Scotts Bluff

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

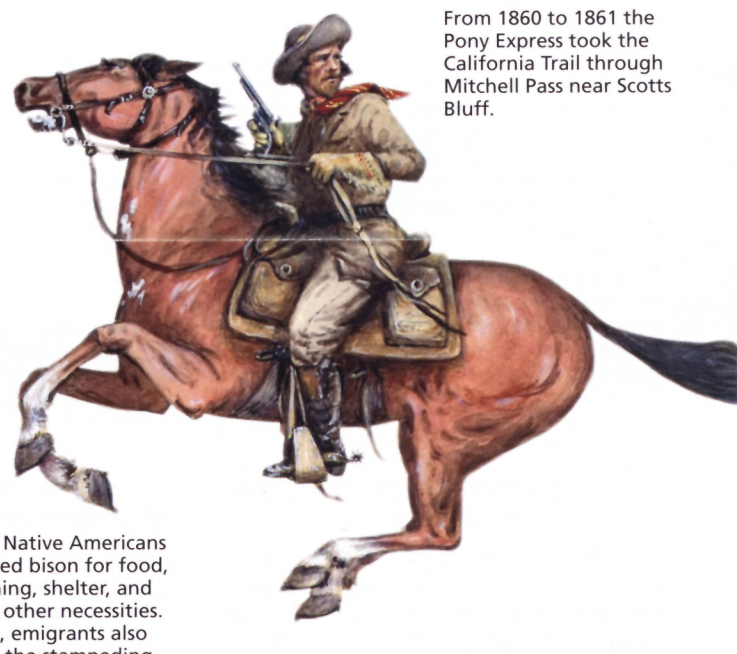
National Monument
Nebraska



Artist William Henry Jackson (1843–1942) depicted a westbound wagon train crossing Mitchell Pass beneath Scotts Bluff. Other scenes of the West by Jackson appear below.

Scotts Bluff is a memorable landscape feature for all who travel along the North Platte River in western Nebraska. It seems timeless, yet the immense sandstone and siltstone formation is gradually disappearing. Wind and water, which built the peaks, are dismantling the rock grain by grain (*other side*).





From 1860 to 1861 the Pony Express took the California Trail through Mitchell Pass near Scotts Bluff.

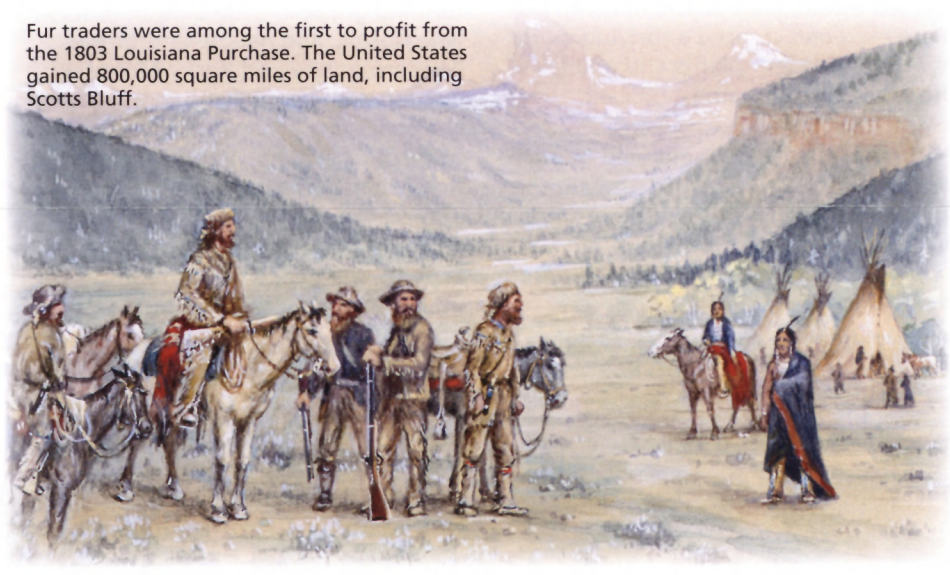
Left: Native Americans hunted bison for food, clothing, shelter, and life's other necessities. Here, emigrants also hunt the stampeding bison.

Sentinel of the Plains

The North Platte River valley, chiseled through the plains of Nebraska and Wyoming, has been a prairie pathway for over 10,000 years. Native American hunters followed it to places where bison stopped to drink. Near Mitchell Pass, a huge bluff towers 800 feet above the valley floor. Its imposing size and the adjacent badlands inspired the name Me-a-pa-te, "hill that is hard to go around."

