

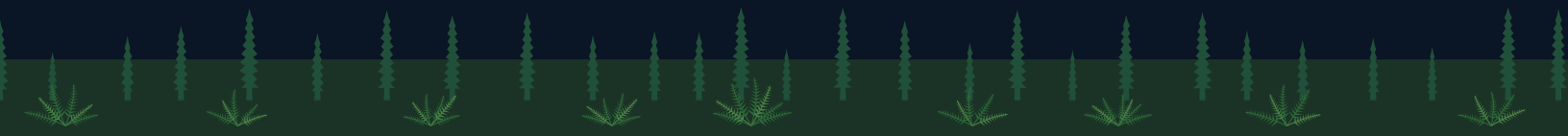


Fort Bragg, California

A history of the town and the Skunk Train

Its people, its mill and its harbor, its disasters and crimes, and the "Redwood Route" railroad, from the first Pomo villages to October 2026.

A birthday history, October 2026



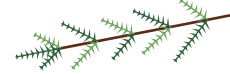


How to read this report

This is a full history of **Fort Bragg, California**, the lumber and fishing town on the Mendocino County coast, about halfway between San Francisco and Eureka. It is *not* about the army base in North Carolina that shares the name. Both places were named for the same man, Braxton Bragg, but they have nothing else in common.

The report is in five parts:

