

# Territorial Daguerreotypes

## FORT SNELLING AND MINNESOTA TERRITORY

*Edited by Bertha L. Heilbron*

DURING THE THREE DECADES *that elapsed between the founding of Fort Snelling in 1819 and the organization of Minnesota Territory in 1849, the lone outpost at the junction of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers was the center of much of the life and activity in the Minnesota country. To it were attracted practically all who found their way into the region, some to visit and observe, others to remain and settle. By steamboat, canoe, Red River cart train, stage-coach, even on foot, they came—explorers, travelers, missionaries, soldiers, fur traders, artists, authors, Indian chiefs, government officials, scientists, settlers. Regardless of eventual destination, most of them at least paused at Fort Snelling.*

*That the post continued to play an important role in Minnesota life during the territorial era is well illustrated by the letter that follows. It was written by a civil engineer, George F. Fuller, who in 1853 assisted Lieutenant James W. Abert in making a topographical survey of the Fort Snelling vicinity. Fuller arrived at a dramatic moment, for at and near the post were gathered the members of a great exploring expedition bound for the Pacific, detachments of soldiers engaged in establishing a new post to the west, and Indians awaiting a council with the newly appointed governor of the territory. About them and about the normal and permanent residents of the fort, the visiting surveyor wrote to his wife in the East.*

*After being treasured by his family for more than eighty years, Fuller's letter was presented to the Minnesota Historical Society in 1939 by his step-grandson, Mr. H. W. Morris of Santa Cruz, California. Accompanying it were a pencil sketch of Minnehaha Falls and three miniature water colors of Fort Snelling and Maiden Rock, all by Fuller. In addition to these items, the society has a microfilm copy of the surveyor's "Field Notes," prepared at Fort*

*Snelling under Abert's direction in June, 1853. The original notes, preserved in the office of the chief of engineers, are in the war records division of the National Archives in Washington, D.C. Even when recording column after column of dull figures, Fuller could not resist the temptation to picture the country about him. His surveying notes include views of Fort Snelling and the Mississippi, as well as the camp scene here reproduced.*

FORT SNELLING, Sunday, May 30<sup>th</sup> 1853

MY DEAR WIFE: I wrote you a letter yesterday announcing my arrival here, and enclosing a check for \$80, which I hope you have received. I sent you in this 2 little sketches one called the "Maiden's Leap" from the fact that a certain Sappho, or love persecuted Indian damsel, had leaped from the summit of it, so sayeth the legend. The other is of the fort, which I sketched this morning from Lt. [William T.] Magruder's quarters, where the rain was keeping me prisoner.<sup>1</sup> I am very comfortably situated have quarters in the barracks, and mess with Lt. Magruder, who is about the only officer permanently at the post, a real good fellow. There are two or three other officers, who have been stationed here for some time but are about removing 100 miles farther up to establish a new post.<sup>2</sup>

Capt [John W. T.] Gard[i]ner of the Dragoons, is here but goes with Gov [Isaac I.] Stevens and his party, having charge of the escort of 20 *dragoons*.<sup>3</sup> There is only one company of troops

<sup>1</sup> The "little sketches" mentioned here probably are two of the miniature water colors received by the Minnesota Historical Society with Fuller's letter. They picture Maiden Rock on the east bank of Lake Pepin and a corner of the enclosure within the walls of Fort Snelling. For a discussion of the legend of Maiden Rock, see G. Hubert Smith, "The Winona Legend," *ante*, 13:367-376. Magruder was commandant of Fort Snelling from May 4 to June 27, 1853. Richard W. Johnson, "Fort Snelling from Its Foundation to the Present Time," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 8:431.

<sup>2</sup> The post was Fort Ridgely, which had been established on the upper Minnesota River, near New Ulm, a month before Fuller's letter was written. Three companies of infantry left Fort Snelling for the new post just before Fuller arrived. See a manuscript history of "Fort Ridgely, Minnesota," 6-10, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society; Marcus L. Hansen, *Old Fort Snelling, 1819-1858*, 46 (Iowa City, 1918).

<sup>3</sup> Stevens was the leader of an expedition which surveyed a route for a railroad from St. Paul to the Pacific in 1853. Before starting, he was appointed governor of the newly organized Territory of Washington. Captain John W. T. Gardiner went

here—Dragoons—and the most wretched Bugler I ever heard play. Capt Gardner is the son of [Robert H.] *Gard[i]ner* of *Gard[i]ner*, Me. I came up from Dubuque with Gov Stephens [*sic*] and his party. I think you must have seen him in Portland. He is a Lieut of Engineers, and was succeeded by Lt [Z. B.] Tower. He is a little insignificant looking fellow but “not so big a fool as he looks”, by any means. The Camp of the party is about 2 miles from here, and I think of going out to look at the motley set tomorrow.<sup>4</sup> The next day, I am going to “a grand Indian Council” where there is to be a smoking of pipes, and a number of speeches made to the “little father”, as they call the Gov of Minnesota in contrast to their “big father” the President<sup>5</sup> There is an Indian Encampment on the opposite shore of the St Peter’s [*Minnesota*] river, in full view of the fort. I think I shall send you a sketch of it.

