

# Fort Larned

Fort Larned  
National Historic Site  
Kansas

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



Company C, Third U.S. Infantry, in front of barracks at Fort Larned, 1867. Courtesy Kansas State Historical Society.

## Guardian of the Santa Fe Trail

From 1822 to 1880 the Santa Fe Trail was one of America's most important overland routes, carrying annually several million dollars in commercial traffic between Independence, Mo., and Santa Fe. The acquisition of vast new southwestern territories by the United States after the Mexican War, and the gold rushes of 1849 and 1858, gave added impetus to trail traffic. Inevitably, the great influx of settlers, merchants, gold seekers, and adventurers disrupted the Indians' way of life. Believing their very existence was in jeopardy, the tribes struck back, attacking the commerce, mail shipments, and emigrants on the trail.

To counter these attacks, the army, on October 22, 1859, established a military post near Lookout Hill (now Jenkins Hill) on the bank of the Pawnee River about 8 kilometers (5 miles) from its junction with the Arkansas. The post was initially called "Camp on Pawnee Fork," but the name was soon changed to "Camp Alert." In June 1860 the camp was moved 5 kilometers (3 miles) farther west, where a more durable sod-and-adobe fort was built and named for Col. Benjamin F. Larned, U.S. Army Paymaster-General (1854-62).

During the early 1860s Fort Larned was the northern anchor of the line of forts defining the southwestern military frontier. This line extended

south from Fort Larned through Fort Cobb in Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma) to Forts Griffin, Concho, McKavett, Clark, and Duncan in Texas. Locally, Fort Larned guarded the Kansas segment of the Santa Fe Trail, while Fort Lyon (originally called Fort Wise) protected the eastern Colorado portion of the route.

As a military center, Fort Larned, for several critical years, was the principal guardian of Santa Fe Trail commerce, its soldiers cooperating with troops from Fort Union and Lyon on both the Cimarron and Mountain branches of the route. In 1864, following the Sand Creek Massacre in eastern Colorado and after the War Department forbade travel beyond Fort Larned without armed escort, the post furnished guard detachments for mail stages and wagon trains. It served as the base for Maj. Gen. Winfield S. Hancock's abortive 1867 campaign against the Plains tribes—a campaign that was intended to impress the Indians with the military strength of the United States but which only succeeded in terrorizing them and intensifying hostilities.

Fort Larned was a key post in the Indian War of 1868-69. In 1868, in violation of the Treaty of Medicine Lodge signed the year before, the Cheyennes attacked several wagon trains along the Santa Fe Trail and

raided settlers as far south as the Texas panhandle. These events signaled a general outbreak, and Kiowas, Comanches, and Arapahoes also began to pillage and raid from Kansas to Texas. To meet the threat Maj. Gen. Philip H. Sheridan, commanding the Military Division of the Missouri, obtained permission from Washington to organize a winter campaign and ordered Lt. Col. George A. Custer and the 7th Cavalry to Fort Larned for a thrust south into Indian Territory. Custer's campaign culminated in the defeat of Black Kettle's Cheyennes at the Battle of the Washita on November 27, 1868. This battle ended the organized Indian threat to the area around Fort Larned, although skirmishes and unorganized resistance continued.

Throughout most of the 1860s Fort Larned also served as an agency of the Indian Bureau in its attempts to provide peaceful solutions to the cultural conflict between Indians and Whites. The groundwork for such an approach was laid by the 1861 Treaty of Fort Wise and strengthened by the subsequent treaties of the Little Arkansas (1865) and Medicine Lodge (1867). Under these agreements, the U.S. Government promised to pay annuities of clothing and other necessities to the Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Kiowas, and Comanches in return for staying on their reservations and keeping the peace. Beginning in 1861 Fort Larned was a dis-

tributing point for these annuities. The agency was abolished in 1868 when the tribes were moved to new reservations in Indian Territory.

Fort Larned's last important function was, ironically, to help end the usefulness of the trail it had so long protected. The close of the Civil War released the Nation's great industrial energies, foremost of which was the great surge of the railroad across the plains. The railroad promised cheaper and faster transportation and shattered old ideas of distance. Trails of mud and dust could not compete with the trails of steel stretching westward from the Missouri. In the early 1870's, as the Santa Fe Railroad pushed west from Topeka, soldiers from Fort Larned provided protection for construction workers. In July 1878, nearly 6 years after the completion of the line through Kansas, the fort was abandoned, except for a small guard force of soldiers left to protect the property.

On March 26, 1883, the Fort Larned military reservation was transferred from the War Department to the General Land Office, U.S. Department of the Interior. A year later the buildings and land were sold at public auction. For the next 80 years the property remained in private hands. In August 1964 Fort Larned became a national historic site and a unit of the National Park System.

