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Article Summary: Maps and journal entries suggest that in 1795 James Mackey established a trading post on the Missouri River for Spanish traders from St. Louis. Archeologists have found no trace of the post, which was located near present-day Homer, Nebraska.

Cataloging Information:

Names: James Mackey, Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, Alexander Philipp Maximilian, Chief Blackbird, Gayle F Carlson, Rolfe D Mandel, Jean-Baptiste Truteau, Pierre Cruzatte, John Evans

Nebraska Place Names: Homer, Dakota County

Keywords: James Mackey, Omaha Indians, Mandan Indians, Ponca House, Post of the Otos, geomorphology, Gayle F Carlson, Rolfe D Mandel, Jean-Baptiste Truteau, John Evans

Photographs / Images: (Fig 1) detail from the John Evans 1796-97 map, showing the location of Fort Charles; (Fig 2) James Mackey-Nicholas de Finiels 1798 map; (Fig 3) redrawn detail of the James Mackay-Nicholas de Finiels 1798 map showing Fort Charles and “Post of the Otos”; (Fig 4) Prince Maximilian’s copy of William Clark’s 1804 field map; (Fig 5) the changing course of the Missouri River from 1804 to 1894 in present-day Monona County, Iowa, and between Burt County, Nebraska, and the Omaha Indian Reservation (from Hiram M Chittenden, *History of Early Steamboat Navigation on the Missouri River*, 1903); geomorphologist Rolfe Mandel examining a soil profile at one of the conjectured Fort Charles locations

Fort Charles

OR

"Mr. Mackey's Trading House"

By W. Raymond Wood

Monday, August 13, 1804: It was late summer, and Meriwether Lewis and William Clark were in the heart of Omaha Indian country, having passed the mouth of the Little Sioux River on August 8 and visited the grave of the famous Omaha Chief Blackbird on August 11. After moving upriver nearly eleven miles since daybreak on Monday, Clark wrote in his notes about their course, perhaps in the early afternoon:

to a Willow Isd on S. point and opsd. to which Mr. Mackey had a Small fort in which he traded with the Mahars the winter 95 & 96 & call the place *Fort Charles*[.]¹

Clark's other notations for the same day provide no further information.

Fort Charles (or Fort Carlos) was a trading post established in 1795 by James Mackay for Spanish St. Louis traders and located on the Missouri River between the mouths of the Little Sioux and the Big Sioux rivers. The fort was named by its builders for the reigning king of Spain, Charles IV. Fort Charles was designed for trade with the Omahas and their neighbors, and to act as a base for exploring further upriver—indeed, to the Pacific Ocean. James Mackay (or, as the Spanish called him, Diego McKay) and John Thomas Evans led the expedition that built the post in the late fall of 1795.

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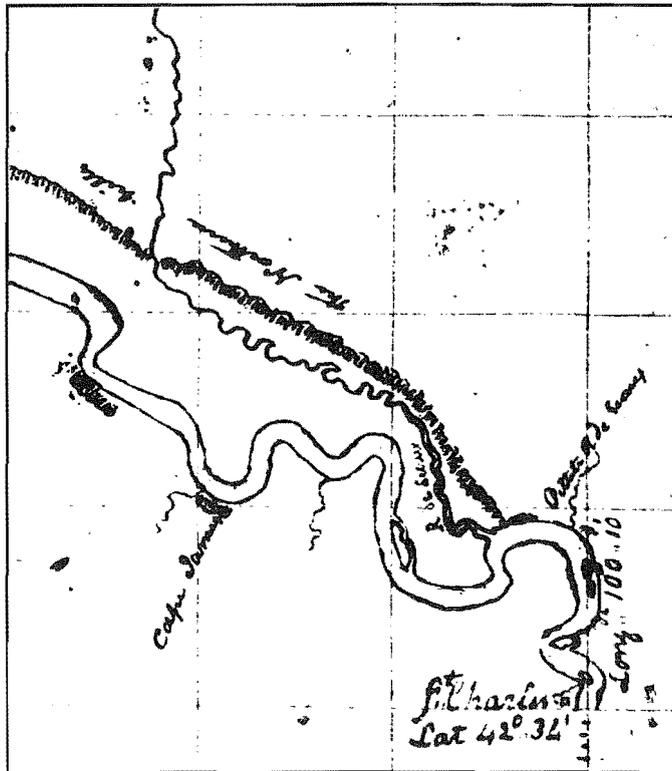


Fig. 1. Detail from the John Evans 1796-97 map, showing the location of Fort Charles. Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beineke Rare Book and Manuscript Library

Fort Charles was built about five miles southeast of Big Village, the principal village of the Omaha Indians, at a point near the south boundary of today's Dakota County, Nebraska, some twenty-five airline miles below Sioux City. The fort's exact location is unknown, but it must have been somewhere near modern Blyburg Lake, an old cutoff meander of the Missouri River.

