

Comparative Development on the American Frontier:  
A Political Ecology Perspective

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The American frontier in the early to mid-nineteenth century: a fascinating, if enigmatic, place; full of wonder, intrigue, and above all, possibility. To those daring trailblazers encountering new and exciting lands for the very first time – as well as to the United States government – the prospects must have appeared positively mind-boggling, the potential of the lands seemingly boundless. The sense of entitlement and Manifest Destiny felt by those early Americans certainly spurred the drive to *develop the frontier*, to integrate the previously unknown, unorganized, and untapped lands – recently made a legal part of the United States via the unprecedented Louisiana Purchase of 1803 – into their nascent and burgeoning country. Of course, the quest for adventure or profit (as opposed to a sense of duty to the state) may have been foremost on some of the early pioneers' minds. Yet this by no means detracted from the overall goal of development for the purposes of aggrandizing the state, given the individualistic, capitalist structure of the United States, especially in that storied age of expansion.

Importantly, though, it was soon learned that some areas of the western frontier possessed certain advantages, of both site and situation, over others. When combined with other factors, including the national plans and policies of the US government in Washington, DC, these differing levels of apparent advantages led to differential growth along the frontier. Thus, areas of the nineteenth century American frontier settled at similar times, even if for similar reasons, often have very different histories of development. Critical analysis of these histories, especially in comparison with one another, can lead to a more complete understanding of the processes by which Americans effected marked transformation on the various wilderness frontiers, bringing them – quite rapidly, at certain times and in certain places – into closer association with the larger, and expanding, United States.

To that end, the following paper will compare and contrast the developmental histories of two very different parts of the nineteenth century frontier – from their initial settlement to the present day – using a political ecology<sup>1</sup> framework in an attempt to illuminate the range of factors which contributed to their disparate growth histories. Specifically, the areas herein examined will be the vicinities of two American frontier forts which were founded in and remained active throughout much of the 1800s: Fort Snelling in Minnesota and Fort Davis in West Texas.

These two locations were chosen for several reasons relating to both their similarities and their differences, all of which will be further discussed in later sections. The similarities revolve around the initial establishment and functions of the forts. Both were founded in the early to mid-nineteenth century, established by the US government for the expressed purposes of protecting and managing the frontier and projecting American power into the unoccupied or lightly populated (by whites) – yet legally American-owned – lands (Folwell 1921; Hansen 1958; Uteley 1965; Wooster 1990). In this capacity, both acted to defend US territory from potential invaders and to administer the native and early pioneer populations. Furthermore, both forts were founded as important nodes in planned strings of garrisons that extended along what were deemed particularly important stretches of the frontier (Folwell 1921; Hansen 1958; Uteley 1965; Wooster 1990).

The forts and their vicinities are quite different, however, with regards to their environments and their present-day appearances (again, expanded upon in later sections). For instance, Fort Snelling is located in the Upper Midwest, at the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi

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<sup>1</sup> Political ecology is an emerging sub-discipline of geography which is often variously described. As defined by Greenberg and Park in Robbins (2004, p.6), it is essentially an attempt to “synthesize the central questions asked by the social sciences about the relations between human society, viewed in its bio-cultural-political complexity, and a significantly humanized nature.”

Rivers, in an area with a temperate continental climate and abundant natural resources (water, timber, fertile soil, etc.). Today, the historic environs of Fort Snelling comprise the Twin Cities metropolitan area, one of the leading urban areas in the country, with a population of over 2.8 million (Metropolitan Council 2006). In contrast, Fort Davis is located just east of the Davis Mountains in the Trans-Pecos region of southern West Texas. This area is characterized by a mixed mountain/desert semi-arid climate, with only moderate natural resources. The town of Fort Davis, which grew up next to the military installation, serves today as the county seat of sparsely-populated Jeff Davis County, with a year 2000 population of only 1,050 (the county population was only 2,207) (US Census Bureau 2000).

This brings us to the central question of the paper, namely: Why did Fort Snelling and Fort Davis develop so differently? Was it merely that they were areas with vastly different resource bases, as many – especially those influenced by the environmental determinist vein of geographical thought (see, for example, Semple 1911; Huntington 1924) – might argue? Or were other, larger structures (politics, roles in the capitalist economy, etc.) also important factors? This lattermost question, of course, would be of particular interest to – and would likely be generated by – political ecologists or environmental historians. Such an approach, designed to search beyond the obvious answers, is called for here. The differences between the two locations today (and throughout much of recent history) are *so* dramatic that it seems unlikely that this ‘obvious’ answer is the complete one.

The following, then, is an attempt to answer the above questions as completely as possible. First, a brief review of the literature which has informed the theory and structure of this paper will be presented. Following this, two important terms, ‘the frontier’ and ‘development,’ will be discussed briefly, with regards to how they will be defined and used herein. Next will come a

section devoted to the geographies of the two locations, followed by one describing their unique histories of development. Finally, a discussion section will analyze and compare the historical development of the Fort Snelling and Fort Davis areas, in order to elucidate why they developed so differently.

### *Brief Literature Review*

Before continuing, it seems appropriate to at least briefly mention the previous works that this paper – and the research process leading to it – is drawing from, both theoretically and structurally. In addition to the vast body of work produced within the broadly-defined field of political ecology, this paper is indebted to and informed by the sub-discipline of *environmental history*. Several works, herein mentioned and briefly described, were particularly enlightening with regards to American frontiers, the ‘West,’ and comparative environmental histories.

William Cronon, Professor of History, Geography, and Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, is one of the most prominent personalities in the environmental history sub-field. His books and essays have had tremendous influence on the understanding of the natural environment, especially in relation to humanity and civilization. His pioneering *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* is a critical reanalysis of the impact that European colonists had on the ecology of New England and its native inhabitants (Cronon 1983). Upon settling at the New England frontier, the colonists began an irreparable transformation of the environment. Their cultural and economic institutions, Cronon contends, informed their understanding of nature and, therefore, dictated how they used and adapted the land to their purposes. *Changes in the Land* highlights the importance that the physical environment has on development, but also reveals how cultural and

economic forces can play a large part as well, even superseding nature at times (Cronon 1983). A similar pattern, to be sure, can be found throughout the history of westward expansion in the United States and, thus, the theory of *Changes in the Land* has important implications for understanding the changes that occurred on the nineteenth century American frontier.

