

## FORT HOMESTEAD, GOLD HILL, NEVADA

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Fort Homestead was on a knoll overlooking Gold Hill from the northeast just above the old Virginia and Truckee Railroad tunnel when one first passes around Greiner's Bend going south on State Route 342 from Virginia City into Gold Hill.

In early spring of 1863, Mr. Z. Lyford located 200 feet of ground called the Homestead mining claim. Mr. Lyford was also the principal owner of the claim and superintendent of the mine. By December of 1863, he had spent \$1500 sinking a shaft 102 feet and running a drift 115 feet. He had also fenced a plot of ground 200 feet square, started grading a carriage road around the prominent knoll on the property, and built his house<sup>1</sup>.

According to Earl (1982), Fort Homestead was, "established in the summer of 1864 as a garrison for Nevada and California volunteers when Fort Churchill became overcrowded," and was apparently leased from the Homestead Mining Co.<sup>2</sup>. Stanley (2004), however, only states that Fort Homestead was not a military installation and was only, "intended to be a parade ground and shooting gallery," and prior to 1870 also served as the main area for town gatherings<sup>3</sup>. By the end of September, 1864, Gold Hill had three fully organized military companies of which one was an artillery company<sup>4</sup>, though the newspaper does not say whether any ever used Fort Homestead for drills. On the afternoon of September 27, 1864, however, a 13-gun salute was given from Fort Homestead for the Nevada Territorial Volunteers coming back from a visit to nearby Silver City<sup>5</sup>. In gratitude for the use of the Homestead mining claim in the Union cause, the Gold Hill Board of Trustees exempted Mr. Lyford from the town tax of \$13.75 assessed on his property<sup>6</sup>.

As early as May 1864, the "Gold Hill News" reported, "The news that we are now daily receiving from the East is too big for the calibre (sic) of the gun on the hill." A subscription was taken up for a larger brass cannon, which was ordered when the subscriptions reached \$125<sup>7</sup>. This suggests Fort Homestead may have started a little earlier than the summer of 1864. Some became impatient in waiting<sup>8</sup>, but the cannon was finally delivered by August 1<sup>9</sup>. The cannon was forged of iron (not brass) at the Fulton Foundry on the nearby divide between Gold Hill and Virginia City, was installed by the flagpole at Fort Homestead. The cannon, a six-pounder, was called the "Kearsarge" after the "USS Kearsarge" which sank the "CSS Alabama", and Louis Wagner, a volunteer fireman of the local Liberty No. 1, was put in charge of it<sup>10, 11</sup>. A picture in Stanley (2003) shows a picture of the "Kearsarge" in 1865<sup>11, 12</sup>. Also, a stereograph in the Bancroft Library shows a cannon at Fort Homestead<sup>13</sup>, which is likely the same one. A "cannon-house" was erected in the fall of 1865<sup>14</sup>.

The cannon was fired to mark special events and Union victories. Waking up most of the town, the "local battery" (more than one cannon?) at Fort Homestead was fired at midnight on April 3, 1865, to announce the fall of both Petersburg and Richmond<sup>15</sup>. Along with the ringing of church and fire bells, the blowing of steam engine whistles, and the firing of personal firearms, the cannon was fired again when General Lee surrendered<sup>16</sup>.

On April 19, 1865, a procession and obsequies were held to mourn the assassination of President Lincoln. Flags were at half mast, mines and shops were closed, the Catholic and Episcopal church bells tolled from 10 am until 4 pm, "the gun" (singular) at Fort Homestead was fired every half hour from sunrise until sunset. A large procession wound its way up Main Street to Fort Homestead. There, about 2000 people on bended knees participated in prayers lead by the Reverend O. W. Whittaker and listened to a funeral oration delivered by B. C. Whitman, Esq.<sup>17</sup>.

After the war, Fort Homestead became a “place of public recreation” and “best point for celebrations of all kinds<sup>18</sup>”. With ten men working on it daily, a main hall, 35 by 66 feet with wings 15 by 35 feet, was completed in time for the Fourth of July in 1866, when a citizens’ ball was held at Fort Homestead<sup>19, 20, 21</sup>. A mineral survey made in 1868 shows Mr. Lyford’s house, the hall, the flagpole, the mine workings, and a saloon on the mining claim<sup>22</sup>. A number of old photographs of Fort Homestead have been published in Stanley (2003)<sup>23</sup>.

Among the festivities held at Fort Homestead were circuses<sup>23</sup>, Fourth of July balls and celebrations<sup>24</sup>, military and civic balls<sup>25</sup>, and the German May Festival<sup>26, 27</sup>, and political rallies such as the one held during the nomination of General Grant in 1868<sup>28</sup>. The proceeds from the \$1 admission to a social party and ball held at the end of the May Festival in 1868 were to go to paying for a newly erected flagpole at Fort Homestead. Interestingly, it was noted that Mr. Lyford was “Commandant of the Fort.<sup>29</sup>” The main site of Gold Hill’s social gatherings, however, shifted to the Miners’ Union Hall when it was completed in 1870, and Fort Homestead fell into disuse<sup>30</sup>.

