

By the Kansas State Historical Society

## Fort Hays

*Fort Hays protected travelers on their way to the gold fields in the Rocky Mountains. The soldiers later protected workers building the Union Pacific Railroad. The fort first was established in 1865 as Fort Fletcher.*

The Smoky Hill Trail stretched from Atchison to Denver. The trail was the fastest route to the gold fields, but it cut through the hunting grounds of the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Sioux, Kiowa, Comanche, and Pawnee. The Indian tribes were not happy with the invasion and resisted travelers who were using the trail. Many people saw the Smoky Hill Trail as a potential trade route. To make this happen, military escorts would be needed.

### **What was the original purpose of Fort Hays?**

The Butterfield Overland Despatch began freight service on the Smoky Hill Trail in the summer of 1865. The U.S. Army sent troops out west to protect the employees, passengers, and freight traveling on the Butterfield Overland Despatch. This led to the establishment of Fort Fletcher, which would be renamed Fort Hays.

The Plains Indians continued to resist this traffic through their lands. There were too few soldiers stationed along the Smoky Hill Trail to control the situation. The railroad also was creeping west. It soon became clear the railroad could move both people and goods more efficiently than overland stages.

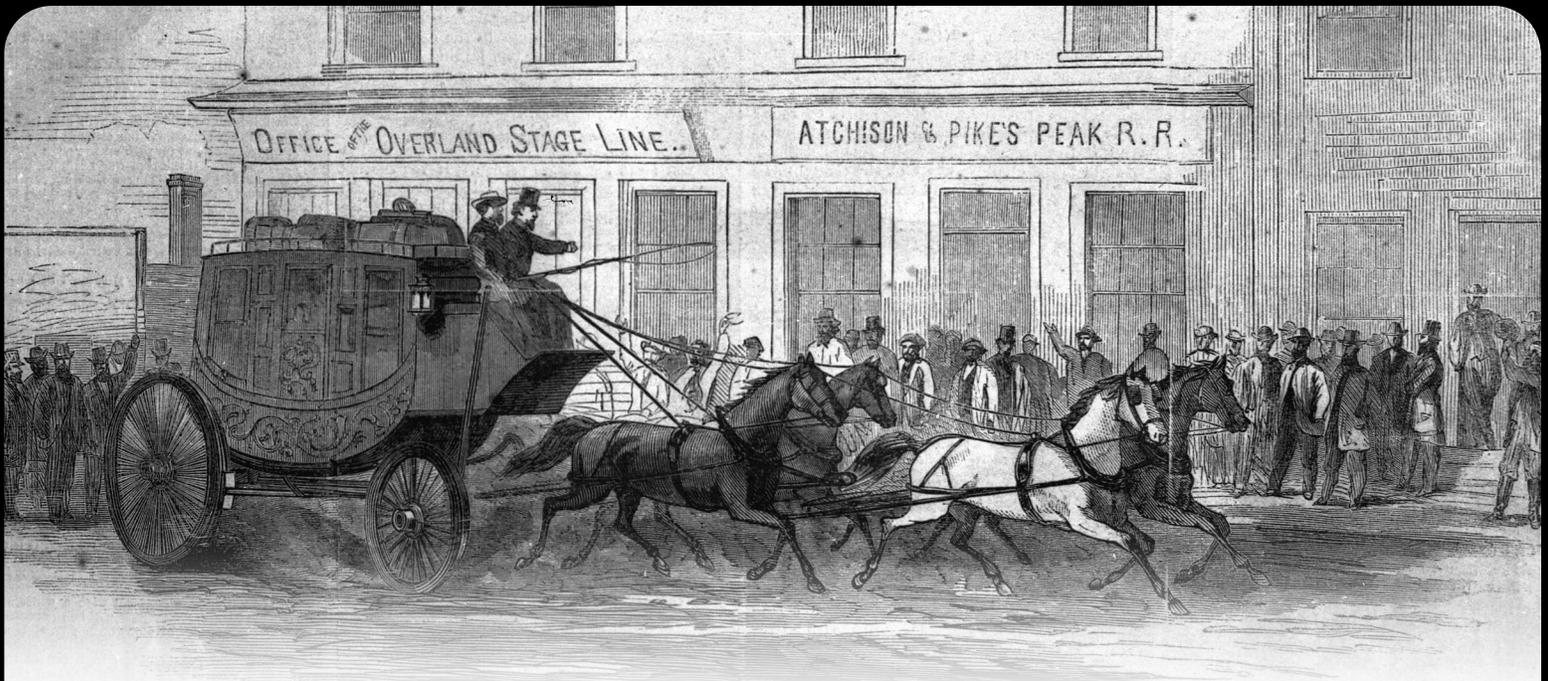
The Union Pacific Railroad followed the Smoky Hill Trail. It was the first rail line to stretch across Kansas. The construction started in the east and reached Denver in 1870. The soldiers at Fort Hays continued to protect people and goods. But their attention turned to the railroad.

### **What was it like to be stationed at Fort Hays?**

Fort Hays was not built like a traditional fort with a wall surrounding its exterior. It and other frontier forts were built more like small communities. The fort was designed to house supplies, animals, and soldiers. There was no fear of being attacked. Instead the fort was a base from which soldiers rode out into the field.

Soldiers working alongside some civilians had to build the fort structures.





Many of the soldiers had no construction skills. Lumber, doors, and windows had to be shipped from cities in the East. Before the railroad, this was very expensive. With the coming of the railroad in 1867, Fort Hays was moved closer to the rail lines. New barracks, kitchens, and storage rooms were built.

The railroad attracted settlers to western Kansas and towns sprang up around the fort. New stores and places for entertainment were available to the soldiers. Officially, soldiers had to obtain a pass to leave the fort, but many left the post without permission. Life at a frontier fort could be very isolated and dull. New towns offered much needed diversions.

Entertainment could be found on post as well as in town. Many regimental bands were stationed at the fort over time. They played during parades, at concerts, and at dances. The bands played for civilians as well as military personnel. When bands left the post there was disappointment. The *Hays City Republican* wrote,  
*In losing the 18<sup>th</sup> Infantry Band, the people of Hays lose something that can never be replaced. Such sweet music very few western cities have ever had. The boys were kind, liberal and courteous, playing for citizens very often.*

### **What happened to Fort Hays?**

- Many famous people were associated with Fort Hays including Buffalo Bill Cody, Wild Bill Hickok, and General George Armstrong Custer.
- Fort Hays shut down in November 1889.
- The land at Fort Hays eventually was turned over to the state of Kansas to be used as a state agricultural college and a public park.
- An Agricultural Research Center still is operated and is the biggest dry land experiment station in the world.
- Four of the original buildings from the fort are preserved as Fort Hays State Historic Site. It is operated by the Kansas State Historical Society.