Fort Laramie

National Historic Site
Wyoming

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Official Map and Guide



Photo by Jim Milmoe

As America expanded westward, this outpost in the Wyoming wilderness played a crucial role in the transformation of the West, first as fur-trading center, then as military garrison. For over five decades, it was a landmark and way station for the cavalcade of trappers, traders, missionaries, emigrants, Pony Express riders, and miners wending their way west. It was also an important staging point for the U.S. Army in its dealings with the plains tribes displaced by migration and settlement.

Fur trader William Sublette, searching in 1834 for a site for a trading post, found it at "Laramai's Point" on the Laramie River near its confluence with the Platte. From the palisaded Fort William erected by his party of mountainmen, Sublette sent runners out to inform Sioux and Cheyenne chiefs of his readiness to buy their buffalo robes. It was not until the American Fur Company bought the post in 1836, however, that it became a major fur trade center. The company enjoyed a monopoly until a new trading post, Fort Platte, was built in 1841 a mile away. This spurred the owners to replace the rotting wooden fort with a larger adobe structure. They named it Fort John, but it was usually called Fort Laramie.

Because it was near the old trappers' trail through the Platte Valley, Fort Laramie had always hosted occasional traders and missionaries. In the 1840s, however, it became a well-known stopping point for large emigrant parties following the Oregon Trail. Owners of the post capitalized on its strategic location by selling supplies to travelers while its traders carried on a dwindling fur trade with the Indians.

Early relations between Indians and whites were peaceful enough, but as immigration increased, young warriors began to harass wagon trains, leading to calls for protection. In 1849 the army bought Fort Laramie and made it a military outpost along the Oregon Trail. Though the old fort was still used, it was allowed to decay while the army laid out a new post around a large parade ground. Soldiers built stables, a bakery, and officers' and soldiers' quarters to house and support the fort's first garrison, which consisted of two companies of mounted riflemen and one of infantry.

As the Indian troubles escalated in the 1850s and 60s, Fort Laramie became an important arm of the government, protecting emigrants and hosting major treaty councils. Its primary mission was to help maintain links across the continent. The Oregon Trail became the Nation's major overland mail route when the Civil War eliminated the southern route. The Pony Express, with Fort Laramie as a major station, proved the superiority of this route during 1860-61. This dramatic but costly experiment came to an end after 18 months, its passing guaranteed by the completion of the transcontinental telegraph, which also had a station at the fort.

The stream of emigrants past Fort Laramie slowed during the 60s, diminishing the need for protection of travelers. The post became the staging area for Indian campaigns that eventually led to the tribes' confinement on reservations. Later, Fort Laramie served as a buffer between whites and the few defiant Indians in the area and as a stopping place for travelers on the Cheyenne-Deadwood stage road to the gold fields of the Black Hills. With the end of Indian hostilities, the post declined in importance and was abandoned in 1890, its buildings sold at public auction.

Trappers and Traders

Fort Laramie owed its reputation as capital of the American Fur Company's Rocky Mountain empire to an excellent location and skilled traders. Loaded with trade goods brought to the fort by annual supply caravan, the traders traveled to the mountains for the fur trappers' summer "rendezvous." Between rounds of revelry the traders bartered with trappers, or "mountain men," for beaver pelts and other furs. By the late 1830s, with silk hats replacing those of beaver fur, buffalo robes were the fort's primary commodity. Several times a year, bands of Indians camped outside the fort. After the requisite drinking and dancing, business began as Indians traded their buffalo robes for blankets, tobacco, powder, lead, and beads. Hoping to beat the competition, Fort Laramie also sent out traders in early winter. They built small shelters near the Indians' villages and displayed their merchandise. Unscrupulous traders often resorted to diluted alcohol to dull the Indians' wits and cheat them of their hides. But the Indians were normally sharp and patient dealers, trading their laboriously prepared robes only for quality goods.



Thomas Gilcrease Institute

The Emigrants

In 1841, a small party of emigrants bound for the west coast stopped at Fort Laramie. Their guide was Thomas Fitzpatrick, mountain man and former co-owner of the fort. He had brought them from Independence, Missouri, along the Platte River to Fort Laramie. From there he took them through South Pass and on to the Columbia River in Oregon Country. This trail, used earlier in the century by trappers, became famous as the Oregon Trail. The Great Migration of 1843 brought close to a thousand people to Fort Laramie, and throughout the 1840s, wagons rolled up to the fort in steadily increasing numbers.

