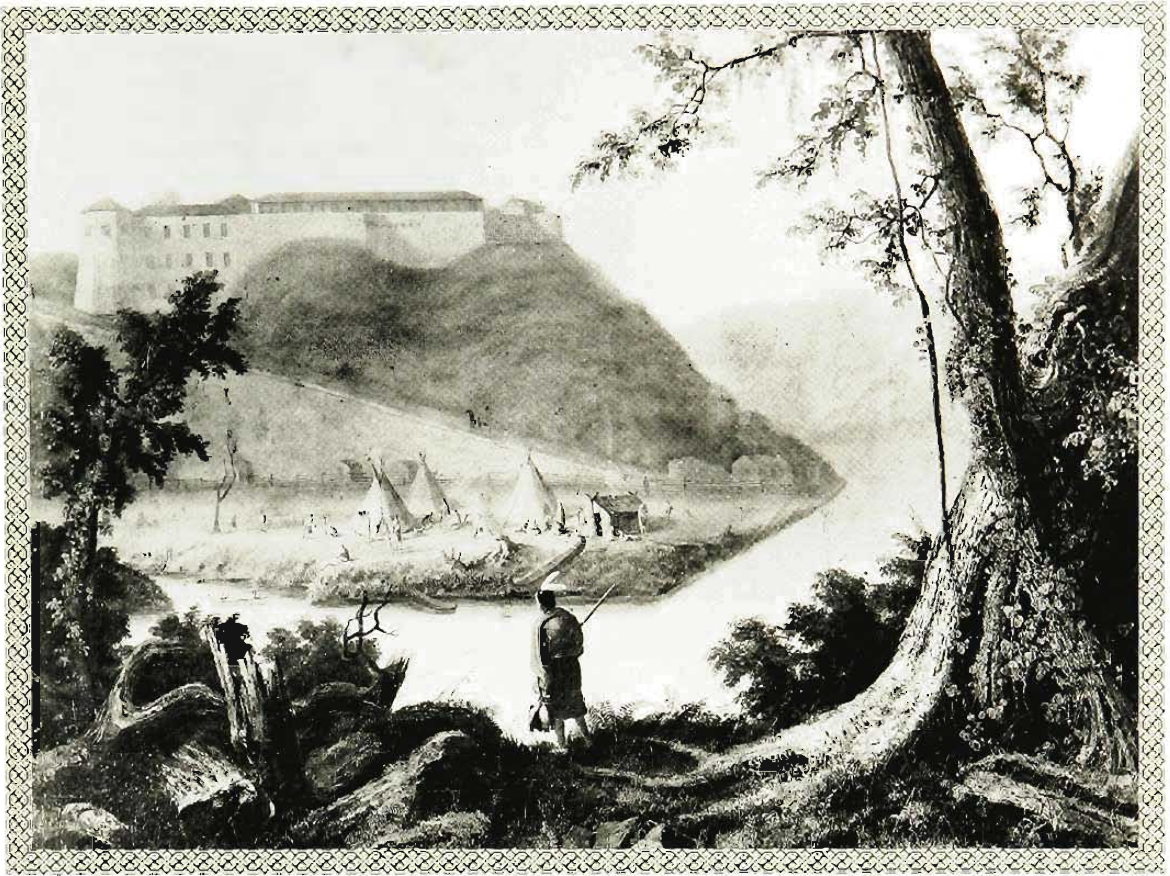




Abigail Hunt Snelling, oil portrait attributed to Alvah Bradish

FACING PAGE: *Fort Snelling on the Upper Mississippi, painted by Seth Eastman, about 1840*



Abigail Snelling

MILITARY WIFE, MILITARY WIDOW

Abigail Snelling is perhaps best known as the wife of Colonel Josiah Snelling, first commandant of Fort Snelling. More than simply the helpmate of a career military officer, she was a spirited woman, the daughter, sister, and mother of military men. Her life story also illuminates the minor triumphs and hardships of women tied to military men in the nation's early years.

Little is known about military wives who accompanied their husbands and who raised families on the frontier in the early nineteenth century, and Abigail Snelling is no exception. Only from piecing together fragmentary records and reminiscences by family and acquaintances does the story of her fortitude and resourcefulness emerge. Widowed at a young age, she survived adversities common to women who raised families alone in a

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time of limited medical knowledge, restricted employment opportunities, and little government assistance.

Born on January 23, 1797, in Watertown, Massachusetts, to Eunice Wellington Hunt and Maj. Thomas Hunt, a career officer who served in the Revolutionary War, Abigail was the sixth of 12 children. Her experience with the unsettled nature of military life began at the age of six weeks. When her father was ordered to Fort Wayne (in present-day Indiana), her family rode west over bumpy corduroy roads with Abigail nested on a pillow. Before the Hunts reached the western post, however, the major was reassigned to command a fort, formerly British, at Mackinac Island (in present-day Michigan). Finally arriving there, the family was delighted to find that the English commander had left his furniture and window curtains, giving the home an unusual and welcome "air of comfort."¹

In 1805 Hunt, a colonel of the First Infantry, was ordered to Fort Bellefontaine at the junction of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers near St. Louis. Packing up for the long journey to the frontier together, the Hunts traveled comfortably, if slowly, in a flat-bottomed "ark" that the colonel ordered sectioned into separate spaces for a kitchen, parlor, and bedrooms. En route, eight-year-old Abigail and her family stopped at the garrison at Fort Wayne, where 16-year-old Ruth married Dr. Abraham Edwards, the fort surgeon. The Hunts next visited at Vincennes, staying with Gen. William H. Harrison, governor of the Northwest Territory and later president of the United States. Continuing on to Bellefontaine, the family settled down. There, in 1806, the young Abigail probably saw two men dressed in fringed deerskin garments embellished with porcupine quills, their heavily bearded faces a startling contrast to the clean-shaven fashion of the day. They

were William Clark and Meriwether Lewis, returned from exploring the Louisiana Purchase.²

Several years later, in 1808, tragedy struck. Colonel Hunt suddenly died of fever. His widow petitioned Congress for funds to move her family back to Massachusetts, but no money arrived. She fell ill and died six months later.³

To rescue the stranded children, the family's oldest son, 22-year-old Henry Jackson Hunt, a merchant in Detroit, journeyed by boat and horseback to Bellefontaine. He left Eliza, five years old, with a family in St. Louis and brought the rest, including 12-year-old Abigail, back to Detroit. The journey in an open barge with only an awning for protection was far less comfortable than their first excursion west.⁴

At Vincennes the family again stopped at General Harrison's home, resting for two weeks. In Fort Wayne, Abigail's sister Ruth offered to care for 11-year-old John Elliott and nine-year-old Mary LeBaron. Another brother, Thomas Brown Hunt, age 18, went to Detroit to work in Henry's store, while Henry proceeded on with Abigail and several younger brothers to Waltham, Massachusetts, where they lived with their maternal grandfather, Samuel Wellington. Abigail remained there about two years, part of the time attending a boarding school in Salem or Waltham.

