

Hole in the Rock Foundation Bluff Fort Historic Site

Newsletter July 2025

IN THIS ISSUE



100TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE DEMISE OF THE SAN JUAN COOP BUILDING (AND FRED STARR)

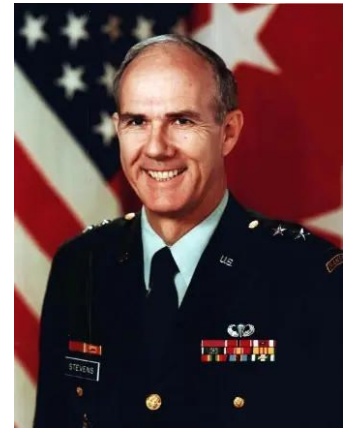
Mark your calendars! July 19, 2025 marks 100 years since Fred Starr set dynamite to the safe in the Co-op. Read "Remembering Fred Starr, San Juan County's Most Infamous Bank Robber" and more about the Co-op Store.

NEW UPDATED WEB SITE

Be sure to check out the new website! Many hours of work, a lot of them by volunteers, have been put into giving the website a fresh, new, exciting look. Find the new site at www.hirf.org.

LYNN HENRY STEVENS

We love and miss you, Lynn Stevens! Lynn passed away February 5, 2025 after a valiant battle with cancer. Lynn was a great strength to Bluff Fort and the Hole in the Rock Foundation, where he served as President of



the Board of directors. Lynn was a driving force at Bluff Fort, visiting often and always having the answers needed. The Fort flag was lowered to half-mast and the Co-op store wore black for a week as befitting 1886's mourning tribute.

REFLECTIONS FROM DONNA JENSEN, BOARD MEMBER

Donna shares thoughts about the growth and strength of Bluff Fort Historic Site.

WHAT'S NEW AT THE FORT?

Check out a new structure to protect the horses, growing things, and meet a new set of directors, Rick & Lenore Jones.

YOUTH CONFERENCES

Two groups of young men enjoyed Camp Stickie in May and June. Read about their adventures.

Hole in the Rock Foundation

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435-672-9995
blufffort@gmail.com
www.blufffort.org
www.hirf.org

Check Out Our New Website: hirf.org


A new Bluff Fort website has been developed which features dynamic introduction imagery, a “Plan Your Visit” section, a “Youth Conference” section, and a “Learn More” section where you can view and download trail guides/maps, pioneer journals, histories, and biographies. You can also view / download current and all previous newsletters and see how you are related to a San Juan pioneer. The new website is cell phone friendly, making it ideal for visitors on the go. It has been developed by Jeff Teters (WebDesigner.Domains) who has designed over 6600 websites. Jeff has been very generous with his time and expertise. The new website was launched on June 14th, 2025

This is the Bluff Fort’s third generation website. We express our gratitude to David Walton who developed our second-generation website and greatly expanded our pioneer biography database.

Note that blufffort.org will redirect you to the site.


HOLE-IN-THE-ROCK
FOUNDATION

[Home](#)
[Plan Your Visit](#)
[Learn More](#)
[Entertainment](#)




BLUFF FORT
Historic Site

The Bluff Fort, located in the red rock country of southeastern Utah, was established by the Hole-in-the-Rock Pioneers in 1880 following their epic six-month journey.

Experience Pioneer Life


Experience pioneer life in the remote frontier and pan for gold. See films of the Hole-in-the-Rock journey. Enjoy activities, Friday evening entertainment, the gift shop, refreshments, and a covered/pavilion picnic area.




Free Admission

Summer Hours: 9 AM to 6 PM
Winter Hours: Nov 1 – Feb 28, 10 AM – 5 PM
Closed Between Dec 20 and Jan 2, 2025
Gift shop and concession closed Sunday.
After hours (during daylight) the main entrance is open. Stroll the property and learn from the many interpretive displays.


[Online Gift Shop](#)




**Plan Your Visit To
The Bluff Fort**



**Learn More About
the Pioneers and
Bluff Fort**



**Friday Night
Entertainment**



LOCATION:
550 East Black Locust
Bluff, Utah 84502
(435) 872-9995
blufffort@gmail.com

HOURS:
Summer Hours: 9:00 AM to 6:00 PM
Winter Hours: Nov 1 – Feb 28, 10:00 AM – 5:00 PM
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RECEIVE OUR NEWSLETTER

Remembering Fred Starr, San Juan County's Most Infamous Bank Robber

Compiled by Grant P. Taylor, Hole-in-the-Rock Foundation board member and secretary

Saturday, July 19, 2025, will mark the 100th anniversary of the most infamous criminal act that ever occurred in San Juan County.¹ On the evening of Sunday, July 19th, 1925, Fred Starr snuck into the San Juan Co-op Store, undetected. Fred was a newly hired employee who had likely seen money being locked away in the co-op safe every evening and must have decided that he would help himself to it. Although he called himself Fred Starr, his name was actually Alfred Earl Wright.² Alfred had served in the army in World War I, but circumstances must have changed for him. Although at one point in the late 1800's San Juan County had been an outpost for outlaws, the new Mormon settlement of Bluff City had brought law and order to the area in the 1890s.

