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Jules De Mun's Cabin:

A French Fur Trader on the Sugar River, Wisconsin

By Donald E. Thompson and Thomas Fey



Enlargement of part of the sketchmap in the 1834 notebook of surveyor George W. Harrison. East of Sugar Creek [River], White Breast's village is labeled as "in ruins." De Mun's cabin is shown on the west. Harrison had surveyed the west side of the river in 1832, and that year's sketchmap marked the road [sic] as well as the cabin and various topographic features.

In the fall of 1831, as the fur trade era was ending east of the Mississippi because of the decline of the beaver and the opening of land to settlers, Jules de Mun built a trading post on the Sugar River in southern Wisconsin. One hundred and fifty-five years later in the early fall of 1986 the authors, aided by local amateur archaeologists and students from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, laid out a grid and started excavating a series of one meter squares in an area we thought likely to be the location of de Mun's cabin. Beginning just below the sod we encountered charcoal, cut nails, and other artifacts consistent with a trader's post and a date in the 1830s. We would like to address these questions here, at least in a preliminary way: Who was Jules de Mun? Why was he here? What is the evidence that we have located the site of his cabin? What happened when he left?

According to various published accounts Jules Louis René de Mun was born at Port-au-Prince, island of Santo Domingo (now Haiti) in the French West Indies on 25 April, 1782. His father, Alexandre Jacques de Mun had moved to Santo Domingo, where he owned a plantation, from France, where he was *Chevalier* of the King's Body Guard and a member of an aristocratic family.

Excavation in progress in a meter square pit. Strings and stakes mark the grid from which the squares were selected for excavation. Many enthusiastic local amateur archaeologists volunteered to help; without their aid we would have accomplished much less. After careful excavation with mason's trowels all dirt was screened.

The de Muns trace their ancestry back to the twelfth century in southwestern France, where there is still a small town named Mun.

As a youngster Jules, along with his brother, Auguste, was left in France to be educated. Meanwhile, in the 1790s, the unrest, uprisings, and final revolt in Haiti forced his parents to flee to England. The boys in turn narrowly escaped to England during the French Revolution (dressed as peasant children, practically in the shadow of the guillotine beheading Robespierre according to one perhaps somewhat romanticized account).

As a young man of around twenty, Jules returned to the New World about 1803, where he grew coffee in Cuba. He was joined first by his brothers, then by his mother (nee Marie Madeleine Le Meilleur) in 1808, following the death of his father in England. By his own statement, he was trying to recuperate the losses suffered by his family earlier in Santo Domingo. In August of 1808 he apparently swore allegiance to Spain [to Ferdinand VII?] and was granted permission to remain in Cuba. (The details from the secondary sources available to us are confusing on this point, citing Ferdinand VI who died before Jules was born. Ferdinand VII is more likely but had been forcibly replaced by Joseph, Napoleon's brother, by the time Jules would have been swearing allegiance in Cuba. Perhaps the Cuban authorities did not recognize Joseph; perhaps the news had not arrived yet.)

Less than a year later, however, Jules was in the Baltimore-Philadelphia area where he spent about a year before settling in the French



community in St. Louis early in 1812. Later that spring he married fifteen-year-old Isabelle Gratiot, described as well educated and mannered and the most beautiful woman in St. Louis. She was the daughter of Charles Gratiot, whose family members, like de Mun's, were aristocratic refugees from France, and Victoire Chouteau, whose family founded St. Louis and was active in the fur trade of the Upper Mississippi. It was at this point that Jules de Mun entered the fur trade. Both sides of his wife's family were important in the commercial life of St. Louis; indeed his father-in-law, Charles Gratiot, had once been associated with the Northwest Fur Company in Montreal.

