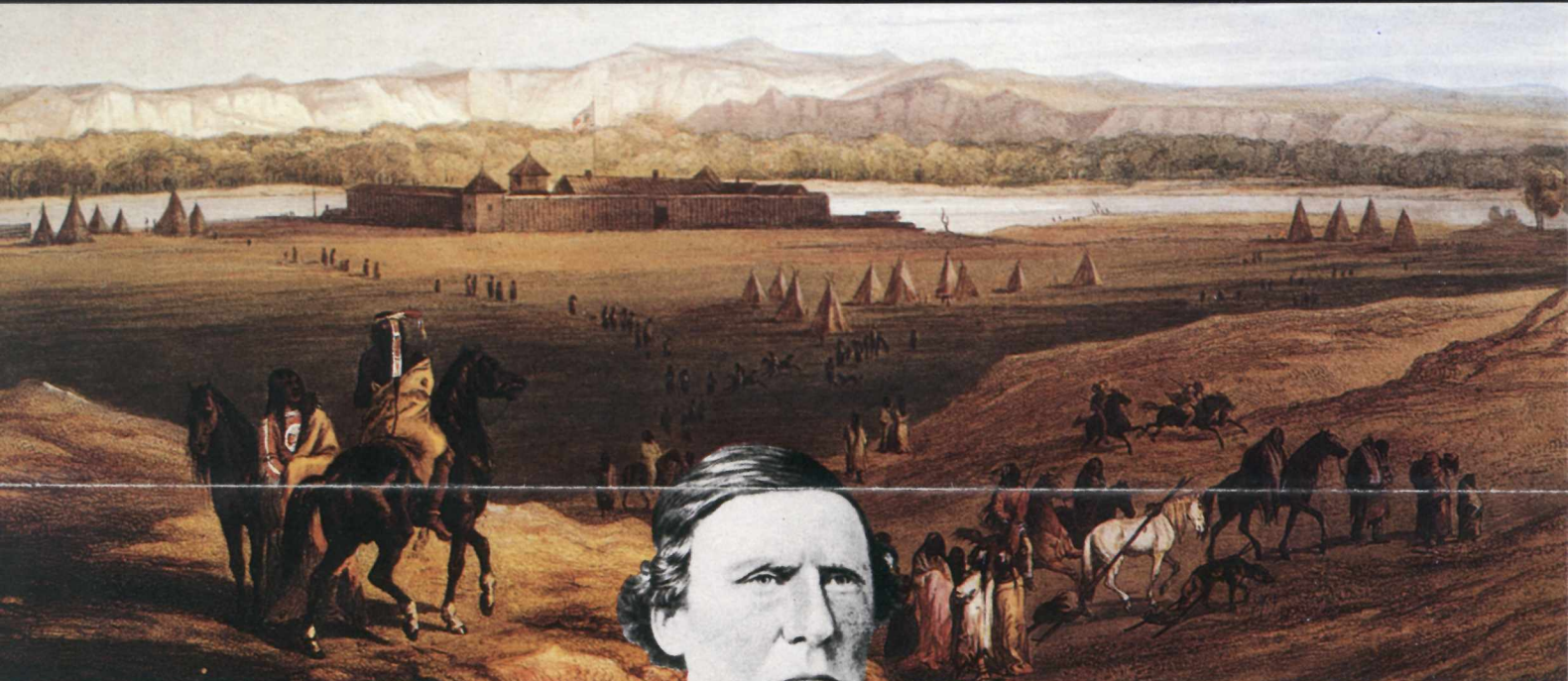


Fort Union Trading Post

Official Map and Guide



Fort Union Trading Post in 1833, by Karl Bodmer.

Outpost on the Missouri

John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company built Fort Union in 1828 near the junction of the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers in what is now North Dakota. The post soon became headquarters for trading beaver furs and buffalo hides with the Assiniboin Indians to the north, the Crow Indians on the upper Yellowstone, and the Blackfeet who lived farther up the Missouri.

