



Where on Earth are you?

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Project Liberty Ship is a non-profit organization based in Baltimore, Maryland dedicated to educating by preserving and operating the Liberty ship S.S. JOHN W. BROWN as a living memorial to the men and women who built the great Liberty fleet and to the merchant seamen and Naval Armed Guard who sailed the ships across the oceans of the world.

Landlocked in New Mexico

How an old frontier fort survived by reinventing itself, including serving as a treatment center for merchant mariners

By Joan Burke

Photos by author unless otherwise noted

Sixty-three hundred feet above sea level seems an unlikely altitude at which to find a group of merchant mariners. The White Mountains of New Mexico would seem just as unlikely a place to encounter a bunch of old salts. And yet, between 1899 and 1953 some 5,000 sailors came here seeking a cure for tuberculosis.

Fort Stanton, in Lincoln County, New Mexico, has seen more than its share of drama in U.S. history. It remains one of the few frontier forts in the western United States retaining its original buildings, not reconstructed replicas of them. Like the SS JOHN W. BROWN, the old fort has seen several careers in its lifetime, and its history is intertwined with several famous events in American history.

Early Military Fort Era

Built as a military fort in 1855, and later captured and destroyed by Confederate forces, Fort Stanton was rebuilt and occupied in 1862 by Colonel Christopher Huston “Kit” Carson and volunteer forces. Under Carson the fort was to serve as an assembly place for the Mescalero Apache before the army deported them to the Bosque Redondo Reservation at Fort Sumner, New Mexico, some 150 miles to the northeast. The Navajo had also been relocated to Bosque Redondo.

Bosque Redondo was a complete failure. The Native Americans did not thrive there, to put it mildly. The Mescalero Apache escaped in 1865. Three years later the Navajo were freed when the Navajo Indian Reservation was established by the Treaty of 1868.

After 1875, some Buffalo Soldiers were stationed at Fort Stanton. The fort offered some protection to the local settlers and provided the only law enforcement in the area. On three occasions the soldiers marched out to put down local disturbances that threatened to escalate into civil unrest, and the army’s actions determined the outcomes. The most famous such action was during the Lincoln County War.

Lincoln County War

In 1876, John Henry Tunstall arrived from England in the town of Lincoln, New Mexico, located about a dozen miles from Fort Stanton. Tunstall and his friend Alexander McSween opened a store, thereby providing competition to the sole existing mercantile establishment owned by James Dolan and Lawrence Murphy. Dolan and Murphy also had contracts to supply Fort Stanton and the Mescalero Apaches. (Coincidentally, they also controlled the local sheriff and the courts.) In contrast to Dolan and Murphy, Tunstall’s store charged comparatively decent and fair prices. Dolan and Murphy objected to losing their monopoly. In February, 1878, Lincoln and the surrounding area exploded in violence.

With a warrant to attach cattle owned by McSween, a posse deputized by the sheriff went to Tunstall’s ranch. They found that Tunstall, his ranch hands and horses were gone. Part of the posse gave pursuit, even though the horses were not included in the warrant. When they caught up with him, Tunstall was shot dead and the scene of the killing was arranged to make it appear as though he had fired at the posse.

Tunstall’s murder ignited the Lincoln County War. One of Tunstall’s outraged ranch hands, William Henry McCarty (aka William H. Bonney), is said to have declared that Tunstall was the only man who had ever treated him well and allegedly swore, “I’ll get every son-of-a-bitch who helped kill John if it’s the last thing I do.”

The Lincoln County War cost several dozen lives and was finally settled in July, 1878, when US Army troops, under the command of the controversial Colonel Nathan Dudley, arrived in Lincoln. Dudley had his troops point cannons at the McSween house, setting it afire several days later after McSween’s wife and other women and children were allowed safe passage. Most of McSween’s supporters (known as Regulators) escaped and scattered to become fugitives. Col. Dudley was subsequently transferred to Fort Union in northeast New Mexico after being cleared by a board of inquiry of charges stemming from his actions against the Regulators.

Many who took part in the Lincoln conflict were later offered amnesty by New Mexico Governor Lew Wallace, a former Union Army general. It has been claimed that Bonney himself would have gotten off “scot free” in return for acting as an informant and for his testimony, but the deal fell through on the government’s end and he returned to his outlaw life. Bonney achieved his national fame in 1881 when Governor Wallace put a \$500 bounty on “Billy the Kid”, as he had become known.

