

Quick, Timely Reads

Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

On the Waterfront

Finding the Forts: Schwinn Expands Our Territory

By David Frew
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Dr. David Frew, a prolific writer, author, and speaker, grew up on Erie's lower west side as a proud "Bay Rat," joining neighborhood kids playing and marauding along the west bayfront. He has written for years about his beloved Presque Isle and his adventures on the Great Lakes. In a new series of articles for the Jefferson, the retired professor takes note of life in and around the water.



Rusty, Rin Tin Tin, and two of the brave soldiers from Fort Apache

After watching “The Adventures of Rin Tin Tin” on television, my friends and I had a complete understanding of forts. They were exciting places, staffed by brave soldiers and attacked by Indians. It was such a simple concept. Having had several geography classes, we also realized that Fort Apache, where Rin Tin Tin lived, was in Arizona and that we were in Pennsylvania., But we had heard that there was a fort here, too, and that it was attacked by Indians. We also

learned in history classes that Erie's fort was near the east end of Presque Isle Bay at the place where Mill Creek flowed into the bay.

We knew that we could get there. It was on the familiar waterfront so all we would have to do to find it would be press on beyond State Street, the eastern end of our explorations to date. We would be like Columbus and his brave sailors, venturing beyond the known world.

The magical instruments for our expanded adventures were bicycles. We had all learned to ride at a relatively early age and learned the hard way: no training wheels and lots of road rash.

But we had been constrained by unfair parental rules. We were not allowed to ride in the street. How insulting. Riding to the end of the block, dismounting, and pushing our trusty bikes to the opposite curb had seriously limited explorations. By Seventh Grade, however, we were riding in the streets and ready to stretch our boundaries.



The venerable Schwinn Phantom was equipped with stock whitewall tires, headlight, spring suspension, luggage carrier, and an in-tank horn.

While we all had bikes, none of us had the “bike of our dreams,” a Schwinn Phantom. To overcome these deficits, we saved money and made countless trips to Joe Hoffman's Bicycle Shop on West Eighth Street where we made vain attempts to trick-out our wanna-be Phantoms with such accessories as rear-view mirrors, fancy handle grips, saddle bags, and streamers. The result of this diligent work was to make our already lead-bomb machines heavier and totally unwieldy. So, when we went on extended bicycle trips, we were riding one-speed machines that had been burdened with a lot of crazy extra stuff. But we were young and tough and able to overcome such obstacles in the service of image. We were cool.

So east we rode, on a quest to find the forts that we had learned about in grade school. And most of all, we knew that we would be finding countless arrowheads. There were always thousands of arrowheads near forts, after Indian attacks. Weren't there?

Long before the Bayfront Parkway, a network of dirt roads connected the waterfront businesses. The roads ran parallel with the railroad tracks and stretched from Cranberry Street on the west end of the bayfront to the Presque Isle Bay Channel on the east end. Using our faithful bicycles, our posse of young anthropologists headed east, stopping to explore all of the roads that connected with the waterfront. We knew exactly what we were looking for: a road

that headed north to the outflow of Mill Creek. That was where we would find the remains of the old fort and the precious arrowheads we sought.

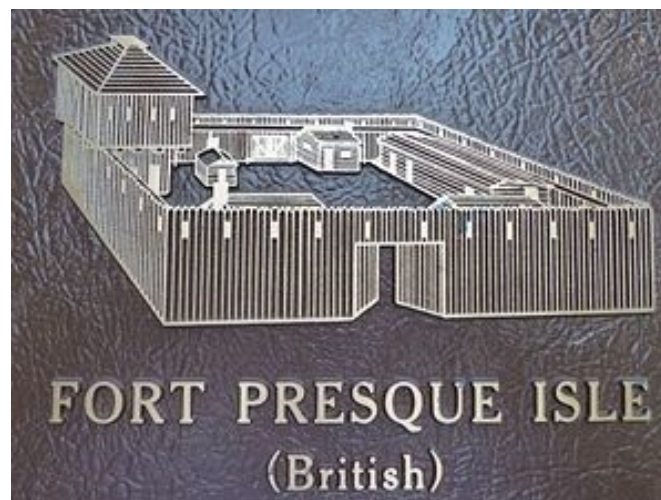
Like previous explorers, we had a map. One of the guys, Donnie, had sketched a map of the fort during a class. His illustration showed the fort, Mill Creek, the bay, and a road. Fortunately for us, he had a public school teacher who was interested in local history.



