

Scotts Bluff

NATIONAL MONUMENT ■ NEBRASKA



W. H. Jackson's painting of an 1866 freight train in Mitchell Pass.

Scotts Bluff, a landmark and favored camping ground for thousands of emigrants, overlooks the historic North Platte Route to the Far West. Named for Hiram Scott—a mysterious fur trader, who, tradition relates, was abandoned by his companions to die in this vicinity in 1828—the bluff is chiefly remembered for its association with the mass migrations across the treeless plains between 1841 and 1869.

Emigrants seeking homes in Oregon, gold in California, or a religious haven in Utah all passed this promontory. Although for the most part poor in worldly goods, these emigrants were abundantly supplied with courage, determination, and confidence in the new life that awaited them. Their sturdy pioneer character was nurtured and tempered by the rigors of the trail. Into the far country they carried their principles of equality of opportunity and freedom of thought and action—ideas that laid the basis of new American communities in the West. Scotts Bluff is today a memorial to those who on foot, on horseback, and in covered wagons moved America westward.

Early Life In The Region

The North Platte Valley, of which Scotts Bluff is the dominant natural feature, has been a human migration corridor for centuries. Prehistoric campsites found in the valley indicate an antiquity for man of several thousand years. The first new-

comers found the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho hunting the vast herds of buffalo that watered in the valley.

The first known white men to see the bluff were Robert Stuart and his 6 companions, bearing dispatches to John Jacob Astor from his new fur post in Oregon. They spent the winter of 1812–13 on a cottonwood island near the present Torrington, Wyo. During the 1820's, Scotts Bluff was frequently passed by trappers and traders taking their beaver pelts from the Rocky Mountains to settlements farther east. Among early visitors were such well-known frontiersmen as Jim Bridger, William Ashley, and Thomas Fitzpatrick.

A Landmark Of Western Migration

In 1830 the fur traders Jedediah Smith, William Sublette, and David Jackson took the first wagons past Scotts Bluff. Jason Lee, the first missionary to the northwest, passed the site in the company of the Wyeth Expedition in 1834. The wives of Marcus Whitman and Henry Spalding, missionaries to the Oregon country, were the first white women to see Scotts Bluff, passing in 1836. In 1841 Father de Smet followed the trail with the Bidwell party, who were the first real emigrants. Fremont's first expedition came past in 1842, and S. W. Kearny's dragoons in 1845. And in 1846 Francis Parkman, the most famous of the early Oregon Trail writers, met some Sioux Indians near Scotts Bluff and was invited to a meal of dogmeat.

In 1843 the first large migration to Oregon passed Scotts Bluff, the vanguard of a great pioneer army. For years, they journeyed past in their white-topped wagons, despite hazards—floods, desert dust, quagmire, marauding Indians, and cholera—that laid thousands in trailside graves. In 1847 Brigham Young led the first group of his followers past Scotts Bluff on the north side of the Platte River to the Great Salt Lake Valley in Utah, a route later known as the Mormon Trail.

Reenactment of the passage of a covered-wagon train through Mitchell Pass.



The westward migration boom really got underway after the discovery of gold in California in 1848. In the following two decades more than 150,000 men, women, and children passed Scotts Bluff on their way to California and Oregon. At this time Robidoux, a French-American with a Sioux wife, erected a blacksmith shop in Robidoux Pass to accommodate passing emigrants, and a year later the American Fur Company set up a trading post 8 miles south of Scotts Bluff. These establishments lasted only a few years.

To avoid obstacles imposed by Scotts Bluff and its badlands, the trail originally turned away from the river, passing south of the bluff and crossing the ridge at Robidoux Pass. When it was discovered in 1850 that Mitchell Pass would accommodate wagons, the trail began to follow its present path through the National Monument.

