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*Fort Union Trading Post*

Fur Trade Bastion on the Upper Missouri, Reconstruction and Interpretation Today

**Brief History**

On a steep plateau, overlooking the Missouri River in 1828, men of the newly-formed Upper Missouri Outfit, would build a trading post near the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers. Fort Union would come to be known as one of the great successes of the American Fur Trade, where Native Americans and white Europeans would have a peaceable trading relationship for almost forty years.

Fort Union’s history began long before the first stone was laid down. Merriweather Lewis and William Clark came through this area in April 1805 and noted its varying geography from the banks of the Yellowstone to the South and the Missouri to the East.[[1]](#footnote-1)

By 1825, many expeditions had set out to the Rocky Mountains as the fur trade was becoming a lucrative business, to survey this uncharted area of the young United States and to interact with local Indian tribes in certain areas. One such expedition, led by Brigadier General Henry Atkinson, brought a number of U.S. troops through this area. It is noted in the Journal of this expedition the former Fort Henry, built in 1822, and the good terrain of this area in relation to the river.[[2]](#footnote-2) The soldiers camped here for some time while a portion of the expedition escorted Indian Agent Benjamin O’Fallon to meet with the Assiniboine and less-friendly Blackfeet Indians.

The Atkinson O’Fallon Expedition noted the need to establish a trading post further up the Missouri River. In the Fall of 1826, James Kipp had been sent further up the Missouri to build a post to trade with the Assiniboine Indians who lived north of the post. At this time, the closet northern trading post was further south at Fort Clark, near the Mandan villages and mouth of the Knife River.

By 1827, Kenneth McKenzie, Agent of the Upper Missouri Outfit, was invited by Chief Iron Arrow Point (Assiniboine) to establish a post in this area of the Upper Missouri.[[3]](#footnote-3) Given the routes established for commerce of the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone it is assumed that the name ‘Union’ was given as a proper name for the soon-to-be trading post.

McKenzie, first arrived in 1829, and chose the spot for Fort Union not just based on the confluence of two rivers, but the commerce given by the Indian tribes that inhabited the northern plains. From 1828-1867, Assiniboine, Plains Cree, Blackfeet, Chippewa, Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara tribes all made annually, or semi-annual trips to trade Buffalo, Beaver and other furs for goods imported from over eight different countries. A well-established trading post would fulfill both the needs of the tribes and the companies who sold them goods. On average, Fort Union would trade 25,000 buffalo robes and sell roughly $100,000 of merchandise each year.

The introduction of Steamboat navigation to the Upper Missouri by the 1830s would vastly make commerce more lucrative and access to these once remote parts of the nation accessible. The first steamboat to arrive at Fort Union was the Yellow Stone in 1832.[[4]](#footnote-4) Steamboat transportation would transform the fur trade into one of constant commerce from such places as St. Louis to the numerous trading posts located along the multiple rivers of the West. It would also drastically make trips up the Missouri shorter, the average trip taking roughly over a month to get to one’s destination.

Throughout Fort Union’s history, it would host numerous influential people to the Fur Trade era. Many of these individuals were well-known artists of the time period, naturalists who studied this new and fascinating part of the young nation and even royalty from Europe. These individuals left behind numerous accounts, drawings and paintings that would be critical in the study of the Fur Trade and in properly interpreting the reconstruction of Fort Union in the future.[[5]](#footnote-5)

By the 1860’s, the nation had experienced political and social change. Numerous settlers flocked out West after the Civil War. The westward migration would eventually bring the U.S. Army to the Upper Missouri and the eventual decline of the Fur Trade.[[6]](#footnote-6) The U.S. Army would establish Fort Buford, about 2 miles East of Fort Union, at the Confluence of the two great rivers in 1866. The next year, Fort Union’s structural remains would be the building blocks for the new military post to protect itself against the Sioux and fuel for the steamboats to power their boilers down or upriver.

The site laid in ruin for years and the eventual works of mother nature took its course. It wasn’t until the 1930’s when gravel mining began to intrude on the site, numerous groups and the State Historical Society began to move on purchasing the roughly 10.5 acre plot of land where the fort site was located. By the mid 1930’s it was purchased by the State Historical Society and became a state park, protected from further intrusion.

The push to preserve the site went further, when in 1966, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Fort Union Authorization Bill into law, putting the park now under the control of the National Park Service.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Reconstruction**

The push for reconstruction began long before the first shovel of earth was turned or the first trowel excavated any artifacts. By the 1920’s, much of what remained of Fort Union was mounds or depressions in the soil near the town on Mondak.

Mondak’s rise came as many towns did in the Dakotas in the 1880s and 1890s, the railroad and liquor, as Montana allowed liquor sales and North Dakota didn’t. The railroad opened the country to new areas and allowed for shorter travel time between places. It also brought a push after the First World War by the Great Northern Railroad to “See America First,” which was a promotional program that told people to see the numerous historic sites and natural wonders of the country.

