

Local Preservation

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IS THERE ARCHEOLOGY IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

When many people think of historic preservation they think of fine old buildings, or perhaps of neighborhoods that retain distinctive architectural characteristics from the past. The National Historic Preservation Act, however -- the nation's central historic preservation authority -- extends the same protections and benefits to archeological resources as it does to historic buildings, structures, and districts.

More and more communities throughout the nation are learning that significant archeological resources lie under their streets and backyards, and are incorporating the identification and protection of such resources into their historic preservation programs. Archeological projects can be significant and rewarding activities for a historic preservation commission, revealing otherwise unobtainable information about its community's past, preserving such information for the future, and contributing notably to the community's understanding of itself. Local governments that exercise responsibility for the remnants of their past that lie under their streets and buildings find that residents and visitors alike are excited by what is being found.

What are archeological resources? They are the physical remains of the past, that can be studied by archeologists and other scholars to answer questions about history and prehistory. The answers to such questions can be used by everyone to better understand and appreciate our heritage. Although a standing building may be an archeological resource, most archeological resources are sites and groups of sites, buried in the ground and invisible, or very hard to see, on the surface.

Archeological sites are especially important to historic preservation because they are our only sources of knowledge about prehistory -- the thousands of years before written records began to be made in the United States. More recent archeological sites can provide information on aspects of history that were never written down, even though they occurred after written records began to be kept. For example, the ways of life of the poorer segments of many communities, including such ethnic groups as slave communities in the antebellum South and Chinese immigrant communities in the West, were often not recorded by contemporary writers, and our only access to them today is through archeological study of their remains.

Archeological sites are fragile and irreplaceable; they cannot be rebuilt or remade. Destroying an archeological site is often equated with burning a book, since it destroys the information the site, like the book, contains. But each site is a unique resource -- a one of a kind book. Even excavation by archeologists, using modern techniques and great skill destroys some information, so archeologists are careful to dig only as much as they need to in order to address important questions, and they try to concentrate their work on sites that must be destroyed for other reasons, such as to make way for modern development.

Protecting archeological resources: Recognizing the importance of their archeological resources, more and more communities across the nation are establishing programs to protect

them. An important aspect of such programs is **identification**. Since most archeological resources are underground, they can be hard to see -- especially if buildings, streets, or landscaping have covered them. Identifying them requires two things: background research to identify the most likely places to look, and fieldwork to determine whether resources really exist in the expected locations. Fieldwork may include both inspection of the ground surface, and excavation using hand tools or machines such as backhoes. Some communities have comprehensive archeological survey programs, while others provide for surveys, often at the expense of developers, only when needed in advance of development that will disturb the ground.

The **physical protection** of archeological resources can be achieved in many ways. If a site can simply be left alone, in the ground, this is usually to be preferred; there are plenty of threatened sites for archeologists to study, and a site preserved today is one that can be studied by archeologists ten years, a hundred years, or even a thousand years from now, when archeologists will have new tools and concepts to use, and new questions to ask about the past. Sometimes archeological sites can be **incorporated** into development projects, so that they remain intact within landscaped areas, are buried under fill on top of which new structures are built, or exposed to some extent and interpreted for the public.

Where an archeological resource cannot be physically preserved, **data recovery** is appropriate. Data recovery means excavating the site to study the information it contains, and translating that information from the form it takes in the ground into books, maps, notes, and other forms that can be consulted by scholars in the future, before the site is destroyed. Data recovery requires careful planning and development of research designs and strategies to guide the work. Fieldwork usually involves careful excavation, under professional supervision, to record not only objects in the ground but -- most importantly -- the way those objects lie in the ground relative to one another, which can reveal the human activities responsible for their being there. Analysis of the results of fieldwork leads to the preparation of reports, computerized data bases, and other documents that help answer questions about the past and Preserve the site's information for future study.

Archeologists and pothunters. Professional archeologists are usually found in college and university anthropology departments (because archeology is a subdivision of anthropology), in museums, and in environmental consulting firms. Some local governments have established archeological programs, and all State Historic Preservation Officers have archeologists on their staffs. In some States and communities there are also avocational archeological societies, which make it possible for interested non-professionals to participate in archeological work. Unfortunately, there are also some people who excavate archeological sites for non-archeological reasons -- to build up their own private collections of artifacts, to obtain artifacts for sale, or even to rob graves. Archeologists refer to such people, whose activities destroy archeological resources without scientific gain, as "pothunters." While the work of avocational archeologists should be supported, pothunting should be discouraged because it deprives all of us of bits of our heritage.

Examples of archeological resources in our communities:

* The remains of prehistoric Hohokam Indian villages, with temple mound complexes and extensive agricultural fields and aqueducts, have been excavated in **Phoenix, Arizona**, sometimes under low-density suburban housing tracts.

* Buried ships dating from the early years of port development have been found in cities like **New York** and **San Francisco**.

* The remains of an early 19th century free, Black community have been found and extensively studied in **Alexandria, Virginia**.

Your community, too, may contain important archeological resources. To discuss the archeological potential of your community, and ways to protect it and make good use of it, contact your State Historic Preservation Officer.

Readings about archaeology:

A Field Guide to Conservation Archaeology in North America, by Georgess McHargue and Michael Roberts.

Archeology in the City, by Pamela J. Cressy, Belinda Blomberg, Rebecca Bartlett.

North American City Archaeological Survey Results, by Pamela J. Cressy, Belinda Blomberg, Rebecca Bartlett.

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