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At Fort Churchill State Historic Park there was a sign for many years stating that, in August of 1861, the First Regiment of Dragoons became the First Regiment of Cavalry, thereby making the fort "the first post in the nation to have cavalry." Most claims to being a historical first are subject to debate; this particular assertion was completely in error.

From the American Revolution through the War of 1812, the Regular Army usually included at least small mounted units, commonly called "light dragoons." In the strict sense of the term, dragoons were mounted troops who fought dismounted; in the American experience, however, dragoons were, in effect, cavalrymen. In 1833 Congress created the Regiment of Dragoons, renamed the First Regiment of Dragoons in 1836 when the Second Regiment of Dragoons was organized. Another regiment, the Third Dragoons, existed only during the Mexican War. The Regiment of Mounted Riflemen came into being in 1846. In 1855 Congress established the First and Second Cavalry Regiments. So, at the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, the Regular Army had five horse regiments. The Third Cavalry, organized in May 1861, brought the number to six, three of them designated as cavalry.

So what happened in August of 1861? On the third day of the month an act of Congress redesignated the First and Second Dragoons and the Regiment of Mounted Riflemen as the First, Second, and Third Regiments of Cavalry, respectively, and the old First, Second, and Third Regiments of Cavalry became, respectively, the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Regiments of Cavalry.

In August of 1861, Company A of the First Dragoons was at Fort Churchill, the remaining companies of the regiment being garrisoned at various posts in California, Oregon, and Washington Territory. Similarly, at that time the several companies of the other five mounted regiments were scattered throughout the country. (In the nineteenth century it was rare for all the companies of a Regular Army regiment to be at the same place at the same time.) Even if we ignore (which we can't) the fact that the First, Second, and Third Cavalry already existed before August 3, 1861, no one military post could claim to be the birthplace of the cavalry as of that date.

After the error was brought to the attention of Nevada State Parks, the sign was changed in 2002 to read "In a stirring ceremony on the parade ground in late August 1861, the name of the First Regiment of Dragoons was officially changed to the First Cavalry."

Photo: Nevada Historical Society, Reno

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