

“Archaeology at the Agency” Special Exhibit: 2020

Sponsored by (and now in memory of) Attorney Doug Kammer



The Art of Interpretation

The archaeologist's job is to analyze objects (called artifacts) to reveal the story of how people lived in the past. Archaeology is like detective work. Each artifact contributes clues that help an archaeologist draw conclusions about a site's history. Even an artifact's position in the ground and its pattern of wear can help an archaeologist understand what happened in the past in a particular location. Try your hand at interpretation using the questions to the right and below!

Typology

Both of these pottery shards were found in the Agency House's refuse pit. One dates to the 1830s, but the small white fragment is a salt-glaze piece which was not manufactured later than the 1770s. What might this say about the Kinzies' dining ware?



Location

This corroded piece of a brass epaulette (a component of a military officer's dress uniform) was discovered outside the dining room door of the Agency House. What might this indicate about this entrance's function and the house's guests?



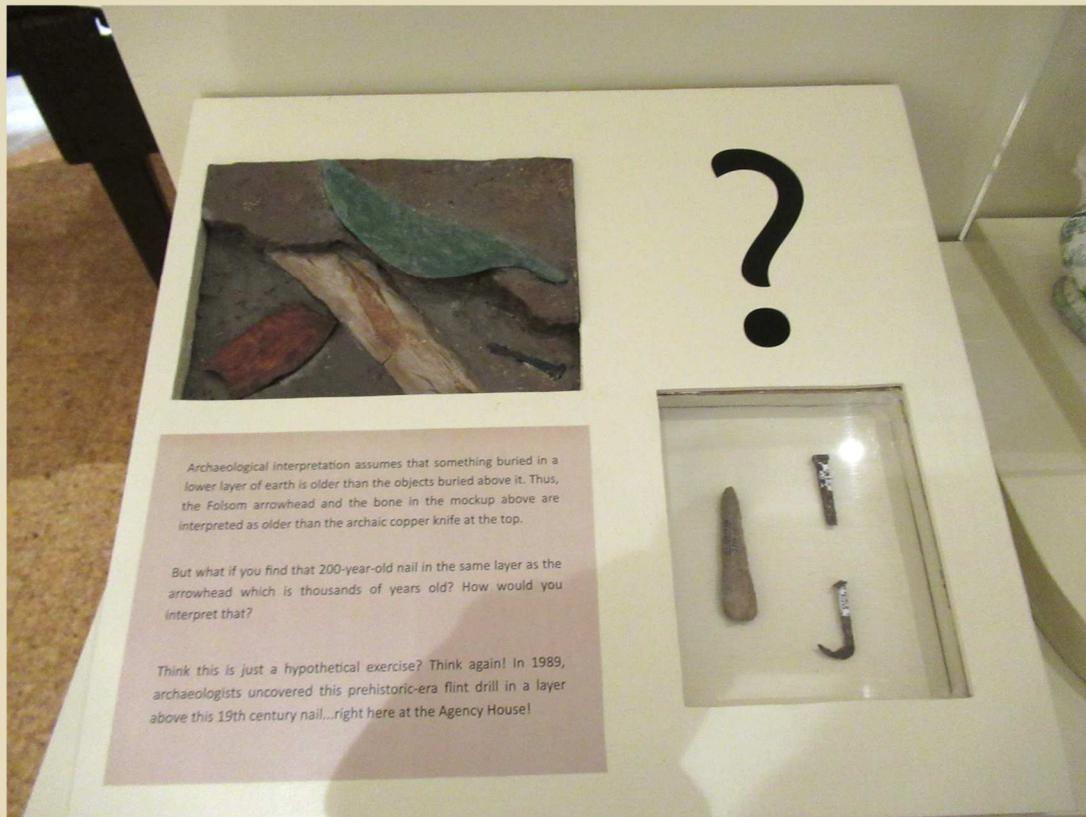
Ceramics can be identified and used as a key indicator of a site's date. The shards below were uncovered outside the Agency House. Can you match them with their more complete counterparts above? What clues did you use? Color? Shape? Pattern?



Condition

The bone on the left was sawn in the butchering process. The bone on the right, however, features rough breakage and knife marks instead of saw marks. Does this say something about their respective sources?





