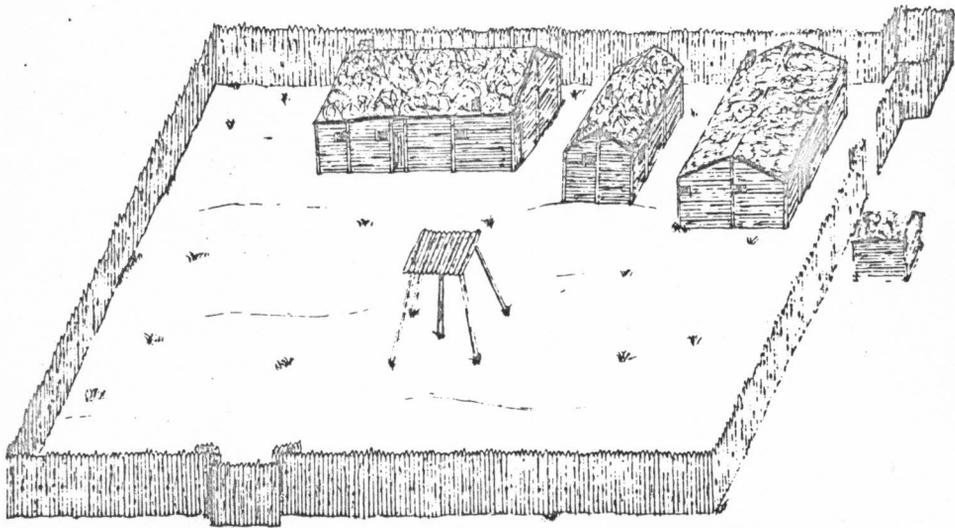


# The Excavation of Fort Renville

An Archaeological Report

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## THE FORT AND ITS BUILDER

IN MID-APRIL, 1826, Lawrence Taliaferro, Indian agent at Fort Snelling, referred to Fort Adams, a Columbia Fur Company post at Lac qui Parle, as one of "several locations . . . for carrying on trade with the several Indian tribes." The post had been built by Joseph Renville, one of the founders of the company. In 1827 the Columbia firm was purchased by the American Fur Company, and Renville remained at the post. When the name of the fort was changed from Adams to Renville is not known, but by 1835 it was generally called after its builder and occupant.

Joseph Renville, the son of a French-Canadian trader and a Sioux woman, was born about 1779 near the site of St. Paul. Educated in Canada, he fought against the Americans in the War of 1812. For a time he traded for the Hudson's Bay Company at the head of the Red River, but he left that organization in 1822, became an American citizen, and formed the Columbia Fur Company (legally known as Tilton and Company). The following year he served as guide and interpreter for the expedition led by Major Stephen H. Long, a familiar assignment since Renville had performed similar duties in 1805 for Lieutenant Zebulon M. Pike.

After the merger of the Columbia and American fur companies, the trader moved his family to Lac qui Parle. From this post Renville ruled with a strong hand; he exercised great influence over the Indians, an influence commented on by such travelers and missionaries as William H. Keating, Joseph N. Nicollet, Stephen R. Riggs, Thomas S. Williamson, and Pike, among others. Fort Renville was noted for its hospitality and was a favorite stopping place. Nicollet said that the "liberal and untiring hospitality dispensed by this respectable family . . . afforded the only retreat to travelers to be found between St. Peters and the British posts, in a distance of 700 miles."

Due to poor fur seasons and to food shortages during the 1830s and 1840s, Renville suffered economic hardships and built up a large debt to the American Fur Company. That it continued to supply him was in large measure due to his control over the Indians of the area. Fort Renville slowly deteriorated as the trader himself grew older. By the time of his death in 1846, the fort had virtually ceased to exist. The post was taken over by Martin McLeod who moved it, perhaps literally, to the present site of Lac qui Parle village about four miles away. Over the years the old fort was forgotten until 1940 when interest in the history of the area made it once more a stopping place for visitors.

