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Forging Insights: Indian Agency Blacksmiths of the American Frontier

Abstract

Following the War of 1812, the United States government sought to more directly deal with the Native tribes in the American interior. The establishment of Indian agency blacksmith shops was one significant component of this endeavor. While it remains a virtually untouched topic in scholarship, the analysis of agency blacksmith services may reveal significant historical insights within topics as diverse as ethnic perception, material culture, frontier government practices, and language dynamics during a time of great upheaval. This case study of the blacksmith shop at the Fort Winnebago sub-agency in pre-state Wisconsin seeks to demonstrate the manner in which these institutions provide new opportunities for a better understanding of the cultural and political dynamics of the American frontier.

Keywords

Frontier Blacksmith, Treaties, Winnebago Tribe, Ho-Chunk Nation, Indian Agents, Indian Removal, Fort Winnebago, Northwest Territory, Frontier Politics, Frontier Culture, John Harris Kinzie, Juliette A. Kinzie, Thomas McKenney, Henry Gratiot, 1830s Supply and Contracting, Wisconsin History

The late 1820s brought the United States government into a pivotal era of relations with the Winnebago (Ho-Chunk) tribe in the old Northwest Territories. While this subject has received attention from scholars of Native affairs within the Northwest frontier, one critical aspect has been notably overlooked. The study of Indian agency blacksmiths is a key component to enriching the field's understanding of both the Bureau of Indian Affairs' approach to Native needs and tribal ways of life in a time of transition away from reliance on the fur trade as removal loomed on the horizon. It is the purpose of this case study to demonstrate how one such agency blacksmith establishment—that of the Fort Winnebago sub-agency in modern-day Portage, Wisconsin—operated, opening the larger subject for further study.

Historical Context

The short-lived Winnebago War of 1827 highlighted the need for the government to become involved in more direct ways to avoid the inevitable conflicts which would continue to arise due to the ever-expanding reach of lead miners on tribal lands in the southwest region of modern-day Wisconsin. While the re-garrisoning of Forts Crawford and Dearborn, as well as the building of Fort Winnebago at the Fox-Wisconsin portage, shored up the military balance of power, local officials perceived no effective solution other than the purchase of the lead district from the Winnebago tribe.¹ Therefore, in July of 1829, a council was held with the tribe at Prairie du Chien. The United States government's objectives were threefold. First, boundaries would be established both among tribes and between the tribes and the United States. Second, the Winnebago people would be compensated for damages wrought by over-eager settlers. Third, the predominant purpose of the council was to permanently obtain this lead-rich region of Wisconsin with an air of legality.² An agreement was reached on August 1 and signed by many of the influential leaders of the tribe.

United States law, expounded and reaffirmed in the charter of the Northwest Territories, stipulated that Native land was to be duly purchased from its tribal

¹ William Clark to Thomas McKenney, March 22, 1828, *United States Bureau of Indian Affairs Copied Documents, 1616-1906*, U.S. Mss BN MAD 4, Wisconsin Historical Society.

² "Ratified Treaty No. 155, Documents Relating to the Negotiation of the Treaty of July 29, 1829, with the United Chippewa, Ottawa, and Potawatomi Indians," (Washington, D.C.: National Archives, July 29, 1829).

owners through the legally peculiar means of treaties.³ The lead mining region came to the United States government at a cumulative cost over thirty years of \$540,000 in specie. Bureau of Indian Affairs officials understood that although the specie would largely compensate the tribe for the value of the land, the money had to be supplemented by goods and services to physically demonstrate the payment's value to the tribe. To that end, an immediate distribution of \$30,000 in trade goods was followed by yearly bulk allowances of tobacco and salt. Possibly the most practical component of this compensation arrangement, however, was government-sponsored blacksmith services for the tribe.⁴ While some such blacksmith establishments were arranged in accordance with Native request and financed out of the annuity allotted the tribe, the smiths provided through the Treaty of 1829 were delivered directly at the government's expense as an integrated component of the land payment.⁵

The blacksmith shop at the Fort Winnebago agency was established in pursuance of the third article of Prairie du Chien's treaty of 1829. An act of the United States' Twenty-First Congress on March 25, 1830, appropriated funds for the Bureau of Indian affairs to establish three such treaty-bound blacksmith shops at a cost to the government of \$3000.⁶ One would be located at the Prairie du Chien agency, one in the region of the tribe's Rock River band, and one at Fort Winnebago, all of which would join an existing blacksmith shop at Green Bay to constitute the four earliest Native-serving blacksmith shops in Wisconsin.⁷

Blacksmith shops had long been an integral component of Indian agencies in America. Bureau of Indian Affairs Superintendent Thomas McKenney was known to have repeatedly impressed upon his employees within the Indian department the importance of incorporating the blacksmith shop as a key and

³ An Ordinance for the Government of the Territory of the United States Northwest of the River Ohio, article 3, July 13, 1787, accessed June 4, 2019, The Avalon Project.

