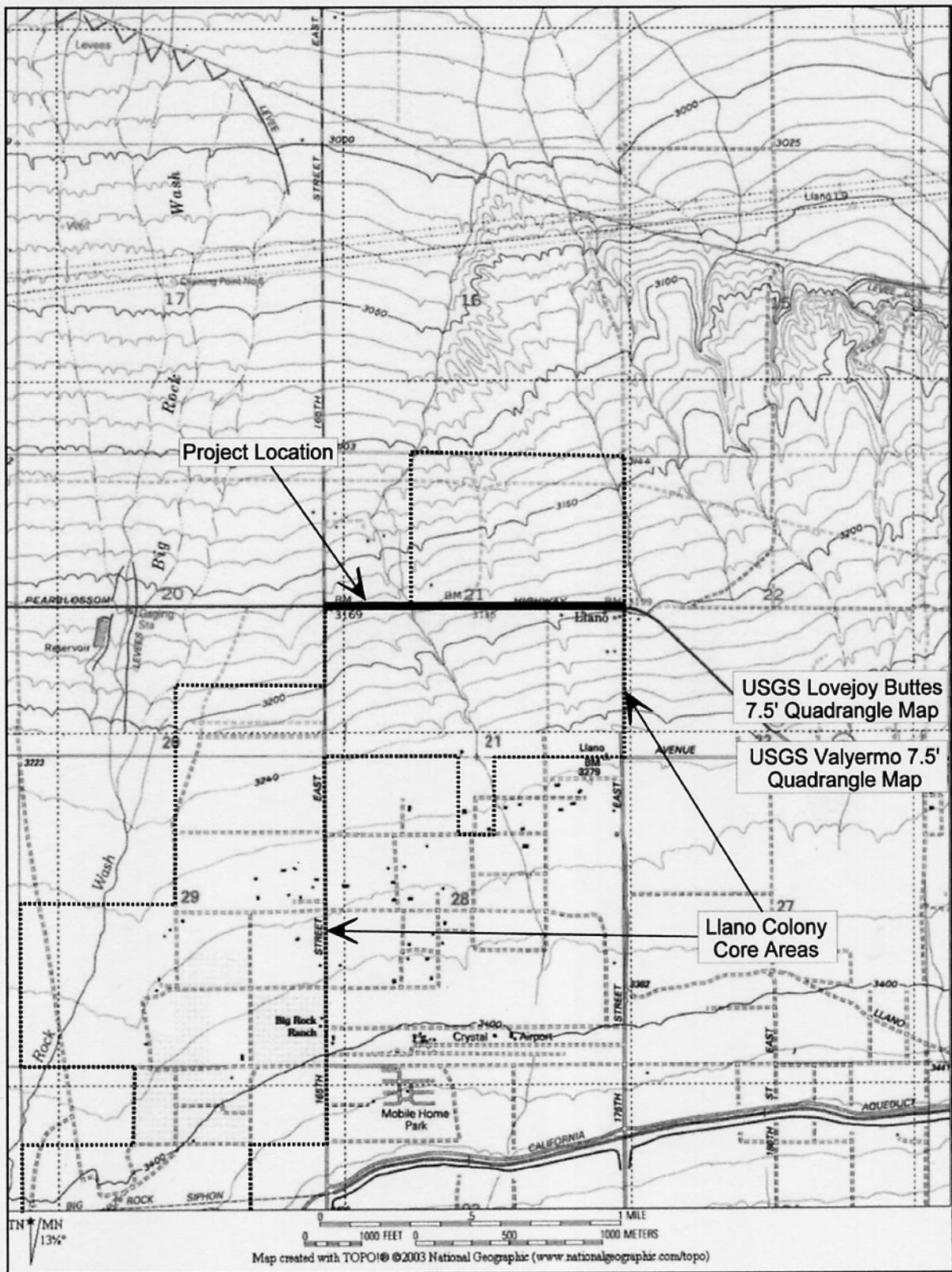


Figure 1. Vicinity map.

