

LIFE ON THE EDGE: SOLDIERS AND MINERS ON THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY COSO FRONTIER

MARY L. MANIERY

The tentacles of the Civil War were far reaching, creeping even into the remote high desert area of the Coso Ranges. The discovery of copper in the early 1860s (metal needed by the United States military in its war efforts) brought an influx of Spanish-speaking miners and some settlers into the Coso region. Uprisings by Native Americans against these intruders resulted in the establishment of Camp Independence and related outposts by 1863, eventually allowing mining to resume. Within 10 years, massive smelters in nearby Darwin were in operation processing the copper ore, resulting in a full-blown charcoal-production industry high up in the Coso Range. This paper discusses the archaeological expressions of the early military land use in the Coso Range area of Naval Air Weapons Station - China Lake.

April 13, 1861. After a night of cannon fire, Fort Sumter fell and the Civil War began. As state after state seceded from the Union, Congress realized that a long-term, protracted war was likely. By July they had passed the Volunteer Employment Act, a way to quickly raise a large army to defend the Union. As news of the Act spread west, hundreds of men flocked to enlist. On August 14, 1861, just weeks after the Act passed, a Presidential call for state troops led to the establishment of the 2nd Cavalry Regiment of California Volunteers (Griffen 1942:142). California's gold districts and cities like San Francisco and Sacramento were filled with men originally from eastern states that were eager to respond to the Presidential call. As they signed the enlistment papers, I'm sure they believed they would be sent east to defend their family, friends, and their home states against the Confederate forces. Imagine their surprise when they ended up in the Mohave Desert.

Like military everywhere, the Union Army had its fingers in many pies. Out west, the 1860s was a time of widespread Native American conflicts. There was also an increasing fear that Confederate forces would sail around the horn and invade the west. The Army thought the best use of California Volunteers was in California, defending the settlers and protecting the state (Figure 1). Many of the volunteers were sent to Fort Tejon and later Camp Independence (McGrath 1988:31-35).

Figure 1: U.S. Military Outposts, 1847-1900. Adapted from Beck and Haase (1974) and Hart (1965).



The 2nd Cavalry Regiment first went to Owens Valley in the spring of 1862 to control attacks against settlers by the Native Americans. When their brief campaign was unsuccessful, they returned in July and established Camp Independence. Lieutenant Colonel George S. Evans arrived in Owens Valley with 40 hand-picked men from five different companies. He set up the fort about three miles north of what is now the town of Independence with a two-fold purpose. The first goal was to protect the settlers in Owens Valley by keeping Native American out of the valley and surrounding hills. The Army practice was to cut off water and food. By not letting the Native Americans gather their necessary winter supplies, keeping them on the run and thirsty, the military believed that the Native Americans would surrender and ask for peace, and then could be transported to distant reservations (McGrath 199:31).

The second reason for Camp Independence was directly related to the discovery of gold, silver, and copper in the hills south and east of Independence, at the southern end of the valley. Work began in the mines in 1861, and by the time Camp Independence was established, several mills were busy crushing ore and a small village of miners was established at Coso Springs. The stamp mill at the Josephine Mine near Coso Village was destroyed by fire in the summer of 1862 and hostile Native Americans were blamed (Maniery et al. 2000:13-15).

In May 1863, Lieutenant Colonel Evans's replacement, Captain Moses A. McLaughlin, commanded a tough group of soldiers and civilian irregulars who took part in a series of skirmishes against the Native Americans believed responsible for the attacks on the miners. Captain McLaughlin filed reports on his activities and discussed placing his troops on points overlooking canyons and ravines used by the Native groups. From these high points, he reported, his men could force Native Americans into submission by denying them water, leaving them the choice of dying of thirst or surrendering to the Army (United States Congress, House of Representatives 1897:210-213, cited in Maniery et al. 2000:15). By mid-1863 about 1,000 Native Americans in Owens Valley had been rounded up by McLaughlin and his men and taken to the Fort Tejon and Tule River reservations.

The Army, believing that all was well, abandoned Camp Independence in 1864 but returned in March of 1865 when hostilities once again flared up. The last of the encounters between the Army and Native Americans in the Owens Valley area occurred on March 4, 1867, when local Shoshone raided Coso Village, killing one miner and removing anything portable and of use. The Army tracked down the Native Americans, destroyed their rancheria, and returned to Camp

Independence. The Camp was abandoned on July 5, 1877, 10 years after the last action took place (Maniery et al. 2000:15; McGrath 1988:62).

