



Fort Atkinson at Council Bluffs

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Article Summary: The author presents the history of Fort Atkinson and questions still surrounding its origins. New interest in the site of the post arose during the summer of 1956 when a Nebraska State Historical Society field party, under the direction of Marvin F Kivett, did some archeological work there. There was a bill before Congress to make the site a national monument at that time.

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Photographs / Images: Meeting of Lewis and Clark with Oto and Missouri Indians at Council Bluffs, 1804 (painting reconstructed by Herbert Thomas, staff artist, Nebraska State Historical Society)

FORT ATKINSON AT COUNCIL BLUFFS

BY SALLY A. JOHNSON

I NTEREST in the old frontier post, Fort Atkinson, has been stimulated by the archeological work carried on at the site of the post¹ during the summer of 1956 by the Nebraska State Historical Society Field Party, under the direction of Marvin F. Kivett. A bill before Congress to study the possibility of making the site a national monument brought the location of Fort Atkinson in relation to Council Bluffs into focus. Was Fort Atkinson built in 1820 on the same bluff that Meriwether Lewis and William Clark selected to hold meetings with the Oto and Missouri Indians in 1804 and which they called Council Bluff² in honor of the occasion? A number of contemporary observers from the time of Lewis and Clark until after the abandonment of the fort left records which indicate that there is a positive relationship between the two.

¹ At the east edge of Fort Calhoun, Washington County, Nebraska.

² Not to be confused with Council Bluffs, Iowa. Lewis and

Sally A. Johnson is curator of history in the Museum of the Nebraska State Historical Society. Our readers will recall her article "Cantonment Missouri, 1819-1820," which appeared in the June 1956 issue of this magazine.

The history of the meeting between Lewis and Clark and the Indians residing in present-day Nebraska is too well-known to detail here. On August 3, 1804, the American soldiers were paraded and the chiefs were welcomed:

. . . A speech was then made, announcing to them the change in the government, our promises of protection, and advice as to their future conduct. All the six chiefs replied to our speech, each in his turn, according to rank: they expressed their joy at the change in the government; their hopes that we would recommend them to their great father (the President), that they might obtain trade and necessaries; they wanted arms as well for hunting as for defence, and asked our mediation between them and the Mahas, with whom they are now at war. We promised to do so, and wished some of them to accompany us to that nation which they declined for fear of being killed by them. We then proceeded to distribute our presents . . .³

To the six chiefs were given medals of the second and third grade, paint, garters, cloth, ornaments, canisters of powder, a bottle of whiskey, and a few other presents. Before the party proceeded on its way, the airgun was fired, which created a great stir among the natives.⁴

The locale elicited comment from several of the diarists of the expedition. Clark recorded in his journal:

. . . The Situation of our last Camp *Council* [*sic*] *Bluff* or Handsom Prarie [*sic*], (25 Days from this to *Santafee*) appears to be a verry [*sic*] proper place for a Tradeing [*sic*] establishment & fortification The Soil of the Bluff well adapted for Brick, Great deel [*sic*] of timber above in the two Points—many other advantages of a small nature. and I am told Senteral [*sic*] to Several nations viz. one Days march from the Ottoo Town, one Day & a half from the great Pania village, 2 days from the Mahar Towns, two ¼ Days from the *Loups* village, & convenient to the Countrey [*sic*] thro: which Bands of the Soux (*rove* &) hunt. perhaps no other Situation is as well Calculated for a Tradeing [*sic*] establishment.⁵

Clark camped on the south [west] side of the river, in present-day Nebraska. They designated the site as Council Bluff, but modern usage has tended to change the name to Council Bluffs.

³ James K. Hosmer (ed.), *History of the Expedition of Captains Lewis and Clark* . . . (Chicago, 1905), I, 40.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Reuben Thwaites (ed.), *Original Journals of Lewis and Clark* (New York, 1904), I, 98-99.

Sgt. John Ordway also perceived the beauty of the camping site, which was at the foot of the bluffs in a strip of woods. By the flickering firelight he made an entry in his journal for July 30:

. . . the timber is copper nut [,] white oak [,] Black walnut [,] Elm [,] bass wood or Lynn Hickery & C. below this handsome bottom praries [*sic*], above the Timber and bluffs is a beautiful high prarie [*sic*], I think it is the Smothesst [*sic*] & prittyset [*sic*] place for a Town I ever Saw. back of this high large praries [*sic*], their [*sic*] is uneven praries [*sic*] Some Timber in the vallies & on the branches & C . . .⁶

