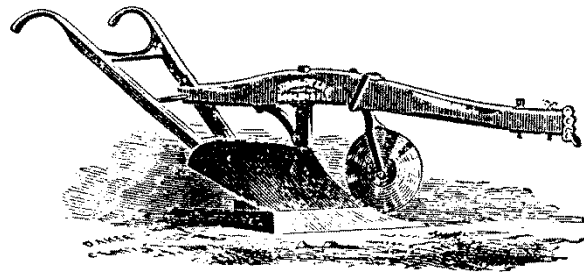


The Mystery of the Log Cabin



National Mississippi River Museum & Aquarium

History Education Curriculum

| | |
|----------------|--|
| Target Grades: | 4 th -8 th grade |
| Key Words: | archaeology, artifact |
| Subject Areas: | history, archaeology |
| Duration: | 45 minutes-1 hour |

Title: *The Mystery of the Log Cabin*

Summary:

Students will be given clues and asked to solve the mystery of who built and lived in our 1800s cabin from Frenress Lake. Along the way, they will consider what early industries were present in this region along the Mississippi River, what sort of people would have taken part in these industries, and what their tools would have looked like.

Objectives:

Students will experience the work of archaeologists, learn how artifacts can help uncover how people lived in the past, and use evidence and critical thinking skills to solve the mystery of who lived in the log cabin.

Group Size:

15-30 students

Background for Educators:

Waterways acted as the earliest forms of roadways in North America, when river travel was much faster and easier than overland travel. A variety of trades and industries quickly sprang up along waterways in early America and the wild frontier slowly progressed westward. The United States and France negotiated the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, and Lewis and Clark set out to explore and map the new territory shortly thereafter. They followed several major rivers over the course of their 2-year expedition, including the Missouri River, the Snake River, and the Columbia River. Prior to this, French fur traders and explorers such as Marquette, Joliet, and Julien Dubuque travelled waterways, made contact with local Native Americans, and traded for furs. These fur traders traded European goods to Native Americans in exchange for beaver, otter, and other luxurious pelts. These European wares often included metal goods that the Native Americans did not yet have the technology to make (kettles, pots, crosses, needles, knives, axes, traps, guns, etc.), decorative items (glass beads and jewelry), and textiles (wool blankets and cotton). Fur traders were generally men and relocated whenever necessary; the only time a woman might have accompanied them was when the trader had married a Native American woman. These individual fur traders often signed contracts with larger companies and served as middle-men or voyageurs. Where a fur trader was stationed or was allowed to trade might change over the years depending on what company he worked for or what country claimed the territory at the time.

Another important early industry along the upper Mississippi was mining. Miners came to the area seeking wealth as early as the 1820s, when the landscape was still considered wilderness with only a few settlements. Though riverways were still a significant source of transportation, miners sometimes delved further inland seeking mineral deposits.

Their early arrival and impact on the land is reflected in such local names as the Mines of Spain, Galena, Leadmine, Mineral Point, Potosi, and New Diggings. These miners searched for lead and zinc in underground mines. They frequently owned only mining tools and basic cooking equipment; they were much less likely to have exquisite trade items like fur traders. Later miners were more likely than fur traders to be accompanied by women and children, but also frequently lived in the wild on their own or with other men. These early inhabitants had to follow the natural resources, regardless of whether or not they were a convenient distance from a waterway, but often used waterways to transport their finished metal.

The lumber industry also grew quickly in the upper Midwest with the help of rivers to transport logs downstream to lumber mills. Much of northern Minnesota and Wisconsin in the late 1800s was still densely wooded and not usable as the farmland we are used to today. Loggers worked to harvest these trees and send them off for further processing. Loggers often lived in camps of just men, moving when the area had been logged out. Again, women and children in these camps would have been unlikely. Similar to miners, these men often carried with them only tools of their trade, basic living supplies, and perhaps some objects for entertainment in the evenings (such as musical instruments). They were much less likely to possess valuable trade items like beaded goods or jewelry. In the early years of the logging industry, these men cut down only timber that was close enough to waterways to transport it. As railroads became more widespread in the later years of the industry, loggers could move their camps to where the lumber was without having to consider its proximity to a river.

