

FORT DAVIDS



fort davis national historic site, texas

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

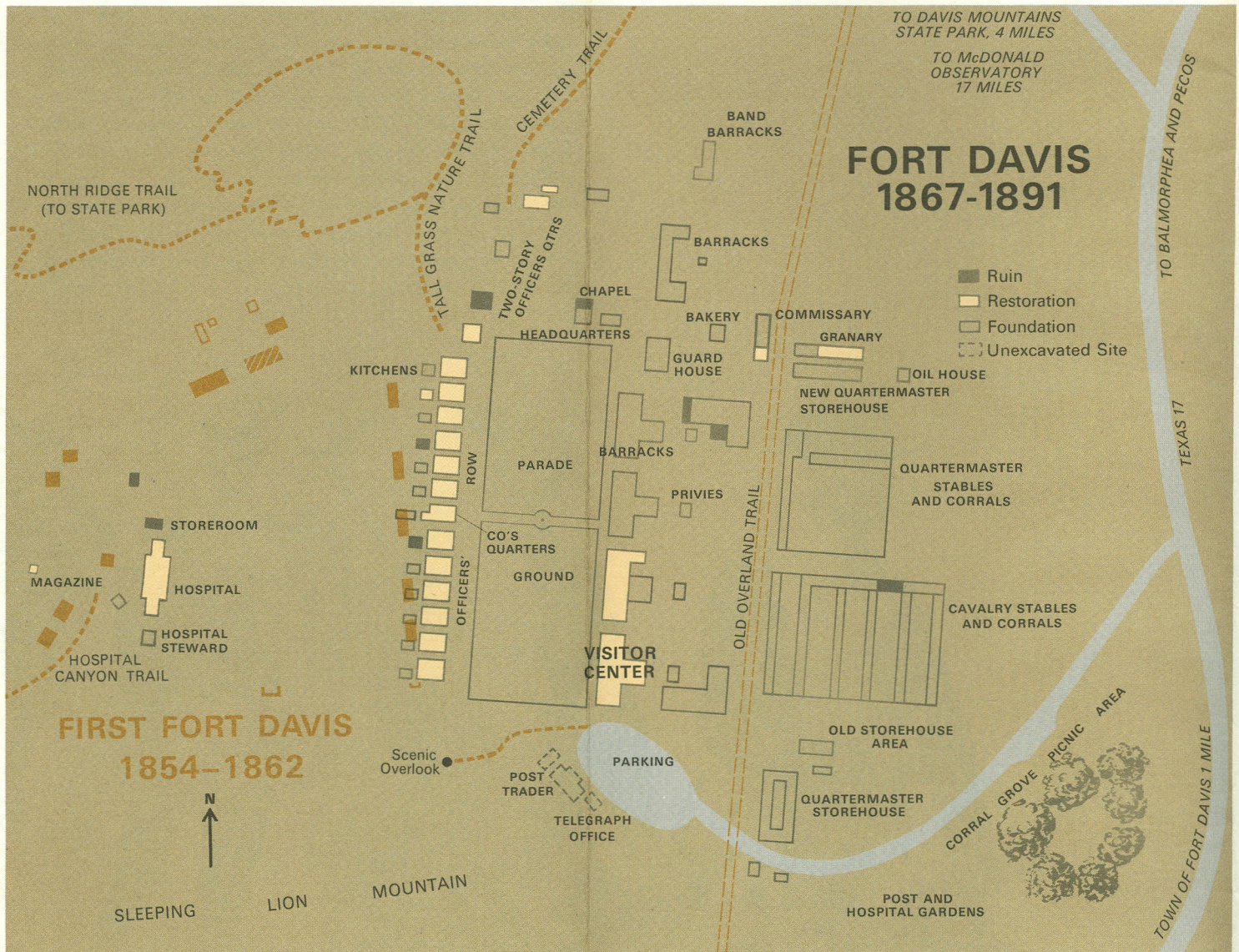
*"A Practice March in Texas," by Frederick Remington.
Courtesy Denver Public Library Western Collection*

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.