After the return of the little exploring party in 1806, the Missouri River developed rapidly into an artery into the heart of the fur country. Men of vision, like Manuel Lisa, seeking to expand their trading operations, hired members of the Lewis and Clark expedition to assist and guide them in their new ventures. In 1807, George Drouillard, John Potts, and Peter Wisner, all former members of the expedition whose knowledge of the Upper Missouri was invaluable, were employed by Lisa. At the Platte River, John Colter, who had separated from the Lewis and Clark group on the homeward trip, was met by the Lisa outfit and persuaded to return to the north country as a member of the company.⁷ When the boats passed Council Bluffs, these members of the exploring party easily could have pointed out the bluff to their fellow companions and commented on the events that had transpired. Drouillard held a semi-official position by virtue of acting as proxy for two of the partners of the Missouri Fur Trading Company of St. Louis,⁸ and it is difficult to believe that the astute Lisa did not learn as many details of the journey from this man as possible. Lisa may also have been influenced by these talks to build his post, Fort

⁶ Milo M. Quaife (ed.), "The Journals of Captain Meriwether Lewis and Sergeant John Ordway . . ." *Publications of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin* (Madison, 1916) XXII, 103.

⁷ Burton Harris, *John Colter . . .* (New York, 1952), p. 59.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Lisa, five years later about six miles south of Council Bluffs, near present-day Omaha.

In 1819, the Army initiated an ambitious project of establishing a series of forts to protect the valuable fur trade. The original plan involved the construction of posts at the mouth of the Yellowstone River and at the Mandan villages. Economy measures prevented the completion of the proposed expedition, and the force was halted on the Missouri River near Council Bluffs. On September 29, 1819, a board of officers was selected to explore the adjacent country and to report a site for the cantonment that would serve as winter quarters for the troops. To soothe the Indians and to pave the way for occupation of the land by the troops, Manuel Lisa, with his wife,⁹ accompanied the Sixth and Rifle Regiments and took up residence at Fort Lisa. We may conjecture that the officers consulted the trader concerning the terrain before they made their choice of location, although actual evidence is lacking.

Probably it was the more plentiful supply of wood and convenience in unloading boats that led to the construction of the post on a site "one mile above the place called the Council Bluffs, where Lewis and Clark held a general council with the Indians . . ." ¹⁰ The exact location of the first cantonment, Missouri, has not been discovered. It lay near a swamp or pond, which may be the one noted by Patrick Gass in his diary in 1804 as lying about "two miles from camp on the south side of the river . . ." ¹¹

About six to eight miles below the cantonment lay Engineer Cantonment, the headquarters of the party of

⁹ Mrs. Lisa may have been persuaded to make the long and arduous journey because there were other women, wives and laundresses of the soldiers, who were accompanying the Rifle and Sixth Regiments up the river.

¹⁰ Extract from a letter written by an unidentified person attached to the Yellowstone Expedition, dated November 19, 1819; published in the *Cleveland (Ohio) Herald* (January 25, 1820).

¹¹ Patrick Gass, *A Journal of the Voyages and Travels . . .* (Pittsburgh, 1808), p. 34.



Meeting of Lewis and Clark with Oto and Missouri Indians at Council Bluff, 1804

(Painting reconstructed from contemporary accounts, by Herbert Thomas, staff artist, Nebraska State Historical Society)

Maj. S. H. Long, which was soon to depart on an exploring tour of the country. When Major Long and Capt. J. R. Bell rode from their encampment to Cantonment Missouri to pay a courtesy visit, they crossed Council Bluffs, noting the view from the bluff, and then descended to the first bank or river bottoms on which the post was located.¹²

Major Long was so impressed with the eminence that he wrote:

The Council Bluffs, so called by Lewis and Clark, from a council with the Otoes and Missouries held there, on the 3d of August 1804, is a remarkable bank, rising abruptly from the brink of the river, to an elevation of about one hundred and fifty feet. This is a most beautiful position, having two important military features, security, and a complete command of the river. Its defects are a want of wood within a convenient distance, there being little within a mile above, and much farther below, also a want of stone and of water, except that of the river. From the summits of the hills, about one mile in the rear of the Bluff, is presented the view of a most extensive and beautiful landscape. The bluffs on each side of the river, exhibit a chain of peaks stretching as far as the eye can reach. The river is here and there seen meandering in serpentine folds, along its broad valley, chequered with woodlands and prairies, while at a nearer view you can look down on an extensive plain interspersed with a few scattered copses or bushes and terminated at a distance by the Council Bluff.¹³

Shortly after Long's visit to the cantonment, the post was destroyed by a flood of the Missouri River.¹⁴ On June 12, 1820, the soldiers were forced to move onto the bluffs, where they established a camp of tents. The new site had the advantage of commanding the Missouri River, which was narrow at this place, and also was "freely swept by breezes," which it was hoped would reduce the fevers that were so debilitating to the health of the men. There seems to have been little doubt in the minds of the com-

¹² Harlin M. Fuller and LeRoy R. Hafen (eds.), *The Journal of Captain John R. Bell* (Glendale, 1957), pp. 88-89.

