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1987 EXCAVATIONS AT FORT KNOX II: THE DISCOVERY OF THE BLACKSMITH SHOP AND POWDER MAGAZINE LOCATIONS

Figure: [Fort Knox II powder magazine, east profile of the excavated northwest quarter](#)

As part of a continuing program of archaeological investigations at Fort Knox II, an early 19th-century military site located in Knox County, Indiana, excavations lasting four weeks were conducted at the site during the summer of 1987. Fort Knox II was an early U.S. military post, occupied from 1803 to 1813, whose purpose was to provide military support for the town of Vincennes, then capital of the Indiana Territory. Its major contribution to the defense of the territory lay in its use as a staging area for the march to the Battle of Tippecanoe, in the fall of 1811. It was at this battle between U.S. regular and militia troops and the combined Indian forces under the leadership of the Shawnee Prophet that the future of the territory and frontier expansion, through the defeat of the Indian troops, was secured.

Earlier excavations at the Fort Knox II site have exposed the stockade walls and associated features, allowing an interpretation of the fort's physical structure to be made, and a trash pit, which has provided detailed information about the life-styles, status, and subsistence practices of the fort's occupants during the period from 1811 to 1812. The 1987 field season was focused on tying up several loose ends concerning the results of earlier investigations. These included the reexcavation of the north corner of the stockaded area to determine whether a bastion had been located there and, if so, what were its dimensions. The 1985 investigations had indeed suggested such a possibility. Another topic of research involved a functional identification for an area of dense metal concentration located southeast of the stockade during the 1984 metal detector survey. Finally, a photograph from the 1965 excavation season showed the presence of a large pit-like feature on the inside of the southwest curtain of the fort for which no documentation had been made. Since this was the only known feature thus far discovered in the interior of the post, documentation of its presence and function was considered an important goal of the 1987 season.

Excavation of the north corner of the stockade proved disappointing in terms of locating a bastion. Considering the roughly triangular shape of the fort, the presence of a bastion in this corner would have been a most defensive plan. However, the only feature discovered was a shallow posthole that may or may not have been associated with the fort. Excavations in the area of the dense metal concentration southeast of the stockade proved somewhat more successful. A large quantity of iron fragments, chunks, and half-completed objects, as well as masses of slag and cinders, suggested that this area may have been the site of the blacksmith shop or its associated refuse area. No features were discovered below plowzone in the three 5 by 5 foot units excavated, however. That this obvious forge area was not associated with later agricultural occupation of the site was evidenced by the presence of only early 19th-century domestic artifacts associated with the iron and slag.

By far the most successful investigation of the 1987 field season was the rediscovery of the pit-like feature in the interior of the stockade. Removal of the overburden in the previously excavated areas revealed the presence of the feature, which had been covered with plastic before backfilling in 1965. In following the dimensions of the feature, it was discovered to measure about 15 feet in diameter, and presented the appearance of a rounded-off square. Because of time constraints, only one quarter of the pit feature was excavated. No intact structural features were discovered in the pit, other than a possible square posthole at the north corner. The artifactual inventory from the feature was sparse, and consisted of prehistoric and early historic artifacts, including brick fragments, lead shot and sprue, nails and window glass, and domestic artifacts, occurring randomly in the fill. The stratigraphy of the excavated portion of the feature revealed the presence of numerous striations and slumping episodes. No intact floor was found at the base of the feature.

An interpretation of the function of this large feature is based on both the archaeological and historical evidence. It is known that a powder magazine was present at the fort and that, if constructed according to orders, was semi-subterranean and built of brick. It is also known that at the time the fort was abandoned in 1813, most of the reusable building materials were salvaged and rafted downstream to be used in the construction of Fort Knox III, in Vincennes. That this pit is contemporaneous with the fort is revealed by the absence of later 19th- and 20th-century artifacts in the feature fill. It is suggested that this large, rather deep pit is the location of the powder magazine at Fort Knox II. At the time the fort was abandoned, the bricks and usable timbers were salvaged from the structure, leaving a large, empty hole. That such open areas were left at the fort site after it was abandoned was documented by David Thomas in 1816. During the years after the fort was abandoned, this hole slowly filled in with surrounding topsoil and clay, taking with it any artifacts in the soil around the pit. This process resulted in the episodic filling and slumping present in the stratigraphy of the feature. When the fort site was converted to agricultural use in the mid-19th-century, any remaining holes were probably completely filled by the farmer, thus sealing off the feature fill to future contamination. It might be possible to test the sulfur content of the feature fill and the surrounding topsoil to determine if there is any greater amount of sulfur present in the feature fill. If so, this would contribute to the evidence that the feature was originally used for the storage of gunpowder.