⁴ Treaty with the Winnebago, U.S.-Winnebago, August 1, 1829, accessed June 6, 2019, <https://www.firstpeople.us/FP-HTML-Treaties/TreatyWithTheWinnebago1829.html>.

⁵ F. W. Armstrong to Lewis Cass, April 6, 1833, in Commissary General of Subsistence, *Correspondence on the Subject of the Emigration of the Indians Between 30th November, 1831, and 27th December, 1833, Vol. IV*, (Washington, D.C.: Duff Green, 1835), 171.

⁶ Acts of the Twenty-First Congress of the United States, Chapter 41, *The Public Statutes at Large of the United States of America Vol. IV*, (Boston, MA: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1846) 390.

⁷ U.S. Congress, Executive Documents, *Disbursement to the Indians*, 25th Cong, 3rd sess., 1830, Doc. 101, serial 208, 49.

integrated part of their mission as an agency.⁸ In some instances, agency blacksmith shops were not merely a matter of convenience for the tribe, but a means by which the goals of the government's "civilization" program could be advanced under the optimistic assumption that a blacksmith's availability would in some way impress upon the Natives the feasibility of their living like white people.⁹ The importance of the blacksmith shop to the work of the Fort Winnebago sub-agency is highlighted in the establishment's 1830-31 ledger. Annuities and treaty-determined gifts aside, the blacksmiths swallowed \$2391.03—a full fifty percent of the sub-agency's remaining budget.¹⁰

Arrangements of Service

John H. Kinzie, Indian sub-agent at the newly established Fort Winnebago, provided oversight for two of the 1829 treaty's requisite three blacksmith establishments: one at Fort Winnebago and one on the Sugar River near Four Lakes (present-day Madison). The third was overseen by Joseph Street, who was the agent at Fort Crawford.¹¹

While logic would deem the blacksmith's service to be the exclusive privilege of only the portion of the tribe whose land was purchased in 1829, its services had been promised to the entire nation in the same way that the annuity had been pledged.¹² This was doubtlessly influenced by practicality. For a semi-nomadic tribe in which families had winter villages and summer camps in different localities, it would have been virtually impossible to differentiate between those dispossessed through the treaty and those still in possession of their land. Apart from this logistical issue, however, the blacksmith's practical availability to the entire tribe from the very first is an indication of the government's intent in relation to the eventual extinguishment of the whole tribe's title to their Wisconsin land.

Despite the complimentary service, some within the tribe were reluctant to utilize the blacksmith. For example, the Prairie du Chien agency blacksmith for

⁸ Herman J. Viola, *Thomas L. McKenney: Architect of America's Early Indian Policy: 1816-1830*, (Chicago, IL: Sage Books, 1974) 101.

⁹ Linda M. Clemmons, "'We Will Talk of Nothing Else': Dakota Interpretations of the Treaty of 1837," *Great Plains Quarterly*, 25, no. 3 (Summer 2005) 177.

¹⁰ U.S. Congress, Executive Documents, *Trade and Intercourse with the Indians*, 22nd Cong, 1st sess., 1831, Doc. 180, serial 219, 113.

¹¹ *Trade and Intercourse with the Indians*, 1831, 94, 113; Juliette Kinzie, *Wau-Bun: The "Early Day" in the Northwest*, (Chicago, IL: The Caxton Club, 1901), 368.

¹² Treaty with the Winnebago, art. II-III.

the Winnebago found the tribe strangely hesitant to come to him. In due course, he began working more for the settlers than the tribe to which he had been appointed. Tribal members were said to have gone so far as to pay a settlement blacksmith rather than go to the agency smith.¹³ A traveler through the region at the time stated that the “benevolence” of the government embodied by agency blacksmith shops was being wasted since they rarely served their intended audience.¹⁴ While this is doubtlessly an overgeneralization, it correlates with other evidence to represent a grain of truth about agency blacksmith shops. It is uncertain whether this same phenomenon affected the Fort Winnebago agency. This problem could conceivably have been a result of personal preferences on the part of individual Natives. Winnebago oral tradition, which highlights tribal resentment over the comparatively small payment for their land in money and blacksmithing services, corroborates the notion that the blacksmith may have been eschewed because he stood as a representation of their loss of land.¹⁵

Blacksmithing service for non-Native customers was not a localized phenomenon. The agency blacksmith at Green Bay, Joseph Jourdain, is noted as having made utility pieces for members of the fort community during his work for the tribe, as well as having participated in official functions unrelated to smithing.¹⁶ Other agency blacksmithing operations were called “the public blacksmith shop,” demonstrating that some agency blacksmiths were known to do more jobs for the local settlers than they did for the tribes they were commissioned to serve.¹⁷

Establishing a New Agency Blacksmith Shop

The blacksmith shop at Fort Winnebago slightly predates the agency house on the site. Abstracts of disbursements for the sub-agency indicate the building

¹³ Joseph Rolette To G. B. Porter, December 6, 1832, in *Correspondence, Vol. IV*, 95.