While Camp Independence served as the central fort for the Army activities in Owens Valley, it was common for outposts to be manned by patrolling garrisons. As pointed out by McLaughlin, these outposts were often placed on high points overlooking springs, roads, or canyons. One site within China Lake, locally called Old Fort (CA-INY-5754H), appears to be a McLaughlin outpost.

There has been much controversy throughout the years concerning whether this site really was a fort. Its construction is not specifically mentioned in Army records, although this is not unusual for many redoubts that lined major travel ways or overlooked springs and other natural resources. There are two pieces of evidence, however, that support the conclusion that this was indeed an Army outpost. First is the designation of Camp 22 near this vicinity on a 1860s map (National Archives 1863-1866). Camp 23 (Camp Coster) was a documented Camp Independence outpost established around 1863, and it is logical to assume that Camp 22 was also military and established at the same time, especially considering its location near Coso Village.

Also compelling is oral tradition related by Melvin Chico, a Shoshone. According to Mr. Chico, many Native Americans moved from Coso Hot Springs east to the Coso Village area when Anglo-Americans first entered the Hot Springs area. After gold was found near Coso Village, they moved once again to an area near Darwin Springs, about two miles from the little village. This would put them at or near the Old Fort site. Chico stated that a conflict arose between the Native Americans and miners in the area of the springs. Soldiers were sent from Camp Independence, and an outpost fort was established at Darwin Springs. He claimed the soldiers intended to "slaughter the Indians at Fort Coso" and battle ensued, resulting in several deaths (Brooks et al. 1979:93; Maniery et al. 2000:13).

The physical remains of Old Fort consist of three main structures and several minor features (Figure 2). The main structures include a redoubt on a high peak, a magazine storage facility halfway down the hill, and a barracks located on a flat near the spring. The fort location is about two miles from Coso Village and about a mile from the Josephine Mine, the location of stamp mill that burned in 1862. Strategically, it has everything that Captain McLaughlin included in his report and would have been an ideal spot to defend the troops, cut off access to water, and protect miners on the main wagon road.

