

Fort Davis

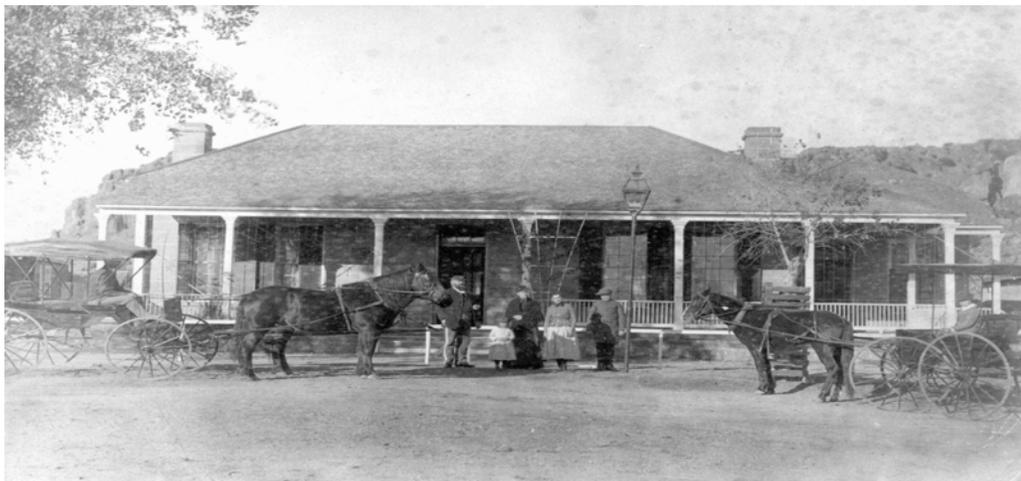
National Historic Site

National Park Service
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Curriculum Materials Grades 2-5

Women of Fort Davis



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Teacher Notes: Women at Fort Davis

Topic: Women at Fort Davis

Objectives and Standards:

Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5
Social Studies	Social Studies	Social Studies	Social Studies
113.4 -16,17,18	113.5 - 13,22,23,24	113.6 - 3,4,9,16,17,19	113.7- 4,9,25,27
Language Arts	Language Arts	Language Arts	Language Arts
110.4 - 2,3,8,9, 10,13,18	110.5 - 2,3,8,9, 10,13,18	110.6 - 8,10,11,14, 15,22,25	110.7 - 8,10,11, 14,15,22,25

Materials Needed:

Copies of handout/reading entitled *Women at Fort Davis* (3 pages)

Copies of handout/reading entitled *Mary's Letter*

Copies of student worksheets:

- A Woman 's Work is Never Done*
- Letters*
- Biographical Research on the Internet* on one Fort Davis woman, Alice Grierson

Optional: a "mailbox" for students to deposit the letters they write

Optional: some illustrated letters to show students

For further research, computer(s) with internet access or books

Lesson Activities:

Background information sheets can be read aloud to younger students, or used for upper grade students to read independently. The information can be discussed in small groups or as a whole class.

Students can compare various tasks of the Fort Davis women to tasks of women today—how they are similar and how they are different. Students can compare and contrast the actual jobs of the three groups of women who lived at the fort.

Activities and Projects:

* *A Woman's Work is Never Done Worksheet*

This can be done as a ranking activity instead of a worksheet. Students get into groups of three. After underlining the difficulties, they discuss together, and then as a group agree upon which of those underlined were the three most difficult things women had to deal with. Finally the group will rank those three from most difficult to least difficult. Each group can present their results to the class.

***Letters**

Teacher leads a discussion of letters—their importance then and now.

Suggestions for Questions:

1. When did someone in your family write or receive a handwritten letter?

2. What was the occasion?
3. Do cards count as letters? How are they different from letters? Can they serve the same purpose? Are they as meaningful?
4. Is letter writing used that much today? What has replaced it?
5. How important do you think it was in the 1800s to send and receive letters? (Remember there were no telephones and women may have felt isolated.)
6. How important would it be to hear from each other when someone was located in an area that seemed dangerous or far away?

Additional Letter Activity:

Pair up students. One partner will pretend to be a woman living on an army post—either the laundress, the servant, or the officer’s wife. The other partner will be her sister, brother, mother, or father back home or in an eastern state like New York. It would be fun to have a mailbox for students to “mail” their letters.