## The Santa Fe Trail

The vital artery of commerce, travel, and communication known to history as the Santa Fe Trail began on the west bank of the Missouri River, first at Franklin, then at Independence, later at Westport. It led west through Council Grove, past Fort Larned to Fort Dodge, where it forked, one route going southwest through the Cimarron Desert and the other continuing west into Colorado, turning south at Bent's Fort. Both branches merged just beyond Fort Union, 121 kilometers (75 miles) from Santa Fe. Fort Larned, like other outposts scattered along the trail, offered not only protection and refuge for harried travelers but also respite from the rigors of the journey and a chance to replace broken gear and dwindling supplies.



Encampment on the Plains, by Thomas Worthington Whittredge. Courtesy InterNorth Art Foundation, Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska.



Ribbons of deep-worn ruts from countless ox- or mule-drawn wagons (like the ones in the painting above) still mark the route of the Santa Fe Trail. Close by Fort Larned, a

portion of the trail has been preserved as part of the historic site. From a viewing platform can be seen a glimpse of nature and history combined.

Near the trail furrows a colony of prairie dogs thrives among the mixed prairie grasses. Shallow buffalo wallows dent the otherwise level land where meadow larks, bur-

rowing owls, hawks, and an occasional eagle may also be seen. Check at the visitor center for directions to the Santa Fe Trail ruts area.

## Indian Bureau Agency, 1861-68

Each autumn during the years Fort Larned served as an agency for the Indian Bureau, post residents watched in fascination as the scattered tribes of Southern Cheyenne, Arapahoes, Kiowas, and Comanches assembled at the fort. Pitching their tipis in the nearby fields, the tribes (like the Cheyennes shown in the painting at right) settled down to search out friends and kin among their neighbors, to trade, and to await the distribution of their annuities. Noted Indian Bureau agents Edward W. Wynkoop and Jesse Leavenworth were among those who served the tribes from Fort Larned. Annuities provided included staples such as bacon, wheat flour, coffee, sugar, fresh beef, and tobacco. Clothing, beads, blankets, metal tools and cooking utensils, gunpowder, and lead for bullets were also usually provided.



Indian Camp at Dawn, by Jules Tavernier. Courtesy Gilcrease Institute, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

The annuity system, established under treaties like the one negotiated at Medicine Lodge in 1867, was designed to pacify and transform roaming tribes of warlike Indians

into sedentary, peaceful farmers. Benevolent in theory, the system in practice encouraged indifference on the part of the Indians. And depredations continued, despite

sincere efforts by Indian agents like Wynkoop and Leavenworth to treat the tribes honorably.

# Fort Larned

## Help Us Protect the Site

Most of these old buildings are showing signs of deterioration, and over the years people have disfigured them further by scratching or carving names and initials onto the sandstone blocks. The National Park Service

is doing everything it can to stabilize deterioration of the buildings, but we need your help to stop other kinds of destruction so that future visitors can see the fort as you see it today. *Please do not scratch, carve, or*

*mark on the walls of the buildings.* All objects within the fort's boundaries are protected by the Federal Antiquities Act and it is illegal to disturb, injure, or remove any of them.

## About Your Visit

Fort Larned National Historic Site is located 9.5 kilometers (6 miles) west of the city of Larned, Kans., on Kansas 156. The fort is open every day from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. except Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New

Years days. It is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Groups desiring guided tours should make advance arrangements with

the superintendent, whose address is Route 3, Larned, KS 67550.

## Fort Larned's Buildings

When Capt. Henry W. Wessells, 2d Infantry, came to the fort in 1860 to construct a set of buildings, he planned to build them of wood and was disappointed when ordered to use adobe, which he thought would be less durable. Nevertheless, by year's end, an officers' quarters, a combination storehouse and barracks, a guardhouse, two laundresses' quarters, and a hospital had been completed. Later additions included soldiers' quarters and a bakery, both dug into the river bank; a small adobe meathouse; and a three-room picket structure housing blacksmith, carpenter, and saddler shops.

For the most part, Fort Larned's buildings at that time were poorly constructed and inadequate to meet the threat of the large-scale Indian war many high-ranking officers were predicting. Appropriations for new construction work were finally made in 1866, and the fort's garrison began an extensive building program. By the winter of 1868 Wessells' "shabby, vermin-breeding" adobe structures were gone and nine new stone and timber buildings stood around the quadrangular parade ground. These are the same buildings you see here today. They are shown on the diagram below and briefly identified at right.

### 1 Barracks/Visitor Center

Originally constructed to house two companies of infantry, this barracks has been restored and adapted for use as visitor center and administrative offices. *Museum, audio-visual program, bookstore, and restrooms.*

### 2 Barracks/Post Hospital

This building originally housed one company of infantry and one of cavalry, about 150 men. In 1871 the east half was converted into the post hospital, the way it is seen today. The west half has been restored as the barracks for Company C, 3rd Infantry.

### 3 Shops Building

Bakery and blacksmith shops occupied the end spaces in this three-room structure. The center "workshop" area was used for carpentry, wheelwright, tinsmith, paint, and saddlery activities.

### 4 New Commissary

Built to house the overflow of garrison food and subsistence supplies from the Old Commissary. For awhile it served as a hospital annex, and in 1871 the north end was used as a schoolroom for post children and as a library.

