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CONNOR'S FUR POST





Thomas Connor's

FUR TRADE POST on the Snake River

On Sunday, October 7, 1804, Thomas Connor, a fur trader with the British North West Company, wrote in his diary: "went with 2 men in a Canoe in search for a More Convenient place to build." At the spot which Connor picked, near where the Snake River flows into Cross Lake, he and his crew of voyageurs built a log post. There they spent the winter, while engaged in the fur trade with Chippewa Indians who lived in the area.

Connor's men, probably with help from some of the Chippewa, finished the trading post and built a log stockade around it in six weeks. On Tuesday, November 20, Connor wrote: "The Doors of the Fort were fixd and Shut this evening." He and his men would no doubt roar with laughter today if they knew that the Minnesota Historical Society spent *seven summers* working on the excavation and reconstruction of their winter home.

Of course, an accurate reconstruction of a long-vanished building is much more difficult than simply putting up a log trading post. In the first place, the site of the structure must be located exactly. Although its existence was known from Connor's diary, which had found its way into the Public Archives of Canada, no one knew until 1963 just where Connor had built his post. In that year Joseph Neubauer, an amateur archaeologist living near the trading post site in Pine

County, discovered signs in his neighbor's plowed field that some kind of building had once stood there. When he reported the fact to archaeologists on the staff of the Minnesota Historical Society, they suspected that he might have found the site of Connor's post. In the spring of 1964, archaeologists of the society began digging at the site.

Four summers were spent in excavation, careful work which yielded important information. The archaeologists discovered that the original post was destroyed by fire, for as they worked they found charred remains of the log uprights which once supported the walls of the building. As they dug deeper, they found the rotted ends of the poles which had been sunk several feet into the earth. A short distance from the building, a line of such remains of posts marked the location of the log stockade which once surrounded the fort.

As digging continued, the clay bases of four fireplaces inside the building outline were exposed, as well as indications that the building had contained six rooms.

After all this had been uncovered, there was no longer any doubt that this was the site of an early trading post. From information found in records and from other sources, there is reason to believe that it was Connor's.

Archaeological excavation is a long, painstaking process, for each shovelful of dirt and sand must be sifted to find the small objects — buttons, frag-

ments of pipes, pieces of glass bottles, bits of metal—which give archaeologists and historians hints of the daily activities of the people who once lived in a particular place. The men working at the site under the direction of Dr. Leland Cooper, former professor of archaeology at Hamline University, St. Paul, found parts of guns, ornaments such as earrings, broken pipes, and even a silver cross. Most of the objects were trade goods which Connor and his men used to barter for the furs, wild rice, and maple sugar of the Chippewa.

Just as digging into the ground uncovered clues to the construction of Connor's post, searching in libraries and in collections of old manuscripts uncovered other kinds of valuable information. Some of the records which were found described early fur trade buildings. Because Connor's diary did not give details of how he built his post, other

sources were needed to supply this information. Several letters written in 1832 by a missionary named Sherman Hall were particularly helpful. Hall described in some detail the exact method used by many traders for putting the logs in place and holding them there without nails, and of building the fireplaces which were needed to heat the rooms. Other documents of the time contained lists of the items which were carried into the wilderness by traders. These writings helped the historians to decide how the store in the trading post looked.

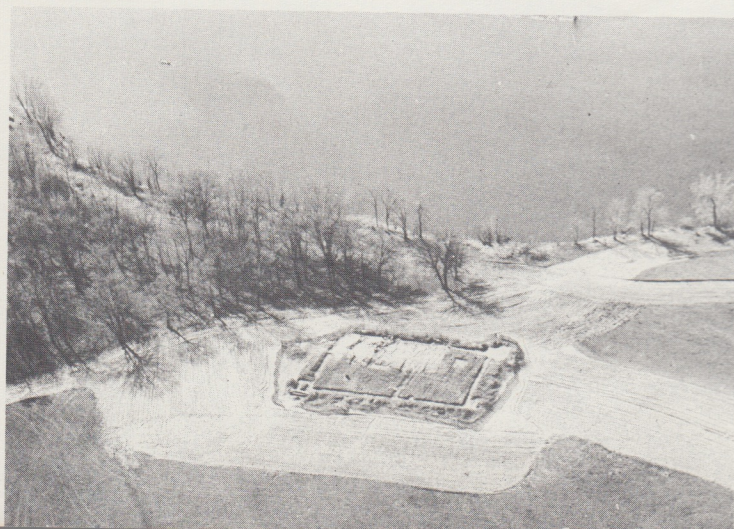
In the summer of 1968 work was begun on the reconstruction of the trading post. Connor probably used cedar or pine poles for the building and stockade, but a good supply of such poles or thin logs could not be obtained. And so tamarack and poplar poles were secured. The first step was to skin off the bark. A group of high school and



1. First steps in uncovering the site of Thomas Connor's trading post, in a plowed field in Pine County west of Pine City. 2. The site uncovered, on the south bank of the Snake River, and the surrounding area cleared. 3. Excavations indicating remains of some of the walls and partitions and the bases of fireplaces. 4. Circles marking where logs of the original stockade once stood. They guided the builders in placing logs of the restored enclosure.



