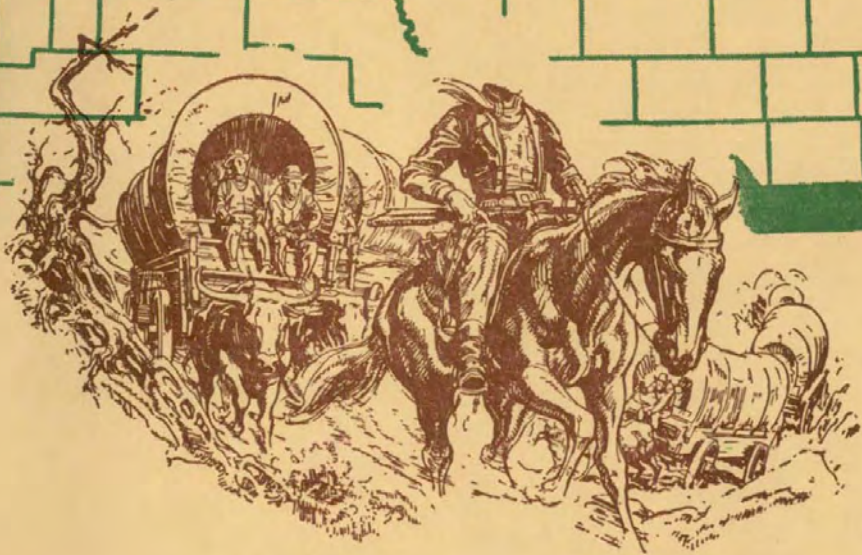


NORTH DAKOTA HISTORY

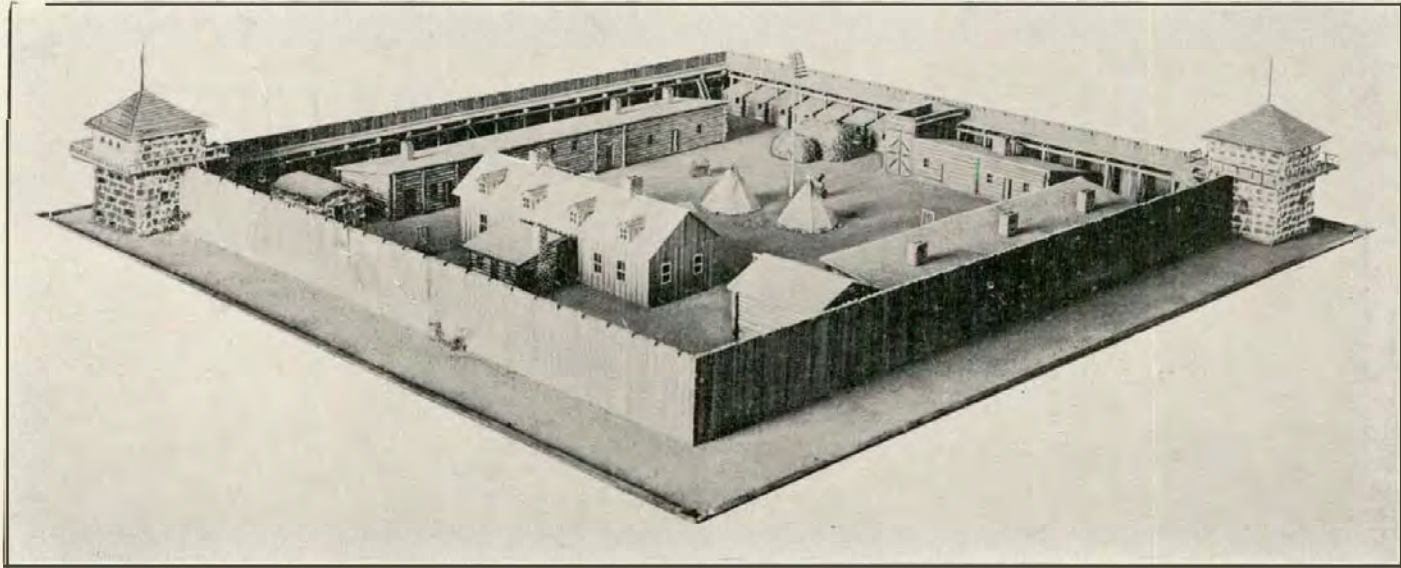


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FORT UNION

One of the important early trading posts on the Missouri River, built in 1829 near the mouth of the Yellowstone River. From a model in the State Historical Society's museum.

FORT UNION: ITS ROLE IN THE UPPER MISSOURI FUR TRADE

°RAY H. MATTISON

Historian, National Park Service

The traders and trappers were the trail-blazers of the white men in their conquest of the West. Far in advance of the main stream of civilization, they left no permanent impression on the wilderness. However, in their search for furs and pelts, they explored practically every stream in the trans-Mississippi West and found their way past every mountain barrier to the Pacific. They broke down the self-sufficiency of the Indians, and through the introduction of white man's diseases and the free use of liquor, made the disintegration of his society almost inevitable.

The American fur trade was based on an insatiable demand in Europe for the furs and skins of animals. During the Middle Ages, furs, such as sable, ermine, and fox, were a status symbol and much sought by noblemen. Beaver pelts, as early as the 14th and 15th centuries, were in demand for the most stylish hats. The term "high hat" had an early origin. Poor people needed protection for their heads and skins with which to make shoes for their feet. The destruction of the fur-bearing animals was so great by the 15th century that western Europe could no longer meet the demand for furs. For many years Russia was able to supply the needs. However, this source also declined during the latter part of the 16th century. Still the demand for furs persisted. At that time the wilderness of North America was swarming with fur-bearing animals.

In their search for furs, the French, in the New World during the 16th and 17th centuries, pushed their way up the St. Lawrence River, into the Great Lakes region, and down the Ohio River. In the late 17th and early 18th centuries, they pressed their way westward up the rich fur-bearing Missouri. When they were forced to surrender their American claims to Spain in 1763, the French had a knowledge of the Missouri as far as the Platte.

The advance up the Missouri by the less aggressive Spanish traders was more slow than that of the French. It was not until the British traders, operating under Hudson's Bay Company, and its rival, the North West Company of Montreal, began to penetrate the Upper Missouri region that the Spanish decided to act. To counteract the influence of the English, French traders in St. Louis, in 1794, organized the Company of Explorers of the Upper Missouri operating under a Spanish license. This company sent out three trading expeditions, the last of which, under James Mackay, in 1795, reached the Mandan villages above present-day Bismarck, North Dakota. There Mackay found

°Mr. Mattison, a frequent contributor to this magazine, is stationed in the Midwest Region, National Park Service, at Omaha, Nebraska.

the British trading with the Indians and ordered the English rivals to leave the country. When the Spanish surrendered control of Louisiana Territory to the French in 1802, the British were in control of the fur trade on the Upper Missouri. Meanwhile, St. Louis had become, and was destined to remain, the center of the fur trade for the trans-Mississippi West except those parts penetrated by the North West and Hudson's Bay Companies.

In 1803, even prior to the transfer of Louisiana from France to the United States, President Thomas Jefferson authorized Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to make their epic journey from St. Louis to the Pacific. On their return trip in 1806 from the Pacific, the two captains and their followers encountered several parties of traders ascending the Missouri.

The stories of the rich fur-bearing regions near the headwaters of the Missouri which the Lewis and Clark party brought back, served as a great stimulus to the fur trade. With Pierre Menard and William Morrison as his associates, Manuel Lisa, in 1807, led an expedition up the Missouri River from St. Louis to its confluence with the Yellowstone and up that river to the mouth of the Bighorn where he established a post among the Crow known variously as Fort Lisa, Fort Manuel, and Manuel's Fort. The expedition met with success, and Lisa, elated with the results, returned to St. Louis in 1808.

With Lisa as its leading spirit and with nearly all the prominent St. Louis merchants as shareholders, the St. Louis Fur Company, better known as the Missouri Fur Company, was incorporated to carry on the fur trade and trapping above the mouth of the Platte River. Its first expedition, comprising about 150 men and sufficient merchandise to equip five or six trading posts, set out from St. Louis in the spring of 1809. After leaving men to establish posts among the Sioux, Arikara, and at the Mandan villages, Lisa's main party proceeded up the Missouri to its confluence with the Yellowstone and up the Yellowstone to the mouth of the Bighorn. There they spent a profitable fall and winter trapping and trading with the Indians. In the early spring of 1810, a party, under Pierre Menard, was sent to the Three Forks of the Missouri where they established a post. At first, the trappers who had been dispersed were successful, and the beaver catch was heavy. In the midst of their success, the Blackfeet suddenly attacked the trappers and killed several. In the succeeding months, the Blackfeet continued to harass the white men so they were finally forced to abandon the Three Forks post during the fall of that year.

