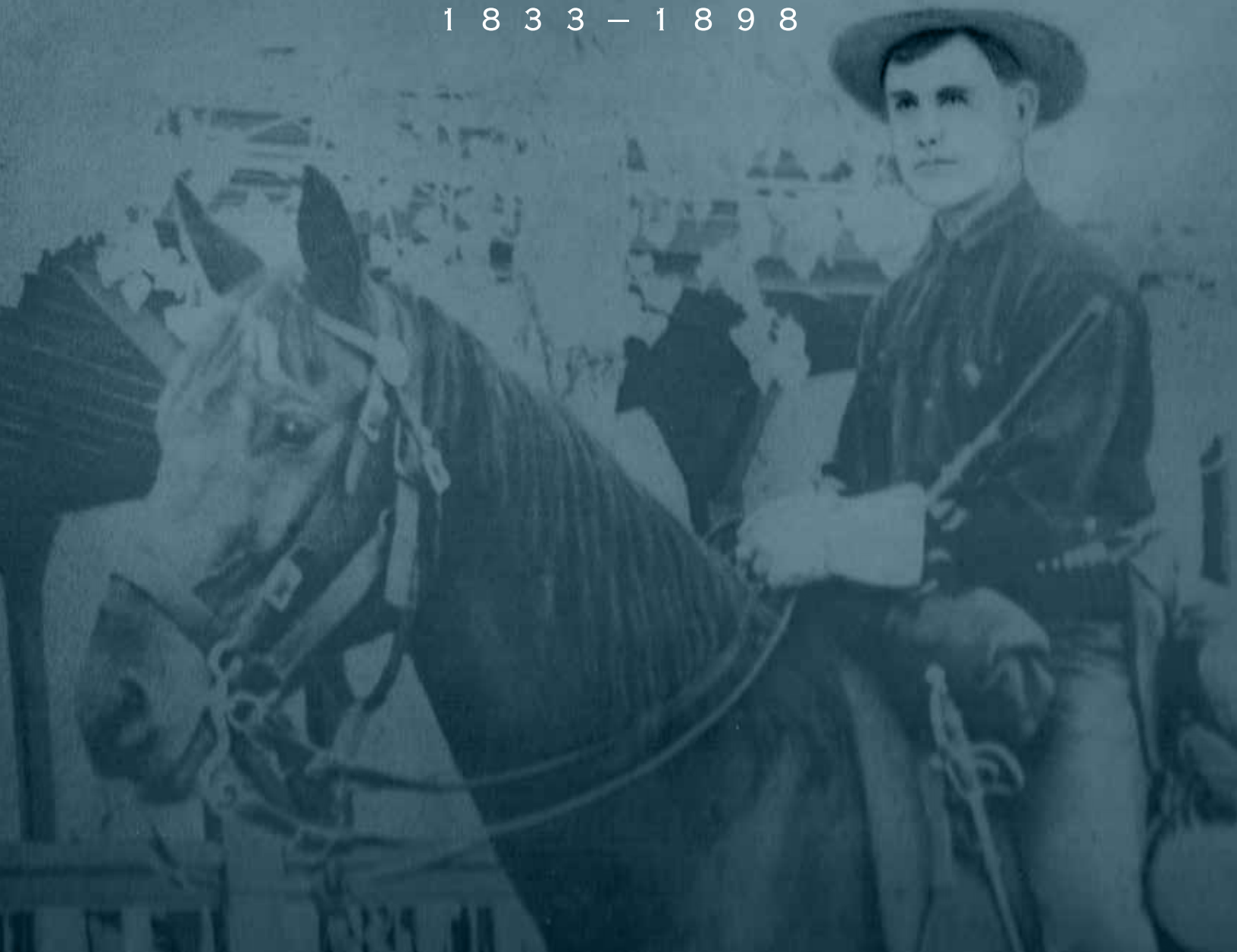


COURAGEOUS *and Faithful*

THE CAVALRY AT JEFFERSON BARRACKS,
1833 – 1898



BY DANIEL GONZALES

Last Soldier of the Indian Wars at Jefferson Barracks, c. 1890. (Image: St. Louis County Parks)

