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 piece-meal demolition, steps have recently been taken to explore and preserve the precious remains of historic old Fort Snelling.

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 1958, the excavation is expected to be completed by the middle of next year.
11, 1958, Minnesota statehood day, ar­
chaeological excavation was begun in Sep­
tember, 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 approxi­
mately 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 suc­
cessful, portions of both being brought to
light within the first two weeks of excava­
tion. 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 recalci­
trant members of the garrison and occa­
sionally for miscreant Indians.

Although the project has not been pri­
marily a relic hunt, a number of interesting
small items have been found. Two gun­
flints, two musket balls, a small hand­
blown medicine bottle, and a large brass
uniform insignia of a type worn by caval­
rymen between 1855 and 1858 were uncov­
ered 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 appar­
tently been torn down by 1870. It is ex­
pected 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 but­
tons 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 founda­
tions 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
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 cavalrymen 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.¹

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 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.

¹ Marcus Hansen, Old Fort Snelling, 1819–1858, 77 (Iowa City, 1918).