The Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project: 2015 Field Season

John Cardinal, Aaron Howard, Erika Loveland, Michael Nassaney, and James Schwaderer

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History of Fort St. Joseph

Fort St. Joseph was founded in 1691 along the St. Joseph River in Niles, MI as a French mission, garrison, and trading post complex. The fort became one of the most important eighteenth-century outposts in the western Great Lakes region, serving as a vital link in the commercial and communication network of New France. Goods and ideas were exchanged between the French and local Native Americans who maintained close interactions and alliances throughout the western Great Lakes region. Fort St. Joseph fell into the hands of the British during the French and Indian War and was attacked during Pontiac’s Rebellion in 1763. French traders continued to occupy the fort until it was abandoned in 1781. In 1998 Western Michigan University (WMU) archaeologists used documentary sources identified by Joseph L. Poynter to locate the physical remains of the fort.

Summary of Excavations

Our current research design is oriented toward identifying evidence of eighteenth-century activities in the vicinity of Fort St. Joseph and collecting architectural data to understand the buildings, construction techniques, and contents of the buildings associated with the eighteenth-century artifacts throughout the Niles vicinity, although most of the archaeological materials contemporaneous with the fort have been found adjacent to a series of fireplaces uncovered since 2002. Six 1 x 2 meter units were opened this field season in locations where we expected to intersect walls in order to ascertain the size, orientation, construction methods, and contents of the buildings associated with the fireplaces along the river. In one of these units, four structural stones (10 to 15 cm long) were found in a linear orientation, which we designated as Feature 26. These stones appear similar to ones found in two other partial foundation walls associated with other buildings on the site. Further excavation is needed to determine their function and association with other architectural features.

Notable artifacts found this year include: a French marine military button, a Type D French flintlock sideplate, a copper alloy bell, a ring with blue glass insets, and two lead seals (see artifacts). The seals testify to the volume of cloth that was imported to the site.

History of the Project

The Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project is a partnership between WMU and the City of Niles, MI. It began when Support the Fort, Inc., a local history group, contacted WMU to search for the fort. A shovel test pit survey revealed an eighteenth-century French cutlers. Subsequent excavations over 11 field seasons in the western Great Lakes region, serving as a vital link in the commercial and communication network of New France.

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Public Outreach at Fort St. Joseph

The Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project has maintained a longstanding commitment to engage the local Niles community. Examples of public involvement include:

- The Fort St. Joseph Archaeology Advisory Committee contributes input regarding all aspects of the research design.
- Lifelong learners, teachers, and students can attend our week-long summer camp programs to participate in recovering and interpreting the history and archaeology of Fort St. Joseph.
- An annual Summer Archaeology Lecture Series features prominent speakers who discuss topics of both historical and archaeological interest.

- The annual Open House has drawn over 20,000 visitors since its inception in 2006. Visitors can view ongoing excavations, interact with living history re-enactors, and meet archaeologists and public scholars.

Expanding the Project’s Social Media Presence

Over the past year, the Project has strategically expanded our social media presence in an effort to explore the advantages of using several new platforms to reach a larger and more diverse audience. Previously, the Project utilized a blog and Facebook page, but now we have added both Instagram and Twitter. Instagram reaches 150 million active users and is focused on visual marketing. Twitter also has an enormous reach and allows us to connect and engage with our followers. This venture has also fostered our efforts to communicate and collaborate with other archaeological projects with a shared interest in colonization and the fur trade.

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Facebook Followers By Age and Gender

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Women: 62% Men: 38%

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A shovel test pit located at Fort St. Joseph in 1691 along the St. Joseph River in Niles, MI. Archaeologists used documentary sources identified by Joseph L. Poynter to locate the physical remains of the fort.

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