



THE *Hexagonal*
Tower about 1900

FORT SNELLING

From MILITARY POST *to* HISTORIC SITE

RUSSELL W. FRIDLEY

FORT SNELLING is perhaps the most significant landmark in the entire history of Minnesota and the Northwest. Its establishment in 1819 at the junction of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers radically changed the course of events in the upper Mississippi Valley. Before its erection, the Minnesota country had been a vast wilderness inhabited by Sioux and Chippewa Indians and claimed at various times by Spain, France, and Great Britain. The establishment of the post effectively extended for the first time the authority of the young American nation over the region, paved the way for white settlement, and set in motion the transformation of a vast Indian territory into an American state. Soldiers like Zachary Taylor and Jefferson Davis served at Fort Snelling, and their later fame enriched its traditions and dramatized its importance as a training ground

for a host of the nation's leaders. As a military outpost on the remote American frontier, Fort Snelling served as the nucleus from which stemmed much of the settlement of Minnesota and the Northwest.

Yet it is curious that a spot so rich in history should not have been adequately preserved at some point in its one-hundred-and-thirty-seven-year existence. Time and progress have made serious inroads into what once seemed an almost indestructible military installation. Today, two sturdy stone buildings—the Round and Hexagonal towers—constitute the principal remains of the original fort.¹

Although the walls and the other buildings have long since disappeared, the idea of preserving the old fort is neither new nor peculiar to our day. For almost a century Americans, and particularly Minnesotans, have lamented the gradual decay

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¹ Portions of two other buildings, the officers' quarters and the commandant's house, also exist. Although these structures have been partially destroyed and considerably altered, certain interior features of the original buildings may still be discerned.

and disappearance of this famous landmark. Since the Civil War there has been an unmistakable growth in appreciation of the site's historical importance. Various plans for developing the area that either endangered the stone towers or substantially altered the landscape have periodically revived interest in the fort's heritage. From time to time, threats to the integrity of the site have set historically minded people to thinking about how it might be safeguarded.

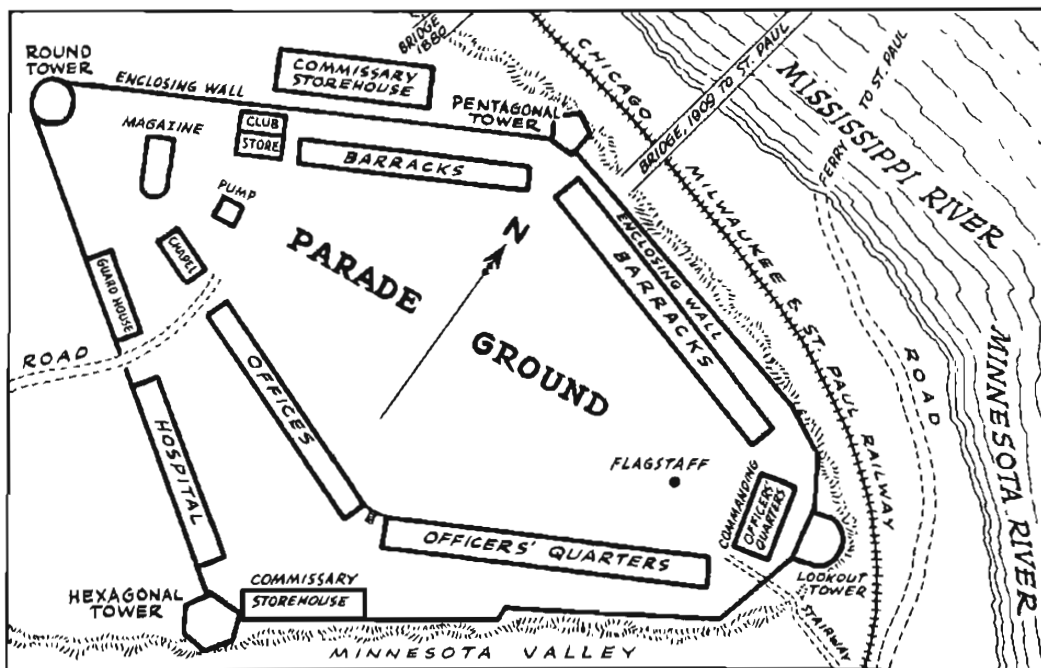
While the dominant theme in the story of preserving the old fort has been one of neglect and disappointment, it has been broken at various times by individuals and organizations that have come forward to advance bold and imaginative plans for its preservation. Though none of these plans has been fully realized, they reflect a continuing desire on the part of an increasing number of people to save what remains of old Fort Snelling for future generations.

² Marcus Hansen, *Old Fort Snelling, 1819-1858*, 27 (Iowa City, 1918).

THE SITE of Fort Snelling was acquired from the Sioux Indians in 1805 by Lieutenant Zebulon M. Pike and was included in the general area that he suggested for an American military post. Before that time, an Indian village occupied the picturesque spot overlooking the two river valleys. In 1819 troops under the command of Colonel Henry Leavenworth arrived to start construction of a fort. But it did not really begin to take shape until the following year when Colonel Josiah Snelling succeeded Leavenworth as commandant.²

The fort built under Snelling's direction was laid out in the shape of a diamond, outlined by a wall made of limestone quarried from the banks of the river. Two blockhouses, hexagonal and pentagonal in shape, overlooked the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers. At the point of the bluff above the junction of the two rivers stood a round watchtower. Opposite it at the point of the diamond exposed to the open prairie stood a lookout, the structure we know as the Round Tower. Within the

PLAN of the old Fort Snelling area



walls were barracks, quarters, and storehouses. Many of the early buildings were made of hewn logs; these were largely replaced by stone structures by 1830. The boat landing for the fort was directly below the end of the bluff. In later years a stairway ran up the steep slope, and a wagon road crept slowly up the bank of the Minnesota River along the stone wall to enter the fort between the two towers that still survive.³