In 1812 Abigail's brother Henry seems to have again assumed responsibility for her welfare when he and his wife,

Ann McIntosh, brought 15-year-old Abigail back to Detroit to live with them. Abigail's move could not have occurred at a more exciting time. During the summer of 1812, the United States was launching a major attack on the British in Canada from Detroit. Military Gov. William Hull arrived there with, among others, Abigail's brother-in-law, Surgeon Abraham Edwards, and her brother, John, now a teenager. Also with the Fourth U.S. Infantry was 30-year-old Capt. Josiah Snelling, a veteran of the battle of Tippecanoe. Upon meeting the attractive Abigail, Josiah, a wid-

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¹ Warren Upham, "Early Home Life at Fort Snelling," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Sept. 12, 1920, sec. 2, p. 8; Hunt Family Genealogy, J. Fletcher Williams Papers, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), St. Paul; statement, Feb. 7, 1869, Pension Applications, Abigail Snelling, Veterans Administration, Record Group 15, National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D.C.; copies of Snelling documents in Box 9, Fort Snelling Papers, MHS; Elizabeth F. Ellet, *Pioneer Women of the West* (Philadelphia: Porter and Coates, 1873), 306, 307, 309. Ellet, who visited Minnesota in the 1850s, published the first edition of this book in 1856. Abigail Snelling may have been one of the many women she interviewed personally.

² Ellet, *Pioneer Women*, 306-07.

³ Ellet, *Pioneer Women*, 307-08; Barbara K. Luecke and John C. Luecke, *Snelling—Minnesota's First First Family* (Eagan, Minn.: Grenadier Publications, 1993), 10.

⁴ Here and below, Ellet, *Pioneer Women*, 307-09.

over, lost no time in asking her brother Henry's permission to "address" the charming—and charmed—young lady.⁵

During a lull in the fighting on August 13, Abigail and Josiah married at her brother's home. Relatives, army officers, and their wives attended the ceremony. The 15-year-old bride also became the stepmother of six-year-old William Joseph Snelling (known as "Joseph" or "Joe"), Josiah's surviving son by his first marriage. (Another son died in infancy.)⁶

Abigail's youth and the age difference between the newlyweds seem notable today. Statistics are not available to determine average age at marriage in the early nineteenth century, but we do know that Josiah's first wife and Abigail's sisters Ruth and Eliza married at nearly the same age. The shortage of women on the frontier may have contributed to the competition for a woman's hand and the tendency to wed at a young age. Perhaps Abigail did not want to be a further burden to her brother Henry. Or perhaps the anticipated battle with the British added to the appeal of an immediate union between Abigail and Josiah.

Following the wedding ceremony, the regimental musicians played the "to arms" call, and a surprised Josiah ran for his sword. General Hull assured him he would not be expected to honor the alert. When Josiah insisted, Hull told him it was only a joke on the newlyweds. Not a joke was the report a few days later that Thomas Hunt had been killed fighting the British. This rumor proved unfounded, but it prompted Snelling to extract from his bride the promise that if he should be killed, she would "never marry an Englishman."⁷

Several days after the wedding, Hull, to the chagrin of his officers and troops, surrendered to the British. Abigail later recalled what happened to her and other post women:

A few hours previous to the surrender of Detroit, I had engaged with other ladies in making flannel bags for powder to be used in cannons. When the cannonading from the British side commenced, a shell burst directly over the building, knocked in the chimney and part of the roof; an other followed. In the next room were seated officers from

Mackinaw [*sic*], prisoners of war on parole. Two of them were instantly killed and three wounded. When we heard the groans of the wounded we all rushed into the little hall, and one of our ladies saw her husband weltering in blood, dead. She became frantic. We were directed to make our way into a vacant bombproof magazine.

The shells were hursting in every direction and there seemed very little hope of us crossing the parade ground in safety. We did so however and remained until after the surrender. My husband, Col. Snelling, was taken prisoner, and I accompanied him to Fort Erie [on Lake Erie] from which place the prisoners were marched to Fort George [on Lake Ontario]. My husband said to me, "This gentleman promised me that you shall be sent on this afternoon. Delay not, for if the wind is fair we will be off," at the same time giving me a gold piece, saying, "You may want this before we meet."⁸

When the British apparently agreed to move the imprisoned officers' families to Canada on the same ship as the prisoners, Abigail recalled, she and the other women hastily engaged a man with a lumber wagon to take them to the vessel. After a frantic ride to the landing, they saw their husbands already on board, obviously entreating the captain to wait a bit longer for them. The women raced to the departing boat, leaving their considerable luggage behind, ample reward for the driver's service, Abigail later remarked.⁹

The party of prisoners hastened to Montreal and then to Boston, where they were formally exchanged for captured British officers. Josiah then left for Plattsburg, New York, to join Gen. Wade Hampton's army. Abigail stayed in Boston with her brother Samuel and his wife Eliza, giving birth on August 17, 1813, to her first child, Mary. Shortly afterward, Abigail and her newborn determinedly rejoined Josiah at Plattsburg, and when he was ordered west to Fort Erie, she moved to Burlington on Lake Champlain. When Josiah retired to Buffalo for the winter, Abigail and her baby traveled across New York, including some 40 miles on horseback, to join him. One of her brothers assisted by carrying Mary on a

⁵ Hunt Family Genealogy, Williams Papers; Ellet, *Pioneer Women*, 309, 311–14.

⁶ Ellet, *Pioneer Women*, 313, 314; Allen E. Woodall, "Descendents of John Snelling," 187, [1932], Fort Snelling History Center Library.

⁷ Statement, Jan. 14, 1856, Pension Applications, Abigail Snelling, Fort Snelling Papers, hereafter Pension Applications; Ellet, *Pioneer Women*, 315; Friend Palmer, "Detroit in 1837," p. 12, article series in the *Detroit Free Press*, [1896?], copies in MHS.

