Fort Sumner was established in 1862 to enforce the confinement of rebellious Indian populations at the newly minted Bosque Redondo Indian Reservation, on the Pecos River. Colonel Christopher "Kit" Carson brought approximately 400 Mescalero Apaches and 7,000 Navajos to Bosque Redondo. There they were kept under guard and forced to practice agriculture. Crop failure from drought and insect infestation quickly followed, and the reservation increasingly relied on extremely limited and substandard provisions provided by the US government. Disease was rampant. Over the course of four years, pneumonia and dysentery resulted in the death of nearly 2,000 Native Americans—roughly a quarter of the Bosque Redondo population. In early November 1865, the Mescaleros fled the reservation under cover of darkness. The Navajos remained until permitted to return home, on the grueling Long Walk, from the place they had come to call Hweeldi, or Place of Suffering, under the terms of the Treaty of Bosque Redondo in June 1868. Deemed an absolute failure, the post was abandoned by the US Army in 1869.

Between September 17 and 21, 2012, the Office of Archaeological Studies conducted investigations in advance of ground-disturbing activities at Fort Sumner Historic Site/Bosque Redondo Memorial in De Baca County, New Mexico. Irrigation improvements were planned, along with the introduction of a small herd of churro sheep on a vacant lot within the state property. The job of OAS was to determine if man-made deposits and features remained in the area proposed for development and document what was there before said development occurred.

The area considered for agriculture was known to have housed three structures associated with the Fort Sumner military installation: the fort stables, the Indian commissary, and one of the fort’s four corncribs. However, the area where the structures once stood had been flooded by the Pecos River and subjected to intensive farming during the mid-twentieth century. Archaeologists were hired to determine if man-made deposits and features remained in the area proposed for development and document what was there before said development occurred.
century, and we had no way of knowing in advance if any evidence of the structures remained.

While surveying the field, we found nearly 900 surface artifacts which have subsequently been curated at the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture. Many of these items dated to the Fort Sumner occupation and appeared to be concentrated in areas directly associated with the former locations of auxiliary buildings at the military post. Among other things, we found fragments of Native ceramics, hand-forged horseshoes and harness hardware, US military buttons, and lead bullets.

We also excavated four test trenches in the area where the structures once stood. In one of the trenches, we uncovered packed earth, or puddled adobe, foundations associated with the Fort Sumner stables. While plowing and flooding had made a visible impact on the remains, portions of the fort appeared to be preserved under the current ground surface. More importantly, the artifacts and features associated with Fort Sumner and the Bosque Redondo Indian Reservation promised to provide insights into the daily lives of the soldiers and Indians who lived at the post.

The packed-earth foundations and animal bones recovered from the test trenches exemplify how these investigations are reshaping our knowledge of the past. Packed-earth foundations are not typical of US military buildings of that time. Instead, quarried limestone or sandstone blocks were used for underground support in such installations throughout the territory. Packed earth, on the other hand, was typical of Indian building
methods, and these foundations could reflect the use of Indian labor when the post was built.

Animal bone recovered from the test trenches suggests the consumption of beef, lamb, and buffalo. Beef was supplied to the US Army by cattle barons such as John Chisum, Charles Goodnight, and Oliver Loving. Sheep were raised by Navajos on the reservation. The buffalo remains, however, came as something of a surprise. Presumably, residents of the fort, possibly both Native American and Anglo, made foraging expeditions onto the eastern plains, encroaching into areas controlled by Comanches.

We were excited to find intact subsurface structural features along with hundreds of artifacts at the site, which we had not expected. These discoveries change our perspective on building practices at the fort and what types of food were consumed. They remind us that there is always the potential for adding to our understanding of history through archaeological investigation, and of the need to continue protecting New Mexico’s historic places.

Matthew J. Barbour is the manager of Jemez Historic Site in Jemez Springs, New Mexico. He was formerly an archaeologist with the Office of Archaeological Studies in the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs.

Donald E. Tatum is an archaeologist and geomorphologist with the Office of Archaeological Studies in the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs.

Visiting Fort Sumner Historic Site and Bosque Redondo Memorial

Heading south from Santa Fe on US 285, you can approach Fort Sumner from the west on US 60, going through Encino, Vaughn, and tiny Yeso, in country where antelope actually play, and dropping down to the Pecos River Valley. You can also approach from Santa Rosa on I-40, heading southeast on US 84. If you arrive at lunchtime, try the chicken fried steak with green chile at Fred’s. As you near the historic site, you spot the adjacent Billy the Kid Museum and the nearby grave of young Billy. Continuing on Billy the Kid Drive, you arrive at the entrance to Fort Sumner Historic Site and the Bosque Redondo Memorial. The architecturally striking building holds temporary exhibits on Navajo and Mescalero culture, while the major installation is under way. The gift shop has a fine selection of jewelry and books. Outdoors, an audio guide leads you through the grounds of the old fort. Billy the Kid fans can pay homage at the site of Pete Maxwell’s house, where Pat Garrett killed the Kid. A nature trail leads along the Pecos River, and you can visit churro sheep, central to Navajo heritage. Hours are 8:30 to 4:30, Wednesday through Sunday. Admission is $3. Free to New Mexico residents with ID on Sundays, and to New Mexico seniors on Wednesdays. Children sixteen and under are always admitted free. For more information see nmhistoric sites.org.

—Richard Sims, director, New Mexico Historic Sites