Courageous and Faithful: The Cavalry at Jefferson Barracks, 1833–1897

The United States Cavalry was born at Jefferson Barracks, and its purpose was to conquer the western frontier. The men who joined became the vanguard of manifest destiny and were witnesses as Native Americans made their final struggle to preserve their way of life. To understand how the western half of our nation came to be, and a proud and ancient civilization was lost, we must listen to the stories of those who served as United States mounted troops. The men who served combined the lessons of earlier dragoon and mounted ranger regiments with the leadership of strong infantry officers. They came from a variety of backgrounds. Members of the U.S. dragoons were noted as “young men of respectable families,” and some of the most influential military figures of the nineteenth century, like Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, John Bell Hood, and Nathan Boone (son of Daniel Boone), were included in their ranks. Most enlisted men, however, came from more humble roots. They were immigrants looking to find a path to the American dream, ex-slaves who quickly discovered that “freedom” did not mean freedom to work and live as equals, and men for whom life had hit them hard and a dangerous job with low pay on the edge of the frontier was the best path forward. For a great number of these men, Jefferson Barracks was the beginning of the journey. It was the site of organization for the first unit of cavalry in the regular army, a mustering

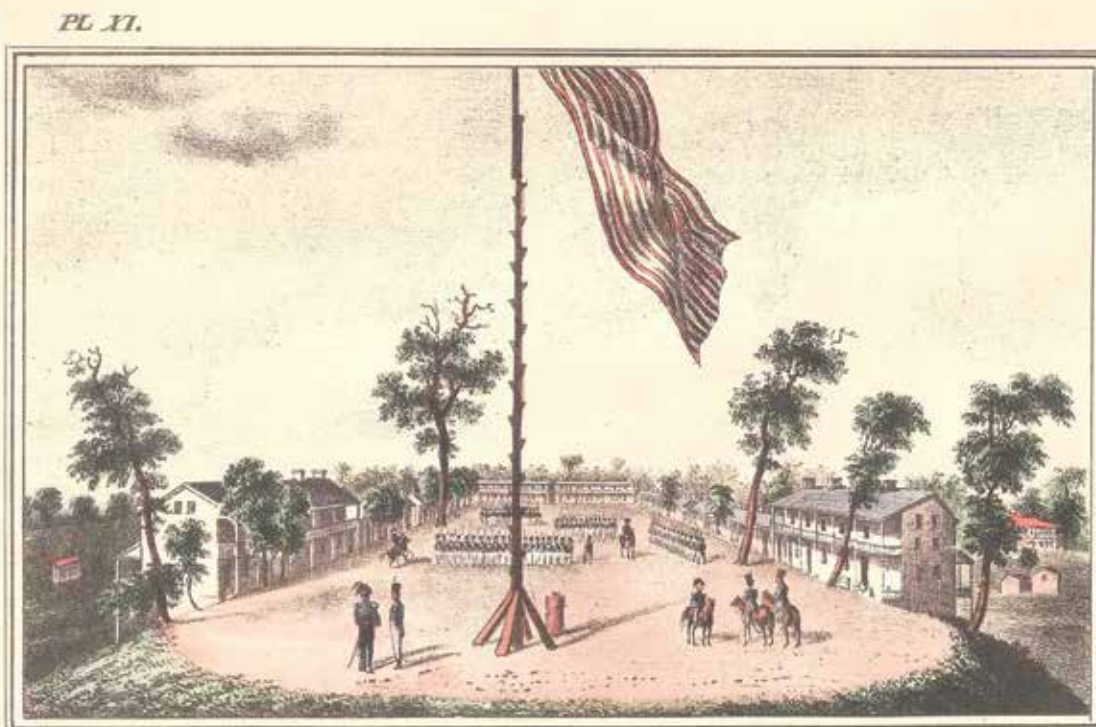
point for the first buffalo soldiers, and the cavalry recruit depot for the entire army during much of the Indian Wars. Finally, throughout the nineteenth century, it was Jefferson Barracks that stood at the heart of the network of forts that spanned the ever-growing American frontier.

