

The US-Dakota War of 1862: Changing Interpretations Through Material Culture,
Monuments, and Commemorative Activities

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Abstract

The material culture surrounding the US-Dakota War – encompassing war artifacts, souvenirs, commemorative objects, and monuments – presents a unique and physical opportunity to read the changing interpretations of the war. For many years, the material culture created around this conflict reflected the mindset of the victors, and reinforced the traditional narrative of the war, the Dakota, and American Indians. The material culture examined in this study is a physical manifestation of these ideas, but also a challenge, and finally, a reinterpretation. These objects subtly reinforced the traditional narrative, pervading popular culture and academia. Yet in their visibility, they also drew criticism and questions. These issues, along with increased Dakota involvement became a part of the ongoing shift in the conversation on and understanding of the US-Dakota War and Native America.

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Introduction

The US-Dakota War of 1862: Its Causes, Aftermath, and Original Artifacts

The US-Dakota War was a brief period of intense physical violence built on years of simmering tension and structural violence between the Dakota people and white settlers of Minnesota. For six weeks during the late summer and early fall of 1862, these two groups warred with one another, frequently characterized as a “clash of cultures.” This traditional interpretation of the war reveals underlying trends among both academics and the general public in historicizing American Indians and their interactions with the government and settlers, namely that violence between the two sides was inevitable and primarily the fault of “savage” natives.

For years, the creators of this dominant historiography wrote this historical narrative in objects, as well as in words. The material culture surrounding the US-Dakota War plainly depicts this narrative, but it also reads the changing historiography and collective memory of the war.¹ This study will seek to examine how the traditional historical narrative of this event influenced its material culture, which in turn both reinforced these narratives and drove the changes in the interpretations and understandings of the war. The arena for this analysis will be a selection of objects: those initially collected and interpreted for the support of the traditional triumphant narrative of victory for the United States

¹ “Historiography” is primarily used here to note the changing interpretations of the US-Dakota War. This refers both to the changes in academic understandings of the war among historians, as well as the popular understanding and collective memory of the US-Dakota War.

over the Dakota, later pieces created specifically for the purpose of solidifying this historical narrative, and finally objects created that signal a change in the interpretation of the war.

Pieces of this material culture, particularly monuments, have been discussed in detail elsewhere and other examples, such as the Standard Brewing Company beer tray, are frequently referenced in passing. Rather than viewing this material culture as anecdotal to the history of the war, these pieces will be treated within this study as imperative to the shaping of that history. While they vary greatly among creation dates, mediums, and intended audience, the objects discussed here have been grouped together purposefully to exhibit how they inform one another, and exist on the same continuum of changing historiography of the war. Instead of dealing with the six weeks proper of the US-Dakota War, the scope of this study spans the nearly 155 years since the war.

Despite its brevity, the US-Dakota War is a significant and sensitive event in the history of the United States, the state of Minnesota, and Native America, especially among the Dakota people, who are part of the larger Sioux Nation.² Unpacking the nuances of this conflict has challenged historians for more than 150 years. While difficult, the importance of arriving at a fair and more balanced history of the US-Dakota War is imperative for the reconciliation of contemporary communities and for a broader understanding of the history of the

² As will be further discussed in a later chapter, “Sioux” is a misnomer and not the chosen name of the Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota peoples. While it developed initially as a pejorative, it is also now an historical term, and like the application of “Indian” to the indigenous peoples of North America, is a linguistic witness to the continual process of colonization.

United States. Since 1862, material culture has been an important part of this process, documenting, commemorating, and in a way, continuing the war. Today this material culture is a tangible means of grasping the changing understandings of the US-Dakota War and its historical significance.

At the intersection of the Civil War and the Indian Wars, the US-Dakota War represents a turning point in the history of Minnesota and the Dakota people. Its consequences were immediate and far reaching. The fear of another outbreak of violence persisted among Minnesota settlers and radiated throughout the western frontier for years. This fear was used to justify the violence perpetrated against many noncombatant Indians by the United States Army in several massacres, originally dubbed battles, such as that at Sand Creek, Colorado a few years after the violence in Minnesota.³ Understanding not only the period of warfare, but its causes and immediate aftermath, are essential to understanding the history that followed.

The US-Dakota War was a seminal event in the history of Minnesota and the Dakota, and it significantly shaped the history of the United States. Yet historians outside of Minnesota frequently overlook this war. Even the general population within the state had for a time largely forgotten the events of 1862. This trend has changed recently with a new focus on teaching the war in primary schools as a part of Minnesota's history. Public memory of the war is dynamic, and the material culture that surrounded it has heavily influenced the public's

³ Ari Kelman, *A Misplaced Massacre* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 145.

perception of the war. This material culture, which will be discussed in detail in the following chapters, includes souvenir objects, commemorative items, monuments, and artifacts from the war itself, many now collected by museums. These pieces and their meanings can only be understood after first looking more closely at the US-Dakota War, in its causes, action, and aftermath.

The earliest of the underlying causes of the war stretch back to 1805 with the initial treaty signed between American explorer Zebulon Pike and two Dakota leaders. While Pike did not have the authority to sign the treaty, Congress ratified it in 1808. This treaty ceded 100,000 acres of land to the US Government. The legality of the treaty was nebulous from the start as two chiefs could not have represented the entirety of the Sioux Nation, believed by Pike to number at least twenty thousand.⁴

Subsequent treaties also ignored the Dakota decentralized power structure, as representatives of the government continued to sign treaties with individuals who did not necessarily have the authority to speak for all of their bands, much less the entire tribe.⁵ Throughout the mid-nineteenth century treaties carved out land that eventually became the state of Minnesota. The Dakota were cajoled and

⁴ Gary Clayton Anderson, *Kinsmen of Another Kind: Dakota-White Relations in the Upper Mississippi Valley, 1650-1862* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 81-82.

⁵ The historic bands of the Sioux Nation are: Mdewkanton, Wahpeton, Wahpekute, Sisseton, Yankton, Yanktonai, and Teton. According to their location they referred to themselves as Dakota, Nakota, or Lakota, all meaning “allies.” Those in and immediately around Minnesota were the Eastern Sioux, or Dakota, comprised of the Mdewkanton, Wahpeton, Wahpetuke, and Sisseton bands. See: Alan Axelrod, *Chronicle of the Indian Wars: From Colonial Times to Wounded Knee* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 191.

coerced into signing these treaties, most significantly the treaties of Traverse des Sioux and Mendota, both signed in 1851, which moved the Dakota onto a reservation in southwestern Minnesota. The original wording of this agreement guaranteed this land to the Dakota in “perpetuity,” but was later changed to “at the discretion of the President” before it was agreed to by both sides.⁶

For their land accessions, the government paid half the agreed price immediately and then issued the Dakota the rest of their payments in annuities, in the form of both money and supplies. Part of these annuities also went to paying traders in the area for any debts accrued by the Dakota. This was not a difficult system to manipulate, and traders certainly took advantage, with the Dakota receiving less and less of their promised payment each year, all while their dependence on the annuities continued to grow.⁷

During this time, the Minnesota Territory attracted more and more settlers from the eastern United States, as well as immigrants from Scandinavia and other areas of northern Europe. The settler population exploded in Minnesota during the 1850s, which led to Minnesota attaining statehood in 1858. This new population and the changes brought to the landscape through agriculture meant the Dakota could no longer support their traditional way of life through hunting. They became almost solely dependent on the annuities provided through their treaties.

⁶ Amy Danielson, “Timeline,” *The US-Dakota War of 1862*, last modified March 12, 2012, <http://www.usdakotawar.org/timeline.html>.

⁷ Guy Gibbon, *The Sioux: The Dakota and Lakota Nations*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 109.

In 1858, the demand for land by settlers resulted in another halving of the Dakota reservation.

The outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 exacerbated these existing issues. The government prioritized dealing with the conflict in the East, and the scheduled annuities, which the Dakota depended on, frequently arrived late. Corruption was common among the Indian agents responsible for distributing the annuities, while others simply did not understand the tenuous circumstances that existed in the frontier state. Because of this, traders in the area consumed more and more of what had been promised to the Dakota by their treaties. While the annuity system fell short of the needs of the Dakota, the Homestead Act of 1862 provided further incentive for settlers to pour into the area, adding further strain to the already tense situation in Minnesota.⁸

In 1862 this mounting tension reached a breaking point. Crop failures of the previous year followed by a difficult winter meant that the Dakota existed at a point of starvation. Foodstuff arrived in Minnesota, but not the cash annuities. The Indian Agent Thomas Galbraith decided to wait to distribute the two at the same time. When confronted with the Dakota's needs at a meeting of traders and Indian agents discussing the current situation, trader Andrew Myrick purportedly replied, "If they are hungry, let them eat grass."⁹ Those reading the signs knew that Minnesota had become a powder keg ready to erupt into violence.

⁸ Gibbon, *The Sioux*, 109-10.

⁹ Gary Clayton Anderson, "Myrick's Insult: A Fresh Look at Myth and Reality," *Minnesota History* 48, no. 5 (1983): 198.

The spark occurred on August 17 near Acton, Minnesota when four young Dakota men returned from an unsuccessful hunt and came across a settler homestead. Accounts vary as to how the situation unfolded. One story says that the Dakota youths argued about whether to collect a nest of eggs found on the property, where one's refusal turned into an accusation of cowardice, leading eventually to a confrontation with the settlers. Another account is that the Dakota initially were friendly with the settlers, and challenged the men to a shooting match, which somehow turned violent.¹⁰ The undisputed facts of the encounter are that the Dakota men left after killing five settlers, including two women, at the homestead. They brought news to their community of what had transpired and asked for support.

That night their village held a council to determine how to proceed. Knowing that the hunting party's actions had already guaranteed swift reprisals for the murders of the settlers, a faction of the council advocated for a concentrated war effort to drive whites out of the area. The federal government was weak at this time, distracted by the Civil War, and it did not escape the notice of the Dakota that much of the regular army and many fighting age men were far away from Minnesota. Still, there was tension in this decision. Chief Little Crow recognized the consequences of going to war with the settlers. Called a coward for his initial hesitancy to join the fight, Little Crow, or Taoyateduta in Dakota, replied at length.

¹⁰ "Chapter II: The War Begins," in *Through Dakota Eyes: Narrative Accounts of the Minnesota Indian War of 1862*, ed. Gary Clayton Anderson and Alan R. Woolworth (St Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988), 34-38.

We are only little herds of buffalo left scattered; the great herds that once covered the prairies are no more. See! – the white men are like the locusts when they fly so thick that the whole sky is a snowstorm. You may kill one – two – ten; yes, as many as the leaves in the forest yonder, and their brothers will not miss them. Kill one – two – ten, and ten times ten will come to kill you... Yes; they fight among themselves, but if you strike at them they will all turn on you and devour you and your women and little children... Braves, you are little children – you are fools. You will die like rabbits when the hungry wolves hunt them in the Hard Moon. Taoyateduta is not a coward: he will die with you.¹¹

The war began in earnest the next day with Little Crow leading an attack on the Lower Sioux Agency that killed the infamous trader Andrew Myrick and other government representatives.¹² Most of the civilian deaths occurred in these first few days of fighting, as war parties of Dakota moved throughout Southwestern Minnesota killing settlers at their homes or as they fled to nearby towns. Not all settlers were killed however; some were warned in time or were protected by the many Dakota who chose not to go to war. Others, particularly women and children, were taken captive and held within Dakota camps until the end of the war.¹³

While the war waged against settler families, the organized war faction led by Little Crow and other chiefs, such as Mankato and Big Eagle, launched two full-scale attacks on the German town of New Ulm on August 19 and 23 with the

¹¹ “Little Crow’s Speech,” in *Through Dakota Eyes: Narrative Accounts of the Minnesota Indian War of 1862*, ed. Gary Clayton Anderson and Alan R. Woolworth (St Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988), 39-42; “Taoyateduta Is Not a Coward,” *Minnesota History* 38, no. 3 (1962): 115.

¹² Myrick’s body was found with grass stuffed in his mouth.

¹³ No standard rules seemed to determine whether settlers were taken captive or killed outright. Kinship ties, created through years of friendship, often saved settlers that might otherwise have been killed. Anderson, *Kinsmen of Another Kind*, 267.

hope of looting the town for supplies.¹⁴ Between these attacks, the Dakota warriors attacked Fort Ridgely on August 20 and 22, one of the only forts west of the Mississippi to successfully weather a frontal assault, and strategically significant to the Dakota war goals.¹⁵ Both targets withstood the Dakota attacks, despite being defended largely by civilians and untested militia.

The inability of the Dakota to claim victory at Fort Ridgely and New Ulm limited the scope of their war effort. Battles continued throughout August and September as the army mobilized to quell the violence. In addition to raising a fighting force, Colonel Henry Sibley attempted to negotiate with Chief Little Crow for the release of prisoners. Sibley also led burial parties throughout the area, to deal with the remains of settlers that had lain where they fell, sometimes for weeks. Many accounts state that these remains were mutilated, a practice abhorrent to whites but an accepted part of Dakota warfare to ensure that enemies did not continue their fighting in the afterlife.¹⁶ The Dakota ambushed one of these parties in early September at the Battle of Birch Coulee, a hard-fought battle that proved the difficulty in ending the war.

On September 23, the Dakota war faction and Sibley's troops met at the Battle of Wood Lake, which proved a final victory for the US Army and the last

¹⁴ Dakota warfare tactics relied more heavily on small war parties and surprise attacks than large-scale battles and sustained campaigns, a marked difference from the methods of the US Army. Gibbon, *The Sioux*, 92.

¹⁵ Dian Olson Belanger, "The True Story behind the Fort Ridgely Medal," *Minnesota History* 47, no. 6 (1981): 236.

¹⁶ The frequency of mutilations is difficult to verify, as are the accounts of the violence against settlers. It is known that settlers were axed, beaten, and burned to death, but the accounts of Dakota brutality were also often exaggerated in newspaper reports. Anderson, *Kinsmen of Another Kind*, 267.

major battle of the war. Casualty estimates for the war as a whole vary widely, with the number of white settlers killed ranging anywhere from 450 to 800, while soldier deaths were more precisely cited at seventy-seven. Dakota losses during the war were also difficult to gauge as they typically removed their dead from the battlefield, but it is believed that roughly 150 warriors were killed in the fighting of that summer and fall. The US-Dakota War was at an end, although its legacy of violence continued.

Seeing defeat at hand and facing growing dissatisfaction with the war from other chiefs, Little Crow and some of his followers moved to the western plains in September. Sibley negotiated the release of captive settlers at Camp Release on September 26, where 269 white and mixed heritage captives gained their freedom. Freedom for settlers soon became captivity for the Dakota who remained in the area. The Dakota present at Camp Release were taken into custody. In the beginning of November, the army completed its roundup of the Dakota who had fought and surrendered at the war's end, along with noncombatants including approximately 1,700 women, children, and elderly men, and interned them at Fort Snelling for the remainder of 1862.¹⁷

The condemned prisoners and noncombatants who were marched to Fort Snelling for internment frequently met with angry bands of settlers along their

¹⁷ Julie Humann Anderson, "Memory on the Landscape: Monuments and Historic Sites Commemorating the US-Dakota War of 1862," in *We Are What We Remember*, ed. Laura Mattoon D'Amore and Jeffrey Meriwhether (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 26.

routes, and had to be guarded by US troops to prevent vigilante justice.¹⁸ The most hated aspect of the US-Dakota War, attacks on noncombatants, continued. Revenge masquerading as justice is a hallmark of the immediate aftermath of the US-Dakota War. Settlers still reeling from the deaths of hundreds of their neighbors, at least 100 of which were under the age of ten, continued the cycle of violence. A frequently cited story illustrates this tragedy. As a group of Dakota women marched through one town, a white woman attacked the group and grabbed a Dakota baby from its mother's arms, and killed the child by throwing it to the ground.¹⁹

The following spring, the previous treaties with the Dakota were abrogated for all bands regardless of their role in the war. Governor Alexander Ramsey decreed that "the Sioux Indians of Minnesota must be exterminated or driven forever beyond the borders of the state," which resulted in the forced march of the interned Dakota out of Minnesota to their new reservation in Santee, Nebraska, at the time part of the Dakota territory.²⁰ Even in the West, the war against the Dakota continued. In the following year, the US Army embarked on

¹⁸ Settler women made up the mobs that carried out these attacks. Fearing citizen unrest, the army previously made it clear that no men would be allowed to approach the Dakota prisoners.

¹⁹ Waziyatawin Angela Wilson, "Decolonizing the 1862 Death Marches," in *In the Footsteps of Our Ancestors: The Dakota Commemorative Marches of the 21st Century*, ed. Waziyatawin Angela Wilson (St. Paul: Living Justice Press, 2006), 55.

²⁰ Scott W. Berg, *38 Nooses: Lincoln, Little Crow, and the Beginning of the Frontier's End* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012), 163. The nullification of the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux denied land reservations to the Sisseton and Wahpeton bands of Dakota, although they did not participate in the violence. Minnesota expelled all bands of the Dakota from the state; most of the Sisseton and Wahpeton Dakota were removed in 1867.

punitive missions hoping to overtake Little Crow and others believed responsible for the war and placed bounties on Dakota scalps.²¹ These actions brought further devastation to the already fragmented Dakota community. Little Crow escaped harm until he returned with his son to Minnesota in 1863 to steal horses for his men. As the two picked berries near Hutchinson, Minnesota, two men shot and killed Little Crow. When his identity was later realized, they collected the bounty and Little Crow's remains were paraded through the street, and put on display at the capitol. Eventually they became part of the collection at the Minnesota Historical Society.²²

The Dakota noncombatants removed to Nebraska arrived at their new home without their men, who had remained interned separately as they awaited trial. Following the conclusion of the war in November of 1862, the army established a military commission to deal with the captured Dakota warriors. During these proceedings the Dakota warriors were given the legal status of common criminals who had engaged in a violent uprising, rather than that of enemy soldiers of a sovereign nation. This court heard 392 cases in six weeks, with the speed of each case accelerating as the proceedings continued.

The military commission conducted the trials in English, which many Dakota did not fully understand, and the accused received no legal counsel. These

²¹ Paul N. Beck, *Columns of Vengeance: Soldiers, Sioux, and the Punitive Expeditions, 1863-1864* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), 50. Revenge primarily motivated these punitive missions, but fear that Little Crow was forming a new fighting force also contributed.

²² Gary Clayton Anderson, *Little Crow: Spokesman for the Sioux* (St Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1986): 181.

anomalies, today creating suspicions of a miscarriage of justice, were at the time accepted. The tribunal presumed some level of guilt for all those tried, simply due to their proximity to the fighting. Less importance was placed on evidence and proving guilt. Frequently, the court pronounced guilt after ascertaining only that those on trial had been present at battles and fired their weapons at whites, which many freely admitted.

Of the 392 tried, the army sentenced 303 to death. Sixteen were sentenced to prison. Episcopalian Bishop Henry Whipple interceded on behalf of the condemned, a lone voice amid a crowd of many calling for the total extermination of the Dakota. Whipple successfully petitioned President Lincoln for a reexamination of the court proceedings. Lincoln ordered the review of the trial records and shortened the list of the condemned to thirty-nine. One man was later reprieved, and thirty-eight Dakota warriors went to their deaths the day after Christmas.²³

Residents of Minnesota viewed Lincoln's actions as a miscarriage of justice. In theory, the thirty-eight sentenced to hang were those guilty of raping or killing civilians, yet the atmosphere and methods of their trials almost guarantee that some, if not many, truthfully claimed innocence. With that said, those guilty of acts of violence against settlers were also assuredly found among those executed, though the majority of Dakota who had committed these acts had left

²³ Two more Dakota chiefs, Little Six and Medicine Bottle, were hanged in 1865. They escaped to Canada following the war but were drugged and smuggled back into Minnesota, putting the number of executed at forty. The Dakota who were not sentenced to death were interned at Fort Davenport in Iowa for close to four years before they also were moved to Nebraska.

the area and gone west with Little Crow when the tide of the war turned against them. The warriors who remained and surrendered largely did so because they believed they had nothing to fear by remaining, as they had not taken part in the atrocities of the war.²⁴

One of the known innocents was Chaska, or We-Chank-Washta-don-pee in Dakota.²⁵ During the war, Chaska and his family protected a white woman, Sarah Wakefield and her children. As the war ended and US troops arrived to release white captives, Chaska surrendered, assured of fair treatment and even praised for his actions in saving the Wakefield family. However, during the trial, rumors arose that Chaska and Sarah Wakefield had had an intimate relationship during her captivity, largely due to Sarah's insistent defense of Chaska's innocence. When the shortened list of thirty-eight names was read out in prison, Chaska was for some reason listed among the condemned.

Sarah Wakefield did not hear of the mistake until the day after the execution. When she questioned those responsible for the execution they admitted to the mistake, but claimed that it was just that, a mistake. Chaska, they said, had been mistaken for another man who had been sentenced to death for murdering a pregnant woman.²⁶ The similarity between the two men's names caused the confusion, and the mistake went unnoticed until after the execution. Today it is

²⁴ Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola, *The War in Words: Reading the Dakota Conflict through the Captivity Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 68.

²⁵ "Chaska" is a frequent name among the Dakota given to the firstborn son. Chaska, or We-Chank-Washta-don-pee, was also referred to as Chaska-don, the additional modifier meaning "small."

²⁶ This man was also referred to as Chaskadon. His fate is unknown.

widely accepted that Chaska was wrongfully executed, but not accidentally. Sarah Wakefield, aware of the rumors against her, also believed this, saying “I will never believe that all in authority at Mankato had forgotten what Chaska was condemned for, and I am sure, in my own mind, it was done intentionally.”²⁷

The execution of the thirty-eight Dakota warriors took place on December 26, 1862 in Mankato, Minnesota. The instrument of execution was a large gallows constructed on 21-22 December in view of the prison that held the condemned. The gallows were designed to allow for all thirty-eight to be hanged at once, at the time undoubtedly a way to enhance the spectacle and bolster the notion of carrying out swift and complete justice. Some interpret this detail of the execution as a humane act that allowed for the completion of the gruesome display as quickly as possible, a fast and final capstone on a period of great violence.²⁸

While this may have been an effect, it is unlikely that this was a consideration at the time. Many complained that the gallows were too small, and might have been expanded without the president’s interference.²⁹ In hanging so many men at once, the executioners did not measure the ropes individually or account for variance in sizes among the condemned men. Without this consideration, many of the thirty-eight struggled until they finally asphyxiated to

²⁷ Sarah Wakefield, *Six Weeks in the Sioux Tepees: A Narrative of Indian Captivity*, 2nd ed. (Shakopee, MN: Argus, 1864), 308.

²⁸ Shelley Harrison (Archives and Collection Manager, Blue Earth County Historical Society), interview with Kristin Glomstad, January, 18, 2017.

²⁹ Harriet Bishop, *Dakota War Whoop: Indian Massacres and War in Minnesota* (1864; reprint, Chicago: R.R. Donnelley and Sons Company, 1965.), 256.

death, treatment that can hardly be considered humane.³⁰ Furthermore, there was an element of pride in executing so many Dakota at once, with one spectator recalling roughly thirty years later, in a memoir that is otherwise largely inaccurate on the details of the day, that it was “probably the greatest number ever hanged at one time in the world’s history.”³¹

The desire for revenge was strong among the settlers in Minnesota. This is indicated first by the mobs that attacked the imprisoned Dakota as they marched across the state; those who sought personal vengeance for their lost loved ones played their part in the legal executions as well. Many who had lost friends and family offered, and sometimes begged, to help during the construction of the gallows. The man who swung the axe to cut the rope, releasing the bottom of the scaffolding and hanging all at once, had the proverbial axe to grind: William J. Duly was the father of three young victims of the violence of the previous fall.³²

Yet the atmosphere among the spectators on the day of the hanging was subdued, relative at least to the crowds that had attacked and killed two of the original 303 condemned Dakota during their relocation to a new prison several weeks before the execution day. Witnesses record that the crowd was initially silent during the hanging, while some muffled but sustained cheers could be

³⁰ This adjustment was normally made in single executions to result in a quick death, with the length of the rope calculated to allow the neck to break with the initial drop.

³¹ H.D. Smith, *Hanging of Thirty-Eight Sioux Indians at Mankato, Minn., December 26, 1862*, pamphlet, 1898, from Hathi Trust Digital Library, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/012477434.html>, accessed January 30, 2017, 8.

