

# MINNESOTA HISTORY

VOLUME 28 • PUBLISHED IN SEPT. 1947 • NUMBER 3

## Fort Ripley: The Post and the Military Reservation

*F. Paul Prucha*

THE EARLY HISTORY of Minnesota is in many ways related to the activities of the United States army, which set up forts on the frontier to maintain order among the Indian tribes. For thirty years Fort Snelling, at the junction of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers, was the only outpost in the area, but as white population advanced, new army posts took up the task of frontier defense. One of these was founded in 1849 on the Mississippi River a few miles below the mouth of the Crow Wing River. It was originally named Fort Gaines, but after another post took the same name, the Minnesota fort was redesignated Fort Ripley on November 4, 1850.<sup>1</sup>

On October 13, 1846, a treaty was concluded in Washington with the Winnebago Indians by which they agreed to give up their rights to their lands in Iowa and to accept and move to a tract of land somewhere north of the Minnesota River and west of the Mississippi. It was to consist of not less than eight hundred thousand acres suitable to their habits, wants, and wishes. The Winnebago delegated the selection of their new home to Henry M. Rice, who had traded among them earlier. He decided upon an area between the Watab and Crow Wing rivers in what was still Chippewa territory. By a treaty signed on August 2, 1847, the Chippewa agreed to sell the land in question to the United States. As the Winnebago

<sup>1</sup> See an unpagged manuscript history of "Fort Ripley, Minnesota," prepared by the adjutant general in 1880, and now in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

began to move to the new reservation in 1848, the United States army prepared to establish on the border of the reserve the second of Minnesota's military posts.<sup>2</sup>

Brigadier General George M. Brooke, who was then in command of the Department of the West with headquarters at St. Louis, was ordered by the secretary of war to proceed to Crow Wing to establish the new post. He arrived in the area in November, 1848, with a detachment of dragoons and several officers, and after an extensive examination of the surrounding locality, determined on a site seven miles below the mouth of the Crow Wing River.<sup>3</sup> General Brooke had been instructed to determine the limits of a reservation for the use of the military post. "Instead of laying off a reserve of ten miles around the new post to be established in the Winnebago Country," directed the adjutant general in a letter to Brooke, "you will please reduce this reservation to one mile square and cause a second reservation to be laid off on the public lands east of the Miss. directly opposite the post, commencing at the mouth of the Crow Wing below the Chippewa Country, and extending down the Miss say ten miles by four, in width."<sup>4</sup>

The reservation at Fort Ripley was set aside by President Zachary Taylor on September 15, 1849. It consisted of two parts. On the west side of the Mississippi was a small reserve of about one square mile, which included the site selected for the fort. On the east bank was the main body of the reservation, which was intended to furnish space for gardens, and to supply forage and wood for the garrison, as well as to prevent settlers from moving in too close to the post. The general land office described the reserve on the west side as containing "about one thousand acres . . . while that situated on the East side of the river, and immediately opposite the Fort contains an area of 57,618.50 acres per retracement of the original boundaries as surveyed in 1848."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1:310 (St. Paul, 1921); United States, *Statutes at Large*, 9:878-880, 904-907.

<sup>3</sup> See the manuscript history of "Fort Ripley."

<sup>4</sup> Adjutant General R. Jones to General Brooke, June 24, 1848, in the manuscript history of "Fort Ripley."

<sup>5</sup> 46 Congress, 2 session, *Senate Reports*, no. 196, p. 2 (serial 1893); J. Wilson, commissioner of the general land office, to Governor William R. Marshall, March 22,

According to an early description, the site upon which the fort was built was twenty feet above the Mississippi, and "probably about 1100 feet above the Gulf of Mexico," near the point where the little Nokasippi River empties into the Mississippi from the east. "The post is built upon a sandy plateau," the account continues, "partially drained by shallow ravines at its northern and southern extremities, gradually sloping toward a narrow swamp about half a mile in the rear of the fort. Beyond this is a range of thickly wooded hills, rising to a height of 100 or 150 feet, which slightly shelter the post from the northwest winds of winter. To the westward of these hills again is a belt of broken surface thickly covered with woods and swamps."<sup>6</sup>

When the post was built, the initial work was done by civilian mechanics brought into the region for that specific purpose. One of them, Charles T. Stearns, has left an account of the activities of the first winter. Stearns, who was employed at St. Louis by the army quartermaster department with six others, went north with the advance party of soldiers under General Brooke in September, 1848. "A Steamer was chartered in St. Louis," he recalls, "to take us, Stores, provisions, Horses, Cattle, and all the articles necessary for the undertaking to Fort Snelling. . . . From Fort Snelling we transferred our goods and all things for the new post on to wagons and Started for Crow Wing. The trip occupied us nine days, traveling was bad, no road most of the way, stopages often."

