The term “westward expansion” gained significance in the United States by the mid-1840s, as tens of thousands of pioneers journeyed across the country to settle the rich agricultural valleys of the Far West. During the course of this migration, wagon trains traversed the “Great American Desert”—the plains and prairies that were home to many American Indian tribes, the powerful Sioux and Cheyenne among them. In the early years, the Plains Indians tolerated the immigrants because most were simply traveling through with no plans to stay. By the early 1850s, however, a number of pioneers had opted to stake out claims in Nebraska Territory, inciting the Indians to raid livestock and burn fields as a means of convincing them to leave. When the United States government determined that these actions warranted a strong response, the War Department began to increase the presence of army troops in the region.

Fort Randall grew out of this military build-up. Established in 1856 in the portion of Nebraska Territory that would become Dakota Territory in 1861, it held the distinction of being the last post built to provide protection for westward-bound pioneers and the first constructed to stave off Indian aggressions toward those who settled in the region. In its thirty-six years of active service, Fort Randall played host to both famous and infamous figures in Northern Great Plains history. Its greatest legacy, however, is found in the contributions its soldiers made to the development of Dakota Territory and the American West.
The need for a military post, particularly one located at the confluence of the Niobrara and Missouri Rivers, escalated in August of 1854 when Lieutenant John L. Grattan and a company of twenty-nine soldiers were killed in a battle with Brulé Lakota, or western Sioux, warriors. Government officials and settlers alike seldom differentiated between the various bands and factions, and as a result of the Grattan incident all Lakotas in the region were considered hostile. In October 1854, the army selected Colonel William S. Harney to lead a punitive expedition against the Indians. As a decorated veteran of the Black Hawk and Mexican Wars, Harney appeared well suited for the task. He began his campaign the following August, engaging Little Thunder's band of Brulés at Ash Hollow, where troops killed a reported eighty-six Indians on 2 September 1855.

Prior to Harney's arrival in Nebraska Territory, the army's quartermaster department had selected the site of a former fur-trading post, Fort Pierre Chouteau, as an acceptable base for military operations. Despite the advice of Chouteau and Company's principal partner that its abandoned post could not possibly meet the army's needs, Major David H. Vinton advised Quartermaster General Thomas S. Jesup that a lack of prime fort locations in the region made "no other place on the Missouri more eligible" than Fort Pierre. In April 1855, the United States government agreed to pay Chouteau and Company forty-five thousand dollars for the trading post, and the army assumed occupancy on 1 June 1855.

Harney recognized the inadequacy of Fort Pierre immediately upon arriving there in October with plans to winter his troops within...

1. Grattan, a recent West Point graduate and a novice in Indian affairs, was dispatched from Fort Laramie to apprehend a Minneconjou Sioux man accused of stealing a cow from an emigrant wagon train. When the soldiers found a large camp of Indians near the fort and demanded the surrender of the accused, leaders of the band refused. Grattan, anxious to prove himself, sounded the order to fire. All of the soldiers were killed in what became known as the "Grattan Massacre." Lloyd McFarling, ed. and illus., Exploring the Northern Plains, 1804-1876 (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, 1955), pp. 220, 234; Robert G. Athearn, Forts of the Upper Missouri (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.; Prentice-Hall, 1967), pp. 33-34; Michael Clodfelter, The Dakota War: The United States Army Versus the Sioux, 1862-1865 (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 1998), p. 19.

2. Athearn, Forts of the Upper Missouri, pp. 33-34, 38-39. The tally of dead at Ash Hollow included a number of Indian women and children. Army losses were reported at four killed and seven wounded.

3. "Official Correspondence Relating to Fort Pierre," South Dakota Historical Collections 1 (1902): 384. Vinton himself believed the Fort Pierre site to be completely "unfitted for a depot of supplies for any considerable body of troops in its immediate vicinity," or "to provide for the wants of a mounted force" (p. 382).

the anticipated comfort of its confines. His ensuing flurry of communications with the adjutant general’s office detailed the condition of the post, which Hamey found to be “in a more dilapidated condition than I had been led to expect.” The post consisted of crumbling huts, decayed fences, a worn and inoperative sawmill, and an overgrazed plain that could provide neither timber nor forage for a large garrison. With winter rapidly approaching, and Fort Pierre incapable of quartering even a fraction of his troops, Hamey distributed his men amongst various locations along the Missouri River for winter cantonment.6

Despite the lateness in the year and the severity of the weather, Hamey began an immediate search for an alternate site for a new military post. Former soldier D. L. Magruder recalled accompanying Hamey on a strenuous march from Fort Pierre to the mouth of the Niobrara River in mid-December 1855. Near the present site of Fort Randall, the troops “were compelled by heavy snowdrifts in the ravines to abandon the prairie and take to the ice upon the river,” Magruder remembered of the detached duty that did not return the men to Fort Pierre until 17 February 1856.7

Hamey resumed his search in the spring. After considering several sites, he decided to locate the new fort on the west bank of the Missouri River in Nebraska Territory, thirty miles above the mouth of the Niobrara River. On 26 June 1856, the first post returns report that “Lieut. Stanley, one Sergt. & 100 Recruits joined, and garrisoned the new Post,” whose structures consisted of portable buildings from Fort Pierre that had been collapsed for moving and reassembled at the new location. In August, Companies C and I of the Second Infan-

