The Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project: 2015 Field Season

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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. Payzant 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 and construction techniques at the site. Excavations have identified eighteenth-century artifacts throughout the site, although most of the architectural materials contemporaneous with the fort have been found associated with a series of fireplaces uncovered since 2002. Six 1 x 2 meter units were opened this field season in locations where we expected to intercept 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.

Expanding the Project’s Social Media Presence

The majority of followers are women (60 percent), while the modal range is between 25 and 34 years old for both genders. Artifacts from this past field season include: a Type D French flintlock sideplate (exp. 152–229), a lead seal (bottom left; 1542–22), and a ring with blue glass inset (bottom left; 1542–24). Artifacts from this past field season include: a Type D French flintlock sideplate (exp. 152–229), a lead seal (bottom left; 1542–22), and a ring with blue glass inset (bottom left; 1542–24).