Fort Union National Monument

(Left) Soldiers, officers, and even women and children, once shuffled over the flagstone sidewalks of Fort Union. Stone blocks, all in a row, supported imposing white-columned porches on the officer's quarters. Relics of a not-too-distant past, the ruins are all that remain of the hopes, joys, and sorrows of the post's former residents.

In 1934, an 89-year-old woman made a trip down the old Santa Fe Trail, hoping to re-capture the memories of her youth. As a very young woman, Marian Sloan Russell lived at Fort Union, a large military post situated on the famed overland trail northeast of Santa Fe. It was there she met her future husband, Lt. Richard Russell; they were married in the fort's small military chapel in 1865. It was a place of numerous fond memories for Marian, but time had wreaked havoc on the post. "I found crumbling walls and tottering chimneys," Marian said of that last visit. "Great rooms stood roofless, their whitewashed walls open to the sky. Wild gourd vines grew inside the officers quarters ... Among a heap of rubble I found the ruins of the little chapel where I had stood—a demure, little bride in a velvet cape - and heard the preacher say, 'That which God hath joined together let no man put asunder.'

Yet instead of resigning this place to a distant past, the melting adobe walls and empty rooms seemed to evoke it. "The wind moaned among the crumbling ruins and brought with it the sound of marching feet," Marian recalled. "I saw with eyes that love to look backward, a wagon train coming along the old trail. I saw a child in a blue pinafore. It was little Maid Marian on the seat of a covered wagon." Marian's wagon was one of thousands that came to Fort Union during its 40-year existence, and her story is just one of countless others that keep the past alive at Fort Union National Monument today.

(Right) Lt. Richard D. Russell and his bride Marian Sloan Russell, circa 1867. Marian made several trips over the Santa Fe Trail in the 1850s and 60s before marrying her soldier husband in 1865. The newlyweds lived in quarters next to those of post commander Col. Christopher "Kit" Carson, a great friend of Marian's.

The Santa Fe Trail and the First Fort Union

In 1821, a full thirty years before Fort Union's establishment, legal trade commenced between the United States' western border and the new Republic of Mexico. Traveling via an overland route eventually known as the Santa Fe Trail, caravans of mule and ox-drawn wagons yearly transported tons of material goods to the Southwest: everything from bolts of cotton cloth to fancy parasols. An international highway, the 900-mile Santa Fe Trail connected two very different worlds - different languages, different customs, different religions.

These two worlds were permanently joined in 1846. The United States declared war on Mexico on May 13th,
and a 1,657-man force called the Army of the West marched down the Santa Fe Trail from Fort Leavenworth on the Missouri River, occupying the New Mexican capital of Santa Fe on August 18th. Gen. Stephen Watts Kearny claimed New Mexico for the United States and established Fort Marcy on a hill overlooking the town's plaza. U.S. possession of New Mexico became official with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. The territory would require a permanent military presence to keep open its communication and supply line with the States—the Santa Fe Trail—as well as to fulfill a pledge initially made by Kearny in 1846. The general had assured New Mexicans that in return for their "allegiance, they would be protected by the United States government from the Indians, and from all their enemies." That promise would prove to be a decades-long challenge for the U.S. Army.

Initially, small detachments of dragoons (mounted infantry) were stationed at the prominent towns and villages of New Mexico, with the military's headquarters located at Fort Marcy. But garrisoning troops in towns was expensive, as quarters for the troops were usually rented, and their presence in the various communities did little to solve the most pressing problem in the territory: raiding bands of Indians. In 1850, Col. George Archibald McCall reported that the only way in which a military force can be advantageously and effectively employed to put an end to Indian spoliation in New Mexico is to post them, not in our settlements or on our borders but in the heart of the Indian country." The following year, Col. Edwin V. Sumner was given the command of the territory with orders to "revise the whole system of defense." He wasted no time in removing the headquarters and supply depot of the 9th Military Department from Santa Fe to the edge of the plains northeast of the capital. The exact destination was known locally as Los Pozos—The Pools.

