



THE MUSEUM GAZETTE

Jefferson Barracks: The Early Years

In the early years of the American frontier, St. Louis' proximity to the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers made it a prime location for a military installation for defense, instruction and supply. Jefferson Barracks became such an installation, and at the same time an integral part of the history of the St. Louis area, providing military and economic stability for the westward expansion of the United States.

The story of Jefferson Barracks began on March 4, 1826 when generals Edmund P. Gaines and Henry Atkinson were instructed to select a site "for the establishment of an Infantry School of Instruction" within twenty miles of the mouth of the Missouri River. Until that time, cantonments Atkinson and Bellefontaine were the primary army posts in the trans-Mississippi west. Cantonment Atkinson was established at Council Bluffs, Iowa, during the 1819 Yellowstone Expedition. It was abandoned in 1827, since its location was too far north to protect the Santa Fe Trail, and it was medically unhealthy. Fort Bellefontaine was built in 1805 on the south bank of the Missouri, four miles from the river's mouth and twelve miles from St. Louis. It was indefensible because it was situated below a high bluff, and was in danger of being cut away by the Missouri River because it was located on low, damp bottom land.

The new site selected by generals Gaines and Atkinson for an infantry school was in a wooded area on the west bank of the Mississippi River, ten miles south of St. Louis and 26 miles from

the mouth of the Missouri. The site's advantages included a limestone bank above the high water mark which offered an excellent landing, and a well-timbered, gentle slope with dry, sandy soil. Close to the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers, the site was perfect in terms of supply and logistics.

In July 1826, the construction of barracks for two infantry regiments began, despite the fact that title to the approximately 1,800 acres of land was not obtained from the local farmers until August. A battalion of the First Infantry Regiment, under the command of Maj. Stephen Watts Kearny, and the Third Infantry, commanded by Col. Henry Leavenworth, were the first occupants. The initial plan consisted of five buildings in the shape of a parallelogram, including two enlisted men's barracks and three officers' quarters. The front of each building faced the parade ground on the interior of the parallelogram. The enlisted men's barracks were each 640 feet long, one story high in the front and two stories high in the rear. At the east end of each barracks and the west end of the parallelogram were smaller buildings, 37 feet by 90 feet, to house the officers. The front of each officer's quarters was two stories high, while the backs were three stories. The exterior of the buildings was of brick and stone, with interiors and framing of wood.

The enlisted men were originally slated to construct the fort, but the Third Regiment arrived too late to complete their barracks before winter, and the quartermaster contracted their part of the

work to civilians for \$3,000. The Army supplied the contractor with stone from quarries on post, and bricks manufactured in a kiln built by the First Infantry. On October 23, 1826, the Adjutant General named the post Jefferson Barracks in honor of Thomas Jefferson, who had died on the Fourth of July, 1826.

Construction expenses totaled \$18,783.44 by November 1826, with storehouses, guardhouses and a hospital yet to be built. In addition, the size of the enlisted men's barracks was expanded to accommodate 22 companies instead of the original 16, making the garrison's capacity 1,200 men, excluding officers. The initial construction of Jefferson Barracks ended in the fall of 1830. A good relationship with the city of St. Louis was forged through the purchase of large amounts of supplies and the use of civilian craftsmen.

The Infantry School at Jefferson Barracks taught tactics to all incoming recruits and gave refresher courses to regular troops, who were rotated through. Regimental officers stationed at Jefferson Barracks composed the faculty. Courses included close-order drill, artillery and cavalry schools of instruction, marksmanship, and the care of weapons. Approximately 20 men went to the range at a time for target practice, with their Model 1816 Harpers Ferry flintlock muskets in hand, firing three rounds each from a distance of 60 yards. Their performance was considered to be good if from the total of 60 rounds fired, 20 fell within the bullseye.

Training was expected to instill a high degree of martial spirit and respect among the soldiers. However, the men were only human, and often violated military law, most often through drunkenness or desertion. Between 1826 and 1832, at least 50 soldiers were court-martialed each year for drunkenness; habitual drunkards were eventually drummed out of the service. The common sentence was reduction to the rank and pay of a recruit and the loss of one month's regular liquor allowance (1/4 pint a day).