After the site for the fort had been determined, the first blows were struck for Fort Ripley. "In a few days," Stearns continues, "things were got in order, the Horse Sawmill a circular Saw, the first ever put in operation in the Territory was put up, and commenced Sawing lumber." Stearns also notes the arrival of soldiers from Fort Snelling late in the fall. "This," he says, "I suppose was for the protection of the *Workemen* or the Indians. I could never

1869. The letter is quoted in a group of documents and letters relating to the "Fort Ripley Military Reservation," p. 45. The Minnesota Historical Society has filed a photostatic copy of this compilation among a group of items relating to abandoned military reserves. The original documents are among the archives of the general land office or in the National Archives at Washington, D.C.

<sup>6</sup> From a report of Surgeon J. F. Head of the United States army, quoted in the manuscript history of "Fort Ripley."

determine in my own mind which. . . . The company of Infantry after *Sojourning* with us a month or more, (the Weather getting verry cold) left for warmer quarters, returned to Fort Snelling, and left the Workmen Som[e] fifteen to take care of ourselves, and doe the best we could with our neighbors the Red Skins."<sup>7</sup>

Stearns makes no mention, however, of the part played by the troops in the erection of the fort, and one infers from his account that he did not value very highly the soldiers' help. Better perspective, perhaps, is obtained from the report of the secretary of war for 1848. "To preserve good order in the new country of the Winnebago Indians, a military reserve has been laid off, and a fort commenced on the Upper Mississippi, opposite the mouth of the Nokay," according to this record. "The season having become too far advanced for working without shelter, the two companies, one of the 1st dragoons, and one of the 6th infantry, employed in erecting and destined to garrison the fort, have been withdrawn to winter quarters at Fort Snelling. Mechanics, however, were left to get out the necessary timber, that no time may be lost in completing the work early next spring." On April 13, 1849, the new post was occupied, and members of the infantry company stationed there continued the construction of the buildings.<sup>8</sup>

The recorded history of Fort Ripley is meager because the post existed for only a short time and because it was never the center of much activity. There were no settlements of importance, for example, in the neighborhood of the fort; settlers who squatted on the military reserve were concentrated at the trading post of Crow Wing rather than at the post. But the essential duty of keeping the Indians peaceful and thus protecting missionaries, traders, and other scattered settlers was performed satisfactorily, and the military garrison helped to extend civilization into this northern area.

Fort Ripley's founding coincided closely with the establishment of Minnesota Territory, which brought extensive civilian law enforcing organization to the area. Nevertheless, due largely to the

<sup>7</sup> Charles T. Stearns to J. Fletcher Williams, May 8, 1872. This reminiscent letter is in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>8</sup> 30 Congress, 2 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 1, p. 161 (serial 537); 31 Congress, 1 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 5, p. 182 (serial 569).

post's distance from the seat of government, the fort was important as a guardian of law and order among civilians as well as Indians. The Reverend Solon W. Manney, who arrived at the fort in December, 1851, to serve as chaplain and schoolmaster, has left a clear record in his diary of the dependence of the region upon the strong arm of the United States army.<sup>9</sup>

It was the duty of members of the post garrison to apprehend criminals and confine them after arrest and conviction. On May 1, 1852, Manney recorded, "Constable brought here a young man charged with having taken the life of a black man at Swan River. He could not give bail and was committed." On March 18, 1858, a detachment of troops under the command of Lieutenant William C. Spencer was sent to Crow Wing to aid the civil authority in making arrests and in keeping the peace. As a result of this expedition four prisoners were sent to Fort Ripley, two of whom—known as "Whiskey Jack" and Menell—were charged with burning the store of Clement H. Beaulieu at Crow Wing. In the story of the trial, as recorded by the chaplain in his entry for March 23, the importance of the military personnel is immediately noticeable. The chaplain himself was the prosecuting attorney. Lieutenant Spencer was the defense counsel, and Alexander B. Hassan, the army surgeon, acted as recorder because, as Manney says, "the Justice couldn't write well." "Whiskey Jack" was found guilty and, refusing to give bail, was committed to jail. "But," the chaplain notes, "as there is no jail in these parts he was brought back to the Garrison in charge of the Guard & confined in the Guard House."<sup>10</sup> Menell, too, was confined, but on April 25 he escaped. "On the supposition that he had been carried to Little Falls," says the chaplain, "a large detachment, nearly the whole company, was sent thither under Sergeant Kinnugton to arrest him & bring him back." On April 27 the troops returned without their quarry, and when news was received on May 12 that Menell had been seen at Little Falls, a

<sup>9</sup> A manuscript copy of Manney's diary for the years from 1851 to 1859, made by the Reverend George C. Tanner, is owned by the Minnesota Historical Society. See also George C. Tanner, "History of Fort Ripley, 1849-1859, Based on the Diary of Rev. Solon W. Manney," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 10:179-202.

<sup>10</sup> Manney Diary, March 18, 22, 23, 1858.

detachment under Lieutenant Spencer was no more successful. "Non est inventus," concludes the chaplain.<sup>11</sup>

Manney was an important person in the life of the garrison and the community. He regularly held religious services at the post, and each Sunday he entered an account of the services and the text of his sermon in his diary. The energetic chaplain made frequent visits to Crow Wing, to the missions at Gull and Leech lakes, and to the villages that were springing into being on the upper reaches of the Mississippi. "Left in the Morning for Sauk Rapids," he writes on one occasion, "had services in the evening at Mr. Russell's. I preached. Text, 'So run that ye may obtain.'" <sup>12</sup>

The fort served as a stopping place for missionaries in the area — for Father Francis de Vivaldi, a Catholic priest who conducted a mission among the Winnebago at Long Prairie and ministered to white Catholics in the vicinity; for the Reverend Edward D. Neill, a Presbyterian minister who is well known for his religious and educational activities in Minnesota; and for such men as James Lloyd Breck and E. Steele Peake, Episcopal clergymen who were active among the Chippewa.

