

TEXAS PARKS AND WILDLIFE

*Interpretive Guide to:*

# FORT LEATON

STATE HISTORIC SITE





## THE EARLY DAYS

The story of Fort Leaton begins in Chihuahua City, Mexico. There, Juana Pedrasa met Ben Leaton sometime between 1833 and 1840. In 1848 the couple and their three children moved to the La Junta District on the Rio Grande, where Pedrasa owned land. They purchased additional acreage and fortified existing adobe structures into the square-shaped compound known today as Fort Leaton, which served as a home, trading post on the Chihuahua Trail, and private fortification. The Leaton family and their visitors—explorers, soldiers, traders, freighters, native Americans and Anglo settlers alike—sought protection here against Native American raids and attacks by borderland outlaws.

A handful of journal entries provide a glimpse of life at Fort Leaton in its early days. In 1848, 70 men led by John Coffee Hays traveled from San Antonio to the Big Bend area on a mapping expedition. Today that trip would take about seven hours, but in 1848 it took two months! Imagine how welcome the relative safety and comfort of Fort Leaton must have seemed after such an arduous journey. The expedition purchased horses, mules and other supplies at the fort.



© Archives of the Big Bend, Sul Ross State University

Although Fort Leaton was not a military fort, the U.S. Army maintained an intermittent presence. As shown here, members of the U.S. Cavalry visited the site in 1916.



Carretas were used to move freight on the Chihuahua Trail.

The following year, Lt. William H.C. Whiting and party arrived at Fort Leaton while exploring a military route between San Antonio and Santa Fe. By this time Leaton owned two slaves, employed eight to 10 workers and maintained extensive farming operations. Whiting referred to the fort as “one of the most important places on the Rio Grande” due to its position as the lone defensive outpost and supply station along a 450-mile stretch of river. He also commented on the exorbitant prices being charged. Although Leaton was widely known as a scoundrel, Whiting praised his hospitality. Leaton treated the party to an enormous meal including stewed chicken with chilies, roasted turkey, tortillas, frijoles, coffee and homemade peach brandy.

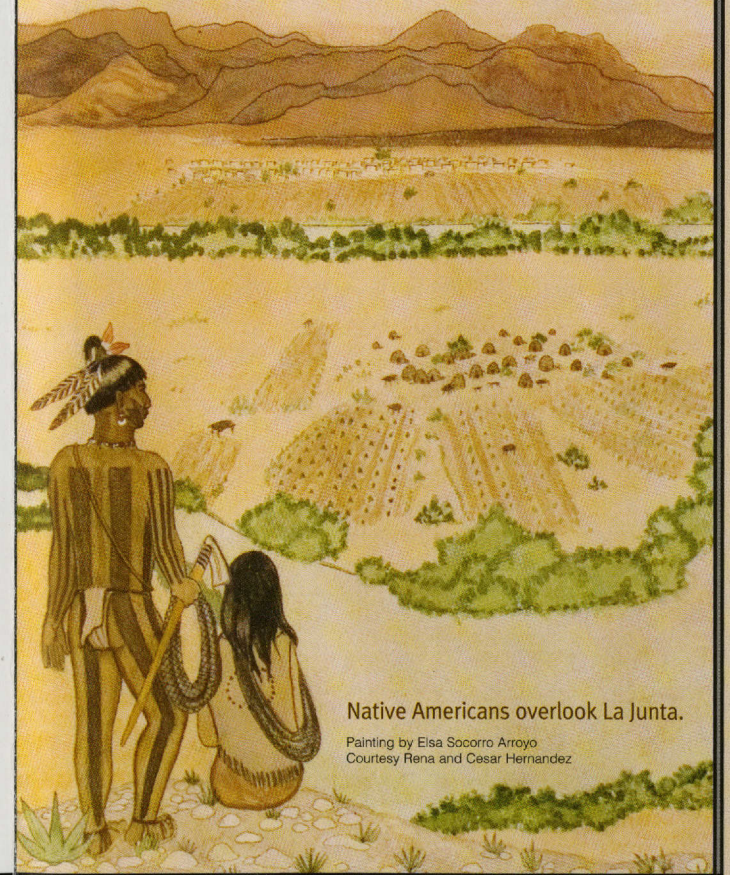
## MURDER AND MAYHEM

The story of Fort Leaton soon took a series of violent turns. Following Ben Leaton’s death in 1851, Juana Pedrasa married Edward Hall and continued the fort’s operation as a trading post, albeit unsuccessfully. Fort Leaton passed to John Burgess during foreclosure proceedings in 1862, but the Halls refused to leave. Ten years later an angry and frustrated Burgess was indicted for Hall’s murder. Despite a second slaying—this time of Burgess by a vengeful William Leaton—the family continued the trading business through 1884. The Burgesses went on to occupy the deteriorating structure until about 1927. Following Fort Leaton’s acquisition by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department in 1967, restoration work was completed in 1978.

