Thu., August 10: A Lack of Preparation Pays Off

I figured I should catch an early ferry to beat the crowds, so I downed a Clif bar (White Chocolate Macadamia Nut), loaded the car, and drove a short distance to the ferry dock. I got to the front of the line thinking I'd arrived with time to spare, only to be informed my ticket was for the *other* ferry in town, Sheplers. As it was next door, the directions the clerk gave me last night still applied, so that was on me. I was early enough to move the car down and get to that line before the 8 a.m. sailing. However, the young woman there looked at my ticket and said, "I'm going to have my colleague (so and so) check you in." Maybe I was in the the wrong lane, but the sign next to her didn't indicate a reason for her action. Maybe, like the dog at the Blue Licks, she sensed my malevolent energy.

The open-air topside was already filling up, so I asked an attendant if I could stand in the open rear area used to store a surprisingly large collection of bicycles. No. I had to settle for a bench seat in the enclosed area below.

We pulled out onto Lake Huron within view of where it touches Lake Michigan under the beautiful Mackinac Bridge. The surface was calm, the sky clear. However, the mid-sized puppy of a young woman forward on the other side of the aisle was not happy, yipping much of the way as her embarrassed companion tried to calm her down. A young guy sitting across from her moved to the end of my bench in a huff. As we prepared to debark, I said to her with as kindly a grin as I could muster, "*Not* a water dog." She smiled and said the pup actually loved the water, so she wasn't sure why it got anxious."Not a *boat* dog," we agreed upon.

A bosun came to the bow during the trip and gave us a spiel regarding a visitor's guide, which she assured us was the same cost if bought where we were headed. At $2, she joked, it was the "cheapest thing you'll find to buy on Mackinac Island." I bought one.

I had heard of this place, pronounced "MACK-i-naw," but I wasn't sure why when I was looking at the atlas. In fact, I had debated even going. But having gotten to St. Ignace yesterday, such that the early visit was possible, I had decided, why not? I'm exceptionally glad I did.

The thick visitor's guide[1] reminded me why I'd heard of it. The island was already mostly a state park when the first car appeared here in 1898. "The noisy contraption frightened horses and threatened the island's carriage tour economy," the guide says. "After receiving a petition from the tour drivers the village council quickly banned 'horseless

1 *Historic Mackinac Island Visitor's Guide*, Mackinac State Historic Parks, 2013.

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carriages.'" That ban still stands. To this day, people and goods get around Mackinaw Island by horse-, pedal-, or foot-power—though I presume engines are on, and used to pull, planes at the small airport.

The ferries arrive at the largest, really only, population center on the island, which quickly proved the typical tourist trap except for the lack of engines. It is pretty, the main drag lined with wooden buildings of several stories, some balconied.

Main Street already felt crowded, though, so I quickly headed sharply uphill to the other major street in town proper, Market. And here, the history really began. Hang on, this gets full-on circular.

The first summer visitors came here to fish. Native Americans called the island Michilimackinac, or "'place of the great turtle'" according to the guide, because its shape viewed from the water looks like the top of a turtle shell. Fishing and other apparatus left by the first visitors go back to 1,000 BCE. A French priest was supposedly the first white guy to show up, founding a mission on the island in 1670, but moved a year later to what now is St. Ignace. After 40 years, it moved again across the Straits of Mackinac where the bridge crosses, to the tippy top of lower Michigan. By then the fur trade was raging, and France sent soldiers to build a fort and trading post there, which they named after this island for some reason. We'll get to that fort, but for the moment know the British won it

in the French & Indian War, only to get spooked during the Revolutionary War, so they moved it… to what they called Mackinac Island. Losing that war meant losing the fort to the U.S., though they obstreperously held onto it for 13 years after the treaty ending the Revolution was signed. That's when the American Fur Company showed up.

Yes, that's the same company of John Jacob Astor we encountered far to the west. On Market Street stands the company's northern headquarters warehouse, built in 1810. An L-shaped complex, two two-story wood-planked buildings that appear as one, form the center of the fur trading world for a time. Here "a small army of clerks processed fur pelts such as mink, muskrat, otter and especially beaver," the guide book says. "The furs arrived from the winter trading grounds… and were brought here to be graded as to size, fineness of fur and shade of color. The furs were then cleaned and pressed into bales for shipment," as we saw at Old Fort Benton. The company had started in Astor's fur shop in New York City in 1786. The same year this site opened, Astor sent a ship all the way to Oregon to build a fort at what now is the town of Astoria on the western end of the Columbia River, six years after Lewis and Clark camped nearby.

This building that played such an outsized role in American history seemed so… *normal*. I got so lost in the moment, I didn't take a picture. (The old one of the warehouse portion at right is from a National Park Service website.) Among the many nouns people say "built America," most of them a reflection of their biases instead of evidence, I will add "fur." Obviously no one commodity (or group of people) could have built the massive system we call a country. But fur is the reason many Native Americans first laid eye on white men. It spread guns, horses, and liquor across the future country long before stagecoaches and railroads. We've seen case after case where fur forts appeared before militaries got to the spot. It created the first uber-rich "self-made" man, Astor, contributing to the myth of upward mobility (by ignoring the thousands of workers who made him rich). The demand for fur in Europe also brought massive amounts of capital and manufactured goods to this continent.