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college boys started this difficult task, using draw knives. Nearly 1,600 poles were used in the reconstruction, all of which had to be stripped. Connor and his men almost certainly did not take the time to remove the bark from the poles which they used to build their fur post. The new building, however, is planned to last longer than the one Connor built. For this reason the poles were stripped and then dipped into a solution to kill insects and prevent rot and mildew.

Finally, after several hundred poles had been prepared, a big day came, when the first pole was set into the ground. As the work continued, the building began to take shape. The type of construction used by most of the early traders was different from the Yankee method of raising a log building by notching logs at the ends and fitting them together to form corners. The traders first set up the cornerposts of the buildings, each one deeply imbedded in the ground so that it

would stand firm. Two grooves were cut in each post, from top to bottom. The logs to be used for the walls were then cut to fit between the corner poles, and the ends were notched to fit into the grooves. Every log was lifted to the top of the upright corner poles and slipped down into the grooves, one above the other, until each wall was built up to the desired height. Where a door was to be placed, posts were erected to form the door frame, and the ends of the horizontal logs were slipped into grooves in these posts. In this way a long, low six-room cabin, measuring 77 feet long by 18 feet wide, was built on the bank of the Snake River. It was roofed with hand-split red cedar shingles, which will last longer than the cedar bark that probably covered the original post.

Log buildings always have spaces between the logs which must be filled, or chinked, to keep out the cold winds. Connor's cabin was, we know, chinked with clay, but clay has to be replaced fre-



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5. Student employee cutting a log in preparation for starting the construction. 6. An early stage in putting up the walls of the building. The horizontal logs are slipped down, one by one, into grooves cut in the upright posts. 7. A detail in the construction of the roof. 8. Forming the stockade by placing logs upright, side by side, in a deep trench, which is then filled.



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quently because it cracks and falls out. The new trading post is chinked with masonry cement, which was made to look like clay by the addition of red coloring. Connor made his floors of clay and sand. In the new building they are of cement, also colored with red to resemble clay. The room partitions are formed of upright poles.

Fireplaces were important in a wintering post. The traders usually made them of stone, with clay used as mortar to hold the stones in place. The chimneys were built of wood poles, then lined with clay to prevent fires. In the reconstructed post cement was used here also, instead of clay. The chimneys were made of cement blocks, then covered with logs to look like those which Connor's men built.

The original log building had six rooms. Two were used by Connor and his Chippewa wife for a bedroom and living room. A third room served as a store where the Indians brought their furs to

exchange them for the goods which Connor brought in to trade. One room was a workroom; one which had no windows or outside door was for storage. The remaining room served as living quarters for the five or six voyageurs who worked for Connor. Except for the storeroom, every room had an outside door. Beside each was a window, placed so that the person inside could have a clear view of anyone knocking at the door. In the wilderness of 1804, it was a good idea to know exactly who was outside before opening a door. The window panes in the reconstructed fort are of glass which was made to resemble the crude window glass found in the archaeological excavations. Iron nails, hinges, and other hardware in the new building were specially made by the blacksmith working at the restored Fort Snelling near the Twin Cities.

The log stockade which surrounded Connor's fort probably served two purposes. It gave pro-

