



Company C, Third U.S. Infantry in front of Fort Larned barracks, 1867.
COURTESY KANSAS STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Guardian of the Santa Fe Trail

From 1821 to 1880 the Santa Fe Trail was one of America's most important overland routes. It carried several million dollars per year in commercial traffic between Independence, Mo., and Santa Fe. The acquisition of vast new territories by the United States after the War with Mexico, and the gold rushes of 1849 and 1858, further boosted the Trail traffic. Inevitably the influx of merchants, gold seekers, and adventurers disrupted the Indians' way of life. Believing their existence in jeopardy, the tribes struck back, attacking the commerce, mail shipments, and travelers on the Trail.

To counter such attacks the army set up a military post on October 22, 1859, west of Lookout Hill (now Jenkins Hill) on the bank of the Pawnee River about five miles from where it joins the Arkansas River. Called "Camp on Pawnee Fork" at first, it soon became "Camp Alert." In June 1860 the camp was moved farther west, where a more durable sod-and-adobe fort was built and named for Col. Benjamin F. Larned, U.S. Army Paymaster-General (1854–62).

Fort Larned was one in a succession of military posts set up for Santa Fe Trail protection and escort duty. Others were forts Mann (1847), Atkinson (1850), Union (1851), Wise (1860), Zarah (1864), Dodge (1865), Aubrey (1865), and

Camp Nichols (1865). Fort Wise was later renamed Lyon. Some were temporary posts lasting only a few months. Others like Larned were considered permanent. Forts Larned, Union, Lyon, and Dodge saw much development for years after the Trail closed and the Indian threat ceased in the area. As military presence grew so did troop movements and government freighting to keep posts supplied.

For several critical years Fort Larned was a principal guardian of Santa Fe Trail commerce. Its soldiers worked with troops from forts Union and Lyon on both the Cimarron and Mountain branches of the Trail. In 1864, after the Sand Creek Massacre in eastern Colorado and after the War Department forbade travel beyond Fort Larned without armed escort, the post supplied guard detachments for mail stages and wagon trains. It served as a base for Maj. Gen. Winfield S. Hancock's abortive 1867 campaign against the Plains tribes—intended to impress the Indians with U.S. military strength, it only terrified them and intensified hostilities.

Fort Larned was a key post in the Indian wars from 1859 to 1869. In 1868, violating the Treaty of Medicine Lodge signed the year before, the Cheyennes attacked several wagon trains along the Santa Fe Trail and raided settlers

as far south as the Texas panhandle. This signaled a general outbreak, and the Kiowas, Comanches, and Arapahos also began to raid from Kansas to Texas. Maj. Gen. Philip H. Sheridan commanded the Military Division of the Missouri then. To meet the threat Sheridan obtained permission from Washington to organize a winter campaign.

Sheridan ordered Lt. Col. George A. Custer and the 7th Cavalry to thrust south into Indian Territory. Custer's campaign culminated in an attack on Black Kettle's Cheyennes along the Washita River in the pre-dawn hours of November 27, 1868. Black Kettle was among those killed as the camp of 51 lodges was destroyed. This ended organized Indian threats to the area around Fort Larned, although skirmishes and scattered resistance continued.

For most of the 1860s Fort Larned also served as an agency of the Indian Bureau, which tried to find peaceful solutions to Indian and white cultural conflicts. The 1861 Treaty of Fort Wise began this approach, which was strengthened by subsequent treaties of the Little Arkansas (1865) and Medicine Lodge (1867). In these agreements, the U.S. promised to pay annuities of clothing and other necessities to the Cheyennes, Arapahos, Kiowas, and Comanches in return for

their staying on their reservations and keeping the peace. Beginning in 1861 Fort Larned was an annuities distribution point. The agency was abolished in 1868 when the tribes were moved to new reservations in Indian Territory.

Ironically, Fort Larned's last important job helped to make obsolete the Trail it so long protected. The close of the Civil War released the nation's industrial energies, especially the railroad's surge across the plains. Promising cheaper, faster transportation, the railroad shattered old ideas of distance. Trails of mud and dust could not compete with the trails of steel stretching westward from the Missouri River. In the early 1870s, as the Santa Fe Railroad pushed west from Topeka, Fort Larned soldiers protected those building it. In July 1878, nearly six years after the railroad was completed through Kansas, the fort was abandoned, except for a small guard force left to protect the property.

In 1883 Fort Larned military reservation was transferred from the War Department to the General Land Office, U.S. Department of the Interior. In 1884 the buildings and land were sold at public auction. For the next 80 years the property remained privately owned. In 1964 Fort Larned became a national historic site and part of the National Park System.

Santa Fe Trail

A vital artery of commerce, travel, and communication, the Santa Fe Trail began on the Missouri River's west bank, first at Franklin, then at Independence, later at Westport. It led west through Council Grove, past Fort Larned to Fort Dodge. There it forked, one route going southwest through the Cimarron Desert and the other continuing west into Colorado, turning south at Bent's Fort. Both branches merged just beyond Fort Union, 75 miles from Santa Fe. Fort Larned, like other outposts scattered along the Trail, offered not only protection and refuge for harried travelers but respite from the rigors of the journey and a chance to replace broken gear and dwindling supplies.

