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FORT FILLMORE

By COLONEL M. L. CRIMMINS

ABOUT thirty-eight miles from El Paso, on the road to Las Cruces on Highway No. 80, we pass a sign on the railroad marked "Fort Fillmore." About a mile east of this point are the ruins of old Fort Fillmore, which at one time was an important strategical point on the Mexican border. In 1851, the troops were moved from Camp Concordia, now El Paso, and established at this point, and the fort was named after President Millard Fillmore. Fort Fillmore was about three miles southeast of Mesilla, which at that time was the largest town in the neighborhood, El Paso having only about thirty Americans and some two hundred Mexicans. The Rio Grande then ran between Mesilla and Fort Fillmore.

In 1854, while the then attorney general of the territory of New Mexico, Judge W. W. H. Davis, was visiting this section, he visited Fort Fillmore. He described it as a large and pleasant military post, built in the form of a square. The quarters of the officers formed one side, and the barracks of the enlisted men forming two sides, while the south side extended to the Rio Grande.¹ There were quarters for a battalion of infantry at this place. All the buildings were of adobe, and quite comfortable. A post garden furnished fresh vegetables for the troops, an item of maximum importance on account of scurvy. At that time

1. The river is now two miles west of its former position. The old river bed may still be seen in Mesilla Park and at other points.

the garrison was under the command of Major Electus Backus, and it was manned by three companies of the 3rd infantry.

Mrs. Lydia Spencer Lane was stationed at Fort Fillmore with her husband in 1860. Fort Fillmore was then run-down, and had a very small garrison under two lieutenants, and there was no doctor at the post. In case of medical attention being required, they sent to Fort Bliss, forty miles south, or to Fort Craig, eighty miles north, and a relay of mules was sent out to expedite the doctor's arrival. It took a month to get letters from the East, and the mail service was very poor, usually coming by way of Santa Fé, or by the Butterfield Stage Line from Tipton, Missouri, to El Paso. In the spring of 1861, the post was so weak that when troops were sent out on an Indian scout to Dog Canyon, ten miles south of Alamogordo, only one sergeant and ten privates were left in command of the post, and Mrs. Lane was put in charge of all the public funds. This particular scout was probably only a ruse of the confederates to weaken the garrison, so they might loot it. Colonel John Baylor was then gathering confederate troops at El Paso, Texas, to use for that purpose.

Toward the end of the winter of 1860, the probability of the Civil War was quite certain. The department commander at Santa Fe, aware of the weakness of Fort Fillmore and desiring to correct it, sent Major Gabriel Paul, with several companies of the 5th and 7th infantry and some mounted rifles, to take station there. Two doctors also were sent there, First Lieutenant Cooper McKee, and First Lieutenant Charles H. Alden. Major Paul being appointed colonel of the 4th New Mexico infantry (Dec. 9, 1861), he was succeeded by Major Isaac Lynde.

That spring a cloudburst in the Organ Mountains, fifteen miles to the east, flooded out the officers' quarters.

Many of the army officers in the West at that time were southerners, some of whom resigned, passing through Fort Fillmore on their way to Texas and other southern

states. Among them were Colonel John B. Grayson, 2nd artillery; Colonel William W. Loring, mounted rifles; Captain Cadmus M. Wilcox, 7th infantry; First Lieutenant Lawrence S. Baker, mounted rifles; Major Henry Hopkins Sibley, first dragoons; Lieutenant-Colonel George B. Crittenden, mounted rifles, General Albert Sidney Johnston, lately in command of the department of Utah, and Second Lieutenant Joseph Wheeler, who was to take such an important part in the Civil War as a great confederate cavalry leader.

Loring had been in command of the department of New Mexico, and resigned on May 13, 1861, but he still remained in New Mexico in the interest of the confederacy. Major Sibley resigned at that time, and sent the following letter to Colonel Loring from El Paso.

Hart's Mill, June 12th, 1861.