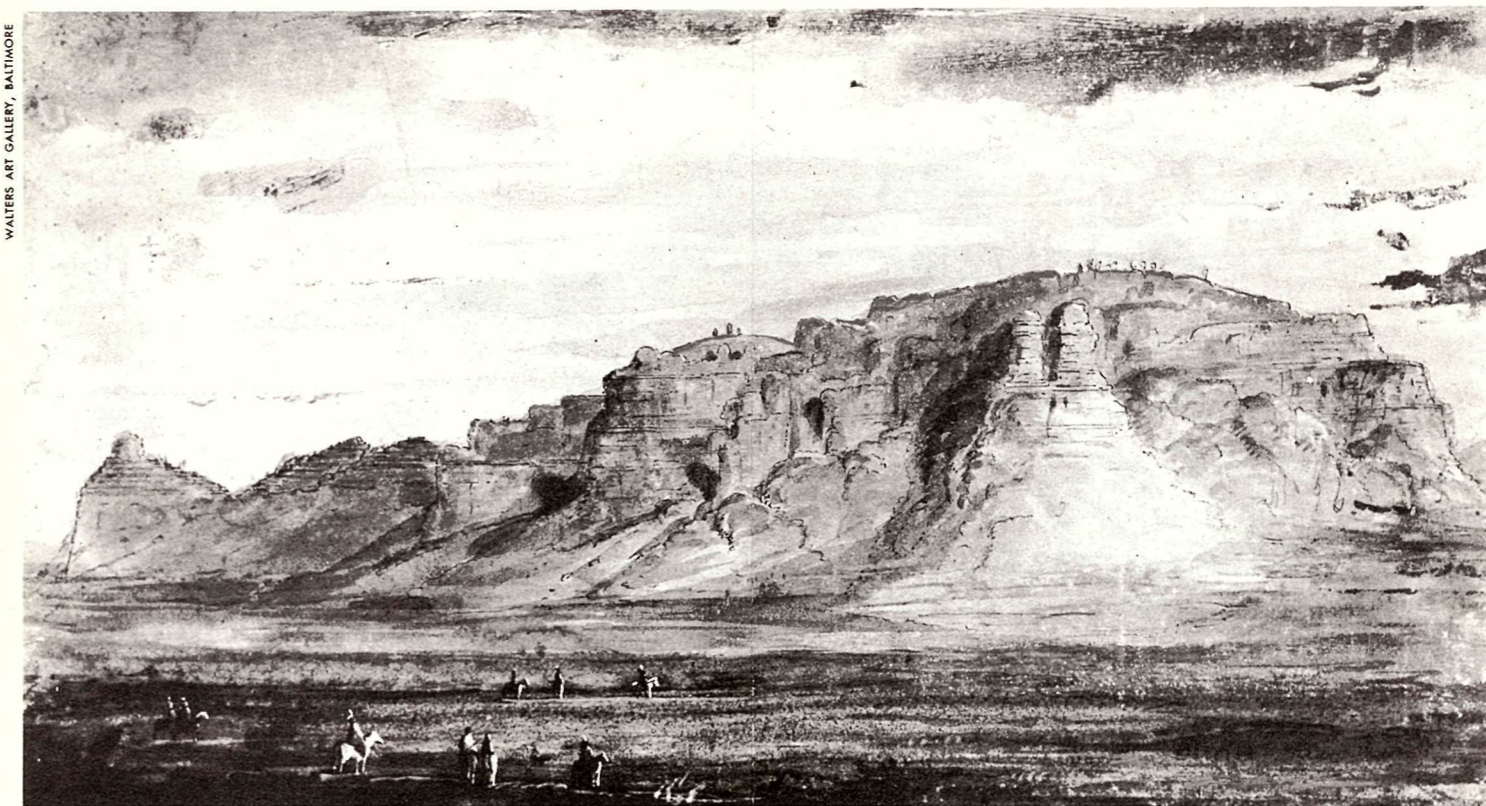
Today "Scotts Bluff" refers to the one large promontory. Originally, though, the term designated the entire ridge, including the present-day "Wildcat Hills." Thus, in emigrant journals "Scotts Bluff Pass" often refers to the Robidoux site.

Later History

During 1860 and 1861, Pony Express riders galloped through Mitchell Pass and were soon followed by the first transcontinental telegraph. Dismayed by the tempo of the newcomers' progress and by the disruption of their ancient life ways, the Plains Indians went on the warpath, attacking stagecoaches and emigrant trains and burning telegraph poles.

To protect communication lines, Fort Mitchell was established as an outpost of Fort Laramie in 1864. The fort, named for Gen. Robert B. Mitchell, was located 3 miles northwest of the present monument headquarters. It was abandoned about 1868.

Gen. Grenville M. Dodge surveyed the North Platte Valley through Mitchell Pass in 1865 as a possible route for a trans-



The earliest known view of Scotts Bluff, drawn by Alfred J. Miller in 1837.

continental railroad. But the present route through Cheyenne was finally selected instead. Completion of the Union Pacific Railroad in 1869 marked the decline of the Oregon Trail as an overland route to the coast, although it continued in use locally for many years.

In the late 1870's and early 1880's, Scotts Bluff was near the center of the range cattle industry, the last great romantic episode of the frontier. Arrival of the first homesteaders in the North Platte Valley in 1884 and 1885 marked the disappearance of the local frontier, and the old Oregon Trail landmark of Scotts Bluff remained important only as a symbol of America's past.

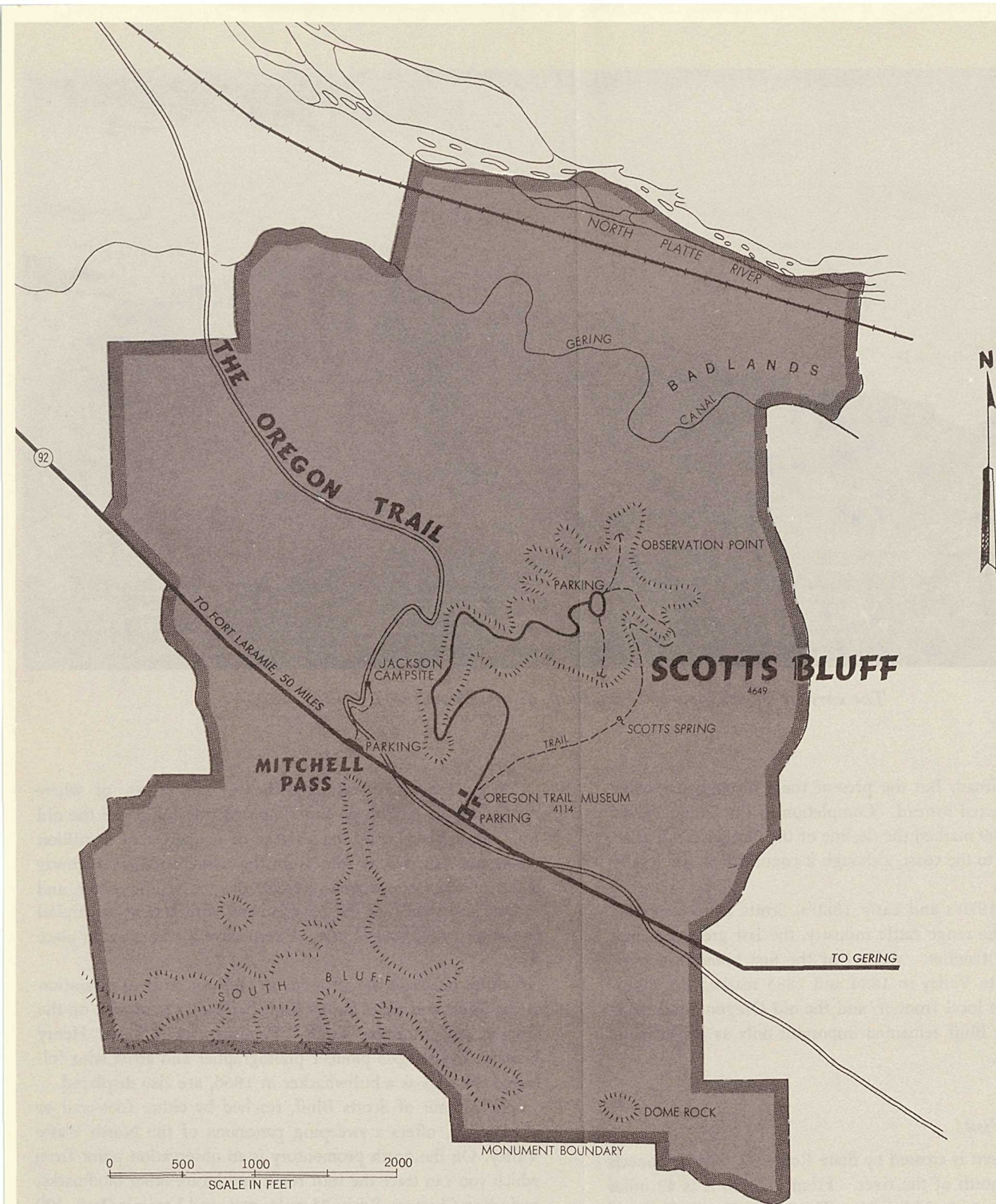
About Your Visit

The monument is crossed by State Route 92, which connects with U.S. 26 north of the river. From U.S. 30 it is 42 miles to the monument via Nebr. 71. The Union Pacific Railroad serves Gering and the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad, the city of Scottsbluff. From Gering it is 3 miles to the monument and from Scottsbluff, 5 miles.

