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Mackinaw City Sites, Historic Downtown Mackinac Open This Week

MACKINAW CITY, MICH. — It's a busy week of openings for Mackinac State Historic Parks, starting with Colonial Michilimackinac Wednesday, May 8, Old Mackinac Point Lighthouse Thursday, May 9, and Historic Mill Creek and Historic Downtown Mackinac on Friday, May 10.

Fort Mackinac, on Mackinac Island, opened on Friday, May 3.

“We are thrilled to open the rest of our historic sites and welcome back guests,” said Steve Brisson, Mackinac State Historic Parks Director. “We’ve been hard at work all winter and are excited to present the rich history of the Straits of Mackinac.”

Colonial Michilimackinac will open at 9:00 a.m. on Wednesday, May 8. The year 1781 will be explored, when local and global forces uprooted the entire community as soldiers and civilians relocated to Mackinac Island. After six decades as a thriving diplomatic and economic hub, Michilimackinac came to an end in 1781. A special daily program will go into detail on the end of Michilimackinac.

Other programs throughout the day explore the rich history of the site and showcase how it was more than a military outpost. Get an up-close look at the merchandise that passed through Michilimackinac during the height of the fur trade; learn about the different architectural styles found at the fort; explore dining culture at a Merchant’s House; explore the 5,500 square feet of gardens during an engaging tour; have tea at a British Trader’s home and dive into the complexities of British society; find

out what civilians and soldiers were up to; and, of course, feel the power of Michilimackinac's weapons with musket and artillery firings.

“The gorgeous setting and beautiful reconstruction of the 18th century fur trading village and fort overlooking the Straits of Mackinac are worth a visit for everyone that comes to Mackinaw City,” said LeeAnn Ewer, Curator of Interpretation. “Here you will be able to explore and learn about what the last year of Michilimackinac was like for the soldiers and civilians that disassembled the community and moved to Mackinac Island. Our newest tour will highlight the move to the island, as well as the historic architecture that would have housed the community daily from Michigan weather as well as the occasional war.”

Later this summer, the first new reconstruction at Colonial Michilimackinac since 2013 will open. Located on the east end of the Southwest Rowhouse, the building will host a new exhibit, combining archaeological and archival research to help present community life at Michilimackinac in the 1700s: *Slavery at the Straits*. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, slavery was integral part of the community at Michilimackinac, as well as the rest of Michigan. Enslaved Black and Native American men and women worked in all levels of society, doing everything from domestic work to skilled labor. Already a hub of the Great Lakes fur trade, Michilimackinac also served as the center of the regional trade in enslaved workers as French and British colonists exploited preexisting systems of Native American enslavement to feed a growing demand for enslaved labor.

“This new exhibit explores the lives of these enslaved individuals and how their experiences fit in with the larger story of Michilimackinac, allowing us to present a more complete vision of the site in the 18th century,” Brisson said.

The Mackinac State Historic Parks' archaeology program will enter its 66th season in 2024. Work will continue in House E of the Southeast Rowhouse at Colonial Michilimackinac. Archaeologists will be out daily (weather permitting) during the summer months. Guests will have the opportunity to see the most recent finds at Colonial Michilimackinac with a “Recent Excavations” display inside the Colonial Michilimackinac Visitor's Center.

Guests can join in on the action by firing the opening ceremonial cannon or firing all four black powder weapons after the site closes for the evening. Learn more here. Colonial Michilimackinac is also home to several premiere special events, including Fort Fright. Learn more here.

Old Mackinac Point Lighthouse, across the park from Colonial Michilimackinac, will continue to bring guests back to the year 1910. This season small details are being added back to the site, including a privy, pump, and flagpole. A small sidewalk will be added to the privy and pump, and, along with the oil house that was added in 2023, new interpretive signs will be added. Old Mackinac Point Lighthouse opens for the season at 9:00 a.m. on Thursday, May 9.

