

MSU Uncarths History

Ships longer than two foot-ball fields now glide under the mighty Mackinac Bridge that joins Michigan's two peninsulas. But in its shadow, where birch bark canoes once landed, archaeologists literally are turning back the sands of time.

They're uncovering two centuries of drifting sand to reconstruct a time of adventure, of treachery, of intrigue, of cannibalism.

They're looking a time when the Straits of Mackinac, was inhabited by voyageurs, French and British soldiers, fur traders and trappers, the Chippewa and Ottawa Indians.

THE SITE is Fort Michilimackinac (that's "Mish-i-uh-mah-naw"), at Mackinaw City at the top of Michigan's lower peninsula.

Under the direction of the Mackinac Island State Park Commission, archaeologists from Michigan State University are rebuilding the fort as it was 200 years ago when it was a key western outpost for the fur trade.

Restoration began in 1959. Pioneering excavation has uncovered more than 300,000 artifacts that help tell the story of the fort and its inhabitants. Coupled with the Fort Michilimackinac findings and research in Canadian and English archives, the archaeologists have pieced together precisely the plans of the fort, its buildings and the village outside its gates.

THE FORT was founded in 1715 by the French as both a fur outpost and jumping-off spot for further Great Lakes exploration.

The British took control in 1761 at the conclusion of the French and Indian War.

The Indians, however, had their revenge on the British in the 1763 massacre. They gained entry to the fort by a ruse during a canoe race game, slaughtered most of the English garrison, but spared the French-speaking traders. It was part of a general Great Lakes uprising inspired by Chief Pontiac.

The British retook the fort in 1764 and held it until the Revolutionary War when they abandoned it, moving to near-by Mackinac Island which offered a better defensive position. Fort Michilimackinac then was left to be covered by the drifting, blowing sand until 1959.

AMONG THE CENTRAL figures in the fort's history was Alexander Henry, a British fur trader whose journal recorded the horror of the 1763 massacre.

Through the intercession of an Indian friend, Henry's life was spared, and he witnessed the cannibalism of a less fortunate prisoner who the Indians "chose as the fattest, cut off the head and divided the whole into five parts, one of which each was put into five kettles..."

Major Robert Rogers' fate was somewhat better. He was taken from the fort in chains, accused of being a traitor in 1767, and sent to Montreal for a court martial. He was acquitted, but life wasn't the same again for him.

Rogers, a hero of the French and Indian War as leader of Rogers' Rangers, dreamed of finding a northwest passage to the Pacific while commanding of Fort Michilimackinac. But the expedition was a failure and led to his arrest.

THE COMMANDING officer's house, where Rogers lived, is among the houses restored at the fort.

The latest restoration is that of Charles Langlade's house. Langlade, a native of the Straits, helped lead an Indian war party that routed British General Braddock's western Pennsylvania expedition in 1755. And it was Langlade's house in which Henry sought refuge from the Indians during the massacre.

Archaeologists also have found the blacksmith's forge and the foundation of the priest's house next to the already reconstructed Chapel of St. Anne de Michilimackinac where Langlade's wedding is re-created electronically for visitors several times daily by means of spotlights, sequence lighting and stereophonic sound.

Fort Michilimackinac had a normal population of approximately 500 persons. It rose to 2,000 to 3,000 during the peak of the fur trading season.

THE FORT is much more popular today—and more readily accessible—thanks to Michigan's excellent highway system. Interstate 75 runs right next to the fort.

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