

Tippecanoe

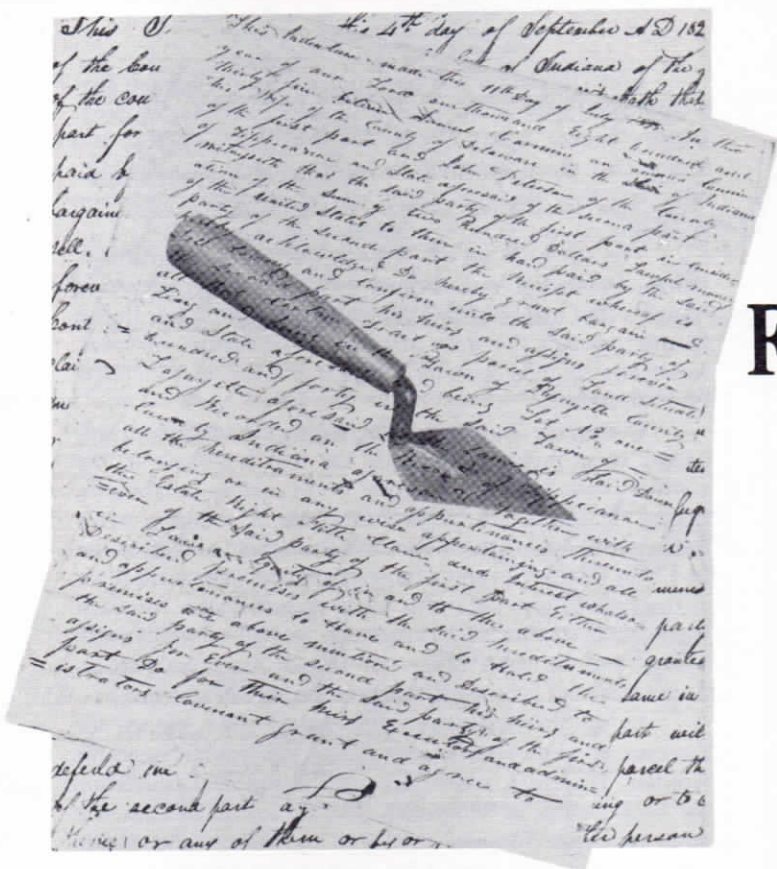
Tales



Published by
Tippecanoe County Historical Assn.
Lafayette, Indiana

No. 6

2019.062.72 C.1



DISCOVERING FORT OUIATENON: Its History and Archaeology

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The written history of Fort Ouiatenon* draws but a sketchy picture of events at the first white settlement in what was to become the state of Indiana. All too few documents have been brought to light, and no map of the trading post is known to have survived. For nearly 200 years, however, the forgotten remains of Indiana's early European heritage were preserved in the soil of Tippecanoe County. From these fragments of the past, a more complete picture

of life on the frontier could be pieced together; they needed only to be discovered. This is the tale of that discovery and the knowledge it has provided.

History of the Post

Fort Ouiatenon was a small but prosperous trading post established by the French in 1717. At that time, a temporary stockade was raised on the west bank of the Wabash River opposite a large village of Wea (or Ouiatenon) Indians. The French feared that this branch of the great Miami tribe was located too near the rival British traders and sent a meager garrison with only the intent of coaxing the Wea back to their former homelands near present-day Chicago. Since the fur trade was not going well in the East, the administration in Quebec saw this proposed removal of the Indian population as essential to their cause.

*Editor's Note. The words "fort" and "post" have been used interchangeably when referring to Ouiatenon throughout the years of research into its history. While this has been confusing to some, a check of the dictionary may help clear up the confusion. It defines a fort as "a fortified place . . . stationed with troops" and a post as "a military base where troops are stationed." Fort Ouiatenon was a trading post and it was stationed with troops; therefore, it may be called correctly either Fort or Post Ouiatenon.

The Indians, however, were not easily convinced to leave the rich river valley farmlands and hunting grounds they had come to know along the Wabash. They remained steadfast despite the efforts of their new neighbors across the river. Thus, the French were forced to stay on with the Wea in order to protect their own interests.

