Fort Smith

Fort Smith National Historic Site
Arkansas

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Shaped by a diverse cast of colorful characters—soldiers, Indians, outlaws, and lawmen—Fort Smith National Historic Site evokes 80 years of turbulent history on the western frontier. Explore remnants of two frontier forts, the tragic Trail of Tears, and the historic jail and federal courthouse of Judge Isaac C. Parker.

Stronghold of law and order

The 1803 Louisiana Purchase launched Fort Smith's history. President Thomas Jefferson wanted southeastern American Indians to move west of the Mississippi River, opening their lands to white settlement. This flawed notion assumed western lands were vacant, even though they were already occupied by other native tribes. Jefferson thought it would take 1,000 years for whites to settle the West. In fact, it took just 50 years.



A US Rifle Regiment company *(top art)* built the first Fort Smith in 1817. Troops from the 7th Infantry Regiment *(soldier at left)* took over in 1822.

SOLDIER (LEFT) AND BOAT © MICHAEL HAYNES-WWW.MHAYNE-SART.COM

In 1817 most of the Louisiana Purchase was, by US policy, "Indian Territory" *(map)*. Fort Smith's western boundary was the Indian Territory by 1825.



First Fort Smith 1817–1824

First Fort Smith was built in 1817 to keep peace in the Arkansas River Valley between the native Osage and newly arriving Cherokee. Built of logs and stone, the first fort sat above the Poteau and Arkansas rivers, a spot known by French trappers as Belle Point. Trying to be more effective in maintaining peace, the Army abandoned the fort in 1824 and moved farther west.

In 1836 the Army returned to the fort temporarily to meet treaty obligations by providing supplies to relocating tribes during the tragedy known as the Trail of Tears. Over time the fort's logs rotted and the soil claimed its stones, but the problems for the Indians would persist and increase.



MISSOURI HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Above: George Catlin painted these "Osage Warriors" in 1834. In 1832 he had called for "a nation's park" to preserve Plains Indians' way of life.



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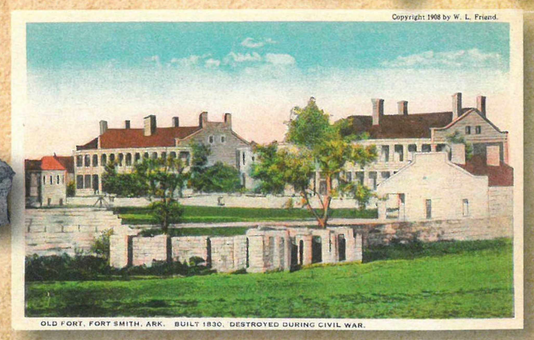
Above: Samuel Seymour watercolor "Fort Smith," 1821. *Right:* In 1960 archeologists unearthed this Rifle Regiment button (from about 1815–1821) at Belle Point.



1838



A personal belongings stencil from the 57th US Colored Troops (USCT). Various units of African American troops served at the fort in the Civil War and after. The 11th USCT was recruited here at Fort Smith.



Arkansas became a state in 1836. A second Fort Smith was built starting in 1838, not 1830 as the post card above suggests. Residents and politicians convinced the War Department of an Indian threat right across the river. The fort's stone walls were built like coastal fortifications meant to withstand heavy cannon fire, but they were never to be tested in combat.

Second Fort Smith 1838–1871

Second Fort Smith was built in 1838 because of an unfounded fear of Indian attack, but the 1846–48 US-Mexican war, 1849 California Gold Rush, surging westward migration, and forts built farther west made it an important supply depot.

Arkansas River steamboats brought supplies from St. Louis and New Orleans. The city of Fort Smith began to prosper and grow. After the Civil War (1861–1865) the military permanently closed the little-needed fort in 1871.

In the Civil War the fort saw little action, but it was a major supply post for both sides. In April 1861 the US Army abandoned the fort to Confederate Arkansas state troops. Two years later the Confederates abandoned the fort to Union troops who occupied it for the rest of the war.

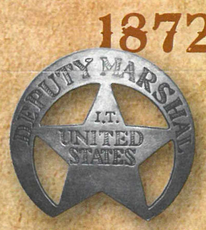
Bitterly divided, American Indians fought on both sides in the Civil War, as did western Arkansas citizens. After the Union forces returned to Fort Smith, local African Americans were recruited into the US Colored Troops (USCT). After the war, African Americans had their freedom. This was not true for American Indians, regardless of who they had fought for.

