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FORT WEBSTER ON THE MIMBRES RIVER

LEE MYERS

OF THE SEVERAL frontier military installations established to combat the Apache menace in southwestern New Mexico, Fort Webster was the first.¹ It was the only one of the group to occupy two different locations, the first at the Copper Mines, the second on the Mimbres River. Until recently this last site has been lost to history.

The Copper Mines, now Santa Rita and the site of Kennecott Copper Corporation's huge open-pit copper mine, was in the heart of the range of Mangas Coloradas' band of fierce warriors, variously referred to as the Copper Mine, Warm Springs, Mimbres, and Gila Apaches. The history of the mining of this rich deposit of native copper includes more than one hundred and sixty years of operation under Spanish, Mexican, and American supervision and it was under almost constant harassment by the Apache until the late 1870's.²

In the first months of 1851 the International Boundary Commission, composed of representatives of the United States and Mexico and charged with surveying and mapping the boundary between the two countries in accordance with the 1848 Guadalupe-Hidalgo treaty, which ended the Mexican War, made Santa Rita their headquarters for several months.³ While there, the Commission and their 3rd Infantry escort occupied several of the old adobe buildings left by the Spanish and Mexican operators, including a triangular stronghold that had served the dual purpose of a fort against the Indians and a prison to confine the convict

labor from Chihuahua utilized as miners.⁴ Bartlett called his camp Cantonment Dawson.⁵

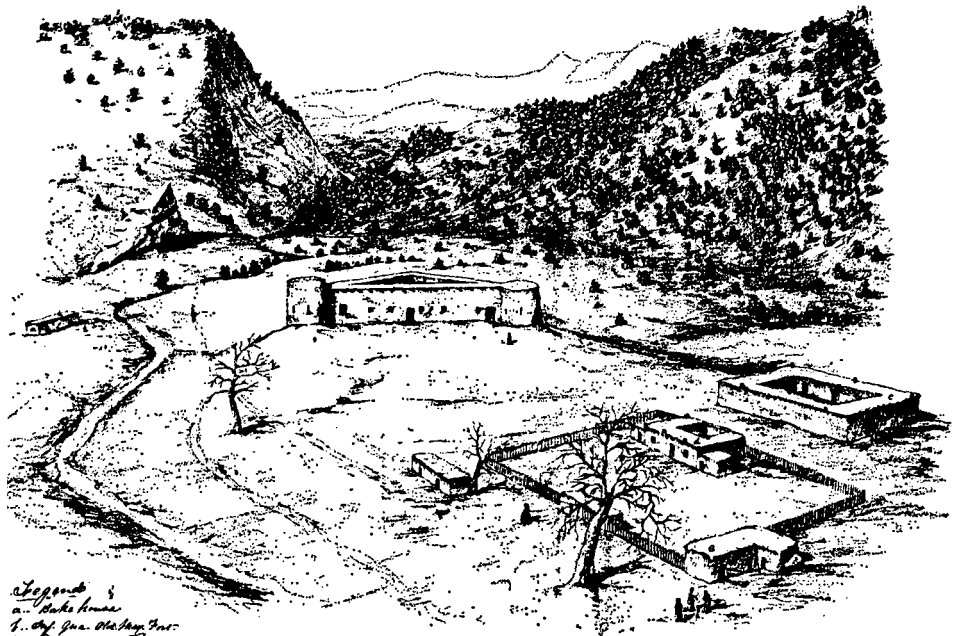
After several months' occupation, Cantonment Dawson was abandoned by the Boundary Commission;⁶ then, on January 23, 1852, Company K, 3rd United States Infantry, upon the recommendation of Brevet Major Enoch Steen, 1st Dragoons,⁷ reoccupied the site and named it Fort Webster in honor of Daniel Webster who was then United States Senator from Massachusetts.⁸

Steen recommended that the post should be garrisoned by troops who were then stationed at Doña Ana on the Rio Grande. The presence of these troops among the Apache, declared Steen, would have such a restraining effect upon the savages that peace would be secured without "resorting to that last extreme, the shedding of blood. . . ." In addition, said the Major, it would save the War Department fifteen thousand dollars per annum in rents, fuel, and grazing, the amount then being expended at Doña Ana for the maintenance of the dragoons and their horses.⁹

On September 9, 1852, Fort Webster was moved to the Mimbres River. Records of the move and of the second site differ about the direction and the number of miles from the Copper Mines. The reason for the move is not readily apparent without considerable study of the history of the time and place. The direction and distance has been variously given as east or northeast, and eight or fourteen miles. Colonel J. K. F. Mansfield, who inspected the post in 1853, gave the location as "latitude 33° on the Mimbres about 14 miles east of the Copper mines."¹⁰ The actual location is nearer 32° 49' north latitude.