As the result of the failure of the project, the Missouri Fur Company reorganized early in 1812. Despite the fact that war was threatening, and the fur market would soon be cut off, another expedition was

fitted out in that year under Lisa's leadership. This expedition established a post on the Missouri near the present North Dakota - South Dakota State line. As the result of increasing Indian hostilities, probably incited by the British, the company was forced to abandon this post in the spring or summer of 1813.¹

During the War of 1812, Lisa withdrew his establishments down the river to Council Bluff. There he built a trading post known as Fort Lisa. From 1814 to 1817 he served as "agent for the tribes on the Missouri above the Kansie." The Missouri Fur Company underwent some changes in both 1814 and again in 1817 but what these were are not known.

Still distrusting their late enemy, the Americans, following the War of 1812, gave attention to protecting the fur trade and counteracting British influence along its northern and western frontiers. Plans were made to establish a line of military posts from the Great Lakes to Arkansas. To thwart the British traders on the Red River of the North, the Secretary of War, John C. Calhoun, proposed to establish a military post at both the mouth of the Yellowstone and at the Mandan villages. With the view of implementing this plan, the Yellowstone Expedition, in 1819, moved up the Missouri River to Council Bluff where it erected a post known as Camp Missouri and remained for the winter. As the result of the failure of Congress to appropriate additional funds for the expedition, it remained at Council Bluff where it erected a new post known as Fort Atkinson in the following year. As a part of its program of conciliating the Missouri River tribes, the Government also established an Indian agency near the post, in 1819, with Benjamin O'Fallon as agent.

In spite of the Government encouragement following the War of 1812, the fur trade languished for several years on the Missouri River. In 1819 the Missouri Fur Company, with Lisa as president, and Joshua Pilcher, Andrew Drips and Robert Jones among the prominent members, was reorganized. Lisa died in the following year and Pilcher succeeded as manager.

Like its predecessors, the reorganized company was destined to have a short life. After meeting with success in its ventures in 1822, it endeavored in the following year to open trade with the Blackfeet. While travelling in a narrow defile on the Yellowstone with an apparently friendly party of that tribe, the Indians treacherously attacked a party of 29 mountaineers of the company, killed its leaders and five others, wounded four men and robbed them of their horses, traps and beaver catch, valued in all at about \$15,000. As a result of this disaster, Pilcher and his company withdrew from the trade above the Omaha. The

¹Stella M. Drumm, ed., *Journal of a Fur-Trading Expedition on the Upper Missouri 1812-1813* by John C. Luttig (St. Louis 1920).

company continued to do business under Pilcher's direction until about 1830 when it went out of business completely.

Three other important companies entered the fur business on the Missouri River in the 1820's. One of these, the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, was organized in 1822 by Gen. William H. Ashley and Maj. Andrew Henry. This company was destined to play an important role in the fur trade of both the Upper Missouri and the Rocky Mountain regions. Following its organization, an expedition, under Henry's leadership, set out from St. Louis with two keelboats and trapping equipment, with the Great Falls of the Missouri as its objective. After losing a keelboat, and having their horses stolen above the Mandan villages, the mountain men reached the mouth of the Yellowstone. There they built a post, known as Fort Henry. During the winter they trapped, hunted, and explored the country and Henry obtained a supply of horses. In the spring of 1823, Henry set out with a party to the Blackfeet country. While in the neighborhood of Great Falls, the party was attacked by Blackfeet who killed four and drove the rest out of the country. Henry and his men returned to his post at the mouth of the Yellowstone.

In the same year, the Rocky Mountain Fur Company met an even greater disaster. Ashley set out from St. Louis with 100 men and two keelboats. The party reached the Arikara villages, near the mouth of the Grand River, without incident. After negotiating with this tribe for horses, the white men were treacherously attacked in the early morning with a loss of 14 and nine wounded. The mountain men with most of their killed and wounded withdrew down the river in their two keelboats to Ashley Island where they waited. Dale Morgan described this Indian attack on the trappers and traders as "the worst disaster in the history of the Western fur trade."²

Ashley at once notified Col. Henry Leavenworth, the Commanding Officer at Fort Atkinson, and O'Fallon, the Indian agent, of the attack, and informed them if they would send an expedition against the Arikara he would cooperate. Leavenworth at once organized an expedition consisting of 220 men, later joined by 120 trappers and 400 or 500 Sioux allies. The expedition attacked the Arikara villages on August 9 and forced the Indians to sue for peace. In the negotiations which followed, the Arikara agreed to return a portion of the goods stolen from Ashley and to refrain from further attacks on the traders.

As the result of the Arikara attack and its failure to gain a foothold in the Blackfoot country, the Rocky Mountain Fur Company abandoned the Upper Missouri and gave its attention to the Rocky Mountain region. There it adopted the rendezvous system under which traders, instead of operating from fixed trading posts, held annual fairs. At these fairs,

²Dale L. Morgan, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West* (Indianapolis 1953), 56.

they traded articles of English and American manufacture to the Indians in exchange for furs and horses.

To afford the traders further protection on the Upper Missouri by a show of strength, the Government, in 1825, sent out a military expedition, under the command of General Henry Atkinson and accompanied by Indian agent O'Fallon, which consisted of eight keelboats, 435 infantrymen and 40 mounted soldiers. As the expedition moved up the river, the commissioners met with the various Indian tribes. At the mouth of the Yellowstone, they established a post known as Camp Barbour where a part of the expedition remained. Two boats proceeded up the Missouri to the mouth of Red Water Creek. Not finding any Indians, the expedition returned down the river. On this expedition, the leaders, after parading the soldiers and making a show of the power of the United States, gave presents and made treaties with the tribes. In all cases, the Indians, after being duly impressed, agreed to acknowledge the supremacy of the United States. Other than the Arikara, most of these tribes maintained a comparatively peaceful attitude toward the traders.³

The decline of the Missouri Fur Company and the withdrawal of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company to the mountains, left two powerful rivals on the Upper Missouri — the Western Department of the American Fur Company and the Columbia Fur Company. Incorporated by an act of the Legislature of New York, April 6, 1808, and under the leadership of John Jacob Astor, the American Fur Company dominated much of the fur trade in the United States. As the result of an act passed by Congress in 1816, excluding foreigners from the fur trade in the United States except in subordinate capacities under Americans, the British were forced to sell out to their American rivals. By the end of the decade the American Fur Company dominated the business in the Great Lakes region.

In the early 1820's, the American Fur Company took initial steps to gain control of the fur trade of the Missouri River Basin. Despite their own opposition, some of the powerful traders and trading companies, such as Bernard Pratte and Company, which included one or more of the Chouteaus, Stone Boswick and Company, and others were brought under its control. In 1822 the Western Department of the American Fur Company was organized with Ramsey Crooks as its head and St. Louis as its headquarters.

Immediately after organizing its Western Department and entering business on the Missouri River, it encountered the powerful opposition

³Russell Reid and Clell G. Gannon, eds., "Journal of the Atkinson-O'Fallon Expedition," *North Dakota Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 4 (October 1929).

of the Columbia Fur Company. Soon after the British North West Company was absorbed by Hudson's Bay Company in 1821, a number of former employees of the North West Company, including Kenneth McKenzie, Joseph Renville, William Laidlaw, Honore Picotte, James Kipp, Daniel Lamont, and an American named Tilton, organized a new company. Apparently to evade the law of 1816 which forbade foreigners to enter the fur trade in the United States, the concern, although generally known as the Columbia Fur Company, took the name of Tilton and Company.⁴

With the able McKenzie at its head, the new company was soon to prove that it was more than a match for its more powerful rival. To check its competitors from moving up the river, it established a trading post, called Fort Tecumseh, which served as its headquarters near the mouth of Teton River. Later this post moved several miles north and was named Fort Pierre. The company also built a post, known as Fort Lookout, farther down the Missouri and others near the mouths of the Niobrara, the James, the Vermillion and the Big Sioux. It also established another post near Council Bluff. Near each of these posts the American Fur Company also placed a competing trading establishment.

About 1825 the Columbia Fur Company pushed its operations up the Yellowstone into the regions recently abandoned by Pilcher and Henry where there was no competition. There it reaped a rich harvest in furs, and the company's income from 1825-1827 grossed \$150,000 to \$200,000 annually. Seeing there was no hope of crushing the opposing company, the American Fur Company, in 1828, finally negotiated for a division of the trade. Under the new arrangement, the Columbia Fur Company took the name Upper Missouri Outfit and operated under the supervision of the Western Department. The new subsidiary gave up its business on the Mississippi and Red River and concentrated its activities to the Missouri and the territories westward. McKenzie remained head of the organization with Kipp as his assistant. Laidlaw and Lamont remained at Fort Tecumseh, replaced in 1832 by Fort Pierre, where they supervised the smaller trading houses from above present-day Bismarck to Council Bluff. In 1831 Kipp built Fort Clark near the mouth of Knife River. Here David D. Mitchell, who became one of the company's ablest traders on the Upper Missouri, came as factor. Tilton and Renville disappeared from the records.

Already firmly established below, the Upper Missouri Outfit had as its objective the exploitation of the rich fur resources of the Yellowstone and the upper regions of the Missouri. Independent trappers and traders still hunted the region. Eventually, McKenzie was able to attach these men to his organization. News of the phenomenal success of the

⁴Paul C. Phillips, *The Fur Trade* (Norman 1961), II, 407-408.