The post school was established shortly after the chaplain arrived. On March 8, 1852, he noted, "Commenced school this morning," but the diary is scanty in its information, and no other records of the school activities have survived. On many days Manney found nothing to record outside of brief comments on the weather — an indication that garrison life was pretty much a matter of routine.

The fort was not an unpleasant place, nevertheless, and enough visitors came and went to break some of the monotony of frontier existence. A description of the post in 1856 presents a pleasing picture: "On the west side of the river is Fort Ripley, with quarters, barracks, etc., all built of wood, inclosed on three sides by the buildings, and on the fourth by the river, a quadrangular piece of ground, of about three acres, beautifully ornamented. The houses of the officers, built facing each other, forming two right angles from the river, are of a cottage style, with a wide piazza, and are altogether

<sup>11</sup> Manney Diary, April 25, 27, May 12, 13, 1858.

<sup>12</sup> Manney Diary, February 23, 1852.

very comfortable and convenient. All the buildings are kept handsomely painted, the ground neat and clean, which makes the fort present, from the river, a very pleasant and comfortable appearance. Nor is this appearance deceitful to a visitor at the fort, or at the quarters of the officers."<sup>13</sup>

The fort became a post office early in 1850, despite some initial trouble regarding the appointment of a postmaster. The post, too, was the terminus for one of the primary territorial roads built in the 1850's and it was thus influential in opening the region to settlement.<sup>14</sup> Of the fort itself, however, Father Ezekiel G. Gear, who became its chaplain in 1860, wrote that "There are no settlements nearer than Crow Wing up the River seven miles, and the Little Falls below, fifteen miles, and but few inhabitants in either place. And these are mostly engaged in selling whiskey to the Indians, especially those of the former place."<sup>15</sup>

As Minnesota's population increased, the state came more and more to supply the military posts, including Fort Ripley, with whatever goods could be produced locally. Soon even hay and wood were furnished by civilians. In 1857 a traveler in the area recorded that there "is nothing connected with the Fort on the east side, except a few acres of land which is cultivated by the soldiers for garden vegetables," and remarks that a farmer lives "directly opposite the Fort, and he generally supplies it with beef and such other articles as he may have to dispose of." On one occasion the contract for hay was given to a man named Grant who lived within a half mile of the fort. His bid of \$2.75 per ton was the lowest among more than twenty proposals. In one week a firm in St. Cloud delivered to Fort Ripley a thousand dollars worth of oats. These are but examples of the business furnished by the military post to the citizens of the

<sup>13</sup> Nathan H. Parker, *The Minnesota Handbook, for 1856-7*, 70-71 (Boston, 1857).

<sup>14</sup> During the decade of the 1850's the federal government, through the war department, surveyed and built a basic network of roads in Minnesota which spread out spoke-like from the hub at St. Paul and St. Anthony. One of these roads, extending from Point Douglas via St. Paul and the Falls of St. Anthony to Fort Ripley, was important in the development of the Mississippi Valley above the head of navigation. See Arthur J. Larsen's unpublished study of "The Development of the Minnesota Road System" (1938). A copy is in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>15</sup> Gear to Judge Mason, April 26, 1860. A typed copy of this letter is in the Gear Papers in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

surrounding area. The matter of transporting supplies from the head of navigation at St. Paul to the post in the north was significant, too. Contracts for a year were let for "receiving, storing, and delivery" at Fort Ripley "all such public supplies destined for that Post as have not already been contracted for."<sup>16</sup>

The necessity for economy pressed upon the war department during the 1850's, and there developed, partly from this, a feeling that on the frontier large concentrations of troops would be more effective than scattered cantonments of little strength. This situation, together with the general opinion that the Chippewa were a peaceful lot, led to the evacuation of Fort Ripley on July 8, 1857. As early as 1852 the quartermaster general had voiced his opinion about the location of the forts in the West. "The economy of the service," he wrote in his annual report, "as well as its efficiency, would be promoted, were better positions selected for the defense of the western frontier. By referring to the map it will be seen that Fort Ripley and Fort Dodge, in Minnesota and Iowa, are placed where there is nothing to defend, and where they have to be supplied by land transportation. Were the former removed to the head of navigation on the Minnesota river and the latter to the Missouri, near the mouth of the Sioux river, their military effect upon the Indians would be doubled, and both could be supplied by water transportation at far less expense."<sup>17</sup> With the founding in 1853 of Fort Ridgely in the Sioux reservation on the upper Minnesota River, the need for Fort Ripley was considered diminished.

