The
Fort Snelling
Round Tower

AN INTERPRETATION OF
THE RICHARD HAINES MURALS
BY GRACE LEE NUTE
The Round Tower is more than the oldest building in Minnesota. It is a shrine to Minnesotans and other residents of the Northwest. For nearly a century and a quarter it has typified American occupation of the region. Standing guard high above two rivers at their junction it has been a sort of beacon to white men both military and civil. It has witnessed the coming of soldiers and settlers and the departure of the red men and much that they represented. These are the themes of the murals in the Round Tower painted by Richard Haines.

To make description easy let us begin with the scene facing the visitor as he enters at the main door. It is a panel devoted to the theme of the establishment of a visible arm of the United States government in this region. On the left and on the right the panels continue this theme, stressing on the left the civil importance of Fort Snelling before the Civil War, and on the right the military significance of the fort. The panel above the door shows the Indians departing in despair when faced by both civilian advance and military regulation.

The arrival of American military forces in 1805 and 1819 begins the story. Though the region at the mouth of the St. Peter's, now the Minnesota River, had been known to white men for at least a hundred and twenty-five years when Zebulon Montgomery Pike reached the area in 1805, he more than any other individual typifies the arrival of the American frontier here. French and British explorers and fur traders had been here but had left almost nothing permanent. Then with the formation of the United States government came the resolve to oust British influence and occupation on the headwaters of the Mississippi. To accomplish that purpose Lieutenant Pike with about twenty men of the United States Army was sent with instructions to try to find the source of the Mississippi, to examine the country, to conciliate the Indians, to note British influence, and to look for positions suitable for military posts.

He arrived at the mouth of the St. Peter's on September 21, 1805, and made his encampment on the large island now called in his honor. One result of this expedition was the purchase of the land on which, fifteen years later, a fort was commenced. The panel represents not only Pike's arrival in batteaux, but also the coming of Lieutenant Colonel Henry B. Leavenworth and his soldiers in 1819 to begin the actual construction of the fort. On the right of the main scene a few of the hundred and fifty Sioux warriors who welcomed Pike are depicted; and on the left are the Chippewa whom the Sioux were about to raid when deflected by curiosity about the "palefaces." These were the two great tribes of Indians who made the Minnesota country a battlefield in historic times. No little part of the garrison's duty was to keep the peace between these rival tribes and to protect white traders, missionaries, and settlers from them. However, Indians never attacked the fort and its walls never had to withstand a siege. Fort Snelling's history has ever been a peaceful one.

The panel to the right shows the construction of Fort St. Anthony, whose name was changed to Fort Snelling in honor of the second commandant and the real builder of the post, Colonel Josiah Snelling. A diagram of the fort as originally constructed is depicted in the terrazza floor of the Round Tower immediately below the skylight. Note that the fort as built on the present site in 1820, after some false starts elsewhere, was diamond shaped. One point fitted exactly into the sharp angle formed by the junction of the two rivers. There a semicircular lookout was constructed with the commandant's house where
the commanding officer's residence still stands. To the north­west, overlooking the Mississippi and connected by a wall with the semicircular lookout, was a pentangular tower, long since gone. Directly opposite it was the hexagonal tower, which still surmounts the white Minnesota River bluff. It was connected by a wall with the Round Tower and by buildings with the semicircular tower. Remains of the two walls, where they connected with the Round Tower, are still visible.

This first panel to the right shows also soldiers, canthooks on shoulders, coming from the woods in winter, where they have been cutting logs for the new fort. To keep the soldiers contented with their hard lot on a raw frontier, the officer in charge of the garrison gave them an extra allowance for their construction work. This is the first intimation in the murals that the country near Fort Snelling had a wealth of pines, an asset which was to have tremendous influence not only on Fort Snelling's history but also on that of all the Northwest. This lumbering note is echoed in the third panel to the left, where freshly cut trees are noticeable; and in all the panels that show log cabins. The lumber for the first log buildings of the fort, situated about three hundred yards northwest of the present location, were cut and sawed by hand from pine logs felled along Rum River about forty miles north of the fort. Obviously more modern methods were needed, and so, in the summer of 1821, a garrison sawmill was erected at the Falls of St. Anthony. It began cutting boards in 1822, and in 1823 a grist mill was added to it. Note in another panel the wheat, which symbolizes the early agricultural efforts at the fort as well as among the pioneer settlers round about. By the early 1850's Fort Snelling was raising crops that necessitated still more modern equipment. The post had one of the first reapers, if not the first, in Minnesota.

Note also in this panel the stone work of the fort and the men working with hammer and trowel in the construction of a wall. The stone was secured at hand, from the limestone bluffs that still brighten the junction of the two rivers. These bluffs make a pleasant note in the central panel, where they line the banks of the rivers; and again in the second panel to the left, where they make the background for the steamboat landing.

The second and third panels to the right depict the relations between the garrison and the Indians. In 1819 an Indian agent, Lawrence Taliaferro, was appointed to take up his duties near the new post, but before his arrival and even later on occasion, the commandant at the fort took charge of Indian affairs. Usually close co-operation existed between the agent and the fort, to which Indian offenders were brought by troops, as shown in one of the panels. Taliaferro enticed the natives to the fort for solemn conclaves, and the Indians loved to gather there for games, dances, and ceremonials of one sort and another, as intimated by the mural. Note the Indian dance in progress, and the figure in the panel suggesting the much revered "Father" of the "red children" of the Northwest, Major Taliaferro, inducing them to give up their British flags, silver gorgets, and medals. The soldiers are at attention, for the Indians were kept in awe partly by shows of military display, discipline, and pageantry. Still another note struck by this panel is the feminine influence supplied by Fort Snelling. The first white women ever seen by many of the natives were the wives and daughters of officers and men of the garrison. Family life is pleasantly suggested in the panel by the women in their quaint, charming costumes, the knitting, and the child in arms.