The emigrants were farmers drawn by free land in Oregon and California, Mormons seeking religious freedom, and, after 1848, miners lured by stories of California gold. This westward migration peaked in the early 1850s at more than 50,000 annually. The weary emigrants and gold-seekers eagerly anticipated their arrival at Fort Laramie, one of the few supply points on the long journey. Its location on the approaches to the Rocky Mountains, approximately one third of the way between the "jumping-off places" on the Missouri River and the western destinations, made it a natural stopping place.

The period during which emigrants could leave Missouri River points was short. Spring grass was needed on the trail for livestock, but to wait too long for it meant risking snows in the Rockies. The emigrant season at Fort Laramie thus lasted only about 45 days, but they were days of intense activity. Emigrant camps often spread out for great distances around the fort. After the long trip along the muddy Platte, emigrants welcomed the chance to bathe and wash clothes in the clear Laramie. They bought fresh draft animals, flour, and medicines before continuing the journey. Harness makers and blacksmiths at the fort helped service stock and repair worn equipment for the mountainous part of the trail that lay ahead.

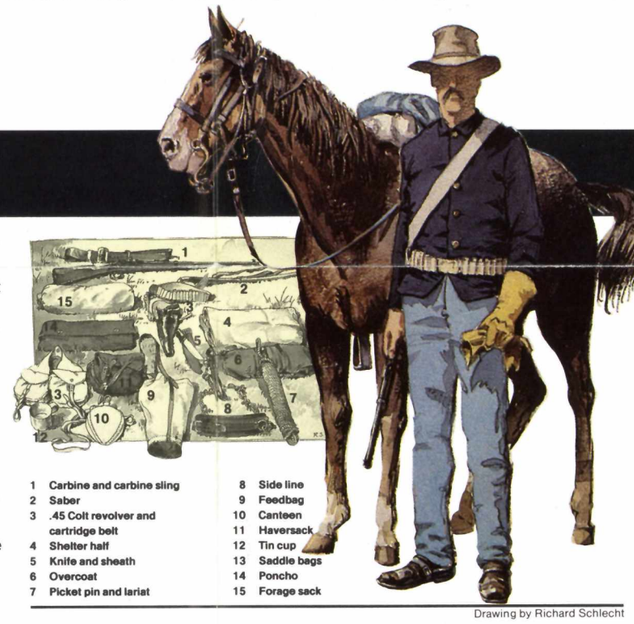


Enron Art Foundation/Joslyn Art Museum

The Soldiers

Soldiers were assigned to Fort Laramie to protect emigrants along the Oregon Trail, but actual combat was rare, and most soldiers never saw a hostile Indian. A rigid routine of drill and "fatigue duties" set the tone for most of their days, with occasional forays to the "hog ranches" near the post for liquor and the company of women. Discipline was harsh in the 19th-century army. Minor infractions often drew severe penalties, including confinement in the bare, unheated guardhouse. The frontier army contained a good number of recent European immigrants, many of whom were poor and illiterate. After they learned the realities of garrison life, the 5-year enlistment seemed endless to many, and Fort Laramie suffered from the frontier army desertion rate of 33 percent between 1865 and 1890. But there were also soldiers like Ordnance Sgt. Leodegar Schnyder, who served with distinction at Fort Laramie for 37 years.

Soldiers from Fort Laramie fought a number of engagements with Indians, but the fort itself was "attacked" only once during its history. In the summer of 1864 a small cavalry patrol had just returned to the fort and unsaddled its horses. Suddenly about 30 mounted warriors rode onto the parade ground. Before the soldiers could react, the Indians had driven off their horses. The soldiers gave chase, but the Indians eluded them. Even with friendly Indians as scouts, it was difficult to locate and engage "hostiles" in the vast expanse of the plains.



1 Carbine and carbine sling
2 Saber
3 .45 Colt revolver and cartridge belt
4 Shelter half
5 Knife and sheath
6 Overcoat
7 Picket pin and lariat
8 Side line
9 Feedbag
10 Canteen
11 Haversack
12 Tin cup
13 Saddle bags
14 Poncho
15 Forage sack

Drawing by Richard Schlecht

Most of Fort Laramie's soldiers belonged to infantry units, such as the 7th U.S. Infantry, shown here in 1887. During the 60s and 70s, when the army conducted extended campaigns, foot soldiers were most in evidence. They marched five or six hours a day in long columns, four abreast if possible, often accompanied by cavalry and artillery. More frequent were the short patrols, or "scouts." Perhaps the most notable involved Bvt. 2nd Lt. John L. Grattan and 29 soldiers sent by the fort's commanding officer to a nearby Sioux village to bring in an Indian thought to have taken a cow from a passing wagon train. Grattan unwisely forced a confrontation that resulted in the loss of the entire detachment. The Grattan Fight in August of 1854 marked a turning point in Indian-white relations in the region.



