UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL SURVEY OF HISTORIC SITES AND BUILDINGS

1. STATE	2. THEME(S). IF ARCHEOLOGICAL SITE, WRITE "ARCH" BEFORE THEME NO. Theme XV West-
Montana	ward Expansion 1830-1898 (Transportation & Communication).

3. NAME(S) OF SITE	4. APPROX. ACREAGE
Fort Benton	

5. EXACT LOCATION (*County, township, roads, etc. If difficult to find, sketch on Supplementary Sheet*)

6. NAME AND ADDRESS OF PRESENT OWNER (*Also administrator if different from owner*)

7. IMPORTANCE AND DESCRIPTION (*Describe briefly what makes site important and what remains are extant*)

Significance: Fort Benton, Montana, the head of navigation on the Missouri River, was, during its heyday in the late 1860's, the 1870's and early 1880's, the leading distributing point on the Northern Plains. From 1859, when the steamer Chippewa reached Benton, until the 1880's, numerous steamboats piled up the muddy Missouri from St. Louis and other points bringing merchandise and passengers to this frontier town.

As pointed out by Dr. Paul Sharp, in his Whoop-Up Country:

"Fort Benton in the post-Civil War years was the hub of an overland transportation network radiating as spokes in a giant wheel to the busy gold fields along the circumference of North American civilization. Through the treeless, dusty streets of this frontier village moved the commerce of the continental heartland.

"To supply freight for these trails, toylike, shallow-draft sternwheelers fought their way up the Great Muddy, as capricious a watercourse as commerce ever forced to do its will. Senator Ingalls' famous description, 'a little too thick for a beverage and a little too thin for cultivation,' paid tribute to its dirty waters. The upper river was especially dangerous, for treachery lay under the shallow, murky waters in shifting sand bars, constantly changing channels, and the countless snags on which the fragile 'Mountain' boats might be 'stove in' without warning.

8. BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES (*Give best sources; give location of manuscripts and rare works*)

Paul F. Sharp, Whoop-Up Country (Minneapolis, 1955), 5-6; Hiram M. Chittenden, History of Early Steamboat Navigation on the Missouri River (New York, 1903), II, 264-276.

9. REPORTS AND STUDIES (*Mention best reports and studies, as, NPS study, HABS, etc.*)

10. PHOTOGRAPHS * ATTACHED: YES ☐ NO ☒	11. CONDITION	12. PRESENT USE (*Museum, farm, etc.*)	13. DATE OF VISIT July 1954
14. NAME OF RECORDER (*Signature*) Ray H. Mattison		15. TITLE Historian	16. DATE August 10, 1960

*DRY MOUNT ON AN 8 X 10½ SHEET OF FAIRLY HEAVY PAPER. IDENTIFY BY VIEW AND NAME OF THE SITE, DATE OF PHOTOGRAPH, AND NAME OF PHOTOGRAPHER. GIVE LOCATION OF NEGATIVE. IF ATTACHED, ENCLOSE IN PROPER NEGATIVE ENVELOPES.

(IF ADDITIONAL SPACE IS NEEDED USE SUPPLEMENTARY SHEET, 10-317a, AND REFER TO ITEM NUMBER)

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SUPPLEMENTARY SHEET

This sheet is to be used for giving additional information or comments, for more space for any item on the regular form, and for recording pertinent data from future studies, visitations, etc.   Be brief, but use as many Supplement Sheets as necessary.   When items are continued they should be listed, if possible, in numerical order of the items.   All information given should be headed by the item number, its name, and the word (cont'd), as, 6. Description and Importance (cont'd) . . .

STATE	NAME(S) OF SITE
Montana	Fort Benton

"Perched at the head of navigation, Fort Benton was an un-usual frontier town. 'Chicago of the Plains' the village proudly called itself--'the door through which the country to the east, west and north of it was entered.' Eastern pilgrims always watched with mingled emotions the motley crowds that greeted their boat as it nosed into the wharf, for there stood merchants in high-collared broadcloth coats, French-Canadian and Creole rivermen wearing bright-colored sashes, tough trappers and traders heavily armed and wearing buckskin, bullwhackers and muleskinners in coarse, rough denim, and, in the background, red savages wearing leggings and blankets.

"This diverse collection of humanity was eloquent testimony that Fort Benton was the most cosmopolitan city on the plains. Through this inland port passed pious missionaries and hunted desperadoes, merchants and gamblers, American soldiers and British policemen, hopeful land-seekers and speculators, miners, roustabouts, muleskinners, bullwhackers, and cowboys. Immi-grants from nearly every nation of Europe visited it, as well as wanderers from China and Negroes from the Deep South.

"The human stream pouring through Fort Benton was a constant reminder that the northern plains were the commercial hinterland of the proud little river town. With justifiable enthusiasm, the local editor could claim that his little village 'commands the traffic of the country, holds the key to the business houses of the Territory . . . /is the/transportation centre of Montana.' With the opening of the Canadian plains, the country to the north was regarded as an addition to Fort Benton's territory--'a vast expanse of country . . . extending into Her Majesty's dominions, its natural and permanent tributary.'"

Fort Lewis, later known as Fort Benton, was established on the site of the present town in 1847 by Alexander Culbertson, the famous fur trader. The original fort was a temporary structure but it was later replaced by a large permanent fort built of adobe. By 1848, the name Fort Benton started to appear on the records, and on Christmas Day, 1850, the name was formally changed to Fort Benton. This post became the most important fur and trading post in Montana.

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STATE	NAME(S) OF SITE
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With the discovery of gold in Montana in 1862, the Missouri River route became one of the principal routes to the gold fields of that territory. Many of the miners came up the Missouri to Fort Benton by steamboat and then traveled by land to Bannack, Virginia City, and other gold mining towns.

With the invasion of the free traders in the late 1860's, the monopoly of the Indian trade so long held by the American Fur Company and the Hudson's Bay Company, ended. With the support of such merchants as I. G. Baker, T. C. Power and William G. Conrad, these traders established a trade empire, centering at Fort Benton, over the northwestern United States and western Canada.

The Montana gold rush and Indian trade combined, greatly increased the Missouri River traffic. At times there were thirty to forty steamboats on the river between Fort Benton and the mouth of the Yellowstone. In 1868, total shipments valued at $1,270,000 were shipped down the river from Fort Benton and $1,394,000 shipped up the Missouri to that town.

With the coming of the railroads the town of Fort Benton and the river traffic rapidly declined. In 1887, the year which the James J. Hill interests and the Montana Central Railway completed their lines to Fort Benton, there were 21 steamboat arrivals; in the following year there were only three.

Remains: Very little remains of the Fort Benton of the 1860's and 1870's. A blockhouse and a portion of the adobe walls still stand. The riverfront, along which the steamboats once docked and unloaded their cargoes, seems to be unchanged.