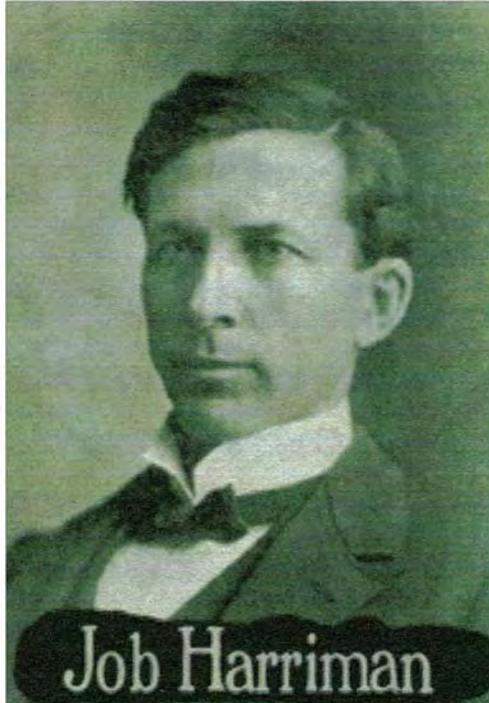


Figure 2. Job Harriman, ca. 1900
(www.marxisthistory.org).

The location in the arid Antelope Valley had been occupied 20 years earlier by Almondale (1887 to ca. 1893), a failed temperance colony (Foster 2008:13). In 1913, Job Harriman and his partners negotiated rights to purchase the property from the Mescal Water and Land Company.

It was stated very clearly that this was "NOT a cooperative colony, but a corporation, conducted upon the lines of ordinary private corporations" (Harriman 1917).

Housing, in the form of architect-designed cottages, was to be provided at nominal rent and was designed by a little-known architect, Alice Austin (Figure 3). Bricks and lumber produced by colony labor were to constitute the building materials, thereby keeping construction costs to a minimum. Electrical power was to be supplied from the colony's own plant.

The first structures built, the hotel and the single mens' dormitory, were sturdy frame structures. The hotel was enhanced with cobblestone pillars that still stand, and had two stone fireplaces.

Housing, however, consisted primarily of tents on hastily prepared pads. The few adobe structures that were built were unpopular because of their tendency to melt

when surrounding damp ground weakened the dried clay (Figure 4). It was later discovered by the colonists that adobe walls will withstand water if coated with a thin layer of black paint.

Although enthusiasm was high, the food at the colony was neither palatable nor plentiful. Carrots were the only vegetable available for several weeks during one notable period. After some initial care was taken in selection of colonists, an open policy was adopted to facilitate getting enough members to reach the projected goal. The result was a population riddled with stool pigeons, informers, and *agents provocateurs* (McWilliams 1946:286).

When the Colony lost its last legal battles over water rights, Job Harriman moved most of the community to Louisiana.

SITE LAN-2677H

The Llano Colony was determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criteria A and D as a discontinuous district significant at the national, state, and local levels of significance (Van Bueren and Hupp 2001). The California SHPO agreed that the research value of the site under criterion D was limited to the theme of community planning. In subsequent consultation, the SHPO agreed to consider the possibility that some additional research value may be present at the colony's machine and blacksmith shop, located within the footprint of the project (Figure 5).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

The archaeological deposits investigated in this study comprise four types of features: pits, tent pads, surface scatters, and alignments. It was recognized at the start that the majority of pit features had been looted or vandalized, and as a consequence, there were only two possible contextual frameworks: spoil piles around the feature, and anything left within the feature. Opting to maximize the research potential of the features in spite of the looting, it was decided to capture as much of the cultural material as possible and maintain some degree of spatial and horizontal control.