The Birth of American Cavalry

While short-lived mounted units were used beginning in 1776, it wasn't until 1833 that the first permanent unit of cavalry in the United States Army was established. In the early nineteenth century, the United States Congress pursued policies based on the philosophy of manifest destiny, or the belief in the divine right of the United States to claim land as far west as California. The first unit of permanent cavalry, the United States Dragoons, was established to help accomplish that end.

In the years that followed, Jefferson Barracks was selected as the site of organization for these early units of mounted troops.¹ The site was chosen, as Dragoon Colonel Philip St. George Cooke explained, because it was a central location for the units to be organized “after a uniform system, before it was to be thrown into actual service, operating in detached bodies among widely scattered tribes of Indians.”² The task assigned to these early cavalymen was monstrous. They numbered in the hundreds, but were given the mission of patrolling a 1,000 mile frontier from Texas to Minnesota populated with almost 200,000 native people and ever increasing numbers

Jefferson Barracks, c. 1841, from John Casper Wild, *Valley of the Mississippi*. (Image: St. Louis County Parks)



JEFFERSON BARRACKS.
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of white settlers.³ In the 1830s and 40s the contributions of the mounted troops in Oregon, California, Texas, and beyond would expand United States territory by over a third and serve as a guiding force for establishing law and order in that new territory.⁴

The motivation to create the first unit of permanent cavalry came as caravans of traders began moving along the Santa Fe Trail. As they did, increasing conflict developed with native populations. The current military, made up of only infantry and artillery, proved inadequate to patrol the growing frontier. Calls began as early as 1824 for Congress to act to protect United States citizens in the western territories. Many argued that the only way to do this was to authorize a mounted force. They remained unwilling, however, as concern over a standing army and the high cost of maintaining mounted troops remained. In 1832, a Sac and Fox warrior named Black Hawk led a band of warriors to reclaim land he felt was improperly taken from his people in Illinois. The ensuing conflict, known as the Black Hawk War, left Congress with no choice but to act, and in 1833, after a failed experiment

with volunteer mounted rangers, it authorized the creation of the U.S. Dragoons. The unit began formation at Jefferson Barracks in August of 1833.⁵ Officers were drawn from the regular army and those who had served as mounted rangers.⁶ Recruits were drawn from around the country to avoid sectional alliances, and described as “athletic young men of decent character and breeding.”⁷

Despite the picturesque location of Jefferson Barracks along a bluff above the Mississippi River, the dragoons were unhappy. Poor quarters and a lack of equipment made many question their decision to join the new unit. Adding to frustrations was the fact that many new recruits had been induced into joining with promises of fine uniforms, ranking commensurate with cadets at West Point, and no menial duties, none of which proved forthcoming. These realities led to mass desertion and disorder. In order to keep the unit from falling apart, harsh penalties were introduced. Deserters could lose their citizenship, receive 50 lashes, or serve out the rest of their enlistment without pay.⁸

This painting was made from a sketch done at Jefferson Barracks in 1832. In that year, Black Hawk and five other Sac and Fox leaders were imprisoned at the post. He was escorted to Jefferson Barracks by Lieutenant Jefferson Davis. While here, they were visited by author Washington Irving, who described them as “a forlorn crew, emaciated and dejected.” (*Image: National Gallery of Art*)





The 1st, 2nd, and the short-lived 3rd Dragoons served during the Mexican-American War between 1846 and 1848. This image depicts the second major battle of that war at Resaca De La Palma, a dried-out river bed filled with dense trees. At that battle, the 2nd Dragoons, led by Captain Charles A. May, led a botched charge against Mexican artillery. The unit was redeemed when it was discovered that in the process they had captured the commander of the enemy line, General Rómulo Diaz de la Vega. (Image: St. Louis County Parks)

Ultimately, the unit came together, and by 1837 the Commander of the Western Department of the Army, General Edmund Gaines, found them to be “in a state of police and discipline reflecting the highest credit.”⁹ In the years following the unit’s organization, they patrolled the western frontier. Their “pomp and precision” intimidated native tribes, allowing them to defend the west without a single battle with Native Americans until 1846.¹⁰