¹⁴ Caleb Atwater, *Remarks made on a Tour to Prairie du Chien; Thence to Washington City, 1829*, (Columbus, OH: Isaac N. Whiting, 1831), 140-141.

¹⁵ Jane A. Heib, *Visions and Voices: Winnebago Elders Speak to the Children*, (Independence, WI: Western Dairyland Economic Opportunity Council, 1994) 39.

¹⁶ Mary Ann Brevoort Bristol, “Reminiscences of the Northwest,” *Report and Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin for the Years 1877, 1878, and 1879, Vol. VIII*, (Madison, WI: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1879) 304; Treaty with the Menominee, 1831, in Commissary General of Subsistence, *Correspondence on the Subject of the Emigration of the Indians Between 30th November, 1831, and 27th December, 1833, Vol. II*, (Washington, D.C.: Duff Green, 1835) 554.

¹⁷ Benjamin Reynolds to Samuel S. Hamilton, October 6, 1831, in *Correspondence, Vol. II*, 619; Joseph Rolette To G. B. Porter, December 6, 1832, in *Correspondence, Vol. IV*, 95.

was constructed between October 1, 1830, and September 30, 1831.¹⁸ John Kinzie's wife, Juliette, described how appropriations for the agency house were delayed longer than funding for the blacksmith shop and quarters.¹⁹ Thus, these latter buildings were constructed first.

According to Juliette Kinzie's book, *Wau-Bun*, the blacksmith's home—and, by extension, the shop since it was built simultaneously—was constructed at a time when the Kinzies needed a temporary living space between their occupation of the ramshackle barracks at the fort and the completion of their house in 1832. Thus, when the blacksmith's log home was finished, it was occupied by the Kinzies while the blacksmith boarded with other residents of the portage. To build the home and shop, contractors R. and A. J. Irwin were retained in return for \$500 compensation.²⁰ According to Juliette, the workers arrived via the Mississippi, likely from St. Louis.²¹ Interestingly, R. and A. J. Irwin's headquarters was located in the shanty town neighborhood of Green Bay.²² It is likely that this enterprise bid for the contract and then had to subsequently put together a team where labor could be found, in this case down the Mississippi, in order to fulfill it—a common practice for military contractors of the day.²³

Regardless of the arrangements, the cost of building on such a remote sector of the frontier quickly became apparent. The businessmen experienced a loss of \$200 for producing the structures. This was either a true testimony to the unexpected costs of frontier construction or an example of profiteering since the workmen had already received extra assistance by Winnebago women who locally produced slabs of bark for roofing and by the agency's resident hired men.²⁴

The log structures were built roughly in line with the agency house on an east-west axis. As portrayed by Juliette Kinzie in her painting of the Fort Winnebago complex, both the blacksmith's home and shop were oriented

¹⁸ *Trade and Intercourse with the Indians*, 1831, 113.

¹⁹ *Wau-Bun*, 261-262.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

²² Deborah B. Martin, *History of Brown County Wisconsin Past and Present Vol. I*, (Chicago, IL: S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1913)343.

²³ Francis Paul Prucha, *Broadax and Bayonet: The Role of the United States Army in the Development of the Northwest 1815-1860*, (Madison, WI: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1953), 161.

²⁴ Louise Phelps Kellogg, "The Agency House at Fort Winnebago," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 14, no. 4 (June, 1931)447.

perpendicular to the agent's house.²⁵ I. A. Ridgeway's portrayal roughly coincides with Juliette's details but scales them much smaller in relation to the agency house.²⁶ Not shown in either picture are multiple buildings Juliette mentioned as being present on the agency hill at the time of the shop's construction. These consisted of the customized remnants of the temporary barracks set up by the Army during the building of the fort and smaller out-buildings constructed of local tamarack logs. The former had been torn down and relocated on the hill across from Fort Winnebago for the agent's use, and the latter—consisting of a dairy, stables, and a smoke house—were indicated by Juliette to be of a temporary nature.²⁷ The fact that none of these are pictured in Juliette's painting may be attributed to their unsavory appearance or because these earlier structures had been parted-out for use in constructing the permanent buildings.

A total of \$271.03 was awarded for the inaugural contract to supply the Fort Winnebago and Sugar River blacksmiths with "iron, steel, etc."²⁸ Glass was also known to be purchased for agency blacksmiths' use.²⁹ Steel was contracted from distant providers. For example, Benjamin B. Kercheval—one of the major suppliers—operated his business out of Detroit.³⁰ An interesting side note may provide an insight into Indian department contracting practices. Kercheval was a sub-agent of the Indian Bureau in the 1820s.³¹ This connection may have paved the way for his becoming a private contractor with the Bureau.