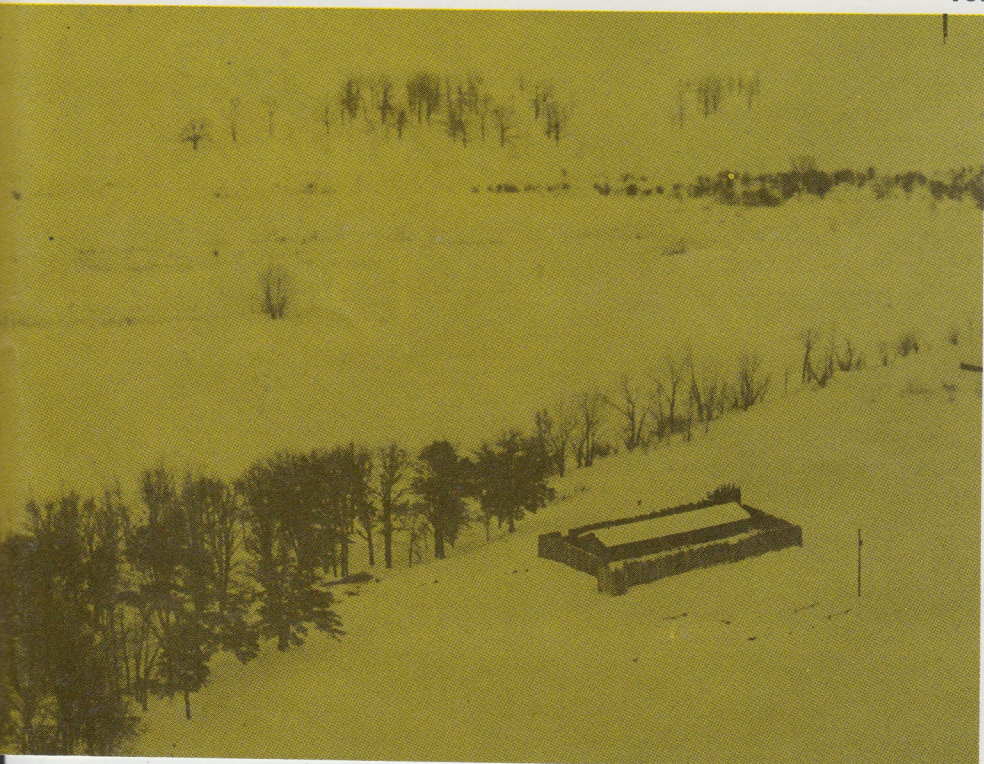


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9. Interior view of one of the two bastions which were built into opposite corners of the stockade. A man standing on the little platform could shoot along two sides of the enclosure. 10. Aerial view of the post in winter. 11. The back gate in the stockade. Nails driven into the logs of the walls (right) helped to hold the chinking which was applied later. 12. The front gate or door of the stockade. Logs to extend above the opening have not yet been added.



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tection in case of trouble with wandering bands of Sioux (Dakota) Indians, who at that time were enemies of the Chippewa, with whom Connor traded. The stockade also protected the building from the fierce winds and drifting snow of winter.

For further protection against possible enemies, Connor had two towers or bastions built at opposite corners of the stockade. They were small sections which projected out beyond the walls. A man standing on the raised platform in either tower could fire along two sides of the stockade to prevent anyone from trying to climb over the wall. While Connor and his men stayed at the trading post during the winter of 1804-05, the place was not attacked. It was a long, cold winter, however, and one can almost feel Connor's relief as he put his men to work mending canoes, early in April, in preparation for his departure to a large trading center located on Lake Superior. On April 27, 1805, he left the post with the load of

furs, wild rice, and maple sugar he had received in trade during the winter.

No one knows for certain whether or not Connor returned to his wintering post. If he did, no diary remains to tell us about it. Connor did, however, return to the area of Pine County. Later writers refer to his being there, and some of his children were at one time enrolled in the Indian mission school on Pokegama Lake.

In the summer of 1970, the reconstructed trading post was finished and the Minnesota Historical Society opened it to the public. The British Union Jack, which we know once fluttered over Connor's post, was raised on the flagpole inside the stockade. Visitors, armed with cameras, strolled through the yard and examined the buildings and stockade. They climbed the steps of the bastions to look out over the Snake River and tried to imagine the life of those who lived there more than a century and a half ago.

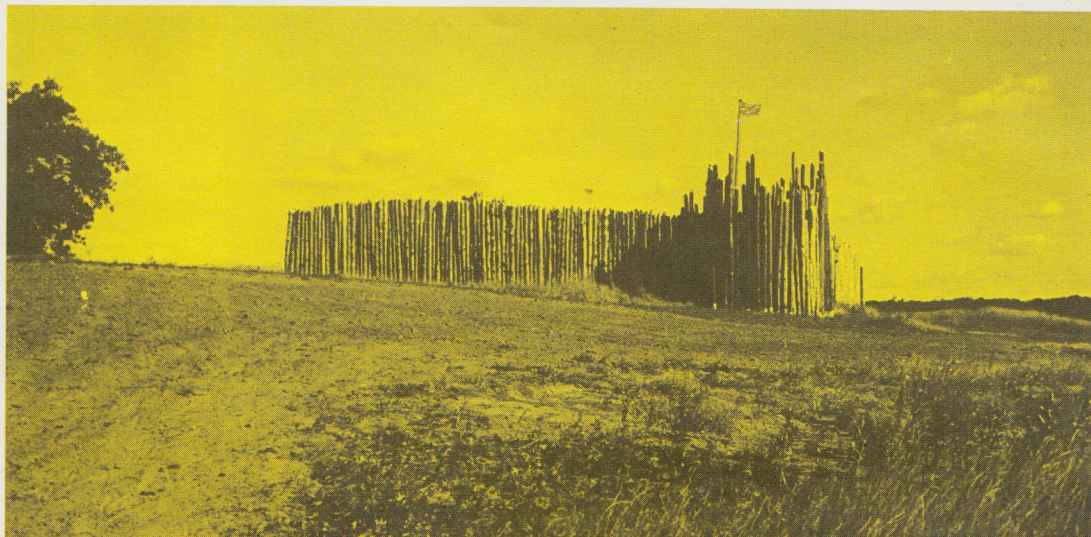


13. The completed fort building, with its five doors. The flagpole is at the right.
14. The trading post as it would have appeared to anyone approaching it in the early 1800s.

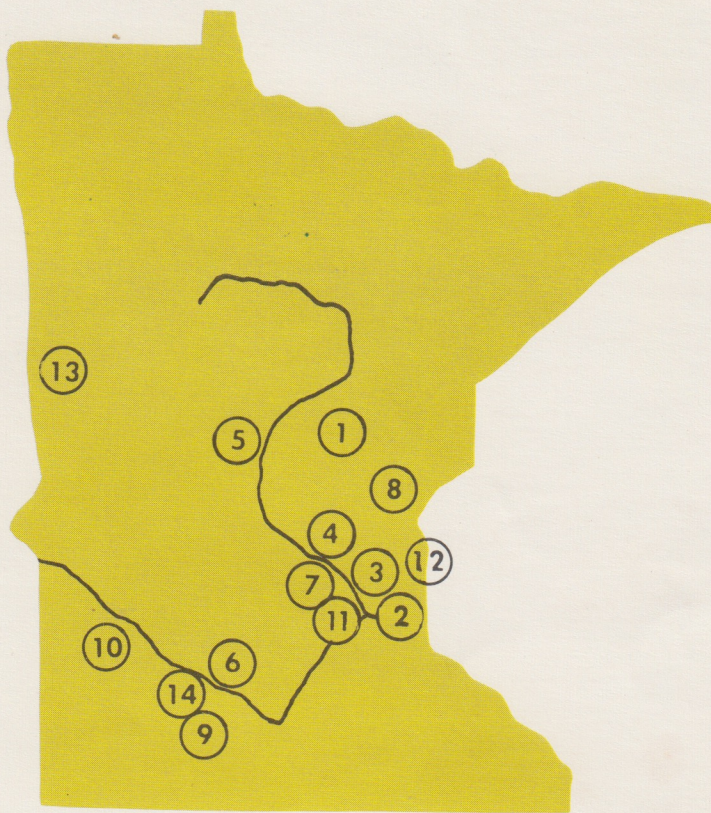


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Sites Administered By The Minnesota Historical Society



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| 1. KATHIO-MILLE LACS INDIAN MUSEUM
On U. S. #169 near Vineland | 10. UPPER SIOUX AGENCY
Off Minn. #67 south of Granite Falls |
| 2. ALEXANDER RAMSEY HOUSE
Exchange & Walnut Streets, St. Paul | 11. FORT SNELLING
Off Minn. #5 and #55, Twin Cities |
| 3. BURBANK-LIVINGSTON-GRIGGS HOUSE
432 Summit Avenue, St. Paul | 12. W. H. C. FOLSOM HOUSE
On Government Road, Taylor Falls |
| 4. OLIVER H. KELLEY HOMESTEAD
Off U. S. #169, 10, and 52, south of Elk River | 13. SOLOMON G. COMSTOCK HOUSE
At Fifth Avenue South and Eighth Street,
Moorhead |
| 5. LINDBERGH HOUSE
In Lindbergh State Park near Little Falls | |
| 6. FORT RIDGELY
Off Minn. #4 south of Fairfax | |
| 7. MINNEHAHA DEPOT
Across from Minnehaha Park, Minneapolis | Sites now under development: |
| 8. CONNOR'S FUR POST
Off Pine Co. Road #7, near Pine City | 14. LOWER SIOUX INDIAN AGENCY
INTERPRETIVE CENTER
Off Redwood Co. Road #2 east of
Redwood Falls |
| 9. COTTONWOOD COUNTY PETROGLYPHS
Off U.S. #71 near Jeffers | 5. LINDBERGH INTERPRETIVE CENTER
Adjacent to the Lindbergh House |