FORT UNION AND DISTRIBUTION OF GOODS TO THE ASSINIBOIN

Painting by John Stanley

Rocky Mountain Fur Company in the Rockies had also reached McKenzie so he was desirous of invading the domain of that company.

As one of the first steps of obtaining these goals, the Upper Missouri Outfit decided to establish a trading post near the point where the travel of both the Yellowstone and Missouri converged. In September 1828, McKenzie dispatched the keelboat *Otter* to the mouth of the Yellowstone to establish a post for the Assiniboin trade. It is quite probable that James Kipp was in charge of the construction of the post which was begun October 1 of that year. The name Fort Floyd was first applied to the post since "Union" was first given to a trading establishment built in 1829 above the mouth of the Yellowstone. It was not until near the end of 1830 that the name "Floyd" was dropped and "Union" permanently given to the post near the confluence of the Yellowstone and Missouri.⁵

After securing a foothold at the confluence of the Yellowstone and Missouri, McKenzie gave his attention to obtaining the Blackfoot trade. Both the Missouri Fur Company and Rocky Mountain Fur Company had attempted to occupy that country with tragic results. The Blackfeet were somewhat under the influence of the British and were hostile to the Americans. When McKenzie returned to Fort Union in the fall of 1830, he found an old trapper by the name of Jacob Berger. He enlisted Berger, who had long served the Hudson's Bay Company and was thoroughly familiar with the Blackfoot language, to lead a party into their country. Berger and his companions set out that fall up the Missouri to the mouth of the Marias which he ascended for some distance until he came to a Blackfoot village. The Indians first appeared hostile to the white men, but when they recognized Berger they became friendly. Berger persuaded the Blackfeet to accompany him to Union where the opportunistic McKenzie feted them. The Indians expressed an interest in having a trading post built in their country so McKenzie gladly promised to establish one there the following summer.

In compliance with his promise, McKenzie, in the fall of 1831, sent James Kipp and a party of 25 men to establish a fort for the Blackfeet. The site for the post, called Fort Piegan, which Kipp selected, was near the junction of the Marias and the Missouri. In less than three months the new fort was completed. Following its opening for business, the Indians came bringing with them beaver skins in large numbers.

Alarmed by the success of the Americans, the British purportedly instigated the Blood Indians, a more warlike group of the Blackfoot tribe, to destroy the post. The Indians besieged the fort for some time and then withdrew. Kipp freely supplied the Indians, both friendly and hostile,

⁵Hiram M. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West* (New York 1902), I, 327-328.

in the vicinity with liquor. As a result they brought all their furs to the American post, and by spring Kipp had collected a fine lot of furs.

In the spring of 1832 Kipp and his men temporarily abandoned the post to take the furs to Fort Union. During their absence, the Indians burned down Fort Piegan.

In the summer of 1832 the company sent David D. Mitchell to take charge of the fort. When he and his men arrived at Fort Piegan he found it burned to the ground. The traders thereupon selected a new site on the left bank of the Missouri six miles above Piegan known as Brule Bottom. There, with thousands of Indians assembled, some of whom were hostile, the traders erected a new post which they called Fort McKenzie. The completion of this post assured the Upper Missouri Outfit a permanent foothold in the Blackfoot country.

While McKenzie was securing the Blackfoot trade, he was also endeavoring to procure the fur business of the powerful Crow. For some time the company had kept itinerant traders among that tribe. In 1832 McKenzie sent Samuel Tullock, in the fall of that year, to the Crow country where he established a post, called Fort Cass, at the junction of the Bighorn and the Yellowstone. With the establishment of the three posts — Forts Union, Cass, and McKenzie — the control of the trade of the Yellowstone and upper portion of the Missouri by the Upper Missouri Outfit was assured.

Meanwhile, to administer more effectively its far-flung empire on the Missouri, the company needed improved transportation. Heretofore, it had used the clumsy and slow moving keelboat to transport its trade goods to the posts on the river. In 1819 a steamboat, the *Western Engineer*, had reached Council Bluff. Impressed by its success, McKenzie, in 1830, convinced the officials of the American Fur Company of the practicability of steamboat navigation to the mouth of the Yellowstone.

In the fall of 1830 the company implemented the scheme by contracting for the building of a steamboat. Following its completion in the spring of the following year, the new boat, known as the *Yellowstone*, began its maiden voyage up the Missouri. With Pierre Chouteau, Jr., as its principal passenger, it reached the mouth of the Niobrara by the end of May without difficulty. Running into low water a short distance above, the steamboat's progress was delayed until boats arrived from Tecumseh to lighten the load of the *Yellowstone*. The steamboat then proceeded to Fort Tecumseh. From this point it returned to St. Louis.

In 1832 the *Yellowstone* left St. Louis in late March with two distinguished passengers on board — Pierre Chouteau, Jr., and the famous American Indian artist, George Catlin. The boat made slow progress

and did not reach Fort Tecumseh until the end of May. After remaining at that post for several days, during which Fort Pierre was christened, it advanced up the river to Fort Union. From there it returned to St. Louis.

In his *Letters*, Catlin recorded by both word and sketches his impressions made from the deck of the *Yellowstone* on its 2,000 mile journey from St. Louis to Fort Union. The natives along the river were very much awed at their first sight of the "big medicine canoe with eyes." Some prostrated themselves on the ground while others shot their horses and dogs to appease the Great Spirit whom they believed to be offended.⁶

The trip of the *Yellowstone* from St. Louis to Fort Union received attention not only all over the United States but Europe as well. It also made a profound impression on the Indians and increased their respect for Americans. Some, as a result, who had been in the habit of trading with Hudson's Bay Fur Company, left that firm to do business with the Americans.

At the time of Catlin's visit, Fort Union was reaching the height of its importance on the Upper Missouri. The artist described it as follows:

The Fort in which I am residing was built by Mr. McKenzie, who now occupies it. It is the largest and best-built establishment of the kind on the river, being the great or principal head-quarters and depot of the Fur Company's business in this region. A vast stock of goods is kept on hand at this place; and at certain times of the year the numerous out-posts concentrate here with the returns of their season's trade, and refit out with a fresh supply of goods to trade with the Indians.⁷

Catlin remained several weeks at Fort Union. Since the post was a rendezvous for the Crow, Blackfeet, Assiniboin and Knisteneux, it gave him an opportunity to paint these Indians. He made a number of trips by canoe up and down the river to these tribes. After spending some time at Fort Union, Catlin began his leisurely 2,000-mile trip back to St. Louis in a canoe stopping at various Indian villages and encampments enroute. He spent two weeks at the Mandan villages painting that tribe and describing in his notes their practices and customs. Later he exhibited his paintings in New York and in Europe. His sketches and paintings, which constitute the first permanent record on the river, did much to publicize the Upper Missouri regions and its inhabitants to the world.

In 1833 the Upper Missouri had another distinguished visitor. Accompanied by a Swiss artist, Charles Bodmer, Alexander Philip Maximilian, Prince of Wied-Neuwied, a small Rhenish principality, set out from Europe in May 1832 for the United States. A naturalist at heart, Maximilian's objective was to study and collect flora and fauna of the

⁶George Catlin, *Illustrations of the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians* (London 1857), 1, 20-21.

⁷Catlin, *op. cit.*, 1, 21.

trans-Mississippi West, and to prepare for publication the results of his journey. Bodmer, meanwhile, would paint primitive landscapes of the New World and portraits of its aborigines to illustrate the prince's narratives.

After spending some time in the East, Maximilian casually traveled down the Ohio to its mouth and up the Mississippi to St. Louis. In April 1833 Maximilian and Bodmer set out in the *Yellowstone* up the Missouri from St. Louis. At Fort Pierre they transferred over to the steamer *Assiniboin*, and made the remainder of the journey to Fort Union where they arrived in late June. After remaining at the post for two weeks, the prince and the artist were transferred to a keelboat and continued their journey to Fort McKenzie, among the Blackfeet.

Maximilian was very much impressed with Fort Union. At that time about 100 people — Americans, Englishmen, Germans, Frenchmen, Russians, Spaniards and Italians — were employed at the post. Many were married to Indian women whom they left when they transferred to a different station or were recalled to the States. The fort was self-sufficient and many different artisans, such as smiths, masons, carpenters, joiners, coopers, tailors, shoemakers, hatters, etc., were employed there. The post kept a herd of cattle, which supplied the inmates with milk and butter, and swine, and maintained a garden which supplied the fort with corn and vegetables. Hunters also supplied it with meat.⁹

At that time, the company had in its employ on the Upper Missouri about 500 people. In addition, there were a number of trappers who supported themselves and exchanged their furs to the company for horses, guns, powder, ball, clothing, etc. The company at that time maintained 23 regular and wintering posts, which were log huts or blockhouses built quickly and readily abandoned. In the fall and the winter the Indian tribes came to these posts to barter the skins they caught while in the spring and summer they engaged in trapping.⁹

The principal furs shipped down the river were beaver, totaling about 25,000 each year; buffalo skins, 40,000 to 50,000 each year; deer, 20,000 to 30,000 each year; and, muskrat. Other skins in demand were otter, weasel, martin, lynx, red fox, cross fox, silver fox and mink. The beaver skins were shipped in 100 pound packs numbering 60 large skins each. Large beaver skins weighed about two pounds and brought about two dollars a pound.¹⁰

The chief items of the Indian trade at that time were awls, half axes, beads, hawk bills, combs, flannel shirts, blankets, lead, kettles, gun worms, powder, bar iron, rifle balls, vermilion, gun flints and coat

⁹Reuben G. Thwaites, ed., *Maximilian, Prince of Wied's Travels in the Interior of North America* (Cleveland 1906), I, 374, 378, 381-383.

