Fort St. Joseph and the American Revolution

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The "Spanish Raid,” 1781
Eugène Pourè, commander of the 2nd Company of the St. Louis Militia, led a party of 65 militiamen and about an equal number of Native warriors from St. Louis in an attack on Fort St. Joseph in early 1781. They entered Fort St. Joseph and captured the garrison. Pourè then pursued the raiders into the Potawatomi region, where he met resistance from the Potawatomi. The Potawatomi refused his urgings and Pourè and his men returned safely to St. Louis.

British soldiers and trade goods excavated at Fort St. Joseph

Demise of Fort St. Joseph
Contrary to popular belief, there is no evidence that Pourè's men burned Fort St. Joseph in the Spanish Raid. The post simply dwindled away in the 1780s until it vanished. After the post was abandoned some of the building materials and timbers may have been salvaged for construction elsewhere in the area. No mention was made of the fort when the first survey was conducted in 1827. Because no detailed maps or descriptions of the fort have been found, archaeology is essential to understanding what Fort St. Joseph looked like in the 18th century. Thus far, Western Michigan University archaeologists have recovered hand-wrought nails, building hardware, fireplaces, and evidence of a house wall in their efforts to reveal the appearance of the fort.

Deportation of the French

Fireplace excavated at Fort St. Joseph

Bennett’s Expedition, 1779
Fort St. Joseph had no garrison during the American Revolution. Instead, long-time resident trader Louis Chevalier served as the “King’s Man” to represent the Crown to Native Americans and local traders. In 1779, Col. George Rogers Clark led Virginia troops in a successful attack on Fort Sackville (present-day Vincennes, Indiana). The British learned that Clark intended to attack Detroit; his route would take him near Fort St. Joseph. The British dispatched a force of regular troops of the 8th Regiment from Michilimackinac to Fort St. Joseph under Lt. Thomas Bennett to ambush the Virginians. Bennett’s force included some 60 French canoe men and volunteers, and about 250 Native American warriors. This force occupied the fort during July and August 1779. Clark called off plans for his attack on Detroit due to a lack of supplies, and Bennett’s men returned to Michilimackinac.

French Marine button, recovered from Fort St. Joseph

The “Spanish Raid,” 1781
Eugène Pourè, commander of the 2nd Company of the St. Louis Militia, led a party of 65 militiamen and about an equal number of Native warriors from St. Louis in an attack on Fort St. Joseph in early 1781. They entered the post unopposed on February 12, raised the flag of Spain, and departed the next day for St. Louis. De Quindre had again been away at the time, but he attempted to rally the local Potawatomi to pursue the raiders. The Potawatomi refused his urgings and Pourè and his men returned safely to St. Louis.