Fort Atkinson was established in 1840 to monitor the Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) Nation who had been forced to move from their traditional homeland in Wisconsin to the Neutral Ground in northeastern Iowa. The fort’s founder, Brigadier General Henry Atkinson, promised the Ho-Chunk that the fort would protect them from their traditional enemies who lived all around the Neutral Ground and also keep white settlers from moving into the territory. At the same time, the government expected the soldiers to prevent the Ho-Chunk from returning to their homeland. Horse-mounted dragoons were stationed at Fort Atkinson to patrol the Neutral Ground and keep the peace.

Orders and supplies came to Fort Atkinson from the Second Fort Crawford in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin. Soldiers frequently traveled between these forts along a road known as the Military Road, which crossed the Mississippi River at Harpers Ferry. The Joel Post house was located about halfway along the 50-mile route and was often used as an overnight camp by the soldiers.

The fort was disbanded in 1849 when the Ho-Chunk were moved out of Iowa and the soldiers were sent to fight in the Mexican-American War. In 1855 many of the buildings were torn down and the salvaged materials were used to build one of the buildings actually formed part of the stockade. You will also notice that notice that the rifle slits are wider on the outside than the inside. This allowed the soldiers to move to the right or left to take aim, while making it harder for someone to shoot in from the outside.

Stockade and Main Gate – The fort was laid out in a rectangular shape with the four main barracks arranged around a central parade ground. A stockade 11 feet 9 inches high surrounded the main buildings. The pickets were hewed flat and fit close together, and the pointed tops were tipped with iron. Gun openings were cut at regular intervals all the way around. There were three gates in the stockade. The main gate opened to the north onto the Military Road which was the main route for travel and supplies.

As you look at the reconstructed stockade you will notice that there are sections where the logs are horizontal rather than upright. This is because the outer walls of some buildings actually formed part of the stockade. You will also notice that in places the stockade has been made shorter to allow a view beyond the wall.

Stockade lines, the Military Road, and the fort area was enclosed by the stockade. Some of the buildings in the town of Fort Atkinson were established in 1840. This research has revealed remains of some of the buildings in the town of Fort Atkinson. In 1958 a portion of the North Barracks and the log stockade were reconstructed, and in 1968 the fort was dedicated as a State Preserve.

The Fort Atkinson site has been the subject of numerous archaeological and historical investigations beginning as early as 1939. This research has recovered numerous artifacts and building foundations which help to tell the story of life at the fort.

Notice that the rifle slits are wider on the inside than the outside. This allowed the soldiers to move to the right or left to take aim, while making it harder for someone to shoot in from the outside. The cannon portals are wider on the outside so that a cannon could be aimed over a broad area. The pickets on the outside of the stockade were covered with wooden covers that were closed to prevent the cannon being reloaded. The stone floor allowed the heavy cannons to be moved more easily.

View of quarry.

South Barracks – The south enlisted men’s barracks was a two-story log structure which housed the men of 1st and 2nd Dragoons and Company, 1st Infantry. The raised stone platforms in the center of the foundations helped to support the stone floors. This building had not only barracks, but also had a schoolroom for the officers’ children and served as a church on Sundays. Some of the objects found in excavations here provide clues to recreation at the fort. They include clay pipes, bone dominoes, and a jaw harp which soldiers used to pass the time. Children’s clay marbles and a fragment of a slate and a slate pencil could have been used for school lessons. A fine-tipped comb made from cow horn was used to remove lice which probably plagued everyone at the fort.

Powder Magazine – The sturdy structure in the southeast corner of the fort was used to store gun powder and ammunition. These materials were very dangerous so the building has double walls and a vaulted stone roof which were designed to contain an explosion in case of an accident. The double walls have a vent in the center to keep the interior from overheating. The vents in the inside and outside walls do not line up to prevent rain and stray sparks from being drawn into the building and damaging the powder or causing an explosion.

Southwest Block House – Although no battles were ever fought at Fort Atkinson it was carefully planned and built to withstand an attack. Two block houses which held the fort’s four cannons projected out beyond the corners of the stockade so that sol- diers could shoot along the outside walls in two directions.
As you visit the fort, watch for signs of hidden features:
- Outhouse depressions
- Cellar at Officers’ Barracks
- Cistern
- North Barracks porch remnants