

Fort Davis

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



The Buffalo Soldiers at Fort Davis

1867- 1885

“BUFFALO SOLDIERS”

Although the term “Buffalo Soldiers “ was first used in the early 1870s in reference to black cavalry troopers, in recent years the term has become synonymous with all troops of African- American descent that served in the frontier Indian Wars Army.

ORGANIZATION OF THE REGIMENTS

Following the Civil War, Congress passed legislation to increase the size of the Regular Army. The Act of Congress, dated July 28, 1866 raised the number of cavalry regiments from six to ten and the number of infantry regiments from nineteen to forty- five. The legislation stipulated that of the new regiments created, two cavalry and four infantry “shall be composed of colored men.” In compliance with the new law, the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry Regiments and the Thirty- eighth, Thirty- ninth, Fortieth, and Forty- first U. S. Infantry Regiments were organized. They were composed of white officers with black enlisted men. In November of 1869, the army reduced the number of infantry regiments from 45 to 25. In so doing, regiments were combined. The Thirty- eighth and Forty- first regiments were combined to form the new Twenty- fourth U. S. Infantry, while the Thirty- ninth and Fortieth were organized into the new Twenty- fifth U. S. Infantry. From 1867 until 1885 units of the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry Regiments, the Forty- first, Twenty- fourth and Twenty- fifth Infantry Regiments served at Fort Davis.

AT FORT DAVIS

Troopers of the Ninth U. S. cavalry were the first “Buffalo Soldiers” to garrison Fort Davis. On July 1, 1867, companies C, F, H, and I, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Wesley Merritt, officially reoccupied the post which had been abandoned since 1862. Merritt and the Ninth had a sizeable job ahead of them In addition to helping to construct a new post, they had the Apache and Comanche Indians to contend with. A major responsibility was to protect travelers and the mail on the San Antonio- El Paso Road. In so doing, small detachments of men were stationed at a number of stage stations, while other troops were sent out on scouts and patrols.

In 1869, Colonel Edward Hatch replaced Merritt as commander of Fort Davis. During his brief stay, Hatch ordered three separate expeditions against the Mescalero Apaches into the Guadalupe Mountains. All three expeditions involved Ninth Cavalry troopers. In 1871, Lieutenant William (Pecos Bill) Shafter, led troops of the Ninth cavalry on an expedition to a previously unscouted region of the southern Staked Plains. Although Shafter failed to encounter any Apaches, he and the men of the Ninth proved that troops could survive in an area almost void of surface water. In September 1875, the Ninth U. S. Cavalry was transferred to New Mexico. The regiment had spent eight years in Texas at Fort Davis and other frontier posts.



9th Cavalry at Fort Davis

THE FORTY- FIRST INFANTRY BECOMES PART OF THE TWENTY- FOURTH

Companies B and E of the Forty- first U. S. Infantry arrived at Fort Davis in the spring of 1868. For the next year and one- half, they were involved in regular garrison duties and scouting and patrolling with the Ninth Cavalry. In November of 1869, when the infantry regiments were reduced and consolidated, Company E became part of the new Twenty- fourth U. S. Infantry and remained at Fort Davis. Units of the Twenty- fourth served at Fort Davis from 1869 to 1872 and again in 1880. The men were involved in all the usual, tedious, every day soldier routines and fatigue details in garrison. In addition, like all the Buffalo Soldiers stationed at Fort Davis, they provided an invaluable service by constructing and repairing military telegraph lines, scouting, guarding water holes, escorting government wagon trains, survey parties and freight and mail coaches.

THE TWENTY- FIFTH INFANTRY

The Twenty- fifth U. S. Infantry, like the Twenty- fourth, was formed during the army's reduction- in- force of 1869. In July 1870, Companies A and G arrived at Fort Davis. From that summer until the spring of 1880, various companies of the twenty- fifth served at the post. In their ten year stay, these infantrymen had numerous accomplishments.

Company E, under the command of Captain David Schooley, was responsible for the construction of new roads through Wild Rose Pass and Musquiz Canyon. In December, 1876 a large contingent of the regiment was ordered to "Presidio del Norte, Texas (present- day Presidio) for the purpose of protecting American citizens from aggression by Mexican marauders and bandits." Many of the troops remained in Presidio for more than two months before peace was finally restored to the town. Perhaps the most important field work for the Twenty- fifth was completed by the troopers of Company I under the command of Second Lieutenant George Andrews. They constructed 91 ½ miles of telegraph line west from Fort Davis to Eagle Springe (located at Sierra Blanca). The line, in conjunction with another to Fort Davis from Fort Concha was the vital link used by Colonel Benjamin H. Grierson, Tenth U. S. Cavalry, and his command during the subsequent Victoria Campaign.

THE TENTH CAVALRY

In 1875, the Tenth U. S. Cavalry moved to Texas with headquarters at Fort Concha. Company H was ordered to Fort Davis and arrived for duty in May. From 1875 to 1885, units of the Tenth were stationed at Fort Davis which became headquarters for the regiment in 1882.

The mission of the Tenth, like that of the other "Buffalo Soldier" regiments, was to protect the mail and travel routes, control Indian movements and gain knowledge of the terrain.

One highlight in the history of the Tenth occurred in the 1879- 1880 campaign against the Apache leader Victoria and his followers. The Apaches had escaped from a reservation in New Mexico and were raiding in areas of western Texas. Learning that Victoria was in Mexico, Colonel Grierson attempted to prevent him from reentering Texas and especially from reaching New Mexico where he could find more supporters. The campaign called for the biggest military concentration ever assembled in the Trans- Pecos area. Six troops of the Tenth Cavalry and Company H of the Twenty- fourth Infantry were assigned to patrol the area from the Van Horn Mountains, west to the Quitman Mountains and north to the Sierra Diablos and



Infantry at Fort Davis

Delaware Mountains. Major confrontations occurred at Tinaja del las Palmas (a waterhole south of Sierra Blanca) and at Rattlesnake Springs (north of Van Horn). These two engagements halted Victorio and forced him to retreat to Mexico where he was killed by Mexican troops in October 1880.

A REMARKABLE LEGACY

In the history of Fort Davis, enlisted men of African- American heritage or “Buffalo Soldiers” as they were called, amassed a notable record of accomplishments. They arrived at the post in 1867 when western Texas was still very open to attack by raiding Apaches and Comanches. By the time they left in 1885, peaceful travel and settlement prevailed in much of the region.