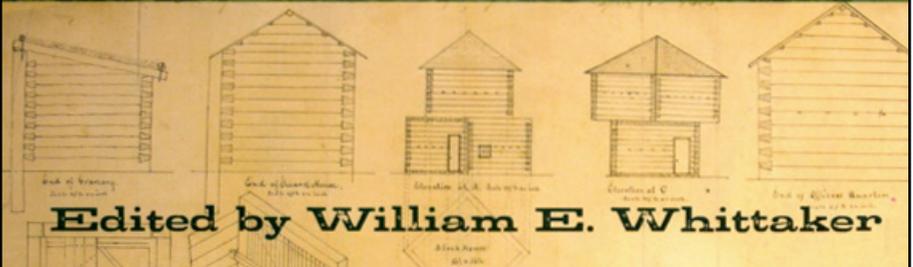


# FRONTIER FORTS OF IOWA

INDIANS, TRADERS, AND SOLDIERS, 1682-1862



# Frontier Forts of Iowa

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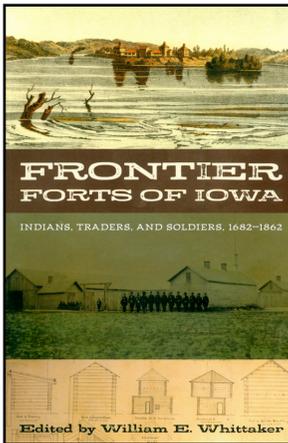
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## Frontier Forts of Iowa: Indians, Traders, and Soldiers, 1682–1862

William E. Whittaker, Editor. 2009. University of Iowa Press. 258 pp., 15 color illustrations, 25 black and white photos, 10 drawings, 41 maps. \$29.95 (paper), \$10.00 or \$29.95 (eBook).

*Reviewed by Michael S. Nassaney, Department of Anthropology, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo.*

Forts and frontiers are central themes in the U.S. national consciousness that imagined Native peoples impeding manifest destiny and cast them as merely temporary setbacks in the inevitable process whereby civilization would conquer the untamed wilderness. Although the tactics and strategies employed to possess America changed from the earliest European settlements through the nineteenth century, forts were the main tools used to take control of the Upper Midwest. While forts clearly had military functions insofar as they often entailed defensive fortifications, blockhouses, soldiers, and magazines stocked with armaments, they were initially constructed in the Midwest by the French to facilitate political alliances that depended upon the exchange of imported goods for fur, skins, lead, tallow, and other resources from the Indians. Thus, forts evolved to serve different purposes, as reflected in changing placements, size, spatial layout, and demographic composition. Relations with Indians, amicable or otherwise, have always been of paramount importance for understanding European and early American settlements, including forts.

In *Frontier Forts of Iowa*, William E. Whittaker assembles 16 chapters that explore the history and archaeology of over 50 trading posts and military fortifications in the strategic area between the Mississippi and Missouri rivers that would become the state of Iowa. All of the contributing authors have intimate familiarity with the documentary and/or material records which they mine for information on locational choices, site design, lifeways, and extant remains, to name just a few of the variables that are examined in this collection. The authors provide brief comprehensive summaries of the data that exist on a range of places that marked significant historical moments in European settlement, Native American relations, and the processes by which Iowa became a temporary home for many Native groups such as the Sauk, Meskwaki, Potawatomi, Dakota, and Ho-Chunk. The forts discussed in this

book were meant to control many Native American groups that had recently migrated (often forcibly) into the area. Because these groups had ceded their homelands to the east and north by treaty, they were transitory, reluctant, and anxious occupants of land that Americans eyed with desire.

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Tensions between Natives and newcomers waxed and waned in accordance with the level of trust, honesty, and justice that was meted out in the contentious process whereby Native peoples were dispossessed of their land and continuously pushed westward ahead of encroaching white settlers. What began as posts established for trading convenience at many of the major riverine arteries in the region, shifted after the War of 1812 to become strategic military outposts. Once foreign military threats were eliminated, "the U.S. government turned its attention toward pacifying and removing Native Americans to make way for settlers" (p. 121). This is reflected in new fort designs that no longer needed to withstand heavy cannon fire from English armies. By the 1820s efforts were made to consolidate soldiers into fewer large centers to intimidate Native Americans and facilitate the maintenance of discipline among the soldiers. While forts were predominantly military ventures supported by the government, civilians occasionally built fortifications when they felt threatened by the Indians. Not surprisingly, forts often had multiple functions. For example, posts of the mid-nineteenth century were intended to stop the encroachment of Euro-American settlers onto Indian lands and simultaneously police Indians at specific locations. Yet "as the tide of settlers advanced, Indians and soldiers reverted westward" (p. 178), a refrain often heard in the self-fulfilling prophesy of the once dominant narrative.

