

Ft. Selden and Leasburg--New Mexico State Park series

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New Mexico Geology, v. 1, n. 3 pp. 41-42, Print ISSN: 0196-948X, Online ISSN: 2837-6420.

<https://doi.org/10.58799/NMG-v1n3.41>

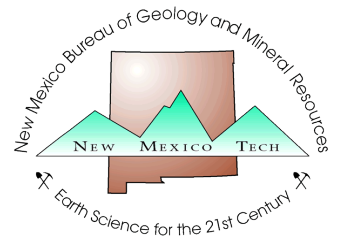
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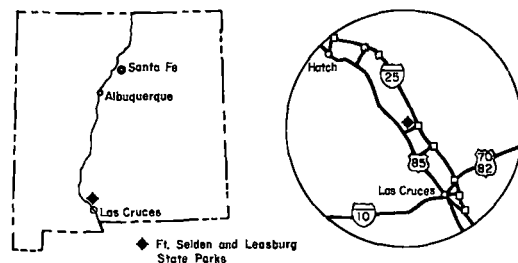
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Ft. Selden and Leasburg



Leasburg State Park and Ft. Selden State Monument are located within a quarter mile of each other along the Rio Grande, about 14 mi northwest of Las Cruces. Access to both sites is via the Radium Springs-Fort Selden interchange on I-25. Leasburg State Park is primarily a camping and picnicking facility; Ft. Selden State Monument is the site of a frontier army post active during the post-Civil War years.

Geologic setting

Ft. Selden State Monument and the eastern portion of Leasburg State Park are situated on a Late Pleistocene river terrace along the east side of the Rio Grande. The terrace, composed of gravel and alluvium, was deposited 6,000 to 9,000 years ago.

The western portion of Leasburg State Park is situated 40 ft lower on the present floodplain along the west side of the Rio Grande. The two portions of Leasburg State Park are connected by Leasburg Diversion Dam. The foundation of the dam rests directly on an outcrop of intrusive rhyolite.

Robledo Mountain, 4 mi south, is a south-tilted wedge of Paleozoic sedimentary and Tertiary volcanic rock bounded by faults. *Lookout Peak*, the lower peak at the north end of the range, is capped by a reddish-brown Tertiary rhyolite sill. On this peak, troops stationed at Ft. Selden operated a heliograph station that provided communication between Ft. Selden and Ft. Bliss near El Paso, Texas.

To the northwest, the mountains in the distance are the *Sierra de las Uvas*, a dome consisting of a thick sequence of Tertiary igneous rocks. The *Doña Ana Mountains*, 6 mi east, are a complex mass

of rhyolitic to andesitic Tertiary volcanic rocks intruded by monzonite that forms the higher peaks. The jagged crest of the *Organ Mountains* (also intrusives of Tertiary age) is visible beyond the *Doña Anas* to the southeast. The highest peak, the *Organ Needle*, rises to 9,012 ft—about a mile above the Rio Grande.

Ft. Selden State Monument

Following President Polk's declaration of war against Mexico in May 1846, a United States Army unit was sent from Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas Territory, against the Mexican provinces of New Mexico and California. This army, known as "The Army of the West" was led by General Stephen W. Kearny. General Kearny and his army arrived in Santa Fe in August 1846 and immediately proceeded to occupy the area now known as New Mexico. Thus began the role of the U.S. Army, which was to continue for the next half century, in securing the frontier in New Mexico and protecting its citizens and their property.

The basic role of the military was to protect travelers, farmers, miners, and settlers from Indian attack. Government policy and defense strategy did not follow a set plan, but gradually evolved. Military posts were established at different places when the need arose, and were abandoned when the need diminished. A few posts were occupied and used by the army throughout most of this period; others were used only a few months or years.

