



FORT DAVIS

Restoration of the Post Hospital at Fort Davis National Historic Site

Background and Introduction

Fort Davis National Historic Site (NHS) in Fort Davis, Texas symbolizes a period of 19th-century westward migration and the essence of the frontier U. S. Army in the history of the American West. Fort Davis's story is powerful and more easily interpreted because of the abundance of original historic structures and the number of restored buildings. Until just a few years ago, the post hospital was the only remaining substantial structure at Fort Davis void of interior restoration. And yet, it was once a premier frontier medical facility. State-of-the-art in its time, it served the needs of the community at the fort as well as the surrounding area; imperative to the health of the soldiers and the success of all post activity.

In the summer of 1868, civilian workers in exchange for medical care built a temporary hospital at Fort Davis. Although roughly constructed of adobe with a mud roof, dirt floors, and window frames covered with cotton cloth, the building was considered comfortable and fulfilling. During the early 1870s, however, as this make-shift hospital required more and more repairs, various post surgeons petitioned for a new facility. A permanent hospital was constructed in 1876, built of adobe on a stone foundation with wooden floors and a tin roof that did not leak. This new structure contained one ward for twelve beds, and an administrative section that housed the post surgeon's office, dispensary, linen room, storeroom, kitchen, dining room, isolation room and the hospital steward's room. The hospital was expanded in 1884 with the addition of a 12-bed ward on the south end of the building. The U.S. Army's rigorous examination for doctors provided it with some of the best trained physicians, in turn giving the soldiers and civilians at the fort and those who

PROJECT SUMMARY



NPS photo

The post hospital at Fort Davis NHS today.

lived in the nearby community of Fort Davis healthcare as good or better than what the average American received during the last quarter of the 19th century.

Because the hospital is a significant part of the daily workings of the fort, its preservation is crucial to interpreting the post's history. Restoration of the building began in the late 1960s when exterior adobe walls were repaired and a new roof and porches were constructed. In the 1980s, a wood walkway erected in the administrative section made the hospital more accessible to visitors. Stabilization of interior plaster began in the 1990s and further restoration efforts described below began in early 2000.

Restoration Efforts

Recent restoration ventures were made possible through the collaboration of many different groups and individuals. In 2000, Richard Cronenberger, NPS Regional Historical Architect, and Jake Barrow, NPS Senior Exhibit Specialist, completed a "Condition Assessment, Evaluation and Recommendations for Repair and Preservation." Initial funding was provided by the National Park Service "Vanishing Treasures" initiative to save prehistoric and historic ruins in the Southwest. In 2004, a matching grant was received by the Friends of Fort Davis NHS from the National Trust for Historic Preservation under the Save America's Treasures Program. Beginning in 2005, this grant provided the majority of the funding for five summer field schools.

Major players in the preservation and restoration of the post hospital at Fort Davis NHS were faculty and students in the Graduate Program in Historic Preservation at the University of Vermont, and representatives from Cornerstones Community Partnerships of Santa Fe, New Mexico who provided in-



NPS Photo

The post hospital at Fort Davis NHS in the late 1880s.

struction and guidance on adobe and historic lime plaster conservation work. Many volunteers and employees from Fort Davis NHS, along with employees from other National Park Service areas skilled in adobe preservation, also worked on the restoration project.

All three units of the hospital, (the two 12-bed wards and the administrative section) required repair and preservation. The scope of work for the project, which focused on the administrative area and the north ward, included stabilizing existing parts of sub-floors, floors, walls, and ceilings, as well as replacing selected floors, doors, ceilings and windows with in-kind materials.

Treatment Methods

Over the course of five preservation workshops from 2005 to 2009, master carpenters, masons, historical architects, conservation specialists and numerous dedicated volunteers worked to restore the hospital to its original splendor. During the 2005-2008 workshops, graduate students from the University of Vermont, from other colleges and universities, and even from other countries participated in the project. These students received hands-on expert training and instruction in historic carpentry, 19th-century lime plastering, masonry, and southwest adobe construction and stabilization. During the 2008 adobe workshop (sponsored by Cornerstones Community Partnerships), NPS staff, the Fort Davis community, and preservation students were instructed in adobe making and stabilization of historic adobe structures. As part of the final workshop in 2009, a lime plaster program/demonstration was presented to program participants and local students. Everyone was able to see firsthand how natural lime was used throughout history and how lime is used



Shaping stone with the Dallet hammer and plain chisel (2009).

to white wash and plaster adobe walls and structures.

Restoration of the building required taking delicate measures to ensure the retention of original fabric. To maintain its historical integrity, in-kind materials were used. Historic carpentry techniques were employed to construct new windows and doors. Nineteenth century methods of mixing and applying lime plaster were used to stabilize and re-attach existing historic plasters and to plaster



Painting of 2,400 feet of ceiling boards (2009).



Installing the new ceiling in the north ward (2009).

areas where no plaster remained. Repairing mortar and replacing adobes were necessary to help conserve the exterior of the structure. In the installation of floors, sub-floors and ceilings, great care was taken to retain and preserve existing materials.

Results and Discussion

The work, according to the original scope, was completed in 2009 with the exception of new doors and windows in the south ward of the post hospital. The south ward of the building will not undergo interior restoration, but doors and windows may be added at a later time. In total, four historic period doors and door casements were installed, one in the north ward and three in the administrative section. Twenty historic era windows were placed in the north and administrative areas, eleven of which included the window casements. Adobes were stabilized in places where the roof attaches to the walls and around all windows and doors. Historic lime plasters were stabilized and re-attached. In addition to stabilizing historic floors in the dispensary, floors and sub-floors were installed in the north ward, the north ward wash room, the post surgeon's office, the hospital steward's office, the hallway in the administrative section, and in the hallway closet between the post surgeon's office and the hospital steward's office. Tongue and groove ceilings and baseboards were constructed in the north ward, the north ward wash room, the post surgeon's office and the hospital steward's office. The new ceilings, as well as the doors and windows, were primed and painted. Although not part of the

restoration project, a new accessibility ramp was constructed on the west side of the building.

With the addition of historical furnishings, the post hospital will be able to provide the visitor with a unique glimpse into the lives of officers and enlisted soldiers who served at a 19th-century military post. In telling a story rarely interpreted at other frontier forts, visitors will have the opportunity to learn about the medical history of Fort Davis and of those who suffered and died of illnesses such as pneumonia, typhoid fever, and tuberculosis – uncommon in today's world of antibiotics and modern medicine.

Literature Cited

National Park Service. Final Project Report. Historic Preservation Grants Division, National Park Service, Department of the Interior.

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<http://www.nps.gov/foda>



Before and after views of the north ward (1) addition of flooring in wash room (2) wash room window installation, and (3) new ceiling in the ward (2009).