

# THE HISTORY OF FORT WINGATE

BY

HAROLD L. JAMES\*

New Mexico State Highway Commission, Santa Fe, New Mexico

## INTRODUCTION: 1846

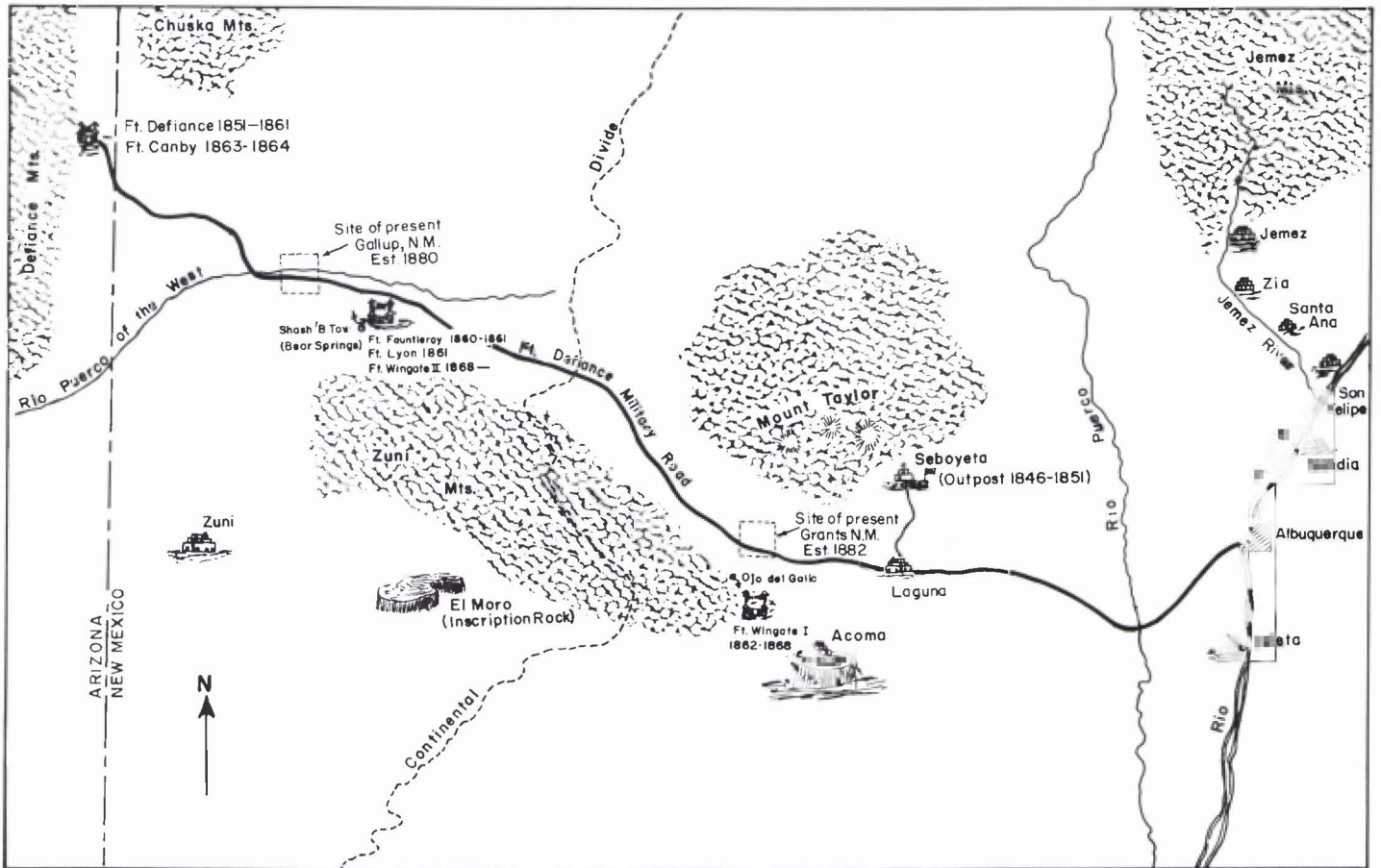
Fort Wingate traces its colorful history back through two locations and three different name designations beginning with the acquisition in 1846.