Doctor William Carr Lane, who served as governor of the Territory of New Mexico in 1852-1853, was also empowered to act as Secretary of Indian Affairs for New Mexico. He believed that the cheapest and most effective peace with the Apache could be attained by feeding them. Accordingly, he negotiated a treaty with the Copper Mine band, agreeing to supply rations for five years to all who would settle upon and work farm lands of his choosing.¹¹ Upon the recommendation of Major Steen, who by now was in command at Fort Webster with a garrison of two com-

panies of dragoons and one of infantry,¹² farm lands were contracted for in the fertile Mimbres Valley adjacent to the new fort. This experiment apparently died aborning, for Washington failed to ratify the treaty and the food and other supplies that Lane had ordered were halted, and the disgruntled Indians returned to their former savage economy, dependent upon the warpath and raids on encroaching civilization.¹³



Legends
 a. - Snake House
 b. - Art. Gun. Battery
 c. - Drug. granary
 d. - Fort. Magazine
 e. - Barracks

by Lord & Ladlow
 5 July

Fort Webster, (Copper Mines, New Mexico) from the North East.

Drawn by Joseph Edward Maxwell, of Georgia, who entered the U.S. Military Academy in 1846; brevetted 2nd Lt. 3rd Infantry, July 1850; he was killed in a skirmish with the Apache near Fort Union, June 30, 1854. Heitman, *Historical Register*, vol. 1, p. 698.

On December 20, 1853, the second Fort Webster was abandoned and the garrison and stores moved to Fort Thorn, in the vicinity of present-day Hatch, New Mexico, victim of the defeat of Governor Lane's plan for peace and Apache refusal to be cowed by the appearance of troops in their midst.

Although Fort Webster, at its two sites, was not of major political or historical importance, it is entitled to recognition as the first military post established in southwestern New Mexico for the control of the Apache of that region. Today, with the revival of interest in western history, the question arises: where was Fort Webster located? The first site at the Copper Mines is reasonably well documented; the Mimbres River site is another matter.

It has been reported, but not officially and with no documentation, as having been located at the later site of Mowry City, on the lower Mimbres where the Butterfield Overland Mail and immigrant trails crossed that river. Army records and maps show that this location is impossible. Mansfield included a map of the post, the Mimbres River and the adjacent terrain in his detailed reports of 1853. In this map the contour of the surrounding region in no way coincides with that of the Mowry City area.¹⁴

In an effort to pin down the site of Fort Webster, several persons, including the writer, drove to the Mimbres Valley in October 1964. We were equipped with copies of two of Mansfield's maps¹⁵ and a working knowledge of the history of the post. One member, an avid history buff and mineral collector, was thoroughly familiar with the entire area. Several years before he had asked Juan Serna, long a resident of the valley, what had been the origin of a mound of earth alongside New Mexico State Road 61. Juan replied, "Old men told me it used to be a fort." This small mound, evidently man-made, was the starting point for the search.