As someone who was only vaguely familiar with military history in Iowa, the names of most of the forts discussed in this book were new to me. However, interest in these types of sites and the role they played in opening up the frontier (and disrupting Native American ways of life) is as old as the forts themselves; the authors base their accounts on this historiography and the recovery of material traces of these places for reconstruction purposes begun in the 1930s at the Second Fort Crawford as part of the Works Progress Administration program. Subsequent research and compliance-driven archaeology has led to the investigation of numerous sites, though the work is of uneven quality and intensity, and generally not widely reported. The authors to their credit make good use of the so-called grey literature and highlight the types of data that have been recovered, particularly in regards to daily life, where archaeology can illuminate documentary bias. Most of the early forts have not been identified on the ground, despite some efforts to locate their remains. Other larger, better documented, and more recent forts have left significant signatures including foundations of various buildings,

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stockade walls, structural debris, and numerous artifact classes reflecting domestic, commercial, personal, leisure, and predictably military activities.

Daily life for most soldiers at many of these sites “was dull, full of endlessly repeated routines, drills and patrols, with little chance for excitement” (p. 151). It is no wonder that soldiers sought to escape this monotony through drink, fight, and flight. Evidence for drinking was found in the liquor bottles in officers’ latrines at Fort Atkinson. Archaeological remains and documentary sources also indicate that soldiers and officers were not the only occupants of the forts. Civilians including sutlers, women, children, and slaves called these forts their home and influenced daily practices as indicated by the objects they left behind. For example, officers (perhaps at the urging of their wives) attempted to bring high culture to frontier life at some of the larger posts through dinner parties, dances, theaters, and libraries along with churches and schools. Glass tumblers, etched glass serving dishes, and decorated ceramics recovered from some forts may point to this type of refinement. Many authors provide assessments of the potential for further archaeological work and point to the presence of extant intact deposits that can contribute new information on these formidable facilities of the frontier landscape.

The book lacks a synthetic concluding chapter that would assist the reader in making connections among the chapters and the numerous sites examined. The first four chapters of the book admittedly aim to provide a broader context by discussing the Native presence in the region (chapter 2), Native perspectives on forts (chapter 4), the functional and chronological placement of Iowa forts (chapter 1), and the roles forts played in creating American control (chapter 3). The remaining chapters provide information (as available) on the location, intended purpose, notable events, built environment, occupants, reasons for abandonment, previous archaeological investigations, extant remains, and preliminary interpretations of the recovered materials at specific places. The brevity of many of the chapters, often due to limited information, inhibits some authors from developing and presenting the type of detailed exposé that the reader is left wanting. Not surprisingly, underrepresented populations away from urban centers are often devoid of written records needed to understand the way in which cultural practices were enacted in geographically marginal and isolated places among artificial communities in interaction with strangers, allies, and enemies. Of course, this is where archaeology can shine the brightest light. Many sites were capped over with fill in the process of growth associated with subsequent occupations, effectively sealing deposits like time capsules. In other cases, populations drifted to new locations away from forts to take

advantage of different landscape opportunities, leaving material remains relatively undisturbed, awaiting discovery, investigation, and interpretation. Unfortunately, as often happens, the material record at many sites has been compromised. Locals frequently robbed abandoned forts of construction materials and settlements that grew up at these strategic locations involved destructive land modifications that negatively impacted the archaeology.

*Frontier Forts of Iowa* is a good summary of the state of our understanding of a class of sites that served an important function in the creation of the American psyche. This edited collection consolidates a significant but limited body of historical and archaeological literature regarding frontier forts and alerts the reader to their role in cultural changes associated with political struggles and conflicts. It remains for scholars to delve into these data in greater detail to determine their comparative utility for deconstructing forts and frontiers and understanding their contribution to the formation of the American experience. This book is a good starting point for students and scholars interested in American history, historical archaeology, and Native American studies. It is also a springboard for further inquiry into the study of colonialism, military tactics, and marginalized groups should investigators choose to follow the leads that are planted here.