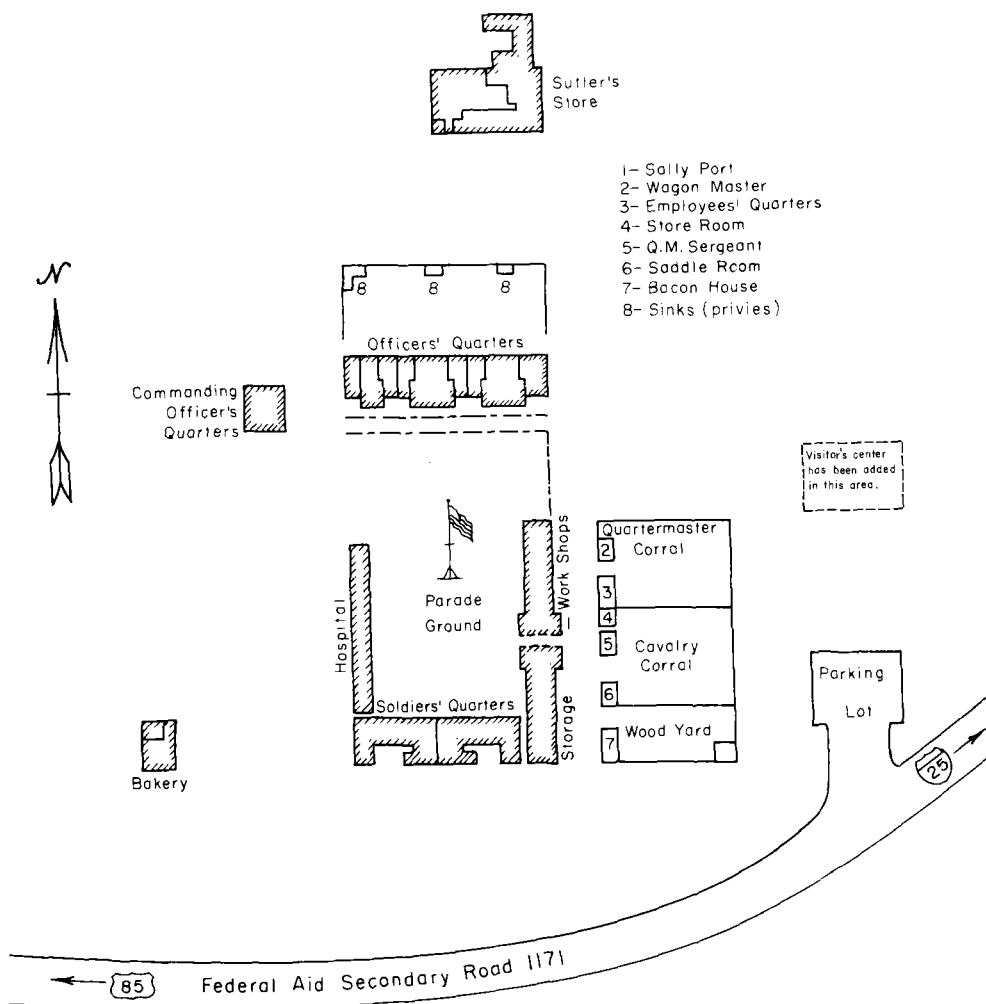
Throughout the countryside, the period 1846 to 1881 was characterized by constant Indian warfare carried on by small predatory groups of Navajos and Apaches. The outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 created a new problem on the

frontier in New Mexico as the Union forces were called upon to meet invading Confederate forces. While the Union troops were preoccupied with the Confederates, the Indians stepped up their raids. With the passing of the Confederate threat, however, attention was once more focused on the Indian problem, and Ft. Selden was established during this period.

General orders for the establishment of Ft. Selden were issued April 25, 1865 by Headquarters Department of New Mexico in Santa Fe. Adobe was recommended as the most suitable building material. The post was established on May 8, 1865 when units of the First California Volunteer Infantry and First California Volunteer Cavalry arrived to begin construction. Plans called for housing one unit each of cavalry and infantry, a total of about 200 men.

The post was named in honor of Colonel Henry Raymond Selden, a Vermonter graduated from the U.S. Military Academy in 1843. Selden performed distinguished service as a Captain in the Fifth Infantry at the Battle of Val Verde, 84 mi north of Ft. Selden, on February 21, 1862. Later he was promoted to Colonel of the First New Mexico Volunteers and in October 1864, placed in command of Ft. Union, New Mexico, where he died in 1864.