¹³ Edwin James (ed.), *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains . . .* (Philadelphia, 1823), I, 152-153.

¹⁴ A more complete account of Cantonment Missouri may be found in the author's "Cantonment Missouri, 1819-1820," *Nebraska History*, XXXVII (June, 1956), 121-134.

manding officers that they were occupying the site utilized by Lewis and Clark, and when more permanent quarters of logs and brick were completed, on October 15, the barracks were officially designated in the orders as "Cantonment Council Bluffs."¹⁵

On September 23, 1820, articles of convention were negotiated with the Omaha Indians ceding a tract of land for the post. A plot of ground fifteen miles square was designated, "to be bounded by due east, west, north, and south lines, and so located that the flag-staff in the area of the new cantonment on Council Bluff shall be the entire center aforesaid tract of fifteen miles square . . ."¹⁶

In January 1821, the name of the post was changed in recognition of the untiring activities of Col. Henry Atkinson in promoting the Yellowstone Expedition and in supervising the construction of the two military posts—Cantonment Missouri, now destroyed, and Cantonment Council Bluffs. To the Commander of the Ninth Military Department, Secretary of War, John C. Calhoun, wrote:

In respect of the works at Council Bluffs, I think it sufficiently important to be considered a fort and in consideration of your indefatigable industry and skillful efforts in accomplishing the objects of the Executive as far as you have progressed toward a completion of the whole plan it will be named "Fort Atkinson."¹⁷

The names, Fort Atkinson and Council Bluffs, however, were used interchangeably in the official correspondence throughout this period.

By 1827 the post had so deteriorated that it was decided to abandon it and move farther down stream to

¹⁵ *Fort Atkinson Records*, Vol. III, O. B. 12, November 23, 1820. (Typed copy in the Library of the Nebraska State Historical Society.)

¹⁶ *American State Papers: Indian Affairs*, II, 226. The articles were not ratified by the Senate, although the proposed goods were given to the Indians to insure the peaceable occupation of the country. (Calhoun to Atkinson, April 6, 1821, Clarence E. Carter [comp.], *The Territorial Papers of the United States*, XV, *Louisiana and Missouri* [Washington, 1951], p. 719.)

¹⁷ Letter, Calhoun to Atkinson, January 5, 1821, Carter, *op. cit.*, p. 688.

Jefferson Barracks. On June 6, 1827, the troops, their women and children, left the gates of Fort Atkinson and boarded the boats. The American flag, with its twenty-four stars, was lowered for the last time, and the soldiers embarked. Slowly, the flotilla, led by the *Water Witch*, moved out into the brown waters of the Missouri. The boats swung into position two hundred yards apart and soon the fort could no longer be seen.

After the abandonment of the fort, the site continued to be called Council Bluffs. Maximilian, in 1833, commented on the ruins "of the former cantonment, or fort, at Council Bluffs" as his party passed it;¹⁸ and in 1836, Gen. T. S. Jesup recommended reoccupying Council Bluffs, "as a post having command of the movements of all the tribes of Indians in the neighborhood."¹⁹ Much later, the name was misapplied to the agency at Bellevue, and two points on the Iowa side of the river, Traders' Point and Kanessville or Council Bluffs, Iowa.

It would appear, however, that the name was correctly applied by members of the Lewis and Clark expedition within one year after their return, and that Manuel Lisa may have been the person who confirmed the location to the officers of the Yellowstone Expedition, who built Fort Atkinson on the bluff. About 1841, the river shifted far away from the edge of the cliff,²⁰ but during the preceding years it would appear that the bluff was sufficiently outstanding as a landmark to elicit comment from travellers who almost always seem to characterize the spot by the adjective "beautiful." At least in 1820 Fort Atkinson was accepted in official circles as being on the bluff selected by Lewis and Clark, and the term Council

¹⁸ Reuben Thwaites (ed.), *Travels in the Interior of North America* (Cleveland, 1905), I, 275.

¹⁹ *Missouri Republican* (April 28, 1836), reprinted in *Publications of the Nebraska State Historical Society* (Lincoln, 1922), XX, 65.

²⁰ John Francis McDermott (ed.), *Up the Missouri with Audubon* (Norman, Okla., 1951), p. 60.

Bluff was being used interchangeably with Fort Atkinson on legal documents of such importance as Indian articles of convention. It is hoped that future discovery of the site of Cantonment Missouri above Fort Atkinson by archeologists will help to locate the bluff even more precisely.