The Indian trails that led southward to Mexico intersected the El Paso road. Apache and Comanche raiders using these trails had long devastated the isolated villages and ranches of northern Mexico and southwestern Texas. 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, 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, where plenty of wood, water, and grass was available. 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 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 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 men rode into the trap. When the smoke cleared, all the soldiers were dead. Only the Mexican guide escaped to tell the story.

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. Consequently, many of the buildings were not completed until the 1880s. By then it was a major installation with quarters for 12 companies, both cavalry and infantry. More than 50 structures finally composed Fort Davis.

buffalo soldiers and the apache wars: Fort Davis was one of the first posts in the west to receive black soldiers. From 1867 to 1885 black troops from Fort Davis, commanded by white officers, served on the southwest Texas frontiers. Black units, like the 9th and 10th Cavalry and the 24th and 25th Infantry, participated in the Indian wars of the late 19th century. Together these units compiled a notable record of military accomplishment against their Comanche and Apache antagonists. In respect, the Indians called them "Buffalo Soldiers."

Toward the end of the 1870s, relentless Apache warriors increased their raids in southwestern Texas and southern New Mexico. In 1880, Victorio and his warriors began a deadly series of attacks northward from their mountain strongholds in Chihuahua, across the Rio Grande, to the desertlands west of the Davis Mountains. Quickly mobilizing units from several nearby posts, Col. Benjamin H. Grierson, then post commander of Fort Concho, called upon the black units from Fort Davis to campaign against Victorio's Apaches. After several hard-fought engagements, the Apache leader retreated to Chihuahua. There, in an engagement with Mexican troops, Victorio was killed. Following the Victorio campaign, Buffalo Soldiers from Fort Davis were assigned to Arizona Territory, where they campaigned against Geronimo. With the surrender of Geronimo in 1886, the Apache wars came to an end.

Henry Ossian Flipper, 1856-1940: Dramatic social change in America marked the post-Civil War period, particularly as the newly freed blacks struggled for recognition and equality. On the western frontier, certainly, the Buffalo Soldiers had distinguished themselves, but white officers had commanded the black units. Fort Davis experienced these changes when 2nd Lt. Henry Ossian



Negro soldier sketched by Frederick Remington.

Flipper, the first black graduate of West Point, arrived at the fort to serve as Acting Commissary of Subsistence. In the summer of 1881, however, Flipper was accused of embezzling government funds. After a controversial court-martial, the Army found Flipper innocent of the charges but guilty of unbecoming conduct and dismissed him from military service. A 94-year fight to clear his name ensued. Finally in 1976, at the urging of his descendents, the Army reviewed the court-martial transcripts and changed Flipper's discharge to honorable.

fort davis today: In 1961, the United States Congress authorized Fort Davis National Historic Site as a unit of the National Park Service. Through a continuing program of restoration half of the 50 original structures have been saved. The visitor center and museum are open daily and audio programs, slide show, and self-guiding tours of the grounds and several buildings are among the year-around services provided. A picnic grove and extensive nature trail system are located at the site. Summer seasons are highlighted by costumed interpreters conducting tours and presenting demonstrations in the Commanding Officer's Quarters, Officer's Kitchens and Servant Quarters, and the Commissary. Uniformed soldiers provide additional programs at scheduled times.

please note: The preservation of this historic site for future generations to enjoy can only be assured by your actions today. The building ruins are fragile. Walking or climbing on them is hazardous and destructive. All features are protected by law. Please do not collect artifacts or disturb plants, animals, or rocks, and drive only on designated roads.

about your visit: Fort Davis is on the northern edge of the town of Fort Davis, Texas. From Int. 10 on the north or U.S. 90 on the south the site can be reached by Tex. 17 and 118. Accommodations are available in town and at nearby Davis Mountains State Park. Camping and additional picnic facilities are available within short distances of Fort Davis. The towns of Marfa and Alpine are located 21 miles to the southwest and 24 miles to the southeast, respectively. Visiting hours for Fort Davis NHS are from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. between mid-September and late May, and from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. the remainder of the year. The site is closed December 25 and January 1.

administration: Fort Davis National Historic Site is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Fort Davis National Historic Site, P.O. Box 1456, Fort Davis, TX 79734, is in immediate charge.

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