2008

The 1730 Fox Fort: Historical Debate and Archaeological Endeavor

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Abstract

For more than one hundred years historians and archaeologists have debated the location of the 1730 fortification created by the Meskwaki on the prairies of eastern Illinois. After four summers of archaeological exploration of the Arrowsmith Battle Ground (11ML6), architectural patterns consistent with the historical record of the siege and diagnostic elements of the Meskwaki material assemblage have been identified. The present paper summarizes these findings and concludes this to be the site of the 1730 Fox fort.

Introduction

The past decade has witnessed a renewed interest in the location of the 1730 Meskwaki fort besieged by the French and their Indian confederates. The fort was the scene of one of the more important battles in the colonial wars of New France. Eight hundred Meskwaki were encircled by 1400 French and Indian allies for a period of more than three weeks. At its conclusion virtually all of the defenders were either killed or enslaved.

For more than one hundred years, historians and archaeologists have debated the fort's location on the prairies of eastern Illinois. French records include charts of the fort and both official and unofficial accounts. However, the documentary evidence is vague and conflicting with regard to the precise location and plan of the battle camp and fort. The epistemological limits of historical argument have been reached without producing an acceptable answer to the question of where the battle was waged or how the fort was configured.

After four summers of archaeological exploration (Figure 1) on the Arrowsmith Battle Ground (11ML6), architectural patterns consistent with the historical record of the siege and diagnostic elements of the Meskwaki material assemblage have been identified. The present paper summarizes these findings and concludes this to be the site of the 1730 Fox Fort.

Accounts of the Siege

While several documents which make reference to the siege are available in the published literature, only three may be properly considered primary accounts. The first is the official report filed by Lieutenant Nicolas-Antoine Coulon de Villiers, Commandant at the River St. Joseph and commander of the French forces (Thwaites 1906: 113-118). The second is an anonymous narrative authored by a Fort de Chartres source under the direction of Lieutenant Robert Groston de St. Ange (Thwaites 1906: 109-113). The third narrative of the battle is provided by Jean-Baptiste Reaume, "interpreter for the *sauvages* that dwell along the River St. Joseph." (Stelle 1992: Appendix: Reaume Narrative).

The three accounts agree in the general chronology of the siege. They offer useful detail on the natural setting of the site, the architecture of the fort, and the strategy and internal politics of the allied forces. In July, 1730, the Meskwaki had captured several Cahokias near *le Rocher* (modern Starved Rock State Park) on the Illinois River and had burned the son of one of their chiefs. Angered, the Cahokias sent runners to Ft. de Chartres seeking support. The Potawatomies, Kickapoos, Mascoutens, and

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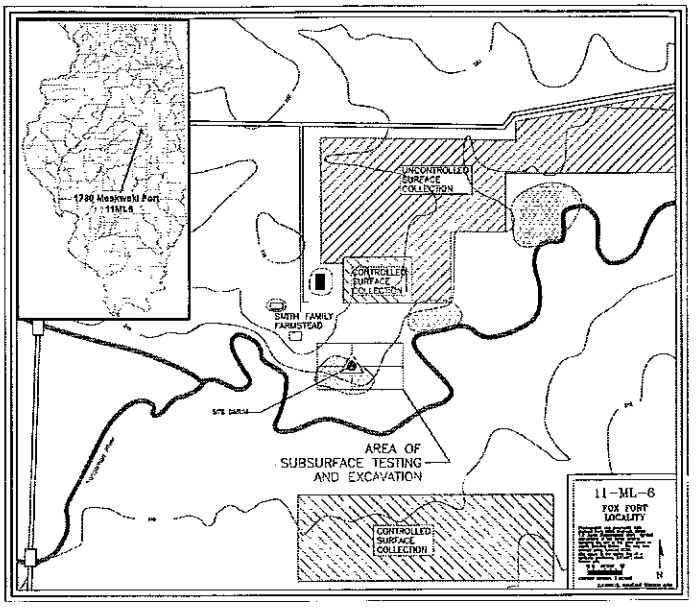

Figure 1: The Arrowsmith Battle Ground study area (11ML6).

other of the Inoca tribal groupings had also been harassed or attacked by the Meskwaki in the recent past and were interested in an opportunity for revenge. The Inoca (Cahokia) pursued the Meskwaki and found them marching in a body in the direction of the Ouiatanons (west-central Indiana). Upon contact, the Inoca engaged the Meskwaki who took possession of a small grove of trees and therein fortified themselves. The next day, runners were sent to the Miami post and to the St. Joseph command to report the fort's location and direct their support. The Ft. de Chartres account indicates that the allied Indian forces had been awaiting aid for a month prior to the arrival of the French.

