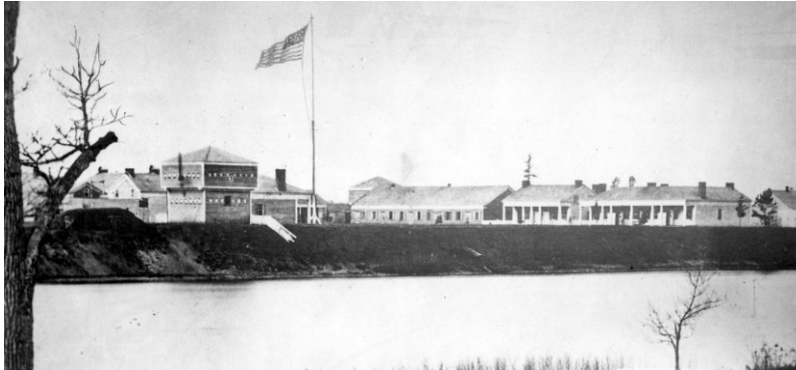


## History of Old Fort Ripley 1849-1877

Fort Ripley was built for the purpose of establishing a government presence on the wilderness frontier of Minnesota Territory; to oversee the Winnebago Indians, who were being moved from their ancestral lands in northern Iowa to a new reservation nearby; and to serve as a buffer between the skirmishing Eastern Dakota (Sioux) and Ojibwa (Chippewa) tribes. Construction began in November 1848 on the west side of the upper Mississippi River, opposite the pioneer farm of Baldwin Olmstead, who provided supplies for the soldiers. On May 13, 1849, the post's first garrison—Company A, 6th U.S. Infantry—arrived from Fort Snelling under the command of Captain John B. Todd.



Fort Ripley in 1862

The fort consisted of several frame buildings forming three sides of a square that opened to the river. Four raised blockhouses offered vantage points on all sides. It was initially named Fort Marcy, was renamed Fort Gaines the following year, and finally in 1850 named in honor of Brigadier General Eleazar W. Ripley, a Maine congressman who had distinguished himself in the War of 1812.

As was typical of frontier posts, Fort Ripley was initially located on a large military reservation. These reservations were vast tracts of land intended to prevent incoming settlers from encroaching upon the fort itself and to provide ample acreage for the gardens, forage and lumber needed by garrison troops. The large reserves were a constant source of friction between the Army and the squatters and homesteaders who wanted the military lands opened for settlement.

In the case of Fort Ripley, the initial reservation was huge. Located on the east side of the Mississippi River, it consisted of nearly ninety square miles (over 57,000 acres). In addition, a single square mile was set aside for the fort itself on the west side of the river. After much agitation, the Army agreed in 1857 to sell its east side lands in public auction, but local settlers, by mutual pact, underbid the property. The Secretary of War later annulled the sale because the bids were too low, but in the meantime, many settlers had already built homes and farms on the land. The resulting confusion and litigation took twenty years to untangle.

With a few notable exceptions, life at old Fort Ripley was uneventful. Boredom, isolation, summer mosquitoes and long, cold winters challenged officers and men alike. The harshness of the land prompted the government to remove the unhappy Winnebagoes

to a new reservation near Mankato in 1855. In 1857, thinking the post had outlived its purpose, the garrison was withdrawn. Almost immediately, however, nearby Ojibwa began disturbances against white settlers and the fort was hastily reopened.

Upon outbreak of the Civil War in April 1861, the Army regulars were withdrawn and sent to fight Confederates. For the remainder of the war, Minnesota volunteer regiments manned Fort Ripley instead. Trouble came in August 1862 when Dakota Indians began to massacre whites in southern Minnesota. Seizing upon the moment as an opportunity to gain power and leverage for redress of legitimate grievances, Ojibwa Chief Hole-in-the-Day II threatened to launch a simultaneous war against whites in northern Minnesota. Fearful settlers flocked to Fort Ripley for protection. Additional soldiers were rushed in and the post was readied for battle.

Fortunately, Hole-in-the-Day's threat was soon defused, thanks in part to the garrison's strengthened defenses. For the next three years Fort Ripley became a headquarters, supply base, and staging area for the Indian campaigns that came on the heels of the Dakota Indian uprising. Activity reached its zenith during the winter of 1863-64, when nearly 500 cavalry troops were quartered at the fort.

The abandoned southeast blockhouse, 1900

By the 1870s the "frontier" had long since moved west. The post's usefulness was diminished further when the nearby Ojibwa were moved to a new reservation on Leech Lake. Then, on a sub-zero night in January 1877, the laundry, commissary, and officers quarters were destroyed as a result of an overheated chimney. No longer on the western frontier nor troubled by Indians, the War Department decided to close the post permanently rather than rebuild. Most of the troops were moved out that summer and by 1878 Fort Ripley was abandoned.



The remaining buildings stood abandoned until well into 1890s, when local farmers began "harvesting" the salvageable lumber and bricks. The ruins of the powder magazine, the post's only stone structure, are all that remain today of this pioneer fort. The site is now within the boundaries of Camp Ripley Military Reservation, which took its name from the old outpost.

-- Jack K. Johnson, 1992