On July 14, 1881, at Fort Sumner, Sheriff Pat Garrett took Bonney by surprise and shot him dead. “Billy the Kid” is buried at the Fort Sumner cemetery between two of his friends.

US Public Health Service, 1899 – 1953

Although Fort Stanton underwent several construction phases in the 1860’s through 1880’s, the Army’s need for the fort ended before the century did. The Mescalero Apache, having been settled peacefully on the nearby reservation, the Army abandoned Fort Stanton in 1896 and it was closed. The U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS) subsequently acquired the fort in 1899 to serve as a tuberculosis hospital for the Merchant Marine. It was the first such facility in the nation.

Tuberculosis was common in ancient Greece and Rome. Evidence of it has been found in the spines of Egyptian mummies. Often called the White Plague or “consumption”, TB was the leading cause of death in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the urban and industrialized areas of Europe and North America. By the late 1800’s perhaps 70 to 90 percent of urban populations in Europe and North America may have carried the TB bacillus.¹ People moved west across North America hoping to find space to prosper, but also wanted clean air and water and an environment free of diseases. The high altitude and arid weather of Fort Stanton was considered ideal to treat TB patients. “Many who have suffered an attack of tuberculosis and emigrated to the high dry regions have recovered or have had their lives considerably prolonged.”²

The first TB patient arrived at Fort Stanton on November 18, 1899. Within 6 months the facility had over 65 patients and over 236 patients were being treated at Fort Stanton by 1928. Most of the patients at the fort were sailors. Eventually, any sailor – regardless of nationality – who had served at least 3 months aboard a US-flagged vessel, was eligible for treatment at the fort’s hospital. The men were expected to pay their own way to get there, after receiving admission papers and directions to Fort Stanton.

Hospital rules were strict and patients were expected to keep their cabins clean. Patients could do pretty much what they wanted, as long as they did not exert themselves. However, during the first few decades alcohol was not permitted, they had to bathe once a week and they could not play cards if they had a fever. They also could not own an automobile without special permission.

The locals were often perplexed by the nautical terms these men used. A trip to a nearby town was known as “going ashore”; the saddle’s cantle was called the “stern of the saddle”³. The high, dry terrain of New Mexico must have seemed a very alien place to many of these men.

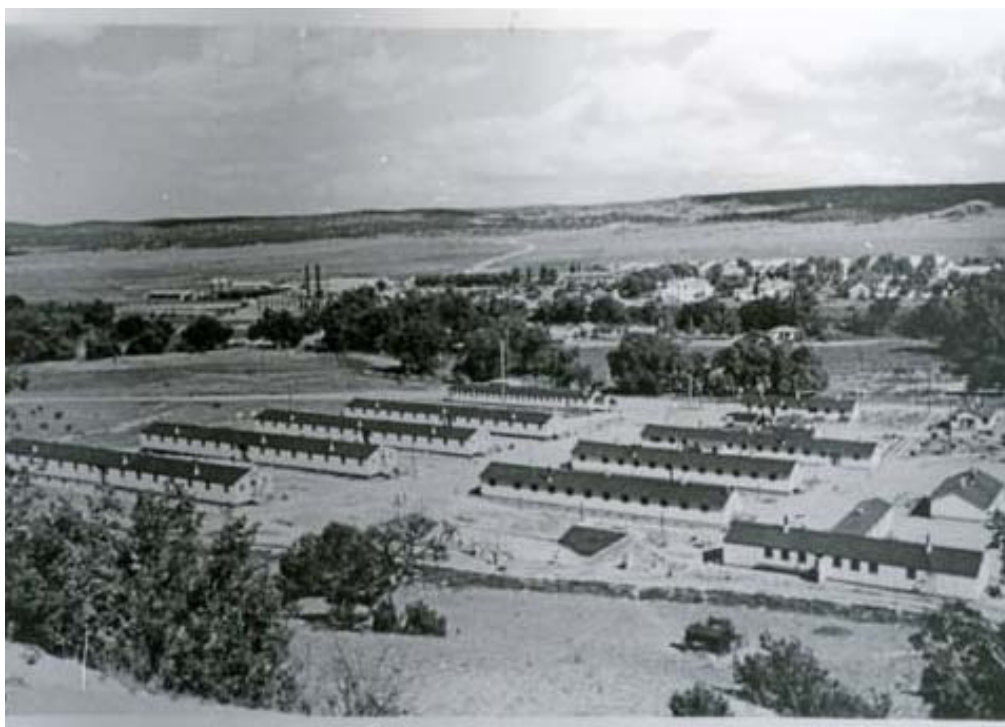
Throughout the first half of the 20th century, through depression, war and into the post-war period, sailors continued to journey to the hospital in the mountains of New Mexico. The late Herk Esibill, former secretary of Project Liberty Ship, was one of the many mariners who found his way to Fort Stanton – and told the author of its existence and importance.