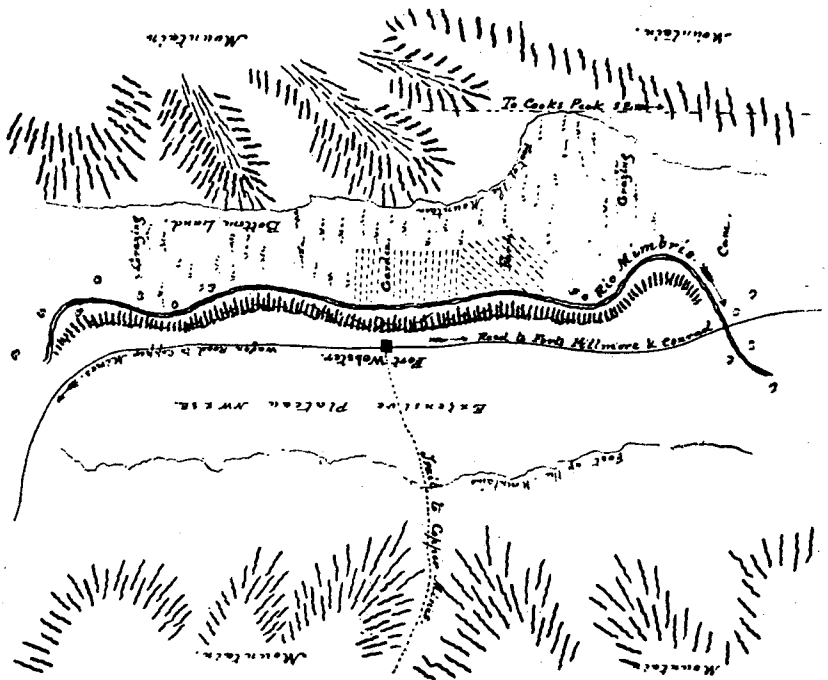
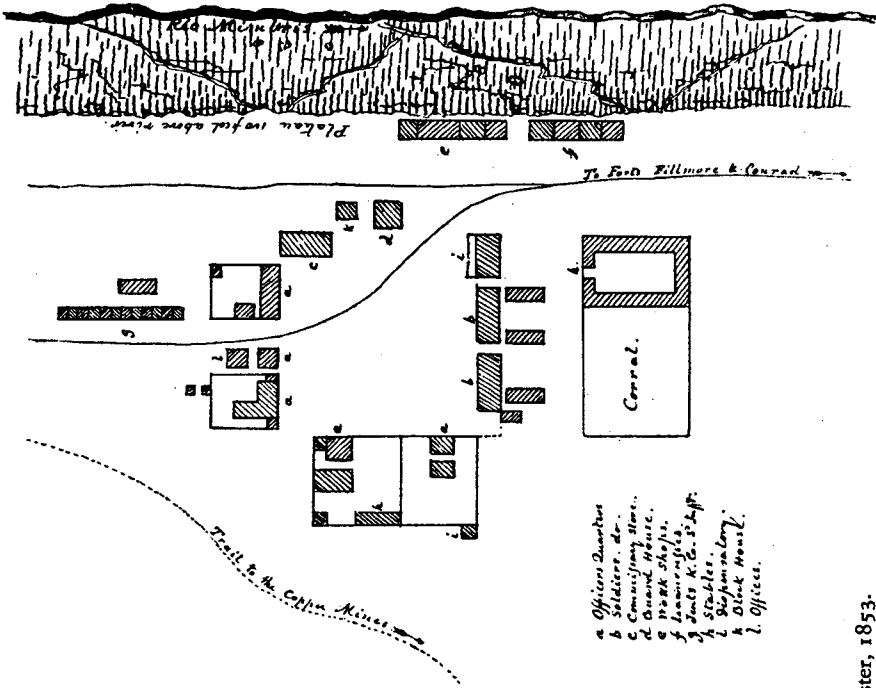
The factors considered, all set forth in the map, were the immediate terrain, hills on each side of the river, a bluff approximately one hundred feet high bordering the river on the west, the river itself, and level farm land in the river bottom, a road designated "Wagon Road to Copper Mines," and a trail designated "Trail to the Copper Mines."

The "Road to Copper Mines" ran in a direction opposite to that of the present highway. This we found explained by a map of the Military Department of New Mexico dated 1864,¹⁶ in which a road, coming west from the Rio Grande, did indeed run north and up the west side of Mimbres River, to turn left several miles beyond our site and, by way of Shingle Canyon, enter what is now Santa Rita from the north.

Today, Highway 180, going east, from Santa Rita to the Mimbres River, winds through a short but deep canyon bordering the river on the west, over a roadbed blasted entirely from the side of the canyon. Across the canyon one can see the remains of a narrow, tortuous wagon road, many years deserted. After exploring the valley for several miles north and south we concluded that this old wagon road must have been the "Trail to the Copper Mines."

When we asked Horace Bounds of the nearby village of San Lorenzo, the owner of the land where the mound of dirt was located, whether he had any knowledge of the old fort, he answered in the negative. Then he stated that he had once farmed a number of acres opposite our site and had experienced trouble with several large mounds of earth there. Finally, exasperated, he leveled them with a bulldozer and met more difficulty, for they each proved to conceal a core of stones foreign to the immediate area. The terrain matched that of the map so closely that we went back, after searching elsewhere for another possible site. There now remained just one piece of the puzzle missing. Approximately one mile south of the site, the Mimbres River bends to the east instead of to the west, as shown on the map. Then our local guide remembered tales of a flood of the river many years before, so great that the channel had been destroyed and a new one scoured out.¹⁷

We were now convinced that our site was indeed that of Fort Webster and we wondered where the old log and adobe buildings of Mansfield's description had stood. After more than one hundred years there are very few signs visible and none to prove conclusively our theory. A few pieces of broken pottery that may or may not have been of military origin, an occasional square nail and several sparse collections of stones of construction size, nothing



more. But on the positive side is the matching with the various features on the map and the fact that nowhere, north or south, can similar ones be found. The post had evidently stood astride what is now State 61, approximately a mile and a half north of Acklin's Store.

