

EXCAVATED walls  
near the  
Round Tower



## *An Archaeologist Explores* THE SITE OF OLD FORT SNELLING

JOHN M. CALLENDER

FORT SNELLING is perhaps Minnesota's most significant historic landmark. Although the fort was never attacked, its presence on the frontier effectively established for the first time the authority of the young American nation over the Minnesota country and made possible the settlement of the area. Built in the early 1820s on a commanding site overlooking the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers, it served also to control the warring Chippewa and Sioux Indians. After more than a hundred years of neglect and piecemeal demolition, steps have recently been taken to explore and preserve the precious remains of historic old Fort Snelling.

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MR. CALLENDER, a graduate of the University of Minnesota, is the archaeologist in charge of excavations at Fort Snelling. The Minnesota Statehood Centennial Commission is sponsoring the project and the society is supervising it.

It is appropriate that the centennial of Minnesota's admission to the Union should see the initiation of work which may, in time, lead to the establishment of old Fort Snelling as a state park. Late in 1957 archaeological exploration of the old fort site was undertaken with funds—in the amount of twenty-five thousand dollars—granted to the society by the Minnesota Statehood Centennial Commission. This work is essential if a reconstruction of the old fort is to be attempted, since only four of the original fifteen buildings are still standing. Two of these, the Round and Hexagonal towers, are in a condition approximating their original state. The other two buildings—the commandant's house and the officers' quarters—are still in use although they have been very extensively remodeled.

In order that as much as possible of the old fort might be exposed to view by May

11, 1958, Minnesota statehood day, archaeological excavation was begun in September, 1957. Although the snowstorm of November 18 brought the digging to a close for the winter season, it was thought that a report on the findings of the first seven weeks might be of interest to readers of this magazine. The first weeks of work were highly successful. The buried remains of the old walls and buildings were found to be extensive and in an excellent state of preservation.

EXPLORATION was begun in the region of the old guardhouse which, according to existing records, was built adjoining the outer fortress wall at a point approximately midway between the Round and Hexagonal towers. The towers provided convenient reference points in determining the area to be excavated. The search for the foundations of the fortress wall and the guardhouse was almost immediately successful, portions of both being brought to light within the first two weeks of excavation. Of special interest are the outlines of a room in the guardhouse believed to be the infamous "black hole," which served as a place of solitary confinement for recalcitrant members of the garrison and occasionally for miscreant Indians.

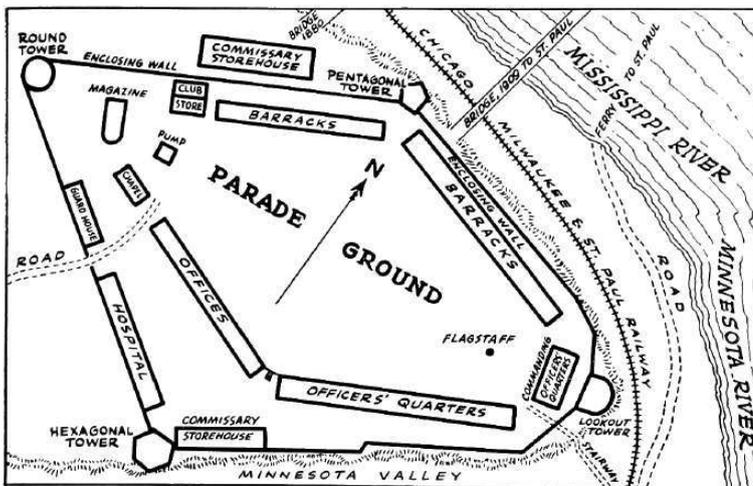
Although the project has not been primarily a relic hunt, a number of interesting

small items have been found. Two gunflints, two musket balls, a small hand-blown medicine bottle, and a large brass uniform insignia of a type worn by cavalrymen between 1855 and 1858 were uncovered near the guardhouse. Of particular interest are two large iron keys found in the guard room.

After formal dedication of the project on October 18, excavation continued along the fortress wall between the guardhouse and the Round Tower. The foundations of the wall and of two buildings were uncovered. The buildings are shown in a photograph of the fort, dated 1860, but it is not known what they were used for. They had apparently been torn down by 1870. It is expected that further research will enable investigators to identify them more fully. A United States penny with a flying eagle design, bearing the date 1857, was found near the outer wall along with uniform buttons which seem to date from the 1820s.

When the excavating had been carried as close as possible to the Round Tower, attention was turned to the area of the magazine, pump, and chapel. Although every surface indication of these structures had long since disappeared, the foundations of all three were found, each within a very few feet of its estimated location.

The foundation most recently discovered was that of the chapel. The excavation of



PLAN of  
old Fort Snelling

this building, at present only well begun, has yielded a number of interesting smaller objects. Several horseshoes in varying sizes and sundry other bits of cavalry equipment have been found scattered throughout the site. Perhaps the most intriguing single item uncovered in this area was a heavily rusted saber scabbard of a type used by cavalymen during the Civil War period. Also of interest was an English penny dated 1861 and bearing a portrait of Queen Victoria.

The cistern, reservoir, or pump, as it is variously called in the old records, was found to be of brick construction and lined with a very well preserved layer of concrete. Approximately twelve feet square, its bottom is seven and a half feet below the original level of the parade ground. It has, for the present, been refilled in the interest of safety, but it will be reopened again next spring when operations are resumed.

EASILY the most impressive structure unearthed to date is the magazine which once stored most of the fort's ordnance and ammunition. This building, the remains of which are now about fifty per cent cleared, was found to have a shallow basement containing two large timbers and six small stone-walled cubicles. The original function of the cubicles is unknown. Only two musket balls were discovered within its foundations, but it is known that in 1834 it contained 7,749 musket flints, 1,825 pounds of musket powder, and 1,513 pounds of rifle powder for the use of the infantry alone.<sup>1</sup>

Fragments of white clay pipes were found in most of the areas explored. In many cases, the inner surfaces of these fragile pieces were blackened by the ash of tobacco smoked to cheer the lonely hours of vigil at a frontier outpost. Other reminders of domestic life include broken glass and china, rusted eating utensils, and the fragments of a china doll. Over a thousand

<sup>1</sup> Marcus Hansen, *Old Fort Snelling, 1819-1858*, 77 (Iowa City, 1918).



FOUNDATIONS of the outer wall

square cut nails of a type no longer manufactured were also uncovered.

Contrary to expectations, not one scrap of aboriginal Indian cultural material has been found to date. There is every reason to expect, however, that such evidences as flint flakes, implements, or Indian pottery will be unearthed when operations are resumed next spring.

A crew of six men armed only with shovels, trowels, and whisk brooms, worked during the fall, but it is expected that next summer's operation may be conducted by a somewhat smaller group utilizing a limited amount of power equipment such as tractors, trucks, and scrapers. A more intensive exploration of the area already probed, plus a partial stabilization and repair of the foundations uncovered is planned for the 1958 season. It is also hoped that explorations can be conducted in a limited area outside the actual confines of the old fort. During the winter, the museum inside the Round Tower will be completely reorganized, and new exhibits, designed to illustrate life at old Fort Snelling, will be installed. Many of the items discovered during the archaeological exploration will be included in the displays.



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