

Fort Union Trading Post

THE BOURGEOIS AT FORT UNION

The Bourgeois at Fort Union trading post was the primary agent of the American Fur Company - the manager of the post - and was responsible for the effective and profitable operation of this post and other smaller American Fur Company trading posts further upriver. Because Fort Union was the most important trading post on the upper Missouri River for almost forty years, holding the Bourgeois appointment here was a powerful and prominent position. In addition to being a significant responsibility, it was financially rewarding position and a high-profile post within the American Fur Company.

The Bourgeois' responsibilities included managing trading post operations, employing workers and contractors for the post, procuring trade goods and post provisions, managing business and financial matters, setting trade arrangements, establishing and maintaining friendly and productive relationships with area Indian tribes, maintaining order within the post, hosting company officials and important visitors, managing the smaller trading posts upriver from Fort Union, observing and scouting trading posts of competing companies, and serving as the liaison to the American Fur Company offices in Saint Louis.

The Bourgeois was paid at a fixed salary, typically \$1,200 to \$1,500, plus a percentage of the post profits. His compensation also included very comfortable living accommodations and a household staff in the luxurious Bourgeois House at the post.

The house also included rooms and offices and a large dining room where the management staff took their meals.

The reconstructed Bourgeois House of today serves as the park's Visitor Center, exhibit center and bookstore, resource library, archives, and the park's administrative offices.

FORT UNION'S FIRST BOURGEOIS



**Kenneth McKenzie,
1829-1836**

Kenneth McKenzie, known as the "King of the Missouri", was a skillful, intelligent, energetic, determined, shrewd, resourceful and formidable businessman – and a highly successful and prominent entrepreneur in the North American fur trade.

Born in 1797 in Scotland, he immigrated to North America at nineteen, working at first for the North West Fur Company of

Montreal. Observant, intelligent and very ambitious, McKenzie promptly mastered all of the elements of the fur trade and moved into more responsible positions with the company. In 1821, Hudson's Bay Company bought out North West Fur and McKenzie lost his position and moved to Saint Louis - the hub of the growing fur business in the United States.

In Saint Louis, McKenzie co-founded the Columbia Fur Company, with the intention of securing the lucrative fur trade along the upper Missouri River. Within five years, the Columbia Fur Company dominated the fur trade on the upper Missouri. John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company eventually bought out Columbia, with McKenzie being placed in charge of their profitable western operation – which was renamed the Upper Missouri Outfit. Determined to extend the fur trade even deeper into tribal lands, McKenzie built Fort Union and numerous other posts, established a steamboat transport between Saint Louis and Fort Union, successfully negotiated effective trading

relationships with various upper Missouri River tribes, and used his extensive knowledge, skill and experience in the fur trade to overwhelm the trading posts of competing fur companies. He also possessed charismatic social skills, hosting noteworthy international visitors and important company guests at Fort Union's Bourgeois House.

With McKenzie managing their upper Missouri operations, the American Fur Company became a financially dominant and highly respected world leader in the fur trading enterprise. At the pinnacle of his leadership, McKenzie exercised control over a territory larger than many European countries.

A man of visionary enterprise, a tenacious businessman, respected Indian ambassador and incomparable manager, McKenzie's determination, intelligence, ingenuity and outstanding business skills made him a wealthy man – and the preeminent entrepreneur of the global fur trade enterprise in his time.

OTHER BOURGEOIS AT FORT UNION



Alexander Culbertson,
1837-1847

Alexander Culbertson was born in Pennsylvania in 1809. After working on the Minnesota and Florida frontiers, he joined the American Fur Company in 1829.

A man of exceptional ability, great courage and exemplary character, Culbertson steadily advanced through important positions in the American Fur Company's organization.

Culbertson's career on the upper Missouri River began in 1833, and he was known as a patient, fair and respected leader among both traders and Indians.

Culbertson served as Bourgeois at Fort McKenzie, a challenging post serving the Blackfeet, and Fort John (Fort Laramie) before bringing his skills to Fort Union, where he effectively and profitably managed the post for eleven years. Fort Benton, the first permanent settlement in Montana was also established by Culbertson.

Culbertson married Natawista (Medicine Snake Woman), the daughter of a Blackfoot chief, and amassed a fortune in the fur trade before retiring from the American Fur Company. Later, he received an appointment as an interpreter and special Indian agent.



Edwin Denig,
1848-1856

Edwin Denig was born in 1812 in Pennsylvania, the son of a doctor. In 1833, Denig travelled to the upper Missouri River as a fur trader, and later that year, joined the American Fur Company as a trader.

Well educated and intelligent, Denig worked his way upward through the ranks of the American Fur Company at Fort Union and Fort Pierre. During his tenure at Fort Union, he met and hosted many of the important visitors to the fort.

Denig married an Assiniboine chief's daughter, Hai-kees-kak-wee-yah (Deer Little Woman) and they had four children.

Like McKenzie and Culbertson, Denig was very knowledgeable regarding the fur trade. In addition to demonstrating effective post management, Denig was very interested in both natural history and the ethnology of the Indian tribes, and spent much of his personal time studying both topics.

After retiring from Fort Union, Denig finished writing *Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri*, regarded as the first comprehensive work done on the Indians of the region. He also authored books related to the language and culture of the Assiniboine and other tribes of the upper Missouri River.



Charles Larpenteur and
James Kipp,
1857-1867

Charles Larpenteur (pictured above) was born in France in 1807, and James Kipp, born in 1788 in Montreal, faced the difficult assignment of trying to manage Fort Union during a period of rapid decline in the fur trade, and at a time when the American Fur Company was struggling financially.

Both men had been employed in numerous capacities by the American Fur Company for many years, at Fort Union and various other posts. Larpenteur spent much of his career here, and his journal of life at Fort Union is the most complete account of the history of this trading post.

Plummeting fur profits, the decimation of the beaver and bison populations, the surge in westward migration, and the displacement or relocation of many fur-trading tribes all contributed to the collapse of the North American fur trade. The American Fur Company sold Fort Union to the North West Fur Company in 1865.

In 1867, Fort Union was sold to the Army for building material at nearby Fort Buford. By August 1867, Fort Union was torn down - marking the end for the most important trading post on the upper Missouri River.