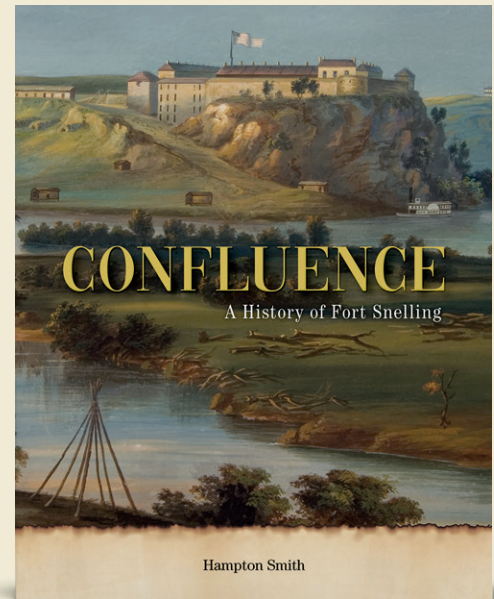


Confluence: A History of Fort Snelling

Hampton Smith

*Fort Snelling, a foundational place in the story of Minnesota, was built 200 years ago at the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers, an area known to the Dakota people as Bdote. Fort Snelling is also viewed by some as the “birth-place” of the state, the site where citizens of the United States first lived in what is now Minnesota. In *Confluence: A History of Fort Snelling*, Hampton Smith delves into the site’s long and complicated story, up to the current revitalization efforts to mark the fort’s bicentennial. The excerpt included here describes the period between the two world wars, when Fort Snelling’s mission was in transition and its residents took on a new role for the state and the army.*

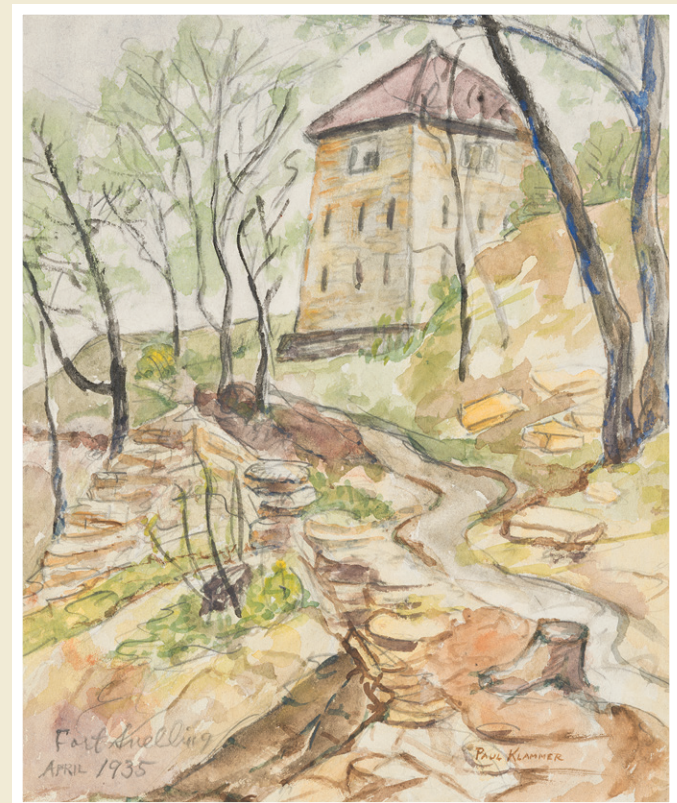


The Country Club of the Army

THE END OF THE GREAT WAR and the closing of General Hospital 29 coincided with the one hundredth anniversary of Fort Snelling’s establishment at Bdote. The Minnesota Territorial Pioneers Association, with the enthusiastic support of officers at the post, began planning for a commemoration of the event in August 1920. As with the observation in 1905, the remembrances were infused with nostalgia. Events took place both at the fort and at the Minnesota State Fair, on its grounds between St. Paul and Minneapolis. Festivities at the fair began on September 4, 1921, with a pageant, including a presentation by Professor D. Lange, “writer of Indian stories for boys,” who “related frontier tales” as the “Indian portion of the program.” No actual Indigenous people seem to have been involved in this presentation.¹

