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# THE editor's page

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THE IDEA OF PROGRESS in America has often been associated with the process of filling in open spaces. Wilderness areas have been snuffed out under housing developments and industrial parks, lakes have been cinched in by summer cabins and resorts, and open fields have been fenced and dissected by highways. Only recently have increasing numbers of Americans been discovering what some at least have known for a long time — that open spaces are of value in themselves and that replacing the natural with the man-made is not necessarily a sign of higher civilization.

Among open spaces with a special value are those that are part of, or near, important historic sites. And these are constantly being threatened by commercial developers, city planners, efficiency experts, and even government agencies. That nothing is inviolable can be determined from the long-time battle that the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association and others have fought to keep the vista essentially as George Washington enjoyed it from his beautiful estate on the Potomac River. As the *New York Times* pointed out in an editorial last March 21, the "Maryland shore is almost the same as it was in Washington's time." This is due in part to laws passed by Congress in 1961 and 1966 for federal land acquisition through purchase and donations. However, it now appears that one landowner has reneged on giving the government a scenic easement on 367 undeveloped acres and instead is contemplating a commercial development that would disturb the whole view from Mount Vernon. The *Times* said that a bill was introduced to remove the danger and then commented: "Early action by Congress is essential to remove an intolerable threat to one of the nation's most cherished landmarks."

Another historic area whose open spaces are being seriously menaced by commercial developers is Antietam Battlefield in northwestern Maryland where the McClellan-led Army of the Potomac and the Lee-led

Army of Northern Virginia fought a bloody standoff on September 17, 1862. At present Antietam is well preserved and drawing about 400,000 visitors a year. But the National Park Service owns only patches of the battlefield — 795 acres which accommodate numerous monuments and markers and a guided auto route but not many of the key historic sites. Because there is no county zoning law, and also because the federal government has procrastinated in making essential land purchases, old family farms right on the battlefield and on the edges are being bought up by real estate developers. One residential subdivision is slated for high land overlooking Burnside Bridge, one of the Civil War's most famous relics, and a motel is a possibility for the West Woods, where the First Minnesota Regiment, among others, lost heavily in close fighting. Bills have been introduced in Congress to preserve the entire battlefield, but the outcome is uncertain.

Another cherished Civil War battlefield with significant Minnesota associations — the highly popular one at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania — faces an additional intrusive "environmental insult" to go with several tourist attractions that already have damaged the area's historic integrity. A wealthy real estate promoter is putting up a 300-foot steel observation tower for tourists only a few yards from where President Abraham Lincoln made "a few appropriate remarks" in November, 1863. Construction of the tower is being bitterly disputed (again, the lack of a zoning law is helping an "intruder"), and the outcome of the new battle of Gettysburg is still in doubt.

All these examples of encroachment on space of historic sites — many more could be mentioned — involve threats from private enterprise. Right at home, however, we have a case of what could have been an even more flagrant desecration of historic ground than those described — and this time the culprit was an agency of the federal government itself! The United

States Postal Service blatantly proposed the building of a regional bulk mailing facility on sixty-eight acres of the Fort Snelling parade ground — property now administered by the General Services Administration (GSA). The plan included construction of a twelve-acre building and provision of ten acres for parking mail trucks. An additional eight acres would have been set aside as a truck-docking area.

When the plan met vigorous opposition from Minnesota's congressional delegation, the governor, both houses of the state legislature, the Minnesota Historical Society, the Fort Snelling State Park Association, and other groups, postal and GSA authorities indicated that they would seek an alternative location. Fortunately, in the face of so much objection, the Snelling postal proposal was dropped last month.

Regardless of its outcome, the plan is inconceivable when one considers the intrusion that the bulk mailing facility would have made on the present reconstruction of old Fort Snelling and on adjacent Fort Snelling State Park. It becomes even more dismaying when one realizes that the 141-acre "later fort area" that would have housed the facility is important historically in its own right. Long before the first American soldiers reached the junction of the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers in 1819, the prairie area behind the future fort site was a well-established meeting ground for the Sioux and Chippewa Indians who camped, hunted, and held field games on its wide expanse. The Indians allowed the soldiers, who were under orders to construct a permanent fortification to control trader traffic in the northwest country, to hunt game for sport and food on the tract, to grow grain for livestock, and to cultivate vegetable gardens to keep away the scurvy that afflicted many men during the first winter.

The plot retained its significance for the area's Indians from 1822 to 1858 as they camped and visited at the log Indian Agency situated there to receive their annuities, to argue government policy with their agent, and, in 1837, to sign a treaty by which the Chippewa surrendered their lands between the Mississippi and St. Croix rivers.

White men, too, clustered on the prairie immediately outside the fort. Soldiers, old voyageurs and trappers, refugees from the Red River Settlement to the north, and enterprising frontier businessmen — squatters on the Fort Snelling military reservation — formed Minnesota's first civilian community which had a population of 157 in 1857. Franklin Steele, post sutler from 1838 to 1858, built a home at the northwest corner of the open acreage.

When the Civil War broke out in 1861, Minnesota troops were too numerous for the fort and spilled out onto the prairie behind. Here many were quartered

and trained for service not only against the Confederacy but in Minnesota itself during the Sioux Uprising of 1862.

