

Forts on the Minnesota Frontier

The United States Army in the nineteenth century did much more than fight in wars or conduct military campaigns. It also played a major role in the expansion and settlement of the American frontier.

Most early exploration was conducted under military authority, such as the 1804-06 expedition of Capt. Meriwether Lewis and Lt. William Clark. Lt. Zebulon Pike selected the site for Fort Snelling while on his way to find the headwaters of the Mississippi in 1805-06 — and in so doing chose the place from which "Minnesota" would emerge.

Fort Snelling, and the wilderness military outposts which followed, represented the government on Minnesota's early frontier. The soldiers enforced laws, served as a check on Indians in the area, built roads and, by their very presence, spurred trade and settlement by offering protection for the early traders, missionaries and pioneer farmers.

US Army Forts in Minnesota

Fort Snelling, established in 1819, stood as a lone sentinel on the frontier for thirty years. Then a series of Indian treaties opened up vast new lands to settlement, creating a need for three more Army posts.

Fort Ripley, 1849 - 1877, located on the upper Mississippi below the mouth of the Crow Wing River. It was built in 1848-49 by dragoons and infantrymen from Fort Snelling. When it opened, it replaced Fort Snelling as the northernmost military installation and was originally intended to control the Winnebago Indians who had been removed from Iowa to a nearby reservation.

Fort Ridgely, 1853 - 1867, located on the Minnesota River in present-day Nicollet County, above New Ulm. It was founded to protect settlers and control the Dakota (Sioux) Indians, who were transferred to a Minnesota Valley reservation in the summer of 1853. The fort played a major role in the Dakota Indian War of 1862.

Fort Abercrombie, 1857 - 1877, located 225 miles northwest of Fort Snelling on the Red River, in the heart of Minnesota's third great valley. It protected settlers and became an important gateway to the northwest.

Each was garrisoned by a small company of Army regulars, except during the Civil War when Minnesota volunteers took over.

Each figured prominently during the Civil and Indian Wars of 1861 - 65. After 1865, Fort Snelling became an important supply and administrative center for the Army of the West while the others faded into irrelevance.

Fort Snelling

Early Fort Snelling: 1819-1849. Minnesota traces its beginnings to Fort Snelling. For thirty years it was the northwestern anchor of a chain of Army garrisons established by the government in the early 1800s. Built on a commanding bluff at the junction of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers, early Fort Snelling protected the frontier and helped keep British fur traders out of American territory. By 1825 it was the hub of the upper-Mississippi — a center of trade and an instrument of US policy and administration.

Traders stopped at the fort while their goods were inspected. American-controlled fur companies built headquarters within a mile of its walls, and the employees settled nearby with their half-breed families. The Dakota and Ojibwa Indians gathered at the fort to trade and socialize. Missionaries fanned out from the fort to teach Christianity, the English language and farming to the Indians. Soldiers were occasionally called upon to enforce peace between the Dakota and Ojibwa or ease tensions between both tribes and their white neighbors.

No attack was ever made upon Fort Snelling and no guns were shot at its defense, but it was the point around which Minnesota settlement began.

The Middle Years: 1850-1920. By 1851, treaties had pushed the frontier farther west and opened much of Minnesota Territory to white settlement. Fort Ripley, 130 miles northwest of Fort Snelling, had two years earlier become the new western outpost and Forts Ridgely and Abercrombie soon followed. No longer needed for frontier duties, the post was demoted to status as a supply depot.

By 1858, the year Minnesota became a state, its troops were withdrawn and the fort was sold to Franklin Steele, a land developer who platted it for a townsite. Plans for the City of Fort Snelling were abandoned, however, with the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. Life quickly returned to the old fort and throughout the war it was used by Minnesota troops as a muster and training center. The regular army returned in 1866 to make Fort Snelling a headquarters and supply base for the US Army's Department of Dakota, which had jurisdiction over military activities from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains.

For the next 80 years Fort Snelling continued to serve as an active Army post, notably as home to the US Third Infantry, and as a large military supply, recruiting and training center. A veterans' home, hospital and cemetery were also built there. Over the years nearly all the original stone buildings were demolished and replaced by newer structures.

Later Years and Fort Snelling Today. During World War I, Fort Snelling became a training headquarters for over 2500 officers, served as a mobilization and demobilization processing center, and continued its role as an important supply depot.

Following a ten year absence, the Third US Infantry returned to Fort Snelling in 1921, and soon gave the post a reputation as the "country club of the Army." Sunday afternoons were filled with

ceremonial parades, baseball, polo matches and recreated battles. It boasted a wild game sanctuary, golf course, tennis courts and swimming pool. A hunting club rode to the hounds and a jumping horse named "Whiskey" became a local legend.

