Cultural Landscape

The historical features of Capitol Reef tell a story of how people's relationship to the land has changed over time—from subsistance and survival in the pioneer community of Fruita, to goals of conservation, preservation, and recreation in the national park.

Vernacular Landscape

Remnants of Capitol Reef National Park's Fruita settlement are listed on the National Register of Historic Places and are protected as a National Rural Historic District. Nestled in the Fremont River valley with two perennial water sources, it was a hospitable place to raise families and plant orchards. From the late 1880s to the 1940s, Mormon pioneer families developed a relationship with the land, each influencing and shaping the other: the definition of a *vernacular landscape*. Orchards were the primary source of income for families in Fruita and remain the most obvious contribution to the historical landscape.

The relationship between the land and the people began to change when Capitol Reef was designated a national monument in 1937 and the first park building was erected by the Civilian Conservation Corps. A new visitor center and State Route 24 were completed in time for the National Park Service's 50th anniversary in 1966, and highlighted ways visitors could now explore and enjoy this area, while protecting it for future generations.

Lime Kilns

Lime kilns were often one of the first community structures built in a new settlement. Lime is necessary for masonry and construction, and can also serve as a protective coating against scalding, cracking, rodents, and insect damage for fruit tree saplings.

Two lime kilns exist in the Fruita Rural Historic District: one adjacent to the campground and one near Sulphur Creek. To make lime, limestone is heated in a kiln, with internal temperatures reaching 800–1200 degrees Fahrenheit (427–649 Celsius) for several days. As the limestone is heated, carbon dioxide is "boiled off"; it loses about half its weight, and very reactive quicklime is formed. The resulting quicklime is slaked with water to make a safer, more usable final product.

These lime kilns were likely used a few times a year. Now they remain an important vestige of the early Fruita community and illustrate the industrious nature of the pioneers.

Lime kiln along Sulphur Creek.

Behunin Cabin

This one room cabin, located along what is now State Route 24, 6 miles (9.5 km) east of the visitor center, was home to a large family for just one year and was built in 1882 by Elijah Cutler Behunin. According to local historians, the boys slept in an alcove behind the cabin while the girls slept in a wagon bed, allowing the parents and the youngest children to sleep in the cabin itself.

Repeated floods along the Fremont River ruined their irrigation system for the orchards and other crops. The Behunin family was one of the first families to settle in Fruita when they moved closer to other early residents.

The cabin is constructed out of local Navajo Sandstone but has a reddish-brown hue from the mud mortar that covers it.

Schoolhouse

The schoolhouse was the only true community building in Fruita. Classes were held from 1896 to 1941; dances, church services, and town meetings also occurred there. The construction was a community effort, and throughout the years a few improvements were made. The original flat, water-resistant bentonite clay roof was replaced with a shingled, peaked roof in 1912, and the interior walls were whitewashed in the 1930s. The National Park Service refurbished it to its 1935 conditions, with a painted canvas blackboard. In 1972, the schoolhouse was listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Merin Smith Implement Shed

Fruita resident Merin Smith built this shed in 1925 as a workshop, blacksmith shop, and garage. The tools and vehicles inside were acquired at various times by the National Park Service and the Natural History Association and illustrate what life would have been like in Fruita during that time period. Notice the Eimco Corp. transitional tractor inside.

Gifford House and Pendleton Barn

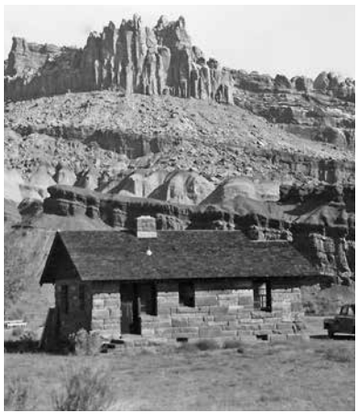
The Gifford House was originally built in 1908 by Calvin Pendleton, the only known polygamist who lived in Fruita. He sold it to Jorgen Jorgensen in 1919. Jorgensen then sold it in 1929 to his son-in-law Dewey Gifford who lived in it with his family for 40 years. The house was the last privately-occupied residence in Fruita. The Giffords sold it to the National Park Service in 1969, fully integrating Fruita into the park's historic landscape.

The Gifford House now serves visitors, a modern group of transient people spending a relatively short time in the Capitol Reef area.

