

ed before my eyes. Suddenly I thought of my new word and knew how to use it. No heavy woollens! A chicken dinner! Of course, Spring House-Cleaning Week did have its compensations!

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## The Founding of Fort Atkinson

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The story of Fort Atkinson, Iowa, is an unusual one. First, the army built this fort to protect one tribe of Indians from neighboring tribes, whereas most frontier forts were built to control the Indians or to prevent Indian-white clashes. Second, this fort owed its location to the stubbornness of an army officer who, having promised the Indians to build it at one site for their protection, persuaded his superiors to change their plans for building it at another.

The establishment of Fort Atkinson resulted from a decision by the United States Government to move the Winnebago Indians from central and western Wisconsin Territory west across the Mississippi River into northern Iowa Territory. In 1837 the Winnebagoes, who had lived in Wisconsin for centuries, had been persuaded to cede their Wisconsin holdings to the United States. The treaty allowed the tribesmen the temporary use of their Wisconsin lands until eight months after ratification; then they were to move to Iowa. The Indians promptly forgot their promise to surrender their ceded lands; and by 1840, settlers in Wisconsin Territory angrily demanded that the tribe be removed. Governor Henry Dodge relayed the wishes of his constituents to Washington, and in the spring of 1840 the War Department decided that the Winnebagoes would be moved that summer.

Three men— General Henry Atkinson, Governor Henry Dodge, and Indian Agent David Lowry—were responsible for moving the tribe. Atkinson, a greying career soldier then commanding the First Military Department to which Iowa Territory and a part of Wisconsin Territory belonged, was well known to the Indians, who called him the White Beaver. He had served in the upper Mississippi valley since 1819 and was considered efficient, firm, and fair in his dealings with the redmen. Governor Dodge, as spokesman for the citizens of Wisconsin Territory and as Superintendent of Indian Affairs for that area, was anxious to get the troublesome Winnebagoes across the Mississippi. He too had spent years on the frontier as an army officer and Indian treaty negotiator. The Reverend Lowry was the Indian Agent then serving the Winnebago tribe. Of the three, he seems to have been the least experienced and to have had the smallest role in the removal.

According to the plan, General Atkinson was to bring several hundred U. S. Army regulars, both infantry and dragoons or mounted troops, to Wisconsin. Then, with Governor Dodge and Agent Lowry, he was to meet the Winnebagoes and convince them to move. The Indians were to be relocated in an area known as the Neutral Ground in northeastern Iowa. This land, by a treaty made in 1832 with the Sac-Fox tribe in Iowa and the Sioux of Minnesota, was supposed to be vacant. Both the Iowa and the Minnesota Indians had promised to stay at least twenty miles on either side of an east-west line separating their tribal holdings. The resulting forty-mile wide strip running west from the Mississippi River into northern Iowa came to be known as the Neutral Ground.

Nevertheless, braves of both tribes roamed the area at will. It had been a traditional hunting ground for decades, and even braves who might have wished to remain out of the area often strayed over the unmarked boundary when pursuing game or enemies. Not only did hunters roam the territory, but also raiding parties of Sac-Fox and Sioux warriors often attacked each other there. Thus the area was not vacant as government planners assumed. The Winnebagoes realized this and wanted no part of living between the hostile Sac-

Fox from the south and Sioux from the North. So when they learned they had to move into the Neutral Ground, the Winnebagoes balked. They said that the Sac-Fox tribe was their traditional enemy, that both Sac-Fox and Sioux greatly outnumbered them; and they made it clear that they had no desire to match strength with either of these tribes.

In April, 1840, General Atkinson arrived at Fort Crawford, Prairie du Chien. There he met with Dodge and Lowry, who told him that nearly half of the tribesmen had agreed to migrate. The Indians living near Portage, Wisconsin, however, not only refused but also ignored demands from the Governor and Agent to discuss the matter. Atkinson decided that the recalcitrant Indians needed a demonstration of military strength to change their minds. The War Department agreed and ordered an army of slightly more than one thousand U. S. troops to support him. While waiting for the soldiers to arrive, Atkinson sent orders to both the civil and military authorities near the Winnebago villages to arrest Yellow Thunder and Little Soldier, two prominent tribal leaders who refused to cooperate. This was done. Several weeks later, Atkinson led a few hundred troops up the Wisconsin River to Fort Winnebago, near Portage, and demanded that the Indians gather there for talks. This they did within a few days. In spite of Atkinson's force, the Winnebago leaders continued their refusal to move into Iowa. They said that their enemies would exterminate them unless they received protection from the army.

The War Department had planned a temporary army post on the Red Cedar River to keep the Sac-Fox braves on their own land and protect the Winnebagoes. Atkinson decided this post was too far south in Iowa to fulfill this function and promised the doubtful chiefs that he would build a post at the place where they would settle. Only then did the Winnebago leaders agree to migrate. Then Atkinson wrote the War Department of his plan to build temporary quarters for one company of infantry at the proposed Winnebago Agency in Iowa.