With the outbreak of the bloodiest Indian War in United States history, the Seminole War in Florida, and with the U.S. Dragoons fully occupied in the West, a new regiment designated the 2nd Dragoons was created. Authorized by Congress on May 23, 1836, it was led by Colonel David Emanuel Twiggs and Lieutenant Colonel William Selby Harney. The regiment’s first five companies were sent directly into conflict in Florida. The second half of the unit reported to Jefferson Barracks for organization and training.¹¹ 2nd Lieutenant William Gilpin described Jefferson Barracks when he arrived as “the most beautiful and pleasant Army station in the West.”¹² In October of 1837, the 2nd Dragoons left Jefferson Barracks and rode 1,200 miles to the heart of the conflict where the training of this new unit would be put to the test.¹³

Almost two decades later, in 1855, the 2nd Cavalry Regiment would be organized at Jefferson Barracks, dubbed “Jeff Davis’s Pets” because of the close supervision Secretary of War Jefferson Davis gave the unit. The unit’s leadership included some of the finest officers of the time including Robert E. Lee and Albert Sydney Johnston. Training of the unit went smoothly until September of 1855 when an outbreak of cholera struck. Some 22 troopers died and over 400 deserted in fear. Miraculously, the unit was able to regroup, departing the base the following month.

Created to manage the massively expanded frontier following the Mexican War, they spend the years leading up to the Civil War protecting the southern border of Texas from Comanche and Kiowa warriors, who had proven elusive as they were able to cross the border into Mexico to avoid pursuit. When the Civil War broke out, the unit like the nation, was divided. Officers served on both sides, but a majority joined Jefferson Davis in the Confederacy. Sixteen of the officers of the unit became generals during the Civil War, more than any unit before or since has produced in such a short period.¹⁴



Colonel Henry Dodge served as the first commander of the U.S. Dragoons. It was Lieutenant Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny, however, who led instruction and training of the new unit. Kearny took command as colonel in 1837 when Dodge retired to take on the governorship of Wisconsin Territory. Kearny was described as “at all times courteous, bland, approachable, and just, yet stern, fixed and unwavering when his decisions were once formed.” Kearny was a skilled and experienced instructor. In fact, while instructing troops at Jefferson Barracks he was thrown from his horse unfazed. He quickly instructed his troops “obstacle—march” and the line passed around him like water.

Kearny was promoted to general during the Mexican American War and led the Army of the West in California. After contracting malaria in Vera Cruz, General Kearny returned to St. Louis where he died in 1848, just days after the birth of his son, Stephen. (Image: Missouri History Museum)

Fighting in the West

In the middle of the nineteenth century, migration west increased dramatically as transportation options expanded with the discovery of gold and other minable resources.¹⁵ This migration caused an increase in violence between settlers and native tribes living on the plains. The violence reached a fever pitch during the Civil War, as the regular army largely abandoned the frontier. In the decades that followed that bloody conflict, the regular army struggled to quell the unrest caused by a civilization aware that it



1st Dragoon Regiment dress uniform, 1833. (Image: St. Louis County Parks)

