

Fort Union Trading Post

NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE
NORTH DAKOTA / MONTANA

The year, 1843. The place, Indian country on the Upper Missouri River at the mouth of the Yellowstone, 1,900 miles from St. Louis. The occasion, arrival at the fort of the first spring steamboat, this one bearing distinguished passengers.

John James Audubon, famous naturalist-painter, and his party were aboard the *Omega*. In his journal for Monday, June 12, Audubon wrote:

We came in sight of the fort at five o'clock, and reached it at seven. . . . We were saluted [by cannon] from Fort Union, and we fired guns in return. . . . The moment we had arrived, the gentlemen of the fort came down on horseback, and appeared quite a cavalcade. . . . We walked to the fort and drank some first-rate port wine. Our trip to this place has been one of the quickest on record . . . forty-eight days and seven hours from St. Louis.

Beginning with the flood waters of the spring thaw each year and continuing into the summer, steamboats brought passengers, Indian trade goods, and luxuries upriver to Fort Union Trading Post. As headquarters for the Upper Missouri Outfit of a St. Louis, Mo., fur company, it was the principal objective of travel to the upper Missouri and beyond to the Rockies. For years it was the limit of navigation for the river steamboats.

During Audubon's 2-month stay, Fort Union Trading Post was in its second and most prosperous decade. It was also under the direction of its second chief factor, or bourgeois, Alexander Culbertson, a man of education and refinement.

Fort Union was the largest and most imposing trading post on the Missouri. It was on the north bank, about 25 feet from the river and about 6 miles from the mouth of the Yellowstone, flowing into the Missouri from the south. Around it was prairie that gave way on the west and north to rolling hills and bluffs. Up and down river from the fort were river bottomlands having a heavy growth of cottonwood, ash, and elm—timber necessary for building and maintaining of the fort.

Kenneth McKenzie, an experienced trader and able executive for the American Fur Company on the Upper Missouri, built the enclosure walls and some structures in the autumn of 1829. But in this wild country of the upper Plains Indians—Assiniboin, Crow, Blackfoot, Sioux, among others—and 1,900 miles from the supply head at St. Louis, it required 4 years for McKenzie to complete the trading post to his satisfaction.

He built for protection rather than for military use. Intertribal rivalries abounded between the Dakota (Sioux) and Assiniboin, and between the Crow and most other tribes. When the different tribes came to trade their furs, they grouped separately on the almost flat plains around the fort, where 100 or more tepees could be raised. The fort staff went out to trade with them, but retreated behind the palisades when a flurry of fighting broke out. McKenzie's policy was not to get involved except as peacemaker. It was better for trade purposes.

Perhaps it was partly for his success with the Indians that McKenzie was known as "King of the Upper Missouri." He lived in a style worthy of his title. He dressed for dinner at a table set with china and silverware. His subordinates sat at the