Many civilians worked at the hospital, and the fort became a center (an anchor?) for many activities through the hospital years for patients and staff and their families. Rodeos and Christmas parties were held. The old cavalry stables saw continuous use by staff who could afford to keep horses, for the area has some of the best riding country in the state. The fort had its own dairy herd.

The Great Depression

The 1930’s saw many changes at the hospital. The New Deal’s construction projects brought new buildings, a new power plant and a new hospital that featured an electric elevator, said to be the first in New Mexico.

In 1935 the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) built a camp adjacent to the fort. Camp SCS-6-N was built just across the Bonito River from the hospital. About 200 young men at this camp worked for the National Forest Service in Lincoln County on many projects including re-forestation, building road and fences and aiding in erosion control. In addition, they enhanced and improved the buildings and grounds of the fort. The CCC camp was abandoned by 1940 – but not for long.



Military quarters and CCC camp at Fort Stanton

From New Mexico Digital Collection

World War II - “German Sailors on the High Desert”

Fort Stanton in 1940 was about as far from the war in Europe as you could get. As unlikely as it might seem, the old fort’s next job was to join the war effort. The new career began with a series of events occurring thousands of miles away.

When war was declared after the invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, the German luxury liner *Columbus* was on her normal run to the Caribbean. Her passengers were sent home at the shipping company’s expense and she was ordered to return to Germany in December, 1939. The *Columbus* set out for home but – with the help of the USS *Tuscaloosa* – was intercepted by the British destroyer HMS *Hyperion* about 400 miles off the coast of Virginia. Commander Wilhelm Dähne, the captain of the *Columbus*, decided to scuttle the ship rather than surrender her to the British. The *Tuscaloosa* picked up the crew of the liner.⁴

As the United States was still officially neutral, the Germans were treated as “distressed seamen” when they arrived in the U.S., with permission to remain in the country for 90 days. But Britain’s refusal to allow Germans of fighting age to return home created a dilemma that was neatly resolved when J. Edgar Hoover intervened with a list of charges against the German seamen that ranged from “fanciful to puritanical”, and they were confined at Ellis Island, New York, and later at Angel Island, San Francisco. In August 1940, with the cooperation of Commander Dähne, about 400 German sailors from the *Columbus* were relocated to Fort Stanton. The fort became the first U.S. internment camp of the war.⁵

The first contingent of 39 sailors arrived in January, 1941, and set about refurbishing the abandoned CCC structures and building new barracks and other buildings for the camp. In March, 1941, the remaining seamen from the *Columbus* arrived at Fort Stanton. For nearly all of 1941 they tried to make the desert camp as comfortable as possible. They built one-room cabins with garden plots, planted trees, landscaped walkways, and relaxed by playing cards or enjoying various hobbies. Interestingly, they also built a swimming pool and conducted an Olympiad in the fall of 1941 using the pool, tennis courts, a soccer field and tracks.⁶



Satellite map view of German interment camp site at Fort Stanton, with ruins of the swimming pool (upper left) and other camp buildings visible.

