

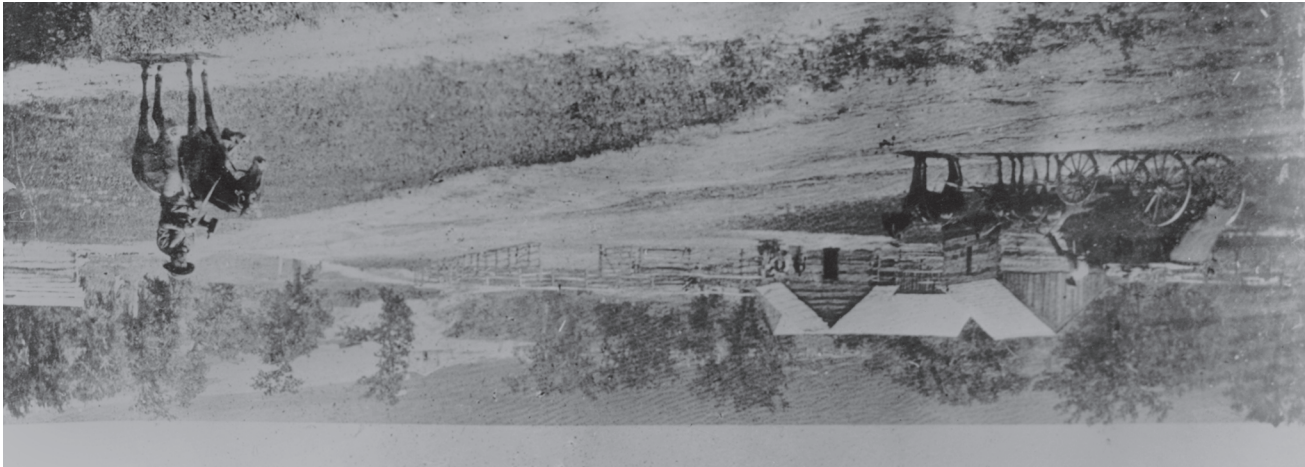
No one really knows why Hickok fired the shots that began this seemingly one-sided fight. Many explanations have been offered, including romantic versions of love, hate, theft, and even the conflict between the North and the South. Probably the best known version of the story was written by Col. Ward Nichols and published in the February 1867 issue of Harpers magazine. His story glamorized Hickok, now dubbed "Wild Bill," as a fighting frontier hero. In Nichols' account, Hickok single-handedly fought and killed 10 men with a gun and Bowie knife, "The M'Kandias' Gang...reckless, blood-thirsty devils who would fight as long as they had strength to pull a trigger." Although, supposedly carrying 11 buckshot and 13 knife wounds, Hickok emerged the victor. Nichols' story, along with others by such writers as Ned Buntline and J.W. Buel, glorified Hickok to the exclusion of the facts. Hickok became a western legend, and the true story of the fight at Rock Creek Station faded from memory.

Aftermath

He had left the gun for Wellman to use to defend the station. When they heard the shot, Woods and Gordon came running from the barn to the house. Hickok stepped into the doorway and wounded both men with a handgun. Woods ran around to a side of the house, where he fell and was killed with a grub hoe, presumably wielded by Wellman. Although wounded, Gordon tried to escape into the brush but was tracked down and killed with a load of buckshot. Monroe dodged a blow from the grub hoe and escaped into a ravine. Wellman, Brink and Hickok were arrested and tried for murder in Beatrice, but were acquitted after pleading self-defense. Monroe claimed his father and the other two men were unarmed, but he was not allowed to testify.

ambush, as he entered the doorway – ironically, with McCanles' rifle. He had left the gun for Wellman to use to defend the station.

Taken in about 1860, this photograph, discovered in archives at the California State Library in Sacramento, shows the East Ranch at Rock Creek Station. Settlers heading west on the Oregon Trail crossed Rock Creek in the valley, marked by the line of trees. California State Library, Sacramento, Calif.



