



ISSUE SEVEN : SUMMER 2017
OPEN RIVERS :
RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

HERITAGE, OPEN SPACE & WATER

<http://openrivers.umn.edu>

An interdisciplinary online journal rethinking the Mississippi
from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

ISSN 2471-190X

The cover image is of Pike Island at Fort Snelling State Park in Minnesota, looking west, showing the Mississippi River. Photographer Brett Whaley. (CC BY-NC 2.0)

Except where otherwise noted, this work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/). This means each author holds the copyright to her or his work, and grants all users the rights to: share (copy and/or redistribute the material in any medium or format) or adapt (remix, transform, and/or build upon the material) the article, as long as the original author and source is cited, and the use is for noncommercial purposes.

Open Rivers: Rethinking Rethinking Water, Place & Community is produced by the [University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing](https://www.lib.umn.edu/) and the [University of Minnesota Institute for Advanced Study](https://www.umn.edu/advanced-study/).

Editors

Editor:
Patrick Nunnally, Institute for Advanced Study,
University of Minnesota

Administrative Editor:
Phyllis Mauch Messenger, Institute for Advanced
Study, University of Minnesota

Assistant Editor:
Laurie Moberg, Doctoral Candidate,
Anthropology, University of Minnesota

Media and Production Manager:
Joanne Richardson, Institute for Advanced Study,
University of Minnesota

Contact Us

Open Rivers
Institute for Advanced Study
University of Minnesota
Northrop
84 Church Street SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455

Telephone: (612) 626-5054
Fax: (612) 625-8583
E-mail: openrvrs@umn.edu
Web Site: <http://openrivers.umn.edu>

ISSN 2471-190X

Editorial Board

Jay Bell, Soil, Water, and Climate, University of
Minnesota

Tom Fisher, Metropolitan Design Center,
University of Minnesota

Lewis E. Gilbert, Institute on the Environment,
University of Minnesota

Mark Gorman, Policy Analyst, Washington, D.C.

Jennifer Gunn, History of Medicine, University of
Minnesota

Katherine Hayes, Anthropology, University of
Minnesota

Nenette Luarca-Shoaf, Art Institute of Chicago

Charlotte Melin, German, Scandinavian, and
Dutch, University of Minnesota

David Pellow, Environmental Studies, University
of California, Santa Barbara

Laura Salvesson, Mill City Museum, Minnesota
Historical Society

Mona Smith, Dakota transmedia artist; Allies:
media/art, Healing Place Collaborative

CONTENTS

Introduction

Introduction to Issue Seven

By Patrick Nunnally, Editor 4

Features

Anthracite Heritage: Landscape, Memory and the Environment

By Paul A. Shackel 6

Lost to Progress: Upper Mississippi River and Minneapolis Parks Development

By Anna Bierbrauer 22

Where the Water Takes You: Unlocking Place-based Meanings
through Inquiry at the Tidal Basin in Washington, D.C.

By Barbara J. Little and Katie Crawford-Lackey 40

Geographies

The St. Louis River

By Alex Messenger 58

Perspectives

River Reveal: Photographing the Mississippi

By Angie Tillges 74

Teaching and Practice

The Flow of Health, Water, and Information in the Mississippi Watershed

By Reba Juetten 92

Primary Sources

Fort Snelling as I Knew It

By Catherine Watson 95

In Review

National Parks: Can “America’s Best Idea” Adjust to the Twenty-first Century?

By Patrick Nunnally 107

PRIMARY SOURCES

FORT SNELLING AS I KNEW IT

By Catherine Watson

When he was nine, my brother Steven enlisted the rest of the kids in our isolated neighborhood to help him build earthworks in the empty field behind our house. Not a fort—we already lived in one of those—but a replica of Little Round Top, a crucial site on the Gettysburg battlefield.

It made perfect sense: When your home is an historic place, some of that history is bound to rub off.

