



# BRITISH FORTS AND THEIR COMMUNITIES

Archaeological and  
Historical Perspectives



Edited by Christopher R. DeCorse and Zachary J. M. Beier

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"A fresh approach to far-flung British forts that unravels the diverse ethnicities of each fort's garrison and support community, thereby revealing the complex and imperfect ways British imperialists imposed colonialism across the globe."

—GREGORY A. WASELKOV, author of *A Conquering Spirit: Fort Mims and the Redstick War of 1813–1814*

"Demonstrates that the study of British forts is as diverse and complex as the communities that developed within and around these fortifications."

—TODD AHLMAN, director of the Center for Archaeological Studies, Texas State University



**W**HILE THE MILITARY FEATURES of historic forts usually receive the most attention from researchers, this volume focuses instead on the people who met and interacted in these sites. Contributors to *British Forts and Their Communities* look beyond the defensive architecture, physical landscapes, and armed conflicts to explore the complex social diversity that arose in the outposts of the British Empire.

The forts investigated here operated at the empire's peak in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, protecting British colonial settlements and trading enclaves scattered across the globe. Locations in this volume include New York State, Michigan, the St. Lawrence River, and Vancouver, as well as sites in the Caribbean and in Africa. Using archaeological and archival evidence, these case studies show how forts brought together people of many different origins, ethnicities, identities, and social roles, from European soldiers to indigenous traders to African slaves.

Characterized by shifting networks of people, commodities, and ideas, these fort populations were microcosms of the emerging modern world. This volume reveals how important it is to move past the conventional emphasis on the armed might of the colonizer in order to better understand the messy, entangled nature of British colonialism and the new era it helped usher in.

Christopher R. DeCorse, professor of anthropology at Syracuse University, is coauthor of *Anthropology: A Global Perspective*. Zachary J. M. Beier is lecturer in the Department of History and Archaeology at the University of the West Indies at Mona, Jamaica.

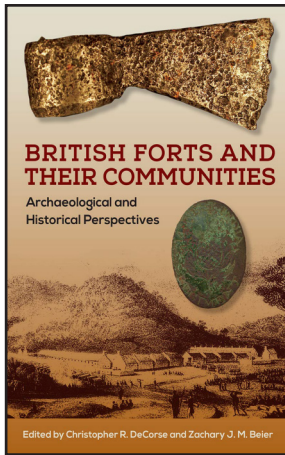
*Front, top:* Axe with copper inclusions visible on the surface; *inset:* Sixth West India Regiment baldric buckle (photo by Zachary J. M. Beier); *bottom:* the Fort Willshire trade fairs, circa 1835.

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## British Forts and Their Communities, Archaeological and Historical Perspective

Christopher R. Decorse and Zachary J. M. Beier, Eds. 2018. [University Press of Florida](#). xvi+330 pp., 57 figures, 10 tables, references, index. \$84.95 (Hardback).

*Reviewed by Mark J. Wagner, Associate Professor in Anthropology and Director of the Center for Archaeological Investigations, Southern Illinois University Carbondale.*

The authors of this volume should be applauded for taking a dynamic landscape approach to the archaeological study of colonial period British military fortifications across the globe. Rather than being particularistic studies of military architecture and armaments, the papers in this volume seek to examine the relationship of such martial bases to the social and physical landscapes in which they once existed, most particularly the diverse civilian and military populations associated with these types of installations. This perspective is cogently stated in a very good introductory essay by the volume editors, in which they define forts as spaces of “cultural entanglement...shaped by the local peoples, places, and conditions in which they were situated” (Beier and Decorse 2018:4). Rather than being isolated locations on the landscape from which Europeans sought to impose their will on surrounding populations, Beier and Decorse view forts as forming parts of larger communities of diverse individuals of varying ethnicities, identities, and status all of whom had their own histories, needs, and goals. A key element in the volume is the issue of cultural “entanglement” in which groups and individuals exchanged ideas or materials across social boundaries to accomplish their own goals, which may have been different from the original purposes of the military installation that they served or interacted with.