In the late summer of that year the Army of The West paused in its march at the mud village of Las Vegas. It was there on the 15th of August that General Stephen Watts Kearney stood on the top of an adobe building and proclaimed himself a "protector" instead of a conqueror. To the Mexican population who gathered for this address,

\* Chairman, Sites Committee, New Mexico Historical Society

mixed feelings of joy and suspicion were certainly in order. One thing was sensed, however, that here was a possible deliverance from their greatest plague—the Indian.

To fulfill this promise Kearney directed his first efforts toward the troublesome "Nomads of The Redrocks"—the Navajo. On September 18, 1846, he dispatched three companies of Missouri Volunteers, under the command of Lt. Colonel Cosgreve Jackson, to the remote mission village of Seboyeta located sixty miles west of Albuquerque. No name was given to this frontier outpost and the garrison which was stationed there functioned mainly as a show of strength against marauding Indians. The Seboyeta



WESTERN MILITARY INSTALLATIONS—DEPARTMENT OF NEW MEXICO 1846-1868

By

HAROLD L. JAMES



Drawn By: M. L. NELSON



FIGURE 2.

This excellent photograph, taken by James Mooney of the Bureau of Ethnology, shows the fort as it appeared in the winter of 1893.

*Photo Courtesy: Smithsonian Institute.*

guard failed to impress the Indians. Incursions and depredations continued to increase. In the weeks that followed, the situation worsened to the point where Kearney was continually besieged with delegations from communities all demanding protection from the Navajo menace. A changed course of action appeared necessary.

In November, 1846, a treaty approach was tried. Colonel Alexander W. Doniphan, representing General Kearney, met with the chiefs of The People on November 22nd at a noted rendezvous point in the northern foothills of the Zuni Mountains called Shash 'B Tow (Bear Springs). In formal terms it was stated that the Navajos would swear allegiance with the Americans, and that all residents of the now acquired territory would be administered by the United States government. Further it was stipulated that the Indians would cease all warlike activities against the residents of New Mexico. Also included were provisions for full restoration of all stolen property and livestock,

and the release of all Mexican captives. The Indians made their mark upon a treaty paper. However, their outward show of friendship and goodwill was misleading. Their animosities toward the Mexicans were too deeply-seated to be simply dissolved by the signing of a document.

#### THE WARS: 1847-1862

The Doniphan Treaty proved to be a failure. Furthermore, the presence of a foreign military power in their homeland served only to incite the Indians. During the years 1847 to 1850 incursions and hostilities reached enormous proportions. Fort Marcy at Santa Fe became nothing more than a huge staging area for outfitting expeditions into Navajoland. More treaties were signed. More treaties were broken. Several peace negotiations failed even before the treaty expedition had returned to Santa Fe. It became an endless frustrating game to which a solution seemed impossible.



