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Article Summary: During its fur trade heyday, the Fort Pierre-Fort Laramie Trail probably carried at least 125 tons of trade goods to the Sioux, Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Crow traders. The trail began and ended in isolation but was an integral part of the commercial history of the American fur trade and played a key role in supplying what was probably the nation's most famous fur trading post.

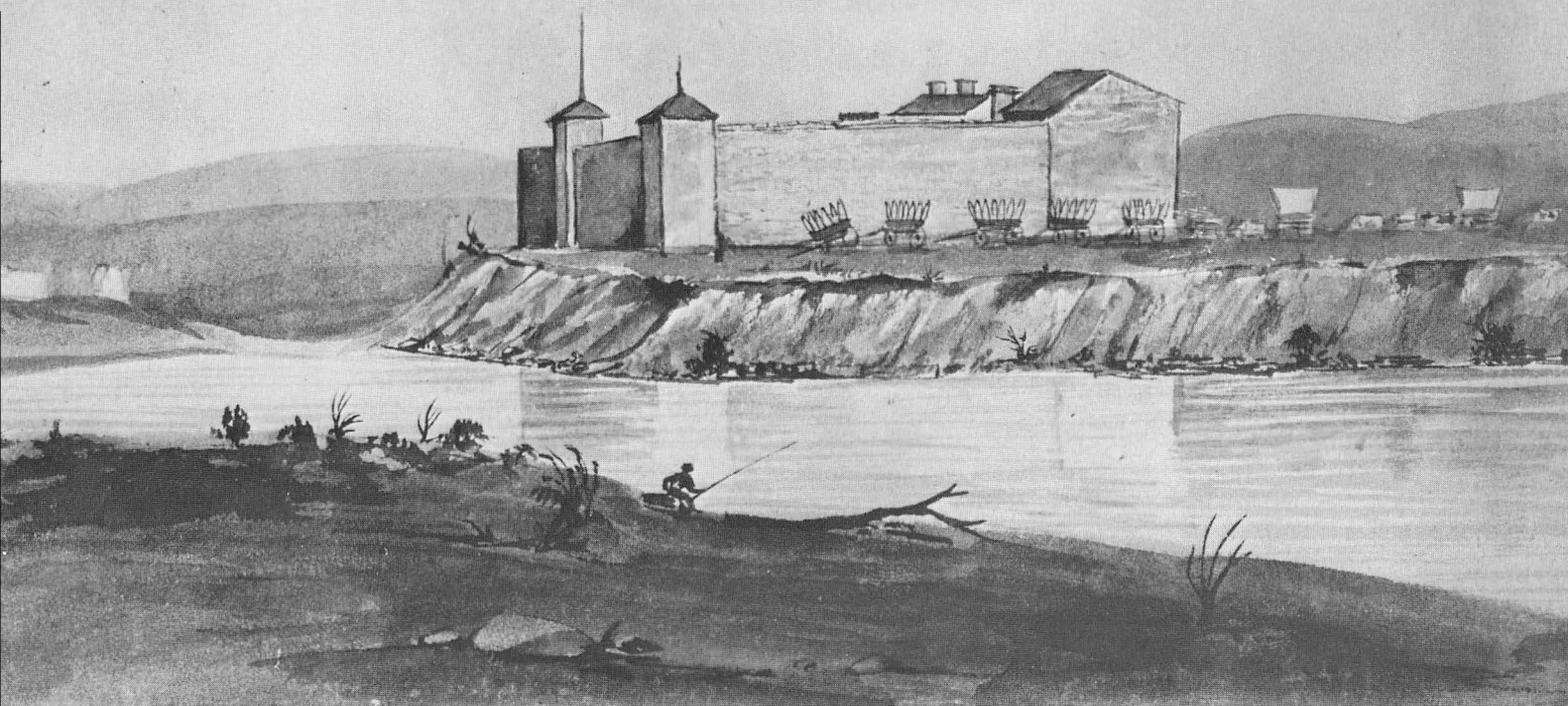
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Names: John Terrel, K Warren, William Sublette, Robert Campbell, Thomas Sarpy, Frederick LaBoue, Stewart Van Vliet, Rufus Sage, Aeneas MacKay, William S Harney, Joseph M Lake, Thomas Twiss, J Hudson Snowden, Joshua Pilcher, Colin Campbell

This index does not include the extensive listing of place names, since the article is a complete discussion of the route of the Fort Pierre-Fort Laramie Trail. Significant place names are listed with the keywords.

Keywords: Plains Indians; buffalo robes; beaver; tur trade; steamboat; Missouri River; Fort Pierre on the Missouri River; Fort Laramie on the North Platte River; horse trade; *the old Spanish trail*; American Fur Company; Fort William near the mouth of the Laramie River; Choteau company; Belgian guns; English woolens; Italian beads; American axes; Chinese war paint; "Soldier Cliff"

Photographs / Images: Drawing "Ft Laramie, June 24 [1849], by James F Wilkins [State Historical Society of Wisconsin]; Map Ft Pierre-Ft Laramie Trail; Sketch made by emigrant J Goldsborough Bruff, Fort Laramie July 11, 1849 [The Huntington Library, San Marino, California]; Rufus B Sage; sketch of Frederick LaBoue, by Rudolph Friederich Kurz, 1851; sketch "Scene in Bad Lands, head of Bear Creek" [New York State Library]; an 1855 drawing of Fort Pierre; Captain Parmenas T Turnley's drawing: Plan of Old Fort Pierre, 1855; Survey of trader's Road from L'eau qui Court R to White River, from J Hudson Snowden's journal, 1857 [New York State Library]