Fred Starr, once inside the store, took a few sticks of dynamite, which likely had come from the general stock at the store, and placed them next to the safe. A rural general store in the 1920s would have stocked both dynamite and kerosene. Fred would have run a fuse wire a distance away, and for some reason unknown to us, he stayed inside to watch the grand event. Late that night, about 11:15 p.m., Fred lit the fuse, and the sparks began, inch by inch, to get closer to the sticks of dynamite.³ Many have wondered what Fred might have been thinking about when the sparks were just inches away from those sticks. However, we'll never know his last thoughts. One Bluff diarist reported hearing the blast and then cries for help from within the building.⁴ The town's folk came running to see that the building was already fully engulfed in flames. Little could have been done but to watch as the building was consumed by fire. The stone building collapsed on itself when the supporting structure was destroyed. The death certificate listed Fred Starr's cause of death as: *"Accidental burns and rock falling . . . (illegible) . . . Hunt Store"*.⁵

Residents of Bluff reported that the

¹ This story comes from an interview done by Corinne Roring, former President of the Hole in the Rock Foundation, of an original settler of Bluff. Corinne shared this with the author.

² Fred Starr's birth name was given as Earl Alfred Wright in the 1900 and 1910 United States Census, and his marriage record of 1912. He was born in Colorado 4 February 1888 and died 19 July 1925. He was also known as Alfred E. Wright on the 1920 United States Census and his grave marker. <https://www.familysearch.org/en/tree/person/details/L6Q9-J3R>.

³ State of Utah -- Death Certificate of Earl Alfred Wright lists death at 11:30 pm on July 19, 1925, and duration of event causing death as 15 minutes, leaving the time of the blast around 11:15 pm. <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HY-6SC3-4CP?lang=en&i=0&cc=1747615>, and <https://www.familysearch.org/en/tree/person/details/L6Q9-J3R>.

⁴ See footnote 1.

⁵ *Id.*

entire building was destroyed, along with a majority of its inventory. It sat for years as a memory and a pile of rubble. Blocks and stone from the building were eventually hauled off and used for other buildings in the town of Bluff.

Co-op Store's Background⁶

Two years after their arrival in the Bluff valley, the San Juan pioneers launched a cooperative mercantile. The co-op, which was originally housed in a log structure at the northeast corner of the Bluff Fort, provided an outlet where locals could sell their goods and buy necessities.

The co-op proved very successful from its opening. It provided revenues that helped sustain Bluff through the difficult times of floods and crop failures. It also provided an outlet where Native Americans could trade their wares and make a profit from their handiwork. Excess goods were loaded into freight wagons and taken to Durango, where they were sold or exchanged. During the coop's peak years, this exchange of freight to and from Durango, Colorado was a weekly event.

Albert R. Lyman recorded in his diary in 1919:

"The Co-op store was organized in Bluff on April 24th, 1882. The store opened on the 11th of June, stocked to meet the needs of the people in the fort, and to trade with the Indians. On the 6th of the following November, the store declared a ten percent dividend.

It paid well from the first. They bought Navajo wool and pelts and blankets, loaded their freight teams to and from Durango

making the freighting so profitable that each stockholder seized eagerly on his turn when it came to make the trip. This local freighting, and revenue from the store, provided a way for the people to stay in San Juan long enough at a time to make a start in the cattle business which afterwards became their stronghold.

The Navajos came with their produce to trade in the little log store, which was generally surrounded with a motley tangle of cayuse saddle ponies, rawhide ropes, bundles of wool and pelts, and snarling mangy dogs. Trading was, to the Navajos, a rather festive occasion, deliberate and long drawn-out. They camped nearby until it was finished to their satisfaction, crowding against the rude lumber counter in noisy talk and laughter, and always a stifling cloud of tobacco smoke. Besides that first dividend, which the store declared when it was less than five months old, on May 7th, 1882, when it was still less than eleven months old, it declared another dividend of twenty-five percent."

