

A Fort is Built

The line of boats that Kingsley led down the Missouri and into the mile-wide Mississippi was the largest convoy the Americans had yet sent into the upper country. There were at least four big keelboats, perhaps as many as six, and the task of getting them to the mouth of the Des Moines River took more than two weeks. So many of Kingsley's soldiers were ill, probably of malaria, that there were barely enough hands to navigate the boats.

About September 11, 1808, the convoy reached the Des Moines, at a time when passenger pigeons would have been surging down from the north and flights of white pelicans would be passing in the western sky — alternately flapping and gliding across the scarlet flare of sunset. On the east the bluffs came to the edge of the Mississippi, but on the west, where the Des Moines came in, there was bottomland with sycamore, cottonwood, and walnut trees. The main channel ran along the west side, and the two islands at the mouth of the Des Moines made that little river seem to have three openings.

Army men in Washington were never quite sure of the topography of the upper Mississippi; some-

times they spoke of the Des Moines Rapids as the factory site, and sometimes they placed it at "the mouth of the Des Moines." The final instructions from the Secretary of War had been specific: build a post at the mouth of the Des Moines. But Kingsley feared the land near the mouth was subject to flooding, and he could find no supply of clean spring water for his men, so he moved on upstream across the twelve-mile stretch of rapids to the land that Governor Lewis had bought from the Indians. No luck here, either, for the only spot fit for a garrison was half a mile from the river and there were not enough big white oaks to make a stockade.

On up the river they went, scanning the western shore. Kingsley probably knew nothing of the recommendations that Zebulon Pike had made after a reconnaissance in 1805. Pike had suggested the head of the Rapids as a likely location for a trading house — considered solely on the basis of convenience for the Indians — and had picked a high elevation farther upstream, at what is now Burlington, Iowa, for a military post. Pike had not supposed that factory and fort would be combined.

Kingsley stopped short of Pike's second site and chose a place on the north shore, some ten miles above the Rapids, and in choosing it he blundered. The location could never be defended; behind it ran a ridge where the Indians could take cover while firing down on the garrison, and along

the west was a ravine where war parties could infiltrate without being seen. Few military men who later saw the location failed to comment on its dismal shortcomings.

Kingsley liked it. "This situation is high," he wrote the Secretary of War, "commands an extensive view of the river and the adjacent country — also an excellent spring of water — and I believe there is no place on the river which will prove more healthy, and none more advantageous to the Indian trade."

Because he had passed up the land bought by Governor Lewis, he would need to ask the Indians for permission to shift the site. Before he unloaded his boats he sent for the chiefs and important men of the Sauks, Foxes, Ioways, and Sioux of the Des Moines, and held a council. The Indians agreed upon the new site, took the \$300 in merchandise that Lewis had offered them for the earlier location, and went away satisfied. Then Kingsley began work on the establishment that, until the following spring, he would call Fort Bellevue.

No one pretended that Alpha Kingsley was the ideal man to supervise the building of a fort; he was merely a man doing a job that no one else was on hand to do. He was a Vermont man who had been appointed ensign in 1803, second lieutenant in 1805, and first lieutenant in 1808. He would never make much of a name for himself,

though he would become the friend of Sam Houston and Andrew Jackson, and Houston would later describe him as "a very amiable man, and a good member of the Church."

The only junior officer on the expedition was Second Lieutenant Nathaniel Pryor, who had some of the intrepidity that Kingsley lacked. Pryor had been the first man to volunteer for the Lewis and Clark expedition and one of the four sergeants who had served in that group. He had won an army commission for his excellent work with Lewis and Clark. But he was doomed to a short, unhappy life spent mostly among the Osage Indians, after a brief career in the Army.

Two civilians had come with Kingsley. One was John Johnson, the factor, and the other was Nicholas Boilvin, the Indian agent. Johnson was a Maryland man who was now starting a career that would keep him among the Indians for many years, then take him back to civilization and make him, for a time, the mayor of St. Louis. Boilvin, a French Canadian, would see long years of service among the Indians and would one day serve as a Justice of the Peace in Prairie du Chien. His present assignment was to help Johnson with the factory and to look after the temporarily defunct farm and blacksmith shop at the Rapids. He had with him the goods for the regular annuity payment to the Sauks and Foxes, provided for in the treaty of 1804.

The winter of 1808-1809 was the roughest the Valley had seen in many a year. An early freeze caught the settlers unprepared; boats were locked tight in the channel as far downstream as the mouth of the Ohio. During this bad weather the men of Fort Bellevue lived in temporary huts while they worked on the permanent buildings. Work parties were cutting fourteen-foot logs of oak, twelve to fourteen inches in diameter, stripping off the bark and hewing the great timbers flat on two sides. It was not easy to find enough logs that met specifications, and some were far from the building site. When snow fell, Kingsley hired sleds and oxen from trader Denis Julien to get the logs moved in. (Julien had settled just below Ewing's farm at the Rapids in 1805; he would supply laborers for the fort during the entire construction process, and would soon be freighting furs to St. Louis for John Johnson).