1. **The story of the town**, in order: the Pomo people, the 1857 army post and Indian reservation, the founding of the lumber town, the 1906 earthquake, the Union Lumber Company years, Noyo Harbor, and the change from mill town to tourist town.
 2. **Fort Bragg in numbers**: charts of its population, its people, its immigrants and its weather.
 3. **Deaths, disasters and tragedies**, then **murders and notable crimes**. These are real people. They are told plainly and with respect, using only what newspapers, courts and historians have published.
 4. **The Skunk Train**, a full history of the California Western Railroad from 1885 to today, with its own photographs and charts.
 5. **Photo gallery**, 394 photographs of the town and the Skunk Train, decade by decade, from the 1850s to the 2020s (page 47).
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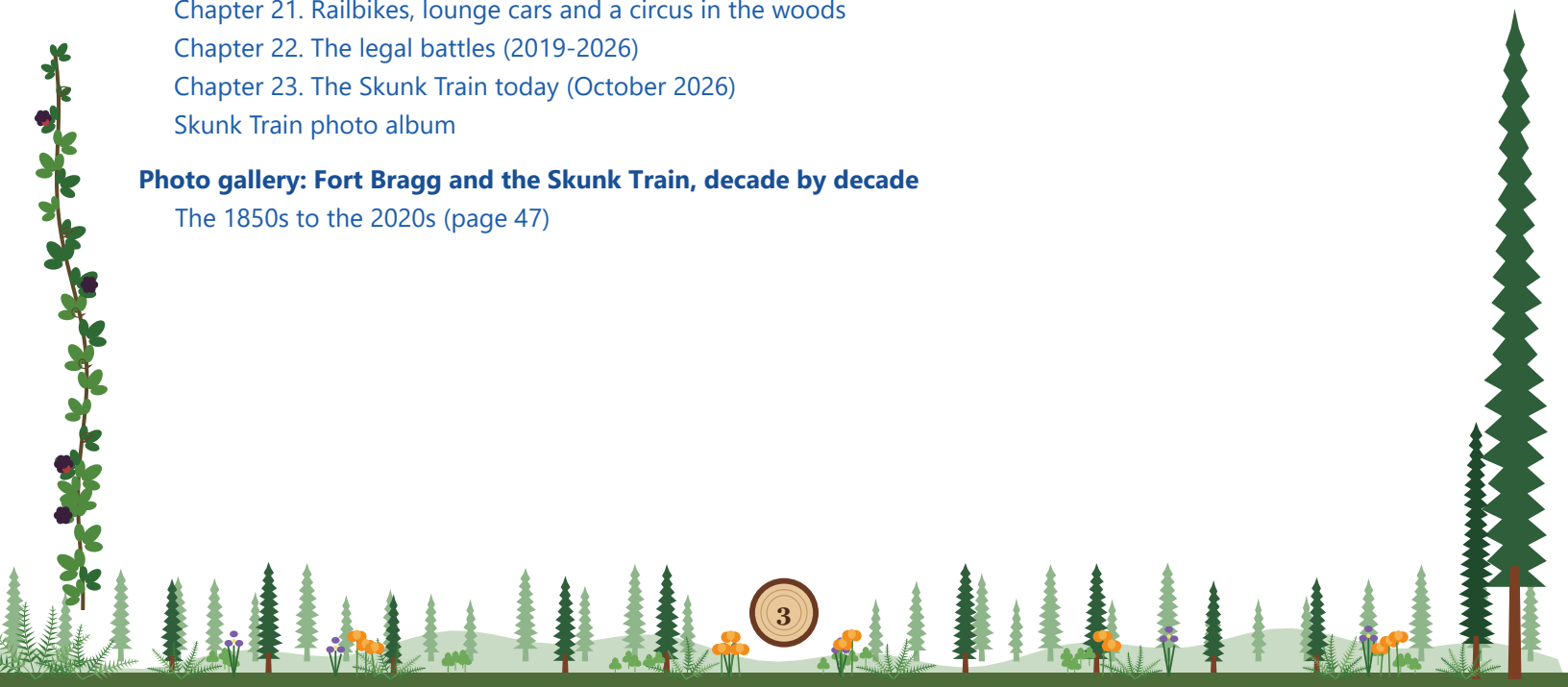
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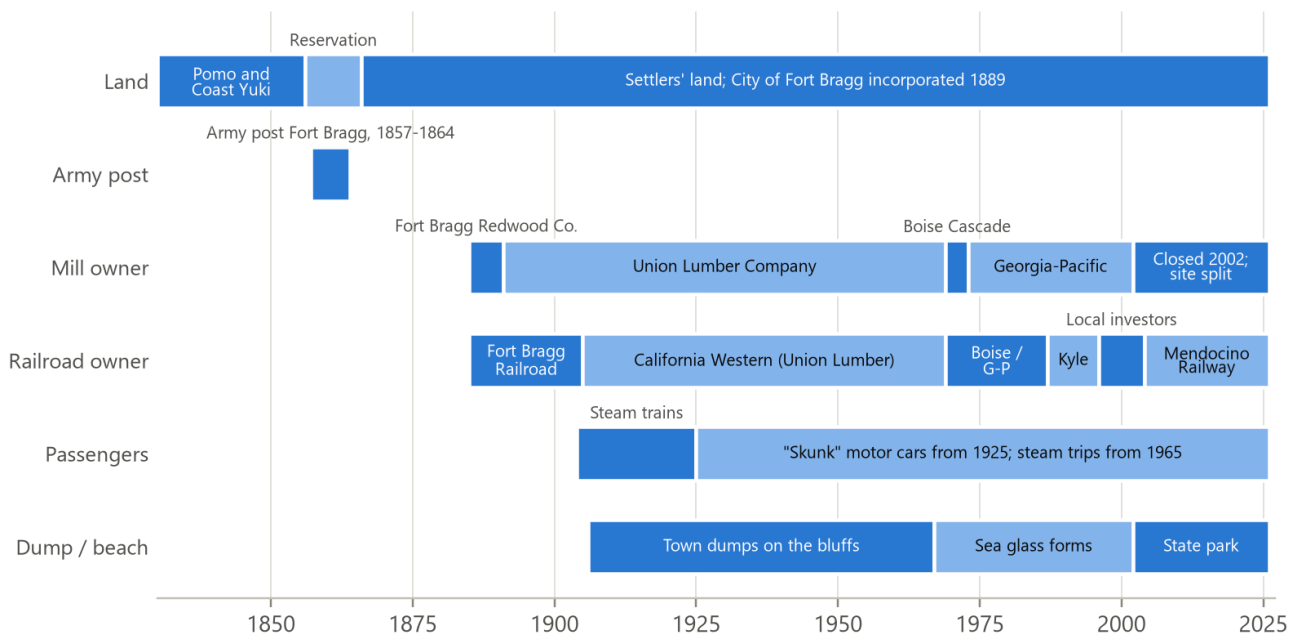


