

**“The Girl I Left Behind Me”
Army Officers’ Wives on the Great Plains 1866 -1900**

Lesson Plan II: Understanding Rank and Class on a Great Plains Army Post

Recommended Grade Level: 8th through 12th

Description: This lesson consists of using fort maps and photographs to understand how physical layout of the fort supported hierarchies of rank and class. Students should be able to visualize social and military distinctions based on the way they apply color to the maps.

Time Required: Two forty-five minute lessons for all three activities.

National History Standards:

- Standard 4 Historical Research Capabilities
- Standard 5 Historical Issues-Analysis and Decision-Making

Background: Soldiers, officers, laundresses and officers’ wives mingled in their daily work, but Army procedures and regulations maintained a strict social order on each post. Officers and their families did not socialize with soldiers or laundresses (usually soldiers’ wives). In order to maintain the power of their rank, officers and their wives maintained social and physical distance when the residents of a Great Plains post were not at their jobs. However, rank and class did not apply to the young children of the post.

Objectives:

- To study how hierarchy of rank and class was maintained at an Army post.
- To use fort plans to identify physical space that maintained rank and class.

Preparation: Students should read the section titled “Centres of Refinement: Maintaining the Image of Rank and Class,” paying special attention to the subsection titled “Cooks and Household Servants.” Students would also benefit from reading the section on Fort Buford in “Forts of the Great Plains.”

Glossary: Teachers may wish to have students become familiar with the following terms either by reading this glossary or by studying these terms in a good dictionary. Some of the terms necessary for this lesson are based on the special language used by the Army in the 19th century.

Barracks – These were the housing quarters for soldiers who were also known as enlisted men. The barracks were large buildings with rows of beds where the soldiers slept and kept the trunks that held their personal belongings. Soldiers who were married to laundresses lived in the laundresses quarters. Barracks often had mess halls or dining rooms attached.

Class – this term is generally associated with industrialized societies, but it also indicates social standing. People of higher class have more money, more education, take

an interest in churches, schools, government, and often hire people of lower social status to work for them. In the 19th century, most officers came from the middle class, as did the officers' wives. Most middle class women hired one or two women to cook, clean, wash, and care for the children. The hired women were from the lower or working class.

Enlisted men – Ordinary soldiers were also called enlisted men. These men held the rank of private or corporal. They enlisted, or signed up, for five years of Army service. Many of the enlisted men in the frontier Army were immigrants from Germany, Ireland, or England.

Hierarchy – This term describes a social or military order in which some people are more important than others. For instance, a general is at the top of the hierarchy in military rank. Another example might be that middle class people stand higher socially than working class people.

Laundresses – A laundress was a woman who washed clothes and bed linens for a living. At an Army post, a laundress had military standing and was hired to wash the clothes of the enlisted men and the officers. If she washed for an officers' wife, she was paid extra. In the nineteenth century laundry was a very hard job requiring the laundress to carry water in buckets to the wash kettle, to boil the water and use long poles to lift the boiling hot clothes from the kettle. She might have to handle harsh chemicals such as lye and bleach. An Army laundress was likely to be married to a soldier and have some children. Laundresses lived at Camp Town or Soapsuds Row, a special portion of an Army post.

Officers' quarters – The term for housing. The officers' houses were usually built as duplexes or two homes under one roof. The section where officers' quarters were built was often referred to as Officers' Row. Non-commissioned officers or sergeants had quarters separate from the enlisted men as well.

Rank – officers held rank according to their ability, education, and opportunity to advance. Officers were promoted when an opening occurred at a rank above them. Officers' titles from lowest to highest are lieutenant, captain, major, lieutenant colonel, colonel, general. Officers' wives were addressed as Mrs. Colonel Jones, and their social standing in the garrison community related to their husband's rank.

Social Boundaries – social classes are often distinguished by where they live, the schools they attend, the clubs or churches they belong to. In the United States, the boundaries between classes are not firm, and people born to the working class can acquire the money and social standing of the middle or upper classes. However, social boundaries are established by neighborhoods, by manners, by clothing, and by the kind of work people do.

Strikers - Enlisted men who worked as an officer's attendant were called strikers. They might polish the officer's boots or carry his laundry to soapsuds row. When officers' wives lived in Army posts, they hired strikers to cook, clean house, look after the children, walk the dogs, and many other duties. They were dismissed from their regular daily duties (except combat) when they were assigned to serve an officer or his family. After 1880, they were to be paid a wage by the officer for their work.

Activity I: The plan for Fort Buford was included in General Philip Sheridan's *Outline descriptions of the posts in the Military Division of the Missouri*, published in 1876.

Students should study the plan of Fort Buford of 1874 (attached below). All of the buildings were drawn on the map and labeled for their current and previous use. Using colored pencils, crayons, or markers, color the buildings as follows:

- Red - Officers' quarters
- Yellow - Library and School
- Pink - Hospital
- Orange - Post Trader
- Green - Camptown/Laundresses Quarters
- Blue - Barracks/non.com. staff quarters
- Purple - Stables and corrals

Once the students have completed their maps, they should study the organization of the buildings. They should be able to answer the following questions.

- Do officers' and their families live next to laundresses and their families?
- What differences can you see between Officers' Row and Camp Town?
- Do enlisted men (soldiers) live next to officers' families?
- Who were the laundresses married to?
- In which buildings might the officers' wives have met laundresses or soldiers in their daily activities?
- Are the officers' quarters near the corrals? Why not?
- What other information can you learn from this fort plan? Are the red/pink/orange/yellow buildings in a different place from the blue/green/purple buildings?

Activity II. In the box below, make a colored check mark to indicate which activities and which locations might be appropriate for officers' wives, laundresses/maids, and strikers. **Use Red for Officers' Wives, Green for Laundresses or Maids, Blue for Strikers.**

Sewing	Cooking	School	Officers' quarters	Post office
Laundry	Child care	Entertaining	Laundress quarters	Post trader
Pet care	Church	Cleaning	Barracks	Library

Activity III. Discussion. Using their reading and the fort plan, students can engage in discussion of class and rank using the following questions as a guide.

- Where and when do officers' wives mingle with soldiers and laundresses? Do these encounters undermine or support the social order of rank and class?

