



“General William Sherman was right. We should have another war with Old Mexico to make her take back New Mexico. I did not believe anything could make me think well of Santa Fe, but this hideous spot, Fort Stanton, does.” Susan Wallace, in a letter quoted by historian Marc Simmons in his book *Stalking Billy the Kid*.

FIRST IN A NEW SERIES ON NEW MEXICO'S STATE MONUMENTS

Fort Stanton

Challenge and Conflict on the New Mexico Frontier

By Lynda A. Sánchez

The wind rustles the golden leaves of old cottonwoods along the Río Bonito. One can almost hear bugles and hoof beats in the distance, ghost riders traversing the valley toward Sierra Blanca, the sacred mountain of the Mescalero Apaches. Twenty-first-century visitors to Fort Stanton will likely pity Susan Wallace, an unwilling exile from the East unable to appreciate the beauties of this landscape, which remains largely unchanged from the days when she and her husband, Governor Lewis “Lew” Wallace, billeted at the fort.

From 1855 to 1898, during its years of military activity, Fort Stanton was important to many of New Mexico's major historical struggles. It was the home, the protector, or the scourge of many significant figures in New Mexico history: Governor and

Mrs. Wallace, Billy the Kid, Kit Carson (once commander of the fort), Rafael Chacón (the fort's first Hispanic commandant), the Buffalo Soldiers, and the Mescalero Apaches. If any of them were to return today to Fort Stanton or to the preserved frontier town of Lincoln nearby, much would be familiar.

Through the advocacy of dedicated citizens nationwide, and particularly the residents, history buffs, authors, preservationists, and public leaders of Lincoln County, Fort Stanton and its surroundings are protected. Governor Bill Richardson proclaimed Fort Stanton a New Mexico State Monument in 2007, noting that it is the “only intact New Mexico fort originally built before the Civil War, and . . . one of the Southwest's most significant and best preserved” forts.

Left: Troops H and D, 6th U.S. Cavalry, and Troops E and I, 13th U.S. Infantry, on dress parade at Fort Stanton, 1885. Courtesy of the Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Neg. No. 77640.

Right: The Officers' Quarters on the Fort Stanton quadrangle. In 1896, a young John J. ("Black Jack") Pershing lived here. Pershing later became Commanding General of the American Expeditionary Forces in Europe during World War I. Photograph by David L. Tremblay.

Framed by towering mountains and lush with meadows of blue grama grass, this relic of the cavalry era covers 240 acres and is surrounded by over 25,000 acres of Bureau of Land Management property. The fort comprises a green quadrangle and parade ground surrounded by stately buildings: officers' quarters with elegant Victorian façades, substantial administration buildings, an imposing hospital, the 1877 commandant's home, a charming 1930s stone chapel, and the 1939 Pueblo Revival Nurses' Quarters. Behind the official buildings are the structures that supported life at this frontier outpost: cavalry stables, silos, and barns. Fort Stanton is so intact, so rich in historic structures and open expanses, that visitors can easily imagine a time when legendary figures walked its grounds.

Fort Stanton's story begins with the Mescalero Apaches, so named by the Spanish for their use of the mescal plant as a major food source. Mescalero Apache tradition holds that the tribe was born on Sierra Blanca. From the arrival of the Spanish conquistadores through the eras of Spanish control, Mexican independence, and Anglo pioneers flooding into their homeland, the Mescalero Apache people fought to protect their territory. By the early 1850s, Hispanic families, mostly sheepherders and small agriculturalists, began moving into *placitas*, or villages, along the river valleys in Lincoln County. The Río Bonito region was rich with fish, game, grazing land, and fertile soil. To protect themselves from Indian attacks, the settlers built *torreones*, or two-story defensive shelters, like one that stands today in the town of Lincoln. In May 1855 the US Army established Fort Stanton to protect settlers from attacks by Indians, rustlers, outlaws, and marauders. The fort was named for Captain Henry Whiting Stanton, who was killed in a battle with Mescalero Apaches near Mayhill, New Mexico, on January 19, 1855.

Building the fort was a challenge: the roads were poor, and there were shortages of tools, work animals, tradesmen, and supplies. Adobe was the original building material; however, it proved too brittle, and the adobe bricks were replaced with stone—a decision that contributed to the stability and endurance of the fort. Hundreds of trees were planted to soften the surrounding environment and provide shade from the scorching New Mexico sun.



Visiting Fort Stanton

Fort Stanton's new museum, originally the Junior Officers' Quarters, is open and free to visitors Monday and Thursday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.; and Sunday, noon to 4 p.m. Fort Stanton restoration is ongoing, and many historic buildings can be appreciated only from outside. For tours and information about special events, call 575-336-1436 or visit www.fortstanton.com. A trip to Fort Stanton State Monument is easily combined with a trip to nearby Lincoln State Monument, open seven days a week, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. (closed some holidays). For more details, visit www.nmmonuments.org or call 575-653-4372. The Bosque Redondo Memorial at Fort Sumner also tells an important piece of the Fort Stanton story; see www.nmmonuments.org or call 575-355-2573.