Fort Presque Isle

The approximate site of the old fort was easy to find. A road that led to the bay crossed Mill Creek just as the map had suggested, and there was a large clearing. We searched but the clearing was so overgrown that even after we had scoured the ground, hunting for clues that would reveal the precise location of an old structure, there was nothing. And little wonder, as we were to learn later. The 120-square-foot log fort that the French built in the summer of 1753 was burned to the ground in 1759, almost two centuries before our visit. And between the day that the French torched their own fort so that the British, who were about to move into the area would not be able to use it, and the 1950s, two more structures had shared the same location.

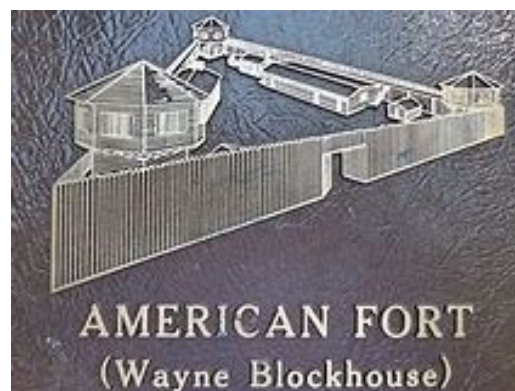
In 1760, British troops arrived, expecting to take over an abandoned fort. Disappointed that the French had burned it, the British decided to rebuild. From a military perspective the site was important as it represented a water connection (Presque Isle Bay, Lake Erie, and Mill Creek) during an era when water transport was the only practical way to negotiate the New World. After spending a year rebuilding, the British found that their outpost was too far from supply lines, and could not defend it during Pontiac's Rebellion.



The new British fort was built in a slightly different style but on the site of the old, burned-out French Fort Presque Isle.

In 1763, a confederation of Native Americans from the Great Lakes, led by Chief Pontiac, began attacking British forts. They started with Detroit, which was a major installation. When they found it to be too difficult to overwhelm, they changed tactics, picking off the eight smaller British forts. British Fort Presque Isle was the last to be targeted by Pontiac and his 1,200 Indians. They surrounded the 60 troops, cut off supplies, and spent two days lobbing flaming arrows and other projectiles over the walls. Realizing they were doomed, the officers approached Pontiac and agreed to surrender if they would be allowed to leave and return to Fort Pitt. Sadly, the Indians waited until the British were filing out of the fort and slaughtered them. Then they burned the fort to the ground.

Three decades later, in 1795, after Pennsylvania had purchased the land adjacent to Presque Isle Bay, Erie's first resident, Thomas Rees arrived. Next, Seth Reed was dropped off on Presque Isle because the ship captain bringing him from Buffalo did not know how to negotiate the waterway that was to become the bay channel. Reed, his wife Hanna, and two of their sons spent several days camping on the peninsula, worrying about Indians and wondering if it would be safe to cross to the mainland. From his vantage point, Seth Reed could see that the very best strategic location for him to establish a trading post would be near the mouth of Mill Creek. When they finally crossed, they found themselves with a federal military group at the ruins of the forts on the west side of the creek. Fortuitously, there was a road, as well, which led south to Waterford (Fort LeBoeuf, and on to Venango (today's Franklin) and Pittsburgh. At first, the Reeds were not sure if the location would be available because Army personnel were planning to build a new American fort.



The American fort, which was operational from 1795 to 1814, was built at the site of today's Soldiers and Sailors Home on top of the bluff, where lookouts would be able to see Lake Erie.

Eventually, the military determined that a new American fort should be built above and east of the old fort site on Garrison Hill (today's Pennsylvania Soldiers and Sailors Home at East Second and Ash streets. When they began construction of the fort with its accompanying blockhouse, Reed took over the creekside location, where he built a public house and trading post. He selected the site since it was adjacent to the sheltered bay and close to the future channel leading to Lake Erie, which would assure shipping traffic would follow.