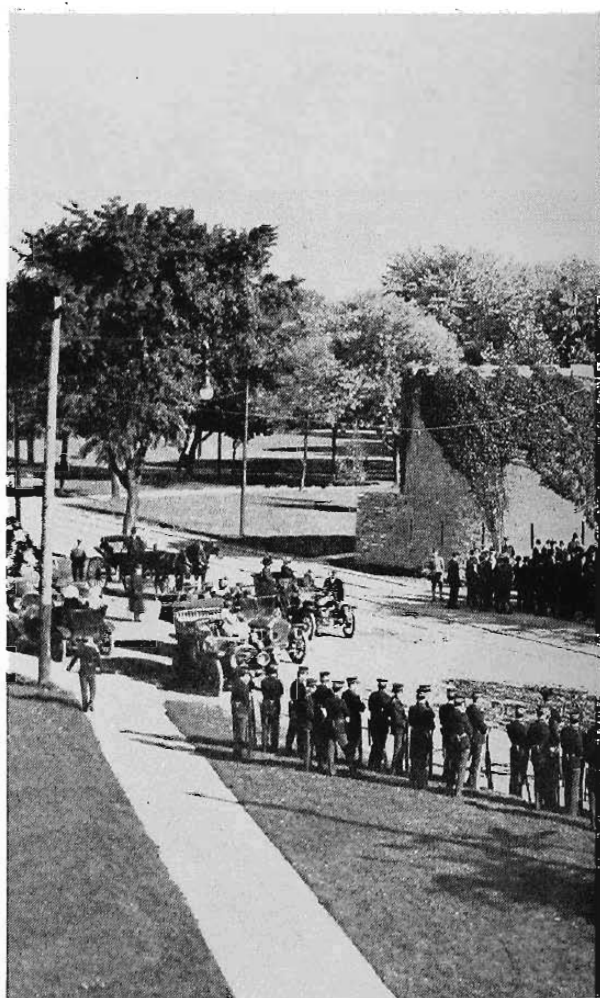
FROM THE STONE fortress atop the bluff overlooking the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers, early visitors viewed a majestic and compelling scene, and they were quick to call attention to it and to the vacation possibilities of the surrounding area. George Catlin, the famous painter of American Indian life who visited the fort in 1835, is credited with suggesting a "Fashionable Tour," a trip by steamer up the Mississippi from Rock Island or Galena to the Falls of St. Anthony. The idea caught on quickly, and in the next twenty-five years a stream of visitors made the novel pilgrimage up the river to Minnesota.⁴

Before the Civil War, the Falls of St. Anthony, climax of the popular excursion up the Mississippi, were the chief tourist attraction in the Minnesota country. Accounts of visitors reveal that Minnehaha Falls ranked second and Fort Snelling third in capturing the tourists' attention. While the two famous Minnesota cascades definitely overshadowed Fort Snelling in tour-

ist literature issued before the Civil War, the scenically located outpost frequently elicited enthusiastic comment from the newcomer to Minnesota.⁵

Visitors of a century ago were understandably more interested in Fort Snelling's scenic and commanding location than they were in its brief history. Mrs. Elizabeth F. Ellet, a discerning observer who took the "Fashionable Tour" in 1852, gave her readers a detailed description of the post and its strategic site. "The distant view of Fort Snelling," she wrote, "its flag gleaming in relief against the sky is startlingly fine; but the nearer one . . . is yet more imposing. Its white walls and bar-

CEREMONY at the Round Tower in



³ Hansen, *Old Fort Snelling*, 73.

⁴ Theodore C. Blegen, "The 'Fashionable Tour' on the Upper Mississippi," in *Minnesota History*, 20:377-396 (December, 1930).

⁵ For examples of contemporary travel literature mentioning these attractions, see John Disturnell, *Springs, Water-Falls, Sea-Bathing Resorts, and Mountain Scenery of the United States and Canada*, 180-182 (New York, 1855); J. W. Bond, *Minnesota and Its Resources*, 37, 149-152, 159 (Chicago, 1856); C. C. Andrews, *Minnesota and Dakota*, 40 (Washington, D. C., 1857); Laurence Oliphant, *Minnesota and the Far West*, 244, 246, 248 (Edinburgh, 1855); and *The New World in 1859*, pt. 2, p. 30 (London, 1859).

racks are clearly defined, with other neat buildings in the vicinity; and all around and beyond lies spread the most magnificent panoramic display on which the eye ever rested. . . . A situation more commanding than that of Fort Snelling as seen from the Mississippi, can hardly be imagined," said Mrs. Ellet. "Its solid walls rise from the summit of nature's rampart of perpendicular rock, more than a hundred feet above the river."⁶

Two years later the strong appeal of the upper Mississippi country was amply demonstrated when approximately a thousand members of the Rock Island excursion, celebrating the completion of the first rail-

commemorating Pike's visit of 1805.



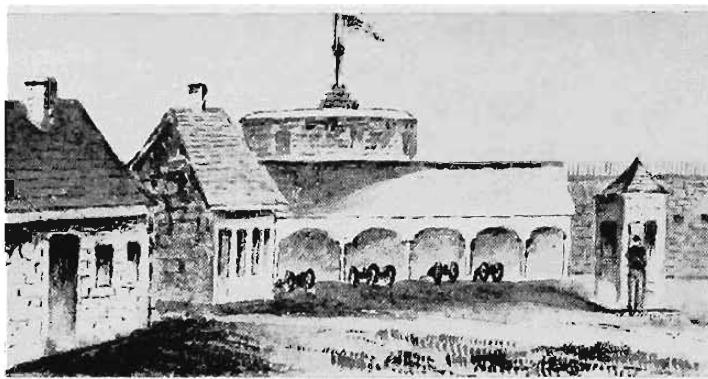
road to reach the Mississippi, arrived at the St. Paul levee in a flotilla of steamboats. "No sooner had the boats landed," reported the *St. Anthony Express* of June 10, 1854, "than every vehicle of every kind, description, shape or age . . . was at once seized by the impatient crowd, anxious to visit the great points of interest and attraction, the Falls, Minnehaha, and the Fort." The same issue of the *Express* carried a letter, signed "Sentinel," from an anonymous member of the excursion who described the fort as "a Rhine-looking fortress." The writer felt, however, that the post was not in good order. There were, he said, "old hats in the windows and other appearances of neglect."

