



PRYCER CONSULTING

## High Plains Group

Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site  
Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site  
Amache National Historic Site

# Staffing and Interpretation Assessment

December 2023



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## Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site

In Fall 2023, Prycer Consulting was hired to do a general interpretation and staffing assessment for three sites within the High Plains Group: Amache National Historic Site, Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site, and Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site. The site visit was conducted in mid-November, just after important changes for the site were announced: the entire second floor of the Fort was closed to visitors due to safety concerns and Director of Interpretation Alicia Lafever announced her retirement at the end of the year. These changes come shortly after a new superintendent, Eric Leonard, came to the High Plains Group in early summer. With fresh eyes already at the site—and more fresh eyes on the horizon, the time for assessment was ideal.

While Prycer Consulting didn't do the official tour of the fort, she did talk with multiple frontline staff members, toured the fort, and met with administrative staff. Tour notes, the foundation document, policies, and program scripts were shared with her in advance. During these conversations, one critical question emerged: **How can we begin to diversify the methods of interpretation at Old Bent's Fort?**

### Living History: The Staff

In recent years, many historic sites have begun to face the limitations of living history. From the visitor perspective, some visitors simply don't like this method of interpretation and may actively avoid it. Visitors learn in a variety of ways, and many visitors prefer going at their own pace. It can take valuable time for a visitor to understand the guiding principles around living history, which may prevent them from fully participating. Some people may prefer to explore on their own before interacting with a Ranger. Of course, one of the big advantages of living history is the conversations between visitors and staff, as they learn from each other. The question was asked: what are the ways visitors can learn at the Fort that aren't dependent on people? Can you still spark conversation? Staff pointed to brochures available at the main entrance: the official 'unigrid' brochure (last updated in 2016), the self-guided tour brochure written in 2002 and last updated in 2022), an orientation video (2005), and a touch-screen interactive with additional information about specific topics.

However, once a visitor starts exploring the Fort, the options are limited. None of the historic spaces have any type of signage or interpretive material. Are there minor



interpretive interventions that can still spark conversation? Is there a way to take some of the hands-on activities that staff run and make them self-guided? There are lots of opportunities to provide additional depth to the current historic spaces, and it's worth exploring various options. In addition, as staff are facing a years-long closure of the second level, adding more learning opportunities should help assuage visitor frustrations with not being able to see everything.

**Recommendation:** Take one room. Assign a small budget—no more than \$250. Let staff identify and create interpretive interventions that will either spark curiosity or conversation—or both.

There are other limits to living history. From an operational perspective, living history programs are an expensive, ongoing investment. Finding individuals that are willing to work a difficult job for low pay in all sorts of weather has always been challenging, and it's become harder in recent years. Often, sites are unable to invest the proper resources into training, leading to disappointing visitor experiences. Without additional interpretive tools in the toolbox, when someone is absent, it's almost like closing an exhibit. In addition, the act of doing living history can create some unusual staff dynamics. Staff mentioned some tension between those frontline staff that only wear historic clothing and those that occasionally wear the NPS Ranger uniform. Additional hierarchies emerge, as well as limitations based on 19<sup>th</sup> century ideas around gender and race. These tensions are also derived from the fact that living history practitioners are mostly white men.

**Recommendation:** Begin shifting living history from being the primary interpretive tool to a supplemental tool. The first step should be an interim interpretive plan, completed as soon as staffing resources allow.

Finally, living history has serious limitations when considering diverse stories. In the past, not everyone experienced Bent's Old Fort in the same way—and that continues to be true. Many people express regret that more people of color don't participate in living history—but is the past a comfortable place for them to work? Is the past a comfortable place for all your visitors? From a mental health standpoint, it is far more beneficial to stop trying to take people to the past, but rather help visitors observe the past. Best practices in living history are evolving rapidly. Visitors need a framework in order to understand what's happening. Many sites are becoming far more intentional in how they



use living history. The emerging best practice is to conduct formal living history programs, with a defined structure such as:

- A third-person introduction, up to 7 minutes. This sets the stage for what's next.
- A living history scene or monologue, up to 20 minutes.
- A third-person conclusion, wrapping up key ideas and inviting visitor feedback and questions.