A little over 100 miles from Santa Fe, Los Pozos consisted of a string of small water holes in the valley of Wolf Creek near the junction of the Mora and Sapelló Rivers (present-day Watrous, New Mexico). The site was very near another junction, that of the Mountain Route (historically the Raton Route) and Cimarron Route of the Santa Fe Trail. At Los Pozos, Sumner ordered the establishment of a new post. Construction began in late July of 1851, and in an effort to save on costs, the new fort was to be built by the soldiers themselves. Katie Bowen, wife of Capt. Isaac Bowen, wrote her mother from this new post, named Fort Union, on August 24: We are putting up quarters as fast as possible of timber and adobies [sic] and in the mean time we are living in tents." As for the location itself, she mentioned that there were hills "close by and timbered with pine" that made "good lumber and fire wood, and will not fail a supply in thousands of years." She also noted that the post was "supplied with a delicious spring, and we have its waters brought twice a day."

Two years later, Fort Union sported over two dozen structures: officers' quarters, enlisted men's barracks, quartermaster and commissary buildings, a hospital, stables, mechanics' shops, and "a good bakery." Trail traveler William Watts Hart Davis, stopped briefly at Fort Union on his way to Santa Fe in 1853. He described the fort as "an open post, without either stockades or breastworks of any kind, and, barring the officers and
soldiers who are seen about, it has much more the appearance of a quiet frontier village than that of a military station. It is laid out with broad and straight streets crossing each other at right angles. The huts are built of pine logs...and the quarters of both officers and men wore a neat and comfortable appearance." In August of 1853, the post had a fighting strength of three officers and 164 men, members of the 2nd Artillery, 3rd Infantry, and 1st Dragoons.

In the mountains to the northwest of Fort Union ranged the Southern Ute, a Uto-Aztecan people. In the foothills of the Rockies north and northeast of the post lived the Jicarilla Apache, a tribe of Athabascan stock. Out on the plains, in the region of the Cimarron Route of the Santa Fe Trail, roamed the Comanche and Kiowa, Uto-Aztecan and Caddoan, respectively. Conflict with native peoples was not a new problem; both Spain and, later, Mexico, had to deal at various times with Indian raids, stolen livestock, and even the abduction of women and children from small villages and outlying haciendas. But with American occupation of New Mexico came increased activity and settlement within the homelands of these tribes and others. Reflecting on the outbreak of hostilities with the Jicarilla and Ute in 1854, Governor David Meriwether wrote that he had "heard...that the Indians were not the aggressors, but I well knew that when the Indians and the whites once commenced fighting, the Indians never would make peace until whipped:

Fort Union soldiers, along with New Mexico Mounted Volunteers, marched against the Jicarilla Apache and Ute in 1854 and 1855, eventually forcing an accord with the Muache Ute and the Jicarilla at the New Mexican settlement of Abiquiu in September of 1855. As for the Comanche and Kiowa, relations were tenuous in the late 1850s, but depredations in New Mexico and along the Santa Fe Trail in 1859 led to a major military campaign the following year. As was often the case, the Indians proved elusive, some even receiving warnings from comancheros, New Mexican traders friendly with the Comanche and Kiowa. Success finally came in early January of 1861, when a detachment of mounted rifleman from Fort Union attacked and destroyed a Comanche village of 150 lodges on the Cimarron River in the present-day Oklahoma Panhandle. Future events, however, would quickly overshadow this small victory.

(Left) Remains of the mechanics' corral, where blacksmiths, wheelwrights, and other craftsmen were kept busy at work repairing wagons, harness, saddles, and other equipment.

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(Right) Chimes of officers' quarters, topped with fired bricks, have fared better against the harsh southwestern climate than most of the fort's adobe walls.

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(Right) Although the second Fort Union, or "Star Fort," was said to be able to accommodate 500 men, the poorly constructed quarters were so unhealthy that much of the garrison lived outside the fort in tents.
Civil War

Despite a separation of more than 750 miles, affairs in the States were much on the minds of the men and families of Fort Union, who hailed from all parts of the nation. Issues of slavery and State's rights were just as heated at Fort Union as they were in Washington, D. C. Writing in his journal on January 5, 1861; Lt. John Van Du Bois noted the arrival of the mail from the States and observed that the newspapers were "all filled with secession. Our glorious Union will at last prove a failure because a man must ... have a brother man for a slave." Du Bois claimed to be one of only three officers at the post who were "thoroughly loyal," and he rebuffed entreaties—made at Fort Union—to join the Confederate army at a higher rank than he then held. "I became involved in several very bitter political discussions here," he wrote again on March 10. He threatened that "if an effort was made to seduce my regiment from its allegiance, I would assume command myself and fight it out."

