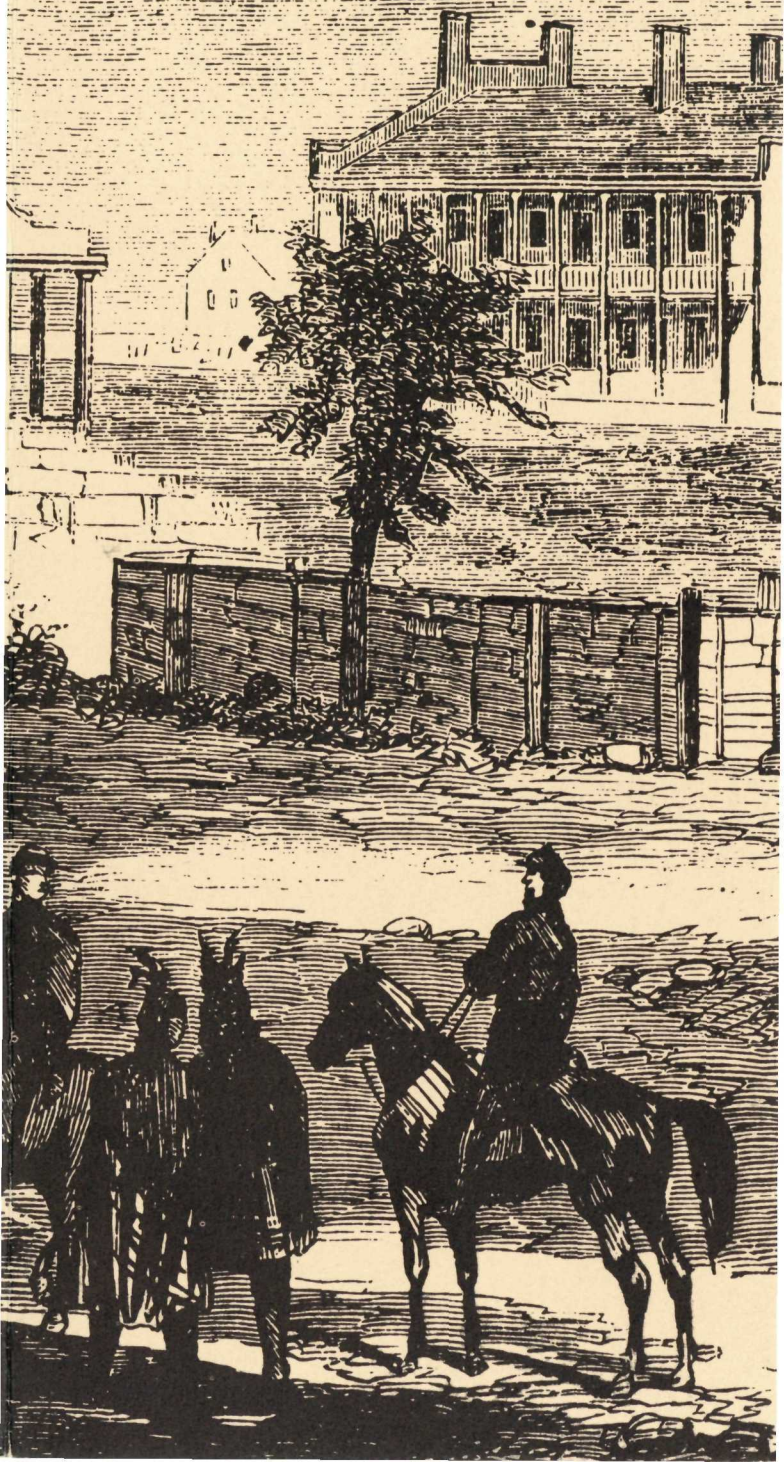


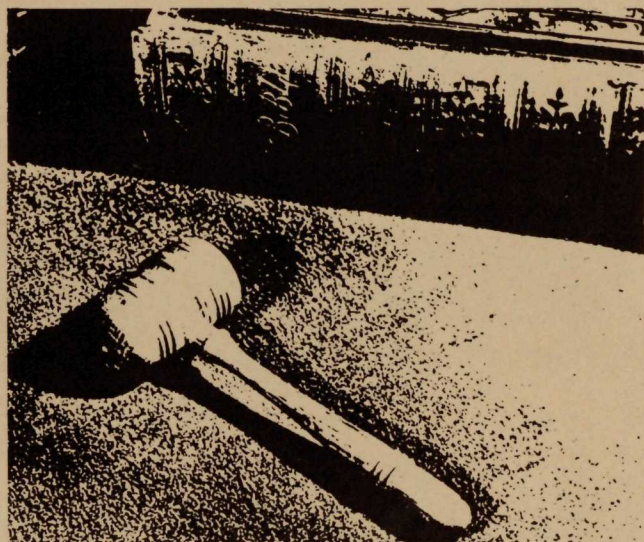
# FORT SMITH

NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE • ARKANSAS



## AN ARENA OF AMERICA'S WESTWARD EXPANSION

AT FORT SMITH, SOLDIER, INDIAN, LAWMAN, AND OUTLAW PLAYED THEIR PART IN THE ROARING DRAMA THAT CHANGED THE FACE OF THE INDIAN COUNTRY. HERE BLUE-CLAD TROOPERS GATHERED TO CARRY THE AMERICAN FLAG WESTWARD, AND FROM HERE THE MEN WHO "RODE FOR JUDGE PARKER" CROSSED THE ARKANSAS TO SPREAD THE INFLUENCE OF HIS COURT INTO THE LAWLESS LAND BEYOND. NO MERE SPECTATOR TO EVENTS, FORT SMITH FOR NEARLY FOUR SCORE YEARS EXTENDED ITS SWAY OVER A VAST EXPANSE OF UNTAMED FRONTIER.



Fort Smith National Historic Site commemorates one phase of America's westward development. In the midst of a busy city the National Park Service preserves the remains of two successive frontier forts and the Judge Isaac C. Parker court as reminders of a day when civilization and security ended on the banks of the Arkansas River.

