

The First Fort Crawford

When the news of the treaty of peace between Great Britain and the United States reached the Indians of the Upper Northwest they received it in a spirit of despair. They felt that they had been deserted. However, United States officials agreed to restore to the Indians all the rights and possessions which they enjoyed in 1811. The influence of British traders over the Indians was still strong and the United States entered upon a definite policy of control of this region to be accomplished by means of fur trading factories, Indian agencies, and military posts established at strategic locations.

Governor Lewis Cass of Michigan Territory recommended the establishment of military posts at Green Bay, Chicago, and at the Grand Portage. Before the end of the summer of 1815, the government had decided not only to establish garrisons at Chicago (Fort Dearborn) and Green Bay (Fort Howard), but also to reoccupy Prairie du Chien (Fort Crawford), to erect a new fort at or near the Falls of St. Anthony (Fort Snelling), another at Rock Island in the heart of the Sauk and Fox country (Fort Armstrong), and one opposite the mouth of the Des Moines River (Fort

Edwards) to protect the line of communication between St. Louis and the Upper Mississippi posts. Immediate steps were taken to put this plan into effect.

In April, 1816, Brevet Brigadier General Thomas A. Smith, late colonel of the Rifle Regiment, was sent upstream from St. Louis to get the program started. He selected the site for Fort Armstrong on Rock Island, then proceeded to Prairie du Chien. On July 3, 1816, workmen and soldiers under the supervision of Colonel William Southerland Hamilton began the construction of the new post at Prairie du Chien, named Fort Crawford in honor of the Secretary of War — William H. Crawford of Georgia. Timber for the new fort and stone for the magazine could be procured only at a distance of from two to five miles from Prairie du Chien and were transported to the site of the garrison by boats. The country where the timber was cut and stone quarried was so broken and hilly that teams could not be employed even to convey these articles to the boats — all this had to be done by manual labor. Even with these disadvantages, work on the buildings progressed at a satisfactory rate.

General Smith soon was succeeded by Captain Willoughby Morgan, who was destined to spend a large part of his subsequent career at this and other posts on the Mississippi River frontier. Morgan remained at Fort Crawford on this occa-

sion only until the spring of 1817; but at different periods during the next fifteen years, he served as commandant of the post. Much of his time was occupied with problems involved in building the fort.

In the spring of 1817 Lieutenant Colonel Talbot Chambers arrived from Fort Howard at Green Bay, and assumed command of Fort Crawford. Captain Morgan moved down the Mississippi to command Fort Armstrong on Rock Island. As Chambers had been in charge of the erection of Fort Howard during his sojourn at Green Bay, he was familiar with the problems he had to face in completing the construction of Fort Crawford.

Although Chambers was an able officer, he was inclined to be arbitrary and tyrannical. Shortly after his arrival he ordered certain houses in front of and near the post to be taken down by their owners and removed to the lower end of the village. Some inhabitants were seized for alleged violations of military orders and tried before a court martial, and he arrested a few fur traders for license irregularities.

The first returns of Fort Crawford, dated February, 1817, in the files of the War Department at Washington, D. C., show that the garrison at that time consisted of a total of 265 officers and men, 159 of whom belonged to the Rifle Regiment, and 106 to the Third Infantry. In addition to the privates, the number included four clerks, nine musi-

cians, fifteen corporals, fifteen sergeants, one sergeant major, two second lieutenants, one first lieutenant, three captains, one major, and Lieutenant Colonel Chambers.

The fort itself was a square of three hundred and forty feet on each side, constructed entirely of wood except the magazine which was of stone. The quarters, storehouses, and other buildings were ranged along the sides of the square, their rear walls some twenty feet high constituting the faces of the work, with loopholes at intervals of six feet. These buildings were covered with rough shingled shed roofs sloping inward. At both the southeast and northwest corners of the post two-story blockhouses with cupolas flanked the works, the upper story of each placed diagonally upon the lower. These blockhouses were fortified with plank upon their sides, and were furnished with loopholes for muskets and apertures for field pieces. Palisade work at the two corners not occupied by blockhouses was constructed of sturdy squared oak pickets some twenty feet high. The rooms were in general about nineteen feet square floored with oak plank; and all designated as quarters had a door and window facing the interior court. The magazine, twelve by twenty-four feet in the clear, was constructed with stone walls four feet thick, and it had an arched roof covered with strong timber. The buildings for the most part were made with squared timbers with crevices in the walls

plastered with lime mortar, and they afforded accommodations for approximately five companies.

In the early summer of 1817, Major Stephen H. Long, a topographical engineer in the United States Army, made a military journey in a six-oared skiff up the Mississippi to the Falls of St. Anthony and return. He inspected Fort Crawford enroute and took a dim view of the site selected for it. He said that the site was unhealthful being surrounded by marshes and stagnant water, that it had no complete command of the river due to a large island in front of it and other islands nearby, that the heights a mile or so at the rear overlooked the garrison, and that troops could be conducted up a valley south and east of the fort completely under cover. Long also mentioned that the site of the fort had been repeatedly subject to inundation which could always be expected when excessive floods prevailed in the river. "Indeed," he concluded, "the military features of the place" are "faint and obscure."

