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Interpreting Settler Infrastructure in Stevens County, Minnesota: Gager's Station and the Post Dakota-US War of 1862 Frontier

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Gager's Station is a little known, but formative settler infrastructure project from the 1860s in west-central Minnesota. Gager's Station was situated along both an important military supply route, and lands of significant importance to the Indigenous people of the area. Gager's Station bears several similarities to the scout camps and civilian defense forts in the broader Fort Wadsworth network that provided civilian defense to new homesteaders following the Dakota-US War of 1862. Fort Wadsworth served as another goal post in western expansion of the United States. Further, the networks of forts that supported it appeased the anxious settlers who feared Dakota uprising levels of reprisal from people who no longer lived in their settlements. The following is a synthesis of the historical and archaeological record of Fort Wadsworth network and how Gager's Station fits into the broader goals of the colonial project in the upper Midwest.

Introduction

In this study, I analyze a little-known trading post in Stevens County, Minnesota known as Gager's Station. There is very little in the historical record about Gager's Station. Despite serving as the county seat between 1868 and 1875, very little is documented about the history or role of Gager's Station in the founding of the county. This was not the only infrastructure of its type in western Minnesota for the time. Western Minnesota was host to a variety of settler buildings and trading posts near or directly next to supply routes utilized by military personnel and settlers alike. Historically speaking, Gager's Station has many parallels to other structures within the Northwest Army's network of posts and forts. The little we know about Gager's Station reveals it to be on the Wadsworth Trail, a military trail utilized between 1864 and 1871.

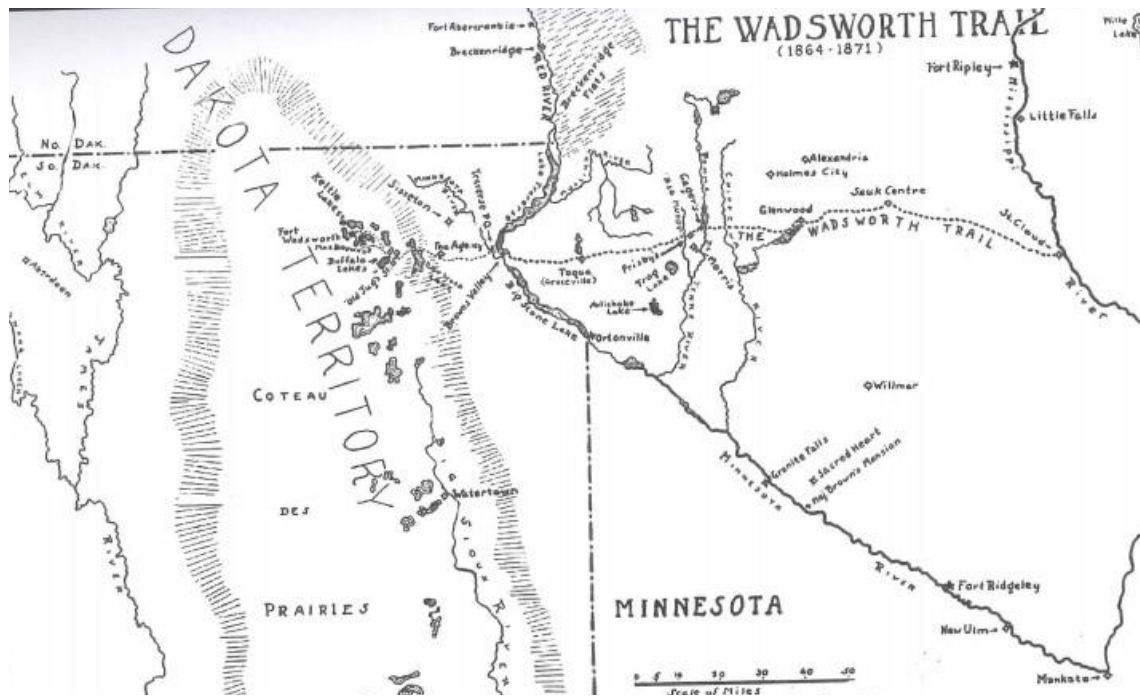


Fig. 1.1. Map of the Wadsworth Trail (Hall 2007)

Whether or not it served any function within the military network remains unclear due to lack of archaeological or historical record, although Henry Gager was known to be a government contractor on the frontier and soldiers frequently utilized the post for supplies (Hall 2007). From contextual clues available about similar structures in the region, I draw comparisons of Gager's Station to the military posts in western Minnesota and eastern South Dakota. Furthermore, I suggest more inquiry into the archaeology of Gager's Station; perhaps revealing more about the history of this important landmark in Stevens County.

