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Fort Mohave, Guardpost on the Western Frontier

By Roman Malach

Lt. Edward F. Beale, after a surveying trip from Fort Defiance to the Colorado River, recommended establishment of a military post “on the Colorado River as an indispensable necessity for the emigrants over this road; for, although the Indians living in the rich meadow lands are agricultural, they are very numerous, so much so that we counted 800 men around our camp on the second day after our arrival on the banks of the river.”

Arthur Woodward wrote about the founding of Fort Mojave in the Pony Express Courier, Placerville, California. He said that at the site of the future Ft. Mohave on the Colorado, an emigrant train on the way from Iowa to California was attacked by Indians a few months after the report of Lt. Beale was received by the government. The emigrant party (the Rose-Baley party) consisted of 123 people; of those, three men, two women and four children were killed. Indians captured most of the train's stock. Men of the train fought the Indians; then under the cover of night, retreated and back tracked to Albuquerque, New Mexico, never reaching California.

Camp Site

Soon after this ambush, the military decided to select a camp site for a two-company post on the west bank of the Colorado River at Beale's Crossing. A steamer brought troops to Yuma from California, and then soldiers marched overland almost 200 miles in the spring of 1859. Ahead of the troops, men were sent with axes and brush hooks to cut a trail through the thick vegetation. Soldiers carried no tents and all excess baggage was left behind. One hundred and twenty-one miles north of Yuma, troops crossed the Colorado and marched along the Arizona shore. The steamer, “General Jessup,” which was pushing upstream, ferried soldiers across, but the pack train mules had to swim.

The troops established their camp five miles north of the 35th Parallel, covering 198 miles in the march from Yuma. It took soldiers 18 days to reach their destination. Immediately upon the troops' arrival, a party of Mohave Indians, about 500 in number, visited the camp to see Brevet Lt.

Col. Hoffman, troop commander. The Indians wanted to know the intentions of the troops. After a peaceful council with the Indians, Colonel Hoffman explored both river banks, looking for a suitable post location. The California side was low and marshy; hence, the fort had to be built on the Arizona side. In no time, soldiers were constructing quarters, corrals and other necessary structures for the new post. Arthur Woodward commented at the end of his story on the found of Fort Mohave:

Spot Marked

“Thus was Fort Mohave founded with a few hundred yards of the camp in the grove and within gunshot of the spot where the emigrant train massacre had taken place a few months previous. At the time, when soldiers were encamped in the cottonwoods, the spot was marked in a small open space some two hundred yards below the camp by broken wagons, boxes, kegs, torn books, bloodstained and fire-scorched, vivid reminders of the tragedy that gave birth to Fort Mohave, the lonely outpost of the Colorado.”

The above description and comments give an impression that the first Fort Mohave (Camp) buildings stood below the mesa, where the post re-garrisoned in 1863 stood. No cottonwood trees could grow on the desert mesa. In all probability, the buildings of the first Ft. Mohave stood in the Colorado River wash.

In 1859, post buildings were constructed with available on-the-spot materials. In the wash of the Colorado River grew large and tall cottonwood trees; timber from those trees were used in the construction of the post buildings. It can be noticed on a rare and old Ft. Mohave photograph, where part of the building is plainly visible. Upright timber posts supported beams for the roof. No door, but only a wide doorway is noticed. In between wall posts were cottonwood pickets, set upright and clinched with mud. The roof was built similarly and covered with a thick layer of mud. So, dry mud served as the floor of those post buildings.

Two Long Buildings

Fort Mohave, in its first phase of operation, had two long buildings for men's quarters, hospital, four buildings for officers' quarters, guardhouse and other needed structures. Lt. Col. Hoffman with Major L.A. Armistead initiated construction of the first camp buildings, prior to its abandonment on May 28, 1861. The fort was closed in fear that it could be captured by

the Confederate forces of the Civil War; hence the post buildings were burned down. A story comes out of that period of fort destruction. Peter Rainsford Brady was in charge of the post library, and he was ordered to destroy all books. Instead of destruction, Brady, with the help of soldiers, dug a large hole in the floor of the warehouse-commissary building. He placed some 300 books with other records and papers into the hole, wrapped in canvas and placed in kegs. Then Brady covered the hold and burned the building.

