



MANY VOICES, MANY STORIES, ONE PLACE

Engaging Scholarship, Audience, and Diversity at Historic Fort Snelling

In September 2023, the Minnesota Historical Society opened a 4,000-square-foot exhibit at Historic Fort Snelling. The people who lived (and continue to live) in and near Fort Snelling and Bdóte speak in many voices. Their history is complex and often challenging. Exhibit teams spent more than seven years conducting research, developing prototypes, and engaging with the site's diverse community stakeholders in order to capture this complexity. The result is Historic Fort Snelling's first major exhibit update in more than 25 years. Many Voices, Many Stories, One Place introduces visitors to the full 12,500-year history of the historic site and helps them understand the enduring significance of Fort Snelling and Bdóte today.

William Convery

WHAT GOES INTO the creation of an exhibit on the scale of *Many Voices, Many Stories, One Place*? Exhibits in high-profile sites such as Historic Fort Snelling are an enduring way to interpret the past. The topics or stories that are included—or left out—can take on an outsized symbolic importance. So exhibit staff at the Minnesota Historical Society moved carefully, thinking deeply, consulting with community stakeholders and scholars, conducting archival research, and testing exhibition ideas to properly convey the flow of history, in all its complexity, at Minnesota's most significant historical site.

Ancestral Dakotas and other Native American people frequented the bluffs and nearby spring at the site for 12,000 years or more. They hunted, fished, and foraged; conducted diplo-



macy; exchanged resources; made clothing and pottery; manufactured tools; and planted and harvested crops. They prayed, danced, and shared stories. They cared for family members and remembered ancestors. In the Dakota language, “bdóte” means “where two rivers come together. Some Dakota people refer to the bdóte where the Mni Sota (Minnesota) and Wakpá Tarjka (Mississippi) come together as “Bdóte.” For all, it is a sacred site of creation. Many Native American people, including the Anishinaabeg (Ojibwe), Báxoje (Ioway), Jiwere (Otoe), Asakiwaki (Sauk), Meskwaki (Fox), and Tsis tsis’tas (Cheyenne) people, are connected to this place. Some connections span millennia. But only Dakota people know this site as Maǰá ʕokáya Kiŋ, “the Center of the World.”¹

The confluence attracted newcomers over time. French, then British, missionaries, explorers, diplomats, and fur traders engaged with Native people here beginning in the 1600s. At an 1805 conference with US Army officer Zebulon Pike, the Bdewakan-ton Dakota leader ʕetáŋ Wakúwa Máni (Little Crow I) and several other Dakota leaders granted permission for the United States to construct a military post on the bluffs. Construction began in 1820 and was completed by 1825. Over the next 120 years, Fort Snelling attracted soldiers, settlers, immigrants, merchants; leaders of the Dakota, Ojibwe, HoChunk, and other tribal nations; and other VIPs. Some residents arrived unwillingly. Dozens of enslaved African Americans were forced to cook, clean, cut firewood, and serve Army officers, fur

traders, and their families. Yet some enslaved people also found paths to freedom here. Dred and Harriet Scott’s freedom lawsuit, originating during the time they spent at Fort Snelling, shook the foundations of the nation in the years leading up to the Civil War.

Fort Snelling served the nation’s needs in times of crisis. Hundreds of thousands of recruits rallied there, serving their country during the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, and World Wars I and II. African American “Buffalo Soldiers” of the 25th US Infantry garrisoned the fort in the 1880s; the Third US Infantry “Old Guard”—America’s oldest regular infantry unit—served there in the 1890s, 1920s, and 1930s. Japanese American recruits, some coming directly from American wartime concentration

(often incorrectly called “internment”) camps (see below), studied at the World War II-era Military Intelligence Service Language School before deployment in the Pacific. Their work shortened the war and saved thousands of American lives.

The fort oversaw darker chapters in American history as well. Over the winter of 1862–63, authorities penned more than 1,600 Dakota women, children, and elderly non-combatants into a crowded stockade on the flats below the fort. The following spring, some 1,200 were pressed into steamboats bound for desolate reservations far from their homes. Dakota people survived exile, disease, and despair. Many have returned to their original homelands, where they thrive today.

The intersecting stories at Fort Snelling and the Dakota cultural landscape known by some as Bdóte sometimes make for unsettling combinations. The uneasy history that coexisted here presents many challenges to exhibit developers. How does an exhibit about Fort Snelling honor military service and sacrifice while commemorating Native American exile and dispossession? Or give credit to the fort’s early builders and commanders when they also enslaved other human beings? How does it present a Dakota site of creation that also housed a place of detention and forced exile? How could exhibit developers include the voices of scholars, veterans, tribal representatives, descendants, and community members in the development process?