By August 10, St. Ange was moving north with 500 men and de Villiers southwest with 300. They joined the 200 already present at the site. Another group of 400 Ouiatanons and Peanguichias under the command of Simon Reaume arrived the same day as de Villiers, bringing the total to about 1400 men at arms.

The main encampment of St. Ange was to the south of the river. This group positioned three redoubts and attendant trenches so as to command the river and deny the Meskwaki access to water. De Villiers' primary encampment was to the northeast or north of the Meskwaki fort. His forces constructed two cavaliers on the high ground overlooking the fort, as well as an attack trench from which he hoped to set fire to the fort.

During the ensuing siege the allied forces were plagued with internal intrigues, shifting sympathies, and intertribal conflicts. The French alliance was a fragile one. On September 1, Nicolas des Noyelles arrived with 100 men from the Miami post. Six days later, the Inoca deserted.

On September 8, a terrible storm blew up and as the Ft. de Chartres narrative records "interrupted our work" (Thwaites 1906:113). The night was rainy, foggy, and very cold. The allied Nations refused to man their posts. Seizing this opportunity, the Meskwaki escaped from their fort. However, the crying of the children alerted the French sentries and their flight was discovered. Fearful that in a night engagement their own allies would fire upon them, the French command determined to wait until daybreak before launching their assault. At dawn, some eight leagues from the fort, they rushed the exposed Meskwaki. Their ranks were immediately broken and defeated. The Reaume account states that 500 were killed and 300 captured and that forty of the captured warriors were "burned." The Ft. de Chartres narrative adds that not more than 50 or 60 unarmed men escaped.

Charts of the Fort

At least six maps of the siege are known to survive, as well as a plan view of the fort with a number of appended details. The official map of the battle camp

(there are two drafts) and the plan of the fort (Figure 2a) with the appended details are signed by Chaussegros de Lery (respectively titled *Blocus du Fort* and *Plan du Fort des Sauvages*). De Lery was the chief military engineer of New France and as such had responsibility for the official documents. De Lery's informants were de Villiers' son, Coulon, and the interpreter, Jean-Baptiste Reaume. These interviews occurred in Quebec when the two reported de Villiers' victory. The documents are variously dated November 10, 11, and 15, 1730.

The Ft. de Chartres narrative is associated with two maps (one a copy of the other) produced in New Orleans. They are titled *Carte du Fort* (Figure 2b) and are dated March 26, 1731. The legend indicates that the maps were based upon the officers' reports.

The two remaining drawings, *Fort des Renards* (Figure 3a) and *Sauvages Renards Attaques*, (Figure 3b) seem circumstantially associated with the Reaume account. The references in the narrative correspond to those of the maps, placing as they do a singular emphasis on the roles of the Reaume brothers.

What I find most intriguing about these documents is that their authors could be so varied in their perception of something as basic and important as the geometry of the fort. For the archeologist both the promise and frustration of the direct historical approach are revealed in

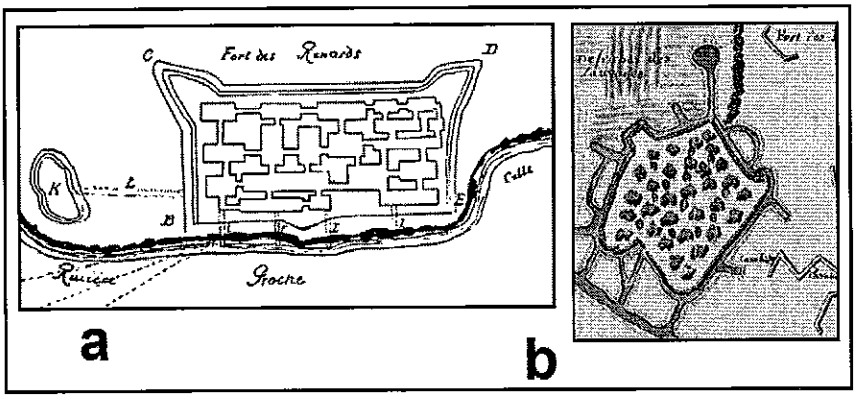

Figure 2: Drawings of the 1730 Meskwaki fortification extracted from a) Plan du Fort des Sauvages and b) Carte du Fort .

