The Construction and Development of Fort Wallace, Kansas, 1865-1882
R. Douglas Hurt

Because of the determination of the Plains Indians to prevent white encroachment on their western Kansas lands, military force became necessary for the acquisition of that area. Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman, commander of the Military Division of the Missouri, planned to provide that force by fortifying the Western Plains with a chain of posts as strongly garrisoned as possible. In addition to Fort Riley, which already existed, the army constructed Forts Harker, Hays, and Wallace, plus a host of minor camps along the Smoky Hill trail. These forts provided protection for stage coaches, wagon trains, railroad surveyors and laborers, and settlers. Fort Wallace, originally known as Camp Pond Creek, was the most western post in Kansas along the Smoky Hill trail, and from 1865 to 1878 bore the brunt of the hostile Indian activity in the state.¹

Although General Sherman did not officially authorize the construction of Fort Wallace until October 26, 1865, a detachment of troops made camp at the bluffs of the south fork of the Smoky Hill river and Pond creek in September, 1865. This camp was about two miles west of the permanent location of the fort. These troops spent the winter in dugouts and had begun minor construction when Capt. Edward Ball, Second cavalry, arrived with Company H and assumed command in March of 1866. Ball reported the building for the quartermaster's stores had already been constructed with lumber received from Denver. He further noted the commissary was nearly completed, and the 46,000 board feet of lumber remaining would be utilized to provide storehouses for the commissary and the quartermaster. A substantial building program, however, was needed to make the post comfortable and large enough to hold a garrison for a year. Ball recommended the construction of two quarters for a company of cavalry and

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Development of Ft. Wallace

one of infantry; a mess room and kitchen; quarters and kitchen for two captains; quarters and kitchen for the medical officer and four lieutenants; guardhouse; stables for the cavalry horses and quartermaster’s animals; a building for the carpenter, the wheelwright, and the blacksmith; and two buildings for the quartermaster’s and subsistence stores. One problem the army faced, though, was the need to transport all the necessary lumber to the site because such a large quantity was not available in the vicinity of the post.\(^2\)

In May, 1866, Capt. James J. Gordon, Sixth infantry, assumed command of the post, and Company B, Sixth infantry, and Company M, Second cavalry replaced the garrison. Gordon reported plentiful grass along the river, a heavy meadow five miles to the south, and sufficient timber for building purposes which could supply the post for an unlimited period of time. In addition to grossly over estimating the physical resources of the area, Gordon reported the post now consisted of two storehouses, and a hospital constructed from pine lumber. At this time the officers and troops were sheltered in wall tents, and as yet no stables had been built.\(^3\)

1st Lt. A. E. Bates, Second cavalry, replaced Gordon the following July. Bates immediately complained the situation was not as favorable as Gordon claimed, since the camp was located on a low bottom which could be approached from any direction entirely unknown to the command. Thus, the camp, thrust deep into Indian country, was in a dangerous position and could easily suffer a surprise attack. Furthermore, not more than 150 tons of hay could be cut along the Smoky Hill river. Two assets of the vicinity, however, were an excellent stone quarry and a favorable tableland several miles east of the camp.\(^4\)

Since a fort built on the tableland could be easily defended, Bates requested permission to move the camp to the more defensible position. Although he informed the district headquarters that he would not move the camp until he received authority,

\(^2\) Headquarters, Department of the Missouri, General Order No. 33, October 26, 1865, as cited in David K. Strate, Sentinel to the Cimarron: The Frontier Experience of Fort Dodge, Kansas (Dodge City, 1970), p. 27; Frank W. Blackmar, Kansas (Chicago, 1912), v. 1, p. 676; “Fort Wallace Medical History, Locality and History of the Post,” p. 1, National Archives, Record Group 94; “Fort Wallace Post Returns,” March, 1866, National Archives, Record Group 94; Edward Ball, post commander, to the acting assistant adjutant general, Headquarters, U.S. Forces, Kansas and the Territories, April 30, 1866, “Letters Sent,” National Archives, Record Group 94. (Microfilm copies of these Fort Wallace records are on file at the Kansas State Historical Society.)

\(^3\) James J. Gordon, post commander, to I. N. Palmer, commanding general, District of the Arkansas, Fort Ellsworth, Kan., May 23, 1866; “Post Returns,” May, 1866.