Sites are also moving to hiring actors for their living history programs. Even though Bent's Old Fort has been doing third-person interpretation for about 5 years, it's unclear how well even this experience is framed for visitors. What does historic clothing signal for the average visitor? For staff that wear both historic clothing and the NPS Ranger uniform, they have certainly experienced differences. As one staff member shared in an email:

"The NPS uniform is iconic, and most visitors are happy to meet a park ranger. In contrast, when I wear historic clothing, visitors are not sure who I am. Many guests assume I am a volunteer or ask me whether I am a staff member or a volunteer. When I wear the NPS uniform there is no confusion. The visitors' reaction to seeing me in the NPS uniform has been entirely positive. The only negative reaction has been from co-workers who feel that the uniform detracts from our guests' immersive historic experience."

**Recommendation:** Establish clear lines around the use of historic clothing. Throughout the NPS, the NPS uniform is standard. It's time for Bent's Old Fort to follow the same protocol. Historic clothing should only be used for specific, well-planned programs.

It's impossible for staff to know what knowledge and experiences visitors walk into a historic site with—making sure a framework is established for everyone makes it a better experience for everyone. The use of historic clothing and uniforms is one way to establish that framework.

### **Living History: The Volunteers**

There are so many ways that living history events can go wrong, from exposing the site to unnecessary liability to visitors having the type of experience that will cause them to never participate in a similar program again. Therefore, it is critical that the site retains



control of all living history programs, whether they are working with volunteers or not. Bent's Old Fort has a long history of an active volunteer cadre, with some participants traveling hundreds of miles to participate. However, over the years, bad habits have developed. Though some of the more problematic incidents are well in the past, the current lack of clearly written and communicated policies and procedures opens the NPS to unnecessary risk. There's a disconnect between how staff are doing interpretation (mostly third person) and how volunteers are doing it (a mix of first and third person). Staff must regain control of the volunteers, as well as the programs they present.

Currently, the park-level policies and procedures governing volunteer work are slim at best. For some volunteers, the focus of their time at the Fort is reconnecting with old friends. Everything the NPS does must be visitor-first. During these events, the focus for staff is often ensuring that the volunteers have a great experience—allowing them privileges no one else has (such as spending the night in the Fort) and feeding them multiple meals. So, the question remains: who are these programs for? If the answer isn't clearly in favor of the public, the program or practice should be discontinued. However, these volunteers often have specialized, rare skills that bring something unique to key programs.

There are a few examples of how other sites have shifted volunteer programs that include aspects of living history. Historic Huguenot Street took one of their popular living history events, the New Netherland Marketplace, and wrote contracts for all participants and paid each a stipend. This creates a contractual relationship between the site and the volunteer. It protects both parties and sets clear expectations for everyone. These contracts have also increased the Native American presence at this event.

However, others certainly see the opportunities within the complex stories that Old Bent's Fort can tell. Noted historian Edward Ayers wrote about a recent visit in a blog post (<https://medium.com/new-american-history/borderland-stories-742b4f64d375>), comparing the history at the Alamo with the history at Old Bent's Fort. He says:

Bent's Old Fort and the Witte Museum tell a story that's quite different from the stories being told at the Alamo and San Jacinto. It's a story of cooperation and coexistence, rather than of conflict. These stories acknowledge that people of Anglo and Mexican backgrounds have lived together, and shaped one another, far more than they have warred. They recognize that Native people had histories far



longer and more complex than the bit parts they play in depictions of warfare against white settlers.

Americans have long thought of the West as “the frontier,” an ever-expanding boundary between the civilized, commercial, and democratic United States and a chaos beyond. Places such as Bent’s Old Fort and the Witte Museum, however, reveal borderlands where boundaries shifted and crossed, where identities changed with circumstance. Such sites offer a rich vision of a vast landscape whose possibilities continue to unfold.