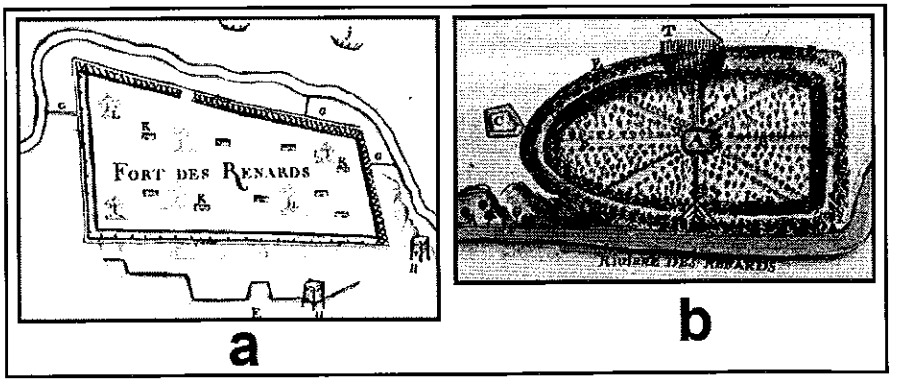

Figure 3: Drawings of the 1730 Meskwaki fortification extracted from a) Fort des Renards and b) Sauvages Renards Attaques.

a comparison of these renderings. On the one hand, we do have documents to work with, sometimes ones which include the lovely detail we find in these charts of the battle camp. On the other, and as is the case in this illustration, those documents are often in conflict with each other. De Lery's *Plan du Fort des Sauvages* seems all straight lines and regular angles, is formal and powerful, and reminds one of de Vauban's school of military engineering. In fact, the rendering undoubtedly was intended to symbolize the fortification rather than depict the device itself. Realism seems best expressed in the drafting details associated with the *Cart du Fort*. The New Orleans document is defined by curves and irregularities, looking very much as a structure carved in an *ad hoc* fashion from existing natural features. The *Fort du Renards* is formal yet simple, lacking de Lery's design complexities. Lastly we have the *Sauvages Renards Attaques*, which is formal yet curving in a decidedly non-militaristic fashion.

Which representation of the fort is correct? The methods of historiography fail to provide an answer to this critical issue. The real promise of archaeology is that answers to questions of historical speculation are potentially available in the ground and can be verified upon the application of proper archaeological techniques. In this case, the validity of the drawings has potential for empirical determination.

Proposed Locations

The same consideration applies to determining the actual location of the fort. The poverty of colonial cartography and the absence of useful landmarks on the prairie have rendered answers to this question problematic. At least ten tracts are offered in the literature as the site of the fort [see Peyser (1980:208) for a summary discussion]. Authors have chosen their locations on the basis of their perceptions of the veracity of the historical documents and their interpretation of distance and direction measurements. All of the distance and direction references are generalized and presumably reflect surface rather than statute distances. This ambiguity has left much room for historical speculation.

11ML6 is one of the suggested localities for the fort. Situated on the headwaters of the Sangamon River, it lies east and south of Starved Rock some 80 statute miles (see locator map on Figure 1). Historically, the locality supported a small grove of hardwoods surrounded by an extensive mixed and tall grass prairie. On the north bluff-crest of an eastward trending prairie stream, the landscape rises from the east and southeast to the north and west. The topography on the western periphery is dominated by three hill-locks formed of sands and gravels washed from the Lake Michigan Sublobe of the Woodfordian Glacier (likely ice-contact features). All of these characteristics of the site are described in one or more of the historical sources.

11ML6 Archaeology

Features

A number of data recovery techniques have been employed at 11ML6 including infrared aerial photography, uncontrolled surface collection, controlled surface collection, metal detector survey, shovel probe survey, and forty-seven test excavations (Figure 4). The test excavations involved the removal of 104 square meters of surface. They yielded information on a number of features and afforded an opportunity for the recovery of many artifacts from primary contexts. The feature inventory for the fifteen semi-subterranean structures, eight connecting ditches, and five other unusual subsurface disturbances is summarized in Table 1.

The historical sources offer descriptions that corroborate feature identifications. Of the three siege narratives, de Villier's provides the least specific information regarding the fort, observing only that the Meskwaki had ditches on the outside (Thwaites 1906:115). The Ft. de Chartres account adds that "Their cabins were very small and excavated in the earth like the burrows of the foxes from which they take their name" (Thwaites 1906:111).

It is the Reaume narrative (Stelle 1992: Appendix: Reaume Narrative) and the details on de Lery's *Plan du Fort* that provide the greatest detail on the interior architectural elements of the fort (Stelle 1989:47). Reaume indicated that:

> On the outside a ditch ran around three sides with branches planted to hide it, with pathways of communication for the fort in the ditches and others that ran to the river. Their cabins were complete with joists covered with decking, commonly called straw mats (*natter de paille*). On top of this there was two to three feet of earth, depending on the cabin. There were covered ways such that one could see only an earthwork (*terrasse*) that would cast a shadow in the fort [Stelle 1992: Appendix: Reaume Narrative].