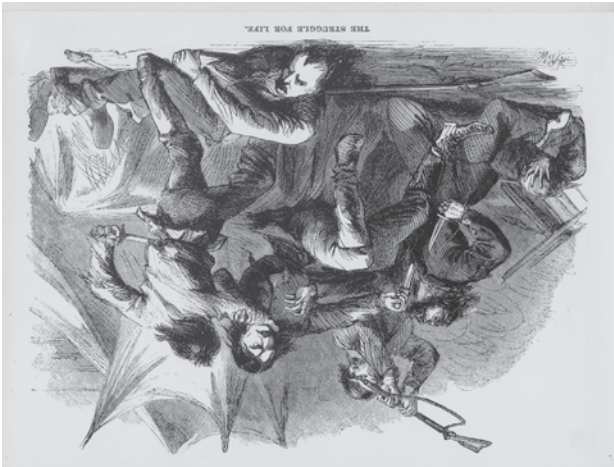
James Butler "Wild Bill" Hickok was a real "dandy" with a drooping moustache and shoulder-length hair. He was born in LaSalle County, Ill., on May 27, 1837. Nebraska State Historical Society Photograph Collections



After the killings, the Pony Express rode its last ride and the East Ranch was operated as a home station for the Ben Holliday* Stage Line. The West Ranch was owned by Wolf and Hagerstein, who were also involved in Overland Trail traffic. In 1865, D.C. Jenkins set up the second post office in Jefferson County on the West Ranch and ran the toll bridge. Holliday sold his East Ranch holdings to the Wells Fargo Stage Line in 1866. Within a year, traffic on the Oregon Trail tapered off as the railroad pushed westward.

Development of Rock Creek Station as a state historical park began in 1980. Archaeologists investigated and excavated sites at both ranches to determine building sites and to recover period artifacts. Visitors will find an excellent interpretive center, picnic and playground areas, hiking and nature trails, as well as a modern campground on an adjoining tract. Rock Creek Station is open year-round.

This drawing published with an artical in the February 1867 issue of Harper's magazine depicts Hickok in a hand-to-hand fight with a gang of assailants at Rock Creek Station. The story and illustration bore no truth to the events of July 12, 1861, when three men were killed. But the story helped establish Hickoks legend as a fearless gunslinger. Harper's New Monthly Magazine, February 1867.



Rock Creek Station State Historical Park

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Rock Creek Station

A State Historical Park



Nebraska Game and Parks Commission
www.OutdoorNebraska.org.

own portable pens or tie to trailer. The horse camp is primitive camping with a vault toilet, water, campfire rings and picnic tables.