³² Jack Shuler, “The Noose in the Museum: Hanging and Native America,” in *The Thirteenth Turn: A History of the Noose* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2014), 138.

heard. The governor had asked the people of Minnesota to act calmly and the military officer overseeing the execution saw to the order of the crowd and declared martial law.³³ Because of this decree, or perhaps the December cold that made cameras malfunction, there are no photographs of the hanging.³⁴ The descriptions from onlookers say the thirty-eight men acted calmly and resolutely. Singing as they mounted the scaffolding, some held hands and called out their own names to one another in the moments before the rope was cut.

After thirty minutes, the presiding doctors declared the hanged men deceased. The bodies of the dead were removed and buried in a shallow trench, and the crowd dispersed after an initial flurry to obtain souvenirs from the bodies. That night the mass grave was completely emptied by medical students and doctors who sought corpses for dissection, save for one body, which soldiers tied to a tree and used for target practice. During the period of controlled chaos immediately following the hanging, Captain John K. Arnold of the 3rd Minnesota Regiment also took the opportunity to remove a souvenir from the scene.

The Mankato Hanging Rope

In an 1869 letter Arnold claimed that he had cut the noose that killed Chaska from the gallows and concealed it beneath his coat immediately following the execution. Accompanying this letter, Arnold sent the noose to the Minnesota

³³ Tim Krohn, "Remembering the Dakota War: After the Hangings, More Suffering and Deaths," *Mankato Free Press*, December 22, 2012.

³⁴ The exact reason why no photographs exist of the hanging is unknown. Benjamin Gessner (American Indian and Fine Arts Collections Associate, Minnesota Historical Society), interview with Kristin Glomstad, December 20, 2016.

Historical Society. Arnold stated that he originally took the rope with the intent of gifting it to the family of one of Chaska's supposed victims.³⁵ For some reason, Arnold never carried out his original intention, and instead the noose became part of the collection at the Minnesota Historical Society.³⁶

Still tied in its original hangman's knot, the three-strand rope is 95-inches long, and fraying where it was cut from the gallows. A testimony to the frequent violence that accompanied westward expansion, the noose found plenty of company in the museum collection among other war related artifacts, such as a cane believed to be made from wood taken from the gallows. The Minnesota Historical Society, like many museums in the United States and beyond, has a complicated history of holding Native American objects and even human remains within its collection. Into the early 1900s, museums collected American Indian remains and cultural artifacts both as evidence of their biological inferiority and already as a means of romanticizing what was believed to be a "vanishing race."³⁷

³⁵ Chaska had been accused of killing George H. Gleason. While he admitted to being present to the killing, he maintained that he had not killed him, but another man, Hapa, had. This account was corroborated by Sarah Wakefield and another witness.

³⁶ Arnold may have been unable to locate Gleason's relatives, as had John F. Meagher of Mankato, who cut off Chaska's braid and had a watchband made from it. When he could not find Gleason's family he wore it himself, eventually donating it to the Minnesota Historical Society. This piece is no longer at the Minnesota Historical Society. Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola, *The War in Words*, 73.

³⁷ Raney Bench, *Interpreting Native American History and Culture at Museums and Historic Sites* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), xii. This theory and the history of museum standards in relation to American Indians will be discussed further in chapter 4.

The Gallows Timber

In discussions of the noose from the Mankato hangings and other physical reminders of the execution, another object from this day frequently enters the fray. Within the collection at the Blue Earth County Historical Society (BECHS) in Mankato there is a piece of wood purported to be a section of the gallows upon which the thirty-eight hanged. While the histories of collection surrounding these two objects are very similar, they diverge at important parts due to differences in institutional practices and questions of provenance. Their direct link back to the executions makes them particularly poignant reminders of the war, and the way they have been treated historically is indicative of the thoughts on the US-Dakota War in the following years.

The beam in question is nineteen feet long with dimensions of eight inches by ten inches (Figure I.1).³⁸ In December of 1862, *The Mankato Independent* reported on the building of the gallows used to execute the condemned Dakota warriors, including the exact measurements of the beams used in the construction. After the execution day, the gallows did not receive mention in the press again until August of 1864 when the *Mankato Weekly Union* gave notice of the sale of the wood from the gallows and prison that held the Dakota warriors to Dr. Brown

³⁸ These size details are now a point of contention for proving the authenticity of this object. This discussion of disputed provenance for the object at BECHS will follow chronologically, as these questions of authenticity did not arise until 2012. The timeline for the movement of the gallows was mapped out by researchers of the BECHS as they explored the provenance of their collection piece, during the 150th anniversary year of the war and hangings.

for \$33.50. Dr. Samuel Brown died in April of 1881, leaving his possessions to his wife Amelia.



Figure I.1. Photo credit Blue Earth County Historical Society.

The next time that the timber from the gallows received attention anywhere was in November of the same year, but this time associated with the name of John Meagher, a local businessman, and no relation to Samuel or Amelia Brown. The University of Minnesota recorded Meagher's donation of the timber to the university during the summer of 1881. Here Meagher is quoted as saying, "Agreeable to promise I have sent the last stick of the 'Indian Gallows' this p.m. to the St. Paul & Sioux City depot to be forwarded to the University of Minnesota." The museum at the university has no record of accessioning – or deaccessioning - the piece.³⁹ How the timber came into the possession of John Meagher is unclear.

³⁹ "The Timber History Mystery," *Blue Earth County Historical Society*, accessed January 30, <http://www.bechshistory.com/timber.html>.

The record of the timber's movement to the BECHS is also significant for understanding attitudes towards the US-Dakota War at this time. The thirty-eight were still unquestionably regarded as criminals, still deprived of even the designation of enemy soldiers. The initial collection of the timbers was not so much about preserving the history, but a means of owning the narrative surrounding the war. The key items from the execution, the gallows and the nooses, and other souvenirs taken by the crowd seemed to prove that justice had been served.

The presence of the noose and gallows at Mankato on December 26, 1862 and their integral roles in the hangings make these objects both powerful and problematic. As will be seen in the succeeding chapters, there are many examples of painful and frequently offensive material culture surrounding the US-Dakota War, yet these two pieces are treated differently than any of other artifacts of commemoration of the war. The noose and gallows timber set the foundation for the preservation and historical interpretation of material culture from the US-Dakota War. The considerations for these pieces are unique due to their probable involvement in the execution of the thirty-eight Dakota warriors, but also for the precedent they created served to inform the later material culture that developed around the conflict. In the following chapters, the traditional narrative and changing historiography of the US-Dakota War will be read through this material culture.

Chapter 1: Connection to the Civil War – Defender Medals

Introduction

Humans use objects to bring order to their interior lives and the world around them. Even objects that seem solely utilitarian serve this purpose, therefore offering insights into humanity, societies, cultures, and history.¹ War and violence are especially difficult to withstand and make sense of, and so humans process and understand them through the creation and interpretation of material culture. The noose and gallows timber are original artifacts from the US-Dakota War and were created for the purpose of execution. Yet through their intentional collection and preservation they took on new meanings, a meaning necessarily dependent on who headed this process and interpreted the objects. Their historical significance is grounded in their authenticity, which is responded to in differing ways across history and cultures. The material culture surrounding the US-Dakota War includes artifacts from the war, but it also includes objects made after the war, which reflect the thoughts at the time of each object's creation on the war, the Dakota, and American Indians in general. Through the creation of these pieces, and their collection, preservation, and interpretation, a physical manifestation of the historiography of the war is also created.

The material culture that originated around the US-Dakota War to commemorate and remember the actions of the conflict reveal how it was initially processed and interpreted by the European-American population of Minnesota,

¹ Arthur Asa Berger, *Reading Matter: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Material Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 7.

and a strong connection that existed between the US-Dakota War and the Civil War in their collective memory. This is apparent in some of the earliest commemorative pieces created for private ownership by veterans of the war and their immediate descendants. The creation of commemorative medals for the Battle of New Ulm, produced in 1891, and for the Battle of Fort Ridgely, produced in 1896, exhibit the link between the practices of commemorating the US-Dakota War and the Civil War, and the connection between the wars themselves.

As the settler community recovered from the events of 1862, their thoughts eventually turned from the immediate need to rebuild their lives towards publicly marking the war's events, heroes, and victims. Commemorating events that involve heavy loss of human life allows members of a community to make their grief public and support one another in their losses.² Because civilians suffered enormously in the US-Dakota War, the initial commemorations, frequently at burial sites, focused on mourning the dead and coping with this grief. As the years passed, the military actions in the war also received commemorative attention and the violence of 1862 began to be thought of as a military engagement in addition to a massacre of civilians.

The US-Dakota War and the Civil War

The events in Minnesota in the summer and fall of 1862 cannot be separated from the contemporary violence experienced on a national level during

² Kenneth E. Foote, *Shadowed Ground: America's Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 80.

this period. In 1862, Americans were midway through their second summer of fighting. While the major battles of the US-Dakota War raged in August and September in Minnesota at places such as New Ulm, Fort Ridgely, Birch Coulee, and Wood Lake, the battle of Antietam took center stage in the nation's consciousness as the single bloodiest day in American history. The wars surrounding Minnesotans in 1862, across the country and in and around their homes, were not as separate as the many miles between them might make it seem. Fought in different places and for different immediate reasons, the two wars overlapped through the people involved and what they represented, and in the underlying causes of the violence. The effects of the Civil War on the Dakota were palpable.

Minnesota was the western frontier at this point, and the Civil War was being fought in the East for the control of the West.³ In determining who would move west, slave power or free, it was simply a nonnegotiable fact that westward expansion was going to happen. The delayed annuities and food rations were partly due to a government preoccupied elsewhere, and it was not difficult to notice that many fighting men in the frontier state of Minnesota were far away. Those advocating for war against settlers realized that this was the best opportunity for action. The ongoing Civil War that consumed national attention cannot be viewed separately from the US-Dakota War, with consideration to their immediate effects and consequences, and long-term causes.

³ Kelman, *Misplaced Massacre*, xi.

The sectional tension in America affected the Dakota long before 1862. The change in terms in the Traverse des Sioux and Mendota treaties was the result of the ongoing debate between the representatives of slave and free powers in the United States. The desire to maintain the balance of power in the Federal Government led Southern senators to propose this change in the language regarding the future of Dakota land. The guarantee to the Dakota that they would hold their lands “in perpetuity” received the caveat, “at the discretion of the president.” Those making this change anticipated that the Dakota chiefs would refuse the treaty based on the uncertain future this correction created, thus delaying Minnesota’s statehood and thus the addition of another free state. Alexander Ramsey, the territorial governor at this point, convinced the Dakota otherwise and the treaties were signed and ratified.⁴

In this sense, the Civil War is itself a proximate cause for the US-Dakota War, providing a provocation for the Dakota to go to war, while also making it difficult for the state of Minnesota to mount a defense. The US-Dakota War in turn influenced the Civil War, threatening to redirect attention and resources, and engulf a new region of the country in widespread violence. On September 6, Governor Ramsey appealed to Lincoln for aid in fighting the Dakota, insisting, “this is not our war; it is a national war.”⁵ Governor Ramsey’s claim was echoed

⁴ Amy Danielson, “Timeline,” *The US-Dakota War of 1862*, last modified March 12, 2012, <http://www.usdakotawar.org/timeline.html>.

⁵ Theodore Christian Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 274.

by the governors of neighboring states who feared a general uprising of all Sioux, or perhaps even a pan-tribal war effort with the Chippewa and Winnebago tribes.⁶

In the summer and fall of 1862 the Civil War was still very much undecided. The Union continued its struggle with ineffective commanders and reports from the front frequently bore news of Union defeats, notably the loss at the second Battle of Bull Run. Political turmoil in Washington DC further meant that the Federal Government was at a point of weakness, and this did not go unnoticed. The early theory that Confederate sympathizers had incited the Dakota to violence is largely discredited by historians, but at the time was a very real fear.⁷ The abundance of rumors and fears based on half-truths marked the Civil War years in the United States. In 1862, it appeared that the British were close to offering aid to the Confederacy, a move that historians now say was always unlikely, but nevertheless provoked fear in the Union states.

Lincoln could hardly afford to divert troops and resources from the existing war with the South, but he also could not risk another front opening in the Northwest. Lincoln replied to Ramsey's fears first by telling the governor to "tend to the Indians first" before addressing the state's pending draft requirements.⁸ The federal government also created the Department of the Northwest to oversee

⁶ Steven Hahn, *A Nation Without Borders: The United States and Its World in an Age of Civil Wars, 1830-1910* (New York: Penguin, 2016), 246.

⁷ Samuel M. Schmucker, writing in 1865, attributed the violence in Minnesota, after years of "propitious peace and harmony," to neglect by the federal government and Confederate emissaries. Samuel M. Schmucker, *The History of the Civil War in the United States: Its Cause, Origin, Progress, and Conclusion* (Boston: Jones Brothers & Company, 1865), 328.

⁸ Hugh J. Reilly, *Frontier Newspapers and the Coverage of the Plains Indian Wars* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), 6.

military operations in the area. Disgraced Major General John Pope assumed command and arrived in Minnesota in mid-September, chafing from the Second Battle of Bull Run and eager to redeem himself and make short work of the Dakota.⁹

Although the connection between the Civil War and the US-Dakota War is clear, there are also valid reasons why the US-Dakota War should be viewed distinctly from the Civil War proper. Although it is sometimes referred to as Minnesota's "Other Civil War," this perspective oversimplifies the conflict, and ignores the sovereignty of the Dakota and the system of colonization at play.¹⁰ Playing into this notion is the historically common practice of referring to Dakota acts of war as "rebellion," and to those in the peace faction as "loyal" Indians. The tension in referring to Dakota warriors as enemy soldiers or as rebels is also reflective of the question of how to view Confederate soldiers. While the Union, particularly President Lincoln, refused to recognize the Confederacy as a separate nation due to the illegality of secession, Confederate soldiers were nonetheless treated as enemy soldiers, not criminals in rebellion. The lenient peace terms granted at the conclusion of the war to soldiers who fought for the South stand in stark contrast to the treatment of Dakota warriors and people at the conclusion of the US-Dakota War. These differences, and others, including the short duration and large number of civilian casualties of the Dakota War, must be recognized.

⁹ Axelrod, *Chronicle of the Indian Wars*, 193.

¹⁰ For an example of this, see: Kenneth Carley, *The Dakota War of 1862: Minnesota's Other Civil War* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2001).

On the whole, however, the connection between the two conflicts was felt at the time and reverberated in the years that followed.

Commemorating War through Medals

The connection between the Civil War and the US Dakota War is displayed materially in the medals awarded at the end of the nineteenth century to the defenders of Fort Ridgely and New Ulm, as well as to their descendants, in the years following as the white people of Minnesota commemorated their heroes. These medals, like those awarded to veterans of Civil War engagements, were born out of the same spirit of commemoration and reflect a conscious effort on the part of the settlers to link the two wars.

An 1898 correspondence with a lieutenant in the War Records Office reveals that the office was assembling an archival record of all state-issued medals from the Civil War.¹¹ That this project also included medals awarded to Civil War veterans shows the similarities between the commemoration activities for the two wars. That these medals were all archived together shows that the War Records Office did not differentiate exceedingly between the two and to some extent viewed the two conflicts through the same lens, as an American military operation for which veterans and US Army achievement should be recognized. These medals also appeared at about the same time, showing that commemoration for both was equally important and thoughts turned towards commemorating each war's individual participants with personal medals at about the same time.

¹¹ Belanger, "The True Story behind the Fort Ridgely Medal," 233.

The field of commemorative military medals at this time included the Medal of Honor, awarded to select soldiers during the Civil War. A closer contemporary to the defender medals of the US-Dakota War was the Civil War Campaign Medal, approved by Congress in 1906. This medal was available to any living veteran of the US Army or volunteer unit who served at some point between April 15, 1861 and April 8, 1865.¹² There were no stipulations about the particular battles that needed to be participated in, nor who the soldier was immediately fighting against, suggesting that a veteran of the US-Dakota War, not initially recognized as a separate conflict, could receive this medal for service in the Civil War.

The Civil War Campaign medal also shows the government's thoughts on the war after the passing of forty years. According to the Pentagon's Institute of Heraldry, "[t]he head of Lincoln was selected because it was the only thing that could be used on the medal without offense to the sentiment then happily prevailing over the whole country in regard to the Civil War."¹³ Reconciliation between the two sides was at work, the inclusion of Lincoln was made acceptable by also inscribing his "With malice towards none" quote on the medal.¹⁴

¹² U.S. Department of the Army, *Military Awards*, Army Regulation 600-8-22, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Army, June 25, 2015, 70.

¹³ "Civil War Campaign Medal," *The Institute of Heraldry*, accessed March 30, 2017, <http://www.tioh.hqda.pentagon.mil/Catalog/Heraldry.aspx?HeraldryId=15268&CategoryId=4&grp=4&menu=Decorations%20and%20Medals&ps=24&p=0&hilit=civil%20war%20medal.html>.

¹⁴ This reconciliation came at the price of the abandonment of the goals of Reconstruction and the further establishment of white supremacy in the South. See: David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2002).

The progression of reconciliation between the North and South is illustrated further in 1913 when the ribbon supporting the medal went from two bands of red, white, and blue, to the left half of the ribbon being blue and the other half gray.¹⁵ The sensibilities of defeated Confederates were clearly a consideration in the design of the medal. This consideration towards the viewpoint of a defeated foe is also evident in the Fort Ridgely medal, although the history of reconciliation following the two wars are not similar.

Congress also established the Indian Campaign Medal in 1907. The campaigns that provided the eligibility to receive this medal, while they include the wars against the Sioux in South Dakota, do not begin until 1865 at the earliest.¹⁶ Veterans of the US-Dakota War were not eligible to receive this medal then, perhaps because their service was already covered by the Civil War Campaign medal.

The US-Dakota War, a short conflict admittedly, but hugely significant for the Indian Wars that followed, is not considered a part of the Indian War campaign. This seeming anomaly or oversight may be due to the distinction between a defensive and offensive war. The Indian Campaign is just that, an offensive campaign against various American Indian groups for concrete goals,

¹⁵ As part of enemy action against the United States, Confederate veterans would seem to be outside these criteria, but eventually they too could receive the medal, which would display the gray portion of the ribbon on the top, rather than bottom, half. "Civil War Campaign Medal," *The Institute of Heraldry*, accessed March 30, 2017, <http://www.tioh.hqda.pentagon.mil/Catalog/Heraldry.aspx?HeraldryId=15268&CategoryId=4&grp=4&menu=Decorations%20and%20Medals&ps=24&p=0&hilite=civil%20war%20medal.html>.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of the Army, *Military Awards*, Army Regulation 600-8-22, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Army, June 25, 2015, 70-71.

generally the acquisition of territory or the subjugation of the Indians and any military threat they posed. The US-Dakota War, while provoked for years in various ways, was a defensive war. However, the punitive expeditions that followed were undeniably offensive, but these too are excluded from the Indian Campaign. The victim ideology of Minnesotans regarding the US-Dakota War persisted, even when the Dakota were clearly defeated.

The Battles of New Ulm and Fort Ridgely

Dakota warriors attacked New Ulm twice during the six weeks of warfare, first on August 19 and again on August 23. Armed civilians and militia defended the town successfully both times. Between these dates, Fort Ridgely was attacked on August 20 and 22, becoming one of the only military forts west of the Mississippi to undergo and survive a direct attack.¹⁷ These battles were hugely significant for turning the tide of the war in favor of the militias and US Army. Fort Ridgely was the doorway to the Minnesota Valley, which had it fallen would have allowed the Dakota to sweep into the rest of the state, expanding the scope of the war and the amount of territory that would need to be recovered and maintained.

Understanding these battles is essential for recognizing both the Dakota military strategy and the connection made to the Civil War. Fort Ridgely was strategically important to the Dakota and their leaders, such as Little Crow, recognized this. Little Crow knew that their best chance of success lay in attacking the fort as soon as possible both for the strategic location and arms and

¹⁷ Axelrod, *Chronicle of the Indian Wars*, 191-92.

ammunition stored there. The younger warriors, however, wanted to attack New Ulm for the wealth that could be gained in looting the town. This faction won out and New Ulm, which was likely better defended than the fort, was attacked first. The delay in attacking Fort Ridgely allowed militia to assemble and defense preparations to be made. These added days of preparation made all the difference for the survival of the fort, which was minimally garrisoned due to the demand for troops in the eastern theater of the Civil War. In the days leading up to the attack the fort also became a refuge for fleeing settlers though it was woefully underdefended.¹⁸

New Ulm Medal

Veterans of this fight received the Defender of New Ulm medals in 1891 at the dedication day of the monument for the fighting, August 22. The medallion itself is made of bronze and has a one-and-a-half-inch diameter.¹⁹ The front face reads, “SOUVENIR TO THE DEFENDERS OF NEW ULM AUG. 18th to 24th 1862,” and hangs from a red, white, and blue ribbon, itself encompassed between two metal bars reading “NEW ULM” and “MINNESOTA” (Figure 1.1). The backside of the medal depicts the monument erected in memory of the battle, reading: “DEDICATED AUGUST 22nd 1891.” Around the edge of the medal the words scroll: “MONUMENT, COMMEMORATING THE BATTLES OF NEW ULM” (Figure 1.2).

¹⁸ Paul N. Beck, *Soldier, Settler, Sioux: Fort Ridgely and the Minnesota River Valley, 1858- 1867* (Sioux Falls, SD: The Center for Western Studies, 2000), 143.

¹⁹ Anthony R. Margrave, “The Minnesota Indian War Medals,” *Journal of the Orders and Medals Society of America* 35, no. 7 (1984): 27.



Figure 1.1. Photo Credit Minnesota Historical Society



Figure 1.2. Photo Credit Minnesota Historical Society

The origin of this medal is unclear, but it is believed that a local pioneer organization funded its creation. While the prerequisites for receiving the medal are also unknown, the medal seems to have been awarded to anyone participating in either of the battles, not just those present for both attacks. According to one source, about 900 people received this medal. Veterans received their medals at the dedication ceremony, though to reach the aforementioned 900 there may have been a later wider distribution for those unable to attend.²⁰

Fort Ridgley Medal

Five years after the commission of the New Ulm medals, similar commemorative medals were issued to those involved in the battle at Fort

²⁰ Anthony R. Margrave, "The Minnesota Indian War Medals," *Journal of the Orders and Medals Society of America* 35, no. 7 (1984): 24-27.

Ridgely. This medal is made of copper and has a diameter of one-and-a-half inches. The front of the medal displays a detailed engraving of the fort with the words “DEFENDER OF FORT RIDGELY” arcing above the image. Below this, the line “AUG. 18-27 1862” roots the medal in the action of the US-Dakota War, and again seems to open the possibility of recipients being anyone involved in the fort’s defense during that week, not just during the two heaviest days of fighting. On a raised scroll above the scene of the fort it reads “TI-YO-PA/NA-TA-KA-PI” (Figure 1.3).



Figure 1.3. Photo credit Minnesota Historical Society

The inclusion of this Dakota phrase, which translates to “it shut the door against us,” is important for multiple reasons. This quote comes from the Dakota leader Big Eagle as he later recalled the immense strategic significance of the defeat at Fort Ridgely for the Dakota.²¹ If the fort had fallen, the Dakota warriors

²¹ Belanger, “The True Story behind the Fort Ridgely Medal,” 236.

would have had unfettered access to the Minnesota Valley, allowing the war to move east and south. The war would have continued, with a much larger force required to end the violence. Where this force would have come from and how this would have affected the fighting going on in other parts of the country are questions lost to the “what ifs” of a history that never happened.

One question that does deserve continued attention is why the creators of this medal included these words on the medal given to veterans. The inclusion of this phrase could be read as a sympathetic acknowledgment of the Dakota position and respect for a defeated foe. During the period at which the medal was created, the Lost Cause theory was maturing in the South. The Lost Cause was the idea that although the South fought valiantly in the Civil War, they nevertheless lost the war, through no real fault of their own, but rather due to a simple inferiority in manpower, resources, and supplies which was impossible to overcome.²²

The addition of this fatalistic and prescient realization of Big Eagle could signal another sort of “lost cause” theory, as applied to the US-Dakota War. Outnumbered and outgunned, the Dakota defeat at Fort Ridgely and in the larger war was simply inevitable. This view can be challenged, however. The Lost Cause theory developed in the South as a means of assuaging the humiliation of defeat. Following the war the Dakota were exiled from Minnesota and became a diaspora. They were struggling for survival, not grasping for understanding as to how they lost the war. Even before the violence began, they that knew their odds

²² Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 51.

of success were extraordinarily low, as evidenced by Little Crow's reluctance to lead the war effort.

