

Archeological Sites

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An excavated prehistoric house floor showing the stains left by wooden posts that formed the walls and interior roof supports.

What Is an Archeological Site?

All through the ages, peoples' actions have left an imprint on the land. It's true, not everything we do leaves traces that would be preserved for very long to be discovered by curious investigators in the future. If we just take a walk through the woods, it would leave no trace—unless we and our friends and family walked the same route often enough to create a well-worn trail, and occasionally dropped a lost button or pocket knife along the way. (Using modern remote-sensing technologies and aerial photography, archeologists can “see” remnants of ancient and medieval footpaths that still mark the landscape in some parts of the world!)

Archeological sites are places where something is preserved that is the result of past human activity. These leftovers from the past don't have to be spectacular to be important. Anything in or on the ground that can be seen or touched and that results from human action is enough to qualify a place as an

archeological site. A crumbling, abandoned cabin and the litter strewn around it is an archeological site. So is a prehistoric campsite marked by stone spear points, burned and broken animal bones, and blackened, ashy soil. An Indian mound, an old stone wall, the bones of a prehistoric animal that was butchered by ancient hunters, and an unmarked pioneer or Native American cemetery are all archeological sites. Even an abandoned nuclear missile silo is nowadays considered an archeological site. These places are the physical remains of human lifeways and can tell us something about our history.

Sometimes archeological sites have features that are easily seen where they protrude above the ground—like a pile of old bricks where a chimney has fallen down, an earthen mound built by prehistoric people, or an elevated ridge running through the woods that used to be an old road bed or rail tramway. Very often there are only discolored soil and a scatter of artifacts—like stone tools, old nails and pieces



of dishes, burned rocks, and broken bits of animal bone—that tell where a site exists. In plowed fields artifacts may be easy to find. In forested areas, where this evidence is often buried by leaves, brambles, and topsoil, archeologists have special methods of searching to locate the signs of past activities or settlements.

Why Are Archeological Sites Important?

People have lived in Arkansas for thousands of years, and there is no place in the state where archeological sites cannot be found. Natural forces like erosion have destroyed many of these sites. So have human disturbances like construction, agriculture, and reservoir development. In some parts of Arkansas the casual visitor may not notice any sites at all—but they are there. Each of these places is a type of time capsule. The kinds of objects present and the manner in which they are deposited in the soil can be studied by archeologists, and this information tells something about how people lived in past times. Since most of these people left behind no written descriptions of their lives and cultures, it is only through archeological sites that we can learn about and commemorate these historic Arkansans.

Once sites are destroyed, the story that they have to tell is gone forever. Sites that are badly damaged by farming, by construction, and by people digging up artifacts to take home as souvenirs are like books that have lost some of their pages. Artifacts removed from their original resting place or context, lose much of the information they could provide. Continued disturbance will eventually destroy all scientific and historic value of a site.

Many archeological sites are destroyed by accident because no one realizes that they are in the path of a development project, or because no one thinks that a site has something to contribute to our appreciation of a previous society or person. Often, important informa-



A pile of stones in the snow indicates the collapsed chimney of an historic period homestead cabin.

tion can be rescued from a site before it is destroyed, or a development project can be modified to preserve a significant site. Just knowing how archeological sites of various ages and kinds are distributed across the state helps archeologists and historic preservationists locate and identify the most important sites and plan for their preservation or study.

The Arkansas Archeological Survey is trying to record the location of all the sites that still exist in Arkansas and to determine which ones most need protection or study. Survey archeologists and records managers work with representatives of Federal and State agencies, with private landowners, and with concerned citizens in this effort. Landowners are our most important stewards because they traditionally have control over any sites on their own property. Many individuals and organizations, however, are able to help find and evaluate historic places. The Arkansas Archeological Society is one organization, made up of private citizens interested in Arkansas's past cultures, that is particularly active in helping to find and document archeological sites. Society members learn how to report sites to Survey archeologists without further damage to the historic and scientific information that may be left in the ground.





Archeologists monitor a site in front of soil-stripping by heavy equipment for agricultural land-leveling.

What Are the Most Important Sites?

Different sites are important for different reasons. To archeologists and other scientists, certain kinds of undisturbed deposits and artifacts are significant because they could help answer important questions about human history, prehistoric lifeways, ancient environments, or other topics. Modern Native American tribal members see some kinds of sites as important ancestral settlements, cemeteries, or religious places. Other sites may be important simply for their rarity, their connection to significant historical figures or events, or their great age. And, of course, some sites may be significant for several of these reasons at once.

One way to recognize important sites is to add them to the National Register of Historic Places. This is an honor list of the most significant buildings, places, and sites in the Nation. It is kept by the Federal government, and there are rules for deciding how sites are evaluated and judged eligible for the list. People who own archeological sites do not lose their property if the sites are added to the National Register. But the effect on these sites of any federally funded or licensed project, like highway or dam construction, has to be taken into account. People who think they know about a site eligible for the National Register of Historic Places should contact the Archeological Survey or Arkansas Historic Preservation Program for more information.

What Can You Do To Help?

The Arkansas Archeological Survey collects information about sites through its 11 Research Stations (regional offices) that are scattered across Arkansas, and through its centralized records center in Fayetteville. Most Research Stations have responsibility for a group of specific Arkansas counties, and all of the Survey's archeologists can pass site information on to the appropriate regional office. Site information is confidential so that site owners won't be bothered with trespassers, and the sites themselves won't be damaged or destroyed by vandals.

Anyone can report an archeological site to the Survey by contacting one of the regional Research Stations or the headquarters Coordinating office in Fayetteville.

Some tips for reporting a site

- If you would like to learn how to record sites, join the Arkansas Archeological Society and participate in the Archeological Survey/Society Amateur Training Program. It is open to anyone interested in the past.
- If you find an archeological site on state or Federal property, report it to the agency manager or archeologist. Taking anything from these sites is against the law.
- Always ask permission of a landowner before visiting an archeological site on private property.
- Never take anything off a site or disturb it in any way unless the landowner has given permission and you know how to keep a record of what is removed.
- Never dig in an archeological site. Digging disturbs evidence and destroys part of the scientific value of a site and the objects in it.
- Never dig in or disturb cemeteries, either marked or unmarked. Deliberate disturbance of any human grave without proper permits is now against the law.



How to Contact the Arkansas Archeological Survey

*For the Director, State Archeologist, and various
Coordinating Office units:*

Arkansas Archeological Survey
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University of Arkansas System

**ARKANSAS
ARCHEOLOGICAL
SURVEY**

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Parkin Archeological State Park
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870.755.2119

Arkansas Archeological Survey
Toltec Mounds Research Station
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Arkansas Archeological Survey
ASU-Jonesboro
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Blytheville Research Station
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