

# The Significance and Challenge of Camp Release, 1862-2012

## CAMP RELEASE

by Alan R. Woolworth

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# Camp Release



Camp Release, 1862. Photographer: Adrian J. Ebell. Image courtesy the Minnesota Historical Society photograph collection.

**Mrs. Urania S. White** wrote of this event:

“I am sure every captive there offered up fervent and grateful thanksgiving that the hour of release had come. Right well did this Camp Release come by its title.”<sup>7</sup>

(Read her personal story on page 100.)

# THE SIGNIFICANCE AND CHALLENGE OF CAMP RELEASE, 1862–2012

Alan R. Woolworth

[Editor's note: Governor Rudy Perpich declared 1987 as the Year of Reconciliation for Minnesotans, intending to make reconciliation possible for both whites and Dakota. Among the many activities taking place that year, Alan R. Woolworth delivered this paper at the site of Camp Release in Chippewa County in September of that year. As Alan's title suggests, the significance and challenge of that place echo to the current day, now in its sesquicentennial year. We need to understand our history and respect different viewpoints to truly reconcile and to live in harmony. Alan's paper is as relevant today as it was 25 years ago.]

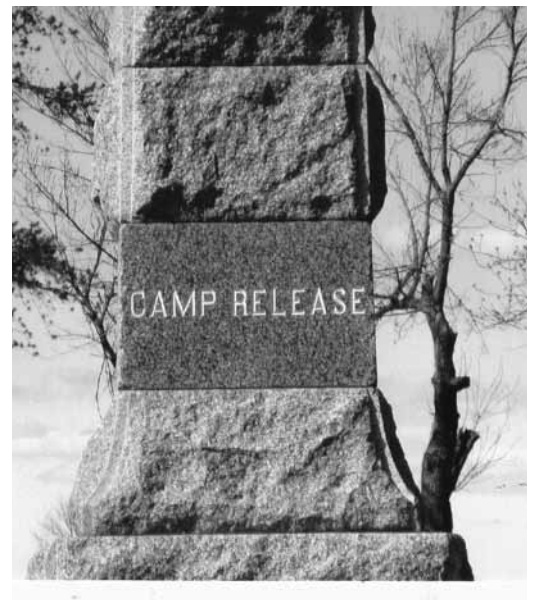
At Camp Release on September 26, 1862, some 110 white and 160 mixed blood Dakota Indian people who had been held as hostages by traditional Dakotas engaged in a war were freed from captivity. Thus, the site came to be called "Camp Release." Incidentally, Colonel Henry H. Sibley asserted that he named it thus.<sup>1</sup> Happily, this event marked the effective close of the U.S./Dakota War of 1862. Although it was an emotion-filled, happy day for the captives, their relatives and friends, other individuals looked at the war and its events differently.

I am much interested, and hopefully the readers are too, in examining the widely differing viewpoints on that tragic conflict and its events. Here, I am thinking of the general white population then in Minnesota; of the traditional minded Dakota Indians; and of the mixed blood population who logically shared much from their immediate relatives. Further, each of these groups contained many individuals with widely divergent opinions.

True, many traditional minded Dakota Indians supported this war, but others opposed it. As the initial successes, loot and war honors accumulated, more mixed bloods and Dakotas came to support this war. As time went on, and great military pressures were placed on the Dakotas, other significant changes took place in their viewpoints. Let us now examine some of these matters.

The U.S./Dakota War of 1862 began in a casual manner when four young Dakota men murdered several white settlers near Acton, Meeker County, Minnesota, on Sunday, August 17, 1862. Hurrying homeward, they told of their deed to other Dakotas at Shakopee's village at the mouth of Rice Creek on the west bank of the Minnesota River, about six miles upstream from the Lower Sioux Indian Agency. A large group of excited Dakotas then hurried to Little Crow's village about two miles above this agency. After much argument, and many pressures, Little Crow reluctantly agreed to lead his people in a