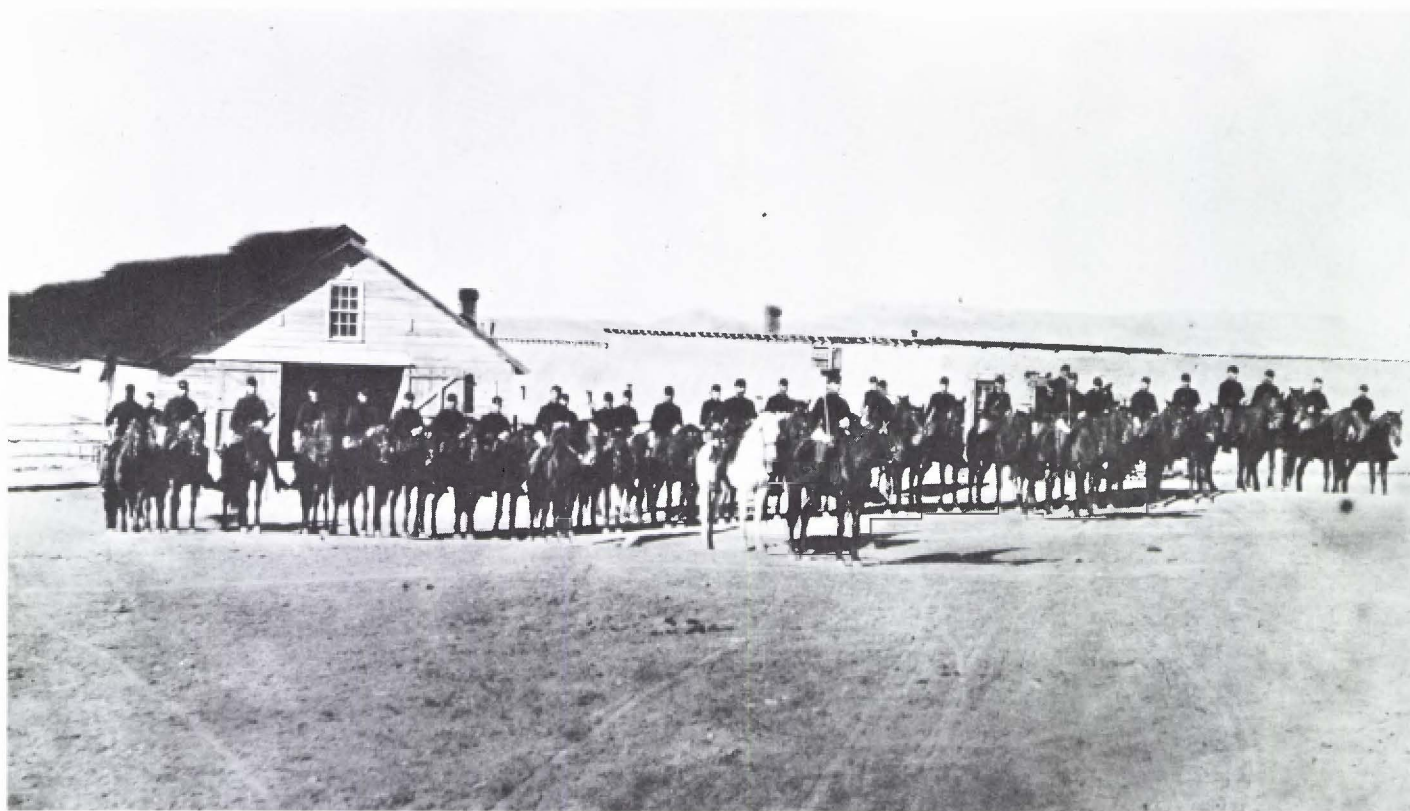


FIGURE 3.

Cavalry inspection of K Troop. Early 1890's.

*Photo Courtesy: National Archives.*

On July 19, 1851, a soldier of considerable experience, Colonel Edwin Vose Sumner, assumed command of the Ninth Military Department of New Mexico. He immediately undertook to revolutionize the whole system of frontier defense. He authorized the erection of Fort Union to serve as departmental headquarters, replacing Fort Marcy. He withdrew the garrison from the Seboyeta outpost. On September 18, 1851, he issued general orders for the construction of still another post to be located along the east front of the Defiance Mountains. The site chosen was at a Navajo shrine called T'se Hot' Sohlih (Meadows between The Rocks). The post was designed to house five companies, and was appropriately named Fort Defiance.

Colonel Sumner, with his sometimes criticized reorganization, had the desired effect upon the Navajo—peace. To assure a lasting friendship he instituted commercial trade with the Indians. He directed the distribution of quartermaster stores to supplement the tribe's needs during sterile winters. He provided technical services and agricultural aids. His assistance reached even into tribal government where he preached the advantages of affairs conducted in a democratic manner.

Fort Defiance remained the great fortress of peace for nearly eight years. Several violations of theft and murder did occur during this time but the incidents were tactfully handled without provocation for war.