Gager's Station, much like any other settler infrastructure of that time, played a role in the settlement of west-central Minnesota in the 1860s. Located along the Wadsworth Trail, there was a flow of civilians and military personnel in the area between 1864 at its inception until 1871 when the railroad reached Morris. Fort Wadsworth was established following the Dakota-US War of 1862 amidst public pressure from settlers, as well as federal aims of western expansion (Jones 1960; Hall 2007; Arnott and Maki 2019). A general fear of potential Dakota violence was popular amongst rural settlers. However, these anxieties appear to not extend into urban industrialized areas (Jones 1960). Further, very little conflict is documented in Stevens County between the settlers and the Indigenous population (Hall 2007). Fort Wadsworth's construction and connection to Saint Cloud via the Wadsworth Trail served as another goalpost in the persistent western expansion of the United States through Dakota lands. A series of scout camps were established throughout the area, especially in territories already devoid of Dakota settlements. These laid the groundwork for a network of routes and forts utilized for intelligence and intimidation (Anderson 2018; Dahlin 2017). A significant amount of work was completed on burial mounds and frontier forts which concluded the intentional placement of military forts and civilian defenses on or adjacent to burial mounds (Arnott and Maki 2019) at Fort Wadsworth, South Dakota. Burial mounds were discovered just north of the Wadsworth Trail near Pomme de Terre Lake in Swan Lake Township, furthering the argument that the military infrastructure was intentionally constructed to sequester the Indigenous population from sacred lands and furthering the colonial project (Wolfe 2006). Further, a few cultural resource management projects have taken place in this area in 1998 and 1999. Lithic scatters and proposed places of interest were discovered as a result of the studies (Kluth and Kluth 1998; Mulholland et al. 1999). The Office of the State Archaeologist of Minnesota has not published any further inquiries into these sites located in Sections 19 and 30 of Swan Lake Township, Stevens County, and Section 29 of Morris Township, Stevens County. Given such a unique and identifiable series of variables such as its proximity to burial mounds and the Wadsworth Trail in the geographic location of Gager's Station, further inquiry should be considered to discover Gager's Station's role during the early years of settlement in Stevens County within the context of settler colonialism. Other scout camps in west central Minnesota have been studied historically and archaeologically (Dahlin 2017). Gager's Station merits archaeological inquiry given what we know about military forts, their proximity to burial grounds and natural resources, and the methodical genocide of the Dakota people in western Minnesota.

Methods

Although there is a lack of corroborated historical data on Gager's Station, contextual literature analysis and existing archaeological study can be analyzed in order to identify where we may find Gager's Station, what function it may have served, and what it meant for the development of Stevens County. We know where it is from an account by Grace Cynthia Hall (Hall 2007), and we have lidar data from the Iowa Office of the State Archaeologist to support the presence of burial mounds (Artz et al. 2013). More supporting archaeological evidence comes to us from the Office of the State Archaeologist of Minnesota and an 1896 field survey that mapped the burial mounds (Mulholland et al. 1999; Kluth and Kluth 1998; Winchell et al. 1911). There has also been a substantial contribution to our understanding of frontier forts and the role they played in the settler colonial project (Arnott and Maki 2019; Anfinson 1984). By examining what we know from the sparse historical record we have from Hall, with what we can learn from the artifacts and other archaeological resources in the area thanks to the Minnesota and Iowa state archaeologists, we can determine that the area around Gager's Station was of significant importance to the

Dakota people. Further, due to the presence of burial mounds in the area it is likely that this location was home to Dakota camps (Anfinson 1984). It is important to approach archaeological data concerning remains and histories of Indigenous people with an understanding that settler colonialism was not a single event, nor was it anything less than an act of genocide (Wolfe 2006; Waziyatawin 2008). The archaeological data that we have would hold very little value to us if we fail to place it in the colonial context. By utilizing existing historical data and interpreting what we have in the archaeological record, we can identify further areas of inquiry that would reveal more about Gager's Station and its role in the early Euro-American settlement of this region.

