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War And Consequences: The American Indian Movement Vs. The National Park Service At Fort Laramie, Part II

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%20Movement%20Vs.%20The%20National%20Park%20Service%20At%20Fort%20Laramie

By **Richard West Sellars** (/users/richard-west-sellars) on April 26th, 2011



For Laramie served as an important backdrop to Indian talks during the late 19th century, as this top photo of Man Afraid of His Horses and the bottom photo of General Sherman meeting with Sioux chiefs show. National Archives photos.

Editor's note: Across the National Park System, there are many units that are reservoirs of the nation's history. But how completely do those units tell history? Do they overlook some aspects? And if so, is it done intentionally? In this, the second part of a two-part series, former National Park Service historian Richard West Sellars examines how fully the agency at **Fort Laramie National Historic Site** (<http://www.nps.gov/foia>) recounts the history of the 19th Century Indian Wars.

History Noir

Today, most of the interpretive text that I and other visitors encounter at Fort Laramie National Historic Site is of recent vintage. Park staff, past and present, told me that the visitor-center museum exhibit text has undergone little change since its installation in about the late 1980s to the late 1990s. The current park brochure is a reprint of a 1997 version; and the orientation film dates from about 1996-1997. Some interpretive signs along the tour route appear more recent; and the park's website is updated periodically. But nearly four decades after AIM made clear its feelings about the

fort, the park's story is still revealing—for what it says as well as for what is it does not say about the fort's history and legacy.

The park brochure describes Fort Laramie as having been an “important supply and communications center” and a “major staging and logistical center” during the campaigns against the Plains Indians. Certainly this was the case. But surely, most of the truly consequential actions of the Fort Laramie garrison came after the soldiers received orders from the commanding officer and rode away from the routine of everyday life at the fort to confront situations elsewhere in the region, possibly to fight and die in combat with American Indians. Such actions in the field helped determine the fate of the Northern Plains.

Even when negotiating the **1851 Fort Laramie Treaty** (<http://digital.library.okstate.edu/kappler/vol2/treaties/sio0594.htm>), the army chose to meet the tribes away from the fort, in large grassy fields near the mouth of Horse Creek some 35 miles down the North Platte River. There, it could accommodate the 10,000 or more Indians in attendance and the need to provide pasturage for its horses and those of the tribes. The army also wanted to keep this exceptionally large gathering of Plains Indians at some distance

from the fort.

Despite the treaty's statements on maintaining peaceful relations, the troops left the security of their home base on numerous occasions to deal with difficult situations. In an August 1854 incident of special note, 29 soldiers were killed in a sudden confrontation with a group of Sioux along the overland trail east of the fort. Yet soldiers from the fort continued their patrols of the surrounding plains.

Troops coming out of Fort Laramie participated in the **Great Sioux War of 1876-1877** (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Sioux_War_of_1876), seeking to force non-treaty Indians onto their reservation, and fighting at Powder River, Rosebud Creek, and Slim Buttes—but not at the Little Bighorn, where the Sioux and Northern Cheyenne defeated Custer's Seventh Cavalry in June 1876. It is estimated that about two-fifths of the entire U.S. Army served on the Northern Plains at the height of the Great Sioux War. And of those soldiers not stationed at Fort Laramie, many stopped at the fort for rest and replenishment on their way to confront the tribes in remote areas of the plains.

It may be a commonplace historical fact, but it is of great consequence to people living on the Northern Plains—then and now—that the army in its determination to avenge the Little Bighorn soon managed to subdue the Indians, forcing them onto reservations. Overcoming Custer's defeat and aided by its bases at Fort Laramie and elsewhere, the military effectively concluded the Great Sioux War by the summer of 1877.

During the conflict, both General Sherman and especially his subordinate (and successor), General Phil Sheridan condoned a kind of total war against the Plains Indians, somewhat akin to their Civil War strategies that had devastating effects in Georgia and the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. The generals viewed the mass slaughter of buffalo by professional hide hunters with ties to commercial markets back East as a convenient means to complete the destruction of the tribes' most crucial food source—in effect, an early take on biological warfare.

The buffalo were at the heart of the Indians' livelihood and indeed of their very culture, and the near-extinction of the nomadic herds left the tribes little alternative to greater dependency on food rations and reservation life. Even had the military not condoned it, the buffalo would have been nearly extirpated by the hide hunters in the quest for private profit. Still, where park interpretation mentions the buffalo slaughter, it makes no connection with strategic goals of the army's top command.