However, in Ayers description of the Fort, he makes no mention of the staff he interacted with or the living history aspects of the Fort’s interpretation. Perhaps this aspect of interpretation is not as essential as staff assumed.

**Recommendation:** Rethink living history programs. Are intensive multi-day events the best use of resources? Would it be better for visitors to begin hosting regularly occurring, smaller scale programming? (i.e. family programs on the first Saturday). Also, consider contracting with “volunteers” for specific activities during a living history event or smaller scale programming.

In order to support additional, smaller scale programming, more opportunities emerge for volunteers to assist in ways beyond supporting living history programming. How could the community increase its support of the Fort if the volunteer requirements were more welcoming to all kinds of history enthusiasts?

**Recommendation:** Separate volunteer training from living history training. Baseline volunteer training and orientation should be regularly occurring and free. Consider what living history training is needed, as well as the goals for this training. Will participants be using these living history skills at sites besides Bent’s Old Fort? If so, there should be a fee attached to those training events. Another alternative is to consider continuing multi-day or immersive living history training as a special use activity only.

For those times when reenactors want the opportunity to connect with friends, learn new skills, or practice current interpretations, some sites are moving to fee-based programs for re-enactors. The focus is on the reenactors, and they pay for that privilege, with the pricing including both the cost of the facility as well as staff time. The event may



or may not be open to the public. Within the NPS, this will mean requiring a special use permit for this program that has limited public benefit.

Interim steps might include drafting a signed volunteer contract that establishes clear expectations for behavior during a public event. Staff will need to supervise more closely and pre-approve any activities during a public event. Staff must also be empowered to correct volunteers or release them from further involvement.

**Recommendation:** Update or draft volunteer descriptions that everyone must sign before returning. Draft volunteer policies and procedures.

Finally, it is time to consider other volunteer opportunities that aren't directly connected to living history. Could there be a greeter position? Someone to facilitate a hands-on activity, where historic clothing isn't necessary? Someone to help with the animals? Are there things that could help with collection management? Opening a broader array of volunteer opportunities may increase local involvement with the site.

**Recommendation:** Create a broad "menu" of volunteer opportunities that don't center around living history activities.

### **Living History: In Summary**

When faced with the limitations of living history, many people default to the idea that more training will solve the issues. In all honesty, I believe that living history is a fundamentally flawed method of interpretation, especially when telling diverse, complicated stories. Before determining which of these recommendations to pursue and whether or not to invest additional NPS resources in fixing the living history at the Fort, you must answer this question:

### **Is living history the best or only way to tell the many complicated stories at Old Bent's Fort?**

Have this conversation with the entire staff, assuring them that living history can remain an interpretive tool. But let this conversation and your answers guide the next steps.





The Foundation document references “cultural traditions” as a fundamental resource. But can these traditions be interpreted by majority white male staff and volunteers? Staff want to tell the complicated stories of western expansion, race, and gender present at a fort like this, but may feel trapped by the confines of living history.

Though a national historic site, Bent’s Old Fort should still serve the local community. Are your diverse neighbors visiting the Fort? Why or why not?

Finally, think about what you’re not doing because of the amount of energy and resources being spent on living history. What might you be able to do if you weren’t bound by these limits? What kind of programming might be possible? How else could that money be used? What sort of staff might you attract if you moved away from living history?

My recommendation is to begin taking steps to sunset the living history program as it’s known today at Bent’s Old Fort. Begin now with adding interpretive tools to the tool kit. Make notes on what’s working and how visitors are responding. Build a culture of experimentation. Start rethinking every aspect of interpretation. Make the question “why” almost automatic. If there aren’t any good answers, it’s probably time for a change.

