

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE
OFFICE OF PLANNING



The Treatment of Archeological Sites

Historic resources include archaeological sites as well as buildings, structures, and objects. Because there are so many different types of archaeological sites there are many different ways to treat them in the consultation process. The term “treatment” refers to what is done when a construction or development project cannot minimize or avoid harming a site, or causing adverse effects. The object of the consultation process is to come up with ways to mitigate or make up for the adverse effects to the resources.

One treatment for archaeological sites is to conduct data recovery – a full-scale dig -- to rescue some or all of the information contained in them. This is an expensive and time-consuming process and other mitigation treatments are possible. Sometimes sites are left place and protected by burying them with fill or covering them with pavement. As long as the information on the location is carefully recorded, such sites can be preserved intact for future archaeologists to investigate – and maybe they will have wonderful, new high-tech tools to use we can’t even imagine are possible!

The Advisory Council for Historic Preservation (ACHP) has produced treatment guidelines tailored specifically for archaeological sites and are different from treatments for other historic resources. The ACHP is a federal agency whose mission is to promote the preservation, enhancement, and productive use of our Nation's historic resources, and to advise the President and Congress on national historic preservation policy. The ACHP can participate in any federal consultation process..

The following text is from the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation’s web site and includes all of text they authored on the treatment of archaeological sites. You can find it online at: <http://www.achp.gov/archguide.html#archsites>.

Archeological Sites and Their Treatment (from the ACHP)

The nature and scope of treatments for such properties should be determined in consultation with other parties, but in ACHP's experience they generally need to be guided by certain basic principles:

- * The pursuit of knowledge about the past is in the public interest.
- * An archeological site may have important values for living communities and cultural descendants in addition to its significance as a resource for learning about the past; its appropriate treatment depends on its research significance, weighed against these other public values.
- * Not all information about the past is equally important; therefore, not all archeological sites are equally important for research purposes.
- * Methods for recovering information from archeological sites, particularly large-scale excavation, are by their nature destructive. The site is destroyed as it is excavated. Therefore management of archeological sites should be conducted in a spirit of stewardship for future generations, with full recognition of their non-renewable nature and their potential multiple uses and public values.

* Given the non-renewable nature of archeological sites, it follows that if an archeological site can be practically preserved in place for future study or other use, it usually should be (although there are exceptions). However, simple avoidance of a site is not the same as preservation.

* Recovery of significant archeological information through controlled excavation and other scientific recording methods, as well as destruction without data recovery, may both be appropriate treatments for certain archeological sites.

* Once a decision has been made to recover archeological information through the naturally destructive methods of excavation, a research design and data recovery plan based on firm background data, sound planning, and accepted archeological methods should be formulated and implemented. Data recovery and analysis should be accomplished in a thorough, efficient manner, using the most cost-effective techniques practicable. A responsible archeological data recovery plan should provide for reporting and dissemination of results, as well as interpretation of what has been learned so that it is understandable and accessible to the public. Appropriate arrangements for curation of archeological materials and records should be made. Adequate time and funds should be budgeted for fulfillment of the overall plan.

* Archeological data recovery plans and their research designs should be grounded in and related to the priorities established in regional, state, and local historic preservation plans, the needs of land and resource managers, academic research interests, and other legitimate public interests.

* Human remains and funerary objects deserve respect and should be treated appropriately. The presence of human remains in an archeological site usually gives the site an added importance as a burial site or cemetery, and the values associated with burial sites need to be fully considered in the consultation process.

* Large-scale, long-term archeological identification and management programs require careful consideration of management needs, appreciation for the range of archeological values represented, periodic synthesis of research and other program results, and professional peer review and oversight.