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Fort Riley and Its Neighbors

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Fort Riley and Its Neighbors



STREET SCENE IN JUNCTION CITY, 1900

G. A. Streeter

Pennell Collection, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas

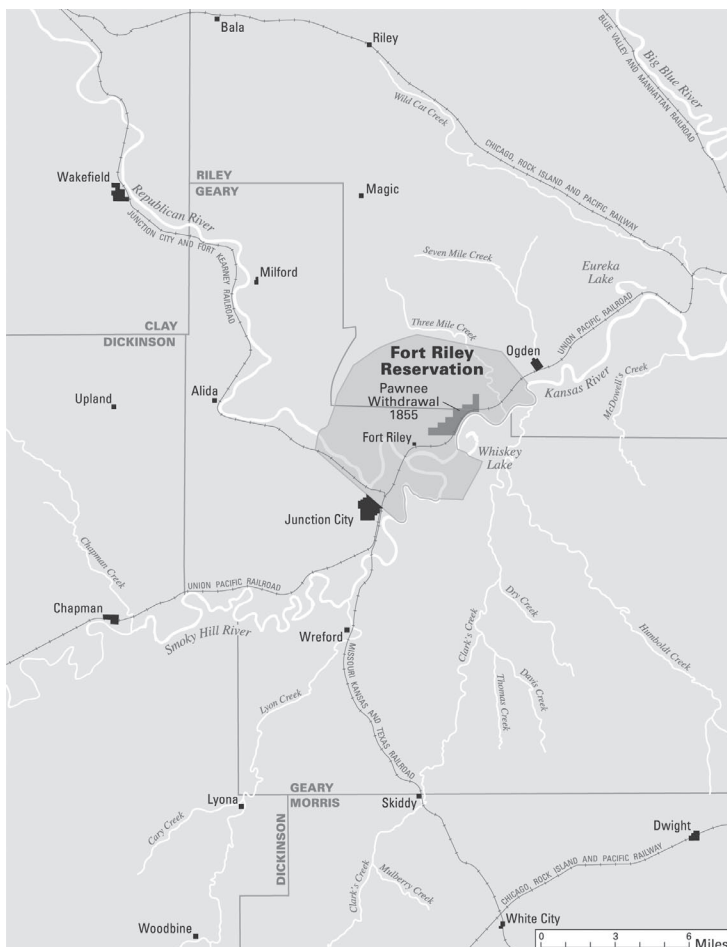
“Amateurs study strategy; professionals study logistics” is a maxim often attributed to the late General Omar Bradley. Getting supplies to soldiers has been proven to be a challenge throughout history.

During the nineteenth century, the vast spaces of the American West presented endless problems for those army officers whose duties included feeding, housing, and clothing soldiers.

By the end of the 1840s, after five years of territorial expansion, the army faced a logistical crisis. In 1844 sixty-nine of its companies were manning twenty western forts, none of them farther west than Fort Leavenworth. In 1849 eighty-six companies were scattered among forty posts. Half of the western posts were supplied by steamboat; the rest stood an average of forty-six miles from a navigable river – five or six days’

journey by ox-team. In 1845 the army paid \$130,000 for transportation. In 1850 the Army paid \$2,094,000 for an increase of 1,500 percent. Military authorities racked their brains for ways to cut costs.

Fort Riley was founded in 1853 at the confluence of the Smoky Hill and Republican rivers, about halfway between the roads to Santa Fe and the Pacific Coast. The closest the army came to conducting a feasibility study of supplying the new post by water was to send a lieutenant down the Kaw River in a canoe that summer – the third in a string of wet years on



MAP OF JUNCTION CITY AND VICINITY, CIRCA 1900

Darin Grauberger, Cartographer

Our Town on the Plains, J.J. Pennell's Photographs of Junction City, Kansas, 1893-1922

Courtesy of University Press of Kansas

the plains. He pronounced the river navigable for at least “two to four months of the year, dating from the first spring rise.” The next year, another officer boasted, “navigation of the Kansas [River] has opened a way... for all the supplies that will ever be required at Fort Riley.” Still, only three steamboats managed to make it as far as the fort between 1854 and 1866. Most government freight continued to move by ox-team.

Steam provided the motive power for another means of transportation: the railroad. Between 1854 and the end of 1860, the territorial legislature of Kansas chartered at least fifty railroads. By October 1866, the railroad had reached Junction City. It did not rest there for long. In the spring of 1867, track-laying continued west, and army quartermasters prepared to move their supply depot for the central plains from Fort Riley to Fort Harker, near Ellsworth – five or six days’ journey by ox-team, but only five hours by rail. The depot at Fort Riley had

employed more than 320 teamsters during the previous summer. The Junction City *Union* observed that “the onward progress of the railroad... will render useless to [the] government the keeping up of such a military establishment as Fort Riley. It must before long be abandoned.” Local business interests wanted the 20,000-acre military reservation opened to settlement.

Civilians were just as aware of freight costs as army officers. Although a jubilant reception always greeted the first locomotive to arrive in town, residents along the line of the Kansas Pacific soon came to realize that the railroad could set whatever rates it pleased. Local businessmen were alive to the advantages of competition between the rival commercial centers of Chicago and St. Louis as well as between railroads. By 1869 the *Union’s* editor fumed, “It is impossible that so large a population, and interests of such magnitude, should... submit to such exactions as are imposed upon the

district of country now tributary to the Kansas Pacific Railway.”

