

Iti Fabussa



Fort McCulloch | A mostly forgotten Choctaw historical site

Part one in a three-part series by James Briscoe

Fort McCulloch was built shortly after the Battle of Elkhorn Tavern (as it was known by the Confederates or Pea Ridge as the Union called it) in the Spring of 1862. For a time, the post was the largest and most fortified Confederate position in Indian Territory, and yet so little was written about it that a traveler in 1870 wrote in the diary of his trip down the Texas/Butterfield Road, "Today we passed an earthen fort with rifle pits. Whose it was and for what we did not learn." The earthen fort Joseph Edmonds spoke of was undoubtedly one of two gun positions guarding the west side of the crossing of Blue River on his trip down the old road. The two gun positions were a small part of a military post that covered over two square miles and housed (for a time) over 3000 troops of Choctaw, Chickasaw, Arkansas and Texas military units.

The fort was built by General Albert Pike, who became the ranking Confederate officer in Indian Territory after the death of General Benjamin McCulloch at the Battle of Elkhorn Tavern. Pike's orders were to defend Indian Territory and he personally did not believe that there were sufficient forces or supplies to defend the entire Indian Territory. His basic strategy was to defend the territory south of the Arkansas River, leaving a smaller force north of the river for tactical raiding and general harassment of Union forces and supply lines by General Stand Watie's Cherokee mounted regiment and William Quantrill's guerillas.

Pike arrived in the vicinity of Nails Crossing on the Blue River in late March, 1862, with about half of the combined Indian and Texas forces in the territory. The remainder of the troops, under Gen. Douglas Cooper's command, were left on the Arkansas River. Pike had chosen this location as the most defensible and important crossroads in the Indian Territory. The bulk of both his troops and those of Cooper were Choctaw and Chickasaw, and the placement of the new post was also (more than likely) intended as a gesture to the Choctaw and Chickasaw Nations that they were not being abandoned.

Work began on the construction of a series of earthworks, strategically placed to protect the troops and control traffic on the various roadways across the area. The first earthworks were fortified berms and ditches as detailed by the Confederate Corps of Engineers. It is presumed that the drawing made by the Corps of Engineers was the 'plan' for the defenses rather than what Pike actually had constructed. The 'plan' shows four open sided earthworks on the high terrace west of Nails Crossing, but only the northwest feature matches where earthworks were actually found.

The basic design for the post was a series of defensive points that generally supported the surrounding defensive points and included a series of raised platform star forts and entrenchments, and possibly make-shift breastworks. The defensive locations encircled (for the most part) the occupied portion of the



The earthen fort Edmonds found on the Texas/Butterfield Road.

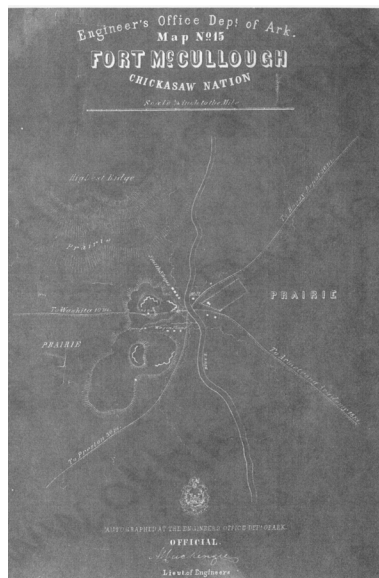
post, consisting of the Quartermaster's compound, unit-sized bivouacs, mechanics shops and the headquarters area. Work details spent the day excavating and building the defensive points. This work was difficult in the shallow rocky soil and half of the force was continually on sick call. Pike commented on the absentee list and ended up furloughing a percentage of his force, to go home and help with the planting and harvest chores.

Supplies and arms (much of which Pike paid for with his own money) were diverted to other locations, and pay for the troops was virtually nonexistent. For the most part, Choctaw and Chickasaw troopers supplied their own horses and carried bows and arrows into battle. Hunting parties, traveling onto the prairies to the west, supplied much of the food for the post. The troops from Arkansas and Texas were clothed with issue uniforms while most of the Native American troops had jackets and caps (usually) over traditional clothing from home.

The post was initially garrisoned with elements of the Choctaw and Chickasaw brigades, two Arkansas batteries and infantry units, and Texas cavalry. The Creek and Seminole light cavalry were ordered to patrol the Santa Fe Road and on raiding parties along the Kansas border. Smaller units were sent to garrison posts at Armstrong Academy, Boggy Depot, Camp McIntosh and elsewhere. He had eighteen field cannons (including twelve parrot rifles) and a roster of about 1500 on the daily active duty roster at any one time.

