

The First Family of Fort Concho

The Griersons had a rich and exciting life before and after Fort Concho, but they spent more time at this post than at any other Army facility.

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Over its twenty-two years of active service (1867-1889), Fort Concho saw several dozen commanders, a few hundred officers, and several thousand soldiers and civilians assigned to the post, but no commander and no family had more influence and longer lasting effect on the place than Colonel Benjamin Grierson, his wife Alice, and their five children. Indeed, Colonel Grierson commanded Fort Concho longer than any other officer, covering the years of 1875 through 1882, when he and the 10th Cavalry moved west to Fort Davis. The Griersons could rightfully be called "the first family of Fort Concho."

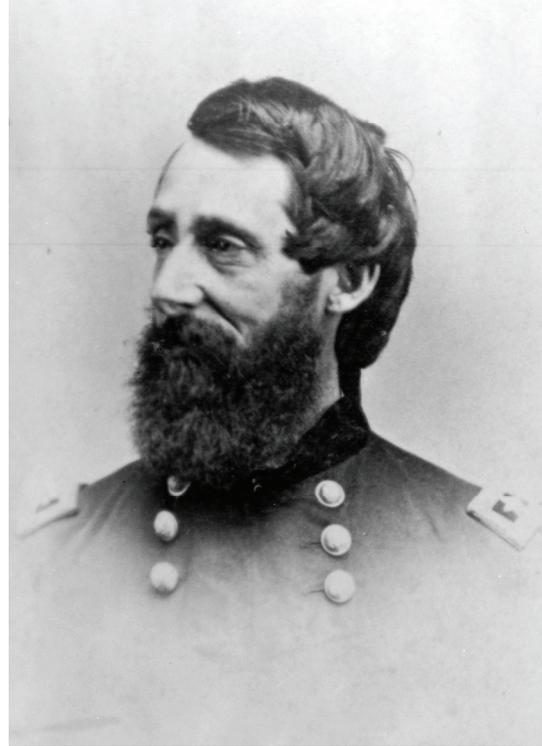
Fort Concho acquired a large collection of letters from the Grierson family that provide a wonderful portrait of daily life, its challenges, joys, and all too common sorrows that marked life at a western frontier outpost. Alice was a frequent letter writer and even on scarce paper she crammed endless details of life on post as she kept her older children briefed as they were living away from Fort Concho. These letters offer both a visual and verbal connection to this site and our community's earliest days.

To begin with Ben and Alice, they both spent their earliest years in Youngstown, Ohio. Ben was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1826, but his family moved to Ohio when he was young, and Alice Kirk was born in 1828 in Youngstown. They were childhood

friends; they seriously courted; and despite several separations and setbacks they were married in 1854 and spent thirty-four years together.

Benjamin Henry Grierson

His interest and talent in music at an early age led to some employment as a song writer and band director, but it did not offer him a career prosperous enough to raise a family, so after some years in a mercantile business that failed in the late 1850s, his prospects were dim. At the outbreak of the Civil War, Ben volunteered with an Illinois regiment and his calm leadership and organizational skills brought him swift promotions to the rank of colonel with additional brevet promotions to Major General by the end of the conflict. His most famous achievement, "Grierson's Raid," took 1500 men through Mississippi in 1863, destroying Confederate supplies and rail lines while diverting enemy forces from Grant's vital siege of Vicksburg. Thus a permanent military career was born and in 1866 Grierson took command of the newly formed 10th Cavalry, composed of black enlisted men, and these soldiers, nicknamed the Buffalo Soldiers by their Indian foes, served under his steady leadership for twenty-five years. Grierson and the 10th Cavalry built Fort Sill, re-built and stabilized Fort Concho, commanded Fort Davis, and oversaw posts and commands in Arizona and New Mexico until his retirement in 1891. He died at his summer home in Michigan in 1911.



Alice Kirk Grierson

The daughter of a progressive father, Alice received the best education her family could afford in the mid-nineteenth century. After her education she taught school and developed a love of education and literature that she instilled in all her children. Her upbringing also gave her a strong character and sense of duty that served her well in her years as a commanding officer's wife. Indeed, Alice managed two families, her own children as well as the families at whatever post she and Ben were assigned. As the first lady of Fort Concho, Alice took the lead in making officers and their families feel welcome. To Alice and Ben seven children were born, and two, John Kirk (1856-1858) and Mary Louisa (1871) died in childhood. Two other children, Charles and Robert had severe cases of mental illness and eventually were placed in institutions. Edith, their only surviving daughter, died at Fort Concho in 1878. Throughout their many tragedies and challenges, Alice kept the family together and her letters

reflect her love and strong feelings for her children's welfare. She passed away in Santa Fe, New Mexico in 1888.