How could it capture the emotional range of the site’s history—a range that encompassed joy and tragedy, betrayal, loss, and suffering, but also honor, service, and patriotism?

MNHS staff had long wrestled with these interpretive challenges while planning for physical infrastructure improvements at the site. In a series of appropriations from 2015 through 2018, the State of Minnesota provided \$19.5 million to demolish a failing 1982 visitor center, rehabilitate historic buildings into new interpretive spaces, and reconceptualize landscaping and other features. The keystone of the revitalization plan was the reconditioning of a long-disused 1905 cavalry barracks into a new visitor center, complete with a 4,000-square-foot exhibit



Soldiers from Task Force Timberwolf, 372nd Engineer Brigade, say goodbye to friends and family during a deployment ceremony at Historic Fort Snelling, October 2021.



Lower Sioux Indian Community Tribal Historic Preservation Officer Cheyanne St. John and others worked with exhibit developers to educate museum visitors about the importance of Bdóte to Dakota people.

gallery intended to orient visitors to the site.

In imagining new interpretation at the site, recent history mattered. For some historians and activists, especially within the Dakota community, a perceived lack of recognition of Native American history at the fort was painful. For many years, the site's interpretation had focused almost exclusively on military life at the fort during the 1820s and 1830s. The popular first-person interpretive history program, presented by costumed reenactors in military garb, received

national recognition. Yet it had made little room for the stories of Native Americans, African Americans, or women, or for events occurring after about 1838. In 2010, activists staged a "Take Down the Fort" protest, calling for Fort Snelling's complete removal as a means to bring healing to displaced Dakota communities.²

The 2012 opening of an exhibit commemorating the 150th anniversary of the 1862 US-Dakota War at the Minnesota History Center exposed further tensions. Speaking to a conference of Dakota advisors in

2011, MNHS Director Stephen Elliott observed that "[MNHS] needs to listen more closely and demonstrate a new spirit of openness and transparency to the Dakota as we recover the past together." In 2017, MNHS formed a Dakota Community Council to partner on Dakota interpretation, making sure that MNHS staff listened to the needs and priorities of the Dakota communities whose history suffused the site. The same year MNHS established a Department of Native American Initiatives, staffed by museum professionals with Native American backgrounds to help guide Indigenous interpretation and programming. MNHS reached out to Dakota partners in 2017 to host the Dakhóta Wówičakhe Wóyakapi Omníčiye, the Dakota Truth-Telling Gathering, inviting Dakota people to gather at the fort for activities promoting healing, commemoration, and cultural revival. Historic Fort Snelling also enrolled as an International Site of Conscience, joining a global coalition of sites dedicated "to remembering past struggles for justice and addressing their contemporary legacies."³

Armed with a new commitment to acknowledging the legacy of past injustices, Minnesota History Center Museum Director Dan Spock outlined a vision for the new exhibit in 2015. Citing the importance of interpreting the site's Dakota history, African American history, and military history, he called for "exhibits . . . that reach beyond the nineteenth century to the present."⁴

Yet even as museum staff initiated plans for more expansive historical interpretation, they encountered new challenges. An attempt by MNHS to add the Dakota site name "Bdóte" to its Fort Snelling welcome signs elicited concerns that the site's interpretation was tilting too far in favor of Dakota histories. Some critics called for a return to histories

that centered on the achievements of European American soldiers and settlers. Efforts to curtail “revision” of the fort’s history rippled into the public arena. The Minnesota legislature heard critical commentary on MNHS’s approach to sharing history at the site; while a threat to reduce MNHS’s operating budget did not pass into law, the criticisms were a wake-up call regarding the sensitivity of historical interpretation.⁵

To help map the boundaries of public attitudes, exhibit developers continued to focus on community outreach, working to bring together the diverse perspectives of the site’s stakeholders. The exhibit project formally kicked off with a May 2016 roundtable of scholars funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. MNHS assembled more than a dozen historians, artists, veterans, educators, and museum professionals to identify interpretive themes and wrestle with the sensitive and often contradictory historical storylines at the site. Having heard from scholars, MNHS next assembled a community-oriented Exhibit Advisory Group. Starting in 2019, this group of veterans, scholars, jurists, and community organizers participated in eight workshops to propose ideas and vet exhibit concepts. Exhibit team leaders also held discussions with the Dakota Community Council and the Fort Snelling Veterans Advisory Committee to further refine ideas.

As expected, the members of these various advisory groups voiced a variety of perspectives. Yet areas of consensus existed. Advisory groups stressed the importance of elevating Dakota, African American, and Japanese American history at the site. They urged MNHS to highlight the diversity of veterans’ ethnic identity, experiences, and perspectives. They recommended addressing issues

of historical injustice head-on and involving stakeholder groups in every step of the process. Advisory groups advocated for humanizing big themes by framing them through the stories of individuals and discussing how past events continue to resonate in the present. They articulated a goal of highlighting “process, not products,” that is, creating an exhibit that supports active participation between people and communities.

Besides convening community meetings, MNHS staff tested ideas through exhibit prototyping. In 2017, exhibit developers tracked visitors’ reaction to enhanced interpretation regarding enslaved people at the fort. Developers set a table with biographical information on enslaved people attached to dinner plates. They measured visitor “hang time,” the amount of time visitors spent with each exhibit component, witnessed how visitors interacted with each other to discuss the content they were learning, and tracked the questions they asked to gauge curiosity about the exhibit content and clarity of its messaging. The following year, exhibit developers and site interpreters created a prototype exhibit about the

everyday life of soldiers at the fort. Located in three rooms at the fort’s Stone Barracks, the exhibit presented visitors with questions regarding soldiers’ military experiences. Visitors explored the different ways that photos and historical quotes answered these questions. Interpreters recorded visitors’ reactions to the stories, how they related to their own lives and experiences, and additional questions they had about the stories and themes.

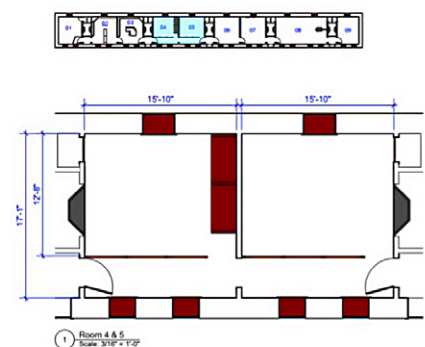
The exhibit prototypes provided temporary, inexpensive, and easily changeable drafts of early exhibit ideas. By putting together quick, unfinished exhibits, exhibit and program developers got a better sense of what our visitors were interested in, what they responded to, and how they interacted with exhibit concepts. Visitor reaction to exhibit prototypes confirmed the importance of taking a “show, not tell” approach to the exhibit. Visitors were more comfortable learning potentially unsettling concepts through the direct words and actions of people in the past. The prototypes helped cement the exhibit’s central organizing principle: that individual quotes and biographical

Exhibit Prototyping

Evaluation

Potential questions:

1. What message did you get from these rooms?
2. What connections do you see between these stories and your life today?
3. How does this change your perception of the site or the story told at the site?
4. What questions do you have? Is any of this content confusing?



Working with Historic Fort Snelling interpretive staff, the exhibit team developed a visitor survey to capture reactions to a prototype exhibit about enslaved people at the fort. Visitors responded with curiosity about these untold stories.

profiles would be an effective way to convey the exhibit's sweeping themes.

In a few cases, researchers relied on historical research to shed light on potentially controversial topics. The appropriate use of the term "concentration camp" was one such topic. Researchers encountered the term in context of the camp created to detain Dakota noncombatants after the US–Dakota War, as well as for the camps used to incarcerate Japanese Americans during World War II. The use of the term often stirs debate. Many people associate concentration camps with Nazi "death camps" used to systematically exterminate Jewish people and other people deemed "undesirable" by the Third Reich. Researchers pored over the 1949 Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, the works of scholars and Holocaust survivors Hannah Arendt and Raphael Lemkin, as well as research by other scholars, journalists, and legal historians. Staff paid particular notice to the definitions developed by the Smithsonian's Japanese American National Museum and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. These combined works make it clear that the term "concentration camp" has both a broader use and a historical context that predates World War II, one that has been applied retroactively to cases that precede the invention of the term in the 1890s. MNHS referred to this scholarship to develop a working definition of "concentration camps" for the exhibit:

A concentration camp is a place where people are forcibly imprisoned, often in harsh conditions, not because they committed any crimes but simply because of who they are. Concentration camps have existed throughout history in many places around the world, including the United States.

Key Resources Lead to Compelling Stories

To ensure that the exhibit represented a fair cross section of perspectives and experiences, staff researchers dove deeply into archives across the nation. The most valuable primary and secondary sources came from the Gale Family Library at the Minnesota History Center. The Gale Library offered up a treasury of historical newspapers, letters and journals, period histories, autobiographies and memoirs, artwork, objects, and photographs. MNHS's monthly journal, *Minnesota History*, and its predecessor, *Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society*, contained several important first-person accounts. Researchers identified key resources at half a dozen local historical societies, as well as at the Minnesota Military Museum, the Montana Memory Project, the Newberry Library in Chicago, the Hočokata ȩ Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community Center, the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, the National Museum of the American Indian, and the North Dakota and Wisconsin historical societies. They reviewed government records, maps, photographs, and documents—including military surveys, Army reimbursement vouchers, legal documents, and boarding school records—from the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian Institution, the National Park Service, and the National Archives. They read the accounts of African American freedom seekers such as Dred and Harriet Scott—dictated in their own words and endorsed by their own hands—in court records provided by the Missouri State Archives and Washington University in St. Louis.

Such documents helped present compelling stories. For example, developers pulled selected quotes from Civil War–era letters and diaries to create a flipbook that portrayed wartime experiences from the soldiers' points of view. The documents, all selected from the writings of soldiers in the 1st Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, reflect the high literacy rate of Civil War soldiers in general. Each quote illustrates a particular milestone in a soldier's life, from recruitment, to training, deployment, combat, and homecoming. "I will fight for [the United States] and freely bleed, and even die for her if needs be," wrote recruit Adam Marty of Stillwater. "Who would not fight for such a country, such blessings, and such privileges?" Winona resident Charles Goddard, who lied about his age to enlist when he was only 15, expressed the simple pleasures of camp life. "We do have some hard times," he acknowledged. "But when we get in camp and have time to get a cup of warm coffee and a slice of corn beef . . . [one] feels as if he might stand it a very little while longer." Some reflect on the fear before combat or the loss of a loved one. P. Henry Taylor, a teacher from Belle Prairie in peacetime, notified his parents of the death of his brother, Isaac, on the Gettysburg battlefield: "I scarcely dare write you that my dear brother who has shared many privations with me on more than one battlefield has fallen. . . . Our Regt. lost over two-thirds of its number during the two days' fight; but thanks be to God the victory is ours." Sergeant James Wright summed up his feelings when he returned home to Red Wing at war's end: "I am at home, at last, once more, and as gratefully glad as a mortal can be."

Written records and published scholarship provide only one path toward our understanding of history at Fort Snelling. The exhibit utilizes both traditional Dakota stories and up-to-the-moment archaeology to convey the deep, 12,000-plus-year history of Bdóte before Fort Snelling. To shed light on more recent history, short videos present the perspectives of modern-day descendants of men and women whose lives intersected with the fort. Descendants of Dakota leaders Wápahaśa and Āetán Wakúwa Máni (Little Crow I), students at the Military Intelligence Service Language School, Dred and Harriet Scott, and others reflect on the lives of their ancestors and their ongoing connection to this place.

The *Many Voices, Many Stories, One Place* exhibit concludes with a nod to the enduring legacy of Historic Fort Snelling. For Dakota people this site is the heart of a homeland, a place to remember tragedy, to celebrate resilience, and to reclaim and revive culture. For the military it is a place to commemorate service and sacrifice, to remember veterans, and to honor the men and women in uniform who serve our country today. Situated near the confluence of two rivers, Bdóte and Fort Snelling represent a confluence of intermingled histories—at once unique and part of a larger whole. We are the heirs of the people who gave life and meaning to this special place. Their stories, their choices affect us, for good or for ill. □

Personal Stories Spoken Personally

Oral histories from veterans who served at the fort in World War II provide another direct connection between the past and the present. MNHS historians recorded scores of interviews with World War II veterans between 2001 and 2008 (and beyond) as part of the Minnesota's Greatest Generation oral history project. Exhibit developers for the *Many Voices, Many Stories, One Place* exhibit combed this collection, as well as oral history collections at the University of Southern California, the Smithsonian Institution Museum of American History, the Densho Archives, and elsewhere, for personal stories that illuminated life at Fort Snelling during the war. Some of the best found their way into the exhibit. Here are a few examples:

One day as a child, Minneapolis resident Harold Brown watched an airplane fly high overhead and thought: "Why not me?" He pursued his dream of becoming a pilot by enlisting in the Army at Fort Snelling. Brown's exams rated him for service in the fabled Tuskegee Airmen flying corps. "I can remember coming home and I'm wearing my little uniform," he recalled. "Hey, I've been selected to go into military flight training. I was on cloud nine."⁶