When the news finally reached New Mexico of the beginning of the war, several Fort Union officers did indeed resign their commissions, including Maj. Henry Hopkins Sibley, who actually held command of the post while awaiting acceptance of his resignation. Fears of an impending Confederate invasion of New Mexico prompted Sibley's successor, Maj. William Chapman, to abandon the fort. The scenic bluffs just to the west of the post, he reasoned, would provide an enemy's artillery a fine field of fire and "render this post untenable." Another consideration in the decision to move, though, was the poor state of the post's structures. They had not been put up by skilled craftsmen to begin with, and the soldiers' use of green logs resulted in rotting buildings after only a few years. In fact, in August of 1859, Acting Inspector General Joseph E. Johnston found the fort's buildings so decayed "that none of them are worth repairing" He noted that the fort's commanding officer had "just had a part of his company quarters pulled down —thinking it dangerous to its occupant."

(Above) Fort Union's great flagstaff could be seen at a considerable distance from the open prairie surrounding the post. One resident saw the staff crash to the ground "during a heavy wind storm."

Chapman located the new fort one mile to the east. This second Fort Union, an earthen structure later known as the "Star Fort" because of the eight "points" of its defensive perimeter, boasted bomb-proof quarters, warehouses, and magazine. Yet the second fort was plagued with the same structural problems as the first, again stemming from a combination of unskilled soldier labor and inferior materials. In June of 1862, the new post commander, Capt. Peter W. L. Plympton, found the quarters of the Star Fort "very objectionable." Not only were the unseasoned timbers shrinking in the warm weather, but the quarters themselves were "low and
badly ventilated." Most of the garrison chose to live in tents outside the fortification. Even worse, in Plympton's eyes, was the fact that Major Chapman had failed to locate the Star Fort far enough away from those troublesome hills to the west. Plympton confirmed this by placing cannon at the bluff and firing towards his own fort, the shells easily covering the distance to the fieldwork and beyond. Fortunately for the second Fort Union, it never came under attack, although just three months earlier, in March of 1862, a Confederate invasion force had been poised to do just that.

In July of 1861, former Fort Union commander Sibley had convinced Confederate President Jefferson Davis that New Mexico was theirs for the taking. Davis authorized a Texas column commanded by Sibley, whom he commissioned a brigadier general. Davis' orders to his new general were to drive the Federal forces from the territory, "at the same time securing all arms, supplies, and materials of war," of which New Mexico had considerable quantities. Sibley's Texans defeated Federal forces at the Battle of Valverde (south of Socorro, New Mexico) on February 21, 1862, and subsequently occupied Albuquerque and then Santa Fe. "It was an undisguised fact," wrote one Colorado soldier, "that the Texans were having it their own way in the Territory" Sibley's next objective was the capture of Fort Union, and there is evidence he planned to continue his campaign north to the rich gold fields of Colorado.

On March 26, at Apache Canyon, fifteen miles east of Santa Fe, the advance element of the Texas army, some 280 men, was attacked by a much larger force of "Pike's Peak men". These were part of the 1st Colorado Volunteers, who had made swift marches from Colorado Territory to Fort Union to counter the Confederate invasion. The Colorado Volunteers, along with members of the 1st and 3rd U. S. Cavalry and the New Mexico Volunteers, 418 men in all, forced the Confederates to retreat after a three-hour fight known as the Battle of Apache Canyon. The "Pike's Peak men" took more than 70 Texas prisoners. Yet Apache Canyon had been little more than a skirmish; the deciding contest came two days later, on March 28.

(Left) When a Confederate army of Texans threatened Fort Union in 1862, ten artillery pieces were requisitioned to defend the Star Fort. The cannon were never needed.