De Lery's profile of one of the fort's structures (Figure 5. Detail M from de Lery's *Plan du Fort*) included the explication that the dug-outs were "Roofed with pieces of

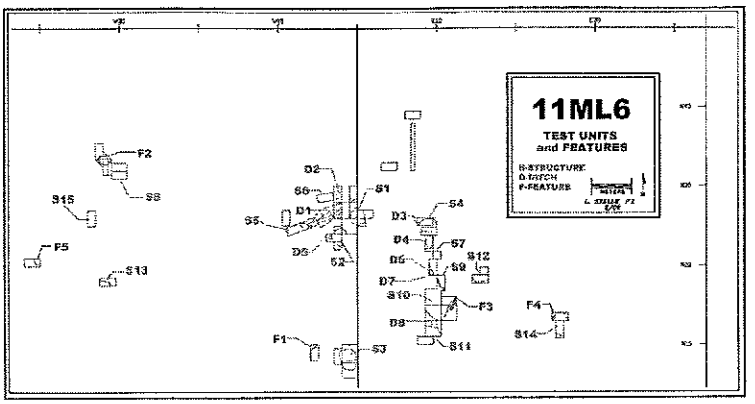

Figure 4: Test units and features 11ML6, 1988–1991.

TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF FEATURES FROM 11ML6, 1988–1991

Feature Number	Dimensions (LxWxD cm)	Specialized Use Area	Roof Elements	Artifacts	Function
S-1	280x180x45	Hearth	1.Rafters 2.Banked earth	Yes	Domestic quarters
S-2	240x>200x58	1. Hearth 2. Lead Smelting	1.Rafters 2.Banked earth	Yes	Domestic quarters
S-3	227x265x79	1. Hearth 2. Lead Smelting 3. Flint knapping 4. Brass working 5. Meat processing	1.Rafters 2.Banked earth	Yes	Domestic quarters
S-4	105x255x60	Hearth	1.Rafters 2.Banked earth	Yes	Domestic quarters
S-5	210x>100x82	Dog burial	1.Rafters 2.Banked earth	Yes	Domestic quarters
S-6	>200x>100x53	Hearth	1.Rafters 2.Banked earth 3. Cattail matting	Yes	Domestic quarters
S-7	325x200x66	Hearth	1.Rafters 2.Banked earth	Yes	Domestic quarters
S-8	>240x>200x67	Hearth	1.Rafters 2.Banked earth 3. Bearing posts	Yes	Domestic quarters
S-9	240x>100x82	None identified	1.Rafters 2.Banked earth	Yes	Domestic quarters
S-10	385x318x98	Hearth	1.Rafters 2.Banked earth 3. Bearing posts	Yes	Domestic quarters

TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF FEATURES FROM 11ML6, 1988–1991 (CONT.)

Feature Number	Dimensions (LxWxD cm)	Specialized Use Area	Roof Elements	Artifacts	Function
S-11	>200x189x66	Hearth	1.Rafters 2.Banked earth 3. Cattail matting	Yes	Domestic quarters
S-12	200x169x58	None identified	No roof observed	Yes	Firing position?
S-13	>200x>100x97	Hearth	1.Rafters 2.Banked earth	Yes	Domestic quarters
S-14	265x>100x65	1. Hearth 2. Meat processing	No roof observed	Yes	Domestic quarters
S-15	>200x>100x80	Hearth	Banked earth	No	Domestic quarters
D-1	>700x37x57	None identified	No roof observed	No	Communication ditch
D-2	>100x63x37	None identified	No roof observed	No	Communication ditch
D-3	>20x>41x45	None identified	No roof observed	No	Communication ditch
D-4	<300x77x70	Hearth	No roof observed	Yes	Communication ditch
D-5	>100x43x49	None identified	No roof observed	No	Communication ditch
D-6	>30x33x56	None identified	No roof observed	No	Communication ditch
D-7	>30x45x60	None identified	No roof observed	No	Communication ditch
D-8	120x77x49	None identified	No roof observed	No	Communication ditch
F-1	>68x>28x35	Hearth	N.A.	Yes	Fire basin
F-2	100x100x70	None identified	No roof observed	No	Roasting pit or sweat lodge?
F-3	>220x25x54	None identified	N.A.	No	Pot hunter's trench
F-4	>67x>52x88	None identified	N.A.	No	Recent sheep interment
F-5	>80x>80x72	None identified	No roof observed	No	Unkown

