



Shaped by a diverse cast of memorable characters—soldiers, Indians, outlaws, and lawmen—Fort Smith National Historic Site explores 80 years of turbulent history on the western frontier. Discover compelling stories of two frontier forts, the tragic Trail of Tears, and the historic jail and federal courthouse of Judge Isaac C. Parker.

Stronghold of law and order

The 1803 Louisiana Purchase launched Fort Smith's history. President Thomas Jefferson wanted southeastern American Indians to move west of the Mississippi River, opening their lands to white settlement. This flawed notion assumed western lands were vacant, even though they were already occupied by other native tribes. Jefferson thought it would take 1,000 years for whites to settle the West. In fact, it took just 50 years.

In 1817 most of the Louisiana Purchase was, by US policy, "Indian Territory" (map). Fort Smith's western boundary was the Indian Territory by 1825.

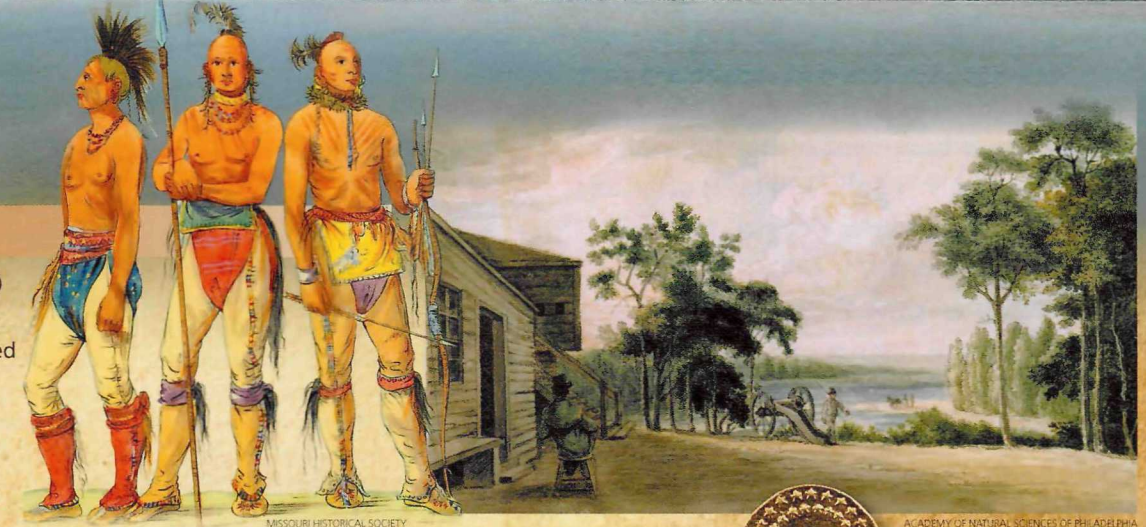


First Fort Smith 1817–1824

First Fort Smith was built in 1817 to keep peace in the Arkansas River Valley between the native Osage and newly arriving Cherokee. Built of logs and stone, the first fort sat above the Poteau and Arkansas rivers, a spot known by French trappers as Belle Point. By 1824 the frontier had pushed west. The Army followed to keep the peace, and Fort Smith was abandoned.

The Army returned (1833–34) to work with Indian Department Agents. Soldiers arrested those who entered Indian Territory to sell whiskey and take advantage of the Choctaw, who were forcibly relocated from their homeland.

Over time the fort's logs rotted and the soil claimed its stones, but the problems for the Indians would persist and increase.



Above: George Catlin painted these "Osage Warriors" in 1834. In 1832 he had called for "a nation's park" to preserve Plains Indians' way of life.

Above: Samuel Seymour watercolor "Fort Smith," 1821. Right: In 1960 archeologists unearthed this Rifle Regiment button (from about 1815–21) at Belle Point.



ACADEMY OF NATURAL SCIENCES OF PHILADELPHIA. ALL OTHER IMAGES NPS EXCEPT AS CREDITED.

