

FIRST DRAFT

# Fort Crockett was a bustling fur-trade site in Brown's Park

By mid-April of 1836, most of the country knew about the siege of the Alamo in Texas that year and the deaths of more than 180 men defending it, including Col. William Travis, Jim Bowie and a former Tennessee congressman named David Crockett.

A year later, Crockett was honored in what would become Colorado when three fur traders opened a trading post on the Green River in Brown's Hole (now Brown's Park). They named their trading post Fort Davy Crockett. Some called it Fort David Crockett or just Fort Crockett.



BOB SILBERNAGEL

It was a short-lived post, probably operating for no more than three years. But during its brief life, many famous mountain men visited, people like Joe Meek, Doc Newell, Jo Walker, Antoine Robidoux and Kit Carson.

Although situated in a lush meadow next to the Green River, "The fort itself is the worst thing of its kind that we have seen on our journey," wrote doctor and amateur scientist Frederick Adolph Wislizenus after visiting in 1839.

"It is a low, one-story building constructed of wood and clay, with three connecting wings and no enclosure," he added. "In short, the whole establishment appeared somewhat poverty stricken, for which reason it is also known to the trappers as Fort Misery."

Wislizenus also said his small group of travelers had hoped to purchase meat from the fort. But they discovered that the proprietors were worse off than Wislizenus' crew, having recently bought a dog from some visiting Indians as their only source of meat.

The proprietors of the fort were William Craig, Philip Thompson and Prewett Sinclair or St. Claire. All had been involved in the fur trade for several years. It's not clear where Sinclair hailed from, but Craig was a native of Virginia and Thompson was from Tennessee. That may be why the trio decided to name their post after Crockett.

It's no mystery why they chose a site on the Green River in Brown's Hole. As historian LeRoy Hafen noted, "The mountain-walled valley ... had long been a favorite winter resort of the Indians."

Later, fur traders such as William Ashley of St. Louis and Etienne Provost of Taos found it a good stopping point on their journeys.

In addition, licenses were issued to traders to operate on the Green River near Brown's Hole as early as 1832, but the precise locations aren't known.

The fact the fort was named for Crockett suggests it was built soon after the news of the Alamo battle reached the area.

Kit Carson spent a winter at Fort Crockett in 1837-38, and again in 1839-40.

"I was employed as a hunter for the fort," Carson wrote in his autobiography. "And I continued in this service during the



BOB SILBERNAGEL/Special to the Sentinel

This meadow along the Green River in Brown's Park in Moffat County, just below where a Crockett plaque is located, is believed to be the site of Fort Davy Crockett.

winter, having to keep twenty men supplied with meat."

Thomas J. Farnham, who led a group of emigrants from Illinois to Oregon in 1839, was delighted to arrive at Fort Crockett in mid-August.

"As we rode into the hollow square, (we) received from Mr. St. Clair, the person in charge, the hearty welcome of an old hunter," Farnham wrote. "A room was appropriated immediately for our reception, our horses were given to the care of his horse guard, and every other arrangement within his means," was made to make the travelers welcome.

"Such kindness can be appreciated by those only ... who have starved and thirsted in these deserts and been welcomed after months of weary wandering, to 'Fort David Crockett.'"

In 1839, however, the fur trade was winding down and people were turning to other endeavors. Stealing horses was one profitable enterprise. Two notorious horse-theft events are linked to Fort Davy Crockett.

The first came in November of 1839, after a hunting party from the fort encountered some Sioux Indians and engaged in a brief battle, during which the leader of the Sioux party was killed.

In revenge, the Sioux snuck into Brown's Hole and made off with 150 horses from Fort Crockett.

In retaliation, a group of traders led by Philip Thompson headed northwest and stole about 50 horses from a band of Shoshone Indians, who were generally allies of the white traders.

When the Shoshones complained to those still at the fort, the traders were incensed by their colleagues' actions. A second expedition was mounted to recover the Shoshone horses from the first group of traders.

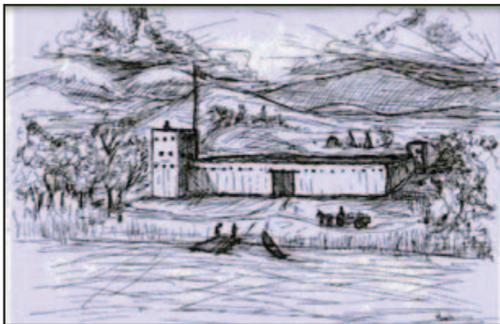
A standoff between the two groups occurred on an island in the Green River near the mouth of the Uintah River, well downstream from Brown's Park. The horse thieves eventually relented, and the stolen animals were returned to the friendly Shoshones.