The Big Village site is in Dakota County, Nebraska, on U.S. Highway 77/75, about

two miles northeast of the town of Homer, on the banks of the now-channelized Omaha Creek/Pigeon Creek Ditch.² At the time Fort Charles was built, this large Omaha Indian village was ruled by the formidable Chief Blackbird. The history and archaeology of Big Village have been dealt with in two major monographs.³

Several attempts have been made to find Fort Charles, but to date all of them have been unsuccessful. The site of the post has been lost, even though there are three primary maps showing its location. Unfortunately, two of them are small-scale and almost useless. One is based on Evans's 1796-97 exploration upriver from Fort Charles to the Mandan Tribe (Fig. 1), and the other is a chart based on the Mackay-Evans expedition and drawn in St. Louis by Nicholas de Finiels in 1798 (Figs. 2, 3).⁴

More helpful is a larger-scale map drawn by William Clark illustrating the expedition's route for August 13 to 21, 1804 (Fig. 4). This detailed chart depicts both the Omaha village and "Mr. Mackey's trading House" in relation to the river and the bluff line.⁵ A sketch map showing Fort Charles and the Omaha village in the field notes of Alexander Philipp Maximilian, Prince of Wied-Neuwied (Collections of the Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska) is based directly on Clark's map and gives no additional details.

Fort Charles

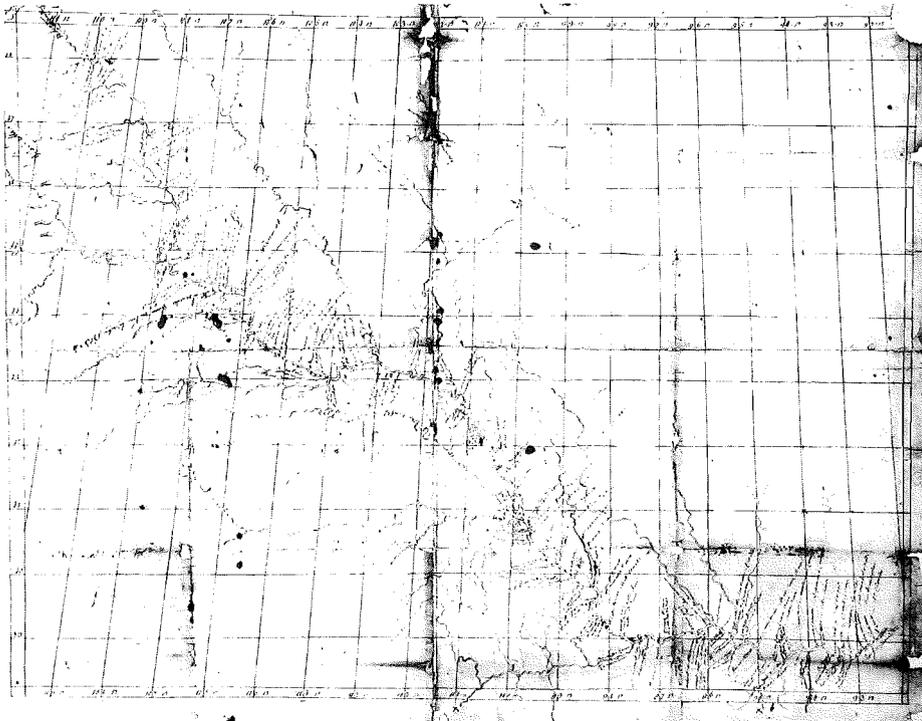


Fig. 2. The James Mackay-Nicholas de Finiels 1798 map. The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, Center for Great Plains Studies, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