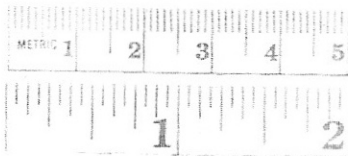
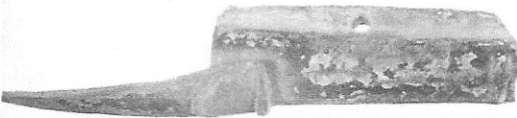
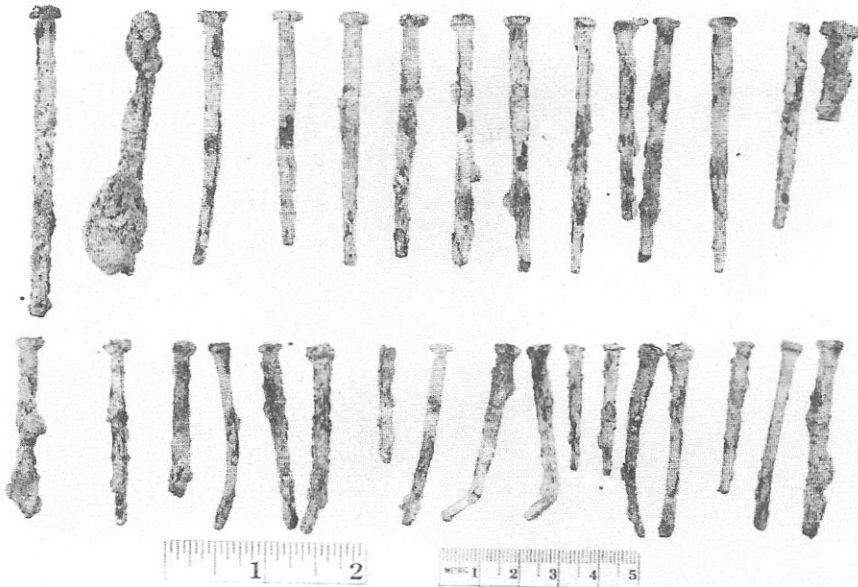
In 1815 Jules de Mun joined his wife's first cousin, Auguste Pierre Chouteau on an ill-fated trading expedition to the headwaters of the Arkansas River, a trip for which we have some excellent documentation in the published letters and journal entries by Jules. At that time Spain claimed all of the southwest. Upon hearing that a party of French were encroaching on their territory they sent out troops to capture them. De Mun, Chouteau, and the men were taken to Santa Fe and thrown into prison in irons.

As de Mun wrote about his trial at the Governor's Palace, which still stands in Santa Fe:

Many questions were asked, but particularly why we had stayed so long in Spanish dominions. I answered that, being on the Arkansas river, we did not consider ourselves in the domains of Spain, as we had license to go as far as said river. The president [of the court] denied that our government had a right to give such a license, and entered into such a rage that it prevented his speaking, contenting himself with striking his fist several times on the table, saying, "Gentlemen we must have this man shot."

Fortunately, a new governor was installed before the sentence took place and de Mun and his party were sent packing back to St. Louis upon the worst horses that the Spanish would spare. Their goods and furs were also confiscated, a loss of two years of trade, estimated at 30,000 dollars.

He returned to St. Louis to a hero's welcome but presumably broke and riding one of the scrawny horses allowed each released captive. A year later he and his family returned to Cuba, where they remained for about ten years growing



Above: Selection of cut nails from one square. There appear to be roughly three sizes. Hand-wrought nails also occur, especially in larger sizes.

Below: Rampipe to hold the ramrod for a muzzle-loading gun. It is distinctive in style, and Robert Camardo, who is working on the identification of both the found and listed artifacts from the de Mun site, has matched it with better quality trade guns from Birmingham, England, dating to 1789 and 1820.

coffee. In 1830 they returned to St. Louis. The reason for their return is as yet uncertain. Isabelle's family ties to St. Louis may have been a factor, as may the political corruption in Cuba and the growing opposition to Spanish rule in the wake of the wars of independence on the mainland. It was shortly after his return that Jules de Mun had his brief and puzzling association with southern Wisconsin.

By 1831 the southwest section of Wisconsin was teeming with lead miners. Among the successful ones was Jules de Mun's brother-in-law, Henry Gratiot. Gratiot had a few years previously learned of a rich lead area from the Winnebago Indians and was busy mining and smelting the ore at his new settlement of Gratiot's Grove, located just over the Wisconsin line about twelve miles north of Galena. Henry Gratiot held a position as Indian subagent to the Winnebago and probably introduced de Mun to the Indians. De Mun took up residence in an abandoned miner's cabin, Skinner's Diggings, a few miles north of present day Monroe, Wisconsin. He had likely received

information from Gratiot about prospects for trade with the Winnebago in the still largely unsettled woods and prairies to the east of Gratiot's Grove.

On October 11, 1831, H. [Henry] Gratiot wrote Jules a letter addressed to Skinner's Grove in which he says:

Owing to the inclemency of the weather we have not sent a wagon to Galena. Mr. [William S.] Hamilton is going to send a load of lead in immediately and promises to take your goods as far as his house. The wagon will pass here [Gratiot's Grove] and I will send you tobacco, powder, etc., etc. P.S. Don't forget to send three of your best buckskins by first conveyance.