Further evidence of the growing awareness of the fort as a major scenic site on the western frontier was the attention it received in *The United States Illustrated*, an elaborate volume edited by Charles A. Dana and published in 1855. In it, the scenic and romantic qualities that most impressed early visitors to Fort Snelling are aptly summarized. The writer said that the "scenery around Fort Snelling" was "of a sublime and impressive character." Then he continued, "About fifty years ago, an Indian camp stood on the bluff, now occupied by Fort Snelling; bare-headed squaws, in deer-skin garments, with papooses cradled on their backs, were paddling their light bark canoes across the river. . . . The Indian wigwams are now replaced by a well-built fort. . . . The whistle of the steamboat, as she passes from Mendota to the Fort, is heard instead of the cry of the painted warrior."⁷

Guides published during the 1850s lured the immigrant as well as the tourist to Minnesota, and gave special attention to Fort Snelling. J. H. Colton's *Guide*, published in 1852, commented that from the river the fort appeared "imposing and

⁶ Ellet, *Summer Rambles in the West*, 102 (New York, 1853).

⁷ Dana, ed., *The United States Illustrated: The West*, 29-30 (New York, 1855).



INSIDE the fort, a
water color by
George F. Fuller, 1853

seemingly impregnable." Although it was "within the reach of cannon from higher ground," the writer thought that "the object for which the site was selected—the protection of the frontier from savage incursion is well attained by its situation." Another guide published in 1857 portrayed Fort Snelling as a "castle-like structure, of time-defying materials," and said that it had long been "the point from where the Indians of the Northwest received their annuities, and were held in check."⁸

Important also in popularizing the scenic features of the fort were the men and women who painted and sketched it. It is doubtful that any site in Minnesota attracted so distinguished and talented an array of artists as did Fort Snelling between 1830 and 1860. During the 1840s Charles Deas, J. C. Wild, and Henry Lewis were among those who depicted the fort, and in the 1850s it attracted the attention of such St. Paul artists as James McC. Boal and Robert O. Sweeny. Officers and men who served there also pictured the post—Sergeant E. K. Thomas in the 1850s and Captain Seth Eastman, commandant of the fort at various times, who sketched the frontier post as early as 1830 and painted several views of it in the 1840s. Daguerreotypes made by men like Alex Hesler also supplied lasting and accurate views of the site. As these likenesses of Fort Snelling multiplied and were distributed about the nation, they undoubtedly acquainted many people with the military post at the junc-

tion of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers.

BY THE 1850s Fort Snelling's scenic values had been amply recognized. But while its commanding view received increasing notice during that decade, its importance as a frontier military post rapidly declined. Once the hub of activity in the Northwest, where it reigned supreme over a vast wilderness, Fort Snelling's influence diminished as settlement spread beyond it. New treaties signed with the Indians pushed the frontier farther west, and the performance of the fort's principal function—the protection of the frontier—was no longer required.

In 1849 a new post, Fort Gaines, was established near the junction of the Crow Wing and Mississippi rivers. Soon to be renamed Fort Ripley, it superseded Fort Snelling as the nation's northwesternmost military outpost.⁹ In that year, too, the seat of authority for the area passed from Fort Snelling to St. Paul, capital of newly created Minnesota Territory.

C. K. Smith, the secretary of the new territory, suggested in 1849 that the fort be made a branch of West Point, and that it serve as a western military academy.¹⁰

⁸ Colton, *The Western Tourist and Emigrants' Guide*, 53 (New York, 1852); *A Guide for Emigrants to Minnesota*, 16 (St. Paul, 1857).

⁹ See F. Paul Prucha, "Fort Ripley: The Post and the Military Reservation," in *Minnesota History*, 28:205-224 (September, 1947).

In the *Minnesota Pioneer* of May 1, 1851, James M. Goodhue speculated on the fate of the fort and made another proposal for its future use. He believed it would "soon be evacuated." If so, he said, the "solid walls of the fort and out-buildings, with their decaying roofs, will remain for a while to tell our children the history of these times. . . . A sergeant of the guard, with men enough to make a melancholy whist party, will remain for a time." But, Goodhue asked, "within those walls will there never again be heard the reveille, the tattoo[s], the retreat, the clatter of musketry, the sweet music of the band, and the ringing, joyous laugh of smart officers, with be vies of gay girls and wives."

Goodhue then went on to say that there was a movement afoot to establish a national military asylum and that a board of commissioners would probably be sent around the country to select a suitable site. "It seems impossible," he continued, "that disinterested commissioners *can* overlook the many and manifest advantages of Fort Snelling . . . over any other place in the

United States, no matter *where* it may be." And he concluded, "We look with the most sanguine confidence, to see Fort Snelling selected for that purpose."

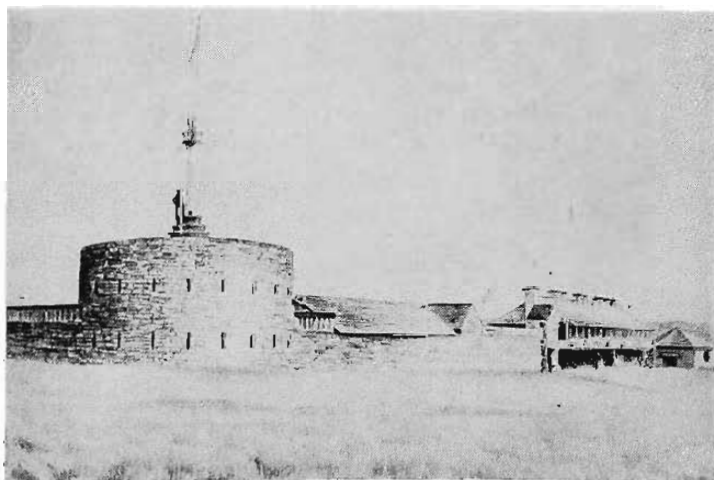
Instead, in 1852 the Fort Snelling military reservation was substantially reduced by Congress. A New Haven newspaper editor, who accompanied the Rock Island excursion of 1854, echoed the often expressed sentiment that "The march of civilization has rendered Fort Snelling nearly useless."¹¹

In 1857 troops were withdrawn, and the entire military reservation was sold by the war department to Franklin Steele, a former sutler at the post and one of Minnesota's earliest and most successful businessmen. This transaction created such a furor that a Congressional investigation into the circumstances surrounding the sale was conducted. It also prompted an inquiry by the war department to determine whether a garrison of soldiers should remain at the post. The whole matter, however, was laid aside by Congress in 1858, and the buildings and land were turned over to Steele. For a time he used the fort as a sheep ranch. The animals grazed about the stone walls that had enclosed an active frontier army post, and at night they were herded inside for protection. Thus, the fort that had served the Minnesota frontier for thirty-seven years was temporarily aban-

¹⁰ See a letter from Smith to Thomas Corwin, September 1, 1849, in the William Pitt Murray Papers in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

¹¹ James F. Babcock, "Rails West: The Rock Island Excursion of 1854," in *Minnesota History*, 34: 133-143 (Winter, 1954). On the reduction of the military reservation, see William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1: 424-428 (St. Paul, 1921).