An 1865 Fort Smith Council was held to establish relations with Indians after the Civil War. Delegates of 12 Indian nations *(right)* met with the US government. Although they had fought on both sides in the war, the United States treated all tribes as defeated enemies. They were told that their rights had been forfeited, their slaves must be freed, and their property could be confiscated. The council ended with little resolved. Not expecting to sign treaties and concerned that tribal sovereignty was at stake, the tribes simply pledged their allegiance to the United States. The next year the tribes signed separate treaties with the federal government. The council was one more step in the relentless reduction of tribal sovereignty.



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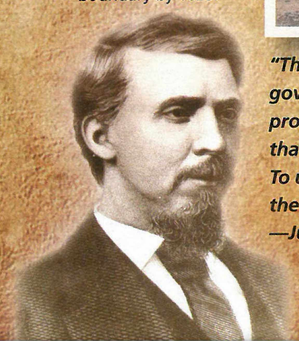
1872



Initials I.T. on this US marshal badge stood for Indian Territory, Fort Smith's western boundary by 1825.



"The Territory was set apart for the Indians in 1828. The government at that time promised them protection. That promise has always been ignored. The only protection that has ever been afforded them was through the courts. To us who have been located on this borderland has fallen the task of acting as protectors."
—Judge Isaac C. Parker, 1896





Federal Court 1872–1896

Federal Court for the Western District of Arkansas had jurisdiction over Indian Territory. It moved into the former enlisted men's barracks in 1872. One side of the first floor was the courtroom and the other held offices for the US Marshal, US Commissioner, and Court Clerk. The attic was used for jury deliberation. Over the next 25 years, hundreds of US Deputy Marshals rode out from the court into Indian Territory to maintain law and order.

The barracks basement, once a mess hall, became a primitive jail with two big cells (up to 100 men per cell)—and poor, unsanitary conditions. Prisoners nicknamed it "Hell-on-the-Border." Journalist Anna Dawes, daughter of a US senator, visited the jail in 1885. Reprinted in *The Congressional Record*, her news article prodded Congress to fund a new Fort Smith jail.

Judge Isaac C. Parker, although called "the hanging judge," tried to create "the moral force of a strong court." He rehabilitated convicts, reformed criminal justice, and advocated the rights of Indian nations, but sensational cases and mass executions overshadowed such work.

Judge Parker presided over one of the largest, deadliest, and busiest federal court districts. He heard over 13,000 cases—344 were for capital crimes. Of 160 he sentenced to hang, only 79 faced the gallows. His court's jurisdiction over Indian Territory ended in September 1896. Judge Parker died 10 weeks later, on November 17, 1896.







Clockwise above: Choctaw Indian police, deputy US marshals; federal deputy marshals captured suspects and brought them to Fort Smith for trial; non-Indians rush to homestead former Indian Territory in 1889.