⁹Maximilian, *op. cit.*, I, 379-380.

¹⁰Maximilian, *op. cit.*, I, 380-381.

buttons. Liquor, although forbidden by law, was, and remained the most popular as well as lucrative item. Sugar and coffee also later became popular.¹¹

Popularly called "King of the Missouri" and "Emperor of the West," McKenzie from Fort Union ruled over a far-flung empire. As stated by Hiram Chittenden, recognized authority on the fur trade:

. . . His outposts were hundreds of miles away. His parties of trappers roamed far and wide through the fastnesses of the mountains. From every direction tribes of roving Indians came to his post to trade. Altogether it was a remarkable business that he followed, and one which only a man of great ability could have handled so successfully. He was universally feared and respected even by the turbulent spirits of the mountains, while his immediate subordinates in charge of the various posts considered him not merely their superior but a friend. His correspondence with them shows diplomatic skill of no mean order, and he could with equal facility praise well doing, administer mild censure in a way to rob it of all bitterness, or bear down with merciless weight upon him who deserved it.¹²

McKenzie lived in regal style as befitting his position. One clerk who worked at Fort Union wrote that when he first dined there in 1834 that at the table, presided over by McKenzie, the higher ranking employees, all wearing coats, were seated according to their position. The dinner, at which buffalo meat, fresh butter, cream and milk were the principal items of diet, was set on a white table cloth. Two waiters, one a Negro, served.¹³ The lower ranking employees such as mechanics and tradesmen, ate at a separate table.

Both Maximilian and Bodmer found life at Fort McKenzie among the Blackfeet very interesting. There they came in intimate contact with the actual operations of the fur trade. On one occasion they witnessed a battle in front of the fort between the Blackfeet and Assiniboin. In the two months spent at the post, Bodmer found many subjects to sketch and paint while the prince made his way among the Blackfeet near the fort observing their customs and collecting both scientific specimens and Indian artifacts and gear. Learning that it was inexpedient to travel to the Rockies on account of the intertribal wars and restlessness of the Indians, Maximilian and his party decided to abandon the proposed trip. The factor of Fort McKenzie built a barge for them and, together with a small crew of *voyageurs* and two cages of live bears and several other animals, Maximilian and Bodmer set out down the river.

Maximilian and Bodmer spent the winter of 1833-1834 at Fort Clark. There, during the winter, Maximilian, in company with Toussaint Charbonneau, formerly of the Lewis and Clark expedition, visited the

¹¹Ray H. Mattison, "The Upper Missouri Fur Trade: Its Methods of Operation," *Nebraska History*, XLII (March, 1961), 8.

¹²Chittenden, *op. cit.*, 386-387.

¹³Elliott Cones, ed., *Forty Years a Fur Trader on the Upper Missouri: The Personal Narrative of Charles Larpenteur, 1833-1872* (New York 1898), I, 70-71.

Mandan and Hidatsa living near the fort and observed their customs. Bodmer, meanwhile, made sketches of Indian life and ceremonies. Before winter passed the prince suffered with scurvy, but recovered. When the ice broke up, Maximilian and Bodmer descended the river to St. Louis. At Fort Pierre, Maximilian transferred a large portion of his specimens to the *Assiniboin* where they were burned when that steamboat caught fire.

The narrative of Maximilian's travels, together with the atlas of Bodmer's engravings, was first published in German. Later it appeared in both French and English versions. While Maximilian and Bodmer's works are primarily of value to ethnologists, they give an excellent historical description of the Upper Missouri as it appeared over a century and a quarter ago.

While the Upper Missouri Outfit was establishing its foothold on the Yellowstone and upper portions of the Missouri, it was endeavoring to establish a monopoly of the trade on the lower part of the river. It was always known as "the company." Those who competed against it, whether it might be a small individual trader or a large company, were known as "the opposition."

The correspondence of both Laidlaw, from Fort Pierre, and McKenzie at Union, are full of advice to the smaller traders, employed by the company at the wintering posts, on how to crush the opposition. *Coute que coute* and *ecraser toute opposition* were the rule. At first the company tried to force rival traders out of business by competition. If that failed, it then tried force. If force did not succeed, the company would buy out its rivals.¹⁴

Because the Indian trade was so lucrative and despite its ruthless methods, the company, during its entire period of operation, encountered considerable opposition. The first it met on the Upper Missouri was the French Fur Company, which had an equipment of \$16,000. This latter firm operated somewhat ineffectively for two years and then sold out to the company. Several of the partners entered the service of the Upper Missouri Outfit.

The company ran into difficulties when it tried to liquidate by strong-arm methods an independent trader named Leclerc. In 1831 and 1832 he operated successfully by the free use of liquor. Congress in July of 1832 enacted a law forbidding the transportation of liquor into the Indian country. Before the law was recognized in St. Louis, both Leclerc and the company shipped liquor up the Missouri. At Fort Leavenworth the company's liquor was confiscated, but Leclerc slipped by with his supply. J. P. Cabanne, a partner in the company who operated a post at Council Bluff, after learning of this, notified

¹⁴Mattison, *op. cit.*, 14-17.

his clerk Sarpy to take a body of men and enforce the law against bringing liquor into the Indian country. Sarpy captured Leclerc and confiscated the liquor. The company could not hold Leclerc who returned to St. Louis where he and other independent traders raised an outcry against the high-handed methods of the Upper Missouri Outfit. At St. Louis he brought suit against the company and criminal action against Cabanne. The company finally paid Leclerc \$9,200, and he dropped his case against the company.

The most formidable opposition which McKenzie and his organization encountered was the partnership of William Sublette and Robert Campbell. In late 1832 Campbell led a party of traders over the mountains to the mouth of the Yellowstone. At the same time Sublette, with a steamboat, the *Otto*, moved up the Missouri with supplies and trading goods. On his journey, Sublette left off traders with Indian goods near the posts of the Upper Missouri Outfit. At the mouth of the Yellowstone, three miles below Fort Union, the partners erected a post known as Fort William.

During 1833 and the winter of 1834 the Upper Missouri Outfit and its rival tried to outbid each other in order to get furs and peltries from the Indians. Maximilian stated that as the result of this competition the Indians at Fort Clark received \$12.00 for a beaver which would not bring more than \$4.00 in the States.¹⁶

McKenzie charged the opposition with the lavish use of liquor in the trade. To obtain a modification of the law prohibiting the bringing of liquor in the Indian country, he made a trip to Washington, D. C. There he argued that the British were using liquor in the trade and that it was imperative that the company have liquor to compete.

Unable to convince officials to relax the liquor law, McKenzie decided to thwart it by another means. The law specified only that liquor could not be brought into the Indian country but said nothing about manufacturing it there. In the spring of 1833 he shipped a still to Fort Union where he began the manufacture of whiskey from corn raised by the Mandan Indians. However, the period of the operation of the still was a short one. When M. S. Cerre and Bonneville's lieutenant, Nathaniel J. Wyeth, stopped at Fort Union while enroute from Fort Hall to the States, McKenzie showed them the still. The factor at Union entertained the two visitors lavishly. When they left for St. Louis, McKenzie charged them exorbitant prices for supplies and refused to sell them liquor from the still. After the two men arrived in St. Louis, the vindictive Wyeth reported the still to William Clark, Superintendent of Indian Affairs. The existence of the still at Fort Union aroused increased indignation on the part of the public, which was already

¹⁶Maximilian, *op. cit.*, II, 229.

aroused by the ruthless methods of the company. As a result it almost lost its license to trade. Although the existence of the still was known to American Fur Company officials, McKenzie was made the scapegoat and was retired as head of the Upper Missouri Outfit.