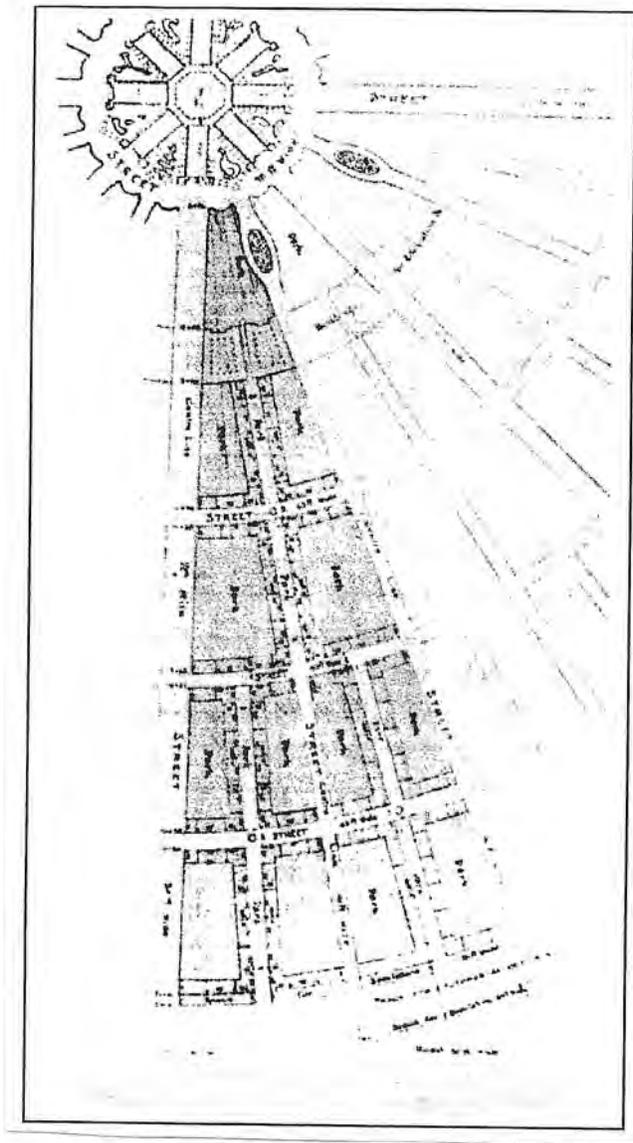


Figure 3. Austin housing design.



Figure 4. Adobe structure under construction.

The principal goal of this investigation was to make meaningful interpretations of a small cross-section of a very large historical archaeological site. This method inherently limits the degree of confidence in making generalizations and coming to terms with the amount of variation in the larger site universe. Archaeologists like to move from specifics to generalities that would encompass similar situations, environments, and cultural contexts. Notwithstanding these broader scientific goals, this work can be seen as a progression of building blocks that eventually will contribute to the patterns that we are trying to discern.

COMMUNITY PLANNING

Immediately south of the highway are the machine shop complex and a large residential group located east and south of the work area (Figure 6). The southern housing cluster can be split into three groups based on structure alignment and azimuth.

The spatial differentiation is evidence that there was a purposeful intent to segregate the various community components. It was of interest to determine how the actual configuration of the colony compared with the visionary radial plans developed by Cooke, Austin, and others (Foster 2008:51; Van Bueren 2006:144). Austin had proposed a model city built around a radial street system with integrated parkways (Foster 2008; Millsap 1964:50-51, Figure 3).

While it is evident that there are limitations in the data, the very fact that the investigation documented two types of flooring does suggest that the individual rather than the community made the decisions relative to some aspects of the interior. This is an important point, since it suggests what thresholds of privacy were paramount.