All of which gives me the willies, as a vegetarian who escorts cockroaches out the door. I am not speaking in defense of the fur trade, especially today. But it remains overlooked

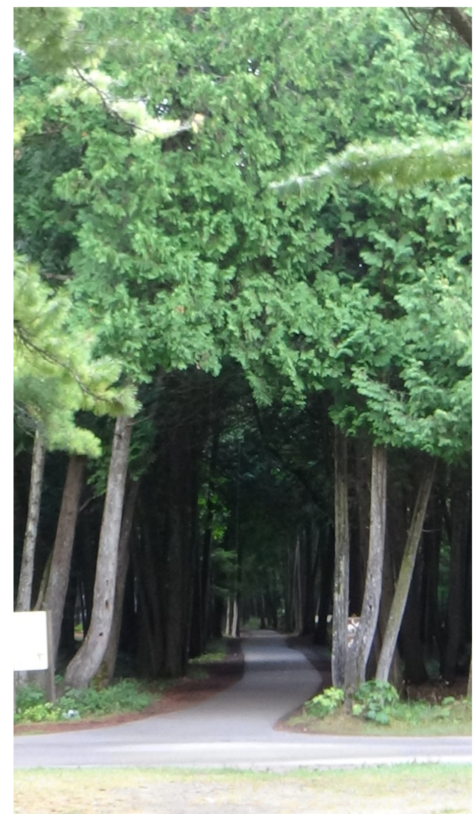
when people tell myths about how America became rich, also ignoring land theft from Native Americans and labor theft from slaves, for instance.

A remarkable story started at the end of the block, at what was a general store run by American Fur. In 1822 a French trader was accidentally shot here, at a distance of a yard. He was carried up to Fort Mackinaw and patched up by its surgeon, but "the hole never healed. Through this hole (the doc) conducted experiments, observed the workings of the human stomach and discovered much about the digestive system," the guide book reports.

The fort was not yet open, so I began what, I am happy to report, was the last ridiculously uphill, face-down climb of this summer odyssey. As cars and trucks need not be accommodated, the roads encountered beyond the City of Mackinac Island are narrower than you're accustomed to and have no painted lines. They also have sharper inclines. I passed a couple around my age huffing up to a small overlook, just as their daughter stepped into it for a rest.

Rounding sharply onto a large terrace, I bypassed the fort to the right for now and puzzled over the scene developing to the left. Young teen girls were sputtering out of what appeared to be a wood-sided dormitory. This turned out to be a barracks for Boy and Girl Scouts, who come from around the state to serve as volunteers at historic buildings for a week. One of those was Gerald Ford, who became U.S. president in 1974 after Richard Nixon resigned.

A family ahead of me seemed unsure whether they were close enough that they should stop and honor the flag-raising ceremony. Never having understood the human love of ceremony, I had no such debate, and soon was pleasantly surprised to spot as fetching a trail entrance as I've ever seen. Among the traits I didn't know Mackinac possessed was natural beauty. "I was not expecting this," I muttered aloud. The forests are thick with trees that, to my uneducated eye, seemed to belong in the rainforests of Washington's Olympic Peninsula rather than an island in Michigan. I was wrong, of course. A roadside sign told me the vast majority are sugar maples, good for syrup, furniture, and flooring.



Then I came across a cave that seemed out of place. Another sign explained why. It looked like the kind of

cave I've seen along sea coasts, but way too high and distant from the lake. Also, it was in a free-standing lump of rock, not a cliff. *Currently*, that is; go back 11,000 years, a sign explained, and I would have been standing on the shore, if not *in* the lake. When glaciers were pulling out of this area, the three Great Lakes that converge here were one lake, which scientists call Lake Algonquin. (Superior ends a short distance north across the tip of the U.P.) So this spot 220 feet above current lake level *was* lake level then. Waves ate away softer soil and rock between the limestone here and the cliff behind, now a hill. More waves slamming into this spot created the low and shallow "Skull Cave."

When I saw the name, I looked for the appearance of a skull in the rock formation, like in some adventure movie, but it didn't appear. That's because the name, the guide book explained, comes from an incident during the French and Indian War. The original Fort Michilimackinac, across the strait, was captured from the British by French-allied Ojibwe, as you'll see. Few Brits survived. One got help from a chief who brought him to the island as a safety precaution. Seeking shelter, he found this spot—apparently in the dark, because when he awakened in the morning, he found himself surrounded by skulls and bones. Natives used the cave for burials. The next time you wake up feeling a little grumpy, and you aren't in a low-roofed cave surrounded by dead people, feel better about your morning!

The limestone cliff behind the cave exposed the high point of the island, to which I had a choice of routes. The guide book wanted me to walk a roundabout way up the roads, but a small sign pointed out some steps… and steps, and more steps, with multiple landings, which I challenged myself to take two at a time. After all, I once took a flight of 999 steps in Greece, I told myself.[2] 'Of course, I only took those *down*,' I then teased myself.