In Steven's case, it turned him into a nationally recognized collector of Civil War literature. It made me a writer and a devoted believer in



*1895 aerial view of Taylor Avenue, Fort Snelling's Officers Row.
Digital image Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

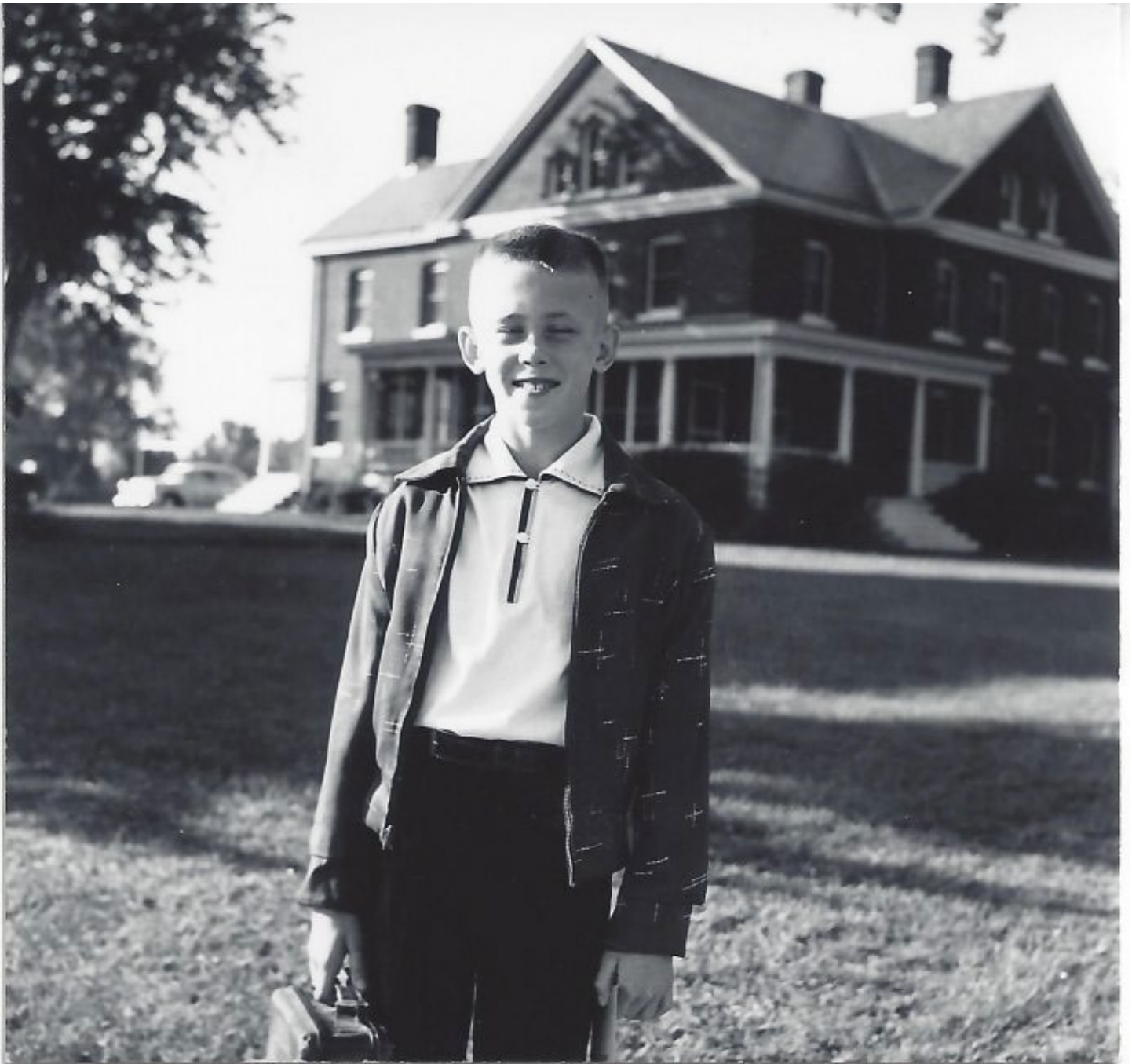
ISSUE SEVEN : SUMMER 2017

historic preservation, particularly of our peculiar home town—Fort Snelling, Minnesota. I don't remember a time in my childhood when we weren't plotting to save it.