Frontier forts were quite standard in design. The pattern called for a palisade or stockade of upright logs about 120 feet square, with two-story blockhouses at each corner, twenty feet square. Kingsley decided to vary slightly from this pattern and build a five-sided stockade with three blockhouses. At first he thought he would put the factory inside the fort, but after looking over the tough, suspicious Sauks and Foxes he moved the location to a safer position west of the garrison.

By the spring of 1809 the Indians had decided they disliked the look of things around the fort. They had agreed to a peaceful factory but the place looked more like a military installation. British traders such as Jacques Porlier and Edward Lagoterie, who had been wintering with the tribes at their hunting grounds down along the Wyaconda River, had been stirring up unrest. Now the Indians were about ready to come up the river and pass the fort on the way to their summer homes near the mouth of the Rock River. They knew the condition of the post, that it was still a vulnerable collection of huts surrounded by a temporary stockade of low and spindly pickets. The blockhouses were not completed. If any mischief were to be done, now was the time.

One of the unhappier Indians was Black Hawk. He was by no means a principal chief of the Sauks, and in these days he had little influence. Later, as a fiercely pro-British warrior and probably a "war chief" of the Sauks, he would lead a group against the Americans in the War of 1812. Still later, his stubborn will to resist the westward movement would bring on the tragic Black Hawk War of 1832. As of now he was merely one of the ringleaders of a band that wanted to get inside the stockade and kill the soldiers.

The Indian activity around the fort so alarmed Kingsley that in late March he sent Pryor and six soldiers down to St. Louis to alert Governor

Lewis and Superintendent Clark. Lewis issued a call for volunteer riflemen, and some of these Rangers and a detachment of regulars from Belle Fontaine set out by land and water to reinforce Fort Bellevue.

Early in April the entire population of the Sauk and Fox tribes appeared at the fort, swarming ashore on the opposite bank and leaving their hollow-log canoes heaped with rolls of loosely tied furs. After they camped, trading parties began to cross the river to barter with Johnson for their summer supplies. The peaceable Indians were in a hurry to reach their summer homes and put their fields in shape for corn planting. Perhaps they also were anxious to get their trading done before the trouble started.

It was hard to keep a secret in an Indian camp. The old men sat gabbling in the spring sun, the bitter young men met in council and murmured their awful plans to one another, and the women chattered all day long at their work. It is not surprising, then, that three separate warnings of an attack had already reached Kingsley. William Clark had sent word of possible trouble. Nicholas Jarrot, a merchant and trader, had stopped by the fort on April 8 with another warning. Finally a young Ioway brave had reportedly revealed, while trading was in progress, that the hour was near.

On April 10 a party of Sauks and Foxes came to the fort, led by Black Hawk and a chief named

Pashepaho. "*Bon jour, Father,*" the chief may have said, using the traditional form of address for a white official. "My braves have finished their trading. They are happy to have made a good hunt and to have dealt well with the trader. Now they wish to come inside the stockade and do a dance for the white soldiers."

A hurried parley with the interpreter, then Kingsley shook his head. No dance, he said. If they wanted to dance they could go over to the factory and dance for John Johnson. A rumble of surprise and disappointment ran through the party of warriors. Apparently it had not occurred to them that Kingsley might refuse their suggestion. Uneasily, not quite sure what to do next, they began to crowd the gate of the stockade.

Kingsley had kept all his men inside today, under arms, and they stood ready with flintlock muskets loaded and primed. Just inside the gate, its muzzle trained directly at the Indians, was a cannon charged with grape shot. Beside it stood a soldier with a stick of flaming port-fire in his hand, ready to touch the fuse.

The Indians backed down. Pashepaho waved them away, and as they turned in retreat they raised war clubs and sent forth a great shout of defiance and frustration. "In twenty minutes," said an eye witness, "not an Indian was to be seen on the north side of the river."

Next day a party of chiefs that included Quash-

quame came over to apologize. It was hard to keep the belligerent young men under control, they said, and they were thankful to know that "the smoke had disappeared." Kingsley had the cannon, a six-pounder, wheeled out to the river's edge and fired. After a terrific boom, the balls of grape came spattering down into the water. The chiefs, said one report, "put their hands to their mouths with an exclamation that the shot would have killed half of them."

The thwarted coup caused Kingsley to double his efforts. He burned fires about the fort to conceal the nighttime movements of the men, and worked long hours to complete the stockade. The big logs went up fast now, and on the evening of April 14 the men tamped the earth around the final section, hung the gate and barred it, and were secure.

In the letter he wrote to Washington a few days later, Kingsley called his post Fort Madison for the first time. It was an obvious choice for a name, considering the fact that James Madison was now the President — so obvious that it had already been given to another post on the Arkansas River fifty miles above the Mississippi. There was still another Fort Madison in Annapolis harbor on the East Coast. Because of this duplication in names, there would always be some confusion in the records.

A detachment of regulars reached the fort after

the excitement was over, stayed a few days, then started home. Downstream they met the militiamen under Captain Bernard Pratte, a St. Louis merchant, bound for the fort in keelboats. Pratte's boats were laden with supplies for Kingsley and it was necessary for them to finish the trip, but the volunteers were also soon hurrying back home.

The alarm was over. The Mississippi Valley settlers heaved a sigh, and Meriwether Lewis dismissed his Rangers.