

FORT CHURCHILL

STATE HISTORIC PARK

The year was 1860, and the fear of Indian attacks was at its peak. Talk of Indian atrocities at Williams Station, a Carson River outpost 30 miles east of Carson City, filtered back to Carson Valley settlers, who demanded immediate protection.

Actually, the so-called Pyramid Lake War began on May 12, 1860 when three white men living at Williams Station kidnapped and held prisoner two Indian girls. Their action and refusal to release the girls led to reprisals by the Indians who killed the three men, released the girls and burned the station. Rumors magnified both the number of whites killed and the number of Paiutes thought ready to move against white settlements. Hasty and ill-conceived plans resulted in the movement of 105 volunteers to Pyramid Lake to avenge the deaths of the white men.

In the battle that ensued, the out-numbered whites suffered a major defeat. They lost two-thirds of their original force. The Indians' decisive victory led to immediate white retaliation. Urgent calls went out to California for regular army troops. The troops, bolstered by additional volunteers, moved against the Indian forces in early June. In this second battle, the out-numbered Indians were forced to retreat. Casualty reports ranged from four to 160 Indians killed while only two whites died.

Captain Joseph Stewart and his Carson River Expedition were then ordered to establish a post on the Carson River. Starting July 20, 1860, tens of thousands of dollars were spent to construct Fort Churchill, the desert outpost that guarded the Pony Express run and other mail routes. Hundreds of soldiers were based here between expeditions against the Indians.

The fort was named in honor of Sylvester Churchill, the Inspector General of the U.S. Army. It was built as a permanent installation. Adobe buildings were erected on stone foundations in the form of a square, facing a central parade ground. The Civil War made the fort an important supply depot for the Nevada Military District and as a base for troops patrolling the overland routes.

The fort was abandoned in 1869, and the adobe buildings were auctioned for only \$750. In 1884, the remains of soldiers buried in the post cemetery were moved to Carson City. The remaining graves are those of the Buckland family, pioneer ranchers who sold supplies to the fort.

grounds in 1871; it was not until 1957 that the state finally gained title. During the intervening 86 years, the fort served a variety of purposes, from a source of building materials for nearby structures, to a temporary shelter for travelers on the Carson River Trail.

In the early 1930s the Nevada Sagebrush Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution took an interest in preserving the fort and managed to have 200 acres transferred to the state. The National Park Service made restoration plans, and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) renovated what was left of this once proud fort. It was the CCC that built the Visitor Center.

World War II stretched America's manpower resources, and the fort was again abandoned, falling victim to vandals and weather. A renewed interest in the '50s arose, and in 1957 the fort became a part of Nevada's State Park System. Fort Churchill is an integral part of the history of Nevada and the American West.

A visit to Fort Churchill requires some imagination. The buildings that remain are in ruins; others simply no longer exist, and only markers tell what structures once stood there. The Division of State Parks maintains these ruins in a state of arrested decay.

BUCKLAND STATION

Samuel Buckland settled the valley in 1859 and began ranching. His early establishment served as an important way station for pioneer travelers on the Overland Route. It was one of the earliest ranches in the area, supplying emigrants, ranchers, travelers and the soldiers at Fort Churchill. The Overland Stage Company kept horses at the station and the Pony Express stopped here for change of mounts. As Fort Churchill was dismantled, Mr. Buckland salvaged materials from the fort buildings to build the two-story house seen today. The Buckland family lived in the house and rented rooms to travelers.

Buckland Station was acquired by State Parks in 1994. The exterior, and the first floor of the interior, has been renovated since the acquisition. An information kiosk outside Buckland Station can direct you to the sites and trails in the area. Buckland Station is located on the Carson River at Weeks Bridge, one-half mile south of the Fort Churchill entrance road.

CARSON RIVER RANCHES

Nevada State Parks acquired 3,200 acres along the Carson River in 1994. The properties, known as the Carson River Ranches, connect Fort Churchill State Historic Park with Lahontan State Recreation Area. This river corridor, with its diverse plant and wildlife communities, is a popular area for campers,

motorized travel on the ranches is not permitted, construction of public access parking areas and a scenic network of trails is ongoing.

NATURAL RESOURCES

Fort Churchill sits at an elevation of 4,250 ft. and is flanked on the south by rolling desert hills and higher areas of the Pine Nut Range. Churchill Butte, reaching an elevation of 6,250 feet, rises to the north and is the closest mountain. The Carson River originates in the Sierra Nevada Mountains to the west. It forms the major water resource in the area and is the only perennial source of surface water near the park.

Three distinct plant communities cover the park. The first and most diverse is the Floodplain River Terrace community. The most common vegetation is Big Sage, Fremont Cottonwood, Greasewood and Indian Ricegrass. The riparian community occurs along the Carson River and is dependent on the course of the river and the water table level. Typical species are Rushes, Sedges and Willow. The third plant community, Upland Scrub, lies north of the Carson River and consists of sparsely vegetated slopes. Species include Low Sagebrush, Squirrel tail and Bluegrass.

The wildlife at the park is typical of the Great Basin desert. Wild turkey, mule deer, bobcat, coyote and fox enjoy this habitat along with a variety of birds and reptiles.

Summers at the fort are hot with daytime highs of 94F and nighttime lows of 58F in July. Winters are cold with occasional snow.