By the late 1850's the Indians became restless. This uneasiness grew from the reservation treaties of Meriwether (1855), and Bonneville (1858), in which the Navajos were geographically restricted within specified boundary lines. These limits were defined by the San Juan River on the north to the Zuni River on the south at a point just east of the Zuni Pueblo. The western boundary was placed along a line running south from the San Juan River (north of present Kayenta), to the confluence of Chevalon Creek and the Little Colorado River between present-day Holbrook and Winslow. The eastern boundary forbade all Indian claims east of Chaco Canyon.

These treaties, although specifying their traditional lands, restricted their travel outside the set boundaries. In short, the Navajos felt like prisoners in their own domain.

The strict conformity to reservation life, coupled with severe winters, forced many Navajos upon the plunder trail. A breach began to widen. Minor incidents became major incidents. Plots were instigated in the lodges of the chiefs. Finally, on the morning of April 30, 1860, the peace was broken. With the war-whoops of an estimated 1,000 warriors, Fort Defiance was attacked. The fort sustained itself for the entire day. Only until evening when darkness made it difficult to distinguish friend from foe did the Indians withdraw into the surrounding hills.

The brazen attack upon Fort Defiance threw New Mexico back into the grip of another Indian war. Additional



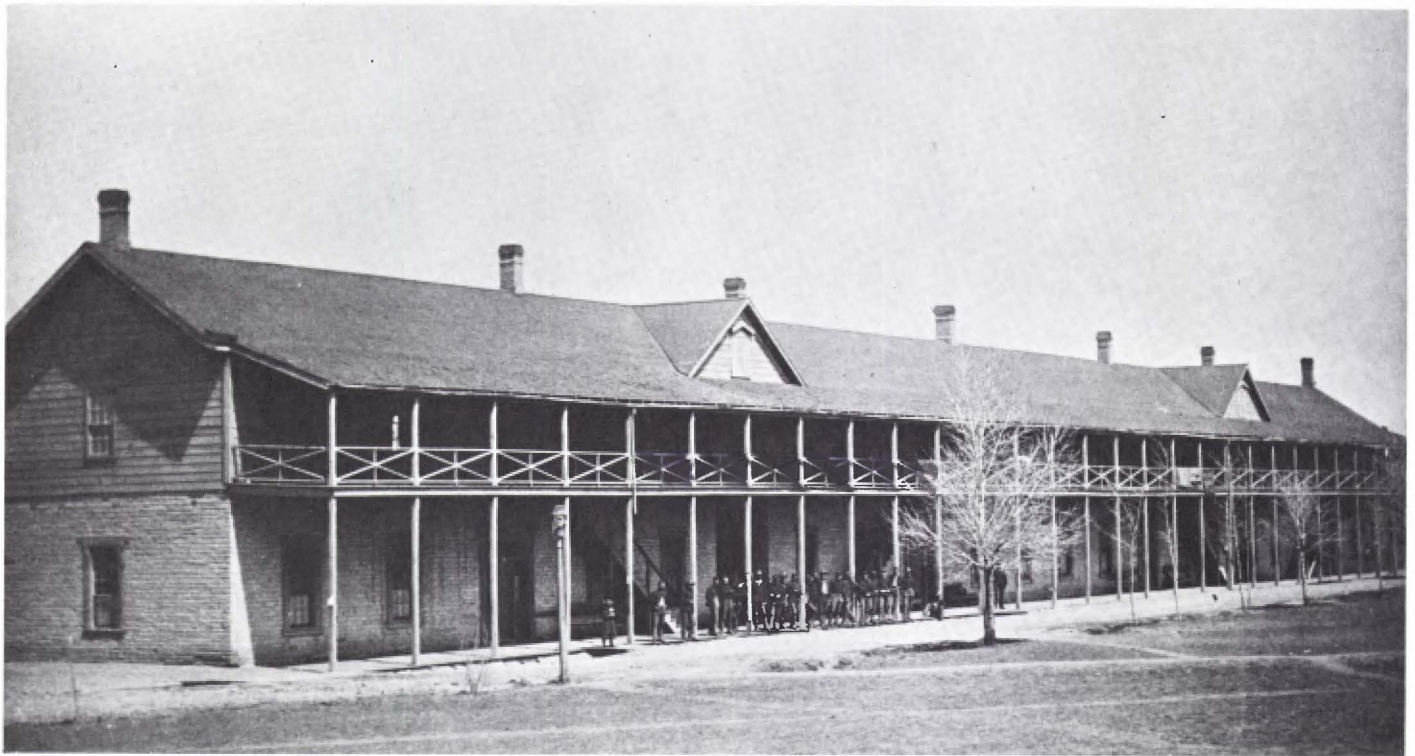


FIGURE 4.

Enlisted mens barracks north of parade ground. Early 1890's. *Photo Courtesy: National Archives.*

troops of calvary reinforced the redrock perimeters. Another post was established (August 31, 1860), on the grounds of the old Doniphan Treaty site at Bear Springs. It was named for the present Department Commander, Colonel Thomas Turner (Little Lord) Fauntleroy. Throughout the remainder of 1860 and the early part of 1861 the United States Army engaged in a full-scale Indian campaign, the likes of which the territory had never before witnessed.

In the Spring of 1861 the Military Department of New Mexico faced still another peril brought about by the secession of the southern states, and the apparent Confederate plan to invade the desert-southwest. To meet this threatened invasion of the territory, the newly appointed Department Commander, Colonel Edward S. Canby, set the Indian problem aside and began concentrating his defenses closer to the Rio Grande. Fort Defiance was abandoned on April 25th, its garrison transferred to Fort Fauntleroy.