Anecdotes about the post are rare. The best source of information comes from W.E. Woodruff, who published a memoir in 1903 (<http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/009535740>), of his reminiscences of his Civil War years with the Eleventh Arkansas Battery. Woodruff speaks briefly of how disagreeable the trench digging was (and the nature of the food). He also mentions that the

site of Fort McCulloch was the location of a fight between the Frontier Rangers and Comanches in 1828 or 1829, an as yet



Confederate Corps of Engineers Plan for Fort McCulloch.

unsubstantiated fact. Supplies were scarce at Fort McCulloch and the quartermaster, as Woodruff recalls, came into the possession of a quantity of marble wall paper. The wall paper was cut into pieces and printed up as military script, redeemable in \$5 lots.

About two weeks after the arrival of the Eleventh Arkansas Battery, the commander of the battery decided that the guns needed to be fired. The unannounced firing caused pandemonium among the troops. The only other time that cannons were fired at the post occurred after the Plains Indians to the west heard of the earlier event. Since Pike was eager to make friends with the Comanche, Kiowa, Plains Apache, Caddo, Delaware and other groups living in the western part of the Indian Territory, a visit was arranged for them at the fort. Pike had the battery take a section of cannon to the edge of the post and fire live rounds for their benefit. One of the more stoic leaders commented that the gun 'shoot twice' (as an exploding shell hit and exploded half a mile away). Men with the battery were surprised to find that the gentleman spoke English. Trade between the soldiers and the Plains Indians was brisk, particularly in handkerchiefs. A short time later, General Thomas Hindman, in command of the Trans-Mississippi Department, ordered the guns to Arkansas.

The hey-day of Fort McCulloch lasted less than eight months. In August, 1862, Hindman ordered Pike to bring his troops to the defense of Fort Smith. Pike, who had originally secured the treaties with the Tribes of Indian Territory, found himself in conflict with the terms of those treaties. The Indian brigades were raised for self defense and were not to be taken out of Indian Territory, according to treaty terms. The troops had been taken out of Indian Territory for the Battle of Elkhorn Tavern in March and were unfairly criticized for 'savage' behavior by Confederate officers. In lieu of disobeying a direct order or further breaking treaty stipulations, Pike tendered his resignation from the army.

Hindman withheld the letter from his superiors, most likely in hopes of embarrassing Pike. Hindman didn't have to wait long before Pike (thinking he was officially resigned) penned a tirade against the entirety of the Confederate officer corps, specifically those in command of the Trans-Mississippi Department. Gen. Cooper, with Hindman's blessings, sent an armed detail to Fort McCulloch and had Pike arrested for treason. The troops at Fort McCulloch were sent elsewhere and the post was only sporadically occupied through the remainder of the Civil War.

The location was occupied by Union forces under Col. William Phillips for a brief period in February 1864 during a thrust aimed at attacking across the Red River. By the end of 1863, a stalemate had been reached with Union forces in control of Indian Territory north of the Arkansas River, and Confederate forces south of the river. Fort Smith had fallen and General Blunt moved his headquarters there, leaving Phillips in command of the Indian Regiment at Fort Gibson (being rechristened as Fort Blunt). Confederate setbacks in much of the Trans-Mississippi Department (including Indian Territory) provided an opportunity to take Indian Territory out of the war and strike a real blow at Texas. The Phillips Expedition, as it has become known, called for a main strike force moving through Indian Territory and meeting up with fresh supplies and fresh cavalry at Boggy Depot. From Boggy Depot, there were a number of roads leading: south into Texas; east to Armstrong Academy (being used as the temporary Council House of the Choctaw), Fort Towson, southern Arkansas and northern Louisiana; west towards Fort Washita, Fort Arbuckle and the Great Plains; and southerly to Bonham, Sherman, Dennison and elsewhere in Texas.

Phillips left Fort Blunt (Gibson) on Jan. 29, 1864, with a force of between 1500 and 2000 men. The Second Indian Brigade, under Major Moses Wright was sent east to Rhea's Mill to acquire grain and provisions for the expedition. Wright was to then march down the old Texas Road and meet up with Phillips at Boggy depot. Phillips's plan also called for reinforcement by Col. Thomas

Moonlight and the Fourteenth Kansas Cavalry at Boggy Depot, marching southwest from their camp at Skullytown. Wright's brigade would be needed to resupply the expedition and Moonlight's Regiment would be needed as fresh troops for a push into northern Texas.

The main historical opinion, at this point, is that Phillips started out from Fort Blunt heading due west and then turned south and headed for North Fork Town on the Texas Road. After hearing no word from Wright or Moonlight, Phillips marched south on the Texas Road to its junction with the old Butterfield Road, southeast to Boggy Depot, and then south to Nails Crossing on the Blue River. Phillip's route began with moving west (away from the Texas Road) into Creek country as far as Hillabee and then south to North Fork Town and then down the Texas Road. A reconnaissance in force was sent farther west to Edwards (a trading post community near old Camp Holmes) and then down the old Dragoon trail from Camp Holmes to Boggy Depot.

