



## Civil War Earthwork 1861-1863



The "Star" Fort  
58001

### Introduction

**The outbreak of the Civil War** in 1861 forced many changes to occur throughout United States, and Fort Union was no exception. The first Fort was suited for quickly dispatching troops on the Santa Fe Trail and for conflict with American Indians, but was considered weak in the face of an attack by a conventionally armed force. Fort Union would have to change drastically and quickly if it was to be ready to defend itself, the Santa Fe Trail, and the Southwest from the Confederate threat of invasion.

### Preparing for Battle

By August 1861, Confederate actions in the southern half of the New Mexico Territory had the the Army convinced that a large-scale invasion was imminent. The first Fort Union was located on the foothills to the southwest of Wolf Creek, in an area vulnerable to cannon fire. Consequently, a new area 1.5 miles across the valley was chosen. An area which was to be out of range of artillery fire from the bluffs.

#### Builders

At this time, the fort was home to over one thousand troops composed of both U.S. Army Regulars and newly enlisted New Mexico Volunteers, whose first duties also included the use of pick and shovel in the construction of the second fort. Troops worked twenty-four hours a day in four-hour shifts of 200 men each in order to complete the fort before the arrival of the

Confederates, which many suspected could be at any moment.

#### Standing Ready

By the time Confederate forces were advancing up the Rio Grande in early 1862, the earthwork was ready. The completed fort had openings on the parapet or wall for artillery positions to fire with minimal exposure, a large ditch that acted as an obstacle surrounding the parapet, and demilunes or angled positions outside the fort for forward positions for the artillery and infantry. These defenses would act as an obstacle to any attacking ground forces. The earthwork was also constructed with storage room for supplies and ordnance, quarters for officers and enlisted men, and a tunnel to the waters of Wolf Creek. By having access to supplies and water from within the earthwork, the fort was capable of sustaining its troops for an extended period of time during battle. All that was left, was to wait.

### Defense?

Even before the earthwork was completed, word about its defensibility was circulating in both the Confederacy and Union. Some saw it as a formidable bunker that could withstand just about anything, and others who saw it as a position that could simply not defend itself from even the smallest of artillery.

A Confederate take on the second fort is found in an article in the *Mesilla Times*, December 12, 1861, which gave praise to the hastily constructed fort "*considering its position and the material at hand, one of the*

*best pieces of engineering ever done in America.*" A Union description was provided by Ovando J. Hollister, of the 1st Colorado Volunteers who had been at Fort Union in March 1862, calling it a "*A simple field-work of moderate size...*" and even went on to call armament of the fort "*poor*".

Fort Union's earthwork, constructed to keep supplies, the Santa Fe Trail, and the Southwest out of the hands of the Confederates, would have its defensibility in question until it could be tested.

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## Trial and Error

With doubts as to the strength of the earthwork, it would only be a matter of time before it was tested in one way or another. That test came, not in combat with the Confederacy, but rather with the arrival of a new post commander, Captain Peter Plympton, 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry, in June of 1862.

Plympton, suspected that the earthwork had not been moved far enough from the location of the first fort to be safely beyond cannon fire from the bluffs. To test his theory, Plympton placed two cannons in position on the cliffs and fired them in the direction of the earthwork.

With ease, fire from the guns were able to reach well beyond the perimeter of the earthwork. In addition, it revealed that the fort was constructed on a dip which exposed the interior to the higher elevated position where the first fort once stood. Finally, Plympton, in order to see if the earthwork could defend itself properly, fired back at the bluffs with a six-pound gun from the western bastion of the fieldwork. The ball only reached midway up the face of the bluffs.

Too close to the to the bluffs of the first fort, and with an exposed interior, the fieldwork was just as weak against cannon fire as the fort before it.

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## Moving Ahead

The Civil War by the middle of 1862, was no longer a priority for Fort Union or the New Mexico Territory after the Confederate loss at Glorieta Pass outside Santa Fe. The earthwork which had been constructed to defend the territory from invasion, had lost its purpose.

The earthwork was designed to meet an emergency situation in a time of war when invasion was thought to be imminent. The second Fort Union had been constructed in haste by unskilled soldiers, using materials readily at hand, and following a plan of construction that was not adapted or adequate for the environment in a position too close to the bluffs. This created an earthwork which was indefensible from cannon, plagued with

poor air circulation, the infestation of insects and snakes, as well as constant flooding with each rain storm. It was clear that the earthwork could not adequately serve as a long standing fort.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Fort Union

As a result, the Army would find the construction of a new fort necessary. In 1863, construction on a more permanent post began. Built with more suitable materials comprised of adobe, fire brick, lumber, and tin. This final Fort Union would replace the earthwork, and become the largest outpost west of the Mississippi River.