By the summer of 1861 the impending Confederate threat became a reality. On July 27th, Lt. Colonel John R. Baylor, C.S.A., struck north from El Paso and captured Fort Fillmore (south of present-day Las Cruces). Baylor declared all New Mexico below Socorro to be Confederate territory, designating Mesilla as its capitol.

On September 28, 1861, a general order of the U.S. Department of the Army changed the name of Fort Fauntleroy to Fort Lyon; Colonel Fauntleroy had resigned his commission to join the Confederacy. The post's new

name honored General Nathaniel Lyon who had been killed weeks earlier at the battle of Wilson Creek, Missouri.

Three months later, on December 10th, Fort Lyon was abandoned and the garrison was used to strengthen the forces at Fort Craig, below Socorro.

On February 14, 1862, the Texas Army, CSA, under the command of Brig. General Henry H. Sibley, who had replaced Col. Baylor, began its tidal march up the Rio Grande valley. It defeated the Union forces at Fort Craig in the historic Battle of Valverde on February 21st. Continuing intact, Gen. Sibley's army swept up the Rio Grande, engulfed Albuquerque on March 2nd and Santa Fe on March 23rd. Their dreams of conquest were shattered, however, when they were badly defeated by Union troops, reinforced by Colorado Volunteers, at the Battle of Glorieta Pass, southeast of Santa Fe, on March 26th and 28th.

The Civil War in New Mexico was short lived. The Confederates, though badly beaten, were successful in avoiding capture by sustaining an agonizing, forced-march retreat back to Texas.

#### FORT WINGATE I: 1862-1863

The Indians had taken full advantage of the military turmoil created by the Confederate invasion and their raids greatly increased during that time. In the summer of 1862 the new Military Commander for New Mexico,





FIGURE 5.

Officers Row south of parade ground. About 1895.

*Photo Courtesy: National Archives.*

Brig. General James H. Carleton, turned his full attention to the Indian problem. His plans for the complete reduction of the Indian menace called for gathering all the Navajos and placing them on a supervised military reservation. His "Indian Policy" included the authorization of a new post on the eastern slopes of the Zuni Mountains to serve as the staging area for his "Navajo Roundup."

Gen. Carleton named the new post "Fort Wingate" to honor Captain Benjamin A. Wingate, an infantry officer who had served at Fort Lyon, and who died of wounds suffered during heroic conduct in the Battle of Valverde.

