Hiking through history

The acreage surrounding the Agency House is not just a beautiful place to explore. It is steeped in rich and fascinating history.

On August 29 and October 3, participants enjoyed morning guided history hikes on the Agency House's brand-new “Stories of the Land” trailway. As the groups traversed several different ecosystems and areas of historical significance, they learned about the remarkable stories connected to the soil beneath their feet.

The “Stories of the Land” trailway, funded by the Kohler Foundation, was completed in mid-August and is ready for your enjoyment.

Cemetery walk premieres at HIAH

On September 19, the City of Portage Historic Preservation Commission premiered their 2020 cemetery walk on a large outdoor screen on the Agency House lawn.

The annual performance—which is normally held live with actors in the Silver Lake Cemetery—went virtual this year due to COVID-19.

The cemetery walk is now available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJLnt60U0i6s

Dear Friends,

We are grateful to have had a great 2020 season despite the challenges involved with operating in the midst of a pandemic, thanks in no small part to the faithful contributions of time, talents, and resources from so many of you.

Our hope is that all who were able to take advantage of our offerings—whether in-person or online—enjoyed experiences of notable value.

Preparations are now being made for the 2021 season. Thank you for your patronage and your commitment to helping us fulfill our mission as a museum. We look forward to seeing you in the spring!

Respectfully,

Adam Novey
Executive Director and Curator

The land reveals its stories

Enjoying a 2nd Cup

The Powder Magazine historic site in Charleston, South Carolina, featured the Historic Indian Agency House in its 2nd Cup Conversations program on September 17.

This series of “relaxed discussions of Great American Treasures & more” takes place live via Zoom for free. For more information on upcoming featured speakers, go to www.powdermagazine.org.

Archaological test units identify areas of interest

Around 75 individuals rolled up their sleeves and dug with us into our site’s buried history over the course of two weekends in July. Many signed up for multiple dig times as they learned the process of archaeology firsthand. Almost every participant uncovered at least one artifact.

Three 1-meter by 1-meter test units were excavated under the direction of a team of professional archaeologists. The units were arranged based upon the results of a ground penetrating radar survey completed last year. All of the units yielded some artifacts, but units 1 and 3—adjacent to one another—ended up being the foremost areas of interest.

Among the artifacts discovered were small amounts of charcoal and coal, cut bone, tableware fragments (early transfereware), glass (both bottle and flat), a tinkling cone, modified chert and flakes (from the making of stone tools), a piece of a harness buckle, and a significant quantity of blacksmith-crafted square-headed nails.

A mottled area of compacted soil at around 20 cm extended down to sterile red clay. This may indicate a disturbed area associated with a building which could possibly be the blacksmith’s house.

In the know

In the Know: History Off the Beaten Path

Each year, we produce a history series to educate by various means those who visit our website. An online exhibition entitled “Artifact Ambassadors” was produced in 2019, followed by an audio history series called “Vintage Viewpoints” this year.

In 2021, we will explore some little-known tidbits from history related to the Agency House and the Portage area in general.

“In the Know: History Off the Beaten Path”

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An account of early Portage: Eugene James Hamele, Sr.

As recorded by his wife, Thelma “Ruth” Hamele

My husband’s great-grandfather, Vincent John Hamele (Vinzenz Jean), came to Portage in the 1840s. He was a stonemason and whether he came to work on the docks I do not know but he did quarry and cut the sandstone blocks for many of the foundations of the old homes and buildings. The Old R.R. from Portage from the quarry which was on some of his land. He owned quite a bit of land around the old Fort. The home he built for himself and died in it is still in use. It is owned by Alex Milanski. There was quite a settlement around it at one time. Even a small bowling alley. But it stands by itself now. His grandparents built their first home by the crossing of the Fox below the Surgeon’s Quartermaster. It burned and they moved into the Surgeon’s Quarter which was empty, until a new house could be built. While they were there my father-in-law was born. Grandpa Hamele did not build the new house right away and they moved into the Agency House where they lived for 7 or 8 years and where Uncle Billy and Aunt Harriet were born. Uncle Billy later was the last locktender on the canal. They then built their new house: which is the Calvin Breezer home now.

The things I am going to tell you are scattered and unrelated items as my husband remembers them from his grandmother, his father and uncles. Many are of no historical value but they have been interesting to me.

For instance Grandma said that the “Old Portage Trail” used by the Indians and the Traders, was not along the route we call Wauona Trail but that it started right below the Surgeon’s Quarters and followed the high sandy ridge across where my great grandfather’s home is behind Vilian Paske’s home, past the Milanowski house which was great-grandpa’s house where it angled toward the fairgrounds and on to the Wis. River. Along this sandy ridge was where all of the Indian arrowheads, war clubs and other relics were found. There was even a child’s skeleton found there. My husband found many and his uncle and an unidentified one found. He told me he thought they might be 200 years old.

Hamele’s family ties to Portage extend back to the 1840s. When his great-grandparents’ home burned down, they were said to have lived in both the Agency House and the Fort Winnebago Surgeon’s Quarters for several years until their new home was built. Hamele’s great-grandfather was born at the Surgeon’s Quarters, and two of his great-grandfather’s siblings were born at the Agency House.

Hamele’s grandmother recorded Portage history as recalled by her husband, Eugene Hamele, Sr. We are thankful to Nick for sharing this history with all of us.

Some participants also sifted one of the sand piles that had been deposited when the Agency House’s foundation was repaired during its 2012 restoration. Artifacts such as flint and brick were recovered from this area, as well.

One participant remarked that it is an amazing thing to hold in your hand something that has not been seen or touched by anyone for almost 200 years or even more.

Reenactors demonstrated the techniques and shared the history of blacksmithing as the search for the 1830s Agency blacksmith shop was underway. Although the shop itself remains elusive, further investigation is on the docket as we plan to host another community dig in 2021.

Between now and then, we are cataloguing and preserving what has already been found, completing this year’s dig report, applying for a state permit for next year, and doing additional study and prep work.

Dr. Constance Azrizzian again plans to lead the 2021 excavation with the assistance of archaeologists Dan Joyce and John Wackman. It may entail opening up additional test units or perhaps even utilizing a different method such as one which involves a trench.

Find more information on our website: www.agencyhouse.org/archaeology-2020.

A plethora of artifacts was unearthed by Alex Milanski.

A homecoming

Family ties to the Agency House

When Nick Hamele, a high school science teacher in Fort Atkinson, learned of an opportunity to demonstrate blacksmithing at the Agency House’s archaeological dig, he jumped at the chance.

Hamele is an instrumental part of the annual Fort Kohlskeun Rendezvous, reenacting the blacksmith trade from the 1830s, which is the same time era John H.

Virtual tours extended

Live virtual tours will continue to be available during our off-season (Oct.-May). We have special rates for school groups and for groups in care facilities, such as assisted living homes and nursing homes. Families, civic groups, and other large groups are also invited to join us online. Spread the word!

www.agencyhouse.org/online-tours

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Society depicted 1830s blacksmithing on September 19. Next year, the whole group is enthusiastic about their plans to perform a melodrama and demonstrate ways in which our ancestors entertained themselves in the 1830s.

Kinzie served as Indian sub-agent here in Portage. It is also the time period of the blacksmith shop which is the present subject of archaeological inquiry. With family roots firmly planted in the early days of Portage, and with his grandfather’s blacksmith tools in tow, Hamele was a perfect fit for the Agency House event...

A plethora of artifacts was unearthed by Alex Milanski.

...but there’s even more!

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