

FORT DAVIS

NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

Key post in the defense system of West Texas, Fort Davis played a major role in the history of the southwestern frontier. From 1854 to 1891, troops based at the post guarded immigrants, freighters, and stagecoaches on the San Antonio-El Paso road and contended with the hostile Comanche and Apache Indians whose plunder trails scarred the deserts east and west of the fort. Today, the remains of Fort Davis are more extensive and impressive than those of any other southwestern fort. They are a vivid reminder of a significant chapter in the history of the western frontier.

The founding of Fort Davis

The Mexican War of 1846-48 added to the United States a vast territory comprising the present States of New Mexico, Arizona, and California. Texas had joined the Union on the eve of the war. Interest in the new lands quickened when word of the discovery of gold in California burst upon the Nation in 1849. Intent upon avoiding the winter snows and rugged mountains of the central routes to the gold fields, thousands of immigrants made their way over the southern transcontinental trails. A vital segment of the southern route was the newly opened San Antonio-El Paso road. Beginning in 1849, hundreds of immigrant and freight trains pushed westward on this road. Stagecoach service began in 1853 when George H. Giddings won a Federal mail contract. James Birch's "jackass mail" took over the contract in 1857; and 2 years later the famed Butterfield Overland Mail, St. Louis to San Francisco, pointed its coaches over the El Paso road.

Intersecting the El Paso road were the raiding trails of Indians who swept southward on plundering expeditions that had long devastated the isolated villages and haciendas of northern Mexico. West of the Davis Mountains, the Mescalero Apaches from New Mexico crossed the road in their forays. East of the mountains, the "Great Comanche War Trail" crossed the road at Comanche Springs, later the site of Fort Stockton. Inevitably, the Apaches and Comanches paused in their raids to assail travelers on the El Paso road. By 1854, Indian depredations had grown to such alarming proportions that the military authorities in San Antonio found it essential to build a fort in West Texas.

In October 1854, the commander of the Department of Texas, Maj. Gen. Persifor F. Smith, personally selected the site, a pleasant box canyon near Limpia Creek, in the scenic Davis Mountains. The new post, the general decreed, would be named Fort Davis in

honor of Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, later President of the Southern Confederacy. Six companies of the 8th U.S. Infantry marched westward to build and garrison Fort Davis. Their commander, Lt. Col. Washington Seawell, disliked the site, for Indians could and did come very near without discovery. Dutifully, however, he placed the fort where ordered. It was a shabby collection of more than 60 pine-slab structures scattered irregularly up the canyon. They were not built to last, for Colonel Seawell dreamed some day of erecting a fine new stone fort on the open plain at the mouth of the canyon.

The decade of the fifties

Colonel Seawell spent most of the next 7 years as commander of Fort Davis. Although he never realized his ambition for a permanent post of stone buildings, by 1856 he had housed the enlisted men in six stone barracks laid out in a line across the mouth of the canyon. The officers continued to live in the rotting log huts, and the supplies deteriorated in rickety warehouses roofed with canvas or thatched with grass.

The men of the 8th Infantry, afoot or mounted on mules, spent much of their time in the arduous but unspectacular duty of escorting mail and freight trains, pursuing but rarely catching raiders who had attacked travelers or a mail station, and covering their sector with patrols that rarely came to grips with Apaches or Comanches. On occasion, cavalry expeditions used the fort as a base for concerted operations against the Indians. New forts—Hudson, Lancaster, Stockton, and Quitman—were built to aid in the task of guarding the El Paso road. From 1857 to 1860, the feasibility of using camels for military purposes on the western deserts was tested, with encouraging results, at and near Fort Davis. By the close of the decade, however, little real progress had been made in solving the Indian problem.

The array and magnitude of Fort Davis are evident in the two 1887 photographs opposite. The top view looks south, with Officers' Row on the right and barracks on the left. The bottom photograph surveys the fort from the opposite side. Barracks front the parade ground, with corrals behind, and the usual sutler's store is in the foreground. In the center picture, made in 1875, several officers of the 10th Cavalry lounge about the Commanding Officer's Quarters.

The Mays Massacre

The Civil War destroyed the frontier defense system of West Texas. With the secession of Texas from the Union early in 1861, the department commander, Brig. Gen. David E. Twiggs, ordered Fort Davis and its sister posts abandoned. They were occupied by Confederate troops in June 1861.