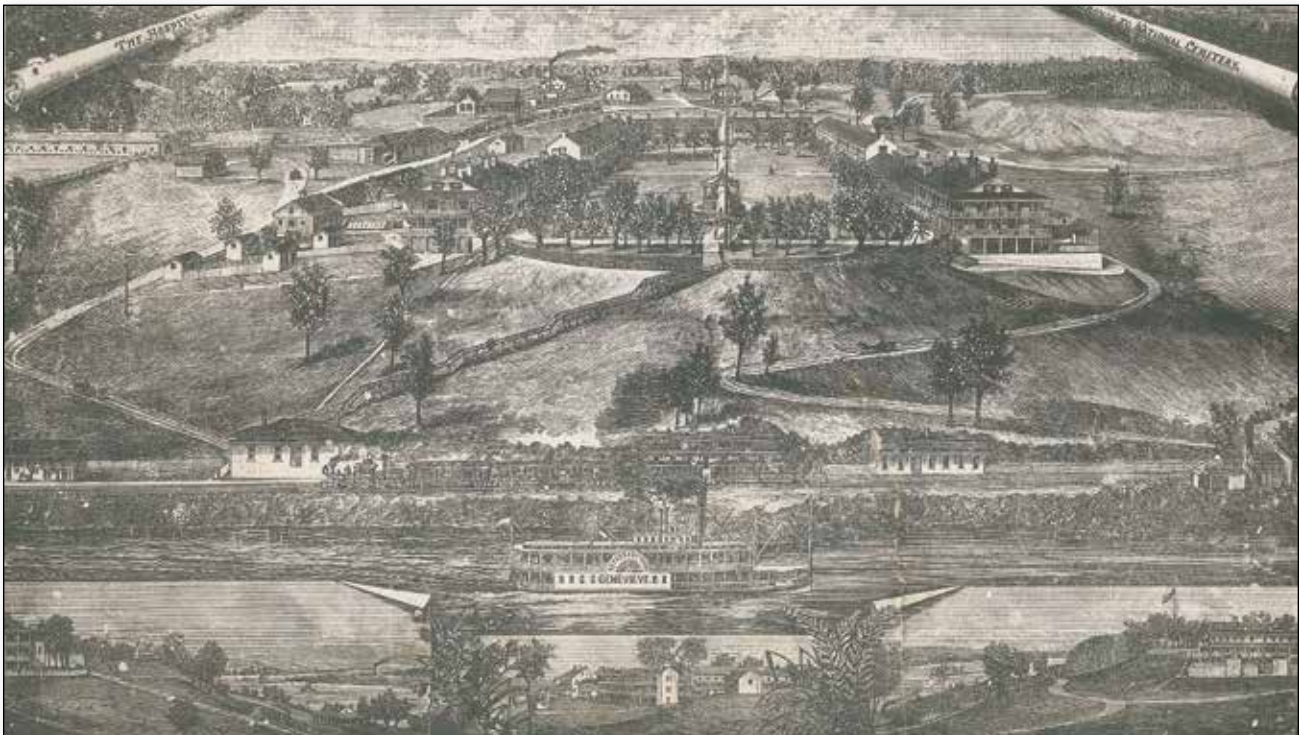


Robert E. Lee, pictured here in his cavalry uniform, had served at Jefferson Barracks earlier in his career as a lieutenant with the Corps of Engineers in 1837. He described it then as the “dirtiest place I was ever in.” It is unclear if his opinion of the region had changed when he returned as lieutenant colonel of the 2nd Cavalry, but given the small number of commissions available in that period he likely saw it as his only opportunity for promotion. (Image: St. Louis County Parks)

was facing a fight for survival.¹⁶ Between 1866 and 1890, there were over 400 individual fights between Native American warriors and U.S. troops. Collectively, these battles, skirmishes, and actions have been dubbed the Indian Wars.¹⁷ They included fights with the Comanche in Texas, the Apache in New Mexico, the Sioux in Montana, and numerous other conflicts. Throughout this tumultuous period, the U.S. Army struggled to adapt to Native Americans’ unique and effective style of combat, while also struggling against their own shortcomings in manpower and training.¹⁸

Ultimately, the continuous flood of settlers combined with the Army’s constant pursuit to drive Native Americans onto reservations and pacify the West. Serving in a chief role during this struggle were the recruits trained in St. Louis and at Jefferson Barracks. St. Louis became the principal Cavalry Recruit Depot for the entire United States Army in 1870.¹⁹ Then in 1878, the depot was transferred to Jefferson Barracks. Troops who came

Jefferson Barracks, 1883. This view of Jefferson Barracks shows much of what the post looked like while it served as the Cavalry Recruit Depot. It is a steel engraving originally published in the *History of St. Louis City and County* by J. Thomas Scharf. (Image: St. Louis County Parks)



Recruits Leaving Jefferson Barracks Cavalry Recruit Depot
January-December 1886



Recruits Leaving Jefferson Barracks Cavalry Recruit Depot, January–December 1886. (Image: St. Louis County Parks)