From such beginnings, Fort Ouiatenon grew in importance to the French Regime. Its key position between the regional capitals of Quebec in Canada and New Orleans in Louisiana guaranteed many visitors at the post following the spring thaws. Here, also, the exchange of goods for pelts was fast and profitable. As a result, *voyageurs*, who often came down the Wabash in their laden canoes, began to take up residence at Ouiatenon; many of them married Indian women and raised families. The flourishing commerce also attracted other native peoples, including such tribes as the Kickapoo, the Mascouten, and the Piankeshaw. At its height, Fort Ouiatenon and its surrounding villages possessed several thousand inhabitants.



Lead seal, dated 1733

The settlement continued to prosper under French control, but, in 1760, Fort Ouiatenon and the other posts in French Canada were turned over to the British as a consequence of the French and Indian Wars. In that year, a small band of soldiers began the journey from Detroit to the Wabash. After stopping first at Fort Miamis (present-day Fort Wayne, Indiana), they arrived at Ouiatenon and took command of the trade for the British crown.

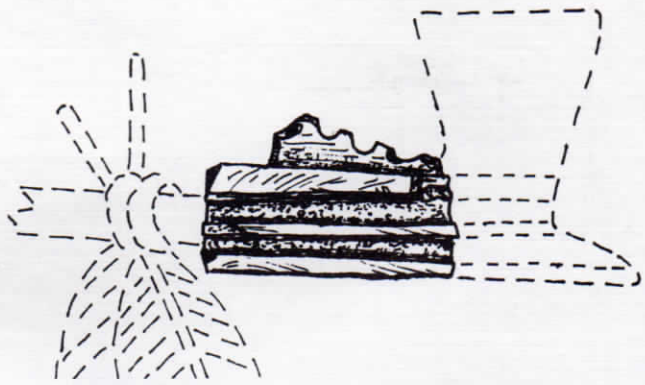


Lockplate fragment from British musket, manufactured by Samuel Galton of Birmingham, England

Unfortunately, the British did not enjoy the same friendly relations with the local tribes that had been true of the French partnership. For this reason, the new commandant, Lt. Edward Jenkins, held no great advantage against the rising tide of Pontiac's Rebellion. After only two short years of British rule, Fort Ouiatenon fell to the uprising.

Unlike many of the other posts taken at this time, Ouiatenon was captured without bloodshed and destruction. Indeed, the garrison surrendered peacefully after Lt. Jenkins had been lured to one of the villages and there held hostage. It is said, however, that the British were spared subsequent harm only through the efforts of influential French settlers who had continued to trade in the region.

Fragment of calumet pipebowl carved from catlinite



Fort Ouiatenon was later the scene of a council that would eventually bring an end to the hostilities. In 1765, Deputy Indian Agent George Croghan was abducted and brought to the post where he later met with Pontiac himself. Here they discussed terms of the peace that was soon to come.

The stockade on the Wabash was never regarrisoned. Hence, Ouiatenon was claimed by the French traders and trappers that had remained about the post with their Indian friends through the shift of power. The region, however, was nearly trapped clean by this time and the once lucrative trade diminished.