In southern Minnesota and Wisconsin, and most of Iowa and Illinois, early settlers found vast seas of tallgrass prairie. Eighty-five percent of Iowa was tallgrass prairie before settlement and now less than .01% (one-tenth of 1%) remains in native prairie. Early settlers brought teams of oxen to break the prairie sod for farming. Settlers usually tried to settle in small groves of timber so that the prairie fires wouldn't burn up their farms. They often used some of the trees in the timber to build their log homes. To break prairie was very difficult because of the thick and deep roots of the prairie. It often require from four to six, and sometimes eight oxen hooked to a plow to break the prairie sod. The soil was very fertile under the prairie.

Many people have a romantic view of the land that was waiting for farmers and settlers when they arrived in the upper Midwest. In truth, settlers that arrived to claim land often found a landscape studded with tree stumps left over from the logging industry that had already moved on to a more lucrative encampment. The settlers usually had no hope of farming the land they had until it had been cleared of the stumps or the prairies had been plowed, both long and laborious processes. The earliest settlers – people interested in clearing the land and remaining on it rather than just extracting its natural resources and moving on – began arriving in the region as early as the 1820s. These early inhabitants frequently included women, children, and whole families travelling and working together. Thus, settler artifacts might include more varied items, such as a child's toy or a woman's jewelry or accessory. Other artifacts might reflect the presence of crops, tools, animals, or both in these locations.

Materials Needed:

Small bags or boxes with fur trading artifacts such as laminated maps, laminated photos of a French fur contract and wool trading blanket, glass beads/jewelry, small crosses or other metal trinkets, and trading coins or tokens.

Procedure:

Welcome the students into the log cabin and gather them around you to discuss the cabin. All that we know about the cabin is that it was built in the 1800s and was located across the Mississippi River on a backwater inlet called Frenress Lake. There have been several theories about who built and lived in this cabin. Ask students if they can identify some of the major industries that might have brought settlers to this area (logging, mining, farming, and fur trapping).

Next, explain that archaeologists help solve mysteries about the past by analyzing maps, building remains, and other artifacts. They take time to carefully study, analyze, hypothesize, and draw conclusions about the artifacts that have been left behind by previous generations. Make sure the students understand that artifacts are any objects used by human beings that give us clues into their life and culture. These can be the most commonplace of objects, including bones, tools, pottery, cooking utensils, religious objects, etc. Ask students to hypothesize about what future archaeologists will think of us based on our artifacts (cell phones, cars, jewelry, etc.). Explain to the students that we need their help and archaeology skills to solve the mystery of who built and lived in the Frentress Cabin.

Split the students into small groups of about 4 or 5. (This will help young students stay more engaged, as they are looking through the bags themselves and touching the artifacts rather than sitting still, watching, and listening to an educator hold these items up.) Give each group a bag of artifacts and invite them to look around the cabin for more clues. Each bag should contain a map of the cabin's location on Frentress Lake, glass beads/jewelry, a document in French (possibly a fur contract), metal goods such as crosses and other trinkets, a picture of a wool trading blanket, and coins or trading tokens. Allow the students to work for 10 to 15 minutes together to examine their artifacts and the features of the cabin. Ask the each group to come to a conclusion about who built the cabin: a fur trader, a miner, a logger, a farmer, or someone else.

Evaluation:

Bring the students back together to discuss their conclusions and how they came to them. Have each group share how they interpreted the artifacts and who they think built the Frentress Lake cabin. When all groups have finished, a knock at the door announces the arrival of the real owner of the cabin (in period clothing). He or she reveals their identity to the students and the artifacts/clues that should have lead them to this conclusion. The educator(s) can take this time to elaborate on each of the artifacts and how it hints that the cabin belonged to a fur trader in the early 1800s. The educator can also point out features in the cabin that indicate its origin. (The bark is still on the logs, which indicates it was built quickly and possibly as a temporary residence. There were no women's or children's artifacts found in the cabin, which leads us to believe only men lived in the cabin rather than a settler family.)

Additional resources:

Where Two Worlds Meet: The Great Lakes Fur Trade published by the Minnesota Historical Society

Extensions:

Furs and Lead: The Life of a Voyageur Along the Mississippi River
Visit the National River Center for more information about voyageurs, the fur industry, and trade with Native Americans in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Credits:

Inga Schilling, National Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium, Dubuque, Iowa.
Mark D. Wagner, Director of Education for the National Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium, Dubuque, Iowa. Kirstin Slaght, National Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium, Dubuque, Iowa.