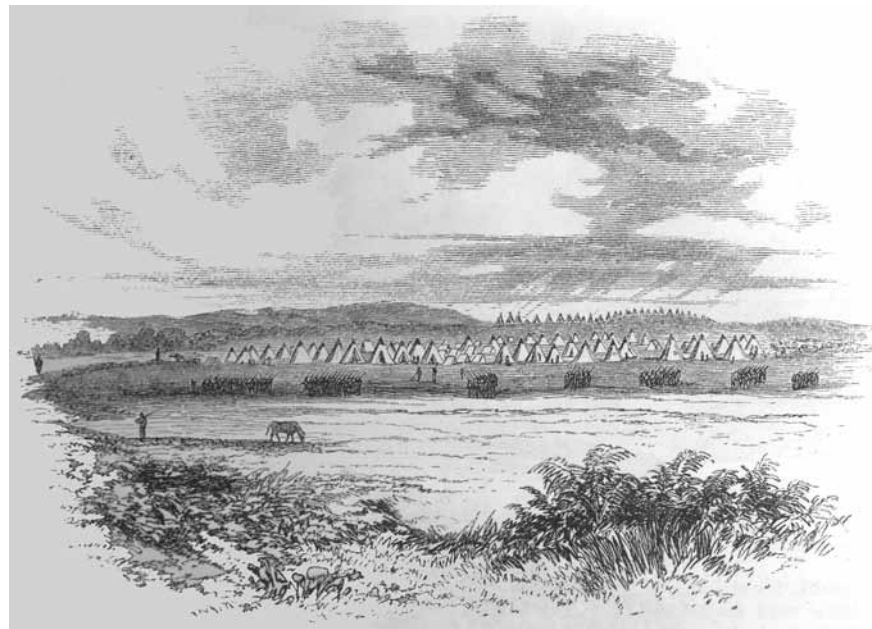
Camp Release monument.  
Courtesy of Curtis A. Dahlin.



general war against the white people. Thus, an impulsive event triggered general war between Indians and the white men.

Plans and preparations were made for a surprise attack on the nearby Indian traders' stores and the government-run Indian Agency. It began about 7:00 a.m. on the morning of Monday, August 18, 1862. Within an hour, about thirty government employees and men in the Indian trade were dead; the stores and warehouses had been looted, and most of the surviving white population had fled to Fort Ridgely for refuge. Others were made captives. Many mixed blood Dakotas were soon held as hostages too.

Next, the Dakotas ambushed a small military unit led by Captain John S. Marsh at the Redwood Ferry crossing of the Minnesota River below the Agency. Here, a total of 23 soldiers and the interpreter, Peter Quinn, were killed. Looting and killing began later that day at the Upper Sioux or Yellow Medicine Agency. Two large parties of more than a hundred civilians fled across the prairies to safety on the lower Minnesota River, aided by Christian Indians. Dakota war parties also fell upon the white civilian farmers north of the Minnesota River and the Germans downstream near New Ulm. As is often true in wars, white males who might resist were killed; so were some women and children. Other women and children were made captives.



Red Iron's camp, 1862. Wood engraving based on Adrian J. Ebell photograph. Image courtesy the Minnesota Historical Society photograph collection.

Dakota warriors led by Little Crow attacked Fort Ridgely on the morning of August 19 but were driven off. A preliminary attack was also made on New Ulm at the mouth of the Cottonwood River this same day. A more serious attack was made on New Ulm on August 20, but it too failed.

The Dakota forces attacked Fort Ridgely again, but that outpost had been reinforced and held. General warfare then spread over western and southwestern Minnesota. Within a few days, twenty-three central and western Minnesota counties were depopulated and several hundred white civilians were killed. Dakota Indian losses were tiny in comparison as they totaled about thirty to forty people for the entire war. "In all, a region two hundred miles long and averaging fifty miles wide was devastated or depopulated."<sup>2</sup>



Camp Release, 1862; he, and others who opposed the fighting, offered protection to the white captives and notified Colonel Sibley when the uprising's leaders left the area. Wood engraving based on Adrian J. Ebell photograph on page 4. Image courtesy the Minnesota Historical Society photograph collection.

The white population of our state viewed the Dakota raids as a massacre of unoffending citizens. The Dakotas viewed themselves as being engaged in war, an honorable action, against a race who had robbed them of their lands and who was now forcing them to adopt cultural changes that were distasteful to many of them. Indeed, traditional Dakota Indian culture and political organization were being ground to fragments under continued governmental pressures. When the Dakota went to war, they used the same tactics common to most Indian wars; and for that matter to other wars too.

On August 19, Governor Alexander Ramsey appointed Henry H. Sibley, a prominent citizen and former Indian trader who was well acquainted with the Dakota Indians, as a colonel to lead a military unit to fight the Dakotas. He moved rapidly up the Minnesota River to Saint Peter with a few hundred raw troops. By August 26 his forces had grown, were equipped and under the best available leaders. Then, he was ready to advance for the relief of besieged Fort Ridgely. In late August Major Joseph R. Brown led a unit from Fort Ridgely to bury both soldiers and civilians at the Lower Sioux Agency, and in its vicinity. They camped at Birch Coulee north of the Minnesota River late on September 1 in a poor defensive location. Early the next morning, they were surprised by Dakota Indian warriors. About twenty

white soldiers were killed and many more wounded. Dakota losses were minor as they fought from cover whenever possible. This event taught Sibley and others that they needed a large, well trained army to fight the Dakotas.

