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River history series kicks off as part of water trails regional planning effort

A two-part speaker series starting Saturday highlights the significance of rivers on human history in Greater Des Moines.

The confluence of the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers has attracted humans for at least 7,200 years, from hunter-gatherers living in small houses along the river, to prehistoric mound builders, to soldiers exploring the area, to residents of a growing metropolis.

“Our time in this area represents a tiny fraction of the overall human timeline,” said John Wenck, water trails coordinator for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. “And I think the more we understand its history, the more we can appreciate this unique natural and cultural resource.”

The river history speaker series is part of a regional water trails and greenways planning effort funded by Iowa Department of Natural Resources and led by the Des Moines Area Metropolitan Planning Organization.

Part 1 – 2 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 9, Hoyt Sherman Place, 1501 Woodland Ave., Des Moines

Bill Whittaker, the interim research director of the Office of State Archaeologist and co-author of the 2015 book “The Archaeological Guide to Iowa,” will discuss and exhibit the results of recent archaeological investigations in and around Des Moines, including the fort established at the confluence of the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers.

Kathy Gourley, historian with the State Historical Society of Iowa, will discuss the Meskwaki and Sauk migrations from the area of present day Des Moines to Kansas in the mid-1840s. Her master’s thesis focused on discerning locations of Sauk and Meskwaki villages, trading posts, government Indian agencies, and U.S. military forts in Iowa during the 1830s and 1840s.

Part 2 – 2 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 16, Hoyt Sherman Place, 1501 Woodland Ave., Des Moines

John P. Zeller, Des Moines native and local historian, will give a presentation titled “Fishing Money from the River: Historic Uses and Misuses of the Des Moines River,” showing early hunting and fishing, steamboats, mills, factories, ice and slaughter houses, water works, sewers, railroads – and how the City Beautiful Movement ended most of it.

John Wenck, water trails coordinator for the Iowa DNR, will speak about Des Moines pioneer and river man Tacitus Hussey, a printer, newspaper man, poet, historian, conservationist and civic leader, championing most city improvement efforts, but especially those concerning the rivers.

For more information on the event or the planning effort, please visit to www.dmampo.org/water-trails/ or call or email the MPO at 515-334-0075 or info@dmampo.org.

The Des Moines Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) acts as a regional forum to ensure coordination between the public and local, state, and federal agencies in regard to planning issues and to prepare transportation plans and programs. The MPO develops both long- and short-range multimodal transportation plans, selects and approves projects for federal funding based upon regional priorities, and develops methods to reduce traffic congestion