6. Ibid., pp. 399-414. Hamey’s Order No. 19 produced a significant dispersal of troops. Four companies of the Second Infantry were sent to winter on the east bank of the Missouri River five miles above the post; two additional companies of the Second Infantry were sent to a position eighteen miles upriver on the west bank; and four companies of the Sixth Infantry relocated ten miles up on the east bank. One company of the Second Dragoons, with a detachment of one noncommissioned officer and eight privates from each of the six companies of the Second Infantry, were sent to a point between the mouths of the White and L’equiqui-court (Niobrara) Rivers in order to take charge of the provisions carried on the steamer Grey Cloud.
try and D, E, H, and K of the Second Dragoons joined the troops already in residence. Harney requested that the post be known as Fort Randall, in honor of the late Colonel Daniel Randall, former deputy paymaster general.\(^{10}\) By the spring of 1857, the final stores and troops were transferred to Fort Randall, and Fort Pierre was officially abandoned.\(^{11}\)

Fort Randall was situated half a mile from the Missouri River, on a bench of land that provided it a strategic vantage point and afforded a two-sided frontage facing east and north. Proximity to the river also allowed for better transport of troops and supplies and more efficient communication.\(^ {12}\) An 1861 newspaper account described the post as located on “a beautiful plateau descending gradually to the river” with “commodious” officers’ quarters and barracks “sufficient for several hundred soldiers.” By that time, Fort Randall also boasted

10. Wilson, “Old Fort Pierre,” pp. 292, 428. Circular No. 4, issued by the surgeon general’s office of the War Department in 1870, notes that the post was named for army surgeon B. Randall.
11. Schell, _History of South Dakota_, p. 68. By 1859, the federal government had defaulted on its payments, and Fort Pierre reverted back to Chouteau and Company.
large hospital and commissary buildings, in anticipation that the headquarters of supplies for the forts and Indian agencies of the upper Missouri would be transferred there from Fort Leavenworth.\textsuperscript{13}

The new fort became the regimental headquarters of the Second Infantry in September of 1856 when the regimental band, field, and staff joined the companies already in residence. By 1859, the military population numbered almost four hundred with the arrival of detachments from the Fourth Artillery. The civilian population grew, too, as the wives and families of officers and enlisted men joined them on the frontier. A sense of community followed these newcomers who organized regular band concerts, dances, dinners, and card parties to stave off the monotony of everyday life at the plains outpost.\textsuperscript{14}

\begin{enumerate}
  \item Yankton Dakotian, 27 June 1861.
  \item Post Returns, Fort Randall, Aug. 1856, June, July 1859, M617, Roll 988. Because post returns and other military documents list only military personnel and civilian employees, the number of families residing at Fort Randall is not known. The numerous card parties and dances reported in local newspaper accounts suggest that more than a few women were present at the fort.
\end{enumerate}

\begin{quote}
The Fort Randall Military Reservation encompassed a large area south and west of the post. Across the river to the north was the Yankton Indian Reservation.
\end{quote}
Soldiers' duties at Fort Randall fell into two distinct categories. There were the routine, often monotonous, tasks such as military preparedness and post maintenance that seldom warranted recording in the post returns. An entry for December 1861, however, does mention that the Iowa Volunteers spent their early weeks at the post "employed mostly in drilling and procuring a supply of fuel for winter." The primary duty of the soldiers stationed at Fort Randall was to settle conflicts between the Brulé Lakotas and their more peaceful neighbors, the Poncas and the Yankton Nakotas (Sioux), and to escort the supply and mail trains that traveled west from Sioux City. The post returns reveal numerous instances of Fort Randall's commanders deploying men throughout the region for these purposes. In January 1858, for example, three companies of the Second Infantry left Fort Randall to deal with "small depredations by the Ponca Indians, and serious threats by the same nation." The threats did not materialize, and the soldiers returned within a month. In June of the same year an "effective force" under the command of Captain Henry W. Wessells traveled by steamer to settle disputes near the Yellowstone River. The post returns for August 1859 report the return of portions of two companies from the Fourth Artillery after "det[ached] service at [the] Yankton Agency."

Many entries are similarly cryptic, but from time to time more articulate commanding officers recorded troop deployments in greater detail. Among them was First Lieutenant Thomas R. Tannatt of the Fourth Artillery, who served as acting commanding officer in late 1861. His post return for September of that year recorded that "upon the call of the agent of the Yankton [sic] Indians it was deemed requisite that troops should be sent to his aid. Accordingly on the 29th of September," Tannatt continued, "38 men from company 'M' were immediately sent to the assistance of the agent making a forced march of 18 miles in three hours. The troops returned to this post Oct 3rd the trouble having been adjusted."

With the arrival of soldiers and settlers, communications in the region improved considerably and allowed Fort Randall, despite its isolated location, to maintain regular contact with various govern-

15. Ibid., Dec. 1861.
16. Ibid., Jan. 1858.
17. Ibid., June 1858.
18. Ibid., Aug. 1859.
19. Ibid., Sept. 1861.
ment agencies. Stagecoach companies established regular runs between Fort Randall and Sioux City in 1860. Weekly mail service to the fort also began in 1860, increasing to three times a week by early 1862. In his reminiscences, Private Frank Myers of the Sixth Iowa Cavalry recalled that even though the stage line connected Fort Randall with “civilization,” mail and deliveries destined for points further up the river required an escort of several soldiers.

