

Explore Nebraska Archeology

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# 1887 Adobe Barracks Fort Robinson, Nebraska



Nebraska State Historical Society



The mission of the  
Nebraska State Historical Society  
is to safeguard and interpret  
Nebraska's past  
and make it accessible in ways  
that enrich present and future generations.

**Explore Nebraska Archeology, No. 6**

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Division of the Nebraska State Historical Society.

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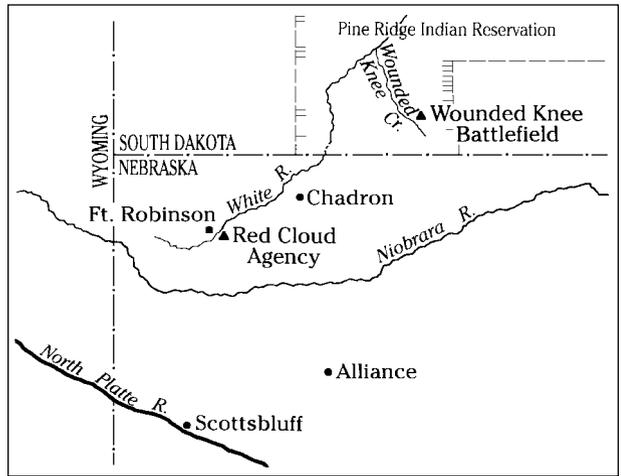
Design and Production by Debra Brownson

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Illustrations courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society.

2002

*On the cover: Dress cavalry helmet of the type worn by the  
first occupants of Barracks 56.*



### **1887 Adobe Barracks, Fort Robinson, Nebraska**

Camp Robinson was established in 1874 as a temporary U.S. Army post adjacent to the Red Cloud Indian Agency on the White River in northwestern Nebraska. Ten years later the post was still in existence and plans for its enlargement were being put into effect. By the mid-1880s the army was beginning to consolidate its activities along the growing railroad network of the United States. Because of Fort Robinson's advantageous location, near one of the recently established Sioux Indian reservations and on a new rail line, it was selected for expansion to accommodate a regimental headquarters.

Although the post was only about ten years old, many of its buildings (most of which had been constructed of pine logs cut from the neighboring Pine Ridge escarpment) were beginning to show signs of serious deterioration. Because of the increasing cost to maintain the existing structures, and the need for new buildings as part of the expansion, the army decided to construct what was essentially a new fort around a larger parade ground directly northwest of the 1874 parade ground and building complex.



Fort Robinson, 1888, showing the location of Barracks 56.

As part of the expansion six enlisted men's barracks were constructed on the south side of the new parade ground in 1887. All of these L-shaped structures were built of adobe bricks. Between 1889 and 1892 two similar-appearing barracks of wood frame construction were added, one on each end of the row. This barracks row was first occupied by members of the Ninth Cavalry and Eighth Infantry. The adobe barracks were used until the 1920s, when all were demolished and replaced by more modern, fired-brick barracks.

In 1999 the Nebraska State Legislature appropriated funds, to be matched by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, for the reconstruction at Fort Robinson of one of the adobe barracks. The bill was subsequently signed by the governor and plans for the reconstruction were set in motion during the summer of 1999. The reconstructed building will be used by the Game and Parks Commission as a meeting room

and group lodge, and for the interpretation of the significant role that the members of the Ninth and Tenth cavalry (Buffalo Soldiers) played in the history of the West and Fort Robinson.