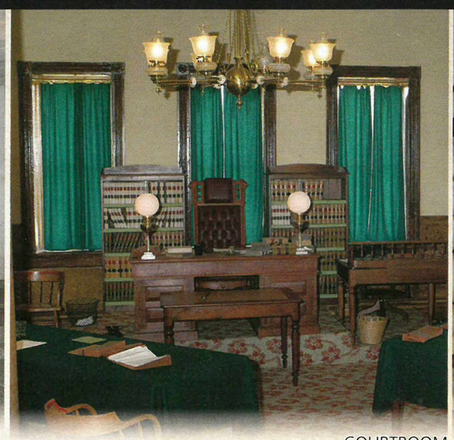
Visiting Fort Smith



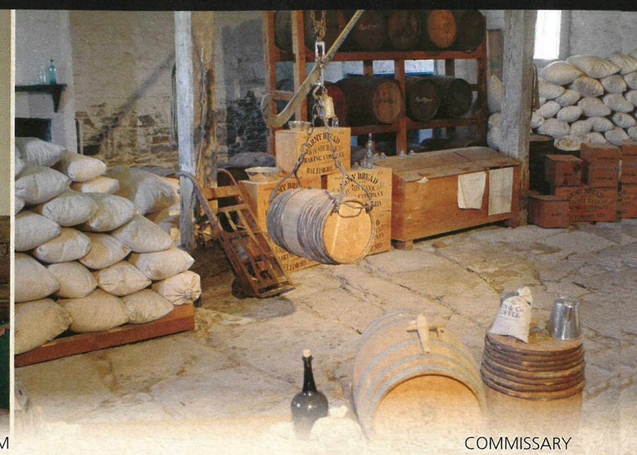
BARRACKS-COURTHOUSE-JAIL



HELL-ON-THE-BORDER JAIL



COURTROOM



COMMISSARY

GREG DISH; ALL OTHER IMAGES NPS EXCEPT AS CREDITED

"THIS dark, crowded underground hole is noisome with odors of every description . . . horrible with all horrors–a veritable hell upon earth."

— Journalist Anna Dawes, 1885

Make your first stop the visitor center in the former basement of the 1888 jail of the second Fort Smith. Rebuilt after an 1849 fire, the barracks were in use until the fort closed in 1871. Added onto later, the building was the Federal Courthouse for the Western District of Arkansas. The primitive jail in the building was replaced in 1888 after a journalist publicized the poor conditions prisoners endured.

Barracks-Courthouse-Jail

The former barracks and federal district court building *(above)* now houses the wheelchair-accessible visitor center with book and gift shop, orientation theater, jail, and exhibits. The must-see exhibits on the second floor bring to life Fort Smith's 80-year history—this was once the western frontier of the United States—including its starring roles in many Hollywood movies. The replica of a 37-star fort flag *(see photo)* that flies beside the building accurately represents 1867–1877, when there were only 37 states in the Union.

"Hell-on-the-Border" Jail

Imagine being locked in one of two basement cells that each hold 50 prisoners. "Hell-on-the Border," the prisoners nicknamed it. Journalist Anna Dawes' 1885 story on the frightful conditions provoked Congress (her father was a senator from Massachusetts) to vote funds for a new jail, built in 1888. Area women and children treated prisoners, especially on holidays, to music and special meals. When a jailer threw in a holiday drink, cigar, and a chew of tobacco, a local newspaper dubbed the jail "Hotel de Uncle Sam."

Judge Parker's Courtroom

Judge Isaac C. Parker was a reformer whose reputation as a "hanging judge" is understandable but unfair. He made the court system honest and tried to rehabilitate prisoners, but giving Indian Territory law and order was tough. No federal judge hanged more criminals or lost more deputy marshals on duty, but Parker tried over 13,000 criminal cases, 344 for murder or rape, when federal law mandated the death penalty for those crimes. Of the 160 people that Judge Parker sentenced to hang, only 79 were hanged.

Commissary Building

The Commissary, built between 1838 and 1846, is the oldest building in the city of Fort Smith. Some Indians traveling the Trail of Tears drew government-funded supplies here. The storehouse also helped supply the 1846–48 US-Mexican War, 1849 Gold Rush, and army forts farther west. Be sure to visit this massive stone building *(above right)*. Displays and an audio program recreate its storehouse role—with sacks of grain, barrels, and sounds of the hustle and bustle of daily Army life.

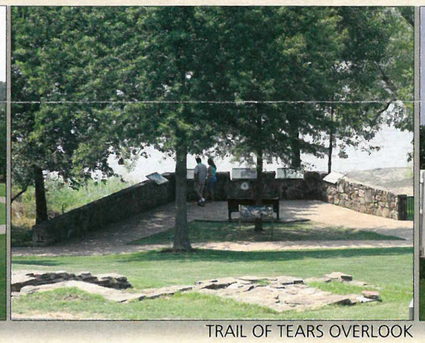
See posters of movies with Fort Smith or Indian Territory settings or themes in the visitor center—like *Belle Starr the Bandit Queen* and *True Grit,* the original and recent remake. Belle *(right)* was not so glamorous as her popular Hollywood image.