Another centennial ceremony, held at Fort Snelling’s round tower, included a number of veterans and pioneer groups. Descendants of some of the important local figures active during the early years of the fort, carrying names like Steele, Botineau, Brown, and Larpenteur, were represented. Curiously, there were no Snellings, Leavenworths, or Blissés among the military—and most certainly no Dakota representatives. Numerous speakers took part at both occasions, including the now very aged William Watts Folwell, Governors Joseph A. A. Burnquist and Samuel R. Van Sant, and a wide variety of clergy representing every major Christian denomination, each of which had its own day of commemoration at the state fair—an odd circumstance since missionaries played a minor role, at best, in the early history of Fort Snelling. Themes of

their speeches seemed to focus more on Minnesota in 1920 than 1820: “Fort Snelling and the Present Generation,” “The Value of Permanent Christian Organization,” and “Minnesota’s Position” appear to give scant attention to the actual history of the fort. Perhaps Dr. Folwell, who



Fort Snelling, hexagonal tower, 1935. Watercolor by Paul W. Klammer

was then finishing his own comprehensive history of that era, touched on why and how Fort Snelling was built in his four-minute address to the crowd.²

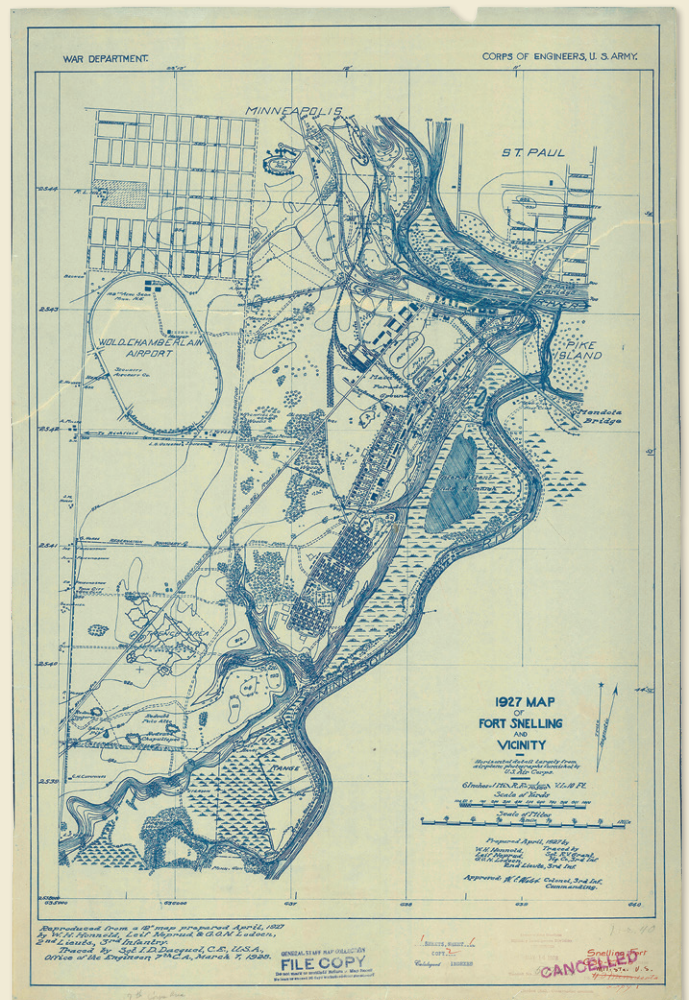
Though some of the Twin Cities papers covered the centennial celebration, even devoting part of a Sunday edition to a historical overview of the establishment and building of Fort Snelling, other events probably dominated public attention. Even the issue of the *Minneapolis Tribune* with the most coverage of the history of Fort Snelling buried it behind “Freak Stuff at the State Fair”—auto polo, anyone? The same issue covered the ongoing presidential campaign, noting that all four candidates would be visiting the Minnesota State Fair. There may have been a certain nostalgic interest in the old fort, but it was not in the forefront of mainstream public attention.³

As its second century began, Fort Snelling found itself in a role far removed from its original mission. Westward expansion had become a distant memory, romanticized in literature and more recently in film, and the United States had become a major economic and industrial force, the recognized equal of the great European powers. By 1920, the United States had forcibly acquired colonies in the nearby Caribbean and the faraway Pacific, requiring a military presence to control and protect US interests. The Great War had compelled the army to mobilize the nation’s economic and human resources in ways America’s founders never imagined, creating an army of millions and transporting much of it overseas.