In addition, if there is a Lost Cause element to this medal, it was clearly not intended as a nod of reverence to the Dakota, as it was when applied to the defeated Southerners.²³ Drawing attention to the improbability of Dakota success was not a means of comforting the Dakota, but reinforcing the idea of the cultural and military supremacy of the United States. The victors of the war, not the Dakota, created this medal. Displays of military superiority on the part of the United States were not infrequent. In early sources on the US-Dakota War, the military tactics and leadership of the Dakota are generally discredited or disparaged.²⁴ The message itself, "it shut the door against us," though it offers the Dakota perspective, reaffirms the belief in the superiority of "it," the US Army as represented by Fort Ridgely. Using these words in the original Dakota language, however, is perhaps a subtle recognition of the military skill that the Dakota did in fact possess.

Just as the outbreak of violence between the Dakota and settler population seems inevitable, so too does the eventual Dakota defeat. Even with the depopulation of fighting men and regular army from the Minnesota frontier, the settler population outnumbered the Dakota five to one. Yet the individuals who

²³ Belanger, "The True Story behind the Fort Ridgely Medal," 236.

²⁴ Kenneth Carley, writing in 1961, evinces little respect for the Dakota war tactics. Even with superior fighting forces, the Dakota could not win any pitched battles. Kenneth Carley, *The Dakota War of 1862: Minnesota's Other Civil War* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1961; reprint, 2001), 38.

survived the fighting knew firsthand that their own outcomes in surviving were in no way guaranteed and could have easily been otherwise. US Army units and civilian militias sent to quell the violence entered the conflict equipped with outdated weapons and were largely untested in battle. This fact hardly gives rise to a myth of inevitable victory.

The inclusion of the Dakota phrase adds weight to the Fort Ridgely medal that is not present in the New Ulm example. The veterans awarded this medal were reminded of the significance of their fight and success. This quote came from the Dakota warrior Big Eagle as he recollected the battle at Fort Ridgely, “We thought the fort was the door to the valley as far as to St. Paul, and if we got through the door nothing could stop us this side of the Mississippi. But the defenders of the Fort were very brave and kept the door shut.”²⁵ How well known was this quote, especially in its original Dakota? After thirty years did Minnesotans still realize the meaning of these words? If they did, this medal played an important part in maintaining this public memory, and in preserving a very small piece of the Dakota language.

The reverse side of the Fort Ridgely medal is equally interesting. It features the moccasin flower curling just inside the edge of the medal (Figure 1.4). In 1902, under the new name of the lady’s slipper, the moccasin flower became the state flower of Minnesota. In 1896, when this medal was created, this botanical shift in naming was already in process. An orchid native to North America, the moccasin flower was frequently used as a symbol of American

²⁵ Belanger, “The True Story behind the Fort Ridgely Medal,” 236

Indians, both in discussing federal policies and in poetry and literature.²⁶ One example of this is an 1842 poem by William Cullen Bryant, “The Maiden’s Sorrow,” in which the titular Indian maiden, “Far on the prairies in the west, None who loved thee beheld thee die... There, I think on that lonely grave... There, in the summer breezes wave, Crimson phlox and moccasin flower.”²⁷ These words reflect the forced removal of many American Indians and show the connotation carried by the moccasin flower, and the belief that American Indians would inevitably become extinct.



Figure 1.4. Photo credit Minnesota Historical Society

It is interesting that the flower on the Fort Ridgely medal is referred to as a moccasin flower and not by its new title, the lady slipper. Yet this is not wholly surprising given the inclusion of Dakota language on the medal, and seems fitting in regard to this other homage to Dakota culture. At a time when many

²⁶ Kyhl Lyndgaard, “Taking Off the Moccasin Flower and Putting on the Lady’s Slipper,” *Potash Hill: The Magazine of Marlboro College*, Summer 2012, 3-4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

increasingly believed the disappearance of American Indians and their culture were inevitable, two reminders of their existence were featured on a medal commemorating their defeat.

Yet the inclusion of Dakota words, language, and a particular flower was likely not a homage to a respected, albeit defeated, enemy. This mindset of respect towards a defeated foe was increasingly common in the United States in the 1890s, but it was directed mostly towards the defeated South. Battlefield monuments and Civil War commemorations of the era frequently honored the sacrifices of soldiers on both sides, sometimes to the point of neglecting to discuss the causes of the war, such as the issue of slavery. Reconciliation between the North and South was increasingly becoming the focus of discussions of the Civil War, but it was a reconciliation for white men only.²⁸

This was not the case with the US-Dakota War. While the loyalty of the Dakota was seemingly demanded by the United States, there was no focus on reunification immediately following the war. Instead, the details of this medal hint at an attempt at ownership. In claiming the flower, the land itself is claimed with finality. Its subsequent name change reflects the taming of the land.²⁹ Using the words of a defeated warrior, in his own language, is a claim on the culture of the Dakota. As the Dakota were moved west in exile, the once great threat that they represented was preserved on a small medal.

²⁸ Nuala Johnson, "Cast in Stone: Monuments, Geography, and Nationalism," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 13, no.1 (1995): 55.

²⁹ Lyndgaard, "Taking Off the Moccasin Flower and Putting on the Lady's Slipper," 3.

This was a different kind of Lost Cause theory. The pervasive view in the United States at this time was that American Indians were dying out, and their cultures could not continue. This is reflected in the urgency in which museums were collecting Native American artifacts, believing that they were right in doing so because they needed to preserve a culture that would not be around much longer.³⁰ The lost cause was not just the Dakota defeat in the war, but the inevitable disappearance of Dakota people, language, and culture.

The moccasin flower is not the only detail on the back of the Fort Ridgely medal. Almost surrounded by the aforementioned orchid are the words, “PRESENTED BY THE STATE OF MINNESOTA TO.” Here there was also space for the name of the recipient to be engraved. This addition links this medal closely to medals awarded by other states for service in the Civil War. The interesting distinction here is that this medal was not awarded by the State of Minnesota, but was quietly arranged and paid for by a veteran of the Fort Ridgely battle and local businessman, Werner Boesch. The committee behind the medal’s creation decided that the distinction was more meaningful for those honored if they believed it came from the state, and they received permission to include this dedication.³¹ At the ceremony unveiling the Fort Ridgely monument, a member of the committee first presented these medals to the Minnesota governor’s representative, who then handed them back for distribution, symbolizing that they came from the state.

³⁰ Bench, *Interpreting Native American History and Culture*, ix.

³¹ Belanger, “The True Story Behind the Fort Ridgely Medal” 239.

Analysis and Discussion

These pieces of the material culture of the Dakota War bring up important questions. How is warfare defined, and who defines it? It was not until relatively recently that this conflict was recognized as a full-scale war. For many years, it was referred to first as the “Indian Massacre,” understandable as the settler population reeled from the civilian losses that touched many families in the area. These losses were great, and were used to justify the expulsion of the Dakota from Minnesota, enacted first through an internment at Fort Snelling and then forced march out of the state. In the years following, punitive missions to the West, an effort to bring justice to the Dakota warriors who fled as the war concluded, resulted in many more deaths. Again, this violence was certainly not limited to those who played an active part in the war of 1862. The “Indian Massacre” was a name earned through the losses of innocent lives on both sides.

The events of 1862 later became known as the Sioux Outbreak or Uprising, reflecting a view of American Indians as largely subdued, but still prone to occasional outbursts of violence. The belief followed that these acts of violence were due to their inherently “savage” nature, while settler violence was almost always in the name of self-defense.³² This language also reflects the idea of the US-Dakota War as viewed as a part of the Civil War. As the fractured nation dealt with the rebelling South, it was imperative that the North present a united front. A commonly cited example of this need to unity in the face of national crisis is

³² Phillip Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 21.

President Lincoln's actions in suspending habeas corpus to political dissenters, which illustrates the severity of questioning the Federal war effort.

In this atmosphere acts of violence could not be easily forgiven, and this perhaps partly explains why brutal reprisals were deemed necessary by many. In this view, the Dakota were not exercising their sovereignty in deciding to go to war with the United States, they were themselves rebelling against the country.³³ Little thought was given to understanding Dakota culture and the importance placed on kinship ties. The Dakota owed their allegiance to the United States. Those who joined the violence against white settlers at any point were considered traitors.

It is easy to see the problems in defining loyalty this way. It imposes a dangerously simplistic reading over a situation that was far more nuanced than the black-and-white notions of loyalty versus treason imply. Many Dakota, as well as those of mixed heritage, were conflicted about joining the violence, and those who chose to join or refused involvement did so for a variety of reasons. Those who fought in the war did not necessarily take part in the violence against civilians and may have advocated for different war measures, such as suing for peace earlier or the release of captives.

The changing nomenclature around this event is significant because it shows a changing understanding of what happened in Minnesota in the summer and fall of 1862. While the written historical narratives reflect these changing

³³ William T.R. Marvin and Lyman H. Low, eds., "Medal for the Defense of Fort Ridgely, Minn.," *American Journal of Numismatics* 35, no. 1 (1901): 21.

attitudes, objects such as the medals given to those involved in the fighting at New Ulm and Fort Ridgely show that the notion of these days of violence as part of a larger war persisted even in the early days of commemoration of the Civil War and US-Dakota War.

Frequent attention has been given to the motives and thoughts of Civil War soldiers as they faced the hardships of battles and campaigns. A similar method can be applied to those fighting in the US-Dakota War. Lives were lost and the lives of survivors were irrevocably changed. While the words used to describe this violence have changed and the way in which the war is thought of and is defined has done likewise, the historical actors themselves did not make this distinction. This discussion necessarily ties into the differing definitions of war used by white settlers and Dakota at the time. For the Dakota warfare was not limited to men of fighting age acting as combatants but rather extended to all, including women and children. In Dakota beliefs, spirits continued fighting and so bodies were sometimes mutilated to prevent this threat in the afterlife. To white settlers, violence against noncombatants was not an act of war but a massacre, and mutilations were horrific war crimes.

While these actions would be denounced as such, the moral distinction is in name only. One need not look much further than the massacres, historically defined as battles, at Sand Creek and Wounded Knee.³⁴ Reported as successful

³⁴ In contrast, there is the Battle of Little Bighorn, historically defined as a massacre because the United States Army lost. See: Edward Tabor Linenthal, *Sacred Ground: Americans and Their Battlefields* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

battles by the US Army, these engagements have since been recognized as massacres of noncombatants where the bodies of men and women alike were mutilated for trophies. The US-Dakota War reflects this dichotomy. Innocents on both sides suffered horrendously and in either side condemning the actions of the enemy they must also account for their own sins.

Conclusion

The connection between the Civil War and the US Dakota War is displayed materially in the medals awarded to the defenders of Fort Ridgely and New Ulm and to their descendants. These medals, like those awarded to veterans of Civil War engagements, are born out of the same spirit of commemoration and reflect a conscious effort on the part of the settlers to link the two wars.

The medals presented in commemoration of these battles are revealing in a number of ways. Bearing witness to changing attitudes and understandings of the war, they indirectly preserve Dakota culture, believed to be defeated and obsolete. In linking the commemoration efforts of the US-Dakota War with that of the Civil War, these medals are physical reminders of the American mindset in the uncertainty of 1862 and how this period was remembered forty years later.

Chapter 2: The War Remembered in Popular Culture – Standard Brewing Company Tray

Introduction

Commemorations of the US-Dakota War continued and evolved into different aspects of American culture. While the focus of state and community sponsored commemoration continued on the sites and people particularly significant to the war, commemoration also branched out into popular culture. This arm of the material culture surrounding the US-Dakota War deserves special consideration because it shows the lasting place of the war in the collective memory of the general public, and changes in how the war was viewed at various points in history. One example of this is a promotional beer tray released by the Standard Brewing Company, itself located in Mankato (Figure 2.1).



Figure 2.1. Photo Credit Numismatic Bibliomania Society.

The tray, with a twelve-inch diameter, is made of tin with a brightly colored border running along the inside edge. Set against a yellow background,

bold red letters read “STANDARD BREWING CO. / MANKATO, MINNESOTA.” The interior scene depicts the moments before the execution of the thirty-eight Dakota warriors. In the background appears the fledgling town of Mankato. The pleasantly blue and lightly cloudy sky paired with the green of the immediate foreground does little to suggest a Minnesota winter. Just inside the upper right quadrant of the tray stands the scaffold. The gallows and the condemned, seemingly the focal point of the scene, are just off center. Instead, the middle of the scene belongs to the American flag, rising above the events on the ground and fluttering gently in the breeze. Beneath this weighty symbol of victory the thirty-eight are all in position awaiting the moment of their execution, 10:16 the morning of December 26. Many are depicted with knees bent and one foot off the ground, indications that they are dancing.¹

Surrounding the scaffold are lines of federal soldiers clad in their standard navy blue. The last row is mounted, with the horses standing in line, perfectly straight. Behind the soldiers appears the civilian crowd. To the left they are pictured among the army transports with their own horses and wagons while on the right they stand grouped together, some conversing among themselves, a few pointing towards the imminent hanging. In the immediate foreground are the words: “THE EXECUTION OF 38 / SIOUX INDIANS AT MANKATO DEC. 26TH 1862.”

¹ Robert K. Elder, “Execution 150 Years Ago Spurs Calls for Pardon, *The New York Times*, December 13, 2010.

There are variations of this particular tray. One version, such as the one on display at the Blue Earth County Historical Society located in Mankato, has added “BY PERMISSION OF HON. JOHN C. WISE” beneath the descriptive title of the scene. The other does not have this addition but over the sky is written “STANDARD BREWING CO. / Mankato / Minn” (Figure 2.2). The production of both trays is attributed to the Meek and Beach Company of Coshocton, Ohio.



Figure 2.2. Photo credit Vesterheim Norwegian American Museum.

In addition to the variances on the round tray, there is another tray produced for the Standard Brewing Company in the shape of a rectangle (Figure 2.3). The scene of this tray is also framed by an ornate golden border, across it reading “STANDARD BREWING CO. / MANKATO, MINN. U.S.A.” Centered on the left and right borders a beer bottle from the Standard Brewing Company is pictured. Written over the inexplicably green grass in the scene are the words, “THE EXECUTION OF 38 / SIOUX INDIANS AT MANKATO, DEC 26TH

1862. / FOR HISTORY SEE OTHER SIDE.” The other side the tray originally included a piece of paper attached that gave some context for the war and hanging.²



Figure 2.3. Photo credit *Land of Amber Waves*. From the Jim and Ruth Beaton Collection.

The execution scene here varies minutely from the other tray. The figures making up the crowd in the foreground are different and are not as tightly packed as they appear in the other tray. The surrounding army and distant crowd appears largely the same, save for two American flags buttressing the scaffold instead of one. The scaffold itself is even smaller and more distant than it is in the round tray. Contextually, it is still the focal point in that it is the draw for the crowd, but it is far from front and center.

² Doug Hoverson, email message to author, April 3, 2017.

While this tray still depicts the hanging scene, half of the space is devoted to showing three military officers drinking on a porch. Here at least there is some sign of winter. The vines running up the three pillars of the porch appear dormant, neither green nor flowering. Empty bottles from their earlier enjoyments grace the table and porch floor, while two cases of empty bottles and two kegs sit in the lawn before them. A serious day of drinking has taken place, but the officers appear composed, ordered, and alert. Above the officers a sign for the brewery hangs. The scene is largely anachronistic. The Standard Brewing Company did not exist at this time, nor did the crown-capped bottles shown in the cases.³

While the Standard Brewing Company did not exist at the time of the hanging, and probably no commercial breweries existed in the frontier town of the new state, the message is that had there been the opportunity, officers undoubtedly would have enjoyed their products on the day that marked the successful conclusion of a period of great violence. Of course, this also ignores the fact that the army commander overseeing the hanging had ordered martial law for the event and closed all bars for the preceding few days to ensure the crowd would not be too rowdy.⁴

To the modern viewer, the juxtaposition in this image is unsettling. The officers are composed, but nonchalant. This cavalier scene of merriment, albeit

³ Doug Hoverson, *Land of Amber Waves: The History of Brewing in Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 87.

⁴ John D. Bessler, "On Lincoln's Orders: Mankato's Mass Hanging," in *Legacy of Violence: Lynch Mobs and Executions in Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 59.

somewhat reserved, contrasts harshly with the public execution about to commence, which remains the largest mass hanging in United States history. While there is more going on in this tray than in the round version, this larger tray will not be the focus of this discussion. While this tray and its message does invite further research, it is also more overtly an advertisement for beer. The round tray, with its sole depiction of the execution scene, is indicative of the feelings towards the US-Dakota War at the time and the place of this event in the national and local consciousness at the time it was produced.

With this disclaimer, the focus will return to the common element among all of the trays, the scene of execution. This rendering is based on the primary contemporaneous representation of the event, a lithograph sketched by witness W.H. Childs. The image circulated in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated News* in January of 1863, and later appeared in the *Mankato Weekly Record* (Figure 2.4). As previously mentioned, there are no photographs of the hangings at Mankato and so this image is generally relied upon for a visual representation of what the day looked like.

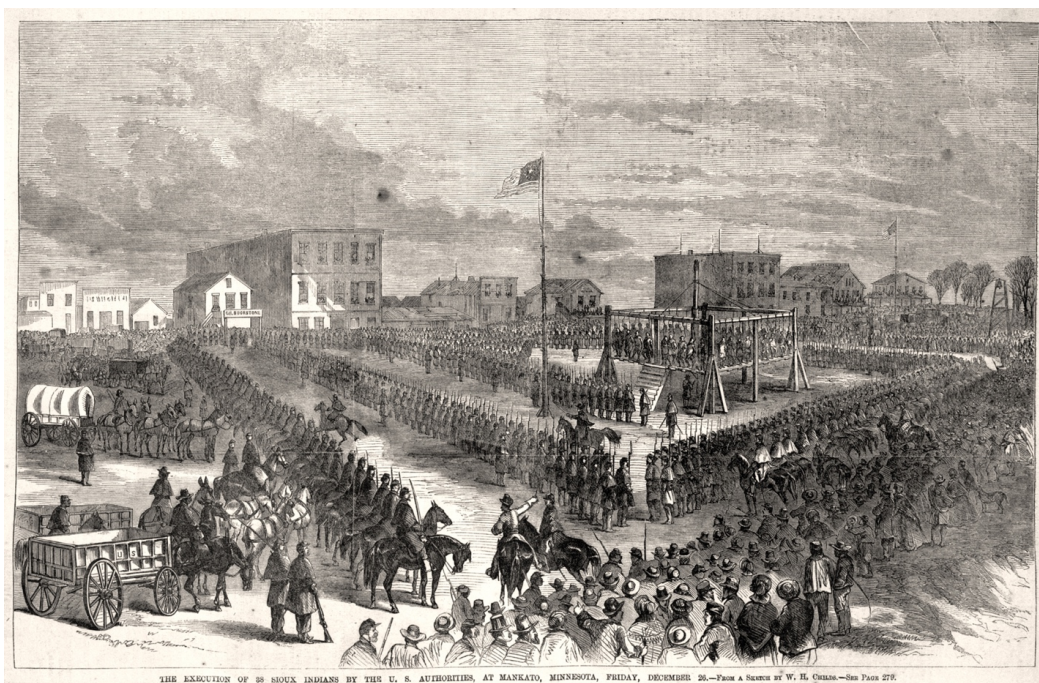


Figure 2.4. Photo credit Minnesota Historical Society.

The execution scene as depicted by Childs shows up on other commemorative pieces apart from beer trays. At the same time, around the turn of the century, medals and even spoons were engraved with the image of the execution and produced for souvenirs. The fortieth anniversary of the war and executions provided an increased interest in remembering the war, and a market for items relating to victory over the Dakota.⁵ While these depictions all come from the same source, each is slightly different from the original lithograph.

The scene on the tray diverges from the one that appeared in Leslie's paper in its addition of vibrant color, and in the simplification of the scene. In the original lithograph, the crowd, made up of both soldiers and civilians, is larger. The background is filled with spectators as far as the eye can see, including the

⁵ This continues to fit into the national trends during this period, which focused on commemorating the Civil War.

distant buildings with people seemingly hanging out of windows to get a look at the upcoming execution. The crowd depicted on the tray is much smaller. There are fewer people in the immediate foreground and while the scaffold is surrounded by the crowd as it is in Child's drawing, the crowd does not extend to the horizon and no people can be seen in the distant buildings.

The macabre scene on this tray served as advertisement for the Standard Brewing Company by linking it to one of the most historically significant events in Mankato's history, which was also relatively recent enough that many consumers would have first-hand memories of the event, or knew someone who did. This brewery had a penchant for infusing their products with a national and dramatic flavor, naming one beer "1776" and featuring a label depicting drummers and a flutist marching across a Revolutionary War battlefield (Figure 2.5). What these pieces show about the Standard Brewing Company is that while the company did not exist at the time of either of these seminal events in national and local history, its owners sought to link their company and product to the memories of these national triumphs, and knew what sentiments appealed to their customers – an appeal to the unifying and heroic themes of American military victory.⁶

⁶ Hoverson, *Land of Amber Waves*, 87.

The tray in question was likely produced in 1902 to mark the fortieth anniversary of the US-Dakota War and following executions. Without a date on the tray itself, this makes the most sense when considering the brewery's relatively short lifespan, operating from 1900 to 1908. As one of nine breweries in the Mankato area at the time, the Standard Brewing Company could not make a go of it for long, despite its dedication to modern brewing technology and financial backing from Chicago investors.⁷



Figure 2.5. Photo credit *Land of Amber Waves*.

Mankato at the turn of the century was forty years removed from the role it played in the final chapter of the US-Dakota War, yet this tray makes it very apparent that the memory and desire to commemorate the event were not lagging. The historical context for the production of this piece necessitates taking a closer look at the situation in Mankato, Minnesota, and the nation at this time. The beginning of the 1900s witnessed a continued period of intense commemoration, both for the US-Dakota War and the Civil War. Civil War commemoration took

⁷ Hoverson, *Land of Amber Waves*, 243.

off in the 1890s and during this period, initially dominated by northern efforts and funded by veterans' societies.

Forty years is long enough to be removed from the danger and instability wrought by violence to recover from the losses of the war, both physically and mentally. Elaborate or organized commemoration could not take place immediately after the war because those affected were still reeling and regrouping. But forty years is also long enough that those who were in their adulthood at the time of the war were now entering old age. The desire to commemorate the event thus intensified with the growing realization that those who witnessed it and were key players were becoming rarer. The fear that the collective memory of key places and events within the war were in danger of being lost with the passing of the generation involved spurred efforts to mark and commemorate, both in an effort to honor those involved and to ensure that physical reminders continued to exist and inform the collective memory of future generations.

While the United States was far enough removed from the Civil War to begin commemoration in earnest, the nature of that conflict affected how commemoration took place. New understandings of the war were emerging, such as the Lost Cause theory, and the need for white reconciliation was taking precedence over the need to resolve the issues that had led to the war, namely slavery and institutional racism. The country was tired of division, and so the unity of white men was again emphasized. Reunification was already the theme at

the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Civil War.⁸ Commemorations reflected this, as once mortal enemies now dedicated monuments to one another and commemorative activities frequently stressed the heroism on both sides and the tragedy of the war, neglecting again any real discussion of its causes and consequences. Many Americans viewed these efforts as a “healthy process of sectional reconciliation – a process that everyone knew but no one said was for and between whites.”⁹

The Indian Wars were not like this. Violence in the West was still very recent when the US-Dakota War was being remembered in beer trays. The slaughter at Wounded Knee in 1890 is one of the markers of the closing of the western frontier, but the Indian Wars continued in pockets well into the twentieth century. Minnesota had not long been free from violence either. In north central Minnesota, the Battle at Leech Lake took place in 1898, between the United States and Chippewa, or Ojibway.¹⁰ While no one was killed here, this event sparked fears again of an Indian “uprising” among settlers, and fear of settler reprisals among the Chippewa.

The US-Dakota War was one of the links between the Civil War and these Indian Wars, overlapping with both in chronology, people involved, methods of warfare, and reasons for fighting. The US-Dakota War was brief compared to the four long years of the Civil War. Yet the US-Dakota War fits into

⁸ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 2.

⁹ Nuala Johnson, “Cast in Stone: Monuments, Geography, and Nationalism,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 13, no.1 (1995): 55.

