

Fort Atkinson, Nebraska

The History of Fort Atkinson

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A little more than 150 years ago, when the American revolution was a mere 36 years behind us, when not a single settler had crossed the Mississippi into Iowa, and when not a single mile of railroad existed in the entire nation, a simple patch of ground a few miles north of Omaha, now surrounded by cornfields, pastures, and small town homes, was the site of the largest military post in America.

Upon this quiet little patch of Nebraska once strode several thousands of soldiers, many of them veterans of the War of 1812. Here bugles blew, orders were barked, cannons roared. Here all the intricately controlled chaos of a great military establishment was conducted. Here also were Nebraska's first school, farm, sawmill, hospital and library.

Here was Ft. Atkinson, the "Elysian Fields" of the 6th infantry, the first fort west of the Missouri, and the sole accomplishment of the Yellowstone Expedition of 1819.



The story of Fort Atkinson began in 1804 with the Lewis and Clark Expedition. The land that is now Nebraska was once a part of the territory of Spain and later of France, and was peacefully acquired by the United States in 1803 when the French Emperor Napoleon offered the vast Louisiana Territory to the U.S. for \$15,000,000. For three cents an acre, the fledgling American Republic doubled its size and acquired what would eventually form all or part of 15 states.

President Thomas Jefferson proposed an expedition to be undertaken by the U.S. Army. In a confidential message to Congress he stated:

"An intelligent officer, with ten or twelve chosen men, fit for the enterprise and willing to undertake it, might explore the whole line even to the Western Ocean, have conferences with the natives on the subject of commercial intercourse, get admission from them for our traders, and return with the information acquired in the course of two summers."

This would literally be a journey into the unknown, and chosen to lead the romantically titled "Corps of Discovery" were Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark.

For the next two years, four months and 10 days their expedition would row, pull, ride, walk and paddle nearly 8,000 miles to the Pacific Ocean and back. They had found the way west and helped to start America on an adventure that would last for nearly 100 years.

One of the most memorable events on their odyssey was the council held between July 30 and August 3, 1804, with the Oto and Missouri Indians. This was the first of many solemn treaties concluded on this spot, which was to make it a highly successful diplomatic post as well as a military one. This site, popularly known as the Council Bluff (not to be confused with the present Iowa city) was to become a famous landmark on the route of the earliest pioneers to the plains and mountains. These were the mountain men, white traders, hunters, and trappers for whom the Missouri River was the link between the rich beaver streams of the northwest and the city of St. Louis, aptly titled the "Rome of the Early West."



The Indian fur trade was not only an important economic activity; it also had great political importance since those who traded with the Indians were better able to gain influence with the powerful tribes of the interior. The British traders of the Hudson's Bay Company had for many years been a dominant force in the Louisiana Territory and continued to be so despite the American acquisition of the area. Britain had successfully used its influence with the Indians for many years to harass, inhibit, and actively war upon the upstart Americans.

To counter the British influence, President James Monroe proposed to dispatch a military expedition into the heart of the area via the Missouri River. Called the Yellowstone Expedition, its aim was to establish a series of forts along the river with the western-most fort to be placed at the junction of the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers, along the present-day North Dakota-Montana border.

An eastern newspaper of the period declared, "It will go to the Source and Root of the Fatal British influence which has for so many years armed the Indian nations against our western frontiers."

Selected to man this expedition were the Sixth infantry and the crack Rifle Regiment. The Sixth, commanded by Col. Henry Atkinson, was then stationed at Plattsburgh, New York, on the Canadian border. Their orders were to rendezvous with the Rifle Regiment on the Missouri near St. Louis, an arduous 2,700-mile journey by land and water.

From there they attempted to ascend the Missouri River in three steamboats, but steam power was in its infancy in 1819 and the vessels were unable to survive the snags, sandbars and currents of the river. For the men of the Yellowstone Expedition, it was back to the keelboats, which were powered mainly by men rowing, poling or towing them upriver with ropes. An accompanying scientific and exploring party under the command of Major Stephen Long did succeed in reaching a spot some five miles below the bluff in the sternwheeler *Western Engineer* in 1819. It was the first successful ascent of the Missouri under steam power.

The expedition arrived at the Council Bluff on September 19; a site recommended by William Clark. In his journal of the Lewis and Clark Expedition: "The situation of our last camp, Council Bluff appears to be a very proper place for a trading establishment and fortification." The site chosen for the camp lay along the riverbottom a mile or so north of the actual bluff.

The Expedition had succeeded in reaching the site designated for the first of the Missouri forts, but congressional economy measures and difficulties in supplying such far-flung outposts prevented the completion of the expedition and the force was halted there. Approaching winter impelled the 1,120 men of the expedition to bend all their energies to construction of the first post.

Called Cantonment Missouri, it had a short and unhappy existence. Severe winter conditions contributed to a shortage of supplies which had tragic consequences, for during that winter, some 160 men died of scurvy and fevers. Many more were hospitalized from the debilitating effects of the simple lack of vitamin C in their diet. The following spring, record high waters on the Missouri flooded the camp and forced the troops to move atop Council Bluff to establish what became Fort Atkinson.