In the late 1890s, the log co-op was replaced with a two-story stone structure. The upper level was set aside as the community's dance hall. Jens Neilson, bishop of Bluff for almost 26 years, recorded that the stone building was completed enough to hold a holiday dance in 1899. The San Juan Co-op Store would have been the pride of Bluff residents and the hub of conversation and industry for the next 25 years. It was the largest store in the area. It was a multipurpose building. In addition to the rural general store, it included a United States post office. It was where cowboys and farmers got together and learned of farm prices and the latest

⁶ Information on the construction of the replica San Juan Co-operative Company stone building comes from *Bluff Fort Historic Site*, "Chapter

Three - Miracle of the San Juan Cooperative 'Jewel of the Fort,'" compiled by Grant Taylor and others, 2024.

information on their neighbors' doings. It was where women purchased staples and goods for their families. It was where children came to buy penny candy to satisfy their sweet tooth.

By the 1920's Bluff's population had greatly diminished, and the once thriving community cooperative had been sold to John LaRay Hunt who continued operating the store until its untimely demise at the hands of Fred Starr.

After the robbery and fire, the ground lay empty for over 85 years. Then in 2011, money was raised by the Hole-in-the-Rock-Foundation, and a groundbreaking was held with Utah's governor, Gary Herbert, moving a little Bluff soil to mark the beginning of the construction of a replica of the San Juan Co-Operative Company stone building. Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, the co-operative store began to emerge from the dust. Joe Hurst, owner of TriHurst Construction, laid the forty by sixty-foot concrete pad and followed the plans designed by Archiplex, a Salt Lake City architectural firm. A grant from the federal Scenic Byways, along with generous donations from the James and Beverley Sorenson, George and Delores Dore Eccles, and Gayle and Larry Miller foundations, together with other generous private donors, meant the building could be restored.

The building and grounds were dedicated in October of 2013 by Elder Marcus B. Nash, a member of the Seventy who was serving in the Church History Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

In the spring of 2014, additional monies were raised to apply a sandstone veneer to the building. Stone came from the Kumen Jones ruin (a home on the Bluff Fort property that had been partially destroyed many years ago) and the Steven, Craig, and Barry Simpson family donated stone from their property at Twin Rocks. Corrine Roring, past president of the Hole in the Rock Foundation, had also gathered stones from the original stone building that were lying unused throughout the city of Bluff, with their owner's permission. Vance Seeley, a local stone mason, carefully replicated the stone front of the store using a picture taken by Charles Goodman, a professional local photographer, soon after the original building was completed in 1899. The 7" thick stone veneer gives the appearance of a solid stone building. The base stones look like the large, foundational 2 and 4-man stones that would have originally encompassed the base of the building.

The interior post and beam construction adds to the historicity of the building. Interior fixtures were built by Jack Powers, a historical restorationist from Farmington, Utah. All his work was built in his single car garage after much research and visits to similar period sites. Grant and Dell Taylor, brothers, used their painting skills to apply milk paint purchased in Boston to create the historic feel of an 1880s general store.

Today's gift shop is a unique experience for visitors because much of the inventory is created by volunteers and Senior Missionaries from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints serving

at Bluff Fort. From hand-pieced quilts, handknit items, Topsy Turvey dolls, and woven rugs to wood breadboards, biscuit cutters, and homemade children's games, there is something for everyone to remember their visit to Bluff Fort.

Also inside this replica co-operative store is an amazing video experience that shares the story of hardship and determination to follow a Prophet of God, narrated by the stories of Bluff's original settlers. The video brings to light that this hearty band of pioneers were just ordinary people who had the indomitable spirit to blaze a trail to the southeastern corner of the Utah Territory.

Almost 75,000 visitors visit Bluff Fort Historic Site each year, learning the stories of faith, courage, and determination of the Hole in the Rock pioneers.

Many visitors claim a special feeling comes to them as they learn of the undaunted spirit of those early settlers. Kumen Jones, one of the original Hole in the Rock pioneers, said of this group, *"Surely the hand of Providence had been over the traveling pilgrims. No serious accidents had befallen any of them..."*⁷ Among these pioneers, during their six-month expedition, there were no lives lost, and two babies were born along the way.

The Fort is located on Highway 191 in Bluff, Utah. Corinne Roring, a long time Monticello resident and president of the Hole-in-the-Rock-Foundation for over 20 years, had a head stone placed in the Bluff Cemetery at the final resting place of the infamous Fred Starr.

Reflections

By Donna Jensen, Board Member of the Bluff Fort

As I reflect on nearly ten years of service on the Board of Bluff Fort, I am filled with gratitude and awe at the remarkable journey this sacred place has taken—not just in terms of physical growth, but in its deepening impact on all who visit. Bluff Fort is more than a historic site; it is a living tribute to the courage, faith, and perseverance of the Hole-in-the-Rock pioneers, and a gathering place where

history, culture, and community converge.

