

Seth Eastman

a biography



Seth Eastman, ca. 1860s, Civil war photographs, 1861–1865, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs, LC-8813-6355 C (P&P)

Seth Eastman was born on January 24, 1808, in Brunswick, Maine. The oldest of thirteen children, he became interested in joining the military at an early age. He entered West Point Military Academy at sixteen and spent five years studying sketching and topography. After graduating in 1830, the military transferred him to Fort Snelling in what is now Saint Paul, Minnesota. Fort Snelling was first established after the War of 1812 to help control the fur trade between Indigenous peoples and American fur traders, as well as to maintain a line of defense against the British troops in the Northwest. During his time stationed there, Eastman familiarized himself with native culture, studying the language as well as the traditional dress and lifestyle of the local people. Fort Snelling stands at the junction of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers, a strategically advantaged natural location where the Dakota people, a subculture of the Great Sioux Nation, had been living for centuries.

Unlike other artists of the time concerned with similar subject matter, Eastman was able to spend vast amounts of time with the Dakota people while he sketched and painted them. Often, artists such as Karl Bodmer (1809–1893) and Alfred Jacob Miller (1810–1874) traveled to areas populated by First Nations People to make sketches that would later be used to create finished paintings and prints in their studios elsewhere. Eastman was unusually steeped in Dakota culture for an artist of the time, resulting in depictions that are considered to be much more naturalistic and less sensational than some of his peers. One of his contemporaries, landscape artist Charles Lanman (1819–1895), called him a “soldier-artist of the frontier” who had devoted himself to “the study of Indian character, and the portraying upon canvass [sic] of their manners and customs, and the more important fragments of their history.”

While stationed at Fort Snelling, Eastman married a Bdewakantuywa Dakota woman, Wakaj Inazin Wij (Woman Who Stands Sacred), the fifteen-year-old daughter of Chief Mahpiya Wicašta (Cloud Man) of the village at Bde Maka Ska. Shortly after the birth of their daughter Wakaj Tanka Wij (God Woman/Great Spirit Woman), Eastman finished his first tour and left his new family, declaring his marriage to Wakaj Inazin Wij over and forgoing an official termination to their marriage.



Seth Eastman (American, 1808–1875), *Dacotahs Made of Sitting*, 1849–1855, sepia ink wash, 6 1/4 x 8 in. (15.88 x 20.32 cm), Minneapolis Institute of Art, Gift of the W. Duncan and Nivin MacMillan Foundation, 2014.31.22



Seth Eastman American, 1808–1875

Sioux Indians

1850

oil on canvas, 32 7/8 x 44 7/8 in. (83.5 x 114 cm)

Museum purchase, 1946.27

The artist returned to West Point to teach drawing in 1833, and shortly afterwards, in 1835, married his second wife. Mary Henderson (1818–1887), the daughter of a military surgeon, was also interested in Native American culture and would go on to write books and treatises illustrated by her husband. During this time, Eastman also began showing his work in several art academies in New York, before being stationed in Florida in 1840 where the artist studied the Seminole people.

Eastman returned to Fort Snelling in 1841, where he would remain for seven years with Mary and their five children. His second time at Fort Snelling was a prolific time for the artist. He served as commander of the Fort four times over seven years and produced a large body of work depicting the Dakota and Ojibwe peoples' life around the Fort. Both Eastman and his wife learned Dakota and Ojibwe languages, which Mary used to collect stories and oral histories from their Native American neighbors. These anecdotes were compiled into the book, which Eastman illustrated, *Dacotah, or Life and Legends of the Sioux Around Fort Snelling* (1849).

After their time at Fort Snelling, the Eastman family moved to Texas briefly before relocating to Washington, D.C. There, the artist worked on illustrating Henry Rowe Schoolcraft's six-volume study of Native American cultures, *Historical and Statistical Information Respecting the History, Condition, and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States*, which was commissioned by Congress and was published between 1851 and 1857. Eastman's illustrations for this body of work included 85 compositional drawings of Native Americans' daily life, and over 180 maps and illustrations of artifacts. Around this time the state of Minnesota also commissioned Eastman to design the state seal, a variation of which is still in use today.

Eastman served in the Civil War as a mustering and disbursing officer for his home state, Maine, as well as for New Hampshire. After being promoted to lieutenant colonel in 1861, he soon retired from the military in 1863. He was awarded the rank of brevet brigadier general as an honor for his service in the military. In his final years, the House Committees on Indian Affairs and on Military Affairs both commissioned Eastman to paint works to decorate their offices. Eastman died of a stroke on August 31, 1875, at the age of 68.



