

# Layers of History:

## Archaeology on the Agency House Site

1988-1989





As we attempt to reconstruct an image of life in the past, the historical record can leave gaping holes in our understanding. The down fall of written sources is that prominent individuals and extraordinary events leave the most thorough record, while everyday people and life are forgotten.

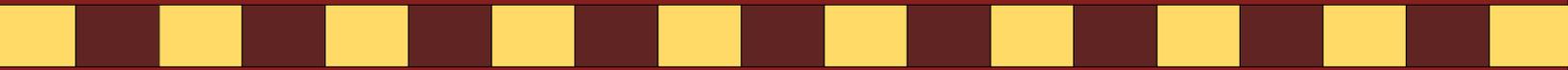
## Archaeology can help fill in some of what has been lost.

Everything from pottery shards and arrowheads to charred remains of food and the foundations of buildings can provide a glimpse into what people in the past used, what they made, and how they lived.

The archaeological dig performed at the Agency House from 1988-89 uncovered a history of the property and its inhabitants that goes far beyond the Kinzie family. Sturdy glazed pottery, finely painted china, cannonballs, and pieces of trading silver were revealed, layer by layer, as archaeologists carried out the excavation.

The items on display constitute only a fraction of the **1,129 artifacts** found during the excavation process.

The dig was conducted by Archaeological Rescue, Inc., a volunteer group under the auspices of the Milwaukee Public Museum, and supervised by trained archaeologists. The supervisor at the Agency House site was John Wackman.



# What Did the 1988 - 89 Dig Tell Us?

## POTTERY

There were 208 separate items reconstructed from the ceramic shards found in the Agency House dig, with ratios of 79% earthenware, 17% stoneware, and 3% porcelain.

These items were found in literally thousands of tiny pieces, requiring tedious work to uncover and analyze. Once compiled, they provide valuable insight into human presence on the site.

While we know from historical records that the Agency House property was farmed for over 70 years, the archaeological record tells a different story. The ratio of tableware (tea cups, saucers, and more formal dishes) to utility wares (storage crocks, jugs, butter churns, etc.) does not suggest the prolonged presence of farming families.

So, which is right?

The answer is most likely both. We know that the property was farmed for some years from written records and photographs, but we also know that the property was rented. The excavation, which was conducted close to the house, may suggest that, while the land had been cultivated extensively, few families actually lived in the house.

Pottery can also tell us more about other uses of the Agency House. The presence of twifflers, a small plate between the size of a dinner plate and a side plate, as well as a wealth of trade pipe fragments, bowls, platters, and plain whiteware add credence to claims that a tavern had been located on the site between the 1840s and 50s.



# What Did the 1988 - 89 Dig Tell Us?

## OTHER HUMAN ELEMENTS

Aside from pottery, various landscape features were uncovered on the property.

The location of an outhouse or privy was found on the northwest side of the house, and leading up to the privy, a small cobblestone path has been completely hidden under the soil.

On the west side of the house, a large brick bell cistern covered with a steel plate was uncovered. This impressive, hidden reservoir was still accessible from the surface, and was likely installed when the home was used as a farm house.

On the east side of the building, the remaining impressions of a wagon trail were found, running parallel to where the fence sits today.

The property's military history is also verified through the presence of military issue buttons found during the digs.

# What Did the 1988 - 89 Dig Tell Us?

## ANIMAL REMAINS

By studying animal remains, we can infer some information regarding historical food-ways—that is, the culture and decisions people make regarding food. Evidence of what people ate, where their food came from, and how they ate it can all be found in the archaeological remains of culinary refuse.

One surprising find was the prevalence of chicken bones on the site. In fact, chickens constituted 71.7% of all bird remains identified, and 25.8% of all vertebrate and invertebrate species remains identified. The majority of chicken bones were found on the south side of the house, along with some large duck remains that may have been from domestic fowl. These findings are consistent with Juliette's account that she raised chickens on the site.

As for mammals, Juliette recalled eating pork most frequently. Remains found at the site suggest that cattle were more commonly consumed by residents. However, the beef remains are likely post-1832, due to the presence of marks on the bone from a butcher's saw.

There is also a presence of fish bones, native shellfish remains, and even marine species, such as Virginia oysters, which would have been imported. Of the fish bones recovered, a majority were found to be walleye bones, showing that, even in the 19th century, it was a fisherman's favorite.

There were also many species of now rare animals found on the property, including the snowshoe hare (which once thrived in this area alongside the eastern cottontail), the prairie chicken (now an endangered species), and even the now-extinct passenger pigeon. The presence of these remains illustrates just how drastic changes in population dynamics have been over the course of a century.

# Photos From the 1988 - 89 Excavation





1988-89 Dig - Agency House Cistern