Since our 1964 expedition additional material has been found that, together with the map, establishes the site, with little or no chance for controversy. James Tevis, in his reminiscences of Arizona in the 1850's,¹⁸ describes a fight with the Apaches on the Mimbres several miles below our site. After the fight his forces, volunteer miners from Pinos Altos, started to return to their mines by way of what he termed "Copper Mine Pass." Although there is no longer such a name in the locality, it is evident that anyone traveling on foot, saddle animal or pack train in the 1850's could not have found a more direct route from the Mimbres Valley to the Copper Mines than the old wagon road opposite Acklin's Store. It is logical to suppose that during the pre-automobile development of the valley, the "Trail to the Copper Mines" was improved into a wagon road.

Moreover, orders written at Fort Cummings, New Mexico, on March 3, 1865,¹⁹ include this mention of Fort Webster:

Special Orders No. 11.

One Non-Commissioned Officer and two men of Co. "C," 1st Vet. Infty., C.V. [California Volunteers] will start tomorrow morning as an escort to a party of settlers now at this post, and will proceed with them to old Fort Webster on Rio Mimbres.

The escort will be rationed for 12 days and will carry forty cartridges to each man.

After having performed the duties herein mentioned the escort will return to this post without delay.

Geo. A. Burkett,
Capt. 1st. Vet. Infty. Cal. Vols.
Comdg.

Mowry City, actually the later site of Camp Mimbres, established there in 1863, was twenty miles west of Fort Cummings. It

is hardly likely that an escort party traveling to a place only twenty miles from Fort Cummings would require twelve days' rations.

Any remaining doubts relative to the true site of Fort Webster should be dispelled completely by a report submitted by Captain Joseph Smith, 5th Infantry, California Volunteers, to his superior, Captain William McCleave, on February 13th, 1863.²⁰ This report is also of interest for its account of the physical hardships undergone by the troops charged with the thankless job of defending that rugged frontier:

Pinos Altos, A.T.
Feb. 13th., 1863.

Captain,

Sir, I have the honor to report that according to your orders, I left this place on the morning of the 10th inst., with 50 men and four day's rations. We struck a north course from Pinos Altos, and crossed the Pinos Altos Mountains, west of the two high peaks that lay due north of here. We here got into such a rough country, that it was almost impossible to make any headway at all, the mountains being very high, and very deep cañons. The north side of these mountains is covered with snow from 4 to 5 feet deep, making very hard marching. We camped that evening in a deep cañon about 18 miles N.E. from the mines.

On the morning of the 11th, we started at daylight, and after ascending a very high mountain, struck an eastern direction, and marched over a fine rolling country, and came into the "aroyo," called by our guide "Cañada del Sapo." This is a small valley, about one half a mile wide. We marched down this valley about 9 miles, when it intersects the "Rio Mimbres." There is an old Indian trail up this valley, but we found no fresh tracks of either Indians or animals. We then marched about 10 miles down the Mimbres and stopped about 4 or 5 miles above Fort Webster, to let the men rest, and get supper. I found the Cavalry had been here, and, as I supposed, had cooked breakfast the same morning. I expected the Cavalry were at the old fort. While lying here I found some fresh Indian tracks, a short distance from camp, and also the tracks of the Cavalry, which led me to believe, that you had here come across a party, and were following them down to the river. We again packed up, and moved for the fort. About one mile from our camp, we found that the Indians

had left the river, and crossed the plain, for the west Mountains. The tracks were fresh, and appeared to be about 10 in number, but my men were too tired, to follow them, having then marched about 28 miles, and it was nearly dark. We got to the fort after dark, but found no Cavalry. On the morning of the 12th, after it was light, I sent some men over to the other side of the valley, and they found that the Cavalry had gone down the river. I then took *the lower trail for the Copper Mines, and got to that place, about one o'clock, P.M.* but found no Indians, or sign on the road through the mountains. . . . [italics mine]

After a careful analysis of the facts given in this report and a comparison of mileage, and elapsed time, in view of the facts that distances were then estimated, and that there is no other point on the Mimbres River where the terrain matches Mansfield's map—then the finger of certainty points to the Horace Bounds ranch site, one and one half miles north of Acklin's Store, as the location of old Fort Webster.

