



## FORT DAVIS

## Fort Davis National Historic Site

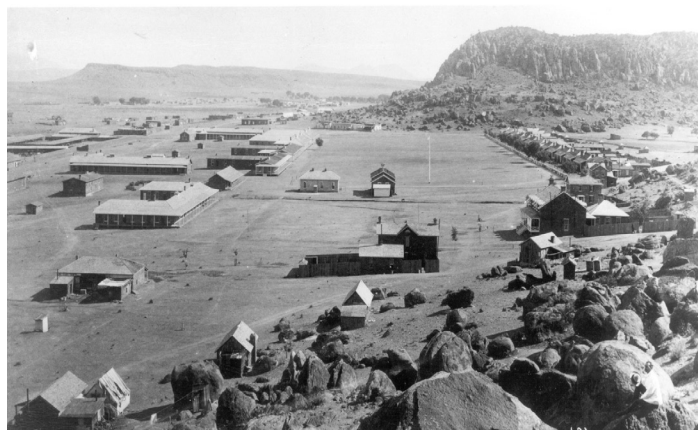
### Cultural Resources

### Introduction

If a tourist had traveled to Fort Davis in the early 1900s and stopped to walk around the remains of the old army post, a local may well have regaled the tourist with the story of Indian Emily. According to the legend, a young Apache girl was found by soldiers stationed at Fort Davis and brought back to the post. While recuperating at the fort, “Emily” fell in love with one of the young officers. When the officer married another woman, Emily fled from the fort, heartbroken. She returned, however, to warn the soldiers that the Apaches were planning an attack. The sentry accidentally shot her as she approached the fort, and as she died, Emily gasped out her warning and prayed that the officer she loved would be saved (Scobee 1947). This apocryphal tale had no basis in actual fact, but it became one of the most popular local stories about the fort, using a common stereotype of Native Americans—the “noble savage”—to romanticize a story of conflict and conquest.

Fort Davis was founded in 1854 and operated as an army post for over thirty years until the army abandoned it in 1891. When the National Park Service took over management of Fort Davis after it was designated a national historic site in 1961, the park staff not only had to preserve the physical remains of the fort, they also had to decide how to interpret the history of the resources. In striving for historical accuracy, the Park Service confronted the power of cultural traditions, like the Indian Emily story. Many locals became upset when park staff expressed their doubts over the accuracy of the legend and attempted to correct the historical record. White resistance to the interpretation of the history of the black regulars stationed at the fort also presented a challenge for park staff (Welsh 1996). The debates over the history of the fort show that the importance of the Fort Davis cultural resources does not end in 1891. Indeed, although the history of the fort in the nineteenth century establishes the resources’ significance, the story of how Fort Davis is remembered and how its history is interpreted is just as crucial to understanding the resources and their importance.

## OVERVIEW



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Fort Davis as it appeared in the 1880s.

### The Establishment of Fort Davis

Fort Davis stands in the Davis Mountains, a cooler and slightly less arid environment than the hot, dusty plains of the Trans-Pecos. The environment made it attractive for settlement, and people had lived in or traveled through the region long before the army arrived. The Jumanos migrated south from New Mexico in the 1100s and settled in the area, but by the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the Mescalero Apaches claimed much of eastern New Mexico and the Trans-Pecos as their territory, driving out the Jumanos. The Comanches, who dominated the Southwestern plains in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, often rode through the area on raiding expeditions south into Mexico (Wooster 2006; Welsh 1996).

The U.S. Army started constructing outposts in West Texas in 1846, a long string stretching along the frontier. Fort Davis, named after Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, was built in 1854 along the San Antonio to El Paso road. The government never provided adequate funding for construction, and the first buildings were rude, ramshackle structures. Like most western forts, Fort Davis included a barracks, officers’ quarters, and a parade ground. Buildings were initially made of vertical wooden pickets of oak and cottonwood with thatched roofs. In 1856 the original barracks were replaced with sturdier ones built of stone. By that time numerous other structures had been built, including a corral, stable, laundresses’ quarters, bakery, guardhouse, and sutler’s store (Myers 2000).