The site chosen for the fort was at Ojo del Gallo (Chicken Spring), near the present-day village of San Rafael. Construction began on September 30, 1862. The actual erection of permanent buildings was a slow process, as materials were salvaged and hauled by wagon from old Fort Lyon 45 miles to the west. The fort was formally commissioned on October 22, 1862.

On November 9, 1862, Carleton notified the War Department of the establishment of still another post, to be named Fort Sumner in honor of the old campaigner of the 1850's Edwin Vose Sumner. The fort was located 165 miles south of Santa Fe at a point on the east side of the Rio Pecos known as Bosque Redondo (Round Grove). This post would supervise Carleton's great prison encamp-

ment of the Navajos.

By the Spring of 1863 Fort Wingate was beginning to take shape. Four companies of the Fourth New Mexico Mounted Rifles and one company of California Volunteers, under the command of Lt. Colonel Jose Francisco Chavez, had taken up their quarters. In addition to these troops the garrison was further strengthened by Colonel Christopher "Kit" Carson's E, F, and H companies of the First New Mexico Volunteers.

Carleton was now ready to take the field against the Navajo. In his first movement, on July 28, 1863, he directed Carson to set up a basis of operation at the ruins of old Fort Defiance (renamed Fort Canby). He then sent word to all chiefs of The People that total war was to commence, and that all Navajos not wishing to engage in these hostilities could surrender at either Fort Wingate or Fort Canby. Some Indians, observing the strength building of the "white man," and the proclamation of a vigorous war, began surrendering in small groups. By fall the count was 180 tribesmen, a figure quite short of Carleton's idea of total suppression.

In mid-October, 1863, Carleton released the full fury of his "Indian Policy." He undertook a chastisement the likes of which the Indians had never dreamed. Carson's troops pursued them night and day, week after week; over mesas and deserts, under boiling suns and through drifts of





FIGURE 6.

Guard Mount at Fort Wingate. Early 1890's.

*Photo Courtesy: National Archives.*

winter snows. The military pursuit included the ruthless destruction of planting fields, grain storages, the burning of hogans and orchards, and the wanton slaughter of sheep and cattle. By the end of 1863 the Navajos found themselves in a desperate state. To worsen matters they lay in the grip of a severe winter faced with complete extermination, not only by the saber but from exposure and hunger. On January 12, 1864, Carson delivered the final blow by attacking their only remaining stronghold—Canyon de Chelly. There, huddled together, demoralized, too weak to resist, the once great Lords of The Canyonlands submitted to the will of the white man.

#### BOSQUE REDONDO: 1864-1868

On March 4, 1864, more than two thousand Navajos filed out of Fort Canby and began the infamous trek to Fort Sumner that is known in history today as the "Long Walk," a 350-mile journey to the Rio Pecos. The "Long Walk" soon became a stream of ragged humanity that continued throughout 1864. The moccasined pathway was plainly marked by the remains of hundreds of Indians who crawled to the wayside to die a lingering death through dysentery and exposure.

Carleton had envisioned his 40 square-mile reservation

to be self-supporting, but the 6,000 acres set aside for tilling were found to be impregnated with alkali and as a consequence the yield of crops was low. By the beginning of 1865 the population had grown in excess of 9,000 and included some 400 renegade Apaches sent over from Fort Stanton. The large population, coupled with the first years crop failure, began to tax the Army's Quartermaster in its quest for food.

From the beginning, the troubles at Bosque Redondo were compounded by dissention and natural disorders. Conflicts broke out between Navajos and Apaches, Indian agents and the military, and between civil authorities and the military. Inadequate food and clothing was a prime cause of disorder. The confined were undernourished and plagued by disease. The brackish water from the river resulted in mass dysentery. Desertions and "runaways" were frequent. Added to this, the prisoners in unprotected sectors became the targets of bands of Comanches and Kiowas who roamed the vast Llano Estacado.