Shifting time periods and subjects slightly, Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* is essentially a discussion of the environmental dimensions of development (especially urban development) and, conversely, the important role played by urban areas in commoditizing the environment – thereby 'rechristening' parts of it to 'create' hinterlands<sup>2</sup> and informing many, if not most, aspects of its functioning (Cronon 1991). In essence, *Nature's Metropolis* lays bare the process by which civilization, and especially capitalist society, co-opts nature in order to develop, along the way changing its value and meaning (i.e. the market takes the historic place of ecology in dictating changes in the hinterland/nature). As will be shown, this process was as unmistakably at work – albeit at different scales and paces – at the Minnesota and West Texas frontiers as it was in Chicago (originally Fort Dearborn).

Another influential environmental historian, especially in regards to the history of the American West, is Donald Worster. His *Under Western Skies* is a collection of essays concerning development and environmental history in the West. Essentially, it is a discussion of how the West developed and is continuing to evolve. Worster makes special and repeated note of how perceptions of the West – both exogamous and endogamous – are both fluid and often incomplete, revealing how this influences the particular development of the 'region' (Worster 1992). Especially apposite to the discussion in this paper is the chapter on 'Cowboy Ecology' in which Worster provides insight into the development of the dry west (most notably in ranching)

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<sup>2</sup> A *hinterland* is generally understood as referring to the land surrounding an urban area which 'serves' it by providing resources and raw materials.

and how this connects to the American capitalist system (Worster 1992). Thus, as detailed below, *Under Western Skies* is especially informative to a comprehensive understanding of the history of development of Fort Davis and West Texas.

Finally, the detailed and provocative volume, *Environment and History*, by William Beinart and Peter Coates, has been helpful, both theoretically and structurally. The authors echo and expand upon the environmental history arguments of Worster and (particularly of) Cronon, placing a heavy emphasis on the role of capitalism in determining human-environment interactions, especially on the frontier (Beinart and Coates 1994). It is also informative to this paper given its comparative structure. In analyzing, comparing, and contrasting the development of both the American and South African frontiers, Beinart and Coates provide a method to achieve a balanced argument in which the analysis of each region reflects and enhances that of the other.

#### *'The Frontier' and 'Development'*

In addition to the above discussion, it may also prove expedient at this stage to provide a brief note of clarification concerning this paper's central themes – namely, those of 'the frontier' and 'development' – before continuing. Hopefully, this will serve to give the reader a better idea of what to expect and, in so doing, will enhance the effectiveness of the arguments. From a traditional historical (or, one may even venture, from a popular) perspective, the frontier is most often understood as the edge of civilization, a place to be guarded or a border to be defended. Alternately, it may be understood as “the land or territory that forms the furthest extent of a country's settled or inhabited regions,” (Dictionary.com) or as a place of interaction between two or more groups. It is more abstractly made reference to as a dynamic, influential notion, one

that, as it is being deliberately pushed back, has the power to affect people's perception of place and to manipulate their decision-making and opinion-forming (Turner 1921, especially chapter 1; Worster 1992).

While the frontier is all these things – and is mentioned within this paper in several of these capacities – it may also be understood in another way: from a political ecology perspective. Drawing largely from Marxist theory (for Marxist geography, see Harvey 1982; Peet 1991; Bryant and Bailey 1997; and also Cronon 1991, Beinart and Coates 1994), political ecologists tend to view the frontier in relation to the larger capitalist economy. For them, and for the purposes of this paper, the frontier may be more aptly described as a) an area on the periphery or fringe of the market economy; b) a place of resources to be extracted or exploited; and c) an area undergoing incorporation into the larger capitalist economy, with the goal of achieving a less peripheral (i.e. more central) status.

The term, 'development,' also requires some discussion, especially as it pertains to history, geography, the environment, and the frontier. While development is often used as a synonym to growth or progress, it will also be (and has also been) used in a slightly more specific manner in this paper. To historians and geographers, especially those studying the environment or the frontier, development is most often used to describe the process of transforming the environment from a natural one – howsoever that may be defined – to one more visibly displaying signs of human intervention, often manifested in the form of roads, plowed fields, and perhaps even cities. In this sense, development can be seen as a relatively benign act, a mark of human progress.

To a political ecologist, the term must, again, be defined somewhat differently, keeping the larger political and economic structures in mind. Development, from a political ecology



perspective, refers to the mainly economic process by which the environment is transformed and/or utilized for the benefit of one or more interested parties, most often as a means of accumulating capital and thus improving that party's standing in relation to the world market. On a larger scale, and in relation to the frontier as previously described, it may also involve a particular community's or area's progress toward integrating itself more fully into the capitalist economy, most often through (resource) extractive processes. Improved infrastructure and conveniences and a rise in population are often the effects, as well as part of the cause, of development, especially in the First World.

### *Geographies*

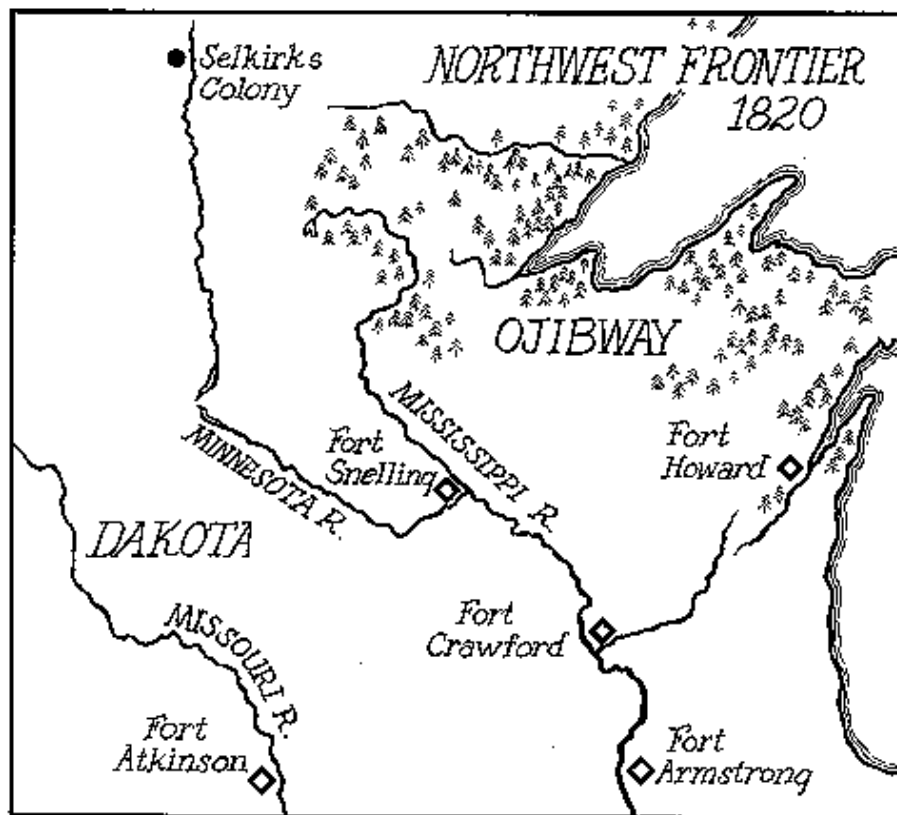
An understanding of the geography of a place is an essential element to being able to fully comprehend and analyze its development. With that in mind, the following section gives a brief geographical setting to each of the locations to be discussed.