By 1860 many of the buildings at Fort Davis, which had not been well constructed to begin with, were falling into disrepair. Colonel Joseph Mansfield inspected the post in October and found the sawmill broken down and the hospital “a worthless building of posts set on end, and shrunken in, & rotten.” Before repairs could be undertaken, the Civil War broke out the following year and federal troops abandoned Fort Davis. Confederate troops occupied the fort for around fifteen months and then vacated it. According to an eyewitness account, Apaches burned the vacant structures. With the army busy in the East, Indian raiding increased in west Texas. After the Civil War, the federal army returned to Texas and Fort Davis to pacify the frontier (Myers 2000).

## The Second Fort

Following the Civil War, Congress reorganized the U.S. Army. Initially, six regiments formed exclusively of black troops, commanded by white officers, were formed: the 9th and 10th U.S. Cavalry Regiments, and the 38th, 39th, 40th, and 41st U.S. Infantry Regiments. When Major General Philip Sheridan took command in Texas in 1867 and brought numerous troops to the region—both to try and force Indians onto reservations and also to make sure that Texans accepted federal authority once more—he immediately sent the Ninth Cavalry to Texas, and several companies from the other black regiments also served in Texas. In 1869, due to reductions in funding and lack of recruits, Congress consolidated the Army’s existing forty-five infantry regiments into twenty-five regiments. The four black infantry regiments became the 24th and 25th U.S. Infantry Regiments. Companies from all four black regiments (the 9th and 10th Cavalry and the 24th and 25th Infantry) served on the frontier and garrisoned Fort Davis over the following years (Wooster 2006).

Lieutenant Colonel Wesley Merritt, commander of the Ninth Cavalry, led four troops of the Ninth to old Fort Davis in June 1867. Other regulars occupied adjacent forts in the region. The old buildings at the fort were unusable. Merritt employed over 200 civilian workers to build new structures in a location a short distance from the old fort. For the next twenty years, construction continued sporadically at the fort as new buildings were added and old ones replaced. During later periods in the 1870s and 1880s, the troopers themselves handled most of the construction (Myers 2000).

The second Fort Davis was an extensive complex. An average of 390 officers and men were stationed at the fort through 1880. During this period, black regulars garrisoned Fort Davis (Wooster 2006; Dobak and Phillips 2001; Leckie 2003). Although the power of the Comanche empire waned in the post-Civil War decades, and their raids south into Texas diminished, the Apaches remained determined and resilient,

contesting the attempts of the U.S. government to force them onto reservations. Victorio, a leader among the Warm Springs Apaches, repeatedly led parties of warriors away from the San Carlos reservation on raiding expeditions (Wooster 2006).

The defeat of Victorio in 1880 signaled the end of hostilities in the Trans-Pecos. The Comanches had been forced onto reservations in Oklahoma, the Apaches to ones in New Mexico and Arizona. With the cessation of hostilities, Fort Davis’s purpose in the region was removed. As the buildings at the fort grew older, and as the army looked for ways to reduce expenses, officials decided that spending the money to rehabilitate and modernize Fort Davis would be pointless. The army abandoned Fort Davis in 1891 (Welsh 1996; Wooster 2006).

Fort Davis, because it remained on the landscape, even if many of the buildings crumbled into ruin or disappeared entirely, retained the memory of the soldiers’ service on the frontier. At the beginning of the twentieth century, that memory, particularly of the black regulars, was usually ignored. But because Fort Davis still stood, it could not disappear entirely. The adobe walls of the old structures and dusty roads that the soldiers knew so well harbored the history of the conflicts on the frontier and the lives of the soldiers who lived—and sometimes died—there.



NPS PHOTO

The Ninth Cavalry on the parade ground at Fort Davis.

## Searching for Profits

The army’s abandonment of Fort Davis dealt a crushing blow to the local community, which depended on the presence of the army and the jobs it offered. The inhabitants of the town of Fort Davis immediately began exploring the possibilities of turning the fort into a profit-making enterprise once again. Locals grazed their livestock around the fort and families rented and occupied habitable buildings. In the early 1900s

all of the buildings along officers' row were occupied and people still lived in many in the 1920s and 1930s. Locals also sought to capitalize on the healthful reputation of the Davis Mountains with their cool, fresh air. Tuberculosis patients sometimes came to Fort Davis, seeking a cure, and wealthy residents of Houston and Dallas began building summer homes in the mountains (Welsh 1996; Myers 2000).

