Historic Fort Snelling: A Time Travelers Guide

The importance of maintaining and preserving Fort Snelling and its rich history in these troubled economic times is just as crucial now as it was when this fort was used by the military for active duty. For many people, remembering history is more than just dates on a page; for the citizens of Minnesota, the fort represents a link to our earliest pioneer days when we had rivers instead of roads and surviving the long winters required resilience as well as proper planning.

Today much of the primary funding for Fort Snelling is acquired a variety of statewide historic and cultural grants; however, without the support of visitors to the site and interest in maintaining the fort, it would all be pointless. In the words of George Santayana (1863-1952), “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” There are many websites with historical information available about Fort Snelling, a quick Google search may reveal a few such as: www.historicfortsnelling.org, www.upperpost.org, www.friendsofcoldwater.org, www.cem.va.gov/CEM/cems/nchp/ftsnelling.asp or, http://fortsnellingmcf.org/historic-preservation-fund.php. The historical data presented here can be found on these and other sources.

Imagine that is it 1805 and you are on the banks of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers, having just witnessed the signing of a treaty between the Dakota tribe and Lieutenant Zebulon Pike. As the Native Americans exit the camp you hear the Lieutenant boast that, “for a song” the
US government now has 100,000 acres of land, where the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers meet.

Over the next two decades, the fort location moved from the low ground on the south bank of the Minnesota River, to high ground near a spring a mile up the west bank, this became Camp Coldwater. In the summer of 1819, Colonel Josiah Snelling is the new commander and a new stone fort is constructed atop the bluff on the west bank at the confluence of the rivers. The new post is given the name Fort St. Anthony. By 1826, the fort has been completed and renamed Fort Snelling.

Though Minnesota did not become a state until 1858, the years as a territory were filled with many changes from the first post office being built, to a controversial doctor who prevented a small pox outbreak by vaccinating the Native Americans, as well as, the soldiers and their families. Some of the more noticeable names from American history passed through Fort Snelling, such as Zachary Taylor and a slave named Dread Scott.

In 1829, the forts commander, Lieutenant Colonel Zachary Taylor was surprised to find that one of his daughters, Knox, eloped with Lieutenant Jefferson Davis, reportedly marrying him in the fort's blockhouse. Both Taylor and Davis later become presidents: Davis of the Confederacy 1861-65, and Taylor the 12th president of the United States 1849-50.

Dred Scott lived at Fort Snelling from 1836-1839 with his master Dr. John Emerson even though slavery was not legal in the north. Years after leaving the fort, Scott eventually sued for his freedom in the 1857 Supreme Court case of *Scott v. Sandford*. Though the outcome of the case was not in Scott’s favor, and many say that this case was spark that started the Civil War.

One of the more frustrating things about life in the United States in the 19th century was the treatment of non-white people by those in power. The end to slavery is clearly documented
by the 13th amendment and this change was the result of a war that nearly tore the country in two. However, the end of slavery did not eliminate unjust treatment of all citizens. The suffering of the Native Americans at the hands of both the military and regular citizens of the United States is not an easy past to remember. Thus, there were darker times at the Fort and the nation.

In 1848, troops from Fort Snelling participated in the forced migration of Winnebago Indians to the Todd County reservation. Almost in tandem with the Civil War, the U.S. Dakota war in the winter of 1862 brought death and suffering to several hundred Dakota when approximately 1600 elderly people, women, and children were incarcerated on Pike Island below the fort. The deplorable conditions in which the Native Americans were held have been compared to a concentration camp.

It is clear from the numerous treaties signed between the United States government and the Native American people, which of the two groups held the power. In 1852 as the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux and Treaty of Mendota were going to the U.S. Senate to be ratified, it was through coercion and threats of force that the treaties were ratified without Land Guarantee. This meant that the Native Americans could no longer live on the land that had been theirs for generations. This forced the Dakotas to move to new lands along the Minnesota River. As we learn from historicfortsnelling.com:

“After the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862, many Dakota leaders were captured and imprisoned by the U.S. military, among them Sakpedan (Little Six) and Wakanozhanzhan (Medicine Bottle). … Tradition says that as they climbed the scaffold, a steam train whistle blew in the distance, prompting Sakpedan to say, ‘As the white man comes in, the Indian goes out.’ … The executions followed the
hanging of 38 Dakota men on Dec. 26, 1862, in Mankato, MN. … It remains the largest mass execution in U.S. history.” (web)

By 1898 soldiers mustered at the fort for the Spanish/American War. Also, the post hospital was built, and soldiers were dispatched to Leech Lake where their presence discouraged a rebellion among the Pillager band of Ojibwe Indians.

