



# Foundation Document Overview

## Scotts Bluff National Monument

Nebraska



### Contact Information

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## Purpose



*The purpose of Scotts Bluff National Monument is to preserve the scenic, scientific, geologic, and historic integrity of Scotts Bluff. The monument preserves remnants of the Oregon Trail through Mitchell Pass and affords views of surrounding formations that, along with Scotts Bluff, were primary landmarks along the emigrant trails (the Oregon, California, Mormon Pioneer, and Pony Express National Historic Trails) used for westward expansion.*



## Significance

Significance statements express why Scotts Bluff National Monument 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. The following significance statements have been identified for Scotts Bluff National Monument. (Please note that the sequence of the statements does not reflect the level of significance.)

1. **Historic Trail Corridors** – The Overland Trail ruts through Mitchell Pass at Scotts Bluff are the remnants of one of humankind’s most epic migrations to America’s western frontier.
2. **Landmark** – Scotts Bluff was a physical and emotional landmark for emigrants and had cultural significance to American Indians. Views to and from this landmark were critical for pioneers traveling west.
3. **Topography and Trail History** – The land formations of the area influenced the locations of historic trails, which evolved from the time of the earliest plains inhabitants 8,000 to 10,000 years ago.
4. **Geology and Paleontology** – The monument contains more geologic history than any other location in Nebraska. The exposed strata at Scotts Bluff National Monument span a time period extending from 33–22 million years before present. These geologic deposits yield fossils used as type indicators of the Oligocene epoch (34 to 23 million years before present).
5. **William Henry Jackson Collection** – The monument preserves the largest single collection of watercolor paintings by photographer and artist William Henry Jackson, one of the greatest chroniclers of the Oregon Trail and the westward migration. Fifty of those paintings and many of his personal items now reside at Scotts Bluff National Monument and is the largest single holding of Jackson paintings.



## 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 following fundamental resources and values have been identified for Scotts Bluff National Monument:

- **Historic Trail Ruts** – The historic landscape at Scotts Bluff National Monument contains historic resources, including ruts, related to the Oregon Trail, California Trail, Mormon Trail, and Pony Express Trail.
- **Geology and Paleontology (the bluffs, the badlands, and their embedded fossils)** – The geologic landscape of the Scotts Bluff region is historically significant.
- **Views to, from, and of the Bluffs** – The monument’s high steep bluffs, its prairie, and the eroding and deeply incised terrain of its badlands and gullies all contribute to dramatic and panoramic views of the surrounding regional landscape.
- **Scotts Bluff as a Landmark for Westward Expansion** – Scotts Bluff is an important link in a series of features related to the region’s history.
- **William Henry Jackson Collection** – The monument protects close to 1,100 objects related to William Henry Jackson.

## 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.

- The wide diversity of humans who have used the North Platte River Valley transportation corridor through time shared common experiences in the challenges and opportunities they encountered.
- Ongoing human use and manipulation of the North Platte River Valley transportation corridor over time has altered the area’s natural resources and the way of life of its native inhabitants.
- Scotts Bluff illustrates the geologic processes and uniquely visible features that have defined and constrained routes to the west, provided a window to changing environments, and continued to fascinate travelers.
- Indians have long inhabited the region and moved across the plains through the Scotts Bluff area. They established important trade routes long before the arrival of Euro-Americans, and have maintained long physical and spiritual connections with the land.
- The diversity of Euro-Americans who passed by Scotts Bluff mirrored the growing diversity of social, political, cultural, and economic forces within the young United States.
- Late 19th century military necessities and economic factors brought improvements to the transportation corridor.
- William Henry Jackson’s art, based on his personal experiences, helped memorialize all four trails, and provided a contrast between legend and reality.
- The majority of the monument’s existing administrative, maintenance, and visitor service complex, which was constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps, illustrates one response of the government to the Great Depression by putting young men to work building facilities and preserving and interpreting the nation’s natural and cultural heritage.
- The monument’s remnant prairie ecosystem reflects both historic natural conditions and the impact of change over time in climate, adaptation, and concepts of progress.

# Description

Scotts Bluff National Monument was established in 1919 by Presidential Proclamation, marking the first time that the Antiquities Act was used to preserve a landscape based on the westward expansion movement “Manifest Destiny.”

The monument currently encompasses 3,003 acres of prairie and bluff habitat located in the Panhandle of western Nebraska. The monument is dedicated to preserving South Bluff, Mitchell Pass, and the remnants of the Oregon-California Trail. The monument preserves the historical scene, the associated geological features, and natural and cultural resources in perpetuity.

In the 19th century, approximately half a million Euro-Americans traveled up the Platte and North Platte Rivers on their way to lands that later became the states of Oregon, Utah, and California. The chain of rock formations in western Nebraska marked the change in terrain between the prairies to the east and the mountains to the west.

The main route of travel was south of the park, through Robidoux Pass, until 1851. The previous year, anonymous laborers physically altered the area known as Mitchell Pass by filling gullies and building earthen ramps into the side of ravines. This allowed wagons the opportunity to safely

navigate “The Gap,” now known as Mitchell Pass. This became the primary route in 1851 and cut approximately 8 miles off the trail route. During 1852, the peak migration year, up to 50,000 people passed through the area. Later, the Pony Express and the transcontinental telegraph used this route. The completion of the transcontinental railway in 1869 greatly reduced the number of emigrants using the Oregon Trail as transcontinental travel by railroad became available.

Scotts Bluff was named after Hiram Scott, a fur trader who died while on an 1828 journey eastward out of the Rocky Mountains. His remains were found near the bluffs in 1829, but the circumstances of his death remain a mystery. During the period of overland migration (1840s–1860s), travelers generally used the term Scotts Bluffs in the plural to refer to the chain of formations extending east and west from the most prominent bluff and including today’s Wildcat Hills. Over the years, the geological features known as “Scott’s Bluffs” have taken on their own individual names. They are now known as Dome Rock, Crown Rock, Sentinel Rock, Eagle Rock, and Saddle Rock. However, the largest and most prominent is known as Scotts Bluff, and still stands as a landmark for travelers.

