

1837

# FORT LARAMIE

1849

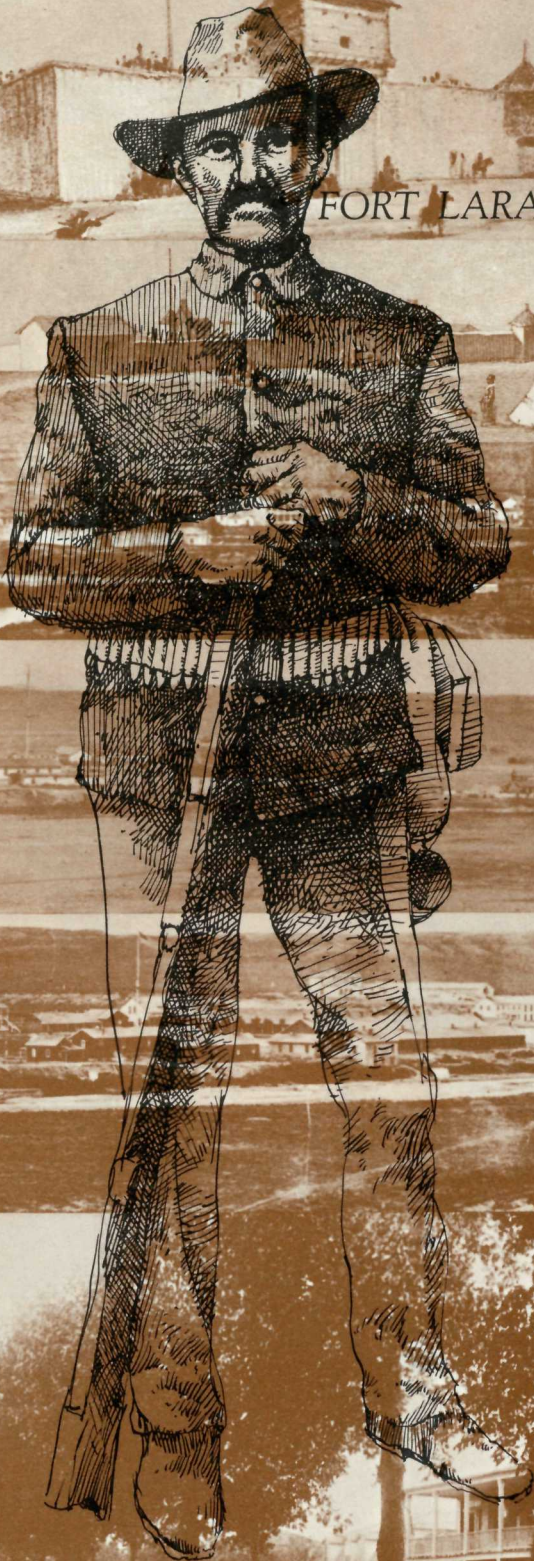
1858

1868

1876

1887

NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE • WYOMING





*"[By Fort Laramie passed] a panorama of frontier life: Indians, a few soldiers, immigrants, fur traders, a few dirty mountain men. There was a busy blacksmith's shop, the anvil ringing, the hearth glowing from the forced air from the bellows. There was an odor of stacked up hay, the pungent smell of saddle leather, of horses, of unwashed humanity, and of rotgut whiskey. But outside, there was the ever-present breeze, blowing from the West, calling, reminding, urging men onward, ever westward."*

—Richard A. Bartlett, *Great Surveys of the American West*

**S**HORTLY after the purchase of Louisiana Territory, Americans began pushing up the Missouri River to exploit the lucrative fur resources of the Rocky Mountains and Great Plains. On December 22, 1812, Robert Stuart and a small group of men, carrying dispatches for John Jacob Astor eastward from Fort Astoria, traveled past the site of the future Fort Laramie.

Ten years later William Ashley and Andrew Henry of St. Louis formed the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. This company, first to exploit the Fort Laramie region, trapped the country around the sources of the Platte, Green, Yellowstone, and Snake Rivers, and gave the world its first real information about the character and potentialities of this vast territory.

