

Fort Davis

National Historic Site

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Curriculum Materials Grades 6-8

Student Activity: Women at Frontier Army Forts

Women at Frontier Army Forts



Life for women at U.S. Army forts on the frontier was not easy. Being far away from their families and friends, they were often lonely. Their lifestyles also offered many challenges. For example, it was not unusual for women to die in childbirth at that time.

Different classes of women lived or worked at army forts, but they did not always socialize with one another because of the army caste system. In other words, officers'

wives did not befriend other women, such as enlisted men's wives who often worked as servants for officers or as laundresses for the army.

Of all the women who lived at western army forts, officers' wives probably had the hardest time adjusting to the frontier because they usually had a pampered upbringing. They disliked having no voice in their housing arrangements. Here's how it worked: officers received quarters (housing) based on their rank and seniority, but they could be "ranked out" of the house by a superior officer. Imagine yourself as an officer's wife at Fort Davis in the 1870s, living with your family in one of the houses on Officers' Row. How would you like it if a new officer arrived at the fort who had a higher rank than your husband, and he selected your house to be his own? You and your family would have to move into a different house and then "bump out" someone lower ranking than your husband from their house! Then that family would have to move, and so on. In their 19th-century journals, officers' wives called this "falling bricks."

Life was hard, but many officers' wives adapted well to western frontier army life. They had servants to help with household chores. So they spent their time making clothes for the family, educating their children, managing the household, reading and writing letters, sidesaddle horseback riding, putting on plays, and going on picnics.

At forts, enlisted men's wives usually worked as:

1. army laundresses—who washed uniforms and other clothes for soldiers,
2. hospital matrons—who did laundry at the post hospital, or
3. officers' servants—who cooked, cleaned, and did laundry for officers. These women did not have the social status or finances enjoyed by officers' wives. So they endured more miseries, suffered more hardships, and often worked from sunrise to sunset.



Sally Caldwell

Sally Caldwell was an officer's servant at Fort Davis in the 1880s. Her husband was Private Menger Caldwell, a Buffalo Soldier in the 10th Cavalry. Sally worked as a servant for Major and Mrs. Anson Mills for eleven years, including the time that they were at Fort Davis from 1882 to 1885.

The United States Army did not allow women to enlist as soldiers at that time. The only women officially recognized by the army were laundresses and hospital matrons. They were paid for doing laundry, and the army gave them quarters, food rations, and a supply of wood. As for the women who worked as officers' servants, they were paid by the officers for whom they worked. An officer also usually provided his servant with room and board.

Women provided stability and a sense of domestic life at 19th-century army forts. They also added a civilizing element that most people welcomed on the frontier.

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QUESTIONS:

1. What hardships might you have endured as a woman living at a frontier army post in the 1870s or 1880s in comparison to our lives today? Consider conveniences that we have today that they did not have.
2. If you had been a woman at a frontier army post, which would you rather have been—an officer's wife, a servant for an officer's family, a laundress who washed clothes for soldiers, or a matron who did laundry at the hospital? Explain.
3. The United States Army did not allow women to be soldiers or officers in the 19th century. Yet it allowed women to do laundry for the soldiers and for the hospital. Why do you think the army did this? Might soldiers act differently if there were women around? How do you think having women around an army post might change things?
4. Why would an officer's wife fear a high ranking officer moving to the fort where she was?
5. Why did the army give each laundress a supply of wood each month? Remember this was before washing machines.