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## Fort Snelling: Should its history be told?

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Historic landmarks are places that powerfully evoke memory and meaning, connecting us tangibly to the past. Minnesota's Fort Snelling is such a place, designated the state's first National Historic Landmark in 1960. From its commanding presence above the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers, Fort Snelling lies at the crossroads of Minnesota's and our nation's history.

When the Minnesota Historical Society opened the restored fort in 1970, visitors came to experience life at a frontier outpost in the 1820s. Since then, we have gradually expanded the scope of our programs. Plans are now underway to present a much broader story, conveying the immense meaning Fort Snelling holds for us. It is time to open the lens of history wider, to include our diverse Minnesota communities in presenting the past, and to address differences of opinion about the events that unfolded in this place.

The story of Fort Snelling begins with the presence of native peoples on this land for thousands of years. We know that many Dakota Indians regard the meeting of the great rivers and the surrounding land as their sacred place of origin, often referred to as *B'Dote*. When the fort was completed in 1825, the landscape and the experience of Indian people in the area were changing. For many years, Fort Snelling was the hub of government administration on the Upper Mississippi.

It was also the meeting place of many cultures -- American Indian, white and African-American.

Most Minnesotans are probably not aware that there were slaves at Fort Snelling, including Dred Scott, a pivotal figure in the events leading to the Civil War. Based partly on his six-year residence at the fort in a free territory, Scott waged an unsuccessful court battle for his freedom, galvanizing anti-slavery sentiment. The Minnesota Historical Society has recently begun to tell the story of Dred Scott, connecting Minnesota to the issue of slavery that divided the nation. We look forward to presenting the stories of African-Americans at the fort in greater depth.

One of the saddest chapters in Minnesota history was the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862. This conflict led to the largest mass execution in U.S. history when 38 Dakota men were hanged at Mankato. Many more Dakota were incarcerated, including approximately 1,600 elders, women and children on Pike Island at Fort Snelling. During the harsh winter of 1862-63, hundreds died there before the survivors were forcibly removed to Dakota Territory. The fort later became headquarters for the U.S. campaigns against the Indians

in the West. This is history we must tell.

When the Civil War broke out, Minnesotans were the first volunteers. Thousands enlisted and trained at Fort Snelling. The soldiers of the First Minnesota Regiment played a crucial role in the war, holding the line at Gettysburg in 1863 despite terrible casualties. We must tell their stories and the stories of soldiers from every era, including the 300,000 men and women who mustered through the fort on their way to service in World War II.

Fort Snelling is a landscape with many meanings, from its banks where great rivers meet, to historic buildings spanning more than a century, to the national cemetery where generations of Minnesota's veterans are buried. Today, people come to these places for many reasons, spiritual and temporal. The power of this place is public and personal, conveyed through what people learn about the past and the emotions they experience.

Minnesotans have a responsibility to preserve Fort Snelling and to absorb the full scope of its history and meaning. As the Minnesota Historical Society develops programs to tell the larger story of this place, we are also planning new physical facilities that will serve increasing numbers of visitors who come to experience history where it happened. Some argue for erasing history that is painful and marked by injustice. I see it differently, believing that we cannot transcend the past until we know it and have learned from it.

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