In the same manner, coal was purchased for consumption in the blacksmith's forge.³² Some agency blacksmiths used "coal wood" (charcoal) for their needs, even within the same superintendencies as other smiths using true coal.³³ It seems that charcoal's use was more prevalent in remote locations, such

²⁵ Juliette Kinzie, *Wau-Bun: The "Early Day" in the Northwest*, (Chicago, IL: The Caxton Club, 1901), 56.

²⁶ I.A. Ridgeway, *Fort Winnebago*, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI, accessed June 7, 2019, <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM28343>.

²⁷ *Wau-Bun*, 260-261.

²⁸ *Trade and Intercourse with the Indians*, 1831, 113.

²⁹ *Trade and Intercourse with the Indians*, 1831, 45.

³⁰ Clarence M. Burton, William Stocking, Gordon K. Miller, eds., *The City of Detroit, Michigan 1701-1922*, (Detroit, MI: S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1922) 498.

³¹ Treaty with the Miami, U.S.-Miami, October 23, 1826, accessed May 5, 2019, <https://cdn.citl.illinois.edu/courses/aiiopcmps/miamicase/1826Oct23.htm>.

³² U.S. Congress, Executive Documents, *Indian Agents: Copies of Accounts of Persons Charged with the Disbursement of Money, &c. for the Benefit of the Indians from the 1st October, 1831 to 30th September, 1832*, 22nd Cong, 2nd sess., 1832, Doc. 137, serial 235, 130.

³³ F. W. Armstrong to Lewis Cass, April 6, 1833, in *Correspondence, Vol. IV*, 171.

as the St. Peters agency, where expenses for importing coal would have been more prohibitive.³⁴ While the Fort Winnebago agency was likewise remote, the lack of available natural material for making charcoal in the portage region would have made coal a necessary import. This coal would likely have come from St. Louis where it was extensively mined and used by the late 1820s. In the agency's later years, the coal deposits to the north of Rock Island may have provided a more convenient source.³⁵

In the early 1830s, the Prairie du Chien agency blacksmith's pay remained set at \$360 per annum.³⁶ The blacksmith's striker (assistant) was paid \$180.³⁷ In comparison, the blacksmith at Fort Winnebago received an annual salary of \$192.³⁸ The persistent high turnover for Kinzie's blacksmiths may be due to the meager income allotted to this position, compounded by the fact that the cost of living at Fort Winnebago exceeded that of many other frontier posts.³⁹

To sweeten the deal, living quarters were provided for the agency blacksmith at government expense. The blacksmith's quarters, built of timbers hewn on the spot and roofed with bark produced by the "squaws," was a small-scale replica of the later agency house.⁴⁰ A parlor and two bedrooms stood below a two-room half-story loft. A kitchen protruded from the back. Uniquely, Mrs. Kinzie claims that this last addition was not built through contract, but by the "Frenchmen"—the blacksmith's assistant and local laborers—under the sub-agent's guidance.⁴¹

The Process

The process of blacksmithing for an Indian agency was complicated by the fact that the smiths did not know the Winnebago dialect. Thus, assisting the blacksmith with translation became a daily component of John Kinzie's job.

³⁴ *Trade and Intercourse with the Indians*, 1831, 64-65.

³⁵ *Remarks made on a Tour to Prairie du Chien*, 44.

³⁶ *Trade and Intercourse with the Indians*, 1831, 113; *Indian Agents*, 1832, 130; U.S. Congress, Executive Documents, *Names of, and Disbursements by the Indian Agents on Account of Indians*, in 1833, 23rd Cong, 1st sess., 1833-4, Doc. 490, serial 259, 79.

³⁷ *Names of, and Disbursements by the Indian Agents*, 1833-4, 79.

³⁸ Department of State, *Register of all Officers and Agents, Civil, Military, and Naval, in the Service of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: William A. Davis, September 30, 1831) 129.

³⁹ G. B. Porter to Elbert Herring, February 11, 1833, in *Correspondence, Vol. IV*, 87; *Trade and Intercourse with the Indians*, 1831, 94.

⁴⁰ *Wau-Bun*, 262.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 263.

Juliette, in relaying a story of the tense visit of a group of Winnebagos to the agency house, gives insight into this process:

He [John] continued to listen to all the directions they were giving him about the repairing of their guns, traps, &c., which they wished to leave with the Blacksmith...Contrary to his usual custom, their father [John] did not ask their names, but wrote their directions, which he tied to their different implements, and then bade them go and deliver them themselves to M. Morrin.⁴²

Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, a prominent regional agent, seems to have operated under the same system with the tribe which he served. He wrote of one Native man's visit in which he "gave him a ticket on the agency blacksmith" for the tools which he brought. The way in which this is written seems to indicate that in addition to translation assistance, the agent may have had to give permission for the Natives to use the blacksmith service, itself.⁴³

Translating was, however, not as easy a thing to do for some agency blacksmiths—particularly John Kinzie's other blacksmith who was established on Sugar River. In a seeming lack of foresight, Kinzie established the shop at a site chosen by the tribe to be convenient without considering the lack of translators nearby.⁴⁴ The closest Indian agent was Henry Gratiot, living in the lead district of southwest Wisconsin. Gratiot complained of his inability to oversee the shop, which he claimed should be under his jurisdiction: a clear indication that he was not involved in translation. It is strikingly coincidental that the Sugar River blacksmith was also the source of complaint from his regional Winnebago patrons.⁴⁵ It seems likely that the language barrier could have contributed to this blacksmith's perceived ineffectiveness.