In response to many urgent messages from Governor Ramsey, the national government created the Military Department of the Northwest on September 6. Meanwhile, at Fort Ridgely, Colonel Sibley organized, trained, and equipped his army as swiftly as he could. By September 19 he was moving up the Minnesota River Valley. On the morning of September 23 his army met Dakota Indians at Wood Lake a short distance downstream from modern Granite Falls, Minnesota. This battle was a decisive victory for Sibley's army. It also marked the end of organized warfare in Minnesota by the Dakota Indians and led directly to the release of white hostages and to the surrender of many Dakotas.

While the battle of Wood Lake was underway, the captives and their Dakota Indian friends dug rifle pits and trenches in their camp for possible shelter from the hostile Dakotas. When Little Crow's men returned to their camp after their defeat at Wood Lake, leaders such as Little Crow, Shakopee, Red Middle Voice, and others spent little time contemplating the deaths of fifteen Dakota men. Instead, they hastily gathered their possessions, and families. Then, they struck their tipis in preparation for a move westward to remote sections of Dakota Territory where they hoped to be well beyond the reach of vengeful whites.

They turned over their captives to Dakotas who were friendly to the whites in this camp such as Wabasha, Red Iron, Taopi, mixed blood Gabriel Renville, and others, then sent a messenger to Sibley to tell him that the captives were safe. Sibley's army moved up to the friendly camp on September 26, but camped about half a mile away near noon. Colonel Sibley and a detachment visited this camp about 2:00 p.m. and the captives were turned over to him by leaders from this camp. They were then removed to Sibley's main camp.

A large amount of Dakota Indian testimony from interviews at the time, later reminiscences, and correspondence with Sibley shows that the Dakota Indians were never united in support of this war. When it began at the Lower Sioux Agency on the morning of August 18, 1862, Wabasha, Wacouta, Traveling Hail, Taopi, and others opposed it and urged that the white captives be freed and sent at once to Fort Ridgely. Gabriel Renville, and many other mixed blood Dakotas, along with their Wahpeton Dakota relatives, soon formed a "peace party" at the Yellow Medicine Agency. Prominent Sisseton Dakota leaders such as Standing Buffalo and Red Iron also spoke out against it. Dakota opposition to the war grew, particularly after their defeat at Wood Lake.

Soon after the Birch Coulee defeat, Colonel Sibley began negotiations through mixed blood messengers with Little Crow, with the hope of freeing the captives. Little Crow and some of his supporters, however, viewed them as an important bargaining asset for use if needed. Some more militant Dakotas voiced opinions that the white hostages should suffer discomforts if they did from food shortages, a lack of clothing, etc.

Of particular interest is the testimony of Big Eagle and Wabasha concerning their efforts to induce Little Crow to free the captives. Mazomani, a Wahpeton Dakota leader accidentally wounded at Wood Lake by a cannon ball, also asked that these people be released. Little Paul Mazakutemani, a Christian Wahpeton Dakota Indian, spoke out boldly and forcefully to free them. Gabriel Renville, leader of the mixed blood Dakotas, sought consistently to free them. Other Dakota Christians such as Simon Anawangmani and Lorenzo Lawrence went further by conducting captives from the hostile camp to Fort Ridgely. Still other captives escaped by their own efforts while the battle of Wood Lake was underway.

Some Dakotas thought that the captive hostages should be killed if the war went badly for them. Fortunately, other Dakotas intervened, so this never

took place. There were many instances too by which Dakotas cared for these captives. Many years later, Wamditanka or Big Eagle pointed out how he and many other Dakotas had actively aided captives. He, for example, had cared for five men, one woman, and four children. Many other leaders such as Wacouta had done the same. For that matter, Little Crow himself was protective of the Joseph R. Brown family and set Charles Blair free to find his way to Fort Ridgely. Generally, mixed blood captives with prominent Dakota relatives fared quite well. Nancy McClure Faribault later told how her uncle, The Rattling Walker, or Rday-a-manee, came to the hostiles' camp and took her with him in spite of Little Crow's protests. The Wahpeton leader Akipa did the same with members of the Joseph R. Brown family who were his wife's relatives. Most of the Christian Dakotas such as Simon Anawangmani, Little Paul Mazakutemani, and others cared for captives.

It is also of interest to note that at least some of the white captives more or less enjoyed their stay in the Dakota camps. This appears to have been especially true with the white boys who found excitement, adventure, and sport in dressing as Indians and in living among them. Many of the white women, but not all, found the lack of privacy, unfamiliar foods, and tent living to be contrary to their tastes. Mary Schwandt reported in detail that Mrs. Wakefield and Mrs. Adams were "painted and decorated and dressed in full Indian costume, and seemed proud of it. They were usually in good spirits, laughing and joking, and appeared to enjoy their new life. The rest of us disliked their conduct, and would have but little to do with them."<sup>3</sup>

Some captive women with children later recalled their difficulties in caring for their wards in unfamiliar circumstances and their concerns about the lacks of familiar foods, clothing, medicine, and the general amenities of white households.

