



Scotts Bluff, looking southwest from the north bank of the North Platte.

SCOTTS BLUFF
NATIONAL MONUMENT

Nebraska

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

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Scotts Bluff National Monument
Gering, Nebraska

To the thousands of emigrants who followed the Oregon Trail to Utah and the Pacific Coast, Scotts Bluff was a prominent landmark and a favorite camp site. Named for the mysterious fur trader, Hiram Scott, who according to tradition died here in 1828, its prominence is more distinctly associated with the mass migration across the treeless plains between 1843 and 1869. The covered wagons of the pioneers, the handcarts of the Mormons, and the pack trains of the fur traders, all passed this natural promontory. Frenchmen, Scotchmen, Germans, and others of European nationality joined the native-born American in the arduous journey to a "promised land." Some carried with them more material possessions than others, but all carried with them the necessary determination, resolute courage, and confidence in the American way of life.

This way of life, an integral part of American democracy, was nurtured, tempered, and revitalized by the rigors of the trail. Freedom of action and equality of opportunity made possible the wagon trains that followed the trail, and it was their occupants who extended these principles of Americanism beyond the Rocky Mountains. Today, as a national monument, Scotts Bluff is a reminder of that spirit and a memorial to those emigrants who disseminated it over a vast territory.

EARLY LIFE IN THE REGION

This bluff was once part of the ancient High Plains. Erosion over millions of years has carved the surrounding valley down to its present level, leaving Scotts Bluff and others near it as remnants of the unbroken plains which now lie farther to the west. These erosional islands remain because of their position between drainage lines - the last remnants to be worn away.

Entrance, Scotts Bluff National Monument. Mitchell. Pass in background.



The North Platte Valley, of which Scotts Bluff is the dominant natural feature, has been a natural migration corridor for countless centuries. Human artifacts found in the valley indicate an antiquity of more than ten thousand years. When white men first used the Platte Valley, the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapahoe Indians roamed the area to hunt buffalo and other wild game.

The first white men to see the Bluff were Robert Stuart and his party, bearing dispatches to John Jacob Astor from his new fur post in Oregon. They spent the winter of 1812-13 on a cottonwood island nearby. During the eighteen twenties Scotts Bluff was frequently passed by trappers and traders when taking their beaver pelts from the Rocky Mountains to the settlements. Joseph Meek, Jim Bridger, and Thomas Fitzpatrick were among the famous characters who visited the area.

A LANDMARK OF WESTERN MIGRATION

Jedediah Smith, who is also credited with the discovery of the Great Salt Lake, in 1830 took the first wagon train up the North Platte Valley across what later became known as the Oregon Trail. The first missionary to the northwest, Jason Lee, accompanied the Wyeth expedition by here in 1834. The wives of Marcus Whitman and Reverend Spalding were the first white women to see Scotts Bluff when the party passed here in 1836. Five years later Father De Smet with the Bidwell party, the first real emigrant train, followed the Trail. Fremont's first expedition came by in 1842, and Major Phil Kearney's dragoons 3 years later. In 1846, Francis Parkman, the most famous of the Oregon Trail historians, met the Sioux near Scotts Bluff and was invited to partake of dogmeat.

It was not until 1843 that the first large migration to Oregon, a vanguard of a great pioneer army, passed Scotts Bluff. On they came in their white-topped wagons, rolling toward the sunset despite the hazards of the Trail - snow, desert dust, flood, quagmire, marauding Indians, and cholera - that laid thousands in trailside graves. In 1847, Brigham Young led a group of his followers past Scotts Bluff on the north side of the Platte which route later became known as the Mormon Trail. The migration boom really got under way in 1849, following the discovery of California gold. That year the American Fur Company set up a trading post 8 miles south of Scotts Bluff, and Roubideaux, a French squaw man, erected a blacksmith shop to accommodate the emigrants 8 miles west.

Oregon Trail remains, looking southeast.