The Black Hills

Similarly, the interpretation gives only brief references to the military's failure to steadfastly defend treaty-guaranteed Indian land rights against white incursion. Surely the most notorious failure was the aborted effort to protect Sioux tribal rights once the Black Hills gold rush began in 1874-1875. Willing to confront Indians almost anywhere on the plains, the army vacillated in blocking white access to the Hills.

The Sioux held firmly to their rights to the area based on the **1868 Fort Laramie Treaty** (http://puffin.creighton.edu/lakota/1868_la.html); and the non-treaty Indians continued their resistance. Then, at a meeting in Washington, D.C., in early November 1875, President Grant and other top officials (including General Sheridan) deliberated on how to deal with the situation. They agreed to maintain the official policy of preventing white entry to the Black Hills, while Grant would direct the army to allow trespassers into the area. Their plans led to a virtually full-scale invasion of the Black Hills by gold seekers and other profiteers. At the same meeting, the group arrived at a tactic to provoke the non-treaty Sioux as a means of starting a war that could then be blamed on the Indians—which indeed brought on the climactic Great Sioux War.

In a matter-of-fact way, park interpretation comments that “little effort was made” to prevent whites from entering the Black Hills, but avoids any mention of the sleight-of-hand calculations made in Washington at the nation's highest political and military levels. And in an example of what I think of as “drive-by” interpretation, a park audio-tour comments briefly on the Indians' refusal to sell the Black Hills, and the

coming of the Sioux War—but the audio-tour quickly turns sentimental, and the visitor hears (along with background music) an army wife's wistful recollection of the military band playing "The Girl I Left Behind Me" as the men rode off from the fort in 1876 to do battle against the tribes.

Conspicuously missing from park interpretation are the perpetual disputes over the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 that have lasted even to the present day. After the Indians had won decisively at Little Bighorn, but suffered defeat elsewhere, an official delegation from Washington coerced the Sioux into an "agreement" giving up their rights to the Black Hills portion of their reservation—lands the 1868 treaty had guaranteed them. Threatening to withhold food rations, the delegation used a sign-or-starve ploy to force tribal acquiescence. Even without approval of three-quarters of the adult Indian males, as required for variances from the 1868 treaty, the government declared a new agreement had been reached.

As a result, the Sioux lost a wide strip of their reservation along the entire westernmost border of today's South Dakota, where an abundance of natural resources had already been discovered in the Black Hills. An 1877 Act of Congress confirmed the government takeover. The seizure of the Black Hills, in open contradiction to the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty, is at the center of the decades-long Sioux legal efforts to gain satisfactory redress from the government—efforts that have never yet reached a conclusion.

Although park interpretation mentions the Black Hills at times, it avoids any clear indication that the government grabbed this land back from the Sioux at the end of the war, or of the tactics employed to force tribal acquiescence. Nor is it made clear that Indian leaders (including those present at the final negotiations over surrendering the Black Hills) often lacked a full understanding of the consequences of the treaties and agreements they made, as white negotiators sometimes intended.

Unlike the 1851 treaty negotiated at Horse Creek, negotiations for the 1868 treaty took place at Fort Laramie itself, and without doubt comprised the single most important historical occurrence at the fort. But the Park Service makes no effort to inform the public that the treaty remains a living, festering source of contention—as is evidenced by AIM's threats against the very site where the treaty was negotiated, its occupation of Wounded Knee, and by the still unresolved Sioux litigation over the Black Hills.

With so many Indians forced onto reservations and buffalo reduced almost to extinction so that they no longer threatened to stampede through farmsteads or cattle ranches, most of the Northern Plains were left open for white settlement and use, a not-unintended consequence. The Fort Laramie museum exhibit text notes that white settlers "made their homes on former Indian lands, and ranchers acquired great expanses of territory, where cattle replaced the buffalo." Indeed these were opportune times for adventuresome whites on the Northern Plains.

The text also recalls the defeat of the tribes in the 1870s, and states that they became "starving, ragtag refugees, and prisoners in their own land." Of all the interpretive statements in the park, this brief, disparaging comment may well provide the most explicit acknowledgement that Fort Laramie's military history had any enduring tragic consequences.

Land and Culture

The museum exhibit text and film briefly cover the long period of white civilian use of the old fort after the army left in 1890, including the establishment of the park in 1938, and even quite recent National Park Service historic preservation work. But they give little indication of the long-term fate of American Indians who once roamed throughout the area and traded frequently at Fort Laramie. Yet even while the army still occupied Fort Laramie and the tribes were taking refuge on the reservations, the Indians' "own land," in which they were said to be prisoners, had begun to shrink—the government seizure of the Black Hills being only one example.