At the top was re-constructed Fort Holmes. Americans, you may recall, got the main fort after the Revolution. When they and the British went to war again in 1812, British troops made a surprise attack on Fort Mackinaw. Instead of a stupid frontal assault against its formidable highness, they sailed around to the north of the island, landed a good-sized contingent, and pulled a little baby cannon up to this spot. When the Americans awoke

2 The Palmidi Fortress in Nafplion.

the next morning, they found themselves literally under the gun. None of theirs could point this high. They had little choice but to surrender. The British, not interested in having the same thing happen to them, built a little baby fort here. The version I was looking at was the newest reconstruction of my trip, from 2015, built from the original plans.

A middle-aged woman had beat me here. Cognizant of her possible concern over a man approaching her in that isolated spot, I hesitated, then went a little downhill to get a shot of the bridge till she moved on from the closest sign. But she was a slow reader, and the time came when I decided I had to approach her as she stood in the fort entranceway reading. I threw out a loud, "Good morning," before getting too close, and quickly added, "A fellow history buff!"

Yes, she said, with the usual line about not liking it in school but loving it now. Her grandsons visiting the island with her were still asleep, so she decided to come out early. She seemed to have trouble grasping that I had never been to the island before, so I summarized my trip. She asked for recommendations. I said Wounded Knee, but she'd already been; Bannock, the Montana territorial capital I mentioned from an earlier trip, and Big Hole Battlefield, one of the Nez Perce sites; and the museum in Cody. I briefly

surveyed the inside of the baby fort, wished her a good day, and took the road down from the far side of the hilltop.

Heading for an overlook the map showed a bit downhill, I started wondering if I'd somehow passed it when a carriage crossed my path in the distance and disappeared to the right. Soon thereafter I was walking into a gravel drive loop with a carriage in it and a bourgeois couple around my age in country club clothes standing on a terrace by a wooden wall. I joined them and took a quick gander of Bois Blanc, "white wood," a smaller tree-covered island to the northeast. I was also afforded a glorious view of one of the most striking physical landmarks of the island, Sugar Loaf Rock, another limestone "breccia" eroded free of the surrounding rock by Lake Algonquin.

Meanwhile the couple had made their way toward the carriage, the woman downing a couple stairs with some difficulty. I awaited her and began my exit. He was already in when she began struggling up the carriage steps. "No, (what's his name), I don't need any help," she joked sarcastically.

The driver said something appropriate and I added in passing, "Yeah, *that* marriage is gonna last." Obviously it had, and the guy laughed, but I doubt he caught the irony.

I know, I shouldn't have. But I'm glad I did.

The hardest part of walking on Mackinaw Island, at least for me, was not the hills. It's adjusting to the fact you don't have to listen for cars coming behind you as you walk along the middle of the road. The horse poop was a bigger concern than vehicles. That said, the island is not totally devoid of motors. Beside the airplanes', at various points I heard lawn mowers and a chainsaw, and a graveyard had a small backhoe.

Two years after the British took the big fort, the Americans came to take it back, with seven warships. They tossed a few dilatory cannon shots at it, which bounced off the cliff

below and landed on the beach. They decided to follow the path blazed by the Brits, landing on the north and taking the high ground—unaware of Fort George, it seems, as the British called the baby fort.

But the Redcoats figured what the fleet was up to as it sailed out of sight. They also knew the ground, including a ridge that crosses the island and the one road from the northern parts back then. The British commander secreted his men, cannons, and some Native allies there, and the Americans foundered. Major Andrew Holmes led a force to try to get around the end of the British line, only to run into warriors in the woods, which did not turn out well for Holmes. He was killed, and the Americans gave up. The worst thing about the loss of life on both sides was that the war ended a year later—with none of the causes resolved, and the fort given up by the British. The U.S. troops who then occupied the island renamed Fort George for Holmes.

I wanted to see the battlefield, now a golf course. But the distance I'd walked to the overlook had me a bit spooked. It seemed longer than anticipated. The map of the tour I was taking in the guide book had a scale, of which I was now dubious. After again walking yet farther than expected, I came to a sign—they're good about signs—that said the battlefield was yet another mile. "Either the scale is off on this, or that is." It was 10 a.m., past opening time for Fort Mackinaw. I decided not to risk the round-trip being even longer than the 40-minutes it would take me, not including visitation time.

Why the hell I did this has me flummoxed as I write this. I was clearly enjoying my time on the island. I was capable of walking not only that distance, but all the way to the "British Landing" where both forces, um, landed. The odds of my coming back to this out-of-the-way tourist spot are nil. I had no timetable. It would have meant an extra night on the road, but I wish to hell I had spent the money. I also left a couple of small museums unvisited. This is the biggest regret of the trip.

Self-flagellation sufficient, let's walk back to the main fort. Along the way came the post cemetery, as military graveyards attached to specific installations are generically known. I think it is the most sublime, peace-inducing resting place I have ever seen, settled in a saddle of the hillside before a cyclorama of trees. A few others stood guard over the buried within a white picket fence. Local tradition claims some of the 1812 casualties are here, but their wooden markers are long gone. A sad percentage of those white headstones you see below, perhaps the majority, proclaim simply, "Unknown Soldier." Also here are one officer's two infant children, side by side.