"Ft. Laramie, June 24 [1849]," wash drawing by James F. Wilkins. Courtesy of State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

A FORGOTTEN FUR TRADE TRAIL

By James A. Hanson

Fur trade entrepreneurs faced seemingly endless difficulties in their efforts to reach the Indians with ample and desirable merchandise, fend off intense competition, deliver the furs to an uncertain international market, and realize a reasonable profit on their investment. Perhaps the greatest expense and most difficult problem in the fur trade was transportation. Prior to 1830, buffalo robes, which the Plains Indians had in considerable surplus, were scarcely worth what it cost to ship them to market, while expensive furs such as beaver were in tremendous demand. As the fur companies became increasingly well-organized and efficient and after the steamboat came into

general use on the Missouri River, beginning in 1831, the cost of shipping buffalo robes declined, the profit margin grew, and the fur trade with the Plains Indians blossomed through the mid-nineteenth century.¹

While water transportation was the cheapest and most efficient mode available, the westward moving trade still required the shipment of goods and robes by land. This led eventually to the establishment of a unique commercial highway that passed through parts of present South Dakota, Nebraska, and Wyoming to connect the fur trading centers of Fort Pierre on the Missouri and Fort Laramie on the North Platte River.

The origins of the trail between these two great western rivers may be of considerable antiquity. John Terrell speculated that a major prehistoric

traveling and trading road ran between the mouth of the Laramie River and central South Dakota. This trail continued southward to the pueblos of New Mexico and eastward to the Mississippi and Great Lakes.²

There is little archeological evidence to verify this thesis. From what is known of the extensive late eighteenth century trade in horses among the Plains tribes, it is logical to assume that horses, captured or purchased in the Southwest, were brought to the area between present-day Scottsbluff, Nebraska, and Fort Laramie, Wyoming. Horse Creek near Henry, Nebraska, probably obtained its name from its use as a market place for ponies. From there, Kiowa, and Kiowa-Apache horse traders drove herds along the approximate route that became the Fort Pierre-Fort Laramie Trail to the

James A. Hanson, director of the Nebraska State Historical Society, is an authority on the fur trade.

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Arikara Indians living in permanent villages on the Missouri. The horses, exchanged for manufactured trade goods and farm produce, were then sold to tribes farther east and north, the Arikara obtaining more European goods from the Great Lakes, Mississippi Valley, and Canada.³

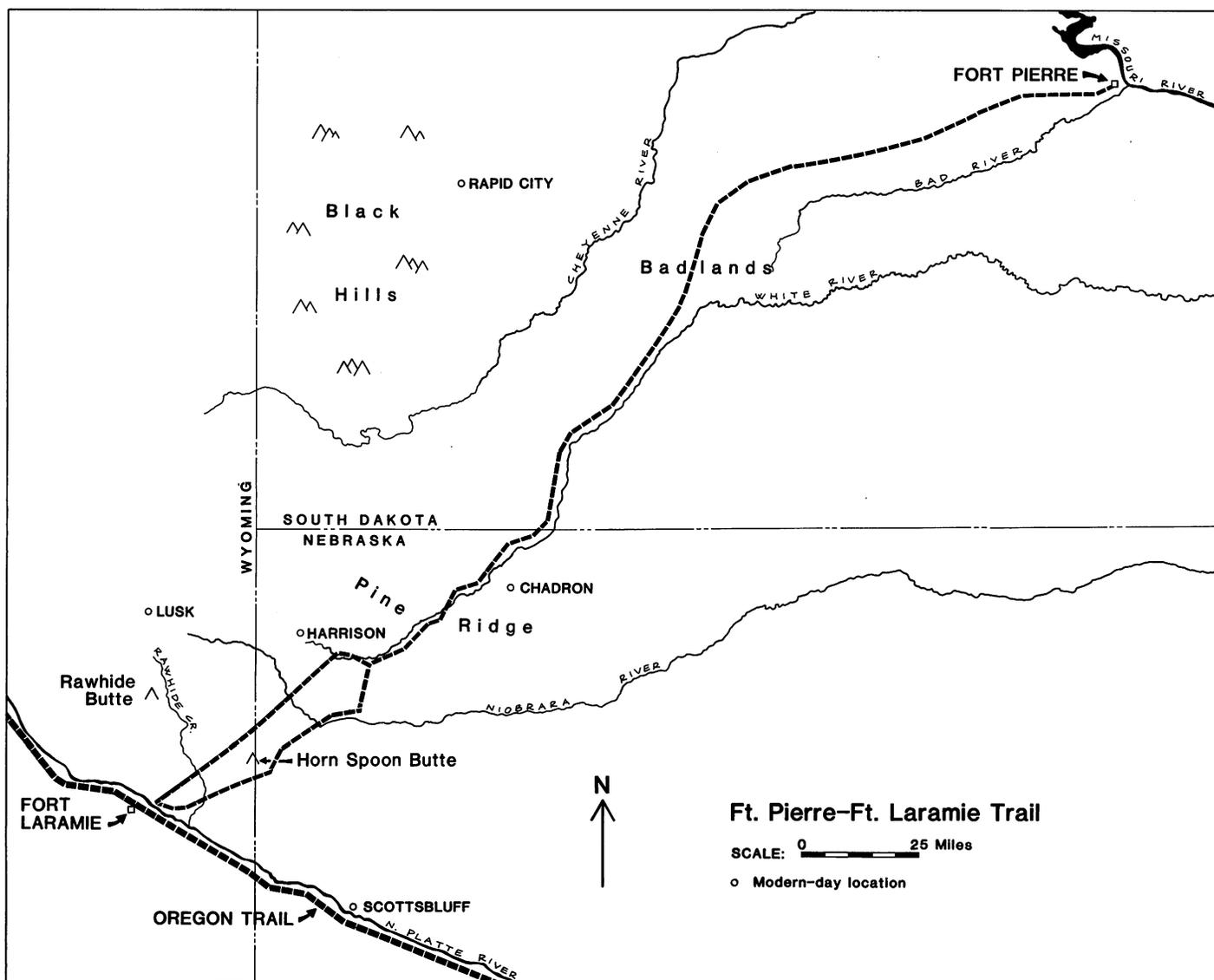
It is probable that New Mexicans and Pueblo Indians engaged in this horse trade as well as the various Plains tribes. When Lt. Gouverneur K. Warren made a reconnaissance of the Fort Pierre-Fort Laramie Trail in 1855,