Colonel W. W. Loring:

We are now at last under the glorious banner of the Confederate States of America. . .

We shall have no trouble in reaching San Antonio. Four companies of Texas troops have been ordered to garrison this Post [Fort Bliss]. Meanwhile Colonel Magoffin, Judge Hart and Crosby are very much exercised and concerned on account of the public stores here in their present unguarded condition.

Meanwhile you may, by delaying your departure [from New Mexico] a week or two, add much to the security of this property. . .

I regret now, more than ever, the sickly sentimentality by which I was overruled in my desire of bringing my whole command with me from New Mexico. . . . I wish I had my part to play over again. . .

Should you be relieved of your command too soon to prevent an attempt on the part of your successor to recapture the property here, send a notice by extraordinary express to Judge Hart. Your seat in the stage to San Antonio may be engaged. . .

Faithfully yours,

H. H. SIBLEY.

All the troops of Texas with their supplies and equipment and funds had been surrendered to the Texans by General David E. Twiggs, on February 18, 1861, so conditions were getting very serious.

Major Lynde had been repeatedly warned that the confederates might take Fort Fillmore, but he took no steps to fortify it. Some of his junior officers suggested to him how he might make it more defensible, but he always turned a deaf ear to all advice. On June 27, 1861, First Lieutenant William B. Lane, Second Lieutenant Christopher H. McNally, and First Lieutenant Edward P. Cressy, with seventy men of the mounted rifles, rode toward Fort Bliss to investigate the report of the approach of four hundred confederates, with orders to attack them if they were met, but they were not encountered. About the end of June, the post herd was stampeded by the confederates and forty-one of their horses were stolen. As they could not be replaced locally, forty-one men of the mounted riflemen were dismounted.

Affairs looked so bad, about the middle of July, that Lieutenant Lane was sent to Fort Craig with a wagon train of surplus supplies, so as to keep them from falling into the hands of the confederates, in case Fort Fillmore should be abandoned. He left July 24, 1861, with an escort consisting of the dismounted "mounted rifles" riding on his wagons. A short time after starting, the wagon master insisted on halting to rest the mules before starting the night drive across the Jornada del Muerto, of over eighty miles without water. It was evidently his intention to have the wagon train captured by the confederates, who were then marching toward Fort Fillmore.

About nine o'clock that night, the sound of galloping horses was heard, and Doctor Steck, the Indian agent, and a strong union man, arrived and warned Lieutenant Lane that two hundred and fifty mounted Texans were leaving the lower valley, en route to capture the wagon train. It was first planned to corral the wagons, and use sacks of

flour and bacon for fortifications, and put the women and children inside. It was then remembered that Captain Alfred Gibbs, mounted rifles, was on his way to Fort Fillmore with a military escort, guarding beef cattle for that post, and was due next morning at the "Point of Rocks" on the Jornada del Muerto. A messenger was sent to him, telling him of the plan of attack of the confederates, and asking for reinforcements. Lieutenant Lane then decided to push on toward Captain Gibbs, with all possible speed, and so ordered the wagon master. By one a. m. the mules began to give out and a halt was ordered, and shortly after, Captain Gibbs and his escort joined them.

Notwithstanding the rumors of the movements of the confederates, no precautions were taken by Major Lynde to defend Fort Fillmore. On the night of July 24, 1861, the garrison was sleeping peacefully, without taking any measures to guard against the enemy, consisting of four hundred Texans under Lieutenant-Colonel John Bell, who were encamped only six hundred yards away, ready to spring to arms for an attack at daylight. Luckily the confederate pickets had among them two former regular army soldiers, and they came in and warned the garrison of the plan of attack. A call to arms was sounded, the drums beat with "the long roll," and the command turned out.

