



“Scotts Bluff, Fort John”

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

This article is copyrighted by History Nebraska (formerly the Nebraska State Historical Society).
You may download it for your personal use.

For permission to re-use materials, or for photo ordering information, see:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/publications/re-use-nshs-materials>

Learn more about *Nebraska History* (and search articles) here:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/publications/nebraska-history-magazine>

History Nebraska members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* annually:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/get-involved/membership>

Full Citation: T L Green, “ ‘Scotts Bluffs, Fort John,’ ” *Nebraska History* 19 (1938): 175-189

Article Summary: Nineteenth-century visitors’ accounts confirm the existence of a nearly forgotten American Fur Company trading post run by Major Andrew Dripps in Helvas Canyon near Scottsbluff.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Andrew Dripps, Pierre Chouteau Jr

Contemporary Witnesses Cited: James Bennett, Percival G Lowe, Honore Picotte, Andrew Dripps, Alexander Culbertson, J M McCloskey

Place Names: Fort Laramie, Fort John, Scotts Bluff (*sic*), Fort Pierre

Keywords: American Fur Company, Pierre Chouteau Jr & company

Photographs / Images: site of Fort John (3 views), J T McCluskey and A E Sheldon, crucifix found at Fort John

"SCOTTS BLUFFS, FORT JOHN"

By T. L. Green, Scottsbluff

Location of the Post

"A Forgotten Fur Trading Post in Scotts Bluff County" is the subject of an article in *Nebraska History Magazine*, Volume XV, Number 1. That article presented some circumstantial evidence supporting the suggestion that the site described might be that of a post of the American Fur Company which was built after sale of Fort Laramie to the Government in 1849.

Since that publication, further research has supplied the following records concerning that trading post and the operations of the American Fur Company at Scotts Bluffs, thus opening an entirely new page in the history of this locality.

James Bennett, an emigrant, wrote in 1850: "June 22nd. Today at 9 o'clock we arrived at Scotts Bluffs. The road leaves the river at this point and by a circuitous route for 30 miles. We met an Indian Trader here who pointed out to us an excellent spring, 7 or 8 miles ahead. He also stated that there was a regularly established trading post 3 miles to our left, where we could see a herd of cattle grazing." ^{1/}

Here is definite mention of a "regularly established trading post" as being exactly located in Helvas Canyon in 1859, three miles to the left of the trail and eight miles east of the spring in Roubideaux Pass.

Lowe, traveling eastward in 1851, wrote: "Having crossed to the east side of Scotts Bluffs, about 50 miles east of Laramie, we turned south and camped near a trading post belonging to Major Dripps, who was or had been an Indian agent." ^{2/}

Here again is definite mention of this location, south of the east side of Scotts Bluffs. But while Lowe refers to the post as *belonging* to Major Dripps, he is in error as to ownership, as the following letters clearly show that at the time he was associated with P. Chouteau Jr. & Company, Western Agents of the American Fur Company. And Lowe's identification of Major Dripps with the post at this location is in itself positive evidence that it was an American Fur Company post.

After the sale of Fort Laramie and removal to Scotts Bluffs into quarters hastily constructed and probably inadequate, there was an understanding that the site was not satisfactory (as will be shown by letter of Honore Picotte July 20, 1850); that moving up to the White River was considered; but that it was finally decided to remain on the Platte, with the decision as to selection of a permanent site left to Major Dripps. And the letter of December 4, 1850, stating that "The Major was engaged in moving his fort," shows that the post was moved from its first temporary location to a new one. The new site, as above evidence shows, was in Helvas Canyon.

Location of the first site, it seems probable, was in Roubideaux Pass, northwest of where Roubideaux's post stood, and on the point where the two canyons meet. Here are some remains of a post. Stansbury, in his report bearing date October 18, 1850, mentioned a "row of deserted houses"³/ apparently at this spot.

The continuous encampment of great numbers of emigrants within the pass, with their numerous draft stock consuming all pasturage, must have made a more retired but still accessible location greatly to be desired. This factor may have dictated removal to Helvas Canyon.

Major Dripps

As Major Dripps was in charge of the Scotts Bluffs post, some account of his life may be of interest.

