

# Trading Posts and Forts Along the Oregon Trail

An 1849 emigrant, A.J. McCall, recorded in his diary passing by "a number of long, low buildings constructed principally of adobe, or sun dried bricks, with nearly flat roofs of brick" where the Oregon Trail meets the Platte River. This was Fort Kearny, the first fort built to protect emigrants crossing the Great Plains. No matter what year emigrants traveled the Oregon Trail, they saw forts along the way. Some were fur trading posts that predated the Trail, and others were military bases established to protect westbound emigrants and impress the Indians.

In 1845, Stephen Watts Kearny led five Cavalry companies on a sweep of the plains during which he and his men passed the huge Stephen Meek wagon train. Kearny's force of 250 dragoons was overwhelmed by the sight of 3000 emigrants crossing the countryside in their 460 wagons. Riding ahead, he held council near Fort Laramie with 1200 Sioux Indians and secured safe passage for Oregon Trail emigrants. The following year, Congress mandated the construction of forts along the route to Oregon, leading to the construction of Fort Childs on a site purchased from the Pawnee tribe for \$2000 in trade goods. Fort Childs was renamed Fort Kearny by dragoons transferring from the original Fort Kearny at the mouth of the Platte River. The new Fort Kearny had a Post Office, which gave outbound emigrants the opportunity to send back letters assuring their friends and relatives that they were doing well. It also boasted the adjacent "hell-hole" communities of Dobytown and Dirty Woman Ranch, which were typical of the shantytowns that clung to the fringes of any military reservation.

Several fur trading posts were passed by Oregon Trail emigrants near where trails led to the various rendezvous points. Fort John was an American Fur Company post on the Oregon Trail near Scotts Bluff. It replaced an earlier Robidoux Trading Post. Two competing fur trading posts were Fort Bernard and Fort Platte. The oldest fur trading post was Fort William, dating back to 1834 when fur trader William Sublette established a post at LaRemay's (Laramie) River. He prospered by undercutting the Rocky Mountain Fur Company and capturing the Indian trade. The structure was typical of the era, with a rectangular stockade of cottonwood logs and elevated blockhouses on two corners and over the main entrance. Fort William was later sold to Lucien Fontenelle and renamed Fort Lucien. Later still, Fort Laramie was built of adobe only a few yards away, and the adjacent wooden fort was dismantled for firewood. This sort of salvage was common on the frontier in order to save on both labor and wood, and some of the beams of Fort Laramie's Bachelor Officers Quarters (nicknamed "Old Bedlam") came from Fort William.

Mounted riflemen sent from Fort Leavenworth to Fort Laramie in 1849 found their route wrought with confusion as the epidemic of Asiatic cholera cut through the jostling crowds of emigrants rushing to seek California gold. Modern Fort Laramie was a U.S. Army post from 1849 to 1890 and boasted up to 180 buildings at its height. Just before arriving at the fort, outbound emigrants passed the site of the Grattan Massacre, where on August 19, 1854, 2nd Lt. John Grattan and 28 soldiers attempted to arrest several Sioux Indians for butchering a wayward Mormon cow. The arresting party killed a Sioux chief, and the wrathful Sioux slew them to a man. This incident was the start of over 35 years of intermittent hostility between the Army and the Sioux which culminated in the massacre at Wounded Knee.

Eight other forts and camps were constructed along the Trail by the U.S. Army in addition to Forts Kearny and Laramie. Most were only used briefly. Fort Grattan was a defense point and supply depot established at Ash Hollow following the nearby Battle of Blue Water. Fort McPherson, popularly known as Fort Cottonwood, was completed in 1863 at the confluence of the North and South Platte Rivers. The cavalry soldiers killed at the Grattan Massacre were eventually reburied at Fort McPherson. Camp Mitchell was established just outside of Scotts Bluffs at Mitchell Pass. It was in operation for only three years, from 1864-'67. Fort Fetterman was built where the Bozeman Trail split off from the Oregon Trail, just past Fort Laramie. Camp Conner was sited at Soda Springs by Irish immigrant General Patrick Connor. Cantonment Loring protected emigrants and Idaho miners near Fort Hall. The Army's Fort Boise was built in 1863 by Oregon volunteers to protect emigrants on the Trail and gold miners in Idaho. The US Army took over Fort Boise after the Civil War, and it became the base of operations for General Crook's campaign against the Snake River Indians from 1866-'68, and also for General Howard's sorties against the Nez Perce and Bannocks in 1878. It is now the site of the VA Hospital in downtown Boise.

### Jim Bridger

Fort Bridger was a palisaded trading post and blacksmith shop established in 1842 by Jim Bridger and Louis Vasquez to capitalize on the overland traffic. When it became obvious that most Oregon and California bound emigrants were shortcutting the fort, it was sold to the Mormons in 1853. The Mormons burned the fort to the ground in 1857 to prevent its capture by US Army forces. The Army simply built their own Fort Bridger on the same site, incorporating a surviving stone wall of the original fort to save time and labor.

Fort Hall was a stockaded trading post on the east bank of the Snake River. It was established by Nathaniel Wyeth in 1834 and later sold to the Hudson's Bay Company. After Oregon became a United States Territory, the HBC departed and the post served the emigrant trade exclusively until it was abandoned in 1856. A new Fort Hall was built nearby by the US Army in 1870 to control the Indians of the area.

The HBC operated other forts in what used to be their territory. The original, or Old Fort Boise was located at the confluence of the Owyhee and Boise Rivers where they flow into the Snake. It fell into disrepair after the Hudson's Bay Company left the area, and a new Fort Boise was built in 1863, as noted above. Those traveling by the Whitman Mission went past Fort Walla Walla.

The Dalles was the terminus of overland travel for Oregon Trail emigrants until 1846, when the Barlow Road was opened. Camp Drum, opened in 1850 and renamed Fort Dalles in 1853, was manned by mounted riflemen. It became a quartermaster's depot prior to being abandoned in 1867. The Army sold the fort in



1877, but much of it was left intact by the local citizenry. The buildings of the fort are still present among the elegant old houses of The Dalles.

Emigrants taking the Columbia River from The Dalles to Oregon City stopped over at Fort Vancouver. The HBC trading post and regional headquarters under Chief Factor John McLoughlin was established in 1824 following the abandonment of Fort Astor, which was originally an American outpost established by John Jacob Astor's Pacific Fur Company. For many emigrants it was here for the first time since Missouri that they ate at a table or slept beneath a roof. McLoughlin's hospitality won him considerable respect, though it would eventually cost him his job.