Well-supplied with liquor, Sublette and Campbell kept up a strong competition during the winter of 1833-1834. At the mouth of the Yellowstone, the Assiniboin first rushed to Fort William to trade, but finding the choice of goods at that post meager, they returned to Union. It was apparent to the company that it would be costly to outtrade Sublette and Campbell, whom they knew had Ashley as well as Eastern backing. In February 1834 the American Fur Company and Sublette and Campbell reached an agreement described by John E. Sunder as the "partition of Poland." Under this agreement the partners agreed to give up their trade and posts on the Upper Missouri. In exchange, the company promised to retire from the mountain trade, in which Sublette and Campbell were primarily interested, for one year.¹⁶

When Sublette and Campbell went out of business at Fort William, one of the clerks, who went over to the employment of the Upper Missouri Outfit at Fort Union, was a young Frenchman named Charles Larpenteur. At that time, 27 years of age, Larpenteur was to spend much of his life in the fur trade on the Upper Missouri serving in various capacities with the Upper Missouri Outfit and opposition companies. He never reached a position of great responsibility with the company and apparently bore a feeling of resentment toward it for his lack of success. Unlike his colleagues in the fur trading fraternity, he was never addicted to profane and indecent language and seldom drank — never to excess. Larpenteur kept a journal throughout much of his life, which, after being edited and placed in narrative form, gives a very good picture of the inside workings of the fur trade.¹⁷

Larpenteur started out with the company as a humble clerk. His first duties at Fort Union were opening and closing the gates of the post each day, keeping the tools and harnesses in order, and lending a hand at the stores. When Fort William was rebuilt about 150 yards from Union, Larpenteur was placed in charge of construction.

As he gained more experience with the company, Larpenteur spent more and more time with the trading aspects of its operations. In his journals he relates many incidents from his wide experiences at Fort Union and other posts on the Missouri. He was a good story teller and frankly relates his experiences as a trader, such as feuds between the personnel at the post, the visits of the various Indian tribes and the

¹⁶John E. Sunder, *Bill Sublette: Mountain Man* (Norman 1959), 132-135.

¹⁷Cones, *op. cit.*, I.

difficulty in keeping peace between them while at the fort, his efforts to placate drunken Indians, and the use of liquor in the fur trade.

Larpenteur was at Fort Union during the winter of 1837-1838 when smallpox swept through the trading post. Following the arrival of the steamboat *St. Peter*, which brought the dreaded disease, steps were immediately taken to prevent its spread among the inhabitants of the fort. Jacob Halsey, the representative of the company, who was to take charge of the fort that summer, had the disease of which several of the hands had died. No vaccine was available, and to prevent the spread of the epidemic, about 30 Indian women were inoculated with the disease. Unfortunately the operation proved fatal to many of the patients. The stench was so great that it could be smelt 300 yards from the post. Some went crazy while others were half eaten by maggots before they died. Many died, while those who recovered were hardly recognizable. While the epidemic was at its height, a party of about 40 Indians appeared at Fort Union and insisted on being admitted. On showing them a little boy who had not recovered and whose face was a solid scab, by holding him above the pickets, the Indians left. The people at the post later learned that over half the visiting party died. The remaining buildings of Fort William were made pest houses for the diseased Indians, the attendants being several old Indian women. Larpenteur estimated that over half the Assiniboin died during the winter.¹⁸

The decade of the 1830's witnessed several changes in the fur trade on the Upper Missouri. The silk hat was slowly displacing the beaver hat as a status symbol. Astor, noting the decline of the beaver trade, decided to retire from the business. In 1834 the American Fur Company sold out the Western Department to Pratte, Chouteau & Company of St. Louis. In 1838 the company again underwent a change in management when its name changed from Pratte, Chouteau & Company to Pierre Chouteau, Jr., & Company. Despite the retirement of the company from the trade, the name American Fur Company was popularly applied to the new firm for many years. Its methods of operation continued to remain the same until it went out of business in the 1860's. Buffalo robes and skins, meanwhile, became more and more the principal items of trade as the demand for beaver decreased. The company ceased to employ trappers to roam the country in search of furs and peltries.

In the 1840's the company encountered on the Upper Missouri the most serious competition it had met, with the exception of Sublette and Campbell 10 years earlier. After spending a successful winter on the Upper Missouri, one Ebbetts made a trip to New York and convinced the firm of Fox, Livingston & Company to enter the fur business on the

¹⁸Coues, *op. cit.*, I, 131-135.

river. This company established two posts — one at the mouth of the Yellowstone where they reoccupied Fort William, which they called Fort Mortimer, and Fort George, about 20 miles below Fort Pierre. The opposition company smuggled in liquor with the Upper Missouri Outfit, working through the Indian agent, Andrew Drips, attempted in vain to confiscate, and employed notorious characters to conduct its trade.

Fox, Livingston & Company, known also as the Union Fur Company, did a losing business for about three years. An Assiniboin chief visited Fort Mortimer, which was under the charge of F. Cutting. The factor presented the chief with a new uniform as a present. After receiving the present, the chief went to Fort Union and assured the Upper Missouri Outfit that he would continue to trade with them. In 1845 Fox, Livingston & Company sold out to the Upper Missouri Outfit.

One of the best-known guests at Fort Union, and of the other fur trading posts on the Missouri, was the famous Jesuit missionary, Father Pierre-Jean DeSmet. Born in Belgium, DeSmet came to the United States in 1823. After a missionary assignment with the Potawatomie, near present-day Council Bluffs, Iowa, he began in 1840 his long missionary journeys which were to take him all over the Northwest. After visiting the Crow and other tribes near the headwaters of the Missouri, DeSmet and his companions in September of that year stopped at Fort Union. He described the post as "the vastest and the finest of the forts that the Fur Company has upon the Missouri."¹⁰ After saying mass and baptising the half-breed children at that post, the priest renewed his voyage down the river reaching St. Louis on New Year's Eve. In 1842 and in 1847 he again visited Fort Union. In 1851, after ascending the river in the cholera-stricken *St. Ange*, he took a delegation of Assiniboin, Hidatsa, and Crow from Fort Union to Fort Laramie to participate in the famous Fort Laramie Treaty. He again visited Fort Union in 1866.

In 1843 Fort Union had another distinguished visitor, the famous naturalist John J. Audubon. In late April he set out with a party on the company steamer, *Omaga*, which had as its destination Fort Union. They arrived at the post on June 12. At that time Alexander Culbertson was in charge of Fort Union and Edwin Denig, who later became a recognized authority on the Indian tribes on the Upper Missouri, was chief clerk. While at the trading establishment, Audubon hunted, collected, and made observations on the wildlife in the vicinity. His journals, which fill an important gap in the history of the Upper Missouri, contain numerous items of interest regarding life at Fort

¹⁰Hiram M. Chittenden and Alfred T. Richardson, eds., *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean DeSmet, S.J., 1801-1873* (New York 1905), I, 244.

Union and the fur trade. In mid-August of that year, Audubon and his companions set out in a mackinaw for their long trip down the river. After a period of over two months, they reached St. Louis on October 19.²⁰

In 1847-1848, John Palliser, English hunter and adventurer, made his journey to the Upper Missouri country. After hunting in Arkansas and Kentucky, he decided to make a tour of the Missouri. Arriving by steamboat at Independence, Missouri, in early September, he joined a party of the Upper Missouri Outfit under the leadership of James Kipp whose destination was Fort Union. The party followed the Missouri and stopped at Forts Vermillion and Pierre. In late October they arrived at Fort Union which he made the headquarters of many of his hunting expeditions. When the steamboat *Martha* arrived in July of the following year, Palliser went aboard with his trophies of the hunt and took passage to St. Louis. His travels in America were later published.²¹

In 1850, Thaddeus Culbertson, the younger brother of Alexander Culbertson, of fur trade fame, visited the Upper Missouri region. A scientist by training, young Culbertson was employed by Smithsonian Institution to make a scientific expedition to the Bad Lands of present-day South Dakota. After traveling by steamboat from St. Louis to St. Joseph, the party, comprising the young scientist, his brother Alexander, four voyageurs, and a Negro servant, set out by land. In early May they reached Fort Pierre. There, Thaddeus, accompanied by Owen McKenzie, half-breed son of Kenneth McKenzie, made an 11-day trip to the Bad Lands and returned to Fort Pierre. After remaining at the trading post for three weeks where he collected botanical and wildlife specimens, Indian objects and observed Indian customs and ways of life, he set out in the steamboat *El Paso* for Fort Union. From that place the boat ascended the Missouri to the mouth of the Milk River. From here the boat descended the river, stopping briefly at Fort Union and other trading posts.²²

Of the various observers on the fur trade at Fort Union, Rudolph Friederich Kurz was the most intimately associated with the business. Born in Switzerland, this artist spent 1846 to 1852 at the trading posts of the great fur companies on the Mississippi and Upper Missouri Rivers, from New Orleans to St. Louis and Fort Union. With the view of studying and sketching primitive conditions and collecting Indian relics, Kurz, in 1851, set out up the Missouri River from St. Joseph in the steamboat *St. Ange*. While enroute he secured employment as clerk

²⁰Maria R. Audubon, ed., *Audubon and His Journals* (New York 1900); see also John Francis McDermott, ed., *Up the Missouri with Audubon: The Journal of Edward Harris* (Norman 1951).

²¹John Palliser, *Solitary Rambles and Adventures of a Hunter in the Prairies* (London 1853).

