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Maintaining the Military

Blacksmithing at Fort Michilimackinac, Michigan

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Located at the northern tip of the Lower Peninsula of Michigan, Fort Michilimackinac (1715–1781) served as a major trading post on the frontier during the eighteenth century and was of key importance to both the French (1715–1760) and British (1761–1781) fur trade economies. Within this frontier community, the blacksmith was instrumental in repairing and producing the metal objects required for trade, military, and civilian activities. Frontier communities, whether trade posts, civilian settlements, or military posts, required a blacksmith. Survival and prosperity on the eighteenth-century frontier relied upon a variety of metal objects. Blacksmiths provided necessary repair services and manufactured goods, including building materials; guns and ammunition; objects for food production, processing, and consumption; plus a wide range of tools.

Within the context of fur trade militarized fortifications, blacksmiths and gunsmiths were seen as crucial members of society who aided in the success of the trade industry and in everyday survival (Brown 1980; Morand 1994). Furthermore, due to the fact that all groups within the community would have sought the blacksmith's services, he would have been a key component in the effort to maintain relationships among the diverse communities that occupied these sites. For instance, it is well known that Sir William Johnson, superintendent of Indian Affairs for the British government, often distributed orders that ensured American Indians who conducted trade at militarized trading posts received blacksmithing services for free (Johnson 1921–1965: 11:808). In these cases, not only did the blacksmith assist in meeting material needs, but his services also aided in broader

political strategies and alliance formation for Great Britain. Following the conclusion of the Seven Years' War in 1763, Great Britain realized the importance of ensuring peaceful trade with the Ottawa, Ojibwa, and Potawatomi, among other tribes, who frequently traded at Fort Michilimackinac. These tribes had also supported the French and looked to Great Britain to continue trade and political protocols, including gift-giving practices (Kent 2004; White 1991). By providing blacksmithing services for free to those who traded at Fort Michilimackinac, Johnson leveraged the blacksmith to ensure good relations more broadly with the American Indian tribes of the western Great Lakes.

During the eighteenth century, the blacksmith's workshop also functioned as a common space within the community that promoted intermingling between groups as people waited for their goods and services, and often served as a place to stay abreast of community happenings (Andrews 1977: 2; Landers 2003: 5–6). During the eighteenth century, the presence of a blacksmith and his various roles in supporting the community were essential to success within the frontier setting, as can be seen at sites like Fort Michilimackinac. Archaeological data and historic documents describe the use, trade, and demand for iron products at the fort and provide insight into the blacksmith's work and his role, more broadly, within the community. The inevitable need for the services of a blacksmith to produce or repair metal objects can be seen through the analysis of axes and animal traps recovered from the site. By examining the blacksmith and his work, we are able to gain an understanding of the importance of individuals and craftsmen, like the blacksmith, to the success of the fur trade and European expansion in North America.

“The Key and the Door . . . for All Peoples”

Fort Michilimackinac was the center of a consistently expanding, vibrant frontier community throughout the eighteenth century (Figure 2.1). The Jesuit missionary Father Dablon described Michilimackinac and alluded to the strategic political and economic potential of a militarized fort in the region stating, “It [Michilimackinac] is situated exactly in the strait connecting the Lake of the Hurons and that of Illinois, and forms that key and the door, so to speak, for all the peoples” (Thwaites 1902: 94). For approximately 30 years prior to the fort's construction, the French had occupied the Straits of Mackinac, building Jesuit missions and small military outposts.

