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*Rewarding
Private Investment*

Fort Snelling's Upper Post

By *Chuck Liddy, AIA, NCARB*
Miller Dunwiddie Architecture

There may be no greater preservation development opportunity that would stimulate incredible private investment than the Fort Snelling Upper Post. With incentives in place like the state and federal tax credit programs, developers are taking a new look at this National Historic Landmark. Fort Snelling is often called not just the "Birthplace of Minnesota" but also the "Gateway to the Northwest." Built between 1820 and 1825, the fort served as one of several Army outposts during Euro-American settlement of the nation's western frontier. When the frontier passed the fort, the property was sold and stood empty between 1858 and 1861. It was pressed back into service during the Civil War and the 1862 Indian Uprising in Minnesota, providing a base for training and equipping over 22,000 soldiers from the Upper Midwest region. New barracks, barns, warehouses, and kitchens were built outside the fort's original stone walls, and defeated Native Americans were interred at the base of the cliffs while awaiting their fate after the failed insurrection.

After the Civil War, the federal government designated the fort as headquarters for the Department of Dakota, which administered the expansive Dakota Territory to the west. As such, the fort was a staging point for military campaigns against Indian tribes, a tragic chapter of our nation's past. This expanded role launched an extensive construction campaign at the fort, producing dozens of new buildings for training, supplies, and administration. Between 1871 and 1880, long avenues and broad drill fields were laid out from the old fort, which had fallen into disrepair, to the new department headquarters. The handsome single and double houses of "Officer's Row" were constructed between 1879 and 1905 on Taylor Avenue, named for early fort commander, Zachary Taylor. Troops moved into modern brick barracks across the avenue in 1889.

Fort Snelling grew during the late 19th and early 20th centuries to meet military needs within and beyond U.S. boundaries. Training areas and induction centers were built for National Guard, Army Reserve, Officer Training Corps, and Regular Army troops called up for the Spanish-American War, the Mexican Expedition, and World War I. Life was more leisurely during the 1920s and 1930s, when officers played polo on one end of the parade grounds and golf on the other, giving the fort its reputation as the "Country Club of the Army." After America's entry into World War II, the fort's induction center was again filled with new recruits—over 300,000 were processed by a permanent staff of 1,000. The fort also housed the Military Intelligence Service Language School, which graduated

some 6,000 linguists, mostly Japanese-Americans. After the war, though, the Army found the fort of little strategic value. It was decommissioned and turned over to the Veterans Administration in 1946.

Fort Snelling was recognized as a National Historic Landmark in 1960, and the Minnesota legislature established the 2,500-acre Fort Snelling State Park in 1965 to protect the magnificent river setting. The park's manager, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR), gained additional responsibility to administer the Upper Post in 1971 when the federal government deeded it to the state, stipulating that it be used for recreational use. As buildings were emptied between 1971 and 1997, they were partially mothballed, as funding allowed, to await reuse, but they began deteriorating due to the elements and some vandalism. Now, decades later, the damage is accelerating.

The restored 1820s fort, the Lower Post, is managed by the Minnesota Historical Society as a living history museum. The Upper Post is overlooked by most people, although it played the primary role in the fort's history for nearly three-quarters of a century. While sports fields have been added to the parade grounds and the golf course remains in use, visitors have no incentive to explore the Upper Post area and its abandoned and decaying buildings.

Threats and Alterations

Since its construction in the 1820s, Fort Snelling has experienced many physical alterations and unsympathetic uses. Always, though, the fort has been saved by recognition of its national significance in the western expansion of the frontier, the development of the Mississippi River as a transportation corridor, and the settlement and growth of the Midwest. The ultimate test came in the 1950s when the Minnesota Highway Department announced plans to expand two major highways, which would have obliterated much of the historic fort. This triggered an intense battle, ultimately the highway department revised its plans, avoiding most of the historic structures.

Unfortunately, one upgraded highway bisected the fort, dividing the Lower Post from the Upper Post. While the former serves as the living history museum, the latter has languished, primarily due to the recreation-use deed restriction placed when transferred from the federal government. Ironically, these restrictions have sometimes fostered the fort's preservation, as some of the spurned redevelopment proposals called for demolition or intrusive new

construction. The Upper Post now faces a greater threat -- Mother Nature. Some Upper Post buildings have been empty since the DNR took possession in the early 1970s. Occupants moved out of the last building, the Post Headquarters (Building 67), in 1997.