The predictions and considerations of the value of Fort Ripley in Indian control, however, were not borne out in fact. No sooner had the soldiers withdrawn, than the hitherto peaceful Chippewa went on a rampage, making it necessary to send in fresh troops before many months passed. "The withdrawal of the troops from Fort Ripley," notes a St. Paul newspaper, "seems to have been the creation of an outbreak among the Chippewas, heretofore regarded as

<sup>16</sup> *Sauk Rapids Frontiersman*, April 16, 1857; *Minnesota Pioneer* (St. Paul), January 16, May 23, 1850, January 6, 1855; *St. Anthony Express*, October 8, 1852; *St. Cloud Democrat*, January 31, July 19, 1860.

<sup>17</sup> 32 Congress, 2 session, *Senate Executive Documents*, no. 1, p. 71 (serial 659).

the most friendly Indians in the Territory." On July 23 Manney returned to the abandoned post from St. Paul to find it in a state of unrest. "Arrived at Ripley 6 p. m.," he states, "& found Bro. Breck & his family & Mr. Reese's family at the Garrison . . . on account of the bad & violent behavior of some Indians who destroyed their property & threatened personal violence. We may now expect personal violence & murders & the destruction of property on the Ceded Lands & all along the frontier. The withdrawal of the troops from this section can result in nothing else."<sup>18</sup>

The account of the outbreak in the official reports of the army gives a sorry picture of the affair and shows clearly that the mere presence of the troops in the area, without the necessity of any actual fighting, was an effective deterrent on Indian depredations. "The report of the abandonment of Fort Ripley in June last spread like wildfire among the Indians," wrote the commander who re-occupied the fort in the autumn of 1857, "producing a marked change in their conduct. They became insolent and reckless in their bearing towards the whites. No sooner had the troops left the garrison in July last than their outbreaks commenced." The Indian disturbances centered about the missions at Leech and Gull lakes. Cattle were killed, settlers robbed, and personal violence threatened. An inoffensive German was murdered near the mission buildings at Gull Lake, and his three murderers were arrested by the members of the mission and taken to Fort Ripley, in the belief that the troops might have returned. Since they were still absent, the prisoners were turned over to the sheriff at Little Falls. He proceeded to take them to St. Paul or Fort Snelling for confinement. When seventeen miles from Little Falls the sheriff was overtaken by a band of armed men, who seized the prisoners and returned with them to Swan River, where they were hanged and buried in one hole, still chained together. The lynching excited the Indians in the area still more, but they were quieted somewhat by a report that troops were on their way to Fort Ripley.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Pioneer and Democrat* (St. Paul), July 19, 1857; Manney Diary, July 23, 1857.

<sup>19</sup> 35 Congress, 1 session, *Senate Executive Documents*, no. 11, p. 151-153 (serial 920).

This state of affairs called for immediate action on the part of the the war department, which ordered the reoccupation of the post. It was accomplished on September 12, 1857, by a company of the Second United States Infantry under the command of Major George W. Patten. A St. Paul newspaper expressed the hope "that this officer will be enabled to settle the difficulty with the settlers in that vicinity and the Chippewa nation as he has had much experience in Indian affairs, having served for a long period in that country."<sup>20</sup>

When the firing on Fort Sumter transformed secession into civil war, the regular troops were withdrawn from Fort Ripley, as they were from the other Minnesota forts, and replaced by companies of Minnesota volunteers. In June, 1861, members of the First Minnesota Volunteer Infantry garrisoned the post, and from then until November, 1865, volunteer soldiers provided frontier defense. To them fell the duty of preserving order during the serious Indian outbreak of 1862. The main attacks were made by the Sioux in the Minnesota Valley, and some of the troops from Fort Ripley were sent to aid in defending that region, since once again the Chippewa around Fort Ripley were generally believed to be peaceful. As in 1857, however, the surmise about the Chippewa proved false, and those from the vicinity of Gull Lake caused much fear and excitement at Fort Ripley.

The fort was in poor condition to ward off a strong attack. The troops had little experience with howitzers and they lacked cartridges for their rifles. When word came that the Indians were heading toward the fort, "all hands were set at work by candle-light making cartridges," according to a report of Lieutenant F. B. Fobes of Company C, Fifth Minnesota Volunteer Infantry. At daylight on August 20, 1862, with twenty men he started for the Indian agency at Gull Lake. The detachment had proceeded as far as Crow Wing village, seven miles from the fort, when, Fobes writes, it met Indian Agent Lucius C. Walker, "with all the whites of the agency, in full retreat, having abandoned the government property. They reported the Indians were coming down from Gull Lake in force,

<sup>20</sup> *Pioneer and Democrat*, September 6, 1857.

and an attack was expected at any time." Troops were sent out to arrest the Chippewa chief, Hole-in-the-Day, and requests for reinforcements were hurried down the river to St. Paul. Steps were taken, too, to strengthen the position of the fort. Martial law was declared. All white citizens who took refuge at the fort were ordered to aid in its defense. An additional stockade was begun and barriers were placed in the openings between the buildings.<sup>21</sup>

A pioneer woman who was driven to the fort by the Indian scare pictured some of the confusion in a contemporary letter. The settlers from Crow Wing hastened to the fort, she reported to her sister, "& they commenced putting it in fighting condition, though it was a poor show, only twenty or thirty men poorly armed and a crowded garrison of women and children [and] the wives & children of soldiers who had been ordered away on temporary duty. Our Post must have contained full hundred and fifty women and children & not over fifty men outsiders & all, capable of defending it."<sup>22</sup> The Indians, however, did not attack immediately, and the strengthening of the fort and the arrival of reinforcements by the end of August removed the danger. The alleged grievances of the Indians were peacefully settled by negotiation with the commissioner of Indian affairs.