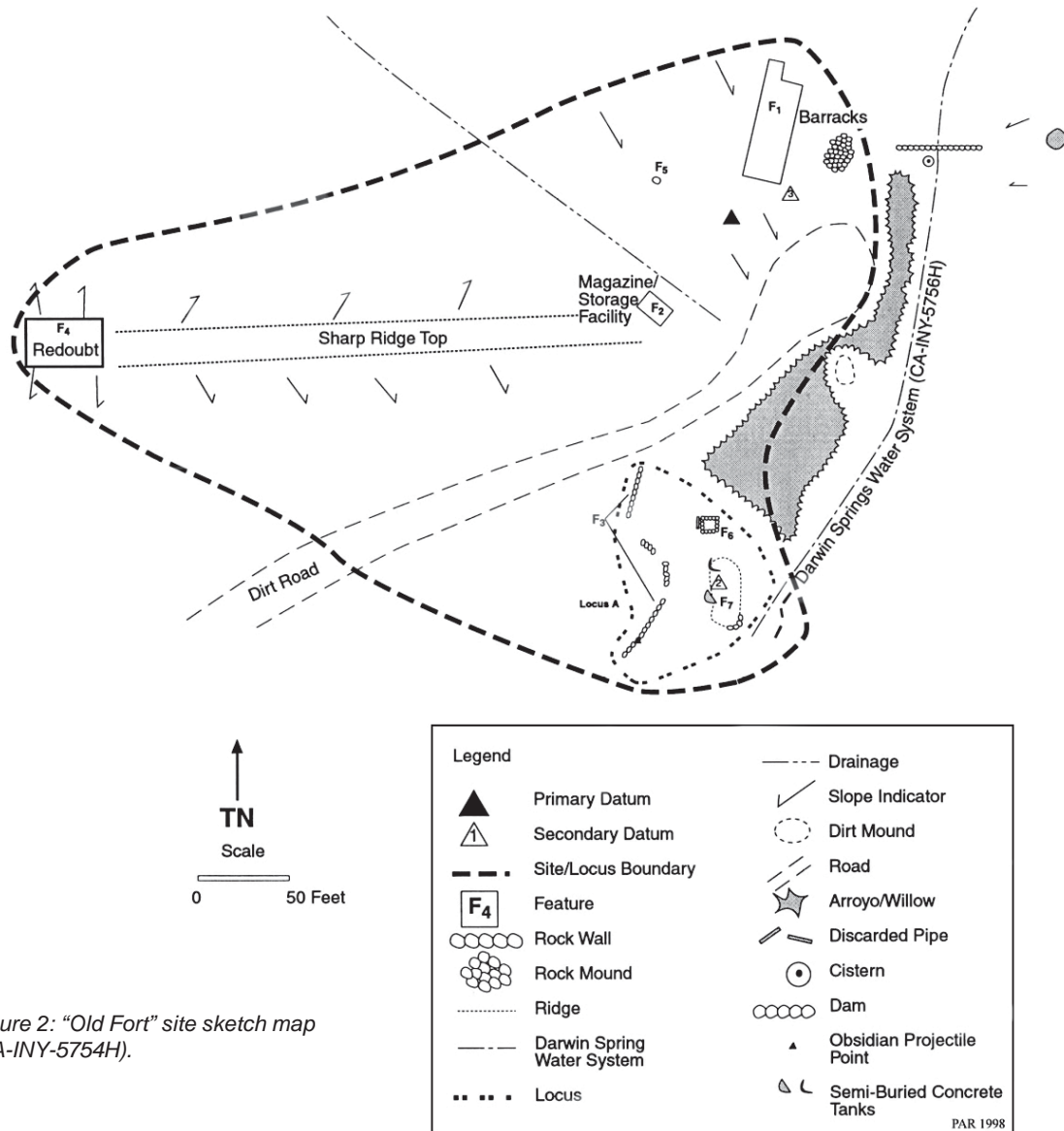


Figure 2: "Old Fort" site sketch map (CA-INY-5754H).

The guard station, or redoubt, is built on a ridge peak above the springs using the natural granite dike (Figure 3). The majority of rocks used in construction are local, uncut, and crudely stacked. The design of the redoubt incorporated large upright boulders that were part of the natural rock outcrop. No mortar was used in construction; small rocks and cobbles were used to fill in spaces between rocks. There is a steep drop on three sides due to the redoubts' location on a ridge; a sharp ridge top lead west to the spring and barracks site. A ramp on the east side of the redoubt, facing the barracks, provided access. Walls are four to five feet in height and two feet thick.

During construction, spaces were left between the rocks to provide loop holes or gun ports. These 13 openings are square or rectangular in shape and about

five inches across. Vertically they are staggered to accommodate sitting, kneeling or standing soldiers. The loopholes allow for a 360-degree view of the surrounding ridge tops and saddles, the wagon road approach into the fort and another leading to the Josephine Mine and Coso Village, and up and down Darwin Springs Canyon. The redoubt could have accommodated a five- to ten-man garrison.

Halfway down the ridge top toward the barracks is a probable magazine or storage area cut into the hill. This feature is made of crudely stacked, unmortared and uncut local rock and is about 15 feet by 20 feet in size. Walls are over two feet thick and were at least four feet high. It was common in the Army outposts to store ammunition and supplies away from the barracks, yet close enough to reach them quickly, should the need