These changing circumstances drove the army to change, but like many institutions with a conservative and tradition-bound past, transformation came slowly and erratically. Nearly three million soldiers were demobilized in the first nine months following the end of the war. The question facing the US government and army leadership centered on how to maintain a relatively small army able to meet a national emergency but also capable of rapid expansion in the event of another large-scale, international conflict. Of particular relevance to Fort Snelling was Secretary of War Elihu Root’s attempt to modernize the National Guard and create a stronger connection between the guard and the regular army.⁴

But these reforms were slow to take hold. The states clung to the guard as their local militia, a source of police power and a field for political patronage. Federal interference here was unwelcome. Congress was also slow to provide funding for the extra guard training and equipment, while regular army officers had a poor opinion of their counterparts in the Army Reserve and National Guard. Early experiments with division-level maneuvers and the problems on the Mexican border in 1917 had illustrated these issues.

THE UNITED STATES’ INVOLVEMENT in the Great War dramatically changed the situation, however. The value of quickly trained “citizen soldiers,” often commanded by reserve officers or men trained in officer candidate schools like those run at Fort Snelling, had been proven in combat. In postwar planning, this experience informed the ideas of Colonel John McAuley Palmer and gained support in both Congress and the army. Palmer, a West Point graduate, had wide experience in the army, serving in overseas posts and as a member of the general staff prior to World War I. Here, he gained a reputation as a military planner, helping to create the Selective Draft Act of 1917. During the war, he served on the staff of General John J. Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Forces in France. Palmer developed the idea of a “total army”: a core professional army that would include the Army Reserve and National Guard. This concept strongly influenced the National Defense Act of 1920.



This 1927 map of Fort Snelling and its surroundings shows the tangle of transportation, polo fields, new airport, relocated firing ranges, entrenchment training grounds, and the press of the community on the old fort.

Though Congress had rejected the idea of universal military training, it accepted a reduced army of 280,000 with reliance on citizen soldiers who were to be prepared for war through the National Guard and an Organized Reserve. Officers, especially those preparing to join the Reserve, were to come from an expanded Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC), a four-year program run by the army and navy to train college students—eligibility limited to white males at this time—to become Reserve officers. Officers also were to come from the Citizens' Military Training Camps, a kind of volunteer training program that originated in the Preparedness Movement prior to World War I. The Regular Army was to devote much of its energy to training both the National Guard and the Organized Reserve, but ideally these forces were eventually to be led by their own officers. Nonprofessional officers were to be offered opportunities for advanced training at army war colleges and granted tours of duty on the general staff. This plan would determine most of the military activities at Fort Snelling from 1921 to 1941.⁵

Another factor that would influence life at Fort Snelling between the world wars was the return of the 3rd Infantry in the autumn of 1921. The 3rd, now a “skeleton” regiment

counting just 300 soldiers, was ordered to march from Fort Sherman, in Chillicothe, Ohio, to Fort Snelling, a hike of 800 miles. “Red tape” was the official reason given for this unusual maneuver. According to press reports, the army did not have sufficient funds to transport the regiment by rail, though the cost of supplying the troops on the march exceeded what their train fare might have been. But the march made for good publicity, and given that the US military had discovered the value of public relations during World War I, the 3rd's long walk may have been a convenient accident. Whatever the case, it made for a memorable return, and veterans of the trek celebrated the event for years, recalling mud, cold, and sore feet. Upon arrival at Fort Snelling in early December, they replaced the 49th Infantry and joined Battery F of the 14th Field Artillery and the 7th Tank Company as the garrison of Fort Snelling.⁶

The mission of Fort Snelling had evolved as well. The National Defense Act of 1920 created three branches of the army: the Regular Army, the National Guard, and the Organized Reserve. Regular Army posts were intended to be training sites for the National Guard and Organized Reserve with the Regular Army troops stationed at each post assisting with the training programs.



The color guard of the 3rd Infantry Regiment, wearing their eighteenth-century uniforms, 1935



Mock battle staged at Fort Snelling, September 1928

Fort Snelling was now within the 7th Corps area, a geographic designation roughly comparable to the departments created by the army in the late nineteenth century. The 7th Corps, headquartered in Omaha, included Minnesota, North and South Dakota, Iowa, Missouri, Nebraska, and Kansas. Most of the Guard and Reserve units training at Fort Snelling came from these states, particularly Iowa and North and South Dakota.