He was born in Pennsylvania in 1789. One authority states that he entered the employ of the Missouri Fur Company in 1820; was appointed Indian Agent by President Tyler in 1842, serving four years; and in 1846 was employed by the American Fur Company. He died in Kansas City in 1880. ^{4/} But he was with the American Fur Company at an earlier date, for he commanded their expedition to the Green River rendezvous from Westport in 1840, and which was accompanied by Father P. J. DeSmet. ^{5/}

The wife of Major Dripps was a woman of the Otoe Tribe. Their daughter, Mary J. Dripps, became the wife of F. M. Barnes of Barneston, Nebraska. In 1870 Mr. Barnes was licensed as an Indian Trader at Otoe Agency by Major A. L. Green in charge. Of his wife he wrote: ^{6/}

"Mrs. Barnes' father was an American of Scotch descent—was not French. Was Indian Agent for all the Indian Tribes between Missouri River and the mountains to the west. The Otoes were on his south line and his territory extended to the Canadian line. Later he was with the American Fur Co. and was stationed at Bellvue at one time." ^{7/}

The search for information relative to the early trapping and trading period must naturally lead to St. Louis, Missouri, the great capital of the fur trade. And there, it was thought, definite facts might be learned regarding the operations of this Scotts Bluff trading post and Major Dripps' connection with it.

Through the kind cooperation of Miss Stella M. Drumm, Librarian of Missouri Historical Society, certain extracts from historical records in the files of that institution were obtained, much being entirely new and heretofore unpublished, apparently.

The following extract from a letter to Major Dripps gives insight into the basis on which leaders in the industry were associated and offers him a share interest, with full charge of Fort John (Fort Laramie, as will be shown herein).

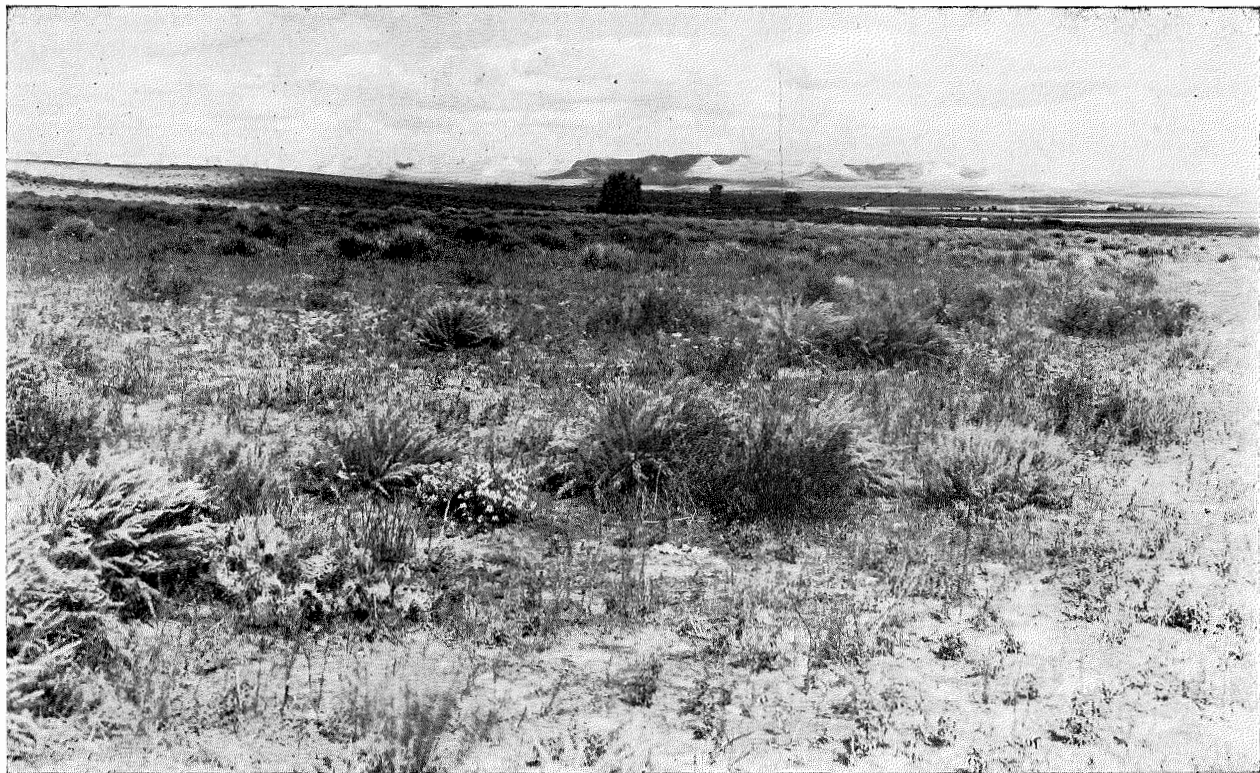


Photo by George Grant—Courtesy National Parks Service.

