

Fort Kearny
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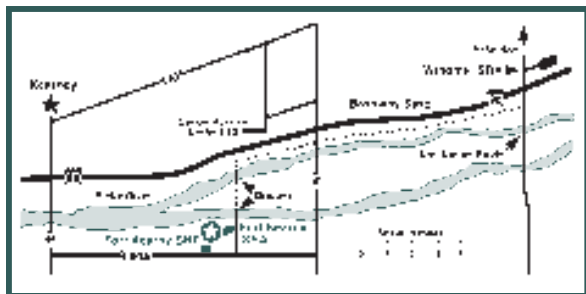
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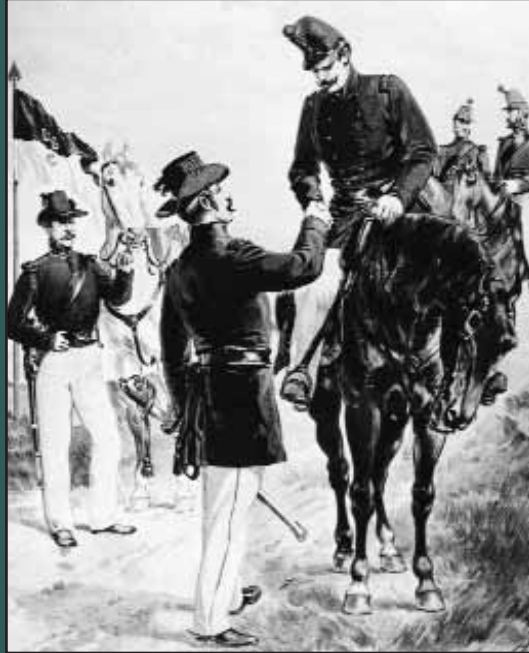

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission



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Fort Kearny State Historical Park and State Recreational Area

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

The History of Fort Kearny

In its 23 years as a military post, Fort Kearny came to symbolize westward expansion and development. It was the first fort built to protect travelers on the Oregon Trail. It was the headquarters of military and civil government, an important stage station, a home station of the Pony Express, an outfitting depot for numerous Indian campaigns, and the home of the famed Pawnee Scouts under the leadership of Frank and Luther North.

The first Fort Kearny was established by Col. Stephen Watts Kearny on Table Creek (now Nebraska City), as a result of an 1844 report of the Secretary of War, recommending the construction of a chain of posts from the Missouri River to the Rocky Mountains to protect the Oregon migration. By an 1846 act of Congress, such posts were authorized along with the creation of an Oregon battalion, a regiment of mounted volunteers. This encampment at Table Creek soon proved to be a gross error in geographic judgment, and on June 1, 1847, the War Department directed that an alternate military station be established "near Grand Island where the road to California encounters the Platte River."

Complying with Army orders, topographical engineer Lt. Daniel P. Woodbury left old Fort Kearny (Table Creek) on Sept. 23, 1847, to find a new site for the outpost. He was escorted by 5 officers and 78 men under Capt. Andrew Sublette. Woodbury arrived at the foot of Grand Island on Oct. 2. There he began his reconnaissance for a new fort. The site he selected was, by his calculations, "Two or three miles from the head of the group of island called Grand Island," just 17 miles above the intersecting Independence Road and 197 miles from old Fort Kearny.

Returning to Table Creek on Oct. 23, Woodbury cited three advantages – a slight elevation two-thirds of a mile from the nearest bayou of the Platte River, a guarantee against flooding; nearby was the heaviest timber of the Grand Island group; natural hay bottoms, and a strategic location for keeping the peace between the warring Pawnee and Sioux.

By Christmas of 1847, Lt. Woodbury was in Washington, D.C., on orders from the battalion commander Col. L.E. Powell to secure organization of the new post. In a series of communiqués to General Totten, chief engineer, he requested an appropriation of \$15,000 for materials and labor, advocating the employment of Mormon

farmers at Council Bluffs to supply the new post and urging the transfer of a large stockpile of lumber and millwork from old Fort Kearny. Although he failed to attain all of these objectives, Woodbury did secure orders to construct a fort, which was to be built "from scratch," using local materials and "volunteer" soldier labor.