The story of Fort Smith falls into three phases: the small First Fort, 1817-34, the enlarged Second Fort, 1838-71, and the Federal District Court, 1871-96. Yet a single theme persists: men pushing back the frontier as they carved a nation out of the wilderness.

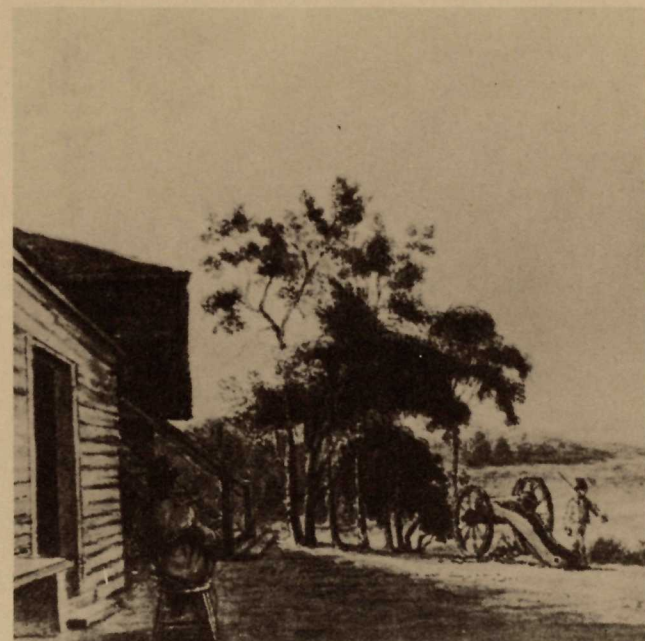
## THE SMALL FIRST FORT

*"to select the best site . . . and thereon . . . erect as expeditiously as circumstances will permit, a stockade."*

Under these orders, Maj. William Bradford reached Belle Point on December 25, 1817. Earlier Maj. Stephen H. Long had selected this rocky bluff at the juncture of the Poteau and Arkansas Rivers as the site for the fort. Using Long's plans, Bradford set his 70 men to work constructing a simple wooden stockade with two blockhouses. The unimposing fort was named Smith for Gen. Thomas A. Smith, commander of U.S. forces west of the Mississippi. Construction proceeded slowly, and not until February 1822 could another commander describe the fort as "nearly completed and in a good state of defense."

