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Contents

Alternate Visions of Reno	<i>Elmer R. Rusco</i>	1
Nevada Images in the Poetry of Joanne de Longchamps	<i>Barbara Agonia</i>	15
Sandstone Quarry: A Site Complex in the Spring Mountains of Southern Nevada	<i>Kevin Rafferty</i>	25
NOTES AND DOCUMENTS "Reno Reflections"		41
BOOK REVIEWS		47
NEW RESOURCE MATERIALS		61
CONTRIBUTORS		65

Sandstone Quarry: A Site Complex in the Spring Mountains of Southern Nevada

KEVIN RAFFERTY

SANDSTONE QUARRY is a geological and man-modified complex located in the Red Rock Canyon Recreation Lands (RRCRL), a recreation area supervised by the Bureau of Land Management. It is situated fifteen miles west of Las Vegas at the base of the Spring Mountains. This area was the locus of an intense protohistoric occupation by Southern Paiutes during the nineteenth century, and it was exploited for its sandstone by the earliest Anglo settlers of Las Vegas in the early twentieth century.

In late 1982 and early 1983, the writer, then employed by the BLM, conducted an intuitive survey¹ in the Sandstone Quarry area. This was prompted by a report from a visitor concerning a rockshelter associated with charcoal pictographs that seemed to date from the recent protohistoric period. The investigation of this site (number 26CK419 in the Smithsonian Institution site numbering system) led to the conclusion that further work was necessary in order to assess the archaeological resources and potential of the area; plans then could be established to protect the sites from increased visitation caused by the paving of the Red Rock Canyon loop road and the opening of the Visitor's Center in May, 1982. Thus in late December, 1982, and late January and early February, 1983, the author, assisted at various times by Red Rock Canyon Recreation Lands Manager Rodger Schmitt, Rangers Doug Filer, Steve Fleming and Rick Obernesser, and District Archaeological Technician Ron Young, undertook an intuitive survey and reevaluation of already recorded sites. Thirteen sites were recorded: ten were previously recorded, and three sites previously unknown. The specific data is reported below, and an attempt is made to interpret these sites in the light of their local and regional significance to the archaeological record.

¹ An archaeological survey that examines known or suspected site locations, as opposed to a sample survey which examines parcels of land selected via mathematical sampling theory.

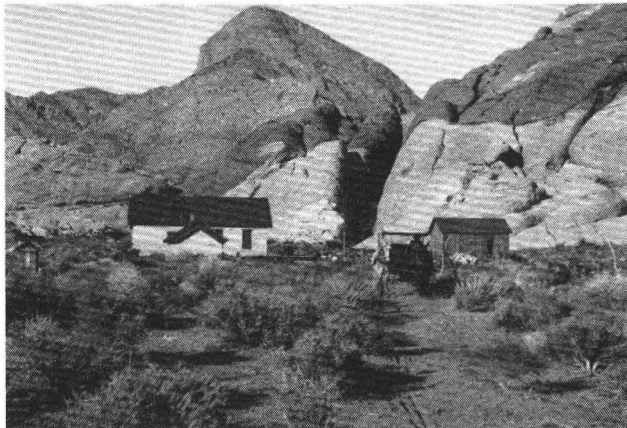
Natural Setting

For over 400 million years, the study area was part of an ancient sea bed that deposited what are now layers of limestone and shales that comprise the Spring Mountains. Crusted movement and structural faulting thrust up the mountains and the dominant feature of the study area, the Red Rock Canyon escarpment that rises over 3000 feet above the Las Vegas Valley floor and forms the eastern edge of the Spring Mountains (Seior 1962; Fiero 1976; USDI, BLM 1980).

The arid valley floor receives only about four inches of rain a year, but precipitation increases to about twelve inches a year at elevations over 7,000 feet. Daily temperature fluctuations of 30°F or more are common, and temperatures range from a low of 5°F to a high of 110°F in the study area. The scanty rainfall and high temperatures prevent the formation of surface streams, but numerous springs in the Red Rock Canyon areas provided abundant water for the aboriginal inhabitants of the region (NOAA 1955-1978; USDI, BLM 1980).

Vegetation also changes with elevation, with each vegetative zone supporting a slightly different set of fauna. Zones within walking distance of Sandstone Quarry include creosote (under 4,000 feet), oakbrush-blackbrush (4,000-6,000 feet), Joshua Tree (3,600-4,200 feet) and pinyon-juniper (5,000-7,000 feet). There are also a number of unique vegetative types located in the cool, well-watered canyons cut into the face of the escarpment (USDI, BLM 1980). Thus the Spring Mountains provided several different types of exploitable habitats for the humans who occupied the southern Nevada region for the last 12,000 years.