Notable though its pioneering achievements were, the Rocky Mountain Fur Company lacked the financial and marketing resources of the larger fur companies. Competition became increasingly keen and unscrupulous. Both the price and demand for beaver skins, principal object of trapping, gradually declined as silk and other hats began to replace the once fashionable beaver.

Finally, in 1830, Astor's powerful American Fur Company began to operate in the central Rockies and to diminish still further the business of its smaller competitors. Four years later the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, unable to meet these adverse conditions, was dissolved.

**T**HAT same year two experienced fur traders, William Sublette and Robert Campbell, built the first fort on the Laramie, a small stockade with blockhouses over the front entrance and at diagonal corners. The owners called it "William" after the senior partner, but it was known to most as "Laramie" after the nearby river, named for a French-Canadian trapper, Jacques La Ramee, killed by Indians on its banks in 1821.

Sublette and Campbell sold the post in 1835 to a triumvirate that included famous mountain men Jim Bridger and Thomas Fitzpatrick. The following year it was purchased by the American Fur Company and rapidly became one of the major trading centers in the Rockies.

In 1841, spurred by competition from recently constructed neighboring posts, the company replaced its decaying log fort with a similar one made of adobe. Though named Fort John, the new fort was also known as Fort Laramie.

Congregating here was a colorful assemblage of American traders and trappers, Indian and French-Canadians, often en route to a summer rendezvous in the upper Green River Valley of Wyoming. Bands of Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapahoes, seeking trade with white men, camped near the post in large numbers. Then came strange newcomers—men, women, and children in homespun, traveling in covered-wagon caravans to a far place called Oregon.

### *A promised land beckons*

Fort Laramie gave vital help to these caravans. As one writer described it, hundreds of people on their way to Oregon and California "had lost their horses and oxen, their wagons broke down, and others again were sick, unable to travel, some had broken limbs and some entirely destitute of anything like provisions, all of these unfortunate individuals met with instant relief [at Fort Laramie]."

It was a belief in the opportunities on the virgin soil of the Pacific Coast that impelled men westward. In 1841 the nearly 80 homeseekers and missionaries of the Bidwell-Bartleson Expedition were the first true covered-wagon travelers to pass over this part of the Oregon Trail.

The adobe-walled fort was a welcome sight to the emigrants, weary from weeks on the treeless plains. Here they paused, repaired their outfits, and gave their animals a much-needed rest before the gradual ascent to the South Pass crossing of the Continental Divide.

In 1843 the first sizeable Oregon migration—more than a thousand persons—passed Fort Laramie. During the next two decades some 200,000 emigrants stopped here on their way west to build new homes in Oregon, California, and Utah.

Next came the emigration of the Mormons. Driven out of Missouri and Illinois by persecution, the first band of Mormons,

led by Brigham Young, rested at Fort Laramie in 1847 on their way to the Salt Lake Valley.

In 1849 the great California gold rush started. Many laid glowing plans for the journey to the land of gold, and Fort Laramie as the most important way station on the Platte River route figured in nearly every one of them. An estimated 25,000 gold seekers passed by that year.

In 15 years the fur trade had reached its peak. But conditions were changing. As the fur trade declined, the dealer in buffalo robes and the weary traveler gradually gave way to the soldier. And the change gave Fort Laramie a new life.

### *A military post*

Even before the days of the gold fever, it was plain that the Federal Government would have to set up a chain of military posts along "Emigrant Road" to protect the increasing numbers moving westward across hostile plains.

In a message to Congress on December 2, 1845, President James K. Polk recommended that "a suitable number of stockades and block house forts be erected along the usual route between our frontier settlement on the Missouri and the Rocky mountains, and that an adequate force of mounted riflemen be raised to guard and protect them on their journey."

Polk's wish became law on May 9, 1846, but the Mexican War diverted the Army's attention. Not until after the restoration of peace in 1848 did official eyes focus on the heavily used trail.

In late 1848 the Army garrisoned Fort Kearny on the Platte River in present-day Nebraska. On June 26, 1849, it purchased Fort John from the American Fur Company for \$4,000. Almost immediately the Army began erecting other buildings, so that in a decade Fort Laramie became a sprawling military post—too large to be walled in but strong enough to deter Indian attack.





