

Fort Atkinson State Historical Park

PO Box 240 / Fort Calhoun, NE 68023-0240
Phone: 402-468-5611

For More Parks Information
Visit us on the Web at: www.OutdoorNebraska.org



It's EASY to make RESERVATIONS for your favorite

NEBRASKA STATE PARKS

online at www.outdoornebraska.org

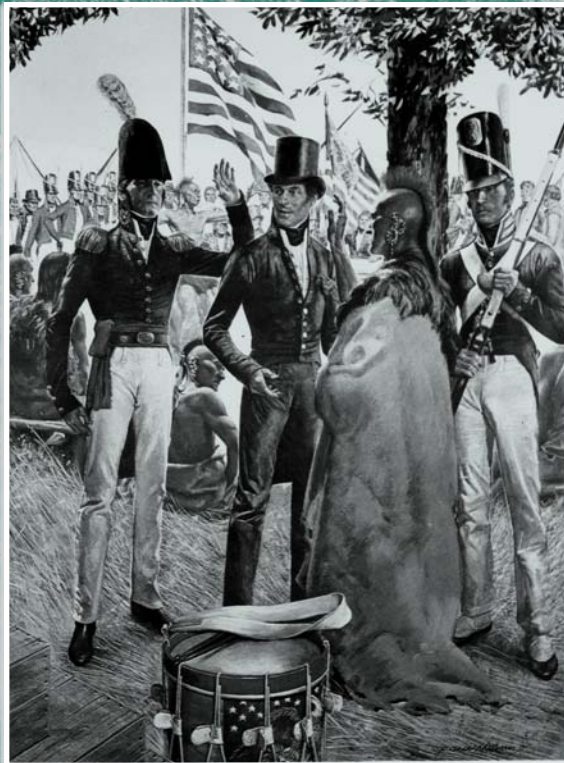
or by calling:

402-471-1414



Under federal and/or state law, discrimination is prohibited on the basis of race, color, religion, age, gender, marital status, national origin, disability or political affiliation. If you think you have been discriminated against in any program, activity or facility or want more information, contact the Affirmative Action Officer, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Lincoln, NE, 402-471-0641; the Equal Opportunity Commission, Lincoln, NE, 402-471-2024, TTY / TDD 402-471-4693. USFWS, Division of Bird Habitat and Conservation, Civil Rights Coordinator, 4401 North Fairfax Drive, MBSP 4020, Arlington, Virginia 22203.

Fort Atkinson 1820-1827 State Historical Park



Nebraska Game and
Parks Commission



William Clark

Meriwether Lewis

The first U.S. military post west of the Missouri River, Fort Atkinson was established by the Yellowstone Expedition of 1819. But, its story actually begins 15 years earlier with the Lewis and Clark Expedition. They first set up camp in the area on July 30, 1804, and held council with the Oto and Missouri Indians on August 3, 1804. That powwow gave the locale its name of "Council Bluff," and Clark later recommended the site for the location of a fort. A sculpture display depicting the council is on site near the visitor center. Fort Atkinson was built on the bluffs overlooking the Missouri and replaced Cantonment Missouri, a temporary outpost set up the year before on the banks of the river about 1½ miles north.

The Yellowstone party spent the winter of 1819-20 at the cantonment. Sickness and bitter cold claimed the lives of over 160 members of the expedition. A disastrous spring flood prompted the move from the bottom lands to the present site on the valley terrace above the flood plain. Although initial plans called for a string of posts across the plains, this was destined to be the only one built by the Yellowstone Expedition. Congress, in an economy move, abandoned the idea of a chain of forts.

Consequently, the goals of the expedition were altered drastically . . . to the building of a single permanent fort on the Missouri River. With the site selected, it was called Camp Council Bluff while the fort was under construction because of its close proximity to Lewis and Clark's council site. However, upon completion, the Secretary of War instructed that it be named Fort Atkinson after Col. Henry Atkinson, commander of the Yellowstone Expedition.

LARGE GARRISON

At one point, over 1,000 men were garrisoned at the post. Active from 1820 to 1827, the fort protected the burgeoning western fur trade and controlled access to the Upper Missouri Country and the Platte Valley overland route. As the only government authority in the vast territory west of the Missouri, the garrison at Fort Atkinson assumed the often impossible task of regulating the fur trade and enforcing peaceful relations between traders and the Indian tribes of the region.

During its brief existence, Fort Atkinson played host to momentous events in America's westering experience. It was the scene of several "firsts," including the first school and library in what later became Nebraska. The soldiers demonstrated that agriculture could flourish in the so-called "Great American Desert." Though isolated, the garrison at the fort came to enjoy many of the amenities characteristic of life in settled communities elsewhere. The story of Fort Atkinson adds much to the social history of the West.