In 1887, Congress passed the **General Allotment Act** (<http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~dee/NATION/DAWESACT.HTM>), mandating processes by which tribal ownership of reservation lands could be replaced by private, individual Indian ownership, a practice known as "allotment in severalty." The

severalty policies were intended to convert the tribesmen into farmers and ranchers, much like whites. But they also left the Indians vulnerable to fraudulent manipulation by the government and private sectors, opening the way for whites to gain control of Indian lands. Many inexperienced allottees sold their lands to whites. And lands that had never been allotted to Indians often ended up in white ownership.

Perhaps the most glaring example on the Northern Plains came in 1889, when the government used divide-and-conquer strategies to coerce the Sioux into ceding 9 million acres of un-allotted reservation land. With so much land attracting white settlement, the Northern Plains territories (Montana, the Dakotas, and Wyoming) attained statehood in 1889 and 1890, about the time Fort Laramie closed.

Assaulted by other government assimilation measures, such as intense pressure to convert to Christianity and forced attendance at Indian schools that required students to speak English language only, tribal reservation life came to include high rates of unemployment, poverty and alcoholism. Persistent racial discrimination fueled these and other consequences, which have affected generations of Indians to this day. In one way or another, many eluded or survived such consequences, successfully re-establishing their lives under new circumstances. At times they joined efforts like AIM's militant protests, but they also used main-stream legal and political tactics.

Overall, it was the U.S. Army's campaigns that facilitated creation of the tribal reservations—conditions where assimilation and severalty could then be carried out effectively. The army still operated out of Fort Laramie when assorted assimilation programs got under way and severalty policies were authorized that would greatly impact Indians on the Northern Plains, and elsewhere. Yet interpretation at Fort Laramie gives only fleeting reference to these consequences that followed close on the military's subjugation of the plains tribes.

Quite possibly, today's visitor could take the complete historic buildings tour, view the film and museum exhibits, and go home with little knowledge about the grim consequences of the wars against the Northern Plains tribes that very much involved Fort Laramie. With the refurbished buildings a major distraction drawing attention to daily army life, "American Innocence" survives the park tour pretty much unscathed.

Yet before heading home, visitors may want to take a close look at the Western histories for sale in the park's well-stocked book store, a number of the books written by members of the Custer Mafia. There they will find almost all of the fateful history that remains untold or obscured in the park's own interpretation.

Wounded Knee

Fondly recalling the army's "golden years" at Fort Laramie, park interpretation notes the addition of boardwalks, gaslights, picket fences, and vine-covered verandas that had brought "delightful results" by the late 1880s. The fort had "all the amenities of late Victorian life." These sentimental reflections on the soldiers' various comforts and pleasures at the "Grand Old Post" come just before notice that the fort would be closed. The last combat troops left in March 1890, headed to Fort Logan, at Denver.

By late 1890, the same contingent of troops had joined a large military force gathered in present-day southwestern South Dakota, on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation through which flows Wounded Knee Creek. The army had moved into the area to quell the messianic Ghost Dance movement that some whites feared would revitalize armed Native resistance, although others believed it posed no serious threat. The determination to suppress this new religion (through which many Sioux sought redemption for the loss of their independence, traditions and lands) had much in common with ongoing forced assimilation efforts to bring American Indians in line with white ways.

In freezing weather on the morning of December 29, 1890, a tense confrontation between U.S. troops and a group of Indians, followers of the Sioux chief and Ghost Dance adherent Big Foot, sparked a sudden outbreak of shooting—known to the world today as the Wounded Knee Massacre. In the encounter, 25 soldiers were killed—about one-tenth of the number of Indian dead, which although variously estimated,

quite likely totaled more than 250, including many women and children.

At the time of the massacre, the army unit recently based at Fort Laramie was far to the north and not directly involved. Along with reflecting on the Grand Old Post, the park's museum exhibit text does mention Wounded Knee—but in effect it leaves the tragedy disconnected from Fort Laramie, as does the park film. Yet a reasonable case can be made that the infamy of the slaughter (surely the most widely-known massacre in the saga of Indian-white relations in the present-day United States) and the participation of units recently associated with Fort Laramie in the overall suppression of the Ghost Dancers place a burden on the Park Service not to ignore the fort's connection with that horrific event.

Again, it is a matter of consequences: Wounded Knee was, after all, one of the consequences—indeed, it was the culminating event in the U.S. Army's campaigns to suppress the Northern Plains tribes, in which the fort had played a significant part.

The Upshot

The one serious attempt to connect Fort Laramie's interpretation with current Western history scholarship was initiated in the mid-1990s by Bill Gwaltney, park superintendent at the time. Gwaltney began by going to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation to, as he told me, "broker a better relationship" with the Sioux. He then hosted Indian activists and other concerned individuals at the park for a discussion of the fort's history and interpretation. He also invited Park Service staff from the Denver office in early March 1997 to review the situation. A follow-up report on the meeting asserted that the "primacy of the Indian story" had become the group's top recommendation to the Park Service hierarchy.