Five days later, Jules wrote from Skinner's Old Place [Grove] to his twelve-year-old daughter Louise, back in St. Louis, warning her of the hardships of frontier life:

I think often, dear child, of the idea that you had of spending the winter with me [at the trading post]. I believe that you are a lot better off making your way to St. Louis. I am here about 20 miles away from any other dwelling in company with Monsieur Gallois, my cook. He is an old soldier, the dirtiest man that has ever existed and I assure you we must have a good stomach and good appetite for the eating of his fried potatoes. Soon I am going to move. I am going to build a house on a pretty little river [the Sugar River] twelve miles from here.

From these letters as well as from surveyors' maps it is clear that the main route to de Mun's future cabin was overland from Galena to Gratiot's Grove to Hamilton's diggings to Skinner's Grove to de Mun's. This overland route by horse and wagon contrasts sharply with the standard picture of fur trade as mainly by canoe. The prairie and oak savanna countryside permitted relatively easy travel by horse and wagon. De Mun probably stayed at Hamilton's himself en route to

Skinner's, though this is not stated in any of the documents available to us to date. In any case he would have gone to Hamilton's to pick up the goods mentioned in Gratiot's letter.

Hamilton's Diggings, later Fort Hamilton, near modern Wiota, was the lead mining and smelting establishment of William S. Hamilton, youngest son of Alexander Hamilton. Just seven months previous to these letters, in March of 1831, Juliette M. Kinzie, with her Indian agent husband, John, and party, had taken refuge from a storm at Hamilton's on their cross-country trip from Fort Winnebago (Portage) to Fort Dearborn (Chicago). In her fascinating book, *Waubun: The Early Day in the Northwest*, she provides a vivid description of travel in this part of the state in 1831, the appearance of Hamilton's cabins, the people working there, and Hamilton himself.

Skinner's Old Place or Grove, where Jules was staying, has also been located, but no serious research beyond survey has yet been undertaken there. Most interesting are the numerous pock mark-like depressions over the area, the remains of the "diggings" for lead. There are also a few piles of tailings.

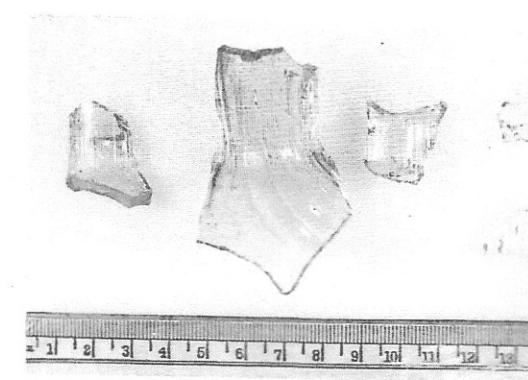
About twelve miles east of Skinner's Grove on the Sugar River Jules de Mun built his cabin. Fortunately, in early 1832 and again in 1834 the area was surveyed by George W. Harrison, who briefly commanded the militia at Fort Hamilton, and his notebooks and maps have survived. Despite the preliminary nature of the maps and the probable meander shifts of the river, it is possible to make a good estimation of the general location of where the cabin would have stood.

Not only do the early maps and the accompanying notes provide a basis for locating the cabin but they also plot the local trails and in passing indicate one of the reasons de Mun may have chosen to build where he did. The Winnebago chief, White Breast, had a village of eight to ten long lodges about three

fourths of a mile downstream on the east bank of the river. In 1831 territory to the east of the Sugar still belonged to the Indians. De Mun built on the west side because, according to the treaty of 1829 at Prairie du Chien, this had been ceded by the Winnebagos. According to law, no traders should live in an Indian village or in their territory. So de Mun was separated by the river from his clients. Nothing prevented Indians from living around a trader, however, so some Winnebago families set up their wigwams around the trading post, as is shown in an early survey map.

After we had located the general area of the cabin, informal surface use of a metal detector yielded artifacts such as a strike-a-light (firesteel) which were in keeping with a traders post. Subsequently we examined the site in detail, laid out a metric grid, and selected a series of meter squares for excavation. The choices were based on topographic irregularities suggesting human activity. These squares were excavated, with the landowner's permission, over a series of fall weekends in 1986 and 1987.