Ribbons of deep-worn ruts from countless ox- or mule-drawn wagons (see painting) still mark the Santa Fe Trail route. Close by Fort Larned, some of the Trail has been preserved as part of the historic site. From a viewing platform you can glimpse nature and history combined. Near the Trail furrows, among the mixed prairie grasses, a prairie dog colony thrives. Shallow buffalo wallows dent otherwise level land where you may also see meadowlarks, burrowing owls, hawks, and the occasional eagle. Information about the Santa Fe Trail ruts area and how to reach it is available at the visitor center.



Encampment on the Plains
by Thomas Worthington Whittredge.
COURTESY AUDUBON MUSEUM OF WESTERN HERITAGE, LOS ANGELES, CAL.

An agency for the Indian Bureau, 1861–68

Each autumn in the years Fort Larned served as an agency for the Indian Bureau, post residents watched in fascination as the scattered tribes of Southern Cheyenne, Arapahos, Kiowas, and Comanches assembled at the fort. Pitching their tipis on nearby prairie, the tribes (like the Cheyennes in the painting) settled in to locate the friends and kin among their neighbors, to trade, and to await distribution of their annuities. Noted Indian Bureau agents Edward W. Wynkoop and Jesse Leavenworth were among those who served the tribes from Fort Larned.

Annuities included staples like bacon, wheat flour, coffee, sugar, fresh beef, and tobacco. Usually clothing, beads, blankets, metal tools and cooking utensils, gunpowder, and lead for bullets were provided, too. The annuity system was established in treaties like the one negotiated at Medicine Lodge in 1867. The system was designed to pacify and transform roaming tribes of warlike Indians into sedentary, peaceful farmers. But depredations continued, despite sincere efforts by the Indian agents, like Wynkoop and Leavenworth, to treat the tribes honorably.

An Indian Camp at Dawn
by Jules Tavernier.
COURTESY GILCREASE MUSEUM, TULSA, OKLA.



A Guide to Fort Larned

About Your Visit

Fort Larned National Historic Site is six miles west of Larned, Kans., on Kansas 156. The fort is open daily 8:30 am to 5 pm; closed on Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1.

Activities Special events run throughout the year. Programs and

times vary. Check our website for current schedules.

Groups should request guided tours in advance. Contact the park for more information.

Help Us Protect the Site

Most of these old buildings show signs of deterioration, and people have disfigured them further by carving names and initials into the sandstone blocks. The National Park Service works to stabilize the buildings, but we need your help to stop other destruction so that future

generations can see the fort as you see it today. Please do not scratch, carve, or mark on walls of buildings. All objects within fort boundaries are protected by the Federal Antiquities Act. It is illegal to disturb, injure, or remove any of them.

More Information

Fort Larned National Historic Site
Route 3, Box 69
Larned, KS 67550-9733
620-285-6911
www.nps.gov/fols
email: fols_superintendent@nps.gov

Fort Larned NHS is one of over 390 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about the parks and National Park Service programs in America's communities visit www.nps.gov.

For Your Safety

For a safe visit, use caution and common sense. Please observe all hard hat and other warning signs around buildings undergoing restoration or stabilization. Be alert for uneven ground and non-standard steps. Please keep children a safe distance from the Pawnee River.



Fort Larned in 1867

This earliest known photograph of Fort Larned looks west from the oxbow toward the officers' quarters. It shows all the stone buildings at the fort except the new commissary storehouse completed in 1868.

Fort Larned Buildings

When Capt. Henry W. Wessells, 2d Infantry, came to the fort in 1860 to build a set of buildings, he planned to use wood and was disappointed when ordered to use adobe. He thought it would be less durable. By year's end, an officers' quarters, combination storehouse and barracks, guardhouse, two laundresses' quarters, and a hospital were finished. Added later were a soldiers' quarters and a bakery, dug into the river bank; a small adobe meathouse; and a three-room picket structure housing blacksmith, carpenter, and saddler shops.

Most of Fort Larned's buildings were poorly built then and not adequate to withstand the large-scale Indian war that many high-ranking officers predicted. Funds for construction were finally appropriated in 1866, and the fort's garrison began an extensive building program. By winter 1868 Wessells' "shabby, vermin-breeding" adobe structures were gone, replaced by nine new stone and timber buildings around the parade ground. These are the buildings you see here today. Shown on the diagram below, they are identified in captions at right.

Barracks/Visitor Center

Originally built to house two companies of infantry, this barracks has now been restored and adapted as a visitor center and administrative offices. *Museum, audio-visual program, bookstore, and restrooms.*

Barracks/Post Hospital

Originally this building housed one company each of infantry and cavalry, about 150 men. In 1871 the east half was converted into the post hospital, as you see it today. The west half has been restored as the barracks for Company C, 3rd Infantry.

Shops Building

Bakery and blacksmith shops occupied the end spaces in this three-room structure. The center workshop area was used for wheelwright, carpentry, tinsmith, paint, and saddlery work.