1. The “army woman” will take on an imaginary identity, including a fictitious name, and then compose a letter. Her letter will include sentences to reflect her surroundings, problems, concerns, enjoyable times, etc. Students can use information on the sheets provided but can also infer and elaborate. The letter should also include some questions for their partner to answer.
2. The family member will write at the same time, reflecting similar concerns and mention some things going on at home that the “army woman” might be interested in knowing.
3. The teacher will act as “mailman”, taking up the letters to redistribute to the partners. Students will compose another letter (maybe the next day or for homework) to answer the one they received. It might be good to imagine some time has gone by before the letter is answered.
4. Let students read letters aloud to the class or get into groups of four and read letters to each other.

Internet Activity for *Biographical Research on the Internet for one Fort Davis woman, Alice Grierson. The information from this website can be printed off and copies made for students to use at their desks if a computer isn’t available for student use.

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Student Activity: Women at Fort Davis

Women at Fort Davis

Along with soldiers, Fort Davis had women and children. There were three distinct types of women living and working there. Usually they did not socialize with each other at all. Life offered challenges for each of them.

Laundresses

A laundress was a washerwoman, though she often took on other jobs at the fort such as nurse, midwife, and babysitter. She might make as much as \$30 a month (much more than an enlisted soldier) washing uniforms for soldiers. The laundress received a ration of food, fuel, housing, and medical services. In 1871, laundresses at Fort Davis lived in tents behind the men's barracks. Everyone called it "Suds Row." Laundresses were often married to enlisted men.

Doing laundry, a laundress must have gotten very hot and tired. She was up early to get the fires started. Water had to be hauled from Limpia Creek and heated. Then the clothes were boiled to get out all the dirt and to kill lice. It could be dangerous bending over the boiling pots while wearing long skirts, which might catch on fire. And it must have been difficult to see through the steam, not to mention the heat. Hands were in water all day long. Clothes were hung to dry—so there was more lifting and bending over. Next came the ironing. The handle of the iron was so hot that a cloth had to be kept over it. A laundress could probably be recognized by her red, raw hands.

Domestic Servants

Officers' wives needed servants to keep their homes the way they had been in the East. But servants were difficult to find and even more difficult to keep on the frontier. Occasionally army wives brought a servant with them as they traveled to a post like Fort Davis. Officers' wives sometimes hired servants from the nearby town. Sometimes servants were men.

Cooking was one of the chores of the servant, who was expected to rise early and get the cooking fires lit. There were often additional chores to do before breakfast. The servant might meet with the officer's wife and be told



Sally Caldwell, wife of Private Menger Caldwell of the 10th Cavalry, worked as a servant for Major and Mrs. Anson Mills for eleven years, including the years they were stationed at Fort Davis, 1882-1885. Photo credit: "My Story" by Anson Mills

what to prepare for that day. Following any meal there were dishes to clean, pots and pans to scrub, counters to put in order, and floors to mop. The kitchen was located just behind the officer's house in a separate building because of the danger of fire and to keep heat out of the house.

The same work had to be done over and over again, but most servants took pride in their work. Other chores included sweeping, dusting, polishing, brushing carpets, beating rugs, scrubbing floors, cleaning and filling oil lamps, carrying water for baths inside the house, removing dirty water, emptying chamber pots, tending the garden, watching over children, and looking after chickens and cows.

Indeed, it was a long and often exhausting day, with little time for fun. Many servants met and married enlisted men, leaving the army wife once again looking for help.

Officers' Wives

In the 1850s, a trip west traveling to Fort Davis from the East might take months. For some women, it was their first trip alone. It took more than one means of transportation for them to reach their destination. By the late 1860s, they could travel part of the way by rail and the last part by wagon or stage coach. There was not enough room for them to bring as much they would have liked. The army post was in territory where Indians lived. What a mixture of emotions they must have felt!

Arriving at Fort Davis, the immediate concern was to set up house. The commanding officer had his own quarters. All other officers could choose the quarters of anyone below them in rank. It did not matter if the officer had a large family or not. Officers could be sent from post to post. When a new officer came, he



New Yorker Mrs. Mildred Jewell Townsend Heard, and her husband Lieutenant John W. Heard, 3rd Cavalry, lived at Fort Davis in the late 1880s. Photo courtesy National Park Service, Fort Davis NHS

might choose a house he liked and cause everyone to move again. How frustrating it must have been to move again just when you had everything set up, and then perhaps to smaller quarters. Some families moved as many as 20 or more times during their time in the army.

Army wives sometimes had a hard time adjusting to life at Fort Davis. Maybe that was because they were used to a more refined life back home. They missed friends and family they had left behind, and it was hard to leave material possessions they loved.

Once into their house, a wife was busy managing the household and children. She tried to create much the same life she had back in the East, but it was often difficult. She couldn't always get the ingredients for recipes. Prices for some items were high. The houses were small and did not allow for much privacy. Sanitation was a concern.