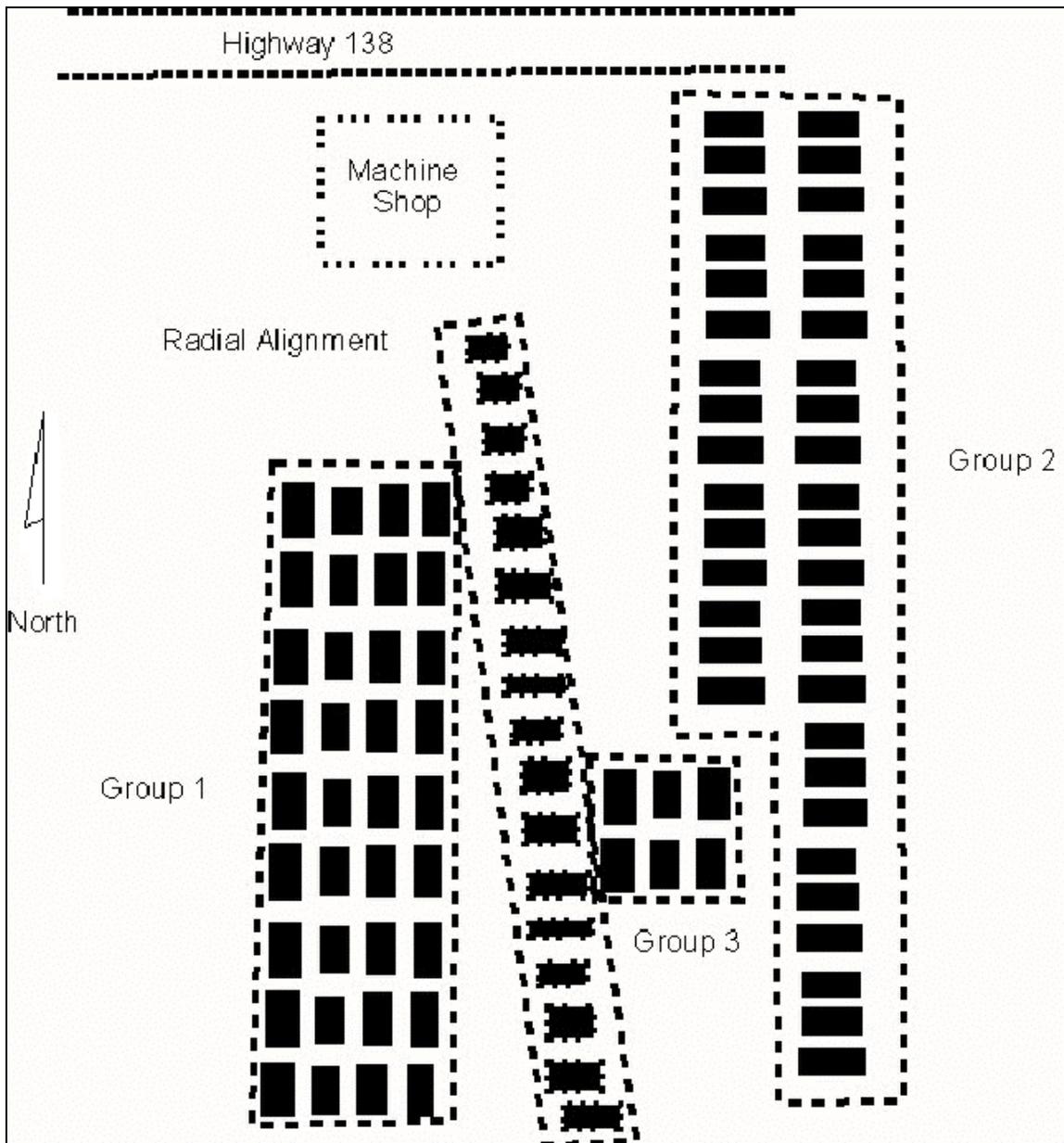


Figure 5. Residential groupings (not to scale).

Utopian researchers have stated that almost all communitarians built their own buildings, but at Llano the archaeological evidence demonstrates that at the very least the community supplied the exterior building materials and probably the labor. The exterior was within the domain of the community, and the interior reflected the individuals, but with some glaring exceptions. The lack of kitchen utensils and cooking facilities suggests that the line between the individual and community was more finely drawn, with a great deal of community control even within the house interior. In some communities the inhabitants of private dwellings withdrew from the communal territory more than was desirable. Llano del Rio planned single-family houses without kitchens. Members dined communally, balancing the privacy of bedroom and parlor against the required sociability of the dining room.