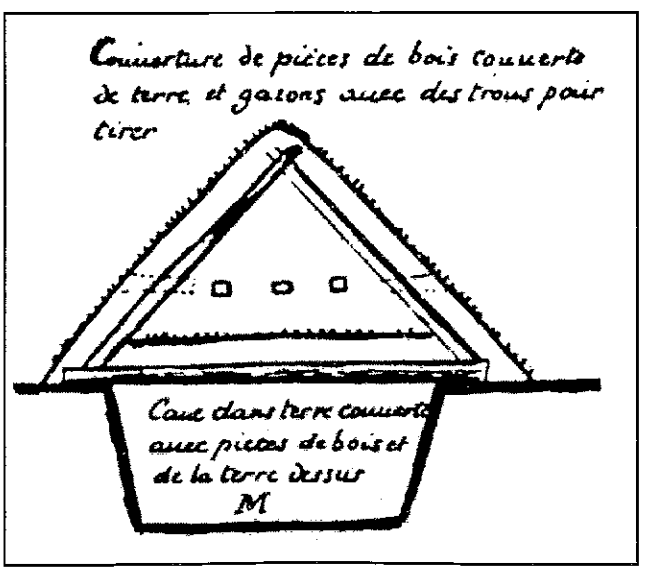

Figure 5: Detail from de Lery's *Plan du Fort* showing a profile of one of the fortification's internal structures.

wood protected by earth and sod with holes for shooting" (de Lery 1730). De Lery also described covered ditches connecting the dug-outs.

The architectural and design elements of 11ML6 are quite distinctive. Excavation has exposed fifteen semi-subterranean structures. They are often oval in plan view reaching a maximum length of 3.25 m at the base of the plow zone. The basins have a maximum depth of 98 cm below surface. Several activity areas can be identified including food preparation and tool production. Eleven of the fifteen demonstrate a differentiated use area for a fire. All but one of the hearths contained bone. Only one structure failed to yield artifactual material from below the plow zone.

All but two of the structures appear to have been roofed. The roofing system seems to have consisted of three elements: rafters, cattail mats, and banked earth. Structures No. 1, No. 2, No. 4, and No. 10 offered the best evidence of bearing elements or rafters. One might speculate that a pole was placed in the ground at 30 cm to 40 cm below surface and then tied off to one on the opposite margin of the structure thereby creating an arch. Lashings could then have been placed at each intersection of rafter material. Such a configuration would have produced a very strong grid work stabilized by the weight of the cattail mats and a thick layer of earth. The cattail matting preserved in Structures No. 3 and No. 6 includes specimens where the matting is present on both the upper and lower surfaces of a horizontal brass object. One interpretation would be that matting was employed on both the ceiling and floor. Smith's (1928:269-270) ethnobotany of the Meskwaki, indicates that *Typha latifolia*, or cattail, was sown into large mats and used as the exterior cover for the Meskwaki winter houses. The distinctive clay mottled lens in the feature fill suggests an exterior sheathing of banked dirt. The lens is typically 15 to 20 cm thick but is variable suggesting that the sheathing was thickest at the base and tapered to the peak. All but perhaps three of these structures were burned.

Several of the structures were connected by ditches or had ditches radiating from them. The ditches were substantial: 50 cm wide at the base of the plow zone and extending to 50 cm below surface. The configuration of the exposed passageways suggests the location of several structures as yet unidentified. Our data on these structures and ditches would seem to support the historical descriptions of the central design elements of the fort's interior.

No clear evidence of a wall or perimeter ditch has as yet been identified. Judging from the density of musket balls in the plow zone above the structures, the shooting ports revealed in the roofs of the domestic quarters of de Lery's detail M (Figure 5), and the apparent necessity of ditches for communication, any "wall" must have been low, porous, discontinuous, or displayed some combination of these properties. What is known is that the area of occupation does not extend beyond N35, S15, or E30. The western boundary remains unclear at this juncture, although on the basis of present evidence, it would seem to fall somewhere around W40. If this value holds, then this component of the site would be approximately 50 m by 70 m. Included on the drawing of the fort entitled *Sauvages Renards Attaques* (Figure 3b) is the statement that the fort was slightly less than an arpent square (arpent = 58.5 m). The correspondence seems good. Could the estimated 800 Meskwaki fit into such a limited space? The density of the structures in the areas investigated suggests something on the order of five per 100 square meters. Inferentially, this would yield 150 structures for the total area. So the answer to the question is yes, if each structure housed an average of 5.3 persons. Such a prospect certainly falls within the range of possibility given a hastily constructed defensive position under a state of siege. Moreover, one of St. Ange's scouts reported counting 111 cabins in his reconnaissance of the fort (Thwaites 1906:110).

In conclusion, the exposed features are consistent with French descriptions of the interior components of the 1730 Meskwaki fort. They are also quite distinctive if not unique. The issue of the "wall", its design and geometry, remains unresolved. However, the horizontal dimensions of the complex appear to coincide with at least one French estimate of the fort's size.

Material Culture and Diagnostics

The artifactual assemblage (Table 2) reveals several things regarding the cultural and temporal contexts of the people who occupied 11ML6. The predominance of war materials (Figures 6 and 7), their production on the site, as well as the volume of spent bullets, clearly indicate a state of battle and perhaps siege involving a Native American society. Diagnostic items date to the first half of the eighteenth century with the glass beads (Figure 8) suggesting a range of 1719 to 1731.

