



History and Nature Trail



Echoes of the Past

The sandstone buildings on Fort Larned's quadrangle have survived to today in part because of their sturdy and careful construction. Most frontier military buildings were not such high quality. In fact, many of Fort Larned's buildings were built out of weaker materials such as adobe or wood. These structures, though once vital to the post, have not survived. As you explore Fort Larned's History and Nature Trail, imagine the full scale of the living post: a mail station, corrals, stables, stores, and offices amid a stream of countless passing wagons.

Getting Started

The nature trail is a one-mile loop, half on a mowed path, and half on a gravel road. There is no significant elevation change along the trail. The entire trail may be completed at a leisurely pace in about half an hour. See the map on the reverse of this brochure for detailed information.

The trail begins on the mowed path between the Hospital and Shops buildings on the northeast corner of the fort. Look for marker #1 to begin the trail. The trail loops around the oxbow of the Pawnee Fork, then along the south side of the fort and behind Officers' Row before returning to the visitor center.

Please leave the park as you find it. Collecting or disturbing any park resource is prohibited.

Upon returning from the trail, hikers are advised to check for ticks. Certain species of ticks can carry life-threatening diseases such as Lyme disease and Rocky Mountain spotted fever.

Venomous snakes such as the prairie rattlesnake are uncommon at Fort Larned, but may be present. Be alert! If you hear a rattlesnake, stop, identify the location of the snake, and back away slowly. Do not attempt to harm or kill any snakes. All wildlife is protected in the park.

Prairie Life

Beyond the fort's walls, the immense prairie that once thrived here was home to bison, wolves, elk, grizzly bears, pronghorns, and more. Most of these animals have been pushed from their homes in the last two centuries as the land has been converted to agriculture, cities, and roads. Fort Larned National Historic Site protects a small area of grassland, offering a window into this now radically altered ecosystem.

Today, mule deer and white-tail deer are the only ungulates, or hooved mammals, that inhabit the area. Many small mammals may be found here: fox squirrels, thirteen-lined ground squirrels, prairie dogs, pocket gophers, beavers, skunks, raccoons, opossums, coyotes, muskrats, weasels, and badgers. Occasionally, armadillos may be seen in this northern extreme of their range.

Several species of reptiles may also be found at Fort Larned: lizards, toads, turtles, bullsnakes, blue racers, hog-nosed snakes, and garter snakes.

The nature trail's variety of habitats provide for numerous species of birds such as hawks, orioles, kingbirds, blue jays, and red-headed woodpeckers, among many others. Fort Larned is located on the Central Flyway, a major bird migration corridor. White-fronted geese, sandhill cranes, and many other species pass over Fort Larned during spring and fall migrations.

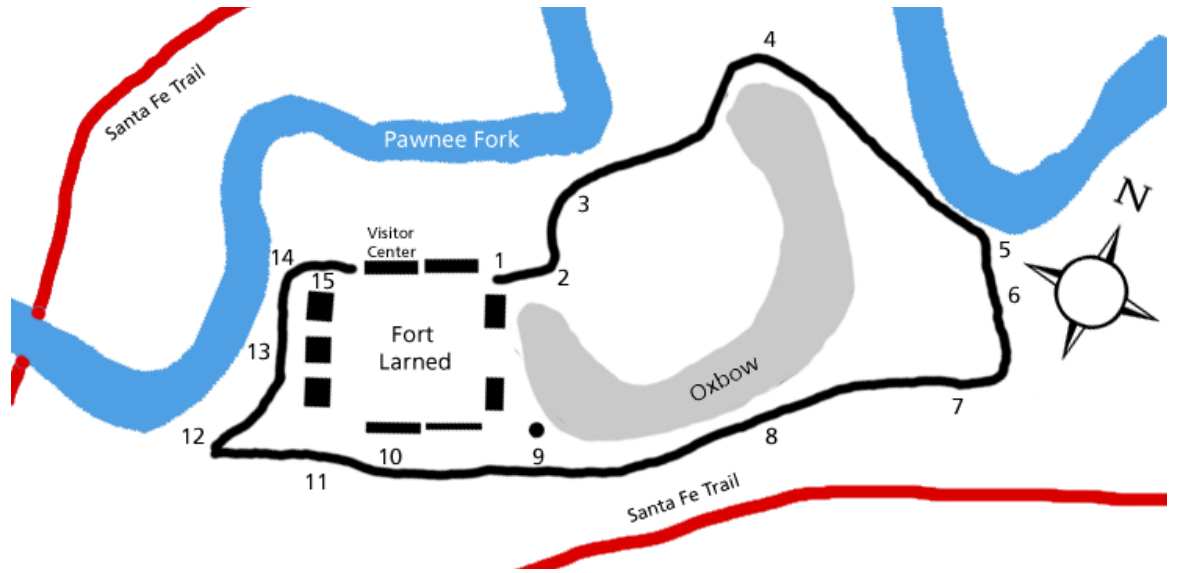


Northern Harrier

Dozens of species of grasses, forbs, and shrubs constitute the plant life of the grasslands, providing food and shelter for animals as well as impressive wildflower displays.