Translation issues aside, much nonverbal communication took place at agency blacksmith shops. The blacksmith was often closely watched as he went about his work. Blacksmithing was a key means of the production of many tools the Natives needed, and contemporary narratives attest to the fact that the Natives were learning the trade as they watched. It was not unusual for an agency

⁴² Ibid., 384-385.

⁴³ Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, *Personal Memoirs of a Residence of 30 Years with the Indian Tribes on the American Frontiers*, (Philadelphia, Lippincott, Grambo, and Co., 1851) 248.

⁴⁴ John H. Kinzie to Lewis Cass, February 16, 1831, *Correspondence, Vol. II*, 413.

⁴⁵ Henry Gratiot to William Clark, October 15, 1831, in *Correspondence, Vol. II*, 715-716.

blacksmith who had been away from his post to return to find the local Natives working his forge.⁴⁶

A salient question at this point is what tasks comprised the blacksmith's work. Unfortunately, this question is also one which has received little attention in scholarship. Some agencies were large enough to occasion the establishment of two or more smiths, each with their own respective areas of specialty. For example, an Osage agency employed three blacksmiths and one gunsmith—a situation which allowed an individual, such as the gunsmith, to be a highly trained professional in a particular type of smith work.⁴⁷ Fort Winnebago, however, with its smaller budget, contented itself to supply one talented individual who could do anything from working with spring steel to repairing firearms.⁴⁸

A common refrain when describing the work of agency smiths is a reference that the smith would “mend the guns, traps, etc. [of the tribe].”⁴⁹ A rudimentary look into the *et cetera* in this case provides tantalizing bits of information about some unmentioned work of smiths. For example, Henry Schoolcraft's agency is noted to have repaired kettles.⁵⁰ One familiar with the trade realizes that cast iron cannot be effectively altered by a blacksmith. The alternative is that the kettles described were brass or copper. This contingency opens the query as to how often the smiths worked with metals other than wrought iron. Further research, especially archaeological inquiry, is needed in this subject area to glean key clues about how the Natives lived during the decline in the fur trade at the time of the Fort Winnebago blacksmith shop's establishment. The Natives' inability to buy newly imported items without incurring prohibitive debt may have given agency smiths increased importance, not only due to their ability to repair existing items, but to fabricate new tools for the Winnebago. Thus, agency blacksmiths may have played a crucial role as a stopgap in a time of painful transition for the tribe.

Another unanswered question about the work of agency blacksmiths in the Old Northwest is whether the “repairing” of implements, as mentioned by Kinzie, was the only service provided to the tribe.⁵¹ While documentary coverage of Fort Winnebago only refers to repair work, economic evidence may point to a wider use of the shop. In 1831, the materials for producing a new axe head totaled 38 cents.

⁴⁶ Thomas Forsyth to William Clark, June 7, 1830, in *Correspondence, Vol. II*, 95.

⁴⁷ S. C. Stambaugh to Commissioners Office, March 22, 1833, in *Correspondence, Vol. IV*, 225.

⁴⁸ *Wau-bun*, 262.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Personal Memoirs*, 248.

⁵¹ *Wau-Bun*, 262.

For the amount of material provided the agency, the blacksmith could have created over 700 new 4.5 lb. axe heads.⁵² Even assuming that the repair of traps and firearms required moderate amounts of material, it must be concluded that there would still have been a large quantity of material in this allowance for new smithing work. How it was determined who and how often a tribal member could take advantage of this offering is uncertain. In providing repair “tickets,” there was seemingly a component of discretion on the part of the agent for determining who would receive various services, including new fabrication of items.⁵³ Regardless of how this system functioned, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, it may thus be assumed that the agency blacksmith would likely have included new production in his work schedule.

This daily regimen of repair and fabrication work at the blacksmith shop was occasionally interrupted by the needs of the agent. During Kinzie’s travel cross-country to visit his relatives at Chicago, the blacksmith’s striker was marshalled to accompany the agent.⁵⁴ Similarly, during the Sauk disturbances in 1832, the blacksmith at Sugar River—initially rumored to be killed during the outbreak—was employed to accompany Juliette to safety in Green Bay after his blacksmith shop’s work had been discontinued to ensure the safety of its equipment during the conflict.⁵⁵

Fort Winnebago’s Smiths

The man hired to do agency blacksmithing work was chosen carefully. Officials made a point of reminding their subordinates to ensure that the government was securing the work of a skilled and virtuous blacksmith. The Indian Bureau wanted “a good workman, who is sober, moral, and industrious.”⁵⁶ Moreover, he was to be an “exemplary man, and if possible, one acquainted with

⁵² R. L. Bakerto George Bomford, August 29, 1831, *Correspondence, Vol. II*, 586.