Life for the Germans changed drastically before the year ended when Germany declared war on the United States on December 9, 1941, following the declaration of war against Japan by the United States. Wire fences and guard towers were erected. Guard dogs arrived. Floodlights illuminated the enclosed compound. The distressed seamen now had the status of enemy aliens.⁷

The camp eventually held 652 German detainees. The Nazi mindset caused problems in many POW camps, and the authorities did their best to segregate the pro-Nazis from the non-political types. At Fort Stanton, those who were anti-Nazi were transferred elsewhere, and the site became known as a pro-National Socialist camp. There were several escapes from the camp, but all were captured and returned. One escapee was shot in the leg by a local rancher. There were also four deaths at the camp: two in a trichinosis epidemic, one suicide and one murder – although charges were reportedly dropped in the killing after it was clear that all participants were highly inebriated.⁸



Columbus Rock – Before they left for home, the crew of the ill-fated liner COLUMBUS carved this stone and presented it to the people of Lincoln, New Mexico, as a gesture of friendship.

The insignia is the logo of the German Hapag-Lloyd merchant fleet, which is still operating.

The stone is located outside the Visitor Center and museum in Lincoln, NM.



Two of the German sailors' graves –Otto Zeitsch and Hermann Neuhoff

There were also some Japanese interned at Fort Stanton from 1942 – 1945 for short periods, probably until they could be transferred to all-Japanese camps. Locals remember that there were some Japanese children registered at the nearby Capitan school and at the school at the fort.⁹

The Hospital Tradition Continues

The POW camp operated concurrently with the USPHS hospital and was officially closed in October, 1945, the last internees having left by September, 1945. The hospital continued to operate as a state hospital to treat TB in Native Americans until the 1950's. It also served as a hospital for the mentally handicapped until the 1990's.

However, with the transfer from the USPHS to the state, many people left, jobs were downsized or even lost, and a mini-depression hit Capitan and the surrounding areas of Lincoln County. In the opinion of many, workers who stayed were paid less and treated differently than they had been (under the USPHS).¹⁰

Fort Stanton Veterans Cemetery

Not far south of the fort buildings there was an old cavalry cemetery, high on a windswept hill. The patients who died at the hospital were buried there, and this resting place for merchant mariners gradually replaced the old military cemetery. Today it is a Veterans cemetery, and contains the graves of mariners of several nationalities.

In the 1980s, retired Merchant Mariner Captain E. Victor Schaerer and his wife, Jean, decided to clean and repair the cemetery. They identified many graves and placed flags. Captain Schaerer (d. 2000) and Jean (d. 2013) now rest there.

On May 22, 1993 (Maritime Day), the Albuquerque New Mexico Roadrunner chapter of the American Merchant Marine Veterans dedicated a monument at the cemetery. They placed a 5-ton anchor from the SS *Drake Victory* just inside the entrance in honor of all Merchant Marine Veterans of World War II "wherever they are", as the dedication states.



JOHN W. BROWN Schoolship Alumnus and AB Ernie Gaspari with the DRAKE VICTORY's anchor. The graves of the four German seamen are visible in the distance in the upper right.

The AMMV monument inscription reads:

**THIS 5 TON ANCHOR TAKEN FROM THE DRAKE VICTORY
IS A MEMORIAL TO MERCHANT MARINE VETERANS OF WW II
WHEREVER THEY ARE. THEIR CASUALTY RATE OF 1 TO 32
WAS ONE OF THE HIGHEST OF ALL SERVICES.**

**DEDICATED MAY 22, 1993
AMERICAN MERCHANT MARINE VETERANS
ROADRUNNER CHAPTER
ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO**

On Nov. 10, 2010 – the day before Veterans Day – the Museum of New Mexico's Board of Regents voted to close the cemetery to all future burials. However, in April of 2014, the governor of New Mexico announced that four locations would provide coverage for New Mexico's veterans, who now number over 170,000. The Fort Stanton cemetery was one of the sites chosen. A new section could be opened at the cemetery as soon as 2015.

Fort Stanton Today – Go Visit!

Fort Stanton is located on NM Highway 220, not far from Ruidoso, Lincoln and Capitan. (Capitan is also famous as the birthplace of Smokey The Bear.) Although there is a fine museum and visitor's center at the fort, as of press time much of the property was off-limits to the public. However, more buildings are in the process of being opened for tours. If you visit during one of the monthly Living History Events, you may be able to see more of the fort's grounds. See Events Calendar at fortstanton.org for dates.

The Veterans cemetery is located a short distance from the fort on NM 220. There are many places to stay and dine in Ruidoso, and the entire area is rich in New Mexico's frontier history.



Some of Fort Stanton's buildings today. The canteen survives!

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