Literature Review

What we know about Gager's Station was published in a pamphlet in 1937 by the Wadsworth chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. The account was written by a settler named Grace Cynthia Hall, whose family arrived in 1871. She admits that her accounts are from memories and interviews with community members, but it is one of very few accounts of the Wadsworth Trail or Gager's Station we have available. Hall writes that Henry Gager moved his courier enterprise from Sauk Centre, Minnesota to an area south of Morris near what is now Pomme de Terre City Park in 1866. Soon after, he relocated to an area 5 miles north in northeastern Morris Township along what is now Wintermute Lake. Gager was described as being surrounded by men with no discernable job, and the station was supposedly frequented by cattle rustlers, outlaws, soldiers, and settlers moving west (Hall 2007). The first saloon in the county was established at Gager's Station, as was the first post office. We do not know much more about Gager's Station until it was sold to a former officer in the Dakota-US War of 1862 named Charles Wintermute, to pay outstanding debts. Wintermute was a high-ranking military officer who was involved in protecting railroad surveyors in the northwest territory and the transportation of Dakota prisoners of war to Mankato for trial, and public execution in 1863. Wintermute relocated to Morris in 1871 following his time as an officer in the Union Army and post-trader at Fort Wadsworth. Wintermute would become a very powerful member of the new community, ascending to Commissioner of Stevens County in 1875 and holding the position until 1877. He is also credited with establishing the Old Settlers Association, an organization of the first settlers in Stevens County who organized a historical record that would eventually become the modern-day Stevens County Historical Society. Currently, the area around Wintermute lake is privately held land parcels with family homes, situated just west of Highway 59 in Morris Township.

Some historical records specific to Henry Gager are available to us via the *St. Cloud Democrat*. Gager was a stagecoach owner and government contractor for infrastructure projects in Stearns County. Gager was known to take up relationships with passer-throughs and give them odd jobs around his places of business. For a brief period of time, he served as a deputy marshal (*Saint Cloud Democrat* 1864:4). After a petition to have a mail route established from Saint Cloud to Fort Wadsworth failed, Gager moved his operation to Morris (roughly halfway between Saint Cloud and Fort Wadsworth) (*Saint Cloud Democrat* 1866:3). His interest in mail routes was evidenced further as his business was a functioning post office after 1868. Gager recognized that the railroad was going to come through the county very shortly and in 1869, he moved once again to Bismarck, North Dakota where he continued his career as a government contractor and trader. In 1875, Gager was convicted of stealing government grains and cattle and was sentenced to three years in federal prison (*Saint Cloud Democrat* 1875:2). He was buried in Fargo, North Dakota following his death in 1901.

Gager's Station in the Archaeological Record

Gager's Station is no longer discernible from visual architecture. However, the account from Hall and wagon ruts nearby identified by a soil survey have pinpointed a general area of interest (Sharratt et al. 1998; Hall 2007). Further, relationships developed via the Stevens County Historical Society have revealed areas of interest along the southeastern shore of Wintermute Lake. From historical records, it is likely that the station rested in this vicinity. The Office of the State Archaeologist published reports of

finding lithic scatters and areas of interest during a survey of the lands around Wintermute Lake prior to the construction work done on Highway 59 that sequesters Wintermute Lake from the Pomme de Terre River (Kluth and Kluth 1998; Mulholland et al. 1999). Lidar readings of the area northeast of Wintermute Lake reveal burial mounds of the Dakota people near the Pomme de Terre River and Swan Lake (Lower Pomme de Terre Lake) (Artz et al. 2013). An 1896 land survey further corroborates the presence of burial mounds on the southeast side of Swan Lake (T126N, R41W, Sec. 29; Stevens County) (Winchell et al. 1911). Historical records from Hall suggest that the mounds are from a costly battle with Ojibwe groups in the mid-1860s, but this remains uncorroborated and is highly unlikely. (Hall 2007). Gager's Station therefore is believed to be located only a short distance from known burial mounds and lithic scatters; evidence that this area was frequented by and sacred to Dakota people. Gager's Station's most likely reasoning for its spatial context to mounds is that the Wadsworth Trail potentially followed Indigenous trails (such as the Mandan Trail). Gager's Station's relationship to the burial mounds is indirect, but related within the context of settler colonialism. The Pomme de Terre River was a frequent mobility network for the Dakota from their rice harvesting in the lakes of its source, and their planting camps near its drainage into the Minnesota River. Lithic scatters, as well as the area's recorded abundance in wild game, suggest that the Dakota had a hunting camp in the area. Finally, ceramic sherds and faunal remains discovered near Wintermute Lake reside in the collections of the Stevens County Historical Society, although these were discovered by civilians and they lack spatial context, as well as a general lack of information on their retrieval. Private collectors in Stevens County have amassed a sizeable collection of faunal remains, ceramic sherds, and lithics in the area around Wintermute Lake and frequently share their findings with the Collections Manager at the Stevens County Historical Society.

