

MVAC AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-LA CROSSE

ARCHAEOLOGYNEWS

CONNECTING THE PAST, THE PRESENT, AND THE FUTURE

This spring and summer MVAC has been as busy as ever! From initial surveys to site evaluations to monitoring in sensitive areas, our contracts staff have been active throughout Wisconsin and neighboring states. Our popular outreach and education activities have engaged people of all ages both in person and online. You can get the latest information on upcoming activities through our website, Facebook page, and monthly e-News.

NEWS & HIGHLIGHTS

In this issue we'll bring you up to date on some exciting personnel changes at MVAC and UWL, and Connie Arzigian and Dan Joyce will share the latest on this season's volunteer excavations at the Historic Indian Agency House in Portage, Wisconsin.

EVENTS

Upcoming activities for 2025 include:

October 16, 2025

LECTURE | "The Rise of Bronze Age Societies: A View from the Maros Culture" (Southeastern Europe) by UWL's Amy Nicodemus

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.*

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*Participants at the Volunteer Field Survey in May 2025 searching for ancient artifacts on the surface of a plowed field.
Photo courtesy of WXOW News 19.*



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CHANGING ROLES AND FACES AT MVAC/UWL

So far 2025 has been an exciting year for MVAC/UWL archaeology personnel!

KATHY STEVENSON BECOMES DIRECTOR: Kathy Stevenson, previously MVAC Operations Manager, has now replaced Tim McAndrews as MVAC Director. Tim is still Chair of the Archaeology & Anthropology Department and works with Kathy closely. Kathy has a long history with MVAC and UWL and says she's grateful to be part of such a dedicated, capable team.

CONNIE ARZIGIAN RETIRES: After 37 years at UWL and MVAC, Connie Arzigian retired in May 2025. Connie's career is legend—she taught and inspired countless undergraduates, conducted groundbreaking research, and brought archaeology to the public every day. In typical Connie fashion, she requested no retirement parties or gifts; instead, she enjoyed an informal reception at the end of Senior Thesis presentations and encouraged anyone thinking of a gift to direct it to the Archaeology Scholarship fund. Fortunately, Connie will still be an important part of our MVAC/UWL community.

CINDY KOCIK DEPARTS: Cindy Kocik—the face of MVAC in numerous videos—headed for Madison in July to begin her new role as a Historic Properties Researcher with the Museum Archaeology Program at the Wisconsin Historical Society. Cindy's hard work and unfailing good nature were much appreciated at MVAC, and we wish her the very best!

NEW ARCHAEOLOGY FACULTY AND INSTRUCTOR: The Department of Archaeology & Anthropology finalized two important hires. Dr. Heather Walder, an archaeologist known for her collaborative work with Tribal communities and her expertise in

chemical analysis of beads and other items, became a new faculty member. Dr. Daniel Osborne, a biological anthropologist with experience in forensics and archaeology, was hired as a Teaching Professor. They both start their new positions this fall.

MVAC ANNUAL ARTIFACT SHOW

Visitors to the Valley Mall View on May 1 saw precontact and historic-era items from throughout the region, brought in by 20 collectors, and also had their own items identified by MVAC staff. Special thanks to Robert Keiper and Jack Larson for their flintknapping demonstrations and to Valley View Mall for co-hosting the event! Thanks also to archaeologist Ryan Howell for sharing his expertise with artifact identification, and to the UW-La Crosse archaeology students who helped with artifact identification, flintknapping, and the information table.

MVAC 2025 VOLUNTEER FIELD SURVEY

BY CONSTANCE ARZIGIAN

On May 3, 2025, 34 volunteers participated in the MVAC Public Field Survey. The weather was beautiful, and the fields were well washed but not muddy. We surveyed some fields near locations we had walked in 2024, on some of the highest land in Vernon County. A local resident had told MVAC staff they had found artifacts in their field that spanned nearly 10,000 years, so we wanted to identify specific site locations and collect more artifacts. We found two projectile points. One is a nice triangular point of silicified sandstone that should date to the Late Woodland period roughly 1,000 years ago. A second point base is well made and looks intriguingly like the base of a lanceolate point that might be Late Paleoindian, perhaps 8,000 years old, though it is probably too fragmentary

to confirm. We found a lot of Prairie du Chien chert raw material but didn't find many flakes, suggesting that people used this area for hunting and perhaps as an overlook, rather than as a residence.