The Indians

Throughout the 1830s and 40s, Fort Laramie served as a social and economic center for some 7,000 Sioux. But the amicable trade relationship between the fort and the Indians gradually deteriorated into one of dependency, resentment, and finally, hostility. Some tribes grew angry in the late 1840s as more emigrants crossed Indian lands, and young warriors demanded "tolls" of coffee and tobacco from wagon trains. Attacks on trains were rare, but in 1851 Indian Agent Thomas Fitzpatrick called a council near Fort Laramie, attended by some 10,000 Indians. In the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851, they pledged not to harass the trains in return for a $50,000 annuity. In eliciting the pledge, however, the white negotiators insisted that one Indian speak for all the groups. This ran counter to Indian custom, and agreements predictably broke down. Subsequent incidents near the fort, resulting in deaths on both sides, showed the treaty to be unworkable.



Indian resentment intensified in the early 1860s as hundreds of wagons rolled over the Bozeman Trail through Sioux hunting grounds on their way to the gold and silver fields of Montana. Anticipating resistance to this treaty violation, the government decided to force the Sioux back to Fort Laramie for more talks. Veteran Indian fighter Gen. Patrick Conner left the fort with nearly 1,000 men, but the expedition soon returned, a dismal failure. The next strategy was to use promises of annuities to draw the Indians back to the fort. But the Army angered the more moderate Indians like Sioux leader Red Cloud (left) by building Forts Reno, Phil Kearny, and C. F. Smith along the Bozeman Trail.



Public Archives of Canada

The Indians responded with stepped up attacks on travelers and small detachments of soldiers. The Fetterman, Hayfield, and Wagon Box Fights were major actions of Red Cloud's War of 1866-68. Red Cloud refused to participate in talks until the Bozeman Trail forts had been abandoned.



Newberry Library

The government finally agreed to these terms, but when the treaty council took place at Fort Laramie in April 1868 (above), the Sioux were shocked to learn that key hunting grounds were outside the proposed reservation. A compromise was reached, allowing the Indians to make hunting forays outside the reservation.

The Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 did not end the fighting, however, for its terms were broken when gold was discovered in 1874 in the Black Hills, a sacred area well inside lands guaranteed to the Sioux by the treaty. Prospectors flooded the region despite efforts by the Army to keep them out. An agreement to purchase the Black Hills from the Sioux could not be reached, and many Indians, some led by Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull, chose to stay outside the reservations and fight. What followed was the Great Sioux Campaign of 1876, with Fort Laramie serving as a major staging and logistical center. Many of the fort's troops participated in the fighting, including the famous Battle of the Rosebud in June 1876. Fort Laramie remained an important supply and communications center during the years the army was slowly forcing the Northern Plains Indians onto reservations.

Fort Laramie

Red numbers indicate renovated structures. Others indicate standing ruins or visible foundations.

Fort Laramie is depicted below as it appeared in 1888. By that time it looked somewhat like a frontier town, but for much of its history it was an unadorned collection of military buildings in a stark, treeless setting, as shown in this 1868 photo. Like most frontier posts, Fort Laramie did not fit the commonly held image of a fort with palisades. Initial plans called for a log or stone wall with blockhouses. Funding was not forthcoming, however, and since the Indian threat at that time was small, Fort Laramie was built without walls.





Painting of Fort Laramie in 1888 by Richard Schlecht

Fort Laramie Today

Fort Laramie's setting on the approaches to the Rocky Mountains looks much as it did when the post was the center of activity in the area. Significant structures of the fort's military period, some dating to 1849, have survived intact because homesteaders purchased and lived in these buildings and public agencies later took vigorous steps to preserve them. The complete restoration of nearly a dozen structures to their historic appearance provides visitors with a glimpse of a bygone military era.

