

FORT GIBSON: A BRIEF HISTORY

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Fort Gibson: A Brief History by Grant Foreman & Carolyn Thomas Foreman

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GRANT FOREMAN & CAROLYN THOMAS FOREMAN

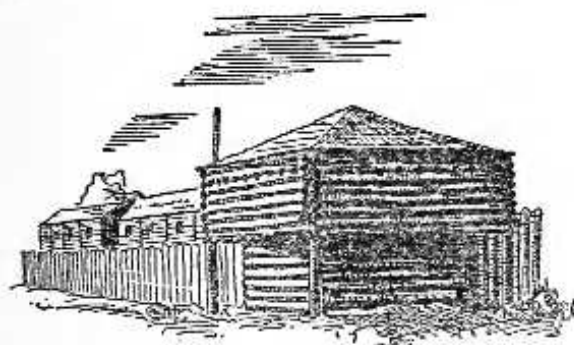
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GRANT FOREMAN

CAROLYN THOMAS FOREMAN



*To the Friends
whose assistance has made possible
the restoration now in evidence
in Fort Gibson*

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FORT GIBSON was not only the oldest and most celebrated military establishment in the annals of Oklahoma but in its early days it was the farthest west outpost of the United States, and in many respects continued for years to be one of the most important on that frontier. It was one of the chain of forts reaching from the northern to the southern boundaries of the nation, which included Fort Snelling, Fort Leavenworth, Fort Gibson, Fort Towson, and Fort Jesup, at times there were as many soldiers stationed at Fort Gibson as in all the other forts together. It was constructed in a wilderness frequented by bears, wolves, and panthers, while the neighboring prairies were the feeding grounds of wild horses, buffalo and deer. The nearby streams were rich in beaver, and furs were shipped by trappers and traders to eastern markets.

This fort actually owed its establishment to the indomitable spirit of the Osage Indians who ranged the surrounding country and claimed exclusive right to the game in that locality; consequently they challenged the hunters from eastern Indian tribes, notably the Cherokees, and were constantly engaging in savage battles with them. This situation resulted in the establishment, in 1817, of a garrison at Belle Point, subsequently called Fort Smith, which it was hoped would be able to abate the warlike activities of the Osages. As it was not able to achieve the desired results, the garrison was abandoned and the troops were directed to find a new location at the mouth of the Verdigris River, where they would be near the towns of the Osages and better able to watch and control their movements.

When Colonel Matthew Arbuckle came up the Arkansas River with his command of the Seventh Infantry, he found the best boat landing on the Verdigris River, and adjacent territory for three miles above its mouth, occupied by

a considerable settlement of white traders and trappers, the earliest trading settlement within the limits of Oklahoma. Most conspicuous among the settlers was Colonel A. P. Chouteau, a graduate of West Point of the class of 1806, who resigned from the army the next year to engage in Indian trade. From 1815 to the time of his death in 1838 he was identified with the Indian Territory and performed valuable service for the government in the negotiation of important treaties with the Indians, with whom he had more influence than any other man of his time. He was long a familiar and welcome figure at Fort Gibson. His judgment commanded greater respect of army officers, commissioners and Washington officials than that of any other man on the frontier; he was frequently consulted and his services solicited for the settlement of important problems relating to the Indians.

In connection with his Indian trade at the Three Forks, Chouteau's establishment was integrated with the facilities of river navigation. He employed a large number of men for assorting and packing for shipment the peltries purchased from the Indians; he also maintained a little shipyard on the bank of the river where he made the boats in which, with the help of a rough and hardy class of river men, he shipped his peltries to New Orleans and St. Louis. As the settlement of traders and trappers would have made it troublesome to establish a garrison on the site, Arbuckle decided to find a location for his fort a short distance up the nearby Grand River, which discharged its waters into the Arkansas about half a mile from the mouth of the Verdigris.

It was on the twenty-first day of April 1824, that two long flatboats were to be seen ascending Grand River, manned by bearded young men in the uniform of the United States Army. As they worked the boats up the river they scanned the shore for a landing place, and about three miles from the river's mouth they were successful in discovering a wide ledge of shelving rock on the east bank, which made a natural boat landing. They tied up their boats at this ledge, and unloaded axes, adzes, froes, saws, food supplies, tents, baggage, and a miscellaneous assortment of camp equipment. On the bank they met other uniformed young men, unshaved and long of hair, who had come by land to the place from

Fort Smith with their horses and oxen. They were, in all, 122 officers and privates of companies B, C, G, and K of the Seventh Infantry.

The river bottom land near their landing place was low and fertile, and covered by an immense canebrake, great forest trees, and a jungle of vines and undergrowth. The soldiers were soon engaged in clearing sufficient space in which to set up their tents. Then began the weeks and months of labor necessary to remove the cane, vines, and brambles from an area large enough for an army post; the ring of the ax and the crash of the huge falling trees were heard, and roaring fires consumed the prodigality of nature. Logs were fashioned by axes and cross-cut saws into lengths and shapes suitable to form the walls of houses; other logs were split into puncheons for floors, or rived into clapboards to roof the structures to be built.

