



# BRINGING FORT ST. JOSEPH TO LIFE

Imperial ambitions led Europeans deep into North America, ushering in territorial wars. Fort St. Joseph was central to their expansion, growing from a French Jesuit outpost on the banks of the St. Joseph River into a garrisoned fort and trading complex. The post brought together settlers, soldiers and fur trappers, who interacted and traded with Potawatomi and Miami settlements in the region.

Fort St. Joseph served as a hub of commercial, military and religious activity for local Native Americans and European colonial powers in southwest Michigan. The French, British, supporters of Pontiac's Rebellion and even the Spanish controlled the post throughout its occupation until the United States claimed the territory and the fort was abandoned.

Neglected, nature slowly obscured any evidence of the once-lively trading post until it was nothing more than a shared memory. That is, until local efforts grew into a regional initiative to document this history.

The Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project developed as a community-based research organization determined to investigate the fort, train future archaeologists and promote local cultural heritage.

MICHIGAN ARCHAEOLOGY MONTH 2023



# BRINGING FORT ST. JOSEPH TO LIFE

**Pre-1400** – Native Americans occupy the Great Lakes region for thousands of years.

**1400–1600** – Potawatomi ancestors live in the St. Joseph River valley and, more broadly, western Great Lakes region.

**1640s** – Some Potawatomi communities relocate to northern Illinois and the Green Bay area of Wisconsin.

**1680s** – The Miami return to the St. Joseph River valley area with the Jesuit priest Father Jean Claude Allouez.

**1686** – French King Louis XIV grants land along the River of the Miamis (St. Joseph River), indigenous territory, to Jesuit priests to encourage trade and missionary activities.

**1691** – The French send soldiers to the area of the mission to expand the fur trade and solidify local relations, establishing Fort St. Joseph.

**1695** – Members of the Potawatomi return to the Fort St. Joseph area and settle along the river.

**Early 1700s** – The post consists of a small garrison, a blacksmith, an interpreter, a priest and up to fifteen households.

**1754** – The French and Indian War begins between the French and British-controlled colonies, both with support from Native American Tribes.

**1761** – The British gain control of Fort St. Joseph and garrison it with a small contingent of soldiers.

**1763** – Pontiac's Rebellion begins between a confederation of Native Americans and the British. Supporters of the Odawa leader Pontiac attack British posts in the Great Lakes region. They capture Fort St. Joseph and remove the British garrison. French traders continue to occupy the fort.

**1763** – The French and Indian War ends, and peace negotiations begin.

**1775** – The Revolutionary War begins between Britain and the American colonies.

**1779** – The British briefly re-garrison the fort to supply allies in the Revolutionary War.

**1780** – French traders occupying the post's households are deported to Fort Michilimackinac in now-Northern Michigan.

**1781** – A group backed by the Spanish raid the fort and claim it for Spain, then leave the site after one day. **This marks the official end of the fort occupation.**

**1783** – The Revolutionary War ends, and the United States claims ownership of the region with the Treaty of Paris.

**Mid-1800s** – Artifact collectors search plowed fields in the area for evidence of the post and collect artifacts.

**1913** – A commemorative boulder is dedicated at the fort's approximate location.

**1918** – The Women's Progressive League erects a granite cross to replace a wooden cross at the assumed burial site of Father Allouez, the settlement's founding Jesuit priest.

**1998** – Western Michigan University (WMU) archaeologists are invited to conduct an archaeological survey, and **the site of the fort is found after more than a century of searching.**

**2023** – **Celebration of 25 years of archaeology and research at the site.**

## Partners Explore the Past

The Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project is a partnership between the City of Niles, WMU, the local heritage group Support the Fort, Inc. and numerous other community groups who have led discovery efforts over the last 25 years. Dr. Joseph L. Peyser, an eminent scholar of New France, helped begin the present-day search by examining and translating French documents relating to the fort to find its location.

## Students Building Knowledge

Now, WMU's archaeological field school students gain hands-on experience at the site, learning 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 students then share their work with the community through public archaeology programming. Site tours, summer camps, lectures and an annual Archaeology Open House event bring cultural tourism to Southwest Michigan.

## Finds from the Fort

With few records intact, our understanding of the lives of those in the community is led by what and where artifacts are found underground. Excavations have revealed thousands of religious, military and domestic artifacts and evidence of housing, including:

- **Six stone fireplaces**
- **A deep pit feature (possibly a well) filled with baked clay**
- **Middens containing a wide array of artifacts and animal bone**
- **Two metal caches, one with more than 125 gun parts**
- **Thousands of glass trade beads**
- **Hand-wrought nails**
- **Knives stamped with the names of French cutlers**
- **Pottery made in France and England**
- **Numerous animal bones**



### Mouth Harp and Game Pieces

To pass the time, occupants played mouth harps (left), small iron or brass musical instruments. They placed the instrument against their teeth and strummed the thin reed. They also made gaming pieces with small bone or antler discs. These two pieces (right) are smooth on one side and decorated on the other, resembling a die or domino.



### Ceramics

Excavators have uncovered hundreds of ceramic fragments, or sherds, from plates, platters, cups and bowls made in France, England and elsewhere. These faience sherds are refined, tin-glazed earthenware, generally used for tableware and are evidence of consumer choice in the eighteenth century.



### Butt Plate

Several gun parts have been found at the fort, including this copper alloy butt plate, a mid-eighteenth century design that would fasten to an English trade gun. The tang features a bow, arrow and quiver design, and the plate has 119 hash marks.