The Sandstone Quarry consists of two sets of sandstone outcrops bisected by a large, southerly flowing wash, and it is in a transition zone between the



Sandstone Quarry. (Courtesy of University of Nevada, Las Vegas)

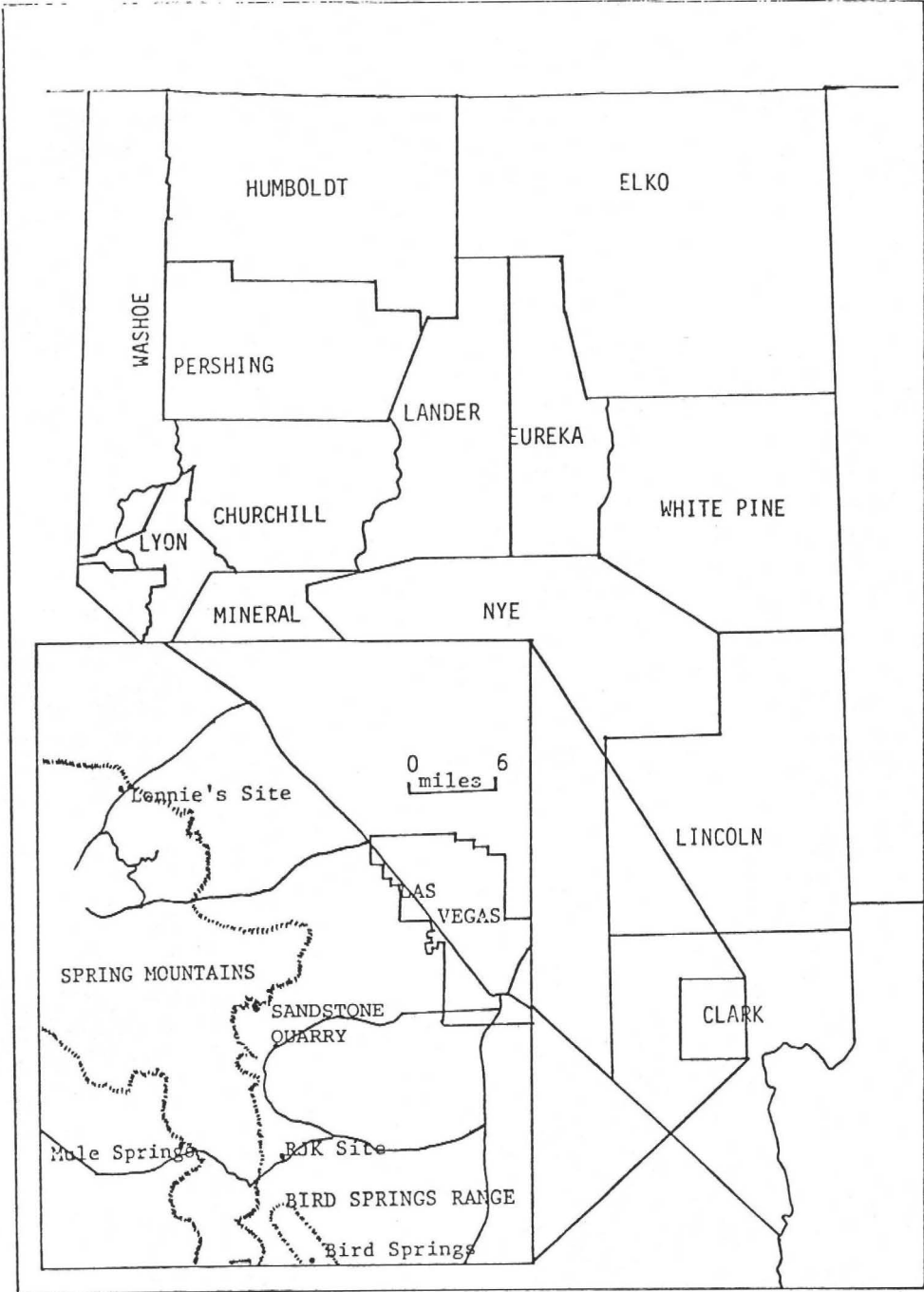


Figure 1

yucca and blackbrush communities. In addition to these flora, the area contains several species of cacti, Indian rice grass, desert almond, agave, and a small community of juniper and pinyon in its northern reaches. Exploitable animals in the region included bighorn sheep, white-tail deer, jackrabbits and cottontail rabbits, desert tortoise, lizards, and birds. Water was available at several springs within two miles of the study area and at numerous sandstone *tinajas* (natural water catchment basins) that contain water in the spring after winter rains. Sandstone Quarry was a very desirable area for prehistoric use.