²²John Francis McDermott, ed., "Journal of an Expedition to the Mauvaises Terres and the Upper Missouri in 1850 by Thaddeus A. Culbertson," *BAE Bulletin* 147 (Washington 1952).

for the Upper Missouri Outfit. He remained at Fort Berthold as clerk under James Kipp. At that time, cholera was sweeping through the various trading posts on the Upper Missouri killing many of the Indians. While there, the Swiss artist sketched the Indians. Believing there was some connection between the drawings and the plague, the superstitious Indians blamed Kurz for the epidemic so the artist, whose life was threatened, was sent to Fort Union.

At that time, Denig was factor or bourgeois at Fort Union. Alexander Culbertson had under his supervision Forts Union, Benton, and Alexander. Under W. Picotte were Forts Berthold, Clark, Vermillion, Lookout, and Pierre. Papin had under his supervision the Platte posts and Fort Hall. Each of the posts were under a head clerk or bourgeois who received a fixed salary of \$1,000 and a stated percentage on sales. He bought goods at cost price.²³

At that time Fort William, under the charge of Joe Picotte, operated at the mouth of the Yellowstone about three miles below Fort Union.

In April 1852, Kurz, together with his sketches, his collection of Indian weapons, apparel, and ornaments, set out down the river in a keelboat. After arriving in St. Louis in late May, he disposed of a part of his Indian collections in order to obtain passage money, and departed for his home in Switzerland. There he spent the remainder of his life. His journal, translated into English and edited, was later published by the Bureau of American Ethnology.

Fort Union was an important rendezvous point in the Northern Pacific Railway Survey. Authorized by Congress, this survey, led by Isaac I. Stevens, Governor of Washington, was the most elaborate of the five surveys conducted by the Federal Government in 1853. In accordance with instructions from Jefferson Davis, Secretary of War, Stevens was to conduct a line of survey to the Pacific between the parallels of 47 and 49 degrees, north latitude. One party, operating under Stevens, set out from St. Paul, Minnesota, while Stevens himself set out by way of St. Louis. There he procured Alexander Culbertson as guide and proceeded to St. Paul where he arrived on May 27. From St. Paul, parties, operating under Stevens, pushed westward to Fort Union while a secondary group proceeded by boat up the Missouri. At this place all of the parties assembled. From Union Stevens and his party, under the guidance of Alexander Culbertson, explored westward as far as Fort Benton, located on the site of the modern town by the same name. Stevens, with parties operating on each side of his route, proceeded to the Columbia and descended that river to Vancouver.

²³J. N. B. Hewitt, ed., "Journal of Rudolph Friederich Kurz," *BAE Bulletin* 115 (Washington 1937), 235.

Accompanying him was the artist, J. M. Stanley, who made drawings of Forts Union, Benton, and other points along Stevens' route.²⁴

The Government early recognized the importance of Fort Union as a focal point in dealing with Indian tribes on the Upper Missouri and the Yellowstone. As early as 1830-31, it sent up John F. A. Sanford, sub-agent, with presents for the Mandan, Chippewas, Hidatsa, Blackfeet, Assiniboin, and other tribes. Following the signing of the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1851, Fort Union was made a distribution point for the annuities of some of the Upper Missouri tribes. Indian Agent Alfred J. Vaughn recorded that in 1856 he distributed the treaty goods to the Assiniboin at Fort Union. After waiting for the Crow to appear to receive their annuities, he set out with three horses loaded with presents and five men to visit the tribe. After traveling for 15 days, Vaughn finally found the tribe and gave them the presents.²⁵

With the advance of white settlement in the 1840's and 1850's on the Missouri, the fur trade frontier declined. By the early 1830's white settlements extended westward across the Missouri River. Twenty years later it extended to the mouth of the Platte. In 1855, as the result of the William S. Harney Expedition against the Sioux, the Government acquired the important fur-trading post of Fort Pierre. While other trading houses later sprang up in the vicinity, these had a short life.

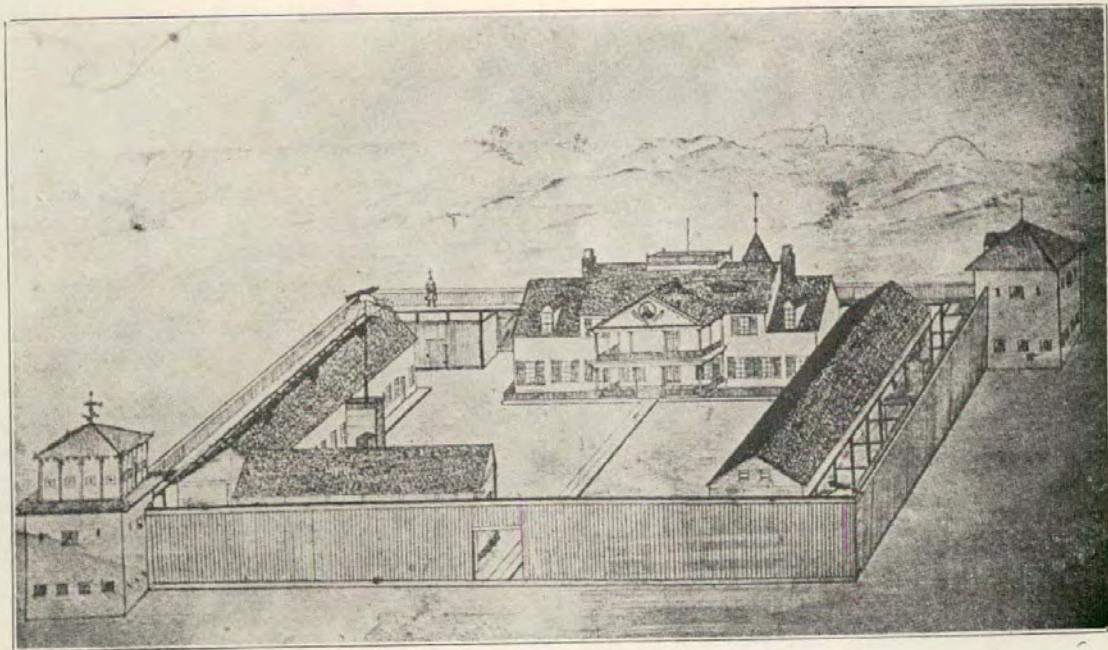
The widespread unrest among the Indians on the Upper Missouri, resulting from the Sioux Uprising in Minnesota in 1862 and the Civil War, had an adverse effect on the trade with the Indians. The fur resources, meanwhile, declined. Since many of the officials in the company were southern sympathizers, the Government refused to renew the fur trade license to the Chouteaus. As a result, they, in 1865, sold their interests to the Northwestern Fur Company. Meanwhile, the condition of the post deteriorated.

When Gen. Alfred Sully, in 1864, made his famous Northwest expedition through western Dakota, he found Fort Union "an old dilapidated affair, almost falling to pieces."²⁶ Despite its condition he left a company of infantry there to police the region. During the winter of 1864-1865, the soldiers at that post suffered from scurvy. In the summer of 1865, a company of "galvanized Yankees," comprising former Confederate prisoners-of-war, were stationed there until August when Fort Union was entirely abandoned by the military.

²⁴*Narrative and Final Report of Explorations for a Route for a Pacific Railroad near the Forty-seventh and Forty-ninth Parallels of North Latitude from St. Paul to Puget Sound* (Washington 1855).

²⁵Ray H. Mattison, "The Indian Frontier on the Upper Missouri to 1865," *Nebraska History*, Vol. 39 (September 1958), 263-264.

²⁶*The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series II, Vol. XLI, Part I, 149.



FORT UNION, 1864

During its declining years of operation, Fort Union continued to be a focal point for Indian tribes. Larpenteur, who served there under both the Upper Missouri Outfit and the Northwestern Fur Company in the early and middle 1860's, recorded the visits of the Assiniboin and Crow to receive their annuities and of the raids of the Sioux.

With the establishment of the military post of Fort Buford at the mouth of the Yellowstone in 1866, several miles below, Fort Union survived only a short time. When the military establishment was enlarged from a one-company to a five-company post in 1867, Fort Buford purchased Fort Union and dismantled it for building materials. The Northwestern Fur Company then moved to the military post.

The fur trade, primarily in buffalo skins, continued largely in the region above Fort Union for over a decade and a half after the dismantling of the old trading post.

In the late 1860's and the 1870's most of the fur trade between the Indians and the whites was conducted by the licensed traders operating usually at the Indian agencies or by the sutlers at the military post. The rapid destruction of the buffalo herds, which began in about 1875 on the Northern Plains, was conducted by a specialized group of professional white hide hunters and skinners. The Indians were primarily witnesses to this wholesale slaughter which reduced the once immense buffalo herds to a few scattering remnants. By the mid-1880's the fur trade, which had once been the primary industry on the Upper Missouri, was at an end.

PHYSICAL REMAINS AT FORT UNION

The first of the known Upper Missouri visitors to describe Fort Union was George Catlin. He briefly wrote as follows:

The American Fur Company have erected here, for their protection against the savages, a very substantial Fort, 300 feet square, with bastions armed with ordnance. . . .²⁷

Catlin's drawing of Union, which accompanied the description, was inaccurate in that it showed three bastions attached to the post instead of two.

