

Fort Davis

National Historic Site

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Curriculum Materials Grades 6-8

Student Activity: Fort Davis – Post Schooling

FORT DAVIS—Post Schooling



Post Chapel – Fort Davis

If you were a child living at Fort Davis before 1878, chances are you might not have gone to school. You might have been schooled at home by a parent, or by teacher or governess who lived with your family. Or you might have been sent back East either to attend a boarding school or to live with relatives and attend school. Poorer classes of people did not send their children to school.

In 1878, the U.S. Army issued an order to establish schools at all army posts. Old army records show that by early 1879, a school was in operation at Fort Davis. There was no school building as such, but the fort had a structure—the post chapel—large enough for a school. The school at Fort Davis was under the direction of the commanding officer, but he usually left the post chaplain in charge. School for children was held during the day, and school for soldiers operated in the evening. The chaplain could appoint an enlisted man as a teacher or “overseer.” This enlisted man was paid an extra 35 cents a day to teach, but his duties as a teacher were not allowed to interfere with his military duties. One teacher taught all levels in the same room.

Children of enlisted men had to attend school, but attendance of officers’ children was optional—depending on what their parents decided. If officers decided not to send their children to the post school, they were required to keep the children from playing or making noise near the post chapel while school was in session. Children of the civilians living at or near the post could also attend the post school, but their parents were expected to make a small payment to the army post in exchange for their child’s schooling.

Like today, the school week back then ran Monday through Friday, except during summer months. The school day began at 9:30 a.m. and often a bugle call sounded 15 minutes before the school hour to remind students that classes were about to begin. The students, or pupils, as they were called back then, went to school until noon and then again for two hours in the afternoon—from either 1:00-3:00 or 1:30-3:30. Sometimes school was dismissed if the teacher was sick or if the building was needed for meetings or trials (since this same building served as the fort’s courtroom).

School attendance varied, depending on how many soldiers and officers were stationed at the fort. From 1880 to 1890, the average number of pupils attending the post school at Fort Davis was 20. The children were divided into classes according to intelligence and progress in school. The younger students only took reading and spelling, while the older students studied reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic, geography, history, and



A 19th Century Classroom - Picture used with permission of the Denver Public Library

sometimes algebra. Although pencils and writing tablets were available at the time, pupils practiced their writing skills and did their math problems on slates using slate pencils. This was done to keep down costs, since paper and lead pencils were more expensive.

If you were an older student attending the post school in the early 1880s, you would have had to learn about the 38 states of the United States and about such things as the presidential election of 1884—when no one knew who became president for weeks after the election. You would also have participated in frequent spelling bees, which were used by the “overseer” to assess pupils’ progress in spelling. Commonly used was the traditional spelling bee. Less frequent were the “fun” spelling bees, like the “Dumb Speller,” in which the vowels in a word were NOT spoken; instead, gestures were substituted for each vowel in a word.

In the evening, enlisted men could choose to attend classes in geography, arithmetic and “schooling for the soldier.” If an enlisted man did not know how to read and write, these subjects were taught first. Many soldiers had never gone to school before joining the army. Some enlisted men saw education as a way to obtain promotions, since higher ranks usually required the ability to read and write.



Fort Davis Children at a Birthday Party in 1888

1. Make a chart with two columns—THEN and NOW. Compare the school and classroom of 1880 with your school and classroom today. List differences and similarities such as subjects studied, teaching tools, class schedule, and difficulty of subjects.
2. Which states were in the United States in 1880? How many stars were on the U.S. flag in 1880?
3. Work the following problems from 1876:
 - a. A house rents for \$20 a year. Taxes amount to \$15 a year. Repairs amount to \$62 a year. What is the annual cost of the house?
 - b. If George sells a goat for \$8, how many goats will bring him \$96?
 - c. If a farmer erects 72 feet of fencing each day, how much will he complete in a fortnight?
 - d. If a man’s salary is \$7 per month and he saves 2% of his salary each year, how much will he have saved in five years?

4. Students played alphabet games to help their reading and vocabulary skills. *The Minister's Cat* is one of those games. The first player begins the game with the letter A. The player might say: "The minister's cat is an angry cat, and his name is Abraham." The next person must use words beginning with B to describe the cat's personality and name. Try this with your classmates, going through the entire alphabet.
5. From the drawing and photograph, can you tell if this building was heated? Explain the clues you used to answer this question.
6. Do you think you would like to attend a one-room school like the one at Fort Davis in the 19th century? In what ways would it be different than your current classroom?
7. Can you imagine a grown man who doesn't know how to read or write, as was the case of many soldiers at Fort Davis? What would a person today miss if he didn't know how to read or write?