

times of need all the women of the Fort stepped up to assist with health epidemics.

Ladies of the Evening

Wherever there was a military reservation, a frontier town could also be found. Frontier towns often catered to the soldiers' dark side. In 1881, after President Rutherford B. Hayes forbade the sale of whiskey at all military establishments, "hog ranches" sprang up. These towns specialized in "watered whiskey and wayward women." Throughout history, ladies of the evening have followed armies, and the frontier army proved no exception. The community of Leasburg appeared while Fort Selden was under construction. At Fort Selden, especially in its earliest days, Leasburg provided soldiers the opportunities to "visit their concubines or courtesans to gamble and indulge in whiskey drinking," according to Lieutenant Colonel Nelson H. Davis in 1865.

A trip to Leasburg was typical in the days following a pay day. Of the seven or eight soldiers court-martialed every month for being absent without leave from Fort Selden, 90% were visiting Leasburg. Their punishments typically included forfeiture of pay for one month, hard labor for one month, and in the case of non-commissioned officers, reduction to the ranks.

Women at Fort Selden, as well as other frontier forts, played many roles. The women and children that accompanied soldiers broke up the monotonous lifestyle of the frontier army and provided them with stability and comfort. Wives, children, civilian laborers, and women from nearby frontier towns made Fort Selden a much more diverse place than might have been imagined.

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Help us preserve Fort Selden by becoming a site volunteer or by making a designated gift to the Museum of NM Foundation for the Fort's preservation and interpretation. 100% of your gifts will be used to support Fort Selden.

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Join other community members as we work to form a non-profit group to support the Fort. Call us for more information at 575-202-1638.



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FORT SELDEN

HISTORIC SITE

WOMEN OF FORT SELDEN



The MacArthur Family while at Fort Selden
Left to right: Douglas, Arthur, Arthur, and Mary

Frontier forts were home to many women. These women included the wives of officers and enlisted men, wives of civilian traders, sutlers' wives, contract laborers, civilian servants, women of nearby towns and, in at least one recorded case, women who actually served in the ranks. For many, life on the frontier was challenging and isolating. Their presence and influence made a significant impact on nineteenth century forts.

Girlfriends
Most of the soldiers were young men who probably had, or wished they had, girlfriends back home. One of the best first-hand accounts of life at Fort Selden comes from the letters Lieutenant James H. Storey wrote home to his girlfriend. The letters detail the day-to-day life at the Fort and his long-distance romance.

Officers' Wives
Army wives accompanied their soldiers west

for many reasons but primarily out of love and a sense of duty. Women considered their role as that of a refuge for their husbands. These women also acted as stabilizing forces for these, generally, isolated communities. They helped grow produce in company gardens, organized social events, hosted tea parties, held community picnics, organized outings, and planned dances and other activities.

Officers' wives lived in a highly regulated military society where they were expected to behave according to their husbands' rank. The best asset to an officer's career was a wife who could maintain her own personal honor while also advancing his career.

This didn't always happen. In 1866, Lieutenant James H. Storey reported a tragic love triangle. Lieutenant John Warner suspected that Lieutenant Fred Hazelhurst was "too intimate with his wife," Julia. Once he determined his suspicions correct he sent Julia away and filed for divorce. On October 22, Warner discovered three letters from Hazelhurst addressed to Julia detailing his plans to resign from the military to be with her. About 12:30 that night, outside the Fort Selden Officers' Quarters, Warner shot Hazelhurst, who then fired back. Warner died shortly thereafter and Hazelhurst died at five the next morning.

Lydia Spencer Lane is probably the most well-known woman who lived at Fort Selden. Her memoirs of traveling throughout the West as an officer's wife were published in 1893. She crossed the plains seven times and never grew tired of camping out on the march. She was not, however, impressed with Fort Selden, describing the post as "a quiet rather unattractive place..."

Wives of Enlisted Men and Non-Commissioned Officers

From the 1860s to World War I, official governmental policy refused enlistment to married men and discouraged single soldiers from marriage. An enlisted man who wished to marry had to ask the permission of his company commander. Whenever quarters were available he could live with his wife on post or else he was allowed to reside with her outside the garrison in the nearby town. The soldier who married without approval usually kept his marriage a secret because such action could be considered insubordination.

The enlisted man's wife frequently received authorization to work on military posts. One such job was as laundresses. Laundresses were recognized by the army and given legal status. However, this also meant they were subject to military law, and therefore a general court-martial. At least one laundress in the late 19th century was recorded as having been court-martialed.

Enlisted men's wives did more than just act as laundresses. They served as part-time cooks and maids in the officers' homes and were also sometimes midwives and nurses.

Wives of Post Traders, Sutlers, and Tradesmen

In the 1870 census of Fort Selden, 13 adult women are listed. This however, may be an inaccurate number as the U.S. Army generally did not keep numbers on married enlisted men. As a result, the women listed are the wives of officers, post traders, sutlers, and tradesmen.

Theodora Ott, 24, was listed as keeping house with Peter F. Ott, her husband, listed as the post's hotelkeeper. Mariana Gallegos

served as the hotel's cook. Both women were born in Mexico.

The saddler's wife taught the first formally organized school at Fort Selden in 1884. She taught 13 children during the day and illiterate soldiers in the evening.

African Americans

Remarkably, at least one woman served in the military as an enlisted frontier soldier. Cathay Williams, a former slave from Independence, Missouri, served for two years as Private William Cathay before she was discovered after becoming ill. Williams never served at Fort Selden, however she did serve at Fort Cummings and Fort Bayard and later, after leaving the military, opened a hotel in Raton, New Mexico.

In early February 1869, when Lydia Spencer Lane and her husband were on route to Fort Selden, they advertised for servants to go with them. They hired an African-American woman. According to Mrs. Lane the maid, Mary, was incorrigible and was eventually fired.

It is unclear from our current records how many African-American women who lived or worked at Fort Selden over time.

Civilian Laborers

Hired female servants were hard for officers' wives to keep. Officers' wives reported that pretty maids sometimes became popular among the troops and often resigned to get married.

In the 1870 Census two women are listed as Company Laundress and one is the Hospital Matron. Two of the laundress and the matron are enlisted men's wives. Although the census only lists one hospital matron, in