OUTSIDE the fort, 1860,
a wash drawing
by D. S. Williams



doned. Many people believed it should be preserved and used, but no one expressed the opinion that it should be saved for historical reasons.¹²

The temporary evacuation of the fort by United States troops came to an abrupt end with the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. At that time, Governor Alexander Ramsey designated it an induction and training station for Minnesota volunteers. After the war, Fort Snelling was re-established as a permanent post although Steele retained technical ownership of the reservation until 1871, when the government officially reacquired a portion of the land for military purposes.¹³

Among the distinguished visitors to the fort during the war years were Henry Thoreau and Count Ferdinand Zeppelin. Thoreau, who went west in 1861 in search of health, commented in his journal on the post's "tawny or butterish" limestone walls. Zeppelin, a German military observer with the Union army, visited Fort Snelling in 1863. While there he became intensely interested in a captive balloon that had been used for observation purposes by the Union forces. He secured permission to make a flight in the balloon, his first such ascent and one that significantly influenced his later career in the development of lighter-than-air craft.¹⁴

BY THE CLOSE of the Civil War several forces were at work that would affect the future development of Fort Snelling. The outlines of a larger military installation with a different purpose began to appear as the disappearance of the frontier and changing army policy outmoded the old post. At the same time, its buildings and walls began to show signs of age and decay. More and more the old fort was becoming a symbol of the past.

In 1864 officers of the Minnesota Historical Society asked the eminent local historian Edward D. Neill to write a paper on the fort's history. Neill responded with what seems to be the first study of the post

as a historic site. "For nearly fifty years," he wrote, "Fort Snelling has been well known for the beauty and prominence of its situation." He feared, however, that "under the advancing and resistless pressure of modern civilization, it may be, that within a generation, not one stone will be left on another." Therefore, said Neill, "In anticipation of its disappearance, it is the object of this article to narrate some of the incidents connected with the Fort and the vicinity, previous to the organization of Minnesota."¹⁵

Travel literature issued during the late 1860s and early 1870s also reflects a growing awareness of the fort's historic backgrounds. In a Minnesota guide published in 1868, three times as much space is devoted to a sketch of the fort's history as is given to a description of its scenic qualities. This booklet interestingly enough appeared under the editorship of J. Fletcher Williams, secretary of the Minnesota Historical Society. A similar work issued in 1872 gives about equal space to the post's history and to its scenic features, noting that its chief use "now is as a supply post, whence are sent men and supplies to the frontier forts now hundreds of miles further on."¹⁶

A description of the fort published in 1870 reveals that it looked much as it had thirty years earlier: "A stone wall about nine feet high incloses the fort, and rests on the east side nearly on the edge of the bluff. . . . The quarters for officers and

¹² For the terms of the sale and the investigation, see Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1:503-514, and Hansen, *Old Fort Snelling*, 51-52. Steele's sheep ranch is described in the *St. Paul Globe*, October 4, 1903.

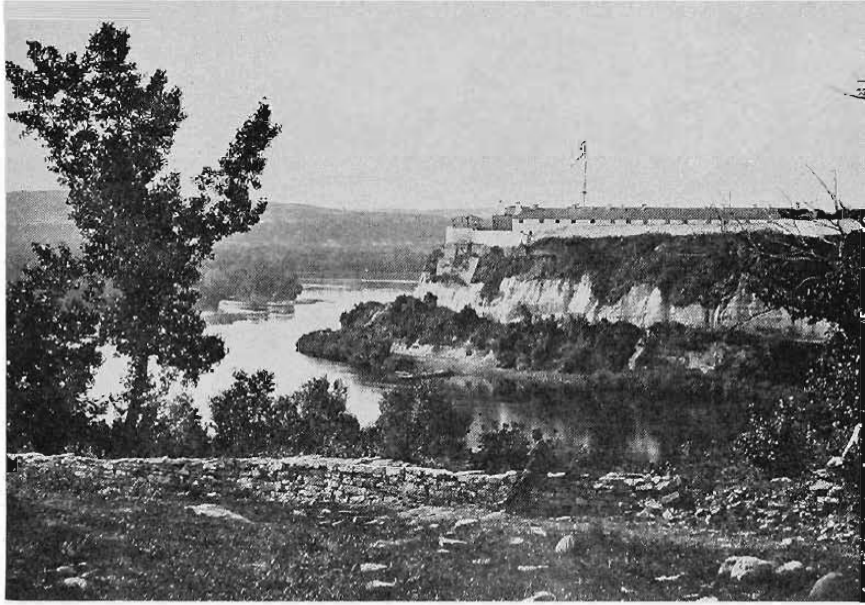
¹³ See Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1:514; and Hansen, *Old Fort Snelling*, 52.

¹⁴ Franklin B. Sanborn, ed., *The First and Last Journeys of Thoreau*, 2:41 (Boston, 1905); interview with Zeppelin in *Minneapolis Journal*, February 9, 1915.

¹⁵ Neill, "Occurrences in and around Fort Snelling from 1819 to 1840," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 2:102 (1864).

¹⁶ Williams, ed., *The Guide to Minnesota*, 36 (St. Paul, 1868); *Minnesota Tourist's and Traveller's Guide*, 30 (St. Paul, 1872).