#### Fort Snelling/Southern Minnesota

Established as the northwestern most in a series of early nineteenth century forts, Fort Snelling was sited on a natural promontory at the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers. Very near the head of navigation on the Mississippi, the fort, itself, was the northernmost node of concentrated settlement on the Mississippi River up to the 1840s (Folwell 1921). The fort serves today as a National Historic Landmark and is located near the center of the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area in the north central United States.

The land on which Fort Snelling and, later, the Twin Cities were built consists of a moderately flat plain. The topography of the region was greatly affected by the glaciation of the

last ice age, with only the so-called ‘Driftless Areas’ of southwestern and southeastern Minnesota and southwestern Wisconsin escaping the most recent glaciers and thus retaining a characteristically hilly appearance today (Minnesota DNR 2006). Hence, central and southern Minnesota is relatively flat, save for the gorges cut by the proto-Minnesota and -Mississippi Rivers as they drained glacial Lake Agassiz (North Dakota 2006). Thus, the two main rivers systems are the most recognizable features of the local landscape. Fort Snelling’s position at their confluence was very advantageous in terms of controlling activity in the region, as well as in terms of maintaining early communications and transportation connections with the rest of the United States (discussed further below). The area’s soils are mainly loess deposits from the glacial period, quite suitable to agriculture (Minnesota DNR 2006).



Upper Mississippi region at the time of Fort Snelling’s founding (Minnesota Historical Society)

Because of its location near the geographical center of the continent, Fort Snelling, and southern Minnesota more generally, has a continental climate, with cold winters and hot, humid summers (NOAA 2006). Importantly, the region is also well east of the so-called wet/dry line – roughly 100° west longitude – and so receives enough annual rainfall to make agriculture possible without irrigation. Southern and central Minnesota generally receives around 20 to 30 inches of precipitation annually, though a good percentage of this comes in the form of snow in the winter months (NOAA 2006).

Due in large part to the adequate rainfall and fertile soil, the region supports a relative abundance of natural vegetation. Minnesota encompasses three main biomes, including one of coniferous forest in the north and east along the Canadian Shield – extending as far south as roughly 50 miles north of the fort – a fairly narrow band of deciduous forest running generally from the southeast to the northwest of the state, and a region of tall grass prairie to the south and west (Minnesota DNR 2006). Fort Snelling and the Twin Cities metro area fall within the band of deciduous forest, very near the ‘boundary’<sup>3</sup> with the tall grass prairie. Thus, the Fort Snelling environs were originally a mix of deciduous forest and tall grass prairie.

When the fort was established in the early nineteenth century, the original inhabitants of the region were members of the large Ojibwe (at times referred to as Chippewa) and Dakota (Sioux) tribes. The Ojibwe can generally be thought of as controlling the coniferous forest-covered part of the state while the Dakota were most numerous on the plains. In fact, though, these groups were in a period of transition, with the Ojibwe having been steadily pushing the Dakota southward, out of the forested areas (Folwell 1921). The Ojibwe had begun migrating west from

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<sup>3</sup> Boundaries are very relative terms when describing biomes (as is the case with most large-scale geographic phenomena). The ‘boundaries’ described are not a sharp ones. Instead, they are much more akin to a gradient. The land surrounding Fort Snelling was initially a mix of deciduous forest and prairie land, one of the site features which made its placement there so advantageous (discussed further below).

their original homeland north of the Great Lakes as a result of the Iroquois Nation's push into that area. Upon arrival in Minnesota, the Ojibwe were able to overwhelm the native Dakota using tools and weapons that had been gained through trade with whites in the east, and because they were more suited to the woodland lifestyle (Folwell 1921). Thus, as white America began to take its first organized steps into the region, it would encounter two powerful and competing Native American nations seemingly locked in a protracted struggle.

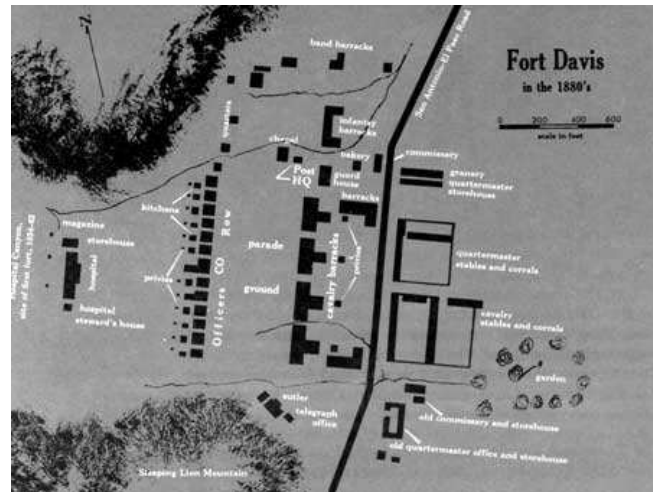
#### Fort Davis/West Texas

Much like Fort Snelling, Fort Davis was established as an important part of a series of frontier forts, this time in the American South. Originally built to protect the important San Antonio–El Paso road, the eastern section of the southernmost route to California, Fort Davis was sited just to the east of what are now known as the Davis Mountains in an area of Texas commonly known as the Trans-Pecos region. Currently, the fort serves as a National Historic Site and tourist draw for the nearby town of Fort Davis, county seat of Jeff Davis County in southern West Texas (in the south central United States). On a more local scale, Fort Davis lies “80 miles northeast of Presidio, 175 miles southeast of El Paso in south central Jeff Davis County,” and about 30 miles south of US Interstate-10 (Fort Davis Chamber of Commerce).

The Trans-Pecos region is generally regarded as synonymous with the southeastern part of the US extent of the Chihuahuan Desert, a highland desert landscape characterized by basins, small mountain ranges, and box canyons. According to the National Park Service (2006a), the “post was located in a box canyon near Limpia Creek on the eastern side of the Davis Mountains – where wood, water, and grass were plentiful.” Thus, the fort was (and the town is)



Relative location of Fort Davis, in the Trans-Pecos region of West Texas (CNN)



A detailed diagram of Fort Davis as it appeared in the late nineteenth century (National Parks Service)

strategically located in a relatively pleasant and habitable part of an otherwise somewhat foreboding region.

