

# Fort Scott

HISTORICAL AREA, KANSAS

## FORT SCOTT HISTORICAL AREA

Fort Scott, in Bourbon County, extreme eastern Kansas, was established in 1842 as a base for U.S. Army peace-keeping efforts along the vague "Permanent Indian Frontier" between the established states of the Union and the unorganized territories to the west. It was abandoned in 1853, after this concept was dropped, and Kansas and Nebraska territories were opened to white settlement. The fort area then became a civilian community and, during the "Bleeding Kansas" period [1854-1861] — when free-staters and pro-slavery factions struggled for supremacy — was the focus of much civil disturbance.

During the Civil War [1861-1865] Fort Scott was reactivated and was an important supply center and staging area for Union armies fighting in Missouri, the Indian Territory [modern Oklahoma], and Arkansas. Civil commotion attendant to new railroad construction brought the Army back in the 1870's for a short period.

Few of the many western fort sites available to the modern traveler and history buff reveal so many separate aspects of our nation's Westward Expansion experience.

## THE INDIAN FRONTIER

The Fort Scott story begins early in our history, when the nation was struggling with many problems of a new and expanding country. We were experiencing our first "population explosion". In 1790 about four million people lived in the United States; by 1830 there were over twelve million, and more coming! Ten new states had been formed and admitted to the Union. How could conflicting rights of the original inhabitants — the American Indian — and those of the land-hungry newcomers be justly resolved?

Statesmen of the time developed a very reasonable solution — move the Indians farther "Out West", beyond the organized, developing states. A permanent frontier between the states and the wild country to the west would give the Indian tribes security from white interference. It would make use of wild, little-known country which nobody thought the white man would ever need, or want. It was sincerely believed the idea was fair to all concerned, that it would work, and both cultures could then co-exist in peace.

To define this border and control it, the Army was to build a chain of outposts extending from Fort Snelling (modern Minneapolis, Minnesota), southward into Louisiana. Fort Scott was to be one of these, roughly half-way between Fort Leavenworth, in northern Kansas, and Fort Smith, in western Arkansas. A military road to connect these forts was begun in the 1830's. Although a far cry from today's freeways, this wagon road served well as a transportation medium for the time, and was in use for many years. Modern highway US 69 follows much the same route north and south of Fort Scott.

Because of distances between the outposts, a spe-



cial breed of troops was developed to handle the situation. These were the colorfully uniformed dragoons — not only dashing cavalymen, but men well trained in infantry combat as well. Their mobility permitted quick response — for those days — to any frontier problem. Their job was to guard the border — to keep the Indians from bothering the settlers, and vice versa.

Fort Scott was officially founded May 30, 1842, and manned by two companies of the First United States Dragoons. Its name honored General Winfield Scott, "Old Fuss and Feathers" of Mexican War fame, who had only recently been made General-in-Chief of the U.S. Army.

This was a good site. Here, where a flat limestone bluff overlooks the valley of Marmaton River, were the resources they needed. It had a commanding position atop the bluff, with wide vistas — essential in the days before radar. There was ample building stone, and plenty of water in the creeks — enough, perhaps, to power a water-wheel sawmill. There was grass for the horses and many trees for lumber; even beds of coal, to supplement the fuel supply! It was furthermore within the Indian Country, yet quite close to the State of Missouri [admitted to the Union over twenty years earlier].

Construction of the fort buildings began at once. The post required houses for officers, barracks for the men, large stables for the many horses, as well as a hospital and the many other accoutrements of an isolated military base. All these had to be built almost from scratch, since the nearest supply points were hundreds of miles distant and land transportation was slow and difficult. Nevertheless, after first laying out the parade ground — 350 feet square — work began on the buildings that very first season of 1842.

The dragoons policed Indian Territory [modern Oklahoma], prevented undue encroachment of frontiersmen, and maintained peace in the region. In conjunction with troops from Fort Leavenworth they took part in three major expeditions: those led by

Capt. Philip St. George Cooke [1843], Maj. Clifton Wharton [1844], and Col. Stephen W. Kearny [1845]. Ranging the northern Plains and the Rocky Mountains, the dragoons marched as far as the modern states of New Mexico, Colorado and Wyoming. They also helped provide escort for wagon-trains on the Santa Fe Trail.

## THE "BLEEDING KANSAS" YEARS

In 1846 — four years after Fort Scott was established — came the War with Mexico. Most of the dragoons were rushed off to distant battle-fields; some fifty infantry soldiers kept the post functioning. Things were quiet here during those war years — 1846-1848. Perhaps this was because the fort was here; if so, the "Indian Frontier" idea was working well hereabouts.