### The Buffalo Soldiers

Thousands of African Americans served in the Union Army during the Civil War. In 1866, a year after the cessation of hostilities, four regiments of black infantry (later consolidated into two, the Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth) and two regiments of black cavalry (the Ninth and Tenth) were formed. These units were collectively given the nickname “Buffalo Soldiers” by the Plains Indians because of the perceived similarity of the soldiers’ curly hair to that of the buffalo. Both the Ninth and Tenth cavalry regiments were activated by 1867. The Ninth Cavalry was sent to the Southwest, where it was engaged in active service in Texas and New Mexico until 1881. In that year the regiment was transferred to Kansas and the Indian Territory (Oklahoma). On August 10, 1885, troops C, F, and K of the Ninth were assigned to Fort Robinson. Two years later they were among the first units to occupy the newly built barracks row. In 1887 Fort Robinson became the Ninth Cavalry’s regimental headquarters. While at the fort the Ninth participated in the 1890–91 Wounded Knee campaign to suppress the Sioux Ghost Dance movement at Pine Ridge Agency in South Dakota. In 1898 the Ninth was sent overseas and served in the Spanish American War. After the war units of the Tenth Cavalry were assigned to Fort Robinson and served there until 1907. Other units that may have occupied the soon-to-be reconstructed barracks during their service at Fort Robinson included those of the Eighth, Twelfth, and First cavalry; Eighth, Tenth, and Twenty-second infantry; and Twentieth Field Artillery.



Two Buffalo Soldiers from Troop C, Ninth U.S. Cavalry. Courtesy of The Frontier Army Museum, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.



View of a portion of adobe barracks row, from the east end.

### **The Barracks Site**

The barracks chosen for reconstruction was the second adobe barracks from the east end of the barracks row (originally designated Barracks 56 by the military), situated near the southeast corner of the new parade ground. Barracks 56 was constructed in 1887 of 83,000 adobe bricks and was covered with a wood shingle roof. The barracks was shaped like the letter “L” and, according to archival information, the main portion of the building measured 169 feet by 30 feet. A 70- by 30-foot wing extended south from the west end of the building. (The sole exception to this basic plan was the easternmost adobe barracks, which had the wing attached to its east end.) The barracks also had a porch ten feet wide that ran along most of the front of the building.

The interior of the barracks was divided into eleven rooms. Located at the east end of the main portion were four small rooms: a first sergeant’s room, a bedroom, a storeroom, and a hall. The hall led from the first sergeant’s room into the combined squad room and dormitory that occupied the rest of the main building. There were six rooms in the “L” wing: a dining room, a shop room (barber and saddle repair), a lavatory (washroom), a bathroom, a pantry, and a kitchen. The bathroom had two tubs with

a cold-water tap. The kitchen also had a cold-water tap and drain. The barracks was used until it was demolished in 1923.

Besides the barracks, at least four other structures were known to have occupied the site. Two of these, identified from a circa 1890s map, were located behind the barracks. These structures were associated with the barracks and consisted of an early latrine and a root house or cellar. A photograph of a portion of the former barracks row indicated that by the late 1890s new root cellars (with domed, earth-covered roofs) were built to replace at least some of the original structures. Around 1900 a new troop lavatory was constructed just south of the original latrine. This lavatory was subsequently moved in 1930 and remodeled into noncommissioned officers' (NCO) quarters. In 1942 a post exchange building was constructed over part of the south wing



Adobe barracks squad room and dormitory.



Adobe barracks dining room.

area of the former barracks. The post exchange was demolished sometime following World War II. No buildings or other structures subsequently occupied the site of the former Barracks 56.