With Fort Laramie's conversion to a military post and the almost endless chain of emigrant wagons, steps had to be taken to placate the indignant Plains Indians.

The first official contact occurred in the summer of 1851 when a great assembly of Indian tribes met with U.S. Commissioners at Horse Creek about 30 miles from the fort. The Indians agreed not to molest wagon trains and to permit stationing of troops along the trail, while the Government was to pay the Indians \$50,000 annually in goods and respect their rights to traditional hunting grounds.

But the peace was shortlived. In August 1854 a Mormon emigrant accused a Sioux warrior of stealing and killing one of his cows. The chief of the Indian band informed the commander of Fort Laramie of the incident and offered a horse in payment for the loss. The fort's commanding officer, however, sent Lt. John Grattan with 30 men to the Sioux camp, demanding surrender of the culprit. When this demand was refused, a dispute followed, and in the ensuing engagement the Indians annihilated Grattan's detachment. This incident marked the beginning of the war between the Plains Indians and the U.S. Army that lasted, almost without interruption, for 35 years.

Peace commissioners of the Federal Government met in June 1866 with about 2,000 Sioux and Cheyenne at Fort Laramie to obtain their consent to use the Bozeman Trail to Virginia City, Mont. In the midst of the conference, troops under Col. Henry Carrington arrived, carrying orders to erect forts along the trail. Red Cloud and his tribesmen resentfully withdrew. Carrington's men constructed three forts along the Bozeman Trail, but Sioux warriors harassed them frequently. The worst incident occurred on December 21, 1866, when Capt. William J. Fetterman, with 80 men from Fort Phil Kearny, pursued the attackers of a wood-cutting party into a carefully arranged ambush from which not a member of Fetterman's command emerged alive. John "Portugee" Phillips rode to Fort Laramie in zero weather to announce this disaster.

A treaty with the Indians in April 1868 resulted in the abandonment of the Bozeman Trail posts. The Southern tribes signed readily enough, but the hostiles of the Northern tribes, led by Red Cloud, refused to sign until the last soldiers had left the hated forts. Under the treaty, the western half of present-day South Dakota became a permanent reservation for the Sioux, and the Indians retained control and hunting rights in the vast territory that stretched westward to the Bighorn Mountains. Since the treaty forbade the Indians to cross south of the North Platte, it marked the end of Fort Laramie as the great trade center of the Sioux.

The comparative peace in the Fort Laramie region lasted until 1875-76, when the gold rush to the Black Hills, in violation of the Treaty of 1868, brought hundreds of hopeful prospectors to the fort. Soon hostilities broke out again, and the fort became a base for Gen. George Crook's operations in the last stand of the Sioux against the white man. After the annihilation of Custer's command at the Little Bighorn on June 25, 1876, the hostile bands scattered. Within 2 years their resistance was broken by strong U.S. Army units.

With the Indians subdued, the Army recognized that the fort no longer served an essential military function. So in 1890, the same year that the Census Bureau reported the closing of the frontier, the old fort was abandoned. The last bugle call sounded, the troops marched away, and homesteaders purchased the buildings.

### Mail across the mountains and plains

During its days as a military post Fort Laramie helped guard not only the Oregon Trail but routes of transportation and communication. The rapid growth of American settlement in California, Oregon, and Utah led to the establishment in 1850 of mail service between Independence, Mo., and Salt Lake City. For most of the 1850's Fort Laramie was the division point—mail stages from each end of the line met at the post on the 15th of the month.

But not until establishment of the Pony Express in the spring of 1860 was there a truly fast mail service across the West. At Fort Laramie, one of the relay stations, the arrival and departure of riders were routine events at the post during 1860 and 1861.

The Pony Express was fairly successful across the plains and mountains from St. Joseph, Mo., to Sacramento, Calif., making the trip in about 13 days—in 1860 the height of speed. Yet it had a short life, since it couldn't compete with the overland telegraph finished in the autumn of 1861.