With the structure itself at great risk, you may be forced to reimagine Bent’s Old Fort anyway. What could you do if you didn’t have the reconstructed fort? What opportunities might open up? Look at these current shifts as opportunities, not problems, and reinforce that with staff every day. With thoughtful conversations, Bent’s Old Fort could become something entirely new and welcome new audiences.

## **Other Observations and Recommendations**

### **Animal Program**

Bent’s Old Fort is home to many animals, including an ox, donkeys, a horse, peacocks, goats, guinea hens, and chickens. Though they certainly add atmosphere to the site, it’s unclear whether they are used to their full interpretive potential. In addition, there are concerns about damage the animals cause to interior spaces and the resources (staffing and financial) to properly care for the animals.

Before any major adjustments occur, staff need to answer a few questions:



- How does each type of animal contribute to the stories of the fort?
- How are they used by staff for interpretation? What is the benefit to visitors?
- Do any of these animals pose any serious risks to visitor safety?
- How much is being spent to care for these animals? Are these resources sufficient?
- How many animals make sense for our current resources?

Once these questions are answered, an animal plan should be drafted. This plan should include how the animals will be used in interpretation, guides for care of the animals (including exercise and healthcare), which breeds can be included at the fort, and how to handle end-of-life decisions. These questions and the resulting animal plan may mean that there will be fewer animals at the Fort in the future.

For the animal program to continue at its present number, it is highly recommended to have a part-time position where the primary role is animal care and interpretation.

### Historic Spaces

Just before I arrived, the second floor of the fort was closed to the public due to structural issues and safety concerns. Additionally, there has long been a desire for a “modern” visitor center. However, with the reconstructed Fort needing extensive, critical maintenance work, it is very unlikely that a visitors’ center will ever be constructed. Instead of thinking about the things that can’t be done because there’s no modern visitor center, start thinking about how spaces within the reconstructed Fort could be utilized differently to better meet visitors’ needs.

As staff wait for repair work to begin, it would be a good time to reconsider each of the rooms within the fort. Is each room used to its highest and best potential? Are some stories being told more than once while others are hidden? Is there a need for some spaces to be used differently to make different types of programming or exhibits possible? What can you not do now, but could do if a space was slightly different?

**Recommendation:** Staff should take a close look at each room within the fort, asking these questions. It may be that one area could become a temporary exhibit space. Another space might be able to be used for programming space with ample seating. As staff works through each room, make notes on what’s needed (physically, financially, and



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timewise) to make any proposed changes. Once this work is completed, prioritize each idea that emerges.

As this work occurs, use the seasonal operating hours to go through storage areas. With the abundance of space within the Fort, it's easy for things to accumulate. Cleaning out those areas now will make future changes easier—and make it possible to accurately assess storage needs.



## Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site

In Fall 2023, Prycer Consulting was hired to do a general interpretation and staffing assessment for three sites within the High Plains Group: Amache National Historic Site, Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site, and Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site. The site visit was conducted in mid-November. During the visit, we toured both the museum in Eads and the site itself. We met with key staff and discussed concerns, as well as things that are going well.

Generally speaking, Sand Creek is an incredibly well-run site. They have the benefit of a site superintendent, Janet Frederick, that is from the area and has worked for the site for many years. She has built close relationships with members of tribal communities, working with them for memorial events and other projects.

However, Janet is beginning to think about retirement, which is the critical question for Sand Creek: **How to plan for Janet's eventual retirement, especially considering tribal and community relationships?**

With the transient nature of the NPS system, it is highly unlikely that someone with similar connections will fill her role. With the critical importance of community relationships, this transition may need to be handled slightly differently than others. Though a traditional succession plan may not be possible within the boundaries of NPS procedures, here are a few ideas to help ensure a smooth transition for the community:

- Make sure the tribal relationships extend beyond Janet to all levels. As High Plains Superintendent, Eric should prioritize meeting with key people before Janet announces her retirement.
- Look into possible phased retirement so that there can be some overlap with the next site manager.
- Work with current staff to build their skills so that they can possibly move up.
- Keep key partners informed about the timelines and hiring process for the next site manager.