*GPO: 1979-281-357/22
Reprint 1979

FOR YOUR SAFETY

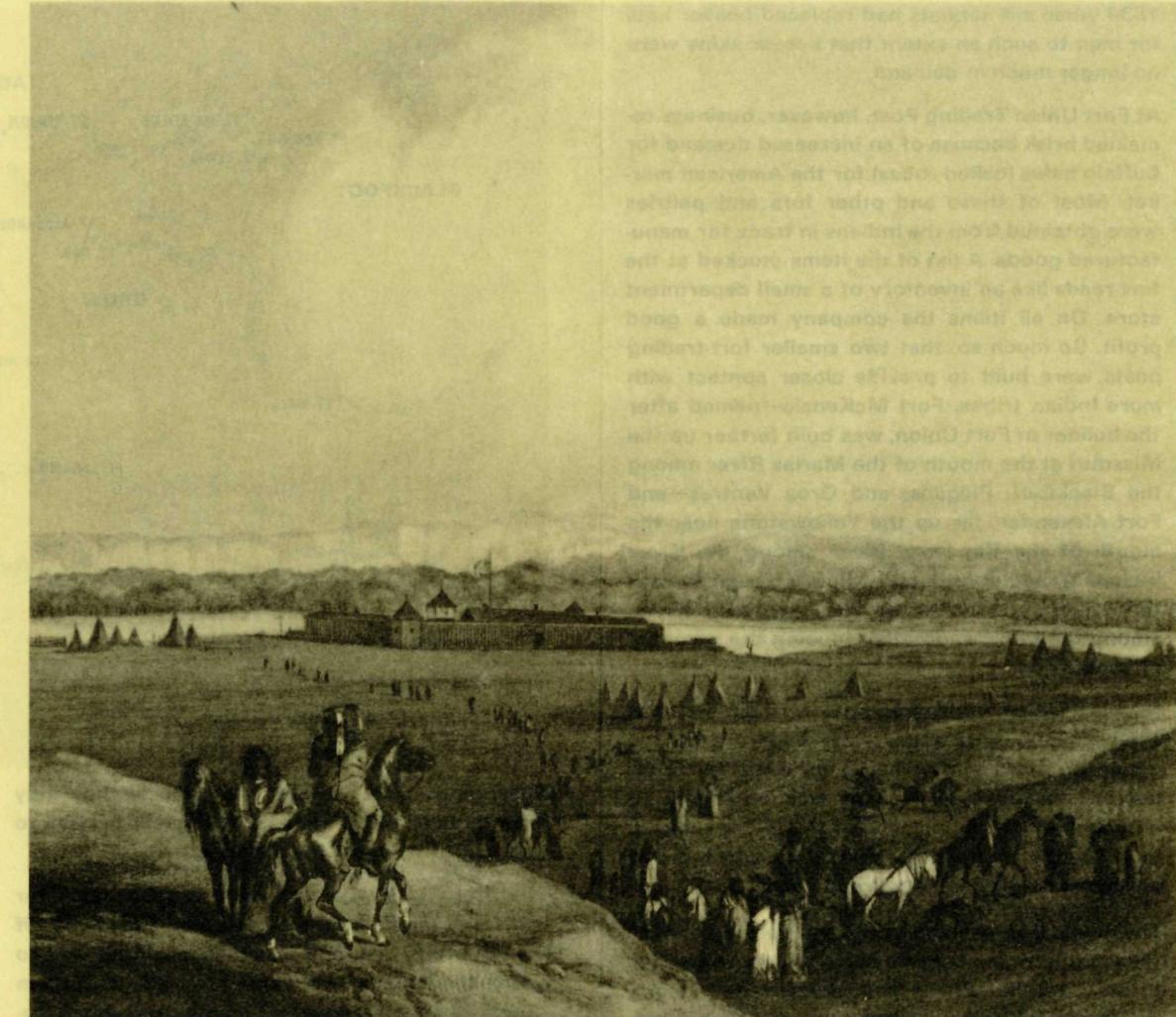
Exercise caution when touring the fort site. Observe the cellar excavations from a safe vantage point and view the river only from the designated overlooks. Although poisonous snakes are not common to this area, be alert and do not walk in the tall grass. Obey all posted warning signs.

ADMINISTRATION

Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. The superintendent of Theodore Roosevelt National Memorial Park, Medora, ND 58645, is in charge.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

National Park Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR



long table in descending order of importance, the least sitting farthest from the bourgeois. Meats, vegetables, dairy products, and good bread were served at his table, with coffee, tea, and wine. The ordinary laborers, sitting at a separate table, also ate plentifully, but of a restricted fare.

Sophisticated visitors were impressed with the occasional social events. Several ranking company officials had Indian wives who adopted the dress, customs, and manners of their new life. The bourgeois gave dances similar to those in the East.

Thus, when McKenzie left and Alexander Culbertson succeeded him in 1843, the trading post was a comfortable and quite complete American community in the midst of the wilderness of the upper Plains Indian territories.

Its walls of good size cottonwood trunks were 20 feet high and were grounded in stone foundations and supported by stone bastions at two corners, 24 feet square and 30 feet high. Its buildings served every basic need for life in the wilderness and for trade with the Indians.

The bourgeois' house was along the 220-foot north wall, facing the river gate in the south wall. The 1½-story, planked building was painted white with green trim. Its interior, handsomely papered, furnished, and ornamented, had a mess hall, ample sleeping accommodations, offices, and a tailor shop. Behind the house was a separate kitchen, manned by three black cooks.