Despite the Indian disturbances in the summer of 1857, the war department did not abandon its plan for disposing of a large part of the military reservation, and it directed a public sale of the lands east of the Mississippi in October of that year. The action initiated trouble, for the original sale was annulled by the secretary of war, and the matter of finally disposing of the land persisted over the two succeeding decades, until in 1880 the reserve was turned over to the secretary of the interior for entry under the homestead and pre-emption laws.

The Chippewa Indian lands in northern Minnesota were opened to settlement in 1855 and the Chippewa themselves were located on

<sup>21</sup> *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 1861-1865*, 2:189-193 (St. Paul, 1899). See also the account of the Chippewa disturbance of 1862 in Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:375-382.

<sup>22</sup> Abby Fuller Abbe to Elizabeth Fuller, August 25, 1862, in the Fuller Papers, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

small scattered reservations. In the same year the Winnebago were removed once more, this time to small sections of territory south of the Minnesota River.<sup>23</sup> With the extensive Indian reservations thus removed from the Fort Ripley area, the citizens of Minnesota began to demand that the military reservation, too, be opened to white settlement, especially since it held a coveted location along the Mississippi.

As territorial delegate, Rice took steps to reduce the limits of the reserve on the east side of the river. He first turned his efforts to the secretary of war, only to be told that he did "not doubt that the reduction would be expedient," but that he did not consider it within his authority to dispose of the reservation. Rice then attempted to have Congress extend the provisions of the pre-emption act of 1841 to portions of the Fort Ripley Reservation, and on July 9, 1855, he addressed a letter to the chairman of the house military affairs committee, in which he set forth his arguments. "In 1848 the Winnebago Indians were removed to the Territory of Minnesota—Fort Ripley was established on the line of their reservation, on the west side of the Mississippi river," wrote Rice. "To enable the troops to prevent the introduction of ardent spirits into the country, and to give control of the ferry, and of ground for gardens, a reservation was made east of that river, which is about twenty miles long and four wide. Last year the Indians were removed. This reservation has become a serious obstacle to our citizens, lying for so great a length upon that river, the land on both sides being subject to settlement. It is necessary that the citizens should be enabled to make roads and build bridges connecting their various interests through this reservation. Again, so great a reservation prevents that union of interests as would enable the citizens in its vicinity from building school-houses, supporting schools, and doing various other things conducive to the interests of a rural district."<sup>24</sup>

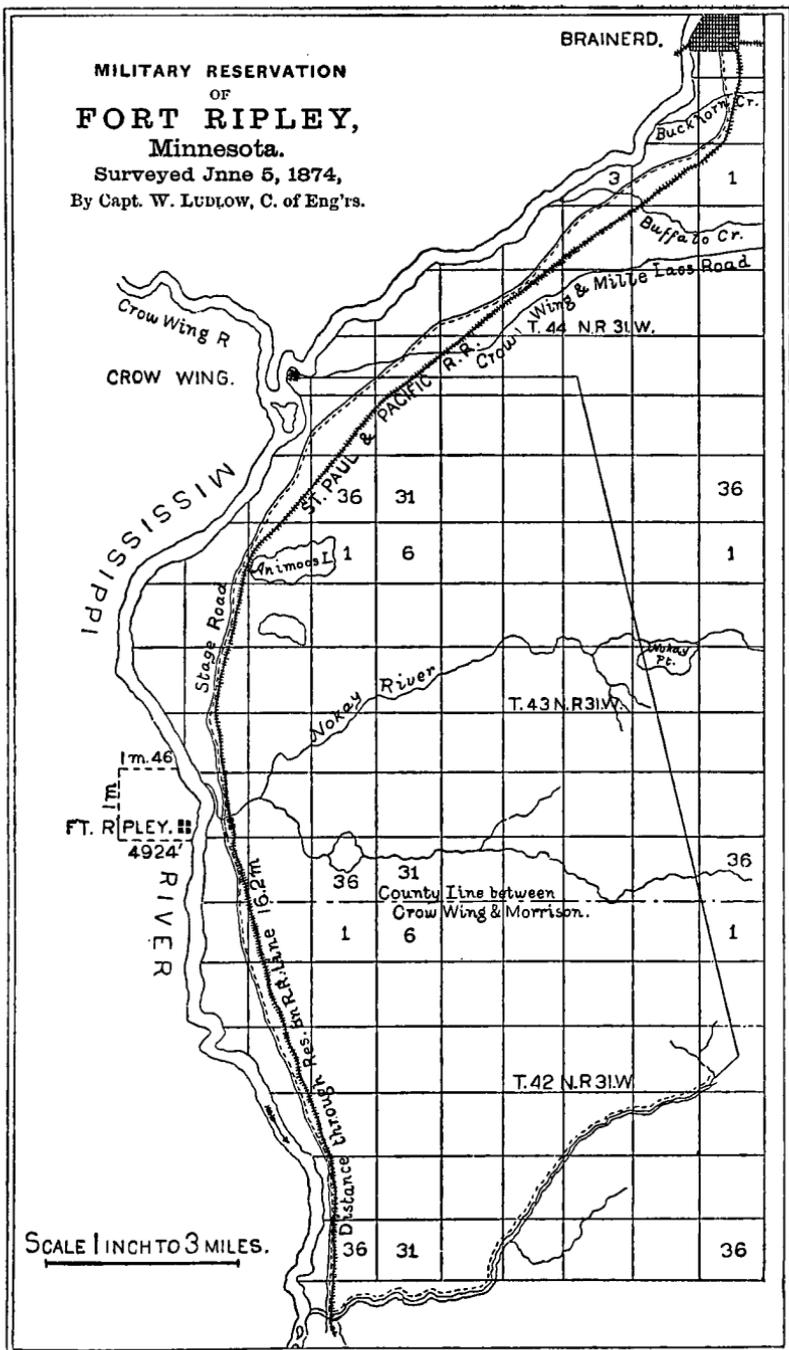
The house committee reported favorably on the resolution to extend the pre-emption provisions to the reserve on the east of the Mississippi, but before final action was taken, other activity was be-

