

ARCHAEOLOGYNEWS

CONNECTING THE PAST, THE PRESENT, AND THE FUTURE

The Mississippi Valley Archaeology Center is having a productive 2026, thanks to the dedication of supporters, friends, staff, and volunteers. MVAC staff have stayed busy with regionwide contract work and outreach, and UWL students and community volunteers have made important contributions to field and collections-based research. This issue features a 2026 update on excavations at the Historic Indian Agency House (HIAH), where Connie Arzigian (supposedly retired but just as busy as before) worked with HIAH staff to involve volunteers in fascinating research.

To keep up with MVAC you can subscribe to our free monthly e-News or check our Facebook page and website. Our YouTube channel also offers some great new short videos and "video glossary" entries by MVAC staff and our volunteer videographer, Lynda Morley.



Connie Arzigian working with volunteers on public archaeology at the Historic Indian Agency House, Portage, Wisconsin.

EVENTS

Upcoming activities for fall 2026 include:

- **Fall Lecture | From Northern Brazil to Southern Minnesota: Rock Art's Unique Window into Past Lifeways.**

**Thursday, October 1, 2026
7:30 p.m. at UWL Student Union, Room 3310**

Dr. Constance Arzigian will share rock art from two lesser-known locations (Serra da Capivara, Brazil, and Jeffers Petroglyphs, Minnesota) that both feature lively images of daily life.

- Additional events will be shared on MVAC's website, Facebook page, and e-News as they become available.

MVAC AVAILABILITY

MVAC is usually open during regular business hours, but if you would like to visit, we recommend emailing or leaving a voicemail in advance to make sure someone will be available (mvac@uwlax.edu or 608.785.8463).

Archaeology News is a publication of the Mississippi Valley Archaeology Center.

Newsletter Submission:

T: 608.785.8454

E: jdowiasch@uwlax.edu

www.uwlax.edu/mvac

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1725 State Street

La Crosse, WI 54601-3788



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Figure 1: Excavations June 21, looking to north.

2026 EXCAVATIONS AT THE HISTORIC INDIAN AGENCY HOUSE

CONSTANCE ARZIGIAN

Since 2020, MVAC has supervised excavations at the Historic Indian Agency House (HIAH) in Portage, Wisconsin. The house, which lies at the portage between the Fox and Wisconsin Rivers near Fort Winnebago, was built in 1832 as the residence for John Kinzie, Indian subagent to the Ho-Chunk Nation, and his wife Juliette. Other structures are known to have existed there, but their locations have not been confirmed. We have been looking for the blacksmith shop, which was established in 1830 to serve the Ho-Chunk Nation. Over two weekends this summer (June 13–14 and 20–21, 2026) we continued the excavation of six units opened in 2025: Units 21, 22, 26, 27, 28, and 29 (Figure 1).

The weather was remarkably pleasant, and almost 200 volunteers joined us, including two group tours from the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin. Additional visitors came to watch and learn more about the project. We are currently washing and analyzing the artifacts and have a nice assemblage of window and container glass, ceramics, metal from barrel hoops, a fire striker, an ox shoe, and several beef or pork bones.

Archaeology projects often find the most exciting discoveries on the last day, and HIAH has been no exception. On the last day of the 2025 excavations, near the base of Unit

21, about 50 cm below the modern surface, we encountered a large quantity of nails, window glass, mortar, brick fragments, and a large nail going into a segment of mortar—this looked like part of a structure! A rough line of postholes to the west could also relate to this concentration. In 2026 we reopened Units 27 and 28 to track more postholes, and Unit 21 to track the structure. We found more large stones, bricks, and mortar—not a wall, but definitely construction material. We recovered three bone buttons that had been hand-drilled from the long bones of cows and then shaped and polished (Figure 2). Each has a slightly



Figure 2: Bone buttons.

different design, indicating they were not mass-produced. There were also a number of push pins and a possible garment eyelet, as well as lots of fish scales and animal bones. One corner of the unit produced three unexpected items: two wampum beads (one purple and one white), and a silver earbob (Figure 3).

Wampum. Long before European contact, Indigenous peoples made wampum beads from quahog clams found along the Atlantic shore. The beads were traded and incorporated



Figure 3: White and purple wampum beads and silver earbob.

into sacred belts that served as visual mnemonic devices for complex narratives, peace treaties, shared values, and important events. These belts remain as sacred possessions of many Nations. The beads were either purple or white, depending on the part of the clamshell that was used.

European traders recognized the importance of the beads to Indigenous people and began making them with metal tools that greatly facilitated production and led to large quantities being produced and circulated. In the 19th century, beads were also widely used in Tribal regalia. George Catlin painted many Indigenous men and women wearing wampum necklaces. This commercial production of wampum appears to have been directed by John Campbell and his family in New Jersey. Settlers along the Atlantic Coast spent the winter in household production of the tubular beads and then sold them to fur traders, who distributed them widely. Juliette Kinzie mentioned Ho-Chunk visitors to the Agency House wearing wampum necklaces and described Ho-Chunk chief Four-Legs as “dressed in all his finery, brooches, wampum, fan, looking-glass and all” (Kinzie 2021 [1856]:244).

