

FIRST DRAFT



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The Cantonment on the Uncompahgre as it appeared in 1886, just before it was named Fort Crawford.

# Cantonment on the Uncompahgre served Western Slope for a decade

After the White River Ute uprising of 1879, but before most of Colorado's Utes were forced onto reservations in Utah, settlers on the Western Slope were eager for U.S. Army protection.

The Cantonment on the Uncompahgre — later named Fort Crawford — provided that protection from 1880 until 1890.

During the first years the post operated, newspapers in Gunnison and Ouray pleaded for the Army to provide more troops at the cantonment to control the Utes if more conflict occurred.

When Gen. John Pope, commander of the Army in the Southwest, recommended closing the cantonment in 1882, "petitions poured in from settlers" to Colorado's governor and senator, and to the Secretary of War, "urging the retention of troops in Western Colorado," wrote Army Major John H. Nankivell, in a 1934 Colorado magazine article about Fort Crawford.

The petitions worked. The cantonment was officially recognized by President Chester Arthur as a permanent post in March 1884, and it became part of the community.

Troops at the fort participated in local dances and other social activities, and they fielded baseball teams to compete against the locals.

The post hospital often provided medical care for local citizens.

On one occasion, a Ouray newspaper reported, "Jesse L. Wheeler mashed his hand in the stone quarry near Ridgway Monday and went to Fort Crawford to have it amputated."

In December of 1886, the post was renamed Fort Crawford in honor of Capt. Emmet Crawford, a cavalry officer who had been killed earlier that year while chasing Geronimo's Apaches in Mexico.

The cantonment, at first just a collection of tents, was established in the summer of 1880, when Col. Ranald Mackenzie was sent from Fort Garland in the San Luis Valley to Uncompahgre Valley — with six cavalry companies and nine companies of infantry — to maintain peace while treaty negotiations with the Utes were underway.

One of the young officers in Mackenzie's command, Lt. James Parker, described entering the Uncompahgre Valley on May 31, 1880.

In total, there are several thousand soldiers "in our semi-permanent camps," he said.

Although that number sounds high, it is not out of line with the number of companies Mackenzie commanded.

That summer, Parker and the company of cavalry he commanded rode several hundred miles "marching and scouting" for signs of Ute hostility.

One trip took them north to the Grand (now Colorado) River, east along the Grand toward where Parachute is today, then onto Grand Mesa, "thence through Leon Park and Surface Creek" and back to the Uncompahgre Valley, Parker wrote.

While camped along the Grand River, he said, "we used fire stones for fuel — the shale was so impregnated with oil that it burned regularly."

Parker's company and most of the troops left the Uncompahgre Valley in October 1880 because peace terms had been accepted by the Utes. A small contingent of the 23rd infantry remained at the cantonment.

During the winter of 1880-81, those infantry soldiers began constructing log buildings at the post. But surviving that winter in tents had not been easy.

"The weather was so cold that the officers had to be up and down all night stoking their Sibley stoves to keep their families from freezing to death," said Winifred Pollock Fairfax, the daughter of one of the officers who served at the cantonment. "Oftentimes, when there had been a snowstorm, they would find their cots covered with snow."

The troops were happy to move into their new wooden quarters the next spring, even though, Fairfax said, the freshly cut logs oozed sap and canvas had to be nailed to the walls and ceilings to prevent it from dripping.

Parker and his cavalry company, as well as others in Mackenzie's command, returned in June, 1881, and spent most of the summer keeping Utes and too-eager white settlers separated as they prepared to move the Uncompahgre Utes to Utah.

Late that summer, the Utes finally accepted the move. Fairfax was a young girl living at the

cantonment when the Utes left under military escort.

"I was standing at the door of our house, watching them pass in single file, Indian style, all day long, the horses drawing the travois," she recalled.

On Aug. 31, 1881, Parker led his cavalry company to the mouth of the Uncompahgre River, then held the civilians on the south side of the Gunnison River until the departing Utes had passed Kannah Creek on their way to their new reservation.

After the Utes had been successfully herded into Utah, Mackenzie and his men left the Uncompahgre Valley for Arizona to join the effort to corral Geronimo's band of Chiricahua Apaches.

Once they were gone, the number of troops at the cantonment dropped significantly.

Immediately after the Ute removal, Nankivell said, there were four companies of the 14th infantry, a total of about 180 men. In 1884, there were about 250 total troops.

Shortly before the post was closed, there were fewer than 160 men.

Throughout its existence, there were frequent, often-contradictory rumors about the future of the fort. It was going to be abandoned, one newspaper said in 1884.

No, it would become home to the 9th Cavalry regiment of African-American Buffalo Soldiers, another paper said the same year.

In 1886, a Pueblo newspaper argued that the two companies of infantry at the cantonment then amounted to "a military nuisance" and should be moved out of Colorado.

Two years later, a Ouray newspaper welcomed the report that Fort Crawford would expand and take troops from Fort Lewis, near Durango, which was supposedly going to close that year.

Although troop numbers fluctuated, the fort's buildings grew. By 1885, they included a 4,500-square-foot headquarters building and four troop barracks.

There were eight houses for officers and families, as well as the command-

ing officer's home. The post hospital, a guard house and assorted outbuildings also existed. A large parade ground fronted the buildings.

People at the fort remained important to the local social scene.

In late 1882, local newspapers reported that James Fenlon, a civilian trader at the cantonment, had traveled to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, to marry Elizabeth Rowen Clarke.

"Ouray extends congratulations, and will join the Cantonment in welcoming the bride to a home beneath the shadow of our hills," said the Solid Muldoon newspaper of Ouray.

By 1889, however, residents of the region felt secure enough about the Utes to circulate a petition demanding the closure of the fort. The 8,000 acres controlled by the Army could be better utilized for agriculture, they argued.

The War Department was ready to do just that. In May of 1890, it ordered the closure of six Army posts nationwide, including Fort Crawford.

The closure occurred in December, 1890, and the lands were opened to homesteaders.

Among those who acquired Fort Crawford land were the fort's

*After surviving the winter in tents, the troops were happy to move into their new wooden quarters the next spring, even though the freshly cut logs oozed sap and canvas had to be nailed to the walls and ceilings to prevent it from dripping.*

civilian store operators, James and Elizabeth "Lizzie" Fenlon.

James Fenlon died in 1914, but Lizzie maintained a long connection to the fort. She remained on her Fort Crawford homestead until the 1930s, more than 50 years after she first arrived at the cantonment. She died in Montrose in 1943.

Sources: "Fort Crawford, Colorado, 1880-1890," by Major John H. Nankivell, *The Colorado magazine*, March, 1934; "The Old Army," by James Parker; *historic Colorado newspaper articles at https://www.coloradohistoricnewspapers.org.*

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