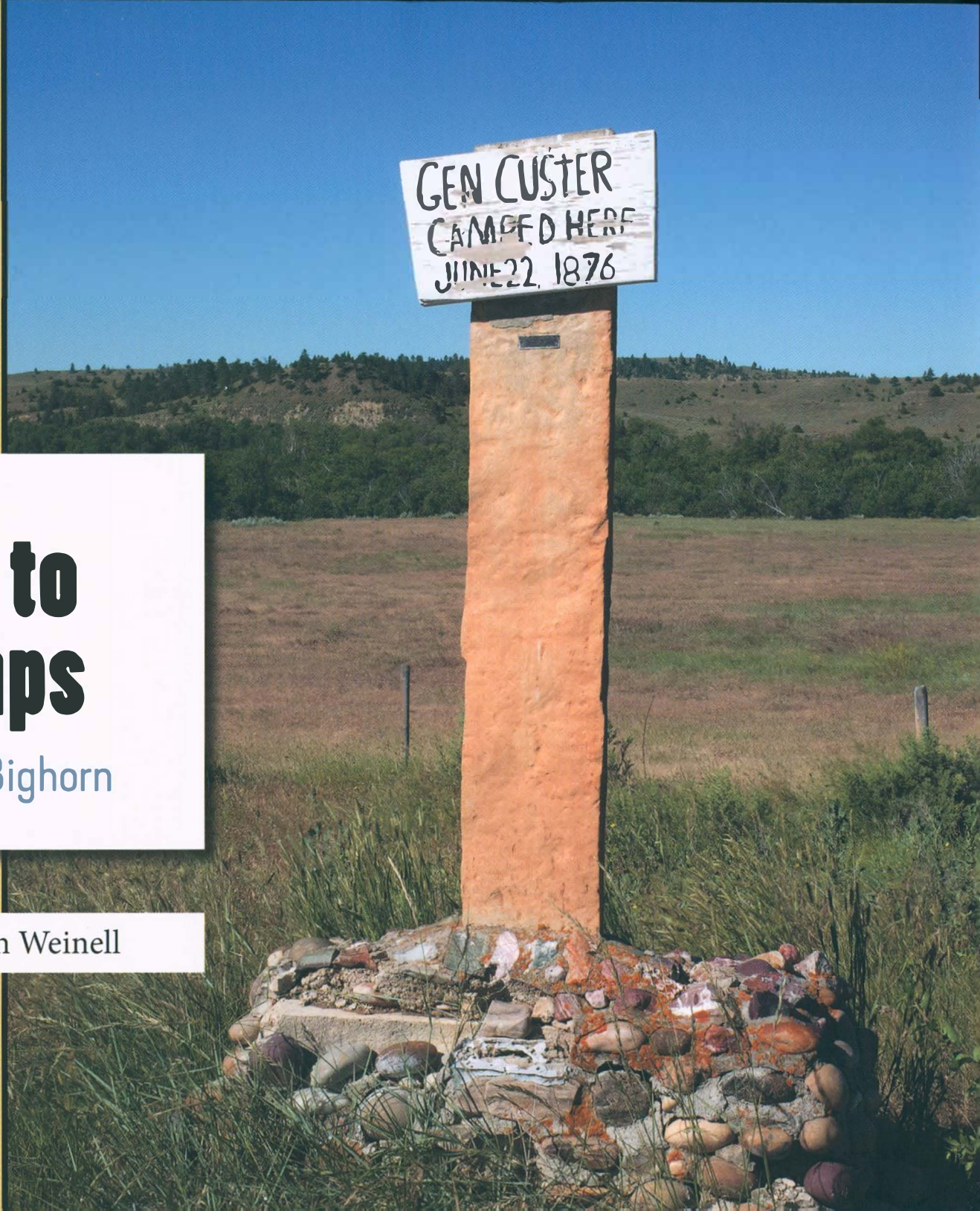


# A Field Guide to Custer's Camps

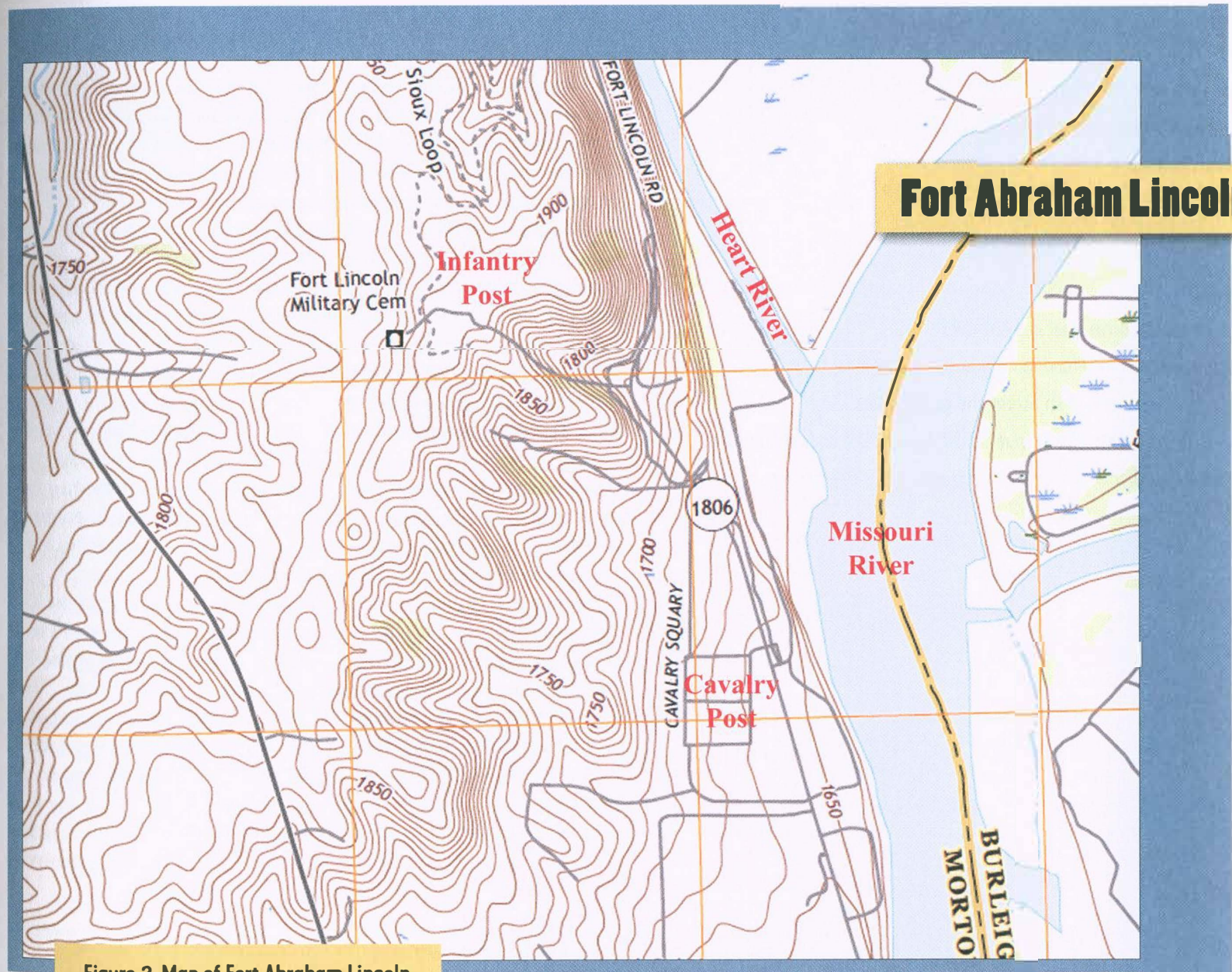
On the March to the Little Bighorn

Don Weinell

A photograph of a wooden sign mounted on a tall, rectangular stone pillar. The sign is weathered and has the text "GEN CUSTER CAMPED HERE JUNE 22, 1876" written on it in black paint. The pillar is set on a base of stacked stones. The background shows a grassy field with a line of trees and a clear blue sky.