The fort's location was chosen to keep peace between the Osage and the Cherokees and to prevent white men from encroaching on Indian lands. Restless tribesmen of the Cherokee Nation had recently moved into what is now northwestern Arkansas. Penetration into Osage hunting grounds by these Indians from east of the Mississippi produced a constant threat of war. Until 1824 soldiers from Fort Smith were able to prevent Indian outbreaks.

By then the frontier had shifted westward, and the fort's garrison moved some 80 miles up the Arkansas River (near present Muskogee, Okla.), where they established Fort Gibson. Only small detachments returned sporadically to the fort before it was finally closed in 1839. Once deserted, the old fort rapidly fell victim to decay and passed from the scene. Its exact location remained lost until archeologists uncovered the foundations in 1958.



## AN ENLARGED SECOND FORT

*"for better defense of the Arkansas frontier."*

Demands from inhabitants of western Arkansas for protection against possible Indian uprisings caused Congress to authorize the War Department to reestablish Fort Smith in 1838. Plans called for an impressive installation to be located near the earlier fort.

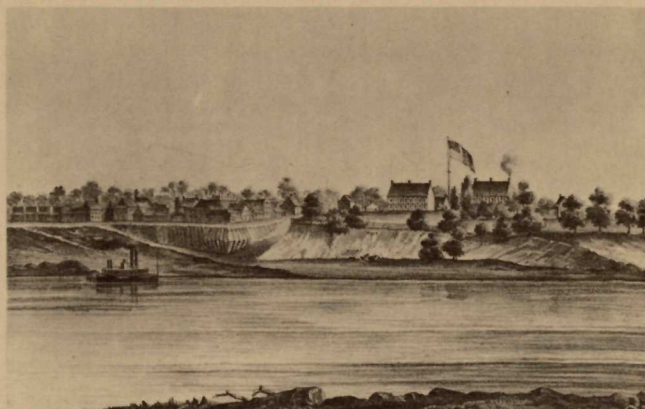
Work began in 1839, but the fort was never completed as first envisioned. By 1841 the danger of uprisings had faded. Col. (later President) Zachary Taylor, the newly appointed departmental commander, ordered work stopped on the partially completed fort. Instead of following the 1838 plan, the Government modified its facilities to serve as a supply depot. Occupied by troops in May 1846, the second fort, during the remainder of its active military life, served to equip and provision other forts being pushed deeper into Indian Territory.

Both North and South used its supply and hospital facilities during the Civil War. This prolonged its usefulness for a brief time, but the fort's days as a military post were over. By 1871 the Army had little need for such a post at Fort Smith, so the War Department abandoned the reservation.

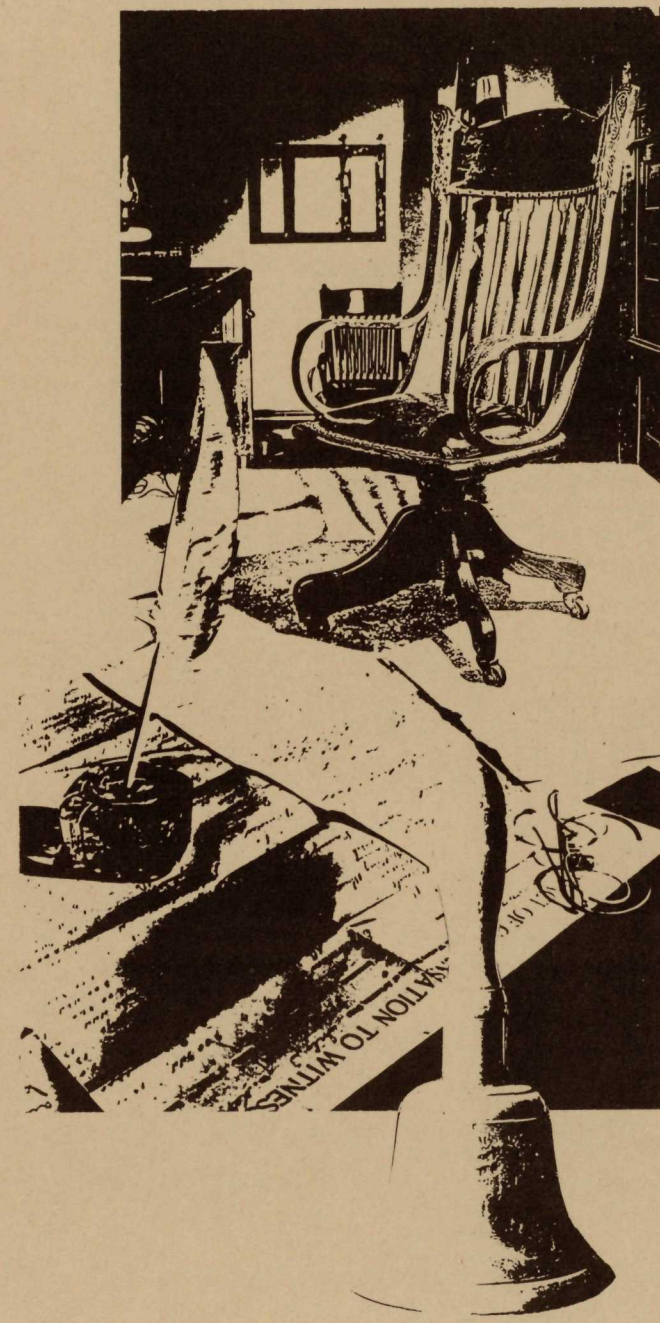
Today only the barracks and the commissary buildings remain to mark the site of the second fort. All of the walls and other buildings have been pulled down, victims of progress. The stone commissary building, except for minor alterations, appears much as it did when completed in 1842.