⁸ Statement, Jan. 14, 1856, Pension Applications; Palmer, "Detroit in 1837," p. 12; Ellet, *Pioneer Women*, 314–16.

⁹ Statement, Jan. 14, 1856, Pension Applications; Ellet, *Pioneer Women*, 317–19.

pillow part of the way, as Abigail herself had traveled with her family as a baby.¹⁰

When the United States finally reached peace with Britain, the Snellings, no doubt weary of wartime travel and stress, set out for Detroit to visit relatives. A severe storm on Lake Erie wrecked their small vessel and nearly took everyone's life. From Detroit the Snellings moved back to Plattsburg, where their second child, Henry Hunt, arrived on November 8, 1816. The baby was probably named after Abigail's brother Henry, who had cared for his siblings after their parents' death. Another son, Thomas, was probably born at Plattsburg, as well.

A lieutenant colonel by 1818, Josiah was next ordered to St. Louis on the far western frontier, where troops were gathering for an expedition to the Upper Mississippi River. Abigail's younger sister Eliza and brother Samuel accompanied the Snellings to their new post, stopping at Bellefontaine where their parents had been buried 10 years earlier. Suddenly, year-old Thomas worsened from an illness and died. He was buried beside his namesake grandfather. The grieving family wintered at Bellefontaine, where 16-year-old Eliza married James Gaston Soulard, a prosperous St. Louis merchant.¹¹

Josiah, promoted to colonel of the Fifth U.S. Infantry in 1819, next received orders to relieve Col. Henry Leavenworth at what was to be Fort St. Anthony, a new post at the confluence of the Mississippi and St. Peter's (now Minnesota) rivers in the Northwest Territory. The post was established to monitor the fur trade and keep peace among the Indian tribes.¹²

The journey of the Snelling family and party up the Mississippi by keel boat proved tedious and disagreeable. The craft, propelled by men

pushing on long poles against the current, was low, uncomfortable, and confining. Mosquitoes plagued the travelers day and night. At Fort Crawford Josiah officiated at a court martial. Finally, on September 5, 1820, the family had its first glimpse of the lonely frontier post where they would be stationed for the next seven years.¹³

Despite the rude temporary housing awaiting them, Abigail must have been relieved to arrive, for she was expecting another child. It was in a log cabin carpeted with buffalo hides that Abigail gave birth on November 6, 1820, to Elizabeth, who died just 13 months later. She would have three more children at the fort: James Gaston Soulard, daughter Marion, and, finally, the colonel's namesake, Josiah R. In all, Abigail bore seven children, two of whom died in infancy. Infant death was common at the time, and Abigail's losses probably matched those of other women of her generation.¹⁴

Joseph Snelling, Josiah's son from his first marriage, was 14 when the family took up residence at the fort. Abigail was outspoken in her disapproval of the high-spirited young man over whom her husband exercised little control. (Interested in the life around him, young Snelling had an inquiring mind and became a writer of some note before his death in 1848).¹⁵

By the time Fort St. Anthony's permanent quarters were ready for occupancy, Abigail's female companions probably numbered less than a dozen officers' wives as well as a few wives or sisters of enlisted men. Bringing a semblance of traditional family and cultural life to the frontier, many of these women were well educated and from families "in good standing."¹⁶

Although officially discouraged from packing up their household belongings and accompanying their military husbands, a significant number of women did "follow the drum." Like the female settlers who crossed the plains and mountains of

¹⁰ Here and below, statement, Jan. 14, 1856, Pension Applications; Ellet, *Pioneer Women*, 317-18, 322-23; Henry H. Snelling, *A Boyhood at Fort Snelling* (Minneapolis: private printing, 1939), 2.

¹¹ Warren Upham, "The Women and Children of Fort St. Anthony Later Named Fort Snelling," pamphlet reprinted from *The Magazine of History* 21 (July 1915): 20, 27, 29, 30; Ellet, *Pioneer Women*, 323-24.

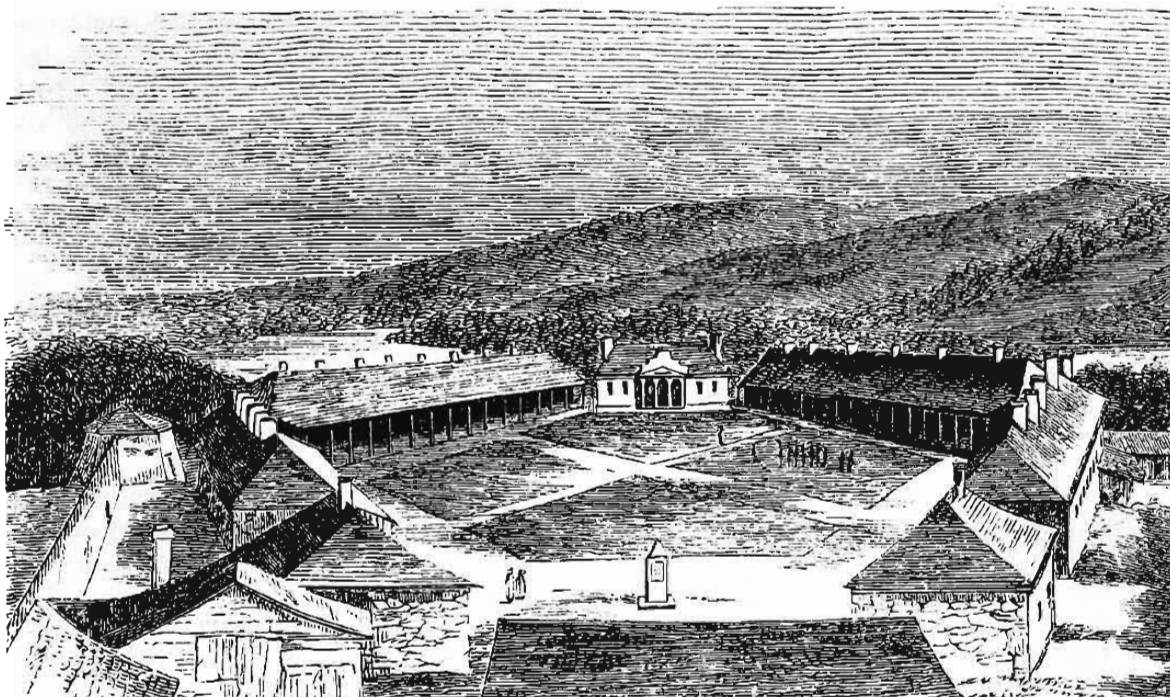
¹² Ellet, *Pioneer Women*, 324.