Table 6 -- *Brass Rings*

| <u>Ring Diameter</u> | <u>Width</u> | <u>Thickness</u> | <u>Distinctive Attributes</u>   | <u>Catalog No.</u> |
|----------------------|--------------|------------------|---|--------------------|
| 18.5 mm.             | 4 mm.        | 1 mm.            | Plain   | 451                |
| 20.5 mm.             | 4.5 mm.      | 1 mm.            | Band is grooved with leaf pattern on each side of groove.                 | 922                |
| 21 mm.               | 3.5 mm.      | .75 mm.          | Band is grooved. Each side of the band has a series of small raised dots. | 923                |
| 20 mm.               | 5.5 mm.      | 1.5 mm.          | Plain   | 924                |
| 18 mm.               | 2 mm.        | 2 mm.            | Band is grooved. Each side of the band has a series of small raised dots. | 925                |

The other two rings were intended to contain stones. One ring retained a clear, molded and faceted glass set held to the band by a small circlet which completely surrounds it. The ring is identical to one found at Kipp's Post, 32 Mn 1, by Raymond Wood and Alan R. Woolworth in 1954. The band is 2 mm. wide, .05 mm. thick, and 17.5 mm. in diameter [No. 1161]. A second faceted ring -- intended for a child -- was found, but the set was missing. The band, which also had a missing section, measures 1.25 mm. wide, .05 mm. thick, and 14 mm. in diameter [No. 854].

*BEADS* (115) -- Plate 24 -- recovered from Fort Renville were found scattered over a wide area. There were no large concentrations. Measurements were obtained by using vernier calipers. Color classification is based on visual appearance to the authors. To aid presentation of this data, the information is provided in table form. It should be noted that all the beads are wire wound except for the faceted and tubular varieties.

*BALE SEALS* (2) -- Plate 23-2, 3. Portions of two lead bale seals were recovered at Fort Renville. One is a seal proper, circular in shape, and measuring 32 mm. in diameter and 1.5 mm. thick. The front side is flat with two parallel incised lines on it. Between the two lines is the number "101"; below the bottom line is the incised number "22." The back side has a raised lead boss, which is now flattened. Missing from this seal is all but a portion of the strap 5 mm. long. The strap has an eye which was bent over the boss, and the boss was then hammered flat to seal the loop [No. 811].

The second fragment is a strap from a different seal. It measures 16 mm. in length and 3.5 mm. in width. The eye of the strap has an exterior diameter of 21 mm. and an interior diameter of 14 mm. [No. 1062].

Table 7 -- *Beads*

| Quantity | Form    | Color                                   | Length   | Diameter | Perforation |                    | Catalog No.  |
|----------|---------|---|----------|----------|-------------|--------------------|--|
|          |         |   |          |          | Diameter    | Opaque/translucent |  |
| 1        | faceted | dark blue                               | 5.5 mm.  | 5.5 mm.  | 2.5 mm.     | x                  | 774  |
| 1        | faceted | dark blue                               | 5.5 mm.  | 7 mm.    | 3 mm.       | x                  | 1106   |
| 1        | faceted | dark blue                               | 5.5 mm.  | 6.5 mm.  | 2 mm.       | x                  | 164  |
| 5        | faceted | blue (white<br>paste center)            | 5 mm.    | 5 mm.    | 1.5 mm.     | x                  | 283, 285,<br>414, 639,<br>1115                       |
| 8        | faceted | blue (white<br>paste center)            | 6.5 mm.  | 6 mm.    | 2 mm.       | x                  | 281, 287,<br>673, 1073,<br>1081, 1101,<br>1108, 1111 |
| 8        | faceted | light blue<br>(white paste<br>center)   | 5.5 mm.  | 6.5 mm.  | 2 mm.       | x                  | 226, 282,<br>286, 868,<br>1077, 1097,<br>1099, 1107  |
| 1        | faceted | green                                   | 7 mm.    | 6 mm.    | 2 mm.       | x                  | 656  |
| 1        | faceted | white/<br>bluish tinge                  | 4.5 mm.  | 5.5 mm.  | 2 mm.       | x                  | 187  |
| 3        | faceted | white                                   | 5.5 mm.  | 5.5 mm.  | 2 mm.       | x                  | 280, 781,<br>795                                     |
| 3        | tubular | dull violet                             | 12 mm.   | 4 mm.    | 1 mm.       | x                  | 158, 312,<br>1114                                    |
| 1        | tubular | violet & white<br>(peppermint<br>stick) | 14 mm.   | 4 mm.    | 1.5 mm.     | x                  | 816  |
| 1        | tubular | white                                   | 20 mm.   | 4 mm.    | 1.5 mm.     | x                  | 1066   |
| 1        | tubular | painted white<br>(bone)                 | 14 mm.   | 4.5 mm.  | 1.5 mm.     | x                  | 1104   |
| 1        | tubular | natural (bone)                          | 11.5 mm. | 7 mm.    | 5 mm.       | x                  | 283  |
| 1        | tubular | shiny blue                              | 14.5 mm. | 5 mm.    | 1 mm.       | x                  | 1067   |
| 1        | tubular | gray-blue                               | 13 mm.   | 3.5 mm.  | 1 mm.       | x                  | 1091   |
| 4        | tubular | blue<br>(polished)                      | 15 mm.   | 5 mm.    | 1.5 mm.     | x                  | 215, 602,<br>867, 1085                               |