I let a horse-drawn bus pass, the driver's tour-guiding intruding on the moment, and stepped into the road for a shot on my phone for Guy. After telling where it was, I said, "Most of them are unknowns."

"Wish I could be there on this kind of stuff," he responded.

"Me, too."

As I walked downhill I fell in behind three of the Girl Scouts. One was walking turned out, so I debated whether she was a ballerina. There are seven signs I look for, the more of which appear together, the greater the likelihood of significant training: turnout (toes pointing outward), because they spend so much time that way in studio; exceptional posture; hair in a tight bun; pale skin (again, studio time); huge gym bags; and clumsiness. Yes, that's right, grace on the stage often translates to tripping on flat pavement. At NCSA, I joked that all dancers should be issued boom-boxes (this being the late 1970s), in order to walk across campus safely. Girl Scout's posture likely ruled her out.

Their barracks sit on the edge of Fort Mackinaw's parade ground. The topography of the fort, falling over the upper edge of the hillside, made it impossible to place it in the middle as we've seen in a half-dozen examples. The fort had already been through several iterations by the time the parade ground was laid out here in 1843. Eventually there were stables and housing for non-commissioned officers, but I was far more intrigued by a later structure a marker described: a grandstand for the fort baseball team, holding 500. In 1887 when it was built—three years before Wounded Knee—a grandstand seat cost 35 cents.

I sidled past an emptying horse bus to approach the upper ticket booth for Fort Mackinaw, now a state historic site. A brutally efficient cashier confirmed that I wanted a combo ticket, including entrance to the original location across the strait. That purchased, I went through the gate past a Girl Scout and a re-enactor in 1880s soldier gear, nodding greetings.

Besides the parade ground, the fort has other significant differences from the others we have visited. As the word "gate" implies, this one has a wall. It starts along the edge of the hilltop and tumbles down around a lower terrace of the hillside, where it follows the top edge of the cliff. The buildings squeeze along the topside or are crammed onto the terrace wherever they can fit, though a few approximate the usual rectangular arrangement on three sides of a small courtyard.

There was a crapload more people at this one, too. Imagine touring a 19th-Century fort along a New York City sidewalk on a workday. Except the sidewalk is a boardwalk barely two people wide, if those people walk sideways.

The flagpole just below the upper gate bore an interesting if anticlimactic story. A private who rebuilt the original pole in 1835 stuck a note in a bottle under it. In 1869 a group of soldiers tasked with re-rebuilding the pole found the bottle, stuck another note in it, and reburied it. But the bottle has never been found.

On that pole flies a large version of the U.S. flag, visible as far away as the bridge, or a smaller version on stormy days. Maybe you have to be a true history geek to appreciate this factoid I had to look up: "garrison flag," a term used on the sign, simply means a large version of the flag.

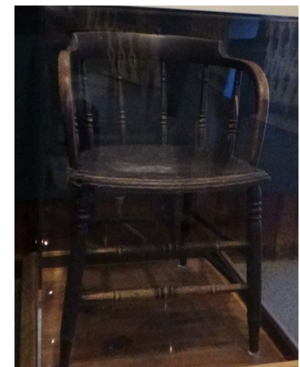
The history geek found some peace in the 1799 West Blockhouse, which overlooks the town, and features six probably boring-to-most-tourists panels showing the evolution of the fort. A couple-hundred pages ago, I mentioned the audacious mid-winter attack George Rogers Clark led on a British fort in Vincennes, now in Indiana, during the Revolution. This freaked out the British overseers of other far-flung outposts that had been thought too remote for an overland attack—like Fort Michilimackinac across the Mackinac Strait. As soon as it was warm enough, they packed up and moved the fort

here, as mentioned earlier. And I do mean “moved the fort”: Some of the buildings were broken apart, floated across, and rebuilt. By adding a limestone wall following the contours of the hillside, they got themselves a far-more-defensible new-ish fort.

As required by the Revolution-ending treaty 13 years earlier, the Brits finally relinquished the fort in 1796. The new owners found the caretakers hadn’t taken care of it. The Americans rebuilt the walls and three blockhouses. Then in the 1850s many of the buildings burned down, so what you see today is mostly from the 1880s.

As I went through the usual building types we’ve seen before, some exhibits had uniquenesses:

- The officer’s quarters told of a seven-year-old girl whose friend brought her a “wonderball” when she was sick, “a large ball of yarn filled with little toys to be discovered as Mary slowly unwrapped the threads.”
- In 1812 the lieutenant in command of the 57 Americans holding the fort wrote his superiors that he first learned his country was at war when the British showed up, as described earlier, and “‘sent in a flag of truce, demanding a surrender of the Fort and Island.’” Facing 650 warriors and the aforementioned cannon, he wisely agreed.
- A European-American fishing industry replaced the earlier NA one. Coopers—barrel-makers—set up shop where the town is now, to pack catches brought from all over the region. Merchant ships picked them up to carry to Great Lakes cities. In 1837, 2,000 barrels went out.
- Tourists showed up around the time the coopers did, including Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville, who famously traveled the young United States and wrote an influential analysis of its culture and burgeoning democracy.[3]
- The troops was sent away during the Civil War, but for a few months the fort was used as a prison for three captured Confederate politicians, with a small unit of guards.
- In 1895 the garrison sold off almost everything the soldiers couldn’t take with them and abandoned the fort. Troops sent to begin a restoration in the 1950s found one lonely chair from its military days, shown at right, now behind glass.