U.S. Army Barracks at Jefferson Barracks, c. 1890. (Image: St. Louis County Parks)

through the recruit depot to receive initial training and supplies were distributed widely to every cavalry unit in operation across the American West.²⁰ The number of troops who left Jefferson Barracks each year fluctuated, but they averaged around 1,500 men.²¹

Recruits at Jefferson Barracks were assigned to one of four companies of instruction. Each company shared a barracks, which left the recruit completely without privacy. Upon arrival they would be issued uniforms and some supplies. Much of the recruit's necessities had to be purchased with his first month's pay, which was a paltry \$7 a month, half of their normal pay. With the money left over, some would visit local bars or bawdy houses, but others would use it to buy decent food at local groceries or restaurants, as the mess service at the depot was notoriously bad, consisting of salt pork, fried mush, and black coffee.²² While many aspects of service at the recruit depot could be unpleasant, one recruit explained that "to many of us enlistment was the best break in our lives. We

Stables at Jefferson Barracks, c. 1890. (Image: Missouri History Museum)



learned to walk gracefully across...the parade field...head up, chest out, stomach in, arms close to the body, and not swinging like pump handles."²³

The staff of the recruit depot was made up of officers from each active regiment, veteran non-commissioned officers, and a few re-enlisting privates. In the early years staff did little training of recruits, who would stay at the depot for just a few days or a month at the longest. Instead, they would assign them to basic barracks duty and task them with learning army discipline. The need for recruits to be better prepared for service led to changes at Jefferson Barracks in the 1880s, and a new program was instituted where recruits would spend four months at the base learning riding skills, the use of weapons, and basic military doctrine. Frederick C. Kurtz, who enlisted in 1883 and served with the 8th Cavalry, described the training, saying "[we] went through the usual recruiting service of setting-up exercise [calisthenics], manual of arms, and bareback riding around a bull ring conducted by that cock-eyed drill sergeant you all perhaps remember, who used not very polite language whenever one of us accidentally fell off the horse or dropped a gun while drilling."²⁴

Once training of the recruits was complete, officers on detached duty at Jefferson Barracks would then escort troops in groups of as few as a dozen to as many as several hundred out to their regular posts across the West.²⁵

Jefferson Barracks played an important role in the history of racial relations in the U.S. Army in this period. In 1866, the peacetime expansion of the military, which was necessary to address southern Reconstruction and westward expansion, resulted in the creation of the first African American units in the regular U.S. Army. Two of these were cavalry regiments.²⁶ With an initial pay of \$13 a month, military service, while dangerous and difficult, was one of the best breaks available to newly freed African Americans, who found that freedom did not mean equal opportunity.²⁷

Nicknamed “Buffalo Soldiers” by the Cheyenne and Comanche Indians, these African American regular troops served with distinction across the western frontier. Throughout most of the rest of the nineteenth century, they maintained the highest rates of re-enlistment and the lowest rates of desertion in the United States Army.²⁸

While official organization was done elsewhere, both units of African American cavalry would have early ties to Jefferson Barracks. The 9th Cavalry Regiment would make its headquarters in 1870, and the 10th’s first recruits would join at the post in 1866. Beginning in 1878 all new recruits for both units would pass through Jefferson Barracks before joining their permanent regiments.²⁹ African American troops would make up 20 percent of the regular army during the Indian Wars, and they would serve in vital conflicts from the capture of Geronimo to the charge up San Juan Hill.³⁰

While serving with distinction, African American troops in the latter part of the nineteenth century faced deeply embedded racial prejudice, but the shortage of troops in the army during this period meant that discrimination in the form of withholding equipment or supplies was rare. Additionally, by the early 1880s, recruit units at Jefferson Barracks were integrated. Whites and blacks trained and lived side by side. At many other posts around the country, troops of varying racial backgrounds served together as well, and for the most part interactions were peaceful. In January of 1888, however, racial tensions exploded at Jefferson Barracks in one of the most serious events of racial violence in the nation.³¹ Newspapers of the time called it “A Soldiers’ Riot.” Problems arose after an African American soldier was seen talking with a young white girl and was thrown in the guardhouse. This angered the other black troops, who then got in a fight with some white recruits. Things escalated into a large brawl involving knives, clubs, and rocks.³² In 1889, in reaction to these events, recruit units at Jefferson Barracks were re-segregated. Company A and C became white, Company B became Irish, and Company D was designated for African Americans and other races. This condition remained until the Jefferson Barracks Cavalry Recruit Depot closed in 1894.³³