¹⁰ Also known as the Battle of Sugar Point.

a much longer history of colonialism, broken treaties, and violence. The Civil War, while it was much costlier to the nation, and had been built on years of sectional saber rattling. The two wars coincided in troops involved with the use of “galvanized Yankees.” These Confederate prisoners of war swore allegiance to the Union, then moved west to fight Indians. This arrangement is further proof that the unity of white men was always stronger than any allegiance or treaty between the United States and American Indian tribes.¹¹

This racial component helps to explain why the commemoration for the US-Dakota War was significant and unique. At the time of this commemorative tray’s production, the war was commonly referred to as the Indian Massacre or the Sioux Uprising. This also accounts for why it was deemed appropriate to depict the execution of the Dakota warriors on an advertisement for beer. The Dakota had acted unlawfully and the executions were legal and just. Recognizing that the US-Dakota War was not initially designated as such in official records, similarities may appear between the execution of the Dakota and other contemporary hangings.

In contextualizing this item, it is beneficial to look for other pieces of material culture that address lawful executions. Chronologically the closest

¹¹ The US-Dakota War and the need for troops in Minnesota that it generated was one of the factors leading to the use of “galvanized Yankees.” These regiments were used in the West, far from the fighting of the Civil War, so as not to overly test their newfound Union loyalty. The newly created Department of the Northwest welcomed many of these former Confederates, mostly for the punitive missions against the Sioux that followed the US-Dakota War. Stephen E. Osman, “Galvanized Yankees’ Do Their Duty in Minnesota,” *Allies: Newsletter for Members and Friends of the Military Historical Society of Minnesota* 21, no. 1 (2013): 1.

executions that garnered national attention on a similar level as the hangings of the Dakota thirty-eight were the executions of the Lincoln conspirators, or perhaps that of John Brown before the Civil War, or of Henry Wirz, the commandant of Andersonville prisoner of war camp in Georgia, following the conclusion of the war. These hangings all took place under the law for various acts of treason, for which the Dakota were also hanged. While emotions ran high among these executions as well, and they received their own commemorations, these other hangings are not remembered in the same way as that of the Dakota warriors.

The executions of John Brown and Henry Wirz, while carried out under the laws of the United States, were reclaimed by their respective causes' supporters in efforts to rescue and rehabilitate the good names of the men hanged. John Brown was hailed as a martyr by the abolitionist cause. Henry Wirz was celebrated in the South as a hero who had done all that he could in a time of great difficulty, but was nevertheless scapegoated by the conquerors looking for a way to blame the defeated Southerners.¹²

The execution of the Lincoln conspirators perhaps bears the most resemblance to that of the Dakota warriors in terms of the national feeling at the time. While only four were executed in this situation, they too were hanged all at once so that their deaths provided a spectacle of quick and unflinching justice, as

¹² Tony Horwitz, *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War* (New York: Random House, 1998), 325.

was the intended effect at Mankato.¹³ Both executions marked a final capstone on a bloody conflict. In both cases, there is the sense that those executed were treasonous, and had taken innocent life. In theory, the Dakota who were hanged were those responsible for killing civilians, although the many problems with this theory have already been discussed. The hanging of the Lincoln conspirators was well documented and a number of photographs survive from the event. But there has been no material culture created similar to that of the US-Dakota War.

Why then has the US-Dakota War, specifically the mass execution that marked its end, engendered such strong efforts to create souvenirs and popular culture reminders? To understand this, the details of the tray produced by the Standard Brewing Company will be examined and interpreted. While the image on this tray is the same as that which appeared in 1863 newspapers, the two depictions have different meanings and messages. As already discussed, the purpose of the image as it appeared in the paper was primarily to document the event and show what it looked like to be standing in the crowd in Mankato on December 26 of 1862. When this image appeared forty years later on a beer tray, though it was nearly identical to the paper version, it had a much different meaning.

When placed on a tray advertising for a local brewery, the image was no longer a simple effort at documentation. Colorized and surrounded by an equally

¹³ In addition to hanging a great number, Pope and Sibley both wanted to hang the condemned as soon as possible, in order to send a message. John D. Bessler, "On Lincoln's Orders: Mankato's Mass Hanging," in *Legacy of Violence: Lynch Mobs and Executions in Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 46.

bright and patterned border, the message was more clearly one of triumphalism. The fact that the Dakota warriors appear at a distance and are not centered in an image that is focused on their imminent deaths is particularly revealing. Instead, the American flag stands at the center of the image. Already cast off to the side, this image can be read as an indirect hint at the expulsion of the Dakota from Minnesota and the Americanization of their traditional homeland.

Overall, the scene depicts the thoughts on the hanging that still existed forty years after the event. This is a triumphant victory of civilization – complete with its well-dressed and orderly spectators, disciplined military, and architectural structures that are just the beginning of a new and thriving town. The West is on its way to being won. While the threat of occasional violence was not completely gone at this period, the tray’s celebratory depiction of ordered and seemingly just death boasts that Mankato, Minnesota, and the United States know how to respond when the necessary violence of clashing cultures erupts.

It is also important to consider that this was not an unusually controversial message or image at the time of this tray’s production. Advertising is about appealing to the largest portion of consumers possible. That this image appears in this format, and in other mediums serving as advertisements and souvenirs, is indicative of how common this depiction of the execution was.¹⁴ The message in the tray was not questioned, nor was it found to be unusual. However, for some the Standard Brewing Company tray went too far. Some breweriana collectors and Mankato residents later speculated that the use of the execution scene to sell

¹⁴ Hoverson, *Land of Amber Waves*, 87.

beer was not only inappropriate and tasteless, but also brought doom for the Standard Brewing Company, which was only in operation for eight years despite the proprietors' best efforts to stay in business.¹⁵

The tray and the conversation around it is evidence of the mixed feelings on the popular commemoration of the US-Dakota War. The mainstream interpretations of the war and following executions were well-represented, and continued to be for many years, as will be shown in the next chapter addressing the monuments to the war. Yet this mainstream narrative was clearly questioned, at least to an extent. Nevertheless, popular opinion determined and guided the acceptable methods of commemoration for the Dakota War.

Collecting – Breweriana and Museums

More than one hundred years after its production, the meanings that people read into this piece of material culture have again shifted. This is evidenced in how the tray is discussed and where it appears. In many sources on the commemoration and material culture surrounding the US-Dakota War, the tray is alluded to briefly, generally as an example of some of the more unique routes that commemoration of the war has taken.¹⁶ The existence of the tray is

¹⁵ Hoverson, *Land of Amber Waves*, 243.

¹⁶ For examples of brief mentions of the tray see: Kelsey Carlson and Gareth E. John, "Landscapes of Triumphalism, Reconciliation, and Reclamation: Memorializing the Aftermath of the Dakota-US War of 1862," *Journal of Cultural Geography* 32, no. 3 (2015): 284; Shuler, "The Noose in the Museum: Hanging and Native America," in *The Thirteenth Turn: A History of the Noose*, 147; Melodie Andrews, "U.S.-Dakota War in Public Memory and Public Space: Mankato's Journey to Reconciliation," in *The State We're In: Reflections on Minnesota History*, ed. Annette Atkins and Deborah L. Miller (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2010), 53.

well known among historians, but it is mentioned only in support of other commemorative pieces for the war and is never the sole focus of the discussion.

Where the tray is most frequently mentioned is among collectors of breweriana, particularly of vintage beer trays. Within these circles the anomaly of the tray's image is noticed and receives suitable attention. However, the history behind the image is rarely included, and when it is, is frequently inaccurate. The tray is not collected for its historic significance, but for its aesthetic quality and rarity among brewery memorabilia. All versions of the trays are considered rare. Based on current and recent availabilities at auction, the larger, rectangular tray is much rarer than the round tray. Author Doug Hoverson estimates that there are only ten to twelve examples of the larger tray depicting the drinking soldiers.¹⁷ The round tray is also rare, but it has also appeared recently on several auction sites, selling on one platform for \$950.¹⁸

It is through these collectors of brewery memorabilia that at least one example of this tray has ended up in a museum, although it seems to be underrepresented in these institutions.¹⁹ The tray is not found within the Minnesota Historical Society collection, but is part of the collection at the Blue

¹⁷ Doug Hoverson, email message to author, April 3, 2017.

¹⁸ "0980: Brewery Tray, Standard Brewing Co. – Mankato, MN," *liveauntioneers*, accessed February 10, 2017, https://new.liveauntioneers.com/item/12545065_brewery-tray-standard-brewing-co-mankato-mn-c.html. This tray sold on September 30, 2012. Its description misattributes the hangings depicted to the aftermath of the Spirit Lake Massacre of 1857, not the US-Dakota War of 1862.

¹⁹ The tray has also found a home within the collection of Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum in Decorah, Iowa, where it served as inspiration for the current study.

Earth County Historical Society. This is fitting as the Standard Brewing Company was in Mankato. The tray at BECHS was donated by the estate of a collector of Kato Brewing Company memorabilia, another local brewery, in 2014. Because the tray arrived as a part of a larger, thematic collection it has since then been displayed in this context within an exhibit case featuring brewery memorabilia (Figure 6a, b).



Figure 2.6a. Author's photo.



Figure 2.6b. Author's photo.

Conclusion

That this tray is not more prevalent within museums perhaps speaks to its rarity and prized position among breweriana collectors. However, the display of the tray in at least one museum within only the context of brewery memorabilia also shows that the study of material culture and its ability to witness to historical viewpoints is easily overlooked. The Standard Brewing Company tray has multiple meanings, which come through depending on the context of its display. The tray helps to tell the story of brewing history in Mankato and Minnesota, and

logically belongs with other pieces of breweriana. Yet this unique piece of material culture brings up many questions surrounding the US-Dakota War commemoration and the nature of American society at the onset of the twentieth century, such as popular thoughts on consumerism and materialism, which have not been examined here. The most apparent message of the tray is in its depiction of the execution of the Dakota warriors.

Yet this message is not addressed by the Blue Earth County Historical Society. A piece of consumer culture, the tray originally depended on the popular knowledge of the US-Dakota War to achieve its purpose, the sale of beer. Now the conversation around the tray and the war has shifted so that the collective memory of the war is in part kept alive through the existence of this tray, and pieces like it. The changing interpretation of the tray itself reflects how the views on the US-Dakota War have changed over time as well.

Chapter 3: The War Remembered in Stone – Monuments, Markers, and Plaques

Introduction

The State of Minnesota, the Minnesota Historical Society, local historical organizations, and individual towns and settlers all erected commemorative monuments for the US-Dakota War. Generally, state monuments mean that the state funded the monument, while the effort towards commemoration itself took place on a local level.¹ Monuments themselves vary according to the subject of their commemoration. Many mark the places of significant battles or events, others mark these events and the nearby burials that followed any action that took place there, and many call attention to individuals for their various deeds. While recent monuments and commemorative plaques and markers generally reflect a tone of reconciliation and healing from the war, earlier monuments typically portray a more triumphant interpretation of the war from the settler perspective.² Carved in stone, these monuments bear witness to the changing attitudes and interpretations of the US-Dakota War, and the pervasive pain that coincides with the memory of the war.

While state commemoration began in 1873 and continued to 1929, privately sponsored monuments started appearing as early as 1866. The very first monument was placed in the New Ulm Cemetery where white victims of the war

¹ Julie Humann Anderson, “Memory on the Landscape,” in *We Are What We Remember*,

² Kelsey Carlson and Gareth E. John, “Landscapes of Triumphalism, Reconciliation, and Reclamation: Memorializing the Aftermath of the Dakota-US War of 1862,” *Journal of Cultural Geography* 32, no. 3 (2015): 271.

were buried. This early monument is not place specific in that it did not mark a location significant to the events of the war. Before monuments like this one, gravestones also frequently read, “killed by Indians” as a small commemoration to the events of 1862.³ Though monument building began early and continued most recently to 2012, there are lulls and bursts in commemorative activity.

Attention to commemoration generally peaked around significant anniversaries of the events of 1862, but these bursts also coincided with broader national trends in memorialization and follow general rules about what history can be commemorated with monuments, and after how much time. As monuments dedicated specifically to war, these pieces uniquely reflect the political history of the United States.⁴ They serve as glimpses into American society at the time the particular monuments were erected, while the changing opinions on some of the monuments in the following years show the transformation in mainstream views on the war, the Dakota, and on American Indians in general.

Between these various types, there are over fifty monuments, markers, and plaques dedicated around the US-Dakota War. Here the focus will be on how monuments and the landscapes of which they form a part are an important aspect of material culture, and as such how these monuments fit into the material culture surrounding the war that has developed in the last 150 plus years, reflecting and

³ Curtis Dahlin, *Minnesota State Monuments to the Dakota Uprising* (Roseville, MN: Author, 2010), 5.

⁴ James M. Mayo, “War Memorials as Political Memory,” *Geographical Review* 78, no. 1 (1988): 75.

reinforcing traditional interpretations while creating an impetus to revise this standard narrative, in part at least. To do this, two monuments will receive significant attention for both their singularity and congruency within the broader commemorative activities on the war.

Monuments, and changed landscape, hold an important place in the study of material culture. Monuments are one means of commemorating history, and are necessarily as subjective as any other method. While monuments are frequently viewed as objective and impartial markers of the past, they are shaped by the societies in which they exist and which they themselves continue to influence.⁵ Monuments shape history just as much as they capture it. Monuments, in their prominent visibility, shape and define what is remembered about a specific place.⁶

War monuments are particularly ubiquitous in the United States in the forms of memorials to wars, specific battles, and individuals, and in dealing with the difficult and volatile topic of war, frequently become a source of controversy. The erection of monuments can precipitate this controversy by creating a need for precise and defined language. This can be problematic in situations where the labels of massacre and battle have been used to describe the same event. When reading monuments, it is important to keep in mind the original intention in creating the object, how the monument was originally received by the public, and how the public and scholars have interpreted it in the period that followed.

⁵ Owen J. Dwyer, "Symbolic Accretion and Commemoration," *Social and Cultural Geography* 5, no. 3 (2004): 422.

⁶ Patricia Rubertone, "Engaging Monuments, Memories, and Archaeology," in *Archaeologies of Placemaking: Monuments, Memories, and Engagement in Native North America*, ed. Patricia Rubertone (New York: Routledge, 2016), 13.

Monuments are significant aspects of material culture because they are undeniably public and shared, thus becoming an intersection for differing viewpoints on the content of commemoration. Monuments commemorating the US-Dakota War are significant for this reason, and they differ in this regard from previously discussed examples of material culture dealing with the war. While the beer tray from the last chapter was created for public consumption, it is a private piece of material culture in that it needed to be purchased and possession was a prerequisite to viewing. The defender medals are even more private as they were awarded to a select group of people.⁷ Monuments are not like this, and while they are similar to other pieces of material culture for the narrative that they shape and tell, they are also much more visible and accessible to the public.

The Mankato Hanging Monument

Early commemorative efforts in the form of monuments, such as those at New Ulm and Fort Ridgely, have been previously discussed for their connection to the commemorative defender medals issued there. The first monument that will receive sole attention in this chapter is the 1912 monument marking the location of the Dakota execution in Mankato. Interestingly, Mankato is one of only two sites of the US-Dakota War without a state sponsored monument.⁸ This is likely because of the controversial nature surrounding this location due to the hangings, and the political motives that are almost always present in erecting monuments

⁷ Reproductions of said medals were later sold in the Minnesota Historical Society gift shop, the privacy and limited circulation of these artifacts then is limited to the original medals.

⁸ The other location is the Lower Sioux Agency, where the US-Dakota War began in earnest. Dahlin, *Minnesota State Monuments to the Dakota Uprising*, 5.

there. While there are no state monuments present, there are several highly significant monuments and memorials. The first to appear on the scene was the original marker for the hanging, erected in 1912.

This monument was erected for the fiftieth anniversary of the war and hangings. Following a ten-year effort on the part of US-Dakota War veterans to create a monument for the site, the marker went up amid fears that knowledge of the exact location of the execution was being lost among the newer generations as Mankato grew and changed appearance. It was not just fears that the young were forgetting the history of Mankato, but also that the influx of newcomers did not recognize the significance of what had taken place there and memory would lapse as a result. This fear was instigated by the growth of Mankato. From 1860 to 1910, the population of Mankato expanded from 1,558 to 10,385.⁹ Just as the influx of white settlers into Minnesota had been crucial in precipitating the US-Dakota War, the continued growth of the state and that of Mankato led some to worry that the unique history of their town would be forgotten and so caused this permanent reminder of the war to be etched in stone.

The need for commemoration was felt and recognized by those who had participated in the war and had long made their homes in Mankato. The monument was not state-sponsored but was paid for by two veterans of the US-Dakota War, Judge Lorin Gray and General James Baker. Before the work of commemoration began, the exact spot of the hangings needed to be determined

⁹ Blue Earth County Planning Commission, *Blue Earth County Economic Base Population* (Mankato: Nason, Law, Wehrman & Knight, Inc, 1963), 7–8, quoted in Rick Lybeck, “Rise and Fall of the U.S.-Dakota War Hanging Monument,” 40.

and agreed upon for authentication. Gray and Baker formed a committee for this purpose, calling specifically for army veterans who had been present at the hangings to share any information they had on the location.¹⁰ Once erected, the monument stood on land belonging to the Chicago and Northwestern Railway, who allowed this free of charge. Other local businesses also donated to the effort, laying the foundation and shipping the stone for the monument.¹¹

Crafted from granite, the imposing monument stood six feet tall and four-and-a-half feet wide, weighing four tons (Figure 3.1). The only text on the face of the monument reads, “HERE / WERE HANGED / 38 / SIOUX INDIANS / DEC. 28TH 1862.” This simple statement reflects the apparent impetus for erecting the monument as a marker to a specific place that was in danger of being lost. In his speech at the dedication, Cray emphasized that the point of the monument was simply to accurately mark the site of the hanging, not to “gloat over the death of the redmen.”¹² The simplicity of the statement made by this monument may be a result of the seemingly straightforward intentions behind it, but there is much said in the relative silence around the monument.

¹⁰ Lybeck, “Rise and Fall of the U.S.-Dakota War Hanging Monument,” 42.

¹¹ Melodie Andrews, “U.S.-Dakota War in Public Memory and Public Space: Mankato’s Journey to Reconciliation,” in *The State We’re In: Reflections on Minnesota History*, ed. Annette Atkins and Deborah L. Miller (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2010), 52-53.

¹² *New Ulm Review* (New Ulm, MN), January 1, 1913.



Figure 3.1. Photo credit the Minnesota Historical Society

There is no indication within the monument as to why the thirty-eight Sioux were hanged here, nor any mention of the war that led to the hangings. It is not so important what transpired before the hangings, but that there were thirty-eight Sioux hanged at this spot. In this one place the Dakota are seemingly exonerated for the violence of the summer and fall of 1862. Only here is that violent period forgotten, yet it is at the exact place where theoretically those who carried the most guilt met justice. But the Dakota are obviously not really exonerated by this monument, rather their story is even further simplified than is generally the case and their assured guilt is etched in stone. Those responsible for the execution are the ones exonerated, through the passive and sparse language of the monument, those who carried out the hanging are not mentioned and forgotten.¹³

¹³ Lybeck, "Rise and Fall of the US-Dakota War Hanging Monument," 44.

This monument fits into the narrative of blame for the war. First all guilt was placed on the Dakota for their “rebellious disloyalty.” Later as the legitimacy of their grievances and difficulty of their situation were recognized, it became clear that all blame could not be placed on them, yet it was also unthinkable to implicate the settlers of Minnesota, who remained innocent victims. The blame then was placed on the United States government for its duplicitous dealings with the Dakota while continuing to maintain that the settlers themselves did nothing to provoke the violence.¹⁴ Of course this does not recognize that these dealings happened locally as well as at the national level, thus implicating at least some settlers, such as traders and Indian agents. Nor does it recognize that the settlers of Minnesota, while caught in a difficult position, were part of a system that benefited them at the expense of the Dakota.¹⁵

Just as the reason for the hangings is not worthy of inclusion on the 1912 monument, neither is any mention of those who carried out the execution deemed necessary. The thoroughly entrenched idea of the Dakota executions as just was not yet questioned at this time, and so no defense was needed. While from a modern vantage point the passivity of this language is telling, it simply cannot be the intended message of this stone, nor the only message.

The language on the monument is passive, but it is also bold. The monument itself is physically imposing, and the words are forceful. Judging from

¹⁴ Julie Humann Anderson, “Memory on the Landscape,” in *We Are What We Remember*, 28.

¹⁵ Carlson and John, “Landscapes of Triumphalism, Reconciliation, and Reclamation,” 278.

the size of the letters, the most important aspects of this message can be assumed to be “HERE” and “38,” as they are the largest parts of the message. This again points to the intention of the monument, to mark a specific place. This monument only made sense in Mankato, at this specific site. Perhaps that is why there is no context; it is not needed. Yes, visitors will wonder, but those who made Mankato their home understand as no outsider ever could.

“WERE HANGED” and “SIOUX INDIANS” appear in slightly smaller font. Was it merely aesthetics that determined the sizing of the letters? Perhaps, but it also coincides with the generally interpreted message of this monument. While this monument is undeniably sparse in its details and contextualization, these two lines could have been sparser in detail. Hanging is a specific means of execution. If the monument was merely stating facts it could have used the latter term, although if paying by the letter it is understandable why this route was not taken. “Sioux,” an inaccurate term that will be discussed shortly, did narrow the scope of the event and provide some telling details.

Hanging during this period was the common method of criminal executions. That these words appear on this monument is significant. The context is not needed to understand the event that the monument marks, simply its method shows that the execution was just and lawful. It is also significant that this monument was erected shortly after the death penalty was outlawed in Minnesota in 1911. This change in punitive law was the result largely of foreign born immigrants.¹⁶ Generally from Scandinavia and Germany, they brought their

¹⁶ Lybeck, “The Rise and Fall of the U.S.-Dakota War Hanging Monument,” 42.

differing ideas with them. Adolph Eberhart, Minnesota's Swedish-American governor, succeeded in passing the law.

With this information, the statement made by this marker suddenly takes on a new, political meaning. It uses a certain interpretation of history, the events of 1862, to make a point about the present, the changing political landscape of 1912. By boldly proclaiming that there was a time when Minnesota needed the death penalty and that this time will neither be forgotten nor ignored, the monument also makes a statement against foreign-born settlers and newcomers to the area, who may have different views and different interpretations of the past.¹⁷ There is of course a dose of irony in this meaning of the monument, as many of the civilian victims and veterans of the war were immigrants themselves.

According to Rick Lybeck, this fits into the narrative of the "old settler" identity. The "old settler," or "early citizen" who had witnessed the days of Indian fighting could be trusted, and he alone could be trusted to know the exact location of the hanging, and the correct way to commemorate this event. Those who were not native to the area, including foreign born immigrants, were treated with suspicion as it was not always clear where their loyalties lay.¹⁸ They did not understand the earlier ways of the state and could not appreciate the sacrifices of those who had come before them.

¹⁷ Lybeck, "The Rise and Fall of the U.S.-Dakota War Hanging Monument," 42-43.

¹⁸ Governor Eberhart promised in 1911 to meet with Dakota to see about their reclaiming their Minnesota reservation.

This theory is also illuminating in regards to the language of the hanging monument. The lack of contextualization suddenly makes more sense when considering the growth experienced by Mankato and Minnesota. There was tension between the old population, and that of the newer generation, who were not taking seriously the lessons of the past. This tension expanded into a broader discord between native “Yankee” settlers and foreign-born immigrants. The context for the hangings is not provided because it is insider information. The monument then is a political reaction to newcomers and to the new laws that they influenced.¹⁹

The last line, “DEC. 26TH 1862” is the smallest part of the message, and while this reflects that less importance is placed on the context for the event, it is something that the date is included, though its placement does little to explain the circumstances for the hanging. There is no contextualization for the hangings, there is no explanation. The names of those who were executed are not important. The message of this monument is quantitative, not qualitative. The thirty-eight hanged there were not individuals, but part of the ongoing war between the United States and Native America.

The monument’s builders also failed to grasp the significance that those hanged at this place were Dakota specifically.²⁰ Here again words are particularly meaningful. The term “Sioux,” unquestioned at the time of this monument’s creation, is an inaccurate name. A combination of French and Ojibway, the

¹⁹ Lybeck, “The Rise and Fall of the U.S.-Dakota War Hanging Monument,” 42.

²⁰ Ibid., 45.

traditional enemies of the Dakota, “Sioux” essentially means “snakes,” or enemies. Like the misnomer “Indian,” this name has stuck, and while it is recognized as an historically inaccurate name, it is also thoroughly engrained in the historical narrative and is itself a reminder of the process of colonization.²¹

It is not just the six weeks of violence that culminated in the mass hanging that is ignored, it is the aftermath of the event for the people of Minnesota and for the Dakota in particular. A monument that is so heavily drenched with unquestioned guilt of the Sioux and triumphant justice meted out does not mention that this was not the only punishment for the community. The Dakota were expelled from Minnesota, after being interned at Fort Snelling for the winter, and then forcibly marched out of the state. Two more Dakota chiefs were executed at Fort Snelling after they were smuggled out of Canada and back to Minnesota. This monument, focused on the singular event of the hanging alone, does not attempt to connect to any other parts of the history it is commemorating. The monument is purely place based. Its significance exists only at this spot.