3 *Democracy in America*, 1835.

The most authentic sight of the fort appeared below the north wall after I visited the small sentry tower in the northeast corner. I looked over the side directly into the 1800s:

I'll leave it to you to analyze the fact these were all black men on a very white island. Ironically, this far north, that may not have been the case in the 1800s.

The last building the army built was a bathhouse. There were six wooden stalls, looking like really spacious toilets, but instead containing cast iron bathtubs with hot water. The post surgeon recommended it, and two years later reported illness rates had dropped.

Speaking of water reminds me… I thought it odd that scouts were brought in for one week at a time. What do they know? Sure enough, when I engaged one to ask if water was sold at the modern fort, she answered confidently—and wrongly—that the gift shop sold it. Then I found one old-style standalone water fountain and drank my fill.

On the far side of the courtyard I came across two old friends, the young woman and her dog from the ferry. Pup looks much happier, I said. Yes, she agreed, he was back to normal, and they were having a good time.

Up some steps in the southeast corner a large crowd had gathered for a demonstration of a 19th-century cannon. I only got close enough to shoot a pretty view of town instead:

While doing so I noticed a Sheplers boat pulling in, the one visible above town in that pic, and decided to try to make it. I bolted for the south sally port and race-walked with the aid of gravity down the long ramp to Fort Street. I took Market Street to avoid the human traffic I knew would be clogging Main by then, and dropped straight to the dock on a side road. Not surprisingly, far more people were getting off than on at noon, making me glad again for my sleep schedule shift. This time I got a prime seat, top deck, front row, port side rail. The tiny

wheelhouse was in front of me to the right, door open, so I got to watch the captain. Now the sailing geek in me gets a moment. Normally the stern and bow lines get released before the boat moves. However, after the stern line was removed, the captain swung the stern out, creating slack and placing the bow right at a pier support, from which a crewman removed the bow line.

As we left I got a shot of the fort as the American warships saw it… kinda… not really… in 1814:

Then I settled in for a bumpy ride, because the winds had picked up with the day's heat. I got a short video of a passing buoy with relative ease. As we picked up speed, though, so too did the apparent wind speed, which with the bouncing from below combined to threaten a long swim for my Panthers cap. I rode all the way across with one hand holding it down and the other my camera, phone and wallet between my legs. I managed to take one more vid on a lark, knowing it would not come out well. It makes me laugh whenever I show it. The ride was glorious, a fine punctuation to my truncated Mackinaw trip.

As I debarked I saw a heartwarming moment. I had hoped to speak to the captain, but his demeanor suggested he did not consider himself part of the Shepler's guest experience, which overall was excellent. His shift apparently done, he headed astern

before all of us passengers had, avoiding eye contact. It didn't bother me; he got us there safely. I had also noticed a woman leaving the island with a cool home-welded trailer behind her old-fashioned bike. In part, I admit, it's because she was the only African-American on the ride, perhaps with some Native American or Pacific-Islander in her. I found myself desperately wanting to hear her life story. Then on the pier I spotted the two of them walking off together, the captain pushing her bike for her. Misanthropic though I am, I couldn't resist taking a picture of love.

One of my greatest loves, and sadly my longest, awaited me in the parking lot. The Purple Sage was 50 feet from the entrance, but that was not the exit. We had to keep going all the way to the back of the parking lot, killing only a few fellow tourists as they slogged across our path—kidding, I'm kidding—on the way to a residential street leading back to the main drag. A right and a left took me uphill through more such streets until I got back to Highway 2 for a very brief final good-bye. The sign saying "2 Ends" made me sad.

I turned right onto, ugh, an interstate, but it was the only way off the U.P. without a floating Sage. At the bridge toll booth the chipper woman around my age asked if I needed a receipt. "No, it's not a business trip, I can't deduct it."

"Oh, darn," she quipped, then wishing me a good day so earnestly, I felt she meant it.

The bridge is 1.5 miles long, this country's third-longest suspension bridge. I just found that out online, and that I have also been on the two longer ones, the Verrazanno-Narrows in New York City, and the Golden Gate in San Francisco. Designed in the 1940s, Mackinaw Bridge's construction was put on hold during World War II, and didn't open until 1957.

I love bridges, and this one is glorious, pretty itself and offering views of water and boats east, west, and south separated by leafy green. I took a bunch of shots from various angles, but I think this one from the southwest makes the point best:

Once across, a series of turns brought us underneath the approach road. On the eastern side, the Sage nudged his way into a shady spot near the very top of mainland Michigan. People were in a park there, many picnicking. I took their lead and ate a road-lunch in the car watching families, waves, boats, and the end of the U.P. in the distance.

Across the parking lot and under the highway—after a false start, because I realized I'd left the camera behind—I entered the entrance to Colonial Michilimackinac. I showed a punctilious clerk of my demographic ilk the combo-ticket receipt from Fort Mackinac and walked out the back door toward, believe it or not, the last fort we will visit on this trip.

