

FORT LANCASTER

state historic site

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VISITORS GUIDE

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TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION

Welcome to Fort Lancaster State Historic Site, an 82-acre property that preserves the remnants of the only post established in 1855 to protect the Lower Road between San Antonio and El Paso. Visitors can explore the ruins, imagining

the once-impressive establishment of 25 permanent buildings—including officers' quarters, barracks, a blacksmith shop, hospital, sutler's store, and bakery—and enjoy the real sights, sounds, and wildlife of this real place in West Texas.

FORT LANCASTER

Fort Lancaster was a link in the chain of western forts that provided protection for westbound settlers, trade, and communication. Established as Camp Lancaster in 1855, the post became a permanent infantry fort a year later. The location of the fort was chosen because of easy access to fresh water from Live Oak Creek and proximity to the Lower San Antonio-El Paso Road. The first buildings on the site were temporary structures covered with canvas roofs. Work quickly began on developing more permanent structures, and by 1860, most of the buildings were made from stone and adobe bricks.

Life at the Post

Soldiers constructed the permanent buildings at Fort Lancaster with local materials. Limestone was used for the foundations, corners, chimneys, and sometimes the gable ends of the structures. Adobe bricks formed the walls, which were then stuccoed and whitewashed. Soldiers created the quicklime necessary for the mortar, stucco, and paint by burning chunks of limestone in a lime kiln. Many buildings were roofed with thatch made from grasses cut in the area, although a few had wooden shingles.

By 1858, Fort Lancaster housed approximately 150 enlisted men and three officers of companies H and K of the 1st U.S. Infantry. The soldiers who lived and worked at Fort Lancaster endured difficult conditions including the climate, limited resources, and tedious routines and duties. Maintaining the fort's buildings and patrolling the

local area were activities that took up most of their time. Actual skirmishes or military engagements were rare.

While the fort supplied limited, but necessary, provisions to travelers, it remained an isolated outpost. The only civilian presence was the mail handler at the relay station used by the San Antonio-San Diego Mail Line, and the sutler merchant who sold a limited number of goods to the soldiers. While a few women were present at the fort, they were usually the officers' wives or laundresses hired by the Army. Opportunities for soldiers' recreation were rare and frequently revolved around drinking and gambling.

The U.S. Army relinquished the fort during the Civil War. Confederate troops occupied some of the western forts, including Fort Lancaster, until 1862, but then abandoned them for the remainder of the war. Fort Lancaster was reoccupied by the U.S. Army as a sub-station of Fort Stockton in 1867 by rotating companies of the Buffalo Soldiers' 9th Cavalry. They lived in the crudely restored barracks for months at a time as they re-established federal control of the area.

In December 1867, during this period of reoccupation, Company K of the 9th Cavalry successfully defended the post against a significantly larger force of Kickapoo and Lipan Apache raiders. This battle distinguishes Fort Lancaster as the only U.S. Army fort in Texas that suffered a direct attack by Native Americans.

Fort Lancaster was finally abandoned for good by the late 1870s. Eventually, much of its masonry was taken and used for buildings in nearby Sheffield.

Walking Guide

1 COMMANDING OFFICER'S QUARTERS

The largest residence at the fort was reserved for the Commanding Officer and his family. This structure was built of stone and adobe, with a wooden shingle roof. It had wood floors and an attached kitchen. The quarters also had a dining room where the Commanding Officer and his wife hosted dinners for important travelers during their stay at Fort Lancaster.

2 OFFICERS' QUARTERS

Each officers' quarters originally consisted of two rooms separated by a double fireplace with a separate kitchen behind. By 1860, the kitchens had been attached and most structures had wooden shingle roofs. Unmarried officers and those with families lived in these residences.



Grave of Little Margaret.

4 HOSPITAL

The post hospital was an adobe structure with a dispensary, storeroom, small three-bed ward, and an attached kitchen. The hospital staff included a surgeon, hospital steward, nurse, matron, and dedicated cook.

5 COMMISSARY

The commissary, along with the quartermaster's storehouse, was one of the first stone buildings constructed at Fort Lancaster. It supplied soldiers with government-issued food and provisions. Provisions were bought from private contractors and shipped along the Lower Road from San Antonio to the fort.

6 SUTLER STORE

Owned and operated by a civilian merchant or sutler, the store was a one-story building at Fort Lancaster. The sutler sold liquor, tobacco, and supplies to travelers and soldiers. This building also served as a stage relay station for the San Antonio-San Diego Mail Company.

3 CEMETERY

The cemetery included soldiers and their family members stationed at Fort Lancaster. Known burials include Private Joseph H. Norris, the grave of Capt. Arthur T. Lee's 15-month-old son, and another grave with a headstone simply inscribed "Little Margaret."



In 1857, 1859, and 1860, the U.S. Army camel experiment passed through Fort Lancaster.

7 LIME KILN

Soldiers burned limestone in the kiln to create quicklime, needed for the mortar, stucco, and whitewash used in the construction of the post buildings. A large amount of wood, which was a scarce resource, was needed to fuel the kiln. Soldiers gathered the wood needed for the kiln, kitchens, and the bakery from as far as six miles away.



Company K Enlisted Men's Barracks.

8 COMPANY K ENLISTED MEN'S BARRACKS

Soldiers originally lived in quickly built structures made of locally available materials or prefabricated Turnley Cottages. Neither type of building was comfortable or effective at shielding the occupants from the weather. The 1857 permanent

stone and adobe barracks were more comfortable and had wood floors, stuccoed and whitewashed walls, and could house about 30 men. Approximately half of these buildings had wooden shingle roofs, while the other roofs were covered in grass thatch.

9 COMPANY H ENLISTED MEN'S BARRACKS

Vacated in 1859, these barracks closely resembled those of Company K. That year, the Army transferred Company H to a newly established post along the Lower San Antonio-El Paso Road that would eventually become Fort Stockton.

10 KITCHEN AND MESS HALL

Each company had its own dedicated kitchen and mess hall where soldier cooks prepared and served meals for the enlisted men. Meals revolved around limited food supplies—mostly beef, bread, and canned goods—but a hand-watered garden provided a few vegetables and melons during the summer.

11 LAUNDRESSES' QUARTERS

In 1860, there were four laundresses employed for Company K at Fort Lancaster. Each had her own living quarters made of adobe and stone, complete with an open hearth and stone chimney. Typically, laundresses charged each soldier \$2 per month for washing, ironing, and mending their clothes.



A Spencer carbine.



Military hat pin and emblem.

12 QUARTERMASTER'S STOREHOUSE, GRANARY, AND CORRAL

The quartermaster provided general supplies and equipment for the soldiers. He also oversaw the bakery, blacksmith's shop and carpenter's shop, as well as the corral, granary, and hay yard for the fort's horses and mules.

13 GUARDHOUSE

Isolation and boredom often led to crimes ranging from neglect of duty to theft and desertion. Drunkenness was also a recurring problem, as soldiers had little else to do but drink and gamble in their spare time. The stone guardhouse, which functioned as a jail, was attached to the corral and the quartermaster's storehouse.

14 BAKERY

The bakery was a stone and adobe building with a large oven that measured approximately 12 feet wide and 11.5 feet deep. The fort's baker, also a soldier, was responsible for providing the daily ration of bread for an average of 130 men.