FORT Snelling
about 1870



men are built of stone. . . . The hospital is a stone building, two stories high. . . . The stable, workshops, ice-house, and other necessary buildings are outside the wall on the bank of the Mississippi." During the Civil War, "a number of wooden barracks, store-houses, and stables were erected a short distance above the post, which still remain." The report notes that the garrison obtained drinking water from the spring at the site of Camp Coldwater, on the Mississippi a half mile upstream from the fort.¹⁷

During the thirty-five years that elapsed between the end of the Civil War and the turn of the century, however, the appearance of the old fort was altered as a result of drastic changes in army policy. With the virtually complete removal of the Indians from the Great Plains by 1890, the era of small posts in that area ended, and the army adopted a new system of establishing fewer but larger garrisons.

Fort Snelling was chosen as the site for a

major army post, and in 1881 it became the headquarters for the Department of the Dakota. In a letter requesting funds for the construction of new quarters and other buildings, the army's deputy quartermaster-general, Charles H. Tomkins, reflected the growing interest in the fort's historic backgrounds. Tomkins wrote that "The site selected for the headquarters buildings, the associations and surroundings of the neighborhood, combine to invest Fort Snelling with a peculiar charm. This old post, the pride and strength of a generation of pioneers in this country, is midway between the cities of Saint Paul and Minneapolis, and is a central point of interest to residents of both, as well as to all tourists in this country."¹⁸

As a result of the army's increased use of the fort, new officers' quarters were erected west of the old post between 1879 and 1881, and in 1889 additional barracks for soldiers were built outside of the confines of the original area. Construction of a bridge over the Mississippi between St. Paul and Fort Snelling in 1880 further altered the appearance of the fort site, and soon a road to Minneapolis from the new bridge led past the Round Tower, just as a paved road does today. The decades following the Civil War also saw a marked deterioration in the walls surrounding the fort. Grading for the

¹⁷ War Department, Surgeon General's Office, *A Report on Barracks and Hospitals with Descriptions of Military Posts*, 367-369 (Washington, D. C., 1870).

¹⁸ For authority to move the headquarters, see Adjutant General, Department of Dakota, *General Orders*, no. 7, June 4, 1881. Quoted material may be found in a *Letter from the Secretary of War* (46 Congress, 2 session, *Senate Executive Documents*, no. 54 — serial 1884).



ROUND lookout tower
about 1864

track of the Minnesota Central, now a part of the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railway, along the Mississippi bank in 1864 had destroyed much of the wall joining the pentagonal tower and the lookout at the point of the bluff. Other sections of the original walls cracked and crumbled in the 1870s and 1880s, and during the latter decade the lookout, the pentagonal tower, and significant portions of the walls were torn down. By the 1890s only traces remained of the original walls enclosing the fort.¹⁹

IT WAS natural that the disappearance of these features should give rise to a wave of nostalgia over the old fort. The concern felt by many Minnesotans was expressed in 1895 by General E. C. Mason, the post's commandant, who advanced a most ambitious plan for the preservation of old Fort Snelling. Intimately acquainted with its history and traditions, Mason was dedicated to the cause of preserving what remained of the fort and to restoring and reconstructing portions that had been removed.

At a celebration on September 10, 1895, commemorating the seventy-fifth anniversary of the laying of the fort's cornerstone,

Mason warned that "If the people of Minnesota would preserve Old Fort Snelling for coming generations, they should make haste; for sooner or later the buildings so dear to every Minnesotan will be torn down to make room for needed improvements. In the War Department," he said, "there is neither romance nor sympathy."²⁰

Then he outlined his plan. "In this old fort we have one of the most interesting places in the frontier history of our coun-

¹⁹ For information on barracks' construction, see Secretary of War, *Reports*, 1882, p. 289 (47 Congress, 2 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 1, pt. 2—serial 2091), and 1889, p. 342 (51 Congress, 1 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 1, pt. 2—serial 2715). Construction of the bridge is described in Secretary of War, *Reports*, 1880, p. 1869-1873 (46 Congress, 3 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 1, pt. 2—serial 1954). See also John W. Cary, *The Organization and History of the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railway Company*, 159 (Milwaukee, n.d.); and Edward D. Neill, "Fort Snelling Echoes," in *Magazine of Western History*, 10:607 (October, 1889). Photographs in the Minnesota Historical Society's collection indicate that the round lookout behind the commandant's house disappeared in the early 1880s and that the pentagonal tower was removed a few years later.

²⁰ For the quoted reports on Mason's talk, see Louis de Lestry and Fannie Fullerton, "Shall Old Fort Snelling Belong to Minnesota," in *De Lestry's Western Magazine*, 2:135 (September, 1898); and *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, September 11, 1895.

try," Mason stated. "I suggest that either the historical society or the Twin Cities secure from the general government the control of this place; having done this, restore the old wall and the demolished bastions . . . convert these buildings into storehouses for the display of such articles as may yet be collected, illustrating the way in which the Indians and the white men lived and traveled when this beautiful state was a wilderness. The lodge of the Chippewas and the Sioux, the cart of the Red river trader, the travois and the birch bark canoe and the thousand and one articles used by the Indians or the settlers in war and in peace, in the chase or the cultivation of the soil or in domestic life." Mason pointed out that "Every year these things become more valuable and interesting; they should be collected now. In a few years it will be impossible to find them. Such a museum in the old fort, restored to its former state, would give us a place unique in its character," he concluded. "There would be nothing like it in the United States."

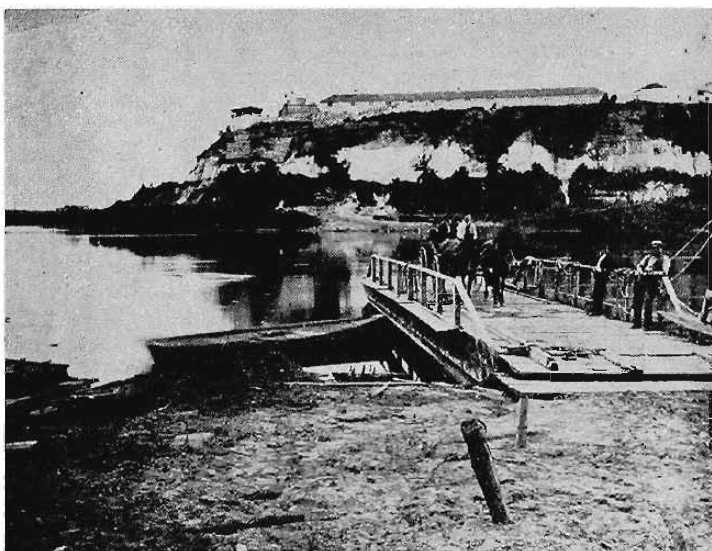
Among those who shared the platform with General Mason was Mrs. Charlotte

²¹ *Pioneer Press*, September 11, 1895; Van Cleve. *Three Score Years and Ten*, 13-20 (Minneapolis, 1888).

