

BENT'S OLD FORT

An Archeological Study

BY JACKSON W. MOORE, JR.

WITH AN HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

by Dwight E. Stinson, Jr.

1973

A study conducted under the National Park Service, U. S. Department of the Interior

Published by the State Historical Society of Colorado
and the Pruett Publishing Company

pointed out that these data would appear to reveal more about the integrity of the excavation units than about the flints themselves, for there is little likelihood that any flints were used at Bent's Fort in Stagecoach times.

The shapes of both types of flints are of further interest here. As stated above, the classic French flint was blonde, single-edged, and round-heeled. However, several rectangular French flints were recovered at Bent's Fort. Their sides were not understruck but were formed by secondary chipping. T. M. Hamilton knew of no significance which might be attached to this phenomenon.

The classic English flint, on the other hand, was double-edged. Nevertheless, most of the English flints from this site were single-edged. Hamilton saw some significance in this phenomenon, especially when both types occurred together at a single site but could not provide conclusions without further study.

Finally, some Indian-made flints were found (figure 54). These were square, or very nearly so, and lacked a "face" or platform behind the bevel. The entire flint was shaped by secondary chipping in the manner of other flint tools (i.e., scrapers, projectile points, drills, etc.), and the result was a very neat gunflint. These probably were not made after European flints became available, since their manufacture was tedious and time-consuming. The paucity of their occurrence bears out this conclusion. Only three such flints were found,

and these were not recovered from "hard" Bent provenience levels but from mixed fill beneath Stagecoach surfaces.

Glass Trade Beads

The penchant of all primitive peoples for personal adornment probably exceeds only slightly that of their technologically advanced brothers. Lacking the technology of "civilized" man and his vast inventory, American Indians found glass beads very attractive and became a dependable market for them (figure 56). Although the use of native materials such as shell, bone, hammered copper, and drilled and polished stone (including turquoise) continued, their love for glass beads of all types dates earlier in many cases than their first visual confrontation with the white man.

The methods for manufacturing glass beads have changed little over the years. A frequent method consisted of a tube of glass from which long cylindrical, long faceted, barrel-shaped faceted, and the small "common" bead types were cut.

Another method of manufacture involved winding a strand of glass around a steel mandrel. Beads produced by this process were of various sizes and could be egg-shaped, slender or thick cylindrical, round or ovoid.

Some beads were mold-pressed, and these can be identified by a characteristic seam. No beads of this kind were found at the fort.

