Partnerships 5: Living History Partnerships at Fort St. Joseph

Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project

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The living history community is a bridge between scholars and the public. Re-enactors and craftsmen bring history to life for the public through events sponsored by the Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project (hereafter “the Project”), demonstrating 18th-century lifeways and animating archaeological discoveries.

LIVING HISTORY AT FORT ST. JOSEPH
Interest in Fort St. Joseph within the Niles community was galvanized in the early 1990s with the formation of Support the Fort, Inc., a non-profit organization devoted to commemorating the 18th-century site through education and living history demonstrations. Since 2006, Western Michigan University archaeologists have invited historical re-enactors to the annual Archaeology Open House specifically to engage with and educate attendees. They aim to bridge the gap between the material remains of the past and the activities associated with 18th-century daily life.

GRAPPLING WITH AUTHENTICITY: “IS THIS REAL?”
The re-enactors engaged at Fort St. Joseph emphasize historical accuracy. Underlying document- and archaeologically-based evidence, they ensure that the material details of 18th-century life (e.g., buttons, personal effects) are accurate representations. For re-enactors, authenticity is not about employing actual artifacts from the 18th-century; rather, they use and wear items that are produced using the methods and materials that were available to people in this period. The most desirable reproductions are those that resemble precisely objects from the past.

CRAFTSMEN: THE BACKBONE OF THE RE-ENACTING COMMUNITY
The replicated material world of re-enactors is created by craftsmen to ensure accurate reproductions. Sometimes, modern tools are used to help craftsmen be more productive or help them work alone. Blacksmiths are craftsmen that support re-enactors with reproduction items, as well as supporting other craftsmen, such as carpenters, by making the tools they use. A large concern of modern blacksmiths is to recover the history of the craft that was almost lost by the mid-20th century.

ARCHAEOLOGISTS: EXCAVATING HISTORY
Archaeologists make inferences to obtain information about past human societies and their activities through the recovery of material remains. Archaeologists are increasingly searching for new ways to present this information to larger public audiences beyond academia. The living history community uses archaeological finds to ensure accurate reconstructions and demonstrations, and helps interpret these materials in a way that is readily understood by, and engages, audiences of all ages and backgrounds. A re-enactor can use a replica of an artifact in a demonstration to help the public visualize how it was used to bring the past to life.

FORGING NEW COLLABORATIONS
Archaeologists and the living history community stand to benefit from further collaboration at Fort St. Joseph. For instance, the mobile phone app Next Exit History, a tool which enables archaeologists and public historians to make knowledge about historic sites widely accessible, has the potential for use in providing authentic examples in providing authentic examples of reproduction. In return, many re-enactors engage with the public to disseminate archaeological findings and some see their craft as experimental archaeology, a way to put objects into practice and learn more about how they were originally used.

RE-ENACTORS: A BRIDGE TO THE PAST
The re-enactor community is comprised of individuals from diverse backgrounds and with varying priorities. Some re-enactors do not agonize over the authenticity of their items, but those who do use primary sources such as period documents or archaeological remains to establish their historical accuracy. The work of an archaeologist is often imperative in providing authentic examples for reproduction. In return, many re-enactors engage with the public.