

Fort Davis

National Historic Site
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



The Post Hospital At Fort Davis 1876 - 1891



Medicine in the Frontier Army

The story of the post hospital at Fort Davis serves as a basis for interpreting all aspects of military and civilian life at the fort and in the surrounding community. The hospital not only helped to ensure that the soldiers remained healthy, but its operation was critical to the success of all military activities. Its functions were broad and they encompassed more than just treating the sick and wounded.

The construction of a well-provided hospital at any frontier army post was of key importance. While awaiting funds to build a permanent facility at the post- Civil War Fort Davis, civilian workers in 1868 erected a temporary hospital in exchange for medical services. This adobe structure, however, sustained heavy damage during the spring rains of 1870. As a result, Post Surgeon Daniel Weisel began to campaign that a “permanent hospital be erected as early as practicable.”

The building of a substantial facility began in the mid- 1870s, with the north ward and central administrative ward completed in 1876. In the summer of 1884 a south ward was added. The hospital consisted of two twelve- bed patient wards connected by a large administrative

section. The latter contained the post surgeon’s office, dispensary, kitchen, dining room, hospital steward’s room, linen room, isolation ward, and storeroom.

Constructed of adobe on a stone foundation, the hospital was located behind and west of officers’ row. It had a tin roof, wooden flooring, and glass windows with curtains. Wide porches gave it an airy, spacious appearance.

The post hospital at Fort Davis was considered one of the most up- to- date medical facilities west of San Antonio. For example, it had an ether delivery system before such machines were common in the West. Army records for the post show that soldiers suffered predominately from diseases and accidental injuries, not battle wounds.

Pension records of former enlisted men reveal that several suffered from blurred vision and/or temporary blindness contracted on campaign in the hot desert sun of the region.

The Post Surgeon

Doctors hired by the U. S. Army in the 19th century were some of the best trained physicians in the United States. The army examination for



Charles DeGraw was post surgeon when the hospital was constructed in the mid- 1870s.

surgeons and assistant surgeons was rigorous and complex.

Both surgeons and assistant surgeons were commissioned officers. Acting assistant surgeons (civilian contract physicians) were paid a monthly wage based on the terms of their contracts.

Many surgeons who served at Fort Davis were veterans of the Civil War. William Henry Gardner, post surgeon from 1882 to 1886, entered the War in 1861 as a medical cadet. The following year he was promoted to assistant surgeon. John Vance Lauderdale, who served at Fort Davis from 1888 to 1890, worked on a hospital boat carrying the sick and wounded from battle to medical facilities during the Civil War.

The duties of a post surgeon were numerous and sometimes overwhelming. In addition to treating and caring for the sick and injured, he was responsible for insuring that proper sanitary measures were endorsed and enforced. In this capacity, he was involved in all aspects of garrison life.

Among the surgeon's duties was the regular inspection of living areas, the water supply, and cooking and sanitary facilities. To help ensure that the garrison stayed healthy, he supervised bread baking at the post bakery, oversaw the planting of a hospital garden, and strongly encouraged troops to have vegetable gardens to supplement their rations.



Post Surgeon William Gardner oversaw construction of the hospital's south ward in 1884.

The surgeon inspected the stables and corrals, functioned as the official coroner, and frequently accompanied troops on campaigns and scouting details. In the late 1880s, when Fort Davis received an ice machine "deemed essential to the comfort and health" of the garrison, the post surgeon had responsibility for its operation.

The post surgeon was encouraged to collect and send to the Army Medical Museum in Washington, D. C., fauna and flora specimens as well as unusual human skeletal parts. He kept weather statistics and spent hours completing a multitude of reports and forms.

The Hospital Staff

Another duty of the surgeon was the supervision of those who assisted him in running the hospital. At his right hand was the hospital steward who



Hospital Steward Jacob Appel served at Fort Davis 1887- 1890.

was responsible for the day- to- day operation of the hospital. It was essential that the steward have a good medical background since he mixed and administered medications, checked on the condition of patients, and at times was called upon to extract teeth.

Other members of the hospital staff included nurses, cooks and hospital matrons. The nurses and cooks were enlisted men assigned to the hospital from the companies present on post. The matrons, charged with washing the hospital linens, were often wives and /or daughters of the hospital stewards.

Serving the Community

The surgeon and his staff not only served the needs of the military personnel, civilian dependents and employees of the post, but also often cared for the sick of the surrounding area. The journals of Dr. John Lauderdale reveal



Dr. John Lauderdale and family at Fort Davis - 1889

that he often made house calls on civilians living off the post. At times he was gone for several hours. When called to a neighboring ranch, he sometimes found it necessary to spend the night.

Restoration of the Post Hospital

The exterior of the post hospital at Fort Davis was restored in the late 1960s. Restoration consisted of repairing the adobe walls and putting a new



The hospital as it looked in the late 1870s. Another ward was added in 1884.

roof and porches on the structure. In the 1980s, a wood walkway was constructed in the administrative section to allow visitor access. In the 1990s, some interior plaster stabilization work was accomplished.

Because the history of this structure and its staff affected all aspects of life at the post, it is the plan of the National Park Service, in partnership with the Friends of Fort Davis NHS, to restore and furnish the north ward and one or two of the administrative rooms. The restoration will enhance the visitor's experience as well as increase the park's ability to interpret the history of the entire garrison.

Medical treatment at Fort Davis represented state- of- the- art medicine of the nineteenth century. The soldiers at Fort Davis and other frontier posts probably received medical treatment as good or better than what the average American received at the time. Lacking knowledge of what caused disease or infection, army doctors concentrated their efforts on treating symptoms and ensuring proper hygiene and sanitation at the post.

The restoration of the post hospital will provide visitors with an understanding and appreciation of a segment of garrison life often overlooked. More importantly, it will serve to better tell the story of those who lived and sometimes died at Fort Davis during the last quarter of the nineteenth century.