Site of Fort John Looking North

Scottsbluff National Monument in distance. Group of trees shows position of Oregon Trail.

P. Chouteau, Jr. & Co., St. Louis, Aug. 18, 1848. To Maj. Andrew Dripps, Fort Pierre. . . . Business organized to carry on trade for two years on Upper Missouri. Alexander Culbertson has been appointed, and by contract is the Agent of Upper Missouri Outfit. . . .

"In the new arrangement we have kept one share for you, with the understanding that as the other interested parties (except Mr. Culbertson) you shall receive no salary—which, from the conversation you have had with Mr. Sarpy, we suppose will be accepted. Mr. P. D. Papin declining to return in the Missouri, as well as Mr. Picotte, we have decided that you shall have charge of Fort John, except Mr. Culbertson should decide otherwise. This post will require a good and careful manager and a person well acquainted with land transportation; we have thought you would fill it to advantage." ^{8/}

This and the following letters are interesting as showing that business ventures and commitments were entered into covering certain operations during a specified period of time, and that in these ventures shares were allotted—either with or without salary.

Major Dripps did take charge of Fort John on the Laramie River, but he was absent in July 1849, when sale of the fort to the Government was closed. Mr. Husband was left in charge.

Sale of Fort Laramie

A newspaper article dated Fort Laramie, Nebraska Territory, August 1, 1849, and signed "An Emigrant," concerning the sale of Fort Laramie says in part:

"Fort Laramie as a trading post has ceased to be. . . . The American Fur Company, having sold Fort Laramie, intend to erect a trading post at Scottsbluff some forty miles below." ^{9/}

The following passages from various letters bear on the same point. Here is one from Alexander Culbertson (Fort Pierre, August 2, 1849) to P. Chouteau Jr. & Company at St. Louis:

"During my absence letters were received from Mr. Husband, who was left in charge of Ft. John, stating that he had sold the same to the Government (in compliance with instructions received from you) for \$4,000. I therefor enclose you the following drafts There has been an immense emigration to California passing Ft. John this season, and Mr. Husband has done a profitable business." ^{10/}



Photo by George Grant - Courtesy National Parks Service.

Site of Fort John Looking East
Positions of men indicate diameter

Honore Picotte, writing from Fort Pierre to Messrs. P. Chouteau Jr. & Company, on July 20, 1850, made this comment:

"It is much to be regretted that Ft. John was ever disposed of, as we now see that by proper management money can be coined there." ^{11/}

Above letters prove that the official name of the fort on the Laramie River was Fort John, and that it was not called Fort Laramie by the company so long as they owned it, even though that name was applied to it by outsiders and the public generally. Only upon its acquisition by the Government was the name Fort Laramie officially given to it. This information is entirely new.

The Post at Scotts Bluffs

Letters here quoted make clear a fact that had been entirely lost and forgotten, namely, that in establishing itself at "Scotts Bluffs" the company not only transferred to that place the base of its operations on the Platte, but also transferred to their new post the old name of "Fort John." It is evident that, in their own minds, the company officials simply moved Fort John from the Laramie River to the new site at "Scotts Bluffs."

All of the correspondence which follows will be clearer if these facts are borne in mind: (1) Fort Pierre, on the Missouri, 1,173 miles above St. Louis, was the main warehouse of the American Fur Company for furs and supplies. (2) The Platte region was under the jurisdiction of Fort Pierre. (3) In the main, Fort John was kept supplied by land transportation from Fort Pierre.

At this period Alexander Culbertson was superintendent of the posts on the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers, while Honore Picotte was head of the company's posts on the Missouri.

