



Program Bulletin- Civilians at Michilimackinac Program

Program Overview

This program is designed to describe the larger civilian community at Michilimackinac. The program includes information about the Anishnaabek, fur traders and merchants, the clergy, enslaved people, soldiers' families, and others who lived at and traveled through Michilimackinac in the 1770s.

Background

Michilimackinac was established around 1715 by the French military. However, long before the arrival of Europeans, the area was a gathering place for the Anishnaabek and people from other native nations. These people gathered near the Straits of Mackinac annually to fish, trade, and conduct religious ceremonies. Soon after the fort was established, French Canadian families began settling in the new community and using it as a hub for fur trading operations. In 1761, British troops arrived to take control of the region and manage the fort. With this change in power, new groups of civilians were also allowed to move to the area and operate fur trading businesses. By the mid- to late 1770s perhaps as many as 2,000 people gathered at the fort during the summer trading season.

Anishnaabek

The Anishnaabek came to the shores of the straits every summer to fish, trade, conduct ceremonies, and generally gather with larger communities. Labor in their communities was often gender-divided. Men often went on extended hunting, fishing, and diplomatic trips. Women were generally responsible for taking care of young children, growing fields of food further inland, making clothing, and managing other work including building and taking care of their homes. As the French Canadians and later the British moved into the area, much of the work that Anishnaabek had been previously accustomed to evolved. They began hunting and processing more furs to be sold to the traders in exchange for high-quality merchandise like fabric and metal goods from around the world. After the British arrived, regional Anishnaabek politics took on increasingly complex tones. A religious revival, paired with dissatisfaction with British policies, led to the fort being taken over by a group of Ojibwe and Sauk in 1763. Michilimackinac remained without a British garrison for a year as a result of the attack..

In addition to business and politics, some of the Anishnaabek converted to the Catholic religion. Church records show many people being baptized at St. Anne de Michilimackinac and within about a ten-year span between the 1740s and 1750s there were over 14 marriages documented between French men and Anishnaabek women. These relationships brought new opportunities to both groups involved and created new opportunities for their children who often spoke multiple languages and were able to move between the two cultures in a way that hadn't been possible in the past. These civilians would become some of the most successful fur traders and community leaders.

French Canadians

As mentioned earlier, very soon after the fort was established, families began to make their way to Michilimackinac from places like Montreal and Detroit. One of the most well-documented of these were the Chevaliers. Monsieur Chevalier moved between Michilimackinac and Montreal regularly for business and after he died in the late 1740s, his widow, Marie Francois, kept up the business for about another ten years. Their business likely continued to be successful, as by the time she left to retire to Montreal, she had four properties to sell.

After the British military arrived at Michilimackinac the French Canadian civilians were allowed to stay. They maintained their private property, their businesses, and their religion. From the British side of things, having these folks around could be beneficial in learning about their Indigenous neighbors. In 1767, commanding officer Robert Rogers went so far as to use the knowledge of Constance Cardin to spy on the Ojibwe at Cheboygan and the Odawa at L'Arbre Croche. While we don't know really what she found during her spy mission, she was paid well, receiving £12.18 for her services.

Much of the domestic and manual labor in Michilimackinac's household was completed by enslaved people. Perhaps as many as one out of every four households included enslaved laborers. These people were Indigenous and Black and lived and worked inside the homes of their enslavers. The church participated in the slave trade by baptizing the people that were enslaved, their children and by acting as enslavers themselves. Priests coming into places like Michilimackinac used the extra labor for domestic chores, as well as church-related work such as assisting with mass.

Jesuits

The Jesuits were the first Catholic missionaries to come to the area, arriving in the 1670s. They built the church of St. Anne in 1743 and it became the center of Catholic religious activities at Michilimackinac. Jesuit missionaries recorded marriages, baptisms, and internments in carefully kept books. The church records continue to be a valuable asset for learning about civilian life at Michilimackinac.

While their primary concern was the religious needs of the people around them, the Jesuit performed other roles in the community. The longest serving priest, Father Du Juanay, worked during 1763 to keep hostilities at a minimum and was able to protect some of the people around him during the Ojibwa attack. As the last resident priest, he left in 1765, but the civilian community continued to maintain the church and its property even as they began moving to Mackinac Island in 1779 with itinerant priests and lay people. St. Anne's Church as a parish is still active on Mackinac Island today.

British

Although the business community made up the bulk of the population, there were also around 70 British soldiers stationed at the fort in the 1770s. These men were sometimes permitted by the military to bring their wives and children with them. The married women worked for the military on key tasks that helped to keep the soldiers healthy and ready for military service. The most common work performed by the military's support system was laundry. It could be a complicated job that paid well and was critical to keep the men healthy. Enlisted men's wives and children were eligible for benefits provided at the officer's judgment. These usually included food and housing.

Officers' wives also made their way to Michilimackinac, although in very small numbers. Only two, Elizabeth Brown Rogers and Rebecca Blair DePeyster, are recorded. Both were from relatively well-off backgrounds and left a mark on the community, both within the limits of their

husband's work as well as in the local community in many ways, including teaching English, hosting events, and providing advice and support to the men and families in the regiment.