Much of the fort's early success was due to Kenneth McKenzie. He not only supervised its construction but served as the first bourgeois, or superintendent, of the Astor-affiliated Upper Missouri Outfit, as the operation at the trading post was called. The Scottish-born McKenzie came to the United States by way of Canada, where he gained experience in the fur trade by working for that country's North West Company. He was a proud, ruthless man and he set out to dominate the upper Missouri trade. Others would compete with him, but none succeeded for long.



Montana Historical Society

Kenneth McKenzie, founder of Fort Union.

Fort Union stood on a grassy plain that stretched away to the north for a mile, thus providing ample space for Indian camps at trading time. A stout palisade of vertical logs enclosed a quadrangle 220 by 240 feet. Employees occupied rooms in a long building on the west side of the interior. A similar building on the east side contained a retail store and storerooms for furs and various food items. At the north end stood the imposing bourgeois house and, behind it, a bell tower and kitchen. The main gate, used by freight wagons and the trading public, opened on the south or river side; another gate on the opposite side led to the prairie. Near the main gate were a reception room for Indians and shops for the blacksmith and the tinner. Other structures included an icehouse, a powder magazine, and enclosures for animals. Impressive two-story stone bastions at the northeast and southwest corners of the fort served as observation posts and defensive positions. A great flagstaff stood in the center of the court.

The American Fur Company's policy of helping travelers to visit its posts on the Missouri brought many famed men—adventurers, scientists, artists, priests—to Fort Union. One of the first, artist George Catlin, arrived in 1832 on board the *Yellow Stone*, the first upper Missouri steamboat to reach the fort. Prince Maximilian of Wied, Father Pierre De Smet, John James Audubon, Karl Bodmer, and Rudolph Frederick Kurz were among other early visitors who made paintings of the fort or wrote vivid accounts of life there. The company also encouraged its bourgeois and clerks to collect and prepare specimens for scientific study. Edwin Thompson Denig, for example, who started out as a clerk at Fort Union and retired 25 years later as bourgeois, spent considerable time during those

years compiling information about the Indian tribes of the upper Missouri which proved of inestimable value to ethnologists. He also contributed many skins and skulls of upper Missouri mammals and birds to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

When McKenzie established Fort Union, beaver had been in great demand for nearly three decades. Starting in the early 1830s, however, silk hats began to replace beaver hats as status symbols and the demand for beaver skins declined. But the demand for tanned buffalo robes increased, and this, coupled with improved river transportation, caused Fort Union to thrive. Trade remained brisk until 1837, when smallpox wrought havoc among the Indian tribes. Despite the tragedy, the robe trade continued, slowly for a time but gradually increasing in volume again.

As Fort Union approached its quarter century, signs of coming change were apparent on the upper Missouri. Buffalo herds were still immense, but white civilization was beginning to encroach on the homelands of the Plains Indians. The Sioux became more and more hostile. In 1857 smallpox struck again, and many of the Plains tribes broke up into bands and scattered to escape the scourge. As a result, not many Indians traded at Fort Union that summer. By the time the Civil War began four years later, trade in general had declined and the post was in need of repair. In the summer of 1864 Gen. Alfred Sully, who had been sent west as part of the Army's efforts to curb the ongoing Sioux depredations, described Fort Union as "an old dilapidated affair, almost falling to pieces." An infantry company was stationed there during the winter to guard supplies until a regular Army post could be built.

In June 1866, a new infantry company arrived on the upper Missouri and commenced the construction of an Army post, Fort Buford, at the site of old Fort William, the earliest Fort Union competitor. By then Fort Union had been sold to the Northwest Fur Company, which tried to continue the trading activity but finally gave up and sold the post to the Army in 1867. Troops dismantled the fort and used the materials to complete Fort Buford. Only remnants of the foundations remained.



Walters Art Gallery

Setting Trap for Beaver, by Alfred Jacob Miller.