Indians were frequent visitors at the Prairie during the fall and winter of 1817-1818, but no hostile demonstration occurred. Stealing horses and shooting hogs were their principal offenses, and threats to confine them in the fort proved to be a deterring factor. An exciting event at the post in February, 1818, was a duel fought between Benjamin O'Fallon, late of the army but more recently an employee of the Indian agency, and

Lieutenant William G. Shade of the garrison. Shade received the second shot in his underjaw which ended the affair. Late in April a large delegation of Menominee Indians held a dance and a powwow at Prairie du Chien. Indian orators gave long discourses with great vehemence. Visiting Winnebago Indians joined in ball games with the Menominee displaying skill in catching and hurling the ball and minding neither broken bones nor bruises.

In the spring, fur traders brought in the season's catch to the trading post at Prairie du Chien, and among them was the renowned Robert Dickson. Lord Selkirk, himself, stopped at Fort Crawford enroute from his Red River Colony in Canada to Washington, D. C., that spring.

In June, 1818, Lieutenant L. Hickman arrived from St. Louis to assume command at Fort Crawford, and Colonel Chambers left immediately for St. Louis to take command of Fort Belle Fontaine.

During June, 1818, boats from St. Louis began to arrive at the Prairie with provisions, whisky, and supplies of all kinds — a welcome sight both to the garrison and to traders. Many boats, too, loaded with furs left Prairie du Chien for Mackinac and St. Louis. Near the end of the month a fleet of Winnebago canoes arrived, and the Indians erected their teepees on the island opposite the fort. When the garrison was mustered in the last day of June, the troops executed various ma-

neuvers to show their military prowess while Winnebago braves, naked except for a breech clout, and painted all colors, danced through the streets of the village. On the nation's birthday, July 4th, the troops at the post fired a cannon at daybreak; and later they marched out of the fort and fired a salute by platoons. All this noise and demonstration of power greatly impressed the Indians.

Major Willoughby Morgan returned to command Fort Crawford on August 17, 1818. In the summer of 1819 the post was taxed to its capacity by the arrival of Lieutenant Colonel Henry Leavenworth with the Fifth Infantry from Detroit. Leavenworth had been ordered to proceed with his command by the Great Lakes, Fox-Wisconsin route to Prairie du Chien. Thence part of his troops would be sent down the Mississippi to garrison Fort Armstrong, part would be left at Fort Crawford, while Leavenworth with the rest of his command would proceed up the Mississippi to establish a new post at the mouth of the St. Peter's or Minnesota River.

Colonel Leavenworth and his troops remained at Fort Crawford for more than a month awaiting supplies, ordnance, ammunition, and recruits from St. Louis. Meantime, he was joined by Major Thomas Forsyth, an experienced Indian agent, with some two thousand dollars worth of goods to pay the Sioux for tracts of land ceded by them to Lieutenant Zebulon M. Pike fourteen years earlier.