<sup>23</sup> *Statutes at Large*, 10:598.

<sup>24</sup> 34 Congress, 3 session, *House Reports*, no. 118, p. 1 (serial 912).

MILITARY RESERVATION  
OF  
**FORT RIPLEY,**  
Minnesota.

Surveyed June 5, 1874,  
By Capt. W. Ludlow, C. of Eng'rs.



[From 46 Congress, 2 session, *Senate Reports*, no. 196 (serial 1893).]

gun to dispose of the land by public auction under the direction of the secretary of war. On May 26, 1857, John C. Mather was appointed by the secretary of war to make an initial examination of the Fort Ripley Reservation with a view to its sale and final disposition. Mather proceeded to Minnesota, where he attempted, without complete success, to find definitely marked out limits of the reserve. He located information in the general land office at Dubuque which indicated the general limits, however, and he set about to fulfill his instructions.

"You will visit the said reserve, in person," the secretary of war directed, "and examine and ascertain how far it has been made valuable by Government improvement, also whether there are any actual *bona fide* settlers upon it who have settled there with the expectation, superinduced by the action of the Government's Agents, of having the pre-emption right extended to them; and whether, under all the circumstances, they should be allowed to purchase not exceeding one hundred and sixty acres, each, covering their improvements, at the Government price of one dollar and twenty five cents per acre."<sup>25</sup>

Mather reported on the value of the government buildings, which he discounted since they were on the west side and located on inferior land, although the buildings themselves were well constructed of wood. He interviewed all those who claimed land under pre-emption rights, and found that most of them based their claims to buy the land at a dollar and a quarter an acre on the fact that they had settled on the land and made improvements on it before it was set aside for military purposes in 1849. The claimants were situated in the extreme northwest portion of the reserve on the east side of the river, "contiguous to, and in fact a part of the Crow Wing settlement which has for a long time been an Indian trading post of some importance." In regard to this group Mather suggested "that the Government ought not only to accede to their very reasonable demands in this particular, but should award to each of the claimants, a pension for life, for having consented to live so long among their

<sup>25</sup> John B. Floyd to John C. Mather, May 26, 1857, in "Fort Ripley Military Reservation," p. 46.

great enemies the Indians and the musquitoes away almost beyond the bounds of Civilized life, and deprived of all its comforts and luxuries."

Two claimants received sympathetic reports from Mather, despite the fact that their claims did not antedate the declaration of the reserve for military purposes. Both had cultivated land on the reservation by permission of the army officers and felt entitled to purchase at the government price the tracts they had improved. "While these gentlemen do not present as Strong a case, as those occupying land before the appropriation was made for Military purposes, I think, their applications should be granted," Mather asserts. A complication in the matter of claims was provided by the existence of a small Catholic church which had been erected on the reserve by Father Francis Pierz with the approval of the officers in charge of the fort. Since the church and its graveyard were situated on the claim of one of the original settlers, Mather suggested ceding one or two acres to the church at its site and then granting it more land in some unoccupied part of the reserve. In Mather's opinion it was of little importance whether the land be sold at public auction or by private sale at a dollar and a quarter an acre, since he felt that combinations among the bidders of an auction would prevent the price from exceeding that figure. "It must be borne in mind," he warned, "that there is a vast amount of land yet to be Surveyed in this Territory and to come into Market at the Government price Equal if not Superior to this land for farming purposes."<sup>26</sup>