⁵³ *Personal Memoirs*, 248.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁵⁵ *Wau-Bun.*, 327; Peter Shrake, “The Silver Man: John H. Kinzie and the Fort Winnebago Indian Agency” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 96, no. 2 (Winter 2012/2013)8; William Clark to Lewis Cass, June 8, 1832, in Ellen M. Whitney, ed., *The Black Hawk War 1831-1832, Vol. II: Letters and Papers, Part I: April 30, 1831-June 23, 1832*, (Springfield, IL: Illinois State Historical Library) 550.

⁵⁶ Elbert Herring to William Clark, April 2, 1833, in Commissary General of Subsistence, *Correspondence on the Subject of the Emigration of the Indians Between 30th November, 1831, and 27th December, 1833, Vol. III*, (Washington, D.C.: Duff Green, 1835) 641.

those Indians.”⁵⁷ All this was to ideally come to the government at “as moderate a sum as [possible], consistently with the important object of securing a proper person.”⁵⁸

The first blacksmith at the Fort Winnebago agency was Isadore Morrin III, a Canadian-born Frenchman, who was retained at a salary of \$495—a slightly higher amount than was paid to the Sugar Creek blacksmith.⁵⁹ His assistant for this year was Augustine Pillon, a young Frenchman whose wife became a servant in the sub-agent’s household. Pillon, however, fled upon hearing the dire reports of Black Hawk’s uprising in the spring of 1832.⁶⁰ Conversely, it is known that Morrin was one of only a few non-military individuals to stay at the portage during this same event.⁶¹

Morrin was noted by Juliette Kinzie to still reside at the portage in the spring of 1833 prior to her husband’s resignation. Interestingly, an Isidore Morrin is listed as a blacksmith in the pay of Henry Connor at the Detroit sub-agency for the year from October 1832 to September 1833.⁶² It is possible that Morrin determined to find employment in Detroit to be closer to his wife to whom he had been married at Detroit in late 1832.⁶³ His continued presence at the agency in the spring of 1833, as noted by Juliette Kinzie, may be an anachronistic mistake on her part as is common in memoirs, but it could also reflect an arrangement in which his services at Fort Winnebago remained necessary through the winter until a new blacksmith could be found in the spring.⁶⁴ Regardless of the circumstances, Morrin disappeared from the Fort Winnebago payroll in the 1832-33 abstract of expenses and reappeared in Detroit’s expense reports that same fiscal year.⁶⁵

Morrin’s replacement at Fort Winnebago was William Jourdain who had recently finished his apprenticeship at the Green Bay blacksmith establishment.⁶⁶

⁵⁷ Elbert Herring to William Clark, April 2, 1833, in *Correspondence, Vol. III*, 639-40.

⁵⁸ Elbert Herring to William Clark, April 2, 1833, in *Correspondence, Vol. III*, 641.

⁵⁹ *Trade and Intercourse with the Indians*, 1831, 113; Krissi Hall “Isadore Morin III (1800 - 1855),” Dec. 15, 2011, *WikiTree*, accessed June 6, 2019, <https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Morin-290>.

⁶⁰ *Trade and Intercourse with the Indians*, 1831, 113; *Names of, and Disbursements by the Indian Agents*, 1833-4, 79-80; *Wau-Bun*, 96, 320.

⁶¹ *Wau-Bun*, 320.

⁶² *Names of, and Disbursements by the Indian Agents on Account of Indians, in 1833*, 128.

⁶³ “Isadore Morin III (1800 - 1855).”

⁶⁴ *Wau-Bun*, 385.

⁶⁵ *Names of, and Disbursements by the Indian Agents on Account of Indians, in 1833*, 79, 128.

⁶⁶ *Trade and Intercourse with the Indians*, 111.

One narrative places Jourdain as the Fort Winnebago agency blacksmith already during the Black Hawk War, although this may also be an anachronism.⁶⁷ Jourdain was born in 1811 and was of a mixed European-Menominee ancestry.⁶⁸ Jourdain was joined by striker Joseph Desjenez, who was known to John Kinzie since 1831 when he temporarily assisted the agency as a “boatman.”⁶⁹ The baton was again passed along when on September 26, 1834, and October 16 of the same year, Leonard Groom and Hosea Russell joined the agency as blacksmith and striker.⁷⁰ Leonard Groom had come from Green Bay where he had assisted at the mission school and also served in a maintenance and agricultural capacity.⁷¹ While multiple 1835-6 publications put them at Fort Winnebago, an 1835 governmental directory places this pair at the Sioux sub-agency. This entry, however, appears to be a simple reverse of names among consecutive entries.⁷² It is likely that this inconsistency is a matter of an editorial mistake.

