

EXCELSIOR LAKE MINNETONKA HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

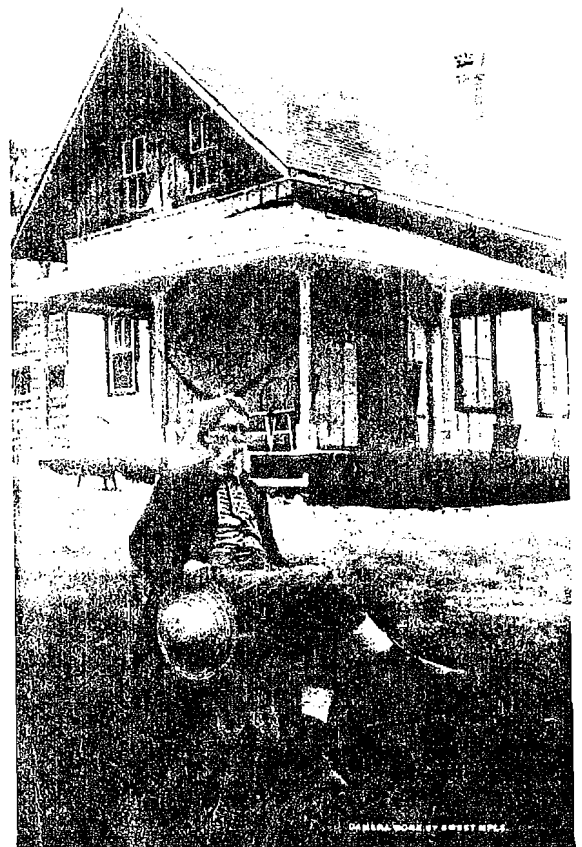
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Captain Frank William Halsted



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Maj. Geo. Blight Halsted, The Hermit, Died Sept. 6, 1901,
Lake Minnetonka.

THE HERMITS OF LAKE MINNETONKA

By Scott McGinnis

The Hermitage was settled by two brothers, Captain Frank William Halsted and Major George Blight Halstead, and was a mecca for every Lake Minnetonka tourist. A visit to this legendary home was all but mandatory. It was not the simple house which drew the tourist, rather it was its contents and the two "Hermits" themselves. Their mystery, intrigue, stories, and charm drew people to the house by the boat load. The appeal to tourists of the Hermits took on two major periods: the creation of mystery and intrigue during Captain Halsted's life and the perpetuation of his life by his brother Major Halstead.

The Hermitage was owned, at different times, by the two brothers, Captain Frank W. Halsted and Major George B. Halstead. Captain Halsted, as Frank was commonly called, had settled in the Lake Minnetonka area in the late 1850's. In 1861, during a visit to his family in Elizabeth, New Jersey, the Civil War broke out and he volunteered for the navy. George Halstead also joined the navy the day after war was declared. Later in life he would claim to be the first civilian to receive a commission during the war. For a short time they both served together on board the flag ship U.S.S Minnesota. Due to conflicts with their commanding officer, Frank requested a transfer and George resigned his commission and accepted an appointment as first lieutenant and "Aide de Camp" to Brigadier General Philip Kearny of the New Jersey Volunteers. By the end of the war, he had attained the rank of Major, hence George became known as Major Halstead. When the war was over in 1866, George returned to his home in New Jersey and Frank went back to Lake Minnetonka.

Upon returning to Lake Minnetonka, Captain Halsted bought some land on the Upper Lake near what is now Halstead's Bay. The Hermitage was situated on about 40 acres in Minnetrista very near where the proposed Hennepin County Park is supposed to be. In 1868 Frank commenced building his small and simple house; it was a story and a half with a basement. Captain Halsted then set about his hermit-like ways. The Minneapolis Tribune, July 6, 1876 described him like this:

In his manners he was ever quiet and unassuming, and though sympathetic and approachable, he invited no confidence and gave none. A recluse, he was hospitable and affable, and when asked why he chose to live such a secluded life, he always replied in such a manner as would show the interrogator that it was not a question he cared to answer.

Little is known of Captain Halsted for this reason, but he did leave five major impacts on the Lake Minnetonka area. In the mid 1870's he was a driving force behind the Lake Minnetonka Improvement Commission. This group was dedicated to the improvement of the lake's navigation system, particularly the dredging of the

narrows. In 1876 he became the first Justice of the Peace of Minnetrista Township and performed the first marriage. He also donated his title Hermit to Lake Minnetonka history. At first this was a term which he freely accepted but which he later grew to despise. During the winter of 1875/6, the Captain had the steamer Mary built. In 1875, one of the two steamers of the lake was removed leaving only one. This sole steamboat was owned and operated by William Rockwell. Because he had a monopoly on lake travel, he boosted the prices and made the tourists abide by his own inconvenient schedule. This, in part, prompted the Captain to build his boat. Other factors were his naval history and involvement in the Lake Minnetonka Improvement Commission. It is believed that this is what directly contributed to his suicide on June 23, 1876. The cost of building the Mary was running way over estimates and was sending him deeply into debt. He had even placed a five hundred dollar mortgage on his house the January before his death. Additionally, the boat was not as seaworthy as the papers would lead one to believe. All these problems seemed to be the ultimate reason for his suicide.