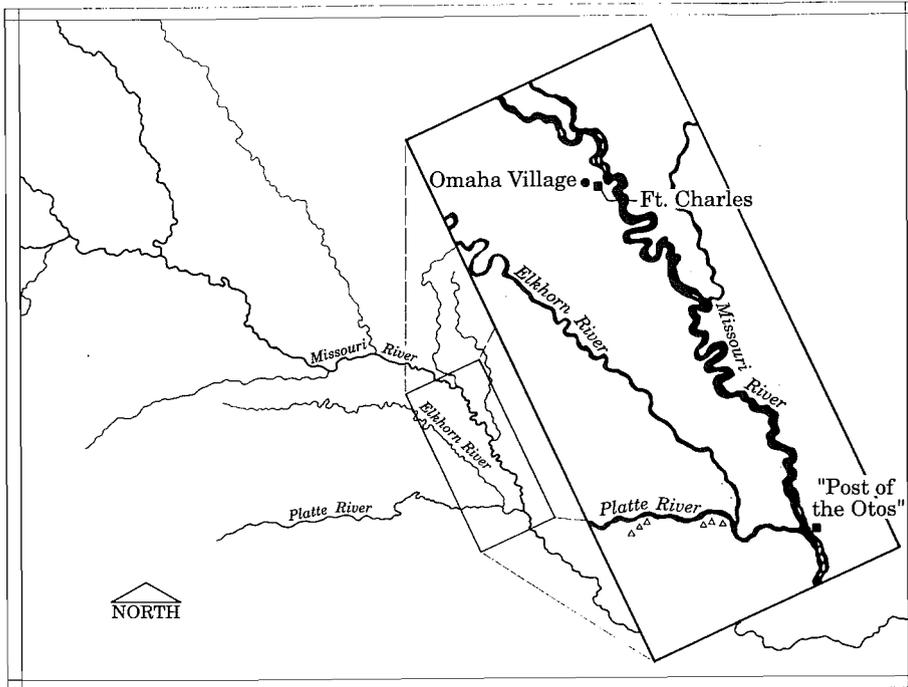


Fig. 3. Redrawn detail of the James Mackay-Nicholas de Finiels 1798 map showing Fort Charles and "Post of the Otos." On the original map the symbol designating the location of Fort Charles is mislabeled as "Maha Village."

The Missouri River in this part of its valley was subject to wild variation before it was channelized, explaining why the location of Fort Charles is so uncertain today. Although the position of "Mr. Mackey's trading House" is clearly shown on Clark's map, the many changes in the channel since that time render it impossible to determine the post's former location with any confidence. On August 11, 1804, in fact, Clark had written that "the river is verry Crooked . . . I have observed a number of places where the river has Changd its Bead [bed] at different times[.]"⁶

It is probably no coincidence that it was an issue of the *Sioux City Register* in 1868 that introduced the time-worn quotation: "Of all the variable things in creation, the most uncertain are—the action of a jury, the state of a woman's mind, and the condition of the Missouri River." The Missouri valley near Sioux City and the Fort Charles location is eleven miles wide, giving the river ample room in which to meander—and it did so capriciously.

The most recent investigations seeking the site of Fort Charles were in June-July 1987 and in October 1990 by Gayle F. Carlson, an archaeologist with the Nebraska State Historical Society, assisted by Rolfe D. Mandel, a geomorphologist from the University of Nebraska at Omaha (see sidebar).⁷ Mackay's description of the fort's setting is consistent with a location along the bank of modern Omaha Creek on an alluvial terrace above the elevation of seasonal flooding. It is, however, possible that the site fell into the Missouri River during one of its many channel changes (for an example of how the channel has moved in this general area, consult the map of its changes between 1804 and 1894 in Monona County, Iowa) (Fig. 5).⁸

Carlson concluded that the points best resembling the fort's setting, as described by Mackay, are on a low terrace on the west side of the Missouri at a height of about four meters above the modern floodplain, as seen on the U.S.G.S. 7.5 minute Homer, Nebraska-

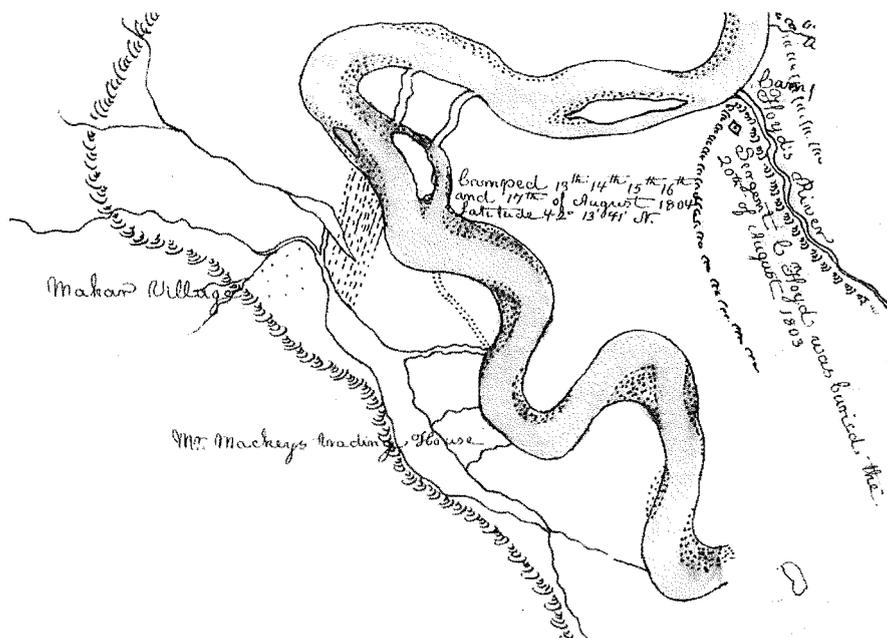


Fig. 4. Prince Maximilian's copy of William Clark's 1804 field map, showing the location of "Mr. Mackey's trading House." Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska; Gift of The Enton Art Foundation

Iowa quadrangle. Only a few locations in this area seem to correspond to Mackay's description and to Clark's map. The quest for the fort's remains was abandoned, however, when the tests Carlson and Mandel made at these locations found nothing.