This haze clears slightly with the arrival of the longer-tenured Francis Dechokette and Francis Gagnier, listed as smith and striker, who were appointed on March 15, 1836, and August 27, 1837, respectively.⁷³ These two Canadian-born blacksmiths remained at the agency until the blacksmith shop’s closing, following it to Iowa after its dissolution in Wisconsin.⁷⁴ Between 1837 and 1838, the situation

⁶⁷ John T. De La Ronde, “Personal Narrative,” *Report and Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin for the Years 1873, 1874, 1875, and 1876, Vol. VII*, (Madison, WI: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1876) 350.

⁶⁸ “William Jourdain,” *United States Census: Brown County, WI, 1860*, accessed June 6, 2019, <http://files.usgwararchives.net/wi/brown/census/1860/pg102.txt>; “Honoring their Memory: William Jourdain,” *Rootsweb*, December 19, 2017, accessed June 6, 2019, <https://wc.rootsweb.com/cgi-bin/igm.cgi?op=GET&db=honoring&id=I2133>.

⁶⁹ *Names of, and Disbursements by the Indian Agents, 1833, 80; Trade and Intercourse with the Indians, 1831, 114.*

⁷⁰ U.S. Congress, Public Documents, *Report of Secretary of War, with Annual List of Officers and Others Engaged in the Indian Department*, 24th Cong, 2nd sess., 1837, Doc. 141, serial 303, 11; U.S. Congress, Executive Documents, *List of Persons Employed in the Indian Department, Compensation, &c.*, 24th Cong, 1st sess., 1835, Doc. 109, serial 280, 5.

⁷¹ Peter Vieau, “Narrative of Peter J. Vieau: An Interview with the Editor,” in Reuben Gold Thaites, ed., *Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Vol. XV* (Madison, WI: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1900) 463.

⁷² U.S. Congress, Executive Documents, *Indian Agents, Accounts of their Disbursement in 1836*, 24th Cong, 2nd sess., 1836, Doc. 137, 37.

⁷³ Department of State, *Register of all Officers and Agents, Civil, Military, and Naval, in the Service of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: A. B. Claxton and Co., September 30, 1839) 83; U.S. Congress, Executive Documents, *Statement of all Persons Employed in the Indian Department*, 25th Cong, 3d sess., 1838, Doc. 103, serial 346, 16.

⁷⁴ Department of State, *Register of all Officers and Agents, Civil, Military, and Naval, in the Service of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Thomas Allen, September 30, 1841) 96.

again became more complicated with the announced arrival of an E.M. Lacy who had earlier been listed as a disbursing agent at the post.⁷⁵ Given his exorbitant \$720 salary, Mr. Lacy seems to have been something beyond a mere additional assistant. The phrasing, “[s]ent to Fort Winnebago for Blacksmith and assistant there,” seems to indicate that this contracted individual was not a normal replacement smith.⁷⁶ His military commission as a Lieutenant also makes the above statement unclear.⁷⁷ He disappears from the records after this point, however, so there are no more clues as to the circumstances of his arrival or his departure.

In 1838, John H. Kinzie fulfilled the Winnebago tribe’s request that he personally return to disburse the final annuity payment at the Fort Winnebago sub-agency before their migration to Iowa.⁷⁸ Subsequently, the agency was relocated to Turkey River. Dechokette and Gagnier remained for another year at Fort Winnebago but had been transferred to the supervision of the Prairie du Chien agency.⁷⁹ By the time of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs’ 1839-40 report, however, the “agency, school, &c.,” had been moved to the Neutral territory, although much of the tribe which had previously resided near the portage was still wandering periodically back to Wisconsin.⁸⁰ Bureau officials had determined already in 1833 that the relocation of the blacksmith shop and other government services across the Mississippi would be key to the permanency of the entire removal project.⁸¹ By 1841, the Turkey River sub-agency had become the host to both prior Fort Winnebago blacksmiths, carrying on the obligations of the treaty of 1829 in its new location in Iowa.⁸² While it is likely that the agency blacksmith position at Fort Winnebago had been effectively vacated in 1839, this seems to be definitive evidence that the blacksmith had ceased to operate at Fort Winnebago by 1840 at the latest.

⁷⁵ U.S. Congress, Executive Documents, *Disbursement of Moneys, Goods, &c. to, from October, 1837, to October, 1839*, 25th Cong, 3rd sess., 1838, Doc. 174, serial 347, 16; *Indian Agents, Accounts of their Disbursement in 1836*, 37.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Indian Agents, Accounts of their Disbursement in 1836*, 37.

⁷⁸ “The Agency House at Fort Winnebago,” 447.

⁷⁹ *Register of all Officers and Agents*, 1839, 83.

⁸⁰ T. Hartley Crawford, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Transmitted with the Message of the President at the Opening of the Second Session of the Twenty-Sixth Congress*, (Washington, D.C.: J. Gideon, Jr. 1840) 111.