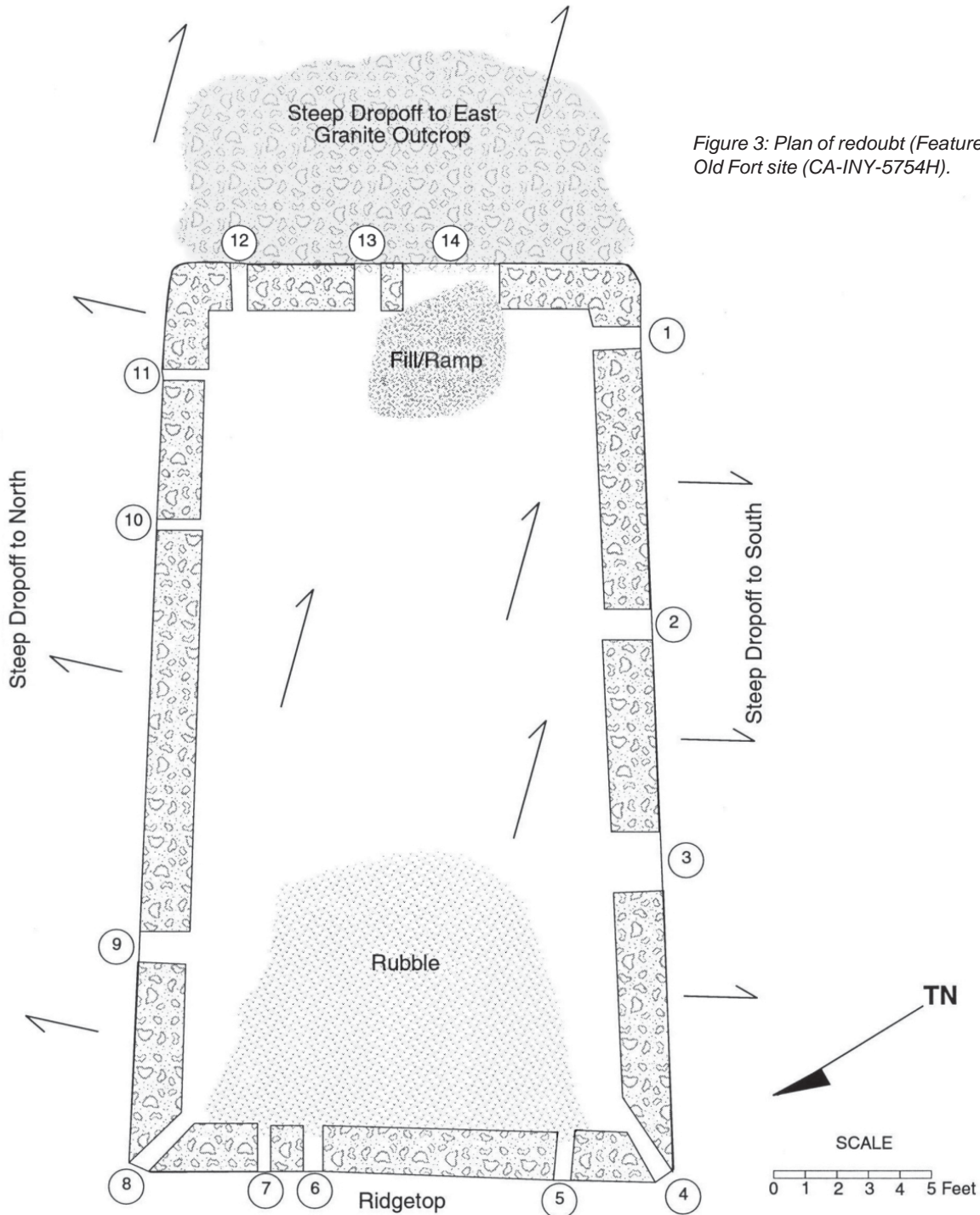


Figure 3: Plan of redoubt (Feature 4), Old Fort site (CA-INY-5754H).

| LEGEND | |
|--------|---|
| 1 | 5" Sq. Opening, View of Darwin Canyon, Wagon Road |
| 2 | 6" Sq. Opening, View of Darwin Canyon South |
| 3 | 20" x 21", Inside, 5" Sq. Opening on Exterior, View of Canyon Road |
| 4 | 4" Sq., View of Wagon Road |
| 5 | 5" x 9" Opening, View of Ridge Top |
| 6 | 5" x 9" Opening, View of Ridge Peak |
| 7 | 5" x 9" Opening, View of Josephine Mine Road |
| 8 | 5" x 9" Opening, View of Ridge |
| 9 | 12" Sq. Opening, View of Saddle |
| 10 | 6" Sq. Opening, View of Saddle |
| 11 | 6" Sq. Opening, View of Ridge Peak |
| 12 | 6" Sq. Opening, View of Fort and Darwin Springs |
| 13 | 9" Sq. Opening, View of Spring + East up Darwin Canyon |
| 14 | 24" x 36" Opening in Wall with Rock Boulder across Top. Probable Entrance |