IMAGES (LEFT TO RIGHT): Mary Henderson Eastman, 1872; Seth Eastman (American, 1808–1875), *West Point, New York*, 1851, oil on canvas, 28 1/8 x 40 5/8 in. (71.5 x 103.3 cm), Corcoran Gallery of Art, Gift of William Wilson Corcoran, 69.63



Fort Snelling & the Dakota People



Seth Eastman (American, 1808–1875), *Fort Snelling in 1848, Head of Navigation*, 1848, watercolor, 8 1/2 x 11 1/4 in. (21.59 x 28.58 cm), Minnesota Historical Society, AV1991.85.35

Fort Snelling was constructed in 1820 at the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers, a site which had been occupied by humans for thousands of years. It was a self-contained community, with a blacksmith, doctor, and barber living at the Fort. Men assigned there resided in the barracks with their families. Seth Eastman was stationed there twice: his first assignment was 1830–1832, and his second was 1841–1848 where he served as the Fort's commander four times. The years he spent at Fort Snelling deeply influenced his art.

Intended to act as a frontier post, the Fort regulated military and economic relations with First Nations People through the St. Peters Indian Agency on the same property, and also managed traffic on the two rivers. The Indian Agent who supervised the organization was a civilian appointed by the President to attempt to control the economic activity occurring between Native communities and European American colonists. The Indian Agent's role also included executing orders from the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs and settling disputes among Native American groups as well as between Indigenous peoples and newcomers. The St. Peters branch was often required to resolve arguments between the Dakota and Ojibwe communities that lived in close proximity with one another.

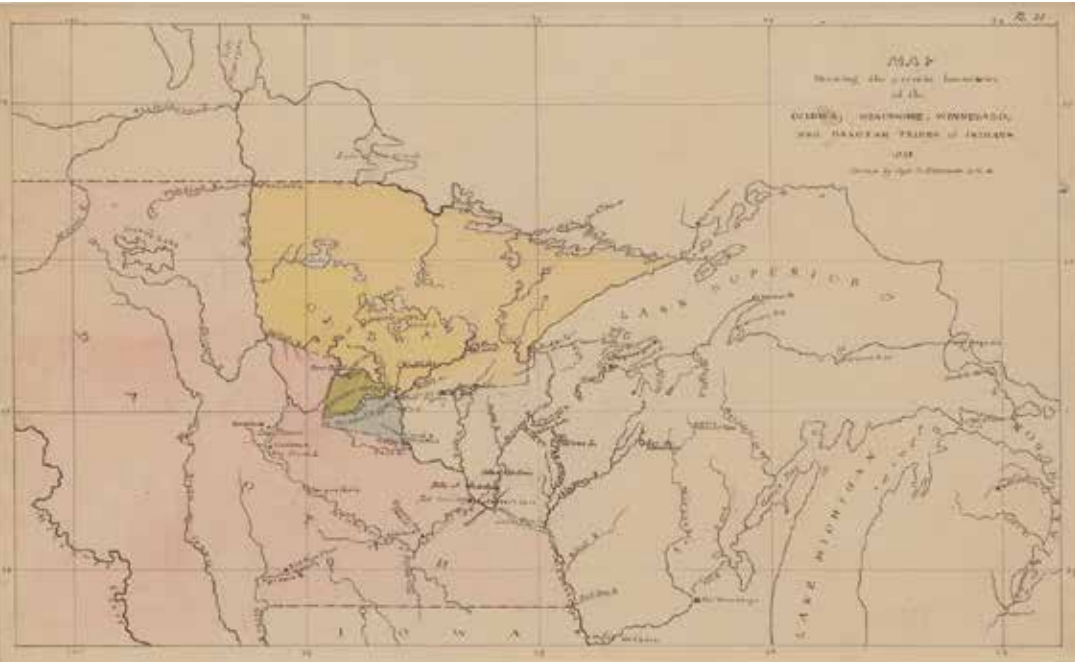
In addition to settling disputes and regulating trade, the Agency played a large role in implementing U.S. government policies aimed at assimilating Native Americans into European American society. For example, in the case of the Dakota, tactics included upending the traditional distribution of labor between men and women, and shifting from Dakota farming techniques to the agricultural strategies used by the white settlers. Historically, Dakota women tended to the crops and the men hunted. However, in order to align themselves with the norms of European American newcomers, Dakota men were encouraged to abandon their hunting duties and take up large-scale agriculture and animal husbandry. Also, Indigenous children were educated in white schools and discouraged from speaking their native languages in order to homogenize future generations with the non-native settlers.