Another issue that came up was concern about staff burnout, especially considering the difficult aspects of this history. Janet has done a great job of creating a supportive environment, with monthly all-staff meetings, potlucks, and regular training to help build



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skills and a more cohesive team. Janet truly sees this site as an important interpretive training ground for the entire NPS. More on staff care can be found in the General Recommendations section.

As the staff continues to think about the future and possible new leadership, another question emerges: **What should we be working towards?** Core interpretation is in a good place, but is there something else that is needed? We chatted some about the site being a place of healing, and that idea may be worth deeper exploration. More historic sites, especially sites of slavery, are talking about this idea, and in an increasingly divided America, the public is often looking to these sites of trauma to provide clues on how to move forward. This is a concept that could also be explored at Amache or Bent's Fort. There was also conversation about how to highlight modern life of these tribal communities. How do we make sure the public knows that descendants are still here? The annual healing run is a great doorway into both topics. Exhibition space is limited, but there are some options. In addition, the new oral history project will go a long way in supporting both healing and the reminders of how this event continues to impact people today.



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## Amache National Historic Site

In Fall 2023, Prycer Consulting was hired to do a general interpretation and staffing assessment for three sites within the High Plains Group: Amache National Historic Site, Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site, and Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site. The site visit was conducted in mid-November. During our visit, we met with staff and toured the site. We also happened to run into John Hopper, founder of the Amache Preservation Society.

Unlike the other, more established parks in the High Plains Group, Amache is in its infancy. It was authorized as a National Historic Site by Congress in 2022 and had just one staff member at the time of my visit. (Interviews for the first park ranger position were set to begin just after my visit.) Site manager Chris Mather has an extraordinary opportunity to build this organization. There are also strong community connections to lean on, including the descendent community and current and former members of the Amache Preservation Society. The big question here is: **How do we set things up well and get off to a good start?**

There were several ideas discussed that will help shape this site to be sustainable and responsive to the community. As the site prepares to officially open, careful consideration should be given to visitor hours and seasonal hours. Staffing will be minimal at first—how to best leverage visitor needs and staff time? Parts of the site can easily be a self-guided experience. However, exhibit projects for the recreation hall and barrack will necessitate staffing. Now is the time to begin thinking about access to these historic resources. As schedules are set, keep in mind that the site doesn't have to be open and guided every single day. Collecting visitor data from the beginning will help guide decisions about program hours. Seasonal hours should also be considered.

One of the truly special things about this site is the involvement of the Amache Preservation Society, a group of high school students, and the Japanese-American survivor/descendent community. Though the transition from community-based museum to national historic site seems to be going well, this is a time to be sensitive to the community. Maintaining these relationships is a priority, and as exhibits change, it will be important to maintain the community's touch within the NPS style of exhibits.



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In Summer 2024, there will be an archeology field school. There was discussion of leveraging this event as the big debut of the site under NPS management. There are some wonderful opportunities with this, both in-person and virtually. There was discussion about rolling out social media during this event, which seems like an ideal situation.

It will be a pleasure to watch this site develop over time, especially with the support of the High Plains Group.



## General Recommendations

Though there are several recommendations specific to each site, there are some ideas that could be applied across all three sites.

### Shared Positions

During conversations at each site, there was discussion about how to better work together. One way to ensure a closer working relationship with each site is to share certain positions. Though these positions would likely be based at one site, this cross-collaboration could ease calendar conflicts and help foster new ideas.

One idea was to create a position that was an interpretation supervisor for all three sites. This person would help guide the broad stories while supervising staff at each site. These sites' stories already overlap—it would be far easier for visitors to see how these sites connect if there was one person that was regularly thinking about all three. All shared positions need to have clearly communicated shared duties that must be explicitly laid out and included in performance standards. Clear communication between all three sites will be essential in making this work for both the employee and the sites.