\(^4\) A. E. Bates, post commander, to W. H. Harrison, acting assistant adjutant general, District of the Upper Arkansas, Fort Ellsworth, Kan., July 1, 1866; “Post Returns,” July, 1866.
Bates sent 20 men the next day to begin cutting stone for the quarters and stables as fast as 18 teams could haul the stone. The work at the quarry proved difficult because the soldiers lacked the proper tools and were forced to use pick axes and wooden spades to cut the stone. Nevertheless, they managed to take stone out at the rate of eight to 10 cords a day.5

Bates began moving the post to the new site before he received authority to do so on July 9. By mid-July, 40 cords of stone were on the ground, and the construction of a permanent fort was about to begin. At this point, Bates wrote, “As I am the only man in the command who knows even theoretically how a stone wall should be built, this must necessarily be a somewhat slow process.” To remedy the situation, he requested permission to hire one or two civilian masons to help lay up the walls necessary to house a two-company post before cold weather arrived. Lack of expertise and inadequate tools, then, thwarted post construction. Bates complained, “My experience with the Quartermaster’s Department out here has been such that I am not sanguine about getting the necessary material for building until I have done most of the work without them.” He again appealed for permission to employ civilian labor and requested information as to whether he was to construct a two- or three-company fort.6

The construction went more smoothly than Bates anticipated; by mid-August one stable and one set of quarters were completed and two sets of officers’ quarters were well under way. L. C. Easton, chief quartermaster of the Department of the Missouri, aided the construction when he authorized Bates to purchase lumber and shingles and to employ private teams to deliver those materials. Still, Bates realized the garrison needed more help for the completion of the storehouses before winter, even though he had hired two civilian masons.7

In September Bates hired 12 more civilians which brought the total civilian work force to 14—four carpenters and 10 masons. And, as the fort increased in size, the civilian personnel—teamsters, clerks, blacksmiths, packers, and herdsmen—also increased in number. Fort Wallace employed the largest civilian work force, encompassing construction, clerical, and maintenance personnel, during

5. Ibid.; Bates to Roger Jones, inspector general, Military Division of the Missouri, July 4, 1866.
6. Bates to L. C. Easton, chief quartermaster, Department of the Missouri, July 12, 1866; Bates to Harrison, July 13, 1866.
January, 1869. At that time 215 civilians were on the payroll. As construction terminated, however, and as Indian hostilities decreased, more soldiers could assume the civilians’ positions. By April, 1882, when the fort was ready for abandonment, the army employed only one civilian, a blacksmith, at the post.\(^8\) (The typical craftsmen hired at Fort Wallace and their wage scale are shown below.)

After the summer of 1866 post construction at Fort Wallace slowed because Company M, Seventh cavalry, left in September and the remaining garrison of 30 volunteers of Company B, Sixth infantry, expected to be mustered out of the army very soon. Evidently their enthusiasm for further construction lagged and the troops accomplished little until Company E, Third infantry, arrived on October 19. These soldiers were joined a few days before Thanksgiving by I troop of the Seventh cavalry. Perhaps the approach of another Kansas winter caused the men to hurry their work because the construction suffered from poor planning and shoddy craftsmanship—a problem that plagued the building and repair of Fort Wallace as long as it was an active post.\(^9\)

**TYPICAL WAGE SCHEDULE\(^{10}\)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>1866-1882</th>
<th>per month</th>
<th>$100.00</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guide and interpreter</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief carpenter</td>
<td></td>
<td>per day</td>
<td>6.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpenter</td>
<td></td>
<td>per day</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stonemason</td>
<td></td>
<td>per month</td>
<td>90.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacksmith</td>
<td></td>
<td>per month</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laborer</td>
<td></td>
<td>per month</td>
<td>45.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreman</td>
<td></td>
<td>per month</td>
<td>60.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamster</td>
<td></td>
<td>per month</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clerk</td>
<td></td>
<td>per month</td>
<td>45.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saddler</td>
<td></td>
<td>per month</td>
<td>90.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wagon master</td>
<td></td>
<td>per month</td>
<td>75.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herder</td>
<td></td>
<td>per month</td>
<td>45.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mule packer</td>
<td></td>
<td>per month</td>
<td>35.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheelwright</td>
<td></td>
<td>per month</td>
<td>90.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painter</td>
<td></td>
<td>per month</td>
<td>80.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>per month</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>per month</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quarryman</td>
<td></td>
<td>per month</td>
<td>45.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Capt. M. W. Keogh, Seventh cavalry, assumed command of the

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post in November. He reported everything possible was being done to forward the work on the fort. But, Keogh found the troops still housed in tents since one company quarters was not due to be completed until the end of the month, and the other did not have its foundation laid. In addition the walls of the nearly completed quarters were so poorly laid, he doubted a roof of even the lightest material could be supported. Although the heating stoves had arrived, the stove pipe had not, so the tents were without heat. Since many of the men were away from the post on escort or scouting duties, and because the soldiers could receive some medical treatment at the tent hospital, these poor living conditions were partly relieved.\textsuperscript{11}

Several months later, on March 4, 1867, Keogh reported parties from Denver and elsewhere cutting down trees within a 40-mile circuit of Fort Wallace with the speculative idea of selling firewood to the post quartermaster. Because many of the trees were landmarks and often designated the presence of water, the practice had to be stopped. Keogh agreed to purchase the wood already cut, but pledged to prevent any further cutting by “robbers and cut throats” that had no intention of permanently settling in the area. To prevent such exploitation the post reservation was laid off, subject to approval from higher authority, to keep settlers from occupying the land and using the resources—grass, timber, stone, and water—necessary for the existence of the fort. The reservation extended five miles in each direction from the center of the parade ground. W. H. Greenwood, a civil engineer for the Union Pacific, Eastern division, officially surveyed this reservation about June 22, 1867. And, on August 28, 1868, Pres. Andrew Johnson declared the 8,926.09 acres surrounding and including Fort Wallace a military reservation.\textsuperscript{12}

During the winter of 1866-1867, department headquarters notified Keogh the strategic importance of Fort Wallace had increased because of the threat of renewed Indian hostilities in the spring. Funds were now available for the construction of a large and expensive fort. Had such plans been determined a year earlier the appearance and utility of the post would have been greatly

\textsuperscript{11} M. W. Keogh, post commander, to acting assistant general, District of the Upper Arkansas, Fort Riley, December 4, 1866; Garfield, “The Military Post . . .,” p. 56.

\textsuperscript{12} Keogh to Henry E. Hayes, acting assistant adjutant general, Fort Riley, March 4, 1867; Mrs. Frank Montgomery, “Fort Wallace and Its Relation to the Frontier,” \textit{Kansas Historical Collections,} v. 17 (1928-1928), p. 200; Headquarters, Department of the Missouri, General Order No. 24, August 8, 1868, \textit{General Orders and Circulars, Department of the Missouri, 1858} (Fort Leavenworth, 1869); P. H. Sheridan, \textit{Outline Descriptions of the Posts in the Military Division of the Missouri Commanded by Lieutenant General P. H. Sheridan} (Chicago, 1876), p. 133.
improved. Nevertheless, in the spring of 1867 Fort Wallace was busy with new construction. Soldiers and civilians completed another set of quarters, began construction of a permanent hospital, and built a dam across the Smoky Hill river to provide a source of water and ice.\textsuperscript{13}

By mid-June, though, hostile Indians brought construction to a standstill. The lumber contractor from Denver had not yet made his delivery because the road was unsafe. Keogh could not send troops to escort him because he needed all the soldiers to guard the fort and stage stations in the vicinity. Indeed, Fort Wallace was undemanned. Although the 243-man garrison in June had been boosted to 541 men with the arrival of Company F, Seventh cavalry, in July and Companies B, H, and I, Fifth infantry, in August, all members of the cavalry were deployed on patrol, and infantry detachments guarded the stations as far as 50 miles east and 90 miles west of the fort. The situation was further complicated because 20 prisoners at the post had to be guarded.\textsuperscript{14}

Quarry work was hazardous at best because the command could not furnish an adequate guard. Nevertheless, civilians and men from the quartermaster’s department managed to continue cutting stone. With the timber necessary to finish the buildings lacking, the forage gone, the officers’ supplies used up, and the general supplies almost gone, morale began to drop. In July things took a turn for the better—supplies arrived along with the proper tools for cutting stone and the Indian hostility decreased long enough to allow construction to resume. The hospital was going up rapidly, and it promised to be a “splendid” building; work on the magazine was about to begin, and it would be completed in about a week.\textsuperscript{15}

Because the construction of permanent frontier forts was a basic element of long-range strategy by 1867, the Department of the Missouri issued a set of guidelines in November of that year to insure regulation and uniformity of design and construction. In compliance with those guidelines, the commanding officers were to employ economy in the building of their respective posts, and they were to see that all buildings were completed in a plain though comfortable manner. Negligence, however, rather than economy caused the troops at Fort Wallace to experience a cold

\textsuperscript{13} “Medical History,” pp. 3-4.
\textsuperscript{14} Keogh to Chauncey McKeever, acting assistant adjutant general, Fort Leavenworth, June 11, 1867; “Post Returns,” June-August, 1867.
\textsuperscript{15} Joseph Hale, post commander, to F. B. Weir, acting assistant adjutant general, District of the Upper Arkansas, Fort Hays, June 24, 1867; Keogh to W. G. Mitchell, acting assistant adjutant general, Fort Leavenworth, July 29, 1867.
winter because Capt. H. C. Bankhead, Fifth infantry, now commanding officer, failed to have doors put on the buildings.\textsuperscript{16}