Officers' wives succeeded and not only made a comfortable home for their families, but they often recorded their experiences in journals or letters to help give us a mental picture of their lives.

Their officer-husbands would go out in the field, leaving them behind at the fort. Women were fearful of childbirth, and sometimes women had babies when their husbands were away. Close by were Indians who had raided the livestock. There were always the forces of nature to deal with: the cold of winter, the heat of summer, and blowing dust, and insects.

The wives would sit together in the afternoons sewing and exchanging news. It was a treat when visitors came to the post, or when family members from the East came to visit.



Mrs. Mary Braxton Bigelow of New York live with her husband Lieutenant John Bigelow, 10th Cavalry, at Fort Davis in the 1880s. Photo courtesy National Park Service, Fort Davis NHS

Most of the officers' wives rode horseback. Of course, they rode side-saddle in those days, both legs on the same side of the horse. Imagine that!

Normally, evenings in the home were quiet with reading and games. Sometimes friends were invited over for dinner. A guest might be asked to play a musical instrument.

It might surprise you to know that officers' wives helped organize many social activities at the fort. People from the nearby town were invited to some of these. There were hops (dances), plays, picnics, costume parties, parties for special occasions, and other events where the men, women, and children gathered to have fun.

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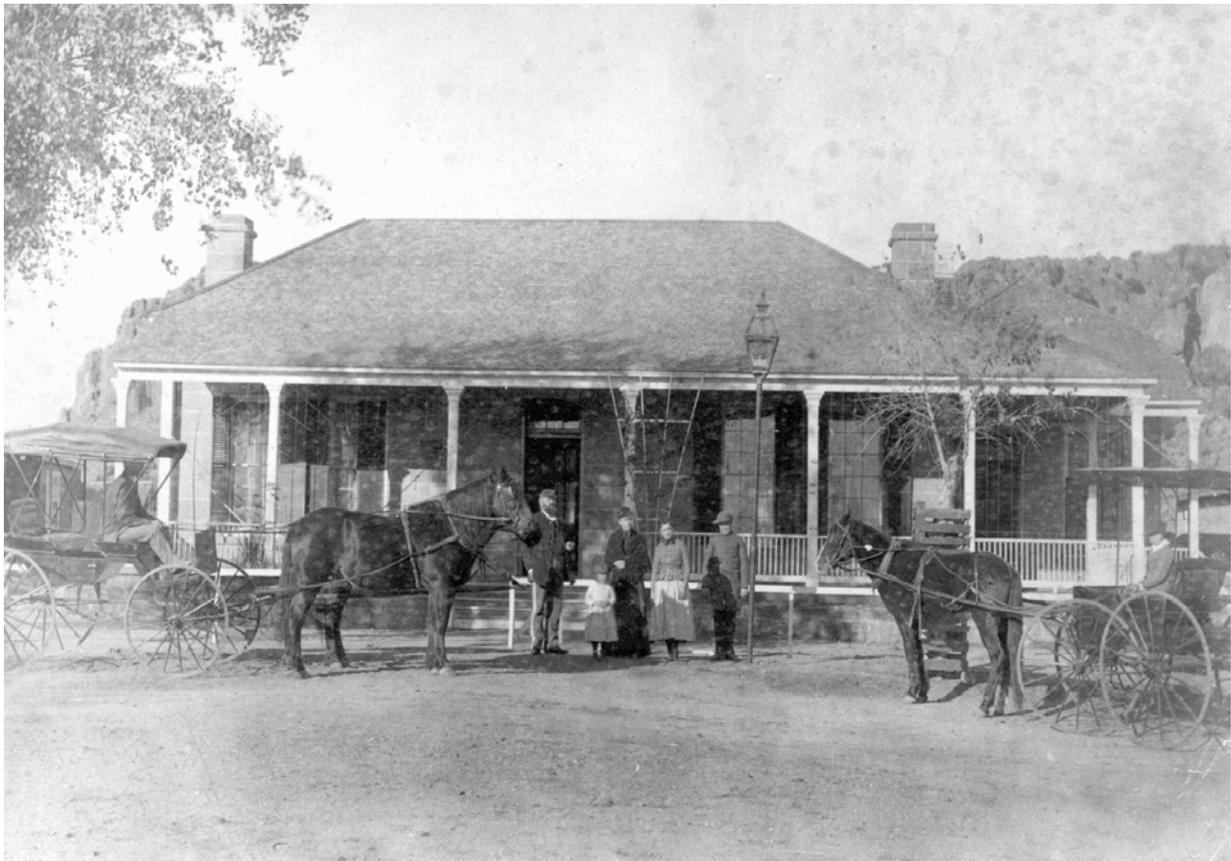
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Curriculum Materials Grades 2-5

Student Activity: Women at Fort Davis -
A Woman's Work is Never Done

A Woman's Work is Never Done



*The family of Lieutenant Colonel Melville Cochran and family at Fort Davis in 1889
Photo courtesy of National Park Service, Fort Davis National Historic Site*

Directions: Read the selection *Women at Fort Davis* and answer these questions.