This promotional program led many to begin the discussion of rebuilding Fort Union. Ralph Budd, executive of the Great Northern Railway, was a big promoter of local history and promotion of the program. He organized two historical expeditions to promote tourism in the Northern Plains in 1925-26. These expeditions brought many from the tribes who once traded at the fort, numerous dignitaries, and fun events including the raising of a flag pole.[[8]](#footnote-8) Budd’s hope was to drum-up support for eventual reconstruction of the Fort so people could see it while they were riding the train, whose tracks were located nearby. Unfortunately, the Great Depression put much of the reconstruction dream on hold.

The presentation of history to the general public by rebuilding historical structures that no longer exist is not that old. There was a time in the 19th-century where American preservationists wanted to save historical buildings, but they neither had Congressional backing, funds or the expertise in preserving history.

Reconstruction was also given another name in the beginning of the 20th-Century, restoration, which was separated from that of historic preservation. Even until the 1960s, reconstruction of historic structures were still seen as a new, or young movement in historic interpretation.

Reconstruction in the National Park Service is not that old. The Historic Sites and Buildings Act of 1935, states the preservation of historic sites for the benefit of the public.[[9]](#footnote-9) Even the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and its further amendments, defined historical reconstruction.[[10]](#footnote-10)

One prominent stepping stone towards reconstruction of Fort Union was the reconstruction of Bent’s Old Fort in 1974-76, in rural eastern Colorado. These sites were similar in that the efforts towards reconstruction came from a mixture of local interest and the transfer to state ownership.

Promotion of the Fort Union site and its history came from numerous individuals, who all had a passion for the history of the area, organized and pushed for extensive archaeology of the site and eventual reconstruction. Mentioned previous, their passion and organization reached the halls of power in Washington D.C. when efforts were led to further archaeology and authorization of the site to the National Park Service.

Unfortunately, reconstruction would be slowed for another 20 years due to an anti-reconstructionist movement within the National Park Service and the usual bureaucracy of the federal government.[[11]](#footnote-11) Local efforts through the passion of local history brought the effort to reconstruct Fort Union back to life through individuals such as Ben Innis, Marv Kaiser and Greg Hennessey who organized multiple efforts at the state and federal level to push state and federal leaders to authorize funding legislation to reconstruct the site. Local living history groups, such as the Fort Buford Sixth Infantry Regimental Association and Fort Union Muzzleloaders would be instrumental in bringing the history of the Confluence area back to life and the promotion of the historic sites.[[12]](#footnote-12) The efforts of these passionate people eventually led North Dakota Senator Mark Andrews to draft legislation to reconstruct Fort Union.

Archaeology efforts along with reconstruction began in 1986 and was finished in 1989.

**Interpretation Today**

Reconstruction efforts in the 1980s and 1990s opened a new era to the further efforts of interpreting history of the Fur Trade era and the Confluence area.

Some of the highlights of Fort Union’s Foundation Document Overview mentioned the, “…impact on the history, exploration, transportation, economics and culture of the American frontier on the Upper Missouri River from 1828 to 1867” and, “Fort Union’s abundant archaeological, archival, and documentary resources offer a rare comprehensive record of the physical site and human activities during the fur trade. This record allowed for accurate reconstruction of the fort and continues to support extensive exhibits of Northern Plains material culture.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

The Interpretation Plan offers opportunities to increase understanding and appreciation of the site and the era it was in operation. It also allows for future efforts through educational opportunities to participate in significant events of the fort’s history.

These statements are highlighted and further elaborated in Fort Union’s Long-Range Interpretive Plan, fiscal year 2010. Some which include: Emphasize the fort experience, Improve park website, Increase volunteer program and Upgrade and improve site-specific interpretation.

Multiple themes are highlighted that encompass the fort’s history. These capture the essence of the sites significance through the interpretation of stories and encompass a core message that visitors would have an opportunity to experience.

This interpretive plan is in its final year and many positive and negative takeaways can be mentioned in retrospect. The Park has increased its media efforts through well-designed flyers placed in numerous locations throughout the region, attendance in community events and social media efforts that put a more personal touch to promoting the site. These efforts have increased Community Outreach. Volunteer efforts have vastly improved through better volunteer education and interpretation to the public. Local living history groups, such as the Fort Union Muzzleloaders have helped to raise the profile of the fort and to better interaction with the public. The telling of the fort’s history through its artifacts has somewhat struggled over the past decades. The Visitor Center and Museum is located inside the fort within the Bourgeois House. This location only offers so much space to show artifacts and has not been updated since it was first installed in 1989.

The history, reconstruction and interpretation of Fort Union today is still ongoing. It is easy to determine that the reconstruction of the Fort Union site gives the public a good visual picture of the historic fort and its history. The efforts of passionate individuals with goals to promote history in a way that uses all the senses has been paramount in keeping Fort Union’s history alive today.