On March 12, 1848, Col. Powell and Lt. Woodbury marched out of old Fort Kearny at Table Creek with an advance guard. By May 1, Table Creek was abandoned. By June, all officers and men of the Missouri volunteers had arrived at the "head of Grand Island" to erect the "first military station on the route to Oregon." The new post was first named Fort Childs, in honor of Col. Thomas Childs of Mexican War fame (and Woodbury's father-in-law).

The construction of the post began at once, with a detail of 175 men erecting temporary sod shelters, manufacturing bricks and adobes, and cutting the sawing timber for later permanent structures.

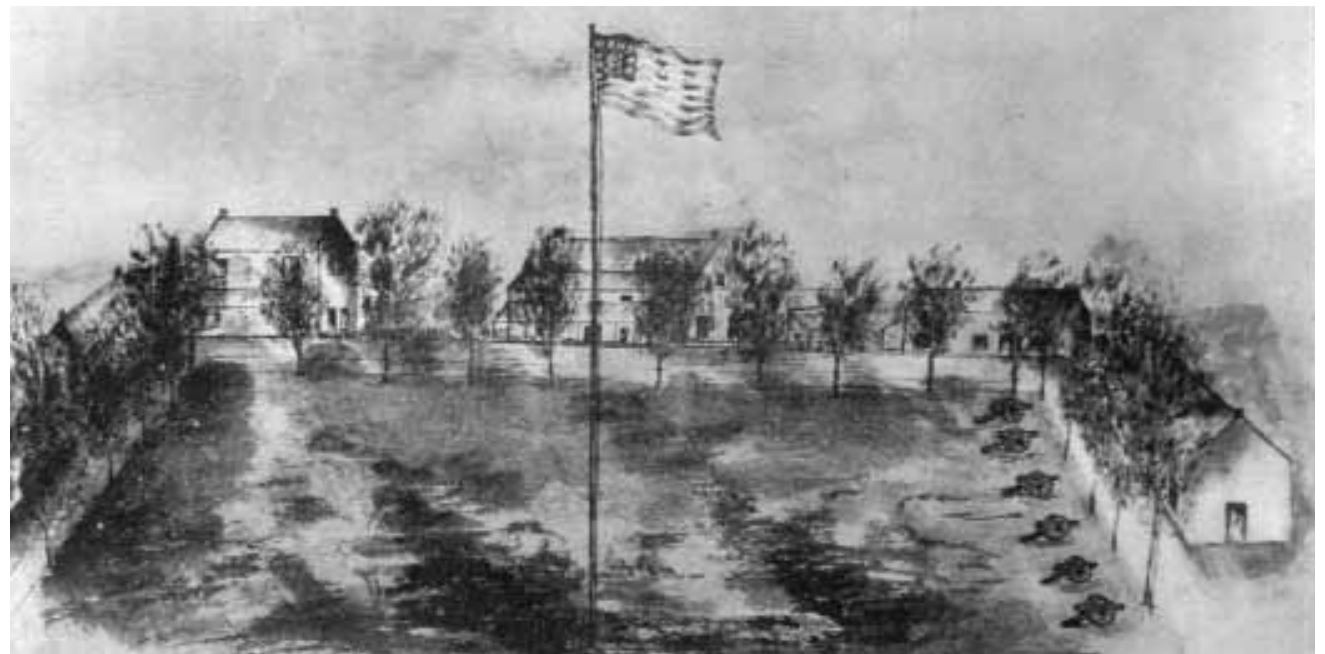
By Dec. 30, 1848, the post was renamed Fort Kearny to honor Gen. Stephen Watts Kearny. It was ready to fulfill its mission of guarding the Oregon Trail and other western routes.

The California Gold Rush further increased travel on the trail. According to an 1849 War Department report, 30,000 people passed through Fort Kearny during an 18-month period, bound for California, Oregon and Salt Lake.

