

Fort Union

Fort Union
National Monument
New Mexico

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



"Wagon Train Near Wagon Mound," from the painting by Nick Eggenhofer.

Defender of the Southwest

"Many ladies greatly dislike Fort Union. It has always been noted for severe duststorms. Situated on a barren plain, the nearest mountains...three miles distant, it has the most exposed position of any military fort in New Mexico....The hope of having any trees, or even a grassy parade-ground, had been abandoned long before our residence there....Every eye is said to form its own beauty. Mine was disposed to see much in Fort Union, for I had a home there."

—Mrs. Orsemus B. Boyd, 1894, recalling her residence at Fort Union in 1872.

When New Mexico became United States territory after the Mexican War, the army established garrisons in towns scattered along the Rio Grande to protect the area's inhabitants against bands of marauding Indians. This arrangement proved unsatisfactory for a number of reasons, and in April 1851 Lt. Col. Edwin V. Sumner, commanding the Military Department of New Mexico, was ordered "to revise the whole system of defense" for the entire territory. Among his first acts was to break up the scattered garrisons and relocate them in posts closer to the Indians. He also moved his headquarters and supply depot from Santa Fe, "that sink of vice and extravagance," to a site near the Mountain

and Cimarron Branches of the Santa Fe Trail, where he established Fort Union.

The first of the three forts built in this valley was begun in August 1851 and, for a decade, served as the base for military operations in the area and a key way station on the Santa Fe Trail, affording travelers a place to rest and refit before continuing their journey. It also became the principal quartermaster depot of the Southwest.

During the 1850s dragoons and mounted riflemen from the fort fought Indian bands which attacked the mountain villages to the north and menaced the desert stretches of the Santa Fe Trail to the northeast. One of the earliest campaigns was directed against the Jicarilla Apaches who, in the spring of 1854, ambushed and nearly wiped out a company of dragoons. The Apaches were driven into the mountains west of the Rio Grande and routed. Military operations were also conducted against hostile Utes of southern Colorado in 1855 and against Kiowas and Comanches raiding the plains east of the fort in 1860-61.

When the Civil War erupted in April 1861, most of the regular

troops (except those officers who joined the South) were withdrawn from Fort Union and other frontier posts and replaced by volunteer regiments. Anticipating a Confederate invasion of New Mexico, Col. Edward R. S. Canby, charged with the territory's defense, concentrated troops at Fort Craig on the Rio Grande and sent soldiers from Fort Union to patrol the Santa Fe Trail, now the main artery of supply for Federal forces. He also ordered construction of the second Fort Union, a star-shaped earthen fortification, to strengthen defenses.

The Star Fort never saw the action for which it was designed. The Confederate invasion was halted and turned back in March 1862 by a regiment of Colorado Volunteers from Fort Union at the Battle of Glorietta Pass, 40 kilometers (25 miles) southeast of Santa Fe. The Confederates withdrew to Texas, effectively ending Civil War activity in the Southwest, and the Star Fort was abandoned.

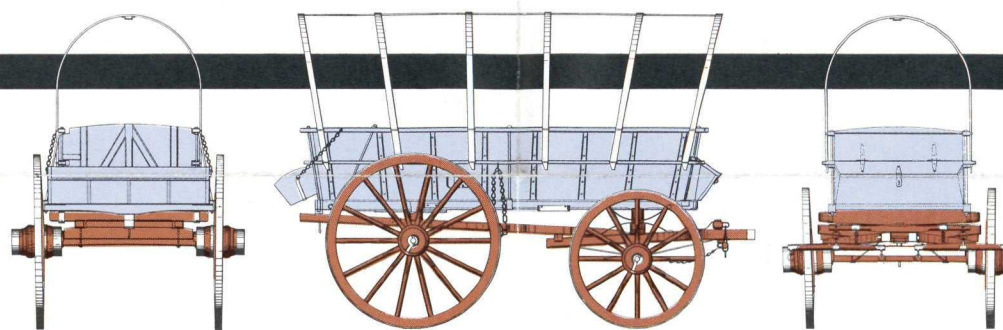
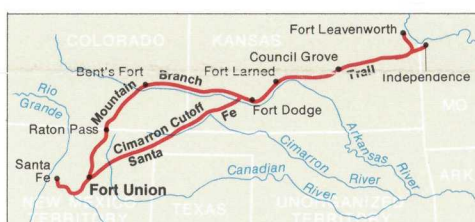
In 1863, with New Mexico securely in Federal hands, the new departmental commander, Gen. James H. Carleton, began construction of the third (and final) Fort Union, whose ruins you see here today. This sprawling installation, which took 6 years to