The starkness of appearance and of the words on the monument, while serving their intended purpose of marking a place, are odd. Perhaps it could not be fathomed that there would come a time that those in Mankato did not know what the monument referred to, even as they sought to commemorate the exact spot for this very fear that it might be forgotten. With nothing to contextualize the event,

²¹ The term “Indian” speaks to the lasting effects of colonization, and has become more popular among native communities because it demands this recognition. “Native American” is popular among both non-natives and natives, although some maintain it sanitizes the history of colonization. Bench, *Interpreting Native American History and Culture*, ix.

viewers were left wondering why this monument existed. Many have noted the monument's tombstone appearance, a mark of irony given that those whose deaths the monument signals were not allowed to rest in their burial place as they were exhumed immediately following burial.²² The Mankato hanging monument clearly has some problems, which will not go away.

The Schwandt State Monument

A second monument fitting within the narrative of war commemoration, the Schwandt State Monument, also displays unique language. As the name implies, this memorial was not privately funded, but was erected by the state. The memorial was dedicated to some of the civilians killed during the war. Previous examples of material culture relating to the US-Dakota War have all dealt with full-scale battles or the martial hangings that followed the war. In the material culture that perpetuates the narrative of complete Dakota guilt there is the foundation of innocent white victims.²³ In dealing with civilians, the Schwandt State Monument allows a different aspect of the violence of 1862 to be perceived. With this added dimension, the popular attitude towards the Dakota at the time can more readily be understood, as can the pervasive fear among settlers and their continual resentment, leading to the harsh treatment of all Dakota at the war's end. The part of the war directed towards civilians is what is most cited by those who continue to hold a grudge against the Dakota. This attitude was very prominent in the immediate aftermath of the war, as has been shown through the

²² Andrews, "U.S.-Dakota War in Public Memory," in *The State We're In*, 53.

²³ Julie Humann Anderson, "Memory on the Landscape," in *We Are What We Remember*, 33.

reactions to the hanging – outrage that more were not hanged and a definite sense of personal vendettas avenged through participation in some form in the hanging. As well as the lingering ideas surrounding the hanging – as displayed partially by the monument that was the focus in the first part of this chapter.

The white victims of the US-Dakota War were largely civilian families who died on their isolated homesteads or as they tried to flee to safety. While battles raged at New Ulm and Fort Ridgely, the unpredictability of the actions of the Dakota warriors that swept through southwestern Minnesota added to the confusion and terror. Between the killing and subsequent evacuations, Southwestern Minnesota was virtually emptied of white settlers, some waiting years to return, some never returning at all. Some families were killed completely, while at other times women and children were taken captive. These tactics were understandably viewed as horrendously brutal by civilians, but to the Dakota it was simply their military tactics and necessary ones given that they would be at a significant disadvantage when the army finally mobilized against them and waged war. It was a war that many had not happily chosen, a war that many more refused to participate in, and a war for which the entire Dakota community would pay.

While both sides suffered immeasurably, the losses of some five hundred civilians and those of the soldiers who died in battle were grouped in with the cultural grief that pervaded the country during and after the Civil War.²⁴ This connection again is illustrated through the period during which monument

²⁴ Julie Humann Anderson, “Memory on the Landscape,” in *We Are What We Remember*, 26

building began in earnest. Minnesota commemorated its dead at Gettysburg and other Civil War battlefields at the same time it was erecting monuments to those who fought at New Ulm and Fort Ridgely.

Yet the vast majority of deaths during the US-Dakota War did not take place during the relatively few full-scale battles. Rather, the greatest violence took place in isolated pockets across rural southwestern Minnesota. Commemoration of these events then is necessarily different than that which takes place in cities and towns such as Mankato and New Ulm. These monuments are less visible and less present in the everyday life of the public, and therefore less obvious in the collective memory. This sometimes created conflict in planning commemorations as it brought up the question of whether monuments should be placed at an exact location of an historical event, or in a more visible and accessible area.²⁵

This relative invisibility perhaps helps to explain why the Schwandt State Monument has received significantly less attention than the original Mankato monument. Both monuments have problematic language, yet the Schwandt State Monument has seemingly not been questioned. There are several important reasons for this discrepancy. Apart from location, the monuments commemorate very different events within the US-Dakota War and its aftermath. Content and location are then important factors in determining which historical interpretations stand and those that are questioned and revised.

²⁵ Julie Humann Anderson, "Memory on the Landscape," in *We Are What We Remember*, 32; In 1930, the problem with historical markers in Minnesota was not the propagation of a one-sided narrative, but that the monuments were not visible enough. See: Willoughby M. Babcock, "The Problem with Historical Markers in Minnesota," *Minnesota History* 11, no. 1 (1930): 29.

The Schwandt State Monument was erected in 1915, three years after the Mankato monument. The monument is a granite obelisk set atop a foundation of natural looking stone (Figure 3.2). It resides in Renville County, northwest of the nearest town of Redwood Falls. The events commemorated by this monument are the deaths of all members of the Schwandt family, save two. Johan and Christina Schwandt, Prussian immigrants, moved first to Wisconsin in 1858 and then settled in Minnesota a few years later. They lived on their homestead at Middle Creek Township with their children, Frederick, Christian, August, Mary, and Karolina and her husband, John Waltz, along with their hired hand John Frass.



Figure 3.2. The Schwandt State Monument in Renville County. Photo credit Minnesota Historical Society.

The family's second daughter, Mary, was away from home when the violence broke out, just weeks before accepting a post with the Reynolds family. When word reached them of the attacks on the Sioux Agency the Reynolds household made their way to New Ulm. On the way, Dakota warriors attacked Mary and her companions, taking into captivity those they did not kill. A young

Dakota woman, Snana, also known by her English name Maggie Brass, guarded Mary in the prisoners' camp. Mary wrote about her experience as a captive and her gratitude to Snana in her memoir published in 1866.²⁶

As a captive in Chief Little Crow's camp, Mary began to suspect the fate of her family after she saw their possessions circulating within the camp. After her rescue at Camp Release she learned that all of her family had been killed except for her eleven-year-old brother, August. Wounded in the head, August was left for dead. He survived however, and crawled away and eventually made his way to Fort Ridgely. Mary and August reunited in Wisconsin following the war. Mary's testimony and experiences received much attention in the following years. She likely played an instrumental role in erecting the monument to her family, and she hoped to see a general monument dedicated to all the settlers who died during the conflict – a hope never realized.²⁷

The monument to Mary's family was erected on August 18th, 1915, near the site of their homestead. The monument was built with an allowance from the state, which was allocated through the Old Settler's Association committee headed by William Wichman. The inscription on the Schwandt monument reads:

“ERECTED BY / STATE OF MINNESOTA / 1915 / IN MEMORY OF /

²⁶ Snana, or Snahnah, lost a young daughter a few weeks before the US-Dakota War began. Snana and Mary reunited many years after the war and kept in touch. Snana's name was eventually added to the Friendly Indian Monument in 1908, the requirements for such recognition being that an individual needed to be full Indian, had never participated in the violence of the war, and had saved at least one white person.

²⁷ Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge, *The History of Renville County Minnesota*, Vol. 2 (Chicago: H.C. Cooper Jr. & Company, 1916), 1346.

MARTYRS FOR / CIVILIZATION / JOHAN SCHWANDT / CHRISTINA / &
 THEIR CHILDREN / FREDERICK & CHRISTIAN / JOHN WALTZ, /
 KAROLINA SCHWANDT / WALTZ & / JOHN FRASS / MURDERED BY
 SIOUX / INDIANS AUG, 18 1862.”

This language reflects the common explanation at the time that the US-Dakota War went beyond even a clash of cultures, but that it was war between civilization and savagery. At the dedication ceremony for the monument, Dr. Warren Upham of the Minnesota State Historical Society explained the tragedy that befell the Schwandts as a result of racism on the part of the Dakota, but looked with hope to the friendship that had grown between Mary and Snana.

The Historical Society of this state, in its published volumes, preserves to all coming time the narrations of Mary Emilia Schwandt and Snannah, children of parents and of races who met in mortal conflict, the one a captive German girl and the other a bereaved Dakota mother. They loved each other with affection that may be likened to that of David and Jonathan three thousand years ago.²⁸

This quote paired with the words “martyrs for civilization” inscribed on the monument creates an unusual and seemingly contradictory message. Snana, a Christian Dakota who spoke fluent English, is nevertheless outside of civilization at least in part based on her race. The dedication quote expresses hope for future generations to find peace with one another, but in doing so it seems to concede that the violence that brought Snana and Mary together was inevitable because their parents’ generations simply could not exist peacefully together.

This monument is also indicative of the tension in holding white settlers as inviolably innocent victims while placing the blame for the war on the

²⁸ Curtiss-Wedge, *The History of Renville County Minnesota*, 1346.

government, which will receive further attention in the following chapter. Hailing the settlers who were killed as “martyrs for civilization” necessarily links them with the plans of their government for westward expansion and Indian removal, the hallmarks of “civilization.” The pioneer experience was built on the assumption that the land newly opened for homesteading would soon be vacated, forcibly if necessary, by its original inhabitants. The perseverance and bravery so often praised in early white pioneers is a necessary part of the concurrent history of oppression of the American Indian.²⁹ This monument, and its accompanying story of Mary and Snana reflects the confusion over how to address this dichotomy.

Conclusion

The Schwandt State Monument is a product of 1915 and the historical narrative surrounding the US-Dakota War that existed up to that point. Today its language strikes the viewer as odd, but the primary motive of its message was to commemorate the lives lost near the spot of the marker. In focusing on this message of innocent life lost, the overarching narrative of the clash between civilization and savagery goes unnoticed and unchallenged. The statement made by this monument is not as bold, nor as controversial as that of the 1912 hanging monument in Mankato. Dedicated to the story of a tragic family, few revisionist commemorative efforts would choose to question this monument or push for its removal. While the language in the Schwandt State Monument is unique among

²⁹ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 413-14.

monuments to the US-Dakota War, it fits snugly in the historic interpretation of the war and the trends of its commemoration.

Chapter 4: Interlude – Museums, Monuments, and Politics in the Twentieth Century

Introduction

The immediate years after the US-Dakota War witnessed the continued suffering of the Dakota, severance from their homeland, and further fracturing of their community ties and traditional way of life. For the settlers affected by the war, the post-war period brought efforts to regroup and recover from the loss of life and property that had devastated so many. As years passed and the struggle for immediate survival lessened, both sides formed collective memories of the war that focused on the pain and suffering the war had brought to their respective communities. For the Dakota this included the injustices that led to the war, the execution of the thirty-eight, and the categorical oppression of all Dakota following the war. For most white Americans, including settlers of Minnesota, this meant remembering the civilians and soldiers killed, and perpetuating the mindset of victimhood, even as they themselves were clear victors in the war.

The creation and interpretation of the early material culture of the war displayed a largely one-sided historical narrative, the narrative developed by and for white Americans. For most of the twentieth century, the conflicting foci in the public memories of the US-Dakota War among native and non-native communities did not receive equal attention in the development of academic and popular interpretations of war. The historical trauma and grief experienced on both sides of the conflict necessarily made the creation of an objective history difficult. The continued Federal Indian policy of oppression during the mid-

twentieth century further impeded any serious attempts at a balanced history of the war in most historical institutions, such as the state-run Minnesota Historical Society. The traditional historical narrative of the war that developed was instead defined by triumphalism and unequal focus on the sufferings of the various communities affected by the war.

Memorialization of the US-Dakota War, as with most significant historical events, clustered around significant milestones, and the fortieth and fiftieth anniversaries attracted particular attention. After these bursts of commemorative activity, the memorialization of the war began to shift. New material culture and monuments continued to appear, but the significant markers and pieces, such as the monuments to major battles and events, were already in place. The material culture added around the war also continued to reflect now well-established themes and interpretations of the war. While these trends progressed, new questions also arose surrounding the existing material culture, beginning the process of revision of the traditional historical of the war.

The visibility that material culture lent to this narrative, especially in the form of monuments, proved a catalyst for this revision. The material witnesses of history keep the past alive in the present, and consciously or subconsciously shape how the past is remembered.¹ Foremost in the eyes of the public, these pieces became the first to fall under criticism for their one-sided portrayal of history. Material culture provided the physical place for this new questioning of the

¹ Rubertone, "Engaging Monuments, Memories, and Archaeology," in *Archaeologies of Placemaking*, 17.

historical narrative and gave a visible face to the imperative of correcting it. Tellingly, the period that this took place in is referred to as the “Dark Ages of Native American History,” which encompasses roughly 1900 to 1950.² This chapter will examine the factors at play during and directly following this period, primarily on the national and local levels, in the fields of politics, history, and museums, to understand the ways in which public opinion shifted around the traditional interpretation of the war and precipitated new efforts at historicizing the US-Dakota War in the following years.

The Noble Savage and the Vanishing Race

This period builds on the history of government-tribal relations, and the perception of native history and cultures in the United States. During the mid to late-twentieth century historians frequently cited the closing of the Western frontier at 1890.³ This date also corresponds to the massacre at Wounded Knee, marking the final period of the Indian Wars. Technically, the Indian Wars continued in pockets of fighting that lasted until 1924, but large scale battles between the US Army and tribes declined significantly. The confidence in the conclusion of this conflict is evidenced again by the Indian Campaign Medal, issued by the US Army and previously discussed in relation to the defender medals of Fort Ridgely and New Ulm. The Indian Campaign Medal, notable for

² Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 10.

³ This closing of the frontier was part of the “Frontier Thesis” developed by Frederick Jackson Turner. This end date has since been challenged. Bill Yenne, *Indian Wars: The Campaign for the American West* (Yardley, PA: Westholme, 2006), vii.

its exclusion of the US-Dakota War from medal earning campaigns through its late start date, lists the end date for eligible campaigns at 1891.⁴

The end of the Indian Wars marked a shift in public perceptions of American Indians. As time and distance removed most Americans from personal experiences of the conflict, and the threat of Indian violence diminished for those living in the western states, a new consciousness arose regarding the devastation left by the colonization of North America and Federal Indian policy. Only as the violence involved in the conquest of the West diminished and became more remote from the lives of civilians did the realization of what had happened begin to dawn on those who had benefited from the conquest of traditional native lands.

A national trend, this realization extended to the interpretation of the US-Dakota War as well. Historically, there were always voices that spoke against the majority public opinion on the Dakota, such as Bishop Whipple, just as there were many Dakota who remained peaceful or helped captive settlers during the war, such as Snana and Chaska. As the work of conquest and the “civilization” of the West neared completion, or at least a point of no return, public opinion shifted. Questions regarding the tactics and ethics of western expansion arose, creating a need for the reexamination of the traditional historical narrative regarding the West and Native Americans. Needless to say, this reexamination occurred at a

⁴ Indian Campaign medals were awarded for service “against hostile Indians in any other action in which United States troops were killed or wounded between 1865 and 1891.” U.S. Department of the Army, *Military Awards*, Army Regulation 600-8-22, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Army, June 25, 2015, 70-71.

perceived point of safety, where there was little fear of civilians being caught up in an Indian war.

This is hinted at in some of the earlier objects that have already received attention. While the Indian Wars were continuing farther west, this mindset is already developing in part in the Fort Ridgely defender medal. The inclusion of the moccasin flower and Chief Big Eagle's fatalistic quote, "It shut the door against us," preserved tellingly in the original Dakota, begin to hint at the changing views on American Indians. Violence between tribes and the United States Army continued elsewhere in the country, but the forty years that passed since the conclusion of the US-Dakota War meant that this particular event could begin to be reevaluated in part, at least in ways that did not threaten the overarching narrative of the war and Native America.

This reevaluation resulted in new perceptions of American Indians, their histories, and their cultures. No longer categorically considered "bloodthirsty savages," a new myth arose of the "noble savage." American Indians, while still very much blamed for the violence that spilled out on the Minnesota frontier in 1862, were also seen as a part of a noble, yet fatalistic, lost cause. This myth focused on the primitive and inferior status of American Indians and their culture, but also tried to convey a sort of sympathy and respect for a people believed to reside in man's natural state, who were therefore untouched and uncorrupted by civilization. Primarily a literary trope, the noble savage myth perpetuated the idea

that before European contact native peoples existed in harmony with one another and with their environment.⁵

While a notable shift from the purely negative earlier views on American Indians, this idea continued the trend of oversimplification of native North America and erased the diversity and accomplishments of Native cultures. Still conducive to the idea of a clash of cultures – specifically the clash of civilization and savagery – the noble savage myth continues the problematic trend of narrow and stereotypical definitions of American Indians. The noble savage myth, with its focus on the primitive nature of native cultures compared to European civilization, was also built on the notion that American Indians would cease to exist.

Another pervasive and related idea that had enormous implications for Native America, the vanishing race theory, emerged in the early twentieth century. This was a time when it seemed most likely that the few remaining American Indians would either die out or be assimilated into larger American society, and their native cultures would vanish completely.⁶ This theory spurred some of the museum collecting practices alluded to in this paper, such as the collection of American Indian human remains. Faced with the impending and inevitable demise of native cultures, museums responded by aggressively

⁵ Ter Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 355.

⁶ Bench, *Interpreting Native American History and Culture*, xii.

collecting pieces of material culture relating to American Indians in what is often termed “salvage anthropology.”⁷

The completion of the conquest of the West, together with the noble savage and vanishing race myths, complicated interpretations of the US-Dakota War. The original interpretation of unquestioned Dakota guilt and savagery was increasingly called into question. This was still a minor strain in the commemoration of the war, but its existence is evidenced in the strong reactionary messages exhibited in some of the monuments to the war, such as the original hanging monument in Mankato, as well as in the reactions to the monuments themselves.

US-Dakota War Monuments and Myths of the American Indian

New ideas regarding American Indians built upon and clashed with the traditional historical interpretation of the US-Dakota War. The existing material culture for the war, monuments being the most publicly visible aspect of this, was the site of collision for these ideas. Monuments, such as the original hanging monument in Mankato, served initially as a reactionary message against new ideas in American history and politics, such as new interpretations of the US-Dakota War that recognized the Dakota side of the conflict, and the abolition of the death penalty in Minnesota. At first a reaction against changing narratives, the monument then became a launching pad and catalyst for further change.

The Mankato monument serves then as an example of how to read historiography through material culture. As a source of tension for the Mankato

⁷ Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 10

community, and the larger communities of Minnesota and native-nonnative relations, the meaning of this monument changed over the years, as did the interpretation of the US-Dakota War. The Mankato monument was a reaction to the questioning of the traditional interpretation of the war, particularly around the use of capital punishment and the ethics of the hangings that concluded the US-Dakota War. Fear that knowledge of the location of the hangings was at risk seemingly motivated the commemorative activity of the old settlers, but underneath that fear was the realization that with the loss of the knowledge of the hanging location, the reality of the war would be less present in the minds of the current citizens of Mankato and Minnesota. The specter of Indian fighting was already at a distance in the early twentieth century, and with the diminishing threat of violence the old settlers' respected place in society, collective memory, and history was also at risk of disappearing.⁸

But the method by which the monument was erected proved problematic. Evidenced by the Defenders of Fort Ridgely medals, it was not unusual for private citizens to cover the expenses of commemoration with their own funds. These individuals frequently wished to do so quietly to give the appearance that it was the state acting, or at least to avoid appearing as if they were the ones seeking the fanfare, to give more authority to the commemoration. This method worked well for the medals because this commemoration was conducted in a relatively private matter; medals were awarded only to a select group – veterans or their immediate descendants. Erecting a monument for the public in a centralized location through

⁸ Lybeck, "The Rise and Fall of the U.S.-Dakota War Hanging Monument," 38.

these means is another matter. While displayed prominently in public, the monument portrayed only one side of the event, and considered only one viewpoint.

Over time, the Dakota reclaimed their history and showed that their ancestors had had legitimate grievances and had been forced into an unthinkable position. Historians took note and the tone of academic histories began to shift, but it was still a challenge to reconcile this with the accounts, often exaggerated, of the brutal slaying of so many civilians, particularly of women and children. This remains a constraint in interpreting the war today. Increased recognition of the losses and suffering of the Dakota community continue to provoke reactions among those dedicated to remembering the settler perspective of the war, who seemingly fear that to acknowledge the pain of the other side is to minimize that of their own. The war may have been largely forgotten by the general public within and outside of Minnesota, but the descendants of its settler victims and witnesses remember it within the context of their own trauma and pain.

The recognition of the injustice done to the Dakota through the government's unfair and frequently broken treaties created a means of escaping responsibility. The passive words of the Mankato monument perhaps hint at the beginnings of this idea. The executions of the thirty-eight Dakota were legal, so the problem was not with the early settlers that followed the law and carried out the sentence, but with the government that allowed it in the first place. This naturally ignored that the government is made up of people, and that the

government's representatives in Minnesota, who were part of the settler community, were a significant part of the problem.

The Schwandt State Monument is another example of this. Seemingly an innocuous memorial to a slain family, this monument also inscribes on the landscape the message that civilization itself was under attack in the US-Dakota War. The underlying message regarding civilization is subtly intermixed with the focus on the victim status of the settlers. In writing this message in stone, at one of the sites most closely associated with the killings of civilians, the Schwandt State Monument lays the foundation for the narrative of the clash of civilization and savagery, which the other commemorative sites of the war corroborate. If the message of the Schwandt State Monument is that the Schwandt family, and those like them, were victims of an attack on civilization, then the Mankato hanging monument states that civilization prevailed over savagery, in this case, over the Dakota.

It is easy to depict this population as innocent victims of a clash between two cultures, neither of which were their own, and this was done in the historical narrative for many years. The settlers themselves committed no crimes and did nothing to provoke the war, but rather had treated the Dakota with kindness, an aspect emphasized in many accounts and histories of the war.⁹ This narrative has since been challenged. In 1962, Historian Roy Meyer acknowledged the difficulty of historical interpretation of this period in his history of the Sioux: “the white

⁹ Julie Humann Anderson, “Memory on the Landscape,” in *We Are What We Remember*, 28.

victims of the Sioux Uprising may have been personally innocent, but they were the beneficiaries of a vicious system.”¹⁰ The treaties that limited the lands of the Dakota were instigated by a need for more land for settlers flocking to the new territory and later state. The expulsion of the Dakota following the war opened the rest of the state to settlers, who prospered socially and economically on the fertile farmlands of Minnesota.

The two sides to this history are necessarily intertwined. The delicacy required in this historical interpretation is similar to that needed when discussing slave rebellions that resulted in civilian deaths. Yes, those killed were personally innocent, particularly children, but all involved existed in a system of oppression. The side they happened to be born on determined if and how they would suffer. That this delicacy has frequently been missing from discussions of the war accounts for the continued resentment between the Dakota and descendants of the settlers involved. On both sides, the memories remain of the suffering of ancestors and even after more than 150 years, the process of reconciliation is difficult for some.

As the narrative was challenged, so too was the hanging monument and other means of historical commemoration. Public outcry against the monument began within ten years of its dedication, and in 1922 the first of many petitions to

¹⁰ Rick Lybeck, “The Rise and Fall of the U.S.-Dakota War Hanging Monument: Mediating Old-Settler Identity Through Two Expansive Cycles of Social Change,” *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 22, no. 1 (2015): 47. See also: Roy Meyer, *History of the Santee Sioux: United States Indian Policy on Trial* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993).

the governor to remove the monument failed.¹¹ When the monument began to fall under criticism, the means of its creation served as an excuse and as a deflector of blame for the city of Mankato. The monument did not reflect the general feelings of the people of Mankato, and was not representative of the city, because as the *Mankato Free Press* reported, its building had been conducted “on the sly by a relatively small handful of men.”¹² Furthermore, while centrally located and readily visible to the public, the monument conveniently rested on private land, so that it did not fall under the jurisdiction of the city, and removing it therefore would not be an easy matter.¹³

Those who defended the monument also rested on the explanation that the language simply stated objective facts.¹⁴ Again, language served as a distraction, or cover, from the implicit message of the monument, one that was very much biased. The nuances of language are further reflected in the original terms for the war such as “massacre” and later “uprising” or “outbreak.” Like that of the monument, the language surrounding the US-Dakota War absolved the settlers from their role in the conflict. The original terms for the war abetted the continued identification of settlers as the true victims, even though the United States was the obvious victor in the conflict.

Many of the voices denouncing the monument came from outside Mankato and Minnesota, some as notable as lawyer and prominent member of the

¹¹ Lybeck, “The Rise and Fall of the U.S.-Dakota War Hanging Monument,” 43.

¹² *Ibid.*, 43.

¹³ *New Ulm Review* (New Ulm, MN), January 1, 1913.

¹⁴ Lybeck, “The Rise and Fall of the U.S.-Dakota War Hanging Monument,” 37.

American Civil Liberties Union, Clarence Darrow, who made a pointed criticism in 1927: “I would never believe that the people of a civilized community would want to commemorate such an atrocious crime.”¹⁵ Again, the idea of civilization takes a central place in the discussion of the war and its commemoration, but now the hangings in Mankato are notably referred to as a crime.

Other quotes reflect the opinions of more ordinary people, such as George Ackerman, a visiting businessman from Chicago, who in 1936 referred to the hangings as “legalized butchery,” perhaps more an indication of changing views on the death penalty than on the US-Dakota War specifically. Ackerman’s solution still showed a disconnect between criticizing the monument and recognizing the underlying problems with representation of American Indians in history: he said that Mankato “ought to forget the incident and attempt to keep it from the minds of their children.”¹⁶

This quote is telling for several reasons. First, it is anti-historical. A terrible thing happened in Mankato and the monument commemorates that in a damaging and polarizing way, but to forget that the incident happened was not the goal of the monument’s detractors. The discomfort surrounding the monument is important to note. The starkness of the message was recognized as problematic and therefore fell under scrutiny. With this questioning came the recognition of the harmful narrative into which the monument fed. Ackerman’s feelings perhaps illustrate the growing awareness at the time, that the hangings were problematic

¹⁵ Andrews, “U.S.-Dakota War in Public Memory,” in *The State We’re In*, 53.

¹⁶ Ibid.

for a number of reasons, but his solution to pretend that it did not happen did little to foster healing for the Dakota and to foster reconciliation between the native and non-native populations of Minnesota.

Within the calls for the removal of the monument there existed those that simply wanted the monument to vanish because it reminded viewers of a painful event, specifically a painful event that engendered shame for the unjust treatment of the Dakota. According to David Lowenthal, the presence of shame at a historic site is an important factor in determining whether the site will be commemorated or ignored.¹⁷ To overcome this shame, it is also common for the victors of an event to portray themselves as the victims.¹⁸ This fits within the narrative created around the US-Dakota War, specifically at sites such as the Schwandt State Monument, where the focus on the civilian victims of the war reinforces the larger narrative of Dakota aggression and savagery.

The Schwandt State Monument is not the only example of the historical narrative of the war as it relates to civilians killed. While public opinion shifted around the Mankato hanging monument, new monuments to the war continued to be built. In 1929, the state erected a monument to the fifty-three settlers killed in Milford Township on August 18, 1862. The site had formerly been commemorated with a plaque in 1912 for the fiftieth anniversary, but area

¹⁷ David Lowenthal, "Past Time, Present Place: Landscape and Memory," *Geographical Review* 65, no. 1 (1975): 31.

¹⁸ Foote, *Shadowed Ground*, 3

residents did not believe this was enough and requested further commemoration.¹⁹

The state responded with the Milford State Monument (Figure 4.1).



Figure 4.1. Photo Credit *Mankato Times*.

The monument lists the names of those killed in the area, with the epitaph: “ERECTED BY THE STATE OF MINNESOTA IN 1929 IN THE MEMORY OF THE MEN, WOMEN, AND CHILDREN OF MILFORD WHO WERE MASSACRED BY THE INDIANS, AUG. 18, 1862.” This plaque is overshadowed by a large, roughly hewn cross, and rests on a three-tiered base representing faith, hope, and charity. Before the plaque of names appears the female figure of “Memory,” with a lily in her hand.²⁰

While the wording of this monument is not as explicit as that of the Schwandt State Monument, the rich Christian symbolism in this monument is

¹⁹ Joe Steck, “Art of Remembering: Milford State Monument, Brown County,” *Mankato Times*, November 23, 2014.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

used to reinforce the victim status of the settlers and the idea of a clash of cultures. Since this is the site of the heaviest loss of civilian life, the commemoration of these deaths is wholly appropriate. Of interest in this case then is the timeline in which the monument was erected. Sixty-five years after the war, the state was still focused on building the victim and attack on civilization narrative, in this case doing so by adding to an already existing memorial.

Politics, Activism, and the Interpretation of the US-Dakota War

Throughout the mid-twentieth century the cause of removing the Mankato hanging monument was intermittently revisited. While the monument had been a source of debate since at least the 1920s, it was not until the 1960s that the public perception of the monument seriously started to permanently shift.²¹ These points of protest over the monument coincide with the broader history of politics and Federal Indian policy, as well as the growth in American Indian activism.

As previously mentioned, the first unsuccessful petition to remove the monument arrived before the Minnesota governor in 1922. On the national level, the 1920s saw new attempts to recognize and address some of the problems in Indian Country. In 1924, Congress granted United States citizenship to all American Indians, which had previously been determined on the state level and thus varied throughout the country. The Meriam Report, also known as “The Problem of Indian Administration,” followed a few years later in 1928. This report recognized the failures of the allotment and assimilation policies of the

²¹ Lybeck, “The Rise and Fall of the U.S.-Dakota War Hanging Monument,” 49.

previous decades and focused on suggesting improvements for the social and economic conditions among American Indians.²²

The findings of the Meriam Report led to the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act, which ended the unsuccessful policy of allotment of Indian lands.²³ The federal government began to recognize the failures of its Indian policy, but sought to fix these shortcomings with a new disastrous policy called termination. During this time, the periodic protests against the Mankato monument also continued on the local level. The *Mankato Daily Free Press* and other later newspapers record occasional resurgences of criticism of the monument in 1937 and again in 1942.

While past issues in Federal Indian policy gained recognition, including the shortcomings of the Indian Reorganization Act, termination policy proved itself a fitting chapter in this history of bad ideas regarding American Indian governance in the United States. Faced with the economic inequality experienced on Indian reservations, and corruption and general ineptitude in the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), the federal government decided to terminate American Indian tribes in the post-war period. Concerns about the reservation system led to the notion of termination as a means of emancipation so that American Indians would be free of dependence on imperfect government programs. When framed in

²² Lewis Meriam, "The Problem of Indian Administration. Report of a Survey Made at the Request of Honorable Hubert Work, Secretary of the Interior, and Submitted to Him, February 21, 1928," <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED087573.pdf>.

²³ Allotment had been official Indian policy since the Dawes Act of 1887, which divided reservations into individual holdings and then selling excess land, seeking to entrench the notion of private property among American Indians.

this way, termination was proposed as a humanitarian effort that would extend equality to American Indians.²⁴

In practice this meant the dissolution of reservations and the special relationship between tribes and the federal government, established by the long precedent of treaties. Termination legislation was passed and went into effect throughout the late 1940s, but it became official policy in 1953 with the Termination Act. Public Law 280, passed in the same year, further eroded tribal sovereignty by beginning the shift from tribal to federal jurisdiction for criminal proceedings. The end goal in these acts was the dissolution of reservations, with American Indians becoming subject to state laws and essentially assimilated into American society.²⁵

Desires for termination found new meaning throughout the following years in the politics of the Cold War. Anti-collectivism feelings ran rampant, and the communal identities of Indian tribes were viewed as un-American. It became increasingly important that American Indians be fully “Americanized,” with any hint of otherness posing a threat in the war of ideology as it seemingly weakened the core of American stability. This ideological need for uniformity was coupled with a general lack of understanding as to how anyone would willingly choose to remain on a reservation, given the poverty and other social problems experienced

²⁴Donald L. Fixico, *Termination and Relocation: Federal Indian Policy, 1945-1960* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990), 33.

²⁵Charles F. Wilkinson and Eric R. Biggs, “The Evolution of the Termination Policy,” *American Indian Law Review* 5, no. 1 (1977): 140.

there.²⁶ This corresponded with an increased pressure on American Indians to urbanize and assimilate into the larger American culture.

With the dissolution of reservations as a landmark of termination, relocation naturally followed as a necessary aspect of this policy. Urbanization as a trend among American Indians had been on the rise since World War II, and the BIA launched a relocation program in 1948 to feed this trend in the postwar period. This policy gained government sponsorship with the Indian Relocation Act of 1956. Through this law American Indians were encouraged and aided in moving to urban areas, receiving vocational education, and finding employment and housing. Participation in this program was voluntary, although for some who faced the declining opportunities on reservations and removal of government support, it may have been one of few viable options.²⁷

As is evident in many other points in the history of American Indian policy, the promises in this program frequently did not come close to meeting the needs of newly relocated Indians. The problems cited with reservations were still present, and often worse, in cities. The higher cost of living exacerbated their poverty and stable jobs and decent housing were in no way guaranteed. Thus, new lives in the city brought little stability. These issues only added to the growing identity crisis among American Indians in urban areas. The generation targeted by this relocation program had been placed in Indian boarding schools as children,

²⁶ Michael Harris, "American Cities: The New Reservations," *City 5*, no. 2 (1971): 47-48.

²⁷ Donna Martinez, Grace Sage, and Azusa Ono, *Urban American Indians: Reclaiming Native Space* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2016), 87.

already separated from their families and cultures once before.²⁸ To dissuade relocated Indians from returning home, the BIA frequently moved them to cities as far as possible from their families. The importance of ties to the land and of tribal and familial relationships were not a factor in relocation and termination decisions. Along with the loss of tribal recognition and reservations, hunting and fishing rights were also negated. This loss exacerbated the loss of identity felt by many.²⁹

An unequivocal disaster, termination as an official policy did not last and was reversed in the 1960s. The result of termination, and the accompanying uptick in Indian urbanization, was an increase in American Indian activism during the 1960s and seventies. Conditions in cities were often dire and the BIA worked to keep Indians from forming tribal communities in their new homes by refusing to inform individuals of one another's whereabouts. Yet these conditions also created the need to put aside any historical tribal rivalries and created the means for new pan-tribal communities to form and thrive.³⁰ This activism, with a new focus on self-determination and cooperation across tribal lines, frequently focused on immediate political objectives, but also expanded into a new push for American Indians to have a voice in the interpretation of their own history.

²⁸ Martinez, Sage, and Ono, *Urban American Indians*, 87-88.

²⁹ Larry W. Burt, "Roots of the Native American Urban Experience: Relocation Policy in the 1950s," *American Indian Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (1986): 91; Roberta Ulrich, *American Indian Nations from Termination to Restoration, 1953-2006* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 20.

³⁰ Burt, "Roots of the Native American Urban Experience," 95; Harris, "American Cities," 4.

In this climate, the debate on the Mankato hanging monument gained new traction and became a rallying point for local American Indian activists. On American Indian Day in 1969, someone vandalized the monument by pouring red paint over it (Figure 4.2). The disgust with the monument reached its boiling point. The rising sentiment against the Mankato hanging monument was the product of not just increased American Indian activism, but also growing dissent over the Vietnam War and became a site for anti-war demonstrations.³¹ Society was changing and new groups and narratives were finding their voices. The meaning of the monument likewise shifted.



Figure 4.2. Photo credit Blue Earth County Historical Society.

American Indian activism was growing in this period, particularly pan-tribal activism due to the unique conditions created by Indian urbanization. From

³¹ Lybeck, "The Rise and Fall of the U.S.-Dakota War Hanging Monument," 49.

November to June of 1969 the group Indians of All Tribes led the occupation of Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay, in an effort to claim ownership of the island. The American Indian Movement (AIM) emerged at this time in Minneapolis. Created as a means of protecting urban Indians from police brutality, it soon turned its attention to other aspects of American Indian oppression and injustice present in American society.³² In February of 1971, a social studies conference at Mankato State College brought several prominent members of AIM to Mankato within a lineup of notable American Indian speakers. The hanging monument was an important point of discussion at the conference and became the launch pad to discuss the wider racist and stereotypical narratives of American Indians present within history.³³

While the conference speakers did not mince words when it came to the monument and the frequent racism that the Dakota had experienced in Mankato in the years since the hanging, the speakers' anger focused on constructive solutions rather than destructive bitterness. In calling for a change to the commemoration of the war, they expressed a simple desire to have both sides of the conflict present in the memorials to the war. The promotion of peace between the Dakota and the people of Mankato was an important theme, foreshadowing the reconciliation efforts that would take place in the following decade.³⁴

³² Coll Thrush, "Urban Indigenous Histories," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Indian History*, ed. Frederick E. Hoxie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 561.

³³ Lybeck, "The Rise and Fall of the U.S.-Dakota War Hanging Monument," 50.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

With the monument acting as a very visible reminder of the state of injustice in the United States, its removal became one of the first areas of focus in changing this narrative, part of the trend of American Indians reclaiming the authority to tell their own history. The monument's detractors eventually succeeded and the Mankato hanging monument was removed in October of 1971, with little fanfare.³⁵ This was only after years of debate as some originally wanted it moved and put somewhere else, on the grounds that the monument was historical and should be preserved, although this would necessarily nullify the supposed intended meaning of the monument in simply marking the place where the hangings took place.

The monument was never erected elsewhere. It was however offered to the Blue Earth County Historical Society for accession, but was turned down by the Historical Society. This decision was made not for any lack of historical significance, but rather based on logistical qualms. The needed storage facilities did not exist, and to store the piece outside would necessarily leave it open to the threat of further vandalism. While this was a legitimate and necessary consideration, BECHS hesitates to address the hangings more than is necessary. This is evidenced in subtle ways such as the display of the Standard Brewing Company tray without any connection to the US-Dakota War, and as will be discussed in a later chapter, the convenient limbo for the supposed gallows timber created by provenance questioning.³⁶ This hesitancy surrounding the

³⁵ Lybeck, "The Rise and Fall of the U.S.-Dakota War Hanging Monument," 51.

³⁶ The display of the Standard Brewing Company tray within the context of breweriana is ostensibly due to the fact that the entire collection came from the

interpretation of the Dakota execution is perhaps natural due to the controversy that has existed around the hangings and their commemoration for more than one hundred years.

This first successful challenge to the overarching narrative of the Dakota War would bear more fruit throughout the seventies. The remains of Chief Little Crow, held at the Minnesota Historical Society all this time, were finally repatriated to his descendants and buried.³⁷ This is an obvious example of a new level of institutional responsibility for the injustice in which museums played a role. Yet, many museums were in similar circumstances and would not address similar problems within their own collections until they were mandated to do so with the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) twenty years later, in 1990. The relatively early actions of the Minnesota Historical Society, then, were likely the result of close proximity to and pressure from groups such as the American Indian Movement, and are reflective of the changing understandings that began at Mankato. Other signs of change during the seventies include the end of the sale of reproductions of defender medals at the Minnesota Historical Society gift shop.³⁸

estate of a collector of brewery memorabilia and is therefore displayed together. The issues surrounding the provenance of the gallows timber will be discussed in chapter 6, as it was not until 2012 that the BECHS discovered a potential hole in the provenance of the piece.

³⁷ While still a part of the collection, the remains of Little Crow had been quietly removed from display in the early part of the twentieth century.

³⁸ Benjamin Gessner (American Indian and Fine Arts Collections Associate, Minnesota Historical Society), interview with Kristin Glomstad, December 20, 2016.

Conclusion

The important discussions that took place around the Mankato hanging monument brought a Dakota presence back to Minnesota and increased their visibility and recognition of their continued existence. Recognition that the way in which commemoration was enacted mattered and the stories that monuments told needed to be inclusive and unbiased led to new commemorative activities in the following years, and the solidification of a new narrative and interpretation of the US-Dakota War.

This shift did not come easily, nor did it come from historians or museum professionals. Rather, the change in the conversation around the interpretation of the US-Dakota War reflects the addition of new participants in the conversation, American Indian voices, and those of the Dakota specifically. Criticisms of the traditional narrative of the war, grounded at the original Mankato hanging monument, gained more acceptance while defenses of the monument continued and remained successful until 1970.

Chapter 5: 1987 – The Year of Reconciliation

Introduction

The increased American Indian activism of the late-twentieth century led to greater visibility of American Indians in areas other than politics and contemporary issues, it also extended to the history of the country. As seen in the previous chapter, the questioning of traditional historical narratives surrounding the US-Dakota War popped up at various points in time, but steadily gained traction in the Vietnam era. New outlets for American Indian voices allowed for a reclamation of history and a new attempt at a more objective, or at least balanced, view of the past.

This trend continued into the 1980s and eventually led to the proclamation of 1987 as the Year of Reconciliation by Minnesota Governor Rudy Perpich in commemoration of the 125th anniversary of the war and hangings. A combination of individual and state organization initiatives, the Year of Reconciliation meant many different things to different people. It was generally received well by non-natives, many of whom were not previously familiar with the war or its broad reaching implications, though many Dakota felt it simply did not do enough. The Year of Reconciliation was part of a broader movement in which American Indians exercised their rights to tell their own history, a perspective that had been lacking in the traditional historical narratives of the US-Dakota War.

Though the Year of Reconciliation met with mixed results, its legacy continues and marks a turning point in the commemorative activities surrounding the war. While the previous chapters have been focused primarily on telling the

historiography and aftermath of the US-Dakota War through the windows of material objects, this chapter and the following will also include commemorative events. The Dakota are more likely than European Americans to commemorate the past through events, such as ceremonies, than through material objects. Furthermore, as commemoration of the war became more inclusive and balanced, the Dakota also found a place in initiatives to create new monuments.

That the Dakota have a different view on material objects was already apparent in the varying understandings of the Mankato hanging rope discussed in the introduction. This again relates to the Dakota concept of history. Objects are not needed to order memory and ground history, because history is a living memory. It is carried in descendants and kept alive by them. The year of Reconciliation forms an intersection between two communities, the Dakota and whites, or *Wasicu* in Dakota language, and between their differing methods of preserving and honoring historical and cultural memory. The results of this intersection are memorial events such as pow wows, marches, and ceremonies, often coinciding with the building of new monuments and memorials that reflect the changing interpretation of history and a new focus on healing the wounds of the past.

As was the case with many of the previously discussed commemorative activities – such as the placement of monuments and commissioning of defender medals – this path towards the goal of reconciliation was instigated first by individuals, and then picked up by state and local organizations. The path towards the Year of Reconciliation was largely a result of two individuals: Amos Owen, a

Dakota elder, and Bud Lawrence, a new white Mankato resident, who met in 1958 while fishing.¹ The two formed a close friendship that eventually resulted in their co-creating and leading various youth programs for native and non-native youth alike to broader mutual understanding and encourage cultural knowledge. Their friendship and collaboration extended to welcome Jim Buckley, the director of the Mankato YMCA.²

The friendship was fostered and grew through a mutual respect for one another's cultures and customs. In 1963 they created an education program through which non-native youth groups could participate in a Dakota mini pow wow. In honor of Amos Owen's 1965 election to tribal chairman, Bud Lawrence, Jim Buckley, and several others completed a ninety-mile walk over the course of two days. The Dakota responded with a small ceremony and mini pow wow in the Mankato YMCA gym.³ Another honor walk took place in 1969, bringing attention to the work that Owen, Lawrence, and others were accomplishing and the ties they were creating between their respective communities.

With the support of local organizations such as the YMCA, in 1972 Owen and Lawrence hosted the first full-scale pow wow in Mankato since before its settlement.⁴ This initial event met with mixed success; it was a financial wash for its supporters and did not attract the crowds hoped for, although approximately

¹ S.I. Dowlin and B. Dowlin, "Healing History's Wounds: Reconciliation Communication Efforts to Build Community Between Minnesota Dakota (Sioux) and Non-Dakota Peoples," *Peace & Change* 27, no. 3 (2002): 419.

² *Ibid.*, 420.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

2,000 Indians did attend. The pow wow brought a Dakota presence back to a city that they had avoided for more than a century. While the later work of reconciliation has met with mixed evaluation, it is undeniable that the collaboration between Owen, Lawrence, and Buckley succeeded in opening Mankato to Dakota once again, and increasing Native visibility there.

Nevertheless, this first pow wow resulted in calls for the event to be held again in 1974, and then annually in the following years throughout the seventies. During this time, the Native American Student Association at the Minnesota State University in Mankato also put forward a proposal for a Day of Reconciliation in Mankato to the city council. After a discussion in which part of the proposal was accepted, the council unanimously proclaimed November 5, 1975 as a “Day of Reconciliation,” the 113th anniversary of the day on which the thirty-eight Dakota were sentenced to death.

Be it further resolved that this City Council encourages all citizens of the City of Mankato and State of Minnesota to participate in the Memorial Vigil for the 38 Santee Sioux who were hanged here 113 years ago.⁵

This first reconciliation event was held to coincide with the country’s bicentennial, which included on the federal level the passing of a resolution to proclaim October 10-16 “Native American Awareness Week.”⁶ The word choice

⁵ “Minutes – Mankato City Council – Regular Meeting, Monday, October 27, 1975,” *Mankatomn.gov*, accessed March 25, 2017, <https://content.mankatomn.gov/minutes/1970s/1975/19751027.html>.

⁶ “National American Indian & Alaska Native Heritage Month History,” *IndianAffairs.gov*, accessed March 25, 2017, <https://www.bia.gov/DocumentLibrary/HeritageMonth/.html>.

of “awareness” corresponds to some of the critiques of the reconciliation effort of the next decade. Reconciliation goes far beyond simple awareness of another group. It means the restoration of a damaged relationship with said group. If the goal is still simple awareness, the point at which active reconciliation can take place has not yet been reached.

The dichotomy between words and actions is evident in 1975. While President Ford was receiving congressional authorization to proclaim, “Native American Awareness Week,” a federal court ruled that the Sioux Nation was not sovereign. This was part of the decision against AIM’s claim that the United States did not have criminal jurisdiction over Indian reservations, namely the Pine Ridge Reservation during the occupation of Wounded Knee that lasted just over two months in 1973. The judge in this case, Warren K. Urbom, recognized the difficulty of ruling on this case given the historical injustice the United States had practiced towards American Indians. Yet he maintained that it was not the court’s right to recognize sovereignty:

The Sioux People were once a fully sovereign nation. They are not now and have not been for a long time. Whether they ever will be again is dependent upon actions of the Congress and the President of the United States and not of the courts. ...It cannot be denied that official policy of the United States until at least the late 19th century was impelled by a resolute will to control substantial territory for its westward-moving people. Whatever obstructed the movement, including the Indians, was to be – and was – shoved aside, dominated, or destroyed. ... They were left a people unwillingly dependent in fact upon the United States.⁷

The Sioux had been sovereign when they signed treaties with the United States government, as they needed to be for these to be considered legitimate.

⁷ Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz, ed. *The Great Sioux Nation: Sitting in Judgment on America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), 197.

Since then however, they had become a dependent nation within the United States. While on the federal level the recognition of American Indian history was contradicting itself, the local scene in Mankato was making progress. November 5th in Mankato witnessed a joint memorial between natives and non-natives at the hanging site. The original hanging monument was now gone from the site, reportedly resting under a pile of gravel at a nearby maintenance shed belonging to the city, where Dakota elders had visited the monument and prayed over it in the previous November. The site was now free of any monuments for the time and had begun to take on a sacred meaning for the Dakota people, who were calling for the site to be reinterpreted with a new monument or memorial. By placing a new monument at the site, the existing commemorative tradition is maintained, but the site is opened to new meanings and interpretations, in this case as a sanctified site of counter-history for the Dakota.⁸

Members of the American Indian Movement were also present on November 5th, and in statements comparing the thirty-eight Dakota hanged there to the patriots of the American Revolution, incited a not entirely unexpected note of controversy at the gathering.⁹ The wounds of 1862 still ran deep. Whites had benefited from the material advantages that followed with the expulsion of the Dakota from their land, and they had not suffered categorical persecution from the government in the intervening years, but the memories of the violence done towards their ancestors and early settlers lingered. The reexamination of the

⁸ Foote, *Shadowed Ground*, 5, 172.

⁹ *Mankato Free Press* (Mankato, MN), November 5-6, 1975.

causes of the war and its aftermath challenged the traditional historical narrative, and threatened those memories and sense of loss.

This single-day event became the foundation for the idea of a year-long focus on reconciliation in the next decade. In 1980, the Mankato pow wow moved to a permanent location at the newly constructed Dakota Wokiksuye Makoce Park, meaning “Dakota Land of Memories.”¹⁰ The name reflected the visceral connection that the Dakota felt to the thirty-eight hanged in Mankato, and for one of the first times acknowledged the event from the Dakota perspective. A Dakota presence was finally returning to Mankato and was furthermore inscribed on the landscape. This change of location brought increased interest to the annual event, and even resulted, interestingly enough, in the sale of commemorative buttons.

While all of this was going on at the local level in Mankato, state organizations were also responding to the changing understanding of the US-Dakota War and increased communication and attempts at understanding between natives and non-natives. The Dakota Studies Committee, a group made up of natives and non-natives alike, was formed by Dr. Chris Mato Nunpa, also known as Chris Cavender. The group began meeting informally in the decade leading up to the Year of Reconciliation, and eventually submitted the request for such official designation to the governor.¹¹ This request was accepted by Governor Rudy Perpich, and together with the Minnesota Historical Society and the Science

¹⁰ Dowlin and Dowlin, “Healing History’s Wounds: Reconciliation Communication,” 423.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 424.

Museum of Minnesota the governor's office spearheaded the event on the state level.

The Year of Reconciliation officially began on December 26, 1986 with an eighty-five-mile relay run in commemoration of the hangings in Mankato. Throughout the year symposiums, workshops, and school programs were held with the goal of fostering understanding and recognizing the pain carried on both sides from the events of 1862 and the intervening years. Vernell Wabasha's quote, "forgive everyone everything" became the motto of the year designed to put aside the animosity that had continued between the two communities for well over a century.

The *St. Paul Pioneer Press Dispatch* ran a five-part series of articles on "The Great Dakota Conflict," a drastic change from the newspaper coverage and nomenclature that had described the war in contemporary accounts, and that continued well into the twentieth century with coverage on the debate over the original Mankato hanging monument. New emphasis was placed on the words used to describe the war, and the traditional usage of "outbreak" and "uprising," which perpetuated stereotypes of violence and reinforced the guilt of the Dakota, were finally questioned. These articles brought new attention to the war among whites and increased knowledge of events that had been forgotten by many and were rarely taught in schools.

The newspaper also led a brief editorial campaign calling for a pardon for the executed thirty-eight Dakota. This initiative was abandoned when it became known that not all Dakota reacted favorably to such a petition, citing it as just

another example of an act of appeasement that was motivated out of guilt. Vernell Wabasha's thoughts on the issue, "How can they pardon somebody when the people didn't do anything wrong?" reflect the underlying issue with the petition.¹² A pardon does not remove recognition of guilt and so it would not address the Dakota's problems with the executions. Particularly in the case of Chaska the ethical questions of the trial and execution are apparent. A pardon for Chaska would effectively shut down the real history of the event: that he was not convicted and was not sentenced to die. Chaska was wrongfully executed, a fact that a pardon would obscure.¹³

Increased awareness seemed to be the name of the game, at least for non-natives in Minnesota who had seemingly forgotten the trauma their infant state suffered in 1862. While this forgetfulness is problematic, and would continue to be so in the evaluations of the success of 1987, it is significant that the history of the US-Dakota War was being reexamined. The language around the event was changing, and for the first time the perspective of the Dakota was told alongside that of the settler perspective. One question followed naturally from these efforts, was this enough?

The year concluded on December 26, 1987, the 125th anniversary of the hangings, and was marked with another memorial run and the unveiling of a new statue, the "Winter Warrior" (Figure 5.1). The statue, carved from Kasota

¹² "Indian Incident in 1862 Still Stirs Deep Emotion," *The New York Times*, December 26, 1987.

¹³ Calls for a pardon have resurfaced since the Year of Reconciliation, most recently in 2014 from a City Council member in Mankato. It has yet been unsuccessful.

sandstone that originated near Mankato, was placed on a corner of the Mankato Library, which partially covered the exact spot of the hanging since its construction in 1902. The sculptor was Tom Miller, who had worked on the piece for the preceding ten months on a farm outside Mankato, during which time he invited the public and school groups out to observe his progress. Miller also collaborated closely with Amos Owen to ensure historical accuracy in the depiction of a Dakota chief.¹⁴



Figure 5.1. Author's photo.

¹⁴ William Fox, "Healing Old Wounds in Minnesota: Sculpture Recalls 1862 Indian Conflict," *LA Times*, December 27, 1987.

The year officially ended, but the legacy of this reconciliation effort continued to bear fruit. Outside of Minnesota, South Dakota began its own reconciliation effort a few years later, Iowa also took measures to reconcile its native and non-native communities. Churches throughout Minnesota also sought forgiveness for their complicity in the tragedies of the past.¹⁵

Reconciliation Theory

It is important to examine what is meant by the term reconciliation and how it was proposed. Reconciliation as a political process between differing entities has occurred throughout the world in locations marred by a seemingly insurmountable historical trauma between existing communities, notably in South Africa regarding the wounds of apartheid. According to authors Sheryl Dowlin and Bruce Dowlin, reconciliation is “the restoration or bringing together of parties that are estranged.”¹⁶ The patterns through which this process is enacted consist of three parts: dialogue, collaboration, and communally shared experiences.

In the theory of reconciliation, dialogue is the first step, and represents a willingness to experience compassion and empathy for the other’s perspective and way of life. This openness is fostered through individual connections and conversations. These individual relationships should then spread throughout the community and result in collaboration. Together, communal activities and events

¹⁵ Dowlin and Dowlin, “Healing History’s Wounds: Reconciliation Communication,” 425.

¹⁶ In the same article, these authors also state that the Dakota War was a “moral conflict,” the result that followed when “two incompatible social worlds collided.” This suggests that the war was inevitable, a common interpretation of the war. Dowlin and Dowlin, “Healing History’s Wounds: Reconciliation Communication,” 413-14.

are planned as a way to bring the broader community together and foster new bonds. Finally, through the implementation of these activities and events there are new communally shared experiences that unite previously opposed groups and create a shared history. These experiences serve to restore and heal previously damaged relationships.

Evaluation of the Year of Reconciliation

On one hand this pattern is seen to be almost perfectly carried out through the friendship of Bud Lawrence and Amos Owen, who then expanded their relationship to include their respective communities and created new and sustainable activities to bond the two. An organic friendship blossomed into a community-wide initiative to heal the trauma of the past. Yet the language is still problematic, and this issue helps to explain why many Dakota felt, in the words of Vernell Wabasha, that the Year of Reconciliation was a “farce” because it did not really change the relationship between the Dakota and whites. The reconciliation attempt could not change history, and it did little to address the future of the Dakota.¹⁷ While the Year of Reconciliation brought increased awareness of the Dakota community, this sudden interest felt unnatural to some. The Dakota had never ceased to exist in the years following the war, but they had been all but erased from the historical record, except in the matter of their guilt. The injustice dealt to them was finally being recognized, but it was not rectified.

¹⁷ “Indian Incident in 1862 Still Stirs Deep Emotion,” *The New York Times*, December 26, 1987.

The definition of reconciliation speaks of restoring a damaged relationship. This necessarily implies that a healthy relationship needed to exist to be disrupted. While the traditional narrative of the US-Dakota War stresses that settlers were frequently on friendly terms with the Dakota, and this is evidenced by the Dakota who saved the lives of many settlers, the wider relationship between the Dakota and European settlers was obviously flawed from the start. Can this relationship be reconciled? Should it be? That this foundational prerequisite for reconciliation is not met calls into question the validity of the reconciliation efforts and shows that important conversations still needed to happen.

The issue of collaboration was also at the heart of many of the critiques of the Year of Reconciliation. While on the personal and individual level the events in Mankato fostered cooperation and communally shared experiences, the state initiatives for the Year of Reconciliation as led by the governor's office, Museum of Science, and the Minnesota Historical Society felt imposed and forced to some. The Dakota did not feel that they were consulted but rather were told that reconciliation had occurred.¹⁸ This was cited as a reason against the pardon initiative brought up by the *Pioneer Press*, according to David Larsen, the Dakota tribal chairman in 1987, the move was insincere because: "once again, they didn't ask us. They just went ahead and did this."¹⁹

¹⁸ "Indian Incident in 1862 Still Stirs Deep Emotion."

¹⁹ Ibid.

This is reflective of the complaints that whites felt too eager to embrace reconciliation, so that they could expunge themselves of any guilt they may have felt for the events of 125 years ago, which they had already long forgotten. For the Dakota, nothing changed. Their present situation remained the same and they still had the painful memories of the past, which they felt were not recognized or validated by the other side, an essential component to reconciliation. The Dakota had lived with the consequences of 1862 every day since and they did not need increased awareness. They needed their side of the story recognized and validated, but they also needed this validation to lead to action.

This necessarily leads into differing views on reconciliation. The reconciliation efforts critiqued by the Dakota fell short because there were no results. There were no stakes in it. It was simply lip service, and so it was easy for whites to proclaim it. Reconciliation apparently meant an increased awareness and knowledge of history that they had long forgotten, ignored, or misinterpreted. The Dakota on the other hand were frequently looking for critical reconciliation. This meant that some restitution of what had been taken from them in the years leading to the war and in its aftermath needed to be returned. The words of reconciliation and forgiveness needed to be followed up with concrete action.

These differing expectations are perhaps indicative that the wrong words were chosen, leading to mutually exclusive expectations of what reconciliation would bring. Initiated by state organizations, reconciliation could perhaps better be termed "seeking forgiveness," although this was unlikely to have gone over well with many whites, particularly the descendants of victims of the war who

carried with them the painful experiences of their own ancestors.²⁰ This intersection of historical wounds brings up many questions regarding reconciliation that are important for the evaluation of its success, such as: for reconciliation to truly take place, does one historical narrative need to be agreed upon by all sides? Are the feelings and beliefs of individuals, and their respective communities, necessarily subordinated to those of the larger community? Is reconciliation simply a large-scale compromise that means that neither side is completely happy?²¹

Reconciliation also meant different things to different individuals, and this necessarily affected personal evaluations of its success. To some reconciliation did imply the broader, public initiative that sought to reconcile the Dakota and non-native population where the wrongs done by each side would be owned and forgiven. Others, perhaps recognizing the enormity of this task, viewed reconciliation instead as a personal transformation. The focus in this view is not so much on building a new relationship with the other side, but with coming to terms with the past and accepting that this relationship will likely never be perfect.²²

Reconciliation is often referred to with analogies of opening old wounds and allowing them to bleed again, in order to more properly heal. This is

²⁰ Colleen Murphy, *A Moral Theory of Political Reconciliation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 10.

²¹ Wayne Booth, "The Rhetoric of War and Reconciliation," in *Roads to Reconciliation: Conflict and Dialogue in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Amy Benson Brown and Karen M. Poremski (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2005), 7.

²² Charles Trimble, "Apology and Reconciliation: Empty Word without Action," *Lakota Country Times*, February 1, 2012.

predicated on the idea that the process of reconciliation is painful for both sides, but it is necessary for healing to occur and for the future to move forward in peace. This places both sides in an emotionally vulnerable position where they are acutely aware of their own suffering, as well as any perceived or real slights from those who have not suffered in the same way.

One example of this is the belief that the Minnesota Historical Society refused to acknowledge its own historical wrongdoing. Some Dakota people expected MNHS to ask forgiveness in an official statement for keeping the remains of Chief Little Crow for so many years, which it apparently resolutely refused to do.²³ In the face of this opposition to owning up to institutional responsibility, particularly by an organization that had been instrumental in calling for and leading the reconciliation effort, the Year of Reconciliation naturally felt hollow to some.

The problems with the Year of Reconciliation do not mean that the year was a complete failure. Rather, it is another stop on the timeline, a timeline that has come a long way since 1862. Increased awareness of Dakota presence and the tragedies that unfolded as their history intersected with that of the United States may not be enough, but it is a start. The differing views of history among the two communities are obvious, but there are also different ideas of the future. While

²³ Waziyatawin Angela Wilson, “Voices of the Marchers from 2002,” in *In the Footsteps of Our Ancestors*, 130.

In the following year, facing pressure from Dakota individuals and American Indian organizations, MNHS apologized for its past actions, without referring explicitly to Little Crow.

“Historical Society Apologizes for Displaying Remains,” *Associated Press*, March 17, 1988.

the Dakota suffered immeasurably in the last 150 plus years, they had not given up hope of a just future. This is why the Year of Reconciliation was criticized by some, because more was expected, and this expectation was deemed realistic.

The Year of Reconciliation, and the events that led to it and came out of it, are part of this continuum of hope. In recognizing that the moral conflict presented by the US-Dakota War was not simply a clash of cultures, and was therefore not inevitable, the continued strained relations of the past are also not set in stone. In challenging the traditionally accepted historical narrative of the past, the future is open to new relationships. There clearly never existed a perfect relationship between the Dakota and non-natives and so in the terminology of reconciliation there is an ever-present danger of tidying up history. In an attempt to right one wrong, there is another wrong committed. Yet this debate over the proper terminology is meaningful and beneficial. The debate over proper word selection should not impede the healing of historical trauma, but it also needs to take place.

The issue of language comes up at multiple points in discussing the US-Dakota War. On one hand, the Year of Reconciliation made serious gains in the vocabulary used to describe the event. The terms “uprising” and “massacre” were questioned, and new, more neutral terms such as “conflict” became more mainstream. Recognition of the derogatory origin of the name “Sioux” was achieved and more attention to the details and nuances of American Indian terms have resulted. The term Sioux has become historical now, and like the misnomer

Indian it has been reclaimed as a means of bearing witness to the historical injustice from which it originated.

Yet the language of reconciliation itself is problematic as it necessarily assumes that there was a relationship that was damaged by the war. This gets to the heart of what the Dakota have wanted to be reexamined about the war, namely that their ancestors were motivated to violence by years of structural violence at the hands of the government and by traders.²⁴ The treaties signed between the Dakota, or broader Sioux Nation, do not reflect a meeting of equals, or a healthy relationship between two entities.

Officers of the United States government entered into binding agreements with individuals who did not speak for all of the Sioux bands. The Sioux nation did not exist under the same centralized government structure that the United States did, yet this factor was not considered. The years after the treaties brought continued examples of the United States taking advantage of the situation. Reconciliation then needed to address not just the events of 1862 and its aftermath, but needed to begin well over one hundred years before the war itself to address the causes of the war.

While Reconciliation on a local level was the focus of the eighties, changes in views on American Indians, their culture, and history were also taking place on a national level. In 1990, just a few years after the main events of this chapter in Mankato, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act

²⁴ Paul Farmer, "On Suffering and Structural Violence," in *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 47-48.

(NAGPRA) was passed. NAGPRA mandated that museums repatriate any sacred or funerary American Indian objects, and American Indian remains, to the corresponding tribes or descendants. As previously discussed, many, but not all, of these objects came into museums through dubious collection methods. NAGPRA is significant then for its implicit recognition of the active role that museums historically played in the process of colonization.²⁵ This legislation came not through the reevaluation of museum standards by museum professionals, but followed twenty years of sustained effort from American Indian activists.²⁶

Conclusion

1987 did not become the final moment of reconciliation that had been hoped for, but it did open the door and began a new stage in the healing process. Just as there is no place in history to point to for an example of perfect relations between the Dakota and the United States, there will likely never be a moment where perfect harmony is met and the trauma of 1862 is fully healed for both sides. But this does not mean that this is not a worthy goal that deserves to be worked towards. The Year of Reconciliation laid a foundation for future efforts and highlighted the work that needed to be done. Not an endpoint, but part of the continuum of US-Dakota relations, the spirit behind the Year of Reconciliation is manifested in the new commemorative events that took place in the 1990s and 2000s in preparation for and in honor of the 150th anniversary of the war in 2012,

²⁵ Bench, *Interpreting Native American History and Culture*, xi.

²⁶ Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 18

further manifested in new monument building and new interpretations of existing material culture.

Chapter 6: Reconciliation Continues - the 150th Anniversary

Introduction

The Year of Reconciliation, while it accomplished a great deal, also showed the amount of work that remained to be done for true reconciliation between the Dakota and non-natives of Minnesota. The work of reconciliation continued after 1987, with the next largest concentration of effort coming in 2012 at the 150th anniversary of the war. This anniversary brought new attention to the US-Dakota War, now undergoing the process of developing a more balanced historical interpretation with the help of Dakota voices. This period witnessed new monuments built that reflected this shift, and new interpretations of the material culture that had been created and interpreted within the original historical narrative of the war.

The changing focus in this historiography also expanded to incorporate aspects of the war previously not addressed. For years, the Dakota had focused their commemorative activities on the thirty-eight hanged at Mankato, treating this site as sacred and honoring their ancestors there. Over time, this effort changed the understanding of the aftermath of the war, with new scrutiny directed towards the legalities of the trials and subsequent hangings. As this progressed, some realized that other areas of the war's aftermath had gone completely without commemoration, most notably, the fate of Dakota noncombatants after the war. Following the conclusion of the war, approximately 1,700 Dakota women, children, and elderly men marched to Fort Snelling, where they remained for the

winter of 1862-63. In the spring of 1863 they were forcibly marched out of the state, boarded onto river boats, and sent to a reservation in South Dakota.¹

It is this path of their ancestors that proved to be most painful for many Dakota people. The severance of kinship ties and the relationship to their traditional homeland is believed to be the cause of many of the social ills present among the Dakota today.² Proper mourning never took place for the many who died in Fort Snelling during the winter and subsequent forced march. Their bodies never received proper burials, and their remains are now lost to their descendants. In a sense, their spirits themselves are now lost.³ It is from this idea that the commemorative rides, marches, and runs of the twenty-first century were born. Returning to Minnesota became a way for the Dakota to put to rest the spirits of their ancestors.

The reconciliation efforts spearheaded by Amos Owen and Bud Lawrence in the 1970s and eighties centered around Mankato, specifically the hanging site, and this trend continued into the nineties. This point of intersection for the Dakota and white communities became the nexus for remembering the US-Dakota War. In 1862, the site marked the end of the first active phase of the conflict, the settlers of Minnesota were no longer at risk, yet they were just beginning to grieve, and did so by calling out for retributive justice. The hangings at Mankato

¹ Duane Schultz, *Over the Earth I Come: The Great Sioux Uprising of 1862* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 280-81.

² Waziyatawin Angela Wilson, "Manipi Hena Owas'in Wicunkiksuyapi (We Remember All Those Who Walked)," in *In the Footsteps of Our Ancestors*, 1.

³ Wilson, "Decolonizing the 1862 Death Marches," in *In the Footsteps of Our Ancestors*, 53.

signaled the entrance of a new phase of persecution where the Dakota would be punished, regardless of their role in the war. While the events of the previous years had clearly led to this point, the Dakota's time in Minnesota was over. The settlers, as they had been encroaching for years, now resolutely held the legal ground for claiming ownership over Minnesota.

Just as the hangings represented a shift in the lives of the two communities, the commemoration of the site also reflects this. The importance of this site for history was recognized immediately, but for different reasons. The old settlers of Mankato in the early twentieth century had been concerned that the site would be lost to the new generations, and so they commemorated it by inscribing their interpretation of the site on stone. This interpretation, while periodically challenged, continued for many years. The removal of the original marker and new focus of commemorative activities at the hanging site marked another transition in relations between the Dakota and whites, and in the historiography of the war.

Reconciliation Park

In 1992 the City of Mankato purchased the hanging site, or the land closest to it. Five years later this space was dedicated "Reconciliation Park," named so in honor of Amos Owen and his work.⁴ This park is across the street from the "Winter Warrior" statue that had been erected in 1987, which stands adjacent to the hanging site. In 1997, the same artist, Tom Miller, installed a new

⁴ Paul Barry, "Reconciliation – Healing and Remembering," *Canku Ota (Many Paths)*, published December 16, 2000, http://www.turtletrack.org/IssueHistory/Issues00/Co12162000/CO_12162000_Reconciliation.html.

sculpture at the park, a large buffalo carved from a 67-ton block of Kasota limestone (Figure 6.1). This monument, meant to symbolize the resilience and survival of the Dakota people, does not belong to the city. Instead, Tom Miller gifted this work to all Dakota people.⁵ Native prairie grass and wildflowers grown around the monument, and a boulder with the plaque bearing Amos Owen's reconciliation prayer is featured nearby.

In honor of Amos Owen, Norman Crooks and Hereditary Chief Ernest Wabasha for their lasting efforts toward reconciliation among all people. / Grandfather, I come to you this day / In my humble way to offer prayers / for the thirty-eight who perished / in Mankato in the year 1862. / To the West, I pray to the Horse Nation, / and to the North, I pray to the Elk People. / To the East, I pray to the Buffalo Nation, / and to the South, the Spirit People. / To the Heavens, I pray to the Great Spirit / and to the Spotted Eagle. / And Below, I pray to Mother Earth / to help us in this time of reconciliation. / Grandfather, I offer these prayers / In my humble way. / To all my relations. / Amos Owen / Reconciliation Park Founders / Hereditary Chief Ernest and Vernell Wabasha / Louis C. "Bud" Lawrence, Co-chairman / James H. Buckley, Sr., Co-chairman / Mankato Mayor Stanley T. Christ / Jim Petersen / Bruce and Sheryl Dowlin / Perry Wood / Jeff Kagermeier, A.I.A. / Thomas M. Miller, Sculptor / September 21, 1997.

⁵ Dowlin and Dowlin, "Healing History's Wounds: Reconciliation Communication," 426.



Figure 6.1. Author's photo.

The familiar names on the plaque from the previous chapter again emphasize the point that commemoration, and reconciliation, are consistently driven on the local level by individuals. This is important in a discussion of an event where individuality is often lost. For years, the Dakota were stereotyped and treated categorically. Even the efforts of historians to categorize the Dakota of 1862 as belonging either to the war camp or the peace faction neglects the complexities of their culture and kinship ties.⁶ Apart from a few notable individuals, the victims remained largely nameless and faceless, and this is what caused so much pain for those who followed. The Dakota who died are unknown

⁶ Benjamin Gessner (American Indian and Fine Arts Collections Associate, Minnesota Historical Society), interview with Kristin Glomstad, December 20, 2016.

to all but their descendants, who kept, and continue to keep their spirits alive through their familial oral histories, but they too do not know the final resting places of their family members.

The settler victims of the war could have suffered a similar obscurity, particularly in the cases where war parties killed entire families. But early commemorative efforts preserved the names of victims and the locations of their final resting places, and gave survivors an outlet through which they expressed their grief publicly and collectively. The victims of the war on both sides were the individuals caught up in something larger than themselves. The European-American victims were often excused from any blame by the traditional focus on the guilt of the US government and the Dakota people as a whole, a narrative evidenced and reinforced by material culture. Only recently have a handful of individuals on the local level recognized and challenged the forgetting of Dakota victims' names.

The prayer offered by Amos Owen is also significant for the cosmology of the Dakota that it offers. This makes the Dakota culture accessible and appreciable for those visiting the park who might not otherwise have that background knowledge. This inclusivity through sharing aspects of Dakota culture and faith, traditionally besmirched, lends credibility to the words of reconciliation. Again, driven by Amos Owen, the effort towards reconciliation shows the difference that individuals make, and the growing room for the Dakota to reclaim their presence and culture in Minnesota.

Commemorative Marches

As the Dakota expanded into monument-building to mark their own perspectives on the landscape of Minnesota, they also continued with their traditional commemorative activities of ceremonies and other events. The Mankato pow wow and corresponding education day for the local schools, and the memorial run from Fort Snelling to Mankato in December all became annual events. In 2002, a new commemorative march began that expanded the perspective of the Dakota to a focus on those previously overlooked, namely the women and children who were forcibly marched out of the state at the same time the sentences were being passed on the Dakota warriors.

This event was first envisioned by Leo Omani at a conference in New Ulm in 2001 and shared with his niece, Angela Wilson, or Waziyatawin, a Dakota scholar and historian.⁷ They and several others began planning the march for the following year, with plans to hold it biannually until they reached the 150th anniversary in 2012. The march began with humble numbers: about a dozen marchers set out from the Lower Sioux Agency in Morton, Minnesota, to walk the 150 miles to Fort Snelling, where Dakota women and children were interned for the winter before being removed from the state. As the march progressed, several hundred more joined the ranks.⁸

Angela Wilson's participation in the history of the US-Dakota War and arrival on the scene of its scholarship is particularly interesting for her views on

⁷ Wilson, "We Remember All Who Walked," *In the Footsteps of Our Ancestors*, 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

restorative justice for the Dakota. She correctly interprets and praises the changing narrative surrounding the war that is evident in the historical scholarship of the mid and late-twentieth century. Yet she also criticizes the historians most responsible for this shift, citing that they treat the Dakota conflict as a “closed chapter,” a sad period in history that cannot be undone.⁹ Here Wilson, or rather Waziyatawin’s, Dakota heritage is evident in her view on history as not a static piece of the past, but still very much alive and capable of being rectified.

Wilson wrote the history of these commemorative marches in which she was instrumental as a way of showing that the Dakota are reclaiming their right to tell their own history. She too recognizes the importance of the individual, so often lost in the traditional historical narrative, and begins her work with not only a list of the thirty-eight executed in Mankato, but also the names of those who were forcibly marched out of Minnesota, which in her words is “the first step in reclaiming the humanity of our ancestors.”¹⁰

During the marches, those who are descended from the original participants of the forced march placed stakes periodically along the route with a name of an ancestor on the march. At each of these stops the marchers paused to pray and make an offering of tobacco. Retracing these steps and creating a ceremony out of what had originally been a forced march was a means of

⁹ Wilson, “We Remember All Who Walked,” *In the Footsteps of Our Ancestors*, 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

decolonizing an event that was part of a larger act of genocide and ethnic cleansing, and a way to reclaim the land and spirits that had been lost.¹¹

150th Anniversary

Reconciliation Park was added to in 2012 for the 150th anniversary of the war and hangings. The additions made here reflect a focus on healing between the Dakota and United States. This continues the trend already established in Mankato, but also fits into the overall trend of commemoration in twenty-first century America.¹² To further the message of reconciliation, benches now populate the small park with the inscription, “forgive everyone everything.” (Figure 6.2). This quote from Vernell Wabasha, the wife of a hereditary Dakota chief, reflects not only the native involvement in the project but that several Dakota individuals were really the driving force in it, with Vernell Wabasha leading the memorialization effort.¹³ The benches also reinforce the purpose of the park as a site of reflection and meditation, providing space for visitors to sit and showing that they are invited and expected to remain for a time to reflect on the monument before the benches.

¹¹ Wilson, “We Remember All Who Walked,” *In the Footsteps of Our Ancestors*, 7.

¹² Kelman, *Misplaced Massacre*, 4.

¹³ Dan Linehan, “Mankato Memorial Planned for those Hanged in 1862 after Dakota War,” *Mankato Free Press*, March 3, 2012.



Figure 6.2. Author's photo.

The monument enclosed by the benches, also dedicated in 2012, has become the focal point of the park, tying the park to its historical purpose for existence. A new memorial to the thirty-eight men hanged there was unveiled. The design of Martin and Linda Bernard, from Winona, Minnesota, depicts two scrolls held up by four wooden support beams, two on each side that lean together (Figure 6.3). The monument is made to resemble leather and wood, but is made of fiberglass.¹⁴ The scrolls, measuring ten by four feet, on one side list the names of those hanged in Mankato, their Dakota names listed, and on the other a poem and a prayer (Figure 6.4). The poem, written by Katherine Hughes, is titled "Reconcile" and reads:

Remember the innocent dead, / Both Dakota and white, / Victims of events they
 could not control. / Remember the guilty dead, / Both white and Dakota, / Whom
 reason abandoned. / Regret the times and attitudes / That brought dishonor / To

¹⁴ "History," *citycentermankato.com*, accessed March 25, 2017, <http://www.citycentermankato.com/city-center/things-to-do/history/.html>.

both cultures. / Respect the deeds and kindnesses / that brought honor / to both
cultures / Hope for a future / When memories remain, / Balanced by forgiveness

This poem reflects the meaning of the park, and the obvious focus on
reconciliation, not as a *fait accompli*, but as an ongoing process. The work of
reconciliation has been started, and both sides are working towards it, but its
completion resides always in the future. Below this appears the entry from Eli
Taylor, titled, "Dakota Prayer."

Grandfather, Father, Creator / Look down upon us / Whatever works we do / in a
humble way / In the future, when the children / see them, they will understand /
And have knowledge / For this reason, here at this / gathering place, we have
come / Have pity on us and look!! Make us / live in friendship, as a community!! /
All my relatives.



Figure 6.3. The list of the thirty-eight Dakota executed. Author's photo.

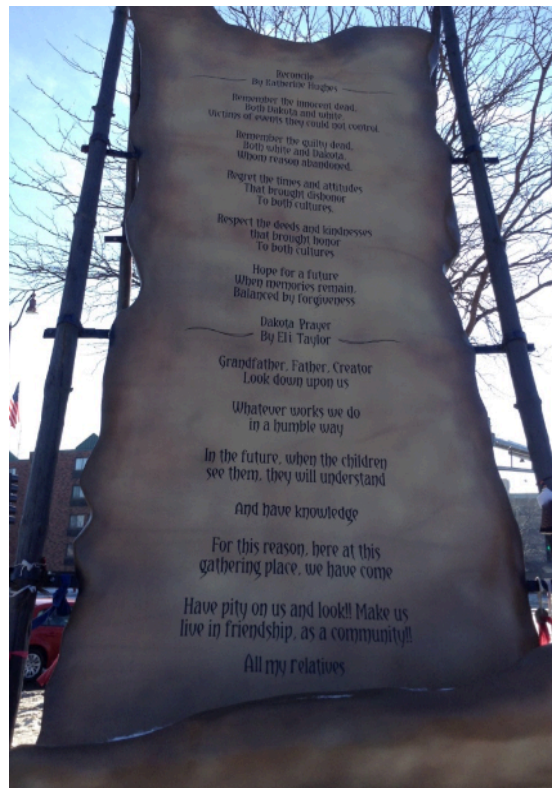


Figure 6.4. Poem and Prayer. Author's photo.

The form of the monument and the process by which it was erected shows that the Dakota now have a voice in the commemoration and memorialization of the war and subsequent hangings. What was once a medium used by whites alone to present a single perspective on the war, monument building is now a bridge between the two cultures. This is evident in material and physical ways, but is also apparent in the symbolism behind this monument. The monument faces south, which in Dakota belief is where the spirits of the dead travel in their afterlife.¹⁵

With the new focus on balanced history and reconciliation, the commemorative ceremonies and memorial events were planned largely by Dakota people. Monument building also became a new way for them to share their perspective of the events revolving around 1862. The traditional interpreters of history, such as the museums within Minnesota, also responded to the changing atmosphere surrounding the US-Dakota War. Similar to its involvement in the 1987 Year of Reconciliation, the Minnesota Historical Society also played a large role in the marking of the 150th anniversary in 2012. In terms of new activities and commemoration, MNHS unveiled many new initiatives for 2012 and the following years.

Through the launch of new websites, commissioning of new signage for historic sites, virtual tours, article and book publications, and teacher workshops, MNHS worked to reach new audiences with the history of the US-Dakota War

¹⁵ Jessica Dawn Palmer, *The Dakota Peoples: A History of the Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota through 1863* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008), 217.

and to correct some of the wrongs in the past interpretations of the war. MNHS organized three major exhibitions during the anniversary year. The first was a standard exhibit on the history of the US-Dakota War, but reflected the changing historiography of the war by including the long-term causes that led to the violence of 1862, as well as the aftermath that was still felt in the Dakota and white communities. To reach this perspective the exhibit relied heavily on the descendants of those involved in the war. As a part of a “truth recovery project” MNHS met with these descendants across the upper Midwest and Canada to get their thoughts on original documents and artifacts and to present a balanced and informed historical narrative.¹⁶

“De Unkiyepi, We Are Here,” the second exhibition, featured the artwork of contemporary Dakota and other American Indian artists. The artwork in this exhibition were the artists’ responses to the US-Dakota War and its commemoration.¹⁷ Both of these exhibitions reveal an important shift in how museums respond to the changing social and political landscape. An historic institution that was once heavily involved in creating and perpetuating a historical narrative that did not consider Dakota perspective and culture, the Minnesota Historical Society shifted with the times and began working to be a place of inclusivity rather than exclusivity regarding who has the authority to tell history.

“The War and Legalities Exhibit,” the third exhibition sponsored by MNHS, was a collaboration between the William Mitchell College of Law and

¹⁶ “Initiatives,” *usdakotawar.org*, accessed March 28, 2017, <http://www.usdakotawar.org/initiatives#.html>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

the Historical Society.¹⁸ As the name implies, this exhibit focused on the legal aspect of the war, exhibiting documents and photographs from the MNHS collection. In addition to these exhibitions a number of online exhibits were also created, such as the permanent “Oceti Sakowin Seven Council Fires” digitization project.¹⁹ This project is particularly important for recognizing the changes that museums have made over the years in regards to their interpretations of American Indian history and culture.

The “Oceti Sakowin” project was a merger between traditional museum practices and standards for the interpretation, care, and handling of historic artifacts, with a new focus on inclusivity for previously unrepresented voices, namely that of American Indians. Curatorship of the online exhibit was limited, as the decision was made to include anything that may have been made or used by Dakota, or related communities.²⁰ The online database project sought to make Dakota culture newly accessible to all, while also fostering an inclusive learning community for Dakota people and for those who desired to learn more about them. The project raised important questions on culturally sensitive materials that should not be available to the public through photographs on the database. This

¹⁸ “Initiatives,” *usdakotawar.org*, accessed March 28, 2017, <http://www.usdakotawar.org/initiatives#.html>.

¹⁹ “Oceti Sakowin – The Seven Council Fires,” *usdakotawar.gov*, accessed March 28, 2017, <http://www.usdakotawar.org/initiatives/oceti-%C5%9Dakowi%C5%8B-seven-council-fires.html>.

²⁰ “Explore the Collections,” *mnhs.org*, accessed March 28, 2017, <http://collections.mnhs.org/sevencouncilfires/.html>. The online database also grapples with the historical use of inaccurate language, i.e. Sioux. As this blanket term was used to describe also the Lakota and Nakota peoples, it disclaims that these objects may also be included due to this imprecise and outdated nomenclature.

issue arose regarding the online display of pipestone pipes, considered sacred and reserved for ceremonial use. The decision to exclude photographs of these pipes in the online database created a precedent that proved useful in addressing the problem of other pieces of material culture of a sensitive nature.

Return to the Start – Original Artifacts and New Interpretations:

The Mankato Hanging Rope

While the changing interpretations of the US-Dakota War, its causes, and aftermath resulted in new commemorative activities and monument building with a focus on reconciliation, exhibitions and changing historical narratives also meant that the remainders of the traditional historical narratives needed to be grappled with anew. The main arena for this discussion was at the Minnesota Historical Society in regards to the institute's collections and exhibition practices, which kept several problematic pieces relating to the war - notably the noose that was used to hang Chaska.

To deal with this issue, MNHS established a Native advisory council made up of Dakota elders to help the museum determine how to treat collections items that merit special considerations. While the route taken by MNHS in regards to this was similar to that in the case of the pipestone pipes, these pieces exist in drastically different contexts and atmospheres. The digitization project was a new endeavor to foster learning and sharing of Dakota culture, while maintaining a respectful distance for the uninitiated. The historical pieces in the MNHS collection reflect the institution's role in colonization and the creation of the original, one-sided historical narrative surrounding the war.

Because of this distinction, there is also the question of whether the noose and objects like it should be held in the museum's collection, or rather face repatriation. This issue is related to NAGPRA, but it also falls outside of it. The noose, and other hanging related items, were not created by Native Americans nor are they funerary or sacred objects. Therefore, they are not strictly governed by the rules outlined by NAGPRA, yet they are obviously of a sensitive nature for the Dakota.

Using NAGPRA as a framework, and with the help of the Native Advisory Committee, MNHS designated the noose and other similar objects as "culturally sensitive" on April 20, 2012. This meant that these objects would not be featured in the 2012 exhibitions, which were already purposefully lite on material culture due to the problematic nature of the many of the objects surrounding the war.²¹ Within this new designation, the Historical Society also decided to not include a photograph of the noose in the public record for online collections. To further respect the wishes of the Dakota people, researchers are also not allowed access to the objects, or to photographs, though Dakota elders are.

For the time being, a satisfactory solution was reached, but the fact that the noose remains in a museum is still unsettling for many Dakota. Some believe that the noose should be returned to the Dakota, and properly and ceremoniously destroyed. This option is held by those who believe the noose's continued

²¹ Benjamin Gessner (American Indian and Fine Arts Collections Associate, Minnesota Historical Society), interview with Kristin Glomstad, December 20, 2016.

existence causes harm to Chaska's spirit and to the Dakota community today. MNHS has stated that it is open to receiving repatriation claims under NAGPRA for the noose, but it must proceed with caution in this. Because of the diaspora of the Dakota following their expulsion from Minnesota, there are not clear ties between historic and contemporary communities. This makes tracing Chaska's lineal descendants, an important part of the NAGPRA repatriations, difficult.²² The stakes are high in this case as different groups want to do different things with the noose.

There are also those, within and outside the Dakota community, who believe that the noose should remain in MNHS collections – and furthermore, should be displayed. The noose is a painful piece of history, but it is also a powerful witness to a difficult period in American history. They believe that removing it from public access is an attempt to hide that history.

As with any debate concerning history, there is necessarily a political component to this one as well. The US-Dakota War is an event within the colonial past of the United States. Collecting, researching, and exhibiting automatically entails dealing with this past and interpreting it. As previously mentioned in the discussion of NAGPRA, museums played a significant role in this history and maintained colonialism well past the wars for the American West. This role has been challenged at various points in time, with efforts amplifying during the 1970s as more Native Americans found their political voice through pan-tribal

²² Benjamin Gessner (American Indian and Fine Arts Collections Associate, Minnesota Historical Society), interview with Kristin Glomstad, December 20, 2016.

organizations and activism. The Minnesota Historical Society's proximity to the American Indian Movement in Minneapolis and this general period of activism help to explain why the Minnesota Historical Society began addressing this issue, and returned the remains of Little Crow well before it was mandated to do so by NAGPRA.

The Minnesota Historical Society is cognizant of its own history in the process of colonialism. This history must be recognized. Historically museums have thought of themselves as the outside chroniclers of history, but this view has changed to recognize that museums play pivotal roles in the shaping of that history. Keeping the noose within the collection and making known its provenance is one way in which the Minnesota Historical Society acknowledges the institution's history and role in colonialism.²³ It must now determine the best route to move forward in which it rights the wrongs of the past while maintaining its mission.

As a museum, the Historical Society holds their collections in trust for the people of Minnesota, and the whole country. This necessarily includes the Dakota. Should the museum repatriate the noose to one Dakota community and then is later presented with another more valid repatriation claim from a different community, perhaps one with a different aim for the noose, MNHS has failed in its mission. MNHS is open to receiving repatriation claims on the noose under the mandate of NAGPRA, but it also has its hands tied in some ways in the matter.

²³ Benjamin Gessner (American Indian and Fine Arts Collections Associate, Minnesota Historical Society), interview with Kristin Glomstad, December 20, 2016.

Still, it is not difficult to view this situation as an extension of colonialism. The Ho-Chunk scholar Amy Lonetree sums up the situation, “museums can be very painful sites for Native peoples, as they are intimately tied to the colonization process.”²⁴ The Minnesota Historical Society does not wish to ignore this colonial history. It makes it clear that noose is in the collection, and the provenance that exists for it. The Minnesota Historical Society is caught between these conflicting ideas on the noose. On one hand, it is a powerful statement of Dakota and United States history. On the other, it is imbedded with a powerful spiritual component that continues to have negative implications on the Dakota community. The decision on the collections policy of MNHS regarding Dakota War artifacts is settled for the moment, but like the concept of reconciliation, will likely be an ongoing process of communication and mutual understanding.

The Gallows Timber

The Minnesota Historical Society is not the only museum that had to reevaluate its collection and exhibition procedures regarding the US-Dakota War. Readers will remember from the introduction that the Blue Earth County Historical Society also holds an artifact from the hanging of the thirty-eight Dakota men, although a recent provenance debate has called this into question. The timber held within the collection at the BECHS, historically believed to be a piece of the hangman’s gallows, received new scrutiny in 2012 from researchers at the historical society.

²⁴ Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 1.

The narrative of this beam, left off at its 1881 donation to the University of Minnesota, will now be revisited. In 1927, the timber left the University of Minnesota and entered the Blue Earth County Historical Society. The *Mankato Free Press* again reported on this development.

Indian Scaffold Timber Sent Here...In the basement of the Ben Pay Hotel today lies an ancient, weather-beaten timber about twenty-four feet long which formed part of the frame of the scaffold on which thirty-eight Indian criminals were hanged here December 26, 1862. The beam arrived here almost on the anniversary of the hanging from the University of Minnesota, where it has been kept for years. It was sent there by John F. Meagher, a Mankato hardware dealer who purchased the wood of the scaffold in the summer of 1863, six months after the executions, and there it remained until W.H. Pay secured it. It had been stored in the geological survey rooms of the University, and was about to be destroyed when the president of the Blue Earth County Historical Society heard of it and asked if it could be returned here. It was sent down sheathed in boards to prevent damage to it in shipment. The timber is about a foot square and shows signs of decomposition. Pay does not know whether it formed part of the top or bottom of the scaffold frame, but the presence of nine notches cut in one edge leads him to believe that it was part of the top. He points out that those notches may have been cut for the passage of ropes. When Meagher purchased the scaffold timber, which was virgin at the time, he used it for a building in back of his hardware store, about where the J.C. Penney company now stands. The building later burned and Meagher selected one timber for preservation at the University of Minnesota.²⁵

This quote is important for several reasons. Besides tracing the coming and going of the supposed timber to its current home at the BECHS, it reveals the 1927 attitude towards this piece of material culture dealing with the Dakota War, as well as the war itself. As referenced in this article, and revealed in the timeline research of BECHS, the timbers did not serve solely as pieces of the gallows during their working lives. Though the gallows were constructed of virgin wood, the deconstructed timbers were used in various other building projects in the years

²⁵ *Mankato Free Press* (Mankato, MN), December 21, 1927.

that followed. The timber was obviously already imbued with an historical significance as there were those who kept track of, or at least tried to track their movements. Yet the wood was not significant enough to think of immediate preservation. Instead practicality reigned and other building projects benefited from the timber's availability.

It is clear that the Blue Earth County Historical Society believed in 1927 that it had a piece of the Mankato gallows. This was not questioned until 2012, when the provenance of the piece was further explored. During this research, the gap between the Samuel Brown's possession of the timber and that of John Meagher raised serious questions about the authenticity of the object. Like the Minnesota Historical Society, the BECHS is now in a difficult position in determining what to do with its collection item.

For close to ninety years the BECHS claimed that the timber was a piece of the gallows. To suddenly disavow this position naturally looks bad for the institution. While the BECHS can neither confirm nor deny the authenticity of the timber they cannot deaccession the object, or they feel, exhibit it honestly. The murkiness surrounding the provenance of this object may also save the BECHS some of the constraints that the Minnesota Historical Society has for its culturally sensitive collections. While BECHS will not exhibit the piece, they do so out of claims that logistically it is too big and their own worries about the provenance. Researchers are allowed access to the beam, but are prohibited from taking photographs, again based on the problem of size and logistics. They have not had to face the same process that MNHS has in dealing with the painful and

controversial items within their collection. Because the authenticity of the timber is the focus of any discussion around it, the more important discussion of its meaning and how it should be interpreted cannot fully happen. This situation has caused some to question the tactics of the BECHS and claim that they simply do not want to own up to the fact of having such objects in their collection.

Conclusion

The differing responses to the noose and timber reflect different historical and contemporary institutional practices. While they have not followed the same trajectory, they set the foundation for the preservation and historical interpretation of material culture from the US-Dakota War. The considerations for these pieces are unique due to their involvement in the execution of the thirty-eight Dakota warriors, but they also serve to inform material culture that developed later around the conflict.

Conclusion

The Role of Material Culture in the Historiography of the US-Dakota War

Since 1862, the US-Dakota War has perplexed historians. Out of this perplexity came many questions about how to understand the causes and effects of the war, and the action of the war itself. The biggest questions and most pertinent to understanding 1862 revolve around the definition of the war and differing cultural definitions surrounding war in general. This is clear in the historiography of the war as the language around the war has changed over the years. Initially deemed a “massacre,” then an “uprising,” and finally recognized as a war, or at least a conflict, reflecting that two sides are at play with valid perspectives.

The material culture of the war precipitated this transformation and bears continual witness to it, throughout history. Objects were a means of making the memory of the war tangible, and thus more easily understood in the minds of those who grappled with the violence of 1862 and the following years. The material culture surrounding the war defines it, and in a sense, continues it. A major theme in the questions surrounding the war of 1862 is that of definition. When did the war really start? When did it end? Did it really end?

For the Dakota, the war began long before 1862. From the beginning of US relations with the Dakota, hostility and greed hallmarked the exploitative and unfulfilled treaties, unscrupulous traders and Indian agents, and the general attitude of the US Government in federal Indian policy. These policies removed the Dakota from their traditional homeland, in the process denying them and

eventually completely cutting off their ability to sustain their livelihoods independently of the government. This was the beginning of a systematic attack on the sovereignty of the Dakota, or larger Sioux Nation, which continued for the next two centuries. Is an attack on sovereignty an act of war, or a precursor to war? While physical violence did not break out on a large scale until 1862, the years leading up to this conflict were undeniably violent in the very act of encroachment on the Dakota's homeland.

For many settlers in Minnesota, violence erupted without warning in the summer of 1862. This did not surprise those with familiarity of the situation in Minnesota, who tried to warn of the impending crisis, with their concerns largely ignored or unnoticed. For those that did not understand the larger factors at play, they were caught up in devastating violence for seemingly no reason. Yet the reasons abounded. The historiography of the war frequently refers to this situation as a "clash of cultures" with earlier sources, such as the Schwandt State monument, making it even clearer that these were not just disparate cultures clashing, but rather civilization and savagery.

To be clear, the Dakota and European-American settlers presented radically different cultures, and this is an important part of the lead up to the war of 1862. But to present this conflict as simply a clash of cultures is to imply its inevitability, which is to deny responsibility to historical actors, on both sides, who contributed to the devastation of 1862. The theory of the inevitability of the war was reinforced for years by the traditional historical narrative, which

simultaneously declared that the Dakota violence came out of nowhere and for seemingly no legitimate reason, a rebellion.

A critical part of this historiography and historicity, the material culture created around the war also serves the purpose of reinforcing these traditional ideas about the US-Dakota War. The material culture is in itself a result of this traditional historical interpretation, but it also promotes and reinforces this interpretation, a cyclical process. The material culture of the war, both the interpreted artifacts from the war and the commemorative and memorializing objects that followed, bring the historical interpretation of the war out of the books and into the public's eye and consciousness. This physical manifestation of the historiography of the war reinforced traditional narratives, but it also witnesses to the changes in these narratives, forcing a confrontation as understandings shift.

In reinforcing, but also challenging traditional historical narratives, material culture becomes part of the history of the war, and in a sense, continues it. This is reflected in the Dakota views on the noose from Chaska's hanging, for one example. In the beliefs of some Dakota, the continued existence of the noose not only has an impact on Chaska's spirit, but causes harm for the contemporary Dakota community. The war is ongoing in that whoever controls this material culture, controls the narrative of the war. The artifacts from the war mark the beginning of this control, which continues then through the creation of material culture dealing with the war, but not directly related to it.

Those who controlled the historical interpretation of the war created this commemorative and memorializing material to reinforce the narrative already at play and supported by the noose and gallows timber and their interpretations. Some pieces, such as the Standard Brewing Company beer tray show how ingrained this narrative was in society that it could be used as an advertisement for beer, among many other products. The connotations of the war and executions among the general public are made clear through objects such as this.

For most of the nearly 155 years since the war, the narrative has been controlled by the settler perspective. The causes of the war were cut and dried, it was simply unwarranted, yet typical, Indian aggression. The victims of the war were only the white settlers killed in the war, and their families and friends left to pick up the pieces. The Dakota perspective was almost completely ignored, except for their relation to whites, such as the friendly Indians monument. This trajectory follows the history of American Indians and their relations to the US Government, with interpretations changing as American Indians found their voice in politics and reasserted their authority to govern themselves, including their rights to tell their own history and their side of history.

The material culture surrounding the war presents a unique and physical opportunity to read the historiography of the war, in what remains and what has been destroyed, and in what invokes controversy. For many years, the material culture created around this conflict reflected the mindset of the victors, and reinforced the traditional historical narrative of the war, the Dakota, and American Indians. Built on the notion of cultural superiority of European-

Americans, this traditional interpretation of the war reflected both a triumphalism in victory and a continuing preoccupation with maintaining the appearance of the victim. The material culture examined in this study is a physical manifestation of these ideas, but also a challenge, and finally, a reinterpretation. These objects subtly reinforced the traditional narrative, pervading popular culture and academia. Yet in their visibility, they also drew criticism and questions, which in turn enveloped the entire war and became a part of the ongoing shift in the conversation on and understanding of Native America.

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