The purple bead found in 2026 is 15 mm long, with a bore hole about 1.3 mm in diameter that appears to have been drilled straight through. The white bead, which is not as well preserved, is 10 mm long, with a bore hole about

1 mm in diameter. These dimensions indicate that both beads were produced with metal drills or awls. Older stone-bored beads are somewhat larger and have holes over 2 mm in diameter—a reflection of the difficulty of boring small holes with stone tools.



Figure 4: Stain in Unit 21, perhaps a cellar.

The silver earbob has a tiny sphere at the top and a cone dangle 17 mm long. It is missing the long, thin loop that would go through the ear, but a loop and ball found in another unit confirm a second earbob for the site.

Structure(s)? The end of the 2026 dig uncovered another complex, interesting find. After we excavated the area where the wampum and earbob were found, we exposed a large dark stain that is at least 1 meter wide, over a meter long, and 25 cm deep (Figure 4). Although the feature seems small, it is only partially exposed, and it does fit within the size range of some 19th-century subfloor root-cellar/pit features, so we are wondering whether that is what we have found. In 2027 we will excavate this feature to see what might have been stored here—or might have fallen through the floorboards.

The Kinzies waited a long time for their actual Agency house to be built. One of the first structures built was the blacksmith's house, which the Kinzies adopted as their own because the blacksmith was living elsewhere at the time. Juliette describes this early structure: "It was not very magnificent, it is true, consisting of but a parlor and

two bedrooms on the ground-floor, and two low chambers under the roof, with a kitchen in the rear; but compared with the rambling old stable-like building we now inhabited, it seemed quite a palace" (Kinzie 2021 [1856]:242-243). Could this be the structure associated with the construction materials we have been finding? We hope to find out in 2027. Join us! **Home | Historic Indian Agency House | Portage**

Reference: Kinzie, Juliette. 2021 [1856] *Wau-Bun: The "Early Day" in the Northwest*. Historic Preservation Edition. National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in the State of Wisconsin. Historic Indian Agency House, Portage, Wisconsin.

Further reading. This newspaper story talks about the manufacture of wampum in New Jersey: **FROM PASCACK TO THE PLAINS: The Story of Campbell Wampum — Pascack Press & Northern Valley Press**

Catlin painted a Menominee chief in 1831 with silver earbobs and wampum regalia. **Mah-kée-mee-teuv, Grizzly Bear, Chief of the Tribe | Smithsonian American Art Museum**

NOTABLE RETIREMENTS

MVAC staff are wishing the very best to two highly respected colleagues and friends who recently retired after years of outstanding service as educators, administrators, and leaders.

William "Nqawqcekǵize" Quackenbush, Ho-Chunk Deer Clan Tribal Member, retired at the end of June after serving as the Ho-Chunk Nation's Tribal Historic Preservation Officer (THPO) since 2005 and its Cultural Resources Division Manager since 2006. He also chaired the Wisconsin Inter-Tribal Repatriation Committee (WITRC). Bill's impacts and accomplishments have been extraordinary. He has led educational and outreach activities ranging

from lectures and presentations to hands-on workshops and living-history experiences—including the collaborative, widely acclaimed dugout canoe research and journeys. The guidance and wisdom he has provided to archaeologists and other historic preservation specialists, including MVAC staff, will be sorely missed.

Dr. Betsy Morgan, who retired in early July, capped a 33-year career at the University of Wisconsin–La Crosse by serving as Provost and Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs. She was one of the best known and most widely respected people at UWL—in fact, her retirement celebration had to be moved to a larger venue to accommodate all the well-wishers. Her honesty, integrity, and acumen, combined with her engaging personal style and legendary sense of humor, were invaluable in making UWL what it is today, and were an enormous help to MVAC and its mission.



Figure 5: Betsy Morgan presents an appreciation plaque to Bill Quackenbush.

Betsy was the perfect UWL representative to present a plaque to Bill "in appreciation for his many contributions to the University of Wisconsin–La Crosse; its students, staff, and faculty; the Mississippi Valley Archaeology Center; and the public we all serve."

The MVAC staff salute these two hardworking and accomplished leaders and will strive to keep following the examples they set. (Figure 5).



MVAC at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse
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CONTACT US

MAIN OFFICE

608.785.8463
mvac@uwlax.edu
1725 State Street
La Crosse, WI 54601-3788

MVAC DIRECTOR

Dr. Katherine Stevenson
608.785.8451
kstevenson@uwlax.edu

CHAIR, DEPARTMENT OF ARCHAEOLOGY & ANTHROPOLOGY

Dr. David Anderson
608.785.6778
danderson4@uwlax.edu

MVAC STAFF

Erik Anderson
Michael Bednarchuk
Jean Dowiasch
Wendy Holtz-Leith
Bonnie Jancik
Vicki Twinde-Javner

RESEARCH ARCHAEOLOGISTS

Dylan Chapes
Lindsay Lentz

RESEARCH ASSOCIATES

Constance Arzigian
Suzanne Harris
Amy Nicodemus
James Theler
Heather Walder

SUPPORTING MVAC

If you haven't already, please consider renewing your support for MVAC's ongoing mission of discovery, research, education, and preservation. If you would prefer, you can make your donation with our **secure online donation** option through the UWL Foundation. Your support is greatly appreciated!

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