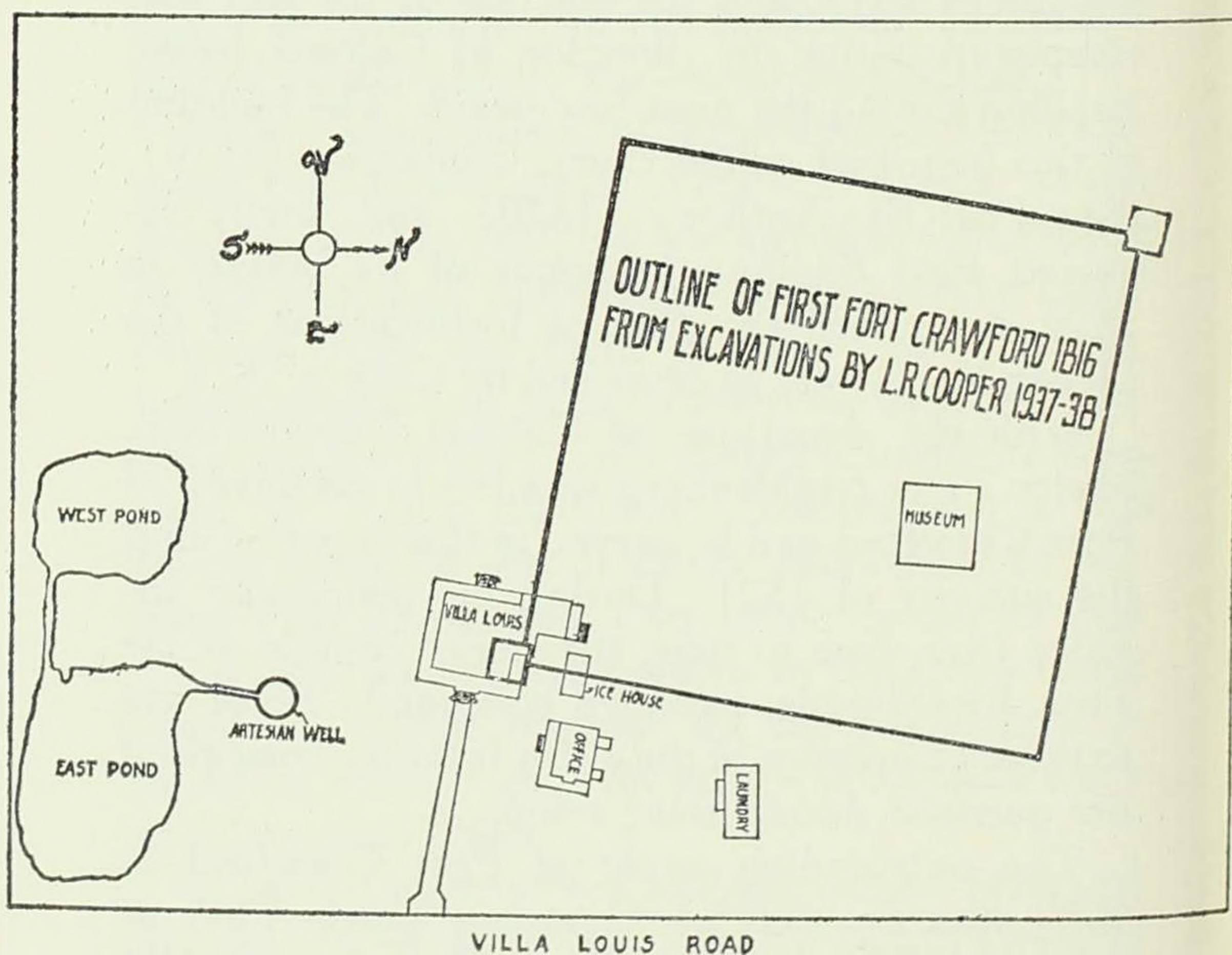
As soon as the supplies arrived from St. Louis, Colonel Leavenworth and Major Forsyth embarked on their journey upstream.

Preparations for the establishment of a military post at the mouth of the Minnesota River were begun by Colonel Leavenworth upon his arrival in the fall of 1819, and the erection of the fort was completed under the direction of Colonel Josiah Snelling during the next few years. The building of this fort, first called Camp Coldwater (1819); then Fort St. Anthony (1820); and finally renamed Fort Snelling in honor of its builder in 1824, completed the plan of fortifications of the Upper Northwest as proposed by Cass in 1815.

With the departure of Colonel Leavenworth, Major Peter Muhlenberg was left in command of Fort Crawford and he served in this capacity until the summer of 1821. During his temporary absence from time to time, the senior captain at the Fort, John Fowle, assumed command. From one to three companies of the Fifth Infantry comprised the garrison during this period.

The outstanding event at Fort Crawford in 1820 was the visit of Governor Lewis Cass of Michigan Territory. Cass and his party had sought the source of the Mississippi, placing it erroneously in Cass Lake. The expedition which had set out from Detroit, thirty-eight in number, on May 24, 1820, arrived at Fort Crawford on August 5th. Henry Schoolcraft, who accompanied

the party as mineralogist, described Fort Crawford as having "a very neat and imposing appearance." The garrison consisted of ninety-six men under the command of Captain Fowle who received the distinguished visitors courteously and ordered a salute fired in honor of Governor Cass.



The year 1821 passed quietly at Fort Crawford, with Major Muhlenberg in command from January to June inclusive, and Captain Fowle from July to December. In April, 1822, Morgan, now a lieutenant colonel, again took over command of the

post. He complained to Major General Edmund P. Gaines, commanding officer of the department, about his difficulties in trying to enforce the rules against bringing liquor into the Indian country.

During the early summer of 1822, a flood in the Mississippi caused the river to cover the parade ground to a depth of three to four feet. The water entered the officers' and soldiers' quarters and compelled them to encamp for about a month on the neighboring heights. At the end of that time they returned to the fort and to the unpleasant task of making the quarters habitable again.

In the summer of 1823, the garrison at Fort Crawford again entertained Major Stephen H. Long who had first visited the post in 1817. Long was in command of a governmental expedition to explore the region about the head of Lake Superior. One member of the party described Fort Crawford as "the rudest and least comfortable we have seen." Its site, he said, was low and unpleasant, and was injudicious not only because of the danger of such floods as occurred the previous summer but also because it commanded neither the Mississippi nor the Wisconsin. Major Long and his party soon departed for Fort Snelling with an escort from Fort Crawford. The narrator of the expedition thought that Fort Crawford, doubtless, would soon be abandoned. Little did he foresee impending events.