We shall be able, I think, to make all our surveys, and get ready to start home, in a fortnight or 3 weeks, at the farthest. [James W.] Abert wants to go round by Lake Superior,<sup>6</sup> but as it will cost \$50 I have no idea of accompan[ing] him, but shall make the best of my way home by the shortest route—for though you may not credit such a statement, I am *impatient* to get home and see you again. I don’t like living a bachelor life, and sleeping on a little narrow straw bed. I am afraid *straw beds* are *not healthy*.

I wish so much that you could have come with me, and enjoyed

ahead of his chief to “select the escort, establish the camp near St. Paul, and prepare the expedition for the field.” Stevens reached St. Paul on May 27. “Isaac I. Stevens and the Pacific Railroad Survey of 1853,” *ante*, 7:128.

<sup>4</sup> The camp was Camp Pierce on Lake Nokomis, then called Lake Amelia, in the present city of Minneapolis. Fuller evidently carried out his plan to visit it, for a sketch of Camp Pierce illustrates his “Field Notes,” in the war records division of the National Archives.

<sup>5</sup> The governor was Willis A. Gorman, who succeeded Alexander Ramsey on May 15, 1853. A report of a council between Gorman and sixty Sioux under Little Crow appears in the *Minnesota Democrat* (St. Paul) for June 1, 1853.

<sup>6</sup> Fuller’s work in the vicinity of Fort Snelling was done under the direction of Abert, who at the time was a first lieutenant serving as assistant topographical engineer in the improvement of the western rivers. His father was John J. Abert, the distinguished chief of the United States Topographical Bureau. George W. Cullum, *Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the U. S. Military Academy*, 2:151, 152 (Boston, 1891).

the very agreeable trip up to the upper Mississippi. The scenery after getting above the Missouri, is exceedingly bold & picturesque as the sketch which I send you shows. In some places the rocks rise perpendicularly from the river to the height of 2 or 3 hundred feet, and assume at times the wildest and most fantastic forms— frequently a column shoots up far above the cliffs like a watch tower, and often—for long spaces—the rocks appear like castle ruins—the outlines of battlements as plainly designated as if they had been erected by the hand of man. I should like to drop quietly down the river in a skiff and make a legion of sketches. While on the boat, I was obliged to sketch in outlines with great rapidity, as the boat moving rapidly, changed the view every moment. I passed the mouth of the Bad axe river where Black Hawk was defeated, and his power broken up, during the last Indian war.

I am going to send you a view of St Pauls, the approach to which as you come up the river is exceedingly beautiful.<sup>7</sup> I find I was very much mistaken when I supposed that I was coming to the outskirts of civilization. The country is thickly settled, and the city of St Pauls has 5000 inhabitants. 5 years ago, It had one house, or rather a log cabin.<sup>8</sup>

There are several ladies here— Dr. M<sup>c</sup>Dougall's wife and daughters— Mrs Capt Dana— Mrs Lieut Munroe— & the wife of the Commandant of the Post— said Commandant being absent somewhere on duty.<sup>9</sup> I called upon some of them last evening, with Abert and Magruder—to pay our respects as new comers, but found only

<sup>7</sup> If Fuller made a sketch of St. Paul, it has not been found. John Mix Stanley, the artist with the Stevens expedition, made a drawing of St. Paul on which is based the lithograph reproduced herewith.

<sup>8</sup> St. Paul did not grow as rapidly as might be inferred from Fuller's statement. In 1845 about thirty families were living in the vicinity. When the census of 1850 was taken, 2,187 inhabitants were recorded; five years later an enumeration credited the Minnesota capital with a population of 4,716. J. Fletcher Williams, *A History of the City of Saint Paul*, 149, 266, 359 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 4— St. Paul, 1876).

<sup>9</sup> The absent commandant doubtless was Lieutenant Colonel Francis Lee, who occupied the post both before and after Magruder's brief service as commanding officer. Like Captains Napoleon J. T. Dana and James Monroe, in the spring of 1853 Lee was much occupied with the founding of Fort Ridgely. See Johnson, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 8:431, 432; Hansen, *Old Fort Snelling*, 49. Dr. Charles McDougal was the post surgeon in 1853 and 1854. For a brief sketch of his career, see Guy V. Henry, *Military Record of Civilian Appointments in the United States Army*, 1:94 (New York, 1873).

the McDougalls, and the Chaplain's wife at home — the latter lady being an intensely beautiful woman — about *60 years of age*. The Chaplain whose name is Gill is a jolly fellow, remarkable for revelling in a garmant [*sic*] which reaches a little below his heels.<sup>10</sup> It might by *courtesy* be denominated a coat.

I hope you and the Children are well, and that nothing has happened to trouble you since I left. I suppose Menie is desirous to see her "Papa Georgie" again and *of course*, Nelly is. Take good care of yourself, and do'nt have a fit when you do'nt have a letter from me the very day you expect one, I shall write you often while I remain — and let you know when you can expect to see me, to a day. . . .

thine

GEORGE [F. FULLER]

<sup>10</sup> The Fort Snelling chaplain was the Reverend Ezekiel G. Gear, an Episcopal clergyman who lived there for more than two decades. A letter that Gear wrote to his brother shortly after arriving at the fort in the spring of 1839 was published in the issue of this magazine for March, 1943. With an introduction and annotations by Theodore C. Blegen, it appears under the title "Armistice and War on the Minnesota Frontier." For some biographical information about Gear, see Dean Blegen's introduction, *ante*, 24:13.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).