1838



A personal belongings stencil from the 57th US Colored Troops (USCT). Various units of African American troops served at the fort in the Civil War and after. The 11th USCT was recruited here at Fort Smith.



Arkansas became a state in 1836. A second Fort Smith was built starting in 1838, not 1830 as the post card above suggests. Residents and politicians convinced the War Department of an Indian threat right across the river. The fort's stone walls were built like coastal fortifications meant to withstand heavy cannon fire, but they were never tested in combat.

Second Fort Smith 1838–1871

Second Fort Smith was built in 1838 due to an unfounded fear of Indian attack, but the 1846–48 US-Mexican War, 1849 California Gold Rush, surging westward migration, and forts built farther west made it an important supply depot.

Arkansas River steamboats brought supplies from St. Louis and New Orleans. The city of Fort Smith began to prosper and grow. After the Civil War (1861–65) the military permanently closed the little-needed fort in 1871.

In the Civil War the fort saw little action, but it was a major supply post for both sides. In April 1861 the US Army abandoned the fort to Arkansas state troops. Two years later the Confederates abandoned the fort to Union troops who occupied it for the rest of the war.

Bitterly divided, American Indians fought on both sides in the Civil War, as did western Arkansas citizens. After the Union forces returned to Fort Smith, local African Americans were recruited into the US Colored Troops

(USCT). After the war, African Americans had their freedom. This was not true for American Indians, regardless of who they had fought for.

The 1865 Fort Smith Council was held to establish relations with Indians after the Civil War. Delegates of 15 Indian nations (right) met with the US government. Although they had fought on both sides in the war, the United States treated all tribes as defeated enemies. They were told that their rights had been forfeited, their slaves must be



freed, and their property could be confiscated. The council ended with little resolved. Not expecting to sign treaties and concerned that tribal sovereignty was at stake, the tribes simply pledged their allegiance to the

United States and freed their slaves. The next year the tribes signed separate treaties with the federal government. The council was one more step in the relentless reduction of tribal sovereignty.

1872



Initials I.T. on this US marshal badge stood for Indian Territory, Fort Smith's western boundary by 1825.



"The Territory was set apart for the Indians in 1828. The government at that time promised them protection. That promise has always been ignored. The only protection that has ever been afforded them was through the courts. To us who have been located on this borderland has fallen the task of acting as protectors."

—Judge Isaac C. Parker, 1896

Federal Court 1872–1896

Federal Court for the Western District of Arkansas had jurisdiction over Indian Territory. It moved into the former enlisted men's barracks in 1872. One side of the first floor was the courtroom and the other held offices for the US Marshal, US Commissioner, and Court Clerk. The attic was used for jury deliberation. Over the next 24 years, hundreds of US Deputy Marshals rode out from the court into Indian Territory to maintain law and order.

The barracks basement, once a mess hall, became a primitive jail with two big cells (up to 50 men per cell)—and poor, unsanitary conditions. Prisoners nicknamed it "Hell-on-the-Border." Journalist Anna Dawes, daughter of a US senator, visited the jail in 1885. Reprinted in *The Congressional Record*, her news article prodded Congress to fund a new Fort Smith jail.

Judge Isaac C. Parker, although called "the hanging judge," tried to create "the moral force of a strong court." He rehabilitated

convicts, reformed criminal justice, and advocated the rights of Indian nations, but sensational cases and mass executions overshadowed such work.

Judge Parker presided over one of the largest, deadliest, and busiest federal court districts. He heard over 13,000 cases—344 were for capital crimes. Of 160 he sentenced to hang, only 79 faced the gallows. His court's jurisdiction over Indian Territory ended in September 1896. Judge Parker died 10 weeks later, on November 17, 1896.



Clockwise above: Choctaw Indian police, federal deputy marshals; non-Indians rush to homestead former Indian Territory in 1889.