The east and west walls, each 240 feet long, were bordered by large multi-purpose buildings. The

This first detailed sketch of Fort Union was drawn by Karl Bodmer, a Swiss artist in the party of Maximilian, Prince of Wied, who visited the fort during his travels in the West.

one on the east contained a wholesale warehouse, a retail store, and had rooms in which baggage, meats, and other foods were stored. At the river end was a "press room" where all the robes, furs, and peltries were kept. Also in this building were an artist's workshop, a cooper's shop, milkhouse and dairy, a stable for buffalo calves raised for food, and a henhouse. The long building on the west was partitioned into apartments for employees. An icehouse was attached to it, and nearby were a blacksmith's shop and stables for horses.

Along the south wall and west of the large river gate were more workshops and the important reception room for the Indians who came to the fort to visit and trade. This room was constructed so that access to the courtyard required admittance through a second strong gate. Thus, the fort people were effectively protected against surprise attack.

In the center of the courtyard was a tall flagpole flying the large American flag frequently mentioned by the first travelers to the American West.

This imposing establishment was the headquarters of the Upper Missouri Outfit of the St. Louis-based fur trading firm of Pierre Chouteau, Jr., & Company. In 1834 Chouteau bought out the Western Department of John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company, headquartered in New York City. Astor sold his interests west of the Mississippi in

1834 when silk tophats had replaced beaver hats for men to such an extent that beaver skins were no longer much in demand.

At Fort Union Trading Post, however, business remained brisk because of an increased demand for buffalo hides (called robes) for the American market. Most of these and other furs and peltries were obtained from the Indians in trade for manufactured goods. A list of the items stocked at the fort reads like an inventory of a small department store. On all items the company made a good profit. So much so, that two smaller fort-trading posts were built to provide closer contact with more Indian tribes. Fort McKenzie—named after the builder of Fort Union, was built farther up the Missouri at the mouth of the Marias River among the Blackfoot, Piegan, and Gros Ventres—and Fort Alexander, far up the Yellowstone near the mouth of the Big Horn River among the Crow Indians. Trade continued to flourish even though the smallpox epidemic of 1837 wrought havoc among the Indians, greatly reducing the numbers of some tribes.

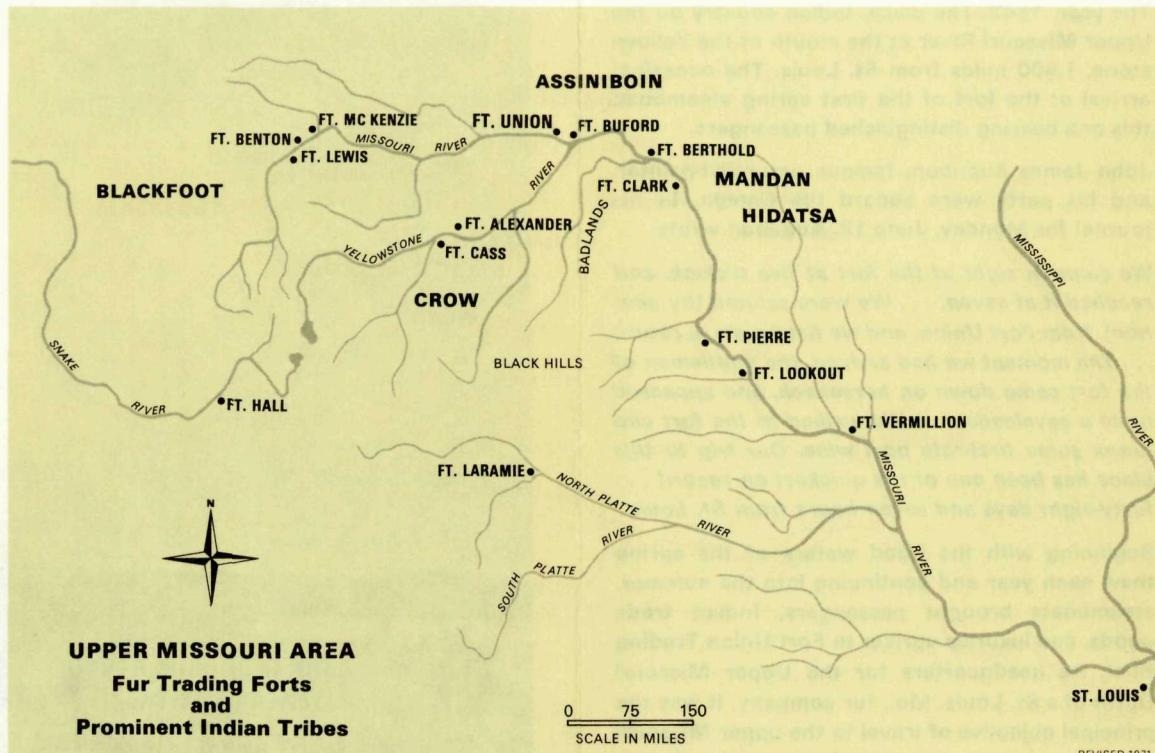
As Fort Union approached its quarter century, signs of coming changes were apparent on the upper Missouri. Buffalo herds were still immense, but Western-type civilization was beginning to encroach on the homelands of the Plains Indians. In 1853, the trading post played host to a group of men surveying for a railroad route.