In early May, 1840, before receiving any reply from the War Department, Atkinson sent two officers and Agent



Lowry to Iowa to choose the site for the new post. Twelve days later he ordered Captain Isaac Lynde to lead his company of infantry from Fort Crawford west into Iowa to begin work on log cabins which would serve as temporary quarters for the troops. As was often the custom, the new post was named Camp Atkinson in honor of the man responsible for its location. The agency house and army post were both near the Turkey River, about forty miles west of the Mississippi in the northeastern corner of Iowa.

Late in May, Atkinson received orders from the War Department to halt any building along the Turkey or Red Cedar Rivers and shift the troops and new post south to the forks of the Des Moines River in central Iowa. This order threw Atkinson into confusion. He complained that he had promised the Winnebago chiefs that he would build a fort for their protection on the Turkey River site. Without that promise, he said, the Indians would have refused to migrate. Therefore, he wrote that because of his promise to the Indians, "a promise I feel bound in honor, as an officer of the army, to faithfully preserve," he should be allowed to complete the temporary quarters which were even then being built. If this were not done, some of the Winnebagoes would surely return to Wisconsin, and those who remained in Iowa would be subjected to continuing harrassment from their enemies. In either case the army would have trouble with these Indians for several years to come. Therefore, he suggested that the Turkey River installation be continued, but only as a temporary post, and that the buildings be made of logs. He asked for authorization to build a post large enough to house one company of infantry and one of dragoons. Then the army could still build the proposed permanent post on the Des Moines River farther to the south.

Early in June, Atkinson's letter asking for permission to continue building the post at Turkey River arrived at Washington. Secretary of War Joel Poinsett, after reading it, realized that the future peace of the area made it necessary for the post to be where it would afford adequate protection to the Winnebagoes. General Atkinson was probably right, and it would be a simple matter to accept his suggestion.

Poinsett replied that Atkinson's request to complete the temporary post he had ordered started was reasonable, and granted it. Because of his insistence that the fort was necessary to ensure peace, safeguard the Winnebagoes, and uphold his honor as an officer and a gentleman, Henry Atkinson had changed the policy of the War Department and had caused Fort Atkinson to be built on the Turkey River rather than at the forks of the Des Moines.

In spite of Atkinson's promise to protect them from the Sac-Fox tribesmen, the Winnebagoes still dreaded having to live near their warlike enemies. Exasperated with the Indians' continued uncooperativeness, Atkinson bluntly told the chiefs that their annual payments from the United States Government would be paid at the new agency house then being built at Camp Atkinson. Any Indian who refused to travel west into Iowa would have to forego his annuity that year. This was a persuasive argument, and most of the Winnebagoes moved. In an effort to reassure the Winnebagoes that Sac-Fox warriors would not attack them, Atkinson arranged a council between the two tribes to be held at Prairie du Chien later that summer. At this council the Indians agreed to remain at peace with each other, but this, like most Indian agreements, was not binding on the members of either tribe.

Having succeeded in moving the Winnebagoes to Iowa and in persuading his superiors in the War Department to build a post to protect that tribe, the General returned to his home at Jefferson Barracks near St. Louis. Difficulties with the Indians continued, however. The troops sent to build temporary quarters at the Turkey River site finished their task as the winter of 1840 arrived. Having a company of U. S. Infantry did not give the Winnebagoes the protection or security they needed. The Sac-Fox braves decided to attack the Winnebagoes late in November, 1840, but a severe snow storm stopped them. When the Winnebagoes learned of the plan, many of them abandoned the protection afforded by the troops and wandered back into western Wisconsin. In April, 1841, Atkinson received orders to station a company of dragoons in the Neutral Ground with orders to patrol the

area between the Winnebago and Sac-Fox tribes.

With the addition of the dragoons to the garrison the temporary quarters at Camp Atkinson proved inadequate. Therefore, in 1841 Atkinson requested and got authorization to expand the facilities at the camp. During preceeding decades the troops did most of the actual work of building military posts. Now, however, the soldiers were busy trying to keep unruly Indian tribes apart; and civilian workers labored to erect barracks, stables, and other fortifications. To bring lumber, stone, door and window fixtures, and furnishings to the new fort, a wagon road was built extending from the west shore of the Mississippi River across from Prairie du Chien to the camp nearly forty miles into Iowa. Soon sturdy stone and plank barracks and stables replaced the temporary log buildings erected only a year earlier. That summer the post was renamed Fort Atkinson.