¹³ Ellet, *Pioneer Women*, 324. On the court martial, see Helen McCann White, "Frontier Feud, 1819-20—How Two Officers Quarreled All the Way to the Site of Fort Snelling," *Minnesota History* 42 (Fall 1970): 99-114.

¹⁴ Edward D. Neill, "Early Days at Fort Snelling," *Minnesota Historical Society Collections* (St. Paul: Ramaley, Cheney and Co., 1872), 1:428; Upham, "Women and Children of Fort St. Anthony," 29; Ellet, *Pioneer Women*, 326.

¹⁵ Ann Adams, "Early Days at Red River Settlement, and Fort Snelling," *Minnesota Historical Society Collections* (St. Paul: Pioneer Press Co., 1894), 6:96; "Snelling, William Joseph" in *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), 9:381-82.

¹⁶ Ellet, *Pioneer Women*, 327; Francis P. Prucha, *Broadax and Bayonet: The Role of the United States Army in the Development of the Northwest, 1815-1860* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1953), 200-01; F. R. Blackburn, "Army Families in Frontier Forts," *Military Review*, Oct. 1969, p. 17.



Engraving showing Fort Snelling in 1853 with light-colored stone commandant's house overlooking the river

America in later decades, military wives such as Abigail tucked into their bags and bundles favorite pieces of china, glass, silver, and linen to be used in their next new home. Some had furniture transported from place to place along rough wilderness trails and rivers.¹⁷

These long, tedious, and even perilous journeys were made in bumpy wagons and slow, crowded boats. Capricious weather, flooded waterways, swarming insects, and spoiled food stores presented constant threats. Fears of hostile encounters with Indians were always present.¹⁸

Along with the officers' ladies, other women traveled to military outposts to cook, do laundry, and provide feminine companionship for enlisted men. Enlisted men's wives also acted as nursemaids for officers' children and hired out to do household work in officers' homes.¹⁹

One chronicler has suggested that women of all walks of life added a strong leavening of grace to life at frontier military posts, introducing some

attributes of a polished society. Any such attributes on the harsh military frontier, however, would have had to be accomplished with household help. Officers received government allowances for servants, and Josiah, as a commandant, received an allotment to pay for two, although he was free to hire more if he felt the need. His journal names more than a dozen individuals who staffed his home over the years, most of whom moved on after several months.²⁰

The carefully restored 1820 officers' homes open to visitors at modern Fort Snelling confirm explorer William H. Keating's 1823 description of the dwellings as being well built and comfortable. The Snellings' home with its cut-stone facade could even be considered elegant, suitable for the principal military outpost of the Northwest. Barbara Ann Shadecker, a refugee from the ill-fated Selkirk colony in the Red River Valley who served as the Snellings' nursemaid for several years, recalled that "society at the Fort at that

¹⁷ Blackburn, "Army Families" 18, 19. For an account of life on the Wisconsin military frontier in the early 1830s, see Juliette M. Kinzie, *Wau-bun: The "Early Day" in the Northwest* (1856; reprint, Portage, Wisc.: National Society of Colonial Dames, 1989).

¹⁸ Ellet, *Pioneer Women*, 326; Adams, "Early Days," 103-07.

¹⁹ Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), 55-58; Willa G. Crampton, *Women Beyond the Frontier: A Distaff View of Life* (Fort Wayne: Historic Fort Wayne, Ind., 1977), 5.

²⁰ Prucha, *Broadax and Bayonet*, 200, 201; Josiah Snelling, *Journal*, n.d., MHS; Luecke and Luecke, *Snelling*, 261.

period was of the most select and aristocratic. Many of the ladies would have shone in any circle. Their households in the garrison were attractive places, and showed evidences of wealth and good taste." Writing under her married name, Ann Adams, Shadecker later recalled, too, that at least some of the women who followed their officer husbands considered the experience a happy one and made lifelong friends from their shared adventures. Abigail and Charlotte Clark, wife of Capt. Nathan Clark, were among those who maintained a strong friendship based on their years together at the frontier fort.²¹

However refined life at the fort may have been, its inhabitants found that just keeping food on the table far from supply lines presented a major challenge. Fickle weather conditions made planning for food supplies mostly conjecture—as the Snellings found out. Heavy snows, flooding rivers, and crop failure contributed to shortages of the gravest proportions. The first

winters at the fort were particularly difficult; on one occasion, only 16 of a herd of 100 cattle driven there survived the trip.²²

Not surprisingly, then, residents tried to raise as much food as possible, planting gardens and growing crops such as corn and wheat. They also built a grist mill and sawmill at the nearby Falls of St. Anthony. At one time they fattened three black pigs and kept poultry. They caught fish, picked berries, and bought buffalo meat from the Indians. Lt. Martin Scott, noted for his hunting skills, was relied upon to enlarge the larder. After the hard early years of food shortages, an 1826 inspector general's report noted that supplies were adequate for a two-year period.

A listing of purchases in 1827 for Abigail Snelling's household from the nearby American Fur Company trading post at Mendota includes some intriguing items for a frontier outpost, such as ribbons, fabric, rosewater, lavender, silver and gold lace, anchovies and capers, and "1# of ladies' Twist tobacco." Ladies of colonial America smoked tobacco, as did the wives of presidents Andrew Jackson and Zachary Taylor. The irre-

²¹ William H. Keating, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peter's River . . . 1823* (1825; reprint, New York: Ross and Haines, 1959), 305; Adams, "Early Days," 99.

²² Here and below, see Keating, *Expedition to the Source of St. Peter's*, 305; Adams, "Early Days," 100; *Inspector General's Report*, Aug. 1826, Record Group 159, National Archives, copy at Historic Fort Snelling.



