

By the Kansas State Historical Society

Fort Leavenworth

Fort Leavenworth is the oldest active army post west of the Mississippi River. It was established in 1827.

Fort Leavenworth was built on the bluffs overlooking the Missouri River. Colonel Leavenworth, who picked the location wanted the post to be near the river, but away from the river bottoms. At forts located too close to the river, the soldiers often died from "fevers." At the time people did not know that mosquitoes carried malaria. Mosquitoes live near standing water. Malaria infects the blood stream and causes fever and headaches and, in severe cases, death.

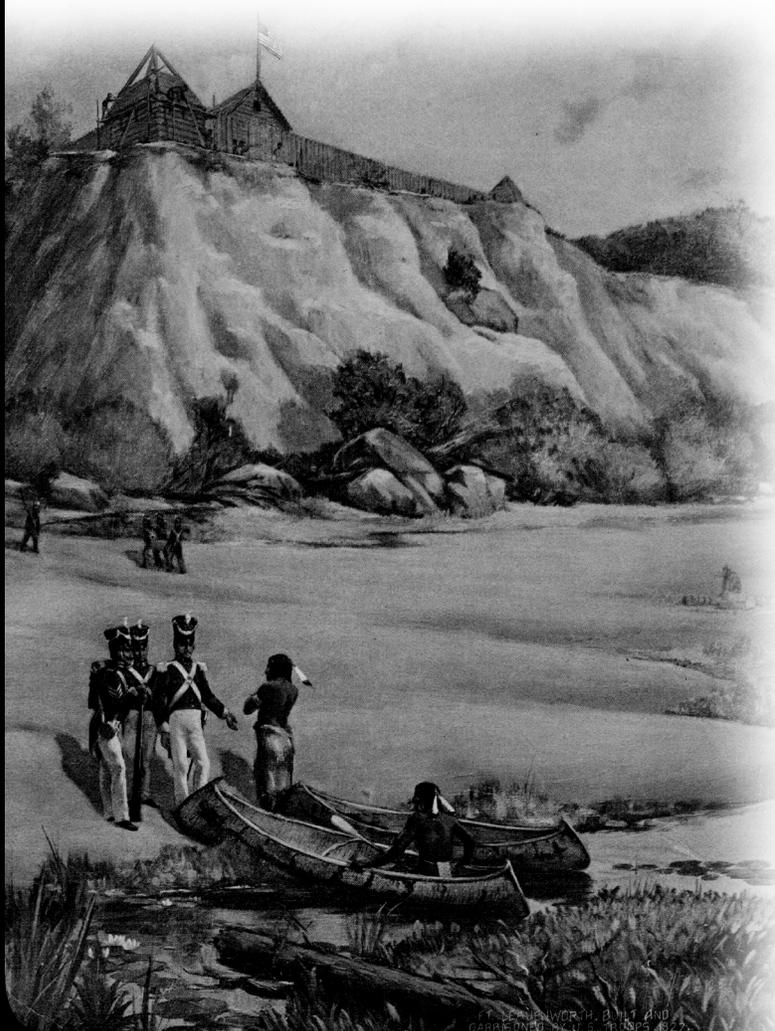
What was the original purpose of Fort Leavenworth?