Superintendent Gwaltney's efforts failed outright. He had entered the arena of "contested history," and for the first time the park became a kind of political and ideological battleground—albeit briefly. Confronted with possible changes to the park's Manifest Destiny interpretation, both the Fort Laramie staff and local area residents resisted, and held the park to its traditional views of the fort's history.

Bill recently recalled that some staff seemed to think it was "almost politically dangerous to know too much about Indians" and become suspect in the local community. At Fort Laramie the Service has had to contend with a situation that parks all across the country face: the need to maintain a constructive working relationship with park neighbors—who can be very helpful, and-or very controlling. Area residents often play a crucial role in the creation of a park; and local enthusiasm for the patriotic history of Fort Laramie—the overland trails, the army, and the settlement of the West—predates the park's 1938 establishment, going back to the late army era.

If war is an addiction, as has been said, so too can the remembrance of war be addictive. And the threat to entrenched local perceptions of Fort Laramie's history triggered the protective response of a mother hen.

National parks belong to the nation as a whole: Citizens who live near Fort Laramie have a stake in Park Service-administered Ellis Island or Yosemite, whether or not they have ever been there. And likewise, residents of New York or California have a voice in Fort Laramie's management if they wish. But as one close observer of Superintendent Gwaltney's efforts at Fort Laramie noted, the locals have a tremendous influence on this park. Indeed, by one informed estimate, in the early-to-mid-1990s (just before his time there) long-time area residents who were hired at the fort made up a large component of the park staff—probably more than 60 percent.

Moreover, in the end, the Park Service itself failed to follow through with its stated support of the "primacy of the Indian story." Its Denver Office did not override local and staff resistance and force the proposed interpretive changes—further evidence of National Park Service corporate culture's tendency to adhere to the status quo. It seems the Service did not understand the need to understand.

In late 2010, the Service announced the park's on-line virtual tour of the fort, which of course puts Fort

Laramie's history in easy reach of a vast new audience. However, this high-tech presentation makes no effort to rethink the fort's past and address the overall impact of the military on the Northern Plains Indians. The interpretation remains much the same as before.

* * *

Nonetheless, in contrast to Fort Laramie, extraordinary changes in interpretation have taken place at long-established parks, such as at **Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument** (<http://www.nps.gov/libi>) in Montana, which preserves "Last Stand Hill" and surrounding lands that have been a Custer shrine since almost immediately after the June 1876 battle. Indications of contested history at the site had emerged periodically in the past—but it was none other than the American Indian Movement, through its dramatic, intimidating protests at the battlefield in 1976 and 1988 that provided the key impetus for change.

Amid much controversy, Congress reacted in 1991 by rescinding the park's decades-old designation, "Custer Battlefield," a name offensive to many Indians, particularly descendants of those who won the battle. Congress also authorized an Indian memorial at the park to honor those who fought there to defend their way of life. After some hesitation, due mainly to the amazing persistence of the Custer mystique, the National Park Service actively supported the changes. It also began promoting Indian participation in ceremonies at the battlefield and including them in park management and staffing; three have served as superintendent since 1989, the year after AIM's last protest there.

Unlike present-day Little Bighorn, with its much expanded attention to the Indian perspective, Fort Laramie does not in any way qualify as one of what I believe can rightly be called "atonement sites" within the national park system—places that, through forthright interpretation, make meaningful acknowledgement of the more troubling aspects of America's historic past, and of public regret. Park Service experience with atonement sites has grown in recent decades, such as at Little Rock Central High School and the Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail (which portray both the tragedy and the triumph that engulfed the Civil Rights era)—and also new Western history parks, like the **Sand Creek Massacre** (<http://www.nps.gov/sand>) site in eastern Colorado.

Another, **Washita Battlefield National Historic Site** (<http://wwwnps.gov/waba>) in far-western Oklahoma, preserves the setting of a bloody attack by Custer's Seventh Cavalry in November 1868 on Chief Black Kettle's band of Cheyenne. Washita, with its newly constructed visitor center and interpretive trails, provides an example of fair and equitable interpretation at a site of deeply painful history—what the Service can do when working openly and candidly with historical data and all affected parties. Sand Creek's interpretation, still in preparation, seems on track for similar results.