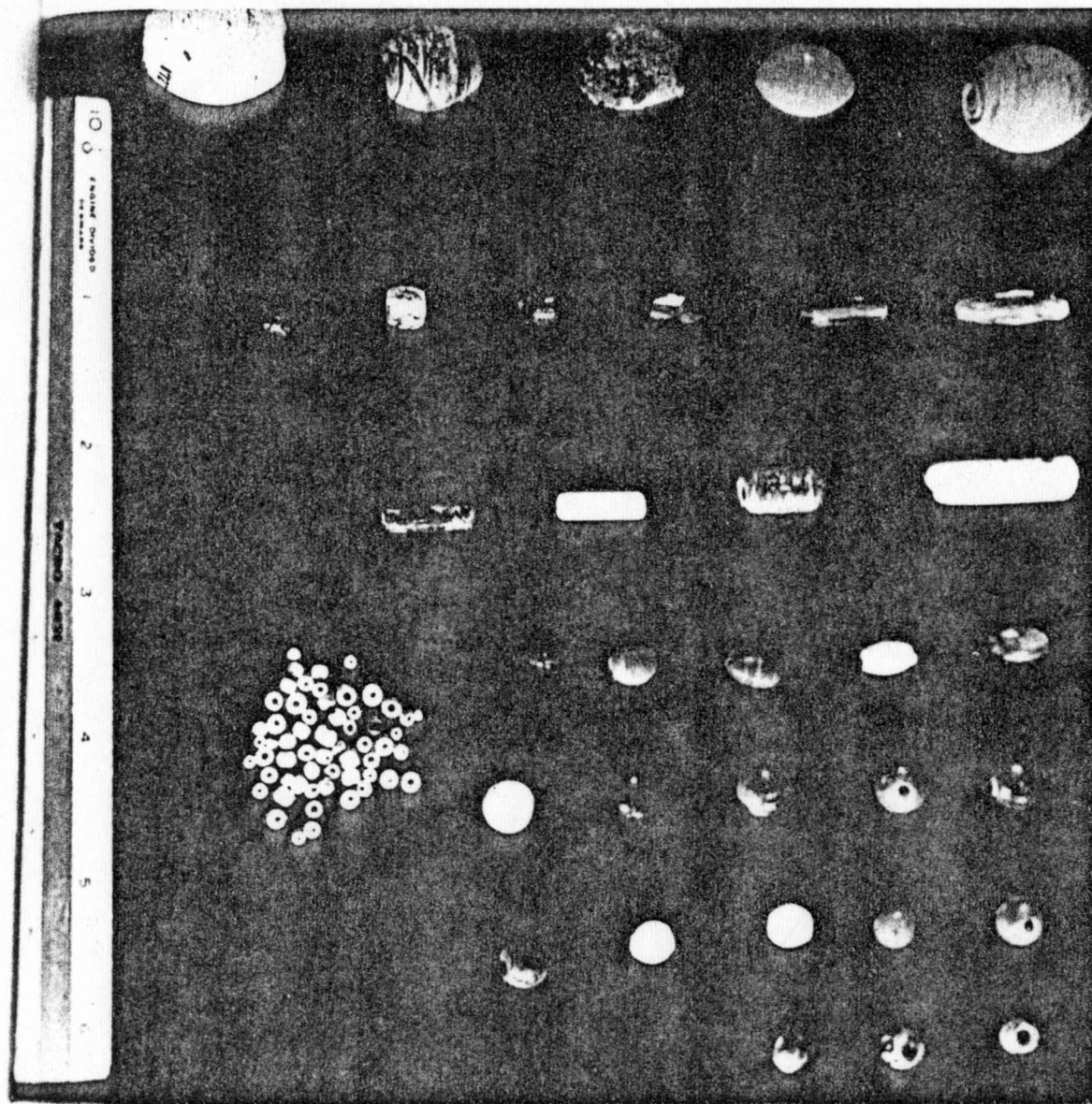


FIGURE 56. *Representative glass beads from Bent's Old Fort.*
 TOP ROW. Mandrel-wound large opaque beads: white;
 pearlescent; green, deteriorated; blue; white.

Row 2. Transparent drawn tubular, faceted: long beads—
 clear, green, blue; short or barrel beads—blue, clear, red.

Row 3. Industrial porcelain: opaque white (insulator?);
 mandrel-wound cylindrical beads: blue, white, lavender.

Row 4. Mandrel-wound small egg beads, translucent: blue,
 white, blue, red, red.

Row 5. Mandrel-wound round, flat beads: blue, green,
 black, red, white.

Row 6. Mandrel-wound round beads: blue, blue, white,
 white, green.

Row 7. Round, transparent beads: blue.

LEFT. Group of mixed common beads.

Common Beads

These very small beads made up the largest group recovered at this site. Although cut from tubes of glass, these beads when finished were shaped like tiny wheels and, at least in the 19th century, do not appear to have derived from tubes. Tubular beads were made from a long, thin, glass tube formed when the glass-blower's apprentice grasped the pontil, at the opposite end of the "gather" from the blow pipe, and ran full speed with it before the glass cooled. The result was a hollow tube of glass with its internal and external diameters largest at either end and thinnest in the middle. Such rods, sometimes 150 feet in length, were marked into segments of the desired length and the beads snapped off. The tiny common beads were taken from the thinnest middle section of the rods, and they vary considerably in size, reflecting the taper of the tubes from which they were taken. Their tubular origin was obscured by tumbling in a lapidary drum which softened their edges.

Of a total of 27,568 common beads found at Bent's Fort, 14,789 or 53 percent are white, 9,464 or 35 percent are blue, 393 or 2 percent are red, 2,649 or 9 percent are green, 208 or .75 percent black, 98 or .35 percent "pearlescent" (a light blue), and 29 or .10 percent yellow. Of the individual colors, 54 percent of the white beads have Bent provenience, 11 percent of the blue, 48 percent of the red, 93 percent of the green, 47 percent of the black, 100 percent of the "pearlescent,"

and 82 percent of the yellow. Not factored into any of the percentages were 182 white beads, 113 blue, 14 red, 16 green, and 5 black beads which lacked provenience.

Many of the common beads exhibited an extra trait, such as a red band of glass wound over a white tubular core. None of these have been given detailed analysis. Only a cursory check was made of orifice diameters, all of which fell within the range of diameters given by Murray for the common beads at Fort Laramie (Murray, 1964).

Tubular Faceted Beads

Made by breaking off long or short segments of drawn hexagonal tubes with facets filed down by hand, beads in this style were most often pressed after 1860 (Murray, 1964). The short beads of the type resembled barrels in profile and are often called barrel beads. It would seem likely that both the long and barrel forms would have been struck from similar, if not the same, tubes, perhaps even by the same maker. It should then follow that both forms would share the same color range, but this was not so at Bent's Old Fort. The long form was found in transparent clear (4), blue (10), and red (2), while the barrel form occurred in transparent clear (39), blue (22), and green (3). No long forms were found in green, and no barrel forms in red.

Only 16 long beads were found, compared with 64 barrel forms. Yet the percent with

Bent provenience was close: 62.5 percent for the former and 68.5 percent for the latter. This similarity disappeared when the colors were compared, however. The clear long beads had 25 percent Bent association, compared with 89.5 percent for the clear barrel form. The long blue beads showed 70 percent Bent association, against only 40 percent for the barrel blue beads. The two long red beads were both Bent in provenience, but none of the three green barrel beads were.