The last time he had been seen around Lake Minnetonka was June 21. He had left to go into Minneapolis to take care of some business. He returned on the 23. The Captain returned on the 23rd and procured a neighbor's row boat, rowed out into the lake not far from his home, tied a forty pound bag of rocks around his neck, and cast himself overboard. He must have thought that the rocks would prevent him from rising to the surface but his bloated and badly decomposed body surfaced. As the Captain had not been seen for over a week, a search party of tourists from Saint Louis, MO was sent to check up on him on July 3. It was common for him not to be seen for a few days but ten days was a bit long even for the Hermit. They did not find him at home but when they went back out on the lake, they found his body near Crane Island. He was so badly decomposed that he could not be lifted from the lake. A wooden casket was floated up from beneath him and his body taken to the Hermitage. There they discovered a note to R. R. Cummins, the captain of the Mary, telling him to look after things and make a go of the Mary. Also a trunk addressed to his brother Major G. B. Halsted and a box marked "books, Mrs. Dunlap, Excelsior," were found. It was supposed that the box contained letters pertaining to the estate of Mrs. Dunlap's husband, of which Captain Halsted was the executor. Abiding by his will, the citizens of Excelsior buried their friend at the Hermitage near the lake.

Captain Halsted's will made his brother, Major George Halstead, executor of the estate and he immediately came to Lake Minnetonka to take care of his brother's affairs. Major Halstead, so taken with the lake and his brother's home, decided to stay in Minnesota and took up permanent residence at the Hermitage. He also kept the steamer Mary running. The Major set about perpetuating the life of his brother almost immediately. On July 25, he used the Mary to bring a group of about 150 to 200 to the Hermitage from Excelsior. The purpose was to pay a last tribute to his

brother. By the time everyone had left the Hermitage, Captain Halsted's grave could not be seen because of all the flowers, ferns, and wreaths which were laid on top of it.

At the age of only 43, it seemed that the life of Captain Frank William Halsted was over, but through his brother he lived on. The Major even took his brother's title, "The Hermit." The Hermitage became a major tourist attraction. People at first paid 25 cents to come ashore and visit the Hermitage; the price was later raised to 50 cents. For another fee, people could sign the siding of the house and the signatures of the more famous people were covered with glass to prevent others from writing on top of them. Legend has it that Major Halstead kept the Hermitage just the way his brother left it.

The basement was the main bedroom. The ground kept the basement cool in the summer and relatively warm during the winter. The top half story was also a bedroom, but additionally was a shed where an assortment of shovels, rakes, knives, and miscellaneous tools were kept. The main floor was the Hermits' living area which tourists could see. An assortment of seven chairs were arranged around two tables. The larger one was a dining table which always had a linen spread over it and places set with fine china. The china had formerly been their mother's. At the back of the room stood a large Franklin stove with a pipe extending up through the decorative chimney. The walls were covered with engravings and photographs of assorted sizes, medals from the Grand Army of the Republic, and books of all subjects. If a visitor paid close attention they might have found a naval spy glass, a magnifying glass, a chess set, and a large hall clock. There were also a couple of Civil War swords, the Revolutionary sword of their great grandfather which George carried into battle during the Civil War, and an engraved resolution from the state of New Jersey to Captain Frank William Halsted on service in the Navy in the Civil War. The brothers had taken great pride in their service to this country. After Captain Halsted died the Excelsior post of the Grand Army of the Republic honored him by naming itself, Captain Frank Halsted Post, G.A.R.

The years past and the visitors kept filing up to the Hermitage to see the Hermits, both living and dead, and perhaps have a picnic. Sometimes the Hermit would join them. Major Halstead eventually added a shed to the rear of the building and in the 1880's added the corner porch which is seen in most of the existing pictures. The Major was not a recluse as his brother was. He was a social man. He took delight in conversation and loved to read anything he could. The Minneapolis Tribune, September 7, 1901, has this to say about him:

Maj. Halsted was a man of polished and refined tastes and had a fine education. He was a graduate of Princeton college, and belonged to many societies. He was genial and companionable, and was well liked by those holding his acquaintance. . . . Many picnic parties have had lunch on the Hermitage property, and in this manner the

major [sic] made thousands of friends.

The end of the Hermitage and the Hermit came swiftly in the early morning hours of September 6, 1901. A fire swept through the Hermitage, destroying the entire building, and killing Major Halstead. Upon reading the Major's will, it was even more sad. He had made almost a complete inventory of everything in the Hermitage and selected to whom they would be left. Many of the items were family heirlooms or expensive engravings. Most of the items were irreplaceable. His life had ended and all his loved possession were destroyed.

In accordance with his will, he was buried to the left of his brother beneath a large maple tree on the Hermitage property. The only ceremony being that of the GAR post. He directed his executor, when selling the Hermitage land, to insert a clause, "that the grave of my brother Frank and my own as well shall be respected and shall not be disturbed in any way and that the large stone or bolder [sic] now near the tree and grave shall not be removed or our bodies removed for any purpose from the final resting place selected in life by each of us and this stone to be the only monument with this inscription . . ."

Francis William Halstead

Born

Newark New Jersey 1833

U S Navy 1861 . 1865

Died

AD 1876

George Blight Halstead

Born

Elizabeth Town New Jersey March 17, 1820

U S V 1861 . 1866

Died

September 6, 1901

This clause made a 25' x 25' area to be set aside as their grave site with the above stated stipulation.

The maple tree is now gone but the Halstead brothers still remain in the place that each had selected. The boulder has been mostly covered by dirt and the inscription is no longer visible, but it still marks the proximity of their graves.

The Halstead brothers are long gone but their legacy remains. A bay of Lake Minnetonka, not distant from their home, bears their name, Halstead Bay, and the subsequent and present owners of their land and the respective homes have all been regarded as "THE HERMITAGE."