he repeatedly referred to the westernmost section as "the old Spanish trail." Since he surveyed the route only twenty-one years after the founding of Fort Laramie and received much of his information from old and experienced St. Louis fur traders, the existence of a pre-Fort Laramie trail from the Southwest to the Upper Missouri is quite likely.⁴

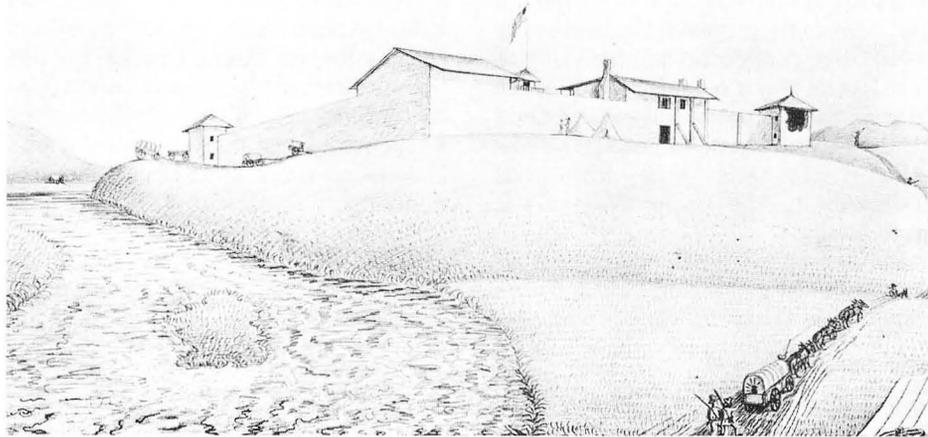
This horse trade was disrupted by the westward expansion of the Teton Dakota or Western Sioux who destroyed an entire band of Kiowas east

of the Black Hills about 1770 and later, about 1814, drove the Kiowa and Kiowa-Apache from a peace parley and trading fair on Horse Creek.⁵ By this time, American traders advancing from St. Louis were firmly entrenched on the Missouri in what is now central South Dakota so the role of the Arikara as middlemen for trading continued to diminish.

In the 1820s and 1830s two different methods of fur trading occupied the attention of the St. Louis, New York, and London merchants. On the one



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Overland emigrant J. Goldsborough Bruff made this sketch of Fort Laramie July 11, 1849. Courtesy of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

hand, Indians continued to supply large quantities of furs and buffalo robes to traders at permanent trading houses like Fort Pierre, established in 1832 by Pierre Chouteau Jr. and Company, successors to the American Fur Company. Fort Pierre was a virtual industrial complex over 800 miles from St. Louis. Its palisades and corrals enclosed more than two and a half acres. Employed there were blacksmiths, tinsmiths, and tailors who fixed traps, repaired guns, made and mended kettles, and sewed cloth garments for the Indians and buckskin coats for whites returning to St. Louis. There were traders, boatmen, herders, hunters, gardeners, clerks, and managers along with a host of Indian wives and children. The men built carts and operated an extensive pit saw operation and there was even an important boat building component, known tongue-in-cheek as the "Navy Yard." The fort boasted a dairy herd and had large numbers of horses and oxen. All this activity existed primarily to serve the Indian trade of the central Missouri River basin.⁶

In contrast to the trade at fixed posts like Fort Pierre, brigades of white trappers, some independent and some employees of large companies, had

taken to the Rockies in order to reap the remarkably valuable beaver pelts. The fierce competition among old and new firms devastated profits to the point that in 1834 two of the largest and most successful firms negotiated a territorial division of the trade. William Sublette and Robert Campbell agreed to abandon their Indian trade on the Missouri in opposition to Fort Pierre in exchange for the withdrawal of the Chouteau Company from the Rocky Mountain beaver trade. Sublette and Campbell then built Fort William near the mouth of the Laramie River to serve as a supply base for their trade with the mountain men. Sublette also invited various Indian tribes, notably the Oglala Sioux, to visit the new post, and he was agreeably surprised to find a growing Indian trade at that location.⁷

