

FORT GRIFFIN

state historic site

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Friends of Fort Griffin

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TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
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VISITORS GUIDE

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TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION

Welcome to Fort Griffin State Historic Site, a 506-acre property that features a post-Civil War fort established to protect local settlers from a variety of threats, including Kiowa and Comanche raids. Once home to more than 465 soldiers, officers, their families, and civilians, Fort Griffin provided a source of stability and safety for an emerging community.

PROTECTING WEST TEXAS

After the Civil War, many Kiowa and Comanche people who had been forced onto reservations north of the Red River returned to their traditional lands in West Texas. This resulted in many conflicts with settlers who had begun moving into the area and demanded protection for their families and property. In response, the U.S. Army established Fort Griffin in 1867 for the protection of settlers and trade routes. Lieutenant Colonel S. D. Sturgis and four companies of the Sixth Cavalry strategically located the new post on a high plateau overlooking a bend in the Clear Fork of the Brazos River.

Easy access to a plentiful water supply and a natural river crossing made the fort's position ideal. It soon attracted settlers and ranchers in need of security as well as a marketplace and became an important stop along several trails and travel routes. Goods were available for purchase in a store operated by a civilian merchant, or sutler, and the fort bought fresh provisions and other supplies locally. Before long, a town, initially called "The Flat" but later organized as the town of Fort Griffin, was established on the floodplain below. The town's main business centered on cattle drivers and buffalo hunters, but also catered to men stationed at Fort Griffin.

Fort Griffin became a major support post during the Red River War of 1874 – 1875. Colonel Ranald S. Mackenzie utilized it as a base of operations for several years. Troops from Fort Griffin, including African American troops known as "Buffalo Soldiers" and Tonkawa scouts, participated in the decisive campaigns

that ended Kiowa and Comanche domination of northern Texas. Due to their active role in maintaining the region's security, troops from Fort Griffin were frequently called upon to participate in dangerous campaigns against native groups and outlaws. Between these campaigns, however, daily garrison life could be quite boring.

The men serving at Fort Griffin, and the families that sometimes accompanied them, were from many different backgrounds, but they all shared the danger as well as the tedium of serving at a remote military outpost. As one soldier observed: "Life at the fort was always the same—drill, reveille, mounting guard, retreat, calling tattoo and taps, hoisting the flag at sunrise and taking it down again at sunset." Active military operations and the training they required took up most of the soldiers' time and left fort construction, improvements, and maintenance projects a low priority. Of the more than 60 buildings at Fort Griffin, only six were completely constructed out of stone. These included the administration building, bakery, and powder magazine.

In May 1881, the Army determined that Fort Griffin was no longer a necessity for defense and the post was abandoned. Shackelford County deeded the land to the state in 1935 and it opened to the public in 1938. On January 5, 1940, the Civilian Conservation Corp established Texas SP-63 at Fort Griffin to improve many of the public buildings and facilities at the site.

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WALKING GUIDE

1 WELL Maintaining an adequate water supply for the people living at the fort was essential. Water barrels filled from this well were located behind each set of quarters to supply drinking and washing water. Due to the labor involved in collecting and transporting water from this well, it is likely that the soldiers bathed in the nearby river.



Reconstructed mess hall

and seasonal fruits and vegetables were added to the soldiers' meals when they were available.

3 FIRST SERGEANT'S QUARTERS As the highest ranking enlisted personnel, the first sergeant lived in separate quarters located between each row of barracks and their associated mess halls.

4 BARRACKS (Reconstruction) As many as four men lived in each of the small barracks, arranged in four rows along the west side of the parade ground. These crowded structures were built from poor materials and left their inhabitants vulnerable to the region's extreme weather.



Reconstructed barracks

2 MESS HALL

(Reconstruction) Dedicated kitchens and mess halls were located at the end of the rows of barracks. The soldiers ate a limited diet of beef, bread, and coffee up to three times per day. Soups made from dried beans, canned fruit, and



Flag raising on the parade ground

5 PARADE GROUND

The 37-star United States flag flew above the post on a central pole designed to look like a ship's mast and announced the presence of the U.S. Army in western Texas. Regular activities on the parade ground included long hours of training, drills, and inspections.

6 LIBRARY

By 1874, the post had a building set aside for use as a library and reading room that boasted more than 100 books and magazines. The two-room building also served as a schoolroom and chapel when needed.



Officer's quarters ruins



Sutler's store ruins

profits came from settlers and buffalo hunters, since many soldiers relied on their rations and preferred to spend their wages on liquor and gambling.

7 OFFICER'S QUARTERS

The officers lived in quarters built on the eastern side of the fort. These residences were more comfortable than the enlisted men's and included private rooms and their own kitchens.

8 SUTLER'S STORE

The sutler, or civilian merchant, located at the fort sold settlers and soldiers a variety of canned foods such as tomatoes, peaches, oysters, and milk and other supplies like candles, gunpowder and ammunition. Most of the sutler's



Administration building ruins

9 ADMINISTRATION

BUILDING This structure housed the offices of the commanding officer, his adjutant (or assistant) and the post quartermaster. This was one of only a few buildings constructed of stone at Fort Griffin.

10 HOSPITAL COMPOUND This hospital complex included four distinct buildings used to treat patients and house medical supplies. The morgue, also referred to as the "dead-house," was located a short distance northeast of the hospital. A cistern located next to the hospital was used to store water hauled from the river.

11 COMMANDING OFFICER'S QUARTERS As the most spacious of all living quarters at the fort, this residence belonged to the commanding officer and his family. They also used their home to host dinners and occasional entertainment for important visitors to the fort.

12 BAKERY As a main staple of all soldiers' diets, up to eight hundred loaves of bread were baked daily at Fort Griffin using two large brick ovens. The heat and the tedium made it an unpopular job—at one point the bakery closed for a time because the baker had deserted!

13 POWDER MAGAZINE

This small storage building was constructed of stone to protect weapons, gunpowder, and ammunition from fire and thieves. Small angled windows allowed necessary ventilation, but prevented stray sparks or bullets from igniting the stored explosives.



Powder magazine

14 LAUNDRESS' QUARTERS The Army provided housing for laundresses to wash, iron and mend soldiers' uniforms and other clothing. Although the work was tedious and difficult, these women charged soldiers as much as \$2 per month. In comparison, each soldier's monthly wages totaled \$13.

