



U.S. Department of the Interior  
Bureau of Land Management

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# Fort Craig

1854-1885

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# Before Fort Craig

Fort Craig lies in south central New Mexico on the Rio Grande, with the rugged San Mateo Mountains to the west and a brooding volcanic mesa punctuating the desolate Jornada del Muerto to the east.

**Native Americans**  
The Piro made their home in this area of the Rio Grande Valley. They lived in scattered villages (pueblos), and grew corn, beans and squash on the floodplains. The Apache also lived here, though they preferred mountainous areas, and alternately traded with and raided the Piro settlements. The arrival of the Spanish marked the beginning of the end of a way of life for both the Piro and the Apache. Although the Piro had a tense coexistence with the Spanish, mission churches were established

including the San Miguel Mission at Pilabó, present day Socorro. After the 1680 Pueblo Revolt, many of the Piro moved south to the El Paso, Texas area with the Spanish, probably against their will. Others scattered and joined other Pueblos, leaving the Apache in control of the region. The Spanish returned in 1692 but did not resettle the central Rio Grande valley for a century.

El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro, or The Royal Road of the Interior, was the lifeline that connected Mexico City with Ohkay Owingeh, (just north of Santa Fe). After a week or more on a segment of the trail known as the Jornada del Muerto (Journey of Death), traveling without water and in constant fear of Apache raids, weary northbound caravans rested and watered their exhausted animals near Fort Craig. As travelers proceeded north, they funneled their livestock herds along a narrow passage between a prominent volcanic mesa and the Rio Grande just northeast of Fort Craig. Here, at Mesa del Contadero or “Counter’s Mesa,” an observer on the mesa top counted the livestock that survived the deadly journey as they were herded through the narrow passage.

## TIMELINE

- 1540 Coronado expedition; Area inhabited by Piro and Apache
- 1598 Spanish colonial era begins
- 1821 Mexico wins independence from Spain
- 1845 Texas annexed by the United States
- 1846 New Mexico invaded by U.S. General Stephen Watts Kearney; Territorial period begins
- 1849 Garrison established in Socorro 1849–1851
- 1851 Fort Conrad activated 1851–1854
- 1854 Fort Craig activated

The transition from Spanish to Mexican rule in 1821 didn't bring many changes. When U.S. General Stephen Watts Kearney invaded in 1846 with his Army of the West, he promised that the U.S. would put an end to Indian raids. The U.S. established a network of forts in the new U.S. Territory of New Mexico, including a garrison at Socorro in 1849. The Socorro Garrison was replaced by Fort Conrad in 1851 and ultimately Fort Craig, in 1854.



Fort Craig circa 1865–1868: U.S. soldiers in front of the enlisted men's quarters.

Life at Fort Craig - Information on life at the fort, both positive and negative, has come from post returns, family letters and official correspondence. Although the routines of military life could be tedious, and sometimes dangerous, Fort Craig was apparently not a bad duty station. By 1859, post returns indicate that many of the amenities of life, including newspapers, magazines, books and social events were available to the occupants of the fort.

# Civil War

The Army had spent the early years at Fort Craig conducting campaigns against Native Americans when a new threat appeared on the horizon – Confederates. By July of 1861, Fort Craig had become the largest fort in the Southwest with over 2,000 soldiers and growing. The same year, the First New Mexico Volunteer Infantry Regiment was formed. This largely Hispanic regiment served with courage and honor under the command of Colonel Kit Carson.

In 1862, after capturing several military installations in southern New Mexico, General Henry Hopkins Sibley led an enthusiastic but poorly equipped brigade of about 2,500 Confederate troops up the Rio Grande to Fort Craig. Colonel R.S. Canby, the military governor of the New Mexico Territory, moved his troops from Santa Fe to Fort Craig with full knowledge of Sibley's movements through information received from Paddy Graydon's Spy Company and local New Mexicans.

Fort Craig's new massive gravel bastions were 'reinforced' with Quaker Guns (fake wooden cannons) and empty soldiers' caps alongside real cannons and caps with real Union soldiers under them. This impressive show squelched any Confederate plans for a direct assault. After days of unsuccessfully trying to lure Union forces from their heavily protected fort, Confederates moved north in an attempt to maneuver around Fort Craig and cut off Union supplies. With the Confederates on the move, Canby started north to ensure Fort Craig was not left isolated and vulnerable.



