

By the Kansas Historical Society

Fort Riley

In 1853, one year before Kansas became a territory, Fort Riley was established. Its beginning was connected to the overland trails.

In the 1850s Kansas was on the edge of the frontier. Many felt the United States was destined to reach farther west, all the way to the Pacific Ocean. Americans felt it was their right and responsibility to spread democracy and freedom across the continent. This was called "Manifest Destiny." Many ordinary citizens believed their personal fortunes also lay in the west. The eastern United States seemed crowded to those who wanted more land. More than four million people made their way west. Most were looking for cheap land.

What was the original purpose of Fort Riley?

Traders who moved commerce through Kansas to Mexico used the Santa Fe Trail. Families moving west followed the Oregon-California Trail to the west coast. The United States government set up a number of military forts to protect both people and trade. Fort Riley, located at the junction of the Republican and Smoky Hill Rivers, was one such military outpost.

The military outposts in Kansas also were given the assignment of protecting the Indians. Americans traveling west were disrupting the traditional way of life of many plains tribes. The Cheyenne, Arapaho, Kiowa, and Comanche all moved across the plains of western Kansas. The scarcity of resources created a mobile, or nomadic, lifestyle.

In order for the military to keep the peace, it needed to establish cavalry units. Soldiers on horseback needed to move quickly throughout the plains. These units needed a base of operation that was near a supply line. Being near the river would serve that purpose, because supplies came up river by boat. The U.S. government also wanted to establish a fort farther west, but close enough to patrol both the Oregon-California and Santa Fe Trails.

Once the site was selected, Congress authorized money to build "Camp Center." It was called that because it was near the geographic center of the United States. Soon the post was renamed Fort Riley.

What was it like to be stationed at Fort Riley in the early years?

Life for the soldiers stationed at Fort Riley was not a lot different from civilian life on the Plains. Soldiers





did participate in military drills and target practice, but they spent much of their time building and keeping up the fort. Many of the enlisted men were assigned to construction work. This was much cheaper for the military than hiring civilians.

Other soldiers were given jobs in the kitchens. They chopped wood to heat the stoves and carried water. They washed dishes, set the tables, and waited on their fellow soldiers. Members of the cavalry units had to take care of their horses and the stables.

The U.S. Army believed that having women on the post was a good influence on the men. Married soldiers sometimes brought their wives and children to live at Fort Riley. Officers and their families rarely socialized with enlisted men and their wives and children.

More soldiers at Fort Riley died of cholera than in combat. Drinking contaminated water caused cholera. Personal hygiene and clean sanitary conditions were not understood as they are today. The men often bathed in the river. George Sternberg, the post surgeon, wrote the following in 1869.

As soon as practicable arrangements may be made to enable the soldiers of each company at the Post, to bathe themselves as often as once a week at or near their quarters. For this purpose a special room should be provided for each company, with bathtubs and facilities for obtaining water. The half a pork barrel would answer very well for a bathtub, two or three buckets of water in such a tub would enable a man to take a very satisfactory bath...

What happened to Fort Riley?

- After the Civil War, troops from Fort Riley protected the railroad lines being built across the state.
- The 9th and 10th Cavalry, made up of African American soldiers, were at times stationed at Fort Riley. They are sometimes referred to as "Buffalo Soldiers."
- In 1884 Fort Riley became the cavalry headquarters for the U.S. Army.
- During World War I the post expanded to train soldiers from across the country.
- Soldiers from Fort Riley have been deployed all over the world.
- Fort Riley is an active military post today.