NOTES

1. There were eight sites: Fort Webster, two sites; Gila Depot; Fort McLane; Fort West; Camp Mimbres; Fort Cummings; Fort Bayard.
2. *This is Chino* (Kennecott Copper Corporation, Santa Rita and Hurley, N.M., privately printed).
3. John C. Cremony, *Life Among the Apaches* (New York, 1868), pp. 23-55; John Russell Bartlett, *Personal Narrative of Explorations and Incidents in Texas, New Mexico, California, Sonora, and Chihuahua*, 2 vols. (London and New York, 1854).
4. M. H. Thomlinson, "Forgotten Fort," *New Mexico Magazine* (Nov. 1945), pp. 14, 39, 41; Lee Myers, "Fort Torreons' a Puzzle," *The Southwesterner*, vol. 2, no. 5 (Nov. 1962), p. 6.

5. National Archives and Records Service to Lee Myers, Oct. 19, 1959; Thomlinson.
6. Cremony, p. 88; Myers, "Mangas Colorado Caused Fort Webster," *The Southwesterner*, vol. 2, no. 6 (Dec. 1962), p. 15.
7. "Steen, Enoch. Born in Kentucky; appointed to West Point from Missouri; 2nd Lieut. Mounted Rangers, 16 July, 1832; 2nd Lieut. 1st Dragoons, 19 Sept. 1833; 1st Lieut. 5 March, 1836; Capt. 31 Dec., 1840; Maj. 2nd Dragoons, 15 July, 1853; transferred to 1st Dragoons, 23 Oct. 1855; 1st Cavalry, 3rd Aug. 1861; Lt. Col. 2nd Cavalry, 28 Sept. 1861; retired 23 Sept. 1863; Brevetted Maj., 23 Feb. 1847 for gallant and meritorious conduct in the battle of Buena Vista, Mexico; died 22 Jan. 1880." Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army, 1789-1903*, 2 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1903), vol. 1, p. 919.
8. Office of Chief of Military History, Washington, D.C., to Lee Myers, Oct. 24, 1957.
9. Report of Major E. Steen, *Report of Secretary of War, 1850, Senate Executive Documents, 31st Congress, 2nd Session*, vol. 1, no. 1, parts 1-3, pp. 71-72.
10. Robert W. Frazier, ed., *Mansfield on the Condition of the Western Forts, 1853-1854* (Norman, 1963), p. 25.
11. Wm. G. B. Carson, ed., "William Carr Lane, Diary," NMHR, vol. 39 (1964), pp. 188, 190, 193-94; Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of Arizona and New Mexico, 1530-1888* (reprint edition, Albuquerque, 1962), pp. 662-64.
12. *Report of Sec. of War, 1853, Sen. Ex. Docs., 33rd Congress, 1st Session*, vol. 2, no. 1, pt. 2, pp. 120-21.
13. Bancroft, p. 669; Marjorie White, "Frontier Doctors Left Record of Achievement," *El Paso Times* (Sept. 5, 1965), p. 2.
14. Colonel Joseph K. F. Mansfield, Report of Inspection of the Department of New Mexico, 1853, National Archives, Appendices M and N.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Map of the Military Department of New Mexico, drawn under the direction of Brig. Gen. James H. Carleton, by Capt. Allen Anderson, 5th U.S. Infantry, 1864 (Albuquerque).
17. *Silver City Independent*, Sept. 2, 1902.
18. Captain James H. Tevis, *Arizona in the '50's* (Albuquerque, 1954), pp. 215-16.
19. Fort Cummings, N.M., Post Orders, 19 Oct. to 30 Nov. 1873, National Archives, Records group no. 98. Fort Cummings, established Oct. 2, 1863, by Captain Valentine Dresher and his Company B, 1st Infantry, California Volunteers, was located at Cook's Spring and the eastern entry to Cook's Canyon. Cook's Canyon was a favorite spot for ambushing

wagon trains and other travelers, east- or westbound, by Mangas Coloradas and his Copper Mine Apaches. The fast-disappearing adobe ruins are located twenty miles northeast of Deming, New Mexico.

20. Department of New Mexico, Fort McLane and Fort West, New Mexico, Letters Sent, 1863, National Archives, Records group 98. "McCleave, William. Born in Ireland; Pvt., Corpl., Sgt., and 1st Sgt., Company K, 1st Dragoons, 7 Oct. 1850 to 1 Oct. 1860; Capt. 1st California Cavalry, 23 Aug. 1861; Maj. 1 May 1863; Bvt. Lieut. Col. Volunteers, 13 Mar. 1865 for his successful pursuit of and gallantry in an engagement with Apache Indians; honorably mustered out 19 Oct. 1866; 2nd Lieut., 8th Cavalry, July 1866; 1st Lieut., 6 Mar. 1867; Capt. 10 Aug. 1869; retired 20 Mar. 1879." Heitman, p. 655.

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