Cottonwood trees, dependent on the water available in the river, line the banks of the Pawnee Fork. Historic photos show far fewer trees than there are today, largely because the trees were susceptible to naturally-occurring prairie fires and were also used for firewood.

Trail Map



Trail Guide

1. Old Barracks - The area behind the present sandstone barracks was the site of the first adobe barracks and laundresses' quarters. The remains of the original, adobe hospital used until 1871 and the hospital steward's quarters are now covered by the dike in front of you.

2. Cemetery - The first post cemetery, used for soldiers and civilians, was located here in the grassy flat in front of you. Following the fort's closing, the military bodies were exhumed and reburied in the Fort Leavenworth National Cemetery. The large cenotaph is original.

3. Oxbow - The depression surrounding this area was once part of the Pawnee River. Before Fort Larned was built, the river naturally changed course. The dry oxbow was used for wood piles and hay stacks.

4. Quartermaster Stables and Corral - The Quartermaster stable was a small, sod structure within a 150' x 200' picket post corral. During Fort Larned's seven years as an Indian Agency, this was the probable site for distributing the tribes' annuities.

5. Mail Station - Fort Larned was originally established to protect mail coaches along the Santa Fe Trail. The station was, in effect, the first post office in the area, though the post commander wrote in 1869, "Only one [load of] mail per week arrives and departs at this post." In 1863, the mail station moved to the Old Sutler Store (#12).

6. Beef Corral - A 100' x 180' post and rail enclosure for cattle was constructed near the river. When available, the soldiers' rations included 20 ounces of fresh beef per day. Beef was also allotted to local tribes.

7. Santa Fe Trail - Wagon trains following the Dry Route crossed the river near the modern water tower on the horizon and passed the south side of Fort Larned near where you are standing. Alternatively, wagons followed the north bank of the river, crossing on the west side of Fort Larned. Fort Larned's sandstone blocks were quarried to the left of the water tower.

8. Native Prairie Grasses - Here, located between the tallgrass areas of the east and the mid-grass country to the west, the big bluestem, Indian,

grama, and wheat grasses mix with the short buffalo grasses. Various prairie wildflowers thrive here, including the sunflower, purple prairie clover, goldenrod, gayfeather, scurf pea, and poppy willow. Native trees include willow, cottonwood, silver maple, box elder, oak, elm, honey locust, black walnut, and ash.

9. Cavalry Stables and Dugout - To your left were once the wooden cavalry stables used by the cavalry. While being used by the Buffalo Soldiers of the 10th U.S. Cavalry, Company A, the structure burned in January, 1869, destroying stores of supplies and equipment and killing 39 horses. The cause of the fire was not determined. Company A was quickly moved to Fort Zarah after the incident, making it the last cavalry unit to serve at Fort Larned.

To your right, dugouts like this reconstruction were inhabited and used by soldiers before above-ground structures were completed at Fort Larned.

10. Early Officers' Quarters - Company officers resided in a 136' x 19' adobe building immediately to the right prior to the completion of the stone quarters in 1867. Teamsters' quarters, a 40' x 20' wood frame building, were 50 yards south of here.

11. New Sutler's Store - The post sutler was a merchant or trader licensed by the Army to sell goods on military land. This second sutler's store, built of wood framing, provided a restaurant, general store, recreation hall, billiards, and a one-lane bowling alley for military and civilians.

12. Old Sutler's Store - Food, clothing, tobacco, and personal items were available here in the original sutler's store. When completed in 1863, it was the first sandstone building on post. It was used until the post closed in 1878.

13. Ice House - An earthen, shingle-roofed dugout in the bank of the river sheltered ice cut in winter for officers' use in summertime.

14. Dugout - The grassy depression in the river-bank is the remains of a caved-in dugout used by soldiers prior to the barracks' completion in 1867.

15. Adjutant's Office - From a small, wood structure here, the post commander and his staff directed daily fort operations.