

Fort Bowie

Fort Bowie
National Historic Site
Arizona

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



“When I was young I walked all over this country, east and west, and saw no other people than the Apaches.”

—Cochise



The ruins of Fort Bowie today.
© SANDRA PETELIN MILLER, IMAGES NOT CREDITED ARE IPS

Guardian of Apache Pass

For over 20 years Fort Bowie and Apache Pass were central to US Army operations against the Chiricahua Apaches for control of the region. The bitter struggle, ending only with Geronimo's surrender in 1886, helped determine how America's southwestern frontier developed in the last half of the 1800s.

The Celerity Wagon was named for its light weight and speed. It was specially designed for the rugged South-west section of the Butterfield Overland stage route. It was smaller than the Concord coaches used on other parts of the line.



ILLUSTRATION BY NICK EGGENHOFER USED BY PERMISSION OF THE NICK EGGENHOFER ESTATE.

The Spaniards called it Puerto del Dado, the Pass of Chance. They might have named it Puerto de la Muerte, the Pass of Death, for the violence that swirled around it. Because its springs were an unfailing water source, Apache Pass—separating the Chiricahua and Dos Cabezas mountains—drew a procession of emigrants, prospectors, and soldiers to this Apache homeland. It was also the scene of two engagements with Cochise's Apache warriors—the Bascom Affair of 1861 (see below) and the Battle of Apache Pass, July 15–16, 1862, in which a Union army under Brig. Gen. James Carleton was ambushed en route to confront Confederate troops in Arizona and New Mexico.

The Battle of Apache Pass led to building Fort Bowie to protect both the pass and Apache Spring. Soldiers from the 5th California Volunteer Infantry started building it on July 28, 1862. Set on a hill overlooking the spring, it was named for regimental commander Col. George Washington Bowie. Completed in under three weeks, the fort was more temporary camp than permanent post—13 tents surrounded by irregular stone breastworks thrown up at key positions atop the hill. As winter loomed, crude stone and adobe

huts replaced the tents. One officer called them “mere hovels” that leaked rain like “a sieve.” In 1868 a less primitive Fort Bowie was built on a plateau 300 yards to the southeast. Substantial adobe barracks, a row of houses for officers, corrals, storehouses, a post trader's store, and a hospital soon occupied the four sides of the sloping parade ground. More buildings were added over the years. When it was abandoned in 1894 Fort Bowie was a modern post of about 38 structures. These are the ruins you see here today.

Between 1862 and 1886, Fort Bowie was the nerve center for military campaigns against hostile Chiricahua Apaches led first by Cochise and then by Geronimo. Cochise finally made peace in 1872, and he and his people were given a 3,000-square-mile reservation in southeastern Arizona that included their traditional homeland.

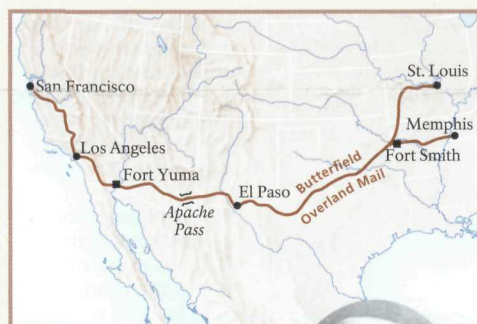
After Cochise died of natural causes in 1874, Indian agent Tom Jeffords tried to maintain order, but young Apaches grew discontented with reservation conditions. Their escape fueled growing distrust between Indians and settlers. In 1876, to impose more rigid

control, the federal government abolished the Chiricahua Reservation, ordering everyone moved to the San Carlos Reservation in the hot, barren, and disease-ridden Gila River Valley. But several bands led by Geronimo and others fled to northern Mexico's Sierra Madre and began to terrorize the border region. For the next 10 years most of these “renegades” would be captured and returned to San Carlos. But, with reservation restraints and deplorable conditions, many escaped again, some more than once. In the last outbreak in May 1885 Geronimo led 134 Chiricahuas back into Mexico. They were pursued by soldiers and Apache scouts under Brig. Gen. George Crook and then under Brig. Gen. Nelson A. Miles.

After their final surrender in September 1886, Geronimo and his remaining followers were brought to Fort Bowie, assembled on the parade ground, and taken by wagons to the railroad for the long journey to exile in Florida. Geronimo's defeat ended both the Apache Wars and Fort Bowie's military usefulness. The fort was an active post for eight more years, finally closing on October 17, 1894, when the last troops were withdrawn.

Butterfield Overland Mail

“Remember, boys, nothing on God's earth must stop the United States mail!” That's what John Butterfield told his Overland Mail stage drivers when he started his semi-weekly, 24-day mail service to California on September 15, 1858. Butterfield's Overland Mail Company started with 2,000 employees, over 250 coaches and several hundred wagons, 1,800 horses and mules, and 240 stage stations spaced along its 2,800-mile route.



John Butterfield (right) gave conductors, agents, drivers, and other workers explicit instructions about how to meet and maintain schedules.