Ouisconsin Van Cleve. As the oldest surviving resident of the fort, it was fitting that she should be the guest of honor at the celebration. Mrs. Van Cleve had been brought to Fort Snelling by her parents in 1820 as an infant and had spent her first winter there at Camp Coldwater. In a trembling voice and in melodramatic fashion she told the audience of her long association with the old post. "I can remember, as a child," she said, "the walls around the old Fort, and how, as a child, I played about them. . . . I remember when the first steamboat came up the river, and how one of the officers lifted me up to the walls of the parapet so that I could look at it. And I remember that old tower there—oh, long may it stand; don't pull it down, I beg of you. . . . Oh, I hope this old fort will never be taken away; that it will always remain."²¹

An editorial in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* of September 11, 1895, commented that "The celebration . . . is a reminder that although we are in the habit of regarding Minnesota as a young state, she already begins to have a history in a really remote past. When we begin to celebrate the anniversaries of an event of which there are no living eyewitnesses, we may indeed feel ourselves a historic locality. The history of Fort Snelling, moreover, is by no means a

FERRY landing
from the St. Paul
side in 1867



commonplace one. . . . In Gen. Mason's address he made a suggestion . . . which is worthy of the attention of the people of the state, or at least of the two cities. The restoration of the old fort and its preservation as a museum . . . would be a most excellent beginning towards conserving what we have of historical interest. . . . Few American cities are in possession of a spot at once so historic, so beautiful and so accessible. The advantages of securing it as an object of local interest would be incalculable."

The press paid tribute to General Mason as the architect and eloquent spokesman of an imaginative plan, and for a moment the attention of Minnesotans focused on the old fort. Enthusiasm for its preservation quickly subsided, however, and General Mason and his cherished idea of a museum were soon largely forgotten.

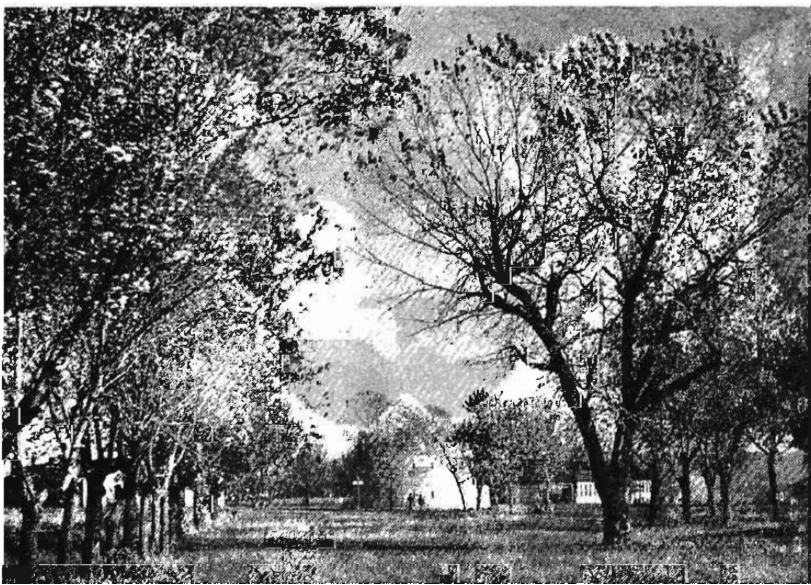
INTEREST in preserving the old fort, however, was kept alive by a few Minnesotans during the early years of the twentieth century. In 1901 razing of the original officers' quarters was begun, and their complete destruction was prevented only after considerable damage had been done. Portions of the first story of this structure are now enclosed in the row of buildings situated along the Minnesota River bank.²²

When plans for remodeling the post were announced in 1903, many people feared that what remained of the old fort would

be completely obliterated. Some comfort was offered by an article in the *Pioneer Press* of July 19, 1903, which reported that many improvements would be undertaken at the post, but that "Everything is being done to retain the historic view rather than emphasize what is new. With this in mind the new buildings are to be plastered on the exterior with a color suggestive of age—probably light yellow."

The paper stated that the Round Tower would be "changed little, and those alterations which will be made are expected to make it look as it did in days gone by. This effect will be produced by restoring the parapets. Its exterior will be strengthened to make it better able to withstand the ravages of time, and its interior will be fitted up for the adjutant as his office. The hexagonal tower, overlooking the Minnesota river, will be treated in the same way for its preservation, and its interior will be used as a store house." Apparently, most of these alterations were carried out. At least one, however, proved abortive. In 1904 a quartermaster at the fort had the Round Tower covered with cement, but such an outcry arose against this disfiguring of the historic tower that the cement was soon removed.²³

²² *St. Paul Globe*, October 4, 1903. For a personal recollection of the razing of the buildings, see Charles Stees, "Old Post Fort Snelling," an unpublished manuscript, dated May 21, 1938, in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society.



VIEW of the
Round Tower and
grounds about 1890

Edward A. Bromley, a Minneapolis newspaper photographer who had been one of the leading advocates of General Mason's plan in 1895, was among those who cherished the hope that it was not too late to save the old post. Writing in a 1904 issue of *The Home Magazine*, Bromley noted the great regret with which Minnesotans had viewed the removal of substantial portions of the fort in previous years. He called attention to the many "improvements" then under way at Fort Snelling and spoke out energetically for preservation of the Round and Hexagonal towers.²⁴

Interest in old Fort Snelling declined after 1905. The bridge from St. Paul to the post was replaced in 1909 by the present Fort Snelling Highway Bridge. During World War I, the post played its part, for the army used it as an induction center and for training and garrisoning thousands of soldiers. In 1926 the Mendota Bridge was constructed, a development that was to have a decisive effect on the network of roads which later cut up the site. A road, built to connect the Mendota Bridge with

another span across the Mississippi to St. Paul, traversed the site between the two surviving stone towers, passing very near the former location of the pentagonal tower. Later this road became the busy highway that today moves a steadily increasing stream of traffic through the Fort Snelling area.²⁵