The deterioration that subsequently set in at the Upper Post led to the entire site being first listed on PAM's 10 Most Endangered Historic Places list in 1996. It was subsequently listed again in 1997 and 2005. In 2006, the Upper Post was also included on the National Trust for Historic Preservation's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places list.

The Effort to Save the Fort

The current effort to save the Fort Snelling Upper Post began in earnest in 2006. That year, the DNR determined that redevelopment and reuse of the Upper Post was not consistent with its parks, recreation, and natural resources mission and would instead be best accomplished by another agency with more urban redevelopment capabilities. Hennepin County, the only local governmental unit within which Fort Snelling sits, stepped in as fiscal agent and began working with the DNR and other agencies to explore and facilitate redevelopment and reuse possibilities for the Upper Post. Since then, together they have secured over \$2 million in grants and other sources of funding for studies and stabilization and restoration work. Included in that amount was a \$150,000 Save America's Treasures (SAT) Grant secured in 2006 that helped fund the temporary mothballing of 26 historic Upper Post buildings. But the overall need is enormous.

Current estimates to rehabilitate all 26 historic buildings at the Upper Post, once reuses can be found for them, total over \$75 million. Showing once again the importance of many revenue sources to more effectively encourage reinvestment for preservation.

Hennepin County used a Base Realignment and Closures (BRAC) Grant in 2006 to update a 1998 Reuse Study for the Upper Post. Each building was resurveyed, photographically documented, and structurally assessed; and areas of deterioration were noted and compared against the 1998 information. This information was then used to determine the priorities for the mothballing work.

Partially spurred by receipt of the original SAT Grant, the effort to find reuses for the Upper Post's buildings is continuing and accelerating. To make available funding stretch as far as possible, Hennepin County proposed a unique approach and has been using its "Sentence to Service" (STS) correctional crews to do the work. STS crew members gained valuable preservation experience, and



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even though it was just mothballing, they learned carpentry and roofing skills; and the work was done for a fraction of the cost of using private sector construction crews. Construction trades groups, who provide supervisors for the work, fully support the STS program and its use at Fort Snelling. The success of the SAT grant-funded mothballing effort led to the Minnesota legislature appropriating \$500,000 in 2008 for STS crews to rebuild a collapsed portion of the roof at the Guard House (Bldg 65) and restore—through re-pointing, selective replacement, and cleaning—the masonry walls at both the Guard House and the Post Headquarters (Bldg 67). Most significantly, STS crews are learning new preservation construction skills—masonry restoration—under the guidance of highly qualified preservation architects and trades people. Additional restoration work on the fascias, soffits, eaves, and windows will be done until the funding runs out, which is expected by June, 2011.

Because of the success of the work being done with the 2008 appropriation, in March 2010 the Minnesota legislature approved an additional \$1.2 million for Fort Snelling restoration. This considerable sum is currently planned for the exterior restoration of the severely threatened Post Hospital (Bldg 55).

Eventual Redevelopment

Since the Hiawatha Light Rail Transit (LRT) line has a station at Fort Snelling, Hennepin County is also currently conducting an LRT Station Area Master Plan study for the entire Fort Snelling area under a Federal Transportation



Photo courtesy of Miller Dumaisidic Architecture

At left and above: #65 Guard House Building in various stages of rehabilitation

Administration (FTA) Grant. Due to be finished in early 2011, the study is exploring planning options for both historic and non-historic areas in the vicinity of the LRT station. The Station Area Master Plan will incorporate or reference many of the over one-dozen historic studies already prepared about Fort Snelling, which include facility assessments, reuse options, treatment standards and guidelines, interpretive

guidelines, and other information. The intent is to eventually establish a governance structure for the area that includes all the stakeholder groups and then solicit reuse and redevelopment proposals for the site. There is more momentum for revitalizing Fort Snelling now than at any time in the recent past. With patience, foresight, continued effort, and some luck, the fort can someday again be a location buzzing with activity!

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