The early 1800s brought other hunters to the plains. Trappers explored river valleys west of the Mississippi in search of "soft gold"—the pelts of fur-bearing animals. Seven fur company employees returning to the East were the first newcomers to find the North Platte route. They reached Me-a-pa-te on December 25, 1812.

Well-known to trappers by the 1820s, the bluff was also a familiar sight for others employed in the fur trade. Their caravans bore supplies westward to be exchanged for furs. A local legend maintains that when Rocky Mountain Fur Company clerk Hiram Scott died near Me-a-pa-te in 1828, the bluff was renamed for him.



Fur traders were among the first to profit from the 1803 Louisiana Purchase. The United States gained 800,000 square miles of land, including Scotts Bluff.

The Oregon Trail, a 2,000-mile-long roadway to the Pacific Northwest, skirted the rugged Scotts Bluff terrain, taking a route well to the south. After 1850, during the peak of the California Gold Rush, many chose to travel through Mitchell Pass just south of the bluff. Called the California Trail, it shortened the journey by eight miles—a full day.



By the early 1860s emigrants, mail and freight carriers, stagecoaches, military expeditions, and the Pony Express all used the Oregon Trail. Some Mormon emigrants who had recently arrived from Europe could not afford draft animals. They moved their belongings in handcarts (*left*), often along the north bank of the North Platte River on a route parallel to the Oregon Trail.

Clashes with Native Americans, though rare, led to the establishment of Fort Mitchell in 1864. An outpost of Fort Laramie, it was 2½ miles northwest of Scotts Bluff.

By 1867 the US Army abandoned Fort Mitchell. Emigrant traffic had waned, and coast-to-coast telegraph wires strung through Mitchell Pass had long since replaced overland mail routes. In 1869 the Union Pacific and Central Pacific Railroads linked up at Promontory, Utah. The Oregon Trail fell into disuse.

In the next decades Scotts Bluff became a symbol that marked the end of the early emigrant waves in wagon trains and the beginning of a new wave who came by railroad. They were not just passing though the plains on their way somewhere else. They came to stay.

Milepost for the Migration West

Some newcomers to the Great Plains had given up hope for prosperity in the East and looked westward for land, wealth, or religious freedom. Others emigrated for different reasons. It is estimated that from 1841 to 1869 about 350,000 people joined wagon trains that departed from points along the Missouri River and set out on the California and Oregon Trails.

An early advocate of Oregon settlement proclaimed the route "easy, safe, and expeditious," but travelers found it otherwise. Many walked beside their 10-by-4-foot, canvas-topped wagons to lighten the load for draft animals. Each mile was hard-won. They contended with unpredictable temperatures, violent winds, quicksand, floods, disease, bison stampedes, and sometimes conflicts with Native Americans.

When the skyline along the North Platte River began to reveal its distinctive features, emigrants knew for sure they were in the West. Scotts Bluff was a sight that loomed in the distance for days before the wagon trains reached it. Travelers called it "a Nebraska Gibraltar" and "a Mausoleum which the mightiest of earth might covet." "I could die here," rhapsodized one voyager, "certain of being not far from heaven." Yet few spent time at the bluff. Wary of being caught on the road when winter arrived, they moved on, grateful at least that a third of the trail lay behind them.



Above: An emigrant's possessions from back East (reproduction trunk and contents). *Below:* Emigrants were forced to travel and camp in all types of weather, including severe thunderstorms like the one depicted in this ink wash drawing by William Henry Jackson.

