

Fort Union

Fort Union
National Monument
New Mexico

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



"Wagon Train Near Wagon Mound," from the painting by Nick Eggenhofer.

Defender of the Southwest

"Many ladies greatly dislike Fort Union. It has always been noted for severe duststorms. Situated on a barren plain, the nearest mountains . . . three miles distant, it has the most exposed position of any military fort in New Mexico. . . . The hope of having any trees, or even a grassy parade-ground, had been abandoned long before our residence there. . . . Every eye is said to form its own beauty. Mine was disposed to see much in Fort Union, for I had a home there."

—Mrs. Orsemus B. Boyd, 1894, recalling her residence at Fort Union in 1872.

When New Mexico became United States territory after the Mexican War, the army established garrisons in towns scattered along the Rio Grande to protect the area's inhabitants and travel routes. This arrangement proved unsatisfactory for a number of reasons, and in April 1851 Lt. Col. Edwin V. Sumner, commanding Military Department No. 9 (which included New Mexico Territory), was ordered "to revise the whole system of defense" for the entire territory. Among his first acts was to break up the scattered garrisons and relocate them in posts closer to the Indians. He also moved his headquarters and supply depot from Santa Fe, "that sink of vice and extravagance," to a site near the

Mountain and Cimarron Branches of the Santa Fe Trail, where he established Fort Union.

The first of the three forts built in this valley was begun in August 1851 and, for a decade, served as the base for military operations in the area and a key station on the Santa Fe Trail, affording travelers a place to rest nearby and refit at the Post Sutler's Store before continuing their journey. It also became the principal quartermaster depot of the Southwest.

During the 1850s, dragoons and mounted riflemen from the fort campaigned against several Indian tribes living in or around the southern Rocky Mountains that were disrupting traffic on the Santa Fe Trail. One of the earliest campaigns was directed against the Jicarilla Apaches who, in the spring of 1854, surprised and nearly wiped out a company of dragoons. The Apaches were driven into the mountains west of the Rio Grande and routed. Military operations were also conducted against Utes of southern Colorado in 1855 and against Kiowas and Comanches raiding the plains east of the fort in 1860-61.

When the Civil War erupted in April 1861, most of the regular troops (except those officers who joined the South) were with-

drawn from Fort Union and other frontier posts and were replaced by volunteer regiments. Anticipating a Confederate invasion of New Mexico, Col. Edward R. S. Canby, charged with the territory's defense, concentrated troops at Fort Craig on the Rio Grande and sent soldiers from Fort Union to patrol the Santa Fe Trail, now the main artery of supply for Federal forces. He also ordered construction of the second Fort Union, a star-shaped earthen fortification, to strengthen defenses.

The second fort never saw the action for which it was designed. The Confederate invasion was halted and turned back in March 1862 by a force of Colorado and New Mexico Volunteers and U.S. Regulars from Fort Union at the Battle of Glorieta Pass, about 20 miles southeast of Santa Fe. The Confederates withdrew to Texas, effectively ending Civil War activity in the Southwest, and the second Fort Union was soon thereafter abandoned.

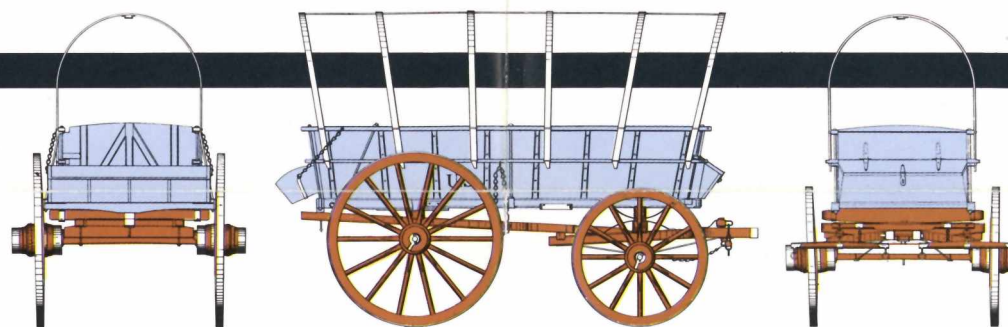
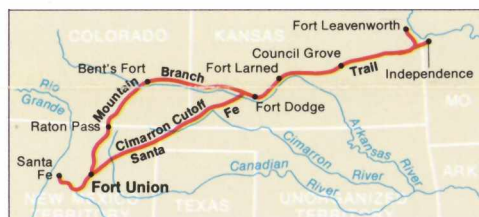
In 1863, with New Mexico securely in Federal hands, the new departmental commander, Brig. Gen. James H. Carleton, began construction of the third (and final) Fort Union, whose ruins you see here today. This sprawling installation, which took six years to complete, was the most extensive in the territory. It included not only a military post, with all its attendant structures, but a

separate quartermaster depot with warehouses, corrals, shops, offices, and quarters. The supply function overshadowed that of the military and employed far more men, mostly civilians. An ordnance depot was erected on the site of the first fort at the western edge of the valley, rounding out the complex.

