



Fort Des Moines Archaeology Site Excavations



1. What is the site? The Fort Des Moines site (officially called the Fort Des Moines No. 2 site, 13PK61) was a U. S. military post from 1843-1846. This fort was the core from which modern Des Moines grew. Over the years, the site has been covered by flood deposits from the Des Moines River and historic landfill, which is why the site is now located under the current ground surface. The area being excavated was the center of the fort, the officers' quarters extended to the north along Water Street, and the enlisted men's quarters extended to the west along Elm Street. In the excavation area several fort buildings once stood.

2. Why is the site being excavated? The Fort Des Moines site will be impacted by a new road and bridge that will connect Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway with the east side of Des Moines. Archaeologists are excavating the site to investigate the impacts and save information about the people who once lived here.

3. Who are the archaeologists? The University of Iowa's Office of the State Archaeologist (OSA) was selected by the City of Des Moines to conduct the archaeological investigation of the Fort Des Moines Site. The supervisors and crew members are highly qualified archaeologists with extensive previous experience throughout the U.S., especially in Iowa and the Midwest.

4. How was the site discovered? Fort Des Moines has always been known to exist in this general area, but the exact location was not discovered until archaeological excavations encountered fort foundations. Other portions of the fort were excavated by the firm Brice, Petrides and Associates in 1985 and by Louis Berger Associates in 2001 during other city projects.

5. What happened at Fort Des Moines? Founded in 1843 by the First U.S. Dragoons led by Captain James Allen, the fort was established to oversee the westward expansion of Euroamerican settlement. The fort was comparatively small and was never stockaded, consisting of five officers' quarters along the west side of modern First Street and an undetermined number of soldiers' barracks to the west, which was called Raccoon Row. Other features of the fort were guard houses, stables, pastures, a hospital, and a well. The fort was abandoned by the Army in 1846, when the area was fully settled by Euroamericans and the Indians removed. The fort buildings were immediately taken over by settlers.

6. What are the archaeologists looking for? They are trying to find remains of foundations, cellars, fireplaces, refuse pits, tools, and food debris left by the fort's occupants and the residents of the early town of Fort Des Moines, as well as earlier Indian people that may have lived in the area.

7. Why is this site important? The Fort Des Moines site was occupied during a period of great change in the American frontier. The system of long-distance trade and exchange established by Indians and traders was rapidly disappearing, as was the traditional Indian life of farming and hunting. Indians were being pushed out of the Midwest, to make way for Euroamerican settlers. Soldiers brought new technologies, goods, and ways of living, but their presence was short-lived, and is poorly understood. The modern city of Des Moines emerged from this fort, but we know very little about these early days.

8. Are there any human remains? No human remains were found during previous archaeological investigations of the Fort Des Moines site, and none are anticipated during these excavations. The City of Des Moines the OSA, and Iowa's Indian community have procedures in place in the unlikely event that any human remains are found. Iowa's burial site protection and reburial program has been a national model for more than 25 years.



9. What happens to the excavated objects? All artifacts collected will be cleaned and studied at the University of Iowa. These materials will be retained in secure and climate controlled storage for future research. A public exhibit of some of the more interesting artifacts is being planned for Des Moines. Archaeologists will complete reports on the site in compliance with State and Federal laws and provide updates to the community. The knowledge gained from the archaeological work being conducted at this site will help increase the understanding and appreciation of the lives of Des Moines' early inhabitants.

For more information visit our website at: <http://uiowa.edu/~osa/>
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Fort Des Moines
on modern city map,
locations approximate

Building 
Fence 
Trail 