

Fort Davis

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



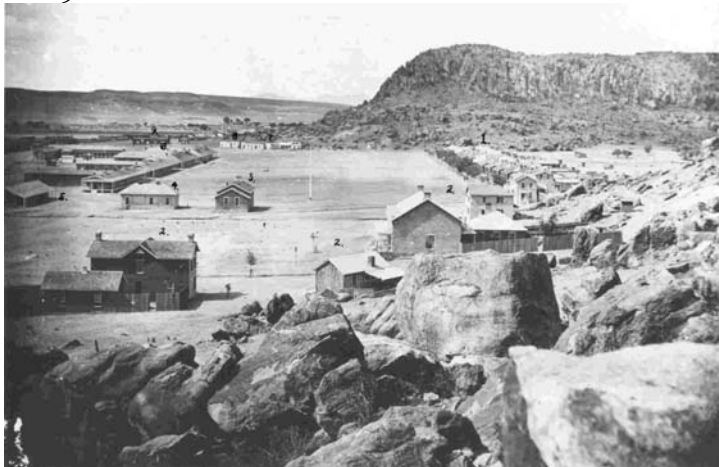
AFTER THE SOLDIERS LEFT:

The Decades Following the Abandonment of Fort Davis, Texas

By the late 1880s, life at Fort Davis had become uneventful and monotonous. Several years had elapsed since Apaches had conducted raids in the area. The steel rails of the Texas Pacific and Southern Pacific railroads crossed the region, but bypassed the post and town.

As early as August 1887, General David S. Stanley, in command of the Department of Texas, recommended the fort's abandonment. "Fort Davis is very much out of place," he wrote. "It is inconvenient to get to it and to draw troops from it, and it is expensive." The actual decision to abandon the post was made by Secretary of War Redfield Proctor on the advice of General Stanley in March 1891. In early July the last troops stalwartly marched away from the majestic post that had been occupied by the army for over thirty years.

As the fort had been built on land leased from the John James family of San Antonio, the property unceremoniously returned to its owners. The last official military act was to have the remains of the officers, enlisted men, and their dependents that were buried in the Post Cemetery moved to the San Antonio National Cemetery. This was accomplished in 1892.



Fort Davis, 1885

Civilians Occupy the Old Post

Although the Jameses had no interest in working or developing the fort property themselves, they had less of a desire to sell it. Therefore, beginning in 1891 and continuing for the next twenty to twenty-five years, a series of caretakers took on the task of overseeing the old post.

The first caretaker was Robert Fair, an ex-soldier who had served at the post with the Ninth U. S. Cavalry. Fair was just one of several soldiers of African-American descent who remained in Fort Davis after their enlistments were up. Many of these former Buffalo Soldiers worked as cowboys and ranch hands on the newly-established cattle and sheep ranches in the area.

During the 1890s and early 1900s, many of the fort's buildings were occupied. The officers' quarters were considered the best rent houses in town. The Post Hospital became the favorite spot for parties, picnics and dances. The Post Chapel was used for Sunday and weeknight church services.

Buildings Fall into Disrepair

By the mid-teens, however, many of the structures had fallen into disrepair. Only a handful of tenants resided in the quarters and there was no regular caretaker. The era of the 1920s saw further deterioration. Troops from Camp Marfa, later known as Fort D. A. Russell, as well as from other Texas forts, used the grounds of the old fort for practice maneuvers.

In 1929, motion picture star Jack Hoxie and his company of cowboys and cowgirls came to Fort Davis with plans to turn the fort into a set for making western movies. Hoxie and company remodeled some of the officers' quarters and publicized plans to develop the entire site. By 1931, however, the group

found themselves in serious financial troubles and within the year pulled up stakes.

In the late 1930s, both the State of Texas and the National Park Service showed interest in the fort property, but the outbreak of World War II turned their attentions and the energies of the entire nation to the war effort.

Property has New Owners

In 1945, the James family sold the property to local rancher M. L. (Mac) Sproul. Sproul, in turn, sold the property in 1946 to Houston attorney, David A. Simmons, and his wife, Elizabeth. The Simmons's plans called for developing the old fort into a "deluxe tourist court." By 1950, three officers' quarters and two kitchen quarters had been remodeled and were being rented as guest cottages. A cafe and curio shop opened and a horse concession was in operation. In addition, facilities were constructed in Hospital Canyon to accommodate a summer camp for boys.

Work of the Fort Davis Historical Society

David Simmons's untimely death in 1951 brought a halt to development. Two years later, his widow leased the property to the newly- established Fort

Davis Historical Society. This organization had one major goal—the preservation of the old army post. For the next seven years, the society worked diligently to achieve this goal.

In 1960, the society solicited the aid of Senator Ralph Yarborough and Representative J. T. Rutherford. The following year, Rutherford introduced a bill into the House of Representatives calling for the establishment of a "National Historic Site at Old Fort Davis." To lend support to the bill, local historical society members traveled to Washington to appear before the House and Senate subcommittees on National Parks. Their trip and all of their efforts were soon rewarded.

Establishment of Fort Davis National Historic Site

On September 8, 1961, House of Representatives Bill 566, authorizing the establishment of Fort Davis National Historic Site, became Public Law 87- 213 with the signature of President John F. Kennedy. In 1963, preservation and stabilization work began on the buildings and ruins of the old fort. Today, Fort Davis National Historic Site is managed by the National Park Service, Department of the Interior. It is considered one of the best surviving examples of a frontier Indian Wars post in the American Southwest.



Restoration work on the Enlisted Men's Barracks began in 1963