

Life, Death,
AND Archaeology at
FORT BLUE MOUNDS



A Settlers' Fortification
OF THE Black Hawk War

Robert A. Birmingham



Life, Death, and Archaeology at Fort Blue Mounds is an archaeological detective story illuminating the lives of white settlers in the lead-mining region during the tragic events of the Black Hawk War.

Focusing on the strategically located Fort Blue Mounds in southwestern Wisconsin, Robert A. Birmingham summarizes the 1832 conflict and details the history of the fort, which played a major role not only in US military and militia operations but also in the lives of the white settlers who sought refuge there.

Birmingham then transports us to the site decades later, when he and fellow Wisconsin Historical Society archaeologists and dedicated volunteers began their search for the fort. The artifacts they unearthed provide fascinating—and sometimes surprising—insights into the life, material culture, and even the food of the frontier.

Robert A. Birmingham

served as Wisconsin State Archaeologist at the Wisconsin Historical Society and now teaches at the University of Wisconsin–Waukesha. He co-authored *Indian Mounds of Wisconsin* and *Aztalan: Mysteries of an Ancient Indian Town*, which received a Merit Award for history from the Midwest Independent Publishers Association. He has also received honors from the Wisconsin Archeological Society and for his efforts to promote Aztalan State Park.



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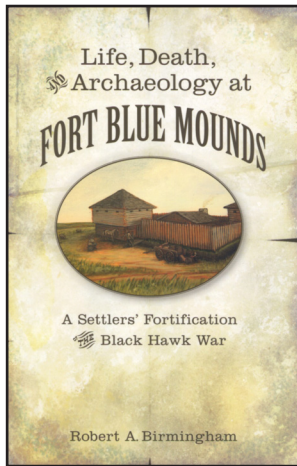
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CONTENTS

	Acknowledgments	vi
	Preface	viii
1	Fort Blue Mounds and the Black Hawk War	1
2	Life and Death at Fort Blue Mounds.....	18
3	Digging Fort Blue Mounds.....	37
4	The Stories Artifacts Tell.....	61
	Epilogue.....	94
	Appendixes	
	I: Other Forts, Other Stories.....	98
	II: Black Hawk War Settlers' and Militia Fortifications	109
	III: Features and Associated Artifacts Found Below the Modern Plow Zone at Fort Blue Mounds.....	119
	Notes	125
	Bibliography.....	134
	Index	142



Life, Death, Archaeology at Fort Blue Mounds: A Settler's Fortification of the Black Hawk War

Robert A. Birmingham. 2012. Wisconsin Historical Society Press, preface+146 pp., 67 figures (including those in the preface, epilogue, and appendices), 1 table, 3 appendices, notes, references, and index. \$14.95

Reviewed by Vicki Twinde-Jawner, Mississippi Valley Archaeology Center, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.

Robert A. Birmingham's book, *Life, Death, Archaeology At Fort Blue Mounds: A Settler's Fortification of the Black Hawk*

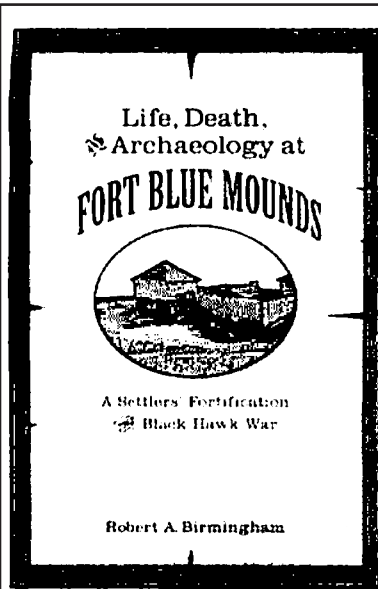
War, is an excellent example of public archaeology that reflects the dedicated work of Birmingham and others to study and preserve a site that may be threatened by future expansion. The book focuses on the archaeological efforts of Birmingham's team to exactly locate a settler fortification built during the 1832 Blackhawk War in Dane County, southwestern Wisconsin.

The volume's preface highlights some of the backstory of how and why the excavations were performed, including confusion over the exact location of the fortification based on historical records and 1921 State Historical Society of Wisconsin (SHSW) markers. In 1910, descendants of the Blue Mound settlers donated the land where the fort once stood to the SHSW. Subsequently, in 1921, markers were placed on the site by the SHSW. Over time, the cement posts marking the edges of the fort were plowed up or moved, and when Birmingham visited the site in 1991 during his term as State Archaeologist of Wisconsin, they were piled near the marker. The original deed for the land did not indicate the location of the fort itself; thus Birmingham started his quest to determine its precise location within the SHSW parcel.

