Fort Laramie

NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE • WYOMING

ADMINISTRATION

Fort Laramie National Historic Site is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Fort Laramie, Wyo. 82212, is in immediate charge.

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 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.

U.S. Department of the Interior
National Park Service

Fort Laramie, on the eastern Wyoming prairies, was a private fur-trading post from 1834 to 1849 and a military post from 1849 to 1890. It figured prominently in the covered-wagon migrations to Oregon and California, in a series of bloody Indian campaigns, and in many other pioneer events. Today the old fort stands in loneliness, its frontier associations faded, yet still a reminder of the historic struggles and romance of an expanding Nation.

A FUR-TRADING POST

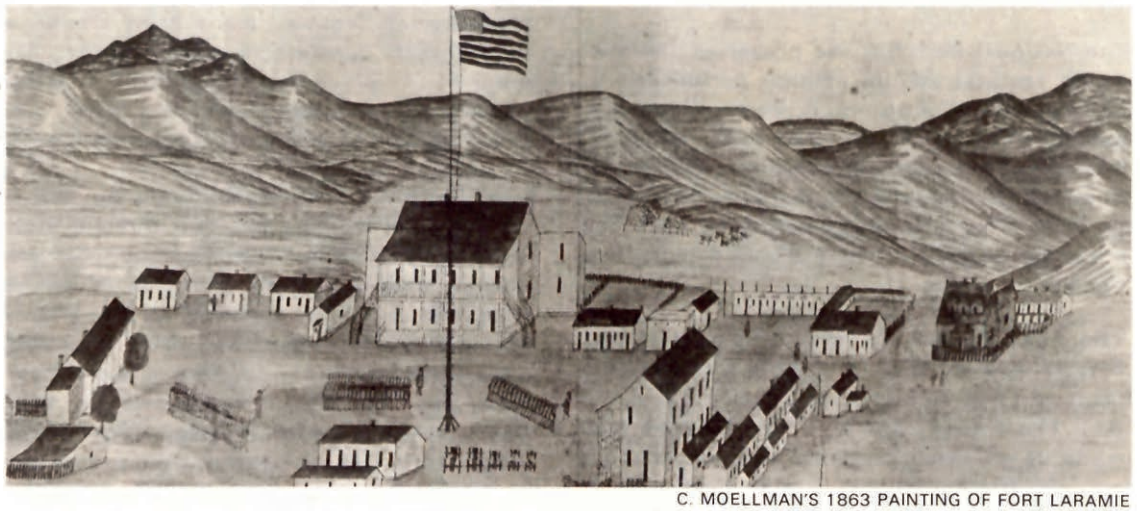
After the purchase of the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803, American trappers and traders pushed boldly up the Missouri River, anxious to exploit the great fur resources of the Rocky Mountains and Great Plains. Fur companies large and small fought each other, often unscrupulously, for control of the trading enterprise.

In the early part of the 19th century, beaver fur was in great demand for wearing apparel, and the Laramie River country was abundant with the prized beaver. It was literally a trapper's paradise. In 1834, two experienced and enterprising traders, William Sublette and Robert Campbell, realized the lucrative potential of the region and built a rude stockade fort near the confluence of the Laramie and the North Platte. It was named Fort William, after the senior partner, but it was more commonly called Fort Laramie.

When the American Fur Company bought the post in 1836, Fort Laramie became one of the major trading centers in the Rockies. Fur traders and Indians came to barter, and depended on the fort for supplies and protection in time of trouble. Bands of Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapahoes camped nearby, eager to trade pelts and robes for dry goods, tobacco, beads, and whiskey.

By 1841, when the second Fort Laramie was built (as Fort John), the fur trade was on the decline and the first covered-wagon emigrants (the Bidwell-Bartleson expedition) had passed by. The Marcus Whitman party, en route to Oregon, visited the fort in 1843, followed 4 years later by the initial Mormon emigration to Utah. By 1849 hundreds of covered wagons were on their westward trek, spurred on by the discovery of gold in California. The following year the high tide of westward migration began, with thousands of travelers stopping at the fort, some only long enough to have broken equipment repaired or to take on supplies.

The U.S. Government bought Fort Laramie in 1849, after recognizing that an Army post here would help to protect emigrants using the Oregon Trail from hostile Indians. A building campaign was initiated and within a decade Fort Laramie became a sprawling military reservation.



University of Wyoming Archives

C. MOELLMAN'S 1863 PAINTING OF FORT LARAMIE

In 1851 and again in 1868 important treaties were drawn up at Fort Laramie, by which the Sioux, Cheyenne, and other tribes of the Great Plains gave up most of their claims to the region. For a while, the fort served as a station for the Pony Express and the Overland Stage, and later it was a supply base for long, costly wars with the Plains Indians. The last major Indian engagements in which Fort Laramie played a significant role were in connection with the Sioux and Cheyenne campaigns of 1876, directed against Sitting Bull and other Sioux chiefs as an aftermath of the Black Hills gold rush.