Visiting Fort Smith



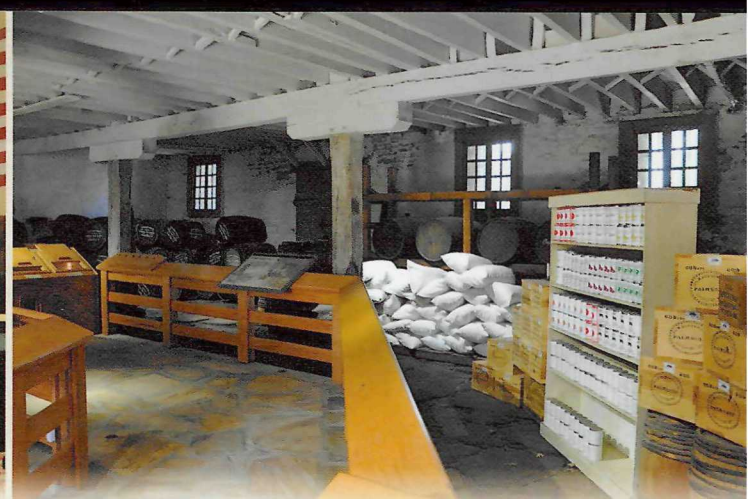
BARRACKS-COURTHOUSE-JAIL
(GREG DISH, ALL OTHER IMAGES NPS EXCEPT AS CREDITED)



HELL-ON-THE-BORDER JAIL



COURTROOM



COMMISSARY

“THIS dark, crowded underground hole is noisome with odors of every description . . . horrible with all horrors—a veritable hell upon earth.”

— Journalist Anna Dawes, 1885

Make your first stop the visitor center in the former basement of the 1888 jail of the second Fort Smith. Rebuilt after an 1849 fire, the barracks were in use until the fort closed in 1871. Added onto later, the building was the Federal Courthouse for the Western District of Arkansas. The primitive jail in the building was replaced in 1888 after a journalist publicized the poor conditions prisoners endured.

Barracks-Courthouse-Jail

The former barracks and federal district court building (above) now houses the wheelchair-accessible visitor center with book and gift shop, orientation theater, jail, and exhibits. The must-see exhibits bring to life Fort Smith's 80-year history—this was once the western frontier of the United States—including its starring roles in many Hollywood movies. The replica of a 37-star fort flag (see photo) that flies beside the building accurately represents 1867–77, when there were only 37 states in the Union.

“Hell-on-the-Border” Jail

Imagine being locked in a basement cell that held up to 50 men. There was no heating, air conditioning, cross ventilation, or indoor plumbing. The toilet was a bucket in the fireplace. This federal jail was called “Hell-on-the Border.” Massachusetts journalist Anna Dawes' 1885 article described the jail's horrible conditions and placed blame directly on the US government. Her article persuaded Congress change was necessary. Construction on the new jail was completed and inmates relocated in 1888.

Judge Parker's Courtroom

Isaac C. Parker was an honest judge who opposed the death penalty and believed in rehabilitating prisoners whenever possible. His reputation as a “hanging judge” is understandable, but unfair. His jurisdiction covered part of Arkansas and all of Indian Territory. During his 21 years on the bench, Parker presided over 13,000 criminal cases, 344 for murder or rape—both carried a federal mandatory death sentence. Judge Parker sentenced 160 men to death, of those, 79 men were actually hanged.

Commissary Building

Built between 1838 and 1846, the Commissary is the oldest standing building in Fort Smith. It housed supplies for the US-Mexican War (1846–48) and military forts in Indian Territory. From 1865–68 it served as a field office for the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands. Judge Parker used part of the second floor as his office from 1875–90 and the first floor was later a residence for court officials. Rescued from demolition in 1909, it housed the city's first history museum from 1910–79.

See posters of movies with Fort Smith or Indian Territory settings or themes in the visitor center—like *Belle Starr the Bandit Queen* and *True Grit*, the original and recent remake. Belle (right) was not as glamorous as her popular Hollywood image.