Many captives spent these few weeks in August and September 1862 in a state of high insecurity. In part, this was caused by the profound cultural and language barriers that separated Indians and whites.

Another contributing cause was the traumatic, often violent, circumstances in which these women and children were taken prisoner. Many of them had witnessed the violent deaths of their husbands, parents, children or other close relatives while they themselves were taken and made captives.

Perhaps the case of Mrs. Urania S. White was typical of the experiences and views of the older women. She was apparently confused and frightened by many of the events and scenes she saw in the Dakota Indian camps. When released, she felt a wave of relief that this ordeal was ended. Other women, she later recalled, laughed, cried, and showed great joy.<sup>4</sup>

Mrs. Mary B. Renville, the white wife of John B. Renville, an educated Christian mixed blood, felt periods of insecurity during her six weeks of captivity, but she was spared to some extent because her husband belonged to a large and influential mixed blood clan.

Much insight into her impressions is given by the different names that she gave to the Dakota Indian camp where they lived near the end of their captivity. These names are taken from her rare captivity narrative:

"September 15, 1862 Red Iron Village—  
September 21, 1862, Camp Hope—  
September 22d & 25th, 1862 Camp Lookout."<sup>5</sup>

Many of the mixed blood Dakotas felt some insecurity, but usually they belonged to extended families and could count on the support of more militant or politically influential relatives. There was much feeling against them by some of the full blood traditional Dakotas, but these feelings were rarely acted out. It would have meant swift vengeance from their victim's relations.

Cecelia Campbell, the 14-year-old daughter of Antoine J. Campbell, an Indian trader and interpreter, and a mixed blood captive herself, wrote a vivid account of her family's experiences at Camp Release. She noted that the "friendlies"



and the “hostile” Dakotas divided up into two separate camps about two weeks before the battle of Wood Lake. Her family were members of the large Campbell family with some of them active hostile warriors.

On the morning of September 24 after this Dakota defeat, Little Crow sent for her father who had served as his secretary and driver during the war. Antoine J. Campbell then asked that the white prisoners be released to him and Little Crow consented, directing his warriors to bring the captives to him. Campbell swiftly wrote the names of 107 captives and led them to the friendly Dakota camp. They were then safely placed among various tipis until Colonel Sibley came with his army on September 26. Sibley’s army was first noticed by the sun flashing off its bright, shining bayonets when they arrived about noon on this day. They marched past the waiting Indians, mixed bloods and white captives, to go into camp about half a

mile away. About 2:00 p.m., Colonel Sibley, some of his officers, and a bodyguard of troops came to this camp that was decorated with white flags of all kinds. The Renville Rangers’ unit lined up opposite to the Campbell tent. Cecelia and other women rushed out to greet them. Her father and Dakota leaders such as Wabasha and Red Iron among others went to meet Colonel Sibley and to escort them into their joyful camp.<sup>6</sup>

With the captives freed, one of the more emotional aspects of the war had been resolved. It was now a time in which there might be a new beginning for both the Dakota Indians and the white citizens of Minnesota.

We too are faced with such an opportunity. It is my sincere wish that we can grasp our opportunity to create paths of mutual appreciation, understanding, and cooperation. If we can do this, the future will be a brighter place for our posterity for many generations to come.

1. Henry H. Sibley *Papers*, M164, Roll 11, Frame 672, Oct. 3, 1862, Minnesota Historical Society.

2. William Watts Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, Vol. 2, Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1921-1930., p. 124.

3. Mary Schwandt, *Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society*, Vol. 6, 1894, pp. 472–473.

4. Urania S. White, “Captivity Among the Sioux, August 18 to September 26, 1862,” *Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society* 9:418–419, 1901.

5. Mary B. Renville, *A Thrilling Narrative of Indian Captivity*, Minneapolis, 1863, pp. 33, 36, 39–40, & 42.

6. Cecelia Campbell Stay, “Camp Relief [Release] in 1862”, 1924, typescript, Sioux Uprising Manuscript Collection, Minnesota Historical Society.

7. Urania S. White, “Captivity Among the Sioux, August 18 to September 26, 1862,” *Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society* 9:418–419, 1901.

*Alan R. Woolworth is anthropologist, archeologist, historian and avid student of the Dakota War of 1862. He retired in 1998 after forty years with the Minnesota Historical Society, where (and since then) his cross-discipline interests have opened doors for many other countless researchers.*