Our first concern was to see if indeed the cabin was located where the maps, landforms, and recovered artifacts seemed to suggest



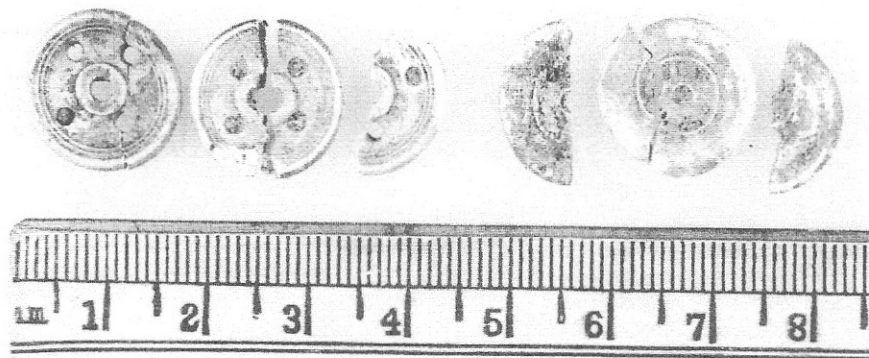
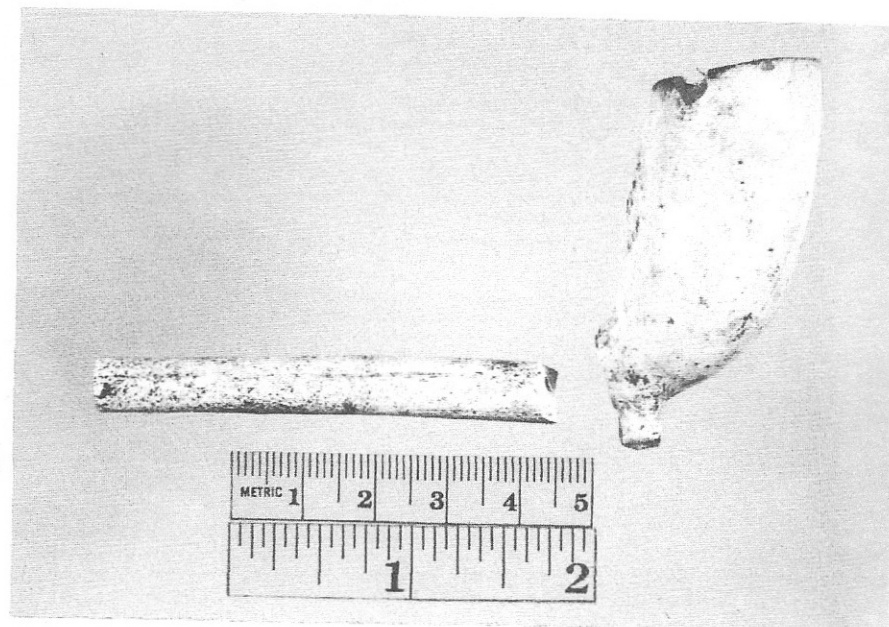
Above: Glass with several patterns present, probably blown into a three-piece mold. The piece on the lower right may have been affected by the later fire. Below: These glass fragments include the neck of a flask. In this shallow, plowed site, there could be later pieces represented in the collection, but most of the artifacts are certainly consistent with a date in the 1830s.

it was. We first excavated a trench, one meter wide and four meters long, across what seemed to be a potential wall location. At about the middle of the trench the excavated material shifted from relatively sterile soil to black earth with a high carbon content and a much higher density of artifacts, including numerous cut-iron nails and some hand-wrought ones, findings which suggested interior construction. At the juncture of the sterile and richer zones and nearby on either side were numerous fragments of friable burned clay, some apparently bearing the impressions of wood—in short, what we are interpreting as log wall chinking that had been preserved by partial firing.

None of the excavations has yielded evidence of foundations. We have therefore concluded that the logs were laid directly on the ground, that the chimney was of wattle and daub and that the floor was earthen, interpretations which are consistent with a cabin that was built in a hurry late in the season when the winter's firewood still had to be collected. Like most trading posts, the cabin was, in any case, probably intended to be temporary, good for two or three seasons at most. Because the area has been plowed, we will probably never be able to outline the cabin exactly, though we can tell in a general way whether we are excavating inside or outside of it. For the same reason the very precise location of artifacts is probably not significant, and the site can be treated as a single vertical excavation unit.

We have also decided that the cabin burned down at quite a high temperature. We reached this conclusion on the basis of the high charcoal content of the soil, the partially fired chinking, and the presence among the artifacts of broken glass that had been warped by heat and pieces of china, the glazed surfaces of which had undergone color shifts and been "crazed" or cracked by intense heat, a sort of refiring.

Some of the recovered artifacts in keeping with a trader's cabin include: the strike-a-light (firesteel), a



piece of a trap, a clasp knife, a small hammer head, a ramrod pipe, what is probably the front plate of a padlock, an iron dutch oven lid fragment, a file, and quite a number of metal artifacts of less certain function such as a ring which could have been part of a trap chain, a pintle possibly serving as a door hinge, and large headed wrought clinched nails which could have been part of the door construction. Some of the artifacts came from excavations in the cabin; others were found several meters away.