WILLIAM A. MAYS / NATIONAL POLICE GAZETTE



FIRST FORT SMITH



TRAIL OF TEARS OVERLOOK



GALLOWES



WALKWAY

First Fort Smith-Belle Point

The US Army built a log-and-stone Fort Smith in 1817 because of a volatile feud between the Osage and Cherokee over land and resources. This first Fort Smith was abandoned in 1824; only its stone foundation remains. Be sure to walk out to the first fort's scenic Belle Point setting, which overlooks where the Poteau and Arkansas rivers join and then flow on as the Arkansas River.

Trail of Tears Overlook

The Indian Removal Act (1830) forcibly relocated the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Muskogee (Creek), and Seminole tribes from their ancestral homelands to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma). Thousands died on this long and painful journey known to many as the “Trail of Tears.” This overlook is a place to reflect and remember those who died, as well as those who survived.

Gallows

The first execution here was in 1873. A legend holds that Fort Smith's gallows could hang 12, but the most executed at one time was six. The earliest executions were public and drew crowds, but the structure was fenced about 1878. Over 24 years, 86 men were hanged in 39 separate executions. A year after the last execution in 1896, the city of Fort Smith destroyed the gallows. The present gallows is a reproduction.

Walking Trails

The entire park can be enjoyed on foot via its trails and walkways. From the visitor center and the commissary building nearby you can walk to the initial point marker, gallows, first Fort Smith site and ruins, Belle Point's vistas above the two rivers, and the town's Fort Smith Riverfront Park. There are restrooms in the visitor center and at Fort Smith Riverfront Park.



Junior Ranger program badge.

Start at the Visitor Center, See its Exhibits, Tour the Grounds, and Walk to the Overlook

Visitor Center The visitor center, movie, extensive exhibits, and gift shop are in the former basement of the 1888 jail (see photo above). Open daily except January 1, Thanksgiving, and December 25, it is wheelchair-accessible and has an elevator. Make this your first stop—but not your last.

Watch the orientation movie that narrates the 80-year history of this historic site. Call ahead or visit the park website (far right) for hours.

Make the Most of Your Visit Archeologists have uncovered the footprint of the first Fort Smith, set above the Poteau and Arkansas rivers. Please stay on the trail to help protect this fragile resource. The River Trail hugs the Arkansas River past Belle Point and Trail of Tears National Historic Trail Overlook (see map) and takes you to Fort Smith Riverfront Park. This paved, fairly level path offers shade in hot weather.

Officers' Quarters (see map) housed officers and their

families and were located northwest of the flagpole.

1825 Initial Point Marker (reproduction) marks the 1825 boundary between Arkansas Territory and the Choctaw Nation. See the original stone marker in the visitor center.

Junior Ranger Program Learn about soldiers, American Indians, marshals, outlaws, and Judge Parker to earn a Junior Ranger Badge. Ask a park ranger for details. Children's programs are offered throughout the

year. Contact the park or visit the park website for information.

Safety The fort is in an urban area; watch children carefully. • Be alert when crossing streets, at railroad tracks, and near restoration/archeological work. • Use the walkway to Belle Point and Trail of Tears Overlook. • Be extra cautious near the river: There can be venomous snakes, steep drop-offs, and strong currents. • Pets must be on a leash six feet or shorter at all times. • For

firearms regulations visit the website or ask a ranger.

Accessibility We strive to make our facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. For information go to a visitor center, ask a ranger, call, or check our website.

Directions This national historic site is located in Fort Smith. Follow Garrison or Rogers avenues by going south on 4th Street (see map) and then west on Garland Avenue.

More Information Fort Smith National Historic Site 301 Parker Avenue Fort Smith, AR 72901 479-783-3961 www.nps.gov/fosm

Fort Smith National Historic Site is one of over 400 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about national parks, visit www.nps.gov.

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