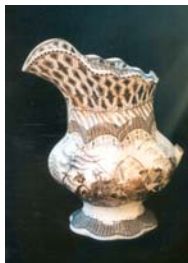


Fort Atkinson and the Winnebago Occupation of Iowa, 1840–1849



In 1840, U.S. infantry and mounted dragoons escorted Winnebago Indian families from their homes in Wisconsin to new lands in the Iowa Territory. This scene, repeated throughout the eastern United States in the nineteenth century, was part of a policy designed to strip tribes of their lands and relocate them west of the Mississippi. By the 1820s, sixty percent of the U.S. Army was stationed along this western frontier to ensure native cooperation for American settlement and enterprise.

Beginning in 1832, the Winnebago (*Hochungohrah*), a Chiwere-Siouan-speaking tribe related to the Ioway and Otoe, were forced to relinquish their Wisconsin homeland through a series of cession treaties in exchange for territory in the Neutral Ground—a forty mile-wide buffer zone in the northeast Iowa Territory. The U.S. Government assured the Winnebago protection from other tribes, illegal settlers, and opportunistic traders, with the understanding that they would be



relocated to “better lands” when these became available. Promised annuities—goods, services, and cash—would be paid by an official subagent whose duties also included the education and “civilizing” of the Indians.

The Fort

Fort Atkinson became command-central for the Winnebago occupation of Iowa Territory over the next eight years. The name honored Brig. Gen. Henry Atkinson, commander at the 1832 Battle of Bad Axe, Wisconsin, the final Indian battle east of the Mississippi. The fort had three major goals: to monitor, protect, and maintain Winnebago bands within the Neutral Ground, to prevent pioneer settlement, and to reinforce the authority of the subagent.



Situated more than twenty miles west of the Mississippi River, construction began in the spring of 1840 at a site chosen by General Atkinson. Post surgeon William King’s 1840 description hints at the setting’s desirability:

Fort Atkinson is situated 50 miles west of Fort Crawford [Wisconsin] on an elevated plot of ground between the Turkey River to the north and Spring Creek on the south and east. The country between the station and Turkey River is woodland. On the west, south, and east it is open prairie, affording a fine view of from 10–15 miles in extent.

Soldiers and hired teamsters hauled pine lumber, nails, and other building supplies from Fort Crawford along a military road. Stone masons quarried limestone blocks from bedrock next to the site. Soldiers cut local trees for structures, pickets, and fuel. As nearby timber diminished, soldiers traveled farther afield to cut wood, sometimes a welcome excursion from more routine chores.

By 1842, 24 log and stone structures were completed at a cost of \$90,000 including enlisted men’s barracks, officers’ quarters, blockhouses, hospital, powder magazine, commissary storehouse, and Sutler’s store, all surrounded by a timber picket. After chipping through 70 feet of limestone, a well was abandoned in favor of a cistern to collect rainwater. Stables, ice house, bake house, granary, blacksmith’s, root house, carpenter’s shop and laundress’s shacks stood north of the stockade.



Throughout its brief existence, Fort Atkinson was home to as many as 196 men at any one time. Families accompanied commissioned and noncommissioned officers, often living in quarters supplied by the post. Never threatened by attack nor engaged in military battles, soldiers’ lives centered around everyday tasks—patrols, drills, construction and repair of buildings and equipment, collection of ice and firewood, tending of gardens and livestock.

Regulating and protecting the legal residents of the Neutral Ground—more than 2000 Winnebago—required patrols to locate the 13–22 separate bands, round up individuals attempting to return to their Wisconsin homelands, remove illegal settlers and unscrupulous traders, and thwart intertribal skirmishes.

Turkey River Subagency and Life Outside the Fort

Occupying camps and villages throughout the Neutral Ground, Winnebago bands congregated periodically near the Turkey River Subagency, three miles south of the fort. Band members collected annuities and received medical care. Annuities included seed corn and oats, blankets, fabric, traps, guns, ammunition, pipes, tobacco, kettles, pots, and livestock hauled over a trail from Dubuque. Annual cash payments of \$20,000 to the tribe bought items from licensed traders. In 1842, Whirling Thunder, one Winnebago band chief, ordered the following from the Dousman Trading Outfit: lead (\$1), powder (\$1), nine bags of corn (\$18), silk handkerchief (\$8), spurs (\$1), and a northwest gun (\$12).



Chief Winneshiek

At the subagency school, Winnebago children and some adults were taught reading, writing, arithmetic, and English, as well as more domestic tasks such as spinning, weaving, sewing, and gardening. A model farm encouraged pioneer ways but was scorned by



Winnebago men and boys who traditionally hunted and fished. Women were farmers in traditional Winnebago society.