Fort Bragg at a glance

Where	Mendocino County, California, on the Pacific coast at the mouth of the Noyo River
First people	Northern Pomo (Noyo River southward) and Coast Yuki (northward), for thousands of years
Named for	Capt. Braxton Bragg, by Lt. Horatio Gates Gibson, who founded an army post here on June 11, 1857
Army post	1857 to October 1864, guarding the Mendocino Indian Reservation (1856-1866)
Lumber town founded	1885, when C. R. Johnson, Calvin Stewart and James Hunter moved their sawmill here
City incorporated	1889, with C. R. Johnson as first mayor
The mill	Fort Bragg Redwood Co. (1885), Union Lumber Co. (1891-1969), Boise Cascade (1969-1973), Georgia-Pacific (1973-2002)
The railroad	Fort Bragg Railroad (1885), California Western (1905), the "Skunk Train" since the 1920s
Population	945 (1890), 3,235 (1940), 7,273 (2010, the peak), 6,983 (2020)
Size	About 2.7 square miles; the largest town on the coast between San Francisco and Eureka
Famous for	Redwood lumber, Noyo Harbor fishing, Glass Beach, the Skunk Train, the Coastal Trail
Weather	Highs of 51-65°F all year; about 43 inches of rain, nearly all of it from October to April

Who owned what, when

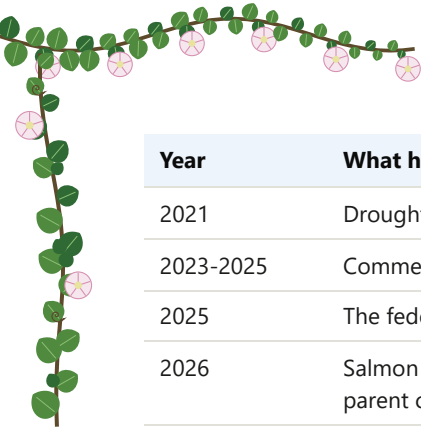
The land, the mill, the railroad and the beach, from before 1850 to 2026. Short bars are labelled above.



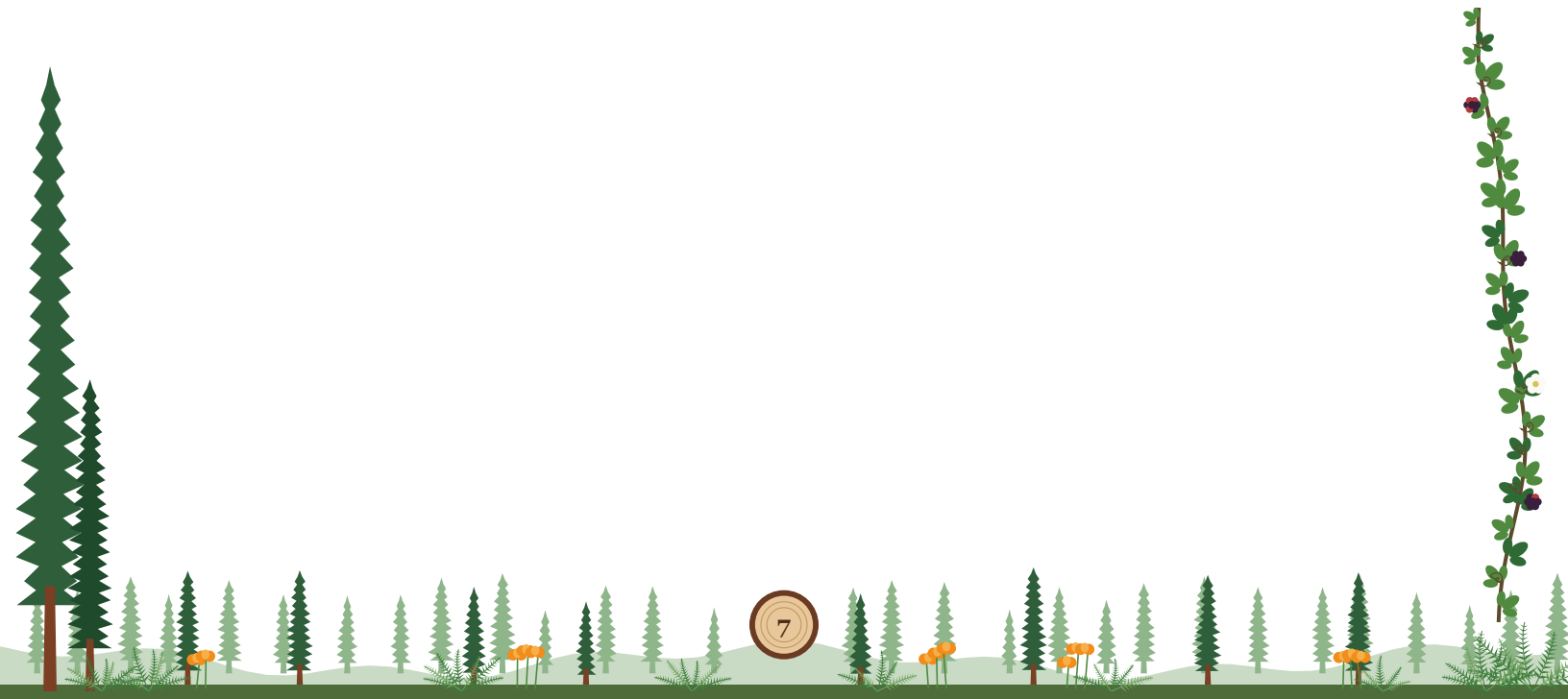
Timeline: Fort Bragg from the beginning to 2026