Alexander Culbertson wrote from Fort Pierre (May 10, 1850) to Major Andrew Dripps at Scotts Bluffs regarding the transportation of his packs. ^{12/} On July 13 of the same year he wrote P. Chouteau Jr. & Company as follows:

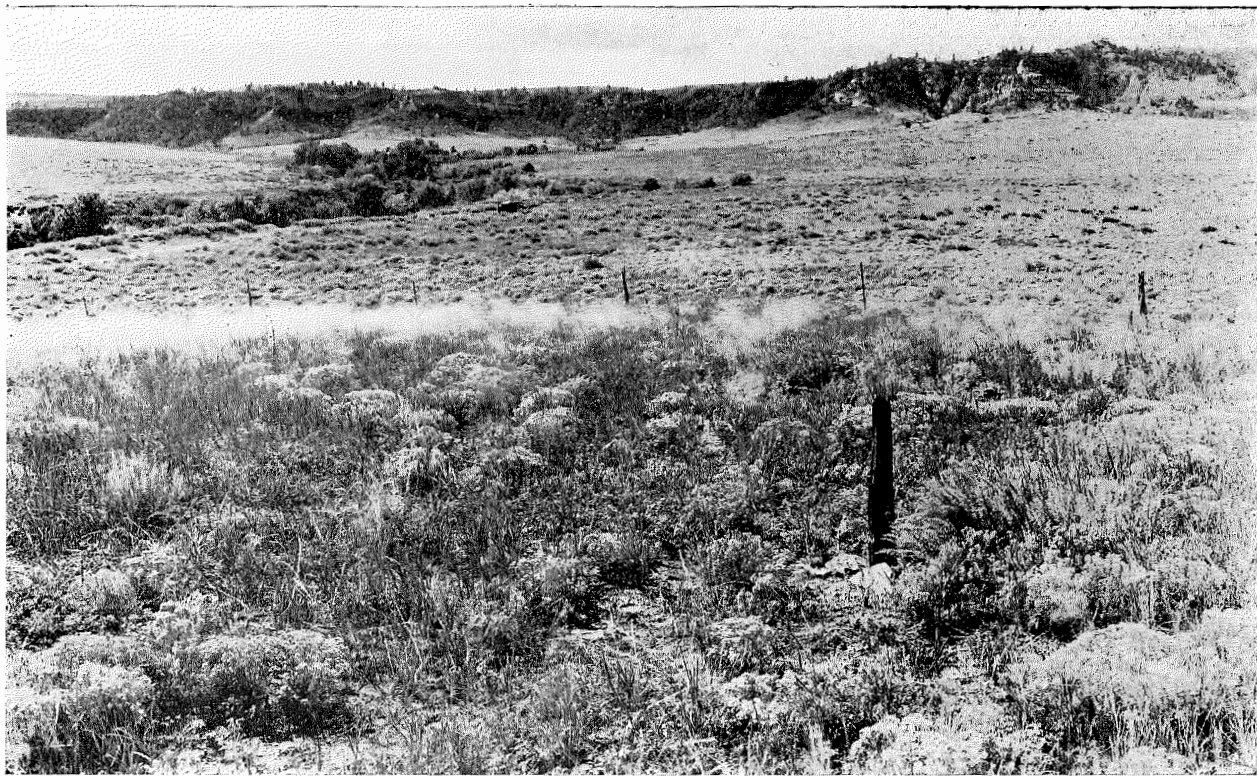


Photo by George Grant—Courtesy National Parks Service

Site of Fort John Looking South

Located across fence to right of auto. Post in foreground is upright of cross thought to mark grave of Pierre Didier Papin.

"I forward herewith a letter what I received from Maj. Drips. I consider Ft. John in good hands as long as he remains in charge. At present I have no confidential person to spare from this Post, whom I could send to take his place. . . I am daily expecting of seeing Mr. Papin and I am in hopes that when he does come he will have in charge the teams that conveyed the returns of Ft. John. Should he not bring these teams, in the present scarcity of Oxen & horses here, I do not see how the equipment to Ft. John is to be transported. In looking over the inventory of Ft. John I should believe I have brought more goods than that post will require. . . " ^{13/}

The firm of P. Chouteau Jr. had a long letter from Honore Picotte at Fort Pierre under date July 20, 1850. The following extracts are significant.

"Gentlemen: Since writing you per Steamer St. Ange, Maj. Drips has arrived here from the Platte, and after a conversation with him with regard to our future movements in that quarter I find they will have to be entirely different from what we had calculated upon.