The plan of the fort conformed to the tradition of long rows of buildings surrounding a central parade ground. Construction proceeded over a period of years with changes made from time to time. The ruins follow fairly accurately a ground plan prepared in 1870.



GROUND PLAN OF FT. SELDEN.

The soldiers' quarters at the south end of the parade ground consisted of two large dormitory units having separate mess facilities. Behind each unit was a yard enclosed along the south by a high wall.

Located along the west side of the parade ground was a hospital including rooms for surgery, quarters for the steward, kitchen and mess, storage, and a ward accommodating 12 patients.

Officers' quarters consisted of three-room units, two duplex buildings, and one single apartment, along the north side of the parade ground. Each unit had a private walled side yard. A large area behind the officers' quarters was also enclosed by a wall.

The buildings on the east side of the parade ground were for quartermaster storage, commissary, granary, carpenter, blacksmith, butcher, and saddler. The center of this building had the only second-story level in the fort, and was constructed of stone. The lower level was for guard and prison rooms, separated by a sally port. The second story consisted of a room for the adjutant and a courtroom.

A roadway paralleling the east side of these buildings separated them from another row of buildings housing a bacon house, saddle rooms, wagon master, employees' quarters and quartermaster sergeant. The walled areas to the east of these buildings were the cavalry and quartermaster corrals.

The commanding officer's quarters were located to the west and slightly south of the officers' quarters. General Douglas MacArthur probably lived here as a small child when his father, Captain Arthur MacArthur, commanded the post from the spring of 1884 until late 1886.

The post bakery was located some distance to the west of the soldiers' quarters. A private home now occupies the site of the Sutler's (trader's) Store north of the officers' quarters.

The post was supplied from quartermaster and subsistence depots at Ft. Union, New Mexico, a distance of some 340 mi. Wagons were used until railroad construction reached the post in 1881. Grain, hay, and wood were purchased locally. Water was obtained from the Rio Grande.

Ft. Selden was abandoned in May 1879 but was reoccupied in December 1880. It was garrisoned until 1887 during the last Apache uprising led by Geronimo, Nana, and Victorio. The final order for abandonment was given in 1892, and the administration of the land passed under the control of the Department of the Interior. In recent years, a visitor's center has been built at the site.

Leasburg State Park

Leasburg State Park includes 23 camping and picnic sites with shelters, tables, and grills. An extensive "pioneer fort" playground has been constructed of materials resembling weathered adobe.

The old Ft. Selden cemetery is located near the south entrance of Leasburg State Park. About 82 interments were made from 1865 to 1883. The remains of 81 decedents (51 unidentified) have since been reinterred in the Fort Leavenworth National Cemetery in Kansas. One decedent was removed to the Masonic Cemetery at Santa Fe, New Mexico, and later reinterred in the Santa Fe National Cemetery.

Leasburg Diversion Dam, located in the northern portion of the park, was constructed in 1908. The dam diverts water from the Rio Grande into the Leasburg Canal which supplies irrigation water to the vast cotton, lettuce, and onion farming area of the Upper Mesilla Valley. Visible in the cliffs at the east end of the dam is the solid bedrock of intrusive rhyolite upon which the dam is built. This rock formation also provided a convenient river crossing on the Butterfield Trail to California.

Access to the area of Leasburg State Park west of the Rio Grande is through an entrance located 1 mi north of Ft. Selden on US-85. Leasburg Dam itself can be approached by the paved road which follows the west side of the Leasburg Canal northward from the US-85—FAS-1171 intersection.

A half mile northwest of the dam, and outside the park boundary, is Radium Springs. Here, naturally occurring highly mineralized springs are used for therapeutic baths at a local hotel. The water is slightly radioactive, and has a temperature that varies from 140° to 200°F. Deep-seated igneous rock bodies are the probable source of the heat as well as some of the dissolved solids. The variable discharge of the spring, however, indicates that most of the water probably comes from an underflow from the Rio Grande. □

—Robert A. Bieberman (1972)
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