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4: Commercial Activities at Fort St. Joseph

Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project

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Commercial Activities at Fort St. Joseph

Fort St. Joseph was an important link in the chain of frontier outposts that marked the far reaches of New France and facilitated the fur trade between the French and Native Americans in the Western Great Lakes region.

Beaver was the predominant animal trapped and its fur was traded to make fashionable felt hats in 18th century Europe. Imported goods such as muskets, iron tools, glass beads, and cloth were shipped from Europe to the cities of Québec and Montréal. Carried in birch bark canoes, these items then flowed into the western Great Lakes region via water routes. The canoes were manned by *voyageurs* who paddled for days to reach their destinations. Furs were obtained in exchange for these goods. By the middle of the 18th century Fort

St. Joseph ranked fourth in volume of furs traded among all posts in New France. It would have seen its population more than double during good weather when the voyageurs and Native Americans engaged in the trade used the post as a base while they carried out their work. Evidence of the fort's role as a trading post abounds in the archaeological record. Glass trade beads are one of the most commonly recovered artifacts. Numerous lead bale seals -- tags that would have marked the contents, origins, or destinations of bundles of goods -- have also been recovered as have baling needles used to bind furs together for transport. A gunsmith's cache of spare gun parts points not only to military activity, but to commercial activity as gun repair was one of the services that the French provided to their Native American allies to whom they traded flintlock muskets.



Beads are a common trade item found at Fort St. Joseph.



Example of a gun trigger uncovered at Fort St. Joseph.

Why is trade important?

In many ways the fur trade was the glue that held together the alliance between the French and their Native American neighbors. A trade relationship was a promise of peace between the trading partners and it implied mutual protection against enemies. Marriages between French traders and Native

American women were often seen as a way of cementing such arrangements and ensuring they continued. The fur trade involved more than exchange in the economic sense. In the process of the interaction that surrounded this commercial activity and in the exchange of goods, the cultures of both Native American

and European groups were altered. Evidence of this interaction is most definitely present in the archaeological record at Fort St. Joseph in the form of various types of the goods exchanged. Further investigation will continue to highlight the importance of the fort as a trading post.