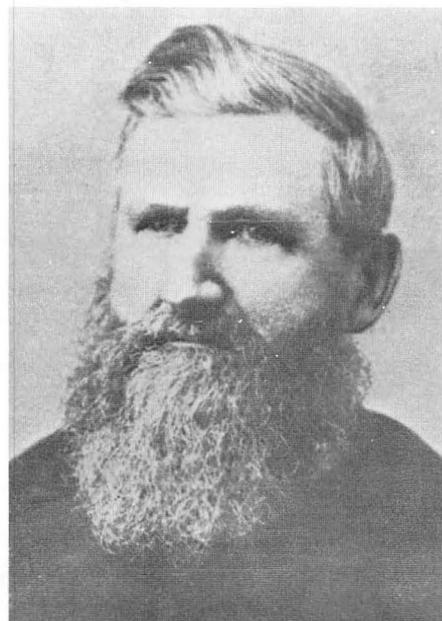
The establishment of this new trade center, popularly called Fort Laramie, came at a propitious time for the Sioux. Fort Pierre and its various predecessors along with a series of competition posts had attracted large concentrations of Indians to that area. Within a few years the population of buffalo declined along the Missouri River, and the Sioux began wintering farther west of Fort Pierre each year.

By 1830 Thomas Sarpy was forced to travel 150 miles from the fort to the vicinity of present Rapid City, South Dakota, to trade with the Oglala. The same year Frederick LaBoue had to go nearly 200 miles to reach the Brule Sioux on the upper Niobrara in Nebraska. With the establishment of Fort Laramie, there was a continual drain on Fort Pierre's share of the trade in favor of the new post, and the relentless westward migration of the Sioux continued.

Sublette and Campbell supplied their post via the Platte River route. This road offered few obstacles, but it was over 500 miles long, requiring large numbers of carts and teamsters. Expenses continued to eat up profits so Sublette and Campbell bowed out in 1835, selling Fort Laramie and their business to Fontenelle, Fitzpatrick and Company. The new owners proved unequal to solving the myriad problems confronting them and in turn sought a buyer.

By then the Chouteau Company was in the market to buy Fort Laramie in order to recover its Sioux trade and to

Rufus B. Sage



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Frederick LaBoue, sketched by Rudolph Friederich Kurz, 1851.

divide the trade territory between Pierre and Laramie at Hidden Butte on the White River north of present Oglala, South Dakota. Not only did this prevent the posts from competing against one another, but it increased Fort Laramie's importance and extended its territory.⁹

Frederick LaBoue probably deserves the credit for inaugurating the Fort Pierre-Fort Laramie Trail. In the 1820s he was one of the principal American Fur Company traders working out of the Fort Pierre region, first with the Oglala and later with the Brule. He was well-acquainted with the country through which the trail passed, at least as far west as Rawhide Butte in Wyoming. LaBoue had a glowering countenance, and he was known as "Grey Eyes" by the Sioux. All accounts delineate a man of violent temperament and driving personality. In organizing the Fort Laramie trade along the paramilitary lines the American Fur Company used elsewhere, it undoubtedly made sense for LaBoue to rely on Fort Pierre as the supply depot and fur warehousing base for Fort Laramie. The route between

the posts, though rougher than the Platte Valley, was a good 200 miles shorter by land to the Missouri River. Because the Chouteau company's steamboats already had to ascend the river to and past Fort Pierre, water transportation costs were a minor consideration. Fort Pierre also provided important supplies, a skilled labor pool, livestock, and warehouse facilities within easy reach, half the distance to the Missouri as compared to the Platte Valley route. By 1837 the new trail was in regular use.

Fur traders made only rude sketches of the trail as favors for inquiring cartographers and only one, Rufus Sage, recorded a trip over the road.¹⁰ Obviously, the trail was just another aspect of a business that may have seemed humdrum to many of those engaged in it. However, at least two U.S. Army officers mapped the trail carefully, and it is to Gouverneur K. Warren and Stewart Van Vliet that we owe our knowledge of the exact route.¹¹

From Fort Pierre, the trail proceeded west and slightly south up the Bad River, a swift, narrow, and deep

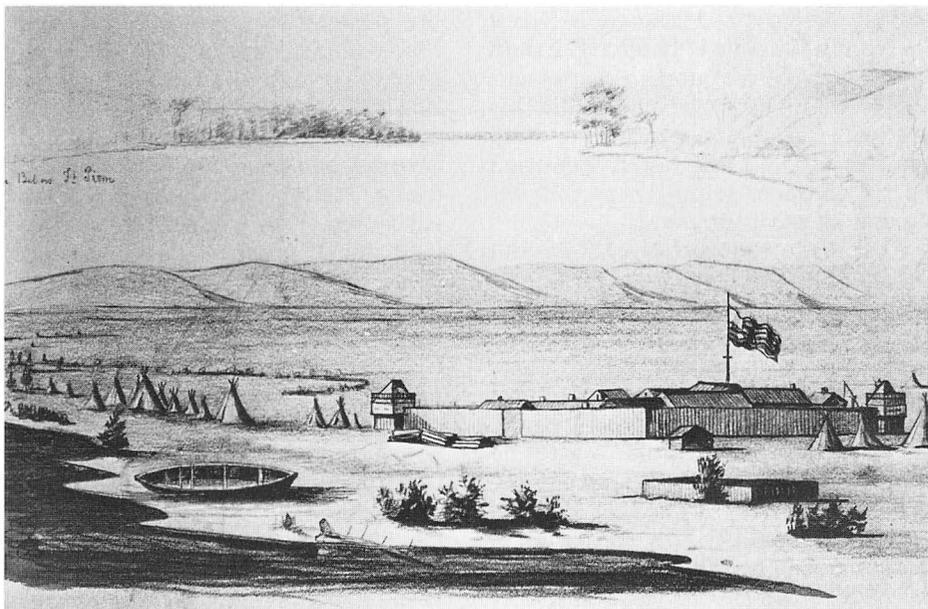
eliminate the niggling competition. In 1836 Joshua Pilcher arrived at the fort as the company's purchasing agent to arrange the transfer. He traveled to Fort Laramie rapidly, probably using the future supply road between there and Fort Pierre. In what may have been the first regular business communication between the two posts, Pilcher reported on his efforts to buy out the competition noting, "Should I not compromise with those fools you will have opposition heavy."⁸