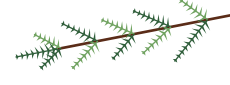
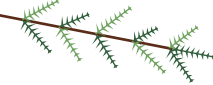
Year	What happened
Thousands of years	Northern Pomo and Coast Yuki live along this coast. Villages include Kadiu at the Noyo River mouth, Djomo at Pudding Creek and Tcadam at Caspar
July 25, 1850	The brig <i>Frolic</i> wrecks just north of Point Cabrillo. The salvage party finds the giant redwood forests
1852-1853	Henry Meiggs builds the first coast sawmill at Big River (Mendocino); a short-lived mill is built three miles up the Noyo
Spring 1856	The federal government creates the Mendocino Indian Reservation, about 25,000 acres from the Noyo to the Ten Mile River
June 11, 1857	Lt. Horatio G. Gibson founds the army post "Fort Bragg" on the reservation
1858	Indian superintendent Thomas J. Henley is exposed for fraud and removed
1864	Most of the Native people are marched inland to the Round Valley Reservation; the soldiers leave on October 19
November 1865	The worst storm on record wrecks schooners at Noyo; seven men are lost with the <i>J. R. Whiting</i>
March 1866	The reservation is ended; from 1867-69 its land is sold to settlers at \$1.25 an acre
March 25, 1880	Richard McPherson is murdered near Noyo; his killer is hanged at Ukiah in 1881
1885	Johnson, Stewart and Hunter move their mill to Fort Bragg; the Fort Bragg Redwood Company's mill starts November 16. The Fort Bragg Railroad is founded
1887	The railroad reaches Glen Blair, 6.6 miles up Pudding Creek
1889	The City of Fort Bragg is incorporated, with C. R. Johnson as mayor. The <i>Fort Bragg Advocate</i> is founded
August 17, 1891	The Union Lumber Company is formed
1891	A fire burns most of a block of Main Street
January 18, 1892	A mob of more than 100 white men drives Chinese railroad-tunnel workers out of their Pudding Creek camp
1892	The Guest House, the Johnson family home, is built of redwood
1893	Tunnel No. 1 is completed by Chinese laborers, opening the way up the Noyo River
1904	Passenger trains begin, to Alpine. The brick Bank of Fort Bragg is built
1905	The railroad becomes the California Western Railroad & Navigation Company
April 18, 1906	The great earthquake wrecks nearly every brick building; fire burns about a block and a half; restaurant owner Lee Poi is killed
1906-1967	The town dumps trash over the bluffs: the start of Glass Beach
1911	The town library opens (January 18). The first train reaches Willits (December 19)
1912	Regular through trains begin July 4; the first tourists arrive by rail. The Union Lumber Company Store is built
1915-1916	The Pudding Creek Trestle and the Ten Mile logging railroad are built