Prehistoric Site Descriptions

This report does not represent the first work conducted in this vicinity; a number of other researchers have conducted surveys and excavations in the Sandstone Quarry area.² However, the results of this survey and the ensuing literature search³ represent the latest and it is hoped the most accurate description and interpretation of the archaeological and historic material of this locality.

The prehistoric sites can be placed in three categories. The first is roasting pits. These sites are circular or doughnut shaped features consisting of burnt limestone and organic material that seem to have been used in the southern Nevada area for many hundreds or thousands of years. The aboriginal inhabitants of the region roasted agave, desert tortoise, bighorn sheep, pinyon nuts, and other wild resources in these pits. In Sandstone Quarry there are five sites that can be placed in this category either as individual roasting pits or as collections. There are twelve of these features, ranging in size from 2m to 17m in diameter, and from .5m to 1.5m high. It is obvious that they are indicative of a long period of use by humans within Sandstone Quarry.

Petroglyphs are designs—geometric, human or animal—that are pecked into sandstone or other outcrops of rock, while pictographs are similar sorts of designs painted onto rock outcrops. There are three sites in Sandstone Quarry that are strictly petroglyph or pictograph sites. One consists of black painted lines criss-crossing in a grid pattern on a sheared-off sandstone panel in an area 3m by 3m. This site also has some red ochre lines and blobs that may have been figures interspersed among the black lines. The second site consists of two small petroglyphs, one a headless human figure carrying a bow and spear and the other a badly worn circular figure.

The third site deserves separate consideration. This site has been named “Prayer Service Cave” by the author, and has been recorded previously

² Published and unpublished reports include Duffield (1904), Harrington (Brooks *et al.* 1976:2), Shutler and Shutler (1962), Brooks *et al.* (1976, 1977a, 1977b), Martineau (1973) and Moen (1978).

³ Sites originally recorded (Brooks *et al.* 1977a) were revisited and re-recorded, while the survey consisted of examining the western and eastern sides of both sandstone outcrops, tops, sides and bottoms looking for a recording as thoroughly as possible archaeological sites contained within the study area.



Quarry Machinery at Sandstone Quarry. (Courtesy of University of Nevada, Las Vegas)

(Moen 1968; Martineau 1973). It consists of a large oval cave situated above the Sandstone Quarry Wash, 12m wide, 3m high, and 6m deep. Its outstanding feature is two lines of charcoal anthropomorphs (human figures); there are between forty and fifty such figures drawn on the cave's back wall. As identified by their hats and clothing, these are Anglo settlers or travelers and include men, women and children, all holding hands. Also depicted are horses or mules and what may either be a loaded packhorse or possibly a camel. There are also several badly faded charcoal figures, several small geometric petroglyphs on the cave floor, and two small petroglyphs (a hunter aiming a bow at a sheep) just north of the cave. Situated north of the cave in the wash is a roasting pit that may have been associated with it.

It is the author's opinion that this site is one of the most spectacular renderings of charcoal pictographs in the southern Nevada area. It probably dates to the late protohistoric or early historic Southern Paiute Indian occupation of the region.

The final site type consists of rockshelters or living sites situated within caves or alcoves carved into sandstone or limestone outcrops. There are four of these, all accompanied by midden or dark organic soil containing artifacts and bone; some of these were also associated with roasting pits and/or pictographs and petroglyphs. The solitary rockshelter is small, 2m by 1m by 1.5m, and it contains only a few nondescript artifacts and stone tools. The other three contain additional features that deserve some separate discussion.