Archaeological interpretation assumes that something buried in a lower layer of earth is older than the objects buried above it. Thus, the Folsom arrowhead and the bone in the mockup above are interpreted as older than the archaic copper knife at the top. But what if you find that 200-year-old nail in the same layer as the arrowhead which is thousands of years old? How would you interpret that? Think this is just a hypothetical exercise? Think again! In 1989, archaeologists uncovered this prehistoric-era flint drill in a layer above this 19th century nail...right here at the Agency House!



Misidentification

Some vastly different artifacts can look very similar, creating problems for the archaeologist. Both of these round objects were collected and labeled as cannonballs. Can you determine which one is an imposter?

(Answer: Neither one is a cannonball. The one on the left is a round rock that was found near Fort Howard. The one on the right is oblong rather than round and is most likely part of a crushing drum at the gravel works near which it was found. A real cannonball from Fort Winnebago is displayed next to the soldier in the corner.)

How old is that building?

Nails are often used to determine approximate age. The top row of nails are (left) hand-forged, (center) cut, and (right) wire. Can you match the nail fragments (bottom row) to their proper type? How did you arrive at your conclusions?



LOOK INSIDE DRAWER: Excavation Square 19 (10-15 cm)

This drawer represents all the artifacts recovered from one 5 cm layer of one archaeological unit dug near the Agency House in the 1980s.

- Which types of artifacts displayed here would give you the most important clues to help you determine what type of habitation (for example, Native, farm, or government) produced and discarded these remains? Is there enough material to make a determination?
- Which types of artifacts displayed here would give you the most important clues to help you determine the approximate age of the items in this particular layer of excavation?

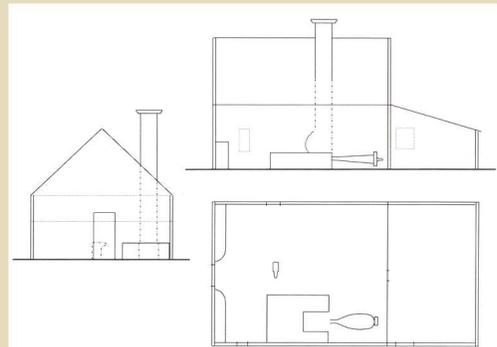


Mockup of a blacksmith's forge: Use the bellows to stoke the "fire" (the pinwheel).



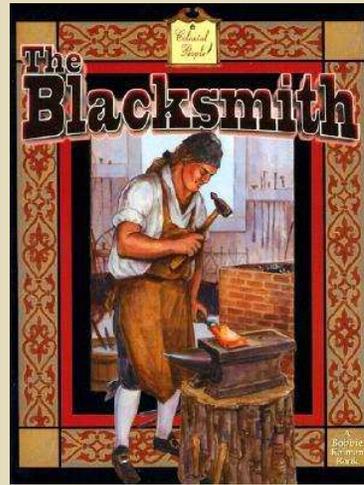
Unearthing Blacksmith History

The U.S. government hired Indian Agency blacksmiths to serve Native Americans as partial payment for their allegiance or, as in our case, for their land. Blacksmiths were valuable because the decline of the fur trade left many Natives unable to procure new iron tools. A smith could repair existing tools at no cost to the tribe. Wisconsin's Agency blacksmiths served the Ho-Chunk Nation in Prairie du Chien, at Sugar Creek near Madison, and right here on our property.



Why Dig?

Much happened on this Agency House hillside. Excavating the blacksmith shop is a step toward understanding more about how a 19th century Indian Agency functioned and how the people of the area lived. What did the blacksmith primarily make? What was the source of his materials? How was his shop positioned? These questions and more will hopefully be addressed by the evidence in the ground.



LOOK INSIDE DRAWER:



The 1980s dig at the Agency House produced artifacts which harken back to multiple eras in the house's history. Toys from the mid-to-late 19th century such as marbles, china dolls, and dominoes (top left corner of the drawer) were joined by indigenous artifacts ranging from thousands to just under two hundred years old such as flint scrapers, stone tools, an archaic copper implement, and a Spanish coin altered to be worn (top right corner of drawer). Along with these were ubiquitous clay pipe fragments; objects from the site's tavern days; military remnants; and building, cooking, and living materials spanning the site's era of Euro-American occupation.