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 a quarter of a million emigrants, can still be seen from the transmonument highway south of the east entrance, across from the visitor center, and in Mitchell Pass. At the pass you can park and walk parallel to the trail for about a mile. Interpretive markers are in place here.

Exhibit rooms in the visitor center tell the story of migration to the West and recall Scotts Bluff's role as a landmark on the Oregon and Mormon Trails. Paintings by William Henry Jackson, the famous pioneer photographer and artist who followed the trail as a bullwhacker in 1866, are also displayed.

The summit of Scotts Bluff, reached by either foot trail or paved road, offers a sweeping panorama of the North Platte Valley. On the north promontory is an observation point from which you can trace the trail route and locate other landmarks, including Chimney Rock, 25 miles east, and Laramie Peak, 100 miles west. An overlook is also on the south side of the summit. From May through September a nominal fee is charged each vehicle using the summit road.



Please Help Preserve This Area

Please help us preserve this area for future generations by not disturbing any vegetation, wildlife, or natural features; defacing any structures or signs; or driving off established roads. Firearms are prohibited.

Administration

Scotts Bluff National Monument, established on December 12, 1919, and encompassing about 5 square miles, is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.

The National Park System, of which this monument is a unit, is dedicated to conserving the scenic, scientific, and historic heritage of the United States for the benefit and inspiration of the people.

A superintendent, whose address is Box 427, Gering, Nebr., 69341, is in immediate charge of the monument.

THE DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR—the Nation's principal natural resource agency—has a special obligation to assure that our expendable resources are conserved, that our renewable resources are managed to produce optimum benefits, and that all resources contribute to the progress and prosperity of the United States, now and in the future.



UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE



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A TRAVELER'S IMPRESSION IN 1860

"Scott's Bluffs," situated 285 miles from Fort Kearney and 51 from Fort Laramie, was the last of the great marl formations which we saw on this line, and was of all by far the most curious. In the dull uniformity of the prairies it is a striking and attractive object, far excelling the castled crag of Drachenfels or any of the beauties of the romantic Rhine. From a distance of a day's march it appears in the shape of a large blue mound, distinguished only by its dimensions from the detached fragments of hills around. As you approach within four or five miles, a massive medieval city gradually defines itself, clustering, with a wonderful fullness of detail, round a colossal fortress, and crowned with a royal castle. Buttress and barbican, bastion, demilune and guardhouse, tower, turret, and donjon-keep, all are there: in one place parapets and battlements still stand upon the crumbling wall of a fortalice like the giant ruins of Chateau Gaillard, the "Beautiful Castle on the Rock"; and, that nothing may be wanting to the resemblance, the dashing rains and angry winds have cut the old line of road at its base into a regular moat with a semicircular sweep, which the mirage fills with a mimic river. Quaint figures develop themselves; guards and sentinels in dark armour keep watch and ward upon the slopes, the lion of Bastia crouches unmistakably overlooking the road; and as the shades of an artificial evening, caused by the duststorm, close in, so weird is its aspect that one might almost expect to see some spectral horseman with lance and pennant go his rounds about the deserted streets, ruined buildings, and broken walls. At a nearer aspect again, the quaint illusion vanishes: the lines of masonry become yellow layers of boulder and pebble imbedded in a mass of stiff, tamped, bald marly clay; the curtains and angles change to the gashings of the rains of ages, and the warriors are metamorphosed into dwarf cedars and dense shrubs, scattered singly over the surface. Travellers have compared this glory of the mauvaises terres to the Capitol at Washington, to Stirling Castle. I could think of nothing in its presence but the Arabs' "City of Brass," that mysterious abode of bewitched infidels, which often appears at a distance to the wayfarer toiling under the burning sun, but ever eludes his nearer search.

RICHARD F. BURTON, THE CITY OF THE SAINTS AND ACROSS THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS TO CALIFORNIA. From his diary of 1860.

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