The soldiers' barracks, however, have undergone many changes. First built in the early 1840's as a two-story structure, the barracks burned in 1849. A second and somewhat smaller barracks was erected on the original foundations. By 1891 this structure was again enlarged to two full stories to match the new wing added to house the Federal jail.

FORT SMITH IN 1853. FROM A CONTEMPORARY LITHOGRAPH.



*Two decades—the 1870's and 1880's—overshadow the fort's military purposes and represent the period of Fort Smith's greatest fame. In 1871 it was occupied by the U.S. Federal District Court for Western Arkansas and the Indian Territory. Between 1875 and 1889 it sheltered one of the most famous tribunals in American legal history, the court of Isaac C. Parker.*



## JUDGE PARKER'S FEDERAL DISTRICT COURT

"No Sunday West of St. Louis—No God West of Fort Smith . . .," thus an unknown writer described the chaotic social conditions in the modern state of Oklahoma during the 1870's. The eastern half of the old "Indian Country" belonged to the "Five Civilized Tribes" or "Nations": Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creeks and Seminoles. They had been forcibly removed from their ancestral homes in the southeastern United States some 30 years earlier. The rest of the territory was the home of various other tribes.

In this vast area no system of law, as we know it today, existed. Indians were subject to their own tribal courts, but these had no jurisdiction over white men. Here the most desperate class of criminals from all over the United States found sanctuary from arrest or extradition. They came in ever-increasing numbers. Disorder ruled, and reputable men—white and Indian—called upon the Federal Government for relief.

The Government assigned jurisdiction over this huge territory to the U.S. District Court for Western Arkansas. Established in 1854, it sat in Van Buren until 1871, when it moved to Fort Smith. For the next 14 years the now abandoned soldiers' barracks became the court's permanent home. Though its jurisdiction included a part of Arkansas, State courts shared its sphere of authority concurrently. The court's greatest influence and authority, therefore, was felt only in the Indian country.

The court's record, up to 1875, was singularly unspectacular. Its powers were unused or perverted during the period of social and political unrest caused by the Civil War and Reconstruction. Just before 1875 the reputation of the court reached its lowest point. One judge resigned under threat of impeachment because of a bribery charge. At a time when the Southwestern frontier was ablaze with violence, and men were demanding vigorous law enforcement, the court was corrupt and powerless.

To remedy this, President Ulysses S. Grant appointed Isaac C. Parker to the vacant judgeship. Parker had asked for the appointment, and Grant could not have made a wiser choice. At 38, Parker was the youngest member on the Federal judicial bench, yet he possessed a sound legal background. His complete dedication to the job and his personal incorruptibility quickly earned the respect of those about him.