In the 1860's travel to Utah became increasingly important, and there was a surge of migration to the newly discovered Montana goldfields. Completion of the Union Pacific Railroad in 1869 sounded the death knell of the covered-wagon migration route up the North Platte Valley, and Fort Laramie's role as a relay station came to an end, except for a short period in 1870 when it was a station on the route of the Cheyenne-Deadwood stagecoach line.

### About your visit

The National Historic Site is 3 miles southwest of the town of Fort Laramie, Wyo., which is on U.S. 26 between its junction with U.S. 85 and 87. It is about 23 miles west of Torrington, 13 miles west of Lingle, and 13 miles east of Guernsey.

The site is open throughout the year. If you are planning a group visit and would like a guided tour, please make arrangements in advance with the superintendent.

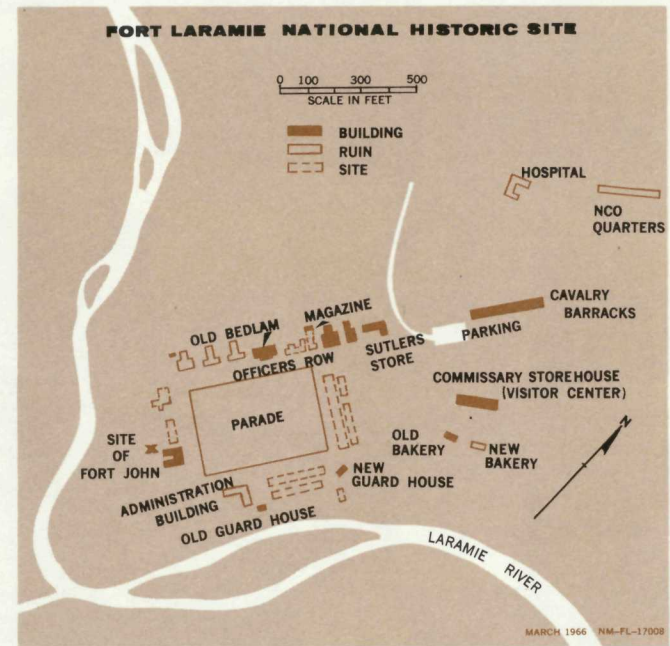
### Administration

Fort Laramie National Historic Site is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.

The National Park System, of which this site is a unit, is dedicated to conserving the great natural, historical, and recreational places of the United States for the benefit and enjoyment of all the people.

A superintendent, whose address is Fort Laramie, Wyo., 82212, is in immediate charge of the site.

THE DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR—the Nation's principal natural resource agency—has a special obligation to assure that our expendable resources are conserved, that our renewable resources are managed to produce optimum benefits, and that all resources contribute to the progress and prosperity of the United States, now and in the future.