Fort Mackinac's predecessor is another example along the lines of Fort Union, a reconstruction with all buildings on the exact footprint of the originals. The first European-American to pass by here was a French dude looking (appropriately for us) for the Northwest Passage, in 1634. Several decades passed before the first Catholic missionary came hunting souls, and the one I mentioned earlier showed up the next year, 1671. This was the more famous, or infamous depending on your perspective, Father Jacques Marquette. If you've heard of Marquette University, that's him. He built the Mission of St. Ignace where the town is today, and the fur traders weren't far behind. A small fort went up during yet another clash between the English and French, who for centuries liked nothing better than fighting each other (for an entire century in one case!). But that fort was abandoned in a few years, and then most of the Natives headed for Detroit, apparently preferring its music scene.[4] So the Jesuits[5] split, too, until the remaining Odawa decided to move here. One of the Jesuits built a new mission around 1710, and French soldiers showed up five years later to build a new fort.

The Native nations clashed with the French over the next few decades, so the fort was expanded a couple times to the current footprint. At the start of the French and Indian War, however, this is where the French and a large number of "Indian" nations met to form their alliance in 1753. Warriors from this area helped ambush the British in modern Pittsburgh, a battle that added to George Washington's pre-Revolutionary military reputation. Eventually the tide turned, and seven years later troops from the fort were in battles at Montreal and Quebec that the French lost. Late in 1760, those remaining here burned the place and split. A year later, the Brits took over what was left.

We'll hold the rest of that story for a bit. I went inside to find a dense collection of buildings, most of squared-off timber. The British Trader's House, I believe, brought up something that often gets missed in discussions of slavery in this country: thousands of

4 Just kidding. Motown was roughly 250 years short of being born.

5 A Catholic group ("order") formed in 1540 in Paris that became known for fighting the Protestant movement, missionary work, and education.

Native Americans were victimized as well. Of course, many were on the slave-*holding* side, too.

As Daniel Boone's captivity exemplifies, Native owners were nowhere near as brutal as the majority of European-American slaveowners. Without minimizing the impact of their loss of freedom—something apologists for the Confederacy consistently do, often while claiming to support freedom more than their political opponents—it is nonetheless valid to point out they were not consistently tortured and killed the way Africans and their descendants were by EAs. (Non-slave captives were, however.) I suspect many Native Americans did not know this when they sold their slaves to whites, as was the case of West African owners selling slaves they did not treat as harshly to white traders. Nonetheless, it was jarring to read that in "the 1770s, Michilimackinaw was a center of the trade in enslaved Native people, with European merchants fulfilling orders for business partners elsewhere in the Great Lakes."

Downright chilling was the quotation from a May 1778 letter by a man ordering "two pretty panis girls of from 9 to 16 years of age. Please speak to these gentlemen to get them for me." One recoils to think what he wanted them for.

In the basement of that house was my first introduction to something fairly unique to this fort: remains of the old fort, in this case logs that divided the home's cellar and supported the floor, looking like the broken spine of a mid-sized dinosaur.

Two artifacts were evocative of how life has changed. A nearly complete if broken pane of glass was green and opaque. Some of that may be age-related, but windows of the time were rare and not crystal clear like ours today. Also, I had seen plenty of weights used to measure goods. As you may have seen in old cartoons or statues of Lady Justice, the scale had two plates hung by chains from either side of a seesaw-like arm on a stand. The goods go on one plate, the weights on the other, and the seller is paid by the pound. The ones I've seen are small. For example, I once saw a long box with a range of sizes like increasingly wide and thick coins. What I had never seen is a *69-pound stone weight*, technically French pounds[6] as this came from the fort's French era. Presumably this was used to weigh bales of fur.

But nothing quite connected me to the early residents of this facility like the 1730s well. The soil at this spot had a six-foot topcoat of limestone the French had to chisel through before digging another 10 feet down to the water table. Now, you may recall that the fort sits right next to a humongous fresh-water lake and think, why in the hell did they need a well? It's that word *fort*. Remember my saying back at Fort Kearny that forts or walled cities often ran out of food or water and had to surrender. Besides being more convenient, the well provided water in the event of access to the lake getting cut off. It served this

The black oval is a shadow from the light hanging over the well

6 The exhibit panel didn't explain, but I presume this actually refers to French *livres*, the pre-metric weight measurement (not the pre-euro monetary unit).

purpose for 30 years, and has served historians since. Before the French closed it up, they tossed some of their trash inside. A rusted telescope from it was on display.

As an American Revolution writer, I was intrigued by the tiniest artifact of the trip. John Wilkes was a member of the British Parliament off and on in the years up to and during our Revolutionary War. Though a rogue of questionable personal character, he became a hero to some in England for his support of human rights versus the king's, and here for openly opposing British military action against independence. Which leads to the intrigue, as noted on the button's exhibit. What was a button honoring John Wilkes doing at a British fort? We'll never know.