2025 EXCAVATIONS AT THE HISTORIC INDIAN AGENCY HOUSE

BY CONSTANCE ARZIGIAN

In June 2025, MVAC again supervised excavations at the Historic Indian Agency House (HIAH) in Portage, Wisconsin, on the weekends of June 14-15 and 21-22. About 230 participants joined us to watch or work for an hour, or as much as all four days, including archaeology students from the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, volunteers of all ages from across the state, and participants in two Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin tours. HIAH was built in 1832 to serve as an embassy between the United States government and the Ho-Chunk nation. We are excavating in the yard of the Agency House, seeking evidence of other structures, particularly the blacksmith's house and shop.

The first weekend had pleasant weather, but the second weekend was hot, with strong winds on Saturday that sent our large tent sailing and left us baking in the sun. Nevertheless, we had some great archaeology. We continued excavations in two units (21 and 26) and opened three new units (27, 28, and 29) to expand on earlier discoveries. Figure 1 shows the two areas of excavation started June 15.



Figure 1: Units on June 15, looking to the SE. Units 27 and 28 are in front, and 26 and 29 to the back.

CONNECTING THE PAST | THE PRESENT | AND THE FUTURE

Last year's discovery of a nearly complete chicken in Unit 21 led us to reopen that unit to finish excavation. Below the chicken were several large, sawed bones from a cow and a pig, suggesting more food preparation. On the last day of excavation, near the base of Unit 21 (around 40–50 cm deep), we encountered abundant mortar, large and small brick fragments, and even a large square nail going into a segment of mortar. Is this evidence of a wall? Hard to say, but it certainly suggests at least remnants of a structure and fits with the plate glass and many nails we have found throughout the excavation. Next year we will continue to explore it.

Among the other finds were artifacts that may date back to the time of the original occupation of the Indian Agency House around 1832. Among the most diagnostic is an Army General Service Great Coat button (Unit 26, Level 3) (see Figure 2). This copper alloy button is 2 cm in diameter and has an image of an eagle over the letters "U.S.," over an oval wreath. This style of great coat button was made from 1820 to 1839 (Albert 1969:Figure 70B, pages 33-34).



Figure 2: Great Coat button with eagle and "U.S."

Previously we had recovered a French gunflint, and this year we found a small gunflint of a British raw material, perhaps from a handgun (Figure 3). It is 1.9 cm long and has some concave margins, suggesting reuse as part of a fire-starter kit.

Another button that might be brass or gold is corroded, but the design suggests that it might have come from a more formal outfit (Figure 4). It is

1.6 cm in diameter and has raised dots and a hint of what might be a rosette of leaves.



Figure 3: Small gunflint made of British flint.



Figure 4: Brass button with raised dots and possible rosette of leaves.

Fragments of coal slag and cinders were widely distributed in the excavations, along with multiple clay pipestems, bottles, transfer ware ceramics, and many nails and other metal fragments. These items could have come from a blacksmith's activities, but they were not concentrated enough to suggest the actual location of a forge; they might reflect more general debris.

The persistence of traditional Native American technology was clearly documented by a number of chert flakes, as well as a partial Durst Stemmed point made of oolitic Prairie du Chien chert (Figure 5). The point may have been made 3,000 years ago, during the time period archaeologists call the Archaic; however, it was found with abundant historic artifacts and might have been reused, broken, and discarded in the 19th century by Ho-Chunk people camping near the Agency House. We had previously found a very nice stone drill, and we are hoping future work will help us understand the persistence of traditional stone tool use during the postcontact era.



Figure 5: Durst Stemmed projectile point.

This year's excavations helped us learn more about the activities surrounding the Historic Indian Agency House, and we hope to continue our work in 2026. Each year we seem to generate more questions than answers, but that's the nature of archaeology--and what keeps us going!

Reference: Albert, Alphaeus. 1969. Record of American Uniform and Historical Buttons. Boyertown Publishing Company, Boyertown, Pennsylvania.

THE TULLY BLACKSMITH SHOP SITE

BY DAN JOYCE

Work also started on a new site. Artistic renderings from the period showed a structure near the Indian Agency House that was thought to be a civilian blacksmith shop predating the Agency House. A sizeable number of no-dig metal detector hits indicated that there was something at that location, and lidar showed a square that looked like a potential structure.

Excavation of two 1 x 2 meter units found numerous coal, slag, and charcoal dumps containing metal blacksmith scraps, as well as an unfinished, abandoned axe. Excavation of another 1 x 2 meter unit began but was not finished by the end of the 2025 season. Findings in the westernmost unit suggest that it is inside the blacksmith shop, although no foundation or builders' trench has been found. Next season's work will explore farther into the shop and attempt to find other walls.



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MVAC EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS ARE SUPPORTED IN PART BY:

- The United Fund for the Arts and Humanities
- The National Endowment for the Humanities