During World War II, it once again became a training, induction and supply center, but after the war, its aging buildings and limited acreage were no longer viewed favorably by the Army. There was also an adjacent metropolitan airport anxious to expand. The result was inevitable: in October 1946 Fort Snelling was decommissioned as an active Army post and turned over to the Veteran's Administration and various military reserve units. Today it is headquarters for the 88th Army Reserve Command, 934th Tactical Air Force Group (Reserve), elements of several naval, marine and air reserve battalions, and as headquarters for the 133rd Tactical Airlift Wing of the Minnesota Air National Guard.

By the 1950's traffic congestion at the fort, a natural junction between Minneapolis and St. Paul, threatened what remained of the historic old Fort area. The highway department's plan to build a cloverleaf around the Round Tower was the final insult, stimulating a public outcry in 1956 to save the remnants of Minnesota's oldest buildings. Fort Snelling was soon designated the state's first National Historic Landmark, a 2,500 acre state park was established, and since 1965 both public and private funds have been used to restore and authentically rebuild the original site to its appearance in 1827. The modern Fort Snelling History Center, opened in 1983 and operated by the Minnesota Historical Society, offers films and changing exhibits on aspects of Minnesota's military past.

Fort Ripley

Fort Ripley typifies the role of the US Army on the western frontier. It was built between 1848-1850 on the west bank of the Mississippi River seven miles north of Little Falls, to keep the Winnebago Indians living on a nearby reservation from returning to their native lands in Iowa and to prevent, if possible, the never-ending skirmishes between the Ojibwa (Chippewa) and Dakota (Sioux) Indians.

Originally known as Fort Marcy and later as Fort Gaines, the name was changed to Fort Ripley in 1850 in honor of General Eleazar W. Ripley, who had distinguished himself in the War of 1812.

Fort Ripley quickly became a vanguard for the extension of white settlement in Minnesota by serving as a post office and furnishing business to local farmers and traders. It was the hub in the wilderness, but for its soldiers, duty at Fort Ripley was mostly boring and uneventful. The most important military duty was to supervise annuity payments of cash and supplies to the Indians at the Long Prairie and Crow Wing agencies.

By July 1855, the Winnebagos were again moved to a new reservation, this time near Mankato, Minnesota, and the US War Department concluded that the Ojibwa were peaceful. The fort was ordered closed, but as soon as the troops left, the Indians began to harass settlers in the surrounding areas. The soldiers were returned and the post reactivated.

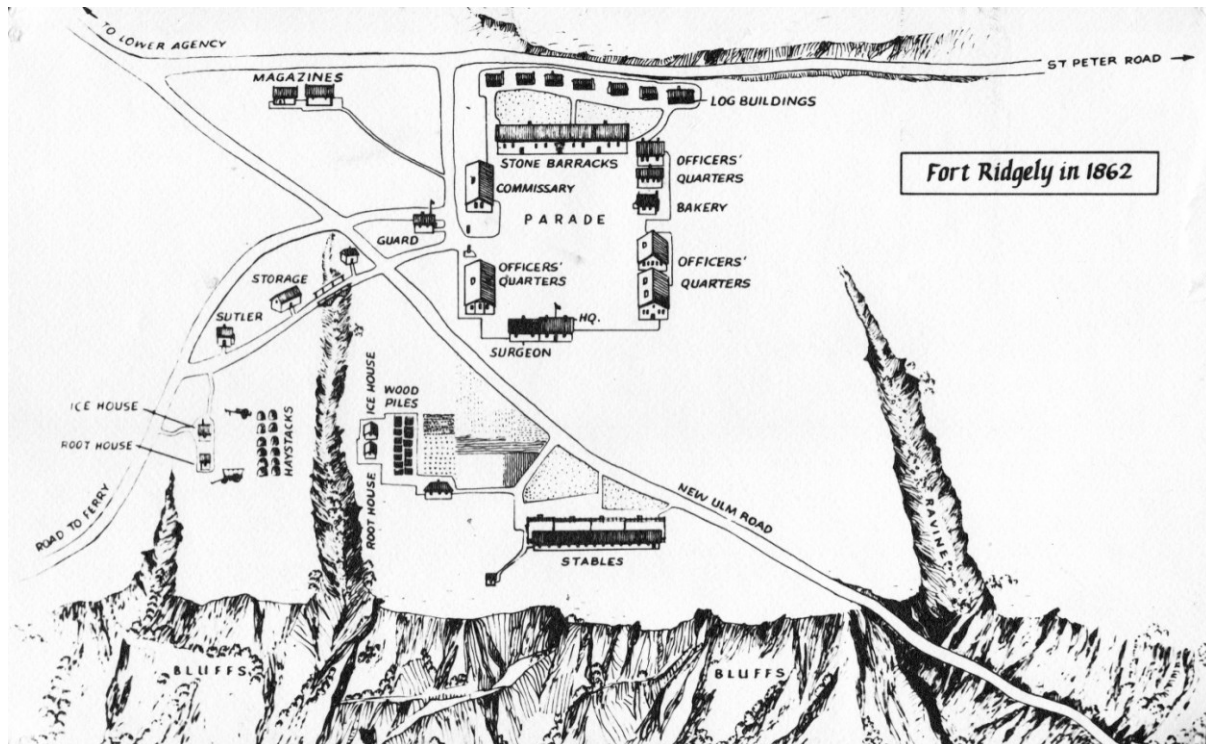
During the Civil War, the regulars were withdrawn and Fort Ripley was manned by companies from Minnesota Volunteer Regiments. It was during this time that the post saw its greatest activity. In August 1862, Chief Hole-in-the-Day threatened to lead the Ojibwa on a northern war against whites, just as the Dakota Indians were then doing in southern Minnesota. Settlers took shelter in the fort and military reinforcements were rushed in. The conflict was fortunately defused but life at Fort Ripley remained tense for the next three years.