"With regard to the future location of the Post, I find it will never do to put it on White River as proposed by Mr. C." (Chouteau?) "The frequent visits of Crow War parties there has entirely withdrawn the Indians, and no inducements could be made them ever to return—the post must therefore remain where it is, or at some more suitable point on the Platte River which Maj. Drips will point out to you. . .

"Should Mr. Papin arrive here (having left before this reaches you) I shall send him to build houses low down on White R. for the Brulles that usually frequent that place. I consider it all important that Maj. Drips should return to the Platte, and I should like to have you make arrangements with him for that Post. I can either employ Mr. Papin as above or at the Yanctons. . .

"Mr. Culbertson and myself have only disposed of one share as yet, to Mr. Denig, and as I have no doubt Maj. Drips can do well for us on the Platte should he come in, interested we can afford to give him a good salary. . .

"Upon inquiry and investigation I find that the Platte Post has been much neglected during the past season and that justice has not been done Maj. Drips, his groceries were left at this Post, that a promise was made him on the arrival of the 'Amelia' with the Fort Pierre outfit they would be sent to him, this was not done, he also left a memo. for corn and other articles to be sent, this was also neglected, he labored under every disadvantage not having these—everybody knows that the principal profit made at that post is on Groceries, corn &c, and had these been sent him agree-

able to request, I feel satisfied that a much better result would have taken place—it is my wish therefore that Maj. Drips return to that Post either interested or hired. . . .

“Maj. Drips left James McClosky in charge of Ft. John, he intends going to Detroit this fall. I shall start someone from here to relieve him on the 10th of August, at the same time I shall send such mdze. as the post is in immediate want of.” ^{14/}

Again on the same subject Mr. Picotte wrote from Fort Pierre on August 14, 1850, to “Jas. M. McCloskey, Esqr.”

“Maj. Drips reached this place in due time safely, he remained here only 3 days and then proceeded to Saint Louis—he informed me that he left you in charge at Ft. John, and as it was your intention to visit your friends this fall he was unable to secure your services for a longer period than 1st Sept. I have delayed sending to relieve you until the latest moment possible, having been advised under date of 18th June that Mr. Papin would leave in a few days for this place with the teams of Fort John, by which it was my intention to have forwarded the Offt” (outfit) “for that Post for the ensuing trade, having however been disappointed in the arrival of these teams. I now forward to you 3 carts, containing such articles as are deemed necessary for the immediate wants of the Post. . . .

“In the event, however, of your resigning the charge of the Post, I see no other person with you, better adapted to take its charge than Mr. J. B. Moncrevie. As is always usual with us in such cases of this kind, you will of course, take a correct Inventory of everything you leave, and get his written acknowledgment of his having received the same, you will please duplicate, one of which you will please forward here, the other if you go down hand to Mess. P. Chouteau, Jr. & Co.

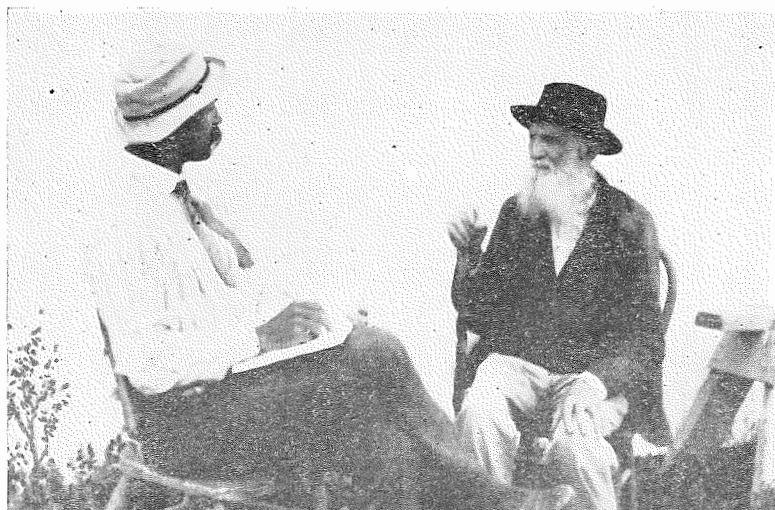
“I send with the Carts Colin Lamont, Jno. Brouillard, Nicholas Turceau, David Butler. These men are to return with the waggons and whatever Oxen, steers and horses you may send, and also Charles Bernard, Arthur Auger, Alfred Renault to stay at Ft. John, provided their services are not required, to bring back the waggons, animals etc.