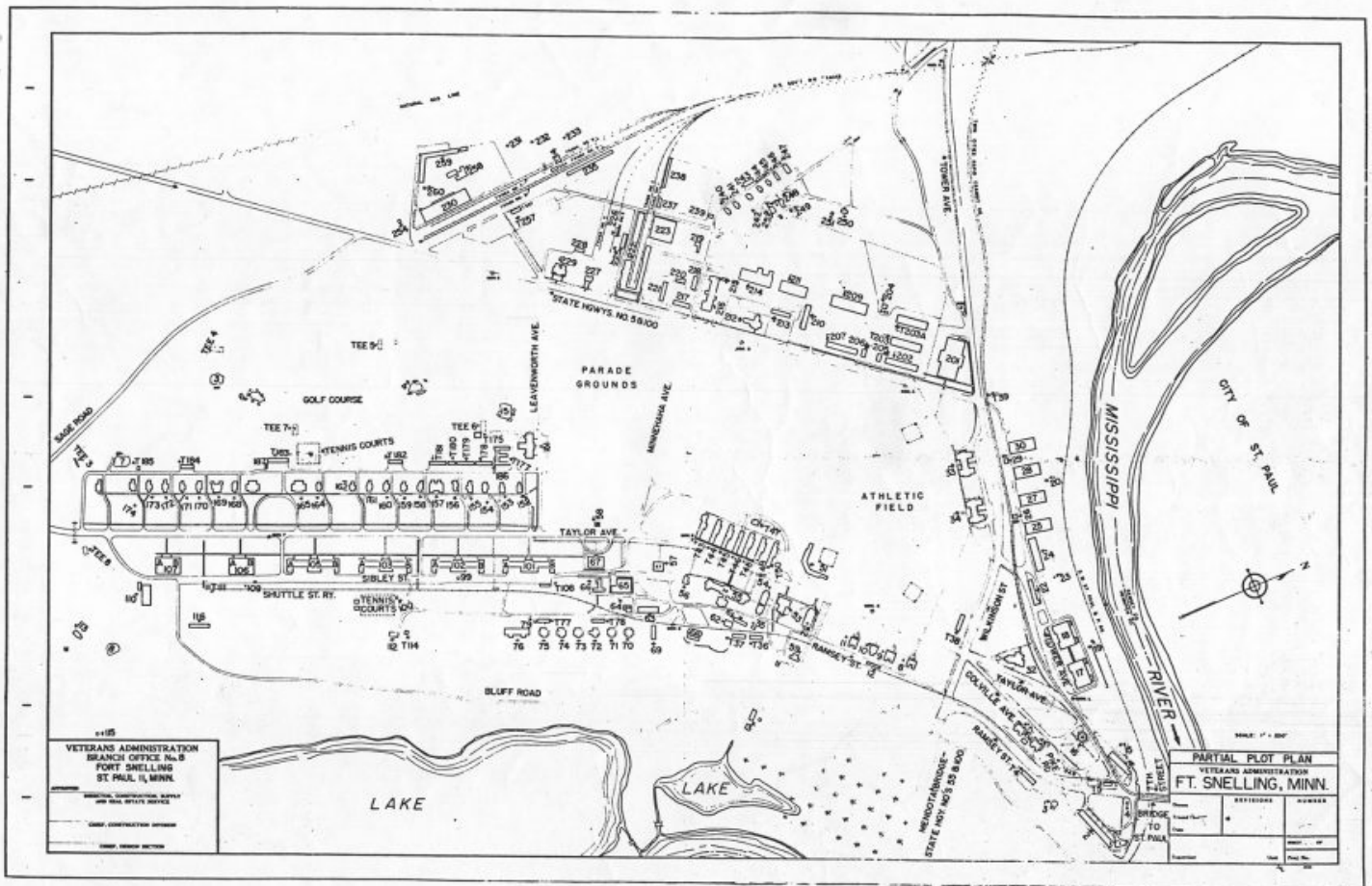
The Fort was started about 1819 on a strategic—and still imposing—promontory high above the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota

Rivers, a place known to the Dakota people as Bdote, meaning “place where two rivers meet.” The Fort never saw battle, but it nailed down the U.S. claim to this part of the continent.

It was decommissioned twice—once just before the Civil War (during which its civilian owner grazed sheep inside the walls) and again after



*Steven Watson in front of 8 Taylor Avenue home in Fort Snelling, Minnesota, about 1952.
Image by Richard E. Watson, M.D., courtesy of the author.*



Plan view of Fort Snelling, Minnesota, 1950, showing Taylor Ave. (lower left quadrant) and other streets on the Upper Post. Source: Veterans Administration. Digital image courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

World War II, when the by-then much larger military post was transferred to the Veterans Administration (VA).

That was fitting: Several hundred thousand Midwesterners had been processed through Fort Snelling during the war and were eligible for VA benefits. That meant a lot of paperwork, and it was managed here.