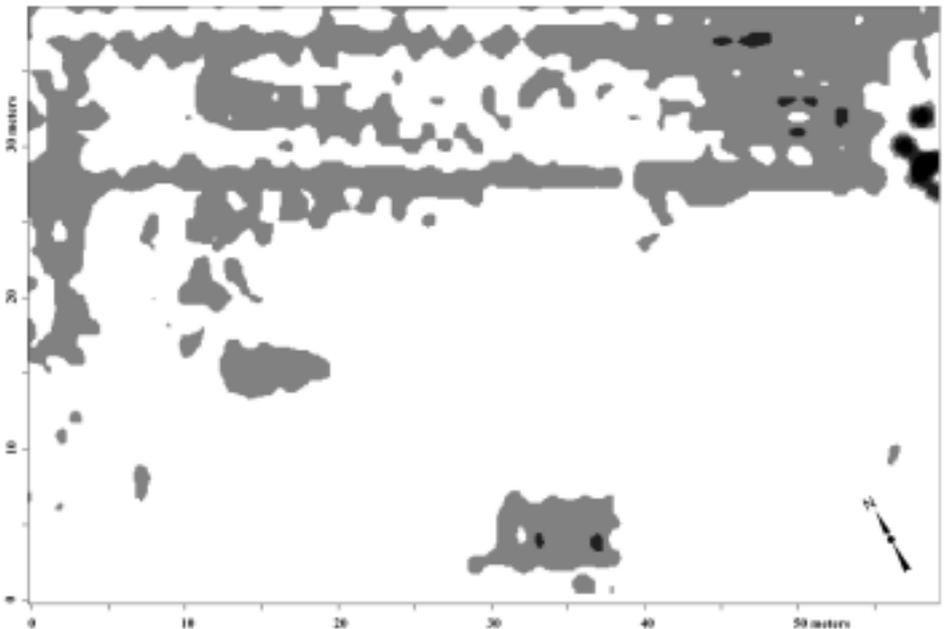
### **Archeology**

The reconstruction process included an archeological investigation of the area. The proposed excavation was intended to answer questions that could not be resolved by existing historical documentation. Four major objectives of the archeological investigation were: 1) determination of the exact location of the original building; 2) recovery of examples of the building's hardware styles; 3) clarification of the sequence of occupation of the barracks by various units stationed at the fort; and 4) identification of associated features such as cellars, pits, and building details not mentioned in the historical

documents. The recovery of an adequate sample of representative artifactual material, useful in interpreting the occupational history of the barracks to park visitors, was an additional goal of the research project.

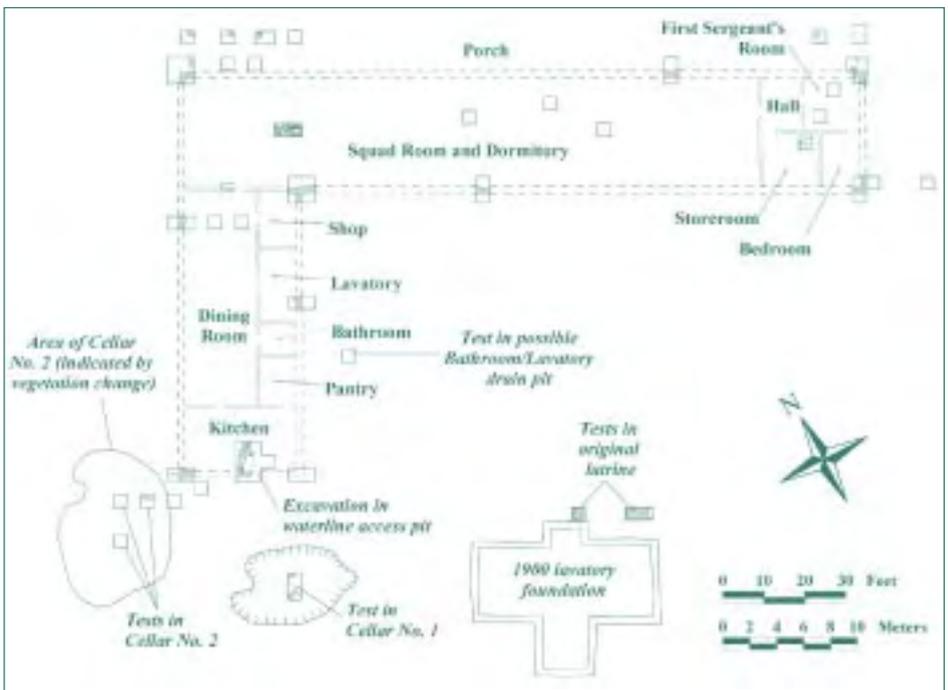
The archeological investigation process was initiated in the summer of 1999 with a remote sensing survey of the barracks area. Remote sensing methods can be used to obtain information on what lies beneath the ground surface without excavation. The type of remote sensing utilized at the barracks site is called electrical resistivity surveying. This is a non-intrusive method in which an electric current is passed through the ground and the resistance to that current in the soil is measured. Subsurface features such as walls, pits, and debris concentrations can often be detected.

