

**HONOR**  
**Wa-kan-o-zha-zha**  
**Medicine Bottle**

**DEATH  
BY  
HANGING**

**NOV. 11, 1865, FORT SNELLING, MN. - EXECUTION ORDER ISSUED BY  
PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES — ANDREW JOHNSON**

© HACHIVI EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS 1990

### **Building Minnesota**

The oppression and slaughter of human beings by white American society does not only come from hatred; greed and potential impediment to economic growth also feed the frenzy to kill and destroy people of color and other spirits that grow from the soil or move over the surface that is our earth. It is therefore proper that we inform the Minnesota public to honor those forty Dakota tribal citizens who were executed by hanging in Minnesota in 1862 and 1865 by order of Presidents Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson and with the support of the citizens of Minnesota.

As a sign of respect, forty Dakota-English, red-lettered metal signs have been placed in the earth in the business zone of what was once called the Grain Belt. This is a proud "historical" district of the city of Minneapolis and the state of Minnesota that houses the grain and flour mills, canals, and facilities to ship out the fruits of "American progress."

It was the potential disruption of American commerce that cost the Dakota people their lives. The Native tribes of the Upper Midwest were not allowed the sovereignty and dignity to provide for their own economic livelihood through hunting and gathering. The Native land base of this region, as in all of America, was not given the right to exist intact in a prominent way and was automatically superseded by the invading immigrants and their hunger to cultivate and consume more of this earth.

As the forty signs are offered along the water called the Mississippi, which remains a highway for American business, we seek not only to extract profit from our surroundings. We also wish to honor the life-giving force of the waters that have truly preserved all of us from the beginning, and to offer respect to the tortured spirits of 1862 and 1865 that may have sought refuge and renewal through the original purity that is water.

—Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds 1990



Commissioned by Walker Art Center

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West River Parkway, Minneapolis



Along a grassy stretch of West River Parkway near downtown Minneapolis, forty aluminum signs have been dug into the earth. They stand shoulder-to-shoulder in a sweeping arc facing the roadway and pedestrian path, each one bearing a man's name and a brief text lettered in red. Except for the names, the messages are much the same: HONOR/TA-TE' HDI-DA/WIND COMES HOME/DEATH BY HANGING/DEC. 26, 1862, MANKATO, MN.—EXECUTION ORDER ISSUED BY/ PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES—ABRAHAM LINCOLN. Behind the signs flows the Mississippi River, studied with the structures of the Upper St. Anthony Falls Lock and Dam and protected from trespassers by a chainlink fence topped with barbed wire.

The forty signs comprise *Building Minnesota*, a sculpture by Oklahoma-based artist Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds. Like many of his works, *Building Minnesota* employs language to challenge established perceptions about Native American history and culture. The text alludes to the forty Dakota men executed for their roles in the U.S.-Dakota Conflict, which was fought along the banks of the Minnesota River in the late summer of 1862. But Heap of Birds' choice of site for *Building Minnesota* relates the events of 1862 to the complex economic and cultural history of this country and provides an unexpected—and unfamiliar—perspective on both.

Many of Heap of Birds' works, especially his public sculptures, are characterized by a similar shift in perspective. Often, his installations are pointed critiques of white North American society, critiques in which he exploits the methods of mass communication developed by that same society. *Apartheid Oklahoma* (Oklahoma City and Norman, Oklahoma, 1989), for example, consisted of several billboards bearing this terse message: 2E3EHO02/RUN OVER/INDIAN NATIONS/APARTHEID OKLAHOMA. They were installed during the centennial celebration of Oklahoma statehood, an event which, for whites, commemorated the birth of

the state in 1889 but which, for Native Americans, was a reminder that until that year Oklahoma had been designated as Indian Territory.

In other works, Heap of Birds joined language and public media to create what were essentially memorials to Native American people, history, or culture. *Native Hosts* (1988) consists of twelve commercially produced aluminum signs of generic design, six of which were installed in New York's City Hall Park. A brief text, silkscreened in red letters on a white background, names some of the native tribes that once occupied the area that is now New York State: XROY W3E/TODAY YOUR HOST/IS/MOHAWK (and, variously, Cayuga, Mahican, Manhattan, Montauk, Oneida, Onondaga, Poosapatuck, Seneca, Shinnecock, Tuscarora, and Werpoe). By rendering the words "New York" in mirror image, Heap of Birds suggested that New Yorkers literally look backwards, at least for a moment, thrusting them into a new relationship with "their" state.

