

In 1834 Robert Campbell and William Sublette built the first "Fort Laramie" near the confluence of the Laramie and North Platte rivers. Officially named Fort William, the small post measured only 100 by 80 feet. Hewn cottonwood logs 15 feet high formed its palisade. It enjoyed a near monopoly on the buffalo trade here until a competing trading post, Fort Platte, was built a mile away in 1841. The rivalry spurred Fort William's owners to replace their own aging fort with a larger, adobe-walled structure named Fort John.

Indian tribes, especially the Lakota (Sioux), traded tanned buffalo robes here for manufactured goods. Each spring caravans arrived at the fort with trade goods. In fall, tons of buffalo hides and other furs were shipped east.

Throughout the 1840s, however, the take of buffalo robes continually declined and Fort John's role changed. In 1841 the first of many westward-bound emigrants arrived at Fort John. Over the next two decades tens of thousands of emigrants bound for Oregon, California, and the Salt Lake Valley would eventually stop at the fort. The traders at

Fort John did a brisk but seasonal business catering to the needs of these emigrants.

In 1849 the U.S. Army bought Fort John as part of a plan to establish a military presence along the emigrant trails. The post was officially renamed Fort Laramie and for the next four decades it served as a military post. Soon after arrival, the army constructed new buildings for stables, officers' and soldiers' quarters, a bakery, guardhouse, and powder magazine to house and support the garrison. Over time the post continued to grow in size and importance.

Fort Laramie soon became the principal military outpost on the Northern Plains. The fort was also the primary hub for transportation and communication through the central Rocky Mountain region as emigrant trails, stage lines, the Pony Express, and the transcontinental telegraph all passed through the post.

Fort Laramie played an important role as host to several treaty negotiations with Northern Plains Indian Nations. Most famous among these treaties were the Horse Creek Treaty of 1851 and the Treaty of 1868, which remains controversial and contested to this day.

Sadly, relations that began amicably between Native Americans and the Army began to change as the number of emigrants using the overland trails swelled.

As conflicts grew, major military campaigns were launched from Fort Laramie against the Northern Plains tribes, who fiercely defended their homeland against further encroachment by a nation moving west. With the end of the Indian Wars, Fort Laramie's importance diminished, and the post was abandoned and then sold at public auction in 1874.

## Trappers and Traders

Trappers lived hard lives, spending months wading in cold mountain streams trapping beaver and other fur-bearing mammals. Beginning in 1825 and continuing for 16 years, trappers met at an annual "rendezvous" to exchange their year's catch of furs for supplies and trade goods and celebrate a successful trapping season.

The heyday of the beaver trade, driven largely by fashions in Europe, would last less than 30 years, and

by the late 1830s buffalo robes had replaced beaver pelts as the sought-after fur.

Traders supplanted trappers and fixed trading posts like Forts William and John ended the rendezvous system. Indians camped near the fort and traded buffalo robes for a variety of goods including blankets, tobacco, powder, lead, sugar, and beads.

Fur trapper by Alfred Jacob Miller  
BUFFALO BILL HISTORICAL CENTER  
GIFT OF THE COE FOUNDATION, 2014



## Emigrants

Overland emigration peaked in the early 1850s at 50,000 annual travelers. The weary emigrants and gold-seekers eagerly awaited Fort Laramie, because it was one of their long journey's few supply points.

Set on the approaches to the Rocky Mountains, this was a natural stop. It was about a

third of the way between their Missouri River "jumping-off places" and their destinations in Oregon or California, or half way for those bound to Utah.

Fort Laramie's emigrant season lasted only about 45 days each year, in the late spring and early summer. These were days of intense

activity. After weeks on the trail, the emigrants bathed and washed clothes in the clear waters of the Laramie River. They rested, bought fresh supplies, replaced worn out draft animals, and made repairs to their wagons before setting out on the rest of their journey.



