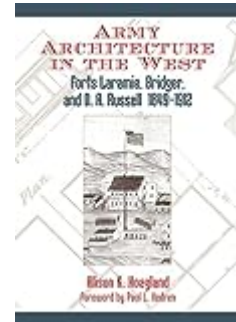


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alison K. Hoagland. *Army Architecture in the West: Forts Laramie, Bridger, and D.A. Russell, 1849-1912.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004. xiii + 288 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-3620-2.



Reviewed by William Dobak (U.S. Army Center of Military History)

Published on H-War (October, 2005)

The Army, Community, and Settlement in the West

“Wasn’t there a wall around this place?” During the four summers this reviewer spent as a seasonal ranger at Fort Laramie National Historic Site, this was the question about the fort’s past that visitors asked most frequently. One colleague lost patience and replied, “There used to be, but the Park Service took it down to give visitors a better view of the fort.” The reviewer thought of saying that the wall was built underground in order to fool the Indians, but somehow never got around to it.

No, the typical nineteenth-century army post in the interior of the American West was not a stone fortress on the Vauban model, like Fort Ticonderoga, or a log stockade in the woods, like Boonesborough, or a masonry coastal fort for harbor defense, like Fort Point, which now stands in the shadow of the Golden Gate Bridge. It was, rather, a collection of buildings to house troops along with the animals and supplies they needed. The center of an army post was the parade ground, where the garrison gathered every day to hear orders read (necessary in an era when many enlisted men were often illiterate), and the guard house, which housed the adjutant’s office and where the business of administration

was done. Around the parade ground stood soldiers’ barracks and officers’ quarters, and beyond them stretched, in all directions, stables and corrals, repair shops and warehouses. Close by the parade ground stood the post trader’s store, the only licensed private business on the military reservation; beyond the limits of the reservation lay unlicensed businesses with names like Three Mile Ranch (if the reservation boundary lay three miles from the parade ground), which dealt largely in liquor and sex, although the proprietors of these ranches might be substantial enough settlers to bid on army contracts for beef, hay and firewood. Each army post was a little community that often formed a nucleus for further settlement, a function that Alison K. Hoagland emphasizes in *Army Architecture in the West*.

Hoagland is a fifteen-year veteran of the National Park Service’s American Historic Buildings Survey who now teaches at Michigan Technological University. The story she tells in *Army Architecture* begins at the time when the United States nearly had reached its present continental limits and the army found itself forced to switch from a north-south axis of garrisons along the

“permanent Indian frontier” of the 1830s and 1840s to an east-west axis along the roads to Santa Fe and Salt Lake City, and to the Pacific Coast beyond. In the spring of 1849 the Regiment of Mounted Rifles, just returned from the war with Mexico, marched west and bought the adobe trading post, where the Laramie River enters the North Platte, for \$4000, dropping off several companies to start construction of more buildings while the rest of the regiment moved on to the newly acquired Oregon Territory. Fort Laramie, as the post came to be known, had this in common with the other two forts Hoagland studies: it was never the uttermost point at the end of a supply line; rather, it was always a way station on the road to somewhere else.

Forts Laramie and Bridger, both founded by entrepreneurs who traded with Indians and westering settlers, stood on the road that led along the North Platte and through South Pass, towards Salt Lake and the Pacific. The army itself founded Fort Russell in 1867, near the projected town of Cheyenne on the Union Pacific Railroad, a route that lay to the south of the old trail, but led to the same destinations. The purpose of all three posts was to protect the flow of settlement and commerce while a succession of treaties, decade after decade, wrested title to the country from its native inhabitants. (In 1849, the Office of Indian Affairs moved from the War Department to the newly created Department of the Interior largely because, during the previous forty-five years, the army had exchanged shots with Indians only a handful of times west of the Mississippi; the era of armed conflict in the West came only after the United States extended to the Pacific Coast.)

As Indian title became vastly diminished and railroads crisscrossed the country, the army withdrew from many of its older forts into larger, more modern garrisons. This move assured cheap supplies for troops, who continued to protect commerce (the railroad strikes

of 1877 had thrown a colossal scare into the propertied classes). Fort Bridger’s soldiers moved to Salt Lake City and Laramie’s to Denver. Only Fort Russell, aided by the strenuous efforts of U.S. Senator Francis E. Warren, a Cheyenne resident for whom the successor air base is named, survived the cuts of the 1880s.

To tell this story, *Army Architecture* employs more than 125 illustrations, including paintings, drawings and photographs, as well as architectural floor plans and elevations from the National Archives. Hoagland has consulted the right sources and generally tells the story well. The comparison of army posts to New England villages is somewhat labored, though, and sometimes the author’s American Studies vocabulary runs away with her reason, as, for example: “The many small forts ... resulted in the wide distribution of the army, which also served another purpose.... For those [civilians] who feared the tyrannical power of a standing army, the distribution of troops effectively scattered the regiment ... and privileged the company, which was smaller and less threatening” (p. 84). Cuddly, even. This was an army in which a company sometimes detailed half of its enlisted strength on construction, clerical, and other tasks, in hospital, kitchen, office, and warehouse; an army in which regiments had to juggle assignments so that each company had at least one commissioned officer present for duty. The army’s administrators did not have much time to consider civilians who worried about the power of a standing army, aside from the vengeful Southern Democrats in Congress whose votes stopped the army’s pay in 1877. It was not the army’s “purpose” to appear “less threatening.” Here and elsewhere in *Army Architecture*, the vocabulary of twenty-first century academe plays the author false. Nevertheless, the book provides a valuable look at the conditions of army life along main transportation routes in the West for a period of more than sixty years. It is worth the attention of historians who are interested in architecture, the army, and the American West.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: William Dobak. Review of Hoagland, Alison K., *Army Architecture in the West: Forts Laramie, Bridger, and D.A. Russell, 1849-1912*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. October, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10913>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication,

originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.