

A New FLAGPOLE for Historic FORT SNELLING

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The flagpole on the old round tower, for 40 years the symbol of the Minnesota Historical Society's Historic Fort Snelling, is gone. Installed during the 1966 restoration of the tower, the flagpole had decayed and has now been replaced—this time, on the same spot where Colonel Josiah Snelling ordered it built in 1820. This latest move is in the tradition of the nineteenth century, when the flagpole stood on four different sites within the fort walls.

Colonel Snelling laid the cornerstone of Fort St. Anthony a month after his August 1820 arrival, and he placed the flagpole directly in front of the new, round defensive tower, on a clear sight-line to the front door of

the quarters he planned for his family. The round tower might well be needed for defense, and so the upper deck was kept clear for use as an artillery platform. The new flagpole, near the guardhouse and powder magazine, was set into the ground and rose some 70 feet into the air, well above the walls and towers. But like much of the fort's hastily completed woodwork—installed as green wood and soon warped and rotting—the flagpole needed replacement by the late 1830s.

Meanwhile, in 1837 a treaty with the Dakota, Ojibwe, and Winnebago peoples had opened up the so-called St. Croix triangle to United States settlement. A much-reduced Fort Snelling garrison, which included a slave named Dred Scott, saw cabins and farms appearing on the land just across the Mississippi River. Lumbermen were beginning to cut the rich timber of the St. Croix valley. The fur trade was in decline, and Indian people in the region faced changes that would wrench their society.

The military mission at the fort was changing from defense to exploration and mapping, as well as keeping settlers off of Indian lands farther to the



Round tower and flagpole that greeted visitors to Historic Fort Snelling, 1970s

Stephen Osman, a senior historian at the Minnesota Historical Society, was site manager of Historic Fort Snelling from 1985 to 2006.

west. Seeds were being planted for Minnesota Territory.

At that time, new porches were added to the soldiers' barracks and the officers' quarters. Additional sentry platforms were constructed around the walls. A rear addition to the sutler's store doubled its size, and the round tower got a new deck. But since the army no longer considered Fort Snelling threatened, the tower had no need to support a field cannon. The upper platform was made the base of a new flagpole in 1839. That pole, with its circular, stepped wooden frame at the base and, eventually, a crow's-nest lookout, lasted until 1863.

The flagpole was moved again, this time to the front of the commanding officer's quarters.

That year, in response to the Dakota War of 1862, expeditions were armed and sent west to punish the Dakota people. The round tower was given a conical sheet-iron roof and used as an ordnance storehouse for the next decade. Thousands of firearms and tons of cartridges were stored there. To make this change possible, the flagpole was moved again, this time to the front of the commanding officer's quarters. There it stood for another decade, the wooden flag-storage box at its base amusing garrison children as a favorite hiding place.

When regular army soldiers again took turns manning the fort after the Civil War, a new flagpole was erected near the sutler's store, about where the powder magazine had recently stood. This pole flew the flag through the 1880s while the Department of

Dakota used the old fort as a supply depot. But at the end of the decade the pole was back in front of the commanding officer's quarters. Each of these poles flew the garrison's huge 20-by-36-foot flag, as did yet another pole at the new Department of Dakota headquarters built along Taylor Avenue, adjacent to the old fort. Near there, on October 20, 1946, the garrison flag was lowered for the last time as Fort Snelling ceased to be a United States army post.

When the Minnesota Historical Society began reconstruction of the fort's buildings in 1966, the round tower was first on the list. Still standing after 146 years, it had been converted to a guardhouse, then a

private residence and, later, to the Round Tower Museum, complete with a terrazzo floor, murals, and display cases. Removal of later additions so weakened the remaining stone walls that a foot-thick skin of new stone was added on the inside, along with conjectural replicas of historic beams, floors, and stairs. As the symbol of Minnesota's ambitious plan to recreate frontier Fort Snelling, the round tower was to fly an historic flag and sport a picturesque crow's nest on its flagpole. In 1966 the two-piece replica made from telephone poles was mounted in a solid stone "cake box," based in shape on an 1862 photograph of the pole's more likely wooden base.