Given its location near the Davis Mountains, the immediate vicinity of Fort Davis has a mountain climate, characteristics of which are “cooler temperatures, lower relative humidity, orographic precipitation anomalies and less dense air” (Texas A&M 2006). This is contrasted by the semi-arid climate of the surrounding lowlands (Texas A&M 2006). In addition, Fort Davis is located just west of the aforementioned wet/dry line, though it is far enough south to lie within the path of sub-tropical summer monsoons. Thus, the Fort Davis environs receive a relatively high (for the desert region) annual rainfall, though usually fewer than 17 inches (Fort Davis CC).

Like southern Minnesota, the Fort Davis area’s relative abundance of natural vegetation is a function of the adequate levels of precipitation and the (surprisingly) rich desert soils. Tremendous vegetation diversity exists in the larger Trans-Pecos region, due in large part to the various landforms which exist there (Texas Parks and Wildlife Department 2005). Desert grasslands are found mainly in the central portion, whereas the mountain ranges support a mix of

juniper, scrub oak, pinyon pine, and live oak (Texas Parks and Wildlife Department 2005). Fort Davis lies generally within the mountain forest biome, though near the desert grasslands, as well.

When the first white Americans arrived in the area in the early to mid-1800s, the region was apparently largely unclaimed by any particular Native American tribe, though it was occupied seasonally, most notably by groups of Mescalero Apache Indians who hunted in the nearby mountains and may have used them as a base for raids on the Spanish settlements of the Rio Grande (National Parks Service 2006b). As the century progressed, the Kiowa and Comanche Nations began moving into the region from the southern plains, forced out by more powerful tribes. By the second half of the century, the Comanches had consolidated into a loosely confederated tribe of twelve bands which dominated the region until their eventual decline in the 1870s (National Parks Service 2006b). A short time later, another Apache tribe, the Warm Springs Apache, was relocated to the region by the US government. The US–Native American relations will be covered more fully in the following sections.

### *Histories of Development*

In order to effectively discuss, analyze, and compare the development of these two important (formerly American) frontier sites, one final and critical – if obvious – step must be taken: the stories of their development (their histories) must be reviewed. To this end, the following section will illuminate the histories of these two locations, particularly as they relate to development. Many of the events detailed herein will be mentioned again in a more analytical sense in the discussion section which follows this one.

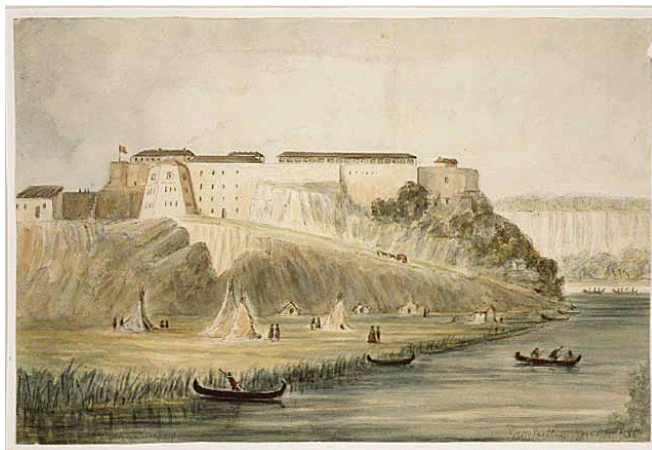
## Fort Snelling/Southern Minnesota

As alluded to above, Native American groups had been living in (what is, for the purposes of this document, being referred to as) the Fort Snelling region for many years prior to the first white arrivals. Additionally, French and, later, British fur traders were active in the area for years before the Americans arrived (Hansen 1958). However, the US acquisition of French Louisiana in 1803 represented the first small step toward the incredible changes that would occur in the land over then next century and a half.

Soon after the Purchase, the US government sent out explorers to take stock of their new lands. To explore the upper reaches of the Mississippi River, they tapped Lieutenant Zebulon Pike, who was additionally ordered to obtain, from the native inhabitants, a grant of land on which to construct a military post. In this capacity, Pike was successful, purchasing a tract of land on either side of the Mississippi River (Folwell 1921). Plans for construction of the fort were delayed until the resolution of the War of 1812. In 1820, however, building began on Fort St. Anthony, later to be renamed Fort Snelling after the able commander who oversaw its construction (Hansen 1958). Completed in 1825, the fort soon became the most important hub of activity on the upper Mississippi and the strongest symbol of American power in the North Country. It was also the headquarters for the St. Peter's Indian Agency, the office responsible for overseeing the Native American-related affairs in the region (Hansen 1958). The officers and soldiers at the fort soon settled into their routine of guarding the frontier, keeping the peace, and generally managing the area according to US interests. A small population of fur traders and a few support personnel also inhabited the immediate vicinity (Folwell 1921).

May 10, 1832 saw the dawning of a new era at the fort with the arrival of the steamboat *Virginia*, the first steamship on the upper Mississippi (Hansen 1958). With such greatly

improved transportation connections to the rest of the country, life in and around this relatively isolated outpost would soon change in a major way. By this time, as well, a few farmers were squatting on government land near the fort, having emigrated from failing agricultural colonies in the northern Red River Valley (Folwell 1921). These squatters sold their surplus harvests to the soldiers at the fort, providing proof of the theretofore unrecognized agricultural potential of the area.



A view of Fort Snelling in the mid-nineteenth century (Minnesota Historical Society)

With transportation routes and technology steadily improving and the resource potential of what would become Minnesota becoming ever more widely known, the final step needed was to acquire legal title to the land (as it was still, to that point, recognized by the US government as belonging to the Native American tribes) (Folwell 1921). This was partially achieved in 1837 with the signing of two treaties near Fort Snelling in which the Americans purchased all the lands in Minnesota east of the Mississippi. Due to the fact that much of this land was heavily forested (especially in the north), this event greatly stimulated the nascent timber industry of the area (Folwell 1921).

In 1838, the commanding officer of the fort, Major Plympton, had a survey conducted to mark off the boundaries of the Fort Snelling Military Reservation. When the results of this



survey found that a portion of the area's population was squatting illegally on the military grounds, Plympton had the unlawful tenants removed (Folwell 1921). These squatters then proceeded slightly downriver, where they founded the town of St. Paul at the head of navigation of the Mississippi.