The Sioux, less affected by the smallpox epidemics than many tribes, became more and more hostile. In 1857 another smallpox epidemic raged among the Plains Indians, and this time the Crows suffered heavily because they also had escaped the 1837 scourge and none were immune. The tribes broke into bands and scattered far and wide in an effort to escape. Not many went to Fort Union to trade that summer. Bourgeois James Kipp estimated that business would be cut in half that year.

The depredations and killings by the Sioux continued, and soldiers were sent to curb them. Then, on June 17, 1865, a steamboat arrived with the news that Pierre Chouteau, Jr., & Company had sold the trading post to the Northwestern Fur Company. By September, Fort Union was put in order to be turned over to the new owners. Within a few years they abandoned the post and it was gradually dismantled by the Army, to help expand Fort Buford a few miles down the Missouri, and by private parties and Indians.

THE INDIANS AND THE FUR TRADE

How did the Indians feel about Fort Union and the fur trade? We don't really know. They had no written language and we know of none who could write in English in the 1830's and 1840's among the Upper Plains tribes. The accounts we have of these Indians were written by traders and by prominent American and foreign visitors to the Fort Union country. When these are purged of words and phrases heavy with animosity and personal, racial, and cultural bias, we are left with enough to conjecture the attitude of the Indians toward the intrusions of the American traders and trappers into their acknowledged territories. Their reactions must have been influenced by what they knew was happening to the tribes east of the



Mississippi. Like humans everywhere, they may have thought those things would never happen to them; but they must have worried.

The first white intruders were the Canadian fur traders of the North West Company. They lived off the bounty of the land and their business was to please the Indians who wanted to trade with them—furs for guns, powder, beads, and blankets. Later American parties of fur trappers and traders moved into the territory. Since the Indians also trapped for pelts for personal use and for trade, they looked upon the white trappers as poachers and often showed their resentment by killing them and taking their fur caches. The Indians may not have been concerned about the number of beaver being taken for they could not envision a shortage, but some individuals and bands, and one large group, the Blackfoot tribe, resented the trespassing upon their hunting and trapping lands. But, though justifiably hostile to these freebooters, the tribes do not appear to have felt threatened.

Small parties of American trappers, or the mountain men working alone, were usually unmolested. The latter fully adopted the Indian way of life, married Indians, and often joined their wife's tribe in fights against traditional enemies.

However, against the Missouri Fur Company's organized trapping-trading expeditions, the attitude of some tribes hardened, particularly the Blackfoot. Their lands were at the headwaters of the Missouri. From 1809 to 1812, these Indians successfully drove the white men from their lands, capturing furs, horses, and equipment.

Despite these reverses, the lure of trade and profit was so great that the fur companies continued their efforts to open trading with the various tribes of the Upper Missouri. They made contacts, encouraging them to trap for furs to exchange for trade goods and to accept trading posts on their lands. The American Fur Company

scourge of smallpox in 1837 which had almost wiped out several tribes, and greatly weakened others.

