



The Second Fort Union



The Civil War Earthwork 1861-1863

Fort Craig, N. Mex., March 18, 1862

The question is not of saving this post, but of saving New Mexico and defeating the Confederates in such a way that an invasion of this Territory will never again be attempted. It is essential to the general plan that this post should be retained if possible. Fort Union must be held.

Colonel Edward Canby
Commander 9th Military District

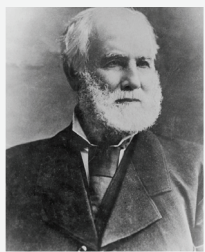
Introduction



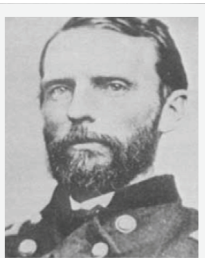
Illustration of
First Fort Union

The outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 forced many changes to occur throughout United States, and Fort Union was no exception. Already a decade old at the onset of the Civil War, Fort Union's original task was to monitor, attempt to control, and respond to and lead campaigns against Native Americans in and around the Santa Fe Trail. By the start of the Civil War, the fort, which was strategically placed near the convergence of the two main branches of the Santa Fe Trail, had become the largest and most important fort in the American Southwest. To counter the strong possibility of a Confederate invasion into the Southwest, a new, redesigned and heavily fortified Fort Union would have to be constructed. This is the story of the nation's largest Civil War earthwork west of the Mississippi River, the Second Fort Union.

Preparing for Battle



Major William Chapman
Commander of Fort Union
June 13, 1861-December 13, 1861



Captain Cuvier Grover
Architect of the
Second Fort Union

By August 1861, Confederate actions in the southern half of the New Mexico Territory had the US Army convinced that a large-scale invasion was imminent. The first Fort Union, located on the steep foothills to the west of Wolf Creek, was completely vulnerable to cannon fire. As a result of its proximity to the perilous bluffs next to the foothills, the forts commander, Major William Chapman (2nd US Infantry) ordered that a new earthwork fort to be constructed 1.5 miles away in the open valley. By doing so, Chapman and the forts designer, Captain Cuvier Grover (10th US Infantry) believed that the new fort would be well out of artillery range from the bluffs.

Construction of the Second Fort Union began on August 4, 1861. At this time, over one thousand troops were stationed at the fort; most of which was composed of the newly formed, predominantly Hispanic, New Mexico Volunteers. The first and primary duty for

these troops was to construct the massive 23-acre fortification. The troops worked twenty-four hours a day in four-hour shifts of 200 men each in order to build the fort. By February of 1862, as Confederate forces advanced into the New Mexico Territory via the Rio Grande River, the construction of the Second Fort was completed.

The Second Fort Union was built to accommodate 28 cannon along its parapet. Officers' Quarters, enlisted barracks, powder magazines and storerooms dotted the interior of the fort. Also inside the fort was a man-made tunnel that led to Wolf Creek so that the troops could access fresh water. Outside of the fort a dry moat was dug that would hamper any attempt by an enemy to climb the walls of the fort. Also outside the fort and located on each of its four sides were four large bastions, or *demilunes* (angled earthwork walls used for forward artillery and infantry positions.) It is with the addition of the demilunes to its design that gives the Second Fort Union its unique "Star" shaped appearance.

An Untested Defense

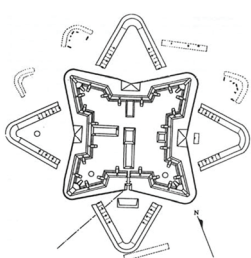


Illustration of Second
Fort Union and its
"Star" design

Even before the earthwork fort was completed, word about its defensibility was circulating in both the Confederacy and Union. Some saw it as a formidable bunker that could withstand just about anything, while others saw it simply as a place where it could not defend itself from even the smallest of artillery. Oddly, most praise for the fort came from the Confederacy and not the Union.

