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Historical sketch of Fort Garland

William Hoagland, 1971, pp. 301-303

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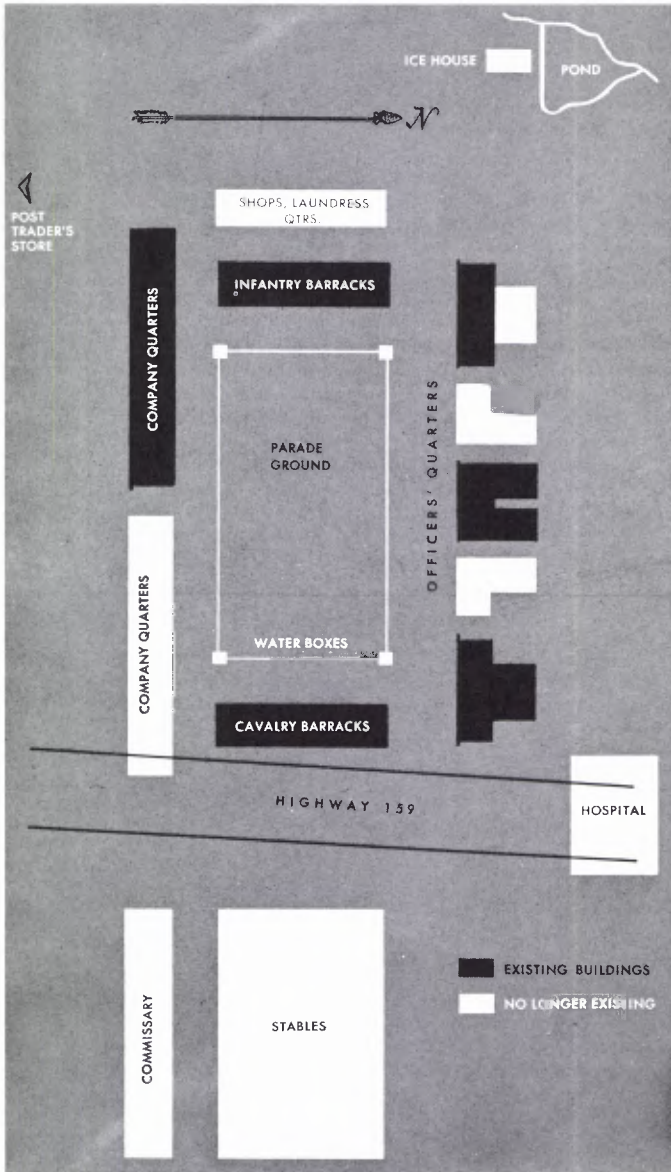
HISTORICAL SKETCH OF FORT GARLAND

by

WILLIAM HOAGLAND

State Historical Society of Colorado

Fort Garland, Colorado



An early view of the fort looking northwest from the hill east of the fort. The commissary and stables, no longer existing, are in the foreground.

abandoned because it was found vulnerable to Indian attack, being so situated that hostiles could fire from the hills down into the fort.

The new fort was named after the commander of the Department of New Mexico, Colonel Brevet Brigadier General John Garland. For 25 years it was a garrison for troops protecting settlers.

The buildings were made of adobe, their interiors plastered with mud and whitewashed with lime. Roofs were of sod. There were board floors, and open fireplaces, with stoves for additional heat. Water was obtained from Ute Creek, by means of an *acquia* (Spanish for canal or



At one time the flagpole was on the south side of the parade ground, near the sally port. Vestibules can be seen on several doors.

Fort Garland about the time Kit Carson commanded.

Fort Garland was established by the War Department in 1858, in what was then the Territory of New Mexico and is now Costilla County, Colorado. It is 25 miles east of Alamosa and 33 miles from the northern boundary of New Mexico.

Fort Garland replaced Fort Massachusetts, which had been built in 1852 six miles north. Fort Massachusetts was

trench) flowing around the parade ground. Sanitary provisions, even at the post hospital, were primitive. When the fort was built, the nearest railroad was 950 miles away and six weeks were required for mail to go from Fort Garland to Washington.

The post buildings formed a parallelogram around the parade ground. On the north side were the officers' quarters, on the east the cavalry barracks, on the west the infantry barracks, and on the south were two long buildings which served as offices and store rooms and housed the guard room and adjutant's headquarters.

Fort Garland was built by the men of Company E, U.S. Mounted Riflemen, and Company A, 3rd U.S. Infantry, under Captain Thomas Duncan of the Mounted Riflemen. It was planned for two companies of about 100 men and seven officers.