For the next 40 years, the new flagpole flew a massive 20-by-30-



New flagpole, early 1870s, near the sutler's store

foot replica 24-star garrison flag and a smaller storm flag in inclement weather. Those flags welcomed three million visitors to the reconstructed stone fortress and became the ubiquitous symbol of the old fort. The round tower alone had held that significance since it was isolated in about 1880 by removal of the fort walls on either side. Everything from postcards to souvenir spoons and china to the masthead of the *Fort Snelling Bulletin* (published for soldiers) and even a brand of canned goods carried the round-tower logo. The Minnesota Historical Society assured continuation of that symbol by adding an historic flag to the tower.

But change was inevitable. First, the crow's nest was removed as its wood deteriorated. (That structure had long frustrated tour guides raising the flag over it.) The upper pole was damaged twice by lightning and replaced; the base section continued to rot within its masonry socket. The tower's upper-deck flooring and

several beams deteriorated and were replaced. By the late 1990s it was apparent that major restoration would be necessary.

Documenting the physical changes made to Fort Snelling in the decades before photography is a challenge.

Simultaneously, the Society was reconsidering the historic fort's interpretation program. While costumed living history remained the major draw for school groups as well as international, national, and local visitors, the story of an isolated garrison on the frontier had been repeated for more than three decades. The rich stories that could be told about the late 1830s would resonate with issues of today and might better engage visitors while they explored the fort. In the context of this discussion, it was

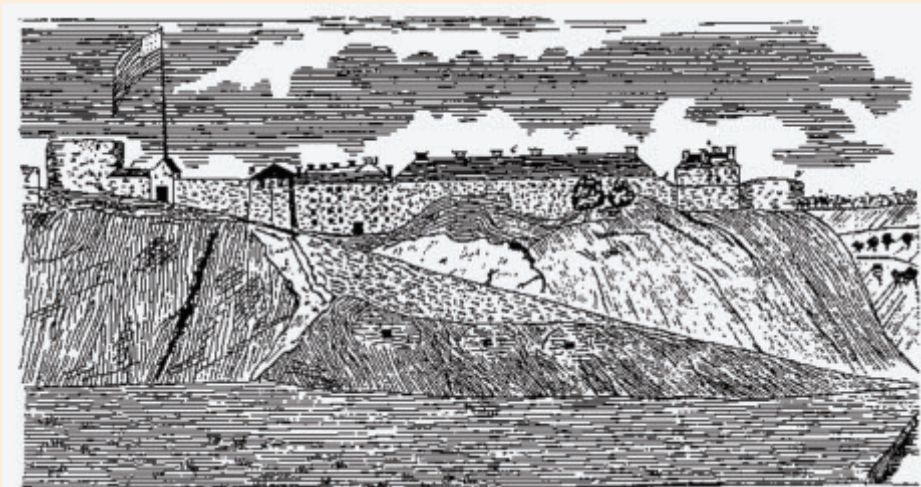
decided to replace the flagpole and restore it to its original location.

Documenting the physical changes made to Fort Snelling in the decades before photography is a challenge. Quarterly inspection reports are incomplete, and letters requesting permission for construction are few and scattered. Only two maps show the original location of the flagpole. Fortunately, an 1833 sketch by fort surgeon Nathan Jarvis, several drawings by Lt. Seth Eastman, and a sketch by George Catlin corroborate the maps and clearly show a flagpole rising well above the walls in front of—rather than on top of—the round tower.

With that information, Patricia Emerson, head of archaeology at the Minnesota Historical Society, and I, as the fort's site manager, discussed a test dig for the spring of 2005. That May, students in Dr. Frederick Cooper's University of Minnesota

This September 1862 photograph by Whitney's Gallery provided the prototype for the 1966 flagpole.