On August 27, 1857, Major Seth Eastman, then stationed at Fort Snelling, was ordered by the secretary of war to survey the Fort Ripley Reservation and lay it off in forty-acre lots for sale. The war department further directed that the portion of the reserve west of the river should not be included in the sale because the secretary intended "to reserve said buildings and land for military purposes." On September 9, Eastman and Mather were appointed by the secretary of war as agents to sell the reservation, and when Mather declined the duty, Alexander C. Jones of St. Paul was named in his

<sup>26</sup> Mather's report to the secretary of war, July 6, 1857, in "Fort Ripley Military Reservation," p. 48-54.

place. There soon appeared in the principal newspapers of the Territory of Minnesota the following advertisement: "Sale of the Military Reserve of Fort Ripley—Pursuant to instructions from the War Department, the undersigned will sell, at public auction, on the 20th day of October next, at the town of Crow Wing all that portion of the Military Reserve of Fort Ripley lying on the east side of the Mississippi river, being about forty thousand acres. The land will be sold in tracts of forty acres each, or as near thereto as practicable."<sup>27</sup>

The report of the sale submitted to the secretary of war by Eastman and Jones on October 26, 1857, gives a complete picture of the proceedings. Previous to the public auction the agents notified the persons having pre-emption claims to appear on October 19, the day before the sale, to enter their claims at the government price of a dollar and a quarter an acre. The claimants paid for their lands and received certificates. On October 20 the remaining lands of the reserve were offered for sale at public auction to the highest bidder in lots of forty acres. "The sale proceeded quietly, and without apparent combination," reported the agents, "until the whole lands so offered were disposed of at prices varying from one to twenty five cents per acre." The agents issued certificates to only a portion of the purchasers, having decided to withhold the rest until their report had been submitted and confirmed.<sup>28</sup> The sale, however, was annulled by the secretary of war on November 11, 1857. "The bids for the lands . . . being considered too low," Secretary John B. Floyd notes in his annual report, "the sale was set aside and the property retained."<sup>29</sup>

The sale price was indeed low. The *Pioneer and Democrat* on October 31, 1857, reported that the "prices received averaged about ten cents per acre for the tract of sixty thousand acres, and the low prices obtained by the government shows as fully as any fact can, the effects of the 'hard times' in that section of the country." A St. Paul woman indicated the effect of the hard times on the Fort Rip-

<sup>27</sup> *Pioneer and Democrat*, October 12, 1857.

<sup>28</sup> 35 Congress, 1 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 94, p. 1-3 (serial 957).

<sup>29</sup> 35 Congress, 1 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 94, p. 3 (serial 957); 35 Congress, 1 session, *Senate Executive Documents*, no. 11, p. 15 (serial 920).

ley sale in a letter to a sister living at Crow Wing. "The times are awful," she wrote on the day of the sale; "men cannot get money to supply the private necessities of their families. Workmen of all kinds are turned out of employment. Mr. Bass has stopped building his new house. . . . Very few have gone to Fort Ripley to the land sale, for no one can get any money." She told of two men who "worked several days to get money enough merely to secure their reserved claim, only two hundred dollars," and indicated that they hoped Jones would accept their checks and notes.<sup>30</sup>

The annulment of the sale caused complications that were not straightened out for years. Purchasers had paid the agents and in some cases had received certificates for the land. When the sale was set aside, however, no money was refunded, nor were those who had purchased parts of the reserve compensated in any other way. Major Eastman, in answer to an inquiry from the war department, reported in December, 1867, that at the time of the sale a decade earlier funds to the amount of \$2,345.37 were paid by the purchasers. Of this sum, \$546.35 came out of the fund for the expenses of the survey and the sale, leaving a balance of \$1,799.02. The secretary of war directed Eastman to return the money to the purchasers, but because he was under orders to join his regiment in Utah, he turned the money over to Jones and received a receipt for that amount.<sup>31</sup>

In the meantime the purchasers or their assignees began to demand confirmation of their land titles. Among the primary agitators in this matter was D. S. Movers, the assignee of one of the original purchasers, whose attorney wrote on May 23, 1868, to inquire what action had been taken on Movers' "application for patent." The answer hinged on the question whether the money paid for the land ever was returned to the purchasers by Eastman or Jones. The inspector general and the judge advocate general recommended granting a patent to Movers on the basis of affidavits that the money had never been returned, but when the matter was

<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Fuller to Abby Fuller Abbe, October 20, 1857, Fuller Papers. These papers include a book of sale of the Fort Ripley reservation, which contains descriptions, price per acre, and names of purchasers of lots sold.

