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ALERT TOP STORY

Building a canoe with fire and a history lesson in Portage

Jonathan Richie

Jun 1, 2021



Claire Peterson tends to the fire on the ash log Friday night.

JONATHAN RICHIE/Daily Register

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The Historic Indian Agency House, 1490 Agency House Road in Portage, is building a canoe with old techniques used by Native Americans this summer with first-hand evidence. Once a month, Adam Novey will be guiding people through the process of making the canoe and is explaining the historical side of these techniques.

Novey is the executive director and curator at the Agency House and is leading the project.

“In the early days of Wisconsin, dugout canoes were used to traverse waters across the region from the Mississippi River all the way to Mackinac Island,” Novey said.

If you go

WHEN: June 25 at 6 p.m. – 8 p.m.

WHERE: Historic Indian Agency House, 1490 Agency House Road, parking lot

WHAT TO BRING: Donations appreciated, no admission, chairs provided

“While one might look at building a dugout using ancient methods as a physically exacting process, it takes more patience than physical exertion,” Novey said. “The process is still being researched today, and during our season themed around the



preservation of historical knowledge and skills, we invite adults and teens (accompanied by a responsible adult) to join in this fascinating process of rediscovery. The techniques we will use are based on the earliest explorers' descriptions, as well as evidence from canoes which have been recovered after being preserved in lake sediment.”

He said to the crowd at the Agency House he has never built a canoe before and the process of building the canoe will be based on a lot of experiments.

“This is how the first Europeans traveled across Wisconsin in these canoes,” Novey said. “We don't have exact instructions on how to do this but we do have research from first-hand experience of using the canoes.”

The first step in building a single-log canoe is finding the log.



Adam Novey of the Historic Indian Agency House in Portage, explains what will be happening with this ash log over the course of the summer when he hopes it becomes a canoe.



JONATHAN RICHIE/Daily Register

Novey said Fred Galley led the Agency House's volunteer brush-clearing crew in harvesting the tree, and Blystone's Towing moved the big, heavy ash log into position.

The ash log had been drying out for a couple of months to help the burning process. Novey said the best way to start the dugout canoe is to cut off the top to help set up the burn zone.

"This first burn, we'll be lucky if we get a quarter of an inch burned and there's no guarantee it will work. We will focus on a long narrow fire on top of the log and it will start with a lot of tinder," Novey said.

Novey then took a charred stick and drew an outline on the log of where they will be burning about seven feet long leaving about a foot on both ends of the log and about an inch on the side.

Then all participants were given a stick with a piece of cloth, which would be used to control the fire. They were then instructed to wrap the cloth around the stick and then dip the stick in a bucket of water to keep the border in place and not burn more than necessary.



The Historic Indian Agency House is building a canoe this summer. Led by Adam Novey, the group will be experimenting with fire to build a canoe from a single ash log.

JONATHAN RICHE/Daily Register

Hallowing out a log is not just about burning, Novey said.

“It includes scraping out the charred wood to get to the fresh wood to make the burn more efficient,” Novey said.

With all the participants in place Novey grabbed flint and steel to start the fire with some charred cloth. Once the cloth was ignited, he placed it in a nest of dry brush and laid it on the log. A second fire was started on the other end of the log and soon there was one continuous fire across the ash log.

The fire tenders with their wet sticks kept the border safe. Two of those fire tenders were siblings from Portage, Brian and Claire Peterson.

“I walk the dogs down here and saw the signs for the dugout canoe,” Brian said.

Claire added, “We thought it’d be interesting to check it out.”





As the fire dies down, Adam Novey reads from a Henry Schoolcraft journal from 1820 when he traveled across Wisconsin.

JONATHAN RICHIE/Daily Register

As the fire continued across the log, more tinder was added and then more robust sticks were added on top of that. While the fire continued to burn on top, the log underneath was also burning. Novey estimated they had burned about an eighth of an inch of the log on the first night.

The second half of the evening included Novey reading from Henry Schoolcraft's personal journey from 1820 when Schoolcraft paddled throughout Wisconsin's rivers and lakes. One very prominent aspect from the first night's reading was the robust fur trade.

"Schoolcraft wrote in his journal the amount of animal pelts traded in one year," Novey said while listing off various animals and the pelts a company sold. "The most prominent was beaver skins. This truly shows the large scale of the fur trade. In one



year 106,000 beaver skins were traded. This all led to population decreasing over this time. By the mid-1820s the fur trade was at a standstill.”

Brian and Claire Peterson said they would come back next month to see the progress.

“The burning is interesting but I really enjoyed learning about the history of the canoes and how it ties to the area,” Claire Peterson said.

Novey will continue with different burning techniques throughout the summer. He said they will be holding five sessions, the next being June 25, on the last Friday of each month from May to September and all events are free to the public. Novey said participation is encouraged but people are also welcome to sit and enjoy the history of the event.

GALLERY: Building out canoe project

Dugout canoe project



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JONATHAN RICHE/Daily Register

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