From the same time period came another surprise at the rough-hewn reconstruction of the jail. A panel mentioned some Spanish prisoners were held here, but not where they came from. I mentioned earlier that Spain supported the American rebels, too, though mostly because a distracted Britain couldn't oppose Spain's intrigues in the Caribbean and elsewhere.

Our friend Daniel Boone moved to Spanish-claimed Missouri, remember? A re-enactor dressed as a Redcoat explained, when I asked, that a raid by British-allied Native Americans on St. Louis was the source of these prisoners. A guard complained in a letter of the smell of the Spaniards' cooking, and made a wry comment (unquoted) comparing English and Spanish cooking. So, my interlocutor inferred, it was probably spicy.

Out West, we learned that U.S. Army laundresses generally retired from the business if the landed an officer as a husband. In the married-officers' quarters, a long-winded re-enactor noted no childrens' stuff was displayed, so maybe the theoretical wife was a laundress. I questioned this, but he confirmed records of married laundresses here, so the rules were different. Out back was the theoretical wife, demonstrating to a couple with a preschooler and second-grader(?) her craft. She asked the older kid: Who does the laundry in your family? He hesitated and then pointed a thumb at mom behind him. Are you surprised? The laundress continued, "But you help by putting your dirty clothes in the hamper, right?" The youngster did not answer. Mom started to say something pejorative and then caught herself.

"Let's go with that," I helped, and she laughed.

I asked about the use of dyes, which in those days were all plant- or earth-derived. She said they'd found no evidence of them here. She noted that just making and washing that many clothes was time-consuming enough, and I added as further explanation how expensive dyes were then, unless they could be found locally.

Another kid raised my smile as I stepped into the replicated soldiers' barracks. About 13, she was reading something on the end of a bunk-bed. She said she always thought of pregnancy when she heard the word "births." I had a feeling I knew why she made the comment. After she stepped away I read the write-up, which had been engraved into the wood—unfortunately, because this made it really hard to correct their misspelling of the word "berths."

Mom had not pointed this out. In the next room, Mom offered for me to go past their fivish-person family. "You're fine, but I wanted to tell your smart daughter she was right to question the use of 'birth'—they misspelled it." She repeated what I'd heard her say earlier, and smiled when I said she had good reason to.

I found oddly poignant a fireplace from a row house that survived both the French destruction and the later British burning. (In modern terms, the fort's row houses were single-story townhouses sharing interior walls.) Not fancy, but obviously well built, it connected me to everyday people seeking warmth and cooking food more than 300 years ago. My house's fireplace is just to my right as I write these words. I don't cook in it. Or much anywhere else, as I can't seem to get a fire going.

Speaking of fire, by far the most unique artifact was the remains of the burned-out powder magazine. Living in the wilderness where you need to store lots of hard-to-come-by gunpowder, in a tiny walled town, presented a problem: Long before the invention of fire-suppression systems, how do you keep the barrels safely? There wasn't even much stone around here. The solution was to place the building partially underground. That way if it went it up, it would go *up*—instead of out. The explosion would only blow the roof off, so to speak. (Fort Kearny took a similar approach.) The roof was covered with

dirt, which played a role in preserving it. When the British burned the joint and the roof collapsed, the dirt put out the flames. Much of the floor, vertical log walls, and planks survived.

Floor and walls of the magazine (bright spots are reflections from exhibit panels)

The holes, infuriatingly, were dug by treasure hunters going back to the 1830s. The exhibit room was in a ten-foot hole.

Often skipped in high-school American history is the fact that Jews were among the earliest colonists. The first to reach Michigan arrived here in 1761. Ezekiel Solomon was from Berlin, first emigrated to Canada, and headed here after the French left. He and a business partner bought a row house in the fort four years later. Solomon apparently summered here for business and spent the rest of the year commuting to Montreal. There he helped found Canada's first synagogue, whose congregation still exists. The goods he sold went to the far end of Lake Superior, the distance that took me all day to drive yesterday. He flattened the house when the British moved to Mackinaw Island, but left behind some trade goods in the root cellar. They're on display under a window in the floor; archaeologists put them back after digging them out.

The archaeologists are still there, too. Probably not the same archaeologists, but there *was* an active dig in progress:

This made my little history geek's heart go pitter-patter. My Revolutionary War work is deeply indebted to archaeologists. Reading their reports nailed down some locations as no other source had, in some cases busting myths, and possibly changing the signage at one.[7]

After observing several college-agers digging, and one sifting dirt on a large box with a screen in the bottom, I stepped up to a thirtyish guy on a nearby seat to ask a question. He tried to hold me off for the next tourist group, but I said I understood generally what was going on, and just had a couple of questions. The first was what they were digging, which turned out to be an unusual double root-cellar (two standard-size cellars sharing a wall). He was an interpreter, so after I asked my second question, he pointed me to an elderly white woman in outdoorsy clothes at the far end of the roped-off area.

One of the exhibits had a harpoon head made by Native Americans, a tube with notches cut out to create barbs. I wasn't 100% sure what it was made of—the tan color could have

7 The David Caldwell Historic Park in Greensboro, N.C., formerly had a sign indicating that a foundation footprint marked in rocks was the home and school run by two prominent Patriots, Rev. David and Rachel Caldwell. I questioned this based on two archaeologists' conclusions, and the fact a student at the school said it was bigger than the foundation. When I went back to the site a year or so later, the sign was gone.

been some sort of reed, and the exhibit didn't say. The archaeologist confirmed it was bone. Now I had my moment to fan-boy. "As a history writer, I think you archaeologists are gods, so thank you for what you do."