*Building Minnesota* is closely related to *Native Hosts*, in both form and spirit. It also consists of a series of signs (of the same size and design as those used in the earlier work) purposely made to resemble typical city signage; and it is also installed in an area intended for public recreation. But while *Native Hosts* referred to American history in a general way, *Building Minnesota* is related to a specific incident—the U.S.-Dakota Conflict of 1862. Knowledge of the history of that event is important to an understanding of the work.

By most accounts, the U.S.-Dakota Conflict of 1862 can be linked directly to the expansion of white settlements into the Minnesota River Valley during the 1850s. Treaties were signed that mandated the relocating of the Dakota people onto reservations, and the Indians were subsequently forced to undergo profound cultural change. This painful disruption, com-





bined with the U.S. government's failure to honor the terms of its treaties, soon brought hostilities to a head: in August 1862, some bands of the Dakota people took up arms against the white settlers and traders. A bloody conflict ensued, and over the next six weeks nearly five hundred whites and many Indians lost their lives. In mid-September Colonel Henry H. Sibley marched up the river valley with an army of more than one thousand men, and by the end of the month the fighting was over and Sibley had begun collecting information to determine who should be punished. At the conclusion of trials that stretched into mid-November, a military tribunal condemned 303 Dakota men to death by hanging. All but forty had their sentences commuted by President Abraham Lincoln; of those, thirty-eight were executed on the day after Christmas, 1862, in Mankato; two others were hung at Fort Snelling in November 1865.

Long vilified in historical accounts as savage murderers, the forty men are recast in *Building Minnesota* as, if not heroes, at least victims of a war that they passionately believed was necessary for the survival of their culture. "HONOR," the text commands—or is HONOR to be read instead as an attribute of each man's character? Either way, that one word places *Building Minnesota* squarely in the tradition of the war memorial: by honoring each man individually on a separate sign, Heap of Birds also exploits the intense emotional impact produced by simply naming the dead and allowing them to be mourned.

In this sense the work recalls Maya Ying Lin's *Vietnam War Memorial* (1981–1983), a black monolith which, because its surface is engraved with the names of those killed during the Vietnam War, has been the object of countless pilgrimages by friends and families of the dead. The names in *Building Minnesota* are given in both Dakota and English, with the Dakota version given primary placement. By including both, Heap of Birds affirms the cultural



importance of a living native language, and reminds us that empathy between disparate cultures is difficult when their languages are mutually unintelligible.

Many of the names in *Building Minnesota* are evocative of nature and natural phenomena, associations Heap of Birds exploits with irony. Presented on commercially made metal signs in plain block letters, names such as Sudden Rattle, Scarlet Leaf, and One Who Walks clothed in Owl Feathers even more strongly evoke the natural world. The incongruity is intensified by the work's site, a stretch of the Mississippi where the rush of St. Anthony Falls has been redirected by a lock and dam and where the riverbank bristles with power lines, grain elevators, and high-rise buildings. In this spot—the site of one of the earliest white settlements in the state—the river seems to exist chiefly to serve the needs of Minnesota's businesses, functioning as a busy thoroughfare for barge traffic and as a source of electrical power. A fence, posted with signs reading "U.S. Property/No Trespassing" and "Dangerous Area/No Swimming," warns off would-be intruders.

In *Building Minnesota* the execution of forty men one hundred twenty-eight years ago is linked to Native people's ongoing struggle for land rights, and thus to a respect for the earth that is traditional in Native culture. Heap of Birds asks whether the river can really be the "property" of anyone, let alone the hard-to-define entity designated "U.S.," and implies that, unless our society develops an attitude of respect for the earth, his sculpture may be read as an obituary not only for forty Dakota men but also for the land that nourishes us all.

—Joan Rothfuss  
Walker Art Center