Sketch by Surgeon Nathan Jarvis, 1833, showing the flagpole rising high above the fort's walls and in front of—not on top of—the round tower

archaeological methods practicum opened four adjacent one-meter test units under a visitor path in front of the tower. Their excavation site was based on measurements in Lt. James McClure's 1835 map of the fort grounds. In a thin layer of undisturbed soil just above bedrock, the students found remnants of a rectangular intrusion. This was all that remained of a roughly 55-inch-square sand-filled pit that had at some time been dug about 28 inches (from current grade) down to bedrock. While archaeologists did not find the expected footings cut into the bedrock, the location of the pit was precisely where McClure's map indicated the pre-1838 flagpole had stood. Unfortunately, major grading of the area in 1958 had destroyed evidence of the four footing braces typically used to support nineteenth-century flagpoles.

The redesign of Fort Snelling's flagpole had actually begun in 1986 when I began corresponding with National Park Service colleagues. In North Dakota, Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site had recently replicated its flagpole, and staff there shared valu-

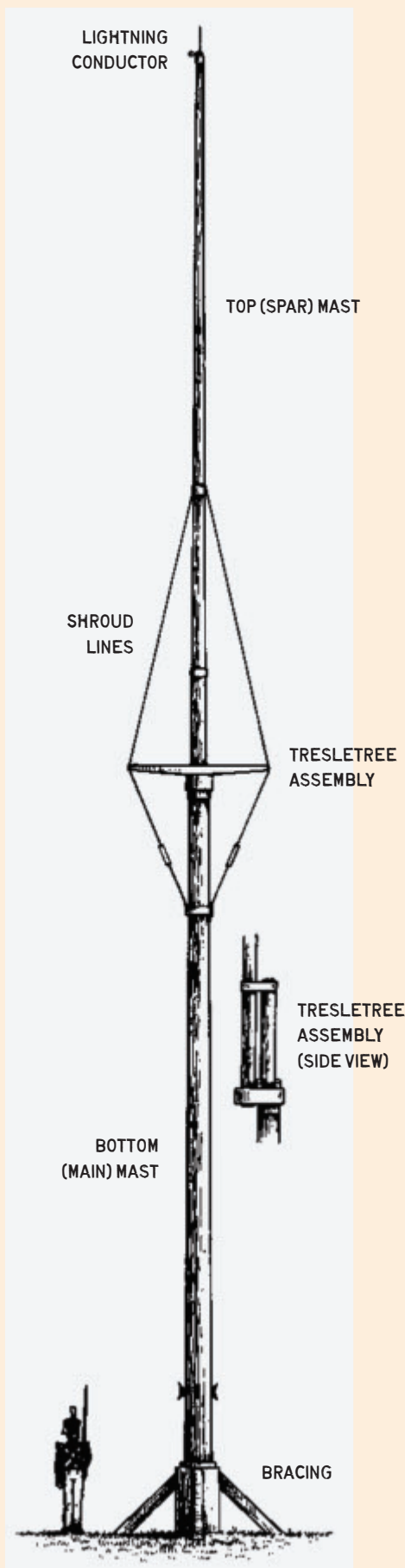
able information. Additional details were discovered in the records of the Quartermaster General, now in the National Archives in Washington, D.C. These included a complete set of plans for the 1874 flagpole at Fort Abraham Lincoln, prepared at Department of Dakota headquarters in St. Paul and approved by the quartermaster there, and specifications for an 1840s pole at Jefferson Barracks,

Missouri. Sketches of various early army flagpoles and later photographs of poles at Fort Snelling and other army posts were surveyed to glean valuable details.

