



Fort Bascom: Soldiers, Comancheros, and Indians in the Canadian River Valley by James Bailey Blackshear.

Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2016. Pp. xiv, 258. ISBN 978-0-8061-5209-7.

Review by Douglas R. Cubbison, Wyoming Veterans' Memorial Museum (douglas.cubbison@wyo.gov).

Throughout the Indian Wars, the US Army erected scores of installations to safeguard the expanding frontier west of the Missouri River. Several were fairly large and featured in major campaigns. Today, they are either still active (e.g., Forts Leavenworth, Still, and Huachuca) or survive as National Historical Parks¹ (e.g., Forts Union, Laramie, and Larned). Yet for every famous fort, many smaller ones are all but forgotten. Most of these once vibrant installations have melted back into the alkaline soils of the West, as their adobe walls succumb to time and weather. Among them is Fort Bascom, built in the eastern New Mexico Territory to safeguard the region, including western Texas, against attacks by Comanches and other Southern Plains Indians.

In *Fort Bascom*, historian James Bailey Blackshear² (Collin College) has skillfully chronicled the life and times of this military base from 1863 to 1874. It typifies the numerous posts that played an integral part in securing the frontier and facilitating American manifest destiny in the nineteenth century.

Chapter 1, "An Awful Country," briefly describes the reasons for establishing the fort. After the abortive Texan invasion of the New Mexico Territory, the US military presence in the region consisted mostly of volunteer units, because the Regular Army garrisons had been recalled back east to fight in the Civil War. The Canadian River was one of the few lines of communication between Texas and New Mexico. Concerned that the river might also become a conduit for a future Confederate invasion, the US military³ constructed Fort Bascom to prevent this and to monitor the movements of hostile Comanches and Kiowas, thus affording New Mexican communities some level of security.

Chapter 2, "In the Shadow of Mesa Rica," concerns the environmental, geological, and topographical conditions of the Las Vegas Plateau and Llano Estacado along the Canadian River. Historians rarely trouble themselves with the geological epochs of the terrain over which soldiers had to operate. Blackshear is to be commended for his careful discussion of the environmental conditions that influenced military operations once Fort Bascom was in place. This is the least interesting chapter of the book, but is nevertheless integral to all that follows.

Using Fort Bascom as a microcosm, the author examines how the smaller Frontier Army posts were selected, sited, established, operated, and maintained. He is also sensitive to the various Indian, Hispanic, and Comanchero inhabitants of the region known as "Comanchería." He highlights the Comanche contributions, assesses their relationships with the soldiers garrisoning Fort Bascom, and emphasizes the Comanche economic influence (10–11, 27). In addition to the traditional military mission of the post, Fort Bascom was intended to halt the traditional wars between the various Indian nations

1. Operated by the National Park Service, Department of the Interior.

2. His previous book is *Honor and Defiance: A History of the Las Vegas Land Grant in New Mexico* (Santa Fe, NM: Sunstone Pr, 2013).

3. Specifically, famed frontier Army leader Brig. Gen. James H. Carleton, who remained closely associated with the fort through 1867.

that had devastated the area for decades (39). The first two chapters in particular provide a comprehensive and impartial analysis of the human environment that Fort Bascom operated in.

Chapter 3, “A Neat Little Post,” provides the background of the 1862 Confederate invasion of New Mexico. Blackshear explains how Fort Bascom’s strategic position secured the New Mexico Territory’s frontier against a Confederate resurgence.

Chapter 4, “This Bean-Bellied Army,” is a gripping, vivid account of the daunting challenges of living at the remote Fort Bascom. Water was often scarce and never easily accessible, frustrating any attempt to cultivate a fort garden. Barracks and other buildings habitually leaked. Lack of entertainment fostered alcohol abuse. Poor rations endangered the men’s health.⁴ Even candles to read and write home by were hard to get. Supplies of wood for cooking and heating and of salt to preserve meats were several day’s distant from the fort. Forage for the fort’s livestock was always in short supply. And even on the best of days the men at the fort were isolated and enduring brutal environmental conditions.

Chapter 5, “Hundreds of Days and Hundreds of Miles,” is devoted to the service of the New Mexico Volunteers at Fort Bascom.