In the late 1850s, the federal government had concluded several treaties with Plains Indians tribes, developments that directly affected affairs at Fort Randall. The most significant agreement concluded between the United States government and the Plains Indians to 1858 was the Yankton Treaty, signed in April of that year, which called for the Yankton Indians to withdraw to a reservation of four hundred thou-

sand acres on the east bank of the Missouri in southeast South Dakota. Under its terms, the Yanktons also gave up a large triangle of land between the Big Sioux and the Missouri Rivers, for which the government agreed to pay $1.6 million over a period of fifty years.\(^{22}\)

Anticipating that Congress would ratify the treaty, white settlers attempted to establish colonies on Yankton lands before the Indians' title had been extinguished. Among them was W. H. Holman and a group of associates who organized a settlement at the present site of Yankton, South Dakota. Within a short time, however, soldiers from Fort Randall arrived and promptly evicted the trespassers. Later in the spring of 1858, the firm of Frost, Todd and Company, which was licensed to trade with the Indians, opened a post near the site of Holman's displaced settlement. John Blair Smith Todd, one of the firm's principal partners, had been associated with Fort Randall since shortly after the fort's founding. In 1856, soon after coming to Dakota Territory with the Hamy expedition, he resigned his commission to pursue the lucrative business of trade among the military posts and Indian agencies on the Missouri River.\(^{23}\) A principal party in persuading the Yanktons to sign the treaty, Todd had provided for himself and his associates by obtaining the insertion of a clause providing that all "persons (other than Indians, or mixed bloods) who are now residing within said ceded country, by authority of law, shall have the privilege of entering one hundred and sixty acres thereof, to include each of their residences and improvements, at the rate of one dollar and twenty-five cents per acre."\(^{24}\)

Within a few months of ratification of the Yankton Treaty in 1859, the area was thrown open to non-Indian settlement. Territorial newspapers sought to attract newcomers by extolling the virtues of the region in articles and editorials. "The country . . . presents many eligible locations for good farms," the *Yankton Dakotian* announced on 27 June 1861, advising prospective settlers that the existence of Fort Randall "has been sufficient without any active demonstrations to keep in check all roving bands of Indians." According to the newspaper, once the Civil War ended and the government relocated its headquarters for supplies in the Northwest from Fort Leavenworth to Fort Randall, the post would become the most important one in

\(^{22}\) Schell, *History of South Dakota*, pp. 70-71.

\(^{23}\) William Maxwell Blackburn, "Historical Sketch of North and South Dakota," *South Dakota Historical Collections* 1 (1902): 115-16.

the West. "The advantages which will thereby accrue to the farmers of Dakota Territory, by affording them a convenient and good market will be very great," the Dakotian predicted.25

As the attention of the nation shifted from conflict on the frontier to the war between the states, the makeup of the western post underwent major changes. The Yankton Dakotian reported in June 1861 that a Captain D. McLaughlin from Dakota City, Nebraska Territory, was busy enlisting volunteers to serve as Home Guards, and that these companies would occupy Forts Kearney and Randall to "afford efficient protection to the country commanded by these posts" in the event that regular troops were withdrawn for service elsewhere.26 Captain McLaughlin's actions were also well warranted since Fort Randall's Fourth Artillery included many officers and enlisted men from the South, a number of whom deserted to return home and defend the Confederacy. In the spring of 1861, Captain John A. Brown, commanding officer at Fort Randall, left the post without orders or authorization. It has been suggested that he was persuaded by his southern-born wife, and "against his own inclinations, to cast his fortunes with the Confederacy." Whatever his reasons, Brown was not heard from again until his resignation, posted from a southern city, reached the War Department in July.27

Captain Brown left Fort Randall under the command of the only commissioned officer still in residence, First Lieutenant Thomas Tannatt,28 who, despite his youth and junior status, was wholly embraced by the Yankton community. "Lieut. Tannatt and lady [Elizabeth Tappan Tannatt, his wife] passed down on Tuesday—the lady to go East, and the Lieutenant to return in a few days to Fort Randall," the Yankton Dakotian reported on 6 June 1861. "He is an accomplished officer, and although quite young in the service, has by recent resignations, been promoted to be 1st Lieutenant. Long may he wave!"29

By late 1861, all regular army troops located on the frontier had received orders to return East to fight for the Union cause, and Captain John Pattee and 299 members of the Fourteenth Iowa Volunteer

25. Yankton Dakotian, 27 June 1861. Despite these predictions, Fort Randall never replaced Fort Leavenworth as the main supply depot for the Northwest.
26. Ibid., 6 June 1861.
29. Yankton Dakotian, 6 June 1861.
Infantry were ordered to Fort Randall to relieve the troops there. Arriving on 4 December 1861, Pattee found "two companies of the 4th U.S. artillery . . . under the command of First Lieutenant Thomas Tennant [sic], a bright and agreeable gentleman." Pattee was pleased to find the post in good order, with all papers completed so that "the transfer of the stores was commenced and hurried through in the shortest time possible," enabling the two companies that had been ordered to Kentucky to start their long overland march to Saint Joseph, Missouri.\(^\text{30}\)