IN THE succeeding two decades historical interest in the fort centered largely in the Round Tower. In 1928 Willoughby M. Babcock, then curator of the Minnesota Historical Society's museum, voiced the hope that the tower would be used as a museum. With funds obtained from the federal Works Progress Administration and others, this hope became a reality in the late 1930s.²⁶

The tower, which long had been used as a residence, was completely renovated. Its two-story interior was converted into a single circular room, with plastered walls, a skylight, and a stone floor. A map, inlaid in the floor, located the fort at the junction of the two rivers and showed the buildings and the parade ground within the walled post as they were about 1840. A mural more than six feet high and a hundred and seven feet long, depicting appropriate scenes in the fort's history, was painted by Richard Haines around the entire tower just below the ceiling. Wall and floor cases, specially designed for the display of exhibits illuminating the history of Fort Snelling, were arranged along the circular walls.²⁷

The museum was administered under a joint agreement between the post command and the Minnesota Historical Society, the former maintaining the building and furnishing a custodian to keep it open daily, and the latter being responsible for the installation and maintenance of suitable exhibits. This system worked well for six years. On a single Sunday in 1942, for example, three hundred persons visited the tower. At long last a museum at the fort had been achieved, and hopes for the his-

²⁴ Contemporary accounts of the remodeling may be found in the *Pioneer Press*, October 25, 1903; *St. Paul Dispatch*, March 5, 1904; and *St. Paul Globe*, July 3, 1904. See also Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1:139n. Contrary to popular belief, the parapets on the Round Tower were not a feature of the original structure. Pictorial material in the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society indicates that the parapets were added after the Civil War. See, for example, illustrations on pages 182 and 183 above.

²⁵ Bromley, "Fort Snelling, Minnesota," in *The Home Magazine*, 3-4 (May, 1904).

²⁶ For information on the highway bridge, see United States Army, Corps of Engineers, *The Middle and Upper Mississippi River: Ohio River to Minneapolis*, 1935, p. 236; for the Mendota Bridge, see *The Improvement Bulletin*, 68:25, p. 5 (November 13, 1926); and *Minneapolis Journal*, November 7, 9, 1926.

²⁷ Babcock, "Old Fort Snelling," in *Travelers Magazine*, published by Travelers Protective Association, 14, 27-28 (October, 1928). In 1927-28 a chapel was constructed in the style of the Round and Hexagonal towers. See *The Fort Snelling Memorial Chapel . . . Dedication Services, June 10, 1928*, a pamphlet in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

²⁸ For information on the museum, see Grace Lee Nute, *The Fort Snelling Round Tower*, a pamphlet issued by the Minnesota Historical Society; and *Minnesota History*, 22:207-209 (June, 1941).

torical development of the area glowed brighter.²⁸

On October 14, 1946, Fort Snelling was discontinued as an American military post after a hundred and twenty-six years of service to the nation, and once again the cause of historical preservation received a setback. Along with the rest of the post, the old fort site was turned over to the Veterans' Administration, which was unable to furnish a custodian for the tower. As a result, the museum was closed. It remains in this unsatisfactory state today, virtually inaccessible to visitors except on special occasions.²⁹

From 1946 through 1948 it was a rare meeting of the executive committee and the council of the Minnesota Historical Society that did not devote considerable time to the problem of the Round Tower and to plans for the permanent preservation of the old fort site. The threatened expansion of Wold-Chamberlain Airport into the area added to the urgency of the situation. Officers of the society explored the possibility of having the area designated a national monument or a state park, but in spite of their earnest efforts no solution to the problem of preserving the old post was found. Seldom had the future of the fort seemed more uncertain.³⁰

INTEREST in preserving the site of old Fort Snelling from the encroachments of modern civilization was suddenly revived in 1956. The prospect of a new highway through the area raised a serious threat. At the same time, it afforded an opportunity to plan for the permanent preservation of this historic spot. The Minnesota highway department's preliminary plan to relieve the traffic bottleneck existing at Fort Snelling included a cloverleaf encircling the Round Tower. The Minnesota Historical Society objected to this proposal on the grounds that it would seriously impair the historical interest of the site and make the Round Tower inaccessible to visitors.³¹

The highway department immediately agreed to alter its plan so that the new freeway would by-pass the most historic section of the Fort Snelling reserve. Its revised proposals, however, were, in the society's opinion, still unsatisfactory, since they routed the freeway between the Round Tower and the chapel and called for a cloverleaf near the spot where a wall had once connected the two remaining towers of the old fort. The society felt that such a plan would destroy the historic setting of the site, since a much-traveled freeway would run within a few yards of the Round Tower.³²

On May 18, 1956, the society called a public meeting for the purpose of presenting the revised plan to interested individuals and organizations. It was attended by members of the governor's staff, the Minnesota department of conservation, the division of state parks, the Minneapolis department of parks, the Hennepin and Ramsey county historical societies, the history department of the University of Minnesota, the Metropolitan Airports Commission, the Sons and Daughters of the American Revolution, the Minnesota Territorial Pioneers, the Minnesota adjutant general's office, and the Veterans' Administration and its employee group. After representatives of the highway department

²⁸ Historical Society, Executive Council Minutes, October 14, 1946, in the society's archives; Bertha L. Heilbron, "Local Historical Museums and the War Program," in *Minnesota History*, 23:12 (March, 1942).