The historic site is about 3 miles southwest of the town of Fort Laramie, Wyo., off U.S. Route 26. There are no camping facilities at the fort itself, but trailer parks, motels, and restaurants are in the nearby towns of Torrington, Fort Laramie, Lingle, and Guernsey. The park is open every day from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., except New Year's Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. Extended hours are observed from early June to Labor Day.

Historical information and literature are available at the visitor center, located in the old Commissary Storehouse (tour stop 1). Information about the park can also be found at **www.nps.gov/fola** on the Internet.

Please remember that the historic ruins are fragile. Help us preserve them by not walking or climbing on them. The possession, removal, or disturbance of any artifact is prohibited.

For Your Safety Don't allow an accident to spoil your visit. Efforts have been made to provide for your safety, but there are still hazards which require your alertness. Please be careful on foot paths and stairs.

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, WY 82212, is in immediate charge.

Touring the Fort

1 Commissary Storehouse (1884) From this lime-concrete structure the commissary sergeant dispensed foodstuffs to the soldiers. Following abandonment of the post, civilians used the building as a coal dispensary and barn. It now houses park offices and the visitor center.

2 Old Bakery (1876, Left) and New Bakery Ruins (1883) As bread was a staple of the soldier's diet, the bakery was one of the most important buildings at a military post. Bakers working at large double-brick ovens produced up to 700 18-ounce loaves daily. Noncommissioned officers turned in their unit's flour ration and drew loaves.

3 Infantry Barracks Foundation (1867) This one-story frame building housed three companies. Mess halls and kitchens for each company were at the rear of the building.

4 New Guardhouse (1876) In response to frequent complaints from the post surgeon that the guardhouse was unhealthy and overcrowded, with major and minor offenders thrown together, a new guardhouse was built. Conditions were better for both guards and prisoners. The latter slept on the floor on straw mattresses and blankets.

5 General Sink (Latrine) Ruins (1886) To protect the post well, a privy, or general sink, was built for four companies. The sewerage was channeled from there to the Laramie River.

6 Two-Company Infantry Barracks Foundation (1866) All that remains of the large adobe infantry barracks on the southeast side of the parade ground is a long, low mound. Mess halls and kitchens for each company were behind the barracks.

7 Old Guardhouse (1866) Fort Laramie's second guardhouse was designed to hold 40 prisoners, doubling the capacity of the first, but it often held more. The upper story contained quarters for the guard and Officer of the Guard. On the first floor was the general confinement area, with two small cells for solitary confinement. Prisoners had no furniture, heat, or light.

8 Administration Building Ruins (1885) Post headquarters were moved in 1885 to this concrete, or "lime grout," building. It also served as the post adjutant's office and library. At the theater in the rear wing, concerts, religious services, dances, plays, and lectures were given. The children of all enlisted men and those of some officers attended school here.

9 Captain's Quarters (1870) Planned as the Commanding Officer's quarters, the structure was divided into a duplex for company grade officers. It is furnished to its appearance in 1872. When a new officer was assigned to the post, he could "rank out of quarters" any officer junior to him, taking the house for his own.

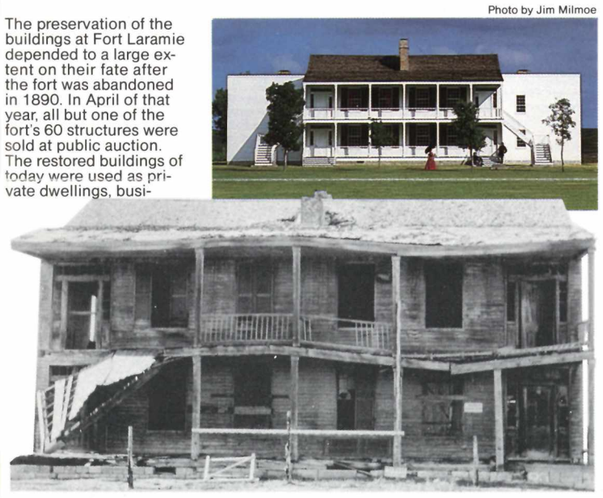
10 Fort John Site (1841-62) Fort John was erected by the American Fur Co. on a site just south of what is now the parade ground. It was built of adobe brick reinforced with wooden beams, with 15-foot walls and block houses on two corners, and was guarded by two brass cannon over the gate. Opinions of the fort ranged from "a rose in the wilderness" to "a very miserable apology for a fort." Abandoned and in ruins by 1858, it was demolished in 1862.