Even though he had been warned about the tenuous nature of lake water levels, Reed decided that the location was optimum. In addition to potential shipping connections, it was on the established trail that led south – Old French Road was the region’s only road for 50 years. Another reason was that his new trading post, Presque Isle Hotel, would be within sight of the American fort just above him. There were still great fears about Indian attacks in the 1790s and the nearby fort would be a comfort. Seth Reed, himself, did not stay at the Mill Creek location for long. He moved south to Walnut Creek (Kearsarge) along the trail to Waterford after a year, and turned the operation of the inn over to his son, Rufus. Note: The “Erie Stone” monument at the foot of Parade Street, above the bluff, marks a corner of French Fort Presque Isle, from which the Erie survey of streets and property was conducted.



A military sketch of the location of the new American fort on Garrison Hill, overlooking the site of the previous French and British forts as well as the Reeds' Presque Isle Hotel

Shockingly, our bicycle expedition to the forts did not turn out as we had imagined. After combing through growth on the west side of the creek (which now winds out of Erie’s Sewage Treatment Plant), we failed to locate any evidence of the three structures that had been there for decades. To make matters worse, we were unsuccessful in our hunt for arrowheads.

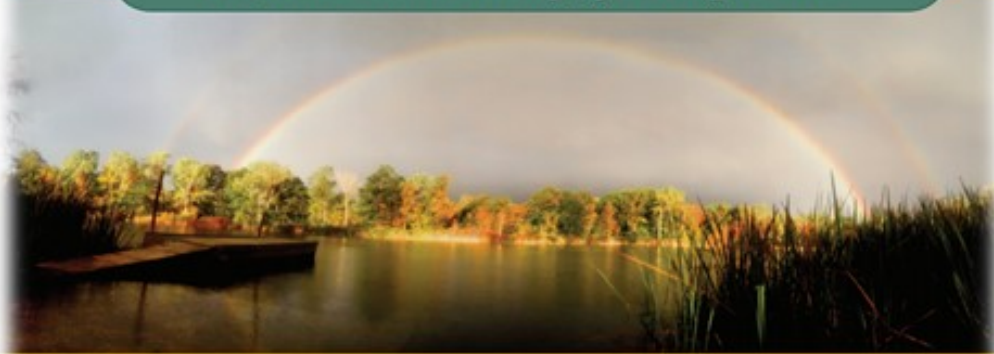
***Field Trip:** Writer and researcher Michael Fuhrman is presently working with professional staff developing a study of the Three Forts project. It is still possible to visit and explore one of Erie’s most important historical sites, the mouth of Mill Creek, though it is difficult to envision what the bayfront looked like during those early years. From State Street, head east on the Bayfront Parkway and turn north (left) onto Ore Dock Road at Sunburst Electronics. Continue on this road and wind to the right at the sand and gravel piles (Carmeuse Dock Operations). A few hundred yards beyond the sand piles you will come to Mill Creek and a clearing where you can park. Wander around and hunt for arrowheads. Let me know if you find any!*

Accidental Paradise Available at TRECF

***Accidental Paradise**
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak*

ACCIDENTAL PARADISE

13,000-Year History of Presque Isle



By David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak

with

*Dr. Jerry Covert, Cheryl Heeseaman, Brian Gula, Harry Leslie, Dr. John Lyons,
Bob North, and Dr. Jeanette Schnars*

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY PUBLICATION

Accidental Paradise Available at TREC

The much-anticipated new book on Presque Isle by authors David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak – “**Accidental Paradise: 13,000-Year History of Presque Isle**” is on sale at the Tom Ridge Environmental Center’s gift shop and through a special website, AccidentalParadise.com.

The book, priced at **\$35 plus tax and shipping**, can be ordered now through the website sponsored by the TREC Foundation, AccidentalParadise.com.

Presque Isle Gallery and Gifts on the main floor of TREC, located at 301 Peninsula Drive, Suite #2, Erie, PA 16505 will also handle sales *Wednesday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.*

For more information, send an email to aperino@TREC.org.

To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is an emeritus professor at Gannon University, where he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.



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