Chapter 1 discusses the Blackhawk War in general, and gives some specifics about the timeline of the war. There have been several previously published books on this topic, but this chapter concisely establishes a background for the 1832 tensions between Euro-American settlers, the military, and Native Americans in the lead-mining region of northwestern Illinois and southern Wisconsin. The chapter also discusses the prelude to these tensions—chronicling the travels of Blackhawk and his band from Iowa, to the Rock River in Illinois, and into southern Wisconsin, that eventually culminated in the Blackhawk War.

Chapter 2 focuses on the history of Fort Blue Mounds itself, including its approximate location, construction, purpose, and final demise. This chapter contains historical accounts of some of the approximately 50 people who lived at the fort and were important to its construction. One great reference in this chapter includes a muster roll of the soldiers who served there.

Chapter 3 discusses Birmingham's excavation methodology, and compares the archaeological record to the historic record, highlighting portions of the two records that do not



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match. The field methodology reflected the major purpose of the excavation, which was to try to reconstruct the layout of the fort. Since this was mostly a volunteer effort, the methodology and goals of the excavation were quite different from those that are often driven by Cultural Resource Management archaeology: where research goals, data-recovery plans, and theoretical approaches to the excavation are spelled out, and interested parties agree upon methodologies ahead of time. Due to conflicting reports on the size of the fortification and confusion between the fort's actual layout and the locations of the 1921 Wisconsin Historical Society site markers, Birmingham focused mainly on trying to define the boundaries of the fort and its limits within the surrounding plowed fields. In this several-season effort, pedestrian survey, test units, mechanical stripping of the plow zone, ground-penetrating radar, and a metal detector were all utilized. A few test units were excavated within the fort boundaries to sample it, but the main purpose of the work was to define the fort's location. Preserving the interior of the fort for possible future work also highlights the ethical issue that many archaeologists face—if a site is not imminently threatened, how much should we actually ex-

cavate, and how much should we leave in place for future generations? Birmingham's successful efforts to define the outskirts of the fort are commendable.

Chapter 4 describes and illustrates many of the artifacts recovered, including several military artifacts. This is perhaps the most pertinent chapter for those interested in military forts or nineteenth-century historic sites in general. Birmingham does a good job of explaining basic terminology for the general public and provides enough information to understand artifact identifications and functions. This makes the chapter an easy read. Although there is an appendix associated with the chapter that lists many of the artifacts recovered, the book lacks detailed descriptions of some of the artifacts, specifically the ceramics, which would be beneficial to professionals. There are some references to the ceramic wares, but generally just the decorations are listed, with little information about the wares themselves. The chapter's largest section deals with military artifacts, and the highlighted artifacts are well identified, with the accompanying text again easy to follow for both public and professional readers. Comparisons to similar historic sites, particularly Second Fort Crawford in Prairie du Chien, are used to make conjectures about use of the artifacts. There are occasional inaccuracies in conjectures regarding uses of some artifacts, but these would not be apparent to the average reader, and only archaeologists involved in excavating military forts are likely to notice these problems. Aside from these few potential inaccuracies, this is in general an excellent chapter that concisely summarizes the material remains of Fort Blue Mounds.

The epilogue of the book discusses the site's listing on the National Register of Historic Places and offers ideas for future work. Appendices 1 and 2 contain a list, a map, and descriptions of several other federal or settlers' fortifications whose occupations are contemporaneous with Fort Blue Mounds. These two appendices are a great resource for both professionals and non-professionals interested in learning more about fortifications during this time in history. Appendix 3 has some general information about features listed and artifacts discovered. A professional might find this appendix too brief, as artifact descriptions do not include much detail (e.g., "plain ceramic sherds"); however, this may have been done to limit the book's length, or because the book was aimed at a general readership. Locations of features are given by excavation-unit only, so the reader must frequently check back to earlier figures to determine relative feature locations, and this can be cumbersome. An addition of the site map to this appendix would have been extremely helpful.

Another drawback to the publication is its general lack of color photographs, which makes it difficult to interpret details of many excavation photos and artifact photos. Color images are more expensive, but a few more colored illustrations would have made a big difference in both the layout of the book and its usefulness for researchers studying similar sites. I saw occasional typographical errors and a few missing references from the appendices. But aside from these few inaccuracies and drawbacks, the book has a nice flow and is an easy read. The volume appears to be aimed primarily at non-professionals, but professional archaeologists also will find it an enjoyable read with useful information regarding settler fortifications in times of nineteenth-century conflict.