Throughout the 1860s and the 1870s troops from Fort Union continued to participate in operations against hostile Indians who, during the disruptive Civil War years, had stepped up the pace of raiding. Several relentless campaigns against the Apaches, Navajos, Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Kiowas, and Comanches finally brought peace to the southern Plains in the spring of 1875, albeit on the white man's terms. Though Fort Union's involvement in the Indian wars had come to an end, its garrison occasionally helped to track down outlaws, quell mob violence, and mediate feuds. The supply depot continued to flourish until 1879, when the Santa Fe Railroad replaced the Santa Fe Trail as the principal avenue of commerce. By 1891 the fort had outlived its usefulness and was abandoned.

The Santa Fe Trail

It began on the west bank of the Missouri River, first at Franklin, then at Independence, later at Westport. It led west through Council Grove to Fort Dodge, Kans., where it forked, one route going southwest through the Cimarron Desert and the other continuing west into Colorado and then turning south at Bent's Fort. Both branches merged just beyond Fort Union, 121 kilometers (75 miles) from Santa Fe. The Cimarron route was the shorter and more dangerous because of infrequent waterholes and hostile Kiowas and Coman-



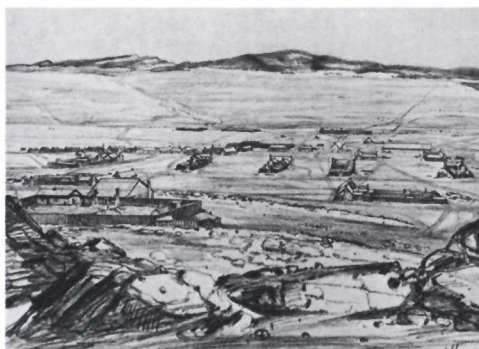
ches. But if a wagon train could make it through the desert and avoid the Indians, a trader could beat his rivals to Santa Fe and reap the first and biggest profit.

From 1821, when trader William Becknell opened it, until 1879, when the Santa Fe Railroad reached Las Vegas, the Santa Fe Trail served as a vital artery of commerce, travel, and communication. Just as the crumbling adobe walls of Fort Union recall the years of frontier military activity, so do the eroding ruts cut

in the prairie sod by freight wagons, emigrant caravans, stagecoaches, and military columns recall the great flow of traffic that made the Santa Fe Trail so significant in the history of the West. Superb remains of the trail have survived throughout northeastern New Mexico, and in the vicinity of Fort Union ruts of both branches of the trail may still be viewed by today's travelers.

First Fort Union, 1851-61

The fort, shown here in Joseph Hager's 1859 drawing, consisted of a collection of shabby log buildings needing almost constant repair. It was established to protect travelers on the Santa Fe Trail and local residents from Indian attacks, as well as provide a headquarters for Military Department No. 9 (later reorganized and renamed the Military Department of New Mexico). Most traces of the fort have vanished. The ruins there today are those of the Fort Union Ordnance Depot, constructed in the 1860s. This area is not accessible to the public.



Second Fort Union, 1861-62

This massive earthwork, shown here in an 1866 photograph, was designed to help defend the Santa Fe Trail against a threatened Confederate invasion. One officer called this fortification "as fine a work of its kind as I ever saw," but the parapets soon eroded into the ditch, the unbarked pine-log barracks rotted and became nesting places for insects, and the rooms were damp, unventilated, and consequently unhealthy. Most of the troops refused to live in such hovels and camped in tents outside. The second fort was abandoned after the Confederate invasion was turned back in March 1862.