Table 7 -- *Beads* (continued)

| Quantity | Form                                 | Color                | Length   | Diameter | Perforation |                    | Catalog No.  |
|----------|--------------------------------------|----------------------|----------|----------|-------------|--------------------|--|
|          |                                      |                      |          |          | Diameter    | Opaque/translucent |  |
| 1        | barrel                               | white<br>(porcelain) | 12 mm.   | 7 mm.    | 2 mm.       | x                  | 1094   |
| 2        | barrel                               | light blue           | 8 mm.    | 5 mm.    | 2 mm.       | x                  | 578a-b   |
| 3        | elongated oval                       | blue                 | 6 mm.    | 4 mm.    | 1.5 mm.     | x                  | 207, 733,<br>877   |
| 1        | elongated oval                       | blue                 | 11.5 mm. | 6.5 mm.  | 1.5 mm.     | x                  | 612  |
| 2        | elongated oval                       | blue                 | 10 mm.   | 6.5 mm.  | 2 mm.       | x                  | 312, 1096  |
| 1        | oval                                 | light blue           | 6 mm.    | 4 mm.    | 1.5 mm.     | x                  | 1113   |
| 1        | oval                                 | white                | 6.5 mm.  | 6 mm.    | 2 mm.       | x                  | 1105   |
| 1        | oval                                 | natural (bone)       | 6.5 mm.  | 6 mm.    | 2 mm.       | x                  | 1130   |
| 3        | seed beads<br>(oblate<br>spheroidal) | light blue           | 2.5 mm.  | 3 mm.    | .5 mm.      | x                  | 575, 1124,<br>1128   |
| 5        | seed beads<br>(oblate<br>spheroidal) | white                | 2.5 mm.  | 3 mm.    | .5 mm.      | x                  | 574a-c,<br>1122, 1129  |
| 1        | oblate spheroidal                    | gold                 | 4.5 mm.  | 2.5 mm.  | 1 mm.       | x                  | 1123   |
| 8        | oblate spheroidal                    | red                  | 5 mm.    | 6 mm.    | 1.5 mm.     | x                  | 1074, 1075,<br>1078, 1084,<br>1087, 1102,<br>1103, 1117              |
| 1        | oblate spheroidal<br>(ribbed)        | dull red             | 6 mm.    | 5.5 mm.  | 1.5 mm.     | x                  | 722  |
| 1        | oblate spheroidal                    | lavender             | 7.5 mm.  | 7 mm.    | 3 mm.       | x                  | 1088   |
| 10       | oblate spheroidal                    | white                | 6.5 mm.  | 6.5 mm.  | 1.5 mm.     | x                  | 529, 577,<br>1072, 1082,<br>1086, 1089,<br>1095, 1105,<br>1110, 1112 |
| 2        | oblate spheroidal                    | white                | 3.5 mm.  | 4.5 mm.  | 1.5 mm.     | x                  | 576, 1120  |
| 1        | oblate spheroidal<br>(ribbed)        | white                | 12 mm.   | 13 mm.   | 3 mm.       | x                  | 844  |