GEN CUSTER  
CAMPED HERE  
JUNE 22, 1876





**Fort Abraham Lincoln**

**Figure 2. Map of Fort Abraham Lincoln**

# Fort Abraham Lincoln

**General Location:** 5.0 miles south of Mandan, North Dakota

**Ownership Status:** public (North Dakota State Park)

**GPS Coordinates:**

Entrance Gate: 46.756123, -100.841838

Cavalry Post: 46.759140, -100.845542

Infantry Post: 46.770286, -100.853018

**Directions:**

1. From Bismarck, drive west on I-94 to Exit 153
2. Turn south (left) onto Mandan Avenue and go 0.8 miles
3. Turn west (right) onto Main Street and go 0.5 miles
4. Turn south (left) onto 6th Avenue SE (ND Hwy 1806) and go 7.0 miles
5. Turn north (left) onto Fort Lincoln Road and go 0.6 miles to the Entrance Gate

Fort Abraham Lincoln began as an infantry post named Fort McKeen in the spring of 1872. It was originally designed to garrison three companies of infantry. On November 19, 1872, the fort was renamed Fort Abraham Lincoln. The following year, the fort was expanded, and an additional six companies of cavalry were authorized to be garrisoned there. Although the fort had a combined force of nine companies with a single post commander, the infantry and the cavalry quarters remained separate. The infantry occupied the bluff above the confluence of the Heart and Missouri Rivers, and the cavalry was located in the valley next to the Missouri. The two sub-posts were separated by about one mile. Over seventy-five permanent buildings were eventually constructed.

The six companies of cavalry at Fort Abraham Lincoln represented half of the US Army's 7th Cavalry Regiment. The balance of the regiment's companies was stationed at other outposts throughout the country. The 7th Cavalry's deputy commander, Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer, had the additional duty of serving as the expanded fort's first post commander.

As preparations were being made for the departure of the Dakota Column from Fort Lincoln in 1876, additional troops and supplies were transferred to the post. All twelve companies of the 7th Cavalry were brought together for the first time since 1868. They were joined by two companies of the 17th Infantry (companies C and G), one company of the 6th Infantry (Company B), a detached battery of three Gatling gun crews from the 20th Infantry, and an assortment of military and civilian support personnel.<sup>6</sup> All of the new temporary arrivals were housed in tents on the fort. Additionally, the six companies of cavalry already garrisoned at the fort were removed from their barracks and put into tents south of the post.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>From newspaperman Mark Kellogg's first article relating his travels with the 7th Cavalry, *Bismarck [ND] Tribune*, May 17, 1876.

<sup>7</sup>Elizabeth B. Custer, *"Boots and Saddles" or Life in Dakota with General Custer* (London: American Cowboy Books, 2015), Kindle.

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Commanding the Dakota Column was Brigadier General Al-  
fred Terry. He was the commander of the Department of Dakota and  
was based at Fort Snelling, Minnesota. He arrived at Fort Abraham  
Lincoln shortly before the column's departure. The actual command-  
er of the 7th Cavalry was Colonel Samuel Sturgis, but he was on de-  
tached duty in St. Louis at the time. This put Custer in the role of  
acting commander of the 7th Cavalry during the campaign.

On the morning of May 17, 1876, most of the Dakota Col-  
umn had been previously staged on the bluff near the infantry  
post. The cavalry, however, was still positioned in the valley below.  
With Custer in the lead, the 7th Cavalry conducted a formal parade  
through their post before ascending the bluff to join the rest of the  
column. Accompanying Custer were his wife, Libbie, and his sister  
Maggie, who was married to Lieutenant James Calhoun of the 7th  
Cavalry. As they reached the top of the bluff, they gazed back toward  
the cavalry post below. It was from this point that the reflection of  
the approaching troops was seen in the low clouds above. "As the sun  
broke through the mist," Libbie Custer later wrote,

a mirage appeared, which took up about half of the line  
of cavalry, and thenceforth for a little distance it marched,  
equally plain to the sight on the land and in the sky. The  
future of the heroic band, whose days were even then  
numbered, seemed to be revealed, and already there  
seemed a premonition in the supernatural translation  
as their forms were reflected in the opaque mist of the  
early dawn.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.





Figure 3. A reconstruction of the Custer House at Fort Abraham Lincoln





**Figure 4. A reconstructed Cavalry Barracks at Fort Abraham Lincoln**





**Figure 5. One of three reconstructed blockhouses on the Infantry Post at Fort Abraham Lincoln**





**Figure 6. The Cavalry Post, as seen from the Infantry Post at Fort Abraham Lincoln. It was from this point that Libbie Custer and others reported seeing the reflection of the approaching cavalry troops in the clouds above the valley as the Dakota Column began their march.**