Bosque Redondo became nothing more than a huge concentration camp without regard to the preservation of human life. It soon fell under attack by civic leaders of the territory who demanded a complete investigation of conditions. The shameful disgrace of the encampment reflected on the people of the Territory and aroused political feelings





FIGURE 7.

This rare photograph shows the partial destruction of the fort during the Great Fire on July 2, 1896.

*Photo Courtesy: National Archives.*

to the point where candidates and parties were labeled either "pro"-Bosque or "anti"-Bosque. Editorials were demanding the resignation of General Carleton.

The plight of the Navajos began attracting national attention that could no longer be ignored. On March 3, 1865, a Joint Special Committee composed of members of both houses of Congress was appointed to investigate conditions along the Rio Pecos. The committee, headed by chairman, James R. Doolittle of Wisconsin, personally inspected Bosque Redondo during the month of July. Their findings resulted in a report which recommended that the care of the Indians be transferred from military control to one of civil authority, namely, the Department of the Interior.

Charges and countercharges were hurled in both directions over the report. In early 1866, the Territorial Assembly in Santa Fe joined the controversy by publicly condemning Carleton's "Indian Policy." They adopted a resolution which was personally forwarded to President Andrew Johnson, urging the removal of the Department Commander.

After much debate, the government slowly began to grind out a solution. Finally, on September 19, 1866, the first steps were taken. General James H. Carleton was relieved as Department Commander of New Mexico and replaced by General G. W. Getty. On December 31st the control of the Indians was assigned to a Commissioner of Indian Affairs under the Department of Interior. The military was instructed to give assistance in Indian problems only when requested by the Commissioner.

The Secretary of Interior and the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, with the authority delegated by Congress, entertained the proposition of returning the Navajo to their homeland. The Interior Department appointed a committee to survey the resources of their original reservation in hopes of re-locating them on their native soil. When all reports were favorably accepted, a Peace Commission, headed by Lt. General William Tecumseh Sherman, was selected to negotiate a Navajo treaty. Sherman arrived at Fort Sumner on May 28, 1867. Three days later a treaty was drafted which was accepted by the dejected and homesick Indians. They were now allowed to reverse the "Long Walk." At sunrise, on the morning of June 18, 1868, a column of Indians which reportedly stretched for 10 miles, began the return to their beloved redrocks.

#### FORT WINGATE II: 1868-1918

With the transfer of the Navajos back to western New Mexico, it was felt that Fort Wingate was too far removed from areas of re-settlement to assist adequately in their supervision. General Getty explored the possibility of re-establishing the garrison further to the west. Fort Canby, which was abandoned after the "Navajo Roundup" (October 8, 1864), would have been the ideal relocation. The post, however, was in a state of complete ruin. Furthermore, being located 35 miles north of the main east-west road, it would have been economically unfeasible for the receiving and distribution of supplies. General Getty de-



cided, therefore, that the median point lay at Bear Springs, and subsequently ordered the reactivation of Fort Lyon (old Fort Fauntleroy), but calling it "Fort Wingate." Getty clarified the naming by issuing a general order stating that the stockade remains at Ojo del Gallo would henceforth be known as "old" Fort Wingate.

After 1868 Fort Wingate entered into an era of routine garrison life. Primary duties consisted of patrols, military surveys, and escort functions. The fort also served as a headquarters and outfitting center for southwestern ethnological and archaeological expeditions.

On February 18, 1870, President Ulysses S. Grant declared a 100-square mile military reservation to accompany the site of the fort. On March 26, 1881, the War Department approved an additional 30-square miles to the south. This later tract, which now lies in the reserve of the Zuni National Forest, was added to provide firewood and building materials for the fort.

Most of the early buildings at the fort were constructed of adobe and lumber cut and milled from prime timber found in the nearby forests. Later construction was mostly of sandstone, also a locally abundant commodity. In 1896 the wooden buildings provided the fuel for a disastrous fire that swept through the fort on July 2.

Fort Wingate was deactivated on February 4, 1911, and placed in charge of a caretaker.

