

Fort Mackinac Cannon Firing Demonstration Bulletin

Program Overview:

One of the most memorable parts of a visit to any Fort is the cannons, and Fort Mackinac's soldiers in the 1880s agreed. While fighting occurred on Mackinac Island during the War of 1812, Fort Mackinac's history has been peaceful. Fort Mackinac even served as the headquarters of a National Park from 1875 – 1895. Yet, cannons continued to play a role at Fort Mackinac until the Fort was closed in 1895. This program will explore how cannons were used daily at Fort Mackinac in the 1880s and how to load and fire a cannon.

Fort Mackinac's Cannons in the 1880s:

In the 1880s, Fort Mackinac served as the Headquarters for Mackinac National Park. Soldiers were stationed at Fort Mackinac to oversee the park but were expected to maintain their regular soldierly duties. A standard military custom in the 1880s was to fire cannons to mark the beginning and end of the soldiers' workday and other important occasions at the fort. These ceremonial shots are called "salute shots." Salute shots don't have any cannonballs, just a small amount of black powder. Salute shots were fired at reveille to start the workday, and then at "retreat" when the soldiers lowered the flag for the day. They fired for national holidays like Independence Day or Memorial Day. Soldiers also fired the cannon to mark the passing of important people, like President Ulysses S. Grant in 1885. These firings were so common that tourist boats from St. Ignace would sail into the harbor at sunset to watch the cannons.

Loading and Firing the Cannon:

Firing a salute shot from a cannon follows a similar process to firing a cannon on the battlefield. First, a soldier at the rear of the gun will place their thumb over the vent of the cannon; this is called thumbstalling. Thumbstalling closes off one of the entrances to the cannon and helps prevent an early explosion of the charge. Then, the soldier at the front of the gun inserts the sponge end of the ramrod down the barrel of the cannon. The ramrod extinguishes any sparks or embers that might still be in the barrel. Once the gun is safe to fire, the charge is loaded, placed in the barrel, and then pushed down the barrel with the ramrod. The soldiers at the front of the gun then move away from the barrel.

The next step is to prime the cannon, a two-part step. First, a soldier will take a brass spike called a "gunner's pick" and send it down the vent of the cannon. The charge should be right under the vent so the gunner's pick will punch holes into the charge, allowing it to ignite. Then, the soldiers place a friction primer into the vent. A friction primer is a brass tube with a wire attached. The tube is filled with finely ground gunpowder, and where the tube and wire are attached is fulminated mercury. Fulminated mercury is highly reactive to friction. The cannon is now ready to fire. A soldier attaches a lanyard to the friction primer wire, stands a few paces away, and waits for the order. Once the command "fire" is given, the soldier pulls the lanyard, which pulls the wire, setting off the friction primer, which sets off the charge and fires the cannon!