Settlement and the Colonial Project

Manifest Destiny was codified into federal law with the adoption of the Homestead Act of 1862, creating a significant power dynamic between the federal government, settlers, and Indigenous peoples yet to be displaced by settlement. Settlement of these lands involved significant conflict and the displacement of Indigenous people was intertwined with the project's goals. Early traders created a series of agreements with tribes to operate trading posts on Indigenous lands and cooperation, tacit or otherwise, is documented in the historical record (Anderson 2018). By the 1860s, a logic of elimination had been employed as the prevailing paradigm in governing the Indigenous lands: "The Sioux Indians of Minnesota must be exterminated or driven forever beyond the borders of the state" (Minnesota Governor Alexander Ramsey, September 9, 1862).

The logic of elimination was not an event, nor just an idea. Instead, it was a series of interconnected events, policies, movements, and connections with a goal of furthering the colonial project (Wolfe 2006). The logic of elimination employed strategies such as starvation, extrajudicial killing, culture erasure, sequestering populations, cultural assimilation, reproduction management, and displacement (Wolfe 2006; Waziyatawin 2008). Further evidence suggests that colonial administrations truncated Indigenous identity and expression (Stojanowski 2005). During the Civil War and Reconstruction, a more "scientific" racist position emerged, interrelated to the United States' view on race in regards to enslaved and later free African-Americans. The political economy of pre-Civil War United States was based on free labor and plentiful lands taken from Indigenous populations (Wolfe 2006). Different quantifiers of identity emerged wherein Black persons needed only a decimal of African heredity, or "one-drop-rule" to be considered Black. Conversely, Indigeneity was beginning to be governed by blood quantum, with each interracial family diluting their claim to Indigeneity. The economic goals of the new state were to make anyone that could be considered black, black; and to make anyone considered Indigenous as little Indigenous as they could (Wolfe 2006). Consolidating Indigenous identity had been occurring long before homestead settlement (Stojanowski 2005). As more Indigenous identities came under fewer sociopolitical systems, cultural identity variation became less prevalent (Stojanowski 2005). Finally, constant forced migration of Indigenous populations, homogenized genetic pools, and grouped together different kinship networks, chiefdoms, and societies. This further contributed to homogenization of genetic variation, as well as

contributed to population declines and destabilization via epidemic disease (Stojanowski 2005). This is the mark of settler colonialism. The act of settling a colony brings with it the implication that a complete cultural overhaul of the area is about to ensue including but not limited to cultural erasure of the Indigenous population, and assertion of power from the settlers and their supporting organizations (Wolfe 2006). This logic escalated significantly following the Dakota conflict when public opinion was vehemently anti-Dakota (Waziyatawin 2008; Anderson 2018).

Frontier Conditions Post-Dakota-US War of 1862

The outcome of the Dakota-US War of 1862 was multifaceted in that the Union military funneled funds and resources to the west in order to remove several Indigenous groups from ancestral lands. Removal of the Dakota from their lands was only the first step of the process. In order to solidify the United States' control of the frontier, settler infrastructure needed to be constructed. Government contractors began constructing villages and settlements near natural resources and along rail survey plots. This in turn left settlers feeling more secure in moving into western Minnesota and thus, displacement of the Dakota began with the military and was supported by homesteading settlers. There was civilian pressure put on the federal government to provide protection in rural areas due to persistent anxieties about hostile Dakota following the Dakota – U.S. War of 1862, which left multitudes of settlers dead (Jones 1960). Several scares occurred in the early settlement of Stevens County but all turned out to be unfounded and the county was generally safe for settlers (Busch 1976). Large swaths of land were cleared for settlement as the Dakota were forced westward, eventually being placed on reservations at Sisseton and in the Black Hills as a result of the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1868. Despite west central Minnesota being depopulated of the Dakota, a series of scout camps and forts were established in the area as support for the larger forts such as Fort Ripley and Fort Wadsworth (Arnott and Maki 2019; Dahlin 2017). These served two main functions: (1) surveillance of conquered territory, and (2) supply lines for forts further in the west such as Fort Wadsworth and Fort Abercrombie in Dakota Territory (Dahlin 2017; Anderson 2018). Supplies from northern Minnesota settlements (such as logging and trapping villages with connections to the Mississippi River) were typically floated down the Mississippi River to Saint Cloud and likewise north from industrial Saint Paul. Prior to the railroad, supplies and troops were networked between these forts and industrial centers by a series of trails moving west, the Wadsworth Trail being the trail of inquiry in this study. There was a necessity for postal carriers in the area as well, and it is known that several frontier post offices emerged in west central Minnesota before railways came through and towns began incorporating, including at Gager's Station in 1868 (Hall 2007; Dahlin 2017).