New Commissary

This building was built to house the overflow of garrison food and subsistence supplies from the Old Commissary. For a while it was a hospital annex, and in 1871 the north end saw use as a schoolroom for soldiers and post children, and as a library.

Old Commissary

From here, in the oldest surviving stone structure at the fort, food was distributed to the garrison. For many years the building's western part was used as an arsenal and powder magazine. Note the rifle slits in the south and west walls.

Quartermaster Storehouse

This building's large open storeroom was filled with military clothing, bedding, tents, field gear, tools, and other materials needed for frontier military operations. Note the rifle slits in the south wall.

Company Officers' Quarters

Each of these buildings accommodated two captains and four lieutenants. The captains' quarters in the ends of the buildings had two rooms, a kitchen, and servant's room. Lieutenants had a room each with no kitchen. In 1870 wooden lean-tos added at the rear of each provided kitchens and servant space.

Commanding Officer's Quarters

A two-story structure, this was the post's only single-family residence. It housed the fort's highest ranking officer. Its four large rooms were separated by a central hallway, kitchen, and upstairs servants' quarters. Maj. Meredith Kidd and his family were the first to occupy the house.

Blockhouse (a reconstruction)

Built in winter 1864-65 to strengthen the fort defenses, this hexagonal stone building contained a powder magazine, two levels of rifle slits or loopholes, an underground passageway, and well. It was not needed for defense, so it was converted in 1867 into a guardhouse. The original structure was dismantled around 1900 by civilian owners who used its sandstone blocks to build other structures.

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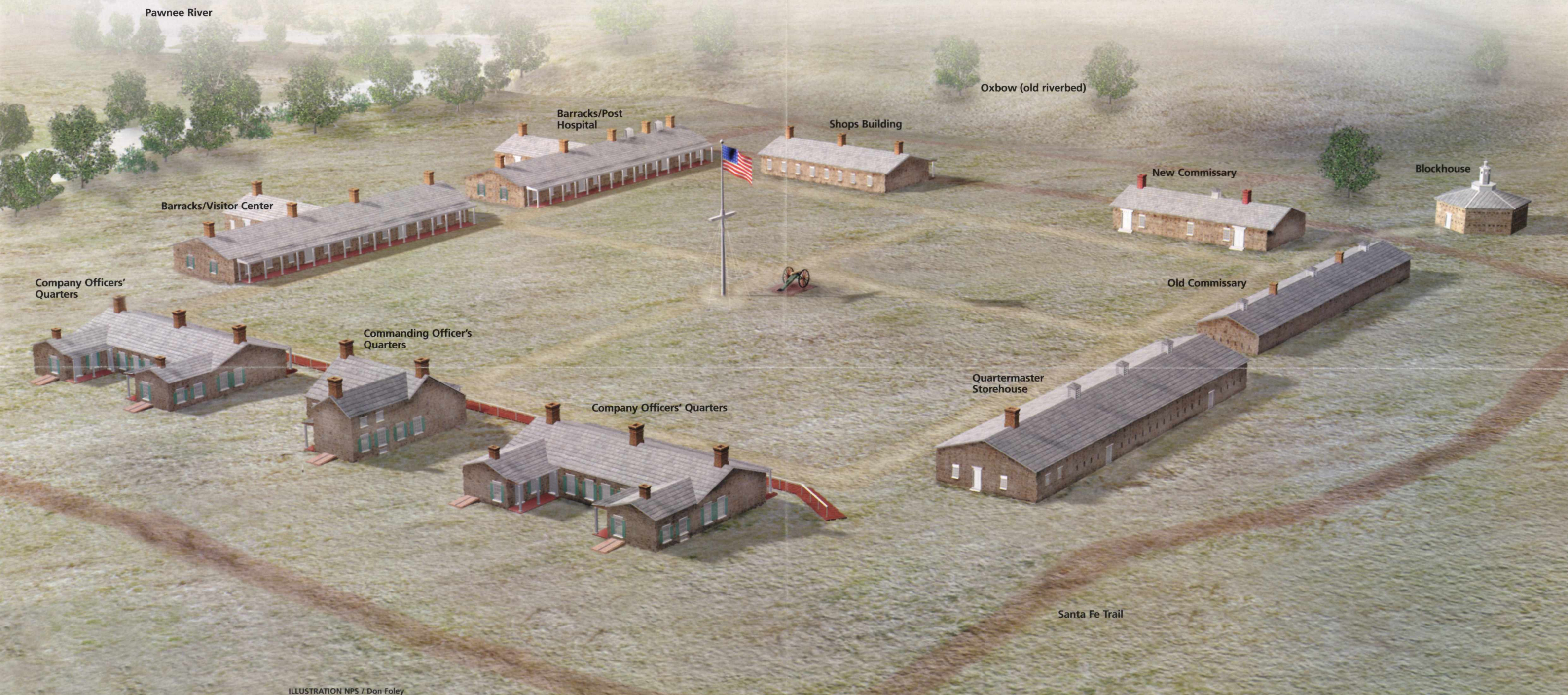


ILLUSTRATION NPS / Don Foley