Maximilian in 1833-1834 gave a much more complete description of the post. He wrote:

The erection of Fort Union was commenced in the autumn of 1829, by Mr. McKenzie, and is now completed, except that some of the edifices which were erected in haste are under repair. The fort is situated on an alluvial eminence, on the northern bank of the Missouri, in a prairie, which extends about 1,500 paces to a chain of hills, on whose summit there are other wide-spreading plains. The river runs at a distance of scarcely fifty or sixty feet from the fort, in the direction from west to east; it is here rather broad, and the opposite bank is wooded. The fort

²⁷Catlin, *op. cit.*, I, 14.

itself forms a quadrangle, the sides of which measure about eighty paces in length, on the exterior. The ramparts consist of strong pickets, sixteen or seventeen feet high, squared, and placed close to each other, and surmounted by a *chevaux-de-frise*. On the south-west and north-east ends, there are blockhouses, with pointed roofs, two stories high, with embrasures and some cannon, which, though small, are fit for service. In the front of the enclosure, and towards the river, is the well-defended principal entrance, with a large folding gate. Opposite the entrance, on the other side of the quadrangle, is the house of the commandant; it is one story high, and has four handsome glass windows on each side of the door. The roof is spacious, and contains a large, light loft. This house is very commodious, and, like all the buildings of the inner quadrangle, constructed of poplar wood, the staple wood for building in this neighborhood. In the inner quadrangle are the residences of the clerks, the interpreters, and the *engages*, the powder magazine, the stores, or supplies of goods and bartered skins, various workshops for the handicraftsmen, smiths, carpenters, &c., stables for the horses and cattle, rooms for receiving and entertaining the Indians; and in the centre is the flag-staff, around which several half-breed Indian hunters had erected their leathern tents. A cannon was also placed here, with its mouth towards the principal . . . entrance. The fort contains about fifty or sixty horses, some mules, and an inconsiderable number of cattle, swine, goats, fowls, and domestic animals. The cattle are very fine, and the cows yield abundance of milk. The horses are driven, in the day-time, into the prairie, guarded and exercised by armed men, and, in the evening, brought back into the quadrangle of the fort, where the greater part of them pass the night in the open air. Mr. McKenzie has, however, lately had a separate place, or park, provided for them.²⁸

Bodmer, the Swiss artist who accompanied the prince, made an excellent drawing of the fort which is one of the most popular of those made by him on his Upper Missouri journey.

Nathaniel Wyeth, who visited Fort Union in August, 1833, wrote of the post ". . . the fort is of the usual construction about 220 feet square. . . ."²⁹

Maximilian stated that at the time of his visit the fort ". . . is now completed, except that some of the edifices which were erected in haste are under repair. . . ."^{30a} Larpenteur stated that in 1834-1835 he supervised some of the rebuilding of the pickets on one side of the fort.³⁰ Denig wrote in 1843 that ". . . The fort itself was begun in the fall of 1829, under the superintendence of Kenneth McKenzie, Esq., . . . As the immense deal of work about such an undertaking had but few men to accomplish it, it was not wholly completed till after the expiration of *four years*, and indeed since then has been greatly improved by the other gentlemen who subsequently took charge of the fort. . . ."³¹

Denig's description of Fort Union as it was in 1843 is quite complete. It appears there were a number of changes which had taken place

²⁸Maximilian, *op. cit.*, I, 376-377.

²⁹"The Correspondence and Journals of Captain Nathaniel J. Wyeth, 1831-6," *Sources of the History of Oregon*, I (1899), 213.

^{30a}Maximilian, *loc. cit.*

³⁰Larpenteur, *op. cit.*, I, 73.

³¹Audubon, *op. cit.*, II, 181.

between Maximilian's and Audubon's visits. Denig described Fort Union as follows:

FORT UNION, the principal and handsomest trading-post on the Missouri River, is situated on the north side, about six and a half miles above the mouth of the Yellowstone River; the country around it is beautiful, and well chosen for an establishment of the kind. The front of the fort is but a few steps, say twenty-five, from the bank of the Missouri. Behind the fort is a prairie with an agreeable ascent to the commencement of the bluffs, about one and a half miles in width, and two in length, surrounded at the borders with high hills, or bluffs. Above and below, at the distance of two hundred yards commence the points, or bottoms, of the Missouri, which contain great quantities of cottonwood, ash, and elm, supplying the fort with fuel, boat and building timber. . . . The plan of the fort is laid nearly due north and south, fronting 220 feet and running back 240 feet. This space is enclosed by pickets or palisades of twenty feet high, made of large hewn cottonwood, and founded upon stone. The pickets are fitted into an open framework in the inside, of sufficient strength to counterbalance their weight, and sustained by braces in the form of an X, which reaches in the inside from the pickets to the frame, so as to make the whole completely solid and secure, from either storm or attack. On the southwest and northeast corners, are bastions, built entirely out of stone, and measuring 24 feet square, over 30 feet high, and the wall three feet thick; this is whitewashed. Around the tops of the second stories are balconies with railings, which serve for observatories, and from the tops of the roofs are two flag-staffs 25 feet high, on which wave the proud Eagle of America. Two weathercocks, one a Buffalo bull, the other an Eagle, complete the outsides. In the interior of the northeast bastion are placed opposite their port-holes one three-pounder iron cannon and one brass swivel, both mounted, and usually kept loaded, together with a dozen muskets in case of a sudden attack from the Indians. Balls, cartridges, and other ammunition are always in readiness for the use of the same. The contents of the southeast bastion are similar to those of the other, with the exception of the cannon, having but one small swivel. These and other preparations render the place impregnable to any force without, not furnished with artillery. The principal building in the establishment, and that of the gentleman in charge, or Bourgeois, is now occupied by Mr. Culbertson, one of the partners of the Company. It is 78 feet front by 24 feet depth, and a story and a half high. The front has a very imposing appearance, being neatly weather-boarded, and painted white, and with green window-shutters; it is roofed with shingle, painted red to preserve the wood. In the roof in front are four dormer windows, which serve to give light to the attic. The piazza in front adds much to the comfort and appearance, the posts are all turned, and painted white. It serves as a pleasant retreat from the heat of the day, and is a refreshing place to sleep at night when mosquitoes are plenty. Mr. Audubon, the naturalist, now here upon scientific researches, together with his secretary, Mr. Squires, prefer this hard bed to the more luxurious comforts of feathers and sheets. The interior of this building is handsomely papered and ornamented with portraits and pictures, and portioned off in the following manner. Mr. Culbertson has the principal room, which is large, commodious, and well-furnished; from it he has a view of all that passes within the fort. Next to this is the office, which is devoted exclusively to the business of the Company, which is immense. This department is now under my supervision (viz., E. T. Denig). These two rooms occupy about one-half the building. In the middle is a hall, eight feet wide, which separates these rooms from the other part. In this is the mess-room, which is nearly equal in size to that of Mr. Culbertson. . . . Adjoining this room is the residence of Mr. Denig. In the upper story are at present located Mr. Audubon and his suite. Here from the pencils of Mr. Audubon and Mr. Sprague emanate the splendid paintings and drawings of animals and plants, which

are the admiration of all; and the Indians regard them as marvellous, and almost to be worshipped. In the room next to this is always kept a selection of saddlery and harness, in readiness for rides of pleasure, or for those rendered necessary for the protection of the horses which are kept on the prairie, and which suffer from frequent depredations on the part of the Indians, which it is the duty of the men at the fort to ward off as far as possible. The next apartment is the tailor's shop, so placed as to be out of the way of the Indian visitors as much as possible, who, were it at all easy of access, would steal some of the goods which it is necessary to have always on hand. So much for the principal house. On the east side of the fort, extending north and south, is a building, on range, all under one roof, 127 ft. long by 25 ft. deep, and used for the following purposes. A small room at the north end for stores and luggage; then the retail store, in which is kept a fair supply of merchandise, and where all white persons buy or sell. The prices of all goods are fixed by a tariff or stationary value, so that no bargaining or cheating is allowed; this department is now in charge of Mr. Larpenteur. Adjoining this is the wholesale warehouse, in which is kept the principal stock of goods intended for the extensive trade; this room is 57 ft. in length. Next is a small room for the storage of meat and other supplies. At the end is the press room, where all robes, furs, and peltries are stored. The dimensions extend to the top of the roof inside, which roof is perfectly waterproof. It will contain from 2800 to 3000 packs of Buffalo robes. All this range is very strongly put together, weather-boarded outside, and lined with plank within. It has also cellar and garret. Opposite this, on the other side of the fort enclosure, is a similar range of buildings 119 ft. long by 21 ft. wide, perhaps not quite so strongly built, but sufficiently so to suit all purposes. The height of the building is in proportion to that of the pickets; it is one large story high, and shingle-roofed. This is partitioned off into six different apartments of nearly equal size. The first two are appropriated to the use of the clerks who may be stationed at the post. The next is the residence of the hunters, and the remaining three the dwellings of the men in the employ of the Company. An ice-house 24 by 21 ft. is detached from this range, and is well filled with ice during the winter, which supply generally lasts till fall. Here is put all fresh meat in the hot weather, and the fort in the summer season is usually provisioned for ten days. The kitchen is behind the Bourgeois' house on the north side, and about two steps from the end of the hall,—so situated for convenience in carrying in the cooked victuals to the mess-room. Two or three cooks are usually employed therein, at busy times more. The inside frame-work of the fort, which sustains the pickets, forms all around a space about eight feet wide described by the braces or X, and about fifteen feet high. A balcony is built on the top of this, having the summit of the X for its basis, and is formed of sawed plank nailed to cross beams from one brace to another. This balcony affords a pleasant walk all round the inside of the fort, within five feet of the top of the pickets; from here also is a good view of the surrounding neighborhood, and it is well calculated for a place of defence. It is a favorite place from which to shoot Wolves after nightfall, and for standing guard in time of danger. The openings that would necessarily follow from such a construction, under the gallery, are fitted in some places with small huts or houses. Behind the kitchen there are five of such houses, leaving at the same time plenty of space between them and the other buildings. The first of these is a stable for Buffalo calves, which are annually raised here, being caught during the severe storms of winter; the second a hen-house, well lined, plastered, and filled with chickens; third, a very pleasant room intended as an artist's work-room, fourth, a cooper's shop, and then the milk house and dairy. Several houses of the same kind and construction are also built on the west and south sides; one contains coal for the blacksmith, and ten stables, in all 117 ft. long, and 10 ft. wide, with space enough to quarter fifty horses. These are very useful, as the Company have always a number of horses and cattle here.