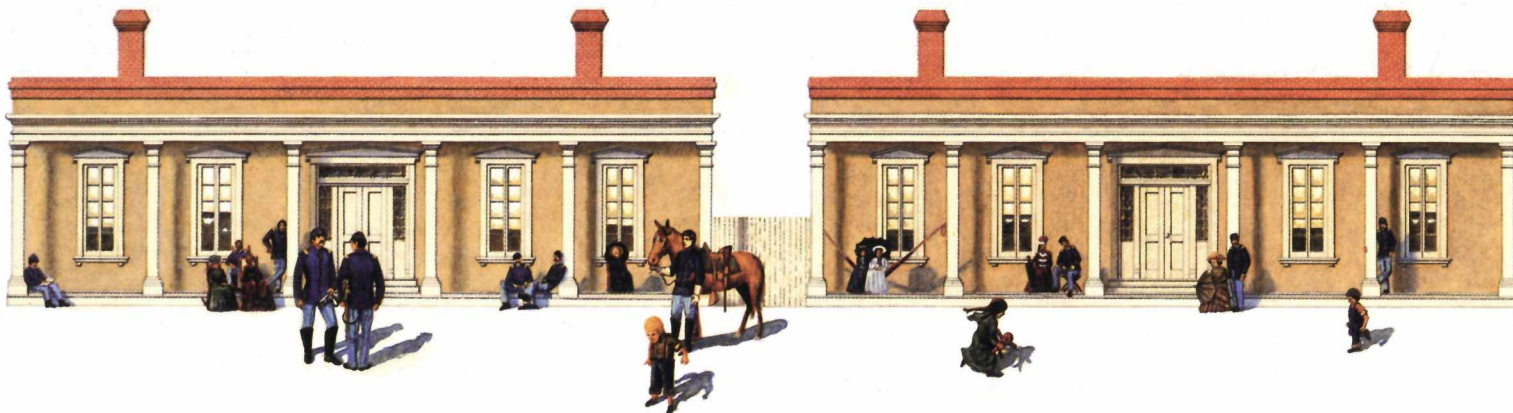


Third Fort Union, 1863-91

The third and last fort, part of which, the Mechanics Corral, is shown here, was almost a city in itself. Erected between 1863 and 1869, and modified somewhat during the 1870s, it consisted of the military post of Fort Union and the Fort Union Quartermaster Depot and served as the principal supply base for the Military Department of New Mexico. Arriving from the east over the Santa Fe Trail, shipments of food, clothing, arms, and ammunition, as well as tools and building materials, were unpacked and stored in warehouses, then assigned as needed to other forts. Like most southwestern military posts, Fort Union was not enclosed by a wall or stockade.



Fort Union



Along the Post Officers' Row.

Touring Fort Union

The ruins of Fort Union are an impressive memorial to the men and women who won the West. It is difficult, however, to look at these melted adobe walls and the few chimneys that rise above ground level and realize that this was once the largest U.S. military installation on the 19th-century southwestern frontier. The diagram below, which you should use while touring the ruins, is an attempt to recapture something of the size and appearance, as well as the functions, of the original Fort Union complex.

The stone foundations of the buildings are still visible, as are some of the adobe walls, so you should have no difficulty matching what you see on the site to appropriate locations on the diagram.

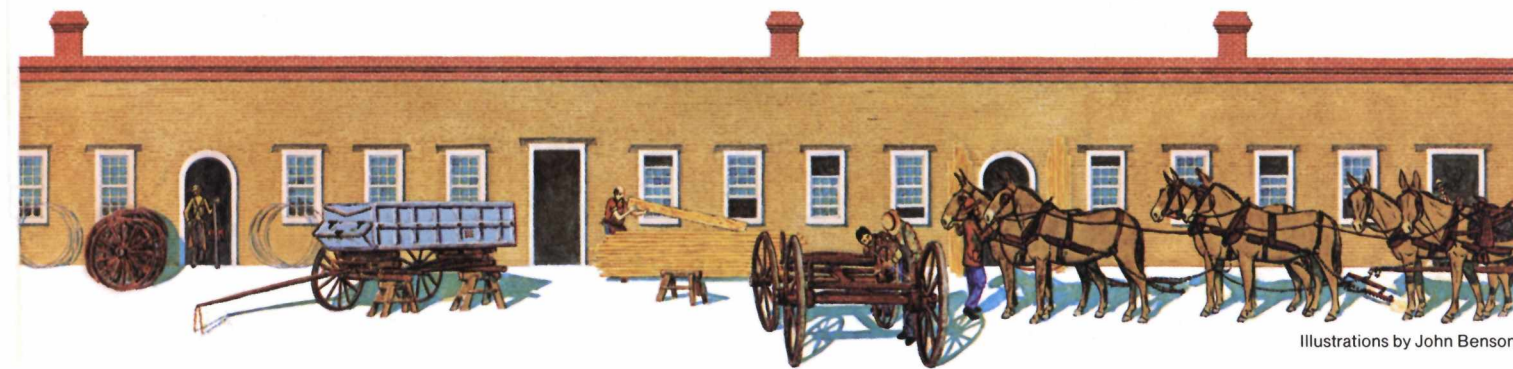
A self-guiding trail (shown in white on the diagram below) leads through the ruins and to the remains of the second fort erected during the Civil War. Across the valley to the west, the ruins of the ordnance depot are visible on the first fort site.



About Your Visit

Fort Union is 8 miles north of I-25, at the end of N. Mex. 161. Watrous, N. Mex., is ½ mile south of the intersection of these two highways. The nearest large community is Las Vegas, N. Mex., 26 miles south, where there are restaurants, overnight accommodations, and auto services. No camping facilities exist at the park, but there are picnic tables. The park is open

from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily, except January 1 and December 25. It is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Additional information may be obtained by writing the superintendent, Fort Union National Monument, Watrous, NM 87753, or by calling (505) 425-8025.



Inside the Depot's Mechanics' Corral.

Illustrations by John Benson



Fort Union is being preserved as an outdoor museum. While every effort has been made to provide for your safety, you must remain alert and exercise caution during your visit. The ruins, though stabilized, will fall if climbed on. Stay on the established trails and watch your footing. Also, be on the lookout for rattlesnakes. Should you encounter one, retreat slowly and report the sighting to a park ranger.