Encampment on the Plains, by Thomas Worthington Whittredge

## Soldiers

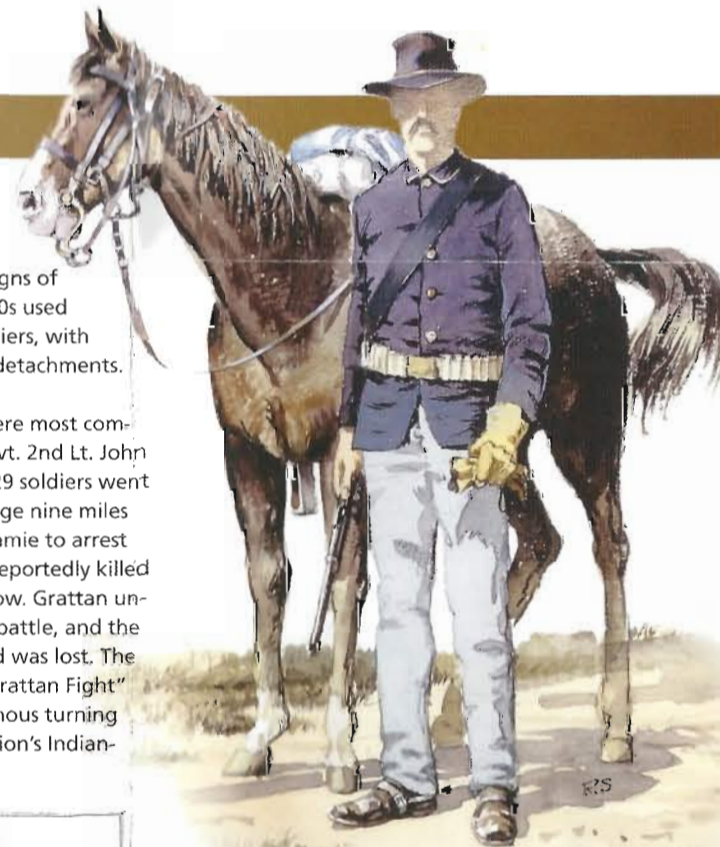
Combat was rare in the frontier army. Instead the enlisted men's days were a rigid routine of drill and "fatigue duties." Discipline was harsh and minor infractions could mean severe penalties.

Garrison life quickly made five-year enlistments seem endless. The frontier army's desertion rate was 33 percent from 1865 to 1890—although Ordnance Sgt. Leodegar Schnyder served 37 years here.

Most soldiers stationed at Fort Laramie served in the infantry, like the men of

the 7th U.S. Infantry shown below. The big summer campaigns of the 1860s and 70s used mostly foot soldiers, with smaller cavalry detachments.

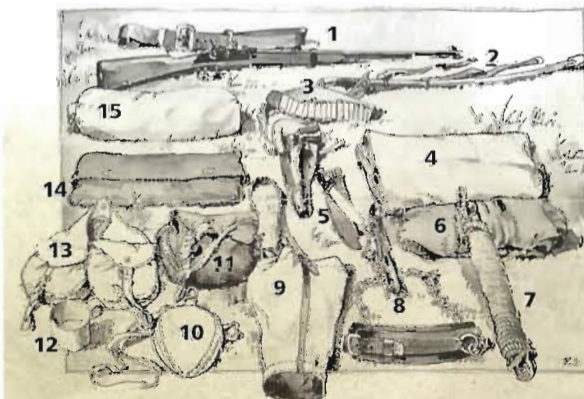
Short patrols were most common. On one, Bvt. 2nd Lt. John L. Grattan and 29 soldiers went to a Lakota village nine miles east of Fort Laramie to arrest an Indian who reportedly killed an emigrant's cow. Grattan unwisely forced a battle, and the entire command was lost. The August 1854 "Grattan Fight" marked an ominous turning point in the region's Indian-white relations.



DRANDIN/AP/WIDE WORLD SCHLEICHER

### Soldier's Field Gear

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



7th Infantry soldiers, 1887

## Northern Plains Indians

As the 1800s began, tribes that dominated the Fort Laramie region were the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapahoe. Through the 1830s and 40s relations between traders and Native Americans were for the most part friendly. By the 1850s tensions mounted after Fort Laramie became a military post and emigrant



Buffalo Hunt by Alfred Jacob Miller



Lakota Chief Red Cloud  
SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION  
NATIONAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL ARCHIVES

traffic mushroomed on the overland trails. Still, attacks on wagon trains were rare.

To try to keep the peace, a treaty council was held nearby in 1851, the largest recorded gathering of Indians on the Northern Plains, over 10,000 from many nations. Northern Plains Indian Nations pledged not to harass emigrants in return for \$50,000 in annuity goods, but just two years after the treaty was signed, incidents near the fort resulted in deaths on both sides.

A 30-year cycle of warfare and intermittent peace had begun. Indian resentment

intensified in the 1860s as thousands of miners headed north on the Bozeman Trail to Montana gold and silver finds. The army built three forts along the trail to protect the miners, which led to Red Cloud's War of 1866-68. In new treaties signed here in 1868, the United States agreed to Red Cloud's demand to abandon Bozeman Trail forts, and the Great Sioux Reservation was set up in western South Dakota. Gold finds in the Black Hills led to the breaking of that treaty by 1884.



1868 treaties council near Fort Laramie



# Touring Fort Laramie

In 1888 Fort Laramie looked almost like a frontier town (*illustration*). But for much of its history it was unadorned military buildings in a stark

and treeless setting. Like most frontier posts, it had no palisades or walls. Early plans for a log or stone wall with block-houses were never funded.

- Restored structure
- Ruins or foundation



## Fort Laramie Today

Fort Laramie's riverside setting on the approaches to the Rocky Mountains looks much like it did when the post was active. Buildings from its military period, some dating to 1849, survived intact because homesteaders bought and lived in them and public agencies later worked to preserve them.