Recently (and as required from all parks by the Washington office), Fort Laramie submitted a plan to commemorate the National Park Service Centennial in 2016; and among other items it calls for creating an on-site Northern Plains Treaty Center—a nod in the direction of atonement. There, presumably, different views of the fort's history would be open to analysis, perhaps ultimately affecting park interpretation. Budgetary restrictions could mean the Treaty Center will come years in the future; and anyway the center's proposed site is isolated from most of the restored historic buildings, to which visitors are usually drawn.

So, if it is ever built, what about locating the center alongside the parade ground in one or more of the restored historic buildings? Put it in the middle of things where the Indian story belongs.

The Park Service might respond, "Those buildings were put to use years ago, and are full of Victorian furniture." (Yet the furnishings are mostly modern reproductions and period antiques.) Ironically, though, Old Bedlam seems a particularly fitting place. Or perhaps better yet, the cavalry barracks—it has the necessary space. Since the park has devoted a huge portion of its exhibit space and interpretive text to army life on the plains—why not share some of it with other perspectives on westward expansion?

What could attract visitors more than exhibits that fully address the controversial issues of Fort Laramie's historic past?

In fact, the centennial plan does seek to encourage more Indians to visit the park and to “provide interpretive services.” But both of these goals seem out of reach, given the current park interpretation and the general drift of the centennial plan. It is as if no Indian anger toward Fort Laramie had ever been expressed. Indeed, AIM’s threats are largely forgotten at the park—a brief, fleeting part of its past, dim and unheeded.

* * *

In a phrase that appears to be almost obligatory at Park Service Manifest Destiny sites, Fort Laramie’s interpretation refers to the epic conflict in the West between whites and Indians as a “clash of cultures.” True in many respects, yet the phrase seems much too benign, as it leaves open the possibility—it almost suggests—that the clash was somewhat evenly matched, which it was not. (I doubt if that phrase appears much, if at all, in parks that interpret white treatment of African Americans.)

In reality, the whites were the aggressive new superpower on the Northern Plains, with their ultimately overwhelming numbers and military strength. And if the Indians thought there was a limitless flow of emigrants crossing the plains and spreading out from the Rockies to the West Coast, one could argue that they were right: It is still going on, but from all directions and by whatever means (including in a VW Bug loaded with academic books).

In the history profession, assertions of inevitability generally get a negative reception. But given the way Indians had already been treated in the East, South, and Midwest, it seems to me that there was a certain inevitability that the whites, with their numbers and their might, would in time subjugate the Northern Plains tribes and take their lands, and that the tribes would be forced to endure a tragic aftermath. What else should one expect? (Even today, some may call this Manifest Destiny, but its true name is American Imperialism.) And sooner or later, descendants of the empire builders would surely want to commemorate their conquests by preserving celebratory places like Fort Laramie.

So it may come as no surprise that the National Park Service has played the role of an “Artful Dodger” at the fort, a court historian skewing the story to avoid history’s darker aspects. Tracking the Service through a 35-year career, I know for sure that it has played an “Artful Dodger” elsewhere, although less so now than in years past. Still, it is time to shed that role at Fort Laramie—and wherever else similar problems exist in the national park system.

End Notes

* Bill Henry, retired (park historian in 1973), personal communication with author, Nov. 18, 2009; Merrill J. Mattes, “Fort Laramie Park History, 1934-1977,” (Denver: National Park Service, 1980), typescript, 332. Note: Much of the text is based on the author’s direct experiences, on-site observations, and his knowledge of National Park Service history and culture gained during a 35-year career in historic preservation and in researching and writing Park Service history. As noted or implied in the text, quotes and other information from park interpretation are taken from the Fort Laramie park brochure (“Fort Laramie National Historic Site, Wyoming,” 1997), the park’s current (2011) museum exhibit and “wayside” exhibit texts, or audio tour tapes. The park website is: <http://www.nps.gov/foia/index.htm> (<http://www.nps.gov/foia/index.htm>) Its virtual tour is: <http://archive.cyark.org/projects/FLA/misc/virtualtour/> (<http://archive.cyark.org/projects/FLA/misc/virtualtour/>)

* Russell Means, with Marvin J. Wolf, *Where White Men Fear to Tread: The Autobiography of Russell Means*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 167-170; 182-186; 261, 276, 327-328; Dennis Banks, with Richard Erdoes, *Ojibwa Warrior: Dennis Banks and the Rise of the American Indian Movement* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 108-111, 126-144; 179, 181, 190-208.

* Means, *White Men*, 257-293; Banks, *Ojibwa Warrior*, 157-209; Wounded Knee Legal Defense/Offense Committee, *Remember Wounded Knee-1890, 1973*, booklet, n.d., 1973, 3-30; Richard E. Jensen, R. Eli

Paul, and John E. Carter, *Eyewitness at Wounded Knee* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 19-20, 187n41; Mattes, "Park History," 332.