Within the next decade, two more important villages were founded in the general vicinity of the fort. St. Anthony appeared just upriver, on the north side of St. Anthony Falls. The town was initially quite successful, harnessing the power of the Mississippi's only waterfall to operate its mills. The town of Stillwater on the St. Croix was also developing as a budding lumber center, taking advantage of the thick forests that grew nearby and upriver (Folwell 1921).

In 1849, Minnesota Territory was formed and the town of St. Paul was incorporated as the territorial capital. Within the next year, the treaties of Traverse des Sioux and Mendota would open much more land in Minnesota, pushing the Native American populations either onto reservations or further west beyond the Red River (Hansen 1958). This newly-acquired land was then surveyed and opened to white American settlement. Settlers poured in from the Ohio Valley and abroad, seeking mainly to take advantage of the cheap, potentially highly productive agricultural land. Lumber, and then later wheat, milling, centered on the Falls of St. Anthony, led to the growth of St. Anthony and Minneapolis (Folwell 1921).

During the four years between 1853 and 1857, the population of the Territory ballooned from 40,000 to 150,000, due in large part to newspaper advertising campaigns commissioned by the territorial legislature (Folwell 1921). As the main gateway to the interior, St. Paul expanded as the chief city of the Territory. The burgeoning urban center around Fort Snelling – comprising St. Paul, St. Anthony, and the rapidly-growing Minneapolis – began to establish itself as by far

the leading territorial center in terms of politics, industry, economics, and education (the University of Minnesota having been chartered in 1851) (Folwell 1921).

On May 11, 1858, Minnesota became the 32<sup>nd</sup> State, with the charismatic fur trader-cum-politician, Henry Sibley, elected as the first state governor (Folwell 1921). By that time, Sibley had already done much for Minnesota, and St. Paul more specifically; he would continue to serve the State in the years to come. Also at this time, the last remaining troops at Fort Snelling were withdrawn. Shortly thereafter, land speculators would become owners of much of the former military reservation land (Hansen 1958). The age of the fort as the hub of activity in the area had long since past, as had, veritably, the age of the region as a true frontier, in the fullest sense of the word.

When the American Civil War broke out only three short years later, Minnesota was one of the first states to send volunteers for the Union, though it would soon have troubles brewing in its own backyard (Folwell 1921). In 1862, the event that became known as the Dakota Conflict erupted in southern and western Minnesota. Hungry and maltreated Dakota Indians began attacking white settlements near their reservation on the upper Minnesota River. By the end of the fighting, between 300 and 800 white settlers and an unknown number of Dakota would be dead (Minnesota State University, Mankato). The American government hung an additional 38 ‘warriors’ at Mankato and liquidated the reservation, forcing the remaining Dakota to leave the State and travel to much more marginal areas to the west. Fort Snelling was temporarily reopened during this time for the dual purpose of training troops for the Civil War and serving as the base of operations for the Dakota Conflict (MSU, Mankato).

On a somewhat lighter note, Minnesota’s first railroad was also completed that year, connecting Minneapolis and St. Paul, foreshadowing an era of unprecedented growth for the

region (Folwell 1921). Within ten years, the Railroad Epoch (Borchert 1967) would be in full swing, with Minnesota and the Twin Cities region reaping the benefits of this new age as much as or more than nearly any other area of the country. The decades of the 1870s and 1880s would see the former Fort Snelling environs become increasingly connected, both with the economic core of the United States and with its ever-expanding hinterland. Entrepreneurs like 'railroad baron' James J. Hill would help Minneapolis-St. Paul become the preeminent city of the Upper Midwest. By the late 1870s, wheat farming and milling were thriving, and it appeared as if there would be no stopping the progress of Minnesota and its urban core (Folwell 1921).

Incredibly, the snowballing development of these years was only briefly halted by a Minneapolis mill explosion in 1878 and by the destruction of much of St. Paul by fire in 1881 (MSU, Manakato). By the 1890s, the region was still going strong, with the expanding streetcar system in the Twin Cities spurring further development and expansion (both economic and spatial).

The thriving regional lumber industry hit its peak around the turn of the century, though by that time the region and its base in the Twin Cities had developed significant tertiary and quaternary sectors (Folwell 1921). By the time WWI broke out in Europe, Minneapolis had been chosen as the site of a Federal Reserve Bank office, a testament to the regional primacy that the Twin Cities had attained (MSU, Mankato). This role as regional leader was further augmented several decades later, when the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 laid down the plans for the Interstate Highway System. The Twin Cities metro area was included on major north-south (I-35) and east-west (I-94) routes, cementing it as an easily accessible, well connected regional center, fully integrated into the American, and world, market system.

Today, the former environs of Fort Snelling are home to more than 2.8 million people and are consistently rated as one of the most livable places in the United States. It has in nearly every way become the primate city of Minnesota and the Upper Midwest.

#### Fort Davis/West Texas

On December 29, 1845, the Republic of Texas was annexed to the United States of America, becoming the 28<sup>th</sup> State. As part of this act, the US agreed to assume all responsibility for their new state's defense (Wooster 1990). Less than one year later, the War with Mexico began. American and Texan troops fought side-by-side, eventually emerging victorious. When the peace treaty was signed in 1848, it included an agreement that the United States would do what it could to prevent future Comanche and Kiowa Indian raids into Mexico (Wooster 1990). These tribes would continue to pose a threat in the region until nearly the end of the century.

Over the next few years, numerous forts were established in southern and western Texas for various reasons, chief among them to guard the new border with Mexico and to protect the thousands of Americans heading west to the California gold fields. The most southerly route in this migration was the San Antonio–El Paso road, originally mapped by two US Army lieutenants (Texas Beyond History 2003). It quickly gained popularity as a preferred course of travel and was therefore deemed worthy of substantial investment by the American government. This investment came in the form of several new forts, established to protect and assist the migrants as well as the mail route that had come to use the road for its deliveries; by 1850, a stage stand had been established near the site of the future Fort Davis (Wooster 1990).

In 1854, the US government established Fort Davis in the foothills of the Davis Mountains near the San Antonio–El Paso road (Utley 1965). Soon after, the “rough-and-tumble” settlement

of Chihuahua, precursor to the town of Fort Davis, was established near the fort (Fort Davis CC). By this time, a sheep ranch had also been established by one of the area's first settlers, a Belgian named Dutchover (Fort Davis CC). For the next few years, the soldiers at Fort Davis performed their duties, helping the migrants and mail coaches and preserving order in the region. Another fort, Fort Stockton, was established nearby at Comanche Springs, in 1859 (Texas Beyond History 2003). Its main objective was to guard the favored Comanche raiding trail which crossed the San Antonio–El Paso road nearby, though it also performed the same duties with which Fort Davis had been charged.