What then did these Indians think would be their future? Once more, we can only surmise. As in all other societies, the Indians must have been divided in their councils—within the various bands, between tribal bands, and between tribes. Some probably advised accommodation of the newcomers, arguing that there was land for all, and, equally likely, others warned of the insatiable greed of the white people for land, their killing of the game, and their plowing of the prairies. And especially warnings must have been raised about the apparently endless numbers of the white settlers.

Perhaps on only these matters were the tribes in agreement—their chiefs, their warriors, and even their women. They would continue to adhere to their own religious beliefs, their own customs of labor and of play, of hunting, and of warfare. Most of these customs were incompatible with American ranching and farming life, or were thought to be by the whites. In the clash between these very different peoples and cultures that grew to such intensity after the Civil War, the victory went to the strongest; a victory that was heavily weighted with injustice.

THE FORT TODAY AND TOMORROW

Grass covered the entire site when the National Park Service acquired the property in 1968. Four low ridges that formed a near square indicated the stone foundations of the palisades, and at the northeast and southwest corners two mounds told the place of the stone bastions. Within the enclosure, two other mounds were the powder magazine and the bourgeois house.

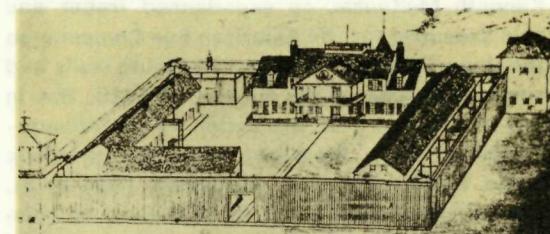
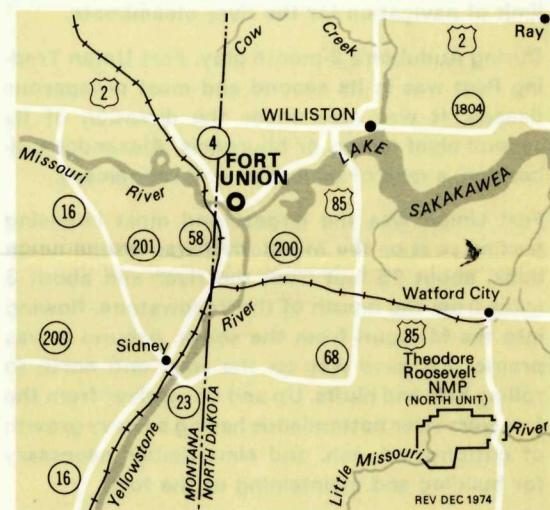
After careful study of all historic sources and archeological test digs, the Park Service has excavated the stone foundations of the palisades, the main house and its kitchen, the Indian reception building, the river gate, and the icehouse. Plans call for additional archeological excavations.

Many uncovered artifacts relate to life at the fort—eating utensils, beer bottles, buttons, metal parts of trapping gear and harnesses, china, pottery, and glass. Because of the rain and snow in the area and a culture level only about 6 feet deep, most objects made of wood, and all paper, furs, and clothes have disintegrated beyond recognition.

The Park Service is continuing its studies and research. The best results of this work will be made available to the public through publications and museum exhibits. The foundations will be restored and the structures they supported will be described by explanatory signs. Long term plans call for complete reconstruction of Fort Union Trading Post. Meanwhile, the surrounding lands will be controlled to provide an authentic setting of mid-19th century river, plains, and hills.

Visitors are invited to inspect the area but are asked to leave the site intact and not to remove any stones, artifacts, or other material.

The national historic site can be reached via U.S. 2 and county road 4 from Williston, N.Dak., which is 25 miles to the southwest.



The fort as it looked in 1864, as drawn by a soldier who had taken refuge there after deserting from the U.S. Army.

succeeded in establishing such a post among the Assiniboin. This was the strongly constructed Fort Union.

The Indians must have looked upon this fort as a settlement of Americans upon their lands. But there was only a little grazing of domestic animals and subsistence farming. There were some threats to the fort, and in its last years, a planned attack by the Sioux. In those final years of Fort Union, the U.S. Army and Federal surveyors, determining the route for a transcontinental railroad, had come to the territories of the Upper Plains and Missouri Indians. So had the terrible