But the event likely created a rift between the owners of Fort Crockett that never was repaired.

The second event, in the spring of 1840, also involved Thompson, although he probably wasn't the ringleader. Various sources say a



A 19th century drawing shows how a trappers' rendezvous may have appeared.



No known images exist to show what Fort Davy Crockett looked like. This is a drawing of Fort Uncompahgre, on the Gunnison River near present-day Delta, as it appeared during the same time Fort Crockett was operating.

mountain man named Peg Leg Smith led the trappers involved.

Those trappers worked with a Ute leader Walkara to arrange a raiding expedition to Southern California.

Different groups had been stealing horses from Southern California ranches for many years. But the 1840 raid was grander in scale and boldness.

Walkara divided his men into a dozen or more small cadres, which raided multiple horse herds around Los Angeles simultaneously, then gathered the 3,000 to 5,000 horses at a point far from the ranches and galloped them into the Mojave Desert.

Peg Leg Smith and other trappers guarded Cajone Pass at the west end of the Mojave. When a California posse came charging after them, they halted the posse with gunfire.

Then, they waited until the posse had bedded down for the night, when they stole the horses the Californians were riding, leaving the posse afoot.

Another posse from California managed to recover some of the horses that Walkara and the trappers were forced to abandon in the Mojave, while many others died of thirst in the great raid.

But the Utes and their trapper allies still arrived in the Brown's Hole region with more than 2,000 head of prime horses.

The last great trapper rendezvous was held

in 1840, near today's Pinedale, Wyoming, proof that the fur trade was waning.

Fort Crockett was apparently abandoned around 1840, even though small gatherings of natives, traders and trappers continued.

The partnership evaporated. Craig trekked to Oregon, where he settled in 1840, followed by Thompson two years later. Sinclair went west also, but to California, arriving there in 1843.

By 1844, when John C. Fremont stopped in Brown's Hole, accompanied by Kit Carson, on his return to St. Louis, he reported that he and his men camped on the Green River "opposite to the remains of an old fort on the left bank of the river."

Settlers who moved into Brown's Park in the 1870s didn't mention seeing the remnants of the fort.

Sources: "Fort Davy Crockett, Its Fur Men and Visitors," by LeRoy R. Hafen, *Colorado Magazine*, winter 1952; "A Journey to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1839," by Frederick Adolph Wislizenus; "Travels in the Great Western Prairies and the Anahuac and Rocky Mountains," by Thomas J. Farnham; "Walkara, the Master Horse Thief," by Bob Silbernagel.

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THIS WEEK IN THE LEGISLATURE

DENVER — Both the Colorado House and Senate have signed off on the final \$36.2 billion budget for the 2022-23 fiscal year, which begins July 1. Now the so-called Long Bill is on its way to Gov. Jared Polis, who has line-item veto power. He is expected to act on the bill within the next week or two.

**Today:** The House State, Civic, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee is to hear SB153, a measure that places more security measures on election officials, including how soon certain election officials, including county clerks, must be certified by the Secretary of State's Office in how to conduct elections. The measure has already cleared the Senate on a nearly 21-13 party-line vote, with Republican Sen. Kevin Priola of Henderson joining Democrats in supporting it.

**Tuesday:** The House Appropriations Committee is to hear HB1122, a measure that prohibits certain practices by Pharmacy Benefit Managers, including reimbursing pharmacies for prescriptions less than the national average for certain drugs. The PBMs, as they are known, often are hired or created by insurance companies to negotiate prices with pharmacies.

**Wednesday:** The Senate Finance Committee is to hear

SB198, a measure introduced in part by Sen. Ray Scott, R-Grand Junction, that would create the Orphan Wells Mitigation Enterprise within the Department of Natural Resources to help deal with the problem of reclaiming and remediating abandoned wells.

**Thursday:** The Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee is to discuss SB29, a measure introduced by Sen. Don Coram, R-Montrose, and Kerry Donovan, D-Vail, to guard against water speculation by mutual ditch companies.

**Next week:** A Senate committee is to consider a proposed ballot question for the 2022 general election to expand the state's homestead property tax exemption to allow qualifying seniors and veterans with disabilities who need to move into new homes because of health reasons, but still allowing them to qualify for the tax break without having to meet the 10-year ownership requirement.

All floor action and committees can be watched or heard on the Colorado Legislature's website at [lege.colorado.gov](http://lege.colorado.gov).

Check that website to see which measures are available for remote testimony, and how to register to speak.

— Charles Ashby

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