

Fort Douglas: Ghost of the Past and Memories for the Future



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What do you think of when you hear the word “village?” A village is a small town where people live, work, and purchase the things they need. Long ago, villages were protected by walls to keep the population safe from outsiders. Few people experienced life beyond the wall, and many of them lived and died in the village of their birth.

The Olympic Winter Games and Paralympic Winter Games bring athletes together from all over the world. One of the responsibilities of the host city is to create an Olympic Village, where the competitors live. Since the Games are all about the athletes, it is important that their needs are met. Just like other villages around the world it must be complete with stores, restaurants, barbershops, dental and medical offices, recreation centers and churches. Just like the ancient villages, the Olympic Village and Paralympic Village must be safe and secure, so a temporary fence will enclose the area.

Olympic Winter Games planners began looking for a good site for the village close to Salt Lake City. They decided to select...a “ghost town” complete with an abandoned movie theater, old

churches, a jail and houses either abandoned or used for offices. The area, settled in 1862, was built as an army base named Fort Douglas. The fort was named after Stephen A. Douglas, the United States senator, who was Abraham Lincoln’s opponent in the election of 1860.

Planners worked hard to adapt the old base into a beautifully restored Olympic Village. Walking along the streets today, it is easy to imagine officers saluting each other as they pass on horseback and soldiers walking to the camp chapel in their Sunday best. The Athletes of 2002 will share space with the ghosts of thousands of soldiers who have served there over the past 140-years.

History of Fort Douglas

During the 1860’s, the United States government had many difficulties. The Civil War divided the North and the South. Out west, the government tried to protect the Pony Express, the new telegraph system and the Overland Mail from Indian raids. The War Department assigned General George Wright to furnish protection for the mail. General Wright ordered Colonel Patrick Conner to take 700 men to the Utah Territory. Colonel Conner decided to camp on a site three miles east of Salt Lake City. Here, he could monitor the Indians and keep an eye on the Mormons. Colonel Conner didn’t like the Mormons. He felt they were traitors who wished to create their own government. The Mormons also provided food and other help to the Native Americans, whom Conner considered to be enemies.

Conner decided that the best way to deal with the “Mormon problem” was to encourage people of other religions to move to the valley. His dream was realized after valuable ore was dis-

covered in Bingham Canyon in 1863. Conner, now a general, helped file the first mining claim in Utah. He knew that mining would bring a variety of people to Salt Lake City.

Over the years, many things changed at Fort Douglas. New officers replaced General Conner. More buildings were added, turning the Fort into a small self-contained village. Red Butte sandstone replaced log buildings, and the Fort continued to play an important role in the history of Utah.

During World War I, thousands of new recruits lived at the Fort. It was also the home of 331 German prisoners of war! The Germans attempted to escape by bombing, tunneling and cutting wire fences. They were always caught and returned to the compound.

Fort Douglas served the state well during the Great Depression of the 1930's. The CCC or the Civilian Conservation Corps opened their headquarters at the Fort in 1933. Many people lost their jobs and were hired by the CCC. The CCC planted trees, fought fires, improved grazing lands, encouraged soil conservation and helped the national and state park service. People in the CCC were paid from \$30.00 to \$45.00 per month and were able to attend school and learn trades to help them find good jobs. During this time, Fort Douglas officers were on great terms with the local citizens. With the help of the community, a monument to General Conner was erected in the cemetery. The army band played for community concerts, and the city lent equipment to the fort. The 1930's brought great changes to the fort and the city. Horses were necessary for both work and transportation, and motor vehicles were just beginning to appear. It would have been interesting to watch the soldiers build Red Butte Dam. Horses, pulling ancient equipment, worked alongside modern, motor-driven machines.



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A high point in the history of Fort Douglas came after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Because the government feared that the West Coast was no longer safe, war headquarters moved to Utah. From 1941 to March 1946, Fort Douglas was the military nerve center for the western United States.

After the war, people were not sure what to do with the fort. It was too small for a modern army, and the old buildings were crumbling. Although the fort was still used by the Army, many buildings became vacant and were given or sold to other agencies. The University of Utah and Salt Lake City purchased many acres. Land, where soldiers marched and drilled, became a golf course, a hospital, university classrooms, a medical school and student housing.

Government officials often debated the fate of Fort Douglas. Some people wanted to tear down the old buildings so that the valuable land could be put to other uses. When Salt Lake City won the bid for the 2002 Games, a new chapter was opened in the life of Fort Douglas. The old camp was the perfect location for the Olympic and Paralympic Village. New buildings were constructed and old ones restored. Fort Douglas would again house young enthusiastic people. The old fort, built to protect the city from outside forces, now welcomes the world, as athletes live together and compete in friendship and sportsmanship.

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Primary Grades

SOCIAL STUDIES: Villages/Neighborhood Workers and Services

Name the people who make up your neighborhood and community. What people and jobs are needed to meet the needs of residents? Compare the services in the local neighborhood to Fort Douglas and the Olympic Village.

SOCIAL STUDIES: Forts and Mail Delivery

What do you think of when you hear the word "fort?" Fort Douglas did not have large protective walls, but its soldiers did provide protection for the western mail service. How was mail delivered in 1800's? How does this compare with present day service? Create a mail delivery service for the classroom. Design a stamp. Choose a postmaster. Write letters to each other and mail them using the classroom postal service.



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Intermediate Grades

(Adapt Primary Grade ideas)

SOCIAL STUDIES/ ART: Create a Village

Brainstorm all services needed for a community. Three thousand five hundred people will be housed in the Olympic Village. Apartments will have two roommates. Divide the class into small groups. Each group will design its own Olympic Village. Students will design apartments, eating areas, recreation areas etc. Use a large sheet of butcher paper or cardboard as a base. Buildings can be represented by cut out colored paper, shoe boxes etc. Remember to add parks and security features.

SOCIAL STUDIES: Security Matters

Discuss the need for safety during the Games. Predict all possible safety issues for athletes, spectators, workers, lost children, a spectator with a heart attack, terrorists and fights breaking out between athletic teams. Create a plan that deals with these situations. Compare safety issues during the Games to safety issues at school. Adapt your plan to the school and share your ideas.



DEBATE: Old Buildings: Eyesore or Historic Treasure

Fort Douglas property is so valuable! Many people felt that Fort Douglas should be torn down and the land used for new buildings. When Salt Lake City won the bid for the 2002 Games, the old fort became a perfect site for the Olympic Village. What would have happened to Fort Douglas if the Games had not come to Utah? There are many old buildings within your community. Should these old buildings be torn down, or restored as historic treasures? Debate the pros and cons of historic restoration.