One officer described the site as "a Bluff of about 100 feet higher than the surface of the water and perpendicular on the side adjoining the river, which flows at its base. The country is prairie for the distance of several hundred miles back but timbered above and below which renders it the most beautiful spot I have ever seen for a fort."



Built of the same material and in the same general layout as the cantonment below, Ft. Atkinson was no doubt a structure impressive to the Indian tribes that were native to the area; the Pawnee, Omaha, Iowa, Oto, Missouri, Osage and Sauks.

At about this time the expedition's leader, Col. Henry Atkinson, was promoted to Brevet Brigadier General and transferred to St. Louis and district military headquarters. He was replaced by Col. Henry Leavenworth, a popular and much admired veteran of the War of 1812.

Starting almost from scratch, the soldiers/builders erected what would be their home for the next seven years. In 1822 a visitor, Prince Paul, the Duke of Wuerttemberg, described the fort:

"... I now saw the Council Bluff, one of the most picturesque points along the often all too monotonous banks of the great river. The good-looking white washed buildings of the fort could be seen at a considerable distance from almost any direction

"The fort itself was a square structure. Its sides were each 200 American yards long. There were eight loghouses, two on each side. There were three gates leading into this fort. Each house consisted of ten rooms, and was 25 feet wide and 250 feet long. The roof of the houses sloped toward the interior court. The doors and windows opened upon this court. On the outside, each room has an embrasure or loophole."



The daily routine at Fort Atkinson was much the same as at every post throughout the Army. Reveille was sounded at daybreak, roll call was taken, and a general policing of the area was attended to. After breakfast the guard was mounted and the men went about their daily routine of drilling or work details.

At Fort Atkinson, most of the day-to-day work was agricultural. There was livestock to be watered and fed and a multitude of crops to be attended to. Since the fort was hundreds of miles from any source of supplies and transportation was primitive and uncertain, it was important for the fort to be essentially self-sufficient.

The soldiers not only raised their own food, but did all the carpentry, brick making, blacksmithing and stone quarrying. They ran the schools and gristmills, their wives and widows did the washing-much like the Roman legions, the American Army was very much involved in the spread of civilization and industry throughout the long frontier period.

Yet, these were soldiers and their primary goal was to protect the fur trade, show the flag and to keep the peace with Indians.

The post's only important military action began on June 18, 1823, when the keelboat *Yellow Stone Packet* arrived at the post bearing wounded and fleeing survivors of an Arikara Indian attack on the Fur Trading Company of William Ashley, on the Missouri River in what is now north-central South Dakota.

More than a dozen fur traders had been killed by the Ree, as they were commonly known, in a surprise attack. Ashley and the remainder of his party were holed up on the river and in need of aid.



Colonel Leavenworth immediately ordered his 6th infantry troops to prepare for a campaign. Within four days he was headed upriver with 220 soldiers and 30 of Ashley's survivors. Along the way he enlisted the aid of 80 white trappers and several hundred Sioux warriors who were more than happy to fight the Arikara, their traditional enemies.

Before departing he sent the following message to General Atkinson at St. Louis: "We go to secure the lives and property of our citizens, and to chastise and correct those who have committed outrages upon them."

Leavenworth's forces arrived at the Arikara villages on August 9 and a short, sharp fight ensued, which ended with the Indians abandoning their villages and escaping. Seven of the troopers were never to see Ft.

Atkinson again, for they would become the first casualties of the Indian Wars of the west, which were to last until the 1890's.

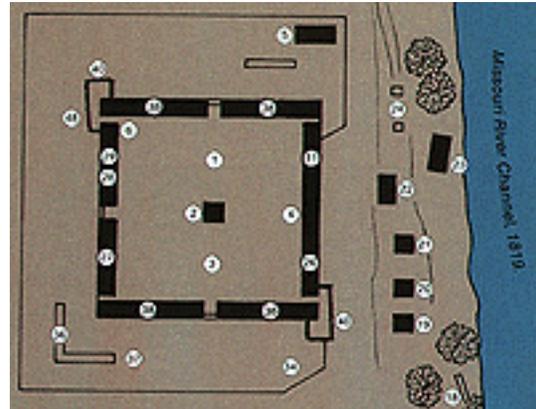
This opening round of the Indian Wars of the west is commemorated by the battle streamer that flies to this day from the regimental colors of the 6th Infantry and reads, "South Dakota 1823."

The other major expedition by the fort's garrison occurred in 1825 when some 500 men were sent up the Missouri in a show of force and with the intention of making treaties with the tribes along the upper Missouri. Led by General Atkinson and Indian Agent Benjamin O'Fallon, the foray was a complete success. Treaties were concluded with the Ponca, Arikara, Mandan, Minataree, Oto, Missouri, Pawnee, Omaha, Crow and several clans of the Sioux.

Following and between these ventures the fort returned to its regular frontier garrison duties of military drills, patrolling, work details and farming, and most importantly, protecting and advancing the American fur trade.