Frederick LaBoue, the Chouteau Company's best man at Fort Pierre, was dispatched to Laramie (officially renamed Fort John) to manage things according to the high standards of the company. Fort Pierre continued to try to engross the Sioux trade, sending Colin Campbell with his outfit all the way to the Brule wintering spot in the Pine Ridge only a hundred miles from Fort Laramie. Campbell's supply train encountered heavy, drifting snow; four horses died and it took seventeen days to make the 200 mile trip. Campbell's complaints induced the company to

"Scene in Bad Lands, head of Bear Creek," probably sketched by J. Hudson Snowden in 1855. Courtesy of New York State Library, Albany.



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An 1855 drawing of Fort Pierre, probably by Snowden.

stream providing grass, firewood, and an easy grade. After about 110 miles, the road reached the river's source and turned almost due south through the Badlands. A series of three springs provided drinking water along this section of the trail. The southernmost, known then as Ash Spring and as Harney Spring today, was just beyond the edge of the Badlands, and it now marks the approximate northern boundary of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. The road finally joined the White River Valley 160 miles from Fort Pierre (the halfway point) and followed the north bank into present Nebraska and the Pine Ridge country. At the approximate location of Whitney, Nebraska, the trail crossed to the south bank of the White to avoid rough hills crowding down to the river.

Eighty miles from Fort Laramie, just west of present Fort Robinson State Park, the trail divided. The western branch was most suitable for horses and traders not overly concerned about the variable grade and lack of wood and water. As the road drew closer to the White River's source, precipitous

canyon walls forced the travelers to cross the stream nine to twelve times in ten miles. Finally the trail broke out of the frowning, pine-clad escarpment and angled southwesterly to the Niobrara River, twelve miles upstream from the future site of the famous Cook Ranch. There was no firewood on the river so crews had to carry it with them to this site when snow covered the buffalo chips which otherwise might have provided fuel. The trail then passed over broken plains into present Wyoming to the upper reaches of Rawhide Creek. After crossing this creek, the trail intersected the North Platte River opposite the mouth of the Laramie River, and continued on into the fort. The distance between Fort Pierre and Fort Laramie was between 319 and 326 miles.

The other leg of the trail, perhaps twenty miles longer but much easier on both man and beast, turned away from the White River to avoid the exasperating canyon at its head. Ascending the west side of the valley of Deadman Creek, the traders experienced one very steep hill and then six miles of

relatively rough going through the pines as the road followed the crown of a long ridge between drainage ravines. Another twelve miles across undulating plains and a final descent down a hogback brought the road to the Niobrara, nine miles east of today's Agate Fossil Beds National Monument. The trail ascended the river to the exact site of the future Cook Ranch and then left the valley, angling southwestward across high, rolling plains.

At what is today the Nebraska-Wyoming border there is a long, low butte known as Horn Spoon Butte because of its shape. Near its base on the south side are springs which surely refreshed weary travelers for millenia and the trail passed by these pools. From there the road turned sharply westward to Rawhide Creek, crossing it and finally striking the Platte eight miles below Fort Laramie.

The difference between the two routes was probably not so great that either could not have been used for the same purpose. However it seems clear that the more westerly one usually was used as the "express" route to and from the Missouri or to reach bands of Indians on the upper White or near the western or southern Black Hills when speed was more important than frequent rest stops for men and animals.

The Fort Pierre-Fort Laramie Trail was used heavily year round by fur traders from about 1837 until 1849. Each spring a steady succession of steamboats churned up the Missouri with next year's supply of trade goods. Some disgorged their cargoes at Fort Pierre while others proceeded to far away Fort Union or even posts in present Montana. This operation took careful planning so the boats could catch the high water from the spring runoff.

At about the same time that the boats started from St. Louis, the fur men at Fort Laramie loaded sturdy, wooden, two-wheeled conveyances known as "Red River" carts. Most were pulled by a horse or an ox, but some were built for two draft animals in order

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to haul heavier loads. The traders baled furs into 90 to 100 pound bundles measuring two by two by three feet, tightly tied with rawhide thongs. Each cart carried an eight or nine hundred pound load.¹²

Then the long, sinuous caravan moved out on a fifteen to twenty day trek to Fort Pierre. If the trade had been good, two or three round trips by as many as 100 carts were required to move upwards of 25,000 buffalo robes plus other furs that had been brought into Fort Laramie. Carts, horses, and oxen from Fort Pierre were also sent to assist. In some years like 1846 the company tried to save money by boating the furs down the Platte. Frequently the boats were stranded by low water, a costly problem when outside freighters had to be hired to rescue the furs. In 1842 one small company was forced into bankruptcy after having to abandon its fur-laden boats on the Platte.¹³