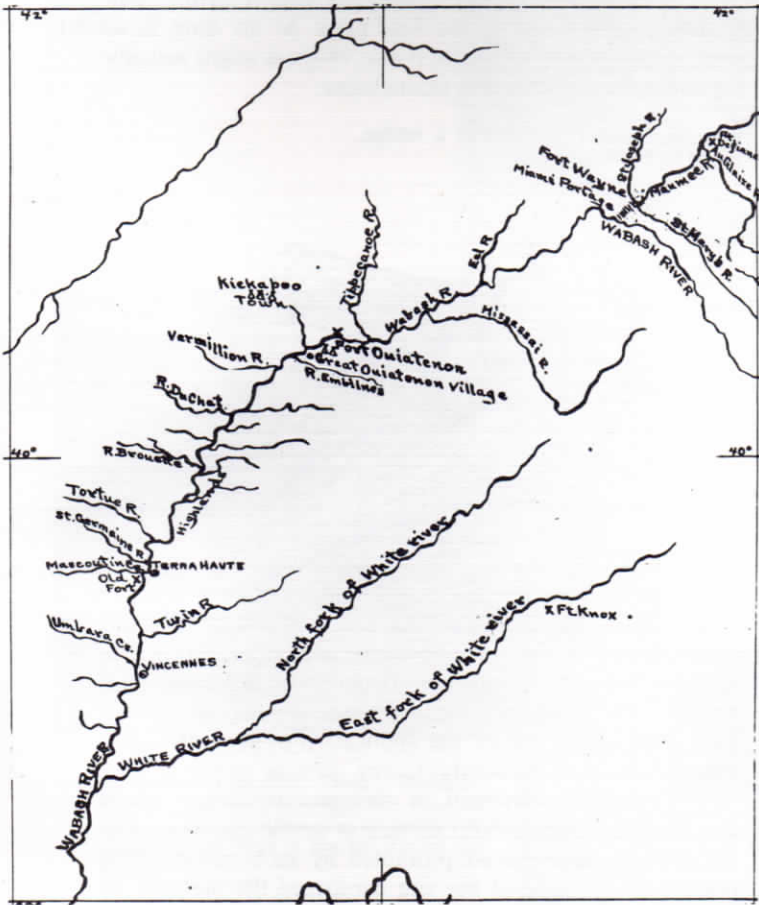
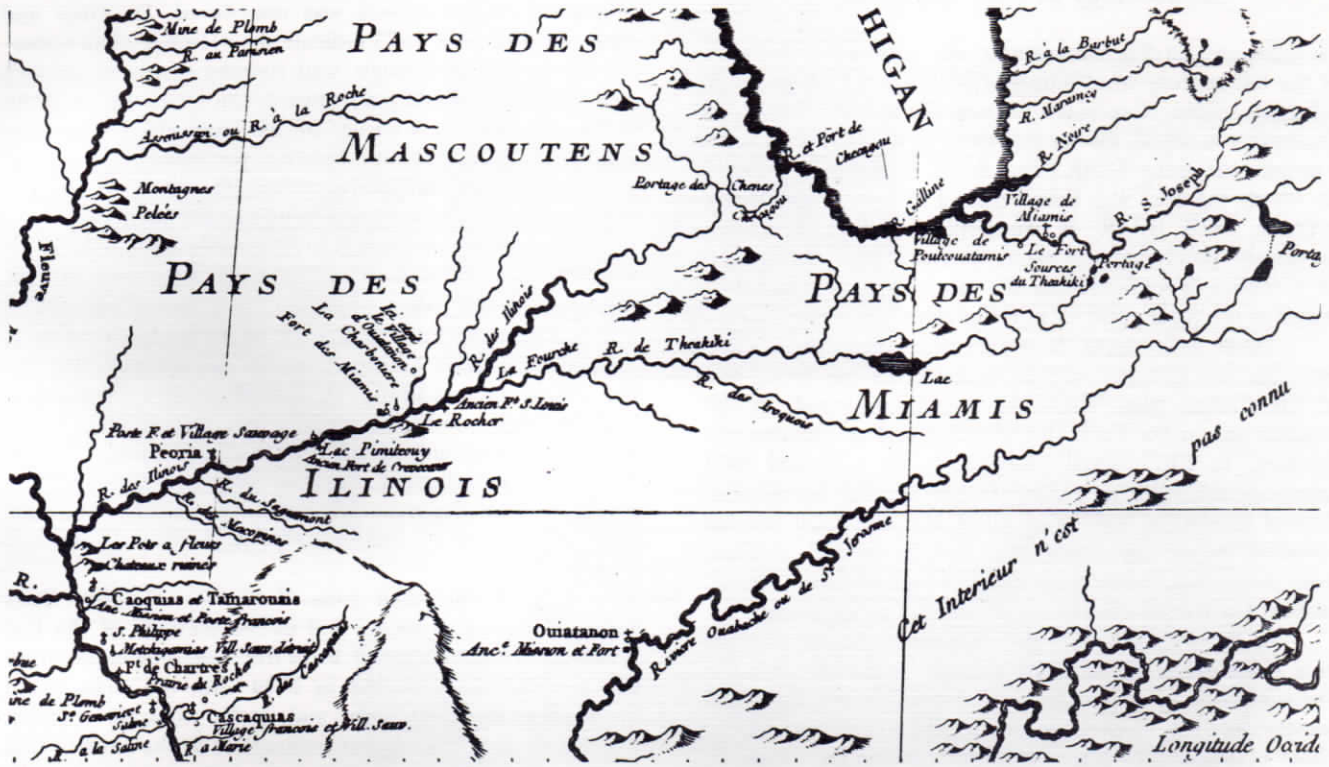
During the American Revolution, the settlement witnessed some minor intrigues as the two principals in the conflict vied for the loyalties of its native inhabitants. George Rogers Clark, representing the Americans, easily took control of Ouiatenon from his stronghold at Vincennes. In 1778, British Governor Henry Hamilton persuaded those at the post to give aid in his plans against Clark's forces. It was soon thereafter that Ouiatenon, and all of the Wabash Valley, was brought under the flag of the Free French-Americans, and independence from the British was won.

