



Face of Fillmore

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The Face of Fillmore became the location of some fascinating scientific research on August 21 and 22.

Matthew Bekker, an associate professor of geography at Brigham Young University, and his assistant Sam Wyatt were busy at the pioneer cabins in the Territorial Statehouse State Park doing research on the logs that the cabins were built of.

This science is known as dendrochronology which is the scientific dating technique which examines growth rings in trees to date events in the past. Through this, scientists can tell much about trees including the climate they grew in, earthquake dating, beetle infestations and much more. Recently, these two men have spent July in Yellowstone collecting climate data using these techniques.



Matthew Bekker taking samples from the log

I watched as Mr. Bekker used what look like a large hand-held drill, but it actually had a hollow “bit” that took out a core sample from the log. He showed me how you can tell the climate by the size of the rings. The wider the ring the wetter the year. These were carefully prepared for further investigation in his lab.

The logs were Douglas fir which were harvested from the Pahvant Range by the early pioneers. Previously taken samples from the forest will be compared with the ones taken today to help with their research.

I was told these trees were called “Red Pine” by the early residents because of the red color of the core of

the logs. In actuality they were not pine at all.

The science of dendrochronology has given us some interesting insights into our pioneer history. One example is the William Hawk Cabin which is considered one of the oldest pioneer structures in Salt Lake City. Tradition tell us that it was originally constructed in 1848 inside the “Old Fort” built by the Mormon settlers in 1847 and that it was moved to its present location between 1850 and 1852. The cabin was built from 23 Douglas fir trees and eight white fir ones. After careful scientific examination, it was determined that a version of the cabin was built by 1852 and the later



core sample of log

timbers were added as a major renovation after 1860. The wood that was used in the earlier part was found to have been cut in 1846 and was probably salvaged from road building effort by the Donner-Reed Party. This suggests that a version of the cabin may have been originally built in the old Fort, although probably not by William Hawk.

William Hawk was living in Council bluffs, Iowa, when he joined the Mormon Battalion to fight in the Mexican-American War July 1846. This information comes from his life history. He went with the Battalion to San Diego, California, and remained there until the spring of 1848. He was at that point asked to carry the U.S. Mail to Missouri. As he did this, he passed through Salt Lake City but did not stay for long. Hawk's family joined him in Missouri and together they headed back to Utah as part of the Allen Taylor Company. They arrived in Salt Lake City in October 1849.



William Hawk cabin in Salt Lake City

According to official records, it suggests that when Hawk arrived in Salt Lake City he received his “inheritance” of property where the cabin now stands. In Salt Lake County records, it shows that the first owner of the property was actually Amasa Russell who was with the first group of pioneers in 1847. There is no record of Mr. Russell selling the property to Hawk.



work area

The mystery continues. The presence of 1846 timber in the cabin points to the possibility that it was originally in the fort, but it is likely that Russell or some other settler built it. When Hawk arrived in 1849 people were already building on their lots outside the fort. It is unclear if Hawk ever lived in the fort or if he lived in an unoccupied house or in his wagon. He may have purchased the lot from Russell as early as 1849 and never lived in the fort at all.

It is fascinating to me the details that can be gleaned from this type of science. For example, one of the trees salvaged for wood in the cabin contained resin ducts in the 1832 ring that pointed to

injury to the tree or “decapitation” associated with a mass movement event, mostly like a snow avalanche. It is difficult for me to imagine being able to tell about an avalanche that many years ago.

Mr. Bekker told me that the results of the samples he was taking of the cabins at the park will not be available for a few months, most likely, but when they are we will find out the “rest of the story”.