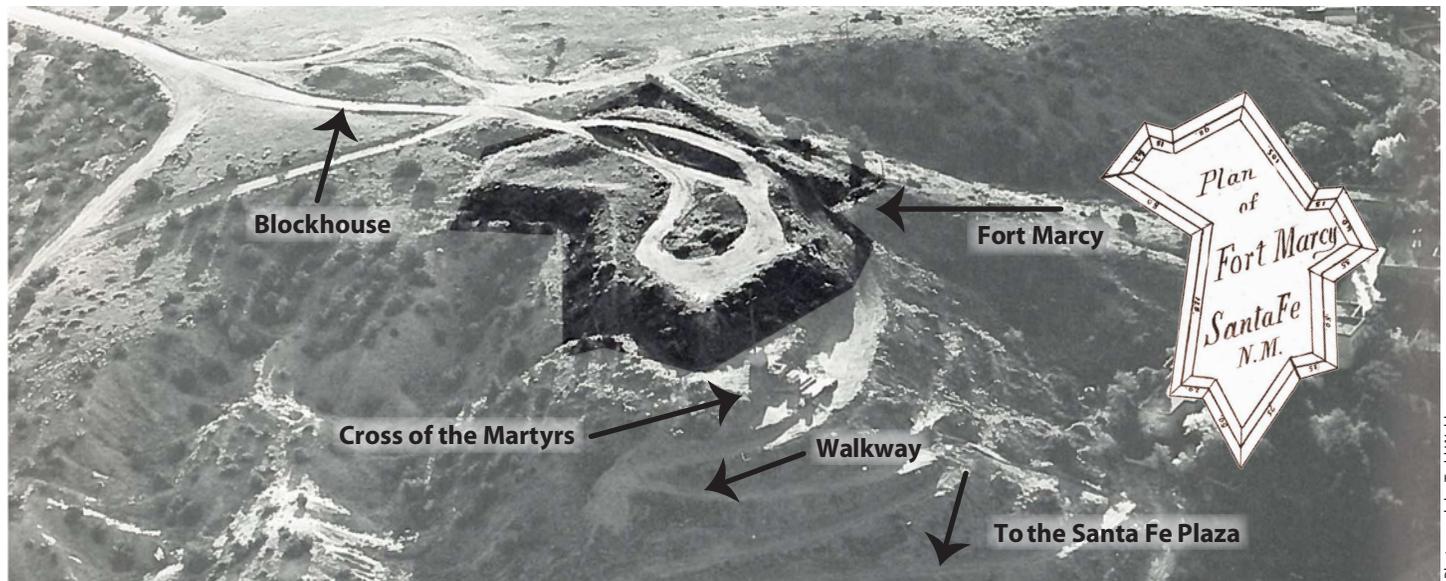


Old Fort Marcy

Santa Fe National Historic Trail



Santa Fe Trail Association
National Park Service



Photograph by Todd Webb.

Aerial photograph from 1966 shows the earthworks of Fort Marcy and other familiar features of the site.

On August 18, 1846, Brigadier General Stephen Watts Kearny and his 1,600-man Army of the West arrived in Santa Fe and declared that New Mexico was under United States rule. Kearny, along with his staff, shared refreshments later that day at the Palace of the Governors as the US flag was hoisted and cannons fired a salute. The following day, work began on a fortification that came to represent the power of the United States and its control over New Mexico.

Choosing the Place

Lieutenants William H. Emory and Jeremy F. Gilmer, two officers from the Corps of Topographical Engineers, found the perfect site above Santa Fe on a hill northeast of the Plaza. According to a July 25, 1887, civil engineering report, “from the foot of the (Civil War) monument in the Plaza to the western edge of the old fort,

(the distance was) 152 feet, two inches above the foot of the monument.”

Lt. Emory reported that it was, “the only point which commands the entire town and which itself is commanded by no other.” From the fort on the hill, all of Santa Fe was within cannon shot.

Construction Begins

By August 22, Lts. Emory and Gilmer submitted a map to Kearny with the recommended site and a plan of the fort. A small force of men, detailed from the Army of the West, began immediately. By August 27, there were 100 men tasked to construct the fort. By the end of the month, there

were 31 skilled adobe brick masons making the 24-by-20-by-6-inch adobe bricks, that served as the fort’s foundation.

Kearny named the fort after William L. Marcy of New York, then Secretary of War under US President James K. Polk.

Size of Fort Marcy

Fort Marcy’s nine-foot high adobe walls were five feet thick and stood above an eight-foot deep, 23-foot wide dry moat. The fort’s defensive perimeter was 754 feet long. The powder magazine, finished in the spring of 1847, was a partially buried log building inside the fort.

extreme dimensions of 85 feet on the north, south, and west, and 95 feet on the east. At the northeasterly corner of this redoubt was a tower, for observation; and this is still the highest and most favorable point from which to enjoy the wonderfully extensive view around the whole circle of the horizon.”