Measurements were taken at one-meter intervals utilizing a grid laid out over the barracks site.



Electrical resistivity survey map.

In all, 4,800 readings were taken and then computer plotted, producing a map showing the various resistance readings across the site area. The readings strongly suggested that most of the foundation from the original building remained buried beneath the surface. The readings also revealed the probable location of the original latrine, as well as the locations of several unidentified features. The resistance map allowed for the planning of a careful and efficient excavation during the following field season.



Barracks 56 excavation map.

Excavations on the barracks remains were conducted in the summer of 2000 under the direction of the Nebraska State Historical Society Archeology Division. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln Department of Anthropology Field School provided most of the workers. In addition, the Nebraska Association of Professional Arche-



View of wall foundation.

ologists sponsored a two-day volunteer dig with fourteen people participating. The fieldwork lasted about four weeks and was completed, for the most part, in late June with some minor follow-up testing in August.

The field investigations were successful in defining all six corners and the exterior wall lines of the L-shaped stone and mortar barracks foundation. A representative sample of the fired-brick porch post pedestals was also located. Testing within the barracks remains identified one of the interior floor supports, which consisted of a collapsed rock pillar. Several electrical resistance anomalies (unusual sets of readings) not associated with the barracks foundation remains were also tested. Some of these were found to have been caused by localized concentrations of debris, either related to the barracks occupation or more recent periods. Two of the larger anomalies were found to relate to the barracks occupation, including the remains of the first latrine and what is believed to have been a large external pit dug



View of waterline access pit beneath the kitchen.



to collect drain water from the bathroom and lavatory, located in the eastern portion of the “L” extension. Near the southern end of the “L” extension a deep pit was discovered and excavated. This proved to have been dug originally to provide access to the water pipes and drain beneath the kitchen. Random tests carried out within the squad room/dormitory and the small room complex at the east end of the main part of the barracks located the remains of a brick chimney and also produced artifactual material relating to the first sergeant’s room (barracks office). Slightly outside the area of the resistivity

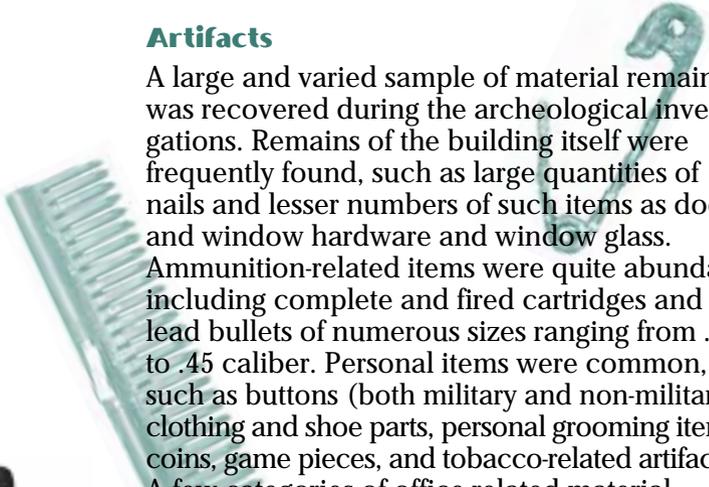
survey, both root cellars associated with the barracks were located and tested.