By the early part of 1826 a number of log houses had been completed, providing quarters for the soldiers, quartermaster, sergeants, surgeon, and a hospital, guard room, matron's room and storeroom. These buildings were constructed on four sides of a square and, with the upright logs or pickets surrounding them, constituted the stockade, so arranged for protection against possible attack by the Indians. This stockade has long since fallen into decay; but on the site another has been constructed from the original plans, as nearly like the old one as possible, where it is now to be seen.

Fort Gibson maintained communication with the outside world by means of transportation on the Arkansas River over which, at first, the keelboat brought men and supplies to the fort from remote distances, and down which furs and peltries were shipped by the traders living in the neighborhood. Later, steamboats that supplanted the keelboats came up to the fort with military supplies and merchandise for the sutler at the post and for merchants in that vicinity. During 1833, seventeen steamboats were tied up to the boat landing from time to time through the season. Under the railroad bridge which now spans the river at this spot may be seen one of the rings anchored in the rock to which the boats were secured many years ago. The fort was also reached by the

famous thoroughfare known as the Texas Road, which came through southwestern Missouri, southeastern Kansas, and following the course of Grand River passed Fort Gibson and continued on to Texas. For many years an amazing number of emigrants, freighters, and traders going to or returning from the then unknown country beyond Red River passed over this road.

In 1831, the whole of the Seventh Infantry was ordered to Fort Gibson and the officers reported the interior of the stockade much overcrowded by the host of officers and men, laundresses and servants. The year 1832 was a notable one in the history of Fort Gibson. A commission had been created by Congress for the purpose of locating in the Indian Territory the Indians about to be removed from the East. It was necessary for the commission to make its headquarters at Fort Gibson, and negotiate treaties with the wild Indians which were to prepare them for the impending changes in their neighbors. The commissioners were Montford Stokes, until then governor of North Carolina, Henry L. Ellsworth, of Hartford, Connecticut, and Rev. John Schermerhorn. They were afforded protection by the Ranger company of Captain Jesse Bean, who arrived at the post in October, 1832, and was then ordered to the West on an exploring tour. Mr. Ellsworth arrived at Fort Gibson that same month, accompanied by Washington Irving and some friends whom he had met on Lake Erie and had invited to accompany him to Fort Gibson. They came down the Texas Road past the Creek agency at Three Forks, just below the site of Okay, and arrived at the bank of Grand River, across which Irving noted the neatly whitewashed blockhouses and palisades of Fort Gibson. Someone halloed across the river, and a scow, which served as ferryboat, was brought over; the travelers entered the boat, which was poled by soldiers across the stream; as it was tied up to the landing the visitors stepped ashore and walked up the bank 150 yards to the gate of the garrison. A sergeant's guard admitted them, and as they entered the fort their attention was attracted to a number of men pilloried in stocks and riding the wooden horse. Startled at this spectacle, Irving made a note of it in his journal.

On their arrival at Fort Gibson, Washington Irving and

Commissioner Ellsworth and their friends, on learning that Captain Bean's company was somewhere up the Arkansas River, after spending two nights in Colonel Arbuckle's quarters in the fort, started out to overtake the Rangers and share in their adventures. They were gone a month on this trip, and from his experiences on that expedition Irving wrote his famous book, **A Tour on the Prairies**. The company returned to Fort Gibson on the ninth of November, and the next day Irving departed down the Arkansas River by steamboat for New Orleans and Washington.

The inhabitants of the fort were awakened each morning as the bugler sounded reveille at daybreak to rouse a sleeping garrison; later the crash of the morning gun echoed and re-echoed among the neighboring hills and rumbled across the more distant prairies, startling deer and bear in their sheltered beds. The flag was run to the top of the staff to catch the first rays of the rising sun. After an early breakfast the soldiers went about their routine duties; details worked in the garrison garden among the vegetables; oxen, horses, and mules were fed, watered, and cared for; recruits were put through their drills by the sharp commands of officers, and the bugle sounded at intervals throughout the day, carrying its lively messages over the surrounding valleys and hills.

The end of the day of toil or boredom, as the case might be, was announced by the drums sounding retreat, followed by the evening gun and the ceremony of lowering the flag at sunset. The roll of the drum and the shrill notes of the fife sounded tattoo at nine o'clock and warned stragglers to cease their amours and other diversions and return to their quarters within the palisades before the great gates should close and shut them out; taps then sounded, and Fort Gibson was again stilled in darkness. This routine repeated day after day, month after month, and year after year, made life at the post a dull experience. It was an isolated station in the western wilderness, far from civilization and white settlements of consequence. The officers and men, exiled, as they termed it, to this remote garrison, wearied of its limited possibilities for entertainment. Trifling incidents varied the dull routine of their lives, and episodes that mattered were of absorbing interest.