Throughout its history the post was plagued by fires. In January 1877, the laundry, commissary and officers quarters were destroyed as a result of an overheated chimney. No longer on the western "frontier" or troubled by Indians, the War Department decided to close the post permanently rather than rebuild. Most of the troops moved out that summer and by 1878 Fort Ripley was abandoned.

The ruins of the powder magazine, the post's only stone structure, are all that remain today of this pioneer fort. The site is now within the Camp Ripley Military Reservation, which took its name from the old outpost.

Fort Ridgely

Fort Ridgely, named for an artillery hero who died in the Mexican War, was established as an artillery post by the US Army in 1853 so that troops could keep an eye on the Dakota Indians who had been moved to a reservation along the Minnesota River.



Neither in location nor construction was it well-suited for defense. When the Dakota War broke out in August 1862, the fort was quickly flooded with refugees and came under siege by Indian warriors led by Chief Mankato and Chief Little Crow. The embattled garrison held out for

eleven days, largely through expert use of its cannons, until reinforcements arrived under the command of Col. Henry Sibley.

After the defeat of the Indians and their expulsion from Minnesota, Fort Ridgely ceased to be of military value. Its soldiers were withdrawn in May 1867 and the reservation lands were opened for white settlement.

Fort Abercrombie

Minnesota's last frontier Army post was established in 1857 at the head of navigation on the Red River of the North. Named for its first commander, the fort was intended to spur white settlement by serving as a check on the Yankton Sioux Indians. It also became a military, commercial and geographical gateway to Dakota Territory and the Canadian northwest.

The garrison endured the typically dull outpost duty until late August 1862 when it was attacked by Dakota Indians. It managed to hold out under siege for a month until reinforcements arrived. The refugees who had crowded into the fort were then escorted to safety in St. Cloud and it was rebuilt to include a stockade and blockhouses.

Abercrombie continued to guard the edge of the frontier throughout the 1860's and served as a supply base for wagon trains heading west. It was finally abandoned by the Army in 1877 and its lands and buildings sold.

Military Reservations

Each frontier Army post was initially located on a large military reservation. These reservations were vast tracts of land intended to prevent settlers from moving in too close to the fort itself, and to provide land for gardens, forage and lumber needed by the garrison.

The large reserves provided a constant source of friction between the Army and squatters and homesteaders who wanted the lands opened up for settlement.

Fort Snelling Reservation. The original reservation included much of present-day Minneapolis. It was gradually reduced in area.

Fort Ripley Reservation. Nearly all of the original Fort Ripley reservation was located on the east side of the river, consisting of nearly ninety square miles, with only a single square mile set aside for the fort itself on the west side. After much agitation, the Army agreed in 1857 to sell the east side in public auction, but the Secretary of War later annulled the sale because the bids were too low. In the meantime, settlers had already established homes and farms on the land. The resulting confusion and litigation took twenty years to untangle.

Fort Ridgely Reservation. Located between New Ulm and the Lower Sioux Agency, Fort Ridgely was integral to the Dakota War and subsequent campaigns. Bitter legal warfare also

ensued over eventual ownership of reservation lands, due to erroneous surveys, unclear directives, and lack of coordination between the offices of the Secretary of Interior and the Secretary of War.

Fort Abercrombie Reservation. The Fort Abercrombie reservation squarely surrounded the fort and was divided roughly in half by the meandering Red River. When Minnesota became a state in 1858, with a western boundary marked in part by the Red River, the post itself fell in the area designated as Dakota Territory while the eastern half remained in Minnesota.

Militia Forts in Minnesota

During the Dakota Indian War of 1862, settlers from Little Falls southward built fortifications for protection from Indian attack. Altogether, 53 such "forts" were built. Most were simple stockades about a hundred feet square, but some were elaborate. Madelia, for example, built an octagonal, two-story structure surrounded by a breastwork and moat.

These improvised structures effectively repelled or deterred attacks, and were an important factor in reducing bloodshed in the fall of 1862. Some continued to be used during the Indian campaigns of 1863-66.

The citizen soldiers who took up arms and manned these posts took names like "Hastings Rangers," "LeSueur Tigers," "St. Peter Frontier Avengers," and "Hutchinson Guards." Most served as militia for about two months. The job eventually fell to the Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, Ninth and Tenth Minnesota Volunteers, and to the First Regiment of Mounted Rangers.

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