

Forts: Northern Plains

When the administration of President Thomas Jefferson concluded the so-called Louisiana Purchase (of territory until then held by France), the area of the United States (U.S.) doubled. This was in 1803, when 828,000 square miles of land were acquired west of the existing settlements. To establish presence of the U.S. in the new territory, a number of military forts were built, and other that originally served as supply stations managed by fur traders were acquired by the U.S. military. These included most notably Fort Union in today Montana, Fort Pierre Choteau in South Dakota, the Bent's Fort in Colorado, and Fort Bridger in Wyoming (Janin, 2001).

When policies including the Indian Removal Act of 1830 were implemented, several Native American tribes (including the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Muscogee-Creek, and Seminole) were displaced from the south-eastern part of the continent and moved beyond the so-called Permanent Indian Frontier. Additional forts that policed this border were built as a result. This "permanent" frontier was soon breached, however, and travel across the continent increased dramatically due to the establishing of overland trails, the transcontinental railroad, and the influx of prospectors following the discovery of precious metals in California, Nevada, and later also the Black Hills in Dakota Territory. Since the U.S. military was supposed to protect travelers across the plains and ultimately displace members of Native American tribes who lived in these areas, the U.S. military established an extensive network of temporary camps, cantonments, and permanent forts along major rivers, trails, and railroads. By 1867, the cumulative number of these posts reached 116 (Field, 2005).

Forts were of several types, this variety reflecting the time and location of their establishment. Some of the relatively later built forts in areas where timber was easily available were similar to early forts, most of which were completely surrounded by stockades from eight to eighteen feet high. These contained buildings from basic block houses to a variety of barracks, officer's quarters, guard houses, storage structures, civilian employee buildings, livestock and enclosures. Earlier forts also often included a trading post, which was typically situated by the front gate, establishing the limited area that civilian clients were able to access. Enclosed forts were of five types. A) those where back walls of contiguous buildings formed a defensive wall, B) forts enclosed by a palisade set in the ground or held by the means of an inner framework, C) combined type where defense consisted of back walls of buildings with palisades filling the gaps between them, D) fort where buildings were surrounded by an earthwork and ditch, and E) those where a protective wall was built wholly of sods (Buecker, 2014).

Stockades were built also around other types of forts after 1864, when an order demanded this kind of protection in reaction to a number of Native American attacks, many of which captured livestock in daring ways (for example a group of warriors drove away a herd of horses right from the middle of Fort Laramie in Wyoming, with soldiers observing them in broad daylight) (Field, 2005). Given the scarcity of timber on the plains, landscape features such as bluffs were also utilized as means of protection, and stone was used as building material where available. Fort Riley in Kansas is one of the largest stone-built forts, and some of the original structures can be viewed in this still active U.S. Army post. Apart from exceptions, however, Native Americans preferred guerilla-type warfare targeting detachments traveling outside of forts (instead of conducting siege war), therefore forts built in the second half of the nineteenth century tended to be of open disposition. At the center of these forts, exemplified by Fort Leavenworth in Kansas,

was a large parade ground surrounded by barracks, officers' quarters, and other primary buildings. Secondary buildings were situated on the periphery in various patterns (Hoagland, 1999).

Dennis Hart Mahan (1802 – 1871) was behind the design of many nineteenth century forts, especially those consisting of blockhouses and stockades. This is because Mahan, whom the War Department first sent to Europe to study public engineering works and military institutions, from 1830 to 1871 taught and produced publications concerning fortifications, strategy, and tactics at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

The system of bugle calls that regulated the daily activities in U.S. military forts varied to some extent depending on circumstances such as the time of the year and the missions at hand, but the following list of the most important calls summarizing typical schedules can serve as an example.

Reveille (wake up)	5:45 a.m.
Assembly (and roll call)	6:00
Stable call (care for horses)	Immediately after
Breakfast call	6:30
Fatigue Call (work, chores)	7:30
Surgeon's (sick) call	8:00
Guard Mounting	9:00
Band and Field Music Practice	Immediately after
Water Call	11:00
Recall from Fatigue	11:45
Dinner (Lunch) Call	12:00

Fatigue Call	1:00 p.m.
Stable Call	4:00
Recall from Fatigue	Thirty minutes before Retreat
Retreat	Sunset
Supper Call	6:30
Tattoo (assembly and roll call)	9:00
Taps (lights out)	9:30

These basic calls were on Sundays complemented by a late morning Church Call, and on other days ideally by drills before lunch and target practice after lunch. However, especially during periods when soldiers were building their forts, sometimes under the supervision of only a few civilian craftsmen, they often complained about military activities being replaced by prolonged Fatigue Calls.

Although Native Americans seldom attacked forts, this did happen in the 1860s. When travel commenced along the Bozeman Trail leading through Wyoming to gold mines in Montana, the Lakota Chief Red Cloud (1822 – 1909) issued warning that he would defend the last and best Native American hunting grounds on the plains, which were so disrupted. His warning not heeded, the following Red Cloud War forced the U.S. government to withdraw its military from forts established in the area between Bighorn Mountains and Black Hills in Wyoming, and close the area to miners and settlers. Accordingly, the 1868 Fort Laramie treaty stipulated that Fort C.F. Smith, Fort Phil Kearny, and Fort Reno would be abandoned (Hedren, 1988).

Descriptions of the current state of U.S. military forts on the plains and information about the possibility of visiting them can be found in a book by J. Barnes, which is listed below.

See also: Forts: Southern Plains; Indian Appropriations Act of 1851; Military Training and Leadership; Mountain Men; Tribal Rules of Engagement

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Further Reading:

Barnes, J. (2008). *Forts of the Northern Plains: Guide to historic military posts of the Plains Indian Wars*. Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books.

Buecker, T. R. (2014). Pretty well fixed for defense: Enclosed army posts in the northern plains 1819 – 1872. *Nebraska History*, 95(1), 14-27.

Field, R. (2005). *Forts of the American frontier 1820-91: Central and Northern Plains*. Long Island City, NY: Osprey Publishing Ltd.

Hedren, P. L. (1988). *Fort Laramie in 1876: Chronicle of a frontier post at war*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

Hoagland, A. K. (1999). Village constructions: U.S. Army forts on the plains, 1848-1890. *Winterthur Portfolio*, 34(4), 215-237.

Janin, H. (2001). *Fort Bridger, Wyoming: Trading post for Indians, mountain men, and westward migrants*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers.