

FORT GIBSON, WEST POINT'S GRADUATE SCHOOL

In the early 1800s, the Grand River and northeastern Oklahoma became the locale of what soon became the western frontier's most important military outpost. Fort Gibson was established as one in a series of forts built on a military trail that extended from Fort Snelling (Minnesota) on the north, to Fort Jesup (Louisiana) on the south. The site of Gibson, now located near the Three Forks region at the confluence of the Grand, Verdigris and Arkansas Rivers, had already been a hub of commercial activity for 20 years. But more recently, the United States government had undertaken efforts to remove Indian tribes "out west" to land the Osage Tribe had deemed to be their hunting grounds for several centuries. This had resulted in considerable friction and unrest between tribes and the unrest was also endangering white settlers. So now, in 1824, a permanent post was built to house the Seventh Infantry, tasked with the responsibility of overseeing further relocation of tribes and quelling violence.

Twenty two years before the founding of Fort Gibson, the United States Military Academy had been established at West Point, New York. By 1811 and thereafter, the Academy had regularly graduated classes of over 100 young officers. As the new forts were constructed, Academy officers were assigned to them so, in a manner of speaking, the new forts became their "graduate school." In the beginning and for 66 years, some of the most well known leaders in United States military history made Fort Gibson their home. The involvement of "West Pointers" is reflected in the fact that some early commanders of Fort Gibson included Lieutenant Colonel Gustavus Loomis, class of 1811; Captain Benjamin Bonneville, class of 1815; and Captain E. S. Hawkins, class of 1820. In all, 20 graduates served as commanders.;

The region protected by the fort continued to grow in importance as the westward movement developed. From 1830, well into the 1850s, in addition to overseeing Indian tribal relocation, the fort became a starting point for numerous expeditions assigned to monitor hostile western Indian tribes, protect trade missions, and patrol southwestern routes to California during the gold rush. The fort was closed briefly in the late 1850s, but inadvertently reopened at the beginning of the Civil War when it was occupied first by Confederate, then Union troops.

Some of Academy graduates who served at the fort are mentioned here, many gaining their celebrity as a result of the War. Among the officers assigned there was Lieutenant Jefferson Davis, future president of the Confederacy. During the 1850's, many of the Confederacy's future generals in the high command "pulled duty" at the fort. The most well known was Colonel Robert E. Lee, who turned down an invitation to lead the Union forces and became a legend in his own time after major victories at Antietam Creek, Fredericksburg and The Wilderness. Another was Colonel Joseph E. Johnston, originally chosen to defend Richmond early in the war, but who was severely wounded by Union troops. Johnston returned later and participated in several battles. Colonel Albert Sidney Johnston, stationed at Gibson, was killed commanding Confederate forces at Shiloh, Tennessee in 1862. Still another was Colonel J. E. B Stuart, the flamboyant cavalry general, highly regarded by Lee, who became famous for his "ride around McClellan's army." Stuart was killed during May of 1864 during the battle for Spotsylvania that included an opposing Union cavalry commanded by George Armstrong Custer. Still another prominent southerner was Lieutenant John B. Hood, who lost both an arm and leg

in earlier battles and during the latter part of the war, was literally strapped to his saddle. Although Hood was victor in several battles, ironically in 1864 he lost at Franklin and Nashville, Tennessee to Union General George H. Thomas. Both had been fellow officers in the Union Second Cavalry prior to the war.

There were other “Gibson graduates” who distinguished themselves during the Civil War, but one hero posted at the fort afterwards was Union Colonel Benjamin H. Grierson. A musician before the war, but commander of the fort from 1872 to 1873, he became famous for “Griersons Ride.” During April of 1863, he led 1,700 cavalrymen south from Tennessee through Mississippi, traveling 600 miles in 16 days and eventually arriving in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, His troops were credited with destroying railroads and munitions that supplied Confederate troops stationed along the Mississippi River and aiding in the fall of Vicksburg.

Fort Gibson and its origins as a protector of United States interests, in a portion of the region recently acquired through the Louisiana Purchase, is a unique story unto itself. However, these few cameo examples of both military graduates and civilian personalities, who distinguished themselves in the service of our country is unparalleled...much like the rest of the history of northeastern Oklahoma.