Another no-less-important role for the fort's garrison was to enhance the army's standing with the public. The 1920s were a challenging time for the armed forces and the army in particular. Though most of the public had initially supported America's entry into the Great War, its high cost in lives and treasure and the perceived failure of President Woodrow Wilson's postwar policies created feelings of disappointment and cynicism in many Americans. Some even saw it as a grotesque waste of human lives for no purpose, except the enrichment of weapons manufacturers. So when Republican Warren Harding came into office in 1921, most Americans were happy to put the war behind them. Funding for the army was reduced in the name of economy, cutting back on both the training that had been proposed in the Defense Act and the size of the army itself. General prosperity and a large antiwar movement made it difficult for the army to recruit both enlisted men and officers. The army needed good public relations to ensure its viability and funding—and to pursue its efforts to become an army supported by citizen soldiers in the Organized Reserves and National Guard.

A unit of the 3rd Infantry marching perfectly in step in a parade along Sixth Street, St. Paul, 1929



For its place in Minnesota and the Twin Cities in particular, the 3rd Infantry was an ideal ambassador for the army. The regiment had spent a decade at Fort Snelling between 1888 and 1898. Many of the men who had served in the 3rd during the Spanish-American War and the decade following had enlisted at Fort Snelling. Though few, if any, remained in the service, there were some veterans of the regiment in both Minneapolis and St. Paul. And if any unit in the army of that day could have been termed “elite” or “crack,” it may well have been the 3rd Infantry. Proud of their history, “The Old Guard” (as they were and still are known) could put on an impressive military review. The troops were well drilled, their marching columns precise; as a nod to their history, the color guard wore the eighteenth-

century uniforms of the early regular army. Their band was excellent. One frequent guest at post reviews who had substantial military experience in the British army wrote the post commander in 1931: “Last Monday’s review was the best I have witnessed. . . . The Infantry marched well and showed solid and unbroken lines; the Artillery did better than ever, and that’s saying a lot. . . . It happened that I took occasion to inspect the artillery and machine guns at close range . . . and was thrilled to note the cleanliness of their accoutrements, which compared most favorably with outfits with which I served so many years ago. . . . I always feel when troops make a good impression that a word of praise will not offend. Once a soldier always a soldier.”⁷

This quality was put to good use in the 1920s and 1930s, both on the post and in the community. Though inspections and parades were a regular part of garrison life, the fort’s were open to the public and frequently featured honored guests.

Beginning in 1928, the troops put on an annual “Military Show,” featuring exhibits of aircraft, guns, tanks, and



The lounge of the Fort Snelling Officers' Club, reorganized into the Fort Snelling Country Club, August 1934. The wooden beams were salvaged from the old Minneapolis Armory.

field kitchens and demonstrations of horsemanship, tank "acrobatics," and "silent drill" by the 3rd Regiment's drill team. The centerpiece for the whole three-day affair was a "mock battle" or reenactment, often of a famous battle from the World War or a reenactment of the regiment's assault on Chapultepec during the Mexican War. These demonstrations, sometimes depicted in local newsreels, were full of troops firing blank bullets while charging through fake artillery bursts and other impressive but harmless explosions. The public loved it. Here was the excitement of battle without the blood, gore, and death. Some years, as many as 20,000 visitors from throughout the region attended.⁸

Perhaps the longest reach of the 3rd Infantry's showmanship came from its band. The participation of military bands from Fort Snelling had been a fixture in local events for years, but new technology made the 3rd Infantry band known over a wide region of the country. Radio was the exciting new medium of the 1920s, delivering entertainment directly into people's living rooms, often in the form of live performances. The Twin Cities were home to two "clear channel" stations, WCCO and KSTP, with powerful signals covering much of the Midwest. These stations were ever in need of quality live performances to fill up their programming schedules, and both stations turned to the 3rd Infantry band as a potential source. Starting in December 1928, KSTP began broadcasting a weekly Saturday evening concert of their music, which included band

arrangements of classical pieces and waltzes. A month later, WCCO began broadcasting live concerts by the 3rd Infantry band on Friday evenings. Initially, those performances ended in April when the band's outdoor duties increased, but the public response to the broadcasts was so positive that the 3rd Regiment's commander, Colonel Walter C. Sweeney, arranged to have a radio broadcast studio set up in a little-used building on the post so the band could perform directly from Fort Snelling. The band's broadcasts earned praise from listeners as far away as Utah, but most came from locations "throughout Minnesota, Wisconsin and the Dakotas." These broadcasts continued into the mid-1930s.⁹

