Postscript: The Aftermath.

Euro-Americans had entered Dakota Territory long before Generals Sibley and Sully. By 1928, the large and significant Fort Union Trading Post had been constructed by the American Fur Trading Company at the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers. Then, in the 1840s, near present-day Walhalla, Antoine Gingras established his trading post near present-day Walhalla.

For decades, peaceful coexistence between very different cultures existed on the northern plains. This coexistence was largely based on an economic system of mutually-beneficial trading. In the 1850s and 1860s things began to change—the peace began to erode. Americans who had long viewed their westward push as their “manifest destiny” were hungry for land and gold. Their hunger left them with growing disregard for the native people who had already discovered and settled the western land.

Although the Americans and the Indians attempted to reach agreements and land-sales through treaty, the treaties were replete with problems. Perhaps one of the most significant flaws with the treaty system, and one that had critical, long-reaching negative impacts, was an American culture that tended to only understand societal hierarchies through their own perspective. Americans could never fully accept or understand a native culture that was divided into many native nations, tribes, and bands—and each of those separate entities maintained its own sovereignty and independent decision making.

This inability, or unwillingness, to fully understand the implication of the existence of numerous sovereign Indian bands led to some of the most unfortunate events of the Sibley and Sully expedition.

When Generals Sibley and Sully left Minnesota in the summer of 1863 en route to Dakota Territory, they were justly seeking revenge for the previous summer’s massacre that the Santee had visited upon the men, women, and children of Minnesota. Over 89 days, Sibley marched nearly 1,040 miles into the heart of DT and engaged in a trio of battles with Sioux. In terms of military success, Sibley was victorious in all of the battles—he suffered fewer casualties and remained on the field of battle. However, Sibley laid little direct punishment on those responsible for the 1862 massacres and the expedition certainly did not end anything—it merely escalated hostilities.

Michael Clodfelter sums up the results of the expedition: “From the Sioux point of view, the Sibley expedition represented another aggression, a westward extension of white encroachment upon their territory. Rather than engaging and annihilating the Santee subjects of the Minnesota Uprising, the expedition had mainly fought Sioux bands that had not participated in the 1862 war, and had initiated hostilities with the powerful Teton tribes that would endure until Wounded Knee twenty-seven years later.”

I have focused on Sibley and have made little mention of Sully during these series of “Historical Highlights.” This does not imply any less import to Sully’s activities—in fact, Sully’s actions at Whitestone are perhaps the most significant and troublesome of the 1863 expedition. On August 24, the State Historical Society of North Dakota will be hosting a special 150-year commemoration at the Whitestone Battlefield State Historic Site. For more information: 701-797-3691.