

# Center for State of the Parks



## THE STATE OF FORT UNION TRADING POST NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE: SUMMARY

### AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PARK

Located near the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers on the North Dakota-Montana border, Fort Union Trading Post was an economic and social landmark during its heyday in the mid-1800s. The primary fur trading post for the American Fur Company on the Northern Great Plains, Fort Union became a center of cultural exchange among European Americans and many American Indian groups. In 1867, relationships between American Indians and European Americans deteriorated as a result of westward expansion, and the fort was sold to the U.S. Army, which dismantled the structure.

Congress designated Fort Union Trading Post as a national historic site in 1966 to “commemorate the significant role played by Fort Union as a fur trading post on the Upper Missouri River.” Although none of the original structures remained when the park was established, the 444-acre site was rich in archaeological evidence of the fur trade and other post activities. Today, a partially reconstructed fort exists at exactly the same location as the original, reconstructed with information gained through extensive archaeological investigations, historic paintings, and archival documentation. The entire fort is a large walk-through exhibit that provides visitors with the feeling of a frontier post.



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Fort Union Trading Post NHS includes a partially reconstructed fort located at the same location as the original, which was dismantled in the late 1860s. Archaeological investigations, historic paintings, and archival documentation guided reconstruction.

### KEY FINDINGS

- **Cultural and natural resources in fair condition:** A Center for State of the Parks assessment indicates that, overall, cultural and natural resources are in fair condition. Cultural resources scored 71 out of 100, while natural resources scored 66 out of 100. History and historic structures are the park’s strongest cultural resources categories. It must be emphasized that the park’s overall natural resources score is based on less than half of the information required by the Center for

State of the Parks methodology. Additional research and monitoring are needed at the park to comprehensively address natural resource conditions.

- **Cultural landscape report needed:** Continued work with adjacent landowners will be critical in maintaining a landscape that reflects the fort’s historic period. A cultural landscape report would increase the understanding of the landscape and could benefit other management aspects of the park such as archaeology, interpretation, and historic research.
- **Additional staff needed to care for museum collections:** The park has one curator to care for its collection



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of 800,000 museum objects, half of which have yet to be cataloged. Additional curatorial staff are needed to catalog, inspect, monitor, and clean the collections.

- **More space needed for archives:** The park's museum collections are adequately housed, but archival collections have outgrown the library and there is limited space for visiting researchers.
- **Additional reconstruction a possible option:** Additional reconstruction would enhance the past reconstruction efforts, which serve as a stage for historical interpretation. But the appropriateness of reconstructions remains highly controversial within the agency, as it was when the existing reconstructions were planned. Although reconstruction greatly enhances the visitor experience, it can also permanently damage archaeological resources. Park staff and partners support additional reconstruction with the understanding that appropriate research and planning must be completed before more work is done.
- **Park works to address top natural resource priorities:** The top three natural resource priorities identified by park staff include invasive plant control, prairie restoration (soil structure, composition, flora and fauna composition), and riparian health. Efforts to address these issues include seeding former agricultural lands, prescribed burning, treating weeds, and riverbank stabilization.
- **Funds for a natural resource specialist critically needed:** The overall effectiveness of the park's natural resources programs suffers from a lack of continuity because the park lacks funding to employ natural resources staff. The park needs funds to hire a natural resource specialist to oversee natural resources

planning, compliance, field activities, and inventory and monitoring. A prairie vegetation management plan is also critically needed to guide restoration activities.

- **Maintaining structures is challenging:** Existing maintenance staffing will not be adequate for the long-term care of the wooden structures of the fort as they reach the end of their life cycle. Additional reconstructed buildings will exacerbate this shortfall.

#### RESOURCE MANAGEMENT HIGHLIGHTS

- The park initiated a prairie restoration project in 1987 that continues today. Staff have consulted with the Northern Great Plains Exotic Plant Management Team and the Washington Resource Division restoration specialist to greatly reduce non-native grasses on 125 acres surrounding the fort and have planted native vegetation.
- The fort's extensive archaeological records and research library contribute to multi-faceted interpretation that appeals to people traditionally associated with the region, enthusiasts of the historical fur trade, and those intrigued by the American frontier.
- Partnerships significantly aid the park. The Friends of Fort Union support special events and have coordinated several land purchases on the south side of the Missouri River to help protect the park's viewshed. The Fort Union Association supports the park's interpretive program and operates a bookstore that provides interpretive resources and reproduction trade goods for the public. The Fort Union Muzzleloaders is a living history re-enactment group that provides accurate historic interpretation of life during the fur trade era.

#### ABOUT NPCA AND CENTER FOR STATE OF THE PARKS

Since 1919, the National Parks Conservation Association has been the leading voice of the American people in protecting and enhancing our National Park System. NPCA, its members, and partners work together to protect the park system and preserve our nation's natural, historical, and cultural heritage for generations to come.

NPCA initiated the State of the Parks® program in 2000 to assess the condition of natural and cultural resources in the parks. The goal is to provide information that will help policy-makers, the public, and the National Park Service improve resource conditions in national parks, celebrate successes as models for other parks, and ensure a lasting legacy for future generations.

#### CONTACT US

For a copy of the full report on Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site (within the *National Parks Along the Lewis and Clark Trail* report) published by NPCA's Center for State of the Parks, to get copies of reports on other parks, or for more information about Center for State of the Parks, visit [www.npca.org/stateoftheparks](http://www.npca.org/stateoftheparks) or contact Dr. James Nations, vice president of Center for State of the Parks, at [jnations@npca.org](mailto:jnations@npca.org).

For more information about Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site, contact the park at 701.572.9083, visit the park online at [www.nps.gov/fous](http://www.nps.gov/fous), or contact the Friends of Fort Union Trading Post (701.572.9083) or the Fort Union Association ([www.nps.gov/fous/about-fua.html](http://www.nps.gov/fous/about-fua.html).) To learn more about what the public and our elected officials can do to help improve the health of this park, visit [www.npca.org/take\\_action](http://www.npca.org/take_action).