Bourgeois, Craftsmen, and Traders

"A craftsman or workman receives \$250 a year; a workman's assistant is never paid more than \$120; a hunter receives \$400, together with the hides and horns of the animals he kills; an interpreter without other employment, which is seldom, gets \$500. Clerks and traders who have mastered [Indian languages] . . . may demand from \$800 to \$1,000 without interest. All employees are furnished board and lodging free of charge."

—Rudolph F. Kurz, clerk at Fort Union 1851-52

In its heyday, Fort Union Trading Post was a busy place and employed up to 100 persons, many of whom were married to Indian women and had families. A visitor in the 1830s noted the cosmopolitan mix of the fort's inhabitants, and it was not unusual to see Americans (including blacks), Englishmen, Germans, Frenchmen, Russians, Spaniards, Italians, Indians, wives, and children stream down to the landing to greet the arrival of the annual steamboats.

The man in charge of the post was called the bourgeois. Starting with Kenneth McKenzie, Fort Union witnessed a succession of outstanding bourgeois, including Alexander Culbertson and

Edwin Denig. Other important members of the fort's staff were the clerks, responsible for maintaining inventories of trade goods and furs and hides. They also kept track of the fort's tools, equipment, animals, and a dozen other things. Interpreters, another key group, had to know several Indian languages as well as English and French.

Hunters, often men of mixed blood, supplied the tables with fresh meat, whether buffalo, elk, or deer. Craftsmen, such as carpenters, masons, and blacksmiths, were essential in constructing and maintaining the fort and its equipment and tools. The tinner had the task of preparing such trade goods as rings, bracelets, and kettles. Herders cared for the horses and cattle. Traders sent to Indian camps during the winter returned in the spring, hopefully with a load of furs and no leftover trade goods.

All in all, fort employees were rough and ready, often hard-drinking men, and violence was a common event in the daily routine. Yet, with a strong bourgeois, the fort's mission was met and the American Fur Company reaped the profits of its labor.



A Cree chief negotiates with Bourgeois Edwin Denig, 1851. From a sketch by Rudolph F. Kurz.

"From the top of the hills we saw a grand panorama of a most extensive wilderness, with Fort Union beneath us and far away, as well as the Yellowstone River, and the lake across the river.

The hills across the Missouri appeared quite low, and we could see the high prairie beyond, forming the background."

John James Audubon, 1835.

"I think Fort Union is the finest place on the Missouri for a military post—in the heart of the Indian country, surrounded with a fertile soil and the finest hunting range, and of easy access by the Missouri

river for eight months of the year. Few positions in Indian territory can be occupied so advantageously and with less expense to the government."

Isaac Stevens, 1854.

National Historic Site
North Dakota/Montana

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Junction of the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers, by Karl Bodmer.

The Indians and Fort Union

The Assiniboin claimed the land on which Fort Union was built. This tribe occupied both sides of the border with Canada and thus had a choice of trading with either the Hudson's Bay Company or the American Fur Company. The Crow Indians lived on the upper Yellowstone River and its tributaries. This was a pleasant, bountiful land, and the Crows were considered the richest tribe east of the Rocky Mountains.

Farther up the Missouri, the Blackfeet also claimed land on both sides of the international boundary. Since the days of Lewis and Clark, when a Blackfoot warrior had been killed by the exploration party, these Indians considered American whites their enemies. The Blackfeet, however, welcomed British traders in their midst. Bourgeois Kenneth McKenzie took advantage of this situation when a trapper named Jacob Berger wandered into Fort Union. Berger had worked for the British and had learned the Blackfoot language. McKenzie sent the man to the Blackfeet with an invitation to visit the fort. The scheme worked and the Blackfeet eventually allowed the American Fur Company to establish a trading post in their territory.

The Indians were sharp bargainers and the trading companies were in fierce and constant competition. Rarely did any of these tribes threaten Fort Union with violence. Occasionally, a disgruntled leader gathered his followers and attempted a takeover. None achieved success. Violence often did occur among the Indians themselves, especially at trading time. Every year the traders smuggled alcohol into the upper Missouri country, despite laws to the contrary. Many trading sessions



Assiniboin Warrior at Fort Union, 1833, by Bodmer.

concluded with the Indians becoming thoroughly intoxicated and settling old scores with one another.