WILLIAM A. MAYS / NATIONAL POLICE GAZETTE





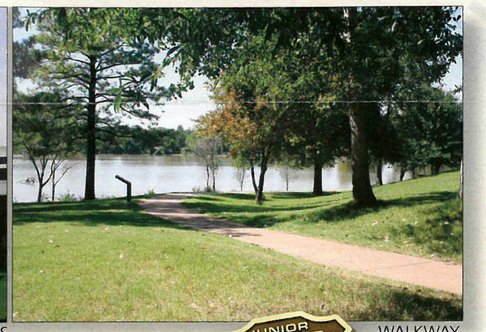
FIRST FORT SMITH



TRAIL OF TEARS OVERLOOK



GALLOWS



WALKWAY

First Fort Smith-Belle Point

The US Army built a log-and-stone Fort Smith in 1817 because of a volatile feud between the Osage and Cherokee over land and resources. This first Fort Smith was abandoned in 1824; only its stone foundation remains. Be sure to walk out to the first fort's scenic Belle Point setting, which overlooks where the Poteau and Arkansas rivers join and then flow on as the Arkansas River.

Trail of Tears Overlook

Before the Europeans came, 22,000 Cherokee controlled 140 million square miles of the Southeast. They first ceded land in 1721. By 1835, after more treaties, they held little of their former lands. From 1831 to 1842 the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Muscogee (Creek), and Seminole nations were relocated to Indian Territory over the "Trail of Tears." Tragically, over 10,000 died along the way.

Gallows

The first execution here was in 1873. A legend holds that Fort Smith's gallows could hang 12, but the most executed at one time was six. The earliest executions were public and drew crowds, but the structure was fenced about 1878. Over 23 years, 86 men were hanged in 39 separate executions. A year after the last execution in 1896, the city of Fort Smith destroyed the gallows. The present gallows is a reproduction.

Walking Trails

The entire park can be enjoyed on foot via its trails and walkways. From the visitor center and the commissary building nearby you can walk to the initial point marker, gallows, first Fort Smith site and ruins, Belle Point's vistas from above the two rivers, and the town's Fort Smith Riverfront Park. There are restrooms in the visitor center and at Fort Smith Riverfront Park.



Junior Ranger program badge.

Start at the Visitor Center, See its Exhibits, Tour the Grounds, and Walk to the Overlook

Visitor Center The visitor center, movie, extensive exhibits, and gift shop are in the former basement of the 1888 jail *(see photo above)*. Open daily except December 25 and January 1, it is wheelchair-accessible and has an elevator. Make this your first stop—but not your last.

Be sure to see the orientation movie that narrates the 80-year history of this historic site. Call ahead or visit the park website *(far right)* for hours. Service animals are welcome.

Make the Most of Your Visit Archeologists have uncovered the footprint of the first Fort Smith, set above the Poteau and Arkansas rivers. The River Trail hugs the Arkansas past Belle Point and Trail of Tears National Historic Trail Overlook *(see map)* and takes you to Fort Smith Riverfront Park. This paved, fairly level path has lots of shade in hot weather.

Northwest of the flagpole were the former Officers' Quarters *(see map)* where officers and their families lived. Between the two train tracks is a reproduction of the 1825 Initial Point Marker for the boundary between Arkansas Territory and the Choctaw Nation. Ask to see the original stone marker, which is now in the visitor center.

Junior Ranger Program Younger visitors should take full advantage of the Junior Ranger program to learn more about the site's history and to earn a Junior Ranger Badge. See a park ranger for details. A great mix of children's programs is offered throughout the year. For information contact the park or visit the park website.

Safety The fort is in an urban area, so stay alert for traffic as you cross streets. Be careful, especially with children, at the railroad tracks and near restoration or archeological work.

Be extra cautious near the river: There can be venomous snakes as well as deep drop-offs and strong currents. Dogs, cats, or other pets must be on a leash six feet or shorter or otherwise physically restrained at all times. Use the walkway to Belle Point and to Trail of Tears Overlook.

For firearms regulations visit the website or ask a ranger.

Directions This national historic site is in historic downtown Fort Smith and can be reached via Garrison or Rogers avenues by going south on 4th Street *(see map)* and then west on Garland Avenue.

More Information
Fort Smith
National Historic Site
301 Parker Avenue
Fort Smith, AR 72901
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www.nps.gov/fosm

Fort Smith National Historic Site is one of over 390 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about national parks and National Park Service programs in America's communities please visit www.nps.gov.

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