In the 1780s, native unrest in the area was on the increase as white settlers encroached ever farther onto the frontier. Therefore, most Europeans abandoned Ouiatenon for such locales as Vincennes. The decaying stockade was from that time forward employed by Indians and British agents as a staging ground for raids on the American settlements in Ohio and Kentucky.

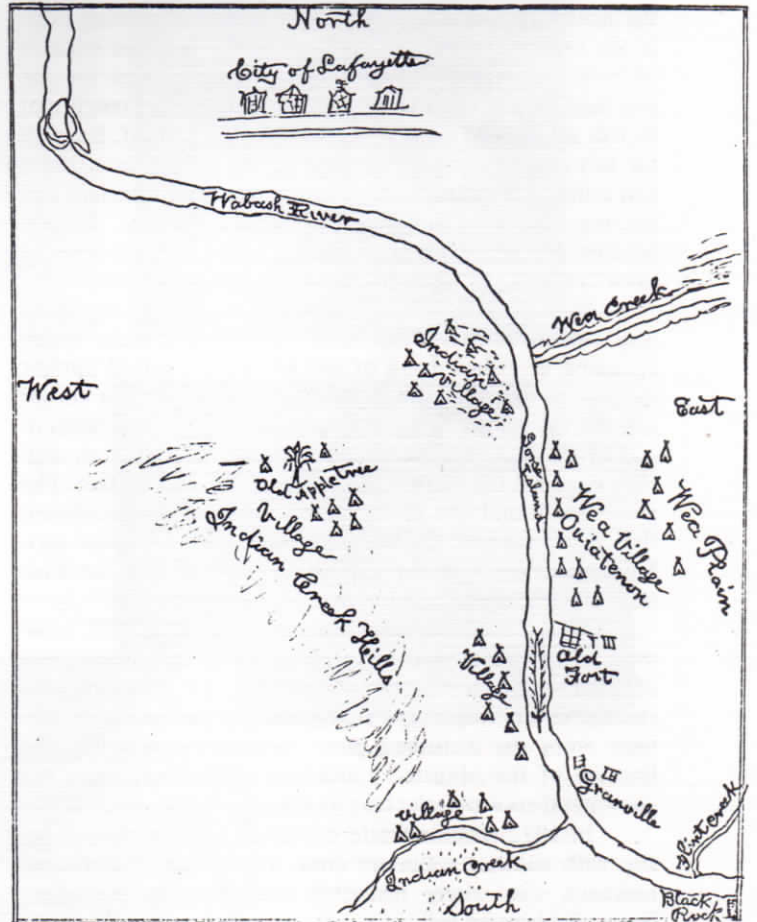
Continued attacks upon these new settlements caused President George Washington to wage an extensive military campaign in the Old Northwest. Finally, in 1791, after several disastrous defeats at the hands of the Indians, an expeditionary force under the command of General Charles Scott succeeded in destroying Ouiatenon and routing its peoples. The stockade, the surrounding villages, and the corn fields were all burned to the ground, leaving the Indians homeless and without crops.

Periodic floodings of the Wabash would soon mask the charred remains of this formerly thriving trading post. Beneath a blanket of silt, Ouiatenon went unnoticed as later pioneers entered the region to found the city of Lafayette. Many claimed knowledge of the old fort's position along the river, but these reports were often confused and conflicting. In time, even these memories dimmed, and the exact location of Fort Ouiatenon was lost.