The first is a west facing shelter 12-15m above Sandstone Quarry Wash. Measuring 4m wide, 1m high, and 3-4m deep, it contains midden soil with chert flakes, sheep bone and bone fragments, a bone awl, and several possible sandstone grinding stones. There is also what seems to be a small wall inside. This shelter is also accompanied by a series of pictographs and petroglyphs (Moen 1968; Martineau 1973) situated either on two sandstone boulders in the cave mouth or on the cave wall. At least eighteen petroglyphs can be identified, including six human figures, three bighorn sheep and nine geometric or abstract linear figures. The pictographs are executed in black charcoal similar in style to "Prayer Service Cave," and include: one Anglo wearing a hat and carrying a rifle and pack, two deer associated with a hatted hunter, one horse and rider, three other Anglo figures, five bighorn sheep, and several faded or blobbed figures. These could date from any time beginning in 1829 when the Old Spanish Trail started going through the Las Vegas Valley (Hafen and Hafen 1954) until the permanent settling of the Las Vegas Valley by ranchers in the late 1800s.

The second shelter site contains midden soil with artifacts; it is associated with a roasting pit, and consists of two caves, one for habitation, and a small alcove with seven charcoal pictographs including four sheep, two deer and one badly smudged figure. The third shelter also contains midden and artifactual material, and is associated with a roasting pit and several badly

faded petroglyphs including circles, a warshield (?), some abstract geometrics and some unidentifiable figures. All of these caves have been vandalized. Brooks (1969) conducted some test excavations at the latter two sites.

Historic Site Descriptions

One major historic site (the one for which the area is named) has been recorded in the Sandstone Quarry area. This site contained six buildings or structures, five quarry areas, two roads, and several historic carvings. It was first recorded by Brooks et al. (1977a:24-27), and then heavily researched in the historic archives by John Lancos, a ranger for Red Rock Canyon Recreation Lands. The present author then conducted the field work and put into final form the data presented here.

The site was originally known as the Excelsior Stone Quarry, and it was opened in 1905 by the Lyon-Wilson Construction Company of San Francisco. Its original purpose was to produce "superior quality" sandstone for buildings in Los Angeles and San Francisco. The stone was cut into blocks of up to ten tons by a channeling machine, and then transported overland in large wagons to the Salt Lake Railroad siding for shipment. A seventeen-ton steam traction machine pulled the wagons, which often weighed twenty tons or more. Unfortunately, the "Big devil wagon" as it was called in the *Las Vegas Age*, consumed 400 gallons of crude oil a day, and thus proved to be an uneconomical means of transport. When an acceptable grade of sandstone was located closer to Las Vegas, the quarry was shut down in 1906. (See the *Las Vegas Age*, May 20, June 24, and August 26, 1905, and October 6 and December 29, 1906. Also, John Lancos, research notes.)

Later in 1906, the quarry was reopened as the Lincoln Sandstone Company, but it fell on hard times, and was reorganized as the Nevada Sandstone Company in 1910. The last reference to the quarry in the *Las Vegas Age* is in late 1912, after which presumably the operation was shut down. (*Las Vegas Age*: January 9 and May 8, 1909; March 12, April 2, April 9, April 30, May 7, May 28, July 16, 1910; January 6 and November 9, 1912. John Lancos, research notes.)

In general, all three operations employed from fifteen to thirty men and used similar equipment, including channeling and gadding machines, hoists and derricks. However, Nevada Sandstone Company also employed a gas-powered traction engine called a caterpillar, which was more powerful and efficient than the old steam traction engine. (*Las Vegas Age*, May 7 and May 28, 1910).

Archival research by Lancos in the Special Collections Department of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas Library uncovered eight photos of the quarry, showing the quarry headquarters, a storage barn, an outside privy,

the channeling machine, various hoists and cables, and the general quarry areas. Today, these features are in ruins, with only the foundations of the buildings remaining, along with the remnant blocks from the quarrying, the quarry areas themselves, garbage dumps, and parts of the old wagon road (Figure 2). There is also a series of historic carvings in the area, indicative of recreational use of the area early in Las Vegas's history. Each category of features is discussed below.

Four photographs from the Ferron-Bracken collection in Special Collections show the main quarry building, the storage barn, and an outside privy. The main building appears to have been rectangular, constructed of rectangular bricks of sandstone held together by mortar, with a pointed roof apparently covered by wooden planks or shingles. Today, all that remains of the building are the sandstone foundation blocks, which have been damaged by the construction of an access road into the quarry, and associated historic debris (Figure 3). This ruin measures $8\text{m} \times 12.5\text{m}$ in overall dimensions, oriented north to south, with one interior room. Five meters of the main building is a small storage room that measures $5\text{m} \times 5\text{m}$, with a large pothole in its center. There is an associated scatter of historic debris in and around the building, and dumps on the edge of the adjacent wash. The building has been vandalized and pothunted.