A reinforced Texas column numbering approximately 600 men under Col. William Scurry marched east to find and attack the Federals. Scurry left behind his supply train of approximately 80 wagons under a guard, along with some wounded from the previous fight. Following the Santa Fe Trail over Glorieta Pass, the Texans found the main Union force, 884 men under Col. John P. Slough, at Pigeon's Ranch, and the battle began. For the next six hours, Scurry's men compelled the Federals to slowly give ground until Slough broke off the fight, retreating to a camp several miles away. The Rebs, seemingly the day's victors, retained possession of Pigeon's Ranch. But disaster had befallen the Texas wagon train left at the mouth of Apache Canyon.

Unbeknownst to the Texan commander, a Union detachment of 528 men under Maj. John M. Chivington had marched around the Texans. Chivington's guide, Lt. Col. Manuel Chaves of the 2nd New Mexico Volunteers, led the detachment across Glorieta Mesa to a point overlooking the Confederate wagon train. After a short skirmish, Chivington's men captured the train and burned it to the ground.

Consumed in the flames that day were precious Confederate supplies—clothing, blankets, food, and ammunition. As Texan A. B. Peticolas recorded in his journal on March 28, "Thus ended the battle of Glorietta [sic] Valley, in which we gained a complete victory but at the expense of every comfort"
Another attempt on Fort Union could not be made without additional supplies, and to remain in the territory while the Federals reinforced themselves would be risky. On April 12, 1862 the Rebel army began its long, grueling march back to Texas. Sibley's dream of a Confederate empire in the Southwest had been forever shattered.

**Third Fort Union**

Now that the Confederate scare had passed, the problems with the Star Fort could not be ignored. Department commander Col. Edward R. S. Canby approved plans for a third and final Fort Union in August of 1862. The buildings for the new post departed radically from their predecessors. They would be built on stone foundations and erected with bricks made of adobe (mud mixed with straw). Today known as Territorial-style architecture, the structures were a combination of Euro American design and Hispanic building techniques indigenous to New Mexico. The officers' quarters, for example, featured white columned porches and white double-hung windows with pediments, all elements of Greek revival architecture still popular in the East. Yet instead of pitched roofs, which the military plans originally called for, the roofs were flat like those of Hispanic plazas and haciendas.

Yet these, too, had their problems, and many an officer's wife dealt with recurring leaks and avalanches of falling plaster from the walls and ceiling.

Work on the third Fort Union would continue throughout the Civil War years. During that time, most of the regular army units were called to the East. The job of garrisoning the post fell primarily to volunteer units, a fair share of these raised in New Mexico. Made up mostly of Hispanic men, many of whom could not speak English, the New Mexico Volunteers frequently encountered racist and contemptuous attitudes from regular army soldiers. Yet they faced the same hardships as the latter and participated in the same duties, be it fort building, escort duty, or campaigning against invading Texans and Navajo Indians. Capt. Rafael Chacon, Company K, 1st New Mexico Volunteers, proudly wrote of his men that "in everything they showed valor. The New Mexico Volunteers were officially released from service in November of 1867.

Completed that same year of 1867, the third Fort Union was built to accommodate four companies of soldiers and later expanded with additional barracks to house six companies. Various regular army units garrisoned the fort in the post-Civil War years, including members of the 3rd Cavalry, 8th Cavalry, 15th Infantry, and 37th Infantry. Beginning in 1876, Fort Union became home to four companies of the 9th U. S. Cavalry. The enlisted men of the 9th were African-American; the regiment’s officers were white. Commonly referred to today as "Buffalo Soldiers," African American regulars made up nearly ten percent of the U. S. Army, and although segregated, found the military a welcome refuge from problems of unemployment and poverty. While stationed at Fort Union in the late 1870s, Buffalo Soldiers were deployed to Cimarron, New Mexico, to quell lawlessness and protect settlers from threatened outbreaks by the Jicarilla Apache and Muache Ute, to southern New Mexico when Apache under Geronimo and Victorio left their reservations, and to Colorado when difficulties erupted with the Northern Ute. On the Nation's centennial, July 4, 1876, the 9th Cavalry band traveled from Fort Union to Santa Fe to participate in a patriotic celebration on the plaza.