In 1921 Fort Davis civic officials petitioned the Department of the Interior, asking for the creation of a national park in their area, which would bring tourists and revenue to their community. When their requests were denied, Fort Davis residents persisted. Many of the early proposals for a national park did not include the actual remains of Fort Davis, focusing instead on the recreational and aesthetic potential of the Davis Mountains. By the 1930s and 1940s, though, as the Park Service began including more historic sites in the system, Fort Davis residents started promoting the old fort's potential as a historic site to be included in either the National Park Service or the Texas State Park System. Locals wanted to preserve the fort, but also recognized the profitable possibilities of turning the old fort into a tourist attraction (Welsh 1996).

The opportunity to include Fort Davis in the national park system finally came in the 1960s. The Park Service's Mission 66 program, lasting from 1956 to 1966, provided funding for new facilities and improvements in existing parks and also encouraged the expansion of the system. Although the remains of the first fort no longer existed above ground, a substantial number of buildings from the second fort still stood at Fort Davis. The Fort Davis Historical Society, formed in 1953, had taken over management of the fort but did not possess the funds to purchase the property or to do the restoration work that was so badly needed. They campaigned to have the site declared a national historic site, and Park Service historian Robert Utley supported the measure. On September 8, 1961, President Kennedy signed the legislation creating Fort Davis National Historic Site (Welsh 1996; Myers 2000).

## Interpreting Fort Davis

When the Park Service assumed management of Fort Davis, they faced a decision on how to interpret and preserve the history of the fort. The story of the black regulars at Fort Davis had been ignored by the various private individuals and organizations who managed the fort prior to its acquisition by the Park Service. As Robert Utley prepared a report on the history of Fort Davis in 1963, he emphasized historical accuracy. Utley did not plan for interpretation at Fort Davis to discuss the lives of black soldiers in depth or to discuss the issues of racism, but even mentioning the black soldiers was too much for some white visitors. The first superintendent of Fort Davis, Michael Becker, reported an incident in 1963 when

a lady complained that the entrance sign did not include the information that black soldiers were stationed at Fort Davis so that her party could by-pass what she called a "contaminated area." Jerry Rogers, a seasonal historian at Fort Davis in the 1960s, recalled how the locals "loved Fort Davis, but disliked its black story." Many whites preferred using the history of Fort Davis to support an Anglo-dominated historical narrative, one which enforced racial stereotypes (Welsh 1996).

The Park Service persevered, however, and historians conducted extensive research into the black experience at Fort Davis. Some residents of Fort Davis preserved family connections to the black troopers. The grandfather of George Bentley, one of the maintenance workers at the park, had served in Company K of the Ninth Cavalry and was stationed at Fort Davis around 1867. The family donated Private Bentley's discharge papers to the park. Recognizing the dearth of scholarly attention towards the black regulars, park historian Ben Levy proposed initiating a "broad study" of this history in 1967. The story of the black regulars eventually became one of the central interpretive themes at the site. Park staff continued to promote the recognition of the black regulars' history both within the park and in a national context as well (Welsh 1996).

The interpretive staff at Fort Davis also focused on the use of "living history" as an interpretive medium. Frank Smith, superintendent at the park in the late 1960s, encouraged living history programs, feeling that rangers in period dress had an easier time engaging visitors' attention and communicating information about life at the old fort. Subsequent superintendents also supported living history, and the interpretation division developed many successful programs on military life and other topics such as race and gender on the frontier (Welsh 1996). By expanding the history that is interpreted at Fort Davis and giving attention to elements that had long been ignored, such as the story of the black regulars, the Park Service helped the cultural resources of the fort become vehicles for a more inclusive historical narrative.

## Fostering Diversity

In the 1960s when the historic site was created, the town of Fort Davis was divided along racial lines. The Park Service, which offered one of the best sources of employment in the area, worked to ameliorate this divide by fostering diversity among the employees at the park. The first superintendent, Michael Becker, chose to live on the Mexican side of Fort Davis and also hired Pablo Bencomo, a local resident, as the chief of maintenance. Becker recorded that many other Hispanics applied for jobs at the park. One evening, at a social event for park staff, the wives of all the Hispanic staff members remained in the parking lot, sitting in their cars. When the wife of a ranger went out and spoke to them she

“learned that no Anglo had ever invited Hispanics to their private social function” (Welsh 1996).