When I first joined the Board, the Fort was already a beloved landmark, but it has since blossomed into a vibrant hub of learning, connection, and service. Over the past decade, we've expanded our facilities, restored historical cabins, enhanced our exhibits, and introduced more immersive, educational programming for guests of all ages. The addition of interactive displays, walking tours, and living history presentations has helped bring the pioneer experience to life in unforgettable ways.

⁷ *The Writing of Kumen Jones*, compiled by Albert R Lyman and Ellen Lyman.

What I find most meaningful, however, is how Bluff Fort has strengthened its role in the community. From hosting school field trips and youth conferences to welcoming thousands of tourists each year, the Fort has become a place of shared stories and spiritual reflection. We've built meaningful relationships with local communities, collaborating on ways to honor and share the broader history of this region with greater respect and inclusivity.

Bluff Fort is staffed primarily by volunteers—missionaries, locals, and seasonal friends—whose love for the Fort and its mission is evident in every smile and every handshake. Watching visitors leave with tears in their eyes or expressions of wonder reminds me that this work matters. It connects hearts across generations and helps each of us remember what courage and commitment look like.

Serving on the Board has been one of the great honors of my life. As we look to the future, I am confident that Bluff Fort will continue to grow in influence, reach, and purpose. I am proud to have played a small part in its story and am forever grateful for the lessons, friendships, and memories forged along the way.



Directors change

Rick and Lenore Jones replaced Bryce and Laurie Fifield as Bluff Fort Directors in March 2025. Lenore was born in Murray Utah and raised in southern California

until she was 14. Her family then moved to Price Utah where the two met and started dating. They rodeoed and



attended the College of Eastern Utah. Rick was born and raised in Price. They were married on November 10, 1973. Rick joined the church and was baptized one year later in December of 1974. They were sealed in the Manti Temple one year after that. Rick and Lenore have five children, twenty-two grandchildren, and four great grandchildren. They have lived in Arizona since 1989. They served a mission in 2022 in the Yakima, Washington mission. They are loving serving at Bluff Fort.

Missionary Brian Torggrimson is excited to show the tree he decorated in the Log Meetinghouse.

Brian has been serving at Bluff Fort with his parents since Fall 2024. Brian especially enjoys the sewing center, riding in the Gator, and greeting visitors in the arbor with his dad.

Cabin Roof upgrades

The cabin roofs are not the typical shingle roofs we have today. The originals were made to look like a sod covered roof of the 1880's and, not unlike those originals, there was some leaking. We wanted them to keep looking authentic, but also keep the elements from dripping down into the cabins. With help from our friends at Sonderegger Inc., and some extra volunteers climbing onto roofs and shoveling off the previous material, the roofs were sealed with a concrete slurry that will protect them and their precious contents for many more years.



Protecting the new horses

When the new fiberglass horses arrived last year, it was apparent that their fiberglass bodies would need protection from the hot Bluff sun. Lots of options were discussed, and this beautiful and protective new pergola was put in place. The pergola roof will keep our horses safe and cool for years to come. It also makes a great place for visitors to come for photos in the wagon. Wagon photos with the horses are very popular with guests. Who can resist taking the reins and hollering GIDDUP!





Gardens

The gardens at Bluff Fort are always a draw for guests. This year there are a few new ones, including this one by the Kumen Jones home.

Youth Conferences

The last week of May proved a busy time at Camp Stickie. The Oak Hills Ward held a young men's encampment. The days were full of activities teaching the eternal principles of courage, faith, perseverance, and good old Stickie-Ta-Tudy. The young men worked hard, played hard and ate lots of good food. They were supported by committed young men leaders including their bishop. They completed a service project that involved digging a long trench to bring water to new trees to be planted in the fall.

Pictures show: High bar – all participants as teams must get over the top; Spider Web – teammates must get through the wires, but in a different way than the others on their team; Human Ladder – a teammate walks the ladder while the



ladder rungs are being moved from the back to the front; San Juan Hill (two pictures). This ward brought a family of four brothers, three of which are in wheelchairs. It was delightful to have them here at Camp Stickie.

All in all, it was considered to be another successful experience designed to help prepare young people for a life of challenges. Hopefully, the lessons learned will give them a head start on success. Thanks to all those who assisted in making it a great experience for the young people.



During the week of June 11 - 14 the Richfield East Stake utilized the camp for their young men activity. They did not use our normal youth conference activities but used Camp Stickie as their base camp while they completed several days of adventure and fun. Reports are that a good time was had by all.



Camp Stickie is an amazing place for Youth to gather, learn, grow together, and learn the true meaning of Stickie Ta Tudy!