Fort Zarah

The Quivira Chapter
Santa Fe Trail Association

Fort Zarah was established at the junction of the Santa Fe Trail, Walnut Creek, and the Smoky Hill Military Road as the result of Indian raids. In May 1864, Captain Dunlap and Company H, 15th Kansas, camped at the ranch on Walnut Creek, calling it Camp Dunlap. On July 28, 1864 General Curtis re-named the camp, Fort Zarah, in honor of his son Zarah Curtis, who was killed by Quantrill Raiders at Baxter Springs, Kansas on October 6, 1863. The first fort was abandoned on April 7, 1866. A second fort was established with stone buildings on June 30, 1866 about 1/2 mile northwest of the first fort, just north of Highway 56 and east of the present day park. The second fort was abandoned in December 1869.

Two sketches of Fort Zarah (1864-1869) are shown as drawn in 1867 by Ado Hunnis. The sketches show the first buildings with a guard walking his post on the ridge of the roof of the long building, a stone “round house” which was the powder house, and the toll bridge. The stone blockhouse was the most permanent of the new buildings. The soldiers were put to work building the octagonal building while their own quarters were holes dug in the creek.

Get Involved in Trail History!
There are many ways to learn more about this site and other sites on the Santa Fe Trail.

- Visit other Trail related sites
- Visit a local museum
- Follow the local auto tour of the Trail
- Join the Quivira Chapter
- Join the Santa Fe Trail Association
- Walk in the ruts that made history!

For more information visit the SFTA website at: www.santafetrail.org and our chapter Facebook page at: Quivira Chapter of the Santa Fe Trail

Sources
- The Ranch at Walnut Creek Crossing by Louise Barry, Kansas Historical Quarterly, Summer, 1971 (Vol. XXXVII, No. 2), pages 121 to 147.
- Biographical history of Barton County, Kansas; illustrated. Published by Great Bend Tribune, Great Bend, Kansas, 1912.
- Robert Button, Great Bend, Kansas.

The first Fort Zarah was located about 1/2 mile southeast of the second fort, just south of Highway 56, east of 30th Road, and north of Walnut Creek.

The second Fort Zarah was located just east of Great Bend Kansas and a short distance east of the park on the north side of Highway 56.
The remains of old Fort Zarah’s soldier dead, almost forgotten and lost in the years that have passed since Indian fighters and forts became unnecessary along the old Santa Fe trail, have been rescued from their unmarked graves on the Jim Harris farm, west of town, and will be carried to the military cemetery at Fort Leavenworth for reburial.

There were seven buried skeletons that were recovered by Major McFarland Cockrill of Fort Riley and his crew of diggers recruited among Great Bend’s unemployed. No one knows the names of the individual skeletons unearthed, although the Major has a list of eight men that government records show were killed and buried at Fort Zarah.

The burial plot was on a knoll in a wheat field on the Harris farm which had plainly visible mounds of earth marking the graves. Some of the graves still had wooden markers, but they have rotted until their inscriptions were lost. The cemetery site has not been cultivated.

One of the 7 skeletons unearthed had a crushed skull. Another had an Indian arrowhead imbedded in the shoulder blade.

War department records show that the following soldiers were buried at Fort Zarah:

- George L. Gardener, private, 3rd Wisconsin cavalry, unassigned recruit, killed by Indians, near Fort Zarah, Kansas, Nov. 22, 1864.
- Charles Dorherty, private, Co. C, 2nd Colorado cavalry, March 30, 1865.
- James Graham, private, Co. G, 7th Iowa, September 8, 1865.
- Casper R. Leach, private, Co. I, 14th Missouri cavalry, October 5, 1865.