complete, was the most extensive in the territory. It included not only a military post, with all its attendant structures, but a separate quartermaster depot with warehouses, corrals, shops, offices, and quarters. The supply function overshadowed that of the military and employed far more men, mostly civilians. An ordnance depot was erected on the site of the old log fort at the western edge of the valley, rounding out the complex.

Throughout the 1860s and the 1870s troops from Fort Union continued to participate in operations against hostile Indians who, during the disruptive Civil War years, had stepped up the pace of raiding activities. Several relentless campaigns against the Apaches, Navajos, Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Kiowas, and Comanches finally brought peace to the southern Plains in the spring of 1875, albeit on the white man's terms. Though Fort Union's involvement in the Indian wars had come to an end, its garrison occasionally helped to track down outlaws, quell mob violence, and mediate feuds. The supply depot continued to flourish until 1879, when the Santa Fe Railroad replaced the Santa Fe Trail as the principal avenue of commerce. By 1891 the fort had outlived its usefulness and was abandoned.

The Santa Fe Trail

It began on the west bank of the Missouri River, first at Franklin, then at Independence, later at Westport. It led west through Council Grove to Fort Dodge, Kans., where it forked, one route going southwest through the Cimarron Desert and the other continuing west into Colorado and then turning south at Bent's Fort. Both branches merged just beyond Fort Union, 121 kilometers (75 miles) from Santa Fe. The Cimarron route was the shorter and more dangerous because of infrequent waterholes and hostile Kiowas and Coman-



ches. But if a wagon train could make it through the desert and avoid the Indians, a trader could beat his rivals to Santa Fe and reap the first and biggest profit.

From 1821, when trader William Becknell opened it, until 1879, when the Santa Fe Railroad reached Las Vegas, the Santa Fe Trail served as a vital artery of commerce, travel, and communication. Just as the crumbling adobe walls of Fort Union recall the years of frontier military activity, so do the eroding ruts cut

in the prairie sod by freight wagons, emigrant caravans, stagecoaches, and military columns recall the great flow of traffic that made the Santa Fe Trail so significant in the history of the West. Superb remains of the trail have survived throughout northeastern New Mexico, and in the vicinity of Fort Union ruts of both branches of the trail may still be viewed by today's travelers.

First Fort Union, 1851-61

The fort, shown here in Joseph Heger's 1859 drawing, consisted of a collection of shabby log buildings needing almost constant repair. It was established to protect travelers on the Santa Fe Trail and local residents from Indian attacks, as well as to provide a headquarters for the Military Department of New Mexico. Most traces of the fort have vanished. The ruins there today are those of the Fort Union Ordnance Depot, constructed in the 1860s. This area is not accessible to the public.



The Star Fort, 1861-62

This massive earthwork, shown here in an 1866 photograph, was designed to help defend the Santa Fe Trail against a threatened Confederate invasion. One officer called this fortification "as fine a work of its kind as I ever saw," but the parapets soon eroded into the ditch, the unbarked pine-log barracks rotted and became nesting places for insects, and the rooms were damp, unventilated, and consequently unhealthy. Most of the troops refused to live in such hovels and camped in tents outside. The Star Fort was abandoned after the Confederate invasion was turned back in March 1862.



Third Fort Union, 1863-91

The third and last fort, part of which, the Mechanics Corral, is shown here, was almost a city in itself. Erected between 1863 and 1869, and modified somewhat during the 1870s, it consisted of the military post of Fort Union and the Fort Union Quartermaster Depot and served as the principal supply base for the Military Department of New Mexico. Arriving from the east over the Santa Fe Trail, shipments of food, clothing, arms, and ammunition, as well as tools and building materials, were unpacked and stored in warehouses, then assigned as needed to other forts. Like most southwestern military posts, Fort Union was not enclosed by a wall or stockade.