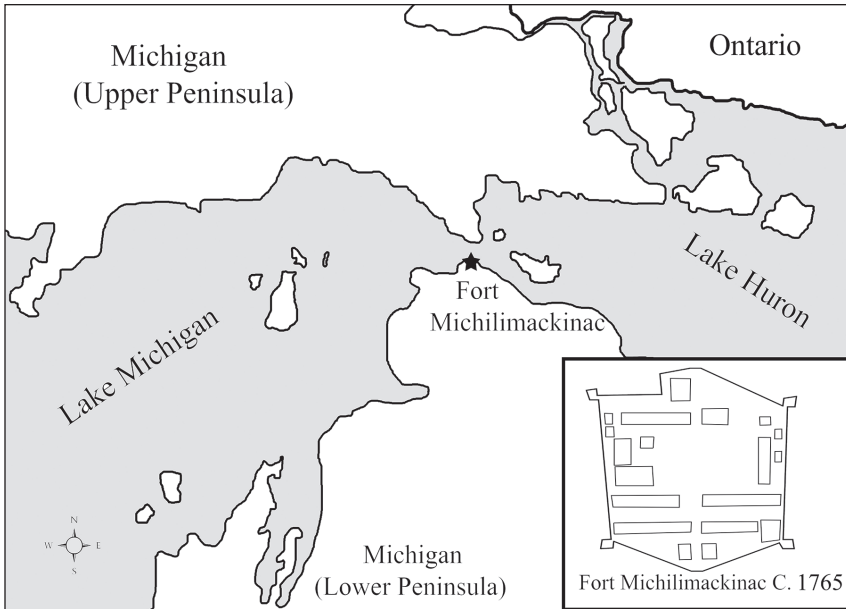


Figure 2.1. Location of Fort Michilimackinac on the northern shore of the Lower Peninsula of Michigan.

The Ottawa, Ojibwa, Potawatomi, Huron, and other native tribes engaged in economic and political interactions with the French, primarily trading furs. By 1715, the fur trade economy had grown sufficiently to require the presence of a strategic, militarized fortification in order to maintain and express political-economic control over the region.

The Michilimackinac community quickly expanded with the support of trade activities, stressing the capacity of the small fortified trade post. The palisade and interior buildings went through several phases of renovation and reconstruction. In the 1730s, the fort was expanded to accommodate more military personnel, stores, and row houses (Heldman 1984, 1991). The increase in trade activity created a competitive market, with a number of trade companies entering Fort Michilimackinac for the first time during the French military occupation of the region (Armour and Widder 1986; Kellogg 1935). More trade led to a diverse labor market, which intensified the complexity of business transactions and the types of work available to traders and non-traders within the community. The number of individuals participating in craft industries at the fort increased along with the success and growth of the fur trade (Morand 1994).

In 1760, British general Jeffery Amherst and the governor of New France, Pierre François de Rigaud, Marquis de Vaudreuil-Cavagnal, agreed upon the Articles of Capitulation which ceded much of colonial New France to Great Britain. A year later, British captain Henry Balfour and approximately 45 military personnel began occupation of Fort Michilimackinac. Upon their arrival at the fort, Balfour “found the Indians in pretty good temper, which induced him to send back 75 of his party, in order to reduce the consumption of provisions, so that his command consist[ed] but of two subs, one sergeant, and forty four rank and file” (Gladwin to Amherst, November 5, 1761, Amherst Papers).

As mandated by treaty following the Seven Years’ War, French civilians were allowed to maintain the Catholic religion and continue occupying their homes inside the fort (Armour and Widder 1986; Shortt and Doughty 1918). Although the French occupants and traders now lived in a militarized trade post controlled by Great Britain, the British soldiers relied on them to maintain fur trade activities and often to serve as liaisons with the American Indian traders (Rich 1960: 38; Stevens 1916: 173). With the sudden population growth, construction of several new buildings, including a barracks, began almost immediately. Both the presence of French civilians inside the British fort and the reliance on these civilians to maintain the local economy and provide regional intelligence gave rise to complex economic relationships that would have affected local craft industries, including blacksmithing.

By 1765 a sizeable community had been established outside the fort. The small village, historically referred to as the “suburbs,” consisted of approximately 100 houses and included people from a variety of nationalities and cultural backgrounds, including British, French, French Canadian, Irish, Scottish, Métis, Ottawa, Ojibwa, Potawatomi, and Huron (Magra 1765; Morand 1994: 8; Quaipe 1928: 69). Yet despite the community’s consistent growth and success, the population and activity of both military personnel and civilians fluctuated with the seasons. During the winter scarcely 50–100 people lived there, while during the warm months potentially 1,000–2,000 people could be present within and outside the fort walls, conducting trade or other business (Armour and Widder 1986: 22–23; Widder 1999). Movement of supplies was seasonal. Supplies were requested during the summer months in order to stockpile goods for the winter months, since travel from October through April was often restricted, if not impossible.