1. Underline all the things you think were difficult in the women's lives. Write what you think would be the most difficult for you if you had lived then?

2. Explain why you think so.

3. How would this difficulty be eased in today's world?

4. Here is list of words that show how people feel.

proud	curious	annoyed
afraid	excited	happy
tired	worried	lonely
eager	doubtful	grumpy
overwhelmed	impatient	interested
concerned	sad	hopeful

With a partner, read about the women on the frontier post. Find specific examples of when the women would have felt each of these ways.

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Student Activity: Women at Fort Davis - Letters



Letters

Even though letters are usually personal and intended only for the person being written to, they sometimes get into the hands of others who use them as clues to the past. Sometimes if the person is famous, the letter later gets published. Letters are considered primary sources. They help us learn more about history from the people who really lived it.

DIRECTIONS: Read the letter from Mary to her grandmother and mother. Now answer the following questions:

1. What hidden clues in the letter help you discover something about Mary or her life?
2. Make a list of things you can guess or conclude about Mary or her life.
3. Predict what you think will happen next in her life.
4. Which of the things she is writing about seem like things women today could write about?
5. Which things are different?
6. What do you think happened to the end of the letter?
7. Imagine you are Mary's son, grown up now, and you have this letter in your possession. Someone who is writing a book about the frontier forts wants to publish the letter in the book. Would you let them even though it is personal. Why or why not?

SOME THINGS TO DO:

1. Compose a letter from Gram or Mother as a response letter to Mary.
2. Re-create the letter Mary wrote by putting illustrations in the margins and spaces, imagining how she might have done it. It was known that Mary painted with watercolors. Beatrix Potter lived during this same time period in England; she wrote letters to a child and illustrated them in the margins and spaces. Later the letters became the book *Peter Rabbit*.

Mary's Letter

The following is part of a letter from Mrs. Mary Swan Thompson, wife of Lieutenant James K. "Jake" Thompson. She lived in the officer's quarters with her husband and their infant son, who was born at Fort Davis in 1890.



Nov. 3, 1890

My dear Gram and Mother,

Today my baby carriage came from Chicago—and I have already found it a comfort..... For the first time in ages I had a walk in the sunshine and wheeled the infant. I stayed out with him two hours. The weather here is simply ideal now.

.....Our garrison keeps changing—new troops ordered in and out—and that is all the excitement we have. The Edwards returned on Monday after a three months stay in the east and are once more our neighbors. I was so glad to see them—as they are our only special friends here. Jake won't get his 1st Lieutenantcy for a couple of years—and he feels blue pretty blue over it. We may stay right here all that length of time.

The baby is getting to be the cunningest little fellow..... I have a Kodak camera and have made some pictures—but of course it will be a good while before they can be developed. The camera has to go to Rochester so don't look for the pictures for months.....

Dear me, I shall be so glad when the apples come. I am crazy for some. You will probably have to pre-pay the freight, and then if you will write me what your expenses in the matter were, I'll refund. We shall enjoy them so. We have no fruit of any sort....

By the way we have a family of small chickens. Kate [servant] said there were seven little chicks out of the shells today. I tell you it is exciting in this land of monotony.

We shall be glad if mother decides to come out. I know it will please her to see this curious place..... I can't seem to find just the name for the baby—and so I haven't given him any yet. I hope to go home next summer—as he can't be baptized until I go north.

[The end of the letter is missing.]

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Student Activity: Women at Fort Davis –
Research on the Internet

Biographical Research on the Internet

You can do biographical research by looking up the following site on the internet: www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online.

Look up the name of ALICE GRIERSON, wife Colonel Benjamin H. Grierson, who was commanding officer at Fort Davis from 1882 to 1885.



Alice Kirk Grierson lived at Fort Davis 1882-1885.

Divide your paper into two columns. Put Difficulties at the top of one column. Put Strengths at the top of the other. As you read, notice what was difficult for Alice. Write it in that column. Also notice strengths Alice had. List those in the other column.