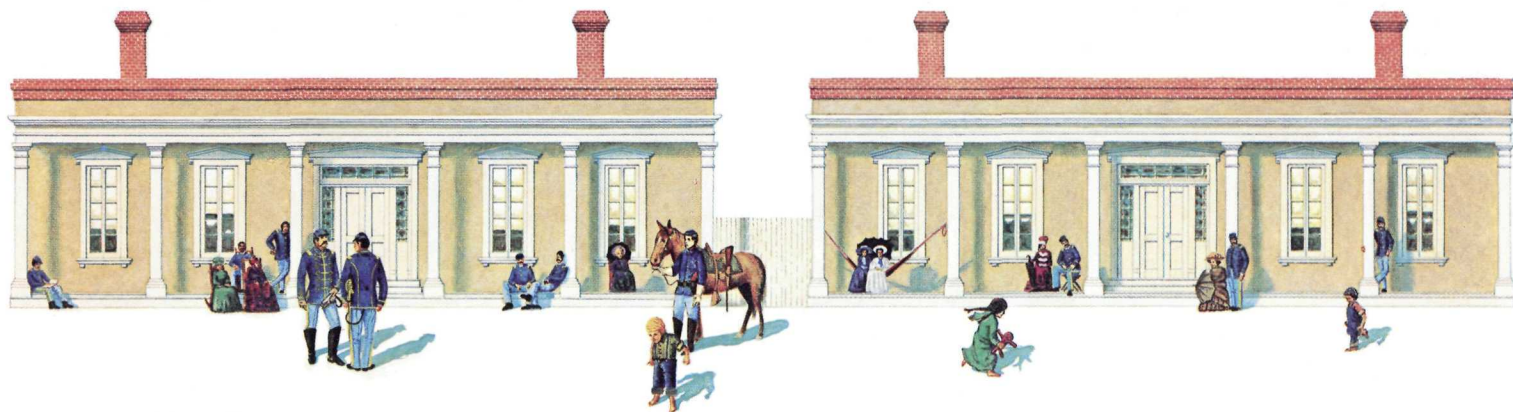


Fort Union

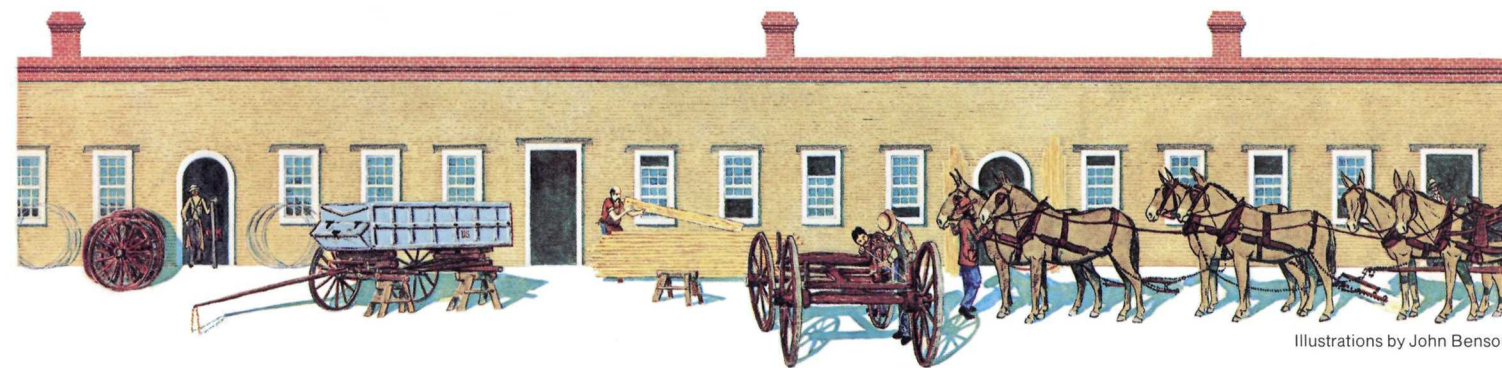
About Your Visit

Fort Union is 13 kilometers (8 miles) north of I-25, at the end of N. Mex. 477. Watrous, N. Mex., is 1 kilometer (½ mile) south of the intersection of these two highways. The nearest large community is Las Vegas, N. Mex., 42 kilometers (26 miles) south, where there are restaurants, overnight accommodations, and auto services. No camping facilities exist at the park,

but there are picnic tables. The park is open from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. daily, except January 1 and December 25. It is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Additional information can be obtained by writing Fort Union National Monument, Watrous, NM 87753, or by calling (505) 425-8025.



