

ARCHAEOLOGY ANSWERS

A bulletin series for the Archaeology Program of the Michigan State Historic Preservation Office



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I found an archaeological site, what should I do?

Picture this, you are planting a tree and part of an old glass jar pops out of the soil! *What do you do? How do you know if you found something significant that should be recorded?* This scenario is not uncommon in Michigan. In this bulletin we explore what to do if you find an artifact or an archaeological site.

Artifacts are objects that are made and used by people. Artifacts can come from anywhere in the world and serve as a record of human activity through time. They tell us about who was here before us. The types of artifacts you might find in Michigan includes everything from stone tools and pottery made by indigenous peoples to twentieth-century rubbish, and everything in between. Places where artifacts are found are called **sites**.

How old does something have to be to be considered an artifact or site? According to [National Historic Preservation Act](#), any object or site that is at least 50 years old can be considered historic. The Michigan State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) will record any site that is 50 years old or more.

What should I do when I find an artifact?

When you find an artifact, the best practice is to follow these steps: 1) **document**, 2) **report**, and 3) **protect**.

First, stop digging and take a picture of what you found and leave the item in place. If you have a global positioning system (GPS) app on your phone, record the location of the find. Without disturbing the soil around the find, look to see if there are other objects or unusual soils nearby.

Second, contact SHPO to report your find. If SHPO archaeologists believe that your find is historic, we may issue an Archaeological Site number. A site number will help us identify where sites are located around the state.

Third, if possible, take steps to avoid the area of the find. Any ground disturbance could damage the site. For example, if you are planting a garden or tree, think about moving it to avoid the site. Ask SHPO archaeologists for advice on how to proceed and how to protect the site.

Why record a site? Recording archaeological sites with the Michigan Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) helps us to document Michigan's history. People have lived in Michigan for over 14,000 years. Archaeological sites provide a window into the past. Planners, state and federal agencies, and Tribal Historic Preservation Officers use the Michigan State Archaeological Site File to gauge potential modern impacts on Michigan history. Information regarding site locations is confidential and is shared with only qualified archaeological professionals and Tribal cultural resources specialist.

How do I report an archaeological site?

If you discover a site, contact Dr. Surface-Evans at surfaceevanss1@michigan.gov. SHPO archaeologists can determine if there is already a site reported at that location or if a new site number should be issued. You can submit a form for a new site using our [Terrestrial Archaeological Site Form](#).

Does reporting a site impact my property-ownership rights? The answer is no. A common concern of some landowners is that reporting archaeological sites may infringe on their property rights. Reporting sites does not affect private property ownership rights in Michigan. In fact, throughout the United States, private landownership is not impacted by the presence of archaeological sites, even sites listed in the [National Register of Historic Places](#).

Archaeological Sites in Michigan

Did you know that there are over 25,000 documented archaeological sites in Michigan? Among these sites are 1,500 shipwrecks or submerged sites in Great Lakes bottomlands. This number grows every year as individuals and organizations report new sites to the SHPO. The SHPO maintains records for all of these sites and coordinates with landowners as well as state, federal, and tribal agencies to minimize the impacts to sites and interpret Michigan history.



The Smithsonian Trinomial System

Archaeological sites across the United States are documented and numbered using the [Smithsonian Trinomial System](#), which was developed and first used in the 1930s. Site numbers are composed of three parts: a state number, alphabetical county code, and number of the site within the county. Michigan's state number is 20. Each county receives a two-letter code based on the county name. Sites are numbered within the county as they are reported. So for example, the first site recorded in Gogebic County, Michigan would be:

20GE1

Trinomial site numbers allow the state to link all records and artifacts associated with a site to a single identification number.

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