The historical issue of whether the combatants were the French and the Meskwaki is more difficult to discern. The most direct indication of a French presence is a military button (Figure 9). Alone it is not enough to conclude that the French were present. While the aboriginal culture remains diffuse, the recovery of a Bell Type I rim sherd (Figure 10) lends support. When taken as a whole, the data seem to indicate the Meskwaki. The low but measurable frequency of stone tools, the predominance

TABLE 2: NOTABLE ARTIFACTS RECOVERED FROM 11ML6, 1988–1991

Debris Category	Frequency	Observations
1. Bone tools	3	Notable is the low frequency (cf. Wittry 1963: 12-160).
2. Hafted bifaces	18	1. Madison points (Figure 6)
		2. Other = 4
3. Gunflints (Figure 7)	17	1. French spall type = 13
		2. Native manufacture = 4
4. Hammerstones	2	Fist-sized cobble displaying edge battering.
5. Stone pipes	1	Mudstone
6. Catlinite	3	Small fragment of pipe bowl = 1.
7. Hematite	1	Crayon showing grinding.
8. Native ceramics	14	1. Rim of Bell Type 1 (Figure 8) with other body sherd consistent with technical descriptions of same.
		2. Three plain beads.
9. Glass beads	19	1. Seven types (Figure 9).
		2. Four types also reported from Bell site.
		3. Narrow date range 1719-1731.
10. Bottle glass	2	Small, olive green body sherds.
11. Brass	38	1. Tinkling cones = 11.
		2. Triangles cut from sheet brass = 3.
		3. Button (Figure 10): simple dome, stamped, flat edge; brazed to back is solid, wedge shaped shank with drilled hole. Type is associated with the Louisiana Independent Companies (Brain 1979:189; Quimby 1966:78-79).
12. Copper	1	Half of a "C" bracelet.
13. Iron knives	10	1. Case = 4.
		2. Clasp = 4.
14.Gun parts	7	1. Barrel elements = 2.
		2. Vise cap = 1.
		3. Sear = 1.
		4. Trigger = 1.
		5. Ram guide =1.
		6. Mainspring = 1.
15.Iron awls/drifts	2	--
16.Lead objects	11	1. Smelting trajectory.
		2. Cubes of Galena = 4.
		3. "Whizzers" = 2.
		4. Bead = 1.
17.Lead musket balls	58	1. Balls = 50 (Figure 11).
		2. Shot = 8.
18. Metal wrapped thread	1	Filigree from a military uniform?

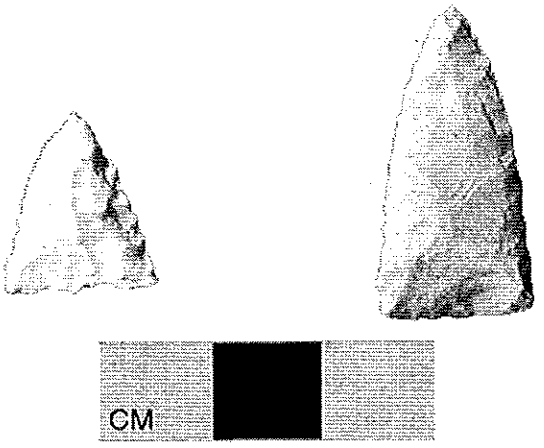

Figure 6: Typical Madison points. Note that the bimodal distribution of length–width ratios described for the Bell Site obtains (Wittry 1963: 29).

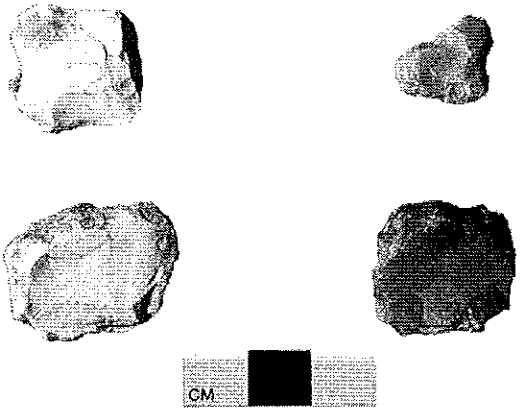

Figure 7: Gunflints. The two on the left are of Native manufacture. The one in the upper right is an exhausted, but classic, honey-colored French trade flint. The gunflint in the lower right may be of English origin.