Along the Post Officers' Row.



Inside the Depot's Mechanics' Corral.

Illustrations by John Benson

Touring Fort Union

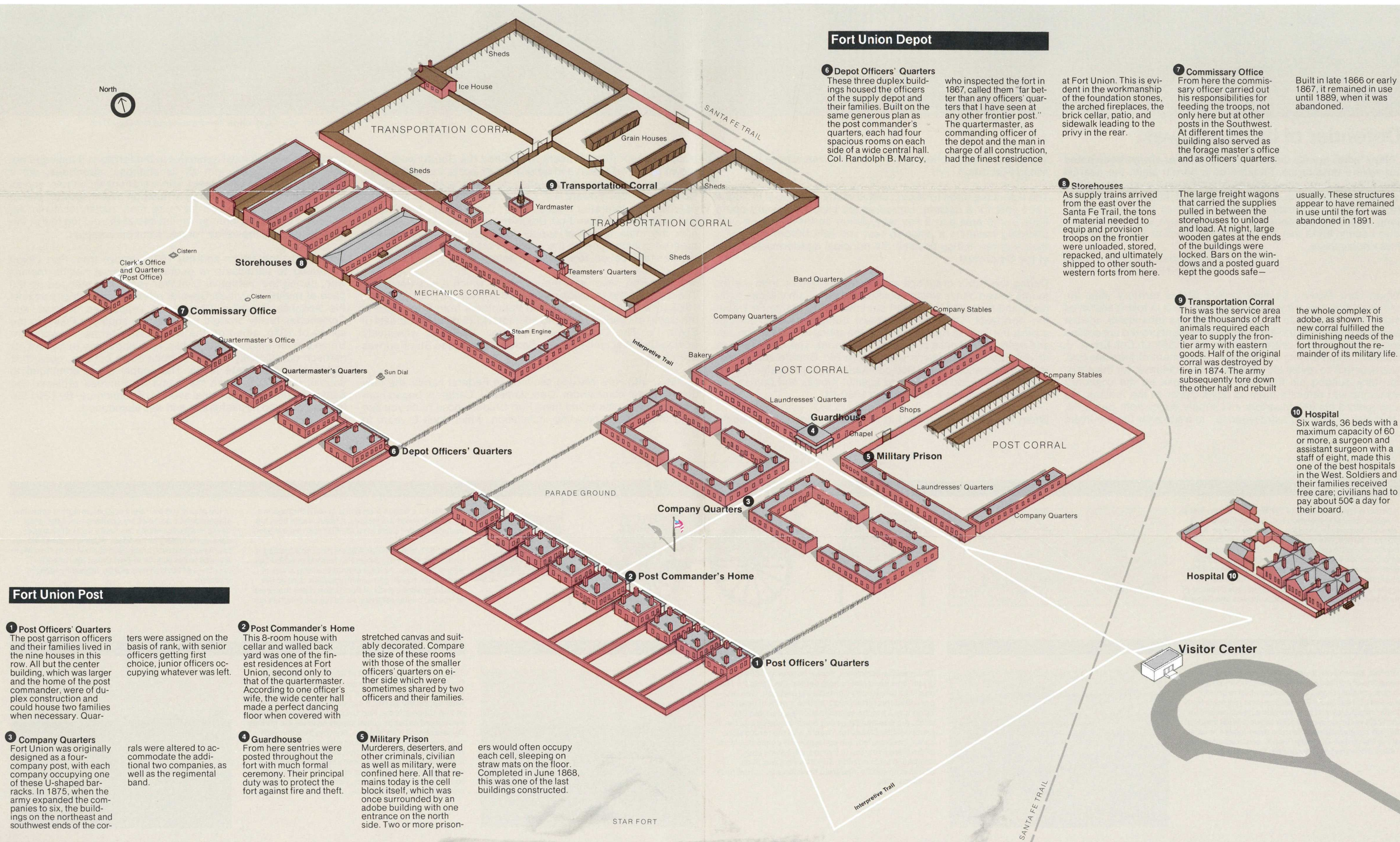
The ruins of Fort Union are an impressive memorial to the men and women who won the West. It is difficult, however, to look at these melted adobe walls and the few chimneys that rise above ground level and realize that this was once the largest U.S. military installation on the 19th-century southwestern frontier. The diagram below, which you should use while touring the ruins, is an attempt to recapture something of the size and appearance, as well as the functions, of the original Fort Union complex.