Year	What happened
1918-1919	Influenza: 175 cases by the end of October 1918; masks are ordered on January 12, 1919
1925	The first gasoline motor car, M-80, arrives: the "Skunk" is born
1936	A washout derails a California Western engine; the fireman is killed
1939	The first Paul Bunyan Days
1940s-1950s	The mill's peak: about 500,000 board feet a day
1946	The redwood strike begins January 14 and lasts about 27 months
1948	The steel Noyo Bridge opens over the harbor entrance
1950	The Noyo Harbor District is formed
1952	MacKerricher State Park opens
1962	Skunk Train passengers peak at 43,419
1964	Two Skunk motor cars collide head-on (nine hurt); the Alaska tsunami damages Noyo Harbor
1965	Steam returns as the "Super Skunk," pulled by engine No. 45
1966	The Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens open; <i>The Russians Are Coming</i> is filmed
1967	The bluff dumps are closed
1969	Boise Cascade buys the Union Lumber Company
1971	Mendocino Coast District Hospital opens
1973	Georgia-Pacific takes over the mill
1986	The Grondalski family of four is murdered near town by Hells Angels
1987	<i>Overboard</i> is filmed (May). Arson destroys the Piedmont Hotel, the library and the courthouse (September 20). The railroad is sold to Kyle Railways
1988	Record year at Noyo Harbor
1996	Georgia-Pacific closes the original 1885 sawmill (June 21). Local investors buy the Skunk Train
2002	The Fort Bragg mill closes for good. The state buys Glass Beach. The railroad files for bankruptcy
2004	Sierra Railroad's Mendocino Railway restarts the Skunk Train (May 1)
2005	The new Noyo River Bridge opens (August 5)
2009	The City acquires the Noyo Headlands. A 73-foot blue whale washes ashore; its skeleton is saved
2010	Population peaks at 7,273
2011	Councilman Jere Melo is murdered (August 27). The Japan tsunami wrecks Noyo docks (March 11)
2013	Tunnel No. 1 partly collapses; service returns that summer
2014	Deputy Ricky Del Fiorentino is killed in Cleone (March 19)
2015	Tunnel No. 1 fails again; through trains to Willits stop
2018	The 7-mile Coastal Trail opens end to end (August 5). The Hart family dies at Juan Creek
2019	Railbikes begin on the Skunk line. The railroad buys 77 acres of the mill site
2020-2022	A citizens' committee studies renaming the town; it does not recommend a new name



Year	What happened
2021	Drought emergency and a desalination grant. The City sues the Skunk Train's owner
2023-2025	Commercial salmon fishing is closed three years running
2025	The federal rail board confirms the Skunk Train is a real railroad. The Coastal Commission rezones the headlands
2026	Salmon fishing reopens. Work starts on the Noyo Center's Whale House. A New York firm buys the Skunk Train's parent company. The Railcoaster opens at Willits. "Locomotive 1776" is painted for America's 250th





Part One: The story of the town

Chapter 1. The first people

Long before there was a Fort Bragg, this stretch of coast was home to the **Northern Pomo**. Their country ran south from the Noyo River. North of the Noyo, toward the Ten Mile River and beyond, lived the **Coast Yuki**. **Cahto** people came over the hills from the Laytonville area. The Kelley House Museum in Mendocino puts it simply: the Northern Pomo "have lived on the Mendocino Coast for thousands of years."

They hunted, fished, gathered and traded. Shell mounds along the bluffs show where families harvested mussels, abalone and seaweed season after season. The Pomo are known worldwide for their baskets. They also made canoes, tools and houses from what the coast and forest gave them.

Several village sites are known around today's town:

- **Kadiu**, at the mouth of the Noyo River, on a grassy flat now buried under river dredgings below the North Cliff Motel. Its people were moved off in 1929, when the Union Lumber Company built a railroad over the bluff.
- **Djomo**, at the mouth of Pudding Creek.
- **Noyo**, at Virgin Creek.
- **Yakale** at Bald Hill; **Galyetil** and **Kabetsitu** near Cleone; **Tcadam** at Caspar.

The place names themselves are Pomo. Lyman Palmer's *History of Mendocino County* (1880) recorded what the Pomo called the rivers. The Noyo River was **Chim-ne-be-dah**, "brush creek." **Noy-o** was really the name for what is now Pudding Creek, "on account of the sand-dunes which were near its mouth." Settlers moved the name to the larger river. The Ten Mile River was **Be-dah-to**, "mush river," for the quicksand at its mouth. Big River was **Bool-dam**, for the blowholes on the headland at Mendocino.

The coming of Americans was a catastrophe for these people, as Chapter 2 tells. By 1903 the anthropologist Samuel Barrett found only three small Pomo settlements left on this coast: about 20 people at Fort Bragg, a few at Noyo and about six at Little River. Their descendants are still here. The Sherwood Valley Band of Pomo now owns land on the old mill site. In December 2024 Marcia Rafanan became the first Pomo person to serve as vice mayor of Fort Bragg.