Park officials also tried to diversify the staff with black and Native American employees. Recruiting efforts reached out to college students, and the park staff also supported many youth programs. These included the Neighborhood Youth Corps, part of President Johnson’s Great Society initiative in the 1960s, and the Youth Conservation Corps, which helped with maintenance and preservation of historic structures. The resolve of Park Service officials to not only interpret the history of minority groups but also ensure that people of all ethnicities could find employment in the Park Service helped to give more people the opportunity to participate in the interpretation and preservation of their history (Welsh 1996).

## Preservation

When the Park Service began managing Fort Davis a few of the buildings along Officers’ Row had been restored, but the rest were falling into ruin. The Park Service decided to embark on an extensive restoration and stabilization program. Many structures received exterior preservation treatment only—the roofs were redone and walls stabilized, but no attempt was made to restore the interiors. None of the buildings from the first fort were reconstructed, but some of the foundations were outlined with stakes or cement adobe bricks (Welsh 1996; Myers 2000).



Officers’ Row as it appears today.

One of the most extensive efforts involved the restoration and refurbishing of the commanding officer’s quarters. It offered one of the best opportunities for recreating a historically accurate depiction of the interior of a structure because more information was known about the inhabitants, in particular Colonel Benjamin Grierson, who occupied the quarters from 1882 to 1885. Members of the Grierson family had remained in the vicinity and there was the chance of locating some original pieces of furniture.



Part of a recently-restored oven at the post bakery.

The decision to restore the commanding officer’s quarters inspired debate within the Park Service about the merits of fully restoring historic structures. In 1978 F. Ross Holland Jr., chief of the Park Service’s cultural resources management division in the Washington office, reviewed the plans for restoring the commanding officer’s quarters and questioned the goals of such an extensive reconstruction. He felt that the more limited preservation work completed on other structures showed “the passage of time and its effects” and also gave Fort Davis “a high degree of integrity as an ensemble having shared a common past down to the present.” Others in the Park Service felt that the building should be completely restored and furnished in order to enhance the interpretation of life at the post. This question about the value of restoration, which can erase the history of a structure in the intervening years between its period of significance and the present, has often been debated in historic preservation circles. As the Park Service made decisions about how to manage the cultural resources of Fort Davis, park staff continually discussed questions about the validity of restoration, what period to concentrate on interpreting, and how to ensure the interpretation was historically accurate (Welsh 1996).

## Current Conditions

The Park Service still works to preserve the original fabric of buildings where possible and initiates more extensive restorations for structures when appropriate. The post commissary is an example of one building that was still in good enough condition to make restoration practicable. Although the adobe walls of the back rooms had deteriorated, leaving only the stone foundation, the south rooms were roofed and had adobe walls in reasonably good condition. After an archaeological investigation, the Park Service repaired and stabilized floor joists, repaired interior damage to adobe walls, replaced floor boards, and completed other repairs so that the building could be furnished and opened to the public.



The post hospital, originally constructed in 1876.

The Park Service also recently completed archaeological investigations of the hospital storeroom and restored the stone enclosure around the spring on the southeast side of the fort. Another extensive project began in 2004—the restoration of the 1876 hospital. During five preservation workshops, experts and volunteers built new doors and windows, used nineteenth-century lime plaster conservation techniques to stabilize the adobe structure, and installed new floors, sub-floors, and ceilings where necessary. The hospital is now open to the public.

## Conclusion

The story of Fort Davis demonstrates the many ways that history can convey power. History can be a source of economic profits. Interpretations of history can perpetuate racial stereotypes or overturn them. By choosing to tell the story of the black regulars and debunk myths such as the Indian Emily legend, the Park Service gave power to people who had long been silenced within the historical narrative. By making an effort to hire minorities, the Park Service gave them the opportunity to participate in the discussion of how to interpret the history of Fort Davis. Fort Davis may preserve the story of the U.S. Army in the Southwest, but the cultural resources of the fort and how those resources are restored and interpreted also have a great deal to say about the politics of preservation, the cultural and social history of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and the power of history itself.

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