Why was this elusive fort built? Let us return to St. Louis in the closing decade of the eighteenth century (the primary sources for this story are in Nasatir, *Before Lewis and Clark*).⁹ Spanish officials were alarmed by the prospect of British traders from the upper Mississippi River and from Canada penetrating Spanish territory and trading with the Indians. British traders from the Mississippi River (e.g., Prairie du Chien), the Minnesota River, and from posts along the Assiniboine River in Canada (e.g., Fort Montagne a la Bosse) were in fact busily trading with Indians as far south as the Omahas and Poncas and as far north as the Mandans. These incursions incensed the Spanish even though their own St. Louis traders were doing little to satisfy this trade. When, however, Spanish officials learned that British traders

had actually built a "fort"—Jusseume's Post—among the Mandans, some 1,510 river miles up the Missouri from its mouth, they were moved to send two major expeditions to expel them.¹⁰ These excursions were sponsored by the Company of Explorers of the Upper Missouri (known also by ten similar names!), but commonly known as the Missouri Company.

The first expedition was by Jean-Baptiste Truteau, who was instructed to dislodge the British traders from among the Mandans, build a fort at the Mandan villages, and go on to the Pacific Ocean. Truteau, a St. Louis schoolmaster, left St. Louis a little more than a year before Mackay and Evans—on June 7, 1794—accompanied by eight men in a pirogue. He never reached the Mandans, his principal known activities being on the Missouri a few miles above the mouth of the Niobrara, where he built a modest post known as Ponca House. There he traded with the Omahas, Poncas, and their neighbors, the Sioux, during the winter of 1794-95.

James Mackay, a Scotsman who pre-

viously had been a trader in Canada, had recently moved to St. Louis and was selected to lead a second expedition. His ultimate goal also was the Pacific Ocean—the destination of Truteau before him, and that of Lewis and Clark to follow. Mackay chose a Welshman, John Evans, to be his lieutenant. Evans had been sent to the United States to seek descendants of the fictitious Welsh Prince Madoc, thought by Welsh nationalists to be living among the Indians. Evans ultimately was to return to St. Louis disappointed and wrote home to tell his sponsors that he'd found no evidence of a Welsh presence among the Mandans.¹¹

The two men left St. Louis for the Mandans with a thirty-three-man crew in late August 1795. The trip was uneventful but was plagued with a number of difficulties. Nevertheless, Mackay and Evans made the trip to the mouth of the Platte River in eastern Nebraska in about forty-four days, a good pace, reaching there October 14. It later took Lewis and Clark sixty days to reach the same point. Winter was beginning. It was bitter cold and snowing, and they stopped here for a few days to hold discussions with the Otos and to build a post that Mackay was to call the "Post of the Otos."

Resuming their way upriver, on November 11 the party reached a point a few miles below Tonwantonga, the Omaha Indian village ruled by Chief Blackbird. The chief came to meet the expedition "a day's journey distant" from the village. The place where the expedition stopped, and where their fort was to be built, was almost exactly halfway to the Mandans—about 760 miles up the Missouri. Because it was so late in the year, Mackay was to build a post here and resume his exploration in the spring. While Mackay was building Fort Charles, his colleague Truteau was probably far upriver, trading with the Arikaras or the Mandans.¹²

The expedition unloaded supplies on November 14 and prepared to build a post. Mackay's journal provides a clear

description of the fort's surroundings:

On the 29th, the Prince [Blackbird] came to visit the fort which was being built in a plain located between the very village of the Mahas and the Missouri River, on the shore of a small river which flows into the latter, and is fairly navigable. This plain is very extensive, the land excellent, and never inundated by the waters. The location of the fort seems to have been prepared by nature. It is in a commanding district, which rises for a circumference of about one thousand feet. It looks on the shore of this river, as if to command the rest of the area. I have established my settlement and my fort there, although at a distance from the woods; however, the horses of the Prince are at my service.¹³

What did this post look like? The only honest answer is, we have no idea. We do not know what specifications Mackay may have been given for its construction, and he says nothing in his journal that provides a clue to its appearance. Was he given some latitude in its size and design? If so, he may have drawn on his experiences and his recollections of fur trade posts in Canada for its plan. In this case we can say little, for our knowledge of them is limited, and reconstructions of late eighteenth century posts there are heavily infused with speculation. We know only that Fort Charles's defenses were planned to include cannon, to be brought to the post the coming summer.¹⁴

Because the post was hurriedly built, it could not have been very large or substantial. Mackay originally had with him a party nearly as large as that of the Lewis and Clark expedition, so manpower was not a problem, at least initially. Although Mackay began building the fort about November 15, he nevertheless said on November 21 that the "scarcity of food retards a trifle the construction of the fort which I am building, but will not prevent me from finishing it soon."¹⁵ Because there was so little to eat he had sent some of his men to accompany an Omaha buffalo hunting party that day. Whatever its scale, the post was certainly a more modest establishment than the one Truteau had been directed to build among the Mandans.



Fig. 5. The changing course of the Missouri River from 1804 to 1894 in present-day Monona County, Iowa, and between Burr County, Nebraska, and the Omaha Indian Reservation. From Hiram M. Chittenden, *History of Early Steamboat Navigation on the Missouri River* (1903)

Because both Truteau and Mackay were employees of the same fur company, some of the specifications of Truteau's unnamed Mandan post (it was never built, much less begun) may be relevant to Fort Charles. Truteau was to

cause to be constructed . . . a building [*cabaña*] thirty feet long and fifteen feet wide, built of logs placed one upon another in English fashion, the corners joined and fitted by a kind of mortise; on the inside he shall have a partition made in order that one part may serve as a storeroom and the other as a lodging.¹⁶

The directions continue:

He shall cause to be constructed another building, or *cabaña* in the same manner, for his men, opposite the first . . . [having] doors and the windows of the two *cabañas* made exactly opposite each other and only on the sides facing each other, but no opening must be made on any of the other three sides.¹⁷

The buildings of Truteau's proposed Mandan fort were to be surrounded later by an elaborate, bastioned palisade.¹⁸ There is real disparity between the magnitude of this proposed post and the eight-man crew Truteau had with him. He'd been asked to do the impossible. When he did build Ponca House, just above the mouth of the Niobrara River in November 1794, it was a structure he merely called a "winter cabin."¹⁹

We might imagine that Mackay built two buildings such as those Truteau was to erect, but defended by a more simple stockade. This idea, however, is speculation, however plausible it might be in terms of the architecture of the period and the length of time that Mackay's men had to do the work.

Construction after December 18, when the Missouri was completely frozen, would have been possible but uncomfortable, so the men had four and one-half weeks to make the buildings secure for the winter between beginning construction and the onset of bitter cold that froze the Missouri River.²⁰ Remember that Mackay had said the fort was "at a distance from the woods," so building material had to be moved some distance to the construction site. However, help in hauling logs apparently was provided by Chief Blackbird, judging from Mackay's following comment that "however, the horses of the Prince are at my service." The snow and cold that had "retarded considerably" his last few days travel to the Omahas also slowed construction.

Adding to the delay was a slow but steady erosion of the work force before and during the fort's construction. The thirty-three-man crew with which

Mackay left St. Louis had been reduced a month earlier, when some men were left above the mouth of the Platte River to build and maintain a house for the Oto trade.

How many men were left behind to man the "Post of the Otos"? We don't know, but in one sentence in his journals Mackay speaks in the plural—for a single man would probably not have survived long in this setting even though Mackay speaks of "the agent that I have placed there for the trade."²¹ Nor do we know how many men Mackay sent with the Omaha hunting party on November 21. Furthermore, we are ignorant of the number of men in the detachment Mackay sent upriver to visit the Arikaras on November 24, while construction on the fort was still in progress. The latter group was forced back by an encounter with a Sioux buffalo hunting party, however, and returned to Fort Charles on January 6, 1796.

We need not be too concerned with the subsequent history of this modest post. Evans left Fort Charles for the Mandans and the Pacific Ocean in June, arriving at the Mandans on September 23, 1796, and leaving there on May 9, 1797. Mackay hoped that Evans would find Truteau in the fort he was to have built among the Mandans, but Evans never laid eyes on him.

While Evans was gone, Mackay apparently left Fort Charles in the hands of a subordinate, for he went on a long summer buffalo hunt with the Omahas, traveling with them as far south as the Loup River. On this hunt he traveled over a substantial part of northeastern Nebraska, giving us the first description of that area and a detailed map showing his route.²² By spring, having lost touch with Evans and assuming that his lieutenant was on his way to the Pacific Ocean, Mackay abandoned both his upriver hopes and Fort Charles, for by May 1797 he was back in St. Louis. By July 15, Evans, too, returned to the city. Truteau had returned to St. Louis about June 1796. The Spanish presence on the Missouri River promptly evaporated.

Who gave William Clark the information about the dates of operation and the location of Fort Charles? Undoubtedly it was one of the captain's own men, and in all probability it was engagé Pierre Cruzatte, who earlier had operated a trading post for the Omahas for two years several miles above the mouth of the Platte River. Cruzatte's unnamed "old Trading House" is shown on the west bank of the Missouri on Clark's map of their course for August 4 to 8, 1804.²³ Clark says in his notes that it was

the remains of an old Tradeing establishment L.S. [left side] where Petr. Crusett one of our hands Stayed two years & traded with the *Mahars* [.]²⁴

Clark's notes on courses and distances say this post was one and one-half miles above their camp of August 3.²⁵ Thus, the site of Cruzatte's House today would perhaps be on Mill Creek, about four miles southeast of Blair, in Washington County, Nebraska. Clark unfortunately did not say which "two years" Cruzatte spent there.

