Tried and Sentenced

Just two days after the captives were turned over, the brief military trials of the Dakota who had taken part in the fighting began here at Camp Release on September 28, 1862. The trials moved to the Redwood (Lower Sioux) Agency on October 24 and were completed there on November 4.

In little more than a month, 392 Dakota men and one Dakota woman were brought before a five-man commission appointed by commander Henry Sibley from among officers who had fought against them. Of the 392 Dakota men tried, the commission sentenced 303 to be executed.

The prisoners had been tried for a variety of offenses against soldiers and civilians. And they were judged harshly for what, today, many would consider just causes for warfare — fighting to regain their land, protecting their way of life, providing for their families.

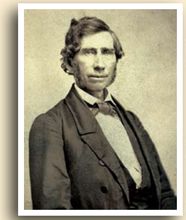
Adrian J. Ebell, courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society

When cold weather forced a move to the Redwood (Lower Sioux) Agency, the remaining trials took place in François Labathe's log kitchen.

Each trial opened with the reading of charges based on interviews with the freed captives by Reverend Stephen R. Riggs. For prisoners who pleaded not guilty, witnesses were called to testify under oath. The trials moved quickly; as many as 42 were held in a single day, some lasting only five minutes.

In the end, the commission sentenced 303 men to be executed; 20 others were sentenced to prison and the rest acquitted. But by federal law, no death sentences could be carried out until authorized by the president of the United States. After reviewing the cases, President Abraham Lincoln concluded that a line should be drawn between those found guilty of "violating women" and "participating in massacres" and those who had only participated in battles. Of the 40 men who fit the former categories, two were granted clemency and 38 were sentenced to die. All the others were sent to prison.

At 10 a.m. on December 26, 1862, the 38 condemned men were led to a scaffold in Mankato and hanged. It was the largest mass execution in U.S. history.



Whitney's Gallery, courtesy of MHS

Stephen R. Riggs

Reverend Stephen R. Riggs, who had long worked among the Dakota as a missionary and translator, wrote about the trials in a letter to his son in November 1862:

"I told the members of the commission several times that I should be sorry to have my life placed in their hands."

These men, tried and convicted at Camp Release by U.S. officers they had just fought against, were among the 38 executed in Mankato on December 26, 1862.

Courtesy of Kramer Gallery, St. Paul, MN

Waȟpe duta
(Red Leaf)

Joel Emmons Whitney, courtesy of MHS

Tihdoni ća
(One Who Forbids Entry to House)

Minnesota Historical Society

Maȟpeonazin
(Who Stands on a Cloud),
or Cut Nose

Martin's Gallery, courtesy of MHS

Taitazipe *(His Bow)*
also called
Dowaŋ *(To Sing)*

Struggles for a Home

The Minnesota River Valley has stories to tell…about the indigenous people struggling to keep their land and their way of life, and about immigrant families who began new lives here. Their stories came together, with tragic consequences for all, in what has become known as the U.S.–Dakota War of 1862 — a war that had repercussions for the whole country.

SCENIC BYWAY MINNESOTA RIVER VALLEY

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