



Foundation Document Overview

Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site

North Dakota



Contact Information

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Purpose

Significance



“The purpose of Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site is to commemorate and interpret the significant role of the fort as the preeminent fur trading post on the Upper Missouri River, and to preserve its resources.”



Significance statements express why Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- Fort Union is significant for its impact on the history, exploration, transportation, economics, and culture of the American frontier on the Upper Missouri River from 1828 to 1867.
- Fort Union epitomizes the mutually advantageous interaction of American Indian and European American cultures associated with the fur-trading empire on the Upper Missouri River region of the American frontier.
- Fort Union is the best representation of the establishment and maintenance of a permanent fur trading post on the Upper Missouri River that capitalized on a long-established American Indian trade network.
- Fort Union’s abundant archeological, archival, and documentary resources offer a rare comprehensive record of the physical site and human activities during the fur trade. This record allowed for accurate reconstruction of the fort and continues to support extensive exhibits of Northern Plains material culture (trade goods, tools, and personal items) from both the prehistoric and fur trade eras.
- Fort Union’s rural landscape provides a sense of place for visualizing the past, recognizing the isolation of the area, and appreciating the wide-open spaces of the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers to both American Indians and European Americans.



Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **The Fort Union archeological site and the museum collection and archives.** As an archeological resource, the Fort Union site is the focal point of the park and preserves nationally significant information that can be used to increase the knowledge of the American fur trade and interactions with American Indian cultures. The museum collection generated from archeological excavations of the site is one of the largest in the National Park Service.
- **Reconstructed trading post and American Indian encampment.** Because the fort has been partially reconstructed, visitors can better visualize the time period and life of the fort. The reconstructed fort provides a “stage” for the living history presentations at the site. The prairie surrounding the fort is where American Indians camped while trading at the fort. Tepees standing north of the fort help visitors visualize life at the fort in the 1800s.
- **Missouri River, the watershed, and associated habitat zones.** The physical and visual relationship of Fort Union to the Missouri River is essential to understanding the cultural resources of the site, and is a tangible reminder of early life ways, European American exploration and exploitation of resources, and events that contributed to the settlement and development of the American West. The Missouri River served as the major transportation corridor while the fort was operating.
- **Cultural landscape/viewshed.** Located in rural North Dakota and Montana, the landscape is largely free of modern development. This viewshed, which includes the prairie surrounding the fort, helps the visitor gain a sense of what the area was like in the 1800s.



Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park— they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from — and should reflect — park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- Located at the heart of the Upper Missouri fur trade network, Fort Union Trading Post influenced cultures and economics on this continent and abroad.
- Daily life at Fort Union Trading Post reflected the social and economic relationship between and within American Indian and European American cultures associated with the 19th century fur-trading empire.
- The northern Plains Indian tribes were affected materially, socially, economically, domestically, religiously, and ecologically as a result of the fur trade.
- The natural resources, including navigable rivers, mature cottonwood forests, open grasslands, and abundant fur-bearing mammals, helped make Fort Union one of the most successful trading posts on the Upper Missouri River.



Description



Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site, a designated national historic landmark, is located on the North Dakota/Montana border, 25 miles southwest of Williston, North Dakota, and 24 miles north of Sidney, Montana.

Today's fort is a full-scale partial reconstruction of the 1850s-era built on the exact location of the original structures, which once was the largest and most imposing trading post on the Upper Missouri River.

The 18-foot palisade walls once again dominate the plains. A trade house and clerk's office sit just inside the south gate. The Bourgeois House communicates the grandeur that it held in the 1800s. It now houses the visitor center including exhibits, films and a bookstore. The partially reconstructed fort serves as a stage for park staff to share the rich history of Fort Union Trading Post.



Vicinity Map
Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site
United States Department of the Interior - National Park Service