Overland stages carrying mail and passengers, prospectors and miners bound for the gold diggings, emigrants lured by free land in Oregon, and the huge freighting caravans all contributed to making Fort Kearny a bustling center of activity. The post continued to expand in size and importance. The Pony Express had a home station here which was later replaced by a telegraph office. Fort Kearny was, indeed, an important factor in the westward expansion of our nation.



The first known sketch of Fort Kearny, this drawing was made in 1849 by a traveler on the Oregon Trail. At left, the building being roofed is the hospital. The large building in the center is an adobe storehouse, the first structure built at Fort Kearny in 1848, courtesy of the Nebraska Historical Society.



The center illustration, courtesy of the Nebraska Historical Society, is a view looking east in 1864 from a sketch by Lenore Clark in the National Archives. Below is an 1849 artist's view of Old Fort Kearny on the Missouri River, courtesy of the Nebraska Historical Society.



The period following the Civil War saw the fort's peak development. However, as the scene of the Indian Wars shifted to the west and north, Fort Kearny became less and less essential to the military. Its last function of any real importance was to provide protection for the crews constructing the Union Pacific Railroad.

In 1871, Fort Kearny was discontinued as a military post. After abandonment, the buildings were torn down, and the fort reservations were opened for homesteading. The earthworks of the fortifications and the large cottonwoods around the parade grounds were all that remained.

In 1928, the Fort Kearny Memorial Association was formed and purchased the 40 acres where most of the building stood. The State of Nebraska accepted title to the land in 1929. Then, the 1959 Legislature enacted a law that classified state-owned areas and provided funds for their development. Fort Kearny was classified as a state historical park, and in 1960, development got underway by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

Archeological exploration to locate building sites and other features of the area was carried out by the Nebraska State Historical Society under a contract with the Game and Parks Commission. This park has been developed to give the visitors an insight into the conditions and events contemporary with the settlement of the American West. You are invited to visit the various exhibits in the interpretive center and in the carpenter-blacksmith shop. Then, follow the walkways to the stockade and view the other information provided.

Fort Kearny State Recreation Area

Campers will find south-central Nebraska's Fort Kearny State Recreation Area much to their liking. Once called Kearney County SRA, this recreation area boasts excellent camping facilities.

The attractive 186-acre area was acquired by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission in 1960 as a recreational and camping addition to nearby Fort Kearny State Historical Park. Just 3 miles south of I-80, the recreation area is located ¾ mile east and 1 mile north of Fort Kearny State Historical Park. It is a year-round recreation area that provides camping, picnicking, swimming, fishing, hiking and winter sports for residents and travelers alike.

Each spring, the world's largest concentration of sand-hill cranes congregates in the central Platte River Valley from about Grand Island to Lewellen. With its strategic location, Fort Kearny SRA has become a popular headquarters for those who want to view this spectacular phenomena.

CAMPING

The up-to-date campground has 110 pads, 75 with electrical hookups and 35 pads without electrical. There are showers and modern restrooms, plus a trailer dump station for the convenience of those with self-contained rigs. Stately cottonwood trees, some over 100 years old, shade much of the camping area.

There is a basic fee for camping and is available year-round, however, modern shower facilities and trailer dump station are open from approximately May 1 through October 31.

RESERVATIONS

Half of the modern campsites at Fort Kearny SRA can be reserved prior to arrival; the remainder are available on a first come, first serve basis. Reservations may be made up to a year in advance of arrival date, and can be made on-line or by phone.

To make reservations online, go to www.OutdoorNebraska.org. Phone reservations can be made through the Nebraska Game and Parks reservation call center at (402) 471-1414. The center is open from 9 a.m. -6 p.m. CT Monday - Friday.

There is a nonrefundable reservation fee for each site or unit reserved. The reservation fee applies to each site reserved, regardless of the number of nights staying.

WATER ACTIVITIES

There are seven sandpit lakes on the area and unsupervised swimming is permitted at the designated beach area. Since there are no lifeguards, swimmers should use caution and always swim with a companion.