After the departure of the Fourth Artillery, Pattee turned his attention to his men and the post, which he described as "an open Cantonment—no works or protection against the attacks of an enemy."\(^\text{31}\) In order for such a post to be effective, it had to be strategically located, and Pattee judged Harney's choice of the site as perfect. Rough-hewn logs provided the building material for most of Fort Randall's buildings, including the barracks, officers' quarters, and guardhouse. The only framed structures served as storehouses for the quartermaster's and commissary's supplies. Pattee recognized that life on a frontier post could be tedious and lonely for the soldiers stationed there. In order to stave off boredom and the disruptive


\(^{31}\) Ibid. There are no surviving sketches of Fort Randall in these early years. Those drawn in the 1870s and later show a post much enlarged and improved.
behavior that often accompanied it, he initiated “extra-duty” details. Soldiers could increase their pay by twenty-five cents a day, or fifty percent per month, through extra work such as cutting wood and hay for use on the post. Pattee recalled with some pride that while his troops were stationed at Fort Randall, no outside contracts for hay or wood were needed.32

Pattee also remembered the neighboring Yankton Indians as peaceful people who “gave very little trouble.” He was not as complimentary about others who lived nearby, professing, “I heartily wish I could say the same of all of the white people who lived along the river...some of them came from St. Louis, and some of these were strongly in favor of the confederate side.”33 Sentiment on both sides in the Civil War was clearly circulating in Dakota Territory during the early 1860s.

A strange situation occurred in the spring of 1862, when William P. Lyman presented himself at Fort Randall as the newly-appointed major of the Dakota Volunteer Cavalry, with orders to assume command of the post. Captain Pattee, cognizant of any protocol requiring him to call upon and relinquish command to his superior, hesitated to do so. First, Pattee knew that two companies were required in order for an individual to be commissioned as a major, and Lyman had just one. Second, and more important, the orders Lyman presented were so irregular in their composition that Pattee questioned both their validity and Lyman’s. The would-be commander responded by allying with one of Pattee’s men, gaining access to the post order book, and placing Pattee under arrest. Through correspondence with Iowa governor Samuel J. Kirkwood, who happened to be Pattee’s brother-in-law, and other officials, the matter was resolved. Lyman disappeared from the post, and record of Pattee’s arrest was erased, as though it had never taken place.34 The post returns for April note that Lyman “left the post at 7 o’clock a.m. today without giving any reason for so doing, or any direct information as to his destination, or probable period of absence.”35

While the fighting in the eastern United States impacted the movement of soldiers on the frontier, it may also have prompted many

32. Ibid., pp. 276-78.
33. Ibid., p. 277.
34. Ibid., pp. 278-82; Report of Major John Pattee upon a Letter of Charges of J. B. S. Todd (Des Moines, Iowa: Mills Brothers Printers, 1863).
35. Post Returns, Fort Randall, Apr. 1862, M617, Roll 988.
settlers to journey west. In July 1862, the *Yankton Dakotian* reported that “the emigration to Dakota Territory is quite lively. Every day brings more or less families seeking a choice home.” Moreover, the new settlers moving into the territory “seem to be an excellent class—are well provided with teams, stock, and agricultural implements of all kinds.”

All was not well on the frontier, however. In August 1862, angered by broken promises and delayed annuity payments, Chief Little Crow led a revolt of the Santee Dakotas (Sioux) in Minnesota. Their actions, which included the killing of men, women, and children and the destruction of property, created panic throughout the region and put Fort Randall soldiers on constant patrol to guard against the possibility of the Yanktons joining Little Crow. Fearful settlers in Dakota Territory abandoned farms, stock, and crops to seek refuge in Sioux City and other towns and at military posts. “Owing to the confusion we were thrown into by the recent Indian excitement—women and children taking entire possession of our office—we have found it impossible to issue our paper for the past two weeks,” read the *Yankton Dakotian*’s 15 September 1862 editorial. Colonel Pattee later recalled that “five counties were depopulated and 800 white people were massacred in the most revolting and cruel manner. A number of women and children were made prisoners by the Indians.”

Three months after the initial Santee assault, word reached Fort Randall that Indians held several white prisoners near Fort Pierre, and three companies were dispatched to assist in their rescue. The 9 December 1862 issue of the *Yankton Dakotian* reported the mission’s success, the prisoners having been “released from the Santees, through the Agency of Major Galpin, who, when at Fort Pierre, sent out a party of men with horses and goods to effect their ransom.” These individuals, who had been taken hostage in Minnesota in August, were removed to Fort Randall to recuperate under the watchful eye of Captain Pattee’s wife, daughter, and the seven or eight other women.

36. *Yankton Dakotian*, 1 July 1862.
40. Ibid., pp. 284-85.
in attendance at the post, until they could be reunited with family and friends. The bedraggled appearance of the former captives prompted the soldiers of the command to contribute more than two hundred fifty dollars for their relief. By mid-December, with the panic stilled, Pattee ordered most of the Dakota Cavalry back to Fort Randall for wintering. One company of infantry remained at the Fort Pierre trading post to protect those employed there and deter any further Santee attacks.

In February 1863, as a result of the Santee conflict the previous summer, Congress authorized the removal of the Winnebago Indians from Minnesota to a reservation beyond the limits of any state. Government officials selected a location on the east side of the Missouri River midway between Fort Randall and Fort Pierre. A sixty-man detachment from Fort Randall laid out the reservation and erected several agency buildings within a four-hundred-by-three-hundred-foot stockade of cottonwood logs. A company of volunteers from the Sixth Iowa Cavalry remained on as guards, and in May more than three thousand exiled Winnebagos arrived at the new Crow Creek Indian Reservation.

