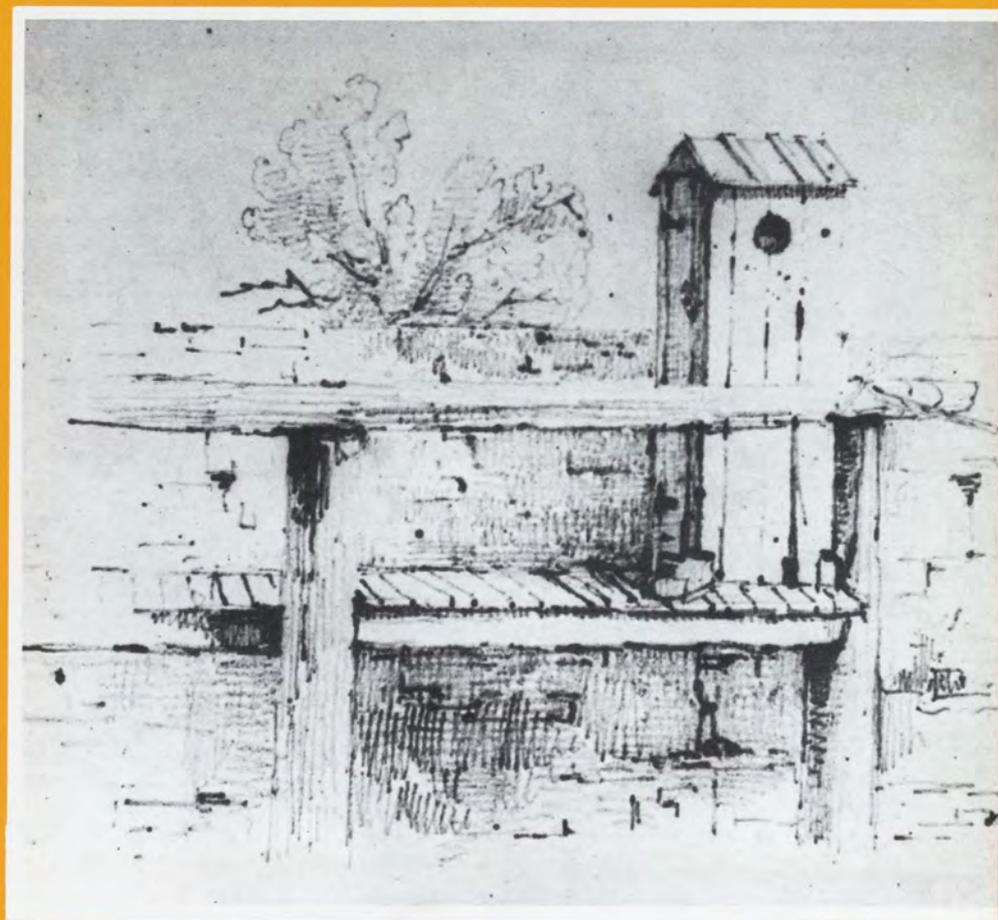


# RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY



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*ON THE COVER:* This sketch by Seth Eastman shows a sentry box at Fort Snelling. Eastman is known today as one of the great painters of the old Northwest and particularly the Mississippi river valley. What is not so well known is that he was an army officer who served four stints as commandant of Fort Snelling, then became a brigadier general after the outbreak of the Civil War.

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## *Orders, Letters, Lists of Possessions*

# Colonel Snelling's Journal

By Virginia Brainard Kunz

NOWHERE, perhaps, is life at a frontier military post more vividly pictured than in the letters, diaries and journals the men who served there left behind them.

In the journal of Colonel Josiah Snelling, commandant of Fort Snelling from 1820 to 1827, the colonel himself, how he lived and the problems of command, all stand revealed.

In an era before copying machines or carbon paper, a post commander who needed a record of correspondence and regimental orders had to carefully copy letters and other documents, often into a journal such as Snelling kept. It is a small book; the entries, on lined paper, are scanty and date chiefly from 1827, the colonel's last year at Fort Snelling before his transfer to Jefferson Barracks at St. Louis, Missouri.

Undoubtedly because he was being transferred, he also has listed his possessions. This inventory provides an intriguing glimpse into the personal life of the colonel and his family.

THE JOURNAL apparently was handed down among members of the family for more than 100 years after Snelling's death. During the late 1930's, it was in the possession of Mrs. William Ritchie of Omaha, Nebraska, whose grandmother was Mrs. Snelling's niece.

Several years ago, however, the journal appeared in San Francisco where Elmer Andersen, former governor of Minnesota and now president of the Minnesota Historical Society, acquired it. He has permitted the Ramsey County Historical Society to use some of the entries in this article.

*ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Virginia Brainard Kunz is editor of Ramsey County History and executive secretary of the Ramsey County Historical Society. She is the author of three books, one of which is history of the military in Minnesota.*

The first two entries touch on the uncertainty of life in the wilderness:

"John Tully, aged about ten years, died at Fort Snelling & was buried on the 27th day of April, 1827." The second is dated April 28, 1827: "In the evening the remains of my daughter, Elizabeth, and Col. Leavenworth's infant were removed from the old burying ground to the new one on the ridge."

Elizabeth Snelling died at the age of 13 months. The young lad, John Tully, had been a member of the Snelling family for four years. Soldiers rescued him from a band of Sioux after the rest of his family had been killed. The boy had been scalped, but the Snellings took him into their home and cared for him. He survived, only to die later of an infection in his foot.

THE ENTRIES which follow sometimes are in chronological order and sometimes jump backward in time.

On May 3, 1827, Colonel Snelling "Re-enlisted Wm. Brewster of Comp. D and paid him six dollars."

A regimental order, dated July 12, from Fort Crawford, at what is now Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, states that:

"The acting Asst. Com[missary] Lt. Jameson will cause to be baked six thousand rations of hard bread by four o'clock P.M. tomorrow.

By order of Col. Josiah Snelling.

M. G. Merrill, Act. Adjt."

A terse order went to a hapless and apparently irresponsible officer, a Maj. T. Hamilton, on July 13, 1827:

"Sir: I have thought proper to place Company B under the command of Lt. Denny. You will remain behind, considering yourself on furlough until we return. I will ex-

plain my reasons for this measure when time and opportunity offer.

Yr. Obt. st.,  
J. Snelling, Col."

Snelling spells out his reasons in a second letter to Hamilton on August 10, 1827. In both these communications, however, he does not neglect the military niceties but signs himself "Yr. Obt. st.," or "With gt. respect, Yrs."

"Major: Seven years ago you were transferred by mutual consent with Major Larabee to this Corps. I was advised at the time by Gen'l Atkinson that it was his last hope of reforming your habits. How far you have met his expectations, is best known to yourself.

"I have connived at your derelictions from duty too-long. On an important expedition you have allowed the command of your Company to be taken from you, when danger & honor should have been courted, & given to your 2nd Lt. without even asking the reason why. Always satisfied if you had free access to the whisky bottle. In truth and candour you are no longer fit for the station you hold, & I am obliged to offer you this alternative. Resign with a year's furlough, or, stand a trial.

With gt. respect, Yrs.  
J. Snelling."

The tragic and ceaseless warfare between the Chippewa and the Sioux of the area also was the concern of the camp commandant. In May of 1827, 24 Chippewa encamped near Fort Snelling were attacked by nine Sioux who had been received hospitably by the Chippewa, eaten their food and smoked a peace pipe with them.

Strong Earth, the Chippewa chief, protested this brutal betrayal of a treaty which had been concluded two years earlier between the two Indian nations. Snelling copied the chief's poignant and bewildered protest into his journal, and he prefaced it with the following notation: "Literal as translated. L. Taliaferro Agt. of a speech delivered by Strong Earth a chief of the Sandy Lake Indians of the Chippewa nation to Col. J. Snelling on the 30th of May 1827."

"Father: You know that two summers ago, we attended a Great Council at Prairie du Chien, where by the advice of our white friends, we made a peace with the Sioux. We were then told that the Americans would guarantee our safety under your flag. We



Colonel Josiah Snelling

came here under that assurance. But, father, look at your floor. It is stained with the blood of my people, shed under your walls. I look up and see your flag over us. If you are a great and powerful people, why do you not protect us? If not, of what use are all of these soldiers?"

Two military orders reveal Snelling's approach to other problems created by the presence of a military post in Indian territory. This order is dated July 21, 1827:

"The present state of affairs renders it necessary that decisive steps should be taken with the vagrant Indians who infest this neighborhood. Half breeds not claiming citizenship, & Indian women of any grade or colour not having husbands, will depart in 24 hours on pain of military evacuation. The commanding officer is fully aware of the responsibility he incurs, and will always be ready to answer for it before a competent tribunal; but he will not suffer spies to be smuggled into his camp under the petticoats of a strumpet. No interference will be allowed with the civil law, and a strict obedience is commanded to the warrants of the magistrates. But vagrant Indians, either whole or half-breeds, must leave the Prairie. Certificates of marriage will be required of those females who are permitted to remain."

THE SECOND order was issued about two weeks later, on August 6, from a keel boat, the "Rock Islander:"

"Regt Orders

On the arrival of the boats at the Prairie on which Wabasha's village is situated & at a place which will be indicated by the Colonel,

the Lt. Infantry under Lt. Denny with Lt. Jameson as second officer will land & march in file towards the village, keeping as near as possible parallel to the boats. An advanced guard to be detailed from Sgt. Louis company of one Corporal & three privates, will move two hundred yards in front of the Light Infantry. They will not attempt concealment, but go directly to the village by the common path, and inform Wabasha or any of his chiefs who may be present, that although we approach in force, we have no hostile intentions. Our only object is to return to St. Peters unmolested.