Frontier Forts and Scout Camps

In conjunction with displacing Dakota people, the Union army constructed a series of forts throughout the former Dakota territory, connected to industrial centers and other forts by a series of trails and waterways. These forts served several functions including protecting settlers, trade, intimidation, and sequestering the Dakota from resources and their burial and hunting lands (Arnott and Maki 2019). Brigadier General H.H. Sibley furthered the networks of the forts by establishing scout camps throughout the area to survey the remaining Dakota encampments, and to serve as friendly stopping points along trails (Anderson 2018; Arnott and Maki 2019). These forts were constructed on or adjacent to burial grounds, hunting grounds, and access points to natural resources (Arnott and Maki 2019). The case study presented by Arnott and Maki is of Fort Wadsworth where several mounds located in a wetland area lie just underneath several structures built there. Now known as Fort Sisseton, this fort was located near the Sisseton-Wahpeton reservation and served as a present reminder of subjugation. The conflict had ceased, yet occupation remained and so too did its physical reminders.

While literature on forts and military infrastructure in west-central Minnesota is growing in recent years, there is still much room for inquiry especially through a colonial lens. A few posts on Big Stone Lake and Lake Traverse were staffed by Dakota scouts, who for one reason or another were conscripted

into service by the Union army (Dahlin 2017). Geographically, these were the closest camps to Fort Wadsworth in Minnesota territory at the confluence of the Red River and the Minnesota River. Fort Juelson, located near Underwood, Minnesota served as a civilian defense fort, made completely of sod (Dahlin 2017). Fort Pomme de Terre located 8 miles northeast of Elbow Lake in Grant County was a stopping point along a different trail connecting Saint Cloud and Fort Abercrombie. Fort Pomme de Terre, too, is known to be built near burial grounds and grave markers persist to this day of soldiers who died nearby (Dahlin 2017). When Gen. Sibley was organizing these scout camps, he proposed a series of camps to be situated north-to-south along established lines to effectively create a grid of enforcement across former Dakota territory (Arnott and Maki 2019). All of the aforementioned forts create a network across the area around the convergence of the Red and Minnesota Rivers, with each fort roughly 20-40 miles away from the closest Union encampment.

Fort Wadsworth Case Study

Although there is not a significant amount of information about the roles or functions of settler infrastructure in Stevens County, a lot is known about Fort Wadsworth thanks to a great deal of research done by Arnott and Maki (2019). At the time, most of the northwest territory's military leadership was traveling between Fort Snelling in Saint Paul, Fort Ripley north of Little Falls, Fort Abercrombie in Wahpeton, North Dakota, and Fort Wadsworth in Lake City, South Dakota. Fort Wadsworth was important for the time as it would lay the foundation for the Sisseton-Wahpeton reservation that still exists today. Further, it functioned as one of the many forts in the eastern Dakotas from which troops supplied the frontier in the later conflicts with the Dakota. In addition, it served these roles prior to and after their forced movement to the Black Hills following the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1868. Unlike other forts built at the time, Fort Wadsworth was built in a poor strategic position in a low, wet area near waterways frequented by the Dakota (Arnott and Maki 2019). However, Fort Wadsworth was never attacked.

Fort Wadsworth's inception came as pressure was placed on the federal government to make lands apportioned out for settlement safe for settlers. As previously mentioned, civilian pressure was mostly reserved to rural areas, but these were the people taking advantage of a government program. Fort Wadsworth's construction further followed the narrative popular of the time, that the Indigenous population must be eliminated, and this was the policy of Brigadier General Henry Sibley. The fort was constructed directly on top of burial mounds, complete with an American flag flying at the apex of the largest mound in the cluster (Arnott and Maki 2019). Over the course of the fort's construction, human remains were exhumed and were received by the Smithsonian Institution for study (Comfort 1873). At the time, the primary study of human remains was focused on racial typing and craniology; practices we now understand to have racist methods and aims that sought to classify and rank people based on their supposedly "biological" race. The settler symbolism at play in these two practices in regards to burial mounds are emblematic of the greater theme of "conquering the Native" and attempting to scientifically justify these actions based on antiquated ideas of racial superiority that unfortunately persist today.