The Dogs of War: Cavalry at the Turn of the Century

As the nineteenth century came to an end, so did the violent struggle between the United States and native tribes for which the U.S. Cavalry had been created.³⁴ At Jefferson Barracks, the end of this era brought a real crisis. The barracks buildings were in a state of disrepair from the constant flow of recruits. Poor conditions meant high levels of disease. Finally, the presence of both meant that desertion reached disastrous levels. The calls for change reached a fever pitch.³⁵

In 1887, the Surgeon General of the U.S. Army declared Jefferson Barracks “the most un-healthy military post in the country.”³⁶ As the decade went on, local newspapers reported on murders, suicides, desertions, and epidemics.³⁷



In January 1889, 2nd Lt. John J. Pershing, who would go on to lead the American Expeditionary Force in France during World War I, was at Jefferson Barracks preparing to lead a group of thirty new recruits to join the 6th Cavalry in Fort Wingate, New Mexico. Pershing would gain the nickname “Blackjack” for his service with another unit of cavalry, the African American 10th Regiment. He would serve with them beginning in 1896, and lead them in the famous charge up San Juan Hill during the Spanish-American War. (Image: Library of Congress)

All of this made *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reporter Frank Woodward curious. What was really happening at the old barracks? In 1889, he launched an investigation by enlisting in the U.S. Cavalry. He spent almost two months at the Recruit Depot before deserting and beginning a series of articles on life at Jefferson Barracks. These exposés would shock the nation with accusations of embezzlement, abuse, false imprisonment, and even murder. In reaction, Secretary of War Redford Proctor ordered a full investigation, the results of which led to better conditions and pay for the entire army. Additionally, over the following years the barracks would be virtually rebuilt.³⁸

In 1894, the Cavalry Recruit Depot closed its doors. The 3rd Cavalry, which had begun its life at Jefferson Barracks in 1846 as the Regiment of Mounted Rifles, returned to take over.³⁹ Commanded by Lieutenant George A. Purington, they would inherit an almost completely

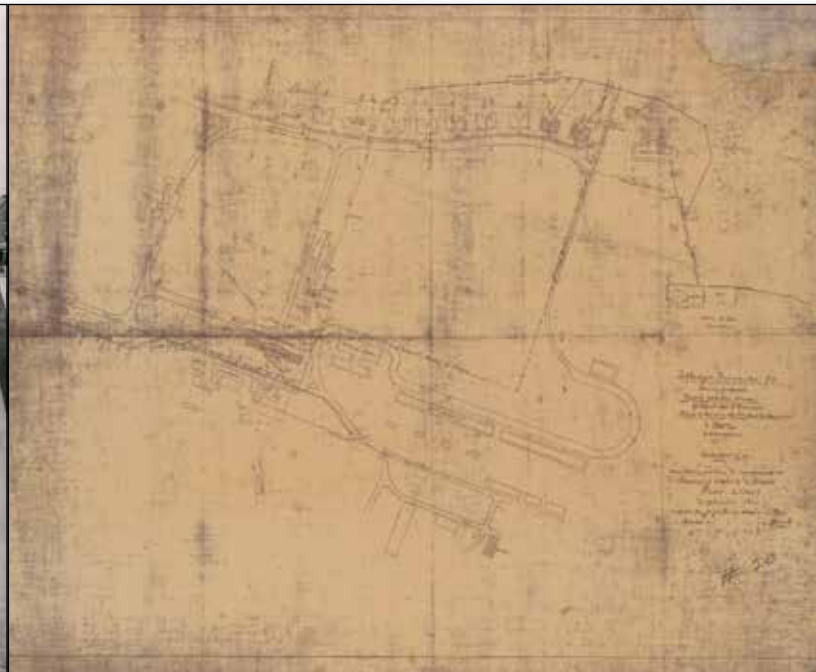


JEFFERSON BARRACKS, MO.