A new century began and, the tides of war once again swell the ranks of enlisted, and through both World War I and World War II as the fort serves as an induction center. The fort gains notoriety in 1944 when the military established a language school with Nisei (Japanese-American) linguists to help train soldiers in Japanese, Korean and Chinese language and culture so they are able to help gather intelligence by translating documents and interrogating enemy soldiers. The fort was chosen because Minnesota has a reputation for being a tolerant state.

When WWII ended and Fort Snelling was decommissioned, it was transferred to the Veterans Administration. Through the next half of the twentieth century, Fort Snelling was designated as a national landmark, one of the first in the country and begins welcoming visitors. In addition to the main Fort, in 1961 the state park a 2,500-acre public area around the fort was established, the Veterans Memorial Chapel, (built in 1927) as well as the Veterans Cemetery. The cemetery was originally intended for the soldiers who died while stationed at the post in 1870; it was expanded in 1960-61, bringing the cemetery to its present size.

In the article by Russell W. Fridley, *Fort Snelling, from Military Post to Historic Site* we learn that:

“Interest in preserving the site of old Fort Snelling from the encroachments of modern civilization was suddenly revived in 1956. The prospect of a new highway through the area raised a serious threat. At the same
time, it afforded an opportunity to plan for the permanent preservation of this historic spot. … it received a spontaneous stream of telephone calls, letters, and personal visits from patriotic and veterans' organizations, businessmen, labor leaders, teachers, school children, and numerous individuals in sufficient number to demonstrate the widespread interest throughout the Northwest in the old fort site. … Eventually, the matter went before Governor Orville L. Freeman, who called a meeting of the interested state agencies. … the possibility of constructing a tunnel under the area between the chapel and the Round Tower be studied. This was done, and ultimately the proposal was incorporated in a third plan advanced by the highway department, a plan that has since been accepted by both the department of conservation and the Minnesota Historical Society.” (190-191)

I am grateful to the citizens of Minnesota in 1956, for if they had not worked to conserve Fort Snelling, I have no doubt that the highway would speed past a memorial plaque that says ‘here stood Fort Snelling’ rather than being able to enjoy the site as it exists today. The fort is now a protected landmark, and work to preserve the site begins in earnest. Visitors begin interacting with costumed employees in the 1970’s, as they represent life at the post in the year 1827 in an attempt to show the routine of every-day army life.

Moving into the 21st century, we see improvements made to many of the buildings and grounds around the fort. Some of the issues with restoration prove difficult as Stephen E. Osman’s article, *A New Flagpole for Historic Fort Snelling*, explains how “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.” (214)
Having only a few sketches made by some of the forts service men to work with, Osman turned to his colleagues in the National Park Service to use some of their research as other historic sites had also replaced their flagpoles. In addition, archeologists from the Minnesota Historical Society and the University of Minnesota worked to excavate the site indicated by several sketches as the original site for the flagpole.

Finding what they agreed was the original location for the flagpole; the next challenge presented to the Claybaugh Preservation Architecture group to use modern materials to recreate a historically accurate looking flagpole. One of the greatest hurdles was to find pieces of wood large enough, without any insect damage. By Memorial Day 2007, the new flagpole and replica 24-star garrison flag was raised, once again, proclaiming the sovereignty of the United States over the wilderness.

Two articles from the Star Tribune newspaper describe changes that will be happening to the fort and the land around it. The Tom Meersman article, *Ransacked Minnesota Historic Site to Be Reborn as Park*, outlines the restoration of the long vacant Coldwater spring area. The current design for the park will be more of an open space and the plating of prairie grasses rather than trees. (Oct 2011) However, controversy exits over this parcel of land because Native Americans who consider the spring and surrounding land spiritually significant because of its location near the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers, and want the area returned to them.

The Mark Brunswick article *Old Fort Snelling Buildings to House Homeless Vets*, describes how the Department of Veterans Affair will be refurbishing 58 units on the four-acre site of the Upper Post of Fort Snelling to accommodate homeless veterans and their families. (Nov 2011)
The choices made by our ancestors helped shape the world we live in now. Some questions that we can ask ourselves about history may be complex and not have easy answers, such as: Would Native Americans have retained their land if the soldiers from Fort Snelling had not been there to intercede? Would slavery still exist today if Dread Scott had not lived in Minnesota and brought his case to court? Would World War II have taken longer to end if linguists had not trained at Fort Snelling? Would Fort Snelling still be around today if Minnesotans had not demanded that the highway go around it?

Though no longer used by the military as an active duty fort, Fort Snelling remains an important part of Minnesota’s landscape. If you chose to visit the fort you will see costumed employees representing life as it was in the 1820’s, without cars, electricity, running water or any of the modern luxuries that we take for granted every day. You can think of your own questions to ask for the next time you visit Fort Snelling.
Works Cited


