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The Constabulary of the Plains

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PASSING IN REVIEW, FORT RILEY
Jerry D. Thomas

The Constabulary of the Plains

“Of all the charming and fascinating portions of the country, probably there is none where Nature has been so lavish as within the radius of 150 miles, taking Fort Riley as the center.”

– First Sergeant Percival Lowe, Veteran, 1st Dragoon Regiment, 1890

First Sergeant Lowe wrote these words in describing his first impressions of the newly created post thirty-eight years earlier. He continued, “In rich soil, building material, in beauty of landscape, wooded streams and bubbling springs, in animal life, in everything to charm the eye, gladden the heart, and yield to the industry of man, here was the climax of the most extravagant dream, perfect in all its wild beauty and productiveness, perfect in all that Nature’s God could hand down to man for his improvement and happiness.”

The idyllic setting described by First Sergeant Lowe gave little indication of the tumultuous national setting in

which the post was created. Fort Riley’s establishment in 1853 came during a turbulent time in America’s history.

The Mexican-American War seven years earlier added vast new territories to the Union, sparking confrontations between those citizens who favored the extension of slavery into the new territories and those opposed.

The Great Compromise of 1850 - a truce between these two fractious parties - began to unravel the same year of Fort Riley’s establishment. The huge expanse of territory encompassing the present states of Kansas, Nebraska, and portions of the Dakotas, Colorado, and Wyoming

rekindled the debate on the organization of these territories as free or slave.

In the spring of 1853, as political winds swept from Washington to the Kansas plains, elements of the 6th Infantry Regiment marched from Fort Leavenworth along the Kansas River to the juncture of the Republican and Smoky Hill rivers - the future site of Fort Riley. A decade earlier the Great Pathfinder, John C. Frémont, explored and traveled a similar route. Frémont, like the soldiers who came afterward, believed this location to be the geographic center of the United States and an ideal spot to establish a military post in the midst of undulating hills, native grasses, and broad vistas stretching to the horizon and beyond.

The troops assigned to the new post were ordered to conduct “territorial frontier defense.” This included escorting and protecting commerce and immigrants that traveled the Santa Fe and Oregon trails and preventing hostilities between Native Americans and the settlers through a combination of diplomacy and force.

Throughout the 1850s the frontier Army enforced provisions of previous treaties with the Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Kiowa that allowed white settlers free passage through their lands. In return the United States government promised the Native Americans protection from their enemies and lawbreaking whites, and the provision of livestock, tools, equipment, and agricultural instruction.

Using the most available building material – native limestone – the construction of officers’ quarters, enlisted men’s barracks, and stables began in the summer of 1853. The following summer, most of the garrison patrolled the frontier to the west, while a handful of soldiers and a few civilian stonemasons continued the construction of the post.

In the summer of 1855, the Kansas Territorial Legislature was convened by Governor Samuel Reader at Pawnee, five miles east of the post. Reader had called the legislature there hoping that Pawnee would become the Territorial Capital. This so-called “Bogus” legislature, comprised



COLONEL SUMNER DISPERSING
THE FREE-STATE LEGISLATURE, JULY 4, 1856
Kansas State Historical Society

primarily of illegally elected and mostly proslavery Missouri residents, had other ideas. They voted to move to the Shawnee Manual Labor School which was located a mile and a half from Westport, Missouri. Later that year the “Wakarusa War” erupted between Free-state and proslavery forces, beginning the violent period known as “Bleeding Kansas.”

By 1858 soldiers and civilian contractors completed the first phase of the fort’s construction. Permanent structures of limestone, quarried from

hills overlooking the Kansas River, framed the Cavalry Parade Field, many of which still stand today. Other posts, located several hundred miles west of the Flint Hills, demonstrated the nation’s and the Army’s commitment to providing a sense of security to settlers establishing lives in the eastern third of the newly organized Kansas Territory.

In the years leading up to the Civil War, a significant number of serving officers sympathized with the South. Nearly 25 percent of American Officer



AN ARMY TRAIN CROSSING THE PLAINS
The Harper's Weekly: A Journal of Civilization, 1858

Corps resigned their commissions and joined the Confederacy. Notable officers who served at Fort Riley and then joined the Confederacy were J.E.B. Stuart, Albert Sidney Johnston, Henry Heth, and Lewis Armistead. Notable Civil War officers who served at Fort Riley and chose to remain with the Union included John Sedgewick, Winfield Scott Hancock, and Nathaniel Lyon. Indeed, Nathaniel Lyon, while serving at Fort Riley, developed strong anti-slavery sentiments as he witnessed the ongoing sectional

strife in Kansas. Lyon lost his life while commanding Union forces at the Battle of Wilson's Creek in August 1861.

With the outbreak of the Civil War in April 1861, regular frontier Army units were ordered east to the major theaters of conflict. In their place militia units from Kansas and Wisconsin garrisoned Fort Riley. In May 1862 the First Kansas regiment as well as Jennison's regiment arrived at the post. By the end of the month some 4000 soldiers arrived and camped around the permanent buildings.