LOOK INSIDE DRAWER:

The proportion of tableware at the Agency site was high compared to the utility ceramics usually present at agricultural sites. The Agency property was farmed for only part of its span of habitation. This evidence corroborates with the historical record which indicates the site's early use as a government outpost and later a tavern. Like the artifacts in the drawer above, these ceramics span a long period of time. Much of what is displayed here, however, may be dated to the earlier days of the house's occupancy.

**Blacksmith
Fun Facts**

HIGH TEMPERATURES

Powerful bellows helped heat iron until it was soft enough to work—sometimes up to 2,000 degrees! Before thermometers were used, blacksmiths judged the metal's temperature by its color.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

In 1831, a government blacksmith shop was furnished with tools for \$35, which is approximately \$1,000 in today's money.

STAFFING

Some shops employed a blacksmith and a specialized smith, such as a gunsmith. Others employed a jack-of-all-trades who could do anything from gun repair to fire steel fabrication. A striker (assistant) worked at some shops in an apprenticeship arrangement. At small smithies, however, the striker was often tasked with the odd jobs no one else wanted to do. Agency blacksmiths rarely spoke Ho-Chunk, so Indian agents such as John H. Kinzie sometimes acted as translators.

AVAILABILITY OF COAL

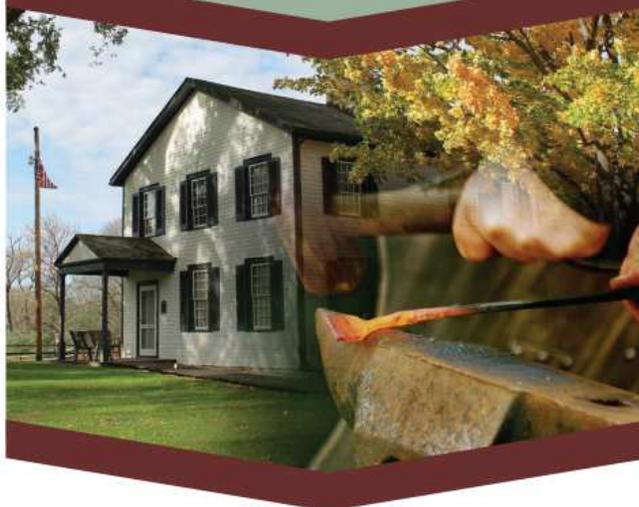
In pre-state Wisconsin, coal was a rare but necessary commodity. Iron and coal were brought to the interior of Wisconsin from as far away as St. Louis and Detroit to feed the agency forges.



The Historic Indian Agency House

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Exploring
Blacksmithing
and Indian Agencies



The Frontier Blacksmith
at the
Historic Indian Agency House



Blacksmiths and Indian Agencies

TREATY OF 1829

In the 1800s, lead mining in southwest Wisconsin created friction between frontier settlers and the Native tribes upon whose land the settlers were encroaching. The Bureau of Indian Affairs saw a need to directly mediate this potentially explosive situation. In 1829, a treaty was signed in Prairie du Chien which stipulated that the U.S. government would purchase Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) land in the lead mining region for \$540,000 over thirty years, as well as provide trade goods and blacksmith services to the tribe. U.S. Commissioners established three blacksmiths throughout Ho-Chunk territory: one in Prairie du Chien, one along the Sugar River near Madison, and one at Fort Winnebago in Portage.

CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

The government also hoped that the availability of blacksmiths would encourage the tribe to adopt more aspects of European culture. However, the Ho-Chunk primarily valued the smith's work in repairing their hunting tools, including guns and traps, which were essential to the fur trade.

BLACKSMITH HISTORY

Archaeological evidence for ironworking appears as far back as 1500 BC among the Hittite civilization. The trade continued strong into the early 20th century but fell out of common use as industrialism arose. While Europeans introduced blacksmithing to America, metallurgy—including that of copper and lead—was practiced by Natives long before that.

VALUE OF THE TRADE

The blacksmith trade has held great importance for thousands of years, affecting everything from domestic life to agriculture; hunting to equine care; commerce to transportation; children's pastimes to United States government relations with Native people groups and settlers on the early American frontier.

DIG DEEPER

To learn more, please visit:

www.agencyhouse.org/archaeology-2020



EXPLORE BLACKSMITH HISTORY WITH US AT THE HISTORIC INDIAN AGENCY HOUSE'S ARCHAEOLOGY DIG IN 2020.