Table 7 -- *Beads* (continued)

| <u>Quantity</u> | <u>Form</u>                   | <u>Color</u> | <u>Length</u> | <u>Diameter</u> | <u>Perforation</u> |                           | <u>Catalog No.</u>                            |
|-----------------|-------------------------------|--------------|---------------|-----------------|--------------------|---------------------------|---|
|                 |                               |              |               |                 | <u>Diameter</u>    | <u>Opaque/translucent</u> |   |
| 7               | oblate spheroidal             | white        | 10 mm.        | 6 mm.           | 2 mm.              | x                         | 39, 122,<br>835, 1092,<br>1093, 1098,<br>1116 |
| 2               | oblate spheroidal             | white        | 3.5 mm.       | 4 mm.           | 1 mm.              | x                         | 1069, 1079                                    |
| 1               | oblate spheroidal             | white        | 6.5 mm.       | 6.5 mm.         | 1.5 mm.            | x                         | 1090  |
| 1               | oblate spheroidal             | white        | 8 mm.         | 7.5 mm.         | 2 mm.              | x                         | 1083  |
| 1               | oblate spheroidal             | green        | 3.5 mm.       | 2.5 mm.         | 1 mm.              | x                         | 1126  |
| 1               | oblate spheroidal             | green        | 3 mm.         | 4 mm.           | 1 mm.              | x                         | 1119  |
| 3               | oblate spheroidal<br>(ribbed) | green        | 4 mm.         | 4 mm.           | 1 mm.              | x                         | 1070, 1076<br>1100                            |
| 4               | oblate spheroidal             | light blue   | 2.5 mm.       | 3.5 mm.         | 1 mm.              | x                         | 608, 746,<br>772, 1125                        |
| 3               | oblate spheroidal             | blue         | 6 mm.         | 7.5 mm.         | 3 mm.              | x                         | 753   |
| 2               | oblate spheroidal             | blue         | 10.5          | 11 mm.          | 2 mm.              | x                         | 1064, 1065                                    |
| 1               | oblate spheroidal             | blue         | 8 mm.         | 5 mm.           | 1.5 mm.            | x                         | 1080  |
| 3               | oblate spheroidal             | blue-green   | 3 mm.         | 3.5 mm.         | 1.5 mm.            | x                         | 1068, 1071,<br>1127                           |

Built for defense of the post, it was never used for this purpose. How high the watchtower stood is unknown. It would normally have been higher than the stockade walls, and historical evidence states that it was reached by a ladder. Whether or not there was a railing around the platform or a roof over it is not known. No data were found for numerous small buildings, shacks, or a large tent reported as having stood within the walls of the stockade.

The artifacts recovered at Fort Renville are typical of the 1826 to 1846 period. The dishware, as might be expected, falls primarily into the years from 1830 to 1846. When the fort was first occupied the inhabitants would probably have had only the bare necessities; as time went by they doubtless added to their possessions. Featherstonhaugh reported that Renville had an Indian bodyguard numbering from fifteen to forty individuals. As Renville was trading with the Indians, native artifacts were anticipated within the stockade. Those recovered exemplify early and mid-nineteenth-century Dakota Indians.

One puzzling note is the lack of quantities of bottle glass and ceramics. Sackett's work should have recovered larger amounts of these materials, especially in the trash pits. The pits shown on Plate 12 were found and excavated by Sackett, and the data is limited to that shown on his map. It seems likely that these items were not kept or have been lost since 1940.

The interpretation of the Fort Renville site is, of course, hampered by the lack of data. Nevertheless, the information offers insight into the workings of an American Fur Company post of this period. The findings presented in this report when combined with existing and future surveys of other American fur posts should shed light on this aspect of national and state history. In addition, the excavations at Fort Renville, when coupled with those of the Joseph R. Brown House which was the subject of the first report in this series, outline a record of building patterns and material culture on one section of the Minnesota frontier. Fort Renville was the work of an independent trader who pioneered white settlement on the western prairies, while the Brown House exemplifies a later period in the development of the same Upper Minnesota River region. The Upper Sioux Agency, which will be the subject of the third report in this series, provides still another example, adding depth and detail to our knowledge of the development of the Minnesota Valley in the years from 1826 to 1862.