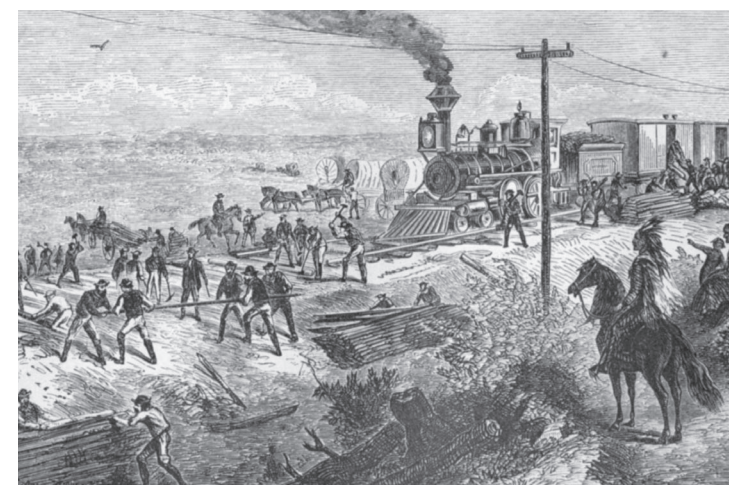
For the duration of the war, Kansas, Wisconsin, and Colorado militia units patrolled the Kansas frontier. In 1864 elements from Fort Riley were sent to the Kansas-Missouri border to counter incursions by William Quantrill's pro-Confederate guerilla forces.

Following the end of hostilities between the North and South in 1865, the United States Army established four new cavalry regiments. The 7th Cavalry Regiment was organized at Fort Riley and commanded by then Lieutenant Colonel George A. Custer, who was notable for

his exploits in the Civil War. Custer and the Seventh Cavalry arrived by rail in the fall of 1866 and organized near the present-day Territorial Capitol site.

The following spring, Custer and the 7th Cavalry participated in a campaign on the high plains of western Kansas and eastern Colorado. The results of the campaign were inconclusive but emphasized the importance the Army placed on protecting railroad construction and settlers who had pushed further west.

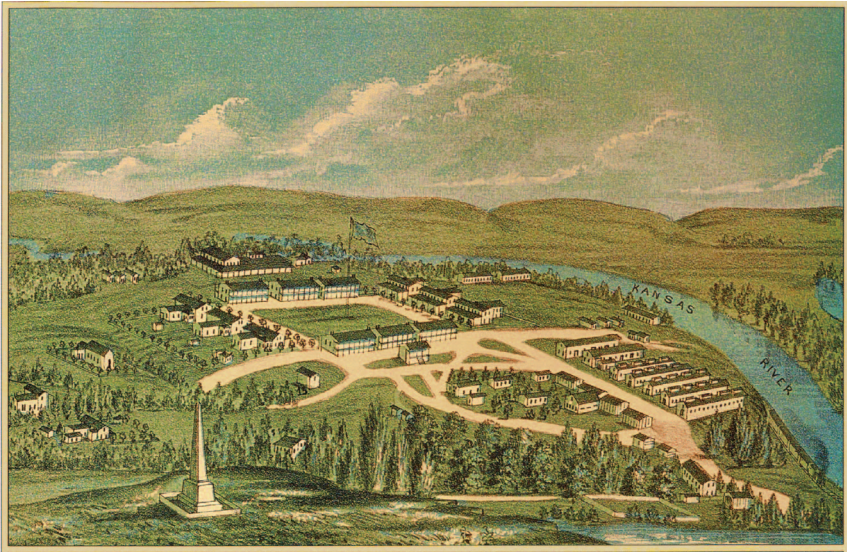
The arrival of the railroad in Kansas brought a significant influx of settlers,



LAYING THE TRACK OF THE PACIFIC RAILROAD
Kansas State Historical Society

inaugurating a profound change to the Flint Hills. Settlements sprang up almost overnight along the railroad routes, resulting in another mission for Fort Riley as soldiers were required to protect the

summer months on patrol and wintered in garrison. During the 1880s Fort Riley's garrison declined in size, populated only by detachments of the 5th, 6th, and 9th Cavalry Regiments and the 16th Infantry Regiment.



FORT RILEY 1870s
Courtesy United States Cavalry Museum, Fort Riley, Kansas

construction crews, towns, and settlements along the line. However, as the American frontier moved further westward, Fort Riley's importance as a citadel on the plains declined. Larger concentrations of troops were now located at Forts Larned and Hays where soldiers spent the

In the two decades that followed, under the guidance of Pond, the post underwent a dramatic transformation as the fort evolved from a frontier post to that of a school post. The original officers' quarters on the south side of the Cavalry Parade Field were demolished and new

quarters of native limestone were added along Forsyth and Sheridan avenues. A new post hospital was constructed, and the headquarters transferred to the old one. An administration building, additional barracks, and stables were added, accommodating artillery units that were also to be located at Fort Riley. In 1886 Congress approved an Army recommendation that Fort Riley be named a school of instruction that trained soldiers in cavalry and light artillery tactics.

By the mid-1880s Fort Riley's era of policing and protecting the plains drew to a close. However, in the decades that followed, the post gained new life as it became an academic post for training America's soldiers. For the next century Fort Riley, as a school post, trained thousands of troops, preparing the United States to take its place in the global community. Throughout the 20th century Fort Riley was an active partner in the defense of America, sending thousands of troops overseas during both World Wars. Today, Fort Riley is the proud

home of the 1st Infantry Division, the "Big Red One," the oldest and most illustrious division in the United States Army.

Robert J. Smith received his BS in history, from Kansas State University. After a long career in a family business, Smith returned to Kansas State University and earned an MA and a PhD in history. In 2011, Smith became Director of the Fort Riley Museum Division. He has published numerous articles on military history topics and is the co-author of the book, Fort Riley: A Pictorial History

William McKale earned BS and MA degrees in American history from Kansas State University. Following graduation, he was commissioned as an Ordnance officer in the United States Army and served with the 1st Infantry Division at Fort Riley. In 1980 he assumed duties as Curator of Collections at the US Cavalry Museum, becoming Director of the Cavalry Museum and 1st Infantry Division Museum in 2002, a position he held until his retirement in 2010. He has co-authored two books: Fort Riley: Citadel of the Frontier West (with William D. Young) and Fort Riley: A Pictorial History (with Dr. Robert Smith).

Both authors are adjunct professors of history at Central Texas College.