

Wisconsin Historical Society, Ho-Chunk Nation: Second historic canoe recovered from Wisconsin's Lake Mendota

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Madison, WI – Wisconsin Historical Society maritime archaeologists, alongside partners from Wisconsin's Native Nations, recovered a 3,000-year-old dugout canoe from Lake Mendota in Madison today, less than one year after their recovery of a 1,200-year-old canoe that drew international attention in November 2021. Radiocarbon dating performed on the latest canoe places it to 1000 B.C., making it the oldest ever discovered in the Great Lakes region by roughly 1,000 years.

The 3,000-year-old dugout canoe is carved from a single piece of white oak and measures approximately 14.5 feet in length. It was initially located by Wisconsin Historical Society maritime archaeologist Tamara Thomsen during a recreational dive in May of this year. Discussions about recovering it from the lakebed began immediately following the discovery, in collaboration with Wisconsin's Native Nations. It was found in the same area the first canoe was discovered, suggesting that the location of Lake Mendota's shoreline may have changed over time and could have once been much lower, according to Dr. James Skibo, Wisconsin Historical Society state archaeologist.

"Finding an additional historically significant canoe in Lake Mendota is truly incredible and unlocks invaluable research and educational opportunities to explore the technological, cultural, and stylistic changes that occurred in dugout canoe design over 3,000 years," said Skibo. "Since it was located within 100 yards of where the first canoe was found at the bottom of a drop-off in the lakebed, the find has prompted us to research fluctuating water levels and ancient shorelines to

explore the possibility that the canoes were near what is now submerged village sites.”

Although it is likely that water transportation dates back to the arrival of Native peoples in this region, this discovery provides the earliest direct evidence. The 3,000-year-old canoe helps to tell a more complete story of the continuum of Native life in Wisconsin and the Great Lakes region. Members from the Ho-Chunk Nation and Bad River Tribe were present at the canoe recovery.

“The recovery of this canoe built by our ancestors gives further physical proof that Native people have occupied Teejop (Four Lakes) for millennia, that our ancestral lands are here and we had a developed society of transportation, trade and commerce,” said Ho-Chunk President Marlon WhiteEagle. “Every person that harvested and constructed this caašgegu (white oak) into a canoe put a piece of themselves into it. By preserving this canoe, we are honoring those that came before us. We appreciate our partnership with the Wisconsin Historical Society, working together to preserve part of not only our ancestors’ history but our state’s history.”

Wisconsin Historical Society archaeologists, along with skilled volunteers, conducted the excavation and recovery efforts. The canoe was hand-excavated in preparation for today’s recovery mission and then securely transported to the State Archive Preservation Facility in Madison for preservation and storage. It will be cleaned and cared for by Tribal members and Society staff before being hand-lowered into a large preservation vat also containing the 1,200-year-old canoe discovered in 2021. Together the canoes will undergo a two-year preservation process that will conclude with freeze-drying to remove any remaining water.

“I was amazed when a 1,200-year-old canoe was uncovered last year, but this discovery of a canoe dating back to 1000 B.C. is just extraordinary,” said Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers. “This incredible finding provides an opportunity for us to work in concert with Tribal Nations to not only study but celebrate the history of the Indigenous people who’ve called this land home since long before Wisconsin became a state, and I look forward to learning more about this artifact’s origins.”

For more information, visit wisconsinhistory.org. Photography and video clips from today’s recovery will be available for media use [here](#).

About the Wisconsin Historical Society

The Wisconsin Historical Society, founded in 1846, ranks as one of the largest, most active and most diversified state historical societies in the nation. As both a state agency and a private membership organization, its mission is to help people connect to the past by collecting, preserving and sharing stories. The Wisconsin Historical Society serves millions of people every year through a wide range of sites, programs and services. For more information, visit wisconsinhistory.org.

About Ho-Chunk Nation

The Ho-Chunk Nation is a federally-recognized tribal nation based in Wisconsin but whose Indigenous boundaries lie between the Twin Cities, St. Louis, Chicago and Green Bay. Previously known as the Wisconsin Winnebago Tribe, the Ho-Chunk, a word meaning “People of the Big Voice”, officially changed their name with the ratification of their new Constitution on November 1, 1994. Hoocąk, the traditional language of the Ho-Chunk, is the parent language of numerous Siouan languages. The Ho-Chunk are not located on a single reservation but own parcels of land throughout Wisconsin, Illinois and Minnesota. The seat of tribal government is in Black River Falls, Wis., with branch offices throughout the state as well as in St. Paul, Minn., and Chicago, Ill. For more information, visit ho-chunknation.com.