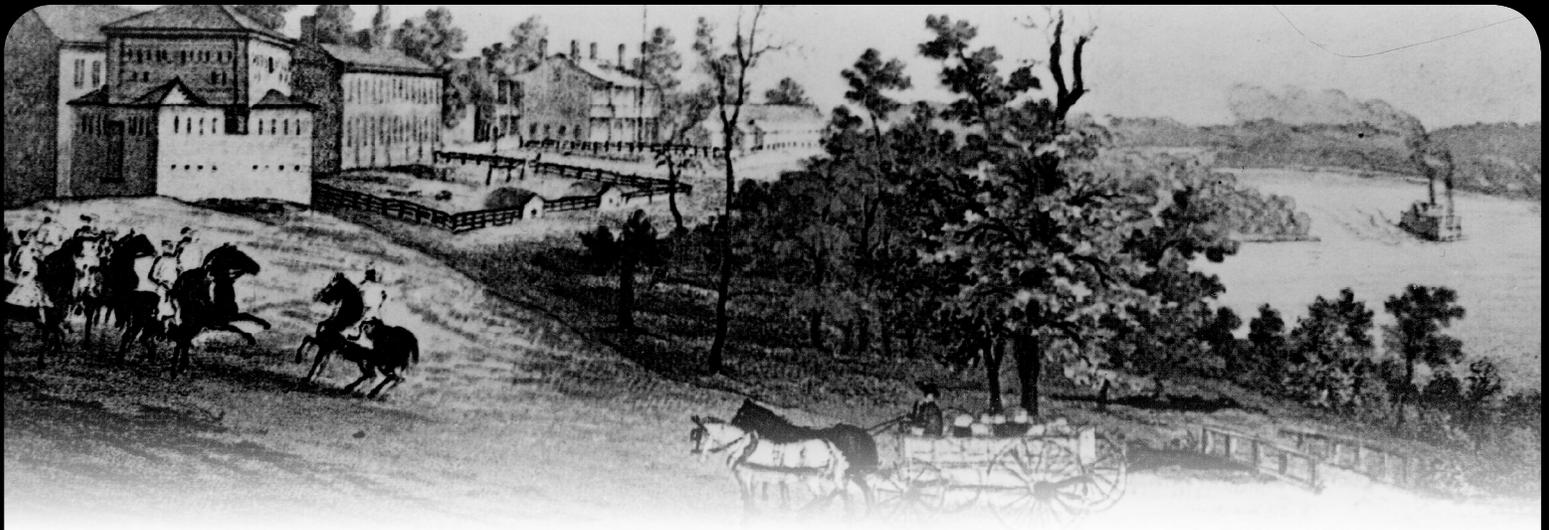
At the time of its founding, the fort had many purposes. The soldiers stationed there were to protect the fur trade on the Missouri River. They also were to protect travelers on the Santa Fe Trail. The trail was an important international trade route. Goods were shipped between Independence, Missouri, and Santa Fe, which was then part of Mexico.

The soldiers at Fort Leavenworth also were charged with keeping the peace between the Indians and the traders. The army presence sent a message to the Indian tribes that the United States now owned and controlled the frontier. At the time of Fort Leavenworth's founding, Kansas was not yet open for settlement. The land west of the Missouri River was reserved for the Indians. Americans who settled on Indian lands were called squatters. The army also took seriously its role in protecting the Indians from Americans pushing west.

What was it like to be stationed at Fort Leavenworth during the early years?

In the beginning, life at Fort Leavenworth was quiet and almost boring. Leavenworth was on the frontier. Soldiers arrived by boat, traveling up the Mississippi River to the Missouri River. They left behind not only friends and family, but also the conveniences of city life. Their day-to-day work at the fort included constructing buildings and roads.





Officers stationed at the fort often brought their families with them. The families usually stayed at the fort when the soldiers traveled west. Some of the wives traveled with the men, serving as laundresses. One soldier's wife and son were both on the government payroll. The son was a drummer for the troops.

Philip St. George Cooke, a lieutenant at the fort, observed, "It was remarkable how large the proportion of married men was among those selected to fill our companies—the boats swarmed with their wives and children. The deck was barricaded with beds and bedding. Infants squalled and chickens cackled."

Many of the early deaths at the fort were caused by malaria. The mosquitoes found their way onto the bluffs. The families were hit especially hard. While the men often rode west away from the mosquitoes, the families that stayed behind were vulnerable. After a six-year-old boy died of "fevers," many of the children were sent 37 miles east to Liberty, Missouri, where they could attend school.

What happened to Fort Leavenworth?

- As the United States expanded west, Fort Leavenworth became an important supply center for western forts. Supplies from the east could reach the fort by boat. Supplies traveled west from Leavenworth over land in wagon trains.
- With the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Kansas became a territory. The first territorial governor, Andrew Reeder, set up the first executive offices at Fort Leavenworth.
- During the Civil War many Kansas volunteers were trained at Fort Leavenworth.
- After the Civil War the soldiers at Fort Leavenworth found themselves in conflicts with the American Indians in western Kansas.
- The 10th Cavalry Regiment was formed at Fort Leavenworth. This all-Black regiment is often referred to as the "Buffalo Soldiers."
- Fort Leavenworth became the leading school for training military officers. Generals Dwight D. Eisenhower, Omar N. Bradley, and George S. Patton were all graduates of the fort training school.
- Fort Leavenworth continues as an active post today.