From a 1755 map of "Nouvelle France."



From a map in the Chicago Historical Society



From the Draper Manuscripts in the archives of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin

Archaeology at Fort Ouiatenon

Interest in Fort Ouiatenon was renewed at the turn of the last century when a long forgotten grave, allegedly of a French soldier, was unearthed near the modern Sandridge Cemetery. In 1909, the local chapter of the D.A.R. erected a monument along South River Road, marking the ground on which the fort was then believed to have stood. Years later, in 1930, Dr. R. B. Wetherill of Lafayette, having previously purchased this land, financed the construction of a replica blockhouse on the site. That structure still stands as the focal point of Fort Ouiatenon Historic Park.

There were those, however, who were not satisfied that this low clearing on the riverbank was the actual site of the trading post. Thus, the search continued, in the archives and in the fields, for any clue to Fort Ouiatenon's location. In 1967, aerial photographs of a plowed field approximately one mile downriver from the blockhouse showed interesting soil color variations, and local citizens collected numerous eighteenth century period artifacts from its surface. When these finds became known, research on Fort Ouiatenon entered a new phase — archaeology.

In the summers of 1968 and 1969, test excavations were initiated by crews from Indiana University with the financial backing of that institution, the Indiana Historical Society, and the Tippecanoe County Historical Association. These investigations, under the direction of Dr. James H. Kellar, set out to determine whether or not the area where the newly discovered artifacts were recovered, a small ridge in the otherwise level floodplain, actually held the remains of Fort Ouiatenon. The archaeologists found that the site was that of a long-standing eighteenth-century French and British settlement, most probably Ouiatenon itself. Support for this conclusion was provided by the numerous artifacts and cultural features, such as refuse pits, wall trenches, and hearths, that were uncovered by the excavations. Largely because of this preliminary research, the site was entered onto the National Register of Historic Places in 1970.

Most notable of the features encountered was a deep wall trench oriented east and west. This trench, which appeared as a dark band of soil left by the rotted upright timbers it had contained, was thought to form a corner toward the south at its easternmost extent. The western end of the wall was not found by these excavators, though they exposed the feature for a distance of over 90 feet. The great length and size of this wall trench led to speculation that it represented the north stockade curtain of the fort. Subsequent work at the site has determined that the dark stain is probably part of the first of two north walls.

No excavations were undertaken during 1970; however, efforts were renewed in 1971 with a small workforce of local volunteers. Larry Chowning, an undergraduate student in anthropology, supervised the collection of artifacts from the disturbed plow zone that covers the site. Because of the admitted limitations of their expertise, the crew members were reluctant to attempt further excavation.

In 1972, Claude White continued examination of the site with another volunteer crew. This group of dedicated amateurs also wisely restricted themselves to the upper layer of cultivated soil.

The following year saw the return of Chowning as field director of the project. During that summer, however, the team ventured a small test excavation below the plow

zone in the southwestern area of the site. There a set of substantial wall trenches was discovered. Drawings and other records from 1973 indicate the presence of an apparent corner having a single wall running east-west and two parallel walls extending northward. Chowning believed this to be the southwest corner of the stockade. Excavations conducted since that time have not produced evidence that would contradict this interpretation, though it is clear that the corner would have to represent an early perimeter.

The Michigan State University Museum, which has many years of experience and an active program in historic site archaeology, began supervision of the archaeological investigations of Fort Ouiatenon in 1974. Dr. Charles E. Cleland, Curator of Anthropology for the Museum, directed the overall project. Judy D. Tordoff, a Ph.D. student in anthropology, conducted summer field activities and served as research assistant for the project. Between 1974 and 1976, they coordinated extensive research supported principally by the Tippecanoe County Historical Association with Department of Interior Historic Preservation Grants-in-Aid.

One of the major goals of the first Michigan State excavations was to locate and define sections of the fort perimeter. Toward this end, three five-foot-wide exploratory test trenches were started in 1974 with the ambition of intersecting the west, east, and north stockade curtains. The North Test Trench was incomplete at the close of that summer, and work resumed on it the following year.