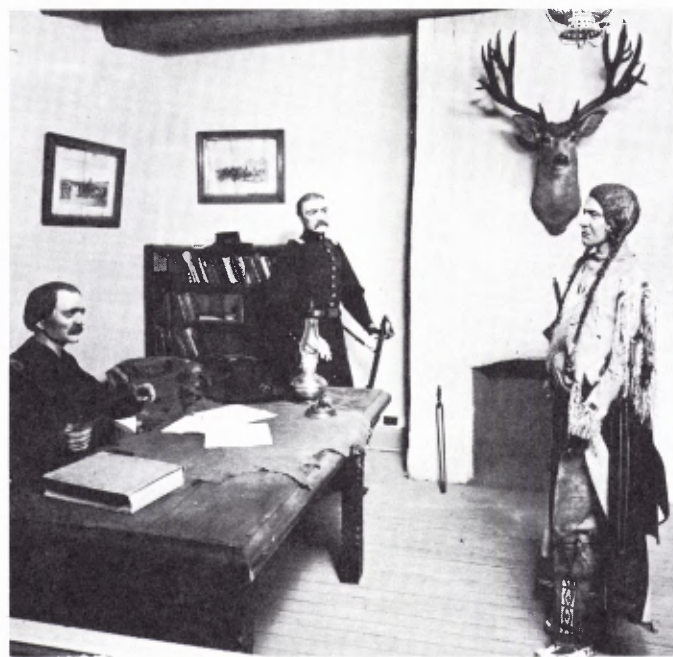
The two units that constructed the buildings remained at Fort Garland until July, 1860, when they were relieved by Companies A, F and H of the 10th U.S. Infantry, under Major E. R. S. Canby. The 10th Infantry had formed part of the expedition to Utah under Colonel A. S. Johnston during the "Mormon War," and Canby's detachment marched the 640 miles to Fort Garland from Camp Floyd, Utah Territory, near Salt Lake City.

In August, 1860, Company A of the 10th U.S. Infantry left the post to take part in an expedition against the Navajo Indians of New Mexico. In 1861, after the Civil War began, the other units of the 10th were sent to New Mexico, under Canby, except for a small detachment left at Fort Garland.

Two companies of Colorado Volunteers arrived in December, 1861, and were mustered into Federal Service at Fort Garland as Companies A and B, 2nd Colorado Infantry Volunteers. They departed in 1862 to join Canby's forces in New Mexico. During the rest of the Civil War, the Fort Garland garrison consisted largely of volunteers, the regulars all being on duty with the Union forces in the main theaters of the war.

Heads rolled on the ground in front of the Commandant's quarters one day in 1863. During that year a band of desperadoes known as the Espinosas blazed a trail of crime through the San Luis Valley. Military efforts to capture the bandits failed and Lieutenant Colonel Samuel F. Tappan, 1st Colorado Cavalry, then in command at Fort Garland, summoned Tom Tobin and told him to get the Espinosas. Tobin, an old scout, set out with a detachment of one officer and fifteen soldiers. The fourth day out, Tobin found the two bandits, slew them, cut off their heads and placed them in a sack. Riding back to Fort Garland, he called Colonel Tappan from his quarters, and threw the heads out of the sack on the ground at the officer's feet. Thus ended the bloody trail of the Espinosas who had killed at least thirty men. Tom Tobin lived on a ranch in the San Luis Valley many years, and was a member of the Costilla County School Board in 1896.

At war's end, some of the volunteer units were retained in Federal Service pending return of the regular troops to man the western frontier outposts. One of these units was a regiment of New Mexico Volunteers commanded by Kit



Life-size diorama of Kit Carson conferring with Chief Ouray in the Commandant's quarters.

Carson, a colonel and brevet brigadier general. Carson had rendered notable service in action against the Navajos and in 1866 he was ordered to Fort Garland with a detachment of his regiment.

The Ute Indians were warlike, and settlers in the San Luis Valley were justifiably apprehensive. Kit Carson knew the Utes, and had their confidence. His understanding of Indian psychology averted open war and saved the settlements.

Lieutenant General William Tecumseh Sherman made an inspection trip to Fort Garland in 1866. While there he held a conference with Ouray, the chief of the Utes, and



Company D, 15th Infantry camped at Fort Garland, Colorado Territory, March 11, 1872.

other Indian leaders. General Sherman later paid tribute to Carson's influence for peace.

In the summer of 1867 the Volunteers were mustered out, and Kit Carson with his wife and six children moved to Boggsville, near present Las Animas, Colorado. There, in 1868, Kit Carson became ill and was taken to near-by Fort Lyons, where he died at the age of 58.

Fort Garland was again garrisoned by regulars, sometimes infantry units, sometimes cavalry, and at times, both. War Department records show that detachments of the following regiments served at the fort at various times: 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 7th, 8th and 9th Cavalry, 5th, 10th, 14th, 15th, 19th, 22nd and 37th Infantry.

During the critical period following the Meeker Massa-

cre at White River Agency in 1879, and the subsequent removal of the Uncompahgre Utes to Utah in 1881, the garrison was considerably increased. At one time during this period 1,500 men were at Fort Garland, camping in the fort area.

With the Utes on reservations, and other Indians peaceful, Fort Garland was no longer needed and on November 30, 1883, Fort Garland was abandoned as an active post of the United States Army. Its last garrison was Company A, 22nd Infantry, Captain Javan B. Irvine commanding.

In 1928 a group of public-spirited citizens of the San Luis Valley bought the property to preserve the fort and in 1945 they presented it to the State Historical Society of Colorado for restoration and preservation.