Restored commandant's house at Historic Fort Snelling with costumed interpreters

pressible Dolley Madison used snuff in public. Fort Snelling's tobacco-consuming women were in good company.²³

On the frontier, a commandant's wife set the tone for the domestic and social life of the officers' families, and the youthful Abigail ably assumed this responsibility. She could look beyond the empty water bucket and ash-filled kitchen fireplace because she had servants to help with dinners and parties.²⁴

Garrison life with its mandatory confinement and isolation behind fort walls led to irritating familiarities and pettiness, even quarrels and duels. Colonel Snelling himself was party to a duel, but sent his son Joseph to stand in his stead. Recreational activities, diversions such as dinner parties, theatricals, and picnics, and outdoor sports such as fishing, riding, hunting, and sledding must have been welcome interruptions in the fort routine. A cabin retreat on present-day Lake Calhoun (Minneapolis) supplied an occasional getaway. The universal women's activity, sewing, filled many moments. On one occasion officers' wives stitched the trousseau for 15-year-old Caroline Hamilton, the daughter of Capt. Thomas Hamilton, who married Lt. St. Clair Denny. Fort residents also must have read books, since a library was established in the early years. Abigail had access to a broad range of books listed in her husband's journal, including the classics, travel, history, poetry, Greek mythology, several books in French, and dictionaries. Gossip, too, surely held an important place in daily interactions.²⁵

Incoming supplies and mail traveled overland from Prairie du Chien in the winter; in summer,

boats brought in goods and visitors. In 1821, shortly after the Snellings' arrival, Abigail's sister Eliza and her husband, James Soulard, their child, and a servant came to visit from St. Louis.²⁶

Not until 1823 did the first steamboat navigate the northern reaches of the Mississippi. During the Snellings' tenure, at least 10 more such boats docked in the waters below the fort. Personnel used the steamboats for excursion parties, and a band played for dances. Noteworthy passengers on the *Virginia* in 1823 were Major Stephen H. Long and his exploration party,

Gen. Winfield Scott, Col. George Croghan, Gen. Edmund P. Gaines, and a flamboyant Italian explorer, Count Giacomo Beltrami. These visitors were made welcome in the officers' homes. Nursemaid Shadecker later recalled that although food supplies were alarmingly low, "the spread [of food] was a creditable one." At a



Brass thimble and plated-brass pins with hand-wound wire heads from early Fort Snelling

reception the officers wore full dress uniforms, and "many of the ladies wore blazing diamonds." Gaines wrote later that Abigail Snelling had made him forget he was in the wilderness.²⁷

Beltrami's visit, in particular, proved a welcome diversion to Abigail. A colorfully dressed gentleman proud of his European cultural background, he was delightfully surprised to meet a woman of Abigail's refinement and intellect with whom to share his thoughts. They did so in French, because he did not speak English. Although one nineteenth-century biographer wrote that Abigail had attended a French school in St. Louis, she would have been only six years old at the time. Another recounted that she had been learning the language from an old soldier at

²³ Account book, 1825–27, American Fur Company post, Mendota, Alexis Bailly Papers, MHS; Josiah Snelling report to Gen. Thomas Jessup, Aug. 16, 1826, "1826" file, copy at Historic Fort Snelling; Robert K. Hemon, *Tobacco and Americans* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1960), 89; Carl Sferazza Anthony, *First Ladies, The Saga of Presidents' Wives and Their Power, 1789–1961* (New York: Wm. Morrow, 1960), 82.

²⁴ Ellet, *Pioneer Women*, 327; *Dictionary of American Biography*, 9:381–82.

²⁵ H. Snelling, *Boyhood at Fort Snelling*, 33; Ellet, *Pioneer Women*, 347; Luecke and Luecke, *Snelling*, 127; Josiah Snelling, *Journal*, Sept. 10, 1827, MHS.

²⁶ Upham, "Women and Children of Fort St. Anthony," 26, 27.

²⁷ Charlotte O. Van Cleve, "A Coincidence," *Minnesota Historical Society Collections* (St. Paul: MHS, 1880), 3:103–07; Edward D. Neill, "Occurrences in and Around Ft. Snelling, from 1819 to 1840," *Minnesota Historical Society Collections* (St. Paul: MHS, 1889), 2:116; Adams, "Early Days," 99; "News and Comment," *Minnesota History* 9 (1928): 193.



Fragments of a child's slate tablet and pencil from early Fort Snelling

the garrison. While Indian agent Lawrence Taliaferro provided Beltrami with living accommodations, the Snellings invited him to take meals with them.²⁸

Beltrami was fascinated by the Indians who lived nearby, especially their apparel and ornaments. Coveting a necklace of polished bear claws worn by the Indian leader Wanata and aware that the Wanata held Abigail in high esteem, Beltrami asked her to acquire it for him. Wanata agreed to part with the necklace if Abigail would give him a lock of her hair to wear in its place. It is not likely that that bargain was struck.²⁹

²⁸ Adams, "Early Days," 99, 101; Ellet, *Pioneer Women*, 226–30; Alfred J. Hill, "Constantine Beltrami," *Minnesota Historical Society Collections* (St. Paul: MHS, 1860), 2:183–197.

²⁹ Henry H. Snelling, "Memoirs of a Life," typescript, 1:21, 22, Newberry Library, Chicago, photocopy, MHS, and *Boyhood at Fort Snelling*, 17; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Sept. 12, 1920, sec. 2, p. 8; Adams, "Early Days," 101; Charlotte O. Van Cleve, "A Reminiscence of Fort Snelling," *Minnesota Historical Society Collections* (St. Paul: MHS, 1880), 3:76–81.

³⁰ Ellet, *Pioneer Women*, 326, 327; Adams, "Early Days," 101, 104; George D. Lyman, *John Marsh, Pioneer* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930), 367.

³¹ Ellet, *Pioneer Women*, 330; Neill, "Occurrences in and around Fort Snelling," 2:106; Van Cleve, "Reminiscence of Fort Snelling," 3:76–81.

³² Snelling, *Boyhood at Fort Snelling*, 17; Alvah Bradish, "Tribute," in Palmer, "Detroit in 1837," p. 13.