Parker approached his task with unparalleled zeal. For 21 years the court at Fort Smith ground out rapid and impartial justice. No appeals from the Judge's decisions were possible during the first 14 years of this period. In sheer volume alone, the record is astounding. Of some 13,400 cases docketed, 12,000 were criminal in nature. Three hundred and forty-four men stood before Parker

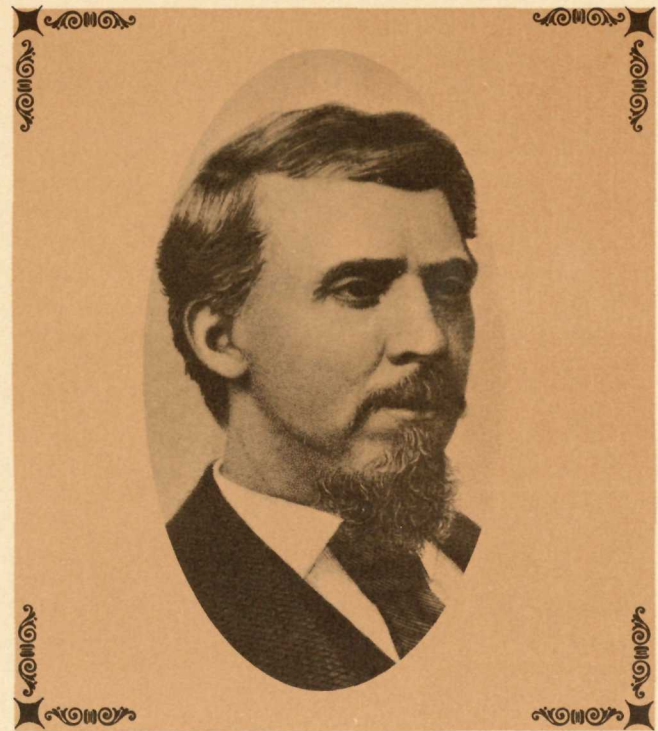
accused of major crimes; 160 were convicted. Seventy-nine were hanged. To keep abreast of an ever-increasing number of cases, trials began at 8:30 a.m. and continued until dusk or even into the night. Autumn and spring sessions blended into one. Only Sundays and Christmas halted the routine of the court.

Parker was not alone in his fight for law and order. He had the support of a hard core of dedicated Federal officials. The most spectacular single group were the U.S. deputy marshals. To the lawless Indian country, these lawmen brought justice. Dedicated and undeterred by hardship, low pay, or physical danger, they developed a high state of esprit de corps, proudly calling themselves "the men who rode for Parker." At times as many as 200 deputy marshals ranged over the court's vast domain. At least 65 were killed and numerous others were wounded in line of duty.

Parkers' most famous collaborator was George Maledon, often called the "Prince of Hangmen," who executed 60 of Judge Parker's death sentences.

Gradually more and more of the Indian country was opened to white settlement, and the settlers quite properly demanded their own courts. Each new court whittled away portions of Judge Parker's jurisdiction.

Finally in September 1896 his court was dissolved. Parker was destined to outlive his famous court by only 2 months. Twenty-one years of unrelenting toil had exacted its toll of Parker. Though only 57 years old at the time he died, he looked 70. With the passing of the Parker court, an epoch was ended: the frontier had vanished.



## ABOUT YOUR VISIT

The park is located on Rogers Avenue between Second and Third Streets in downtown Fort Smith. It can be reached from Garrison Avenue (U.S. 64) by turning one block south to Rogers Avenue. A temporary visitor center is in the old Barracks Building, which also served as Judge Parker's courtroom. This building is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily except December 25 and January 1. Special tours are available to groups if advance arrangements are made with the superintendent.