GATEWAY FOR FUR TRADE

These achievements may have diverted attention from the fort's significant contribution to the development of the western fur trade. From 1820-27, Fort Atkinson was the gateway to the fur regions of the Upper Missouri and the Rocky Mountains. These were pivotal years which saw the fur trade become the dominant force for American expansion. By the 1840s, fur traders and mountain men had explored the West, opened the Mexican territories of the Southwest, and shown the way for emigrants to Oregon and California.

In 1822, a party of fur traders led by General William H. Ashley and Major Andrew Henry ascended the Missouri in keelboats, seeking to tap the fur riches of the Yellowstone Country. This expedition included Jedediah Smith, David E. Jackson, Jim Bridger and Mike Fink.

The years 1823-24 were to be momentous ones, as Fort Atkinson played out its role as sentinel at the fur trade gateway. The second Ashley expedition passed the fort in the spring of 1823. This group included others whose names would loom large on the roll of noted mountain men ? Thomas Fitzpatrick, William Sublette, James Clyman, Hiram Scott and the legendary Hugh Glass. On June 2, 1823, the Ashley party was attacked at the Arikara villages and was forced to retreat after suffering a number of killed and wounded. That attack led to a retaliatory expedition headed by Col. Henry Leavenworth. After an arduous trek upriver, a combined force of soldiers and fur traders fought an indecisive skirmish with the Arikara.

The joust with the Arikara and a series of events which followed in the summer and fall of 1824 prompted William H. Ashley to take steps that would revolutionize the operation of the western fur trade. After two costly failures to gain a foothold in the Upper Missouri, Ashley sent Jedediah Smith and a party of trappers to explore the Crow Country and the region along the Continental Divide. Almost a year passed before several of Smith's party, led by Thomas Fitzpatrick, stumbled into Fort Atkinson after an exhausting journey through South Pass and down the Platte. They brought word that the mountains were rich with beaver. Responding post haste, Ashley outfitted a company of trappers. In November 1824 they struck out from Fort Atkinson via the Platte Valley for the Rocky Mountains.

While Ashley and his men prowled the remote regions of the Rockies, other traders operated in Fort Atkinson's

backyard. Manuel Lisa had established a post in the vicinity before Fort Atkinson appeared on the scene. With Lisa's death in 1820, his Missouri Fur Company was reorganized with Joshua Pilcher as field commander, operating from the Council Bluff. John P. Cabanne was a frequent visitor to Fort Atkinson as proprietor of the Berthold, Chouteau and Pratte Co. post, 6 miles below the fort.

SOUTHWEST EXPEDITIONS

The fort was also the jumping-off point for several early expeditions to the Mexican settlements of Taos and Sante Fe. As early as 1820, David Meriwether set out to find a wagon route to Sante Fe. In the summer and fall of 1824, separate parties led by members of the Robidoux family left the Council Bluff bound for New Mexico. A large trading expedition, outfitted by Berthold, Pratte and Co. at their post near Fort Atkinson, embarked in July 1825, under the command of Sylvestre Pratte. Yet another Robidoux trading party started for the southwest in September 1825.

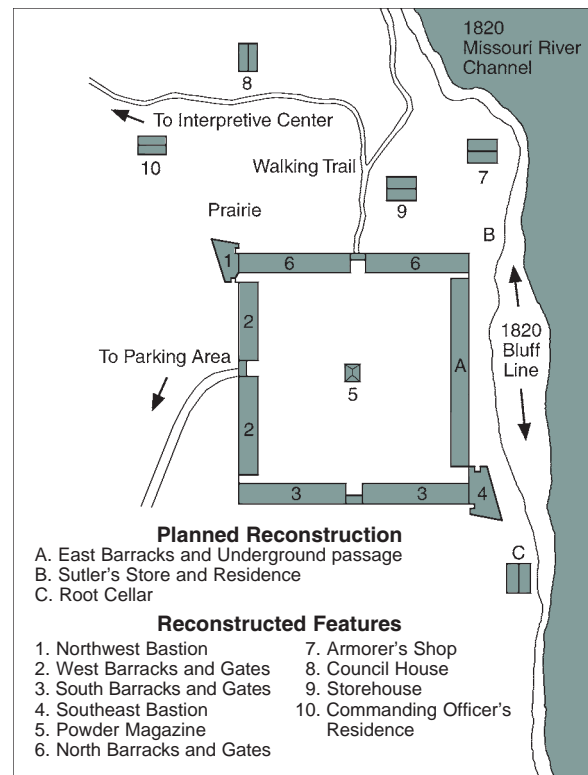
The Council Bluff was also the site of the Upper Missouri Indian Agency, with headquarters at Fort Atkinson. The agency was managed by Benjamin O'Fallon and sub-agent John Dougherty. It was O'Fallon who arranged for a delegation of Mexicans to visit the Council Bluff in September 1824 to conclude a peace treaty with the Pawnee. It was also O'Fallon who visited the tribes along the Missouri and Platte with General Henry Atkinson in 1825 to negotiate a pact not to bother Americans traveling to Sante Fe.

