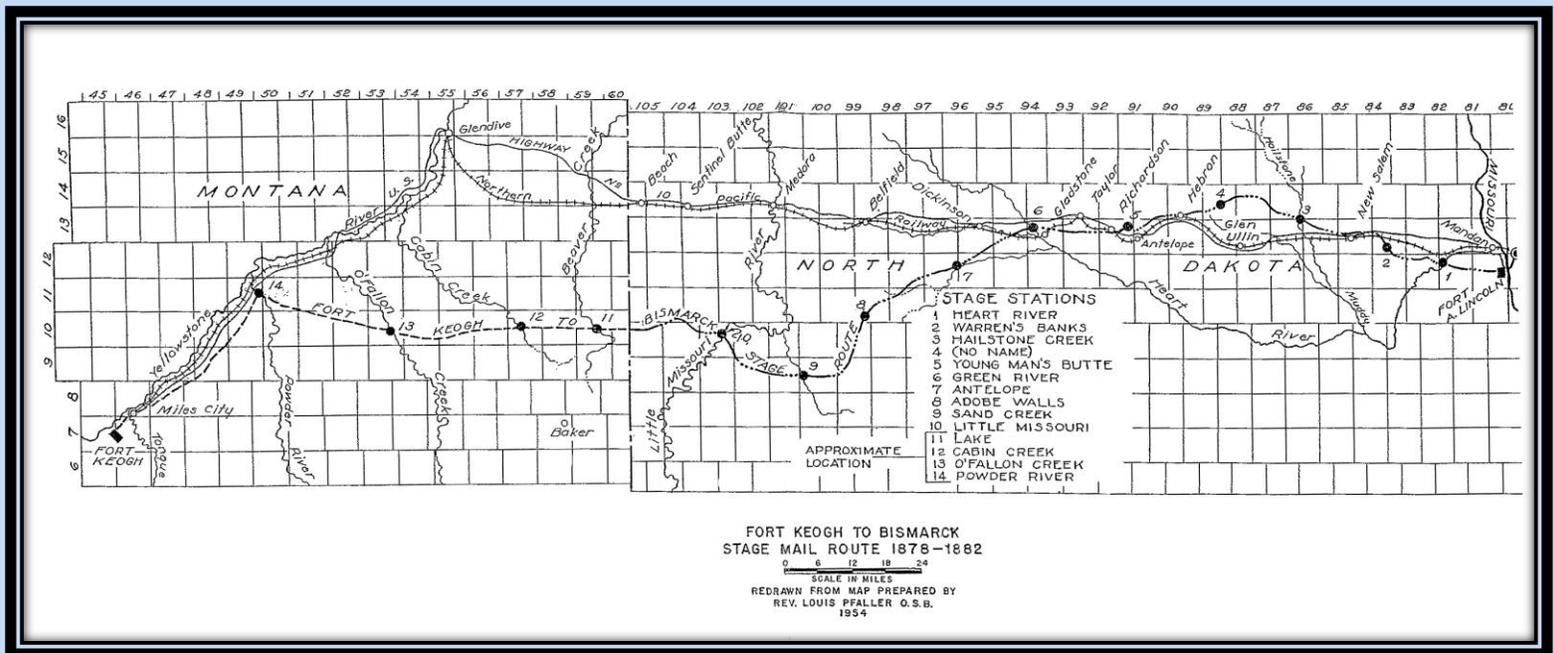


## Before there were roads, there were trails...

Long before the railroad provided easy transportation through Dakota Territory, the demand was high for a direct route to connect Dakota to Montana, Idaho and Washington. The Northern Pacific rail line reached Bismarck from the east in June of 1873, but to travel further west across the territory was a long and treacherous proposition. Not only was it was unsettled wilderness with unpredictable and often harsh weather, but also the threat of hostile Indians was ever-present.

It was not until after the Battle of the Little Big Horn proved disastrous for Custer's 7th Cavalry that the United States government established an official route between Fort Abraham Lincoln in Mandan, North Dakota, and a new fort at the confluence of the Tongue and Yellowstone Rivers near Miles City, Montana. For four years until the completion of the railroad between Bismarck and Miles City, the trail was crucial to connect the frontier on the northern tier.



## Fort Keogh

Fort Keogh was completed near Miles City, Montana, during the summer of 1877, roughly a year after the catastrophic Battle of the Little Big Horn on June 25 & 26, 1876.

“Following the Custer Massacre the United States Army accomplished a project it had long contemplated – the construction of a strong military base along the Yellowstone. Before 1876 the army was bound to live up to the Treaty of 1868 by which all military posts were forbidden on the Indian hunting preserve; after the Custer disaster it was still bound but proceeded to build, nevertheless, as a ‘military necessity.’” (*Fort Keogh Trail*. n.d Theodore Roosevelt National Park. <http://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Research/Digital-Library/Record.aspx?libID=o273373>. Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library. Dickinson State University.)

General Nelson A. Miles had reached the confluence of the Tongue and Yellowstone Rivers the previous August, just two months after the battle, and established a permanent military station there. The next spring, when the Yellowstone River became navigable, supplies for a stockade and a building crew arrived. Although General Miles was the first commanding officer at the fort, he named it Fort Keogh in honor of Captain Myles Walter Keogh who fought valiantly and perished at the Battle of the Little Big Horn.

Steamboats traveling the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers initially delivered supplies and mail to Fort Keogh, but this method was unreliable because the rivers could only be navigated about half the year. A new overland route was desperately needed to connect Fort Keogh with Fort Abraham Lincoln through dangerous territory. The distance between the two forts was more than 300 miles.

### **The Keogh Trail**

The Keogh Trail, or “Post Office Route No. 35,051” as it is referred to in the National Archives, began operation in 1878 and continued for four years. Stations were situated about 17-18 miles apart along the trail to provide fresh horses for the riders, who drove light buckboards to maximize speed and aimed to make 75 miles per day. “Each day a fresh driver left the opposite termini, so that at least four stages were traveling east and four west continuously.” (*Fort Keogh Trail*. n.d Theodore Roosevelt National Park.

<http://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Research/Digital-Library/Record.aspx?libID=o273373>. Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library. Dickinson State University.)

The route roughly followed the Custer Trail of 1876, diverging from it for only a few miles at several locations. The Custer Trail campsites afforded the natural and most convenient places to set up stations, which usually consisted of a dugout in the side of a hill to shelter and protect the station tender who cared for the stock. The isolation in the unsettled territory surely made loneliness the constant companion of the station tenders. Although a rider would stop at least twice a day, the stops were brief and only allowed time to hitch up fresh horses.

The trail was known by several names, including the Tongue River Road, the Fort Keogh Trail, The Bismarck and Fort Keogh Stage Road, and the Government Trail. In 1882, the Northern Pacific completed the rail line from Bismarck to Miles City and the use of the Keogh Trail as a mail route was discontinued.

The traffic on the trail, however, did not cease but actually increased with caravans of homesteaders heading for Dakota Territory and beyond. Trappers also used the route to bring in pelts for trade and ranchers moved herds of cattle to market along the well-traveled Keogh Trail. What started as a mail route between two forts became a super-highway for settling the west, and the precursor to roads and highways across North Dakota and Eastern Montana.