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What's New at Mackinac State Historic Parks?

MACKINAW CITY, MICH. — Opening day for Mackinac State Historic Parks' sites is less than three weeks away, and MSHP staff are busy readying new tours, exhibits, publications, and more.

The most exciting opening for the season is the Biddle House, featuring the Mackinac Island Native American Museum. It had been slated to open for the 2020 season. However, construction progress was derailed during at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, allowing MSHP to only open the site for a weekend at the very end of the 2020 season. It will open on May 1 with the rest of the MSHP island sites.

"We believe everyone will enjoy the reinvented Biddle House," said Steve Brisson, MSHP director. "Working with the various tribal partners to tell the continuing story of the Anishnaabek people has been very rewarding, and we're excited to have it open for the season."

Up at Fort Mackinac, the beloved Kids' Quarters will receive an update, the third to the exhibit in its history, helping to fulfill MSHP's mission in presenting the history of the Straits of Mackinac. Housed in the oldest public building in Michigan, the Kids' Quarters will allow guests to experience how soldiers and civilians lived at Fort Mackinac in the 19th century. Here you'll be able to play various musical instruments used by the military, try on clothes, or design your very own fort, among many other activities.

"The Kids' Quarters has consistently been one of our most popular exhibits," Brisson said. "We're happy to unveil this expanded and reimagined version to our guests."

New programs at Fort Mackinac for the 2021 season include “The Changing Face of Fort Mackinac,” “The Army of the 1880s,” a deeper look into Mackinac National Park, a tour showcasing the women who called Fort Mackinac home, a Signal Drill Activity, and a program dedicated to what happened at Fort Mackinac after the army left in 1895. The Tea Room at Fort Mackinac, operated by Grand Hotel, will feature new menu items for the 2021 season, and, as always, will feature one of the most stunning views in Michigan. The venerable fort also saw some physical updates, with buildings painted, boardwalks replaced, and chimneys repaired. As always, the classic cannon and rifle firings will take place throughout the day, and guests can purchase the opportunity to fire the very first cannon salute of the day.

At The Richard and Jane Manoogian Mackinac Art Museum, located in front of Fort Mackinac in Marquette Park, a new juried art exhibition will debut on the second floor – “The Seasons of Mackinac.” While Mackinac has always been known as a “summer gathering place,” its beauty is unparalleled in all seasons. Mackinac Island resident and award-winning artist Bill Murcko will serve as juror for the show. It will be on display at the art museum from May 1 through October 10. Additionally, seven artists-in-residence will stay on Mackinac Island throughout the summer. Each artist will host a special, free workshop on the second Wednesday of their residency.

Special events at Fort Mackinac and Mackinac Island include the annual Vintage Base Ball game, on July 24, special activities for July 4, and Movies in the Fort throughout the summer.

As guests enter Colonial Michilimackinac, in Mackinaw City, they will be stepping back in time to 1778, when rumors of war and peace swirled around Michilimackinac. Guests will see and hear how soldiers, civilians, and Native people responded to threats real and imagined as they attempted to maintain their livelihood, the fur trade. Two new programs at the fort will provide guests an opportunity to get more hands-on with history, where you’ll unpack a trade bale and another where you’ll explore an artilleryman’s arsenal. Other programs at the site will talk about women’s roles at the fort, the enslaved community, the 5,500 square feet of gardens, as well as musket and artillery demonstrations.

An exciting new program at Colonial Michilimackinac allows guests the opportunity to fire all four black-powder weapons at Michilimackinac: the Short Land Musket, Wall Gun (a BIG musket), Coehorn Mortar, and, as the finale, the cannon. This program is available every evening after the fort closes for regular business June 5-October 8.

The Mackinac State Historic Parks' archaeology program will enter its 63rd season in 2021. Work will continue in House E of the Southeast Rowhouse at Colonial Michilimackinac. Archaeologists will be out daily (weather permitting) during the summer months.

Special events at Colonial Michilimackinac include an exhilarating "Fire at Night" program, informative history talks on topics such as gardening, archaeology, laundry and more, a celebration of the King's Birth-day on June 4, Movies by the Bridge, the ever-popular Fort Fright, and A Colonial Christmas, among others.

The last few years have seen several gallery openings at Old Mackinac Point Lighthouse – the Straits of Mackinac Shipwreck Museum, the Science and Technology Exhibit, and the Marshall Gallery on the extensively renovated second floor. All galleries will be fully open for the 2021 season. Throughout the day guides will sound the Fog Signal Whistle.

Over at Historic Mill Creek Discovery Park, the Adventure Tour will return to operation for the 2021 season. A more robust daily events schedule will showcase the sawpit and sawmill, an extensive tour looking at what else happened historically at Historic Mill Creek, and guided nature hikes through the three miles of groomed hiking trails.

Two new publications will hit bookshelves in 2021. The first, *Preservation at Mackinac – The History of the Mackinac Island State Park Commission, 1895-2020*, is an update to *100 Years at Mackinac*, originally published in 1995 as part of the centennial celebration of Mackinac Island State Park. This updated version fills in the past 25 years and adds additional details to other events. The other publication, *Pipes and Bottles or Bacchanalian Revels? The Truth About Robinson's Folly*, is a new vignette by Todd E. Harburn and Brian Leigh Dunnigan.

Finally, the last major new development will be the completion of road work along M-185. The road, which has been heavily damaged by high water levels the last few years, will be fully paved throughout the summer. While this may cause annoyances for the 2021 season, the completed road will allow visitors to explore the beautiful shoreline in peace for many years in the future.

“We were very pleased and fortunate to safely open last year,” Brisson said. “We’re optimistic for the 2021 season and excited to provide our guests with these new experiences to go along with the programming they’ve come to expect from us.”

Most major projects were funded, in part, by Mackinac Associates. Visit mackinacparks.com for a complete listing of updates and projects at Mackinac State Historic Parks. The season begins at Fort Mackinac, The Richard and Jane Manoogian Mackinac Art Museum, and Biddle House on May 1.

Mackinac State Historic Parks, a family of living history museums and parks in northern Michigan’s Straits of Mackinac, is an agency within the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. Its sites—which are accredited by the American Alliance of Museums—include Fort Mackinac, the Biddle House, The Richard and Jane Manoogian Mackinac Art Museum, Historic Downtown Mackinac, and Mackinac Island State Park on Mackinac Island, and Colonial Michilimackinac, Old Mackinac Point Lighthouse, Historic Mill Creek Discovery Park and Michilimackinac State Park in Mackinaw City. Mackinac State Historic Parks is governed by the Mackinac Island State Park Commission, established in 1895 to protect, preserve and present the parks’ rich historic and natural resources for the education and recreation of future generations. Visitor information is available at (231) 436-4100 or on the web at www.mackinacparks.com.

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