Schooling and religious instructions for the fort's children, especially daughter Mary, were special concerns of Abigail's. She ran a Sunday class with the help of Charlotte Clark, and the women also conducted a school of sorts for post children until the arrival in 1823 of a strict, Harvard-trained teacher, John Marsh. In a later account of his experiences at his post, where he may have had as many as 10 students, he noted his unhappiness at being forced to share a curtained bedroom with the Snelling boys.³⁰

Although Abigail took her responsibilities seriously, she was a high-spirited, adventurous woman. She loved to ride, and had done so since childhood with her father. Because chronic diarrhea first contracted during the War of 1812 kept Josiah from riding for pleasure, he designated Lt. Scott as Abigail's escort whenever she left the fort walls. One account describes them chasing a fox with hunting dogs, Abigail's long black tresses (usually contained under a hat) streaming wildly behind her in the wind.³¹

Abigail's tresses were noticed by others, too. Her son Henry wrote, "My good mother had a very beautiful head of hair; it being jet black, very silky, fine and long, reaching nearly to the ground as she stood and of which she was justly proud." Artist Alvah Bradish, who rented a room from Abigail in Detroit years later, compared her to an "eastern harem" beauty, with long-lashed, coal-black eyes, luxuriant black hair, and noble features.³²

Beauty aside, no frontier wife could escape the need to be resourceful and determined, and Abigail was no exception. When a fire was discovered in the children's bedroom, no water to douse it was at hand. Sending a nurse to grab the sleeping children, Abigail ran out to the parade grounds, grabbed a bucket of milk from a passing soldier, and ran inside to extinguish the fire. In 1827, Dakota prisoners being held in the fort guardhouse for an unprovoked attack on Ojibway visitors were turned over to the angry Ojibway to run the gauntlet. In order to view the harrowing scene that ensued, Abigail and other frontier-hardened

Painted ceramic marble, evidence of child's play at the early fort



women from the fort climbed to the roof of the commandant's house.³³

Other accounts tell of Abigail as a compassionate woman, caring for an ailing Indian leader in the great hall of the Snellings' home where she frequently sat in the summer to catch the cooling breezes. Her son Henry's published memoir recalls her with great feeling, noting that she was a fond, indulgent, and affectionate mother. In 1823 Abigail took into her young family a nine-year-old orphan whose parents had been killed. John Tully was treated as a family member until his death in 1827 from an ax wound. Trader Philander Prescott described how the concerned Abigail brought him a large bowl of soup upon his arrival at the fort after two weeks of subsisting on nothing but wild rice. He found her one of the most charitable, as well as accomplished, ladies at the fort.³⁴

The nature of Abigail's personal relationship with Josiah remains shadowy. The marriage of a parentless girl at age 15 to a man twice her age may have been a matter of infatuation or desire to relieve her brother Henry of her care. Josiah was volatile, outspoken, and a rigid disciplinarian. Frontier officers and enlisted men frequently drank to excess, and the commandant was no exception. Nursemaid Shadecker, who lived in the Snelling household, credited him with being kind and pleasant except when he was drinking. That he cared for the welfare of his men is apparent in his reports to his military superiors. In 1824 Gen. Winfield Scott renamed Fort St. Anthony in honor of the commandant who brought it through its most difficult first years, recognition that Snelling had done his job well.³⁵

By the late summer of 1825, after five uninterrupted years of frontier living, Abigail, now age 28, and Josiah, age 43, received permission to take their children, nursemaid Shadecker, and the orphaned Tully with them to Detroit for a visit to family and civilization. The trip east was reasonably comfortable for, as Shadecker wrote, "They had the best cooks along who prepared meals in good style." While in Detroit, Josiah, who perhaps anticipated a change of career or was worried about his continuing health problem, purchased a farm for \$2,000. According to journal entries, he spent money on putty, glass, nails, a fireplace, and carpentry work to make the house habitable.³⁶



Col. Josiah Snelling, about 1825

The return journey to Fort Snelling proved treacherous. It was late fall, and the weather had become unpredictable. Food supplies were scanty, and Abigail's next child was due in a month. Toward the end of the trip, the keel boat became trapped in a stand of trees, and all hands, including Abigail, labored to pull it free. When the boat finally sank, the desperate party waded ashore through the icy water and made camp. Josiah sent two sets of scouts to the fort to get help, including his 21-year-old son. The first scouts to reach the fort sent back a sleigh to transport the stranded party home over the snow and frozen ground. According to Shadecker, Josiah worried about Abigail in particular, becoming religious during the ordeal and briefly instituting prayer sessions at the fort. Four days after the party reached home, on December 8, 1825, Abigail bore daughter Marion. A hard winter, echoing the harsh conditions and shortages of the early years, followed.³⁷

³³ Snelling, *Boyhood at Fort Snelling*, 20; Ellet, *Pioneer Women*, 333; Adams, "Early Days," 108, 109.

³⁴ Snelling, *Boyhood at Fort Snelling*, 17-19; Ellet, *Pioneer Women*, 329; Adams, "Early Days," 104.

³⁵ Adams, "Early Days," 97; Luecke and Luecke, *Snelling*, 147.

³⁶ Adams, "Early Days," 103, 107; Ellet, *Pioneer Women*, 331; Josiah Snelling, journal, Aug. 13, 1825, p. 15.

³⁷ Adams, "Early Days," 103-107; Ellet, *Pioneer Women*, 331.

By 1827 Josiah faced several serious problems. His chronic physical condition had worsened, and he had to attend the court martial of Lt. David Hunter in St. Louis. He was also summoned to Washington, D.C., for a review of his accounting records. Questioned was the requisitioning of food, clothing, and equipment for his troops. The Snellings packed their belongings, evidently not intending to return to the fort, and left on the steamboat *Josephine* with several other officers and their families in October.³⁸

When they reached St. Louis, Abigail, probably unwilling to travel so far with five-year-old James, two-year-old Marion, and new baby Josiah, Jr., decided to wait while Josiah went east. In Washington, he would rejoin 12-year-old Henry and 15-year-old Mary, who were attending school and living with Abigail's brother, Capt. Thomas Hunt. Josiah's career intentions after straightening out the financial confusion are not clear. He may have intended to settle his family on their farm near Detroit or even to apply for the governorship of Florida.³⁹

In Washington, a distressed Josiah discovered that his salary had been suspended and a final decision about the accuracy of his accounting could not be reached until he produced certain vouchers which he had not brought to Washington. The auditor in charge of the payroll made bond for Josiah, who thanked him, saying he could not have lived or supported his family without his pay.⁴⁰

The financial investigation was not the end of his troubles. Josiah's daughter Mary turned very ill with a cold, allegedly contracted at a party at Henry Clay's house, which quickly turned into a "malignant fever." Before Abigail and her youngest children could leave for Washington, Mary died. Financial troubles, Mary's death, and worries about Abigail, who also had been ill, exacerbated Josiah's own long-standing health problem. His sister-in-law, with whom he had been residing, later wrote that she administered opium and brandy to the colonel at his request. On August 28, 1828, he died at age 44 or 45.⁴¹

Devastated at losing both her daughter and



Watercolor miniature in a case copied by 16-year-old Henry Hunt Snelling from a painting of Abigail's father, Maj. Thomas Hunt

husband within a year, Abigail, age 29, now had four children to raise alone. Son Henry later recalled that his father had left little for the family except ownership of the Detroit farm on which they duly settled after Josiah's death. The officers of Josiah's Fifth Infantry sent Abigail \$450, but the sum was quickly used up. Fortunately, Abigail had maintained close relationships with her brothers during the many relocations of her married life; perhaps their frequent military moves together while growing up created the strong family bond. Throughout Abigail's life, her brothers willingly traveled long distances and extended themselves to come to her assistance.⁴²

Writing of the family's busy years on their farm on the Detroit River, Abigail's son Henry recalled that they grew garden vegetables and field peas, had an orchard and grapevines, and kept lambs and chickens. At first, it was Henry's job to take the produce to market in Detroit early each morning before he went to school, but Abigail decided it would be better to hire a home teacher to educate her daughter and two school-age sons, and so she fitted up an outbuilding for a classroom. Henry recounted, however, that they were "quite poor and unable to carry on at the farm," so Abigail's brother George moved in with them and assisted in its "means and management." For

³⁸ Upham, "Women and Children of Fort St. Anthony," 31; Ellet, *Pioneer Women*, 333; Luecke and Luecke, *Snelling*, 194, 195.

³⁹ Upham, "Women and Children of Fort St. Anthony," 31; Ellet, *Pioneer Women*, 333; Snelling, *Boyhood at Fort Snelling*, xi; H. Snelling, "Memoirs," 2:111.

⁴⁰ Josiah Snelling to Gen. Thomas Jessup, July 14, 1828, General Accounting Office, Record Group 217, National Archives, copy at Historic Fort Snelling.

⁴¹ H. Snelling, "Memoirs," 2: 110, 111; statement, Alice Hunt, Aug. 20, 1828, and statement, Abigail Snelling, Jan. 1, 1863—both in Pension Applications; Luecke and Luecke, *Snelling*, 274n7.

⁴² Certificate #7330, Feb. 21, 1873, Pension Applications; Ellet, *Pioneer Women*, 333–34.

added help, they employed an African-American from Kentucky. Abigail's brother Charles gave her a horse which both she and Henry rode, and Henry enjoyed hunting in the nearby woods and fishing in the river. The usual sports did not interest him, but, he recalled, "the hoe, the rake, and the gun were congenial playthings."⁴³

By May 1831 Abigail abandoned the drudgery of rural life and moved to Detroit, where she operated a boardinghouse in several locations over the next eight years. In 1834 she purchased a lot at the corner of Cass and Fort streets; several years later she had a brick house built on the site. Years earlier Abigail's brothers Henry and William had deeded part of a farm to her, and in 1835 she purchased the other half and sold the whole for \$9,000. It may have been from the sale that she financed her son Henry's seed and feed store, which he opened in Detroit in 1836. While in New York buying supplies for his store, Henry met Anna L. Putnam, whom he soon married and brought to Detroit to live with his mother and family. (Henry became an early proponent of daguerreotype photography and later owned one of the largest supply houses in New York.)⁴⁴

As the owner of what was called a "select" boardinghouse, Abigail claimed some interesting roomers: Territorial Governor John S. Horner of Michigan; Daniel Fletcher Webster, son of "the great expounder"; military officers; and artist Alvah Bradish, who had painted a portrait of her father. (He may also have painted the surviving oil portrait of Abigail.) Another renter was Rev. Jonathan Edward Chaplin, a deacon in the Methodist Episcopal church, who later figured prominently in her life.⁴⁵

It was in these years that Abigail probably began her decades-long quest for a military widow's pension. She began writing the pension commissioner and other government officials herself; so did her pastor and her relatives, but to no avail. The difficulty stemmed from the lack of an attending physician's affidavit that Josiah's death resulted from a chronic condition caused by undue exposure to the elements during the War of 1812, as she claimed. Both of the physicians who had treated the colonel for his long-standing illness had died.⁴⁶

Abigail and Josiah Snelling's Children



*Marion I. Snelling, painted
in oil on wood about 1835 by an
unknown artist*

MARY (1813–28)

HENRY HUNT (1816–97)

THOMAS (1818–19)

ELIZABETH (1820–21)

JAMES GASTON SOULARD (1822–55)

MARION ISABELLE (1825–81)

JOSIAH R. (1827–82)

and

WILLIAM JOSEPH (1804–48)
(from Josiah's first marriage)

In 1839, Abigail rented her brick boardinghouse and furniture to Governor Stevens T. Mason and moved to Maumee City, Ohio, where she and her two youngest children lived with her brother John Hunt. It is unclear when she divested herself of the farm, but in one pension application letter she mentioned that the agent who

⁴³ H. Snelling, "Memoirs," 1:113, 114, 140, 146–47.

⁴⁴ H. Snelling, "Memoirs," 1:145, 150–53, 2: 52; Palmer, "Detroit in 1837," p. 12; Ellet, *Pioneer Women*, 334; Land Records, Wayne County, Michigan, vol. 14, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library; *Dictionary of American Biography*, 9:380.

⁴⁵ Palmer, "Detroit in 1837," p. 12; Henry H. Snelling to J. Fletcher Williams, Dec. 26, 1890, "Snelling Portrait" file, copy at Historic Fort Snelling; Ellet, *Pioneer Women*, 321, 322.

⁴⁶ Statement, Jan. 14, 1856, and letter, Henry Hunt, Feb. 9, 1859—both in Pension Applications.

managed it for her after her brother George's death had embezzled the property.⁴⁷

Also living in Maumee City was Abigail's former boarder, Reverend Chaplin. They renewed their acquaintance and married on May 24, 1841. Abigail, who signed the marriage certificate Abby Snelling, was 44 years old. Henry's memoirs note that his mother's marriage "disappointed my long cherished hope of one day having the satisfaction of being her mainstay in life."⁴⁸

While the details of Abigail's marriage to Chaplin remain unknown, records indicate his birth in Mansfield, Connecticut, in 1799 to a descendant of Mayflower settlers. He graduated from Yale University and studied law in New York. In 1812 he was a military aide-de-camp on the northern frontier, where he had "the habit of intemperance from which he was subsequently delivered by converting grace." After the war he moved to Urbana, Ohio, where he practiced law and then became a Methodist Episcopal minister. He headed the Norwalk Methodist Seminary in Ohio and later went to other posts, including Detroit, where he met Abigail. After marrying her, he became principal of Michigan State University at White Pigeon, where he officiated at Marion Snelling's marriage to William Sylvester Hazard in 1844. At different times four of Abigail's nieces lived with them.⁴⁹

After just five years of marriage, Chaplin suffered a "painful illness" and died on September 15, 1846. Abigail's son James, a second lieutenant in the army, then became her principal means of support, and she went to live with him in Cincinnati.⁵⁰

In 1849, some 22 years after Abigail had left Fort Snelling, she visited the fort again in the company of a nephew and two nieces. This time enjoying the comfort of a steamboat beautifully furnished and boasting a "sumptuous table,"

To the Honorable Senate and House of Representatives in Congress assembled.