A number of features, including several distinct wall trenches, were found by the field crew. At the time, however, speculation as to which, if any, of these might actually represent the stockade was inconclusive.

Iron axe head, later used as a wedge,
found in the forging area



Also in 1974, a cooperative research project was initiated with the Geosciences Department of Purdue University. This National Science Foundation supported program sought to evaluate the application of proton magnetometer and soil resistivity survey data in archaeological research. Such equipment is designed to detect heavy concentrations of metals, as well as subtle differences in soil content. Excavations prompted by an extremely high reading in one area of the site confirmed the presence of large quantities of iron artifacts and waste products, animal bone, and ash. These, together with a large hearth-like feature discovered in the same place, suggest that this was once a forging area within the fort.



a.



b.

a. D.A.R. meeting at supposed site of Fort Ouiatenon

b. Dr. Richard Wetherill searching with metal detector for Ouiatenon artifacts



c.

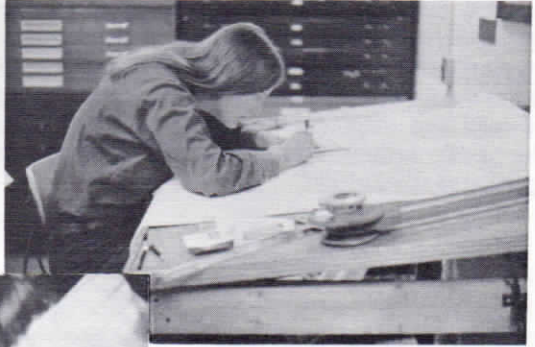


d.

c, d. Volunteers collect artifacts in plow zone at site of Fort Ouiatenon in early 1970s.



e.



g.

e, f, g. Archaeologists from Michigan State University excavate the site of Fort Ouiatenon during the summers and analyze their finds in the lab during the winters.



f.

Completion of the North Test Trench in 1975 revealed several more wall trenches, each aligned east-west, a probable basement of a structure, and most significantly, a deep well. This feature, later determined to lie within the late stockade, was nearly five feet square. The well was excavated by the archaeologists to a depth of 18 feet below the present ground surface where a cribbing of large beams hewn from hickory wood was found preserved at the water table. Artifacts found within the excavated fill suggest French construction and use of the well. The edge of another well was discovered in 1977, approximately 100 feet to the south.

Other work performed in 1975 included the excavation of a 30 x 30 foot block which the archaeologists hoped would expose the northwest corner of the stockade. The placement of this block was determined through extrapolation of Dr. Kellar's north stockade line and the most probable west stockade section indicated in the previous season. Among other cultural features, a major wall trench extended north and south through the approximate center of the 30 foot square. Furthermore, it was noted that this feature neatly aligned with one in the West Test Trench, 80 feet south. No wall ran perpendicular to form a corner with this apparent stockade, however. Excavations were therefore continued farther north.

Immediately north of the block, two parallel wall trenches turned east from the stockade. Another test unit placed 80 feet east of this corner indicated that the line of the walls continued for that distance. Thus, it was believed that this line represented the north curtain of that perimeter and that Dr. Kellar's wall trench may have been from an earlier and smaller stockade of which the west wall had not yet been located.

Excavations were later undertaken to the south of the West Test Trench, and the late west stockade was again detected. Although preservation is poor toward the southern reaches of the site because of wash from a flood channel, a corner was faintly noted. End to end, Tordoff's west wall proved to be some 240 feet in length.

In 1976, because of funding difficulties, Tordoff returned for an abbreviated field season with a drastically reduced crew. Efforts that year were concentrated on a well-preserved structure which had been pinpointed by the magnetometer survey and partially excavated in 1975. This feature, protected from extensive plow damage by masses of rock and other construction materials, was located in the south central area of the site, though within the speculated stockade.



Door handle found in ruins of the trader's storehouse in 1976

The structure proved to be a small semi-subterranean storehouse, measuring 9 x 12 feet. The remains indicated that a shallow pit had been dug into the old ground surface and upright posts placed about it. These posts, which were found intact though badly charred, served to raise the ceiling of the structure to a height accommodating comfortable entry and use. There was also evidence of a narrow doorway and either shelving or platforms of wood against the interior walls. Similar buildings are known from other sites of the period.