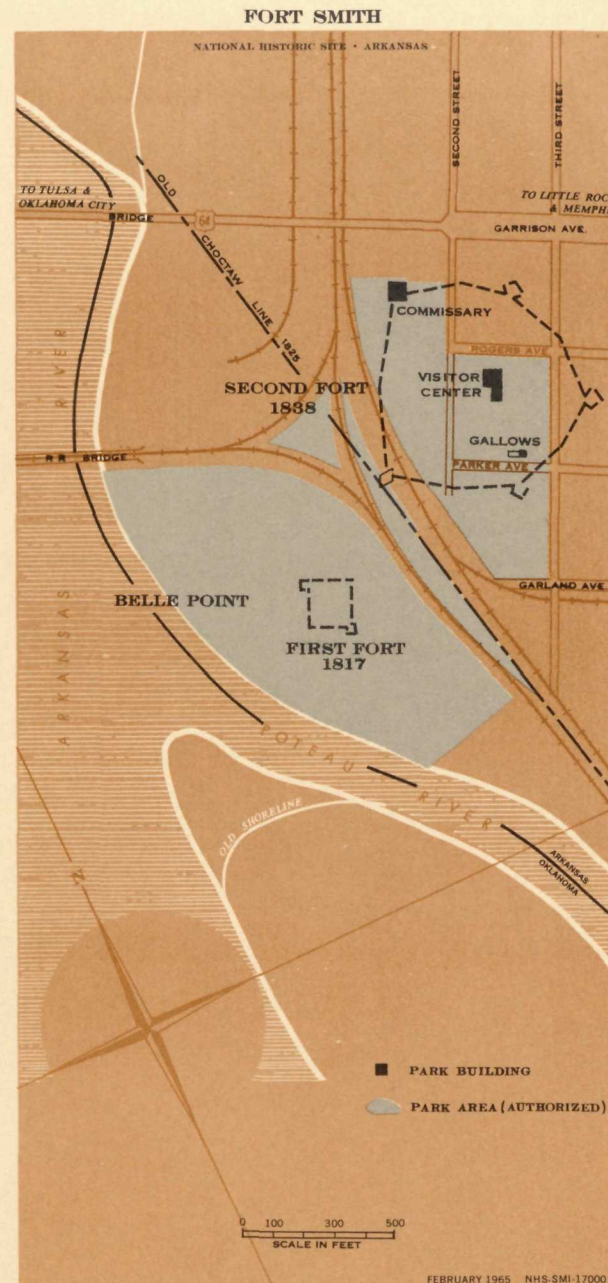
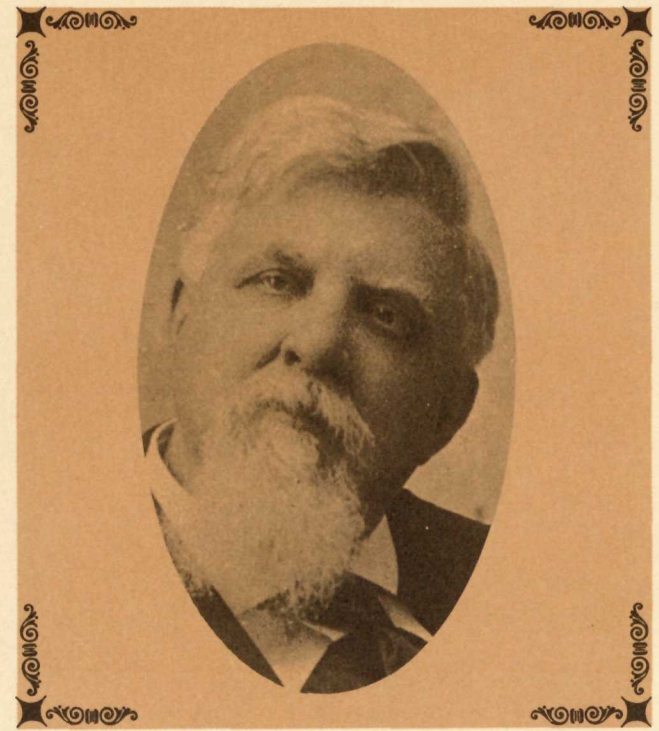
## ADMINISTRATION

Fort Smith, authorized as a National Historic Site on September 13, 1961, was established through the efforts of public-spirited citizens of Fort Smith. The city donated 11 acres of public land, forming the nucleus of the park. Local businessmen contributed funds to purchase private interests on Belle Point. Both Public Historical Restorations, Inc., and Old Fort Museum, by relinquishing sites they had occupied for many years, enabled the park to be established.

The National Park System, of which Fort Smith is a part, is dedicated to conserving the scenic, scientific, and historical heritage of the United States for the benefit and inspiration of its people.

A superintendent, whose address is Box 1406, Fort Smith, Ark. 72902, is in immediate charge of the site.

THE MAN WHOM LAWBREAKERS CALLED "HELL ON THE BORDER" GAVE HIS BEST YEARS TO BRINGING JUSTICE TO THE FRONTIER. THESE VIEWS SHOW PARKER AT ABOUT AGE 37 (LEFT) AND IN HIS MID-50'S.