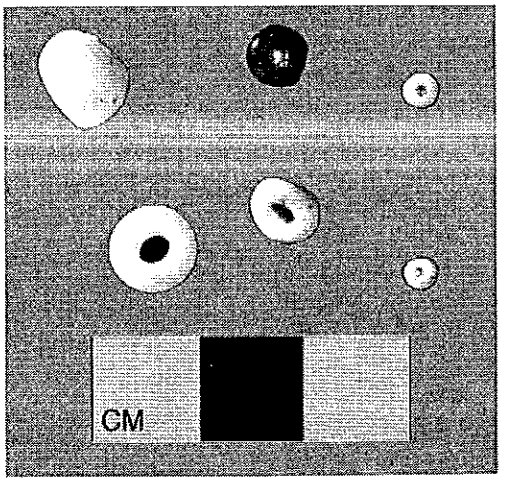

Figure 8: Glass beads.

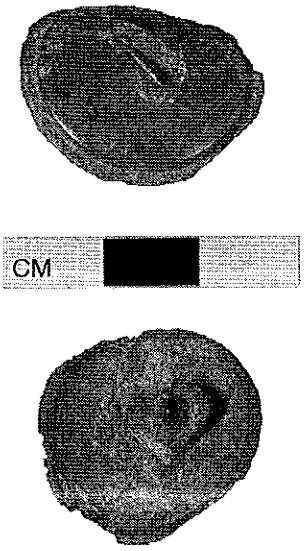

Figure 9: Brass button. The brass button is a simple dome, stamped, with a flat edge; brazed to the back is a solid, wedge-shaped shank with a hole drilled for fastening. The button was recovered from the plow zone between Structures 1 and 2. Following Quimby (1966:78-79), Brain (1979:189) assigns this type to the Middle Historic period, observing that it may have been associated with the Louisiana Independent Companies. That the Companies may have had a presence at Ft. de Chartres is intriguing.

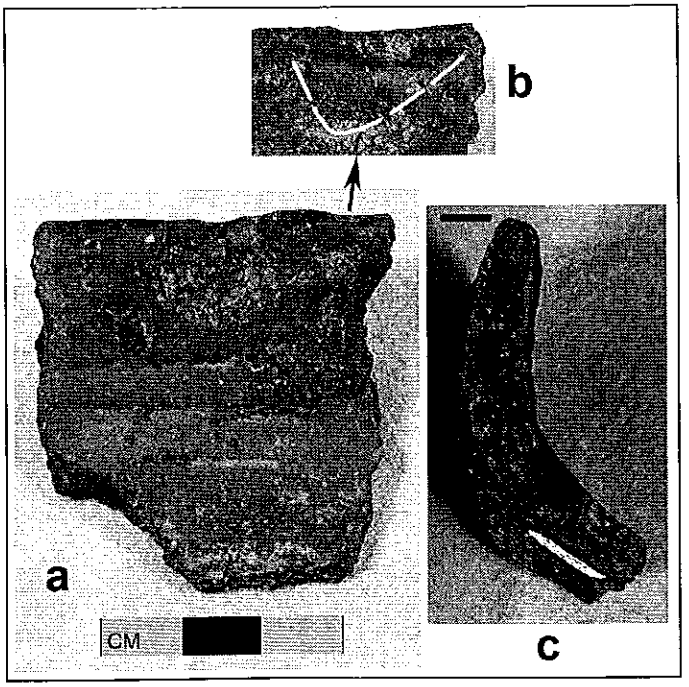

Figure 10: Bell Type 1 rim sherd. Recovered from below the burned roof of Structure 8 (46 cm below surface), the sherd conforms to descriptions of Bell Type 1 pottery (Wittry 1963: 21–25; Warren L. Wittry, personal communication 1991; Jeffery A. Behm, personal communication 2003). View a) is of the exterior displaying the smoothed, narrow-lined incising of the neck and shoulder, detail b) identifies the angled impressions of the lip treatment, and image c) reveals the profile.

of French trade goods, the types of glass beads, the characteristics of the projectile points, the lead ball production trajectory (Figure 11), the style of the knives, and the Bell Type 1 ceramic all argue in favor of this conclusion as reasonable.

Summary and Conclusion

A minimalist interpretation of the archaeological findings would be that 11ML6 has at least fifteen semi-subterranean structures with thirteen clearly displaying earth covered roofs. Most of these structures were connected by ditches. The evidence of armed conflict is substantial. The artifactual recovery reveals a Middle Historic period native society. In this view, 11ML6 is a battle site dating from the first half of the eighteenth century. A more liberal reading of the data would allow for the presence of the Meskwaki. While the data are not definitive, the conclusion seems reasonable. The evidence for the presence of the French is inconclusive. They cannot be demonstrated. The lack of artifactual data bearing on this issue may be a function of at least three facts. First, fewer than 200 members of the attacking force of 1400 were "French." Second, of these men the majority were irregulars (*habitant* and *coureur de bois*) sharing heavily in the material culture of Native American society especially under field conditions. And finally, the present research has centered on the fort locality. The French would have encamped some distance away. The Reaume narrative [Stelle 1992] suggests that the French encampments were more than a half mile from the fort. As the research proceeds, a more complete examination of these areas will be accomplished with the hope of isolating the French components of the site.