ALL IMAGES – NPS

Exploring Scotts Bluff

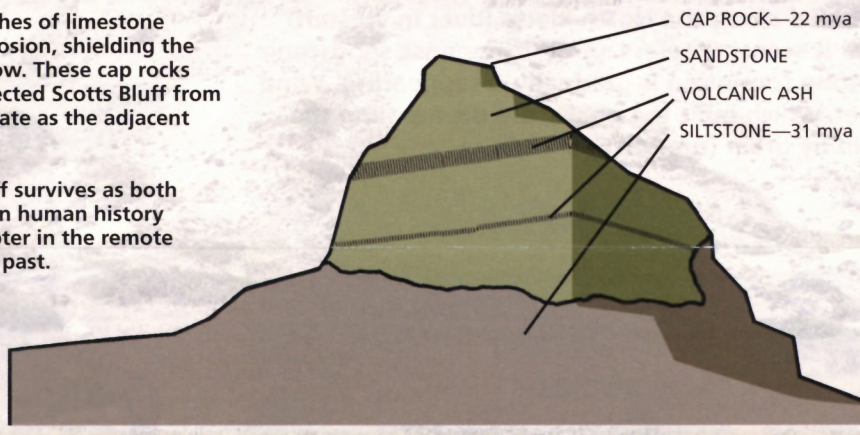
Five Hundred Feet of Great Plains Past

Scotts Bluff is a remnant of ancestral high plains that were hundreds of feet higher than today's Great Plains. Eagle Rock (*above and right*) reveals layers of material deposited by wind, water, and volcanic eruptions. The layers are like a 10-million-year timeline of the ancient plains' development.

Why did the ancestral plains disappear? Four to five million years ago (mya), the land began to erode faster than new material was deposited.

Some patches of limestone resisted erosion, shielding the layers below. These cap rocks have protected Scotts Bluff from the same fate as the adjacent badlands.

Scotts Bluff survives as both a chapter in human history and a chapter in the remote geological past.



BACKGROUND IMAGE AND DIAGRAM—NPS

Hardy Inhabitants of the Great American Desert

Explorer Stephen H. Long, traveling in the early 1800s, described the high, dry land from Nebraska to Oklahoma as the Great American Desert. Here, on the east side of the Rockies, the region gets little rain. Strong winds blow unchecked across the plains. Temperatures range from over 100°F to -40°F. It may have seemed a cold, high desert to Long, but these extremes created a thriving world of interdependent plants and animals—the world of the prairie.

Emigrants of the 1800s planned to arrive here after grasses began to grow in the spring. Too early a start would result in limited grazing for livestock; a late start would expose caravans to severe winter weather.

Newcomers quickly learned that blue grama and buffalo grass have dense roots that create thick, sturdy sod. They used this native material to build homes, called soddies.

In summer bright wildflowers blanket the prairie. Other plants include clump-forming grasses—little bluestem, western wheatgrass, and needle-and-thread. Ponderosa pine and Rocky Mountain juniper, with its small, blue-gray, berry-like cones, grow on the northern slopes of the bluff. All hold soil in this windy, flood-prone climate.

Most prairie plants are habitat for animals. Magpies and kestrels find shelter year-round in stunted trees, where swifts and cliff swallows nest in summer. Mice, rabbits, prairie dogs, and pocket gophers live partly underground, hidden from predators like fox, badgers, coyotes, and snakes.

Highly adaptable animals like white-tailed and mule deer also roam the park. Other animals once common on the plains—elk, bison, bighorn sheep, pronghorn, and grizzly bear—disappeared as more people came here to farm. These animals are now isolated or in protected reserves.


© BARBARA MAGNUSON AND LARRY KIMBALL

Prairie rattlesnake


© MARK TURNER

Plains wallflower


© MICHAEL H. FRANCIS

Mule deer


© GREG BEAUMONT

Black-tailed prairie dogs

Planning Your Visit

The visitor center has exhibits, a film, bookstore, and display of works by William Henry Jackson. Call or check the park website for hours. A short trail leads to Jackson's 1866 campsite; summit trails go to overlooks. Saddle Rock Trail (1.6 miles) links the summit and visitor center. Cars are allowed on the road to the summit; trailers and RVs are prohibited.

For a Safe Visit
Seek shelter if a storm approaches. • Rattlesnakes are shy but may strike if threatened; follow safety tips posted in the park and on the website. • Do not litter, disturb wildlife, or deface signs. • Federal laws protect all natural and cultural features in the park. • Keep pets on a six-foot leash. • Stay on roads and trails. • For firearms and other regulations check the park website.

Getting to the Park
From I-80, exit at Kimball, NE, and drive 45 miles north on NE 71. From Gering, follow National Park Service signs three miles west to the visitor center on Old Oregon Trail.

Emergencies call 911

Accessibility
We strive to make facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. For information go to the visitor center, ask a ranger, call, or check the park website.

More Information
Scotts Bluff National Monument
PO Box 27
Gering, NE 69341-0027
308-436-9700
www.nps.gov/scbl

Follow us on social media. Use the official NPS App to guide your visit; download the park to use offline.

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