Then in 1869 fire destroyed most of the old fort buildings, and the 141 reservation acres became the hub of all Fort Snelling activities, including cavalry exercises, drill formations, and polo. Designated as headquarters for the Department of the Dakota in the late 1870s and early 1880s — a command extending across Minnesota and western land that eventually became the states of North Dakota, South Dakota, and Montana — Fort Snelling, under the command of General Alfred H. Terry, served as supply depot and strategic headquarters to the military missions which explored the Black Hills in 1874 and in 1876 led George A. Custer to his "last stand." In addition, the Snelling area oversaw the most important period of railroad construction and preparation of the vast territories for statehood. From the time of the Spanish-American War until 1946, when the post was transferred to the Veterans Administration, the parade ground-polo grounds area was used for the processing, inspection, and training of army and National Guard troops.

In 1960 the secretary of the interior acknowledged Snelling's historic significance by designating the old fort a National Historic Landmark; and in 1961 Fort Snelling State Park, including the parade ground-polo grounds area, was established for the dual purpose of protecting the atmosphere surrounding the old fort and providing an extensive recreational area to serve Minnesota's major metropolitan center. It was Minnesota's first urban state park.

The parade ground-polo grounds expanse is ideally suited for a wide variety of outdoor recreation activities, including biking, hiking, picnicking, informal football or softball games, and other sports. It could also serve to help interpret the history of Fort Snelling for school and college groups as well as the general public through plaques, re-enactments, outdoor dramas, and demonstrations.

Despite the encroachment of highways and of a St. Paul-Minneapolis International Airport runway on its southwest portion, the Fort Snelling complex is still in many ways amazingly free from urban intrusions. It must be kept that way. Fortunately, widespread citizen interest, the solid front presented by Minnesota's federal and state officials, the effective effort of preservation-minded organizations, and, finally, a favorable decision by the White House — all prevented the misguided proposal of the Postal Service from materializing. On June 8, President Nixon announced that the beleaguered 141 acres would be turned over to the state for Fort Snelling State Park.

The thwarted plan takes its place alongside others on the growing list of schemes for which Fort Snelling has been fair game over the past decade. Suggested uses for the area have included an addition to the airport, a federal office building, a high-rise office building for the army, a junior college, and a zoo.

Happily, the environmental and historical values have prevailed, but one would be naive to believe that this will be the last threat to the integrity of the Fort Snelling area. One has only to look downriver in St.

Paul to visualize the effect that a projected high-rise apartment project would have. If it is put up, the monstrous building will literally cast a shadow on the old fort during certain hours every day. The Fort Snelling area will not be secure from such environmental incursions until its unique historical values and open spaces are protected by a strong zoning law. The legislature has been highly receptive to Fort Snelling. Zoning legislation should be the next order of business in regard to the fort.

RUSSELL W. FRIDLEY, *Director*

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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*The Expeditions of John Charles Frémont. Volume I. Travels from 1838-1844.* Edited by Donald Jackson and Mary Lee Spence.

(Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1970. xliv, 854 p. \$22.50 with map portfolio.)

THIS FIRST VOLUME of documents, published and unpublished, concerning the explorations of John Charles Frémont is, as the editors rightly point out, "in many ways . . . not a documentation of the man, but rather of the events in which he participated." Much valuable information is brought together here for the first time — a fragment of a diary, letters from many collections, and the very important vouchers from the National Archives, as well as the published reports of the expeditions and passages from Frémont's *Memoirs of My Life*, published in 1887 and long out of print.

Unfortunately, the presentation of this material is disappointing. I believe that the scholar (and such a book is primarily intended for him) has the right to expect certain features in the publication of edited documents: a clear statement of the scope of the volume, a lucid discussion of the editor's policies in handling the problems common to all such documents (transcription methods, scientific or specialized information, place names, identification of persons, to name a few), and footnotes clarifying the text at specific points and providing sources for information. An editor's introduction is usually included to place the subject of the documents in historical perspective. Above all, the convenience of the reader and, indeed, the integrity of the whole volume demand that these various types of information be clearly differentiated in the presentation of the material.

It is irritating to realize, as one looks in vain for editors' guidelines, that the aim of this volume apparently is to avoid any appearance of conventional scholarship. It is difficult, in fact, to know for whose use it is intended. The style of the introduction and notes is conversational and maddeningly imprecise in places where one very much wants to know something exactly. An editor cannot be omniscient, but he is expected to state his intentions plainly. Such a statement, however, depends upon his mastery of the material, and this reviewer must conclude that such mastery is lacking in this production.

Indeed, there is no clear declaration of the scope of the volume. In a subdivision of the introduction, called "The Documents and the Project," the opinion is expressed that "no sensible editor would undertake a complete edition of Frémont papers." This reviewer is inclined to agree. We read further: "He would seize . . . upon every shred which bears upon the expeditions of 1838-54." Have the editors done this? One might assume so, but the discussion which follows bears no coherent relation to the selection of documents in the volume or to their arrangement. A list of "published documents upon which Frémont's reputation came to rest in his own lifetime" is followed by a detailed account of the publication of his *Memoirs*.

Another section of the introduction is "On the Annotation of Botanical Matters." It is the editors' only effort to explain their handling of the scientific content of the documents. They have been "taxed to make a meaningful contribution" to the "systematic botanist" or to the "untrained reader" regarding the numerous botanical references, but the attempt is made and the organization described. One would like a statement, however, as to why botany alone was selected and not geography, place names, and geology.



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