When the Civil War broke out in 1861, Texas sided with the Confederates. As with most southern forts, Fort Davis was abandoned by the Union and briefly occupied by Confederate forces. After the Confederates withdrew, they left the strictly neutral Dutchover in charge of the fort and small settlement (Fort Davis CC). Nearly at once, the area was attacked by the Apache chief Nicolás. Dutchover and most of the settlers escaped to safety in Presido, 80 miles to the southwest, but the fort and settlement were sacked and fell into disrepair, languishing in abandonment for the remainder of the war (Utley 1965).

In May, 1865, “General Edmund Kirby Smith surrender[ed] the Trans-Mississippi Department of the Confederacy to United States forces” (Texas Beyond History 2003). Shortly thereafter, over 30,000 US Army soldiers began to reoccupy the abandoned and surrendered Texas forts, guarding against opportunistic French forces which had invaded and occupied Mexico during the course of the War (Wooster 1990). As a result of the continuing hostility of the Indian tribes in the region to white settlers, as well as the formation of several new Reservations near the area, the interior forts of Davis, Quitman, and Stockton were also reoccupied, by members of the all-black (commanded by white officers) Ninth United States

Calvary (Utley 1965). During this time, the newly resettled “town of Fort Davis became ‘the most important town in the Trans-Pecos country,’ by virtue of its position at the crossroads of two important trails and its status as a base for travelers and hunters” (Fort Davis CC). The merchants and settlers that thereafter migrated to this important junction set up a community based on trade, supporting the fort, and catering to travelers. As evidence of the town’s growing importance in the region, in April, 1871, when Presidio County was organized, Fort Davis was voted to be the county seat (Fort Davis CC).

For the following ten years, the town and fort would function as one of the main US headquarters for the administration of the protracted ‘Indian Wars.’ The operations came to a head in 1880 when a revolting war party of Warm Springs and Mescalero Apaches, under the leadership of warchief Victorio began a renewed series of offensives in the Trans-Pecos region



Map displaying expeditions launched from Fort Davis during the ‘Indian Wars’ (University of Texas at Arlington)

(Wooster 1990). During July and August of that year, “detachments of the 10th Cavalry and 25th Infantry [fought] sharp engagements with the Apaches, denying them access to vital water holes” and ultimately forcing them to withdraw to Mexico, where they were dispersed and Victorio was killed (Texas Beyond History 2003). The next year saw the final actions conducted against Native Americans in Texas by the US Army (Utley 1965).

The next decade would witness the gradual reduction of the fort’s importance to the region. As the region became safer, Fort Davis became a ranching center; the inviting local climate and vegetation combined with a fever epidemic raging elsewhere in Texas to induce settlement in the area (Wooster 1990). In 1882, the Texas and Pacific Railroad was completed from Fort Worth to El Paso, finally sending the San Antonio–El Paso stagecoach line out of business (Texas Beyond History 2003). With no more Indians to fight and no stagecoach to protect and assist, the need for the fort – still the virtual lifeblood of the town – began to dry up. To make matters worse, in 1883, the Southern Pacific Railroad decided to build through the town of Marfa, 23 miles to the southwest, instead of through Fort Davis (Fort Davis CC). Many in the county began to wonder if Marfa would be a better choice for the county seat. In July, 1885, an election was held in which Marfa emerged victorious as the new county seat. A movement immediately began in Fort Davis to organize a new county, of which it would, naturally, be the new county seat. By an act of the Texas Legislature on March 15, 1887, Jeff Davis County was established as a separate entity, with Fort Davis as its seat of government (Fort Davis CC).

Shortly following this victory, however, in 1891, the United States Army decided to pull its remaining troops out of the Fort Davis (Utley 1965). The town’s population almost immediately dropped to around 1,200; by 1896 it was only 500 (Fort Davis CC)! Rebounding somewhat during the first decades of the twentieth century, the town becoming a vacation destination,

eventually climbing back to and sustaining a population of about 1,100. Its “mild climate and location amid the Davis Mountains [had] made Fort Davis a popular summer resort for wealthy Gulf Coast families” (Fort Davis CC).

Perhaps due to this newfound charm as a quaint, upscale resort town, locals protested a proposed plan in 1908 by the Kansas City, Mexico and Orient Railway to build a line to Fort Davis. According to its present-day chamber of commerce, the town feared that the railroad connection would attract low-class people (Fort Davis CC). The line was never built.

By 1914, the Fort Davis Commercial Club, which sought to encourage investment in the town, had been established. In the late 1920s, they had apparently succeeded in enticing “a group of Oklahoma oilmen [into turning] Fort Davis into a Western movie center ... but the Great Depression ended that plan” (Fort Davis CC). Then later, in 1946, “David A. Simmons of Houston, former president of the American Bar Association, bought the property on which the old fort stood with the intention of restoring it and opening it to the public as a year-round resort” (Fort Davis CC). Due to Simmons’s untimely death, however, this plan, too, failed. Thus, the town ambled along, fluctuating between 700 and 1,200 inhabitants for the next few decades (Fort Davis CC).

In 1956, the previously mentioned Federal-Aid Highway Act created the Interstate Highway System. Again, though, Fort Davis was largely bypassed by the major new transportation arteries. The closest that the Interstate came to Fort Davis was US-10, passing roughly 30 miles to the north.

Fort Davis was not completely forgotten, however. Plans had been in the works for some time to remake the old fort into a national monument, and in September, 1961, the Fort Davis National Historic Site came into being (Utley 1965). Added to that, “a few years later the



Chihuahuan Desert Research Institute ... opened an arboretum on a 300-acre tract of land on State Highway 118 just southeast of Fort Davis” (Fort Davis CC).

Today, the town of Fort Davis remains the largest town (of only two) and seat of government of Jeff Davis County. It has dropped somewhat in population in the last decade, falling from 1,212 to 1,050 (Fort Davis CC). The nearest commercial airport is at Midland-Odessa, over 100 miles away and currently hosting only three carriers. El Paso International Airport is about 205 miles from Fort Davis. Yet the locals appear to be content in their relative isolation and low population. The chamber of commerce actively markets the fact that Fort Davis is a place wholly without “theme parks, car pool lanes, stop lights, theaters or dress-up dining,” but which can still boast “working cattle ranches on the outskirts of town” (Fort Davis CC).

#### *Discussion: Factors Influencing Development*

Now that the geographies and histories of the Fort Davis and Fort Snelling areas have been presented, the contributing factors to their differential development may be effectively analyzed and presented. The following discussion is divided into four main parts, each of which will focus on a separate aspect or a group of related aspects.