The two barns were constructed of wood planks, in the same rough design as the main house. Remains of the buildings include remnants of several wall supports partially enclosing an area $4\text{m} \times 8\text{m}$, and $2.5\text{m} \times 4\text{m}$, respectively. There is a large historic artifact scatter south and west of this feature, and the scatter is bisected by both the modern access road and the remnants of the old wagon road (Figure 2). There is a third structure, a tent platform, consisting of a dirt platform with its eastern wall a single tier of sandstone. It measures $2.5\text{m} \times 4\text{m}$ and is north of the barns. A small dugout or outlier in the back of the wash is 132m north of the main building. It has a sandstone wall built into the bank of the wash; it is roughly rectangular, measuring $3.5\text{m} \times 5\text{m}$, and it is associated with various historic debris.

Located north of the main operations building (on a bench overlooking the main wash) there are other historic features that may be associated with the quarry. Situated on the eastern side of the wash are three mounds or linear features of shaped sandstone and rubble, and a linear feature at the base of the sandstone boulder. The first feature is oriented in an east-west direction, and it measures 11m long, 2m wide, and 1m high. In an approximately 20m radius around the mound there are hundreds of white porcelain fragments. Feature 2 is 30m northeast of feature 1, and the third feature is 20m north of the first. Numbers two and three consist of the same materials, and are of roughly the same dimensions as the first. Finally, 43m north of Feature 1 is what appears to be the base of a temporary windbreak, consisting of three shaped sandstone blocks forming a clearing 3m long \times 1m wide. There were