Our dad was a VA doctor, which qualified us for housing on base. Between 1950 and 1973, we

lived in three different houses on what is called the Upper Bluff or Upper Post, all quirky, all historic, all irreplaceable.

Two still stand—a little one-story brick cottage overlooking I-494, near the entrance to the international airport, and a mansion-sized, slate-roofed duplex at 157 Taylor Avenue, always known as Officers' Row.

In between, we lived farther north on Taylor Avenue, in a short row of red-brick houses that



The Watson family lived in three different houses in Fort Snelling, including Officers' Quarters at 157 Taylor Avenue. Library of Congress.

stood close to the Mendota Bridge. A giant boulder with a bronze plaque anchored the edge of our yard, commemorating the 1820s location of Indian agent Lawrence Talliafero's trading post.

I don't know where that monument is now. I haven't seen it since our house was destroyed, along with our neighbors' houses and the very land they stood on, to make way for I-494.

Even now, I never drive across the Mendota Bridge without a quick glance to the south, because there's a point out there in mid-air that I once called home. That house might still be standing if our childhood sabotage had succeeded.

Before the land was bulldozed away and the freeway built, teams of surveyors had stalked the bluffs above the Minnesota River, pounding wooden stakes into the ground to mark the future freeway's curves. Steven and I (and the Hagen kids and the Tonozzis) set out to stop it.

We began pulling up the surveyors' stakes and moved them, making the smooth curves wildly jagged. It did no good. But such is the nature of children: They believe they can save the world.

I think Fort Snelling itself taught us that. The very air was full of heroes. My dad's patients included veterans of every war from Spanish American to Vietnam. At the beginning, I believe



*Barracks buildings on Taylor Avenue being torn down.
Image by Richard E. Watson, M.D., courtesy of the author.*

he even saw a few elderly Civil War widows—very young girls who had married very old soldiers and then outlived them.

The Fort was also studded with trophies of heroism. We saw them every day, as we rode a yellow bus into Minneapolis for school.

There was the clock-tower building, once headquarters of the Department of the Dakota, overlooking the broad lawns of the parade grounds. And the nearly mile-long row of yellow brick

barracks on the far side of Taylor Avenue, built for the Spanish-American War. And the grave of Whiskey, a trick horse so famous in the 1930s that he was given his own white headstone, just like the human soldiers in the national cemetery nearby.

My favorites, though, were the buildings on The Point, the earliest part of the Fort. It looked very different in my childhood, starting with its now-familiar gray stone walls. They weren't there. The original walls were torn down after the



*Barracks buildings on Taylor Avenue being torn down.
Image by Richard E. Watson, M.D., courtesy of the author.*

Civil War and not replaced until the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) rebuilt them in the 1960s to frame its living-history restoration, considered among the best in the country.

The Commandant's House and the other buildings of The Point were originally one-story structures of that same gray stone, but by my childhood, they had been given second stories, cream stucco exteriors and Spanish-style

terracotta tile roofs, a touch of California style in the Middle West. Proof, perhaps, that even the U.S. Army is sensitive to architectural trends.

One kid's mom had the keys to the Round Tower—the oldest building in Minnesota—and she would sometimes let us in for careful looks. I remember being disappointed that you couldn't see out of the gun slits.



Round Tower at Fort Snelling, 1934. Photographer Floyd W. Brown with the Historic American Buildings Survey. Library of Congress.

We didn't need keys for our other favorite, the Hexagonal Tower. A surviving fragment of the original walls, it hadn't been touched, which made sneaking in both scary and exciting. Nobody watched us there. It was empty, except for a narrow plank walkway around the inside, near the top. Miss a step, and it was a multi-story drop to the rubble below.

The VA's tenure ended in 1973, and my family's life at the Fort ended with it. The VA administrators told their staffs—and my father told Steven and me—that the Upper Post was going to be turned over to the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and torn down. That news wasn't made public.



Hexagonal Tower at Fort Snelling, viewed from the southwest. Library of Congress.

The Fort had already lost the south half of Officer's Row, demolished for an expansion of the airport. Now the rest of the Fort was doomed, and I was appalled: All that history would be gone, as if it had never happened.

By then, I was a reporter for the Minneapolis Tribune, and I did the only thing I could: I wrote about it, interviewing officials of the VA, the DNR and the Minnesota Historical Society. It felt a lot like pulling up surveyor stakes again.

The plan, a DNR official told me in a 1974 interview, was to do "foundation restorations." Which meant?