The white citizenry-at-large continued to fear attacks, however, and saw it as the soldiers’ duty to treat all Indians as hostile. On 26 May 1863, the Yankton Dakotian noted with great interest the movement of a battalion of Iowa cavalry near Fort Randall. “Conjecture is rife as to the object of this movement,” the paper reported, “and we understand that a numerous body of red-skins, at present located near Fort Randall, will be compelled to seek other quarters, or fight. The 6th Iowa ‘have no rations for prisoners.’” Following a skirmish in June between troops and a group of Siouxs that left several Indians dead, Lieutenant Colonel Samuel M. Pollock, Fort Randall’s new commanding officer, issued a military order prohibiting Indians from entering the Fort Randall military reservation. Any individual caught harboring or concealing Indians would be permanently excluded, and soldiers who aided or abetted them would be severely punished. The order went on to remind all concerned that Fort Randall was not a trading post and that persons engaging in trade with Indians

42. Pattee, Reminiscences, pp. 287-88; Yankton Dakotian, 9 Dec. 1862.
44. Yankton Dakotian, 26 May 1863.
on the military reservation would have their goods confiscated and be expelled.45

Threats from Indians were not the only dangers soldiers at Fort Randall faced. Nature provided its own hazards to newcomers on the northern plains. The 2 June 1863 issue of the Yankton Dakotian reported the drowning of Iowa Sixth Cavalry member John Frazee. While it was common practice to ferry men, animals, and supplies back and forth across the river to the post, the unfortunate Frazee found himself pushed off the edge of a crowded boat by a skittish horse. The cavalryman might have survived had another horse not toppled off and landed on top of him. At the time the article appeared, the soldier’s body had not been recovered.46

As the years passed, the ties between the town of Yankton and the community at the fort continued to grow, and the activities of officers and troops were of great interest to the town’s citizenry. Parties, dances, and informal gatherings were held for most every occasion, no matter how small, and the Yankton Dakotian covered them all. “Lieut. J. K. Fowler, after a brief sojourn in Yankton, has returned to the headquarters of his company, at Fort Randall,” the newspaper reported on 27 January 1863. “Prior to his leaving, we enjoyed the festivities of a social party with the Lieutenant at the house of L. M. Griffith, Esq.”47 As the Fort Randall-Yankton community grew, so too did the opportunities for celebration. None generated more enthusiasm than Independence Day. “The recent Anniversary of our National Independence was observed in an appropriate manner,” the Dakotian reported of the 1863 event. “A salute of 34 guns was fired at noon, and in the evening a large assemblage of officers and soldiers convened at the hall. The ladies of the garrison also turned out in goodly number, which gave to the occasion a social and ‘civilized’ appearance.”48

While the prospect of life on an increasingly “civilized” frontier appealed to more and more settlers, a number of soldiers opted to make the plains their permanent homes, as well. The Yankton Dakotian reported in June 1863 that “upwards of fifty soldiers, belonging to the Iowa 6th, have made claims to Cole county, Dakota,

45. Ibid., 23 June 1863.
46. Ibid., 2 June 1863.
47. Ibid., 27 Jan. 1863.
48. Ibid., 7 July 1863.
intending to settle there as soon as their term of service expires.” The soldiers were “lavish in their praises of the country between this place and Sioux City, and many expressed themselves resolved to make their homes here when the war ceases. Thus our future looks propitious.”

The Yankton community was particularly pleased when senior officers chose the territory as home. Lieutenant Fowler’s resignation from the army was such an occasion. In its 26 May 1863 issue,

49. Ibid., 30 June 1863.

The presence of soldiers’ families contributed to a sense of community at Fort Randall. Pictured here with their wives and children are officers of the Twenty-fifth Infantry.
The Dakotian lamented the loss of this fine soldier but lauded his decision to come to Yankton. "We welcome him back from under his 'straps and bars,'" the newspaper declared, "to full fellowship with us civilians, and promise our personal efforts to make his citizen-ship navigable."

By the early 1870s, it seemed that peace would prevail on the plains. The Civil War had ended, allowing regular army troops to patrol the West once more. The post returns for May 1870 note the reinforcement of Fort Randall with field, staff, and ten companies of the Fourteenth Infantry. With most of the region's Indians confined to reservations, confrontations with white settlers were less common. The discovery of gold in the Black Hills, however, shattered this brief period of peace. Sioux City newspaperman and promoter Charles Collins led a campaign to open the gold fields, located on the Great Sioux Reservation, to white prospectors. Members of his Black Hills Mining and Exploring Association argued that "if the 'Indian Ring' could call on the government to enforce Indian treaties against the pioneers, then the association and the people of the Northwest could press for governmental action to purchase the Black Hills from the Indians." In the absence of such action, the association threatened to invade the region and set up its own government, following "the precedents established in the mining districts of Montana, Wyoming, and California." Collins and his disciples refused to accept the fact that the Black Hills were reserved for the Sioux and that the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 protecting them was, for the time being at least, irrevocable.