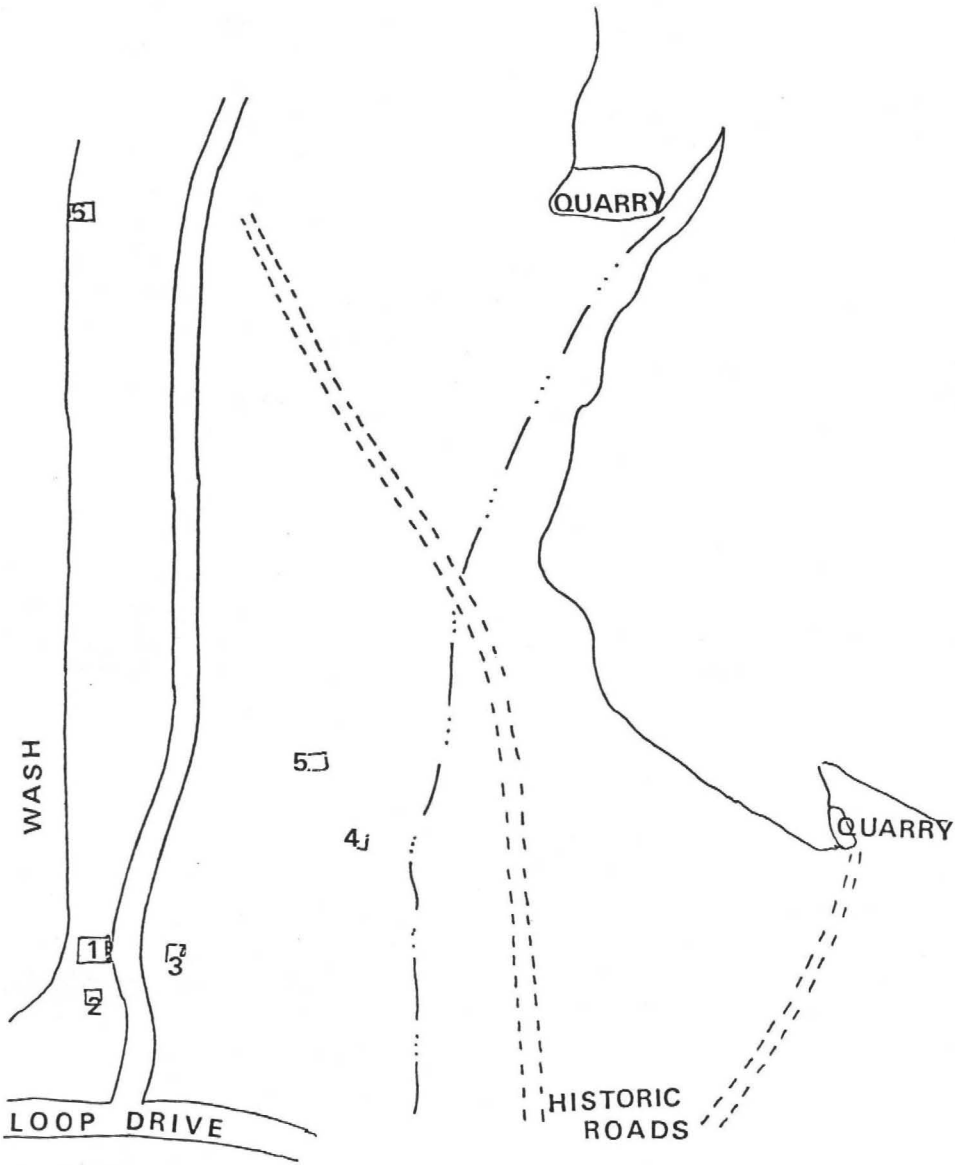


Figure 2

no artifacts associated with the windbreak, and only a few porcelain fragments with Features 2 and 3. The purpose or function of these is presently unknown.

There are five quarry loci within a half mile of the main operations building. The first is the quarry associated with the USGS map, a rectangular pit cut into the western edge of the sandstone hills a quarter of a mile north of the operations building. There are large rectangular sandstone blocks here, evidence of the use of the channeling machine.

The second quarry area is northeast of the main building, and consists of a sandstone shelf and accompanying talus slope; it is one-tenth of a mile from the main building. Area three is two-tenths of a mile east of the main building, and is at the end of an offshoot of the old historic wagon road. It consists of a rectangularly shaped cut in an east facing wall of red sandstone, and slopes downward (north) into a wash.

Areas four and five are farthest from the main building. The former is six-tenths of a mile to the northwest, cut into a sandstone outcrop. It consists of a rectangular cut into the outcrop, and a large talus slope, all facing east. There seem to be no access roads leading to this quarry, so how the material was transported, if at all, remains a mystery. Area five is one-half mile north of the main building up the main wash on its western periphery. It consists of two quarry holes or shafts, associated with several circular drill holes driven into the sandstone outcrop south of the shafts. The shafts measure roughly 2m across and 5m deep, and contain wooden cross beams and other debris. There is also a short access road bladed onto the outcrop, ending 40m south of the shafts.⁴

Finally, there are four examples of historic "petroglyphs" in the quarry area. The first reads "A.N. Arnold Colwich Kan." It is on a quarried sandstone face at the second quarry area, and thus could not have been done prior to 1905. The second reads "J.W., E.G. Woodard, April 13__." This probably can be attributed to John Warren Woodard and his wife, Edith Georgiana, who were married February 3, 1931. Woodard was an important businessman in early Las Vegas from at least 1910 on. He was the proprietor of a steam laundry, and in addition he at times sold cars, oil, mining equipment and tires. He also operated "motor camps," and held various public offices, including that of sheriff in 1916. Woodard died in Albuquerque on

⁴ There are four road segments associated with the quarry; they are parts of the old wagon road through the Red Rocks area. Segment #1 begins .4 miles southeast of the paved entrance into Sandstone Quarry, loops southwest and then northwest around a small knoll ending .15 miles southeast of the quarry entrance, where it is destroyed by the paved loop road placed in the wagon road bed. This connected to segments #2 and #3, which begin .1 mile east of the present quarry entrance. Both are about .15 miles long. Segment #2 bears northeast and terminates at quarry 3, while segment #3 terminates by quarry area 2. Segment #4 is the portion south of quarry area 5, and is several hundred meters long. It bears to the northwest out of the wash onto the sandstone outcrops on the west side of the study area.