The Texans then withdrew across the Rio Grande, into Mesilla, where they had many friends and sympathizers. That same day, July 25, about four or five hundred men of the garrison, under Major Lynde, marched on Mesilla, but did not make an attack. The adjutant demanded the unconditional surrender of the confederate forces and the town of Mesilla. The answer was, "if you wish the town, come and take it." The Texans fired a few shots, and killed and wounded some of the Union soldiers. Major Lynde then ordered a retreat to Fort Fillmore, where they arrived about ten p. m., crestfallen and indignant at the part they had been forced to play.

The next day, July 26, Major Lynde ordered a lot of public property destroyed, and preparations to be made to fall back on Fort Stanton, by way of San Augustine Pass and what is now Alamogordo, Tularosa, and Ruidoso. The Texans started in pursuit of the retreating troops on July 27.

When the post was abandoned, all available supplies were destroyed, and when they came to destroy the hospital whiskey, many of the men emptied their canteens of water, and filled them with whiskey. The consequences may be imagined. After marching twenty miles, and no water being available, the soldiers were overtaken by the Texans, and they surrendered unconditionally, without firing a gun. No sooner had the surrender been accomplished than the same officers who were responsible for bringing it about, by their indifference, sympathy or treachery, now united in charging the whole responsibility upon weak, old Major Lynde. Major Lynde was, on Nov. 25, 1861, dropped from the rolls of the army for this surrender, but he was reinstated as of July 28, 1866, and was regularly retired on Nov. 27, 1866. Of the officers who were with him, some joined the confederates, and others were placed on non-combatant duty, such as recruiting and the quartermaster service. On July 28, the Texans marched their prisoners to Las Cruces and encamped there. They were later paroled and ordered to Fort Union, New Mexico, en route to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

The disgraceful surrender at San Augustine Pass probably was part of the plan of our treacherous secretary of war, John Floyd, and of our equally treacherous adjutant general, Samuel Mason Cooper, who had taken care to place confederate sympathizers in posts of importance in New Mexico. The soldiers of the regular army were, nearly without exception, faithful to their nation. Had there been any officer like Roosevelt or Funston present, who was not afraid to assume authority, instead of a disgraceful surrender we might have won a victory.

Fort Fillmore was never reoccupied by either confederate or union forces. The confederate invasion of New Mexico swept northward, past Fort Craig to Socorro, Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and in the spring of 1862 it was well on its way to attack the union forces which had mobilized at Fort Union. But at Glorieta Pass, late in March, the confederates were checked and forced to retreat. The union forces trailed them back down the Rio Grande and, with the arrival of the troops from California during the summer, the Mesilla valley and western Texas were again held by the federals.

Today, the crumbling adobe walls of old Fort Fillmore stand only as a mute reminder of an inglorious episode of the Civil War. Such honor as should be given it belongs rather to the decade from 1851 to 1861 when it served as a frontier post for the control of marauding Indians; but the records of those years seem to have been lost, perhaps at the time when the fort was evacuated.²

SOURCES USED BY THE WRITER

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Lane, Lydia Spencer: *I Married a Soldier*.
Davis, W. W. H.: *El Gringo*.
Cooper, Maj. James, U. S. Med. C.: *Narrative of the Surrender of a Command of United States Forces at Fort Fillmore, N. Mex., July 28, 1861*.
Mills, W. W.: *Forty Years at El Paso*.

2. According to Lynde's own report, as quoted by Twitchell, *Leading Facts of New Mexico History*, II, 365, the fort was evacuated at one o'clock A. M. of July 27th. Perhaps this explains the curious fact that the flag was left floating over the walls. In the disorder of those midnight hours, the very flag was forgotten. As related by A. J. Fountain, Sr., of Mesilla, it was noticed the next morning by a veteran of the Mexican War who lived in that neighborhood, and he went and took it down. At the time of his death, he gave it to Mr. Fountain's father, from whom it passed to the present owner. Mr. Fountain wishes to retain the flag during his own lifetime, but he feels that it should eventually be placed in the State Museum in Santa Fe.—*Editor*.