War's end [1848] brought over a half-million square miles of new territory into the Union. This included California — soon to have a Gold Rush. Frontier action suddenly moved far west of here. The Army decided that Fort Scott had served its purpose, and on April 22, 1853, the last of the garrison marched out, and the post was abandoned. Other winds of change were also sweeping the nation.

By 1850, pressure to open more land for white settlers became politically irresistible. The idea of a "Permanent Indian Frontier" collapsed, and in 1854 Congress established Kansas and Nebraska territories, open to white settlement. They would be admitted either as free, or slave-holding states depending on votes of the population within them. Since slavery was the burning national issue, eastern Kansas was soon peopled by zealots of both persuasions.

Both factions of these newcomers struggled to control the territorial legislature, and to bend the outcome of pending elections in their favor. Emotions ran high; many atrocities were committed by both sides against each other. Eastern newspapers — the "media" of those days — provided full coverage, and "Bleeding Kansas" attracted national attention.

Meanwhile, the buildings at Fort Scott were quickly picked up as Army surplus by some of the new settlers — and a few former troopers who decided to remain here and "grow with the country". More people moved into the surrounding area, and in a year or so over 600 persons lived nearby. They logically named their new community after the old fort. The town of Fort Scott became a focal point for the turmoil and violence of this period of history.

One of the officers' quarters — still intact — had been converted into the "Free State Hotel", a stopping place for John Brown's fanatical anti-slavery followers. It lay directly across the parade ground from another rude inn, converted from an infantry barracks — now in ruins — called the "Western Hotel". This was a meeting place for pro-slavery activists. Tradition has it that the tragic Marais des Cygnes incident was plotted in this "Western Hotel". On May 19, 1858, several inoffensive free-state farmers were taken prisoner, lined up and shot



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down, in a ravine about 40 miles north of Fort Scott. This "massacre" outraged northern states, and is one of many events which helped trigger the Civil War.

In order to quell the turmoil and maintain order, Federal troops were sent back to Fort Scott in 1857. They withdrew in a year or so — perhaps a bit too soon, for shortly thereafter a 70-man gang of free-soilers made a daybreak raid on the little settlement, with more killing as they were driven out by townspeople.

## THE CIVIL WAR PERIOD

Kansas finally gained admission to the Union as a free state in January of 1861 — the pro-slavery advocates had lost the struggle. By summer, that year, the Civil War was well underway. Confederates, under General Sterling Price — former governor of Missouri — defeated Union forces in August in a battle on Wilson's Creek, near Springfield, Missouri — only some 90 miles from Fort Scott. Fear of Confederate invasion north and west spread through this region. Fort Scott was reactivated, and troops were dispatched here at once, since it was widely believed that Fort Scott was the logical hub of Union defense on the Missouri border. By autumn, 1861, over 5,000 troops were encamped in and around Fort Scott, and rumors of Confederate moves in this direction kept things tense into the winter.

However, the Confederates lost a major battle at Pea Ridge in northwest Arkansas in March of 1862, thus reducing the danger of Missouri's joining the Confederacy or serving as a springboard for attacks on Kansas.

Although the threat of Confederate attack was greatly diminished, Fort Scott remained an important military post throughout the Civil War. It served as headquarters for the Army of the Frontier, commanded by Major General James G. Blunt, Kansas' only two-star general in the War. It served, also, as a supply center and troop depot, and the area about where you now stand was covered with warehouses, barracks, and stables for the hundreds of horses and mules needed to haul army supply trains. Farther out, the environs were dotted with camps of various Union regiments, some from as far off as Indiana and Wisconsin.

Fort Scott was the first home of two regiments of black soldiers — the First and Second Kansas Colored Volunteer Infantry [later officially designated the 79th and 83rd United States Colored Troops]. Kansas was the first Union state to recruit black soldiers; indeed the First Kansas Colored Infantry, commanded by Col. James Williams, was among the very first half-dozen black regiments in the Union Army. These troops compiled a proud military record — by end of the war they had suffered more casualties than any other Kansas regiment.

Fort Scott attracted all manner of war refugees — escaping former slaves from Missouri and Arkansas, dispossessed Indians, largely from Oklahoma

[then the Indian Territory], and war-ruined Union sympathizers from various parts of the border region. A visitor in 1863 called Fort Scott the "largest town in southern Kansas". It was also the home of Colonel Phillip's battalion of Indian Home Guards. In 1862 National Cemetery Number One was established a mile or so south of the Fort, proper. There it is possible to see the graves of white and black and red men who fought and died for the Union.

Troops from Fort Scott had numerous fierce encounters with Confederate guerillas, the so-called "bush-whackers", who preyed on both sides. The notorious border raider, William C. Quantrill, in October of 1863 ambushed the escort of General Blunt near Baxter Springs, some 80 miles to the south, and the General only escaped because of the speed of his horse.