“The requisition of Axes for Ft. John called for 100, but we find that it will be impossible (not having received the requisition in time to send this many at present) being short of the proper sized iron, should you have the proper size Bar Iron, or any old tire, that is suitable for Axes, please send over enough for 100 Axes.” ^{15/}

“Fort Pierre Aug. 16, 1850. To Mess. P. Chouteau, Jr. & Co. Saint Louis. . . . Mr. Papin arrived here safely with the Beads & Horses, altho I regret to state that the Horses are in anything

but a good plight, occasioned by the extreme heat and looking thin. The waggons hired by Mr. Sarpy at the Bluffs was entirely too heavy and not at all calculated for Horses. Mr Papin was obliged to work his horses one after the other untill the whole of them have been completely used up. I assure you I am much astonished that you should send me up here 28 head of Horses to transport 3000 lbs. Beads, when I thought it was perfectly understood between us that you would either buy or lease a pasture for the purpose of putting in the Horses you would buy whenever they were offered you on fair and reasonable terms, and for them to remain there untill such time as I needed them & sent for them—and at the same time having 13 waggons, 88 Oxen, 10 head of horses & mules (which it seems you were then at a loss to know what to do with) at your disposal, out of which I am convinced Mr. P.” (Papin?) “could have selected teams to have brought up twice the weight, and performed the trip in much less time, as it is these horses cost us delivered here \$60.50 cash we shall no doubt lose some of them. . . .

“Under existing circumstances I shall detain Mr. Papin here either untill the waggons arrive, or I hear from you again, should the waggons arrive here he will go over the Of” (outfit) “to Ft.



J. T. McCluskey (at right), A. E. Sheldon
At Manderson, South Dakota, 1903

John when if Maj. D" (Dripps?) "arrives there he will of course take charge of the Post, and Mr. P. be instructed to go & build houses for the Brulles at some eligible point, on the other hand should I hear that Maj. D. has gone up the Platte with the Teams I will send Mr. P to build at some suitable place on Wh. River—and again should Maj. D. not come up and Mr. P take charge at the Platte I shall select some suitable person to send to the Brulles in his place. . . ." ^{16/}

(Signed "H. P."—doubtless Honore Picotte.)

"Fort Pierre, Aug. 31, 1850. Alexander Culbertson, Esqr. Dear Sir. . . The papers for the settlement of Oft. 1848 are forwarded you herewith. . . Maj. Drips also done well for us on the Platte having made about \$3500. clear (after taking inventory) in fine horses & Gold—the present Oft. assumed about \$4000. for Oft. 49 in this district, most of which we have already paid . . ." ^{17/}

"Fort Pierre Dec. 4 1850 Mess. P Chouteau, Jr. & Co. Saint Louis. Gentlemen: . . Maj. Drips arrived at his post in 19 days from Kansas, he sent an Express which arrived and went back again. The Maj. was engaged in moving his Fort, and calculated to be in comfortable quarters before the cold weather, he will be powerfully opposed, and I therefore do not calculate that anything of consequence will be done in the Indian" (trade) "but I am glad that you have arranged with him, for there is not the least doubt but that he will do a profitable business with the emigration. . .

"I kept the principal part of Ft. John oft. here, merely sending sufficient to complete the assortment—I think it will all be profitably disposed of here with the exception of the ammunition & Tobacco." ^{18/}

"A. D." (Andrew Dripps?) "Scotts Bluffs, Feb. 3. 1852 to H. Picotte, Fort Pierre. . . Was sorry to hear of your prospect in the way of trade, altho my own is not very flattering—but we have plenty of Buffalo and our Indians are making fine robes, but they will Trade for nothing scarcely but Groceries. I have now on hand one hundred & fifty packs—and I am pretty certain there is not twenty five packs traded for Goods. . .

"You will please send me one thousand pounds Sugar & One Hundred pounds of Coffee—flour, flour, corn I have a sufficiency for my trade." ^{19/}

Andrew Dripps, Scotts Bluffs, Fort John, May 4, 1852, to H. Picotte, Esqr., Fort Pierre: "My trade is now at a close. I have three hundred & eighty packs Buffalo Robes, Three hundred pounds Beans? 5 hundred Buffalo tongues castorum Wolf skins &c. I will start the wagons in a few days for the states in charge of Charles Aubuchon as I think him the most trusty & carefull amongst my men. . .