Initially, the United States government intended to uphold the treaty terms. In September 1874, Lieutenant General Philip H. Sheridan ordered his subordinate, Brigadier General Alfred H. Terry, to prevent companies organizing at Sioux City and Yankton from trespassing on the Great Sioux Reservation. Terry's men were to "burn the wagon trains, destroy the outfit and arrest the leaders, confining them to the nearest military post in the Indian country." Prospectors found heading toward the Black Hills were taken to Fort Randall, where they were made to sign a parole and take an oath not to

50. Ibid., 26 May 1865.
53. Ibid., p. 145.
return. Those captured a second time were taken to Yankton and turned over to civil authorities for trial. The Fort Randall post returns for this era are crowded with accounts of intrepid mining parties apprehended by soldiers from the post. Three companies of the First Infantry, for instance, departed Fort Randall for the Black Hills in early April 1875. A month later, on 13 May, Company G returned to the fort with a party of trespassing prospectors in tow.\(^\text{54}\)

John Cox served at Fort Randall during this time and later recalled that his “most thrilling adventure” came as a member of Captain Mark Walker’s expedition to the Black Hills in 1875. The troops pursued a party of some 150 men under John Gordon, who had traveled to the gold fields earlier with a party organized by Charles Collins. When the army overtook the miners near the present site of Gordon, Nebraska, they refused to surrender. For a time, there was a stand-off between the two groups, until army reinforcements arrived from Fort Robinson and the miners relinquished their arms. “We burned almost all the property they possessed which consisted of wagon loads of flour, meat, and provisions of all kinds,” Cox wrote to his brother shortly after the confrontation. “We also burned their guns, revolvers, thousands of rounds of ammunition and cannisters of powder and also loads of picks, shovels, and six wagons of mining tools.” Cox estimated the value of the goods the army destroyed at several thousand dollars. He also revealed that the arrest had been illegal, “they being in Nebraska and out of the Indian reservation.” Just the same, he “advise[d] everybody to keep away from the Black Hills till they are opened. Troops are filling up this country and it is useless for people to try to run the gauntlet.”\(^\text{55}\)

In addition to running off trespassing prospectors, soldiers stationed at Fort Randall undertook the task of making structural improvements to the post, which was in need of repair and refurbishment by the early 1870s. Men from the First Infantry expanded the soldiers’ quarters, replaced several buildings, remodeled the guardhouse, and laid out a post cemetery. The commanding officer’s house was enlarged and remodeled, and new white picket fences encircled the buildings, yards, and quarters. In addition, a combination chapel, library, and assembly hall was built of chalk rock quarried from the

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The enlisted men's barracks were among the buildings improved or replaced at Fort Randall during the 1870s.

hills south of the fort.56 Denny Moran, who spent most of his adult life in close proximity to the post, remembered that "some of the soldiers organized a Lodge of I.O.O.F. [International Order of Odd Fellows] which was No. 2 of Dakota Territory." The lodge members struck a bargain with the army's quartermaster department, agreeing

to build the large structure if the government would haul and saw the stone. Moran recalled that the finished chapel "was furnished very nicely; all the pews were two and one-half inch black walnut. It had a large organ, and also a large bell that could be heard for miles. All of this was bought by the soldiers and citizens who were employed at the fort."\(^{57}\)

As tensions diminished on the frontier, the Fort Randall military reservation itself took on the trappings of a community. Dramatic productions, with soldiers and civilians in starring roles, entertained the population. Balls were held, with officers in full-dress uniform and guests invited from Sioux City and Yankton. The post chaplain established both a school and a Sunday school, and soldiers founded


Built of native chalk rock, the Fort Randall chapel provided a place for soldiers to hold religious and social activities.
a chapter of the Good Templars' Society. As the post’s first chief templar, John Cox recalled the officers of the garrison giving the organization “hearty support from the beginning.” While Colonel Pinckney Lugenbeel was in command of the post, the lodge served as a type of correction agency. “When a soldier got drunk,” Cox wrote in his reminiscences, “the Commander would suspend sentence on condition that the offender joined the Templars and took the abstinence pledge.” This method appears to have been effective for curbing drunkenness, since the post bartender soon found himself unemployed.  

By 1880, troop rotation was becoming common throughout the western United States, and the First and Twenty-fifth Infantry prepared to trade stations in May, the former traveling to the Department of Texas and the latter taking up the post at Fort Randall. While this exchange had been suggested earlier, debate swirled around the belief of some officials that the African Americans who comprised the ranks of the Twenty-fifth could not adjust to the cold northern temperatures. “Colored men will not enlist with the prospects of going to that rigorous climate,” the quartermaster general wrote in opposition to the transfer. “The effect of the cold will be very injurious to those men whose terms of enlistment do not soon expire,” he concluded. The exchange finally did occur, however, and the Fort Randall post returns report the 29 June arrival of the headquarters, field, staff, band, and Company I of the Twenty-fifth Infantry, which had departed Fort Davis, Texas, on 17 May. It was at this time that the Indians of the northern plains had their first contact with the African-American troops nicknamed the “Buffalo Soldiers.”  

