



BY SHELLY THOMPSON



IN THE SPOTLIGHT

COSHOCTON'S OLD STONE FORT MYSTERY

Although Coshocton is a relatively small town, it has a wealth of unusual points of interest and “claims to fame.” From being known as the birthplace of specialty advertising to having a street named after the White Woman legend, there’s a lot of intriguing history in the area. The Old Stone Fort in northern Oxford Township is one example. The building is believed to be one of the oldest structures west of the Appalachian Mountains, and perhaps the oldest in Ohio.

Experts have many versions of who built the fort and why. It may have been built by Isaac Evans, one of the first settlers in Coshocton County. But his descendants claim the fort already was an antique by the time they first arrived in the early 1800s.

Another theory is that the French explorer Pierre d’Iberville built the fort. However, archaeologists and historians date the fort to approximately 1679, and although some believe d’Iberville did build some French forts in the western lands between 1679 and 1689, they are said to have been in the Mississippi Valley. Archived records in England indicate the French did not build forts in the United States until the 1750s. There was one recorded to have been built “northwest of the Ohio River” that is generally considered to be Fort Sandusky, but that could be referring to the Old Stone Fort in Coshocton.

Another theory is that British fur trader George Croghan built the fort to protect the Indians — with whom he was known to have traded furs in the Ohio Valley in the 1740s — from the French, but that’s 60 years after the date archaeologists say it was built. Croghan likely stayed at the fort between 1752 and 1759, according to most experts, but it’s unlikely he built it.



The Old Stone Fort in Oxford Township is thought to be the oldest building in Ohio, though its true origin remains a mystery. Below, author Shelly Thompson visited the fort in January.



Still others believe the fort was built by unknown settlers as a spring or meat house. Since the Old Stone Fort dates back 60 years before the first recorded travelers in Ohio, its origin is a mystery.

However, the building and artifacts found in the surrounding area do give us some clues. The structure is very small, measuring 14 feet square, with 22-inch-thick stone walls that were quarried just north of the fort location. The fort has a loft (now inaccessible), and there are narrow vertical gun slits on three sides of the structure. The original door was 3 inches thick. Historians and archaeologists found the fort’s original lintel piece and many rifle balls, arrowheads, and flint knives, suggesting that the Old Stone Fort had been used by a variety of people and cultures over the centuries. There is also evidence that a stockade surrounded the fort at one time.

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A unique find was a bronze compass of French design that may have been carried by an explorer. The compass was found in 1918 by a farmer plowing the field near the fort. It was thought to be more than 200 years old at the time, but it was still in perfect working order.

The fort had long been abandoned by the time European settlers moved into Coshocton County, and the empty fort sat neglected for the next 150 years, until Manches Atkinson, who owned the property, realized its importance and deeded it over to the Coshocton Historical Society for preservation in 1952.

Many Coshoctonians were generous with their labor,

supplies, and funds to restore the Old Stone Fort, and a dedication was held May 14, 1953, after the completion of the restoration. Due to weather, the fort has been restored a few more times, but is in need of repair once again. Unfortunately, the Coshocton Historical Society has dissolved, and the fort’s ownership, as well as upkeep, remains in question.

The Old Stone Fort is located near the banks of the Tuscarawas River on County Road 254 in northern Oxford Township. The French compass and part of the doorway, as well as other artifacts, can be viewed at the Johnson-Humrickhouse Museum in Roscoe Village.

Sources: www.midwesternepigraphic.org, www.holmesbargainhunter.com, www.thetravelingpraters.com, www.coshoctonohio.pa-roots.com, www.youtube.com – NBC4



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