During the evening of September 19, 1866, the “Kearsarge” exploded. The First Ward Union Club was to hold its meeting, and it was customary to fire the cannon to announce it. Mr. Wagner happened to be absent that evening, and others, who had little experience with cannons, took over the task. They put in 2 pounds of powder instead of the usual 1 pound, and improperly packed the wadding. Chunks of iron blew in all directions, and the heavy oak carriage was smashed. One 90-pound piece went through the sidewalk planks in front of the office of the Yellow Jacket Mining Co. a quarter of a mile away. A 40-pound piece came through the roof of Henry Eckert’s nearby blacksmith shop, causing quite a bit of consternation among imbibers sitting 15 feet away in the adjacent saloon. Despite 8 to 10 people being within 40 feet of the explosion, no one was injured<sup>31</sup>.

In April 1867, Captain Putnam, Second Foreman of the Liberty Hose Company started a subscription for a new six-pound brass cannon for Fort Homestead. It was hoped to have it by Independence Day, and \$40 was immediately raised<sup>32</sup>. However, nothing more seemed to come of this effort.

In early May, 1868, the First Ward Union Club received a cannon from the other side of the Sierra Nevada (exact origin not stated). The cannon was a 32-pounder with a 6-inch bore. It was 7.5 feet long and weighed 4,000 pounds. It was installed by mid-May and named the “General Grant<sup>33</sup>.” Union Clubs were staunchly Republican. Messrs. Turney, Kuhl, Drullinger, Blackman, Hanley, Joice, Kirkpatrick, Cook, Buel, Cummings, Jewett, Baglin, and True were appointed the “General Grant’s” gunners, and they first met over Cross and Gibson’s Saloon<sup>34</sup>. The “General Grant” was fired for the first time east of the Sierras in the afternoon of May 21, 1868, to celebrate Ulysses S. Grant’s nomination<sup>35</sup>. An official jubilee by the Union Clubs of Gold Hill, Carson City, Dayton, Silver City, Virginia City, and Washoe City, was held at Fort Homestead a few days later on the 25<sup>th</sup> with the firing of the “General Grant,” the display of flags, bonfires, and speeches<sup>36</sup>.

The “General Grant” continued to be used for special occasions. The last Fourth of July firing was July 4, 1874. At that time, it was noted as being on “a commanding eminence back of Fort Homestead<sup>37</sup>.” On August 3, 1874, The “General Grant” and its cannon-house were removed to the knoll just behind Fort Homestead. The “General Grant” was loud enough to be heard to be heard in Douglas, Lyon, Ormsby, Storey, and Washoe Counties on a calm day. When it was first put at Fort Homestead, the immediate area was devoid of houses, but in the ensuing years residences were built up near the fort. When the cannon was last fired prior to August 3, it broke numerous windows and knocked lamps off of tables as far away as Silver City on the other side of Gold Hill<sup>38</sup>.

During the July 4, 1875, celebration, Federal salutes from Fort Homestead were fired by setting off canisters of giant powder which sounded “equal to the discharges of cannon.” They were set off morning, noon, and night, though the ire of the citizenry was drawn when the first charges were set off at 2 am<sup>39</sup>.

Fort Homestead went officially defunct in 1880. A citizens’ meeting was held on December 11, 1880, in which Mr. Lyford suggested “two old dismantled cannon now lying on the Homestead” be sold for scrap iron. The proceeds would be turned over to the Board of Town Trustees to benefit needy widows and children in Gold Hill<sup>40</sup>. It was noted that one was the “General Grant,” which was made of the “best Government ordnance metal.” The combined weight of the two guns was about four tons, and the iron was worth about 3 cents per pound<sup>41</sup>. Mr. Lyford also asked that the word “Fort” henceforth be dropped from “Fort Homestead.” The Homestead was still being mined with Mr. Lyford as the superintendent<sup>42</sup>.

The Homestead mining claim was still shown on maps as late as 1905<sup>43</sup>, but it appears never to have been patented as a mining claim. However, at some point, title of the land passed into private hands, and the site of Fort Homestead is now owned by a person living in Oregon<sup>44</sup>. On June 30, 1979, the Julia C. Bulette Chapter 1864 of E. Clampus Vitus erected a rock monument with a bronze plaque to mark the site of Fort Homestead<sup>45</sup>.

As of the end of 2004, the site is overgrown with weeds and has been trashed. A crumbling 20<sup>th</sup> century shack sits on the property. The E. Clampus Vitus monument has been knocked over, and the plaque is missing. The vandalism may have occurred two years ago. A neighbor to the site said someone in Gold Hill had the plaque in safe keeping.



Aerial photograph of Fort Homestead, which is slightly above right of center with north to the left (Nevada Department of Transportation, NDOT 1365, frame 7-3, Nov. 30, 1979).



Aerial photograph of Fort Homestead, which is right of center with north approximately to the left (Nevada Department of Transportation, NDOT 1365, frame 6-5, Nov. 30, 1979).



Photograph of Fort Homestead from the northwest looking southeast. Linear cut near top of hill is old carriage road (by David A. Davis, November 2004).

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