Desertion carried a maximum penalty of death. Nevertheless, between September 1826 and January 1827, 80 men deserted from Jefferson

Barracks, out of a total garrison of 400. Deserters were tried before a court-martial usually composed of seven officers. Often sentenced to hard labor without pay, few deserters received the death penalty unless they deserted in the face of the enemy. The President reviewed most sentences of death for desertion, frequently reducing the sentence. Large numbers of enlisted men left the post without permission, in order to visit houses of prostitution and grog shops in St. Louis. These men were easily apprehended or returned on their own after a few days. Disciplinary actions against them were generally taken up at the unit level and not through court-martial. Surprisingly, a proportionately large number of officers were also court-martialed during the early years of Jefferson Barracks. The most common offenses were conduct unbecoming an officer and disobeying orders. There were eight courts-martial involving officers in 1827 alone.

The quality of food and supplies was a contributing factor to desertion. At Jefferson Barracks, the first contract for rations for 800 men was granted in November, 1826 to a Cincinnati company in the amount of \$18,095, for the delivery of 800 barrels of pork; 1,600 barrels of flour; 10,000 gallons of whiskey; 3,000 gallons of vinegar; 600 bushels of beans; 300 bushels of salt; 12,000 pounds of soap; and 5,000 candles, to be delivered in quarterly amounts. Fresh beef was supplied by a local butcher under a separate contract. Animals were slaughtered within one mile of Jefferson Barracks, preferably on the Illinois side of the river, so the smell would be carried away by the prevailing westerly winds. Contractors frequently failed to honor their agreements, however. Throughout 1830, shipments did not arrive on time. Shortages were common, usually due to loss or damage in transit, or, in the case of whiskey, consumption by the boat crew. Despite the problems of supply, the relationship of Jefferson Barracks to St. Louis and the surrounding communities stimulated the economy and promoted the growth of the region.

During the summer of 1832, the Barracks became important as a supply center, establishing depots from which to issue rations to forces fighting the

Indian leader Black Hawk, which included the Illinois Militia and Indians friendly to the United States. A final accounting to the Commissary General at the end of the Black Hawk War reported that contractors delivered 89,561 rations to the Illinois militia at a cost of eighteen cents per ration, totaling \$16,120.98. The cost, although considered high, was reasonable considering the difficulties and distance of transport.

When not engaged in military operations, training, or building and maintaining the installation, the troops performed many non-military duties. Horses, mules, and oxen had to be cared for. Men were assigned on a rotating basis to act as teamsters hauling construction materials, food, and other supplies between St. Louis and the Barracks. In the warm months up to 30 men were assigned to gardening. Army policy required each post to produce or procure its own kitchen vegetables, such as potatoes, beans, carrots, and turnips. Since each regiment had to furnish its own mess hall and barracks with wood, timber cutting went on all year-round. In addition, each regiment had to police and clean its own area. Most of the rubbish was burned, or dumped into the Mississippi.

There also were off-post duties. Some men had to see to the delivery and return of army keelboats used to ship supplies from the Barracks to forts along the upper Mississippi and its tributaries (Forts Armstrong, Crawford, Snelling, and Winnebago). Usually, each boat was assigned a second lieutenant, a sergeant, and ten privates. Dangerous and difficult, the work was even more risky because many soldiers were inexperienced as rivermen and could not swim. Soldiers were also sent to the United States Arsenal between the Barracks and St. Louis to mix gunpowder to meet specifications.

Jefferson Barracks is properly identified with St. Louis and westward expansion. It provided an economic stimulus for the city's contractors and merchants. From its establishment in 1826 until the conclusion of the Mexican War in 1848, it was one of the Army's most important posts, and remained a functioning army installation until after World War II. During its early history, its

location made it, and thus St. Louis, the supply center for military installations in the Missouri Valley and along the upper Mississippi and its tributaries, as well as southern posts at Baton Rouge, New Orleans, and Forts Gibson, Jesup, Macomb, and Towson. The importance of Jefferson Barracks in the history of the St. Louis area and the westward expansion of the United States should not be underestimated.