Once the buffalo robes and furs reached Fort Pierre, they were warehoused until the steamboats arrived. For every pound of trade goods that came up the trail, ten pounds of fur went back to St. Louis, and Fort Pierre's "Navy Yard" was kept busy building keel boats and mackinaw boats to help haul the burgeoning cargo to market. Almost 100,000 robes weighing nearly a million pounds passed through Fort Pierre each year.¹⁴

Trade goods – Belgian guns, English woolens, Italian beads, American axes, and even Chinese war paint – were then loaded into the carts for the return trip to Fort Laramie. Summer was a quiet season, but by fall the carts again creaked along the road to supply trading houses as far away as the northern Black Hills and to haul the robes back to the depots for storage until spring.

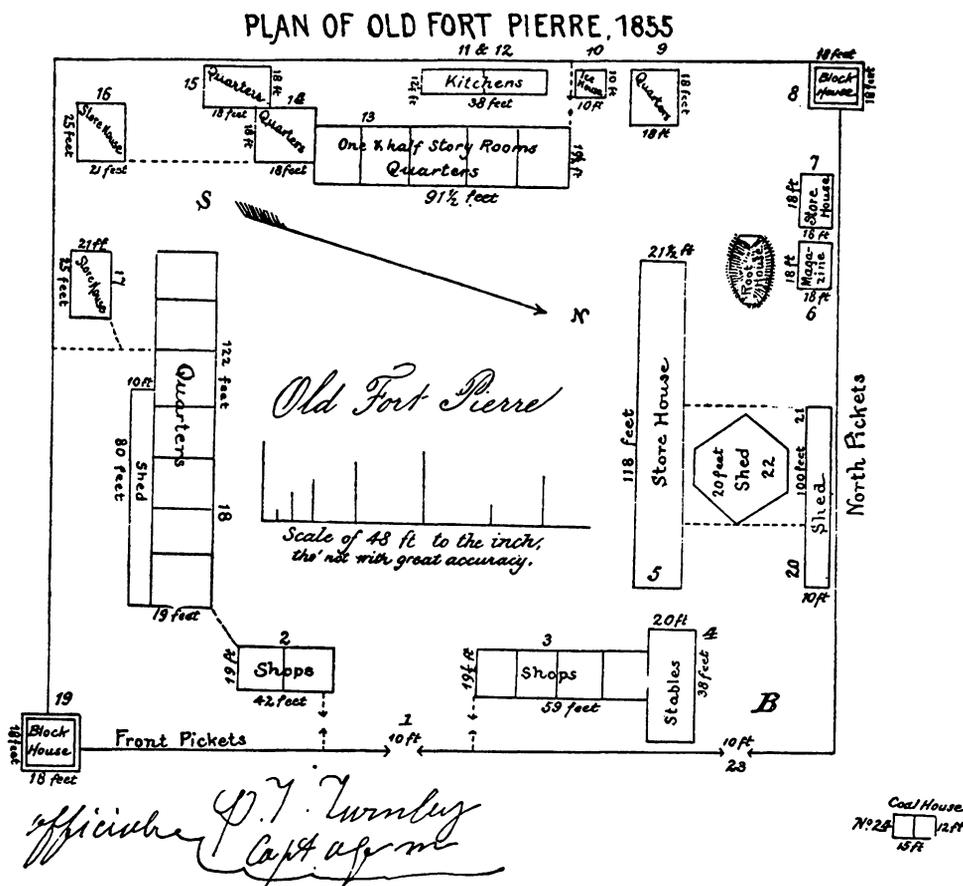
In 1849 the California gold rush panicked the leadership of Pierre Chouteau and Company. They feared the total collapse of the Indian trade at Fort Laramie as 50,000 emigrants swarmed along the Overland Trail that

summer. Had the company been less conservative, Fort Laramie could have done double duty, supplying the emigrant trade in summer and the Indians in winter. But instead, the company sold Fort Laramie to the Army which needed a western post to protect the overland route. The company reestablished its operation at a post south of present Gering, Nebraska, about forty miles lower on the Platte.¹⁵ This move was enough to convince the company to end its use of the Fort Pierre trail in favor of the Platte River road. The factor at Fort Pierre notified the head office on July 20, 1850, "I have now come to the conclusion that it is better hereafter that the Platte equip-

ment comes by way of Kansas . . . the constant rains and deep snow for the last two years have washed out the roads in such a manner between this and the Platte (that) makes it killing to animals – therefore let it be understood that in future the business of this place (the Platte Post) be carried on by way of Kansas."¹⁶

The Fort Pierre-Fort Laramie Trail continued to see occasional use by the Chouteau Company for direct communication with Fort Pierre and frequent use by independent traders like James Bordeaux, who maintained trading houses near Fort Laramie and in the White River valley near present Chadron. An Army detachment consisting of

Captain Parmenas T. Turnley's drawing defined the interior structures at Fort Pierre.