In the third panel are seen the round tower, the guard house, the gate port with a little tower and a flagpole on it, the wall just building, and another structure, possibly a corner of the
chapel, or perhaps a bit of the officers' quarters. Thus log cabins, stone towers, and a high stockade existed side by side in the early days of Fort Snelling, making its design a mixture of garrison and fur-post architecture.

On the left side of the central panel we come first to a scene depicting the fur-trade régime in the Northwest, which had pretty well run its course when the fort was established. For a century and a half French, then British, and finally American traders had operated on the headwaters of the Mississippi and in the valleys of the St. Croix and the St. Peter's. They and their voyageurs had explored the region, given names to lakes and streams, established scores of trading posts, and created an understanding of white men's ways among the Indians. With the establishment of Fort Snelling and the appointment of an Indian agent to reside there, it became a part of the garrison's obligation to supervise trade with the Indians. Licenses to trade were issued by the agent; the post watched for infractions of a law forbidding traffic in liquor with the natives; and treaties were made whereby tribes agreed to keep the peace or to give up their claim to land desired by white settlers. Important treaties of this kind were negotiated with the Chippewa and the Sioux in 1837 at Fort Snelling and Washington; and with the Sioux in 1851 at Traverse des Sioux and Mendota. Mendota, across the river from Fort Snelling, was long the center of the fur trade with the Sioux. There the American Fur Company kept a post under the able direction of Henry H. Sibley, a fur trader and later a territorial delegate, writer, big-game hunter, military man, and host to scores of visitors to Fort Snelling and the Northwest. Explorers, artists, naturalists, English gentry, bishops, and others found their host at Mendota and his warm friends among officers and men across the river such a delightful experience that they recorded it in their diaries and letters and printed it in their travel accounts. Fort Snelling was a magic name in the second quarter of last century to those who wanted to visit or read about unusual places, full of travel interest and exotic touches.

The panel covering the fur-trade phases of the garrison's history uses the keg to typify the containers of both liquor and ammunition as delivered by traders to Indians for furs. The gay sash of the voyageur, universally present wherever traders were found, shows the profession of the main negotiator of the trading scene. Coins suggest the change from a barter to a money system, which entered the country with the soldiers. Note the tump line, or portage strap, and the snowshoes, both typical of voyageur methods of transportation soon to be superseded by the steamboat.

The next scene represents steamboat travel and the changes it brought to the region. In 1823 the first steamboat, the Virginia, anchored at Fort Snelling, which remained the terminus of most of the up-river traffic until St. Paul was established in the early 1840's. Even then, boats usually went on to call at the fort's levee. By the time the Fort Snelling reservation was sold in 1858 hundreds of tourists, including a president's son, a presidential aspirant, and an ex-president, had come up the river on excursions. Indeed, Fort Snelling in the fifties was the end of the Fashionable Tour. With steamboats came business, which is symbolized by the sign on the landing and by the document being written by the boat captain on the left.
The scene that follows shows a quarrel between some of the numberless settlers who came up on the steamboats to settle Minnesota and who are seen to the left leaving the fort for their new homes on the prairies and in the Big Woods. Prairie schooners carried hundreds of Minnesota families to their new homes, both those that came all the way in teams and those that made Fort Snelling their point of departure after arriving on steamboats. Such an altercation as the one depicted serves to recall the rule of the fist on the frontier and the need of a fort as a silent reminder that there was a national government operating over the region, despite the absence in early days of local civil government.

The little lonesome prairie cabin of the next panel typifies the frontier homes which dotted the area on and about Fort Snelling reservation just before and during territory and early statehood days. Past such typical American frontier homes moved the sad trains of Indians, forced off their ancestral homes bysettlers, and leaving behind, as a mute reminder of a life now gone forever, the whitening buffalo skull. The travois, or crude vehicle used by the Indians for transportation, is shown as hundreds of settlers saw it, pulled by a gaunt native pony.

The round tower remains with us, almost the sole man-made reminder of all the scenes, people, and events of early Minnesota days suggested by the panels of the mural. In 1858 the Fort Snelling Military Reservation was sold, but the Civil War came on before the post had been completely dismantled, and brought the fort back into effective use and final government ownership again. Since that conflict Fort Snelling has remained a regular army post. In the first World War it served primarily as an induction post, and it is serving the same purpose in the second World War. The murals in the Round Tower relate only to the period before 1858.

About 1937 the commanding officer at Fort Snelling, Brigadier General C. B. Hodges, conceived the idea of restoring the old Round Tower to something like its original condition and of making the interior a museum paying tribute to Fort Snelling's romantic past. With the consent of the War Department, the efficient and enthusiastic support of officers of the fort, and generous WPA assistance, he pushed the work forward as long as he remained and has continued his deep interest ever since. Since General Hodges' departure from the fort other commandants and officers have carried on the work enthusiastically and efficiently, and the Round Tower was opened as a museum in the spring of 1941. Its displays are under the supervision of the Minnesota Historical Society, which changes them from time to time. Objects presented to the museum are also in the custody of the Society. The museum is open from 8:00 to 5:00 daily, and a sentinel is on guard during those hours.