

Veterans Administration Hospital
Boise, Idaho

HISTORY OF FORT BOISE

by
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The grounds now occupied by the Veterans Administration Hospital in Boise helped make Idaho history. Most of the buildings currently in use are relics of Old Fort Boise, later known as Boise Barracks.

Ghosts of the old Army post pop up from time to time. Not too long ago, two VA employees were raking an area for a parking lot and unearthed several relics of minor significance. Among the items was a shell from an old gatling gun, some hand-cast lead bullets, over 100 pistol and rifle shells with the dates 1884 and 1886 stamped on them, an early mining pick, and adz for trimming timber, an Army medal, a copper flag staff mounting, cavalry uniform buttons, several horse and mule shoes, a pocket knife frame and a flat copper spoon. Some of these relics are on display in the Recreation building.

THREE FORT BOISES

Fort Boise was established in June, 1863. Gold had recently been discovered in the Boise Basin at that time. As a result, the population of Boise Basin mushroomed, discontented Indians started causing trouble and the government felt that military protection was necessary.

The post, occupied by the First Oregon Cavalry under the command of General Pinckney Lugenheel, was originally known as Camp Boise but was soon changed to Fort Boise. It was actually the third fort in Idaho by that name.

The original Fort Boise had been erected in 1834 about 10 miles from the mouth of the Boise River - at that time known as Reed River and, later, as Bear River before receiving its present name.

Two years later the site was changed to the East bank of the Snake River and a short distance from the mouth of Boise River. The second Fort Boise was one of the famous stopping points of the Old Oregon Trail. In 1856, this fort was abandoned due to the marauding of Indians; and seven years later, the third Fort Boise was founded in Boise. Although historically known as the third Fort Boise, it was actually the only Fort Boise to be established by the U. S. government. The other two had been trading posts of the Hudson Bay Company.

SALMON SPEARED ON VA GROUNDS

There were two reasons for the General's selecting the Boise site. Cottonwood Creek had a natural drainage in that area. (Incidentally, this creek, which had its lower course changed, still skirts the VA Hospital grounds and flows through Boise. Early settlers used pitchforks to spear salmon in it.) There were also sandstone deposits nearby for building purposes. An excerpt from a letter

General Lugenbeal wrote to his daughter describes the early construction. He wrote: "The new fort is getting along slowly, but we are almost ready to go to work in earnest. The saw mill started yesterday and will commence sawing at once. The adobe yard is ready and we commence today to make adobes. The lime kiln is built and we can burn lime whenever we need it. The Quartermaster's corral is about two-thirds done. The blacksmith shop will be done when we get the shingles to cover it. The bake house is being built and will soon be ready to run.

"We have given a contract to some people to cut and stack all the hay on a large island. We have also given the contract to some people to make shingles and when the saw mill gets to running well, we will be able to work and build quarters for officers and men to live in. The quarters for the officers and men are to be built of sandstone. The quarters for the laundresses will be built of logs. I think that I will have all the houses we will need this year built before snow falls, and next year if any more people come, we can build for them."

FIRST INSULATED BUILDING IN IDAHO

Several stone buildings, some still standing, were built in those early days to protect the inhabitants from the heat and cold as well as from the Indians. A description of Building 6, located a short distance from the office of the Director of the VA Hospital and near the Veterans Home, is a good example of this. It is a one-story building made of sandstone blocks ranging in weight from 25 to 1,000 pounds. They are not of uniform size yet they are laid in a neat and interesting fashion. This was probably the first insulated building in Idaho as on the inside of the wall for a foot of thickness is a rubble of rocks held together by adobe clay to provide insulation from the cold and heat. The roof structure is unique for that period; and it has deep, recessed windows.

This author once talked to an old timer who said that, in the early days, there was a sign in this building that read, "DO NOT SHOOT DEER FROM THE WINDOWS." This might be true because, as late as February 1949, over 80 mule deer adopted the hospital grounds as a sanctuary. In that year they were driven down from the hills because of the heavy snows.

FIRST CABIN IN BOISE

Soon after the site of Fort Boise had been selected, the townsite of Boise was laid out. At first, the name Boise City was used. Strangely enough, Boise dropped the word City after it became a city.

John O'Farrell has the distinction of being the first actual settler on the Boise City site. He built a small log cabin for his 17-year-old bride near Fort Boise for protection against the Indians. This cabin was used for the first school in Boise and still stands. It was moved to Fort Street in 1912 by the Daughters of the American Revolution and is now located about 100 yards to the right of the VA Hospital entrance gate.

Boise City grew fast that first year. In 1864, there was a population of 1,685 persons consisting, according to reports of that time, of 504 voters, 959 non-voters, 204 women and 318 children. (Idaho City then had a population of over 20,000.) There were two retail stores, two feed and livery stables and, in keeping with those days, several saloons.

IDAHO TERRITORY LARGER THAN TEXAS

During that year, Boise City became the capital of Idaho Territory which included the area now covered by Idaho, Montana and Wyoming. It was larger than Texas of today by over 60,000 square miles.

Houses were rather primitive. Some were logs held together by pegs. Some were tents. Others were tent and wood combinations. Living was hard and rugged, with men outnumbering women five to one. Yet they had their good times with Fort Boise serving as the center of social activities. The Statesman under date of October 20, 1864, reporting on "one of the most brilliant and successful parties of the season," said that "flags, a couple of sixteen-inch howitzers mounted on a platform and all manner of arms and equipment of soldiers furnished the decorations while the rooms were crowded with dancers and guests."

MEDICAL SERVICE AT FORT BOISE.

Medical service at Fort Boise in those early days was a far cry from that offered at the Veterans Hospital today. "Idaho Lore" gives an account of how smallpox was treated at that time.

It seems that one major had his wife and five children living at the Fort. One day one of the children became ill, and we now quote from "Idaho Lore": When the child seemed to be getting worse, the major called a doctor who took one long stare around him and headed for the door. He shouted that it was smallpox and vanished. After the child died, nobody wanted to bury it; but after the grave was dug, the father wrapped the child in a blanket and laid it outside the cabin, and some soldiers roped it from a distance, not venturing within 30 feet of it, and dragged it to the grave and tumbled it in. The mother died next, and one by one the children followed her; and the appalled father laid them outside, and they were roped and dragged away. When the major felt himself stricken, he wrapped a blanket around himself and lay close to the door to die. After he was buried, the cabin was destroyed by fire. These seven graves are still marked in the old burying grounds near the site of the Fort."

FORT BOISE CEMETERY STILL STANDS

The "burying grounds" referred to was the cemetery of old Fort Boise, of course. This historic spot still stands and is located over the hill from the present VA Hospital grounds. In this plot are the remains of Civil War, Indian War and Spanish War soldiers as well as a number of pioneers, some unknown. All were interred prior to 1913.

In 1879 the name of the cavalry post was changed to Boise Barracks, a name that remained until it was abandoned in 1912 when the Army decided to give up its smaller posts and concentrate on a few large ones.

The only buildings used for several years were some stables and storage space occupied by the National Guard. However, after World War I, the United States Public Health Service Hospital was established to provide medical treatment for men suffering from wounds. In 1920 this was taken over by the United States Veterans Hospital which, in 1930, became known as the Veterans Administration.