## LA JUNTA DE LOS RIOS

The same qualities that drew Ben Leaton and Juana Pedrasa to the area have attracted countless others over the centuries. The region known as *La Junta de los Rios*, named for the nearby confluence of the Rio Conchos and Rio Grande, contributes two all-important resources: water and fertile floodplain soils.

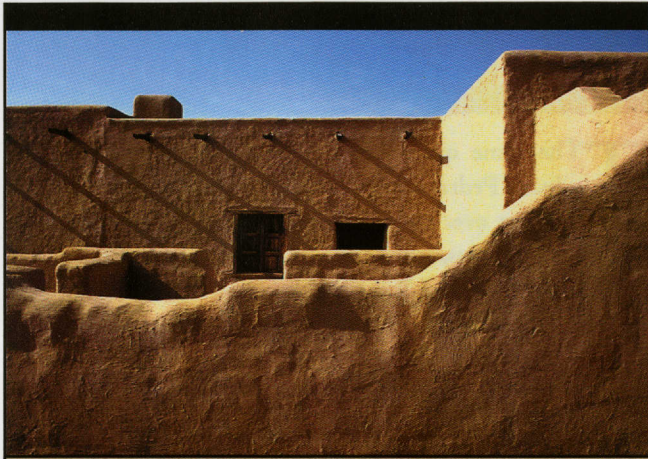
As long as 800 years ago, Native American farmers raising corn, beans and squash lived here in permanent villages while conducting extensive trade. Over time *La Junta* witnessed a flow of diverse cultures and individuals from all walks of life as the region passed through governance by four countries: Spain, Mexico, the Republic of Texas and, finally, the United States. Due to its rich history and relative isolation, the region continues to maintain a unique cultural identity today.



Native Americans overlook La Junta.

Painting by Elsa Socorro Arroyo  
Courtesy Rena and Cesar Hernandez





WELCOME TO ONE OF THE LARGEST AND FINEST HISTORIC ADOBE STRUCTURES IN TEXAS! FORT LEATON STATE HISTORIC SITE PROVIDES A GLIMPSE OF LIFE AT A FORTIFIED TRADING POST ON THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER BEGINNING IN THE TURBULENT MID-1800s. THE SITE CONVEYS A LARGER STORY AS WELL— THAT OF THE VIRTUAL PARADE OF PEOPLE AND CULTURES THAT HAVE LONG INHABITED THE REGION KNOWN AS LA JUNTA DE LOS RIOS. OH, THE TALES THIS SITE COULD TELL ...



Folklorico dancers at Fort Leaton.

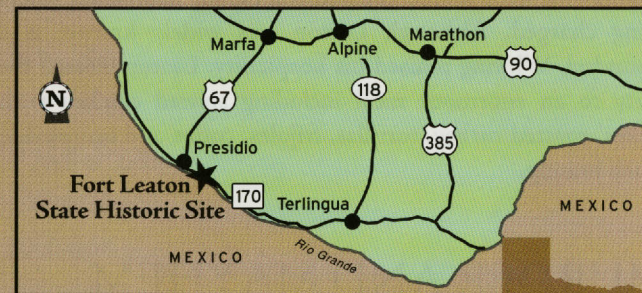


Fort Leaton State Historic Site is day-use only and offers picnicking areas, a nature trail, guided tours, plus exhibits on the area's history from late prehistoric times through the present. The site also hosts several special events throughout the year and serves as the venue for many community activities.

#### FURTHER READING

*The River Has Never Divided Us* by Jefferson Morgenthaler.

*Rio Grande* by Jan Reid.



For more information, visit or contact:  
 Fort Leaton State Historic Site  
 Four miles east of Presidio on F.M. 170  
 P.O. Box 2439, Presidio, Texas 79845  
 (432) 229-3613  
[www.tpwd.texas.gov/fortleaton](http://www.tpwd.texas.gov/fortleaton)



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