Final Days

In 1846 U.S. troops left Fort Atkinson for the Mexican-American War, leaving behind Iowa volunteers. With settlers clamoring for land and Iowa's impending statehood, the Winnebago negotiated a treaty for a new reservation, and in June, 1848, were ushered first to Minnesota and later to South Dakota. By 1865 many had joined the Omaha in northeast Nebraska where a new reservation was established.

Less than two decades later, disaffected Winnebago, who had averted capture and removal from Wisconsin, were joined by kinsmen from Nebraska and purchased farmsteads in ten Wisconsin counties. Today, many of their descendants form the Wisconsin Ho-Chunk Sovereign Nation.

Soldiers abandoned Fort Atkinson in February 1849, and government caretakers maintained the property for a few years after which it was auctioned to private bidders. The fort's cut limestone block proved irresistible to the early inhabitants of the town of Fort Atkinson and most buildings were dismantled and removed. By the twentieth century only four early structures remained, most of the original fort now hidden beneath the ground.

Recognizing its historical importance, local Winneshiek County residents prompted the Iowa Board of Conservation to purchase much of the fort area in 1921. Forty-seven years later, the Iowa State Preserves Board dedicated Fort Atkinson as a State Preserve, acknowledging

its geological, historical, and archaeological significance.

During this time, archaeological excavation and some repair and reconstruction of fort structures commenced. The Fort

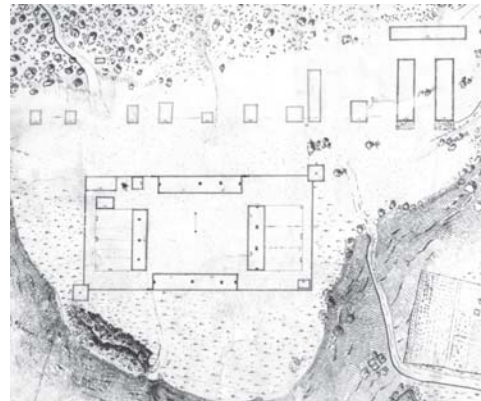
Atkinson Rendezvous begun in 1977, is an annual event held each September to commemorate the 1840s time period.



How Do We Know?

Until recently, most of what we knew about Fort Atkinson was based on historical documents. Many of these are military records including official correspondence, post returns, surgeons' report, and soldiers' rosters. Many still remain untranscribed in the National Archives in Washington, D.C. Architectural evidence exists from standing buildings and foundations, and in the 1842 drawing and plan of the fort prepared by Lieutenant Reynolds.

Recent archaeological research emphasizes the rich potential of Fort Atkinson and related



Drawing of the the fort by Lt. Reynolds

area sites to tell a more complete story of the fort and the Winnebago experience within the Neutral Ground. Ground-penetrating radar survey identified many original structures including the stables and stockade, as well as a number of undocumented foundations. Several miles from the Fort, other Neutral-Ground-era sites have been partially excavated including a Winnebago village, a trading post, and the school at the Turkey River Subagency. Finally, Winnebago tribal history is crucial to understanding this important episode in frontier history.



Quick Facts about Fort Atkinson

Where is it? **Winneshiek County, northeast Iowa**
Who was it named after? **General Henry Atkinson**
Why was it built? **To monitor and protect the**

Winnebago Tribe

When was it built? **1840–1844**

Who built it? **Soldiers and some hired craftsmen**

What was it made of? **Logs, limestone, mortar, wooden shingles, brick, planks**

How large was it? **Main buildings encompassed a parade ground over 1 acre in size**

How high was the log picket? **11 feet 9 inches**

How much did it cost? **\$90,000 (about 2 million in today's dollars) including a road from Ft. Crawford, Wisconsin**

When was it abandoned? **February 1849**

Who lived at the fort? **Infantry and dragoons, enlisted men, and officers**

Did the Winnebago live at the fort? **No. Many lived around the Turkey River Subagency with others scattered throughout the Neutral Ground**

What weapons did they have? **Muskets, swords**

Were there any battles at the fort? **No. Small skirmishes with regional tribes occurred**

Was the fort ever attacked? **No**

Is anyone buried at the fort? **A cemetery less than one mile to the northwest contains the burials of at least 16 soldiers**

When did it become a state preserve? **1968**

When is the rendezvous? **Last full weekend in September**

Lynn M. Alex, Office of the State Archaeologist, University of Iowa, 2008

Image credits: Photos from the Office of the State Archaeologist, University of Iowa; Drawing of Winneshiek by LuAnne Becker, Fort Atkinson

To learn more about Fort Atkinson see:
Carr, Jeffrey T., and William E. Whittaker
2009 Fort Atkinson, Iowa, 1840–1849. In *Frontier Forts: Indians, Traders, and Soldiers in Iowa, 1682–1862*, edited by W. E. Whittaker. University of Iowa Press, Iowa City. In Press.

For information on Iowa State Preserves visit:
www.iowadnr.com/preserves