For the duration of our work our position has been that in order for 11ML6 to be interpreted as the 1730 Meskwaki fort it must demonstrate the presence of the Meskwaki, the French, the fort, and a 1730 horizon. Three of the four requirements have now been achieved.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Wayne Smith family for being such excellent caretakers of 11ML6 and for granting us such unlimited access to the site. The 100-plus students who worked with me over the years would especially like to thank Mrs. Smith for the brownies, cookies, and cold drinks that she so often shared. I would also like to thank my wife, Gina Walls, for her unflagging help in the field, lab, and in front of the computer. To all of those special students who toiled so steadfastly, paying for the pleasure of dirt work, I extend my many thanks. Lastly, let me observe that any errors in our work are exclusively mine.

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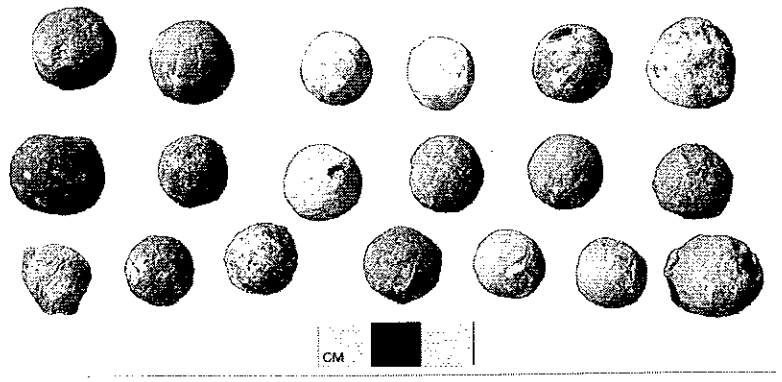

Figure 11: Typical lead musket balls.

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Appendix

In a letter from Hocquart to the French Minister dated 14 Nov 1730, Hocquart notes that he was sending the report of the victory over the "Renard Savages" (Thwaites 1906:120) to France with the son of the French commander, Coulon de Villiers (the younger). De Villiers was to travel aboard the ship *le Beauharnois*. De Villiers "is [also] charged with the duty of handing over to Monsieur de Belamy a Renard slave who has been Sent to Monsieur the general by Monsieur des Noyelles on behalf of the Miami Nation where that officer commands" (Thwaites 1906:120). As historical circumstances would have it, a painting of that slave survives. I am including it here (Figure 12) that we might be able to put a face on those many hundreds of Meskwaki that perished in this battle. Even in this black and white reproduction, the look in this warrior's eyes is...haunting.

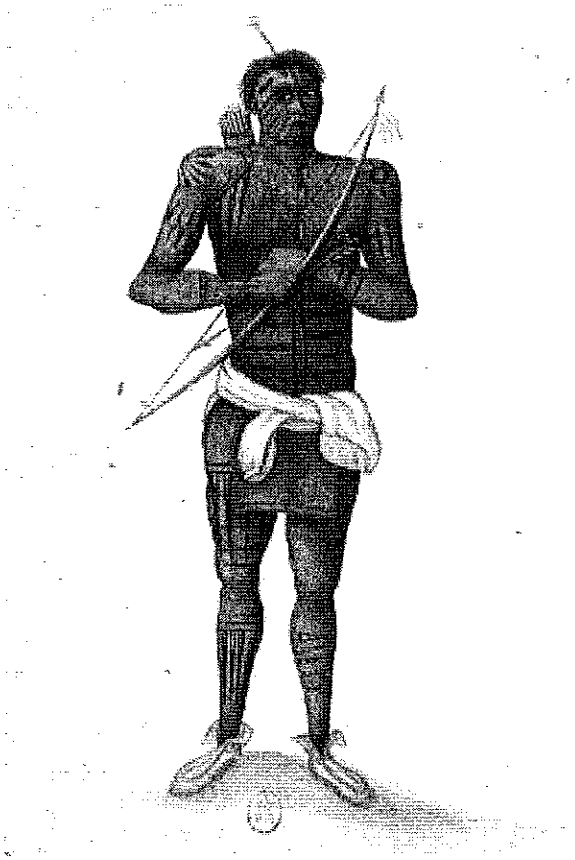

Figure 12: Entitled Guerrier Renard, a full color reproduction is available on-line thanks to a joint digital project between the American Library of Congress and the Bibliotheque national de France. The web address is: http://visualiseur.bnf.fr/CadresFenetre?O=IFN-7822108&M=notice