The men of the Twenty-fifth Infantry found their duties in Dakota to be different from those they had performed in Texas. Instead of acting as station guards, escorting stagecoaches, or conducting regular scouting patrols, the troops spent much time engaged in cutting wood, since great quantities were required for cooking and for heat-

60. Post Returns, Fort Randall, June 1880, M617, Roll 990. The name “Buffalo Soldiers” appears to have been given to the African-American troops by American Indians who noted similarities between the soldiers’ hair and the fur of the buffalo. This comparison was undoubtedly accentuated in the winter when soldiers wore buffalo-hide coats. As the Indians held the buffalo in high regard, the comparison may have been a compliment. Sarah Erwin, ed., The Buffalo Soldiers on the American Frontier (Tulsa, Okla.: Thomas Gilcrease Museum Assoc., 1996), p. 11.
ing in cold weather. The soldiers also assisted the region's settlers in numerous ways, particularly in the spring of 1881. Heavy flooding followed an unusually harsh winter, and many settlers living along the Keya Paha River lost their crops, livestock, and homes. Captain H. Baxter Quimby and Company F made several trips from Fort Randall into the flooded area with food. Perhaps as many as eight hundred men, women, and children were assisted by the black soldiers, who contributed to the relief from their own pockets. In one incident, a herd of cattle pastured near the river was in danger of being swept away as the water rose. The soldiers stepped in and drove the herd onto the military reservation, where it remained safe until the river receded.\(^{61}\)

The next summer, an alarm of another type went out to Fort Randall from settlers along the Keya Paha and Montana Rivers. The Sioux residing at the Rosebud Agency had made plans to host a Sun Dance, and the settlers requested the army's protection in the event that agitation and violence followed. Two companies of the Twenty-fifth Infantry were dispatched from the fort and arrived near the agency on 30 June 1862. These troops patrolled the roads and rivers of the area continuously for a month, until the Indians had dispersed and returned home. No violence occurred, but the presence of the black infantry gave the settlers a sense of security.\(^{62}\)

Of all of the companies comprising the Twenty-fifth Infantry, the regimental band was the best known. The band had been the pride of the regiment since its days in Texas and included many accomplished musicians in its ranks. In September 1883, they entertained crowds at the Minnesota State Fair. Earlier that summer, they had played for commencement exercises at Shattuck Military School near Minneapolis. In his letter of thanks, the school's commandant noted, "The Band proved to be all that we had expected from the reports which had reached us before we heard them, skilled in the use of


\(^{62}\) Ibid., p. 52. The Sun Dance was the most important religious ritual of the Plains Indians. Although it varied among tribes, its main purpose was to give thanks, ask forgiveness for sins, and initiate young people into adulthood. Groups would come together at various locations throughout the summer to observe and participate in this ceremony, which generally lasted for eight days. An atmosphere of religious frenzy and zeal often resulted, causing settlers to fear that the Indians would become violent and attack their homes and farms. James Welch, with Paul Stekler, *Killing Custer: The Battle of the Little Bighorn and the Fate of the Plains Indians* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1994), p. 134.
their instruments and orderly in their deportment." The idea of "orderly deportment" was important to the men of the Twenty-fifth, who prided themselves on the high inspection marks they consistently earned. These reports show the regiment to have been competent, effective, and free, for the most part, of desertion, the army's greatest personnel problem. In fact, the Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth Infantry Regiments proudly claimed the lowest desertion rate in the army. Among the reasons for this exemplary record is the fact that there were few opportunities for African Americans on the plains in the late nineteenth century. As a result, the soldiers felt a unique sense of loyalty to the army. At the end of their initial five-year enlistments, many chose to make the military their life's work.64

63. Ibid., p. 57.
64. Ibid., p. 61; Erwin, ed., Buffalo Soldiers, pp. 12-13.
While the settlers of the region welcomed and accepted these black companies as soldiers, the members of the Twenty-fifth Infantry faced severe social restrictions, for post-Civil War society remained racially segregated. With no other African-American population close at hand, some of these soldiers turned to the Yanktons on the Indian reservation nearby for social outlets and relationships, and some of the men married Indian women. In his reminiscences, Denny Moran noted the presence of children of American Indian-African American parentage on the Yankton reservation. Despite its restrictions, life in Dakota Territory clearly appealed to a number of these soldiers who decided to settle permanently after being discharged from military service.

The Buffalo Soldiers in Dakota are perhaps best remembered as the guards of Sitting Bull, Fort Randall’s most famous military prisoner, during his incarceration at the post. Having fled to Canada after the Battle of the Little Bighorn, the Hunkpapa Lakota leader returned to the United States in July 1881 and surrendered with some two hundred followers at Fort Buford in northern Dakota Territory. The Indians were then transferred to Fort Yates near the Standing Rock Agency. Fearing his ability to incite unrest in the area, government officials sent Sitting Bull and his band to Fort Randall, where Captain Charles Bentzoni of the Twenty-fifth Infantry received them on 17 September 1881. The Hunkpapas set up camp just south of the fort and enjoyed some freedom of movement, although they were under constant surveillance.

The presence of the Indians at Fort Randall brought a number of prominent guests to the region, among them German artist Rudolf Cronau, who arrived in October 1881 to complete a series of Indian portraits. At the request of the commanding officer, Colonel George S. Andrews, Cronau held an exhibition for the officers and their wives, after which he invited the Indians to view his works. “Their interest was intense,” he recalled. “With special delight their eyes hung on the portraits of their far away friends and relatives at Standing Rock Agency, the names of whom sounded almost like soft prayers, as they came from their lips.”