⁸¹ Elbert Herring to G. B. Porter, March 30, 1833; Elbert Herring to William Clark, April 2, 1833, *Correspondence, Vol. III*, 636, 642.

⁸² *Register of all Officers and Agents*, 1841, 96.

A common theme in this listing of smiths and strikers is the occurrence of French names. This is significant, in that it demonstrates how certain agents within the Bureau of Indian Affairs seem to have decided to capitalize upon ethnicity in dealing with certain tribes. It was considered common knowledge that the Native peoples of the old Northwest were still more receptive to the French than to any other nationality during the early 19th century—a testimony to a relationship forged in the bountiful years of the fur trade through intermarriage and longtime association.⁸³ While John Kinzie of the Fort Winnebago sub-agency seems to have used this leverage to his advantage in choosing smiths, newcomers to the Bureau overlooked this nuance. Joseph Street, a Yankee from Kentucky, hired two of his own kind to operate the blacksmith shop at Fort Crawford.⁸⁴ The Winnebagos' reluctance to use his shop may correlate with this staffing decision. Overall, it may be possible to partially gauge changes in Native cultural perceptions through a study of their reactions to agency staffing, particularly that of smiths.

The Shop's Later History

Throughout this time, the blacksmith shop seems to have remained in its original state without improvements from its pre-agency house construction. Given its purpose as an intermediary establishment until the removal of the tribe across the Mississippi, improvements would have been unnecessary. In O.P. Williams' map dated 1835, the shop is still noted as being a log building.⁸⁵ At this point in time, the blacksmith's home is not depicted. While this may be because it was not a governmental work building, this does not seem to necessarily be the case given the map's otherwise extensive documentation of buildings.

Following the Kinzies, the agency house was occupied until 1853 by various tenants who rented the property from the War Department. The house itself, however, was sold that year and became a farm.⁸⁶ In 1871, Andrew Jackson Turner quotes a traveler through the region as finding most of the Fort Winnebago complex's buildings still standing but in a state of advanced decay. Some of the

⁸³ S. C. Stambaugh to Secretary of War, August 4, 1831, *Correspondence, Vol. II*, 532-533.

⁸⁴ *Indian Agents*, 1832, 100.

⁸⁵ O.P. Williams, *Diagram of Fort Winnebago and Out Buildings 1835*, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI, accessed June 7, 2019, <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM123572>.

⁸⁶ Andrew Jackson Turner, "The History of Fort Winnebago," Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Wisconsin Historical Collections, Vol. XIV*, (Madison, WI: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1898)95-96; "The Agency House at Fort Winnebago," 448.

buildings had been utilized as shelters for livestock on the Merrill farm.⁸⁷ It is probable that the blacksmith shop was utilized similarly and likewise disappeared through decay around this time. In 1880, the *History of Columbia County* mentions the only other remaining original structure on “Agency House hill” as being the stone ice house.⁸⁸ In an 1897 photograph, the agency house is seen with the only out-building to its west being a barn seemingly too far to the north and close to the house to be the blacksmith shop.⁸⁹ A 1900 photograph captures standing corn in the field which once held the bustling agency blacksmith’s quarters and shop.⁹⁰ The area continued to be cultivated until 1930 when the property was purchased by the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in the State of Wisconsin.⁹¹ While the area has been periodically disturbed by gardening activities, the site remains relatively untouched since this time.

Conclusions

The area to the west of the Fort Winnebago agency house no longer features any physical reminders of the sub-agency’s other buildings which graced this portion of the hillside. The soil, however, remains host to a reminder of a time almost two centuries ago when government smiths filled the air with smoke and rhythmic clanging in fulfillment of the United States’ treaty obligations to the Winnebago nation. The story of this agency has provided a glimpse into how one agency blacksmith operated. There were, however, blacksmiths who served tribes across the entire United States over the course of a century. There is much to learn from the histories of these agency blacksmith shops. Insights into cultural perceptions, material culture, adaptation, government operations and strategy, and language dynamics may all be refined through further analysis. As introduced in this case study, knowing more about how these operations functioned allows for a more complete understanding of the broader subject of Native affairs within the Northwestern frontier in antebellum American history. While tantalizing bits of

⁸⁷ Ibid., 97.

⁸⁸ Western Historical Company, *The History of Columbia County*, (Chicago, IL: Western Historical Company, 1880) 349.

⁸⁹ Indian Agency House, 1897, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI, accessed June 4, 2019, <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM42788>.

⁹⁰ Indian Agency House, 1900, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI, accessed June 4, 2019, <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM42802>.

⁹¹ *Indian Agency House*, 1930, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI, accessed June 4, 2019, <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM42805>.

documentary information concerning the blacksmiths and Natives who used the Fort Winnebago site for a decade are analyzed in this brief survey, much historical insight presently remains locked in the annals of time.

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