Tearing the buildings down, filling in their basements and running grass up to the foundations, inside and out, so the land would be flat and therefore safe for recreation, but you'd still know what had stood there.

It wouldn't have been enough: To care about history, people need to know how the past felt,



*Officers Row demolished for airport construction.
Image by Richard E. Watson, M.D., courtesy of the author.*

need to be able to imagine themselves being part of it, and for that, you need bricks and mortar.

Historic buildings like Fort Snelling's are souvenirs of our long shared journey, hooks for our collective memory. Once the buildings are gone, history becomes anchorless—untethered words on a page, facts in a book, signs beside an empty field. Important, sure, but not quite real.

It's now been more than 40 years since a DNR official told me, "They can't go another winter or they may reach the point of no return." Or, as the

VA's chief engineer put it, "Those buildings are shot."

Back then, the Minnesota Historical Society was focusing its limited resources on restoring the Lower Post, the original fortress. But the Upper Post was also on the state and National Historic Registers, and tearing it down required the society's permission. The MHS never gave it.

So the buildings stood. That's the key, the essential first step in historic preservation: Keep 'em standing long enough, and wiser people



Demolition for airport construction. Image by Richard E. Watson, M.D., courtesy of the author.

may come to the rescue. Which is what finally happened.

In the decades since the DNR didn't tear them down, Officers Row and the rest of the Upper Fort have been championed by citizen groups, by the National Park Service, and by Hennepin County, through a work-release program that trained offenders in roofing, masonry and other preservation skills.

Several residences (though not yet ones on Officers Row) have been rehabbed with federal funds to provide housing for veterans. And in April 2016, the National Trust for Historic Preservation added the Fort to its elite list of

National Treasures. It has even gained a new, more inclusive name — Bdote Fort Snelling.

Like me, many of the Fort's children, though grown and scattered, still stop by from time to time to check on our old home, at first mourning its decay, now applauding its revival. But it still feels like an awfully close call, and I'm not quite ready to exhale yet.

When the Fort closed, some of us took pieces of it away. I have a pair of brass handles from the front doors of the clock-tower building, for one example. Another kid has the cast-iron fireplace inset that came from her family's Fort Snelling living room. And there are others.



*Barracks demolished for airport construction.
Image by Richard E. Watson, M.D., courtesy of the author.*

We didn't think of this as stealing, any more than we thought replicating Little Round Top was merely playing. To us, this was salvage.

When the restoration of the Upper Post is finally guaranteed, we will give these things back. For now, they are in safe hands. But we're all still keeping our eyes on the agencies that are

committed to saving the Fort—watching, just in case we're needed again, to make sure they finally do.

Postscript: On May 26, 2017, the Minnesota State Legislature authorized spending \$4 million to revitalize Historic Fort Snelling—in time for its bicentennial.

For additional reading on Fort Snelling:

DeCarlo, Peter. 2017. *Fort Snelling at Bdote: A Brief History*. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press.

Osman, Stephen E. 2011. *Fort Snelling Then and Now: The World War II Years*. St. Paul: The Friends of Fort Snelling.

—2017. *Fort Snelling in the Civil War*. St. Paul: Ramsey County Historical Society 2017.

Snowbeck, Christopher. 2011. “Vacant Fort Snelling Buildings to Be Fixed up for Homeless Veterans.” *Pioneer Press TwinCities.com*. <http://www.twincities.com/2011/11/13/vacant-fort-snelling-buildings-to-be-fixed-up-for-homeless-veterans/>.

Watson, Catherine. 1974. “What about the Rest of Fort Snelling?” *Minneapolis Tribune (Picture Magazine)* Sunday, August 11.

Additional on-line resources related to Historic Fort Snelling include:

<http://www.mnopedia.org>

<http://www.historicfortsnelling.org/>

Recommended Citation

Watson, Catherine. 2017. “Fort Snelling as I Knew It.” *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 7. <http://editions.lib.umn.edu/openrivers/article/fort-snelling-as-i-knew-it/>.

About the Author

Catherine Watson, MA, University of St. Thomas; BA, University of Minnesota, is the recipient of the University of Minnesota’s College of Continuing Education’s Distinguished Educator Award. She is the former travel editor of the *Star Tribune* and a recipient of the Lowell Thomas Travel Journalist and Photographer of the Year distinctions. Watson’s most recent book is *Home on the Road: Further Dispatches from the Ends of the Earth* (Syren, 2007).