Southward from Hillabee to the Canadian River, Phillips began experiencing skirmishes with small groups in ever increasing frequency. After Crossing the Canadian River, south of North Fork Town, his route was down the Texas Road. Phillip's main concern was having heard no word from Moonlight's force, upon which Phillips' strategy depended. Phillips was unaware of Confederate moves being made on Fort Smith and the redeployment of Moonlight's cavalry to Shullyville to counter it. Phillips left a store of corn for Moonlight at North Fork Town and then headed southerly towards Perryville. From Perryville, Phillips followed the old Texas Road south towards the Red River. Phillips surmised (correctly) that Gen. D. H. Cooper was assembling a large force at Fort Washita to block his intentions on the Red River. Phillips also knew that most of Cooper's forces were dispersed throughout the region and that a blow to Fort Washita would be a major blow to the Confederate hold on Indian Territory.

One small rag-tag group (around 150 men) under Cpt. Adam Nail was encamped at the point where the old Butterfield and Texas Roads meet (near present-day Atoka) on the Middle (now Muddy) Boggy River. On Feb. 13, Phillips' vanguard skirmishers under Cpt. Charles Willets found Nail's encampment and launched a surprise attack. Forty seven Confederates were killed in the brief melee but the rest were able to retreat after a brief defense. Hoping to catch the Confederate supplies and force at Boggy Depot, some 10 miles away, Phillips pushed his force down the old Butterfield Road (AKA Boggy Depot Road) to Boggy Depot. The two to three hour delay at Muddy Boggy was sufficient time for the remaining supplies to be removed from Boggy Depot and the Confederate force to make a hasty retreat towards Fort Washita. Unlike the majority of places along his route, Phillips spared the houses and property at Boggy Depot, in pursuit of the Confederate force ahead of him.

Phillips continued on to Nail's Crossing, a stage station on the old Butterfield Road and went into encampment. Phillips dubbed his encampment Camp Kagi. In a dispatch to Fort Gibson, Phillips described his position as '...safely encamped behind Pike's ditches...', undoubtedly in reference to the then unoccupied Fort McCulloch. On the 14th of February, Phillips sent out letters to the various tribes offering amnesty if they renounced ties to the Confederacy.

It was clear by this point that Moonlight's force was not coming. A larger concern was the absence of Major Wright and his supplies (not to mention the 500 men with him). In his report of February 14, Phillips reported having a force of 1500 men and 4 field guns. With no hope of achieving the original goals, Phillips decided to make a stab at Fort Washita, only 10 miles to the west. Phillips hand-picked the best riders/fighters, best horses, best weapons from the force, along with one field gun, for the planned attack. The remainder of the force was sent back to Fort Blunt. On the morning of Feb. 17, Phillips led his force of 450 out towards Fort

Washita.

The road between Blue River and Fort Washita runs along a low-broad uplands prairie flanked by numerous wooded gullies and ravines and was still visible on aerial photographs from the 1940s. The route was excellent for travel but was also vulnerable to ambush, as Phillips would have been well aware.

Cooper was well aware of Phillips plans and had sent word for Col. W.P. Adair to bring his regiment of Cherokee Mounted Rifles down the Texas Road. Cooper was going to slip his troops past the Federal column, join forces with Adair and force Phillips south towards the Red River. As Phillips was approaching Fort Washita, Cooper was trying to slip past him. Cooper's troops were under strict orders not to engage the Federals, but sniped and skirmished with them anyway. Some of the Texas troops initiated attacks on the Federal column and it didn't take long for Phillips to suspect a trap was being set. Phillips wheeled his force and retreated north along the old Dragoon Road to avoid whatever force may be coming to meet him on the Texas Road. Phillips arrived back at Fort Blunt on the 29th of February.

In the end, Union and Confederate commanders dismissed Phil-

lips 'invasion' as a minor and inconsequential raid. Feb. 29, 1864, was also the start of a major council with General Samuel B. Maxey, now in command of the Department of Arkansas (and Texas and Indian Territory). The Choctaw and Chickasaw Nations renewed their support of the Confederacy and the Plains Indians in the western part of the territory also pledged loyalty to the cause.

Fort McCulloch, by the end of the Civil War, was mostly forgotten and has never been adequately researched by historians or archeologists. The impact this place had on the Choctaw and Chickasaw peoples, however, is immense because of its place in the history of both Nations, and in Oklahoma History in general. By the same token, the place is associated with a host of people important in Oklahoma History. On the National Historical stage, Fort McCulloch was one of the last encampments of Stand Watie, the last Confederate general officer to surrender, ending the Civil War. Albert Pike would go on to found the Masonic Grand Lodge of the Scottish Rite in Washington D.C. and author of many important works and translations of Sanskrit texts. William Phillips would go on to become a U.S. Congressman from Kansas.