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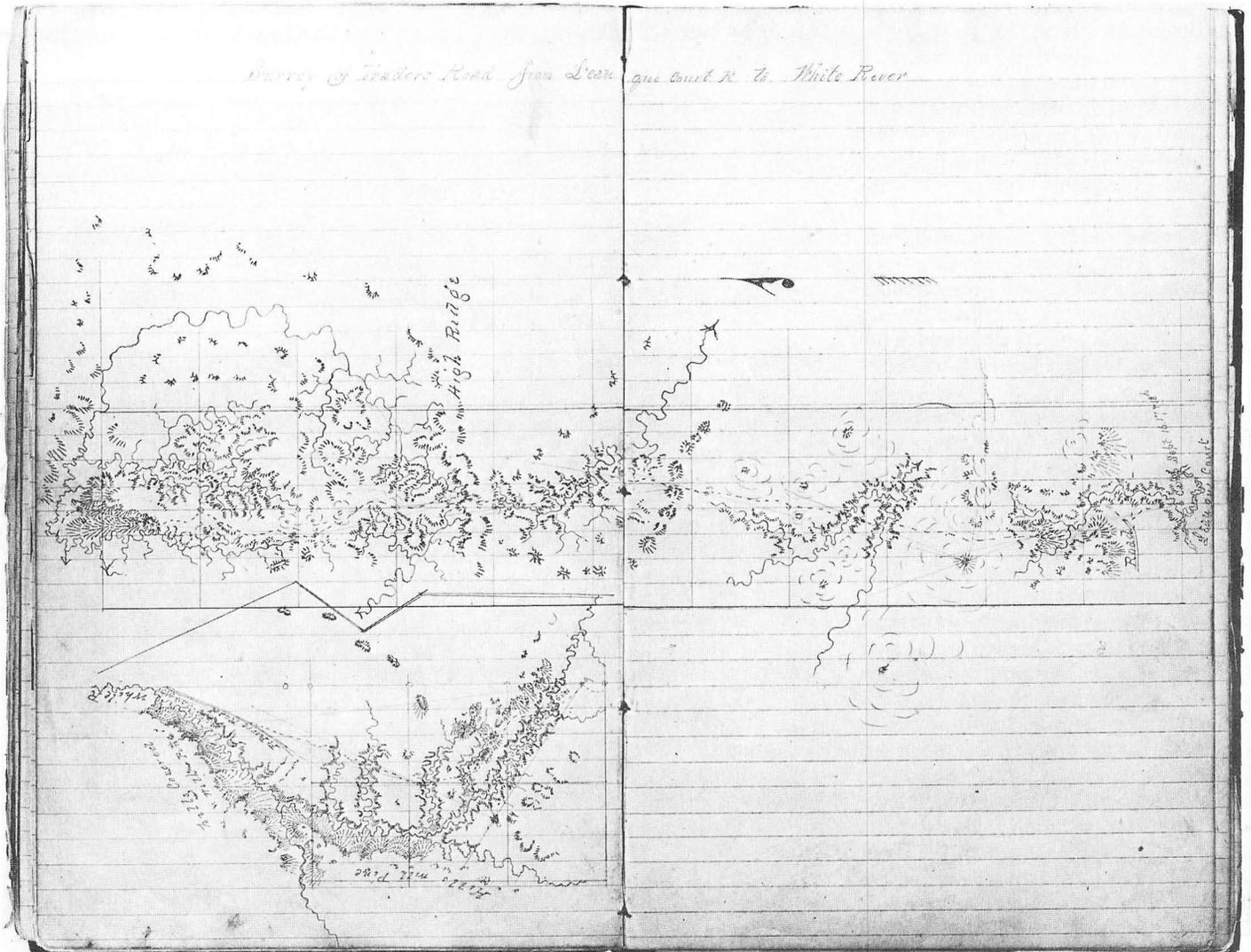
Deputy Quartermaster General Colonel Aeneas MacKay and Captain Stewart Van Vliet with ten mounted riflemen surveyed and mapped the trail in August of 1849. The detachment made the trip from Fort Laramie to Fort Pierre in thirteen days, possibly record time. MacKay reported that the route was "as practicable as any we have seen" for the shipment of military supplies to Fort Laramie; its substitution for the Platte Valley route would

depend on economy and convenience.¹⁷

In 1855 the loss of Fort Laramie and the ravages of time had so reduced the importance and condition of Fort Pierre that the Chouteau Company sold it to the Army. With this acquisition, the Fort Pierre-Fort Laramie trail appeared, on the basis of MacKay's report, to have potential as a military trail. After crushing the Sioux at the Battle of Blue Water near present

Lewellen, Nebraska, General William S. Harney led his men to Fort Laramie. From there his command of 450 men with wagons made a rapid march to Fort Pierre in twenty-two days.¹⁸ Dragoon Joseph M. Lake died along the way and was buried at the base of a spectacular cliff in the Pine Ridge. Lt. Gouverneur K. Warren, the topographical engineer on the expedition, named the landmark "Soldier Cliff" and the nearby stream "Soldier

"Survey of trader's Road from L'eau qui Court R. to White River," from J. Hudson Snowden's journal, 1857. Courtesy of New York State Library, Albany.



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Creek." Because of their proximity to Fort Robinson, established much later, some historians have associated those place names with the fort rather than with the unfortunate dragoon who succumbed to "bilious fever" on October 4, 1855.¹⁹

Lt. Warren was assigned the task of preparing an accurate map of the West from the Mississippi to the Rockies. In 1857 he again took the field, this time to explore the Loup River Valley as a potential military route from the Missouri River to Fort Laramie. The Sandhills road proved to be impractical for wagons, but Warren was able to fill in another blank area of his great map.

