



# Dell House Dig

**Program Purpose:**

Students will under go an archaeological dig exploring off the shore of Black Hawk Island and Wisconsin River where the infamous Dell House once stood.

**Length of Program:**

1 ½ - 2 Hours (Warm Weather Only!)  
(Life Guard needed)

**Age:**

Grades 4-7

**Maximum Number of Participants:**

10-12

**Objectives:**

After the completion of this course students should be able to:

- Verbally describe the historical significance of the Dells House.
- List possible artifacts that could be found at the Dell House site.
- Demonstrate basic procedures for archeology excavations.
- Define the term archaeology

**Preparation:**

Before the class arrives:

- Obtain “Dell House Dig” kit from the storage room.
- Read about the History of the Dell House.
- Make sure Barge or Canoes are available.

**Basic Outline:**

- I. Introduction (5 minutes)
- II. Barge/Hike or Canoe (30 minutes)
- III. History of Dell House (10 minutes)
- IV. Intro in to Archaeology (10 minutes)
- V. Dell House Excavation (30 minutes)
- VI. Show, Examine, & Conclusion (10 minutes)
- VII. Barge/Hike or Canoe (25 minutes)

**Materials:**

Lifeguard  
6 Dig Sifters  
6 Trowels  
Barge or 5-6 Canoes  
Picture of the Dell House  
Old Clothes (student bring)  
Barge or 5-6 Canoes  
Picture of the Dell House

Examples of archaeological specimens from the Dell House Dig

**Introduction:**

Introduce yourself to the class and explain that we will be learning about the history of the Dell House. This will include both written history and hands-on discovery of the Dell House. Explain to the students that all artifacts found today will be kept at Upham Woods.

**Barge/Hike or Canoe:**

In order to get over to the Black Hawk Island one the following activities must be chosen. The first is to take the Barge over to the island and hike the Moccasin Trail to the Dell House site or canoe over to the Dell House site and dock on the beach. Both activities will take about the same amount of time.

The procedure for taking the barge involves meeting at the boathouse, getting Pfd's on, paddles, loading barge, paddling instructions, and then voyage over to the island. Once you get over the island unload the barge, have the students hang their pfd's on the railing and clip the top buckle. Then hike for about 15 minutes on the Moccasin Flower Trail to the Dell House site.

The procedure for canoeing to the Dell House site involves going to the canoe boathouse, getting pfd's and paddles, paddling instruction, unloading and launching canoes. Then paddle down river to the beach next to the Dell House site and docking on the beach. Make sure the canoes are secure, so they do not float away.

**History of Dell House:**

Please refer to Appendix A, the Dell House related pictures and example artifacts found in the “Dell House Dig” kit. Explain to the students, even though the Dell House itself is no longer standing, in the sand in front of them remains artifacts from the logging times. The movement of the river and sand continually bury and expose artifacts left by the era of the Dell House.

**Intro in to Archaeology:**

Archeology is defined as finding and examining material evidence such as graves, buildings, tools, pottery, remaining from past human life and culture. Artifacts are the objects being examined such as buildings, tools, weapons, utensils, jewelry, and etc. of archaeological or historical significance. What are some examples of artifacts or ancient history finds that you know of? Examples can be anything like pyramids, dinosaur bones,

fossils, arrowheads, ancient pottery or sculptures, and etc. At the Dell House site today we will excavate (searching and removing) artifacts that are discovered. Can you name any examples of artifacts that might be found today from the Dell House dig? Examples include bottles, nails, pipe stems, broken dishes, and etc.

The procedure for Dell House Dig will start with having the students find a partner. Next, the teacher will display the tools they will be using for the dig. Each pair will have a trowel and a sifting screen. Then ask a student to help demonstrate. Wade into the water, hold the sifter screen, and ask the students to use the trowel to place sand into the sifter.

Once you have the sand in the sifter screen gently agitate the sifter, so the sand and water pass through the screen. What to be watching for are items left in the screen. These could be rocks or hopefully artifacts. As the students find interesting artifacts have them place them in a safe spot up on shore.

Please remind the students that all artifacts found today will be returned to the site. Also, that some objects that might be found may not be from the Dell House. Most likely these items are from river uses or are from more recent times. Recycle or throw away these types of items when you get back to the mainland!

**Dell House Excavation:**

The students should have picked a partner by now. Have all the students keep sandals on, if possible, because of the trash and broken glass found in the water. Have each pair get one trowel and one sifting screen. Tell them the rules for the water; no splashing each other and not to go in the water past their knees. Then when the lifeguard is ready they may enter the water. The students will have about a half-hour to search for artifacts. Make sure that the partner's switch tools so they get a chance to use them both.

**Show, Examine, & Conclusion:**

Have the students get out of the water and place any artifacts found in their screen shifter. Have them all gather in a circle. Go around the circle and have them show the items. Pass the artifacts around and examine them. Ask the students, "What they think these might be? How did it feel to search for artifacts? What did they learn about the river and the Dell House?"

**Barge/Hike or Canoe:**

**Barge/Hike** – Hike back up the Moccasin Flower Trail to the barge landing. Have the students put on pfd's, load barge, go over paddling instructions again if needed, paddle back the main land, and unload. Make sure all the paddles and pfd's get put in their proper places in the boathouse.

**Canoe** – Have the students put on their pfd's and launch the canoes. Paddle back towards the canoe landing. Make sure the canoes get racked and the pfd's and paddles are to be returned to their proper locations.

**References:**

Carlson, Steve and Woeste, Shan. [Afield with Ranger Mac](#), 1984.

Hoelscher. [A Pretty Strange Place](#) article. Dells Events newspaper, 1999.

Pollack, Keith. [Blackhawk Island Lesson Plan](#), 1997.

Simarksi, Lynn T. [The Geologic Sculpture of Upham Woods](#). 1977.

[The History of Wisconsin Dells Country](#) article.

## **Appendix A**

### **Dell House History**

H.H. Bennett also wrote about lumberman at the Dell House. On landing safely at the Dell House, the raftsmen would:

*.. partake freely of the concentrated river water kept there for emergencies; if the trip had not been successful and the raft had been broke up, then something must be taken to the success of the next trip; if one of the crew had been lost in the mad waters, partaking of something in token of good wishes for his hereafter was not to be neglected by any means and sometimes like token was deemed necessary for the welfare of each of his surviving relatives, and so the old place became the scene of many a boisterous time, which maybe all the foundation there is for the stories of the horrible crimes committed in and about the place in the early days.*

The Dell House was a place of great activity between 1840 -1890. Allen turned the running of the Dell House over to George and Minnerva Orcutt, who operated the Dell House from 1846-1868, and had five children while in residence there.

In the 1870's, railroads began to connect Wisconsin's landscape. The railroad slowly replaced the river as the primary means of transport for logs to the sawmills. In 1890, the last log was floated down the Wisconsin River. Tourists began to replace river men as the primary clientele of the Dell House. In 1874, more than 6,000 sightseers, mainly from the Midwest and the South, toured the Dells. Over the next 30 years, the number increased to 60,000.

In 1879, at the age of 73, Robert Allen sold the Dell House to James W. Wintersteen. He was admitted to the county poor farm at New Lisbon, where he died in 1889. The Dell House was abandoned and burned down by vandals on October 7, 1899.

With the building of the Kilbourn Dam in 1906, the foundation of the Dell House was flooded, and now stands underwater. The only visible signs that it ever existed are the root cellar, still above water, and the artifacts occasionally found on the beach, such as square nails, glass, pottery, metal fixtures, shell casings, and bricks.