"If the advance should be fired on, or made prisoners, Lt. Denny will form his company in line in extended order and fire advancing towards the village. The other three companies will immediately land & support him. They will form line in extended order, & whatever may be the casualties, they will advance to the houses in the village. Arrangements have been made to fire them, & it is expressly enjoined on the officers & men to give *no quarter*, but to women & children whose persons should always be sacred in the eyes of an American soldier.

"Once engaged in this enterprize, courage is safety, and the misconduct of one individual may produce a panic in the whole line. It is therefore enjoined upon every officer to put to death any man who quits his rank, or attempts escape from his duty.

J. Snelling Col"

In September of 1827, Snelling seems to have been involved in a mysterious "affair of honor," not mentioned by any of his biographers. In a letter to a Lt. G. Low, who was to be his second, he set forth his terms for the duel.

"Sir: I have contrary to my duty and my principles and to gratify the bad passions of a bad man, consented to waive my rank to Lt. Baxby and expect to receive a message from him today. As you have agreed to appear on the field as my friend, I think proper to dictate to you the following terms of combat, from which I will not depart. The duel shall be fought at four paces with pistols and the firing shall continue until one of the parties is killed or disabled. I do not go out for a show and I will have no spectators or surgeon. I will consent to no reconciliation or shaking of hands. When I think a man a rascal I never take his hand.

J. Snelling"

The duel apparently never was fought. Snelling was transferred to Jefferson Barracks the following month. He recorded his journey as follows:

"Oct. 2nd, 1827. Left St. Peters in the Steamboat Josephine, Capt. Clark. Passengers, Mrs. Snelling, three children, female servant Olympia, and myself. Majr. Gen'l Gaines, Lts. Hunter, Green, Clark, & Capt. Clark.

"Oct. 4th, 1827. Arrived at Prairie du Chien and sailed the same day for St. Louis.

"Oct. 5. Stopped nearly all day at Galena, Called Fever river lead mines.

"Oct. 9th. Arrived at St. Louis early in the morning.

"Oct. 10th. Took lodging at Mrs. McNous for Mrs. S. \$4 per week. James \$2, Marion \$2. Mary (slave) \$2. Total \$10. Wood and candles to be furnished by me."

IN HIS inventory of his property, he listed a silver saddle and silver spurs; six large silver spoons, six teaspoons and one salt and one mustard spoon; a tea set of French china; a spy glass; six chairs, a portable desk; a pair of plated branch candlesticks; brass candlesticks; a pair of cut glass decanters; a dozen ivory handled knives and forks; a black walnut wash stand; "Two large & one small feather bed."

Mixed in with these items are such practical possessions as a "Spotted white & red cow," a red cow, ten sheep and a farm near St. Louis which Snelling bought for \$2,000 on August 13, 1825 — one of several purchases of land which Snelling made.

In the spring of 1828, Snelling went to Washington, D.C., to bring home his daughter, Mary, who was attending school there. However, sometime between June 1 and June 10, Mary died suddenly after having attended a party. Two months later, in August, Snelling himself died in Washington. He was 46 years old.

This tough-minded but intelligent and often compassionate army officer, one of scores like him who fought the nation's early wars and pushed its frontiers ever westward, once summed up his own career as follows:

"I have passed through every grade to the command of a regiment. I owe nothing to executive patronage, for I have neither friend or relative connected with the government. I have obtained my rank in the ordinary course of promotion and have retained it by doing my duty."



### THE GIBBS HOUSE

*Headquarters of the Ramsey County Historical Society, 2097 Larpenteur Avenue West, St. Paul, Minnesota.*

THE Ramsey County Historical Society was founded in 1949. During the following years the Society, believing that a sense of history is of great importance in giving a new, mobile generation a knowledge of its roots in the past, acquired the 100-year-old farm home which had belonged to Heman R. Gibbs. The Society restored the Gibbs House and in 1954 opened it to the public as a museum which would depict the way of life of an early Minnesota settler.

In 1958, the Society erected a barn behind the farm house which is maintained as an agricultural museum to display the tools and other implements used by the men who broke up the prairie soil and farmed with horse and oxen. In 1966, the Society moved to its museum property a one-room rural schoolhouse, dating from the 1870's. The white frame school came from near Milan, Minnesota. Now restored to the period of the late 1890's, the school actually is used for classes and meetings. In the basement beneath the school building, the Society has its office, library and collections. In 1968, the Society acquired from the University of Minnesota the use of the white barn adjoining the Society's property. Here is housed a collection of carriages and sleighs which once belonged to James J. Hill.

Today, in addition to maintaining the Gibbs property, the Ramsey County Historical Society is active in the preservation of historic sites in Ramsey county, conducts tours, prepares pamphlets and other publications, organizes demonstrations of pioneer crafts and maintains a Speakers' Bureau for schools and organizations. It is the Society's hope that through its work the rich heritage of the sturdy men and women who were the pioneers of Ramsey County will be preserved for future generations.