She grinned and responded, "I'm glad you use it." I walked away beaming. I'd wanted to thank someone in her role for years.

Out the front gate I went, which gave me a semblance of the view a large group of Ojibwe had of the fort on Thursday, June 2, 1763. Two reasons NAs tended to side with the French throughout colonial history is that the French were generous with gifts, plus they tended to trade with Natives on equal terms. The British ended the gifting when they took over French installations; disregarded Native claims to the land; and generally acted uppity with the Native nations. These changes led to immediate tensions here, and finally the warriors decided to boot the Brits out.

An Odawa leader, Obwandiyag[8] or "Pontiac," led an attack on Fort Detroit in May of that year, part of a string of strikes at British outposts across the region. Local Ojibwe, and possibly some Sauk, came up with an easier way to get inside Michilimackinaw. It wasn't unusual for folks to camp around the fort for trade purposes, and while camping, to play a little *baggataway*—the Ojibwe version of lacrosse. On this day, there on the grass in the photo above, they started up a game supposedly in celebration of the upcoming birthday of King George III (yes, the same dude Patriots rebelled against 12 years later). I bet the parapet was lined with spectators watching the action. The gate was guarded but open.

Even now the Native version of lacrosse is, as one Cherokee described it to me, a mashup of lacrosse and mixed martial arts. So I imagine the game of 250 years ago was bloodier, if anything. However, they were unarmed, per British rules for warriors camping by the fort. At one point a player lifted the ball toward a mate only to see it sail over the wall.

8 https://detroithistorical.org/learn/encyclopedia-of-detroit/chief-pontiac

The men used the moment of distraction to pull hidden weapons smuggled in by their women and rush the gate. All of the British, military or otherwise, were killed or captured. French Canadian civilians inside were spared. The fort became an Ojibwe town for a few years, until “Pontiac’s Rebellion” ended with his surrender, and the British returned.

Appropriately, a thirtyish Odawa woman was outside the gate by the reconstructed tipi of branches you can see in the picture above, interpreting the lifestyle of her ancestors. I thanked her for being there and asked a question of pronunciation. The exhibits referred to the collected Natives of the region as “Anishinaabek.” She had to repeat it three times before my EA mouth got close to saying it right. Unfortunately, I didn’t get this written down until that evening, and had the name so wrong by that point I won’t bother repeating it here.

I hesitated to leave, lingering by the small stretch of beach on which a sign said traders landed their canoes. A sign told of the various flags flown over the fort, including the completely white flag of the French. This, the French naval flag, was the one most commonly used in America—not the one usually depicted in illustrations, with gold symbols called *fleur-de-lis*. I dawdled, reading about the suburbs of the fort, civilian homes built outside as the population grew; getting the picture I showed earlier of the bridge; and just looking longingly over the lake, wishing I could grab one of those imaginary canoes and paddle to Chicago.

The Sage and I looped through Mackinaw City just to say we had, which proved to be another tourified town swarming with shoppers in shorts and windbreakers, and picked up I-75 South again. We made it about halfway down the Lower Peninsula, to the small ag-and-college town of Alma. The Triangle Motel was a single-story row of rooms and my second no-human-contact experience. The door bore a black cylinder with numbers on it. Apparently it wasn’t locked, because my first attempt at the code I’d been texted produced a clicking sound and a lighted dial. My second brought the desired outcome.

With the Sage backed up to the door, loading into the small but tidy room took but a moment.

The motel is off the eastern edge of town. I headed into the neat, longer-than-anticipated downtown and stepped toward the Block House. Before arriving, I passed a store that taught me Michiganders call the Lower Peninsula the "mitten," given its shape. The restaurant in spare Modernist style had a video game theme, with several TVs apparently set up for playing, though none were in use, and old game-cartridge boxes used to bring bills. Asked by the host if I wanted to sit at the bar, I explained I needed some writing room and was shown to a four-top in the window. Less than half the place was full, it being a Thursday night between the college's summer and fall sessions.

The Mitten—get it? (Map © OpenStreetMap contributors)

I started with a delightful "Cooldown" mocktail of cucumber, agave, elderberry tonic, and lime juice, refreshing and just tangy enough. My cucumber salad was unusual, veggies sliced lengthwise with a light vinegary dressing. I struggled a bit with how to eat it, ending up cutting through with a fork, but it was tasty. The penne with tomato sauce and basil was passable. The waitress was friendly but aloof, and "honey" sounded odd coming from a twenty-something far from the South.

After dinner I headed west a bit to see the campus of Alma College, a well-ordered Presbyterian liberal arts college founded in 1886. The school's nickname caught my eye, the "Scots," related more to the Presbyterian Church's Scottish roots than a significant presence of Scots in the area. But it was clear the college had gone all in on the traditions. Cultural appropriation, technically, but as a 60% Scot genetically, I approve.