Charles Henry Grierson

The first child born to Alice and Ben in 1855 when they lived in Jacksonville, Illinois, Charles was already a young adult by the time Ben assumed the command of Fort Concho in 1875, and Alice had seen that his formal education took place in Jacksonville rather than in the informal settings of his father's army posts. Charles entered West Point but by 1877 he was suffering bouts of anxiety and depression that caused his parents to remove him to the family home in Jacksonville and later to Fort Concho. He eventually recovered to finish his studies at West Point and was commissioned as a second lieutenant and assigned to his father's 10th Cavalry Regiment. Over the next twenty years he rose to the rank of Lt. Colonel of the 10th, but he never fully recovered from the mental illness that Alice had experienced with several members of her family. In 1915 when he commanded Fort Huachuca, Arizona, Charles suffered a mental breakdown, was retired from active service and spent his last years in institutions until his death in 1928.



Robert Kirk Grierson

Born in 1860 and named after Ben's father and Alice's family, Robert also enjoyed formal education and was a teenager when the family moved to Fort Concho. Described as the most outgoing of the children, Robert had the greatest adventure any youngster could experience when he accompanied his father and a unit of the 10th Cavalry into far West Texas as part of the campaign against Apache chief Victorio in the summer of 1880. He kept a diary of this trip, and at one point he took part in a skirmish with some of Victorio's warriors. Robert entered medical school at the University of Michigan, but by early 1881 he experienced a violent attack of insanity that caused his arrest in a Chicago hotel. Like his older brother Charles, he was eventually brought to the family home in Jacksonville where over time he stabilized, but never fully recovered. He managed some ranch property his father bought near Fort Davis, but he had another breakdown in 1890 and spent his last twenty years in institutions until his death in 1922.

Edith Claire Grierson

Of all the Grierson children, Edith is the most identified with Fort Concho, tragically due to her death at the post in 1878. Born in Jacksonville in 1865, Edith was a young girl at Fort Concho and she was truly the "daughter of the regiment." Edith shared her mother's love of books; she fully enjoyed the dances, called "hops", held at the post; and she regularly rode her pony. Edith had just become a teenager in August of 1878 when she fell ill and Alice never left her bedside in Officers' Quarters 1. She had contracted typhoid, a hazard of the era's poor sanitation habits. To help quell her fever, Alice wired San Antonio and ice was delivered by special courier, but Edith succumbed on September 9, 1878 and rests in the city's Fairmount Cemetery, having been re-interred from the post cemetery by 1900. Alice's letter to Charles provides many details about the funeral service previously unknown.



Benjamin Henry (Harry) Grierson

Although named after his dad, this son born at Fort Riley, KS, in 1867 was always known as Harry. As a young boy at Fort Concho he enjoyed the usual diversions, including the many natural resources and outdoors activities of swimming and riding. Harry enjoyed drawing and made ship models. He eventually attended Washington University in St. Louis, avoided the mental stress that plagued his two older brothers, and settled into ranching near Fort Davis. At both Fort Concho and Fort Davis, his father had speculated in ranch lands, assuming the army's "civilizing" effect on the region would increase the value of any holdings. Unfortunately, the army's departure from Fort Davis in 1891 severely depressed his investment. Harry married and then divorced and had no children, passing away in 1934 on some of that Fort Davis land his father had purchased fifty years previously.

Theodore McGregor (George) Grierson

Ben and Alice's last surviving child, like his older brother Harry, was born at an army post, Fort Sill, Indian Territory (today's Oklahoma), a facility his father built and commanded in 1869. Ben was delighted with their newest son and noted that his birth would perpetuate the Grierson name, a hope and boast that history did not fulfill as none of their boys had any sons who, in turn both married and had sons of their own. Just two years younger than his older brother Harry, he fully enjoyed Fort Concho that one historian tagged as a "paradise for children." He built traps and captured birds at the fort and he rode his "velocipede" (bicycle) on the post grounds. Both he and Harry attended schools in the family hometown of Jacksonville. George remained a bachelor for his life, living longer than any of his siblings, remaining on the Grierson ranch land near Fort Davis, Passing away in 1950.