At Fort Laramie, Warren divided his command. He led one party up the western leg of the former Fort Pierre-Fort Laramie Trail to Rawhide Butte south of present Lusk, Wyoming. There the lieutenant visited the new Sioux agency and collected intelligence about the Sioux, much of it faulty, from the agent, Major Thomas Twiss. At Rawhide Butte, Warren and his men left the trail and proceeded almost straight north to become the first official government expedition to penetrate the fastness of the Black Hills, antedating Custer's Black Hills expedition by seventeen years.²⁰

The second party was supervised by civilian topographer J. Hudson Snowden from Warren's Washington office. Snowden departed Fort Laramie following the eastern route of the Fort Pierre Road. After reaching the Niobrara River near present Agate Fossil Beds National Monument, Snowden's party made camp nine miles downriver where the fur trade trail struck off due north to Deadman Creek and the White River valley. Because no official survey of the important connector route between the Niobrara and White River had been made, Warren had instructed

Snowden to map it. Snowden made a one-inch-to-the-mile rendering of the route and thus completed the survey of the entire road.²¹

Despite the Fort Pierre-Fort Laramie Trail's occasional use by military expeditions and favorable reports by officers, the Platte Valley remained the Army's principal route to supply Fort Laramie. However, the western leg of the fur traders' road found a new use in 1873 when the government located the Oglala and Brule agencies in the White River Valley. Vast quantities of treaty annuity goods and government beef passed up the trail for distribution to the Indians, and after 1874, hundreds of soldiers and their supplies followed the same route to Camps Robinson and Sheridan. This military use of the trail finally ended with the construction of the railroad to Fort Robinson in 1886 and the abandonment of Fort Laramie soon afterwards.²²

During its fur trade heyday, the Fort Pierre-Fort Laramie Trail probably carried at least 125 tons of trade goods to the Sioux, Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Crow traders who dealt them out for an estimated quarter of a million buffalo robes and lesser quantities of beaver, wolf, coyote, elk, antelope, and deer skins which returned over the trail to the Missouri. The trail began and ended, physically and chronologically, in isolation, far removed from the romantic "westerling" of manifest destiny. The Fort Pierre-Fort Laramie Trail was, however, an integral part of the commercial history of the American fur trade, and it played a key role in supplying what was probably the nation's most famous fur trading post.

NOTES

¹Hiram Martin Chittenden, *Early Steamboat Navigation on the Missouri River*, Vol. 1 (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1903), 22-23.

²John Upton Terrell, *Traders of the Western Morning* (Los Angeles: Southwest Museum, 1967), 110-11, 116-17.

³John C. Ewers, *Indian Life on the Upper Missouri* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), 14-33; James Mooney, "Calendar History of the Kiowa Indians" *Seventeenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology*, Part 1 (Washington: GPO, 1898), 156-61, 246-51.

⁴"Drawings and Sketches of Western Travels," Box 5, Gouverneur Kemble Warren Papers, New York State Library, Albany (microfilm copy at the Nebraska State Historical Society).

⁵Mooney, 167-68.

⁶Hiram Martin Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, Vol. 2 (Stanford: Academic Reprints, 1954), 955-56.

⁷Leroy R. Hafen, ed., *The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West*, Vol. 1 (Glendale: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 1965), 137, 143.

⁸*Ibid.*, 152.

⁹Colin Campbell, White River to P.D. Papin, Fort Pierre, December 29, 1837, Chouteau Collection, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.

¹⁰Leroy R. and Ann W. Hafen, *Rufus B. Sage: His Letters and Papers* (Glendale: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 1956), 232-40.

¹¹"Plot of the Route from Fort Laramie to Fort Pierre, August, 1849." P & R File, Map 31, RG 92, National Archives and Records Administration: "Journal, 1855," Box 5, Warren Papers.

¹²Charles E. Hanson, Jr., "Red River and Other Carls," *Museum of the Fur Trade Quarterly* 19 (Fall 1983): 1-12.

¹³Charles E. Hanson, Jr., "James Bordeaux," *Museum of the Fur Trade Quarterly* 2 (Spring 1966): 6; Hafen and Hafen, Vol. 2, 31-32.

¹⁴Inventory of furs received at St. Louis by Pierre Chouteau Jr. and Co. and R. & W. Campbell, Manufacturer's Books, 1850 Commercial Census of St. Louis, Missouri Historical Society.

¹⁵Thomas L. Green, "A Forgotten Fur Trading Post in Scotts Bluff County," *Nebraska History* 15 (January-March 1934): 38-46.

¹⁶Charles E. Hanson, Jr., "The Fort Pierre - Fort Laramie Trail," *Museum of the Fur Trade Quarterly* 1 (Summer 1965): 3-7.

¹⁷"Plot of the Route . . ." and "Report of Col. Aeneas MacKay, November 1, 1849," Consolidated Correspondence File, RG 92, NARA.

¹⁸Richmond L. Clow, "Mad Bear: William S. Harney and the Sioux Expedition of 1855-1856," *Nebraska History* 61 (Summer 1980): 142-43.

¹⁹Military service record of Joseph M. Lake, RG 94, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, NARA.

²⁰"Journal, 1857," Box 5, Warren Papers.

²¹"Journal of J. Hudson Snowden, 1857," Box 5, Warren Papers.

²²Roger T. Grange, "Fort Robinson: Outpost on the Plains," *Nebraska History* 39 (September 1958): 226.