California resident Bill Saburo, a student at Fort Snelling's Military Intelligence Service Language School, remembered his first Minnesota winter: "It was so cold! Oh it was cold. And the first guy we met when we got off the truck, he just had something light on. And we said 'Golly, aren't you cold?' And he said, 'Cold? Wait until it gets cold.'"⁷

Betty Wall Strohfus, from Northfield, Minnesota, joined the Women's Army Service Pilots program to train combat pilots. She recalled her interview and flight physical at Fort Snelling: "Once they found out I could handle an aircraft I had no problem. 'Cause, you know a plane doesn't ask, 'Are you a man or a woman?' It's just, 'Can you handle me baby?' And we did."⁸

Notes

1. Gwen Westerman and Bruce White, *Mni Sota Makoce: The Land of the Dakota* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society MNHS Press, 2012), 18–19; Gabrielle Wynde, MNHS Dakota Community Council, correspondence with Amber Annis, Apr. 17, 2023.

According to linguists and native Dakota language speakers, the terms "bdóte" and "mdóte" are two equally correct variations of the same word, meaning "where two rivers come together." The md/bd cluster reflects regional dialects. Some Dakota language speakers use both pronunciations interchangeably. Historically, "mdóte" predominated in the written record, reflecting the pronunciation favored by early European American missionaries. But many contemporary speakers prefer "bdóte" today. MNHS tries to use the variation most common among Dakota language speakers in the area. Both versions are considered correct.

2. Hampton Smith, *Confluence: A History of Fort Snelling* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society MNHS Press, 2021), 234–36; "Waziya-tawin: Take Down Fort Snelling," *MPR News*, June 28, 2016.

3. "Remarks by Minnesota Historical Society Director Stephen Elliott at the Dakota Iyuheapi Owanzida 'We Gather Together as One: Dakota Nationwide Conference,'" Sept. 30, 2011.

4. Dan Spock, "Historic Fort Snelling—Vision Statements from Dan Spock," unpublished manuscript, Apr. 6, 2015, MNHS.

5. Mary Bakeman, "It's Time for Truth Telling at Fort Snelling," *MinnPost*, May 1, 2017; D. J. Tice, "Fort Snelling: New Vision, Old Wounds," (Minneapolis) *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis, MN), Apr. 15, 2018; Minnesota Session Laws—2018, Regular Session. Chapter 214: H.F. No. 4425, Sect. 24, Subd. 3, <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/laws/2018/0/Session+Law/Chapter/214/>; Jennifer Brooks, "State Senators Try to Slash Minnesota Historical Society's Budget over Sign at Fort Snelling," (Minneapolis) *Star Tribune*, Apr. 25, 2019.

6. Harold H. Brown, interview with Julianna Olsen and Andrea Reed, unpublished transcript, 2018, MNHS.

7. Saburo "Bill" Doi, oral history interview, part 4 of 6 (03:36–03:55), conducted by Richard Hawkins, June 26, 2005, Go For Broke National Education Center, University of Southern California Libraries, <https://digital.library.usc.edu/asset-management/2A3BF114BPQ>.

8. Elizabeth "Betty" Strohfus, oral history conducted by Doug Bekke, Faribault, MN, May 2, 2008, MNHS Exhibit Files, St. Paul, MN.

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Map of FORT-SNELLING RESERVATION 1885-93



Military maps such as this one from 1885-93 charted Fort Snelling's growth over time.



Shivering through guard duty at Fort Snelling in 1849, Private Gustavus Otto complained, "The winters are very cold here. . . I had . . . like many others, frozen my ears, nose, and face." Frank B. Mayer's 1851 sketch, also drawn at the fort, breathes life into Otto's hardship.



Fifteen-year-old Winona resident Charlie Goddard lied about his age to enlist in Company K, 1st Minnesota Volunteers. His journal gave voice to the hopes, fears, discomforts, and triumphs of a soldier's life.



MNHS project specialist Lisa Friedlander works on an installation for the new Historic Fort Snelling exhibit.



A Minnesota Historical Society camera crew records Sisseton Dakota dowan wicasta (male singer) Londel Seaboy on a snowy day in November 2022. More than a dozen historians, descendants, and performers contributed to the digital interactives that enliven the Many Voices exhibit.



Retired Minnesota trial court judge LaJune Lange shared her expertise in history and constitutional law for an interactive video on the Dred Scott court case.



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