Jesuits in New France and Religious Discoveries 2: Religious Discoveries at Fort St. Joseph

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Religious Discoveries at Fort St. Joseph

Archaeological Evidence of Catholic Life

Several religious artifacts have been found at Fort St. Joseph during excavations.

Religious artifacts are objects that were used for religious purposes, some of which were worn on the body or displayed in sacred places. Crosses, crucifixes, medallions, and rosary beads have been recovered at Fort St. Joseph along with an object that has been interpreted as a cîlice. These objects have been found across the site, leading archaeologists to believe they were personal possessions used throughout the community, not solely by priests. These and other related artifacts provide clues about how Catholicism was practiced at the fort.

A Chapel at Fort St. Joseph?

No chapel has yet been located by archaeologists at Fort St. Joseph.

The archaeological identification of a chapel or building dedicated to worship could shed considerable light on religious life at the fort. It is unlikely that the fort had a church such as St. Anne de Michilimackinac, given the smaller population at Fort St. Joseph. Father Charlevoix’s description of Fort St. Joseph does not mention a specific religious building within the fort. The lack of definitive documentation has led to debate about whether such a building existed and if so where it was located.

Practicing Catholics

Archaeological recovery of religious artifacts at Fort St. Joseph give insight into personal practices and patterns of Catholicism across New France.

Documentary sources suggest that many inhabitants of the fort, including the priests, French laymen, and Natives, owned rosaries, crucifixes, and other objects of personal adornment that had religious significance. Medallions found have depicted Catholic saints and symbols reflecting the owners’ personality. Archaeologists at the fort uncover pieces similar to those at other French posts, such as Fort Michilimackinac, which shows that though the choice of design is personal, similar objects were distributed across New France. Continued excavation of religious artifacts will add a better understanding of the lives of the people of Fort St. Joseph and religious practices in New France.

The round Jesus medallion (far right) uncovered at Fort St. Joseph is noticeably similar to an oval Jesus medallion (far left) found at Fort Michilimackinac. The details are more evident in the reproduction (center).

Photographs provided by Andrew Beaupre, Tori Hawley, John Lacko, and Andrew Robinson.