The beach is open from 10 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. from Memorial weekend through Labor Day. Only U.S. Coast Guard approved flotation devices are permitted in the swimming area. Change houses are conveniently located near the beach, as is a modern restroom building.

FISHING & BOATING

Fort Kearny SRA is a popular fishing area in south-central Nebraska. Seven lakes offer good fishing opportunities for a variety of species, including largemouth bass, bluegill, channel catfish, and crappie. Fishing for largemouth bass, bluegill, and crappie can be good year-around, and usually peaks in May and June. Channel catfishing is best from June through August.

Boating is limited to non-powered craft or electric motors only. Archery and spear-fishing are prohibited at Fort Kearny SRA.

Please consult the current Nebraska fishing and boating guides for specific regulation information.

NATURE TRAILS

The unique Fort Kearny Hike-Bike Trail begins at the area and extends 1.8 miles to Bassway Strip State Wildlife Management Area. Entirely within what were the original boundaries of the Fort Kearny Military Reservation in 1848, the trail was a segment of the former Burlington and Missouri Railroad. The trail crosses both channels of the Platte River, and visitors can step back in time to the days of the Oregon Trail, Pony Express and the line of the first telegraph, all of which ran along the south side of the Platte.

Flora and fauna of the Platte Valley can be enjoyed from this trail or from another that follows the old 1864 river channel. In winter, both trails are popular with cross-country skiers. For more information on the trails, pick up a copy of the booklet, "The Fort Kearny Hike-Bike Trail," at the visitor center at Fort Kearny SHP.



GENERAL INFORMATION

A Nebraska State Park Permit is required for all vehicles entering the area. Permits are available at the Fort Kearny SHP visitor center, from any hunting or fishing permit vendor, or online www.OutdoorNebraska.org.

Day-use facilities are open year-round and include picnic tables, shelters, grills, drinking water, and playground equipment for the youngsters. Pets are allowed, but they must be kept on a leash no more than 6 feet long.

Vehicles must stay on designated roads and parking areas, and fires are permitted only in the places provided. Fireworks and mini bikes are prohibited, as is the consumption of alcoholic beverages.

For more information on Nebraska state park areas, write to: Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Division of State Parks, P.O. Box 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503, or visit us on the web at WWW.OutdoorNebraska.org.

(Inside with the map)



LAKE FISHING INFORMATION

Lake 1: Actually two separate lakes which connect when water levels are high, Lake 1 provides fishing opportunities for largemouth bass, bluegill, channel catfish and crappie.

Lake 2: Largemouth bass, bluegill, crappie, and channel catfish are available in Lake 2. Brush piles have been added to several locations as fish attractors.

Lake 3: This small lake provides fishing opportunities for largemouth bass, bluegill, and channel catfish. A lake aeration system on this lake eliminates summer stratification and ensures that adequate oxygen levels are maintained.

Lake 4: An intensive fish feeding program for wipers has been operational on this lake since 2003. Wipers are periodically stocked to maintain the population. The fish feeder is operational from May through September, with feeding generally occurring twice daily. There is an 18-inch minimum size limit and daily bag limit of one fish in effect for wipers. Largemouth bass are also available in this lake.

Lake 5: Largemouth bass, bluegill, crappie, and channel catfish are available.

Lake 6: An intensive fish feeding and lake aeration program to improve fishing for channel catfish has been operational on this lake since 2003. The automated fish feeder is operational from May through September, with feeding occurring twice a day. Stocking of catchable channel catfish occurs twice a year. This lake also provides good fishing for largemouth bass, bluegill, and crappie.

Lake 7: A swimming beach is located on the south side of this lake. A handicapped accessible fishing pier is located in the northeast corner of the lake. Largemouth bass, bluegill, and channel catfish are available.

For a complete guide to identifying fish found in Nebraska, please pick up the Common Fish Found in Nebraska color brochure at the park office.

Please consult the current Nebraska Fishing Guide for fishing regulation details.

Fort Kearny State Recreation Area