### 5 Old Commissary

This is the oldest surviving stone structure at the fort. From here food was distributed to the garrison. For many years the western part of the building was used as an arsenal and powder magazine. Note the rifle slits in the south and west walls.

### 6 Quartermaster Storehouse

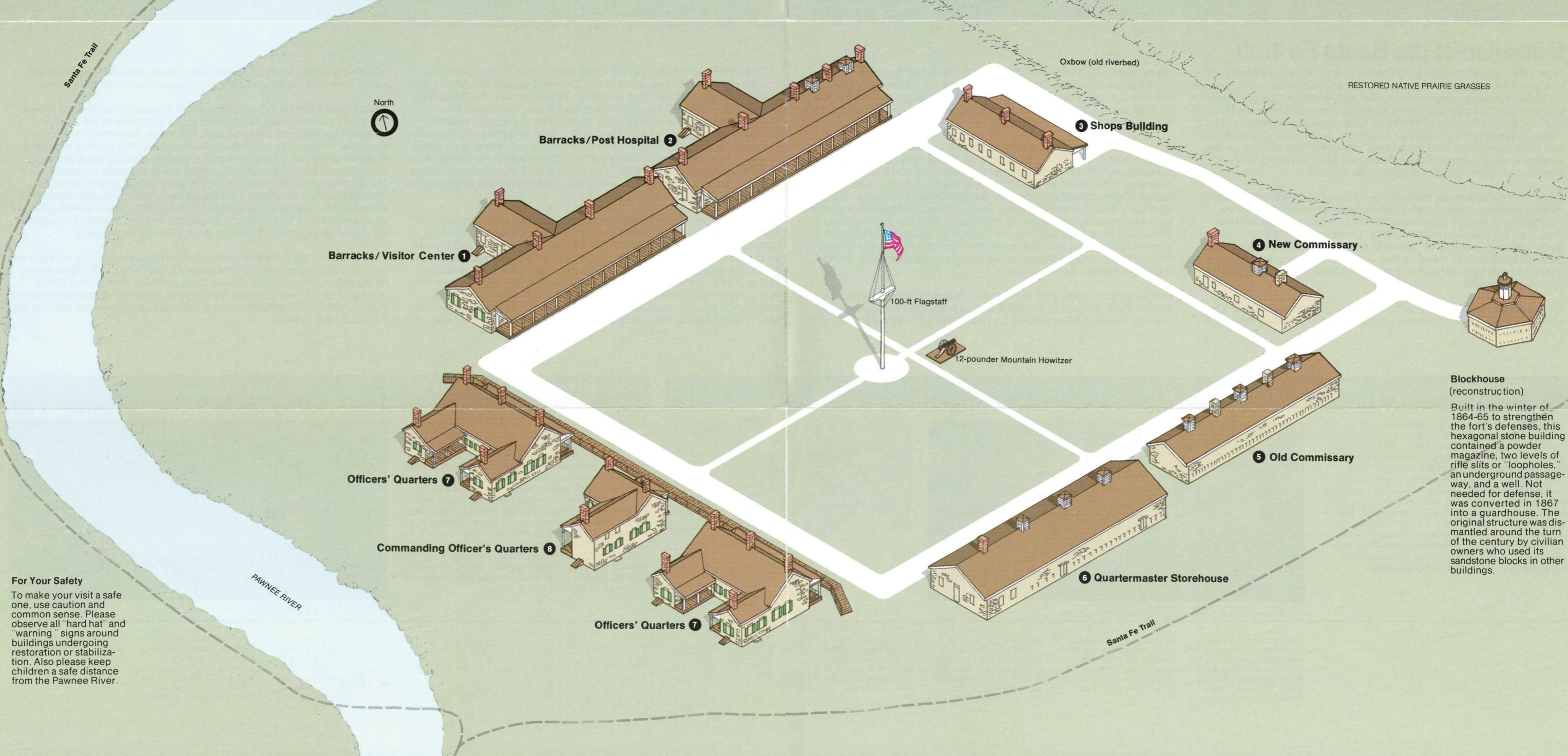
This building's large open storeroom was filled with military clothing, bedding, tents, field gear, tools, and other materials needed to carry out frontier military operations. Note the rifle slits in the south wall.

### 7 Company Officers' Quarters

These buildings each accommodated two captains and four lieutenants. The captains' quarters in the ends of the buildings consisted of two rooms, a kitchen, and servant's room. The lieutenants had one room each without kitchens. In 1870 wooden lean-tos were added at the rear of each to provide kitchens and servant space.

### 8 Commanding Officer's Quarters

This two-story structure, the only single-family residence on the post, housed the fort's highest ranking officer. It contained four large rooms separated by a central hallway, a kitchen, and upstairs servants' quarters. Maj. Meredith Kidd and his family were the first occupants of the house. *Private residence.*



## For Your Safety

To make your visit a safe one, use caution and common sense. Please observe all "hard hat" and "warning" signs around buildings undergoing restoration or stabilization. Also please keep children a safe distance from the Pawnee River.