A year later [October, 1864], guerillas raided the defenseless village of Marmaton, a few miles west of Fort Scott, sacking the town and murdering many civilian inhabitants. However, there was no real threat to Fort Scott proper until late in 1864, when Sterling Price's great raid into Missouri brought shooting war close.

This last gasp of the Confederacy in the northern Trans-Mississippi west, was a serious effort. Price's advance was not checked until he got close to what is now Kansas City. Pushed away from St. Louis and Jefferson City, defeated at Westport, Price retreated south toward Fort Scott, hoping for supplies which he sorely needed. But at Mine Creek, up in Linn County about thirty miles north of here, Union troops under General Alfred Pleasanton fell upon General Price and his battered Confederates, defeating them in a brief and bloody battle on October 25, 1864. The invaders fled south, bypassing Fort Scott to the east as they hurried to safety in Arkansas. For the last time, the garrison and civilian residents of Fort Scott, heard gunfire and explo-



Black Soldiers. Their valor and competence first demonstrated at Fort Scott during the Civil War, led to the famous "Buffalo Soldiers" of later campaigns, far to the west.

sions in the distance and saw smoke darken the eastern horizon marking the place where Sterling Price burned his wagon train.

The Confederate States collapsed next spring [April 9, 1865] with Lee's surrender in Virginia. Fort Scott's military role seemed at an end; the last of the garrison moved out in October, 1865.

Most evidences of the Civil War period at Fort Scott have disappeared, victims of time and the elements. Only part of the old fort site was used — it was then "downtown" Fort Scott — and the troops were generally housed in tent camps on the town's outskirts. Although a few of the original fort buildings were used during the Civil War, the reconstruction plan is based on original 1842-53 aspect of the site.

## THE LAST HUNDRED YEARS

A railroad linking Missouri and the eastern cities with Indian Territory [modern Oklahoma] and Texas, was built through Fort Scott in 1869. This stimulated commerce and further settlement, but also aroused much unrest and turmoil about land titles and validity of squatters' claims to former Indian possessions. Once more the Army — now a peacetime force — was called back to Fort Scott!

Few troops camped in the old familiar setting, however. This was mainly a staff headquarters situation, with the troopers bivouacked at sites along the railroad line, well south of town. By 1873, order was restored, and the Army left Fort Scott once again — this time for sure! Oddly enough, neither World War I nor World War II occasioned any military development here. Fort Scott was a frontier post, and remains so in history.

Efforts by local citizens to preserve this colorful bit of American history were under way years ago. Progress was slow until Congress, in 1965, established the Fort Scott Historical Area, to be preserved by the City of Fort Scott, through a cooperative agreement with the National Park Service of the federal Interior Department. This bureau renders financial and professional aid to the community in their efforts to restore the area about as it was in the period from 1842 to 1863, when the western frontier lay here in today's heartland.

Since 1965, much has been accomplished. Several buildings have been stabilized and partly restored. Two will soon be refurnished with authentic period items. The approaches to the old fort, facing the city, have been vastly improved, with construction of the attractive pedestrian mall and restoration of turn-of-the-century business buildings nearby. Archaeological work has pin-pointed location of some long-vanished structures, such as the post powder magazine building.

Much more work is scheduled for the next few years; meanwhile visitors are welcome to see those parts of the project which are safely accessible, so long as volunteer guides are available for duty. Eventually it is hoped, full-time visitor service by a small permanent staff will be achieved.



Officers Row. Proudly rising above the Parade Ground, these handsome army-post duplex homes quartered dragoon officers and their families in the 1840's — even before Kansas was a state!

## ABOUT YOUR VISIT

Fort Scott, Kansas is about 90 miles south of Kansas City, Missouri, and 60 miles north of Joplin, Missouri, both cities on major airlines with rental car facilities. Continental Trailways busses serve Fort Scott on frequent schedules. Motorists find Fort Scott easy to reach — main U.S. Highway 69 passes through the City in a north-south direction, and U.S. Highway 54 passes through on an east-west course. The city of Fort Scott is well supplied with motels, campgrounds, restaurants, and tourist supply facilities.

The Old Fort buildings are on the Historic Site, which is on the northeast edge of the city's main downtown district. Auto parking is available quite near the historic buildings.

Since this Historic Site is still the scene of archaeological research and reconstruction work, parts of the area may be closed to visitors temporarily. However, it is open to visitors for partial viewing.

Fort Scott National Historic Site is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.

Groups who would like guided tours can make advance arrangements with the Superintendent, whose address is Old Fort Boulevard, Fort Scott, Kansas 66701.



Post Hospital. Once a haven for sick or wounded Army troopers, this fine example of 19th Century architecture serves today as a Visitor Center—information service, museum exhibits and rest-rooms—for the modern traveler.