At that time Ft. Atkinson was hundreds of miles from even the rudest civilian settlement, but nevertheless it was a hub and crossroads for those first frontiersmen who ventured into the American west. These were extraordinary men who opened up the continent almost as an afterthought. Primarily they were men who disdained the settled life and who had a taste and talent for the wilderness.

For most of them, trapping beaver was merely a way of making a living and enabling them to stay in the mountains year-round. These were men who lived life large, and of whom it was said, "They feared God but little, and the Devil not at all." Men like Jim Bridger, who discovered the Great Salt Lake in Utah, like Jim Beckwith, a former slave who became a war chief of the friendly Crow Indians, and Hiram Scott, whose lonely death near it gave Scotts Bluff Monument its name; men like William Sublette, who sold his bed for a dollar, ran away to join Ashley's men and went on to discover Yellowstone, founded Ft. Laramie and retired as co-owner of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company; and Hugh Glass, who was mauled by a grizzly, left for dead by his comrades, yet was still able to crawl and walk hundreds of miles back to Ft. Atkinson; men like Jedediah Smith, who is credited with discovering the South Pass route to California; and the riverboatman Mike Fink, who modestly liked to claim, "I'm a Salt River Roarer, half horse and half alligator, suckled by a wildcat and a playmate of the snapping turtle."



They knew Ft. Atkinson well and considered it both a haven and a way station. For some of America's most famous military men, Ft. Atkinson was both home and training ground for the skills they would later use in bringing glory to American arms. General Atkinson, for whom the fort was named, went on to help found the Infantry School of the Army and Jefferson Barracks, near St. Louis. General Henry Leavenworth founded Ft. Atkinson's successor post, the still active Ft. Leavenworth, near Kansas City, home of the Command and General Staff School. Majors Bennet Riley and Steven Kearny both became heroes in the Mexican War, and Fort Kearny in Nebraska and Fort Riley in Kansas were named for them.

Second Lt. Albert Sidney Johnston became one of the Confederacy's most able generals only to die at the bloody Battle of Shiloh, and Lt. William Harney who would, some 30 years later, lead the expedition to Ash Hollow, Nebraska, to exact revenge for the Grattan Massacre of 6th infantrymen out of Fort Laramie, Wyoming.

Ft. Atkinson was primarily a peacekeeping institution and the Council House near the fort was the site of conferences with such prominent chiefs as On-Pa-Tonga or Big Elk of the Omahas, and Pitalesharoo of the Pawnees. Here, annuities were paid, gifts exchanged and grievances aired and settled.

One of the more memorable treaties concluded at the fort was the peace treaty signed in August of 1824 between 26 representatives of the government of Mexico, sent all the way from Santa Fe, and the chiefs of the Pawnee Nation assembled at



Ft. Atkinson, which was the nearest installation to their tribal area. The assistance of the American government had been requested by Mexico in an effort to halt the raiding by the hostile Pawnee. It is probably the only international treaty ever concluded in what was to become Nebraska. For nearly eight years Ft. Atkinson stood upon this bluff in the remote wilderness and performed its role as a pacifying presence in the forefront of encroaching civilization. However, the thrust of settlement in this period was to the southwest along the Santa Fe Trail and, since the fur trade question had been satisfactorily settled, maintaining a military post at Ft. Atkinson was no longer considered necessary.

On March 7, 1827, the Adjutant General of the Army issued the following orders: "The military post at Fort Atkinson will be abandoned and the 6th Regiment of infantry will be stationed at Jefferson Barracks"

On the morning of June 6, 1827, the keelboats were loaded, swung into the current, and just before disappearing around a bend in the river, all aboard caught their last glimpse ever of the walls, bastions and flagpole of proud old Ft. Atkinson. The soldiers went away and the fort fell prey to time and climate, Indians and settlers. Even the river shifted away in 1841 and now flows some three miles east of the bluffs it once touched. By the time the first settlers came to Nebraska nearly 30 years later, little remained of the fort but remnant brick and masonry.

By the mid 1850's, the entire grounds had become a cornfield. Where once there were swords, now there were plowshares. For more than 100 years the site was indistinguishable from any farm in America, except for the musket balls, uniform buttons, and antique coins that appeared with each spring plowing and which served to keep the existence of old Ft. Atkinson alive to the few who cherished its memory.

In the mid 1950's, archaeological crews of the Nebraska State Historical Society began a determined effort to fix the exact locations of the fort's walls, gates and outbuildings, as well as to recover period artifacts which add to our knowledge of that time and place. These "digs" were hugely successful, and helped inspire the formation of the Fort Atkinson Foundation which, in 1963, cooperated with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission in acquiring the site and developing it as a State Historical Park.

Under Commission Director Eugene T. Mahoney, the reconstruction of the fort has progressed rapidly. Commission crews under the supervision of Park Superintendent Steve Kemper have labored long rebuilding the barracks walls in the same manner as the original.

The Nebraska Game and Parks Foundation was instrumental in raising nearly all the funds necessary to construct the visitor center and reconstruct old Fort Atkinson. The Center and the reconstruction will help tell, for generations to come, the story of the faithful soldiers and bold frontiersmen who knew this place. They will also stand as a monument to honor the major role played by Council Bluff and Fort Atkinson in the opening of the American West.