The federal government paid the company \$600,000 per year to carry the mail. The Overland Mail route (see map) began at Memphis, Tennessee, and St. Louis, Missouri, joined at Fort Smith, Arkansas, then went to El Paso, Texas, across southern New Mexico and Arizona to Fort Yuma, and up California's central valley to San Francisco.

In its three-year history, the Overland Mail was attacked only once by Apaches and was late reaching the end of the line only three times.



Apache Pass Stage Station, built in July 1858 with high stone walls, had a kitchen-dining room, sleeping rooms, feed and weapons storage, and a mule corral. Before the Bascom Affair, Cochise and his people supplied wood to station workers. The station was abandoned when the Butterfield stage route's southern section closed on the eve of the Civil War in 1861. Only ruins remain today.



Apache Spring provided water for Indians, travelers, and soldiers. It still delivers its gentle, steady flow of water today.

The Bascom Affair

In January 1861 a band of Apaches raided the ranch of John Ward, stole some stock, and kidnapped the son of a Mexican woman who lived with Ward. Ward wrongly believed that Cochise and his Chiricahuas were responsible and demanded that the military authorities confront Cochise, recover his stock, and secure the boy's return. In February the Army sent Lt. George Bascom and 54 men into Apache Pass.

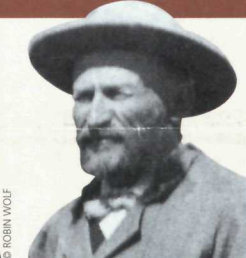
After setting up camp about a mile from the Butterfield stage station, Bascom lured Cochise into his tent and threatened to hold him hostage until Ward's property and the boy were returned. Furious and insulted, Cochise slashed through the tent wall and eluded the soldiers outside. Sporadic fighting between Cochise's warriors and Army troops bloodied Apache Pass for the next two weeks.

The Bascom affair sparked open warfare between whites and Apaches that raged intermittently for the next 10 years.



Cochise (1824?–74) was not overly hostile to whites until 1861, when false accusations of theft and kidnapping sparked 10 years of death and destruction in southern Arizona.

No authentic likeness of Cochise is known to exist. This modern portrait is based on descriptions and facial features of his sons and of Chiricahua Apaches in general.



George Crook (1829–90), West Point graduate and Civil War veteran, came to Fort Bowie in 1871 to fight against Cochise. He returned 11 years later to fight against Geronimo.

Crook was one of the few professional military men who saw Indians as worthy adversaries. He advocated granting them full civil rights and all the privileges of citizenship.



Nelson A. Miles (1839–1925) had a renowned military career from the Civil War to the 1900s. He served mostly in the West, fighting Crazy Horse, capturing Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce, and forcing Sitting Bull's surrender.

Replacing Crook, Miles engineered Geronimo's surrender in 1886 and suppressed the Sioux's Ghost Dance in 1890–91 in the last of the nation's major Indian wars.



Geronimo (1829–1909) was the most famous Apache leader. He was not a chief, but many tribe members turned to him for leadership when they were moved to the San Carlos Reservation in 1876.

For the next 10 years, he alternately stayed peacefully on the reservation and waged war against the settlers. His final surrender ended the Apache Wars.

Historic Fort Bowie



Fort Bowie at the height of its development in the early 1890s.

ILLUSTRATION—NPS / RICHARD SCHLECHT

Visiting the Fort Area

A Walk into History
The original route into Fort Bowie was a wagon road built by soldiers who garrisoned the post. For most visitors today, access to the fort is via a 1.5-mile hiking trail of moderate difficulty.

Begin at the trailhead on Apache Pass Road and pass by historic features including the ruins of the Butterfield Stage Station, post cemetery, Apache Spring, and site of the first Fort Bowie. Plan at least two hours for this 3-mile roundtrip walk and visit.

The park, including trails and ruins areas, is open daily from sunrise to sunset. A visitor center has exhibits and a Western National Parks Association store. Visitor center hours vary; check the park website for current schedules.

