LEAD SEALS FROM COLONIAL FORT ST. JOSEPH (20BE23)

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

• Lead seals are metal tags that served to convey information about goods in the post-medieval period

• They marked:
  - Tobacco
  - Cloth
  - Orphans
  - Customs Taxes
  - Internal Taxes on luxury goods
  - Various goods manufactured by artisans which were organized in guild systems

• Lead Seals are most often associated with textiles
Fort St. Joseph was a mission, garrison, and trading post from 1691-1781.

The fort was a key trading hub at the juncture of the Kankakee River Portage (to the Mississippi), and the Great Sauk Trail (US-12). It was one of the three most productive fur trading posts in the Western Great Lakes Region, along with Detroit and Michilimackinac.

The remains of the fort are situated in Niles, Michigan. The site has been investigated since 1998 by the Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project based at Western Michigan University.
The goal of this study was to determine the origins of lead seals from Fort St. Joseph using the motifs and lettering stamped into the lead. Historical sources were applied to determine possible cloth types or trade goods that these seals may have marked.

This ultimately gives information both about trans-Atlantic trade connections with New France and cloth consumption at Fort St. Joseph.
As textile markers, lead seals were used to mark cloth that met national standards for quality and length after inspection.

Inspection processes in England, France, and the Netherlands were usually carried out by officers elected by guild communities.

In France, inspection was especially rigorous and driven by the government.
Methodology

- Seals from Fort St. Joseph in the collections of the Center for History (South Bend, IN) and the Fort St. Joseph Museum (Niles, MI) were included in this study.
- Seals and fragments that were donated by collectors as well as those uncovered by the Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project were examined.
**Methodology**

- Seals were identified through comparison with published sources from sites and collections in North America and Europe.
- Seals were classified and grouped into a typology based on attachment style, motifs, and lettering in order to facilitate identification and comparison of seals.
- The majority of seals in the collections are Series A seals, the type most often used as textile markers, especially for woolen cloths.
RESULTS

- Of the 65 seals examined, 37% were of an identifiable nationality, and 21% were able to be traced back to a specific town or region of origin.
- Seals from Mazamet (France) most common in collections (29% of identified seals)
- Mazamet, a town in southern France (Languedoc Region), was known for its woolen cloth production.
Results

- Seals of the *Compagnie des Indes* (French Company of the Indies) are the second most common in the collections (21%)

- The *Compagnie des Indes* held a monopoly on the fur trade from 1791 until the end of its charter in 1769.

- The *Compagnie* was the only supplier of legal British *écarlatines* (woolens) to New France, and also imported bleached cottons from France.
RESULTS

Fort St. Joseph French Seals

Fort Michilimackinac French seals
RESULTS

Fort St. Joseph British Seals

- Halifax
- Leeds
- French

Fort Michilimackinac British Seals

- Wakefield
- London
- French
- Unknown
**Conclusion**

- Most of the seals identified were from regions that produced significant amounts of woolen cloths.
- This suggests that most of the cloth imported to Fort St. Joseph (and Michilimackinac) were varieties of woolens.
- This aligns with historical data concerning the importance of woolens in the fur trade.
CONCLUSION

• Lead seals merit further research because they still hold more information, and there are many that have not been identified.

• Further international collaboration with Canada and France could help to better understand these artifacts and the cloth they marked.

• If more seal collections are examined, further comparative studies could find abnormalities in the trend of woolen dominance, or highlight trade relations within in New France and the Atlantic World.