The Texas troops cultivated seemingly cordial relations with the Apaches of the Davis Mountains. But in August 1861 Chief Nicholas turned on his new friends and stole some horses and cattle from the fort. Lt. Reuben E. Mays pursued with 13 men. The trail led southward toward the Big Bend. Pressed closely by the soldiers, Nicholas stopped running and posted 80 to 100 warriors among the rocks on both sides of a canyon through which the trail ran. On August 12, Lieutenant Mays and his handful of men rode into the trap. When the smoke cleared, all the soldiers were dead. Only the Mexican guide escaped to tell the story.



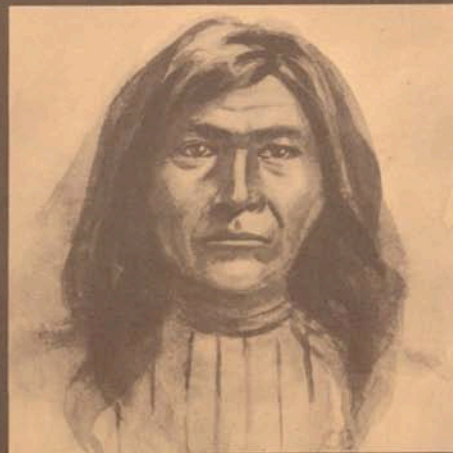
Col. B. H. Grierson



ESTATE OF DAVID S. SIMMONS

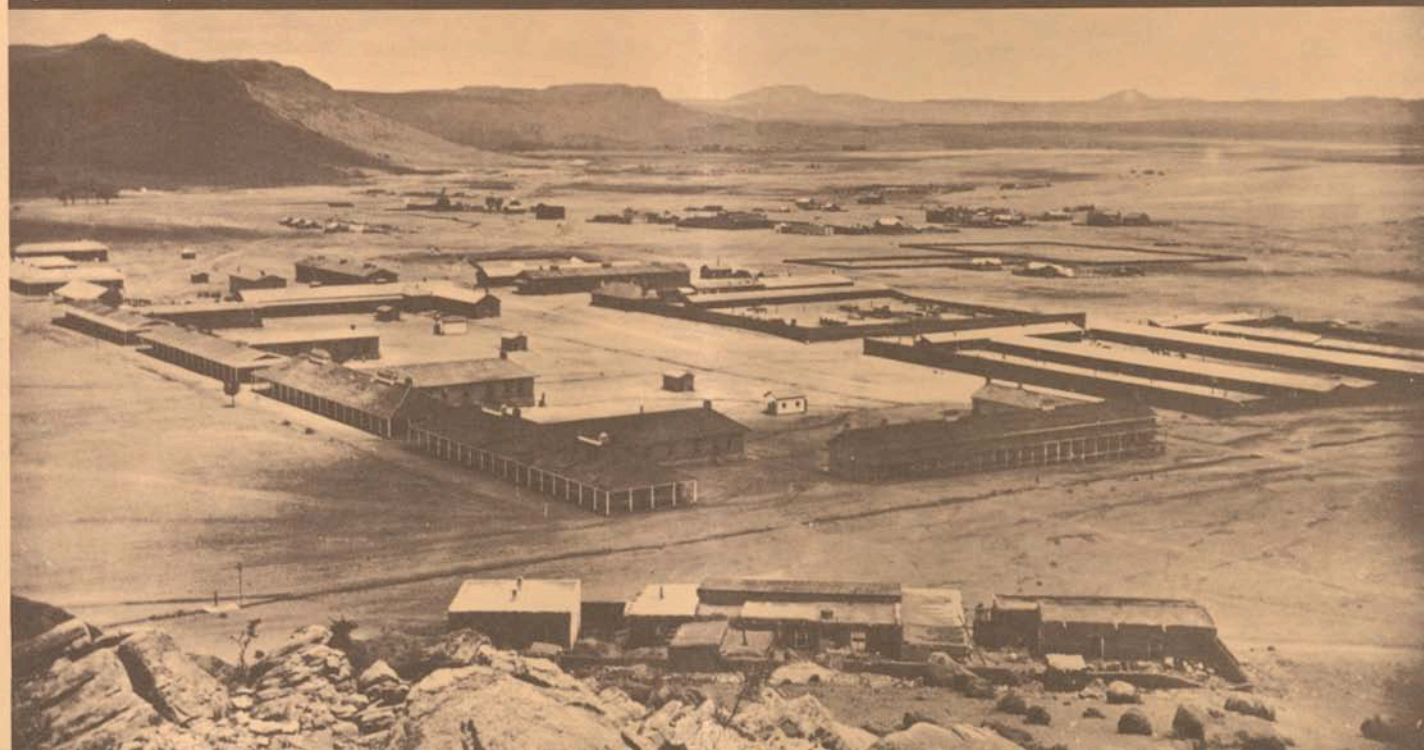


NATIONAL ARCHIVES

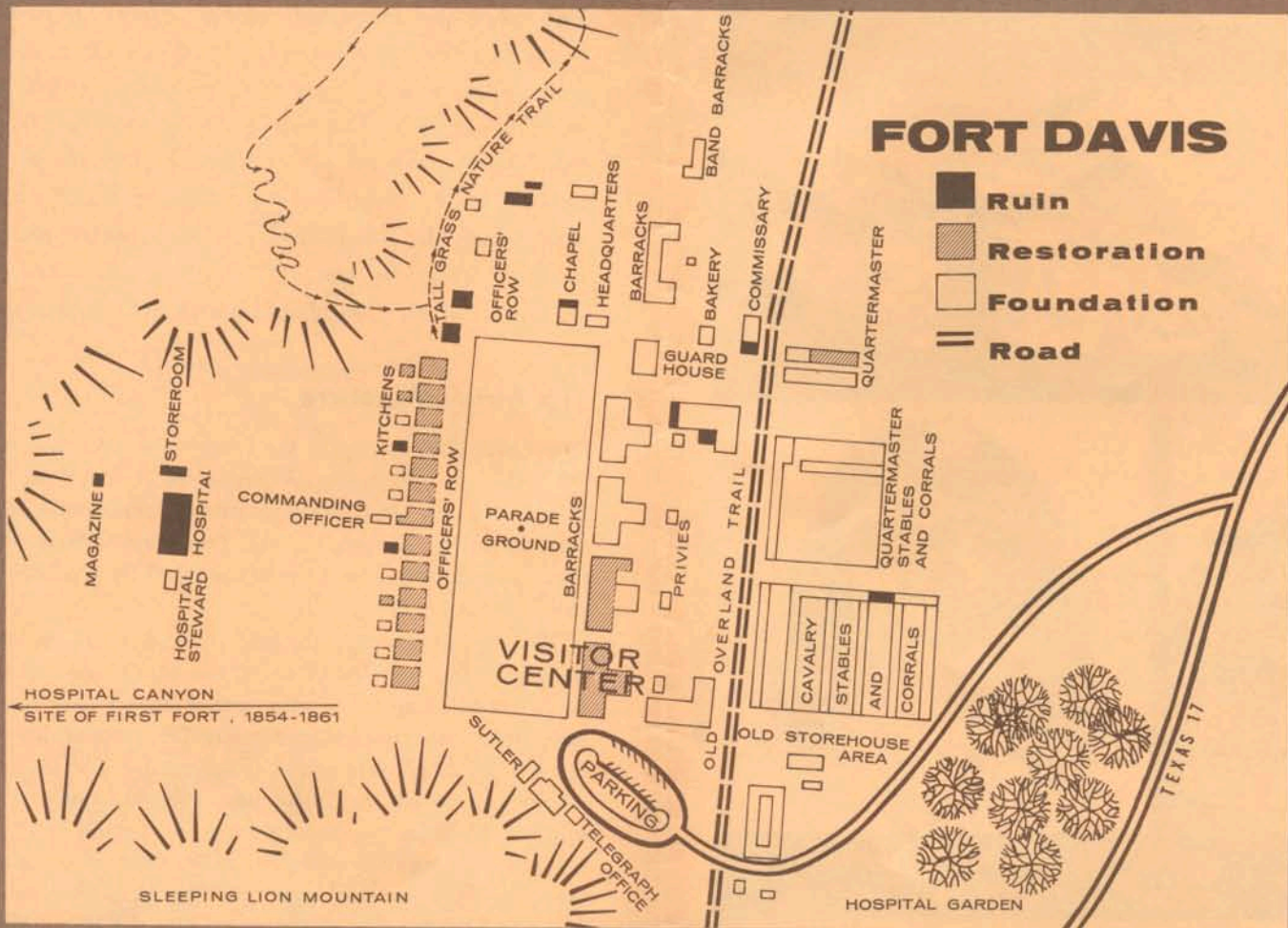


Victorio, Apache chieftain.