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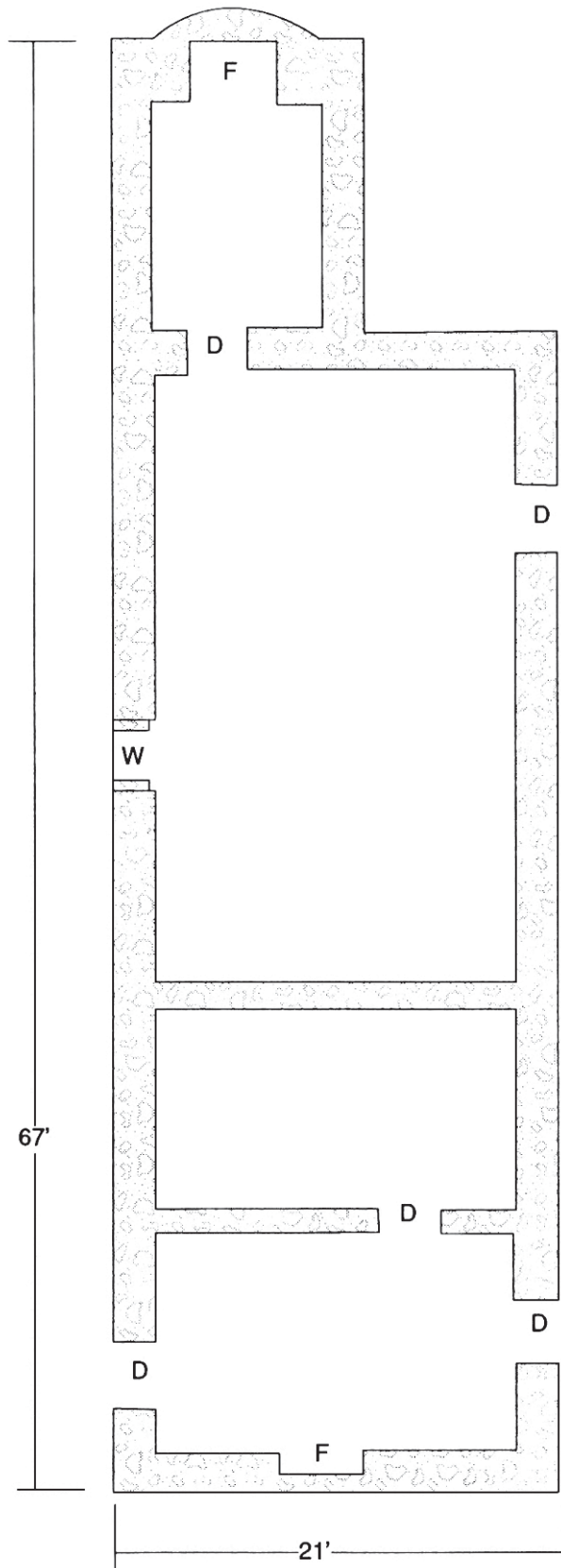


Figure 4: Plan map of barracks building (Feature 1), Old Fort site (CA-INY-5754H).

Legend
D = Door
W = Window
F = Fireplace

TN

SCALE

0 5 10 Feet

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arise. This feature likely served as the secured ammunition magazine facility.

The ruins of the barracks or fort, located on nearly level ground near the spring, stand in mute testimony to the efforts of the Army in this area (Figure 4). The barracks, unlike the other structures, was constructed of cut and dressed granite blocks with mud mortar. The north and south end walls are peaked and have imposing fireplaces. The building likely had a gabled roof. It covers an area about 21 feet wide and 67 feet long.

The interior of the barracks is divided into four rooms, probably representing a separate living space for an officer, enlisted men, and non-commissioned officer. The north end of the structure has an attached room about 13 feet by 12 feet that may have served as a small kitchen area or as a sleeping area for a non-commissioned officer. A large central room likely housed the garrison of enlisted men. The south end of the structure is separated from the rest of the barracks by a solid wall and is divided into two rooms. Given the social stratification of the military, it likely served as officer's housing. Architectural details include several door and window openings and lintels over each fireplace formed from 5-foot-long, rectangular cut granitic slabs that average five inches thick.

Other features at the site include a 10-foot-long by 7-foot-wide rectangular foundation built of both cut and uncut rock, located on a flat near the springs and barracks, and rock retaining walls along sections of the wagon road.

The Old Fort site is the only known surviving example of a Camp Independence outpost in the area and is a physical reminder of a time when the Army was actively involved in controlling and containing Native Americans in the west. The barracks and redoubt were carefully made with an eye towards defense, different from the careless way the miners built stone houses in nearby Coso Village. Local residents of Darwin report collecting military uniform buttons and cartridges from the site in years past, and more artifacts likely remain buried at the fort. This site is in an excellent state of preservation, partially because of its limited access, and is just one more example of the remarkable range of resources present within the truly amazing place that is called China Lake.

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