MACHINE SHOP

The archaeological investigation confirmed the location of the machine shop complex with multiple activities that served the community. While the actual number of specific functions remains ambiguous, there is evidence of a blacksmith shop, shoe repair, automobile repair, machine operations, and fabrication of metal parts and machinery. An underlying component of the machine shop is the pervasive recycling of tools and materials throughout the complex (Foster 2008:57).

One of the key elements of the industrial complex was that it was a facility that shared workspace between tools and persons. While it is difficult to ascribe specific political meaning to such an environment, it is in keeping with socialist egalitarian themes that the workers would share basic work tasks.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Research questions for this study had been formulated to address issues of community planning and industry. Understanding the organization of the colony—its layout and structure—was the primary research objective of the project. Identification of features, key elements, spatial configuration, and constituent materials provided the basis for comparison and areas of divergence for all features. On a broad level, excavation of the site clearly demonstrated segregation of work areas, living spaces, and infrastructure. Utopian researchers have stated that “when cohesiveness was lacking, it was difficult to develop consistent plans or a coherent architectural style” (Hayden 1976:5). Designs tended to result from pragmatic compromise, typified by the Llano del Rio General Assembly's decision to accept one woman's design for the facade of a new school and another man's plan for its interior (Hayden 1976:35). Yet the reality was that the community was far more cohesive than what is stated or assumed. The archaeological investigation, taking into account the recovered materials and surveys conducted, found that the community dictated where an individual would live, the distance between residents, the alignment of the structures (north-south, east-west), the building materials, interior functionality, and the general size.

Patterning within the colony's industrial center was evident and clearly showed a focus on recycling and shared space. The investigation found evidence of different industries, work areas, differentiation between activity areas, and a conscious decision to centralize their industrial capacity. The activities of the complex were spatially discrete but yet shared a common compound, suggesting a planned interconnectedness that would promote the socialist ideals of the colony and yet serve the very pragmatic reality of conserving resources and labor.

The excavation at the Llano del Rio Colony provided new insights into the dynamics of community development. While the nature of the investigation was limited to essentially a random cross-section of the site, it was nonetheless revealing in the various aspects of colony life. From temporary tent pads, a makeshift machine shop, refuse disposal, and settlement pattern on the landscape, it has been possible to explore the mind of the community and its goals and plans.

Archaeologists and historians are often faced with the conundrum of the "documented" reality (i.e., the ideal) versus the physical reality. It is often tempting to ascribe success as attainment of the ideal of the promotional materials, but most such aspirations were only ideals that were probably more targets than something to be actually built (Van Bueren 2006). Most of Austin's creations were fantasy creations that lacked practicality (Foster 2008:53).

Hayden (1976), an author on utopian colonies, wrote, "sometimes historic communitarian buildings and sites themselves provided the best clues of what was going on in a community at a given time; discrepancies between what I read and what I saw were the most frequent sources of new interpretations of the history of various communities."

This investigation has demonstrated new facets of the Llano community and insights into the depth and reach of the colony into the everyday lives of the residents. It is with a better comprehension

that we can discern the specific differences in the landscape, the use of private space, and the shared public spaces that make up one part of Llano Del Rio.

In the broader national picture, the Llano del Rio Colony was a laboratory for social reform. Lewis and Blackwood, in their documentary film on Llano, express the national implications of the colony:

During the next two generations, Americans enacted the Social Security Act, a minimum wage law, the Family Leave Act, and other social legislation, reforms we take for granted today. And while Democrats and Republicans take credit for enacting these reforms, what is lost to history is the fact that these ideas did not originate with these mainstream groups. Such causes were initially proposed and championed long before they became politically popular by those who took great risks of being blackballed, beaten, deported, jailed, and ostracized. Socialists, communists, labor unions, and cooperative communities like Llano del Rio all played their roles in bringing the need for reform into American consciousness [Lewis 1995].

The investigation confirmed the expectations that the project features contained significant archaeological data that would provide insights and a more thorough knowledge of the role of community planning and the colony's machine shop industry at Llano del Rio. The project offered significant challenges in both the field and the analysis that hindered interpretations but also directed lines of inquiry into areas not previously considered, which in turn added to the understanding of this complex and unique historical property.

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