**Works Cited**

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8. Historic Sites Act of 1935, 16 U.S.C. sec. 461-467
9. National Park Service, Fort Union Trading Post, *The Buildup to Reconstruction: Local Support Drives Reconstruction, https://www.nps.gov/fous/learn/historyculture/reconstruction-buildup.htm*
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11. Harpers Ferry Center, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, *Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site Long-Range Interpretive Plan: October 2010*. p. 2, 9-12, 14, 17, 21-22,30
12. W. Raymond Wood, Michael M. Casler, *A Revised History of Fort* Floyd, North Dakota History, Winter 2015/ Vol. 80.4 p. 3-5.
13. Michael M. Casler, *Steamboats of the Fort Union Fur Trade: An Illustrated Listing of Steamboats on the Upper Missouri River 1831-1867,* (Fort Union Association, 1999), p. 37.

1. In the official journal by Merriweather Lewis, he notes the topography in exact detail, “while that on the opposite side of the [Missouri](https://lewisandclarkjournals.unl.edu/search?places=Missouri%20River) and the point formed by the junction of these rivers is of the common elvation, say from twelve to 18 feet above the level of the water, and of course not liable to be overflown except in extreem high water, which dose not appear to be very frequent…” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Atkinson mentions: “Wednesday 17 Augt. “…-a perfect level plain elevated above high water & extending bank [back] two miles to a gentile ascent that rises at the distance of three miles 100 feet…” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. By 1827 the Columbia Fur Company was merged by the American Fur Company. Kenneth McKenzie came to the Columbia Fur Company from the amalgamation of the Northwest & Hudson’s Bay Company. It didn’t take long for him to rise to the rank of president of the company. The Columbia and American Fur Companies competed with each other, until 1827 when a union of the two companies was made and the companies agreed to certain territories where they would do business. Kenneth McKenzie, William Laidlaw and Daniel Lamont would run the territory of the Upper Missouri. In essence their retiring company and the roles they played in it made them heads of a sub-department of a bigger company. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. There were two steamboats named Yellowstone that had traveled to Fort Union, with variations in their spelling. The Yellow Stone was built in Louisville, KY in 1830-31. And the Yellowstone, built in 1864. This steamboat also delivered fifty soldiers of the 30th Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry to Fort Union in 1864 and Galvanized Yankees, paroled Confederate prisoners, to Fort Union in 1865 (Co. B. 1st U.S. Volunteers). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Some of Fort Union’s well-known visitors were: George Catlin, famous American painter, author and traveler who specialized in oil painting portraits of Native Americans. Karl Bodmer, another artist who kept a journal of his time on the Upper Missouri and left behind many drawings of Fort Union. Prince Maximilian of Wied, a German explorer, naturalist and ethnologist had a journal documenting his time on the Upper Missouri between 1832-1833. James Audobon, a painter, naturalist and ornithologist documented many of the natural wonders and animals that inhabited the Upper Missouri in 1843. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The U.S. Army bought Fort Union in 1867 from the Northwest Fur Company, which was the company in charge of the fort at the time. By this time the fort had fallen into terrible disrepair, but the fort was dismantled and what was left was moved to Fort Buford. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The Fort Union authorization bill states the “significant role played by Fort Union as a fur trading post on the Upper Missouri River…” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Budd’s two expeditions brought thousands to the once great trading post site, 10,000 people being reported to have attended at a celebration in 1925. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The Historic Sites and Buildings Act of 1935, “It is declared that it is a national policy to preserve for public use historic sites, buildings, and objects of national significance for the inspiration and benefit of the people of the United States. (Aug. 21, 1935, ch. 593, sec. 1,49 Stat. 666.)” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, “AN ACT to Establish a Program for the Preservation of Additional Historic Properties throughout the Nation, and for Other Purposes, Approved October 15, 1966 (Public Law 89-665; 80 STAT.915; 16 U.S.C. 470) as amended by Public Law 91-243, Public Law 93-54, Public Law 94-422, Public Law 94-458, Public Law 96-199, Public Law 96-244, Public Law 96-515, Public Law 98-483, Public Law 99-514, Public Law 100-127, and Public Law 102-575).” It was also amended in 1980 & 1992. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Much of the slowness to reconstruct Fort Union came from the debate that the 1966 authorization legislation didn’t fund archaeology and reconstruction of the site. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In 1985, The Fort Union Muzzleloaders would reconstruct a flag pole, taken from sketches made by Rudolph Kurz, a well-known artist, in 1851. The completion and placement of the flag at its historic spot was celebrated by close to 2,000 people, including ND’s congressional delegation. It even received a response from President Ronald Reagan. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Material culture would include: trade goods, tools and personal items. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)