

# FORT LARAMIE

NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

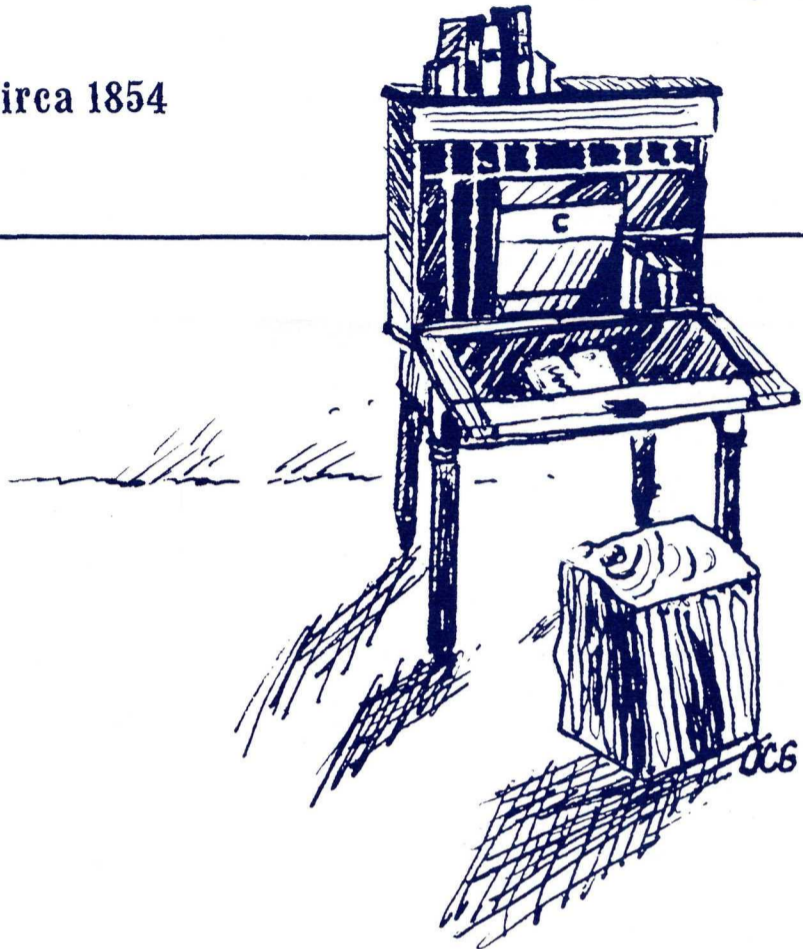


## OLD BEDLAM

Bachelor Officer's Quarters, Circa 1854

This impressive original structure was built in 1849. Known as "Old Bedlam," it is the oldest standing building documented in the State of Wyoming.

The origin of the curious nickname for this building of "Old Bedlam" is unknown. It is known however, that in the era in which this structure was built, the English asylum for the insane, "Bedlam" was quite famous.



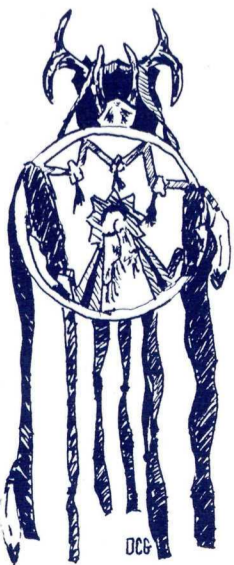
### Bachelor Officer's Quarters

Throughout the years, this multi-purpose building has housed countless numbers of people of every rank and station and has undergone many alterations in appearance. This section is furnished to reflect its original use as a "bachelor" officer's quarters, circa 1853-1854. This early period recalls a time of isolation and distance

from civilization. Before the arrival of the railroad to the west in 1869, transportation of goods was not only slow but also outrageously expensive. Furnishings therefore, were sparse, make-do, and used whatever was at hand.

