

Engraved brass side plate found in Fort Ouiatenon well (French, 1730-60)

Fort Ouiatenon was the first fortified European settlement in what is now Indiana. It was established by the French in 1717 at a site five miles southwest of Lafayette as a military outpost to prevent British expansion into the Ohio and Wabash country.

As buffalo, beaver, and other fur-bearing animals were abundant in the area, the fort served as a trading post and stopping point for the voyageurs from Quebec. Further, the French were interested in converting the "pagan" Indians to Catholicism. Thus, Ouiatenon's establishment was based on defensive strategy, the quest for wealth, and missionary zeal.

The French selected the site in part because just across the Wabash River was a large Wea Indian village. The Weas were a part of the Miami tribes who had settled in five villages on the banks of the Wabash below the mouth of the Tippecanoe River. Their location was the gateway to the western prairies for various other tribes including the Kickapoos, Mascoutens, Sauk, and Fox. The Weas had been quick to establish trade relations with the French so the riches of the prairies and the forests flowed easily from Ouiatenon to Quebec and to France.

Between 1720 and 1760 the settlement at Ouiatenon prospered and grew. French voyageurs annually descended the Wabash to trade their goods for furs trapped by the Indians. Some remained there to establish homes.

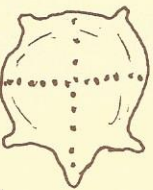
An early visitor describes Fort Ouiatenon as "the finest palisaded fort in the upper country, consisting of a stockade and a double row of houses." Within the stockade, in addition to the double row of ten houses, were a chapel, a blacksmith's shop, and trading areas. Around the walls of the fort were as many as

90 houses of French, Indians, and mix-bloods. At its height there may have been as many as 2,000 to 3,000 inhabitants in the general area.

Among those inhabitants was Anthony Foucher, born at Ouiatenon in 1741, who became the first priest born in the present state of Indiana. At Ouiatenon in these years there was generally harmony between the white and red men. The French regularly presented gifts to the Indians to insure their loyalty, and the Indians in turn brought their pelts only to the French.

This generally tranquil era continued until the French and Indian War (1754-63). The French lost all of their North American lands to England as a result of this war, including Ouiatenon which was taken for Britain by Lieutenant Edward Jenkins and a garrison of troops from Detroit in 1761.

Although Jenkins and his men maintained amicable relations with the Indians, the tribes in the Great Lakes region and the Wabash country resented the growing numbers of white men moving west. It rankled them that the British did not continue the French custom of presenting gifts annually and that British traders were demanding higher prices for goods.



Pipestone turtle effigy found near Fort Ouiatenon

In early 1763 the Ottawa Chief Pontiac set out to drive the Europeans back behind the Appalachian Mountains. His Indians attacked 12 frontier posts and successfully captured eight of them, including Ouiatenon, which fell without a shot on June 1, 1763, when a group of braves simply walked in and took Lieutenant Jenkins and his few men as prisoners. Thanks to the intervention of two French fur traders who lived at the post, Jenkins and his men were not killed but were later released in an exchange of prisoners at Detroit.

"Pontiac's Uprising" came to an end as a result of a meeting at Fort Ouiatenon. Colonel George Croghan, deputy supervisor of Indian affairs for the English colonies of America, was captured by Indians and brought to Ouiatenon. He met with Pontiac in the late summer of 1765 where he suggested that the Indians and whites sign a peace treaty to end the stalemated uprising. Pontiac's response to the suggestion was to pull his tomahawk from his belt and throw it so its blade was buried in the ground. This gesture, meaning "to end hostilities", gave rise to the phrase "bury the hatchet".

After "Pontiac's Uprising", Ouiatenon was not regarrisoned. It remained a small French trading and trapping settlement as well as a large Indian community. In 1778 just 12 households remained at the post although the nearby Wea village was believed by the British Governor of Vincennes to have 1,000 braves capable of bearing arms.



Peuten button of the King's 8th Regiment (1774-84), found in excavations at Fort Ouiatenon

A British agent occupied the post briefly to spy on the Americans in 1778. He abandoned the fort to George Rogers Clark's men, under the command of Captain Leonard Helm. Helm got pledges of loyalty to the American cause from the residents and then rejoined Clark at Vincennes.

The next visitor was British Lieutenant Governor Henry Hamilton who in 1778 was enroute from Detroit with plans to recapture Vincennes from Clark and the Americans. He described the fort as "a miserable stockade surrounding a dozen miserable cabins, called houses. The Indians hereabouts are numerous, there appear 96 of their cabins, which allowing five men to a house make the number 480." Hamilton scolded the occupants for turning to the Americans and made further preparations for his attack on Vincennes. Scarcely three months later Hamilton was captured by Clark in one of the more surprising British defeats of the Revolutionary War.

