

# How Do We Learn About the Past?

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**I**nformation about the American Indian past comes from three kinds of sources: archeological, historical, and ethnographic. What are the strengths and weaknesses of these sources?

## Archeology

Archeologists study the preserved material remains of past human activities. Places where these materials are found are called archeological sites. Archeological remains include weapons and tools used to accomplish tasks such as hunting, farming, cooking, craft making, and building houses or other facilities. The debris left over from performing those tasks is also found at archeological sites. Evidence of houses and facilities such as cooking fires and storage pits sometimes can be identified as anomalies, disturbances, or other features that stand out in natural soil layers. Animal bones and plant remains left over from meals can tell us what people ate. Sometimes skeletal remains are preserved in cemeteries or in isolated burials. These remains are studied by biological anthropologists to answer questions about ancient life histories, including patterns of health and disease.

Archeologists work much like detectives to determine from fragmentary evidence what actions or events produced the remains preserved at a site. They then use this information to compare and contrast what people did at different time periods and from one region to another. This ability to study activity patterns over long periods of time is one of archeology's great strengths. A weakness of the archeological record is that it is incomplete. Most items crafted from perishable materials, such as wood, plant fibers, and most animal products,



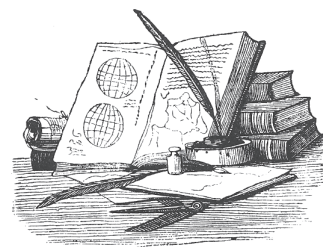
Archeologists deal with material evidence of past human activity.

disintegrate rather quickly. Only the most durable materials, such as stone, fired clay ceramics, dense bone, and plant remains that have been carbonized (that is, turned into charcoal by burning) survive in the ground for more than a few years. This means that archeologists often are able to reconstruct only some of the activities that characterized ancient societies. What ancient people thought, along with other “intangible” aspects of their cultures are not preserved in the ground and can only be imperfectly inferred by interpreting certain categories of materials.

You can learn more about archeology by visiting the Society for American Archaeology's *For the Public* website ([www.saa.org/publicftp/PUBLIC/home/home.html](http://www.saa.org/publicftp/PUBLIC/home/home.html)).

## History

Historians use documentary sources, including written accounts, maps, and lists (inventories and census records, for example) to reconstruct what happened in the more recent past. These sources contain rich detail, identifying not only the time, place, and circumstances of an event, but also the participants' beliefs and motivations. Such detail enables historians to place the event, and others like it, into a narrative account—a story—that tells modern readers what happened in the past, why it happened, and how past events relate to the present state.



Historians deal with documentary evidence of past human events.



Documentary sources have their own shortcomings. Any documentary source—a written description of an event, a map of a newly explored territory, or a community census—is limited by what was observed. A male priest visiting an 18th century Indian village was not likely to witness all women’s activities, nor for that matter was he likely to accompany hunters on most of their trips. The priest could only describe life in the Indian community as he saw it. Furthermore, what the priest wrote about was intended to make specific points to specific readers. He was selective as to what observations he recorded. For example, in a letter to his religious superiors the priest might include more information about rituals he considered to be the work of the devil than about how hunters fashioned their weapons. His descriptions might also exaggerate what seemed to him the “heathenish” aspects of Indian culture, for example, dance. Documentary sources are not infallible. Factors contributing to bias must be critically evaluated. Only through this critical process can the modern historian extract information useful to his or her research.

A wealth of information on Arkansas history, including information on archeology and Indians, can be found at the online *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture* ([www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net](http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net)).

## Ethnography

Anthropologists participate directly in the social life of human communities. This “participant-observation” approach yields a wealth of information—far more than is generally available even in documentary sources. As a result, ethnographies written by anthropologists offer the most richly textured accounts of a society’s way of life, and usually include chapters on the beliefs people have about the world. Nearly every society maintains its own account of its origins, history, and past experiences. Different in many respects from the histories produced by academic scholars, these accounts “from the native point of view” are neither more nor less accurate; rather, they offer a valuable alternative perspective on the past. Many anthropologists study these “indigenous histories” as part

of a group’s belief system.

Ethnographic accounts also have limitations. First, most ethnographers choose to examine a particular aspect of culture—for example, social organization, religion, economic activities, or political relations—so no single ethnography provides a



Ethnographers directly observe cultural activities.

complete cultural account. Most ethnographic fieldwork is limited to a few months or at most a few years’ time, so cultural processes operating on longer time scales may go undetected. Finally, anthropologists, despite their best efforts, often remain “outsiders” in the communities they study; they are not privy to every aspect of community life.

These three major sources of information—archeological, historical, and ethnographic—each possess strengths as well as weaknesses. Archeological information permits us to compare and contrast cultural features from different times and places and to trace the development of long-term cultural processes, but usually only in very general terms rather than in fine detail. Historical accounts offer better chronological coverage and detail, but are selective in terms of topic and observation may be highly biased. Ethnographies are richly textured and highly detailed accounts by specialists trained to be aware of their own cultural biases, but temporal coverage is very limited. Many factors can reduce the quantity and quality of archeological, historical, and ethnographic evidence. These factors must be critically evaluated whenever we turn to these sources for information to answer questions about the past. When properly used, all of these sources can provide important information on American Indian history in Arkansas and the South.