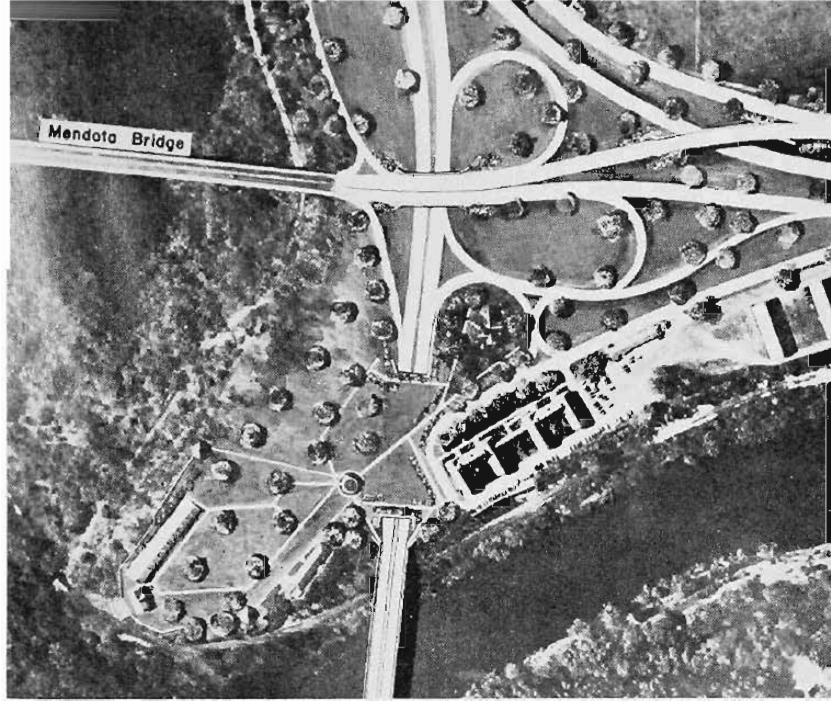
²⁹ See Arthur J. Larsen, "The Minnesota Historical Society in 1946," in *Minnesota History*, 28:52 (March, 1947); and *Pioneer Press*, October 15, 1946, p. 11; January 30, 1947, p. 5.

³⁰ Historical Society, Executive Committee Minutes, March 15, May 28, October 3, 1946, February 2, June 2, 1948; Executive Council Minutes, February 27, 1947, January 12, April 12, 1948, all in the society's archives.

³¹ Historical Society, Executive Council Minutes, October 15, 1956; Jay Edgerton, "Old Fort Snelling Is Endangered," in *Minneapolis Star*, May 16, 1956, p. 11A.

³² The author to Governor Orville L. Freeman, June 4, 1956; Freeman to author, June 7, 1956, in the society's files.

PROPOSED
highway plan in
the old fort area



explained the revised plan, it was the overwhelming opinion of those present that, while the new proposal preserved the area of the original fort, it seriously impaired the setting. The group felt that, if at all possible, the old fort site should be preserved in a more adequate setting than the revised plan allowed.³²

From the outset the Minnesota Historical Society took the position that the problem could and should be resolved cooperatively by the state agencies concerned. It did not, therefore, actively solicit either publicity or mail supporting its position in the matter. Nevertheless, it received a spontaneous stream of telephone calls, letters, and personal visits from patriotic and veterans' organizations, businessmen, labor leaders, teachers, school children, and numerous individuals in sufficient number to demonstrate the widespread interest

throughout the Northwest in the old fort site. From the beginning, Dr. George Selke, Minnesota's commissioner of conservation, and Mr. U. W. Hella, director of the division of state parks, vigorously supported the preservation of the old fort area in an adequate setting.³⁴

Eventually, the matter went before Governor Orville L. Freeman, who called a meeting of the interested state agencies. A representative of the society also attended. After considerable discussion, Governor Freeman asked that the possibility of constructing a tunnel under the area between the chapel and the Round Tower be studied. This was done, and ultimately the proposal was incorporated in a third plan advanced by the highway department, a plan that has since been accepted by both the department of conservation and the Minnesota Historical Society.³⁵

The present plan calls for a tunnel four hundred and fifty feet in length under the area between the chapel and the Round Tower. In this way, the new highway can be constructed to leave the old fort site free of roads—a considerable improvement over its present condition. In addition, the department of conservation is asking that

³² Historical Society, Executive Council Minutes, Addendum A, October 15, 1956; *Minneapolis Star*, May 19, 1956, p. 1.

³⁴ Correspondence on this subject, labeled "Fort Snelling, 1956," is preserved in the files of the director of the society.

³⁵ Freeman to the author, June 7, 1956; L. P. Zimmerman to Freeman, July 6, 1956; Historical Society, Executive Council Minutes, October 15, 1956.



CAMP Coldwater
reservoir about 1890

the federal government transfer title to the historic area to the state of Minnesota so that old Fort Snelling can be incorporated into the state park system.³⁶

THE DISCUSSIONS over the preservation of old Fort Snelling revived interest in the site of Camp Coldwater, where Colonel Leavenworth and his troops camped temporarily in 1820 while the fort was under construction. The Coldwater area later served for decades as a waterworks, and a flowing spring, the remains of an old reservoir, and a stone tower may still be seen. At present the Minneapolis department of parks is considering the incorporation of the Camp Coldwater site into its system.³⁷

Thus, as the year 1956 closes, it appears that old Fort Snelling will at last have a permanent and deserved place among Minnesota's adequately preserved historic spots. Hopes for the preservation of both the old fort and the Camp Coldwater sites seem brighter than they have for many decades. To aid in the development of an interpretative program at Fort Snelling, there is hope that funds will be made available in the not-too-distant future for archaeological excavations so that the remains of the fort below ground can be

preserved as they are in the case of Fort Ridgely.

For a hundred and twenty-six years old Fort Snelling, first as a frontier army post and later as a part of a larger military reserve, served the nation valiantly. Since its deactivation ten years ago, it has been allowed to languish as a neglected part of our state's rich heritage. Now, at long last, it seems that the old fort will receive the official recognition and attention it so richly deserves. It is indeed ironic that Fort Snelling, which in its youth played such a significant role in protecting and promoting the settlement of Minnesota, should in its venerable old age fall victim to the same surge of progress that it so ably fostered.

³⁶ *St. Paul Dispatch*, June 5, 1956, p. 12. Detailed plans are on file in the Minnesota highway department. See also Zimmerman to Freeman, July 6, 1956; and Ben H. Thompson, National Parks Service, to U. W. Hella, February 29, 1956, copies of which are in the society's files.

³⁷ Ed Goodpaster, "Board Votes to Limit Parking around Lakes," in *Minneapolis Tribune*, June 7, 1956, p. 17.

THE PICTURES of Fort Snelling reproduced in these pages are but a small part of the society's extensive collection of pictorial materials illustrating physical changes in the post over more than a hundred and thirty-seven years.



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