"Cruzatte's House" is not the post Mackay established about October 20, 1795, to trade with the nearby Otos.²⁶ William Clark speaks of Cruzatte's trade with the Omahas, not the Otos.²⁷ Furthermore, it is nearly thirty airline miles above the mouth of the Platte, too far removed from the Platte to be considered as the "Post of the Otos," where Mackay remained for eleven days to negotiate with that tribe. The greater part of the Oto post may have been completed by his men during that week and a half.

Mackay provides three separate locations for the Oto post: above, below, and opposite the mouth of the Platte. In his journal, he says:

I reached a place one-half league above the said river, in order to construct a house for the wintering of the traders whom I left there on the 20th....²⁸

It is impossible to reconcile this statement with another in Mackay's own "Table of Distances" from the mouth of the Missouri River. There, he lists the

Fort Charles

"First building, or fort, belonging to the Company of the upper Missouri" as being on the south (or west) bank of the Missouri River two leagues below the mouth of the Platte.²⁹

To complicate matters, the "Indian Office Map," drawn in St. Louis by Nicholas de Finiels for Mackay in 1798, has a diamond-shaped symbol representing the "Premier Poste de la Compagnie du Missouri" on the east bank of the Missouri just below the mouth of the Platte (Figs. 2,3).³⁰

Which location is correct? Mackay is our only chronicler, so there is no independent corroboration for any of the three potential locations. The Oto post could have been anywhere within an area of about fifteen square miles.

Fort Charles and the "Post of the Otos" were the first Spanish fur trading posts about which we have any knowledge known to have been built in the present states of Nebraska or Iowa. They may not have been the first Euro-American post in the area, however, for Mackay's journal leaves little doubt that he believed an English fort had been built the previous year somewhere near the Omaha village. In January 1796 he wrote:

The English of the river of San Pedro [the St. Peter's, or Minnesota River] had concluded among this tribe last autumn [apparently in 1794] the construction of a fort for them on the shore of the Missouri, which they were resolved to maintain against all resistance.³¹

The wording leaves the impression that a post in fact had been constructed—or did the British only agree to build one? If it was actually built it lasted less than a year, for neither Mackay nor anyone else subsequently alludes to it. Truteau, for instance, makes no mention of any such post when he wintered in 1794-95 at Ponca House. The British had, of course, been trading with the Omahas and their neighbors for some time.³² This solitary reference to an ephemeral, nameless post gives no clue to its whereabouts.

It may have been either in Nebraska or, possibly, across the river in Iowa.

Fort Charles, the Post of the Otos, and Cruzatte's House provide the only potentially concrete expression of the futile Spanish expansion that St. Louis officials attempted near and above the mouth of the Platte River. These evanescent posts would be worthy historic sites if their remains could be located. This possibility does not seem realistic, at least given the current documentation available for these establishments. The Spanish presence on the upper Missouri River would, in the course of time, become only an extended footnote in history, one of its principal results being their legacy of maps that illustrate the first full year of Lewis and Clark's travels—maps that the captains were to find so faithful.

Notes

¹ Gary E. Moulton, ed., *Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, August 30, 1803-August 24, 1804* (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 2:475.

² John M. O'Shea and John Ludwickson, *Archaeology and Ethnohistory of the Omaha Indians: The Big Village Site* (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 1-15.

³ *Ibid.*, and John M. O'Shea, *Mortuary Variability: An Archaeological Investigation* (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 1984).

⁴ Gary E. Moulton, ed., *Atlas of the Lewis and Clark Expedition: Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), Map 7; W. Raymond Wood, *An Atlas of Early Maps of the American Midwest*, vol. 18 of *Illinois State Museum, Scientific Papers* (1983), Plate 4D; "Nicholas de Finiels: Mapping the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers, 1797-1798," *Missouri Historical Review* 81 (1987):397.

⁵ Moulton, *Atlas of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, Map 16.

⁶ Moulton, *Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, 2:467-68.

⁷ Gayle F. Carlson, "The Nebraska State Historical Society Fort Charles Survey Project, 1987-1990," with appendix: "Geomorphological Investigation of Fort Charles, Northeast Nebraska," by Rolfe D. Mandel (Unpublished report, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, 1991).

⁸ H. M. Chittenden, *History of Early Steamboat*

Navigation on the Missouri River (New York: F. P. Harper, 1903), opp. 77.

⁹ A. P. Nasatir, *Before Lewis and Clark: Documents Illustrating the History of the Missouri, 1785-1804* (St. Louis: St. Louis Historical Documents Foundation, 1952), 1:75-108, and related documents.