Peter Brady was the post interpreter, and for a short period of time, he with two officers published a small paper called "Mohave Dog Star." In later years, Brady was farming, mining and ranching. He served as Sheriff of Pima County, and was elected to the Territorial Legislature. Brady died in 1902, and claimed he never returned to Fort Mohave to recover those books.

Federal Census of 1860 Listed Three Forces at Lonely Fort on the River

Federal Census

Arizona in 1860 was one large county in the Territory of New Mexico, and the federal census for that year lists military forces at Fort Mohave. In 1860, Ft. Mohave had 19 civilians, including 8 children; two of them were only 3 and 4 months old. The Wife of post commander, Henrietta M. Haller, lived on the post with four children: Alice, George, Charlotte and Henry. Their ages were from three to ten years. Other civilians were wife of sergeant, Mary Cherry with daughter, Susan; wife of private, Rebecca Handel with daughter, Job Harriet, and son, Edward; wife of another private, Ana Lawless, with one-year-old daughter, Mary; wife of first Sergeant; Mary Renaldo, with son, Henry; Peter Rainsford Brady, post interpreter; James Fisher, stonemason; William Fulling, laborer; William Hamilton, druggist, and Michael Woods, hunter.

According to the 1869 census, two infantry companies were stationed at Ft, Mohave, Company "I", 4th U.S. infantry, had 55 officers and enlisted men: Capt. Granville O. Haller, post commander; James C. Harndon, assistant surgeon, physician in civilian life; Robert Koldeway, hospital steward and druggist by profession; Sgt. Tillman Usum, farmer; Sgt. James K Boyd, clerk; Sgt. Alanson C. Brown, Indian guide; Corp, George Atcheson, carpenter; Corp. Patrick Costigan, laborer; Corp. William

Herbert, laborer; Corp. Levi C. Aldrich, seaman; James Deary, post musician and butcher in civilian life.

Company "I"

Names of Company "I" privates are listed with civilian occupation: Thomas Bone, molder; Charles Britton, boatman; Patrick Brosnahan, laborer; Michael Butler, farmer; Richard Codahey, laborer; Bannon Colgan, hostler; Edward Cosgrove, laborer; James Cunningham, paperhanger; Guttried Dettmar, baker; George Diehl, baker; James Dixon, farmer; Timothy Doherty, stonecutter; David Dunbar, shoemaker; Chistian Engers, cabinet maker; John Fitzsimmons, molder.

Also, James Hamilton, tanner; Valentine Handel, plasterer; Robert Hodgson, tailor; George Hoffman, laborer; John Hubbard, bricklayer; Bernad Keeman, laborer; John Kubler, tailor; Louis Laderlie, cutler; Patrick Lawless, teamster; Richard Lester, bartender; Eugene Mahoney, shoemaker; Michael .McCue, bricklayer; Henry McGee, teamster; Phillip McGuire, laborer; John Meehan, laborer; -Theodore Moran, laborer.

Also, John Mullen, shoemaker; John Myers, farmer; Robert Neely, sailor; Timothy O'Neil, laborer; William I. Owens, laborer; Jacob Rodney, laborer; William Rufner, glass-blower; Michael Rupp, farmer; Michael Ryder, laborer; Frederick Shafer, farmer; Patrick Smith, laborer; and Thomas Tector, sailor.

56 Officers

Company "I", Sixth U.S. Infantry had 56 officers and enlisted men: 2nd Lt. Montgomery Bryant, and again after each name is listed civilian occupation: Sgt. Herman O. Renaldo, bookkeeper; Sgt. William Foster, laborer; Sgt. John Cherry, shoemaker; Sgt. Henry Heuer, laborer; Corp. Henry Helfrecht, mason; Corp. John W. Duval, clerk; Corp. Edward W. Bankard, clerk; and privates: John Arthur, baker; William Brady, Laborer; Edward Cahili, laborer.

Also, William Cassidy, laborer; John Chandler, laborer; Mathew . Connor, laborer; John Courts, farmer; Patrick H. Croley, clerk; William Davis, painter; John Poland, laborer; James Donley, weaver; William Donohue, shoemaker; Patrick Dougherty, boatman; Michael Drazer, gardener; Thomas Flynn, laborer; Michael Gately, farmer; Charles Glaeser, farmer; John Harbour, tailor; Thomas Hoolahan, laborer; John Ivers, laborer.