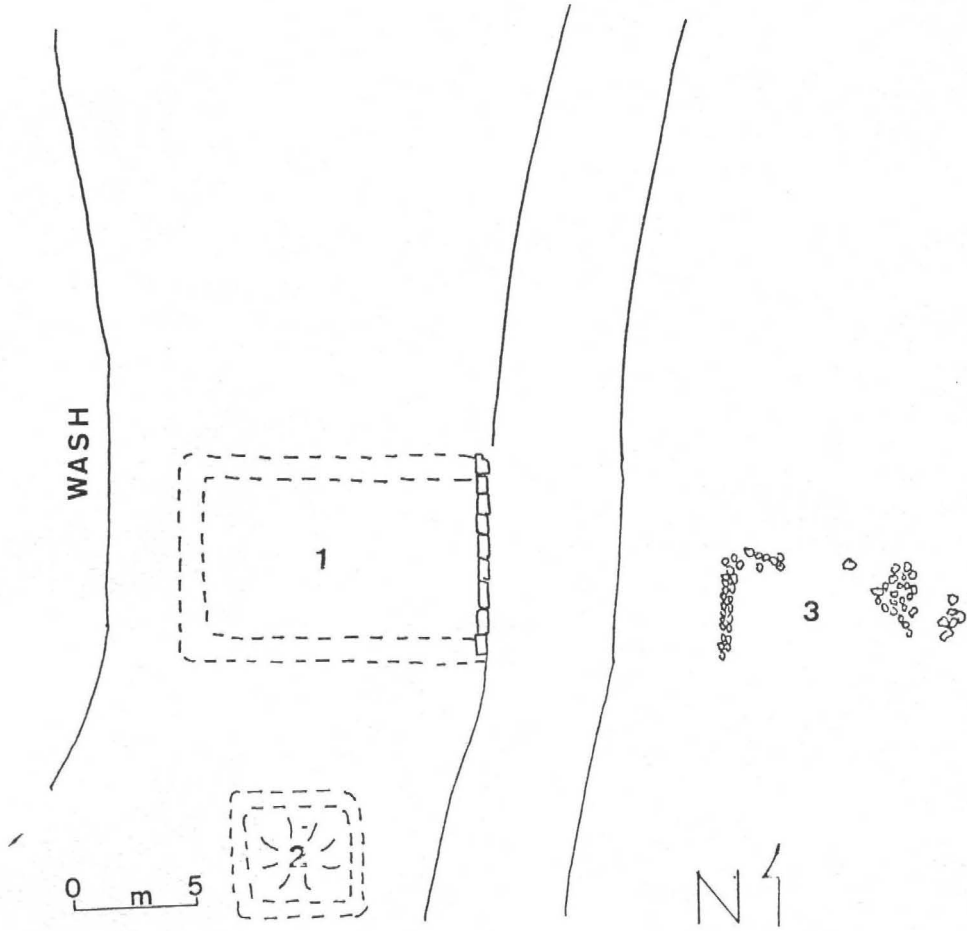


Figure 3

September 10, 1944. There also are two dates ("1905" and "1910") that are probably the work of quarriers working at the site.

Discussion and Interpretation

The prehistoric and protohistoric sites at Sandstone Quarry represent the seasonal occupation of the vicinity for many hundreds of years. In terms of the necessities of subsistence, the study area is rich in the flora, fauna, and water resources that are needed to survive in the region. A wide variety of edible flora exist within or close by: three varieties of yucca, Indian rice grass, beavertain and cholla cactus, desert almond, pinyon and juniper, manzanita, cliffrose, scrub oak, and most importantly, agave. In addition, game animals such as bighorn sheep, mule deer, jack- and cottontail rabbits, desert tortoise, and a variety of small lizards, rodents, and avifauna also occur. Most importantly, water is available on both a seasonal and year-round basis. There are several permanent springs several miles east and west of the quarry, and there are hundreds of small *tinajas* in the sandstone outcrops, as well as several large tanks in the adjacent Calico Hills. These could hold thousands of gallons of water, and could have provided water into late spring or early summer, depending on the amount of winter rains that had fallen from December through February or March, and sometimes later.

The suitability of the study area for temporary habitation and resource exploitation is well illustrated by the number of sites in the one-half by one-fourth mile square area. There are twelve prehistoric/protohistoric sites and five individual rockshelters. In the spring and the fall, aborigines could come into the quarry area and exploit both ripening floral resources and available game animals. Grinding stones located in the shelters, as well as the presence of roasting pits, testify to the exploitation of flora; quantities of bone (presumably bighorn and mule deer) in the rockshelters testify to the exploitation of game.

The length of occupation and the identity of the groups that occupied the quarry area are uncertain except in its later stages of occupation. The two Class II surveys conducted by the University of Nevada, Las Vegas teams (Brooks et al. 1977a,b) identified Puebloan, Paiute, and Lower Colorado ceramics within the general Red Rocks area, and various other projects within the Spring Mountains (Brooks, York and Massey 1972; Ancient Enterprises 1980; Turner 1978) have recorded these same ceramic types in excavations of rockshelters. The literature that deals directly with Sandstone Quarry (Shutler and Shutler 1962; Moen 1967; Brooks 1969; Brooks et al. 1977a) either do not record ceramics at these sites, or just note that ceramics were present. Nonetheless, it seems very likely that the exploitation of the area extends to at least the Puebloan occupation of the Las Vegas Valley, circa A.D. 700-1100.