"We have had a severe winter on the Platte it sweep my oxen—I have lost twenty-five yoke, young oxen is like Am" (American) "Horse—they want seasoning to the country. The wagon I sent you last winter by Paul Guittar he brought it part of the way back, and before I could send for it the Indians Burnt it and destroyed the Harness. . . .

"I have traded but few woolen Goods this last winter my trade has been principle Groceries & corn. The Platte traders have made a great many robes. The White River Indians have gave over three hundred packs. . . .

"There is a large emigration expected this summer and I have no doubt but Horses & Mules will be in demand. Should you have any horses to spare that you think will suit the trade and some person to bring them on, I may be able to get good prices for them. Mules I believe—I will have enough." ²⁰/

The foregoing letter of eighty-six years ago gives us a mental picture of the Scotts Bluff region as it was then—the entirely unsettled country; the trading post, with Indians camped near by; the hazards and hardships involved in business, and the stream of emigration toiling along the trail with ox-drawn wagons. Major Dripp's picture is painted with but a few bold strokes of the brush, but it is a vivid one.

Another glimpse of this region in those days is added by an item in a Missouri newspaper of February 10, 1851:

"Pawnees recently dropped down on traders and Sioux at Scotts Bluffs and escaped with a large band of horses." ²¹/

The contrast presented by the picture of the North Platte valley of that day and the highly developed agricultural and industrial district as we know it is very great; but no greater than that of the rude trading post of Major Dripps with its activities, and today's business houses and volume of trade.

It seems strange that the interesting and romantic history of the trading-post period at "Scotts Bluffs" should have become so obscure and so nearly forgotten. Undoubtedly additional records exist that would tell the complete story, but the letters here presented will dispel some of the shadows gathered around those distant days.

Note: The author has used the word "Scotts Bluffs" in conformity with the letters quoted. This name was originally applied to the whole system of bluffs (including the west end of the Wild Cat Range) forming a barrier across the valley on the south side of the river. Today this name is not used. "Scotts Bluff" is the name of the isolated bluff near the river, and of the county. The city is named "Scottsbluff."

Editor's Note: Major Alexander Culbertson (for whom the town of Culbertson in Hitchcock County was named) established the post of Fort Benton in 1846, during the period when he was a member of the firm and general agent for the American Fur Company.

In this year also he sent to P. Chouteau "the stuffed skin of an enormous grizzly bear" (weighing 1200 pounds) that he had shot as it was pulling down a buffalo bull three hundred miles above Council Bluffs.

Major Culbertson was famous as a hunter and trapper, but more important was his work as interpreter for the Sioux of the Upper Missouri. The French blood in his veins gave him a versatile tongue. "He speaks the Sioux better than a Sioux Indian himself, and also the language of several other tribes." It seems that he took keen interest also in scientific studies, for he furnished to the Smithsonian Institution a large and very valuable collection of Nebraska fossils.



Photo by George Grant—Courtesy National Parks Service.

Crucifix Found at Fort John

Now in Scottsbluff Museum of National Parks Service
(slightly enlarged)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. The History of Scotts Bluff, by Dr. D. D. Brand. (1934) pp. 44-45. Quoting from the Overland Journey to California, by Edward Eberstadt. (1908) p. 20.
 2. Five Years a Dragoon, by Percival G. Lowe; p. 70.
 3. Report—1850, by Howard Stansbury; p. 288.
 4. History of Nebraska, by Morton and Watkins; p. 60.
 5. Life, Letters and Travels of Father P. J. De Smet, by Chittenden and Richardson; pp. 193, 201, 260.
 6. Letter from Major A. L. Green to T. L. Green, October 15, 1936.
 7. Letter from F. M. Barnes to Major A. L. Green, August 7, 1895.
 8. Fort Pierre Letter-Book in Pierre Chouteau Collection, files of Mo. Hist. Soc., 2/12/49 to 12/4/50.
 9. Missouri Republican, 8/29/49; files of Mo. Hist. Soc.
 10. Fort Pierre Letter-Book—2/12/49 to 12/4/50.
 - 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18. Ibid.
 19. The Dripps Collection, in files of Mo. Hist. Soc.
 20. Ibid.
 21. The History of Scotts Bluff, by Dr. D. D. Brand. (1934) p. 45.
-