A Stroll Into the Past a Self-Guided Tour

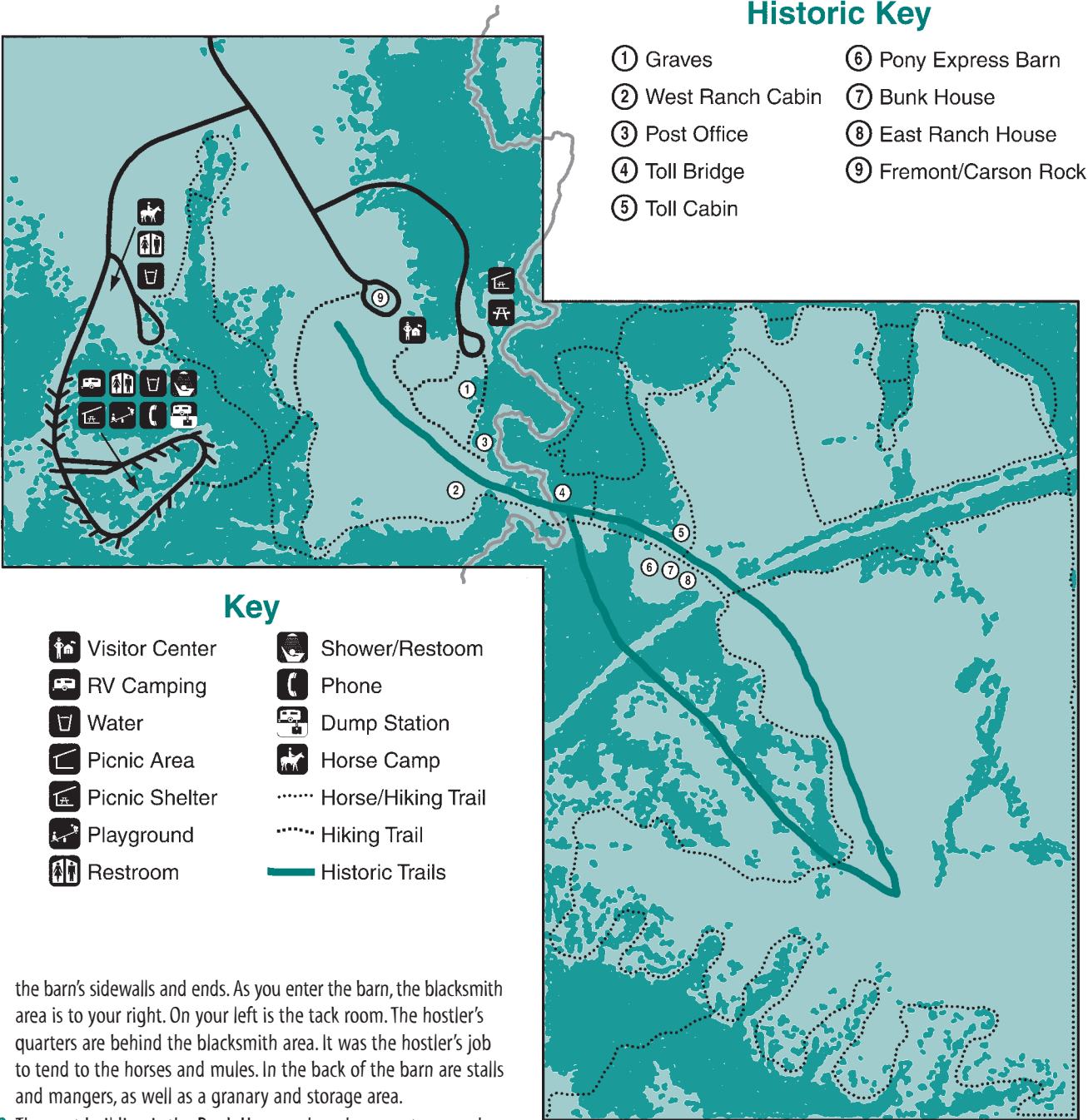
Glimpse life the way it was along the California-Oregon and Pony Express Trail. At the bottom of the hill are the West Ranch and an introduction to “road ranching.” Across Rock Creek at the East Ranch are the Pony Express Barn, Bunk House, Toll-Bridge Cabin and East Ranch Cabin, the site of the 1861 Hickok-McCanles fracas.

