

Fort Ouiatenon

A French officer, four French Marines, and a blacksmith arrived by canoe to what would become Fort Ouiatenon in 1717. They had been sent by the governor of New France at the request of the Ouia (sometimes spelled as 'Wea'), a band of the Miami tribe, who two years earlier had called for a missionary and blacksmith to come and live with them along the River Ouabache (Wabash River). The establishment of Fort Ouiatenon was an important move on the part of the French. During this time, the British were moving inland from their coastal colonies, looking to exploit the vast resources of the North American continent. They sought access to territories claimed by the French crown, and tried to bring the Native American tribes into the British sphere of influence.

The French, through the services of the Sieur de Vincennes and his son François-Marie Bissot de Vincennes, worked to move the Miami further west to keep them out reach of the British. With the elder Vincennes' untimely death, the Miami chose to settle along the Wabash near present-day Lafayette. The Wabash River was a major artery of transportation in those times, as rivers and lakes were like the highways and rail lines of the day. Goods that came from France traveled up the Saint Lawrence River to Montreal. From there they went to Lake Erie then traveled via canoe up the Maumee River to a portage near modern day Fort Wayne and on to the Wabash. The Wabash, in turn, linked the colony of New France with the French colony of Louisiana.

Fort Ouiatenon was constructed on the north side of the river across from the village of Ouiatenon, one of five associated Native towns in the area. Individual farmsteads may have dotted the

countryside as well. The country was rich in resources; the Wabash was teeming with fish and beaver, the Wea Plain was the home of woodland bison, and the surrounding forested hills contained deer and wild turkeys. The villages' associated fields of corn, beans, and pumpkins covered two leagues, or over four miles.

Although the fort was surrounded by a log stockade, it was not a military garrison as much as it was a trading post. No more than twenty soldiers served at the post at any time. Some four hundred bales of furs were produced by the Miami each year and traded to the twenty or more traders who journeyed from Detroit with goods such as blankets, guns, knives, tomahawks, cloth, glass beads, mirrors, silver brooches, and brandy. Some traders would return north in the same season, and some would winter over and travel in the spring. The French civilians at the post were involved with trading. Some intermarried with the Ouia, but there were a few European women and children over the years.

The history of the post was not all peaceful. There were violent deaths; smallpox found its way to the fort, and the fort was briefly captured by disgruntled young warriors. In 1760, the British finally won control of eastern North America during the French and Indian War, and the post was occupied by British forces in 1761. In 1763 the post was seized by Native forces during Pontiac's War, fought by a loose confederation of tribes bent on driving the British from the region.

Fort Ouiatenon was never reoccupied by the British. During the American Revolution, the British encouraged the Ouia to raid into the Ohio Valley. Accounts describe the fort as in decline during this time. American forces captured the fort twice during this period. In the spring and summer of 1791, American Generals Charles Scott and James Wilkinson attacked the villages and destroyed a great deal of property to stop the British-inspired raiding. No mention of the stockade is made in the accounts of that event, so we can assume that Fort Ouiatenon had passed into history by that time.

Fort Ouiatenon
Established 1717
300 years of history

