FORT PHIL KEARNY

Fort Phil Kearny witnessed the events of Red Cloud’s War against the Bozeman Trail forts, from 1866 to 1868. Soldiers and contracted civilians stationed there faced daily attacks from forces of well-organized Lakota, Northern Cheyenne, and Arapaho warriors defending their rich hunting and gathering home and sacred landscape.

FETTERMAN FIGHT

On December 21, 1866, Lakota, Northern Cheyenne, and Arapaho warriors engaged a military force commanded by Captain William J. Fetterman.

Ordered to rescue a besieged wagon train, Fetterman’s men pursued Crazy Horse and other warriors acting as decoys over Lodge Trail Ridge, where more than two thousand American Indians waited in ambush. The warriors attacked the soldiers, overwhelming the separated cavalry and infantry units.

The infantry was armed with Springfield single-shot rifled muskets, while the cavalry carried 7-shot Spencer carbines. The warriors’ main weapon was the bow and arrow, but spears, tomahawks, and war clubs, along with a limited number of firearms, were also used.

Fetterman and all eighty men with him were killed in under forty-five minutes. Reports indicate that roughly a dozen warriors lost their lives, and many more were wounded. The event was also known as the “Battle of Hundred in the Hand.” It was the worst defeat the U.S. Army experienced in the West, as well as the biggest victory for Plains tribes until the Battle of Little Bighorn ten years later.

WAGON BOX FIGHT

In August 1867, a war party of hundreds of Lakota and Northern Cheyenne warriors, led by Ogallala Chief Red Cloud, left their camp on the Big Horn River, aiming to destroy military posts along the Bozeman Trail. Some of the warriors rode toward Fort C.F. Smith, while others approached Fort Phil Kearny.

Fort Phil Kearny needed a steady supply of wood from the base of the Bighorn Mountains in order to construct the fort. The hundreds of soldiers there also needed a fuel source for cooking, as well as a stock pile of wood to keep warm during the upcoming winter.

Contracted civilian woodcutters were tasked with gathering wood from Piney Island (near present-day Story, WY) and transporting it back six miles to the fort, and soldiers were tasked with protecting these civilians. The timber was transported on wagon chassis from which the wagon boxes had been removed. To make a corral for their livestock along the trail from Piney Island to Fort Phil Kearny, the woodcutters took some of the wagon boxes and set them on the ground in an oval shape.

On August 2, 1867, Red Cloud’s warriors attacked one of the wood-gathering wagon trains. Twenty-six soldiers and six civilians headed to the wagon box corral and took cover inside.

Armed with breechloading rifles and under the command of Captain James Powell, the soldiers and civilians held off the warriors until a relief force arrived from the fort. Three soldiers were killed inside the corral, and the exact number of American Indian casualties are unknown.

The battle is also known as “They Surrounded the White Tents.” This was the first time a large force of mounted warriors faced sustained fire from relatively rapid-shooting breechloading rifles.
CONNOR BATTLEFIELD S.H.S.

County Road 67 (I-90 W Exit 9), Ranchester, WY 82839

Connor Battlefield State Historic Site is nestled in an oxbow of the Tongue River in the shade of cottonwood trees. The site is dedicated to the Battle of Tongue River between the U.S. Army and the Arapaho. The battle, led by General Patrick E. Connor, was the single most important military engagement of the Powder River Expedition of 1865 because it led to the Arapaho allying themselves with the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne during Red Cloud’s War between 1866 and 1868.

Today, the site consists of twenty camping sites, picnic tables, two restrooms, a playground, and horseshoe pits. Each camping site has a grill, fire ring and table, but no electricity or water. Two camping sites are ADA accessible. Camping is first come, first served and closes seasonally for the winter. Daily use is free, but the fee for camping is due upon arrival. For up-to-date openings and closures, please visit www.wyoparks.org.

INTERPRETIVE CENTER

A newly remodeled and expanded Interpretive Center was unveiled in 2024, made possible by a Helmsley Charitable Trust Grant. The facility features interpretive exhibits, original artifacts, archeological items, and an extensive selection of site-related literature within the bookstore. Knowledgeable and friendly staff are available to provide interpretation and answer questions, and educational programs, events, and tours are held throughout the year.

Hours and Dates of Operation:
Summer Hours
Open daily May through October
Winter Hours
Please call or visit our website for current schedule

AMENITIES

- Three self-guided interpretive trails:
  - Fort Phil Kearny Stockade - groomed unpaved path that is flat and wide
  - Fetterman Battlefield - 1.5 mile single-track, natural-terrain trail with rolling hills
  - Wagon Box - short, paved loop
- Indoor and outdoor restrooms
- Picnic tables
- WGFD Hunter Management Area (wgfd.wyo.gov)

RULES & REGULATIONS

- No overnight camping
- No removal of artifacts or natural resources
- No discharge of firearms
- Pets must be leashed at all times
- Grounds are open year-round and the Interpretive Center is open seasonally

INFORMATION

We acknowledge and respect that the land we are standing on is the ancestral homeland of the Arapaho, Cheyenne, Crow, and Lakota Peoples.

Hours and Info: www.fortphilkearny.com

FPK/BTA AFFILIATION

The Fort Phil Kearny/Bozeman Trail Association is a non-profit organization associated with the site that works for the preservation, education, and promotion of Fort Phil Kearny, the Bozeman Trail, and related sites. To learn more or to become a member, visit www.fortphilkearny.com.