Another idea was to create a Visual Information Specialist that serves all three sites. This person would assist with marketing, program calendar development, press releases, and similar work. None of these sites have anyone dedicated to this kind of work. This position could also help the public see these sites as a connected group—and hopefully make the effort to visit all three.

### Meetings

Though site managers meet regularly, lower-level staff don't have the same working relationship. All-staff meetings, 2-4 times a year, would help build these connections. Ideally, these would be in-person at a different site. Time should be built in for tours or programs of the site, so that staff can learn from each other.

### Staff Support

Every site within this group deals with difficult history. How can we make sure staff are taken care of doing this work? Other sites should learn from the staff support methods that Janet has implemented at Sand Creek. In recent years, there's been a lot of work





around trauma-informed care and practices. Are there ideas within that methodology that could help support staff?

### **Seasonal Hours**

Each of these sites are in remote areas of southeastern Colorado, where the weather can be extreme. In addition, the staff at each site is relatively small. How could seasonal closures benefit the site? Speaking from experience, seasonal closures are a wonderful opportunity to tackle major projects, whether it's maintenance, planning, or new exhibits. For front-line staff, it gives them time to use their skills in different ways. In addition, it makes it easier to conduct professional development activities for everyone. Visitor data will help inform when closing makes the most sense. However, low visitation at each site also indicates that these sites may not need to be open 7 days a week during the "busy" season either. Explore what operational hours will be best for the public—and the best use of federal resources.

For example, Sand Creek staffs both an off-site visitor center and the actual park site 30 minutes away. The two sites are open at the same time about two days a week. While that may be sufficient in the winter, does there need to be a closer alignment of hours during the busier summer months?

Amache has the luxury at present of a partner museum whose core staffing is up to the partner, allowing the NPS the choice to augment those hours or focus being at the actual site. As operations continue to develop, this gives staff some space to determine how best to meet visitors' needs.



## Resources

### People

Kristin Gallas, MUSE Consulting. <https://museconsultingkg.com/> Kristin primarily works on slavery interpretation (and has written a great book on the subject), but she may be able to help think through some of the interpretation at Bent's Fort especially. She helped Arlington House develop their Visitor Expectations document.

Richard Josey, Collective Journeys. <https://www.collectivejourneys.org/> Consultant who built his career at living history sites, but now focuses on trauma-informed interpretation and creating a sense of welcoming. Could be useful for all three sites.

Jesse Kramer-Parr, Conner Prairie. Currently working on revamping their program. [kramer@connerprairie.org](mailto:kramer@connerprairie.org)

Michelle Moon, Saltworks Interpretive Consulting. <https://www.saltworkshq.com/> Consultant who worked at major living history sites, including Strawberry Banke and the Tenement Museum. Primary work is around interpretive planning, but she's also very interested in workplace culture.

### Literature

Arlington House. "Visitor Expectations and Language Resource," <https://www.nps.gov/arho/planyourvisit/visitor-expectations-and-language-resource.htm>

Armstrong, Jackie. "3 Trauma-Informed Practices for Museums to Follow," <https://www.aam-us.org/2023/05/12/3-trauma-informed-practices-for-museums-to-follow/>

Armstrong, Jackie. "Museums must become more trauma-informed." <https://artmuseumteaching.com/2020/08/03/museums-must-become-more-trauma-informed/>

Barger, Jennifer and Heather Greenwood Davis. "Historical interpreters share their sides of the story," <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/historic-interpreters-changing-the-conversation-about-race>



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“Interpreting Trauma, Memory, and Lived Experience in Museums and Historic Sites,” themed issue of the *Journal of Museum Education*. Volume 43, 2018—Issue 1.

Korn, Randi. *Intentional Practice for Museums: A Guide for Maximizing Impact*. Full of some great exercises to drill down into why certain choices are made—and to what end.

Tyson, Amy. *The Wages of History: Emotional Labor on Public History's Front Lines*. Explores the living history staff at Fort Snelling—and some of the changes made.