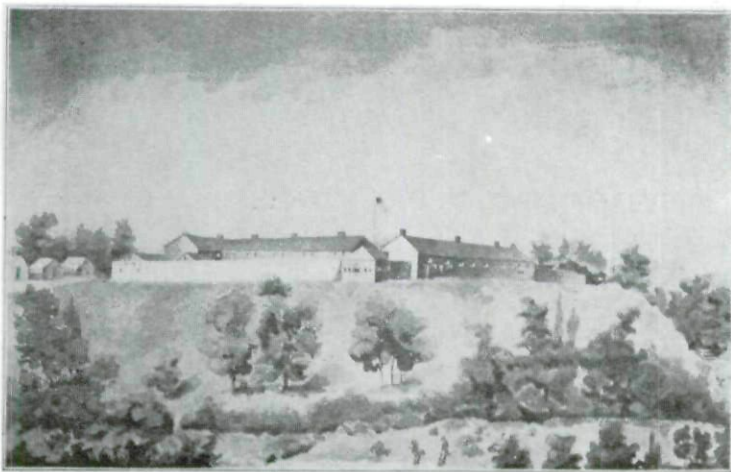
When he had suggested the post in the spring of 1840, General Atkinson had envisioned a few temporary buildings which could be erected by the troops and would be only a minor expense to the government. By 1842, however, the expense of building the road, erecting permanent facilities, and having much of the work done by paid civilian laborers raised the costs far beyond earlier expectations. Inspector General George Croghan, after visiting Fort Atkinson on his 1842 tour of inspection, was most unhappy. "Twenty-eight thousand dollars and more have already been expended upon this post," he complained, "nearly fourteen thousand beyond the amount appropriated by Congress, and five thousand dollars more are wanted to complete the work . . . . No temporary work such as this ought to be, should cost more than five hundred dollars, or require a longer time than a month in its erection."

Inspector General Croghan's criticism seems to have been fair, because in spite of the substantial nature of the post and the enlarged number of troops, both infantry and dragoons, that served there, the Winnebagoes never lost their fear of the dreaded Sac-Fox warriors, and Fort Atkinson proved to be of only temporary usefulness. This certainly made it questionable whether expensive, permanent buildings



should have been erected.

In 1846 the government negotiators persuaded the Winnebagoes to accept land north of the Minnesota River. In this new home they found themselves in the unenviable position of again serving as a buffer, this time between warring bands of Sioux and Chippewa. Thus the luckless Winnebagoes were no better off than they had been while living on the Neutral Ground in Iowa. In fact, they were even worse off than before. At their new home the growing season was shorter, and the soil poorer, and soon hundreds of Winnebagoes returned to Iowa and Wisconsin. In 1848-49 the troops from Fort Atkinson again escorted the Winnebagoes from the Neutral Ground—this time north to a location near the Crow Wing reservation in Minnesota. This was an area with good soil, away from the war-like Sioux, and away from white settlers, at least for the time being. With the Winnebagoes gone, the Sac-Fox tribe pushed farther west and south, and the Sioux soon to be removed from the area, there was little need for the mounted troopers at Fort Atkinson. When the dragoons finished moving the Winnebagoes into Minnesota, they returned to the fort, gathered their equipment and per-



FORT ATKINSON, WINNESHIEK COUNTY, IOWA, AS IT APPEARED IN 1842.  
CUT WAS REPRODUCED FROM AN ORIGINAL DRAWING ON FILE IN  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

sonal goods, and moved south. Thus the army abandoned the post only nine years after it was built, and only six years after the newest buildings had been completed.

Once the troops left, the fort rapidly fell into disrepair, Set-



BARRACK RUINS AT FORT ATKINSON

tlers helped themselves to windows, doors, and hardware. They tore down the wooden stockade to use as fence posts or firewood. In 1855 the War Department sold the battered buildings, and within the next few years the land which had been a part of the military reservation was sold to settlers. Within a few years most traces of the fort became hidden by the improvements of the settlers, and except for a few stone buildings Fort Atkinson disappeared.

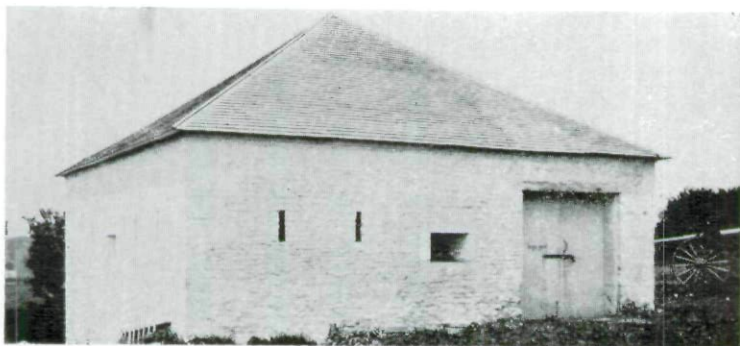
(EDITOR'S NOTE: Since 1958 the State Conservation Commission has restored the east stockade wall and replaced the north wall with new logs. Two cannon houses, the powder magazine, soldiers' well, and the stone barracks on the north side have been preserved along with the foundations of the old officers' quarters, the hospital, and the south barracks. Jack Musgrove, Curator of the State Historical Building, was asked to oversee the setting up of the now completed museum which is housed in the old barracks building. Visitors will also enjoy seeing the wildlife exhibits at the game farm instituted there



in 1959 by the Conservation Commission. This beautiful historic site, where fifteen hundred Winnebagoes once held a pow-wow with Governor Dodge and smoked the peace pipe, 120 years ago, was dedicated to the people of Iowa in 1962.)



RESTORED BARRACKS AND STOCKADE WALL



BLOCKHOUSE NO. 1 AS IT LOOKS TODAY—BUILT IN 1841

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