In order to avoid the obstacle imposed by Scotts Bluff and the adjoining badlands, the Trail originally turned away from Scotts Bluff to cross the ridge at Roubideaux Pass. However, beginning about 1852, it was discovered that Mitchell Pass would accommodate wagons, and thereafter the Trail followed through what is now the national monument. Today "Scotts Bluff" refers to the one large promontory, but earlier the entire ridge, now called "Wild Cat Hills," was included in the term. Thus, in emigrant journals "Scotts Bluff Pass" or "the spring at Scotts Bluff" frequently refers to the Roubideaux site.

LATER HISTORY

In 1860-61, Pony Express riders galloped through Mitchell Pass. They were followed by the first transcontinental telegraph. The Plains Indians were dismayed by the white men's progress. They went on the warpath, attacked stage coaches and emigrant trains, and burned telegraph poles. To protect lines of communication, Fort Mitchell was established as an outpost of Fort Laramie in 1863. It was named after General Robert B. Mitchell, and located 2½ miles northwest of the monument headquarters.

General Grenville M. Dodge surveyed the North Platte Valley through Mitchell Pass in 1865. Many people thought of it as a possible route for a transcontinental railroad, but the present route through Cheyenne was selected instead. The completion of the Union Pacific in 1869 marked the decline of the Oregon Trail as a transcontinental route, although it continued in use locally for many years.

During a brief interim of Indian hostilities, in 1871, the Red Cloud Agency was established west of Scotts Bluff near the present Nebraska-Wyoming boundary. This was the last Scotts Bluff saw of the "wild Indians." During the late seventies and early eighties Scotts Bluff was the geographical center of the range cattle industry, the last great romantic episode of the frontier. But by 1885, when the first homesteader arrived in the North Platte Valley, Scotts Bluff's importance had been relegated to history.

Except for intermittent stretches of cultivation, or where modern roads have been superimposed, the trough of the Old Trail, ground down by the passage of about a quarter of a million emigrants, can still be traced across the continent. At Scotts Bluff it can be seen from

Looking southeast from summit of Scotts Bluff.





Park Headquarters at the base of Scotts Bluff.

the trans-monument highway south of the east entrance, across from the headquarters area, from which point one can walk over the Oregon Trail for a mile along the west slope of the bluff.

FEATURES OF INTEREST FOR VISITORS

Visitors are invited to inspect the museum at the headquarters area. The main wing, featuring water-color drawings, relics, and two dioramas of the buffalo hunters, tells the story of the westward migrations. A second wing contains exhibits which tell the story of the rocks and the fossils at Scotts Bluff.

There are one and six-tenths miles of paved road to the summit of Scotts Bluff which offer a sweeping panorama of the North Platte Valley. At the north promontory there is an observation point that assists the visitor to trace the old Oregon Trail route. It serves also to locate historic landmarks, including Chimney Rock, 25 miles east, and Laramie Peak, 120 miles west. There is an annual automobile fee of 25 cents for the use of this road, which is collected at the gate adjoining the museum building. For those who prefer walking, there is a foot-trail from the museum to the summit.

THE NATIONAL MONUMENT

Established in 1919, Scotts Bluff National Monument consists of 3,476.27 acres adjoining the south bank of the North Platte, 3 miles from Gering, and 5 miles from the city of Scotts-bluff. It is intersected by State Highway 86, the "Oregon Trail Highway," which connects with U. S. 26 north of the river and U. S. 30, 50 miles to the south. It is accessible also by the Burlington and Union Pacific Railroads.

REGULATIONS AND ADMINISTRATION

Visitors are requested to note that it is unlawful to disturb flowers, trees, or any other vegetation; to carve initials or otherwise deface structures, signs or natural features; to throw rocks; to trap, hunt, or carry firearms; or to drive off of established roads. No picnicking facilities are provided at the monument.

Inquiries and communications should be addressed to the Custodian, Scotts Bluff National Monument, Gering, Nebraska.



KEY VICINITY MAP
SCOTTS BLUFF NATIONAL MONUMENT
 GRAPHIC SCALE
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