11 Officers' Quarters Ruins (1881) These large lime-concrete buildings—two duplexes and the Commanding Officers' quarters—were built as major additions to smaller adobe buildings dating from 1855.

12 "Old Bedlam" (1849) Built to house bachelor officers, "Old Bedlam" is the oldest military building in Wyoming. The right side is restored as bachelor officers' quarters in the 1850s, and the left side to its appearance as post headquarters in 1863-64, when Lt. Col. William O. Collins commanded the fort. Collins and his wife lived on the second floor, now furnished as it was in 1864. The room behind his office was the commanding officer's mess and doubled as a conference room. The building was the center of social life at the post, where young officers gave parties (hence one of the theories about the name "Bedlam").

Preserving the Post

Photo by Jim Milmoe



The preservation of the buildings at Fort Laramie depended to a large extent on their fate after the fort was abandoned in 1890. In April of that year, all but one of the fort's 60 structures were sold at public auction. The restored buildings of today were used as private dwellings, businesses, or even livestock shelters during Fort Laramie's "homestead period" from 1890 to 1936. The others were stripped of usable lumber and left to deteriorate.

Perhaps the handsomest and most significant building at the fort, "Old Bedlam" was saved in large part because of the efforts of John Hunton, the last post trader. Although Hunton was able to protect Old Bedlam for 30 years, it was almost 90 years old and near collapse when the Federal Government acquired it. A stabilization and restoration program, begun in 1938 and completed in 1964, used extensive research to make the restoration accurate down to the use of square-cut nails and oak dowels. Old Bedlam now looks as it did when it served as bachelor officers' quarters and headquarters for one of America's most important western outposts.

13 Officers' Quarters Ruins (1882) The first building south of the Surgeon's Quarters on "Officers' Row" was a mixture of frame, adobe, concrete, and stone and was built from an existing ordnance storehouse, gun shed, and powder magazine.

14 Magazine (1850) The stone magazine, restored to its 1850-62 appearance, held all of the post's weapons and ammunition except the large field pieces.

15 Post Surgeon's Quarters (1875) The south half of this duplex officers' quarters, restored to its appearance as of 1880, was normally occupied by the post surgeon and his family. It was among the better quarters, intended for higher-ranking officers. The Victorian furnishings reflect the surgeon's position as one of the cultural leaders of the military community. In his study the surgeon maintained his scientific collections and kept data on such things as the weather. Most of his patients were treated in his office in the rear of the building. Many were sent to the hospital to recuperate.

16 Lt. Colonel's Quarters (Burt House) 1884 Lt. Col. Andrew Burt, an officer in the 7th U.S. Infantry, was a respected soldier and Civil War veteran. Burt and his wife Elizabeth were stationed here twice, the second time in 1887-88, the period to which the interior is restored. The Burts preferred furnishings that were relatively plain compared to the ornate decor in most of the other officers' houses.

17 Post Trader's Store (1849) and Complex Built and operated by a civilian licensed by the army, the post trader's store did a profitable business for 40 years with soldiers, Indians, gold seekers, and emigrants. Now restored to its appearance in 1876, the store supplied everything from staples and whiskey to heavy tools and weapons. From its shelves soldiers could supplement the bare necessities they were issued by the army. The north section, built of stone in 1852, served as the sutler's headquarters and, for a period, as the post office. An 1883 addition housed the officers' club and a bar for enlisted men and civilians.

18 Post Trader's (Sutler) House Foundation (1863) This house, somewhat more ornate than the others, was built by the Ward-Bullock partnership, post traders at Fort Laramie. Mr. Bullock lived here for a time.

19 Cavalry Barracks (1874) The cavalry barracks was the largest building at Fort Laramie, and the earliest of the lime-concrete structures to survive intact. It was built to meet the need for more housing during the Indian Wars. Soldiers slept in two large, open squad bays on the second floor. Their first sergeant had a private room downstairs. After the army sold the building in 1890, sections were converted into a home, store, saloon, and dance hall.

20 Hospital Ruins (1873) The hospital was built on the site of the old cemetery used by the army until 1868. Its 12 beds were enough for most situations but were inadequate when an epidemic hit the post. The hospital contained a dispensary, kitchen, dining room, isolation rooms, and surgeon's office, but no labs or operating rooms.

☆ GPO:2000—460-976/00228 Reprint 1997
Printed on recycled paper.