From 1820-27, the fort witnessed the opening of the West. Few living there then could have envisioned the significance of the events played out within the shadow of its bastions. From the perspective of over a century and a half, however, Fort Atkinson's importance to western history can hardly be overestimated.

ABANDONMENT AND RESTORATION

The great fort fell in need of repair, but Congress refused to allocated the \$3,000 needed. Since the Army was realigning its forces to better protect the growing overland traffic that was following more southerly routes west, the decision was made

to abandon the fort. Gradually, all physical evidence of the fort disappeared, as the area converted to farmland. Thus it existed until 1961, when local concern for preservation of the site prompted a drive to purchase and restore the area. The Game and Parks Commission agreed to buy the land, if half the cost would be paid by local interests. A successful fund-raising drive was spearheaded by the Fort Atkinson Foundation, the Greater Omaha Historical Society and the Washington County Historical Society, in cooperation with the Omaha World-Herald. The Commission took title to the land two years later.



Development and restoration of the site proceeded over the next 20-plus years, but personnel were hamstrung by budget constraints, a situation that also plagued the original fort. Restoration work, however, did go on, including archeological surveys, site development, land shaping, some interpretive work, a temporary visitor center and reconstruction of the southern west barracks wall. The pace picked up, when the Game and Parks Foundation lent financial and other support to the project. Donations made through the Foundation totaled close to \$1 million, with over half a million coming in the form of dimensional lumber and logs for reconstruction, contributed by the Plum Creek Timber Company and hauled to the site by Plum Creek's parent corporation, the Burlington Northern Railroad. In addition, the Burlington Northern Foundation donated \$150,000, an amount matched by the Peter Kiewit Foundation, for the construction of the visitor/interpretive center at the park. At the same time, hundreds of hours of volunteer labor went into rebuilding the Armorer's Shop.

Game and Parks Commission construction crews have progressed with building the Council House, the south barracks wall, the north barracks wall, and the northern west barracks wall. The Commission is now well into its restoration schedule.

BUILT ON A GRAND SCALE

Fort Atkinson was a large outpost for its day. Not only was it garrisoned by 1,000 men, it was built on a grand scale. The exterior wall dimensions were 455 feet by 468 feet, with bastions at the northwest and southeast corners, wagon-width gates in the south, west and north walls, a passageway under the east wall, two narrow exits (sally ports), and a powder magazine in the center of the parade ground. Along the walls were barrack rooms, about 20 feet wide, with plank floors and ceilings, shingled roofs, lime-pointed walls and brick chimneys and fireplaces. Brick was made locally, and the vast supply of logs for both construction and heating came primarily from bottomland timber around the fort.

This was an important site in the journey of Lewis and Clark, in dealings with the Indians, in the expansion of the fur trade, and in the early river traffic on the mighty Missouri.



Living history events add to experience of the fort.

Telling that story through reconstruction and interpretation is an awesome task one the Game and Parks Commission has undertaken with vigor and dedication.

ABOUT YOUR VISIT

Visitors are welcome to see what has already been accomplished, tour the interpretive center, and watch the progress of the restoration. Living history demonstrations are staged periodically at the fort, the blacksmith and gunsmith set up at the Armorer's Shop, while volunteers interpret military activities in various rooms along the west barracks wall. The carpenter and cooper also have workshops there, and, at times, the Indian Agent can be found in his quarters at the Council House. General information and interpretive schedules are available at the visitor center.

A Nebraska Park Entry Permit is required. The grounds are open year-round, and the visitor center is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. during the summer. There is a small picnic area near the fortification parking area. While no food or lodging is available at the park, camping, restaurants and overnight accommodations are available nearby. Tour groups should contact the park office in advance to make special arrangements.

Please do not smoke on the trail or in the buildings. Grassland fires are especially dangerous and spread rapidly. Do not disturb the archaeological remains or take historic objects. Pets are permitted on the grounds but must be kept on a leash. Stay clear of the posted construction areas. Please use caution along the trail, since very steep drop-offs are common. Poison ivy and ticks can be abundant during certain seasons, so take care and watch your children. If an accident should happen, please report it to the staff at the visitor center.

Your comments and suggestions are welcome. For information on Nebraska's other state park areas, inquire at the visitor center; call 1-800-826-PARK (7275). Or visit our Web site at: www.outdoornebraska.org

Watercolor by Karl Bodmer (May 5, 1833) shows the ruins of Fort Atkinson, viewed from the southeast. Illustration courtesy of Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska.