Beginning in the late 1870's, ranchers and homesteaders moved into the Fort Laramie region. The fort served for a time as a supply center for many of these settlers and afforded them protection against Indians and outlaws. But its importance eventually waned. In 1890, four years after recommendations had been made to abandon the old post, the soldiers marched away from Fort Laramie for the last time. Afterwards, some structures were dismantled; other buildings and fixtures were auctioned off.

For nearly 50 years Fort Laramie was allowed to fall into decay. Although the fort's historic importance was recognized earlier, it was not until 1937 that Wyoming appropriated funds for the purchase and donation to the Federal Government of 214 acres of the former military reservation. By Presidential proclamation in 1938, Fort Laramie National Historic Site became a unit of the National Park System.

ABOUT YOUR VISIT

Fort Laramie National Historic Site, which is open all year, is 3 miles southwest of Fort Laramie, Wyo., on U.S. 26 between its junction with U.S. 85 on the east and U.S. 87 (Int. 25) on the west. Groups wishing guided tours should make advance arrangements with the superintendent.

OFFICERS' ROW

OFFICERS' QUARTERS AND SUTLER'S STORE

"OLD BEDLAM"

FORT LARAMIE'S HISTORIC BUILDINGS

The National Park Service preserves the surviving features of the military period and is carrying out a program to restore standing buildings and related portions of the grounds. Remains of 21 historic buildings may be viewed. Some of the restored original structures date to 1849. The following guide deals with the most significant of the surviving buildings open to the public.

The Post Trader's Store. The post trader (known as a sutler before 1868) was a civilian licensed to do business on a military reservation. The trader's store at Fort Laramie was made up of three sections, built at different periods. The adobe part was earliest, built in 1849. A stone addition was built in 1852 and a lime-concrete extension in 1883.

The store proper, in the adobe unit of the building, has been refurnished to represent its appearance in 1876, when campaigns against the northern Plains Indians were at their peak and the Black Hills gold rush was bringing large numbers of soldiers, officers, and civilians to the post. At this time, the trader stocked a wide variety of merchandise, ranging from tools and weapons for frontiersmen to clothing and household goods for officers' wives and families.

The trader's office occupied the stone addition and appears much as it did in 1883. From this compact headquarters, the trader and his staff managed not only the store, but a far-flung commercial domain that included a nearby hotel, a subsidiary store in the mining town of Fairbank (near present-day Guernsey), and a large ranch. In 1883 the post office was also in this addition.

In one end of the lime-concrete addition was the 1883 officers' club, operated by the post trader, with admission limited to officers, their wives, a few high-ranking civilian employees, and their guests. A wide range of drinks were served, including bottled and draft beer, whiskey, champagne, ale, brandy, and wines. Occupying the other end of the lime-concrete structure, as well as one end of the stone addition, was the enlisted men's bar. Actually an open saloon serving both civilians and soldiers, it was perhaps the trader's most lucrative business. Only beer and wine were served here, but there was a thriving trade after each of the year's six paydays.

The Lieutenant Colonel's Quarters. This 1884 structure was the last and best type of officers' quarters used at Fort Laramie. It is furnished to its 1887 appearance, when occupied by the family of Lt. Col. Andrew S. Burt. A lieutenant colonel ranked fairly high in the small Army of 1887, and his pay—about $4,000 a year—permitted a mode of life in keeping with this status. Good transportation through most of the West, with a railway only 40 miles away from the fort, enabled many Army families to furnish their quarters in a typically Victorian manner. This residence was less ornately furnished than most, due to the Burts' more conservative and diverse cultural interests.

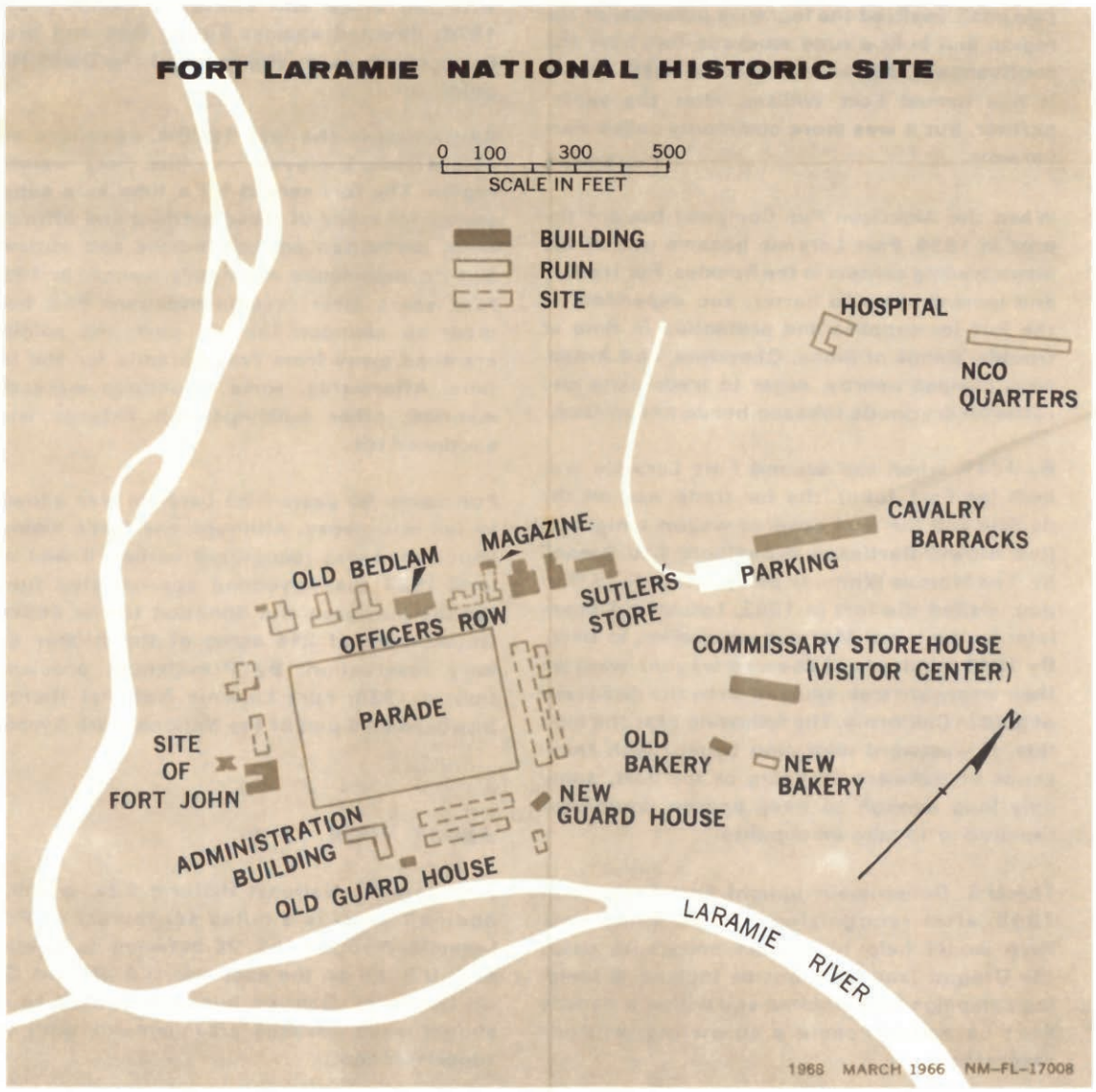
"Old Bedlam." The oldest standing military structure in Wyoming, this four-unit apartment building dates from 1849. The Army and later owners made many alterations in its appearance, but it is now restored to the 1852-68 period. Originally intended as officers' quarters, it served many functions: Part of it was sometimes used for offices, sometimes for family quarters, and often for bachelor officers' apartments. Three units are refurnished to represent an interesting stage in the building's history.

The *bachelor officers' apartment* in "Old Bedlam" is furnished to 1855 and once housed three commissioned officers and their orderly. The senior officer used the front room, two other officers shared the rear room, and the orderly occupied a small room off the kitchen. Furniture not made at the post or salvaged from castoffs of passing wagon trains was hauled from Missouri River ports by wagon freight.

The *post headquarters* was originally one of the first-floor apartments of "Old Bedlam." It is now refurnished as the 1864 headquarters offices. At the front is the office of the post commander. Behind it is a room used for board meetings, courts-martial, officers' classes, and, in 1864, as the dining room for a cooperative officers' mess.

The *post commander's quarters* is above the headquarters. In 1864 the Fort Laramie garrison consisted of volunteer units, principally the 11th Ohio Volunteer Cavalry, commanded by Lt. Col. William O. Collins, who also served as post commander. Colonel Collins and his wife lived in this apartment. The parlor, bedroom, and laundry room were on this floor, while the kitchen was on the first floor to accommodate the cooperative officers' mess managed by Mrs. Collins.

Double Officers' Quarters. This frame building was completed in 1868. Although intended as a single post commander's quarters, it was partitioned into two apartments. One unit of this building is now refurnished as a typical captain's quarters of 1872; the other as a post surgeon's family quarters of 1882.



The *captain's quarters.* With the coming of the railroad to Cheyenne in 1867, transportation costs were reduced sharply. A captain, with $2,000 or more pay in 1872, was reasonably well off, and the general improvement in conditions led many officers to bring their families out to live with them. These quarters, as now restored, represents the midpoint between the primitive bachelor quarters of the 1850's and the more adequate accommodations of the 1880's.

The *post surgeon's family quarters* typified the furnishings chosen by a family of above-average means after the standard of living at western posts improved. The study served both as an office and as a center for the many official and personal interests of the post surgeon. In addition to his medical duties, he kept the post weather records, collected and prepared a variety of scientific specimens, and supplied information on request to such institutions as the Army Medical Museum and the Smithsonian Institution.

☆ U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE: 1968—306-122/100

POST COMMANDER'S OFFICE

1883 OFFICERS' CLUB