While it protected the settlers, Fort Stanton also provided a major market for goods and services, and added to the prosperity of the region. Census figures from 1860 list 257 residents along Río Bonito, most of Hispanic origin. The census reports a population pursuing a variety of occupations: one musician, two teamsters, two carpenters, two millers, a blacksmith, and many herders working on small farms and ranches. Local farmers sold grain, hay, and produce to the fort.

Life was a struggle at this isolated frontier post. The few women who came to live there did not last long. Lydia Spencer Lane, the wife of Lieutenant William Lane, wrote a book about her experiences as an officer's wife, *I Married a Soldier*, published in 1858. She reveals her loneliness and alienation on the frontier: "Fort Stanton was a beautiful post, with the best quarters in the army at that time, but it was like being buried alive to stay there. Nothing ever passed that way, and it was seldom a stranger came upon us. There was but one mail a month. The Mescalero Apaches were in camp that winter near the post, and came and went as they pleased, walking into our houses and



Two non-commissioned officers of the 3rd U.S. Infantry at Fort Stanton, ca. 1886-90.
Photograph by Sgt. Charles Harvey. Courtesy of the Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Neg. No. 11654.

sitting on our porches without the least hesitation. . . . I never could become adjusted to the Indians staring at me through the window when I was sewing or reading.”

During the Civil War, as Confederate troops invaded southern New Mexico from Texas, the Union Army set fire to Fort Stanton before abandoning it. The Union’s scuttling plans were foiled by heavy monsoon rains, which extinguished the fires and left the fort open to a brief occupation by Confederate troops in the summer of 1861. After skirmishes with the Mescalero Apaches, the Confederate troops, too, abandoned the fort. It was reclaimed by the Union, and Kit Carson arrived in 1862 to take over command. He soon received orders from General James Carleton to kill “all [Mescalero] men . . . when-

ever and wherever” they could be found. Women and children were to be taken prisoner and held at Fort Stanton until Carson received other instructions.

By December 1862, the Mescalero Apache leader Cadette, along with several other leaders, sued for peace. Many of his tribe headed to Fort Stanton and camped nearby, where they were fed and protected by Carson until Carleton ordered them to be moved to Bosque Redondo. Eventually about 475 Mescalero Apaches and thousands of Navajos were forced to live together along the muddy and sluggish Pecos River near Fort Sumner. (The tragedy of their forced march and imprisonment at Bosque Redondo is recounted at the Bosque Redondo Memorial at Fort Sumner State Monument.)

Duel at Fort Stanton

The duel between John Whitlock and James Graydon exemplifies the turbulent times at Fort Stanton. This episode reveals how diverse opinions were, even among military men, on what constituted fair treatment of the Mescalero Apaches.

When Brigadier General James Carleton assumed command of New Mexico Territory, he determined to reestablish command of the forts that had been abandoned to the Confederacy and pursue the Apaches and Navajos. He wrote in September 1862, "To punish and control the Mescalero, I have ordered Fort Stanton to be re-occupied. That post is in the heart of their country, and hitherto when troops occupied it, those Indians were at peace. I have sent Colonel Christopher Carson with five companies of his regiment of New Mexico volunteers to Fort Stanton."

Under escort, Company K was to bring supplies needed to rebuild the fort. That escort was led by Captain James (Paddy) Graydon and his Independent Spy Company. Paddy Graydon was one of the most colorful, hardnosed, and controversial characters of the Civil War era in New Mexico. He had emigrated from Ireland to the United States in 1853 and enlisted in the 1st US Dragoons. He headed west and had numerous clashes with Apache Indians in Arizona, where he obtained an honorable discharge. After the Civil War began, he reenlisted in the newly organized New Mexico Volunteers, where his experience with frontier fighting was welcome.

Marching toward Fort Stanton in October 1862, Graydon's troops encountered a band of Mescalero Apaches near Carrizozo/Corona in the Gallinas Mountains (some historians, however, believe the incident occurred at Gallinas Springs). According to Graydon, the Mescalero Apaches demanded liquor and became angry and resentful when they were refused. Other accounts claim that Graydon and his band gave the Mescalero Apaches liquor and then systematically shot them. Graydon was known to have little sympathy for the Mescalero Apaches. He fired one shot and killed their leader, Manuelito (not the famous Navajo chief of the same name).

A few days later, army surgeon John Whitlock arrived at the fort to visit his friend Kit Carson. In a 1923 interview published in the *Capitán Mountaineer* newspaper, George Kimbrell, who later became a judge, gave an account of the events he had witnessed as a young army scout.



The Old Cavalry Cemetery at Fort Stanton. Capt. James "Paddy" Graydon was buried here, and later reinterred in Santa Fe. Photograph by David L. Tremblay.