Color Lithograph of Jefferson Barracks by Gast Moeller and Company, c. 1866. (Image: Missouri History Museum)

4th Calvary at Jefferson Barracks, 1902. (Image: St. Louis County Parks)

Plan for proposed reconstruction at Jefferson Barracks, 1891. (Image: St. Louis County Parks)



new post. In the years that had passed from the 1889 exposé that shed light on the poor conditions at Jefferson Barracks, new two story barracks, cavalry stables, officers' quarters, and quartermaster quarters were all constructed.

In 1892, a bandstand was completed.⁴⁰ This would prove to be an important site during the tenure of the 3rd Cavalry as its nationally known brass band would play for local crowds there on Saturday afternoons.⁴¹ According to one Tennessee reporter, "these regulars marched with an ease and precision that caught every eye along the route, while the sweetness and novelty of their quicksteps pleased the ear already tired with a surfeit of Sousa music."⁴²

With the declaration of war against Spain on April 25, 1898, the United States launched itself onto the world stage in a new way. By the end of the conflict in December of 1898, the United States would be a colonial power, taking possession of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines. Fighting would continue however, as Filipinos sought independence from their new colonial masters.⁴³ This conflict would see service by most regular army cavalry regiments. Additionally, three volunteer cavalry regiments were formed. Only the 1st United States Volunteer Cavalry or the "Rough Riders," would see combat service.⁴⁴

This conflict would require a mobilization of troops from Jefferson Barracks like it had never seen before. Missouri would recruit more volunteers than almost any other state, the majority of whom would pass through Jefferson Barracks.⁴⁵

With the completion of an electric rail line, large patriotic crowds regularly visited the barracks to celebrate the troops and their overseas mission. The largest of the crowds was estimated to be almost 100,000 people.⁴⁶

Several cavalry units would move in and out of the post in this period, returning from or heading to service in Cuba and the Philippines. The 3rd Cavalry left the post for Cuba when the war broke out, serving honorably at the Battle of

Santiago and playing a key role in the capture of San Juan Hill. The 6th Cavalry came to Jefferson Barracks in 1899, but left shortly after for service in the Philippines. Finally, the 5th Cavalry commanded Jefferson Barracks from 1900 to 1902.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Even before the beginning of the Spanish-American War, there were signs that changes were coming for the cavalry service. In 1897, 23 members of the African American 25th Infantry participated in an experiment. They rode bicycles from Fort Mizzoula in Montana to Jefferson Barracks. This trip of 1,900 miles was organized as the Army looked to new technologies to move troops. While many decried the experiment, believing that "transporting soldiers by any means other than the horse ran counter to...the cavalry's feeling that an eternal bond exists between a soldier and his steed," others recognized that industrialization was bringing with it necessary changes in the way war would be waged.⁴⁸

While the horse cavalry would remain in existence until 1944, the ride of the 25th Infantry can be seen as a foreshadowing of the mechanization of the cavalry that would take place as the army entered the twentieth century.

From 1833 until the turn of the century, the story of the United States Cavalry at Jefferson Barracks is the story of the U.S. Cavalry nationally from its establishment until the decline of the horse. It is the story of westward expansion, and of the decline of Indian autonomy. Perhaps most of all it is the story of the men and women who served, coming from all walks of life and dedicating themselves for better or worse to the monumental challenge of living up to the spirit of the American Cavalry, the "Courageous and Faithful."

3rd Cavalry at Jefferson Barracks, c. 1896. (Image: St. Louis County Parks)



Man on horseback at Jefferson Barracks, c. 1897. (Image: St. Louis County Parks)



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Even the Army embraced the bicycle craze of the 1890s, as seen here with the 25th Infantry experimental bike ride from Fort Missoula to St. Louis, 1897. (Image: *St. Louis County Parks*)

