

2025 Governor's Award for Historic Preservation



Awardees: Western Michigan University; the City of Niles; Niles History Center; and Support the Fort, Inc.

The collaborative Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project, Niles

Fort St. Joseph was established by the French in 1691. The fort became a vibrant hub of colonial and Native American activity that brought together settlers, soldiers, and fur trappers, who interacted and traded with nearby Potawatomi and Miami settlements. The fort was abandoned after the United States claimed the territory in 1781.

Nature slowly obscured all evidence of the once-lively trading post, and its exact location was lost to time. In 1998, Western Michigan University archaeologists were invited to conduct a survey in search of the fort. Initial shovel test pits yielded a trove of artifacts including glass trade beads, hand-wrought nails, pottery made in France, numerous animal bones, and knives stamped with the names of French cutlers. The fort location was found!

The Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project is a community-based participatory research collaboration between the university and local partners. Annual project work educates and engages in numerous ways. As a structured part of the university's curriculum, the field school provides aspiring archaeology students with hands-on opportunities to learn surveying and excavation techniques, artifact processing, analysis, and interpretation. Since no detailed diagram of the fort exists, these students are creating a map of Fort St. Joseph with each discovery.

The project also has an extensive public outreach program, including summer camps for children from 6th grade through high school, an annual community open house weekend, and an engaging and dynamic social media presence. In 2025, this enduring educational partnership has worked together for more than 25 years to bring this history to life.

Fort St. Joseph