**A Bustling Place**

"Fort Union is a bustling place," wrote William Bell, a photographer and physician with a railroad survey party in 1867. "[I]t is the largest military establishment to be found on the plains, and is the supply centre from which the forty or fifty lesser forts scattered all over the country within a radius of 500 miles or more, are supplied with men horses, munitions of war, and often with everything needed for their support:" Fort Union, he continued, was one "vast collection of workshops, storehouses, barracks, officers' quarters, and offices of all kinds belonging to the different departments." Contributing greatly to Fort Union's busy appearance were the two depots connected with the post: the quartermaster depot and ordnance depot or arsenal (this latter occupying the site of the first Fort Union). The supply depot, which had been a function of the first Fort Union as well, received military goods via contract freighters, many of whom were Hispanic, from railheads in Kansas
and, later, Colorado. After reaching Fort Union, the supplies were unpacked and placed in large storehouses until needed at some other post, when they would be loaded onto wagons for yet another overland journey.

Fort Union and its depots had a tremendous impact on the economy of northern New Mexico. Wood fuel, forage for livestock, and beef came from local contractors. Flour, the mainstay of the frontier army, came from wheat grown primarily on the upper Mora River. In 1863 alone, approximately 60,000 bushels of wheat were said to have been harvested in the Mora Valley, most of this intended for military use. At the fort and depots, William Bell tells us, "Over 1,000 workmen are here kept constantly employed, building and repairing wagons, gathering in and distributing supplies, making harness, putting up buildings, and attending to the long trains of goods and supplies constantly arriving and departing." Bell's figure is a slight exaggeration, yet Fort Union did employ hundreds of civilians every year, and at least half of this workforce was made up of native New Mexicans. Although Hispanic workers tended to occupy the lowest-paid jobs ($30 per month in the late 1860s), there was much to be said for cash wages in a territory where cash-paying jobs were scarce.

In the eyes of some in the Army, however, Fort Union had become a self-perpetuating monster. Gen. Philip H. Sheridan, writing in 1869, opined that "Quartermasters and Commanding Officers have gone on increasing and building up an unnecessary post, until it has become, by the unnecessary waste of public money, an eyesore. I do not accord with the opinion of any one as to its military bearings for protection as field operations, nor do I see any necessity for its Depot" Despite Sheridan's damning words, however, Fort Union would survive for another 22 years.

**Life at Fort Union**

(Left) The post's military prison, completed in 1868. The adobe walls of the prison have melted away, leaving only the stone cell block.

The first sight of Fort Union for enlisted men and army dependents coming from the lush eastern states often came as a shock. Frank Olsmith, who was stationed at Fort Union for a short time in 1865, remembered the post as "situated on a barren plain, almost wholly devoid of vegetation [sic]" "To Frank, it was "the most desolate and forbidden looking sort of a site for an army post, that I think, I ever beheld, in all my days." Frances Boyd, wife of Lt. Orsemus Boyd, arrived at Fort Union direct from the East in 1872. The Boyds brought along a woman as a servant and nurse for their two children, and when Frances asked the servant if the post "would not be a pleasant home for us," the nurse "looked out on the wide and desolate plain that faced the fort, and with a weary sigh, said she 'preferred NewYork.'" That same servant received her first marriage proposal within three days of the Boyds' arrival and soon married a soldier from the post.

(Right) The sundial is a prominent feature of the fort's parade ground.

