



CONTACT: Dominick Miller
millerd44@michigan.gov
Mackinac State Historic Parks
Phone: 231.436.4100
www.mackinacparks.com

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63rd Consecutive Season of Archaeology Now Underway at Colonial Michilimackinac

MACKINAW CITY, MICH. — Mackinac State Historic Parks’ archaeological program began its 63rd consecutive season of work at Colonial Michilimackinac, in Mackinaw City, on Monday, May 24, with the cleaning and preparation of the dig site, and the season kicked-off in full on June 1.

“This season we will continue excavating the two cellars and also hope to expose more of the north wall trench we got a glimpse of late last season,” said Dr. Lynn Evans, Curator of Archaeology for Mackinac State Historic Parks. “This house has consistently surprised us and it will be exciting to see what this season has in store.”

Current work inside Colonial Michilimackinac is at House E in the Southeast Rowhouse, a project that enters its 14th season in 2021. House E was first occupied by Charles Henri Desjardins de Rupallay de Gonneville, and later by an as-yet-unidentified English trader. The site has been particularly fruitful in recent years. Notable finds include a complete creamware plate utilizing pieces uncovered during the 2018 and 2019 field seasons; a bone-handled table knife; a brass serpentine sideplate for a British trade gun; a brass sleeve button with an intaglio bust; an engraved “Jesuit” ring; the remnants of a second cellar; an isolated structural post that could be a support post or potentially a remnant of the 1715 fort; and much, much more.

In 1959, the Mackinac Island State Park Commission contracted with Michigan State University to carry out a season of excavation, which has continued every summer since, turning into one of the longest ongoing archaeological digs in North America. Evans has served as curator of archaeology since 1996, and has been part of the Michilimackinac team since 1989.

“It is truly amazing to be part of something so big,” Evans said. “When I learned about Michilimackinac in college, I never imagined I would run the project one day. I feel a great responsibility to maintain the tradition and pass it along some day.”

The commission hired its first staff archaeologist, Dr. Lyle Stone, in 1969, once it became apparent that archaeology at Michilimackinac was a full-time job. This was after the majority of the west half of the fort was excavated throughout the 1960s. Work moved outside the palisade walls in the early 1970s with the construction of the Colonial Michilimackinac Visitor’s Center and resumed inside the fort in 1974. Work has been done inside Colonial Michilimackinac ever since.

The most notable building excavated in the 1970s was the most intact building at Colonial Michilimackinac, the powder magazine. In the 1980s, the home of Ezekiel Solomon, Michigan’s first Jewish settler, was excavated. Work continued in the southeast corner of the fort throughout the 1980s and most of the 1990s. In 1998, archaeologists returned to the southwest corner of the fort to tie together current results with excavations done in the 1960s. This project resulted in the reconstruction of the South Southwest Row House in 2013.

More than 1,000,000 artifacts have been unearthed at Colonial Michilimackinac, with more added each season. The sheer quantity and relatively short time frame the fort was occupied are a big part of what makes the collection notable. Beyond that it mostly depends on a given persons particular interests. Michilimackinac has yielded excellent examples of military items, trade goods, and religious objects. The best artifacts are on display in *Treasures from the Sand*, the archaeology exhibit at Colonial Michilimackinac, and in the book *Keys to the Past*, written by Evans.

Work has not been confined to Colonial Michilimackinac, though. The British water well, located near the Post Commissary at Fort Mackinac on Mackinac Island, was definitively located in 1965 and

excavated in 1980-81. The most recent archaeological project at Fort Mackinac was the testing and excavation associated with the repair of the Fort Mackinac wall, done in 2000-01. Other projects on Mackinac Island include an archaeological survey of the Wawashkamo Golf Course, site of the 1814 battle for Mackinac Island, by a team from the Center for Historic and Military Archaeology in 2002. Additionally, excavation of the Biddle House privy in the 1970s took place and the excavation of a pre-contact site during the conversion of the Indian Dormitory into The Richard and Jane Manoogian Mackinac Art Museum.

The most extensive archaeological work done outside Colonial Michilimackinac occurred at Historic Mill Creek Discovery Park, where archaeology played a key role in the development of the site. After the site was re-discovered in 1972, excavations carried out in 1973, 1974, and 1975 revealed the remains of the dam, a ca. 1790-1810 house and separate workshop, and a ca. 1820-1840 house and forge combined in one building. Additional excavations carried out in 1979 and 1980 completely exposed the dam. Between 1984 and 1994, the excavation of the ca. 1820-1840 Millwright's House was completed and additional work was done on the Campbell House and two unidentified structures in the historic area. Work has also been done at Old Mackinac Point Lighthouse that uncovered a privy where the barn had been located, as well as a free-standing privy site near the reconstructed warehouse.

Work will continue at Colonial Michilimackinac and the various MSHP sites as it provides a clearer look at the historic residents of the Straits of Mackinac. "We are still learning from it," Evans said. "It gives us a glimpse into the fascinating details of daily life that weren't written down, and insight into those who didn't leave written records.

"We've (also) learned a lot about diet," Evans continued. "We've learned, in a very tangible way, about the variety and quality of objects the people before us used, and how well-connected Michilimackinac was to the wider world. We've learned how creative they were in answering the challenges of the Great Lakes environment, including adopting Odawa and Ojibwa technology."

Dr. Evans and the archaeology crew are out at Colonial Michilimackinac every day in the summer months, weather depending, and the archaeology dig is part of daily programming at the site.

More information can be found at mackinacparks.com

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 online at www.mackinacparks.com.

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