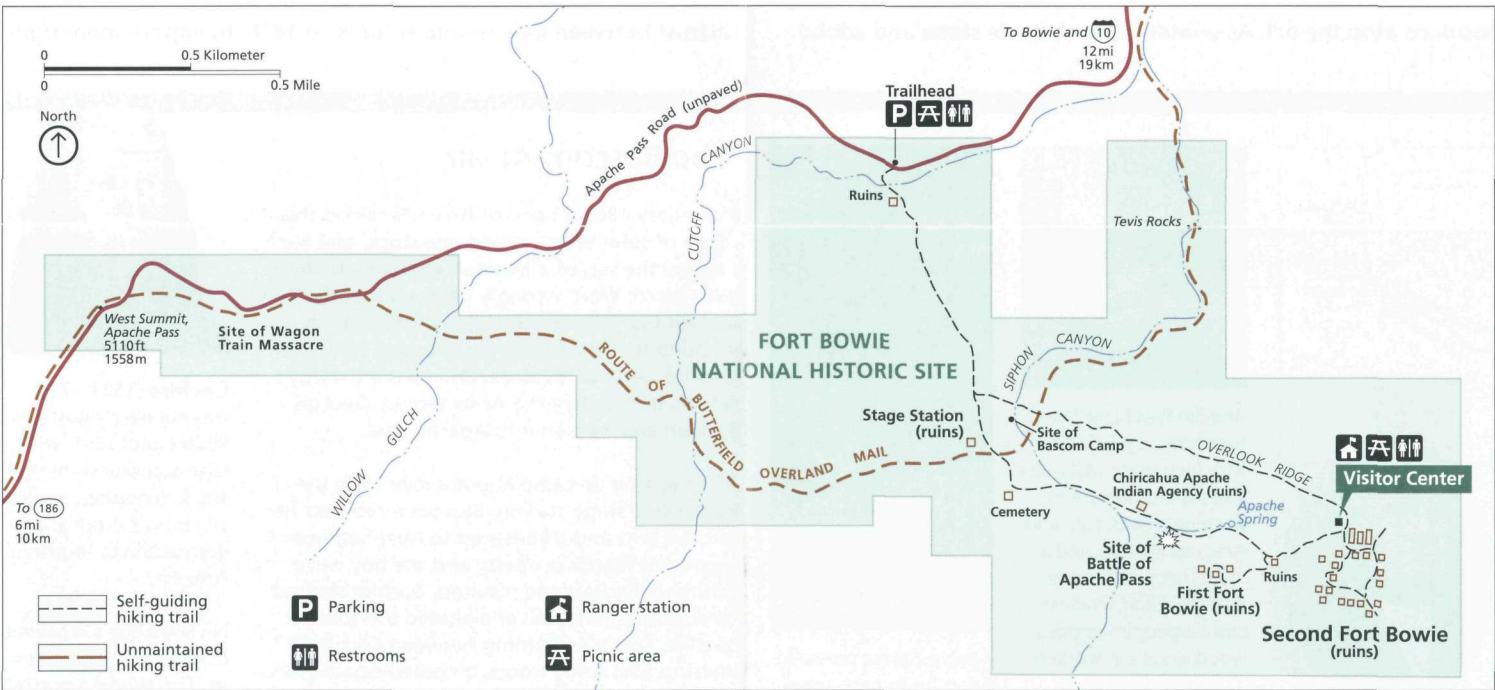
The Natural Setting
The hills around Fort Bowie lie in the Upper Sonoran life zone and contain several biotic communities. Desert grasslands dominate the lower slopes. The chaparral is characterized by tough evergreens, which can form dense thickets of silk tassel, manzanita, and mountain mahogany.

Oak, juniper, and piñon pine grow on the higher slopes. Large trees, like willow, walnut, and cottonwood, typically grow along sandy drainages.

Following good winter rains, spring and summer wildflowers brighten hillsides—bladder pod, desert bailey, alonnia, and globe mallow. You may see deer, gray fox, coyote, cougar, bobcat, coati, javelina, snakes, lizards, and many bird species.

For a Safe Visit Fort Bowie's 5,000-foot elevation may require some getting used to. Drinking water is available only at the visitor center. While hiking, carry water and wear sun protection—there is very little shade and summer temperatures may exceed 100°F. Avoid hiking when lightning threatens. Summer rainstorms can quickly flood washes. Wait out high water. Watch for rattlesnakes.

Drug smuggling and illegal entry can occur this close to the US-Mexico border. Always be aware of your surroundings. Do not travel alone in remote areas. Report suspicious behavior to park staff or call 911.



Protect the Park All natural and cultural features are protected by federal law. Hunting for, collecting, or destroying plants,

animals, structures, or historic objects is prohibited. • For firearms regulations check the park website. • Metal detectors and digging

tools are not allowed in the park. • Do not climb on the fragile walls or mounds. Stay on trails. • Wheeled vehicles must stay on

established roads. • Pets must be leashed at all times.

Camping and Services There are no camping facilities in the park. Motels, stores, trailer parks, campgrounds, and other services can

be found in nearby Willcox and Bowie. Chiricahua National Monument has a campground.

Accessibility We strive to make our facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. For more information go to a visitor center, ask a ranger, call, or check our website. If you are unable to hike the 3-mile roundtrip trail, check the park website or call for alternate access directions.

Getting Here From Willcox on I-10 drive 22 miles south on AZ 186 to the graded dirt road leading east into Apache Pass.

From the town of Bowie on I-10, drive south 12 miles on the partly paved road leading directly into Apache Pass.

Do not attempt to cross flooded washes. Wait until the flooding subsides before you cross.



More Information Fort Bowie National Historic Site is one of over 400 parks in the National Park System. To learn more visit www.nps.gov.

National Park Foundation Join the park community. www.nationalparks.org

Fort Bowie National Historic Site PO Box 158 Bowie, AZ 85605 www.nps.gov/fobo 520-847-2500

Emergencies call 911

©GPO 2018-403-332/82208 Last updated 2018 Printed on recycled paper.