

Fort Hartsuff State Historical Park

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Fort Hartsuff

1874-1881

A State Historical Park



Nebraska Game and Parks Commission
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Abandoned buildings still stood vigil over crops in this view taken about 1890 from the hill northwest of the fort.

Located near present-day Elyria, Fort Hartsuff came into being in the 1870s because of confrontations between the Indians (mostly Teton Sioux) and settlers in the North Loup River valley.

After the War Between the States, homesteaders streamed into the region, eager to lay claim to free government land. As more and more settlers arrived, they encroached farther and farther onto lands the Indians had traditionally roamed at will. One skirmish between the Indians and Whites took place in 1873 on Sioux Creek, 15 miles west of here. It resulted in the loss of \$1,500 worth of horses. A year later, Marion Littlefield of Clay County was killed by Indians at Pebble Creek near the fork of the Loup and Calamus rivers.

A fort was needed on the North Loup not only to protect white settlers, but the friendly Pawnee as well. The Pawnee Reservation near Genoa was raided periodically by their traditional enemies, the nomadic Sioux. Another influencing factor was the abandonment of Fort Kearny on the Platte River to the south.

General E.O.C. Ord, famed Civil War soldier, led the detachment that selected the site for a new fort. Construction began in the fall of 1874 and cost \$110,000. The nine major buildings at Fort Hartsuff were built of lime/concrete, since ample supplies of gravel were available locally. This contributed to the ability of these structures to survive the passage of time. All buildings have now been restored.



Soldiers from Fort Hartsuff went all the way to the Niobrara River valley in north-central Nebraska to cut this 97-foot pine tree and haul it back to the post as the fort flagpole. Long Pine Creek near Ainsworth draws its name from this expedition.



Typical of infantry posts of the 1870s, living quarters and administrative offices fronted the square parade ground. The lone feature on the parade ground was a flagpole in front of the guardhouse – originally a 97-foot pine cut by the troops at Long Pine Creek near the Niobrara River, in north-central Nebraska. It flew a 20-foot, 37-star garrison-type American flag.

The sites of the Post Trader's Store, the sawmill and cemetery are on private property. Several civilians are still buried in the old post cemetery, but the soldiers' remains were moved to Fort McPherson National Cemetery near Maxwell in 1881.

Named for Major General George L. Hartsuff, another Civil War hero, the post served as a rallying point for Loup River Valley settlers during its seven years as an active military installation. Dances, 4th of July celebrations, and other gala occasions drew settlers from miles around. The fort was considered the most pleasant duty station in the entire Department of the Platte.

The years 1873-75 were bitterly hard for settlers in the area, what with drought, grasshoppers and depression. Consequently, employment opportunities at the Fort Hartsuff drew workers from as far away as the South Loup and Platte valleys. Wages were good – a man with a team of horses could earn \$3 a day.

The post was never heavily garrisoned, generally manned by one infantry company of about 55 men. During the life of the fort, the 9th, 14th and 23rd Infantry units were stationed here. Their primary duty was scouting along the Loup and Cedar rivers for hos-

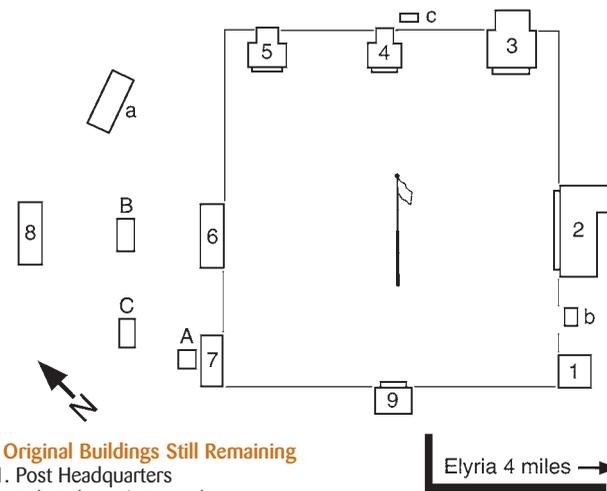
tile Sioux, often traveling as far north as the Niobrara River. Other duties included helping civil authorities pursue horse thieves, murderers and train robbers. In 1877, a detachment escorted travelers to Deadwood in the Black Hills, pioneering a new trail from Grand Island to the Dakota gold fields.

A major encounter with the Sioux took place in April 1876, a few miles northwest of the present town of Burwell. It became known as the "Battle of the Blowout." A party of warriors was harassing the settlers, and a detachment from Company A, 23rd Infantry was sent out. The conflict resulted in Medals of Honor for gallantry for three soldiers – Lt. Charles Heath Heyl, Cpl. Patrick Leonard and Cpl. Jephtha I. Lytton. Sgt. William Dougherty was the only soldier killed in the skirmish.

As time went by, need for the fort became less and less. By 1880, the Army decided to abandon the post. It had served its purpose. Settlement proceeded rapidly; the Pawnee had been moved to Oklahoma, and the power of the Sioux was broken. Orders for abandonment were issued by the Department of the Platte on April 13, 1881. Fort buildings were subsequently sold to the Union Pacific Railroad for \$5,000. When the railroad decided not to build a line up the north side of the Loup River, the fort was sold into private hands and farmed. In 1961, Dr. Glen Auble of Ord presented the site to the State of Nebraska for preservation and interpretation by the Game and Parks Commission as a historical park.

One of the earliest known photographs of Fort Hartsuff, this picture was taken in the early 1880s, shortly after the post was abandoned by the military. The view is from the southwest.

Fort Hartsuff



Original Buildings Still Remaining

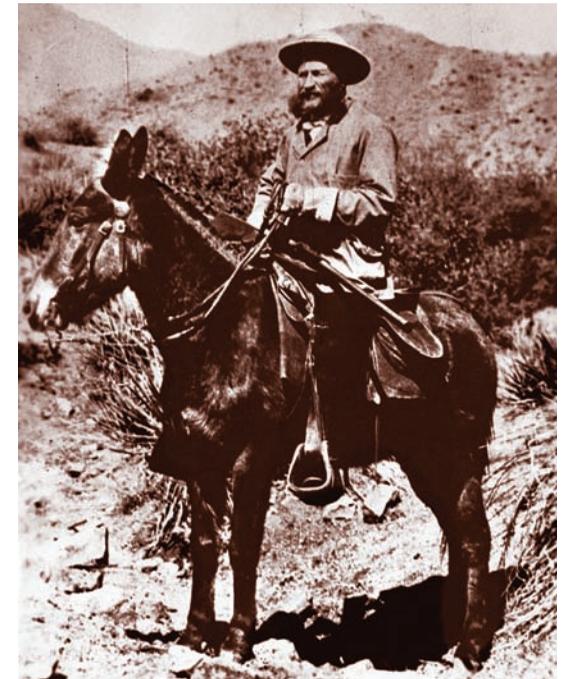
1. Post Headquarters
2. Enlisted Men's Barracks
3. Officers Quarters
4. Commanding Officers Quarters
5. Post Hospital
6. Quartermaster Storehouse
7. Post Bakery, Laundresses and Commissary Sergeant's Quarters
8. Quartermaster Stable
9. Guardhouse

Reconstructions

- A. Wagon Scale
- B. Blacksmith-Carpenter Shop
- C. Privy

Modern Structures

- a. Park Superintendent's Home
- b. Restrooms
- c. Carriage House



General George Crook was commander of the Department of the Platte which included Fort Hartsuff. Crook was a firm believer in the value of the army mule to frontier troops.