* A thorough discussion of the construction and architecture of Fort Laramie is found in Alison K. Hoagland, *Army Architecture in the West: Forts Laramie, Bridger, and D. A. Russell, 1849-1912* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 13-81.

* Douglas C. McChristian, *Fort Laramie: Military Bastion of the High Plains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009) 57-61.

* Robert M. Utley, *The Indian Frontier of the American West* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983) 92-93; 103-105, 109-112, 118-120, 180-187, 232-239; Robert M. Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004, 2nd ed.), 40-41; Paul L. Hedren, *Fort Laramie and the Great Sioux War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 2-18; McChristian, *Military Bastion*, 305-306.

* Merrill J. Mattes, "The Crusade to Save Fort Laramie," *Annals of Wyoming*, Vol 50, No. 1, (Spring 1978), 9-57; park visitor statistics: <http://www.nature.nps.gov/stats/viewReport.cfm>
(<http://www.nature.nps.gov/stats/viewReport.cfm>)

* Mattes, "Park History," 128-129, 138-139, 176-177, 181-186, 204-213, 226-227, 235-246, 257-260, 265-267, 279-285, 287-288.

* Personal communication with the author: Baird Todd, May 21, 2010; Jerome A. Greene, various dates.

* Hedren, *Great Sioux War*, 124-125, 165, 234-235, 237-242; McChristian, *Military Bastion*, 361-372; Mark L. Gardner *Fort Laramie National Historic Site* (Tucson: Western National Parks Association, 2007), 14.

* Paul Andrew Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999, 2nd ed), 246, 283; Andrew C. Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3, 128-129; McChristian, *Military Bastion*, 306; Utley, *Last Days*, 8-9. For General Sheridan's support for buffalo slaughter on the Southern Plains, see Hutton, *Phil Sheridan*, 416n4; S. C. Gwynne, *Empire of the Summer Moon* (New York: Scribner, 2010), 259-262.

* McChristian, *Military Bastion*, 356-362; Hedren, *Great Sioux War*, 17-19, 178-179; Hutton, *Sheridan*, 291-294, 297-300.

* Hedren, *Great Sioux War*, 155-158, 178-179; McChristian, *Military Bastion*, 368-369; Utley, *Last Days*, 41; Means, *White Men*, 420; Thomas Powers, *The Killing of Crazy Horse* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 220-221, 348; Edward Lazarus, *Black Hills, White Justice: The Sioux Nation Versus the United States, 1775 to the Present* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991, Afterword, 1999), 90-93, 119-149, *passim*.

* McChristian, *Military Bastion*, 376-378, 385.

* Utley, *Indian Frontier*, 212-215, 246-251; Janet A. McDonnell, *Dispossession of the American Indian, 1887-1934* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 1-4, 8, 122-125.

* Jensen, Paul, and Carter, *Eyewitness*, 18-20. A much earlier and lower estimate of the number of casualties is found in Utley, *Last Days*, 227-228.

* Michael Welsh, "Final Report, Priority-Setting Workshop, Fort Laramie National Historic Site, WY," March 14, 1997, typescript, p. 7; in author's files.

* Personal communication with the author: Bill Gwaltney, February 12, 2010; Michael Welsh, April 13, 2010; Gary Candeleria, May 14, 2010; and Paul L. Hedren, May 19, 2010.

* Park virtual tour: <http://archive.cyark.org/projects/FLA/misc/virtualtour/> (<http://archive.cyark.org>)

/projects/FLA/misc/virtualtour/)

* Jerome A. Greene, *Stricken Field: The Little Bighorn Since 1876* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), 157, 158, 161, 233; 290,n6, 314,n5; Edward T. Linenthal, *Sacred Ground: Americans and Their Battlefields* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press: 1991), 139-164.

* Fort Laramie's Centennial website: http://www.nps.gov/foia/parkmgmt/upload/FOIA_Centennial_Strategy.pdf (http://www.nps.gov/foia/parkmgmt/upload/FOIA_Centennial_Strategy.pdf)

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Comments

Submitted by **admin** (/users/admin) on April 26, 2011 - 10:13am. [\(/comment/22100#comment-22100\)](/comment/22100#comment-22100)

I find it absolutely disgusting how the US has, and continues, to treat Native Indians. They were here first and we treat them with less dignity than we do illegal aliens from Central America. We need to understand these Native Americans deserve more help in gaining an economic livelihood and less gov'n't handouts. This is a disgrace!

- **reply** (/comment/reply/4558/22100)

Submitted by **admin** (/users/admin) on April 26, 2011 - 12:05pm. [\(/comment/22103#comment-22103\)](/comment/22103#comment-22103)

The catch phrase used to be "education": "Educate" the public and they'll understand that their current assumptions, behavior, (insert your term) ---are in error and modify accordingly. So ---judging by this author's conclusions-- we should interpret the outcomes for the public lest by simply providing the historical facts, they come to a conclusion other than what we desire...like those pushed by "atonement" sites? Facts remain the same but society's idea of right and wrong changes with the wind. The Indian memorial at the LBH battlefield is an interesting case; already the mortar is deteriorating, it's choked with non-native weeds, the panels are much like linoleum and will be fading and in need of replacement; the text is awkward, redundant and should have been proofed first. A great idea, good initiative, poor judgement and little quality control on the design. Now it looks like junk. We shouldn't be so happy to push our current opinions where history is concerned. Let the facts stand, no matter how unpleasant, --and be impartial to all sides. Warts and all.

- **reply** (/comment/reply/4558/22103)

Submitted by **admin** (/users/admin) on April 26, 2011 - 2:29pm. [\(/comment/22106#comment-22106\)](/comment/22106#comment-22106)

Bill Gwaltney, park superintendent, should be commended for his efforts! I HATE politics!! The history and events of the past will never change, Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat them. It's too bad white took over all that wonderful country and screwed it... and all in 160+ years.

- [reply \(/comment/reply/4558/22106\)](#)

Submitted by **admin (/users/admin)** on April 26, 2011 - 4:05pm. [\(/comment/22107#comment-22107\)](#)
Not much to add to what I posted for Part I. Sellars recites the story of the northern Plains wars and the policy and politics underlying them. I don't challenge any of the story, but it's a big one and can't be readily compressed into an interpretive program. Nonetheless, like Little Bighorn, interpretation should be broadened to tell more of the Indian story. And to repeat what I wrote yesterday, the fur trade story (which is not illustrated by any ruins) is more historically significant than the military story.

I remain uncomfortable linking this story to Russell Means and AIM. His central purpose during my active years was to make a big publicity splash, which he did several times at Little Bighorn. The AIM of Russell Means was not well regarded by more moderate tribal members. He went down to Window Rock AZ and tried to run things there until the Navajos found him so obnoxious they threw him out.

- [reply \(/comment/reply/4558/22107\)](#)

Submitted by **admin (/users/admin)** on April 27, 2011 - [\(/comment/22127#comment-22127\)](#)
10:33pm.

Thank you, Mr. Utley for mentioning about the fur trade, that actually was the start of Ft. Laramie. That is one fact that I had forgotten about. But, then again, like you said, that part of history is only mentioned briefly, if at all. The fur trade and the Native Americans go way back before the military intervened in the region. Also, why are we bringing up Russell Means as a reason for this article. It could have been written without AIM, in my estimation. We do need to have both sides of the story, but sadly this is political in nature. I have yet to see were AIM has anything positive to add to a culture that has devastated or left by the wayside in American History.

- [reply \(/comment/reply/4558/22127\)](#)

Submitted by **admin (/users/admin)** on April 29, 2011 - 4:04pm. [\(/comment/22154#comment-22154\)](#)
Richard Sellars has not only provided the rationale to widen---or is the word to "correct?"---the way NPS wants us to remember a significant and treacherous part of US history surrounding Fort Laramie, but he also told his story with clarity, and almost perfect pitch and balance. He should be temporarily rehired by NPS to lead a research group (including maybe Scott Momaday, Tim Giago and even the irascible Russell Means?) to "correct" omissions. Incidentally, I was a reporter covering the Wounded Knee uprising in 1973. Whatever many non-Indians think of Russell Means now or then, his brash presence on behalf of AIM was genuine, therefore all the more loud and defiant. He knew Fort Laramie's negative impact on Indians. And Sellars helps to confirm it.

- [reply \(/comment/reply/4558/22154\)](#)

Submitted by **admin (/users/admin)** on May 4, 2011 - 4:43pm. [\(/comment/22234#comment-22234\)](#)
Dick Sellars has done a fine job in bringing to our attention the need for a broadened interpretation at Ft. Laramie. For those who impliment the interpretive framework, the task is certainly daunting. Should it be focused on a "site-specific" commentary? Or should it offer a broader context, encompassing the fort's impact on the West in general? Certainly Fort Laramie deserves more. Early exploration pointed

to the site's future importance, it was key in the history of the fur trade, and as a major overland trail landmark and resupply station. The interplay of all these topics, plus cultural and military conflict, need to reassessed in the offered interpretation. And that includes, as Dick notes, the iconic status of the fort in regard to the 1851 and 1868 treaties both in the 19th century and the present day. Dick seems to be calling for a necessary inclusion of treaty diplomacy and tribal history. I concur, and would add a request for more nuanced inclusion of emigrant travel, of the Utah War, of the American Fur Company.

