

Eighteenth Century Domestic Architecture in the St. Joseph River Valley



▲ Potawatomi summer houses were much larger than winter homes. Summer houses were built with a rectangular frame of saplings, covered with elm bark, and had an arched roof or could be a large domed shaped wigwam. From *Native American Architecture* by Peter Nabokov and Robert Easton.



▲ Interior of a contemporary elm bark covered wigwam. Courtesy of the Gun Lake Potawatomi.

Construction Methods –The Potawatomis lived in portable shelters covered in light-weight waterproof mats during late fall, winter, and early spring, and spent the warmer months in permanent bark covered summer houses. Native peoples followed a precise cycle of movements within their homeland to take advantage of the seasonal availability of resources. When they moved, they carried the mats from one house and placed them on the other. While traveling between seasonal camps, personal belongings were rolled inside of the mats.



▲ A Potawatomi woman, Rosan Potts, *Ke-o-ko-mo-quah*, cuts strips of bark from an elm tree for the construction of a home in Mayetta, Kansas.

Their portable structures were easy to assemble, dismantle, and transport, making them efficient and effective shelters. These buildings are hard to identify archaeologically because they left few traces on the landscape. Evidence consists of some archaeological remains of house floors, historical records, and oral accounts from members of the Potawatomi Tribe.



◀ Assembling a *pek-ye-gan*, a mat covered winter house, 2001. Courtesy of the Gun Lake Potawatomi.

The typical construction techniques for French domestic structures at Fort St. Joseph are the *poteaux en terre* (posts in the ground) and *poteaux sur sole* (posts on sill) styles. These traditional forms appear at other locations throughout New France.

The *poteaux en terre* technique used wooden posts inserted vertically into a trench and then backfilled with soil and clay. Builders filled the spaces between posts with *bousillage* (a mixture of straw and clay) or *pierrotage* (stones and mortar). This type of building was relatively quick and simple to construct, but wood inserted into the soil suffered from decay and insect damage. The *poteaux sur sole* technique also used upright posts, but they were placed on horizontal wooden sills set on a stone foundation. This method resulted in a more durable structure, but required more time and skill to build.

French-style structures probably had a steep hipped roof—made of long boards—laid horizontally, with the upper board overlapping the lower in order to shed rain and snow. Fireplaces were usually located on the north end of the structures for efficient heating; windows were placed on the east and west sides for cross ventilation.



▲ This figure illustrates the outlines of two possible structures found at Fort St. Joseph. The artifacts found in association with each structure indicate that they were most likely homes of fur traders at the fort.

Top: An ash pit suggesting that a window may have been located here in which ash from the fireplace was thrown out.

Right: The remains of a stone foundation and a posthole. Bottom: Remnants of a fireplace.

Left: Evidence of a wooden sill. Photos provided by the Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project; Drawn by Erika Loveland.

Materials – To construct an oval frame for the wigwam, women bent saplings in the ground and fastened them together to form an arch. Women sewed mats of cattails (*pek-we-shen*) to cover the frame. The mats were sewn tightly together and overlapped slightly to keep out rain and wind.

The French used both local and imported raw materials to construct their domestic structures. Wood, stone, and clay were readily available, whereas window glass came from France and Britain. A blacksmith made iron hardware like hand-wrought nails, pintles, locks, and hinges either locally or in Europe.