Seth Eastman (American, 1808–1875), *Indian Burial Place near Fort Snelling*, 1846–1848, watercolor, 4 1/2 x 7 1/2 in. (11.43 x 19.05 cm), Minnesota Historical Society, AV1991.85.34

At the time, the U.S. government operated under a belief that unless Native Americans assimilated with the white settlers who encroached on their land, they would become extinct. This logic proposed that by encouraging the Native population to abandon tradition, the government was effectively saving the Dakota and other peoples from their own destruction. This paternalistic attitude derives from the commonly held belief that Indigenous peoples conformed to the archetype of “noble savages” – fundamentally good but incapable of governing their own society. White European American settlers justified their systematic oppression and cultural erasure of First Nations People through this flawed logic.

Thus, Fort Snelling's relationship with the surrounding Dakota and Ojibwe tribes was challenging. In 1862, the long-standing tension between the newcomers and the Dakota people came to a head, as Fort Snelling gathered troops to fight in the Civil War. When Minnesota's governor heard the Dakota staged attacks against the Fort and other European American settler communities, he diverted the troops to fight the Dakota. After a military defeat, the U.S. government tried 392 Dakota men for their participation in the conflict and sentenced 303 of them to death – some with trials shorter than five minutes. More than 1,600 Dakota were taken into U.S. military custody; some of them were sent to a concentration camp just a mile west of the Fort, where up to 300 people died due to harsh conditions and disease. The lasting effect of these genocidal tactics is still being felt by the Dakota and other indigenous communities in Minnesota.



Seth Eastman (American, 1808–1875), *Map Showing the Present Boundaries of the Ojibwa, Menomonee, Winnebago, and Dakotah Tribes of Indians*, 1851, 1851, pen, ink, and watercolor, 8 x 12 1/2 in. (20.32 x 31.75 cm), Minneapolis Institute of Art, Gift of the W. Duncan and Nivin MacMillan Foundation, 2014.31.35

Timeline

1800

1810

1820

1830

1840

1850

1860

1870

1880

1808 Seth Eastman was born on January 24 in Brunswick, Maine

1829 Graduates from West Point; begins first tour of duty at Fort Crawford at Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin

1830 Transfers to Fort Snelling

1833 Teaches drawing at West Point

1837 Publishes a *Treatise on Topographical Drawing*

1840 Documents Seminole people while stationed in Florida

1841 Returns to Fort Snelling

1849 Relocates to Washington, D.C.; accepts commission to illustrate Henry Rowe Schoolcraft's book on Native Americans' cultures

1863 Retires from the military

1867 Paints nine scenes of Native American life for the committees on Indian Affairs at the U.S. Capitol building

1870 Commissioned to paint 17 forts for the House Committee on Military Affairs

1875 Dies on August 31 in Washington, D.C.

BACKGROUND IMAGE: Seth Eastman (American, 1808–1875), Detail, *Manabosho's Devices*, 1849–1855, pen, ink, and watercolor on paper, 8 15/16 x 6 3/4 in. (22.7 x 17.15 cm), Minneapolis Institute of Art, Gift of the W. Duncan and Nivin MacMillan Foundation, 2014.31.17

Manabosho's devices

Depicting the Dakota and Ojibwe Peoples' Daily Life

These watercolors by Seth Eastman (American, 1808–1875) were the basis for illustrations in Henry Rowe Schoolcraft's six-volume study of Native American cultures, *Historical and Statistical Information Respecting the History, Condition, and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States* (1851–1857) and part of a 2014 gift from the W. Duncan and Nivin MacMillan Foundation to the Minneapolis Institute of Art.



Dacotah Encampment, 1849–1855
watercolor, 7 x 10 in. (17.78 x 25.4 cm), 2014.31.1



Gathering Wild Rice, 1849–1855
watercolor, 6 1/4 x 8 3/4 in. (15.88 x 22.23 cm), 2014.31.27



Indian Doctor Concocting a Pot of Medicine, 1849–1855
watercolor, 6 3/4 x 8 3/4 in. (17.15 x 22.23 cm), 2014.31.10



Guarding the Corn Fields, 1849–1855
watercolor, 6 1/2 x 9 7/8 in. (16.51 x 25.08 cm), 2014.31.30



Dacotah Village, 1849–1855
watercolor, 6 x 9 in. (15.24 x 22.86 cm), 2014.31.6



Indian Sugar Camp, 1849–1855
watercolor, 6 x 8 3/4 in. (15.24 x 22.23 cm), 2014.31.25



Spearing Muskrats in Winter, 1849–1855
7 3/4 x 11 1/8 in. (19.69 x 28.26 cm), 2014.31.7



Indians in Council, 1850
8 5/16 x 10 15/16 in. (21.11 x 27.78 cm), 2014.31.8



SETH EASTMAN
American, 1808–1875

SIoux INDIANS
1850, oil on canvas, 32 7/8 X 44 7/8 in.

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Museum purchase, 1946.27