

Fort Davis

National Historic Site
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



The Ninth U. S. Cavalry at Fort Davis 1867-1875

The Ninth Regiment of Cavalry was organized in September 1866 in Greenville, Louisiana. It was initially comprised of men from the New Orleans vicinity. Later that year, recruiting was conducted in Kentucky, so most of the enlisted men in the newly formed regiment were from either Louisiana or Kentucky. In March 1867, when the regiment was ordered to San Antonio, it numbered 885 enlisted men.

Early in June, 1867, the regiment was ordered into western Texas and on July 1, 1867 Companies C, F, H and I, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Wesley Merritt, officially reoccupied Fort Davis, the post having been abandoned since 1862. Merritt and his Ninth Cavalry troopers had a sizeable job ahead of them. In addition to helping to build a new post, they had the Apache and Comanche Indians to contend with. It was their responsibility to protect the San Antonio - El Paso Road, as mail and stage traffic on it had resumed following the Civil War. Enlisted men at Fort Davis were detailed on scouts and patrols. Small detachments were often stationed as guards at stage stations such as Barilla Springs located on a barren flat twenty-eight miles northeast of Fort Davis, Barrel Springs twenty-two miles west of the fort and named for the wooden water barrels stuck into the earth near the station to collect water, and El Muerto or Dead Man's Hole situated approximately thirteen miles northwest of Barrel Springs.

For the most part, the patrols were only successful in checking Apache and Comanche activities, as their tracks were often the only visual signs the troops had of their presence in the area. In September 1868, a detachment from Fort Davis composed of troopers from Companies C, F and K, Ninth U. S. Cavalry, under the command of First Lieutenant Patrick Cusack, met with more success. In pursuit of a band of about 200 Apaches who had been raiding near Fort Stockton, the lieutenant and his men came upon the Indians in camp just north of present-day Big Bend National Park. Three of Cusack's men were wounded in the attack. Indian casualties numbered between 20 and 25 with as many warriors wounded. The soldiers captured over 200 head of stock and all of the Apaches' provisions and equipment.

In 1869, Colonel Edward Hatch, Ninth Cavalry replaced Merritt as post commander of Fort Davis. During his brief stay at the post, he ordered three separate expeditions against the Mescalero Apaches in the Guadalupe Mountains. All three expeditions involved Ninth Cavalry troopers from Fort Davis.

Lieutenant Colonel William (Pecos Bill) Shafter, in the summer of 1871, led three companies of the Ninth on an expedition that led them into the previously unscouted region of the southern Staked Plains. Although Shafter failed to encounter any American Indians, he did capture a Mescalero woman who, through an interpreter, gave much valuable information on Apache activities in the region. In addition, he proved that the army could successfully survive in an area that was almost void of surface water. In October of the same year, Shafter, committed to the belief that neither the Apaches nor Comanches would stay in a threatened area, again led an expedition into the Big Bend. Again no native peoples were confronted, but the knowledge gained of area terrain proved invaluable to subsequent patrols and scouts.

In September 1875, the Ninth U. S. Cavalry was transferred to the District of New Mexico with headquarters at Fort Union. The eight years the regiment spent in Texas and at Fort Davis in helping to open the region to peaceful travel and settlement were successful. Under the command of energetic officers, these black enlisted men developed their unit into a first-rate regiment and amassed an impressive record on the western frontier.