The administration of Fort Wadsworth had one very clear goal in mind: remove the Dakota from their lands and continue to move them further west to make room for white settlement. This is reflected in the beliefs espoused by General Pope and General Sibley. They believed the peaceful coexistence of white settlers and Dakota was impossible and sanctioned violence against Dakota found within settler territory (Schuler 2012). A network of scout camps (notably those at Lake Traverse, Big Stone, and Artichoke Lake) informed Fort Wadsworth about Dakota movements and supplied the troops stationed there with parcels and goods (Dahlin 2017; Anderson 2018). As the northwest territory expanded further west with the construction of forts like Fort Wadsworth, a necessity for posts in former Dakota territory was necessary to continue Euro-American presence in the territory. The strategy of building up infrastructure, subjugating a specific region, and expanding west proved effective in removing Dakota from western Minnesota and keeping them in the central Dakotas as planned. Following the Dakota conflict in 1862, violence between Dakota and settlers was relatively rare due in large part to the encompassing presence of the United States military and forts such as Wadsworth.

Discussion

In the absence of historical data on Gager's Station, we find many clues to its history in the archaeological record of other infrastructure along the Wadsworth Trail, as well as the landscape surrounding the area. Several pieces of physical evidence have been observed that place this parcel of land deeply in the realm of sacred or frequented Dakota lands. Inquiry into larger regional forts have given us perspective on the roles that settler and military infrastructure played in the greater goal of displacement and elimination of Indigenous people. Knowing what we know now about the insidious nature of settler colonialism, as well as the function that military forts served in settler colonialism, a clearer picture of this area is being constructed. Between historical data we have of the area and timeframe, the archaeological evidence discovered through surveys, and the critical lens we have to view it all through, a very solid case suggests that Gager's Station served a greater function than a convenient place to water horses and have some whiskey along a frontier trail.

Functionalist interpretations of settler infrastructure ignore the context in which settlers built their farmsteads, industrial capitalists built the railways, and the Union army subjugated the northwest frontier. We must place all settlement activities within the greater context of settler colonialism and consider the power dynamics between an expanding nation state at grips with its own identity and the Indigenous peoples they displaced in order to achieve their political and economic goals. Insidious, pseudoscientific ideas about race that were practiced in archaeological history justified the colonial project. By attempting to understand the history of settlement of the frontier with this critical lens, we are identifying more accurate historical narratives that center the experience of Indigenous peoples. Historical record without context is reductive and, in this case, destructive. Still today, the struggle of the Indigenous peoples of the United States is ongoing. In the upper midwest, resistance efforts from Indigenous people against fossil fuel pollution have been ignored or violently subjugated by state and county law enforcement. Public opinion does not value the experiences and perspectives of Indigenous communities. Further, accurate historical narratives about the relationship between settlers and Indigenous communities is imperative towards descendants of those settlers learning how and why decolonization is so important for civil rights and environmental justice in this post-colonial environment. Places like Gager's Station have been storied as early signs of triumph for settlers who braved the dangerous frontier to establish roots that still persist today in their given communities. We must analyze these places with a more critical lens that does not ignore the colonial nature of their very existence.

Further study is necessary to attain certainty regarding the history of Gager's Station. Much of the land in question is privately held as single-family homes and the rest is currently owned by the United States Forest and Wildlife Service as Waterfowl Production Areas. There are opportunities to not only understand Gager's Station to a greater degree, but to look deeper into the Wadsworth trail; something that many west central communities have done. However, all of that research will be pointless unless researchers approach further study within a lens of settler colonialism. To ignore the structure while studying the system would leave us with little room to interpret anything that we find. Any further research must be approached with a post-colonial lens or with attention to the works in Indigenous archaeology. Nonetheless, Gager's Station, and the whole of Stevens County, merits further inquiry into its history in the settler period so we can better understand our past wrought with violence and racism in hopes of identifying the deep socioeconomic rifts that still exist between the displaced indigenous people of the upper Midwest and the descendants of settlers who took their place.

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