The articles in the volume consist of ten case studies drawn from the North American, Caribbean, and West African areas of the former British Empire. Similar to most edited volumes, the authors of these articles approach the issues of colonial entanglements and colonialism in different ways and with varying degrees of success. In Chapter 1 David Starbuck demonstrates that the very large British military installations in the Lake Champlain and Hudson Valley area exhibit variation in material culture and faunal remains linked to their varying functions as well as the ethnicity and status of associate soldiers and civilians. Particularly relevant in this regard do British soldiers as well as the lives of private merchants who interacted with them make an examination of a civilian merchants house that provided archaeological data on the types of discretionary purchases. Roache-Fedchenko (Chapter 2), in contrast, examines how one type of skilled craftsman—French blacksmiths—at Ft. Michilimackinac navigated the shifting political relationships between the French and British empires. Douglas Pippin (Chapter 3) and Douglas Wilson (Chapter 4) in their studies of the British military garrison at Carleton’s Island and the Fort Vancouver trade entrepot hew closer to the stated goals of the volume by examining how

the diverse military and civilian populations living at these entangled communities expressed their identities through foodways, architecture, and material culture. Robert Cromwell (Chapter 5), in contrast, analyzes a single artifact category (non-indigenous European and Chinese ceramics) found at both European trade forts and Native American villages to demonstrate how these items became entangled with the goals of Native leaders by serving as indicators of wealth and power at Chinook-occupied sites in the in the Pacific Northwest.

In Chapters six and seven the focus of the volume shifts to an examination of the types of culture interaction associated with colonialism at two large Caribbean military installations—Cabrits Garrison (Zachary Beier) and Brimstone Hill Fortress (Gerald Schroedl)—that employed large numbers of African-American slaves both as laborers. Both articles use variations in architectural space, European artifacts, and the presence of African-made or non-Western ceramics recovered from a variety of contexts to address questions regarding the lives of enslaved African-Americans within the two fort communities. In his article Beier also draws attention to the work of Michael-Rolph Trouillot (1995) regarding the exclusion of the less powerful from written history through biased narratives and the need to use multiple lines of evidence including archaeology to break through such historical silences. This perspective echoes the earlier work of Mann (1999:399–427) who in a study of the early 19th century Miami in Indiana similarly argued that archaeological data represents an independent line of evidence that has the power to penetrate historical silences and the exclusion of the less powerful from written history as defined by Trouillot.

The final three chapters examine the types of cultural interaction that occurred between British traders and incipient colonialists with indigenous African peoples. Christopher Decorse (Chapter 8) and Liza Gijanto (Chapter 9) use data from the Guinea Coast and Gambia River regions to illustrate how local African leaders constrained the actions of European merchants and soldiers by controlling the supplies of labor and food that their forts depended on for survival while Flordeliz Bugarin (Chapter 10) similarly demonstrates how African peoples in interior South Africa received colonial goods and ideas through British government “trade fairs” in return for ivory and animal hides. In all three of the above examples the relationship was one of cultural entanglement rather than colonialism, with the British lacking the ability to force African peoples to accede to their demands until the late nineteenth century.

As noted by Guido Pezzarozzi in a concluding essay, these types of entangled relationships echoes Richard White’s (1991) concept of the “Middle Ground” that typified relationships between European colonial powers and Native peoples in the Great Lakes region from the seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries. As long as Native peoples in this area retained political independence, European and American colonialists were forced to negotiate with them as equals in order to accomplish their goals. Only with the rise of the American Republic in the early 1800s and the defeat and removal of Great Lakes Native peoples to reservations in western North America did this type of entangled relationship end and direct colonial control begin. And this brings me to my one criticism of this book, which is that it fails to fully elucidate the difference between

cultural entanglements, in which peoples of different groups interact as equals, and colonialism where change is imposed by a controlling power. These are very different types of cultural interaction, one typified by relationships between peoples of equal political and military power (entanglement) and the other by an asymmetrical unequal power relationship (colonialism) that had very different consequences for the peoples and groups involved (Wagner 2010, 2011).

But this is a minor criticism. This book, which seeks to investigate the lives and relationships of both European and indigenous peoples who interacted with each other at a variety of military and non-military trade forts across the globe, represents a major step forward in the study of such installations, and I strongly recommend it to your attention.

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