Genevieve La Tourrette, daughter of the post chaplain, remembered well the garrison's daily routine during the fort's last decade of existence. It "began with the rising of the sun—firing of the cannon and hoisting of the flag - followed by the bugle sounding call for breakfast - after which there was drilling of various kinds, target practice, etc.; dinner and more drilling, and later in the day recreation—then retreat at sunset—firing of the cannon as the flag was lowered." As for diversions, enlisted men's options were fairly limited—at least on post. Private Olsmith recalled that "Gambling with cards, dice, and now and then horseracing formed the principal recreation of the troops." Many a soldier passed the time at the post trader's store, where he could purchase a tin of oysters, a cigar or two, and take part in a game of billiards.
Located about six miles to the southwest of the post, on the banks of the Mora River, the agricultural village of Loma Parda became the most popular resort of Fort Union’s soldiers. Private Olsmith wrote that Loma Pardas "population derived their subsistence largely from catering to the desires of the troops ... for social entertainment and amusement." Olsmith remembered wine rooms, restaurants, and dancing pavilions. The dance halls, some with attached gambling rooms, were "for the most part well patronized, from early eve to dewey [sic] morn"When Olsmith's company was ordered back to the States on escort duty, he remembered that the order "was most welcome to all but a few of the younger set, who having acquired sweethearts, among the damsels, of Loma Parda, were loath to leave them" Some of these women, according to Olsmith, "packed their possessions in a bundle, brought them to our camp, and with tears of sorrow streaming down their cheeks, besought... permission, to share our march to the States, with their lovers, but to no avail."

(Left) Cisterns were constructed to provide adequate water in the event of a fire.

While officers could bring their wives and families to Fort Union, where quarters were provided for them, enlisted men did not have the same luxury. Not only were quarters non-existent for married enlisted men, but a soldiers wife could not even live in the garrison unless the marriage had been consented to by the enlisted man's officers. Married men were seldom allowed to enlist. Female society, then, was generally limited to post laundresses (four per company), servants of officers, and the officers' wives.

Other activities adding to life at Fort Union were baseball games, band concerts, and fraternal organizations such as the Masons, Sunday religious services, and dances hosted by the officer’s spouses."The quarters at Fort Union had an unusually wide hall which was superb for dancing," remembered Frances Boyd. "We only had to notify the quartermaster that a hop was to be given, when our barren hallway would immediately be transferred into a beautiful ballroom, with canvas stretched tightly over the floor, flags decorating the sides, and ceiling so charmingly draped as to make us feel doubly patriotic:’

**Final Days**

In 1878, the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe railroad entered New Mexico Territory over Raton Pass. Tracks were laid into Santa Fe early in 1880, bringing to a close the era of the famed Santa Fe Trail. Fort Union, originally built as an outpost "in the heart of the Indian country," found itself in a country populated by settlers and ranchers, the native peoples displaced to distant reservations. The hum of activity associated with the quartermaster depot declined significantly beginning in 1878 as its operations were gradually cut back, finally ceasing altogether in 1883. Fort Union's structures noticeably deteriorated in the 1880s as the post hung on without any real purpose. Abandonment of the fort, a foregone conclusion for years, finally came early in 1891. In February, the garrison began the process of packing up material goods and post records. "The last few days have told a terrible tale on Fort Union," wrote a soldier on February 18, "four days ago, everything was in running order; now it's upside down and inside out." The last of Fort Union's garrison departed the adobe post on May 15.

Because the army had leased the land from private owners, Fort Union reverted to the holders of the land title, the Butler-Ames Cattle Company (later the Union Land and Grazing Company), in 1894. Despite its private property status, however, residents of the nearby communities of Loma Parda and Watrous had no qualms about traveling to the old post to retrieve windows, doors, and lumber to use in their private residences. Within a few short years, the great post of Fort Union became a collection of adobe ruins. Efforts to preserve the ruins began in 1929 and continued for the next 25 years. During that period, the former post continued to see tourists and curiosity seekers, and the Union Land and Grazing Company became concerned
about the safety of visitors and cattle. They backfilled cisterns and toppled chimneys. Marian Russell witnessed this activity in 1934, and it deeply disturbed her. "Workmen were busy tearing down the old fortification," she wrote. They tore my heart down with it. Why not let the old walls stand. Around each crumbling wall, each yawning cellar hole, are gathered precious memories of young America."

Marian Russell died two years later. Her wish to "let the old walls stand" became a reality on June 28, 1954, when President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed into law the bill establishing Fort Union National Monument. Today, the adobe ruins stand somber against the New Mexico sky, not unlike an old love left behind to await the return of a soldier.

(Below) Strikingly distinct from the air, the Star Fort lies next to the third and last Fort Union. The scars and ruts of long-abandoned 19th-century roads and trails demonstrate the fragility of our Western environment.
Further Reading


Source:

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