For a short period during 1914-15 the fort served as a detention center for 4,000 Mexican Federalist troops and their families who had fled the Pancho Villa Uprising. The Mexicans were the remnants of an army that were routed and chased across the border at Marfa, Texas. Their leaders requested asylum in the United States. Fearing there might be rebel loyalists among the group, the army moved them away from the border at El Paso and transferred them to Fort Wingate. The Mexicans were billeted in tents on the flat valley below the fort. The camping area was surrounded by barbed wire in an effort to hold the refugees until the Mexican rebellion was put down. Infantry troops from Fort Bliss were housed in the deserted barracks of the fort and provided the guard for the foreign cantonment.

#### LATER YEARS: 1918-1967

The Ordnance Department took command of the military reservation in 1918 as a storage area for excess munitions and high explosives being returned from Europe after World War I. Magazines and revetments were constructed two miles west of the old fort. Between 1918 and 1920 the compound became the largest storage depot of munitions in the world. In 1921 additional magazines were constructed along with barracks and administration buildings. The post was designated Wingate Ordnance Reserve Depot.

In 1925 the grounds containing the old fort were transferred to the Bureau of Indian Affairs for utilization as a boarding school for Zuni and Navajo children. The barracks buildings were used as classrooms and dormitories. Officers Row provided homes for federally staffed per-

sonnel. The old parade ground was converted into a baseball field.

Other than the general outline of the fort, there is little to remind today's visitor of the old cavalry activities. Nearly all of the pre-1900 structures were destroyed by the fire of 1896. Portions of Officers Row remained intact up until 1958 when they were razed to make room for additional dormitories. The oldest remaining building constructed for army use was built in 1906 for a post exchange and recreation hall. It has now been converted into a boys dormitory called "The Hogan."

A short distance to the northwest of the fort stands the newly constructed Fort Wingate Senior High School. Completed in 1965, at a cost of six million dollars, the modern campus-style school boards and educates nearly one thousand Indian students on the secondary level.

#### EPILOGUE

Great and colorful names are always associated with the development of frontiers. Fort Wingate certainly had its share with the register of "Kit" Carson, J. Francisco Chavez, and Ben Wingate. Other notables who served at the fort included General Samuel T. Cushing, Washington Matthews (who later became Surgeon General of the United States), and Captain Henry R. Selden. John J. Pershing was stationed at the post as a 2nd Lieutenant during the years 1889-90. Major F. E. Pershing, a nephew to "Black Jack," served at the Ordnance Depot in 1942. Douglas MacArthur lived at the fort as an infant while his father, Maj. Arthur MacArthur commanded the 13th Infantry in 1881-82.

Such is the history of the evolution of the fort to its present location. From its infancy at Seboyeta, through ancestors called Fauntleroy, Lyon, and Canby, the name "Fort Wingate" still stands—majestically as the "red-rocks" which face it.

On a high knoll overlooking the fort from the south stands a large arch. The inscription reads in part: —DEDICATED TO THE PROUD HISTORY OF FORT WINGATE AND TO THE HORSE SOLDIERS WHO SERVED HERE. TO THE INDIAN PEOPLE WHO WATCHED THEM COME—FIRST IN DOUBT, THEN IN FRIENDSHIP. "IN BEAUTY IT IS FINISHED—from the Navajo."

#### REFERENCES CITED

- Adjutant General's Office, *Chronology Report of Fort Wingate, N.M.*, National Archives, Record Group No. 94, Washington, D.C., 1930.
- Bailey, L. R., *The Long Walk*: Los Angeles, Westernlore Press, 1964.
- Higgins, E. W., *The Bear Springs Story* (unpublished), Fort Wingate Army Depot, Gallup, 1964.
- Horn & Wallace (ed.), *Union Army Operations in The Southwest*: Albuquerque, Horn & Wallace, 1961.
- Hughes, J. T., *Doniphan's Expedition*: Chicago, Rio Grande Press, 1962.
- Twitchell, R. E., *Leading Facts of New Mexico History*: Albuquerque, Horn & Wallace, 1963.