MUSEUM OF NEW MEXICO



ESTATE OF DAVID S. SIMMONS



How to reach the fort

Fort Davis National Historic Site is located on the northern edge of the town of Fort Davis, Tex., and can be reached from U.S. 290 on the north and 90 on the south by paved Tex. 17 and 118. Accommodations are available in Fort Davis and at the nearby Davis Mountains State Park. Marfa, Tex., lies 21 miles to the southwest; Alpine, Tex., 25 miles to the southeast.

A new fort

Confederate troops occupied Fort Davis for nearly a year. With the failure of the attempted conquest of New Mexico in the spring of 1862, however, the West Texas forts were once more evacuated, and their garrisons accompanied the retreating Confederate Army back to San Antonio. Wrecked by Apaches, Fort Davis lay deserted for 5 years. Not until 1867, 2 years after the close of the war, did Federal troops return. On June 29, Lt. Col. Wesley Merritt, famed cavalry general of the Civil War, marched up Limpia Creek with four troops of the 9th U.S. Cavalry, a newly organized colored regiment.

Colonel Merritt laid out and began constructing a permanent post such as Colonel Seawell had envisioned. As Seawell had wished, it rose on the plain outside the canyon. The first buildings were of stone, but economy soon caused a change to adobe, and delayed completion of the project as well. Not until the 1880's, after the Indians had been crushed, were all the buildings finished. By then it was a major installation, with quarters for 12 troops or companies, both cavalry and infantry. More than 50 structures finally composed Fort Davis.

Administration

Fort Davis National Historic Site, authorized by the President on September 8, 1961, and containing 447 acres, is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.

The National Park System, of which this area is a unit, is dedicated to conserving the scenic, scientific, and historic heritage of the United States for the benefit and inspiration of its people.

A superintendent, whose address is Fort Davis National Historic Site, Fort Davis, Tex., 79734, is in immediate charge.

Conquest of the Apaches

For 18 years Negro troops with white officers were at Fort Davis. Although the garrison frequently rotated, it was composed until 1885 of elements of the 9th or 10th Cavalry and the 24th or 25th Infantry. Under such officers as Colonel Merritt, Col. Edward Hatch, Lt. Col. William R. (Pecos Bill) Shafter, Maj. Zenas R. Bliss, Col. George Andrews, Col. Benjamin H. Grierson, and Capt. Louis H. Carpenter, these troops compiled a notable record of persistence, stamina, and success against their Comanche and Apache antagonists. The Comanches were defeated in 1874-75 in the Red River War, in which troops from Fort Davis did not engage.

But the Apaches still made travel on the El Paso road dangerous, and the soldiers kept constantly in the field on escort and scouting duty. The final contest came in 1880, when Victorio and his warriors thrust northward from Mexico across the deserts west of the Davis Mountains. Under Colonel Grierson, units from Fort Davis and other posts blocked the way. After a series of hard-fought engagements, the Apache chief turned back to Mexico, where he was soon killed by Mexican troops.

America's Natural Resources

Created in 1849, the Department of the Interior—America's Department of Natural Resources—is concerned with the management, conservation, and development of the Nation's water, wildlife, mineral, forest, and park and recreational resources. It also has major responsibilities for Indian and territorial affairs.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department works to assure that nonrenewable resources are developed and used wisely, that park and recreational resources are conserved, and that renewable resources make their full contribution to the progress, prosperity, and security of the United States—now and in the future.

The last years

The Indian menace to West Texas had ended, and cattlemen began to drive their herds westward to pasture them on the rich grasses of the region. The troops at Fort Davis settled into a routine of garrison life broken only by occasional tours of escort duty for railroad builders and bandit-chasing expeditions with the Texas Rangers. The railroads bypassed the fort, and it became increasingly an unnecessary expense. In June 1891 Fort Davis was ordered abandoned.

Fort Davis today

Fort Davis National Historic Site was established as a unit of the National Park System in 1963. A comprehensive program was immediately launched to save the remaining buildings and interpret the story of the fort to the public. Of more than 50 adobe or stone buildings that constituted Fort Davis when it was abandoned, visitors can view 16 residences on officers' row, 2 sets of troop barracks, warehouses, and the hospital. Sites of the remaining buildings, marked in most instances by stone foundations, can also be viewed.



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR



REPRINT 1966

National Park Service

U. S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE : 1966 O—229-980

For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office
Washington, D.C. 20402 - Price 10 cents

FORT DAVIS

NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE · TEXAS