

Tests reveal Toledo's dugout canoe may date to American Revolution

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By Lou Hebert | Special to The Press

An intact wooden dugout canoe, acquired by the Toledo History Museum five years ago, may likely be one of the oldest pioneer or native artifacts in the Maumee Valley region.

A new radio carbon dating test, funded by the museum, has concluded that samples taken from the canoe are at least 240 years old and may be upwards of over 300 years of age or more.

This new information reinforces the long-held narrative that the canoe was given or sold to early Toledo pioneer, Luther Whitmore Sr., shortly after the family moved to the Maumee Valley around 1820.

London Mitchell, president of the Toledo History Museum, believes this new information is significant in the always evolving research of the area's history.

"Artifacts such as this canoe provide a direct link not only to our history but to our heritage," he said. "Understanding both helps us understand how we got to where we are and to where we might be going."



CANOE'S LINK TO PAST

The Whitmore family lived for many years on the east side of the Maumee River as one of the first pioneer families of what is now East Toledo.

They and others - such as the Cranes, Prentices, and Andrus families - farmed an area along the river not far from the current I-75 bridge.

The Whitmore family was friendly with the native tribes in the area, and it was through that friendship that the Whitmore's were able to acquire the Native American canoe. The story was passed down for generations, along with the canoe itself, but in 1965, a family member and direct descendant, Ron Goodyear, gave the canoe to the Toledo Zoo, which put it on display in the zoo's natural history museum.

It remained there for years, but as the zoo's focus and exhibits changed, it was taken off display and the Toledo History Museum was able to acquire the 15-foot long canoe. Unsure of its significance or provenance, zoo officials did find a news clipping about Ron Goodyear donating the canoe to the museum and the Whitmore family story about its acquisition in the early 1800s.

THE MYSTERY OF "WAGUSH"

Curiously, emblazoned on the bow of the canoe, in crudely written red paint is the word "Wagush."

It was first reported that "Wagush" was a Wyandot word for "friend." However, subsequent research from the Toledo History Museum shows that "Wagush" is of the Ojibwa or Chippewa language and means "fox."

It is still uncertain what tribe may have built or sold the canoe to the Whitmore family.

Other research by the history museum discovered several news articles from the 1930s about the Whitmore family having possession of the canoe, along with other Indian and pioneer artifacts.

Herbert Whitmore, the great-grandson of Luther Whitmore Sr., said at the time in the 1935 Toledo Times article that they not only owned the canoe, but also many other native and French artifacts found near the ancient Indian fort at the Maumee River and Fassett Street.

CANOE PAINTED RED

It was noted in the 1935 Toledo Times article that the canoe was painted red. When, and by whom, remains unknown. The canoe is no longer red, but that of natural wood, and close inspection of the wood grain reveals faint traces of red.

A separate 1932 article in the Toledo News Bee also notes the existence of the canoe by the Whitmore family. The article says the dugout canoe was hollowed out with fire and stones by local tribesmen. The story quotes Herbert Whitmore, who says the canoe is “still in good condition” and was being used until the early 1900s.

Another news clipping from an 1880 Perrysburg Journal quotes Luther Whitmore Jr. as saying his sister used to paddle a canoe in 1830 across the Maumee River everyday to go to school, which would have been located in what is now South Toledo. Was the canoe she used, in fact, the dugout “Wagush” canoe? It seems probable, but unconfirmed.

MORE RESEARCH AND PRESERVATION REQUIRED

The canoe is currently off-display at the Toledo History Museum, and efforts are ongoing to find a new venue and display setting.

The canoe has a remarkable story to tell about the early families who arrived after the War of 1812 to find found thousands of local Native Americans living in villages along the Maumee.

The Whitmore canoe remains a symbol of those early years of settlement of Northwest Ohio.

The Toledo History Museum is determined to preserve the legacy of this centuries- old dugout canoe and to tell its remarkable story.

“We want to make sure the canoe is preserved for us and future generations to provide that direct connection to our past,” Mitchell said.

More research is planned for the historic canoe, such as determining the species of tree used for its construction. Also, further inspection and analysis is needed to help pinpoint its construction style and identification of the tribe that created it.