¹⁰ Thomas D. Thiessen, "Historic Trading Posts Near the Mouth of the Knife River," *The Phase I Archeological Research Program for the Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site, Part II: Ethnohistorical Studies* (Lincoln: National Park Service, Midwest Archeological Center, 1993), 49-50.

¹¹ A synopsis of Evans's background may be found in Bernard DeVoto, *The Course of Empire* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1952), 373-74. For detailed biographical information, see David Williams, "John Evans' Strange Journey," *American Historical Review* 54(2):277-95 and 54(3):508-29; and Gwyn A. Williams, *Madoc: The Making of a Myth* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1979), 183.

¹² Nasatir, *Before Lewis and Clark*, 1:89, 358.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1:362.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:360.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:359.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:243.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:243-44.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:280.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:362.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 1:352.

²² Aubrey Diller, "James Mackay's Journey in Nebraska in 1796," *Nebraska History* 36 (June 1955): 123-28; Wood, "Atlas of Early Maps," Plates 5, 9.

²³ Moulton, *Atlas of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, Map 14.

²⁴ Moulton, *Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, II:445.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, II:444.

²⁶ Nasatir, *Before Lewis and Clark*, 1:356.

²⁷ Moulton, *Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, II:446, n.3.

²⁸ Nasatir, *Before Lewis and Clark*, 1:356.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, II:489.

³⁰ Annie Heloise Abel, "A New Lewis and Clark Map," *The Geographical Review* 1 (1916):343; Wood, "Atlas of Early Maps," Plate 4D; Wood, "Nicholas de Finiels," 397.

³¹ Nasatir, *Before Lewis and Clark*, 1:363.

³² *Ibid.*, 1:363-64.

The Search For Fort Charles

By Gayle F. Carlson, Curator of Anthropology,
Nebraska State Historical Society

Archaeologists have made sporadic attempts over the last fifty years or more to locate the site of Fort Charles, or Fort Carlos as it is sometimes called. Documentary evidence is not very useful in pinpointing the location. A brief description in James Mackay's journal and a notation on one of Lewis and Clark's maps showing the fort's approximate location are the most helpful. A very general location is shown on the John Evans map of the Missouri River made in 1796-97, and the Lewis and Clark journals also provide some information.

The most recent attempt to locate the remains of Fort Charles began in 1987. The author and Laboratory Supervisor Patrick Phillips spent the week of June 15-19 in the Homer, Nebraska, area. Because Mackay stated that the fort was located "in a plain," that was "never inundated by the waters," and "in a commanding district, which rises for a circumference of about one thousand feet," we believed he must have been referring to some isolated high spot, probably a terrace remnant in the Missouri River floodplain.¹

From an examination of the USGS 7.5 minute series topographic map of the Homer, Nebraska-Iowa Quadrangle, it was apparent that only two or three locations seemed to match fairly well with the topography and landmarks shown on the Lewis and Clark map. The best prospect was a long, narrow terrace remnant formerly surrounded by a horseshoe bend and a later cutoff of the Missouri River for many years, prior to the drying up of most of the cutoff and the river's migration to the east.

Another location, a smaller egg-shaped elevation, was the second choice for investigation, although not seeming to fit the historical evidence as well as the first. A third location between the others was also considered, but it presented problems because it was the site of a modern farmstead. After a thorough surface inspection of the first two locations failed to produce any significant archaeological evidence, a metal detector was used to recheck the first location. Again, results were entirely negative.

Limited subsurface testing of the first location was also undertaken with a motorized, six-inch-diameter posthole digger. Nineteen tests were excavated to depths of approximately twenty-eight to thirty inches. No artifacts were discovered even though all the excavated soil was passed through a 1/4-inch screen. A few small fragments of charcoal were found in the very sandy fill, but these could have occurred naturally.

The next opportunity to visit the area was July 13-16, 1987. A limited survey with a metal detector again produced negative results. The major thrust of this session's work, however, was testing of the two previously mentioned locations with a truck-mounted soil probe furnished by the University of Nebraska Experiment Station at Concord, Nebraska. Testing with the probe to a depth of five feet was done at the same locations

previously tested by postholes in June, but on a much larger scale. As in earlier testing, no definite cultural material was found in the cores, except for a few flecks of charcoal and small wood fragments.

Although one more visit was made to the Homer area in 1987, no additional testing was conducted. By this time it had been decided that any further testing should be done to greater depths and with larger excavations so soil profiles could be examined. Permission was obtained from the landowners to permit backhoe trenching at some future date. It was also decided that further field work on the Fort Charles project would be most profitable if conducted with the aid of a geomorphologist. Geomorphologists study how soils develop and how and when particular landscapes formed. Such information is often helpful in determining where archaeological remains of various time periods might be found in relation to the local topography. Accordingly, Rolfe Mandel, a geomorphologist with the Geology Department of the University of Nebraska at Omaha, was contracted to participate in the subsequent investigations.