As a quadruplex, Bedlam is laid out in four blocks. The north, lower block is furnished for three bachelor officers sharing a bedroom, a dining room and a

kitchen. The small bedroom off the kitchen is set up for a "striker," an enlisted man who would have served all three officers as a cook and housekeeper. The interior design of Bedlam is suited to communal living. Charles King mentions this fact in his book Laramie or the Queen of Bedlam when he referred to two families sharing a dining room. It was certainly true of the unmarried officers.



The rooms are furnished to imply a winter setting with an abundance of buffalo robes and rugs being used as bed and floor coverings. Representing Fort Laramie's earlier years, the furnishings are a combination of soldier-made pieces, and average quality manufactured items such as the field desks. Considered essential to prescribed duties these desks would have accompanied each officer on every assignment.

Native American cultural objects were of great interest to army officers, and were collected in several ways, including purchase, trade or in later years, from the battlefield. These highly prized items were commonly displayed in quarters. Those seen here are recently made reproductions, since originals are difficult to obtain.

Bedlam was one of the only buildings at Fort Laramie built with fireplaces. These proved to be vastly inefficient in the high plains climate and it is understandable that the mistake was not repeated. It is likely that stoves were added for both heating and cooking purposes relatively soon after the building was constructed.

The young officers are sharing a bedroom without regard to

seniority. A center table covered with "oil cloth" serves as a nucleus of leisure activity for card playing, swapping stories, and consuming alcoholic beverages. A packing crate-type washstand, chair, a crude bench and wood blocks fill out the arrangement. The trunks are not idle bystanders awaiting the next move, but are utilized as functional pieces of furniture, catching items of apparel, military accoutrements

and personal belongings. In this early period, candles were used almost exclusively for lighting. Kerosene, the wonderful invention of 1858 was not yet available, and oil lamps of this period were fragile and expensive. A few books and a banjo are also present. Although little time was likely spent in frivolous reading, music was a favorite pastime.

The signatures above the mantel are a 19<sup>th</sup> century form of "graffiti". These signatures represent officers who served at Fort Laramie. They were accurately reproduced from military records. Although it cannot be proven that names once appeared on this wall, the practice was extremely common during the period.

The second room served as a combination dining room and

study area where the company officers handled official paperwork.. Companies normally kept four records. Personnel Records included lists of officers, (commissioned and non-commissioned), desertions, deaths, and company strength; A Clothing Book contained lists of clothing and equipment issued to each man; An Order Book with orders related to the company, and a Morning Report Book, listing

daily activities and assignments for each company member. Normally non-commissioned officers assisted with this task, however company officers were ultimately responsible for the upkeep of these records. Considering the multitude of other duties these men accomplished, this record keeping process would have been time-consuming and labor intensive, leaving little time for recreational pursuits.

### **The Kitchen & "Striker's" Quarters**

The kitchen is simply furnished. Cooking technology advanced rather slowly during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and almost not at all on the fringes of civilization. Of specific interest are the redware and stoneware jugs and crocks which were used so extensively in food preparation and storage.

Also of interest is a somewhat unique cast iron cook stove with a side door oven that could be used for baking.

Behind the kitchen is a small pantry in which dishes, cooking utensils and crocks are stored. A basket of champagne sits at the entrance of the pantry.

Documentation confirms drinking was a major recreational activity for officers.

Beverages were available in

many forms: pilgrim whiskey (a combination of alcohol, water, molasses and red pepper); champagne... and bitters were also available and enthusiastically consumed .

To the left, behind the kitchen is the striker's room. Strikers were enlisted men, chosen for their ambition and reliability. A striker performed household chores, and for these services received extra pay, quarters away from the barracks, and better food than his fellow enlisted men. The term "striker" may have originated with soldiers who would "strike" or take-down an officer's camp.

There was however a downside to these "perks." Strikers were not especially popular with

fellow enlisted men. If a striker had the occasion to return to the barracks, fights often erupted and name-calling ensued. Their comrades often referred to them in such negative terms as "dog robber".

The other half of Old Bedlam, recreates a later period, 1863-64, when Colonel Collins and his wife resided there.