Chapter 2. A shipwreck, the redwoods, and the reservation (1850-1866)

The wreck that started the lumber rush

On the night of **July 25, 1850**, the brig ***Frolic***, a fast Baltimore clipper carrying Chinese silks and porcelain (and, historians believe, opium) to Gold Rush San Francisco, struck a reef just north of **Point Cabrillo**. Historians at the San Francisco Maritime Museum have called it the most significant shipwreck on the West Coast, for what it led to rather than what it carried.

The San Francisco lumberman **Henry "Harry" Meiggs** sent men north to salvage the cargo. By the time they arrived, the local Pomo had already taken what could be saved. What the salvagers found instead were the endless redwood forests along Big River. Meiggs shipped a complete sawmill north on the brig *Ontario* and in 1852 built the first mill on the coast at Big River, today's town of Mendocino. Every mill town on this coast, Fort Bragg included, grew out of that discovery. Divers found the *Frolic*'s remains in the 1950s, and the site is now a California underwater park. (Palmer's 1880 history tells a slightly different version, with the "silk-laden vessel" wrecked at the mouth of the Noyo in the winter of 1851-52. Modern historians identify it with the *Frolic*.)

The Noyo River got its first sawmill almost at once. About Christmas 1852 George Hegenmeyer took a contract from Capt. William Richardson to build a water-powered mill about three miles up the Noyo. In **February 1853** local Native people raided the half-built mill, drove the men off and took everything but three guns. The mill finally started in November 1853, cut about 150,000 feet of lumber, and was swept away by a flood in January 1854.

The Mendocino Indian Reservation

In 1855 a Bureau of Indian Affairs party came up the coast looking for a place to put Native people who were in the way of settlement. In the **spring of 1856** the federal government created the **Mendocino Indian Reservation**: about **25,000 acres** (Palmer gives 24,938.46) running from the Noyo River north to the Ten Mile River, and from the ocean east to the top of Bald Hill.

Into it were gathered Northern and Southern Pomo, Yuki, Wappo, Whilkut and others, brought from as far as Eureka and Chico. One historian counts people from more than 70 separate small villages. The headquarters station stood about a mile north of the Noyo, at what is now downtown Fort Bragg. There were other stations at Bald Hill, at the Ten Mile River and at "Culle-Bulle," half a mile south of the Noyo. The first agent was **Capt. H. L. Ford**, and the first doctor was **Dr. T. M. Ames**.

The reservation was run badly and cruelly:

- **Fraud.** The superintendent of Indian affairs, **Thomas J. Henley**, used it to enrich himself. A clerk, G. Canning Smith, exposed him in 1858 for cheating the government, and he was removed.
- **Round-ups.** Palmer, writing in 1880, already admitted that soldiers and employees raided the inland valleys and drove people in "just as they would so many wild hogs or cattle," whether the tribes were hostile or not. Camps were raided and children kidnapped. California's 1850 Indian "protection" act allowed Native children to be indentured.
- **Hunger and disease.** People faced deadly epidemics of cholera and smallpox, and often there was not enough food.

- **Numbers.** About 2,000 people were held at first. When Lt. Gibson counted in 1857, he found about 1,000. No one recorded how many died. The state Native American Heritage Commission's timeline of killings in the Mendocino region lists two incidents at or near the reservation, in 1857 and 1859. Most of the region's killings happened inland.

In **1864** most of the people were marched inland to the **Round Valley Reservation**, about 40 miles to the northeast. The coast reservation was **discontinued in March 1866**. Its land was opened to settlers from 1867 to 1869 at **\$1.25 an acre**, leaving the Pomo who remained with nothing.

The army post called Fort Bragg

The army arrived to "keep order" on the reservation. On orders dated May 30, 1857, **First Lieutenant Horatio Gates Gibson** of the 3rd U.S. Artillery, with men of Company M, founded a post on **June 11, 1857**, a mile and a half north of the Noyo River. It was first called Camp Bragg. Gibson named it for his old commander from the Mexican War, **Capt. Braxton Bragg**, under whom he had served at Chapultepec in 1847. Bragg never came here. He later became a Confederate general, but the post kept his name through the Civil War.

Later garrisons were Company D of the 6th Infantry (1859-61), then California Volunteers, Company D of the 2nd California Infantry (1861/62-64). Part of the garrison was rushed north to fight in the Coeur d'Alene War of 1858. From 1861 to 1863 soldiers from Fort Bragg went on field campaigns against Native bands as far north as Shelter Cove.



The army post Fort Bragg in 1863, photographed by Carleton Watkins.