According to the 1887 report: “The extreme length of the fort proper was 270 feet, and the width 180 feet. The total length between the exterior walls of the surrounding moat was 400 feet, and width 300 feet. The gateway was directly to the east, and opposite to that was the redoubt or blockhouse just 100 feet distant and nearly square in form, with

Since, according to Lt. Emory’s report: “the contour of the ground (where the fort was to be built) is unfavorable for a trace of a regular work. . .,” its configuration was “. . .that of a tri-decagon. (It) is sufficiently ample to mount a great number of cannon and accommodate a thousand soldiers. Its walls are massive, thick, and strong, and are built of adobe bricks.”

Worth Their While

Essentially finished by the end of September, 1846, Fort Marcy was the first fort in what became in 1850 the New Mexico Territory. Although it was designed for a garrison of 280 men, it was never garrisoned, and was rarely (if ever) occupied. Although it had no permanent water supply (the closest source was a spring 308 yards southwest), Fort Marcy boasted a commanding location

close to the Plaza. That meant that of its planned 14 cannons, either the Army of the West’s six-pounders or the artillery pieces Kearny’s men had confiscated from Mexican Governor Manuel Armijo’s abandoned batteries, 13 of them could defend Santa Fe from an invading Mexican army or demoralize and quash any local insurrection.

First Fort

Lt. J. W. Albert, who had been visiting the gold mines near Cerrillos, New Mexico, described his visit to the fort on October 2, 1846: *“In a little while we reached (the village of) Agua Fria. Soon Fort Marcy came in view and our glorious flag with its graceful stripes playing in the wind. In the evening, we visited Fort Marcy. The distance of the center of this work from the flagstaff to the Plaza is but 664 yards. The whole of the interior is defiladed from all the surrounding heights within range; 10 guns may be brought to bear upon the city. The slopes are revetted with adobes. The block house and magazines are constructed of pine logs one foot square. The only approachable*

point is guarded by the blockhouse, which also assists to protect the entrance to the fort.”

According to Lt. Gilmer, the fort was meant to be a place where US troops could retreat “. . .in case of extremities. . .” until help arrived. But its main purpose was to influence the morale of the capital’s 4,000 residents, just in case: *“Their own guns (Armijo’s cannons) will be chiefly used to garrison the fort, and with them every house in Santa Fe could be leveled in the least appearance of revolt.”*

A Symbol of US Control

When it was apparent to the Army of the West and to the local populace that Armijo (who had abandoned Santa Fe ahead of Kearny’s approach) had no intention of retaking Santa Fe, and that there would be no local uprising that winter (local folks had forewarned the fort’s new commanding officer, Colonel Sterling Price, about that), Fort Marcy’s role and relevance began to fade. Once Price’s troops defeated

local uprisings to the north at Santa Cruz, Embudo, Taos Pueblo, and Mora in January and February 1847, the fort’s importance faded even further. Nevertheless, the blockhouse was finished by the summer of 1847. When the Inspector General, Col. Joseph K. F. Mansfield, visited Fort Marcy in 1853, he reported that it was still *“...the only real fort in the Territory.”*

More than a Fort

Fort Marcy’s design and location reinforced US control, but the military presence required more than just the fort. The Post of Santa Fe, located north and west of the adjacent Palace of the Governors, covered 17 acres and included a hospital, gardens, storehouses, and headquarters. It was the center of military activity. By the 1850s, the need for the fort on the hill was over and it was abandoned.

After 1853 the name of Fort Marcy began to refer to the place in downtown Santa Fe where US troops had been living since 1846. In 1868, President Andrew Johnson designated the cluster of old adobe buildings

where the Spanish colonial *presidio* (permanent military garrison) had once been quartered, as the Fort Marcy Military Reservation. It was abandoned in 1894. President Theodore Roosevelt conveyed its 17 acres to the City of Santa Fe in 1904.

Since the adobe fort and blockhouse had been built on private land, they were part of an 1880 land transaction that was sold to Prince and local attorney William T. Thornton. Eventually Prince became sole owner. In 1969 the City of Santa Fe bought the 10.1-acre tract from his descendants for \$50,000 and named it Old Fort Marcy Park.



Brochure text written by Michael E. Pitel, End of the Trail Chapter of the Santa Fe Trail Association.

The chapter is an affiliate of the Santa Fe Trail Association, whose purpose is to preserve, protect, educate and promote the public awareness of the Santa Fe Trail. www.santafetrail.org

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