Like the special parades for VIPs, these shows and promotions were the brainchild of Colonel Sweeney, as

was the *Fort Snelling Bulletin*, the post's weekly newspaper. Walter Sweeney was one of the army's rising officers. Originally a volunteer in the Spanish-American War, he earned a Reserve commission and later a Regular Army commission. He served on General Pershing's staff during the Mexican Border deployment in 1916–17, and during the Great War he served as chief of staff of the 28th Infantry Division. Sweeney also had a role in army censorship during the war and was instrumental in the creation of the army newspaper *Stars and Stripes*. He believed strongly in the value of military intelligence and propaganda, authoring a book on the subject in 1924; he was transferred from Fort Snelling in 1930.¹⁰

The regiment was also represented in parades and ceremonies outside the post by company- and even battalion-size participation. National holidays saw them in particular demand. In 1929, for example, the band, color guard, and three companies of the 3rd Infantry's 1st Battalion took part in the Minneapolis Memorial Day parade. Considering that this amounted to several hundred soldiers, they likely *were* the parade. At the same time, the 2nd Battalion was marching in the St. Paul parade. Earlier that day, the 3rd Battalion, with the band and color guard, had taken part in an elaborate ceremony at the Fort Snelling cemetery, and, not to be left out entirely, the artillery battery fired a "national salute" of 21 guns on the post-parade ground at noon. Even non-holiday events could draw participation from the garrison:

Monday and Tuesday, April 29 and 30 [1929], a platoon of the Third Infantry with the Regimental Band will participate in ceremonies to be held in Minneapolis and St. Paul in connection with the shipment of a carload of material for the rebuilding of the frigate *Constitution*, normally known as "Old Ironsides." Monday afternoon also the garrison will hold a parade in honor of National Commander Grayson, Spanish American War Veterans. . . . Thursday, May 2, the Band, bugle and drum corps and a flag detail of non-commissioned officers will participate in the official opening of the baseball season in the Northwest at the American Association park in Minneapolis. Friday May 3, the garrison will be host to a party of Canadian Boy Scouts with their own band. . . . Friday May 10, Fort Snelling will entertain about 100 members of the Minnesota State Editorial association.¹¹

These shows and parades demanded a good deal of time and effort from the soldiers. Long hours of drill and training combined with "spit and polish" were necessary. As one wrote on Colonel Sweeney's departure, "We have learned that we could efficiently shoot on the range, and at the same time carry on parades, put on Military Shows, paint and repair barracks, clean and generally renovate our buildings and surroundings." Yet life at Fort Snelling was not all work. Since the late nineteenth century, the army had shown increasing concern for the welfare of soldiers, first by increasing regulation of post sutlers in the 1870s, then replacing them altogether with post exchanges, the proceeds from which funded recreational amenities. In 1903, Congress made funding such facilities and related activities part of the army's regular appropriation. These resources allowed the building of facilities like a library, gymnasium, and post exchange (actually the old military prison converted for the purpose), all added before the World War. When the post expanded during that conflict, many amusements quite unknown to most of their predecessors were made available to soldiers through social agencies and later the army itself. In 1918, the Army Morale Division was created, followed in 1920 by the Army Motion Picture Service and in 1923 by the Army Library Service. All of these amenities aimed at improving the lives of enlisted men and their families to heighten morale and encourage reenlistment.¹²

A full range of sports was available for participation and entertainment. Fort Snelling had a football team that regularly competed not only with other military posts but with local high school and college squads. Its baseball team played against the many town teams around the state, and in winter, that most versatile of buildings, the Riding Hall—a structure too large to heat—was partially



The biggest equestrian star at Fort Snelling was a chestnut stallion affectionately known as Whiskey. A wild horse from Montana trained by a young lieutenant named William Hazelrigg, Whiskey became a star of the Fort Snelling polo team, learned an array of tricks and stunts, and emerged as a crowd favorite at horse shows and competitions.