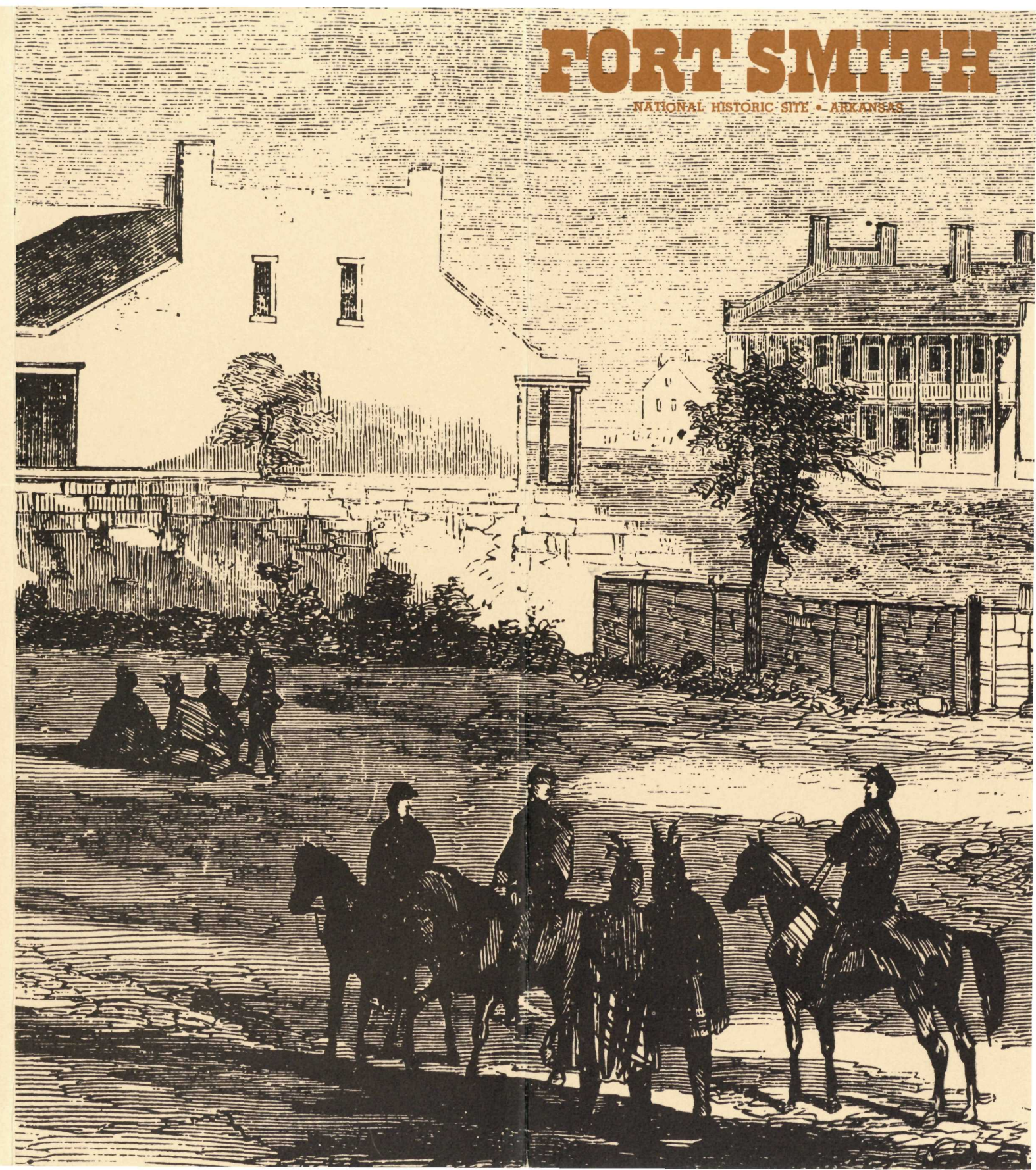
AT RIGHT, HARPER'S WEEKLY RECORDS A GRAND COUNCIL OF THE OKLAHOMA INDIAN TRIBES, CONVENED AT FORT SMITH IN 1865.

THE DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR—the Nation's principal natural resource agency—bears a special obligation to assure that our expendable resources are conserved, that our renewable resources are managed to produce optimum benefits, and that all resources contribute their full measure to the progress and prosperity of the United States, now and in the future.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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