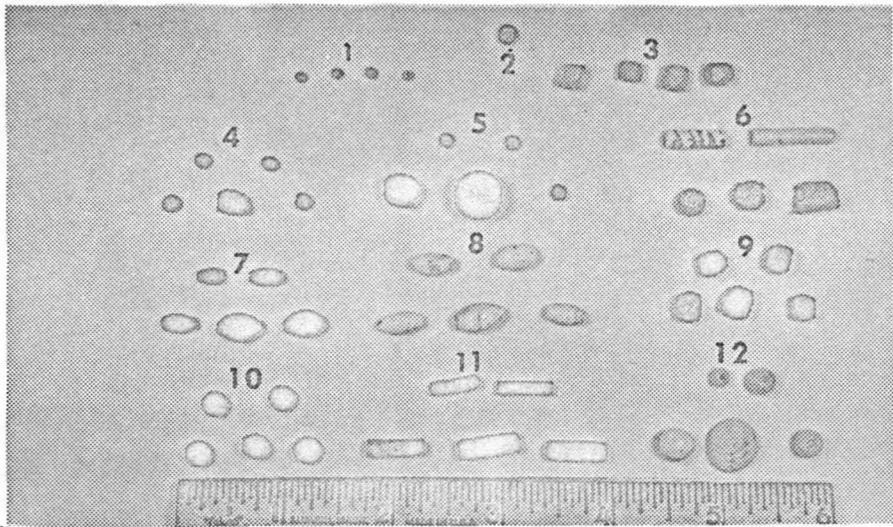


Plate 24. Beads: (1) white and blue seed; (2) gold, oblate spheroidal; (3) white faceted; (4) red, oblate spheroidal; (5) blue, oblate spheroidal; (6) bone; (7) blue, elongated oval; (8) white, elongated oval; (9) blue faceted; (10) green, oblate spheroidal; (11) violet and blue tubular; (12) white, oblate spheroidal.

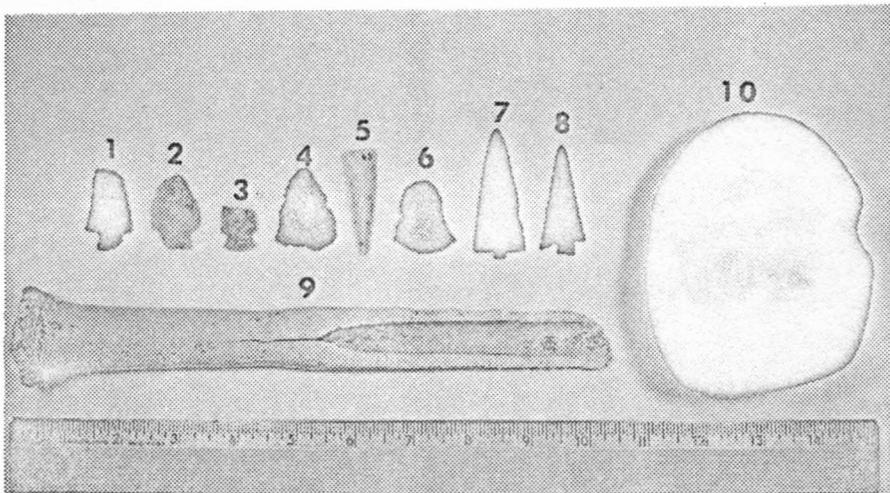


Plate 25. Objects of native manufacture or use: (1) and (2) corner-notched and stemmed projectile points [Nos. 938, 939]; (3) and (4) side-notched and triangular points [Nos. 648, 933]; (5) stone drill [No. 935]; (6) end scraper [No. 937]; (7) and (8) trade projectile points [Nos. 422, 1054]; (9) bone flesher [No. 1144]; (10) three-quarters grooved maul [No. 1154].