These buildings, it will be understood, do not interfere with the Area or Parade of the fort, and are hardly noticed by a casual observer, but occupy the space under the balcony that would otherwise be useless and void. Fifty more of the same kind could be put up without intruding upon any portion of the fort used for other purposes. On the front side, and west of the gate, is a house 50 by 21 feet, which, being divided into two parts, one half opening into the fort, is used as a blacksmith's, gunsmith's, and tinner's shop; the other part is used as a reception-room for Indians, and opens into the passage, which is made by the double gate. There are two large outside gates to the fort, one each in the middle of the front and rear, and upon the top of the front one is a painting of a treaty of peace between the Indians and whites executed by J. B. Moncrevier, Esq. These gates are 12 ft. wide, and 14 ft. high. At the front there is an inside gate of the same size at the inner end of the Indian reception room, which shuts a passage from the outside gate of 32 ft. in length, and the same width as the gate; the passage is formed of pickets. The outside gate can be left open, and the inside one closed, which permits the Indians to enter the reception room without their having any communication with the fort. Into this room are brought all trading and war parties, until such time as their business is ascertained; there is also behind this room a trade shop, and leading into it a window through which the Indians usually trade, being secure from rain or accident; there is also another window through the pickets to the outside of the fort, which is used in trading when the Indians are troublesome, or too numerous. The Powder Magazine is perhaps the best piece of work, as regards strength and security, that could be devised for a fort like this. The dimensions are 25 by 18 ft.; it is built out of stone, which is a variety of limestone with a considerable quantity of sand in its composition. The walls are 4 ft. thick at the base, and increasing with the curve of the arch become gradually thicker as they rise, so that near the top they are about 6 ft. in thickness. The inside presents a complete semicircular arch, which is covered on the top with stones and gravel to the depth of 18 inches. The whole is covered with a shingle roof through which fire may burn yet no danger to the powder within. There are two doors, one on the outside, the other a few feet within; the outer one is covered with tin. There are several other small buildings under the balcony, which are used for harness, tool-houses, meat, etc. The space behind the warehouse between that and the pickets, being free from buildings, affords a good horse yard, and some shelter to the horses in bad weather. The area of the fort within the fronts of the houses is 189 ft. long, and 141 ft. wide. In the centre of this arises a flag-staff 63 ft. high. This is surrounded at the base by a railing and panel work in an octagonal form, enclosing a portion of ground 12 ft. in diameter, in which are planted lettuce, radishes, and cress, and which presents at the same time a useful and handsome appearance. By the side of this stands a mounted four-pounder iron cannon. This flag-staff is the glory of the fort, for on high, seen from far and wide, floats the Star Spangled Banner, an immense flag which once belonged to the United States Navy, and gives the certainty of security from dangers, rest to the weary traveller, peace and plenty to the fatigued and hungry, whose eyes are gladdened by the sight of it on arriving from the long and perilous voyages usual in this far western wild. It is customary on the arrivals and departures of the Bourgeois, or of the boats of gentlemen of note, to raise the flag, and by the firing of the cannon show them a welcome, or wish them a safe arrival at their point of destination. When interest and affection are as circumscribed as here, they must necessarily be more intense, and partings are more regretted, being accompanied by dangers to the departing friends, and meetings more cordial, those dangers having been surmounted. The casualties of the country are common to all, and felt the more by the handful, who, far from civilization, friends, or kindred, are associated in those risks and excitements which accrue from a life among savages. About two hundred

feet east of Fort Union is an enclosure about 150 ft. square, which is used for hay and other purposes. . . .³²

When Kurz spent the winter of 1851-52 at Fort Union he made a sketch of the post.³³ This sketch shows the house of the bourgeois from the interior of the fort. However, he left no written description of the place.

Stevens, while making the Pacific Survey in 1853, was very much impressed with Fort Union. He wrote as follows:

Fort Union . . . is situated on the eastern bank of the Missouri river, about 2½ miles above the mouth of the Yellowstone. It was built by the American Fur Company in 1830, and has from that time been the principal supply store or depot of that company. It is framed of pickets of hewn timber, about 16 feet high, and has two bastions, one at the northwest and one at the southeast corner. The front or main entrance is on the side opposite the river. The fort is probably 250 feet square. The main buildings, comprising the residence of the superintendent and the store, are on the front or eastern side. They are two stories high, and built of wood. The shops and dwellings of the blacksmith, the gunsmith, the carpenter, the shoemaker, the tailor, and others, are of adobe or of wood, and occupy the other sides. These mechanics are mostly French half-breeds, and have half-breed or Indian wives, and many children. There is a grassy plain around and near the fort,

³²Audubon, *op. cit.*, II, 180-188.

³³See *Journal of Rudolph Friederich Kurz*, Plate 13.



FORT UNION FROM A DRAWING BY CARL BODMER

extending to the base of the rising ground, which is a full mile distant on the eastern side. The Assiniboines, the Gros Ventres, the Crows, and other migratory bands of Indians, trade at this fort, exchanging the skins of the buffalo, deer, and other animals, for such commodities as they require. Mr. Culberston, [Culbertson] who has occupied the position of chief agent of the company during the past twenty years, has under his supervision not only Fort Union, but Forts Pierre and Benton also. He is a man of great energy, intelligence, and fidelity, and possesses the entire confidence of the Indians. His wife, a full-blood Indian of the Blood band of the Blackfoot tribe, is also deservedly held in high estimation. Though she appears to have made little or no progress in our language, she has acquired the manners and adapted herself to the usages of the white race with singular facility. Their children have been sent to the States to be educated in our best schools.³⁴

Stanley's drawing of the trading establishment, which accompanies Stevens' report, shows many features of the fort at that time.

No detailed description has been found of Fort Union as it appeared in the 1860's or 1870's. In *Forty Years a Fur Trader*, Volume I, pp. 68-69, is a previously unpublished sketch of the post which was drawn by a soldier, whose name is unknown, in 1864. A few other photographs have been found of the post in its last days.

In 1872-1873, following the demolition of Fort Union, James Stuart, one of the organizers of the Historical Society of Montana, compiled a history and a description of the former trading post which was based on conversations with old trappers, traders, guides, and interpreters. This article was published in *Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana*, Volume I (1876), pp. 71-79.

Washington Matthews, Asst. Surgeon, U. S. Army, who was stationed at Fort Buford, visited the site of Fort Union in 1872 following its abandonment:

Although at different periods, changes may have been made in the buildings within the stockade, I am well aware that from the time the walls and bastions of Fort Union were completed which was previous to Catlin's visit in 1832, until they were razed in 1867 no important change was made in them; none whatever in the superficial area which they covered. The palisades were of hewn logs secured to plates above and below and resting on stone foundations. The bastions were of solid masonry. The marked discrepancy then between the statements of Catlin and Wyeth with regard to the dimensions of the fort can only be accounted for by admitting an inaccuracy on the part of one or the other. Being curious to see which of the two men was correct, I proceeded on April 20th, 1872, a few days before this article was placed on record, to the ruins of Fort Union and took a careful measurement of the foundations of the old fort whose outline is still distinctly visible and discovered that the size [220 feet square] of the quadrangle or Fort proper as given by Wyeth was correct. The bastions projected in each direction about 12 feet beyond the quadrangle.³⁵

³⁴Reports of the Explorations and Surveys, to Ascertain the most Practicable and Economical Route for a Railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean, 1853-5, Volume XII, Book I (Washington 1860), 85-86.

³⁵The Medical History of Fort Buford, I, 1-8, Ms., National Archives, Washington.



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