



Foundation Document Overview

Fort Smith National Historic Site

Arkansas and Oklahoma



Contact Information

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Purpose



The purpose of FORT SMITH NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE is to preserve, protect, and interpret the significant resources and stories associated with federal Indian policy that facilitated westward expansion, Indian removal, two military forts, and the federal justice system.



Significance

Significance statements express why Fort Smith National Historic Site resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- **Location.** At the confluence of the Arkansas and Poteau Rivers, an intersection of several important trade routes with continued use dating back to at least the early Mississippian Period, Fort Smith was strategically located on a pivotal boundary that remained significant throughout much of the 19th century.
- **Establishment of Two Military Forts (1817–1824 and 1838–1871).** Fort Smith National Historic Site preserves the remains of two military forts representing American military operations and federal policy of that era. The First Fort Smith, present in foundations and archeological remains, was founded in 1817. The Second Fort, established in 1838, was a transitional fort and one of the last examples of walled coastal fort architecture built on the interior of the continent. Its transition from garrison to supply post is evident in archeological remains and existing buildings dating to the Second Fort period.
- **Eighty Years of Federal Indian Policy.** The First and Second Forts and subsequent federal court were established for the enforcement and implementation of federal Indian policy. The Fort Smith Council of 1865 and the Treaty of 1866 were events that defined the U.S. government's relationship with tribes residing in the Indian Territory over a century. Fort Smith National Historic Site illustrates and interprets the cultural and economic consequences of these policies on the lives of American Indians and westward migrating European Americans.



Significance

- **Indian Relations, Indian Removal, and U.S. Westward Expansion.** For some American Indians being relocated from ancestral lands, Fort Smith served as a final stop before entering Indian Territory. Fort Smith tells the stories of American Indian removal to Indian Territory, Indian and federal government relations there, and the westward U.S. expansion that impacted the area. Of the multiple removal routes followed by various eastern tribal nations, the water route is most closely associated with Fort Smith—including that recognized by the Cherokee as the Trail of Tears.
- **Federal Justice System in Indian Territory.** The Federal Court of the Western District of Arkansas had jurisdiction over crimes in Indian Territory when either the accused or the victim was non-Indian. Fort Smith National Historic Site preserves the original courtroom, two jails, and reconstructed gallows.
- **Judge Isaac C. Parker—Jurisdiction and Lasting Legacy.** Fort Smith National Historic Site preserves the stories, objects, and places of the judicial career of Isaac C. Parker. Parker oversaw a legal and geographical jurisdiction for 21 years of the court’s 45 years of history. The Western District of Arkansas was one of the most dangerous for law enforcement in the nation’s history. Many of the cases he adjudicated had a lasting influence on the legal system today. Referred to as the “hanging judge” by sensational journalists of his time, the title misrepresents the more complex reality surrounding the life, political aspiration, civic engagement, and stories surrounding the judge’s tenure on the bench.



Resources, Values, and Interpretive Themes

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **Historic Scene and Geographical Setting**
- **Indian Removal Routes/Paths and Trail of Tears**
- **First and Second Fort Sites**
- **Existing Historic Structures—Military Barracks, Courthouse, Jail, and Commissary**
- **Collections—Artifacts, Research Files, and Library Resources**
- **Reconstructed Elements and Reproductions**

Fort Smith National Historic Site contains other resources and values that may not be fundamental to the purpose and significance of the park, but are important to consider in management and planning decisions. These are referred to as other important resources and values.

- **Frisco Railroad Station**
- **Forgecraft Property**
- **Historical Commemorative Markers**

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from—and should reflect—park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- **Belle Point – A Cultural Crossroads**
- **First Fort Smith**
- **Indian Removal**
- **Second Fort Smith**
- **Federal Court Period**
- **Judge Parker**

Description

Shaped by diverse people and groups—American Indians, soldiers, outlaws, and lawmen— Fort Smith National Historic Site evokes 80 years of turbulent history on the western frontier. At the park you can explore the remnants of two frontier forts, the tragic story of the Trail of Tears, and the historic jail and federal courthouse of Judge Isaac C. Parker. The U.S. military and federal court presence at Fort Smith changed the fate of the region by introducing a new political system, economic structure, and set of rules and social values from which people benefited, adapted to, or perished. Fort Smith National Historic Site provides opportunities to create a dialogue within the public discourse to reflect on the profound impact that the concept of Manifest Destiny and frontier heritage played in the nation's history and the influence it has had on the fabric of American identity.

Fort Smith National Historic Site is a landscaped park, interwoven with interpretive opportunities through restored and recreated elements of 19th century history. Fort Smith National Historic Site was authorized on September 13, 1961, and currently encompasses 37 acres within the urban environment of Fort Smith, Arkansas. A trail system at Fort Smith National Historic Site provides a means for the visiting public and local members of the community to enjoy the riverfront historic site both for educational and recreational purposes.

Historically, the landscape and setting was continually modified between 1817 and 1896, directly related to activities associated with the evolving nature and purpose of the site.

Between 1897 and 1955, the historic scene and setting was significantly modified by urban development when the property of the fort and federal court was deeded over to the City of Fort Smith. Since the late 1950s, the City of Fort Smith and the National Park Service have worked collaboratively to preserve and restore the 19th century historic scene and setting by removing buildings, streets, and other intrusive landscape alterations that occurred at this site in the early 20th century while at the same time restoring, replacing, recreating, and marking missing key features of Fort Smith. These improvements continue to help evoke a feeling and association with the 19th century site history, while at the same time developing the site as an urban greenspace.

