



Pre-contact pottery sherd found in northern Michigan and reported to SHPO.

Bulletin 2 | www.michigan.gov/archaeology/

Frequently Asked Questions in Michigan Archaeology

The laws and regulations surrounding archaeological sites and artifacts can be complicated. In this bulletin, we break down your questions and provide you with what you need to know so that you are following the law and responsibly protecting Michigan archaeology. Contact SHPO any time with questions at (888)522-0103 or preservation@michigan.gov.

Q: Is it legal to collect artifacts from the ground surface?

A: It is illegal to collect artifacts from State, Federal, and Tribal land. It is also illegal to collect artifacts from private land without land-owner permission. In some cases, local ordinances may also make it illegal to surface collect artifacts from local parks and municipalities as well. Bottom line, if you find artifacts, leave them where you found them, take a picture, document the location of the find, and contact SHPO to report an archaeological site.

Q: If I collect artifacts on private land with permission of the owner, who do they belong to?

A: Artifacts belong to the property owner unless the owner assigns ownership of the materials to another party. However, in some cases, the State retains mineral and antiquity rights of property and it is illegal to collect artifacts in these situations without a permit. [MDNR issues permits](#) for archaeological investigations of state land and bottomland. If you are not sure if the State retains antiquity rights, it is best to leave artifacts where you found them.

Q: Can I collect artifacts from private land with permission of the owner?

A: Yes, you can collect artifacts with permission from the land owner. However, because artifacts lose their research potential once they are removed from their original location and context, it is important for you to properly document your find. Maintain good records for any artifacts you find, including a map of their original location and notes on how they were discovered. If you think you have discovered a new archaeological site, contact SHPO and report it in the State Archaeological Site File using our [Site Form](#).

Q: Does reporting an archaeological site to SHPO affect land owner rights?

A: No, private landownership is not impacted by the presence of archaeological sites. Reporting an archaeological site to SHPO ensures that we identify and better protect Michigan's archaeology together. See Bulletin 1 in this series for more information.

Q: Is it legal to excavate for artifacts?

A: It is illegal to excavate artifacts (including excavation after metal detecting) from State, Federal, and Tribal land without appropriate State and Federal permits. Artifacts on Federal or State land belong to all of our citizens, and it is illegal to disturb them. Leave them in place and report them to the land manager. Archaeological scientific investigations may be conducted with permits and must be supervised by a qualified professional archaeologist. SHPO reviews qualifications for qualified professional archaeologists and sets archaeological standards for the state of Michigan.

Q: I think I found an artifact on my property, who can I contact to have it identified?

A: SHPO archaeologists can help you identify your artifact and develop a plan to protect any archaeological sites on your property.

Q: If I see or know of someone taking artifacts from an archaeological site, whom should I contact?

A: Any disturbance, vandalism, or looting of an archaeological site should be reported immediately to local law enforcement officials, the land manager, and SHPO.

Q: What should I do if I discover human remains or if a burial is accidentally encountered by activities such as construction?

A: It is illegal to intentionally disturb human remains and associated artifacts. If you accidentally discover human remains, immediately stop any activities in the area and contact local law enforcement and SHPO (if the discovery is on private or Federal land) or MDNR (if the discovery is on State land). If the find is not reported, or disturbance of the site continues, the law is being broken. Respect the dignity of burial sites by protecting and reporting them.

Q: I have a collection of artifacts, is it legal for me to own them?

A: As long as the artifacts were obtained in accordance with State and Federal laws, yes. However, it is illegal for anyone to have human remains in their possession. If you suspect that there are human remains in your collection, contact SHPO. We can assist you with repatriating the remains to the appropriate descendant community.