Shortly after Christmas, an unfortunate incident occurred involving the African-American soldiers and the Hunkpapas. Three recruits accosted an Indian woman while she collected wood, and two of them raped her. Colonel Andrews did not hesitate in marching the command before the injured woman, who quickly identified two of the assailants. In this case, Andrews chose not to turn the accused men over to civil authorities because frontier jurors tended to neglect the rights of Indians, regardless of the severity of the crime or the status of the perpetrator. Instead, he filed military charges and dishonorably discharged the troopers. Losing their army pay may have been a harsher sentence than they would have received in civil court, considering the fact that discharged black soldiers would be unlikely to find any alternative employment readily available on the plains.

In August 1882, Sitting Bull petitioned the commissioner of Indian affairs for a pardon from the United States government and permission to return to the Standing Rock Agency to spend his remaining days among his own people. Yankton chief Strike-the-Ree helped to bring Sitting Bull’s case to the attention of Secretary of War Robert T. Lincoln, who promised the Hunkpapa leader would return to his agency before 1883 came to a close. In April, the order came through, and the post returns recorded the departure of Sitting Bull and his followers with a military escort. In a newspaper interview given at Fort Randall before the party’s departure aboard the steamer W. J. Behan, Sitting Bull summarized his reasons for resisting white encroachment. “White men like to dig in the ground for their food,” he stated. “My people prefer to hunt the buffalo as their fathers did. White men like to stay in one place. My people want to move their tepees here and there to the different hunting grounds.” Comparing the lives of non-Indians on farms or in towns to those of slaves and prisoners, he concluded, “The life my people want is a life of freedom. I have seen nothing that a white man has, houses or railways or clothing or food, that is as good as the right to move in the open country, and live in our own fashion.”

The Twenty-fifth Infantry had rotated out of Fort Randall in late 1882, to be replaced by the Fifteenth Infantry. Among the regiment's
Pictured here with his family, Sitting Bull received curious visitors such as the unidentified white woman and child in this photograph. Captain Charles Bentzoni, who oversaw the Indians' incarceration, is mounted on the horse in the background.

first duties the following spring was the eviction of a group of squatters from the northeast corner of the Fort Randall military reservation. The thirty-seven families found living there were ordered to vacate the premises but were allowed to remain until the crops they had planted could be harvested. Much as his predecessors had done, commanding officer Lieutenant Colonel Peter T. Swaine sought to battle the boredom and isolation that negatively impacted troops, this time through post competitions. In September 1883, five members of the Fifteenth Infantry traveled to Fort Snelling, Minnesota, to compete for a place on an army rifle team. They were joined by a
The Fifteenth Infantry was among the last regiments to staff Fort Randall. Pictured here in front of the barracks is Company A.

In the spring of 1884, a bill was introduced into the United States Senate calling for the abandonment of several military reservations and the opening of their lands for settlement. Fort Randall was designated for closure, but the citizens of the region rose up in vehement protest over the measure. As a result of their concerns and those of voters in other affected areas, the Senate modified its bill to decrease the size, rather than close, the targeted military reservations. It appears that the arguments of area residents were well founded, for the post returns from the late 1880s abound with reports of Fort Randall troops being dispatched to deal with a multitude of annoyances and problems. In October of 1887 alone, the records note the return of two companies of the Fifteenth Infantry from six weeks of detached service at the Yankton Agency; the departure of ten members of Company H, Fifteenth Infantry, to remove a party of intruders from the Pipestone Indian Reservation in southwest Minnesota; and the dispatching of First Lieutenant David D. Mitchell to investigate problems at the Lower Brule Agency.72

The early 1890s brought another distinct group of soldiers to Fort Randall. Under the supervision and encouragement of Captain Jesse

71. Post Returns, Fort Randall, June, Sept. 1883, M617, Roll 990.
72. Ibid., Oct. 1887.
M. Lee of the Ninth Infantry and in the wake of the Ghost Dance phenomenon, the army sought to put the skills of Indian warriors to good use by recruiting Indian troops to serve at its frontier posts. In the fall of 1891, Company I of the Twenty-first Infantry mustered thirty-seven Sioux Indians into its ranks at Fort Randall. The army’s requirement that each new soldier judged to have an “improper” Indian name be given a “proper” English name probably explains the enlistments of Brigham Young and Miles Standish. The men of the Twenty-first Infantry were Fort Randall’s sole occupants, and their time at the post would be short-lived, for Fort Randall had become all but expendable. With the completion of the Northern Pacific Railroad across the northern United States and with steamboat travel having drawn to a virtual close, the post was no longer an effective point from which to move men and supplies. On 31 October 1892, the adjutant general’s office ordered Fort Randall abandoned, and on 9 November the army discontinued the post that had been so instrumental in the development of Dakota Territory.

Remnants of the walls of the Fort Randall chapel still stand today, although other preserved remains are few. As the post’s buildings were dismantled and scavenged for materials or left to disintegrate into ruin, its physical properties slipped from view, taking with them the memory of this frontier bastion of defense, safety, and peace. While the manicured parade grounds are overgrown and indistinguishable from the surrounding landscape, the legacy of Fort Randall remains. The soldiers who established the post in 1856 entered a world that was relatively new to non-Indians. The fact that an American Indian company closed the post in 1892 is testimony to the extent to which the region had been “civilized.” It is with those soldiers and the contributions they made to the development of Dakota that the legacy of Fort Randall is found.

74. Post Returns, Fort Randall, Nov. 1892, M617, Roll 990.
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