

West Point failure Anson Mills contributed to El Paso's history

When Anson Mills arrived in El Paso by stagecoach, it was 1858 and the route he took from San Antonio was "infested with Indians." The seven-day journey, he noted, was through "some of the most desolate country with Indians on all sides."

When he finally overlooked Franklin, as El Paso was then known, he thought it was the most pleasant sight he'd ever seen. The American side of the Rio Grande was named by the first postmaster, Franklin Coontz, after himself. While officially a town, it was "simply a ranch owned by Uncle Billy Smith," Mills later said. Across the river, where Mexican girls sold fruits and vegetables, was a town of 13,000. Now Juarez, it was then known as Paso Del Norte.

For Mills' contributions to the history of El Paso and the Southwest, he will be inducted into the El Paso County Historical Society Hall of Honor at a 6:30 p.m. Sunday banquet at the El Paso Country Club. Dinner tickets will be \$17.50.

Too humiliated to return home after failing at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, he moved to El Paso where he became a surveyor and planner.



Anson Mills rose through the ranks to brigadier general in the Union army.

One of his assignments was to plot the first map of El Paso, for which he received \$100 and four \$50 plots of land as payment. He chose the town's name because of a break in the mountain chain through which the Rio Grande ran.

At the Civil War's outbreak, Mills enlisted in the Union Army, received a commission and rose through the ranks to brigadier

general. He returned to El Paso some 20 years after he left to fight in the Civil War.

Mills' army career was eventful, and he found himself chasing the Apache chief Geronimo into Mexico and leading fighting expeditions against the Sioux. He was guarding Sioux villages when Gen. George S. Custer was killed 14 miles away.

Born in Indiana in 1834, Mills was fascinated by his mother's weaving. This early fascination would pay off, for he designed and patented a cartridge belt that was lighter than traditional cartridge boxes carried by soldiers. Its use was adopted by the U.S. Army and many foreign armies and he became a wealthy man. Though he frequently traveled to the East on business, he maintained property in El Paso.

After his military career, Mills returned to El Paso. He built the Mills Building on the Plaza in 1912. At 12 stories tall, it was El Paso's tallest building.

He was appointed American boundary commissioner for the settlement disputes arising over the Rio Grande River's meanderings on the Mexico/Texas borders, an appointment he resigned in 1914.