Also, Rollin Knight, laborer; Michael Leonard, laborer; Frederick Lieckhardt, cooper; Patrick Martin, laborer; Samuel Martin, laborer; Jacob Meder, carpenter; Henry E. Munson, laborer; Charles McCaffney, laborer; Edmond McCarthy, mason; James McGary, tinner; Miles McKay, laborer; Gottfried Nagel, locksmith; Edward Naughton, laborer; Nicholas Purucker, dyer; John Rehr, carpenter; William Sandees, laborer; Franz Schader, mason; Peter Schmitt, shoemaker; Phillip Schunk, butcher; Arthur Smith, laborer; Henry Smith, machinist; Peter Trumpler, varnisher; John Tucker, laborer; Phillip Vogel, baker; Frederick Voss, laborer; William Weibler, tailor; Richard Willis, actor; and George W. Wilson, painter.

Captain Atchisson

The 1864 census reveals that Fort Mohave had 14 civilians including 11 children, and only one Company "I", 4th California Infantry, with 74 officers and enlisted men. Capt. Charles Atchisson was the company commander. In later years, the same man appeared in Mohave County records, holding public offices, as county school superintendent, and operating his own business, chiefly a store. At Ft. Mohave his assistant was Lt. Robert Paris Nason, who lived on the post with wife Sarah and year-old son Ferris. This company had only one U.S. Infantry, with 41 military personnel, was stationed at Fort Mohave. Capt. May Humphreys Stacey was listed as post commander and his assistant was 2nd Lt. Redmond Tully. Adjacent to the fort stood Mohave City, with over 100 population with many occupations listed as stock raiser, butcher, blacksmith, shoemaker, grocer, trader, carpenter, farmer, lawyer, mason, U.S. District Attorney, sheriff and other.

After Abandonment

After its abandonment in 1861, Fort Mohave was reestablished in 1863. New and better buildings were constructed, making a rather nice appearance as a military post on the Colorado. Post buildings were painted white including fireplace chimneys. Fronts of buildings with high windows and doors, facing the parade grounds, had shaded patios. Planted trees grew around the parade grounds.

Fort Mohave was closed as a military installation September 29, 1890, and the buildings were turned over to the Indian Service for the establishment of a school for native children. One of the final acts of military nature was performed in May 1992, when Lt. Charles Crawford,

with a detachment of soldiers, removed some 70 remains of soldiers and civilians from the cemetery at Fort Mohave. The remains, properly boxed and labeled, were shipped to the National Cemetery at the San Francisco Presidio for reburial.

The Indian School

From 1890 until 1935, the Indian School was operated in the Fort Mohave buildings. New frame buildings were added, concrete walks, and all was geared for school purposes and boarding of children.

After the closure of the Ft. Mohave Indian School, the buildings stood empty until 1942. At the time of disposal of Ft. Mohave buildings by the government, Mabel LeClair tried to purchase the Ft. Mohave land with all buildings intact. She had a plan to establish some kind of resort on the bank of the Colorado River. Mabel LeClair, with her husband, operated a ranch outside of Ft. Mohave boundaries. She made efforts to exchange the fort land for part of her nearby ranch land. Mabel LeClair was almost successful in obtaining approval of the land exchange. But notice about it came too late, and the buildings were dismantled and removed from the Ft. Mohave site.

Final Days Recalled

In 1972, a Kingman resident, Jim Fox, who once worked at Ft. Mohave, recalled those final days. He helped in tearing down some of the buildings. Jim Fox mentioned, for example, that Parker Lumber Company purchased and removed the water tank from the Ft. Mohave site. The material from the school buildings was used in construction of private homes.

“It was hard work, dismantling those fort buildings,” remarked Jim Fox, “because of rigid construction, fine material and hard wood floors.”

The time came when not much remained of the old and new Fort Mohave buildings, only concrete walks, foundations, a few warning signs, and the nearby site of the cemetery.

“The lonely outpost of the Colorado” lives on only in memories.