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Development of the West and the U.S. Army



In spite of romantic notions of the taming of the “Wild West,” a realistic picture of the frontier Army provides a more insightful understanding of its seminal role in the development of the American West.

The Army’s contributions went far beyond territorial acquisition and security and included exploration, civil engineering, and political stability. Perhaps of greatest long-term significance, the presence of the many Army installations in the West and the requirements for an infrastructure to support them created a stimulus that profoundly influenced how and where the emerging economies of the Western Territories became established. Indeed, as the tangible manifestation of government, with all that implied, the Army was perhaps the single most important and influential factor in Western American development.

The Army’s involvement began almost immediately with the acquisition of the vast “Louisiana Territory,” which, with one stroke, doubled the size of the young United States. In 1804 Army Captains Lewis and Clark mounted a military expedition to explore the Missouri and Columbia river systems and, among many other objectives, to make preliminary surveys of the Territory’s economic potential. A host of Army explorers who included Zebulon Pike, Benjamin Bonneville, Stephen Long, William Emory, and George Wheeler soon followed. These officers (usually members of the Army’s elite Corps of Topographical



LEWIS AND CLARK’S SPIRIT MOUND

Ron Backer

Courtesy of the Artist

Engineers) often enlisted the aid of such accomplished frontiersmen as Joe Walker, Kit Carson, and Jim Bridger who received temporary commissions as Army “Scouts” and contributed their unique knowledge and practical frontier skills to the Army’s efforts. Collectively, these expeditions produced the first accurate surveys and maps of the American interior and provided invaluable – if occasionally misleading – evaluations of the land’s agricultural and mineralogical potential. They pioneered the great overland routes such as the Santa Fe, Oregon, and California Trails that became the arteries of 19th century Western migration.

In 1823 Lieutenant Colonel Henry Leavenworth led 230 soldiers, supported by over 700 Sioux “allies,” in a punitive expedition against the Arikara or Sahnish tribe in present-day South Dakota. The Arikara had been attempting to extort tribute from fur traders along the upper Missouri River. When they nearly destroyed an entire American trapping expedition in 1822, it triggered a military

response from the territorial authority in St. Louis. This was a fateful encounter both because it was the first armed conflict between a Plains Indian nation and the United States, and because it set the pattern for the Army’s uncomfortable dual role as peace makers/peace keepers that persisted throughout the century. After clearly, if not decisively, defeating the Arikara in battle, Colonel Leavenworth negotiated with them on condition of their migration out of the Missouri basin and assurances of permanent peace with the United States. Leavenworth’s alleged “leniency” sparked a controversy between those political interests which demanded the subjugation and subordination of the Native Americans and those who favored a policy of accommodation and cohabitation - conflicting policies that were never fully resolved - to the Army’s frequent consternation and the Indians’ growing hostility.

In 1827 Colonel Leavenworth established a military post near the confluence of the Missouri and Kansas



NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS
George Catlin
Linda Hall Library, Kansas City, Missouri

rivers to provide forward military presence on the Plains and from where Dragoons (mounted riflemen) could provide security for the burgeoning and lucrative commercial trade between Santa Fe and Independence, Missouri.

After the Civil War, the rising tide of western migration became a tidal wave and the Army's duties and responsibilities steadily increased to include management of civil infrastructure construction projects.

"Fort" Leavenworth was the first of an expanding network of frontier posts west of the Mississippi although, as with virtually all other Army posts on the Plains, it was never fortified in the military sense - the movie image of the logpalisaded fort is a complete myth. Fort Leavenworth soon became the key logistic

and administrative hub supporting all Army units in the West and the base of operations for the Mexican-American War of 1846-48 that resulted in the acquisition of California and the entire South West. The Army also assumed the role of negotiating safe passage through the many Indian nations on behalf of commerce and emigration along the rapidly growing network of overland trails, in the process becoming the chief intermediary between the Federal government and the Native Americans. They also struggled to enforce a precarious peace among the many mutually hostile factions of settlers such as Mexican Comancheros, Mormon separatists, Kansas Jayhawkers, and Missouri Border Ruffians.

To police this huge area, the US Army (more a frontier constabulary than an army in the traditional sense) was expanded to an establishment of over 21,000 men of whom approximately 17,000 were stationed west of the Mississippi, a figure that remained more or less constant from about 1850 to



CHEYENNE INDIANS ATTACK WORKERS
ON THE UNION PACIFIC RAILROAD NEAR
FOSSIL CREEK IN KANSAS MAY 28, 1869 (DETAIL)

Jacob Gogolin

Private Collection/Peter Newark American Pictures/The Bridgeman Art Library

In ways obvious and subtle, dramatic and mundane, the Army contributed immeasurably to the political, economic, and social development of the American West.

1898. In order for this inadequate force to best cover the ground, it was deployed in as many as four hundred widely separated “cantonments,” each typically housing one or two “Companies” of 40 – 120 soldiers. The Quartermaster Corps was neither organized nor equipped to outfit these many small posts directly so the routine task of delivering subsistence goods and military supplies was hired out to private contractors. Such government contracts could be hugely profitable and formed the financial basis of many Western economic powerhouses such as the enormously successful freighting firm of Russell-Majors-Waddell and

the Overland Stage empires of Ben Holladay and Wells Fargo. In addition Army depots required a steady flow of consumables and replacement animals all of which created incentive for the local development of farming, ranching, and light manufacturing, which, by virtue of proximity, could undercut the price of goods or animals transported from further east. On a smaller scale, every post had a contract “sutler” who provided, at reasonable profit on a cash or credit basis, sundries and small luxuries to the soldiers and their families. Around many of these posts rose civil communities such as Leavenworth, Junction City, Manhattan, Laramie, and Dodge City, which quickly became self-sustaining and accelerated the pace of economic development.

After the Civil War the rising tide of western migration became a tidal wave and the Army’s duties and responsibilities steadily increased to include management of civil infrastructure construction projects. The Army established the trans-continental telegraph. It surveyed

the routes and provided security and technical advice for the expanding system of western railroads. Army engineers supervised improvements for roads, inland navigation, and irrigation projects. Inevitably this led to wholesale violations of the many Indian treaties which the Army was either powerless to stop, due to their limited forces, or politically prohibited from enforcing. The result was the tragic series of conflicts that – the odd reverse, such as George Custer’s astonishing lapse in military judgment at the Little Big Horn notwithstanding – saw the relentless and intentional destruction of Native American sovereignty. The Army increasingly assumed oversight of the far-flung Indian reservation system, further expanding opportunities for profitable government contracts and providing a boon to the ranching industry with a guarantee of 750 pounds of government beef a year to every Indian family.

In ways obvious and subtle, dramatic and mundane, the Army contributed immeasurably to the political, economic,

and social development of the American West. Without the Army, settlement would almost certainly have happened anyway, but equally certainly, it would have been far more chaotic, violent, and with no probability that the US would have emerged from the process as one nation “from sea to shining sea.” Having played a central role in so much regrettable, if unavoidable violence, the Army ended the 19th century with one unblemished legacy of incalculable value to all Americans. From 1872 until 1933, the Army was charged with the protection and management of the incomparable system of National Parks that are among our proudest achievements – a mission that the Army accomplished with unambiguous success.

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