

## **Grade 6 - Informational**

### **Scotts Bluff National Monument**

Scotts Bluff was an important landmark for pioneers traveling west in the 1800s. It stretches across 3,000 acres of land and rises more than 800 feet above the North Platte River in the Nebraska Panhandle. From its highest point, there is a view of Laramie Peak about one hundred miles away.

#### **The Mystery behind the Name**

In 1827, a young man named Hiram Scott worked for American Fur Company. At that time, fur companies realized it was efficient to trade manufactured items, such as pots and pans, for fur. The fur companies sent men west to trade with Native Americans. It is believed that Scott traveled west to keep records of the trades. He never returned home, and little is known about how Scott died. What is known is that his bones were found near cliffs in the spring of 1828. Soon after this, people began calling the area Scotts Bluff.

#### **Millions of Years of Geology**

The rock formations of Scotts Bluff are the remains of a ridge formed when the Rocky Mountains were being uplifted. The north face of the bluff is a time capsule of geologic history. A caprock of hard limestone has kept wind and rain from eroding the formations to the level of the plains. Under the caprock are layers of sandstone, siltstone, volcanic ash, and more limestone. These strata represent 22 to 33 million years of geology.

Ash beds can be found in some areas of Scotts Bluff. Within these ash beds are fossils of rhinos, tapirs, small horses, and camels.

The badlands area has the oldest rocks. This area was a floodplain for streams that flowed east as the Rocky Mountains were uplifted. The rocks found here contain the fossils of horses, prairie dogs, foxes, turtles, beavers, and cats.

#### **Traveling West**

During the mid-1800s, hundreds of thousands of people traveled west. These pioneers drove wagon trains along both shores of the North Platte River. The river twisted through miles of prairie grass where bison grazed. In spring, melting snow caused the river to flood its banks. Flooding increased the difficulty of traveling on the plains, but this was easier than the mountains pioneers would cross later.

Between the Platte River and Scotts Bluff, pioneers encountered the badlands. Steep gorges cut into the rock were barely wide enough for horses. Covered wagons were unable to travel through some parts of the badlands, so pioneers had to find a

different route.

Travelers saw Scotts Bluff towering above the plains several days before arriving. Reaching this point marked the end of the plains and the beginning of the mountains. When they got to the highest point of Scotts Bluff, pioneers knew they were about one-third of the way to Oregon.

### **Mitchell Pass**

Before 1851, travelers had to use the Robidoux Pass because a route through the badlands was impossible. In 1851, Mitchell Pass was opened just south of Scotts Bluff. Walls of rock three to four hundred feet high towered over the trail that measured between fifty and sixty feet wide. Travel was still difficult, but small wagons could cross the pass. Conestoga wagons that carried freight also used the pass. Mitchell Pass quickly became part of the main route on the Oregon Trail, reducing the journey by about eight miles.

Due to erosion, the deep ruts made by the wagons following the trail hundreds of years ago are now gone. A swale—the deep roadbed the wagons made—is still present at Scotts Bluff National Monument. Visitors can walk this roadbed that was part of the original Oregon Trail and experience what the pioneers did more than 150 years ago.