The possibility exists that the study area was in use prior to the Puebloan era, based on data elsewhere in the Red Rock Canyon and Spring Mountains area. Mule Springs Rockshelter (Turner 1978), Lennie's Site in the Spring Mountains (Brooks, York and Massey 1972), Bird Springs Rockshelter (Ancient Enterprises 1980) and the RJK Site in southern Red Rocks (Rodriguez and Rodriguez n.d.) all contain projectile points dating to the Archaic occupation of the region—there are Eastgate and Pinto points in particular. Additional archaic material was noted in the southern Red Rocks area at Lone Grapevine and Scrub Oak Springs in the form of projectile points and Great Basin curvilinear petroglyphs that may date to 1000 B.C. (Cunningham 1978; Heizer and Baumhoff 1962). The petroglyphs at 26CK419 represent some Great Basin curvilinear and representational styles, and thus may help date the occupation of the area from 1000 B.C.

Evidence elsewhere in Clark County also hints at the possible ancient use of the quarry area. Excavations of roasting pits from the Virgin Peak area have yielded radiocarbon dates of 500 B.C. \pm 155, 450 B.C. \pm 80 and A.D. 595 \pm 70 (Ellis et al. 1982). Work in the Dry Lake and Muddy Mountains area have yielded dates of A.D. 1440 \pm 65, 845 B.C. \pm 45 (Brooks and Larson 1975), and 1355 B.C. \pm 125 (Ellis et al. 1982). It is not beyond the realm of possibility that the Sandstone Quarry roasting pits could yield similar dates.

Finally, the pictographs at 26CK419 and 26CK417 very likely represent a protohistoric or contact period use of the quarry. These figures have been known for a number of years. Moen (1968) recorded them in the late 1960s, but dismissed them, particularly the pictographs at 26CK417, as the work of "boy scouts" or vandals. Martineau (1973) recorded them in the early 1970s, claiming that they were authentic and that they represented Southern Paiute records of early travelers to California via the Old Spanish Trail. The writer has examined both sets in great detail, and is convinced that they are authentic Southern Paiute. The sheer number of the figures, their size and the details incorporated into them, are more than the average "boy scout" or "vandal" would know or wish to take the time to draw for a prank. There are also several charcoal figures in both sites that are obviously the work of vandals who attempted to imitate the work of the Southern Paiute, and failed miserably. These figures are blurry and smudged, and are far from being in the style and execution of the original artists. Based on these figures, it can be stated that the occupation of the quarry area could have continued into the period 1830-1849, the period the Old Spanish Trail was in use, or even to the Mormon occupation of Las Vegas during 1855-1857.

The historic quarry is significant because it was one of the first industries to spring up after the founding of Las Vegas in 1905. Mining had been important in the areas south and west of the Las Vegas Valley for a number of years in places such as Mt. Potosi, Searchlight, Goodsprings, and El Dorado Canyon, but not in or immediately near the present city of Las Vegas. Ranching and

farming were also important, starting with the Mormon mission of 1855-1857. The fort, buildings, and land eventually became the property of Mrs. Helen Stewart, who sold 1800 acres of her holdings to the San Pedro, Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railroad, which in turn sold land as parcels to start the Las Vegas townsite. Thus, aside from the railroad, the Sandstone Quarry itself represents one of the earliest "industries" to have an impact on the economy of early Las Vegas.

From the standpoint of communication with the rest of the West, the quarry was also important. Sandstone was shipped to Los Angeles and San Francisco on the Salt Lake, San Pedro and Los Angeles Railroad, bringing the townsite of Las Vegas to the increased attention of west coast population centers.

Finally, the site is associated with at least one important person in Las Vegas, John Warren Woodard, whose initials are carved on a boulder in the quarry area. What sort of direct association, if any, Woodard had with the quarry is unknown; he did leave his mark, and probably this is evidence that the vicinity was a recreation spot from at least the early 1930s to the present day.

This rich cultural depository needs considerable additional research, including excavation, radiocarbon dating, and detailed recordation and analysis of artifacts and features. The present study, it is hoped, reveals the potential of the area and provides a summary and assessment of the current status of the data. The site complex discussed represents human occupation of the Sandstone Quarry for an extended period of time, perhaps thousands of years; it is a valuable repository for data concerning settlement and subsistence patterns through time. The complex illustrates cultural interactions in the prehistoric past, and records Western penetration into the Las Vegas Valley during the mid-nineteenth century. Additional examination of the area undoubtedly will reveal new and valuable insights.

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