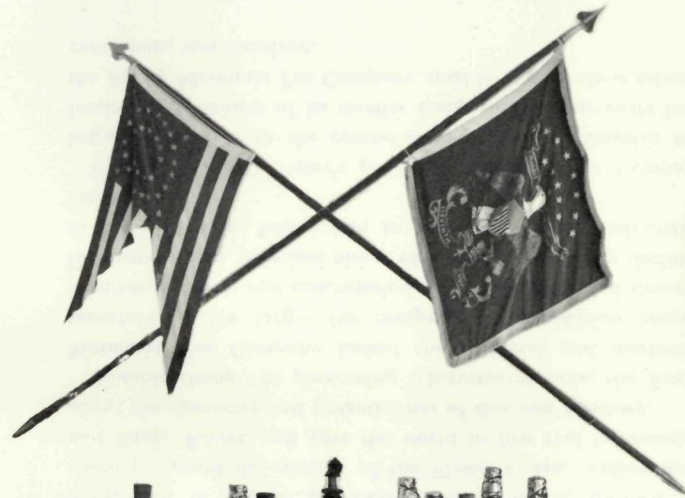
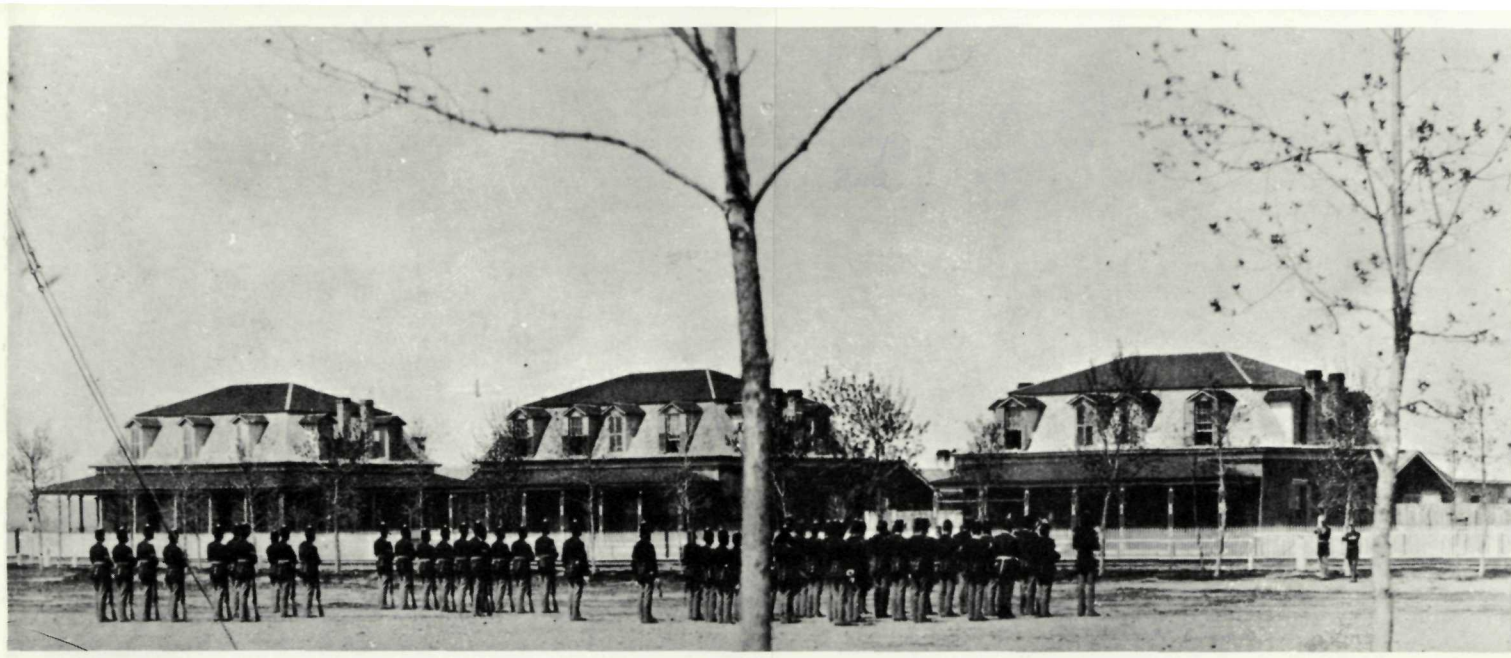


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★ U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE : 1966 O-217-969





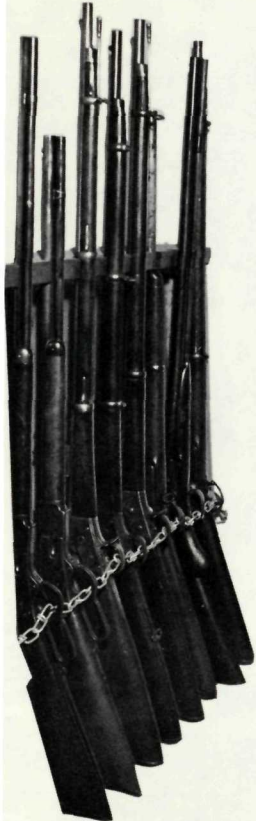


Post. Hospital Fort Laramie  
Wounded. Laramie  
Dec 21 1870

My Dear Friend Willie  
Please say to your mother  
in writing to her that I  
wish to express my sincere  
love for her and to  
the memory of my dear  
father but am thankful  
to be able to say I was  
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This assemblage of persons, scenes, and objects suggests the sweep of life at Fort Laramie during its last four decades.