The Tour

1. Leave the Visitor Center by the south door and follow the sidewalk and grass pathway down the hill. This pathway parallels the trail rut carved by prairie schooners, horses, mules, oxen and immigrants.
2. At the sign, turn to the west (right). Note the deep trail rut or swale. This swale runs downhill to the West Ranch. Heavy trail traffic literally wore out and killed the native grasses, exposing the clay-based soils to both wind and water erosion. About 24 years of constant trail traffic prevented the grasses from re-establishing and allowed wind and water erosion to carve the deep swale you see today. One of our primary goals is to preserve this trail rut. Re-establishing and maintaining a strong stand of native grasses to hold the soil and prevent further erosion has been our best management strategy.
3. Turn to your left. The sign points toward the only marked gravesites in the park. The California-Oregon Trail stretches nearly 200 miles. Some historians believe that if the graves of all who died along the way were evenly spaced, there would be a grave every 500 feet. Most died from sickness or injury, not from Indian attacks, as movies and TV tend to portray.
4. Continue down the hill. The stone building is a replica of the 1865 Post Office. Owned and operated by D.C. Jenkins, it was the second post office in Jefferson County, originally called Jones County.
5. Proceed to the West Ranch Cabin. Note its construction, the half-dovetail joints hold the logs in place and tighten with age. Spaces between the logs are chinked. This historically was done with a mixture of mud and grasses. We have added some masonry concrete and/or latex chink to increase the durability of the chink joint. The West Ranch Cabin was a regular “Road Ranch,” a privately owned business catering to travelers and providing goods and services for profit. Travelers often complained that the prices were high. “Road Ranching” was fairly common during the late trail period of the 1860s.
6. From the West Ranch Cabin, walk east toward Rock Creek. You are walking on the original trail rut. As you approach the horseshoe bend in the creek, don’t worry about paying to cross the Toll Bridge. David McCanles, however, did require travelers to pay ten to 50 cents to cross, depending on the weight of the load and the ability to pay. Given Rock Creek’s steep banks and rocky bottom, travelers were willing to pay. Remains of the original bridge were not found when the State Historical Society excavated the ranches in 1980 and 1981. Perhaps flood-stage waters swept away evidence of that bridge. For many years, Rock Creek was the primary source of water for filling barrels attached to the wagon-sides. One would suppose that these waters also were the source of many illnesses and perhaps death.
7. Continue east toward the East Ranch buildings. As you climb out of the creek bottom, you will spot the Toll Bridge Cabin to the left. This was where toll was paid to cross the bridge. The cabin would have doubled as a bunkhouse for employees, as space was very limited.
8. Enter the Pony Express Barn through the gate on the east side of the corral. Feel free to enter the buildings. The barn was re-constructed based on the daguerreotype photograph of the ranch taken in 1860. Note the “stockade-style” log construction of

Rock Creek Station

Historic Key



the barn’s sidewalls and ends. As you enter the barn, the blacksmith area is to your right. On your left is the tack room. The hostler’s quarters are behind the blacksmith area. It was the hostler’s job to tend to the horses and mules. In the back of the barn are stalls and mangers, as well as a granary and storage area.

9. The next building is the Bunk House, where hungry stagecoach passengers ate. The door is on the east side. While filling, meals would not meet particularly high standards due to insects and lack of sanitation. Mark Twain mentions Rock Creek Station in his book, “Roughing It,” based on his journey to Nevada by stagecoach.
10. Next is the East Ranch Cabin, site of the Hickok-McCanles fracas and killings on July 12, 1861. This building would have been the ranch house and the headquarters of Rock Creek Station.
11. Continue east from the cabin to the bulletin board under the large cottonwood tree near the abandoned railroad right-of-way. Face the west. It was close to this spot that the photographer took the only known photo of the station during its working days. This old photo greatly assisted workers during the reconstruction of the ranch buildings. Visualize a stagecoach stopped near the bunkhouse and a businessman sitting astride his horse.
12. A 3-mile hiking and horseback trail follows the south side of the old railroad right-of way. Historic trail ruts are visible here, heading into the East Ranch area.
13. Another hiking and horseback trail, just north of the East Ranch Cabin leads into the creek area. It loops along the creek and ties to another loop along the north boundary of the park. These trails return to the ranch or the toll bridge.



The Rock Creek Station State Historical Park Visitor Center is a good place to begin your tour.

14. To reach the picnic area from the West Ranch, continue north along the graveled path from the Post Office. A mowed trail from the picnic area leads up the hill to the Visitor Center.
We hope you enjoyed your stroll into history here at Rock Creek Station State Historical Park. If you have any questions about the history or the park facilities, please inquire at the Visitor Center, we will be glad to try to answer them.



Visitors to Rock Creek Station State Historical Park travel along a trail from the East Ranch during the 1993 celebration of the 150th anniversary of the Oregon Trail.