The Pendleton Barn was built by and named for Calvin Pendleton. Over the years, the barn has been used for farm equipment and hay storage as well as a shelter for livestock.

Around the same time, Pendleton and his sons likely constructed the rock walls visible on the slope of Johnson Mesa behind the Gifford House. The walls are about three feet tall and were built to control ranging livestock. Local lore has it that the boys had to roll the basalt boulders uphill as a means of discipline or punishment. Whether this is true or not, building the rock wall was a tedious but necessary chore.

Civilian Conservation Corps Ranger Station



Even though Capitol Reef became a national monument in 1937, there were no official park buildings until 1940, when the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) built the first ranger station from sandstone quarried near Chimney Rock. It is a classic example of the rustic style of architecture produced by the NPS during the Great Depression.

Unfortunately, a lack of water at its location caused it to sit vacant and subject to vandalism for ten years, before it was wired for electricity and put to its original purpose as a visitor contact station in 1950. The ranger station was used by Charles Kelly, the first custodian, ranger, and later superintendent of Capitol Reef National Monument. In 1959 the ranger station was remodeled as the park headquarters and museum. When the current visitor center was built in 1965, the CCC building was converted into the park superintendent's office, still in use today.

During the CCC's tenure at Capitol Reef, crews improved roads and trails such as the route to Hickman Bridge, which was a popular yet rough path that local park supporters forged before Capitol Reef was designated as a national monument.

Before the CCC was disbanded in 1942, over two million men had worked in 94 national park and monument sites, contributing to the face of the National Park Service for decades to come.

Mission 66 Additions

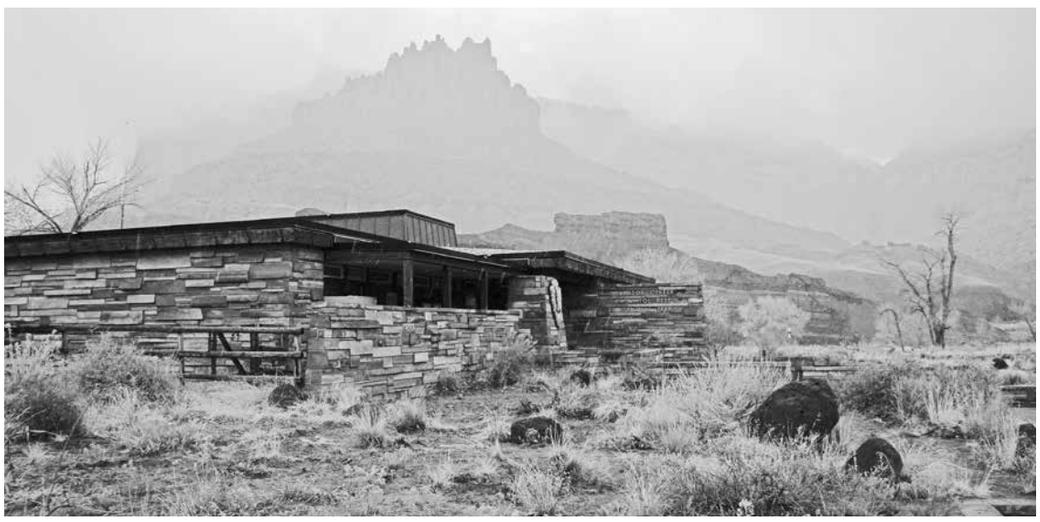
Mission 66 was an initiative to make parks more accessible by the National Park Service's 50th anniversary in 1966. Private land in the Fruita area was acquired to complete the new State Route 24 and entrance to Capitol Reef National Monument within the Fremont River corridor.

Construction for the current visitor center began in 1964 and was completed by 1965. Designs for Capitol Reef's new visitor center were drawn by Cecil Doty, an architect for the National Park Service. Arthur K. Olsen & Associates of Salt Lake City also played a role in its creation.

During this period, the face of Fruita and Capitol Reef changed. Formerly private structures were removed as part of the park management plan. Mission 66 was also the impetus to create or improve hiking trails, including the Cassidy Arch Trail which previously had been a rough route.

As the National Park Service moves into its second century of stewardship, our relationship to the land continues to evolve—from a relationship of subsistence and survival to one of conservation, preservation, and recreation.

Please respect these buildings and the stories they tell so they remain for future generations to enjoy.



The Mission 66 visitor center at Capitol Reef National Park blends into the red rock landscape.