Historic Mill Creek, located about three miles east of Mackinaw City, opens at 9:00 a.m. on Friday, May 10. The highlight of the site is the reconstructed 18th century sawmill. With the smell of fresh sawdust in the air, the awesome power of the water never fails to impress as the mill springs to life, fed by the pond and ever-flowing currents of Mill Creek. Log hewing and pitsaw demonstrations will be relocated near the millpond, providing easier access and shaded seating for visitors of all ages. At the workshop historic farming programs highlight what life was like beyond the sawmill more than 200 years ago.

During the summer months, special themed weeks will dig deeper into the story of Historic Mill Creek. From June 23-29, enjoy “Wildlife Week at Historic Mill Creek,” featuring the amazing animals of the North Woods. From July 21-27, enjoy “Hay Cutters & Summer Pasture,” as programs explore historic hay making at the Straits of Mackinac. Finally, August 18-24 will feature “Lost Rocks & Mackinac Millstones,” where guests will learn about the grist mill at Mill Creek, and how the Mill Creek millstones were hewn from “lost rocks” deposited by glaciers thousands of years ago.

On the wild side, Historic Mill Creek’s 3.5 miles of interpreted hiking trails are always open and available to explore. During the summer months, join a trained naturalist at various times of the day for a guided walk along the trails, looking for blooming wildflowers, fruiting fungi, and singing birds among the trees, as well as for any wildlife along the banks of Mill Creek.

“We’re excited to enter a year of transition at Historic Mill Creek,” shared Park Naturalist Kyle Bagnall. “This year, special themed weeks will highlight aspects of the site’s amazing history. Guests can join a naturalist for short, guided trail walks. We’ll bask in the summer sun as we listen for the swish of the scythe and tales of historic hay cutters. Finally, we’ll join a hunt for “lost rocks” which traveled hundreds of miles thousands of years ago before landing at Mackinac.”

Historic Downtown Mackinac includes The Richard & Jane Manoogian Mackinac Art Museum, the Biddle House, featuring the Mackinac Island Native American Museum, and Benjamin Blacksmith Shop. All open for the season at 10:00 a.m. on Friday, May 10.

The Richard & Jane Manoogian Mackinac Art Museum, located in Marquette Park in front of Fort Mackinac, will feature *Mackinac Rocks!*, a juried exhibition in the second floor changing gallery. From looking in wonder at the natural curiosity that is Arch Rock to skipping rocks at Windermere Point, to maybe enjoying some ‘rock’ at a local establishment or the fact that Mackinac Island is itself a large rock, it is safe to say that *Mackinac Rocks!* An art attendant will lead guided tours throughout the site, and daily “Kids’ Time” crafts will take place.

The Biddle House, featuring the Mackinac Island Native American Museum, shares the continuing store of the Anishnaabek on Mackinac Island, with daily interpretive programs and engaging exhibits. Daily programs, led by an interpreter, are presented in the courtyard and in the kitchen. The Benjamin Blacksmith Shop, located next door to the Biddle House, is a working blacksmith shop that dives into the 1950s and the changing culture of workers on Mackinac Island. To all of these sites is included with a Fort Mackinac or Historic Downtown Mackinac ticket.

Every museum store will feature new items inspired by the site they represent. The Official Mackinac Island State Park Store, inside the Mackinac Island State Park Visitor’s Center, will continue to have new items inspired by the historic and natural elements of Mackinac Island.

Most major projects were funded, in part, by Mackinac Associates. Visit mackinacparks.com for a complete listing of updates and projects at Mackinac State Historic Parks, hours of operation, daily events, special events, and more.

Mackinac State Historic Parks, a family of living history museums and parks in northern Michigan's Straits of Mackinac, is an agency within the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. Its sites—which are accredited by the American Alliance of Museums—include Fort Mackinac, the Biddle House, The Richard and Jane Manoogian Mackinac Art Museum, Historic Downtown Mackinac, and Mackinac Island State Park on Mackinac Island, and Colonial Michilimackinac, Old Mackinac Point Lighthouse, Historic Mill Creek Discovery Park and Michilimackinac State Park in Mackinaw City. Mackinac State Historic Parks is governed by the Mackinac Island State Park Commission, established in 1895 to protect, preserve and present the parks' rich historic and natural resources for the education and recreation of future generations. Visitor information is available at (231) 436-4100 or on the web at www.mackinacparks.com.

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