

Fort find looms large as city marks 150th year

MUM'S THE WORD

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Visitors make their way through the Fort St. Joseph dig site in this file photo during an Aug. 1 open house. The fort's whereabouts were unknown for years until an archaeological team from Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo pinpointed it in 1998. A subsequent WMU team uncovered indisputable evidence of the fort four years later.

NILES — It may have passed under the radar screen but the city of Niles turned 150 years old this year.

Particularly over the last dozen of those years, it has shown its age. And that's a good thing, say city officials.

Asked about the most significant [development](#) in Niles in recent memory, Niles Mayor Mike McCauslin and City Administrator Terry Eull agreed it was likely the discovery or, more accurately, re-discovery, of historic Fort St. Joseph.

McCauslin said removal of the aluminum facades covering downtown buildings on Main Street was a boost to the city as well but it was Western Michigan University's unearthing of the fort's location that's likely to have the most long-range impact.

Eull said pinpointing the fort was "huge" from a historical perspective, adding the find generated international interest. The fort was built by French soldiers and their Indian allies, making it fitting that last summer's open house staged in conjunction with WMU's on-going archaeological dig featured the consul general of France posted in Chicago.

The forerunner to modern-day Niles, the fort was erected in 1691 on the east bank of the St. Joseph River perhaps a quarter mile north of what's now the south city limits. Much of the site was flooded when the French Paper Dam was built but dewatering of the area has allowed for excavation that has turned up, among other things, a hinge believed to have been part of a door, window or stockade, a French coin minted between 1710 and 1713 and a 1730s Jesuit religious medallion that's one of just two found intact in

North America.

Fireplace hearths once used to heat fort buildings were uncovered in 2002, providing hard evidence of the fort's location. Since then, Western Michigan archaeological teams have continued to make discoveries few believed possible after the fort disappeared from the landscape and was replaced by a farmfield.

More of a fur-trading post than a fort, the structure was ruled by four countries — France, Great Britain, the United States and Spain. Spanish raiders were the last in control, ransacking it and, according to some [accounts](#), burning it to the ground in 1781. It was little more than a memory, if that, when Niles was plotted in 1829 and recognized as a city 30 years later.

After the Michigan Central Railroad arrived in 1848, Niles became the center of transportation in southwestern Michigan. The railroad loomed so large that most of the city's adult male population once relied on it to make a living. That changed after the city's railyards merged with those in Elkhart and the hub shifted.

Barbara Cook, treasurer of the Support the Fort organization that promotes Fort St. Joseph, pointed out the river has long had the biggest influence on Niles and still does today. The recreation trail in Riverfront Park winds past it and, when the trail is extended in 2010, trail users who follow it won't have much of a detour to reach the fort site.

Perhaps in a few years, WMU will have a research center in place adjacent to the fort location to educate visitors on the fort and its history. Cook said a fort replica could follow.

Whether the latter facilities take shape or not, archaeological studies of the fort will continue at least in the near future. Already, new light has been shed on life at the fort, revealing a mingling of societies that somehow seemed to mesh despite the hardships of the period.

Maybe Michael Nassaney, an associate [professor](#) of anthropology at Western and the principle investigator of the fort, put it best at a recent fort open house.

"You learn something about the 18th century that in a very real way teaches us something about ourselves."