On December 12, 1861, the *Mesilla Times*, a Pro-Confederate newspaper located in Arizona, gave praise to the hastily constructed fort by stating:

"Considering its position and the material at hand, [the fort is] one of the best pieces of engineering ever done in America."

A Union description was provided by Ovando J. Hollister, of the 1st Colorado Volunteers who had been at Fort Union in March 1862, calling the Second Fort "A simple field-work of moderate size..." Hollister even went on to call the armament of the fort "poor."

Although opinions of the forts' defensibility varied, it was well known by both the Union and Confederacy alike that Fort Union and its vast amount of supplies and weaponry was the key for controlling the entirety of the New Mexico Territory and beyond.

Trial and Error



Artillery Demonstration at Fort Union National Monument
Photo Credit: Richard Gonzales

With doubts as to the strength of the earthwork running rampant, it would only be a matter of time before the fort would be tested. That test came not in combat against the Confederacy, but rather with the arrival of a new post commander to Fort Union, Captain Peter Plympton (7th US Infantry) in June of 1862. At the time of his arrival, the fort was already well known to have poor ventilation, suffered infestations of insects and snakes, and flooded constantly from rain storms. Now, with Captain Plympton's curiosity aroused, the troops would find out whether the earthwork Second Fort Union was fit for combat or not.

Plympton suspected that the earthwork had not been constructed far enough from the location of the First Fort to be safely beyond cannon fire from the bluffs. To test his theory, he placed two cannons in position on the bluffs above the First Fort site and fired artillery shells into the nearby vicinity of the Second Fort Union.

To the surprise of the military commanders of the area it was discovered that without question, the cannon were able to reach not just into the interior of the fort, but also well beyond the perimeter of the fort.

Finally, in order to see if the Second Fort Union could defend itself properly from an attack from the bluffs above the First Fort site, Plympton, now back at the Second Fort Union, fired back at the bluffs above the First Fort site. To everyone's dismay, the shot only reached midway up the face of the bluffs.

Plympton had proven that all of the hard work and meticulous planning that **was made in preparing Fort Union for a Confederate attack had been all for naught**. The fort could have easily been taken if not destroyed had it been attacked.

Moving Ahead



Third Fort Union Officers Quarters

By the end of March of 1862, the fears of the Southwest falling under Confederate rule had been thwarted. The Confederate invasion of the New Mexico Territory that began earlier that same year ended over 60 miles away from Fort Union at Glorieta Pass, just outside of Santa Fe, New Mexico.

It was actually the soldiers of Fort Union, comprised of US Army regulars and Colorado and New Mexico Volunteers, who stopped the Confederate advance. The Battle of Glorieta Pass forever solidified US rule over the American Southwest. Having never fired a shot of aggression, the Second Fort Union had outlived its usefulness within less than two years.

In 1863, construction of the Third Fort Union began. Built with more suitable materials such as of adobe, fire brick, lumber, and tin,

this final Fort Union would replace the earthwork, and become the largest military outpost west of the Mississippi River. In combination with its Arsenal and Depot, the Third Fort Union would continue its role in the Indian Wars of the American Southwest which would eventually and forever change the surrounding landscape and the peoples that call this land home.

For the remainder of Fort Union's lifespan, the Second Fort Union occasionally housed soldiers, civilians, and travelers along the Santa Fe Trail. When the military abandoned the fort in 1891, all the land fell prey to relic hunters and salvagers, including the Second Fort Union site.

Today, the Second Fort Union, called by many as the "Star Fort," recalls a time in American history when the Civil War reached out into the American Southwest and the fate of the New Mexico Territory lay in those who controlled the Second Fort Union.



Fort Union Depot

Help us maintain and preserve this unique piece of Civil War and Southwestern History. Stay on the designated paths while visiting Fort Union National Monument and do not remove any vegetation or artifacts.



Aerial photograph of Second Fort Union