During the late 1860s Kansas entrepreneurs began to incorporate short-line railroads that would connect with the larger markets of Chicago, St. Louis, and even Galveston and New Orleans. The activities of railroad promoters in Junction City and Manhattan were important because they helped build the short-lines that connected their cities and Fort Riley to the Missouri, Kansas & Texas and the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe railroads at Emporia and to the Union Pacific at Kearney, Nebraska. Connections to major transcontinental lines put Fort Riley in the center of the nation’s rail network just as decisively as national expansion to the Rio Grande and the Pacific Ocean during the 1840s had put the Great Plains in the center of the United States. Low freight costs eventually made Fort Riley the cheapest post in the country to supply and led to the establishment of the Mounted Branch School there, which extended the

fort’s economic importance for decades into the twentieth century. This was not at all what local railroad promoters had anticipated, as many of them had favored reducing the size of the military reservation and opening the land to settlement. Their immediate interest, though, lay in access to competing railroads and a variety of markets.

Railroads linked local and national interests. They promoted commerce and military efficiency at the same time, and while the army used the railroads, the railroads changed the army. “For a hundred years we have been sweeping across the continent,” General William T. Sherman wrote in 1882. “Now we are across, and have railroads everywhere.” The next year, in his last annual report before retirement, Sherman concluded, “I now regard the Indians as substantially eliminated from the problem of the Army,” and credited the rail network as an even more important cause of the development than the advance of white settlement or the activities of the army

...he wrote to the Secretary of War, praising Fort Riley’s location in “the richest agricultural section of the state of Kansas.”

itself. Yet the railroads, Sherman went on, “constantly call for the protection of the military” and the army needed to revise its entire scheme of garrisons and depots, concentrating large bodies of troops where they could be moved rapidly and supplied cheaply. General Philip H. Sheridan, headquartered in Chicago, described his own command, “The extension of railroads in all directions over the vast region between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains now affords an opportunity for concentration... and economical results are anticipated.” As always, the general had his eye on transportation costs.

Sherman, the army’s commanding general since 1869, pondered its future

needs as he neared the end of his career. In his annual report of 1882, he drew up a list of posts to be abandoned as soon as possible - posts to be active only a few years longer and posts suitable for large bodies of troops to be regarded as permanent. He listed Fort Riley, with its locally quarried, native stone buildings “meant to last forever,” in the last category.

Sheridan succeeded Sherman as commanding general in 1884. In his first annual report, Sheridan mentioned Fort Riley “on the line of the Kansas Pacific Railway,” its “beautiful, large reservation,” and the need for a cavalry school there. After visiting the fort in May 1885, he wrote to the Secretary of War, praising Fort Riley’s location in “the richest agricultural section of the state of Kansas.” He went on to recommend the establishment of “a good cavalry school... and a place where we could take such horses as are worn out by hard service... and recuperate them.” Sheridan emphasized the



THRESHING IN TOM DIXON'S WHEAT FIELD, 1913



DIXON STOCKYARDS 1902

Photographs by J.J. Pennell
Pennell Collection, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas

fort's hay acreage, which "could not be exhausted." The report ended with an appraisal of Fort Riley's existing structures and suggestions for future construction. Soon after writing the Secretary of War, Sheridan ordered General Schofield, his successor in command of the Military Division of the Missouri, to draw up plans for barracks to house four cavalry companies and quarters for their officers, to be built during the next fiscal year. "The money," Sheridan promised, "will be ready June thirtieth."

Without question, Fort Riley needed more money if the War Department intended to keep it open. Leaving aside a tornado that struck the post in 1882, as well as normal maintenance, Fort Riley's retention as a cavalry post demanded new buildings. Construction of barracks, officers' quarters, and stables got under way while Sheridan's and Schofield's projected school for cavalry and field artillery was still in the planning stage. Most of the federal

government's expenditures on these projects during the next five years wound up in the pockets of Davis (Geary) County contractors, workers, and merchants.

Since those dollars came from Congressional appropriations, and since tax bills must originate in the

By the time the Mounted Branch School opened in 1892, Congress had sunk more than \$740,000 into Fort Riley – about \$18.5 million in today's dollars.

House of Representatives, Sheridan set out to cultivate the chairman of the House Military Affairs Committee. He did this in a long letter, filled with statistics that compared the cost of supplies at Fort Riley with costs at four other military posts. Fort Riley won, hands down. "When the post is in the vicinity of a [rail] line or line of railway

communication or in a country where beef, one of the principal articles of the ration, is cheap, the cost is reduced to a minimum,” the general wrote. Before the year was out, the chairman notified Sheridan of the appropriation’s passage. Sheridan expressed himself “greatly gratified” and “much obliged.”

By the time the Mounted Branch School opened in 1892, Congress had sunk more than \$740,000 into Fort Riley – about \$18.5 million in today’s dollars. Setting aside some special projects such as a steam-heating plant and the waterworks, which went to out-of-state firms, nearly sixty-three percent of expenditures in a five-year period went to Davis County contractors, with other Kansas firms getting a further nineteen percent. The businessmen, editors, and politicians of nearby counties and Kansas statewide had cooperated to an unprecedented degree with one another and with the army officers who needed their help, and they had reaped enormous profits. Fort Riley’s

renovation and expansion sustained a maturing economy in Kansas, and in the West as a region. Skillful lobbying was partly responsible for the appropriations, but the original impetus, modernizing the army, was beyond local control. Tension between local and national interests, as well as the scale of the operation – the size of the garrison, of the physical plant, and of the disbursements – would characterize Fort Riley’s history, and that of the American West, for more than a hundred years to come.

William A. Dobak received a PhD in American Studies from the University of Kansas in 1995. His most recent book, Freedom by the Sword: the US Colored Troops, 1862-1867 was awarded the 2012 Leopold Prize by the Organization of American Historians. Dr. Dobak retired from the Center for Military History and from federal service in 2010.



WELCOME TO THE BOYS IN BLUE

J.J. Pennell

Pennell Collection, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas