



A Moment

in Time

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ON THE MORNING OF TUESDAY MAY 21, 1861, a group of young men in motley attire snapped to attention on Nicollet Avenue in Minneapolis for a photo. Their leader, 35-year-old Lieutenant DeWitt C. Smith, ordered them to dress their ranks, commanded “Parade REST,” then positioned himself in front as the artist uncovered his lens for a several-seconds exposure. This ambrotype, its image captured on a glass plate, would be Smith’s to keep as his remembrance of the day. The boys in ranks were more than happy to comply as they waited their company’s turn to cross the suspension bridge to Nicollet Island. Now, almost 145 years later, the photograph provides Minnesotans a unique look at some of their most famous Civil War soldiers.

The First Regiment Minnesota Volunteer Infantry was formed in immediate response to President Abraham Lincoln’s April 15, 1861, call for volunteers. One thousand eager men soon assembled at Fort Snelling, each having promised to serve faithfully for three months. Among them were the boys of the Minneapolis company, designated by the letter D. Captain Henry R. Putnam, a

29-year-old Minneapolis carpenter, led the company. First Lieutenant George H. Woods, also serving as regimental quartermaster, and Second Lieutenant Smith, who was most recently the Osseo postmaster and a county commissioner, assisted him. Drill began immediately, as did a major cleanup of the ramshackle Fort Snelling, vacant since the government had sold it to developer Franklin Steele three years earlier.

In early May the new regiment received devastating news: the War Department would accept their service only for a term of three years. Worse yet, some companies would be assigned to frontier guard duty rather than head east to gloriously defend the union. Those men unwilling to go for three years were allowed to leave. Company D saw its ranks thinned to 36 men, and the officers

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FACING PAGE: *Company D, First Minnesota Regiment Volunteer Infantry posing in the sunshine, May 21, 1861, while awaiting their turn to cross the suspension bridge to Nicollet Island. ABOVE: Round tower and west wall of Fort Snelling, little changed between May 1861 and September 1862 when this carte-de-visite was made.*

set to work finding some 50 replacements. Meanwhile, an invitation had been received from the citizens of St. Anthony and Minneapolis for the First Regiment to attend a grand picnic on Nicollet Island.

Ex-governor and newly appointed Colonel Willis A. Gorman was happy to accept. Gorman had been drilling the regiment for up to ten hours a day and was now facing the immanent departure of those companies ordered to relieve the regular troops at Forts Ripley, Ridgely, and Abercrombie. A march of eight miles and back would be an ideal training exercise plus an opportunity to impress potential recruits. Eight companies, an aggregate of about 400 men, were selected to attend while two unlucky companies were detailed to hold the fort. With Captain Putnam absent recruiting in the country and Lieutenant Woods recruiting in St. Cloud, Lieutenant Smith formed Company D and marched it to its designated place in the regimental line. The company carried its new flag, presented by the ladies of Minneapolis, and was accompanied by several recruits who had joined during the past week.

Following Colonel Gorman on his horse and stepping to the music of a brass band, the regiment left the gates of Fort Snelling and followed the wagon road north. At Minnehaha Falls they halted for rest and exploration, then crossed the picturesque bridge, passed the small tourist hotel, and continued through the green prairie and past scattered new farms. Two hours later at about 10 A.M. they were in Minneapolis, the men now flushed and sweating in their woolen clothing and leather accoutrements. Fronting into regimental line along the green by the Nicollet House, the men were ordered through a brisk demonstration of the manual of arms, to the delight of onlookers. Meanwhile, a local photographer set up his tripod and camera in front of Company D.

The picnic grounds were clearly visible on Nicollet Island, but the suspension bridge was of questionable safety for hundreds of men marching in step. So, over the next half-hour each company crossed in turn, careful to avoid a cadence. The rest of the day was a delight, with tables of delicacies, adoring ladies, and congratulatory family and friends. Colonel Gorman and others delivered speeches,



*Suspension bridge linking Minneapolis to Nicollet Island, seen here about 1865.
Opened in 1855, it was the first permanent span on the Mississippi River.*



Lieutenant DeWitt Smith, his wife Melissa, and son Eugene, June 1861. Early that month Smith had written Melissa from Fort Snelling: "Have the boys bring you down on Thursday to get the likeness taken. There is a man here who takes them."

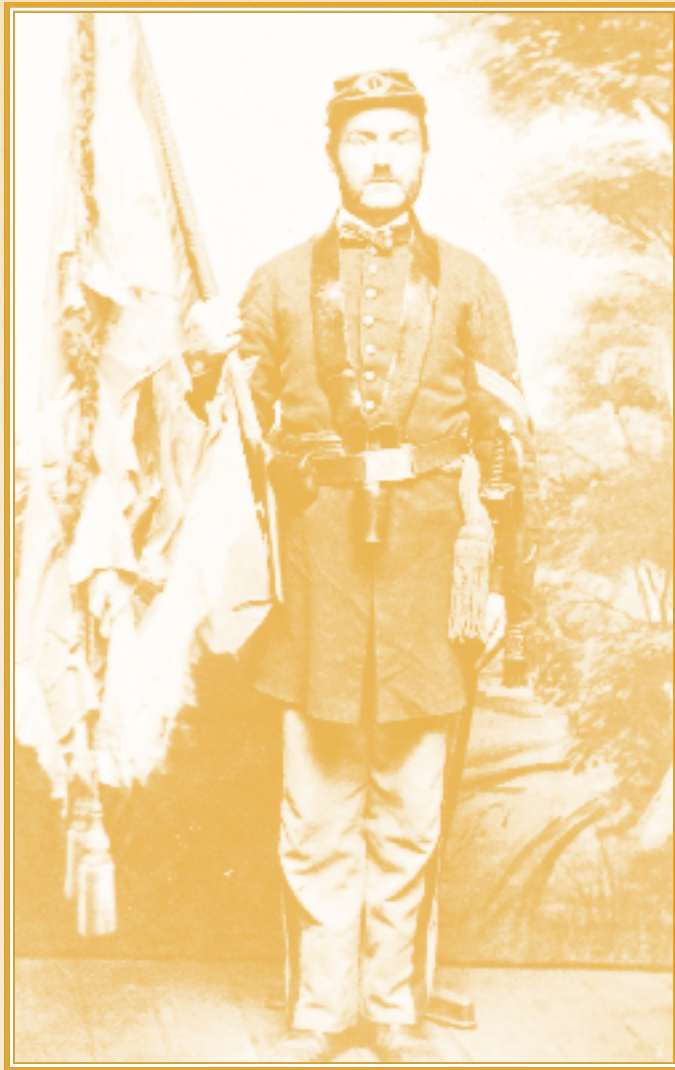
the regiment drilled, and the Wabasha Company even performed a brisk skirmish drill complete with blank firings. About 4 P.M. the regiment left for a leisurely march back and yet another long stop at Minnehaha Falls.

THE UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER AT WORK THAT DAY, possibly Alonzo Beal of Minneapolis or R. O. Sweeny of St. Anthony, hurried back to his studio to develop, fix, and mount the unique glass-plate image. The ambrotype was left with Lieutenant Smith's wife, Melissa Smith, when the regiment was sent east in June. The lieutenant served with and eventually commanded Company D but was severely wounded at the Battle of Antietam in September 1862. Recuperating back in Minnesota, Smith had continuing trouble with the wound but attempted to transfer to the Invalid Corps and then to secure an appointment as an assistant paymaster. He passed the winter as state librarian and finally rejoined the army as a paymaster in the spring of 1864.

That October, now Major Smith and some others were transporting a military payroll via the steamboat *Belle*. When the boat stopped near Randolph, Tennessee, Confederate guerrillas attacked. Though the *Belle* managed to pull away from shore, three of the rebels jumped

onboard. Major Smith and another officer ran forward into the fray, firing their pistols. In saving the boat and payroll, DeWitt Smith was shot and killed. After his death, Melissa Smith would have cherished the Company D photo as a memento. Their son, Eugene, inherited it, and his descendants have now returned the treasured family photo to Minnesota.

WHAT DOES THIS AMBROTYPE TELL US ABOUT THE First Minnesota in its first weeks of service? The hard work in drill shows clearly in the dressed ranks and precise poses of the three-week-old soldiers who stand at the parade rest position prescribed in the 1855 *U.S. Light Infantry and Rifle Tactics* manual. Company D is broken into two platoons of eight files each, the color bearer at the left end (the viewer's right) of the first platoon. In a ten-company regimental line, the regimental colors and guard were attached to the left end of the right center company, and this company color bearer follows that precedent. The use of company colors, typically a reduced-size version of the stars and stripes, was limited to the first days of the war. Several of the First Minnesota's companies carried their own colors, and a silk national color had been presented to both the Minneapolis (D)



William N. Irvine, Company D, posed after the Battle of Gettysburg with the tattered regimental colors he took up when the previous color bearer was shot.

and the St. Anthony (E) companies on May 9. Although Gorman had limited the size of company colors to only three-by-four feet, the color shown here is documented to have been larger. While the St. Anthony color is now in the Minnesota Historical Society collections, the present location of Company D's color is unknown.

The company's first sergeant, probably Seth Hammon, who in this instance should have led the second platoon (substituting in order of available ranks for the absent first lieutenant), has stepped around from the rear to left end of the company (the viewer's right). Hammon later received a commission, managed building projects at Fort Snelling, and helped coordinate a response to the Dakota War in August 1862. The second sergeant, possi-

bly Christopher Heffelfinger, is at the other end of the line. In the absence of the first sergeant, he would march behind the company commander when in regimental line, as pictured here. Heffelfinger also received a commission, rose to command Company D, and later served as major of the First Minnesota Heavy Artillery. The men in line are properly sized with the tallest at the right and the shortest at the left of the company, with the tallest and shortest corporals flanking each platoon, and corporals possibly flanking each section or half platoon. Second Lieutenant Smith, in full uniform but lacking a sword, sword belt, and sash, stands in front.

The company is well equipped with federal-issue leather accoutrements and the Model 1855 U.S. Rifle-

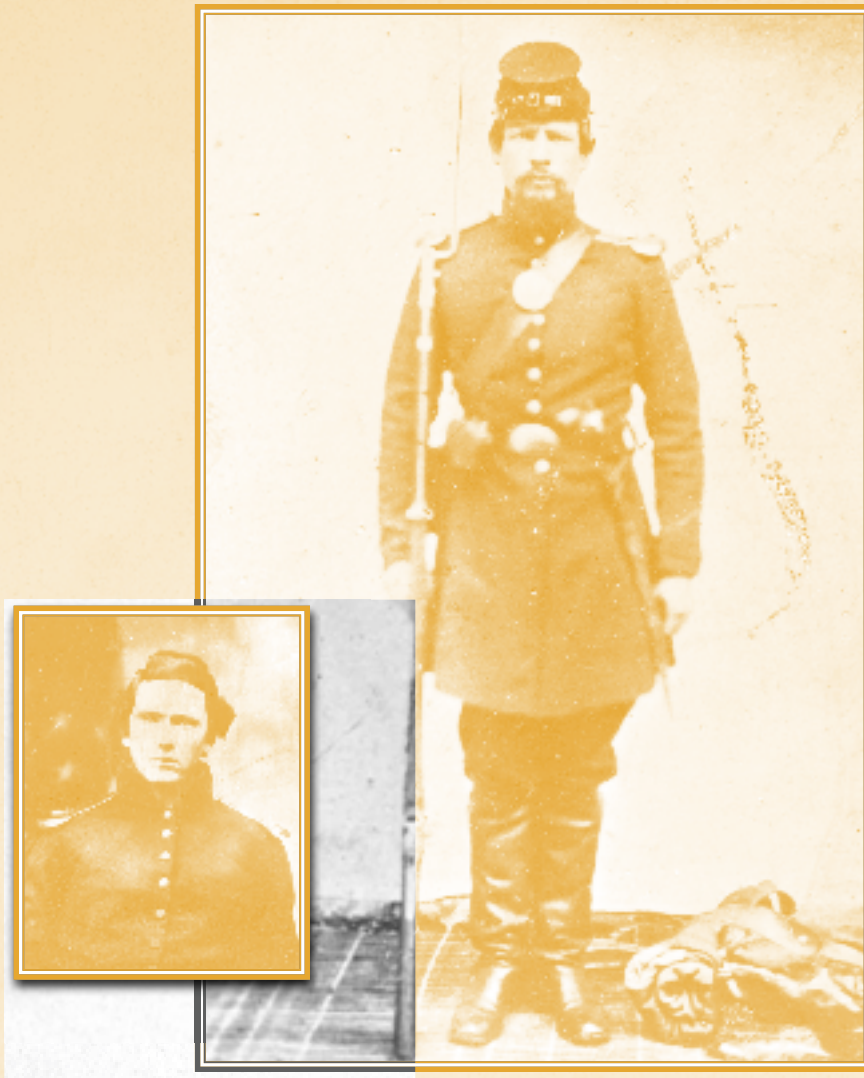


Christopher B. Heffelfinger, about 1863. Heffelfinger is believed to be standing at the viewer's far left in the 1861 Company D photo.

Musket, 58 caliber, with angular bayonet. Minnesota had received 133 of these new weapons in 1858 and another 283 in 1860 for issue to the state militia.* Companies A, B, C, and D were fortunate to be issued 380 of the modern rifle-muskets along with leather waist belts, percussion cap pouches, and bayonet scabbards and cartridge box with shoulder belt and brass decorative plates. The other companies were given older large-caliber muskets, some smoothbore and some rifled, and a few long-range rifles. When the regiment received replacement rifle-muskets from the federal government, most of these state-owned arms were returned to Minnesota and continued to serve successive new recruits at Fort Snelling.

The First Minnesota had been issued underdrawers, socks, and woolen overshirts on April 30. Most had come from the St. Paul wholesale supply house of Culver and Farrington and were cheap, ready-made clothing intended for the Indian trade. The shirts were of various colors, red predominating, and looked like those worn by steamboat crewmen. On May 8 the recruits received black felt hats plus black and dark-blue woolen trousers

* The new rifle musket fired a conical lead bullet .58 inches in diameter and weighing the same as 11 pennies. It could be loaded three times a minute and was still quite accurate at 500 yards. But infantry tactics were written for the old smoothbore musket, accurate only to 100 yards. When the well-drilled and very brave First Minnesota marched into Confederate fire at the Battle of Bull Run on July 21, 1861, more than 20 percent of the men were shot.



Ellet B. Perkins, 1861, with his rifle, bayonet, cartridge box, and bedroll and knapsack at his feet. Later the First Minnesota's regimental color bearer, he is possibly the man holding the Company D flag in the Nicollet Avenue photo. INSET: Adelbert Bryant in his newly issued nine-button frock coat, Poolesville, Maryland, late November 1861. Bryant enlisted in Company D two days before the Nicollet Island picnic.

that had been hurriedly sewn to military pattern over the preceding week. But the boys of Company D were apparently reluctant to wear the cheap laborer's clothing to visit their family and friends. Most instead donned their own civilian frock or paletot coats, and more than half were still wearing an interesting mix of variously colored hats and caps. Only a few men in the second platoon donned the distinctive Minnesota shirt that Colonel Gorman insisted the entire regiment wear at the Battle of Bull Run only 60 days later.

The photograph was taken toward the southeast corner of Nicollet Avenue and First Street in Minneapolis,

an area known as Bridge Square. First Street was just to the left, or north, of the large storefront. This block on the east side of Nicollet Avenue had burned to the ground on July 10, 1860, and was thus newly rebuilt; it would burn several more times. Minneapolis was then a town of less than 6,000 residents, slightly smaller than its older neighbor St. Anthony just across the river.

The new businesses on Bridge Square here photographed include Zeller's tailor shop and the Farmer's Exchange that advertised groceries and produce and had offices upstairs for the Home Insurance Company of New York. Next-door was the establishment of John E.

Going to the Sources

Wayne Jorgenson's discovery of this unique image began a series of rapid-fire email exchanges with the author to confirm the photo's subject and location. We found the firm of J. E. Bell listed in the 1859–1860 Dual City Directory for St. Anthony and Minneapolis (www.pnn.org/History/CityDirectory/main.htm) and immediately knew the photograph was worthy of publication. More about the Bell brothers' varied businesses was pulled from John H. Stevens's *Personal Recollections of Minnesota and Its People* (1890). We plotted the exact location of the photograph using several early downtown Minneapolis images reproduced in Lucile M. Kane's and Alan Ominsky's *Twin Cities: A Pictorial History of St. Paul and Minneapolis* (1983).

Jorgenson has compiled a unique website that chronicles individual members of the First Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, complete with photographs of 225 of the soldiers. He painstakingly collected anecdotes about DeWitt

Smith and other members of Company D included in a massive tribute to the regiment (<http://firstmn.phpwebhosting.com>). DeWitt's own descendent, Gordon Smith, provided copies of several contemporary letters and photographs to add important details to the story.

Information on the clothing, equipment, and weapons of Minnesota's 1861 recruits was compiled from various sources, including the Annual Report of the Adjutant General to the



Captain DeWitt C. Smith, ca. 1861–62

Legislature of Minnesota, published in *Executive Documents of the State of Minnesota, 1861*, and records of the Adjutant General and the First Minnesota Regiment preserved in the Society's archives. The picnic on Nicollet Island was glowingly detailed in contemporary accounts in several local newspapers. Letters from soldiers stationed at Fort Snelling gave a snapshot of daily activities and the surrounding landscape.

The author's many years with the First Minnesota reenactment group and in recreating military pageantry at Historic Fort Snelling made Company D's military formation easy to interpret. *U.S. Infantry Tactics*, published in 1861 and currently available in reprint, was the textbook used by most new Civil War officers and is still a standard reference on company and regimental drill. We hope that even more information can be gleaned through continuing research on this important "moment in time" photograph.

Bell and his brother David, the well-stocked dry goods emporium called *The Regulator*. David Cooper Bell would shortly leave for Washington as Congressman Cyrus Aldrich's private secretary, and the huge store on Nicollet would be sold to Anthony Kelley. This area was just over a block from the suspension bridge and is currently the site of Gateway Park and The Towers.

ONE MONTH AFTER LIEUTENANT SMITH PROUDLY posed with his company, the now full-strength First Regiment Minnesota Volunteer Infantry left Fort Snelling for the east. In late July they fought on Henry House Hill at

Bull Run, losing more men than any other federal regiment engaged. Along with the rest of the regiment, the survivors of Company D were one of the few organizations to leave the battlefield in good order. Always in the thick of the fight, the men of the First Minnesota would earn with their blood an unsurpassed record of courage. Fewer than half of the young men so proudly posing on Nicollet Avenue on that twenty-first day of May in 1861 would return to Minnesota at the end of their active service in February 1864. The survivors, a shadow of Minnesota's first volunteers, would muster out at Fort Snelling on May 5, 1864. □

The photo on p. 343 is courtesy Gordon Smith; p. 341 and 342 are in MHS collections, as are all photos of the soldiers, courtesy Wayne Jorgenson, who donated copies of his originals.



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