#### Environment and Resources

The discussion will begin with a look at how the natural resources and other environmental attributes of the locations helped shape their development. It appears quite plainly that the environmental possibilities, or limitations, had a tremendous influence. This assertion, aside from being pointedly obvious, runs parallel to the theory of environmental possibilism as

conceptualized by such eminent geographers as Paul Vidal de la Blache (1926) and Herbert Fleure (1927) and revived, more recently, by Jared Diamond (1999). To the possibilists, environmental factor such as climate, precipitation, and availability of resources essentially set limits as to the level of development that could conceivably occur in an area; how people and places developed within these undefined limits was the result of other factors. For the purposes of this paper, a brief analysis of these environmental factors – and their effects on the development of the two frontiers in question – will suffice.

Undoubtedly, the Fort Snelling area historically possessed many environmental advantages. An abundance of fur-bearing animals was the first major draw in the region. This was soon overtaken, however, by the potential of the vast and dense forests – not to mention the rivers and streams that crisscrossed them like specialized log highways – for the lumber industry. Experiments with agriculture then proved the soil in much of the region to be quite fertile, fomenting another sustained period of settlement and development. Added to this, the cheap and abundant early industrial power provided by the Falls of St. Anthony appears to have done much to cement the place of Minneapolis and the Fort Snelling environs in the economic future of the region.

Were this not enough, the area's initial situational characteristics could not have been better suited to future development. Being located very near (with St. Paul actually on) the head of navigation of the Mississippi River, the continent's most important river system, the Fort Snelling region was well placed to play a prominent role as a gateway to the Upper Midwest.

Somewhat similarly, relative to much of the rest of the Trans-Pecos and Chihuahuan Desert region, the Fort Davis area was environmentally advantageous in terms of attracting settlement and development. Its foothills location and proximity to prevailing summer monsoons provided

it with a hospitable climate and enough rainfall to support many local species of trees in small forests. Later, the climate and natural beauty of the area would also prove attractive to vacationers. The nearby Limpia Creek provided the area with ample water, and the non-forested land was ideal for pasture, leading to the growth of successful and continued ranching. The most important natural advantage to the early fort and settlement, however, surely must have been its situation, it being located in a defensible position near a significant crossroads on the important San Antonio–El Paso migration, mail, and stagecoach route.

If approached on larger scale, however – or in comparison with another area (of even, say, Texas) – these relative advantages appear much less impressive or beneficial. Though it receives more rainfall than the surrounding area, 17 inches annually is still not enough to sustain either thick stands of forest or successful agriculture, hence the emphasis on ranching and the lack of any commercial timber industry. And of course, from a longer time-scale, the locational and defensive advantages were shown to have not been perpetual ones, eclipsed as they were by new routes and new transportation technologies.

Yet these resource and situational discrepancies do not constitute the complete explanation, even in terms of the environmental factor. Importantly, it appears that one of the most significant differences between the two locations came in the Fort Snelling area's ability to not only *capture* more resources, but to then also *hold* and *exploit* them more efficiently than the Fort Davis area was able to. The land cession treaties with the local Indian tribes meant that the Fort Snelling environs were able to capture resources early and hold them with relatively little resistance, thus being able to take full advantage of them and amass much wealth. The Fort Davis area, even with comparatively fewer resources to exploit, was able to do so less efficiently and only later. The protracted Indian Wars meant that ranching was often interrupted and

therefore didn't really take hold until the 1880s. Then, the lack of quality and reliable transportation connections meant that the area could not as capably take advantage of the relative natural wealth that it did have access to.

These environmental and resource factors do not, however, tell the entire story. Larger political and economic structures also played a significant role. It is to these that we now turn.

## Politics

As has often been shown, the abilities of local and national politicians can have enormous impacts on how a location develops (e.g. the location of the aerospace facilities and related industries in Texas and Florida). The cases of the Fort Snelling and Fort Davis regions are no different.

Especially in the earliest years of territorial- and statehood, Minnesotan politicians from the Fort Snelling area were vital to the decisions made regarding the course and speed which development of the region would take. For instance, Henry Sibley, during his tenure as representative to Washington, was instrumental in securing St. Paul as the capital of the newly-formed Territory of Minnesota. With this action, Sibley (re-)assured the importance of St. Paul to the surrounding lands, securing also the funding for development and the foundation and maintenance of a strong connection to the Federal Government that being a capital entailed. Of course, Sibley's action in this regard was not entirely selfless; he and many of the other former fur traders were large landholders in the area and stood to benefit greatly from its further and rapid development. To this end, many of them were also instrumental in helping Minnesota, centered on the Fort Snelling environs, legally capture and hold resources by negotiating treaties, on behalf of the United States, with the native groups and by encouraging the building of

railroads to better connect the area. It is also likely that Minnesota and Fort Snelling garnered support in Washington with the gallant and enthusiastic performance of its troops in the service of the Union during the Civil War. In ways such as these, national and local politics likely contributed to the course and level of development of the Fort Snelling region.

On both a national and statewide scale, the Fort Davis area was considerably less politically influential and esteemed. Likely due in part to its consistently low population, Fort Davis has historically never produced much in the way of charismatic or powerful politicians. Thus, the location has developed without any significant government assistance, its level of resource capture likely suffering as a result. Fort Davis was, however, able to secure for itself the envied title of county seat. The citizenry even successfully mobilized to break away from Presidio County when this position was taken from the town. Fort Davis was then able to act as the county seat for the new Jeff Davis County. Finally, it must be recognized, the area was chosen to host both a National Historic Site and an important research arboretum, important developments for the now-vital tourist industry. These modest achievements, however, belie a relatively unsuccessful political history for the Fort Davis region, all told, one in which the local politicians were able to do little to improve development or resource capture in the area.

### Roles Played in the Capitalist Economy

In addition to the discrepancies in their environments and relative political power, the Fort Snelling and Fort Davis areas also differed greatly in the ways that they historically related to and engaged in the larger capitalist market economy, as alluded to above. The following section, then, will make explicit three intertwining aspects of this relationship that the two locations differed on and that were crucial to guiding their disparate development.

The first part concerns the policies and attitudes, held by the United States as a whole, regarding the frontier lands. Very early on, Fort Snelling and Southern Minnesota came to be seen as a destination for Americans and for immigrants. Due in large part to the abundant resources and available 'virgin' prairie land, this vision of Minnesota as an attractive settler destination was also promoted by the region's entrepreneurs and political elite. As soon as the area was pacified and formally acquired, it was marketed throughout the United States and abroad as a safe land of nearly boundless opportunity, one in which settlers would be able to prosper and would contribute substantially to national growth and economic progress.