During the post’s first three years, the volunteers played a major role in efforts to stop raids, return run-away Navajos to the Bosque Redondo [Reservation], and circumvent the illegal trade between the Comanches and Comancheros [Mexican traders]. Troopers spent untold hours in the saddle riding hundreds of miles in all directions to accomplish these tasks. Their patrols took them through much of New Mexico and the Texas Panhandle. (95)

Often averaging thirty miles a day in the saddle, the Volunteers worked hard at securing their territory. They supported General Carleton’s Canadian River Expedition of November–December 1864.

Chapter 6, “Between Comancheros and Comanchería,” introduces the post-Civil War Regular US Army era. The 57th US Colored Infantry regiment (later replaced by the 125th) took command of Fort Bascom in late August 1866. In November 1868, the fort was a base for one column of Maj. Gen. Philip Sheridan’s Winter Campaign. The Fort Bascom detachment played a crucial part by destroying the large Nokoni Comanche Village on the North Fork of the Red River (150–56), an action Blackshear maintains was as important as Custer’s destruction of Black Kettle’s Village on the Washita River (27 Nov. 1868)

In chapter 7, “Texas’s Northernmost Frontier Fort,” the author strengthens his argument that Fort Bascom was as significant in Texas’s history and heritage as in New Mexico’s.

Fort Bascom was closed in fall 1870 as a cost-cutting measure by Maj. Gen. John Pope, the new Commander of the Department of the Missouri. Pope had no insight into the military circumstances along the Canadian River. The foolishness of his ill-considered decision (made from two hundred miles away) was painfully obvious when it “led to the Indian Summer of the Comancheros of 1871” (165). The damages inflicted on Texans by Southwestern Plains Indians topped \$48,000,000 in 1872–73, not to mention the staggering loss of life and horrific human suffering in the Panhandle (169). Such were the consequences of predicating tactical and strategic decisions on purely financial considerations.

Col. John Irvin Gregg’s 8th Cavalry conducted extensive operations throughout the Llano Estacado in August and September 1872 (176–79), and the fort figured in the Red River War (1874) that at last quelled hostilities in the Canadian River Valley (184). With that threat removed, Fort Bascom ceased operations after 1875, returned to private hands, and eventually vanished from the landscape.

4. Blackshear erroneously states that “medical personnel [at the fort] were not quite sure what caused scurvy” (73). By the 1860s, scurvy was well understood and had been for decades. See Stephen R. Brown, *Scurvy: How a Surgeon, a Mariner, and a Gentleman Solved the Greatest Medical Mystery of the Age of Sail* (NY: Thomas Dunne, 2004).

In chapter 8, “More Than a Sign,” Blackshear presents a summation of his case for the importance of Fort Bascom’s legacy.

Isolated from its historical context, this remote outpost does not appear to warrant much attention, yet the hundreds of cavalry and infantry who served at Fort Bascom from 1863 to 1876 would beg to differ. What these soldiers did and how they did it shaped the Southwest, regardless of how little has been written about them.... The soldiers engaged in a gritty, slow process that seldom involved any grand or glorious bugle-led charges.... Perched on the edge of Comanchería, facing the Llano Estacado, located between the Comancheros and the Comanches, it played a significant role in gaining control of the Southern Plains Indians. (188–89)

This fine, meticulously researched⁵ study is well supported by maps and (inconvenient) endnotes; it is also liberally illustrated with contemporary drawings and photographs, including historic views of the installation. My only criticism, which is more a reflection of personal taste and interpretive style, is that Blackshear’s writing style is less than ebullient. Rather, the book is written in a dry and tepid prose. Readers used to popular histories more than scholarly works may well discover themselves plodding with difficulty through *Fort Bascom’s* pages.

James Blackshear’s final sentence stands testimony to the scores of isolated, remote minor US Army installations that secured frontier areas west of the Missouri River for American manifest destiny: “All that remains is a sign along Highway 104, about eleven miles north of Tukumcari. It deserves better” (196).

5. In particular, Blackshear makes good use of such emerging scholarship as *Frontier Cavalry Trooper: The Letters of Private Eddie Matthews, 1869–1874*, ed. Douglas C. McChristian (Albuquerque: U New Mexico Pr, 2013).