Artifacts contained in the structure and from several nearby pits show that the storehouse had at one time held a wide variety of goods for the trade. These items were of both French and British origins, and many were found in fine condition. Thus, the building may have seen long use through the change in command at the fort, only to be destroyed in a rapid fire.

I succeeded Judy Tordoff as field director and research assistant for the Michigan State University project in 1977, and under my supervision test excavations were continued across the northern half of the site. These ten-foot squares were patterned in such a way as to provide a cross-section of information on the area and to gather a more varied set of data. Assistance to the historical association in funding these efforts has come from such sources as the HUD Community Development Program and the Purdue Department of Sociology and Anthropology.

During that year, several stockade sections were encountered, reaffirming conclusions drawn from previous excavations. In addition, the location of the late east stockade curtain was defined. Numerous smaller wall trenches representing buildings in and around the fort were also found.

Iron key found buried with the male adult



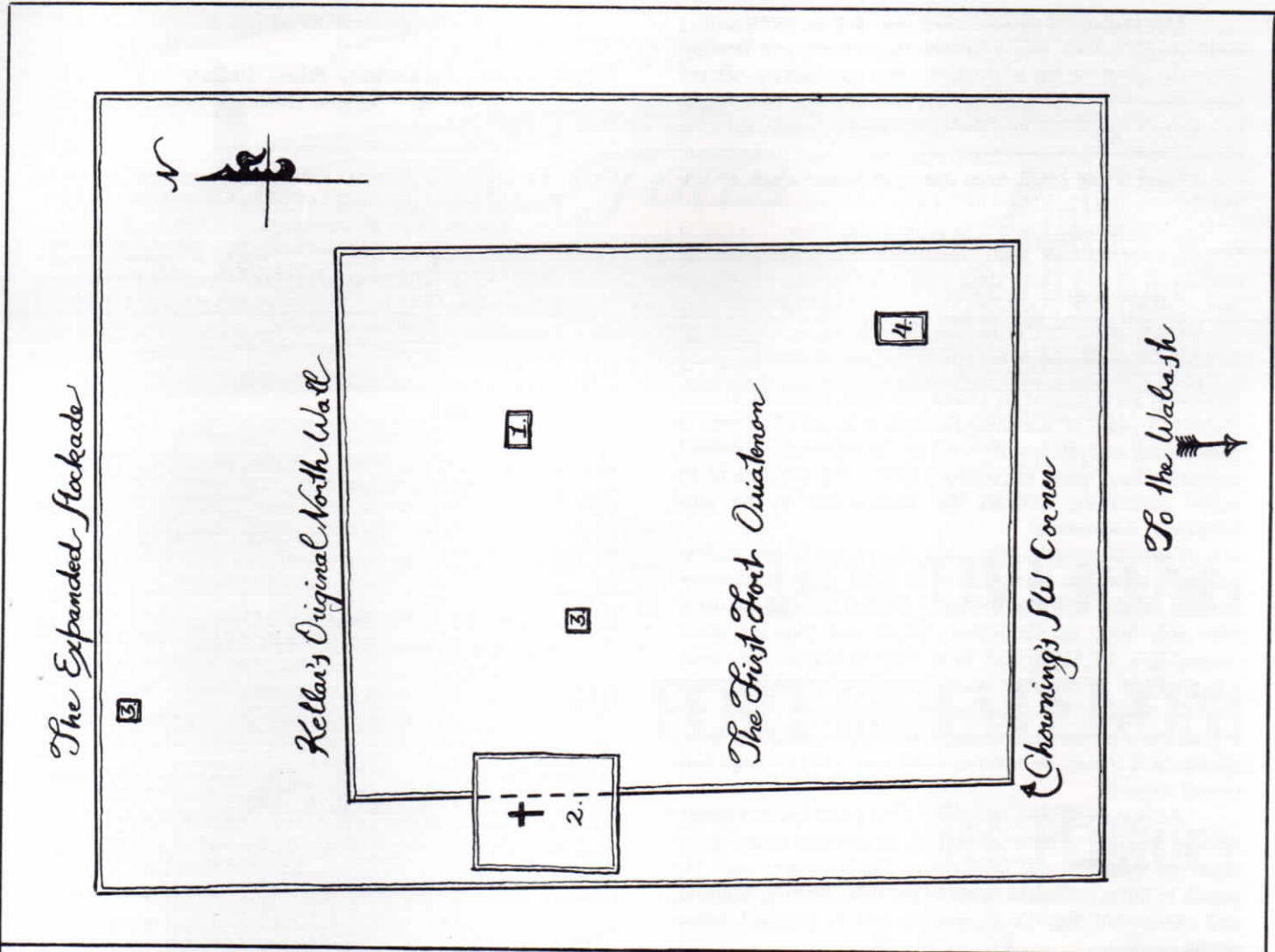
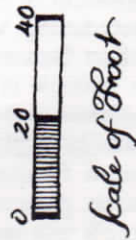
Discovery of the post graveyard was a noteworthy event of 1977. Previous to that time, there had been no knowledge of any burial ground in the immediate site area. Four unmarked graves near the west wall of the fort, however, left no doubt that Ouatennon's dead had been laid to rest within the confines of the expanded stockade.