For a while after the Revolution, Fort Ouiatenon remained a settlement for a small number of French inhabitants and was a popular meeting place for local Indian tribes. The Indians, however, realizing that the flow of white settlers from the east would not halt, began to use Ouiatenon as a staging ground for raids on Kentucky settlers. In 1786 the Ouiatenon inhabitants were forced to evacuate the post for fear of their lives.

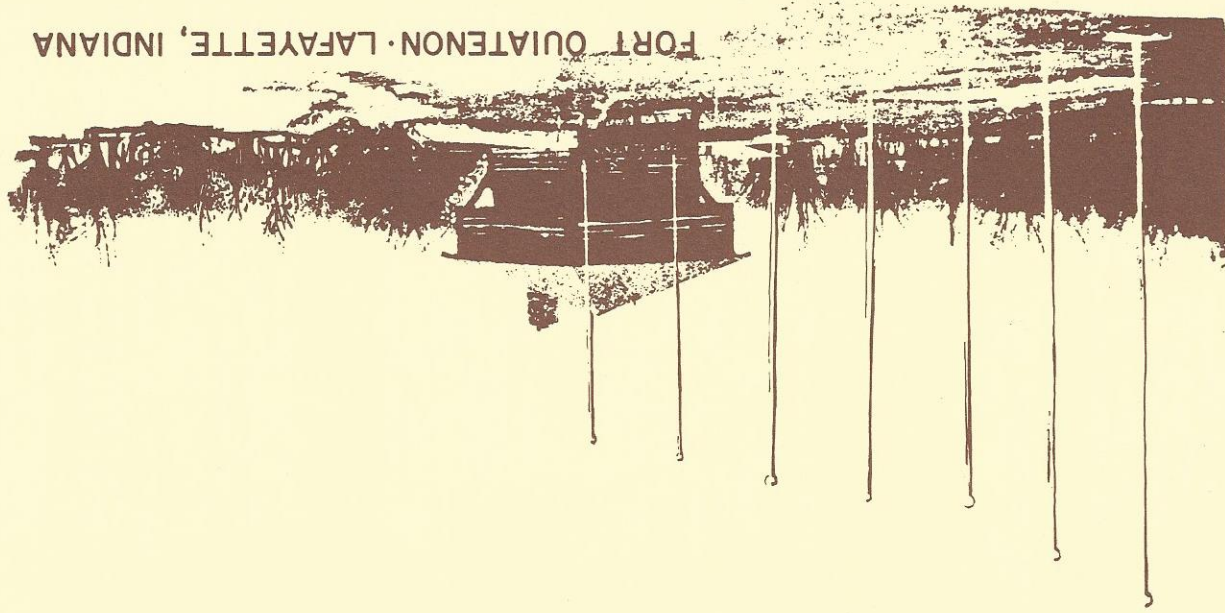
Finally, in 1791, President George Washington ordered the destruction of the Wabash Indian villages. This command was carried out by General Charles Scott who burned all crops and houses, bringing the era of Ouiatenon to an end.

Ouiatenon lay in ruins when white settlement began to grow in its neighborhood in the 1820s. Its existence was slowly forgotten until even its exact location was no longer known.

In the late 19th century, local history buffs began to take a renewed interest in Ouiatenon. In 1930 the present blockhouse at Fort Ouiatenon Historical Park was constructed by a local physician, Dr. Richard B. Wetherill.

In 1968 archaeological excavations and documentation research began under the auspices of the Tippecanoe County Historical Association to recapture and preserve the almost-forgotten French heritage of Ouiatenon. The archaeological excavation uncovered the actual site of the original stockade approximately one mile downriver from the blockhouse. Excavations, under the supervision of archaeologists from Michigan State University, ended in 1979. The actual site of Fort Ouiatenon was placed on the National Register of Historic Places by the U.S. Department of the Interior in 1970.

Both the document research, which has extended as far as Canada and France, and the archaeological research are adding to our knowledge of the Ouiatenon of more than two centuries past. We hope you enjoy your visit to the place where Hoosier history begins. An active summer program at the park is sponsored by the historical association each year. The museum and trading post in the blockhouse are open in the afternoons daily except Monday from the middle of April through October.



*Published by the
Tippecanoe County Historical Assn.
909 South St.
Lafayette, IN 47901*



Search for OUIATENON