

SANKOFA

@Home

*Fort Snelling
at Bdote*



Transform Minnesota

FORT SNELLING AT BDOE

It is one of the most important sites in Minnesota and one of the most complicated stories that we could possibly tell.

- Bill Convery, Head of Research, Minnesota Historical Society

Our second installment of **Sankofa at Home** brings us to **Fort Snelling**. Completed in 1825 and named for its first commandant, **Col. Josiah Snelling**, this site has a multi-faceted history and serves as an entry point into numerous stories that warrant broader discussion.

In 1805, Lt. **Zebulon Pike** selected a site at **Bdote** as the location for a military outpost. Pike negotiated a treaty without authorization which was signed by only 2 of 7 Dakota leaders present. Congress unilaterally set the amount of land granted by the treaty at 100,000 acres, and paid only \$2,000 worth of goods for land Pike had valued at \$200,000.



Historic Fort Snelling

200 Tower Ave
St. Paul, MN 55111
www.mnhs.org/fortsnelling

BDOE

The land around the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers is known as **Bdote** by the Dakota people, and was (and is) considered holy well before it was determined to be a strategic asset to the United States. Many Dakota see this as the place of creation, where human life on Earth originated.

SLAVERY AT FORT SNELLING

While slavery was illegal in the area which is now Minnesota from the time it was acquired by the United States, military officers were allowed to bring slaves with them to their posts. Estimates suggest anywhere from 15 to more than 30 enslaved people were held "legally" at Fort Snelling at any given time during the 1820s and 1830s.

The peak of this slaveholding period began with the assignment of the First U.S. Infantry Regiment, under the command of future President Zachary Taylor, to Fort Snelling in 1828.

DRED SCOTT AND THE FIGHT FOR FREEDOM

Dred Scott was brought to Fort Snelling in 1836 by Dr. John Emerson, an Army surgeon. Dred met Harriet Scott at the fort, and the two married around 1837. The couple had their first child at the fort, and lived there until 1840.

The couple sued Emerson's widow for their freedom in 1846, stating that they were unlawfully held as slaves in free territory.



Dred and Harriet Scott

Two women held at Fort Snelling, Rachel and Courtney, had sued in similar manner and won their freedom in 1836. The U.S. Supreme Court, however, found in 1857 that "the Scotts were considered property that could be taken anywhere by their owners, regardless of whether or not a particular place banned slavery." While the Scotts were freed by their owners not long after the decision, the ruling meant that slaves were no longer free if they escaped to free states. Many see this ruling as one of the final steps toward the Civil War.

PREPARING FOR WAR

On April 12, 1861, the United States entered the **Civil War**. That same day, **Minnesota Governor Alexander Ramsey** (who happened to be in Washington, D.C.) committed 1,000 troops from Minnesota in support of the Union. Fort Snelling, which had been decommissioned in 1857, re-opened to serve as a place to gather and train recruits.

The following year, troops from Fort Snelling were sent to the Minnesota River Valley during the **U.S.-Dakota War of 1862**. Under the command of former Governor and Indian Agent **Henry Sibley**, these troops pursued Dakota fighters over the final weeks of the conflict, oversaw hastily conducted "trials" of Dakota fighters, and marched more than 1,600 Dakota women, children, and elders back to Fort Snelling for internment.



Stockade below the fort c. 1862

WOKUKSUYE K'A WOYUONIHAN

In the wake of the U.S.-Dakota War, **roughly 1,600 Dakota** were brought to Fort Snelling and held at a concentration camp below the fort. An estimated 130 people died during the winter. In 1863, survivors were herded onto steamboats and brought to the **Crow Creek reservation in South Dakota**, before eventually being brought to the **Santee reservation in Nebraska**.

In 1987, a memorial called **Wokuksuye K'a Woyuonihan** (Remembering and Honoring) was created at the site of the concentration camp to remember and honor the Dakota interned at Fort Snelling.

ADDITIONAL HISTORY

1870s and 1880s - Fort Snelling was the headquarters of the US Military's Department of the Dakota

1882-1888 - Fort Snelling was garrisoned by the 25th US Infantry Regiment, a segregated African American unit known as the “**Buffalo Soldiers.**”



U.S. Army 25th Infantry Regiment “Buffalo Soldiers” c. 1890



Informational plaque at Ft. Snelling

World War II - Fort Snelling served as the Military Intelligence Service Language School. Nisei (second-generation) Japanese Americans volunteered or were drafted from internment camps to learn Japanese, Korean, and Chinese language and culture in preparation for work as interpreters, interrogators, and intelligence workers.

Fort Snelling was officially decommissioned in 1946 after the conclusion of World War II. The fort became Minnesota's first National Historic Landmark in 1960.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

As you reflect upon the history of Fort Snelling:

- What's new to you?
- Did anything surprise you? Why or why not?
- What do you see in the stories from the past?
- How do these stories connect to present-day Minnesota?
- How do we think about a historic site that has such a complicated history?



As you visit Fort Snelling:

- What's new to you?
- What do you feel?
- Imagine the fort and the grounds at different points throughout history:
 - Imagine seeing enslaved people at the fort. Did you know slavery was practiced here?
 - Imagine being at the fort in the midst of the Civil and U.S. -Dakota wars. How do we think about fighting for the freedom of one people group while imprisoning another?



As you visit the Wokuksuye K'a Woyuonihan memorial:

- What do you feel?
- Imagine how this site would have looked in 1862. What would it have been like to be imprisoned throughout the winter with 1,600 other people?
- What would it be like to be removed from your homeland?
- How do we honor this history?



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Fort Snelling at Bdote: A Brief History Peter DeCarlo

Author Peter DeCarlo provides a primer on the complex and contested history of Minnesota's premier historical site, newly annotated.

Confluence: The History of Fort Snelling Hampton Smith

In this book, historian Hampton Smith delves into Fort Snelling's long and complicated story in a comprehensive history of an important and controversial Minnesota landmark.

Dred and Harriet Scott: A Family's Struggle for Freedom Gwenyth Swain

A biography for young readers, ages 9 and up, that humanizes the people behind the famous **Dred Scott decision**, the first legal test of slavery in the United States.

Historic Fort Snelling Timeline Minnesota Historical Society

Where the Waters Meet: Stories of Historic Fort Snelling Minnesota Historical Society

Minnesota Untold: 'History Wars,' the battle over Fort Snelling FOX 9

C-SPAN Cities Tour - Saint Paul: Historic Fort Snelling C-SPAN

Dred Scott Case History

Dred Scott is Fort Snelling's best-known slave, but there were others Pioneer Press



Transform Minnesota

COMPLEX ISSUES. BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE.

This resource list is part of Transform
Minnesota' Sankofa @ Home series

Inclusion of a resource on the list does
not represent a full endorsement of
stated beliefs

SANKOFA @ HOME
OCTOBER 2023