- [reply \(/comment/reply/4558/22234\)](/comment/reply/4558/22234)

Submitted by **admin (/users/admin)** on June 17, 2011 - 11:14am.

[\(/comment/22862#comment-22862\)](/comment/22862#comment-22862)

But we, the public have a right to hear the full story and not just what either side wants to disclose for their own glorification! The current 'interpretation' does NOT provide enough information about Indian relations at Ft. Laramie and by omitting information (ex. General Grant's infamy) you are already 'interpreting the outcome'.

- [reply \(/comment/reply/4558/22862\)](/comment/reply/4558/22862)

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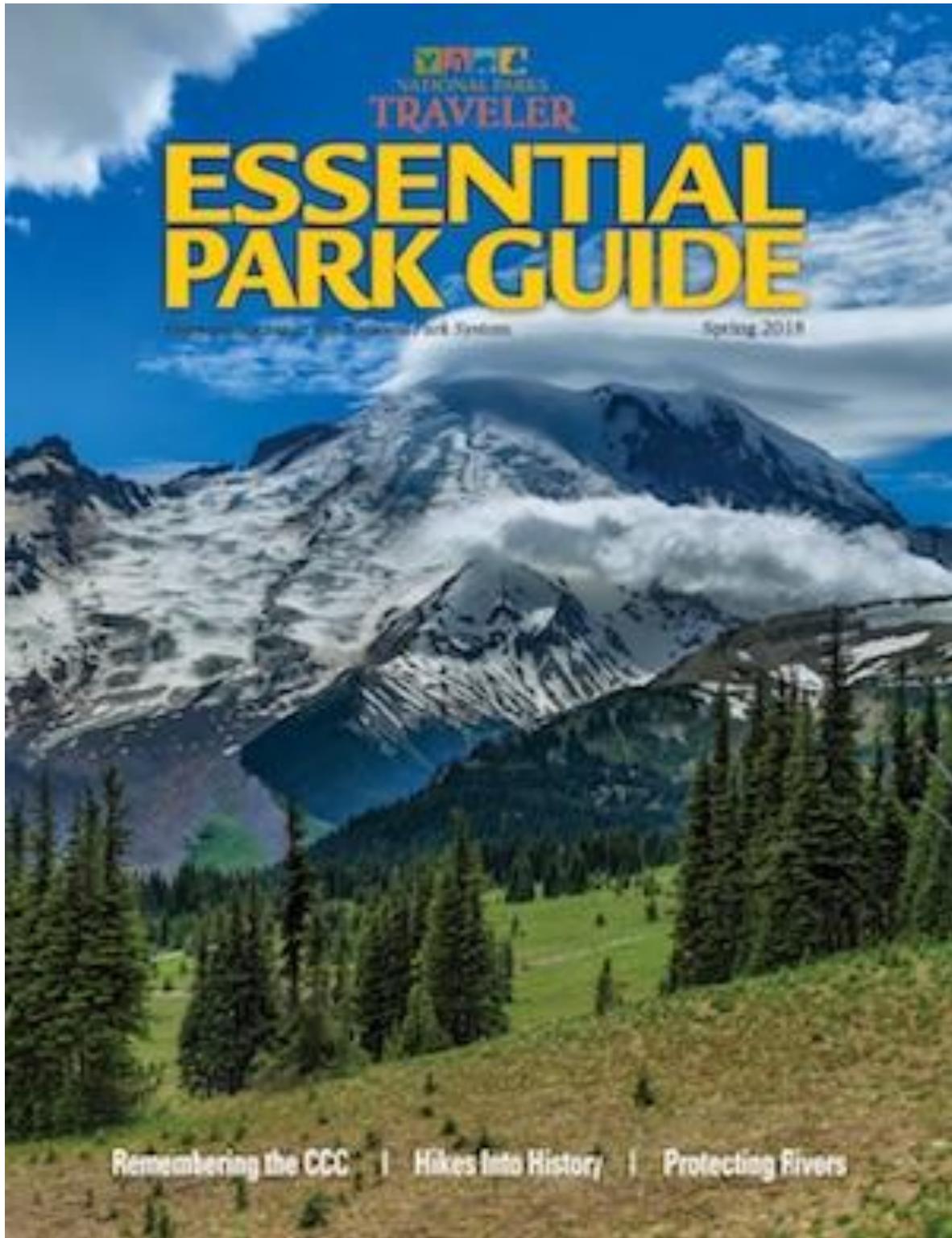


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