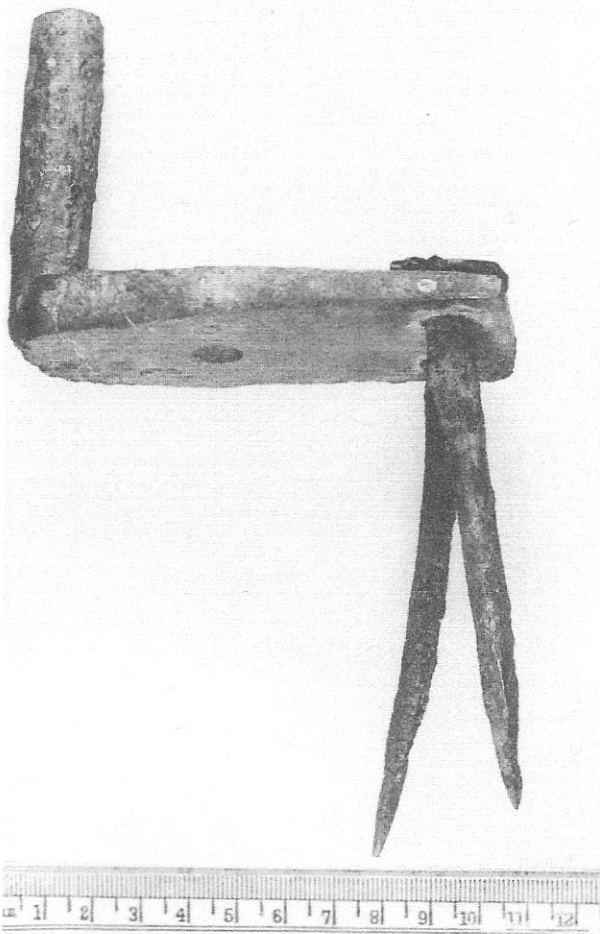
More domestic in nature are the bone button fragments and sherds of several kinds of imported English china. The fragments of glass include one piece which is very thin and may be hand blown and numerous pieces which were blown

Above: Clay pipe and stem. The two may not belong together. Unfortunately we have not yet been able to make out the mark on the bowl. Below: Buttons of two kinds, both apparently of bone.

into decorated molds. All this speaks a certain measure of luxury in the wilderness, a keeping up of appearances, visual and psychological, appropriate to a man of de Mun's lineage. More ordinary and expected are the fragments of clay pipes. Notable by their absence so far are beads of any kind.

After wintering over, Jules de Mun left his cabin at the end of April 1832. We do not yet know what he took with him, though such a list may well exist, but we do have an inventory of what he left behind, probably compiled as a list of losses. The end of April, of course, would be a logical time for a trader to be taking his winter's collection of pelts out to market, but it may be no coincidence that he abandoned his cabin just over three weeks after Black Hawk crossed the Mississippi, putting all of southwestern Wisconsin on the defensive, including the fortification of Hamilton's place. (Today, one may contemplate an outdoor painting of Fort Hamilton in downtown Wiota, but the authors would not care to vouch for its accuracy.)

The inventory, which, perhaps significantly, is not in the de Mun collection but in the P. Chouteau Maffitt one, is a long list of goods valued at a total of \$1219.79. It includes not only trade goods such as blankets, yarn, thread, firesteels, Indian awls, finger rings, gunflints, [gun] powder, hoes, kettles of both iron and tin, both black and white beads, tomahawks, and muskrat traps of two sizes; but also skins, including muskrat, raccoon, deer, mink, gray wolf, otter and buffalo [sic]! The otter skins were the most valuable (12 at \$5.00 each) and the muskrat, the most numerous (1708 at .25 each). Beaver, absent from the list, had been virtually hunted out of southern Wisconsin by this date. The trading house and furniture are also listed and valued at \$70.00 and \$20.00, respectively. The list includes neither personal goods such as clothing nor household items such as glass, china, or tableware, suggesting that the list represents purely a commercial rather than a total inventory.



Above: Pintle, possibly serving as a door hinge. The long nails appear to be hand wrought. Below: Iron artifacts of uncertain function. The piece on the left appears to be a small hammer head, but, on the basis of an examination of the photos, Gary Schluter, an artistic blacksmith, suggests it might possibly have been a hot punch hardie, a blacksmith's tool.