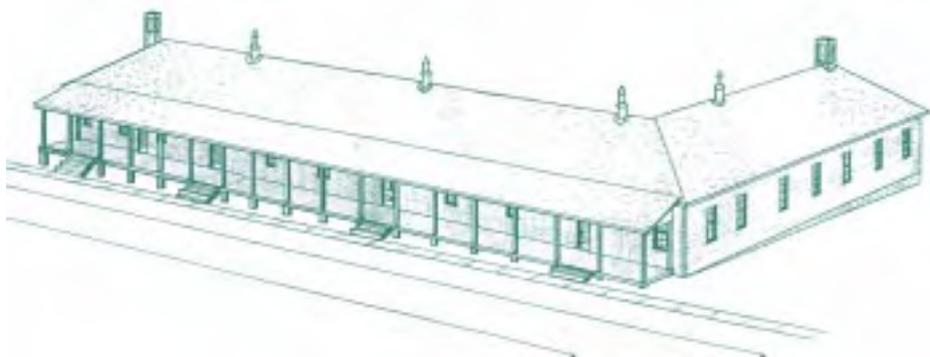
### Artifacts

A large and varied sample of material remains was recovered during the archeological investigations. Remains of the building itself were frequently found, such as large quantities of nails and lesser numbers of such items as door and window hardware and window glass. Ammunition-related items were quite abundant, including complete and fired cartridges and lead bullets of numerous sizes ranging from .22 to .45 caliber. Personal items were common, such as buttons (both military and non-military), clothing and shoe parts, personal grooming items, coins, game pieces, and tobacco-related artifacts. A few categories of office-related material included pens, pencils, paper clips, and thumb-tacks. Household items, such as various types of ceramics, bottles, tin cans, and animal bone, were plentiful. Less common items, such as various types of horse gear (a horseshoe, harness and saddle parts, and a possible buggy wrench) were also recovered, as well as miscellaneous hardware items not easily classifiable. Finally, a small amount of collected material, consisting of chipped stone debris and Native American ceramics, demonstrated that one or more prehistoric or early historic occupations of the site predated the military occupation.

### Reconstruction and Interpretation

The archival, field, and laboratory research related to this project have resulted in a detailed report that will make possible the accurate reconstruction of this historically significant structure. Artifactual material recovered from the excavations will be used in interpretive displays that will teach park visitors about the day-to-day life of soldiers of the Ninth and Tenth cavalry and other military units that occupied the barracks. The displays will also provide





Drawing by Curt Peacock

information on the occupational history of the barracks site from its earliest known use by late prehistoric or early historic Native American groups, probably as a temporary campsite, to the World War II years, when a post exchange building occupied a portion of the former barracks location. The main emphasis will be on the 1880s to early 1900s period, when the Buffalo Soldiers played a prominent role in the settlement of the West.

### **Archeological Preservation and Opportunities for Involvement**

Over 10,000 years of human occupation in Nebraska occurred prior to written records, map-making, and photography. The only way to tell the stories of these ancient peoples is through the careful study of archeological remains. Information on early historic sites is usually also sketchy and can be augmented through archeological research. However, archeological sites are fragile and non-renewable resources. Modern land-use practices and urban expansion are taking an alarming toll on the archeological record. Looting for fun or profit is also having serious effects on significant sites. A disturbed site is nearly impossible to interpret for the benefit of science and public appreciation. Accurate reconstruction of buildings at sites like

Fort Robinson, Fort Atkinson, and Rock Creek Station would not have been possible had the sites been looted.

The Nebraska State Historical Society recognizes the need to balance archeological conservation and the public's desire to participate in research. This publication series is directed to that need. Several other publications that interpret Nebraska archeology are also available. One of these is *Central Plains Archeology*, a publication jointly sponsored by the Society and the Nebraska Association of Professional Archeologists. The journal reports the results of recent archeological research and can be obtained at the NSHS in Lincoln. In addition, those interested in learning about volunteer opportunities are invited to contact the Society's Archeology Division, which sponsors volunteer excavations for the general public.



Excavating a portion of the original latrine pit.



Test excavation in Cellar No. 2.

For more information please call the Society archeological staff at Fort Robinson at (308) 665-2918 and 665-2920, or in Lincoln at (402) 471-4760. Our e-mail address is [archnshs@nebraskahistory.org](mailto:archnshs@nebraskahistory.org). Also, visit our website ([nebraskahistory.org](http://nebraskahistory.org)).

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