<sup>31</sup> Major Seth Eastman to General E. D. Townsend, assistant adjutant general, December 9, 1867, in "Fort Ripley Military Reservation," p. 60-62.

turned over to the secretary of the interior to be carried out, that official declined to act and asserted that he had no jurisdiction over military lands. Movers finally was informed by the war department on February 10, 1870, that if he wanted his patent or the return of the purchase money, he should apply directly to Congress.<sup>32</sup>

Other claimants, too, were presenting their demands for confirmation of titles obtained in the ill-fated sale of 1857. On January 6, 1873, Beaulieu wrote to Senator Alexander Ramsey relative to his claim to pre-empted land on the reservation, and Surgeon Hassan, on April 19, 1873, brought forth his claim to a hundred and sixty acres of reservation land which he had purchased after the sale from one of the original pre-emptors.<sup>33</sup>

In order to obtain information concerning the 1857 sale which might expedite the settlement of such claims as these, the secretary of war asked Jones for a statement concerning his part in the transactions. In a long affidavit Jones related what he remembered of the deal, and he was emphatic in his assertion that in his last conversation with Floyd, the secretary had maintained his intention ultimately to confirm the sale of the Fort Ripley Reservation. The affidavit indicated that Jones had retained possession of the money while waiting until it might be called for. In 1874 the government brought suit against Jones for the recovery of \$1,799.22, and on October 18, 1876, it obtained judgment in its favor for that amount with interest from December 19, 1873.<sup>34</sup>

While these maneuvers were in progress, other forces were at work which directed attention to the Fort Ripley Reservation. Renewed agitation arose for some action to open up the land once and for all to settlement. Governor William R. Marshall of Minnesota wrote to the secretary of war in March, 1869, requesting that the reserve east of the river be opened to bona fide settlers. In May, 1870, General Samuel B. Holabird, quartermaster general of the Department of Dakota, after examining the area, reported that the

<sup>32</sup> "Fort Ripley Military Reservation," p. 60-68, 83.

<sup>33</sup> "Fort Ripley Military Reservation," p. 80-81.

<sup>34</sup> Affidavit of Alexander C. Jones, November 1, 1873, in "Fort Ripley Military Reservation," p. 93-97; 46 Congress, 2 session, *Senate Reports*, no. 196, p. 4 (serial 1893).

"great extent of reservation is of no practical use to the post, but seriously interferes with the progressive settlement of the country, and with the private rights of many citizens," and he recommended keeping only a small hay pasture for military use. On July 6, 1870, the secretary of war received a petition from recent squatters on the reserve, who requested permission to make claims on the military reservation. Their petition was endorsed by the post commander, who described them as "worthy men whose presence near the post would be rather desirable than otherwise." And in January, 1872, the post commander reported the activities on the reserve of trespassers who were cutting logs and ties from timber there to fill contracts with the Northern Pacific Railroad Company. The officer ordered the gangs to stop cutting on the reserve and seized the lumber already cut.<sup>35</sup>

Aroused by this interference with railroad construction, the Minnesota legislature on February 3, 1872, memorialized Congress to restore the land east of the river to the public domain. The lawmakers argued that settlement would be seriously hindered if the construction of a branch line of the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad across lands no longer needed by the military forces were stopped. Congress, in consulting the secretary of war for an opinion about the necessity of retaining the Fort Ripley Reservation, was informed on February 24, 1872, that it could "be disposed of at this time without injury to the public service."<sup>36</sup> As a result, on February 28, 1873, Congress passed an act authorizing the secretary of war to sell at public auction all or so much as was no longer required of the Fort Ripley Reservation. It provided, further, for a board of officers to appraise each parcel of land with buildings on it before the sale, and it specified that no land was to be sold at less than two-thirds of its appraised value.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> William R. Marshall to the secretary of war, March 26, 1869; General S. B. Holabird to General O. D. Greene, May 4, 1870; Captain William S. McCaskey to the assistant adjutant general of the Department of Dakota, January 4, 1872, in "Fort Ripley Military Reservation," p. 68, 70-74, 85.

<sup>36</sup> 42 Congress, 2 session, *House Miscellaneous Documents*, no. 97 (serial 1525); *House Executive Documents*, no. 159 (serial 1513).

<sup>37</sup> *Statutes at Large*, 17:481.

The work of the government agents was slow, however, and the board appointed to appraise the lands did not function. On January 14, 1877, a fire destroyed officers' and laundresses' quarters and the storehouse at the post. Only then did the war department decide to discontinue it, withdraw the garrison, and have the whole reservation appraised for sale under the act of February 28, 1873. Instructions to that effect were issued on February 8, 1877, to General Alfred H. Terry, commander of the Department of Dakota at St. Paul, and the troops were withdrawn in July of the same year. The board of appraisal still did not perform its duty, however, because it wanted further instructions from the war department. Before they were received, the members of the board were assigned to other and remote duties. A movement was already under way to restore the reservation to the public domain.<sup>38</sup> Finally, on April 1, 1880, a bill became law which authorized the secretary of war to turn over to the secretary of the interior all the reserve at Fort Ripley except a strip for the Western Railroad Company. The law provided for entry of the lands by homesteaders and pre-emptors and for the protection of the actual settlers who had squatted on the reserve.<sup>39</sup>

Thus ended the history of Fort Ripley as a frontier post. It had served its purpose as a defensive outpost against the Indians. When that task was finished, the fort and the reservation became a hindrance to the advance of white settlement. Eventually it became necessary to turn the reserved land back into the public domain. Only with the recent use of Fort Ripley as a site for Minnesota National Guard encampments and for Second World War activities did its name again become one of military importance.

<sup>38</sup> 46 Congress, 2 session, *Senate Reports*, no. 196, p. 2 (serial 1893).

<sup>39</sup> *Statutes at Large*, 21:69.



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