Fieldwork employing trenching and geomorphological investigations was carried out on October 17, 1990. The work focused on the previously examined sites, remnants of a low terrace on the valley floor on the west side of the Missouri River. The terrace had been determined to be the only high point resembling the description of the fort's geomorphological setting as provided in contemporary documents.

The stratigraphic evidence revealed by backhoe trenching indicated that the upper 3.5 meters of the terrace fill was composed of sediment deposited on the terrace surface during flooding. Historic flood records indicate that the terrace surface had been submerged at least three times since 1897, most notably to a depth of fifteen feet in 1952.

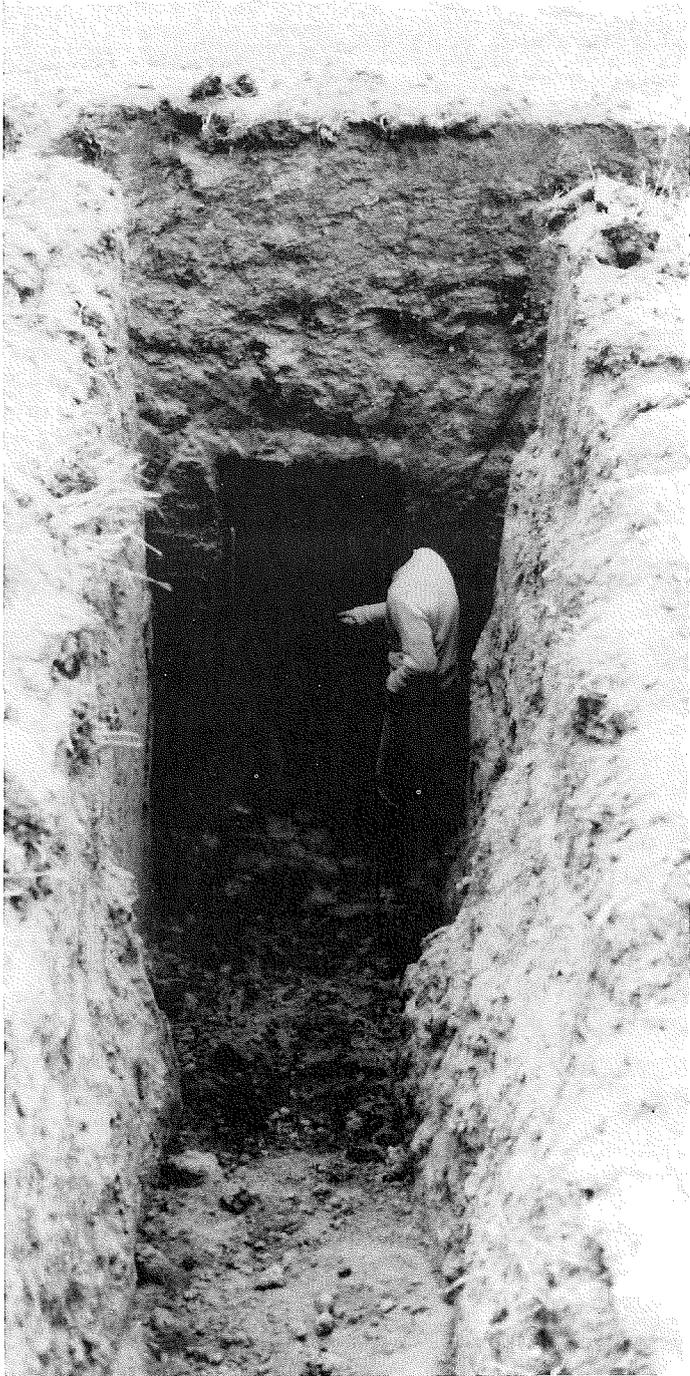
Based on the geomorphological evidence that indicated the only terrace remnant on the valley floor has been frequently flooded, there seems little likelihood of locating any buried remains of Fort Charles. If, as suggested by the historical record, Fort Charles was built on a higher terrace not subject to flooding, it is probable that the site was eroded away by lateral movement of the Missouri River across its floodplain. No remnants of a higher terrace remain in the vicinity of Homer, Nebraska.

While geomorphology failed to reveal the site of Fort Charles, the technique has provided substantial evidence tending to preclude subsequent, and probably futile attempts to locate the fort.²

Notes

¹ A. P. Nasatir, *Before Lewis and Clark: Documents Illustrating the History of the Missouri, 1785-1804* (St. Louis: St. Louis Historical Documents Foundation, 1952) 1:362.

² Rolfe D. Mandel, "Geomorphological Investigation of Fort Charles, Northeast Nebraska" (Unpublished report, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, 1991).



Geomorphologist Rolfe Mandel examines a soil profile at one of the conjectured Fort Charles locations. Gayle F. Carlson Photo