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Partnerships 2: An Archaeological Partnership with the Religious of Niles

Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project

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An Archaeological Partnership with the Religious of Niles

The Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project (hereafter “the Project”) aims to build an active partnership with the religious community of Niles. Given the importance of Catholicism at Fort St. Joseph, the Project has reached out to one of these communities, St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Parishes, to explore their potential interest in collaboration.

RELIGION AT FORT ST. JOSEPH

Fort St. Joseph was established as a mission by the Jesuits in the 1680s with the support of the French crown. The French prioritized the establishment of a mission in this area of the St. Joseph River as part of a strategy to convert Native Americans to Catholicism and, more generally, to create social, economic, and political alliances with the Potawatomis and other Native peoples. Archaeologists have identified evidence of religious activity at the site. Archaeological investigations have the potential to directly connect modern religious individuals to the history of their faith in the region.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF COLLABORATIVE ANTHROPOLOGY

Collaborative research involves the direct involvement and active participation of community partners. Collaborative anthropology allows researchers the opportunity to gain personal insight from community members and produce headred knowledge, a form of knowledge which embodies the perspectives of all project partners, and creates a more responsible anthropology. Such research is valuable, and different from traditional academic study, as it recognizes the fact that knowledge comes in various forms and from diverse sources.

ACADEMIC AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL INTERESTS

Anthropologists study people and their culture, past and present. The accurate and respectful characterization of the groups they study, and those they engage with in the field, is among their top priorities. For this reason, anthropologists and archaeologists, who are experts at studying both immaterial and material culture, often seek the input and involvement of descendant, local, and interested communities. Anthropological work which is produced with the approval of, and in collaboration with, such communities is more likely to be sustainable, ethical, useful, and relevant.

EXISTING RECORD OF SUPPORT

The church and the project have an established relationship. St. Mary’s parishioners and students have visited the museum and the archaeological site and have donated time and resources to the Project. Additionally, individual members of the Niles Catholic community have expressed interest in the Project by attending the Archaeology Open House, the annual summer lecture series, summer camps, and other community events sponsored by the Project.

STRENGTHENING OUR PARTNERSHIP

Discussions with religious community members have revealed a series of possible collaborative initiatives with the potential to strengthen our working relationship, including:

1. The study and preservation of the Fort St. Joseph site. Project findings, especially those related to religious practice, have contributed greatly to the understanding of the history of Catholicism in the region. As such, religious community members are interested in supporting future study, preservation, and interpretation of the site.
2. A historical places tour in Niles to showcase locations related to the shared history of the church and the fort.
3. A field trip at the Archaeology Open House to include historical prayers and reference to the Catholic presence at Fort St. Joseph.
4. Representatives from St. Mary church have expressed interest in hosting guest speakers to inform their youth groups, and potentially wider audiences, about the religious history and significance of the fort.
5. The inclusion of a traveling teacher’s trunk, specifically highlighting artifacts and informational materials related to the study of Fort St. Joseph, could be added to the St. Mary’s School curriculum.

Archaeologists and the religious community of Niles are working together to define and achieve mutual goals using the tools of collaborative, community-based research. Our next step is to move operations, but shared interest in the history of Fort St. Joseph and in community-based learning initiatives is likely to drive the partnership forward in the future, in ways we have yet to imagine.