Two of the skeletons were removed for further study by specialists on human bone; it was found that both individuals had been of European descent. One of these, a male adult, proved to be of particular interest. Close examination of the bones revealed several severe cuts to the head and back, indicating a violent attack from the rear. The historical circumstances of this frontiersman's death remain a mystery.

At the end of that summer, the second well at the site was located. Although it was only partially excavated, layerings of soil within the upper part of the shaft indicate that the well had been abandoned and purposely refilled by occupants of the fort.

A Sketch of the Fort at Ouatatonon
to show Major Archaeological Finds
and Interpretations:

1. The Forge
2. The Cemetery
3. A Well
4. Trader's Storehouse



Archaeological efforts were resumed in 1978 with a small group of students from Michigan State and Purdue, aided as usual by volunteers from the community. At the time of this writing, field records and artifacts from those excavations are only beginning to undergo analysis. It is clear, however, that significant additions to our understanding of the site will result from this most recent work.

Progress and Prospects

Archaeology at Fort Ouiatenon has brought about a basic knowledge of the trading post and its peoples. Only one decade after the first spadeful of earth was removed from the site, researchers have now learned more about the structural arrangement of Ouiatenon than had been accomplished in years of searching through archives. Moreover, as painstaking analysis is performed on the materials recovered, evidence from these excavations offers the promise of insights concerning frontier life unrecorded in the terse historical documents.

From this work, inferences of interest to the anthropologist, historian, and sociologist alike may be derived. Studies of the artifacts found at Ouiatenon and at other sites may lead to deductions about the complex interconnections of trade and how they changed over time. Examination of animal bone found in refuse pits may provide valuable information regarding food habits and exploitation of the environment. And there are many other questions that may be addressed and answered through continued research.

Archaeology is of necessity a long and tedious undertaking. For every hour of actual excavation many more must be spent in the laboratory. Furthermore, such research requires sufficient funds to provide stipends, housing, and equipment for the excavators and to conduct subsequent analysis.

Financing the archaeological investigations at Fort Ouiatenon has been a continuing challenge. The local community, however, has at all times endeavored to meet this challenge. Each year, private donations and public fundraising activities, such as the Feast of the Hunters' Moon, lay the foundation upon which the research is built. The generosity and involvement of concerned citizens has thus helped to promote scholarship, historical interest, and community pride. The Fort Ouiatenon archaeological project has served as a fine example of the benefits to be gained through civic and academic cooperation.

Much has already been learned, but there is much yet that can be ascertained from the data made available as excavation and analysis proceeds. The discovery of Fort Ouiatenon, therefore, is not merely an isolated event of 1967; it is a continuing process.

Illustrations by Martin A. Wyckoff

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Vergil E. Noble, Jr., received the BS with honors in anthropology from Michigan State University in 1974. He expects to receive the PhD in 1981. In addition to being field director at the Fort Ouiatenon site, Noble has been involved in nearly a dozen other archaeological sites and has presented papers on several phases of Ouiatenon archaeology. He has studied archaeology and ethnohistory of North America, the French Regime in the New World, culture contact and change, and research methodologies.