



Archaeology and the French Culture in Indiana

There is a rich history of the French culture in what is now the state of Indiana. Starting in 1679 with LaSalle's explorations, the French have been a part of this state's history. The French had significant influences in many locations of Indiana, but particularly three important areas of our state (Post Ouiatenon, Fort Miamis [present day Fort Wayne], and Post Vincennes) (Jones 1997:8). For a number of archaeologists, the study of this culture, and the material remains that have been left behind, has been intriguing and exciting. The things that we can learn about past cultures, through the science of archaeology, are almost limitless. This document will provide the reader with information on a sample of the archaeological excavations and research which have been conducted to learn more about the French in Indiana. Some of the locations where these "digs" have been conducted are still places that can be visited to learn even more.

One location of excavations is Vincennes, Indiana. Vincennes is the oldest historic city in our state and has a wonderful French history. Archaeologists and other researchers have been interested in the history of the sites in and around this area for many years. One of these sites is the home of French trader Michel Brouillet. His home (the "Old French House") was built around 1806 and still stands today for visitors to see and learn about. Archaeologists began excavation work at this site in the mid 1970s, and digs were conducted in the 1980s as well. Although the house structure is still there, the surrounding yard and grounds have archaeologically provided us with: invaluable evidence concerning the use of the house, outbuildings, and lot; information about the Brouillet and French occupations of the area, and more (Jones 1982:3).



Here is a map produced by the archaeologists showing the location of the house and features which were discovered. These features include: postholes, trash pits and a cluster of bricks. Specific artifacts recovered include such items as ceramics, pipe stems, glass bottles, metal objects and much more (Jones 1982:41, 42, 44).

Archaeological reconnaissance survey (walking over the ground at systematic intervals looking for artifacts and features) was conducted in 1993 in the Vincennes area. The survey was conducted to locate information regarding the French Canadian occupation of the Wabash valley during the 1800s (Mann 1994:1).



The study has helped us learn more about long-lot settlement pattern, the French Canadian habitants of the Vincennes area, their artifacts and adaptations (Mann 1994:195). This map from 1880 (Lake & Co.) shows the classic lines of long-lot land divisions in the Vincennes area. Maps such as these often provide valuable clues for archaeologists about the historic features in an area.

Fort Ouiatenon (Post Ouiatenon) was established by the French near Lafayette in 1717. For years this location was the center of the fur trade in Indiana and an active fort. The site is so significant it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places (today a constructed blockhouse, built in the 1930s, reflects the French presence in the area).



Over the years, beginning in the late 1960s, archaeologists have conducted excavations at the location of what was once the fort. Historic artifacts such as those shown here (image courtesy of Dr. Rick Jones) can tell us much about the people who made and utilized them. These metal items were located in the vicinity of the Fort Ouiatenon site.



This photograph (source: National Register nomination) shows an area of excavation which uncovered three hearths and wall trenches, one of which is the fort's stockade. Archaeological excavations at military and fur trade centers can add greatly to what we today know about the early cultures of our state. Sometimes all that is left physically of the site is what remains archaeologically to be uncovered.

Warren County has also been the location of several archaeological investigations of a French Canadian site. Beginning in the early 1990s, the 19th century Zachariah Cicott Trading Post site has been investigated archaeologically because it provides great opportunities to learn about French Canadian adaptations, material culture, and more (Mann and Jones 1994). Off and on for years over almost a decade, various archaeologists have identified the location of the trading post (and investigated other nearby areas), and learned about artifacts, architecture, and people (Mann 1992, 1999; Helmkamp 2000).



In the illustration to the left, fragments of clay pipes which were recovered from the site are shown. These items have helped us "explore both the active/symbolic and utilitarian (functional) aspects of one type of material culture recovered at the site" (Mann 1999:104, 120).

In Porter County, the French Canadian Bailly Homestead is now part of the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore. Honore Gratien Joseph Bailly de Messein built a trading post and home at this location in 1822. Two major Indian trails met, as well as a canoe route, so this made an ideal spot for Bailly to settle in (source: Bailly/Chellberg Trail brochure, Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore). Archaeologists have also expanded our knowledge about this northwestern Indiana site (Limp 1974; Munson and Crouch 1976). Their excavations have revealed much information regarding the numerous structures that have

existed at the site, the relationships of those structures, their alterations, and the inhabitants. All of this type of information has assisted the Park staff with interpretations of the property. The site is so significant to the history of the region that it has been declared a National Historic Landmark.



This drawing shows the Bailly homestead as it might have looked (source: Bailly/Chellberg Trail brochure, Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore).

Studying sites with French associations can take many forms. Someone can research the site by looking at documents, studying old maps of the property, and more. Archaeologists take all those types of research and expand upon them. The information and artifacts which are discovered are invaluable in terms of helping us piece together this important part of our state's history. Archaeology is happening at places all over Indiana, and this handout has only discussed a few places where archaeology has studied French, or French Canadian culture in our state. If you are interested in learning more, contact:

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3/10/04

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