Eleven structures are now restored and refurbished to their historic appearances.

The national historic site is three miles southwest of the town of Fort Laramie, Wyo., off U.S. 26. There are no camping facilities, but nearby towns offer RV parks, motels, and restaurants.

Service animals are welcome.

The visitor center in the old Commissary Storehouse (tour stop 1) is open 8 am to 4:30 pm daily except Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1, with longer hours from early June to Labor Day. (The parking lot and walkway do not show on this historical illustration.) The visitor center offers historical information and literature, or visit our park website (*below*).

**Safety and Management Concerns**  
Don't let an accident spoil your visit. Be careful on footpaths and stairs and stay alert to hazards. Your safety is your responsibility. Historic ruins are fragile. You can help us preserve them by not walking or climbing on them. Possession, removal, or disturbance of any artifact is prohibited. For firearms regulations see the website or ask a ranger.

**More Information**  
Fort Laramie National Historic Site  
956 Gray Rocks Road  
Fort Laramie, WY 82212  
307-837-2221  
[www.nps.gov/foia](http://www.nps.gov/foia)

Fort Laramie is one of over 390 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about national parks and National Park Service programs in America's communities, please visit [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov).

## Touring the Fort

**1 Commissary Storehouse (1884)** This lime-concrete building served as a food warehouse for the army. It now houses park offices and the visitor center.

**2 Old Bakery (1876, Left) and New Bakery Ruins (1883)** Bread was a staple of the soldier's diet. Here, with big double-brick ovens, bakers made up to 700 18-ounce loaves daily.

**3 Infantry Barracks Foundation (1867)** This one-story frame building housed three companies, with mess halls and kitchens for each in the back.

**4 New Guardhouse (1876)** After many complaints by the post surgeon this new guardhouse replaced an unhealthy, overcrowded older one. It held both major and minor offenders.

**5 General Sink (Latrine) Ruins (1886)** To protect the post's drinking water supply, a privy or general sink was built for four companies, with sewage channelled to the Laramie River.

**6 Two-Company Infantry Barracks Foundation (1866)** Ruins are all that's left of this big adobe barracks building.

**7 Old Guardhouse (1866)** Fort Laramie's second guardhouse was built to house 40

prisoners, but often held more. The upper story had quarters for the guard and the Officer of the Guard. The first floor had the general confinement area and two small solitary-confinement cells. Prisoners had no furniture, heat, or light.

**8 Administration Building Ruins (1885)** Headquarters and the post school were moved here in 1885. Concerts, religious services, dances, plays, and lectures were held here in the post theatre.

**9 Captain's Quarters (1870)** Planned as the Commanding Officer's quarters, this building became a duplex for company-grade officers.

**10 Fort John Site (1841-62)** The American Fur Co. built Fort John here of adobe brick reinforced with wooden beams. It had 15-foot walls and block houses on two corners. Abandoned and in ruins by 1858, it was demolished in 1862.

**11 Officers' Quarters Ruins (1881)** These large buildings, two duplexes and the Commanding Officer's quarters, were additions to smaller 1855 adobe buildings.

**12 "Old Bedlam" (1849)** Built to house bachelor officers, "Old Bedlam" is Wyoming's oldest documented building. The right side is restored to bachelor officers'

quarters in the 1850s; the left side to post headquarters in 1863-64, when fort commander Lt. Col. William O. Collins and his wife lived on the second floor.

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

**14 Magazine (1850)** The stone magazine, restored to 1850-62, held post weapons and ammunition, except large field pieces.

**15 Post Surgeon's Quarters (1875)** Post Surgeon Louis Brechemin and his family normally lived in half of this duplex from 1885 to 1889. His study held his scientific collections, and most patients were treated there before being sent to the hospital to recuperate.

**16 Lt. Colonel's Quarters (Burt House) 1884** Lt. Col. Andrew Burt, a 7th U.S. Infantry officer, and his wife Elizabeth lived in the home 1887-88. They liked relatively plain furnishings rather than the ornate decor used in most officers' houses during the Victorian period.

**17 Post Trader's Store (1849) and Complex** Built and run by a civilian licensed by the army, the post trader's store did a profit-

able business with soldiers, Indians, gold seekers, and emigrants. The north section, built of stone in 1852, was the sutler's headquarters and, for a time, post office. An 1883 addition housed the officers' club and an enlisted men and civilians' bar. The store is restored to its 1860s appearance.

**18 Post Trader's (Sutler) House Foundation (1863)** Owned by the post trader/sutler at Fort Laramie, this house was among the more ornate at the post.

**19 Cavalry Barracks (1874)** Fort Laramie's largest building was built to add housing during the Indian Wars. Soldiers slept in two large squad bays upstairs. The kitchen and mess room were downstairs.

**20 Hospital Ruins (1873)** The 12-bed facility had a dispensary, kitchen, dining room, isolation rooms, and surgeon's office. This was the first lime-concrete building at Fort Laramie.