flooded and used for ice skating, curling, and hockey. Basketball was also popular, with intramural competitions between the various companies. Boxing was particularly well liked. The sport was widely followed in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s, and the fort had an active league competing among the commands within the post and within the army as well. The Fort Snelling boxers also regularly competed in amateur bouts in the Twin Cities in fight "cards" or programs that attracted large crowds and garnered wide coverage in the local press. For those of more refined taste, perhaps, the fort also provided a golf course, completed in April 1932. Soldiers could play up to 30 "rounds" for one dollar. The course offered many of the features of a country club course, with a golf director determining handicaps and a fully equipped golf shop where clubs and golf balls could be purchased. Indeed, when the officers' club reorganized itself as the Fort Snelling Country Club in 1934, the post had truly become "the country club of the army."¹³ □



During the Depression years of the 1930s, Fort Snelling received grants from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) for construction, modernization, and improvements at the post. In 1936, the WPA approved the creation of Fort Snelling National Cemetery. Here a soldier salutes in front of the burial plot of unknown soldiers in 1938.

Notes

1. *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Aug. 15, 1920, 12; Sept. 2, 1921, 12. This was undoubtedly Dietrich Lange, who wrote *On the Trail of the Sioux*, a fictional work set during the Dakota War featuring two boy scouts. Lange was a supporter of the Boy Scout movement. See Minnesota Author Biographies, <https://collections.mnhs.org/mnauthors/10001318>.

2. *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Sept. 12, 1920, 1.

3. *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Sept. 5, 1920, State Fair Section, 3, 6.

4. Richard W. Stewart, ed. *American Military History*, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, US Army, 2005), 54; Russell F. Weigley, *History of the United States Army* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 321–23.

5. Weigley, *History of the United States Army*, 396–400.

6. *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Oct. 4, 1921, 6; *Fort Snelling Bulletin*, Nov. 20, 1931, 1, 5.

7. *Fort Snelling Bulletin*, Nov. 13, 1931, 2; May 29, 1937, 2. The writer was W. C. Nichols, vice president of the Northwestern Milling Company. Some of these men died at the post hospital or the Veterans Hospital at the fort: see *Fort Snelling Bulletin*, Dec. 13, 1929, 1; Oct. 8, 1933.

8. *Fort Snelling Bulletin*, Sept. 13, Sept. 27, 1929; Sept. 5, 1930, 2; Mar. 8, 1935, 1.

9. *Fort Snelling Bulletin*, Dec. 7, 1928, 1; Jan. 4, 1929, 3; Oct. 11, 1929, 3; Mar. 20, 1931.

10. US Air Force, "General Walter C. Sweeney Jr.," <https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Biographies/Display/Article/105473/general-walter-c-sweeney-jr/>. Sweeney later became an important figure in the service during the interwar years, rising to the rank of major general in command of the 3rd Division in 1938.

11. *Fort Snelling Bulletin*, May 31, 1929, 1.

12. *Fort Snelling Bulletin*, June 27, 1930, 2; "United States Army's Family and MWR Programs," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Army%27s_Family_and_MWR_Programs.

13. *Fort Snelling Bulletin* 1, no. 4 (n.d.): 1; Apr. 29, 1932, 1; *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, July 8, 1929, 10.

Built in the early twentieth century as a place for cavalry and artillery to drill during inclement weather, the Riding Hall, a large structure with copious amounts of open space, was used for many purposes during Fort Snelling's days as an army post. It still stands and is actively used by the Boy Scouts.

The reference to Fort Snelling as "The Country Club of the Army" seems to have come from local newspapers, but its original source is unclear. A "Historical Resume of the Fort Snelling Officers' Country Club" is microfilmed with the Mar. 30, 1934, issue of the *Fort Snelling Bulletin* and also printed on page 3. Apparently written for the club's dedication on the following day, it gives an account of the building of the club in 1933–34, concluding, "It is hoped and believed that this fine building will serve as a real Country Club and be a social center and place of assembly and friendly contact for all Officers and Ladies, who may be stationed here, and their friends in St. Paul and Minneapolis, which cities have so long shown the greatest friendship and interest in the welfare of Fort Snelling."

Image on p. 316, NARG 77, Records of the Office of the Chief of Engineers, War Department, Maps; all other images are from MNHS Collections.



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