Little major construction was done in 1868 because Indian hostilities once again occupied most of the soldiers’ time. Completion of the post hospital particularly lagged much to the aggravation of the post surgeon. Matters got worse when the building was “suddenly curtailed in its most essential points by orders from high authority requiring the immediate discharge of the mechanics employed in its construction.” Because other post construction continued, such as unauthorized improvements on the officers’ quarters and the quartermaster’s quarters, the post surgeon no doubt rightfully suspected misuse of funds allocated for the hospital.\textsuperscript{17}

Minor building and repair work during 1868 included the digging of a trench below the dam for the bathing of the enlisted men, insulating the entrances of the ice cellars with hay, and completing the building intended for the reading room and furnishing it with a rough table and benches. Work crews attached a porch to the front of the guardhouse and added an iron grating to its windows, whitewashed the Seventh cavalry’s kitchen and mess, and built a bake oven. The post adjutant also attempted to beautify the post in the spring with the order of five dollars’ worth of flower and garden seed from a supply house in St. Louis.\textsuperscript{18}

By 1870 the officers’ quarters were completed at the north end of the parade ground. Although these quarters were cramped, the plaster interiors improved their appearance. The exteriors of these cottages were of rough lumber, and the roofs were wood shingled. Verandas and picket fences decorated the fronts of these houses, while more solid but less attractive board fences protected the rear. The officers and their families also had the security of permanent outhouses, while those of the enlisted men often changed location.\textsuperscript{19}

With the addition of two more stone barracks, the fort could now garrison 500 men. These barracks were ventilated at the ridge, but the ceilings were set so low that circulation was inadequate.

\textsuperscript{16} Headquarters, Department of the Missouri, General Order No. 17, November 5, 1867, \textit{General Orders and Circulars, Department of the Missouri, 1867} (n.p., n.d.); “Medical History,” p. 4.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 5.

\textsuperscript{18} Granville Suers (?), post adjutant, to Samuel B. Lauffer, acting quartermaster, Fort Wallace, April 4, 6, and 15, 1868; Suers to Charles Brewster, Fort Wallace, April 25, 1868; E. Barnitz, post commander, to acting assistant adjutant general, Headquarters, Department of the Missouri, Fort Leavenworth, May 30, 1868; Suers to Lauffer, June 7, 1868; Suers to Pratt Brothers and Co., St. Louis, May 11, 1868.

The lighting and heating of these quarters was also insufficient. Three storehouses occupied the southwestern portion of the fort; each had ventilated cellars. Two of these storehouses were built of stone. The third building was a wooden grain storage house with a capacity of 15,000 bushels. Other additions in 1870 included an adjutant’s office, and the chapel. 20

In 1870 the hospital consisted of a central building with two wings that served as wards. Each ward contained 12 beds. The central building consisted of four rooms which were used for surgery, offices, a steward room, and a storeroom. On the upper level of the central building were rooms for storage, attendants’ quarters, and a mortuary. A building behind the hospital served as a dining room, a kitchen, a laundry, and a cellar for the hospital. After a fire destroyed this hospital on March 12, 1872, the command partitioned a barracks to provide room for a dispensary. 21

The construction of Fort Wallace was now complete—only minor additions were made after 1870. The major problems now concerned repair. As early as February, 1874, the hospital made from the converted barracks was being remodeled—the ceiling raised, the outside clapboarded, the facilities enlarged, and a sink dug outside. With the completion of this work at the end of March, the hospital once again contained two wards. 22

Other buildings needed repair; the barracks of Company K, 19th infantry, could not be thoroughly warmed, and snow kept drifting inside. The roof leaked on the building behind the barracks which served as washroom, kitchen, mess, barbershop, and laundresses’ quarters, to such a degree that adequate cleaning and heating was impossible. By December the hospital and the quartermaster’s quarters were plagued with the same difficulties. 23

The soldiers at the fort suffered additional discomforts because few of the company barracks had washrooms and the facilities for bathing were inadequate. On the northeast end of the building used as a mess, kitchen, and quarters for the laundresses was a washroom for the enlisted men. Here, the roof leaked, the sewer was plugged, and no wash tubs or heating facilities existed. In the

20. Ibid.
23. Ibid., December, 1874.
Fort Wallace officers’ quarters (above). The building at the left was the commanding officer’s residence. Below, the mess hall and other buildings about 1880.

winter the washing of hands and faces was difficult, and bathing was entirely out of the question. Thus, due to lack of proper facilities, the cold weather produced negligence in the personal habits of the men. In fact, personal cleanliness became so lax the post surgeon complained to the commanding officer who in turn ordered all sergeants to superintend a weekly scrubbing of each soldier.\textsuperscript{24}

Not all of the buildings were dilapidated, though, the commissary, the sergeants’ quarters and warehouse, the garrison office and warehouse, the sinks, the guardhouse, the magazine, the blacksmith shop, and the wheelwright shop were all in satisfactory condition. Nonetheless, almost 10 years after the establishment of the post, buildings remained uncompleted or were in a poor state of repair.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., December, 1873, and December, 1874.
and life was far from comfortable. Further deterioration occurred in March, 1875, when the plaster in the officers’ quarters began falling off the interiors so badly the inhabitants fought the same inconveniences—dirt, snow, and heating impossibilities—as the enlisted men.\textsuperscript{25}

No further building or repair work occurred until, June, 1875, when the command erected two bath houses along the Smoky Hill river. In October an ice house and a root house for vegetables were added, and during the following month a new corral was completed. Still, problems remained; the kitchen floor of the cavalry mess was almost completely ruined, and the accumulation of decaying garbage on the floor indicated the policing regulations of the command.\textsuperscript{26}

In March, 1876, the post surgeon requested a fence around the hospital “to prevent the cattle and hogs from prowling around leaving their filth and dirt, contaminating the water in the barrels and drinking it up.” This annoyance was frequent because the hospital was located near the edge of the garrison and most of the stray cattle used it as a windbreak during stormy weather.\textsuperscript{27}

Perhaps the condition of the post improved in later years and the command gave more consideration to its repair, because the records make only casual note that all was well. But further repair is doubtful since after 1878 the Indian threat to western Kansas no longer existed. Fort Wallace was no longer needed to protect the area, and funds to maintain the post were meager. Indeed, as early as 1870, Gen. Alexander Pope, commander of the Department of the Missouri, recommended to the secretary of war that Fort Wallace be partially abandoned. General Pope proposed that only a small detachment of men remain there until it became uninhabitable. The site could then be used for a summer camp and as a place to store supplies. Most of the buildings could be moved to Fort Hays which would remain a permanent post.

Two years later General Pope again urged that Fort Wallace be abandoned because the buildings were in such a poor state of repair that the coming winter would be almost unbearable for the men. On October 3, 1879, however, Pope issued a report which indicated he had changed his mind regarding the status of Fort Wallace. At that time he believed western Kansas needed one well-located and well-garrisoned fort to guard the routes between

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., December, 1874, and March, 1875.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., June, October-December, 1875.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., March, 1876.
the Indian territory in the south and the reservations to the north
to deter unauthorized Indian movement between them. To achieve
that objective, General Pope proposed Fort Wallace be enlarged to
a six-company post with four companies of cavalry and two com-
panies of infantry. He also suggested moving the buildings from Fort
Hays to Fort Wallace to provide ample shelter for the garrison.28

In spite of this recommendation, on April 25, 1882, the secretary
of war authorized the withdrawal of the Fort Wallace garrison. Al-
though not all the men left the post at that time, maintenance soon
became expensive because the army had to have a company at
Fort Dodge and a detachment at Fort Wallace to watch the build-
ings. General Sheridan recommended the secretary of war end that

problem by advertising the buildings for sale, but this action was not taken.  

On May 31, 1882, the army officially abandoned Fort Wallace, although a small detachment of troops remained at the post until September. The War Department did not transfer the reservation to the jurisdiction of the Department of the Interior until July 22, 1884. And, the secretary of war did not authorize the removal of the soldiers buried at Fort Wallace to the Fort Leavenworth cemetery until December 21, 1885. The exhumation of 80 officers and men was completed by the end of May, 1886. The graves of the army scouts who were not officially a part of the military, together with the civilian graves remain at the old post cemetery.  

In 1886 settlers began salvaging the lumber and stone from the buildings. At first they worked at night, however, when the caretaker offered no resistance, they worked by day. The Department of the Interior did not object because it preferred the settlers remove the buildings and thereby eliminate the expense for maintenance.  

The homestead law of 1888 opened the Fort Wallace reservation to public entry except for the Union Pacific railroad’s right of way. The federal government gave the cemetery to the city of Wallace. Today, little physical evidence remains to mark the location of Fort Wallace—a post which played an instrumental role in the military conquest of the Plains Indians.  

31. Ibid., p. 280.  
32. Statutes at Large, v. 25, pp. 612-613.