The stone foundations of the buildings are still visible, as are some of the adobe walls, so you should have no difficulty matching what you see on the site to appropriate locations on the diagram.

A self-guiding trail (shown in white on the diagram) leads through the ruins and to the remains of the Star Fort erected during the Civil War. Across the valley to the west, the ruins of the ordnance depot are visible on the first fort site.



Fort Union is being preserved as an outdoor museum. You may examine any artifacts, but please leave them in place for future visitors. While every effort has been made to provide for your safety, you must remain alert and exercise caution during your visit. The ruins, though stabilized, will fall if climbed on. Stay on the established trails and watch your footing. Also, be on the lookout for rattlesnakes. Should you encounter one, remain calm, retreat slowly, and report the sighting to a park ranger.



Fort Union Post

1 Post Officers' Quarters
The post garrison officers and their families lived in the nine houses in this row. All but the center building, which was larger and the home of the post commander, were of duplex construction and could house two families when necessary. Quarters were assigned on the basis of rank, with senior officers getting first choice, junior officers occupying whatever was left.

3 Company Quarters
Fort Union was originally designed as a four-company post, with each company occupying one of these U-shaped barracks. In 1875, when the army expanded the companies to six, the buildings on the northeast and southwest ends of the corral were altered to accommodate the additional two companies, as well as the regimental band.

2 Post Commander's Home
This 8-room house with cellar and walled back yard was one of the finest residences at Fort Union, second only to that of the quartermaster. According to one officer's wife, the wide center hall made a perfect dancing floor when covered with stretched canvas and suitably decorated. Compare the size of these rooms with those of the smaller officers' quarters on either side which were sometimes shared by two officers and their families.

4 Guardhouse
From here sentries were posted throughout the fort with much formal ceremony. Their principal duty was to protect the fort against fire and theft.

5 Military Prison
Murderers, deserters, and other criminals, civilian as well as military, were confined here. All that remains today is the cell block itself, which was once surrounded by an adobe building with one entrance on the north side. Two or more prisoners would often occupy each cell, sleeping on straw mats on the floor. Completed in June 1868, this was one of the last buildings constructed.

Fort Union Depot

6 Depot Officers' Quarters
These three duplex buildings housed the officers of the supply depot and their families. Built on the same generous plan as the post commander's quarters, each had four spacious rooms on each side of a wide central hall. Col. Randolph B. Marcy, who inspected the fort in 1867, called them "far better than any officers' quarters that I have seen at any other frontier post." The quartermaster, as commanding officer of the depot and the man in charge of all construction, had the finest residence at Fort Union. This is evident in the workmanship of the foundation stones, the arched fireplaces, the brick cellar, patio, and sidewalk leading to the privy in the rear.

7 Commissary Office
From here the commissary officer carried out his responsibilities for feeding the troops, not only here but at other posts in the Southwest. At different times the building also served as the forage master's office and as officers' quarters. Built in late 1866 or early 1867, it remained in use until 1889, when it was abandoned.

8 Storehouses
As supply trains arrived from the east over the Santa Fe Trail, the tons of material needed to equip and provision troops on the frontier were unloaded, stored, repacked, and ultimately shipped to other southwestern forts from here. The large freight wagons that carried the supplies pulled in between the storehouses to unload and load. At night, large wooden gates at the ends of the buildings were locked. Bars on the windows and a posted guard kept the goods safe—usually, these structures appear to have remained in use until the fort was abandoned in 1891.

9 Transportation Corral
This was the service area for the thousands of draft animals required each year to supply the frontier army with eastern goods. Half of the original corral was destroyed by fire in 1874. The army subsequently tore down the other half and rebuilt the whole complex of adobe, as shown. This new corral fulfilled the diminishing needs of the fort throughout the remainder of its military life.

10 Hospital
Six wards, 36 beds with a maximum capacity of 60 or more, a surgeon and assistant surgeon with a staff of eight, made this one of the best hospitals in the West. Soldiers and their families received free care; civilians had to pay about 50¢ a day for their board.