Egg Beads, Large

These large beads were single-twist, mandrel-wound, and opaque (Murray, 1964). They occurred in white, blue, and green at Bent's Fort and seemed particularly prone to patination. This gave white beads, particularly, at flat laminated appearance which has caused some prehistorians to mistake them for shell. The single green bead found was chalky and deteriorated, a characteristic it shared with the opaque green, common beads.

One of the 28 white beads found was not really large but only medium in size and had a lustre which also set it apart from the others. It was identical to some specimens in the collections of the Museum of the Fur Trade, Chadron, Nebraska, which were documented as having been excavated from a 17th-century site at Jamestown, Virginia. If this fact did not demonstrate antiquity for the Bent's Old Fort bead, it did at least indicate a long history of popularity for the style.

Only three of the large egg beads (one percent) had firm Bent provenience, although they are regarded as an early bead type. One of the three was the pearlescent medium-sized bead.

Egg Beads, Small

There were 84 specimens in this the second most numerous group of beads at the site. They averaged 30/64 of an inch in length and were of six colors—white, blue, green, red, lavender, and yellow. They were single-twist and mandrel-wound (Murray, 1964).

Fifty-five percent had Bent provenience. Fifty-four percent of the 33 white beads had Bent provenience, as did 56 percent of the 46 blue beads and the single lavender bead.

Cylindrical Beads

Like the long, tubular, faceted specimens, these beads were basically long cylinders. Unlike the former beads, however, these were mandrel-wound, translucent to opaque, and soft-edged. In addition, no facets were found on any of these beads, which were always round in cross section and parallel-sided. At Bent's Old Fort these beads occurred in white, lavender, yellow, and blue. Like other wound beads, they have tended to patinate more readily than those made from drawn tubes.

Fifty-one percent of these 41 beads have Bent provenience. By color, the white beads are

most numerous with 27 specimens, 66.5 percent of which had Bent provenience. One quarter of the 12 lavender beads had Bent association, but neither the yellow nor the blue bead (one each) could be assigned to the Bent Period.

Round Beads

There were two styles of mandrel-wound spheroidal beads at Bent's Old Fort. In addition to those which were truly round, there were some which tended to be flat at the ends. Transparent round beads in the same shape were counted separately from the opaque majority.

Among those truly round, 43 of 66, or 65 percent, had Bent provenience. Four colors were present, which broke down as follows: white—33 of 45, or 73 percent Bent; blue—8 of 11, or 72 percent Bent; green—1 of 6, or 16 percent Bent; black—one bead from a disturbed zone. One of three transparent blue beads, or 33 percent, was Bent in provenience.

There was a very close similarity in the percentages when the flat beads were compared with round ones. Dissimilarity appeared, however, when percentages were compared by bead color. The total Bent percentage for the round beads was 66.5 percent, with a 68 percent Bent provenience for those with flattened ends. When seven medium-size (all blue), flattened beads were added, the percentage dropped to 60 percent. Among the white beads

73 percent of the round specimens had Bent provenience, against 67 percent for the flattish; among the blue 72.5 percent for the round and only 33 percent for the flattish. Each form had one black bead, but only the flattish type had a red.

Polychrome Beads

Nine polychrome beads were found at Bent's Old Fort. All were sufficiently dissimilar to permit them to be assigned to six or seven styles. Two-thirds of the total were recovered from Bent zones.

All of the polychrome beads were inlaid in various manners; some had thin strands of a different color glass laid on, while others had hollow cavities filled with a different glass. Of this latter type 15 blue inlays of a translucent glass into opaque white bodies were found.

In figure 57 firm Bent provenience was ascribed to the first two beads from the left, in both rows, and also to the one on the right end, bottom row.

Green Beads

Due to inherent chemistry, opaque green beads of any style failed to survive in usable proportions. There was no real way to measure the green "chalk" residue that was encountered, but an estimate of 10 percent bead recovery to 90 percent loss would be close. It was first assumed that the deterioration of these green

glass beads was due to the heat of the 1849 fire, but the phenomenon of their disintegration occurred equally where no burning was evident. Green glass beads which were translucent or transparent were not so affected.

Discussion

Although only 53 percent of all beads found had Bent association, I feel confident that most or all of them were deposited during his occupancy. Bent, St. Vrain and Company transported beads from St. Louis, Missouri, and did a brisk trade in them. Some, but not many, may have been deposited by being torn or ripped from garments, bags, costumes, etc. The Stagecoach Period probably saw very few bead-adorned Indians and no trappers at all.

I am confident, thus, that the beads found resulted from (1) normal spillage in the course of trading operations, (2) abnormal dispersal during the destruction and abandonment of the fort, and (3) drastic dispersal during the 1859-65(?) cleanup and rebuilding period of the Stagecoach era. Decades of intermittent digging by individuals and small groups, vehicular traffic, and rather recent "landscaping" probably contributed to further dispersal, vertical as well as horizontal.

FIGURE 57. Polychrome glass trade beads from Bent's Old Fort.