In contrast, Fort Davis and the Trans-Pecos region were, for a long time, seen mostly as stopover on the way to the wealthier, more desirable lands of the West, especially California. It was an area of potential danger that needed to be pacified so as to facilitate the peopling of more economically important regions, and not as a destination in its own right. Then, after the immediate danger had passed, it was relegated to the role of a back-country where only ranching could thrive, even as it assumed a prominent regional role in the Trans-Pecos. Thus, Fort Davis was never seen as an area that would provide significant benefits if extensively settled and developed.

Second, as the two areas developed into towns, they invariably established hinterlands from which they drew resources. In general, the rule follows that the larger an urban area's hinterland – and the more resources it contains – the more prosperous that area will become (see especially Cronon 1991). Thanks to the efforts of local politicians and businessmen, as well as to its advantageous site and situation, the Fort Snelling region was able to 'reach out' and capture a large hinterland which eventually included nearly all of Minnesota, the Dakotas, and possibly even more. The cheap and efficient milling allowed by the waterfalls which existed naturally in

the area (and nowhere else nearby) meant that timber and grain from far around were shipped to the Fort Snelling environs for processing. Also, as the northernmost port on the Mississippi River, St. Paul – and, by extension, the rest of the Fort Snelling area – was at a major advantage, serving as the most important break-in-bulk point in the region for many years.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the area was able to capture and hold a large and rich hinterland which it used to further augment its political and economic power, speeding its pace and raising its level of development.

Fort Davis, on the other hand, was not able to capture and exploit a large hinterland, for several reasons. The area's lack of substantial political and economic clout likely combined with regional competition, from nearby towns like Marfa (and even El Paso) which possessed increasingly more advantageous situations, to limit the extent of the area's hinterland. In the face of such competition, Fort Davis was forced to resign itself to a small county leadership role, which it has retained to this day. In reality, neither its influence nor its hinterland, today, exceed the boundaries of Jeff Davis County.

Finally, the two locations differed greatly in their historical connections to the economic core of the United States. The Fort Snelling area, as has been shown, has always been relatively well connected. Successive advances in transportation technology – from steamboats to railroads to the Interstate system to today's international airport – have always been extended to the area. Thus, the area has remained, almost from its inception, relatively well integrated into the national and international capitalist systems.

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<sup>4</sup> A 'break-in-bulk point' is a location at which the means of transporting a good must (or can) be changed. Transportation costs are usually quite disparate on either side of this 'point' as a result of being able to ship a good in greater quantities on one side. Thus, a town located at such a site is very well positioned to control, and benefit from, the trade that flows both into and out of the surrounding region; it often serves collection, repackaging, and redistribution functions. St. Paul was, and is, an important break-in-bulk point due to its river port; many goods can (still) be shipped in greater quantity, and thus more cheaply, down the river than they can be over land.

Again, Fort Davis stands in sharp contrast. While the area began as an important regional route and crossroads location, it was subsequently denied access to, or itself refused, new transportation arteries in the Railroad and Automobile Epochs (Borchert 1967). Thus, it remained at the periphery of the national capitalist system, with few prospects for further development, watching nearby areas with better transportation links ‘pass it by.’ Even today, the area’s potential climatic and scenic advantages are somewhat eclipsed by its relatively poor transportation connections.

#### The ‘Developmental Snowball Effect’

The final factor that appears to have contributed in a very great part to the divergent levels of development between the environs of Fort Snelling and Fort Davis has to do with gravity and momentum, used in a metaphorical (and geographical) sense. Theory relating to the growth and function of urban areas has concluded that, in general, each exerts a ‘pull’ on it’s the goods and people of its surroundings which is directly correlated to it size.<sup>5</sup> In a greatly simplified sense, then, the larger a town or city is, the more people it will attract.

If applied to the histories of development of the Fort Snelling and Fort Davis areas, then, this relatively simple deduction provides what appears to be the last piece of the puzzle, so to speak. As alluded to many times in the preceding pages, the Fort Snelling environs began to develop relatively early and continued to do so at a rapid and sustained pace for many years, drawing on an extensive and secure resource base found within a large and wealthy hinterland. Given the wide variety of advantages, the area soon became a trading, transportation, and milling center, attracting more and more settlers. The resulting growth and development in turn attracted even

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<sup>5</sup> This is just a small part of the larger set of theories which seek to explain *spatial interaction*. For a summary of these theories, including the Gravity Model (the assumptions of which have been gleaned for the purposes of this paper), see Harrington 2000.



more people to the area, many of whom found work in the service sector, giving rise to a strong local tertiary economy. Because some of these most recent settlers had not come to the area due to its natural resources, it can be concluded that the growing city itself had attracted them. This trend continued; as the Fort Snelling environs continued to develop – and, logically, to economically diversify – they became, in and of themselves, a magnet for settlement. Thus, the area had ‘snowballed,’ developmentally speaking, becoming increasingly attractive as it continued to develop. Today, while the resources provided by the former Fort Snelling area’s physical hinterland remain important, the higher-order economic sectors (banking, insurance, telecommunications, entertainment, etc.) are perhaps even more crucial to its sustained development.

Fort Davis, in contrast, was never able to become large enough or economically strong enough for the town to become attractive to substantial numbers of settlers on its own merits. The higher-order sectors that most often require large local population (to serve), did not, therefore, take root in the area. Thus, as a result of its many fewer advantages described above, the Fort Davis area has never able to take advantage of the ‘developmental snowball effect’ and has remained a small town of only limited importance and potential.

### *Conclusion*

Ultimately, it appears that, no, the differences in the development of the Fort Snelling and Fort Davis environs cannot be fully explained by environmental and resource factors alone. Though these have indeed played a role, the more likely and complete explanation for the extremely differential growth lies in an intertwining combination of factors, including human agency and larger political and economic structures.

It has also become apparent how valuable a political ecology perspective is in explaining historical development. Political ecology offers a detailed, logical, and proven framework by which to guide research and analysis, ensuring that important larger-scale structures are not overlooked, as is, unfortunately, often the case/tendency with more local-scale histories. Also, and more to the point, political ecology helps the researcher move beyond the simple questions (Who developed more fully, more rapidly?), demanding that more interesting and pertinent ones (Why did these places develop as they did? What factors have contributed to their differential growth?) be asked, and answered, instead. As applied herein – to a comparative analysis of the Fort Snelling and Fort Davis environs – the political ecology perspective has shown that differences in the environment and resources, the politics, the roles played in the capitalist economy, and the levels of ‘snowballing’ of the two areas all combined to lead them to very different forms and levels of development.

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