Flagpoles in the nineteenth century shared design elements with ship masts. They were stepped, with a bottom mast and smaller top mast overlapped and connected at the center through an iron trestletree and with iron ring bands. Shroud lines fastened to iron bands on the top and lower mast ran through the ends of wooden cross spars above the trestletree to stabilize the two sections. Mortised into the base of the topmast was a pulley, through which a rope was run to enable the topmast to be lowered or raised through brute strength of a crew of soldiers. The base of the flagpole was braced with four heavy timbers set into the ground at an angle. Below ground, a wooden crib filled with stones might have been used to further stabilize the heavy pole and take the wind load.



Archaeologist Patricia Emerson and Fort Snelling guides excavating for evidence of the original flagpole



In the summer of 2005 architect Robert J. Claybaugh of Claybaugh Preservation Architecture was hired to design Historic Fort Snelling's new flagpole. Claybaugh's charge was to create a pole that was historically accurate in general appearance yet utilized some modern materials and design modifications to ensure longevity. Working with site staff, he reviewed the limited historical record, including the complete specifications for the 1874 flagpole at Fort Abraham Lincoln. In addition, National Park Service staff at Baltimore's Fort McHenry provided blueprints plus construction and maintenance details for the replica flagpole designed and installed there in the 1950s. Claybaugh compared flagpole measurements, Fort Snelling drawings and photographs, and information from other historic forts to settle on an approximate height of 80 feet—some ten feet higher than the last flagpole on the round tower.

Bracing the flagpole against wind load from the huge flag proved a design challenge. Two hundred years ago, an underground crib with rocks and aboveground wooden braces might have provided stability for many poles. However, shallow bedrock at Fort Snelling prompted us to use a reinforced concrete foundation bolted to the bedrock; the other modern alternative would have been drilling a hole ten feet down through the limestone. While we retained the wooden braces as a visible feature, the underground concrete provides added stability. A few other comprises were made for longevity. Lightning protection was essential, but the rod on top is spring mounted so that a flag caught over its point can still be lowered. The lower mast is mounted in a steel sleeve solidly attached to the footing but concealed by a

wooden framework. Galvanized steel fittings are on both masts, and galvanized steel cable-shroud stays some 40 feet above the ground replace the hemp rope used in the nineteenth century. This new design ensures that repairs and adjustments will not be needed for many years. Fort Snelling no longer has skilled military craftsmen on hand to perform this once-frequent maintenance.

Fort Snelling's impressive flagpole once proclaimed U.S. sovereignty over a vast region of Upper Mississippi "wilderness."

Once the design was complete, procuring proper masts proved difficult and frustrating. The Wisconsin woodsman who had provided timbers for a Taylors Falls frame bridge was unable to cut large enough logs free of insect damage. Bell Lumber and Pole Company of New Brighton, in business for



Cabinetmaker Charlie Nielsen working to square each round mast where it will overlap the other



Installing the new flagpole, May 2007, and the replica garrison flag once again flying over the fort

nearly 100 years, stepped in with rough-turned Douglas fir logs originally slated for use as utility poles. A Minnesota shipwright had agreed to finish the masts but was forced to cancel when the log delivery was delayed. Marc Cutter of Fox Creek Builders then served as a liaison between architect Claybaugh and a team from Nordic Woodworks: cabinetmaker Charlie Nielsen and machinist Dan Gates.

In November 2006 the two huge logs were delivered to the 1904 cavalry stable next to the fort's parking lots. Meanwhile, archaeology at the site for the massive new concrete base revealed no additional clues about the original construction, and so the concrete footing was poured. Nielsen, Gates, and Historic Fort Snelling

woodworker Paul Cusick worked into May, building a giant lathe, shaping the two masts, assembling all of pieces, and, finally, installing the new pole. A replica 24-star garrison flag was raised for the first time in a commemorative ceremony on Memorial Day weekend 2007.

Fort Snelling's impressive flagpole once proclaimed U.S. sovereignty over a vast region of Upper Mississippi "wilderness." Standing once again on its original site, the care-

fully researched replica flagpole will stimulate countless questions from generations of Historic Fort Snelling visitors to come. □

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