2018

Technology Then and Now 6: Flintlock Muskets

Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project

Fort St. Joseph
Archaeological Project

Western Michigan University

Flintlock Muskets

Flintlocks were imported from Europe and widely distributed in New France for hunting and warfare.

THE FRENCH FLINTLOCK

The French invented the flintlock musket in the early seventeenth century to replace earlier weapons. This technological innovation employed a flint for ignition. The gunflint is held by the jaws at the end of a one-piece mechanism called the cock. When the trigger is pulled, the flint strikes the frizzen to produce a spark that ignites the gunpowder, propelling a musket ball or lead shot out of the barrel. Most production was done by French manufacturers in Tulle and St. Etienne, although the English and Dutch also made similar guns.

(Top to bottom) Gun cocks, frizzens (the part of the lock mechanism that a gunflint strikes to produce a spark), and breech plugs from the gunsmith's cache at Fort St. Joseph. Photo courtesy of John Lacko

A close-up of the mechanics of a flintlock ignition system. Photo courtesy of Meghan Williams.

Munitions including a stone projectile point, musket balls, and lead shot recovered from Fort St. Joseph recovered during the 2004 field season. Photo courtesy of John Lacko.

FLINTLOCK MUSKET VARIATION

There are numerous types of flintlocks that were used by the French and their Native American allies during the fur trade era. The *fusil de chasse*, or hunting gun, is a plain gun that was commonly used. The *fusil de traite*, or trade gun, was produced in varying grades: *fusil de traite demi-fin, fusil de traite fin, and fusil fasson.* The grades of these flintlocks were determined by the addition of decorative embellishments.

Memorandum of work I Durivage gunsmith in partnership with Dehaitres have done on the Kings account by order of Messiers De Celoron and Coulon, in connection with the Chickasaw War. In July 1739.

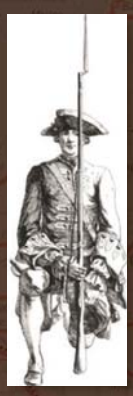
To Wit.

July 11th, 1739	For having Rebrazed a pistol and attached a splice for Lotino, Nepissingue
Ditto 13th	For having made a sear and repaired the Tumblr for Onontate, Nepissingue
Same day	For having repaired a Tomahawk for Matateque
14th of same	For having made a main spring for Nagachias
	Plus a small spring for the aforesaid
15th of same	Plus a guncock for Limbe, Canadian
	Plus a sight bead and holder
	Plus a Tomahawk
	Plus a Tomahawk for Limbe, Canadian
August 4, 1739	Plus a sear for le Corbeau, Pouteatamis
	Plus a screw
	Plus two sideplate screws
	Plus a repaired pike for the son of 8ilamek
	Plus a pike for le Corbeau
7th of same	For the Son-in-Law of le Corbeau a spear
	Plus a pike for Leve
	Plus a screw for Manitoque
	Plus a screw for Chichanac
	Plus for having inspected Monsieur Raimbault's musket

Done at the St. Joseph River on the 7th of August 1739.
Signed Antoine Dehaitre, Michael Durivage Baillonjeu.

From Peyser (1978) Fort St. Joseph Manuscript: Chronological Inventory and Translations.

Larry Horrigan, primitive technology expert, holding a French flintlock musket at this presentation in the 2018 lecture series. Photo courtesy of Meghan Williams.



French Marine of the eighteenth century with a flintlock musket and bayonet attachment.

FLINTLOCKS AT FORT ST. JOSEPH

Primary sources provide archaeologists with further information about gun repair and use. On August 7, 1739 a memorandum was signed detailing the work of a gunsmith at Fort St. Joseph. The memorandum confirms the presence of a gunsmith at the fort, and includes a list of repairs he conducted. In this instance, two gunsmiths were replacing and repairing gun cocks, sight beads, holders, springs, screws, and plates, among other hardware. A few of these items have been found during the excavations at the fort. In 2002, over one hundred gun parts were recovered from a cache at the site. It included gun cocks, frizzens, breech plugs, and a lock plate, among other components. In addition, excavations have led to the recovery of musket balls, lead shot, and numerous gun flints throughout the site.

A fusil de chasse. Photo courtesy of Meghan Williams.

A French amber gunflint recovered at Fort St. Joseph. Photo courtesy of John Lacko.

FLINTLOCK MUSKETS TODAY

Flintlock muskets were replaced in the early nineteenth century by rifles and other more efficient and effective firing weapons. The flintlocks we encounter today are used for sport and by re-enactors in the public and private sector, rather than hunting for subsistence and in warfare. Their use in the twentieth-first century assists archaeologists in understanding fur trade era technologies at Fort St. Joseph and how they were essential for survival on the frontier.

An example of a decorative butt plate from a tradegun recovered at Fort St. Joseph during the 2004 field season. Photo courtesy of John Lacko.

Technology Then and Now was developed by the students (Nicole Aquino, John Campbell, Patrick Dwyer, Abby Floyd, Jacob Kowalczyk, Allie Lewis, Amanda Owens, Brendan Sapato, and Callisto Wojcikowski) in the Museum Studies class (HIST 4080) at Western Michigan University under the direction of Professor Michael Nassaney. The research, contents, and design of the exhibit were made possible through the support and assistance of Christina Arseneau, David Brose, Mary Ellen Drolet, Joe Hines, Larry Horrigan Cori Ivens, Erika Loveland, Meghan Williams and Michael Worline.