Doctor Whitlock, the Regimental Surgeon and several others were in the Sutler's tent engaged at a game of cards. Dr. Whitlock there made some very severe criticisms concerning Captain Graden's [sic] conduct in killing the sixteen Indians at the meeting in the Gallina Mountains. One of Captain Graden's men was sitting in the tent at the time. He said nothing, but walked out and went directly to the Captain's tent and told him what the Doctor had said. A few minutes afterwards a paper was handed to Dr. Whitlock and on reading its contents, he wrote on the bottom of the paper, "Accepted." . . .

The duel immediately took place, the running gears of a wagon standing between the two men. Graydon and Whitlock were both wounded. Following the duel about seventy-five of Graydon's soldiers attacked and killed Whitlock, and Graydon died three days later. Kimbrell's account notes,

Great excitement was created and Carson ordered Lieutenant Morris and the others who participated in the killing of Dr. Whitlock arrested and had them disarmed and marched out on the parade ground and ordered them shot. Several of the officers present told him that would not do; that he would be court marshaled for such a course. He [Carson] replied, "Let 'em court marshal and be damned." However, he finally yielded to their advice and revoked his order. Lieutenant Morris and one private soldier were court marshaled; the private was acquitted but Morris was found guilty and sentenced to be shot. The night before he was to be executed, he made his escape from prison and was never seen afterwards. -LAS

Fort Stanton's commander at the end of the Civil War, Rafael Chacón, was one of the few Hispanics to attain the rank of major. Chacón had commanded volunteer companies, including one at the battle of Valverde, fought Indians under Kit Carson, and escorted the first officials to the newly established territory of Arizona. As commandant, he hired civilians to repair the fort's old stone structures. The restoration pumped money into the local economy. Records show, for example, that local businessman Lawrence G. Murphy of L. G. Murphy & Co. was given a contract to supply 200,000 board feet of lumber. Murphy would later be one of the principal players in the violent Lincoln County Wars.

In 1873 a reservation was established for the Mescaleros in the heart of their homeland, with Sierra Blanca as part of their preserve. But that and the nationwide realization that the Indians' internment at Bosque Redondo was a cruel and colossal failure were not enough to convince some that the US government was repentant. On the periphery of Fort Stanton, the valiant Chiricahua Apache leader Geronimo and the Warm Springs Apache warrior Victorio remained suspicious of any-

thing offered by the military and continued their campaigns against the settlers.

The fort became even more dominant as the economic lifeline and defensive heart of the region. Rivalry over contracts to supply beef and other goods to the army eventually led to more chaos and violence. The Lincoln County War is remembered as one of the bloodiest and most corrupt passages in New Mexico history. By the summer of 1873, the merchants Murphy, Dolan and Company were expelled from Fort Stanton "because of their shady business practices with the Mescaleros and overcharging the government for rations supplied." Captain James F. Randlett wrote, "I consider that L. G. Murphy and Co.'s store is nothing more or less than a den of infamy, and recommend the removal of this firm from this reservation." In 1876, L. G. Murphy & Co. was challenged by a young lawyer and entrepreneur, Alexander McSween. When McSween's ally, John Tunstall, was murdered, and violence in Lincoln escalated, New Mexico Governor Samuel Axtell requested military intervention from Fort Stanton. Over the



Military re-enactors
at the annual Fort Stanton
Live celebration. Photograph by
David L. Tremblay.



Sgt. Wm Minser (left) and Sgt. Harvey play chess at Fort Stanton, ca.1886-90. Photographer unknown.

Courtesy of the Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Neg. No. 11655.

next several months conflicting orders and policies directed, suspended, and resumed military intervention in the civilian struggles in Lincoln. Colonel Nathan Dudley, the commander of Fort Stanton, and his troops were involved in the climactic struggle of the Lincoln County War when McSween's house was burned down and McSween was killed. A band of his supporters, including Billy the Kid, escaped from the burning house and crossed the Río Bonito to disappear into the hills. The county had turned into a bloody battleground, and the president of the United States sent a new governor, Lew Wallace, to New Mexico to establish order in Lincoln County. Eventually Wallace ended the Lincoln County Wars. Shortly after he departed, Victorio was killed by Mexican soldiers, and members of his band were imprisoned or captured. After Geronimo surrendered in 1886, orders came to deploy troops from Fort Stanton to other parts of the country. The cavalry

era lasted until 1896, when Fort Stanton gradually became part of the US Public Health Service, which fought another battle: conquering tuberculosis. Thanks to several accidents of history—the decision to build Fort Stanton of stone, and not adobe; the rains that put out the fires of the Civil War; and the fact that the government found uses for Fort Stanton into the twentieth century, the fort has endured. Today Lincoln County and Fort Stanton are peaceful, disrupted only by the thunder that comes with *la lluvia bendita del cielo*—blessed rain from the heavens—for all who live along the base of sacred Sierra Blanca. ■

Lynda A. Sánchez has lived in historic Lincoln for more than thirty years. Her books include *Eve Ball*, *Woman Among Men*, and *Fort Stanton: An Illustrated History*, with photography by David L. Tremblay. For an article by Charles Bennett on the Buffalo Soldiers, see www.elpalacio.org.