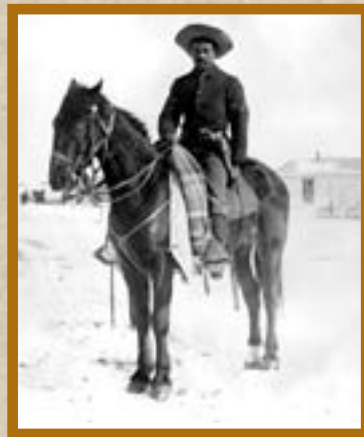
Confederate lancers, Battle of Valverde Reenactment, February 2004

## TIMELINE

- 1861 Confederate States of America is formed
- 1861 Confederates invade New Mexico from Texas
- 1862 Battle of Valverde, February 21
- 1862 Battle of Glorieta, March 28
- 1863 In the "Long Walk," Navajos and Apaches are relocated to Bosque Redondo
- 1864 General William T. Sherman's march through Georgia
- 1865 End of the Civil War, April 9
- 1865 President Lincoln is assassinated, April 14

On February 21, 1862, the Blue and the Gray clashed at Valverde Crossing, with both sides taking heavy casualties. At the end of the day, the Confederates held the field of battle, the Union still held Fort Craig, and the New Mexico Volunteers under Col. Miguel Pino found the Confederates' supply wagons and burned them. What remained of Confederate supplies were lost at the Battle of Glorieta (east of Santa Fe) on March 28th, forcing them to retreat to Texas and ending the Confederate push for military conquest of the West.

After the Civil War African-American soldiers of the 9th Cavalry and the 38th and 125th Infantry served at Fort Craig in the segregated frontier army. The infantry units served from 1866 to 1869, and the cavalry units in 1876, 1877, 1880 and 1881, during the Apache Wars. The courage and dedication of these "Buffalo Soldiers" was such that General William Tecumseh Sherman was moved to remark "They are good troops; they make first rate soldiers, are faithful to their tasks and are as brave as the occasion calls for."



Courtesy Western History Genealogy Dept., Denver Public Library

# Indian Wars to the present

After the end of the Civil War, the Army returned its attention to the Indian Campaigns. The primary function of the fort was to control Apache and Navajo raiding, and to protect the central portion of the Camino Real. Military excursions from the fort pursued such notable Apache leaders as Geronimo, Victorio and Nana.

By the late 1870s, attempts to control Indian raiding began to succeed. The Western Apache were subdued and forced to abandon their traditional homelands and move onto reservations.

The conditions on the reservations – disease, famine, cultural misunderstandings, and shifting or dishonest policies – incited numerous escapes.

The most famous of these rebellions was the escape of the Chihenne (Warm Springs Apache) first led by Victorio, then by Nana.

Geronimo and Nana surrender to General Crook

After seeing the decimation of their numbers on the reservations, Chief Victorio decided to escape from the San Carlos reservation and return his people to their homeland. Fort Craig became a staging area for the Army – this time to pursue the Apache. Victorio died in an ambush at Tres Castillos, Mexico where most of the band – over half of whom were women and children – were killed or captured by the Mexican Army. Eighty year old Nana joined forces with Geronimo and fought the Army for four more years before surrendering. Nana died in captivity at the age of 96, still unbroken.

Geronimo and Nana surrendered in 1885 and Fort Craig was permanently abandoned – its military function no longer needed. Nine years later, Fort Craig was sold at auction to the only bidder, the Valverde Land and Irrigation Company. The property was eventually donated to the Archaeological Conservancy by the Oppenheimer family and transferred to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in 1981. The site is a BLM Special Management Area and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

In 2014 the Bureau of Land Management reconstructed a portion of the historic earthworks in honor of the soldiers who built and defended Fort Craig. The plans used modern materials with dimensions based on

## TIMELINE

- 1868 Navajos and Apaches are allowed to return to their homelands after thousands die of disease and starvation
- 1877 Victorio and the Warm Spring Apache escape from San Carlos Reservation
- 1880 Victorio dies at Tres Castillos, Mexico
- 1881 Army wages campaign against Nana and his band Billy the Kid shot by Sheriff Pat Garrett in Fort Sumner
- 1885 Nana & Geronimo surrender
- 1885 Fort Craig permanently de-commissioned
- 1912 New Mexico Statehood
- 1981 BLM acquires Fort Craig
- 2004 Fort Craig's 150th Anniversary commemoration
- 2014 BLM reconstructs a portion of Fort Craig bastion

historic photographs, blueprints and cross-sections found in National and State archives. The intent was to convey the magnitude of the fortifications and the labor required to build them. The original earthworks were built during the winter of 1861-62 as the Confederate army approached from the south and Fort Craig braced for attack.



Apache prisoners, 1886. Lozen is in the top row, second from left; next is Dahteste and Geronimo is at the lower right.

Lozen, the great Warm Springs Apache woman warrior, is not as well-known as the male warriors, but to the Apache she is possibly more revered. Her brother, Chief Victorio, said "Lozen is my right hand....strong as a man, braver than most, and cunning in strategy. Lozen is a shield to her people." Her people relied on her supernatural powers to know the location of the enemy, and to heal the wounded. Lozen and Dahteste, another woman warrior, helped negotiate the final surrender. It took an army of 5000 soldiers, as well as the Apache Scouts, to secure the surrender of this last Apache group, which consisted of about 17 men and 19 women and children. Lozen died of tuberculosis after 5 years in captivity at Mount Vernon Barracks, Alabama. Dahteste survived the 27 years of captivity and lived out her remaining years on the Mescalero Reservation.

Bureau of American Ethnology Photo

Western History Genealogy Dept., Denver Public Library