I, Abby Chaplin, formerly Widow of Josiah Snelling, Col. of the 5th Regt. of the U. S. Infantry, and at the present time, again a Widow, do humbly pray your Honorable Body for relief, by granting me a pension for the twelve years and nine months, I remained the Widow of Col. Josiah Snelling, viz: from Aug. 15th 1828, to May 24th 1841. As the daughter of a Revolutionary Officer (Col. Thomas Hunt) and the Widow of one of the war of 1812, I confidently look to the Country which they repeatedly risked their lives to serve, for relief in my old age, humbly trusting my claim may be entitled to notice by your Honorable Body, and this in duty bound your Petitioner will ever.
Pray
Abby Chaplin

Abigail's petition to Congress, January 16, 1855, requesting a military widow's pension

Abigail marveled at the cultivated fields and settled towns where once had been wilderness.⁵¹

In 1855, Abigail's son James died as a result of wounds suffered during the Mexican War, and she moved in with her daughter Marion in Cincinnati. Abigail may have enjoyed living in the busy, child-filled household because her whole life had been one of movement and change.⁵²

At the same time, the determined Abigail continued petitioning for a modest widow's pension from the army. From military records we know that in 1848 the House of Representatives approved the request, but the Senate did not. In 1855 she asked for a retroactive pension to cover the time from Snelling's death in 1828 to her marriage to Chaplin in 1841. This entreaty apparently was denied after the surgeon general received a

⁴⁷ Palmer, "Detroit in 1837," p. 12, 13; statement, Jan. 14, 1856. Pension Applications; Luecke and Luecke, *Snelling*, 202.

⁴⁸ Marriage certificate, Abigail Snelling and Jonathan Chaplin, Lucas County, Ohio, copy in author's possession; H. Snelling, "Memoirs," 2:157.

⁴⁹ *Mayflower Descendants* list, Windham Historical Society, Willimantic, Conn.; Minutes, Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1847. United Methodist Church, Minneapolis; Elijah H. Pilcher, *Protestantism in Michigan. Being a Special History of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Detroit: R. D. S. Tyler & Co., undated), 150-53. Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan. Ann Arbor; affidavit, Jan. 1, 1844, Marion Snelling Hall Papers, MHS.

⁵⁰ Minutes, Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1847; letter, Henry Hunt, Feb. 9, 1859, Pension Applications.

⁵¹ *St. Paul Minnesota Pioneer*, Oct. 25, 1849.

⁵² Upham, "Women and Children of Fort St. Anthony," 31; Luecke and Luecke, *Snelling*, 211-12, 251-52.

testament that, instead of dying from a chronic illness brought on by military service, "Colonel Snelling just wore out." In 1859 Abigail again wrote the pension commissioner, "I am now wholly without means of support."⁵³

Despite her disappointments, the tone of Abigail's letters remained courteous, and in 1863 her pension bill finally passed the House. When it came up in the Senate during the final session of the year, however, the last speaker on the floor refused to relinquish ten minutes to Abigail who was in the room to make her request in person. How frustrating it must have been when the 1863 session adjourned without considering her request! Finally, a full decade later, 76-year-old Abigail received a pension of \$30 a month, equivalent to about \$400 in 1990, retroactive to 1870.

Some years later Abigail, Marion, and Marion's family moved across the river to Frankfort, Kentucky. Her health began failing, her eyesight was poor, and she suffered lasting complications from several falls. This did not prevent her from enjoying her ninetieth birthday celebration. She received visitors all day, with a special joy being a letter of congratulations from Charlotte Ouisconsin Clark Van Cleve, the daughter of her dear friend Charlotte Clark from the early days at Fort Snelling.⁵⁴

Abigail died at age 91 on September 8, 1888, having outlived two husbands and six of her seven children. She is buried in Cincinnati's Spring Grove Cemetery with other members of Marion Snelling Hazard's family.⁵⁵

Almost a century after Abigail Snelling Chaplin revisited Fort Snelling, her great-granddaughter, Marion Snelling Hall of Cincinnati, attended the



The elderly Abigail Hunt Snelling Chaplin

dedication of the museum in the fort's Round Tower and presented the Minnesota Historical Society with oil portraits of Abigail and Josiah. She also gave the society several family possessions, including Josiah's watch and Abigail's mourning ring containing a lock of hair. This seems a fitting return for the military couple whose marriage spanned their years together at the frontier fort.⁵⁶



Abigail's mourning ring, set with faceted glass stones

⁵³ Here and below, see statement, Jan. 30, 1863, Pension Applications.

⁵⁴ Ellet, *Pioneer Women*, 336, 337; Palmer, "Detroit in 1837," p. 13.

⁵⁵ Palmer, "Detroit in 1837," p. 13; Director, Spring Grove Cemetery and Arboretum, to author, Feb. 11, 1993.

⁵⁶ *Cincinnati Times*, July 14, 1950, clipping in Marion Snelling Hall Papers. The article says the portraits were 115 years old, dating them to 1825, the year they visited Detroit.

An intriguing 1872 letter in the papers of former MHS Director J. Fletcher Williams notes that Benson J. Lessing, editor of the *Historical Record of Philadelphia*, planned to publish Williams's memoirs of the Snelling family, but no record of publication has been found.

The engraving detail on p. 103 is in Harper's New Monthly Magazine 7 (July 1853): 186; the Eastman painting, p. 99, is at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City. Minnesota Historical Society archaeologists at Historic Fort Snelling found the marble in the officers' quarters and the slate tablet and pencil, tumbler, and pins in the officers' latrine; these objects and all other illustrations are from the MHS collections.



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