

# Fort Davis

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## The Twenty-fourth U.S. Infantry at Fort Davis 1869-1872, 1880

Being a soldier in the army on the Texas frontier at a post such as Fort Davis was certainly not a glorious or easy job. The work was hard, the hours long, living conditions less than ideal, and the isolation from civilization was often sorely felt. At posts where soldiers of African-American descent served, there were often racial prejudices, which existed within the army ranks as well as in many of the nearby communities. Nevertheless, black regiments exhibited excellent morale and esprit de corps.

The Twenty-fourth U. S. Infantry was organized in November of 1869 following the passage of the Army's Reorganization and Reduction Act earlier that year. The Twenty-fourth was in actuality a consolidation of two other African-American regiments of Infantry (the Thirty-eighth and the Forty-first established in 1866). The Thirty-eighth had been recruited in St. Louis, while the Forty-first was organized in southern Louisiana. The staff appointed to command the new Twenty-fourth, headquartered at Fort McKavett, Texas, was a colorful one – headed by Colonel Ranald Slidell Mackenzie and Lieutenant Colonel William R. Shafter.

Units of the Twenty-fourth served at Fort Davis from November of 1869 until April of 1872 and again from June to November of 1880. But as Company E of the old Forty-first was stationed at Fort Davis when the consolidation took place, and it was one of the companies that became Company B of the new Twenty-fourth, many of the same men had been serving at the post since March of 1868.

During their first tour of duty at Fort Davis, the enlisted men of the Twenty-fourth were involved in all the usual, tedious, everyday soldier routines and fatigue details in garrison in addition to constructing fort buildings, guarding stage stations, and scouting and patrolling hundreds of miles of desolate terrain. In 1871, detachments of Company F of the Twenty-fourth were stationed at El Muerto (Dead Man's Hole) located approximately thirty-five miles west of the post and at Barrilla Springs situated twenty-eight miles northeast of the Fort Davis. Both were isolated, vulnerable mail stations on the San Antonio-El Paso Road. A major expedition was undertaken in the summer of 1871, led by Lieutenant Colonel Shafter, after Comanches attacked Barrilla Springs and drove off forty-four mules and horses belonging to the Twenty-fourth Infantry. In December of that year, Shafter, with enlisted men of the Twenty-fourth led another expedition in pursuit of American Indians.

In 1880, the Twenty-fourth U. S. Infantry returned to Fort Davis, and from June until October the post served as the regiment's headquarters. Army records show that the men were engaged in a variety of garrison duties being detailed as cooks in the post hospital, as gardeners, as bakers in the post bakery, as teamsters, carpenters, masons, and plasterers in the Quartermaster Department, as laborers in the Subsistence Department, and as overseers in the post school. They also provided an invaluable service on the frontier by building military roads, guarding stage stations, constructing and repairing military telegraph lines, scouting, guarding waterholes, and escorting government supply trains, survey parties, freight wagons, and mail coaches.

Enlisted men of Company H of the Twenty-fourth were involved in a major engagement with the Apaches during the Victorio Campaign when the supply train they were guarding was attacked at Rattlesnake Springs on August 6, 1880. Troops of Twenty-fourth Infantry played a crucial role in the battle that forced Victorio to retreat and flee to Mexico. Two months later, Mexican forces killed Victorio and many of his followers in the Battle of Tres Castillos in Mexico.

For the most part, being an African-American infantryman at Fort Davis was a thankless job. More of his time was spent searching for elusive Apaches or Comanches than was spent skirmishing with them. The miserable duty of guarding a waterhole in the west Texas sun to keep the American Indians from drinking there –or monotonous work like erecting miles of telegraph poles and stringing telegraph wire – probably did not have much significance for the individual soldier performing the tasks. The Twenty-fourth U. S. Infantry, however, left an indelible mark on the Southwest and played an important role in the peaceful settlement and development of the Trans-Pecos and Big Bend area of Texas.