Liquor was not the only scourge the traders introduced to the upper Missouri. In 1837, the steamboat *St. Peters* arrived at Fort Union bringing with it the smallpox. The disease struck the fort's employees just when a band of Assiniboin arrived to trade. Fort traders went out to meet them, taking along trade goods and urging the Indians not to approach any closer. The Assiniboin paid no heed. Their bodies had little resistance against the foreign virus, and of the approximately 1,000 people in the band who caught the disease, only about 150 survived. Other bands kept coming in that summer and the smallpox spread throughout the tribe. The Blackfeet were also ravaged by the disease. The Crow Indians, somehow, escaped the pestilence. Twenty years later, in 1857, the smallpox struck again. The Assiniboin suffered once more and, this time, the disease swept through the Crow tribe, striking down young and old alike.

The first Sioux appeared in the vicinity of Fort Union in 1847. Before this, they had lived farther downstream, but white expansion from the east forced them to roam westward in increasing numbers. By the 1860s their hostility towards whites, and even other Indian tribes, made them a menace to life at Fort Union. After the Minnesota uprising of 1862, the U.S. Army undertook inconclusive campaigns against the Sioux. This led to the establishment of Fort Buford a short distance downriver from Fort Union. The Sioux continued to harass

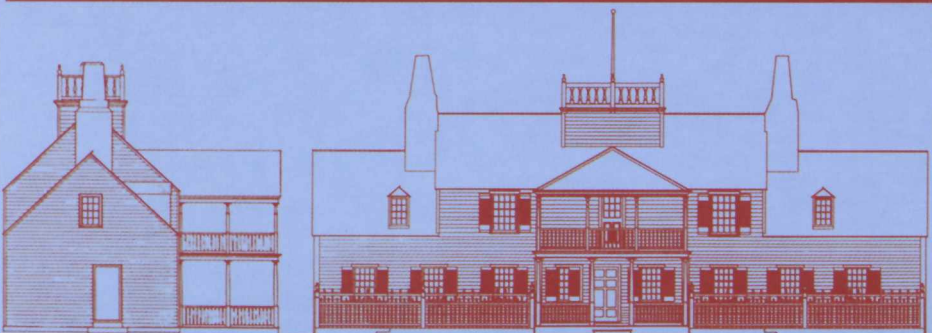


Yellow Stone en route to Fort Union, by Bodmer.

both forts and anyone traveling between them. Fort Union was finally abandoned and dismantled in 1867. The romance of the fur trade on the high plains and in the Rocky Mountains was now but a memory.



Fur Trading Forts and Prominent Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri.



The Bourgeois House, Fort Union's most imposing structure and administrative center.

The Fort Today

Grass covered the entire site when the National Park Service acquired the property in 1966. Four low ridges forming a near square indicated the line of the palisades and two mounds at the northeast and southwest corners the location of the stone bastions. Two other mounds within the enclosure marked the powder magazine and the bourgeois house.

The National Park Service has excavated the stone foundations of the palisades, the main house and its kitchen, the Indian reception building, and the main gate, and has tested for most other buildings. It has uncovered artifacts relating to life at the fort—eating utensils, beer bottles, buttons, metal parts of trapping gear and harnesses, china, pottery, and glass.

Between 1985 and 1991 the National Park Service reconstructed portions of Fort Union Trading Post, including the walls, stone bastions, Indian trade house, and Bourgeois House. The surrounding lands are also being controlled to provide an authentic mid-19th century setting for the post.

About Your Visit

Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site is 25 miles southwest of Williston, N.D., and 24 miles north of Sidney, Mont. The fort is open daily from 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., with extended hours in summer. The fort is closed on Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1. Groups must make arrangements in advance.

More Information Write: Superintendent, Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site, 15550 HWY 1804, Williston, ND 58801-8680. Call: 701-572-9083. Internet: www.nps.gov/fous.

Bodmer paintings courtesy of Enron Art Foundation, Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha.